

Temple Town Bishnupur Set Afire By Terracotta Grandeur

Somen Sengupta

THE ARCHITECTURAL marvel of Bengal is best expressed in the terracotta style and Bishnupur is perhaps the best place to witness this. This temple town is world famous for its unique architecture.

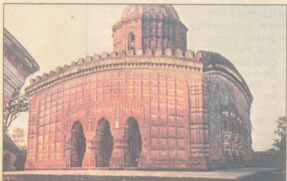
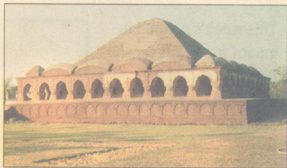
Unlike other temples in India, the temples of Bishnupur are all hut shaped. The top is sloped like a mud hut found in Bengal's villages. They are again classified in terms of Do Chala, Ek Chala, Aat Chala, etc. The art of clay carvings in burnt form (*pota mati*) was first applied here. Apart from its temples, Bishnupur is well-known for its classical music *gharana*, Dokra handicraft and silk saris.

Bishnupur's rise to fame began in the 14th century when Malla king Jagatmalla shifted his capital to this hamlet. The Mallas, originally from Orissa, were followers of Shakti cult but later they turned to Vaishnav cult. After that almost every king of this dynasty constructed one or two terracotta temples.

One structure, Rashmancha, is not a temple but a place for people to assemble during festivals. Built in 1587 by Veer Hambar, this red pyramid-like construction is without parallel in Bengal. There are three galleries with 64 rooms in this 35 feet high and 80 feet high palace.

Dalmadal, the giant cannon is the pride of this town. This 3.58-metre cannon was made in 1742 by king Gopal Singh, at a cost of Rs 1,25,000. With it, he prevented Maratha bandit Bhaskar Pandit from pillaging the city.

The best shrine of this



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Top: The pyramidal structure of Rashmancha is unique in this state; **Above:** A typical hut-shaped terracotta temple

town is the Madanmohan temple, built by Raja Durjan Singh in the year 1694. The aat chala temple is full of terracotta carvings, which describes the stories of the *Ramayana* and *Radha-Krishna leela*.

Jorbangla, built in 1655 by Raghunath Singh, is not to be missed. This double-roofed temple has fantastic terracotta designs on its walls and interiors.

One odd structure here the Radhashyam temple, made by Raja Chaitanya Singh in 1758. It is made not of terracotta but mud and laterite.

The glory days of Bishnupur came to an end in 1806 when Mallabhum was sold to the king of Burdwan. Today, the majestic

temples stand here to remind us of that golden era. To know more, visit the Jagesh Chandra Museum (10 am-noon; 2pm-6pm). Bishnupur's Dashabatar *tash* (playing cards depicting the 10 avatars of Vishnu) make a beautiful souvenir. Most temples have special illumination on weekends.

Travel Information

Bishnupur is 120 km from Kolkata and 85 km from Kharagpur. A bus journey from Esplanade takes you there in 6 hours. To go by train, take the Purulia Express from Howrah. Apart from budget hotels, one can stay in the state tourist lodge. For booking, contact 3/2 BBD Bagh, Kolkata-01 (248-8271).