

bengal variety

> THERE ARE THREE TEMPLES IN PARA, EACH CARRYING A VERY STRONG INFLUENCE OF ODISHA SCHOOL OVER BENGAL SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE.

TEMPLES OF DOOM

NEGLECTED HISTORY The beautiful Jain and Hindu temples of Para in Purulia district of Bengal is in a dilapidated condition, but the state government is doing nothing to preserve the rich heritage

Somen Sengupta
somen.sengupta@gmail.com

In eastern India, Jainism had flourished before Buddhism but due to lack of royal patronage, it vanished and in many places was overtaken by Hindus. In Manbhum region of Bengal-Bihar border, the expansion of Jainism was amazing at one point of time and from 9th century to 11th century, the area revealed a slew of Jain archaeological monuments but from 12th century onwards it saw a sharp decline.

Soon huge archaeological treasures also went into oblivion or were simply destroyed by non-believers. It remained in dark till the middle of 19th century when Joseph Daviditch Melik Begler (1845-1907) an assistant surveyor of legendary Alexander Cunningham, who with an extraordinary passion for oriental study did a deep study of Manbhum's archaeological relics.

It was Begler, the man who in 1878 published a study paper titled *A Tour Through the Bengal Province*, covering unexplored and unexplained archaeological sites and relics, who mentioned about a village named Para that houses three very interesting structures. It is a fact that Begler's discovery of these structures gave a new insight into the history of this place.

The village Para is just 29 km from Purulia town. The village cuts a sorry picture. It simply looks like any other poverty-stricken Bengal village. Once inside the village and standing on the field one gets to see two exceptionally significant monuments of more than thousand years old.

From here time whispers the story of the past and one can see history. It is the interesting temple of Para that contains the oldest testimony of Jainism in Bengal. Historians have traced out that this place was second capital of Panchet kingdom of Manbhum till the year 969 and after that they shifted capital to Garpanchakot.

After staying in oblivion for few centuries, the place was again surfaced in the memory of commoners in 1878 when JD Begler rediscovered it in semi ruined state. The discovery revealed three rekh deul style place of worship.

One made of stone, one made of brick and another made of stone and brick. All are exceptionally enriched in artistic expression but no written testimony was found.

There are three temples in Para and all are rekh deul style carrying a very strong influence of Odisha School

over Bengal School of architecture. Oldest among them is a stone-made Jain temple but local people called it Laxmi temple for some unknown reason.

In its shape and size, it has similarity with other rekh deul temples of Purulia like one of Banda or Telkupi. Believed to be made in 9th century this temple does not have any deity.

It lost its glory even before Begler recorded it for the first time. It is now 40 ft in height. It is assumed that with its intact pinnacle, it must be 47 ft tall. Made of soft sandstone, the temple contains excellent curving of various floral motifs and human figures on its wall. Some figures like dancing women in festive mood, yaksha, horses, etc. are found. Some Hindu gods like Lakshmi, Surjya and Ganesh are also visible but all the figurines are decaying fast and gradually collapsing.

Stylistically, the figures are deeply influenced by Gupta-Chalukya periods. Archaeologists are of the opinion that once a varandha encircled it and still few stone-made pillars are found at a nearby primary school supports the claim. On its outer wall, it has three small chambers which once used to house some Jain Tirthankara statues.

Unfortunately those statues are all lost but still some statues of girls offering services is a common feature of any Tirthankara statue is visible here. This clearly confirms that it was a Jain temple which was later abandoned or captured by the Hindus.

In his report, Begler mentioned that this temple was not repaired in recent times and the last repair was executed during Emperor Akbar's reign by his army General Man Singh who had supreme authority over these parts.

Just 150 ft away of this stone deul stands the biggest archaeological attraction of Para. It is the red brick deul temple constructed between 10th and 11th century. The 45 ft high temple is very badly preserved and is broken from the top.

It looks like the Deulghata deul of Purulia. Its outer walls are embellished with rich work of brick terracotta and stucco work. This also contains floral motifs and human faces though many of those are badly weathered. The lower wall is given a protective brick-casing.

Though the temple is in semi-dilapidated condition and signs of vandalism are clear, it has huge appeal because of its size and shape. The lower part has three niches and each is decorated with a chaitya kind of structure where as there is a heart-shaped chaitya on the top of the tower.

The entrance is tall corbelled triangle and the temple is facing south. Inside the temple, there are few stone-made statues. Out of that a Shiva statue with weapon in hand is known as Narteshwar Shiva. There is a deity with four hands in the temple.

Locals call it Udaichandi temple and worship it as per Hindu rituals. The third temple of Para village is also unique. Though it is in a bad condition and now partly covered with wild vegetation, this is the only temple of Para which has proven history.

The stone and brick made temple is known as Radharaman Temple. It was established by one Vaishnav from Vrindavan named Purushottam Das who came to this village with Mughal general Man Singh. The tomb of Purushottam Das is situated opposite to the temple.

The original deity was removed from here by a ruler named Kalyani Prasad or Shankari Prasad, who took it to their new capital in Kashipur. The temple has a foundation stone placed on its wall but the letters are so badly defaced that now nothing is legible. The temple also has no deity inside but during Janmashtami a temporary clay-made Krishna is worshipped here.

Needless to say, weather and time



are taking a toll over these three temples of Para. If these temples are lost, a golden part of Manbhum's history will be lost forever. Already enough damage is done to Purulia's archaeological treasures by the local people and DVC.

In 1957, at the time of constructing Panchet Dam, DVC, without any consideration, flooded and destroyed more than 19 excellent stone temples in Telkupi. If proper protection is not taken soon, temples of Para will face the same end like the Telkupi temples. And history will not forgive us.



■ If proper protection is not taken soon on a war-footing, the temples of Para will face total destruction very soon. And history will not forgive us.

PHOTOS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

Salt was associated with all forms of ritual from birth to death

BRUSH STROKES



CHHATRAPATI DUTTA

The earlier one learns to take everything in life "with a pinch of salt", the better. Not only does it make things taste better,

going by the analogy of colour, anything dark would turn a little grey with the white of salt, or so it seems. Not everything that one saw in the large Chapel Hall – the final destination of The Wieliczka Salt Mine was actually sculpted by the miners.

They are additions made by professionals who have been employed to do so after the mines were shut down and the site was turned officially into a tourist attraction in the 1990s. These additions, though clearly marked, not only take away the sanctity of the space, one is left with a longing to see exactly how the miners had experienced the Chapel Hall.

This of course is a feeling of loss we are faced with at every bend of this ever-changing landscape. If traced from a distance

from the earth through time, the crisscrossing salt routes of the world itself would seem the same.

From the land routes that led from South Morocco across the lengths of the Sahara to Timbuktu – one of the most traversed salt routes in the world would shift to the sea with ships loads of salt being carried from Egypt to Greece through the deep Mediterranean and the Aegean.

Going by Herodotus, a caravan route that began from the salt oases of the Libyan Desert was another source of salt for the rich Greeks of the time. The wealthy glitter of Venice is attributed more to its commonplace salt than to exotic spices, which Venetians traded in Constantinople for spices of Asia. On the same salt lines travelled



■ Recreation of Leonardo's Last Supper in the Chapel Hall.

by Marco Polo in 1295 led to his stories of the prodigious value of salt coins that bore the seal of the legendary Chenghis Khan which delighted the Doge.

Moorish merchants of the

sub-Saharan regularly traded salt ounce for an ounce of gold. Slabs of rock salt called 'amoles', each of about two inch thick and ten inch long became coins of the realm. These cakes of salt as equivalents

of money spread to other parts of central Africa. Though not buried in salt, of all the roads that led to Rome, the Via Salaria – the salt route – was the busiest. While Roman soldiers marched in routine vigilance, merchants in ox carts full of the precious crystals drove up the Tiber from the salt pans of Ostia.

Salt became associated with very form of ritual, from birth until death. The Roman religious ritual of placing grains of salt on a eight-day-old babies' lips is later appropriated in the Roman Catholic ceremony of baptism; salt ensuring an allegorical purification. The grace and wisdom of Christ is still sensed in salt in Christian catechism. When the Apostle Matthew says, 'Ye are the salt of earth...' he precludes the worthy sheep in the flock, who are

blessed, excluding the erring goats.

The ancient sanctity of salt slid towards superstition during the middle ages. Considered to be ill-omened, the spilling of salt spelt a portent of doom. Having unexpectedly encountered the recreation of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* in the Chapel Hall of Wieliczka of all places was not only surprising, it seemed a little misfit.

But it was much later that I made its connection with salt that justified its presence. Leonardo's use of the medieval superstition in depicting the scowling Judas was the reason. Judas is shown with an overturned saltcellar in front of him. What Judas possibly forgot to do was to cast a pinch of salt over his sinister left shoulder; where evil spirits tend to congregate.