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# Cheliama has one of Bengal's oldest terracota temples

It is strange that Purulia district does not house many terracotta temples although its bordering districts of Bankura and Birbhum are full of them. One of the main reasons of this may be that there are more Jain temples in Purulia, which are made of stone.



PHOTOS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

**(Top) The terracota temple at Cheliama; Idols inside the temple.**

The temple contains panels on its façade, arches and base and on the pillars. The base and borders are also decorated with terracotta tiles, each one of which whispers a tale of its own. The side and back walls of the temple are bare.

There are three entrances to the temple with every entrance having an array of chariots over it. On the main wall, one can see panels of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

The area above the central arch has the war between Ram and Ravana etched in it. The story of

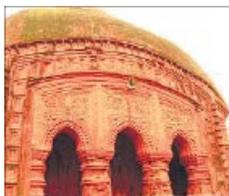
Mahabharata comes on the left side where we can find Krishna doing the mischief of hiding clothing of bathing gopis. Raasleela comes just next to this big panel.

The right arch contains another battle scene. On one side is Kali and on the other a warrior on an elephant back. This appears to be a sequence taken from the battle between Kali and Raktabeej, and is rarely seen in terracotta temples.

The borders of these panels are decorated with the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu amid scenes like deer hunting, royal processions, girls fanning a king.

The quality of terracotta found here is of no match to that of Bishnupur and Ilambazar in Bankura and Birbhum, but this temple is no doubt an important destination for terracotta lovers. However, mindless restoration and an ugly quote of deep red paint have done enormous damage to this historically important monument.

Near to the temple is Mahamayar, where some excellent stone-made medieval Jain and Hindu statues can be seen. Two of these are of Jain exponents Ajitnath and Subudhinath. There is also one broken Vishnu statue here. Scholars are of the opinion that some of these statues are as old as 900 years.



If you are interested in temple tourism, you must come to Cheliama. The village has motorable roads, but some of the lanes are too narrow. Cycle rikshaws will take you to the temple.

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