



Sribati | Where temples mirror a time

By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

The last decade of 18th century was comparatively a peaceful time for Hindus in Bengal. It was the time when British East India Company was gradually gripping the control of crown and some sort of law and order was returning to society after a long spell of Islamic rule under which Hindu community was never at peace.

In 1793, when Lord Cornwallis introduced permanent settlement concept in land revenue, a large section of people in Bengal saw really good days in terms of amassing wealth from various businesses. By the beginning of 19th century, peace returned in social and commercial arena of Bengal and that was the time when one Chandra family migrated to Bengal from Gujarat for a better future.

By involving themselves as salt agent of the Company, soon one Shobharam Chandra earned huge wealth. He shifted his base from Saptagram in Hoogly to a place in Burdawan near Katwa named Sribati where several generations of his blood line boomed and finally derived status of *zamindar*.

As the time was ripe to show prosperity, the family went on to establish several temples with peerless terracotta panels on their walls without knowing that 200 years from that time those temples will be considered revolutionary piece of archaeology mirroring a changing saga of India's social and political lives. It was the time, thanks to wealth gained by many non-Brahmin families, a plethora of temples came up in rural Bengal as a mark of social upgradation. Chandras of Sribati were one of that class.

This Sribati is a village of Bengal with an exceptional temple complex that houses three different shaped temples built during different times.

Out of these one temple is square, one is with five pinnacles and one is octagonal. One is fully embellished with Hindu mythol-

ogy and epics carved on it's walls. The 2nd one is a balanced blending of mythology and social sequence. However the 3rd one is decorated with panels describing only social picture of Bengal of that time.

Chandreshwar Shiva, the square shaped temple was built in 1802. Other temples were established by one Ramkanai and his wife Annapurna Dasi in 1836. They are known as Bholanath and Shankar temple both dedicated to Lord Shiva though the family deity of Chandra was Raghunath.

Temples of Sribati are indeed exceptional. Decorated with some of the finest terracotta panel of Bengal all these temples represent a page of history.

While going through the terracotta panels, one can find out that Dashavatar of Vishnu like any other Bengal temples are curved here but surprisingly Budha is replaced by Jagannatha. It is easy to guess that it was the time when European archeologists were gradually unfolding the fact that Budha is not a myth created by Hindus but a real flesh and blood man who brought a revolution with his alternative religion against Hinduism. This may be the reason that these Hindu temples built between 1802 to 1836, Budha as a Hindu God did not get a place.

In the central temple dedicated to Bholanath, a Shiva *linga* made of white marble can be seen and just behind that a marble wall panel showing Krishna playing flute with his *sakhis*. This is just an extra ordinary co-existence of Shaiva and Vaishnava cult in same temple. It is exceptional and this gives the testimony of tolerance attitude of the patron. The tolerance comes clear on the outer walls where we see Dashamahavidya statues of Kali and Jagadhatri. This are motifs of *tantra* cult.

If these blendings are amazing, then there are more delightful elements hidden in its terracotta panels. One is the influence of European social life on a temple of Bengal.

European influence played so strong on

the sculptors that even the lions are all British lions including one on which Devi Durga rides. Similarly all pillars are doric or ionic showing Greek influence.

The Shankar temple which is octagonal was built last and that is decorated only with panels displaying social lives. Indian lives are expressed in form of grinding *sidhi*, smoking *hukka*, mother and child, women crying over separation. There are some panels that clearly indicate lives in brothel or in music room where European customers are negotiating with Indian ladies on open street. The lives of Europeans are expressed in well dressed women and men. Almost all European figures are draped in apparels like hat, stick, frilly gowns while Indians are dressed in essentially non-Bengali style. Women are found in *ghagra choli* while large turban and *chapkans* are common for male folk. The same dress we find in Ram Sita and Laxman statues atop of main door of Bholanath temple. This specific dress clearly indicates that the patrons had a non-Bengali origin.

Biggest of three temples is Bholanath which is *pancharatna* temple, a typical Bengal school of architecture. Out of five towers of this temple three are very richly decorated with terracotta panels. An excellent Mahishashuramardini panel is found at the central location of the temple. A series of women playing musical instrument and one even playing a violin, again an European influence, is also seen.

One more exceptional thing of these temples is the placement of Mrityulata. Mrityulata is a vertical alignment of man and animal very commonly found at the corner of many terracotta temples of Bengal. Here to one's great surprise, we find Mrityulata over the door border instead of corners. The warfare is also not ignored here. So many soldiers dressed in European and Islamic dress also ignite interest.

Octagonally shaped Shankar temple has seven false door on its wall. They are curved so nicely that they are often mistaken as

real. False door construction is a very common feature in Bengal terracotta temples. The blinds, triangular arches, balconies and other furniture made here in baked soil fully give deep impact of European lives which was by that time rooted deep inside of Bengal's social lives.

Batayanbartika or the lady looking between the windows is found in this temple. The lady by the window indicates a woman's inquisitive mind to see the world out of her walled life. This is also a social message given to society about women's desire of seeing the world. The society was indeed witnessing a time like this when the temple was under construction. The perfect replica of British lion's head that line up on Shankar temple is another big piece of surprise.

Temples of Sribati are unique not only for their super rich terracotta panels but also for the social message that they contain on their wall. These three temples clearly show how socio religious life of Bengal gradually changed within a small span of 50 years and how creative minds captured that changed time in their immortal creation..

Neither Archeological Survey of India nor State Archeology has taken over these temples yet. So these all are still unprotected and massive damage is occurring to these as there is no fence to protect them.

Time will play ruthless with us if we do not take care of these gems and for that history will never forgive in future.

Travel Logistics :

Nearest airport is Durgapur – it is well connected from Calcutta and New Delhi.

Else Calcutta airport can also be used – from Calcutta by road it is 3 hours to reach.

One can travel up to Burdawan by train – from there car can be hired. Photography is allowed. Carry water bottle and light snacks.



PICS; SOMEN SENGUPTA

