

Revisiting the Temples of Barakar, West Bengal

SUPRIYA MEHATARI
INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SCHOLAR

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ABSTRACT

The temple is the most characteristic artistic expression of Brahmanical Hinduism, providing a focus for both the social and spiritual life of the community it serves. The present study is dealing with the architectural features of the Barakar group of temples. Barakar (23°44'15" N, 86°49'15" E) is a town located in West-Burdwan district of West Bengal, India. The temples are located on the eastern banks of Barakar river around 8 kilometers north-east of the confluence of three rivers Damodar, Barakar and Kudia. There are four temples in this temple complex, protected by a big boundary wall and numbered as I, II, III and IV by Archaeological Survey of India.

Keywords: Temple, Barakar, Damodar.

Introduction: A temple is a structure designed to house an icon which is both an object of worship and a work of art. The construction of temples and auxiliary structures and installation of deities are considered as acts of great religious virtue. The building of a temple is expected to confer on the builder several benefits like longevity, health, wealth and prosperity in this world. The early temple architecture of Bengal finds expression mainly rekha type. The earliest temple of the rekha type in Bengal appears to be temple no-IV at Barakar (West Burdwan, West Bengal)¹. There are four temples in this complex protected by a big boundary wall. The temples are numbered I, II, III, and IV by ASI as they are seen from the entrance.

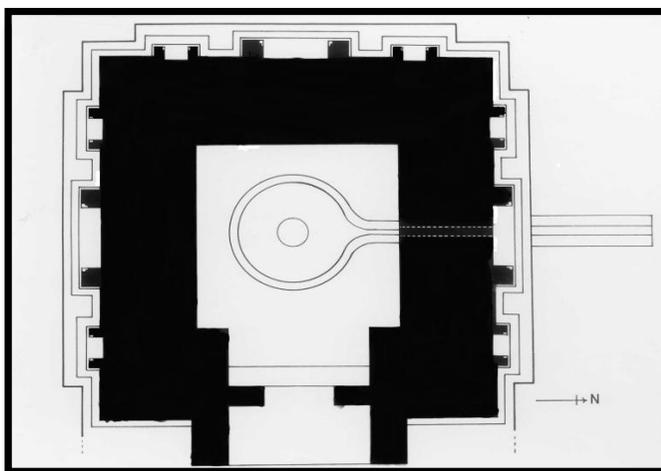
The main purpose of the study is to analyze, identify and describe the architectural features of the temples. The methodology applied for the study are (i) reexamination of earlier published works and (ii) field survey of monuments and surroundings.

Discussion:

Temple No. IV (Fig 1): It is the earliest temple in this temple complex and known as Siddhesvara. It is situated to the south-west of the complex. The height of the temple is 36.5 feet and the length of the cell being 6.9 feet.

This temple consists of a sanctum. It is square in plan with a projecting doorway on the east side (Drg.1), so that the rising sun will bathe the image or the deity. The other three sides have three projections on each face all containing niches. The central niche is capped by a superstructure of tiered stages terminating in the lowest stage of the baranda, above which rises the tower. The others subsidiary niches have uniform superstructures of smaller height. Otherwise, the jangha of the sanctum remain quite plain. The wall is capped by a single kapatapali mouldings forming varandika over which the shikhara rises. The sanctum plan may be said to be tri-ratha, not considering the side projections. The central or bhadra projection is larger than the other projections. The karna projections are surmounted by the pediments. These pediments are made with rows of kapatapalis and amalakas. The pediments of the central projection have sketchily carved split half gavahshas.

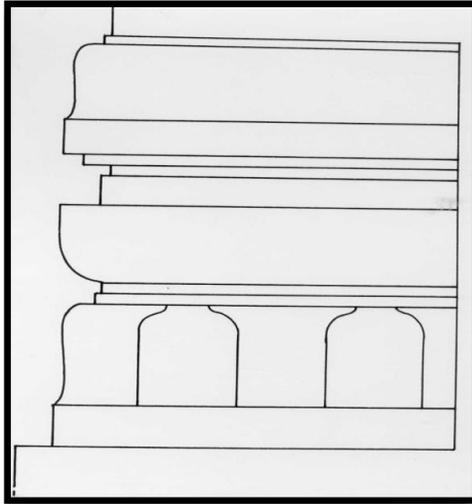
Drg. 1: Ground plan of temple IV, Barakar. (After Khare)



Ajay Khare wrote “the projections on this Barakar temple may be said to be the latina aedicule with a central lata on the pediment and corner amalakas.”²

The vedibandha (Drg.2) rises from the rock below and consist of three tiers- khura-kumbha, kalasha with a flattened top, plain antarpatta and kapotapali. Unlike the Parasurameswara temple the tiers of the base mouldings continue all around including in the central niches on the bhadra projection. The floor of the sanctum is lower than the doorsill. It has a pyramidal roof inside, with no chambers visible above. The beauty of the temple lies on the shikhara portion. The tower of the shikhara rises with a slight inward bent from the beginning. It is surmounted by a spheroid amalaka, supported in a balanced manner on the neck.

Drg.2: Detail of Vedibandha, Temple No. IV (After Khare)



The shikhara has five bhumis marked by bhumi-amalakas. The bhumi amalakas are circular in a specific Bengal characteristic with fluted notches. The tower retains the square plan below the amalaka level up to the skandha. The sharp edges of the corners and of the central projections are rigorously maintained. Rampant lion figure is placed on each corner projections. On the top of the each bhadra projection has a broken figure. The temple has a sukhanasa. The sukhanasa is adorned by a relief of Lakulisa and his disciples. The body of the tower is covered by carved panels, illustrative of various figures, legends and human motifs, both secular and religious in nature.

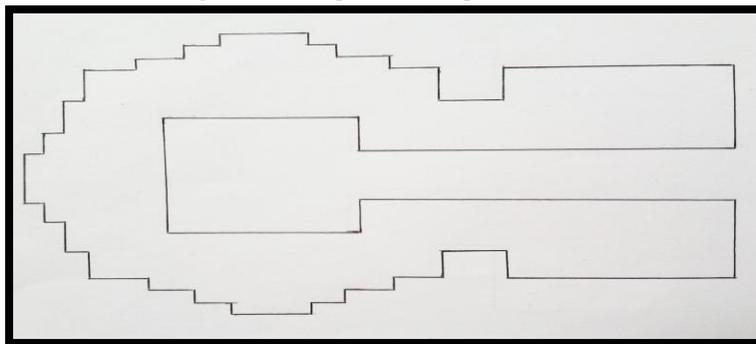
Nirmal Kumar Bose³ has pointed out that although the temple belongs to the tri-anga class, yet its proportions are of those of the pancha-anga class. Over the lintal in front, there is a corbelled opening and this kind of construction is not usually found in temples of the Parasurameswara class in Bhubaneswar. He also pointed out that the rahapaga of this temple is flanked by three pairs of bhumi-amalaka. Temples having this characteristic are known to belong to the late centuries rather than to seventh or eighth and it is quite common in Rajputana. S. K. Saraswati identified some similarity and dis-similarity between the temple no-IV at Barakar and the Parasurameswara temple at Bhubaneswar. In his words “In the tri-ratha ground plan, a cube of three segments along the vertical axis, a plinth of three mouldings and the plain form of the shikhara unencumbered by any anga- shikharas, temple No – IV at Barakar reproduces the prominent characteristics of the early Nagara design and offers a general resemblance to the Parasurameswara at Bhubaneswar which is dated in the latter half of the seventh century.”⁴ Frederick Asher has discussed about this temple in brief. He wrote “There is no doubt that early Orissan temples were the source of inspiration and that at least stylistically and probably in actuality this is the earliest remaining temple of Bengal..... and its date falls beyond 700 – 800.”⁵

Temple Nos. I and II (Fig. 2 & 3): Temple no I and II of the Barakar temple complex seems to be made in the coeval time, judging from their close affinity with each other. They were constructed in the same complex where the Siddheswara temple of Barakar is situated. Temple no II, the southern one, has two inscriptions. The inscriptions are engraved on the right door jamb of the entrance of the sanctum. The date of the

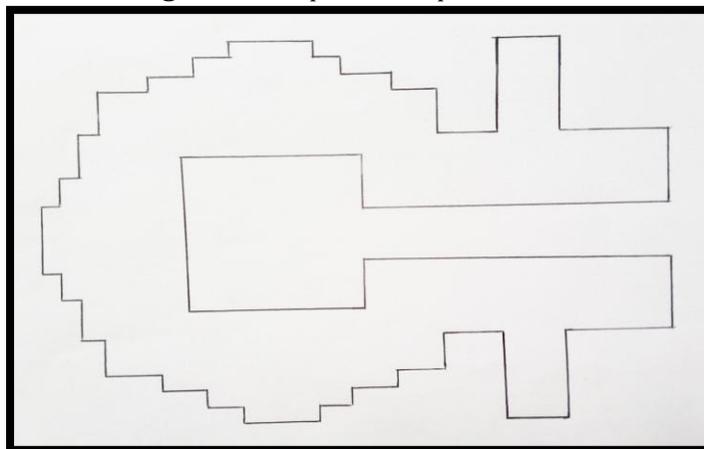
construction of temple no II is the year 1461 C. E., which further increases the value of these temples in the history of the development of the rekha temples of Bengal⁶.

As they stand at present, they consist of a simple cell each. Both the cells are surmounted by a tower roof each. The height of both these temples is fifty feet approximately. The height of the shikhara is comparatively high than the wall portioning. There are traces of a mandapa in front of them. It seems that these temples consisted of a cell, with its doorway; an antarala and a mandapa (Drg.3 & 4). Both these temples are saptaratha on plan and faces east. Both these temples have pronouncedly projected front bhadra.

Drg.3: Ground plan of temple I, Barakar.



Drg. 4: Ground plan of temple II, Barakar.



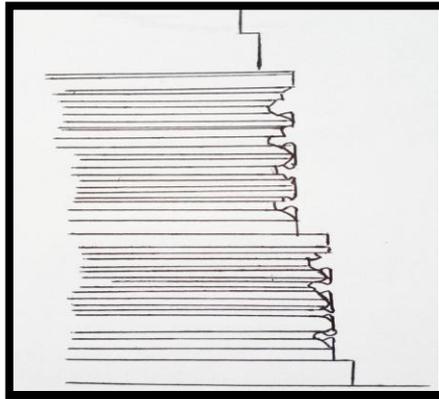
As in the rekha temples, the temple exterior is vertically divided into three main parts, namely mandavara, shikhara and mastaka. Mandavara is further divided into upana, pishta, vedibandha, jangha and varandika. The temples are stands on the upana portion or on the platform (Drg.5). Pista is located between the upana and vedibandha. The upana and pishta is variegated into saptaratha. The vedibandha above the pishta has five mouldings. These mouldings are similar in decoration.

There are no recesses to separate the rathas of the jangha though all of them except front ratha are embellished with a thin pilaster. Pilasters are presented on the wall portion (jangha), above the vedibandha. These pilasters are coiled by the tail of a nagi (snake) and crowned by a ferocious but gentle looking head of an animal, known as kirtimukha. Below the ferocious head of the pilaster, there is a kalasha, a concave amalaka and a human figure is present. The vedibandha is projected as a part of the pilaster, thus presenting the concept of a kutastambha. The bhadra projections on three sides have each a latina aedicule starting from the ground with an oblong niche. The lata of the latina aedicule is also superimposed by a crude latina shikhara with a small niche. These niches are generally made for subsidiary deity. Above the pilasters, the wall is capped by varandika. The mouldings of the varandika are very pronounced. Comprising of two kapotapali mouldings with an in between sunken frieze called kantha. In the kantha portion of the varandika many atlantes are carved. The posture of these atlantes seems that they are supporting the top mouldings of the varandika, above which the shikhara starts.

The shikhara rises vertically to a great height and then takes unexpectedly a semicircular curve near the top portions. The roof is constructed by overlapping stones, chamfered at the edges. The madhyalata of all the temples are decorated with a miniature rekha shikhara which is crowned by an amalaka and a kalasha. The

madhyalata further has two rekha shikhara superimposed on them, one above the other. The lower latina aedicule which is very pronounced on the front face has a lion projecting in a rampant pose. On the central front lata of the temple II this lion is placed on an elephant, known as Gajasimha, as found on the temples of Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Drg. 5: Detail at the base showing Pishta and Vedibandha, Temple I (After Khare)

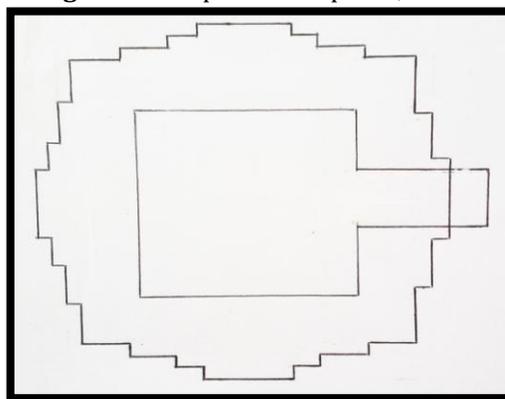


The mastaka is composed with a beki, an amalaka, and a kalasha. The crowning amalaka of these two temples is smaller in size. Here it was not needed to place the amalaka above the beki because earlier it was used to keep the temple stand upwards. The most significant change in both these temples from the earlier one is the total absence of bhumi amalakas.

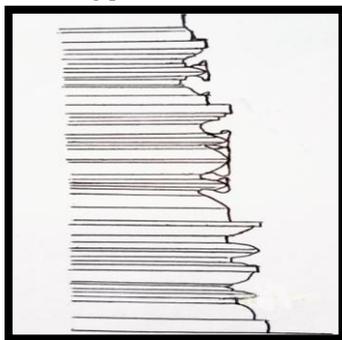
Inside the cell of the temple II has a colossal Ganesha figure on a pedestal, in front of which is an oblong argha, with three lingam holes cut into it. Possibly the Ganesha figure was placed much latter than the construction of the temple. The inner roof of the sanctum is pyramidal in shape and there is no space between it. In front of this temple one Nandi figure is present. K. M. Dikshit⁷ wrote "Though named after Ganesha, owing to the presence of an image of that god in a niche in the shrine, the temple has always been dedicated to Siva, as can be seen from the figures of Nandi and Bhringi at the bottom of the door jambs and figures of the dancing Siva in the center of the lintel of the doorway." Inside the sanctum of the temple I has a Durga figure in a broken condition. In front of the Durga figure three Siva lingams were placed into a common argha. Here one Nandi figure also placed in front of this temple.

Temple No. III (Fig. 4): It is situated 50 to 60 yards west from the temple I and II. It stands by itself. It marks the further development over the temples I and II (Drg. 6 & 7). It looks like temple no I and II, consists at present of a single cell. It does not appear to have ever had a mandapa in front, as the mouldings are carried round to the very entrance of the sanctum. Unlike them it faces west, but why it is in west is not clear. In other particulars it appears to be much like them. It is also saptaratha on plan. The pilasters, with a base of kapatapali and vedi on the karna are of plainer variety and do not run to the entire height of the jangha. It has no Kritimukha. It is a panchangamandovara. Bandhana like mouldings are present on the jangha portion. The jangha portion is capped by varandika comprising of two kapotapali mouldings. In the kantha portion has no figure unlike the temples I and II. The shikhara of the temple is almost similar to the temples I and II. But the volume of the crowning amalaka reduced in diameter.

Drg.6: Ground plan of temple III, Barakar.



Dr. 7: Detail at the base showing pishta and vedibandha, Temple III, (After Khare)



The floor of the sanctum is considerably lower than the entrance. A peculiarity of these temples is the sunk position of the floor of the sanctum. It has pyramidal roof inside but no chambers visible above. The object of worship inside is the figure of a fish lying flat. It serves as an argha to five lingam holes cut in it. Peterson⁸ wrote "This sculpture is especially interesting as proving that the fish is essentially a representation of the female powers of nature, a character which it bears in the mythology of other nations, but which appears to have been overlooked or forgotten in Indian mythology, where it, and a similar symbol, the tortoise, are dissociated from the lingam." In front of the temple one Nandi figure is placed.

Conclusion:All the temples are facing in eastern direction but the temple III is facing western direction. This is unconventional. Artists of the temple complex had very rational view for which a particular rock type would be utilized. Four types of rock have been used.⁹Sandstones are used for building blocks. These were not chosen for sculpting, due to the ill- sorted texture and low compactness. Mudstones, shale and siltstones were used for sculpting. These were avoided for building purpose. These rocks are locally available. Daily worship and seasonal festivals are regularly conducted in the temple complex. It can be said that the temples are acquires greater influence over the society through the conduct of festivals. There is a further scope to study the iconographic features of the temple complex.

Fig. 1: Temple No IV, Barakar



Fig. 2: Temple No I, Barakar



Fig. 3: Temple No II, Barakar



Fig. 4: Temple No III, Barakar



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