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Exploring Maluti Temple: A Conglomeration of Art, History and Religion

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Abstract

Beyond religion, temples carry forward a historical legacy, cultural extravaganza and artistic mastery. These ancient architectures are the witnesses and the mouth-pieces of the progress of a nation in its artistic and architectural journey. The present paper delves deep into the artistic and cultural excellence of Maluti temple in Jharkhand. The temple is an epitome of famous terracotta art of Bengal. It is a tourist place for its beauty and religious significance. The objective of the paper is to showcase the design and structure of the temple depicting its interior details. The architecture of the temple is worth remembering. The paper also discussed the historical value of the temple. In this way the paper offers glimpses on the then society in terms of culture and heritage.

Keywords: Temple Architecture, Indigenous Cultural Heritage, Pauranic Renaissance, Sustainability, Terracotta Art.

Introduction

Temples are not only prayer houses but also the witness of history, culture and heritage highlighting the artistic excellence of a particular period, and uncovering the whispers of history. Westerlaken indicated those architectural masterpieces as “living history or living fossils”

showcasing the progression of the early civilisations (6). These temples act as bridges to connect the present with the past and the future reinforcing pride and collective consciousness of the people (Alam & Kumari 919). Such is Maluti, a unique temple town in the Dumka district of the Indian state of Jharkhand, being a true museum of terracotta temples of the 17th and 18th centuries, showcasing religious values and creative grandeur. What a thriving community it was consisting of 108 temples. But, natural calamities, water leaking, overgrown vegetation, in a word a severe negligence causes gradual deterioration and loss of such captivating terracotta artwork (Barik, cited in Kumar et al. 500). Thirty-six temples thus, finally disappeared. After independence, unlike the nearby towns and even villages, Maluti remained in the “primitive darkness” throughout the century due to lack of government attention (Banerjee 132). If a cultural tradition is lost once, or it can hardly be restored, “it is an unrepairable damage” (Roy, qtd. in Alam 919). So, being aware, the Government of undivided Bihar took charge of restoring all the seventy-two temples of Maluti, decaying at that time. Finally, the day came when Jharkhand’s tableau showcased this significant cultural legacy of Maluti temple in the spotlight of the Republic Day Parade, 2015, attracting the notice of the prime minister of India to its further restoration process (Mukherjee, cited in Kumar et al. 500). Maluti temples are conglomeration of Persian, Sultani, Odishan, Pal, Buddhist and European architectural features (Kumar et al. 508). Maluti has a striking resemblance to Bishnupur, the former capital of Bengal’s Malla dynasty, which is renowned for its terracotta temples. Maluti’s temples have enormous cultural value and tourist potential due to their particular architectural style, which is similar to that of Bengali temples with beautiful clay plaques on their front façade portraying legendary scenes.

Based on the secondary sources like research papers and books namely, the works of Anirban Banerjee, Surendra Jha, Prasun Kumar et

al., Guha & Bandyopadhyay and Mangaonkar, the present article encompasses the historical voyage of the temple along with religious and cultural importance and showcases the architectural excellence of the Maluti temple. Barik's article in The Hindu and Gopaldas Mukherjee's information are also very informative, collected from the aforementioned articles.

Historical Voyage of the Temple

Research reveals that during 16th century the Nankar Kingdom emerged as a tax-free kingdom 12 years old Basanta Roy, an orphan, belonging to Brahmin community in Katigram village, rescued a hawk which was the pet of Gaur's Sultan Allaudin Hussain Shah (1494–1519 CE) and as a reward he received a tax-free land covering villages like Surichua, Hastikanda, Masra, Katiagram, Kasthagara, Damra, Maluti etc. of which Damra was the first capital and Maluti as the final capital in 1520 CE (Banerjee 132). He also received a sword and the title of 'Raja' and became popular as Baj Basant Ray, the Raja of Nankar estate (Jha 27-28).

Maluti became the final capital of Nankar kingdom in the late 17th century (Mukherjee, cited in Kumar et al. 501). In that kingdom a clan of Shamkara Vedantists converted a shrine of Amitabh and the deity Prajna Pandarvini "into a Hindu Shakta temple of Maa Mouliksha" (Banerjee 131). A Shakta king founded "108 Terracotta temples of Shiva" within a 350-meter radius in 1859 CE (131).

Religious and Cultural Importance of the Temple

Maluti was also familiar as Gupta Kashi which means Secret Varanasi and the identity was mostly proliferated during the rulership of Sunga dynasty. The religious beliefs of Baj Basant influenced his later generations to spend money in building temples rather than leading luxurious lives and as an impact Raja Rakhar Chandra constructed a Shiva temple inside the Mauliksha temple complex in 1719 CE and it was the oldest Shiva

temple there (Kumar et al. 501).

Along with the Shakta temple of Maa Mauliksha, Vaishnava faith is also intact in that place in the form of Vishnu temples and also in Kali temples "in the format of Rasamancha of Krishna" (Banerjee 131). The temples are a conglomeration of Vaishnavism and Shakta faith displaying "figures from Bhagavada Purana" and Maa Durga in the same architecture through the beauty of terracotta art (131). There is also an idol of sage Bamakhyepa, a divine devotee of Maa Tara as well as Maa Mauliksha. Even Santali tribe also performs on the eves of Kali Puja. Cultivation of communal harmony is also evident in "donating tax-free lands" by Princess Kashishwari Devi "to the Muslim community to build Majahar for Kalapir" (131).

The plaques on the front façades of some temples were elegant and represented various Hinduism sects, including Vedic, Shaiva, and Vaishnav, regardless of the god being consecrated. The temple facades include inscriptions which are difficult to interpret since the numerals are disguised as literature and must be deciphered, similar to a cypher (Kumar et al. 505-6).

The temples serve as centres of religion and culture, hosting celebrations and ceremonies that encourage local involvement and community involvement. Maluti's terracotta temples are an essential part of the social fabric and foster a sense of pride and communal identity.

Architectural characteristics of the temples

Malla dynasty of Bishnupur patronized Bengali terracotta temple styles in evolving, emerging, and spreading throughout West Bengal (Guha & Bandyopadhyay 47). Maluti's temple architecture has been greatly influenced by Malla art and architecture (Barik, cited in Kumar et al. 502). The terracotta method, which uses baked moulded clay, has been widely used. Maluti's temples, while being modest and personal, are awe-

inspiring with their gorgeous terracotta panels. They offer unusual vistas of many temples in one frame. Usually grouped in clusters of two, three, or more temples, Maluti's temples are constructed in a unique architectural style (Kumar et al. 502). Four temples are dispersed in isolation, but there is a total of seven clusters: the Mauliksha temple complex, Mandal Tola, Panda Tola, and the four clans each (503). Based on their architectural style, the temples are divided into five groups: Dalan (flat-roofed), Mancha style, octagonal temples with pyramidal Shikhars, Chala style, and Rekha Deuls (503).

The traditional thatched kutir (hut) of rural Bengal, which is closely connected to the traditional house with a paddy roof, (Michell, cited in Kumar et al. 503) is the source of the unique terracotta temple architecture. The roof was made up of a pointed vault with a curved base and spine, creating the interior of a Bangla roof form (Mangaonkar 19). The temples of Maluti are characterised by such curving pyramidal roofs with curved edges, known informally as chala (McCutchion, cited in Kumar et al. 503). The roof architecture of the chala temples consist of a single chamber on a square platform (Mukherjee, cited in Kumar et al. 503). Compared to other temples, the tops of the Chala temples are less steep (Guha & Bandyopadhyay 56). Maluti is home to two different kinds of chala temples: char chala and do-chala (Kumar et al. 503). Do-chala/Ek-Bangla temples, which are mostly found in villages in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) (McCutchion, cited in Kumar et al. 503), have roofs that slope on two sides in the shape of huts and have garbhagriha to house the god. There is just one such temple in Maluti, and it is devoted to the goddess Mauliksha (Kumar et al. 503).

The most prevalent architectural style in rural Bengal is found in the temples at Maluti Char-chala used in fifty of the seventy-two temples. These temples get their distinctive look from low shikharas that slope on four sides and are built like domes on pendentives with corbelled cornices (McCutchion, cited in Kumar et al. 504). It's

interesting to note that Lord Shiva is the focus of every char-chala temple in Maluti. They were 4.58 m (15ft) to 18.3 m (60ft) tall, with a single, small entryway and narrow doorways that were just 1.37 m (4ft 6inch) high (Kumar et al. 504). The broader roofs are supported by pillars in front and the Chala temples are larger than these. Shikhara is noticeably absent from Dalan-style temples, which have flat roofs. In Maluti there are fourteen temples in the Dalan style used in temples honouring Kali, Durga, Bamakhempa, and other deities (Mukherjee, qtd. in Kumar et al. 504).

At Maluti, there are four octagonal temples with the octagonal pyramid having the shikhara as an intriguing version of the char-chala type of temples (Kumar et al. 504). Despite being Shiva temples, the pyramidal towers of three temples fused together, resemble those of a church, mosque, and temple, symbolise the cohabitation of people of various religions. Odishan temples have distinctive shikharas with parabolic curves and horizontal lines (Mukherjee, qtd. in Kumar et al. 504). Maluti has only two Rekha deuls, both dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Tulsimanacha, Dolmanacha, and Rashmanacha are the three variations of Mancha-style temples of which Rashmanacha is bigger, octagonal, and elevated on a plinth (Kumar et al. 504). These temples include a unique stage that may be used for religious and cultural events. The god may be seen from any angle thanks to arched apertures on all sides. At Maluti, there is a single octagonal, roofless Rasmanacha temple, exposed to the sky, has been devoted to Goddess Kali rather than Radha Krishna (Mukherjee, cited in Kumar et al. 504).

With the exception of Dalan architecture, all temples have ornamental finials with religious symbols on a pointed top and a kalasha (pot) form (Kumar et al. 504). The Pradhan Sthapati (Chief Architect) planned and designed each temple, assigning tasks to Sutradhars (Artisans) based on

their skills and preferences. Sutradhars commissioned the construction of these magnificent temples.

Building materials of the Temples

Chuna-Surkhi (lime-crushed brick aggregate) mortar and different sizes of thin Lakhaury brick were used to build the temples at Maluti (Guha & Bandyopadhyay 53). The front facades were adorned with terracotta plaques, which resulted in a noticeable difference in their outward looks (Guha & Bandyopadhyay 53). Vajralepa was used to adhere the terracotta panels to the brick surface rather than being carved on walls or stuccoed (Kumar et al. 505). Terracotta plaques used to decorate temple façade are a unique representation of beautiful temple art in late mediaeval Bengali temples. Terracotta art has been popular in Bengal for a long time, even throughout the Mauryan and Shunga eras. Terracotta inspired sculpture and themes that needed to be moulded instead than carved in stone. Their inventiveness led to the fabrication of several clay plaques (Guha & Bandyopadhyay). Terracotta plaques may be seen on 30 Chala temples as well as two Rekha deuls in Maluti, while 26 temples are unadorned and seven of the 32 temples' terracotta façade remain intact. There are 18 temples with partial terracotta adornments, while 6 have plaque theft, lack of upkeep, and weathering (Kumar et al. 505). One of the clay temples is entirely decaying.

Seismic Safety Standards

All temples in Maluti adhere to seismic safety standards (Kumar et al. 506). Local builders demonstrated an intuitive awareness of load routes, material behaviour along with seismic safety prior to contemporary engineering codification. Maluti's temples have a unique type of diaphragm motion in their structural systems. Based on a nearly square plan, these structural configurations consist of two parallel walls in one direction and two in the perpendicular (506). When subjected to lateral seismic forces, these walls act in unison to produce

an integral box action-like structural behaviour, increasing overall structural stability and lateral seismic resistance (506).

Field investigations of vernacular mud dwellings in the Maluti region show remnants of temple-inspired construction expertise, including tapering walls, articulated plinths, and effective space layouts (510). "Carbon-intensive construction materials like cement, concrete, and steel" are causing a decline in traditional methods (510).

The temples at Maluti show how an elaborate and opulent look may be both economical and earthquake-resistant, as terracotta was the most affordable and widely utilised ornamentation method in the past. For the architectural wonders to last a long time, Maluti prioritises maintaining its existing temples.

Sustainability of Indigenous Cultural Heritage

Heritage is conserved as a conglomeration of "traditional heritage and modern environment to revitalize the local economy through tourism" reflecting "the collective efforts of many generations" creating "an appropriate balance between historical, natural, cultural and other heritage assets both tangible and intangible" (Tanwar & Sharma 351). Indian temple architecture being "a living repository of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)" serves as "a profound expression" of "spiritual symbolism and technical sophistication" (Majid et al. 2832). The Indian architectural masterpieces are not only the source of aesthetics but its importance has been embedded in social ethics, cosmic order and also in environmental sensitivity leading to the spiritual resonance as well. UNESCO is also concerned to sustain the indigenous cultural heritage. Maluti's temples also instances of sustainability and modernity marking innovative artistic and historical significance.

Tourism

Maluti has enormous potential for international tourism; its temples' distinctive terracotta-based ornamentation may enthrall future visitors. With its restoration work finished, a newly built entryway and hotel, renovated roads, and better power supply, Maluti can draw visitors to spend more time exploring this temple hamlet (Kumar et al. 510). Moreover, by incorporating Maluti into a larger tourism route that includes neighbouring sites like Deoghar, Basukinath, Tarapith, Begunia, and Garui, it is possible to create a religious circuit that will draw tourists looking for spiritual travel (509). The circuit will be more accessible if connections, transit options, lodging, and tourist amenities are improved (509).

Conclusion

Maluti, a temple hamlet built by the Baj Basanta dynasty, exemplifies India's architectural and environmental expertise. It is one of Jharkhand's remaining terracotta historic sites. While Bishnupur is well-known for its terracotta temples, Maluti stands out for its abundance of temples in a short space and diverse styles. The Maluti temples have a promising future with further efforts and increasing awareness. Maluti's architecture displays India's diverse cultural heritage. Governmental and local support are vital forces which can lead this temple to achieving international status. Maluti deserves to be designated as a World Heritage Site due to its distinctive characteristics.

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