

Sun Temples in Early Bengal

Bijoy Kumar Sarkar
Department of History
University of North Bengal

Temples represent in concrete form the prevailing religious consciousness of the people¹. They are considered as the symbolic representation of God. The building of a temple was regarded as a sacred act in ancient India. It was meant to enhance one's fame and renown in this world and one's eligi-bility for a place in Heaven. The rewards gained by the performance of sacrifices and public works were equal to the rewards which one attains by building a temple. The Hindu temple is a *tirtha* made by art.²

There was no scope for a temple in the solar religion of the Vedic tradition as it centered round the worship of the atmospheric form of the Sun by means of oblations and libations in the sacred fire. However, terms indicative of the temple start occurring in the *Grihyasūtras*.³ The cult of *bhakti*, which inundated India after the 5th-4th centuries B.C., was responsible for the adoption of the temple-tradition.⁴ For the first time, there are references to a Sun-temple established by *Sāmba* at *Mūlasthāna* (modern Multan) in the *Sāmba*, *Bhavisya* and many other later Purānas.⁵ The tradition of public worship of the Sun in temples was introduced in India by the Magas⁶; many temples with the Sun-icons might have been constructed in India under the influence of the Magi Priests.⁷ The temple of Multan might have been built in the Śaka-Kusana period (2nd cent. B.C. - 2nd cent. A.D.). There might have been Sun-temples in the kingdom of Porus⁸ on the eve of Alexander's in-vasion (4th cent. B.C.). Like other temples, the temples for the Sun god were made of perishable materials in the Maurya--Sunga period. Many Gupta inscriptions also refer to Sun-temples.⁹ From the Gupta period onwards, the Sun-temples also came to be built in bricks and stones.

In dealing with the Sun temple, nay with any type of architecture of early Bengal, one is at the very outset confronted with an utter scarcity of material. A cause for this almost obliteration may be sought for not only in the soft alluvial formation of the land and its damp climate, but also in the fragile building materials such as mud, bamboo, reeds, wood etc. The usual medium was brick¹⁰ and a brick structure cannot be expected to resist for long the effects of damp and relaxing climate, the excessive rainfall, and the luxuriant vegeta-tion of the country. When left in neglect, their destruction was only a question of time. Stone was always very difficult to obtain in Bengal and had to be imported at great expenses from the quarry of Rajmahal Hills. Many temples were deliberately razed to the ground by foreign invaders because of their iconoclastic zeal. A few were converted into mosques or Dargahs.¹¹ Quite a large number of temples were demolished by the iconoclasts to secure building materials for constructing or decorating their own structures. We have an example in the tomb of Jafar Khan Ghazi at Triveni in Hooghly.¹²

Distribution of Sun-temples in Early Bengal

Sun images have been discovered more or less from most of the districts of early Bengal. Presumably, majority of these icons used to receive worship in temples, big or small. However,

we have very scanty references to the shrines of the Sun god, and that too in favour of a few districts only.

Rajshahi: The temple of the thousand-rayed god Sūrya referred to in the Jagdishpur copper plate (A.D.447 A.D.) from Rajshahi District was established in the village named Gulmagandhikā adjacent to the Jaina Vihāra area included within *Pundravardhanabhukti*.¹³

Malda: At a place called Madhaipur in the district of Malda, an image of the Sun god is found in a temple of goddess Kālī, which lies at a short distance from the present Malda Court Railway Station across the Mahananda River. It is believed that an exclusive temple for the Sun existed here in olden days.¹⁴ According to local scholars, there was a city named Sūryapur situated in the forest of Kāṭhāl in earlier times. At a place called Yogibhavan of this Sūryapur, is found a big Sun image in a temple. Madhaipur is known to have been once a Brahmana-dominated area. Rāmapāla is also referred to have established at Rāmāvati (Ramauti) a temple for the Sun god in addition to those for a few other Brahmanical deities.¹⁵

Murshidabad: There is a Sun temple in the old settlement of Amritakunda or Amarkunda under Navagram Police Station in the district of Murshidabad. This temple is popularly known as the '*Gaṅgādityer Mandir*'.¹⁶ The god came to be known as *Gaṅgāditya* because of being installed in a temple on the bank of the River Ganges. He is the presiding deity of the Amarkunda village. It is learnt that the temple was built in 1307 - 1308 B.S. (1900-01) on an earlier temple-foundation.

Birbhum: There was probably a big temple of the Sun god in the *Rādha* region, which is indirectly referred to in the Sian (Birbhum) Stone Inscription¹⁷ (of approx. 1043 A.D.). Grant of a *ratha* for the Sun temple is indicated in Verse 17 in the reference to something similar to a moving victory-pillar given by a king ("*Viśrāmārthamivaiṣa jamgām-jayastambho babhou yo'rpitah*"). The term '*Viśrāmārtham*' probably indicates that when tired, the horses of the Sun's chariot would rest for a while at the peak of the temple. Indirect reference is made to a big Sun-temple in another verse (No.46) because the shrine is thought to be the palace of the Sun god where he would stay by giving up the way to the heaven ("*yadīya ruchi lobhitah sa bhagavannābhah pānthatām tyājediti vichintayanniyatamāhi...*").

Bankura: On the bank of a small river Kumari in the extreme southwestern corner of Bankura district¹⁸ lies a temple for the Sun god, which has a standing figure of the Sun god carved on a large pedestal. There is also a Sun-temple at Sonatapal (Onda) in the same district. This *rekha deul* {i.e. temple with curvilinear *śikhara* (tower)} made of brick is one of excellent architectural heritage of the district. It is believed to have been established in the 11th century A.D. The place where the temple is located was known as Hamirdanga in earlier times and still has a large number of the Śākadvīpī Brāhmaṇas living nearby.¹⁹

Hooghly: There are many references to Sun-temples in the District of Hooghly. Panduya (Saptagram), now commonly known as Pedo, probably had a Sun-Temple.²⁰ Every year in the month of January and April fairs are held here in the honour of the Sun god. When Samsuddin Isuf Shah, a king of Gauda, conquered this place in the 15th Century A.D., the temple was converted into a mosque.²¹ An Islamic inscription is found engraved in the lower portion of the backside of a stone slab containing a Sun-image.²² Tribeni was another place where probably a temple dedicated to the Sun god existed in ancient period. Dhoyī, the author of *Pavana-dūta*,

also refers to the same temple, while directing the messenger wind to salute the Sun-god ('*Raghukulaguru*') and offer water to him on the bank of the river Ganges before departing from there.²³ Twelve figures of the god representing probably twelve different Adityas have also been discovered from Tribeni.²⁴ Probably, there was a splendid temple dedicated to them, which, later on, was destroyed by the Mohammedan invaders in the 13th or 14th C.A.D.²⁵

Midnapore: No Sun-temple is found in the Midnapore District. Nor has any evidence that there existed any temple for this god ever in any parts of the district been discovered so far.²⁶ The Pāla-Sena tradition had no abiding influence on temple architecture in this district almost the whole of which was under the territorial jurisdiction of ancient Orissa since the early medieval period.²⁷

A Sun-temple is also found close to the *Visnupada* at Gaya, housing a Sun-image with four hands.²⁸

Navagraha-shrines, though rare, have been discovered in other parts of India. Whether any temple for the nine planets had ever come up in early Bengal, especially in North and South-Western Bengal, which has presented us all the Navagraha images, is not certain.

Patrons of Sun-temples

The *Brahma Purana* prescribes Sun worship for all the castes - *Brāhmanas*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaiśyas* and *Sūdras* - to get all the worldly and non-worldly pleasures.²⁹ No restriction because of caste is imposed on Sun worship in the *Brihadharma Purāna* too.³⁰ Religious privileges were extended to women and men of lower castes by the Magas as well.³¹

As is well known, Sun worship did not receive royal patronage in Bengal as elsewhere. Presumably, the kings had played no important role in the establishment of solar shrine in this territory. Large numbers of Sun-images in stone from different parts of early Bengal speak in favour of the existence of a good number of temples for the divinity. Perhaps most of these temples were built by the rich people³² as well as the residents. The Jagadishpur copper plate refers to the permanent donation of land by three residents - Ksemārka, Bhoyila and Mahidāsa - for the construction of a Sun-temple at Gulmagandhikā in *Pundravardhana-bhukti*.³³ Lands were also granted to the Brāhmaṇas to enable them to build up temples for different gods, as is revealed by several Gupta Inscriptions.³⁴

Priests of the Sun-temples

It is learnt from the *Bhavisya* and some other Purānas that *Sāmba*, a son of *Krisna*, brought the Magas from Śakadvīpa to appoint them as the priests of Sun-temples. This is also corroborated by the Govindapur (Navada, Gaya) Stone Inscription³⁵ of A.D. 1137-38. Further, it is expressly laid down in the *Brihat-samhitā* (Ch. 59, V.19) that it was the Magas who were entitled to install ceremonially the images of Sūrya in temples.³⁶ It may be derived specifically from the Deo-Baranark (Shahabad district, Bihar) inscription that with the temple of the Sun god were associated the *Bhojakas*. As suggested by Monier Williams,³⁷ the *Bhojakas* were the descendants of the Magas through the women of the *Bhoja* race.

Bengal abounds in images of Sūrya belonging to the mediaeval and earlier periods. It is presumable that the descendants of Maga Brāhmaṇas settled in large numbers in this tract. The

Brahmanas who came to be known as *Acāryas* in Bengal and were the main section of the Sauras, had images made for their use, which was worshipped by the general people for averting diseases and other evils.³⁸ Usually, they looked after the solar temples as priests.³⁹

General Features of the Sun-temples

Although no Sun-temples of great antiquity exist in Bengal, we get some idea about their general features from the close examination of some extant temples of the Sun god in other parts of India as well as several stone sculptures, for in many cases the deity is shown as installed in temples whose out-lines are carved round the divine figure. The Sun-temples of ancient Bengal, which belonged to the northern style of Indian architecture, may be divided into not more than two distinct types according to the form of the roof over the sanctum: (i) The *bhadra*, *pida* or tiered type, in which the roof over the sanctum consists of a series of gradually receding tiered stages crowned by the usual finials including the *āmalaka*. (ii) The *rekha* or the *śikhara* type characterized by a high curvilinear tower and the usual crowning elements. The first type may be seen as fully devolved in several images (i.e. Surya images from Kuldia, 24-Parganas and Baria, Rajshahi etc). Here we find temples with trefoil arches supported on richly decorated pillars, the roofs being composed of an odd number of *pīdas* (here sloping tiers), three or five, and the whole surmounted by the *āmalaka* and the usual finials. The last tier occasionally shows rampant lions at the course. It may be safely presumed that the Sun-temples in which the above and other Sūrya images were enshrined might have had forms and features as carved around the celestial figure.

The Sun-temples face towards east. According to the *Bhavisya Purāna*, the entrance of a Sun-temple should face the east;⁴⁰ if not possible, it should face the west. The *agnihotrāgrīha* is an integral part of the Sun-temples.⁴¹ They have usually *pradakṣiṇā-mārga*. They give an impression of massiveness and largeness, though are of moderate dimensions. It is interesting to note that in spite of the Magian influence on the Sun-cult there is no Iranian influence visible in any of the Sun-temples. However, generally they are in perfect keeping with the art traditions of India. These characteristics, at least a few if not all, might have been present in the Sun-temples of early Bengal.

Sometimes the image of the Sun god was installed in a temple along with those of other Brahmanical deities as well. It is not also rare that the shrine of other divinity, even belonging to heterodox cult, had been built up just beside or very close to the temple of Sun god.⁴² The temple of the god *Sahasraraśmi* was established at Gulmagandhikā adjacent to the Jaina Vihāra area in *Pundravardhana-bhukti*. In close proximity of the extant temple of the Sun god and the lost shrines of Visnu and Śiva on the bank of the Kumari River (Bankura)⁴³ is found a huge 10th cent. A.D. standing image of the 23rd *Tirthankara Pārśanātha*. These developments came to take place in early and particularly in late medieval Bengal either out of the growth of the *Panchāyatana Pujā* or of the social compulsion of harmonious co-existence for a better survival of the cults at stake. Stone slabs with *Navagraha* images were used in the medieval temples as architectural pieces allegedly to ensure prosperity to their founders and to prevent any evil happening to the temples themselves.

It is deserving of note that near the Sun-temples⁴⁴ at Madhaipur (Malda) and Sonatapal (Bankura) Brahmana settlements, especially of Śākadvīpīs, are found to have existed, which

seems to be quite natural in view of the Maga Brāhmanas forming the main section of the Sun-worshippers. This sort of settlement might have been present in the neighborhood of a few other solar shrines as well.

Sun-temple Complex

The Sun-temple of Panduya or Pedo (Hooghly), now destroyed, has still two tanks, named Jarapukar and Pīrpukar.⁴⁵ These two tanks are undoubtedly *Sūrya-kundas*, which are sacred to the Sun god. The presence of a *Sūrya-kūṇḍa* became quite common in classical and mediaeval Hindu India⁴⁶ and was an integral part of the Sun-temple complex. The *Rigveda* (10.142.8) emphasizes the need of digging ponds or tanks for having full-blown lotuses (i.e. a sun-symbol standing for the creative force) besides for the supply of pure drinking water (*RV*, 9.110.5). It is said in the Great Epic that the digging of tanks is very agreeable and beneficial and is “gratifying” to Sūrya himself and rewarded are those who dig tanks.⁴⁷ In view of these facts, it is presumable that the Sun-temples which were not situated on some riverbank, were, in all likelihood, endowed with *Sūrya-kundas*. Perhaps at least a few of the Sun-temples were provided with *rathas* (chariot) for the journey of the Sun god installed in the temple, as is surmised from Verse 17 of the Sian Stone Inscription.⁴⁸

We have already seen that most of the Sun-temples in Bengal were built up on the bank of some or other river (Ganges, Mahananda, Kumari etc.) and at least one has been provided with *Sūrya-kundas*. The presence of big and deep-water source like river or pond is quite significant. It is known from the legend of *Brahma-hatyā* and consequent Sun worship by Yājñavalka and his pupils⁴⁹ that it was enjoined for those guilty of sin to have a bath before going to worship the solar divinity. Surya has been worshipped from time immemorial for removal of diseases, especially leprosy inflicted because of some heinous act committed (cf. Samba and Mayura legends). How could a bath be possible as a precondition of Sun worship in absence of sufficient water available nearby? There is also a long established custom to see the reflected image of the Sun in the water. Even at the folk level, a miniature pond is dug in the yard to have reflected image of the Sun in the water, on which the solar worship is to be performed.⁵⁰ In Sun worship by the Mal-Paharia tribe,⁵¹ a brass pot of water with a mango-twig placed on it is thought to represent the seat of the Sun god. It, therefore, appears that the miniature pond or the brass-pot of water is nothing but an available substitute of *Sūrya-kūṇḍa*, which is very sacred to the Sun god. In addition, water happens to be the most important of the eight offerings to god Surya, others being *Kusa-grass*, clarified butter, curd, honey, red *Karabī* flower and red sandal. Dhoyī in his *Pavana-dūta* (V. 30), directs the messenger wind to salute the solar divinity (‘*Raghukulaguru*’) in the temple of Tribeni and offer water to him. Water is also very much needed to quench the thirst caused by the heat of the Sun, a fact which probably became very much prominent in the minds of the builders of the Sun-temples. Such a pressing necessity of water in Sun worship explains the location of the solar shrines on the riverbank or the digging of tanks very close to the temple of the Sun god. The coming up of stone Sun-temples mostly on the riverbank is attributable to the advantage of importing thousands of stone blocks from the distant quarries, either by some vessel or by floating them down the river.

Thus, large number of Sun images discovered from different parts of Bengal presupposes the existence of several Sun-temples in her ancient period, though no solar shrine of great antiquity is found today and references to them occur scantily in different sources. Temple came to be an

important feature of Sun worship from the Gupta period, which witnessed the increased use of stone and preferably brick in the construction. The roof of the Sun-temple was generally of the shape of stepped pyramids crowned by an *āmalaka*. The solar shrines with *agnihotragriha* faced towards east. They were mostly built up on the bank of rivers or elsewhere with a pond (*Surya-kunda*) in front.

Notes and References

1. Brown, P., *Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu Periods)*, Bombay, 1965, p. 1.
2. Shukla, D.N., *Hindu Science of Architecture*, Vol. 1, 1958, pp. 455-456.
3. *Sāṅkhāyana Grihyasūtra*, II.12.6; *Khādira Grihyasūtra*, II.7.21; *Parāskara Grihyasūtra*, III. 14.8.
4. Majumdar, R. C. (Ed.), *The Age of Imperial Unity*, Bombay, 1951, p. 361.
5. Hazra, R. C., *Studies in the Upa-Purānas*, vol. I, Calcutta, 1958, p. 40.
6. Ibid, pp. 30ff; Srivastava, V.C., *Sun Worship in Ancient India*, Allahabad, 1972, p. 251.
7. Chattopadhyay, Sudhakar, *The Evolution of Theistic Sects in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 166-169.
8. Cunningham, A., *The Coins of the Indo- Scythians*, Rep. *Numismatic Chronicle*, London, 1888-92, p. 22 ff.
9. Fleet, J.F., *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. III, pp. 70, 80, 162 and 218.
10. Majumdar, R.C. (Ed.), *History of Bengal*, Vol. I (Hindu Period), 3rd Impression, Dacca, 1976, pp. 480-481.
11. Law, B. C., 'Some Ancient Sites of Bengal', *Journal of Ganganath Jha Research Institute*, Vol. 3, (45-46), p. 32. In the ruins of the old city of Devkot itself, the main temple of Siva was converted into a Dargah by the desecrators. Bhattashali, N. K., *Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculpture in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929, p. xiii.
12. *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, Delhi, 1930--34, p. 37.
13. Sircar, D.C., *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1973, p. 61.
14. Lahiri, Kalidas, *Gaud O Pandua* (in Bengali), 2nd ed., Malda, 1968, p. 22, 247.
15. Ray, Niharranjan, *History of the Bengali People*, (Tr.) John W. Hood, Calcutta, 1994, p. 418.
16. Roy, Nikhilmath, *Murshidabader Itihas* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1309 B.S., pp. 160-161.
17. Sircar, D. C., *Silālekha Tāmraśāsanādir Prasāṅge*, Calcutta, 1387 B.S., pp. 85-101.

18. Banerji, R. D., *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, 1925-26, p. 115.
19. Bhattacharya, Tarundevara, *Bankura* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1982, p. 388.
20. Law, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
21. Ibid.
22. Banerji, R.D., 'Saptagram', *Sahitya Parisat Patrika*, No. 1, 1315 B.S., pp. 28-30.
23. Dhoyi, *Pavana-dūta*, Verse 30.
24. 'Tribeni: District Hooghly', *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, 1930-34, p. 37.
25. This conclusion is made likely by the fact that the slab, on which these figures are carved, was re-used by masons when the Hindu temple was converted into a Muslim structure. Later on, a tomb of Zafar Khan Ghazi was built with materials from the same temple. *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, 1930--34, p. 37; Pandey, L. P., *Sun Worship in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1971, p. 225.
26. Basu, Yogesh Chandra, *Medinipurer Itihas* (in Bengali).
27. Ray, Pranab, 'Temple Architecture and Art in South-Western Bengal', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, XXVII, No.1, 1985, pp. 11, 15.
28. Banerji, R. D., *Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture*, Delhi, 1933, p. 118.
29. Ch. 28, Verses 37-38.
30. *Brihaddharma Purana, Uttara Khanda IX. 27 etc.* Ed. Vangavasi Press, Calcutta, 1314 B.S. (in Bengali).
31. Hazra, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
32. cf. Bhattashali, N. K., *Iconography of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculpture in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929, p. xii.
33. Sircar, *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan*, Calcutta, 1973, p. 61.
34. Chattopadhyay, Kalpana, *Minor Religious Cults and Sects in Bengal*, (unpublished) Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Burdwan, 1986, p. 32.
35. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. II, 1893.
36. Banerjea, J.N., *Development of Hindu Iconography*, 4th ed., New Delhi, 1985, p. 431.
37. Williams, Monier, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1951.
38. *Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art*, XVI, 1948, p. 77.
39. Majumdar, R.C. (Ed.), *Age of Imperial Kanauj*, Bombay, 1955, p.334; *Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art*, XVI, 1948, p. 77.

40. The theory of orientation of buildings...consist in setting them in plan in such a way that they may secure the maximum of benefit from the solar radiation automatically and irrespective of the fact, whether occupants will it or not. Temples, living places, assembly halls, audience rooms and a host of structures to meet the needs of men of all grades, are thus so adjusted in plan as to secure an eastern frontage." Shukla, D.N., *Hindu Science of Architecture*, Vol. 1, 1958. p. 183.
41. *Sāmba Purāna*. 29.15, Venkatesvara .Press, Bombay, 1899.
42. Das, S. R., *Archaeological Discoveries from Murshidabad*, Part I, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1971, p.21; Banerji, R. D., *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, 1925-26, p. 115.
43. Banerji, R. D., *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report*, 1925-26, p. 115.
44. Lahiri, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 247; Bhattacharya, Tarundeve, *op. cit.*, p. 388.
45. Law, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
46. Sankalia, H.D., *Archaeology of Gujrat and Kathiawar*, Bombay. 1948, pp. 212.
47. *Mahābhārata, Anusāsānaparva*, Section LVIII. Tr. M. N. Dutta, Calcutta, 1895-1905.
48. Sircar, D.C. *Silālekha Tāmrasāsanādir Prasaṅge*, Calcutta, 1387 B.S., pp. 85-101.
49. Srivastava, *op. cit.*, p. 220-221.
50. Bhattacharya, Padmanath, 'Folk-custom and Folk-lore of the Sylhet district in India', *Man in India*, Vol. X, Nos. 2-4, 1930, p.117.
51. Das, Tarak Chandra, 'Sun worship amongst the aboriginal tribes of Eastern India', *Journal of the Department of Letters*, Vol. II, 1924, p. 91; Risley, H. H., *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. II, Calcutta, 1891, p.70.