

Rekha Temples of Bengal : Re-confirming the Harmony between Man and Cosmos

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Abstract

Using an examination of the Rekha temples of Bengal as a vehicle, this paper attempts to demonstrate a symbolic correspondence between the universe, a human being and architecture. In establishing this symbolic correspondence the paper reveals one of many ways of interpreting meaning in architecture and discloses the surprisingly complex symbolism of the architecture of the Rekha temple. In Indian tradition the structure of the cosmos as a whole becomes the paradigmatic model of each and every entity within the cosmos. This view posits that a human being, a microcosm, is an integral part of the entire universe, the macrocosm, and that a microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm. This microcosmic and macrocosmic correspondence is projected in the architecture. There thus exists a homologous relationship between the macrocosm, the microcosm and architecture. Through this homologous relationship, architecture *re-confirms* a bond between the cosmos and a human being.

The Rekha Temples of Bengal

The Rekha temple type is one of the most common early Hindu temple style found in Bengal.¹ It reached its zenith in Medieval Bengal. Examples of this temple type which survive in Bengal cover a period from the seventh century to the late eighteenth century.² Rekha temples are generally referred to as *rekha deul*. The Bengali term "*deul*" means "temple", and is a derivative of the Sanskrit term *devakula*³, meaning "belonging to the divinities or celestials". The rekha deul of Bengal are described in the ancient architectural manuals, the Silpasasra⁴ as "*nagara*" (North-Indian) temples.⁵ These temples, however, are not unique to Bengal, they are found in Orissa and are common in many other parts of India.

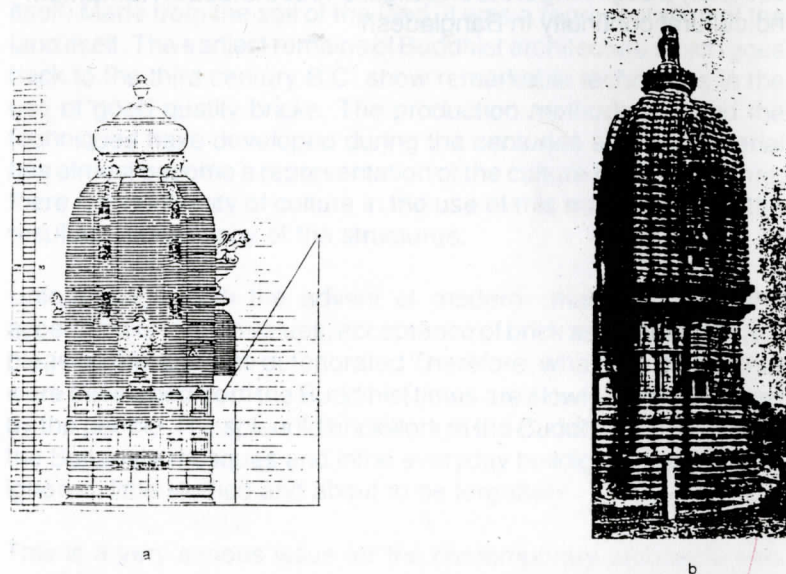


Fig. 1a. Rekha temple from the Silpasarini Silpasasra (Boner, 1975, pl. f. p. 75); b. Rekha temple from Bengal (Michell, 1983)

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A Rekha temple has a pillar-like structure, with a square sanctum and vertical projections from the base to the tower. The lofty curvilinear tower *sukanasa sikhara* gradually diminishes at the apex and is crowned with a large *amalaka sila* (ribbed coping-stone) which carries a *kalasa* (pitcher shaped) finial. The temple's richly ornamented, hollow, pillar-like superstructure conspicuously celebrates the vertical. The slender and elegant Rekha temples may have square, cruciform or polygonal (octagonal, dodecagonal etc.) plan forms.

The main body of the temple is an elaborate structure usually referred to as the *prasada*. While the classical Indian Rekha temple has a porch or "front hall", *mukhasala* attached to the *prasada*, in Bengal the *prasada* usually stands alone.

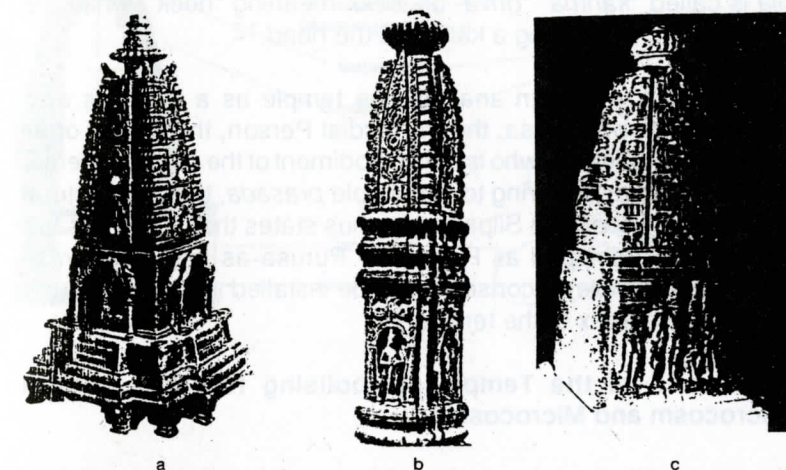


Fig. 2. Model of votive Rekha temples: a. Dinajpur, Bangladesh (Saraswati, 1976, pl. VII. 14); b. Jhewari, Chittagong, Bangladesh (ibid., pl. VII. 15); c. India (Michell, 1977, p.87).

Macrocosmic and Microcosmic Correspondence

In the traditional Indian view the macrocosm is the entire universe, while a microcosm is a human being who is an integral part of the entire universe. There exists a direct correspondence between the macrocosm and a microcosm. One of the symbols used in Indian Hindu and Buddhist literature to establish an analogical relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm is that of *meru*. The macrocosm, the universe, is said to be centered around the cosmic column, Mount Meru, and the microcosm, a human body, is said to be centered around the spinal column, *merudanda* (meaning meru column).⁶

1. Ahmed, Nazimuddin N., Epic Stories in Terracotta: Depicted on Kantanagar Temple, Bangladesh, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1990, p. 101.
2. McCutcheon, D. Origins and Developments, Brick Temples of Bengal: From the Archives of David McCutcheon, ed. by George Michell, New Jersey: Princeton University press, 1983, p. 18.
3. Saraswati, S.K., Architecture of Bengal, Book 1 (Ancient Phase), Calcutta: Mukherjee G. K. Roy, Bharadwaj G. and Co., 1976, p. 47.
4. Silpasasra are the manuals of traditional Indian artists and architects.
5. Saraswati, S.K. Bengal, Book 1 (Ancient Phase, Calcutta: Mukherjee, Bharadwaj and Co., 1976, p. 47 op cit; Datta, B. K., Bengal Temples, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1975, p. 25 ff; Michell, G. The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms, London: Paul, E 1977, p. 86 ff. The Silpasasra, classify the Indian temples into main three types: nagara; dravida; and vesara. Although the styles are sometimes classified by their shapes (nagara as quadrangular, dravida as octagonal, and vesara as round) they are most often classified by their geographic origin (nagara belongs to the North, vesara and dravida belong to the South). However, the styles are found all over the Indian Sub-continent. Manasara, XVIII, 90-102; Silparatna, XVI, 40-50; Kamikagama, LXV, 6-7, 12-18; Supabedagama, XXXI, 37-39, cited in Acharya, P.K., An Encyclopedia of Hindu Architecture, Bhopal: J.K. Publishing House, 1978, p. 260 Indian architecture according to Manasara Silpasasra, Patna: Indian India, Indological Publishers, 1979, p. 176 ff.; and also see Kramrisch, S., The Hindu Temple, vol. 1 & Vol. 2, Motilal Banarsidass Delhi, Varansi, Patna, 1976, p. 286 ff.
6. Sri-Samputika cited in Dasgupta, Shashi Bhusan, An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1958, pp 146 ff.
7. Samhita Brhat, LV 17 f., Matsyapurana, CCLXIX, cited in Kramrisch, op. cit. 1976, p. 161.

8. Bhuvanapradipa, XV. 14 Bose, Nirmal Kumer Canons of Orissa Architecture, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1982.
9. Bhuvanapradipa, XV. 12 Bose, N. K. ibid.
10. Bhuvanapradipa, XV. 13 Bose, N. K. ibid.
11. Bhuvanapradipa, XV. 10 Bose, N. K. ibid.
12. See Silpasarini in Boner, Alice, Extract from the Silpasarini, Studies in Temple Architecture, ed. by Chandra P. American Institute of Indian Studies New Delhi 1975, pp 75-79; Boner, Sarma and Das, 1972, pp. 240, 244; Kramrisch. et al. op. cit. 1976, n. 206, p. 359. Similar references to the name of the elements of the temple gives of the Vastuvidya, cited in Sompura, Prabhaskar O., The Vastuvidya of Visvakarma, Studies in Temple Architecture, ed. by Chandra, P. New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1975, p. 51; Boner, Alice and Sarma, Sadasiva Rath, Silpa Prakasa of Ramacandra Kaulacara, Leiden: Brill EJ, 1966, p xxxviii.
13. Silparatna, XVI. 114, cited in Kramrisch, 1976 ibid page 359 also see chandra, Promod, 1975, ibid, The Temple as Purusa.
14. Kramrisch, Stella, ibid 1976, p. 350.
15. Skandha Purana, XII. 9-23, Kramisch 1976 ibid. 356, also in Snodgrass, Adrian, The Symbolism of the Stupa, Ithaca. New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1985, p. 250; 1990; p. 139.
16. ibid p. 345; Snodgrass, Kramisch 1985, n 15 p. 250.
17. Kramisch 1976 ibid p. 351, also see Snodgrass, Time and Eternity: Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Building, vol. 1 & 2, sata-pitaka series, Indo-Asian Literatures, Volume 356, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1990, pp. 132 & 140.

Rekha Temples as a Representation of the Macrocosm

Temples in the Indian tradition are perceived as cosmic mountains. There are therefore many temples called Meru, Mandara or Kailasa,⁷ the names of the cosmic mountains. Rekha temples specifically are referred to by one of the ancient architectural manuals, the Bhuvanapradipa Silpasastra, as Meru,⁸ Maha-Meru⁹ Mandara,¹⁰ and Kailasa.¹¹

Rekha Temples as a Representation of a Microcosm

The Rekha temple is analogically viewed as a practitioner of yoga, yogapurusa, who is seated cross-legged in yogic contemplation. The elements of the temple are referred to with the same terms as those used for the body of the practitioner of yoga: the base of the temple is called "*jangha*" the "legs" or "shins", the vertical body rising towards the *amalaka-sila* is called the "*skandha*", and the *amalaka-sila* is called "*kantha*" "*griva*" or "*beki*" meaning "neck"; while the *amalaka-sila* supporting a kalasa is the head.¹²

Reinforcing this human analogy, the temple as a whole is also considered to be Purusa, the Primordial Person, the Father of all beings, the archetype, who is the embodiment of the entire universe, the macrocosm. Referring to the temple *prasada*, the architectural manual, the Silparatna Silpasastra, thus states that "The Prasada should be worshipped as Purusa"¹³ Purusa as *prasada-purusa* (Lord of the temple) is considered to be installed in the *kalasa* (the pitcher at the apex of the temple).¹⁴

The Crown of the Temple symbolising the Sun in both Macrocosm and Microcosm

The crown of the temple consists of the *amalaka-sila* (clogged ring-stone) and the *kalasa* (pitcher). The shape of the *amalaka-sila* is like the fruit of the Amalaka tree, the celestial tree, which is the embodiment of the Hindu trinity: the Amalaka tree embodies Visnu at its base, Siva at a higher level, and Brahma at its summit. The leaves, flowers and fruits of the tree represent the celestial beings (*deva*), and on its branches rests the Sun.¹⁵

The attainment of awakening by a yogic practitioner is symbolically represented by the crowning of his/her body by the Sun. The crowning of the Rekha temple by the Sun is thus analogous to both the crowning of Mount Meru, the macrocosmic axis, by the Sun and the crowning of the *merudanda* the microcosmic axis of spinal column of an awakened human being, by the Sun.

The Lotus Symbolising the Sun in the Macrocosm and a Microcosm

The *amalaka-sila* is carved like a lotus and radiates from the centre

like the rays of the sun, so that "The disc of the sun looks like the pericarp of the sky-lotus of which the petals are the directions of the compass and the filaments the solar ray;"¹⁷

In Indian tradition the Sun and the lotus are analogous symbols.¹⁸ The interpretation of the *amalaka-sila* as a lotus suggests that the temple, the meru pillar, is also a lotus pillar. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad refers to the *amalaka-sila* as the lotus at the summit of heaven, the cosmic region: "The *Amalaka* ring-stone on the shaft of

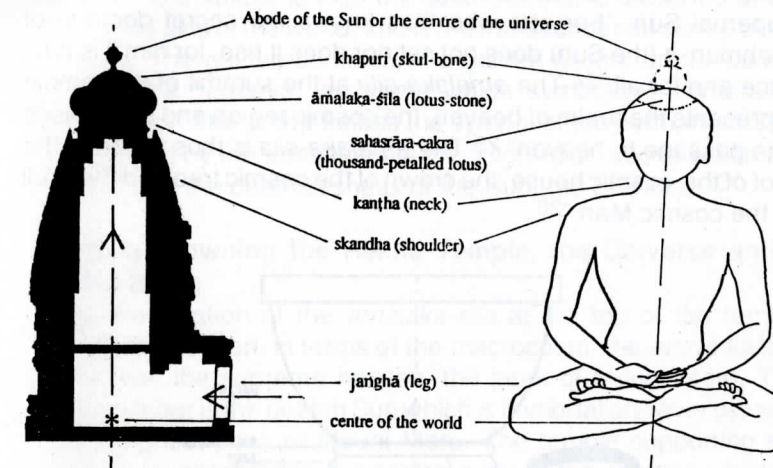


Fig. 3 An analogy between a Rekha temple (after Michell, 1977, p.70) and a yogapurusa (author).

the Pillar of the Sikhara symbolises the celestial region where the rays of the sun spread like the filaments of the lotus of the Zenith.¹⁹ The lotus depicted in the *amalaka-sila* at the zenith of the temple is the "*sahasrara-kamala*" the "thousand-petalled lotus."

In the practice of yoga, the human subtle body is assumed to consist of a number of energy centres called *cakra* placed one above another along the spinal column, the *merudanda*. The *sahasrara-cakra* is the top most cakra of the human subtle body located at the peak of *merudanda* the location which coincides with the human skull. The *sahasrara-cakra* is referred to as a *sahasrara-kamala* a thousand-petalled lotus. The awakening of a yogic practitioner is depicted as the blooming of the thousand-petalled lotus at the crown of the head of human body. The *amalaka-sila* in the form of the lotus at the summit of the Rekha temple is thus analogous to the thousand-petalled lotus at the crown of an awakened human being.

18. For more details see Zimmer, Heinrich, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, Spiritual Disciplines, ed. by Joseph Campbell, Bolling Series VI, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, p. 90; 1968, The Art of Indian Art, Its Mythology and Transformations, vol. 1 & 2, completed and ed. by Joseph Campbell, Bolling Series XXXIX, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp 158-213; Snodgrass, op. cit. 1985, p. 97; also see Chakma, Kabita, The Cosmic Symbolism of the Traditional Architecture of Bengal, M. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1993, p. 175.
19. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, VI. 3.6, cited in Kramrisch, Stella, op. cit. 1976, p. 351.
20. The Silpasarini Silpasastra States that the stone should be carved as lotus petals. See Boner, op. cit. Silpasarini, Studies in Temple Architecture, ed. by Chandra Pramod, New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies 1975, p. 79.
21. Boner, Alice, Sarma, Sadasiva Rath & Das, Rajendra Prasad, New Lights on the Sun Temple of Konaraka, Varanasi : Chowkhamba Publications, 1972, p. 220. For details see the extracts from the Baya Cakada, Leaf L. 13.; Boner 1966, p. xl.
22. Aitareya Brahmana, XIV. 6.44, Commentary, cited in Kramrisch, op. cit. 1976, p. 355.
23. Chandogya Upanishad, III. 113 cited in Kramrisch, op. cit. 1976, p. 355.
24. Kramrisch, Stella, Ibid 1976, p. 35.
25. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., Selected Papers, vol 1 & 2, ed. by Roger Lipsey, Bollingen series: LXXXIX, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, 1 p. 469.
26. The Silpasarini refers to the Kalasa as having six parts: garbha, dori, saraba, bala and dhvaja-danda, Boner, op. cit. 1975, p. 77..

KALASA

BALA NUPRI

KANJI

PATI CUMBAKA LOHA

SHAKHANA U

JAGRATI

BALA

BATHAMUDHANI

BATTI

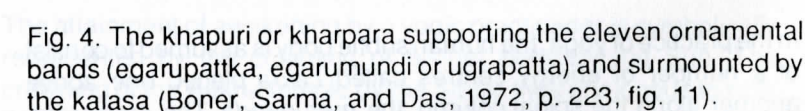
BACHAKUMBHA

BATTI CUMBAKA LOHA

KHAPURI

CUMBAKA LOHA

a



The kalasa (pitcher) as the Womb of the Sun

The *amalaka-sila* holds at its centre the pitcher (*kalasa*), painted in a golden coloured material, which is also called *amṛta-kalasa*, the pitcher of ambrosia, the life bestowing nectar. The dark interior of the golden pitcher *kalasa*, the top-most element of the temple, is referred to as "*garbha*", "womb",²⁷ and represents the "cosmic

The Sun Crowning the Rekha Temple, the Universe and a Human Being

While the location of the *amalaka-sila* at the top of the temple symbolises heaven, in terms of the macrocosm, the *amṛta-kalasa* symbolises the supreme heaven, the peak of Mount Meru. The golden pitcher is the golden Sun which is immortal and ever present on the highest peak of Mount Meru. The temple supporting the golden sun is likened to the central pillar of the cosmos which is described as “the pillar of light, extending downwards from the sun in the zenith and rests on the earth.”³¹ The *amalaka-sila*, the sky-lotus of the Rekha temple, is thus illuminated by the Sun, the *kalasa*. In this way, the Sun is the crown of the Rekha temple, the crown of the universe (the macrocosm) and the crown of a human being (the microcosm).