

VISUAL NARRATIVES OF MONUMENTS AS AUTHORISING DISCOURSES: REPRESENTATION OF EARLY MODERN TEMPLES OF BENGAL THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS¹

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Proliferation of temple building activities in Bengal can be witnessed during the late medieval and early modern period (sixteenth to nineteenth century CE) which is marked also by the transition from pre-colonial to colonial, pre-modern state and governance to modernity as a way of living, cultivating the self and govern mentality. The documentation and representation of these temples began initially with drawings and sketches prepared during surveys by company officials. The photography, as a mode of documentation, brought paradigmatic shifts in the way the temples were represented, reproduced, identified, and consumed not necessarily as signatures of the past that needed to be preserved and conserved. The incorporation of photography as an essential modality of recording monuments, first as manually reproducible replication and recently as digitally manageable and accessible records of the past, transformed the aura of authenticity and perceptions of the spatio-temporality.

The essay aims at delving into the historicity of the transformation of the photographic representation of the temples as sacred monuments, as heritage, and as commodities. In most cases, the rituals, embodied practises, and dynamic landscape and complex settlement contexts are excluded from these narratives. In fact, the journey of temples through photographs is deeply embedded in the ways in which the identities of individuals are in relation to the past and to the current transient yet powerful virtual media. In this sense, photography as a survey modality has also changed the ways and means in which the narratives of sacredness of a monument are turned into the narratives of identities, their assertion and/or subversion, and secular desire for popular consumption.

Photographs, thus, have been essentially entangled with the construction, representation and management of the authorized and authoritative heritage discourses. The paper also attempts to trace the differences and commonalities in the representation of monuments in the academia, in public sphere and in institutional domain in political spaces of present Bangladesh and West Bengal, India, which have gone through continuous changes in their identity and boundary during last century. At the same time, the paper engages with the narratology of visual representation of past at the present in terms of both 'religious' and the 'secular', 'institutionalized' and 'popular', and above all, discursive and performative.

It would be tried to illustrate that particular visual narratives are being constructed through selective ways of seeing and photographing in reference to the temples to fit the dominating narratives of heritage, nationalism, and agency. On the contrary, the idea and actions pertaining to the desire and performances in order to protect, preserve and represent the 'sacred monuments' as heritage and as an essential embodiment of particular perception of past have also been manufactured and circulated with the mediation of the selective manipulation of visuals. Finally, the essay is an attempt to reflect upon the history of the use of a particular modality of recording historical monuments in intimate relation to social, political, religious and regional contexts in changing spatiality, temporality and govern mentality in/of Bengal.

Photography as or within the survey modality of temples:

The year 1839, is often considered as the birth of practical photography. This medium came to India with the company officials. Photographs primarily came to be used as means of documenting India's past, and use it to 'create' and 'write' the chronological and temporal history of India. Of all that was recorded, the architectural monuments were seen as the most crucial link in their connection with the past. According to Maria Antonella Pelizzari, "Survey photographs of Indian architecture had a dual function: accurate delineation and the prevention of decay by bringing the perilous state of these runs to wider awareness".² Most scholars however agree, that photographs came to be believed as the most 'authentic' and 'accurate' derivative of survey modality and hence would result in writing of the most credible and temporal history of the Indians for them.

Photographs are often assumed to be the true and real representation of what is being shown. It is just the 'exact' object/monument as seen. There is practically no difference between what is represented and its representation. Hence, it is an objective evidence of the piece of past with practically 'no' error. It's the most non-biased representation and therefore, doesn't provide with any independent meaning to the object of representation.

On the contrary, photographs stand as the most imposing testimony of 'monumentalization' of a site/monument/object. In fact, if delved cautiously it can be noticed that photographs are rather a selective process. Not all is shown or seen through the photographs. Photographs in their initial stages of role building, did construct a selective 'gaze' for the viewer by default and now with the coming of digital photographs the process is even more manipulative in the systematization of a particular narrative. This narrative is predetermined consciously or unconsciously by the set objectives of its supposed use in a book, museum, archive, exhibition or a private collection.

In case of the Bengal temples this process of narrative building through photographs began only during the 1970's. Some of the pioneers in this field were David McCutcheon, Mukul Dey and Tarapda Santra. Even though, James Fergusson did survey some of the temples from Bengal



Plate 44.1: Kantaji temple



Plate 44.2: Lithographic image of a Bengal temple.



Plate 44.3: Shyam Raya temple.



Plate 44.4: Rasa Mandala, Shayam Raya temple, Bishnupur.

region, a scanty mention of which can be found in his book *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*. He refers to the famous Kantaji Nagar Temple in Dinajpur district of Bangladesh (**Plate 44.1**) in the book and describes it as—

“Its leading characteristic is the bent cornice, copied from the bamboo huts of the natives...No stone is used in the building, and the whole surface is covered with designs in terra-cotta, partly conventional, and these are frequently repeated, as they may be without offence to taste... In execution they display an immeasurable inferiority to the carvings on the old films in Orissa or in Mysore”.³

However, even before an attempt is made to understand and interpret the work of these scholars, it’s crucial to find answer some of the questions related to photographs of the temples, thereby facilitating the understanding of their role in establishing the authorized discourse.



Plate 44.5: Entrance to a stall representing the Keshta Raya Jor-Bangla temple at Bishnupur Mela.



Plate 44.6: Miniature models of the temples of Bishnupur as memento.



Plate 44.7: Entrance hording at the Bishnupur Mela.



Plate 44.8: Miniature representations of popular temples of Bishnupur within the town.



Plate 44.9: Postal Stamp issued by Government of Bangladesh of Kantaji temple.

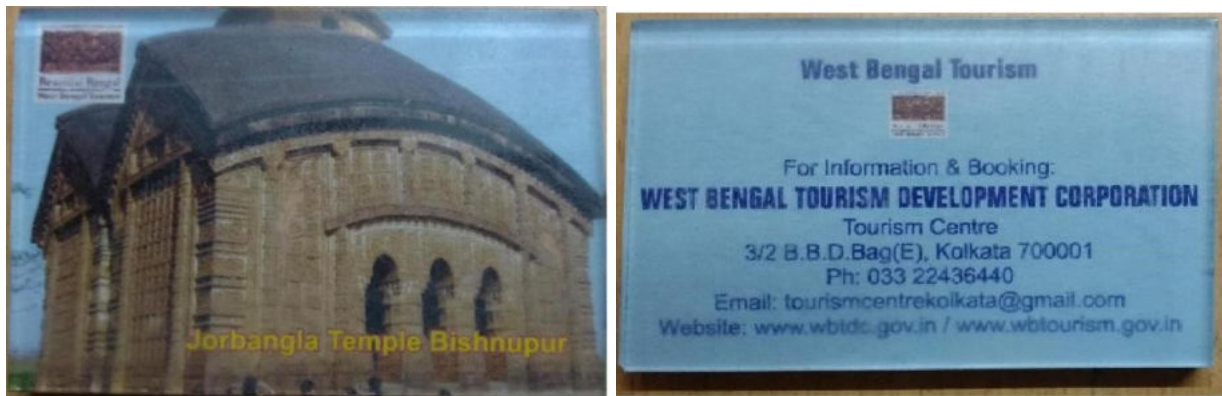


Plate 44.10: Paper weight for sale by the Government of West Bengal.

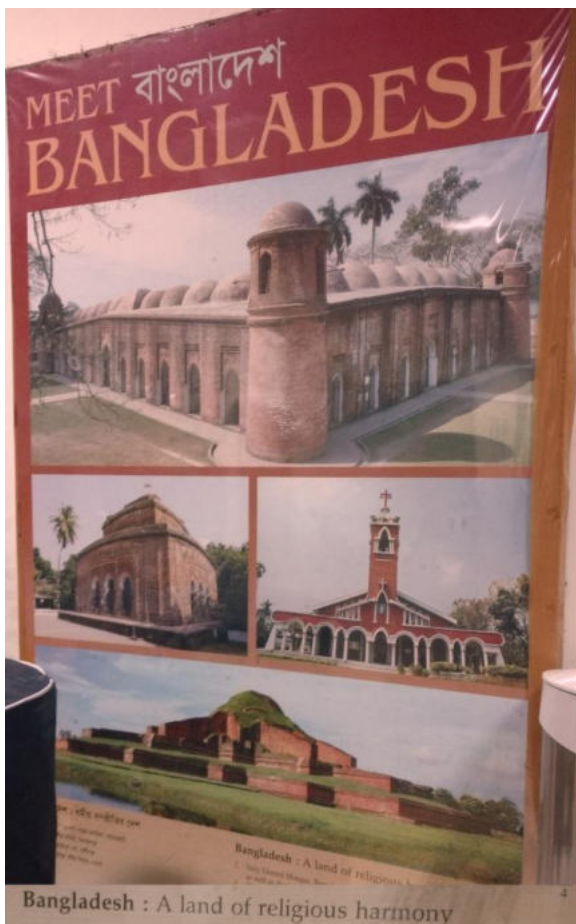


Plate 44.11: Poster of different religious monuments in Bangladesh present at Bangladesh High Commission, New Delhi.

Why at all was there a desire/need to document the temples of Bengal? Why were photographs thought to be the sole medium of doing so? Is the process of documenting selective or unscrupulous? If selective then what premeditated factors regulate it? What is documented of the 'chosen' temples? What would the photographs be used for?

Historicity of documentation of early modern temples of Bengal:

Photographs capture a moment in time to create a memory - of a noun, a verb and an adjective. This generates a memory of the past in the present. In this case, it is the late medieval and early modern Bengal temples. These temples were constructed during the medieval times after the advent of Gaudiya or Neo-Vaishnavism introduced by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. They continued to be built till the early modern times, covering a very socially, politically and religiously dynamic time period.

and identity. This, pre-eminent premise guided the scholars of the late 20th century with respect to the Bengal temples as well.

Predecessors like James Fergusson, formulated the 'stimulating' theoretical ideas behind surveying, particularly the religious monuments from the past and present it to the natives - their history, heritage

Temples are the most engaging tangible fragments of the past, that are capable of arising the collective conscious of the region, as well as the nation, of the rich cultural heritage to which they were the successors. The process of documentation initially began with drawings and sketches (**Plate 44.2**) and later shifted to photographs. The photographs, made the monument easily and constantly available to a viewer at a different time and place. Multiple reproductions of a photograph were capable of transgressing the spatio-temporal boundaries and in the entire representation become multifaceted. Photographs brought a paradigmatic shift in the way the temples were seen - from being just ruins from the past with which the natives co-existed, to a very meaningful testimony from the past and hence the need to photograph them. It could also be used not only to document but also as proof of the not progressive but the regressive pathways that aesthetically were far more inferior to the temple architectural styles from where they had been adopted.

Of all the mediums that were employed as a part of survey modality, photographs were seen as most meaningful and imperative of them all. The visual narrative, that photographs were capable of establishing, could not be achieved by any other means including sketches, lithographs and drawings. The advantages which photographs had over other mediums were several. The numerous copied that could be made from a single negative of photographic film was the most crucial of them all. This multiple availability meant that the temple acquired a transcendental character of its own- a character which was under multiple 'gazes' that were engaged in complex 'meaning making' processes to suit their respective aspirations. This has been correctly pointed out by Edward Said as, "Images are constants, the ideas they legitimate take on different forms and values".⁴

Besides, the portability of photographs meant that it could be transported and accommodated into multiple spaces simultaneously- book, exhibition or archive. Additionally, it was believed that, photographs of the temple from numerous perspectives were qualified in showcasing several nuances through the lenses that were otherwise not visible to the naked eyes. In this process, the photographs secured the trust of scholars and layman alike as the most genuine and trustworthy vehicle for their verification of the history of Bengal.

How does photography relate the observer to the observed?

What is the role of a photographer in the photograph that he/she clicks of a temple site? Is photographer just a mediator? Is his task only confined to dispensing a representation of a temple through photographs? To think on those lines would mean to negate the possibility of any pro-active role of the photographer in discourse building process surrounding the temples of early modern Bengal in particular and the Bengal history in general.

In case of documentation, the purpose of the photographer should be both subjective as well as objective. It may seem that the photographer's task is merely to record/document the temples and create a visual data base for further scholarly endeavours. On the contrary, the

photographer is solely responsible in the re(presentation) of the temples to the viewer. Through what is being displayed in the photograph, stages the foundation for what will be interpreted from it. Practically, all dimensions involving the intelligentsia- which includes meanings, contexts, emotions, applicability and purpose, are all to a considerable extent stimulated by the photographer alongside the already present bias of the viewer. The photographer galvanizes both consciously and unconsciously what he/she understands of the temple in relation to already present prejudice. In a way the photographer shapes and reshapes the association of the viewer through his photograph. The photographer is not aware in most cases of the vital role that he plays in the history and narrative building process.

Documentation and the physical attributes of late medieval Bengal temples:

The early modern temples of Bengal run in thousands. The medium of construction is brick and replicates the domestic thatched hut roofs of the region. They are often referred by scholars as presenting a vernacular idiom. These brick temples borrowed the arcuate technique of construction introduced by the Muslim rulers. These temples usually have slanted roofs with curved cornices and arched entrances. The temple building process also witnessed a continuous series of experimentation with the style, but not the technique. An additional and unique characteristic of these temples is that they were profusely decorated with terracotta plaques on the surface (**Plate 44.3**). The themes of the plaques were both religious and secular in nature. The secular themes were represented at the bottom, separated usually by a geometrical pattern from the religious themes, which dominated the façade decoration.

The temples prior to the period under consideration were both stone and brick built that were heavily influenced from the North Indian style of temple architecture in particular the Orissan style.⁵ These temples that mushroomed across the Bengal landscape during the 14th-15th century CE looked nothing like their predecessors. They caught the attention of early surveyors like James Fergusson, but selectively. This selective process was a pre-determined act based on the size of the temple or the exhaustive terracotta decoration on the temple façade. Most of the temples that were built were usually not very big in size because of the architectural techniques that were employed making them not very suitable to take the enormous weight of the structure, as can be seen from the famous Kantaji Temple which partially collapsed because of an earthquake.

Selective process of visual documentation:

Photographic documentation of the Bengal temples most exhaustively began only from the 1970's onwards. The initial motivation of this was to have an idea of the different types of temple designs which the patrons had constructed. In due course the terracotta decoration got included. These decorations then began a trend of interpretation and analysis of the themes as religious and secular.⁶ The religious themes became a very keen area of interest as most scholars tried to connect them with the corresponding narrative within a particular scripture (**Plate 44.4**).

In fact, this dimension of the temple became the most prominent area of research and hence the virtual documentation was more 'religio-centric' and 'monument-centric' in nature. The landscape, the patrons, the rituals, the visitors, the local residents were all conveniently annihilated from this documentation process.

The process of photographic attestation by company officials had begun from completely different idea/ motivation- recording the past and presenting before the natives the 'true' history. Also, the stimulus for cataloguing of the temples initially began as temple enthusiasts, which soon transformed to scholarly proficiency. Gradually with the notion of identity becoming more extensive, the temples got transformed as one of the core elements of Bengal's regional history and uniqueness. However, Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal⁷ was an exception in the way the study of the temples was interpreted by him.

The studies on the temples were more linear in their approach and the photographs were the most important aids in this endeavour. They became the 'only' and 'true' witnesses to the past glory of the region, which most scholars working on these temples felt the need to keep them as references from the past. Photographs are still taken of these temples, but the shift in time and values of the monuments can be validated by observing the purpose for which they are documented. The association of temples as symbols of pride and its reiteration via multiple forms of representation (particularly visual) brings about an unexceptional shift in the way the temples are understood. The aspirations determine its multiple manifestations. The famous Keshtaraya Jor-Bangla temple from Bishnupur of Bankura district in West Bengal is a living testimony to such varied manifestation as marks of past history through multiple manifestations. This temple is the most famous and visited 'touristic' temple sites in all of Bengal. It is represented and displayed at both micro and macro levels all over Bengal. Right from the annual Bishnupur *Mela* (fair), its posters and gate entrances, the by lanes of this dusty temple town, the souvenirs found at the *mela* to even the West Bengal government tourism department uses different representations of this temple to promote a sense of pride and belonging to this temple (**Plates 44.5-44.8**).

The purpose of a research scholar could be completely different from that of a tourist or a photographer from a local photo studio, not only in terms of what is being pictures through the photographs, but also the subsequent meaning making that will be cultured from it. For the researcher the Bengal temples are there photographs are a visual database which would be used to draw art-historical or ethnographic conclusions. In such a situation the photographs would focus on the iconographic/architectonics or the covert and overt relationship of the temples to its surrounding. This would cover the temples from a close-up to the panoramic. On the other hand, to the tourist these Bengal temples are just one of the several places that he/she had planned to visit while planning a vacation. Here the photograph would usually be the temple acting as a picturesque background with the tourist in the foreground. The photograph clicked at/of the

monument is a memento of the visit to relive later and to the photographer its only a structure that holds a tangible monetary value if appropriately exploited by selling it as souvenirs on mugs, posters and even stamps or paper weight or a tapestry backdrop for those coming to get their pictured clicked at his studio. Similar is the story for Kanataji temple in Dinajpur district of Bangladesh. This temple has been and continues to be a symbol nationalistic pride for the country. Such representations are premeditated and well-constructed with a predetermined agenda and hence establishing the dominant narrative (**Plates 44.9-44.11**).

Concluding remarks:

The early Bengal temples thus emerged as consciously created images of the nation state and national identity as a result of the photographic journey which they had to undergo through the process of documentation. Through the photographs the identity is reshaped, reconstructed and re-appropriated. The representation of the monument through photographs at multiple places and multi purposes helps in the construction of the identity. However, the monument usually disassociated from its surroundings, people and ritual. This selective process and the construction of the identity surrounding the early modern Bengal temples is precarious in nature, but unfortunately that is how the dominant visual discourse surrounding the temple has been constructed over the years. The negation of several key components within the firmly established dominant narrative is acutely ambiguous. It in turn creates the need for using not only the visual re(presentations) but also the topographical and ethnographical references to prepare both the identity and dominant discourse which makes more ‘sense’.

Notes and References:

1. I had presented this paper at an international conference organized by Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology, University of Dhaka, at Dhaka during May 2017. I have however included several additional points, observations and interpretations to this article.
2. Maria Antonella Pelizzari, 2013, *Traces of India: Photography and The Architecture of India*, Montreal: Mapin, p. 33.
3. J. Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 1876; rpt, Delhi: Low Price Publication, 2012, vol. II, pp.159-161.
4. Edward Said, “‘Forward’ in, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscover of India and the East, 1680-1880*’ by Raymond Schwab, of *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation*, ed. Maria Antonella Pelizzari, Ahmadabad: Mapin Publishing, 2003, p. 88.
5. The Orissan temple architecture falls under the broader category of North Indian or *Nagara* temple architecture style. Under the Orissan architecture the *Shikhara* is curvilinear with a very broad *Amlaka* on top and the temple is referred to as the *Rekha Deul*.

6. The temples are profusely decorated with terracotta plaques with both secular and religious themes. Usually, the façade is covered and the other three sides are left plain. However, there are also some temples, like the Keshtaraya temple and Shayamaraya temple, which have terracotta plaques not only on the façade, but also on the other three sides and the interiors as well. The religious themes dominate over the secular ones. The secular themes comprise of hunting scenes and scenes from the daily life of the villagers and are placed at the base frieze. They are separated from the religious scenes by a distinctive line of floral or geometric patterned terracotta plaques. The deity inside the sanctum determines the religious scripture that would be adopted to represent through the terracotta plaques, for example a temple dedicated to Krishna would have scenes from childhood, *Raslila* and the different *Avatars* of Vishnu.
7. It was Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal alone who makes an exception in the way he documented the temples and the interpretation he drew from them. Right from his unpublished doctoral thesis to all that he subsequently wrote, his other books and essays that he wrote, he constantly attempted to present an ethnographical analysis of the late medieval Bengal temples. His research often dealt about of the social and caste background of the patrons, the differences in the preference they had of a particular temple type over others, location of later temples, shift in the choices of deity. He also emphasized on how with the arrival of the British in Bengal created a situation for some form of social mobility that can be observed with the mercantile community earning power, prestige and wealth as a result of this association.