

A
DEUL
STORY



A WEALTH OF RELICS LIE SCATTERED IN AN OFTEN FORGOTTEN,
LONG OVERLOOKED DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL. CALL IT
PURULIA'S REDISCOVERY, IF YOU MAY. TEXT &
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **AMITABHA GUPTA**

Iland in Purulia on a cold winter morning. I am visiting the district as part of a project funded by the West Bengal Wikimedians user group, which is affiliated with the not-for-profit Wikimedia Foundation, to document its heritage spots.

Purulia district, then known as Manbhum, was transferred to the Chhota Nagpur division of Bihar after the state's creation in 1912. In 1956, it became a part of West Bengal and was renamed Purulia. Though there is barely any written evidence of its ancient history, the most prominent record is that of King Rudra of the Shikhara dynasty who helped the Pala King Ramapala (11th–12th century) of Bengal crush the Varendra rebellion. Ramapala's court poet, Sandhyakar Nandi, mentioned Rudra Shikhara in his epic poem *Ramacharitam*.

The Jain Tirthankar statue in a temple at Deuli; and (above) two deul temples at Para

Many scholars believe that a trade route passed through Purulia. The district's temples and deities are mainly Brahmanical but have Jain influences at several places like Telkupi, Pakbirra, Deulghata, Budhpur and Suissa.

Laden with my photography equipment, I set off to nearby Raghunathpur on the first day. It proves to be a fruitful excursion, with the *deul* temples of Banda and Para stealing the show. Their architecture has a clear Odisha influence. Para has three temples, the oldest being a stone structure that is 40-foot-high. Its walls are decorated with a variety of sculptures depicting social life and floral designs that have eroded over time. People from the Jain community are believed to have constructed the temple. Adjacent to it lies a 45-foot-tall brick temple, with exquisite designs



on its walls. The third temple is much smaller and positioned between local houses.

The *deul* of Banda is perhaps one of the most attractive historical structures of Purulia. It has a single cell and a pillared stone *mandapa* in the front. The temple, which is under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), is 72 feet tall and has beautiful decoration on all four walls.

The villages Cheliama and Achkoda showcase *aatchala*-style temples with terracotta work on the walls. The temple at Cheliama contains terracotta panels that depict scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Many of the original panels have eroded and been distastefully replaced with modern terracotta ones by local authorities. The local historian Subash Ray shows me some medieval Jain and Hindu statues made of stone near the local Mahamaya temple.

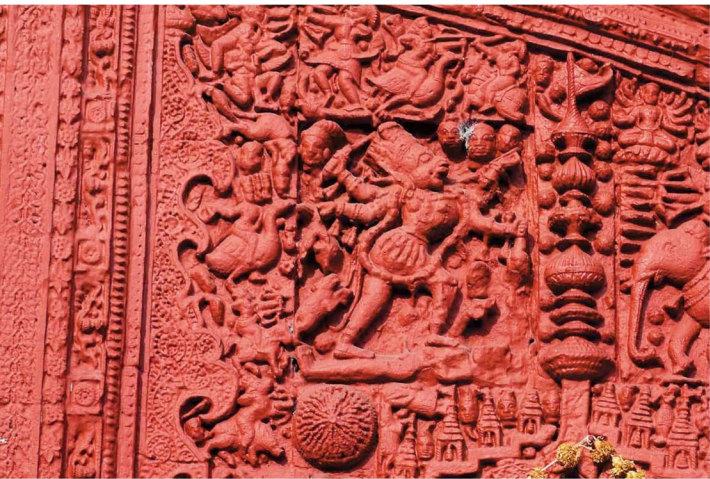
Thankfully, there has been no restoration work attempted on the temple at Achkoda, which seems to be at least five centuries old. Its panels are smaller in size and some of them depict tribal life.

At Chara, there once stood seven *deul* temples but today only one remains, and, at Shankara and Haraktore, many age-old idols are stored inside modern temples. They have mostly weathered with time, though the idols at Haraktore are in better shape.

It is assumed that Telkupi was the erstwhile kingdom of Tailakampa. It once boasted the largest number of temples in Purulia, and the finest. However, the decision to build a dam across the Damodar near Panchet in 1957 proved catastrophic.

A semi-submerged temple at Telkupi

In a very Indiana Jones manner, I climb into the inner sanctum of a temple at Deuli to find a massive Jain Tirthankar idol



The terracotta panels on the temple at Cheliama

The river started to engulf the temples, and at present only two remain—that too underwater. No dedicated boat service is available, and travellers can only visit the sites if a local fisherman agrees to ferry them.

Then there is the Bir Stambha or Hero Stone, located outside one of the temples. It serves as a memorial commemorating the death of a hero in battle. Another gem is the presence of many *shivalingams* at Haraktore. These may actually be *banalingams* (naturally created *shivalingams*).

The next day, I start with Deulghata near Ajothya hills. There were once four massive *deul* temples here, of which only two stand today. Several stone idols have been found at Deulghata, which are now stored in a nearby temple. The place is desolate and deep in the forest, but comes alive during Dol Jatra and Tusu festivals. Surprisingly, neither the state archaeology department nor the ASI have undertaken the restoration of these structures.

The masks of Purulia are famous all over the country, and even the world. They, obviously, make great souvenirs. They are created by artisans

from the small village of Chorida. I meet several of them and listen to them speak about their art in great detail. The Rasmancha, which is a historical structure at Begunkodor, is painted in a shocking blue and located inside a busy bazaar. It is a stark contrast to Deulghata, and the scenic drive from Chorida makes the visit all the more memorable.

It starts to rain heavily on the way to Suissa. I miss a few turns and decide to first visit Deuli, which is the farthest site. It has three very basic temples, one of which is in ruins, and, just as I am about to leave for Suissa, a local boy asks me whether I have paid a visit to the deity.

I am puzzled by his query as the two small temples seem to have no cells and the third is in ruins. To my surprise, he asks me to follow him and climbs over the ruins. I oblige and find a chamber inside the temple, accessed through a very small entrance from the upper portion. In a very Indiana Jones manner, I climb into the inner sanctum to find a massive Jain Tirthankar idol. Locals worship this idol as Lord Shiva.

The masks of Purulia are famous all over the world. They are created by artisans from the small village of Chorida

At the next stop, Harup, I only find a Shasan Devi idol under a tree. Shasan Devis are considered attending deities of Jain Tirthankars. And at Suissa, finally, I find a huge collection of black stone idols of various Tirthankars inside a modern temple. I realise if I had visited Suissa first it would have worked better, since it is the deity at Deuli that truly steals the show.

My third day starts with a visit to Mahadev Berra (locally known as Anai Jambad), home to five beautiful Jain Tirthankar statues, worshipped inside a well-maintained Jain temple. Usually the religion doesn't allow non-followers to photograph the interiors, but I am lucky. The worshippers insist that I take photographs and record the rituals.

I reach Krosbjuri, a 55-kilometre drive from Mahadev Berra. It is a state protected site, with some decorated doorframes inside the temples, and motifs

unlike any other in West Bengal. A four-armed idol similar to Kali, a ten-armed goddess and an idol seated on a lotus are all sights to behold. Though locals consider them Hindu idols, in all probability and as believed by many scholars, they are Jain deities. There is also a huge *shivalingam* inside one of the temple sanctums dating to the eighth or ninth century.

After a hurried lunch, I reach Budhpur. The premises of its temple complex are closed and I have to climb a nine-foot-tall wall to enter the compound. The *shivalingam*-style stone object that is worshipped as a deity inside the temple does not actually resemble one. I assume it is a part of a temple pillar. There are several stone idols scattered inside the complex, including two stone Ganesh idols, a Makara idol, and many hero stones. I even find a few *shivalingams*.

Until recently, Pakbirra, which was my next stop,

The renovated Rasmancha at Begunkodar





*The grand **deul** at Banda*

was an open-air museum with huge stone Jain deities placed around three *deul* temples. They appear unique compared to the other temples of Purulia. There is also an approximately eight-foot-tall Jain Tirthankar idol standing in the open. The colossal figure has a lotus on its pedestal. At present all the artefacts are kept in a small museum. Among them,

the deities depict almost all Jain Tirthankar forms.

I take a tea break after visiting Pakbirra. Officially, the tour is over and I have just enough time to reach the bus stand and catch my night ride home.

As I approach my destination, I realise there are plenty of undiscovered heritage sites I am yet to visit in the district. Well, there is always a next time. **!**

THE INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Purulia city is approx. 300km northwest of Kolkata. The most popular and shortest route connecting both places is Champadanga-Arambagh-Kotulpur-Jaypur-Bishnupur-Bankura (bypass)-Natungram-Hura. The best way to reach Purulia is either by **car** or by **train**. Air-conditioned buses don't often ply between the cities.

Train options include the **Howrah Chakradharpur passenger (58011)**, **Howrah Purulia Express (12827)** and **Rupashi Bangla Express (12883)**.

WHERE TO STAY

In Purulia, you can stay at **Hotel Akash Sarovar** (from ₹1,500; near Surya Mandir, East Lake Road; +91-325-2224488/223377/223385,

akashsarovar.com) or **PearlTree Hotels & Resorts** (from approx. ₹3,000; KB City Centre Mall, Deshbandhu road, Munsifdanga; +91-325-2306000, +91-8145001000, **pearltreehotels.com**).

TIPS

>It is better to **hire a car**, preferably an SUV, as the village roads are not in good shape. One can also reach these places in an

autorickshaw or **tuk-tuk**, provided you are ready to face the many bumps and jerks.

>**Keep your Google Maps handy, your phone fully charged and carry a power bank.** Many of the places mentioned here are unknown to local drivers of Purulia city, though with the arrival of more heritage enthusiasts, they are learning fast.

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