



DHAKA MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2003



Puthia Govinda Temple

Up close with terracotta opulence

A few languid steps into Puthia Rajbari, visitors find themselves into the stream of history that evokes powerful emotions allied to some sense of nostalgia. History tinged with the present-day glum mood, yet mixed with the remnants of beauty bathing the Govinda Mondir, one of the old Hindu temples, in Puthia, 16 miles east of Rajshahi city.

Puthia Rajbari, once fascinating, is a large complexa testimony to a unified architectural pattern. At the entry to Puthia, formerly a large estate, stands a towering white stucco temple dedicated to Shiva, modelled on a typical north Indian

design.

To the left of the main façade of a comparatively new palace -- constructed by Rani Hemanta Kumari Devi in 1895 in honour of her mother-in-law Maharani Sharut Sundari Devi -- the Govinda temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna. It follows a typical Hindu temple shape prevalent in Bengal at the time.

Back of the palace stands another Bangla style miniature temple in the shape of a Bengali bamboo hut but built of brick and adorned with some exquisite terracotta designs. Across a large pond to the right of the palace is

another pair of temples exhibiting a variation of styles.

It is next to impossible not to be subjective about the Govinda temple. One can half hope to glimpse the evening beauty of the terracotta façade that glows in the diffused light of twilight -- a time that comes alive with the intervention of the temple bell. Chimes of the bell pull one back into the forgotten ramparts of memory when a cover of darkness falls on the temple.

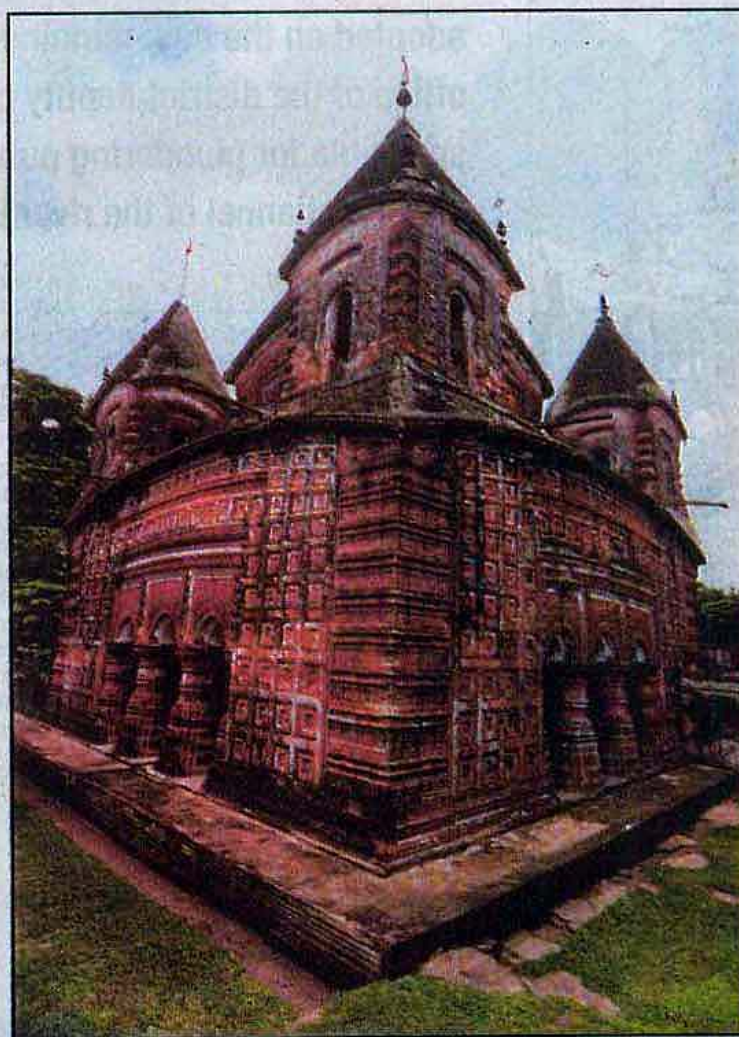
It has many fables to tell -- some half-forgotten through timethe stories spun by locals. Tucked away behind the grandiose palace of the Rajbari that almost fell into ruin, the temple is a stunning tapestry in the backyard -- alone. Earthquakes destroyed other two temples long ago, the local people say.

Like every temple, the Govinda Mondir exudes a sense of solemn mystery, which is intensely felt once inside. This sombre aspect became a uniform feature of Hindu temple architecture, despite extensive variations in designs. One can glide along the memory lane back to the rule of the maharani of the Puthia Estate when overnight worships on special occasions with brilliant illumination added to the pervading mystery. The light covered the delicate tracery of fretted ceilings and motifs on the walls in mythico-religious sanctity. But now only the slanting rays of the afternoon sun suffuse it.

The temple, built sometime between 1823 and 1895, is a 47'-6" square structure rising in two storeys and crowned by a set of ornamental miniature towers, four on each corner of the first storey and a central one crowning the top of the second.

All the doors lead to the main temple chamber where Radha-Krishna images are placed and a staircase in the dark southeast corner of the temple climbs up the wall to the upper floor.

The outer wall surface of the temple is profusely embellished with continuous bands of terracotta panels, one of the remarkable features of late



medieval temples, depicting both figural and floral motifs.

The terracotta art dates back to the Pala-Chandra period when the Buddhists temples at Paharpur, Mainamati and Vasu Bihar and Sitakot were covered in terracotta plaques representing the popular folk art.

The endless panels of Govinda Mondir portray Radha-Krishna images and scenes from the Hindu epics. The effect is more of a richly decorated carpet or embroidered tapestry. The small compositions complete with refined and careful details also depict battle scenes that make a jarring contrast to the images of Radha and Krishna in the idyllic setting.

Imagination finds a free play in

the profusion of figures such as doorkeepers, warriors, archers, dancers, musicians, devotees, birds and animals. The spandrels of the temple with three archways on each side are filled with crisscrosses of floral motifs.

The Govinda Mondir is an epitome of the five-spire temple found in many places like Jessore and Khulna: the Gopalpur temple constructed by Vasanta Roy, uncle of Pratapaditya of Jessore; the Krishna temple at Nalta, the Prana Gopala temple in Gopalganj in Dinajpur; the Siddheswari temple at Naldanga in Jessore, and the Kare Krishna temple in Kanainagar, among others.

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