

A Study on the Unique Architectural Significances of Khelaram Data Temple

Khandokar Mahfuz Alam, Rupali Akter, Imamur Hossain

Abstract— Bangladesh is embellished with a plethora of architectural heritage sites that significantly contributed to shaping the cultural landscape of this country. Temples with heritage significance are the cultural expression and material manifestation that establishes a spatial connection of the traditional 'Sanatan' community of the country with the divine. The temple of Khelaram Data has been restored by the Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Government of Bangladesh, sets an exceptional example not only for its unique architectural features unlike traditional ones but also for embodying a set of cultural meanings, social relationship and heritage values that transcends beyond its materiality. Our discussion centers on a theoretical investigation of these underlying heritage significances by primarily inquiring about the spatial understanding and manifestation of theology that has been reflected in the forms and features. Being one of the most distinctive forms of sacred monuments, we concluded that this brick temple is unique in its articulation and construction. This uniqueness is also featured in its built-form that symbolizes an interim pattern by intermingling Mughal built-form and Colonial functions. Besides these material significances, this study reveals the intangible counterpart focusing how the cultural constitution of 'authenticity' underpinned by oral history contributed as an added value to the heritage significance. Besides serving as the abode of god- a place of worship with spiritual significance, this study also attempts to signify how this temple has impacted the form of a spatial archetype interwoven in an intricate tapestry that constitutes an exceptional vocabulary.

Index Terms— Unique Heritage Significance, Khelaram Data, Aesthetic Value, Historical Significance, Socio-Cultural Significance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Khelaram Data Temple, popularly known as 'Andhar-kotha', situated at the Nawabganj Upazilla of Dhaka can be considered as one of the unique and enthralling temples built in late Mughal and pre-Colonial era. Unlike other notable temples in Bengal, besides serving as a congregational and devotional complex, this temple is unique in its architectural and functional aspects. The edifice of this temple is a material evidence of a living tradition that implies the disappeared and a mythical past. McCutcheon in his studies classified temples in traditional, hut style, Indo-Islamic and European-Influenced styles [1]. While the traditional temples have curvilinear and straight-edge formal expressions, the Hut style is classified in 'Chala' formations signifying the uniqueness of Bengal temple architecture. The Indo-Islamic temples are categorized based on the 'ratna' and dome styles while the European-influenced temples are primarily octagonal, flat-roofed and have porched. Based on these classifications we aimed to reposition our temple in discussion based on its built-forms, features and configurations.

This paper aims to critically reflect upon the attributes that construct the uniqueness of this sanctuary and shapes its aesthetic, historical and socio-cultural significance. The construction technique and the building detail reflects a distinctive principle which represent the ideological premise of the religion blended with local narratives. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section aims to illustrate the historical background and local context of this temple. The second section aims to explore

the analysis of its heritage significance in terms aesthetic, historical and socio-cultural indicators. The third section explains the conservation attempts to restore the dilapidated condition. For this study, besides collecting data, information and responses from the primary sources, the resources from secondary sources as relevant journal articles, documents, government records, and interviews from concerned persons were analyzed.

2 REVISITING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jackson and Henrie have defined temples as 'sacred sites' [2], and Shackley further signifies that temples are 'recognized by individuals or groups as worthy of devotion, loyalty or esteem' [3]. Khelaram Data temple can be considered a divine physical entity that encompasses God's entitlement where worship and ceremonies were orchestrated and have both tangible and intangible expression in terms of its form and rituals. Besides its spiritual significance, this temple also resembles the splendorous architectural magnitude of that era. Mangaonkarin her study shows that during the 16th to 19th century, the region of Bengal has faced multiple influences in the brick-terracotta structures; as a result, a wide range of form and techniques of construction is evident [4].

While investigating the features and notions of temples in the Bengal region, Husain in his studies explored the writings of Sandhyakar Nandi of 11th century that illustrates the temple being the 'ornament of earth' and 'obstructing the very course of the sun with its lofty, imposing towers capped by golden kalasas' [5].

Michell, in his seminal work studied the chronological spans of the temple architectures that contributed to the emergence of a

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new Bengal culture and informs that history of temple architecture in Bengal where the ubiquitous form of God is resembled is divided into three periods as early Hindu, Sultanate and Hindu revival period [6]. This temple in its temporal position belongs to the Hindu revival phase where the Mughal period was on the verge of declination and Colonial regime was about to take its form.

This building was situated beside a large waterbody that was used for worship. Studies from Hossain & Rahman signifies that the location of this temple at 'Kolakopa-Bandura' has a renowned place-identity besides known for trade and business activities for the past 200 years [7]. Among other famous structures and sites adjacent to the temple are the Zaminder house of Brajen Saha (Jaj bari), the house of famous businessman Radhanath Saha (currently known as Adnan Palace Park), Babu Loknath Saha's house (currently known as Maathbari or Telibaari), Painna baari of Modhubabu, Poddar baari and Kaalibari. Besides these famous sites, there are several old structures and math temples are seen in Kolakopa-Bandura region.

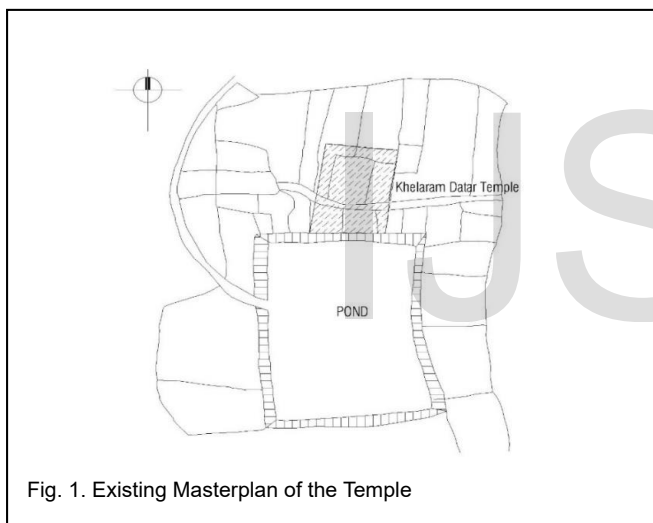


Fig. 1. Existing Masterplan of the Temple

3. EVALUATING THE UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCES OF KHERARAM DATA TEMPLE

The findings from the works of (Ramsay, 1993) endorse the view that assessment of aesthetic significance should be plural and subjective. One of the definitions of heritage significance prioritizes the aesthetic value as the response to visual and non-visual elements that embrace emotional response to the sense of place and the factors that strongly impact human thoughts and feelings.

The architectural features of this temple signify the adherence

to the model derived from core religious ideology and consideration. Hindu philosophy had greatly influenced the temple architecture in its form, ornamental details, and function in Bengal. The meaning of religious materiality and its relation to human experiences have been expressed in elements, material, architectural style, aesthetic patterns, and symbols.

According to the guideline of Burra Charter Australia ICOMOS Incorporated, 2013, while evaluating the cultural significance of this building, it can be assumed that comparing to its concurrent and other regional temples, this temple is unique in the sense that it has an exclusive identity of the definition of built-form, an exceptional historical context which is constructed with local myth blended with material reality and its spiritual significance has created a sense of belongingness and attachment to the community [8]. The unique heritage significance of this temple will be analyzed in this chapter.

3.1 Unique religious significance in the formal articulation

This two-storied temple embodies a formal schema of a cuboidal sanctum where most of the Bengal temples are constructed in three types of forms: square, rectangular, and cruciform planned layout. The square form at the plan level, being the smallest of all types also derived from the canonical texts and philosophy of the religion.

The ground floor is approximately square in shape and divided into fifteen chambers. Staircases on the two opposite mirror directions lead to the first floor where nine individual chambers, each having a square plan, are constructed under the open sky. The central chamber is slightly raised and crowned with a shikhara or a pinnacle roof. This floor had a unique functional use as a dormitory for the people who came to worship from distant places of the country, resembling generosity of this religion.

The form of the plan can be understood through the principles written in the religious texts, which sets rules on temple construction, site selection, the shape of the plan, the internal layout, articulation and formal typology, and ornamental details. [9], [10], [11] in their study state that the 'Vastupurashamandala', a combination of the philosophies of the physical environment, energy and geometry is the divine guideline of Hindu temple. Mitchell, in his study refers that square- being the ideal form is a representation of Earth and the order, the completeness of endless life and the perfectness of life and death [12]. By closely analyzing this temple, it is evident that the 'square'- the supreme geometrical form is reflected at the plan of the temples and the chambers inside, which also symbolizes the form of 'Purusha' or human.

temple and the rest squares are the position of other Gods as per their relevance.

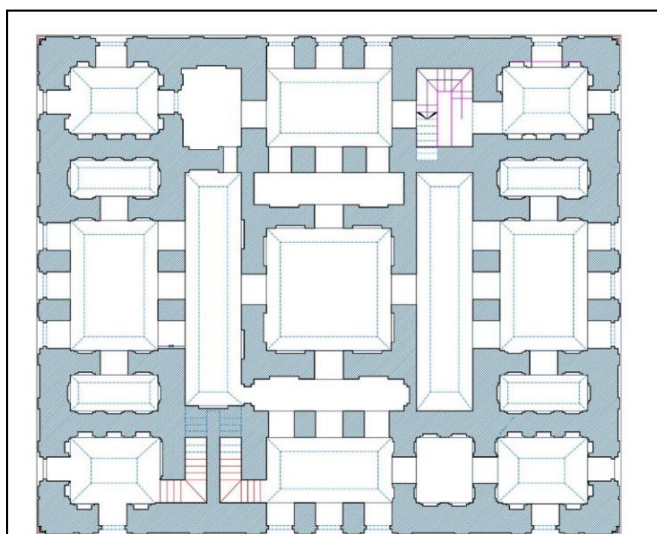


Figure 2. a. Ground floor plan of Khelaram Data Temple. Analysis of the drawings collected from Department of Archaeology, Government of Bangladesh.

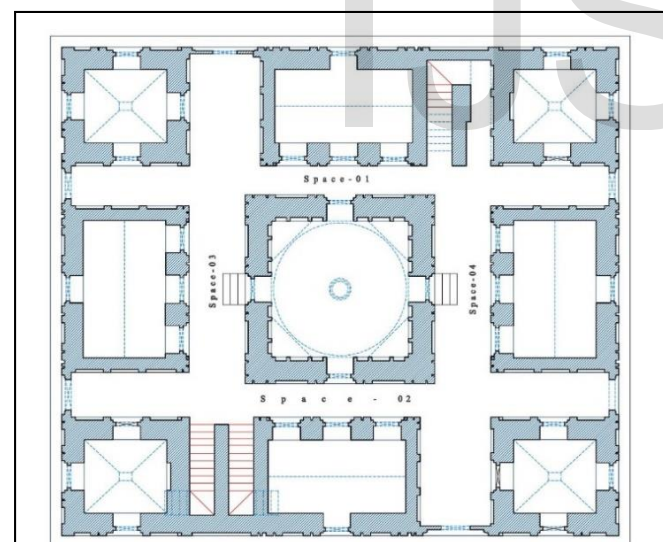


Figure 1. b. First floor plan of Khelaram Data Temple. Analysis of the drawings collected from Department of Archaeology, Government of Bangladesh.

Chambers in temple segmented into smaller squares as the form of a grid that marks the areas of supreme authority of gods. The central portion of the mandala is the place for the Brahma, the creator- to seize the cosmic energy underneath the

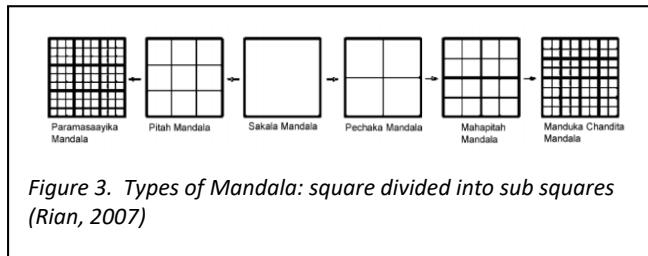


Figure 3. Types of Mandala: square divided into sub squares (Rian, 2007)

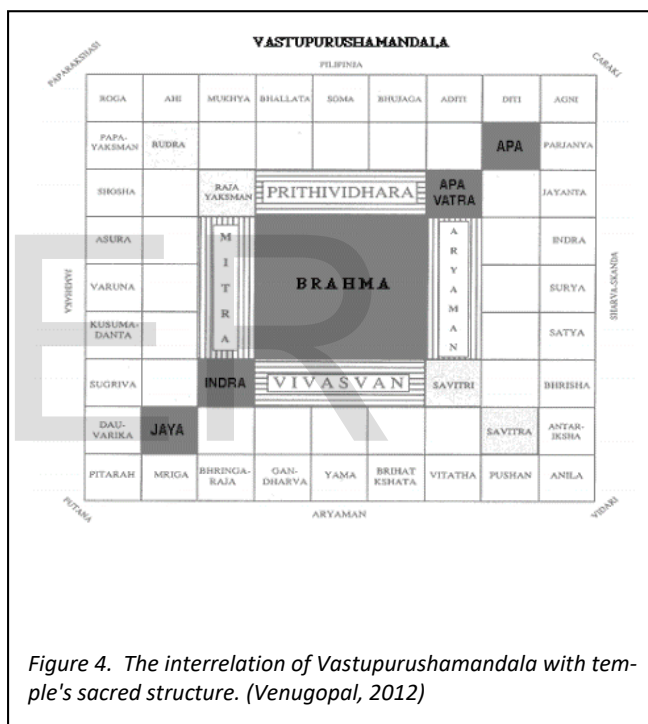
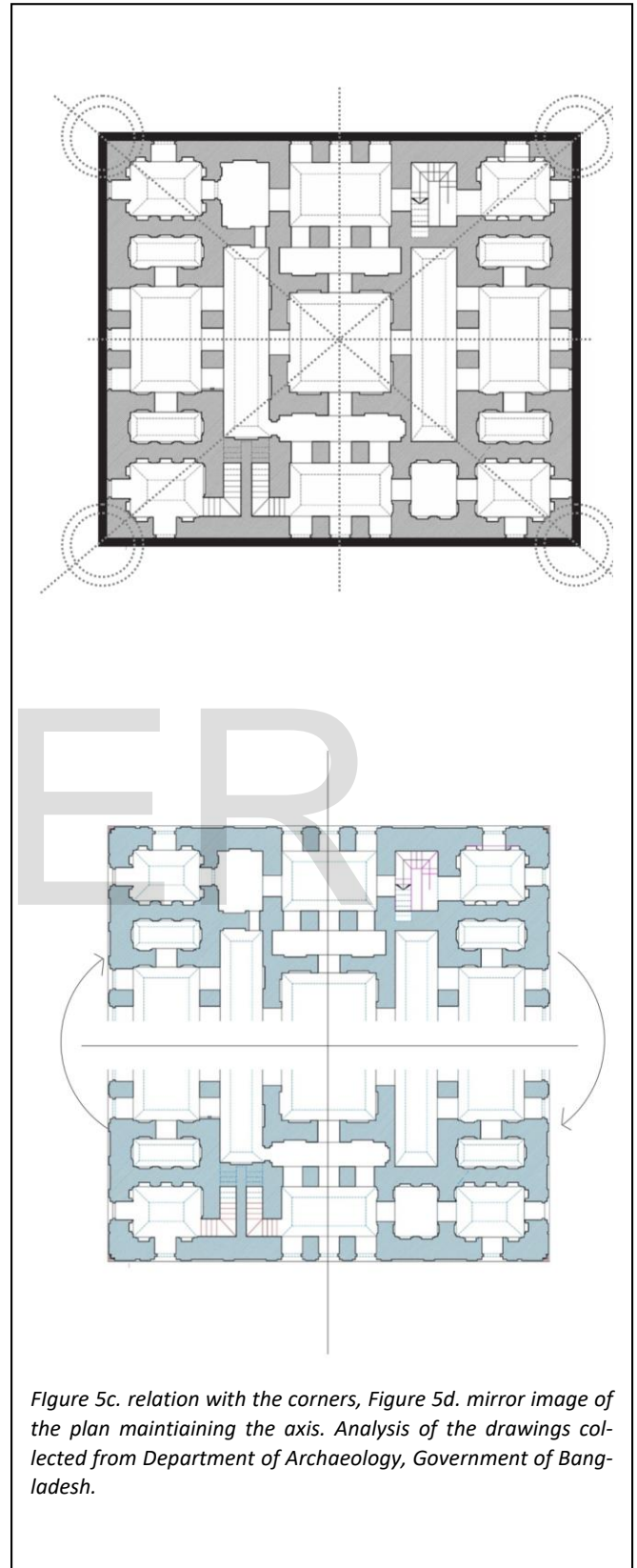
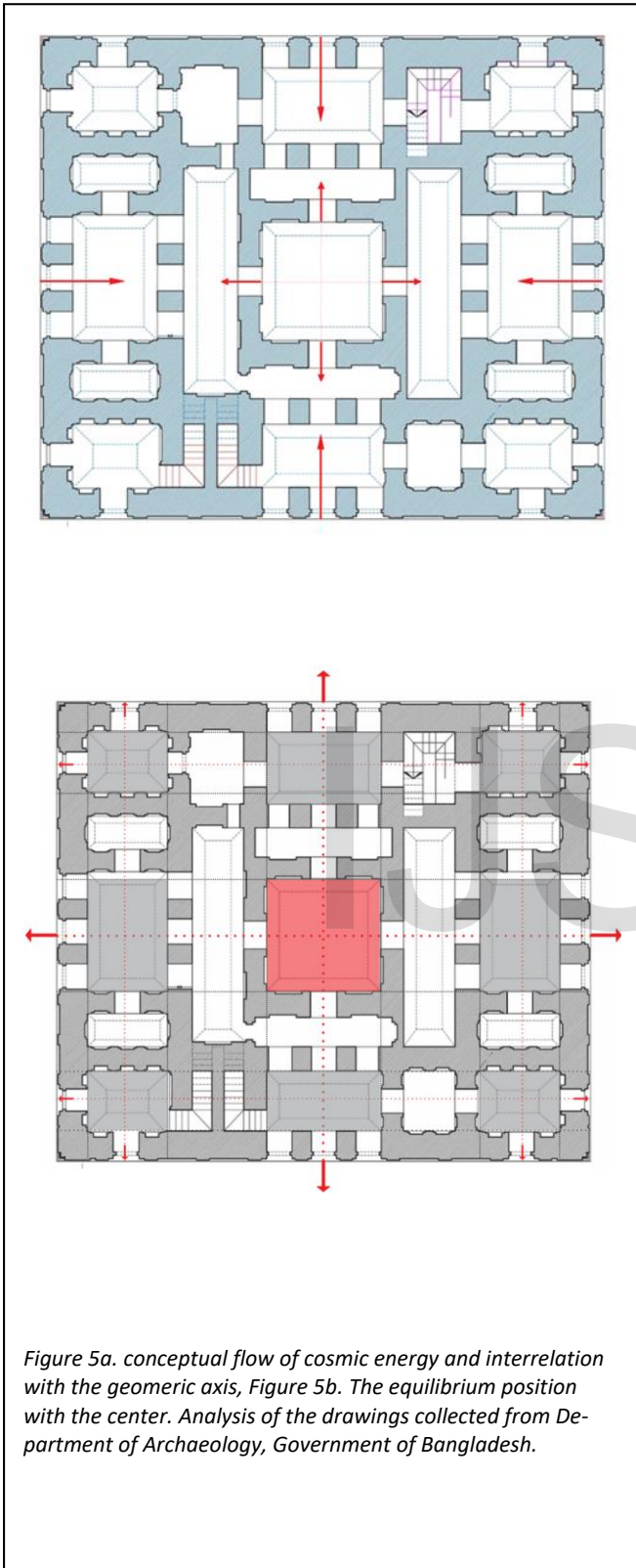


Figure 4. The interrelation of Vastupurushamandala with temple's sacred structure. (Venugopal, 2012)

Here, in this temple the four directions lie outside the plan, representing the meeting of the earth and the universe and the movement of the sun from east to west and its rotation to the northern and southern hemispheres. Although there are several rooms at the ground floor which were covered with earth and was not accessible before the conservation work. At the second floor there are eight rooms in the shape of Bangla house at the four corners of the first floor.



While analysing the geometry of the temple, the reflection of the Vastupurushmandala is evident. The square- being the devine diagram has been fragmented where each of its segment seizes the cosmic energies towards the direction where the Garvagriha is located (figure 5a). The entry approach of the temple from the four sides also reinforces the notion of centrality. The axiality and the equilibrium position maintains the shape of its static identity (figure 5b). Each side of the temple applies the force towards the center and in return the center also applies the force towards sides (figure 5c). The temple is also significant in the geometric shape as it forms the opposite mirror image according to its axis (figure 5d). From the analyses of [6], [13] it can be traced that the ground floor plan significantly resembles the architectural principles of Navaratna temples in Bengal.

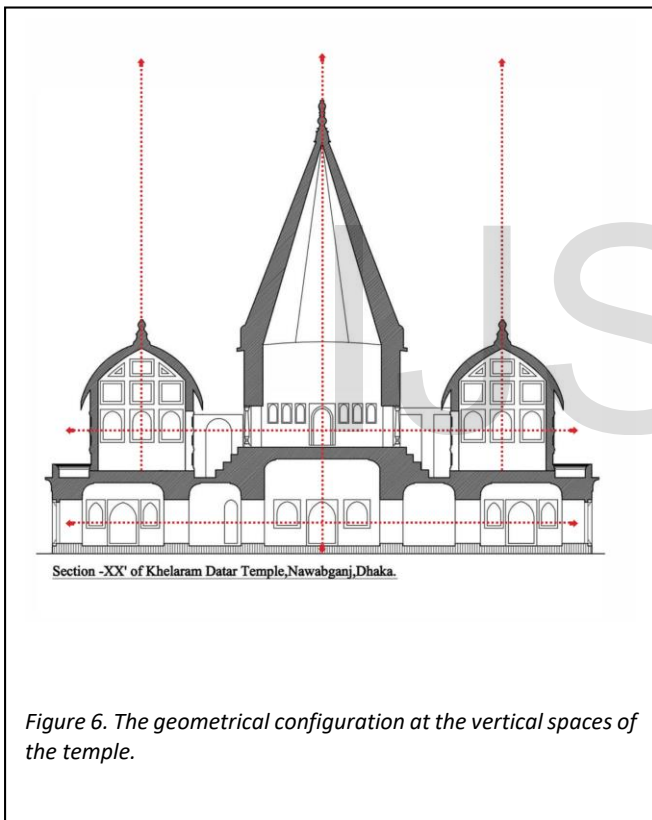


Figure 6. The geometrical configuration at the vertical spaces of the temple.

The stairs from the western and eastern part of ground floor leads to the first floor of the temple is basically a private space as the dormitory of the religious priests on the flat roof open to the sky as a curt of nine structures. This flat roof can be resembled with the significant architectural temples in Gupta period during fourth to fifth century [1].

The roof structure of the eight chambers surrounding the central chamber on the first floor reflects the 'Chaala' style- an identical Bengal structure derives from the thatched roof of rural

'hut' settlement. Observation of this temple illustrates that the roof of each chamber is 'Dochala' and 'Chouchala'. The roof structure of the central chamber where the garvagriha is located having a pinnaced roof or shikhara. This central chamber has an open to sky passage surround it. This composite type of roof structure is exclusive in the Bengal region (McCutchion, 1972), which bolster the uniqueness of this temple.

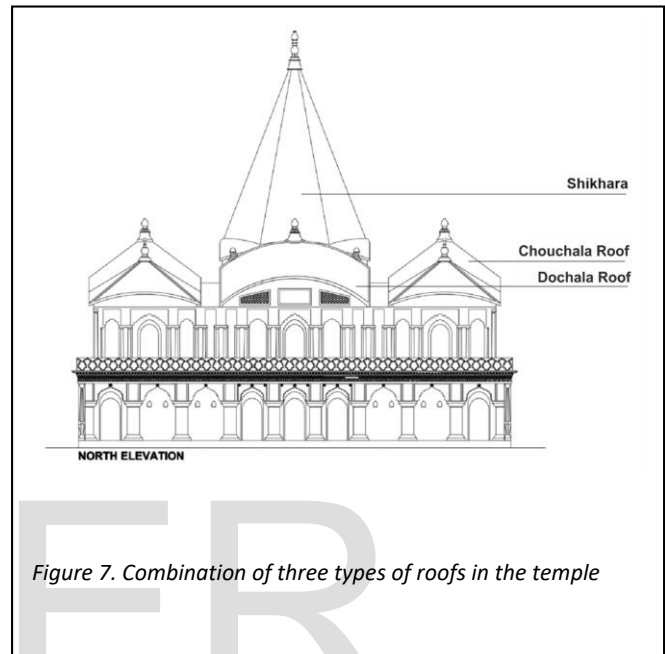


Figure 7. Combination of three types of roofs in the temple

The chambers at the interior space of ground and first floors having a unique feature unlike the other temples of Bengal which were designed to shelter the 'sanyasi's. The 'daalan' type of temple in Bengal are incorporated with household structure, but this temple has the unique feature of incorporating residential space within the religious structure.

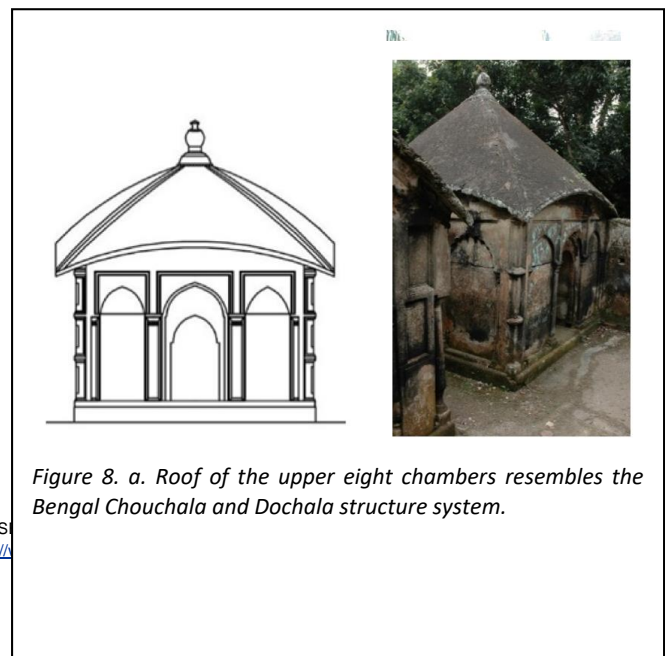
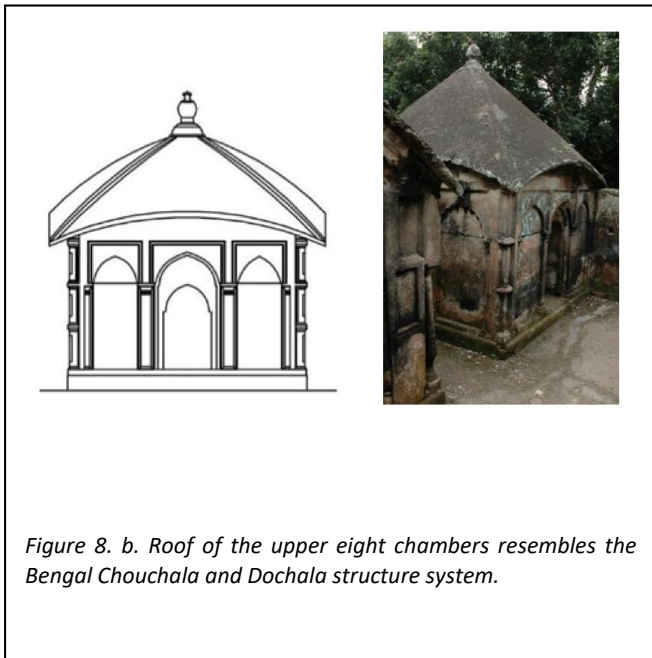
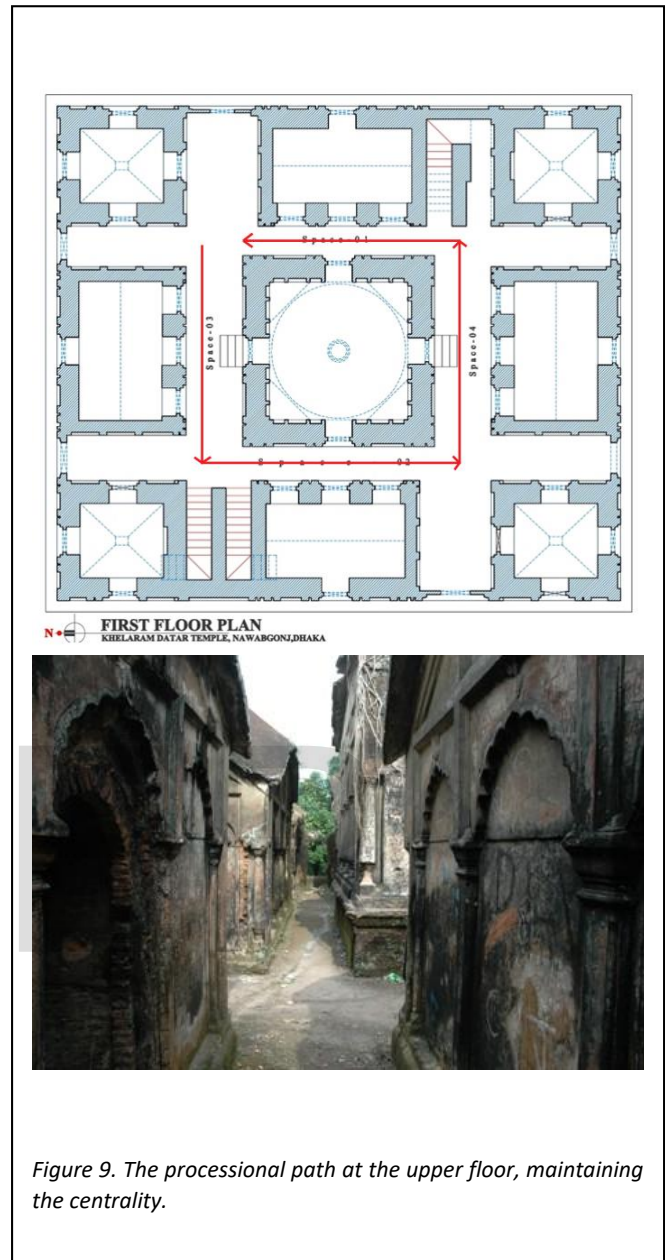


Figure 8. a. Roof of the upper eight chambers resembles the Bengal Chouchala and Dochala structure system.



The richly architectural ornate details of this temple are also significant in establishing its distinct identity. The thirty-inch thick wall of burn bricks signifies the pattern of late Mughal structures. Also, the ceiling design of the ground floor having a vaulted roof resembles Mughal structures. Multifoil arch in both ground floor and first floor and also used blinded arch in both floors. The doors and windows are also follows a Mughal pattern. The richly defined edifice comprised of floral and geometric patterns at the temple's interior and exterior also marks its identity as an exceptional one within its region.

At the first floor of the temple, around the central chamber, a passageway in the form of 'Pradakkhina' path, a significant architectural feature of the temple structure of Bengal can be found. During the puja ritual, people circulated around the central chamber where a Shiva Lingam in the form of deity was placed. From the studies of [1], [12] it is evident that the orchestration of rituals and offering prayers on the first floor under the sky is also significantly exclusive in the Bengal context.



Clay brick was the primary material used to construct the temple. In the Bengal deltaic region, mud is found in abundance [14] and bricks made from mud were used to construct the walls as well as used in the ceiling as a corbel system to bridge the gaps between the walls of this sanctuary. Lime mortar had been used as a bonding material and plaster over the wall. The richly ornamental motif at the edifice is also a symbolism of Hindu philosophy.



Figure 10. Clay brick and lime mortar used as bonding material



Figure 11. Ornamental details in the facade of the temple. Analysis of the drawings collected from Department of Archaeology, Government of Bangladesh.

3.2 The unique cultural significance

The notion of heritage significance can be considered as an intensely contested concept and historical events are experienced differently to the different group of people. The meaning of the history with the active designation, which has cultural, political and social effects, is also a contested identity. History, like tradition, is culturally constituted and politically manipulated. As a listed heritage, it can be assumed that the temple authenticates the relationship of the present to past, but the notion of past is itself is sometimes an imagined identity when it comes to the interpretation from the community. To understand and explore the historical situatedness of this temple the construction the form, the layers of popular myths, community narratives and stories have been explored. The narratives form a dichotomy with actual historical events and create connection

and belongingness to the community, forming a unique heritage significance.

Although it is not debatable of Khelaram Data's identity as a benevolent person at Kolakopa village and built this fascinating half residential and half religious structure. The local community assumed that the building was initially five to seven-storied, but only two of them are visible above ground, and the rest of the building has sunk due to subsidence.

Local myths derived from oral history and community narratives confirm Khelaram's identity as a ferocious robber in the region, and the consternation and trepidation in the community was imposed by his malicious activities. The wealthy people of the community were constantly in fear of his aggression. According to the oral history, Khelaram turned into a pious man when he felt guilt for his activities and his attitude was changed towards the poor people of the community. His benevolence attitude and compassion for distributing wealth to the poor people entitled him as 'data'. This temple he established at this phase of his life for the community's greater religious purpose, later known as Khelaram Data's temple. Another myth of having a tunnel beneath the temple connecting it with the Ichamati riverbank to transport and store Khelaram Data's treasure is popular among the locals.

Another identity of Khelaram Data can be found in the literature of "Maimansingha Gitika" [15]. In a 'gitikobita' or allegory named "Dosshu Kenaner Pala" written by the first woman poet in the mediaeval period named Chandarbati, the name of 'Khelaram' who the son of Dosshu Kenan can be traced. It may be unreasonable to correlate with Khelaram and Khelaram Data due to the different period and region.

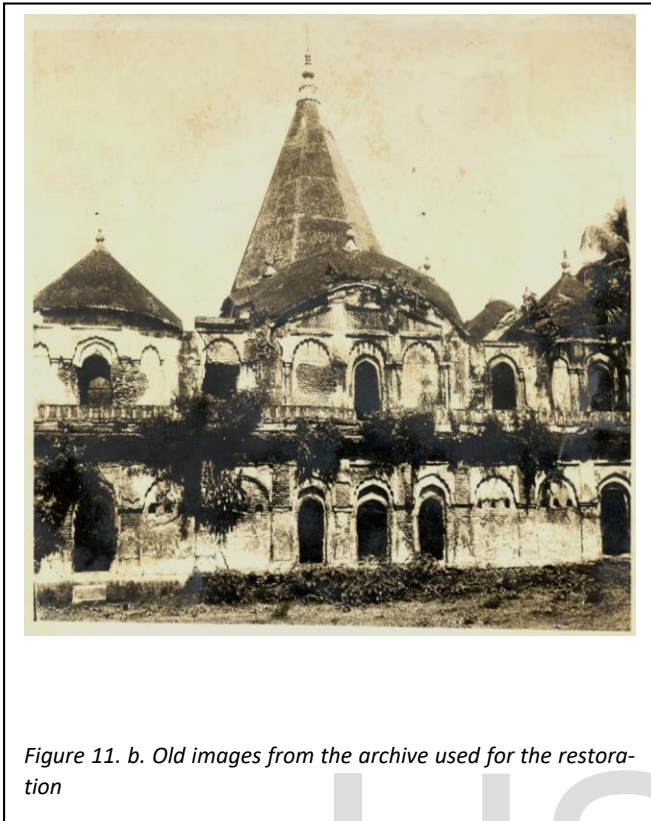
Drawing on the intangible paradigm, we may conclude that the heritage buildings not only resemble the cultural significance of the past but also it clarifies the political, administrative and religious history being blended with architectural style features and pattern. Temple is also a symbolism of prosperity within the community and has political and cultural notions in its formal expressions in the scale as being massive and well detailed at the exterior parts and challenging construction techniques. Apart from the royal patrons and benevolent citizens, it was evident that the local individuals actively participated in different religious and socio-cultural activities associated with this temple.

3.3 Restoration and Conservation of the temple

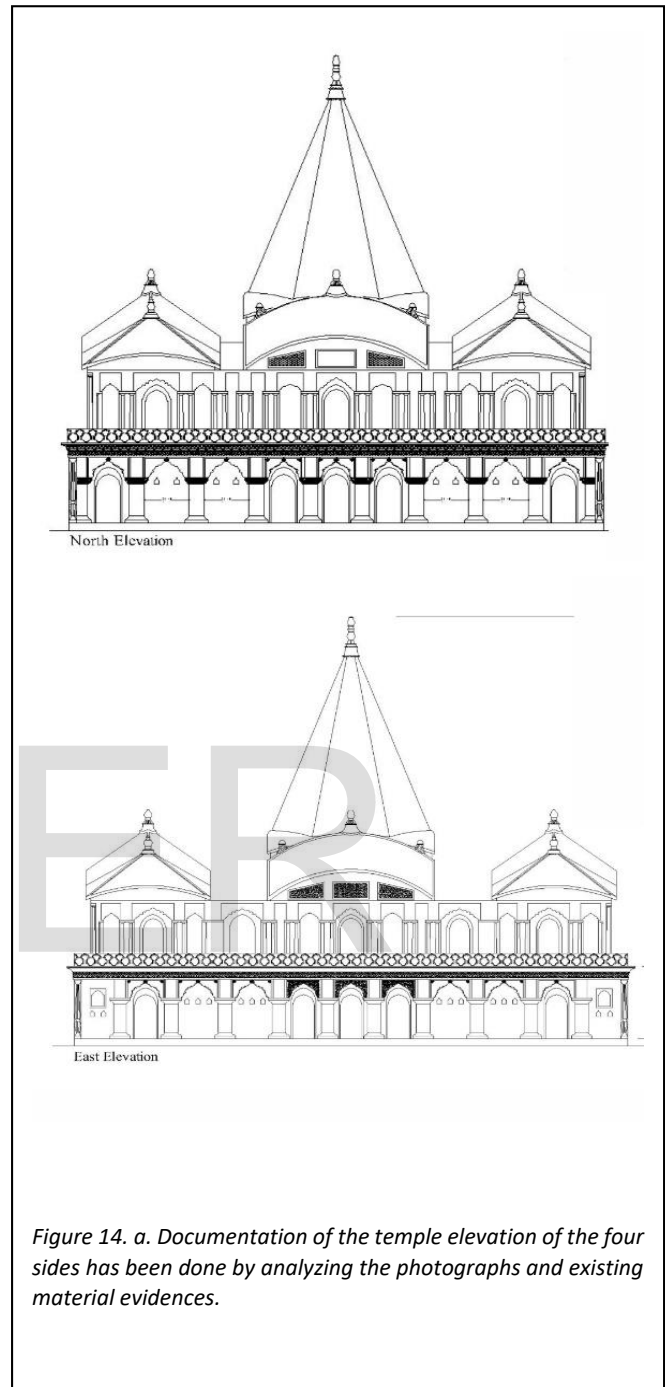
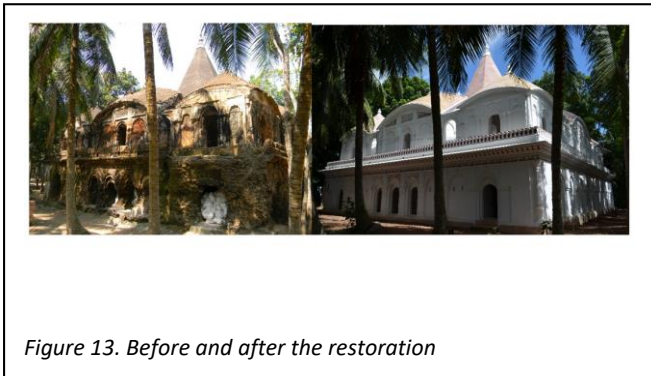
Harrison, in his book 'Heritage: Critical Approaches' states that built heritage has often been defined in the context of some sort of threat to objects, places or practices that are perceived to hold a form of collective value [16]. Although the act of selection for preservation comprises demarcation and separation, which can be considered subjective but the restoration of this building to restore its old image to the community can be considered as one of the bold actions undertaken by the Department of Archaeology in the 2014-2015 financial year. Previously this magnificent temple was declared as a national heritage by Department of Archaeology in 1989.



Figure 11. a. Old images from the archive used for the restoration



Although being officially listed, authorized by the state and recognized in legislation, the protective measures in the context was complex due to the dilapidated condition. The process of restoration was preliminary done by a conditional survey and physical mapping of the building's dilapidated condition. A report was duly submitted with recommendations and restoration approaches. After carefully analyzing the report the Ministry of Cultural Affairs decided for restoration and some part of wall or ornaments were decided to be reconstructed. The author with the draftsmen had documented and archived the building and the accoutrements. After compiling the existing details and measurements, extensive reconstruction of the building and ornamental features had been done with the help of tracing from the old photograph. The building materials were also analyzed, and the conservational work was successfully completed in 2014.



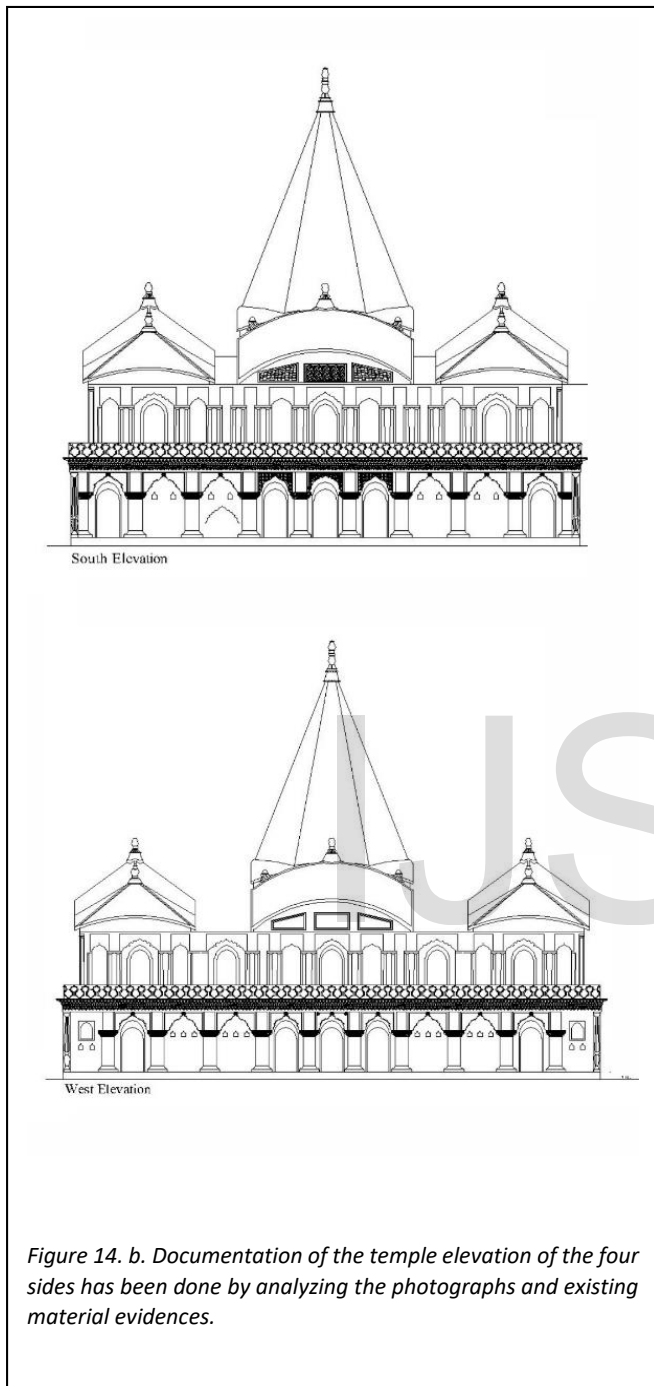


Figure 14. b. Documentation of the temple elevation of the four sides has been done by analyzing the photographs and existing material evidences.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While evaluating the heritage significance, it is evident that this temple has a significant identity as a place-marker embedded with the community's emotional attachment that transposes its domination beyond materiality and establish itself as a unique heritage site in the context of Bangladesh.

Cultural heritage is considered as intrinsic to sustainable development, and further conservations should focus on the spiritual and architectural significance, and it should be carefully monitored that the site will not be commodified for tourism pleasure. Also, equipping the community with their capacity and available resources can revive the building's historical context. The scope should be given in constructing pluralistic definitions and inclusive process in the management. Although the limited information found has impacted questioning the historical authenticity of the temple, the unique identity and architectural significance deserve proper attention to expand its identity as a significant heritage in the global atmosphere. Rapid and unplanned urbanisation and economic ventures should be controlled near to the temple to conserve the physical identity in the coming days.

5 CONCLUSION

Khelaram Data temple is not only unique in its forms and features, but also the uniqueness is expressed in its oral history and social relations. This temple have a spiritual connections within the community of the believers who perceive an aura embedded within. This aura is not only constructed by the spiritual presence but also by materiality and authenticity of the built forms. The restoration intervention by the Department of Archaeology of Ministry of Cultural Affairs ensured the physical stability and by doing so it augmented the spiritual experiences that eventually confirms the cultural continuity of a unique heritage site in the region. Please note that math equations might need to be reformatted from the original submission for page layout reasons. This includes the possibility that some in-line equations will be made display equations to create better flow in a paragraph. If display equations do not fit in the two-column format, they will also be reformatted. Authors are strongly encouraged to ensure that equations fit in the given column width.

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