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## The Jaṭileśvara Temple of North Bengal: A Study

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**Abstract:** *The temples scattered in different parts of North Bengal demands an intense research on its art and architectural form. Very few research works have been done on the architecture of North Bengal till today. Among the ancient and medieval architectural remain of North Bengal, Jaṭileśvara temple retain an important position. On one hand, the temple is very important for its religious and cultural significance and on the other, momentous for its marvelous works of sculpture. The sculptures, engraved with great skill on large stone blocks, are truly extraordinary in the context of contemporary North Bengal. When we go through the sculptures of Jaṭileśvara temple, we find mixture of different kind of artistic forms like Hindu, Buddhist, religious, secular etc. Probably the religious amalgamation of Bengal region was a reason behind this kind of mixture of art. If we go through the features of Pala architecture, use of terracotta, bronze and black basalt rock was very common, but in the case of Jaṭileśvara temple the use of gray sedimentary rock is very interesting. Due to lack of proper maintenance, even its extraordinary works of art are on the verge of destruction. If this invaluable early-medieval historical resource of North Bengal will be preserved properly, it will become one of the attractions of history lovers.*

**Keywords:** *Nāgara style, Jaṭileśvara temple, Pūrṇbadhar, Rekhā-deula, architecture, śikhara etc.*

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**Date of Submission: 15-10-2022**

**Date of Acceptance: 22-10-2022**

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## Introduction

In the present research of art and architecture, regions have been given special importance by the scholars and researchers. In this context, North Bengal deserves special mention. From ancient time ‘Puṇḍravardhana Bhukti’ was an important part of Indian subcontinent.<sup>(1)</sup> From time to time various rulers ruled over this area and built structures for social and religious purposes. Though presently research works on the society, economy and culture of North Bengal done by the scholars belonged to various disciplines are invaluable, but unfortunately there are very few research works on the various historical remains of North Bengal. Specially, the temples scattered in different parts of North Bengal demands an intense research on its art and architectural form. Very few research works have been done on the architecture of North Bengal till today. So the temples and small fortifications surrounding them built in this region and popular stories grew up around the making of this structure are yet to be clarified. British surveyors like Francis Buchanan Hamilton,<sup>(2)</sup> James Rennell<sup>(3)</sup> and D.H.E. Sanders<sup>(4)</sup> have worked out on the region of Jalpāiguri and Coochbehar, and they noticed the presence of such temples. Based on such reports scholars like Prof. Anita Bagchi<sup>(5)</sup>, Biswanath Das<sup>(6)</sup> had done remarkable research, but still there are a lot of sectors to focus. So, I have taken one of this architectural remain in this research study. Serious scarcity of historical data and information was a big challenge in front of me in this field.

A walk about 11.27 km along N.H No-31 from Maynaguri takes one to Huchhludaṅga, just before reaching the Jalḍhaka river.<sup>(7)</sup> From there, turning in right side, the temple located 2.5 km away. The temple is situated in an area of seven bighas. In the right side of temple, there were two big water bodies, which are square in shape and regarded as very pious. Besides the temple of Lord Shiva, there were temple of ‘Biṣṇu’ and ‘Śakti’ too. The cultural significance of this temple is remarkable in this area. By analyzing the archeological remains of the temple, like other scholars, Sri Pratap Kumar Naik,<sup>(8)</sup> prominent archeologist (ASI) has also found that the temple was built during the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, this

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is a matter of astonishment that we do not find anything about this temple in survey report of Jalpaiguri district, 1919<sup>(9)</sup> and in the Survey and Settlement report of Western Duars, 1889-1895. In the report, while D.H.E. Sanders discussed about the neighboring Jalpeśh temple, but he did not make any observation on Jaṭileśvara temple.<sup>(10)</sup>

When we talk about the history and culture of Bengal, we usually think about the modern and medieval Bengal.<sup>(11)</sup> but there is abundance of living histories, which are now dwelling in the darkness and nonetheless they hold a very rich content to cultivate, just like Jaṭileśvara temple, which is one of the oldest temple of Duars of North Bengal. The surrounding of this temple is popularly known as ‘Pūrbadhar’. ‘Pūrba’ means east and ‘dhar’ means swamp area. There is a big swamp exactly at the eastern side of Jaṭileśvara temple. It may be possible that, the name ‘Pūrbadhar’ was popularized based on the location of this temple.<sup>(12)</sup> There is a signboard at the left side of the main entrance of the temple which mentions that “the main temple was built during the time of Gupta rulers of Bengal around 320 A.D to 600 A.D”.<sup>(13)</sup> In another signboard, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee quotes ‘Skanda Purāna’, which is mentioned in the signboard in temple terrace shows that the great sage Vaśiṣṭha, one among the Saptarṣi, ordered the king Jalpa to establish a temple for the worship of the ‘Linga’ of God Kukkuteśwar.<sup>(14)</sup> Here Dr. Chatterjee mentioned king Jalpa as the founder of Jaṭileśvara temple during the Pala dynasty in Bengal around the tenth to twelfth century.<sup>(15)</sup> The period of composition of ‘Skanda Purāna’ is about 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps the temple was at that time or few earlier. In the same signboard Maharaja Pranarayan (1632 – 1665) of Coochbehar dynasty has also been mentioned as the reformer of Jaṭileśvara temple. However, the scarcity of sufficient historical information makes it difficult to expose the original truth from the womb of the history. There is also a mythological saying in this area that ‘Nandi’(mythological character, who is a bearer of lord Śiba) had attained mōkṣa (salvation) from this place and the lord Śiva blessed him that, this temple would be preferred as the first temple for his worship, in this area. The legend goes on that this temple was built within only one night by the bless of lord Śiva.<sup>(16)</sup>

A Hindu temple is a symmetry-driven structure, with many variations, on a square grid of pādas, depicting perfect geometric shapes such as circle and squares.<sup>(17)</sup> From artistic point

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of view Jaṭileśvara temple is a gem of North Bengal for its architecture and sculpture. This is a 'Nāgara' type of temple, which is popularly known as 'Rekhā-deula'. There are two different portion of the temple, in which the upper portion was renovated by brick work.<sup>(18)</sup> The primary feature of Nāgara Style is a central tower (Śikhara), whose highest point is directly over the main deity. Like other Nāgara style temple Jaṭileśvara temple also has its 'Garbhagṛiha' or sanctum in the center, which is in a rectangular shape. The lower portion of sanctum, which was constructed much earlier than the upper portion, is apparently 10 feet in its height. The whole construction was built by rectangular blocks of gray sedimentary rock. The śikhara of the temple is square at the base and walls curved or slope inwards to a point on top, which is most popular as 'Nāgara' style rekhā-deula temple in north east India. After a thorough research, I have found that Śikhara portion is much younger than the lower portion of the temple. Śikhara is decorated by many carvings and designs in its exterior portion. There are eight 'Ūruśikhara', among them four are in four directions and other four are in-between them. Besides the sanctum, absence of 'maṇḍapa', 'antarāla' and 'pradakṣiṇa patha', in the temple is a noticeable detachment. Although, the 'pradakṣiṇa patha' was later constructed on outside of the temple during the renovation. Probably, the art of temple construction was not so developed in North Bengal during this time, or the construction work was stopped without being completed. The top of the 'śikhara' is decorated with a rectangular shape arrangement. On the rectangular figure, there is a mandira kalasa, which is beautifully designed. The shape of the kalasa suggests that, it is a 'maṭkā-kalasa', shaped like earthenware pots. Above the mandira kalasa, there is 'āmalaka' which represents as the symbolic sit for the deity below or the gateway to heaven. A trident is being decorated at the highest place of the temple. The interior portion of the temple is blandest and any kind of artistic work is not found here. Possibly, this portion was renovated later on, because somewhere the use of cement was being found.<sup>(19)</sup> Now the whole interior portion is covered by a thin layer of colour.

The exterior portion of the temple is beautifully designed. At the upper portion of exterior side, there is designed ventilator in every side of the temple. The apex of 'Ūruśikharas' and 'śikhara' are beautifully decorated with the design of lotus petals. The

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lower portion of temple which was constructed by rectangular blocks is not profusely decorated. At the exterior part of the sanctum, there are three blank places in three different sides, and rest one is main entrance of the temple, probably a statue was kept there, but it is no longer seen. Looking the temple from the outside, it seems that there were four layers of stone blocks and gradually coming out and finally it's making that rectangular blank place. We found the use of cement and sand in joining of stone blocks in few places. Interestingly, the sanctum of the temple located approximately 5 feet below the land surface of temple terrace. The lower portion of the temple is apparently 10 feet in height, and the 'śikhara' portion is about 20 feet. The square sanctum of the temple is not so large, about 10X10 feet. The pedestal portion of the temple is not as simple as walls of the temple. Within the vertical grooved stone blocks, there were parallel stone slabs, which giving huge strength to the whole construction. The architects were so efficient that two parallel stone slab is perfectly assembling on the grooved portion of vertical stone. We all know that geographically north-east India is earthquake affected area and the soil is not very stable, this may be the main reason for this kind of heavy construction but this is a matter of astonishment that this kind of heavy construction is not known to us in surrounding temple construction. The construction of plinth suggests that the structure was not built by local architect, they may be outsider.

The most notable feature of this temple is its sculpture. The quality of the sculpture suggests that, carving style was far more developed than the architectural style during the period of construction. It seems that, overcoming Greek and Persian influences, the sculptors became proficient in carving idols in the native way. The statues are carved on the square blocks of stone in such a way that it looks as if they have been molded and placed on the blocks. The presence of icons and sculpture on the entrance and on the walls of temple is an old practice in India. Art, like sculpture always replicates society, culture or the imagination of the sculptor, which is also influenced by the society or culture. In Indian context art was not only for art sake as it is now, it had other perspective also. According to Sri S.P.Gupta- "The so-called 'works of art' were parts of some belief-system, written or unwritten, and some monument, religious or secular with religious attached to it. That is

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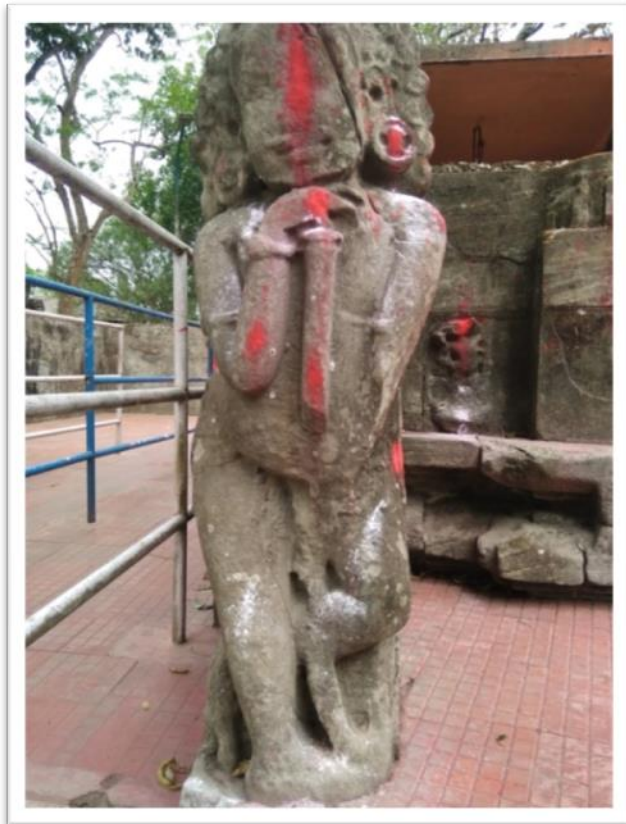
why ‘art’ was always manifested in temples and shrines of one kind or the other in the form of images, icons, idols, votive objects, symbols etc. Its purpose was to heighten one’s spiritual experience”.<sup>(20)</sup> In ancient India, different kind of sculpture like erotic, pagoda, Hindu idols, botanicals were mostly popular. When we discuss about the Indian art, we classified them in Hindu, Buddhist and so on, but the communal classification of Indian art into Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina is quite unacceptable, for it falsely is an essential difference between the art produced for each of these religions.<sup>(21)</sup>

When we go through the sculptures of Jaṭileśvara temple, we find mixture of different kind of artistic forms like Hindu, Buddhist, religious, secular etc. Probably the religious amalgamation of Bengal region was a reason behind this kind of mixture of art. In spite of being a small temple, the Jaṭileśvara temple has a large number of sculptures in different area. The number of sculpture of this temple is 35, among them two dimensional and three dimensional both are present here, though only two sculpture are three dimensional and rest of them are two dimensional. At the entrance of the temple, there were two large three dimensional figures in different sides of pathway. Both figures are bigger than the other figures, approximately 5 feet in height. The figure is holding a sword or a stick in his hand. In the case of both sculpture one leg is fold from knee and another one is straight. Unfortunately the face and some body parts of left sculpture were totally destroyed due to lack of proper protection. ‘Omnibus of North Bengal’ edited by Anita Bagchi identified them as ‘dvārpālas’ which is guardsmen of temple is an important characteristics of south Indian temple architecture.<sup>(22)</sup> The dvārpālas or dvārarakṣaka of the ancient temples evolved gradually into various forms with the inclusion of a wide variety and motifs that bear some religious and spiritual significance.<sup>(23)</sup> Among two dvārpālas, the statue which is in right side of entrance is much eroded, but the left one is in better situation. The head of the statue is longish in shape. Beautiful carvings are there around the head, probably they representing the curly hair of dvārpālas. Ornamentation is an important feature of this sculpture. He is wearing earrings and bangles on arm and wrist, but the decoration with garments is not present here. The stick in the hand of the statue is approximately 4 feet long.

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The sculptures which are engraved on the outside of sanctum are small in size but numerous in numbers. 31 out of 35 are small in size, though all the sculptures are not equal in; more or less they were 18 inch X 12 inch in size. Most of the two dimensional sculptures were engraved on the outside of sanctum. If we go through a proper observation, it will be clear that the sculptures are not made in completely Gupta style. In this case we may find the theory of a school of sculpture, which is may be applicable here, that is “differentiated from Gupta art and foreshadowing the characteristics of Pāla art”.<sup>(24)</sup>



There is a sculpture in left of sub-entrance gate of temple, curved on a big boulder, with the design of furrow. This sculpture seems to have been half bodied; wearing some ornaments or may be some design of dress on the chest. It has lightly grooved belly portion. The face of the sculpture is not like a human being, may be a monkey. There is a flat platform in front of the sculpture. The first sculpture to be seen on the outside of left wall of the sanctum is a multi-handed statue. Countenance of this sculpture suggests that, it is an animal figure.

Worship of animal is an ancient tradition in India. This may be a figure of ‘Narasingha’, incarnation of Vishnu or Nandi, a bull, who was the Lord Shiva. Due to large scale deterioration, the lower portion of the sculpture is not clear. If this is a sculpture of ‘Narasiha’, that means there was influence of Vaishnavism during this time in North Bengal.

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The second sculpture of this row is very obscure, probably due to natural erosion. There is round crown on the head of the sculpture, which is a common feature of Hindu deity. This statue is standing on a flower, probably it is a lotus. Though the whole picture is not clear to me, but the structure suggests that, it is a portrait of Hindu goddess. The third sculpture of this wall is in standing posture. The right leg is bent from its knee. The left hand is on left thigh and the right hand is in upper direction, holding something in his hand. The standing posture seems to have been 'Lord Krishna'. The fourth

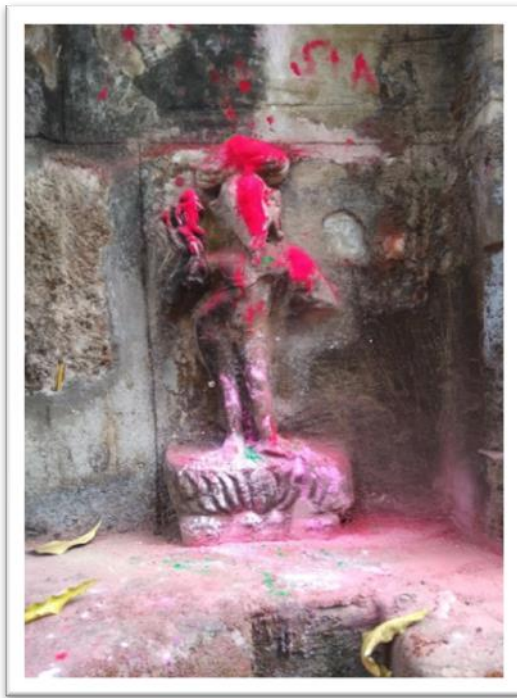


one is a woman, standing in a dancing posture, wearing a waistband. Thigh of the statue is little heavier than the normal, this may be due to the incompleteness of the decoration of the sculpture. Hands and other few portion was eroded. Decoration of the sculpture is expressing less expertise of the sculptor.

Figure no- 06, is totally covered with moss, which reflects the negligence of authority about these precious architectural remain of North Bengal. Due to heavy moss, the idol is not clear; though it seems that, this was a walking male figure. The right leg is bent from knee and forwarding in walking posture, adjusting with the flow of leg, the left hand is also in forwarding posture. The idol wears some dresses, which is very much nebulous. In the same wall the next one is also a female figure, which is standing in dancing posture. Right hand of the figure is fold from her elbow and palm is touching her forehead. Both legs are also bent from her knee. Strangely, the ornamentation is totally absent in this sculpture. The style of dance is representing as the performance of a ballerina in a royal court. Eighth one of the same row, is may be a sculpture of dancing or seated Gaṇeśha. It has four arms, two of them touched its thigh and another two are in upper direction. Ears of the sculpture as flat as an elephant but surprisingly, the trunk is absent there. Either it was eroded or the



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sculptor did not finish the task. During the Gupta period, Gaṇeśha was a well-established deity in Indian subcontinent as the subordinate of Lord Śiva. Probably the tradition was inherited during this time. The ninth one is a statue of standing Ganesh, with a slight bent from its waist. It has two hands; right hand is bent from the elbow, holding something in his hand. The altar of others figures are simple, just a slab, but in this case it is a lotus. Tenth one is a dancing sculpture, whose legs and hands are in dancing steps. The sculpture is so much obscure due to erosion; it is not clear to us that whether it is female or male. Figure no-11 is the next one in the

same side. The legs are in crossed posture. Right leg is bent from the knee and toes are touching the land. The right hand is straight up to the knee and there is something in his hand which is not clear. According to Hindu mythology, cross leg standing posture is popularly seen in Śrī Kriṣṇa. The standing position is popularly known as ‘tribhaṅga’, where the body bends in one direction at the knees, and the other direction at the hips and then the other again at the shoulders and neck.<sup>(25)</sup> Next one is human body with a huge elephant head. The body shape is blatant. Hands are bent, one is touching the thigh and another one is touching the abdomen. There is something in the left hand, it may be weapon. Though it is not clear, but it may be a sculpture of Gaṇeśha. Ornamentation is totally absent here. Due to lack of proper supervision, few parts of the sculptures are destroying gradually.

At the back side of the sanctum, there is a sculpture of cogitative Yōgī. The sculpture is in ‘padmāsana’ seating posture. Hands are bent from elbow and amalgamate in front of nave. The structure is very much similar to status of Ellora, cave 12, known as ‘Tin Thāl’. We found similar type of terracotta idols during the time of Pala dynasty in Bengal during 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Contemporary references suggest that this is a statue of meditative Buddha. Looking at the sculpture, it seems that a person who was sitting for a long time is in

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a state of meditation. The upper portion of the sculpture was totally demolished. Next one is a women woman sculpture. Probably leaning to one side she is worshipping slightly bent from the waist. As far as the idol is concern, the sculptor probably tried to depict 'worshipping girl'. An outstanding grace is spreading from this sculpture for its deliberation.

Front portion of Figure no-15 was totally eroded.

Next sculpture is on the left wall of the sanctum.

The sculpture is in standing posture, right hand is bent from elbow. Face and the left portion of the sculpture are destroyed. Next sculpture is very interesting, comparatively in intact situation. This is a sculpture of drum player. Someone is playing drum, with a great joy. There is something on his head, like a traditional cap. The face is so beautifully carved that, the expression of inner joy coming from inside on his face. Knee is bent and the whole body is in dancing posture. Next one is



partial eroded, remain of the sculpture and suggest that, it was in dancing posture. Legs are bent from the knee and standing on feet, but the upper portion of the sculpture was totally destroyed. Figure no-19 is probably a sculpture of goddess. Large portion of the sculpture was eroded. The sculpture is showing that someone is standing with a slight cranked. There is something on his head; it may be a crown or turret. This statue is also in 'tribhaṅga' position <sup>(26)</sup>. Next one is totally destroyed. After that there are sculptures, whose front portion was



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partially destroyed, but the remains suggest that someone is standing in slightly bent posture from the waist and the right hand is touching the hip on the other hand it was holding something, which is not clear. Figure no-22 is a sitting sculpture; both hands are on the thigh. Next few sculptures are in dancing position. The upper portion of next figure was eroded, the picture is not clear, the lower portion suggest that, it was a dancing girl; though Figure no-24 is surely a dancing woman. Both legs are bent from the knee and the waist is slightly bent. The left hand of the statue is in upturn. She is wearing some traditional dress like śāri or kirtle. Next one is also a women sculpture whose legs are crossed. Left leg is straight and the right one is bent from knee, crossing the left leg feet is touching the land. Just like the previous one, Figure no-26 is in the same posture. Left hand of this sculpture touching the hip and the right hand is broken. While Figure no-24 is beautifully dressed by her dancing uniform but Figure no- 25 & 26 is nude.

Lack of acuteness and abundance of ornaments like other contemporary sculpture is noticeable. If we discuss about the style of dance, there are main six classical dance schools in India. Dressing is an important characteristic of every dance form. To identify the actual dance form used in Jaṭileśvara temple, examination of dressing style may be an important method. Among six dance school, the dressing of Figure no-24 is comparatively similar with two major dance forms; they are 'Bharatnāṭyam' and 'Kathak'. Whereas Bharatnāṭyam is a dance of Tamil Nadu in southern India and Kathak is a dance of Northern India, so the dance form, which was followed on the sculpture of Jaṭileśvara temple, most probably it was Kathak. Figure no- 25 & 26 is nude but not erotic like Khājūrāho. The combined presence of men and women cannot be seen in any sculpture. Actually this is very much difficult to make a remark because of the excessive erosion of stones and destruction of few body parts of sculptures. Next one is something different. Though the sculpture is not intact, thus it is probably a male one. There is a sculpture on the right wall of the sanctum, which was partially eroded. It is very difficult to define that, whether it is a bow and the standing person is throwing an arrow from it or that person is standing within the pious Hindu symbol "Om". If my first prediction is correct, then this may be a sculpture of Hindu god "Rāmchandra", an incarnation of Biṣṇu. The next one is a sculpture of Lotus. This figure is

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only a vegetal device in this temple. This sculpture is very simple in nature. There are no climbers, branches or leaves, only flower and stem. Presence of flower sculpture on the walls of temple is a common characteristic of Nāgara temple architecture. After that there is an interesting sculpture on the same wall, probably a Hindu deity or a warrior riding on an animal. The left hand is fold and holding something in hand. The shape of cap is unique; it is flat and straight in nature. Figure no- 30 & Figure no-31 was so much eroded that, the remain portion of the sculpture is comparatively flat. The next sculpture is also partially eroded. Few parts of the sculpture suggest that it may be a horse sculpture. Forelegs are in upper direction and the back legs are bent from knee.

The sculptures at Jaṭileśvara temple have yielded a valuable mass of materials for the antiquarians of North Bengal. In Bengal, proper no stone sculpture of this early period has come to light as yet, though other antiquities, such as inscriptions, coins and specimens of terracotta art, which may be assigned to this period, have been discovered from several of the older sites of this territory, in this context Jaṭileśvara deserves special importance. If we go through a detail study of this sculpture, some of the features that stand out are – all the sculptures curved on the walls of temple, are on a platform, though there is no embellished border around the sculptures. The abundance of clothing and ornaments is not noticed in these sculptures, though the contemporary works of Bengal like Pāhārpur of Bangladesh has massive ornamentation, either the sculptures were not completed or the artists were lack of skills, or may be the development of such an advance artistic forms has not yet taken place in North Bengal during this period. In the case of male figures we find slightly broad chest or a fat belly. Like Gāndhāra sculpture, we did not find a muscular body; these sculptures are representing very simple Bengali body structure, so the influence of regional art is clearly present here. In terms of numbers, female figure are much more than male figures, among them dancing posture is most important. In the case of female figure, we find slender body types. Professor Swaraswati mentions that “.....the soft and graceful folds of the belly in case of the female figure add to the beauty of the female form”<sup>(27)</sup>, but unfortunately, we did not find such kind of highly artistic design in these sculptures.

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Very subtle design like eyeball, lips is not clearly visible here, though most of them either destroyed or they are covered with vermilion.

The plinths of all sculptures are not same, many times the lotus flowers were used as the platforms of the sculpture, sometimes it is plain and flat also. Out sides of vertical slabs, which were in plinth of the temple were beautifully decorated with subtle carvings. There is a straight line in middle and designs like climber were in both sides. These kinds of designs were also found on the sculptures of Pāhārpur. There is a beautiful carving on the basement of the temple. The sculpture is resemblance with blooming lotus, which is truly an example of extraordinary artistic design of this temple. Though we did not find any pillar in main construction, but there are few symbolic pillars around the sculptures. The sculpture of pillar is around 1 feet in height, and the different parts of the pillar like entablature, shaft, and base are present here, which are the main parts of a pillar, mentioned in ancient texts related to śilpa and temple construction.<sup>(28)</sup> Many priceless sculptures are totally destroyed and among rest them, many had lost few portion. Probably during the time of renovation, without the proper the guidance of Archeological Survey of India, the sculptures were aggrieved. On the other hand, due to fragile nature of sedimentary rock, the sculptures are getting eroded day by day. The most important noteworthy features are diversity, in the context of subjects of sculpture. Presence of Buddhism, Vaishnavism is really interesting, which represents the tolerance of other believes in society in contemporary Bengal.

### Conclusion

At the conclusion it can be said that, from the architectural & sculptural viewpoints, Jaṭileśvara temple is a valuable artifact of North Bengal. Not only in North Bengal, but also this temple is very precious for Bengal province from the view point of early medieval architecture. The most interesting portion of this temple is its sculpture. Interestingly such kind of architectural beauty is not present in any other historical remains of contemporary North Bengal. If we go through the features of Pala architecture, use of terracotta, bronze and black basalt rock was very common, but in the case of Jaṭileśvara temple the use of gray

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sedimentary rock is very interesting. Abundance of decoration and ornamentation is a very common feature in Pāhārpur and Sultāngañj (Bhagalpur) sculpture, but on the other hand sculptures of Jaṭileśvara temple are less ornamented. Due to government's indifference, although the later constructed temples gained considerable fame, but this historically important temple did not gain much fame. Due to lack of proper maintenance, even its extraordinary works of art are on the verge of destruction. If this invaluable early-medieval historical resource of North Bengal will be preserved properly, it will become one of the attractions of history lovers, which I think will play an important role in the socio-economic development of the region.

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