

Architectural Elements of the Bhalla Temple, Chakwal

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study aims to document the architecture and decorative elements of Bhalla temple from Chakwal, which remained unstudied and is currently in poor condition. In addition to documentation, this study aims to examine the spatial distribution within the architectural layout of this temple. The study also intends to create a baseline academic record that may support future conservation efforts and encourage further scholarly research on neglected temple heritage sites.

Methodology: The research uses qualitative and descriptive research methods. The methodology includes multiple perspectives combining both analytical insight, archival study, in situ study and theoretical analysis. The architectural styles, plans, designs, and building materials employed in the construction of Bhalla temple will be focused.

Findings: There are some architectural and decorative elements present on Bhalla Temple Chakwal that are based on local building techniques and styles. The analysis of the architectural elements of the Bhalla temple reveals decoration as a rich visual language that has complex and obscure semantics. The dominant theme is the use of floral decoration, scalloped arches, pilasters and shell decorations. Lotus motif, widely used on Bhalla temple, is used to convey fertility, spiritual enlightenment and rebirth that are key concepts about the world and the universe.

Conclusion: It is concluded that Bhalla temple Chakwal represents an important yet under documented example of regional temple architecture and decorative expression. The architectural expression of Bhalla Temple Chakwal is largely inspired by the regional architectural traditions of Potohar region. The study provides a basis for future scholarly research and may support heritage documentation and preservation initiatives.

Keywords: Ornamentation, Symbolism, Architecture, Heritage, Temple, Aesthetic, Craftsmanship.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Temples are important religious buildings because their unique designs and structures show the history and cultural diversity of South Asia. The decorations of Bhalla temple Chakwal are significant for a number of reasons. The decorations are the source of historical, religious, cultural and artistic information to recognize the heritage of Chakwal and its surrounding areas. The decorative features like complex carvings, decorative items and sculptural embellishments are outcome of multiple centuries of artistic skills, religious ideas and socio-cultural histories which would be lost if not researched and documented. The iconography of temples is used to teach ideas, show meanings and help in rituals by showing belief through pictures.

Bhala Keryala is a village in Punjab, Pakistan, Chakwal District that is surrounded with rich history, culture and heritage. It is one of the historical villages of Chakwal tehsil and is near to the other historical villages. The two villages have a root history of several centuries whereby Karyala can trace its history back to the 16th century AD. Bhala Temple, Keryala Temple are located in this village. The region mainly comprises rural people with the majority of them being small scale commercial farmers and livestock keepers. Bhal Keryala is a place that is blessed with nature, particularly the fertile lands with the scenic hills surrounding it around Bhal and Keryala.

In the past, prior to the Partition of India in 1947, the region such as Bhala and Keryala had mixed population of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs with the majority population forming the Hindu and Sikh population. After the Partition, the Hindu and Sikh people mostly moved to India and the Muslims settled in the region upholding the culture and traditions of the village. Older structures such as houses and places of worship of the pre-partition Hindu and Sikh individuals including a large number of older buildings can be found in the villages around such as Karyala that has a rich and varied historic tapestry. The streets of these villages are normally wide and clean while the buildings are mostly rural houses reflecting the presence of the village in the life of the people of Punjab. Such villages of Chakwal as Bhala Keryala are typified by a fine sense of community, hospitality and traditions. It is a part of the greater historical and cultural tradition of the Chakwal district which is known to harbor historical places such as the Khewra Salt Mines and the ancient Katas Raj Temples making the region more important.

The research paper “Notes on some Hindu Monuments of Different Ages from Talagang” offers a thorough analysis of the historical, cultural and artistic value of several Hindu architectural structures in the Talagang area including temples, Shrines (Samadhi) and sculptures from antiquity to the Middle Ages. The researchers analyzed their stylistic features, construction techniques, and the religious significance. Sassi Da Kallar, Malkana and Malot Temples are the detailed discussed temples. The researcher employs a qualitative methodology, comprising a lengthy field study, extensive architectural documentation, image recording and comparison with other monuments in the region. The researcher also analyzes historical texts and oral traditions for their answers, searching for them in the cultural and religious heritage of the region. In this inter-disciplinary research the study brings to light the rich diversity and continuity of the Hindu legacy in Talagang, Chakwal. It also reflects the changes in religious rites and sociopolitical changes over the centuries through these monuments (Zahra & Imtiaz, 2024).

In the systematic analysis of the Hindu places of worship in Chakwal, it is important to pay attention to them in the context of religion and history, which Sabeena Iqbal does. It involves a field survey and documentation project of the site. Researchers measured, photographed, and documented excruciating details such as architectural forms, building materials, ornamental themes as well as site conditions, and performed artifact collecting and scientific preservation in a lab setting. Settlements with historical origins like Bhoun, Keryala and Dhudiyal are illustrated separately. The design of their temple is cumulative of foreign as well as regional influence with elements of Persian, Greek and Roman in it. The temples belonged to town Bhaun of Chakwal. There are no specific names mentioned, but they can be differentiated by the name of the neighborhood, like Mohalla Naka, Mohalla Koat etc. The author treated

in detail the elements of architecture of these temples. But now they are not found at the site as they have been demolished (Imtiaz & Zahra, 2017).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It is a descriptive and qualitative research where the method of research is multiple-perspective in nature, blending in situ analysis, archival study and theory. Thus, this approach gives an in-depth and refined understanding of the decorative elements by combining both the empirical data collection method and critical reflection. It also connects the study to the wider academic field of Hindu temple art and architecture. The methodology is based on field work and documentation. Being a physical feature of architecture, firsthand knowledge is required. Bhalla temple site was visited several times for the documentation of the tangible features of ornamentation. This is achieved by intensive photographic documentation and drawing. It also analyzes the aspects such as carved figures, relief sculptures, lintels, pillars and ceilings.

2.1. Data Collection

The data collection process for the investigative research of the decorative elements on the Bhalla temple is multi-layered and structured. The research process has begun with a thorough field observation from the first stage where the meticulous documentation of photography of temples and decorations is made. This includes taking photographs of various parts of the temples such as gate of temples, sanctums, pillars and roofs to capture the architectural elements such as carvings, patterns, relief and sculptural features. Simultaneously, the floor plans of each temple are sketched out to provide the spatial information that is so important to architecture. To complement the visual records, semi-structured interviews are conducted with the priests of the temples, local artisans, historians and custodians to gain information about the meanings of the decorative elements that are described as symbolic.

2.2. Study Objectives

1. To examine the structural design and decorative elements of the Bhalla temple in Chakwal.
2. To document the temples through documentation and photography.

2.3. Limitations

1. Unoccupied or non-accessible areas restrict to a general view or survey and the dwellers were reluctant to face much documentation. Physical condition (e.g. due to rubbish, collapse, or safety issues) can also limit access, and the ability to record smaller details or to photograph or survey the building.
2. Oral histories or traditional documentation was hard to verify as original contextual information was lost with the previous custodians displacement. Modern repairs or renovations usually make it difficult to distinguish the original and the additions.

3. FINDINGS/STYLISTICS

3.1. Plan

Bhalla temple temple is dated 25th February 1934, nearly 13 years before partition (plate-1). Bhalla temple was built by a local of village known as Lala Gooke in the honour of his son Tara Shah.

The plan of Bhalla temple demonstrates the current state of the temple along with the nature of its architecture (plate-4). Entering from the main wooden door, one comes to the pillared hall (Mandapa) that simply served as the gathering place of worship and rituals. Although the Mandapa appears to have been roofed, the roofing system has decayed over time due to the exposure to the weather and it has left with the footings and walls of the Mandapa. On the left side of the Mandapa is the sanctum sanctorum (Garbhagriha) the most sacred part of the temple which would have housed the principal deity. Then, there is a small circumambulatory passage surrounding the Garbhagriha and the worshippers can conduct pradakshina (circumambulation) round the sanctum. In a corner of this circumambulatory passage is a

canopied niche. This is a niche of parivara devata (attendant deity) or an statue that is carried during a religious procession.



Plate 1. North View of Bhalla Temple, Chakwal (19th century)
Source: Picture by Author



Plate 2. Entrance for the Devotees in Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by Author



Plate 3. Plate on the Entrance of Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author

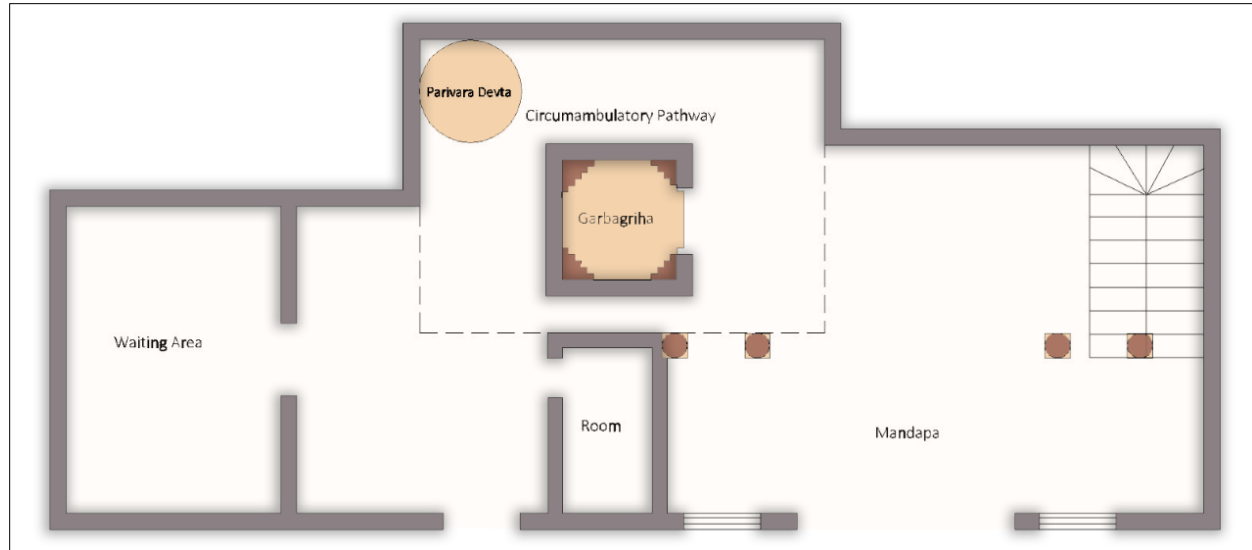


Plate 4. Floor Plan of Bhalla Temple, Chakwal
Source: Drawing by Author

The proximity of garbagriha, the passages and the secondary shrine enhance the sanctity of the temple plan. This demonstrates the importance of the functional ritual space and architectural symbolism meeting to highlight the two-fold meaning of a temple as a sacred object and a social centre of activities such as the wedding ritual. Apart from the main function of worship, the temple being a sacred place has another significance in the Hindu wedding rituals. The bride and groom perform seven circumambulations around

the Garbhagriha (Saptapadi) in the marriage ritual. It is the seven-time they pledge to the god to get married. The explanation of the said practice reveals that it is intended to enhance the sanctum as a spiritual heart of the temple, and Mandapa is an inclusive space for families and the public. The plan creates a sacred space that houses life-cycle ritual worships thereby, symbolizing that the temple is a space of earthly and spiritual lives too.

Circumambulatory passage is not mandatory in all temples. Another temple with circumambulatory passage where ritual is performed is Kandariya mahadev temple, Khajuraho (plate-5) (Kumar, 2021). The Durga Temple in Aihole, Karnataka also has a three-fold inclusion system, with a colonnade around the outermost circumambulatory path (plate-6) (Kumar, 2021).



Plate 5. Kandariya Mahadev Temple of Khajuraho (11th century)

Source: Swantour, “Kandariya Mahadev Temple of Khajuraho.”



Plate 6. Durga temple, Aihole Karnataka (8th century)

Source: Smart Soul Travels, “Durga Temple Complex, Aihole, Karnataka, India: The Fortress Temple.”

The predominance of the symbolic imagery over the narrative reliefs in Chakwal registers the local shift towards the small number of figure images as identified by Stella Meister (1986) and (Michael & Kramrisch (1980) in northern and central India. Kramrisch thought that the large number of sculptures, as in the case of Khajuraho, was to create a cosmic stage on which the Hindu mythology was passed on the surfaces of the temple. Chakwal also compares well with such developments as Cavazos (2016) noted in the Kashmiri temples that figurative images are less significant than flowers, decorative bands and architectural elements. The same restriction can also be noticed in the temples of Salt Range, which researchers such as Ahmad Hasan Dani described them as being only slightly decorated, using geometric bands, pilaster frames and trefoil arches instead of narrative reliefs (Dani & Masson, 1999).

3.2. Exterior

Shikara is a tall tower built above the temple that goes straight upward in a tapered apex, standing up in a silhouette. This is a symbolic form of Nagara style of temples. It represents the mythical cosmic mountain (Meru) that pulls the devotee's eyes upwards to the sky and hence emblematically represents the spiritual journey. The shikhara is tall but not tall enough, it rests on a holistic understanding of elevation and verticality. The shikhara has strong vertical ridges (projections) on its faces. These create segments on the surface and create a rhythmic texture and stress the upward thrust. They likely symbolise so-called "ratha" (chariot or cart modules), a conventional way of dividing shikharas. The shikhara appears to be constructed from vertically diminishing in size (tier) segments laid one over the other and giving the diminishing effect. These parts structure and give the object more visual interest with these features breaking down the mass into smaller parts.

It has niches and panels set back into the front of the temple, which most likely accommodated small sculptures or decorative elements. These architectural elements are likely to be still important stylistically (though worn down or less elaborate in comparison to more elaborate examples). The pinnacle is a spire-shaped tip with a finial (it could be a pin or a kalasha) which could have been reduced by weathering. The pinnacle is usually intended to depict auspiciousness and completeness in architectural design of a temple.

Garbhagriha is present on one side of the canopied niche called Secondary Shrine (Parivara Devata Niche). It is represented as a subsidiary shrine niche of parivara devata or ritual image. It was another secondary holy shrine which was related to the god or goddess of the Garbhagriha. It comprises of Canopy Dome (Shikhara-like dome), Base Niche, Finial and Supporting Frame. It has a dome-like structure on the top which resembles lotus bud or lotus petals. These shapes look like lotus flower petals; the vertical rib represents purity. It also symbolizes divinity, meaning connection with divine or sacred power. The dome has a sheltering appearance of the idol. The dome is topped by some kind of finial, most often a kalasha (a sacred pot) or a tiny tower. It symbolizes prosperity and is a blessing. The hollowed-out understructure was where the idol (murti) of the god was placed. It is like a coffin; it is a small arched niche present in the wall. The arched niche is actually in the wall and it protrudes slightly. The lower is damaged, but there must be the base (pitha) for the idol. There is a lotus bud dome, which is a symbol of purity and creation. The kalasha finial, a symbol of prosperity and god's presence, is placed on the temple. The niche is considered as the holy womb, a place where the god resides according to the Hindu mythology. The architecture style of Bhalla Temple is inspired by Kedareswar Temple from Rajasthan, India (plate-7) (Hardy, 2007). It's tall Rekha-Nagara shikhara resembles Bhalla temple shikara, carved bands and the base of the sanctum is plain.



Plate 7. Kedareshwar Temple, Rajasthan, India (11-12th century)

Source: Pradhan, Sadasiba. "Lesser-known monuments of Bhubaneswar." (Google Books) (2009).

3.3. Interior

The state of the interior of the temple is indeed deplorable, as it speaks of these signs of neglect and decay. Recent explorations reveal such neglect has been sustained over the years, and largely due to the custodial neglect. Heritage specialists often argue that this kind of damage not only affects the mythical nature of the temples, but also the structural nature, diminishing its capacity to express the cultural narratives it once held.

The columns have also been painted later, that show some style which can be associated with the classical architecture. This amalgam of aesthetic definitions is brought by a fascinating blend of adaptation and absorption of the foreign architectural tropes by the local craft guilds which in turn bring about the creation of the hybrid expression, which at the same time speaks of the local ingenuity as well as the overpowering dominance of the more urbanized architecture. The stylistic articulation of the niche in the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) is very plastically comparable to that of the similarly similar temples of Chakwal. These resemblances point to the argument of affinity of stylistic vocabulary that highlights the relationship of the local temple design in terms of regional traditions.

3.4. Material

The temple has local influences of the artistic work and canonical Nagara art of the area. Punjab, Salt Range and its surrounding areas have always been a site of religious, artistic and cultural exchanges for centuries because of its geographical location between Indo-Pak and Central Asia. Local artists adapted the Indian architectural vocabulary and technique to the local availability of material and local climatic conditions. That resulted in regional variations in terms of material and local ornament. Structural solid masonry and foundation were made of limestone, sometimes mixed with sandstones. Sun-baked clay blocks were used where limestone could not be used. Secondary walls were found to have been built with bricks. Mortar was made of lime. Exterior plaster was used for decoration. The frescoes on the pillars were painted on the plaster. The shikhara is constructed of limestone and shows signs of wear with the

weathering and staining of the surface leading to the blurring of some details. Its composition allow it to preserve the general look despite the exposure.

3.5. *Symbolism*

The temple's religious architecture is well informed of the Hindu cosmology; its sky touching shikhara which is a symbol of Mount Meru. It shows the axis mundi, which was a point of expression of the divinity in the sanctum. Plan is rationally distributed in cardinal directions, thus repeating the fundamental Hindu cosmological themes; the garbhagriha (the dwelling of the supreme deity) is placed in the centre of the structure. The iconographic elements and the orientation of the temple further reinforce the religious narratives that are fundamental to the Vaishnavite and Shaivite ritual.

It has a standard architecture of Nagara style (i.e. vertical bands, elaborate cornices, u-shaped Latina shikhara, use of stucco and brick technique). The decorative themes of pillars, scalloped arches, and shell decorations (plate-8 to 11) are used as a symbol of the dialogue of the temple with the local and native arts and the contribution of the Central Asian and Gandharan civilizations.



Plate 8. Parivara Devta in Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author



Plate 9. Columns in Mandapa of Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author



Plate 10. Entrance of Garbhagriha in Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author



Plate 11. Interior of Garbhagriha in Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author

The chhatris and jharokhas are a result of a fusion with the local Islamic and colonial architecture. The temple caters to the regional building language of the Salt Range, by adapting to the climatic condition and replacing stone with brick. Diversity in styles is a result of a combination of northern Indian, Kashmiri and Rajasthani styles, accentuated by the residual influence of Gandharan Buddhist art styles. Thus serving the historical role of the region as an artistic and technological transfer hub. The changing purpose of the temple and its adaptability post Partition mirrors the changes that occur in the social background of Punjab as a tangible representation of collective memory, ritual experience and pluralistic heritage. The columns were in the roman style with the floral relief on the top in red and green color. (plate-12 and 13).



Plate 12. Pillar Design of Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author



Plate 13. Details on Pillar of Bhalla Temple
Source: Picture by author

This temple is a typological example of North Indian but religious and architectural ensemble, bearing witness to the mixture of the religious fervor, architectural finesse, local craftsmanship and the cultural of Punjab region. Certainly, its high shikharas are a metaphor of the Nagara style with their upward thrust and symbolize the Hindu mythology of Mount Meru. The plan thus represents metaphorical movement upwards. Each additional architectural element represents a new journey of devotee towards the light. The temple shikhara is architecturally much more intricate and relatively slender than the other monuments of its time. The additional use of niches and pilasters give a sense of balance and verticality. While they are mainly decorative, they are also symbolic in meaning as well as structural. Each of these niches was presumably occupied by small divinities, allegorical figures or demons. The recessed arches surrounded by rectangular type of panels initiate a dialogue between the Indo-Islamic and typical Hindu structure where arched motifs were generally regarded as a form of beauty. However, in this particular case, arches are transformed into sacred portals, rather than decorative elements.

The local master is knowledgeable about materiality and techniques. The brick and lime plaster used for the temple structure is a reflection of the mode of construction in northern Punjab as no stones are available there. The plaster decoration is, despite being in a bad condition, reminiscent of surface decoration and patterns used on Potahor plateau, i.e. it mixes geometric patterns, arabesques and stylized vegetal forms which on one hand are reminiscent of local tradition, but on the other hand, foreign influences. The subtle use of colour or stucco finish is a sign of some architectural adoptions to the local climate where a lot of sun and monsoon, demanded a very strong type of surface finish. The temple is culturally reflective of the fusion of religious cultures of the past in the region of Punjab, a meeting place of the Hindu, Islamic and Sikh cultures. The rhythmic arrangement of arches, repetitive framing and

levelled composition are the evidence of the Mughal influence but the composition of the whole building is very much functional and symbolic of the Hindu nature. This means that the artisans who built these temples knew very well the vocabulary used in the nearby Mughal monuments but applied it to the template of Hindu ritual architecture. The use of a common artistic vocabulary is no longer an indication of cultural imitation but an imaginative co-existence. It was the feature of the Punjab artistic identity in late medieval-early modern era.

The making of the temple as a sacred place is highlighted in the plan and orientation of the temple, because of the religious nature of the design. The rising curve leading to kalasha marks the final top part of the structure. It is the sacred finishing element of the temple head that represents divine energy and strong spirituality. The absence of the figurative sculpture can be either the result of the destruction of time, or the style which is inclined towards the simplicity, and it is in accordance with the simplicity to which the taste of the local population has been inclined. Hence, it emphasized the harmony in proportion, placement and verticality, rather than the decorative. The whole form enhances the aspect of meditative nature of the building as a sacred focus in the landscape.

Historians such as George Michell (1995) and Hardy (2011) state that the northern Indian Nagara style is distinguished by the sculptural decoration in which celestial beings, deities and narrative scenes dominate the external walls of the temples. The temples of Chakwal display such restraint in figural display. This reflects a deliberate shift in sculptural density that is evident in Khajuraho or Bhubaneswar. Instead, Chakwal is more similar to the Kashmiri style referred to by Cavazos (2016) in which geometric patterns and floral bands dominate over the highly decorated figural panels.

Similarly, in the northeastern Indian temples, Michell (1988) observes that animals, in particular elephants and lions are guardians of portals as well as symbols of sovereignty. But in Chakwal, elephants and lions are conspicuously absent, and these animals might be replaced with more localised animal forms. Not surprisingly, the stress on vegetal ornamentation has some similar emphases as those of Dehejia (1978), who suggests the motifs represent fertility and rebirth, and thus Chakwal exemplifies an Indian set of symbolic meanings, but one that foregoes some of the narrative symbology. This selective borrowing and adaptation of iconographic conventions suggest that the architects in Chakwal were not an isolated group, but an amalgamation of regional and local identities, and artistic conventions. Placing these findings in the context of broader discourse, it can be observed that decoration of Chakwal temples is a continuation as well as modification of the pre-existing Nagara canons and therefore an exemplification of local variety with significance in the history of Hindu temple art.

4. CONCLUSION

The study has addressed its key objectives by identifying the artistic traditions and architectural influences embedded within the Bhalla Temple Chakwal. The research highlights the reflection of regional craftsmanship and broader historical and cultural influences through careful analysis of architectural forms, decorative elements, construction methods, and spatial arrangements of Bhalla temple. The findings show that Bhalla temple is constructed primarily with locally available limestone, that demonstrate the skills and techniques of local artisans, evident in their restrained decoration and carefully executed stonework. The decorative elements found on these temples include trefoil arches, pilaster frames, geometric bands, and occasionally fresco work, all of which emphasize architectural articulation rather than elaborate narrative sculpture. At the same time, their architectural forms and features show connections to wider traditions, particularly the North Indian Nagara style and elements associated with Kashmiri architecture. This combination suggests that while the temples were rooted in local building practices, they were not isolated from external influences. Located in the Salt Range that is a region historically exposed to cultural exchanges, these temples embody a blend of indigenous craftsmanship and broader artistic currents, resulting in a unique architectural expression that balances simplicity with stylistic diversity.

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Conflict of Interest

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