

Living Traditions and Sacred Art: Vaishnava Devotion, Iconography, and Social Harmony at the Shri Shri Ananta Basudev Temple, Hooghly, West Bengal

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Abstract: *This paper examines the Shri Shri Ananta Basudev Temple in Jolkul village, Gurap, Hooghly, West Bengal, as a significant centre of social harmony and cultural continuity in rural Bengal. The temple is distinguished by its unique Krishna-Balarama Vighraha, where Ananta represents Balarama and Basudeva represents Krishna. The fourteen-armed form of Ananta, depicted under a multi-hooded serpent canopy, holds the child-form of Narayana, symbolising fraternal protection and divine unity. The sculptural composition, marked by classical wooden craftsmanship and dynamic iconography, reflects the artistic excellence of artisan Hiralal Kundu. The temple is associated with the Vaishnava saint Khonja Bhagavan Acharya, a companion of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It preserves Gaudiya Vaishnava traditions where Chaitanya and Nityananda are revered as Krishna and Balarama. Annual festivals such as the Chaitra Sankirtan and Ananta Chaturdashi attract large gatherings of devotees. Situated in an agrarian context, the temple symbolically integrates agricultural life, local craftsmanship, and devotional practices. This study argues that the temple functions not merely as a religious site but as a vital repository of Bengal's rural heritage, embodying the interconnectedness of socio-cultural life, devotion, and traditional knowledge systems. It concludes by emphasising the urgent need for systematic documentation and community-based conservation of such heritage sites amid rapid urbanisation and socio-economic change.*

Keywords: Basudev Temple, Balarama Iconography, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Temple Architecture Bengal, Rural Heritage Conservation, Religious Art India

1. Introduction

The Shri Shri Ananta Basudev Temple at Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly, stands as one of the most significant examples of the Balarama tradition in Bengal. It is an exceptional specimen within this tradition, primarily due to its unique Vighraha, which appears rare within Bengal. In this temple, Ananta is identified with Balarama, while Basudeva represents Lord Krishna; together they form the composite Vighraha, Ananta Basudev.

The fourteen-armed form of Balarama, depicted beneath the canopy of a multi-hooded serpent, is adorned with multiple symbolic attributes. Seated on his lap is the four-armed child form of Narayana (Krishna), symbolising the protective role of the elder brother who safeguards his younger sibling from all adversities. On the right side, six hands hold a trident, pestle, bow, plough, half-bloomed lotus bud, and bell; on the left side, six hands carry a mace, thunderbolt, discus, conch, goad, and noose. The remaining two lower hands gently cradle Basudeva with deep affection. The serene yet majestic royal posture, along with the distinctive moustache of Balarama, enhances the commanding presence of the Vighraha.

The Vighraha exemplifies classical wooden sculptural techniques, refined artistic imagination, and dynamic iconographic expression, demonstrating the high craftsmanship of artisan Hiralal Kundu of Binola village in Amta, Howrah, who created this distinctive sculptural form.

The temple is also associated with Khonja Bhagavan Acharya, a companion of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, and is historically associated with his presence. His wooden sandals are worshipped here. The Mukherjee family serves as the temple's hereditary priests. Within this devotional framework, Chaitanya is revered as Krishna and Nityananda as Balarama.

Annual festivals are observed with great devotion, including the Sankirtan festival on the Krishna Trayodashi of the dark fortnight of the month of Chaitra, and the annual on Ananta Chaturdashi in the month of Bhadra, which attracts a significant number of devotees. A distinctive feature of the offerings on this occasion is *panta bhat* (fermented rice).

The agrarian character of the Hooghly region is reflected in the symbolic presence of the plough and yoke, essential implements of cultivation. It is believed that the place name "Jolkul" derives from the presence of Sutradhar (artisan) families skilled in crafting these agricultural tools, as well as from the farming communities residing in the area. The worship of Balarama, the Vighraha of agriculture, has thus been prevalent here since ancient times.

The Shri Shri Ananta Basudev Temple represents a harmonious synthesis of social and religious life. In the contemporary age—marked by rapid urbanisation, mechanisation, and increasing individualism—where values such as fraternity, mutual affection, hospitality, and collective welfare are gradually diminishing, this temple functions as a cultural reminder of humanistic consciousness and social responsibility.

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In the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition of Bengal, the Balarama Vighraha is regarded as the manifestation of Nityananda Prabhu and is worshipped accordingly. Balarama in Bengal embodies multiple identities: he is at once the Vighraha of agrarian society, a manifestation of Ananta Naga, and in certain regions, a representative of folk deities. According to texts such as the *Shrimad Bhagavata*, *Garga Samhita*, *Harivamsa Purana*, and the *Mahabharata*, Lord Balarama is a profound and multifaceted figure whose greatness and virtues are difficult to fully represent through narration or praise.

2. Literature Review

For the purpose of this research, the investigator selected both primary and secondary educational institutions as the principal sites for data collection. The majority of the data has been derived from primary sources, including field surveys and structured as well as semi-structured interviews. In addition, a range of secondary sources has been consulted and critically reviewed to support the study.

Among the key references, Nihar Ghosh's *Banglar Mandirer Shilpa Shaili (Anta Madhyayuga)* (Amar Bharati Publications, 2012) provides significant insights into the artistic traditions of Bengal's temple architecture. Another important contribution is Debabrata Peyada's *Banglar Darushilp* (Radha Publications, 2022), which offers a comprehensive discussion on the wooden art traditions of Bengal. The classical text *Sri Krishna Vijay*, composed by Gunraj Khan (Maladhar Basu) and published by Sri Chaitanya Gaudiya Math in 1977, has also been utilized as a valuable literary and devotional source.

Scholarly engagement with the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition necessitates reference to authoritative devotional literature. In this regard, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Tirtha Darshan* authored by Shri Haridas Das Babaji, published from the Poradaha Ashram of Haribol Kutir, Navadwip, has been extensively consulted. Furthermore, the study draws intellectual inspiration from works such as *Gaudiya Vaishnava Biography*, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Dictionary*, and the writings of Tarapada Santra, along with contributions from various other scholars in the field.

An attempt has been made to synthesize the research through the incorporation of experiential narratives and oral testimonies collected from devotees and Gaudiya Vaishnava saints associated with the concerned monastery or temple, thereby ensuring both textual and ethnographic depth in the study.

3. Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through site-specific fieldwork conducted at the location where the temple is situated. In the course of this field investigation, detailed information was gathered from the chief priest of the temple as well as other priests belonging to the same hereditary lineage.

In addition, significant ethnographic data were obtained from the local inhabitants of the surrounding villages. These include narratives of temple-centred miraculous events, oral traditions, proverbs, folk verses, and lesser-known historical accounts associated with the temple. Such information was collected through face-to-face interviews and on-site participant observation.

Further, data regarding the ritual practices, daily services (seva), and various festivals associated with the temple deities were primarily collected from the officiating priests. It is noteworthy that certain esoteric or restricted ritual practices were not disclosed by some informants, reflecting the presence of sacred confidentiality within ritual traditions.

On the other hand, secondary data were collected from authenticated textual sources, including published books, scholarly articles, and relevant electronic resources. However, the scope of secondary data remained limited due to the scarcity of existing literature on this specific temple. In particular, academic works focusing on Gaudiya Vaishnava temples in the Bengali language are relatively rare, which necessitated a greater reliance on primary data.

In conclusion, this research places special emphasis on field-based investigation, incorporating data collected from ascetics, residents, and temple servitors (priests) through direct, in-person interviews. The findings of this study are therefore grounded in empirical field data, which have been systematically analysed and coherently documented to present a comprehensive understanding of the selected temple.

4. Historical Background: Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple

Maldhar Basu of Kulina village in Bengal is historically acknowledged in literary and social circles. During the reign of the then-Gauda Sultan, Ruknuddin Mubarak (1469–1475 AD), Maldhar Basu was honoured with the title “*Gunraj Khan*” in recognition of his extraordinary literary talent, refined taste, scholarly wisdom, and contributions to social welfare. His “*Shri Krishna Vijay*”, a translation of the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, reflects his deep sense of devotion and noble thinking. He writes:

“ভাগবত অর্থ যত পয়ারে বাঁধিয়া।
লোক নিস্তারিতে করি পাঁচালী রচিয়া।।
সুন হে পতিতলোক একচিন্ত মনে।
কলিঘোর তিমির জগতে বিমোচনে।।
ভাগবত শুনি আমি পন্ডিতির মুখে।
লৌকিক কহিল লোক শুন মহা সুখে।।”

“Bhagavata's meaning, I composed in verses,
To liberate people, I wrote this poem.
Listen, O fallen souls, with a focused mind!
To dispel the darkness of Kali Yuga in this world.
I heard the Bhagavata from learned scholars,
And narrated it entirely for all to hear with joy.”

The poet says that he learned the core teachings of the Bhagavata from scholars and then composed them in simple, rhythmic verses, so that ordinary people can listen with

attention and find a path to liberation from the sufferings of the dark age of Kali (Kaliyuga). (Khan, Gunaraj (Maladhar Basu). *Sri Sri Krishnavijaya*. Edited by Sri Madhusudan Goswami Maharaj, 2nd ed., Sri Chaitanya Gaudiya Math, 1977. Page no. 1)

Lord Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself would listen to “*Shri Krishna Vijay*” with great delight.

Maldhar Basu’s son, Lakshikanta Basu, was also highly honoured by the Gauda Sultan and was given the title “Satyaraj Khan” for his exceptional social and public welfare work. His son, Ramananda Basu, like his father, was a dear devotee of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

A significant tradition was initiated by Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu himself—during the Rath Yatra at Puri, the chariot ropes (called *Pattadori*) used to pull Lord Jagannath’s chariot were specially made following traditional methods. Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu personally entrusted Satyaraj Khan and Ramananda Basu with the duty of preparing these sacred ropes in their village and bringing them to Puri annually. They faithfully carried out this service, ensuring that their village remained deeply connected to the spiritual traditions of Puri.

About 8 km south of their ancestral home in Kulina village, in Jolkul village, stands the temple of Shri Ananta Vasudeva. According to the “*Gaudiya Vaishnava Abhidhan*”, compiled by Pandit Haridas Das Babaji Maharaj, Ramananda Basu was a devoted and dedicated servant of Lord Ananta Vasudeva. From this lineage, we can infer that the Basu family, generation after generation, remained ardent followers of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and dedicated worshippers of Lord Ananta Vasudeva.

The Shri Ananta Basudev Temple stands as a significant example within the Balarama temple tradition of Bengal. This monument represents a unique and distinguished instance when compared with other temples belonging to the Balarama tradition across the region. A comparative study of the Shri Ananta Basudev Temple at Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly, alongside other Balarama temples of Bengal, reveals the distinctive excellence and architectural as well as cultural significance of this temple.

5. Architectural Style of the Temple

The Shri Ananta Basudev Temple is constructed in the *At-Chala* architectural style, a significant form of temple architecture in early Bengal. This construction style represents one of the notable examples of Bengal’s late medieval architectural tradition. Numerous temples across Bengal have been built following the At-Chala style; therefore, the Shri Ananta Basudev Temple undoubtedly serves as a bearer and preserver of this ancient architectural heritage. In the following discussion, a brief overview of the At-Chala style in Bengal will be presented, followed by an examination of the historical architectural tradition of the Shri Ananta Basudev Temple.

Among the architectural styles of medieval Bengal, the *chala* roof type finds its most prominent and refined expression in

the At-Chala form. The popularity of this style is evident from the large number of temples constructed in this manner. In this type, the upper tier of the double-layered roof is comparatively smaller in size than the lower one, especially when compared to the Char-Chala form. The At-Chala roof style is derived from the traditional thatched roof forms of rural Bengal, and this indigenous construction technique was later adopted in temple architecture.

According to architectural needs, certain modifications and developments have taken place within the Char-Chala style, resulting in a composite architectural form.

In the At-Chala style, these transformations become more evident, as various aspects of the *chala* roof—such as its form, structure, and articulation—are expressed in diverse ways. In medieval Bengal, a large number of temples were constructed following this architectural style. Therefore, for a deeper understanding of temple architecture, it is necessary to re-examine the fundamental and primary features, despite the existence of extensive descriptive studies.

In larger temples, the sanctum (*garbhagriha*) is usually preceded by a single entrance, often with an external covered porch. The porch typically contains three entrances. These temples are generally built on a raised platform, and the uppermost roof tier often features three small pinnacles or miniature towers. In some cases, subsidiary shrines are constructed adjacent to the main shrine, housing additional deities. In smaller, single-unit temples, the sanctum is directly connected to a single entrance doorway.

The stylistic variations and developments in temple architecture may be classified as follows: Eighteenth century-Hooghly–Bardhaman region: The roof forms tend to be dome-shaped or display a simple linear outline. Nineteenth century- Medinipur region: The roof forms are generally dome-like; however, in rare and exceptional cases, two-tiered roofs with a more pyramidal appearance are observed. (Ghosh, Nihar. *Banlar Mandir Shilpasaili (Anta Madhyajug)*. Amar Bharati, 2012. Page No. 88-90)

The Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple follows the Atchala (eight-roofed) architectural style. It is relatively small in size, with limited space inside. The present temple was built at the same site where an older, dilapidated temple once stood, and the Vighraha of Shri Ananta Vasudeva was reinstalled. Above the south-facing main entrance, there is an inscription in old Bengali script on a terracotta plaque, which reads:

“শ্রীশ্রীঅনন্তবাসুদেব শ্রিত শ্রীকৃষ্ণপ্রাণমিত্র: শকাব্দা: ১৬৯৪”

“Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva, worshipped by Shri Krishna Pran Mitra, Shakabda 1694.”

Unfortunately, little is known today about Shri Pran Krishna Mitra, but he is remembered solely for his strong devotional association to Ananta Vasudeva.

The year 1694 *Shakabda* corresponds approximately to 1772 AD, meaning the temple is now 253 years old (as of 2025 AD).

In front of the temple is a spacious *Natmandir*. The temple is now painted in pristine white, and beside it lies a large pond called "*Ananta Dighi*", surrounded by lush greenery. A majestic old banyan tree stands within the temple premises, providing shade and a serene atmosphere.

A well-paved road passes close to the temple, connecting it to National Highway two number (Delhi-Kolkata Highway), making it easily accessible to pilgrims and visitors.



Figure 1: Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple was later built by Shri Pranakrishna Mitra. This temple was constructed 253 years ago. Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.



Figure 2: In front of Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, there is a spacious *Natmandir* (pavilion). During various festivals of the temple, devotees gather here for Naam-kirtan (devotional singing) and to witness the Aarti and worship of the Lord. Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

6. Iconographic Analysis of Ananta Vasudeva

At the centre of the temple stands a high pedestal. Seated atop the white marble pedestal is the Vighraha of Ananta Vasudeva Balarama. The finely carved wooden Vighraha is approximately 5 feet tall. The seated Vighraha has a complexion resembling camphor (*karpur-gaura varna*) and well-defined facial features. The well-defined moustache enhances the noble and dignified appearance of the Vighraha. Notably, most Balarama Vighrahas in various temples across the country lack a moustache, making the Balarama of Jolkul a rare and unique representation within the Balarama Vighraha tradition. (Peyada, Debprasad. *Banglar Darubiggriho*. Rarh Prakashan, 2022. Page No 137-138)

Ananta Vasudeva Balarama is adorned with a crown along with a distinctive serpent hood consisting of 14 snake hoods arranged symmetrically. On the right side of the crown, there are six hoods, and similarly, on the left side, six more. Between these, slightly higher, is a single hood, and directly above it, a larger hood, making a total of 14 hoods embellishing the Vighraha's head. The Vighraha's ears are decorated with makara-shaped ornaments, which extend from the head down to the shoulders.

Ananta Balarama possesses 14 hands, seven on each side. The weapons in the six upper right hands, listed from top to bottom, are the trident (*trishula*), mace (*musala*), bow (*dhanush*), plow (hal or langala), a half-bloomed lotus, and a bell. The six upper left hands hold, in order, a club (*gada*), thunderbolt (*ashani or vajra*), conch (*shankha*), goad (*ankusha*), and a noose (*pasha*). The two lowest hands on each side are stretched outward, holding the four-armed Vasudeva Krishna, who has a dark blue complexion.

The Vighraha of Vasudeva Krishna is sculpted to complement the presence of Balarama. Vasudeva's right and left hands are extended, with the upper left hand holding the *Sudarshana Chakra*, while the upper right hand bears the *Kaumodaki* mace. The mace-holding hand is mostly concealed by the drapery. The lower left hand holds the *Panchajanya* conch, while the lower right hand is in a lotus-mudra posture, similar to some ancient Vishnu Vighrahas. A star symbol is visible on one of the extended hands.

The massive and majestic seated figure of Ananta Balarama has his right foot extended forward, as if in a gesture of granting blessings. This outstretched foot appears to welcome devotees, allowing them to receive divine grace. The left foot remains covered with drapery.

On the left side of Ananta Vasudeva's pedestal, a wooden pair of sandals (*paduka*) rests on a small seat, smeared with vermilion and wrapped with a sacred thread (*paita*). According to the temple's priests, these *padukas* bear the divine touch of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

Adjacent to the temple is a serene, shaded pond called "*Ananta Dighi*," which provides water for temple rituals and the Vighraha's service.



Figure 3: Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Vighraha. Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

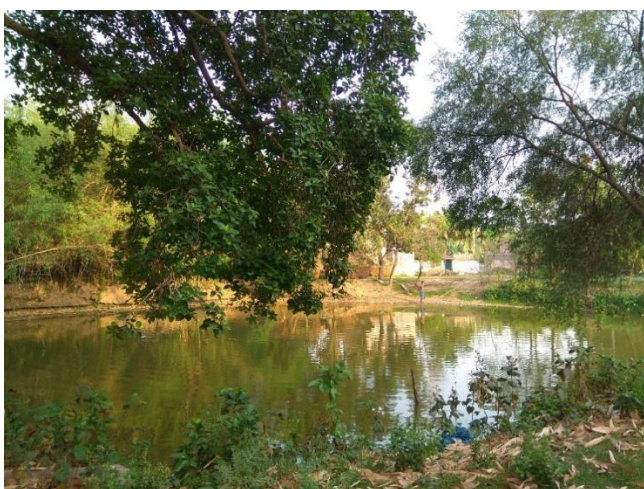


Figure 4: Upon entering Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, on the right-hand side, lies an adjacent pond used for ritual purposes called Ananta Dighi. The sacred rituals and services of Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva are all performed using the holy water of this pond. Shri Shri Ananta Vasudeva Temple, Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

7. Miraculous Legends and Rituals of the Ananta Vasudeva Temple:

Several miraculous stories related to Ananta Vasudeva continue to be recounted by local villagers and devotees.

One such account is about Nirmal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, a former temple priest and the uncle of the current priest, Nilkamal Mukhopadhyay. Nirmal Kumar worked at the Dunlop Factory in Sahaganj, Hooghly, and lived in a rented house in Chunchura. One night, while sleeping in his Chunchura house, he suddenly felt water dripping on him. Given that he was on the ground floor of a two-story house, there was no logical explanation for the water. The next morning, he rushed to Jolkul and discovered that the temple roof had cracked, causing water to drip onto Ananta Vasudeva's Vighraha the previous night. He promptly arranged for repairs.

Another notable account involves a temple priest receiving a divine command in his dream. Ananta Vasudeva, fondly called "Balaichand", appeared in his dream and instructed him to offer a ripe jackfruit (*kanthal*) in the Vighraha's food offerings. However, it was not jackfruit season, and the priest expressed his inability. The next night, Ananta Vasudeva reappeared in the priest's dream, instructing him to check the base of a jackfruit tree in his courtyard. The following morning, the priest discovered a large crack at the tree's base, revealing a perfectly ripe jackfruit. When harvested, its fragrance and taste were reported as highly valued. The sacred fruit was duly offered to the Vighraha, and devotees were delighted to receive the prasad.

Another story involves a devotee who owned agricultural land and would personally deliver meals to his ploughman (*langala-munish*) in the fields. One day, he was late and hurried to the field with food, only to find that the ploughman had already eaten. The labourer mentioned that the devotee's eldest son had brought the meal about an hour earlier. However, the devotee was puzzled- none of his sons had gone to the field that day. Upon returning home and later offering the midday ritual worship, he noticed fresh mud on Ananta Vasudeva's right foot. Overwhelmed with devotion, he realised that the Vighraha himself had ensured that the ploughman received his meal on time.

Stories like these continue to be passed down among villagers and temple priests, reinforcing their strong devotional association with Ananta Vasudeva.

8. Historical and Cultural Significance:

According to regional history, when Mahaprabhu Shri Chaitanya visited Kulinagram, he also stayed briefly at Jolkul, within the premises of the Ananta Vasudeva temple. This event is mentioned in the genealogical records (*banshavali-grantha*) of Goswami Malipara, originating from the lineage of Khanda Bhagavan Acharya. In the northwest corner of the temple stands "*Chaitanyapota*", the very spot where Mahaprabhu is believed to have shaved his head during his visit.

The temple's annual festival takes place over three days, centred around the *Bhadra Shukla Chaturdashi tithi* (*Ananta Chaturdashi*). On this occasion, Balarama is offered 14 different food items, and devotees circumambulate the temple 14 times. Women carrying offerings on their heads also participate in the 14 circumambulations, seeking the fulfilment of their wishes. Those whose desires have been granted return to perform special pujas in gratitude.

During the festival, a large-scale fair is held around the temple, attracting numerous stalls and vendors, creating a lively atmosphere filled with devotees and visitors. Other significant celebrations, such as *Janmashtami* and *Rama Navami*, are also observed with great reverence, albeit with a simple and solemn approach.

9. Conclusion

The Shri Shri Ananta Basudev Temple at Jolkul, Gurap, Hooghly is not merely a religious structure but a significant

Gaudiya Vaishnava sacred site associated with Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It represents a unique convergence of Bengal's ancient Balarama tradition, regional religious history, and local socio-cultural dynamics. The study demonstrates that the temple's architectural form reflects a sacralized adaptation of rural domestic structures, while the theological significance of the Vighras is articulated through indigenous aesthetics and craftsmanship.

As the worship of Balarama, revered as the agrarian Vighraha, has long been prevalent across Bengal, the temple embodies a synthesis of social and religious life. In the context of increasing urbanisation and socio-cultural transformation, where values of fraternity, collective responsibility, and human connection are gradually eroding, the temple continues to function as a centre of spiritual awareness and humanistic consciousness.

The study emphasises the urgent need for preservation through systematic architectural documentation, iconographic and ethnographic analysis, and the safeguarding of oral traditions, kirtan practices, and folk narratives. With sustained academic engagement and active community participation, this temple can be preserved not only as a religious institution but also as an important repository of Bengal's civilizational heritage.

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