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Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly District West Bengal: A Crucial Cradle of the Gaudiya Vaishnava Tradition

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Abstract

This paper examines the Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur at Atpur, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, as a multidimensional tirtha-space and a significant centre of Gaudiya Vaishnava culture. Drawing on Gaudiya Vaishnava hagiographical texts, local oral traditions and field-based observations of ritual and everyday practice, it places Parmeshwar Das—venerated as one of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's dvadasa Gopala and an intimate associate of Sri Nityananda Prabhu—within the broader historical and theological trajectories of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The analysis interprets the architectural layout of the Sripat complex, particularly the main temple and the samadhi, as a sacralised extension of the rural Bengali household. It further explores the ways in which the Vigraha–murti–tattva at Atpur gives concrete material expression to complex theological ideas, with special attention to Radha–tattva and to the polyvalent position of Balaram or Nityananda as both expansion and mediator of Krishna. Moving beyond external form, the paper also investigates the affective dimensions of worship, foregrounding the prominence of sevaka-bhāva—the devotional mood of the servant—in both liturgical performance and everyday religious practice.

Focusing on Holi or Dol-yatra, annakut, Durga Puja, Jhulan-yatra and other festivals, together with practices of prasada distribution and the circulation and enactment of miraculous narratives, the study shows how these elements collectively sustain a local "tirtha-culture." It argues that the Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das functions not only as an important Gaudiya Vaishnava tirtha, but also as a crucial point of entry for understanding the entanglement of devotional lineages, sociocultural life and vernacular architecture in rural Bengal. The paper concludes by underscoring the urgent need for systematic documentation and community-based conservation of this and comparable sacred sites in the context of accelerating urbanisation, economic pressures and environmental degradation.

Keywords: Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur, Bengal, Temple Architecture, Folk Religion, Pilgrimage.

1. Introduction

Within the religious and cultural history of Bengal, Gaudiya Vaishnavism holds a distinctive and formative place, shaping social as well as devotional life. Although Vaishnavism as a religious tradition is ancient in the Indian subcontinent, the systematic articulation and propagation of Gaudiya Vaishnava thought in Bengal emerged later. At the centre of both this theological elaboration and the institutional role of its

ācāryas stands Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. In effect, without reference to Sri Chaitanya, no theological system can meaningfully be described as "Gaudiya Vaishnavism."

The tradition rests, on one level, on bhakti-tattva (the theology of devotion), sustained philosophical reflection and doctrinal formulations oriented around the person and teachings of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. On another level, it is carried by an extensive network of Sripats, Namahatta centres, Akhras and Ashramas that are geographically dispersed yet mutually connected. Each Sripat is associated with the sādhana (spiritual discipline) and the charismatic, gravitas-filled presence of a particular devotee, acharya or close parshada of Sri Chaitanya. Over time, these centres have come to function as major regional and supra-regional sites of pilgrimage. Simultaneously, many of them have developed into key nodes for the transmission of Vaishnava culture: not only spaces for deity worship, but also centres for the study of bhakti texts, the cultivation and circulation of devotional literature, the preservation of Gaudiya Vaishnava historical memory and the continued practice of Vaishnava sādhana as a living lineage.

The Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur, situated in the Atpur region of present-day Hooghly district, is one such enduring sacred centre. In Gaudiya textual tradition, Parmeshwar (Parmeshvari) Das is identified, on the one hand, as one of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's dvadasa Gopala and, on the other, as a dearly beloved disciple of Sri Nityananda Prabhu. His name appears repeatedly in Gaudiya hagiographical literature, where his intimate association with Nityananda and his involvement in important episodes of Gaudiya history are especially emphasised. The Sripat itself is deeply marked by this connection with Nityananda: Parmeshwari Das Thakur is remembered as one of Nityananda's closest associates, and the deity once served by Nityananda Prabhu is now worshipped here as the principal murti—Balarama, honoured in this temple as a symbolic manifestation of Nityananda Prabhu.

If, however, the Sripat is approached only through doctrinal or devotional history, significant aspects of its meaning remain obscured-particularly its embeddedness in local socio-cultural life, the architectural configuration of the temple complex, and the iconographic and ritual practices through which theological ideas are rendered visible and experientially tangible.

This paper is therefore shaped by two closely related aims. First, it seeks to situate the Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur within the broader historical and theological framework of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Second, it proposes an integrated reading of the temple complex, the iconography of the deities, and the associated festivals, narratives and everyday practices, treating them collectively as constituting a coherent "tirtha-culture.

2. Historical Background: Sri Parmeshwar Das and the Sripat

The Sripat of Shri Shri Parmeshwar Das Thakur-honoured as one of the dvadasa Gopalas and identified, in the register of Vraja-lila, with the sakha *Arjuna*—is regarded as a site of exceptional sanctity within the Vaishnava religious world.

Shri Shri Parmeshwar Das Thakur, a leading parshada (close associate) of Shri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and mantra-disciple of Shri Nityananda Mahaprabhu, is credited with establishing this Sripat. Within Gaudiya theology he is understood as the earthly manifestation of *Arjuna*, an intimate companion of Bhagavan Shri Krishna in his Vraja pastimes. In his historical embodiment, Parmeshwar Das Thakur Mahashaya was born into a prosperous Baidya family of the Kayagupta branch at Ketugram in the Bardhaman district, and is described as the nineteenth descendant of the Gauda king Shashanka Gupta. Gaudiya Vaishnava sources refer t twelve principal Gopalas and their respective Sripats; four such centres are located in the Hooghly disotrict, among which this Sripat holds a prominent place.

The presiding deities of the temple here, Shri Radha-Shyamasundar Jiu, are the very Vigrahas formerly worshipped by Nityananda Deva. Following Nityananda's disappearance, and in obedience to the instruction of Nitai's consort, Mata Jahnava Devi, Parmeshwar Das transferred these deities to Atpur and thereby instituted this Sripat. Recasting Vraja-lila through the idiom of Nadiya-lila, he installed the yugala-Vigraha of Shrimat Radharani and Shri Shyamasundar Jiu on the altar in the form of Gauranga, and Shri Baladeva Jiu as the prior body (purva-deha) of Nityananda. These Vigrahas are dated to the sixteenth century. To the best of current knowledge, apart from this Sripat there is no other site where Balaram and the yugala-Vigraha are enshrined together on a single seat in this distinctive manner.

2.1 Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur: Biographical Sketch

Sri Parmeshwar (Parmeshvari) Das Thakur is identified in Gaudiya sources as one of the dhadasa Gopala of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and is consistently described as a close and beloved follower of Sri Nityananda Prabhu. Oral and textual traditions broadly concur that he was born into a Vaishnava-Vaidya family in the Katwa area of present-day Bardhaman district.

In Gaudiya hagiography, Parmeshwar Das emerges as a principal associate of Nityananda whose life and devotional disposition mirror that of his guru. The Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata presents him as one in whose worshipped deity-form Nityananda's own pastimes are manifest:

নিত্যানন্দ জীবন পরমেশ্বরী দাস।

যাঁহার বিগ্রহে নিত্যানন্দের বিলাস।।

(Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata, Antya 5.732)

The same text describes an episode at Atpur in which the deity of Gauranga served by Parmeshwar reveals a direct manifestation of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The encounter is framed as a moment of intense mutual recognition in which both devotee and Lord are overwhelmed by ecstatic love:

পুরন্দর পণ্ডিত পরমেশ্বরী দাস।

যাঁহার বিগ্রহে গৌরচন্দ্রের প্রকাশ।।

সত্বর ধাইয়া আইলেন সেইক্ষণে।

প্রভু দেখি প্রেমযোগে কান্দে দুই জনে।।

(Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata, Antya 5.95-96)

The Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata further narrates that, when Chaitanya Mahaprabhu returned from Kanainatshala to Nilachala and instructed Nityananda Prabhu to travel through Gauda in order to deliver the socially marginal and "lowly", Nityananda undertook this journey accompanied by several close associates: Rama Das, Gadadhar Das, Raghunath Vaidya, Krishnadas Pandit, Parmeshwari Das and Purandar Pandit. As they travel, various ecstatic moods (bhava) appear in them; Parmeshwari Das and Krishnadas in particular are described as being continuously absorbed in Gopala-bhava, the affective mode of Krishna's cowherd companions:

কৃষ্ণদাস পণ্ডিত পরমেশ্বরী দাস।

পুরন্দর পণ্ডিতের পরম উল্লাস।।

নিত্যানন্দ স্বরূপের যত আপ্তগণ।

নিত্যানন্দ সঙ্গে সবে করিলা গমন।।

পথ চলিতেই নিত্যানন্দ মহাশয়।

সর্ব্ব-পারিষদ আগে হৈলা প্রেমময়।।

(Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata, Antya 5.232–235)

কৃষ্ণদাস পরমেশ্বরী দাস দুইজন।
গোপাল ভাবে হৈ হৈ করে অনুক্ষণ।।

(Sri Chaitanya Bhagavata, Antya 5.240)

Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur, in his Gaudiya-bhashya, emphasises that Parmeshwari Das and Krishnadas should be understood as servants of Nityananda Prabhu whose Gopala-bhava corresponds specifically to the dhadasa Gopala of Vraja, rather than to a vague or generic pastoral sentiment.

In the Adi-lila of the Chaitanya-charitamrita, Parmeshwar Das is again mentioned, and his remembrance is associated with the attainment of Krishna-prema. Later Gaudiya biographical and doctrinal texts cite this verse in order to underline his spiritual status. After the completion of Nityananda Prabhu's manifest pastimes, Parmeshwar Das is said, under the guidance of Jahnava Devi, to have participated in preaching across different regions of Gauda and eventually to have established his Sripat at Atpur.

The Bhakti-ratnakara notes that Parmeshwari Das accompanied Sri Jahnava Mata to the celebrated Kheturi festival and later travelled with her to Vraja. There, by her grace, he is said to have witnessed the union of Sri Radha with Sri Gopinath and to have been deeply transformed by this vision of divine love:

গৌরাঙ্গ নকড়ি কৃষ্ণদাস, দামোদর।
শ্রীপরমেশ্বরী বলরাম বিজ্ঞবর।।
শ্রীমুকুন্দ, দাস বৃন্দাবন আদি করি।
এ সবায় সহ সুখে চলয়ে ঈশ্বরী।।

(Bhakti-ratnakara 10.376-77)

On Jahnava Mata's instruction, Parmeshwari Das subsequently installed the deities of Sri Sri Radha–Gopinath at Atpur:

তারা আটপুর গ্রামে শীঘ্র করি যাহ।
তথা রাধাগোপীনাথ সেবা প্রকাশহ।।
ঈশ্বরী আজ্ঞায় শ্রীপরমেশ্বরী দাস।
রাধাগোপীনাথ সেবা করিল প্রকাশ।।

(Bhakti-ratnakara 13.245-46)

Other traditional accounts attribute to him the task of transporting metal Vigrahas of Radharani, cast at Daihat, by boat from Katwa to Vrindavan — an episode read as evidence of Jahnava Mata's confidence in his reliability and devotion. (Fig. No. 1)

Fig. No. 1: Sri Sri Radha Syamasundar Jiu and Sri Balaram are the presiding Vigrahas of this Sripat. Sri Radha Syamasundar Jiu is the deity originally worshipped by Nityananda Prabhu. Later, Sri Parameswari Das Thakur installed the Balaram Vigraha here. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

2.2 Atpur and Anarbati: Spatial and Social Context

Atpur (earlier "Vishakhal" or "Vishakhala") is a historically important village in the Hooghly district of West Bengal, located on the alluvial plain created by the Ganga and Damodar rivers. The village is predominantly agrarian. Ponds, canals, dense vegetation, temples and monastic establishments together form a distinctive religious and folk-cultural landscape. The locality of Anarbati, where the Sripat is situated, constitutes part of this wider Atpur region.

In the late nineteenth century, Atpur became the site where eight monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna are believed to have gathered and resolved to constitute the Ramakrishna Order — an event recorded in institutional histories of the Ramakrishna Math. Atpur therefore functions as a node connecting the sixteenth-century Gaudiya Vaishnava efflorescence with the nineteenth-century "Bengal Renaissance", transmitting two historically distinct yet intersecting devotional and reformist lineages.

2.3 Formation and Development of the Sripat

Parmeshwar Das's arrival at Atpur and the establishment of his Sripat mark the initial phase in the formation of the present temple complex. The site simultaneously served as his place of residence, as a bhajan-kunja (space of contemplative practice) and as a sadhana-dhama (field of spiritual discipline). Over successive generations, disciples and lay patrons erected the main shrine, the samadhi monument and ancillary structures, and installed a set of deities that today constitute the ritual and theological centre of the Sripat.

In contemporary terms, the site is recognised among Gaudiya Vaishnavas as a significant tirtha, known locally as "Shyamer pat" ("Shyam's seat"). For scholars it represents a multilayered cultural field where religious history, material culture and everyday village life intersect. (Fig. No. 2)

Fig. No. 2: This is the exterior view of Sri Parameswari Das Thakur's Sripat. In front, there is an open courtyard. During various temple festivals, large gatherings of devotees assemble in this sacred space. In

this courtyard, the Lord's prasada is distributed, the cachar festival of the Vigrahas is celebrated, and cooking for many devotees is carried out. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

3. Temple Architecture: Sacred Form within a Rural Setting

In Bengal, temple architecture is conventionally grouped into three principal types: *shikhara*, *chala* and *ratna*. That these forms constitute the core of the region's temple-building tradition becomes clear when one surveys the older brick temples scattered across Bengal. Over time, however, a series of stylistic evolutions has significantly reshaped this architectural landscape. The latest major development in this trajectory is what is commonly referred to as the *dalan* style.

The temple at the Sripat of Parmeshwari Das Thakur is an example of this *dalan* type. Historically, such *dalan* structures were richly embellished in various ways. Decorative work was executed in lime and brick-dust plaster (*chun-surki*), with intricate relief patterns; in the course of time, this gave way to ornamentation carried out in cement and sand. With these and other changes, temple decoration itself has undergone a profound transformation.

By contrast, in the older terracotta temples of Bengal we encounter a very different visual repertoire: scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, diverse divine lilas, images of gods and goddesses, as well as depictions of social life, systems of commerce and trade, and even the presence of contemporary ruling elites, were all rendered as narrative panels in terracotta. Many of these features have now been altered or effaced, often as a result of repeated renovations that have made it difficult to preserve the original surface ornamentation.

At the Sripat of Parmeshwari Das Thakur, however, the ornamentation of the temple *dalan* still displays abundant use of creepers, leaves and floral designs, including motifs resembling feather-like (*pankha*) patterns. These reliefs are further accentuated through the application of green, red and golden paint on the temple surface.

3.1 Spatial Layout

The Sripat complex is organised around an open courtyard. On one side stands the principal shrine; on another lie residential quarters and ancillary halls. At the centre, between two mature bakul trees (Mimusops elengi), is the samadhi of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur.

The basic layout may be summarised as follows: An east- or north-facing sanctum (garbhagriha) housing the main deities. A jagamohan or front hall or veranda for congregational activities. An open courtyard functioning as a performative space for Holi, kirtan and fairs. The samadhi shrine of Parmeshwar Das on a slightly raised platform between the bakul trees. Kitchen, *bhog* room and temporary accommodation for visiting devotees along the sides of the courtyard.

This configuration may be read as an expanded version of a rural Bengali homestead, within which domestic and sacred spaces interpenetrate. The courtyard, though structurally continuous with vernacular domestic architecture, is re-coded as a sacred akhra through ritual use and narrative memory.

3.2 The Main Shrine

The principal shrine is of the dalan type and is locally regarded as approximately five centuries old. A nat-mandir (pavilion for performance and congregation) stands before it. Repairs and modifications have been undertaken at different times by devotees and patrons.

Constructed of brick and finished with chun–surki (lime–surki) plaster, the building displays several characteristic features: A relatively modest superstructure with a simplified shikhara-like profile,

consistent with rural shrines. Arched entranceways on the facade with a central wooden door. Limited terracotta or brick ornamentation, largely floral and vegetal motifs flanking the entrance. (Fig. No. 3) A single-cell sanctum with a raised altar or throne for the deities and a small circumambulatory or gathering space.

Compared to larger urban Vaishnava temples with multiple towers or navaratna superstructures, the shrine at Atpur exemplifies an aesthetic of restraint and proximity, minimising physical and symbolic distance between deity and devotee.

Fig. No. 3: A veranda is located outside the garbhagriha or sanctum of the temple. The temple is constructed in the Bangla dalan style, widely known in Bengal as the thakur dalan type. According to elderly local informants, the temple is ancient, although no firm historical evidence has yet been found to establish its exact date. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy-Private Collection Photograph.

3.3 Jagamohan, Halls and Verandas

The jagamohan, immediately adjoining the sanctum, is a flat-roofed brick hall with an open veranda supported on masonry pillars. It serves as the primary locus for kirtan, scriptural recitation, didactic discourse and prasada distribution. (Fig. No. 4)

Traces of local artistic practice are visible in this space: painted alpana motifs on floors and walls, paper flowers and bamboo frameworks deployed during festivals, and temporary lighting arrangements that visually transform the hall during major observances.

Fig. No. 4: Directly in front of the veranda stands the nata mandir or ritual pavilion. In this nata mandir, visitors who come for darshan listen to dance performances, kirtan and scriptural recitation or pat. On special occasions, lila kirtan is performed here, and prasada is also distributed in this hall. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

3.4 Samadhi Architecture: Earth, Tree and Memory

The samadhi of Sri Parmeshwar Das is located slightly apart from the main shrine, centrally framed by the twin bakul trees. Architecturally, it is extremely simple: a low square or circular platform topped by a small domed or spire-like superstructure, typically coated in white or pale paint and inscribed with the saint's name and the date of his passing. A low parapet demarcates the circumambulatory path used by devotees.

Fig. No. 5: The samadhi of Sri Sri Parameswari Das Thakur is situated between two ancient bakul trees. On entering the Sripat, it is seen on the left-hand side in an open courtyard. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

The distinctiveness of this memorial lies less in its formal architectural vocabulary than in its integration with living vegetation. The fragrant blossoms and dense shade of the bakul trees are experienced by devotees as inseparable from the saint's continued presence. The samadhi thus constitutes a composite sacred object, formed by the conjunction of earth, built structure and living tree, within which memory and devotion converge. (Fig. No. 5)

4. Vigraha–Murti–Tattva: Iconography and Theological Representation

While iconography is conventionally concerned with the analysis of the meaningful forms, conventions and symbolic elements of divine, religious or cultural images and icons, in the present study the affective dimension assumes particular importance. In Bengali Gaudiya Vaishnava temples, the devotee's *bhāva* is so closely interwoven with the deity that the two appear almost inseparably enmeshed. From one temple to another, modes of *seva* vary, and with them the inherited emotional tone of the *seva*-lineage also takes distinct shapes.

Within the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the devotee's *bhāva* remains continuously and intimately linked with Vigraha–worship, often exceeding what might be captured by the categories of Gaudiya scriptures, philosophical treatises or formal historical narratives. Yet the outward expressions of these devotional moods are by no means outside the horizon of Gaudiya śāstra or doctrinal reflection. In attempting to trace and interpret these dimensions, one is repeatedly struck by the magnitude of Mahaprabhu's contribution: it is primarily within the Gaudiya Vaishnava lineage, shaped by his presence and teaching, that such forms of devotional embodiment are fully realised, in a manner not readily paralleled in other traditions.

For these reasons, my discussion of the iconography of the deities will be accompanied by a brief exploration of the affective or emotional registers (*bhāva*) that are inseparably bound up with their worship.

4.1 Principal Deities and Their Theological Significance

The main Vigrahas installed and worshipped within the Sripat precincts include: Sri Sri Radha–Shyamasundar Jiu – the divine couple, understood in Gaudiya Vaishnavism as the highest embodiment of pure devotional love. Sri Sri Shyamasundar Jiu – a singular Krishna Vigraha, widely known locally as "Shyam Thakur". To his left stands Srimati Radharani, the Lord's internal energy, and to his right stands Balaram Sankarshan, the direct expansion of Krishna. Sridhar Narayan Dev – a Vishnu Vigraha associated primarily with protection and sustenance.

The samadhi of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur – honoured and ritually treated as the presence of the guru, effectively functioning as a guru–Vigraha.

Within Gaudiya theological discourse, Balaram both enables Krishna's vatsalya-lila (by appearing as elder brother) and manifests as Ananga-manjari, Radharani's younger sister, thereby encompassing both shakti and shaktiman. At Parmeshwari Das's Sripat, Balaram is worshipped explicitly as the representative of Nityananda Prabhu. The Balaram deity, approximately 2–3 feet in height, is depicted with a fair complexion, in lotus posture, the right hand raised in blessing.

Traditional narratives further state that, following the casting of Radharani's metal Vigrahas at Daihat, Parmeshwar Das, at Jahnava Mata's command, transported these from Katwa to Vrindavan by river, and later, again at her instruction, settled at Atpur to install and serve the Vraja-yugala alongside a shalagram and a wooden Vigraha of Balaram. The spatial positioning of the Balaram Vigraha — on the right of the other deities — has been interpreted as an index of Parmeshwar Das's particular reverence for Balaram or Nityananda as his chosen Lord.

4.2 Radha–Shyamasundar: Visualising Divine Love

The Radha–Shyamasundar Vigrahas conform to the established Gaudiya iconographic type: Krishna stands in tribhanga posture, flute in hand, with a gentle smile; Radha stands slightly offset, turned towards Krishna, her complexion bright. The facial features are rendered with soft, humanly intelligible expressions rather than exaggerated transcendental markers.

In daily worship, the deities are dressed in relatively simple fabrics, often in lighter hues. On festive occasions, they are adorned with more elaborate cloth such as Benarasi silks, together with colourful turbans and veils. Flower garlands and bead ornaments are frequently produced by local women using materials available in the village and its environs.

Theologically, Gaudiya Radha-tattva — the teaching that Radha embodies hladini-shakti, the essence of divine bliss and love — is made tangible through this dual Vigraha. At the same time, the complex theological status of Balaram is also visually encoded: as both Krishna's direct expansion and as Ananga-manjari, he is conceptualised as a "couple" within a single figure, so that the shrine, in effect, houses two pairs: the Radha–Krishna couple and what devotees sometimes describe as the "Balaram couple".

In the sculptural representation, Balaram Sankarshan appears fair, standing in gentle tribhanga posture, with plough and horn in his right and left hands respectively, ready to depart for the pastures. Experienced Gaudiya practitioners explicitly identify this Balaram with Nityananda Prabhu, recalling the assertion of the Sri Chaitanya-charitamrita that the world can receive everything through Nityananda alone.

4.3 Shyamasundar: A Folk-Mediated Krishna Vigraha

The popularity of the Shyamasundar deity is reflected in the local designation of the Sripat as "Shyamer pat". The Vigraha displays the following features: A dark shyama complexion consistent with classical Krishna iconography. A dynamic, dance-like posture with flute and peacock-feather crown. An overall aesthetic suggesting rural elegance rather than courtly opulence.

The ornamentation of Shyamasundar is largely local: glass bangles, brass jewellery, inexpensive beads and cloth flowers from nearby markets, rather than highly wrought precious-metal adornments. This marks a contrast with urban Vaishnava centres characterised by conspicuous ritual display.

During Holi and other major festivals, the Vigraha is heavily covered with coloured powders and garlands of marigold, hibiscus and other flowers, so that the sculptural contour becomes indistinct. The emphasis shifts from visual clarity of form to the affective density of joy and shared play.

4.4 Sridhar Narayan: Icon of Protection

The Vigraha of Sridhar Narayan broadly follows standard Vishnu iconography, holding conch, discus, mace and lotus. Local devotees rely on Sridhar Narayan as the guardian of the village, protecting it from epidemics, floods and untimely death. For an agriculturally dependent community subject to environmental uncertainties, this protective deity operates as a symbolic focus for anxieties around livelihood and survival.

4.5 Samadhi as Guru–Vigraha

The samadhi of Parmeshwar Das is treated ritually as a guru–Vigraha. Incense, lamps and flowers are regularly offered there; *bhog*, arati and kirtan form part of its daily service. Devotees circumambulate the structure and bow by touching their heads to the platform. Garlands and sometimes red threads are tied to the trunks and branches of the surrounding bakul trees.

In this way, the samadhi becomes a composite sacred Vigraha that fuses Gaudiya notions of the guru's continuing presence with local Bengali practices of tree veneration and folk votive offerings. (Fig. No. 6)

Fig. No. 6: This samadhi of Sri Sri Parameswari Das Thakur, located between two old bakul trees, is regarded as one of the manifest or prakata samadhis of the close associates of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition. Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur's Sripat at Atpur, Hooghly, West Bengal. Courtesy- Private Collection Photograph.

5. Sociocultural Life: Festivals, Rituals and Everyday Practices

In earlier times, temples frequently stood at the heart of local society, with popular culture, festivals and ritual practices taking shape around them. In a similar fashion, Gaudiya Vaishnava temples and Sripats have served—and continue to serve—as spaces where, in the flow of daily life, a variety of festivals, ritual observances and forms of social instruction are enacted. A Gaudiya Vaishnava Sripat is, therefore, not simply a place of worship; it has historically functioned as a pedagogical institution as well.

Well before the advent of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Navadvip had already emerged as a major centre of Sanskrit learning. In this milieu, Advaita Acharya Prabhu—Mahaprabhu's dearly beloved parshada, previously known as Kamalaksha—was acknowledged as a leading scholar. Because of his extensive command over the four Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and related śastric literature, he bore the honorific title "Veda Panchanana," conferred by the Sanskrit scholarly community of Navadvip. Another close associate of Sri Chaitanya, Devananda Pandit, held the position of a Sanskrit teacher. In this way, many of Mahaprabhu's companions and attendants played a prominent role in animating and enriching Navadvip's Sanskrit intellectual world.

During that period, Sripats operated as important centres of Sanskrit study. At the same time, they were key sites for the teaching of bhakti-tattva and devotional texts, for the preservation of Gaudiya Vaishnava history, for the composition of Gaudiya Vaishnava hagiographies, and for the custody of manuscripts and *pothi* volumes belonging to the tradition. Over the course of time, however, the character of many Sripats has gradually shifted, so that they now function primarily as venues for social festivals and more general cultural activities. In what follows, I offer a brief discussion of these developments.

5.1 Holi or Dol-yatra: "The Holi of Shyamer Pat"

Holi, or Dol-yatra, is the most prominent festival at the Sripat. From the standpoint of sociocultural life, three aspects may be highlighted. Canchar and Holika-dahan: On the eve of Holika-dahan, local craftsmen and youths construct a temporary bamboo-and-straw structure known as canchar in the courtyard. The Vigrahas of Shyamasundar–Radharani, Balaram and Sridhar Narayan are installed here in special festive

dress. Holika is then ritually burned in the presence of kirtan and devotional song. The canchar may be read as an instance of vernacular festival architecture with a clearly demarcated ritual life-cycle. Kirtan repertoire: The kirtans performed during the festival combine scriptural compositions with locally authored songs. Gaudiya nama-sankirtan stands alongside pieces such as "*Gauranger rang khelay*" and "*O Nandalal eso re*", where Brajabuli, standard Bengali and local dialect elements intermingle. The instrumentation — *dhola* (drums), *kamsara* (large cymbals), *karatala* (hand-cymbals) and *mandira* — remains firmly within the folk domain. Colour-play and social levelling: After colours are offered to the deities, participants play Holi among themselves. Differences of caste, economic status and social standing are temporarily suspended, or at least ritually bracketed, in the shared play of colour. Holi thus performs, in condensed form, an ideal of social equality and communal cohesion.

5.2 Vaishnava Festivals, Durga Puja and Other Observances

In addition to major Gaudiya Vaishnava festivals such as Janmashtami, Gaur-purnima, Nityananda Trayodashi, Radhashtami, Balaram Jayanti and Rasa-purnima — marked by lila-kirtan, scriptural recitation and various ritual services — the Sripat also hosts the autumnal Durga Puja.

The performance of Durga Puja within a Vaishnava centre exemplifies the syncretic tendencies of Bengali religious culture, where Shakta and Vaishnava elements frequently coexist and overlap. On Navami, special worship, sindur-khela and prasada distribution enact a form of shared ritual participation that cuts across doctrinal boundaries.

Annakut is celebrated on a large scale, attracting substantial numbers of visiting Vaishnavas and involving the preparation of an extensive range of food offerings. Radhashtami is marked by elaborate *bhog–rag*, while on Raksha-purnima, both Shyamasundar Jiu and Balaram Jiu are adorned with rakhi, accompanied by special offerings.

During Jhulan-yatra, the swing festival, the deities are dressed in a sequence of special "forms": *Phul-besha* (flower dress), *Rakhal raja* (cowherd king), *Subal-milan*, *Nouka-vilas* (boat-pastime) and *Rai raja-besha*, among others. Devotees from surrounding and more distant areas converge on the Sripat during these days. The monastery also observes Vipad-tarini worship and conducts a Ratha-yatra of Jagannath Dev with notable local enthusiasm.

An ashta-prahar (twenty-four-hour) *Hari-Nama-kirtan* is organised periodically, and on Vaishakhi Purnima the tirobhava-tithi (disappearance day) of Parmeshwari Das Thakur is commemorated with a major festival. The appearance day of Nrisimhadev is similarly observed.

5.3 Prasada and Food Culture

Food offering and distribution (prasada) form an integral part of the Sripat's ritual and social life. Three dimensions may be noted. Daily offerings: The daily *bhog* typically consists of rice, lentils, leafy greens, seasonal vegetables and sweets, largely drawn from local agricultural production. Many devotees contribute rice, vegetables, dairy products and sweets, and the regular services of the monastery rely heavily on such donations. Festival feasts: On festival days, khichuri, labra (mixed vegetable curry) and *payasa* (sweet milk pudding) are prominent items. Sponsorship of *bhog* by local families or kin groups is a common form of manat (vowed offering). In addition to such vows, devotees often donate towards *Nara–Narayan*–seva, feeding guests and the poor. Communal eating practices: During prasada distribution, participants sit in rows on mats or quilts on the floor, eating together. This embodied practice gives concrete form to an ideal of equality and shared participation that is central to Gaudiya devotional discourse.

5.4 Miraculous Narratives, Oral Tradition and Local Memory

As in many Gaudiya Vaishnava Sripats, the sacred status of the site is reinforced and elaborated through a body of narratives concerning miraculous events associated with the central saint. While external observers may classify these as "folktales", for practitioners they constitute a domain of truth that exceeds, or corrects, secular historical narrative. Stories surrounding Parmeshwar Das (often affectionately "Parpas") include:

- The revival of a householder's only son who had died from snakebite, affected by the saint placing his hand on the boy's chest and invoking "Jai Nitai".
- The restoration to life of a jackal thrown dead into the midst of a kirtan by hostile elements, and its subsequent participation in nama-sankirtan together with other jackals it brought from the forest — an episode remembered in the well-known Vaishnava invocation:

  পরমেশ্বর দাস বন্দিব সাবধানে।

  শৃগালে লওয়ান নাম সংকীর্ত্তন স্থানে॥
- The revival of the deceased son of a landlord who had earlier instigated sacrilegious acts at the Sripat, leading to the landlord's and his followers' submission at the saint's feet and their entry into Krishna-bhakti.
- The manifestation of additional hands by Parmeshwar Das at Thakur-pukur in order to retie his shikha while the other hands were engaged in japa, the subsequent death of a woman who witnessed the event and disclosed it against his warning, and her later restoration to life through his grace.
- The saint's journey across the Ganga to procure banana leaves for prasada distribution during a large festival at Khardaha, undertaken at Jahnava Mata's request and recounted as an illustration of his prompt obedience and miraculous efficiency.

In addition to these larger narratives, devotees and villagers recount numerous smaller episodes in which the saint's blessing heals illness, diverts floodwaters away from the temple precinct or fulfills vows granted through dream-visions of Shyamasundar. Together, these stories form an oral archive that shapes and sustains the mahatmya (sacred prestige) of the Sripat.

6. Discussion: Interrelations of History, Architecture, Iconography and Sociocultural Life

To consider the Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das solely in terms of discrete analytical domains — history, architecture, iconography, sociocultural practices — is to miss the interdependencies that make it a coherent field of practice. Three axes of interrelation may be highlighted.

History and architecture: Historical change — from the lifetime of Parmeshwar Das to the present — is inscribed in the built environment of the Sripat. Additions, repairs, the construction of new halls and the partial modification of older structures collectively materialise the passage of time and the changing capacities of the community. Architecture thus functions as a visible archive of historical processes.

Iconography and folk aesthetics: The appearance and adornment of the deities are shaped not only by scriptural injunctions but also by local aesthetic preferences, economic constraints, patterns of market availability and the skills of village artisans, particularly women. Iconography here emerges as a negotiated product: a junction of Gaudiya theological concepts and regional folk aesthetics.

Tirtha and everyday life: For residents of Atpur and neighbouring villages, the Sripat is not merely a ritual site visited on special occasions. It is interconnected with life-cycle events (birth, marriage, death), with experiences of illness and recovery, with vows, fears and aspirations. The Sripat thus operates as a

nodal point in a complex system where religious history, built form, deity worship and everyday practices combine into what may be termed a local "tirtha-culture".

7. Conclusion

The Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das Thakur at Atpur is significant not only as a Gaudiya Vaishnava pilgrim centre but also as a key site for understanding the entanglement of devotional traditions with rural Bengali sociocultural life and vernacular art history.

This paper has sought to show how: The interaction of Gaudiya religious history with local social realities underlies the origin and growth of the Sripat. The architectural form of the complex may be read as an extension and sacralisation of the rural household layout. The theological meanings embodied in the deities are mediated through local aesthetic and material practices. Festivals such as Holi, the organisation of prasada, patterns of donation and the circulation of oral narratives together sustain the Sripat as a living institution.

In the context of rapid urbanisation, economic pressure and environmental degradation, the preservation of such Sripats has become an urgent concern. At a minimum, this would require: systematic architectural documentation, including measured drawings and photographic records Anthropological and art-historical analysis of the deities' iconography and related ritual practices and the creation of an archive of oral traditions, songs, votive narratives and kirtans associated with the site.

If undertaken with adequate scholarly and community participation, such efforts could help ensure that the Sripat of Sri Parmeshwar Das is preserved not only as a religious centre but also as an important repository of Bengal's wider civilisational memory.

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