



# Textured Travel

By SHIKHA SHAH

If you've done Kolkata—its history, culture, and food—it's time to move at a different pace. About 140 km away from Kolkata, Bishnupur in Bankura asks you to slow down the moment you enter. The drive sets the mood. The city thins out, traffic loosens its grip, and the road stretches ahead under canopies of sal and palash. In season, the reds flare up against the green like sudden brushstrokes.

The best way to take it in is from a cycle *rickshaw*—low, unhurried, open to everything around you. The wheels turn steadily over narrow roads, past clusters of homes, stretches of open ground, and then, almost without warning, the first terracotta structures come into view. Not imposing, not overwhelming—just there, glowing in the afternoon light.

Begin at the Rasmancha. It isn't a temple in the usual sense. The structure opens out into a series of arched corridors, one leading into another, creating a sense of repetition that feels almost meditative. Light filters in through the arches, falling in soft bands across the floor. Walk along the perimeter, pause at the edges, look out through the openings—the space keeps changing with where you stand.

From there, the Jorbangla Temple shifts the experience. At first glance, it feels familiar—like something you've seen in the countryside. Two hut-like forms placed side by side, joined and crowned by a single tower. But step closer, and you find yourself tracing the pattern with your eyes. Terracotta panels cover the walls in dense, intricate detail—figures in motion, animals mid-stride, patterns that repeat and then break unexpectedly.

The Shyam Rai Temple expands the visual field. Its five pinnacles rise together, balanced and deliberate, drawing your gaze upward before bringing it back down to the carvings. Here, the detailing becomes more layered, more immersive. Look for the Raschakra—a circular terracotta panel that captures Radha and Krishna surrounded by *gopis*, all held in a tight, rhythmic composition.

Moving between these sites, the town reveals itself in fragments. A doorway left open, a wall catching the light, a sudden stretch of stillness before the next turn. The pace of the *rickshaw* allows for these pauses—you notice textures, sounds, the small in-between moments.

Then there's the craft. In a Baluchari workshop, the experience slows down even further.

The loom dominates the room, threads stretched in careful alignment. Artisans work methodically, guiding each movement with precision. You see it unfold—motifs emerging gradually, scenes taking shape across the fabric. The *pallu* becomes a narrative space, filled with mythology, courtly life, and nature, all built thread by thread.

A short drive to Panchmura changes the texture again. You step into courtyards where the ground itself becomes a workspace. Clay forms lie drying in rows, their surfaces catching the sun. Hands move steadily—shaping, joining, smoothing. The rich reddish hue is not painted on; it emerges naturally from the iron-rich laterite clay and the firing technique. You see the process in stages: parts formed on the wheel, assembled with care, then left out in the open before firing.

Back in Bishnupur, if your visit aligns with the annual music festival, the town opens up in an entirely different way. As evening settles in, the temples become a backdrop rather than the focus. Lights come on, people gather, and the first notes begin to carry through the air.

You don't leave Bishnupur with a checklist completed; you leave with a series of impressions that unfold slowly, long after you've gone.



(From above) Rasmancha Temple; Clay artist at work in Panchmura village; Shyam Rai Temple