



Research article

Architecture of Authority: A Historical and Structural Study of the Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex in Southwestern Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex, Kapulmuni Union, Paikgacha Upazila, Bangladesh, is an interesting historical site that represents the dual story of colonial Bengal. This was an example of hierarchical power and true community stewardship. This study examines the history, architecture and symbolic power of the Zamindari, particularly in terms of its power and philanthropy. The research adopts a qualitative, multidisciplinary perspective, employing direct field observations, sketches and photographic documentation to explore the complex's spatial structure and materiality. Sixteen local elders and two historians were interviewed using purposive sampling, with the physical evidence triangulated with this oral history. A reliable historical timeline has also been established by theme and architecture, complementing the secondary archival data. The results show a unique fusion of traditional Bengali, colonial and Indo-Islamic architectural features in the complex. In terms of space, it was its imposing columns and arched facades, designed as deliberate statements of authority, which visually represented the local Hindu zamindari class's association with the British colonial government. On the other hand, the main house, Binod Bhaban, became the center of Ray Saheb Binod Bhari's lifelong philanthropic endeavors. The physical nature of welfare actions—such as schools, hospitals, cooperative societies, and large-scale famine interventions—significantly reconfigured the Complex's symbolic role. It illustrates that this complex once again served as an instrument of elite colonial domination and that it became an enduring legacy of public service, remembered today as a monument to Binod Bihari's deep humanitarian vision.

Introduction

The Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex in Paikgacha, Khulna, stands as a monumental heritage site from the colonial era. Constructed by Binod Bihari Sadhu, the estate's seamless integration of traditional Bengali, British colonial, and Indo-Islamic architectural elements makes it an indispensable resource for regional historical preservation and the study of architectural syncretism in undivided Bengal. While the zamindar (landlord) class typically wielded oppressive socio-economic and political influence during the British Raj, certain individuals dedicated themselves to public welfare rather than mere administration and exploitation. Among them, Binod Bihari Sadhu emerged as a pivotal figure in the Kapilmuni region of south-western Bangladesh. Beyond his position within the local power structure, he became widely acknowledged as the "architect of modern Kapilmuni." In recognition of his extensive philanthropic endeavors, the British Government conferred upon him the honorific title

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of Ray Saheb (C. Acharya, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

Sir Prafulla Chandra Ray (P. C. Ray), the great scientist and intellectual of the subcontinent, had a significant influence on Binod Bihari's philanthropic career. According to oral testimony, their first meeting was held during the undivided British India at a trade fair in Kolkata. But, Binod himself mentioned that, during his early school days, he was introduced to P. C. Ray at Raruli (Amar Byabasa Jiban, 1341 Bangabdo). In later years, through the ties of his heritage in Greater Bengal, Binod Bihari often visited Sir P. C. Ray's house and was strongly influenced by his progressive thinking. Under the tutelage of the visionary scientist Binod Bihari, Binod Bihari began work in the oil industry, achieving unparalleled commercial success (personal communication, 13 March 2026, C. Acharya).

Binod Bihari used the large sums of money he earned from his business activities to improve the region's

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people’s standard of living. He led the way in modernizing Kapilmuni by introducing a series of revolutionary social welfare programs. In the public interest, he established several important institutional frameworks in the newly created ‘Binodganj’ area. Among these are Binod Bazar, Binod Bhaban, the Vedic Temple, Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple, Kapilmuni Sahachari Vidyamandir, the Adarsha Technical School, Bharat Chandra Indoor Hall, Kapilmuni 10-bed Hospital and the Jadabendra Charitable Dispensary.

Binod Bhaban (currently known as Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex) was his key hub for all of his administrative and philanthropic endeavors. The Binodganj Bazar is located approximately 42 feet to the left of the main Khulna-Paikgacha highway, which is in the middle of the complex and thus, the spatial position of the complex is considered strategic (C. Acharya, personal communication, 13th March 2026; T. Sardar, personal communication, 13th March 2026; J. R. Acharya, personal communication, 13th March 2026). Over time, this estate evolved from its original function as a statement of architectural authority. Rather, it became a rare double monument to the hierarchical supremacy of the colonial-era ruling class and to selfless social service.

In this context, this study critically analyzes the historical backdrop and architectural elements of the Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex. In addition, it examines how this estate became a symbolic institution that embodied the complex relationship between the modern colonial state and the new philanthropy.

Materials and Methods

Study Area and Survey Design

Kapilmuni: Geographical Position and Formation

Paikgacha Upazila was formed by the alluvial deposits of the Kapotaksha, Shibsa, and Bhadra Rivers. The police station headquarters was established on April 22, 1872 and Paikgacha Thana was designated as an Upazila in 1983 (Amin, 2012). Paikgacha is an administrative region within Khulna District.

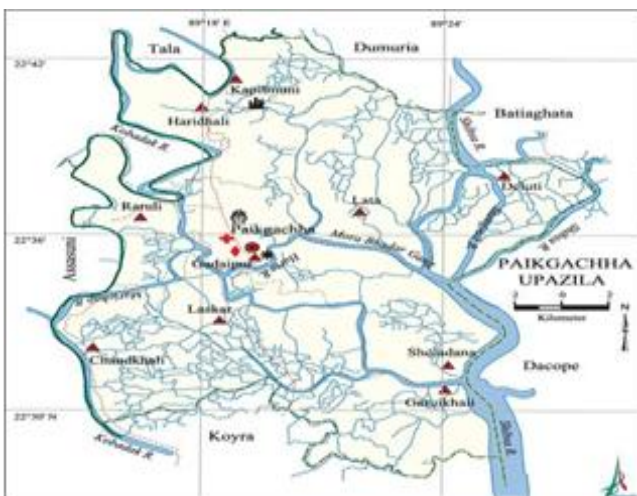


Figure 1: Map of Paikgacha Upazila

Source: From Paikgachha Upazila [Map], by Banglapedia, 2014(<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=File:PaikgachhaUpazila.jpg>).

Among its ten union parishads, Kapilmuni is particularly notable. Amin (2012) reports that Paikgacha Upazila covers a total area of 411.19 square kilometers. Kapilmuni is located approximately 10 to 12 kilometers from Paikgacha. According to Banglapedia (2023), Kapilmuni encompasses 1,364 acres and is situated on the bank of the Kapotaksha River. Geographically, Kapilmuni lies between 22°41’8” North latitude and 89°18’39” East longitude, in the southeastern part of Paikgacha Upazila. The union is bordered to the north by Jessore (now Jashore), to the south and southeast by Paikgacha, to the west by Satkhira and to the east by Khulna (Tapan Sardar, personal communication, March 13, 2026).

Origins and Development of Kapilmuni

Long before it became the epicenter of Binod Bihari’s philanthropic empire, Kapilmuni was forged in the fires of myth and antiquity, its very name a testament to that. Satish Chandra Mitra (2011) describes Vasudeva (in Bangla Basudeb) as historically and mythologically recognized as “Paundraka Vasudeva.” He was an immensely powerful and arrogant king of the ancient kingdom of ‘Paundra’. He lived during the Mahabharata era and was a contemporary of Lord Krishna. His father’s name is Vasudeva (Bosudeb) and his mother is Sutanu. At the same time, it is important to mention that he had a stepmother, named Narachi (According to the Matsya Purana, her name was Ratharaji) (Vedavyasa, n.d., Chapter 46). He had a half-brother named Kapil (Son of Narachi) (Vedavyasa, n.d., Chapter 160). Falling victim to the conspiracies of his oppressive and arrogant elder brother, Paundraka Vasudeva, his half-brother Kapil was expelled from his home and the kingdom. Following this exile, Kapil embraced asceticism, taking the vow of a Muni or sage. He journeyed to the southern fringes of the Upabanga region and established an ashram (hermitage) deep within the forests of the Sundarbans, on the banks of the Kapotaksha River. Today, this location is geographically known as “Kapilmuni” in the Khulna district of present-day Bangladesh (Mitra, 1914). He erected an image of Goddess Kali there, which became renowned as Kapileshwari Kali.

It is believed that Kapil is from the Mahabharata period. The traditional texts place the events of the Mahabharata at the end of the Dvapara Yuga, which is traditionally considered to have occurred around 3100 BCE; the lineage of such figures as Paundraka Vasudeva is also placed at the end of the Dvapara Yuga (Vedavyasa, n.d.). However, the socio-political structures described in these ancient stories seem to parallel the regional power politics of Iron Age India, between 1000 and 900 BCE (Mitra, 1914). The stone image which he made, it is no longer there. Instead, there he constructed a brick mound along the banks of the Kopotaksha River, under a sacred peepal tree. This place is the same place where the sage stayed, and is known as the ashram of the sage (Jalil, 2000). It is also believed that the Kali idol and the temple of Kapil possibly existed even during the Buddhist period. It is believed that some relics from the Buddhist period still exist in Kapilmuni. As per local tradition, a fair was organized every year in Kapilmuni on the day of Baruni Snan during the month of Chaitra in memory of Kapil. It is believed that on this day the waters of the river of

Kopotaksha gained the status of the Ganges River and bathing in such waters would accrue enormous merits. Consequently, on the Baruni Tithi of Chaitra, many people would come to bathe in Kapilmuni. The name Kapilmuni is derived from Kapil, a character from the family of Vasudeva, from the Mahabharata period.

Kapilmuni is quite an old area. It was part of Malai Pargana and was once a part of the Malai kingdom of Raja Pratapaditya. Once the reign of Pratapaditya was over, Malai Pargana was ruled by a strong individual who was called 'Ray.' Some of the important persons of this line were Kamalakanta Ray and Gopikanta Ray, the zamindars of Chachra. To this day, people of this family live in Haridhali and Rajuli. The zamindari of Malai Pargana was acquired by Raja Manohar Ray of Chachra, in 1699. Raja Manohar Ray has been kind enough to help religious services. He constructed a lovely temple of Kapileshwari. But currently, not a single sign of the temple can be seen. In the British era, during the Permanent Settlement period, Malai Pargana was sold to a zamindar from Satkhira under the reign of Shribasta Ray who was a descendant of Raja Manohar Ray (Mitra, 1911).

The temple of Kapileshwari was destroyed about 1867. After some years, an educated youth named Sri Binod Bihari Sadhu Khan who was residing in Kapilmuni, built a permanent (brick-built) temple and a theatre hall in the vicinity of Kapotaksha River. He installed a gorgeous stone statue of Goddess Kali in this temple. He wrote personal and family information, including on a stone plaque at Ram Saheb Kali Temple, on his father's, Bharat Sadhu (Mitra, 1911).

Background of Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar

Information about Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu's ancestral home is not readily available. There are, however, several oral traditions that are a part of him. According to Chittaranjan Acharya (personal communication, 13th March 2026), Rai Saheb was an affluent businessman, but there is no information about his father's hometown. In popular accounts, there was a major flood in the south (Mitra, 2011). It is said that Binod's family floated into this area during that flood and they were on top of straw and debris. Later, they rested here and Binod amassed great wealth with the blessings of Goddess Kali. This is not the case, however. This popular belief may be appropriate for Binod Bihari Sadhu's grandfather and father, not for Binod, as he was born in Kapilmuni (Amar Byabasa Jiban, 1341 Bangabdo).

A dream of Goddess Kali led Binod Bihari Sadhu to dig the ground floor of a dilapidated two-storied building, about 1.5 to 3 miles from Kapilmuni, where he found a large amount of silver coins. Later, under the auspices of Goddess Kali, he dug up an old pond near Kapilmuni Bazaar, where he discovered more of those silver coins (Mitra, 2011). He used these resources to create Binodganj Bazaar and to build Binod Bhaban, as well as other buildings such as a Veda temple next to Binod Bhaban. Nowadays, another temple (Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple) is located next to the Veda temple (Jharna Rani Acharya, personal communication, March 13, 2026).

During the British rule, Binod Sadhu, a rich businessman, constructed a white-stone temple at a good price, as reported by Jalil (2000). His sons engaged a sculptor from Bombay to make a statue using a single piece of stone for Rs 8000. Binod Sadhu made significant contributions to Kapilmuni and is credited with founding Binodganj, Kapilmuni (Tapan Sardar, personal communication, March 13, 2026). According to oral history, when needed Binod Bihari Sadhu was guided and counselled by P. C. Roy. One day, he advised, "Binod, you have done many things beneficial to the society and the state, all of which are praiseworthy, but now you should do something so that you can preserve your memory (A. R. Gazi, personal communication, 20 December 2025)." With this idea in mind, Binod built a Veda temple on the eastern side of Binod Bhaban's courtyard, and today a white stone statue of Binod Saheb stands there.

The Sadhu Zamindar Family: Historical Reconstruction

Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu's father was Jadab Chandra Sadhu and his mother was Sahachari Devi (Chittaranjan Acharya, personal communication, March 13, 2026). There is some disagreement about his date of birth. Although Binod himself authored a book, he did not mention his exact date of birth. He only stated that he was only nineteen years old when his father died in 1314 Bengali year. Local sources, however, claim that he was born on Shukla Ashtami tithi (the 8th lunar day of the waxing moon) in the month of Jaistha, which corresponds to 20 May 1890 (Sokaler Alo, 2025). In contrast, the official account states that Raisaheb Binod Bihari Sadhu was born on the Shukla Ashtami tithi, 26 Baishakh 1296, in the Bengali year (Paikgasa Upazila, 2021).

The difficulty lies in the inconsistency between the Bengali and Gregorian dates provided by these sources. When dates are converted from one calendar system to another, they produce different years and dates. Nevertheless, according to his descendants, Binod was born on 26 Baishakh 1296 Bengali year, which corresponds to 9 May 1889 in the Gregorian calendar and passed away on 3 Magh, 1341 Bangla year, corresponding to 17 January 1935 CE (Tapan Sardar, personal communication, March 13, 2026). Binod Bihari Sadhu and Kunja Bihari Sadhu were brothers. Currently, Tapan Sardar, the son of Kunja Bihari Sadhu and a second-generation member of Rai Saheb's family, resides in Binod Bhaban. He occupies a newly constructed room located at the north-west corner of the building (Tapan Sardar, personal communication, March 13, 2026). The structure is currently in a dilapidated condition, and no formal governmental measures have been implemented to conserve it. The list (Mitra, 2011) of Bharat Chandra Sadhu is given below:

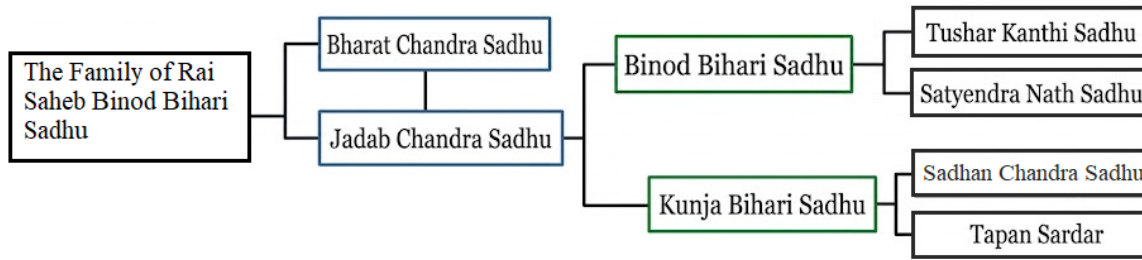


Figure 2: Family Tree of Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu (Prepared by the Authors based on Oral History interviews)

Objectives

The general aim of this study is to investigate the development of Binod Bihari Complex from the perspective of its historical development, architectural typology and changing symbolism as a symbol of regional authority in Southwestern Bangladesh. The specific objectives of this study are:

- i. To explore the history of Binod’s establishment of the Binod Bihari Complex.
- ii. To analyze the architectural design and characteristics of the Binod Bihari Complex.
- iii. To evaluate the change of the Complex becoming a symbol of authority in the region.

Research Methodology

In this study, a qualitative and multi-disciplinary approach is used to examine the historical background, architectural elements, styles and symbolism of authority of the Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In order to investigate the spatial organization, structural design, and decoration of the Complex, direct field observations were carried out and detailed field notes, sketches, and photos were gathered to achieve the materiality of the field observation (Yin, 2018; Groat & Wang, 2013). In parallel, purposively selected oral history interviews with 16 (sixteen) local elders and 2 (two) historians provided valuable insights into the establishment of the estate and its incremental emergence as an emblem of authority in the study area, particularly in contexts where written records are limited (Patton, 2015; Yow, 2015). To intensify the analysis, secondary data were collected from historical books, academic journals and regional newspapers, which enabled cross-verification of oral narratives and the construction of a more reliable historical timeline (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). Finally, thematic and architectural analyses were applied through methodological triangulation, integrating physical evidence, lived experiences and documented history to ensure a balanced, credible and well-supported interpretation of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Denzin, 2012).

Architectural design and structural features of this Complex

Binod Bhavan is the main architectural attraction of the Bihari Zamindar Complex. Other structures were later built around this building, which transformed this Zamindar house into a complex. In the later years, the

Vedic temple and Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple were built in this complex.

Binod Bhaban

‘Binod Bhaban’ was built in 1916 CE, which was the 1322 Bangabdo. The building blends Colonial and Indo-Islamic architectural styles and stands on a 5-foot-high plinth. It is 57 feet long from east to west and 45 feet wide from north to south. The design is open, letting in plenty of natural light and air. High ceilings, large windows and wooden roof beams show British influence, while arched entrances, doors, and windows are typical of Indo-Islamic style.

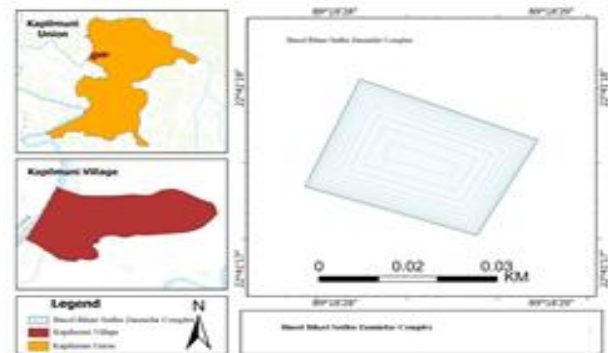


Figure 3: GIS location map of the Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex (Prepared by the authors)



Figure 4: Binod Bhaban (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)

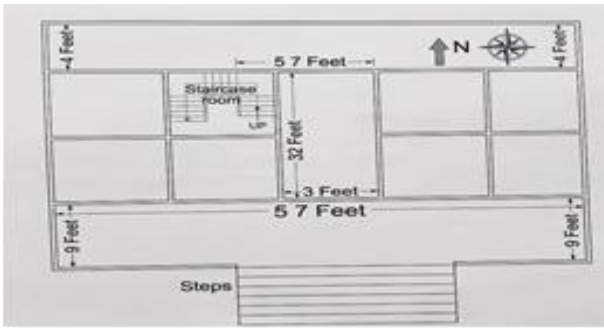


Figure 5: Ground Plan of Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Bari “Binod Bhaban” (Drawn by the Authors)

This building can be broken down into three parts: the front, a veranda; the middle, various rooms; and the back, a back veranda. The veranda in front of Binod Bhaban is 57 feet long and 9 feet wide. Originally constructed with red, black, and white tiles on this veranda, these still remain. The rear walkway is 57' long, 4' wide, with smooth plasterwork on the back of it. Inside dimensions of the building are: 57' x 32'. The building is elongated east-west. On the north-west side of the building is a room used as a staircase. It is 30 steps in height and has a curved (spiral) staircase. The east and west “arcaded” entrances to the front veranda are typical Indo-Islamic features. The front side features a central entryway, accessible via a 7-step staircase. There are two pairs (a total of four) of Doric pillars on either side of this entrance, but they are not ‘pure’ Doric. Rather, these pillars are a blend of British influence and design; thus, the entrance is a blend of British styles. Across from this passage (to the north) is a passage to the staircase room. This representation of a deer with a red head and black antlers above the entrance to this passage represents the natural beauty of the Sundarbans region in southern Bangladesh. This passage is situated in the main building and connects the front veranda to the back veranda; the staircase room is also accessed through it. The central portion of the main building is 32'x3'. There are 10 pairs of similar pillars in the front corridor. It is enclosed with wooden doors having elaborate floral and foliate designs.

It also features arched windows of iron and wood, which are also characteristic of British architecture style (this building has many similarities with the architectural style of the “Rabindra Complex” built in Phultala, Khulna, during the British era). There are 16 rooms in a building: ground-floor and second-floor rooms. The arched wooden doors and windows are used in each room. There was no roof on the second-floor balcony to begin with. The upper portion was left open; however, a brick railing was installed along the roof edge. At the exact center of the balcony railing, a large ventilator has been used. Why have square-shaped pillars been built on either side of this ventilator? The pillars are decorated with triangular arches at both the top and the bottom. In addition, 10 more pillars with similar design features have been added to the railing. Further, decorative designs are formed on the railing with bricks in the shapes of flowers and trees. The building is 57 feet long and 9 feet wide.

The second-floor balcony has been covered with a tin shed, but it was not part of the original structure. The flat roof design is the basis of the building's design. The architecture is flat-roofed, and the cornice is flat as well. The architectural structure is flat, and the roof cornice is flat. Below the roof cornice, a parapet has been built (Tapan Sardar, personal communication, 13 March 2026; Pintu Sheik, personal communication, 13 March 2026; Chittaranjan Acharya, personal communication, 13 March 2026; Jharna Rani Acharya, personal communication, 13 March 2026).

Vedic temple

A Vedic temple stands on the eastern side of the Binod Bhaban grounds. Rai Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu founded the temple, which was built in 1932 (2nd Kartik, 1338 Bangabdo). Rai Saheb’s sons hired a sculptor from Bombay to make a white stone statue of him. Sri Swami Satyanandaji, who was then president of the Hindu Mission, placed the statue inside the temple. The temple has an octagonal layout with four doors, but only one is open to visitors. Its roof is crowned with a kalasha (pitcher) spire, a unique feature of Indo-Islamic architecture.

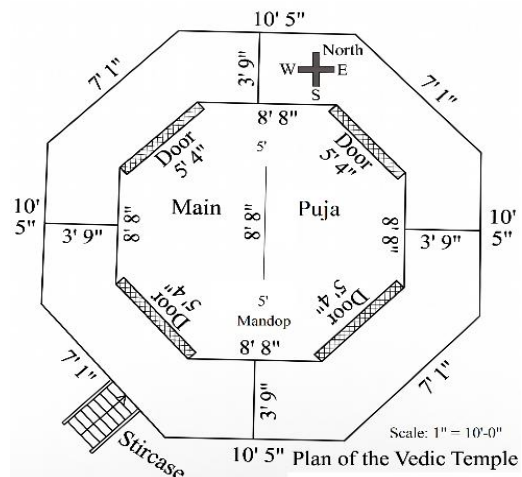


Figure 6: Ground Plan of the Vedic Temple (Prepared by the authors)



Figure 7: Exterior, In view of the octagonal building showing columns and spire detail (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)



Figure 8: In the central Section, A door is closed, and a fan-light has been installed above it. (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)

The architectural layout of the Vedic Temple is an unusual octagonal form, a geometric configuration which is also used in Indian temple architecture to ensure the physical space and Hindu cosmology is aligned with the eight cardinal directions. It has eight arms, the principal ones being the north, south, east and west, which are each 10 feet 5 inches in length; and the diagonals, north-east, north-west, south-east and south-west, each 7 feet 1 inch. The building has a very complicated elevation, with the perimeter lines carefully controlled, and the high-order columns, which embody a fusion of classical European precedents and local traditional building techniques. The whole compound of the temple with its integrated veranda corridor is 70 x 25 feet 2 inches in length and width respectively, and the weight of the veranda corridor rests on a network of 12 structural pillars.

The entry into the temple and fenestration of the temple is preserved by four symmetrical points of entry and two main fenestrations are maintained. All four of the doors are 5 feet 4 inches wide and are on the north-eastern, north-western, south-eastern and south-western facets. A large door is left closed in the middle of the inner shrine (garbhagriha) at times when people are not worshipping in order to preserve its intrinsic sanctity. The door on the south east is used daily for the congregation, the other three doors are closed. The two windows, symmetrically positioned on either side of the door on the north-west, add to the natural illumination. The unique semi-circular fan-light window is juxtaposed above the primary entryway; this practical borrowing from the European colonial tradition serves to both admit light and air into the thick interior masonry, and as a symbol for the sacred main doors remaining closed (Khan, 2024).

The vertical aspect of the temple is a multi-level roofing structure with a series of terra cotta tiles which contrasts between regional styles. The temple has a stepped roof over the main chamber, which systematically tapers inwards as it rises, topped by a decorative finial or pinnacle, with a flat decorative cornice along the top. On the other hand, the surrounding corridor or veranda area has a different curved roof line which is inspired by the traditional vernacular architecture of chala (or dochala)

thatch houses of Bengal (Architecture of Bengal, n.d.). It is characterized by a curved cornice with an elaborate frieze of perforated triangular reliefs and geometric designs. The octagonal base is surmounted by an elongated, tapered spire (shikhara) which is a common feature of late colonial-period regional estates, where the traditional medieval architecture was modified and used to accommodate subtle Western design elements but in a manner that maintained the sacred Hindu purpose of the structure

Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple

To the east of the Vedic Temple premises is the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple, a sacred building built in 1984 by Tushar Kanti Sadhu in memory of Kanailal Bhadra (Bhadra Temple Archives, 1984). The reasons Sadhu built the temple are not officially documented in registers, but there are oral traditions in the local community that the community felt it was their spiritual duty to support the metaphysical importance of the primary Vedic temple (Field Survey, January 5, 2026). The complex of the two interconnected temples, the Vinod Bihari complex, is still used to a great extent as a focal point for people to meet for public worship and community integration during traditional festivals of Puja and Parvana, which are celebrated here (Field Survey, January 5, 2026).

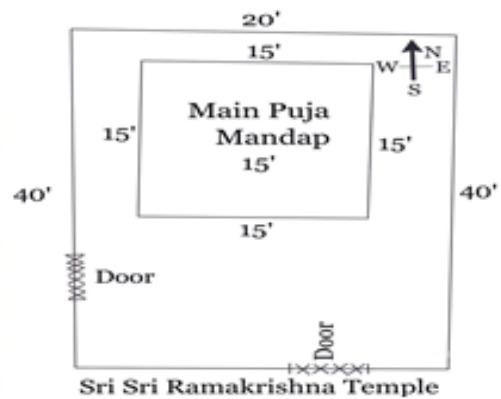


Figure 9: Ground Plan of the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple (Prepared by the authors)



Figure 10: Documentation of Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple- Main Building (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)



Figure 11: Interior view of the South-east Section of the temple, where some Indo-European columns and Iron beams were used in the Roof (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)



Figure 12: The entrance of the Temple. (Photograph by authors, taken during field study, January 2026)

The Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple's spatial configuration and ground plan is precise and single room, outer enclosure is 20' wide x 40' long, giving a structural area of 800 square feet (excluding an exterior veranda) (Local Field Survey, 2026). This inner sanctum square is deliberately placed in the upper part of this perimeter and is 15 feet by 15 feet in order to create a core worship space of 225 square feet, the "Main Puja Mandap". This inner sanctum is exactly on axis with the horizontal axis of the site to ensure symmetry on the east and west sides of the site and the rest of the site below provides a large open assembly and transition area for gathering the devotees (Field Survey, January 5, 2026).

The temple's architectural form is formed through a flat roof shape, with a flat, decorative cornice that runs along the base of the roof (Field Survey, 2026). The building has two active portals: a double door entrance, on the right side of the bottom 20-foot wall, is the primary way that people enter the building, while a side door on the left side of the lower 40-foot wall is the secondary entry point. Of particular interest, on the northern slope of the temple, there is a small shrine dedicated to an idol of the Goddess Kali, which is surrounded by a wrought-iron rod gate and encircled by four classical Corinthian pillars in pairs of two on each side of the entrance (Field Survey, January 5, 2026).

The material mechanics of this Indo-European synthesis is clearly revealed in an interior view of the south-east part of the temple. A classical Indo-European masonry column, and industrial iron beams which are embedded directly into the roof structure, support the flat ceiling structure (Khan, 2024). These iron beams embody an important historical transition as the colonial era landlords started to use technology and manufactured materials from the west to create structural supports that could span wide open congregational halls in sacred spaces.

The temple complex has an eastern and a southern entrance to control access and flow of people through the temple. The south facing entry is built at the same time with the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Temple to build its main entry point. The southern entrance is architecturally significant because it features three canopies supported above with elaborate and elaborate decorative motifs in the form of perforation. The side by side positioning of the two temples allowed both entryways to function concurrently in order to access the area between the two temples. The current design has, however, redesigned the circulation of the complex with the entrance on the east side now the only functional entrance for both buildings, and the entrance on the south side being permanently closed.

Construction Technology and Materials

The main construction materials used in the complex are mainly brick, wood, sand, cement and wooden beams. Red bricks were used in its construction. Its roof was constructed using wooden beams. The front veranda features prominent red, black, and white tiles. This complex has a smooth plaster finish, characteristic of Indo-Islamic architecture. Similarly, the Mughal architectural styles also shared this feature. The stairs are made of brick, sand, and cement, and are plastered.

The Architecture of Control and Philanthropy: From Residential Space to Regional Dominance

The Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex is not to be seen only as a large colonial-era house, but as a well-planned socio-economic and political tool of control. This features and characteristics of the complex evolving into an important emblem of colonial power can be studied by examining the close association of the architectural language, spatial location and socio-economic and political roles of the complex in the region (Rahman, 2021). In colonial architecture, the functional dimension was never the only one; it was always a tool of power, used to convey a sense of permanence, authority and civilization over the colonial space (Jenkins, 2025; Islam & Muntasir, 2020). Within this theoretical context and the collection of oral histories of local individuals, the evolution of the complex as a symbol of regional dominance can be analyzed in terms of the following major dimensions:

Figure 13: Documentation of Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex (a) Kachari house, (b) Five (5) feet-high plinth, (c) Outside view of the Vedic Temple. At the entrance of the veranda, where floral patterns and carved lattice design are present, (d) One pair of columns, (e) A white stone statue of Rai Saheb, (f) Red, black and white bricks were used in the construction, especially on the front veranda, (g) The rear corridor, (h) The narrowest

point in the main building is 32 feet by 3 feet in the middle, (i) Curved staircase, (j) Flat roof parapet, (k) Ornamental brick railing with ventilation, (l) Flat roof, (m) Curved staircase, (n) Outside view of the 2nd floor, (o) Ornate wooden door, (p) Arched door, (q) The eastern entrance with lattice, (r) Wooden beams were used in the roof, (s) Arched window.



Photographs by authors, taken during field study, January 2026.

The Architecture of Control and Philanthropy: From Residential Space to Regional Dominance

The Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex is not to be seen only as a large colonial-era house, but as a well-planned socio-economic and political tool of control. This features and characteristics of the complex evolving into an important emblem of colonial power can be studied by examining the close association of the architectural language, spatial location and socio-economic and political roles of the complex in the region (Rahman, 2021). In colonial architecture, the functional dimension was never the only one; it was always a tool of power, used to convey a sense of permanence, authority and civilization over the colonial space (Jenkins, 2025; Islam & Muntasir, 2020). Within this theoretical context and the collection of oral histories of local individuals, the evolution of the complex as a symbol of regional dominance can be analyzed in terms of the following major dimensions:

The Concept of Spatial Hierarchy and Visual Imposition

The huge area, height and architectural form of the complex enabled the Zamindars to project their rule to the local agrarian population in a strategic manner. The same has been observed in studies conducted in colonial areas,

where these complexes have consistently dominated their environments through monumentalism and location (Brisibe & Obagah-Stephen, 2025; Kyritsi et al., 2022; Olukoya et al., 2025). In this context, it can be said that Binod Bihari constructed the ‘Binod Bhaban’ here, considering the location and religious significance of Kapilmuni. However, it must be noted that those living in its vicinity were marginalized members of society. Recalling this, an 85-year-old elder reminisced,

From our thatched-roof huts, the high roofs and massive walls of the Zamindar’s house seemed to touch the sky. Looking at that house made us feel very small and helpless (Abdur Rashid Gazi, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

This physical dominance primarily served as a constant reminder of the class divide and the Zamindar’s untouchable status. This clearly qualifies as an example of spatial discrimination. However, this statement does not apply to Binod Bihari Sadhu. Because Binod Bhaban was built in 1916 AD. Binod, along with his family, moved to Calcutta in August-September 1919, leaving Kapilmuni (Amar Byabasa Jibon, 1341 Bangabda). Therefore, the distinction between inside and outside the high wall did not apply to Binod Bihari Sadhu. However, after Binod left

Kapilmuni, his brother, Kunja Bihari Sadhu, may have behaved similarly toward the subjects.

The Kachari as a Theater of Power

The Kachari or administrative wing of the complex functioned not only as a site for tax collection and dispute resolution but also as a psychological arena for the exercise of power.

It was designed to force locals to navigate the Zamindar's authority in person (Zakaria, 2019). Two local respondents, identified as descendants of the tenant, detailed how the waiting area of the Kutchery, the raised platform for the Zamindar to sit on and the restricted access zones kept the common people psychologically subjugated (Anup Das and Dilip Kumar Das, personal communication, January 5, 2026). In this regard, one elder notes that,

Before entering the kachari ghar one had to take off their shoes, bow their head, and stand at a specific distance. The room's design placed the Zamindar Babu high up, and it felt as though we were standing before the judgment of a deity (Hira Lal Singh, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

However, it can generally be assumed that, given the governance structure at the time, there is no scope to view this as an exception. In the social hierarchy of that era, it was not unusual to have such a dividing line between the Zamindar and the ryots and tenants. However, this comment does not apply to Binod Bihari Sadhu. Because, "Binod mentioned that,

In 1312, my father ascended to heaven at the age of 65. I was only 18 at that time. At that time, the entire burden of business, shopkeeping, and land ownership fell on my shoulders at an immature age. After that, I was worried about various things and witnessed bad behavior from almost everyone, including my relatives. At that time, the Nayeab Gomastas were filing lawsuits with all the subjects (proja) in the district for their own financial gain. I went to the district and by waiving the interest of some and by waiving some of the property of some, I settled the matter with the subjects (Amar Byabasa Jibon, 1341 Bangabda).

It is clear from the above statement that Binod, together with his brother, managed and ran his father's zamindari in the Kapilmani region from 1312 to 1326 Bangabda. Binod Bhavan was built in 1916 AD. Before the construction of Vinod Bhavan, the kachari ghar was in an open space outside. Binod himself was upset by the oppression of the zamindars' servants. His writings in this regard are very instructive,

Kapilmuni is a famous place for its commerce and business. The market at that time was divided into many sections, each belonging to a different zamindar. Due to the oppression of the servants of all those zamindars, in the month of Bhadra in the year 1332 (Bangabda), I completed the partition with my brother. I went to Calcutta (Amar Byabasa Jibon, 1341 Bangabda).

Although he had previously moved to Calcutta with his family, this time he settled all the debit and credit balances of his property with his brother, except for some common property. So it can be assumed that he behaved badly with the ryots and tenants, which is not credible.

Architectural Syncretism and Colonial Legitimacy

In the deltaic and historically multi-layered context of the Khulna region, local Zamindari power structures and pre-colonial administrative traditions had already shaped the built environment (Abdul Jalil, 2000; Fawcus, 1927; Mitra, 2011). The Binod Bihari Complex emerged as an architectural manifestation of the new colonial order, physically displacing or assimilating existing symbols of indigenous authority. According to a local historian and an educated elder, "alongside traditional Bengali or Mughal designs, the complex intentionally incorporated colonial or European architectural motifs, such as the use of Doric pillars or massive arches" (Hafij Ahmed, K. M Abdullah Al Amin Rabbe and Md. Golap Gazi, personal communication, December 18, 2025). These European-style elements communicated to the general populace that the Zamindars were not merely local rulers but also representatives and allies of the British Raj. This architectural strategy was intended to project an alliance with a broader imperial power.

Psychological Legacy and Collective Memory

Over time, the complex became ingrained in the regional collective memory as more than an administrative building; it served as a spatial manifestation of power. This reading is further solidified through its enduring physical presence long after the end of the colonial era (Imtiaz et al., 2025; Khatun & Islam, 2026; Sultana et al., 2025). It is evident from interviews with five respondents that the building continues to have a deep psychological impact on the public mind today (Nirapado Roy, Prantik Singh, Priyosingh Bhoumik, Sanjay Sarkar, and Md. Priyosingh Bhoumik, personal communication, December 12, 2025). Two distant descendants of the Zamindar family argue that locals still harbor a kind of fear-mixed reverence or 'acoustic memory' surrounding the building (Srikanto Sardar and Nirapado Roy, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Oral histories and local archival materials demonstrate that, decades after the abolition of the Zamindari system, the concept of this structure persists in society as a powerful psychological tool of authority (Denzin, 2012; Thompson, 2000; Yin, 2018; Yow, 2015).

Practical Steps of Philanthropy

'Ray Saheb' Binod Bihari Sadhu (1889-1935 A. D.) was a modern architect and a renowned philanthropist of Kapilmuni, a neglected settlement in southern Khulna. Inspired by the company and ideals of the great scientist P. C. Ray, he spent almost all of his business earnings on social welfare and philanthropic work. In recognition of his selfless social service, the British government conferred upon him the title of 'Ray Saheb'. The outstanding works done by Binod Bihari Sadhu as practical steps of philanthropy are described below:

i. **Expansion of Education:** Binod Bihari took special initiatives for the people of the greater Kapilmuni region who were deprived of the light of education at that time. He deeply felt that there was no alternative to education for the true emancipation of society. With this realization, he established the 'Kapilmuni Sahachari Vidyalaya' (currently Kapilmuni Sahachari Vidyamandir) in his mother's name in 1926 A. D. The then Vice-Chancellor of

Calcutta University, Jadunath Sarkar (8 August, 1926 - 7 August, 1928), inaugurated the school in 1927 A. D. Thus, Binod Bihari created a massive opportunity for institutional education for local children, which continues to spread the light of education in the region today.

ii. **Ensuring Healthcare:** In that era, many people died prematurely due to a lack of proper medical treatment. To ensure healthcare for common and poor people, Binod Bihari Sadhu established the Jadabchandra Charitable Dispensary and Hospital in Kapilmuni in memory of his father. Alongside this, he built a 20-bed 'Bharat Chandra Hospital' in his grandfather's name. He even imported an X-ray machine from Germany at his own expense to improve healthcare standards in the greater Khulna region, a groundbreaking step at the time (Mitra, 2011).

iii. **Socio-economic Organization and Leadership:** Binod Bihari Sadhu was not just a businessman; he was also vocal about securing the social and economic rights of the backward communities. He had two oil mills in Kolkata, through which he achieved financial solvency on one hand and took initiatives to ensure public health by supplying pure oil on the other. His brand 'Binod Marka Khati Sarishar Tel' (Binod Brand Pure Mustard Oil) gained name and fame throughout Bengal. Additionally, he played a pioneering role as the founder of the 'Khulna Teli Jatiya Bhandar' to unite his community. Recognizing his efforts to make a specific class of society financially self-reliant and socially aware, he successfully served as the president of the 'Bangiya Teli Jati-Sammilani' (Bengal Teli Caste Association). As a result, he received the enthusiastic support of the business community in carrying out his philanthropic work.

iv. **Disaster Management and Human Welfare:** During natural disasters and epidemics, he always appeared as a savior by the side of the common people. The establishment of the 'Bharat Chandra Durbhikhya Bhandar' (Bharat Chandra Famine Fund) during the Khulna famine of 1920 CE was one of the greatest examples of his philanthropy. For several months, he provided food, money and clothing to the needy and distressed people within a radius of approximately 6.44 to 8.05 kilometers around Binod Bhaban (Amar Byabasa Jiban, 1341 Bangabda). As a result, countless people were saved from death. Beyond this, he excavated a massive pond right in the middle of Binodganj Bazar. The area of this huge water body was about 6 to 7 bighas. He named this pond 'Sahachari Sarovar' as a sign of deep respect and love for his pious mother, Sahachari Devi. His initiative extended beyond the construction of a simple pond and represented a significant advancement in public health within the prevailing social system. In the absence of a modern water supply system or deep tube wells in Khulna, the 'Sahachari Sarovar' served as the primary and reliable source of drinking water for thousands of local residents. This philanthropic action demonstrates that he not only exercised his authority as a landlord but also exhibited foresight and a pragmatic approach to improving the quality of life and safeguarding the health of marginalized populations.

Comparison between Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex and the Natore Rajbari

The comparative study of the socio-economic differences between the Kachari of Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex and the Natore Rajbari brings the stark socio-economic differences of the agrarian hierarchy in colonial Bengal into focus. Constructed by a merchant-landlord, the Binod Bihari Sadhu complex is a smaller scale gentry estate whose administration centre served mainly as a regional asset management institution. The Natore Zamindari Complex in contrast, is a monumental example of princely aristocracy, possessing tremendous political and territorial power over large parts of undivided Bengal, expanded by the royal personas of Rani Bhabani and others.

The two sites are architecturally very different both in terms of design philosophies and space functions. The Sadhu complex is characterized by kachari, a highly functional, compact revenue-collection court with basic Indo-Islamic styles and utilitarian vernacular brickwork specifications to suit the daily legal actions of revenue collection. On the other hand, the Natore Rajbari, a massive palace matrix, shows ostentatious European Renaissance and Neo-Classical features complete with Corinthian-style pillars, well-kept lawns, a large treasury, and defense walls intended to flaunt dynastic power (Khan, 2024).

These spaces are also differentiated by their scales of governance in the functioning and cultural uses they make of the spaces. At the micro level, the Sadhu complex was a heavy-handed, pragmatic tool for land bookkeeping, local revenue collection and peasant conflicts. The Natore Rajbari was, however, at a macro-political level similar to the state capital, with its massive perimeter containing large-scale public temples and administration councils which governed the broad regional economy and in which large religious festivals were held to assert royal legitimacy. Presently the preservation and heritage routes of these two complexes are quite different. The smaller Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex is a regional heritage site which is very sensitive and is not a part of the mainstream heritage of the region and is at risk of degradation in its structure due to lack of funding for conservation of heritage structures in the region. At the same time, the heart of Natore Rajbari has been given a very high status as a state-recognized monument (Uttara Ganabhaban) and it has been transformed into the perfectly preserved northern official residence of the head of state (Khan, 2024).

Recommendations

The buildings at Binod Bihari Complex are currently in deteriorated condition. It is recommended that the government implement conservation measures for this site. These structures represent centuries of history, tradition and culture. Therefore, relevant government departments are urged to preserve this heritage and safeguard its significance for future generations.

Conclusion

The Ray Saheb Binod Bihari Sadhu Zamindar Complex, Kapilmuni, a hundred years old and more, is a fascinating historic site that encapsulates the dual history of colonial

Bengal – the consolidation of hierarchical power and the actual community's stewardship. The Complex is a unique blend of traditional Bengali, colonial and Indo-Islamic architectural styles, particularly in its imposing columns and arched facades. This was not only a design decision, but also a spatial statement of authority by the local Hindu zamindari class, visually asserting that the caste class was in sync with the colonial administration and had control over the surrounding population. In this regard, the Complex was a continuous symbol of the institution's power, embedded in the region's topography.

The significance of the Complex extends beyond its role as an instrument of colonial authority. The principal residence, formerly known as Binod Bhaban, served as the foundation for Binod Bihari's social development initiatives over the years. Through this institution, he

implemented a range of welfare measures. Ray Saheb Binod Bihari gained recognition for establishing schools to provide education to the broader population, hospitals to address the healthcare needs of the impoverished, cooperative groups to foster economic self-sufficiency and large-scale relief efforts during crises such as famines and natural disasters. These sustained philanthropic activities transformed the Complex's symbolic meaning from a representation of elite power to a legacy of public service. Therefore, the Complex stands not only as a symbol of colonial rule but also as evidence of Binod Bihari's humanitarian values and his dedication to the welfare of the community.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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