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Bishnupur: A Town of Terracotta Temple and Artistic Excellence

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Abstract

Bishnupur, a municipal town in the district of Bankura in West Bengal had once the honour of becoming the vibrant capital of ancient Malla dynasty. The history of kings of Bishnupur is as old as when the Hindus ruled Delhi and the name of the Muslims was not known in India. The town witnessed cultural excellence during the medieval period particularly during the period of Malla king, Bir Hambir and his successors. Now, it is considered to be one of the major tourist destinations in West Bengal. The construction of multifarious terracotta temples in and around Bishnupur by these kings has earned this town the sobriquet of 'Temple Town'. The temple architecture of Orissa resembles the temples of the proposed area. The artisans of this locality were fortunate enough to receive the patronage of these rulers who excelled in the art and craft of making the Baluchari saris, conch-shell carvings, bell-metal utensils, Dashavatara playing cards, terracotta horse etc. The place has the potential to be included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Site. The present paper holds the objective of searching the origin and development of the town as a tourist and heritage centre through historical and cultural perspectives and find out its pros and cons on the present socio-economic silhouette of the town. Archival records, literary studies consisting of primary and secondary sources along with field study in a blended mode boosts the methodology of compilation. The results include the boost of local economy, infrastructural development, possibility of job creation, upholding the national pride etc.

Key-Words - Tourism, Heritage, Temple, Economy, Pride

Introduction: History has witnessed substantial changes in the domain of its meaning and definitions in recent times. For a considerable period of time, the subject matter of history included birth of civilizations, the rise and fall of the empires, military conquests and evolution of human societies. But these days, the horizon of the domain of history has expanded for the sake of understanding the broader nature of human hitches. In this context, the significance of historical tourism as a new branch of study in history has captivated the

courtesy of historians and anthropologists for further exploration. Bishnupur (Latitude 23⁰ 05' N and Longitude 87⁰ 19' E), a municipal and sub-divisional town in the district of Bankura in West Bengal was a vibrant capital of Malla dynasty in the ancient period. The town and its surrounding areas reached its zenith culturally during the medieval period particularly under the patronage of Bir Hambir and his worthy successors. The road distance from Kolkata to Bishnupur is about 140 kilometres and bus services are very much regular. It is also well connected by road with surrounding towns like Asansol, Durgapur, Burdwan, Panagarh, Kharagpur and other parts of the state. The place can also be visited from Kolkata by a train journey of about 200 kilometres on Howrah-Adra section in the South-Eastern Railway. The nearest airport to Bishnupur is Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International airport, Kolkata. Tourism Department of Government of West Bengal has developed a tourist lodge here for the visitors. The local Bishnupur municipality also maintains a guest house and private hotels are abundantly available.

History of the origin of the Malla dynasty: Scholars have given different opinions regarding the origin of the Malla dynasty. Bishnupur, also spelt as Vishnupur originally famous as Mallabhum comprising the whole of the Bankura and parts of the neighbouring districts with Bishnupur as the capital in the centre is as ancient as the days of the Mahabharata (Malik, 1921, p.1). The term Mallabhum means the land of the wrestlers. Legend and fragmentary sources of the dynasty state that Raghunath Singh alias Adi Malla founded the Malla dynasty in 695 A. D. It is believed that the first king received the title of Adi Malla because of his superior skill in wrestling.

The kings of Malla dynasty claimed to have descended from the Kshatriya clan of Jai Nagar near Brindaban. The story of their parentage is mentioned in the following lines. The king of Jainagar once went on a pilgrimage to Puri with his pregnant wife. While passing through the thick forests of Bishnupur, she delivered a baby boy in a halting place. Considering it risky to accompany the mother and her baby with him, he left them there and continued his journey. Soon after the departure of the father, an aboriginal native named Sri Kasmestia Bagdi, while gathering firewood, noticed the newly born baby in a precarious condition with no traces of his mother. The woodman took the baby to his home and reared him till the age of seven, when a Brahman, struck by his magnetic personality, took him to his home. Soon after that an aboriginal prince having died, his last journey was being celebrated with great pomp and splendour and people from all parts enjoyed the funeral feast. While the Brahman was taking the feast, the deceased king's elephant grabbed the boy, Raghu with his trunk and carefully placed him on the throne. Considering the act, the will of God, the ministers happily agreed to crown the boy on the spot. Raghunath Singh, therefore, was the first king of Bishnupur (Hunter, 1868, p.439). But the fact is that the kings of Bishnupur called themselves Mallas (an aboriginal title) for many centuries before they assumed the Kshatriya title of Singh. Even they are presently known as Bagdi Rajas all over Bengal. All these circumstanced lead us to draw the conclusion that the kings of Bishnupur were Kshatriyas due to their long independence and their past history, but not by descent (Banerji, 1968, p.90).

Adi Malla ruled for around thirty-three years and is familiar till now as the Bagdi Raja, a designation which shows that the district was then inhabited by aboriginal races. There is dearth of sources about the kings who succeeded Adi Malla. The accounts merely contain the names of more than forty kings, but their reigns are barren in interest. The first Malla king of Bishnupur, who rose into prominence is Dhar Hambir. He ascended the throne in 1586 and is recorded as the 49th ruler of the dynasty in the family chronicle (O'Malley, 1908, p.27). Dhar Hambir was succeeded by Bir Hambir who ruled Mallabhum from 1591 to 1616. In the early days of his rule, he was involved in a struggle between the Mughals and Afghans. Raja Man Singh. In 1582, Akbar's general was on a military mission against Qutlu Khan Lohani, the Afghan ruler of North Orissa who had extended his sway over Midnapore and Bishnupur. The Afghan king also sent a large force against the Mughal armies who had camped on the western parts of the Bankura district. Man Singh sent his son, Jagat Singh to meet the Afghans. In such a situation, Bir Hambir not only helped Jagat Singh with men but gave some serious suggestions about the enemy's move. But Jagat Singh did not pay attention to his advice and was eventually defeated by the Afghans when he was drunk and asleep. Though Bir Hambir rescued Jagat Singh from the war field and brought him safely to Bishnupur. This incident has been mentioned by the Muslim historians in their writings. Though, *Akbarnama* mentions Bir Hambir as a 'landholder', it can be inferred that he was a powerful landholder and capable enough to help the Mughal forces with men besides having a well-protected fort in his native city of Bishnupur. Bir Hambir was succeeded by Raghunath Singh, who is supposed to be the first of the line to assume the Kshatriya title of Singh. The next important kings were Bir Singh and Durjan Singh. The first half of the 18th century proved ominous for the kingdom as the Maratha raids and aggressions of the Maharaja of Burdwan led to the beginning of its downfall. The kings who ruled these days were also not fit to cope with their difficulties. Gopal Singh (1730-1745) was a pious but poor king. The record states that he ordered all the people of Mallabhum should count their beads and repeat the name of god (*Harinam*) every evening at sunset. This evening prayer is still known as *Gopal Singh beggar*. The first Maratha invasion of Bengal by Bhaskar Rao in 1742 and the internal feuds in the kingdom gradually weakened it. Finally the British East India Company ceded Bankura district with the rest of the Burdwan *chakla* in 1760.

Temple Architecture of Bishnupur: Though Bishnupur has lost its past glory as the seat of powerful family of Malla rulers, the magnificence attained by the town still persists to a great extent in the monumental temples which are outstanding in their architectural style and the terracotta decoration found upon the walls of most of these temples, preserved in an excellent condition (Biswas, 2003, p.9). The use of terracotta as a material evolved from making objects of daily requirements like vessels, pottery, seal, toys etc. in ancient times to its use in temples in late medieval period. Due to unavailability of the stone and availability of good alluvial soil, terracotta soon emerged as the most important medium of temple building in this area. The temples built by the Malla rulers in different places of their kingdom can be categorised into different groups such as *deul*, *chala*, *bangla* and *ratna*

from the point of view of form, style and structure (Das, 1980, p.148). The *deul* type temples are characterized by single tower resembling the *nagara* or north-Indian style and its Orissan variations. Most of the exiting temples in Bishnupur belonged to both the north Indian *nagara* style and the Orissan *deul* styles. Hut-style temples include the *chala* and the *bangla* types. The temples of these types are fashioned in the style of Bengali huts with sloping roofs joined at curvilinear edges and ending in arched cornices. In other words, it can be said that these temples are square or rectangular on ground-plan having roofs either sloping on two sides or on four sides, the latter variety being denominated as structures of the *chala* type. Two *chala* structures can combine to form an *ekbangla*, two *banglas* can combine to form a *jorbangla* and so on and so forth, and it can be extended up to twelve *chalas*. The temples of *ratna* style have features of pinnacle towers over a flat roof resembling Indo-Islamic variations of domed style. Each of these pinnacles can be considered a temple in itself. Most of them are odd-numbered. According to the number of towers, they are known as *ek-ratna* (single-spired) and *pancha-ratna* (five-spired) and *naba-ratna* (nine-spired). Most of the temples in Bishnupur are either single-spired or five-spired. Only one nine-spired temple is the east-facing Sridhara temple near the Madangopal temple.

The scores of terracotta temples built across this region by the Malla kings represent remarkable evolution and celebration of Vaisnavism. In fact, the late medieval period witnessed the rising popularity of Vaisnavism in India. Led by manifold Bhakti saints, the Vaisnavism spread across northern, western and eastern parts of India. The real cultural opulence of Bishnupur just started after the introduction of Vaisnavism as the Malla rulers embraced this faith from the core of their heart. It was Bir Hambir who was instrumental in the revival of Vaisnavism. He transformed the city into an important centre of art, culture and learning as the temples were the seat of all these activities.

Rasa-mancha: It is believed traditionally that Bir Hambir, before embracing Vaisnavism, was a wicked king. Two Vaisnava treatises, the *Prem-vilasa* of Nityananda Das alias Balaram Das and the *Bhakti-ratnakara* of Narahari Chakravarti state that Srinivasa Acharya and other devotees from Brindavan were robbed by Bir Hambir while they were on a journey to Gaur. The sad news led to the death of Krishnadas Kaviraj, author of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. But Shrinivasa Acharya was not ready to surrender before him and insisted Bir Hambir to see him and so motivated him by reading the *Bhagavata* that he became an ardent follower of Vaisnavism and offered his preceptor rich endowments of money and land. Two Vaisnava songs are accredited to Bir Hambir, the originals of which are mentioned in the *Bhakti-ratnakara*. He is also associated with the introduction of the worship of Kalachand, another Vaisnava divinity, in Bishnupur.

The influence of Vaisnavism led Bir Hambir to construct a picturesque pyramidal structure known as *Rasa-mancha* in the vicinity of the town in 1600, where all the divinities of Bishnupur were exhibited during the annual *Ras* festival. The *manch* or stage is square-shaped having each side a length of 24.5 metres, while the base covers 80.3 square metres.

The actual construction without roof is 10.7 metres tall but is built upon a laterite plinth of 1.5 metres. There are four pyramids in four corners of the roof with smaller pyramids spread on all four sides, and yet another bigger pyramid in the centre. The entire temple is divided into three distinct parts. The vaulted pillared porches draw light into the dark interiors and cast deep shadows on the external façade (Pal, 2015, pp.130-133). The exterior arches of the enclosing galleries are ornamented with terracotta lotus motifs while there are panels of singers and dancers in the eastern side of the wall.

Malleswara Temple: The earliest among the *deul* styled temple, Malleswara temple was constructed by Bir Singh I in 1622. Built as a single square tower, its base measures 22.5 metres with each side measuring 6.9 metres in length and 10.7 metres in height (Das, 2015, p.93). Initially, the temple had a design of *rekha sikhara* but later on it was replaced by an octagonal tower. There is an image of elephant at the top of its entrance. There is no terracotta decoration on all the four sides of the wall. The temple was dedicated to Shiva.

Shyam-Ray Temple: Shyam-Ray temple is considered to be the most exceptional among all the temples of Bishnupur for its high quality structural set-up and elaborate terracotta ornamentation. Raghunath Singh I (1643-1656), who consolidated the Malla power and carried it to its palmiest days, has the distinction of building this *pancha-ratna* (five-spired) temple in 1643. It is entirely a brick-built temple and quite massive in shape and proportion. The temple stands on a low square plinth with each side measuring 11.4 metres and 10.7 metres in height. Four square towers rest upon the four corners of a curved and sloping roof. Central tower or fifth one is octagonal. Four outer walls and porch pillars are abundantly decorated with terracotta plaques and floral designs. The temple has the extensive designs of geometric and floral patterns also. The plaques exhibit the contemporary socio-religious life, episodes from Puranic literature, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and stories from Saiva or Sakta legends (Saha, 1998, p.5). Though an inscription located at the main gate of the temple states that this temple was built for the pleasure of Sri Radhika and Sri Krishna. The panels in the frame illustrate a wide variety of scenes showing Krishna with attendant figures. The columns are ornamented with plaques displaying the figures of Radha and Krishna and also a large number of both male and female figures in dancing and singing posture. The cornices demonstrate carved friezes showing musicians and dynamic dancers.

Jor Bangla or Kesto-Ray Temple: *jor-bangla*, famous as the Kesto-Ray temple was built by Raghunath Singh I in 1655. The temple is so known because it has *ek-bangla* or *do-chala* structures (a roof with two-sided curved thatch)-one as a porch and the other as a shrine - which are adjoined to form a *char-chala* temple. The temple has acquired an eminence for its structural formation and exquisite terracotta art upon the facade of the porch and all three sides. Standing upon almost a square stage in southern direction, the temple has a length of 11.8 metres and breadth of 11.7 metres, and it rises to a height of 10.7 metres. In the inner portion of the tower of the temple, there is only a stucco figure representing Sri Chaitanya in his *shadbhuja* (six-handed) form placed on a high pedestal against the back wall of the inner chamber. The entire wall of the temple displays a wide variety of scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It also contains episodes of

Krishna-lila, scenes showing semi-divine beings like the eunuchs, hunter-scenes, scenes from social life, revealing imagination in its wildest extravagance, showing movements and action of dynamic nature. An inscription here reveals that Raghunath Singh I was the son of Bir Hambir.

Kalachand Temple: Most of the temple in Bishnupur falls into the category of *ek-ratna* style. Such temples have a single tower set upon a sloping roof and a square cell below. Out of twelve such existing temples, two are built of brick and the rest are of laterite. This laterite Kalachand temple was constructed by Raghunath Singh I in 1656. It is the earliest *ek-ratna* temple situated in the southern part of the Lal-bandh and eastern part of the Radhamadhab temple. The temple is square shaped with each side measuring 31.4 metres with a height of 9.2 metres (Banerjee, 1979, p.83). The temple stands with corridor with three arched openings on all four sides. It is surmounted by a turret on the sloping roof. Upper portion of the turret resembles the Orissan Shikhara style and in the lower portion, there are four arched windows. The façade of the temple is decorated with stucco works or low relief carvings depicting the scenes from Krishna-lila, Puranic deities, ascetics and dancers.

Lalji Temple: Bir Singh II (1656-1677), who succeeded Raghunath Singh I, was a good administrator and great patron of art and architecture. He is supposed to have built the lone extant fort at Bishnupur. In order to mitigate the paucity of water, he excavated a number of big *bandhas* or tanks such as Lal-bandh, Krishna-bandh, Gantat-bndh, Jamuna-bandh, Kalindi-bandh, Shyam-bandh, Poka-bandh (previously known as Bir-Bandh) and Chowkhan-bandh (now silted up). These tanks also formed a part of town's fortifications. But the most important contribution of Bir Singh II was the construction of a fine *ek-ratna* laterite temple famous as Lalji temple in 1658 which was dedicated to Sri Radhika and Sri Krishna. The temple is erected on top of a large square plinth with each side measuring 12.3 metres with a height of 105 metres, while the roof stands slightly slopping on all the four sides upon which stands the single tower. Situated in southern direction, it is surrounded by a covered ambulatory and there are a few ornamental details on the sides of the three arched openings.

Madan-Gopal Temple: Madan Gopal temple, considered to be the biggest temple of Malla Kingdom was built by Siromoni, one of the wives of Bir Singh II in 1665 (Bhattacharya, 1982, p.117). The *panch-ratna* type temple is entirely built of laterite and it is square shaped with each side measuring 11.3 metres and has a height of 13.7 metres. Placed in the south direction, the temple possesses five *sikharas* overlaid upon an arched roof. The temple has octagonal central pinnacle while the four towers at four corners are square in shape. It can be entered through a triple-arched gateway. In comparison of other temples of Bishnupur, it has very little decoration with only some lotus ornamentations above the arches of the porch.

Murali-Mohan Temple: Rani Chudamani, one of the wives of Bir Singh II built this in 1665. She was the mother of Durjan Singh, who succeeded his father in 1677 (Saha, 2018,

p.50). Standing in south direction, the *ek-ratna* temple has some basic difference with other *ek-ratna* group of temples. It is a square shaped temple, each side measuring 10.1 metres in length and has a height of 12.2 metres. There is a covered ambulatory resting on a row of pillars instead of three arched openings and a tower is also there on the inner sanctum. An insignia or *dhvaja* exists on the top of the temple which indicates the installation of the deity.

Madan-Mohan Temple: Madan-Mohan temple was built by Durjan Singh in 1694 (Singh, 2013, p.67). A single towered or *ek-ratna* temple, this temple was instituted to enshrine the tutelary deity of the Malla rulers. The south facing temple, built in brick, is unique of its type. The temple has a square shape with each side measuring 12.2 metres and has a height of 10.7 metres. The temple is very famous for the ornamentations which is done on its walls. There are scenes of Krishna-*lila* episodes, scenes showing dancers and dancing party etc. on the frontage of the temple. On the other three sides, there are very rich floral ornamentations. The pillars depict the scenes from Ramayana and other mythological scenes of battles between Hanumana and his army of monkeys. The interior part of the temple shows a few dragon-like animals.

Very close to the Lal-bandh, there are two big and one small temples, the entire complex being famous as Jor-Mandir. Gopal Singh constructed them in 1726. Another famous temple known as Radha Gobinda temple was built by Krishna Singh in 1729 while his queen, Chudamani built the Radha Madhab temple in 1737. The might of the Malla rulers gradually declined after the entry of the British East India Company in Indian politics, which also led to the decline of their temple construction habits. The town of Bishnupur is not only famous for having manifold terracotta temples but has also assumed cultural significance in the field of music, architecture and handicrafts such as pottery and weaving.

Bishnupur School of Music: The Malla king, Raghunath Singh II (1694-1730) was a great patron of music and it was mainly through his encouragement that the Bishnupur School of Indian classical music reached its finest phase of development. Since then, its preservation and cultivation is in progress till today. A very simple but classic kind of vocal music was developed here which became famous and identical as Bishnupur School of music. In order to promote music for their subjects, the Malla rulers employed the Muslim musicians from Delhi in their kingdom. Raghunath Singh II appointed Bahadur Khan as a music teacher on an exorbitant monthly salary of five hundred rupees. Gadhadhar Chakravarty was a prominent disciple of Bahadur Khan, who occupied music as his family occupation. Some top quality musicians such as Shyamchand, Kanai and Madhab emerged from this family who brought laurels to Bishnupur. After Bahadur Khan, Gadhadhar Chakravarty was appointed as the court musician in the Malla court. Krishna Mohan Goswami was very prominent among his many disciples. Krishna Mohan Goswami's disciple, Ran Shankar Bhattacharjee, later on, became the court musician. He established a free music school at his house with free lodging and boarding, where many disciples came from other parts of Bengal. Jadu Bhatta, a Vedic Brahman, became the court musician of several kings. He was

both an expert in vocal music and an excellent player on wire instruments and *Mridanga*. Other musicians such as Ananta Lal Banerjee, Radhika Prasad Goswami, Surendra Nath Banerjee provided a new identity to the kingdom in the field of music.

Dashavatara Cards or Cards displaying ten incarnations of Bishnu: Games are considered to be a good source of entertainment and a common pass time cutting across the people and country. In medieval period, the Mughal emperors introduced the *Ganjifa* playing cards in India. Bishnupur in Bankura district was the only place in Bengal, where the Hinduized *Ganjifa* popularly known as the *Dashavatara* cards were manufactured by the artisans, which the people played with great passion and urge. The *Patua* artisans of Bishnupur were masters of producing this very special set of cards showing the ten incarnations or *avatars* of Bishnu. Bir Hambir (1591-1616), the Malla king, introduced it in Bengal. It is quite difficult to guess on what kind of artistic styles were in practice in the *Dashavatara Ganjifa*, which were made in Bishnupur for its kings during the 17th and 18th centuries. Some of these cards now preserved in various museums witness the imprint of a vigorous, bold style reminiscent of local folk art and also of the style of *patachitras* (scroll-paintings) of nearby Orissa. The Malla kingdom of Bishnupur has an older history of assimilating cultural influences from Orissa. A few *Sutradhar* families of Bishnupur specialized in manufacturing these cards, which were circular in shape with a diameter of four to four and a half inches. They descended from the royal court artisans of Bishnupur Raj, holding the honorary hereditary title of ‘*Fauzdar*’ (Ray, 1953, p.327). These cards were one hundred and twenty in number, which was played by three persons with ten suits of twelve cards. The cards had, painted on them, images and symbols representing the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, the *Dashavatara*. These suits could be identified by their symbols such as the *Matsya* by a fish, *Kurma* by a turtle, *Baraha* by a conch-shell, *Nrisingha* by a disc, *Baman* by a water pot, *Parsuram* by an axe, *Sri Ram* with an arrow or a bow, *Balaram* with a plough, Lord Buddha with a lotus, and *Kalki* with a sword or horse.

Baluchari Silk Sari: Baluchari sari is a kind of sari, a garment sported by women in West Bengal. It is produced in the Murshidabad district and at Bishnupur and its surrounding areas. A prominent influence of different features of temples of Bishnupur is discernible in Baluchari saris. Mythological stories taken from the walls of temples and woven on these saris is a common feature in Bishnupur. It takes approximately one week to produce one such sari. In the colonial period, the industry was centred at Bishnupur, Bankura, Rajagram, Sonamukhi, Joypur etc. But its main centre was located at Bishnupur, which had a special reputation for the production of prettily embroidered silk scarves, plain and flowered saris or dress pieces for women, and a maroon coloured cloth called *dhupchhaya*. Sometimes, these garments had depicted in the *pallu* the scenes of Ramayana and Mahabharata, the lives of the Nawab of Bengal featuring women smoking *hookas*, Nawabs driving horse carriages, and even European officers of the British East India Company. The quantity of silk garments produced was comparatively small but there was a good demand among the people for the products of the looms of Bishnupur. While, the method of weaving has undergone very little change during recent times, these garments can be divided into three

groups based on the threads used by the weavers in the patterns. *Resham* balucharis are the simplest of this kind. These *saris* have silk threads in a single colour for weaving the entire pattern. *Meenakari saris* are designed with threads in two or more colours with attractive *meenakari* works which further brightens the patterns. *Swarnachari* or *Swarnachuri* are supposed to be the most gorgeous Balucharis, woven with gold or silver coloured threads which illuminate the patterns to a great extent. The Baluchari *sari* has the distinction of winning the award for the main weaving styles amongst 34 National Awards for the years 2009 and 2010 presented by the then President of India, Sri Pranab Mukherjee.

Terracotta horses: Bankura horse is the terracotta horse produced in the Panchmura village, which is located at a distance of 25 kilometres from Bishnupur town. The repute of this pottery work can be gauged from the fact that it has been accepted as the logo of the All India Handicrafts Board. Originally, it was used for village rituals. Bankura was a district full of dense forest and wild animals in colonial period. These clay horses along with other animal forms like elephants and tigers were bought by villagers as offerings to the forest gods for protection against wild animals (Sen, 1982, p.44). Panchmura, Hamirpur, Bishnupur, Sonamukhi, Rajagram and some other villages were important centres of Bankura pottery. Each place had its own local as well as ancestral style. But the Panchmura-style of pottery was by far the best and finest of all the types. The symmetry of shape, the rhythm of the rounded curves of the body, especially of the horses, lent a dignity and charm to its form, which was incomparable. It looked more sophisticated than the other types (Ghose, 1981, p.28). The Panchmura horse had also the features of towering shoulder, elongated and straight ear and expressive face. In fact, in the Rarh region of Bengal, of which Bankura consists one of the districts along with Burdwan and Birbhum and where *Dharmathakur* is worshipped, there is plenty of examples to the symbolic use of terracotta and wooden horses. Symbolic sacrifice of horses for fulfilment of wishes is very common for many village gods and goddesses, but an assembly of terracotta horses of various shapes and sizes representing sacrifice on wish fulfilment is perhaps peculiar to Dharmathakur (Mitra, 1972, pp. 133-144). In various villages of Bankura and Bishnupur subdivisions, there are *devasthan*s or religious places, where these terracotta horses are assembled around the deities or local village gods. These deities are known as *Kudra*, *Boram*, *Sini*, *Mansa*, *Bongas*, *Dharma Thakur* etc. The villagers worship these deities with indomitable faith in their power of protecting them from the evils and calamities of life. They seek protection from their village-gods even in cases of clear social wrongs and injustices done to them. For this, they offer the only object, terracotta horse or elephant, as their humble token of devotion and faith to the village-god. The size of the offerings to the deity depend on the ability of the individual devotees to pay for it, and at times on the nature of the prayer to be fulfilled.

Dokra metalcraft: The Dokras are one of the traditionally *Adivasi* tribes who have been engaged in the craft of metal casting for centuries. The metal smiths using the *cire per due* method or hollow casting method in west Bengal are known as *dokra kamars* or *dokra* metal smiths. In fact, the *dokra* artisans are a sub-caste of *kamars* or blacksmiths, who make

brass idols (Risley, 1891, p.236). These artisans are dispersed in Bankura, Purulia, Burdwan and Midnapur districts. Bikna, Lakshmisagar, Bindhyajam and Netkamla are the villages where these artisan activities are in progress. But in the Bikna village, a new colony of these artisans has been developed by the artisans' Co-operative Society with government aid. The artisans of Bikna believe that they are the successors of the nomads from Nagpur or Chota Nagpur. They manufacture various types of metal objects which can be classified into several groups on the basis of their specific uses. They are ritual objects like images of deities and animal figures, essential household goods and decorative items. Once the traditional simplicity, the charming folk motifs and formal beauty of the *dokra* metal castings have won for them a well-deserved popularity not only in different parts of India but also in many countries of the world. But in recent times, a large number of metal objects which were earlier produced by these smiths have now virtually disappeared. In fact, the economic condition of these craftsmen have become miserable. Perhaps the poorest craft group of West Bengal, the Dokras are also the most interesting and most creative. In recent years, under the pressure of all-embracing industrialization and changing social values, they have been forced, by the loss of their natural rural market, to diversify their products and are now seeking, with the help of the government and some voluntary agencies, a market among urban sophisticates, as creators of decorative ware (Sen, 1994, pp. 91-92). Though these efforts are yet to achieve the desired success.

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it can be concluded that 'history tourism' or travels to the places of historical importance are witnesses of the past. In fact, history tourism is a popularization of history. In recent times, both history and tourism have become complementary to each other when we try to ascertain the reasons behind the people's longing in the past and present to spare their valuable time for the past or for the places of historical significance. The historical significance of Bishnupur as a temple town is beyond any doubt. The temples of Bishnupur, considered to be the monumental expression of terracotta art in West Bengal, are undoubtedly still popular but other cultural practices in the form of manifold handicrafts have started to diminish. The poor artisans and their vulnerable craft need strong, sincere and genuine support from all the stake-holders such as the government, voluntary organizations and most importantly from the common people. Indeed visiting a place of historical significance not only creates a feeling of national pride or boosts the local economy but for a student, it is always considered as more effective than mere studying or getting inputs from lectures delivered by the resource persons.

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