

Preserving Cultural Heritage

By RANJITA BISWAS



ANJAN MITRA/Courtesy INTACH, West Bengal

A grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation helps protect the unique art and crafts of Bishnupur in West Bengal.

The Bankura horse from Bengal is a beautiful specimen of craftsmanship. Those familiar with the Central Cottage Industries Emporium would recognize it immediately because the terra-cotta figurine is its official logo. However, if your curiosity goads you to look a little beyond, and try to discover who crafted this magnificent equestrian figure, you will have to follow its trail through the red earth of the Bankura district. In the process, you will be richly rewarded with another discovery. The arid

A fine example of terra-cotta art at Bishnupur's Shyam Rai temple. Tourists flock to this West Bengal town to see its elegant terra-cotta temples.

landscape holds in its womb a treasure called Bishnupur, a place that embodies Bengal's indigenous cultural heritage.

Tourists flock to this town to see the elegant terra-cotta temples that dot the landscape. But Bishnupur is not confined to architectural splendor alone. Within a compact area, the town holds many other gems of art and culture: a silk weaving tradition (the Baluchari sari with symbols of kings and queens is famous); a miniature painting style; a unique game with circular playing cards (*dasavatar taas*) with paintings of gods and goddesses on them; handicrafts made from bell metal and embellished conch shell, and a classical style of music known as Bishnupur *gharana*.

Preserving Bishnupur's artifacts and traditions in a holistic manner is of great importance and needs proper documentation, feel conservationists. It is in this context that the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation granted \$15,000 last year for a project by the West Bengal chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). A plan

to preserve the Bishnupur art, architecture and crafts has been completed and was released on August 29 by U.S. Chargé d'affaires Geoffrey R. Pyatt in Calcutta.

The Fund was established by the U.S. Congress in 2001 to help countries preserve museum collections, ancient and historic sites and traditional forms of expression. (<http://exchanges.state.gov/cul-prop/afcp/>). INTACH was started in 1984 during the Festival of India events. Cultural leaders and scholars felt that apart from the preservation efforts by the Archaeological Survey of India, there was a need for projects to preserve other monuments, living traditions, and artistic endeavors.

Considering Bishnupur's position as a living urban heritage center, and the need for preservation of its unique arts and crafts, the project aims to approach UNESCO for recognition as a World Heritage site. But for that, scientific documentation is necessary. The Ambassador's Fund will help in this effort.

"Bishnupur holds a unique place in Bengal's cultural map. It is the only Bengali urban complex in the true sense. All other

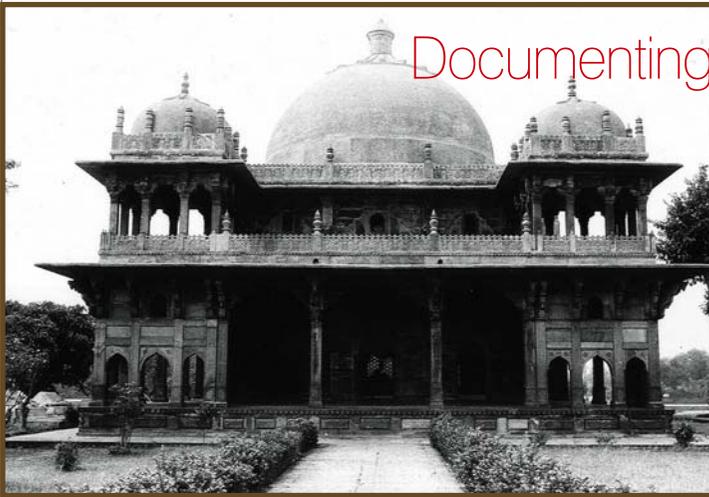
places, except Gaur and Pandua, are colonial towns," says architect Anjan Mitra, project coordinator for conservation of art, architecture and culture of Bishnupur. With the comparative distance and isolation from the more well-trodden Gangetic Plain, and banked in by the Damodar River and sal tree forests, Bishnupur has managed to retain its heritage in a pristine form.

It is home to a unique tradition of handicrafts, pottery and weaving that is illustrative of Hindi, Islamic and tribal artistic innovation.

Located about 150 kilometers to the west of Calcutta, Bishnupur belongs to the terrain of Raibhumi, the land of the red soil. It was also known as Mallabhum after the ruling dynasty of the Mallas (a name that means "wrestlers" and refers to the inhabitants' independent spirit). King Jagatmalla chose Bishnupur as the capital of his powerful kingdom in the 14th century and for four centuries art, culture and education flourished under royal patronage. This also extended to religious philosophy. The kings were greatly influenced by the Bengali Vaishnavite guru Sri Chaitanya, a follower of Krishna. The best examples of this are the terra-cotta relief panels of the temples carved with symbols of Krishna and his life story.

Mitra points out that it was the ingenuity of the artisans to use local material, the red earth, and burn it in a special way to make long lasting bricks. The embellishments give the impression of stone carvings. Temples were constructed in what is known as Bangla style. The slop-

Documenting Bihar's Religious Heritage



The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation also included a grant last year to the conservation group East and West Educational Society of Patna to fund a survey of 25 districts in Bihar to document Islamic and Hindu 15th and 16th century architec-

ture and identify buildings for future preservation. The project will showcase the co-existence of Hindu and Islamic culture that flourished in medieval Bihar. The Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library of Patna is assisting the society to organize lectures, raise public

awareness and conduct workshops with nongovernmental organizations, architects and urban planners. The library has about 21,000 Oriental manuscripts and 250,000 printed books. Though founded earlier, it was opened to the public in October 1891 by Khuda Bakhsh Khan with 4,000 manuscripts, of which he inherited 1,400 from his father, Mohammed Bakhsh.

Above: The mausoleum of Shah Daulat at Maner. One of the finest Mughal monuments in eastern India, it was built during the reign of Emperor Jahangir. Left: An inscription on the mausoleum.





Tibetan Art Conservation

The Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology (earlier known as Namgyal Institute of Tibetology) in Gangtok, Sikkim, is a center for the study of Mahayana Buddhism.

Ornate woodcarvings and murals decorate the interior. The altars hold images of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and tantric spirits.

The library has one of the largest collections of Tibetan texts in the world with 60,000 books in the form of xylographs, manuscripts, printed works and the collected work of all four sects of Tibetan Buddhism.

The museum section contains a vast number of ritualistic chortens, brass bells, *dorj*s,

Artifacts at the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, which is a center for the study of Mahayana Buddhism.

rosaries, rare *tankhas* and 200 icons and prized objets d'art.

A grant of \$35,000 from the Ambassador's Fund aided a preservation effort that was completed in 2004.

ing roofs (*chala*) made in the likeness of thatched huts of the farmers signify a "domestication of architecture," says Mitra. The simplest form is *do-chala*, or two roofs, which was later developed into more complicated forms like *char-chala* (four roofs), *aat-chala* (eight roofs), etc. Radha Binod Temple and Keshta Ray Temple are some examples of these experimentations. The Rasamancha built during King Bir Hambir's time (1600 A.D.) is a stand-alone construction, reflecting a unique experiment to accommodate all the icons of Bishnupur during the Raas festival when, legends say, Krishna and his consorts danced on a full moon night. It has a pyramid-like roof and the building stands on a laterite plinth and the sanctum is enclosed by three successive circumbulatory galleries.

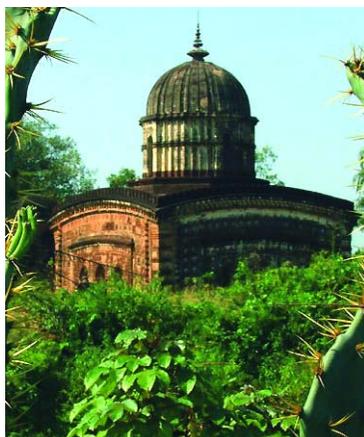
Bishnupur also evolved into a seat of Sanskrit scholarship and stands at the juncture of non-Aryan and Aryan cultural traditions. The Malla kings were of tribal origin and they

retained the link. Even Durga Puja, the most important festival for the Bengalis, has elements of tribal culture as worshipped here.

Two hundred years ago, the Mallas also experimented with rain-water harvesting to provide for people of the arid region. The great tanks, which local people call "bandhs" are still existant and an integral feature of Bishnupur. The Lal Bandh, or the red tank, is the best known.

The U.S.-funded project to help document all these living traditions has also involved local people and created a lot of excitement. "Documentation is not enough, mainstreaming is necessary so that the tradition lives on," says Mitra, so the local people will also take pride in the preservation of their cultural heritage. Mainstreaming will attract more tourists from India and abroad and help make the preservation project sustainable in the long run. ♣

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SUVOMOY MITRA/Courtesy INTACH, West Bengal

The Radha Shyam temple in Bishnupur.