

Medieval Heritage and a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in West Bengal: A Case Study of Bhot Bagan at Ghusuri-Howrah, West Bengal

Pritha Saha^{1*}, Dr. Nilanjana Das^{2*}

^{1*}State Aided College Teacher-1, Department of Geography, Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah, West Bengal

^{2*}Associate Professor, Department of Geography, University of Calcutta

Abstract

Medieval Heritage sites in West Bengal are often in ruins and neglected by the society and Government. As a result, the Buddhist monastery at Bhot-Bagan offers a variety of tangible and intangible cultural heritage features. The study attempts to explore the historical background of this monastery, its cultural heritage features, and its modern situation. Primary and Secondary data are analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The transformation to its present condition has been discussed thoroughly.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Monastery, Buddhist

1. Introduction:

The concept of attributing "sacred" to physical realities provides religious identity to people. This sacred attribute is given to geographical realities to unify groups, maintain legacies, and provide a sense of pride. Religions have their own associations with different spaces, influencing their existential inside-ness. The interaction between religion and geography highlights the influence of religion on landscape changes and sacred meaning, and how religious ideology is guided by specific spaces.^[1]

The religious atmosphere had to be extremely co-operating towards other religious deities because Buddhism frequently opted to establish itself in the hallowed residence of the popular deities. As a result, numerous religious traditions of the time shared those hallowed locations.^[2]

India is home to one of the oldest civilizations and religions, Buddhism, founded by Lord Buddha in the sixth century BCE. Born Siddhartha, he lived from 563 BCE to 483 BCE. At the age of twenty-nine, he witnessed four shattered figures, leading him to leave his family and seek

the truth. At 35, he reached enlightenment and became Buddha. At 80, he established the Sangha, a monastic order for those who wanted to practice Dhamma full-time. The Sangha spread the teachings far and wide. A vihara is a Buddhist monastery, a temporary residence for monks, centre for religious activities, meditation, and yoga. These viharas evolved into permanent monasteries, separate communities for monks and nuns, located near settlements for begging and meditation. Ancient India's trade routes significantly influenced Buddhism's spread and growth of vihara, connecting merchants, travellers, and monks, who supported Sangha religiously and economically, with many viharas built by kings.^[3]

Viharas, Buddhist monastic settlements in India, reflect the strength and spread of Buddhism, reflecting the people's thought, culture, aspirations, and intellectual development. These settlements, initially housing Buddhist monks and nuns, later evolved into educational institutions and grand monastic universities.^[4]

Evaluating the remnants or ruins of monuments like stupas, monasteries, or some isolated communities, as well as sculptures and epigraphy, has been the focus of Buddhist archeological research. The Gangetic Valley's geographical focus is created by locations like Sarnath, Bodhgaya, Rajgir, and Vaishali that are intrinsically linked to the life events and teachings of Gautam Buddha. In India, Buddhist monastic sites make up a greater portion of the cultural landscape. The foundation of site planning concepts was an awareness of the natural context, which has not yet been fully understood and interpreted.^[5]

Ancient India's educational culture in South Asia, combining Buddhist and Hindu systems, thrived in natural and spiritual surroundings, resulting in unique and advantageous teaching environments. Gurukuls were initially located in jungle huts, with nature playing a crucial role in instruction. Later, large Buddhist monasteries expanded the pedagogy and curriculum within these structures.^[6]

Kaushambi's Buddhist temples provide concrete proof of the city's significant architectural and religious legacy. These temples, called stupas and viharas, served as hubs for Buddhist study, meditation, and prayer. The architectural elements of the Buddhist temples in Kaushambi demonstrate the creative inventiveness and skill of ancient Indian craftspeople by fusing local and foreign styles. The wealthy merchant Anathapindika, a devoted disciple of Lord Buddha, is

thought to have constructed the Ghositarama Monastery, one of the most well-known Buddhist institutions in Kaushambi. Monks lived in this monastery, which also functioned as a center for meditation and instruction. It was a highly regarded location for pilgrims and devotees due to its imposing architecture and serene atmosphere. King Udayana of Kaushambi is thought to have constructed the Anandakuti Vihara, another well-known Buddhist temple in the region. The development of spiritual virtues and the spread of Buddhist teachings were the main goals of this vihara. Its elaborately carved pillars, elaborate stupas, and tranquil surroundings created a setting that was ideal for reflection and introspection.^[7]

The study of Buddhist monasteries in West Bengal reveals a pragmatic consciousness in their location, influenced by factors such as resource availability, local patronage, and the proximity of rivers. The monasteries were strategically placed within the subregions of Varendra, Uttara, and Dakshina Radha, allowing for continuous flow of ideas. The geographical and archaeological study also highlights the importance of hydrological dynamics in the landscape, affecting the cultural association of the monasteries.^[8]

Tantra doctrine led to several Buddhist schools from the 7th to 9th century, including Vajrayana, Shahajayayana, and intangible cultural heritage. Bengal, a flourishing center of Buddhism, experienced significant architectural changes between the 7th and 12th centuries. Hundreds of monasteries were built, but most were destroyed due to climate and manmade hazards. The unique morphological character of these monasteries remains.^[9]

Buddhist sites in India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, and Maharashtra, attract significant domestic and international tourists due to their Buddhist heritage. The discovery of the Moghalmari Buddhist monastery in Paschim Medinipur district, comparable to a UNESCO declared world heritage site, further bolsters this trend.^[10]

1.1 Objectives:

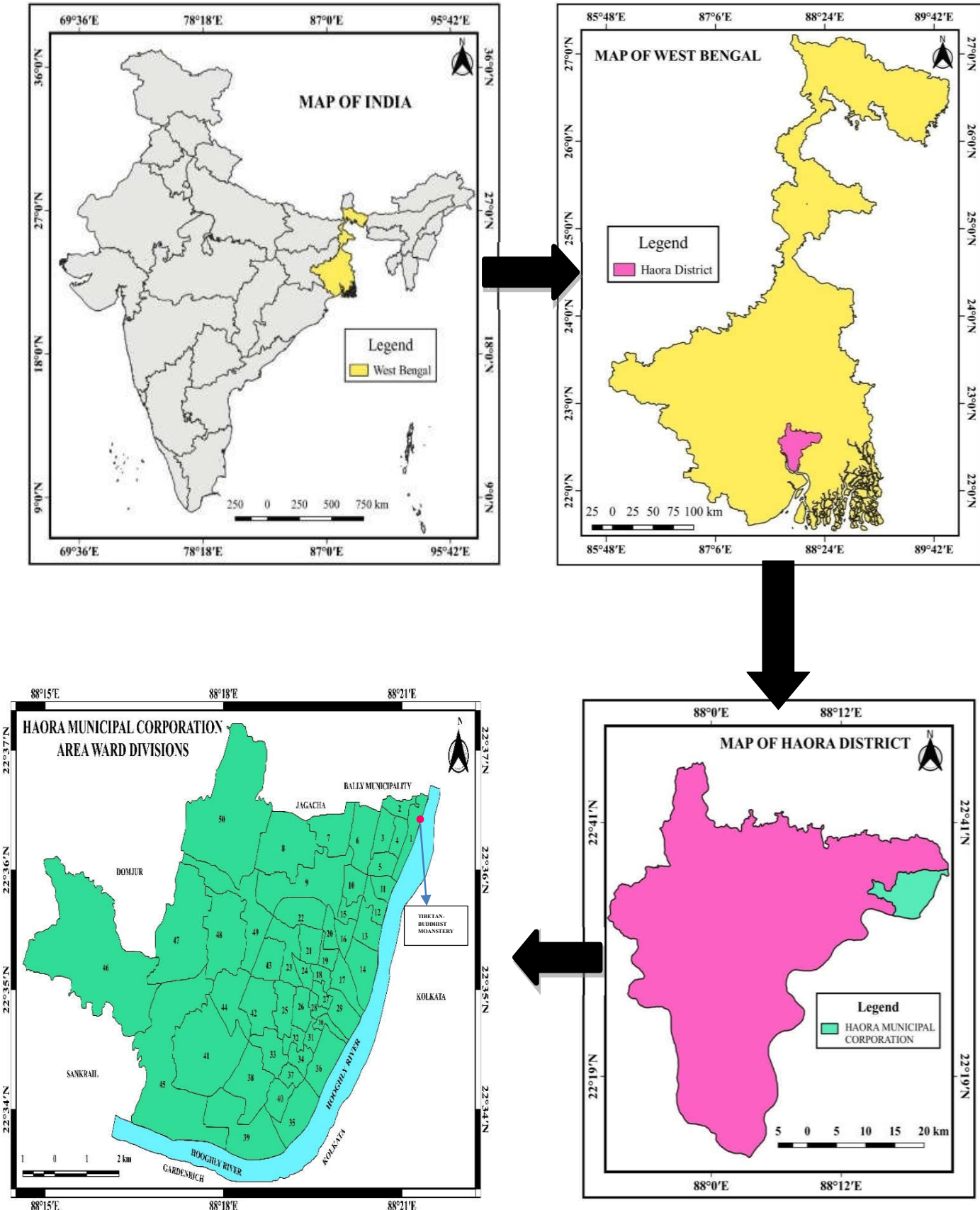
- To study the historical background of this monastery.
- To know the history of Bhot Bagan Monastery's Tibetan-Buddhist and Hindu deities.
- To know the present scenario of this monastery.

1.2 Study area:

Howrah is situated across from Kolkata on the Hooghly River's western bank. The district bears the name of the city of Howrah, which serves as its headquarters. The history of this district is extensive and goes back five hundred years. The city of Howrah, formerly referred to as the Manchester of Bengal, serves as a major transportation hub and entry point to Kolkata and West Bengal. One of the State's major railway stations, "Howrah station," is conveniently located here and can be reached from many of the nation's major cities.^[11]

The riverside city of Howrah, which is located at 22°-35'-30" North Latitude and 88°-21'-0" East Longitude, is roughly 14 kilometres long and 6 km wide on average. The Municipal Corporation consists of 50 Wards.^[12]

Bhotbagan, which translates to "the Tibetan Garden," is in Ghusuri, just north of Salkia. Because of its historical connection to the Saivaite Dasnami sannyasis, it is also known as Bhot-mandir or Bhot-math. The Tibetan Buddhist Monastery of Bhot Bagan, Ghusuri, Howrah is in Ward No-1.^[13]



Map 1: Location map of the Study Area

2. METHODOLOGY:

First, through studying prior research, interviews, papers, and websites, an extensive register of heritage sites was produced. The Howrah Municipal Corporation provided the city's municipal ward map. Data and information have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The heritage site's information is gathered through questionnaires. QGIS 3.10 is used to create maps.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

3.1 Historical background

Cooch Behar's relationship with Bhutan is incredibly old. Bhutan controlled Cooch Behar. Consent of the King of Bhutan was required to ascend the throne of Cooch Behar in 1771. Dhanendra became the king sitting on the throne of Cooch Behar. The king of Bhutan felt insulted by this. Maharaja sent soldiers and captured Dhanendra and brought him to Bhutan. Bengal was under the monopoly of the East India Company. The Raj of Cooch Behar took refuge with the Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings. British soldiers sent envoys to ask for help. Hastings sent troops to free the Cooch Behar Raj from Bhutan and set out to conquer the whole of Bhutan. Meanwhile, the relationship between Bhutan and Tibet is very old. Seeing the tragedy, the king of Bhutan took refuge in Tibet. The main governance of Tibet was then in the hands of the Buddhist monk Lama sect. The then Tibetan priest Toshi Lama took initiative to save Bhutan from the British. Tibet has an old relationship with North India. Buddhist Tantra sadhana and Hindu Tantra sadhana were both high paths. Adi Shankaracharya was a monk of the established Hindu Dasnami sect who pursued the higher philosophies of Vedanta and Shaivism. Apart from this, the monks of this community were well-versed in self-defense, diplomacy and trade. Dasnami monks had the right to stay in Tibet. Based on this source, the Tibetan Buddhist monk Toshi Lama contacted Purangiri, a Shaivite Dashanami monk of North India. In 1773, the Toshi Lama wrote to Warren Hastings on behalf of Tibet, pleading not to occupy Bhutan. Purangiri (alternately Purnagiri, Purangiri) was sent to Calcutta as a Tibetan envoy. Purangiri Gonsai came to Calcutta on March 29, 1774, and met Warren Hastings. Purangiri knew many languages and understood politics and business. Hastings' meeting with Purangiri was fruitful. As a result, the British did not occupy Bhutan. Instead, he established commercial and

diplomatic relations with Tibet. Now the question is why the powerful British army did not occupy Bhutan and expand the empire? A look at the political and economic situation at that time will make the reason clear.

After the Battle of Palashi in 1757, the East India Company and individually, its officials made Bengal destitute by extensive looting. Bengal was India's best economic power during the last century of the Mughal era. Cotton and muslin clothes here were sold all over the world. There were many good and skilled weavers in Bengal. Fifty percent of India's total GDP came from Bengal. This is why India had 12 percent of the world's GDP. The East India Company sold Indian cotton in London centuries ago. Bengali textiles were appreciated by various European countries. The economy of Bengal was destroyed due to various reasons, including the construction of cities which were more extensive than during the Mughal period, and restrictions on the export of cotton cloth. The result of which was the Manvantar of the Seventy-sixth or the great famine and pestilence of 1770. One third of the total population of Bengal died in this famine. 1 crore people died. The English sensed social discontent. Peasant discontent, Sanyashi-fakir rebellion began to take root. Company bosses in London were trying to find a solution. He was trying to control the Indian officials of the company. In 1773 the British Parliament passed the Regulating Act. This broke the company's monopoly in India. In 1774, Warren Hastings was appointed as the first Governor General of India under this Act. In this situation, Hastings facilitated the company's way by subjugating the various kingdoms through compromises rather than military war due to the needs of imperial expansion and trade.

In this context, within a few days of Warren Hastings' first meeting with Purangiri in Calcutta on 29 March 1774, Hastings signed a compromise agreement with the Bhutanese Raj on 25 April. Through this agreement, the British acquired the right to trade duty-free in Bhutan instead of the annual trade fair at Rangpur in Bengal. This agreement brought the opportunity for the company to expand its business and empire to a vast area of South Asia through western Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist monks had great authority at this time. The monks of Nepal, Sikkim, Kashmir, Ladakh, Mongolia, China, Tibetan obeyed China the imposed restrictions on the East India Company's trade. The British used the Tibetan monk Toshi Lama to obtain permission to trade in China, and Purangiri left for Tibet with a group of Englishmen for this purpose. In June 1775 Purangiri along with British official George Bogle and Dr. Hamilton arrived in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

The Toshi Lama welcomed the delegation and promised George Bogle help in getting permission to trade in the Chinese capital, Peking. Tibetans consider the Ganges to be a very sacred river. At this time, Toshi Lama requested the British to grant some lands on the banks of the Ganges, a monastery and a guesthouse for Tibetans, where Buddhist monks would perform pujas and traders from Tibet would stay as guests. On the recommendation of Toshi Lama, the British business continued to grow in Tibet and other South Asian countries. Hastings accepted the Toshi Lama's request and accepted a proposal to donate land to the Company's revenue seat to build a Buddhist monastery and guest house. On June 12, 1778, he gave this land at Ghusuri on the banks of the Ganges. Gradually it increased to one and a half hundred bighas. There is no precedence in the history of India for the East India Company to grant land to a gentile group for the construction of a monastery. Toshi Lama donated a lot of money and wealth to Purangiri to build the monastery here. Images of Buddhist deities like Mahakala, Padmapani, Vajra, Prajnaparamita etc. were sent here from Tibet for the monastery. Toshi Lama could not see the construction of the monastery, Toshi Lama died in Tibet on July 5, 1780, due to spring fever. In 1795 Purangiri was injured in a terrible robbery at the monastery and later died. Later it was considered a place of worship mainly for Hindu gods and goddesses rather than for Buddhism.

Now the question may arise in the mind, why did the English allot so much space on the banks of the Ganga? Ghusuri has long been famous for cotton export, making and repairing merchant ships. From 'Akhbarat', the mouthpiece of the Mughal Raj Sabha, it is known that two to three hundred years before the British came to Bengal, the weavers here used to trade directly with Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and other South Asian countries. This route was known as the Silk Route. This is the path chosen by the British to expand trade. Also, since Hooghly district was the base of various anti-British European powers at that time, Ghusuri's position was important in preventing them from reaching Calcutta.¹⁴

3.3 Bhot-bagan Monastery: Tibetan-Buddhist and Hindu deities

The name of the monastery or temple is 'Bhot Bagan'; 'Bhot desh' means 'Tibetan country'. The most striking visual object in Bhot-bagan Math is the assemblage of Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu deities. In fact, these are not mere exhibits, i.e. not even curios. These idols are precious, 'antique', ancient art pieces. These idols were regularly worshiped by Bhot-Goswami or Bhot-

Mahant, i.e. Shastra scholars for more than a hundred years after the foundation of this monastery.

Today it is not known to many that these Tibetan Buddhist idols were sent as a gift from Tibet by the Tibetan monk and administrator Toshi Lama, through the first abbot Purangiri Gosai, for the establishment and daily worship at Bhot-bagan Monastery. From this point of view, all these idols are symbols of simultaneous religious-cultural and diplomatic fraternity between independent Tibet and British India. It can be said that such examples are very rare.

Immediately behind the monastery is a modest, low-roofed house that could be considered a temple. It has a cubiform tomb, or samadhi-stambha, which the Tibetans would refer to as a Dungten, or repository of relics. The typical phallus or lingam of Siva or Mahadeva above it. A blend of Tibetan and Hindu customs is used in the Monastery's services.

3.3.1 *Tara*

Arya Tara is the primary god. In Tibet, she is universally regarded as the mother of all previous Tathagatas, or Buddhas, and is associated by Nepalese Buddhists with Prajna Paramita, or transcendental wisdom. She is the spouse of every Buddha, past, present, and future, according to the esoteric concept of the Tantra School of Northern Buddhism. In this scenario, she is comparable to the female energy, or sakti, of the Indian Tantrics. Tara is known as Grolma in Tibetan. Copper and Chinese gold are used to create her image. PuranGiri, who travelled with the Toshi Lama to Peking, clearly brought it from China.



Pic 1: Arya Tara

3.3.2 *Mahakal bhairava*



The representation of Mahakal Bhairava is the most artistically created. It depicts him in a monstrous state, holding his Sakti. He has a particularly terrible aspect because of his weaponry, the string of skulls that hangs down his neck to his abdomen, his 36 limbs and 18 legs, and the nine heads on each of his four sides, with a center one on

Pic 2: Mahakal Bhairava

top. He is the main protector of the Tibetan Lamas, especially the Toshi Lama.

3.3.3 *Sambhara chakra*

The leader of Tibet's Tantric deities is Sambhara Chakra. He has one head but many arms. The Sakti is in his grasp as well. He is standing atop the breast of a defeated demon, most likely the devil Mara. He has yellow paint on him. The artwork is approximately nine inches high and is made of copper gilt.



Pic 3: Sambhara Chakra

3.3.4 *Samaj guhya*

Another Tantric deity with three faces and six arms is called Samaj Guhya. He gives his six-armed, three-faced consort Sakti and embrace.



Pic 4: Samaj Guhya

3.3.5 *Vajra bhrukuti*

Vajra Bhrukuti is another name for Tara. Its figure, which was clearly cast in Nepal, is that of King Srongtsan Gampa's second wife. She was the daughter of Nepal's monarch Prabhavarma, who ruled from 630 to 640 A.D. Her head is surrounded with the brilliance of a saint.¹⁵

3.4 *Present Condition*

Bhot bagan monastery lies in the middle of several bighas of empty land. This monastery is open from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. daily. The main monastery is locked. To the west of the monastery is a two-storied house with an enclosed balcony. To the east is a paved hall and a pond. The two-storied house is in a dilapidated state. Doors and windows are broken. Plants are growing in the broken buildings. The monastery faces south. Two Shiva temples are found outside the main monastery's western part of the grounds. One is empty. There are Shiva lingas. There is only one local purohit at this temple, and worship is held there daily. Around ten

non-Brahmin employees are present to perform various temple chores. There are two Shiva mandirs on the east side. Each is made of bricks, and the ground is full of garbage.



Pic 5: A two-storied building built next to the monastery, where the Mohants lived



Pic 6: Main Temple at present day with heritage notice board

The temple premises seem to be the ideal place for local rowdy boys to hang out or get drunk. To the east of the monastery premises is the Ganga, but the river could not be seen as there was a factory there. All the local people are Hindi speaking. The key to this complex lies with the local boy.

The monastery was surrounded by a few mausoleums. First, despite their temple-like appearance, they are actually tombs. According to Dasnami tradition, a monk's body is buried without cremation, even though Hindu saints and monks are cremated once they pass away. In a similar vein, Puran Giri's body was interred on the grounds of Bhot Bagan Monastery long after his death in 1795 AD, and a mausoleum was built over his tomb in the Atchala style of Bengal. There are nine of these mausoleums on the monastery grounds, eight of which are Atchala-style and one of which is modern (pyramid). Every monument has a Shiv Linga, and in this instance, the Dashanami tradition calls for a Shiv Linga to be positioned on the base of the mausoleum. Only one of the monument's Shiva Lingas is frequently worshipped anymore, although previously all of them were worshipped every day. The state of the remaining Shivlingas is terrible; either there is no indication of a Shivalinga anywhere, or the Shivlinga is broken in some of them.



Pic 7: Present conditions of the mausoleums

There is some fruit and flower garden in front. In front of the temple there are two sanctums. One has idols like Mahakala, Mother Tara, Prajnaparamita, Vishnu, Durga, Kali, Ganesha, Gopala, Shalagramshila etc. In another room there is Shiva Linga. The two rooms have separate entrances. The co-existence of different forms of Hinduism such as Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava idols with different Buddhist idols is not seen much. So, the coexistence of so many idols gives this monastery and temple a unique dimension. Next to the main monastery are the stairs to the adjacent two-storey house. Although they are all abandoned. The house next door was used as a guest house. There is a notice board of the heritage committee inside the monastery. The main monastery is maintained. The rest is awaiting demolition. There is a good connection to electricity. Water is also available, which the Howrah Municipal Corporation supplies. Both festival and daily bogs are kept in a separate room. Six big festivals are celebrated i.e. Durga Puja, Janmasthan, Shiva Ratri, Mahakal Puja, Kapil Muni-Paduka Puja and Poush Sankranti. The temple has a committee consisting of 7 members. This committee wish to set up a free school and free dispensary for the needy. The maintenance committee arranges the big festival's special bhog, like rice, different fries of vegetables, chatni, sweets. This special blog can take anyone without a coupon. The highest number of visitors is observed during these festival periods. Most of the visitors are local.



Pic 8: Entrance of the Monastery



Pic 9: Goddess Durga



Pic 10: Shiva Linga

4. CONCLUSION:

The third century BCE to the ninth century CE saw the construction of several monasteries across the Indian subcontinent by kings, merchants, and devotees. A few of these became famous

universities in ancient India. These splendid monasteries were destroyed, however, when the Turks conquered the Indian subcontinent in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Bhot-bagan monastery was the earliest Tibetan Buddhist temple in Indian's plain that is not destroyed. It is converted into Hindu temple, but deities of Tibetan and Buddhist are still there, and they don't lose their glory. They are being worshipped as well as Hindu deities. There is a need to preserve such an architecture to show that long before the arrival of the British, there was a trade route from here to Delhi or the Silk Route to foreign countries.

This Cosmopolitan religious site can be a heritage site and a tourist destination in Howrah city. This heritage place must be improved in a few areas, such as increasing the number of information outlets in different marketplaces and making it more accessible. Second, to raise awareness and remove obstacles, the Ministry of Tourism, GOI, and WBTDG ought to collaborate more closely with the cultural heritage of this place. The local people, the Howrah Municipal Corporation, the Geological survey of India should come together to improve the situation of this medieval symbol of heritage that has been a place of religion harmony.

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