

Cultural and architectural heritage survey at Bishnupur, India

The town of Bishnupur in West Bengal is home to a rich array of unique architectural, artistic and crafts traditions that grew out of its strategic location between the coastal states of Bengal and Orissa. Historically, the Bishnupur culture fused elements of Bengali, Orissan and Islamic architecture, most strikingly manifested in the style of local temples. The terracotta and laterite structures have curving rooflines that evolved from the style of nearby wood, bamboo and straw houses. This distinctive roof is surmounted by one or more pinnacles, an innovation derived from Orissan temples. Each shrine is either fronted or surrounded by a gallery, and pierced by an entrance consisting of three arches, suggesting Islamic influence.

Some of the more eye-catching temples are covered with vividly carved terracotta panels. Artisans developed the technique of baking the area's rich red earth to make long lasting bricks or sculptures resembling stone carvings. The panels portray the life of the Hindu god, Vishnu, and his principal avatar, Krishna, as well as aspects of everyday life: bullock carts, river boats and hunting scenes.

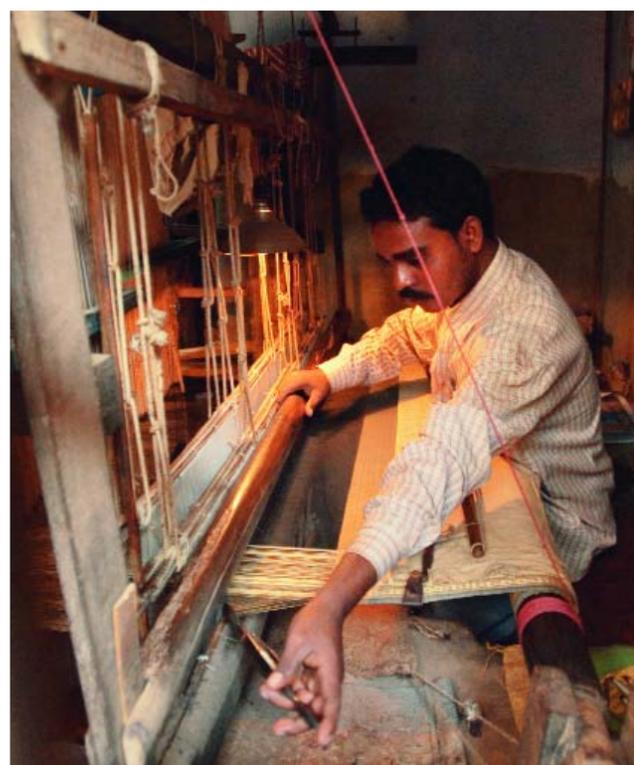
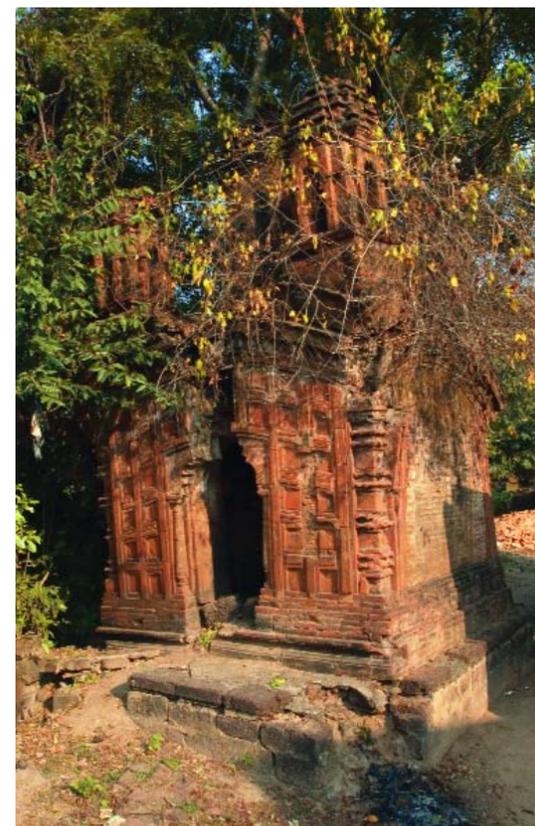
The Archaeological Survey of India manages 14 of the temples, but there has been no overall conservation plan for the town, which flourished as the capital of the Malla kingdom between 1622 and 1758. Smaller, unprotected temples dot the urban area and show signs of neglect or inappropriate alteration.

Bishnupur also gave rise to a silk sari weaving tradition that is still practiced, a classical style of music known as Bishnupur gharana, and a miniature painting school. Other local traditions include a unique game using round playing cards hand painted with pictures of deities, and the Bankura horse, a long-necked figure popular all over India, fashioned from metal or terracotta. Handicrafts are also made from bell metal and embellished with conch shell.



The town's relatively remote location, 140 kilometers northwest of Kolkata, meant that its traditions and monuments survived relatively undisturbed. But in the face of recent regional growth and change, a grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2005 allowed the West Bengal chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) to develop a comprehensive plan to preserve the architecture, arts and crafts of Bishnupur. The plan will be used to support the listing of the town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"Bishnupur holds a unique place in Bengal's cultural map," says architect Anjan Mitra, who coordinated the project. "It is the only historic Bengali urban complex in the true sense because nearly all other places are colonial towns."





Renovations for the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Sikkim

On a leafy hillside on the edge of Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology houses 45,000 Tibetan manuscripts. It is the third largest collection of its kind in the world and thus, an important reference center for Buddhist scholarship. The institute's museum contains a rare collection of statues, ritual objects, traditional art objects, thangkas (painted, woven and embroidered scrolls) and ancient manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Lepcha.

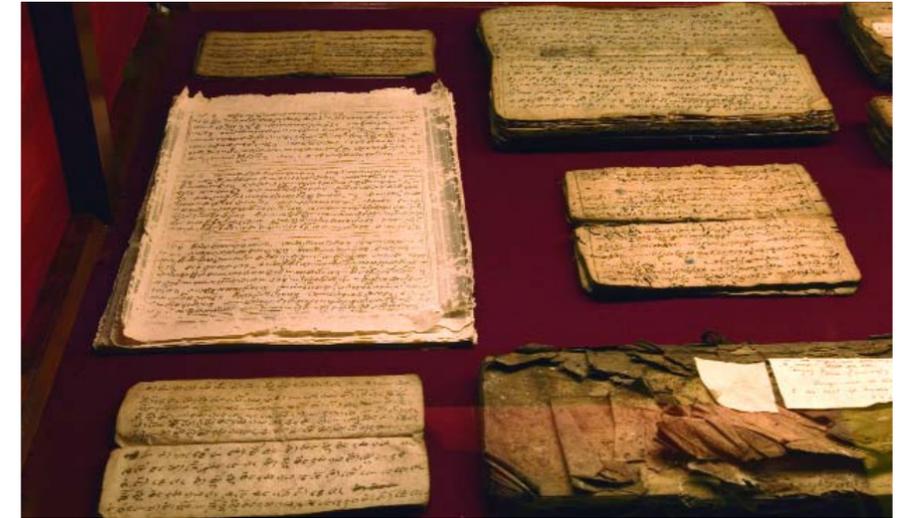
Created by the choegyal, or ruler, of Sikkim in 1958, the collection was mostly donated by the royal family. Parts of it were also donated by the government of India. "Scholars come from all over the world to use the collection," says the institute's director, Tashi Densapa. "Most of the manuscripts come from Tibet."

Bordering Bhutan and sitting astride the main route formerly connecting India with Tibet, Sikkim was a natural collection point for works of Tibetan art and literature. With the loss of much of Tibet's heritage and the recent growth of interest in Tibetan studies, the value of the collection has increased dramatically.

The three-story building also houses Tibetan Buddhist artifacts in a museum on its ground floor. These include thangka paintings, statues of gurus and deities, and tantric ritual objects.

After nearly 50 years in this heavy monsoon region and with the royal family no longer in a position to sponsor the facility, the institute was beginning to deteriorate rapidly. A grant in 2004 from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation helped to address some of the institute's most pressing problems. In addition to waterproofing the room, the building was rewired, and dehumidifiers were installed in the library and museum.

The most visible part of the project was the redesign of the museum display to improve lighting and provide new cabinets that were built and painted in keeping with traditional Tibetan furniture design and decoration.





Preservation of palm leaf manuscripts and rare books, United Theological College, Bangalore

Established in 1910, the United Theological College in Bangalore is one of India's leading institutions of religious studies. It has one of the finest religious studies libraries in South Asia, and a collection of 2,000 palm leaf manuscripts that is over 200 years old, written in several Indian languages. The manuscripts bear testimony to the rich cultural heritage of India in the 18th and 19th centuries. They include folk literature, native medicinal formulae, religious writings, astrological texts and astronomical facts. In addition, there are records of cultural practices and traditional systems of medical, veterinary and agricultural sciences. These manuscripts are impor-

tant materials for historical research and a treasure trove of ethnographic and historical information.

The college also has rare and historic written materials such as letters from Mohandas K. Gandhi; the first Tamil-language New Testament printed in India; and the writings of 18th century Tamil poet-singer Vedanayagam Sastriar of Tanjore.

In 2006, the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation awarded a grant to the United Theological College, for the preservation and micro-filming of the palm leaf manuscripts and rare books in the college's archives. This allows researchers to more closely scrutinize and use these important historic documents for the first time.

