
Boxanagar: An Ancient Buddhist Archaeological Site of Tripura

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Abstract: Near the Bangladeshi border, Boxanagar is situated in the northwest of Sonamura Subdivision, around 40 kilometres from the metropolis of Agartala. During the excavations, a sizable brick-built stupa, a chaityagriha, and a monastery were revealed. This discovery reflects the old Tripuran art, architecture, and religious components. The square-shaped stupa made of brick that was found during an archaeological dig measures 15.40x15.40m. The tapering Medhi is set with mud mortar and burnt bricks of various sizes atop the stupa's substructure, which is arranged in eight moldings in decreasing order.

Keywords: Boxanagar Stupa, Chaityagriha, Tripura, Buddhist Architecture, Kharga Dynasty, Choukhandi Stupa, Pradakshinapatha

Introduction

Boxanagar is located in the northwest of Sonamura Subdivision, around 40 kilometers from the city of Agartala, near the Bangladeshi border. A substantial brick-built stupa, a chaityagriha, and a monastery were exposed during the excavations. The art, architecture, and religious elements of ancient Tripura are reflected in this find. The brick-built stupa discovered during archaeological excavation has a square design and measures 15.40x15.40m. The substructure of the stupa is arrayed in eight mouldings in declining order above which the tapering Medhi is placed with mud mortar and burnt bricks of varied sizes. On the eastern side of the stupa, which is rectangular and oriented east-west, the ruins of the Chaityagriha have been made visible. With the exception of the side walls, which have survived up to 1.60 meters, the Chaityagriha's superstructure is entirely destroyed.

Boxanagar was significant because it provided evidence for the Buddhist School of Philosophy's legitimacy. Archaeologists claim that the Kharga dynasty of the Samatata is when the Buddhist Civilization of Boxanagar first emerged. As a result, it is evident that Boxanagar is Tripura's oldest Buddhist archaeological site (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The stupa is the earliest style of religious building in India. Stupas and Buddhism are commonly used interchangeably. The oldest stupas that have been discovered are

Buddhist ones. The natural world, specifically *Bulbulakaar*, *Upakaar*, and *Dhanyaakaar*, influenced its construction. (Sahai, 2006). On this sturdy pedestal, the physical remains of Buddha and his companions were housed (Brown, 2014). Mud stupas were initially erected over the Buddha's mortal remains upon his Mahaparinirvana. After thereafter, the Mauryan Emperor Asoka constructed several brick stupas all over India. During the Sungas and the period that followed, the stupas were magnificently adorned with the stones that covered them. The ruins of this stupa were gathered from a variety of Indian places, including Uttar Pradesh (Shelby, 2012).

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to examine the architectural features of the Boxanagar Buddhist structures, highlighting their unique design elements and historical significance within the region. Additionally, the study seeks to analyze the structural composition of the Boxanagar Stupa, exploring how its architectural form reflects the influence of early Buddhist traditions.

Background of the Study

In 1977, Ali Ahmed's family members began cultivating their property to build a house, and they discovered some archaeological evidence on their land, which they reported to the late Arber Rahman, the former Forest Minister of Tripura. The matter has been reported to the Archaeological Survey of India by the Minister. Mr. Usha Ranjan Debnath, an ASI Tripura MTS worker, visited the spot and asked them not to excavate the ground. The land was initially government land that was later given to Sayed Ali's grandmother. The Archaeological team visited the place the very next day after being informed by Mr Sayed Ali and the ASI team takes some snapshots as well and the progress was stopped for several years. The Late Ali Ahamed's family members have written a letter to the PMO India regarding the matter.

Following Mr. Sayed Ali's notification, the archaeological team immediately visited the location. The ASI team also took some photo shorts, and the work was halted for a number of years. The family of the Late Ali Ahamed has written to the PMO India on the situation. After a short while, the PMO office acknowledged it, and the next day, an ASI team from New Delhi visited the Panchayat office before moving on to Boxanagar. After lengthy deliberations, the ASI team decided to pay the Ali Ahamed family Rs. 50,000 as compensation for one kani. The son of Ali Ahamed, Mr. Sayed Ali, and Khurshid Alom began working for ASI in 1999 as a casual employee, earning Rs. 1250 per month. During the initial round of excavation, three sculptures of Lord Buddha were discovered in the area, measuring 12 inches, 8 inches, and 6 inches. The sculptures are currently housed at the Guwahati Museum, and the terracotta-backed bricks measure 12 x 8 and 8 x 6 inches.

The beginning of the building activities in Tripura is unknown. However, the finding of a few 7th–8th cult icons with tenons seemed to attest to the presence of the temple and Buddhist stupa that were meant to house them (Das, 1987).

The country is recognised for its Hinduism rituals and traditions in addition to the famed Indus and Ganga Rivers. Many of its structures are based on Hindu religious motifs and ideals. (Anderson, Norman, 1976). The development of Buddhism in India has also made a significant contribution to the impact on regional and other constructions' architectural styles. Buddhism and afterwards Hinduism had a major impact on the development of the area of architecture (Cunningham, 1960). In terms of history, early Buddhism was actually more developed than Hinduism. This is due to the role the monarch played in altering the conditions in which Asoka, a Hindu King, accepted Buddhism (Coomaraswamy, 1927).

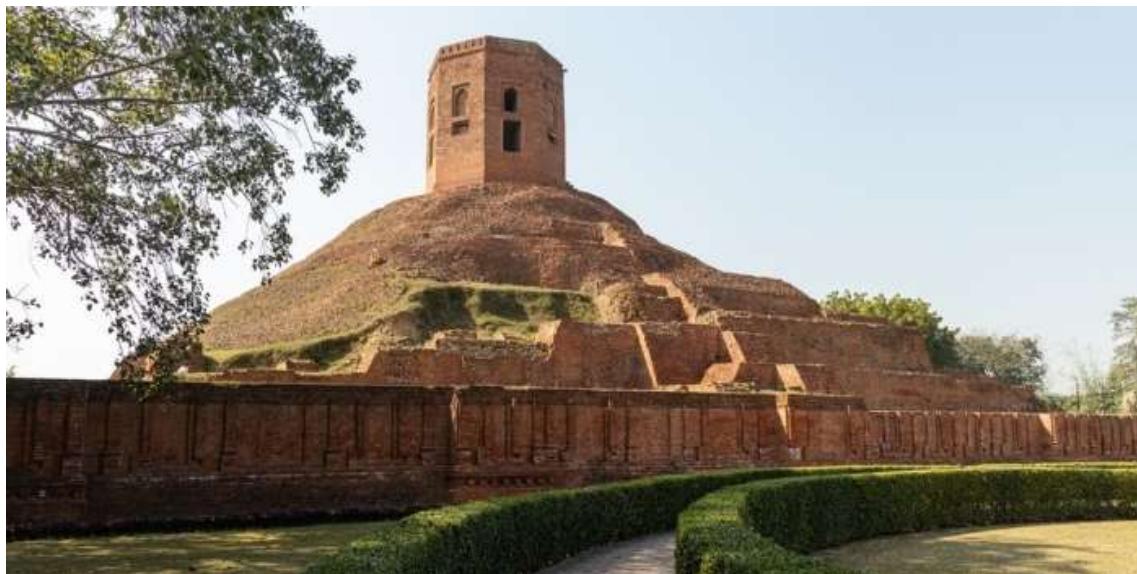


Figure 1a: Choukhandi Stupa of Sarnath

Choukhandi Stupa

The Choukhandi Stupa is an ancient Buddhist monument located in Sarnath, near Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. Sarnath is a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists as it is where Gautama Buddha is believed to have given his first sermon after attaining enlightenment. The Choukhandi Stupa has a rich historical background. It is believed to have been built during the Gupta period, between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. Originally, it was constructed as a simple mound of brickwork to mark the place where Gautama Buddha met his first disciples, the Five Ascetics, after his enlightenment. The term "Choukhandi" translates to "four-cornered" or "four-legged" in Hindi, referring to its square base (Figures 1a,1b,1c).

A broad hallway connects rows of five cells on either side of the brick-built monastery. Another mound at Boxanagar has been excavated, revealing a completely burnt-brick edifice with *triratha* projections and a square holy chamber that appears to contain the existing remnants of three spokes. (Figure 4b) These spokes may be discovered extending out from a semi-circular structure on the sacred chamber's eastern side. In front of this structure is a rectangular hall surrounded by a wall on all sides (Thapar

1997). A brick rammed floor is given within this hall, most likely to facilitate the gathering of believers. A vast *pradakshinapatha* surrounds these buildings as well.



Figure 1b: Boxanagar Stupa



Figure 1c: The top of the Boxanagar Stupa

Another type of construction is the Buddhist Stupa, which has a massive, hemispherical dome that is impenetrable to outsiders. The stupa is a glorified, embellished, and expanded funeral mound, which historically served as the last resting place for a holy man's bones and ashes. According to legend, Emperor Ashoka resolved to build several stupas around his domain in honour of the Master and house relics such as fragments of bone, teeth, hair, and other body parts inside them following the great death of Lord Buddha. (Chakravarty, 1997) Initially, the stupa was enclosed by a wooden barrier and constructed of bricks (Harvey, 1984).

The stupa was a substantial structural dome that was often placed on one or more terraces and covered with a railed pavilion. (Chakraborty, 2019) It is a monument that is often erected next to the crematory or grave. Thus, it is referred to as a chaitya. Where the mortal remains of a great person were either incinerated or buried, stupas were often raised. Stupas were typically paired with a wooden pillar. (Fisher, 2006) The

enormous stupa originated largely from the religious attitude of Buddhists. Many epigraphs exist that tell of the construction and adoration of stupas by Buddhist devotees. (Bary, 1981) It would seem that the great being Buddha has authorised his follower Ananda to worship him in the shape of a stupa. (Hugo, 1970) Stupas with two circular patterns of walls divided by brick-built spokes have emerged in the ground-plan spoked stupas. The voids were often filled with earth. However, other stupas, like the one at Bhattiprolu, are substantial structures made entirely of bricks. The stupa has a significant place in Indian art history, both for its architectural and religious importance. (Chopra, 2003). Asoka, who ruled over India from 273 to 232 B.C., is credited for building the oldest Buddhist monuments in the country. Asoka committed himself and his empire's resources to the spread of Buddhism (Rath, 2005).

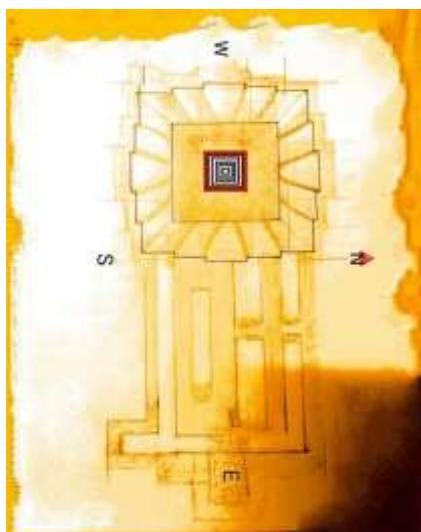


Figure 2a: Ariel view of Stupa



Figure 2b: The square Stupa of Boxanagar

The Harmika, an interesting composition on top of the dome, developed over time in place of the original wooden umbrella, which was erected to symbolise the stupa represented and was constructed over the ashes of the Lord or his closest disciples, a sign of royalty and dignity. The Harmika is a square Buddhist railing from which rises the shaft holding the imperial umbrella, sometimes single and later multiplied to three or even more, diminishing in size as they go upward.

A Brief Account of Boxanagar Stupa

An enormous Buddhist stupa, chaitya Griha, a monastery, and other related burnt-brick buildings were found in Boxanagar, reflecting hitherto unrecognised parts of ancient Tripura's art, architecture, and religion. During archaeological excavation, a square-shaped brick stupa measuring 15.40x15.40m was uncovered. On the stupa's basement, eight mouldings are put in decreasing order, above which a tapering Medhi is constructed with burnt bricks of varying sizes and mud mortar (ASI, 2023). The remnants of the Chaityagriha may be seen on the east side of the stupa's rectangular, east-west-oriented construction. The superstructure of the Chaityagriha has

experienced entire damage, with the exception of the side walls, which have endured up to 1.60 metres. The monastery contains a long corridor made of fire bricks on both sides, as well as five rows of five cells on each side (ASI, 2023).

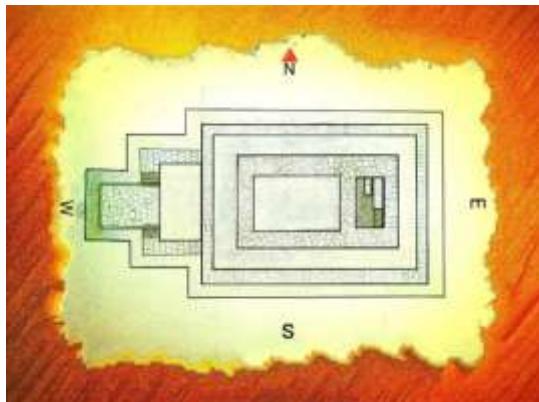


Figure 3a: The ariel view of Chaitagriha



Figure 3b: East side Chaitagriha

At Boxanagar, a different mound has been excavated, exposing a totally burnt-brick structure with *triratha* projections and a square holy chamber that appears to have the remaining remains of three spokes. These spokes can be found extending from a semi-circular structure on the eastern side of the sacred chamber. A rectangular hall is in front of this building and is enclosed by walls on all sides. This hall has a brick-rammed floor, probably to make it easier for believers to congregate there. These structures are also surrounded by a sizable *pradakshina patha* (ASI, 2023) (Figure 2a and 2b). A Chaityagriha, a structure resembling a Buddhist stupa, is present at this location (Figure 1a). Then, excavations also turned up a monastery and other brick buildings with their supporting substructures. The harmika was discovered collapsed, and it is thought that it was originally positioned over the square plan's centre chamber.

There are four Buddhist structures excavated at the Boxanagar Buddhist site, including the extreme east side Stupa, which is a clear example of the Choukhandi Stupa seen at Saranath. In Choukhandi Stupa at the Top, there is hexagonal construction. Chaukhandi Stupa is a tall brick building with an oddly shaped octagonal tower on top. The stupa's four-armed design gave rise to the name Chaukhandi, which the Archaeological Survey of India designated as a site of national significance in June 2019. The great Chinese Buddhist monk-scholar Hiuen T'sang (also known as Husan Tsang and Xuanzang), who made extensive travels throughout northern India between 634 and 645 A.D., is credited as being the first to describe Chaukhandi Stupa. So far as documentary evidence is concerned, we can conclude that by the middle of the 7th century A.D., a stupa existed here.

A far more recent addition is the octagonal tower situated at the top of the stupa. The Mughal emperor Akbar ordered it erected in 1567 as a tribute to his father Humayun, who had traveled to Sarnath 35 years before in 1532. Govardhan, the son of Raja Todar Mal, the Hindu finance minister for Akbar, undertook the tower's construction. (ASI)

According to the landowner, Mr. Ali Ahamed, thousands of bricks were discovered on the top of the stupa during the excavation. One may readily presume that the stupa may have the same type of hexagonal tower construction on the top and that it may be a later addition by the monarch during a later era. The square form's structure is located at the stupa's top, and the stupa's entire top was blocked by bricks.

The Choukhandi Stupa holds great religious and historical significance. It marks the spot where Buddha encountered his first disciples, initiating the spread of his teachings. The stupa is considered a sacred site for Buddhists and attracts pilgrims from around the world who come to pay their respects and meditate in its presence. Visiting the Choukhandi Stupa in Sarnath provides an opportunity to connect with the ancient roots of Buddhism and witness the architectural and artistic craftsmanship of that era. It serves as a reminder of the profound impact of Buddha's teachings and the historical significance of Sarnath as a center for Buddhist learning.



Figure 4a: The Structure of Chaitagriha

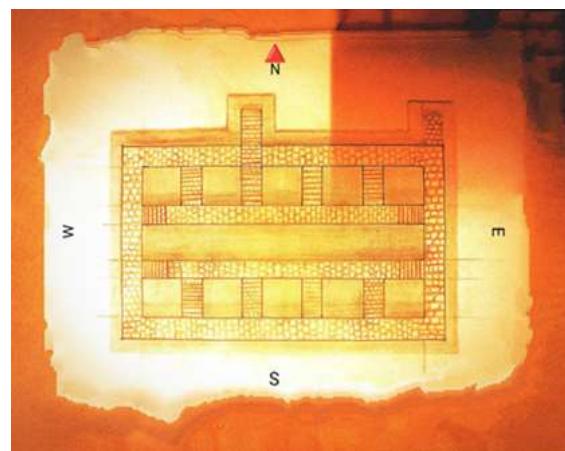


Figure 4b: Ariel view of Chaitagriha

Structure:

The Choukhandi Stupa underwent various modifications and additions over the centuries. The stupa stands on a high rectangular plinth, with each side facing one of the cardinal directions. It has an octagonal tower built on top of the plinth, rising to a considerable height. The structure of the stupa features carved niches and panels, which depict Buddhist symbols, motifs, and deities. These carvings exhibit a blend of Buddhist and Hindu artistic styles, reflecting the cultural influences of the region. The stupa also incorporates terracotta panels with intricate designs that depict scenes from the life of Buddha and his previous incarnations. The octagonal tower of the Choukhandi Stupa is topped with a circular harmika (a square railing) that encloses a central pinnacle or *mastaka*. The pinnacle usually bears symbols like the Dharmachakra (Wheel of Dharma), representing Buddha's teachings, or the *Triratna* (Three Jewels), symbolizing the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

A doorway leading to the assembly hall, dining hall, and meditation or prayer hall, as depicted in (Figures 4a and 4b), was used to enter the main hall. These monasteries

structures were independent structures made up of chambers and Chaitya halls attached to stupas, which served as the main objects of worship. The monks lived in the chambers as their primary living accommodations. They had beds made of platforms carved out of rock. Vihara columns had decorative carvings on them. All Viharas have unique designs. Stone was chosen due to its durability. These Viharas began as simple monk housing in the early stages.

On the east side of the stupa's rectangular, east-west orientated building, one may see the remains of the Chaityagriha. All of the Chaityagriha's superstructure has been damaged, with the exception of its side walls, which have sustained damage of up to 1.60 meters. The monastery has three rows of five cells on each side of a long corridor that is lined with fire bricks. A staircase that is adjourned by the rows is located on the monastery's northern side. The ten chambers are all square, resembling an assembly hall where Buddhist monks used to pray. This hall has a brick-rammed floor. These structures are also surrounded by an extensive *pradakshinapatha*.

Conclusion

As a result, Buddhism had a big influence on Tripura's history. The structural remnants of Boxanagar represent Buddhist architecture from the end of the seventh century A.D. to the beginning of the twelfth century A.D. Other modern Buddhist structures were also created in Bangladesh around this time. It is clear from the analysis that Buddhism had a significant cultural influence in Tripura. Buddhism travelled from Bangladesh throughout the 7th to the 12th centuries, and various Buddhist sites have been discovered there. Due to its location close to Bangladesh's border, Boxanagar is quite close to the Comilla, and Mainamoti Buddhist architecture. Because both sites share a similar structural character and date to approximately the same period, historians believe that Moinamoti and Boxanagar have a close connection. Boxanagar is a prominent site in Tripura art and culture, and in my opinion, more excavation of the area around Boxanagar is necessary in order to discover even more potential sites.

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