
Recent Archaeological Investigations in Hooghly District, West Bengal

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***Abstract:** Hooghly is a district in the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal. This district is surrounded by the Hooghly River in the east, Bardhaman in the north, Howrah in the south, Paschim Medinipur in the west and Bankura in the north – west. This district has a long history of being the European's paradise. Europeans like the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the Danes and the English came to this district for business purpose and established township and gradually this district became the window to these settlers and later on converted into Little Europe. This district has its long archaeological profile indicated by the surviving built heritage of the colonial period. During a recent survey of the villages of the district, there have been some interesting archaeological finds which include mounds, temples and secular structures ranging from Medieval Period to Colonial Period. This paper will focus on the recent discoveries.*

Keywords: Hooghly, Explorations, Temples, Deities, Potsherds, Brick, Terracotta

Introduction

The district of Hooghly in West Bengal is located between 22° 39' 32" and 23° 01' 20" north latitude and 87° 30' 20" and 88° 30' 15" east longitude (Figure 1). It is surrounded by the Hooghly River in the east, Bardhaman in the north, Howrah in the south, Paschim Medinipur in the west and Bankura in the north – west. This district which got its name from the Hooghly River is about 40 km. north of Kolkata and is famous as a river port town from medieval period onwards. There are four sub-divisions in this district and Chinsurah is the district headquarters. Rivers like the Damodar, Dwarkeswar, Hooghly, Mundeswari and Saraswati flows through this district and so most of the land is alluvial. The district is divided into two natural divisions, i.e. the plains and the uplands (O'Malley and Chakravarti 1912).

As part of the village-to-village survey scheme of the Archaeological Survey of India, the authors decided to conduct archaeological investigations in the Hooghly District for 2019-2020 season. The survey commenced in December 2019 and about 25 villages were surveyed. Here we will provide a brief review of the previous studies in the area, followed by results of our recent survey.

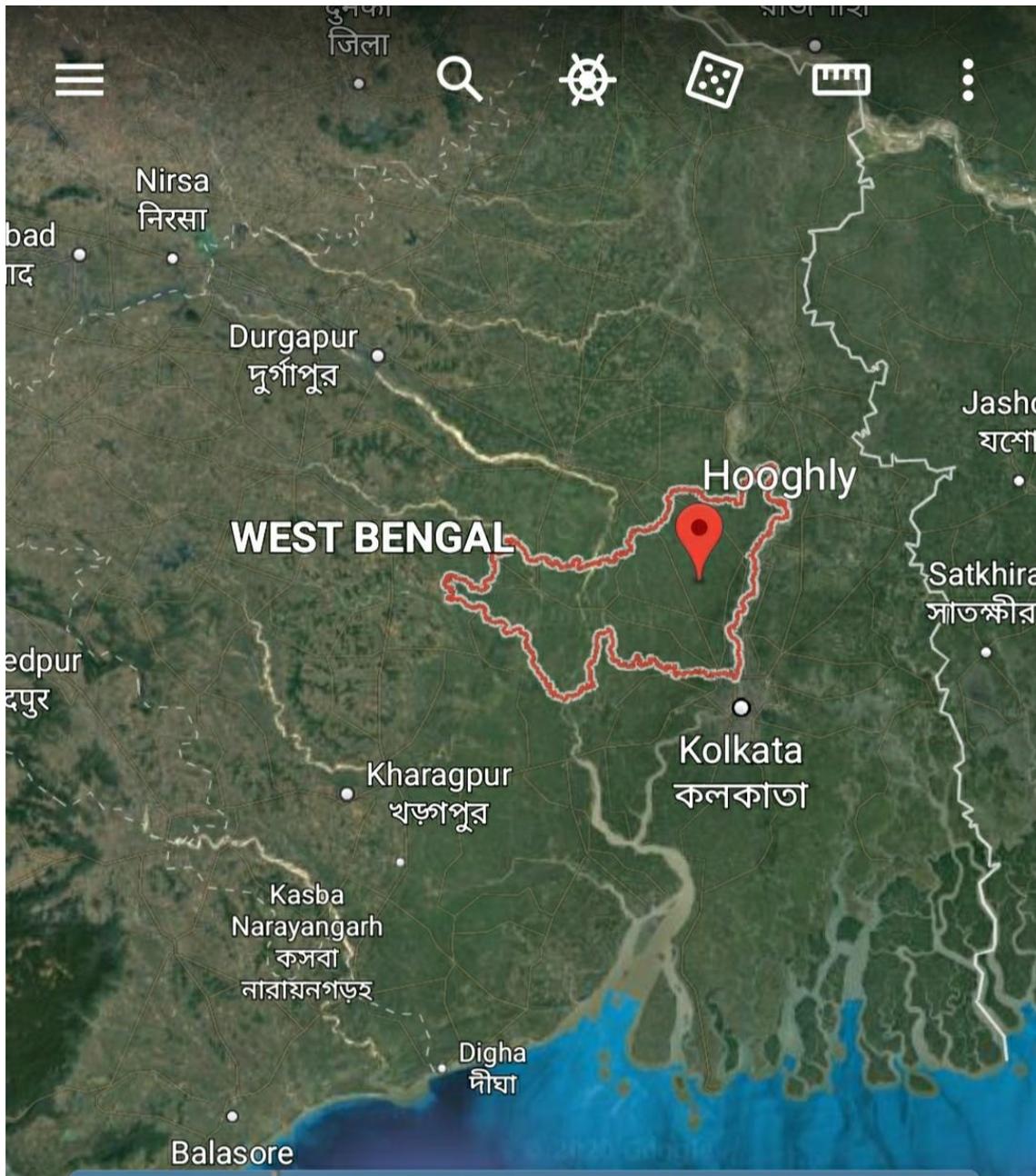


Figure 1: Google Map of Hooghly District

Previous Archaeological Finds in the District

Most of the scholars of this region seem to have neglected the district of Hooghly and focussed their archaeological activities mainly on districts like Bankura, Purulia, Midnapur and Birbhum for the past many years. Few explorations and excavations have been taken up in the district under present study. Documentation of some surviving built heritage was done by the British (1896). Only two excavations were carried out in Hooghly district, one before independence and the other after independence. Before independence, the site of Mahanad was taken up for trial excavation in 1934-35 where pottery and stucco heads of the fifth- sixth century AD

have been unearthed (Ghosh 1989). This site which was excavated by N. G. Majumdar of Archaeological Survey of India and is now a Centrally Protected site is the only major site of this district.

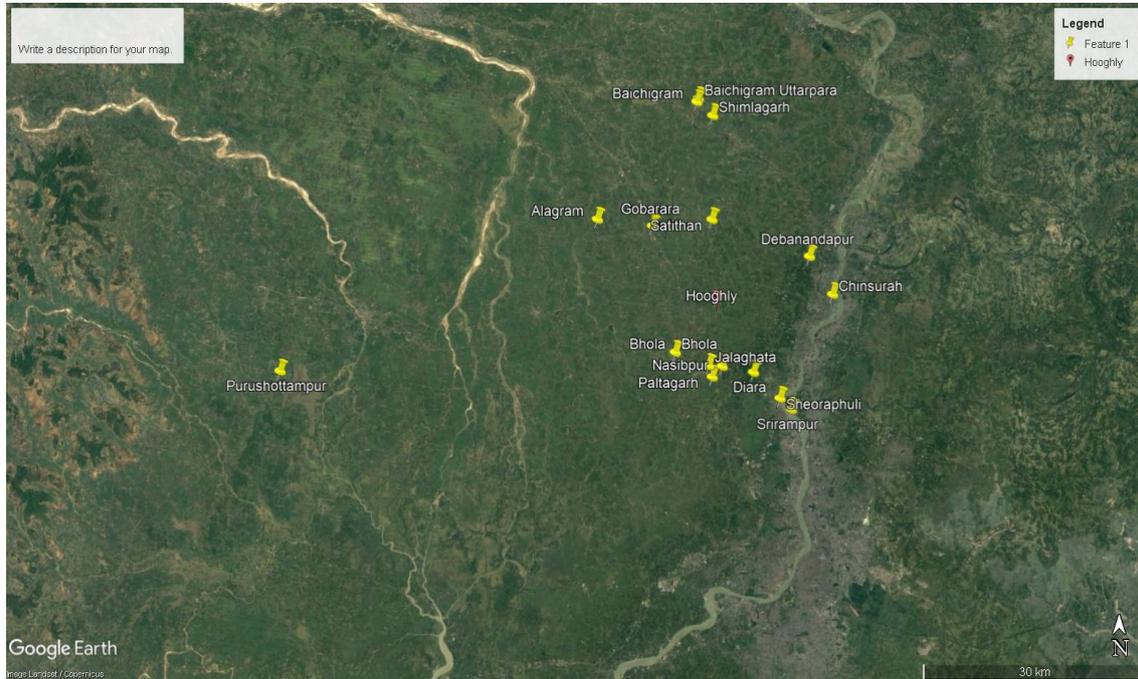


Figure 2: Google Map of villages surveyed

After independence, a few areas have been explored and temples and sculptures have been located by Chattopadhyay (2018). A few mounds with potsherds of the Early Historic to the Late Medieval periods were spotted at Tarakeshwar. Potsherds, beads and terracotta objects were also collected from the site of Nalikul and Bandipur. Some sculptures including a Surya image belonging to tenth-twelfth AD lying at the Nemai Ghat in Baidyabati were observed. Potteries belonging to the Early Historic Period including NBPW and Rouletted Ware, beads, terracotta plaques and sculptures have been found from the site of Janai. Potsherds have also been found from Samudragarh and Simlagarh. The site of Boichigram is known for temples of the Late Medieval and pre- modern times and thin deposit mounds with potsherds were also observed. A sculpture of Manasa at Paltagarh was noted earlier which is still preserved and worshipped by the villagers. From the site of Balagarh, Haludpur/ Haridrapur, Bighati and Bhastara, pottery, terracotta objects and some sculptural fragments have been collected (Chattopadhyay 2018). Potsherds of Rouletted Ware, Black Ware and Medieval pottery and some architectural fragments having Brahmanical affinities have been found during exploration at Saptagram (IAR 1961-62). T.J. Chakraborty (IAR 1991-92) observed a *pancharatha* brick temple of Laxmi- Janardana at Sundarush. A brick *atchala* style temple of Damodar Deb (Narayana) has been noticed by Chakraborty (IAR 1993-94) at Bahirgarh. An eighteenth century brick temple which has a flat roof along with a temple complex with five temples has been found from the villages of Gopinathpur and Khirkeondi respectively (IAR 1989-90).

Excavation at the site of Garh Mandaran which was carried out by the Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of West Bengal in 2010-11 revealed a rich cultural deposit dated to tenth-seventeenth century AD. Some of the important findings from this site include massive structures of brick and laterite, decorated stone slab, pottery and various antiquities (IAR 2010-11).

Recent Discoveries

Hooghly district was selected as it was noticed that this region was fairly less studied as can be seen through the review of previous research in this area. Our latest explorations have resulted in the discovery of some interesting finds which include standing structures as well as surface finds of pot sherds (Figure 2).



Figure 3: Mound at Baichigram

Baichigram Uttarpara: This village (23°7'3" N; 88°13'9" E), yielded a plethora of interesting finds belonging to different cultural phases and types. A few habitational evidences have been found from this village which includes temples, mound with potsherds and terracotta sling ball. At Panch Shiva Mandir tala, around 1 km away from B.L. Mukherjee School there stand two brick temples of the *chala* type of architecture decorated with terracotta plaques of various designs including floral, geometric and some depicting social life. These temples which are believed to have been built by a Zamindar look more of the seventeenth- eighteenth century AD. As informed by the villagers, there once stood five temples as the name of the area

suggests but at present, only two are standing which are in dilapidated condition with thick vegetation and broken, loose and fallen bricks. Around 10 metres away from Panch Shiva Mandir, there stands another Shiva Temple of the *atchala* type. This east facing brick temple is decorated with terracotta plaques comprising of floral designs, geometric designs and birds. Prayers are still offered in this temple which is renovated. This temple seems to be of a little later period than the temples at Panch Shiva Mandir tala. Just next to this temple is a mound which is not more than 2 metres in height and is spread over an area of about 0.5 ha (Figure 3). Some potsherds and a piece of terracotta sling ball have been found from the surface of this mound. Potsherds comprise mainly of red ware of fine and medium coarse fabric. Most of the potsherds are well fired with application of slip on some of the sherds. Some of the potsherds are decorated with mat impression and grooved lines (Figure 4). The terracotta sling ball is broken and has grooved lines. A *kutchha* house nearby has been observed where potsherds can be seen on the walls where mud plaster is applied. After enquiry, it has been informed that their elders built the house and they are unknown of the source of the raw material.



Figure 4: Potsherds from Baichigram

Gobarara: The village of Gobarara (22°58'14" N; 88°09'34" E) is on the left bank of the Ghiya River. There is a brick *chala* style temple known locally as Shiva Mandir. This temple is located in a thickly vegetated area which is generally avoided by the villagers. Terracotta plaques decorate this temple with designs comprising of floral patterns, geometrical designs, battle scenes and other social life. The designs and style of this temple is similar with the temples at Bishnupur particularly Shyam Rai Temple. This temple is in a dilapidated condition with visible cracks and thick vegetation

covering the walls. Most part of it is fallen and architectural fragments are scattered haphazardly around the temple.

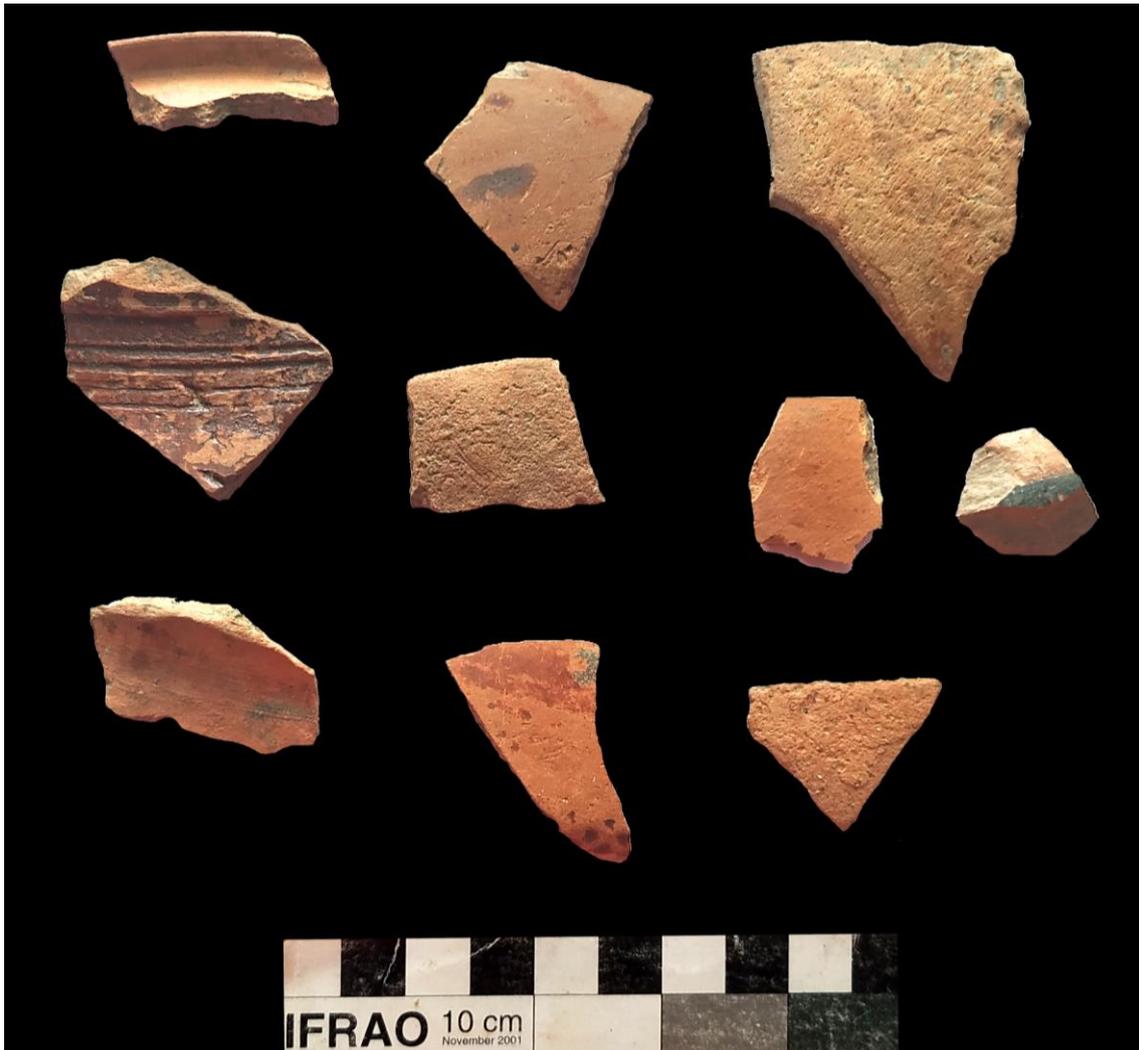


Figure 5: Potsherds from Gobarara

Around 100 metres (22°58'4" N; 88°9'20" E) away from this temple in the southern side, there is a brick *chala* style temple known locally as Sitala Mandir. Apart from a band of criss-cross design which runs over the lower portion of the front side, no other designs can be seen. Most part of the temple is broken with visible loose bricks and thick vegetation all over. Potsherds have also been found scattered near this temple. The potsherds which comprises of rim portion and other parts are of red ware (Figure 5). Application of slip was observed on some sherds. One potsherd has grooved lines. They are of fine and medium coarse fabric. They are most probably of Medieval Period.

Paltagarh: In this village (22°47'48" N; 88°14'13" E), there is a stone sculpture of nine hooded Manasa wearing a crown, big earrings and heavy jewelries (Figure 6). She is shown having four hands, the upper two hands holding a leafy branch, the lower left hand holding a baby who is in folded hands and the lower right hand holding a fruit.

Bhattacharya (2018) identified the baby as Astika, her son. She is seated in *lalitasana* on a double petalled lotus with another small lotus below her right foot. Carvings on the pedestal are not very visible. The deity is accompanied by a fly whisk (*chauri*) bearer on the right but the left side could not be observed clearly as some materials to be offered to the deity are found hanging. Flying Vidyadharas can be seen over the nine hooded snake, which is represented behind her head. Looking at the style, this sculpture possibly could be of the eleventh- twelfth century AD. This sculpture has already been mentioned by Chattopadhyay (2018). It has been found from a nearby pond and kept at a newly built temple. Daily prayers are offered and so the sculpture is applied with red paints and greased with oil all over covering some original features of the image.



Figure 6: Manasa sculpture at Paltagarh



Figure 7: Vishnu Sculpture at Sheoraphuli

Sheoraphuli: In this village (22°46'19" N; 88°19'30" E), a stone sculpture of Vishnu (*Narayana* form) (Figure 7) is kept inside a temple known locally as Ram-Sita Temple. The black stone image of Vishnu is standing on a lotus in *samapadaasthanaka* posture and holding *Padma* on his upper right hand, *Gada* on his upper left hand, *Chakra* on his lower left hand and *Shankha* on his lower right hand respectively. He is wearing *kirita mukuta* and *vanamala*. He is accompanied by Lakshmi standing on his right and Saraswati playing *veena* standing on his left. All three are seen standing on separate lotus pedestals. This sculpture could be of the twelfth-thirteenth century AD.



Figure 8: Sculptures of Vishnus at Nasibpur

Nasibpur: In one of the locality of Nasibpur (22°48'32" N; 88°15" E), the villagers informed that two stone sculptures of Vishnu (Figure 8) found from a nearby pond are kept at Vivekananda Academy, Bodhi Khetra. The two sculptures are of standing Vishnu. The first sculpture of Vishnu is seen holding *gada* on the upper right hand, *chakra* on the upper left hand, *padma* on the lower left hand and the lower right hand is broken. He is wearing *kirita mukuta* and *vanamala*. He is accompanied by Lakshmi standing on his right and Saraswati playing *veena* standing on his left. He is seen standing on a lotus pedestal. The sculpture is made from black schist.

The other sculpture of Vishnu is seen holding *chakra* on the upper right hand, *gada* on the upper left hand but the attributes on the lower left hand and the lower right hand is not very clear. He is wearing *kirita mukuta* and *vanamala*. He is accompanied by Lakshmi standing on his right and Saraswati playing *veena* standing on his left. He is seen standing on a lotus pedestal. The image is made from black schist. The stone is weathered making it difficult to observe some features.

Purusottampur: There is a *charchala* style of brick temple known locally as Ban Bisalakhi at Purusottampur (22°48'9" N; 88°15'35" E). This south facing temple is decorated with beautiful terracotta plaques comprising of floral designs, geometric designs, *jali* pattern and social life. Interesting plaques include sea faring people travelling in boats which can also be seen in the temples of Bishnupur. Ramayana scene including the fight between Ram and Ravana is depicted just above the front door. In one of the depictions, camel riders wearing European dress blowing horns are seen. Similar type of depiction is seen at Amragiri temples (Michell 1983). The Bengali

year 1138 is inscribed on top of the front door. This is a living temple as villagers come and offer prayers. The temple is in dilapidated condition where thick vegetation is seen over the cracks. Not very far from this temple in the same village (22°48'9" N; 88°14'82" E) stands a brick *atchala* style temple of Kali locally known as Dakat Kali Temple which is believed by the villagers to have been built by dacoits. This temple structure seems to be of Medieval Period but it has been re-painted and given a modern look.



Figure 9: Shiva Temple, Srirampur

Baichigram: A few temples were observed in the village of Baichigram (23°6'50" N; 88°13'2" E). There are about four temples belonging to different sects, within 1 km radius. There are two temples, one a Shiva Temple and the other a Kali Temple. These two temples are of *deul* style but renovated and given a modern look. About 20 metres from these two temples in the southern direction, there is a Dol Manch inside B.L. Mukherjee Free Institute Campus. This brick built Dol Manch is also of *deul* style decorated with terracotta plaques all over with designs consisting of floral and geometric ones. It stands on a raised platform. As informed by the villagers, image of Krishna is installed here every Dolyatra. About 20 metres in the southern direction from the Dol Manch is another brick built Shiva Temple of *deul* style. It is decorated with terracotta plaques of different designs like geometric patterns and floral motifs. This temple seems to be of the eighteenth-nineteenth century AD. It is a living temple but in bad condition.



Figure 10: GTS at Bhola

Srirampur: The village of Srirampur ($22^{\circ}45'33''$ N; $88^{\circ}20'23''$ E), presents a Zamindari Rajbari known locally as Goswami Bari and a Shiva Temple which is located near the Zamindari Rajbari. The architecture of the Zamindari Bari is a unique style of colonial architecture having a large hall with tall, huge Corinthian pillars similar to the ones at Metcalfe Hall in Kolkata, a Centrally Protected Monument. It has Venetian windows,

cast iron grates, colourful glass panes and marble flooring. The building has been whitewashed and painted. It is at present vacant and the owner stays away from the town. The Shiva temple (Figure9) located near the Zamindari Bari is built of bricks with lime plaster. The architecture is a unique one which seems to be of *ratna* (pinnacle) style with designs of inverted lotus on each *ratna* where a total of six small *ratnas* in the corner with a bigger *ratna* in the middle are visible. The temple seems to be hexagonal on plan. It is in a dilapidated condition where thick vegetation and cracks can be seen. This type of temple is somewhat similar to Hansesvari Temple at Hooghly which is a Centrally Protected Monument but seems to be of an earlier period than the Hansesvari.

Alagram: In the village of Alagram (22°58'42" N; 88°5'17" E), there stand a Shiva Temple of *deul* style architecture. This west facing temple brick temple plastered with lime is octagonal on plan. The upper part of the temple is decorated with terracotta plaques of different varieties including social scenes and erotic types but most of the plaques are destroyed due to weathering. The lower portion is devoid of designs and seems to be renovated in recent times with cement mortar. There is an *amalaka* on top of the temple. It is believed to have been built by Queen Radha Rani Mahatap. Daily prayers are still offered in this temple. This temple may have been of the eighteenth-nineteenth century AD.

Diara: Two brick *atchala* style temples are located in this village (22°48'07" N; 88°17'26" E). These temples are decorated with terracotta plaques in front. The villagers informed that prayers are still offered in these temples which belong to Shiva and Kali. It has raised platform which is entered through a flight of stairs. These temples are of late eighteenth- nineteenth century AD.

Satithan: Two brick Shiva Temples of *chala* style have been noticed in dilapidated condition in the village of Satithan (22°58'41" N; 88°14'12" E). Both these temples are not presently in use. Most portion of one temple has already fallen and the other is on the verge of falling. Thick vegetation growth can be seen. Some terracotta plaques and bricks from these temples are seen lying on the ground haphazardly. The villagers even used this temple to dry cow dung cakes on its walls.

Jalaghata: There are two brick *atchala* style Shiva temples known locally as Jora Mandir in this village (22°48'35" N; 88°13'57" E). Both the temples stand on a raised platform which is about two metres high and can be reached through a flight of stairs. There is no decoration on the temples which is seen plastered with lime mortar and are next to each other. Thick vegetation and big cracks can be seen. Some portions of these temples are broken and are piled up next to it.

Debanandapur: There is a temple known locally as Dol Mandir in the village of Debanandapur (22°56'8" N; 88°21'48"E). This temple is octagonal in plan and has a small *shikhara* on top. At present it is not in used and according to the villagers this has been used during *Dol Jatra*. In the same village (22°56'8" N; 88°21'51"E), not far from the

Dol Mandir are two *chala* style temples, one dedicated to Krishna and another dedicated to Chandi. At a distance of about 50 metres on the eastern side (22°56'1" N; 88°21'53"E), from these two temples, there is a group of four Shiva Temples having *chala* style architecture. These brick built temples have no decoration. Out of these, two are adjacent to each other and most part of it is already fallen. This group of temples is situated just next to Debanandapur Saratchandra Shiksha Niketan. These temples are of late eighteenth- nineteenth century AD.

Shimlagarh: A group of four Shiva Temples having *chala* style architecture is located in the village of Shimlagarh (23°5'53" N; 88°14'16" E). Among these four, one of the temples is already fallen and only a part of it is standing with other architectural fragments lying on the ground. Two of these temples have been renovated and given a modern look. The last one is also in a very bad condition with thick vegetation and big cracks seen all over it. A few terracotta plaques are seen decorated on this temple. These temples seem to be of eighteenth- nineteenth century AD.

Bhola: At Bhola (22°49'30" N; 88°11'21" E), there is a five storeyed brick tower (Figure 10) just adjacent to the main road in between the villages of Nalikul and Singur. This tower is without any designs and each storey has a small window each. The villagers called this tower '*giriya*' or church and believed that the British built this tower to observe a panoramic view of the nearby villages. This structure is somewhat similar to the Great Trigonometrical Survey Tower (GTS) located at Barrackpore Trunk Road, Kolkata. Crawford (1902) mentions about the introduction of the Great Trigonometrical Survey Towers at Hooghly District which included a tower at Bhola, halfway between Nalikul and Singur.

Chinsurah: A traverse point tower is found erected at the town of Chinsurah (22°53'30" N; 88°23'36" E) around 20 metres away from the Centrally Protected monument Dutch Cemetery. It is a plain structure with no decorations. This tower is believed to have been erected when the first survey of the area started by the British. The purpose of this tower may have been similar with the one at Bhola. The villagers seem to have no idea about this tower as a municipality dustbin and an electric transformer are placed just next to this structure.

Discussion and Conclusion

Archaeologists of this region mostly concentrated in other districts, somehow neglecting this district except for few excavations and explorations. The recent exploration was carried out in this district to find archaeological evidences and have resulted in the discovery of some interesting finds. Most of the findings belonged to eighteenth- nineteenth century AD, especially the temples.

Mounds located in this district have thin deposits not more than 2 m in height. Potsherds comprise mainly of red ware, some decorated with mat impression and grooves lines. As in other parts of the state where there are more sculptures of Vishnu, this district is no exception but the temples are mainly dedicated to Shiva and Kali with

a few instances of Krishna temples. As can be observed, these Vishnu images are mainly of the twelfth-thirteenth century AD but temples were built in the later period. These sculptures must have been worshipped at individual's places. Snake-goddess or *Manasa* worshipped in Bengal is quite popular and an evidence of such image from this district shows that the people of this area also worship this deity.

All the temples except the temples at Baichigram, Alagram and Srirampur are of *chala* type of architecture which is one type of temple architecture style of Bengal. They are generally brick built temples with terracotta plaques comprising various designs including geometric, floral and battle scenes on some of them. Some temples are decorated with terracotta plaques of designs similar to the ones at Bishnupur Temples. These temples are mostly small ones and except for few, the others are without designs or designs only on the front side which is quite typical of the late eighteenth century AD (Mangaonkar 2012). One unique type of temple is the Shiva Temple at Srirampur. It is quite different from the other *ratna* style of temple. Most of the temples seem to have been built by rich zamindars during the late eighteenth- nineteenth century AD.

The temples are situated within the habitational area and daily prayers are offered in almost all of them. The presence of water tanks or ponds near the temples is not seen except for the temple at Jalaghata. These temples may have been built only to offer prayers for few families and not for the whole village.

Another important discovery is the Great Trigonometrical Survey Tower at Bhola and a similar tower at Chinsurah. These unique types of towers are found erected by the British to carry out surveys like measuring the dimensions of India (Sarkar 2012). This shows that this district was in an important route for carrying out survey of the entire subcontinent.

Important archaeological finds from this district include habitational deposit, sculptures, temples and other secular structures. This shows that this district continues to be an important place since the Medieval Period. Our recent survey has clearly shown that there is a tremendous scope for carrying out more intensive research especially focussing on the Medieval Period. Further study of socio-cultural aspects in this region needs to be carried out with the help of historical records and corroborating it with the archaeological remains.

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