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# The Archaeological Sites of Tripura: A Study of the Excavated Sites of Pilak, Boxanagar, Unakoti, Devtamura and the Temples of Udaipur

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**Abstract:** *Tripura, the North Eastern state of India, has some important archaeological sites which define the ancient heritage of this country. The sites such as Pilak and Boxanagar which belongs approximately to the fifth to twelfth century imparts the Buddhists as well as Hindu philosophies. Like the other states flourished in its own way with the rule of different dynasties, Tripura too in its lush greenery and mongoloid ambience equally flourished in its rock cut sculptures and religious architectures. This can be seen in the huge sized bas-relief of Unakoti and also besides the walls of the hills of the Gomati River in Devtamura. The later period when this place was ruled by the Manikya Kings, many temples were patronized by the royal family. Among which, the 519 years old temple of Tripura Sundari and other temples carries some unique architectural features. These temples have the blend of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic style. All these archaeological sites have not researched in a wide manner so far. The paper is a broad study of the archaeological sites of Tripura such as Boxanagar, Pilak, Unakoti, Devtamura and Udaipur.*

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**Keywords:** Boxanagar, Pilak, Unakoti, Devtamura, Udaipur, Archaeology, Tripura

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## Introduction

In ancient days, Tripura was known as *Sukshma Desh* or *Kirata Bhumi* where ancestors from *kirata* tribes were believed to have been living. It is a state covered with hills and greeneries. The state comprises of rich history and culture. There is evidence of the prevailing of culture in this state from the Paleolithic Age. This is seen from the archaeological investigation and discovery of the Stone Age tools on fossils as well as tools from the Neolithic Age. Other artifacts like coins, inscriptions, architectures, manuscripts etc. also carry the imprints of the ancient history of Tripura. The important archaeological sites of Tripura discussed in this paper are Boxanagar, Pilak, Unakoti, Devtamura and Udaipur. The site Pilak has important connection with the Samatata and Harikela (most of these places are now in Bangladesh). Maximum half portion of present Tripura was under *Samatata* and *Harikela* up to thirteenth century. There are lots of views regarding the origin of the name *Samatata* and *Harikela*. The

name *Samatata* originated from the name of the port 'Samandar' which was near to the Chittagong of Bangladesh. During the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Huen-en-sang described the *Samatata* as 'It is next to a large sea'. *Samatata* was an ancient state and Tripura is related to it but the history of this state is yet to be explored.

*Harikela* was also an ancient state. The name *Harikela* came from a place near the seashore of Chittagong named as *Harkhonda* (*Hari+Khela* = *Harikela*). *Hari* is the name of the God and *Kela* signifies a place. Therefore *Harikela* symbolize the place of God.

At that century, the King Trilochan who was the king of the lunar dynasty used to rule in the Harikel state. The northern and southern region of Tripura was under his rule. The Kings ruling the southern part of Tripura in the 7<sup>th</sup> century were Buddhist. This was known from the copper plate inscription of *Samatata*'s ruler King Loknath. This copper plate inscription was found in the Mainamati region of Comilla. Another copper plate inscription found from Comilla give evidences of the existence of Brahmanism in the royal family. There was also the rule of the Hindu Kings like King Purnachandra and King Subarnachandra in the Lalmai hill during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century. The archaeological site Pilak was believed to be patronized from all these Buddhist and Hindu royal families.

The northern regions of Tripura especially the Atharamura, Langtarai were covered with huge hills and dense forest. So the *Samatata* and *Harikela* kingdom couldn't spread in those areas. There the Kuki, Halam, Lushai were the supreme people and the place was known as *Kirata Bhumi*. The other regions near Cachar and Dimasa Srihatta (Sri Bhumi) were under the Kamrup Kings. A new history was discovered after the excavation of the Mainamati region.

The ancient history of Pilak and Boxanagar automatically comes out if we discuss about the Mainamati Civilization. In Boxanagar, the Buddhist civilization dates to 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c A.D. and in Pilak the Buddhist Civilization dates to about 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c. In Pilak there was Vajrayana Buddhism. Pilak's excavation has led to the discovery of many artifacts, among them the Vajra symbol and the statue of Hariti were the most significant ones. Hinduism came in a later period in Pilak and continued till 11<sup>th</sup> century. During the age of Buddhism in Pilak, the Mog people started following this religion widely.

The name 'Pilak' itself is believed to have originated from the Mog language which means 'hidden wealth or treasure'. During the prevailing of Hinduism in Pilak, the art and culture were developed more.

The special feature of Boxanagar was that it has the proof of the existence of the Buddhist School of Philosophy. Such type of religious centre is not seen in Pilak. The archaeological site of Pilak consists of a Buddhist Matha structure. Like the Boxanagar, such kind of Buddhist educational centre was also traced in Mainamati Bangladesh. In case of the terracottas of Pilak, we can find similar characteristics with the Mainamati Civilization.

A large number of sculptures found in Pilak points towards the proof of the influences of Hinduism prevailing after the Buddhist age. As discussed earlier, the Hindu civilization of that region came after the age of Buddhism. From there, the Hinduism has spread and has influenced the history, culture, religion, politics etc. of the Samatata- Harikela region. According to the archaeologists, the Buddhist Civilization of Boxanagar was formed during the *Kharga* rule of the Samatata. Therefore it is seen that Boxanagar is the most ancient Buddhist archaeological site of Tripura. Pilak and Boxanagar region accompanied by the major half portion of Tripura was under the Samatata- Harikela.

Unakoti of Tripura is a Saiva civilization (Lord Shiva is worshipped). The time period of Unakoti can be assumed as 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century. Most probably that may be Natha-Yogi's creation and has been patronized by the Hindu 'Deb' generation of Sri Bhumi. Devtamura consists of the rock-cut sculptures. But this site dates to the later period. In Tripura apart from the excavated sites and rock-cut sculptures, there are some ancient temples with unique features not much highlighted. But they represent a significant role in the history and culture of this state. They are the temples of mediaeval period which can be seen in Udaipur. The paper is a study of these sites and the archaeological findings.



Figure 1: Brick built stupa of Boxanagar

## Boxanagar

Boxanagar is located nearly 40 km south west of Agartala. It lies near to the Comilla district of Bangladesh. Archaeologically Boxanagar is an important site of Tripura. There excavation was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India and many architectural remains were discovered. This site consists of a structure shaped as

Buddhist stupa which is identified as a Chaityagriha (Figure 1). Then a monastery and other brick structures with its substructures were also excavated. The site consists of approximately more than three acres of land which is situated on a hilly area.



Figure 2: The brick built Chaityagriha of Boxanagar



Figure 3: Excavated surface of the Buddhist Monastery in Boxanagar



Figure 4: Shyamsunder Tilla, Pilak

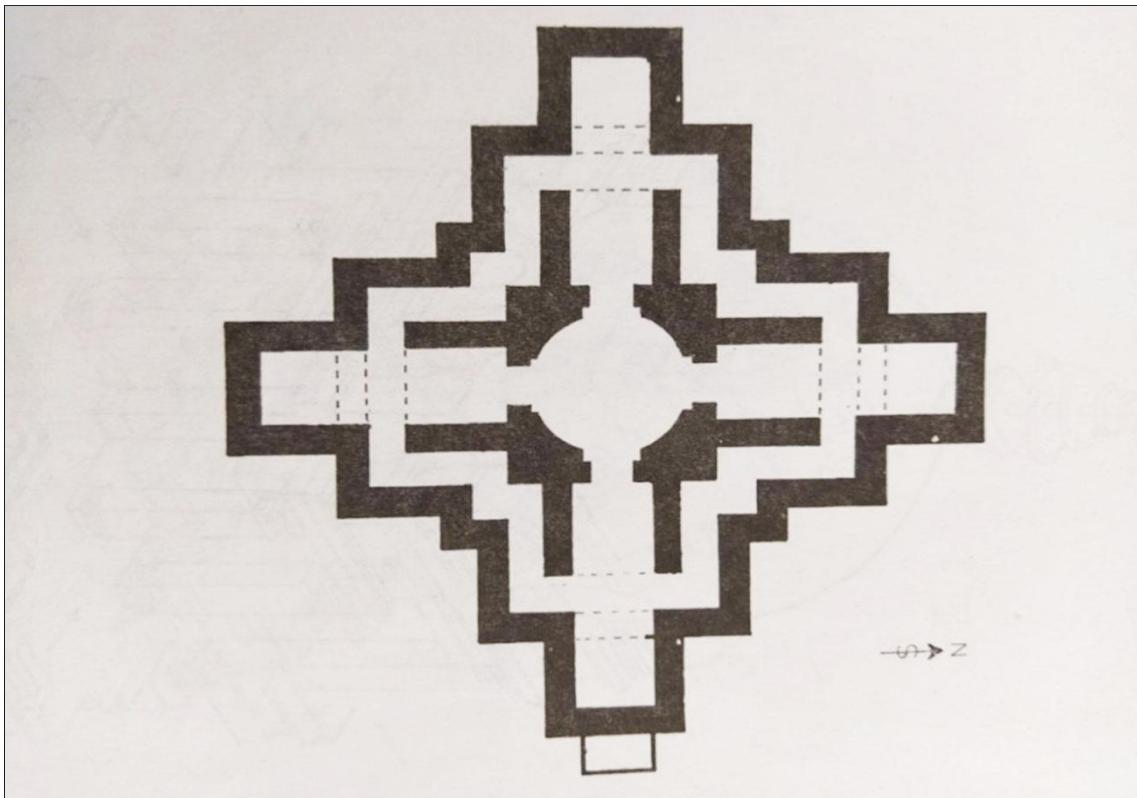


Figure 5: Cruciform structural view of Shyamsundar Tilla, Pilak

In the southern side of the stupa, the harmika was found collapsed. It is believed to be originally set over the central chamber of square plan 2.30 m and 1.50m deep. After removing the mud from the central chamber of the stupa, a large number of clay votive

stupas and sealings inscribed with legends of religious creeds in *Kutila lipi* were found. The next structure is the brick built Chaityagriha (Figure 2) which is rectangular in shape and measures 18.50 m x 11.90m externally. This plinth level structure consists of 19 courses of burnt bricks. This Chaityagriha also has a staircase on its eastern side.

On the right side of the Chaiyagriha discussed above, another structure of monastery was also excavated (Figure 3). Like the other structures it is also built in a raised land. This is also rectangular which measures (31.80 x 17.80) m and is aligned in the east west direction. The monastery consists of one central corridor (26.10 x 3.80) m and it consists of ten cells which measures (2.60 x 4.10) m. Three stage of the construction has been undergone to build this monastery. At first, the floor of the cells in the interior surface is made up of brick at a depth of 2.88m from the upper surface of the remaining extant. In the next stage, the structure of the chamber was constructed on the original plan in which the level of the floor has been raised accompanied by the height of the walls. The burnt brick used for constructing the monastery of same size. Three seated bronze figures of Buddha on *padmasanas* (a sitting gesture) are found from there. Some of the sealing is also found which is paleographically assigned to circa sixth century A.D. and the inscriptions on these seals couldn't be read till now.

## Pilak

The archaeological site of Pilak is situated at a distance of about 80 km far from the capital Agartala (Tripura). This site is renowned for the assimilated cultures of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Pilak consists of some important mounds such as *Shyamsunder Tilla*, *Pujakhol Tilla*, *Thakurani Tilla*, *Bathanbari*, *Debdarur purnandogiri Ashram*, *Club Tilla*, *Bolir Pathar*, *Raj Rajeswari temple of Muhuripur*, *Takkatulshi* etc.

Among the above sites, *Shyamsunder Tilla* (Figure 4) as excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India is the highest hemispherical mound which holds a Buddhist vihara. During its excavation in 1998-99, a cruciform Sarbhato Bhadra Temple (Figure 5) was found. The outer walls of this temple are decorated with the terracotta plaques on the lower part of the side walls (Figure 6).

The terracotta plaques are of outstanding nature covering religious and secular subjects and scenes and stylistically datable to circa 9-10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. These plaques have the essence of highly artistic and naturalistic compositions of various scenes of Puranas, Ramayana, Buddhist theme, auspicious symbol, semi-divine beings, dancers, drummers etc. (Figure 7a, 7b). Thus, the outer walls of those Buddhist shrines were decorated artistically which portray the co-relation of art and social culture.

The exposed Stupa's dimension measures to 34.50 m long. Across the stupa it survived up to a height if 1.70m only. The 1<sup>st</sup> circumambulation is 1.75 m wide. The stupa is cruciform in plan provided with one staircase on the eastern direction consisting of five steps. The width of the staircase is 4.70 m. There are 4 entrances on cardinal directions around the central shaft approachable from 1<sup>st</sup> terrace. The entrances lead towards

central areas of stupa speak that each side was provided with an antechamber or sanctum having image of Buddha or Bodhisattvas. Four small porches are also discovered attached with the central stupa or temple on all the four cardinal directions. Square stone blocks (pillar bases) exposed three each on either sides of porch or *antarala*. The side walls of the porches are survived with 1.50m to 2 m only. The circumambulation around the sanctum measured 1.60 m and 25 to 30 layers of burnt bricks super structure.



Figure 6: Terracotta Plaques on lower part of the side walls of Shyamsundar Tilla, Pilak

The other important site is the *Thakurani Tilla* at west Pilak. The site is well preserved and consists of brick built basement of nine small shrines which comprises of sanctum sanctorum and a circumambulation path. After the excavation, in one of them, quartz made *Shivalinga* fixed in a sandstone *yonipitha* was found. This indicates that the temple was dedicated to lord Shiva. The other fragmented icon present there indicates that there were the shrines dedicated to the other deities like Surya, Ganesh, Shakti and Vishnu.

There is also a colossal image of Surya in standing posture holding lotus (Figure 8). This monumental sculpture can be considered as one of the tallest Icon and on stylistic analysis it can be dated to the fifteenth century C.E. According to the Archaeological Survey of India, the excavated remains are assumed to be between the time span of tenth century and thirteenth century C.E.



Figure 7a: Drummer, one of the terracotta plaques of Pilak



Figure 7b: Terracotta plaques of the temple of Shyamsunder Tilla, Pilak

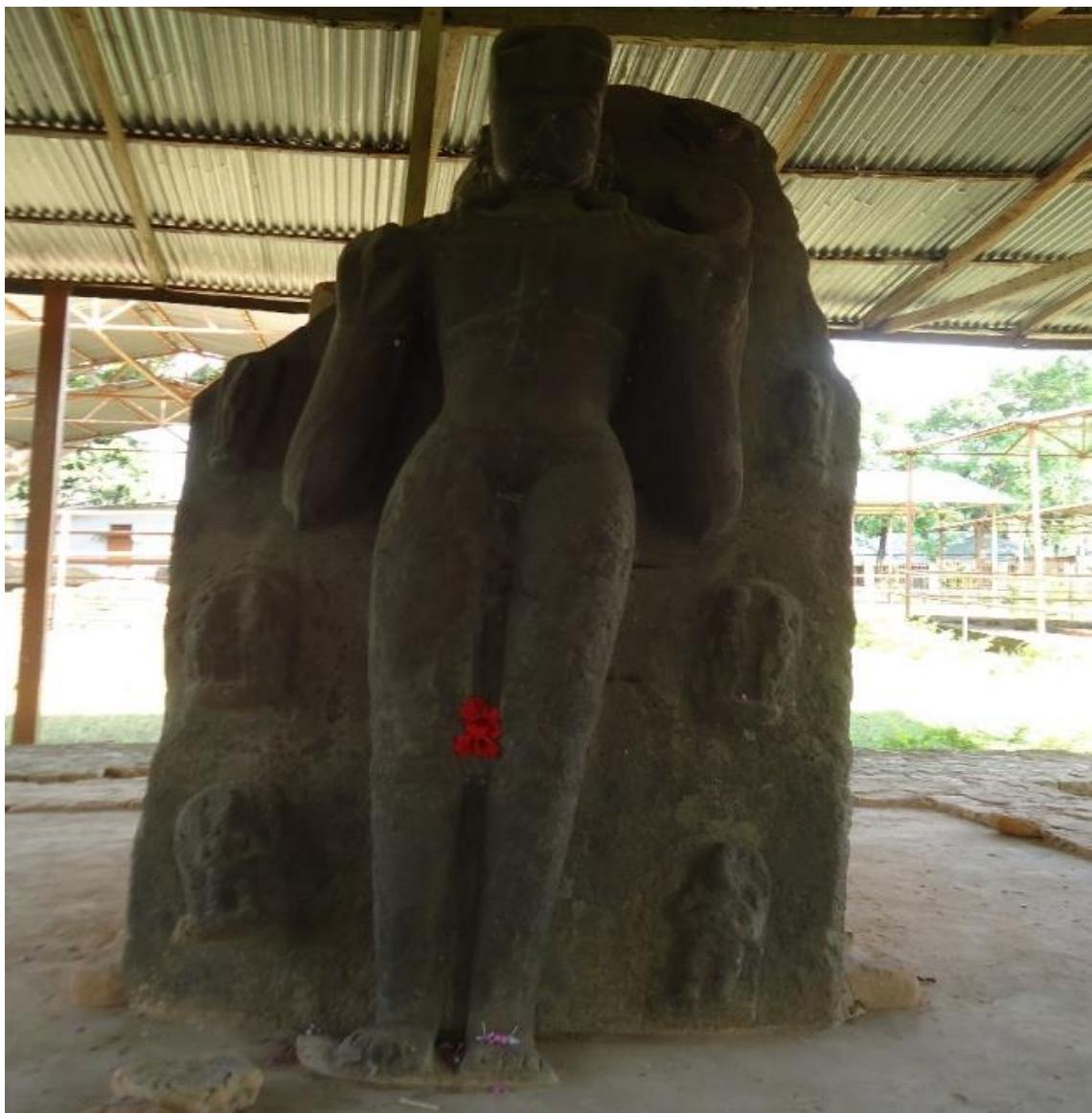


Figure 8: Surya



Figure 9: Wide view of Unakoti central area



Figure 10: Siva Head, Unakoti



Figure 11: Panel of Lord Ganesha, Unakoti



Figure 12: Chaturmukha Linga in Unakoti (view from two sides)

Pilak is believed to have similar features with the *Somapura Mahavihara* in *Paharpur* (a Buddhist site in Naogaon District, Bangladesh). After the excavation of this site by the A.S.I Guwahati Circle many facts came out about the flourishing of Buddhism throughout the North East India. These influences were assumed to come from several Buddhist pilgrimages of Bangladesh (*Paharpur and Mainamati*), Bihar (*Bikramshila, Nalanda and Bodhgaya*) and West Bengal (*Jagjivanpur in Malda District*).



Figure 13: Sculptures found in Unakoti

## Unakoti

Unakoti is another important archaeological site of Tripura. Situated in the north Tripura, it is at a distance of 180 km far from the Agartala. The name 'Unakoti' means 'one less than a crore'. This is an abode of the Lord Shiva nesting numerous bas-reliefs of rock cut sculptures of the Gods and the Goddesses (Figure 9). History says that the reliefs are made during the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The Siva head is the most unique creation (Figure 10). It is a composition of only the head of the Lord Shiva with two female deities riding their *Vahanas*. The symmetrical female deities were sculpted on both sides of the head itself. Such symmetry was seen in the sculptures of 11<sup>th</sup> century. The design of the eyes, ornamental features has influences of the local tribes.

Apart from the Siva head, there is a panel of Lord Ganesha (Figure 11) which rather shows a composition with multiple features. There are other detached sculptures such as Chaturmukha lingas (Figure 12), Uma-Mahesvara, Ganesha, Vishnu, Vrsabha etc. kept in the upper portion of the hill. These sculptures show the influence of Hinduism in Unakoti (Figure 13).

The influence of Buddhism in this region is also clear in the sculptures. This place is surrounded by various sculptures with the motifs of Buddhism. There is an emblem of peacock in the central Siva which is symbolized in Buddhist Iconography 'as a protector from the serpents'. The peacock is an enemy of the snakes. Therefore it is symbolically sculpted here. The Siva is also known as *Unakotiswar Kalbhairab* and its

exaggerated facial feature (ferocious features) has similarities with the images of the Mahakal found at Nepal. This head representation of Shiva is unseen in Hindu art. In the Fourteen Gods and Goddesses temple of Khayarpur of Agartala, there are only head images but those are modeled in a well-defined manner than the Unakoti sculptures. This multiple hand features are seen in Tantric Buddhism. The Ganesha panel of Unakoti is also unique with three Ganesha reliefs each with four, six and eight arms respectively. The Ganesha sculptures also have three to four tusks which also confirms about the influences of Tantric Buddhism.



Figure 14: Tripura Sundari temple

## Devtamura

Devtamura is situated in the southern part of Tripura about 8 kms far from Amarpur town. The place is also known as '*Chabimura*'. This site is famous for a colossal rock-cut image of 'Mahishasurmardini' carved in the sloping surface of the Kalajhari hill adjacent to which the natural Gomti River flows. Many scholars named the deity as '*Chakrakma*'. This ten armed mother Goddess image is 13 mts. High (45ft). This image is carved in flat surface with limited modeling of the face having rounded volume with broad shoulder standing in *Pratyalidha* pose. The carving style has similarities with that of the Unakoti rock-cut reliefs but the gesture of Devtamura reliefs are different. The expression of the Goddess is more sanctified than the *Raudra* head of Shiva at Unakoti. The features might have been adopted from the Islamic arts. Some multi-foiled arches are also found in Devtamura which shows influences of the pre- Ahom period.



Figure 15: Bhubaneswari temple



Figure 16: Dol of Jagannath (Jagannath temple)

In the other side of the hill, there are some rock-cut images of Ganesha, Kartikeya, Durga etc. Among them, the important panels are the panel of five deities, panel of 37

figures. One of the deities in the five panels is assumed to be of Lord Vishnu and the other four images are carved on the four sides of the central image. The composition of the panel of the five deities can be compared with the basic composition of *Umalinga murti* ASM 1432 collected from *Ujan* bazaar, Guwahati which belongs to the pre- Ahom period.

## **Udaipur**

Udaipur is situated in the Gomati district of Tripura and is 51 km far from the capital Agartala. This was initially known as *Rangamati*. Udaipur is famous for its ancient temples constructed during the Manikya Dynasty. The rulers from the Royal Manikya families patronized numerous temples and palaces in Tripura and most of the important temples are situated in the Udaipur city which was the ancient capital of Tripura. Some of the aesthetically rich architecture of Udaipur glorifies the history of temples of Tripura built during the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and continued till the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Among them, the Tripura Sundari temple (Figure 14) is the most famous which is also regarded as one among the 51 Shakti peethas of India. The other temples are Hari temple, Mahadevbadi group of temples, Gunavati group of temples, Bhubaneswari temple (Figure 15), Dol of Jagannath (Figure 16) etc.

The Manikya rulers were the follower of Hinduism and therefore their temples were of their tutelary deities. Those temples also have elements of Brahmanism and Buddhism. This is due to the arrival of the other religions as well as the acceptance of those philosophies by the royal house. A new style of temple architecture was constructed at that era. They are conserved by the Archaeological Survey of India but these temples need to be highlighted in the main stream history of Indian architecture. The temples of Tripura are *char chala* roof (4 sided hut like roofs) type with a stupa shirsha. Such type of characteristics of blending the Hindu and the Buddhist design of the architecture is unique in India. This also has the combination of the Muslim designs such as the corner buttresses of the Tripura Sundari temple are joined by four pillars which are shaped as minarets.

The Dol of Jagannath has the characteristics of the later Muslim period. The roof of this temple has a dome and vaulted roof. This temple is a combination of the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic style of architecture. The temples of Udaipur have other interesting features like the sanctum of most of the temples are round inside and square outside. The entrances are minimal in order to stop the wild elephants and other enemies from trespassing into it. Some have porch and torana which leads the pilgrims to enter the temple. In some of the temples we can see that both the porch and the sanctum bear a votive stupa like structure over charchala (four-sided roof).

## **Research Methods**

The paper is based upon the qualitative and descriptive research of the archaeological sites of Tripura (Pilak, Boxanagar, Unakoti, Devtamura and Udaipur). Materials of the research were collected from various sources, documentaries, literature survey etc.

## Tools and Techniques

The data collected were made using several tools and techniques of interviews, literary sources, questionnaires, libraries, field visits etc. The qualitative descriptions were made vividly regarding the archaeological sites, the sculptures and architectures found there. The study is made in accordance to the paper.

## Results and Discussions

The paper narrates about the archaeological sites of Tripura. They include the excavated sites of Boxanagar, Pilak, Devtamura, Unakoti and Udaipur. The sites of Boxanagar and Pilak have some architectural remains in the form of stupa structure which highlights the spread of Buddhism in this region. The other sites in Unakoti and Devtamura comprises of ancient rock-cut sculptures which on examination shows the inspirations of traditional motifs amalgamated with Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Unakoti on the other hand has some interesting temples showing the merge of the structural elements of Hindu, Islamic style and Buddhists stupa structures popularly known as the *tribeg* style.

## Conclusion

The structural remains of Boxanagar symbolize the Buddhist architecture during the fifth century A.D to the end of the twelfth century A.D. The other contemporary Buddhist architectures were also developed in the same era in Bangladesh. One of the important Vihara is the '*Somapura Mahavira*' of *Paharpur* in the *Rajshahi* district of Bangladesh. This was founded by the King Dharmapala (AD 770-810) who was the second Pala king of Bengal. This was the center of the Mahayana Buddhism which has spread its ideas in the south of the Eastern Himalayas region. It considered of rich and thematic terracotta plaques which can be seen both in Mainamati, Comilla as well as in the Shyam Sundar Tilla in Pilak. Such type of architectural tradition can also be seen in Myanmar and Indonesia which shows the connection with the Southeast Asian region. Mainamati and Boxanagar are nearer to each other but there are no traces of terracotta plaques in Boxanagar like that found in Mainamati. The similar difference lies in the stone figures of Buddha and Bodhisattva. The style of architecture and the inscription rather indicates that Boxanagar was constructed earlier than Mainamati and Paharpur. The inscribed sealing consists of the *Brahmi* characters with the motifs of *triratna* symbol and can be considered to circa fifth century A.D. The site needs to be researched more since lots of information is not yet discovered.

The site of Pilak is nearer to Mainamati and the terracotta plaque of this place is artistically enriched. This might also be due to the influence of the Pala tradition. The terracotta of Pilak is similar to the terracottas of Paharpur, Mainamati, Vikramshila and Jagjivanpur (ninth- tenth century A.D.).

In Unakoti, there are rock-cut sculptures on either side of the hill. There are also many sandstone sculptures, stone pavements, debris of bricks and stones, a brick basement of a temple etc. When we have a birds-eye view, we can see the hill and the vast area

which was once full with visitors and pilgrims. The place has faced earthquakes and is not restored in due time which resulted in the ruin of the sculptures and the site. Unakoti is an important archaeological site of Eastern India. The huge massive rock-out Shiva heads dissimilar to the other Indian style of sculpture is exotic in its own way.

The other site Devtamura is also known as 'the peak of Gods' is a place which attracts the visitors with the panels of rock-cut sculptures carved out of high rocky walls facing the river Gomati. These sculptures belong to the post fourteenth century. They also depict the regional style marked by ethnic elements of the local region.

The temple- building activity in Tripura started in the early sixteenth century or towards the end of the fifteenth century under the patronage of the Manikya Dynasty. Most of the temples are situated in Udaipur. These temples are made up of bricks and known as *Char- Chala- Stupa-Sirsha* temples. This style is also named as *tribeg* style. The sanctum of these temples is round inside and square outside. The walls were highly thick. No pillars or pilasters were used inside the construction. At the four corners of the sanctum, there are tapering pilasters with a *kalasa* finial. The buttresses are inspired from the Muslim minarets which are utilized in these Hindu monuments. Such innovative style of temple architectures is not found even in the neighbouring states of Assam, Bengal or Orissa. There are other architectures apart from these in Tripura like the Neer- Mahal Palace, Ujjayanta Palace, Buddhist and Hindu temples, mosques etc. This paper projects only the selected and most important archaeological sites among them.

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