Bisnupur: A town of Cultural Heritage

Eastern Regional Center of Anthropological Survey of India has conducted a study on Bisnupur to document its cultural heritage. Bisnupur, a historical town, located in the district of Bankura, western West Bengal, lies just south of the Dhaleshwari (Dhalkisor) river. It was the capital of the Hindu Mallabhum King, which was founded in the 8th century AD and was once the most important Hindu dynasty in Bengal. The fame and glory of Bisnupur rose to its peak under the rule of Bir Hambir, the 49th king of Mallabhum. He was contemporary with Akbar. Bir Hambir was deeply influenced by Sri Nibas Acharya, a disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Thus he became a Vishnu worshipper. It is said that Bisnupur derived its name from Lord Vishnu. A number of Vishnu temples were built at Bisnupur by different kings. Jor Bangla, Radheshyam, Rashmancha, Kalachand, Radha Madhava, Radha Govinda are a few of them. The town Bisnupur is famous for old fortifications and several terracotta/Brick temples. The town and its adjoining regions have some rekha deul temples which are the fine examples of Kalinga School of architecture. One of the good examples of Bengal style of temple architecture is Jor Bangla temple. The Shyamrai temple built by Raghubir Singh is the oldest Pancharatha temple of Bengal with curved roofs in thatched style. This town has a glorious past that is reflected in its rich tradition of architecture, music and handicrafts. Bisnupur has a very rich tradition of arts and crafts. All of these occupy a very important position to the art loving people. The fame of its art and crafts has spread not only all over Bankura but also throughout the country. Each and every art and craft item has its own technology and social organization of production. All these are very interesting and at the same time also very thought provoking. Bisnupur is proud of her ancient terracotta art. Decorative terracotta tiles of the past centuries still adorn numerous temples and adjoining structures. The bold local style that the village artisans evolved operated as a great lever in the evolution of Bengal art, adding to the wealth and variety of colour and design. Nowadays Bisnupur potters produce domestic and decorative terracotta items. Baulchari sari of Bisnupur is also very famous item of cottage industry of the Indian tradition. It glorified the name of Bisnupur for its excellent designs and workmanship though Baluchari is not the original product of Bisnupur. Perhaps this art and its technique were borrowed from the district of Murshidabad. One sari may have an entire episode from the Mahabharata woven into its border and pallu. Conch shell craft is another important craft item of Bisnupur. The Sankhari community (traditional conch shell workers) is engaged in this work. Another important craft is Dashabatar tash (a set of playing card on which the ten incarnation of lord Vihnu were designed and depicted). It was developed and flourished in Bisnupur during the Malla era as a game initially for the Malla Kings for their recreation in their leisure. This game started in the royal court of Bisnupur about 400 years ago during the reign of Bir Hambir. Under the patronage of royal family, Dasabatar card making came up as an important occupation of the area. It is said such tash was first prepared by Kartik Fauzdar as desired by the king Bir Hambir and presently his descendents prepare such cards. Some trace the origin of such cards in Odisha, but Dasabatar design is perhaps original to Bishnupur. The other craft tradition include Belmala craft, stone carving, Bell metal work, Dhokra, Bamboo crafts, Lantern etc. Besides, Bishnupur has famous
musical tradition popularly called Bishnupur Gharana. The tradition has a glorious past, the history of which has little been revealed. The Bishnupur Gharana emerged during the reign of Raghunath II, when the then renowned musician of Seni Gharana, Ustad Bahadur Khan visited Bishnupur and with him started this rich Gharana of Music at Bishnupur. This Gharana is still an important part of Indian classical music. Nowadays due to the occupational shifting of the artisans, and some other problems these cultural traditions are under the threat of declination.