



Ancient Heritage and Jainism of Purulia District: A Historical Journey

Dr. Malay Majee

Assistant Teacher, Barbashi High School (H.S), Email: Malaymajee11@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Purulia district is a south-western part of Westbengal where history and rugged nature coexist. Ancient Manbhum (Present day Purulia) was once one of the main centres of Jainism in Bengal. The Sarak community played a important role in propagation of Jainism in this reign. Jain archaeological sites across the vast area of this region stand as silent witnesses to the past heritage .In addition, the people of the Sarak community continue to follow some of the principles of Jainism even today through their simple and distinct life.

Introduction:

Purulia is one of the oldest districts in West Bengal and has a rich culture and heritage of West Bengal and From being a part of the country known as Vajra-bhumi to being a part of Jungle Mahals district and then Manbhum district, Purulia has seen a lot of phases in its life. According to the Jaina Bhagavati-Sutra, the place existed as early as 5th century BC and was one of the 16 Mahajanapadas of its time.¹ It is believed that Purulia was a part of the country known as Vajra-bhumi, in ancient times.

It was during the British rule in India that Purulia gained importance. Just when British East-India Company acquired the 'Diwani' of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, in the year 1765, Purulia achieved significance. In 1805, by the Regulation XVIII, a Jungle Mahals district, comprising of 23 Parganas and Mahals - including the present Purulia, was formed². However, years later, in 1833, the Jungle Mahals district was ruled out and a new district, by the name of Manbhum, was Constituted with headquarters of its own at Manbazar.



However, the district Manbazar was extremely large in size and constituted of Bankura and Burdwan (in the present West Bengal), apart from Dhanbad, Dhalbhum, Saraikela and Kharswan. It was in 1956, nine years after India received its independence that the district of Manbhum was partitioned and the states of West Bengal and Bihar were formed, under the States Reorganization Act and Transfer of Territories Act. In the November of 1956, Purulia was formed as one of the districts in West Bengal. Located at the westernmost side of the state, Purulia boasts of a tropical location. It acts as a funnel, transferring tropical monsoon current from the Bay of Bengal to the subtropical parts of northwest India. Purulia also acts as a gateway to reach the industrial belts of West Bengal and the hinterlands in Orissa, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.³ The red-soil district of **Purulia**, once a vital part of the ancient **Manbhum** territory, stands as a silent sentinel to a bygone era where Jainism flourished as a dominant spiritual force. Unlike the bustling heritage sites of Central India, Purulia's history is etched in rugged stone deuls (temples) and weathered Tirthankara idols scattered across its dry, undulating landscape. This article traces the historical journey of Jainism and heritage in Purulia, from the arrival of Mahavira to the architectural legacy that still defines the region.

The Spread and Historical Context of Jainism

In the adjacent areas of Parswanath hills, the people of this Sravaka or Sarak community continued to follow the principles introduced by Parswanath from within the household and played an important role in spreading non-violent Jainism in these regions i.e. Singhbhum, Manbhum, Santhal Parganas. Therefore, various traces of Jainism can be seen in all these regions.

According to Dalton, Saraks have been living in the region since before the Metal Age. Hence their efforts in the Singhbhum region ushered in a famous copper age. In 1854 A.D Mr. Haughton first mentioned the ancient copper mines in the Singhbhum district in a article. The remnants of the Saraks working in copper in Singhbhum district are seen in a number of old ancient copper mines. The Saraks evidently had attained a high level of efficiency in working copper ore considering the non-availability of the modern tools and plants and scientific knowledge. But the skill they had achieved even without them was remarkable.³

If one asks the inhabitants when such work was in progress, they do not know; they speak of 100 years with the vague ideas of Asiatic about time, representing thereby an arbitrarily long period. It seems to me, however, certain that the present half-wild inhabitants are not in a condition to carry out such works, and these may be the relics of an ancient civilization, like the rock temples of the neighbouring Orissa, like the fruit tree (mango and tamarind) that one often finds as very old trees in the middle of the thickest



forest; as again the remains of the great Dalmi, which once stood in the thick woods of the Subarnarekha. Only one story has reached me of the ancient mines. In 1868 V. Ball made special explorations in Singhbhum district and found copper mines in the hills, deep forests and even in the paddy fields of the region. He reviewed the copper mines and realized that those who worked them did not lack technical knowledge. According to V. Ball, the Saraks here are the creators of the copper mines of Singhbhum and Manbhum regions.⁴The Copper Age was brought about by the Saraks in Singhbhum and Manbhum regions. Later, the Saraks clashed with the Ho clan of Chotanagpur over the ownership of copper mines. Proceedings of the Asiatic Society states that "...The more adventurous Seraks or lay Jains, having alone penetrated the jungles where they were rewarded with the discovery of copper upon the working of which they must have spent all their time and energy, as with exception of the tanks above mentioned, the mines furnish the sole evidence of their occupation of that part of the country. It is scarcely conceivable that the Hos, when they drove out the Saraks could have utterly destroyed all trace of buildings".⁵The same tradition of the former rule of these people was discovered by Major Tickell, who in 1840 wrote-"Singhbhum passed into the hands of Surawaks,a race now almost extinct but then numerous and opulent,whose original country is said to have been Sikrabhum and pachete.The oppressions of the Surawaks ended in their total expulsion from the Kolahan".⁶

This tradition is also referred to as follows by Colonel Dalton in the "Ethnology of Bengal" –"It is admitted on all sides that one part of Singhbhum was held by the people who have left monuments of their ingenuity and piety in the adjoining district of Manbhum and who were certainly the earliest Aryan settlers in this part of India-the Sarawaks or Jains". In the Kolhan also there are still a large number of tanks called Sarak tanks by the Hos. Not only Kolhan but other parts of Singhbhum and Seraikella and Kharsawan also abound in such ancient Sarak tanks.The enormous tank of Ahar Bundh with remains of ruins of temples near its banks in Karaikella pergunah of Seraikella State and the Mullick Bundh in Seraikella Town itself are best examples of such Sarak tanks.⁷

The Sarakas are not only the initiators of the Copper age but also the founders of the Iron Age in this region. They extracted and processed iron in large quantities in this region i.e. Manbhum, Singhbhum, Santal Pargana, Radha region in a scientific way. Saraks was connected with the huge iron pillars and iron furnaces that ran from Rupnarayanpur to Pandaveswar on both sides of the river Ajay. Evidence that the Sarak community was the originator of the iron industry in the region is found in literature after Mahavira, where three ironsmiths are found. The first Lauhacharya was Mahavira's disciple Sudharma who was a native of Kollak Sanivesa which belongs to this region and may have been a scholar of ironwork or acharya of iron artisans. The second Lauhacharya was Bhadrabahu the author of Kalpasutra.



He was a man of the region. Dr. Rameshchandra Majumdar and Debprasad Ghosh called Bhadrabahu the people of Radha country.³²The third Lauchacharya was Kumar Sen. He was also a man of Radha region. Since the above three Lauhacharyas belonged to this region, we can say that Saraks collectively played a prominent role in the development of iron industry in the region. According to P.C.Roychoudhury “.....This is the area where the ancient Sravakas who were clearly Jains, lived and practice the earliest known smelting of Iron ore,Hiuen Tsang mentioned this area as the ‘Safa province’. The origin of the name of Safa is not known, but it appears to be clearly associated with Jainism. Hibert and indentified Dalmi as the capital of the Safa province and the entire Dalmi hills are full of Jains antiquities.It is this province of Safa which is indentified with a part of Radhdesa which was visited by Lord Mahavira”.⁸

A Jain kingdom was probably established within the circle of Jainism which grew around Pareshnath Hill. This kingdom was known as Shikharbhum. This state extends obliquely westward of the rivers Ajay and Damodar. From here, Jainism spread to Manbhum, Singhbhum, Bankura, Medinipur regions and the Jain Sarak people of the region played a significant role in this. A number of Jain idols and temples in the region bear witness to that fact.⁹

Between the 7th and 8th centuries, the military campaigns of Shashanka, Harshvardhana, Bhaskar varman began to destroy political cohesion in the south-east Bihar, south-west Bengal and the north-eastern regions of Orissa. As a result the Shikarbhum kingdom in the middle of the region began to collapse. This Jain kingdom began to lose royal patronage as none of them were Jains. Also, the copper-plated port gradually lost its former glory during this period. As a result, political instability, lack of patronage and disruption of trade by Jain merchants fuelled Jain Sravakas or Saraks to leave the region and settle elsewhere.

As the Jain kingdom of Shikharbhum progressed towards destruction, the Jain followers of this region spread to different parts of the country. At this time, Jainism received royal patronage in North and South India, but the opposite picture can be observed in East India. Here Brahmanism became the state religion. As a result the Jains of this region have to face extreme crisis. Also the relationship or contact between the Jain followers living in this region and the Jain community staying elsewhere in the country was severed. The reasons for this can be attributed to the various divisions within Jainism and the absence of any central organization. Nevertheless, a section of the Jain Sarak community associated with agriculture in the region, they could not move elsewhere, continued to live in the region for generations, and another section settled along the river in the Kansai, Kumari, Darekessar, Shilavati riverside areas.



As the influence of the Jain kingdom Shikharbhum gradually declined, the kingdom gradually expanded to the south bank of the Damodar River and a new kingdom started on the south bank of the Damodar River. King Rudrushekhar Pal of this Telkupi kingdom was a close friend of Emperor Rampal. Rudrushekhar is described in Sandhyakar Nandi's poem 'Ramcharit'. Evidence from temples, statues, and inscriptions from this region suggests that the kingdom of Tailokampo extended from the southern bank of the Damodar River to the northern bank of the Kasai, with its boundary extending from Jhalda in the west to Budhpur in the south. Boundaries found at Budhpur inscriptions carved on stone pillars support this hypothesis. It is not known what religion Raja Rudrasikhara belonged to. However, Jainism spread throughout Manbhum, Bankura and parts of Medinipur during his time in Telkupi, Bandha, Pakbirra, Tusma, Baromasya, Para, Shaka, Budhpur and Deulghata etc. Jain archaeological sites are its signs. Between the 10th and 12th centuries Kansai, all the archaeological sites that were built on the banks of the Damodar River were established by the Sarak Jains. According to E.T .Dalton “This is borne out by the fact that from all along the bank’s of the Kansai (kangsaboti) river numerous stone images of JainTirthankaras have been found,which are datable to the 10th,11th or 12th centuries or stylistic consideration beside these,there are remnants in the above place of Jain temples built between the 10th and 13thcenturies in variation of the north India and kerjaan and Nagarsikarastyle.These can be seen at Boram ,Budhpur ,Charrah ,Palma ,Pakbirar.....”.¹⁰

During the reign of King Rudrashikhar, Sarak traders of Jain religion took a special role in spreading Jainism. They were mainly copper traders. At that time, there were two famous copper mines in Manbhum - Tamjuri and Tamakhun. From these two mines, Sarak Jain traders used to bring copper ore by Sarak and reach the port of Tailkom or Telkupi. Then from there they would load the boat with copper ore and reach the port of Tamlaripta. Also at that time business was also done by Sarak. At that time, the Sarak was spread through Manbazar-Budpur-Laulara-Dhadhki-Bargram-Lalpur-Lakshanpur-Purulia-Chhara-Jhapra-Para-Shakra-Banda and reached Telkupi. There are various Jain monuments scattered in almost every village along the Sarak.

In the past, there was a wide Sarak from the port of Tamralipta to Telkupi. From Tamluk in Midnipur district, gradually northward along the west bank of Rupnarayan river, Ghatal sub-division Kheputpur, Daspur, Panna, Ghatal, crossing the Shilabati river, sometimes keeping the Shilabati river on the left, sometimes on the right, Bishnupur of Bankura district, Chattna, through Shusunia to Raghunathpur in Purulia district, Telkupi to Varanasi. This Sarak route was famous in those days. Industrialists, traders used to travel along this route and reach the port of Tamralipta. Therefore, multiple temples and temples were built in Telkupi. The evidence of this can be found only by looking at the archaeological site



adjacent to the oil tank. The archaeological finds suggest that Telkupi was a mixed architecture of Jain and Brahminical culture. Presumably, when the oil fields were abandoned by the Jains or their trade declined, the Vaishnavites and Shaivites took possession of it and the Brahmanical culture developed here. Construction of Panchet Reservoir by DVC in 1957 AD resulted in submergence of all monuments.

While the local inhabitants initially met the ascetic with hostility, his presence sowed the seeds of a faith that would dominate the region for nearly five hundred years (9th to 12th Century CE). Purulia became a strategic corridor for Jain monks and traders traveling between the Magadha empire (Bihar) and the Kalinga coast (Odisha).

The Golden Age of The Jain Temple or Deul (9th -12th Century)

The peak of Jain influence in Purulia coincided with the rule of the local **Shikhar dynasty** and the patronage of the powerful merchant Sarak Community. This era saw the construction of numerous **RekhaDeuls**—stone temples characterized by tall, curving spires.

In the past, a trade route developed around the Kasai and Damodar rivers. One was over Budhpur-Pakbirra from Benares to Tamralipta and the other was via Teilkamp or Telkupi on the banks of the Damodar River to Raghunathpur-Daspur-Ghatal to Tamralipta Port. Hence, speaking of the archaeological sites along the banks of the Kansai and Damodar rivers, Dalton says that “.....the Saraks appear to have colonized along the banks of rivers and we find their temples ruins on the bank of the Damodar, the Kansai is rich architectural remains.....”.¹¹ So between the 9th -12th centuries in Purulia district, the people of the Sarak community established several Jain temples for the propagation of Jain religion and culture, the ruins of which stand as a witness to our history. The areas where Jainism and culture flourished in Purulia district and several Jain temples were built are as follows –

Pakbirra:

Pakbirra is the golden land of ancient Jain culture. Several Jain Tirthankar idols and tombs of the Sarak Jain culture are found here. The Pakbirra Jain archaeological site in Pancha Thana, 54 km from Purulia town is particularly noteworthy. It is the largest and most significant of the Jain archaeological sites in Purulia. Pakbirra is mentioned in the District Gazetteer of Manbhum.⁵¹ Pakbirra was the main center of all the Jain shrines that developed in Manbhum from about the 9th to 12th century. J.D. Beglar during his visit to Manbhum found 21 temples here and out of them 19 temples were made of stone. But now days almost all the original temples have been destroyed, but now three temples have been reconstructed. Many broken Tirthankara idols are found here, from which it is believed that there were once 24



Tirthankaras of 24 temples. In the account written by J.D. Beglar, we find a description of a large and brick-built *devalaya*, of which there are no remains today. Beglar's description of this temple is as follows “ A large brick temple,the only one now standing of brick; faces east, and has its doorway of the usual overlapping type”.¹²

Telkupi:

Telkupi is one of the Jain archeological sites of this district, belonging to Raghunathpur police station, 45 km away from Purulia city. In this Telkupi, a mixture of Jain culture and Brahminical culture can be seen. As many Tirthankara idols are found here, so are many Hindu deities. The style of idol construction of these gods and goddesses shows the impression of Pala art. Although most of the antiquities here are submerged in the Panchet Reservoir constructed by D.V.C. Yet its value is immense, once a temple city Tailakupi developed on the southern bank of the Damodar River.

The word ‘Telkupi’ is derived from the word Toilokompa’. In Sanskrit the word til means oil and the word ‘compa’ comes from the word compan which means pargana. Kautilya's Arthashastra describes oil as a tax. So it can be assumed that Toilokompo, now Telkupi, was once a tax-paying feudal state. The word toilokompa is found in Sandhakar Nandi's poem 'Ramacharit'. The Toilokompa kingdom of that time was spread from the south bank of Damodar to the north bank of Kasai.

I get a rough description of how many temples and what kind of idols were here before Telakamp or Telkupi Panchet was engaged in reservoir. In 'Report of a Tour through Bengal Province' by J. D. Beglar. In this work he mentions 22 temples in Telkupi. Beglar noticed the presence of temples arranged in two rows in Telkupi. In the first row he mentions 13 deuls and these deuls gave detailed description of structure structure, sculptural style, built material etc.¹³ He also mentioned that the idols of Shiva, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Vishnu etc. were installed on the altars of these temples. In the second line he describes the 9 temples; he also talks about the structure of the deuls, architectural style, various idols. He also finds here a separate temple which he refers to as Jain or Buddhist. In this regard his opinion is “ I believe the only Buddhist temple in the place,it may however Jain,for the sculptures overentrance,the onlyclue now visible as o this purpose,is too small and too weather beaten to how distinctly weather it is or is not Jain”.¹⁴

**Para:**

Jain archaeological site of Para village under Para police station, about 30 km from Purulia city, was the oldest archaeological site of Purulia district, rich in relics of Sarak culture. One of the oldest stone temples of Bengal is located here.

At present there are three temples in the neighbourhood - one made of stone, one made of brick and one made of stone and brick. The temple made of stone and brick is the oldest. Later, another brick-and-stone deul was built, which is now known to the villagers as Raganathji's temple.¹⁵

Boram (Deulghata):

Boram or Deulghata is one of the Sarak culture sites located on the south bank of the Kangsavati River, 27 km from Purulia Town. This Boram village is popularly known as Deulghata as it is situated on the ghat adjacent to the temple on the banks of the Kangsavati River. There were several temples in the past but now there are only three brick temples and a broken pile of stone temples.

Deulghata temples are from the pre-Muslim era. In this context, David McCutchen writes that “on the brick field still standing from the pre-muslim tradition at Jatra(24 pargana), Satdeuli (bankura), bahulara and sonatopal or Deulghata and Para (purulia).¹⁶

Among the temples at Deulghata, the southern temple was the largest, with a height of 60 feet. The temple stands on an area of about 26 square feet and its sanctum is about 9 square feet. The temple is pyramid shaped and its entrance is triangular. The temple had designs on it, but most of the work is broken. The second brick temple has a height of 45 feet. It is about 130 feet from the banks of the Kansavati. This temple faces east and the entrance is triangular. The structure of the temple is similar to that of Pakbirra. The third temple here is completely decayed, may be completely destroyed in a few days.

Charra:

Chhara is an archaeologically important center of Purulia district, 6 km north-east of Purulia town. In the ancient times, the center of Jain Sarak culture was built here. Under the soil of Chhara, there are many examples of sculpture art. Today, next to this area there are Sarak villages like Jhapra, Para, Kelahi, Jhabora etc. Various historians and archaeologists have visited Charara at various times and recorded their opinions about the ancient archaeological sites here.



E.T. Dalton in his 'Notes on a tour in Manbhum in 1864-65' wrote about Chharra that "at the village churra near poorulia, there are two very old stone temples called 'Deuls' or 'Dewalas'. The only tradition regarding them is, that they and some large tanks in the vicinity were constructed by Serawaks here called Seraks. They are build with roughly cut stone. Without cement, on the stone carpentry principle. There were originally seven of these Deols. Five have fallen, and the pragments have been used in building houses in the village. The most perfect of the two that remain, is a tower terminating in a dome of horizontal courses of stone about 30 feet high, with a circular final like a huge cog wheel, and the remains of flag roofed colonnades on both sides. The slabs furning the roof are great blocks of granite from 5 to 9 feet in length, 2 to 2.5 in breath and 1 foot thick. There is no carving about these temples, and no object of worship now in the shrines, but one some of the stones that are scattered about, tracing of the 'Tirthancarar' are visible".¹⁷

Budhpur-Palma-Mahadevberya:

Budhpur, Palma, Mahadevberya are notable sites of the Sarak culture found on the banks of Kansavati river.

Budhpur under Manbazar blocl 1 was a large pilgrimage site in the past. Beglar visited budhpur during his visit Manbhum and found five temples in budhpur and he dated them to the 12th to 13th century A.D. However, no more temples remain today. In the past there was a temple here. The Shiva temple is built on top of his broken stupa and the stones of temple were used in the constraction of this temple.

At present, a part of temple is lying to the left of the entrance of the Budhpur Shiva temple. On the right side of the Shiva temple there is huge stone rubble. Behind the temple there is also the foundation of a stone wall. Also there are several large stone pillars, which are about 5 feet tall and one feet wide. The carving on the pillars are quite remarkable in terms of sculpture. By looking at these pillars, it can be assumed that the deuls here were quite large.

However no Jain Tirthankar idols are found in Budhpur today. However, the various parts of the temple found in the ruins, the structure of the deuls, it can be assumed that several temples were built here by the Jain Sarak in the past. Lieutenant Beavan mentions the four temples here as being founded by Jains.¹⁸

Also, several Jain Tirthankara statues and remains of deuls have been found at Baromasya, Herbana, Lakhra, Tushyama, Suisa, Tadgram, Shaka, Bashgarh, Laulara, Nangtir Than, Daiuli- etc. in Purulia district, that is, the Sarak culture spread over the vast area of Purulia between the ninth and twelfth



centuries AD. The idols of Tirthankara are the silent witness or signs of what happened. Later, as the Sarak community's influence in the region declined, the temples were taken over by Brahmins and the Tirthankara idols were buried underground and many of the idols were moved elsewhere. Besides, the existence of several Jain archaeological sites in Purulia district proves the influence of Jainism here. But all the Jain temples that are still there today will also disappear in the coming days if proper conservation measures are not taken.¹⁹

Features of Architecture and Sculpture:

The Jain temples of Purulia are mainly of the 'Rekh Deul' style. It has a lot of similarities with architecture of Odisha. The Jain heritage of Purulia is best preserved in its **Basalt and Chlorite sculptures**. The Tirthankaras are typically depicted in two primary postures:

1. **Kayotsarga:** A standing meditative pose symbolizing detachment.
2. **Padmasana:** The lotus seated pose.

Each statue is identifiable by its **Lanchhana** (animal or plant symbol) carved at the base. For instance, the serpent hood of **Parsvanatha** and the lion symbol of **Mahavira** are common sights in the village shrines of Purulia.

Syncretism: From Tirthankaras to Folk Gods

As Jainism's formal structure waned, a unique cultural assimilation took place. In many tribal villages, Jain idols were not discarded but were integrated into local folk religions.

- Tirthankaras were anointed with vermilion and worshipped as **Bhairav** or **Dharam Thakur**.
- Jain female deities (Yakshis) were often reinterpreted as the snake goddess **Manasa**.

This syncretism ensured the physical survival of the idols, though their theological origins became obscured by folk legends.

The Sarak Community: The Living Link

The history of Jainism in Purulia is not just found in ruins; it lives on in the Sarak community. The Saraks constitute a completely non-violent, vegetarian community living with relatively modest population density spread over their villages in certain districts of Southwest Bengal like Purulia, Bankura and Birbhum. The word 'Sarak' is actually a corrupt form of the word '*Sravaka*'. The



etymological meaning of the word *Sravak* is the listener. If the word *Sravak* is an adjective, it stands for - Sra- Shraddha (respect), B-Vivek (conscious), ka- Kriya (work) i.e. the one who is conscious with respect about his deeds is called 'Sravaka'. It is known from *Jain 'Kalpasutra'* that those who observe Jain rituals and vows from inside the house are known as *Sravakas*. The corruption of the word from *Sravakato Sarak* is believed to have taken place ever since they migrated to Manbhum. According to Coupland "The word *Sarak* is doubtless derived from *Srabaka*, the sanskrit word for 'a hearer'. Amongst the Jains, the term is used to indicate the laymen or persons who engaged in secular pursuits, as distinguished from the *yatis*, the monks or ascetics and it still survives as the name of group which is rapidly becoming a regular caste of the usual type *Saraogi*".²⁰ According to O' Malley, "The name *Sarawak*, *serak* or *Sarak* is clearly a corruption of *Sravak* the sanskrit word for a 'hearer' which was used by the Jainas.....".²¹ Today in 94 villages of Purulia district, 32 villages of Bankura district, 24 villages of Burdwan district and 3 villages of Birbhum district, the people of this *Sravaka* or *Sarak* community are following the rules and laws of non-violent Jainism through their individual life. The comment of Sarat Chandra Roy, an anthropologist, on the position of the *Saraks* in Manbhum district is noteworthy. According to him, "At present, the number of *Saraks* in Raghunathpur, Para, and Gaurangadi police stations in the northeast of Manbhum district is relatively high And in the south and west, there are still some *Saraks* living in the areas of Chandil and Chasha police station. In the 1901 census in this district About 10,500 *Saraks* lived".²³ While the majority of the region transitioned toward Hinduism (specifically Shaivism and Vaishnavism) after the 13th century, the *Saraks* maintained their distinct identity, acting as the human bridge between ancient Jainism and modern Purulia.

Conclusion: The ancient heritage of purulia is mainly a history of sacrifice and practice of non-violence Jainism. The imprint of non-violence and simple living of Jainism is still observed in the life journey of the people of *Sarak* community here and in the folk culture here. Preserving these archaeological monuments is not only a historical responsibility, but also a great means of preserving our past heritage.

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