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Go back to

- NEWS
- PLACES
- PEOPLE
- LIFESTYLE
- EVENTS
- FOOD
- TRY THIS

Home » My Kolkata » Places » Exploring the forgotten Buddhist archaeological sites of Tilpi and Dhosa

HERITAGE TOUR

Exploring the forgotten Buddhist archaeological sites of Tilpi and Dhosa

Those visiting on a day trip may still find terracotta bricks lying around at these ancient historical sites near Kolkata

SUBHADIP MUKHERJEE | PUBLISHED 27.03.23, 06:14 PM



Terracotta plaques and seals unearthed from Tilpi and Dhosa excavation sites

Photos: Subhadip Mukherjee

How many of you have heard of Tilpi and Dhosa in West Bengal? Located at a distance of around 48 kilometres from Kolkata, these are two villages that are located very near each other and recent archeological digs around these two villages have unearthed remains of some old structures which have a clear indication of the presence of some Buddhist archaeological structures.

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The narrow concrete pathway toward Dhosa archaeological site

The archaeological finds in Tilpi village indicate three different periods of active human presence. The first period dates from the 2nd to 1st century BC and the last period dates around the 2nd to 3rd century AD. After the end of the third period, there seems to be a sudden stop to the human occupation of these sites. Archaeological records found here suggest that there could have been a massive fire that could have destroyed this place post which there was no presence of human civilisation. The next record is as recent as the 16th - 17th century AD. Most of the artefacts unearthed here during the excavation belonged to the Gupta Period.



The playground, which is the actual Dhosa archaeological site

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Both of these two archaeological sites are located in very close proximity to the Piyali river, which when you look from a geographical perspective, was connected with navigable waterways connecting with the Bidyadhari river. And if we look a little up towards the north, we get another major historical town of Chandraketugarh. Historically, Chandraketugarh was a major trading center that had trade links from all over the world.

This proximity to the Piyali river brings another school of thought that a massive sudden flooding of the rivers could have led to the abrupt abandonment of these two historical sites.



Terracotta structures visible on the ground at Dhosa archaeological site

We also get some descriptions of these two places from the famous Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-Hien, who travelled across these regions of India visiting different Buddhist sites. He mentions visiting a large stupa around this location of Bengal, which roughly corresponds to the location of Dhosa. During the excavation process around Dhosa, a large number of terracotta bricks were unearthed that tell of the presence of a large well-built structure.

What to see at Tilpi and Dhosa



Tilpi village

It takes around two-and-a-half hours to reach these two places. The first place would be the village of Dhosa and another 15 minutes of driving will take you to the other archeological site of Tilpi. The archaeological site at Dhosa is located near the main road, thus making it easy to locate.

At Dhosa, the archaeological digs have all been covered up and what one can now see is a small football ground with a very rough surface. Chunks of terracotta bricks and other structures can be seen on the ground. It can be safely concluded that a large structure was very much once present at this very location.



The playground at Tilpi – the location of the archaeological dig site

Finding the next location of Tilpi can be a bit tricky as we have to leave the main road and enter the villages with very narrow strips of roads. Most of the villagers are aware of the archaeological sites, thus feel free to ask the local villagers for the last mile direction. Similar to Dhosa, the archaeological site out here in Tilpi is also now a playground and the easiest way to locate this is the presence of a large mobile tower located right next to it.

The archaeological site at Tilpi has also been covered up but unlike in Dhosa, where one could see remains of terracotta bricks and other terracotta structures, it's not possible to see anything out here. One can make out pits that had been dug once and covered up but nothing more than that.



Pits can be still seen, which were dug during the excavation at Tilpi

The locals point out that major excavation work was carried out between the years 2005 and 2007 and during the excavation, the team unearthed a good number of terracotta and metal objects. No presence of structures was seen out here except these objects.

Most of these objects, which were found here during the dig, can be found displayed at the State Archaeological Museum in Behala.



Terracotta figurines unearthed from the Dhosa excavation site

The villagers out here were very vocal about the lack of apathy from the government. The locals were promised that the area would be developed as a tourist destination bringing much-needed revenue to the local economy. Unfortunately, nothing of that sort happened and further excavation of the surrounding areas was not carried out. The locals also complained that much of the actual treasure

trove had already been illegally excavated and sold off in the market much before the official excavation work was carried on.



More terracotta figurines unearthed from the Dhosa excavation site

Unlike the Buddhist archaeological sites that can be seen in Odisha and Bihar, which are now very popular tourist destinations, the ones out here in Tilpi and Dhosa are hardly visited by anyone. If developed properly, these two places can become a quick day-trip destination from Kolkata.

*Working for more than a decade in the book retail and publishing industry, **Subahdip Mukherjee** is an IT professional who is into blogging for over 15 years. He is also a globetrotter, heritage lover and photography enthusiast.*



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