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Shakti Peeth Bakreswar-An Ancient Religious & Rural Tourism Destination in Birbhum District of West Bengal.



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Abstract

Bakreswar is a sacred and great pilgrimage, located 18 kms South West of Suri in Birbhum District. Bakramuni was a worshiper of Lord Shiva who lived on the valley of Bakreswar river, where he adored Siva for ten thousand years. After being satisfied with his worship Lord blessed him for being worshiped before the worship of Lord Shiva. On the instructions of Lord Shiva the divine temple of Bakreswar was constructed by Vishwakarma the architect of heaven. The Bakranath temple, also known as Bakreswar, is one of well known pilgrimages in Birbhum District of West Bengal. There are hundreds of images of deities in a large number of temples within a specified area but there is hardly any human habitation not associated with the temples. The principal temples are Bakreswar Shiva temple and Mahisamardini temple. Birbhum has a rich cultural heritage and a glorious past and Bakreswar is one of them. The region has played a significant role in the history of Bengal, both in the ancient and medieval ages. There are about 51 Shakti peethas scattered from present day Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. Bakreswar is among the 51 Shakti pithas, where Sati's fore-head and eye-brows fell and was established in the subcontinent. The study identifies Bakreswar a remote village of Birbhum District, to explore the possibilities of the growth of rural tourism that could play an important role in sustainable development of rural societies.

Keywords: Backwardness, Employment opportunities, religious tourism destination, rural community, rural tourism

Introduction

Bakreswar is a sacred and great pilgrimage in the district of Birbhum. The village is located 18 kms South West of Suri and about 6 miles to the northwest of Dubrajpur railway station on the Andal- sainthia railway section of the Eastern Railway.¹ The word Bakreshwar comes from the name of Bakramuni, worshiper of Lord Shiva.² Bakra means bent or curved and Ishwar means God.³ Birbhum has a rich cultural heritage and a glorious past and Bakreswar is one of them. The region has played a significant role in the history of Bengal, both in the ancient and medieval ages. A wonderful location to visit, Bakreswar, a place for those who want to relish the charm of rich cultural heritage and beauty of Birbhum.

The Shakti Peethas, seat of Shakti are places of worship consecrated to the goddess Shakti or Sati, the female principal of Hinduism and the main deity of the Shakta sect. It is a "Non-Vedic beliefs and practices that emphasized the existence in man of divine powers that could be activated and experienced by means of special spiritual procedures." According to the Hindu mythology When Sati, the wife of Shiva and the first incarnation of Parvati, Sacrificed herself at a yagna performed by her father King Daksha; a very distraught Shiva started dancing with her body. The world was terrorized from this Tandava Nritya and to stop the devastating penance, Vishnu used his Sudarshan Chakra and completely cut up Sati's Body in several pieces. Wherever a piece of the Divine Mother's body fell on earth, that place became a Shakti Pitha and a temple was erected to commemorate different manifestations of Shiva and Parvati and became a Hindu pilgrimage. There are about 51 Shakti peethas scattered from present day Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. Bakreswar is among the 51 Shakti pithas,⁴ where Sati's fore-head and eye-brows fell and was established in the subcontinent.⁵ This place is also famous as one of the 51 Shakti Pithas where there is a temple dedicated to Adi Shakti.⁶

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The basic concept of rural tourism is to benefit the local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage. But in our country, the rural tourism in its true form is relatively new. The potential for rural tourism to be a major force in rural economic development resulting in poverty alleviation is yet to be realised to the fullest extent. Rural infrastructures are maintained by the Government authority like State Tourism Department along with local panchayats should take a leading role in infrastructure development. As rural tourism requires relatively less infrastructure and therefore low investment, so private participation needs to be encouraged at a small scale in building infrastructure.

The history of tourism developed mainly through indirect sources in the early period. In India, in the early days of agricultural abundance, export of cash crops created an important trade link. Manufacture of iron-ore into steel for weaponry was another important item of trade by the later Vedic period. In the early days, pilgrimage or pilgrim travel assumed great importance. Ashoka the great, travelled a great deal in his eagerness to spread the doctrines of Buddha. A number of monasteries were also built for the pilgrims. This shows that travel facilities were much improved and travel was not a cumbersome experience. Rural tourism or tourism in rural areas is a new form of activity that can bring economic and social benefits to the society. The study identifies Bakreswar a remote village of Birbhum District, to explore the possibilities of the growth of rural tourism that could play an important role in sustainable development of rural societies.

The Bakranath temple, also known as Bakreswar, is one of well known pilgrimages in Birbhum District of West Bengal.⁷ It is one of unique and most popular temples which attract the tourists towards its Oriya style of architecture.⁸ The name of this place came from the legend that once upon a time, the renowned sages Subrita and Lomas received an invitation to attend the sayambar or marriage rites of Lakshmi.⁹ Astabakra Muni (then known as Subrata Muni) was insulted by Indra. The muni was so enraged that he developed 8 cripples in his body, which gave him his name of Ashtabakra muni.¹⁰ Astabakra's pilgrimage therefore took an eastern direction and ended at Bakreswar, where he adored Siva for ten thousand years.¹¹ After being satisfied with his worship lord blessed him for being worshiped before the worship of Lord Shiva.¹² On the instructions of Lord Shiva the divine temple of Bakreswar was constructed by Vishwakarma the architect of heaven. This created the auspicious Bakranath temple on the eastern shore of Bakreswar River that flows through the District of Birbhum. Though, there is no evidence of the present temple being such an ancient one. A tablet records that a portion of the edifice was erected by one Darpanarayan, Minister of Assadujaman Khan in the

year 1761 A.D.¹³ Thus known for the legends of Ashtabakra Rishi this is one of the legendary temples of West Bengal.¹⁴ This is a major pilgrimage spot for Hindus. Besides its scenic beauty the place is popularly known for its legends.

Pilgrimage tourism in Birbhum district lays in visiting the various ancient temples located here. Bakreswar is famous for its Bakreswar temple which is dedicated to Lord Bakranath (Shiva) and Goddess Kali.¹⁵ The main temple of Bakreswar is surrounded by many small shrines which are dedicated to Lord Shiva.¹⁶ Bakreswar is visited by thousands of pilgrims and tourists every year.¹⁷ A visit to the place is an education by itself. There are hundreds of images of deities in a large number of temples within a specified area but there is hardly any human habitation not associated with the temples. Whoever is there at Bakreswar having something to do with the temples. At other places the deities live in a habitable village but at Bakreswar the men live for the deities.¹⁸ A big Mela is held every year on the day of Shiva-Ratri.¹⁹ The three principal sects of Hinduism, that is Shaivism, Vaishnavism and the Shakti cult, have synthesised in the district of Birbhum. Both shaites and Shakti sects come to Bakreswar for pilgrimage. The principal temples are Bakreswar Shiva temple and Mahisamardini temple.²⁰ To the east and north of the holy place runs the Bakreswar River.²¹ and to the south is the Papahara River. To the southwest of this curious group are three tanks of various sizes known as the Shat katali, the Chandra Sayer and the Damu Sayer.²² Their origin is lost in the mists of time, but the attendant priests aver that they are named after the votaries at whose expense they were excavated.

On the way, to Bakreswar there located, another site seeing i.e. the renowned Mama-Bhagne hill at Dubrajpur.²³ It appears that nature has taken care to place the gravel here and redecorate the set. A temple dedicated to Lord Shiva is located there which is popularly known as Pahareswar.²⁴ Travellers may locate numerous hilly caves. There are the temples of Lord Shiva and Shasan Kali,²⁵ according to the legend; it is worshipped by the eminent dacoit Raghu.²⁶ The Mughal Kuthi at Mahanto Para is also a significant tourist spot to pay a visit. The Mughal Kuthi at Mahanto Para is also a significant place to pay a visit. And the terracotta Shiva temple and Trayodash Ratna temples are worth to visit.²⁷

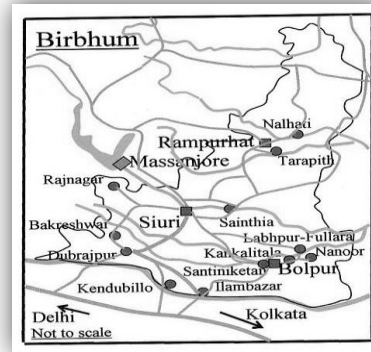
The Bakreswar hot springs located at Bakreswar village near Bakranath siva temple and 210 Km. from Howrah by rail and 18 km. west of Suri town. Bakreswar thermal springs issue out of alluvial which is successively underlain by weathered rocks and crystalline basement as revealed from geological and geophysical studies. A hot spring is a spring that is produced by the emergence of geo-thermally heated ground water from earth's crust. It has relatively high sulphur content and is believed to provide a possible solution to skin infection. Bakreswar is also a place of geological interest with many hot springs of varying temperatures located on the eastern continuity of Son Narmada Lineament.²⁸ There are ten hot springs here.

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1. Paphara ganga.
2. Baitarini ganga.
3. Khar kunda : The water in this spring is of 66 degrees Celsius.
4. Bhairav kunda : The water in this spring is of 65 degrees Celsius.
5. Agni kunda : Agni means fire. The water in this spring is at 80 degrees Celsius. It is also rich in many minerals of sodium, potassium, calcium, silicates, chlorides, bicarbonates and sulphates which are said to have medicinal properties. It might also contain traces of radioactive elements.
6. Dudh kunda : Dudh means milk. The water of this spring attains a dull white hue during early morning probably due to ozone concentration. The water in this spring is at 66 degrees Celsius.
7. Surya kunda : Surya means sun. The water in this spring is of 61 degrees Celsius.
8. Shwet ganga. It bears the memory of the great king, Kirata.²⁹
9. Brahma kunda.
10. Amrita kunda.

Bakreshwar Thermal Power Station is located at Jamboni bus-stop and about 14 KM. from Suri town, on the side of the Moregram Panagarh Highway. Mr. Jyoti Basu, Chief Minister of the State, inaugurated the Thermal Power in the year of 1988.³⁰ Thus, the Bakreshwar Thermal Power Project, under The West Bengal Power Development Corporation Limited, is one of the most reliable and prestigious coal-fired power plants in West Bengal and in India as well.³¹ In two stages the total capacity of the plant is (05 X 210) MW. Funded by the Overseas Economic Co-Operation Fund (OEFC) of Japan Govt. subsequently constituted as Japan Bank for International Co-operation (JBIC) this project is one of the first Fast Track projects to be successfully completed within scheduled time.³²

Another site seeing of Bakreshwar is Neel Nirjan located near the Thermal Power Station. The surroundings of the spot are very amusing for tourists, besides there are many unknown trees here and there standing, which gives the area so beautiful. Every year many tourists come from different parts of Bengal to visit the place and performed their picnic and waste the whole day for leisure. Near the spot a big Water reservoir situated there for Bakreshwar coal-fired Power Project. The reservoir formed by erecting a dam in Bakreshwar River named 'Neel Nirjan' (meaning blue solitude), for providing water to the thermal power plant, is gaining in popularity as a tourist spot.³³



On the Valley of Bakreshwar River, there is a beautiful site, named Basudeb International Mission of Shiva Lingam, made of 7 tons of white Carrara marble. There are many shops trying to attract attention of the pilgrim-tourists. Beside Bakreshwar in the village Tantipara, there are a large number of handlooms can be seen. Variety of silk products available here.³⁴ Many visitors take a short tour to Tantipara- "The village of Handloom products".

The Government of West Bengal is now running occasional visits to Bakreshwar in well appointed passenger buses for encouraging tourism. There is great potential for developing tourism at Bakreshwar because of the temples and the hot water springs of medicinal value. Bakreshwar does not find place as a Pithasthan or an Upapithasthan in the Tantras. In 2006, the plan has been prepared by the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation, with help from Birbhum District Magistrate Barun Roy and the Confederation of Indian industry, Eastern Region. The state government had already allotted Rs 1.5 crore has been sanctioned for Bakreshwar. Sanitation facilities, roads, electrification and parking facilities would be arranged with this fund, he added. The minister had gone to Bakreshwar to reopen Hotel Bakreshwar Inn, a government tourist lodge given on lease to a private owner. Local Member of Parliament Ramchandra Dom has granted Rs 25 lakh from his MP's local area development fund for infrastructure development in the proposed tourism circuit. Help of global experts will be sought to develop the hot springs of Bakreshwar, a major tourism attraction in Birbhum.

So Bakreshwar is an idyllic deva-gram or a place where the deities live. The men that are there are the pujaris, pandas, pilgrims or the few shopkeepers who entirely depend on the rush of pilgrims to the temples. As a rural tourism place, Bakreshwar should need financial support from many rural development banks, like NABARD, BIRD, UBI and tourism development-related financial institutions like TFCI as well as private financial agencies and Companies like HDFC etc.

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