

## Heritage Tourism Potential in Achipur

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**Abstract.** Heritage tourism is camouflaged with many treasures hidden in our native places and is yet to be fully unfurled. The knowledge of the existence of such places is not completely missing, but its heritage potential is very superficially understood. One such place is Achipur, a small settlement on the banks of river Hooghly, about 30km from Taratala in South Kolkata. Chinese food is integrally cloned to the culture of Kolkata, but very few are aware of the fact that the first existence of Chinese settlement traces back to Achipur. With its unbeatable heritage resources, this destination vibrates the heart of the Chinese community during their New Year. Apart from this, other artifacts dating back to the British era. It is also intimately related to the "Zamindari" culture of Bengal with its supposed roots in the reign of Emperor Akbar. Many structures are dilapidated, and a severe lack of understanding of their historical significance did not hatch any plans for their proper preservation. Although tourists are visiting this place, the heritage aspect and the intermingling of culture have fallen sadly on the blind eyes. The first Chinese footfall in British India started from Achipur with the name of Atchew Tong. The authors' personal experience in the amalgamation of the opinions of residents of Achipur plays a vital role in setting up the primary source of data and related literature reviews. The information is obtained from structured interview techniques, questionnaire-based methodology, and first-hand observation experience. This research work throws light upon the age-old link between the Chinese community and culture that developed in Achipur and other spots of heritage value present here. The work also focuses on the various scopes and limitations of destination management and the socio-economic impact the tourism resources can create in this location. Thereby the main objective lies in developing better insight into the heritage potential of Achipur and a deeper look into the enriched cultural value the destination hides in its cradles.

**Keywords:** Achipur; Heritage; Chinese; British; Bengal

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

India is a country whose every inch seems to be having a touch of history and heritage. Some of them are prominent enough and thereby have attracted enough attention. Some had been brought to light by archaeologists, scholars, and experts. Despite all efforts, there are still many pages left to be flipped, and the understanding of the depth of historical enrichment and heritage value of the land is far from complete. There are also several instances where the site's heritage value, monuments, and artifacts remain confined within the host population. Finally, one day suffocates to death before the world even gets a whiff of it. It is also a saddening sight when structures of historical significance lie in a dilapidated state as the vagaries of nature degrade it more. With every such structure slowly disappearing, it seems that the voice of our ancestors got buried along with it. Keeping all these at the backdrop of the mind, this research was conducted at a local site, Achipur, where people visit primarily on weekends. Still, the seeds of heritage that this place sown is yet to reap any formidable appreciation and recognition. Achipur is located thirty-three kilometers from Kolkata and may be simply reached by local transportation.

## 2 RATIONALE

Achipur is a place known in the tourist circuit, especially the weekend hoppers. There are picnic grounds and temples of the multi-cultural faith. Looking at the various monuments and old structures present here, a curiosity crept into the mind as far as the origin. There is a Chinese temple over here, and seeing that, a question is how is it possible that a Chinese place of worship is present here. Talking to the local people, a "Barood Ghar" area was found in a very ruined state. Again, the mind asked – what was the requirement of storing explosives here and who did so? A stately building was some distance away, converted into a hotel – talking to the people there unearthed the chequered history of Bengali landlords. When such bits and pieces of the past were seen scattered there, and an effort was made to put the pieces together, it very prominently brought out the fact that the answers to these questions lie deep in the heart of history that can bring to light the hidden heritage value of the place. These were more than just mere structures built in the past – each one of them perhaps has a story to tell which can help humanity know a little more of the ancient time.

## 3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

When it became apparent that Achipur could unwind the cultural enigma visible if explored more profoundly, an effort was made to dig deeper. This inspired the research paper titled: "A Study on the Heritage Tourism Potential in Achipur (West Bengal)."

## 4 SIGNIFICANCE

Traveling through the mostly untrodden paths of history in Achipur, a more profound insight can be gained about the cultural interactions of the Chinese and the British along with the Indians (referred to as natives). The timeworn, damaged, and some nearly destroyed structures present over here are like tombstones of our rich heritage, so garnering information about them can establish their connotation so that the attention of the competent authority can be captivated for their upkeep and restoration. . The destination can also be enlisted as a heritage tourism site as one can feel the aura of the past while walking down its avenues. It surely has got the potential to be another bright feather in the heritage cap of Incredible India.

## 5 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research work are as follows:

- To identify the places and monuments intimately related to the history of the land.
- To collect and analyse the various ancestral links of Achipur
- To establish the importance of Achipur as a symbol of cross-cultural intimacy and interaction
- To develop an understanding that the structures neglected here must be restored.
- To estimate the potential of Achipur as a heritage tourism site.

## 6 LIMITATIONS

- There was a variety of information available from the host population regarding the same temple or site. There was little scope of verification regarding the authentic version. The most repeated version is considered here.
- Not many written accounts regarding the place where found.
- Many tourists were not interested in taking part in the survey.

## 7 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section highlights some of the very prominent data collected from secondary sources.

The first one is from an article titled - The legend of Tong Atchew, the 'first ancestor of the Chinese in India' by Ipsita Chakravarty, published on Jan 28, 2017, in the scroll. In. (Chakravarty, 2019) Some of the significant inputs regarding Tong Atchew mentioned in this article are as follows:

The long-time Chinese residents in Kolkata (previously Calcutta) believe that Atchew or Yang Da Zhao was the first Chinese person to land on the shores in the

British era. Remains of various offerings and incense stick ashes are visible in the red tomb, dedicated to Atchew with great regard and respect.

According to Dominic Lee, The owner of Pou Chong food products in Kolkata's famous Tiretti Bazar, Atchew was called "Thongyeng Pakkung" by them, whose English meaning is "sugar plantation master." Atchew arrived when the British developed a lively interest in China and its perfected beverage over centuries: tea.

According to the opinion of Tansen Sen, Professor of History at the City University of New York, Warren Hastings – the Governor-General of India from 1773 to 1785 was trying to find out avenues via road to China by sending representatives and delegates towards the east. There are other studies conducted that provide varied versions of how Atchew landed in the port area.

According to one version, a Chinese ship was trapped in turbulent weather resulting in a storm that washed it up to the shores, and Hastings agreed to give land to the sailors to settle there. Atchew was in that ship. It is also said that Atchew managed to satisfy Hastings with his service, and he was thereby gifted with as much land as he could travel in one morning. It can be noted here that the mention of Tong Atchew and his interactions with Warren Hastings is also mentioned in the 'The Chinese Community in Calcutta – Their Early Settlements and Migration by Ramakrishna Chatterjee.'

Professor Sen recollects that the Bengali Novel "Chinatown" written by Badrinath Das was published in a sequel in the Basumati magazine in 1958. This novel provides extraordinary details about Atchew.

As per a British document of 1778, Atchew received land from Hastings as a return gift for tea. This also gives a clear hint that the Chinese wanted to collaborate with the British on Indian soil. Again, there is evidence that many labourers of Atchew moved into the city's interiors, creating a labor shortage for Atchew. He was facing a problem.

The British were quick to act, and they passed a notification that any such act would be punishable by law. Prasanta Das, a resident of Achipur who runs a printing press behind the Chinese temple, says that Atchew Tong built the temple. The ponds that were visible one after the other were connected in the past, forming a water channel.

This facilitated the coming of the steamers to carry away the sugar and indigo from that place. This was the sugar mill that Atchew had set up in a piece of land adjacent to the town of Budge Budge.

This attracted other Chinese migrants, and the community's formation gained ground. An advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette in 1804 announces that the sugar mill was up for sale. And if Badrinath Das' book is to be believed, all Chinese families disappeared from Achipur within a few years, moving to better prospects in Calcutta and confirming Atchew's worst fears.



**Fig. 1.** Entrance to the Chinese temple at Achipur

The area where the temple is located is still called Chinamantala. Both the inhabitants of Achipur and the Chinese community in Calcutta say that Atchew married a Muslim woman, though nothing else is known about her. "Achi saheb's wife was called Teli Bibi.

The second account of Achipur and its heritage resources can be found in the writings of the Travel Writer and Photographer, Rangan Datta. He takes a very close view of the Bawali Rajbari present here and the temples. A variety of information is also available regarding the "Barood Ghar."



**Fig. 2.** The horseshoe-shaped tomb of Atchew Tong

### 7.1 Bawali Rajbari

The historical background of Bawali Rajbari as accounted for by Rangan Datta: "Bawali, a commonplace in the Budge Budge subdivision of 24 Parganas (South) can be reached from the Budge Budge. Bawali can also be reached from Amtala on Diamond Harbour Road. The Bawali dominance in the area started with this magnificent and spacious Rajbari building, roughly around 1710. The family prospered under Rajaranam's grandson Haradhan, who gained support and backing of the East India Company. Their seven generations, one after the other, had built many temples and contributed to converting a simple, featureless, and lesser-known place into a temple town (Dutta, 2019).

Manik Mondal, in 1796 constructed the high Gopinath temple in "Nabaratna" style. In front of the temple is a flat-roofed natmandir, whose roof has long collapsed. All that remains are the slender pillars and arches.

In front of the ruined natmandir is a circular platform, which once housed the octagonal Rashmancha. The dramatic and eye-catching octagonal structure of the Rasmancha gave up in 2008, and only the base remains to date. Behind the temple lies the Radha-Kanta and Lakshmi-Janardan temples, both built-in traditional path – Chala style. Next to the Gopinath temple is the Radhaballav temple. Built around 1857, it houses the surrounding abandoned temples' idols. The plaster on the walls is long gone, and several adjoining structures are on the verge of crumbling and disintegration. The scenic garden that surrounded it has vanished. Bawali also has an interesting architectural piece called the jail tungi (water folly). An eight-sided structure, built as a centerpiece in a pond with decorative railings and windows with venetian blinds. Rangan Datta also wrote that he obtained some information from Dakshin Chabis Pargana Jelar Purakirti by Sagar Chattopadhyay

According to his writings, he visited Achipur in 2008, where he first came across a Gopinath Temple, which looked magnificent but in ruins. He also visited Bawali Rajbari then. He states the same as "the crumbling Mondal Mansion of Bawali." On his visit in 2012, he found that the crumbling mansion was renovated, and it had found a new lease of life in the form of a heritage hotel, though. Ajay Rawla, a Punjabi gentleman, had conceived this idea

### 7.2 Barood Ghar

The details of this neglected piece of history are obtained from two sources: Rangan Datta and Deepanjan Ghosh (who writes under the name - The Concrete Paparazzi). (datta, 2019) (Ghosh, 2019).

From their accounts, the Barood Ghar (the Achipur Powder Magazine) had a significant roleplay during British rule in India. Ships navigating towards Kolkata from the Bay of Bengal carrying gunpowder had to deposit their stock in these storehouses or Barood Ghar located beside River Hooghly. As per the norms followed during the British rule and a brief period after independence, the ships approaching the harbor were allowed to carry about 45kg of gunpowder with them in desperate situations for signaling purposes. These were deposited in Brood Ghar before the ship went to the harbour.

These were collected back on their return journey. According to the Bengal District Gazetteers: 24-Parganas by Lewis Sydney Steward O'Malley, These regulations were strictly followed. Any accident due to negligence can prove fatal and have devastating consequences for the harbor neighborhood.

## 8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Primary and secondary data were collected for the present study to complete the research work correctly.

The primary data was collected through Questionnaires, Observation, interviews, and feedback from the host population at Achipur, the Bawali Rajbari managers, and the tourists visiting there. There was no fixed number of target clientele, and the selection was random. Only at Bawali Rajbari were the managers interviewed.

The secondary data was collected from the internet and some journals mainly.

A qualitative analysis of these is done to draw concrete conclusions. Some graphical representation depicts a few aspects related to the tourism status of the place.

## 9 DATA ANALYSIS

The following information is the summarised version of the information collected from the local population – what they had seen or what they have heard from their forefathers. A detailed account of the history in shatters is also provided here.

### 9.1 DISTINCT CULTURAL MELANGE



Fig. 3. KHODA-KHUDI

The Chinese Temple in Achipur is closely related to Tong Atchew but is maintained over generations by a Muslim family. Roots of Secularism going deep down from time immemorial. According to a story, a small structure was dedicated to Dakshin Rai, lord of the south, who was believed to rule over beasts and demons. The Chinese temple was constructed in the same compound. In the Ram Kali temple across the road, there is an idol of Bonbibi, guardian spirit of the forests, worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike.

Atchew brought a God and Goddess of the earth, known as Tudigong. The Chinese have this concept of a local god to safeguard the community. The present-day nomenclature of these deities, "khoda-khudi," probably are derivations of the Urdu word for God, "khuda." When prayers are offered to Dakshin Rai, usually for weddings or other festive occasions, flowers are also placed before " khoda and khudi" Many religious traditions now meet in that temple compound. Whether Chinese or Bengali, all Gods are looked after by the same family.

As found in the towering temples of Bawali, the European architectural features depict another fine example cultural openness of India and the Indians. Built by the Mondal family, the temples offer an insight into the European influence on Bengal's temple architecture. The pillars built on the principles of European architecture that support the temples within the village are rare within the remainder of the state. Sadly most of the structures are in a dilapidated stage and on the verge of collapse.

## 9.2 THE MONDALS, THEIR TEMPLES, AND THE BAWALI RAJBARI

History books tell us that the Mondals of Bawali were originally Roys. Sharma, the grandson of Basudev Roy (who lived between the end of the 16th century and the early 17th century), was awarded Mondal. The magnificent cultural heritage site near Achipur is a nice blend of western and Indian art. The place possesses a significance of architectural value and promotes the heritage on the ground of socio-economic aspects in modern days. The beautiful place is known as Rajbari of Bawali.

About four hundred years back, during the Mughal era, the great Akbar had a commander, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh, and his promising army officer Shobha Ram Rai having war between the pirates in that particular region. Shoba ram fought well and won the battle for his chief. On that occasion, Shobharam Rai offered Bengal land, particularly in that area. They belonged to the Roys' family, but the grandfather of Shobha Ram Rai was awarded the title Mondal, and they are famous with the Mondal family. Another source of information told that Shobharam's grandson Rajaram was the Senapati (Chief of the Army) of the Raja of Hijli. Rajaram won a particular battle. The king offered him the land comprising approximately 50 villages, which was how Bawali was included in his dynasty. Earlier in this area, 24 Parganas (south) came under the extension part of the Sunderbans, which has a mangrove forest and swamp area on the banks of the Hooghly river. The 'Baule' community dominated this area'; they survive on fishing and honey collection from the forest. They follow the two main Gods; one is the goddess of forest known as Bonbibi, and the other owner is the God of the tiger, Dakhin Rai. The locals feel that both of them are protecting them from an external enemy.

This land flourished and was renowned when the Mondal family came into existence during the time of Raja ram's grandson Haradhan Mondal. He was the person in the Mondal family who built up several temples of Radha Krishna in the Bawali with the help of local people and Rajbari of today.

Now Bawali Rajbari, a more than a 300-year-old palace, occupied the area around 3 acres of land with ponds and gardens. The Bawali Rajbari has a large courtyard with colonial pillars structure show the western architectural pattern amalgamate with Indian art. Gopinath jiu temple is a beautiful architectural masterpiece that shows the excellent terracotta-style temple in Bengal. Local people of Bawali said that the famous Dakineswar temple architecture also is inspired by the Gopinath temple (picture below).



**Fig. 4.** Gopinath temple

At present, the Rajbari of Bawali converted into a heritage hotel. The best part of this heritage is that it takes responsibility for the upliftment of the socio-economic condition of that particular locality in several ways. Now Rajbari of Bawali is a heritage hotel owned by Ajay Rawala. He restored the architectural value of the Rajbari; it will take around ten years, and the property is now in operation for the last 02 years. This heritage property is certified by IHHA (Indian Heritage Hotel Association).they still follow all the traditions supposed to be in "Jamindar Bari" in the old days, like Sandhya arati Durga puja.



**Fig. 5. The\_Bawali Rajbari (Renovated)**

### **9.3 BAROOD GHAR (ACHIPUR GUN POWDER STORE ROOM)**

Achipur has not only developed the connection of heritage with China but also brought us the new chapter of heritage relationship with the British era. This bonding and heritage significance of three hundred years is still alive in Achipur. The root connection of Achipur with the British period is maintained by the famous Barood Ghar, called by local people. It is a storage place of gunpowder when ships move towards Kolkata port through the route of Hooghly River from the Bay of Bengal. The purpose of the construction of Barood Ghar on the bank of the Hooghly river is the safety of the city of joy because the quantity of gunpowder which is supposed to carry by the ships that amount if taken and reached to Kolkata that is the risk for the city for any incident or explosion. The British government established the storage area in Achipur, also known as barood khana, to avoid all such incidents. This was a protected area surrounded by a boundary wall and guard room in each corner. Not much of this is remaining now. However, two guardrooms were found to stand still erect and uphold the heritage flagship of the place.

The architectural structure of Barood Ghar was found to be somewhat unique; there are the remains of three masonry buildings standing in the field without any window and with a dome-shaped roof, which remarkably resembles the Islamic architectural style incorporated in the Barood Ghar. There are two doors in opposite directions in the structure. The unique feature is that the storage area was down below the ground and was covered with a water chamber for protection purposes as the place was laden with a high amount of explosives. A staircase directly reaches the underground room from the surface.

As found out from the residents, who have lived here for generations, after closing down the Barood Ghar, the British had also shut down all the underground routes. Near the 3rd Ghar, a two-storied structure is found; again, as per the host population, the building is the house of - charge of the Barood Ghar. The locals had also heard from their forefathers that the British officers came to this place with their family and enjoyed the beauty of the Achipur.

Just near Barood Ghar, a small setup was seen, also constructed by the British, which is known as Foot Ghar in terms of the local language. This is a setup for measuring the water level in Hooghly River so that the ships can move quickly, and, to date, this place is active and comes under Kolkata Port Trust, also known as Mayapur and Simapur cross.



**Fig. 6. BAROOG GHAR** – The gunpowder was stored beneath this floor, as the public says

Apart from these heritage fact findings regarding Achipur, the tourist potential of the place was also explored. Talking to the tourists visiting here, it was clear that most of them were unaware of the historical importance of the same. On the websites also, unfortunately, Achipur has been described as the weekend destination, suitable for a picnic away from the humdrum of the city life but again not very far away from it. There were no visible efforts seen as far as the publicity of the heritage sites of the place is concerned. Only the Chinese temple and the Tomb of Tong Atchew are vibrant as the Chinese New Year celebrations are held with them in focus.

A few graphical illustrations clarify the scenario further:

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TOURIST

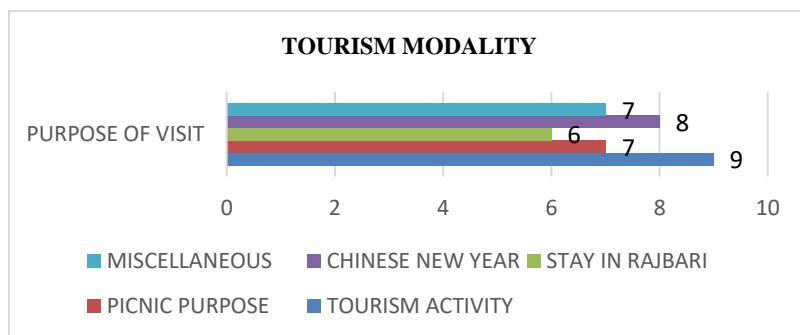
Q1. Have you ever visited Achipur?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No



Q2. What is the purpose of visiting the place Achipur?

- (a) Tourism activities
- (b) Picnic purpose
- (c) Stay in the Rajbari
- (d) Chinese New Year
- (e) Miscellaneous



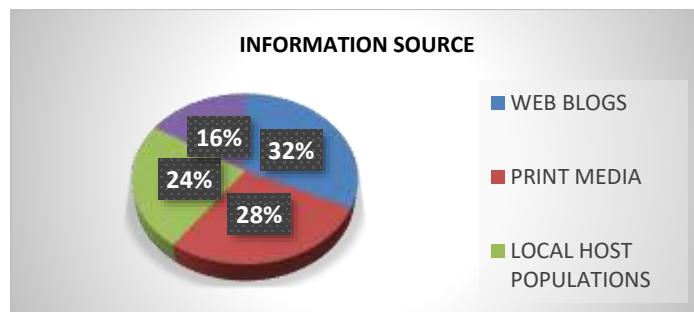
Q3. Are you aware of the historical significance of Achipur?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) Somewhat



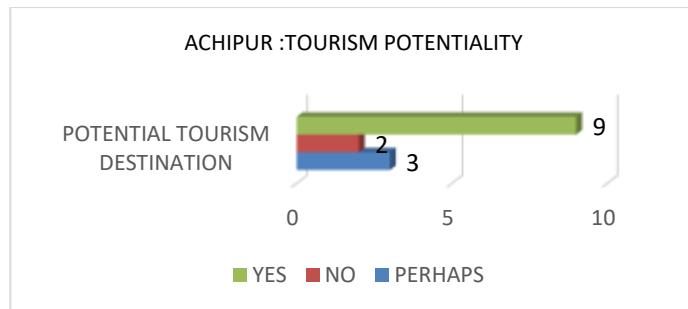
Q4. Where from you get the information about the Achipur?

- (a) Web blogs
- (b) Print media
- (c) Local host populations
- (d) Miscellaneous please specify

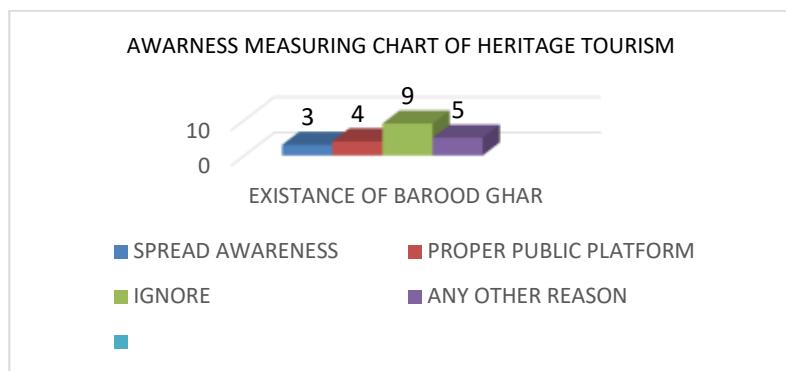


Q5. Do you think Achipur has the potential to become a heritage tourism destination

- Yes
- No
- Perhaps

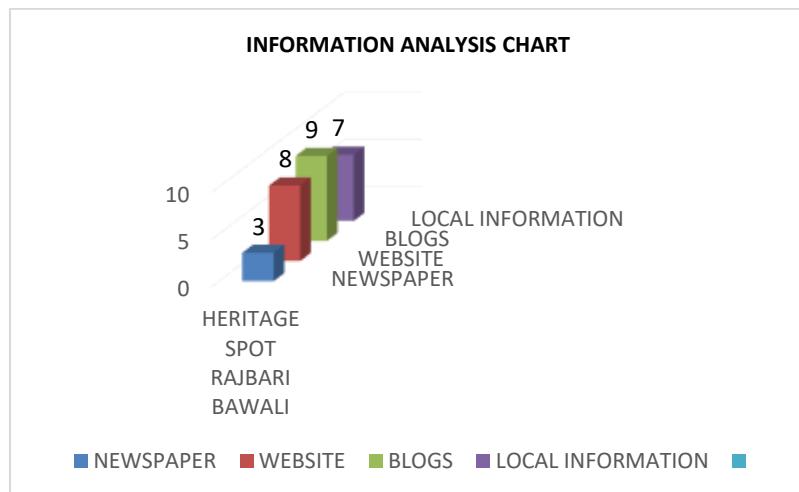


- Q6. China temple and Bawali Rajbari are maintained very well as tourist spots but, Barood Ghar lost eminence. What action would you like to take?
- Spread awareness and sanitize
  - Please do your part to place it inadequately related forums
  - Ignore and let it be
  - Restore it yourself with the host population



- Q7. How do you know about the heritage spot Rajbari of Bawali?

- Newspaper
- Website
- Blogs
- local information



Q8. Would you like to suggest that anyone visit the Achipur as a heritage tourism destination?

- Yes
- No
- To some extent



As far as the destination is concerned, there is an acute shortage of rooms and proper tourism infrastructure as far as hygienic food and lodging are concerned. There is absolutely no effort taken by the concerned authorities to inform people about the heritage sites and their importance. It is shocking that even after certain historians and writers highlighted the place's historical significance, that was still grossly overlooked. With all its heritage jewels, the site is left to be scavenged by time. Bawali Rajbari renovated brings life to a minute fraction of the latent history of the place.

## 10 RESULTS

From the close study of the data collected from the primary and secondary sources, the following concrete facts emerge:

Achipur has a chequered history as there is considerable evidence that establishes that the first Chinese settlement in India had emerged from this place.

There are ample proofs of rich display of the spirit of secularism here wherein the Chinese Temple and the Tomb of its builder (Tong Atchew) is looked after by a Muslim family. Enriched cultural interaction through the adoption of the European architectural style in temple construction is also visible.

The hidden heritage of Achipur has got a new shot in the arm through this work. The Chinese temple, The Mondals, and their Palatial mansion (now renovated), along with the temples constructed by them and the Barood Ghar, carve out a profound heritage connection of this place. Unfortunately, most of these significant historical remains, which can quickly flip a new page in Indian history, are just destroyed. Even though the historical significance of some of these monuments has been highlighted before, almost no action has been taken for their survival. Historical glory in shatters probably

describes it correctly. The Barood Ghar, with its apparent connection to the British rule, definitely has an immense heritage value, but it will be extinct soon.

Achipur can indeed be promoted as a heritage tourism site, keeping all these things in mind. Concrete and hasty action must be taken to save the relics on their death beds. Proper development of tourism infrastructure and glorification of the heritage value of the place will attract more tourists here and scholars in the related field. From the survey, it was clear that people visit here but mainly for picnic purposes and they leave without experiencing the rich treasures of heritage value the place holds. Unfortunately, Achipur is marketed as a weekend destination only where the marvelous past is just ignored.

The conversion of Bawali Rajbari into a heritage hotel was a significantly appreciating step towards the restoration and preservation of history. It has also boosted the number of tourists visiting here.. Such More popularity of the destination has taken place after a celebrity marriage was recently held in the heritage hotel initiatives. It also boosts the economic growth of the region's status, and the multiplier effect will be activated. The average earning level of the host population here can also rise with the rise in tourism activity.

Achipur has not got the honour it deserves despite all these due to its illustrious and splendid past. We wake up from our slumber and save this place, which has a fantastic potential to be mapped as a heritage site.

## 11 CONCLUSION

The Indian civilization is considered one of the oldest in the world. With time, the enrichment of the civilisation reached its heights through an organised system of governance, the spread of education, cultural and social advancements, etc. Every nooks and corner of our great country seem to have a story to tell. Fortunately, some of these tales have been heard, and the many eroded with time. There are still many waiting to be discovered and understood. But, there are also places whose historical values are known and studied, but still, they are neglected and are slowly being wiped away from the face of the earth.

This research aimed at highlighting one such site, i.e., Achipur. There is a gold mine of heritage here with its links spreading far wide from the Mughals to the Hijli raja and the Bawali and the British. The fact that this place was the earliest settlement of the Chinese in India tags its specialty on the heritage platter. The name Tong Atchew bears special significance. It is a landmark area of British rule, as can be understood from the existence of Barood Ghar. The Cultural compatibility seen here perhaps sows the spirit of togetherness, love, and secularism in India.

With this fantastic backdrop, this place can be awarded the laurels of a prominent heritage site, and tourism can be developed on these lines. It is a clarion call for the concerned authorities to save Barood Ghar and the temples built during the Bawali Era. Appropriate measures taken for spreading its value will attract various classes of tourists here, and the spirit of heritage that this place bears can shine the brightest.

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