

Framing the Past: Experiencing an Archaeological Museum as Cultural Nexus at Mainamati, Cumilla

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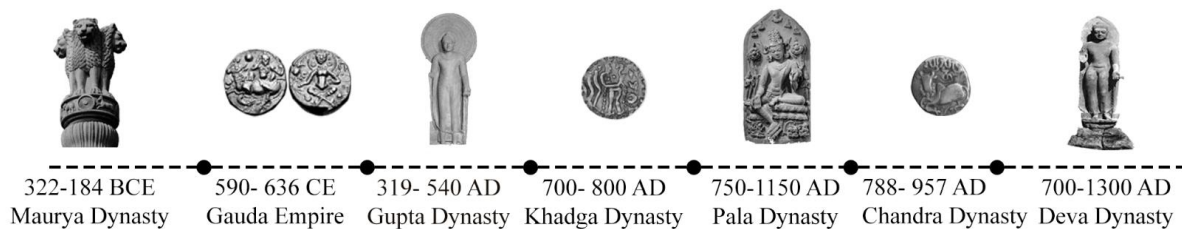
Abstract

Archaeological museums are essential to preserving a country's rich history and cultural heritage. Bangladesh has a rich history that dates back to prehistoric times, and numerous archaeological sites are scattered throughout the country. Mainamati, Cumilla, is home to most of the country's historic sites. Archaeologists' discoveries of Buddhist remain at Mainamati have made the site more well-known in recent years. However, many of these artefacts will likely be lost or destroyed due to insufficient preservation and conservation efforts. This paper proposes to preserve the archaeological remains in a museum complex and enlighten the people about the history of Bengal. Since the intended location is the hub of all other excavated viharas, this paper will represent the country's cultural and historical significance, fostering a sense of place and identity and considering the long-term preservation of the artefacts in a museum complex. This research paper aims to engage people, remind them of their history and roots, and cater facilities for tourists (to enhance their interest in visiting), archaeologists, and young researchers (to enhance their interest in researching.)

Keywords: *Archaeological; history; museum complex; space; preservation; culture.*

1 Introduction

Archaeology provides a glimpse into the past for the contemporary world. Bangladesh has significant archaeological richness, particularly from the medieval era under both Muslim and pre-Muslim control. However, the majority of this wealth has yet to be discovered. For many years, this area was largely ignored in archaeological fieldwork and research due to several factors, not the least of which are its challenging geology, harsh temperature, and distance from the subcontinent's major cities. Although Bangladesh is a young state, its land, people, and culture are deeply rooted in history, with Bangladesh's cultural legacy reflecting the great civilisations in the area over two millennia. Through the archaeological heritage sites (Mainamati, Paharpur, and Mahasthangarh), we can see the history from roughly 1200 to 1300 years ago. We have been wealthy in culture, art, and building since very early times. There are now 50 sites being found in and around Cumilla. Many rules were in place from the Khadgas through the Devas, but we need more to make a picture of it.



1.1 Background

The Mainamati region, situated in the southeast of Bangladesh, is renowned for its archaeological significance, with many ancient remains such as Buddhist monasteries, stupas, temples, and residential districts dating from the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE. These structures glimpse this area's thriving and vibrant communities during the Pala and Sena kingdoms. Shalban Bihar, one of the monasteries in the region, is particularly well-

known, having served as a Buddhist monastery from the seventh century until 1300, where pupils studied. Mainamati boasted numerous educational facilities where children received education in an unobstructed and accessible manner. There was more than one such monastery in the Mainamati region of Cumilla. Only a small part of it has been excavated. A huge part remains under the ground. While Kotila Mura, Charpatra Mura, Bhoj Bihar, Rupban Mura, and Itakhola Mura have been unearthed and opened to the public, others are still waiting to be discovered. Formerly a part of Samatata, meaning "shore" in Swahili, Cumilla derives its name from the region's low altitude above sea level. From the sixth to the twelfth centuries, this region was the hub of Buddhist culture. The last remnants of Buddhism in India were ignited here. Unfortunately, this vast civilisation was buried underground, and people lost track of it. During World War II, the Cumilla area played a crucial role in preventing a Japanese invasion of Myanmar. While constructing various military installations, ancient sites were discovered. The ruins of Buddhist culture in the Mainamati area were a shocking revelation to everyone. Between 1955 and 1956, over 50 installations were reviewed. Since then, the installation has undergone significant updates, but areas still need to be addressed. The handloom weaving industry on this continent has been highly respected globally for a long time, and during this period, the Khadi industry experienced impressive growth. Cumilla pottery is one of the ancient traditions of Bengali folk art. For decades, locals have honed their pottery skills and crafted a range of unfired clay items in Bijoypur. Bijoypur pottery is sold across the country, but they currently require help to make a reasonable profit. Standardising their quality and presenting a unified front could benefit the market in many ways. The Centre showcases its goods at craft fairs nationwide to promote its products and attract overseas customers. It is important to create a market for these items in other countries, and therefore, we need to educate people about handicrafts through modern training methods. (Eagle, 2016)

The Archaeological Museum in Cumilla is a significant location that preserves priceless cultural objects. It is situated in the centre of Mainamati district. Despite its historical significance, the location's age and limited capacity have yet to attract tourists. The exhibit space needs to be more sufficient, making it difficult to accommodate many visitors. Unfortunately, several artefacts risk being lost or damaged due to insufficient preservation and conservation measures. Even the prior culture is vanishing because there is nowhere to engage the community. As a result, ongoing debates have been about demolishing the existing museum, rest stop, and surrounding buildings. This paper suggests an archaeological museum in the city's heart that will be a community hub. This complex will enhance its residents' quality of life while preserving and celebrating their history and heritage. (Afrose, n.d.)



Fig 01: Bangladesh Archaeological sites
(Source: (en.banglapedia.org, n.d.))

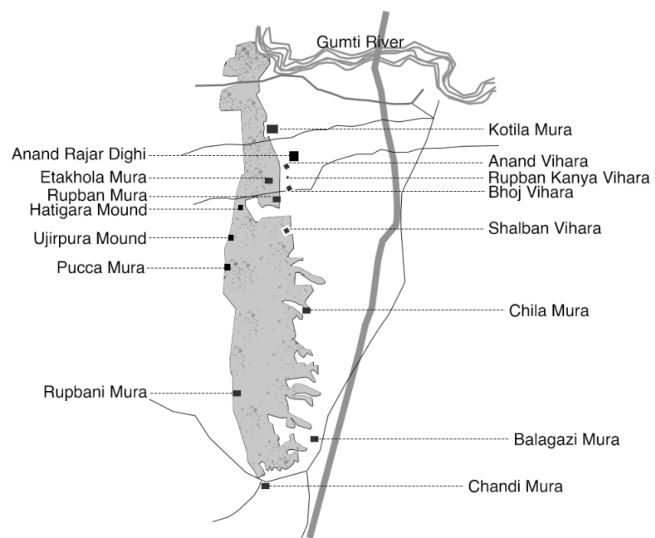


Fig 02: Archaeological sites on Mainamati hills near Cumilla
(Source: Author)

1.4 Methodology

The paper will adopt the exploratory method for research on rethinking the existing museum. This paper will use existing articles, books, and research papers that are essential to the topic are reviewed. This research aims to develop a strategy for proposing an archaeological museum as a cultural memory tool. After analysing, we will develop a concept for an Archaeological Museum and a research centre that can be implemented in Mainamati region. The conceptual analysis will shed some light on implementing public facilities by rethinking the existing museum and promoting local culture and entertainment.

2 Analysis

2.1 Contextual Analysis

Mainamati is now better recognised for the Buddhist ruins archaeologists have uncovered there. Bangladesh's largest collection of ancient Buddhist relics may be found here. The Finding Workers unexpectedly discovered the remnants of what was assumed to be "a small brick fort" when re-building the ancient axial route through these hills in 1875. Actually, it was a monastery for Buddhists. The first Mainamati artefact, the copperplate of Ranavankamalla Harikaladeva, dated 1220 AD, and found in the same region some 72 years earlier (1803), describes the capital city of Patikera as being "adorned with forts and monasteries." The Patikara Pargana of the area still uses the name today. During the Second World War, the Mainamati remains were once again found. The soldiers discovered several prehistoric ruins while erecting an advanced camp along the ridge. The government identified and safeguarded the sites in the following hasty survey. When the entire ridge remained uninhabited between 1955 and 1957, more than 50 sites were discovered through more routine and comprehensive investigations. Shalban Bihar is one of Mainamati's most prominent archaeological monuments. It is situated at Kotbari, close to Comilla, in the centre of the Lalmai Ridge, near the modern Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development. During excavations, a significant Buddhist monastery in the Paharpur style and various items from the 7th to the 12th century AD have been found. There are 155 total cells in this 167.6 sq.m monastery, which is organised into four formal wings surrounding a central shrine. The back wall of the monastery is the biggest (5 meters thick), and each of its walls is strong and durable. (Ghosh, n.d.)



Figure 03. Shalban Bihar



Figure 04. Shalban Bihar (Ramble BD, n.d.)

2.2 Other Archaeological Sites of Mainamati

Several scattered archaeological ruins were discovered along the Lal Mai hills in Mainamati, Cumilla. These ruins play an essential role in illuminating our previous history's ancient periods. Some of them are given below:

2.2.1 Ananda Bihar:

Even though Shalban Bihar was smaller than Ananda Bihar (Figure 04.), it has sadly mostly disappeared. Excavations have revealed the remnants of the entrance complex on the northern side and a few places along the southern side. The main shrine looks to remain intact and stands around 10 feet above the surrounding ground level. Four wings surrounded the courtyard, each including a row of monastic cells. (Ghosh, n.d.)

2.2.2 Rupban Mura

An important Mainamati archaeological site is Rupban Mura. Located in the Kotbari neighborhood to the south of the Cumilla-Kalirbazer road, it is situated on a mound next to the contemporary Bard and BDR institutions. Here, impressive semi-cruciform ruins of a medium size temple have been found during excavations, together with several auxiliary buildings, including an octagonal stupa and another on a square foundation. A boundary wall surrounded all sides of the rectangular stupa courtyard. The entryway facing the monastery is where it usually enters. Deep excavations have uncovered three primary eras of construction, restoration, and reconstruction, the earliest being during the sixth and seventh century AD. (Ghosh, n.d.)

2.2.3 Kutila Mura

The most beautiful Mainamati monuments were discovered at Kutila Mura, the tallest mound in the northeastern portion of the ridge close to Ananda Vihara. Among the archaeologically revealed constructions were three main stupas. They symbolise the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, thus the name Triratna Stupa. There are two Ratnatraya shrines in this area, according to documents found in the Lalmai Mainamati district. The Kutila Mura institution might be interpreted to be one of them. These things feature a hemispherical dome and round drums in the style of early tradition. The centre stupa's floor layout was fashioned after the dharmachakra, often known as the "Wheel of Law." Although the complete structure has not yet been excavated, a vihara could be uncovered at that location. (Ghosh, n.d.)

2.3 Existing Museum



Figure 05. Mainamati Museum

Plan Analysis:

- The extension was built in 1970-1971 in the south, giving the building a T-Shape.
- There is a total of 42 receptacles for display.
- There are varieties of antiquities, beads, motifs, seals etc.

Positive Sides:

- The landscape is quite fascinating

Negative Sides:

- Inadequate space for indoor exhibition
- The indoor airflow is poorly conceived
- Inadequate storage facilities
- No lab infrastructure
- No details regarding the archaeological site
- There are no tourist amenities

2.4 Heritage and Tourism

Tourism is one of the most significant sources of income for the Bangladeshi government. Mainamati's tourist attractions are significant to the government's revenue. Entirely governed by the government, Shalbon Bihar and the Mainamati Museum have varying incomes rising yearly since the fiscal year (FY) 2012–13. The high trend income for the fiscal year 2016–17 is 1,22,15,114 taka. If we look at the bar graph below, we can observe that from the fiscal years 2009–2010 to 2017–18, the income has nearly doubled. (Mamun, 2019)

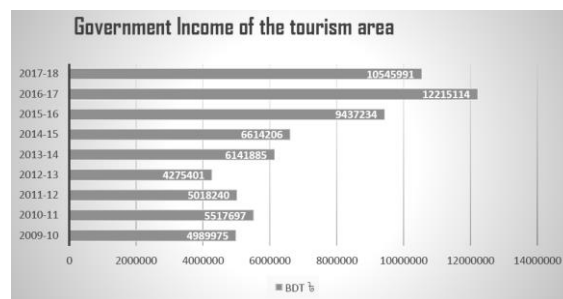


Figure 06. Annual data of the Archaeology Department, Cumilla

3 Findings

3.1 Issue identification

Heritage is, or ought to be, a subject of active public reflection, debate, and discussion. What ought to be kept? What can we or should we forget? What memories can we treasure, mourn, or learn from? Who owns "The Past" and has the authority to speak for former generations? The active public discussion of the material and intangible legacy of people, organisations, communities, and nations is a significant component of public life in a

multicultural society. The cultural legacy of Mainamati is closely entwined with its past. The construction of a museum complex must consider local customs and culture. The study will focus on how to communicate the archaeological findings while still honouring the cultural sensibilities of the local community.

1. While the Mainamati archaeological site holds significant historical and cultural importance as a once-rich civilisation in Bengal, it currently faces a critical issue concerning the need for adequate infrastructure for heritage preservation, a place for cultural celebration and public education, lack of public platform.
2. The public facilities are scattered and not appropriate; lacks an integrated platform.
3. Tourists are discouraged from visiting the museum since it is relatively old and cannot accommodate a large enough crowd of visitors; lack of visitors as people tend to accept contemporary museums more.
4. Lack of proper recognition, exposition, trading and manufacturing facilities. (pottery)

3.2 Aims and Objectives

The primary goal of this project is to build an architecture that will engage people, serves as a reminder of their history and roots and cater to facilities for tourists, archaeologists, young researchers and art enthusiasts. This endeavour will eventually strengthen our historical and cultural identity on the global stage. The project's aforementioned objective will be attained by-

1. To acknowledge this place by preserving its heritage and transforming it into a cultural venue which would also improve its economic status.
2. Establishing research and learning centre at this location to serve as the focal point for Bangladesh Heritage Forum's study and excavation.
3. To integrate the local people with this project so that the people and the project serve each other.
4. To improve the visitor's experience by offering a compelling and immersive environment that mimics the ambience of the prehistoric Mainamati location.

3.3 Significance

We carry our heritage to the following generation. The history of Devaparabata, the area's ancient name, or Mainamati should also be preserved for a variety of reasons. The heritage value may spark social, economic, development, archaeological, and other values.



Figure 07. Significance of this research in the context of Bangladesh

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Making a realisation statement was the main goal of this endeavour. Having such a revered past is a blessing for us as a nation and as a country. However, it is terrible that we couldn't properly care for the archaeological artefacts. The selected location served as a Buddhist educational facility and a victorious camp, respectively, for centuries. One of our nation's most valuable archaeological gems is Mainamati. This ought to have produced a global tourist environment that was unmatched. Eventually, historical awareness may have been cultivated through embedding knowledge among visitors through an experience setting. Thus, the nation as a whole is strengthened. In conclusion, the proposed archaeological Museum in Comilla, Mainamati, will serve as a guardian of the past, enabling us to unravel the mysteries of a bygone era. This research paper endeavors to delve into the museum's rich history, explore its collections, and emphasize the importance of its preservation efforts in safeguarding the cultural heritage of ancient Bangladesh. By understanding and appreciating the treasures within this museum, we can forge a stronger connection to our collective history, fostering a sense of cultural pride and identity for generations to come.

To achieve the final goal of this paper, the followings are the recommendations from the study.

1. To improve tourism conditions (Rethinking of existing museum and adding research facilities)
2. To Promote locality and local entertainment (Music, Drama, Fairs, Festivals) in the museum plaza.
3. To Create a productive field and hold on to exposition, seminars, and manufacturing, selling facilities (Pottery)

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