

Integrating Conservation with Development through Contextual Heritage Management

– A Case for Mahasthan

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ABSTRACT

Mahasthan has been identified as ancient Pundranagar of the 3rd century BCE and represents the important provincial capital in Bengal. The site is already tentatively listed by the Department of Archaeology for nomination as world heritage site. The remaining houses date from the 4th century BCE to the 18th century. The heritage site is facing rapid transformation due to the lack of proper conservation and management. The objective of this paper is to show how the use of conservation and management can be vehicles for sustainable development of the heritage site. The paper will explore underlying issues to bridge the gap between formal and informal heritage management and to make the existing approach for conservation more inclusive and participatory.

Keywords: *Cultural Heritage, Conservation, Heritage Management, Sustainable Development.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 3rd century BCE the Mahasthan area of Bangladesh has passed through urbanization, suburbanization and de-urbanization (Hossain, 2011b). In the present context Mahasthan is a rural area, flourishing as the suburb of the new urban center of Bogra. So Mahasthan may face the challenges of re-urbanization. Since the beginning of the 19th century, different measures have been

taken to protect the heritage sites. But due to lack of any inclusive developmental plan.

METHODOLOGY

This study includes a review of literature and field survey. To mitigate the research problems Qualitative Research¹ is, the existing management faces formidable challenges to use the cultural resource for

¹ Qualitative Research is multi method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. That means qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studies use and collection of a variety of empirical materials. Qualitative research is specially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors and social context of particular population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000)

economic development. So the study will explore the underlying issues to adopt an alternative mechanism to shift from the existing notion of bureaucratic formal approach to an informal and participatory approach.

Followed with a grounded theory method². This method was used because it enabled the researcher to evaluate and explain informal heritage management issues relevant to the research area (Leedy & Ormond, 2010). The field study for this research was conducted using a combination of methods; interviewing and observing. Qualitative in nature, the field study conducted in the designated areas enabled detailed understanding of the socio cultural spheres and their relationship with informal heritage management. Quantitative data was collected for survey and analysis of numerical data such as historic settlements and small scale onsite investigation.

CULTURAL COMPONENTS OF THE SITE

The Mahasthan heritage site is enriched by both tangible and intangible heritage.

Tangible Heritage

The extensive archaeological remains of Mahansthargarh are sprawled along the western bank of the River Moribund *Karatya*. **The site has two special features: the fortified citadel and its suburb.** The citadel occupies almost 208 hectares of area (Rahman, 2000). The existing rampart wall and it's inner remains reveal the fortified capital of the ancient city. The northern, western and southern sides of the fortified city were encircled by a deep moat. The river Karatoya flows on the eastern side. Many isolated mounds are scattered around the citadel, testifying to the existence of vast suburbs of the ancient metropolis. Besides the citadel, 134 medieval and early medieval sites were identified (Rahman, 2000) in the Bogra district. In 1920, under the 'Ancient Monuments Preservation Act-1904', areas located at the bank of the river Karatoya and within the five miles radius centering on the southeast corner of the citadel were declared

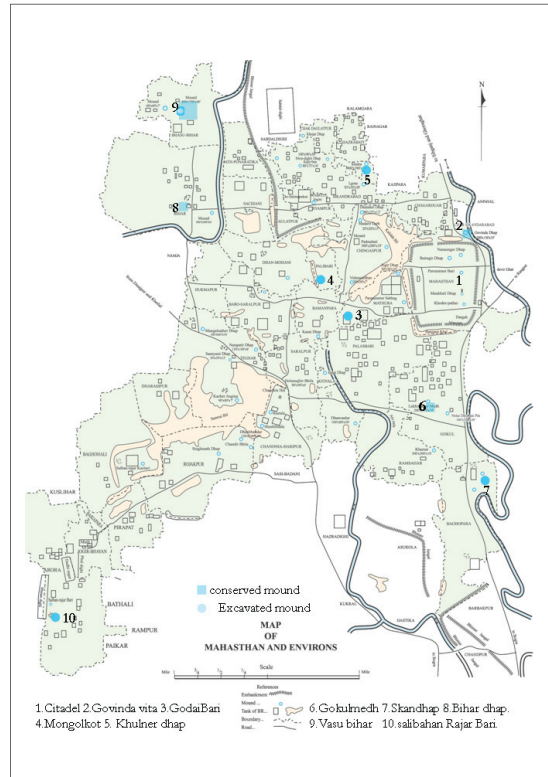


Figure 1:
The core zone of Mahasthan based on PC Sen 1929.

as a protected area. The five mile protected radius may act as buffer zone for proper protection and management of the historic site.

Besides the archaeological remains, there are some mosques of Mughal and pre-Mughal period in the area. In addition many buildings of British period are located here. There are traditional pottery based artisans' villages situated at Shekerkola in Bogra Sadar. The area of Shekerkola, Mouza is 284 acres and its population is 1108 (Population census 2001). There is also a blacksmith village at Dhaua Para in Bogra Sadar. Structures in the local villages of the Bogra district are comprised of traditional adobe architecture. The houses commonly have walls and floors of local clay and roofs of thatch and terracotta tiles. The traditional settlements reveal significant features of the indigenous architecture in the region.

² Grounded theory is the systematic generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method. Grounded theory is not a finding, but rather is an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses. (Glaser, 1998)

Table 1: Population census: 2001 & Rahman: 2000

Upojela	Area (km ²)	Population	Population Density / sq Km	Growth rate of population %	No of identified Early Historic & Early Medieval Sites
Bogra Sadar	398.57	694077	1741	1.66	70
Kahaloo	238.79	195565	819	.65	17
*Shibganj	3.15.92	352415	1118	1.2	32, including the citadel.
Sherpur	296.27	286303	966	2.26	5
Nandigram	265.47	168155	633	1.32	7
Dhupchanchia	162.45	160894	990	.76	4

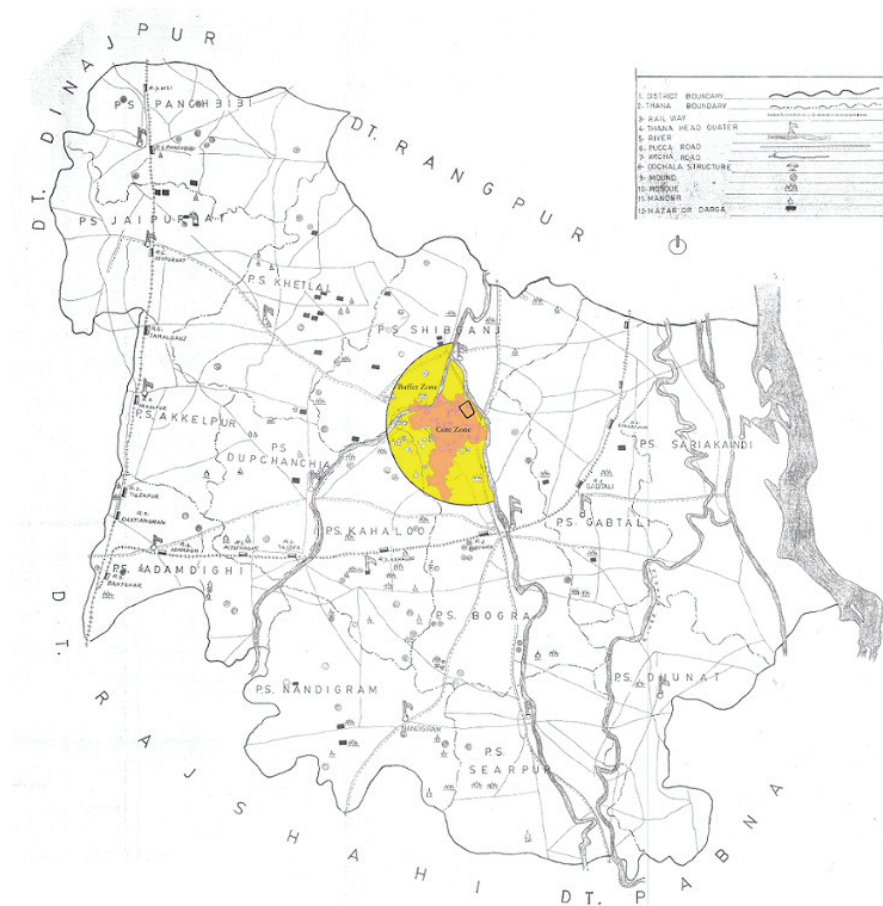


Figure 2:
Core zone & Buffer zone on the map of the Bogra District . (Hossain, 2011a).

Intangible Heritage

The cultural festivals and activities like Baishaki mela, Chand mela at Shiladevir ghat ,Poradaho mela, Sesh Baishaki mela at the Mazar area of the Moahasthan citadel are deeply rooted in the cultural landscape of the historic zone. There are many legends and folklore associated with the cultural landscape of Mahasthan. Behula-Laksindarer Basar-ghar is popularly known as the nuptial room of the traditional heroine and hero of a popular ballad Behula and Laksindar. It is also associated with the angry snake goddess Manasa.

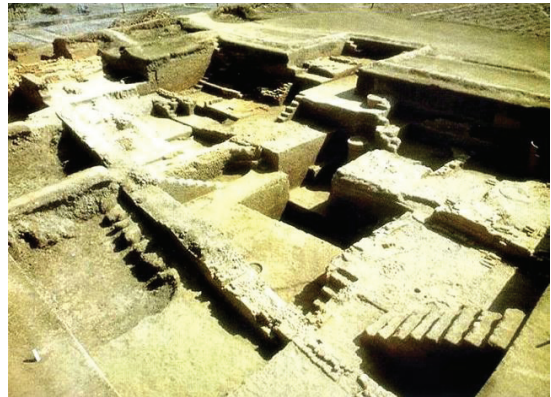


Figure 3:
Excavation at the eastern Rampart area reveals 3rd cent BCE to 12th cent settlements
(source: 1st Interim Report 1993-99).



Figure 4:
Mughal Mosque



Figure 5:
Traditional mud house



Figure 6 & 7:
Mansions of British Period house



EXISTING STATE OF CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

The ownership pattern is diverse for different portions of the site. Most of the areas of the huge site are under various private ownership and are generally used for agriculture. But some of the sites were acquired by Government under the 'Land Acquisition Act 1894'. The Department of Archaeology is the main authority concerned with the management and protection of the site. The Department of Tourism is responsible for promoting the area's tourism. Within the "Antiquities Act, Bangladesh" there exist explicit and implicit mandates for heritage resource protection and conservation.

Large Portions of the Northern and Eastern rampart walls are already preserved & restored by the Department of Archaeology. The Jahaj Ghata and Munirghon were also taken under restoration in different periods. Jiat Kunda, the base remains of the pre Mughal mosque at Mankalir Dhap, is the important remains inside the fortified citadel, that was preserved and restored. Moreover, part of Bhasu Bihara, Bihar Dhap, Godabari Dhap, Govinda Vita and Gokul Medh were also restored (Ahmed, 1975).

FACTORS AFFECTING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE

The following are the key factors affecting the conservation and management of the heritage site:

Lack of community involvement

The overall heritage management system of the site is quite formal in nature and is mainly overseen by the Governmental bodies. So the local communities have a very little role to play in the decision making process. As a result the management system has failed to draw strong responses from the local communities to adopt any decision.

Gap between Conservation and Economic Development

Currently conservation is taken as isolated components of mainstream development. Conservation of the heritage sites have no strong relationships with cross sectoral development programmes. As a result conservational approaches have failed to create a strong impact on the economic



Figure 8:
Traditional festivals.



Figure 9:
Traditional pottery industry.



Figure10:
Govinda Vita , preserved by the Department of Archaeology.



Figure11:
Gokul Medh, preserved by the Department of Archaeology.



Figure12:
Vasu Bihar, preserved by the Department of Archaeology.

development of the local people and unapproved development is exerting serious pressure on the cultural heritage.

Over dependence on standard practices rather than local technique and craftsmanship

In the existing practice of conservation, influence of the western practices is quite high and local context

is overlooked. As a result, local knowledge and skills are not sufficiently utilized used during conservation.

PLANNING CONSERVATION

Conservation planning for the huge urban zone of the ancient Mahasthan is a very complex issue, so a number of small schemes will be more effective rather than a large one. On the basis of the present context and limitations of management and technical capacity, different phases of site conservation may be planned. One conservational challenge is to valorize both tangible and intangible cultural components.

Shifting Notion from Formal to Informal Heritage Management

World Heritage Committee New Zealand session, 2007, declares that “The identification, management and successful conservation of heritage must be done, where possible, with the meaningful involvement of human communities, and the reconciliation of conflicting interests where necessary. It should not be done against the interests or with the exclusion or omission of local communities”. [needs a reference number here] In the traditional neighborhoods of Mahasthan, communities have been living for generations and have formed a sense of belonging to the place.

The benefit of this attachment is evident in cases where the community is directly involved in heritage management. For example, active involvement and support of the community in the heritage management process ensure that the heritage enclaves of the traditional cottage industries [see fig 9] are protected from decay and loss. Even in the case of tangible heritage the mosques of Mughal period [see figure: 4] are well managed and maintained on regular basis by the local Muslim communities who kept the structures in continuous use. But in the case of mounds like Vasu Bihar, Gokul Medh and Govinda Vita that are managed by Department of Archaeology, it wasn't possible to create similar impact [see figure 10-12]. The community's traditional wisdom about local craft, construction techniques, and most importantly, the intangible, living cultural practices, are manifested in informal heritage management in ways that the formal approach often fails.

Participatory Heritage Conservation

The formal governmental authority of the Department of Archaeology has a tendency to prioritize conservation of the mounds and other archaeological remains at Mahasthan. The heritage of traditional neighbourhoods like the established adobe settlements are always ignored by the formal authority. Such cultural heritage are safeguarded and used by the local communities and embody the local identity and cultural essence in both tangible and intangible forms [see figure 5]. Active community involvement in heritage management or conservation ensures that heritage continues to be valued. Heritage conservation in turn ensures revival of local crafts and helps the communities sustain an economy based on conserving their heritage. People in the local communities are most knowledgeable about their heritage; this is because traditional knowledge about the local crafts and construction techniques are passed on to subsequent generations along with the intangible elements of local customs, traditions, stories and myths. Thus, active involvement of the local people may add some distinct elements in the heritage conservation process.

Strategic Development

Planning the development of the huge urban zone of the ancient Mahasthan is very complex issue. So a number of small schemes will be more effective rather than a large one. Conservation of the site may be planned in small phases. Conservation should focus the on valorization of other potential components like landscape, environment, indigenous settlements and intangible heritage.

Promotion of Cultural Tourism

Tourism development at Mahasthan and its environs encompasses tangible and intangible heritage as important components. Although the archaeological remains of the site are the main focus of tourism, the traditional adobe architecture and traditional festivals may also become important components of heritage tourism. A large number of tourists from local, national and international levels visit the heritage area on a regular basis. So conservation of the tangible heritage must ensure proper exhibition of the historic remains and their values. Unique cultural

practices associated with the land, river, climate, tradition and history of the area are an intangible heritage. It is important to provide different facilities and services to promote the cultural practices; integrating cultural components within the tourism network will foster cultural tourism at the area.

Educational Venture

Mahasthan and its environment are potential sites for an “Ongoing laboratory” for research and study of archaeology, history, conservation, culture, tourism, environment, and architecture. So it is important to enrich the educational prospect of the site by developing it as hub of research and study within an educational network. The largely unexcavated area of the site may generate an opportunity for different universities and institution to conduct laboratory work for archaeological study at the area. A great many students, researchers and teachers from different countries may come to the site for the purpose of their study. The site can be a hub for the study of history, archaeology and conservation through establishing proper linkage with different educational institution.

Socio-Economic Development with Cultural Heritage Component

Facilitating integration of cultural heritage concerns into main stream development programs and building new cross-sectorial operational links is important to economic sustainability. Socio economic development may have significant impact on the cultural dimension of the area. The traditional pottery industries and blacksmith villages are the important cultural components of the area. To valorise the cultural production in the area it is important to upgrade the traditional industries through different schemes like the introduction of micro credit. The traditional mud housing of the local people exhibits the indigenous architecture of North Bengal. It is very important to preserve the traditional techniques and to promote such settlements at the area. Different social development programmes like housing upgrading, technical assistance for self help housing, improving health and sanitation may create an important impact on living conditions at the cultural villages. Tourism development may create opportunities for jobs and small scale businesses to rejuvenate the economic base in the area.

CONCLUSION

The built heritage of Bangladesh is significantly important to explore and maintain the cultural diversity in a global context. As a developing country, Bangladesh needs to explore its cultural resources and prioritise the tourism sector for sustainable development. Like many other developing countries Bangladesh faces formidable limitations in managing its cultural heritage and presenting its potential heritage sites in a global context. Mahasthan and its environs are potential heritage sites which are important in understanding the cultural development of ancient civilizations in Bengal as they represent the earliest city state in Bengal. Like other heritage sites in Bangladesh, Mahasthan faces different challenges due to lack of long-term management plans to maintain sustainable development.

This study has explored the underlying issues and finally outlines a comprehensive approach for conservation. To begin and to facilitate the progress of development and to establish inclusive heritage management programmes, the existing notion of valorisation and cultural development has been shifted from an “isolated approach” to an “integrated approach” where cultural heritage is considered as an important component with different developmental factors within an institutional framework while ensuring the social and economic viability and long-term sustainability.

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