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Varendra: Our First Museum

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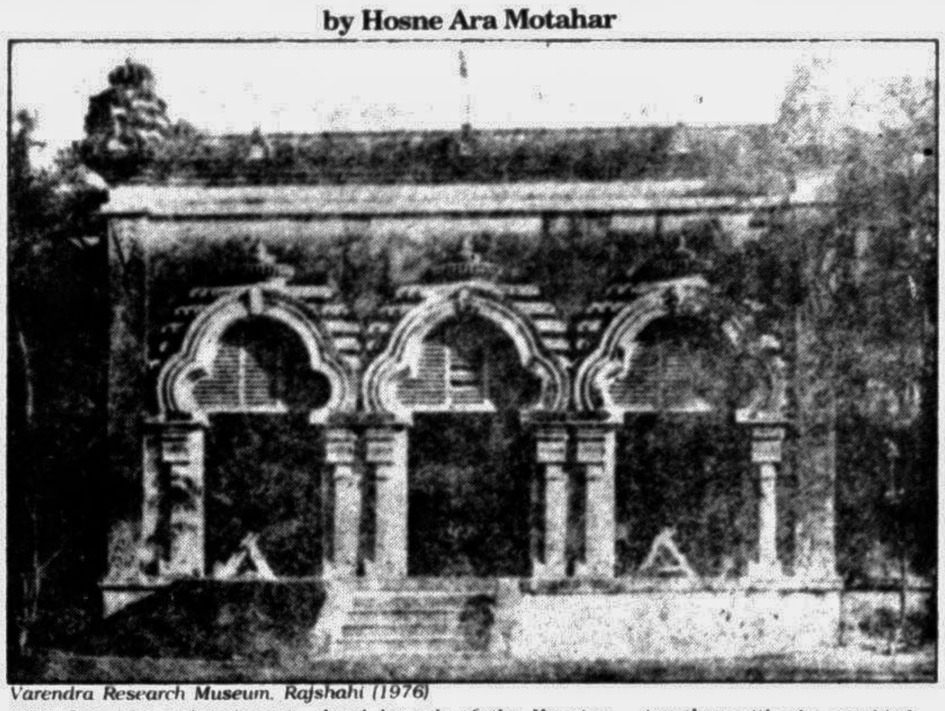

Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (1976)

IT is surprising to note that the first museum of what is now Bangladesh was established not at the initiative of the government but by a private individual. Varendra Research Museum was founded in 1910 by Kumar Sharat Kumar Roy, a descendant of Dighapatiya Raj family of Natore.

Dighapatiya family, noted for its active involvement in social, cultural and educational activities in Rajshahi region, was founded by the influential Dewan of the Natore Raj, Ray Rayan Dayaram Roy (1680-1760). He was succeeded by Jagannath Roy (1745-1790), who had 16 children of whom all had died except one, Prananath Roy. The latter was succeeded by his adopted son Prasannanath Roy (1826-1862). Pramathanath Roy was the next successor in line who left his ancestral properties to his eldest son, Pramadanath Roy and his substantial self-earned properties to his three younger sons, Basanta Kumar Roy, Sharat Kumar Roy and Hemendra Kumar Roy.

Kumar Sharat Kumar Roy, born in 1976, became known as a writer, a liberal patron of literate men and an archaeological researcher. He travelled to see the monuments of Egypt, Italy and India, and also visited the great museums of Europe.

The Varendra Research Museum came into existence as a consequence of a series of events. The second Vangiya Sahitya Sammelan was held at Rajshahi in 1909, where Rama Prashad Chanda had read a paper on the archaeological heritages of Rajshahi. In 1910, the next meeting of the Vangiya Sahitya Sammelan was held at Bhagalpur in Bihar. Sharat Kumar Roy as well as Rama Prashad Chanda and Akshay Kumar Maitra had attended the meeting. At that time they visited the antiquities around Bhagalpur with the famous archaeologist Rakhal Das Banerjee.

They became very enthusiastic about the archaeological treasures that were lying scattered all over the area and decided to explore the Varendra region. Accordingly, soon after his return to Rajshahi, Kumar Sharat Roy had arranged an exploratory tour at his own expenses. He was accompanied by Akshay Kumar Maitra, Rama Prashad Chanda, Shashadhar Roy, Rakhal Das Banerjee and Ramkamal Sinha in this tour. Their exploratory tour was indeed very rewarding as they returned with a handsome collection of 32 valuable Bengal sculptures accumulated from different villages of the Godagari Thana in Rajshahi district.

This small incident of field work and its yields had a positive impact on the influential personalities of Rajshahi and a public reception was arranged to celebrate the success of the exploratory tour by Kumar and others. At the reception, the leaders of the town including the honorary secretary of the local branch of the Vangiya Sahitya Parishad, Shashadhar Roy, requested Kumar Roy to preserve the collected objects in Rajshahi in order to promote the antiquarian studies and research. Though Kumar did not immediately make any commitment at the reception but soon he realized and made up his mind about setting up a museum in Rajshahi to preserve the materials collected from his exploratory tour. Thus with the 32 sculptures the first museum ever in Bangladesh, Varendra Research Museum (it was first called Rajshahi Museum), started its journey in April, 1910 in Rajshahi. The Museum was first housed in the residence of Raj Kumari Induprava, Kumar Roy's sister and then in the ground floor of the Rajshahi Public Library. Subsequently, a purpose-built museum building was constructed to house the Museum.

The success of his first tour together with the establishment of the Museum encouraged Kumar Sharat Roy to take a second exploratory tour in Bogra district in the same year. He was accompanied by Akshay Kumar Mitra, Rama Prashad Chanda and Sriram Mitra. During this tour they organised a society called Varendra Research Society with Kumar Sharat Roy as its President, while Akshay Kumar Maitra and Rama Prashad Chanda became the Director and the honorary Secretary of the Society respectively. The Varendra Museum was under the control of the Varendra Research Society until it was handed over to the Rajshahi University at a later period. The Varendra Research Society was formally inaugurated on 27 September, 1910," for the study of antiquities" and to encourage higher studies and research on the ancient history of Bengal in general and of Varendra region in particular. The Varendra Research Society played a significant role in recognising and bringing into notice the rich potentiality of archaeological wealth and art treasures of Bangladesh.

The government of Bengal was hesitant about allowing the Rajshahi Museum to keep the valuable antiquities for security reasons. But Kumar Sharat Roy promised to build a suitable building in order to ensure the proper safeguard and preservation of the antiquities. Lord Carmichael, the Governor of the Bengal Presidency laid the foundation of the proposed building for the museum on 13th November, 1916. The other members of the Dighapatiya Raj family also contributed towards the building of the Museum as Raja Pramadanath Roy bought the wooden furnitures for the museum while Kumar Basanta Kumar had donated Rs. 5,000/-. Apart from this a generous man named Durgadash Bhattacharya gave away a piece of land for the construction of the Museum building. Kumar Sharat Roy had to buy the rest of the land. The Varendra Research Museum was established on about two acres of land. The new museum building was finally inaugurated and opened to the public on 27th November, 1919 by Lord Ronaldshaw, the governor of the Bengal Presidency.

The Varendra Research Museum was widely recognised immediately after its establishment. It earned a fame as a storehouse of rare collection of Bengal sculptures.

The Varendra Museum did not have an easy start as it faced resistance from other museums of the Sub-continent, the foremost being the Indian Museum, Calcutta. The Indian Museum could not accept the fact that a local museum could collect and keep so many rare and significant antiquities. At one point they even claimed to take over the collection of the Varendra Museum. But the situation was saved by the intervention of FJ Monohan, Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division and finally, of Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal. The Varendra Research Society impressed and convinced the Governor by arranging an exhibition of sculptures and other archaeological and historical remains on the occasion of his visit to Rajshahi in August, 1912. The impact of this Exhibition was so great that soon after this event the government of Bengal issued a circular granting the local museum authorities permission for collection, preservation and display of antiquities. This decision of the government enormously helped the development of Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi and all other local museums.

The Varendra Research Museum was brought under the supervision of the Rajshahi University in October, 1964 and it still remains so.

Arabic inscriptions of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah, 1474 AD, (above), and of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah, (below), stone.

Garuda, stone

Nataraja, stone

China Continues to Yield Priceless Relics

Wang Zhengzhong writes from Beijing

As a cipilization with a history of more than 5,000 years, China has produced countless artefacts

AMAZING archaeological discoveries in China have revealed a bronze culture reaching back more than 3,000 years.

Starting in the 1920s, tens of thousands of bronze utensils have been excavated from the site of Yin, the capital of the Shang Dynasty (around 16th-11th Centuries BC), Anyang in north China's Henan province, and other parts of the country, they demonstrate brilliant techniques, artistic value and craftsmanship.

But where did the copper come from?

The riddle was not solved until the mid-'70s when Tonglu Hill, a copper mineral site in Daye, Hubei province, was discovered. The finds showed it was once an important source for copper mining in China.

Since then, this belief was further enhanced by several extensive excavations in the city of Tongling, in East China's Anhui province. Experts from the Provincial Relics and Archaeological Institute have found nearly 100 mining and smelting sites covering more than 600 square kilometres around the city.

"They span more than 2,000 years from the Shang to Song (960-1279 AD) dynasties, as a national centre of copper mining and smelting," says Professor Hua Jueming, director of the Institute of Natural Science History under the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Lying 300 km away from the Yangtze River's outlet, Tongling's very name refers to "copper mausoleum" in Chinese and first caught the experts' attention in the '70s. There, they found about 20 pieces of rhombus and rust-coloured ingot copper accompanied by bronze vessels and earthenware dating to the Spring and Autumn Period (77-476 BC).

In 1983, says Prof Hua, experts unearthed two bronze wine vessels at Xihu town of Tongling, which belonged to the early or middle phase of the Shang Dynasty. The following year, they found a cellar for storing bronze utensils in the Spring and Autumn Period on Phoenix Hill of Tongling, which contained another rhombus and rust-coloured ingot of copper.

Based on further excavations and studies on Tongling's ancient copper mines, experts came to the conclusion that Tongling was "one of the sources of the world bronze culture."

As a civilization with a history of more than 5,000 years, China has produced countless artefacts which are now displayed in museums nationwide.

The big find stemmed from a survey of cultural relics in southwestern Inner Mongolia. In 1982, a worker from an exploration team picked up some pottery fragments in the village of Xinglongwa.

He reported the discovery and a subsequent search unearthed the remains of a neolithic village — about 7000 years old. It is probably the most completely preserved remains of a primitive village yet unearthed in China.

"It is much more complete than the famous Banpo Village in Shaanxi Province," says Associate Prof Yang Hu, chief of the Inner Mongolia Field Team of Archaeological Research Institute (ARI), under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

In a good state of preservation, the Xinglongwa relics provide rich material for the study of the New Stone Age, and the discovery will probably be designated as one of China's 10 most important archaeological discoveries of the year 1992.

In March last year, a farmer by the name of Zou Qiaogeng unearthed a white fossil skull while digging in the Hulu Karst Cave in Tangshan, a small town east of Nanjing.

The skull is probably that of a female "homo erectus" who lived from 150,000 to two million years ago, says Prof Zhou Gouxing, a renowned paleoanthropologist and researcher at the Beijing Natural History Museum.

"The fossil proves that the Yangtze River, along with the Yellow River, is a cradle of ancient Chinese culture," stresses Mr Zhou, who examined the Tangshan find last June. "And it offers some proof that Jiangsu province was inhabited at least 90,000 years earlier than previously thought."

Located in Jiangning county, which is 20 km from Nanjing, capital of east China's Jiangsu province, Tangshan is in a basin surrounded by mountains stretching in an unbroken chain. Covering a hilly area of 100,000 mu (about 6,667 hectares), the town is known for its fountains and for raw materials used in construction, says Mr Zhou.

After the local farmers accidentally discovered the Leigong (Karst) Cave in 1984, they found the Hulu Karst Cave in 1991, which is even bigger than the former.

Mr Zhou notes that, morphologically, the Nanjing cranium (Zou's discovery) appears similar to that of the Peking Man, examples of which were first found in 1929 buried at Longgu Hill, Zhoukoudian, on the southwestern outskirts of Beijing. The discovery of the Peking Man proved human beings existed 200,000 — 500,000 years ago.

An eight-year study of literature and art left by the medical men on the ancient Silk Road is yielding a remarkable trove of information.

The documents and art are from the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang, once a major hub of the ancient trade route. The grottoes extend 1,600 metres along a cliff near the city in far northwestern Gansu Province.

They were unearthed at the beginning of this century and covered a time span of more than 1,000 years. The art with the medicine theme includes murals and painted clay sculptures.

The grottoes have been described as "a treasure house" of traditional Chinese medicine, with almost all aspects of traditional medicine represented.

One achievement was the discovery of a considerable amount of work, mostly manuscripts, of medical theory, herbal medicine and acupuncture, from the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907 AD). They are considered an invaluable gap-filler in the scarcely-existing literature of the times.

Noteworthy is the finding of the only fragments of the long lost "Variorum of Shen Nong's Herbal, Collective Notes to the Canon of the Materia Medica," compiled by Tao Hongjing from the Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD). The original seven-volume magnum opus, with more than 730 medicinal substances listed, was accepted as a guide for medical practitioners in ancient times.

Also found were fragments of "Dietetic Materia Medica," a Tang monograph recording herbs which can be used as food and drugs. The original had been thought to be lost, though some text remained in the "Classified Materia Medica" and the "Ishinpo," two monographs compiled by Japanese physician Yasurori Tanba (912-995).

Among the works are two important monographs on diagnosis and treatment based on the physio-pathological relationships between the five solid organs (the heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys) and the five sense organs (the nose, eyes, lips, tongue and ears).

China, with its splendid ancient civilization, is the site of hundreds of archaeological excavations every year. Both local and national academic institutions carry out the work.

Feng Haozhang of the ARI's research department lists three types of excavations in China. They are excavations with special academic purposes; excavations at the site where a capital construction project is to be carried out; and rescue excavations to save accidentally discovered relics from further damage.

Excavations are funded by several sources. The ARI, for example, has an annual research grant from CASS. A special project can receive funding from the State Cultural Relics Administration (SCRA) and from the National Fund for Social Sciences.

But the majority of excavations, in cooperation with construction projects, are paid for by project contractors.

Zhao Fusheng, deputy chief of Beijing Cultural Relics Research Institute, says local archaeological institutes get their regular financial grants from local governments. They also have access to the sources mentioned.

Feng Haozhang of ARI complains of lack of funds, which hinders and sometimes prevents active excavations with special academic topics.

Archaeologists are now seeking other sources of funds for their excavations and research, such as foreign funds.

In February 1991, SCRA is-

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Diggers Find Buried History under Busy Road

John Carr writes from Athens

A metro project to build and underground railway in Athens hopes to bring traffic relief to the four million residents of the Greek capital. However, some archaeologists are unhappy about the speed with which the engineers are stripping away layers of Athens' 3,000-year history. They want more time to pore over the finds, which include the finest Roman baths in the Balkans.

WORKERS digging stations for Athens' new underground commuter railway can only dig an inch at a time.

Instead of plain earth, they have to get through layers of ancient rubble representing long periods of Athens' ancient history. There are almost as many archaeologists as workers on the sites, which is why the Athens metro will not be ready for another five years.

"It make one's blood rush," says William Stead, a former University of Pennsylvania archaeologist. He has the task of running the metro project, which the Greek government says will solve Athens' chronic traffic and pollution nightmare, and bring what is Europe's oldest city into the modern public transport era.

Financed by the European Community, and run by a consortium of two dozen Greek, German and French technical companies, the metro project has the task of boring 18 kilometres of underground railway under Athens by 1998.

Stead, at home in a business suit and hard hat, makes it clear that despite the technical objective of the project, the stripping away of layers of Athens' 3,000-year history — often jumbled like the layers of a mille feuilles — holds more fascination for him.

One of the first finds in central Syntagma Square, just inches under one of the city's busiest thoroughfares and right in front of the Parliament building, was what Stead calls "the finest Roman baths in the Balkans, and we didn't even know it was there." The baths were advanced for their time, with a floor resting on squat clay pillars under which hot-steam circulated in an efficient central heating system.

The baths stand out among a dusty pastiche of scattered graves, the remains of shops and homes and gas and sewage pipes. Diggers next to the Roman baths came upon a thick layer of pebbles: the remains of the River Eridanus, known only in the history books.

Syntagma Square, in fact, lies almost on top of the ancient Garden of the Muses near the Lyceum, where the philosophy teachers really did stroll with their eager students. For example, in Plato's Lysis, Socrates is described as meeting up with wisdom-hungry youth "towards the lyceum and under the wall" — a description that fits only the modern square.

Each week it takes to dig one metre deeper, ancient coins and bits of pottery turn up by the hundreds. They are taken away in plastic bags and stored in sheds near the station-digging sites. Archaeologists point out that anything really valuable, such as status, would have been removed in previous eras.

The Greek archaeological establishment remains suspicious of the speed with which the engineers want to get the metro dug. They want more time to pore over the finds. They hark back to the 1890s, when workers on the Athens-Piraeus railway line cut a destructive swath through the Agora, the political and commercial centre of ancient Athens.

But sheer necessity has silenced most qualms. In the past 30 years the number of motor vehicles in Athens has gone from 70,000 to more than a million. Last year 44 per cent of Athen's four million people used public transport, against twice that proportion in 1972. Athens' sole existing commuter railway is just 26 km long and overburdened.

"The city has reached its critical mass," says one project executive. Officials hope that five years from now, 20 new stations will handle 140 million commuters a year.

The archaeologists, seconded by the Greek government, plan to make commuting in the Athens metro an educational experience. Banned from the stations, they say, will be such fixtures as newsstands and snack bars. The public instead will be served with glass-fronted dioramas of vases, statuary, and bits of wall built in the time of Pericles, ancient Athens' most illustrious ruler.

For example, in the station now being dug in the district of Kerameikos — which was ancient Athens' main cemetery — the remains of several Athenians have been lifted from their resting places and left to moulder in storage basements. Some of the artifacts found in their tombs, archaeologists say, could provide the decor for the modern station.

"They will attract a better clientele," says Stead of the project museum-stations.

Though the idea of an Athens metro has been around for at least 30 years, archaeologists' fears of ruining Athens' underground history had dissuaded governments from giving the green light. But technological progress has dissipated those fears. A gigantic French-built tunnelling machine, as long as a football field, will bore through the Athenian bedrock 20 metres below the surface. That is far below even the earliest human habitation.

Digging in Athens' Syntagma Square revealed 'the finest Roman baths in the Balkans'

— GEMINI NEWS

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