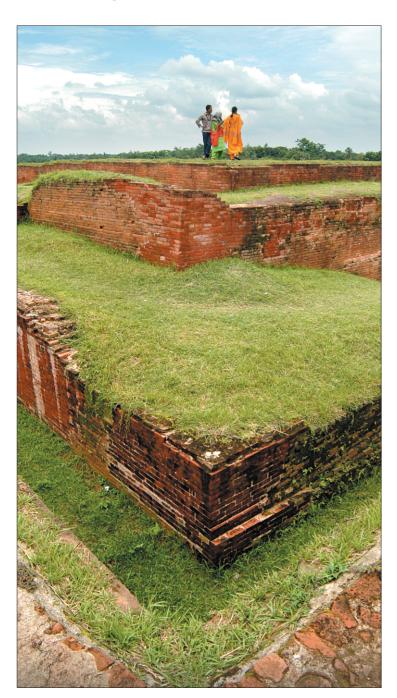


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Mahasthan-Pundranagar

Glory to be treasured

AVING travelled 13 kilometres on the BograDinajpur highway, one cannot ignore a 5m high earthen rampart on the left from where hidden parts of ruined brick wall emerge sparkling, taking us to about 1,500 years to the glorious past of Pundranagar, the earliest (4th century BC) known urban settlement of Bengali civilization.

Pundranagar, presently identified alongside Mahasthangarh, was the capital or the most important city of Pundra Varendra Bhukti-one of the five janapadas (provinces) in the eastern region of this sub-continent according to Varahamihira in the 6th century AD stating that the famous Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang too visited the Pundra-Varendra between 639-645 AD.

In 1879 Sir Alexander Cunningham, Superintendent Archaeological Survey of India, rightly identified these ruins of Mahasthangarh as the ancient city of Pundranagar. It was a vibrant administrative, religious and cultural centre from 4th century BC to 16th century AD. The archaeological evidence proves that it was the provincial capital of pre-Mauryans (4th century BC), Mauryans (3rd century BC), Sunga-Kusana (1st century BC), the Guptas (6th century AD), the Palas (8th century AD), and lastly an important centre of Muslim Sultanate rulers (16th century AD).

Besides the rampart citadel, more isolated mounds are dotted in the adjacent villages within a radius of 8-10 km on the north, south and west, believed to contain cultural remnants of the ancient fortified city of Pundranagar. Govinda Bhita, Laksindarer Medh or Gokul Medh, Bashu Vihara, Bairagir Bhita, Bihar Dhap, Mangalkot and Godaibadi Dhap are the already excavated examples.

Mahasthangarh citadel: The spectacular

site is an imposing landmark, having a fortified oblong enclosure measuring 1,524m long in north-south and 1,370m broad in east-west direction, with an average height of 5m from ground level. The brick rampart walls of the city were successively built in six different periods or phases -- one above the other. The river Karatoya flows on the eastern side and the other three sides are encircled by a deep moat, which formed the defence line of the fort. There are three gateways; two in the northern rampart and one in the eastern. All the gateway complexes consist of a guardroom on the inner side

Noteworthy of the findings are the inscribed stone tablets of the Mauryan period, punch-marked and copper cast coins, black, red and rouletted ware and northern black polished ware. Terracotta plaques of Sungha affiliation, stone and terracotta images, semi-precious stone beads, **bolls**, net-sinkers earthen and metal objects of every day use and a stone slab with Arabic inscription of 16th century are included too.

Govinda Bhita is located on the bank of river Karatoya outside the northern rampart wall of the Mahasthangarh citadel complex. There are two excavated



and bastions projecting towards the outer side of the rampart walls.

A single domed mosque and mazar complex of the early Mughal period occupies the southeast corner of the fort. Resulting in the many excavations of this city, the following remnants are exposed: Munir Ghon, Bairagi Bhita, Parasuram's palace, Jiyat Kunda, Mankalir Kunda, Khodar Phahar, Dorab Shah Mazar and Tamra Darwaza. Besides traces of the foundation, there remains the superstructure of these excavated sites, along with a large number of movable objects of its inhabitants that were discovered.

temples-eastern and western, within a massive enclosure. These temples were constructed and reconstructed in four successive periods commencing from late Gupta period (6th century AD). Gokul Medh is located around 5 km south west of the complex of the village Gokul. This site popularly known as Behular Bashar Ghar or Lokshminderer Medh is a 13m high podium consisting of 172 blind cells. On the flat top of this podium a Buddhist religious stupa or temple was built in 6th century AD. During the rule of Senas in 11th centuries another temple was built on the ruins of

the former Buddhist one. The substructure appears to have been decorated with ornamental bricks containing floral and geometrical motif of ornamentation. Attention is now focused on the site inside the citadel and a few explored sites around one feels that the feeder zone of Mahasthan lies with a radius of 8-10 km, where unexplored sites scattered around, certainly illuminates the history of Mahasthan and the Bengali heritage

The entire Mahasthan periphery is densely populated and under constant modification. Nevertheless, there are still several visible constructions around the site of Mahasthan. A detailed satellite area survey is therefore absolutely necessary, because many of the unexplored sites are badly damaged and endangered by modern developments by the local people, as well as governmental agencies

It is also unfortunate that the European experts, who help restore our heritage, also built a permanent luxurious rest house near their excavation site on a permanent brick foundation, opposing the international conservation guidelines. Who knows! Our cultural properties are lying under the foundation of their luxurious rest house, which is used only for two to three months in a year during their stay in Bangladesh.

An earnest appeal to the concerned department and government that an area conservation project should be undertaken urgently. Stop unauthorised construction in and around the Mahasthangarh. Protect and prolong the life of our cultural, archaeological and architectural heritages.

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