

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

History in Our Hands

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Coins of ancient times can be compared to today's media. An ancient coin can tell you about who was in power during its origination, offering detailed insights about the reign and disposition of the monarch of a particular place. In ancient Greece, for example, coins with olive branches on them would mean that the ruler of a particular kingdom desired peace. A coin with arrows on it would mean that the king was a warmonger.

While most of us are content with earning, spending and saving money, there are some whose joy in lucre is derived from from collecting the shiny coins we're so eager to get our hands on. Starting from the Roman emperor Julius Caesar to American president Thomas Jefferson, coin collectors who assiduously track and hoard rare or precious coins are an interesting bunch, with great stories to tell.

Md Noorul Islam considers collecting coins to be a passion rather than a mere hobby. With over 2000 ancient coins in his collection, the 84-year old former civil engineer still feels the excitement and thrill of adding a new coin to his valuable compilation.

Islam was entrusted with the construction of an irrigation project under the Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation of the then East Pakistan government. When he started levelling the land, Islam found little buildings surrounded by a jungle of trees. Realising that he had unearthed the ruins of an ancient civilisation, Islam burnt down the jungle to unearth the city underneath. What he discovered within the ruins changed the young engineer's life forever.

He went to the then Chairman of the Islamic History and Culture Department of Dhaka University, Professor ABM Habibullah with the cache of coins he had discovered in the ruins. Eager to preserve a part of ancient Bengal, Professor Habibullah entrusted the responsibility of further excavation of the said spot to eminent archaeologist Dr Nazimuddin Ahmed. After studying the coins for nearly a month with a team of 30 scholars, Dr Nazimuddin realised that the coins were of immense cultural and historic value. He sought to ensure complete preservation of all the priceless coins trapped in the ruins. However, hopes of preserving these national treasures could not immediately be met due to a lack of funds from the government of East Pakistan. Dr Nazimuddin then approached the Central government of Pakistan to fund the project but managed only to collect an insignificant amount.