

Bhitargarh: destroyed before discovery

ZYMA ISLAM

There was a king named Prithu Raja in northern Bangladesh in the 13th century. He had a fort city in Panchagarh called Bhitargarh, and he may or may not have died by committing suicide in a lake. This is the extent of what we know about this ancient fort city and its king. The rest hides beneath the rolling green fields and tea gardens of Amarpara union.

Ask around and people will say that the main attraction of Amarpara union in Panchagarh is a vast lake, locally called Moharajar Dighi, which stretches up until the border with India. You can come to this place to bask in the gusts of wind coming in from the lake and munch on the piping

not be invented for another 1,500 years from the time that archaeological experts believe this structure to have been built.

You may not know—many of the tourists visiting this place don't—but you are standing on top of a dam belonging to the ancient city. The centuries have not been kind. Layers of earth cover the dam and large trees have taken root from atop, and even the stairs that you just used to climb have been constructed by slicing into the dam. But it's all there, waiting to be unearthed and revived.

"Bhitargarh is the largest fortified settlement in South Asia, extending over an area of about 25 square kilometres



A terracotta artefact unearthed from the excavation site. PHOTO: ANANTA YUSUF



Dr Shahnaj Husne Jahan's team excavating a temple. It has been covered with earth since then for protection.

PHOTO: COURTESY

hot *piyajju* being offered by hawkers. Then you can choose to climb up either of the oddly shaped hillocks flanking the *ghat* of the lake—the mounds even have short staircases built into them for easy access. I chose the one on the right.

The first thing you notice is that the mound is not exactly the hillock it poses to be. It seems to stretch on for yards and yards...almost like a wall. There are bricks jutting out from the beneath the roots of the trees, and the bricks are narrow and red and not layered in with cement. They do not look like they are from this time. Because they are not. In fact, cement would

enclosed within four concentric quadrangles surrounded by ramparts and moats," informed Dr Shahnaj Husne Jahan, an archaeologist and professor at University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh who has been researching the site since 2008. The whole union is littered with subterranean temples and monuments, she found.

However, 10 years on, the government has taken no initiative to unearth and preserve this city. Meanwhile, the situation is further complicated by the fact that almost all of this lies buried under private property.

For example, last week an 11-year-old

boy led me to his grandfather's plot of land to show me the ruins of a structure. They have planted tea saplings across the plot, in hopes of turning it into a tea garden.

"There, do you see it?" he asked.

"See what?" I replied.

He pointed to a patch on the ground where the rocks were more reddish and polygonal, and suddenly it seemed impossible that I had missed this. It was clearly the top of some archaeological remain, trying to burst its way through the earth's crust.

Similarly, another pyramid shaped temple upheld by rows of broad columns lies under the home of an old woman named Ashima. The locals call the site *Rajar bhita*.

"The pillars start right from here," Ashima, a sexagenarian matriarch who goes by one name, pointed out, "and goes on all the way under those homes." Small piles of medieval (or maybe even pre-medieval) bricks lay around Ashima's house, and her chickens have pecked away at holes in the bricks for tasty bugs.

Ashima's home consists of three houses gathered around a courtyard, with a sizeable betel nut garden in the backyard. The pyramid-shaped temple lies beneath all of this, Dr Jahan and her team have found.

And herein is the problem—if this temple has to be unearthed and displayed before the public, Ashima's entire household has to be moved.

Ashima, however, states that she would consider giving up her ancestral land if the government approached her with compensation and land somewhere else.

"But nobody from the government has ever approached me with anything," she said. Three years ago, in 2016, the then director-general of the Department of Archaeology, Altaf Hossain, had told this newspaper that they were trying to acquire the land from the locals with the help of the ministry. Seems as if the owner of the land holding one of the most important archaeological monuments within Bhitargarh is yet to be contacted regarding this.

Continued to page 11