



A broken hand of an idol of Vishnu discovered from the site.

PHOTOS: ANANTA YUSUF



Ancients measuring weights were also found at the site.

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Almost all the locals this correspondent spoke to said the same thing—nobody from the department of archaeology has visited them in a long time.

Meanwhile, even though the sites at Bhitargarh are protected by a direct order from the High Court, destruction continues. “The locals own the land, and use it as they see fit, without being conscious of protecting the



A broken pot, recovered

heritage,” stated Dr Jahan. She has been documenting the sites for a decade now, and has volumes of photographs archiving the destruction. She flipped through them one by one. “Here, you can see the school. The boundary wall of Bhitargarh runs past the school. And here you can see that they built a toilet right on top of the boundary wall,” showed Dr Jahan. “This happened even after multiple efforts at raising awareness.”

Another photo showed a security forces camp built right on top of a Bhitargarh

structure. One photo captured how locals were building an *eidgah* by clearing out the Bhitargarh boundary wall as a part of a government work scheme. More photos showed a desecrated column, a wall built on top of Bhitargarh’s ancient boundary wall, missing bricks, monuments cut, cleaned and cleared. A map of the destruction of the site made by the researchers pinpoints mazars, mosques, hotels, poultry farms, irrigation channels, tea gardens, all built on top of the archaeological structures.

“There is even a temple underneath the village graveyard. The villagers routinely dig new graves there,” stated Dr Jahan—acquiring this site would undoubtedly prove the most complicated.

Ironically, her first interaction with this site more than 10 years back was when she came across a woman cutting out a part of the boundary wall. “I asked her why she was doing that. She said she was taking bricks to lay out a new floor in her home,” Dr Jahan described. She has had plenty such encounters since then with people attempting to destroy the heritage site.

It is of utmost importance that this site be protected and researched into because of how little information there is out there about Raja Prithu. “We find references to several *rajas* named Prithu beginning from the seventh century till the 13th century,” stated Dr Jahan. “For example, the first king of the Khen dynasty that existed in the geopolitical entity of Kamrup (a region extending from north of Bangladesh to Assam and beyond) was one Prithu.”

“Then there was another Prithu mentioned in a 13th century text called *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, but we are yet to find any inscriptions or archaeological evidence

pinpointing which one was the king of Bhitargarh,” added the professor, who also heads the Centre for Archaeological Studies at ULAB.

*Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* is a Persian historical volume written in 1260, and it detailed the life and exploits of a 13th century Mamluk emperor called Sultan Nasir Uddin. In that ancient text, Prithu Raja is recorded to have resisted the Islamic invasion from Central Asia, and it states that he had killed “one hundred and twenty thousand Musalmans.” He was eventually killed by Sultan Nasir Uddin, the text states. An Assamese historian named Kanaklal Barua put the year of Prithu Raja’s death at around 1228 AD, in a 1932 article called “Stemming the tide of Muslim conquest in India” published in the *Journal of Assam Research Society*.

There is yet another story about who Prithu Raja may have been, and how he died. In a book chapter written by Dr Jahan herself, and published last year, the archaeologist mentioned how noted British colonial surveyor Dr Francis Buchanan-Hamilton visited Bhitargarh in early 19th century, and recorded local tales of a Prithu Raja. Buchanan-Hamilton said that the king had died by committed suicide in order to save himself from a tribe called Kichak coming from the north.

The research team led by Dr Jahan have found important artefacts like household items, and part of an idol of Vishnu—but more waits to be found. Perhaps the biggest thing yet to be discovered is who the king was, and during what time he reigned. To do this, the site needs to be protected and acquired. The question is, will the site get destroyed before the government gets to that point?



Dr Shahnaj Husne Jahan is pictured here, measuring an excavated boundary wall.

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