

The mystery of Chawkbazar's lost ARTEFACTS

Dispute between DoA, excavation team leaves history of relics mired in the unknown



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TARUN SARKAR

Years after some 30-40 ancient artefacts were discovered from inside the old central jail compound in Old Dhaka's Chawkbazar area, information regarding the total number of artefacts at the site or their age is yet to be ascertained due to an internal issue between the Department of Archaeology (DoA) and the excavation team.

The artefacts include ancient coins, cowry, pieces of clay pots, terracotta balls and more, said sources at the DoA.

In 2016, a government technical committee appointed Prof Sufi Mostafizur Rahman, of Jahangirnagar University's archaeology department, as supervisor of the excavation site. However, despite repeated requests from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the DoA, he is yet to submit his report.

Earlier on April 11 this year, The Daily Star ran a report titled 'Chawkbazar Jail: Ruins offer trip deep into Old Dhaka history'.

Following the report, authorities concerned started pressurising Prof Mostafizur to submit his report.

Contacted, the professor said the report

the jail authorities appointed him.

On June 11, 2017, the DoA gave approval to Home Ministry to conduct excavation at the site, imposing three conditions, which included that the excavation work must be conducted in the presence of a representative of the department.

The department proceeded to assign Razia Sultan, former assistant custodian of Lalbagh Fort Museum, as its representative.

Interestingly, the excavation team led by Prof Sufi completed the excavation works by July 24, 2017, the same day that Razia Sultan joined the team.

After this, Razia in a letter to her superiors claimed that she was not fully aware about the numbers of artefacts that were found in the site as the excavation work was completed before she joined.

Following the letter, officials of the Department of Archaeology tried to visit the site to scrutinise the artefacts, but they were denied access by the jail authorities.

Later, in December 2019, the department's director general (DG) sent a letter to the secretary of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs explaining the overall situation.

took some photographs of the artefacts. Now, they are in the process of studying the artefacts.

Asked about the numbers of artefacts at the site, he asked The Daily Star to speak to Halima Afroz.

Contacted, Halima declined to comment on the issue and suggested this correspondent talk to Rakhi Roy, Dhaka Divisional regional director of the DoA.

However, despite multiple attempts, this correspondent could not reach Rakhi—she did not respond to the calls or the text



messages left for her.

Contacted, technical committee member and eminent historian Professor Muntasir Mamun said, 'Earlier, we had decided to showcase the artefacts found in the old jail compound. We requested the jail authorities several times to publish the excavation report, but they said they were still trying to collect it.' He opined the report should be published immediately for the sake of public interest.

Another member of the technical committee eminent architect Prof Abu Sayeed M Ahmed said, 'We cannot devise the next plan of action on this issue in absence of the report.'

The project's director, Home Ministry Joint Secretary Md Ali Reza Siddiquee, could not be contacted over phone.

Contacted, Brigadier General ASM Anisul Haque, Inspector General of Prisons, said he had only recently joined his post and as such was unable to make a comment on the issue. Earlier in April this year, Prof Sufi told The Daily Star that he conducted the excavation for around three months at four spots in the prison between 2017 and 2018.

'I have got some significant ancient archaeological evidence there. But the technical committee asked me not to publish my findings. They are even barring me from working there,' he had said.

That time, this correspondent contacted Prof Muntasir Mamun, who denied the allegations and said Prof Sufi had personally published a brochure containing information on the excavation.

Prof Sufi wanted to hold a press conference to disclose the findings without taking the consent of the technical committee, he added.

'We repeatedly asked him [Sufi] to submit a report with the findings before the technical committee. But it is a matter of great regret that he did not do it,' said Prof Muntasir Mamun in April this year.

Brimming with History

Built on the banks of the rivers Buriganga, Turag, Balu and Tongi, Dhaka was urbanised centuries ago. For the last five hundred years, the city has gone through numerous iterations, but Chawkbazar has remained an important marker of the city's past and present. It was the political, administrative and commercial hub during the Sultanate, Mughal, and Nawab periods, and as such, has long been designated as a historically and archeologically significant area of the capital.

In terms of both number and variety, the highest number of artefacts has been found in Chawkbazar in Dhaka. An ancient stone statue of Basudev was found during an excavation on the Churihatta Mosque premises in 1906. In 2011, the Dhaka Architectural Writing Committee found a Nateshwar statue – a prominent symbol in art from the Chandra dynasty, dating back to the 10th and 11th century – at Sarangdhor monastery in the area.

The oldest artefact from the Sultanate period in Chawkbazar is an inscription about the renovation of Urdu Road Mosque, excavated in the 19th century. According to the inscription – now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum – the construction of the arch of the mosque in Chawkbazar was completed in 1459.

It is still unclear exactly when the Chawkbazar Fort was constructed, but it can be confirmed that it existed during the rule of the Bengal Sultanate between the 14th and 16th centuries. At the time, it was surrounded by palaces, treasury, courts and administrative offices. The fort was possibly renovated before Islam Khan reached Dhaka after being appointed as a subedar during the Mughal period.

The area's political and commercial importance started to decline with the beginning of East India Company rule. The office of the then nayeb-e-nazim, who was the administrative chief of Dhaka, was relocated to Nimgoli Palace from Chawkbazar

Fort. The fort eventually became a mental asylum and prison. The latter remained in operation during British and Pakistani rule and in independent Bangladesh, till it was finally closed down in 1976.

This jailhouse has a significant place in recent history too, bearing witness to the anti-British movement, Language Movement, and the Liberation War. Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and many key important figures in the country's politics served time here as political prisoners. The assassination of four national leaders took place here in 1975.

The government formed a technical committee – Committee for Documentation in Architectural Sites in Dhaka – comprising representatives from the home ministry, prison authorities and Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh, architects, planners, and historians in 2016 to oversee the process of turning the old prison into a heritage site and urban oasis.

Historians say that if exploration continues in Chawkbazar, more artefacts can be discovered in the future.



Historians and archaeologists think more archaeological evidence from the Mughal, Sultanate and Sen eras or before these can be found at the old central jail.

PHOTOS: RASHED SHUMON

will be submitted, but could not say when.

The Chawkbazar fort was constructed during the Sultanate rule between the 14th and 16th centuries. Eventually, the fort was turned into a mental asylum 1819 and a prison in 1836. The asylum was shut down after some years, but the prison came to be the Dhaka Central Jail and remained in operation till 45 years after the country's independence.

After July 1966, inmates were shifted to the newly built jail in Keraniganj, as the government took initiatives to preserve this historic site.

The same year, the government formed the technical committee with representatives from the home ministry, prison authorities and DoA, along with architects, planners, and historians. It is now overseeing the work of converting the old prison into an urban oasis.

It was this committee that proposed the name of Prof Sufi Mostafizur Rahman as the supervisor of the excavation, following which

On the basis of the letter, the cultural affairs secretary in January 2020 wrote to the secretary of the Home Ministry, citing that the excavation team did not comply with the conditions of excavation.

Later, the ministry asked the jail authorities to take necessary measures to publish the excavation report regarding the ancient artefacts found at the site.

In response, jail authorities sent a letter to the DoA, seeking representatives to prepare the list of artefacts.

The department appointed two representatives. Of them, one was Md Tanjilur Rahman, assistant custodian of Lalbagh Fort Museum, who was made a full-time representative, while Halima Afroz, custodian of Lalbagh Fort Museum, was made a part-time representative.

Contacted, Tanjilur said he along with the excavation team visited the excavation site two or three times in July and August. They

