

DECAYING *In* Silence

The ancient terracotta temples of Munshiganj need urgent conservation

It's the duty of the archaeology department to preserve these maths. A nationwide survey must be conducted to assess the most significant ones for preservation. But has such a survey been done?

Dr Sufi Mustafizur Rahman
A professor of Archaeology at JU

PHOTO: STAR

Once part of a sacred complex encircled by a moat, these temples retain echoes of their former glory. However, the intricate plaster work that once adorned their surfaces has succumbed to erosion, leaving the structures vulnerable to the elements.

TANJIL HASAN

In the verdant landscape of Munshiganj district, a treasure trove of ancient terracotta temples, known as "maths" in Bangla, stand as silent witnesses to a bygone era of architectural grandeur and cultural richness.

These temples, erected by prominent local figures, are not merely structures of stone and clay; they are enduring symbols of religious devotion and artistic brilliance that have weathered the tides of time.

However, as the years have rolled on, many of these majestic relics have succumbed to the ravages of neglect and the unforgiving forces of nature.

'MATHS' OF MUNSHIGANJ

Among these architectural wonders lies the Chowdhury Bazar Math, nestled in the Mahakali union, a mere 4.8 kilometres from the bustling heart of Munshiganj town.

This exquisite temple, crafted in the late 18th century during the waning years of the Mughal period, is a splendid representation of the distinctive "Pancharatna" style.

Its striking five-faced spire, or sikhara, rises elegantly to a height of 14 metres above the square sanctum, commanding the attention of all who pass by.

The once-vibrant terracotta motifs that adorned its facade now lay in ruins, victims of decades of exposure and wear. The southwest side's spire has vanished entirely, leaving behind an unsettling emptiness that mirrors the



of time are evident. Sections of plaster are peeling away, and the cornices are eroding, a somber reflection of the state of decay that grips so many temples in Munshiganj.

The impressive sikhara soars to a height of 21.15 metres, yet its kalasha finial is conspicuously absent, a silent testament to the ongoing struggle for preservation.

The urgent need for attention and restoration of these historic structures has sparked conversations among local authorities and residents alike.

Mostafizur Rahman, the Tongibari upazila nibabhi officer, said, "These temples have very visually aesthetic architecture. We will take measures to enhance their security. Additionally, we will try to preserve them by discussing with stakeholders."

MORE SITES IDENTIFIED BY AUTHORITIES

An archaeological survey report published in 2000 by the Department of Archaeology under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Bangladesh, identified 12 significant maths in Munshiganj.

Sites such as Fegunaser Math, Tongibari Math, Tegharia Math, Sarker Math, Hasara Math, Bejgaon Math, Dhairpara Math, and Kanakshar Math were included in this significant enumeration.

Each of these sites represents a unique architectural heritage, yet they too are facing the ravages of neglect.

The intricate spires, gracefully curved cornices, and delicate plasterwork that once stood as symbols of artistic excellence are slowly disappearing, leaving behind mere shadows of their former selves.

A CALL FOR PRESERVATION

The gradual decline of these historic structures has sparked calls for urgent preservation efforts.

Mojib Rahman, a local writer and activist, underscored the importance of preserving these temples, describing them as among the finest examples of late Mughal and early British-era architecture. "These temples should be preserved for future generations," he said.

Contacted, Afroza Khan Mita, the regional director of the archaeology department, acknowledged the daunting challenges faced in preserving these temples on a national scale.

"There are hundreds of maths across the country. It's not possible to preserve all of those. We must prioritise the most important ones. However, stakeholders can take initiative locally to help preserve them," she said.

Dr Sufi Mustafizur Rahman, a professor in the Department of Archaeology at Jahangirnagar University, stressed the necessity of comprehensive surveys to ascertain the most significant temples for preservation.

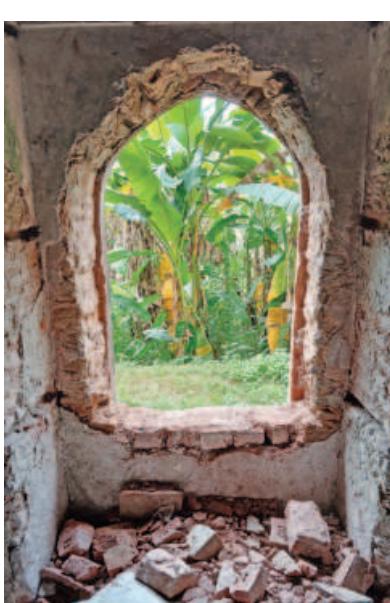
"It's the duty of the archaeology department to preserve these maths. A nationwide survey must be conducted to assess the most significant ones for preservation. But has such a survey been done?" he questioned.

He said urgent action must be taken to preserve these archaeological heritages.

Locals said these temples stand as testaments to a time when artistry flourished, and faith was intricately intertwined with culture. These sacred spaces continue to inspire awe and reverence for generations to come.

They must be preserved properly.

It is not just the responsibility of the authorities; it is a shared duty of the community, local stakeholders, and those who hold dear the legacy of Munshiganj, said locals.



temple's gradual decline.

Instead of safeguarding this cultural gem, a union land office has sprung up beside it, encased within a brick wall that starkly contrasts with the temple's intricate artistry.

The Chowdhury Bazar Math, with its echoes of the past, stands in silent protest against the encroachment of contemporary development.

Venturing further into the heart of Tongibari, one discovers the Outshahi Math, another remarkable edifice that captures the spirit of the region.

Built in the early 19th century, this eight-faced sikhara-style temple rises majestically to 19 metres, its former elegance now marred by the passage of time.

The intricate designs that once graced its exterior have begun to erode, with the temple's kalasha finial, an ornamental crown, missing from its summit. The entrance, once an ornate threshold to the divine, now lies in a state of disrepair, the signs of neglect etched into its very structure.

"It's heartbreaking to see such architectural gems deteriorating due to a lack of restoration effort," said Narayan Chandra Das, an elderly local whose memories are intertwined with these sacred sites.

His words resonate with the collective sentiment of the community, who view these temples as integral to their cultural identity.

The twin temples of Jora Math, dedicated to



sanctuary measuring 3.85 metres on each side, crowned by a dome that tapers elegantly towards its apex.

Inside, the remnants of intricate motifs whisper tales of craftsmanship and artistry, yet the ravages