

IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVING MUGHAL RIVER FORTS AT NARAYANGANJ, BANGLADESH: A UNESCO CRITERIA BASED PUBLIC OPINION ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Preservation of historically important buildings is a growing practice throughout the global North. In Bangladesh, however, public knowledge and support for the preservation of historic places are still lacking. There seems to be an obvious deviation from the UNESCO standard in that, as the majority of conceptual adaptations of heritage protection laws appear to overlook context, values, and history. Law enforcement and structural significance are given greater weight in Bangladesh than intangible aspects like historical impact or regional identity. Its traditional and extinct character, its creative genius and technological triumphs from the past, and, altogether, its remarkable value are all neglected. This leading to a lack of public awareness and inadequate reach for law enforcement. To showcase the Mughal river forts, this article provides two case studies: Sonakanda fort and Hajiganj fort. The first section of the paper discusses the context of the area, local urban identity, and historic relevance in order to define the scope of the study. After then, a comparison was made for heritage protection, between Bangladesh's current legal framework and the global standard. Finally, in order to address and reconcile these gaps in reality, public opinion was sought. Eventually, a few suggestions and recommendations were discovered for upgrading of those antiquated historical regulations, landscape development, environmental policies and safeguarding such urban heritage structures, the majority of which are in jeopardy because of the rapid urbanisation tendency and public awareness.

Keywords: Mughal forts, heritage preservation, local identity, urban context, public awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The locations of every river fort show some interesting significance that establishes an important connection between Mughal history and the greater Dhaka region. They can bring the conception of unique and lost connectivity that they established in a hostile land to light and reveal a straight-line progression, from Idrakpur fort at the south to Dhapa fort at the west, to Beg Murad fort in the east to Jamalpur fort in the north, and other extinct forts at further points of Bengal (Taylor, 1840). These river forts, along with the trade centres, are definitely the witnesses of such an era, which reflects the expansion time of the world's most prosperous dynasty, its conquest and failures in Ahom

kingdom, and subsequently, the military strategies associated with defensive shelters in a faraway and troublesome province in innovative ways (Doza, 2015). It also resembles how the Mughal engineering knowledge and technological advancement of north Indian territories inspired road network establishment here and stretched its dominance in the watery topography of Bengal with adaptive communication modes: river forts, bridges (Tangi and Pagla), and inclusion of strong naval fleets in the army (Ball, 1925). The Mughal Empire's desperate clinch of Bengal was something exceptional for its wealth; such a defence and stronghold strategy was never implemented in any other parts of India, and has no parallel in South Asian history. If Mughals are considered intruders, then their main focus was revenue collection with

opportunities for expansion of the empire and establishing profitable monopolies in businesses like betel leaf, war elephant, slave trade, silk, and muslin (Karim, 1995) rather than the 'well-being' of the local Bengalis. The huge wealth of Bengal needs to be exploited to run a vast empire; scholars believe that 50% of India's revenue was collected from Bengal. The taxation survey of Raja Todar Mal and the climatic survey of Abul Fazl were implemented immediately to achieve the results of new land reformation and annual tax collection according to the local solar calendar by considering agriculture and harvesting times (Heaney, 1968). This period saw astonishing agricultural productivity, rapid Islamization led by Sufi practices, and tremendous population growth in Bengal (Mowla, 2003).

The regional history of whole eastern India was changed due to the presence of these river forts; for example, the Portuguese were driven out of Bengal for the presence of this fort (Sircar, 1971), while the English were able to establish their colony due to the weakening of Mughal influence and the emergence of independent nawabs in Murshidabad, and above all, the question of the extraction of Bengal's treasure trove (Mehta, 2005). Most importantly, Dhaka, the capital city of today's Bangladesh, could not have been a successful and prosperous city without the support of this river fort network, which ensured safety (Mohsin, 1991; Rapson et al., 1937). The city's pro-industrial economy was achieved by maritime supremacy and trade through an obedient feudal system comprised of Hindu landlords where various craftsmen used to gather in tax-free zones of the city core to make the city viable (Mamun, 1993; Dani, 1962).

However, it is evident that not all of the pre-existing Afghan forts, known as Garaz, were converted; only major junctions of the river route were chosen. Once built, captured, and occupied, all acted as strategic expansion posts of the Mughal occupation in Bengal and beyond. These acted as expedition posts to conquer Assam, Tripura, Chittagong, and Sylhet to include the territories with mainland India (Chakma, 2006; Majid, 2016). Also, the Mughals developed a triangle of defence to control the entrance pathway of Dhaka via Khijirpur, controlling a waterway route of mayhem creators like Portuguese and Burmese pirates that connected the Dholai River (mistakenly regarded as a canal today) and the Shitalakshya River as these were the main entry routes of the waterway (Begum, 2002). Today, the major issues that the forts are facing are that reminiscence of all other forts has already vanished, while the existence of major forts is dilapidated due to the lack of public awareness and authority's mismanagement. Hopefully, all of these Mughal

archaeological sites could be easily included in UNESCO's World Heritage List as heritage series. Including these forts as a series of monuments in the nomination process for such a list would be a prior recommendation from this study requiring dedicated research (Ahmed, 2023).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH:

This first objective of this research is to identify the scope of the effectiveness of UNESCO benchmarks or similarly moulded standards in Bangladesh's local heritage context. Secondly, this study will try to understand how locals perceive and experience the Mughal river forts of medieval Bengal in today's urban context; are they aware of the value, authenticity, and integrity of these forts. Awareness and recognition can help protect relics in the future with public support. Such investigations will help to trace the level of public awareness for heritage conservation in Bangladesh implying attitudes to other similar heritage at risk throughout the country. Finally, to find out key factors and reasons for deterioration and risk in the existing situation of heritage conservation and preservation, the study re-examine the failures and shortcomings of existing law enforcement and heritage management (not economically but strategically) and gives suggestions and recommendations accordingly.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The scope of the research is to identify distinguished characteristics and context specifications, to analyse the morphology of the river forts along with the urban fabric in Narayanganj based on public opinion through pictographic survey, and technical documentation. The study tries to eradicate the misunderstandings of current laws for heritage protection and recommends some amendments for future betterment. The benchmark should follow UNESCO criteria, and the concept of authenticity and integrity should be included in Bangladesh's existing heritage laws to upgrade heritage management. Scopes might provide a decent framework for intelligent solutions that will then be similar to global standards, and employment in tourism. The limitation of this research is that it is considering only two river forts in Narayanganj district of Bangladesh to reach a convenient scale of study within a feasible time frame, although there are lots of Mughal forts scattered in the Dhaka region and also in some other parts of this country. It acknowledges that such studies should be conducted on a nation-wide scale to derive the overall consequences of the problem for all heritage sites in the country.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the first objective, this study will establish a framework for identification and analysis of the article's development; thus, a thorough review of previously available literature will be conducted. Studies from various sources (reviews of related books, previous literature, articles) and field surveys on two heritage sites of river forts in a district adjacent to Dhaka were done. Moreover, UNESCO world heritage listing qualifying criteria, as prime parts of the research technique, will include the main comparing tool for this study. The researcher has conducted a questionnaire survey at both historically significant river forts in Narayanganj using a simpler version of questions generated from UNESCO criteria. Next, for identifying the existing gaps of law enforcement to protect heritages in Bangladesh's situation, UNESCO criteria of 2004 and the National Heritage Protection Law of Antiquities from Bangladesh Government were studied and compared. Finally, to validate the scholars' claims public opinion was obtained through a variety of combined techniques, for better comparison. Additionally, site surveys and documentation helped to find the extent of heritage demolition, vandalism, and encroachment in buffer zones for further analysis. These two river forts were chosen due to their neighbourhood differences: sustaining in rural and urban contexts. Situated in different comparable environments, Hajigonj fort is located in the Narayanganj city corporation area, while Sonakanda fort is in the municipal area, and both forts are separated by the river Shitalakshya.

To achieve the last objective, the study derives suggestions and recommendations, alongwith identifying challenges and threats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Criteria From UNESCO To Preserve International Heritage

The Criteria for Selection is the benchmark of UNESCO to evaluate any heritage site around the world. For information, there are six cultural (1-6) and four natural criteria (7-10) to be included on the World Heritage List and sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. These are inscribed below in Table 1 (UNESCO-WHC, 2004).

Now, in this study, questions from 7 to 10 were omitted as the aim is not for dealing with the natural criteria of heritage. It simplified the cultural criteria subjects into easy understandable questions so that the common people can give their own opinions. For example, the 1st criteria subject was formed with a simple question that asked about the creative and genius masterpieces of the Mughals compared to modern days. Similarly, the second criteria were transformed into a simple question to investigate their view about Mughal architecture or technology developments and how exchange of ideas occurred in these heritage. Regarding the extinction of cultural tradition, the 3rd question included uniqueness or exceptional testimony of heritage for fetching

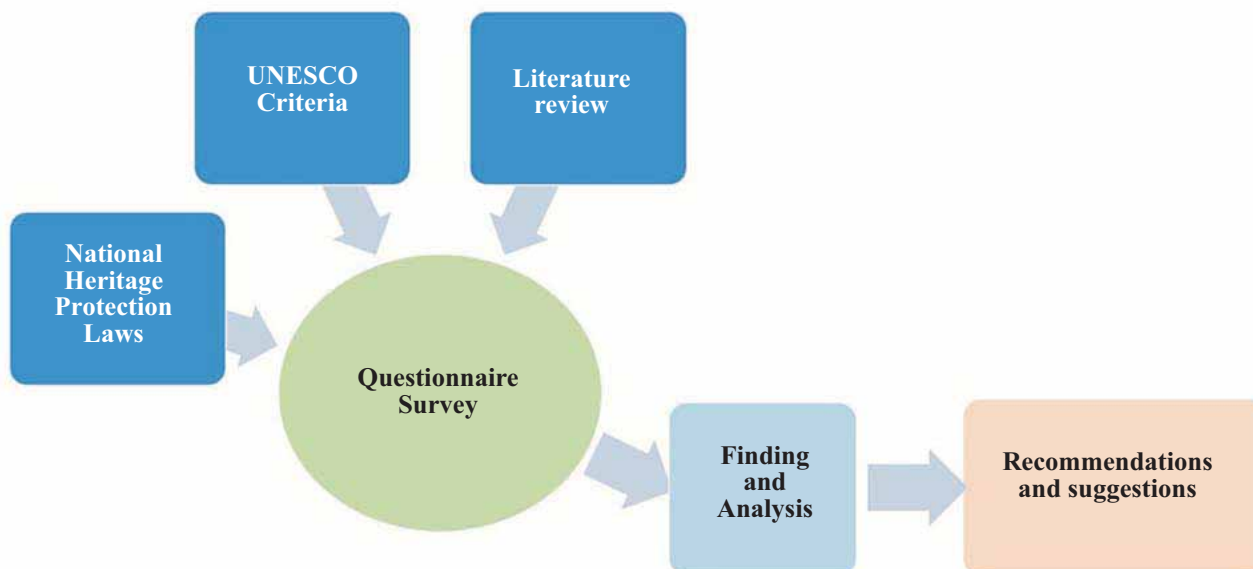


Figure-1: The Methodology Flow Chart of the Research.

Table-1: UNESCO Criteria for Selection of World Heritage Explained in the Operational Guidelines for The Implementation of the World Heritage Convention at, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>.

Category	Criteria	Potentials
1. Cultural criteria	Criteria (i)	to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
	Criteria (ii)	to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
	Criteria (iii)	to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;
	Criteria (iv)	to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
	Criteria (v)	to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
	Criteria (vi)	to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria).
2. Natural criteria	Criteria (vii)	to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
	Criteria (viii)	to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
	Criteria (ix)	to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
	Criteria (x)	to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

general opinions of respondents according to 3rd criteria. Like this, to derive the outstanding value of the Mughal forts according to 4th criteria, people were asked regarding their knowledge about whether they acknowledge these forts as significant stage of human history or not. For 5th criteria, public opinion was sought for comprehending the significance value of river and waterway routes for the survival of these

heritage sites. For the last criteria, which includes living traditions and associated culture of Mughal heritage in relevance to public life, a simplified question was formulated to generate public opinion about whether they are aware of the ideas, beliefs, artistic, and previous literary works of Mughal river forts.

National Heritage Protection Laws in Bangladesh and its Limitations

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh's Part II, describes about the 'Fundamental principles of state policy' and its 23 section clearly declares that the state is bound for conserving and protecting the right of cultural traditions and heritage in Bangladesh. It states under the title of National culture: "*The State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture*" (LoB, 1972).

Under constitution, an Act was regulated to consolidate and amend the law relating to the preservation and protection of antiquities; was published in 1968 in erstwhile East Pakistan. The section 2 (c) of this act, defines "antiquity" with the means- "*Any ancient product of human activity, movable or immovable, illustrative of art, architecture, craft, custom, literature, morals, politics, religion, warfare, science or of any aspect of civilisation or culture*". Additionally, its section 27, gave right to all the citizens to enter historic sites, known as- 'Right of Access' to protected and immovable antiquities. It states, "*Subject to the provisions of this Act and the rules made thereunder, the public shall have a right of access to any immovable protected antiquity maintained by the Government under this Act*". After the Liberation of Bangladesh, in 1976, the same antiquity act remained with the change 'Bangladesh' and its dependent relevant matters (LoB, 1968). During 1986, a gazette was published as the amendment of a draft rule, which indicates that places of worship and shrines must remain their original characters and provides three guidelines for visitors under the draft rule number 6 (Bangladesh Gazette, 1986). Moreover, The Bangladesh National Building Code, 2006 stipulates in sections 1.5, 1.16, and 3.8 that structures and locations with historical or architectural significance ought to be preserved. This regulation also stipulates that a building must have been in use for at least 20 years after it was finished. According to Chapter 3 of the Bangladesh National Building Code of 2012, the rehabilitation, regeneration, and adaptive cultural reuse of urban, rural, and architectural heritage must be compatible with the sustainable use of natural and human resources. Additionally, it specifies that the approving authorities must establish a buffer zone next to the heritage building that is at least three metres wide and free from any construction or establishment of comparable types in the surroundings (Talukdar; 2010).

State of the problem: Urban heritage

Constructed heritage conservation is an idea, it proposes future construction that combines both conservation of the old and modernity in their use. Preserving ancient urban contexts with unique character derived from physical, sociocultural, and historical features—all are parts of cultural antiquity. These integrate the settings, and were rooted in historical evolution, thus include various aspects: terrain, natural components, resident customs, streets, hedges, buildings, present uses, place names, monuments, and archaeological sites (Rifaiođlu and Neriman, 2007). For the importance of urban heritage, a conservation management plan ought to be in place and action, so that it can serve as a roadmap for the upkeep and usage of historically significant sites in the cities. Going forward, they may include guidelines for any new construction (Avrami et al., 2000). In Bangladesh, historic preservation is not effectively practiced, and the relationship between a historic building and its urban surroundings is generally disregarded, not recognised or utilized and even ignored (Ali, 2008). As a result, in developing countries like Bangladesh, preservation methods prioritise appearance and use over the true local context and spirit, which is the opposite trend if compared to the Western world. Urban heritage faces various challenges if they are disturbed and cannot preserve their proper meanings to convey in particular urban contexts, as both its 'closeness' (architecture itself) and its 'openness' (spatial relation to surrounding urban spaces through inlaid landscape) many make it 'inactive' and fraught with challenges due to suffocation (Bhuiyan, 2016).

Mughal fortification heritage mid-Bengal

Why did the Mughals come to Bengal? Bengal was the wealthiest province of India, called 'Hell full of divine gifts', however it had a very rebellious character. Due to its geographical isolation, six month-long monsoon, and sudden flood-prone topography, it was the most costly and well-waited land to be conquered by the Mughals. Although, Emperor Akbar the Great won the decisive Rajmahal Hills battle with the last Afghan ruler of Bengal, Daud Khan Korrani, in 1575; the rest of the 12 landlords made it very difficult for them to penetrate the whole country. The Mughals learned how to enrich their naval fleet and win battles without horses in Bengal. It took nearly another century to grab their stronghold, and it is said that 1610 was their real victory berth when they were able to establish their capital in Dhaka and appointed their first Subedar, Islam Khan. Bengal did not frustrate them, as it provided nearly half of the Mughal Empire's total revenue during its peak time of power. Thus,



Figure-2: Akbar Praising to Almighty on the Occasion of Bengal Conquest, Mughl Miniature. Source: Alamy.

to consolidate their power, they decided to build river forts in Bengal (Karim, 1995; Sirkar, 1947; Stewart, 1971).

These Mughal forts are situated mainly in modern districts like Narayanganj, Munshiganj and Dhaka. It is critical to comprehend how Bangladesh's river forts differ from those in other regions of North India (AHB, 2011). However, all other Mughal forts in northern India included residential units and thus, were called palace forts. But in Bengal, only Lalbagh was designed according to residential purposes, while others were just kept for the chain of defence. If materials are considered, stone was used in the structure of Lalbagh Fort (especially in arches) which is a palace fort—as casting materials to add strength to its masonry's brick core. Lalbagh is also unique, as the whole complex of walls assumed the character of battlemented parapet, which is not present in other Mughal defence buildings in northern India

(Doza, 2015). Several important defence functions, like bastions and elements like the elevated artillery drum, were also introduced to these river forts to facilitate clear vision. Sometimes, towers were erected near the riverside for better observation. But in Idrakpur fort and Hazingonj fort, all of which have cylindrical bastions over circular bases, which are very exceptional practices for Mughals. Both the Lalbagh and the Sonakanda forts consist of polygonal bastions. But the difference is, riverfront bastions are comparatively bigger in form, and the bastion on the land side is a bit smaller (Alam and Polin, 2022).

A unique example of river fort is Idrakpur fort, at Munshiganj; as it has a pond inside the complex and the whole building is made of brick walls. Perhaps bricks were made using the excavated earth from the pond digging. Additionally, its bastions are uncommon and round in shape. Moreover, the basement chamber could only be found in this fort, not elsewhere. Situated 15 miles from south-east corner of Dhaka city, on the bank of the Ichamati River; this fort was a later addition to the network and it might have been built by governor Mir Jumla (Dani, 1962). With the capital moving from Dhaka to Murshidabad in 1717, the construction of river forts and other defences in eastern Bengal was mostly discouraged by rulers, if not; absolute shut down of further development. It highlights, the final element in this network of river fortifications was Idrakpur fort (Begum, 2002).

CASE STUDY 1: HAJIGANJ FORT

This fort is located in Hajiganj in Narayanganj on the western bank of the Sitalakshya river and is also known as Khizrpur Fort. It was originally constructed as a water fort, where the old Buriganga river meets with Sitalakshya river. It might have been constructed shortly after Islam Khan founded Dhaka as the Mughal capital in 1609 AD. It was designed as a countermeasure against the Harmad (Portuguese) and Magh (Burmese) raids (Khan, 2012).

The quadrangular fort is made up of a pentagonal curtain wall with rounded corner bastions that is machicolated deliberately for muskets. A rampart walkway rising to a height of 1.22 metres is located on the inner side of the curtain wall. The base of the wall is itself punctured by several musketry holes. There is a stairway leading up to the rampart level within each corner bastion, and the merlons have bigger openings between them for gun firing. A free, tall, square brick column in the corner of the fort quadrangle



Figure-3: Hajiganj Fort, Narayanganj, An Exceptional Shape.

was, once a watch tower. This column's existence connects the fort's myth, for having an underwater connection with other historical water forts around this region. One of the fort's key features is the elevated platform where cannons can be placed. The fort's lone and detached little entrance to the riverbank side implies that the river served as a primary means of communication. The rectangular structure covering the pentagonal doorway has etched rectangular arches on both sides. Lotus finials are used to embellish the top of that gateway. The absence of any other building within the fort suggests that its occupants and soldiers utilised tents as a makeshift dwelling during the war and this fort was only used during the rainy season probably, when pirates were anticipated to raid (Khan, 2015).

CASE STUDY 2: SONAKANDA FORT

Near the Hajiganj fort, on the eastern bank of the Shitalakshya river, is a Mughal river fort called Sonakanda. It appears as though Mir Jumla is credited with founding this fort but no other inscription or proof of its date has been discovered yet. It is clearly a mid-17th-century fort, evidence based on stylistic parallels with other Mughal river forts in and around Dhaka, it could be estimated (Iqbal et al., 2023). The defence wall of the fort is 3.05 metres high and 1.06 metres thick. It consists the enormous artillery platform, which has inner and intermediate bastions and is quadrangular in shape, spanning 86.56 metres in width and 757 metres in length. Four corner bastions are prominent features of this river fort. The bastions of this fort are octagonal in plan, in contrast to those of the forts at Hajiganj and Idrakpur. Thus, this fort is unique by its own, without any moats like Jangalbari fort of Kishoreganj (Jahan, 2021).



Figure-4: Sonakanda Fort, the arched entrance leads to a circular artillery platform with a five of the arches of river bank. These platforms were a novel element of the Mughal river forts in Bengal; they could easily house a large calibre cannon directed towards the assailants emerging from the river. The platform is comprised of two circles, the inner circle measuring 15.70 metres in diameter and the outer circle measuring 19.35 metres. It is encircled by high walls those stand 6.09 metres tall. With a diameter of 4.26 metres for the eastern wing and 6.85 metres for the two others on the western wing, the corner bastions on the western wing's two sides are larger than those on the eastern wing. The fort consists of two main sections: a massive rampart wall that is reinforced by several narrow and broad openings. The other, and most significant, component is an elevated outwork on the western face. In the court, there is no permanent structure other than the artillery platform. The walls all around averaging one metre in height, machicolated merlons crown its upper portion. There is only one entrance gate to the fort which is situated on the north side. Some scholars describe the entrance gateway's tall arch used to have four centres, which gives better options for observing the enemies in water ways. Plastered from inside, the arched doorway features many plastered panels on both sides of a rectangular frame (Begum, 2015).

It is also thought by the scholars that Sonakanda fort served as a model for the remaining forts; it was just an ideal and practical shape for all Mughal river forts of Bengal. Sonakanda has an additional circular form in front and is a large rectangle. Canons are altered using this circle. There are four octagonal bastions at each of its four corners. This brick building set common benchmarks for river forts: the symmetric arcade gate with its high stairs, central courtyard, bastions at each corner, altars and plazas for cannons, watch tower, and thick wall formed of perforated merlon. The

merlon units of the walls have same height but varying widths. The rectangular panels made with a half circle above the rectilinear arcade planes at the entrances are seen as a typical ornamental element shared by all the Mughal forts, signifying their royal qualities. There are also some patterns resembling "petals of lotus" on top of the parapets (Begum, 2002). So, it could be easily said that Afghan forts, called Garaz; have been influenced by the Mughals during 16th century such as their single elevated entrances, through main portals and silhouettes embellished with merlons (Doza, 2015).

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

A structured questionnaire was used to survey the population in order to generate primary data. These questions were meant to gauge the respondent's viewpoint regarding the importance of prioritising different subjects (historic elements in the urban context) for grabbing the public opinion (about preservation of historic structures) for any research (Ruslin et al., 2022). They were to assess their relevance by using a 'provided number scale' that went from "not important" to "very important" for evaluation, provided print copy of the questionnaire with Bangla translation. The sampling strategy was random; respondents were asked suddenly whether they were willing to answer these questions or not. A total of 25 people were interviewed in each case study area. The participant parameter mostly included the locals of the neighbourhood and tourists from distant city quarters coming for afternoon and evening walks; most of them were found to be residents of the same district, Narayanganj, but only 4 persons came from capital city, Dhaka. It means, not that many tourists from the rest of the country value these historical monuments. Only an exception was found in the adjacent tomb of Bibi Mariam of Hajiganj Fort, where 5 people were interested in giving answers. This was due to their illegal accommodation and settlement in a heritage site, and their fear of getting uprooted. They maybe are considered dependent on this heritage site as they were occupying it for living. Only 3 persons were bachelor degree holders; one was found in Sonakanda Fort, and the rest two were found in Hajiganj Fort for this survey; the rest were either students or school dropouts who work in lower-status jobs, aged above 45. The age of the respondents was in the range of 18 to 65. Total 40 men and 10 women were interviewed in two sites, result was prepared considering the total number as 50.

The interviews took place in public areas around Hajiganj Fort in Narayanganj City and Sonakanda Fort in Bandar Municipality on a random basis. 25 people were interviewed on each site; all were over the age of 18. The distribution of the questionnaires was also done randomly, based on their willingness and interest. The objectives of the survey were explained to the respondents first, before any questions were asked to them. The inhabitants' perception for the significance of various preservation attempts regarding historic structures in various urban contexts; is shown in Table 1. The term heritage building is referred to here as "the river forts." Most importantly, the international UNESCO criteria was connected to local interpretation; they were explained simply to outline general people's understandings in simple language.

Moreover, the purpose of this survey, in this study was primarily to gain insight on the public sentiment about Mughal heritage and their proper conservation and protection. Recently, in December 2022, a Mughal bridge dating from 1740 was demolished for the sake of rural development by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) of the Government of Bangladesh at Golapganj of Sylhet (The Daily Star, 2022), and a sudden attack on Boro Katra, a Mughal caravan Sarai dating from 1640, was partially demolished by a private owner who got a lease for 99 years from the Capital City Development Authority (RAJUK) and is currently an adobe for 2000 illegal people occupying its different parts (The Daily Star, 2024). These two alarming incidents ignited great controversy and debate among heritage scholars about the responsibility of government officials and how Bangladesh could protect its Mughal heritage in future. This study's questionnaire survey aimed to outline public opinion of whether they know about Mughal heritage and if they recognise their historical and tourism values. The process included random questionnaire of inhabitants and tourists, cover ingenuous category of gender, age, social, local, and educational status. During the survey, there were some unavoidable limitations. People felt shy to answer, and especially, hesitant to talk about the encroachment of heritage property, as the politically powerful leaders and corrupted government officers may be supporting these actions. Many people also did not know what heritage is or whether it is important for conservation, and for some, demolition is expected, as they believe the old buildings are inhabited by ghosts, so it's good to knock them down! Most of them did not know the real history; rather, they liked to make their own exaggerated stories without any logical base.

After that, it is important to understand that, for any property that may be included on the prestigious World Heritage List, the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO wants to know about the heritage's current state, which should meet one or more of their inscribed main criteria. The UNESCO list of criteria are the basic 10 benchmarks to evaluate any heritage internationally. Criteria 2 and Criteria 4 are more important for this study, as UNESCO put all these river forts on its tentative list on May 17, 2023; on the basis of these two important criteria, public opinion was sorted. This study will try to mould the questionnaire according to the shadow of UNESCO criteria so that we can identify lack of awareness of general people corresponds with the intellectual point of view coming from global context, the public responses were tabulated in table 2.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The built elements of the river fort sites and the logical interaction between their location and occupants are undermining the historical essence of the overall area. The relationship between the river forts and the surrounding landscape, its boundary properties, the outstanding value, and the creative ideas and technical advances behind all these heritage structures are fading. It is as a major threat to their authenticity and integrity. Most importantly, this will be a problem for including them in the World Heritage List (WHO List) of UNESCO. For that, public opinion regarding advantages and disadvantages between the heritage buildings and the surrounding landscapes are major conflicting aspects. Because the approaches to encroach

Table-2: Survey Respondents in Tow Mughal Forts of Narayanganj District.

Criteria Number	Questions	Degree of significance				
		Not Important	Slightly Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
1	Do you think it's a masterpiece? Were Mughals more creative and genius than modern days?	16%	7%	50.5%	25.5%	1%
2	Does this fort show interchange of developments in architecture or technology?	12%	15%	62.5%	5.5%	5%
3	Does this fort show interchange of developments in architecture or technology?	10.5%	20%	37.5%	30%	2%
4	Is it an outstanding example of a type of building which shows significant stage of human history?	50%	12%	20.5%	6%	1.5%
5	Does it represent the culture that includes an outstanding example of a traditional river use?	10%	15%	25%	30%	20%
6	Is it relevant to public? Is it anyhow related to your living traditions, with ideas and beliefs, with artistic and literary works?	5%	10%	30%	45%	10%
7, 8, 9, 10	Not relevant to river fort heritage and public opinion, thus were omitted during the field survey (only for natural sites).	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

heritage lands rather than protecting the "spirit" of such urban heritage are conflicting. For Mughal river forts, identifying and maintaining the essence of the local contexts seems to be the most important challenge due to lack of public awareness. Vandalism is the most threatening aspect that was found in field survey. Another example is, the archaeological department's negligence in protecting the watch tower at Hajiganj Fort brings out their lack of responsibility. It was found that school students were dismantling the whole staircase of the Mughal watch tower, for playing cricket matches every evening, using bricks instead of wickets! It is a necessary recommendation that students of schools in early childhood learn how to protect and respect heritage from their cities to develop public and collective awareness for conservation and preservation.

Thus, public awareness is identified as a major threat in this study. As per the statistics of field survey, 50% of the respondents opted for 'not important' when answering the question related to historical connection and outstanding universal view, which comprises the motto of criterion 2, the site that UNESCO already included in their tentative list. This finding is shocking, and it implies that people don't care about heritage around them and may be directly involved in vandalism or encroachment on its surrounding land if they get the chance. They are also transferring these ideas to the next generations. For the question of another vital criterion, which is criterion 4, related to architectural value, human achievement and creative genius of past, most respondents remained 'neutral' with 62.5% people not caring about it.

The antiquity acts of 1968, 1976, and 1986 have secured the status of heritage, fortunately. But these acts do not include the UNESCO benchmarks for this nation's 'protected'

heritage, causing confusion for law enforcement and implementation of protection endeavours. The 27-section of the 1968 Act preserved public accessibility for entering heritage through its 'right of access' was something hopeful.

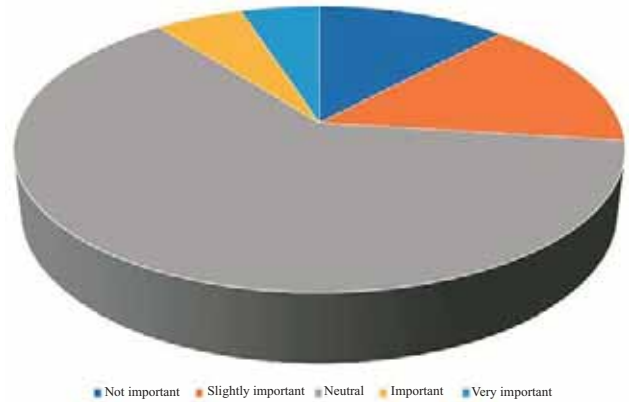


Figure-5: Criteria 2: Architectural Achievement of the Post.

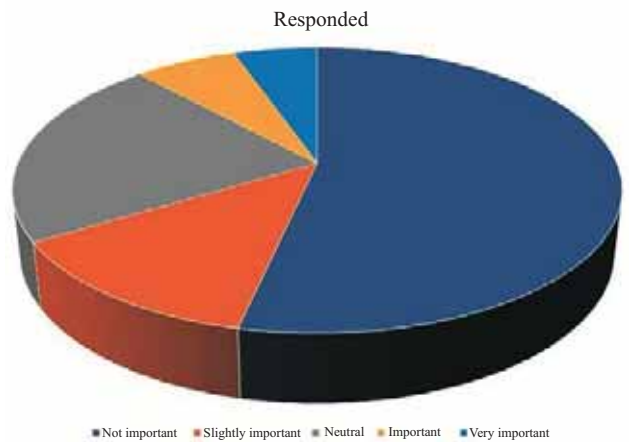


Figure-6: Criteria 4: Outstanding Stage of History.

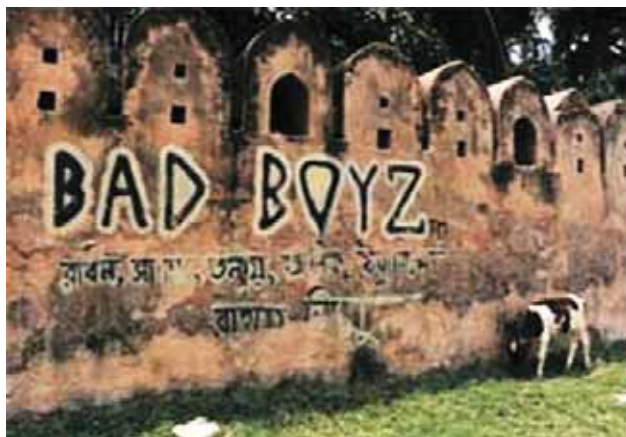


Figure-7-8: Graffiti Art on Heritage Wall (Left) and Corner Bastion Converted as Dustbin (Right) at Sonakanda Fort, Bandar Upazila, Narayanganj. Source: Tarik Sajib

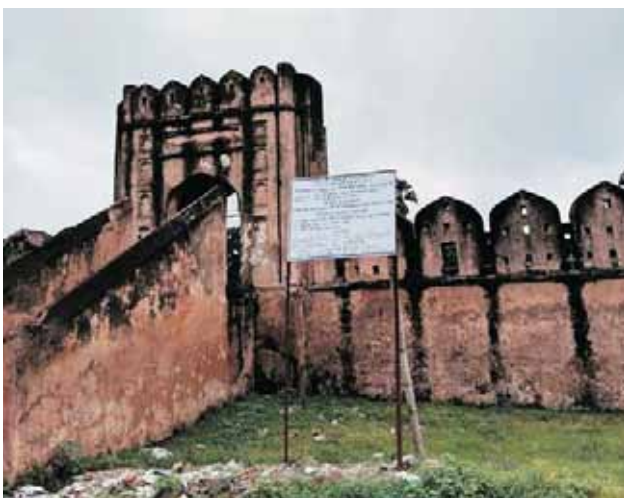


Figure-9-13: Criteria 4:

Poor People Started to Live in Heritage Complex (Left Top),

Corner Bastion Converted to Police Station and Commercial Retail Storage (Right Top),

School Going Students Taking Bricks of Watch Tower for Playing Cricket (Middle Row) and

Dumping Household Wastes in Front of Entrance (Bottom) at Hajiganj Fort, Narayanganj City Corporation Area.

Source: Md. Afnan Hossain

Its section 2 (b) gives a definition of “ancient”: means belonging or relating to any period prior to the preceding hundred years. This is not a good and empirical definition at all. The 1976 Antiquity Act was actually a direct improvisation from the 1968 Act. Not much was added in

the new rules; only the word ‘Pakistan’ was substituted with ‘Bangladesh’ as was evident and unavoidable because of the country’s independence. The question is, why was the local context of heritage preservation not introduced in replacement? Additionally, the 1986 Act included some draft

rules only, and its point number 6 derived some guidelines for visiting religious heritages! In all these acts, concepts like authenticity, integrity, and outstanding national value need to be included to comply with international standards according to ICOMOS, Nara and Venice Charters and global requirements with adequate principles for analysis, conservation, documentation and structural restoration of all architectural heritage of the country. This should also follow the Global Mandates to support the protection of cultural heritage of all types: movable and non-movable heritage (ICOMOS, 2003). It is now a pressing demand of time that an own National criterion for Bangladesh's heritage

is generated, following the guidelines and basis of UNESCO criteria.

Comparison of survey data, public opinion, and insufficiency in heritage law or lack of updates in such laws related to heritage preservation, highlights that pragmatic solutions to fill these gaps seem like a far cry. Meanwhile, most of the heritage in cities may be knocked down in time, and the authority may not have enough proofs and any legal basis to protect them in future due to the absence of contemporary criteria concepts for the preservation of heritage, as existing national laws are not sufficient. In the future, especially in



Figure-14: Map of Greater Dhaka Region in 1778. Prepared by James Rennell. It Shows Dhalaj Canal Connected Demra with Postagala.
Source: Tarik Sajib

urban areas, there will be no private heritage left for future generations and public heritage will be further dilapidated. Bangladesh as a nation of ancient civilizations with various layers of historical period will be at an enormous cultural and historical loss.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In recent years, the Bangladesh government has taken initiatives to revive its canals in urban areas, which are filled due to rapid urbanisation and mass pollution of waterbodies. The act for protecting natural drainages was introduced in 2000 and is called the Water Resources Conservation Act.

It states, ‘Natural wetland’ means the place declared as flood-flowing land as any river, canal, depressions, pond, stream, or fountain indicated in the master plan by the government gazette or any flow of water, and such kind of land that conserves rainwater should be re-included in the context. The Hatirjheel water reservoir project in the heart of Dhaka city was a very successful and epoch-making incident for such an urban canal re-excavation project. This re-excavation was possible because of the implementation of that act. It was monitored through the joint venture of various state parties, foreign aid, government authorities, and other stakeholders. The surrounding area benefited from it largely; there is no water flooding in the streets, and it is

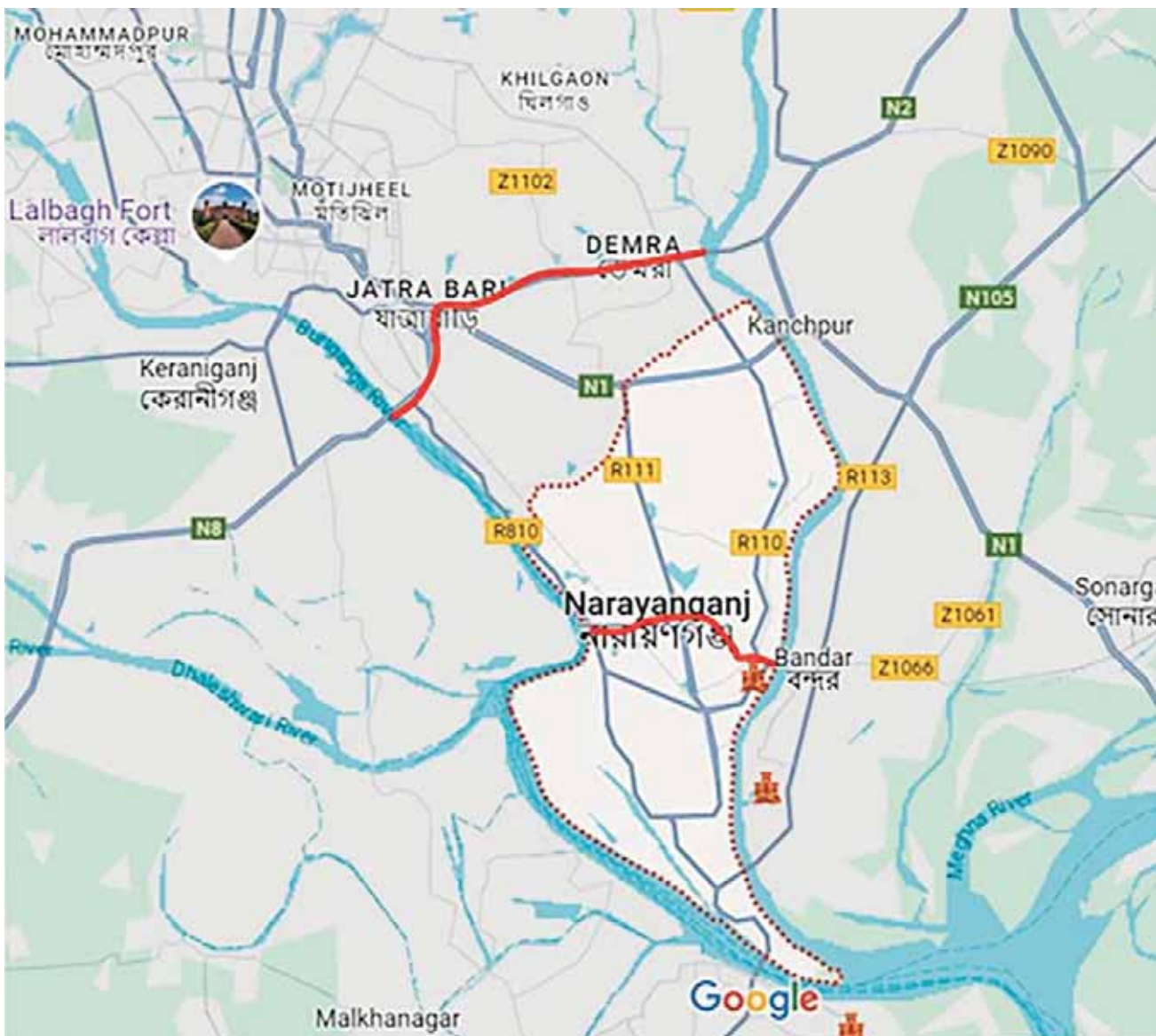


Figure-15: The Two Mughal Water Routes, Extinct Today; Should be Re-Excavated to Integrate Mughal Heritages of Greater Dhaka Regio.

working as a vast retention pond in the middle of the capital city for its natural drainage system and regenerating wetland around it. Waterway was re-established and inhabitants are using water taxis as alternative to roads which are less time consuming compared to road communication as streets of Dhaka are full of traffic congestion (Ahmed, 2017).

Such a great example could be implemented to revive the historic waterways of two ancient Mughal navy routes, from both touristic and environmental purpose. These are the historic routes like Dholai canal (Tarabo to Postagola via Demra) and an extinct canal (Hajiganj to Fatullah) which were traced so far (Khandakar, 2012). Once excavated and acquired properly, a heritage trail of the waterway is possible to reintroduce where foreigners may get a chance to ride on traditional Bajra (Barges) vessels and have snacks like Bakarkhani (well-preserved and dried bread), staying in tents during nights with Mughal lifestyle. The Mughals used to stay in tents on their way to Dhaka from Delhi and vice versa during 16th century. Such a proposed heritage trail could be transformed into a good tourist hub, and Bangladesh may earn a lot of foreign money by providing cutting-edge touristic facilities and heritage tours. This is how environmental issues might help to integrate the historic monuments of Dhaka from a single platform. Such invigorated stimulation and flourishing of economically vibrant tourism definitely need sustainable strategies from environment and heritage specialists together, if the government wants to make options for good revenues.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's heritage regulations are found insufficient, and the concept of conservation is non-existent knowledge in public realm. In urban settings, the problem is more acute. For historical preservation, raising public knowledge for connecting heritage buildings to their local urban context is essential for its survival. The majority of the nation's heritage protection laws focuses on old buildings and their material aspects, with little attention paid to the surrounding intangible contexts. These are essential as worldwide criteria for assessing any heritage. Such approach includes things like exceptional qualities, creative brilliance, or technological advancements in human history, which is absent in the general vocal people's understanding. Moreover, due to increased urbanisation, historically important structures are likewise receiving little attention and are increasingly vulnerable to vandalism and demolition due to unplanned development. Furthermore, if residents are aware and educated, the relationship between social context and historic buildings can show how urban environments can be changed, environmental features like waterbodies, rivers and canals can act as conservation instruments, proving economic sustainability via heritage and eco-tourism. According to this analysis, the Mughal forts are historically significant buildings that can preserve the authentic essence of the greater Dhaka region. This study outlines the gaps and failures in current practices between local urban context, public opinion and heritage restoration. Combining these factors together in accordance with UNESCO standards may create a cultural enlightenment for the nation.

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