SITE MUSEUMS IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

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Before 1947, three very important historical places Taxila, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were parts of India. But when Pakistan was created, these three places became a part of that country and all these Site Museums with their rich heritage became their property. At that time East Bengal was also a part of Pakistan. Here I shall try to give the conditions of these Site Museums in our neighbouring countries that is Pakistan and Bangladesh (former East Bengal) which later became independent from Pakistani rule.

14.1 PAKISTAN

A. ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, TAXILA

Taxila is situated at the head of Sind-Sagar Doab between Indus and Jhelum river. The city is a very old one, the original name was Takshasila and its history begins from the 6th century B.C. It was conquered by Alexander The Great in 326 B.C. and was subsequently dominated by the Mauryans, the Bactrian Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Kushanas and Sassanians, till its final destruction by the White Huns in the 5th century A.D. It was also visited by Fa-Hien and Hieun Tsang.

The excavations at Taxila were carried out between 1913 to 1934 by Sir John Marshal and again by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1944. After independence the Heads Of The Department of Archaeology and Museums excavated early settlement sites belonging to Neolithic, early Harappan and Gandharan Grave Culture periods at Sarai Khola, Jhanc and Hathial.

The Archaeological Museum, Taxila is situated 31kms north west of Islamabad, the
capital of Pakistan. Its foundation stone was laid by Lord Chelmsford in 1918, and it was opened to the public on April, 1928. The Museum reflects the cultural history and the achievements of the people of Taxila. The first historic city of Taxila is now locally called the Bhirmound (6th century B.C TO 2nd century B.C.). It was here that Raja Ambhi welcomed Alexander. Here the Great Ashoka also ruled as a viceroy. The excavations have revealed that the layout of the settlement was rather haphazard. Jewellery, coins, pottery etc have been displayed in the Museum.

The second city of Taxila, Sirkap (2nd century B.C to 2nd century A.D.) was founded by the Bactrian Greeks and was located 2Kms north east of the Museum. The remains of some spectacular buildings, both religious and secular including the market place, houses of the commoners, the Royal Palace, the shrine of the double headed eagle etc have been unearthed after excavation.

The third city of Taxila, Sirsukh (2nd century A.D to 5th century A.D.) was located on the Haro plain about a kilometer away from Sirkap. It was founded by the Great Kanishka. Only a small portion of the defence wall have been excavated.
The Archaeological Museum contains many specimens of Gandhara Art. Coins, stone sculptures, stucco, semi precious stones, beads, reliefs of Gandhara school, Buddha images, architectural fragments, seals, relic caskets and other minor antiquities have been discovered from the three famous stupas of Dharmarajika, Mohra Moradu and the Jaulian Monastery. Group of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have been now removed to the Museum.

The entry ticket for the Archaeological Museum, Taxila is Rs4/ for an adult and Rs2/ for a child under 12. Students accompanied with teachers are given free entry to the Museum. Museum timing is from 8 o clock in the morning to 12:30 P.M. and then again from 2:30 P.M to 5:30 P.M. Between 1st October to 31st March is the winter timing which is between 9A.M. to 4 P.M. The Museum is closed on the first Monday of every month. The Museum Library is open for research scholars. Car parking is outside the Museum. Gents and ladies washroom is next to the main gate.
B. HARAPPA

Harappa in the Larkana district of Sind is the earliest discovered Indus Valley site in south Asia which after 1947 has gone to the side of our neighbouring country, Pakistan. In 1856, a rail road was being constructed between Multan and Lahore when the railway contractors came upon this spot which yielded fragments of Indus seals, potteries and other antiquities. Sir Alexander Cunningham recognized the value of these pieces and the depredation of the site was stopped at his intervention but many ruins had already vanished. This newly discovered Harappan culture became a frontier of archaeological finds. After the discovery of Mohenjo-daro, it became synonymous with Indus Civilization.

Under the guidance of Sir J Marshall, systematic efforts were made in the direction of archaeological investigation. About 1922, excavations at Harappa led to the discovery of seals, painted pottery and other objects which showed an entirely different culture from what was known from the excavations of Buddhist period sites. When Marshall established affinities between the finds of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro and published the result the scholars all over the world were interested and realized that an unknown civilization has been found.

Subsequent excavations brought to light the past glories of the two cities. The well
constructed houses were built of burnt bricks, the city was very well planned and there was an elaborate covered drainage system which might be the envy of many modern cities. It was also affirmed by scholars that the cities flourished before and after 2350 B.C. placing the Indus Civilization at the same level with Mesopotamian and Egyptian Civilization.

An archaeological Site Museum has now been set up at Harappa where from the remains of the exhibited materials one can gather the history of our glorious past. The site is closed to the village of Harappa and the mounds lie along the old banks of the river Ravi. It is very unfortunate that the site was damaged when the railway track was laid and the contractors took for ballast as much building material as they could. This had been a great loss to our Archaeology.

At Harappa on a level piece of ground a symmetry has been uncovered. The mortal remains of the ancient inhabitant of Harappa has been kept in the Site Museum. Other finds include terracotta toys, jewelleries, terracotta figurines of mother goddess, and terracotta potteries. Shell was extensively used in the manufacture of different things like cups, beads, ornaments and for inlay work which are displayed in the Museum in broken condition. Bead ornaments like necklaces have also been found. Small
terracotta spinning wheels show that cotton must have been grown and spun. The most characteristics of all the objects found at Harappa are seals and sealings. The majority of them are of steatite stone and bear the picture of an animal with pictographic writing which has not yet been deciphered. In pottery there is everything from huge storage jars to tiny delicate domestic containers.

Animal figurines mainly found as toys for children include bulls, buffalo, rhinoceros, tiger, pig, dog and monkey. There are also crocodile and turtle and birds like dove, peacock, hen and duck. Wheat grains 5000 year old has also been dug up. There are terracotta animals with movable heads and a toy cart similar to that of the bullock cart still in use in India. The personal ornaments for the poor were usually of shell or terracotta while those of the richer people were made of precious metals or of copper overlaid with gold. Many ornaments like necklace, armlets, girdles etc have been displayed in the Museum. Bronze utensils are also found but not iron. The Museum is closed on the first Monday of every month. The entry fee is Rs10/ for the local people and Rs200/ for foreigners.
C. MOHENJO-DARO

The Harappan excavation was done earlier than Mohenjo-daro but no one understood the significance of the excavations at Harappa until Mohenjo-daro was discovered. Today, more than 400 similar ancient urban centers have been discovered along the coast of Gujarat and Maharashtra which makes this civilization comparable to Mesopotamia or Egypt.

Mohenjo-daro, a large metropolis was built on the west banks of the river Indus but now the river has moved nearly 5kms from the ancient embankment. Like Harappa, this city also was built of burnt bricks with well constructed houses, a regular city plan and an elaborate covered drainage system. It is evident from the excavated material that this civilization was indigenous in character. Both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro had strongly fortified citadels. Unlike Harappa, Mohenjo-daro had remained intact to some extent. Wherever excavations have been carried out, complete plans of houses and streets have been found at Mohenjo-daro.

At Mohenjo-daro there is a Museum. It contains some reconstruction drawings and plans that provide a picture of the city of Mohenjo-daro in its good days. The city
depended on water which was a means of communication. Food was brought in by boat and carried through the broad roads by bullock carts. It was stored in the civic granary. Nothing like money was found at the sites, so the exchange was probably through barter.

From outside the Museum, the highest mound of the area can be seen which is topped by a ruined stupa. This stupa first attracted the archaeologists. When the excavation was done a city was unearthed that pushed back the history of the subcontinent to 2500 B.C. To the west of the stupa is the Granary and the Great Bath. Mohenjo-daro is not the original name of the place but was given by local villagers who referred to the mound as the mound of the dead.

The Museum at Mohenjo-daro has a collection of artefacts used in houses. Large collections of pottery with fine designs and motifs of birds and flowers have been found. They vary from enormous storage pots, a meter or so high to a tiny little vessel that looked like a child’s play set. Pots for cooking, serving and containers for oils and perfumes are also seen. There are many clay toys for children which include bullock carts, animals and working people which show how life was in this ancient city.

A fine collection of beads in semiprecious stones and some gold jewellery are kept in the Museum. Semi precious stones that are not from the region like lapis lazuli and turquoise show that overland trade existed with the people of Persia and Afghanistan. Seals of Sumair has confirmed that the people of Indus Valley had trade contacts with Sumair and
Mesopotamia. Seals made of steatite bear inscriptions and carved figures of animals like humped bulls, unicorns, tigers and strange men wearing bull horn masks and seated cross legged on a throne. The script is still undeciphered but the Archaeologists and Historians believe that they were used by traders to mark their goods before sale and export. Some were probably used as family insignia or a religious talisman.

The seated mask wearing male on the seals is believed by some to be a prototype of Shiva. The large stone objects are probably symbols of Phallic worship. The female figurines point to mother Goddess worship. While going through the site and Museum, one can experience of going through a wonderful culture of a race who did not bother about arms and weapons but were good crafts men and made tools, jewellery, exquisite sculpture and built well planned cities that is a marvel even to the present day.

Mohenjo-daro which is in the Montgomery district of west Punjab can be reached from Karachi either by flight or by rail route. The flight is about an hour long from Karachi. There is a small rest house near the Museum at Mohenjo-daro.
14.2 BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is considerably rich in archaeological wealth. The country became independent from Pakistan in 1971, when the Government started many field projects on unexplored areas and also adopted schemes of excavations on selected sites. Though the work is carried on a limited scale, the discoveries have been significant. The earlier history of Bangladesh reveals that Buddhism received Royal patronage from important ruling dynasties.

A. PAHARPUR

Paharpur is a small village in the Rajsahi district where the remains of the most important and the largest known monastery, south of the Himalayas has been excavated. The archaeological find covers an area of 27 acres of land. The court which is quadrangular in shape measures 922 into 919ft. and from 12ft to 15ft in height. It has an elaborate gateway complex to the north. There are 45 cells on the north and 44 in the other three sides. The architecture of the central temple is profoundly Buddhistic. It is called Paharpur after a high mound which looked like a pahar or hillock. The ruins of the site were recorded in the early 19th century. Scholars visited the place including Cunningham. The first excavations took place in February and March 1923 under the direction of D.R. Bhandarkar.
From 1925 onwards, excavations were carried on practically every year and the definite report on Paharpur was published by K.N.Dikshit in 1938.

A Site Museum has been built there to house the collection of objects recovered from the area. The antiquities include, terracotta plaques, images of different Gods and Goddesses, potteries, coins, inscriptions, ornamental bricks and minor clay objects. 63 stone sculptures found from the basement are very similar to that of the Vikramsila Monastery. The architecture has a profound impression of the Pala times. Many reliefs however have been kept covered by earth to protect them by salt action. Paharpur terracottas have a special character because they mainly depict scenes from daily life. Sabara males and females in various postures and dresses received a lot of attention from the Paharpur terracotta artists.

Small scale excavations by the Bangladesh Department Of Archaeology led to the discovery of a bronze torso in one of the cells of the monastery. It was an image of Buddha and dates from circa 9th century C.E. five round copper coins of the three fishes and bull type were found indicating that there was a currency system during the Pala Kings. A thin round silver coin of Khalif Harun al-Rashid of Baghdad, circa 788C.E. which has been found suggests that there was trade between this area of the Palas and west Asia.
From the dedicatory inscriptions some names of Paharpur monks like Ajaygarbha, Srigarbha and Dasabalagarbha have been found. Between 9th to 12th century C.E. Paharpur was a center of pilgrimage for monks from Tibet.

Paharpur will always have a special place in the history of Bengal for its architectural and artistic magnificence, for its huge monastery with a rich array of names of its Buddhist monks and for its association with Dharmapaladeva of the Pala dynasty.

B. MAINAMATI

Mainamati, now in Bangladesh is an isolated low range of hills dotted with more than fifty ancient Buddhist settlements of the 8th to 12th century A.D. The Mainamati range are extended through Comilla district. Mainamati was discovered in the 19th century. This was the most important Buddhist site of undivided Bengal.

The Mainamati area contains several monasteries which are locally called Viharas and Muras (head or top). As early as 1875, during the construction of the Comilla Kalir Bazar road that runs through the Lalmai Mainamati hill range, ruins of an old fort were discovered along with terracotta plaques with beautiful images. N.K. Bhattashali visited the site in 1917 and for the time being identified it with the ancient city of Pattikera. In 1943-44 military contractors
engaged in construction discovered a huge deposit of old bricks in ancient structures which were reused and thus many monuments were destroyed. This however was stopped through the intervention of the Archaeological Survey Of India. There after during the war eighteen ancient sites were detected which were identified as the remains of a Buddhist monastery.

The Pakistan Archaeological Department discovered fifty five ancient sites of which Salban Bihara, Kutila Mura and Charpatra Mura have been fully excavated. Two other mounds called Ranir Banalow and Ananda Rajar Bari are also being excavated.

The Mainamati Site Museum has a rich and varied collection of copper plates, gold and silver coins and eigtty six bronze objects. Over one hundred fifty bronze statues have been recovered from the monastic cells. eight inscribed copper plates have been found from Salban Bihara but only one is in good condition. One copper plate though badly cracked has a seal containing the name of the Gupta King Vainya Gupta dated 507-508 C.E. So the time of Salban Bihara goes back to the 6th century.

The Salban Bihara monastery had four phases of occupation. The first phase has contributed the most important antiquities. Apart from the inscribed copper plates, gold and silver coins, gold ornaments, silver ingots, a large number of bronze images of Buddha and other Buddhist deities, clay seals and sealing, clay oil lamps, decorated earthen ware lids, storage jars and cooking pots have been found. Among the
other important finds were three hoards of gold and silver coins discovered in clay pots buried beneath an early floor level. This coins are the first major finds of high quality silver currency dating between the Gupta and the early Islamic period.

Seven pots containing bronze votive images of Bajrasana Buddha Bhattaraka were recovered from the lesser known site of Rupban Mura which was excavated in the mid 20th century. A standing Buddha has also been discovered which is supposed to be the earliest and tallest free standing Buddha image so far discovered in the Indian subcontinent. Two large black stone images, one of Sakka Muni and the other depicting an eight armed Marichi of the 10th century have also been found. Mainamati bronze sculptures are well known to art historians for their elegant style and artistic quality. They are mainly Buddhistic.

In 1978, the Bangladesh military dug up a huge bell at Rupban Mura weighing over 500kgms. It is now at the Mainamati Site Museum. In 1994, the Archaeological Department of Bangladesh discovered a colossal Vajrasattva image from the central shrine of Bhoj Bihar. The historians have dated this to early 10th or 11th century.

Like Paharpur, Mainamati is alos famous for the large number of excellent terracotta plaques. Though not of the same high quality, they are full of vitality. Some terracotta plaques from Mainamati depicting combat between man and lion, a semi devine figure holding creepers and a man with knife and shield are kept in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

Mainamati is 114kms from Dacca city and is just a days trip by road on way to Chittagong.
C. MAHASTHANGARH

Mahasthangarh is one of the greatest archaeological sites in Bengal. It is located about 13kms North of Bogra district on the Western bank of the river Karatoya. The place is rich in archaeological remains of the early phases of Hindu-Buddhist settlements. The ruins generally stand out as brick mounds called dhap or dvip. There are many tanks inbetween. Alexander Cunningham visited the site in 1879 and identified the place with Pundrevardhana whose reference is found in the Rajtarangini of Kalhana (circa 12th century C.E.). This identification was reconfirmed by the discovery of a fragmentary stone tablet in 1931 bearing 6 lines of Brahmi inscription. The tablet is kept in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

There is a Site Museum at Mahasthangarh with wide varieties of antiquities ranging from terracotta objects to gold ornaments and coins recovered from the site. The Museum is situated between the Northern ramparts and Govinda Bhita. The Museum also preserves a large number of stone bronze and terracotta sculptures from various parts of North Bengal.

Excavations at Vhasu Bihara, a few kilometers North-West of Mahasthangarh have brought out many terracotta plaques which are being kept at Mahasthan Museum.
Mahasthangarh is an imposing landmark in the area having a fortified long rampart wall. Beyond the fortified area, other ancient ruins lie within about 8km radius some of which are Govinda Bhita temple Khodar Pathar mound, Monkalir Kunda, Gokul Medh, Parashuramer Bedi, Jiyat Kunda etc. This 3rd century B.C. archaeological site is still held to be of great sanctity by the Hindus. Every year in mid April and once in every twelve years in December, 1000s of Hindu devotees come for a bath in the Karatoya at a certain conjunction of the planets known as the Narayani Yoga.

Mahasthan has excellent road links with Bogra, Rajsahi, Rangpur and Dinajpur district towns. It is only a four hour drive from Dacca over the Bangabandhu Jamuna bridge. The nearest motel is at Bogra town. There is an archaeological rest house at the double bend of the Karatoya at Govinda Bhita. The Bangladesh- France, joint archaeological team has been working at the site for the last 7 years and it is expected that the history of Mahasthangarh may go back to the pre- Maurya period.
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