



Potential of Archaeological Heritage-Based Homestay Tourism in Bangladesh: A Case from Mahasthangarh

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ABSTRACT

Homestay is an effective form of sustainable tourism where tourists can learn about the community's cultural identity and natural resources. Along with the tourism trend, homestays are also increasing globally. This study aims to explore and develop an archaeological heritage-based homestay tourism management model in Bangladesh, specifically to verify the possibilities of homestay tourism based on Mahasthangarh, a prosperous ancient urban centre formerly known as *Pundranagara* (300 BCE). Hence, the people of Bangladesh are known worldwide for being very hospitable. As a result, how can sustainable homestay tourism be developed in this country through the community living adjacent to the archaeological heritage of Bangladesh? Considering this question, a month-long ethnography following a qualitative approach beginning in 2023 was conducted in Mahasthangarh. The result obtained from this study has shown that homestay tourism can play an effective and helpful role in solving many problems, particularly financial constraints.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, though small in size, is a country rich in diverse natural beauty as well as enriching cultural heritage. Currently, this small landmass supports about 170 million people [1]. The rivers of the Bengal Basin surrounding the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) delta are very dynamic, and their courses are constantly shifting, making the country multi-dimensional [2,3,4,5]. Although the country is lagging behind many sectors, it has achieved enormous success in the last few decades, especially after attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2014; it is on the way to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 [6]. In this case, Bangladesh has to face a new challenge, particularly since the country's sustainable tourism industry has yet to develop and sustainable tourism is one of the goals of the SDGs, if it

cannot be organized according to plan, Bangladesh will not stay within the goals of the SDGs.

However, although the village-based agricultural occupation continues in Bangladesh, a rich urban culture developed in the region about two and a half thousand years ago, Wari-Bateshwar (450 BCE) and Mahasthangarh (300 BCE) are notable [7,8,9,10,11]. Besides, 528 archaeological sites of this country have been protected by the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh (DoA), among which Sompur Mahabihara and Bagerhat Mosque City are UNESCO-recognized World Heritage Sites (WHS). The archaeological site of Sompur Mahabihara, presently known as Paharpur, is said to have been one of the world's oldest (800 CE) educational institute [7,1].

As Bangladesh is a very densely populated country, it has been observed that most of the archaeological sites

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of the country are inhabited by locals. In some cases, locals are considered a threat to archaeological sites, but in the current context, locals are considered one of the main stakeholders of archaeological site management. Also, according to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), greater emphasis has been placed on including locals in tourism [12,13,14]. In that case, it is undoubtedly necessary to formulate an effective and sustainable plan on how the people living around the archaeological sites of Bangladesh can be included in the sustainable tourism plan. Mahasthangarh (c. 300 BCE), an ancient urban centre located in the North-western part of Bangladesh, is considered the prosperous capital of ancient India in the past. The periphery is believed to have developed with numerous archaeological sites, and archaeological surface structures still bear witness to this urbanization.

This study emphasized on homestay tourism based on Mahasthangarh to comprehend the interrelationships between archaeological site and the local inhabitants. Besides, the objective is to verify the feasibility of homestay tourism by accommodating tourists in the homes of the locals. A month-long ethnography has been conducted beginning in 2023 to implement this objective. The study reveals that the level of potential of homestay tourism in Bangladesh is very high if an effective and sustainable policymaking plan is initiated and implemented properly.

2. Problem Statement

Homestay tourism is prevalent in many countries, and even in our neighbouring country India, homestay tourism has already gained wide popularity [15,16,17]. Despite Bangladesh's natural diversity and rich archaeological heritage, why can't we present them to global tourists? As it is a very profitable source of revenue generation, in-depth research is highly required, focusing on how to adopt an effective system by properly preserving the archaeological sites of Bangladesh and creating awareness among the locals inhabitants. Since the way of earning will be opened for them due to homestay tourism, and as a result, the locals will carefully preserve the archaeological heritage of this country on their own initiative.

3. Material and Methods

Study Area

Mahasthangarh is situated in Bogura district, in the North-western part of Bangladesh. The Bengal Delta is located in the Himalayan range in the north and the Burmese range in the west. The area has formed sedimentary land for riverine sediments known as the Bengal Basin. Inside the Bengal basin, a few tracts were formed, i.e., Barind Tract and Madhupur Tract Units. Mahasthangarh is an ancient settlement located on the west bank of the Brahmaputra Basin and south of

the Ganges Basin in the Barind Tract formed on the river Karatoya's banks. Archaeological findings found from Mahasthangarh (Fig. 1) indicate that this ancient place was formed as the capital city around 300 BCE and backward. This place is also known as *Pundranagara*; archaeological findings, and historical sources suggest that this settlement was probably developed as the prosperous capital city of *Pundravardhana*. This prominent site was built around 300 BCE as one of Bangladesh's most prosperous urban centres. The research has been conducted by identifying the archaeological sites within the four-kilometre radius of Mahasthangarh and generating a Geographical Information System (GIS) map (Fig. 1).

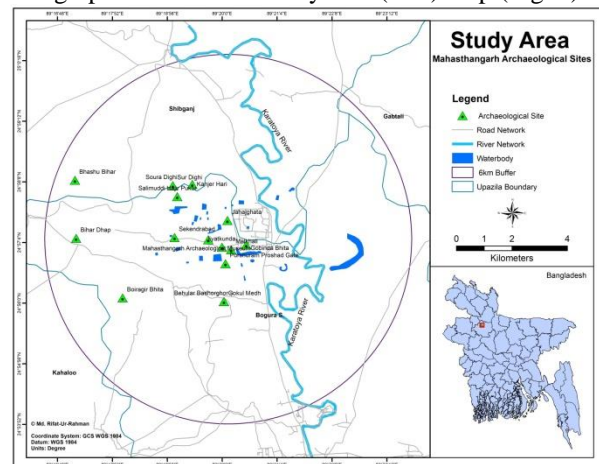


Figure 1. Study Area Map of Mahasthangarh. Source: Author.

Data Collection

The study was conducted mainly using a qualitative approach, including interviews. Data and information have been collected by conducting surveys on locals through unstructured questionnaire-based interviews. Besides, since Mahasthangarh is a massive cluster, the sites within four-kilometres have been mapped by Geographical Information System (GIS). Finally, the participants' observation method was applied to a local family as a case study, receiving their valuable and informative feedback.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data obtained from the field was analyzed by Microsoft Excel. Besides, since the longitude and latitude data were collected from each site using the Global Positioning System (GPS), those data have been processed by Geographical Information System (GIS) to generate maps. Besides, the perceptions of the locals about the sites of Mahasthangarh have been recorded during the fieldwork and analyzed later.

4. Result and Discussion

Archaeological expeditions have been conducted at Mahasthangarh at various times over the last one and a half centuries, and research on the artefacts obtained from there is still on-going. In this study, those sites

have been intensely observed to understand the current status, which has already been discovered. Fifteen archaeological sites, including the Mahasthangarh Museum, have been re-explored in this month-long field survey. At the same time, the latitude and longitude of each location were collected using GPS during the survey (Table 1).

Table 1. Archaeological Sites at Mahasthangarh. Source: Author.

| Site | Latitude | Longitude |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Mahasthangarh Archaeological Museum | N 24°57'.759'' | E 89°20'.698'' |
| Gobinda Bhita | N 24°57'.764'' | E 89°20'.758'' |
| Sekendrabad | N 24°57'.943'' | E 89°19'.446'' |
| Salimuddi Hajir Pukur | N 24°58'.295'' | E 89°19'.434'' |
| Sur Dighi | N 24°58'.389'' | E 89°19'.241'' |
| Soura Dighi | N 24°58'.415'' | E 89°19'.243'' |
| Kanjer Hari | N 24°58'.440'' | E 89°19'.053'' |
| Bihar Dhap | N 24°57'.844'' | E 89°17'.965'' |
| Bhashu Bihar | N 24°58'.983'' | E 89°17'.833'' |
| Boiragir Bhita | N 24°56'.559'' | E 89°18'.391'' |
| Gokul Medh | N 24°56'.171'' | E 89°20'.183'' |
| Behular Bashorghor | N 24°56'.177'' | E 89°20'.196'' |
| Porshuram Proshad Gate | N 24°57'.252'' | E 89°20'.898'' |
| Jiyatkunda | N 24°57'.284'' | E 89°20'.865'' |
| Jahajghata | N 24°57'.691'' | E 89°20'.781'' |

From the month-long fieldwork, an attempt has been made to understand the location of the archaeological sites and their current condition. The study revealed that although locals inhabit next to the ruins of Mahasthangarh; in that case, what is their relationship with the sites- considering this question, the geophysical context has been comprehended by mapping the areas within a radius of four kilometres. During the research, the latitude and longitude data of fifteen sites were collected to understand the distance from one to the other, photographs of those sites were taken, and random interviews were conducted with the locals. As mentioned earlier, Mahasthangarh consists of a massive cluster of archaeological sites, covering two upazilas of the Bogura district, Shibganj and Bogura Sadar. Firstly, our team visited the Mahasthangarh Museum (Fig. 2) and Gobinda Bhita (Fig. 3) to understand the location and the inhabitants adjacent to the sites. Several artefacts bear witness to the past outside the museum; also, inside the museum, there are

a significant number of artefacts found at various times during the excavation at Mahasthangarh.



Figure 2. Mahasthangarh Archaeological Museum. Source: Author.



Figure 3. Gobinda Bhita. Source: Author.

Later, the research team visited Sekendrabad (Fig. 4) and Salimuddi Hajir Pukur (Fig. 5) and collected information from those sites. Although the locals do not damage the sites, the problem is the negligence of the staff responsible for taking care of the archaeological site is visible, especially since the Sekendrabad site is entirely forested; however, the signboard of the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, is hung in front of the site.



Figure 4. Sekendrabad. Source: Author.



Figure 5. Salimuddi Hajir Pukur. Source: Author.

Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) and brick structure visible in the western section of Salimuddi Hajir Pukur (Fig. 5); however, the site has been abandoned and is almost extinct. A local named Salimuddi Haji owns the pond, after whom the place is named. He informed us about getting various archaeological remains while renovating his pond. Also, Salimuddi Haji said that tourists from different parts of the country and even abroad visit this place at different times of the year. But, many visitors cannot see the sites with enough time due to lack of good accommodation facilities. In this regard, our team asked Salimuddi why he does not accommodate tourists in his house- although he hosted visitors many times, he could not accommodate tourists as he needed more rooms to stay overnight, Salimuddi replied.



Figure 6. Sur Dighi. Source: Author.

Sur Dighi (Fig. 6), Soura Dighi (Fig. 7) and Kanjer Hari (Fig. 8) are both forested and inhabited by locals. It is difficult to clearly understand the context of the sites because they are covered with plants, although these are protected areas.



Figure 7. Soura Dighi. Source: Author.

Among the sites of Mahasthangarh are Bihar Dhap (Fig. 9), Bhashu Bihar (Fig. 10), Gokul Medh (Fig. 12), Behular Bashorghor (Fig. 13), Porshuram Proshad Gate (Fig. 14), Jiyatkunda (Fig. 15) and Jahajghata (Fig. 16) is in somewhat better condition. However, the shape of Boiragir Bhita (Fig. 11) is quite deplorable, and several sites also have piles of garbage. Hence, ample

opportunity exists to present them more attractively to the tourists.



Figure 8. Kanjer Hari. Source: Author.



Figure 9. Bihar Dhap. Source: Author.

The locals are undoubtedly one of the most important stakeholders of the sites; having lived near the sites for a long time, they know a lot of information about the periphery. It is not impossible to take the initiative to effectively apply the concept of homestay tourism by giving them adequate training and proper facilities [18].



Figure 10. Bhashu Bihar. Source: Author.



Figure 11: Boiragir Bhita. Source: Author.



Figure 12: Gokul Medh. Source: Author.



Figure 13: Behular Bashorghor. Source: Author.



Figure 14: Porshuram Proshad Gate. Source: Author.



Figure 15: Jiyatkunda. Source: Author.



Figure 16: Jahajghata. Source: Author.

The sites of Mahasthangarh are protected by the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, although local inhabitants surround most. Some areas have ticketing arrangements for visitors. Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation has a motel for visitors close to the Mahasthangarh Museum. Many visitors visit Mahasthangarh for a picnic; therefore, the authorities have set up a picnic spot at a specific place. Also, there are restroom facilities for visitors. Notably, Mahasthangarh has an extensive range of archaeological sites; the sites of Mahasthangarh are spread over a four-kilometre radius. During the research conduct, we met a van driver named Abu Bakar (Fig. 17), who later hosted us. Notably, some local people like Abu Bakar only pull vans to visit the Mahasthangarh-based sites. Some of them participate in the archaeological excavations of Mahasthangarh almost every year. Having lived in Mahasthangarh for a long time, they have gained considerable experience in many aspects of Mahasthangarh. This study has conducted a case study to pursue the perception of Abu Bakar and his family members.



Figure 17. Abu Bakar's Van. Source: Author.

Abu Bakar, approximately sixty-five years old, has been making a living by pulling a van in Mahasthangarh for almost forty years. He has four sons and lives with his wife in the village behind the Mahasthangarh Museum. In addition to driving a van, Abu works part-time in archaeological excavations as a day labour. Abu's experiences of living in that house for three generations played a significant role in serving the purpose of our study, especially as he explained to us the details of Mahasthangarh as a skilled guide in the light of his experience. It is presumed that practicing archaeology without an academic degree is impossible. Still, surprisingly, Abu, who has never been to school, knows at least a little more about Mahasthangarh than an academician. Most importantly, Abu's ideas about protecting Mahasthangarh have given us a glimmer of hope. Moreover, Abu did not have to train to get these ideas. We collected data from Mahasthangarh's sites using Abu's van for about a year and have been entertained at his house. Abu's wife, including Abu, provided us with their invaluable views on the tourism prospects of Mahasthangarh. Abu believes that the most crucial factor in protecting an archaeological site is the active participation of locals. Because the locals have developed a deep relationship with the sites due to living for a long time adjacent to the sites. However, in the name of so-called archaeological site protection, the locals are being entirely isolated. Regarding Abu's experience, he also feels inadequate facilities at Mahasthangarh for visitors. In that case, he suggested that including locals would increase the protection and tourism value of the sites significantly.

Now the question is how tourists can get the benefits of homestay tourism- to explore the answers to these questions, our team randomly started staying overnight at the homes of locals at different times of the year. Field data shows approximately 20 thousand locals inhabit adjacent Mahasthangarh sites, though mostly poor, yet quite generous and hospitable. Most of them cannot maintain a standardized household environment, but we did not notice any lack of sincerity in anyone; rather, some locals said that since 1993, a team from France has been conducting archaeological expeditions jointly with the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh. Hence, the locals have developed a very

cordial relationship with the French team; even in 2020, a woman and a man from the French team had their wedding ceremony at Abu's house.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh is known as a hospitable nation worldwide; however, the country's size is small, and the poverty rate is high, yet the people of this country do not hesitate to entertain guests [1,5]. This alone can become a strong triggering weapon to develop homestay tourism. Bangladesh has made remarkable achievements in the past fifty-two years after independence; despite many challenges, the country has to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Therefore, attaining equal success in each sector is essential given the SDGs [6]. Bangladesh must formulate a new and sustainable plan to move ahead with sustainable tourism, poverty reduction, gender equality etc. In this case, there are immense possibilities for sustainable and planned homestay tourism development in Mahasthangarh.

However, before developing sustainable homestay tourism, a sustainable and effective plan must be formulated so that the sites of Mahasthangarh do not face any risk [18]. In this case, its feasibility can be verified by formulating a master plan according to the model below (Fig. 18).

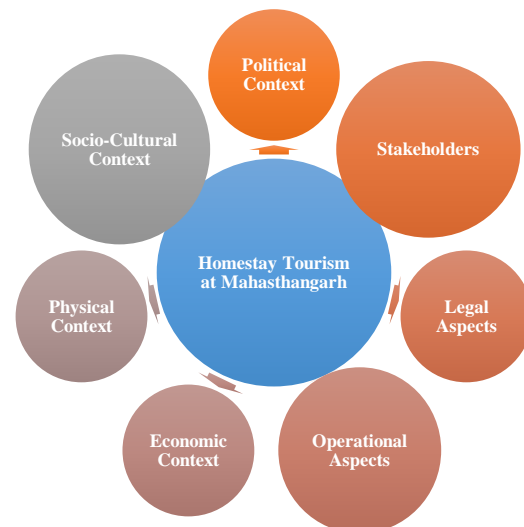


Figure 18. Recommended Plan for Homestay Tourism.

Many countries of the world have taken various initiatives to flourish homestay tourism [18,19,20,21,22,23]; Bangladesh has immense potential, especially since it has a diverse natural heritage as well as remarkable cultural heritage in the world's largest delta. Thus, Bangladesh will be one of the tourist destinations if it can be presented attractively to global tourists [5]. To develop homestay tourism in Bangladesh, a few issues should be considered, particularly political stability, socio-cultural context, physical context, economic context, operational aspects,

legal aspects, and feasibility determination. At the same time, an effective and sustainable policy plan with stakeholders' must be initiated to flourish homestay tourism [5,19,21].

5. Conclusion

Although Bangladesh is an agricultural-based rural country, if a sustainable tourism plan can be formulated around the diverse archaeological heritage of the country, employment opportunities will be created for the country's unemployed youth. Simultaneously, the way of revenue generated will be widened, but, before that, numerous research based on homestay tourism should be conducted so that the archaeological heritage of this country is not damaged in any way in the name of tourism.

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