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Public Archaeology in Bangladesh: Saving Our Past for the Future Generation

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ABSTRACT

Public archaeology in Bangladesh plays a crucial role in preserving the country's rich cultural heritage for future generations. Conserving these heritage structures not only preserves cultural identity, but can also promote intergenerational equity by safeguarding Bangladesh's invaluable cultural aspects. Recognizing the urgent need to protect a wide range of built cultural heritage, the government of Bangladesh must take proactive steps to engage the public and implement sustainable preservation initiatives. Engaging local communities in the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage is a vital aspect of public archaeology. Community participation not only fosters a sense of ownership and pride but also ensures the long-term sustainability of heritage. This journal article explores the field of public archaeology in Bangladesh, focusing on the importance of community involvement and the utilization of innovative technologies. Through a comprehensive analysis of community archaeology and community museology initiatives, this study highlights the significance of preserving cultural heritage for future generations. Furthermore, it discusses the potential of virtual museums and eBooks in enhancing public engagement and accessibility to archaeological knowledge. It underscores the importance of public archaeology and community museology in Bangladesh as effective means to involve the broader population in archaeological endeavors, enhance awareness of its significance, and promote active participation. The authors emphasize the common people's role as guardians of local archaeological heritage, emphasizing the imperative for researchers to acknowledge the value in safeguarding Bangladesh's culturally rich history.

Keywords: Public archaeology, Community archaeology, Museology, Virtual museum, and eBook.

INTRODUCTION:

The use of the term 'public archaeology' first occurred in the United States (Schadla-Hall 1999, 147) when McGimsey published his book *Public Archeology* in 1972, appealing for the preservation of archaeological heritage for the sake of the "public right to knowledge" (McGimsey 1972, 5).

Community archaeology or public archaeology, involves the communication of information unearthed in academic archaeology to individuals outside the profession. This dissemination can occur through various means such as personal visits, the Internet, literature, programs, lectures, exhibits, archaeology fairs, or even by opening up excavation sites to the public. The foundation of community archaeology

rests on the belief that a more comprehensive accepting of the past is attainable when a variety of voices contribute to its interpretation. At its core, the term 'community' refers to the assemblage of individuals residing in the proximity of the area under investigation. Community groups, descendants, elders, and local historians are just some of the many interested parties who work side-by-side archaeologists in exploring the past. Archaeologists frequently look to local residents for historical information, for assistance in the actual excavation of a site, or for research partnerships⁴.

The public serves as spectators of the work carried out by archaeologists, and public archaeology strives to safeguard archaeological sites by educating and instilling in the public a deep appreciation for the significance of archaeological heritage. However, it transcends mere outreach initiatives; community archaeology emerges as the most effective means to ensure the enduring protection of our cultural heritages and sites.

METHODOLOGY:

This article is based on primary (field experience) and secondary (literature) method. The research methods employed in this study, including qualitative interviews, participant observation, and document analysis at Wari-Bateswar, Vikrampur, Bangladesh National Museum. Through this case study, it is reflected that Bangladesh needs ethical considerations in conducting research in the context of public archaeology, ensuring the protection of cultural heritage and the rights of the community.

Research objectives

This paper's objective is to comprehend the impact of archaeological advancement changes and implications of the community archaeology a developing country, like Bangladesh. Some detailed aims include:

- To inspect the impact of archaeological advancement of public archaeological activities in Bangladesh.
- To examine the approaches and strategies that have an impact on achieving the goal.
- To identify the limitations or challenges in practicing.

Commencement of a new premise

The impulse for the expansion of new theoretical perspectives in archaeology has primarily originated from external influences, bringing the discipline into closer alignment with broader discussions in social theory. Conversely, archaeological logic and explanatory structures have predominantly revolved around hypothesis-based deductive reasoning, often posing a challenge for laypeople to comprehend. Public archaeology emerges as a means to provide a sustainable role for the community, transforming them from passive observers into active participants. In Bangladesh, where archaeology and its concepts have not reached a widespread understanding among the masses, the practice of public archaeology becomes particularly significant. Public archaeology frequently sets a deliberate goal to promote the conservation of archaeological ruins and, seeks ongoing government support for diggings and protection studies. Archaeological excavations have not only impacted the lives of nearby communities but have also been influenced by them. The extensive information and knowledge generated by archaeological research have not only added to shaping public understanding to form the basis of collective identities. Even so, there was a long period of time when archaeologists ignored the connections and seemed to consider public archaeology as irrelevant to the main goal of studying the past. Public archaeology began in the 1970s–1980s, and later in the 90s and early 21st century, it sought to redress this omission. Today community archaeology takes many different forms and increasingly has more projects that share basic principles though they differ in definition or operate outside conventional archaeological contexts.

Communities Avoiding essentialism is, therefore, very critical in defining communities as this may lead to the misuse of modern interpretations that seem universal and permanent but are rather immediate constructs within a specified social set ups. In community archaeology, one can challenge the idea of a community as a single entity by bringing in dissenting views that draw attention to variations or heterogeneity where possible. This recognition opens up debates about a people or group without imposing on them any notion of being homogenous and it includes

such diverse intersecting identity categories as class, gender, religion, economic status, ethnicity and sexuality. The concept based on location serves as a valuable starting point for exploring the relationship between a current population and a particular archaeological site. This approach accommodates the multiple identities within a community without resorting to divisive categorizations. However, in certain instances, location naturally defines roots, especially when communities opt to emphasize a traced heritage and ancestry.

Community museology

The involvement of source communities in archaeological projects extends beyond the completion of excavations, contrary to community archaeology. Community archaeology strives for collaboration throughout all steps of research, playing a crucial role in presenting research results. This connection underscores the significant relationship between public archaeology and community museology. Modern museums are no longer considered neutral spaces. It acknowledges the national, moral, historical, and ethical impacts that exhibitions can have on local communities in terms of accessibility, interpretation, and ownership. Museums are powerful mediators for social modification, actively contributing to the construction of knowledge about the past, present and future. The heritage holder have own perspective on exhibition creation. This goes beyond text wording or object selections, extending to decisions about the exhibition's subjects, themes, spatial organization, decoration, and layout. Collaborative decision-making ensures that the constructed knowledge aligns with the meaning communities aim to convey, prioritizing their perspectives over those of the designer or author. The discipline can be advanced by involving source communities in lighting options, display types, object management, and even museum emblems so that different interpretations and culturally responsive displays can be achieved. As an example, Bangladesh National Museum established a logo at 1983 but by involving source communities, it revised its emblem at 2024.

Access to community objects as a bridge between past and present, not only facilitate the retelling of local inheritance but also reinforce ideas of identity and

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revive a sense of vanity in community heritage. Community museology is emerging from new trends in the social sciences and the insistence of local communities on actively participating in the understanding of their past. Recognizing its importance, community museology should be viewed as an integral component of the overarching framework for successful public/community archaeology.

Perceptions in Bangladesh

Approximately a millennium ago, various dynasties began settling in the Greater Bengal region, leaving behind over 400 sites, each with a unique narrative. Extensive literature exists on these sites, but the local stories, myths, and tales provide an immediate glimpse into that historical era. These narratives hold significant space in the local people's psyche, fostering a sense of concern and ownership, leading them to care for these locations as cherished assets. Local myths play a crucial role in shaping this perspective. When archaeologists tries to investigate fields, the apprehensive local residents treat them with great caution. The positive aspect of this cautious approach is the protection it affords to these sites, guarding them against potential harm. The community actively strives to prevent looting by confronting individuals attempting to unlawfully smuggle, and they also raise awareness among those residing near archaeological sites about the risks of looting. Many established concepts within archaeology have been tested and supplanted by this new approach. Common public outreach methods involve disseminating press releases and encouraging educational trips to excavation sites led by professional archaeologists. Local heritage awareness aims to boost civic and individual arrogance through improved public demonstrations of archaeological sites within excavation projects.

As archaeologists increasingly recognize the significance of inclusivity and community engagement in establishing the modern-day relevance of their work, there has been a shift towards more participatory and collaborative approaches to develop operative strategies for public appearance and interpretation. Over the past few decades, there has been a dynamic evolution in standards and philosophy within community archaeology and heritage interpretation. A notable example is the Wari-Bateswar site in

Narshingdi, where popular activities, including school campaigns and open-air museum displays, have generated a significant surge in public interest, yielding positive outcomes. Initially, archaeologists conducting the first archaeological inquiries faced challenges, with villagers perceiving them as treasure hunters or oil miners. However, as these professionals integrated themselves into the exploration process, local residents developed an interest in it. Consequently, the people of Wari-Bateswar now recognize these ruins as their own and have a sense of responsibility for their preservation. Similar positive experiences have been observed at the Vikrampura excavation site.

Significance to execute public archaeology in Bangladesh

Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Bangladesh has a rich archaeological history with numerous ancient sites and artifacts. Community archaeology helps raise awareness and fosters a sense of responsibility among local communities for preservation of their cultural heritage (Fairouz *et al.*, 2024).

Active Community Involvement

Engaging local communities in archaeology turns them from passive observers into active participants. This involvement not only educates the community about their history but also instills a sense of ownership and pride in their cultural legacy.

Diverse Perspectives

Community archaeology encourages the inclusion of diverse voices in the understanding of the past. This approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of historical events and cultural practices by considering the perspectives of different community members.

Addressing Lack of Understanding

Archaeology, as a discipline, may not be well-understood by the general public in Bangladesh. Community archaeology serves as a bridge to fill this gap, making archaeological concepts more accessible and relevant to the local population.

Mitigating Potential Threats

Many archaeological sites face threats such as looting, unauthorized excavations, and encroachment. Invo-

lving local communities creates a sense of guardianship, making them proactive in protecting these sites from potential harm.

Cultural Identity and Pride

Community archaeology allows communities to connect with their roots, promoting a sense of cultural identity. Rediscovering and showcasing local histories can instill pride in the community, fostering a deeper connection with their heritage.

Educational Opportunities

Community archaeology initiatives provide educational opportunities for local residents. This can include workshops, training programs, and school outreach, contributing to a broader understanding of archaeology and its significance.

Tourism and Economic Development

By actively involving communities in archaeological efforts, there is potential for developing cultural tourism. This, in turn, can contribute to local economic development through increased tourism-related activities.

Combating Misconceptions

In some cases, communities may hold misconceptions about archaeological activities. Community archaeology allows for transparent communication and dispelling myths, fostering a positive relationship between archaeologists and the local population. Community archaeology in Bangladesh is essential for fostering a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship between archaeologists and local communities. It not only contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage but also promotes education, inclusivity, and a shared sense of pride in the nation's rich history. Eventually, adopting new technologies can significantly enhance community archaeology initiatives within museums, fostering increased engagement and participation. Here are some technologies that could be leveraged for this purpose:

Virtual museum

Implementing VR and AR experiences in museums can transport visitors to archaeological sites or give experience to know more about artifacts virtually. This immersive technology allows community members to

explore historical locations and artifacts in a dynamic and engaging manner. Bangladesh National Museum

has his very own virtual gallery web application and it is emerging.



Fig. 1: Virtual museum.

Mobile Apps

Developing mobile applications that provide interactive guides to archaeological exhibits can enhance the visitor experience. These apps can offer detailed information, multimedia content, and even augmented reality features, making the learning process more interactive and accessible. Bangladesh National Museum has facilities of a Heritage Hub Mobile App for Intangible Cultural Heritage documentation/inventory. In future, a mobile app will be found for Audio-guide facility.



Fig. 2: Mobile app of museum.

Digital Storytelling Platforms

Utilizing digital storytelling platforms allows communities to share their own narratives related to archaeological sites. This user-generated content can be integrated into museum exhibits, providing diverse

perspectives and fostering a sense of ownership among community members.

Online Collaboration Platforms

Implementing online platforms for collaborative archaeology projects enables community members to actively participate in research and documentation. These platforms can facilitate the sharing of knowledge, artifacts, and personal stories related to local history.

3D Printing

Introducing 3D printing technology allows museums to create replicas of archaeological artifacts. These replicas can be availed by visitors, providing a tactile experience and a deeper connection to the past.

Social Media Integration

Leveraging social media platforms can enhance community outreach. Museums can use social media for live streaming events, virtual tours, and interactive Q&A sessions, fostering a broader online community interested in archaeology.

Digital Archives and Databases

Developing comprehensive digital archives and databases enables communities to access historical records, photographs, and documents related to archaeological sites. This empowers individuals to contribute their own knowledge and memories to the digital repository. Archiving of rare books like Bangladesh National Museum can be an example.

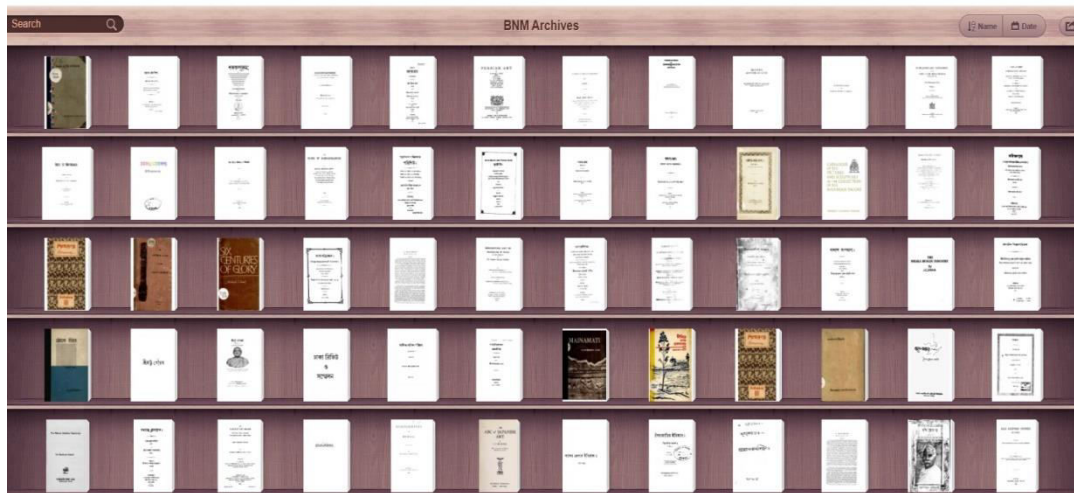


Fig. 3: Archiving of rare books of museum.

GIS Technology

Geographic Information System (GIS) technology can be employed to create interactive maps showcasing archaeological sites.

Crowdsourcing Platforms

Implementing crowdsourcing platforms encourages community involvement in tasks such as cataloging artifacts, transcribing historical documents, or identifying archaeological features. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility.

Podcasts and Webinars

Creating podcasts and hosting webinars on archaeology topics can be an operative way to disseminate information and engage the community. These digital formats provide flexibility for individuals to access content at their convenience. By taking on these technologies, museums can transform community archaeology into a dynamic and inclusive experience, adopting a deeper connection between the public and heritage within their localities.

Community Interpretation

Numerous archaeologists contend that integrating local knowledge is crucial for the continued existence of archaeology as an academic field. The extent of interpretive influence that communities wield in archaeological endeavors ranges from utilizing interpretations obtained through consultations and talks to academic publications crafted by community members, addressing research questions identified within the community.

Involving New Generation

Engaging the upcoming generation enables the formation of a society inclined towards archaeology, contributing significantly to the preservation of our cultural heritage and archaeological discoveries. In Bangladesh, incorporating archaeology into the school and college curricula can serve as a means to inspire a deeper appreciation and understanding of archaeology among the younger generation.

Involving Mass Media

Engaging mass media is instrumental in fostering community archaeology by leveraging its reach and influence. By integrating mass media into community archaeology initiatives, it becomes possible to reach a wider audience, inspire public interest, and actively involve diverse communities in the preservation and exploration of their archaeological heritage. Here are several ways in which mass media can be involved in promoting community archaeology:

News Coverage

Encourage media outlets to cover local archaeological initiatives, discoveries and archaeological projects. Regular news updates can generate public interest and awareness.

Documentary Productions

Collaborate with media professionals to produce documentaries or series that highlight community archaeology projects, showcase local heritage, and involve community members in storytelling.

Advertisements and Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Create targeted advertisements and PSAs that educate the public about the significance of community archaeology, upcoming events, and how individuals can actively participate.

Interviews and Talk Shows

Arrange interviews with archaeologists, community leaders, and project participants on talk shows to discuss the significance of conserving local heritage through community archaeology.

Social Media Campaigns

Utilize social media platforms for targeted campaigns, sharing engaging content, live updates, and multimedia materials related to community archaeology projects.

Educational Programs

Develop educational programs in collaboration with media outlets to air segments or shows that explain archaeological processes, share historical insights, and promote community involvement.

Interactive Websites and Apps

Create interactive websites or apps in partnership with media organizations to provide additional resources, virtual tours, and educational materials related to community archaeology.

Live Streaming Events

Live stream community archaeology events, workshops, and excavations to allow a broader audience to participate virtually and interact with experts in real-time.

Feature Articles and Columns

Collaborate with print media to publish feature articles and regular columns that delve into the local history, ongoing archaeological projects, and the role of the community in preserving heritage.

Partnerships with Media Outlets

Forge partnerships with television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and online media to ensure sustained coverage and promotion of community archaeology initiatives.

Contests and Challenges

Organize media-supported contests or challenges related to community archaeology, encouraging public participation and fostering a sense of pride in local heritage.

Public Engagement Events

Promote community archaeology through media coverage of public engagement events, such as archaeological fairs, exhibitions, and heritage walks.

Local Tourism

Viable tourism approach can be developed by engaging the local community in archaeological endeavors. If they comprehend the significance of the heritage and its characteristics, they are likely to advocate for its preservation, recognizing the potential benefits that arise from implementing a tourism strategy. This livelihood opportunity could create a new phase of development.

Limitations and Challenges of Public Archaeology in Bangladesh

Public archaeology in Bangladesh faces significant limitations and challenges that hinder its progress and impact. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of adequate funding and resources allocated to archaeological research and preservation efforts. The government's investment in this field remains relatively low, making it difficult for archaeologists to conduct extensive excavations, analysis, and public outreach programs. Another major challenge is the limited awareness and appreciation of the importance of archaeology among the general public. Many Bangladeshis are unaware of the rich cultural heritage that lies beneath the surface, and the potential benefits that public archaeology can bring to their communities. This lack of public engagement and support can make it challenging to garner the necessary support for archaeological projects. Furthermore, the lack of effective legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to protect archaeological sites and artifacts is a significant concern. Illegal looting and the destruction of historical sites are ongoing problems that require stronger legislation and enforcement to address. Lastly, the limited availability of trained professionals in the field of archaeology, as well as the lack of specialized facilities and equipment, hinders

the advancement of public archaeology in Bangladesh. Investing in the development of archaeological education and infrastructure is crucial for overcoming these limitations and fostering a thriving public archaeology landscape in the country.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Archaeology's public outreach and engagement need to be comprehensive, purposeful and a part of our scientific research design in all projects from the beginning, must also grapple with several ethical matters related to developing public archaeology projects. These include minimizing looting and vandalism by providing incentives to local people who live near sites; discouraging international trade in antiquities; addressing privacy concerns resulting from working with communities that have been under surveillance; Presenting data that tells about the secular or religious life of a particular group might be seen as offensive if members of such a group do not actively participate in research. Technological advancement, increased access to vast amounts of information, developments are not only transforming the nature of our work but also opening up new possibilities for increasing public engagement with minimal fuss. It is essential that we go beyond just counting how many people came to our sites when considering public outreach and engagement, such as lecturing, tours, school visits, videos streaming, and websites. This change should move toward meaningful involvement in which the public is treated as an equal partner at every stage of archaeological research. The emerging trend offers the hope of preserving our past for future generations. Conserving heritage goes further than just safeguarding physical structures but also cherishing cultural legacy. In order to maintain the dynamism of heritage, it is important that communities are empowered so as to transmit their respective customs through generations. The point is to encourage communities to express themselves and get involved in heritage management. There is a belief

that if one could engage a plurality of stakeholders such as skilled heritage professionals, traditional craftsmen and women, diverse community members' engagement, then the possibility of preserving living heritage sites can be realized effectively. Heritage is a catalyst for economic prosperity, civic pride and education. It is this which distinguishes us from other nations and makes Bangladesh unique in the true sense. Another significant angle with regard to heritage and archaeological management lies in appreciating different legislative protection measures aimed at securing our cultural backgrounds for generations unborn.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

The author(s) declares no conflicts of interest

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