

Volume 2; Issue 2

E-ISSN: 3048-6742

April to Jun 2025

# Sanskriti-Samvahika

## संस्कृति-संवाहिका

Peer Review

Indexed

Refereed Journal

Quarterly Journal

**Editor-in-Chief**

**Dr. Ashwini Devi**

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Sanskriti-Samvahika संस्कृति-संवाहिका

E-ISSN: 3048-6742

<https://sanskritisamvahika.in>

Volume 2; Issue 2; April to Jun, 2025; Page No. 1-13

Peer Review, Indexed and Refereed Journal

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**Shalvan Mahavihara is a Unique Institution of Buddhist Philosophy  
Education and Religious Tourism Center in Ancient Bengal: A Review**

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**Abstract**

*Among the many indications of ancient civilisation in modern Bangladesh, Shalvan Mahavihara is one of the main centres of Buddhist education. Shalvan Mahavihara is located in Mainamati, Comilla district, Bangladesh. There are numerous monuments in Lalmai and Mainamati, Comilla district. However, there is no doubt that, among all those ruins, Shalvan was an ancient Buddhist monastery and the greatest centre of Buddhist education. Many have identified it as a Barshata archaeological site. The construction of the Shalvan Mahavihara is believed to have occurred in the late 7th and early 8th centuries AD. At that time, the Dev*

*dynasty was ruling this region in the vastness of time. At that time, the fourth king of the Dev dynasty, Shri Bhavadeva, built this Buddhist monastery. Due to the rise and fall of various events, it is known that the Shalvan Mahavihara has been built and rebuilt six times until now, keeping the original structure intact. The tendency of taking over this Vihara in various ways, including for political reasons, has always been observed. It was a matter of self-respect for everyone at that time. Therefore, the tendency for political figures to take possession of the monastery and patronise it at all times is quite understandable. The central temple was built in the 8th century AD. The temple has undergone not only construction but also renovations. And this stage was the third phase of construction and renovation. Additionally, we have completed the construction and renovation work of the next phase, which includes the fourth and fifth phases. And the construction and renovation work of this stage was completed in the 9th and 10th centuries. The article in question presents the historical and religious tourism importance of Shalvan Mahavihara as a unique institution of Buddhist philosophy and education in ancient Bengal.*

**Keywords:** *Shalvan Mahavihara, Unique Institution, Buddhist Philosophy, Education, Religious Tourism*

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## **1. Introduction**

Among the many archaeological sites in the Comilla district of modern Bangladesh, the oldest is *Shalvan Mahavihara*. It is also called *Mainamati Mahavihara*. There is no doubt that it is a religious tourist destination. Not only that, but if it can also be arranged as a religious tourism centre and a tourist circuit is created between Bangladesh and India, then not only will Bangladesh's fame increase, but its economy will also be enriched. Such an arrangement would enable Bangladesh to generate significant foreign currency earnings. This is because tourists from various countries can visit *Mainamati* or

*Shalvan Mahavihara* in the same manner as they visit the major pilgrimage sites in India. Therefore, it is imperative to develop *Shalvan Mahavihara* as a tourist zone that is suitable for the times, keeping the religious significance intact. It is imperative to establish high-quality hotels and restaurants for foreigners to stay in and to increase all kinds of facilities while maintaining the old structures. Along with this, the development of a communication system is needed. Political stability is also an important issue. People believe *Shalvan Mahavihara* has a lot of potential if they can ensure all these things. *Shalvan Vihara*, as one of the Buddhist educational

centres of ancient Bengal, plays an important role in the lives of its people. This institution has facilitated the spread of interreligious education from ancient Bengal to modern Bengal. The article in question presents the timely importance of *Shalvan Mahavihara* as a unique institution for Buddhist philosophy education and a religious tourism centre in ancient Bengal.

## 2. Review of Literature

The works so far on the topic under discussion are: *The Archaeological Buildings of Cumilla* (Begum, 2010) the author presents a brief description of the archaeological resources of Comilla district of modern Bangladesh in her book. *Pali Sahitye Nagar Vinnyas & Nagar parikalpana* (Karunananda, 1994) in the book, the author has discussed various topics of cities and rivers and archaeology from various texts of Buddhist philosophy. *Buddhist Civilization and Buddhist Achievement in Deshe Deshe* (Barua, 2016), gives a brief description of the Buddhist traditions of different countries. *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism* (Lars, 2015), the author has made a statement on Indian Archeology and Buddhism. *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (Sarkar, 1997), the author presents a series of descriptions of Buddhist art and architecture. So it appears that the article in question is a complete

dissertation to my knowledge. The research paper has been written to fill that gap.

## 3. Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the article in question are: 1. To gain a correct idea about the location of *Shalvan Mahavihara*, 2. To know exactly how *Shalvan Mahavihara* was named, 3. To gain correct knowledge about who built *Shalvan Mahavihara*; 4. To present an assessment of the excavations and resources found at *Shalvan Mahavihara*; 5. To provide a preliminary idea of the various ancient monuments found in *Shalvan*, that is, the *Mainamati* area; 6. To provide an idea of the religious tourist potential of *Shalvan Mahavihara*.

## 4. Research Methodology

Research activities are mainly conducted in three approaches. One of them is the qualitative approach. Again, there are many methods within the qualitative approach. One of them is the historical approach. The research in question has been completed using historical methods. To conduct the research, theories and information have been collected and studied from Buddhism-related texts, books, Buddhist archaeology-related texts, essays, inscriptions, coin inscriptions, etc., and then analysed.

## 5. Location of *Shalvan Vihara*

Comilla is a traditional district of Bangladesh. Comilla District is one of the oldest districts of the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh. A historical place in Comilla is *Mainamati*. In the past, *Mainamati* was known as *Rohitgiri*. Currently, the famous Buddhist *Shalvan Mahavihara* is located in *Mainamati*.<sup>1</sup> The *Shalvan Mahavihara* of *Mainamati* is one of the archaeological sites of ancient civilisation. It falls within the *Lalmai* region. The ruins found in the *Mainamati* region are actually an ancient city. The city contains the ruins and remains of a Buddhist monastery. However, according to archaeologists, it is the ruins of an ancient city. 'This archaeological site in *Mainamati* is the oldest ruin of the *Lalmai* civilisation. The area was known as *Jayakarmantavasaka Nagar* in ancient times.'<sup>2</sup>

## 6. Naming of *Shalvan Vihara*

*Mainamati* is a place where more than fifty ancient Buddhist settlements are known to exist. It refers to a low-lying area surrounded by hills. *Samatata* is one of the few important towns in ancient Bengal. And *Mainamati* is believed to have been part of this ancient *Samatata* province. It is located about 12 kilometres from the present-day city of Comilla. History tells us that *Mainamati* was the name of a woman who later became a queen. The

queen gained fame through her marriage to the king, *Manik Chandra*. King *Manik Chandra* was the king of this region in the 10th century. The king built a bungalow on a secluded high peak on the northern edge of the *Lalmai* Hills for the queen's comfort. However, many believe that this bungalow later came to be known as *Rani Mainamati*. It is also believed that this place may have been named *Mainamati* based on the incident. There are numerous sal trees on the hillside here. This leads to the formation of a dense canopy of medium-density vines within the sal forest. The sal tree is also known as the *gajari* tree. It is believed that the Buddhist monastery was named '*Shalvan Vihara*' after the name of the sal tree.'<sup>3</sup>

## 7. *Shalvan Vihara*

There is a place in *Shalvan Mahavihara* that is thought-provoking in terms of shape. It looks like a square. Each side of this *Vihara* is 167.7 meters long. In addition, the walls on all four sides of the *Vihara* are five meters thick. The *Vihara's* four walls form the foundation for the rooms. There was no other way to enter and exit the monastery. One had to enter and exit the monastery through only one way. The door is located right in the middle of the north block. The walls of the rooms are 1.5 meters thick. The central temple was located right in the middle of the monastery. There is a hall in the

*Shalvan* monastery. It is located outside the monastery, next to the entrance gate, in the southeast corner. There was also a dining room for the monks. Four massive round pillars supported the building on all four sides and in front. The size of the hall was 10 meters X (into) 10 meters. There was a wide brick road around the hall.<sup>4</sup>



*Shalvan Mahavihara*, Comilla, Chittagong, modern Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>

#### 9. Excavations and Found Resources

Archaeological excavations have been carried out in *Shalvan Mahavihara* over time.<sup>6</sup> This excavation has yielded a total of eight copper inscriptions. The inscriptions include: 1. Copper inscription of *Vainyagupta*, 2. Copper inscription of *Dev Khadga*, 3. *Khadga* Copper inscription, 4. *Balabhatta* Copper inscription, 5. Copper inscription of *Anandadeva*, 6. Copper inscription of *Bhabadevare*, 7. Copper inscription of *Dev* dynasty, (a) and 8. Copper inscription of

#### 8. Builder

It is difficult to say exactly when, how, and who built this monastery. However, history confirms that King *Shri Bhavadeva* of the *Dev* dynasty built the monastery. And the construction period of this monastery is believed to be in the late 7th century and early 8th century.

*Dev* dynasty B. Two of these copper plates have revealed valuable information. One of the copper plates gives the lineage of the gods. On the reverse of the second copper plate, it is written that the son of the king who granted it, *Shri Bhavadeva*, approved the donation on the 13th *Bhadra*, in the twelfth year of his reign. All the kings mentioned in the copperplate inscriptions are endowed with sovereign titles such as '*Param Saugata*,' '*Param Bhattarak*,' and '*Maharajadhiraja*.' This evidence shows that these kings were

independent and possessed sovereign power. Furthermore, researchers have discovered some notable terracotta seals in *Vihara*. Abu Imam said about the terracotta seal, "This terracotta sealing is one of the most valuable findings from the *Shalvan Mahavihara*. It bears a three-line inscription, "Sri Bhavadeva Mahavihara Arya Bhikshu Sanghasya."<sup>7</sup> That is, "Sri Bhavadeva (the fourth ruler of the *Dev* dynasty) built the *Mahavihara*." Since the artefact was discovered in the third Settlement period, this monastery is also called *Sri Bhavadeva Mahavihara* after the name of the *Dev* dynasty's king, *Sri Bhavadeva*. The monastery and its associated structures are believed to have been built between the 7th and 12th centuries. Researchers have also discovered four hundred gold and silver coins. In addition to these, reports suggest the discovery of terracotta tablets, seals, pottery, and clay idols. These items serve as signature evidence of the ancient archaeological heritage of modern Bangladesh, carrying with them historical currents from the past. Countless tourists flock to see them every day.

## 10. Ancient *Murā* found

### 10.1. *Cutilā Murā*

A cantonment near Comilla city is home to an archaeological site. It is named *Kutilā*

*Murā*. It is located three kilometres north of *Shalvan Mahavihara*. It is situated approximately two miles south of the Dhaka-Comilla highway. Among the important monuments located on the ancient hill called *Lalmāi* in Comilla, *Kutilā Murā* is particularly noteworthy. Researchers have discovered a total of three stupas here. This project required digging the soil. The three stupas represent *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Samgha*.<sup>8</sup> It is open to tourists and visitors every day from 10 am to 5 pm. It is a monument of the *Abbasid* era. The period was during the reign of the *Abbasid Caliph Mutasim Billah*. It has a round dome. The dome rests on a square base. There is a room in the middle of the round *stupa*. In addition, there is a hermit and a pinnacle on top. The main room also has eight smaller rooms around it. Researchers have discovered a pit here. Researchers have found clay seals and gold coins here. Moreover, researchers discovered two stone *statues*, a seal, and a *Nivedana Stupa* from the 7th and 8th centuries here. They were later preserved for the benefit of visitors at the *Shalvan Mahavihara* museum.



*Kutilā Murā, Comilla, Bangladesh*<sup>9</sup>

### 10.2. *Itākhola Murā*

The *Itākhola Murā* archaeological site is located in the *Mainamati* region of Comilla. There are two distinct archaeological sites in the Mainamati region of Comilla: Itakhola and *Rūpban Murā*.<sup>10</sup> It is located about eight kilometres west of the city.<sup>11</sup> It is located on three levels. People have used it as a brick kiln since ancient times. That is why it is named *Itākhola Murā*. Many people believe that excavation work has found several Buddhist *stupas* here. Researchers

have also discovered a Buddhist monastery forty-two meters away from this brick mound. It is believed to have endured through five distinct cultural eras. This has led to the belief that many of its ruins are located underground. For this reason, it is not possible to recover all the artefacts. The *stupa* complex is its main attraction. It is located on a total base of 13.1 square meters. The *stupa* boasts a sturdy construction. There is a small pedestal in the middle of it. Both 2.4 and 2.1 meters make up the structure.<sup>12</sup>



*Itākhola Murā, Comilla, Bangladesh*<sup>13</sup>

### 10.3. *Rūpvān Murā*

This is also located in the Comilla district. It is located exactly where Bard is, in the Comilla district. Excavations took place here in the nineties. They found a monastery and a temple here. The length of the monastery is 112 feet (ca. 34 m),

and the width is 82 feet (ca. 25 m). The temple is 95 feet (ca. 29 m) long and 95 feet (ca. 29 m) wide. A Buddha statue made of sandstone is found here. It is believed to have been built between the 7th and 12th centuries.<sup>14</sup>



*Rūpvān Murā, Comilla, Bangladesh*<sup>15</sup>

#### 10.4. *Cārapatra Murā*

The location is also an ancient archaeological site in the Comilla district of Bangladesh.<sup>16</sup> Its construction period is estimated to be between the 11th and 12th centuries.<sup>17</sup> It is located in *Mainamati* near *Lalmāi*. From 1955 to 1957, excavation work took place here.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, researchers discovered a temple in this location. Its length was 150 feet (ca. 46 m), and its width was 55 feet (ca. 17 m). It has various elements and characteristics of Buddhist architecture.<sup>19</sup> The artefacts found here include a gem vessel and a copperplate grant. The king *Govindapala* of the *Chandra* dynasty granted it to the Vishnu temple. It may have been named *Cārpatra Murā* because of the four copper plates.<sup>20</sup>

#### 10.5. *Cāratra Murā*.

Other notable monasteries and restorations include *Ananda Vihara*, *Bhoj Vihara*, *Rupban Kanyaar Vihara*, *Banglar Vihara* on the hills of the cantonment, Buddhist *Vihara (Mainamati)* at the burial ground of soldiers killed in World War II, *Kotbāri Vihara*, *Abbas Ali Murā*, *Batagach Murā*, *Cullā Murā*, *Fakira Murā*, *Bairagi Murā*, *Baragach Murā*, *Ninjan Murā*, *Hatigara Murā*, *Uzirpur Murā*, *Pakka Murā*, *Chila Murā*, *Rupbani Murā*, *Chandi Murā*, *Alishwar Vihara*, *Balagachi Murā*, *Mainamati Dhibi: 1*, *Mainamati Dhibi: 1A*, *Mainamati Dhibi: 1B*, *Mainamati*

*Dhibi: 2*, *Mainamati Dhibi: 2A*, *Rani Mainamati's Palace (Queen's Bungalow)*, *Latikot Murā*, *Itākhola Murā 2*, *Jagatpur Moullabari*, *Meher*, *Gunaighar*, *Manduk*, *Barakamta*, *Shivmurti*, *Panchpuri*, *Paharpur*, *Palgiri*, *Deodighi*, *Dharmasagar*, and *Saharpar Dighi*.

The archaeological findings in the *Lalmāi Mainamati Tilamay* area, including the *Shalvan*, reveal much information about the history of Southeast Bengal from the 7th to the 13th centuries AD. In addition to the *Shalvan Vihara*, the *Lalmāi Mainamati* area also contains traces of numerous Buddhist monasteries, *stupas*, and temples. *Shalvan Vihara* was the first mining centre. As a result of excavations at *Shalvan* and other monasteries over time, monasteries, *stupas*, temples, royal copper plates, gold, silver and copper coins, bronze memorials, large and small Buddha statues made of bone, *bodhisattvas*, sculptures, terracotta plaques, seals, ornaments, everyday objects, etc. have been discovered at these archaeological sites.<sup>21</sup>

#### 11. The museum

A museum has been built on the south side of *Shalvan Mahavihara*. The construction period of this museum is 1965. Some valuable items or parts of the archaeological resources found in the greater Comilla region, including *Shalvan Mahavihara* built in ancient times and

various murtis have been preserved in this museum. The museum constructed an extended building in 1970–71 to accommodate the growing number of archaeological resources. There are a total of forty-two chambers in the entire museum. Visitors can view these displays. All the objects and resources found here have been preserved. In addition, stone and bronze statues have been kept here. The weight of the idols can reach up to five hundred kilograms. Notable among them are various types of stone Buddha statues, *Tri Vikram Vishnu* statues, *Tara* statues, *Marichi* statues, *Manjur* statues, *Parvati* statues, *Hargauri* statues, *Nandi* statues, *Mahishamardini* statues, *Manasa* statues, *Ganesh* statues, *Surya* statues, *Heruka* statues, and bronze *Vajrasattva* statues. The museum's collection includes gold and silver coins found in *Mainamati*, terracotta plaques, bronze and copper objects, iron objects, various types of toys made of clay, examples of woodwork, and ancient manuscripts written on parchment paper. The collection also includes various samples of pottery. There is a ticket counter next to the museum. From there, you can enter the museum with a ticket on all days except the closing day and see the archaeological treasures. The ticket price starts at twenty *taka* and goes up to a maximum of two hundred *taka* for both locals and foreigners. However, school

students pay a fixed entrance fee of five *taka*. The museum is open from 10 am to 6 pm during the summer. Additionally, during the winter, it operates from 9 am to 5 pm. However, it is closed from 1:00 PM to 1:30 PM. On Fridays, it is closed from 12:30 PM to 3:00 PM. However, the museum is open on special government days.

## **12. The religious tourism potential of *Shalvan Vihara***

Good-quality hotels, road improvements, and other development activities in the *Shalvan Mahavihara* area can significantly enhance its religious tourism potential. Facilitating the arrival of foreigners can increase its tourist importance. For instance, India has established all Buddhist circuits and is actively working to enhance them further. We can also draw inspiration from these ideas. And if steps can be taken accordingly, it is believed that tourists from various Buddhist countries of the world will travel here, and Bangladesh will be able to earn foreign exchange. However, consultation with some Buddhist countries can guide the implementation of initiatives like creating an easily transportable circuit.

## **13. How to reach *Shalvan Vihara***

There is a place called *Kotbāri* in the Comilla district. This is the location of the 'Bangladesh Rural Development Academy.' The *Shalvan Vihara* is located

in the *Majhamjhi* area of *Lalmai* Hills near the Bangladesh Rural Development Academy. *Kotbāri* is located eight kilometres from Comilla City. *Shalvan Mahavihara* is located in *Kotbāri*. However, the distance from Dhaka to Comilla is about ninety-seven kilometres. And it is true that, to go by train, you have to travel about one hundred and ninety-seven kilometres. It takes only 2 hours and 30 minutes to reach Comilla from Dhaka by road. There are various types of bus services operating from Dhaka to reach and return to Comilla. Bus services are also available from other divisions and districts. However, there are AC or non-AC bus services among them. In addition, there is a train service from Chittagong to Comilla. However, there is also an opportunity to come and go through Saudia and Prince Bus services.

#### 14. Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it can be said that the observation of the archaeological finds in the *Lalmai Mainamati Tilāmay* area, including the *Shalvan*, reveals a lot of information about the history of Southeast Bengal from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries AD. Apart from *Shalvan Mahavihara*, there are numerous Buddhist monasteries, *stupas*, monasteries, and temples in the *Lalmai Mainamati* region. *Shalvan Mahavihara* is the first excavation site. As a result of

excavations at *Shalvan* and other monasteries over time, monasteries, *stupas*, temples, royal copper plates, gold, silver and copper coins, bronze memorials, bronze statues of Buddha and *Bodhisattvas*, sculptures, terracotta plaques, seals, ornaments, everyday objects, etc., were discovered at these archaeological sites. So it appears that the *Mainamati* region of Comilla became famous around the *Shalvan Mahavihara*. Although other discoveries have increased the scope of *Mainamati*, they have also increased the importance of *Shalvan*. All things considered, a modern tourism spot modelled after *Kumlala's Shalvan Mahavihara* would rank among Bangladesh's best. It certainly needs to be in the religious vein, but we should not forget that. *Shalvan Mahavihara* has the potential to become one of the primary religious tourist destinations in Bangladesh, generating foreign currency. Let this be the thinking and work effort of *Shalvan Mahavihara* in the 21st century.

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