



ENDANGERED ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE AT RAJPUR, MEGHALAYA: NAVIGATING POPULATION, LIVELIHOOD, AND GOVERNANCE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Rajpur is an archaeological site located in the West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, that is increasingly under threat today. Rapid population growth in the last two decades, changes in the livelihood, and the limitations of state administrative mechanisms have intensified the pressure on this fragile archaeological site. This commentary examines how these factors intersect today endangering the archaeological heritage of Rajpur, highlighting the challenges of governance, livelihood management, and sustainable development within a sixth schedule hill area. Based on media reports and field observations, the study highlights the need for integrated strategies that balance heritage preservation with the socio-economic realities, ensuring continuity of heritage landscapes in the region.

Keywords: *Archaeology, Heritage Endangerment, Heritage governance, Livelihood, Landscape Transformation, Community archaeology*

Introduction

Archaeological heritage often enters the realm of public attention only when it has already reached a stage of severe vulnerability. Instead of being actively protected, sites are frequently discussed in public discourse only after processes of damage, encroachment, or neglect have become visible and difficult to reverse. In Meghalaya, the early medieval archaeological site of Rajpur reveals this pattern. Over the last fifteen years, Rajpur has made sporadic appearance in regional newspaper reports, mostly in terms of encroachment, illegal settlement, mining, and structural constraints within existing heritage governance frameworks. While these reports temporarily draw attention to the site, the realities encountered on the ground are far more complex and disturbing than what newspaper headlines might suggest. A visit to Rajpur reveals not a remotely located archaeological ruin of an earlier era, isolated from contemporary life, but a living and contested landscape in which heritage is gradually fragmenting due to everyday practices, livelihood-oriented land-use pressures, and administrative lapse.

Rajpur is situated in the West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya, on the bank of the river Jinjiam, a tributary of the river Brahmaputra (see figure 1). The site was referred to as Bhaitbari in the earlier studies; later on, both Bhaitbari and Vadagokugiri have been alternatively used; however, the name more commonly used by the local communities is Rajpur. In fact, most of the visible archaeological remains such as brick structures, mounds, and fortification traces are visible in the present-day village of Rajpur. For these reasons, the name Rajpur has been used in this study.

The site was excavated for a season in 1992 by the Prehistory Branch of Archaeological Survey of India, Nagpur. The 1992 exploration recorded brick-built temples, a stupa, water tanks, and extensive fortification walls, which suggested a complex settlement. Subsequently, in the 1992 excavation (Sharma, 1993, p.6) brick-built temples were excavated, one stupa and a section of the fortification wall. Based on the handmade pottery found here, excavators dated the site beyond second century BCE. This dating is based on similarity of handmade pottery which A K Sharma, Director of the aforesaid excavations found in Sekta, Manipur and the sites in Indo-Gangetic plains (Sharma, 1993, p.75). But scholars like G N Bhuyan (Bhuyan, 1972, pp.11-12) and P Sharma (Sharma, 2018, p.312) dated the site as early medieval based on their study of terracotta plaques and pottery respectively. The latter interpretation is more convincing in terms of relative dating, as kaolin pottery is the common artefact

found at the sites of early medieval Brahmaputra valley (Sharma, 2018, pp.322-23), whereas, handmade pottery traditions in the region exhibit long-term continuity from earlier periods (Roy and Hazarika, 2023, p.322) and persist even into the present. Currently, the site is protected by the Directorate of Arts and Culture, Government of Meghalaya. Despite its archaeological significance, there has been no noticeable state initiative undertaken in the form of excavation or conservation efforts since the initial excavation of 1992.

During the colonial era, the area encompassing Rajpur was under the revenue and administrative jurisdiction of Rangpur district, which was then part of the Bengal Presidency (Mackenzie, 2017, pp.245-46). Later, the area came under the revenue administration of Rangpur which roughly corresponds with the present-day Goalpara district, and was later incorporated into the West Garo Hills due to the British administrative reorganisation, which involved the territorial separation of hill regions and tribal areas (Mackenzie, 2017, pp.245-46).

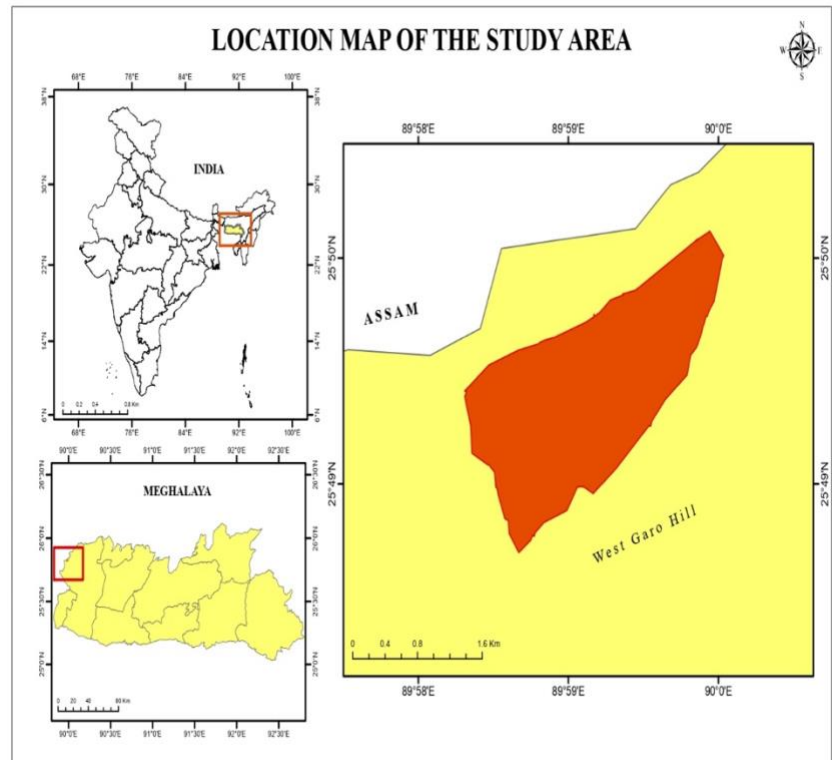


Figure 1: Figure showing the map of the study area.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of institutional attention towards this site since approximately 2010 onwards. Regional newspapers have reported about the deteriorating condition of the site, focusing on the destruction of material remains resulting from encroachment, neglect, and human activity. While these reports occasionally acknowledge official concerns and record sporadic administrative visits, they also point towards the lack of sustained protection efforts, proper site definition, and community-based conservation approaches. Therefore, the engagement of local media with the condition of Rajpur has remained sporadic, focusing on the visible damage rather than the underlying structural and policy-related issues that continue to make the site vulnerable.

Despite growing attention, there remains a significant gap in understanding how archaeological endangerment in Northeast India is shaped by the intersection of livelihood insecurity, demographic change, and institutional constraints. These issues are mostly presented either in the form of encroachment or administrative constraints, often overlooking the deeper socio-economic and political processes that produce such conditions. This commentary addresses the gap by examining Rajpur not merely as a site under threat, but as a complex socio-archaeological landscape where heritage preservation, survival imperatives, and governance structures are deeply entangled.

The commentary contributes to the contemporary scholarship by three different ways. Firstly, it provides reinterpretation of structural nature of archaeological endangerment. Secondly, it highlights the role of livelihood and displacement in shaping heritage landscapes in the Brahmaputra valley. And thirdly, it proposes an alternative heritage conservation focused on participatory and community-based heritage governance approach.

Media Reports and Public Narratives of Threat

The local media report over the last fifteen years have provided a significant amount of data record to understand the process of gradual endangerment of the Rajpur archaeological complex. Although the reports are sporadic, they collectively show a steady escalation of the level of threat to the site, from encroachment, unauthorised settlement, brick kiln activities, agricultural practices and quarrying. At the same time, they highlight the limitation of administrative measures in addressing these challenges. One of the earliest significant interventions appeared in *The Assam Tribune* (30 March 2010), where Prof Robin Dev Choudhury, former Director General of the National Museum and Chairman of the Indian Art History Congress, highlighted that unauthorised migrants were damaging ramparts and occupying structures within the fortified area. He recommended that the entire site be handed over to the Archaeological Survey of India for systematic excavation and preservation, highlighting the potential risks associated with delayed response could lead to permanent destruction.

A report published in *The Shillong Times* (July 2021), highlighted the alleged permission granted by the Nokma of Wadagokgre for quarrying in this protected area. Despite NGO complaints and temporary intervention by the forest authorities, the quarrying continued. The reports suggested that the enforcement drive remained reactive rather than preventive.

A report published in The Shillong Times (28 November 2023) highlighted Wadagokgre as reflective of broader institutional and regulatory constraints in heritage governance. It noted how temporary flood-related human migration from Assam evolved into full-scale encroachment, reshaping this hill terrain into plains. Although, prohibitory orders under Section 144 CrPC were issued in 2016 and subsequent management measures were taken, they appear to have encountered practical limitations. The appointment of contractual caretakers was noted as a procedural step, but it will remain affected by institutional capacity and jurisdictional complexity.

The 13 December 2025 report in the same newspaper linked the archaeological loss with demographic transformation: unauthorised households reportedly rose to over 440, while around 90 indigenous households remained. Concrete houses, roads, and farming reshaped the archaeological landscape, reportedly through informal land transactions. Student organisations such as the Garo Students' Union and the A'chik Students' Welfare Association were active in raising awareness, while the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council addressed the issue within its administrative framework and responsibilities.

Statements in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly (March 2025) indicating “Nil” conservation initiatives undertaken, further highlighted policy absence. Reports in The Shillong Times (January 2026) noted the issue of prohibitory orders under the Assam Ancient Monuments and Records Act, 1959, along with references to the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act, 1971 and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, indicated renewed regulatory intervention within reports of conflict and law-and-order concerns. Taken together, these media narratives do not merely document isolated incidents; they trace the cumulative transformation of Rajpur from an archaeologically significant landscape into a contested zone shaped by demographic pressure, extractive exploitation, weak enforcement, and structural gaps in heritage governance.

Field Observation

This archaeological site is a significant part of my doctoral research where I have spent a considerable time since 2023 conducting field work. I have observed the overall condition of the site has deteriorated considerably since my first visit 2023. The site, despite its recognized archaeological significance, continues to suffer from anthropogenic pressure and limited maintenance. The fortification wall that once demarcated this settlement is severely damaged today. The areas surrounding one of the most significant structural components of the site is the stupa which have been affected due to agricultural expansion, and brick kiln manufacturing. These damages to the material landscape of this site have gradually affected the archaeological contextual reducing its potential for future research.

In the demographic context, it is to be noted that there is an emerging conflict at the intersection of archaeological conservation, migration history, land insecurity, and humanitarian vulnerability across the Brahmaputra basin. The 1992 excavation report mentioned only the Koch and Garo communities and a few Muslim families as residing in the nearby areas of this site. However, during my field visits I could observe a significant demographic shift linked to migration and riverine displacement around the protected archaeological site and within as well. It was observed that many families had built their houses and constructed roads right on top of certain portions of the fortification wall itself.

This transformation has produced a tense and distrustful environment for research engagement which I experienced during my field visits. It was observed that there was visible community resistance from these inhabitants towards my field survey activities and viewed me as a state agent. This resistance which also took an ugly turn sometimes should not be seen in isolation but must be understood within the broader structural anxieties. It seems the inhabitants perceived my field work as a precursor to state intervention, eviction, or demolition drives in the future, not as neutral academic work. This hostility produces from a fear of displacement and fear of losing their shelter and livelihood.

The Brahmaputra Valley has historically experienced multiple phases of migration due to riverine erosion, land scarcity, and shifting settlement patterns. In the contemporary times, existential anxiety shapes the everyday life of the Bengali Muslim communities many of whom confront bureaucratic scrutiny, citizenship debates, and land insecurity. In such a context, the presence of an outsider conducting surveys might have been interpreted as surveillance rather than academic research. Thus, my archaeological field work became entangled in the contemporary politics of identity and belonging at Rajpur.

At the core of the conflict lies a fundamental dual crisis - on the one hand, there is the heritage protection imperative and on the other, there exists the humanitarian survival imperative. The site is legally protected, and the continued inhabitation within the site increases the risk of irreversible damage to the remains. Conservation laws mandate preservation, documentation, and prevention of encroachment. The presence of inhabitants is shaped by socio-economic precarity, displacement often linked with river erosion and the absence of viable livelihood alternatives. For these communities, the site does not represent an abstract or symbolic cultural landscape; rather, it constitutes a lived terrain of shelter, security, and survival. The tension between these two imperatives highlights the ethical complexity of managing heritage in contexts marked by vulnerability and marginalization, creating a clear ethical dilemma.

Thus, strict enforcement of heritage laws may cause humanitarian hardship, while permitting continued inhabitation will damage archaeological heritage. The issue is therefore not simply administrative, but raises questions about land rights and heritage with competing claims. It also reflects the tension between the “Authorized Heritage Discourse,” as described by Laurajane Smith (2006), and lived community realities. Conservation frameworks prioritize expert authority and material preservation, whereas livelihood and survival are priorities for marginalized communities. In such a context, archaeological practice becomes inseparable from current socio-political realities.

The issue is also relevant to discuss with broader debates in political ecology and critical heritage studies, where landscapes are understood as products of competing claims over land, resources, and identity rather than cultural entities.

Why Rajpur Matters Beyond Regional Boundaries?

Rajpur is located in a significant geo-strategic location within the Brahmaputra basin with easy access into the eastern Bengal region and the Bay of Bengal. Historically, this site might have been a crucial nodal point in the networks and linkages connecting the inland regions of the Brahmaputra valley through the Brahmaputra-Meghna river system with the Bengal region, including the maritime space. This is reflected in the rich archaeological heritage across the material landscape of this site. Presently, this terrain is witnessing rapid transformation due to continued human inhabitation and activities within the protected site area. The gradual levelling of mounds for cultivation and settlement is fast altering the topography of this site. This area is gradually getting converted from a hilly terrain area to a riverine plain due to human encroachment.

In the recent times, there are several state eviction drives being conducted in the Brahmaputra Valley to remove encroachment from protected public land. In principle, such measures could be used to protect vulnerable heritage sites like Rajpur, but requires extensive state intervention and coercion. In practice, such conservation efforts using coercion without local community consultation and their rehabilitation will create opportunities for future conflict and endanger material heritage. The state of disrepair and ruin at Rajpur today is not merely the result of unlawful inhabitation but also a policy of neglect and weak heritage governance. When public debate centres exclusively on eviction as the supreme solution to all heritage problems, it reduces these concerns to identity politics. A more sustainable approach would embed preservation within frameworks of ecological vulnerability, social justice and participatory governance, prioritising transparent documentation and community partnership. Therefore, Rajpur highlights the central challenge in heritage management, namely the complexities of safeguarding historically significant landscapes situated within densely inhabited and politically contested regions. The continued deterioration of the site of Rajpur, is not just a regional heritage crisis but a permanent loss for world archaeology. Each destroyed structure, each disturbed stratigraphic layer, represents the permanent loss of information pertaining to the historical processes of early medieval South Asia.

Reframing Heritage Governance of Rajpur

Rajpur requires crucial and practical intervention to protect it from further damage and encroachment. First of all, the site needs to be officially notified under heritage act so that unauthorised activities can be controlled. Along with legal protection, a comprehensive archaeological survey and new exploration should be conducted with guaranteed and continuous funding. Scientific documentation through detailed mapping, excavation, and analysis, would help in preserving and understanding the site. A practical site management plan is important to identify the areas that require immediate conservation, define strategies for safeguarding structural remains and the surrounding landscapes, and establish mechanisms for long-term monitoring. Although the site is presently maintained by TDACM, a purely state-centric approach is insufficient. Therefore, the conservation of Rajpur needs to transcend the bureaucratic conservation approach and adopt a community archaeology approach. Given the proximity of local communities, their active participation is critical for sustainable preservation. Awareness programmes, participatory documentation, collaboration with educational institutions, and inclusion of community representatives in management committees can foster shared responsibility.

This case from the Brahmaputra basin accomplishes a rethinking of heritage governance in such conflict prone areas across the world. Conservation cannot be pursued in isolation from social justice, nor can humanitarian concerns entirely predominate legal protection of the past. Sustainable resolution requires participatory models that integrate community dialogue, state accountability, and ethical archaeological practice. Only then can the past be preserved without extending of contemporary precarities.

Conclusion

Rajpur demonstrates that archaeological endangerment in Meghalaya is not the result of a single catastrophic event but of a slow, cumulative process shaped by shifting livelihood, demographic change, and governance. Although the site has formal recognition for its historical value, conservation effort has remained limited, leaving the site vulnerable to encroachment, environmental degradation, and incremental alteration of its terrain. The presence of caretaker, fences, and signboards symbolise the acknowledgement of the officials, but the absence of long-term conservation planning and community engagement has constrained their effectiveness. Heritage management thus appears largely procedural, responding to emerging situations rather than anticipating them. Archaeologically, Rajpur holds wider significance for the study of early medieval South Asia by providing archaeological evidence of Buddhist and Brahmanical architectural remains, planned fortifications, hydraulic features, and riverine connectivity in the Brahmaputra valley and Indian subcontinent and situates the site in the broader discussion of early medieval urbanism, religious landscapes, and riverine connectivity. Its continued deterioration would therefore represent the heritage loss. The study further exposes structural governance complexities. The overlap between Sixth Schedule autonomy and state-level archaeological regulations has produced diffused accountability and weak enforcement. Rajpur thus reflects a wider pattern of threatened landscapes existing at the margins of policy attention. Its preservation demands sustained institutional commitment and landscape-based protection. Without continuous intervention, both the archaeological record and the fragile terrain that sustains it face irreversible loss.

Rajpur ultimately demonstrates that heritage conservation in socially and politically fragile landscapes cannot be sustained through regulatory enforcement alone, but must be reimagined as a negotiated process between preservation, livelihood, and justice.

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