

In Search of *Nine Mathas*

Archaeology department to start looking for Sylhet's Chandrapur; historians say it hosted an educational complex with nine mathas



Paschimbhag copperplate inscription. Photograph By Dwoha Chowdhury

Read the following passage based on the recently found ancient educational institution.

Ancient Bengal, the land of knowledge, is the place where institutional education flourished through vihara (monastery), mahavihara (monastic complex of viharas) and matha (cloister, institute or college). Thousand-year-old heritages like Nalanda, Shalban, Somapura, Vikramshila, Jagaddala and many others stand tall as a testament to our glorious past. These ancient higher-learning institutions eventually laid the foundation of what later came to be known as universities.

Srihatta (present day Sylhet division) is home to such an institution, which is older than Jagaddala, as disciplined as Nalanda and was built in the early 10th century, according to historians.

King Srichandra of Chandra dynasty (900 to 1050 AD) of south-eastern Bengal patronised constructing nine mathas at Chandrapur of Srihatta. Details of these mathas were inscribed in a

copperplate grant (historical legal records engraved on copper plates) found in Paschimbhag of Rajnagar upazila in Moulvibazar in 1958, which was later decoded and translated.

King Srichandra ruled for 45 years, longest in the dynasty; and his achievements, prosperity, battles and generosity were engraved in the copperplate inscriptions or grants at the time. So far, 12 inscriptions of the Chandra dynasty are found and eight of them are from during the reign of Srichandra.

Paschimbhag plate is the most notable and discussed.

According to Kamala Kanta Gupta Choudhury (commonly referred as Kamalakanta Gupta) -- a decoder of the inscription and author of "Copperplates of Sylhet" -- the inscription was accidentally found by one Binod Bihari Chakravarti in 1958 in a vacant land of Paschimbhag village of Rajnagar upazila in present day Moulvibazar.

Though family history of the king, his conquest and many other incidents were engraved in it, the main reason of the inscription was for land grant.

It was written in Sanskrit but the script is Devanagiri -- a left-to-right abugida (writing system) based on the ancient Brahmi script -- commonly used during his reign, engraved by one Haradasa. There are 28 lines in obverse and 37 lines in reverse.

According to Kamalakanta Gupta and articles written in Bengali, later compiled and edited by Dr Zafir Setu in the book "Tamrashashone Sylhet", the king granted 452 patakas (a measurement of land) of Chandrapura of Srihatta for different purposes of nine mathas.

Following his study and research, Kamalakanta Gupta believed that Chandrapur was a town in the Chandrapura Vishaya (subdivision) of Srihattamandala or Srihatta and the vishayapati (ruler) used to live there and the mathas were situated in the town.

"The inscription and all the evidence lead us to believe that there was a large educational institute in the land, which was mainly a religious education centre, like Nalanda or Odantapuri," said Dr Zafir Setu.

"The educational concept, the land grant structure based on the level of labour distribution of around 25 types of professionals point that this was a planned and disciplined institute -- functioning almost like a modern university," he added.

"It makes me wonder how such an institution could be forgotten from history," he said.

Many say the place is situated in the Dighirpar area of Juri upazila in Moulvibazar. The archaeology department is planning to start their survey works from the spot.

Historians, however, never agreed on a specific spot till to date.

Writer and researcher Prof Nripendralal Das said, "There are many possibilities where the town and the educational institute might be."

"The copperplate was found in Rajnagar upazila but there are many other places nearby like Nidhanpur or Kalapur where copperplates of other dynasties were found. It proves that the land holds many histories and mysteries, waiting to be unearthed."

On July 15, the archaeology department asked the regional director of Sylhet-Chattogram to look into the matter and file a detailed report after visiting the possible location at Juri upazila in Moulvibazar.

The regional director said, "Following the instruction, I've already started studying about the matter and am very excited to look for the historical educational institute."

Hannan Miah, director general of the department said, "If we find the heritage, it could be one of the greatest archaeological findings of recent decades in the country. Now, we're planning for research and survey at the first phase; if the result is promising, we will start a large-scale excavation soon."

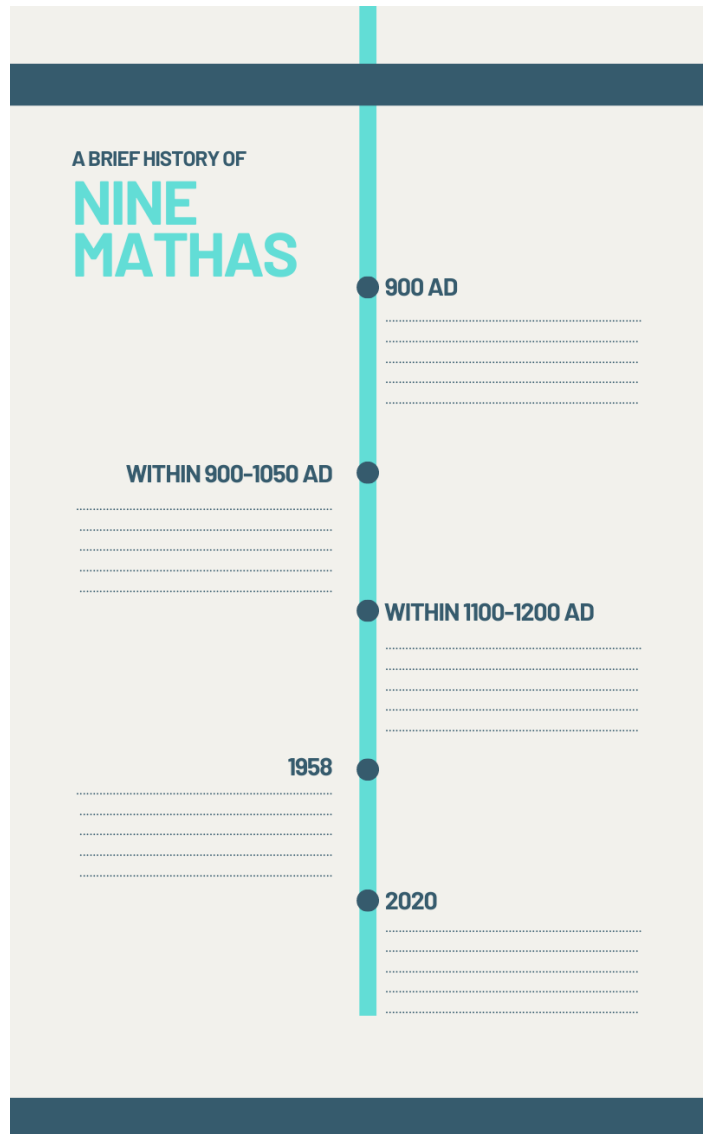
Fill in the blanks based on information from the text above.

According to _____, a decoder of the inscription and author of "Copperplates of _____" -- the inscription was accidentally found by Mr. Binod Bihari Chakravarti in 1958 in a vacant land of Paschimbhag village of _____ upazila in present day Moulvibazar. Though family history of the king, his conquest and many other incidents were engraved in it, the main reason of the inscription was for _____. It was written in Sanskrit but the script is Devanagiri -- a left-to-right abugida (writing system) based on the ancient _____ script -- commonly used during his reign, engraved by one _____.

According to Kamalakanta Gupta and articles written in Bengali, later compiled and edited by Dr _____ in the book "Tamrashashone Sylhet", the king granted _____ patakas (a measurement of land) of Chandrapura of Srihatta for different purposes of nine mathas. Many say the place is situated in the _____ area of Juri upazila in _____. The _____ is planning to start their survey works from the spot.

Complete the timeline using information from the box below.

- Beginning of the reign of King Srichandra of Chandra dynasty
- Discovery of Paschimbhag plate
- Foundation of Jagaddala
- Foundation of Nine Mathas
- Survey by archaeology department



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