

Historic university lost in time

Restoration project for Pandit Vihar in Ctg stalled due to indecision over funding

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The restoration of Chittagong's Pandit Vihar University, the once renowned educational institution of the 8th century, has remained stalled for around six years, due to indecision over its funding process.

The institution was one of the four prestigious universities and Buddhist monasteries of ancient India.

The idea of restoring its glory by establishing a university in Chittagong was conceived in 2010 during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to China, according to the education ministry sources.

The name of the university will be changed to International Pandit University and restored following the footsteps of the revival of the ancient Nalanda University in India, said the ministry sources, adding that a draft law and curriculum was also primarily approved.

Insiders said though the ministry and University Grants Commission (UGC) advanced much by approximating a budget of Tk 560 crore and selecting a 50-acre land; the activities came to a halt as the decision of funding remained pending.

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The sources said the problem of funding rose when a body led by the education ministry proposed to build the institution under Public Private Partnership (PPP) in 2013. But UGC in its report opined that university such as Pandit Vihar should be established with the government's funding because of its historical value and specialty.

Insiders said during the PM's visit to China, the Chinese premier gave his government's commitment to extend help in starting the restoration works.

Later on August 4, 2012, PMO issued a letter to the education ministry to take essential measures.

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is the chief patroniser of the university. Realising its historical value, she gave the directives to restore it," said Dr Jinobodhi Bhikkhu, former chairman of the Department of the Oriental Language (Pali and Sanskrit) of Chittagong University, who was with the PM during the China visit.

"This university is a prestigious asset for us; the government should start the restoration works under its budget," he

added.

The university was also rich with various invaluable artefacts from the Pala Dynasty from 8 to 12 AD, said Prof Jinobodhi, quoting a writing on Bangladesh's Buddhist artefacts from 4 to 12 AD of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, published in 1999.

"The artefacts are preserved in various museums around the country," he said.

A committee was formed in November 2011 and it visited the location of the ancient university at Anwara on December that year, he said.

UGC in its reports said the restoration of Pandit Bihar University is feasible as it had played a vital role in writing Charyapada, a collection of mystical poems, which was recognised as a precursor to the Bangla language.

There is a possibility to build the Trans-Asian Highway up to Myanmar and Thailand; students from the neighbouring countries would also be interested in studying here, it added.

In a letter to the PMO, signed by Jinnat Rehena, deputy secretary of the

education ministry, on December 21, 2015, said UGC officials had talked with the officials of different high commissions and embassies over the funding. They told the UGC that they could not make any commitment until the work started.

The ministry said in this circumstance the PM's decision in principle is required on the issue.

Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, state minister for land and lawmaker from the Anwara constituency, said his ministry is waiting for the decision taken regarding the issue and then will decide over handing of the land.

Asked, deputy secretary Jinnat yesterday told The Daily Star that, there was no development regarding the issue. She said they were waiting for the PMO's decision.

Mohibul Aziz, professor of the Bangla department of CU, said, "Pandit Vihar was a historical university and played a vital role in spreading the knowledge including origination of Bangla language. "Re-establishment of the university will help to inform the world that our land was so rich in education, even in the past."