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## Theater, Space and Place Making in North-East Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Although Theater activities inject a significant effect on outdoor public affairs, local urban planners do not sufficiently consider such impact while designing a new civic theater in Habiganj, a growing sub urban district of Bangladesh. Incoherent theater buildings in such urban areas fail to engage people with theater at large, in consequence, the act of theater remains incomplete. The research was conducted through a semi structured interview, social demographic data analysis, case studies, technical aspects and literature survey providing the anthropomorphic image of a theater as an embodied space, elementary spaces of theater and affordable & inclusive theatrical form as major findings. A regional model is driven from the research for local theater (different types of performing spaces) practice that can guide future municipal theater planning for theater to sustain among society & people.

**Keywords:** Public spaces, Theater, Elementary spaces, Anthropomorphic image, Architectural intervention  
Regional model.

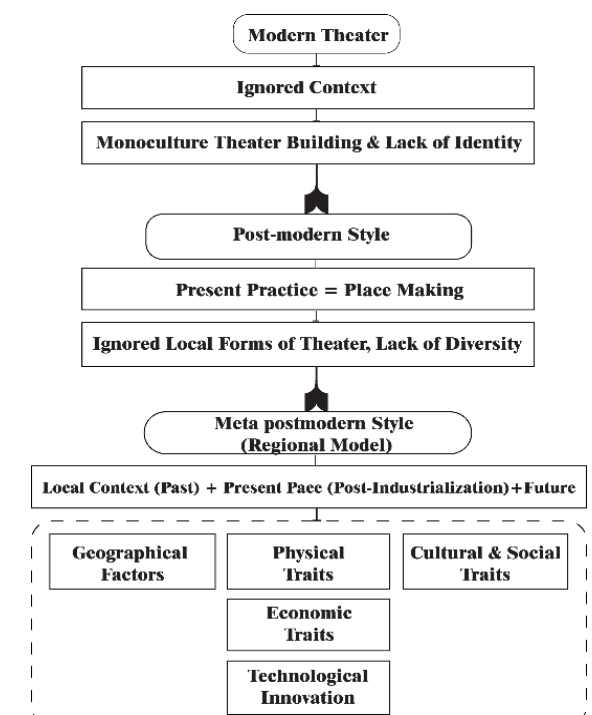
### 1. Introduction

The term "theatre" encompasses both dramatic performance (performance) and the physical structure (architecture) that houses that production. As an art form, theatre contains the theatrical artifice of transient events that employ ephemeral materials such as gesture, light, and sound alongside disposable elements such as costume, prop, and setting; as a built form, theatre provides a stable environment designed to endure beyond the transitory events it houses. [1] For years, theatrical space evolved around a fundamentally distinct principle: a theatre was a site of human conversation. The audience did not sit, gaze, and listen passively; it took part in the performance—the experience was shared—with actors and members of the audience interacting. [2] Syed Jamil Ahmed (2022) stated that in this region, which is primarily deltaic, theatre and performance spaces referred to contextual and core performances presented in democratic and extremely flexible settings such as open, semi-open (Nat mandir), or robust arenas. Additionally, he stated that our ancient theatre ancestors were primarily farmers and other wage earners, which has changed throughout time. With the impact of Europe, the embodiment of theatre and performance became exclusive and belonged to a certain class of people in society, limiting the outcome and scope of theatre in this region. The theatrical space of experience, as well as theatre's place-making, have been transformed by economic and industrial modernization, and have largely lost their fundamental social and political purposes, which are primarily to serve the underprivileged sections of a society in a third world country. [3] According to several widely accepted practises in academic and professional circles, the fundamental aim of place-making appears to be the regeneration of crucial urban areas through the redesign of public space with the active participation of local populations. Recent research indicates that place-making has the potential to be an innovative and potentially independent field, competing with more established disciplines such as urban planning, urban design, and architecture. [4] This paper focuses on outlining the anthropomorphic image of theatre in this region by revising and re-visioning the scale, form and image of local theater masses and examining them in their current and previous forms, which may help in enhancing the decision-making process for future cultural development planning by providing context of the local lifestyle and pattern of cultural attributes, as well as exerting a positive influence on the physical settings of the local area.

### 2. Industrial Development and Morphology of Theatrical and Cultural Landscape

By and large, cultural landscape studies have stressed the relationship between natural settings and human-made interventions. However, cultural landscape methods for studying places and people's shaping of them have tended to emphasise the physical rather than the political dimensions of places, focusing on rural, pre-industrial landscapes, vernacular house types, and patterns of cultivation, while dealing with different ecology but avoiding political discord [5]. Syed Jamil Ahmed (2021) mentioned that a region's theatre and cultural activities evolve in response to its geographical, economic, and social orientations and constraints. Theatrical and artistic activities developed in this region around its level terrain, floodplains, impoverished population, and folklore. As a result, indigenous people produced, appreciated, and promoted old theatre in more democratic settings with few spatial boundaries. The fact that community boundaries are mostly symbolic does not mean that they indicate diverse meanings for different

people. Additionally, it implies that some individuals may see boundaries that are completely imperceptible to others. [6] According to structural elements, the ancient theatre and cultural environment is composed of a few natural and materialistic components, such as: a stage, monoliths, and roof, connected passages for artists, circular or rectangular areas for the audience, and organic spaces for the performers. The key tendencies in Bangladeshi theatre nowadays can be broadly classified as i) rural-based indigenous theatre and ii) urban-based non-professional socially and artistically involved play. [3] Bangladesh's indigenous theatre is rooted in the legacy of Indian subcontinental theatre practise and dates back at least thirteen centuries. On the other hand, urban theatre predates the 18th-century British occupation of the subcontinent. [3] The indigenous theater and cultural practices of Bangladesh are people orientated and the structure, space and their place making were also deeply humanitarian. But with time the planning of cultural spaces has become homogenous and exclusive at the pressure of industrialization and globalization which has caused the greater part of the crowd averse towards theater and cultural practices. The present planning of theater and theatrical buildings also disregard the indigeneity of the regions that fails to promote or in cases house the local cultural performances. The transformation phases of the theater and cultural performances transforming into modern theater practice in this region are depicted below.



**Figure 1.** Structure of the Study (Developed by Author).

### 3. Material and Methods

The study on the cases of theatre spaces and placemaking creates a guideline for developing a methodological framework by including the site environment and the study's goals. The study essentially has three major goals: (1) to exhibit and promote the natural and cultural settings of local theatre; (2) to outline the picture of the anthropomorphic image of theatre in this region; and (3) to provide a future management guideline for Cultural planning.

To attain these objectives, a conceptual methodological framework has been developed for this project. First, theoretical analysis is used to justify the town's contextual theatrical significance, and then an action plan is developed based on an on-site survey and questionnaire survey, in which visitor experience objectives are identified through value identification mapping and value analysis of the study area. The following step was to recognise the identified assets, which resulted in a structured outline of anthropomorphic theatrical resources that can effectively convey the region's story. By the end of the study, we may have established an existing sense of connection or link of the most prominent elements of the local theatre, which can be reinforced through municipal development planning.

The comprehensive research was carried out in the following stages:

- 1) The figure comprising the study area's figure ground map and its connectivity with the cultural zone was obtained from the relevant institutions.

- 2) The traditional procession and dance-music-based theatrical performances that comprise the cultural landscape, values, historical structures (Temples, Nat mandirs, Banyan tree plazas, etc.), demographic structure, and cultural texture of the study region were obtained through a review of pertinent publications and official documents.
- 3) The methodology for this study for measuring urban dwellers' cultural values and preferences and merging them with the planning specialist's competence, so more accurately portraying all points of view, is determined by the audience's perspective. The authors regarded the local community or habitats that live or work in the area, as well as tourists and visitors that frequently visit the area, as their audiences. The questionnaire survey was administered to 100 members of the community and guests, as well as seven members of the theatre profession. A data collection form was created to assess existing heritage resources through the identification of cultural values. Oral data were gathered by inquiring about the current theatre scenario, practising facilities, physical and structural characteristics, infrastructure and spatial conditions, cultural activities and industrial development, population and population movement in the area, educational, sociocultural, and economic conditions of the area's residents, their customs and traditions, performances from the past to the present, and folkloric characteristics. Thus, the cultural landscape's contributions to the area's inhabitants were determined. Additionally, the interventions, notably the human ones, that altered the setting of theatre practises and their influence were questioned.[7]
- 4) To highlight the values of the area's indigenous culture, oral data obtained via information forms was analysed. A variety of factors were considered while evaluating the cultural background. This information was collected from a survey of the literature. Apart from that, several other aspects were considered, including the region's historical value, as well as the area's current historical-cultural components and spaces, as well as religious sites. Due to the presence of these characteristics in the study region, a qualitative evaluation was conducted. Qualitative study was conducted due to the region's continual dissemination of cultural values. Six cultural values were identified during the area's inquiry. There are four types of values: aesthetic, cultural, scientific and social values.
- 5) In light of the data gathered during the final stage, some guidelines were developed to demonstrate how the study area's cultural values operate effectively in the context of theatrical performances.



**Figure 2.** Monocultural Structures End up creating a Shabby Town and Lack of Sense of Place for People.

As a result, decreased social engagement and communication, comfort, and identity led to an increase in social conflict, criminality, and other infractions in urban areas where people were losing their sense of place.

#### 4. Postmodern Trends of Theater

The post-modern style of architecture and urban forms is currently being used by municipalities and architects to try to revive a city's identity (Harvey, 1989). As a result, architects have made an effort to integrate elements from the past with those from the contemporary. Cities utilize local culture and traditional characteristics to build a feeling of place in the built environment. To improve the quality of life in a more conventional setting, post-modernists advocated using urban planning and construction methods. Some significant signs like the coming crisis of identity, the expected repercussions like an ageing population, and some of the most fundamental human needs are overlooked by the style of design, which lacks long-term vision. The postmodern style, on the other hand, led to a decline in design originality and creativity. According to Jamil Ahmed (2020), the style is inadequate in our environment because it relies on empirical and European knowledge of space and place creation. The lack of long-term vision causes urban incoherence, the loss of time-old traditions and anthropomorphic methods, mass communication, and social segregation in the cities. However, despite their efforts to incorporate cultural and social events from both the past and the present, designers were unable to achieve their goals due to a lack of contingency

analysis. The study will bring a creative approach to a new style of design by emphasizing the importance of creating sustainable theatres in the research area while maintaining a critical balance between the past, present, and future.

## 5. Current Homogenous Approach of Theater Planning

Environmental, social, and economic forces all work in concert to ensure a long-term future for the environment (Newman, 2002, Amen, 2021). In contrast, the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) defined sustainability as the ability of the current population to meet their own needs while also meeting the fundamental needs of future generations. As a result of this comprehensive examination, sustainable planning may be defined as raising quality of life for future and current generations without compromising the sense of place for present people. It's hard to find rehearsal and experimental space, let alone traditional or anthropomorphic theatre in the modern, uniform theatre planning in Bangladeshi cities, which includes large town halls with a variety of services on the ground floor, proscenium theatres, and seminar rooms.

### 5.1 Theater Formation and Morphology of Anthropomorphic Theater In North-East Bangladesh

According to Shree Brojendra Nath Bandopadhyay (1943), the earliest Bengali theatre was a foreign import. It had nothing to do with the country's enthusiasm or taste. As a result, this could not be permanent. There is a forty-year gap between the establishment of authentic Bengali theatre by Bengalis and European theatre. These forty years have marked a pivotal point in Bengali history. Until then, Bengalis were content with Jatra, Panchali, Kavigan, and Half Akhrai, among other forms of entertainment, and no new European form of entertainment became relevant. Syed Jamil Ahmed characterises ancient North-East Bangladesh in his writings as a theatre space in which royals serve as producers, local theatre enthusiasts serve as directors, and farmers serve as actors-viewers-stage staff. As a result, the architectural environment in this spirits' basin is a spatial composition constructed to suit a shared narrative.

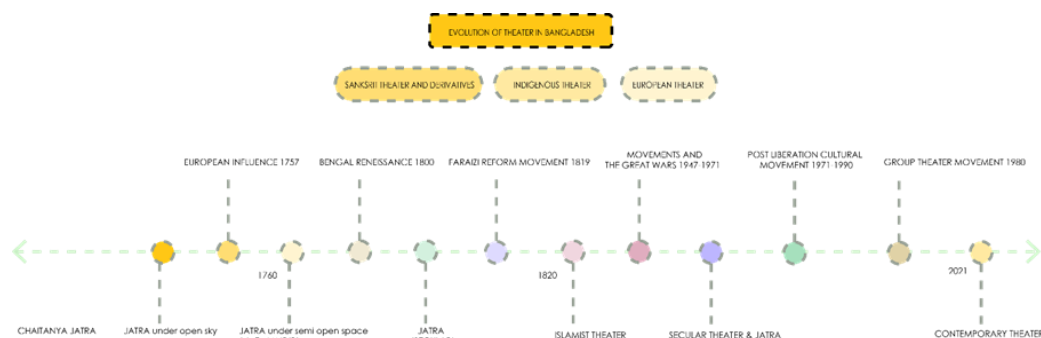


Figure 3. Historical Framework for Theatre.

Having established the historical framework for theatre in this region, this study will now seek to explore the indigenous theatre of the study area. 'Indigenous' refers to something that is 'naturally born or created in a land or region'. [8] The term 'theatre' refers to any action performed in three dimensions by an individual or a group for another individual or group.

On the basis of this understanding, the following figure depicts the transformation of morphological theatrical space in North East Bangladesh:

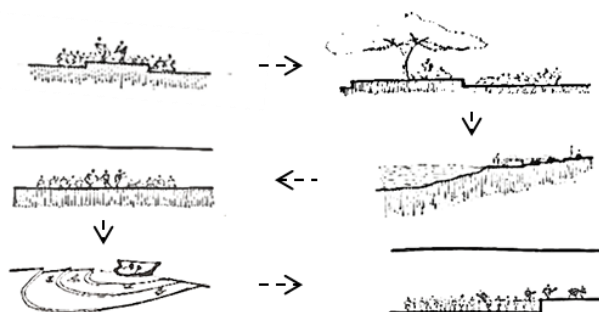


Figure 4. Transformation of Morphological Theatrical Space in North East Bangladesh.

This graphic depicts the progression of a theatre space as understood in the western world from its primordial stage of an open space that serves as an inspiration for theatrical productions to its pinnacle in the shape of a techno-expressive architectural design. This diagram illustrates how there is a current trend to bring theatre works out of their techno-physical shells and into a new investigation of spaces that can inspire and provide meaning to theatrical works in ways that were previously unimaginable.

It can be seen from the diagram that the theatre space in North-East Bangladesh has never experienced the articulation of its spaces in the same way that theatre space in the west has. What has changed in this region is the relationship between actors and audience members, or, to put it another way, the modification of the audience's relationship to the theatre performance. According to the sources we have, the first real Bengali plays were adapted from the Shri Chaitanya Jatra, which took the form of a parade. From open-air theatrical performances, our region's theatre has embraced a variety of venues influenced by diverse movements and invasions by other administrations. As a result, we studied and embraced indoor theatre approaches. The reason for our theatre style, which is based on minimum and vernacular settings, may be understood in terms of geopolitical and economic contexts.

## 5.2 Anthropomorphic Image of Theater and Audience Engagement

The anthropomorphic image of theatre is one that is shaped by a community's indignity. The settings, structure, and infrastructure that draw an indigenous audience to a theatre are generally referred to as the anthropomorphic image of theatre in this study.

In Greece (as the birthplace of European theatre) and Rome, the proscenium stage and the hill-carved amphitheatre serve as an anthropomorphic representation of their theatrical practises. On the other hand, the Nat mandir and the Banyan Tree shadow on the Indian Subcontinent serve as anthropomorphic settings for theatre practise.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Identification of Cultural Values in the Study Area: A Case Study of Habiganj, Sylhet

The study selected the Habiganj and its surrounding area (Figure 5) as a sample of "North -Eastern Bangladesh" which is located at Habiganj, popularly known as the Industrial Area of Sylhet.

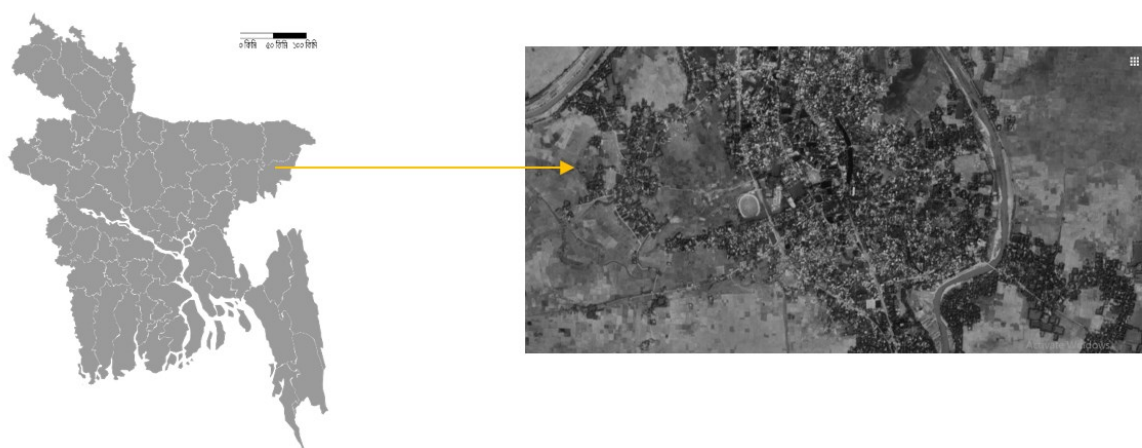


Figure 5. Map Showing Study Area (Habiganj).

**Habiganj** (Bengali: হবিগঞ্জ, Romanized: *Hobigonj*), formerly known as **Habibganj** (Bengali: হবিবগঞ্জ, romanized: *Hobibgonj*), is a district in north-eastern Bangladesh, located in the Sylhet Division. It was established as a district in 1984 as a successor to its *subdivision* status since 1867. Habiganj is a developing district in the country, with a population of around 20,00,000. The city has a significant history with education and culture.

Habiganj is well-known for its folk literature and culture, and there are numerous groups dedicated to fostering cultural and social activities. Clubs, libraries, theatrical groups, women's societies, and literary societies are only a few examples. Additionally, the region contains almost 1,300 mosques, 176 temples, and two churches.

Habiganj is a district in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh that has developed into a thriving hub for all activities relating to trade, manufacturing, economy, and electricity distribution. Additionally, this area has created a unique array of ethnic groups that are inextricably linked to ethnic lifestyles. Historically, they were largely uneducated labourers from impoverished communities.

Using their shared norms, beliefs, and practices, this energetic group of people has transformed themselves into a new style of cultural practice and developed a homogeneous and radical pattern, from which they have derived their current sense of self as a community.



The initial phase in this research is to identify the intangible cultural resources that exist within the Habiganj cultural environment. The following map depicts the cultural resources that have been discovered, which was created by compiling data from Google Earth and integrating it with a physical survey that included interviewing 150 people from the local population and visitors, as well as 7 persons from the theatrical industry.



**Figure 6.** Map Showing the Existing Performance Spaces in Habiganj. (Developed by Author)

### 6.1 Value Analysis

According to the findings of the audience perception survey, the identified and noteworthy heritage cultural performances are sorted into categories as shown in the following table. In the first instance, the value elements were classified into seven groups. They embody the rasa (essence of an art form): the pathetic, the devotional, the heroic, the comic, the furious, the erotic, and the peaceable. Based on the information in Table 1, all Heritage Cultural Performances can be split into two distinct categories. They are the values of the traditional acts that are either secular and religious in nature.

**Table 1.** Table Showing the Aesthetic & Anthropomorphic Values of local performances in the study area.

performances (related to)	pathetic (karunya)	devotional (bhakti/madhur)	heroic (vira)	comic (hasya)	furious (roudra)	erotic (sringara)	peaceful (santa)	time of the year	Secular	religious
siva & parvati dance		✓	✓					chaitra sangkranti	✓	✓
dhamail				✓				programs	✓	
marisia jari		✓						muhammad		✓
bhatiwalii gaan		✓					✓	festival	✓	
jatra	✓			✓		✓		festival	✓	
kirtan	✓		✓					festival		✓
karbala legend	✓				✓			muhammad		✓
kumari puja		✓				✓		durga puja(shareef)	✓	✓
bhatu gaan				✓		✓		festival	✓	
rasnitya		✓				✓	✓	ras purnima	✓	✓

The result of the audience perception study demonstrates that all tangible heritage pieces have substantial aesthetic and geographical significance because of their scenic beauty, as well as making major contributions to anthropological and vernacular architecture research areas.

The audience was quite interested in hearing their thoughts on the Valuable and Rare Cultural Values of Theater, and they were interested in sharing their thoughts. Their perspective is that the most significant Tangible Cultural components are found in the town's central public area, which is where the majority of the people congregate. The "Nat Mandir" has the greatest number of values of any of them and may be considered one of the most important "Cultural Icons" of theatre, as the theatre scholars who were interviewed reiterated as well. When it comes to Cultural Centre, the living style, the sense of worship, and its rituals have all been acknowledged as having higher cultural worth than physical cultural heritage. The rural and contextual theater of this region is mainly Giti Natya (Songs and Dance).

**Table 2.** Table Showing the Character and Spaces of local performances in the study area.

Performances (related to)	Character of the Play	Community Space of performances	Building Structures of Performances
<i>Shiv Parvati Dance</i>	<i>Procession, Dance &amp; music</i>	<i>Courtyard, Street</i>	
<i>Dhamail</i>	<i>Songs and dance</i>	<i>Community program</i>	
<i>Marsia Jari</i>	<i>Songs and Waz</i>	<i>Community Field</i>	
<i>Bhatiwalli Gaan</i>	<i>Songs</i>	<i>On boats and by rivers</i>	
<i>Jatra</i>	<i>Folk Theater</i>	<i>Open Air</i>	
<i>Kirtan</i>	<i>Recitation, Narration</i>	<i>Household programs</i>	<i>Nat Mandirs</i>
<i>Karbala Legend</i>	<i>Procession, Re-enactment of Karbala Battle</i>	<i>Streets</i>	
<i>Kumari Puja</i>	<i>Ceremonious worship</i>		<i>Mandirs</i>
<i>Bhatu Gaan</i>	<i>Songs and dance</i>	<i>Community program</i>	
<i>Ras Nritya</i>	<i>Indigenous dance</i>	<i>Monipuri Para</i>	

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Evaluating the Existing Elements of Local Theater Spaces in the Neighboring Areas of the Study

Tea local contextual theatre is being introduced as part of a living cultural legacy, and its significant values are being identified in this study, which is a preliminary method. Conserving the current harmony between forms and practices has the potential to protect the social and built eco-system as well as the spatial coherence of the area. Because of the existing network of cultural landscape resources in the research region, it is feasible that it will serve as a vehicle for the advancement of economic development if it is promoted by supporting cultural tourism and presenting cultural heritage (Amen & Nia, 2020). Ancient history, geographical location, and cultural customs all have an impact on it. Sustainable cultural planning encourages appreciation of the local forms of theatre and other activities such as visiting famous actors and nostalgic Spaces, demonstrations of theatre production, participating in local ceremonies and cultural events and sustain the cultural context in the midst of recurring hegemony. In this study, the spatial structure of Theater spaces has been studied; cultural resources are identified and then classed according to the value typology and user perception. Theater orientation can be understood as a multifaceted depiction of local narratives and scriptures.

### 7.2 Regional Model

In order to get started on this research project, a comprehensive grasp of the primary concepts of nature-human interaction and a conceptualization of the theatre culture in and around the regions were produced. Following the presentation of the situation of the research region at the time of writing, a preliminary evaluation was carried out in order to identify the initial issues. In addition, engaging in conversation with others who live nearby is helpful in determining the true nature of the problem at the place. At the same time, a large number of pertinent papers, journals, and articles were analyzed and examined in order to determine the issue. The zoning was established in order to produce a public-oriented complex while preventing significant constructions from becoming off-centric and heroic. Therefore, as a result of our efforts, we have developed a set of guidelines that should be adhered to when planning a theatre building or complex in the study area. These guidelines include the incorporation of outdoor and semi-outdoor space, Banyan tree plazas, intermediate space incorporation, horizontal expansion if feasible, configurable halls, free and fair entrances, and all of these features should be sculpted around an unheroic scale.

## 8. Conclusion

Cultural cohesiveness and spatial structure of theatre is a self-sustained and organically produced variation that was formed and impacted by the inhabitants living in it. Theater (Giti Nritya), it- self has potentials to be regarded as valuable cultural resource. However, these important types of theatre are being overlooked as a result of a lack of ingestion. Sustainable Conservation management of Cultural planning\s can bring people together to be conscious about their collective identity and legacy, and create a shared local vision within a global context. Involvement of the local community helps help bring back the process, as they are the most effective keepers of the cultural legacy [10]. This paper is a primary initiative that explored for the heritage forms and values in the existing theatrical cultural landscape in Habiganj in North East Bangladesh, which can help to realize the importance of protecting this valuable

heritage and also can serve to guide detailed culture management planning and designs. Therefore, the successes of this study could also contribute to strengthen the conservation systems of dwindling local traditions.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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