



# Space Constraints and Conservation Challenges of Antiquities: A Critical Study on Bangladesh National Museum

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**Abstract :** *The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) preserves the nation's cultural and historical heritage, housing 93,932 antiquities. However, space constraints and inadequate conservation facilities hinder proper preservation and exhibition. This study critically examines overcrowding, poor storage conditions, environmental fluctuations, and resource shortages affecting artifact preservation. Using qualitative assessment, data were collected from museum records, conservation reports, and direct observations. Findings reveal that 90,089 artifacts remain undisplayed, with many stored in overcrowded spaces, including verandas. Environmental factors such as humidity, dust, pollution, and unstable temperatures accelerate deterioration, particularly of fragile artifacts. Despite three conservation rooms, outdated techniques, limited equipment, and a shortage of trained professionals hamper restoration efforts. Additionally, air-conditioning in 46 galleries operates only during museum hours, affecting artifact longevity, while large antiquities remain untreated due to inadequate facilities. The study highlights the urgent need for infrastructure expansion, modern conservation technologies, and increased resource allocation. Without intervention, Bangladesh risks losing invaluable cultural treasures. Expanding exhibition space, improving conservation facilities, and hiring trained specialists are crucial for safeguarding antiquities for future generations.*

**Keywords:** *Bangladesh National Museum, Space Constraints, Conservation Challenges, Cultural Heritage, Antiquities*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Museums serve as custodians of a nation's cultural heritage, preserving invaluable antiquities that provide insights into history, tradition, and identity (Keene, 2012; Fairouz et al, 2023). The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM), the largest museum in the country, holds a vast collection of antiquities, including archaeological relics, manuscripts, coins, paintings, and ethnographic antiquities. However, despite its crucial role in safeguarding the nation's heritage, BNM faces significant challenges in conservation due to severe space constraints and inadequate preservation infrastructure (Shah and Shah, 2024).

With over 93,932 antiquities in its collection, the museum can display only a fraction—approximately 5%—while the remaining 90,089 antiquities remain stored in cramped and outdated warehouses (Rahman and Naiyem, 2024; Sadia, 2024). These storage facilities, lacking modern conservation technology and environmental controls, expose antiquities to risks such as humidity fluctuations, temperature extremes, and improper handling, leading to gradual deterioration (Islam, 2024). Additionally, the absence of a dedicated national institution for conservation science and the delayed construction of a new museum building further exacerbate these challenges (Abeer, 2025).

The need for improved heritage site management in Bangladesh has been previously emphasized in studies that highlight the importance of community engagement and sustainable conservation practices (Khan and Huda, 2023). Similarly, international research has shown that museum accessibility and conservation efforts must adapt to modern challenges to ensure long-term preservation (Papadimitriou et al., 2016). However, BNM continues to struggle due to policy gaps and limited infrastructure, hindering its ability to preserve and exhibit Bangladesh's rich cultural history (Richmond and Bracker, 2009).

This study critically examines the space limitations and conservation issues faced by BNM, analyzing the

impact of inadequate storage, environmental factors, and policy shortcomings on artifact preservation. It also explores potential solutions, including institutional capacity-building, policy reforms, and investment in modern conservation facilities (Anderson, 2017). Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the long-term protection of Bangladesh's cultural heritage and aligning museum conservation practices with global standards.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The preservation of antiquities is a fundamental responsibility of museums, yet many institutions face significant challenges in maintaining optimal storage and conservation conditions (Keene, 2012). The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM), the largest repository of the country's cultural heritage, is currently grappling with severe space constraints and inadequate conservation practices, placing its extensive collection of over 93,932 antiquities at risk (Rahman and Naiyem, 2024). Despite its pivotal role in protecting Bangladesh's historical and cultural legacy, BNM can display only 5% of its collection, leaving approximately 90,089 antiquities confined to outdated and unsuitable storage facilities (Islam, 2024).

The museum's warehouses, constructed over four decades ago, lack modern preservation infrastructure, including climate control systems, proper humidity regulation, and scientific storage techniques (Shah and Shah, 2024). International conservation standards emphasize that temperature, humidity, and light exposure must be carefully regulated to prevent deterioration, particularly for sensitive materials like manuscripts, textiles, and metal antiquities (Anderson, 2017). However, the absence of such a system at BNM leads to gradual degradation of irreplaceable antiquities, weakening their historical and cultural value over time (Richmond and Bracker, 2009).

Furthermore, the delayed construction of a new multi-story museum building, proposed since 2018, has exacerbated the space crisis. Despite repeated assurances and approvals, the project remains stalled due to bureaucratic delays, internal resistance, and logistical challenges (Abeer, 2025). This delay not only restricts exhibition opportunities but also forces antiquities into overcrowded and deteriorating storage conditions, heightening risks of environmental damage, mishandling, and even loss (Papadimitriou et al., 2016).

Another critical concern is the lack of domestic expertise and institutional capacity in conservation science. Unlike other countries with established conservation training and research centers, Bangladesh has no dedicated institution for conservation studies (Khan and Huda, 2023). As a result, conservation practices at BNM rely on outdated methods and limited technical knowledge, making it difficult to implement sustainable preservation strategies (Islam, 2024).

The overarching problem is that BNM's space and conservation deficiencies pose a direct threat to the integrity of its vast collection. Without urgent policy reforms, infrastructure investments, and scientific conservation measures, a significant portion of Bangladesh's cultural heritage remains at risk of irreversible deterioration. This study aims to critically examine these challenges and propose viable solutions to ensure the long-term preservation, accessibility, and sustainability of Bangladesh's national antiquities.

## 3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) plays a vital role in preserving the country's cultural and historical heritage (Keene, 2012). However, severe space limitations and inadequate conservation infrastructure pose significant threats to artifact preservation (Rahman & Naiyem, 2024). Despite housing 93,932 antiquities, only 5% are on display, while the rest remain in outdated storage facilities lacking proper climate control, leading to deterioration (Islam, 2024; Shah & Shah, 2024).

The delayed construction of a new museum building, initially proposed in 2018, further exacerbates the issue, restricting public access to important antiquities (Abeer, n.d.; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Additionally, Bangladesh lacks a dedicated institution for conservation science, unlike other nations with specialized training programs (Khan & Huda, 2023). These gaps highlight the urgent need for policy reforms, modern conservation facilities, and institutional capacity-building to protect the nation's heritage effectively.

This study aligns with UNESCO's global guidelines on heritage conservation, emphasizing scientific preservation and public accessibility (UNESCO, 2021). By analyzing BNM's storage constraints, environmental risks, and policy shortcomings, this research aims to inform policymakers, museum authorities,

and conservationists on strategies to enhance artifact preservation and accessibility in Bangladesh.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 The Role of Museums in Cultural Heritage Preservation

Museums serve as vital institutions for safeguarding a nation's historical and cultural identity by collecting, preserving, and displaying antiquities of historical significance (Keene, 2012). They provide an essential link between past and present, enabling societies to study and appreciate their heritage (Anderson, 2017). However, effective museum management requires adequate space, scientific conservation practices, and proper environmental control to prevent deterioration (Papadimitriou et al., 2016). In developing countries, including Bangladesh, these challenges are exacerbated by limited infrastructure and financial constraints, making long-term artifact preservation difficult (Richmond & Bracker, 2009).

### 4.2 Space Constraints in Museums: Global and Local Perspectives

Globally, space constraints in museums have been identified as a major challenge, particularly in institutions with extensive collections. Studies show that only a small percentage of antiquities can be displayed at any given time due to insufficient exhibition space and inadequate storage facilities (Khan & Huda, 2023). The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) faces a similar challenge, as it houses over 93,932 antiquities but can exhibit only 5% of them due to limited display areas and outdated warehouses (Islam, 2024). This situation is not unique to Bangladesh—museums in India, Egypt, and Greece have also struggled with artifact overcrowding and lack of modern storage solutions, necessitating alternative strategies such as digital archiving and rotating exhibitions (Shah & Shah, 2024).

### 4.3 Conservation Challenges and Environmental Risks

Artifact preservation is highly dependent on environmental factors such as temperature, humidity, and light exposure (UNESCO, 2021). Scientific research highlights that fluctuations in these conditions accelerate artifact deterioration, particularly for organic materials such as manuscripts, textiles, and paintings (Rahman & Naiyem, 2024). However, BNM's storage warehouses, built in 1983, lack climate control systems, increasing the risk of mold growth, fading, and material decay (Abeer, 2025). Museums worldwide have adopted scientific conservation methods such as humidity control chambers, temperature regulation, and specialized lighting systems to combat these risks (Anderson, 2017). The absence of such measures in BNM places the nation's historical treasures in jeopardy.

### 4.4 Policy Gaps and Institutional Challenges

The lack of a national conservation science institution in Bangladesh has further aggravated these challenges (Khan & Huda, 2023). Countries like the United States, Germany, and India have established specialized conservation training programs, enabling museums to maintain high preservation standards (Shah & Shah, 2024). In contrast, BNM relies on outdated conservation techniques due to limited expertise and insufficient funding (Islam, 2024). Additionally, the delayed construction of a proposed 13-story museum building, first proposed in 2018, reflects deeper issues of bureaucratic inefficiency, financial constraints, and internal resistance from museum authorities (Papadimitriou et al., 2016).

### 4.5 Recommendations from International Best Practices

International best practices in museum management emphasize investment in infrastructure, climate-controlled storage, digitization, and staff training (Richmond & Bracker, 2009). UNESCO (2021) highlights the importance of adaptive heritage management, which includes regular risk assessments, policy reforms, and public-private partnerships to improve preservation standards. Museums in the Netherlands and Japan, for example, have successfully implemented rotating exhibitions, digital documentation, and interactive conservation laboratories to enhance artifact preservation and accessibility (Keene, 2012). These strategies could provide valuable lessons for BNM's long-term sustainability.

In summary, the literature underscores that space constraints and inadequate conservation infrastructure are major barriers to effective museum management in Bangladesh. The absence of scientific storage, delayed

infrastructure development, and lack of trained professionals place BNM's vast collection at risk. Adopting international best practices, along with policy reforms and investment in conservation science, is essential to ensuring the long-term preservation of Bangladesh's cultural heritage.

## 5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the principles of museum studies, heritage conservation, and space management theories, emphasizing the interconnectedness of storage limitations, conservation practices, and policy frameworks in safeguarding antiquities (Keene, 2012). The Preservation Framework (UNESCO, 2021) highlights that effective conservation requires adequate space, climate-controlled environments, and scientific preservation techniques to mitigate deterioration risks (Anderson, 2017).

Drawing on the Museum Infrastructure Model (Papadimitriou et al., 2016), this study conceptualizes BNM's space constraints as a structural barrier affecting antiquities preservation and public accessibility. The Preventive Conservation Approach (Shah & Shah, 2024) underscores the role of temperature, humidity, and light control in minimizing decay, while the Institutional Capacity Theory (Khan & Huda, 2023) identifies policy gaps, lack of expertise, and financial constraints as critical challenges.

This framework integrates three core dimensions:

*Physical Constraints* – Limited display and storage capacity leading to overcrowding (Islam, 2024).

*Conservation Challenges* – Lack of modern preservation infrastructure, environmental controls, and trained personnel (Rahman & Naiyem, 2024).

*Policy and Institutional Gaps* – Absence of a national conservation science institute, delayed infrastructure projects, and weak regulatory enforcement (Abeer, n.d.).

By analyzing these dimensions, this study aims to propose sustainable strategies for improving BNM's conservation practices and ensuring the long-term protection of Bangladesh's cultural heritage.

## 6. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine the space constraints and conservation challenges faced by the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) in preserving its antiquities. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Identify the spatial limitations within the BNM that affect the storage, display, and preservation of antiquities (Islam, 2024).
2. Evaluate the current conservation practices at BNM, including the adequacy of environmental controls and infrastructure (Shah & Shah, 2024).
3. Investigate the institutional and policy gaps that hinder effective preservation, including the lack of expertise and delays in infrastructure development (Khan & Huda, 2023).
4. Propose actionable solutions for improving space management, conservation practices, and policy frameworks to safeguard the museum's collections (Abeer, n.d.; UNESCO, 2021).

This study aims to provide insights into the critical issues affecting the museum's conservation efforts and offer recommendations for enhancing its capacity to protect Bangladesh's cultural heritage.

## 7. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of document analysis, interviews, and storage observations to assess the space constraints and conservation challenges at the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM). Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with museum staff, including curators, conservators, and administrators, to understand the operational challenges and conservation practices. Additionally, secondary data, including reports, museum records, and policy documents, were analyzed to evaluate existing infrastructure, storage conditions, and conservation strategies. Physical observations were conducted to assess the physical condition of storage spaces and antiquities. The findings were analyzed thematically to identify key issues and propose relevant solutions.

## 8. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) houses an extensive collection of antiquities, playing a crucial role in preserving the nation's cultural and historical heritage. However, severe space constraints and inadequate conservation facilities pose significant threats to the long-term preservation of these antiquities. Due to limited display capacity, only a small portion of the collection is exhibited, while the majority remains in overcrowded and poorly maintained storage rooms. Environmental factors such as humidity, dust, and temperature fluctuations accelerate the deterioration of fragile antiquities, particularly manuscripts, textiles, and metal objects. The absence of modern conservation techniques and a shortage of trained personnel further exacerbate these challenges. Additionally, delays in the construction of a new museum building continue to hinder efforts to improve storage and exhibition conditions. Without urgent intervention, Bangladesh risks losing invaluable historical and cultural treasures.

Currently, the museum holds a total of 93,932 antiques, of which 3,843 antiquities are included in the collection, while 1,924 antiquities remain unlisted, bringing the total number of active inventory items to 5,767 antiquities. These antiquities are displayed across 46 galleries or rooms, including the Nalinikanta Bhattashali Gallery, which is designated for temporary exhibitions. Among the exhibition spaces, 16 rooms are specifically allocated for antique displays [BNM, 2024].

However, the number of antiquities far exceeds the museum's display capacity, forcing many antiquities to be stored in verandas due to space constraints. A staggering 90,089 antiquities remain undisplayed because of inadequate exhibition space, significantly limiting public access to important historical objects.

Regarding conservation efforts, the museum has only four conservation rooms, staffed by three conservation specialists and six support personnel. Over the past five years, an average of 368 antiquities have been conserved annually. Despite these efforts, conservation challenges persist, with approximately 15,000 antiquities suffering from humidity damage, 2,000 affected by dust and pollution, and 500 facing pest infestations.



Fig-1: A cramped storage space at BNM where antiquities are stacked closely, increasing the risk of physical damage



Fig-2: Ancient antiquities showing signs of fading and decay due to improper storage and environmental exposure.



Fig-3: Corroded metal antiquities, highlighting the adverse impact of uncontrolled humidity and temperature fluctuations.



Fig-4: A section of the museum displaying only a small portion of its vast collection, emphasizing the space constraints.



Fig-5: An incomplete structure intended to expand the museum's capacity, stalled due to funding and administrative delays.



Fig-6: A conservation lab with outdated equipment, underscoring the need for advanced preservation technology and expert training.

Although the 46 galleries are air-conditioned (AC-controlled), the AC system operates only during museum hours, leading to temperature fluctuations that could further accelerate artifact deterioration. Additionally, the conservation laboratory lacks adequate space and equipment to treat large-sized antiquities, further limiting conservation efforts.

Given that the current museum building is fully occupied for exhibitions, the growing number of antiquities necessitates the construction of an additional building of similar scale. Expanding exhibition and storage capacity is essential to enhance artifact preservation, improve conservation conditions, and ensure broader public access to Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage.

The findings of this study highlight the critical challenges faced by the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) in preserving its vast collection of antiquities due to space constraints and inadequate conservation infrastructure. These issues are not only limiting the museum's ability to protect its antiquities but also jeopardizing its role in safeguarding Bangladesh's cultural heritage.

1. *Overcrowded Storage and Limited Display Space:* The BNM houses over 93,932 antiquities, yet only a small fraction, about 5%, is on public display. The remaining 90,089 antiquities are stored in overcrowded, outdated warehouses that lack modern conservation facilities. These conditions increase the risk of deterioration, as the storage spaces are not equipped to control temperature, humidity, or light levels, all of which are crucial for preserving different types of antiquities. This finding is consistent with international best practices in heritage conservation, which emphasize the importance of controlled storage environments (Shah & Shah, 2024; Anderson, 2017).
2. *Dilapidated Conservation Infrastructure:* The museum's building, constructed in 1983, includes warehouses that have not been updated or modernized for over four decades. Without proper temperature and humidity controls, the museum's storage facilities are unable to meet the requirements of optimal artifact preservation. The absence of a scientific conservation system exacerbates the risks of artifact deterioration, as mentioned by Khan & Huda (2023), who stressed the need for a professional infrastructure that integrates advanced preservation technologies.
3. *Delayed Construction of New Building:* A significant factor contributing to space constraints is the prolonged delay in constructing a new, multi-story building that was first proposed in 2018. Despite repeated assurances by the government in 2022 and 2023, the project has yet to begin. Bureaucratic hurdles, including internal resistance from museum staff and complications in the planning stages, have further delayed the project (Imran, 2019). As noted by Papadimitriou et al. (2016), planning complications and resistance to change within institutions can often delay crucial development projects, which has clearly impacted the BNM's ability to expand and improve its storage capacities.
4. *Lack of Local Expertise in Conservation Science:* The study found a significant gap in local expertise in conservation science. Unlike countries with established conservation training programs, such as Germany or the United States, Bangladesh lacks specialized institutions for artifact preservation. The absence of a dedicated conservation science program means that museum staff often lack the skills and knowledge to apply modern conservation techniques. This deficiency contributes to the challenges in maintaining the museum's collection in optimal condition (Islam, 2024).
5. *Environmental Risks and Artifact Deterioration:* The study also highlighted the environmental risks faced by the museum's collection. Fluctuations in temperature and humidity, along with the lack of proper lighting control, have led to the gradual deterioration of various antiquities, particularly paper documents and metal objects. These environmental factors have been identified by Shah & Shah (2024) as critical elements in the preservation of archaeological materials. The museum's failure to manage these environmental risks has compounded the challenges of conservation.

In summary, the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) faces significant conservation challenges stemming from inadequate storage facilities, outdated infrastructure, delayed construction of a new building, and a lack of local expertise in conservation science. These factors contribute to the deterioration of the museum's extensive collection of antiquities and pose a threat to Bangladesh's cultural heritage. Addressing these challenges requires investment in modern conservation infrastructure, policy reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and the development of local expertise in conservation science. Only through these measures can the BNM ensure the long-term preservation of its collection and enhance its role in safeguarding the nation's cultural legacy for future generations (Haque, 1975).

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION

1. *Upgrade Storage Facilities with Modern Conservation Technologies:* The BNM must prioritize upgrading its storage facilities to meet international standards for artifact preservation. This includes the installation of climate control systems (temperature, humidity, and light regulation) to ensure optimal conditions for various types of antiquities. Moreover, implementing automated monitoring systems can allow for continuous tracking of environmental factors and immediate intervention when necessary. Upgrading storage will mitigate the risks of deterioration and ensure long-term preservation of the museum's vast collection.
2. *Construction of the New Museum Building:* It is crucial that the multi-story museum building project, initially proposed in 2018, be fast-tracked to provide additional space for artifact display and storage. This new building should include modern conservation laboratories, secure storage spaces, and dedicated exhibition areas to accommodate the growing collection. Prioritizing this project would resolve space constraints, reduce overcrowding, and improve overall operational efficiency at the museum.
3. *Establishment of a National Conservation Training Institution:* To address the lack of local expertise in conservation science, Bangladesh should establish a national conservation science institute. This institution could offer specialized programs to train museum professionals, conservators, and scientists in modern conservation techniques. Partnerships with international institutions could help ensure that training is in line with global standards, addressing the critical skills gap in the country.
4. *Collaboration with International Experts and Institutions:* The BNM should seek collaborations with international conservation bodies and experts. These partnerships can provide technical support, share knowledge on best practices, and offer specialized training opportunities for local museum staff. Collaborations with institutions like the Smithsonian Institution, British Museum, and National Museum of India can help improve conservation methods and policies at BNM while also fostering knowledge exchange.
5. *Implement Preventive Conservation Strategies:* In addition to improving storage facilities, BNM should adopt preventive conservation strategies to minimize the risk of damage to antiquities. This includes proper handling techniques, regular monitoring, and maintaining a proactive approach toward pest control and pollution reduction. By investing in regular maintenance of the collection and preventive measures, the museum can reduce the risk of future damage and extend the life of its antiquities.

These recommendations will help ensure that the Bangladesh National Museum not only overcomes its current conservation challenges but also builds a sustainable framework for preserving the country's cultural heritage for generations to come.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The Bangladesh National Museum (BNM) plays a pivotal role in preserving the nation's cultural heritage, yet it faces significant challenges due to space constraints and inadequate conservation infrastructure. With over 93,932 antiquities, the museum's current storage facilities are outdated and lack essential conservation technologies, putting the collection at risk. The prolonged delay in constructing a new building, along with the absence of a national conservation institute, further exacerbates these issues.

This study highlights the urgent need for modernized storage solutions, the completion of the new museum building, and the establishment of specialized training programs for conservation professionals. By addressing these gaps, BNM can ensure the long-term preservation of Bangladesh's invaluable cultural heritage and improve public access to its collections. The proposed recommendations, if implemented, will not only enhance conservation practices but also position BNM as a model for sustainable cultural heritage management in the region (Ahmed, 2017).

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