



Museums in Chittagong, 1964-2026: A Documentary History of Their Development, Typology and Challenges

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Abstract

Chittagong (Chattogram), Bangladesh’s principal port city, keeps much of its public past behind academy gates, campus walls and police lines, or with Dhaka-based agencies, rather than with the city itself. The history of its museums has not been consolidated; what is known is spread throughout encyclopaedias, webpages and press reports. This article reconstructs the history of eleven museums, from their antecedents in the 1960s to their state as of this writing, through external and internal criticism and triangulation of the sources. It identifies four foundation phases, overlaid since about 2016 by closure and contest. Its typology is that all eleven are held by parent organisations and none by the city or a civic trust (in the sources consulted). The research proposes the concept of institution-bound custodianship, which suggests that a parent’s commitment, locus of control and spatial enclosure help to shape the documented challenges of access, care and contested memory, where the custodial vacuum and split custody are two failure modes.

Keywords: Chattogram; institution-bound custodianship; museum governance; memorial museums; university museums; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Chittagong is a port city that has been shaped by sea, river and hill; in this article, the name of “Chittagong” has been used for the name of the city and the name “Chattogram” has been kept for official names. It has been mapped since ancient times (Qanungo, 1988) and Sultanate studies have defined it in the context of the changing boundaries of medieval Bengal (Sultana, 2013). On 18 April 1930 revolutionaries led by Surya Sen captured the police armoury at Dampara and on 28 March 1971 Bengali police stood firm in face of the Pakistani army at the same lines (Sengupta, 2021; The Daily Star, 2022) and on the other hand Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra at Kalurghat functioned as a medium of public opinion during the war (Mridha, 2009). Such a city of historical reference might be supposed to have a visible civic museum culture.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022) defines a museum as a permanent, not-for-profit institution “in the service of society” which is “open to the public, accessible and inclusive” and fosters sustainability; like the green libraries examined in this journal (Khatun et al., 2026), museums are thus framed as knowledge institutions serving sustainable development. Chittagong has an ethnological museum (the only one in the country according to the press; Akter, 2026a; Shahriar, 2019), since 1973 a university museum, and memorial, military, transport and scientific museums. Some information about them is available in the encyclopaedia (A. M. Chowdhury, 2021), a national newspaper survey (Paul, 2012) and in some sporadic press reporting, and empirical studies have either taken Chattogram as one part of a national sample (Sharmin & Haque, 2024) or studied one display (Ahmed, 2011). To date, no comprehensive history of the city’s museums has been published.

Three research questions guide the study. RQ1: How, and in what phases, did museums in Chittagong develop between 1964 and 2026, and what earlier initiatives prepared the ground? RQ2: What types of museum emerged, and who holds custody of them? RQ3: What challenges have they faced, and how are these related to their custodial arrangements?

The article, apart from compiling what seems the first source-critical history of these museums, challenges institutional and popular assertions, such as that the University of Chittagong Museum is the only university museum in the country, the Ethnological Museum one of the two in Asia. Conceptually it contributes with the notion of institution-bound custodianship, because all eleven museums examined are in the hands of parent organisations, and none of the museums found in sources consulted is under the control of a civic trust or the city. As can be seen below, there is unequal access, care and contested memory of all types, which, it argues, can be attributed to variation in such custody.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Museums, power and memory

This is the ICOM definition, whose history since 1946 Mairesse (2019) traces and whose role as backbone of the profession Sandahl (2019) explains, now defines museums by their social role (Brown & Mairesse, 2018) and provides this article’s yardstick of openness, accessibility and inclusion. But as McCall and Gray (2014) demonstrate, organisational hierarchies, staffing and budgets often hinder the implementation of such ideals of the ‘new museology’ that are oriented towards the public. The public museum is part of a civic governance “exhibitionary complex” (Bennett, 1995), and Anderson (2006) demonstrates that museums have been a tool for imagining nationality by colonial and postcolonial states. Crane (1997) demonstrates the way in which museums construct a space in between personal memory and collective memory/history, Williams (2007) sees the memorial museum as a particular type, Sodaro (2018) views such museums as political acts of ‘never again’ and Conn (2010) notes the move from object to narrative that these museums based on replicas and dioramas represent.

2.2 South Asian and specialised scholarship

Guha-Thakurta (2015) discusses colonial collecting, conserving and classification, Mathur (2007) deals with the colonial culture of exhibiting and Singh (2015) demonstrates that museums are becoming “national” in postcolonial states. Kreps (2008) suggests an “appropriate museology” that is based on local resources, while Abungu (2019) discusses the museum reform from the Global South perspective. In this journal, Bhattacharya (2013) presents an examination of colonial ethnology with its fixed traits for the community in the so-called “criminal” tribes and N. Uddin (2010) in *South Asian Survey* examines identity and marginality in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

2.3 Museums and memory in Bangladesh

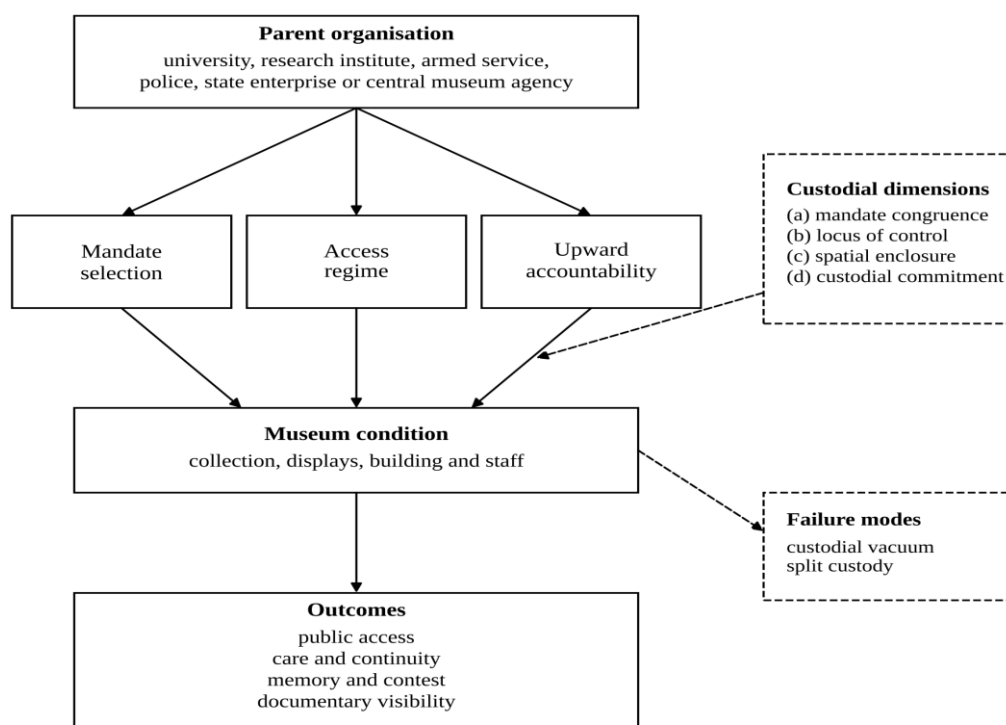
The scholarship of Bangladesh has focused on ‘1971’ and on Dhaka. Mookherjee (2011) discusses the ‘never again’ aesthetics of the Liberation War Museum and Feldman (2019) interprets it as a civil-society counter-narrative to state history. According to Shah and Shah (2024), only approximately 2.7 per cent of the artefacts in the National Museum belong to ethnic material and State policy has been in favour of assimilation in this respect. Survey conducted by Sharmin and Haque (2024) in 16 museums of Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chattogram divisions reveals poor infrastructure, exhibition design, service delivery and staff attitudes; while Hasan et al. (2022) find poor community engagement in heritage conservation in north-western Bangladesh. There are few works specifically about Chittagong such as a museological reappraisal of the Ethnological Museum’s display (Ahmed, 2011) and an analysis of Buddhist sculpture display, which includes the Chittagong Buddhist Monastery (Ahmed & Kabir, 2008).

2.4 Conceptual framework: institution-bound custodianship

This literature discusses parent-held museums primarily by type: university museums (Simpson, 2022), which have long been neglected, underfunded and less accessible (Boylan, 1999); service museums (Kavanagh, 1988; Whitmarsh, 2001), as it reads as a memorial with a commemorative function, or celebratory, sanitised or realistic displays (Scott, 2015); and transport museums (Divall & Scott, 2001). Very few people ask, “what next?” when a city’s museums come under the guardianship of parents. This article thus suggests the concept of *institution-bound custodianship*: when the governing body, budget, staffing and access of a museum is decided upon by its parent body, not by a body that has been established specifically for the museum, for example a municipal department, a statutory museum board or a trust. The parent may be museological, but what is key is that the museum will be run as part of a larger organisation.

There are four dimensions for the arrangement. (a) *Mandate congruence*: the work of the museum is core (a museum or heritage agency), partially congruent (a university or research institute) or peripheral (an armed service, police force or railway). (b) *Locus of control*: Decisions regarding repairs, posts and budgets can be made locally, in the chain of command of the institutions or in Dhaka. (c) *Spatial enclosure*: the museum can be located in an open urban space or in a limited institutional space, like an academy, a campus or police lines; museums that are in the closed end will be called *enclave museums*. (d) *Custodial commitment*: the parent can commit to the museum over time, whether by investing in, maintaining or withdrawing from the museum. Two modes of failure are identified: the *custodial vacuum* (when a parent becomes non-custodial) and *split custody* (when the building and collection are under separate custodianship).

The concept is generalised to include other types of custodians, incorporates the spatial and urban aspects and is not restricted to one civic exhibitionary complex (as in Bennett, 1995), but rather a distribution of a city’s exhibitionary functions among parents who have distinct mandates. It does not imply inevitability but rather association: outcomes to vary within each custodian type according to levels of commitment and locus of control (Figure 1).

Figure1. Institution-bound custodianship: dimensions, mechanisms and outcomes

Note. Solid arrows indicate associations documented in this study; dashed lines indicate the moderating custodial dimensions and the two failure modes. Dimensions (a)–(d) are defined in Section 2.4; examples are documented in Sections 4–6 and Table 4.

3. Methodology

The study follows the qualitative historical method of documentary analysis applied to published primary and secondary sources. Its design parallels district- and regional-level heritage surveys in this journal (Alam, 2013; Idris, 2009) and work that treats newspapers as primary evidence within a chronological method (Mohsin, 2020).

Search and corpus. Searches were conducted using the words ‘museum’, ‘*jadughar*’ and ‘*sangrahashala*’ with ‘Chittagong’, ‘Chattogram’ and ‘Chattagram’ and each individual museum’s name on the websites of newspapers, both editions of *Banglapedia*, government and institutional portals, Crossref, OpenAlex and the publishers’ websites. The data for all web sources were collected on June 2026 and the information regarding events in 2026 was included as it stood on that date. Wikipedia and the author’s previous unpublished survey of nine museums are used here only as finding aids; no finding from these is retained unless it is independently documented. The works cited (106) are classified in Table 1, of which 39 are items in the press from 14 mastheads.

Inclusion criteria. A museum is added to the corpus if it is documented in the accessible sources (a) the location is in Chattogram district; (b) by name it is designated as a museum (জাদুঘর or museum); (c) founding date and/or date of opening and/or date of collection start is between 1964 and 2026 (museums started earlier are included if completed in the designated date range); (d) it has a parent institution/site from which the custody can be documented and/or for two service museums, the name of the museum suggests a parent institution/site. Eleven museums are entitled for qualification, where Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (CVASU) Anatomy and Fisheries museums are considered as a complex. Three candidates are outside: Smriti Amlan, a Cantonment Liberation War memorial site, with no mention of it being a museum and no date (AmarNews, 2026); a Buddhist sculpture display at the Buddhist Monastery in Chittagong, documented in one study but not as a dated museum (Ahmed & Kabir, 2008); and an unidentifiable “Fisheries Museum” mentioned by *Banglapedia* (A. M. Chowdhury, 2021). If the CVASU museums are added

separately ($n = 12$), it makes no difference, nor does the addition of Smriti Amlan ($n = 12$), or both ($n = 13$), except for the monastery collection, which is a possible community custodian but requires fieldwork.

Source criticism. The three grading levels were: (i) official pages, legal documents and signed encyclopaedia articles; (ii) news reports with a named news reporter or bureau; and (iii) features, opinion pieces and minor portals. External and internal criticism to establish provenance, consistency and proximity to events, wire copy under different mastheads was counted as one source, agreement, only where reporting was independent, was counted as corroboration. When there are disagreements, this is stated as an attributed range, and, in the case of dates, the date of the earliest dated source is plotted and variants are indicated. Statements from institutions or political statements are all considered to be claims for testing.

Analysis. Coding is based on units of museum–challenge, with at least one dated source, under eight codes: maintenance, staffing, visitors, documentation, closure, custodial failure, restricted access, contested memory or representation. Twenty-four pairs were identified and coded (Table 4).

Positionality and limitations. The author comes from the Department of History of the University of Chittagong which provided the CU Museum's initial collection, an aid to familiarity but a liability of campus-centred bias, redressed by the comparative design. No fieldwork was conducted, no visitor surveys or interviews were conducted, and the CU Museum's website and catalogues, as well as the National Museum's pages and the Department of Archaeology's annual reports were blocked or were not found online when consulted. The corpus is also retrospective: the earliest source on any of the museums dates from 2011, a press report; the phases prior to 2003 have been reconstructed from later accounts written decades later.

Table 1. Documentary corpus by source type ($n = 106$ cited works)

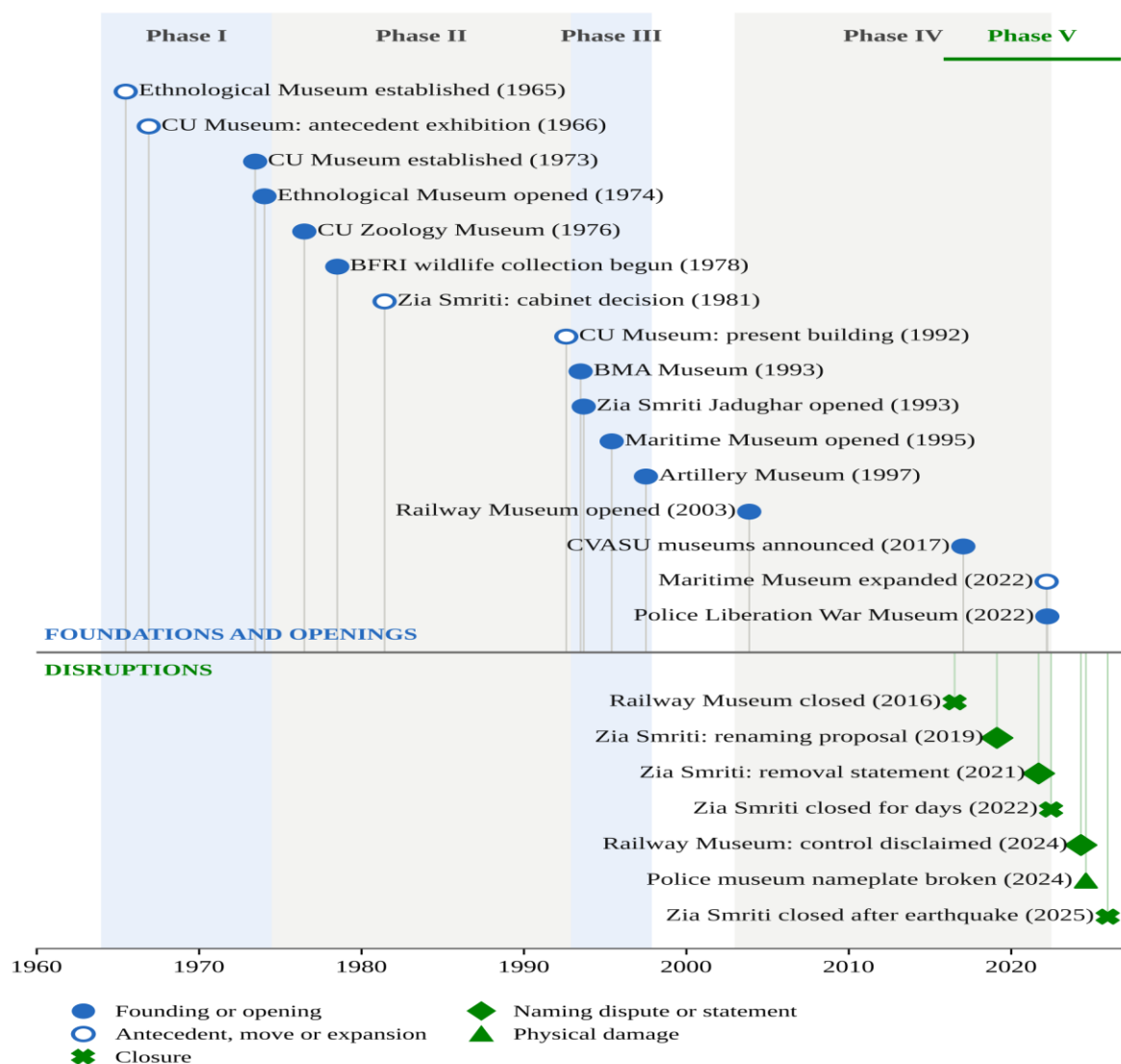
Source type	n	Language, period or outlet	Entries
A. Documentary sources	53		
Official webpages of Chittagong museums, parent institutions and government bodies	3	English and Bengali	CVASU (n.d.); Chattogram District Administration (n.d.); Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh (n.d.)
Institutional directory	1	English	Asia-Europe Foundation (n.d.)
Webpages of comparator museums	3	English	National Museum of Ethnology (n.d.); University of Rajshahi (n.d.); Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (n.d.)
Legal instrument	1	English	Antiquities Act (1968)
Encyclopaedia entries (<i>Banglapedia</i>)	6	5 English, 1 Bengali	Baten (2021); A. M. Chowdhury (2021); Hoque (2021); S. Hossain (2014, 2021); Islam (2021)
Newspaper, magazine and news-agency reports	39	19 English, 20 Bengali; 2011–2015: 4; 2016–2020: 8; 2021–2025: 16; 2026: 11	14 mastheads: <i>The Daily Star</i> , including <i>The Daily Star Bangla</i> (10); <i>The Business Standard</i> , including its Bangla edition (6); <i>bdnews24.com</i> (5); <i>Prothom Alo</i> , including <i>Prothom Alo English</i> (4); <i>Bangla Tribune</i> , <i>Desh Rupantor</i> , <i>Dhaka Tribune</i> and <i>The Financial Express</i> (2 each); <i>AmarNews.com.bd</i> , <i>Dainik Azadi</i> , <i>The Daily Observer</i> , <i>Jagonews24</i> , <i>risingbd.com</i> and <i>Suprobhat Bangladesh</i> (1 each)
B. Scholarly and normative literature	53		
International museum, memory and heritage scholarship, with the ICOM definition	27	English	Abungu (2019); Alberti (2011); Anderson (2006); Arinze (1998); Bennett (1995); Boylan (1999); Brown and Mairesse (2018); Clifford (1997); Conn (2010); Crane (1997); Divall and Scott (2001); International Council of Museums (2022); Kavanagh (1988); Kreps (2008); Mairesse (2019); McCall and Gray (2014); Nora (1989); Pearce (1994); Sandahl (2019); Sandell (2002); Scott (2015); Simpson (2022); Sodaro (2018); Whitmarsh (2001); Williams (2007); Winter (2012); Witcomb (2003)

Source type	n	Language, period or outlet	Entries
South Asian museum scholarship	3	English	Guha-Thakurta (2015); Mathur (2007); Singh (2015)
Bangladeshi museum, heritage and memory scholarship	12	English and German; 3 Chittagong-specific	Ahmed (2011); Ahmed and Kabir (2008); Feldman (2019); Ghosh et al. (2024); Hasan et al. (2022); Khan and Huda (2023); Madhury et al. (2023); Mookherjee (2011, 2015); Shah and Shah (2024); Sharmin and Haque (2024); N. Uddin (2010)
Regional history of Chittagong	1	English	Qanungo (1988)
Articles in <i>Development Compilation</i>	10	8 Bengali, 2 English	Ahamed (2026); Alam (2013); Bhattacharya (2013); Idris (2009); Keya (2015); Khatun et al. (2026); Mohsin (2020); Mridha (2009); Rasul (2011); Sultana (2013)
Total	106		

Note. Press items are counted by masthead, with language editions under their parent title and agency copy under the publishing outlet; wire copy carried under different mastheads was treated as a single source in the analysis.

4. Historical Development

Four foundation phases are identified, and, from the year 2016 onwards, a phase based on status is overlaid on this (Figure 2). **Figure 2.** Foundations and disruptions of museums in Chittagong, 1964–2026



Note. Upper lane: foundations and openings (solid circles) and antecedents, relocations and expansions (hollow circles). Lower lane: closures (crosses), naming disputes and political or custodial statements (diamonds) and physical damage (triangles).

Where sources disagree, the date given by the earliest dated source is plotted; 2026 events show the status at the time of writing. Exact dates and sources are given in Section 4 and Table 2.

4.1 Inherited foundations (1960s–1974)

Two late-Pakistan projects were completed by the Bangladeshi state, which are included in Phase I. The Ethnological Museum at Agrabad was started by the Pakistan Department of Archaeology (Akter, 2026a; Chattogram District Administration, n.d.), it was established in 1964 (Shahriar, 2019) or 1965 (Akter, 2026a; M. Uddin, 2016) according to various sources and *Banglapedia* mentions 1967 (A. M. Chowdhury, 2021). It was opened on 9 January 1974 by the Minister of Education, Yusuf Ali (Akter, 2026a; Dey, 2011). In 2019 and 2022, the sources mention about 25 (Chattogram District Administration, n.d.) and 29 (Baten, 2021) Bangladeshi communities along with groups of Pakistanis, Indians, Kyrgyzstani and Australians in about 2,700 objects (Dey, 2022; Shahriar, 2019), or over 3,200 in 2026 (Akter, 2026a). It is claimed as one of the two museums of ethnology in Asia (Akter, 2026a; Chattogram District Administration, n.d.), a claim that is contradicted by the ethnological museum of Japan and of Vietnam (National Museum of Ethnology, n.d.; Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, n.d.), and a headline dubs it as “Asia’s first captivating Ethnological Museum” (Sinthia, 2024) does not demonstrate priority.

The University of Chittagong (CU) Museum emerged out of a modest collection of some 24 artefacts donated by Mumtaz Hasan, managing director of the National Bank of Pakistan, to inaugurate the university on 26 November 1966 (Asia-Europe Foundation, n.d.; Rahaman, 2023). It was established on 14 June 1973 (S. Hossain, 2021) with a small collection of History Department items (30 items according to Rahaman, 2023; four cannons and Mughal era clothing according to S. Hossain, 2011; and four cannons and 24 antiquities according to S. Chowdhury, 2019) conceived by the first Vice-Chancellor, A. R. Mallick, in collaboration with the historian Abdul Karim (Rahaman, 2023). After moving around to various places such as the Chattogram Zila Shilpakala Academy (a non-university public host), in 1992 it found a home in the Library and Museum Building (S. Chowdhury, 2019; Rahaman, 2023), whose trustees are appointed by the university Syndicate (Asia-Europe Foundation, n.d.).

There are five permanent galleries from prehistory to contemporary art in Rahaman’s report (2023) and the University Correspondent’s report (2026), four of which are mentioned in *Banglapedia*’s story (S. Hossain, 2021). This includes 52 stone sculptures, including a ninth-century sandstone Vishnu from Mirsarai (Rahaman, 2023); coins (which the museum has published catalogues of [S. Hossain, 2021]); and folk objects, including *nakshi kantha* (S. Chowdhury, 2019), which folklorists have read as social history from below (Keya, 2015), among nearly 2,000 (Asia-Europe Foundation, n.d.) or more than 2,000 objects (University Correspondent, 2026). The archive also has Liberation War documents, such as Swadhin Bangla Betar material (S. Hossain, 2021) and a corner is reserved for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (S. Chowdhury, 2019). It is the only university museum, according to the frequent statement of the staff and journalists (Rahaman, 2023; University Correspondent, 2026), ignoring the Varendra Research Museum founded by a learned society in 1910 and transferred to the University of Rajshahi on 10 October 1964 by deed (University of Rajshahi, n.d.). The CU Museum is different from Varendra; it is the only museum of regional history and art of the corpus established by its own university.

4.2 Departmental interlude (1975–1992)

For almost two decades after 1974 only departmental or research collections were established: CU Zoology Museum was established in 1976 (M. Abbas, 2016) and the wildlife collection of the Bangladesh Forest Research Institute (BFRI) at Sholashahar was started in 1978 and now has approximately 120 specimens of 74 species (S. Chowdhury, 2025). The only public-museum decision recorded during this period was that the cabinet on 3 June 1981 decided to make the Circuit House into a museum (Akter, 2026b), but the handing over took place in January 1993.

4.3 Institutional and memorial foundations (1993–1997)

The Museum of Bangladesh Military Academy dates from 1993 (Paul, 2012); the date of 19 December 1992 in the author's earlier survey is unconfirmed, and there is no record on the contents of the museum and access to it.

Zia Smriti Jadughar (Zia Memorial Museum) is housed in a multi-layered building. The building was constructed in 1913 as a residence for the Governor and was subsequently used as the Circuit House (Akter, 2026b) and as a control centre and torture unit by the Pakistani army during the Liberation War in 1971 (M. Chowdhury, 2026) before President Ziaur Rahman was shot dead there by a group of soldiers during the night of 30 May 1981 (N. Uddin, 2026). The district administration handed over the building to the Bangladesh National Museum and the responsibility for its repairs was given to the Public Works Department (PWD) on 9 January 1993 (Chattogram Bureau, 2025; M. Chowdhury, 2026). Its inauguration was done by the Honorable Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia on 6 September 1993 (Chattogram Bureau, 2025; Islam, 2021). This is displayed with Ziaur Rahman's personal effects (Akter, 2026b), the Kalurghat transmitter and microphone (M. Uddin, 2016). According to Chattogram Bureau (2025), the collection has been counted as 902 items in 12 galleries, while according to Akter (2026b), it is 422 items in 17 galleries, which is planned for after renovation (A. Hossain, 2026).

The navy's Maritime Museum at Kazir Dewri was first opened on 1 June 1995 (Tajrin, 2023); this was confirmed by Paul (2012) who also mentions an Artillery Museum in Chittagong in 1997, presumably considered to be under army custody (as suggested by its name). On 22 March 1996, the Liberation War Museum of Dhaka was inaugurated, which is a trustee-run museum (Hoque, 2021). The memorial turn of the 1990s thus manifested itself in the capital as a civil-society turn and in Chittagong as a turn towards the state and services.

4.4 Specialised and commemorative foundations (2003–2022)

Since 2003, new museums have been established by parents, outside the cultural box, for one purpose only: institutional. Bangladesh Railway converted a two-storey tin-and-wood bungalow, on a hillock in a 12-acre land at Pahartali, to the Bangladesh Railway Museum on 15 November 2003 (as per earliest source, S. Hossain, 2012) or on 5 November 2003 (as per later source S. H. Chowdhury, 2020; Neerob, 2018).

Under a sub-project of the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) under World Bank two teaching museums were developed at CVASU in Khulshi (Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University [CVASU], n.d.). Both were supposed to be opened in January 2017 (Prothom Alo, 2017). About 60 skeletons are reported at opening (Prothom Alo, 2017) and in 2026 (Hosen, 2026) but about 260 are reported in the university's website (CVASU, n.d.). Similarly, the Fisheries Museum has reported 350 species of fish at the time of opening (Prothom Alo, 2017) but 325 in 2026 (Hosen, 2026). The Anatomy Museum is continuing a tradition of museums in the nineteenth-century Britain of which Alberti (2011) has traced the history; claims to be the country's first university fisheries museum (Hosen, 2026; Prothom Alo, 2017) and the first anatomy museum are institutional self-descriptions.

On 5 March 2022 the navy expanded the Maritime Museum (Tajrin, 2023) and on 24 March Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan inaugurated the Police Liberation War Museum, established by the Chattogram Metropolitan Police in two British-era buildings at Dampara which are linked to the armoury raid in 1930 and the resistance in 1971 (Dainik Azadi, 2022; The Daily Star, 2022). Among its displays are the replica of Surya Sen's gallows and the "Bangabandhu Corner", which is dedicated to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Dainik Azadi, 2022).

4.5 Attrition and contest (c. 2016 to the time of writing)

Approximately 2016, the number of closures was approximately equal to the number of new foundations. The Railway Museum was reported locked since the time of its renovation in 2016 (S. H. Chowdhury, 2020) or since it was suddenly closed in 2018 (Yousuf, 2024). As of April 2024, no reopening had been reported, although it was open in January 2018 feature (Neerob, 2018) which favours 2018, but features may repeat old info. The Zia Smriti Jadughar was closed for several days in June 2022 (Staff Correspondent, Chattogram,

2022) and closed to visitors after an earthquake on 2 December 2025 cracked the walls and stairs of the museum (Chattogram Bureau, 2025). As of the writing, general works for painting and the boundary wall and lighting works were also started in May 2026 with a contract of Tk 1.87 crore (Tk 18.7 million) (A. Hossain, 2026), but the repair of the damage caused by the earthquake has not yet started as of mid-August 2026 (Chattogram Bureau, 2026b).

5. Typology and Custodial Profile

Each of the patterns below is a test for the concept and profiles, classifies and places the eleven museums on the custodial dimensions as shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2. Comparative profile of eleven museums in Chittagong, with status at the time of writing, 2026 (the CVASU museums counted as one complex)

Museum (location)	Founded or opened	Parent institution and type	Core collection	Access (year) and status	Key sources
University of Chittagong (CU) Museum (campus)	Antecedent exhibition 26 Nov 1966; established 14 Jun 1973; present building 10 Aug 1992	University of Chittagong (trustee board of the Syndicate). <i>Type:</i> University: regional history and art	Nearly or more than 2,000 objects: archaeology, sculpture, Islamic art and coins, folk and contemporary art; Liberation War archive; Bangabandhu corner	<i>Access:</i> 9.00 am–1.30 pm (2023); fee n.r.. <i>Status:</i> Open (May 2026)	Asia-Europe Foundation (n.d.); S. Hossain (2011, 2021); S. Chowdhury (2019); Rahaman (2023); University Correspondent (2026)
Ethnological Museum (Agrabad)	Established 1964 or 1965 (1967 in <i>Banglapedia</i>); opened 9 Jan 1974	Department of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs. <i>Type:</i> Central agency: ethnographic	About 25–29 Bangladeshi communities and groups from Pakistan, India, Kyrgyzstan and Australia; about 2,700 (2019, 2022) to more than 3,200 (2026) objects	<i>Access:</i> Tk 20 domestic, Tk 10 school students, Tk 200 SAARC nationals, Tk 400 foreign (2026); closed Sundays (2022); hours n.r. after 2011. <i>Status:</i> Open; roof leaks; 16 of 30 posts filled (Apr 2026)	Akter (2026a); Dey (2011, 2022); Shahriar (2019); Chattogram District Administration (n.d.); Baten (2021); A. M. Chowdhury (2021)
CU Zoology Museum (campus)	1976	University of Chittagong. <i>Type:</i> University: disciplinary teaching	n.r.	<i>Access:</i> n.r.. <i>Status:</i> Underfunded (Tk 45,000 a year), cramped (Jun 2016)	M. Abbas (2016)
BFRI wildlife museum (Sholashahar)	Collection begun 1978	Bangladesh Forest Research Institute. <i>Type:</i> Research institute: natural science	About 120 specimens of 74 species	<i>Access:</i> n.r.. <i>Status:</i> Extant (Nov 2025)	S. Chowdhury (2025); A. M. Chowdhury (2021)
BMA Museum (Bhatiary)	1993 (19 Dec 1992 in author's earlier survey; unconfirmed)	Bangladesh Military Academy (army; inferred from name). <i>Type:</i> Armed services: service history	n.r.	<i>Access:</i> n.r.. <i>Status:</i> n.r. (Jan 2012)	Paul (2012)

Museum (location)	Founded or opened	Parent institution and type	Core collection	Access (year) and status	Key sources
Zia Smriti Jadughar (Kazir Dewri)	Conversion decided 3 Jun 1981; building handed over 9 Jan 1993; opened 6 Sep 1993	Bangladesh National Museum (branch); building repairs: PWD. <i>Type:</i> Central agency: memorial site	902 items in 12 galleries, or 422 items in 17 galleries (planned); personal effects, dioramas, Kalurghat transmitter and microphone	<i>Access:</i> Tk 20 (2016). <i>Status:</i> Closed since 2 Dec 2025; general works from May 2026; structural repair not begun (Aug 2026); 32 of 45 posts filled (Jan 2026)	Akter (2026b); Chattogram Bureau (2025, 2026b); A. Hossain (2026); M. Chowdhury (2026); M. Uddin (2016); Islam (2021)
Maritime Museum (Kazir Dewri)	Opened 1 Jun 1995; expanded 5 Mar 2022	Bangladesh Navy. <i>Type:</i> Armed services: service history	Naval history, insignia, weapons, ship models, marine life, country-boat models	<i>Access:</i> Building 4.00–8.00 pm, Tk 50; grounds 10.00 am–10.00 pm, Tk 10 (2023). <i>Status:</i> Open (May 2023)	Tajrin (2023); Paul (2012)
Artillery Museum (location n.r.)	1997	Bangladesh Army (inferred from name). <i>Type:</i> Armed services: service history	n.r.	<i>Access:</i> n.r.. <i>Status:</i> n.r. (Jan 2012)	Paul (2012)
Bangladesh Railway Museum (Pahartali)	15 Nov 2003 (earliest source); 5 Nov 2003 (later sources)	Bangladesh Railway; grounds taken into a City Corporation park, joint committee reported (2024). <i>Type:</i> State enterprise: transport heritage	Lamps, bells, uniforms, signalling equipment, telephones, sleepers	<i>Access:</i> 3.00–5.00 pm in winter (2012). <i>Status:</i> Closed since 2016 or 2018; no reopening reported (Apr 2024)	S. Hossain (2012); Neerob (2018); S. H. Chowdhury (2020); Yousuf (2024)
CVASU Anatomy and Fisheries Museums (Khulshi)	Opening announced Jan 2017	CVASU (Department of Anatomy and Histology; Faculty of Fisheries). <i>Type:</i> University: disciplinary teaching	Skeletons (60 or 260 reported), taxidermy, bones, slides; about 325 fish species (2026)	<i>Access:</i> Free; 9.00 am–5.00 pm, closed Friday, Saturday and holidays. <i>Status:</i> Open (Mar 2026)	CVASU (n.d.); Prothom Alo (2017); Hosen (2026)
Police Liberation War Museum (Dampara)	Inaugurated 24 Mar 2022	Chattogram Metropolitan Police. <i>Type:</i> Police: memorial site	1930 armoury raid and 1971 police resistance; gallows replica; memorabilia of police killed in 1971; Bangabandhu Corner	<i>Access:</i> Fee charged, amount n.r.. <i>Status:</i> Nameplate broken 2 Aug 2024; later status n.r.	Dainik Azadi (2022); The Daily Star (2022); Sengupta (2021); Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (2024)

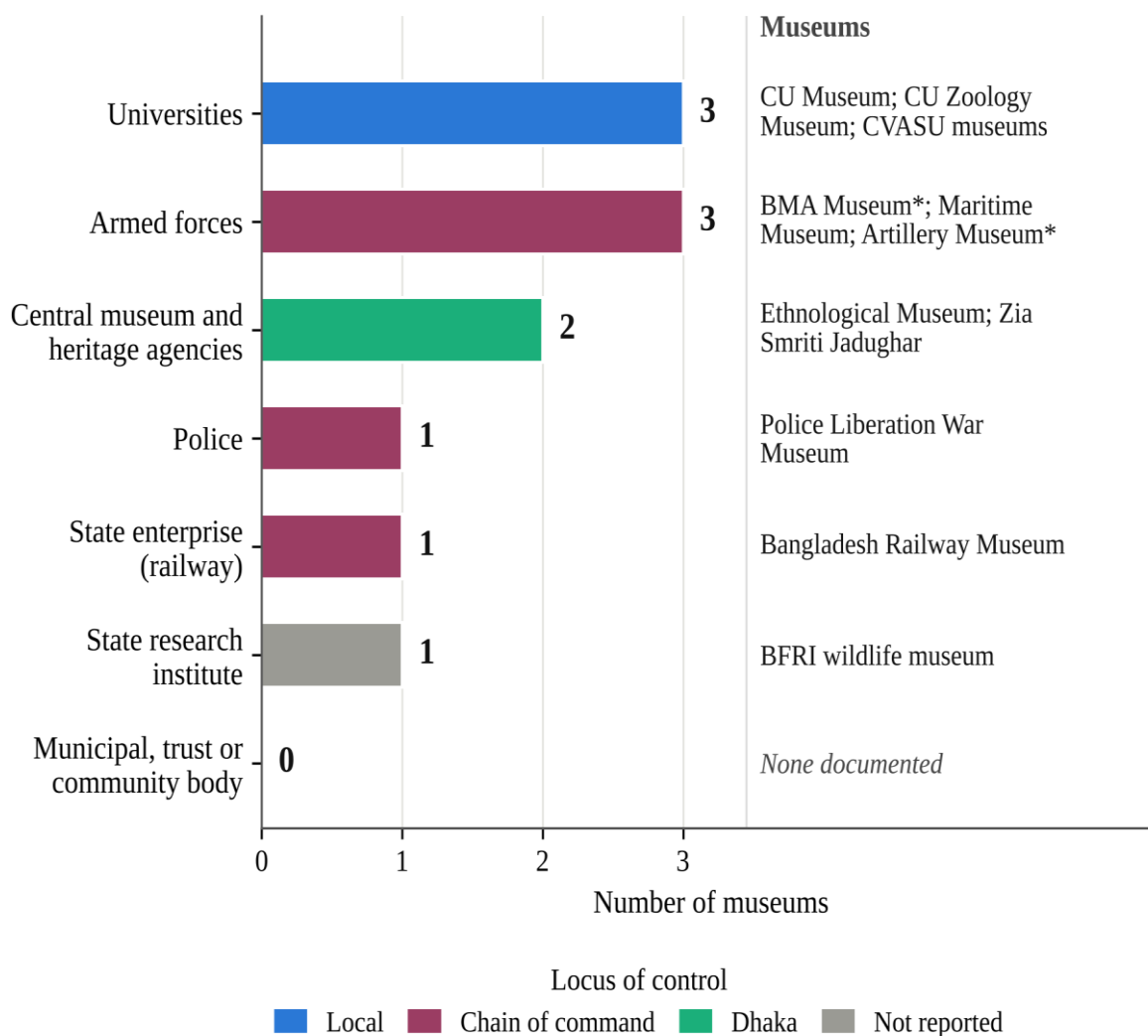
Note. n.r. = not reported in the sources consulted. SAARC = South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; PWD = Public Works Department. The post-2024 status of the Bangabandhu corners at the CU Museum and the Police Liberation War Museum is not reported. Every cell is drawn from the sources listed in its row.

Table 3. Museums in Chittagong by custodian type and function

Custodian type	Disciplinary teaching or research	Regional history and art	Ethnographic	Service or institutional history	Memorial site
University	CU Zoology Museum (1976); CVASU museums (2017)	CU Museum (1973)	–	–	–
State research institute	BFRI wildlife museum (1978)	–	–	–	–
Armed services	–	–	–	BMA Museum (1993); Maritime Museum (1995); Artillery Museum (1997)	–
Police	–	–	–	–	Police Liberation War Museum (2022)
State enterprise	–	–	–	Bangladesh Railway Museum (2003)	–
Central museum or heritage agency	–	–	Ethnological Museum (1974)	–	Zia Smriti Jadughar (1993)
Municipal, district, trust or community body	None documented	None documented	None documented	None documented	None documented
Theoretical reference	Simpson (2022)	Simpson (2022)	Clifford (1997); Mathur (2007)	Kavanagh (1988); Scott (2015); Divall and Scott (2001)	Williams (2007); Sodaro (2018)

Note. Comparators for the empty civic row lie outside Chittagong: the trustee-run Liberation War Museum, Dhaka (1996; Hoque, 2021), and the Varendra Research Society's museum, Rajshahi, before its transfer to the University of Rajshahi in 1964 (University of Rajshahi, n.d.). Excluded candidates (Section 3) would fall under armed services (Smriti Amlan) and, if documented as a museum, the empty community row (the Chittagong Buddhist Monastery collection).

Custody. The eleven museums are all in the care of parent organisations: three are in the care of universities, two of these are in the care of CU, three are in the care of the armed forces (two are inferred from their names: BMA and Artillery museums), one is in the care of the police, one is in the care of the state railway, one is in the care of a state research institute and two are in the care of central museum and heritage agencies (Figure 3). None is recorded as held by the City Corporation, a district body or a civic trust, except the Railway Museum's grounds which, under a reported joint committee (Yousuf, 2024), were handed over to the City Corporation to incorporate as a part of a children's park. There is a close association between custodian and function (Table 3): service parents with service-history museums, universities with disciplinary/regional ones, and central agencies with national-narrative ones.

Figure 3. Museums in Chittagong by custodian type ($n = 11$)

* Armed-forces custody inferred from the museum's name.

Note. The CVASU Anatomy and Fisheries Museums are counted as one complex. The pattern is unchanged if they are counted separately ($n = 12$), if the excluded Smriti Amlan is added ($n = 12$), or both ($n = 13$). Armed-forces custody of the BMA and Artillery museums is inferred from their names. The empty row records that no municipal, district, trust or community custodian is documented in the sources consulted.

Mandate. Partly for the CU Museum that is regional, but not for the Ethnological Museum, the prediction that museums narrate their parents' history or discipline holds true for the Maritime, police, railway and science museums (the BMA and Artillery collections are unreported).

Access. Enclosure indicates that access will be limited. The clearest enclave museums, the BMA Museum and the Artillery Museum, in contrast, do not seem to fulfil the recommendations of ICOM (2022) in their attitude to openness, and instead appear to cater to their own communities. But campus museums make prediction difficult: the CU Museum is open to walk-in visitors on weekdays between 9.00 am and 1.30 pm (Rahaman, 2023) and the CVASU Museums are free of charge on weekdays between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm (CVASU, n.d.). The service custody does not mean closing, as the navy's Maritime Museum in Kazir Dewri, which is an urban site, was allowed to receive ticketed visitors at proper times in 2023 (Tajrin, 2023).

Visibility. Documentary density is a measure of enclosure and salience (Table 4). While the Zia Smriti Jadughar is documented in the corpus by 15 sources, the Ethnological Museum by 11 and the CU Museum by 9, the BMA and Artillery museums have a single documentation each, dated 2012. Custodianship not only

involves who gets to enter, but what can be known: museums that the press can't enter are not likely to be reported as decaying, and, as a result, documented problems focus partly where the press has access.

Table 4. Custodial profile, coded challenges and documentary visibility of the eleven museums

Museum	Custodial dimensions (a)–(c)	(d) Custodial commitment (dated evidence)	Failure mode	Coded challenges	Sources (n); latest
CU Museum	(a) Partial (university); (b) Local (Syndicate); (c) Campus	Low to moderate: no curator, two attendants (2011); conservation laboratory and research centre reported (2019)	–	M, S, V, D	9; May 2026
Ethnological Museum	(a) Core (heritage agency); (b) Dhaka; (c) Open urban	Low: lights unreplaced for lack of funds (2022); 16 of 30 posts filled (2026)	–	M, S, V, D, R	11; Apr 2026
CU Zoology Museum	(a) Partial (university); (b) Local; (c) Campus	Low: Tk 45,000 a year (2016)	–	M	1; Jun 2016
BFRI wildlife museum	(a) Partial (research institute); (b) n.r.; (c) Institute building	n.r.	–	–	2; Nov 2025
BMA Museum	(a) Peripheral (army); (b) Chain of command; (c) Enclave (academy)	n.r.	–	A	1; Jan 2012
Zia Smriti Jadughar	(a) Core (National Museum); (b) Dhaka; (c) Open urban	Variable: Tk 46 lakh request not approved (2014–16); budget doubling announced (2025); Tk 1.87 crore works (2026)	Split custody	M, S, D, C, F, R	15; 2026
Maritime Museum	(a) Peripheral (navy); (b) Chain of command; (c) Urban site, ticketed	High: expansion (2022)	–	–	2; May 2023
Artillery Museum	(a) Peripheral (army, inferred); (b) n.r.; (c) n.r.	n.r.	–	A	1; Jan 2012
Bangladesh Railway Museum	(a) Peripheral (railway); (b) Chain of command; grounds with City Corporation; (c) Railway land	Withdrawn: closed (2016 or 2018); control disclaimed (2024)	Custodial vacuum	M, S, C, F	4; Apr 2024
CVASU museums	(a) Partial (university); (b) Local; (c) Campus	Project-funded (HEQEP)	–	D	3; Mar 2026
Police Liberation War Museum	(a) Peripheral (police); (b) Chain of command; (c) Police lines, ticketed	High at founding (2022); n.r. after 2024	–	R	4; Aug 2024

Note. Codes: M = maintenance; S = staffing; V = visitors or low visibility; D = documentation; C = closure; F = custodial failure; A = restricted access (assigned where no visiting arrangements are published); R = contested memory or representation. A dash means not reported in the sources consulted, not absent. Sources (n) counts reference-list items that document the museum directly. Evidence as cited in Sections 4–6 and Table 2.

6. Challenges

6.1 Care and staffing

The two museums, centrally held and open, provide the best documentation of decay. The reporters noted that the plaster section of the Ethnological Museum was falling in 2019 (Shahriar, 2019); in 2022 the keeper reported monsoon leaks and failed lights that were not replaced due to financial constraints (Dey, 2022); and the condition of rainwater seepage through the roof was observed in 2026 (Akter, 2026a). The request for renovation of Zia Smriti Jadughar for Tk 46 lakh (Tk 4.6 million) for 2014–15 and 2015–16 failed to get approval (M. Uddin, 2016) and the building was left without repair for 17 years (A. Hossain, 2026) or 18–20

years (Akter, 2026b). There are also records of decay at the CU Museum (broken windows in 2011; S. Hossain, 2011), at the CU Zoology Museum which is cramped and funded at Tk 45,000 per year in 2016 (M. Abbas, 2016) and at the Railway Museum where a renovation of Tk 17.5 lakh was proposed in 2012 (S. Hossain, 2012). The CU Museum was without any curator and had two attendants in 2011 (S. Hossain, 2011) and the Ethnological Museum in 2026 had 30 posts of which 16 were filled up (Akter, 2026a) and Zia Smriti Jadughar had 45 posts, of which 32 were filled up; its curator's post was unfilled for long time (Akter, 2026b). The Circuit House and the railway bungalow are not alone in sharing the fate of Chattogram's much neglected and largely unlisted built heritage (Madhury et al., 2023).

6.2 Visitors

Units of numbers of visitors are incompatible. The Ethnological Museum received about 150 visitors a day in 2011 (Dey, 2011) and 26,522 in October 2015–March 2016, against 21,522 a year earlier (M. Uddin, 2016). A 2019 report of fewer than 1,500 a month (Shahriar, 2019) cannot be reconciled with an official 42,160 for 2019–20, which fell to 24,022 in 2024–25, a decline officials put at 43 per cent; a figure of 24,714 for 2025–26 was reported in April 2026, before that financial year ended (Akter, 2026a). The Zia Smriti Jadughar drew 115,000 visitors in 2012 and 127,000 in 2014–15 (M. Uddin, 2016). The CU Museum's art gallery was shut down in 2011 due to a drop in visitors (S. Hossain, 2011), and in 2023, it was stated that the museum is not exposing enough (Rahaman, 2023). Complaints of unchanged displays and missing captions (Akter, 2026a; Shahriar, 2019) speak to service deficits experienced across the nation (Sharmin & Haque, 2024) and the critique of the static museum by Witcomb (2003).

6.3 Documentation

In 2014–17, approximately 500 items were gathered for the Ethnological Museum but due to limited space, most of them have not yet been exhibited (Shahriar, 2019). In 2025 some of the *puthis* were reported as unread and deteriorating in the Central Library of the University, not in the CU Museum (Ahmad, 2025); the CU Museum's conservation laboratory and research centre is still listed in the *Banglapedia* as planned (S. Hossain, 2014, 2021). The counts at the Zia Smriti Jadughar (902 or 422 items) and CVASU (60 or 260 skeletons) are yet to be reconciled, and the objects, according to Pearce (1994), yet to be interpreted.

6.4 Custodial vacuum and split custody

The Railway Museum is a typical case in point of the custodial vacuum. The General Manager (East) attributed the reason to lack of employees in the railway, and the Divisional Railway Manager didn't know it closed (S. H. Chowdhury, 2020); in 2024 the Divisional Railway Manager said that it was not a proper museum and it was not under the railway's control (Yousuf, 2024). The Zia Smriti Jadughar is an example of split custody between the National Museum and the PWD: split custody did not only occur in the rejected 2014–16 proposal, but also during the years that no work took place, and during the delayed response to the earthquake, although the sources do not say which body withheld action. In March 2026, the museum was still shut with no sign of repair of the damage caused by the earthquake, though the Ministers pledged quick repair and heritage declaration as well as early reopening in June (Chattogram Bureau, 2026a; TBS Report, 2026; N. Uddin, 2026).

6.5 Contested memory

The Circuit House and the Dampara armoury are instances of memory as Nora (1989) defines it and, as Mookherjee (2015) demonstrates in relation to public memory of the war, museum discourses on 1971 select and record. The Zia Smriti Jadughar foregrounds Ziaur Rahman (M. Chowdhury, 2026) and a diorama of the Kalurghat broadcast, which the museum presents as the declaration of independence; the Police Liberation War Museum foregrounds the 1930 raid and police resistance in 1971 and includes a corner dedicated to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Dainik Azadi, 2022). Commemorative naming has been following changes of government. On 11 February 2019, Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury Nowfel put forward the idea of renaming the Zia Smriti Jadughar the Liberation War Memorial Museum with reference to its history in 1971 and Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain opposed the proposal (S. M. Abbas, 2019). State Minister for Information in September 2021, M. Murad Hasan, announced the removal of the museum and the Kalurghat microphone would be transferred to Kalurghat, Bangladesh (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, 2021). During the quota-reform movement, the nameplate of the Police Liberation War Museum was broken on 2 August 2024

(Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, 2024). According to Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, the Zia museum is closed for 16 years (or “almost inactive” for 15–16 years according to other reports) and a doubled budget was announced in May 2025 (Akter, 2026b; Chattogram Bureau, 2025; Desh Rupantor Online, 2025); the word “closed” is not consistent with the number of visitors during 2012–15. Memorial museums are then political endeavours (Sodaro, 2018) where memory and history are constantly being renegotiated (Crane, 1997).

6.6 Representation

According to a press report, a government gazette published on 23 March 2019 mentions 50 ethnic groups, while the Ethnological Museum exhibits approximately 26 (Akter, 2026a; Dey, 2022), and researchers quoted in the same press report estimate some 75 ethnic groups. Ethnic groups referred to in the article are the term used by its sources, as communities themselves use a variety of terms. This gap is not in line with a museum’s inclusive role to marginalised groups as described by Sandell (2002) and is similar to the national museum context as described by Shah and Shah (2024) and the colonial classificatory practice explored by Bhattacharya (2013) and N. Uddin (2010).

7. Discussion

The one constant common element in these museums’ known histories is the custodial arrangement: the subject and hours, and, if available, budgets and fates, follow the priorities and commitment of the parent. Here the exhibitionary complex of Bennett’s (1995) is not a single civic system, but rather parallel systems of institutions, the majority of which tell their own histories. In their narratives of 1971, museums imagined themselves as a contributor to the imagining process, as Anderson (2006) suggests that the state does this through museums.

Another theory is one of under-resourcing. Custodial gaps are shared across custodians (Sharmin & Haque, 2024) and, in Chittagong, the most well-documented decay, vacancies and decline is at the two centrally held, open museums and not at the enclaves. Similar under-resourcing and outdated exhibits have been reported at other postcolonial museums (Arinze, 1998). This is a common denominator and does not account for variations in the condition. For the central-agency branches the operative dimension is locus of control: repairs, posts and budgets are decided in Dhaka, and with split custody there is a second gatekeeper. In the enclaves, the operative dimension is enclosure and this results in restricted access and documentary invisibility instead of recorded decay. A documentary design can establish such associations but not causation.

The navy and the railway are both peripheral-mandate parents, but the navy increased its museum in 2022 and has ticketed visitors and by 2024, the railway’s divisional manager has disclaimed control of the railway’s museum: commitment, not mandate, separates them. Both CU and CVASU are university parents, but the CU Museum is understaffed, as of 2011, and the CVASU museums are funded by donor project money which may be at risk at the end of the project. At the same time, the politicised Zia museum received over 100,000 visitors each year in 2012–15 and was subject to contest, while the Ethnological Museum, which is also Dhaka-controlled, did not.

Outside Chittagong, Dhaka’s memorial museum run by a trustee has been described as a civil-society counter-narrative (Feldman, 2019) or a cosmopolitan memorial (Mookherjee, 2011), while Chittagong’s memorial museum, the one with the best-documented political history, has been challenged by successive governments in terms of its naming, opening, and budget. The journey of Varendra from its foundation by a learned society in 1910 to being handed over to university custody in 1964 (University of Rajshahi, n.d.) indicates that institutional custody can also be a destination for a civic museum though there is a perception of weak guidance and display and communication within the museum (Ghosh et al., 2024). The National Museum also has a clearly defined public mandate (Islam, 2021), and a bill to replace the ordinance of the National Museum of 1983 was passed in the parliament in 2022 (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, 2022), while the involvement of the community in the site museums of the Department of Archaeology also raises similar questions (Khan & Huda, 2023). The Ethnological Museum’s Pakistani groups (shown in 2019; Shahriar, 2019) are a legacy of an earlier state’s ethnographic imaginary in Singh’s (2015) sense, and of a colonial genealogy (Guha-Thakurta,

2015; Mathur, 2007). Antiquities are controlled on a national level in Bangladesh (Antiquities Act, 1968) but there is no published framework which coordinates the institutions holding the collections in Chittagong.

A three-part result is thus generated: without civic museums, outcomes depend more on custodial commitment and locus of control than on museum type; spatial enclosure determines access and the public record; and the custodial vacuum and split custody are failure modes with policy remediation.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The museum is a process of four foundation phases (Figure 2) which was overlaid by closure and contest, starting in around 2016 with RQ1. On RQ2, a variety of typologies are based on the different kinds of parent custody, with different degrees of mandate and locus of control, enclosure and commitment. The documented challenges are related to that variation and National under-resourcing are the challenges on RQ3.

Seven recommendations follow. (1) There should be a joint listing and calendar of VWG (voluntary working group) with CU/CVASU, Ethnological Museum, Zia Smriti Jadughar and the Maritime Museum with an inter-ministerial memorandum for museums on security premises. (2) Disclosure of the procedures of access to, and open days of, service and police museums, where allowed by security considerations. (3) The Department of Archaeology should maintain a public record of the division's museums and each museum should have a dated digital catalogue, including the CU coins and the challenged counts of the Zia museum. (4) The posts of 14 at the Ethnological Museum and 13 at the Zia Smriti Jadughar are vacant; the Ministry of Cultural Affairs should fill them up and create standing maintenance budgets, in the spirit of appropriate museology (Kreps, 2008). (5) Where custody has failed, the writing of Railway–City Corporation agreement should be formalised, and there should be one repair authority for the Zia building, with the humility towards representing violence that Winter (2012) advises of war museums. (6) Museum studies should be offered with placements in these museums by the University of Chittagong, in partnership with other departments. (7) Linking museums to heritage tourism and community co-curation are two more recommendations, drawing on work in this journal on heritage and local economies (Rasul, 2011) and regional history (Ahamed, 2026), respectively, to respond to calls for participation (Clifford, 1997; Hasan et al., 2022).

Future research should involve fieldwork in the enclave museums and visitor studies, and the recording of oral histories of curators and communities, along with contemporaneous newspaper reports and institutional records.

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