



***Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery's Importance as a Destination for Religious Tourism**

Dr. Md. Ashikuzzaman Khan Kiron

Associate Professor, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

kiron@du.ac.bd

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ABSTRACT

Rājbanda Buddhist Monastery is located in the *Rānāmāti* district of the Chittagong division of Bangladesh. It is well known as one of the largest monasteries of the Buddhist community in the country. It is one of the most visited places in the *Rānāmāti* district. It is an attractive place that has attracted a lot of tourists. The *monastery* is very closely associated with the venerable *Sadhanananda Mahasthavira*, who is more widely known as *Vanabhante*. He was even well-known in the international arena. He moved to *Rānāmāti* to live permanently in 1977. The monastery was originally built for him and his disciples. Today, it has become known as an international Buddhist pilgrimage site. It is a wonderful place not only for Buddhists but also for people interested in nature and knowledge. It can be a wonderful tourist destination for people who are thirsty for travel. It is also a very sacred place for Buddhists. In addition, here you can find one of the most remarkable examples of communal harmony in Bangladesh. But there is also a great chance and potential for cross-cultural interaction here. In the article has discusses the tourism and religious importance of *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery.

1. Introduction

Rājbanda Buddhist Monastery is a famous monastery in the *Rānāmāti* Hill District. It would be wrong to say that it is only a famous monastery in the *Rānāmāti* district. This is due to its fame not only in



Bangladesh but also on an international scale. Although it is a new monastery in age, it is much ahead in terms of fame, which is known to everyone. The monastery was originally established in 1974. The monastery is located in a beautiful natural environment. As a result, the importance of this monastery has increased to a significant extent. There is a beautiful area in *Vihara* where animals and birds roam and move freely. *Shrimata Sadhanananda Mahasthavira* was the chief of this monastery. It is said that he was better known as 'Banabhante' because he meditated in a deep forest. He was a well-respected and universally respected figure both nationally and internationally. However, the Buddhists of Bangladesh deeply respect him. He is one of the foremost figures in the revival of Buddhism in Bangladesh. He came to this monastery from *Lamgadu* in the *Rānāmāti* district in 1974 at the invitation of the *Chakma* royal family and local leaders. The land of *Rājvana* Monastery was donated by the royal family there. As a result, the total land area of *Rājvana Vihara* is forty-seven acres. The *Vihara* has a temple of worship, a *chaitya*, a monk's house, a *deshanaghar*, a *changkramana* hut, a monk's enclosure, a dining hall, a library, a museum, a weaving shed, and a statue of monk *Upagupta*. In the article has discusses the tourism and religious importance of *Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery.

2. Research Questions

The research work has been done keeping in mind the following research questions: 1. When and why was *Rājvana Vihara* built? 2. Is it open to people of all religions? 3. What kind of cultural events are held in *Rājvana Vihara*? 4. Why is *Rājvana Vihara* considered different from other *Viharas*? 5. Is there potential and importance for religious tourism in *Rājvana Vihara*? Should we learn about it nationally and internationally?

3. Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the discussed research are: 1. To gain a correct idea about the location of *Rajvana* Buddhist Monastery; 2. To learn about the history and traditions of *Rajvana* Buddhist Monastery; 3. To provide an idea of the religious tourist potential of *Rajvana* Buddhist Monastery.

4. Research Methodology

Research activities are mainly conducted in three approaches. One of them is the qualitative approach. Again, there are many methods within the qualitative approach. One of them is the historical method. The research questions have been completed using historical methods. To conduct the research, theories and



information have been collected and studied from Buddhism-related texts, books, Buddhist archaeology-related texts, essays, etc., and then analysed.

5. Location of *Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery

There is no doubt that *Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery is one of the largest monasteries of the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. *Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery is located in the heart of *Rāṅgāmāti* city. Despite its central location, the monastery remains virtually untouched by the city's bustle. In 1977, *Banavante* came to *Rāṅāmāti* from the *Loṅgadu* area to settle permanently. The devotees built this monastery for the residence of *Banavante* and his disciples. A full committee for the maintenance of *Rājvana Vihara* was formed under the supervision of *Chakma Raja Debashish Roy*.¹ Every year on the full moon day, the ceremony of donating the *cīvara* of Buddhist monks is held at *Rājvana Vihara*.² *Rājvana Vihara* is one of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Bangladesh. It can be said that *Rājvana Vihara* is located in the shade of green forests and surrounded by the crystal clear waters of *Kaptai* Lake. It is located near the Reserve Market and Stadium in *Rāṅāmāti*. It is possible to reach *Vihara* in five minutes by water from the launch pier at *Rāṅgāmāti's Reserve Bazar* and by road next to the stadium. However, it should be remembered that tourists are not allowed to enter the monastery grounds wearing hats, burqas, veils, sandals, shoes, etc.



Image: *Rājvana Vihara*

6. '*Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery' and '*Banavante*'

The name most closely associated with the *Rājvana* Buddhist Monastery is that of Venerable *Sadhanananda Bhante*. He was born on 8 January 1920 and died on 30 January 2012. He is more commonly known as *Banvante*. He is an internationally renowned Buddhist monk.³ Again, it can be said



that the *Banabhante* and *Rājbanda* Buddhist monasteries are connected in the same thread. Once more, it can be claimed that *Banabhante's* name is inextricably linked to *Rājbanda Monastery*. *Banabhante* means *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery, and *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery means *Banabhante*. Basically, *Banabhante's* sacrifice, his boundless love for Buddhism and philosophy, his unsurpassed scholarship in this religion and philosophy, and his dedication to the welfare of mankind. Banabhante dedicates his life to Buddhist philosophy, earning him great respect both within and beyond Bangladesh.

A monk immersed in the forest with the determination to ensure the permanence of the Buddha's words and his philosophy, their protection from extinction and distortion, and their propagation and expansion; he is simultaneously a seeker of knowledge, a forest wanderer, a social reformer, and a seeker of truth. Almost everyone adores him, having abandoned all forms of jealousy, hostility, and greed. He has immersed himself in spiritual contemplation after leaving the ocean of worldly life. For more than 60 years, he has created an exemplary path through the study of various religious texts and sayings, practices, and rituals. He has built his own position by rising above caste and religious differences. Able to transcend all narrow social constraints, this legendary sage was able to create his own world in his own way. He has carried out great deeds with the determination to establish all kinds of personal restraint and eliminate family sorrows and ensure a climate of peace.

The giant crowd of people from all over the country, including the three hill districts, who gathered to listen to *Banabhan's* words, to see him, and to commit to spending the rest of their lives following his path, reminds us that people have not truly deviated from the path of religion. He died on the afternoon of January 30, 2012, at the age of 92.



Image: *Banavant's* preserved body



Various religious books and memoirs are being published at the *Banabhante Ashram* under its own management and investment. The work of translating some rare books from Pali to Bengali is also underway here. And for this, its own self-sufficient printing press has been established on the *ashram* campus. This religious knowledge centre, located in the dense tourist area of the hilly region, has added new meaning to the knowledge field of Bangladesh and the whole world. Another important thing is that all nature lovers, beauty lovers, and knowledge seekers of the world will find different incentives here. The joy of travelling will easily be combined with the joy of seeing a new world of knowledge. Intense opportunities for religious thought, communal harmony and camaraderie, and the pursuit of a bright path will accompany the cultural exchange.

7. Construction of *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery

Prominent people of *Rānāmāti* went to *Laṃgadu Tila* to invite *Banabhanta*. The aim was to arrange for *Banabhanta* to reside permanently in *Rājbanda Vihara*. For this purpose, *Kumar Koknadaksha Roy*, the oldest man at the time, took the lead at a very sacred time in 1974, with the permission of the royal family. Others who were with them were Regional Officer of the Garden Development Board *Babu Samar Bikash Chakma*, *Babu Sneh Chakma*, *Babu Arun Chakma*, *Dr Himanshu Bimal Dewan*, *Adyut Dewan*, *Mrs Sudipta Dewan*, and *Babu Bankim Chandra Chakma*. At that time, *Nandapala Bhante* was the most devoted servant of *Bhanveta* and the chief official monk at *Laṃgadu Tila*. He was the only one under *Bhanveta's* rule. There were also some monks. At that time, people from different parts of the hilly region used to come to see the venerable *Banabhanta* and listen to his sermons. But the educated *Chakma* Buddhists of *Rānāmāti* town rarely showed interest in listening to the sermons and practicing the religion. As a result, he felt very uncomfortable with their actions. For this reason, he initially declined their invitation. As a result, everyone became very worried. However, when they were disappointed, the servant requested *Nandapal Bhante*, and the *Bhante* asked them to stay that night and come the next morning. The next day, when *Nandapal Bhante* requested *Banabhante* about various matters for the welfare of his religion, he agreed. They happily returned to *Rānāmāti* in the morning and spread the good news everywhere. Upon hearing the news, *Rajmata Aarti Roy* decided to donate twenty-six acres of land in *Rānāmāti* to build a forest monastery. The place was on the western side of the *Rajbari*. *Nandapal Bhante* was brought in in 1974 when *Rājbanda Vihara* was being built. The purpose was to preserve and supervise the temple. He stayed there and supervised the construction of the *Vihara* and gave all the directions. Under his supervision, the work of *Rājbanda Vihara* progressed rapidly. After the construction of *Rājbanda Vihara*, *Banabhante* started living there from 1975. *Nandapala Bhante* used to provide all-



round support to Venerable *Banabhante* in various religious works. Besides, *Nandapala Bhante* would look after all aspects. He performed this important duty with great devotion. The monastery quickly removed Buddhist subculture and customs from the hill Buddhist community, and the respect, interest, and belief in virtuous deeds began to grow in the *Rāṇāmāti* Buddhist community. The number of liberation-seeking clansmen began to increase very quickly. However, most of them came from the three hill districts. As a result of its success, fifty-seven branches were established throughout the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In addition, more than twenty small and large branches of *Rājbanda Vihara* have been established in *Tripura, Arunachal, Mizoram, Guwahati* and *Bodh Gaya* in India.

8. Architecture and infrastructure of *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery

Rājbanda Vihara is very well organised and planned. There are various examples of modern architecture here. Notable among the architecture and infrastructure found in *Rājbanda Vihara* are the picturesque *Upasana Vihara*; the modern, architecturally rich *Deshanalaya*; the residential huts and rest houses of the forest dwellers; the accommodation of monks and ascetics; the large guest house, the *Changkramanghar*, and the *Seemāghar*; a stage and a seven-storey sanctuary; a ten-bed hospital and several meditation huts; a kitchen and dining hall; and its own library and press. A boundary wall was built for the security of the entire monastery. A brief description of some of the important structures of *Rājbanda Vihara* is presented below:

8.1. *Ashtamārga*

The *Ashtamārga* is known to all as the seven steps to heaven. Its floors, from the first to the seventh, are: *Manusyaloka, Caturmahārāika, Tabatiṃsa Heaven, Yama Heaven, Tushit Heaven, Nirmanarati Heaven,* and *Paranirmit Basvarti Heaven*. It is called *Swarga Ghar*. It is built on the ground in the southern corner of the *Rājbanda Vihara* Complex. However, it can be called a seven-storey building with a different shape. It is an entirely new addition to the history of Buddhist art in Bangladesh. No other *Vihara* in the country has witnessed the construction of such structures. Only *Rājbanda Vihara* in Bangladesh has witnessed such structures. The design of this facility was prepared in 1997 by the late engineer *Budhendhu Bikash Chakma* and *Shrimata Sourajagat Sthavir*, one of the senior monks of *Rājbanda Vihara*. This shrine was later built with the funding of the *Rāṇāmāti* Hill District Council and the tributes of pilgrims. Its speciality is that it is an architectural representation of the six superior abodes of human life, known as the Six Heavens, according to Buddhism. Buddhists believe that the Buddha could have resided in these six heavens in his *Iddhi* or *Riddhi guna*. Such structures are also found in Myanmar. They call the



worship of such structures *Chimitang Puja*. Originally, it was built under the guidance and advice of Venerable *Banavante*. It is the tallest structure in *Rājbanda Vihara*.⁴



Image: *Ashtmārga, Rājbanda Vihara*

8.2. Two-story brick residential building

There is a two-storeyed pucca residential building near *Upasana Vihara*. However, it is located just north of the *Vihara*. It is said to have been built in 1986. This building has a special feature. That is, five domes have been placed at the top of the building. The chaityas were supposedly built in 1988. Various materials have been used to build the chaityas. And those materials include clay, cement, concrete and ceramics. We know that chaityas and stupas are crucial in the architectural history of Buddhism. Emperor *Ashoka's* reign was 273-232 BC.⁵ Additionally, *Kanishka's* reign was from 78 to 101 BC.⁶ During that period, architectural progress in the propagation of religion began through the construction of religious pillars, *chaityas*, and stupas at various places associated with the memory of Buddha. Similarly, one could argue that constructing a *Chaitya* on top of the residential building in *Rājbanda Vihara* represents its complete realisation. Below the building are four rooms for monks. On the second floor of the building is a beautiful Buddha statue. It is made of eight metals. The Buddha statue is seated on a lotus seat. In addition, two Buddha statues are in a state of contemplation. However, the Buddha statues are on the left and right sides of the two beautiful statues. It is known that the two statues were donated by the Thai government. However, the two statues were made by sculptors from Myanmar. The colour of the sculptures was golden and very smooth.⁷



Image: Residential concrete building

8.3. Guest house

A guest house was built in *Rājbanda Bihara* in the financial year 2000-2001. This was necessary due to the significant influx of guests from both within and outside the country during their travels. However, the guesthouse was built with the assistance of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board. They also designed it. It was a milestone for the physical infrastructure of the monastery. The building is two-storied. It has a total of twelve residential rooms and two halls for religious discussions.⁸



Image: Guest House

9. Tourism Importance

Bangladesh is one of the countries in South Asia that is rich in tourism. One of the attractions of this place is the beauty of the mountains. The place is *Rānāmāti* district. *Rānāmāti* is located in the Chittagong division. One of the tourist attractions of this district is *Rājbanda Vihara*. This temple is



especially important for Buddhists, like the Golden Temple. The beauty around this temple attracts everyone.

9.1. Travel etiquette and precautions

Rājbanda Vihara is a critical religious and holy place. Therefore, one must adhere to several rules and regulations when visiting this place. For example, taking pictures in an offensive manner is prohibited. Making videos and making loud noises and shouting is prohibited. It is forbidden to enter the *Vihara Chattar* wearing a cap. It is forbidden to enter anywhere without permission. There are some places where taking pictures without permission is prohibited. Generally, no one is allowed to enter the *Vihara* after 5 pm.

9.2. How to get to *Rājbanda Buddhist Monastery*

There are several bus services directly to *Rānāmāti* from *Fakirapul* and *Sayedabad* in Dhaka. Among the non-AC buses, the most notable are *Shyamoli*, *Unique*, *Hanif* and *S Alam Paribahan*. The fare is usually between 850 taka and 900 taka. AC buses include St Martin Hyundai *Robi Express*, *Hanif* and *Shyamoli*. The fare will be between 1200 and 1800 taka. In addition, buses to *Rānāmāti* are available from Chittagong's Oxygen Intersection and *Bahaddarhat* Bus Terminal. The fare for local buses and direct buses is between 120 and 180 taka. The distance from *Rānāmāti* to *Rājbanda Vihara* is only five kilometres. From here, there are opportunities to go by auto-rickshaw, private car and boat.

9.3. Housing management

There are various quality guest houses and hotels in *Rānāmāti*. If you choose a hotel near the lake, you can enjoy the beautiful environment of Kaptai Lake. Hotel Green Castle. Non-AC room: 800-1200 taka. AC room: 1600-2000 taka. Tourist motel. Non-AC room: 1000-1200 taka will be required. AC room: 1500-1800 taka will be required. There is a Rainbow guest house. Couple bed: 500 taka will be required. Family bed: 650 taka will be required. There are also other hotels. To learn more about other hotels and resorts in *Rānāmāti*, you can study the *Rānāmāti* Hotel and Resort Guide and get an idea.

9.4. Food management

There are restaurants in *Rānāmāti* with different qualities of food. Anyone can eat at any restaurant within budget. But don't forget to taste the local traditional dishes. It is very important. You should try new foods in new places.



9.5. Other places of interest in *Rānāmāti*

When you come to *Rānāmāti*, you can visit not only *Rājbanda Vihara*, but also some other nearby tourist attractions. So before coming here, we have given you an idea of some of these places. They are: *Shuvolong* Waterfall; *Kaptai* Lake; Hanging Bridge; Tribal Museum; *Jhum* Restaurant; *Chakma* Palace and Navy Picnic Spot.

9.6. *Kathina Chivara* Donation Festival at *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery

The donation of the hard robe is an important charity event for Buddhists. Within 24 hours, cotton is made into yarn, and a durable robe is made from the yarn and donated to the cause of *Bhante*. Every year, this festival is celebrated with great importance by the devotees of *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery. On this occasion, various donation rituals, including offering Buddha images, donating eight holy objects, praying the five-fold prayer, reciting sutras, religious sermons, and offering cotton, are observed during this difficult *Chivara* donation festival. Thousands of pilgrims from far and wide flock to *Rājbanda Vihara* on the occasion of the *Kathina Chivara Danotsav*. The largest Buddhist monastery in Bangladesh is *Rājbanda Vihara* in *Rānāmāti*. Lakhs of people gather at this monastery to donate the tough robe. It is known that Buddhist pilgrims not only from Bangladesh but also from *Bodh Gaya*, India, participate in *Rājbanda Vihara*.

10. Conclusion

In light of the above discussion, it is critical to see *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery not only as a religious place but also as a meeting place for nature and knowledge. It has a peaceful and pleasant environment. Apart from that, there are wonderful architectural monuments. And the religious atmosphere here will give any traveller a unique experience. Numerous travellers from the country and abroad travel here. Since it is one of the largest pilgrimage sites in Bangladesh, people from all districts of the country travel here. Its promotion and spread are increasing considerably with time. As a result, it goes without saying that the *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery has become an attractive pilgrimage site for people outside the country. It can be said that, meeting the needs of the age and time, *Rājbanda* Buddhist Monastery has become an attractive pilgrimage site for people from many countries around the world. As a result, every year, numerous people from abroad come to visit *Rājbanda Vihara* and enjoy the unique beauty of its nature. So it wouldn't be unfair to say that *Rājbanda Vihara* is definitely a place to put on your list when travelling to *Rānāmāti*.



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