BEYOND BARRIERS: AN EXPLORATION OF ACCESSIBILITY CHALLENGES AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN INCLUSIVE HERITAGE VISITATION AT LALBAGH FORT, DHAKA

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Abstract

Heritage sites, as revered repositories of cultural memory, form an integral facet of a nation's cultural and architectural fabric. In Bangladesh, where conventional conservation paradigms have been traditionally embedded, the connection between heritage conservation and outdoor accessibility, especially for physically challenged individuals, remains under-researched and overlooked. This study seeks to bridge the gap between existing research and the limitations of accessibility regulations in Bangladesh by investigating outdoor accessibility challenges faced by physically challenged persons at heritage sites, focusing on the historical Lalbagh fort. This qualitative case study methodology includes surveys with observations through access audit checklists and semi-structured questionnaires to investigate the physical barriers, communication systems, and representative and interpretive resources that could impede accessibility and impact the experience of heritage visitation. This study aims to investigate the challenges that prevent individuals with physical disabilities from having barrier-free access to the heritage site's resources and experiences. While doing this, this research also explores potential solutions to overcome these obstacles and promote inclusive heritage tourism practices. The findings of the study indicate that while there is a genuine intention to enhance accessibility, the barriers of core outdoor accessibility elements remain unattended. The study recommends a multifaceted strategy to improve accessibility, including modifications to the site's physical environment, enhancements to communication systems, and increased staff training and capacity-building. By addressing these barriers and promoting accessible tourism practices, places like Lalbagh Fort can become more inclusive, fostering future generations' cultural heritage preservation.

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage sites are the collective memories of a nation's cultural dimensions developed by its historical and architectural identity. Schaper et al. (2018) defined heritage sites as educational and socio-cultural platforms combined with historical affiliations that captivate many domestic and international visitors. Moreover, people worldwide explore heritage sites due to their unique historical insights and immense educational and emotional value (Zahari et al., 2023). However, despite being globally important tourist places, a constantly overlooked aspect of the narratives of these heritage sites is the accessibility concerns for people with disabilities. As recognized by Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), disabled persons have equal rights as others to actively engage in any recreation, leisure, sports, or cultural activities (United Nations, 2006). For this reason, it is very important to address the issue of incorporating accessibility into heritage sites to accommodate people from diverse backgrounds to experience the cultural legacy without any barriers.

Disabled individuals want to explore various travel destinations as much as abled persons although most of the time they must give up their aspirations due to accessibility issues (Zahari et al., 2023). Particularly, the physically disabled encounter hurdles in terms of navigating places in contrast to other disabled persons (Page & Thorsteinsson, 2018). As a result, they feel discriminated against because they cannot access numerous locations, particularly heritage tourist sites. Accordingly, 15% of the people in the world face challenges in the form of physical disabilities while visiting tourist attractions including heritage sites (UNESCO, 2017). Also, these challenges arise not only from physical and informational barriers but also from societal perceptions and marginalization toward disability (Darcy et al., 2020; Oliver, 2018). However, despite global consideration for inclusivity, making heritage sites accessible continues to be a considerable challenge.

Furthermore, Darcy et al. (2020) discovered that making heritage sites accessible is difficult due to the absence of initial design considerations for people with disabilities along with the adaptive transformations these sites undergo over time. Latip et al. (2018) pointed out that enhancing accessibility often necessitates physical alterations, which may conflict with preservation demands. Moreover, Kosmas et al. (2020) suggested that integrating accessibility must be in harmony with heritage conservation principles. Therefore, these perceptions of different researchers regarding integrating accessibility in heritage sites necessitate the pressing need to maintain the balance between preserving historical authenticity and ensuring inclusivity. Particularly, in countries such as Bangladesh, this interplay between conservation and accessibility has become prominent and critical (Khan, 2020).

Given the context of Bangladesh's historical Lalbagh Fort, the challenges encountered by disabled people are often neglected like other tourist places. Moreover, Huq et al. (2017) found that in Bangladesh, literature primarily focuses on the financial and socio-economic benefits of accessible tourism rather than accessibility challenges. Moreover, he also pointed out that accessibility laws in Bangladesh have made it compulsory for public buildings and sites to provide disabled access or ramps, but there is a lack of instructions for enhancing accessibility in heritage sites. Whereas countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have clearly defined accessibility regulations for heritage structures (Huq et al., 2017). It emphasizes that there is a lack of clear guidelines for enhancing accessibility in heritage sites, combined with limitations in the implementation and oversight of local regulations. In addition, previous studies reveal that incorporating accessibility with the conservation process has always been under-researched and overlooked in the context of Bangladesh. Therefore, this research aims to comprehensively investigate and address the outdoor accessibility challenges faced by physically challenged individuals at heritage sites in Bangladesh, with a specific focus on the historical Lalbagh Fort, and bridge the gap between existing research and the limitations of accessibility regulations in Bangladesh. Through a qualitative methodology encompassing e-surveys, and document analysis, this study intends to investigate the physical barriers that hinder accessibility and impact the heritage visitation experience for physically challenged individuals.

The paper begins with an understanding of the concept of outdoor accessibility and disability by incorporating a barrier-environment approach in parallel to the conventional conservation paradigm within heritage sites in Bangladesh. Next, the paper discovers the present condition of accessible heritage tourism in Bangladesh. Then the study investigates the different barriers that could impede accessibility and impact the experience of heritage visitation for disabled people. For this paper, the term persons with disabilities (PwDs) specifically refers to physically challenged persons, including wheelchair users and crutch users.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Understanding of Disability & Accessibility
Accessibility and disability are deeply interconnected and an integral part of creating an accessible barrier-free environment. Both the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2008) defined disability in terms of physical and mental well-being that limits an individual to perform their everyday functions independently. Whereas accessibility can be characterized as the notion of providing equal rights to access the barrier-free built environment. Converging these two, it demonstrates that it

is the service provider's responsibility to ensure equal rights for PwDs to utilize public spaces with equal opportunity as others.

Disabilities impact a significant segment of the global population while many view accessibility as an infrastructural issue (Hooi & Yaacob, 2019). Meanwhile, Oliver (2018) found that despite its broad acceptance, the concept of disability encountered an evaluation of how Pwds experience their surrounding environment. This implies that disability is not restricted to being a medical term only, it refers to a complex phenomenon involving the interaction of an individual's physical characteristics and sociocultural factors. It is thus crucial to change social perception towards disability and collective notions around physical capabilities to ensure equitable accessibility.

However, in the discourse of disability, the term 'accessibility' broadly refers to a theoretical investigation into access to the built environment undertaken to establish how the environments and their inherent tangible and intangible properties can be made convenient to all (Darcy et al., 2020). Moreover, Oliver (2018) in his further research about disability found that the contemporary requirements of accessibility focus solely on the physical modifications to the exteriors of heritage sites. For this reason, the evolving dynamics of global society necessitates critical consideration for continuing adaptation particularly around inclusion, even though historical context has a place. So, when coming especially to the heritage sites, this understanding translates to architectural and design alternations. For instance, ancient pathways might need to be reimagined to ensure they are navigable for those with mobility impairments, without compromising the site's historical integrity (Muscarà & Sani, 2019).

Why it is important to make heritage sites accessible?
It is not possible to make heritage sites completely accessible until people with disabilities are accepted as contributing parts of a nation's past, present, and future (Sakarneh & Katanani, 2021). He further emphasized that full accessibility goes beyond adding ramps and grab bars; it necessitates a change in societal perspectives about the participation of PwDs in all aspects of life. Moreover, heritage does not exist in isolation rather it is defined by how people collectively acknowledge and assign value to it (Kosmas et al., 2020). This implies that heritage value is not universal but potentially varies depending on who accesses and assesses the site.

Moreover, Hooi & Yaacob (2019) found that visiting heritage sites helps PwDs feel part of larger social narratives and that they prefer historical places over other public spaces due to reduced feelings of isolation. For this reason, alterations to external features like pathways and entrances can enhance their experience. In contrast, Lynch & Proverbs (2020) discovered a startling

figure that 42% of disabled individuals have not encountered any arts event. This absence might result from barriers such as inaccessible facilities or inadequate communication strategies. Conversely, Muscarà & Sani (2019) argued that when it comes to heritage sites, the entire site does not necessarily require full accessibility. In this regard, Sakarneh & Katanani (2021) pointed out an example such as if a building can be accessed through both a staircase and a ramp, most of the users will use the ramp instead of the stairs, even if they do not have mobility issues. It demonstrates that what is necessary for a person with a disability can still prove useful and make situations easier for others.

**Challenges to Outdoor Accessibility in Heritage Sites**
Disabled travelers undeniably experience distinct travel challenges compared to non-disabled individuals. Sakarneh & Katanani (2021) found that the main challenges extend beyond architectural and infrastructural limitations. Hence, ignoring these barriers declines to address systemic inequity in travel and exploration. Similarly, even within the context of heritage sites, the travel challenges of disabled individuals remain distinct. This highlights a clear oversight in preserving history at the expense of inclusivity. Lynch & Proverbs (2020) pointed out that heritage sites tend to prioritize architectural authenticity and conservation over inclusivity. However, historical preservation should never come at the cost of excluding a significant portion of the population.

According to a report by Global Accessibility News (GAN), many archaeological sites are off-limits to disabled individuals due to the absence of wheelchair ramps and other health utilities. This implies that when planning heritage sites, the concept of accessibility, which fundamentally emphasizes inclusivity, is frequently neglected. On the other hand, Darcy et al. (2020) categorized barriers into three primary types: environmental, interactive, and intrinsic. This implies that the barriers identified not only interrupt travel experiences but also have broader implications for social equality and inclusion.

However, among all the challenges that PwDs encounter in heritage sites, the most prominent identified barrier is the physical one such as uneven surfaces, a lack of tactile guides, and inadequate pathways (Muscarà & Sani, 2019). Although physical obstructions can be removed or modified, reshaping societal attitudes is more profound. In addition, Foster & Nuttgens (2016) found that besides physical barriers, attitudinal challenges also significantly contribute to inaccessibility issues. This finding emphasizes a pressing need for society to address its deep-seated preferences. As suggested by Hooi & Yaacob (2019) and supported by UNESCAP (2016), the duality of the issue implies that a truly inclusive environment can only be achieved when society confronts and adjusts both its physical structures and discriminatory perspectives. In addition, Kosmas et al. (2020) stated that informational barriers, such as inadequate signage, and

untrained staff, obstruct full accessibility and understanding of a site's context. This implies that the barriers identified not only interrupt travel experiences but also have broader implications for social equality and inclusion.

Area of Study: Lalbagh Fort, Dhaka
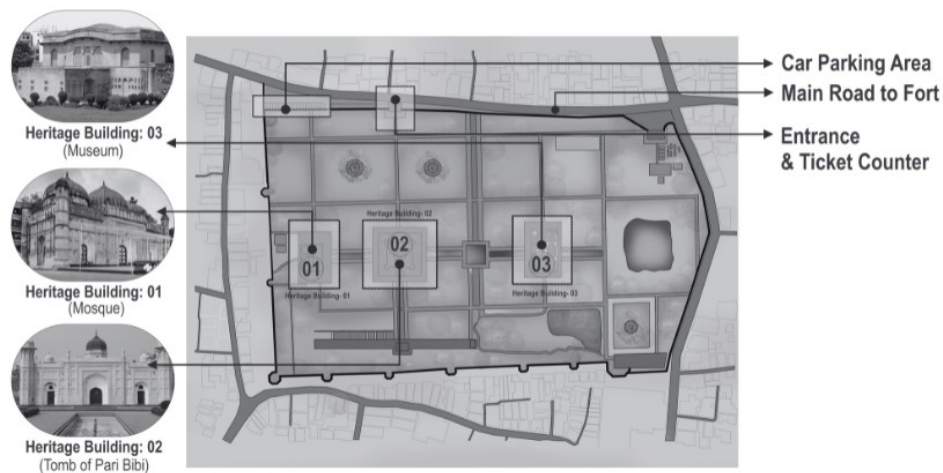
Figure 1: Site Plan of Lalbagh Fort
Source: Author

Lalbagh is a prominent tourist destination in Dhaka city, renowned for its cultural and historical significance in Bangladesh. Yet, the majestic architectural aesthetics do not diminish the need for adaptive measures to enhance outdoor accessibility. The Fort spans an area of 71,827 square meters. Within this expanse, the fort encompasses three heritage structures complemented by two gateways and remnants of the fortification wall.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate and critically analyze outdoor accessibility challenges at Lalbagh Fort for people with physical disabilities, focusing on identifying physical barriers impacting their visitor experience. As a result, a qualitative method was adopted for this study to identify the obstacles and evaluate the experiences of PwDs. For this study, data was collected through two sources.

1. The first source is the survey that was conducted among 31 disabled individuals from the site Lalbagh Fort. A semi-structured interview was conducted to gather detailed information about their experiences and challenges in accessing heritage sites like Lalbagh Fort, along with suggestions for improvements. The researcher

visited the site to observe and interview these individuals to capture their direct interactions with the site's facilities and services.

2. The second source is the access audit checklist which was designed based on the ADA Standards for Accessible Design (2010) and ADA Standards for Accessible Design (1991). This checklist, used to assess accessibility and investigate barriers at Lalbagh Fort, was also used by Yaacob & Hashim (2005) for evaluating heritage sites in Malaysia. The checklist identified accessibility issues using available documents and reports on the study areas.

Table 1: Accessible Checklist

	Access Feature
Public Transport	Transport Arrival and Departure (Bus stop)
Accessible Car Parking	a) Car Parking b) Passenger Loading Zone
Approach & Entry	a) Accessible footpath b) Ticket Counter
Entrance	Entrances and Doors
Accessible Toilet	Public Toilet
Wayfinding	Wayfinding or sign
Services	Café, Information centre
Public Transport	Transport Arrival and Departure (Bus stop)

Source: (Hooi & Yaacob, 2019)

Based on previous studies, eight core elements were identified to determine outdoor accessibility barriers at heritage sites. These were derived from checklists based on the ADA Standards for Accessible Design (2010 and 1991).

Table 2: Core elements of outdoor accessible provisions in heritage sites

Outdoor Accessibility Elements	Access Audit Inventory for Heritage sites
1. Accessible Footpath	i) Surface material, ii) Width of footpath, iii) Clear markings, iv) Obstruction
2. Entrances and exits	i) Total number of entrances/Exits, ii) Entrance width, iii) Presence of ramps, iv) Signage for accessibility features
3. Accessible Car Parking & Passenger Loading zone	i) Distance from the main entrance, ii) Number of accessible parking spots, iii) Width of parking spots, iv) Clear signage for parking & loading zone, v) Ease of transition from parking to footpath
4. Entry & Ticket Counter	i) Distance from the main Gate, ii) Counter Height, iii) Space for Queue, iv) Obstructions
5. Internal Pathways and Routes	i) Total Length of Internal Pathways, ii) Width Consistency & Turning Radius, iii) Elevation Changes & Ramp Inclinations,

Outdoor Accessibility Elements	Access Audit Inventory for Heritage sites
	iv) Obstructions
6. Seating and Rest Areas	i) Number of Seating Areas, ii) Types of Seating, iii) Distance Between Seating Areas, iv) Accessibility for Disabled
7. Wayfinding	i) Entrance Signage, ii) Directional Signage to Key Attractions, iii) Informational Signage, iv) Map Availability
8. Services	i) Information Desk, ii) Accessible Toilet, iii) Café

Source: (Hooi & Yaacob, 2019)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
Semi-Structured Interview Analysis: Disabled Visitor's Experience

a) Visitor's demography and patterns of visitation: According to the checklist, Lalbagh Fort attracts a diverse group of disabled visitors, including both male and female children. The fort has a significant proportion of local participants, with nearly 75% being locals. Approximately 450 to 500 individuals visit Lalbagh Fort daily, but only 4 to 5 people with disabilities visit every 3 to 4 days. This rate increases during national holidays. Most disabled visitors are locals who use the fort as a primary leisure and recreational space due to the lack of accessibility in more conventional places like parks, which are often overcrowded and incompatible with their needs.

b) Impact of socio-cultural factor: The access audit checklist revealed that at Lalbagh Fort, 31 disabled visitors consistently reported a strong sense of belonging and appreciation, enhancing their visit. This positive experience extended beyond physical features to include the way people interacted with them. Visitors felt that their disability did not define their experience; instead, they were treated as integral members of the visitor community, particularly by the staff at the entrance. One visitor emotionally stated, "Here, I am not just 'the disabled one' but a true part of the crowd, enjoying stories of our heritage." Another shared, "The way I'm welcomed and assisted here makes me feel valued; it's not just about being able to access everything physically but feeling genuinely included."

c) Visitor Satisfaction and Feedback: According to the report, disabled visitors generally appreciated the accessibility of pathways at Lalbagh Fort, and the efforts made to make the site navigable. However, despite these positive aspects, the absence of enough benches often made their visits less enjoyable and physically exhausting. A respondent mentioned, "The paths are easy to travel, but

the absence of enough benches and accessible restrooms sometimes cuts my visit short."

d) Impact of Accessibility on Repeat Visitation Patterns: The checklist revealed that accessibility measures significantly enhance the visitor experience at Lalbagh Fort, encouraging frequent repeat visits. Among the 31 disabled visitors surveyed, the majority expressed high satisfaction with the site's infrastructure. One respondent stated, "Lalbagh is a place I can easily navigate, and every visit feels welcoming here. Moving around freely without help makes me want to come back often."

e) Relationship with the Heritage site: At Lalbagh Fort, the analysis of 31 disabled participants revealed that the initial attraction for many visitors was the availability of open space for leisure and recreation. Of the 31 interviewees, 21 highlighted that their first visits were motivated by a desire to find an accessible place to breathe freely and enjoy the outdoors. For instance, one participant stated, "I first came here because it was one of the few places I could easily navigate in my wheelchair." However, repeated visits sparked curiosity, with many becoming increasingly interested in the historical structures and their significance. One visitor shared, "I wanted to know why this fort was built, who built it, and what happened here." This continued engagement reflects a growing emotional connection with the site, transitioning from practical needs to cultural exploration.

f) Experience with the Heritage site: According to the data, accessibility experiences for disabled visitors vary significantly between locals and non-locals, and by mode of transport at Lalbagh Fort. Locals often rely on family assistance due to poor roads and footpaths. One local visitor shared, "My brother helps me navigate the broken pavements, which are impossible alone in a wheelchair. It is exhausting for both of us before we even reach the fort." Non-local visitors faced challenges with public transportation, "The buses here are not equipped for wheelchairs, which makes me dependent on costly private transport to visit this place I love," a non-local visitor said. However, the data revealed that those who could afford private transportation found sufficient parking facilities. One visitor who drove to Lalbagh Fort expressed moderate satisfaction: "While the parking facilities were sufficient, the journey was still stressful. However, getting down at the entrance with the help of others made it manageable and slightly more pleasant."

Based on the data, the ticketing experience was poor for all respondents. A local visitor stated, "Reaching over a high counter to get a ticket is not just

inconvenient; it is humiliating." One non-local mentioned, "The ticket counter was highly inaccessible. It caught me off guard and started my visit on a sour note." As the data revealed, upon reaching the main entrance, the welcoming attitude of the staff somewhat alleviated the initial discomfort. Moreover, the internal pathways were appreciated for their width, but the lack of accessible resting spaces and toilets was a significant drawback. "I can navigate the paths but cannot rest when needed. Why there are no accessible benches or toilets?" asked another, highlighting a critical oversight. At the end of the survey, the data revealed that local visitors have developed a strong sense of adaptability, fostering place attachment to Lalbagh Fort, which acts as a social hub for leisure, recreation, and spiritual activities. In contrast, non-local visitors, lacking place attachment, face heightened challenges and connect more with the site's cultural and historical significance.
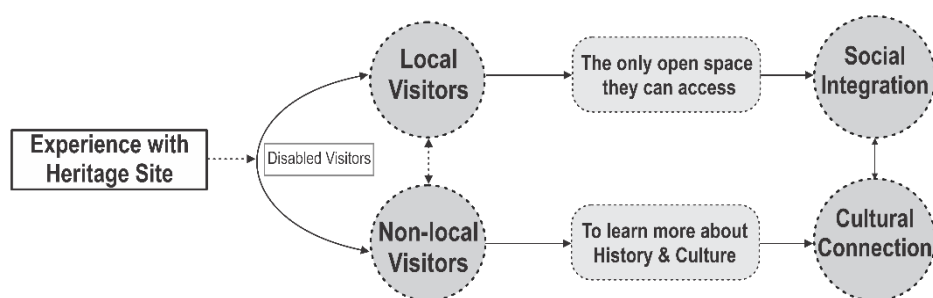
Figure 2: Developed narratives from the experiences of disabled visitors
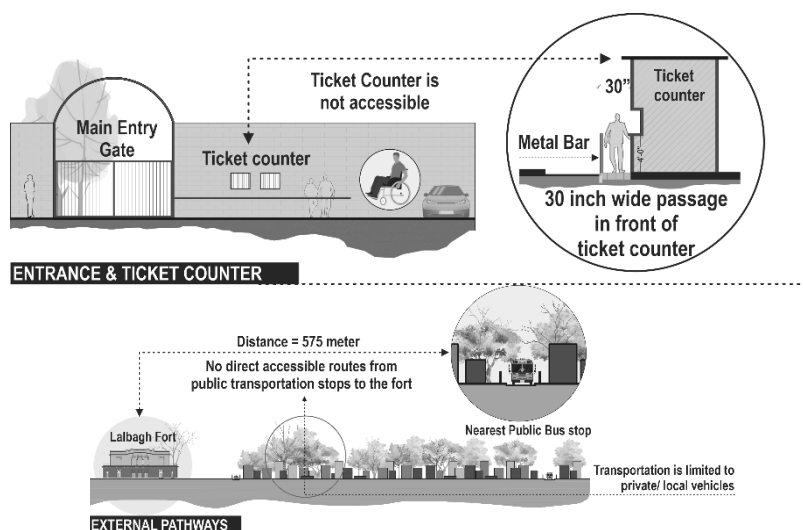at Lalbagh Fort
Source: Author

Table 3: Summary of participants' perspectives and experiences from Lalbagh Fort

| Narratives	Lalbagh Fort
Terminology outlined	Semi-Inclusive
	Multicultural
	Cohesion
	Interconnectedness
	Collectiveness
Opinions regarding experiences	Relatively accessible – 21
	Physically tiring - 19
	Enhanced social interaction - 23
	Cultural engagement despite barriers - 17
	Valued community space- 20

Source: Author

Findings From the Access Audit Checklist

A. External Pathway and Entrance: The nearest public transport stops lack direct routes and suitable pathways, making access difficult for disabled visitors. Additionally, the fort's main entrance and ticket counter are not wheelchair-friendly, lacking essential accessibility features, clear signage, and adequate space for independent use by persons with disabilities.


Figure 3: External Pathway and Entrance
Source: Author

B. Internal Pathways: The internal pathways at Lalbagh Fort have mixed accessibility results. While they are wide and connect main areas, the brick paving creates an uneven, challenging surface for wheelchair users. The lack of consistent smoothness and seating arrangements, along with difficult transitions between surfaces, further impacts accessibility.
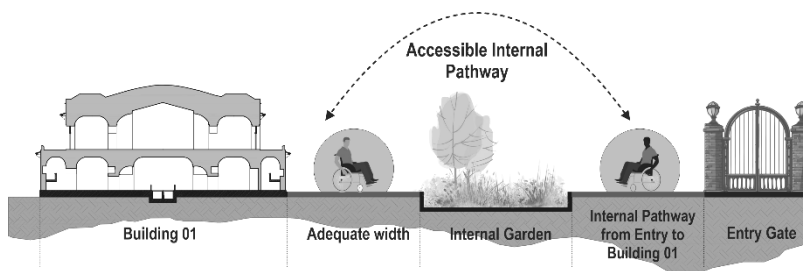
Figure 4: Internal Pathway
Source: Author

C. Accessible Car Parking: The parking space at Lalbagh Fort, encompassing 1027 square meters, is located near the entrance and ticket counter to accommodate all visitors, including Pwds. However, the availability of designated spaces for PwDs may fluctuate based on visitor volume and time. The passenger loading zone ensures convenient disembarkation for individuals with disabilities, while its proximity to the ticket counter facilitates ease of access.
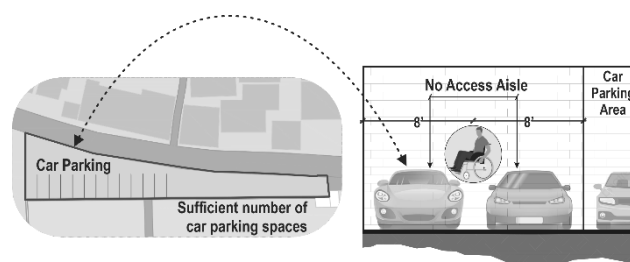
Figure 5: Accessible Car Parking
Source: Author

D. Accessible Toilet: Accessibility criteria were unmet, with only one male-only accessible toilet 75 meters from the entrance, requiring wheelchair assistance due to stairs. The toilet near Hammam Khana lacks proper dimensions, and signage, and has narrow doorways

E. Wayfinding: While the complex attracts a considerable number of visitors, it has been noted that there is a lack of wayfinding systems within the site. This poses a significant challenge for PwDs, as the absence of clear directions can make navigating the complex difficult.

F. Services (Café, Information Counter, seating areas): The present study reveals that the Fort does not have a cafe situated within its premises and instead has several cafes located near it. Additionally, the Fort also appears to lack an individual information counter, as the information services are likely provided at the ticket counter. Also. there are no seating or rest areas for disabled or elderly people within the fort

This summary of findings has been derived from detailed observations conducted using the access audit checklist at Lalbagh Fort. These observations provide a comprehensive assessment of the site's accessibility, identifying key areas where improvements are needed to ensure inclusivity for all visitors, particularly those with disabilities.

Table 4: Summary of Findings from Access Audit Checklist for Lalbagh Fort

Category	Evaluation Criteria	Critical Analysis and Details
1. External Pathways (Arriving at the site)	a) Nearby public transportation stops b) Accessible routes from public bus stops to the fort c) Dependence on private or local Transport d) Pathway stability and slip-resistance of walkways e) Shelter and seating at public transport stops	a) The nearest public transportation (Bus stoppage) is available within 575 meters of the Fort. b) There is no direct public transportation route to the Fort. c) Visitors need to rely on the private or local transport (rickshaw, CNG) d) There is no proper footpath from the bus stop. The pathway is extremely narrow, lacks curb ramps, and has improper grading e) There is no shelter and seating arrangement
2. Car Parking	a) Number of accessible parking spaces b) Accessible parking space width (8 feet) c) Parking signage	a) The number of accessible parking spaces meets the required standards. b) The accessible parking space meets the standard c) There is no signage for accessible car parking
3. Approach and Entrance	a) Main entrance accessibility b) Availability and usability of alternative entrances c) Signage at entrances d) Ticket counter	a) The collapsible gate at the entrance is not suitable for disabled individuals. b) The main entrance does not have any ramps or any steps, but the entry point is very narrow. c) There are no accessible alternative entrances. d) There is no clear signage at entrances to direct visitors to accessible routes. e) There is no accessible ticket counter
4. Accessible toilet	a) Accessibility of toilet facilities.	a) There is no accessible toilet available
5. Internal Pathway	a) Width and condition of internal pathways b) Level changes and obstructions	a) The internal walkway has sufficient width but lacks smooth, firm, slip-resistant surfaces. b) Internal pathways have abrupt level changes and obstructions. c) There is a lack of ramps or navigational aids.
6. Signage and Other Services	a) Visibility and information of signage b) Staff training on disability awareness c) Accessibility in cafes, shops, and service areas	a) The signage inside the site is inadequate in visibility and lacks critical information. b) The Staff members are trained to assist individuals with physical disabilities. c) The absence of amenities like cafes and souvenir shops reduces the overall visitor experience

Source: Author

CONCLUSION

This study focused on Lalbagh Fort, reveals a glaring inconsistency between the need for accessibility in heritage sites and the current reality faced by Pwds. The access audit checklists and e-surveys point out significant areas for improvement, such as inaccessible car parking, pathways, and toilets, which severely limit the visitation experience for physically challenged individuals. The findings show

that these challenges are not only physical barriers but also symbolic of the broader neglect of inclusivity within heritage conservation practices. Moreover, it highlighted that the traditional conservation paradigms in Bangladesh have neglected mainly accessibility considerations. This oversight not only disregards international norms, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but also limits the socio-cultural engagement opportunities for a considerable population segment. Moreover, the research highlights the urgent need for a reimagined approach towards heritage conservation that goes beyond mere compliance with regulations and adopts a more holistic view. This approach should harmoniously integrate accessibility with preservation efforts, ensuring that heritage sites like Lalbagh Fort are not just preserved in their historical authenticity but are also made available and accessible to all.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT / ETHICAL STATEMENT

All participants involved in this study provided informed consent for their interviews, all of them are adults, and all procedures were conducted following ethical standards.

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