

# Conservation Status of Panam City: Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

Panam Nagar is a little township in the vicinity of Sonargaon in Narayanganj district, Bangladesh. It was built by wealthy Hindu merchants in the 19th century. This historic area has become abandoned city space in the post-partition era, during 1947-1965. However, this coherent spaces of neighborhood still telling us about our past history, lifestyle and living pattern through its richly detailed of edifices. At present most of the structure and spaces in the buildings are becoming ruin and it is now concern for the necessary steps of measurements for the conservation of this historic built environment. However, it is not only about bringing back life in the architectural remains, for a true conservation it is also important to make the livelihood vibrant again, and for that an integrated plan is essential, where all the stakeholders can have scope for playing their role.

## Introduction

Panam City, or Panam Nagar as it is generally called, small township, full of heritage building situated in the Sonargaon thana of Narayanganj district. The heritage township is actually spread along either sides of a street, about half a km length. Existing buildings are predominantly colonial in flavour, but there are strong evidences that the locality had been inhabited since at least medieval era. The word Panam is derived from a Persian word “Panah+Am” meaning ‘shelter+common’ or ‘Commoner’s Shelter’ and the name itself points to the locality’s pre-colonial existence. The variety of buildings, their rich decorative features as well as the curious settlement pattern of the ‘city’ makes it an important heritage site that needs to be conserved. The process of conservation is ongoing, but it needs a detailed study of the site to determine the challenges and prospects of the process.

The street of Panam Nagar used to be approached from the main road by turning right from the main road and by crossing a small arched bridge. However, the bridge is not existent these days, instead the canals that surrounded the township is filled to connect the two roads. The Panam street runs from west to east with a northward curve and then straightening towards east. Two fairly wide canals run parallel to the street on its either side; they were joined by a small canal on the western side, over which was the now defunct entrance bridge built. The street ends up at the Panam Bazar. All the buildings are lined up on either side of this street. It is very likely that the colonial structures grew up on the sites of an earlier settlement of the Muslim period. The construction system and the use of *jafree* brick in some of the existing buildings clearly indicates to the Mughal technique, but the origin of the settlement may even be older as Sonargaon was a famous urban centre during the Sultanate era. The well-planned canal enclosure clearly shows that they served the multiple purposes of protection, transportation and sanitation.

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## Research Methodology

This particular study will be conducted thorough literature review as well as physical and cartographic survey and their analysis. The historical significance of the study area, the socio-economic structure of Panam remains the focus of the literature review. Available cartographic maps and the background history of Sonargaon-Panam as well as the history of economy and trade in Bengal need to be studied. The physical layout of the houses has already been studied to some extent, and can be derived from different cartographic references. . Both the Asiatic Society and the Department of Archaeology have surveyed the main street of Panam to understand the setup of the buildings. However, they needed to be updated through a new detailed survey.

## Objective of the Research

The process of conservation of the historic city of Panam Nagar has already been started to some extent. The Department of Archeology has initiated it back in 2007. The land has been sealed and documentation of the buildings has also done to some extent. However, conservation is a complex project that involves planning on various social, economic and financial levels. English Heritage's *Conservation Principles* defines it as 'the process of managing change to a significant place in its setting in ways that will best sustain its heritage values, while recognising opportunities to reveal or reinforce those values for present and future generations.'<sup>1</sup> The process can be defined in four broad thematic headings, such as<sup>2</sup>:

- a. Evidential, deriving from the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity
- b. Historical, deriving from the ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present
- c. Aesthetic, deriving from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place
- d. Communal, deriving from the meanings of a place for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.

In a developing country like Bangladesh, conservation of historic buildings, monuments and areas usually do not get priority. Often it is mainly limited to the preservation of buildings and monuments of historic importance. However, keeping the above mentioned criteria, conservation of an area of historical importance needs a detailed study.

As a growing place of tourist and business interest, Sonargaon is under pressure for growth of new and unplanned development. Therefore, it is necessary to take protective measures to preserve this historic city and its environment. The primary objective should be to stop further destruction; which has been addressed. But to stop the deterioration, the buildings need to be restored. Finding the challenges and prospects of this process is the main objective of this research.

## Rational of the Study

Apart from the government initiative, some other institutional and personal level efforts have also been made in this regard. The first major initiative was taken by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh back in 1997<sup>3</sup>. Sadia Akhter<sup>4</sup> and Pushpita Eshika<sup>5</sup> has done masters level thesis on the Architecture of Panam city. Qazi Azizul Mowla<sup>6</sup> has published a number of articles along with a few co-authors. Tariq Mahbub Khan<sup>7</sup> and G.M.A.

Balayet Hossain<sup>8</sup> has also done some researches on the issue. However, from the previous studies it is difficult to make a concrete plan on the conservation of the historic city. The Asiatic Society has identified three types of buildings in Panam, since then the others have been following the same typological study. But it is still unknown why there are so many types of buildings in such a small area. The functions of the indoor spaces, about the people who lived there, their social life, the purpose of the buildings and how these buildings served the inhabitants and the visitors are also still unknown. If these questions can be answered, the social and spatial dimensions of the house forms of Panam may be unveiled, which is an integral part of any detailed conservation plan.

### Historical Background

The locality that is called as Sonargaon is mentioned in a number of ancient and medieval sources. The pre-Muslim principality of Sonargaon was situated at the confluence of the Dhaleswari, Sitalakhya, the old Brahmaputra and Meghna and included Vikrampur with which communications were maintained across the river routes. Although no traces of the Muslim capital can be detected at present, archaeological evidences do suggest that a rich and extensive Muslim settlement may have grown over the entire Mograpara and Galdi region. There are quite a few edifices in and around including Fath Khan's mosque, ruined buildings and tombs of Dargabari, Azam Shah's tomb and the two mosques of Galdi. Usually a metropolitan city of medieval period like Gawr and Pandua, used to be built within a fortified space. But traces of fortifications are not found in Sonargaon, even though a large area consisting of a raised circular ground called 'damdama' or fort exists near Azam Shah's tomb.<sup>9</sup> James Wise thinks that the fort stood on the coast of Baidyer Bazar where the Meghna flows.<sup>10</sup> In 1345, when Ibn Battuta visited the place, the port was of considerable importance. He found gold and silver coins in circulation to facilitate exchange and also a Chinese junk ready to sail.<sup>11</sup>

Sonargaon developed into an independent kingdom under Isa Khan, chief of the Bara Bhuiyans and continued until the subjugation of his son, Musa Khan to the Mughals in 1611. During the Mughal period Sonargaon, as one of the Sorkars of the Bengal Suba, had 52 mahals, in addition to the divisions and towns of Isa Khan's kingdom. But the name Panam is not shown in the Mughal documents. Even the city of Sonargaon itself became an insignificant place as Dhaka flourished as the Mughal capital. In Major Rennells 'Memoir' published in 1785, Sonargaon is said to have dwindled to a village. When Buchanan-Hamilton visited the area in 1809, his informants could not give him any idea about its exact location.<sup>12</sup> The extant sites of archaeological interest in and around Sonargaon may, for the sake convenience, be divided into three groups on the basis of their location.<sup>13</sup> They are, 'Northern Group', 'Southern Group' and 'Bandar Group'. Panam is situated in the northern group, which has much evidence of having muslim industry in that area including a large pond in the close vicinity of Panam, named Khashnagar Dighi. The Khashnagar Dighi, a large tank of around 365 × 182.5m, is traditionally known to be favorite to the Muslim weavers, as its water made their Muslims remarkably white.<sup>14</sup>

The Panam township grew in the nineteenth century and continued to flourish until the end of the second World War. At present, it looks like an empty township deserted by the original inhabitants, however from the environmental surroundings suggests the vibration of a life primarily based on trade and commerce. A group of talukdars, who came into being from among the traders in the nineteenth century, chose this place as their residence and used to pay the revenue direct to the Dhaka treasury. Apart from the talukdars, the majority of the people were most probably traders and money-changers.

The monuments of Panam are the only link to this story, but unfortunately, most the historical monuments at Panam have reached a state of decay.

### The Site and the Monuments

As already mentioned, Panam Nagar is spread along a narrow serpentine street. At present, there are 52 buildings surviving on either side of the road, 31 on the northern side and 21 on the south.



Fig. 1: Panam Nagar street plan



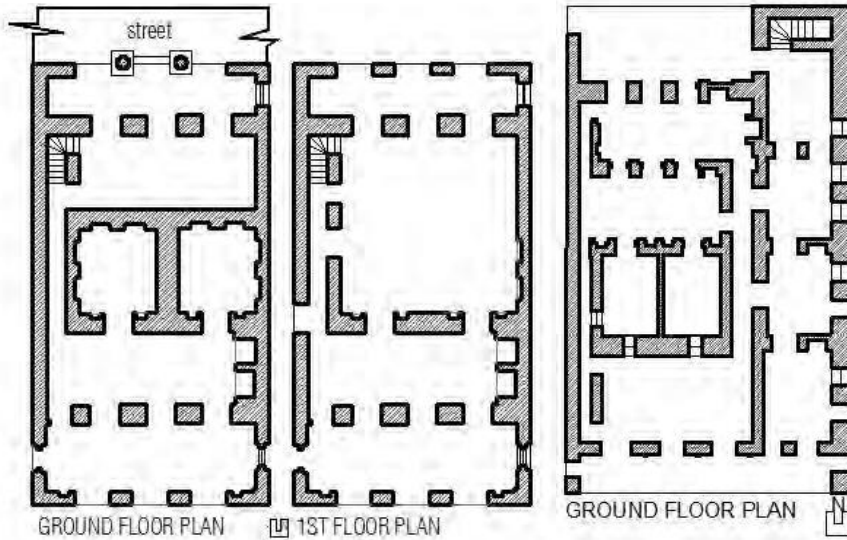
Fig. 2: Panam Nagar in Google maps.

The buildings are mostly rectangular in shape. Average facade width varies between 6 to 9 meters, the depth varies but usually is greater than the frontal length. Facades of all buildings are axially balanced with three, five, seven and nine openings. However, this balance does not exist in the internal organization of spaces. Openings are made with various kinds of arches with pilasters in between. All the pilasters have defined base, shaft and capital. The floor levels are expressed externally with projected cornice. Parapets followed a uniform design and heights with vertical slit openings, rounded at the top and bottom. Raised plinth and veranda created the transition space between the inner house and the street.

Previous studies have identified many varieties in building type; however four major varieties can be cited here<sup>15</sup>:

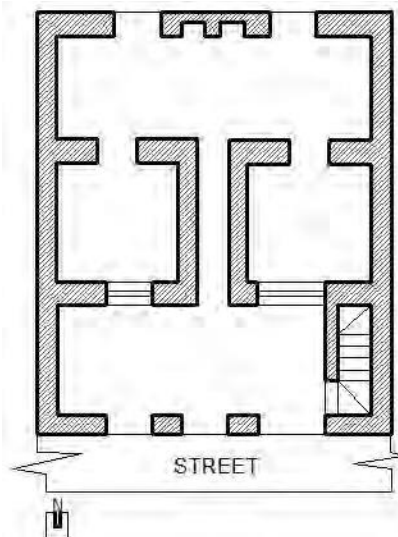
1. Central Hall type
2. Central Courtyard type
3. Consolidated type
4. Compartment type

Majority of the buildings are of the consolidated type, without having any inner court or hall. These buildings are designed with either an entrance portal or a veranda or a high plinth as transition space from street to inner house. There is no uniformity in the organisation of inner cells and rooms, but formal balance has been maintained in all the front facades. Single storied buildings in Panam mostly belong to this typology, however the type is used in double story buildings as well.



**Fig. 3:** Consolidated type: a) Plan of Building no-2 (Double Story) and b) Plan of Building no-37 (Single Story) (Source: Dept. of Archaeology)

The single compartment houses are without articulation of interior spaces. But formal balance have been maintained in the outer facade to relate the buildings with the setting. There are 5 such small buildings.



**Fig. 4:** Compartment type type : Plan of Building no-23, (Source: Dept. of Archeology)

Deriving from traditional rural house form, designed around a courtyard, the central courtyard type of buildings are essentially enclosed. The courtyards are paved and open to sky. The enclosing walls around the courtyard are delineated with arched openings and pilasters having ornamentation in base, shaft, capital, cornice and parapet. The design of street facade and courtyard facades are almost look-alike.

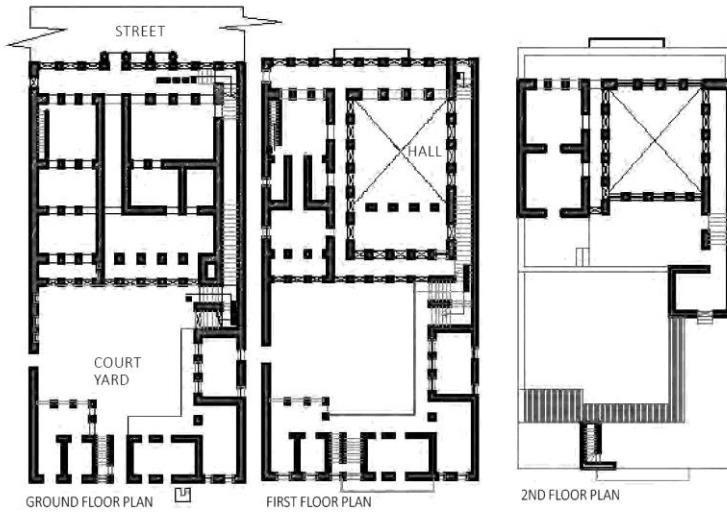


Fig. 5: Courtyard type : Plan of Building no-3, (Source: Dept. of Archeology)

However the most fascinating features are found in the central hall type buildings. They are usually double-storied and the plan is centred around a hall, either in the ground floor and open to galleries on the upper floor, or in the upper floor, surrounded like the courtyard type. Even though the rich decorations on the walls, capitals and in the cast-iron railings and grills are inspired by British designs, the hall does not seem to be derived from any European design. Rather, it evolved from the indigenous tradition of house planning around a courtyard.<sup>16</sup>

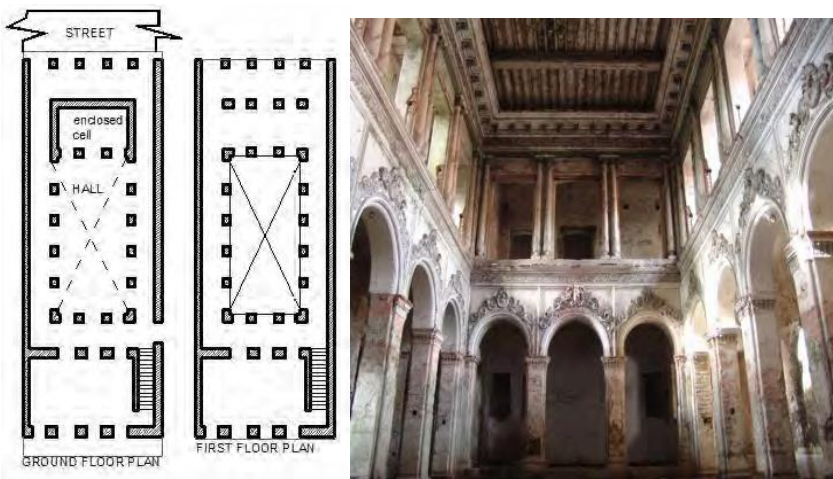


Fig. 6: Central Hall Type, a) Ground Plan of building no. 1 (Source Dept of Archaeology) and b) Photographic view

### **Challenges of Conservation**

One of the major constraints in the conservation of this tiny but important township is the dispute regarding ownership of the properties. As mentioned earlier, Panam appears to have been founded by the affluent merchant community during the nineteenth century. The inhabitants were mostly Hindu, and of business class with some households engaged in craftsmanship. The city was vibrant until 1947, when the partition of the British India created two new states, India and Pakistan based on religious majority. It created a succession of communal unrest in both East and West Bengal, and in the consequence, the Sahas and Poddars abandoned Panam Nagar, feeling insecure. Majority of them left for India. A few families stayed in Panam Nagar till the 1964 riot and the 1965 Indo-Pak war, but in the aftermath of that battle, rest of them also decided to migrate. With their departure the whole town was nearly abandoned. In 1965, those properties were declared as 'Enemy Property'. From then the township is theoretically owned by the Government. However, most of the buildings were re-occupied by local Muslims gradually. The government had leased out some of the 52 buildings, but the rest were occupied illegally by squatters and encroachers. The inhabitants claimed that the buildings were their own property, which were bought by their families from the Hindu owners during the riots of 1964. After a long hustle and tussle, the government had managed to take-over the control over the 52 buildings with the backing of army. Since then, the Department of Archaeology has been documenting the buildings and the surroundings. However, the action itself has created a new dilemma as the evacuation process has completed a new phase of social displacement. While there were among 250 inhabitants in the vicinity in 2003<sup>17</sup>, it is now a town without inhabitants. The biggest question now is how can these abandoned buildings be made active? All the concentration has so far been on the structural conservation. Beginning with the Asiatic Society's study in 1997 until the recent documentations done by the DoA has made significant progress in this regard. On the basis of those studies, a reconstruction process can be planned in near future. However, the question remains, who will be the users and the stakeholders of this reconstructed site? The quality of spaces and the assemblage of large number of historic buildings in Panam Nagar area make it a perfect contender for area conservation. But any such attempt can only be successful when the local people actively participate in the process. As it is impractical because the local people have marked themselves as the enemy of the process and have already been evacuated, a consolidated plan should be created keeping these questions in mind.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Conservation process for a heritage area consists of many steps like identification, protection, documentation, adaptive re-use and monitoring. Regarding the conservation of Panam City, the most important part, i.e. the documentation process has already been done to some extent. The process of identifying the spatial spaces and their co-relations with the building types and the purpose of the buildings is also going on through different institutional and personal initiatives. However, it needs an integrated plan to revive the vibrant city space with incorporating the roll of all stakeholders. Otherwise, it will remain socially displaced and disintegrated.

## Notes & References

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