



Architecture of Panam Nagar

Visual poetics of memory

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THERE is a saying that one should move two steps backward in order to go one step forward. This is usually referred to the question of continuity of the culture. Since the present time is the extension of the past a good knowledge of the history and memory can give us a clear understanding of what we are and what we can do in contemporary world. In this way the present is also transmitted to the future with all its wisdom filtered through time. And a rich culture is formed linking its future with the past. Thus culture becomes a continuous process and grows on its own roots. Significant buildings and cities of the past not only provide us with concrete visual document of our history and nature but also form the very basis of our culture on which we are to build. This is why one cannot allow buildings and cities of historical significance to crumble into oblivion.

Panam Nagar today in half ruins was once a small, beautiful and vibrant township settlement of Hindu merchants about 5 km west of Narayanganj city developed on both sides of a single street during the 19th century and flourished until the end of the Second World War. The street about 5m wide and 600m long, slightly undulated and irregular extends from the west towards east and provides unexpected and changing vistas as one moves along the street. There are now about 52 houses, one to three storeys high in dilapidated and precarious conditions. During the partition of 1947, Panam seems to

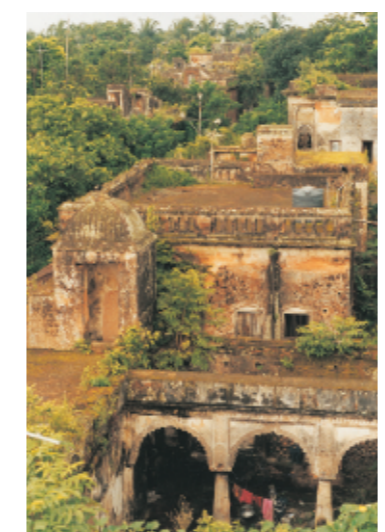
be abandoned by its affluent owners and thus fallen into the hands of their poor relatives and unauthorized occupants. Due to the lack of incentives and financial capability of the new occupants the buildings received no attention at all. Added to this was vandalism and aggression of the hot-humid tropical climate that together has transformed this mini-city into a tragic site of almost ruins.

As architecture mirrors society, even in its present adverse state one can easily understand and feel the spirit of the community and the culture. Panam once belonged to. The compactness of the detached and attached buildings with or without courtyard, and double storey halls and the making of the street as the spine clearly express the attitude, living pattern and the taste of the wealthy marchants who once lived in Panam Nagar. Panam used to take a festive look particularly in each autumn to celebrate Durga Puja when all the marchants, most of whom remained otherwise away, would gather at Panam.

Houses in Panam are usually designed symmetrically with the entrance as the central focus of the facade composition. Colonnaded arches flanked on both sides of the entry create the visual order and harmony. Entrances are usually designed with columns having Corinthian capitals, entablature, semi-circular arches and various decorative elements. Although the ornamentation of these buildings is of hybrid nature evolved from the juxtaposition of Mughal, Colonial,

Hindu and other exotic motifs, does not pose to be busy or excessive because of the introduction of flat plastered surfaces in between as visual relief.

In the absence of more permanent material like stone, like in most of the historical buildings of Bangladesh, brick is the main construction material of Panam.

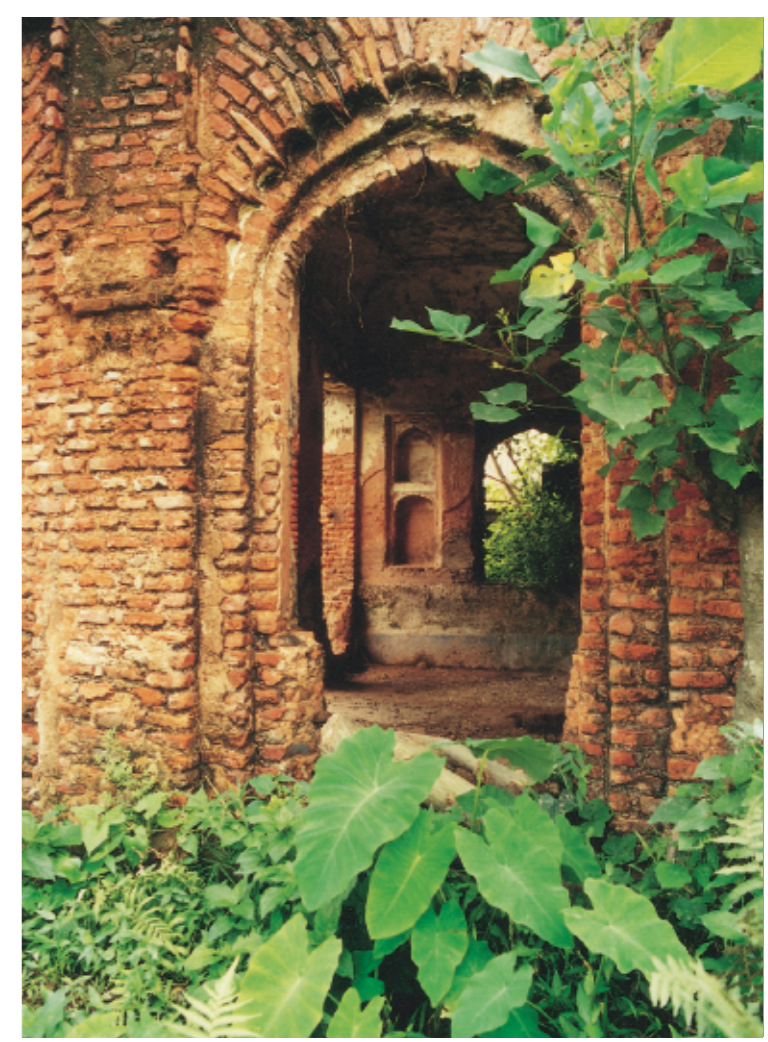


Brick walls and pillars bear the structural load. Traditionally, brick is not left exposed in Bengal. Bricks are covered with terracotta plaques, plastered with lime concrete or covered with broken ceramic glazed tiles. Brick wall surfaces both insides along with pillars and arches at Panam are all covered with lime concrete plaster with intricate floral motifs. In a few buildings the shafts of columns are

covered with broken colorful ceramic glazed tiles in various patterns and decorative motifs. The semicircular areas of the arched openings are filled with floral grilles made of cast iron, wood or lime concrete. Cast iron brackets are also used in places to hold the balconies in place along the street facade.

The unique quality of the architecture of Panam is its consistent use of the vocabulary throughout its development. The visual unity of the buildings is striking and the variations are its obvious richness. Although there are many contemporary colonial buildings of superior quality in the old part of Dhaka and in other parts of the country, particularly the Jamindar houses, no where in Bangladesh so many Colonial buildings have been built with such strength and character. The buildings of Panam are compact, urbanistically conceived and exquisitely arranged to capture the aura of particular period of time of our history. The building to building proportion and the proportion of the parts within a building, the entry way, colonnade, projected cornices, the parapets, the decorative elements and the overall color scheme of the built forms are so fascinatingly executed that Panam is transformed in to an event in itself.

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building where the decorative plasters have been peeled off from the brick walls is covered with plain cement plaster without any regard for the original form and shape in such a manner that the building is defaced beyond recognition. Many of the cast iron brackets, lamp fixtures and decorative glazed tiles, which are still visible, are missing every day as time passes away.

History of Bangladesh can be more or less conjured up to 4000 years from now to the time of the advent of the Aryans in the Sub-continent. But it is from the time of Asoka that the written history is available. The archaeological finds of Mahasthangarh in Bogra stand on this account. Archaeological finds of Paharpur and Mainamati

tell us of the great Palas of 8th 12th century. We have a number of edifices still standing on their feet from the Sultanate, Mughal and Colonial periods. These are all part of our own history and culture. But where most of these archaeological find and edifices are of religious nature Panam presents itself with the secular nature of our life and culture. A thoughtful conservation of this so long neglected settlement is therefore of greater importance to us all.

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