

DHAKA MONDAY NOVEMBER 10, 2003



Sonargaon

An Admixture of Cultural Heritages

BANGLADESH inherits a rich architectural heritage - reminiscences of the past great civilisation of the region. Ancient edifices found in a specific region brings to the limelight the history of specific periods like Mahastan & Paharpur of Buddhist architecture, Bagerhat of Khan Jahan Ali and Gaur of Sultanate etc. But Sonargaon, is a unique example of early Islamic or Sultanate, of Mughal and of Colonial architectural epoch -- an admixture of various cultural heritages.

Historical background: Sonargaon literally meaning 'golden village', was the capital of the province Bang (eastern Bengal). In 1338 Fakhr al-Din-Mubarak seized the provincial government of Sonargaon. He was the first Sultan of Bengal. In 1352 the Sultan of Gaur (Ilyas Shah) defeated him. From then Sonargaon formed a part of the independent Kingdom of united Bengal until the advent of the

Mughal (1575). In the reign of Akbar, this was the chief city of Isa Khan, who maintained his independence for several years. After Isa Khan's death it became a part of the Great Mughal Empire.

Sonargaon's decline started with the establishment of the Mughal capital in Dhaka in 1608. With the conquest of the kingdom of Isa Khan by the forces of Islam Khan in 1611, it became one of the sarkers of the Bengal *subah* losing its former prestige. The history of Sonargaon for the next 200 years, until the establishment of the commercial cum residential belt of East India Company in Panam, still remains unknown. This colonial city Panam came into being in the 19th century and flourished till the end of the Second World War.

Geographical background: According to the world map "Theatrum Orbis Terrarum" vol. II (fig. 1) published in 1650 AD from Amsterdam, (H Blockmann,

Contributions to the History and Geography of Bengal, Calcutta, 1968) Sonargaon was a port city by the Bay of Bengal. Ibn Batuta described, "it was a very important port city where merchant-mariners of China and Java came with their merchant ships for trade" (M I Abdullah, *Ibn Batuta's account of Bengal*, tr. by Harinath De, Calcutta 1978, p. 78). Sonargaon, the medieval capital of eastern Bengal is currently the name of an administrative *Upazilla* in the district of Narayanganj. It is situated about 21 km south-east of Dhaka city and about 5 km west of Narayanganj town. The territory of Sonargaon that was developed during the early Islamic period cannot be defined. N K Bhattacharya estimated the total area of Sonargaon to be about 24 sq. miles. (N K Bhattacharya, *Bengal Chief's Struggle, Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. XXXV, Calcutta 1977, pp. 24). What remains now of a few

medieval buildings, scattered in this region exists in the villages of Aminpur, Dulalpur, Goadi, Mograpara, Sadipur and Muazzampur etc. of the *Upazilla* Sonargaon and Bandar. The Dhaka Chittagong highway runs through this upazilla. This highway looks like the dividing line between the medieval Sonargaon city and colonial Panam city (fig. 2). The present geographical situation of the *Upazilla* Sonargaon at the junction of the river Meghna and Brahmaputra made it one of the most flourishing centers of trade and commerce.

Socio-economical background: Sonargaon and its neighbourhood were famous from the early days for manufacturing and exporting *Muslin*, one of the finest cotton fabrics in the world. In reality the decay of cotton manufacture began when the English East India Company adopted a calculated policy of destroying the artisans and the

industrial institutions of Bengal with a view to accelerating the progress of the Industrial Revolution in England in the later part of the eighteenth century. From that time the economy of Sonargaon depended upon agricultural products like betel-leaf (*pan*) and mango (*am*). According to Cunningham "there are other signs of an old city in the numerous *pan* or betel gardens and the great numbers of *am* or mango trees. The best kind of *pan* or betel is called *Kafuria pan*, from its faint scent of camphor. It is said to be in great demand in Lucknow. The mangoes are still famous, the best kinds being known as *Shahipasad* or the king's favourite and *senduria* or the red mango." (A Cunningham, *Report of a Tour in Bihar and Bengal* in 1879-80, Calcutta 1882, p. 135)

Architecture: The locals consider the village Mograpara the place to have been the site of

the capital city of Sonargaon. We are unable to trace any building in Sonargaon, which could be identified as residential of either the Sultanate or the Mughal period associated with the name of the famous Isa Khan, chief of the Baro Bhuiya.

Sonargaon came into prominence not only as a seat of government or a business center, but also as a center of saints and missionaries. They settled in Sonargaon and its neighbourhoods and built mosques of which only a few structures remain. Of the nineteen surviving mosques, eight belonged to the early Islamic period dating from the 15th & 16th centuries and the rest to the Mughal period from the 17th & 18th. The mosque at Bander (1481-82) was built by Baba Salih, at Goadi (1519) (fig. 3) by Mulla Hijib'r Akbar Khan and the mosque at Muazzampur (1432-36) by Firuz Khan. (Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, *The Choto Sona*

Mosque in Gaur: An Example of the Early Islamic Architecture of Bengal, Karlsruhe-Germany 1997, pp. 114-119) are some examples of early Islamic period. Panch Pir mosque at Mograpara (late 17th cent.), (fig. 4) mosque at Dulalpur and Abdul Hamid's mosque at Goadi (1705) are some examples of Mughal mosques. Most of these mosques have square shaped single prayer rooms with turrets at each outside corners. The mosques of Khan Jahan Ali at Bagerhat (fig. 5) might have provided precedence for such adaptations of the square shaped single room with other typical features like curved cornice, terracotta ornamentation etc. The innumerable inscriptions found here indicate that many tombs were built in the Islamic period. The tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Muhammad Azam Shah (1388-1410) at Mograpara is believed to be the earliest Muslim monument of present Bangladesh. It should be

mentioned that tourists or visitors are being frequently misinformed by some locals that the present Panam city is the ruin of the old capital of Isa Khan of the 16th century.

Panam city did not have a single Muslim house in the colonial period. The surviving buildings originally belonged to Hindu *talukdars*, *shahas* and *poddars*. The majority of the population was wealthy merchants who used to control the export of *Pan* & *Am*, made considerably large purchases in Dhaka and Calcutta and sold commodities in the villages around. Most of these merchants were absentee landlords who could be found here only in the autumn to celebrate the *Durga-puja* festival.

Story: DR. ABU SAYEED M AHMED
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE
THE UNIVERSITY OF ASIA PACIFIC
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

