

## **REVITALIZATION OF PANAM NAGAR: SOCIAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE MINORITY ISSUE**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is based on the historical evidence of the socio-political attitude towards the minority community, especially the critical issue of the Vested Property Act in Bangladesh and its impact on the social discontinuity which raises the challenge of revitalization of the historic town of Panam Nagar. Property ownership has been a contentious issue since the 1965 Indo-Pak war when many Hindus lost land holdings due to unequal application of the law. This paper analyzes the process of social displacement and loss of traditional lifestyle to emphasize that the preservation of urban heritage is not only preserving a few historic buildings but rather the urban fabric and the city life as a whole.

**KEYWORDS:** Socio-political condition, minority issue, social displacement, urban revitalization

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary urban design is about creating a sense of place and place making. Spaces become places through their use by people [1]. Much of the unique character of historic cities comes from the details of their urban fabric - pattern of land use, variety of architectural styles, and local activities, because they are the sum of many interconnected parts. Only preserving the historic towns without the presence of the original inhabitants, the areas will definitely lose their traditional environment and identity.

Panam Nagar, a distinctive example of early urban settlement of Bengal, is located near Sonargaon, one of the prosperous capital cities in Mediaeval Bengal. This town was initially constructed by the Hindu merchants towards the end of the 19th century with richly detailed buildings which tell us about the life and culture of our past. After the Partition of Bengal in 1947 and during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, most of the owners, the minority Hindus, shifted to West Bengal or other parts of India. In 1965, the Government passed an Order by which the property of those minorities was declared 'Enemy Property'. From then the township is owned by the Government. In March 2003, Panam Nagar area was marked for protection and conservation under the Antiquities Ordinance of 1968. Most of the area was occupied by lease holders, few in numbers and largely by illegal residents who had been living there for nearly 40 years and refuse to give their possession to the government. In the year 2006, the army backed government took control over this area and the second phase of social displacement took place. This paper is focused on the critical issue of the social displacement of this area and the present challenges of revitalization.

### **2 THE LEGACY OF VESTED PROPERTY ACT**

The Vested Property Act was a controversial law, which has long been criticized in Bangladesh and abroad as a major violation of the rights of citizens, especially minorities, allowed the Government to confiscate property from individuals it deemed as an enemy of the state. It represents a major source of insecurity and of human rights violation against the Hindu community. The vested property was known in Pakistan as 'enemy property' after the 1965 Indo-Pak war. On 6 September 1965, Pakistan proclaimed a state of emergency under the Defence of Pakistan Ordinance at the outbreak of war with India. Central Government of Pakistan promulgated on the same day the Defence of Pakistan Rules. Under the rules, the Governor of East Pakistan passed an Order regarding enemy property by which the property of the minorities was declared "Enemy Property" [2]. This order was directed against the Hindu minority, who had temporarily fled to India in fear of their lives, and was used as an instrument for appropriating land belonging to those Hindus accused of supporting India. The state was enabled to take their property into

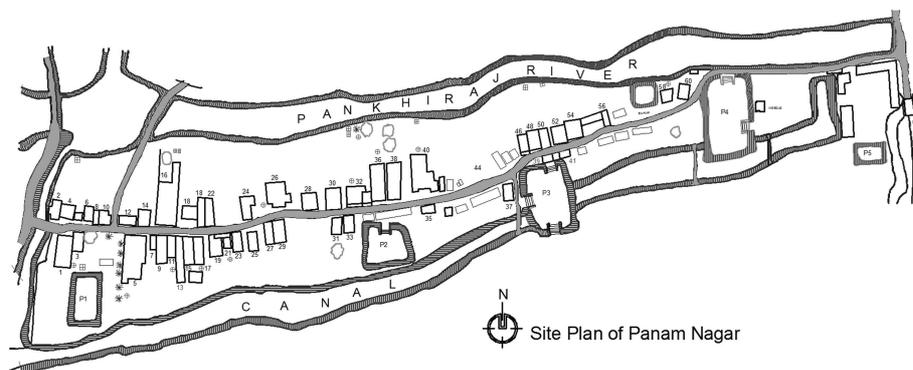
custody, with the rationale that a Hindu who went to India was an enemy. With the emergence of Bangladesh, the law relating to the administration of Enemy Property remained in force by virtue of the Laws Continuance Enforcement Order 1971. Since then the issue has been rolling with ordinances, amendments, circulars, and so on. Though renamed as the Vested Property Act in 1974, the law retained the fundamental ability to deprive a Bangladeshi citizen of his/her property simply by declaration of that person as an enemy of the state. Leaving the country through abandonment was cited as the most common reason for this, and it was frequently the case that Hindu families who had one or several members leaving the country for economic as well as political reasons, had their entire property confiscated due to labeling as enemy.

This law was the culmination of several successive discriminatory laws against non-Muslims passed while Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. Chronologically the major Acts and laws of this law are:

- The East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act (XIII of 1948)
- The Defence of Pakistan Ordinance (No. XXIII of 6 September, 1965)
- The Defence of Pakistan Rules of 1965
- The Enemy Property (Custody and Registration) Order of 1965
- The East Pakistan Enemy Property (Lands and Buildings Administration and Disposal) Order of 1966
- Bangladesh (Vesting of Property and Assets) President's (Order No. 29 of 1972)
- The Vested and Non-Resident Property (Administration) Act (XLVI of 1974)

It should be mentioned here that the operation of the Vested Property Law has continued to disturb the normal life of the people belonging to the religious minorities of Bangladesh. Land grabbers gobbled up more than two thirds of vested property as the government lost control over the lands as the custodian and its long-line dithering blocked anti-encroachment efforts. Prof. Barkat points out that 53% of the family displacement and 74% of the land grabbing occurred before the country's independence in 1971, after the then Pakistan government, following the India-Pakistan War in 1965, introduced the Enemy Property Order [3]. During Bangladesh's first three decades of independence many politicians made empty promises to repeal the act but no tangible action had been taken. Finally in 2001, they succeeded in a drive to repeal the act. The Vested Properties Return Act (2001) was implemented in an effort to make amends for the confiscated property. However, little progress has been made in returning or compensating lost property yet.

### 3 SOCIAL DISPLACEMENT IN PANAM NAGAR



**Figure 1** Site plan of Panam Nagar, Sonargaon.



**Figure 2(a)** Panam Street in 2004, **2(b)** canal, **2(c)** structural condition in 2004, **2(d)** Interior of one building.

### 3.1 Background of Panam Nagar

Panam Nagar is located to the north of Sonargaon, the capital of the independent Sultanate of Bengal around the 13th century AD, about 27 km. east from Dhaka. By virtue of its location on the confluence of three major rivers, Sonargaon acquired great importance as an inland port, connecting ancient Bengal with Middle East and Far Eastern countries. With the Muslim rule in the 13th century, it flourished as the capital of Bengal till 1608, when Dhaka superseded it. Although its political importance was diminished, it remained a center of commerce and trade for a long time. Panam Nagar came into prominence in the later part of 19th and early 20th century, when a cloth trading centre grew up under the influential Landlords. The cloth merchants came from various places such as Kolkata, Patna or Mumbai. These wealthy Hindu merchants, titled Sahas and Poddars, built their exquisite residences in a beautiful setting in Panam Nagar [4].

### 3.2 Physical and social characteristics

The residents of Panam Nagar were protected by two artificial moats on the north and south, run parallel to the central street on its either side [Fig. 1 & Fig. 2(b)]. Originally there were three bridges with gates secured at night for protection. The residences are close to each other with the central street being the major access and the canals serving as the secondary or service access. The street is about 5 meters wide and 600 meters in length, with the urban street front houses, around 52 in number, mostly 2 storied and made of small bricks, lined up on the either side [Fig. 2(a)]. The architectural styles reflect the socio-economic condition and lifestyle of the merchants and the elite class in the British colonial period.

As mentioned earlier, Panam appears to have been founded by the affluent Hindu community, which demonstrates one of the best examples of community living and early urban settlements during the 19th century. The inhabitants were mostly of business class with some households engaged in craftsmanship. It had a very cohesive society participating in similar trade and religion evident in shared use of backyard facilities. The residences, most of them having a street side verandah on ground level, illustrate a very close relationship with the street life. They often enjoyed religious and other celebrations and musical festivals. People from nearby villages were invited to come and enjoy the celebrations and rituals.



**Figure 3(a)** Unauthorized addition in Panam, **3(b) & (c)** the graffiti on buildings echoed the sentiment of inhabitants in 2004, **3(d)** a private Hindu temple on top of a residence.

### 3.3 Social displacement in Panam Nagar

In Panam Nagar, the Hindu merchants lived a vibrant life until 1947, when the partition of the Sub-continent into India and Pakistan created a succession of communal unrest in both East and West Bengal. The Sahas and Poddars abandoned the town feeling insecure, and majority of them left for India. A few families stayed in Panam Nagar till the 1964 riot and the 1965 Indo-Pak war, and then most of them migrated to West Bengal or other parts of India. With their departure the whole town was nearly abandoned. In 1965, those properties were declared as 'Enemy Property'. From then the township is owned by the Government.

For quite sometime, it remained untenanted but later reoccupied by local Muslims illegally as squatters and encroachers. Among the 52 buildings, government leased some out for 99 years, but some of the inhabitants claimed that the buildings were their own property, and bought by their families from the Hindu owners during the riots of 1964. In the year 2003, there were about two hundred and fifty people in Panam Nagar. Due to lack of proper maintenance along with the degradation caused by natural weathering and unplanned modification, many of the buildings face serious threat of collapse [Fig. 2(c)]. In the face of continued demands from archaeologists, architects and cultural activists, the government invoked the Antiquities Act 1968 to declare the town, mostly vested property on more than 10 acres of land, as a

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protected site in March 2003. After the declaration, the residents had initiated a campaign denouncing the government drive for the eviction. They argued that they had been living there for the last 40 years, they could not leave it for the sake of heritage, and the government should permanently allocate those houses to them. The graffiti on most buildings of that time echoed the same sentiment. They said that they would rather sacrifice their lives, not Panam; they had the right to live there. [Fig. 3(a) & (b)]. However, in 2006, the army backed government took control over this area and the second phase of social displacement took place.

#### **4 REVITALIZATION ATTEMPT AND CHALLENGES**

Now Panam, a town without inhabitants, has raised many questions. How can we use these abandoned buildings and make them active? Who will be the users and the stakeholders for the revitalization process? A successful protection plan for this city must manifest physical, economic and social revitalization. But what should we do for the social revitalization of this area?

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. The local and international heritage conservation group argued that the structures in the former capital would be totally ruined and lost to posterity unless preservation measures were taken immediately. Threats to the site include vandalism, unauthorized occupation, illegal development, poor maintenance, flooding and vulnerability to earthquakes [Fig. 3(a)]. A lack of sufficient funding has led to a crisis in efforts to preserve the structures of this area. In 2006, with the help of some foreign donors, renovation and restoration of these buildings began by the Department of Archaeology without having any future plan for particular use of this potential area. Part of the project plan of two years had already been carried out.

The conservation attempt can only be successful when the local people actively participate in the process. Here the participation of the local community is impracticable because they are not living here anymore. Nowadays, Living in the old town has gradually become more and more popular within the newly affluent higher middle class as a symbol of prejudice. If we go back to history, we can find that previously this place was a residential area for the affluent class of that time. We may consider this as a revival of history. But this new user group desires contemporary facilities and which may hamper the strong character and unique experiences of this area. Through a comprehensive revitalization of the social life and activities; with active participation of the new community, a sense of pride can be established here. Again, there are still many physical features and structures which were used for Hindu religious and other celebrations [Fig. 3(d)]. To provide new use to those structures will be challenging. Thus, by the changing social perspective and present needs, this traditional quarter is confronting adversity for its authentic existence.

#### **5 CONCLUSION**

The deterioration of a historical town is perceived differently by a variety of individuals and groups. Some of them may consider the decay to be nothing extraordinary - just a part of life. For others, however, the deterioration creates a whole series of problems, and they therefore will seek relief in a variety of ways, whether it is rehabilitation, conservation, or clearance and building of a modern city center. The perception of the value of such heritage is subject to drastic changes over the years, depending on education, awareness, fashion and external influences. The minorities, both in religious and economic terms, are having been pushed out at the expense of the social elements that gave structure to their lives in the neighborhood. The desire of maintaining the inhabitants in their house is fundamental in a certain idea of heritage, but is completely unrealistic if we do not change our attitude towards the minority community of our society.

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