

Forgotten Ruins

By

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Abstract

The township has come alive. Lights shine from every corner. While the conches blow and announce the evening prayers at Kashinath Bhavan, Shehnai starts playing at Mihir Bari. The Baijis have traveled from Kolkata to entertain the Babus and the Sahibs. The jingling of their anklets serves as the perfect accompaniment to Reema Bai's mellifluous voice. Dadra and Thumri are popular choices. Glasses tinkle as liquor is filled in everyone's goblet. The audience sits mesmerized with the performance while the women of the house manage a peek from the alcove above.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Bengal, Hindu

Introduction

Bangladesh is popular for its rich history. Years ago, when undivided Bengal disintegrated into two geographical entities, the countries were marred by political strife, riots and violence. A prosperous city witnessed wide-scale migration, destruction of property and instability for the next few years. The city still stands. A mute spectator, it bears testimony to turbulence and its impact on mankind.

Forgotten Ruins

Not many are aware that Sonargaon, 37 km's from Dhaka is an attestant to the turmoil that the country faced! The ghost township is the oldest capital of undivided Bengal. It is also known as the 'City of Panam.'

Sonargaon - the name was derived from Subarnagram. Sonar and Subarna denotes gold while Gaon and Gram connote a village. It is said that the city, which dates back to the thirteenth century, was ruled by the Vanga and Samatata Kingdoms in the ancient times. Later it came under the domain of the Sena dynasty. King Dasharathadeva of the Deva Dynasty shifted his capital from Bikrampur to Subarnagram, according it much importance. It served as the capital of Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah, Isa Khan and the Baro-Bhuyan Confederacy.

When Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah became its Governor, he established a court in Sonargaon, where rich Persian prose and poetry thrived.

The history behind this town is fuzzy. But the first concrete evidence is found in the Tarikh-i-Firozshahi of Zia ud-Din Barani, where he mentions the amiable relationship between Rai Danuj of Sonargaon and Ghiyasuddin Balban, the Delhi emperor, at the time of the emperor's visit to East Bengal in 1281. The city has been described by prominent travelers in their memoirs and journals, like Ibn Battuta, Ma Huan, Niccolò de' Conti and Ralph Fitch as a rich and popular trading centre.

The city was significant for it was well-connected. In 1610, the city was connected to eastern terminus of the Grand Trunk Road, which was built by Sher Shah Suri. Its proximity to the Brahmaputra Valley and the Bay of Bengal made it an important river port. It had connections to China, Indonesia and Maldives. In 19th century, Sonargaon developed into a major trading center of cotton fabrics, mainly Muslin. Sonargaon became an important township where senior officials chose to settle. Administrative offices were also set up here.

It was at this time that a group of wealthy merchants moved here to set up their residences. Broad roads with houses built on either sides, it was a community of the rich and the

affluent. But dark clouds hovered above. The impending Bengal Divide brought along a series of riots. The events made the area inhabitable. The residents escaped during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, entrusting their estate with the caretakers. Soon illegal occupation, flooding (city was located on the old course of River Brahmaputra), vandalism by miscreants became a major threat to the old architecture. The once prosperous city with a history dating back to the ancient times lay in ruins, forgotten and relegated to the limbo of oblivion.

Finally, in 2009, the Bangladeshi Government evicted all the illegal settlers and declared Sonargaon as a protected heritage site. World Monuments Fund, placed Sonargaon on the 2008 Watch List of the 100 Most Endangered Sites.

What remains today are the ruins. Almost fifty-two majestic houses of great grandeur line up on both sides of the broad road that lead into the city. The road stretches from east to south and measures 600 meters in length and 5 meters in width. The buildings are mostly rectangular and varies from one to three storeys. Each house has a distinct beauty of its own. These houses, if observed in detail are Indo-Saracenic townhouses. It is a mix of elements from native Indo-Islamic and Indian architecture with Gothic revival and neo-classical styles favored in Victorian Britain. Huge bulbous domes with miniature domes around, combination of minarets, harem windows, spacious courtyards, open pavilions, vaulted roofs, open Arcading, durbar Halls, marble fountains, marble statues, overhanging eaves, pointed arches, cusped arches, scalloped arches, Hindu inscriptions, openings sealed with colored glasses are evident in these majestic palaces. 'Chini Tikri', a popular broken china decoration is found on most doorways. Floral grills, balusters and iron brackets are also seen.

Though located in India and built by Indian hands, the influence of the British and the Mughals is eminent. It's not just the architecture that tells us in great details about the inhabitants of the Sonargaon. The socio-cultural pattern that emerges from mere observation of these houses is also enthralling. Some of these buildings have a name accorded to it. For example, Kashinath Bhavan, built in 1898 was named after the writings found inside it. Hare Krishna Hare Rama written at the doorway of another mansion speaks about the Vaishnavite leanings in those times. Grand central halls with decorated archways are visible

from the road. In some houses, there are spacious courtyards open to the sky. They are surrounded from all sides with minarets. All the minarets have a *mashrafiya*, that is, they are enclosed with carved wood latticework. These restricted spaces were reserved for the women of the family who could oversee the proceedings from a safe refuge. This speaks volumes of how some of the families maintained the purdah system. The British rulers and often the officials occupying high posts were entertained by these merchants in the hope of furthering their relationships. Elaborate arrangements for food and music were made. Live Shehnai would be arranged and they would occupy the *Baithakkhana*, the room above the gateway. In the hall, the *Baijis* and their women would present their performances.

Atypical of a Hindu household, one of the house still has a *Natmandir* (small temple) on the second floor. The small dome and the four-walled-enclosed space must have housed a deity at one of time. Today, it stands empty and forlorn.

The ruins present an era that was dominated by the educated, affluent elites. The ruins speak of ambitious dreams, powerful men, and extravagant lifestyle. The remains of the golden era remind us of an important period in the history of Bengal. A period when a class of people rose. These Hindus, who unknowingly had inculcated traces of the Sultanate. These merchants who had a strong affinity towards colonialism.

Unfortunately, their journey ended prematurely.

The abandoned city speaks of loss and melancholy. Every nook and corner probably has a story to tell. The people are long gone. But the remnants of their lavish life have stayed back, fighting against time to retell their story.

As the sun begins its westward journey casting long shadows around, the guards bark orders to close the gate. The long line of visitors' trickle past the ruins. An eerie silence descends on the city once again. Darkness gathers slowly, embracing the ruins within its fold. No wonder, it is known as a 'ghost town.'

About the Author

Ms. Sreemati Sen holds a Masters in Social Work from Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan. A Development Professional, writing and documentation has always been a part of her work. From documenting the life of the Tsunami survivors to advocating for Child Rights, she has worked with a variety of target groups. One of her key projects was the Rehabilitation of victims affected by the Tsunami in the Andaman Islands. She lives in Kolkata with her three children.

