

ARCHIVING 'NAGAR KASHBA'

A study on the present condition and the architectural features of an evanescent historic settlement

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Abstract

Bangladesh—a small country enriched with prestigious history possesses an enormous number of unrecorded heritage buildings which act as the raconteur of tangible-intangible cultural and historic identity. 'Nagar Kashba'—a row of magnificent courtyard houses on both sides of a narrow alley built in British Colonial style is a precedent of heritage edifices situated in Munshiganj (Bikrampur)—the first capital of ancient Bengal. During the Colonial period, it was built near Mirkadim river port as residential settlements of elite Hindu Merchants adorning the fusion of British Colonial and Mughal style adapting the local context and spatial formations. The buildings were encroached illegally after the liberation war of 1971 by local influential people and now when the buildings fail to please their contemporary needs, the owners are willing to demolish the edifices and erect multi-storied buildings. Reluctance towards heritage conservation, random alteration, weathering, etc. are accelerating this process of decay. Unfortunately, this living archaeological site is still neglected by scholars. The heritage buildings and the surrounding area should be conserved and prior conservation, documentation is necessary. This paper endeavours to archive an overview of the architectural features and spatial formations of this evanescent historic settlement through documentation, assess the context and present condition, which will help to re-evaluate the historic site for conservation and adapt further strategies to rejuvenate the glorious historic identity of Nagar Kashba.

Keywords: *Nagar Kashba, historic settlement, architectural features, heritage conservation*

1. Introduction

Architecture that traversed from the historic timeline connects the past to the present and future. They are undeniable historical and cultural resources for a country. Though Bangladesh is enriched with a lot of architectural heritage of different periods, unplanned development in urban, suburban and rural sectors is engulfing historical settlements, architectural and cultural heritage. Such a historical settlement is Nagar Kashba in Munshiganj. In the early 19th century, during the colonial rule when Hindu merchants of this region had a promising business in Munshiganj started to build a small township at Nagar Kashba area, over an older ruined settlement. (Rahman, 2017)

The pattern is referred to as 'Street front houses' mostly concentrated along narrow Hindu *Para* (street) or Nagar Kashba street and previously were surrounded by canals/moat (*khals*). Although the actual owners were gone long ago, people are still living there amongst dilapidated situations without realizing the historic value of their residence. This endangered heritage carries the legacy of a romanticized architecture of the Colonial period. Thus this evanescent living archaeological site should be preserved properly before it is too late to conserve.

2. Historical context

Nagar Kashba is located at Mirkadim *Pourashava* of Munshiganj District (officially known as Bikrampur until 1986). Bikrampur, the first capital of ancient Bengal (from early 10th century AD to mid 13th century AD) started to lose its administrative value, as Sonargaon became the capital of Bengal in the 13th century. The importance of Sonargaon lasted for a long period even after the capital shifted to Dhaka in the 17th century. Similarly, Bikrampur also continued to hold an important position among the traders during the Sultanate, Mughal and Colonial period due to its favourable geographical location. It was bounded by the rivers *Dhaleshwari*, *Ichamati* & *Padma* merging with the *Meghna* River and acted as a trade centre for the then businessmen.



Figure 1, Location of Nagar Kashba (Source: Google map, Author)

The term '*Kashba*' refers to the administrative units of the Sultani rulers (1342-1576). Nagar Kashba is one of the thirty-seven *Kashbas* in Bangladesh, though there are hardly any visible remains of the Muslim period now. While trading to Sonargaon, the *Komla Ghat* and *Katpotti Ghat* of *Mirkadim* acted as important river transits and were used as the anchoring place for the boats from the heavy tidal surge of the river (Figure 1). Location of *Katpotti launch Ghat*, *Komola Ghat*, *Abdullahpur*, *Ramgopalpur*, *Gopalnagar*, *Rikabi Bazar*, *Firingi Bazar*, and *Bou Bazar* clearly expresses the importance of the place in the development of a business centre and settlement of elite businessmen (Rahman, 2017).

The architectural remains of Nagar Kashba refer to the colonial establishment in this area from the 18th to the 20th century and define a new era of architecture that continued in Bengal till the British left. Thus Kashba is considered to be rebuilt as a residential area of Hindu merchants (locally known as *Shahas* and *Poddars*) who traded through *Mirkadim* river port. After the partition of India in 1947, most of the Hindu merchants abandoned the area and went to India. (Adnan, 2018) Those who decided to return, left again because of the Hindu -Muslim communal riots and those who struggled to stay, left the land during the liberation war of 1971. After remaining vacant for a long time, the houses had been unlawfully encroached by the local influential people but they managed to create false paperwork of their ownership. The descendants of these activists now own the heritage property and some of them had already sold the houses to other people. This is the historical context behind the houses that look like they were purposely built for Hindu owners now adorn the names of Muslim people (Figure 2).

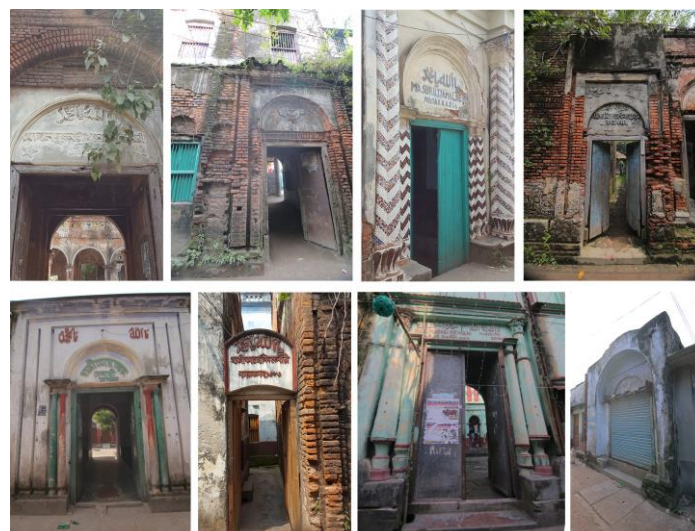


Figure 2, Gates of the Hindu houses adorned the name of Muslim owners. (Source: Author)

3. Methodology

The architectural remains of Nagar Kashba failed to attract the attention of architects and proper authority as the inhabitants are not influential in the present socio-political context and are ignorant about the value of their architectural, archaeological and historical culture and buildings. Many of the edifices have already been defaced and severely threatened by occupational activities. This paper is a qualitative and descriptive study about the architectural features of the heritage site. Present condition of the study area and the future prospect of Nagar Kashba will be narrated through the description of the site.

The overall study has been conducted in several phases. The data have been collected from field surveys, heritage building assessments, photographic documentation, oral surveys among the inhabitants, analysing the surrounding environment, and infrastructure. Then a comparative analysis was done with secondary data from other colonial structures of the traditional houses, their forms, spatial zoning, and architectural features. Finally, it was aimed to archive the documents gathered and evaluate the potential methods to conserve the historic settlement.

4. Evolution of the settlement of Nagar Kashba

From the structural pattern of the heritage buildings, the chronological development of the area could be traced.

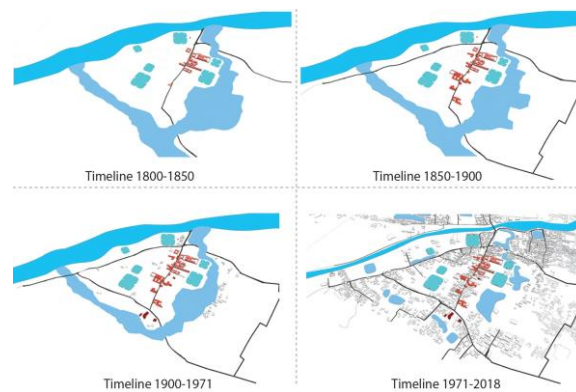


Figure 3, axonometric view of chronological evolution of the area in Nagar Kashba (Source: Author)

Rafter and purlin, made of wood or steel determine the time-period of the settlement. (Rahman, 2017) With the expansion of the settlement, the canal surrounding it has been abolishing slowly. The whole area is transforming into a massive urban jungle (Figure 3).

5. The Present condition of the study area

The actual number of heritage buildings remaining in the study area could not be traced completely due to the lack of evidence. Twenty-one buildings could only be found in Nagar Kashba during the study period in extreme dilapidated conditions (Figure 4).



Figure 4, Location of the heritage buildings in the settlement of elite Hindu businessmen of Nagar Kashba (Source: Author)

5.1 CONDITION OF THE HERITAGE BUILDINGS

During the colonial period, the elite merchants built these double-courtyard buildings. Now the present owners occupied the land unscrupulously, as the original owners migrated to India permanently. Some owners also bought this property from those who encroached the buildings. Some of the present owners, living in Dhaka city or foreign countries, are enjoying their ownership by giving rent of their portion. Previously one building had one owner but with the extension of the family, the ownership has been distributed among the heirs. With an increasing number of owners and a limited number of rooms, the buildings are failing to meet the contemporary needs. The people who have been living in the buildings for a long time want to demolish the edifices and erect multi-storied buildings. Even if they could realize the value, they are not capable enough to maintain it due to their socio-economic condition. Unscrupulous interventions and low maintenance have endangered the survival of the heritage buildings (Figure 5). Thus the identity of the entire culture and region will get into oblivion. With the booming economy and being situated in a demanding area, the trends of giving rent to businessmen, students, service holders, shop owners are on the increase. Because of the ever-increasing population, increasing land value, negligence of the authority and an act of commercialization the total character of the place is changing constantly.



Figure 5, Demolition of house 3 in 2017 (Source: Author)

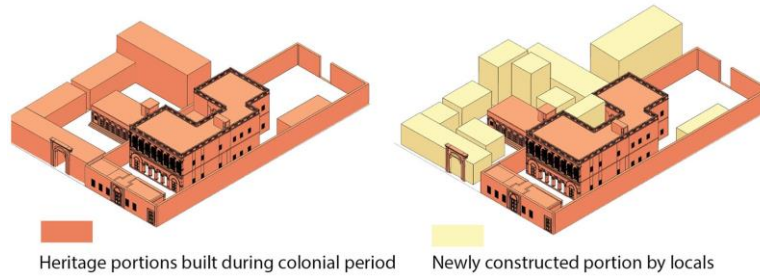


Figure 6, 3d view of the modified situation of house 13 & 14 (Source: Author)

By dismantling some portions of the heritage, the owners erected and extended rooms immoderately. They added toilets inside the buildings or in the courtyard, built partitions or dismantled walls inside, added windows or doors or erected walls eliminating the openings (Figure 6 & 7). The owners, who are not wealthy enough to build new structures are doing these alterations and the wealthy ones have already constructed new buildings demolishing the historic buildings. These valuable historic resources are perceived as unfit and unproductive and thus replaced with the buildings that seem to be more contemporary and efficient in terms of new functions. Moreover, they are not willing to put the tag on them of living in the heritage buildings, as they know they may lose their belongingness because of the law that will be imposed on them.

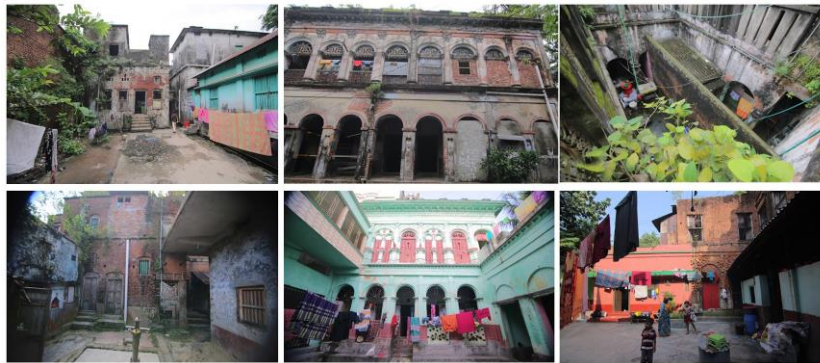


Figure 7, Unscrupulous interventions in the heritage buildings (Source: Author)

5.2 CONDITION OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

The environmental and infrastructural conditions are ironically getting worse. The canal was seized by dishonest powerful persons in the area. The lands located in between the buildings are also utilized to erect multi-storied buildings impacting the harmony of this area brutally.



Figure 8, Images from road representing poor conditions. (Source: Author)

The historic road of Nagar Kashba is 358 meters long and the width varies between 1.8-3 meters. This narrow alley is used by the vehicles like rickshaw, tempo and CNG autorickshaws and acts as a short-cut road to reach other *mahallas* making the road adverse to the pedestrians. Because of this situation, the facade of the heritage buildings are defacing. Open electric wires, poor system of storm water drainage and littering are making the area chaotic. The whole fabric is now in endangered condition and will be vanished soon.

6. Elite Hindu Merchants' Houses

Nagar Kashba was a settlement with rows of magnificent houses, mostly of two floors, though not too large, built in British colonial or Indo-European styles. None of them are in perfect condition now, but are still carrying the architectural features of their original condition. Some of the buildings are so altered that the original portion and typology cannot be determined. These houses also vary in size and shape. Two types of buildings can be found - Courtyard type houses and Bungalow type houses.



Figure 9, Ground plan of the houses (Source: Author)

6.1. COURTYARD TYPE HOUSE

The houses in Kashba consist of two courtyards- the outer court for public activities and the inner court for private activities. Building no. 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 11, 14, and 18 consist two courtyards (Figure 9). From the trace of the previous locations of the foundation, it is assumed that building no. 12, 13, 16, 17, 18 also had two courtyards.

6.2. BUNGALOW TYPE HOUSE:

These types of houses have no courtyard. These are of one or two-storied buildings having yards in the front or in the back. No uniformity is found in the organization of the rooms among the buildings. Building no. 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 15 are considered to be bungalow type houses (Figure 9).

7. Spatial Organizations

Common physical properties found in these buildings of Kashba help to determine the physical as well as the spatial characteristics of these buildings. Courtyards of the houses define the spatial organization according to the functions (Figure 10).

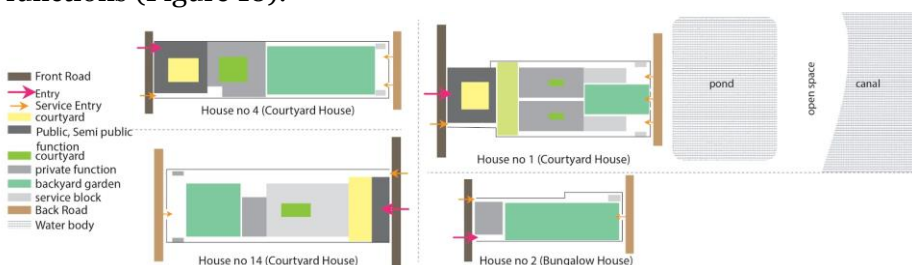


Figure 10, Diagrammatic spatial zoning of some of the houses-Courtyard house and Bungalow (Source: Author)

In most of the courtyards, the block facing towards the street acted as the gate-house and used to accommodate the public or semipublic functions. The rooms facing the courtyards contain temples, guest rooms, living rooms, and dining rooms. The front courtyard was also used for cultural activities like Jatra, folk music and dance shows. The second (private) courtyard is accessible through a passage and the bedrooms and other private zones were faced towards it. Colonnaded circulations formed by rectangular or circular piers with arches surrounded the courts. There is a backyard for the kitchen garden, toilets and restrooms situated adjacent to the boundary. All the backyards are accessible through a narrow alleyway. There are two service entries from both the front and back of each house. Beside the pathway, there were the shared ponds for the inhabitants of the houses. Then there was a canal which surrounded the settlement where the elite merchants lived, and served as a service route for the buildings and also acted as a moat for security purpose.

8. Architectural Elements

The architectural language of Bengal has emerged over several periods of socioeconomic and political development. The manipulations of forms and spaces of British style had a vast appeal to the neo-elite of Indian society. (Rahman, 2009) Thus a new hybrid style named Indo-British or the Colonial style emerged (Mowla, 2000). The architectural features of Nagar Kashba represent an amalgamation of occidental and oriental ornamentation. Decorative features like grand and huge columns, decorative arch, different arched openings, pediment, and other ornamental elements are the main architectural elements of the elite houses of the Colonial period (Figure 11). (Adnan, 2018)

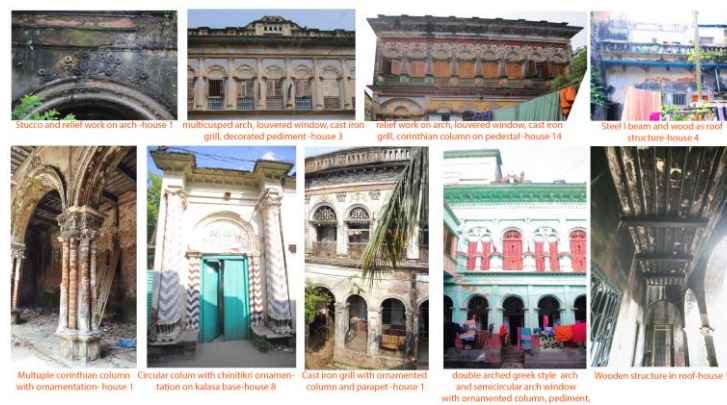


Figure 11, Architectural elements at buildings of Kashba (Source: Author)

Load-bearing brick masonry and lime plaster finish were used to raise the walls of 15 to 24 inches in width. Facades were built with exposed brick or painted. Different types of ornamentation (geometric, organic, floral etc.) of Indo-European style can be seen. In the flat Roof of comparatively older buildings, the rafters are made of wood and in the other ones, the rafters are steel I-section joist. The timber purlins are placed upon the rafters to support the roof tiles and lime concrete. The top floor cornice is enclosed with an ornamental parapet and also has pediment in some houses.

Various types of structural elements are observed in different buildings. Round and square-shaped pillars, pilasters, piers, and clustered piers are found in classical character with ornamental features, like base, shaft, and capital. The foliage of leaves are an integral part of the decoration.

Most of the courtyards are enclosed by arched corridors or arched doors and windows. Semi-circular, segmented, multi-foiled, multi-cusped, Greek-style double arch, and flat arch, etc. are found in different buildings.

Floral patterned cast iron railings are visible. Operable louvers are used in the corridor of the balconies and are also used as doors and windows to maintain the ventilation and prevent rain.

Entrances with simple large wooden doors are usually designed with columns, pediments, arches and various other decorative elements that show a complete fusion of Colonial and Mughal style.

9. Recommendations

The unique settlement of Nagar Kashba is struggling against the contemporary developments, climatic and financial adversities. It is mandatory to conserve the area now. Detail documentation of the historic features and surroundings at their existing state is the first step towards any conservation strategy. (Mowla, 2008) In most cases, it is seen that government-driven conservation freeze the life of the conserved area and become a burden for its future maintenance, so the conservation program must recognize and accommodate the cultural fabric and social needs of the inhabitants to make it sustainable. Policies should be initiated to invite private and public bodies to share responsibilities. Proper adaptive reuse, community-based tourism activities incorporating the residents of the area and integrating contemporary additions when needed with the assistance of heritage specialists can be the perfect way to breathe new life into the old buildings while preserving resources and historic value.

10. Conclusion

From the study above, it is quite discernible that the quality of spaces and the assemblage of a large number of historic residential buildings situated on both sides of the street in Nagar Kashba make it an absolute contender for area conservation. In this paper the documented features and analysis of the area and historical context may act as a testament of the socio-cultural, political, economic, climatic and functional factors of the then vibrant days of Bengal.

The study will undoubtedly open scope for re-evaluating the spaces of an evanescent living archaeological area full of historical value by proper conservation.

11. Acknowledgements

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