A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO CONSERVATION: WORKING WITH COMMUNITY TO SAVE THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF PANAMNAGAR

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ABSTRACT

Panamnagar is a unique township in Sonargaon thana of Narayanganj district of Bangladesh. It is stretched in a single street with street front houses on either side, which are of high architectural and archeological value. Due to lack of proper conservation plans, degradation caused by natural weathering, lack of maintenance and unplanned modification, many of the buildings face serious threat of losing the unique architectural features. Though declared a national heritage site, there is no definite mention about what constitutes the heritage of the area and how it should be conserved. Urban conservation is not about freezing time or even the new development and use. Rather it is best to set stage for the management of incremental changes. As compelling and historically valuable the place may be, it is the people and activities that breathe life in Panamnagar. With absence of any major initiative from the government, a "community-based" conservation process is the only possible solution to save the cultural heritage. This paper suggests the process of integrated public involvement in the conservation management plan for Panamnagar including steps, such as, understanding problems; generating options for response; evaluating the options; and ultimately choosing a roadmap for conservation management.

Key words: Conservation, Participatory approach, Adaptive reuse, Cultural heritage, Management plan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Heritage places are those which help an understanding of the past, enrich the present and which will be of value to the future generations. For the places of archeological and architectural values, it is the people and activities that form the cultural heritage. The prodigious interconnections between place and history are matched only by the richly-textured relations between place and community [1]. Three elements constitute most definitions of community, namely, area, common ties and social interaction. In this sense, community is a society anchored in place.

Panamnagar is a 17th century locality in Sonargaon thana of Narayanganj district about 29 km north-east of Dhaka (Figure 1), capital of Bangladesh. Panamnagar is stretched in a single street about 5 meters wide and 600 meters in length. All the buildings have the character of urban street front houses and are lined up on either sides of the street (Figure 3). Fifty-two houses exist in dilapidated and disused conditions, of which 31 are in the north side of the street and 21 on the south [2]. It is one of the few representative townships of Bengal that are mostly traceable.

II. HISTORY OF THE TOWNSHIP

The township was developed during the British Colonial period at Sonargaon, the capital of the independent Sultanate of Bengal around the 13th century AD. Sonargaon was a very prosperous capital of former Bengal. The word 'Sonargaon' means 'Village of gold'. The Panamnagar formed as part of the Muslim metropolis developed on the south of the old city. Sonargaon developed into a center of trade during the colonial period of the British East India Company. In the 17th century Panamnagar grew as a result of the commercial activities.

The buildings were initially constructed by Hindu estate owners and merchants towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century [2]. Panamnagar continued to flourish till the end of the Second World War. The British left the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and as a consequence of the India-Pakistan division in the same year, most of the Hindu merchants migrated to India and the town was mostly abandoned. During the 1964 riot, more Hindu occupants left for India.
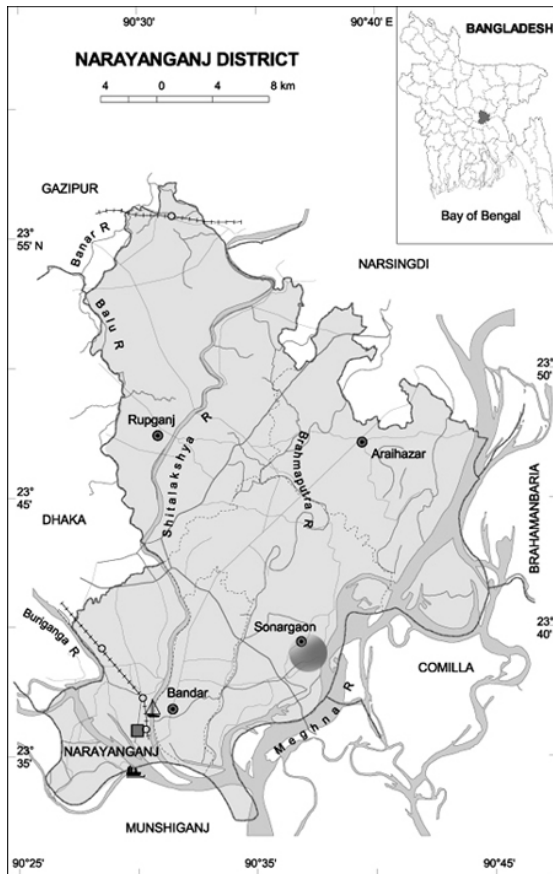

Figure 1: Map of Sonargaon, Source: Banglapedia (2003)

Among the 52 buildings, the then deputy commissioner of Narayanganj leased some out, but some of the inhabitants claimed that the buildings are their own property, bought by their families from the Hindu owners during the riots of 1964.

III. THE URBAN PATTERN

A. Architecture and open space

The township has a common pattern language resulting from a creative process and constitutes a unity to which each single house (having its distinct vocabulary) relates and contributes. The urban fabric of Panamnagar has a rich blend of open and built space. The houses are both detached and row types (Figure 2), mostly rectangular in shape and elongated in the north-south direction. The buildings, mostly two or three-storey high, are made of lime and brick. They vary in their designs in terms of elements such as verandahs, balconies, porches and arrangement of rooms around richly decorated courtyards.

Figure 2: Street front row houses of Panamnagar, Source: Iftekhar Ahmed (2003)

The adjoining houses share a common backyard facility which can be observed from the layout of pond, *ghat*, well etc. Although the buildings are much diversified in design of façade; all the buildings collectively achieved a common unity through a pattern language of height, symmetry and arched openings. They have a good blend of European decorative elements with the local motifs. The influence conveyed through the traveling traders inspired by the motifs and using them in Panamnagar.

Figure 3: The linear planning of Panamnagar, Source: Q. M. Mahtab-uz-Zaman (2005)

Semicircular and flat arches (Figure 7) are commonly used in most of the buildings that are regarded as some of the most magnificent examples of the Mughal style. Another significant feature is the use of ornamentation of 'Chini-Tikri' (with broken porcelain pieces of different colors). Panamnagar has some of the best examples of terracotta craftsmanship of Bengal of 19th century with decorative ornamentation on both interior and exterior of buildings.

B. Social significance of the planning

Panamnagar is a significant example of urban township as it demonstrates one of the best examples of community living and early urban settlements during the 19th century. Panamnagar had a very close-knit society participating in similar trade and religion evident in shared use of backyard facilities. The arrangement of the houses with most of them having a street side verandah on ground level illustrates a very close link with the street life (Figure 4). The residents were mostly of wealthy business class with some households engaged in craftsmanship. Most of the houses show an efficient separation of public and private space with internal courtyards (Figure 5) and backyards. Most of the settlement was the result of the 'Permanent leasehold' system introduced in the colonial period, which virtually gave ownership of the property and was significant for bringing a change of social hierarchy. It was an important deviation from the traditional 99-year leasehold system.
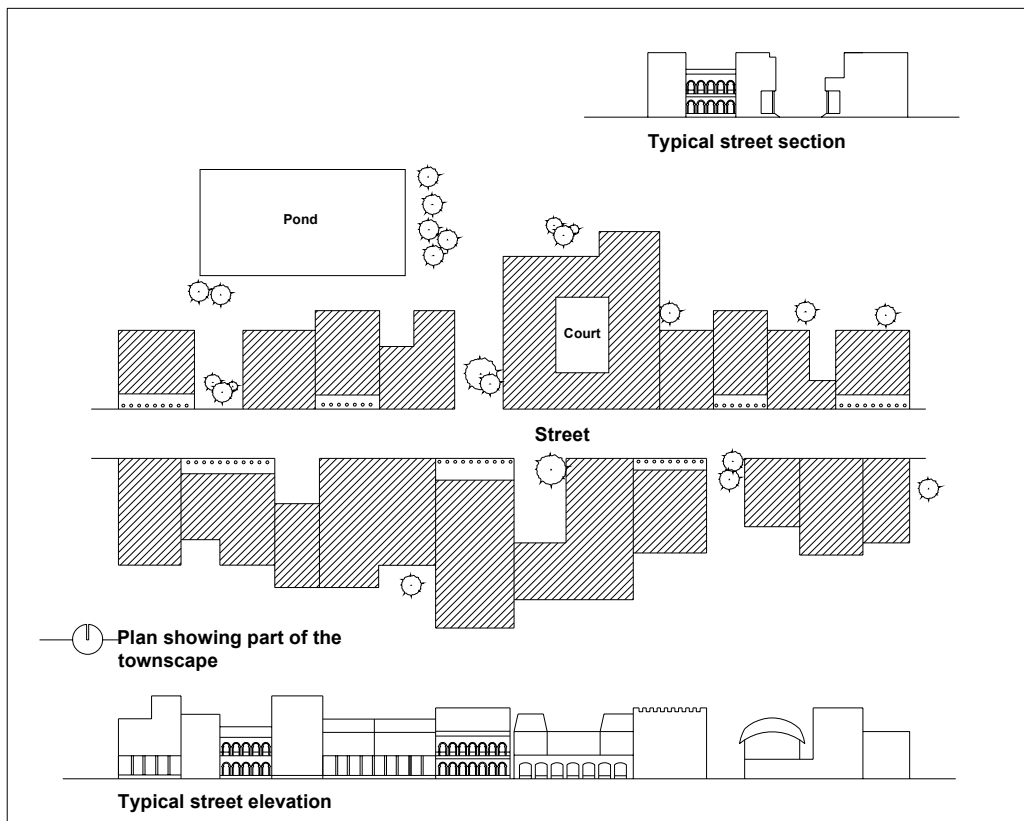

Figure 4: Schematic diagrams showing typical plan, elevation and section of the settlement (not to scale)

IV. THE HERITAGE OF PANAMNAGAR

A. The Cultural heritage

The present-day concept of cultural heritage is a result of the process related to the development of contemporary society, its values and its requirements. Culture is "the custom, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people" [3]. According to the *Deschambault Declaration*, 1982 [4]: "Heritage is the combined creations and products of nature and of man in their entirety and

a rich inheritance that may be passed on, which invites our recognition and our participation".. And Cultural heritage "may be defined as the entire corpus of material signs – either artistic or symbolic – handed on by the past to each culture and, therefore, to the whole of humankind" [5]. The Cultural Heritage of Panamnagar constitutes of both the place and its people.

Panamnagar has some of the best and intact craftsmanship of terracotta and exposed brick works from the 19th century. It is a rare example of a linear town in Bengal with a very intimate social structure which is evident in the arrangement of street front verandahs and other elements in the built form (Figure 3). A unique hybrid architecture with all the planning elements of Bengal architecture and European façade treatment (Figure 5) is found in Panamnagar. The place has an aura unmatched by any other old town of Bengal and should therefore be conserved.

Figure 5: Arcaded interior courtyard of typical houses of Panamnagar, Source: Iftekhar Ahmed (2003)

B. The 'Living' Heritage

A heritage component in a living environment implies dealing with their present context. Here the primary issues are concerned with protection and management of those significant components of heritage which still survive in the present (in totality or in parts). According to Rohit Jigyasu [6], the term 'Living' Heritage has two fundamental dimensions. The first, dealing with those aspects of heritage, which are still living (in the case of Panamnagar, the different surviving skills, crafts and lifestyle) and the second dealing with heritage components, which exists in a living environment. The living aspects of heritage deals with skills and crafts (Figure 6), vernacular building systems,

ecological systems characterizing the way of life of local people, which have evolved over time and are still surviving in similar or modified form. 'Continuity' is the key word for this type of 'living' heritage. For Panamnagar, these aspects are pivotal for maintaining the living heritage and making it an integral part of the place. The buildings along with the activity within them are vital in accentuating the value of the heritage. For this the buildings can house functions such as local crafts workshops, shops and museum. These will ensure active participation of the local community in the conservation process.

Figure 6: Different crafts form the living heritage of Panamnagar, Source: Iftekhar Ahmed (2003)

V. HERITAGE UNDER THREAT

A. The Present scenario

The government of Bangladesh declared the town an archaeological site in March, 2003 and about 52

Figure 7: Schools and offices housed in the heritage buildings, Source: Iftekhar Ahmed (2003)

structures, mostly vested property, on more than 10 acres of land, were marked as part of an archaeological site for protection and conservation [7]. But the town still lies unprotected.

Most of the buildings are of high architectural and archeological values. Only a few of the houses that are inhibited now are in better shape (Figure 7). Due to lack of proper conservation plans and active participation of the residents along with the degradation caused by natural weathering and lack of maintenance and modification, many of the buildings have lost their color and plaster (Figure 8), and face serious threat of collapse.

Figure 8: Degraded buildings of Panamnagar, Source: Q. M. Mahtab-uz-Zaman (2005)

For the past 30 years, some of the buildings were renovated according to the needs of local residents who lack knowledge and awareness about heritage sites. Local people have also added new structures by removing or modifying old buildings.

B. Lack of Government initiative

Panamnagar was taken over by the Department of Archaeology of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, under the Antiquities and Monuments Act 1968 [7]. Though declared a national heritage site, there is no definite idea about what constitutes the heritage of the area and how it should be safeguarded. The archaeology department informed the author that there has been a brief survey on the Panamnagar, which included photographs and drawings of the buildings. Also a project plan of two years involving US$ 7 million have already been submitted to the ministry for the conservation of Panamnagar that is yet to be finalized.

Meanwhile Panamnagar is fast deteriorating due to lack of government initiative. Many of the buildings should be evacuated immediately both for the safety factor and for stopping further damage. But the government is yet to serve notices on the residents to vacate these buildings.

VI. THE CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PROCESS

A. Approaches for Conservation of Panamnagar

Conservation involves making interventions at various scales and levels of intensity; these are determined by the physical condition, causes of deterioration and the community involvement. It is undeniable that in the present time of increasing connectivity and globalization, transformation and adaptation has become a fact of life. So it would be best to agree that urban conservation is neither about freezing time nor adapting new uses for old buildings [4]. Rather it is best to set stage for the management of change allowing incremental changes that may ultimately result in something new and better. The following approaches may be adapted in the conservation process:

Renewal: The process of Renewal targets redevelopment of existing communities. This process should be recognized as a policy based less on destruction and more on renovation and investment; often combined with small and big business incentives. The collective memory of the streetscape is a powerful renewal tool for Panamnagar.

Figure 9: Buildings like this should be revitalized or preserved, Source: Iftekhar Ahmed (2003)

Redevelopment: Redevelopment targets old, dilapidated buildings with poor living conditions that may be re-planned and re-built to achieve clear environmental and community benefits. In case of Panamnagar, footprint of some of the old buildings that are not safe in the long run may be demolished and redeveloped using 'reduction method' referring to significant features [4].

Revitalization: Revitalization aims to strengthen the design and quality of local features in the area by upgrading streets, landscaping and activity pattern. In return, these features improve vitality and identity of the area. The existing uses, street characters and activities can be strengthened for this purpose. Panamnagar has very rich cultural heritage tracing back to 19th Century. Selected buildings representing the heritage features and activities can be revitalized and superimposed with the redeveloped fabric.

Preservation: Preservation aims to retain and enhance the unique character, culture and heritage of the area. It includes conservation of buildings of historical, architectural and cultural value. Many rich detailing are still intact in the buildings (Figure 9), which should be preserved.

All the challenges can be materialized through a Conservation Management Plan.

B. The importance and Objectives of Conservation Management Plan (CMP)

In order for a place to be managed well, the decision makers (in this case both the government and the local people) must first understand the nature of the place and its people, as well as understand the identity and values that are shared at both individual and community levels. The second vital task would be to involve fieldwork and group work, and with input from experts to produce a management plan. The third objective is to work from conservation towards the management of the place in a cost effective way.

The CMP aims to identify, retain, conserve and enhance socio-economic as well as the physical character of Panamnagar. For this the decision makers need to identify key issues and stakeholders involved, especially vulnerable groups, existing cluster of specialty trades and to motivate all for support. Later they should ascertain possible consensus on the themes, issues and the general approach to the implementation of redevelopment, rehabilitation, revitalization and preservation appropriate for the particular site.

C. The Conservation Management Plan

Generally a conservation management plan is a document which explains why a site is significant, and how that significance will be retained in the future. James Kerr describes [8] a CMP as "…a document which sets out what is significant in a place and, consequently, what policies are appropriate to enable that significance to be retained in its future use and development. For most places it deals with the management of change".

The Conservation Management Plan provides guidelines that aim to conserve important elements in the area without jeopardizing opportunities for change and growth, as change is inevitable. The existing crafts and living pattern of the local residents are also considered in the process to avoid gentrification. The process may involve urban planning / design / conservation. The management plan involves community-planning process, whereby different stakeholders such as the local community, the academics, and the professionals are involved both in the early planning and implementation stage.

The management plan suggests the systems of integrated public involvement and conservation for the area. The idea of conserving an area with peoples living in it includes a range of steps, such as, understanding problems; generating options for response; evaluating the options; and ultimately choosing a roadmap for action. The process includes preparing "participators" to participate in a meaningful way. This includes, but not limited to, adaptive re-use of older buildings and sharing ideas of the residents in the process. For Panamnagar, the several phases of work may include the following steps:

Background research: This includes analyzing historic maps, documents and photographs, which generate basis for assessment process of the physical history of the site and how it has developed into the place that we see today. Detailed survey of the area need to be done for clear understanding of the planning and design of the built form and open space.

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Assessing the significance of the site: The second phase requires assessing the significance of the site which involves identifying the factors that makes it such a special and valuable place; its historical and archaeological importance, its views and what it means to the local people.

Identifying issues for management: In the third phase, the CMP needs to consider a number of issues such as:

- The condition of the buildings;
- The views to and from the surrounding areas;
- Access and basic visitor facilities e.g. toilets;
- Site information about the history and built form;

The conservation management plan also provides a framework for decisions on houses for renewal, redevelopment, revitalization and preservation.

Management framework and options: Based on the analysis of the significance and issues, a series of principles to guide the future management of the site should be formulated. These will be supported by a management framework for the day to day management of the site and a series of options for conservation works.

VII. THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

A. Working with the community

The social coherence and involvement of the community has been the driving force behind many conservation work. Though not universal, the demand for wider community engagement in the management process is a part of the culture of contemporary problem solving in the public interest [9]. As compelling and historically valuable a place it may be, in Panamnagar it is the people and activities that breathe life into its streets, alleys and open areas.

A "community-based" conservation process needs to engage residents and others stakeholders in developing a broad plan for its pragmatic application. The residents of the buildings in Panamnagar have already initiated a campaign denouncing the government drive for the eviction of the dwellers. So the best possible solution would be to conserve the site by developing the conservation management plan with people using an active participatory approach.

Benefits of participatory approach: When designed and managed well, participatory approach can produce better substantive ideas, useful relationships and social support (from the community involved) which is so vital for the conservation process. Participatory approach can serve a variety of overall purposes, such as a) creating a wider democratic way to conserve, b) better substantive ideas to drive action, c) feeling of psychological "ownership" and investment in collective work. As there is a sense of 'our place' exists in Panamnagar, the urge to work for the better management is strongly needed.

Relevant participators in participatory approach: Effective participation requires the best setting of boundaries that define participants' role and responsibilities to each other, not to impose control but to develop trust and coordination. All part of the community should be represented.

The advantages of working with local people in the conservation process are demonstrated in the following table:

Table 1: Promoting Deliberation:

Conventional approach	Participatory approach
The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more "air time."	Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.
Differences of opinion are treated as conflict that must either be stifled of "solved"	Opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist.
People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.	Even in the face of opposition from the person in charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.

Source: Xavier de Souza Briggs. (2003), p 22

B. The steps of participatory approach

The 'facilitators' in the participatory approach, Government or private, should work to encourage the participatory process. They will organize different stakeholders including concerned officials, professionals, different stakeholders especially the local residents to uncover assumptions and information gaps, promote

learning, generate consensus and more. The public participation will include the following five steps [9]:

Organizing issues and participants: Help the local residents define their interests in key issue in the conservation process, facilitate public participation workshops to give the local residents a clear understanding of a site (in this case: Panamnagar) and build on agenda for collective attention, build 'local leadership'.

Possible steps: Public should be notified of the intention to develop a conservation management strategy or plan. Public meetings and workshops should be held in to clarify issues.

Building a common knowledge base and analyzing opportunities and problems: Engage the public (especially the local residents) in education and cultural understanding. Identify information requirements, resources available; identify 'community assets', needs and deficiencies to come up with more viable action ideas.

Possible steps: Educational institutes should initiate research and documentation and help in building the knowledge base and the analyzing process.

Presenting and giving feedback to the residents: Communicate ideas with words, pictures, numbers, etc from all stakeholders involved. Involve the local community (by incorporating their lifestyle and local craft) in formulating the conservation management plan with their feedback. The modes can be public meetings, Community surveys, charettes, workshops, etc.

Possible steps: Public should be notified of draft conservation management plan and public submissions will be invited on the drafts. Submissions will be received in written and oral form (will be received at public hearings).

Discussion and deliberation: Encourage dialogue (not just debate) for positive learning to work towards community based conservation proposals for Panamnagar. The discussion will make the decision making process more efficient, democratic and accountable.

Possible steps: Written and verbal comments should be summarized and the conservation management plan should be revised in light of submissions.

Decision-making: The decision making process should be creative. Weigh the pros and cons while deciding. Priority should be given to valid conservation ideas of the local participants. While for simpler issues voting may be used, other more critical issues may need more creative group processes and more time.

Possible steps: The documents should be considered and finally approved by conservation board (including local representatives).

C. Few recommendations

When it comes time to action a given strategy, community participation has a different value: providing vital "user" information to inform specific design and management activities, including activities the community will lead. The Director of Bangladesh Folk and Crafts Foundation, Mahmud Shafique stated that the high number of tourists visiting the Sonargaon folk museum also visit the city and it has a good potential of becoming a tourist spot. To generate more revenue, the site needs more marketing and the following steps may be taken:

- Setting up a regular and convenient transport system to and from Panamnagar.
- Convert the houses into live museums and craft shops.
- Setting up management committee with representatives from all the relevant stakeholders.
- Creating opportunities for trade and job for the local occupants related to tourism for their survival.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The traditional approach to urban renewal has often resulted in gentrification. The remaining people including ancestral (if any) of Panamnagar are an integral part of its heritage. The conservation process can only be successful when the people actively participate in the process. Through a comprehensive revitalization of the street lives (i.e. social life and activities); conservation of the built forms of historical and cultural significance; and with active participation of the community, a sense

of pride and a common purpose in the community can be established in Panamnagar.

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