

**HISTORIC
SONARCAON**



**BANGLADESH
FOLK ART MUSEUM**

HISTORIC SONARGAON

Published
by

BANGLADESH FOLKART & CRAFTS FOUNDATION

HISTORIC SONARGAON

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Dacca.

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Foreword

Sonargaon, the very name is enchanting. Situated 17 miles from Dacca the present capital of Bangladesh, Sonargaon was considered once the oldest capital of Bengal. So far our knowledge entails it is difficult to get a complete ancient history of Sonargaon. But the innumerable number of visitors from land and abroad visiting this monumental and enchanting place is proof enough to reflect Sonargaon's glorious past and elegance.

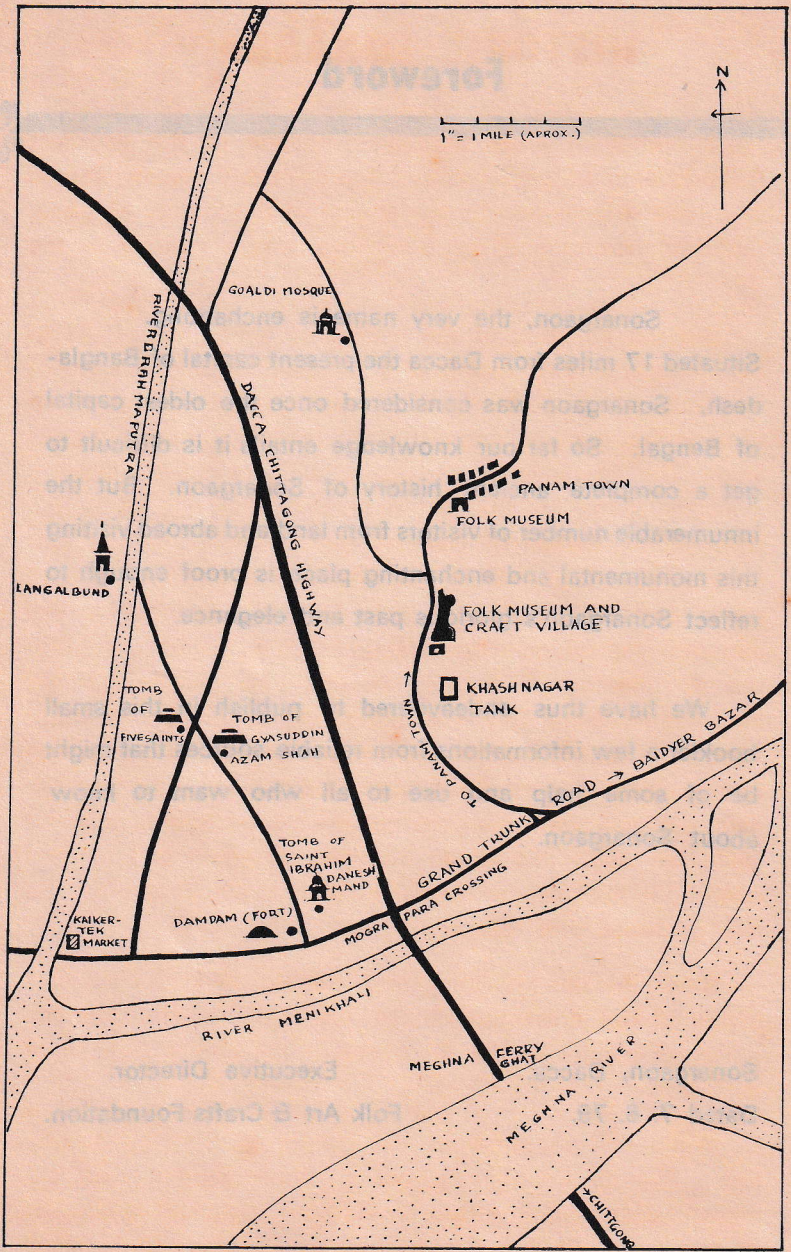
We have thus endeavoured to publish in this small booklet a few informations from reliable sources that might be of some help and use to all who want to know about Sonargaon.

Sonargaon, Dacca.

Dated 7. 6. 79.

Executive Director.

Folk Art & Crafts Foundation.



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HISTORIC SONARGAON

Suvarnagram alias Sonargaon is one of the brightest embodiments of past history. Approximately twenty square mile land strip bathed by the stream of the mighty Meghna, the Brahmaputra and the Sitalakhya was a wonder to the Bengal.

But the antiquity of the history of Sonargaon is yet to be precisely known mainly due to the paucity of source of materials, which are still undiscovered and, as a result, much of its former glory is lying out of the horizon of human knowledge. The reference to Sonargaon with its dated history is available to us for the first time since the rule of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban of Delhi, Emperor Balban, with a vast army pursued Tughril Khan, the rebellious Governor of Bengal, up to East Bengal. Tughril Khan built an unpenetrable fort and took his refuge there. Ziauddin Barani called this hide-out as "the fort of Tughril." At that time a certain Hindu king named Danuj Roy was ruling over Sonargaon. In about 1280 A.D. Sultan Balban reached the borders of Sonargaon in pursuit of Tughril Khan, the rebel Governor of Lakshmanavati and since then the covetous eyes of the rulers of Delhi fell upon this Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom and, consequently, it became the capital of the Muslim-Rulers for the few centuries that followed.

Since the pre-Muslim period, Sonargaon is the subject-matter of our present discourse, we shall, therefore, devote ourselves mainly to the discovery of the earlier sources of its history.

While discussing about the history of Sonargaon, historian Swarup Chandra Roy says, "Suvarnagram is an old place".¹ But he did not put forward any argument in support of this statement. Mr. Roy further says, "Since the Buddhist

period, Suvarnagram had been the seat of administration of the Suras, the Palas and the Devas." ²

According to him, Suvarnagram was considered as one of the important centres of ancient Bengal. But he could not, produce any dependable source or authority in support of this statement.

It is, however, a no denying fact that Suvarnagram was an ancient place. Many of the historians admit that it is really a difficult matter to determine the exact date and history of the pre-Muslim period of Sonargaon. To quote R. C. Majumdar, "It has, however, to be admitted that there is no dated reference to Sonargaon before the thirteenth century A.D." ³

Though no date is mentioned still Suvarnagram is referred to in the history of ancient Bengal. In those days areas comprising the Brahmaputra to the Sea was known a Vanga or Bengal. It is said that Raghunandan Bhattacharyya, the great Hindu logician, while describing Suvarnagram writes, "Vange Svarnagramadaya", that is, "here in Bengal, there are places like Svarnagram or Suvarnagram." If we analyse the ancient history of Sonargaon, it clearly seems that Suvarnagram alias Sonargaon was initially within the areas of Vanga and later on the Samatata. It is also not unlikely that Samatata had in those days some sort of relationship with Pragjyotisha or the modern province of Assam.

Samatata is mentioned for the first time as a new kingdom in the Allahabad Rock inscription of Samudra Gupta as early as the 4th century A.D. that some areas of Vanga were included within Samatata is known from the account of the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang. The Muslim historian Minhaj-i-Siraj in his Tabagat-i-Nasiri, Part I, mentions Samatata variously as Sankat, Sakat or Sokat. There is, however, definite evidence of Suvarnagram being a part of the areas comprising Samatata. It is said that "on the eastern side of the continent the tributary Kingdoms are Samatata or the

delta of Brahmaputra ; Kamrupa or Assam ; and Davaka, which seems to have been practically synonymuous with Vanga, lying between Karatoya on the west, the Ganges on the south, Meghna on the east and Khasi hills on the north and including both Dacca and Sonargaon." 4

Not only that, the Gangetic Suvarnagram was the 'Suvarnabhumi, the golden coast' of the Chinese, Scoff connects the name with the Gangetic port of Sonargaon. 5 It is remarkable that in his description of Samatata the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang did not make any mention of Sonargaon. However, it is evident from his account of Samatata and Vanga that Suvarnagram formed a part of Samatata and was under the sway of the empire of Harsavardhana.

According to Dr. Baijnath Sharma, "Yuan Chwang records a similar episode of Harsa's life and it indicates that Harsa also succeeded in expanding his sphere of influence in Brahmaputra Valley." 6 While describing the life of Harsavardhana Hiuen-Tsang says, "in the early part of this life, he had joined the Buddhist Church and, perhaps, taken the vow of a Bhikshu or a least of lay member of the common." 7 But it cannot be denied that this area was included within the mighty Gupta empire prior to this. In the opinion of Dr. Niharranjan Ray, during the Gupta rule, Bengal was divided into two parts. It is evident from the Ghughrahati Copper-plate inscription of Samachardeva that Suvarnabithi was the administrative centre of a Uparika. This Suvarnabithi, as it seems, was within the area forming "Navyavakasika". According to Dr. Ray, Suvarnagram of to-day has had a synonymity of meaning with Suvarnabithi. It is not, therefore, surprising to presume that from the very beginning of the expansion of the Gupta empire Suvarnagram was included in it.

The flourishing condition of Buddhism as a dominant religion in various parts of Samatata is clear from the account of Hiuen Tsang. "There were 100 Deve temples, the various sects lived pell-mell and the Digambara Nirgranthas were

very numerous." ⁸ Suvarnagram or Samatata was situated at a distance of about 175 miles from the port city of Tamra lipti. Hiuen-Tsang describes this distance as 900 li "...there is no doubt about the fact that the capital of Samatata stood near Sonargaon." ⁹ Fergusson while commenting on the account of Hiuen-Tsang says, "Although Hiuen Tsang visited both Kamarupa and Samatata as we shall presently show it was on two different occasions and though it is not asserted in the text, he never made the journey in question. If he had, he probably would have described it as at least one half longer as he could hardly have crossed the Kossyah hills, but must have first gone east to Goalparah and the south. But taking it as we find, it lands us at Sonargaon, or very near the city, which preceded Dacca as the capital of this province. For this and other reasons, I have no doubt that district or province of Dacca is the Kingdom described as Samatata in our text."¹⁰

Flourishing Buddhist cultural influence is clearly discernible in this area between the periods from 650 A.D. to 700 A.D. During this period such Buddhist King as Khadgodyama, Jatakhadga, Devakhadga and Raja Rajabhata etc., ruled over this region. It is mentioned in the History of Vikrampur (**Vikrampurur Itihas** in Bengali) that "during the rule of Devakhadga there was, in a certain place of Suvarnagram, a Buddhist Stupa. It is also known that Sanghamitra was the chief priest of Salivardhak Vihara. In our opinion the 'Buddhist Stupa' and the Vihara were situated somewhere in the village of Suvarna. In this regard we learn from the Tibetan history PAG - SAM - JAN - ZONG - INDEX CXXVII that like Vikrampur, Suvarnagram was also an important centre of Buddhist learning of Bengal in eastern India. Suvarnagram or Sonargaon is mentioned several times in that book. Such as, Suvarnagram (Sonargaon) a city in Bangala where a Brahman named Kacijita established a religious institution in which every ten householders supplied to Bhikkhus."¹¹ More details of this Brahmin Kasijit of Suvarnagram are available

in Tarant's **History of Buddhism in India** where in it is stated that "towards the end of the life of king Bhamsa candra (Vamsa candra ?) and during the period of Sila-candra, there lived a Brahmin called Kasijatda in the east. The surviving earlier centres and in particular, he provided sixty four teachers with livelihood, each with ten listners to the Doctrine in the city of Say-na-ra-gha-bo (could it be Sonargaon, the old capital of Dacca of Bangla."¹²

The Hindu rule at Savarnagram followed the end of the Buddhist rule. But is, again, a matter of conjecture as to who was the first Hindu King to start his rule there and in which period. Some of the **Kulagranthas**, however, furnish some evidence in this regard. It was around the beginning of the 8th century A.D. that the first Sena King who was a great devout of lord siva (Parama Saiva) Adisur defeated the Buddhist rulers of Vikrampur with his prowess and established there a Hindu Kingdom. Names of some of the Sena King who ruled in East Bengal immediately after Adisur are known from the recently discovered copper-plate grants and other inscriptions. They are in order of chronology. Virasena, Samanta Sena, Hemanta Sena, Vallala Sena and Lakshmana Sena.

In 1204 A.D. Lakshmana Sena with three of his sons fled aways to East Bengai at the news of the victory of Nadiah by Bakhtiyar Khalji and he started his rule at Vikrampur. His discendants somehow managed to rule there for some more years and after that Sonargaon came into prominence of the political arena of Bengal with the activities of the king of Vikrampur. Sonargaon managed to retain its former glorious existence till the advent of the Muslims.

The history of Sonargaon during muslim period first appeared in 1281 A.D. while Ghiausuddin Balban was in persuit of Mughisuddin Tughril.¹³

In 1338 A.D. it became the separate kingdom of East Bengal with Fakral-Din-Mubarakshah, the first independent Muslim ruler.¹⁴ Shams-al-Din-Ilyas Shah (1342-1357), Ikhtiyar-al-Din Ghazi Shah (1349-1353), Sikandar Shah (1357-1391), Ghiyas al-Din Azam Shah (1392-1410), Saif al-Din-Hamza Shah (1410-1411), Ala al-Din Husain Shah (1493-1519) and other Ilyas Shahi and Husain Shahi Sultans also ruled Bengal with their Capital there. During the rule of Masnad-i-Ali Isakhan, Leader of Baro Bhuyans, Sonargaon had been in the for-prominence in administration. Isakhan extended his Zamindari to Sonargaon region.¹⁵ Popularly known as that his chief army head quarters was at the township of Sonargaon-Pannam.¹⁶ He also contested the mighty forces of Mughal emperor Akbar the great in 1575 A.D.

It was a lively seat of Governing from the later year of the thirteenth century. It began under the propitious patronage of the renowned scholar Maulana Sharf-al-Din Abu Tawama. Moulana Abu Towama founded this seminary of advanced learning and devoted his life to teaching at this place. His renown as a scholar attracted students from far and near. The celebrated Sufi-Scholar Makhdum-al-Mulk Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri was a student of Mowlana Abu Tawama at the Sonargaon academy (Islamic Madrassa). Mowlana Abu Tawama died in 1300 A.D. and was buried there.¹⁷

The historic Grand Trunk Road built by Sher Shah in the sixteenth century was extended up to sind from Sonargaon.¹⁸

Not only in administrative matters, Sonargaon was also developed in religion, culture and knowledge. The age old Mosque and Mazars in and around the region bear the proof of it. In the medival times, it has attracted travellers and traders for socio-political and economic significant. Ibn Batuta, Mahuan, Fahien and Ralph Fitch visited Sonargaon. Ibn Batuta came in about 1345 A.D. and mentioned that the 15 maunds of rice for one rupee, 8 fowls for one anna, 15

stout sheep for four annas, 12 sheers of oil for 4 annas and one pretty slave girl for two rupees and eight annas were available in the market. Ralph Fitch travelled in about 1586 A.D.

✓ According to Ralph Fitch, the cotton cloth and rice exported to India, Ceylon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra and other countries.¹⁹

✓ Sonargaon has lost its importance with the transfer of the capital from Akbar Nagar (Raj mahal) to Jahangir Nagar (Dacca) in the early part of the 17th century, while Islam Khan was the Governor of Bengal. /

The historic phase is no more to-day. Sonargaon gradually diminished all socio-Cultural as well as political activities.

✓ The famous cotton fabrics muslin, wood engraving, pottery, oyster-shell works etc., craftsmanship reminds those bygone days. Specially the fine cloth Muslin was reputed through out the civilized world.²⁰

Now Sonargaon is alive only in history, legends, documents of tourists and historians and in the mind of inquisitive researchers. New efforts are on to reconstruct the tradition of Sonargaon. ✓

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NOTABLE HISTORICAL RELICS

GOALDIMOSQUE- 1519 A.D.

This graceful single domed mosque was built by Mullah Hizabar Akbar in 1519 A.D., during the reign of Sullan Ala-al-Din-Hussain Shah.

PANAM BRIDGE, 17TH CENTURY A.D.

Near the complex of Bangladesh Folk Art Museum lies two chamber type brick bridge on the 'Pankhiraj' canal on 3 Pointed arches.

TOMB OF PANCH PIR, 17TH CENTURY A.D.

To the 4 miles south west of Bangladesh Folk Art Museum lies the village Sachilpur, which contains tomb of 'Panch Pir' of five Pirs. Among these Pirs-Badr Alam was the most prominent.

TOMB OF GHIYASUDDIN AZAM SHAH, 1410 A.D.

About half a mile to the east of the 'Panch Pir Dargv' lies the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah. This tomb was built of a single block of black basalt forming a keeled top stone which rests on a table of some material.

TOMB OF MANNA SHAH, (MEDIVAL PERIOD)

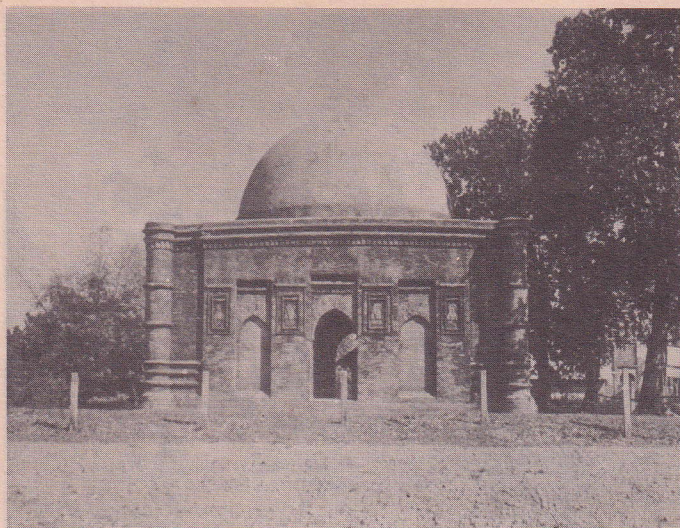
In the market place of Mograpara lies the tomb of Manna Shah Darvish, bare roofless within an enclosure.

DAMSMAH (FORT) 15TH CENTURE A.D.

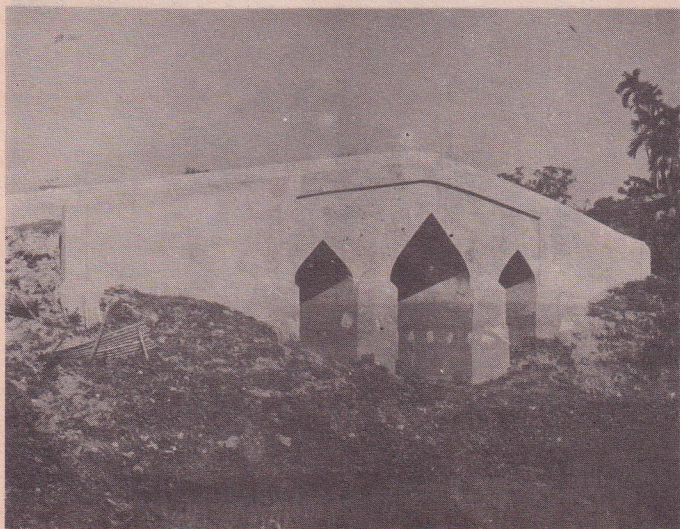
To the opposite of Sonargaon Degree College, Mograpara, in an eminence which still bears the name of Damdamah or fort.

TOMB OF IBRAHIM DANISHAMANID, (EARLY MEDIVAL PERIOD)

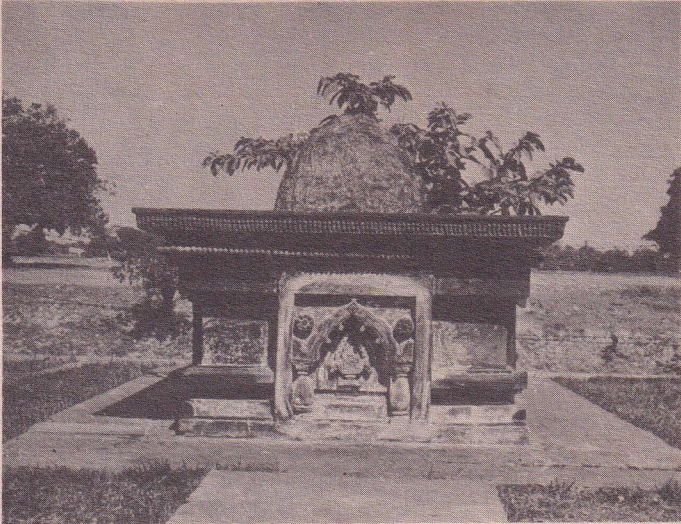
On the heart of the market of Mograpara within the enclosure the tomb of Hazrat Ibrahim Danishmaind, which are roofed over by poor segmented roofs.



Mosque of Galdi - 15th Century



Bridge at Panam (Side View)

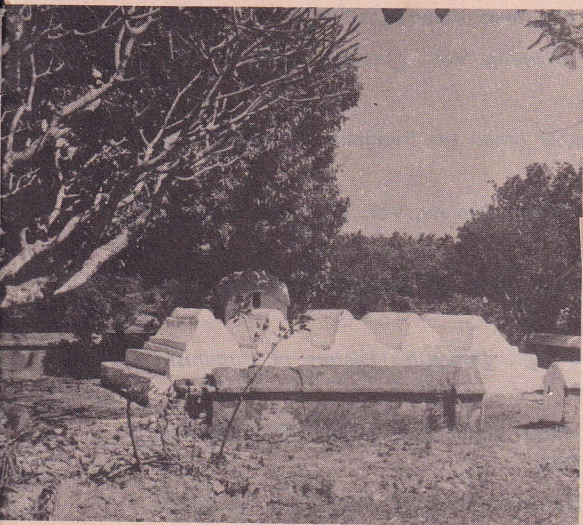


Tomb of Emperor Gyasuddin Azam Shah



*Tombs of Syed Hazrat Md. Kamal & Syed Hazrat
Md. Yusuf - Mograpara*

Treasury - Aminpur



Tomb of Panchpir : Shachilpur



Treasury - Aminpur

NOTES

1. Swarup Chandra Roy, *Suvaranagramer Itihas*, Calcutta, 1891. P.52.
2. Ibid., P. 52.
3. R.C. Majumdar (ed.) *History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Dacca 1970 (re-print), P. 26.
4. *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. Vol. VI, No. I, 1960, P. 144.
5. V.A. Smith, *The Early History of India*, London, 1967, P. 37.
6. Baijnath Sharma, *Harsa and His Times*, Varanasi, 1970, P. 31.
7. Thomas Waters, *on Yuang Chwang*, Vol. I, London, 1904, P. 340.
8. Ibid., Vol. II, London, 1905.
9. Jatinadra Mohan Roy, *Dhakar Itihas* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1322 B.S., P.30.
10. The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. VI, 1873, London, P.P. 242-44.
11. Jogendranth Gupta, *Vikrampurur Itihas* (in Bengali), Culcutta, 1346 B.S., P. 181.
12. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (ed.) *Taranath's History of Buddhism in India*, India, 1940, P.122.
13. Dia-ud-din Barani, *Tarikh Firuz Shahi* (ed) Maulvi Syed Ahmed Sahib. Bib. Ind. Calcutta, 1862.
14. M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* vol. II Dacca 1967 P. 81.
15. Ibid. P. 199.
16. A.F. Bradlay Birt. *Romance of an Eastern Capital*.
17. M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*. Vol. II Dacca 1967, P. 289.
18. Abdul Karim, *Bharatiya Upa Mohadesher Itihas* (in Beg.) Dacca 1969. P. 241.
19. Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrims*, Vol. X Glasgow 1905. P. 185.
20. M.A. Rahim, *Social and cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. II. Dacca. 1967. P. 216.