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## LATE COLONIAL PERIOD MERCHANT HOUSES AT BIRULIA: A STUDY ON ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

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### Abstract

Bangladesh is rich in its unique culture and heritage, latent in its architecture and settlements. Facing challenges and struggles to be a global capital, the 400-year-old city - Dhaka seeks its historical identity amongst a diverse range of political reigns and socio-cultural influences. Birulia, being a century-old settlement at the brink of Dhaka is historically important as a witness to the uprising of the middle-class elite (Merchants) of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Biruila was a vivacious business center, important river port as well as a sacred place for Hindu religion during the regime of Vawal king. At the end of the nineteenth century, local elite Hindu merchants started building houses and temples along a brick-paved road. The form and spatial arrangements of these remaining buildings bear distinct architectural styles of British Colonial Period with a fusion of Mughal Architecture adapted for the local climate and traditional house forms. Due to the lack of proper documentation, conservation plans, and maintenance, unplanned modification, natural weathering and encroachment by the local people; the majority of the heritage buildings are now losing distinct architectural features. The tangible heritage of this settlement is almost unrecorded and needs to be revived as evidence of urbanization and prosperity of this region by taking strategic conservation policy. Before any conservation endeavor, all elements and architectural features need to be documented properly. The paper will discuss mainly the architectural features (spatial form, zoning) and elements used at the façade of the remaining significant buildings. Based on the documentation, this paper will analyze to find the links between the traditional zamindar house forms and the Birulia buildings at the late colonial era.

**Keywords:** *Birulia, Heritage Conservation, Zamindar Houses, Architectural Features*

### 1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a country with a lot of architectural heritage of different periods. The Socio-Cultural, Political and Economic aspects of different regimes influenced the architecture, and Climatic and Physical factors determined the variations in architectural styles and forms, layout, exterior, and interior facade ornamentations, the material used etc in these buildings. It is also rich with building art of the indigenous craftsmen and the influence of different mighty Hindu & Muslim rulers from time to time. However, it took a different turn in the British period in the seventeenth century. The British colonial era influenced the local people to follow colonial culture and social structure where the total paradigm shifted. A process of change had been started and a new feudalistic class was evolved upon the dependent-dominant relationship between the European rulers and the dependent natives. The permanent Settlement Act, 1793 particularly helped building this new class. One of these dependent native classes was merchants of money lending business. They actually did their businesses in and around Dhaka, the then a booming city. The surrounding rivers of Buriganga, Turag, and Balu around the city made it easier for them to communicate. The Merchant class started building their settlements in and around the city. One of these settlements is Birulia, situated at the west bank of the river Turag and was accessible through a landing station (Ghat).

Today many of these buildings are either been abandoned by the original owner due to the partition of 1947 or neglected at the hand of Nature. The remaining architectural evidence was overlooked by the scholars and historians. However, Jatindra Mohan Roy mentioned Birulia as a sacred place for the local

Hindu religious community. There were around sixty-four colonial architectural buildings in this settlement (Kabir, 2009). The Hindu merchants left Bangladesh after the partition of India-Pakistan in 1947 and at the time of Liberation war in 1971. At present context, only Twelve buildings of that characteristics have been survived.

Birulia bears the historic significance of architectural magnificence, it is very important to conserve and restore the beauty of this island-like settlement. It is not very far from the capital, and urbanization is grasping the surrounding so abruptly that it is very urgent to protect this area, conserve it and create an opportunity of breathing space for the urban life.

## 2. Historical Context

Birulia is an eyewitness of Zamindari System in the British colonial period. It was under the reign of Bhawal Zamindars. The Bhawal Zamindars ruled the then Savar, Kaliakair, Barmi, Shripur, Mirpur & Gabtoli. Birulia was a temporary place for them to rule over the area. As it was a famous landing station for an established trade route, the merchants built their residences here. The Haat-bazaars were vibrant with a crowd of merchants and sellers. Rajani Kanto Ghosh, a famous merchant of that time built his palace by the river Turag at Birulia.

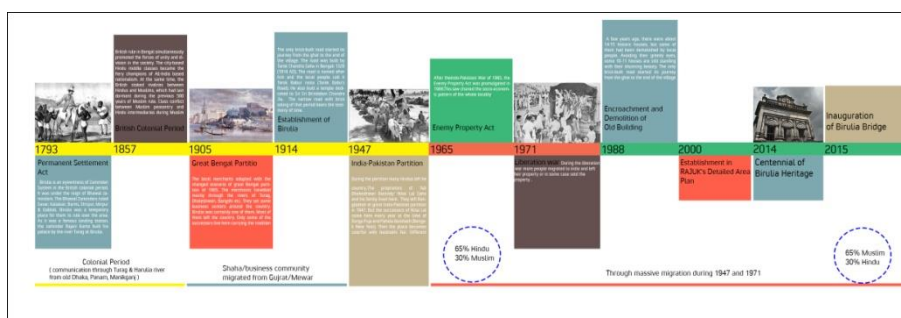


Figure 01, Timeline of Birulia (Source: Author)

Apart from Rajanikanto Ghosh, the other famous family was the Sahas. They created a small settlement of their own. The Sahas are usually known as merchants in Hindu Society. They built their residences along the roadside. Though, their houses were individual but close together like a town having their series of courtyards. Both Bungalows and Courtyard houses were built with the main street at the front side. Among the Saha Family, The proprietors of 'Adi Dhakeshwari Bostraly' Nitai Lal Saha and his family lived here. They worshipped at the temple beneath the Banyan trees of hundred years. They left Bangladesh at great India-Pakistan partition in 1947. But the successors of Nitai Lal Saha come here every year at the time of Durga Puja and Pahela Baishakh (Bengali New Year). Then the place becomes colorful with Baisakhi fair. Different types of manohari elements are sold at that time. In the monsoon, the settlement acts like an island. This settlement becomes separate from the surrounding land in the monsoon and the regains life after the monsoon and becomes vibrant in different religious festivals of the Hindu religion.

A few years ago, there were about 20-21 historic houses, but some of them had been demolished by local people. Avoiding their greedy eyes, some 10-12 houses are still standing with their stunning beauty. The only brick-built road started its journey from the ghat to the end of the village. The road was built by Tarok Chandra Saha in Bengali 1320 (1914 AD). The road is named after him and the local people call it *Tarok Babur Rasta* (Tarok Babu's Road). He also built a temple dedicated to *Sri Sri Brindabon Chandra Jiu*. He also built his house and Guest house along the road named after him. The narrow eight feet road with brick soling of that period bears the testimony of time.

## 3. Methodology

The architectural remains of Birulia failed to attract the attention of archaeologists and scholars as the inhabitants were not very influential in the socio-political context of that time in Dhaka. There is also a scarcity of written records and proper documentation. In most cases, the original owners dilapidated the houses in the time of India-Pakistan partition in 1947 and liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Many of the architectural features have already been damaged or severely threatened by occupational

activities. There were around sixty-four colonial architectural buildings in this settlement. But, at present, there are only twelve buildings contain these architectural motifs. The primary data have been collected through field survey, Building Assessment, Streetscape Assessment, photographic documentation and an open-ended survey among the inhabitants. The data were then compared to secondary data from other colonial structures of traditional house form, especially in the cases of the spatial zoning and arrangements and the architectural elements used at the facade of the buildings.

#### 4. Colonial Architecture in Bengal

The early colonial buildings were executed in neoclassical styles popular in Europe at that time. In Dhaka, these styles were first seen at the churches and later applied on secular buildings. Eventually, by the middle of the colonial period, a new hybrid architecture of Mughal Style and European style architecture evolved. (Rahman, M, 2001). It overlooked the traditional Brick construction, concealing with plasters over it to give a false sense of Stone structure. The new style introduced some foreign elements as semi-circular and segmental arches, triangular pediments over Corinthian, ionic or Doric columns; battlement parapets, traceroid windows, moulded plinths, rusticated walls, and foliated decorative motifs. The decorative elements were transposed from European Architecture and blended in places with local motifs. This hybrid style can be named Indo-Saracenic style which became popular among the powerful people and elites who loved to show their power and affordability. The native *baniyas, gomostas, dalals, pike, peyadas* worked as the local agent for the foreign traders. Most of them were high and upper-middle caste Hindus. These new emerging elite class tried to build residences to raise their socio-political status.

Colonial influences led two very distinctive styles of residential buildings- Bungalow type and Mansion Type. The bungalow was the first residential Building Type adopted by the British in Colonial India. Bungalows also integrated many local characteristics like large verandas, which were used as semi-private spaces. The mansion was the other type resulted from colonial influences. By the end of the nineteenth century, many Indians adopted the European lifestyle and imitating the administrative building facades at their homes. Their houses were full of foreign decorative elements.

The secular architecture of Birulia is broadly divided into three categories. They are - single cell house, bungalows and courtyard residences. The bungalow was the first residential pattern chosen by the merchants here. Multiple courtyards have been added in various spaces later in course of time.

#### 4. Morphological Dimension of Birulia

Birulia is located on the west bank of the Turag River and its western boundary was well connected by natural Harulia canal. The landscape was not occupied by any human community before the colonial period. The *Saha* business community who all might have originated from Gujrat or Mewar region occupied this piece of land for business as well as habitation purposes in the early colonial period.

##### 4.1. DISTRIBUTION OF MAHALLAS

Birulia has a total of 320 units of households where 270 households are *pucca* and about 50 households are *Semi pucca*. At present, the entire settlement is divided into several blocks (Mahallas/Paras) depending on its social and professional status (Figure 02).

These are as follows:

*Jele Para* is located in the North-eastern part of the study area.

*Gowala Para* is located in the Eastern part of the study area.

*Muslim/Dakshin Para* is located in the Southern part of the study area.

*Madhya Para* is located in the Middle portion of the study area.

*Shaha Para* is located in the Western part of the study area.

*Uttar Para* is located in the Northern part of the study area.

*Sarkar Para* is located in the outskirts of the main study area.

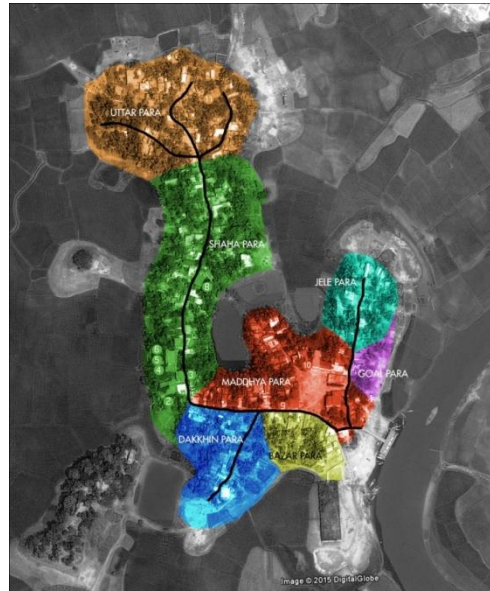


Figure 02, Distribution of the Mahallas (*Source: Author*)

The secular architecture of Birulia is broadly divided into three categories. They are - single cell house, bungalow types and courtyard residences. As it was a small settlement, the additional road was not necessary. Only an eight feet wide and one-kilometer long pathway is seen in the middle of its residential area. Colonial houses among the regular buildings are located on both sides of the pathway. Most of the archaeological buildings of Birulia are located on the south-west corner, mostly in Saha Para of Birulia.

### 5. The Merchant Houses at Birulia

Elite Saha merchants built their residences at Birulia. Though N. Kabir found Sixty Four Buildings earlier but at present around Twenty buildings survive on the landscape. In this paper, this paper will discuss a few of them. The old buildings are scattered around the settlement. The locations of Houses and Temples are shown in Figure 03.

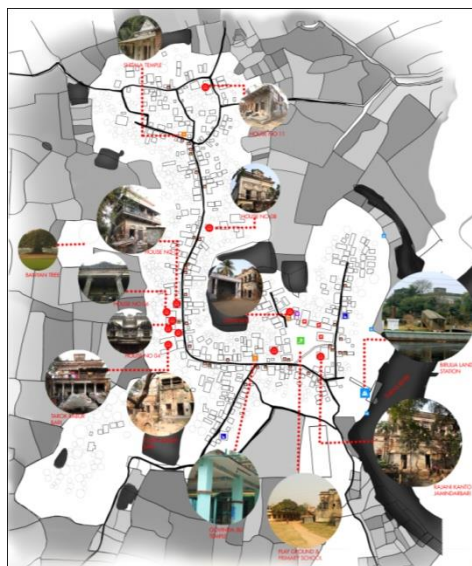


Figure 03, Location of Merchant Houses at Saha Para (*Source: Author*)

There are eleven single storey houses while the other eight houses are two storied. Among them, fifteen buildings are secular in nature and rest of the buildings are used for religious purposes. Some of them are threatened for illegal encroachment and some of them are rebuilt without knowing its archaeological value.

### 5.1. SINGLE CELL HOUSES

Building no 9, 11(House of Guru Charan Saha) and 15 are single cell houses and were probably used as either an outhouse of the main building or served as office administrative building, storage and public gatherings (Zaman, 2014). These houses are rectangular compartment and places with verandah in front (Figure 4).



Figure 04, Single Cell House (No 11) at Saha Para (Source:

The small-scaled façades of these houses are decorated with arched openings, which are surmounted by rectangular panels (Fig. 5). Raised plinth and veranda have created the transition between the inner house and the street.

### 5.2. BUNGALOW TYPE HOUSES

The residences of Tarok Chandra Saha (Building 2-Baithak khana), Gopi Chandra Saha (Building 4), Panu Chandra Saha (Building 5 and 6), Nihar Chandra Saha (Building 7) are bungalow type residential buildings. The two-storied residences have a prominent central porch and their front façades are highly decorated with Neo-classical style with a symmetrical plan.

The residences are generally situated by the road and a frontcourt. A layer of inner courts has made the spatial arrangement of the residences compact. Although this type of plan is highly influenced by British cottage, bungalows of Birulia adopted many local characteristics including large verandas and terraces, service and sanitary areas, etc. They enhance the cooking and service area is behind the house plan. (Figure 05)

### 5.3. COURTYARD HOUSES

The residences of Rajani Kanto Saha (Building no 1), Tarok Chandra Saha (Building No 3), Guru Charan Saha (Building No 12) are the courtyard houses of Birulia. The styles and elements of the front façades are very similar to the façade styles of bungalows. Spatially, they are organized around internal courtyards for functional, practical, socio-cultural and climatic reasons. The inner courts accommodate many informal and semi-private domestic activities. Generally, the private rooms are arranged around the inner courts. Service zone is set behind the house, which is connected with the waterway. The formal or front area is constructed with entrance portico and living rooms express colonial character, but the spatial arrangement of the multiple courtyard house plans show the local sense of privacy especially for women. (Figure 06)



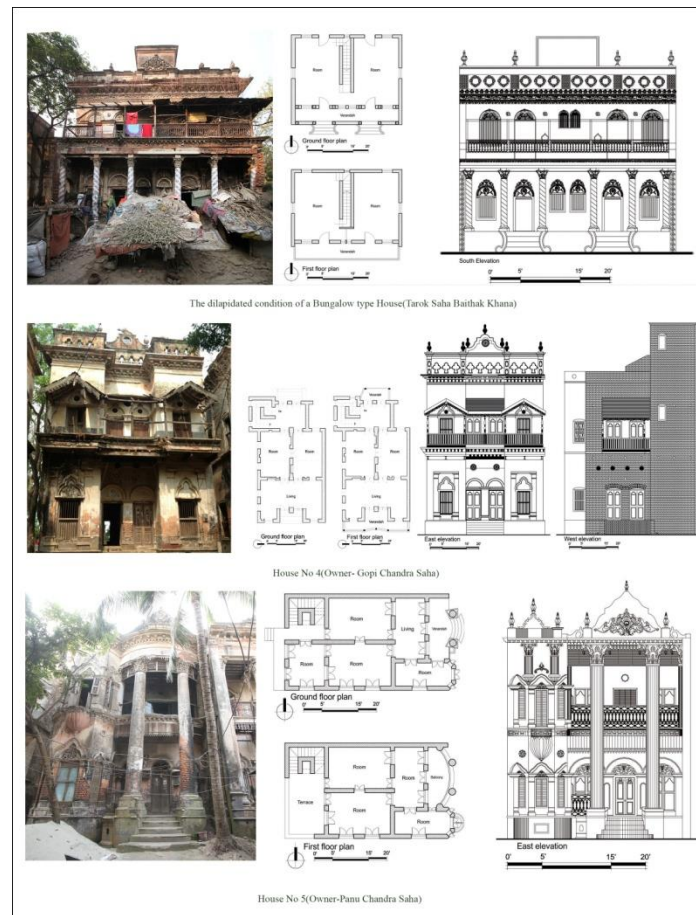


Figure 05, Bungalow Type Houses (Source: Author)

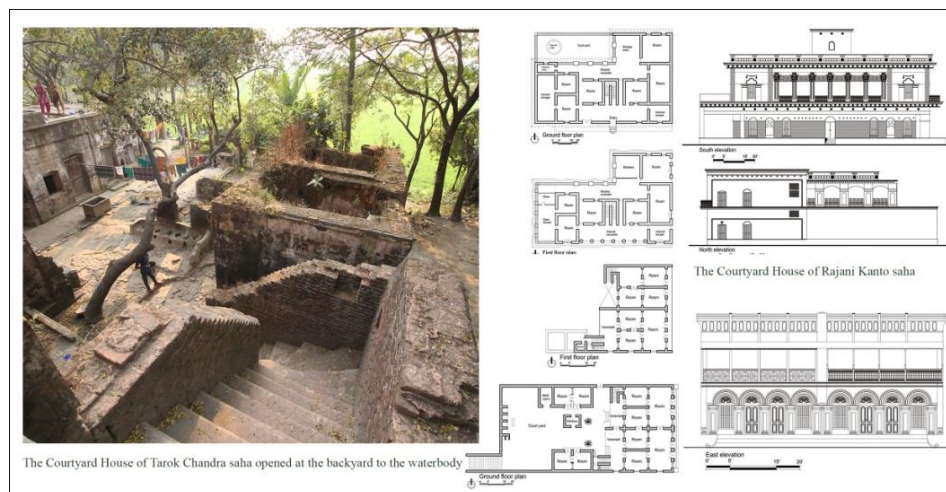


Figure 06, Courtyard Type Houses (Source: Author)

### 5.3. RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

Five temples along with *mandapa* can be found in Birulia settlement. These religious edifices represent graceful examples of the European Renaissance style as adopted in Bengal during the colonial period. Radha and Krishna are worshipped at the community temple of Birulia. They are also worshipped inside the houses as well. Some merchants have dedicated their houses in the name of the deities, e.g. Panu Chandra Saha dedicated his house to Radha and Krishna. The written evidence is still evident on the frieze of this building. Worship of Durga (goddess of prosperity) is also a universal festival in Bengal. Nehar Chandra Saha dedicated his house, in the name of Durga. Tulsi is also seen in some houses.

In contrast, few old buildings are loosely structured on the north, east and middle part of the landscape. No residential building of Saha merchants has been found on *Jele Para*. The rich merchants of Birulia during the colonial period selected their residences on the southwest portion of the landscape because it was located in relatively high ground and set on a suitable distance from the community market.

## 6. Architectural Elements of the Buildings

The Elite houses of the colonial period contain grand and huge columns, decorative arch, different arched openings, pediment, and other decorative elements. These elements are the integrated part of the building's form which is extensively used with a variety of decorations from the early stage of development until the colonial period. As the style matured it became less in volume and quantity.

The walls of the houses are found as load-bearing brick masonry. Usually, the thickness of these walls varies from 15 to 20 inches. Walls are usually finished with lime plaster both inside and outside. The overall color impressions of both interior and exterior walls are white because lime or chuna is used for surface treatment. Stucco and other ornamentations are applied to highlight the surface of the buildings.

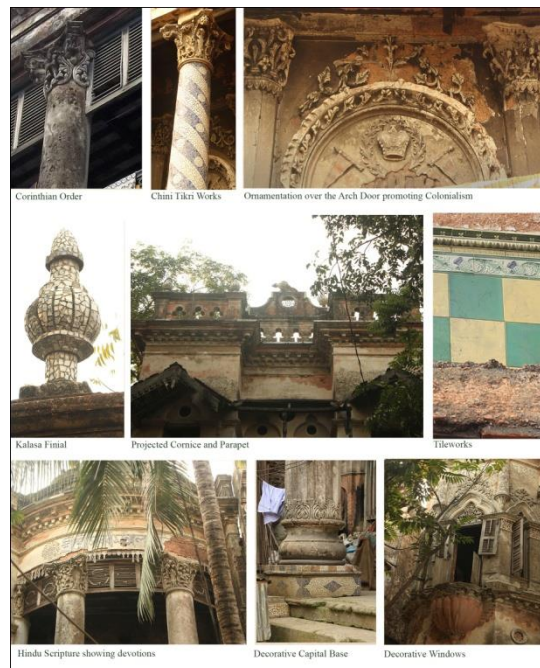


Figure 07, Architectural Elements at Houses (*Source:*

Different types of arches have been used in these houses. The most common types like a semi-circular arch, segmented arch, trefoil arch, multi-cusped arch, and flat arch etc. are found in the study area. Sometimes the exterior elevation is relieved with flat-arched openings. Above the openings, the entablature is mostly decorated with scroll floral and foliage works at the houses of Tarok Chandra Saha and Gopi Chandra Saha.

A variety of column types such as round and square shaped pillar, pilasters, pier, and clustered pier are found in classical character with their full ornamental features, like base, shaft, and capital.

Flat Roof construction system had been introduced during the colonial period where rafters and beams were used to cover the span in the houses. It is popularly known as the *Ganga-Yamuna* system. Generally, the rafters are made of steel I- section joist (Figure 07). 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 wall. Pediment or crest, kalasha finials give the buildings an elegant appearance.

The antiquity buildings of Birulia are basically built on high moulded, arched or niche decorated plinth. Some of the most common are in some cases, the entablature is framed by using flat moulding bands

or rectangular panels treated on the façade. The floor levels are defined externally with projecting cornice. Modillions and dentils are used to support ornate cornices.

Inner houses are also decorated with high-quality ornamental features, for example, most of the floors have colored net cement or mosaic finish. Round shaped ventilators are designed with cast iron floral works which are served on top of the wall surface.

The wooden doors and windows are ornamented with various colors of floral, foliage and geometric patterns. Blind windows and doors under decorative plaster is a common element. The merchants added a great variety of attractive ornamental features, such as cast iron, colored glass, wooden screens, chinitukri, marbles, etc. Cast iron is used to ornate as well as to protect a by the elements like the railings of the veranda, crest, Oculus, ventilators, ceilings, etc.

## 7. Zoning and Spatial Arrangement

Some of the merchant houses at Birulia contain the concept of zoning which is *kachari* (outhouse) and *andar* (inner house). The *kachari* or *baithak khana* or the outer house are always kept separated both physically and conceptually from the *andar* (inner house). Tarok Chandra Saha house has significantly two buildings for this purpose. The *kachari* or outer house areas are defined as the formal or public part of the house. The courtyard located within this part acts as public courts which possess more accessibility and less privacy. The inner house is identified as the private zone of the contained courtyard houses.

The service court is usually placed at the rear; this follows the layout of the rustic houses surveyed. The backyards are mainly used as services areas. A continuous veranda running around the court set the access primarily from the court to the veranda and secondly veranda to rooms. Stairs are well connected with the verandah for vertical circulation.

Environment and culture clearly influenced the design. The layout pattern of the houses also reflects cultural beliefs and prejudice of the Merchants. Religion and culture have been an integral part of the domestic architecture of Bangladesh. The main religions practiced in this region are Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Jainism. All of which favored the inward, defensive courtyard form in their philosophies of dwelling design.

## 8. Conclusion

It is apparently evident from the study that, Birulia was once a very vibrant settlement and a witness to the uprising of a merchant class at the late eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth-century linked with the socio-political condition of Bengal influenced by the colonial structure and ethos. Though the houses were influenced by European houses, their adaptability in zoning and function turned them into our houses suitable for this climate and context. They are the fusion of occidental form with oriental nature of spaces.

This paper conducted a comprehensive analysis interpreting the merchant houses in their context. The study has its limitations due to the scarcity of documented materials and written history. The original owners left the settlement to the oblivion. Birulia needs attention from the scholars and there is scope for developing conservation restoration, management to rejuvenate the area.

## 9. Acknowledgments

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