



Baliati Zamindarbari, Manikganj

Façade of splendour

Baliati Zamindarbari is situated about 35 miles northwest of Dhaka and 5 miles east of Manikganj district headquarters. There were two great periods of palace construction in India: the first corresponded to the period of Mughal supremacy from the mid-16th century to the mid-18th century and the second to the British Raj.

In both cases, the provision of an overriding central authority kept rulers in check and accelerated the growth of a provincial elite who gained both power and prestige as local representatives.

During the post-Mughal period, the British weren't the only ones who were changing the construc-

tion style. Magnificent palaces were also being built by local feudal chiefs -- Zamindars -- in a style to which was unique in the history of Bengal architecture. The families like Rags of Taras (Pabna), Mitras of Sitlai (Pabna), Chakrabartis of Balihar, Rags of Dubalhati (Naogaon) and Sahas of Baliati (Manikganj) were all Zamindars.

Though Manikganj has lost much of its past glory, its remarkable Zamindarbaris like the Tosta, Dhankora, Terosri, Pakutia and Baliati and other historic relics, both religious and secular, bear testimony to its rich heritage. Since Manikganj was within Dhaka district, it was more populous and

developed than other subdivisions. Moreover, in the early periods of Muslim rule, great Sufis and saints came here for their religious preaching and became famous for their activities. Manik Shah, one of the early Muslim saints, who came to Manikganj, was so famous that it is believed that the district was named after him.

Baliati Zamindarbari is one such remarkable example of the 19th century palaces of Zamindars in Bangladesh. A fascinating set of buildings of their Zamindarbari extended the reputation of the splendour and prosperity of the Saha family throughout undivided Bengal.

The Baliati Zamindarbari

originally consisted of five similar but separate blocks. The south facade of grand palace presents an attractive frontage of about 400 feet. Of the extant four blocks of the palace, the two central blocks are two-storied and the other two terminal ones are three-storied. The lofty encircling walls of the imposing Zamindarbari complex is pierced by three superb gateways, identical in their architectural features. Each imposing gateway is spanned by semi-circular arch surmounted by an attractive stucco figure of a lion. The lion gate was a common feature of the feudal palaces in colonial architecture and considered a symbol of pride and strength. The

broad facade of the palace with its impressive array of lofty fluted Corinthian columns lining a wide continuous corridor creates a grand consequence.

The vast complex of the Zamindarbari occupies an area of over 20 acres of land that is now beyond verification, while the block situated at the east-end of the building complex has now completely disappeared. The complex comprises over 200 apartments of varying sizes and shapes.

At present, the palace has four inner blocks or 'Mahals'. Each of the blocks situated around an oblong open courtyard behind the front line buildings. On the north there is a big excavated water tank with landing masonry "ghat" that leads long succeeding steps towards the water below. On the other side of the tank there are outhouses, servant quarters and stables.

The imposing central block with corridors on both sides is given highest importance. The broad staircase leading to the upper storey is a distinguishing feature of the palace complex around the reception hall dotted with artefacts, odd bits of art and crafts overlooked by a hanging chandelier from top of the ceiling.

In front of the Baliati Zamindarbari there is a temple in a comparatively good state of preservation and an old school and some beautiful fruit trees.

Nearly one mile to the south of the palace an artificial tank (dug by the Zamindars) in the middle of which there is a 50 feet high tower set on a square 'Airy Lodge' or 'hawakhana' with four attractive masonry landing 'ghats', one with screenwall that are reserved for women.

The buildings of Zamindarbari are gradually falling apart and in a pitiable condition of neglect. The Department of Archaeology that can still save a large number of these impressive Zamindarbaris from destruction should immediately initiate some efforts.

These Zamindar palaces in outlying areas of Bangladesh that were erected during the British period represented renaissance style derived from the aspirations of the local zamindars to European ideas and consciously cultivated European social habits. This led so significant changes in their palace architecture, featuring classical columns, attractive triangular pediments, semi-circular arches, slender Corinthians columns with acanthus, staircase with flights of steps, hall room in the centre with subsidiary rooms on both sides and elegant stacco decorations. But it is interesting to note that the geographical and social conditions of the region influenced and enriched the architecture by combining European Renaissance elements with some architectural features of Bengal. The individuality of Bengal's architecture comes from such an ultimate resolution of a series of stylistic experiment in a blend of eastern and western architecture that produced an extraordinary heritage of palaces unparalleled anywhere outside Bangladesh. The Baliati Zamindarbari undoubtedly is one of the finest examples of feudal palace architecture developed in the 19th century.

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