



100 years of glory

CURZON HALL: The Legacy

SINCE architecture is the art of creating space it demands to be entered and experienced. In spite of the fact that Bangladesh has a rich heritage of architecture, most of the buildings of the antiquity are lost. A few antique sites on excavation have revealed the foundation work and a few broken walls like in Mahasthangar, Paharpur and Mainamati. These ruins belong to the Hindu-Buddhist period. Due to the missing walls and roofs, the ruins practically have no enclosure to be entered into and thus cannot be experienced. One cannot imagine the experience without having it experienced. A good number of edifices still standing in-situ from the Sultanate, Mughal and the British periods are scattered all over the country and are obviously not readily available for visit. The inhabitants of Dhaka city however with a little effort can enjoy some of the artistic and historic buildings, weathering silently around them. The British Colonial buildings built within the last hundred years, although miserably unprotected can still be found in fairly good condition. This is primarily because these buildings have been in some kind of use from their inception till today and a bare minimum of day to day maintenance thus continued to exist. One such

building is the Curzon Hall of Dhaka University, whose foundation was laid on 1904 and going to complete its hundredth anniversary on the 19th day of February this year.

Curzon Hall is a magnificent example of the hybrid architecture of the British Raj. The two storey symmetrical building plan of the hall contains a double height central hall flanked by two wings having a series of rectangular rooms in the east and west directions. The whole building is wrapped with a wide arcaded corridor running all round the building thus allowing easy circulation of people, movement of air from all directions and protection of the rooms from rain and sun. Towards the central hall on the north, the arcaded corridor takes a pentagonal plan form containing a tower at the centre that provides the main entry to the building. The central tower on the north rises high delineated with eaves at different levels supported by brackets, perforated screen railing with geometric patterns along the edges of the corridors and finally terminated on top by cupolas. The corners of the central pentagonal plan form on the exterior are emphasised with hexagonal turret like piers partially embedded in the wall and also terminated on top with cupolas. The brick wall surface

has been broken by carefully proportioned recesses and horizontal bands and has been relieved by the vertical pilotes and piers. The central tower, heavy corner piers and the vertical massing of the building is typically British whereas the lightness of the arches, eaves, brackets, cupolas are all taken from the architectural elements of Fatehpur Sikri. Due to the absence of stone in East Bengal, Curzon Hall was built of unplastered brick masonry and coated with red-oxide on the exterior surfaces to resemble the red sandstone architecture of the great Mughals. Dark grey and white marble are used in patterns at the floor of the main hall and also used at the steps and floor of the main entry area. Light brown sandstone pieces are also visible at the steps on the rear side of the building. Like most of the buildings of the Raj the staircase to link the ground floor with the first floor above is made of teak, whereas steel I-beams are used to support flat roofs of the building. Curzon Hall although not a large building has a unique elegance and charm because of its careful proportioning, delineation of restrained details and overall order. The elements of fantasy represented by the cupolas crowning the central tower and the corner piers have

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given Curzon Hall a mystic value and rhythmic beauty. Curzon Hall unlike many of the white neo-classical buildings of the British Raj with ionic or corinthian columns and pediments (like in the old High Court building on the opposite side of the street facing Curzon Hall) is a unique building. Curzon Hall is unique because of its wonderful fusion and embodiment of the Western rationality and the Eastern sensitivity.

The then principal of Dhaka College, Doctor Roy had a long-felt demand for a general library for the college. Kumar Narendra Narayan, a prince of Bhawal Estate, donated a sum of Rs 1.5 lakh for the construction of the library. At this time, Lord Curzon,

the Viceroy of India was visiting Dhaka from Kolkata, the centre of the imperial government. The prince of Bhawal took this as an opportunity and named the proposed library building "Curzon Hall" after the name of the viceroy who laid the foundation stone. The white marble foundation stone embedded in the plinth of the building is read in black letters as the following.

**THIS FOUNDATION STONE
OF THE CURZON HALL,
DACCA
WAS LAID BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE
GEORGE NATHANIEL,
BARON CURZON OF
KEPLESTONE**

**P.C. G.M.S.L. GMIE.
VICEROY AND GOVERNOR
GENERAL OF INDIA
ON THE 19th DAY OF
FEBRUARY 1904 A.D.**

The construction of Curzon Hall was completed in 1908. Later in 1921, when Dhaka University was established on a 600 acres of land, Curzon Hall became a part of the university and began to be used for the Science Department. Later as the Science Faculty grew, a number of three and four storey buildings were built in close proximity of the Curzon Hall to accommodate various Science Departments including one students dormitory (F.H. Hall). This group of red-oxide coated exposed brick buildings are all built according to the architectural vocabulary of the Curzon Hall. These buildings together have achieved a wonderful aesthetic consistency and unity of form and have given the campus a sense of dignity. The surrounding lush green vegetation and careful gardening around these buildings have gained a wonderful balance between the man-made and the nature. The renowned anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss remarked when he saw Curzon Hall complex (Tristes Tropiques, New York, 1972) --- "My first glimpse of British University life was in the neo-Gothic precincts of the University of Dacca in Eastern

Bengal has since made me regard Oxford as a part of India that has got its mud, its humidity, and its superabundant vegetation under surprisingly good control."

The four storey building on the north-east corner along the Curzon Hall accommodates today the Faculty of Pharmacy. In this rectangular building, the corridor stops at the two large corner rooms. These corner rooms having no corridor around, contain instead a number of balconies (unlike that of Curzon Hall) in three directions. These beautiful balconies with perforated screen railings are projected out of the building and are suspended on brackets. Recently a few balconies on the east facade of the building have fallen out of place due to sheer lack of maintenance.

Dhaka University has a great tradition intellectual, cultural and environmental. This university owns elegant buildings from the time of the British Colonial rule, namely Curzon Hall (1908), Salimullah Muslim Hall (1921), Medical College (1940) and the Vice Chancellor's Bungalow. Dhaka University introduced modern architecture to Bangladesh with the inception of two of its great buildings i.e. University Library and the Fine Art Institute (1954). Later in 1965, the Teachers-Students Centre

complex has brought sun, air, weightlessness and a sense of contemporaneity with the rest of the world to the campus. But after the independence of Bangladesh, the university has not been able to put up a single decent building. Most of the buildings built after 1971 are trash. It seems that the university today seriously lacks the understanding that an artistic temperament with a love for architecture is absolutely required along with administrative competence to run decent institutions. The Colonial rulers as well as the Mughals never failed to recognise this. There are good architects available in the country with certain international recognition. The university seems to be totally ignorant of them. The building activities of Dhaka University is run by its culturally naive Engineering Department and the so-called sensitive and progressive teachers of the university seem to have no concern at all. If the university today is incapable of building anything decent or novel, at least it should be able to preserve what it already has, otherwise what respect the university can expect from the public?

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