



Burdwan house



Echoes of a living legend

FALGUN (spring) approaches with a gentle smile. Nature enchants so does it mesmerizes the souls of each Bangalee, as February rings bells of joy and pride, reminding a past full of fury, blood, sacrifice and aspiration. As the youthful leaves and fire-flame flowers adorn nature, the white walls of the Bangla Academy Building ie. the historic "Burdwan House" holds its head high and stands bold under the clear blue sky with fresh zeal. The barren premises then become a fair of book stalls of all sizes for people of all ages. This is the popular Ekushey Boi Mela. As scheduled programmes continue on the main stage, and book worms are engaged in buying books, youngsters and older people browse around with leisurely strolls. At corners or open spaces, on the steps of the Burdwan House or under the old big tree groups enjoy the

Bangalee traditional adda and laughter. Fans surround their favourite authors and poets while some remain busy with the tantalizing taste of Fuchka, Chotpoti or Jhal Muri or quench their thirst with steaming coffee, fruit juice, chocolate milk or even soft drinks offered from a vending machine. Like an old man who cherishes time with gone away memories, the Burdwan House like a living witness of time enjoys all this around him and seems to travel in the past. With all its colonial styled features this building has been witnessing history from a time when Dhaka in the early 20th century was facing a change in its appearance being the capital of the East Bengal and Assam during the first partition of Bengal in 1905. A brief journey with the memories of this building into the past can reveal its importance and the time that now rests high up in the mystic world.

1905 Dhaka. Being the new capital it was being turned into a vibrant place. The new planning of buildings particularly influenced by Lord Curzon were a new hybrid Mughal and European style. Naturally comes the names of Curzon Hall, Northbrooke Hall, Fazlul Haq Hall, Dhaka Hall, Dhaka Medical College, Salimullah Muslim Hall and so on. The Ramna area which had gained its importance since the Mughal period of 1610 and gone under different positive and negative phases was then regaining its glory. Along with other beautiful structures for government offices and residences for officials and professors in different places of the vast Ramna, three important buildings were built at that time; the Burdwan House was one of them. At a constructive time like that the Maharaja of Burdwan, Sir Bijoy Chand Mahtab, a member of the Administrative Council (1919-1924) came to Dhaka on official work once a year. It is said that he built the Burdwan House in 1906 for his convenience.

The Burdwan House contains an exclusive colonial style of late 19th and early 20th centuries. Originally a two storied building, it is rectangular in plan, the central bay holding the main entrance portico being projected out. A wide arcaded verandah runs in front of the building at both levels with balustrade railings. The arches are all semicircular which conform to the 19th century style (these type arches replaced the earlier two centred, four centred and multi-cusped pointed arches). The wide verandahs not only act as shading devices but also protect the rooms from rain and provides easy circulation with adequate lighting and ventilation. The semicircular open balconies adds spice to the beauty of this simplistic building. The main arcaded portico with a room offers a sheltered drop-off and warmly invites visitors through a flight of red-oxide steps to the building and then straight to the staircase hall giving access to the upper storey. The wooden staircase conforms with the wooden doors, window frames and louvered shutters. There exists a room with partial wooden

floor, according to some, which was used for dancers who came to the hall from a secret stairway placed behind. The heavy books, big volumes of files and records and endangering presence of termites must have hushed away the tingling sound of their ornaments and anklets that once used to enchant the occupants in this room.

It is said that around 1926, Kazi Motaher Hossain, the eminent professor of Dhaka University used it as his residence for sometime during which Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam as a guest, enjoyed the house and its beautiful premises. After 1947, the scenario of Burdwan House changed. It became the official residence of Khaja Nazimuddin who had become the new Prime Minister of the East Bengal. However after the death of Mohammad Ali Jinnah in September, 1948, Nazimuddin became the Governor General of Pakistan and was succeeded by Nurul Amin who then became the Prime Minister of East Bengal. He had used the house as his official residence till 1954. It was on December 3, 1955 that Burdwan House was declared the Bangla Academy and was renovated and another floor added in 1985.

Bangla Academy, Bangladesh's national academy of arts and letters is an institution devoted to the development of language, literature and culture of our country. The circumstances in which the Academy was launched are an integral part of the country's political history. The Institution has emerged out of the Language Movement which sings the ballad of the outburst of a nation's thousand-year-old love for her mother tongue. Bangla, linguistically belonging to the Indo-European group of languages dates back to more than a thousand years. A fine tradition of literature that is old, rich and varied introduces us to Vaisnava poets, Alaol of earlier times and of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibanananda Das in the later years or even the folk tradition of Lalon, Hason Raja or the ballads of Mymensingh. Despite all these treasures and the



majority of population speaking this language, the claim of this language was ignored by the men in power who came mostly from the west wing of Pakistan. Protests were immediate and recognition of Bangla as a state language was demanded. Following a

countrywide general strike, on March 11, 1948, the provincial government negotiated an agreement with the assurance of Bangla being accepted as one of the state languages. Some of these agreements and important discussions had taken place in Burdwan House. Hence, later, the ultimate result of the movements gave the Academy a physical existence. Yesterday's Burdwan House is today's Bangla Academy. As one keeps feet on the entrance verandah, a sculpture depicting a young man with a rifle greets him. Facing the old stair-hall, on both sides are rooms arranged that houses the library and offices. The first floor houses the Compilation and Research section as well as two exclusive archives dedicated to national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and the renowned Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah. The

uppermost floor is now being used as the Folklore and Technical Training Department.

Burdwan House is just not a mere structure of memories; it is a living legend, a source of knowledge. A leisurely stroll around this Burdwan House gives rise to all kinds of imagination. Maybe the Maharaja of Burdwan could be seen pacing up and down the long verandah or may be it is the great Nazrul under the old tree immersed in his poetic imagination! A snap could easily divert the mind towards the period of the Language Movement. Imaginary visions could reveal the walls of the meeting halls that stood in silence as government officials and political representatives discussed and argued on the issues of political decisions, or maybe it is the uproar of the excited students and people demanding their rights for Bangla in the premises of

Burdwan House while Khaja Nazimuddin and Nurul Amin who as stories say, flee from the back kitchen door. Allw these events and people who had lived then and had been in these premises are now a part of history. Their footsteps are forever lost to time; we can hear only the echoes now while every part of the building carefully protects the memories inside them. Let the echoes remind us of glories, failures, sacrifices, pride and aspirations and go on being a living legend.

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