



Neel-kuthi in sonargaon

## Hushed walls of cry and oppression

THE plastered, white walls do not interpret the past. It seems that a building stands in embarrassment and despair in the disguise of its alarming beautification. This is what can be said about the *Neel Kuthi* or *Kompani Ka Kothi* that stands presently with its so-called 'renovation' on the grounds of Dulalpur near Sonargaon's Panam Nagar.

Lying at a distance of more than 200 metres to the north of Panam and about 0.4 kilometres from the Mughal bridge known as the Panam-Dulalpur bridge stands this colonial structure. The building, as history depicts was initially used for cotton trade and subsequently, indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*). Indigo plantation or "*Neel Chash*" was first introduced to Bengal by the Europeans around 1795 and was completely stopped as a result of widespread revolt in 1858. But it was during the British period that a French merchant, Louis Bonnaud from America, introduced the plant and the knowledge of its effective plantation process. Being the first European indigo planter in India he established two Indigo *Kuthis* in 1777 and later built two more factories in Maldah and Jessore. Subsequently other Europeans

followed and there were many other indigo factories as well as large "Concerns" or "Houses" (which included many factories) spread to the other districts of Bengal. Situated about 10 kilometres from Banagram on the Ichamati river, the Mollahati concern was the headquarters of the Bengal Indigo Company which had been the inspiration behind the famous Bengali drama "*Neel-Darpan*" by Dinbandhu Mitra written on the oppression of Indigo planters. After sometime peasants realised that it was not at all profitable to them although the trade was highly lucrative to the planters. Hence, peasants were not willing to continue its cultivation anymore. This resulted in the various forms of oppression of the planters on the peasants. The cruel and greedy planters even went to the extent of burning villages, killing people and exerting inhuman torture to the poor unwilling peasants whereby emerged a popular Bengali proverb: "*No indigo box could be dispatched without being smeared in human blood*". At one stage the clashes between the factory workers and the planters and such confrontations became a daily event in the different plantation areas. These sporadic clashes resulted to a five-member "Indigo Commission" in

1860 by the Bengal Government, which ultimately submitted its report stating and admitting the unjust coercion and forcible engagement of farmers by the planters in such an unpopular trade. During the Indigo Revolt (1859-1860) there were no indigo plantations in the country and later the plantations steadily declined and by the year 1895, it was totally extinct. Indigo *Kuthis* were mostly built in the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and some of them still survive in different conditions. The *Neel Kuthi* of Dulalpur of Sonargaon is one of those surviving examples, isolated and built at a safe distance from the prevailing neighbourhood. The building started right from the edge of the road separated by a high plinth. In its layout design, it followed the courtyard typology and it seems that the courtyard was used for packaging and processing of indigo powder while the surrounding rooms were used as storage space. The rear of the building was completely fortified with blank wall surfaces, which were provided for defensive arrangements. The main entry was located on the road while there existed a side entrance in the middle of the north wall next to the stairs to the upper floor. Despite

being a two-storied structure, the upper floor had a mezzanine for storage purpose, the extended portion of which was visible in the front façade as blank wall panels. The original remains that survived since the colonial period today exists in books and photographs only because a local chairman taking lease of this building has brushed off all of its past to give it a new look. So, only records tell us about the architectural design and character of the original building, about how the decorative treatments expressed the transposition from European architecture and blended in places with local motifs influenced by the Mughal architecture. The building with all these features and details although had barely escaped the claws of natural destruction could not ultimately escape the flaws of an unaware builder. The original structure had a flat front façade with regular arched recesses for window and door openings. The contour of the principal arches reflected the cusped forms. The once existed exposed, brick walls topped with hard vines and creepers, the high stepped stairway which led the silent footsteps of embedded history,

the arches with their distinct architectural character making up the façade - all lost their entity with the imposition of its so called renovated face-lifting. Although like many of the *Kuthis*, the building was a simple one, with practically no such great architectural significance. Yet it contained within its two-storey high structure the touches of history, the eerie sound of lashing of whips on the barren shoulders and backs of weak peasants echoed and lay embedded in the walls. But today nothing remains, today's 'plastered walls' have hushed the sound of whiplashes and cries and of the ill-fated peasants who were tortured and even sometimes killed by the Indigo planters. The name *Neel Kuthi* still does ring a bell in the nostalgic sphere of history during the colonial period, but with our unaware activities in protecting our heritage sites how long the bells would ring has now becoming a burning question.

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Story: **ZAKIA RAHMAN, ARCHITECT**  
Photo: **SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN**

