



The old high court

Reminiscence of the days gone by



HIGH court-er majare koto Fakir ghere " the tune of a popular song resonates nostalgically with the word High court. The name derives its identification of a court building where silent footsteps echoes on the white marble floor as hushed voices of the court people -- justices, judges, barristers, lawyers, security personnel, pleaders and criminals of so many reverberate along the walls.

Today it is no more a court building but houses the Defense Ministry of the Bangladesh Government although originally constructed for a very different purpose. The white coloured two-storey grand edifice standing against the lush and verdant green Ramna, popularly known as the Old High Court Building was originally designed to be the official residence of the governor of the Bengal when Assam and East Bengal was created as a new province in 1905 -- the time of political and socio-economic change. Lord Curzon, the imperial wing of the Conservative party in England was made the Governor with hope for improvement in the administration.

Rapid growth of population rendered the administration of this vast area increasingly impossible. Moreover, the isolation and the difficulty of communication in East Bengal resulted in neglect and stagnant condition which was dominantly contrasting with the development of West Bengal, predominantly a Hindu dominant, while East Bengal was of Muslim dominance. To initiate a balanced development, Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal in 1905 by uniting

Assam and Chittagong with fifteen more districts of East Bengal to form the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam with Dhaka its capital.

The development of architectural edifices saw a new dawn in the wake of this

Partition of Bengal. Influenced by Lord Curzon quite a number of notable buildings were erected during that time -- the Curzon Hall, the Northbrook Hall, Fazlul Haq Hall, Dhaka hall, Dhaka Medical College, Salimullah Muslim Hall to

name a few, and of course, the Old High Court Building. Although initially designed and constructed as the residence of the Governor, it had been suggested that it was not fit to be the governor's residence. Hence, during the first phase of its birth, the building was used as an office for sometime and then given to the intermediate college. But after the partition in 1947, this was used as the High Court.

The monumental old High Court building is located on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, opposite the Curzon Hall in contrast to it. Approached through an elegantly built triple-arched gateway in the south this edifice stands at the centre of an extensive area originally laid out with a planned landscape of formal garden and plantations. Designed in a symmetrical plan with the entrance as the central focus of the facade composition, this elegant white edifice presents a graceful example of the European Renaissance style.

A prominent feature of the imposing facade is the central porch under a triangular pediment supported on Corinthian columns. The central part of the building facade is crowned by a dome, which rests on a ring of columns. As one enters the building, one can easily see on both sides of the 28 ft square hall which has the image of two wide verandahs paved in white marble. The colonnaded arches with balustrade railings flanked on both sides creating visual harmony bind the external facades of the verandahs.

Beyond is the staircase flagged with white marble, leading to the upper storey. Different rooms or halls are arranged along the north-south oriented verandah. The rooms are protected from the tropical monsoon or the glare of the sun by the wide verandahs. On the west of the entrance hall are the drawing rooms of similar

dimensions (35 ft X 24 ft). On the east, there is a ballroom, which measures 60ft x 55 ft, with a verandah on the south. The floor of the ballroom is of polished teak timber plank. A long corridor around a large rectangular inner courtyard

presents one of the common architectural features of this country. The inner central courtyard is overlooked on both the east and west wings by long covered corridors and a circular projection in the centre of each wing. The two-storey northern

wing facing south accommodates four large bedrooms measuring 28ft x 17ft -- 8 inches and 25ft x 16 ft with dressing and bathrooms between them. These are also flanked by two 9ft -- 8 inches wide verandahs at the front and the back. A

staircase through the middle of the north wing leads to the upper storey. There are two spiral staircases at the corners of these quadrangular blocks. Presenting a grand and graceful edifice complementing the European Renaissance, this building stands as one of our heritages.

The premise of the High Court bears another story. A mausoleum stands and many devotees pay homage, yet not knowing exactly who rests in eternal peace. According to some it is the tomb of Subadar Islam Khan Chishty, the founder of Dhaka, as the mausoleum was once known as the Chishty Behesty's Mazar.

But contradictions were revealed from other sources. From the essay "Baharistan-e-gayebi" written by Mirza Nathan a story goes on like this: Islam Khan became sick and unconscious at one stage when he was residing in Bhawal and due to improper medication, he collapsed. His corpse was brought to the garden, Bag e-Shahi of Jahangirnagar, where he was buried.

According to another source, Masir-ul-Umara, Emperor Jahangir took the body to Fatehpur Sikri where it was buried and a monument constructed. Dani also complements this information, but adds that the body was kept for some time in the Bag-e-Shahi (the present High court area) and then taken to Fatehpur Sikri for burial. However diversified these stories are, it is true that some noble person was buried here before the construction of the High Court building and the mausoleum still gives company to the European Renaissance Building giving it a touch of religious divinity and together tuning a united story of heritage.

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