



Edifices of Farashganj's brick mansions

DHAKA can look back at its past for a new lease of life, from the crowded, winding and forgotten old Dhaka mahallahs where the thriving settlement had begun before the Mughals made it the capital of Bengal. This is where the oldest, most elegant buildings still stand as reminiscence of the grandeur and magnificence they once embodied.

A tryst with the past can take the pulse of the vibrating localities among the maze of lanes and by-lanes, ambling through its 700 mosques, 52 markets and 53 lanes. Among the worn-out and despair, there is the variegated scenario of hope and glory.

The French merchants came to Dhaka in the 1680s and settled in Tejgaon. They established Farashganj as a trading quarter with permission to conduct business from Naib Nazim

from the Sutrapur Zamindar Bari up to the Lal Kuthi. Farashganj, a treasure trove for traditional architecture, is now the centre of vegetable, spice, timber and cement wholesaler. It is full of derelict and often abandoned palatial mansions, many of which are over 150 years old and still proudly stand in their ornate disposition. Among which are Basanta Babu, Prasanna Babu, Jatindra Saha, Ashu Babu, Ruplal, Uma Babu, etc. Besides there are other buildings, some four centuries old - Bihari Lal Jeo Mandir, Bibi ka Raoza, Shib Mandir, Gokul Roy's Samadhi, Lal Kuthi.

To commemorate Lord Northbrooke's visit, Lal Kuthi, the elegant Indo-Saracen building, in 1879 was erected. Subsequently used as a town hall, library and various offices, it blended the Mughal and Renaissance elements most cunningly. In a

Madhusudan and Swarup Chandra bought vast estates and established one of the leading families of Dhaka in the late 19th century. Swarup bought these buildings from Aratone -- a rich and influential Armenian salt merchant who led a colourful life with kite flying, pigeon and cock fighting. The Calcutta Martin Company modified and extended the original house to rival the Ahsan Manzil. Swarup's sons Ruplal and Raghunath inherited the houses. Ruplal, a music connoisseur, used to arrange soirees for the elite in the house.

The house, a listed property now occupied by the BDR personnel and the spice traders, can be entered from the main road on the north and the river on the south. It consists three blocks -- the imposing western one of Ruplal, the richly eastern one of Raghunath, and a connecting bungalow offset from

living rooms, other external rooms on both sides, and the internal court surrounded by colonnades to connect other rooms around. The ground floor verandas in each block surround the large public courtyard. The columns are of hybrid origin. Courts are of similar size in this block. There is an oblong court open to the riverside in the Ruplal's block.

2. *House of Jatindra Kumar Saha:* This one of Jatindra Kumar Saha -- a zamindar from Tangail, currently houses the Kabi Nazrul College Hostel. The grand entrance foyer in the north is distinguished with a projecting convex plinth, heavy square piers and huge pillars. Next is a big veranda, flanked by stairs and an exterior room, leading to the living room, and the corridor around the main courtyard. There are four courtyards. The northwest yard adjacent to the



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Nawajesh Khan in 1740. They flourished in the Muslim, crystal, essence and wine businesses for over 50 years. The French had their office in the Ahsan Manzil and its vicinity, which they bought from Sheikh Enayetullah, a Faridpur Zamindar. Ali Mian acquired these in 1835 from the French who had left the area half century ago. Mr. Pogose, an Armenian businessman and philanthropist, took lease of the area from the English, though officially it was under the French. The mile long Farashganj Road is elongated East-West starting

sign of utter disrespect, a recently erected government office now obscures its view. However, most noteworthy of the Farashganj edifices are the brick-built multi-court mansions. These used cast iron railing and balusters, lime plaster on small hand-made bricks, Greco-Roman columns with ornate capitals.

Below is a brief of four such mansions; the last one is no more.

1. *Ruplal House:* Mathura Nath Das' business could not earn him the dignity and aristocracy he longed for till his sons

the main road fronted by the entrance court. Two archways connect this with the other blocks at upper level. A gabled roof tops the western archway. The eastern connecting archway has a style similar to that of the central block. The bedrooms are on the upper floors with terraces to pan the river.

The main blocks have two courts each, surrounded by rooms. The north entrances fronted by foyers are grandly disposed with double height Corinthian columns, pediment and entablature. This lead to the

road has a separate entry. Its surrounding rooms were for public use. The southwest courtyard was for the services. There are first floor terraces on the south and southwest.

3. *Prasanna Babu's House:* Prasanna Babu, a moneylender and trader, built this magnificent three-storied building more than a century ago. The south-facing 40' x 200' house built on the property line has an alley running along the eastern wall. The axial entry through the facade block of a guardhouse, guestrooms and bureau in low-

height rooms leads to the colonnaded public courtyard. On the facade, is a curved balcony with cast iron balustrades overhanging the street.

An axis with symmetrically arranged rooms on both sides lead to the family courtyard, the rest consists of a room and a staircase. There are separate staircases for the public, family and service zones. The first floor including part of the service area, the guardhouse and habitable rooms rise up. The entire upper floor is inter-connected, the front part through open corridor above

the colonnade. The partly three-storied building has many small terraces.

4. *Adi Basanta Babu's House:* Sitanath Roy Chowdhury, a Barisal zamindar, bought this house from Basanta Babu, who had other houses in Farashganj. The detailing of the arches, round columns on the ground floor, piers on the upper floor along the iron railing, and incomplete dance hall surrounded by stained glass windows gave elegance to this mansion, aka Sutrapur Zamindar Bari. The inheritors approached

various bodies to have this building conserved, but failed. Very recently they sold it and left the country. The jewel of Farashganj is already been ground to dirt by the developer.

The east-west elongated house oversaw the famous Iron Bridge. There was an alley along the south while the north had open spaces. The entrance veranda led to the hall room, backed by an inner room. Next to it was the semi-public courtyard surrounded by corridor and rooms. The symmetrical arrangement had flanking rooms on both sides

of the hall, living room and entrance veranda. The staircases and rooms on either side of the courtyard were symmetrically arranged. The first courtyard was connected to the family yard with a double-sided corridor. This had colonnades around it linking the bedrooms and a service court at the back that consists of a well and a narrow stair up to a terrace. The terrace surrounded by high walls took a third of the first floor area to the west.

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