



Nimtali: The maiden British-era building

N AWAB Sirajuddin assembled an army to plunder Kolkata at the peak of his conflict with the British ordering *Naib Nazim* Jasarat Khan to kill the British in Dhaka. Khan confined the British in the old fort of Dhaka (present Central Jail), confiscated their valuables and sent them to Murshidabad.

He released them the next day with an undertaking not to oppose the Nawab. Later Nawab Mir Kashim Ali, learnt of Khan's treachery, and ordered Dewan Mohammadi Beg to imprison him. However, Khan conducted the British to Kolkata in 1763 before he was captured and brought to Munghyur. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Swinton rushed from Lakshmipore and took over Dhaka and resided at the old fort. Lord Clive reinstated Jasarat Khan to the post of Naib Nazim in 1765. The Naib stayed in Bara Katra as Swinton occupied his old residence. Swinton constructed the *Nimtali Kothi* and the *Deuri* as the gatehouse hastily in 1766 -- the first noted building built during the Colonial Period in Dhaka.

Till 1843 the palace housed Nawab Hasnat Jung and Nawab Nusrat Jung who were already stripped of their power in 1822. Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal, acquired the land and buildings and set up the Dhaka Museum in 1913, realised after seven years. It was housed in the eastern-most building and started in 1925. The *Deuri* housed the office of the Asiatic Society of Dhaka after its formation in 1952. The Dhaka University now occupies most of the original compound.

Nimtali *Dalan* consisted of a number of separate buildings within a vast compound spread up to the present High Court site (*Bag-e-Badshahi*). It included the *Nawabi*

Dighi (the Fazlul Haq Hall tank) and *Nawabi Masjid*, a single domed mosque to the south inside the Ananda bazaar Basti. Among these, the *Deuri* was the most imposing one. Rs 6,000 monthly pensions did not allow the Nawab to maintain the complex resulting in deterioration and disappearance of most of the buildings except the *Deuri*. Some saw a brick gateway besides the *Deuri*; others described a similar

gate at the eastern side, common for most Mughal complexes.

Bishop Heber left a vivid account of the complex in 1824: "...we drove a considerable way through the city, then through an old brick gateway into a sort of wild-looking close, with a large tree and ruinous buildings all around. In front was another and really handsome gateway, with an open gallery..."

He further noted: "...the inner court was surrounded with

low and irregular but not inelegant buildings, kept neatly, and all white washed. On the right hand was a flight of steps leading to a very handsome hall, an octagon supported by Gothic arches, with a veranda round it, and well venetianed high Gothic windows..."

Besides these, a chamber with twelve doors known as *Baraduari* was there, used as an audience hall for twelve *Sardars* of the city. It is now hidden inside the *Anwar Pasha Bhaban* of the University.

Naib Nazim Jasarat Khan, coming from Qum, descended from the fourth Caliph Hazrat Ali (RS), and was the spiritual head of Dhaka's Shias. Hence, Nimtali *Deuri* was part of the socio-religious life of the Dhakaites. Early nineteenth century paintings by Alam Mussawar, now at the National Museum, depict that an Eid procession used to originate and terminate at the Nimtali *Deuri*. Another significant event was *Nobuat*, flag music, played from the *Deuri* gallery. This, allowed by the British, was a mark of sovereignty, which the Naib never enjoyed. The *Niabat* was shifted to Murshidabad in 1715, and people disassociated themselves from them because of their servile association with the British and poverty. With the East India Company's right to collect taxes, the Naib's role was reduced; British Tax Collectors were the actual administrators since 1765.

Nimtali *Deuri*, a secular building built at the start of the transition from Muslim to Colonial rule, bears a metamorphosis of styles as details have been taken from various sources though the end represents the local crafts. It is Mughal in planning and ornamentation, Regional in material use and structure, and Colonial in period and roof construction. The building



follows Mughal order in spatial arrangement in axis and symmetry; the gradual change in scale helps in generating the sequential spatial transition.

The kiosk shaped cupolas on the roof, the balconies, and mouldings in parapet, plinth and polygonal shape are largely Mughal. The rectangular panelling on the exterior wall can be found in Mughal structures in the region -- the *Lalbagh Fort*, and *Bara Katra*. The morphology of the gatehouse resembles the earlier Mughal gatehouses of Dhaka. The features like three-storey height, open gallery and balconies, three central windows, fluted arch on pilasters, a large opening in urban scale with a small opening behind are taken from Mughal examples. However, its polygonal shape is unique which distinguishes it from other gatehouses of both earlier and later period. Qualities of pre-Mughal architecture are also found in its mass-volume ratio, proportion of interior spaces, low ceilings, niches in walls and kalasa motif in the

plinth.

Yet the building represents time and expresses the function clearly. The thick masonry walls built with small hand-made bricks covered with lime plaster that shapes arches, columns and mouldings, are the contributions of the local *ustagars*. This initiated a fusion of Colonial, Bengal and Mughal building crafts and techniques. This is probably the earliest surviving building using cast iron joists of both I-section and timber girders in different places. Brackets used in this building and some column mouldings were influenced by the colonial architecture. Popularly known as *Ganga-Jamuna*, the type of construction was practised extensively for the next two centuries. Stone was used in only cantilevered part and balconies.

Most of the surroundings of the *Deuri* have been lost. No trace can be found of the original road network across the Chand Khans Pool (towards the Mymensingh Gate) along the palace walls. The present road started in late nineteenth

century along the old rail tract provides a little glimpse of the gatehouse over the shanty structures when approached from the west. Other structures of the palace complex have either gradually decayed or have been transformed, such as the *Baraduari*. The new Society building with a total disregard for the social and historical context of the site obscured and submitted it to derogatory uses. Thus the historic structure remained as a burden -- neither demolished nor put into any proper use. It is an irony that the splendid structure probably survived because of the financial inability to demolish it, which is the usual case. An appeal to the Archaeological Department was made in 1982 to conserve the building, which only enlisted it. Two other attempts were made in the 1990s with the association of architectural students, academicians and foreign experts without any fruition.

The *Deuri* is a simple building with two small rooms on both sides of a 6m wide double height vestibule.



The 10 m² rooms can be used for information and reception, souvenir shop, snack corner etc. These are connected at the over the lobby providing two chambers- an airy and well-lighted 60 m² large hall, and a 20 m² room, suitable for using as exhibition space for rare books, manuscripts, coins, paintings etc. There are, however, few physical and technical constraints in readopting the suggested uses into the form derelict due to abuse and lack of maintenance. Excavation must be done to unearth the deterioration on the plinth and create a sense of transition at the entry; a new set of stairs must replace the present one at the northeast corner. Also extensive repair and refurbishment is required to bring back the splendour the *Deuri* once possessed.

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