



A landmark in despair

THE Settings
"The instinct to climb to a high place, from where you can look down and survey your world, seems to be a fundamental human instinct". (Christopher Alexander et al., "A Pattern Language"). The Parir Pahar (Fairy's Hill) is one such high site, on which sits the Chittagong Court Building. It is the largest single building atop a hill before Bengal was divided. The British purchased the 25-acre property of hill and valley from Zamindar Akil Chandra Sen and built the two storied red brick building in 1892/98. The site had two large water bodies in the northern valley for a park (later filled for a hawkers market). The building was surrounded by open park spaces with public access. It was a favourite spot of city dwellers and tourists to look down and have a comprehensive view of the town below, the river, hills and plains beyond, thus satisfying a natural human instinct to survey one's own

surrounding. A passer-by travelling on the main road below or an outsider approaching the town from the river could view this imposing building from afar, which is now obstructed by tall buildings put up by the government in the foothill.

The British, and the subsequent governments had always used it as the Court and the seat of administration. Besides the Main Court House, there were other important buildings located in the lower slopes such as the Record Room and the Registration Office. Later other buildings were added haphazardly destroying the pleasant aesthetic setting.

Building: Architectural Features

The building has a unique blend of Mughal and British traditions, representing a new Indo-British architecture. The building plan follows a rectangular form running east west with extension on the west and a major north-south extension

on the east after which the buildings extends further at a lower level. This permits this section to have three floors. The plan is largely dictated by the topography of the site. The blending of different levels was done with extreme care. Bricks were laid with immense skill, making neat protruded mortar joints.

Wide corridors with twin semicircular arches resting on corbelled capitals occupy the central portion of the south facade on the first floor. Each twin arch on the first floor corresponded to one arch on the ground floor corridor. The central grid on either side has been treated as a pedestrian entrance with the arches making different decorative patterns and culminating in a decorative pediment of circles, and arches. Rainwater down pipes are square edged and consciously placed between the arches and under cornice mouldings.

Protruding from the centre of this corridor is the arched main entrance

porch for vehicles, flanked on both sides by two square entries. The arched porch has a series of small circular openings forming a horizontal band on top. On the first floor the whole wall surface is punched with narrow openings culminating in semicircular arches. On the two flanks a series of corbelled circular openings forming a series of horizontal bands were constructed over each of the above narrow arched openings. The top has a central cupola with tiny ones on the outer sides. It is unclear how the top of the main top porch was roofed as the additional floor constructed in 1953 finished off with a flat roof.

Elegantly decorated cornices protect openings from the weather. At the corner of the building the cornice is octagonal in shape emphasizing the turning point of the load-bearing wall. The building is embellished with cupolas, recesses, engaged turrets and window screens akin to Mughal art.

The floor consists of sandstone floor tiles sitting on iron joists and ribs.

Beside the formal entrance from the top there is a wide-open stairway for pedestrian blended with the site from the lower level leading to a carefully detailed wide arched opening. The panel above has decorative foliage motifs in shallow stucco relief. A series of semicircular cornice mouldings embellishes the roof edge.

Windows when placed on outer walls are spanned in various ways. They have semicircular glass panels of various sizes. When horizontal, the brick masonry above is laid of flat brick arches and bands of lime concrete protruding out as flat arches above and windowsills below. The railing of cast iron along the main stairway has a delicate design and the steps and balustrade were of mahogany wood.

Historic Importance

The Court Building is of immense historical importance. Legal proceedings against many renowned persons had been conducted in this building. These consist of cases against persons revolting against the British rule and subsequently Pakistani rule. During the Indian Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, a valiant freedom fighter, Subedar Rajab Ali was tried here and subsequently hanged at the Parade Ground. During the Partition of Bengal movement (1905-1912), Deshpriyo Jatindra Mohan, Karam Ali and Maulana Islamabadi were tried amongst others. Revolutionaries of the Chittagong Uprising (1930-34) Maste rDa Surya Sen, Kalpana Dutta, Ananta Singh, Purendu Dastider, Binod Bihari, Pulin Ghosh, Tripura Sen, Loknath Bal, Chowdhury, were tried here. So were Joshoda and Ambika Chakraborti of the *Anushilan Party* during the same movement. This movement is the forerunner of the Quit India movement which culminated to the end of British Rule in the subcontinent. Both Subash Chandra Bose and his brother Sarat Bose defended the freedom fighters in this Building.

During the Quit India Movement in 1942, numerous national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, G.M. Sayeed, M.A. Jinnah visited the Court

building. Later, during various movements (1948-1970) including the Language movement (1952) important national leaders like Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Sk. Mujibur Rahman, and others visited the Court Building and addressed the Bar. During 1971 freedom fighters from the Pakistan Rifles took shelter here, which resulted in the shelling of this Building by the Pakistan army. The first administration of the newly formed Bangladesh was housed in this Court Building. Records of court cases of numerous such trials are preserved in the Building.

Current State

The Building is in a state of neglect and unattended. Fungus has covered northern walls; leakages from pipes have caused dampness to the wall surfaces in some parts. The most damage has been caused to the corridor floors in the north and south. Rainwater seeping through the sandstone floor tile joints and the limestone surface has corroded the iron ribs and joists below, in some sections. The main wooden staircase has been damaged with overuse and neglect and the cast iron railings are missing in many parts. A Court Order has been passed to the authorities to maintain the building.

Conclusion

Conservation of buildings and sites is little understood and less valued. It is important to establish a mechanism for this activity - one that works. To uphold our image as a nation with a cultural and historic past, and to promote tourism conservation and preservation of History and Heritage must form a routine exercise of the normal planning and development activity within Development Authorities and Municipal Bodies. Conservation of the Chittagong Court Building and many other such landmarks must be saved for our future generations.

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