

DHAKA'S HIDDEN PEARLS-1

Ruplal House: Unique features in wholesale wreck

Precious motifs, cast iron grills, imperial columns and many more of this unique structure are left to ruin

DURDANA GHIAS

Rows of grocery shops, godowns of onions, dried chilies, turmeric, ginger, garlic, betel leaves and various spices, where vegetable traders are bickering with the buyers under a big shed. This is the portrait of Ruplal House, an edifice of colonial period, in Farashganj in the city.

When this correspondent walked into the compound of the 150-year old palatial residence of Ruplal Das, a merchant, the whole area was buzzing with wholesale buyers and traders making the entire complex look like a grimy and chaotic wholesale trade centre.

People and vehicles were coming in and going out of the place with loads of supplies completely unaware of the historical value of the house.

The architectural style of Ruplal House reflects that of the late renaissance period. This is the only structure bearing this style in the Dhaka region.

The magnificent towering colonnades of the main entrance is covered by rows of warehouses. One walking by the entrance will not be able to see or feel that a grand entrance is stifled behind the rows of shops. The colonnades are visible only from the rooftops of the multi-storeyed buildings nearby.

From the rooftops the Ruplal House looks splendid standing by the river Buriganga. In spite of its dilapidated features it bears the testimony of lavish expenditure and affluence of its times.

The House is divided into two uneven blocks in east-west and is situated on Buckland bund. If seen from above the house is E-shaped. It has three extending arms -- one towards the north or to the city, the second one on the southern side towards the river and the third one is the biggest.

The upper floor of the building, located on a three-bigha land, is inhabited by the non-commissioned personnel of the defence force.



View of the front columns of the house

Ruplal House was reconstructed by merchants Ruplal Das and Raghunath Das, which they bought from Arratoon Stephen, an Armenian tycoon, in 1840. The extension and renovation was done by an architect of Martin Company of Kolkata.

There are around 50 rooms in the house including a central hall in the upper floor of the west wing of the building. The ceiling of the hall contains elegantly decorative motifs and the dance floor was made of teak wood, which was planked over the years, said locals.

Ruplal House first came into limelight in 1886 when Ruplal Das threw a ball dance party in the honour of Lord Dufferin. Ahsan Manjil was the dominating building at that time.

A massive migration of Hindus and Muslims took place after the partition in 1947. At that time the family of Ruplal Das left for Kolkata. Through a formal deed of exchange in 1962, one Siddiq Jamal took over the place.

Tawhid Amanullah, coordinator of Ruplal House conservation project of Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, said the floral motif on the columns is the characteristics of classical Corinthian fluted column.

On the northern and southern sides there are elongated verandahs with grills made of cast iron. The motif of the grill is called art-deco, which is found in the contemporary buildings like the ones in Panam City, Tajhat Rajbari in Rangpur and Puthia Rajbari in Rajshahi. he said.

"The Ruplal House itself represents a goldmine in terms of architectural and historical studies. It must be conserved at any cost in the way we renovated the Nawab Bari," said an expert.

"To conserve the individual identity of the house the whole area should be taken under the conservation project. The present inhabitants of the house will have to be rehabilitated elsewhere. The riverfront of the house can be highlighted. The road on the front and on the riverside should be declared for pedestrians' use only," said Amanullah.

"A museum, library and a cultural centre can be set up in the house to attract tourists, he added.

Asked why Ruplal House is not taken care of even if it is a listed heritage site, Md Shafiqul Alam, director, Department of Archaeology said that they do not have the ownership or access into the house. "We could not do land requisition for shortage of funds. We cannot evict the occupiers by force," Alam said.

The helplessness of the top officials of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs is to such an extent that when this correspondent asked whether any step would be taken to save the house they expressed surprise to know the name and asked where Ruplal House is located.



General view of the Ruplal House by the river Buriganga.

Haridas Banik, a trader with a shop in the Ruplal House and son of the caretaker, said that the government requisitioned the house in 1974. There is a case pending in High Court over its ownership.

Judhajit Das, great great grandson of Ruplal Das, now lives in Mumbai working as a senior vice president of ICICI, an insurance company.

Mira Das, great great granddaughter of Ruplal Das who lives in Kolkata, told Star City over telephone about the cultural environment of Ruplal House when she was only thirteen.

"We were a joint family. I was in Eden School [now Eden College]. I was the only girl in the house. Instead of playing with dolls, I used to play football and table tennis with my brothers who studied in the St Gregory's School," said Mira, now a septuagenarian.

"My father [Jogesh Chandra Das] was very careful about our education. He was very fond of singing. My mother [Kanak Prabha Das] was an active social worker. She was involved with Hindu Bidhoba [widow] Asram and was the president of AIWC [All India Women's Council]," she said.

"Musical soirees, wedding receptions and gathering of the elite were regular events at our house. I had lots of Muslim friends. We used to visit each other's house at parties. The family of Dr Hasan, the then vice chancellor of Dhaka University, was very close to us," said Mira.

"We left for Kolkata just a few days after the partition," she said.

"What I have heard about the present state of the house I do not wish to see. If I see it now it will break my heart," said Mira.

FOLLOW-UP

Mirpur kids' park returned to public

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

going on.

The disputed land, 17,700 square feet by area, was shown as a 'green space' in the city master plan dated September 15, 1961. Surprisingly, on December 12, 1995, the National Housing Authority (NHA) approved a layout plan showing the same space as a 'ditch'. The authorities

decided to construct 38 shops on the place under the DUPIP.

Hundreds of locals were cheerful as the advisers -- Anwarul Iqbal, adviser to the LGRD ministry and CS Karim, adviser to the agriculture ministry -- instantly instructed to suspend the market construction and assured the locals of saving the park.

Law enforcers took position at the park since that evening to avert any further destruction of the park.

"The advisers' visit to the park now makes us hopeful that it will be saved," said Zahirul Islam, 50, a resident of the area.

When asked what he expects from the government, Zahirul said, "We want punishment of the responsible government officials

and unscrupulous individuals who destroyed the greenery of the park within a few hours which took us a long time and a lot of money to create. We now need assistance from the government to revive it."

Another local echoed Zahirul's views.

On Friday night, this correspondent found a few chopped down trees on the site. Locals said that those trees were chopped down and bulldozed on April 16 and police was supposed to confiscate those trees. However, the trees felled before April 16 have already been sold to a firewood store located on Road 6 in H block, they alleged.

As owner of the firewood store Maidul was absent, an employee of the store said that Maidul had a contract for cutting all the trees for Tk 6,000. They chopped down around five hundred trees, but he did not know where those are now. He also said the officials might know where the trees are now.

No trees were found on the zonal Housing Estate office premises on Friday night and no official was available there for comments either as it was a public holiday.

Local residents rejoice the saving of the kids' park in Mirpur while police guard the area.

STAR PHOTO

Destruction of the park at H block in Mirpur section 2 has been suspended on Friday evening after two advisers of the interim government visited the site where construction of a shopping centre under Dhaka Urban Infrastructure Improvement Project (DUPIP) was

going on.

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