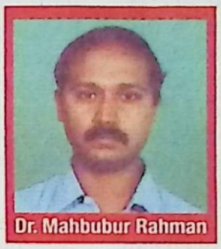
An Architect's Dhaka

Part Nine


Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

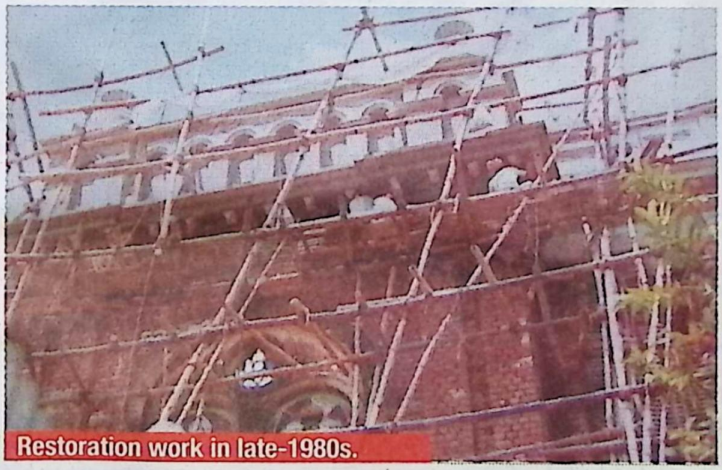
THE Ahsan Manjil in Kumartoli, the most splendid architectural landmark in Dhaka besides the Sangshad Bhaban, crowns the river bank in the oldest part of the city. The building, aka Pink Palace because of its colour, caught the fancy of Alimullah who had a tendency to appropriate personal artefacts of the royalty and saw himself in the image of the majestically reposing Mughals.

Sheikh Enayetullah, a zamindaar from Jalaldi, Faridpur, built a Rangmahal. The French merchants in Dhaka bought it from his son Motiullah and used it till 1830. Alimullah acquired it in 1838 to reside there. His son, Ghani Miah, who was later given the title of Nawab, among more to come, by the British mainly because of his stand against the 1857's Sepoy Revolt, engaged Martin and Co. of Kolkata in 1859 to make an extension to the mansion. The new structure, completed in 1872, was named Ahsan Manjil after his son. It became the Rangmahal and the older one the Andarmahal, connected by a covered wooden bridge.

In 1888 a tornado severely damaged and burnt down the buildings, which were rebuilt and the new one was crowned with a high dome. The 1897 earthquake badly damaged them, felling the dome. Once again these were repaired by the Nawab, while the family stayed at Dilkusha. As zamindari was abolished (1952), the family shifted to Paribag, and various low-income stakeholders rented the complex out. They even walled up many spaces and reduced it to a slum.

The Anglo-Indian styled Ahsan Manjil was influenced by the colonial bungalow in plan and a Neo-Classical facade. A lantern dome popular in England was added; the original roof was raised at the centre, along a small gable at the middle of the south facade. The older Andarmahal bears arched colonnaded and Palladian windows. Literature makes no reference to its original style; perhaps renovation completely stripped off the original features. The buildings stand as perfectly symmetrical rectangles after the modifications, their neo-classical facade harmonises the wings.

A rotunda with an octagonal drum supporting the dome over it is at the centre of the symmetrical rectangle plan of the Rangmahal on the upper level. On the west next to it are a wooden floor ballroom and a guest room. The east has an audience hall, followed by a guest room and a card room. A flight of steps leading from the south lawn into the upper lobby over the porch and through a three arched portal was added to provide access from the Buckland Bundh. Dignitaries taking this entry would be given Guard of Honour. At the lower level that looks like a podium, a billiard room and a dining room are symmetrically arranged. It has vehicular access from the north too. The first floor has arched colonnades with Corinthian capitals; the lower level pilasters are Ionic. The parapet is surmounted with kiosks.


Restoration work in late-1980s.

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The building deserved preservation because of its historic value, emotional attachment of the Dhakaites, prominence as a landmark on the riverfront, and due to the outstanding Ango-Indian style. The Manjil's historicity lies in its being the seat of socio-political leadership of Muslim Bengal and the centre of colonial urban development in Dhaka. Patronised by Nawab Salimullah, many activities leading to the emergence of Pakistan centred in Ahsan Manjil the cradle of all India Muslim League. Colonial rulers on Dhaka visit spent time here. Governor General Lord Northbrook attended a function in the mansion as he laid the foundation of the water works sponsored by Nawab Ghani (1874). Lord Dufferin enjoyed its hospitality (1888). Lord Curzon stayed in the mansion to drum support for the proposed partition of Bengal (1904).