An Architect's Dhaka

Part Thirteen

THE Ramna Governors House at the south end of Ramna Oval (green), popularly known as the Old High Court Building, was built as the official residence of the Lieutenant Governor of the newly created province of East Bengal and Assam in 1905. Its location was selected by the Lt. Governor designate Sir Fuller himself, who saw it only befitting to put it opposite the ongoing Curzon Hall building amidst the large expansive plains of Ramna, while the new Secretariat Building (present Dhaka Medical College and Hospital) was under construction on the west after the triangular college field (current Dhaka University Stadium).

Approached through an elegant triple arched gateway and a formal garden, the building had a series of rooms of various sizes, aligned on four symmetrically laid out wings overlooking a square inner court, and connected by double storied corridors. It is entered through a porch under a triangular pediment supported on Corinthian columns. A graceful lantern dome, found in many such civic buildings of the period in England, rising behind the pediment in the south elevation crowns the building. In plan the building is nearly symmetrical with a square entrance hall, a number of drawing rooms and a ballroom. A broad bifurcated staircase from the entrance hall leads to the second floor that has four large bedrooms with 10' wide verandas on both the north and south sides. In all, the building is a fine example of the European Renaissance style of architecture.

By the time it was completed, annulment of the partition of Bengal was very much in the air, and hence the authority including the Chief Architect was not sure how to furnish it. Thus it ended up with minimum office furniture, and therefore the then Lt. Governor Bayley couldn't like it. Hence the building either lay vacant or carried some official businesses before along with several other major buildings around (initially built to house administrative, civic and residential purposes of the new provincial administration) being given to Dhaka University. The Lt. Governor himself preferred to stay at the temporary lodge further east - a huge wooden bungalow with high sloping walls, raised plinth and ekra walls. The 'Temporary Governor's House' was located in the south part of Dilkhoosa Garden where the present Bangabhaban stands, erected in 1905 as office cum residence of the Lt. Governor. The Viceroy of India too used to stay in this bungalow during his East Bengal visits.



Shahbaj Kha's Mosque seen from above the podium of Teen Netar Mazaar

Meanwhile, the original Governor's House was used by the Dhaka Intermediate College and the Dhaka University was occupying the Curzon Hall and the adjacent chemistry laboratory given to the College across the street. Since then (1921) it has seen many changes in use Dhaka University Council (Senate) building, next as the High Court building, and later in the 1980s as the Defence Ministry office. With the construction of a larger facility in the 1960s nearby that now houses the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, the High Court was shifted from here in 1967. Currently this building serves as the office of the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs and the Law Council.

Over the years unsympathetic and ugly extensions and modifications, for example hanging toilets built by government officers attached to their chambers or corrugated iron veranda sheds, have marred the beauty of the splendid structure, one of only a few such architectural marvels Dhaka had that could rival the rich colonial heritage as found in such other sub-continental cities as Mumbai or Kolkata. Its restoration work started as a routine repair and refurbishing of the long-uncared-for structure by the Department of Architecture, who took the opportunity to undertake a conservation work based on old photographs and other records; this was completed in 1985. However, during the conservation some unauthentic modifications, for example the shades over the front terrace that converted them to veranda, were rather made permanent.