



# EDIFICES of the past

## 'I WILL FLOWER EVERYWHERE I AM PLANTED'

Since it is a part of Farashganj, the area must have been of some significance even before the twentieth century when it was titled Bashanta Kumar Das Road, as a tribute to a philanthropist by this name. Farashganj bears the memory of French East India Company in Dhaka. "I will flower everywhere I am planted", their motto went. The French were given permission to open a 'ganj' or market in 1740, and hence 'French-ganj' came into being.

The buildings we see today on BK Das Road were founded much later, but subtle traces still allude to the locality's much older history.

Holding #45, known as Boro Bari, is an illustrious example. Its front block, which works like a gatehouse and forms the facade we see from the street, is older than the rest of the building, and features French Rococo style of architecture. With its balconies, French windows and decorative pediment, the gatehouse is a beautiful structure. If you look closely underneath the balconies to see what is supporting them, you will find brackets (an architectural element that extends from the wall to support weight) in the shape of 'C's and 'S's.

"The C-curves and S-curves are a hallmark of French Rococo," Taimur Islam, CEO of Urban Study Group (USG), explained. "The curves are in the form

of leaf-like motifs, thus adding ornamentation to the structure."

USG is an organisation that works for the conservation of architectural heritage of Old Dhaka.

An architect himself, who frequently visits and vigorously studies old buildings of Dhaka, Taimur says that the memory of French East India Company in Dhaka. "I will flower everywhere I am planted", their motto went. The French were given permission to open a 'ganj' or market in 1740, and hence 'French-ganj' came into being.

This is not the only rare element that can be found in Boro Bari: the 'gatehouse' is connected to the main building through two elevated walk-



ways, something which we don't see in any other building. Between them is a public courtyard.

The entrance building had offices and a 'rang-mahal' (dance hall) on the upper floor. We can only guess that the residents of the house did not see fit to use the public courtyard, and used the walkways, which are supported by pillars, to go to the dance hall and return to the inner quarters.

"Inside, there were two more courtyards, which are now occupied, thus

hampering the ambience and feel of this heritage-building," Taimur complains. "Moreover, the dance hall is now used by book binders. Stacks of paper rise from floor to ceiling; the enormous weight is a threat to the structure."

Attempts have been made to demolish this building, and USG - with the help of the media, civil society and legal quarters- has protested the doom. So much so, one night of police protection was also managed.

## ELEGANCE EXEMPLIFIED

The mansions of BK Das Road radiate elegance. Lakshmi Villa, which sits at Holding #47, embodies style as well as antiquity. The facade's neatly decorated pair of balconies on two sides, with an elongated one in the middle, makes a good first impression.

The couple of balconies are readily brought into an onlooker's attention by their French windows, pediments, motifs and ornate Corinthian columns. The sheer symmetry of these elements, and the layout of the three balconies together, make the residence remarkably beautiful.

Ornamentation is at its peak here, quite literally, as the middle of the parapet (railing) is crowned by an intricately designed decorative pediment. And the railing itself reflects the age of the edifice, which was built during 1910s: the continuous series of small holes on its railing is a common feature of colonial period buildings.

## THE ABODE OF ENDURING FACES

If you glance at the parapets of these buildings, you would realise that adorned triangular pediments are a common feature.

Case in point is the crowning pediment seen at Holding # 65- Mongalalaya- popularly referred to as Putul Bari, built in 1915. From the street, we can see three decorative pediments and a number of finials (distinctive ornaments at the peak of a building) marking off the roof. The centre pediment is the most adorned and complex and it has in the middle a sculpture of a bearded man.

The building is home to many such faces-- sculptures on the wall, surrounded by circular/oblong-shaped 'frames' or borders, extend from the surface-- graceful women with a pendant around the neck, powerful men and watchful lions.

The house also happens to be a testament to the atrocities of the Pakistan army during the Liberation War. "In Dhaka, during 1971, this was an extremely rare building where the Hindu property

owner did not let go ownership. The mansion fell victim to arson attack. The balcony collapsed then, and we can still see charred walls," Taimur informed.

The front balcony is missing, but its neighbouring octagonal blocks on both sides, featuring pointed arches, give an idea of how magnificent the complete structure must have looked.

## REVERENCE - IN RETROSPECT

Besides mansions, the neighbourhood also has temples. "Sri Sri Pran Ballabh Jee Mandir is one of the best examples of neoclassical architecture," Taimur opines. "The arcade, formed by a succession of Corinthian pillars and semi-circular arches, is common in neoclassical style."

Meanwhile, Bihari Lal Jee Mandir is another historically significant building. The sculptures on the wall, of two British soldiers in uniform, reflect the building's antiquity.

BK Das Road has the pride of being the area where the oldest Imambara (C. 1608) of Dhaka is

situated. SM Taifoor in his book, Glimpses of Old Dhaka, wrote, "The earliest Shia house of mourning could be traced to a place called Farashgunj[sic] in Dhaka on the river bank where the site is called Bibi-ka-Rawzah."

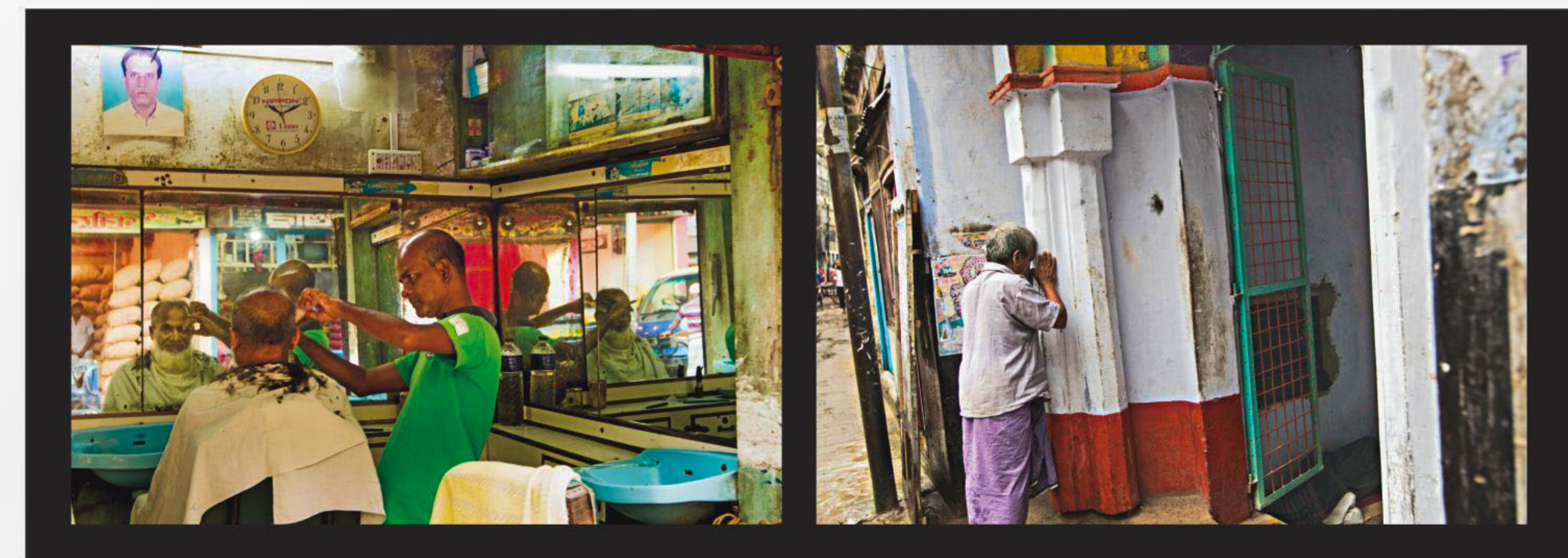
Unfortunately, the original building has been long gone: "... no vestige of any building except a half-built gateway and an unpretentious mosque," Taifoor wrote around mid-1900s.

## A WALK DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

There are a few other grand residences, like that of Mohini Mohan Das's, who was the nephew of the well-known Ruplal Das. This building was probably established around a couple of decades earlier than its counterparts.

Old Dhaka is dotted with old buildings no doubt; but very few localities have what this neighbourhood has: an ambience of antiquity owing to the large number of such buildings standing in close proximity to each other.

"There have been cases of demolition of a



## LIFE STYLE

number of buildings. B. K. Das Road is officially a heritage-protected neighbourhood, and the structures cannot undergo reconstruction or demolition, especially without proper permission. Unfortunately, such illegal activities have indeed occurred, harming the overall ambience of the street," Taimur informs.

It is not just those grand residences. There are plenty of smaller houses which are more or less of the same age. From the balconies with sloped roofs - supported by metal brackets or metal posts - to the multiple courtyards inside the premises, these homes are in sync with their more outstanding neighbours.

The Buriganga River is nearby. So much so, you can still catch glimpses of it from some of the rooftops. "There was a tendency among the elites to build their residences on the riverfront, and hence it is no surprise that the 'nouveau riche' had preferred this locality for housing," Taimur observes.

They came. They saw. They conquered. And they built edifices to match their egos and to grab their share of the aristocracy.

And that is how today we have a treasure trove of heritage called BK Das Road.

By MH Haider  
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

If you are interested to see these buildings and walk through the neighbourhood, you may choose to do it by yourself. Alternatively, you may contact the Urban Study Group ([usg.dhaka@gmail.com](mailto:usg.dhaka@gmail.com)) and request a heritage walk. Either ways, note that you may not be able to enter all the residences.

