

Want to understand the Partition of Bengal? Visit Curzon Hall



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THE GRUDGING URBANIST

ON October 16, 1905, Dhaka became the capital of the newly-created province of East Bengal and Assam, in the wake of what is known as the Partition of Bengal (1905–1911). Although the stated aim of the partition was administrative efficiency on the part of the colonial rulers, Governor-General of India George Nathaniel Curzon (1899-1905) sought to achieve political goals by dividing Bengal. He had hoped that the political autonomy of the Muslims of East Bengal would counterbalance the growing power of the Hindus of West Bengal. Many Hindus viewed the partition as a classic colonial policy of “divide and rule.” Muslims of East Bengal, on the other hand, welcomed it as a new opportunity for the development of their region, for they long held the grievance that Hindu-dominated West Bengal and its hub Calcutta (now Kolkata) grew as a vast metropolis of trade, education, and Anglo-Indian bourgeois middle-class life, allegedly at the expense of East Bengal.

An activist of Muslim regeneration, Nawab Syed Shamsul Huda wrote of this prevailing view among the Muslims: “Before the Partition, the largest amount of money used to be spent in districts near Calcutta. The best of colleges, hospitals and other institutions were founded in or near the capital of India...We have inherited a heritage of the accumulated neglect of years.” Dhaka’s Nawab Salimullah wrote in an article titled “The New Province—Its Future Possibilities,” published in the *Journal of the Moslem Institute*, in 1906: “No one can deny that the partition has roused the entire Mahomedan community of Eastern Bengal. Many poor Mahomedan youths, who had graduated with

honours, but were roaming about in search of suitable employment, are now getting prize posts, which they so highly deserved.”

One of the most visible transformations of Dhaka as a result of its new status as the capital of East Bengal was seen in the realm of civic architecture and urban infrastructure. To prepare the provincial capital, the colonial administration acquired sprawling land in the verdant Ramna area beyond Dhaka’s northern periphery, demarcated by the then-existing railway line. The architectural and urban growth of Ramna helped mitigate Dhaka’s “backwater” reputation, as encapsulated in a report of *The Times* of London, in 1909: “For many years Dacca has been looked on as the back of the beyond, a place devoid of any compensation for exile...The dreariness, the expense, the remoteness of the station were sufficient to make it abhorrent to most Englishmen whose lot was placed in India.”

There was considerable investment in the city’s infrastructure, including: the garbage disposal system, the water works, electric street lights, the drainage system, and road improvements. And, a significant number of buildings were created in the Ramna area for official, educational, and residential purposes. The two most architecturally ambitious edifices built here were the Curzon Hall (presently the Science Faculty of the University of Dhaka), named after the incumbent Viceroy Lord Curzon, who laid the foundation of the building on February 14, 1904, and the Government House (now the Dhaka High Court).

Ahmad Hasan Dani, author of *Dacca: A Record of Its Changing Fortunes* (1956), claimed that Curzon Hall was originally built as a town hall for the colonial administration. But, according to historian Sharif Uddin Ahmed, the building was constructed as a library for Dhaka College. The provenance of the building remains contested.

Who paid for the building? The zamindar



PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

The Curzon Hall located in the University of Dhaka campus area, was named after the incumbent Viceroy Lord Curzon, who laid the foundation of the building on February 14, 1904.

princes of Bhawal, an estate in the eastern district of Dhaka, in British Bengal contributed Tk 1,50,000 for the construction of the red-brick edifice at Ramna. Their motivation was twofold: They were eager to be affiliated with Lord Curzon’s development programmes for the new capital, and the self-promotion would enhance their visibility and esteem.

The two-storey building represents a hybrid style of European and Indian architectural forms and elements—known variously as Indo-European or Indo-Saracenic style—that was popular around the turn of the century in colonial India. Contemporaneous buildings elsewhere in India—such as the Taj Mahal Hotel in

Mumbai (architect: WA Chambers; 1904) and Howrah Station in Kolkata (architect: Hasley Ricardo; 1900-1908) exhibit a similar blending of architectural styles. Synthesising imperial grandiosity with sporadic Mughal motifs, the imposing building symbolises how the colonial administration sought to include elements of “local” architecture as a way to show its sensitivity to native culture, which, they hoped would counter growing nationalist sentiments among the natives.

While Curzon Hall’s plan demonstrates European spatial sensitivity, its red brick exterior—adorned with multi-cusped arches, projected eaves, continuous loggias, brackets, lattices, corner turrets, and kiosks (or chatis)—evokes images of Mughal

architecture. A typical Mughal building motif, the kiosk defines the skyline of Curzon Hall, as it had at Humayun’s tomb and Red Fort, in Delhi; the Taj Mahal and the tomb of Itmad-ud-Daulah, in Agra; and the Diwani-I-Khas at Fatehpur Sikri, in Agra. Like Itmad-ud-Daulah’s tomb, Curzon Hall’s balustrade features decorative jali (intricate ornamental latticework) and rises above a bracketed cornice. A continuous verandah wraps around the building, providing a recessed area and protecting the inner rooms from the penetrating monsoon rains.

The composition of the north-facing building is symmetrical: A grand central hall is flanked by linear wings on either side, terminated by rectangular building forms. The colonnaded three-story central hall is the focus of the plan and accessible from all sides. Loggias wrap the interior of the hall on the second and third floors. Colourful square panels adorn the ceiling. The entrance is marked by a lofty projecting tower that appears to have compensated for the absence of a dome. The tower has three tall horseshoe windows, framed within an arched niche. Soaring kiosks crown the tower on four corners, with three smaller kiosks in between on each side.

Curzon Hall is not an extraordinary building, but its elevation—variegated by pilasters, bays, panels, arched windows, eaves, and kiosks—presents a delightful impression. Rising from Ramna’s foliated garden, it reveals a quiet grandeur. Most of all, it narrates a poignant political story of early twentieth-century Bengal.

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What lies beyond the hug, wink and no-trust motion

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IN keeping with predictions, Prime Minister Narendra Modi easily defeated the first opposition-sponsored no-confidence motion that he faced in his four-year tenure on the floor of the Lok Sabha, the lower House Parliament. Both the BJP and the main opposition Congress have some major takeaways from the exercise which gave an insight to key components of their strategy for the coming parliamentary elections.

The BJP’s strategy during the debate on the no-confidence

opposition against a coalition with the Congress. He recalled how the Congress had betrayed its different allies at different times by first supporting them from outside to form governments in 1979, 1991 and 1997 and then withdrawing the support leading to premature fall of federal governments and triggering political instability in the country. Modi’s political message was that Congress cannot be trusted as a reliable coalition partner. It is a fact that some regional parties in the opposition aiming at an anti-BJP coalition are the main political rivals of Congress, like

to “suffer” for challenging the Jawaharlal Nehru-Indira Gandhi dynasty. The names the Prime Minister mentioned in this context are significant—Subhash Chandra Bose, Vallabhbhai Patel, Morarji Desai, JP Narayan, Chaudhary Charan Singh, Chandrashekhar, Nationalist Congress Party Sharad Pawar (who quit Congress in the 90s questioning Sonia Gandhi’s credential to become the PM because of her foreign origin) and Pranab Mukherjee who missed out being India’s Prime Minister. Modi also contrasted his own humble background and backward caste to those of Rahul’s rich dynasty.

development work which prompted political analysts to view the TRS’ boycott of the no-trust motion as a boost to the BJP.

Whether or not the BJP’s strategy succeeds in dividing the opposition remains to be seen. However, behind the caution to the regional parties about the Congress lies the lurking fear in the saffron party that a combined opposition in the elections could dash its hopes of returning to power for the second time in succession. But then power politics is a slippery path. That is why one sees the Janata Dal (Secular) party led by HD Deve Gowda (who was present during the debate on Friday) joining hands with the Congress recently to form government in Karnataka state despite the fact the Congress had pulled the rug from under Deve Gowda when he was the Prime Minister in 1996–97. That is why one saw Samajwadi Party founder Mulayam Singh Yadav (who was also present in the Lok Sabha on Friday) supporting the no-confidence motion even though he was a Defence Minister in Deve Gowda government brought down by the Congress.

True, there was disappointment for the BJP as its longest-standing but now estranged ally Shiv Sena stayed away from voting against the no-confidence motion. But the saffron party took heart from the direct opposition to the motion from All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADM), another key regional party which rules the southern state of Tamil Nadu and is a potentially ally in the TRS.

The Congress too finished the no-confidence motion exercise with some positive takeaways: Rahul Gandhi’s combative speech attacked the government and aimed to hurt the BJP’s main plank of anti-corruption by alleging graft in the deal with France to buy Rafael fighter planes. Rahul brought Modi into the firing line for the major part of his speech and then followed it up with the dramatic bearhug for the Prime Minister and wink at Congress lawmaker-colleagues inside the House. But one came away with the impression that the wink took some lustre off his speech and his hug, given the seriousness of the occasion.



Congress President Rahul Gandhi hugs Prime Minister Narendra Modi after his speech in the Lok Sabha on the “no-confidence motion” during the Monsoon Session of Parliament in New Delhi. PHOTO: PTI

motion could be a good opportunity to deflate the perception of a pan-Indian united opposition front of the Congress and key regional parties. The BJP not only sought to drive a wedge between the main opposition party Congress and other key regional parties which are trying to join hands against Modi and woo some of these parties. Both the components of this strategy of the BJP were abundantly available in Modi’s hour-long reply to the debate on the motion.

A thrust area of Modi’s speech was to try and wean away other opposition parties from the Congress. That was why one saw Modi digging into history to caution the non-Congress

the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS) ruling Telangana state in the South and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) which is in power in Odisha in the East. The TRS does not share Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee’s enthusiasm for including the Congress in a pan-India anti-BJP front. Interestingly, lawmakers of both the TRS and the BJD stayed away from the no-trust motion debate, thereby making it possible for Modi to defeat the motion with a much bigger margin as their absence brought down the threshold mark in the Lok Sabha.

For much the same reason, Modi kept the main focus of his speech on the Congress and recalled how political stalwarts had

In another crucial component of the strategy to woo the regional parties, which could be the Congress’ allies in the coming elections, Modi also pointed out that it was under the previous BJP dispensation headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee that three small states—Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand—were smoothly created by dividing geographically some of India’s biggest states Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and juxtaposed it against the creation of Telangana state out of Andhra Pradesh under a Congress-led federal government resulting in heartburns which are yet to be resolved. Modi also commended TRS chief and Telangana K Chandrasekhara Rao’s

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at *The Daily Star*.

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