

# A tribute to Rabiul Husain: Our beloved poet-architect

**THE GRUDGING URBANIST**



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

If you are passing by Farmgate, you are most likely to notice a boxy brick building at the intersection of Airport Road and Khumar Bari Road. In Dhaka's usual urban clutter, this red brick building may not seem like a Taj Mahal at first sight, but if you look closely you would notice that there is something poetic about it. In fact, the building's designer is a poet-architect—Rabiul Husain, who passed away on November 26. Universally admired as a Bangladeshi cultural icon, Husain has been an integral part of the country's modernist architectural legacy. His design for the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC; 1978-81) headquarters at Farmgate in many ways symbolises the aesthetic gravitas that drove Bangladesh's architectural evolution after the country's independence.

The BARC was established in 1973 to coordinate administrative and research activities to modernise agriculture in Bangladesh. In 1978, Shahidullah & Associates Ltd, an architectural and engineering consulting firm, was chosen to design the BARC headquarters (1978-1981) on the south-eastern edge of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. The World Bank provided funding for the project. Architect Rabiul Husain of Shahidullah & Associates Ltd designed a three-story building, clad in red ceramic bricks. Over the years, BARC's headquarters has come to epitomise one of the earliest attempts to find a Bengali "identity" in post-independence Bangladeshi architecture.

While BARC is among several buildings that occupy the L-shaped site, it is the most recognisable one from the street and surrounding areas. South of the site are Farmgate and a narrow "road-island" park. Louis Kahn's Parliament building is nearby, to the west. To the southeast is Holy Cross College. Building height in this area was restricted to four stories when BARC's headquarters was under construction because the site was close to the capital's then main international airport at Tejgaon.

The 223-foot-long and 63-foot-wide rectangular building plan is aligned along the east-west axis, maximising exposure to the southern breeze and cross-ventilation. The three-story building is vertically divided

into three functional zones. The first floor is allocated for administrative offices; the second floor houses the executive branch. The third floor includes, at the centre, a 7,500 square foot conference room with a seating capacity of 280, flanked by a library and a meeting room, each comprising 1,350 square feet. The total built area of the headquarters is 32,700 square feet. The first and second floors are organised along a double-loaded corridor. There are two staircases, one is on the building's east end, and the other is on the west end.

In keeping with the local tradition of projecting roof eaves to protect the building from rain and sun, BARC is essentially two buildings: a brick shell covers the main space. The extra layer moderates the harsh tropical sun and tempers the driving rain during the monsoon season. This climatic scheme has been a time-tested building practice in the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals have employed this method to ensure thermal comfort and meet the challenges of downpours. In his Parliament building, a 15-minute walk from the BARC site, Louis Kahn experimented with a building-within-a-building concept as a climate-mitigating device, eventually producing "transcendental" spatial effects. In the Teacher-Student Centre at the University of Dhaka, the Greek architect-planner Constantinos Apostolos



Rabiul Husain

Doxiadis also has employed different gradations of buildings, providing naturally ventilated and thermally comfortable spaces, a sustainable response to tropical conditions. Architect Muzharul Islam—whose office, Vastukalbid, was a rite of passage since the early 1970s for many young architects, including Rabiul Husain—also experimented



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PHOTO: ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

with the critical fusion of climate considerations and modernist aesthetics. The National Institute of Public Administration (1964), among his other designs, inspired generations of architects to search for the visual language of "critical regionalism" through the lens of climatic aspects.

After the independence of Bangladesh, during the 1970s, the inquiry into a Bengali identity in architecture became a passionate cause, sometimes favouring a tangible visual expression over modernist abstractions. Many Bangladeshi architects came to believe that bricks were the most authentic or organic building material, representing the soil of the riverine country. Since stone is rare, and burnt bricks could be produced abundantly from the indigenous alluvial soil, architects viewed bricks as a phenomenological embodiment of the delta and its culture.

It is difficult to miss the "poetics" of brick in the conceptualisation and organisation of the BARC headquarters building. Here, one feels the influence of Kahn's

magnificent brickwork at the Parliament complex. Echoing the masonry work at the Philadelphia architect's hostels for the Members of the Parliament, architect Rabiul Husain conceived a brick as the module to lay out his BARC plan. Brick is used as much as possible in exterior and interior walls, columns, beams, floors, ceilings, and stairs. Not only were the basic characteristics of brick reflected in the building, but its volumetric proportions also appear to have been derived from those of a brick. It feels as though the architect has employed a subtractive method to carve out space from one mega-brick! A renowned poet, Rabiul Husain claims to have been both an architect and a sculptor of this brick building.

At times, the building's "presence" seems more about the exterior than the interior. This is experienced once the visitor enters the headquarters from the covered car portico at the east end. Apart from its linear monotony, the long corridor admits or reflects very little natural light, sometimes requiring artificial

illumination during the day. The chiaroscuro interior conjures up images of a Hindu temple rather than those of an administrative office or a research facility. Yet the significance of this building is best understood when considered in the historical context of the late 1970s in Bangladesh. It may seem that, at times, the pursuit of an indigenous architectural expression through materiality took precedence over interior organisation. A closer look at the BARC headquarters reveals how the edifice negotiated climatic demands of the region with an archetypally symmetric spatial modulation. It would not be far-fetched to view the building's plan as a reincarnation of a Buddhist vihara (monastery) or a Greek temple like the Parthenon with its single-row or peripteral colonnade and naos. As a geometrically pure brick structure blending with its verdant base, the BARC headquarters' regional flavour is unmistakable. Yet, the building also presents a type of Bengali aesthetic identity that is in harmony with a universal sense of beauty. This is exactly what architect Rabiul Husain sought during the turbulent decade of the 1970s. In a post-Bangabandhu Bangladesh,

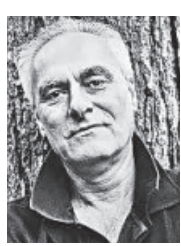
*As a geometrically pure brick structure blending with its verdant base, the BARC headquarters' regional flavour is unmistakable. Yet, the building also presents a type of Bengali aesthetic identity that is in harmony with a universal sense of beauty.*

pursuing a secular Bengali identity through the aesthetic language of architecture was an urgent social mission for Rabiul Husain and many members of his generation.

Rest in peace poet-architect Rabiul Husain.

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## A microcosm of Iran's domestic problems, port city bears brunt of crackdown



JAMES M DORSEY

THE Iranian port city of Bandar-e-Mahshahr has emerged as the scene of some of the worst violence in Iran's brutal crackdown on recent anti-government protests.

Located in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province, home to the country's restive ethnic Arab minority, the protests in Bandar-e-Mahshahr strengthened Iran in its belief that the anti-government outburst was yet another effort to destabilise the Islamic republic by the United States, Saudi Arabia and/or Israel.

Iranian state television reported that security forces had confronted a separatist group in the city that was armed with "semi-heavy" weapons. It claimed the armed rioters had fought with security personnel for hours.

Iranian exiles in contact with family and friends in Bandar-e-Mahshahr said protesters blocked off a road leading from the city, that is home to Iran's largest petrochemical complex, to the village of Koorra.

In contrast to past protests in the province, the protesters chanted slogans against Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani rather than Arab

nationalist phrases. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' 3rd Marine Force Division, based on the outskirts of the city, intervened with armoured vehicles after police failed to disperse the protesters. The exiles said the Guards opened fire on protesters trying to escape into nearby marshlands.

An unconfirmed video purportedly documenting the killing of up to 100 people shows armoured vehicles driving down a road as multiple rounds are fired and men are heard shouting. "They simply mowed them down," said one of the exiles who studied in Bandar-e-

economy and widespread corruption was undermining their legitimacy.

The notion of a US-Saudi-Israeli conspiracy to stoke unrest among Iran's ethnic minorities in a bid to destabilise the regime was reinforced by statements in recent years by American, Saudi and Israeli officials and a series of violent incidents in Khuzestan as well as the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdish regions of Iran.

Ayatollah Khamenei's insistence that the Iranian protests constituted a "dangerous conspiracy" by the United States was hardly surprising.



An Iranian soldier carrying an injured comrade at the scene of an attack on a military parade in Ahwaz on September 22, 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

Mahshahr and has relatives in the city. In many ways, the protests in Bandar-e-Mahshahr and multiple other Iranian cities fit a global pattern; a specific issue sparks anti-government demonstrations that quickly evolve into a mass movement demanding a complete overhaul of a political system that has failed to cater to the aspirations of major segments of the population.

In Hong Kong the spark was a law that would enable extraditions to mainland China, in Santiago de Chile it was public transportation price hikes and in Iran it was a surprise increase of petrol prices.

Struggling under the yoke of harsh US economic sanctions imposed after the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal in 2018 from the international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear programme, Iranian leaders failed to recognise that long-standing mismanagement of the

The protests erupted after weeks in which demonstrators in Iraq denounced Iranian influence in their country and attacked the Islamic republic's consulates in Basra and Najaf. Similarly, Lebanon, home to Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia, has been paralysed for the past two months by anti-sectarian protesters.

The conviction that Iran's enemies were tightening the noose around its neck may well have some grounding in reality even if the Islamic republic's most recent regional setbacks as well as the outburst of deep-seated anger at home cannot be reduced to foreign conspiracies.

The brutality with which the regime cracked down on protesters as well as its drastic decision to shut down the Internet for four days suggests that Iran has little faith in indications that Saudi Arabia is groping for ways to dial down tension with its arch-rival or Omani

efforts to mediate.

It also explains why the squashing of the protests in Bandar-e-Mahshahr may have been particularly harsh.

The Ahvaz National Resistance, an Iranian Arab separatist group, claimed responsibility in September 2018 for an attack on a Revolutionary Guards parade in the Khuzestan capital of Ahwaz in which 29 people were killed and 70 others wounded.

Unidentified gunmen in the Netherlands killed Ahmad Mola Nissi, a leader of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA), in November 2017.

Shot dead on a street in The Hague, Mola Nissi died the violent life he was alleged to have lived.

A 52-year-old refugee living in the Netherlands since 2005, Mola Nissi was believed to have been responsible for attacks in Khuzestan in 2005, 2006 and 2013 on oil facilities, the office of the Khuzestan governor, other government offices, and banks.

Mola Nissi focussed in his most recent years on media activities and fund raising, at times creating footage of alleged attacks involving gas cylinder explosions to attract Saudi funding, according to Iranian activists. Mola Nissi was killed as he was preparing to establish a television station backed by Saudi-trained personnel and funding that would target Khuzestan.

Protests in Khuzestan have focussed in recent years on identity, environmental degradation, and social issues.

International human rights groups have long accused Iran of discriminating against Iranian Arabs even though a majority are Shiite rather than Sunni Muslims. Dozens of protesters were reportedly killed during demonstrations in Ahwaz in 2011 that were inspired by the popular Arab revolts.

"Despite Khuzestan's natural resource wealth, its ethnic Arab population, which is believed to constitute a majority in the province, has long complained about the lack of socio-economic development in the region. They also allege that the Iranian government has engaged in systematic discrimination against them, particularly in the areas of employment, housing, and civil and political rights," Human Rights Watch said at the time.

That was in 2011. Like in the rest of Iran, things have only gotten worse in Khuzestan since.

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**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**



December 6, 1992  
Demolition of the Babri Masjid

*The Babri Masjid ("Mosque of Babur") in Ayodhya was demolished leading to mass riots throughout India.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

- ACROSS**
- 1 Ship staffs
  - 6 Make fun of
  - 11 Quartet doubled
  - 12 Moved slowly
  - 13 Martin Scorsese film
  - 15 Clothes line
  - 16 Spider's home
  - 17 One or more
  - 18 "The Rehearsal" painter
  - 20 Medal, for example
  - 23 "I want that!"
  - 27 With 28-Across, Martin Scorsese film
  - 28 See 27-Across
  - 29 Lock of hair
  - 31 Mink's cousin
  - 32 Taters
  - 34 Express despair
  - 37 Afternoon hour
  - 38 Moose's cousin
  - 41 Martin Scorsese film
  - 44 Like xenon
  - 45 - Arabia
  - 46 Lassos
  - 47 Useful skill
  - 14 Coat rack part
  - 18 Attire
  - 19 Makes finer
  - 20 Drama division
  - 21 Simple card game
  - 22 King Kong, for one
  - 24 Ran into
  - 25 West of Hollywood
  - 26 Make mistakes
  - 30 Newspaper section
  - 31 Black Sea port
  - 33 Numerical prefix
  - 34 Commotion
  - 35 Cry of distress
  - 36 Horn sound
  - 38 Aussie birds
  - 39 Store in the hold
  - 40 Make a sweater
  - 42 Rage
  - 43 Holds



**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**



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