

Want to understand the Partition of Bengal? Visit Curzon Hall

Adnan Morshed

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.



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. Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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 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 chattis)—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.

Adnan Morshed, PhD, is an architect, architectural historian, and urbanist, and currently serving as Chairperson of the Department of Architecture at BRAC University. He is also executive director of the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at BRAC University and a member of the USA-based think tank Bangladesh Development Initiative. His recent books include *DAC/Dhaka in 25 Buildings* (2017) and *River Rhapsody: A Museum of Rivers and Canals* (2018). He can be reached at amorshed@bracu.ac.bd.