

A Comparative Study of Two Structures from the British Raj in Dhaka: Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building

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Abstract

In the late 19th century, British architects developed a distinct architectural style that blended Indo-Islamic and Indian traditions with elements borrowed from Gothic Revival and Neo-Classical styles, which were still prevalent in Victorian Britain. During this period, the region now known as Bangladesh was largely neglected by British colonists due to its limited urbanization and industrialization. Nonetheless, several significant structures were erected by the British colonial administration, which remain notable today for their architectural and historical importance. As British colonists transitioned from traders in the 18th century to rulers in the mid-19th century, their architectural practices underwent a series of developmental phases. Initially, British churches in Dhaka and its surrounding areas were constructed in the European Renaissance style, which was later adopted for secular buildings as well. The subsequent phase saw the emergence of structures featuring Classical orders, such as semi-octagonal or rounded corners and tall Doric columns, characteristic of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This paper aims to examine two colonial buildings constructed in the early 20th century in Dhaka—Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building—analyzing their socio-economic, political, and architectural dimensions, and exploring the reasons for their differences, despite being built by the same colonial power.

1. Background

Compared to India and Pakistan, Bangladesh has not historically been known for having a wealth of remarkable historical and architectural sites. Until recent discoveries, there was limited tangible evidence to suggest a long history of human habitation and cultural heritage in this region. However, in the late 19th century,

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British architects in India developed a distinctive architectural style that fused Islamic—more specifically, Mughal—and Indian architectural traditions with elements borrowed from Gothic Revival and Neo-Classical styles, which were still prevalent in Victorian Britain. This synthesis led to the emergence of the Indo-Islamic Revival in architecture. As this architectural movement spread across the Indian subcontinent, it reached what is now Bangladesh, though primarily in terms of design elements and shapes, rather than a comprehensive adoption of the style. The variations in architectural expression in Bangladesh can be attributed to several factors:

1. **Geographical, Geological, and Natural Factors:** The Gangetic delta, rich in alluvial soil, lacks local sources of durable building materials, such as stone quarries, which are more abundant in regions like India and Pakistan.
2. **Political and Administrative Factors:** As a region that was not a seat of government, present-day Bangladesh was largely neglected by British colonists, due in part to its lack of urbanization and industrialization.
3. **Economic Factors:** The region remained impoverished throughout British rule, largely as a result of exploitative practices such as forced labor in the cultivation of indigo and the production of muslin. This economic hardship meant that few individuals had the financial means to construct buildings using expensive imported materials or to hire skilled artisans from abroad.

1.1 The Duration of the British Raj

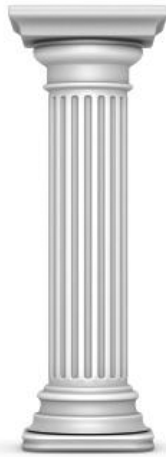
In 1857, the Indian Rebellion, also known as the Bengal Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence, broke out at Barrackpore.¹ While some historians regard this event as the first major attempt at Indian independence, the rebellion was ultimately suppressed with considerable brutality. The deposition of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, marked the end of both the Mughal dynasty² and the East India Company's rule in India. Following the rebellion's suppression, the British Crown assumed direct control over India in 1858, inaugurating the period known as the British Raj.³ This era of British rule lasted from August 2, 1858, until India and Pakistan achieved independence on August 15, 1947.

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1. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who first wrote 'The History of the Indian Independence' in Marathi in 1909, is credited with popularising the term 'First War of Independence' in India. The Government of India used the phrase 'First War of Independence' because Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, insisted on using it to describe the event
 2. Crispin Bates, *Mutiny at the Margins*, New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857: Volume 7 (2013-2017), SAGE Publication Private Ltd., 7 Volumes, Online Pub. Date: January 09, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353287726>
 3. Government of India Act of 1858 passed on August 2, 1858 by the British Parliament and transferred the power over India from the East India Company.

1.2 The Evolution of Architectural Styles under the British Raj

During the British Raj, the colonial government constructed several significant structures that continue to be recognized today for their architectural and historical importance. As was the case in many other parts of the world, business and religion were closely interlinked in this region. Under the East India Company (EIC), architectural development was limited, primarily consisting of a few kutir (bungalows) in various locations across India, as well as some churches built to serve the religious needs of expatriate EIC officials, their allies, and native converts. At that time, the primary focus was on meeting functional religious requirements. As the British shifted from traders in the 17th century to rulers by the mid-19th century, their architectural practices evolved through several phases, increasingly reflecting a desire for aesthetic expression. Initially, churches in Dhaka and its surrounding areas were built in the European Renaissance style, which subsequently influenced the design of secular buildings. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, architectural styles featuring semi-octagonal or rounded corners and tall Doric columns became more popular, with the Classical orders gaining prominence in the region.

The architectural style of the British colonial period was marked by a formal and rational approach, characterized by strictly symmetrical designs. These buildings



Doric Column [Picture Courtesy: Internet]

often featured pitched roofs, shutters, and decorative elements such as columns or pilasters, and were typically constructed from wood or brick.

Over time, an architectural style emerged that represented a synthesis of various influences. By the late 19th century, a blend of Islamic—particularly Mughal—and Indian architectural elements with Gothic Revival and Neo-Classical styles from

Victorian Britain culminated in the development of a new genre known as Indo-Islamic Revival architecture.

2. Buildings Erected in Dhaka during the British Raj

Several buildings were constructed in major cities of present-day Bangladesh, such as Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet, either directly by the British authorities or by other parties during the British Raj. These structures can be broadly categorized into two types:

1. Secular Public Buildings
2. Private Residences

Table 1: Examples of the Secular and Private colonial buildings in Dhaka⁴

No	Name of the Building	Establishment/ Built Year	Purpose of use (Initial)	Purpose of use (Present)	Location
1	Ahsan Manzil	(1717-1880) 1859 – 1872	Residence and Kachary (Headquarter) of the Nawabs of Bengal.	Museum - important tourist attraction and source of recreation	Kurmitola, Near Burigonga River, Old Dhaka.
2	High Court Building	1905	Residence for the governor of East Bengal and Assam	Supreme Court of Bangladesh	Topkhana Road (High Court Street)
3	Curzon Hall	1904	Town Hall for Dhaka's Elite people	Education: Science Faculty of Dhaka University.	Dhaka University
4	North Brook Hall	Late 19th century (1874-1880)	Town Hall (Club House) named as "Johnson Hall"	A facility for social and cultural gatherings and a library (reading center) for the people of old Dhaka.	Farashganj, Old Dhaka.

4. Parvin Nargis, 'Case Study on Three Prominent Colonial Establishment in Dhaka, Advances in Environmental Biology', *A Review on the Architectural Styles of Colonial Buildings Bangladesh*, 9(24), November 2015, p. 7
<http://www.aensiweb.com/AEB/>

Colonial architecture, as it is commonly understood, refers to the architectural style that emerged from the fusion of local design philosophies with the architectural traditions of the colonizing nation. It is widely recognized that the architectural style of a particular era reflects the political and social influences of its time. The British, who viewed themselves as successors to the Mughals, utilized architecture as a symbol of authority. Thomas R. Metcalfe, a historian and professor at the University of California, remarked, “In the public buildings put up by the Raj, it was essential always to make visible Britain’s imperial position as a ruler, for these structures were charged with the explicit purpose of representing the empire itself. Since they wanted to legitimize their rule, they decided to justify their presence by relating themselves to the previous rulers, the Mughals.”⁵

Similarly, historian Perween Hasan noted, “The style combined traditional art with modern technology and functions, and favored Mughal forms such as arches and domes, believed to have entered the Islamic world from the West. It marks the casting aside of veiled power after the Sepoy Revolt of 1857, and India’s passing directly under the British Crown, seeking legitimacy by linkage to the Mughals.”⁶ During the early colonial period, the British employed various architectural styles, including Gothic, Imperial, Christian, Palladian, and Victorian. The primary building materials included coarse limestone and red sandstone. Gothic architecture, sometimes referred to as the Victorian style, was a distinctive fusion of Gothic, Persian, and Indian architectural elements. However, as the British moved to establish a new administrative structure in Eastern Bengal at the beginning of the 20th century, architectural plans began to take a different direction.

At the close of the Victorian era, India witnessed a national awakening and movement, with Bengal experiencing similar upheavals. The architecture of this period reflected a blend of national and imperial aspirations, driving the Indo-Islamic movement. This approach combined elements of the Neo-Classical and Gothic Revival styles popular in Victorian England with features of indigenous and Indo-Islamic architecture. One of the most defining characteristics of Indo-Islamic architecture was the bulbous dome. The hemispherical bulbous dome, often forming a ceiling or roof, is believed to symbolize the Heavenly Vault. Two notable examples of structures with bulbous domes are the Chennai Museum in present-day India and the Old High Court Building in present-day Bangladesh.

3. The Two Buildings Erected in Dhaka during the British Raj

Among the notable buildings constructed in Dhaka during the British Raj, two stand out: Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building. Erected in the same period, these buildings differ significantly in both appearance and color.

5. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920*, October 2008, First Edition, pp. 105-6

6. Perween Hasan, Curzon Hall, *Banglapedia*, 2012, Second Edition, Category: Architecture

3.1 Curzon Hall

Curzon Hall, constructed between 1904 and 1908, stands as a significant architectural achievement of its time. In February 1904, Viceroy Lord Curzon visited Dhaka and laid the foundation stone for the building, which was initially intended to serve as a town hall or public meeting place.⁷ The design of Curzon Hall was the work of Edward Thornton, a prominent architect based in Calcutta, in collaboration with the builders Martin & Co. The ornamentation was completed by an artist from Rajputana, present-day Rajasthan in India.

Following the partition of Bengal in 1905, Dhaka was designated as the capital of the newly formed provinces of Assam and East Bengal. Although the partition was annulled in 1911, Curzon Hall was repurposed as the library of Dhaka College (DC). After the establishment of Dhaka University in 1921, the building became part of the university's science faculty, a role it continues to fulfill to this day.

Curzon Hall exemplifies a harmonious blend of European and Mughal architectural elements, making it one of the most remarkable examples of Dhaka's architectural heritage. The building's north facade features both cusped and horseshoe arches, characteristic of Mughal architecture, which were adapted to accommodate modern functions and technologies. This style, which emerged after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, reflects the end of covert rule and the straightforward subjugation of India by the British Crown, which sought legitimacy through its connection to the Mughals.



Curzon Hall Front Facade [Picture Courtesy: Banglapedia]

7. The purpose of town hall meetings is for local and regional officials to hear the community's views on public issues.

The intricate brackets, deep eaves, and dome-shaped terrace pavilions (chhatris) in the central section of Curzon Hall, along with its red coloration that substitutes for red sandstone, bear a striking resemblance to the small but renowned Diwan-i-Khas in the palace fortress of Fatehpur Sikri, Emperor Akbar's capital from 1570 to 1585. The British choice to adopt the architectural style of Fatehpur Sikri may be attributed to their admiration for Akbar, whom they considered the most intelligent and tolerant of the Mughal rulers. Thus, Curzon Hall became a marvel of architecture and a lasting symbol of colonial-era Dhaka.

The colonial architects often combined European and indigenous elements to create hybrid forms of architecture, particularly in public and administrative buildings. These buildings, characterized by their attractive red color, include town halls and railway buildings across Bengal. This new hybrid style integrated features of Mughal architecture, such as arches, chhatris at roof corners, slender columns in corridors, projecting façades, cornices, screen walls, and folded decorative motifs inspired by plants, with European elements such as battlement parapets, molded plinths, rusticated walls, and triangular pediments over Corinthian, Ionic, or Doric columns. This Indo-Islamic style represents a fusion of European and Indian aesthetic traditions.

3.2 Old High Court Building

The Old High Court Building in Dhaka is a prime example of the European Renaissance architectural style, notable for its lack of Mughal elements. Constructed in the early 20th century, this imposing two-storied edifice was designed by Chishti Brothers Architects and Engineers. It was originally intended to serve as the official residence of the governor of the newly created province of East Bengal and Assam, following the Partition of Bengal in 1905.⁸ However, after its completion, the building was deemed unsuitable as a governor's residence by an advisor to the Indian government. Consequently, it was repurposed as a general office for the British government.

Located on High Court Street, directly opposite the elegant Curzon Hall, the Old High Court Building stands in stark contrast to its Mughal-inspired neighbor. The building features a typical European Renaissance-style facade, characterized by a triangular pediment over a large porch supported by Corinthian columns. The structure is crowned with a graceful dome supported by slender columns and piers arranged in a ring formation. The white color of the building, along with its broad staircase made of white marble, further distinguishes it from the red-colored Curzon Hall.

Over the years, the Old High Court Building has served various functions. Initially, it housed the 'Dhaka Intermediate College,' and later, during the period

8. Nazimuddin Ahmed (Ed.), 'High Court Building, Old', *Banglapedia*, 2nd Edition, Published in 2012 [https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/High_Court_Building,_Old]



Old Highcourt Building [Pic Courtesy: Banglapedia]



Inside Stairs of Old Highcourt Building

of East Pakistan, it was converted into the High Court.⁹ This architectural style was commonly employed in buildings designed to accommodate colonial high-ranking officials, making the Old High Court Building a significant representation of European Renaissance architecture in Dhaka.

4. The Tangible and Intangible Attributes of the Buildings

4.1 Imposing Presence

Both Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building command an imposing presence in the landscape, embodying a sense of grandeur, gravity, and dominance. At the time

9. Nazimuddin Ahmed, *High Court Building, Old*, 2021

of their construction, these buildings were visually overpowering, characterized by their architectural styles, considerable height, mass, and expansive front facades. However, with the development of taller structures in their surroundings over the years, these once-dominant buildings now appear somewhat diminished in comparison.

4.2 Color

Color is a vital aspect of both the natural and built environments, playing a significant role in human perception and experience. The influence of colonialism on Indian architecture extended to the use of color, leaving a lasting impact on design and aesthetics. The British, along with the Dutch, Portuguese, and French, contributed to the architectural landscape of India, each leaving their distinct mark. The red color of Curzon Hall, for example, was a deliberate substitute for the red sandstone traditionally used in Mughal architecture.¹⁰ This choice of color is evident in other examples of the hybrid Mughal-European architectural style in Dhaka, such as Northbrook Hall, Dhaka Medical College, and Salimullah Muslim Hall. However, it is important to note that in Bengal, the red sandstone itself was not used; only the color was adopted, reflecting a symbolic rather than material continuity with Mughal architecture.

4.3 Colonial Town Planning

The architectural grandeur of Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building raises questions about the British Raj's approach to town planning in their larger colonial cities. Colonial town planning and urban management were guided by three primary strategies: the diffusion of planning ethos and methodologies from the colonial powers, the transfer of planning expertise to the colonies to create policy documents and design schemes, and the enforcement of planning laws and decisions.¹¹

Dhaka, the former capital of Bengal from 1608 to 1707, became a municipality in 1864. During the intervening years, the British began to focus on urban services and the construction of administrative infrastructure.¹² In 1917, British town planner Sir Patrick Geddes was commissioned to draft the first physical plan for Dhaka.¹³ Although Geddes' Dacca Town Planning Report was intended as a concept paper for a future master plan, it was never formally adopted, and the city's development up to 1947 proceeded in a largely spontaneous manner rather than according to a structured plan.

10. The architecture of Mughals shows extensive use of sandstone unlike Delhi Sultanate in Delhi and other places in India.

11. Gideon Baffoe & Shilpi Roy, *Colonial legacies and contemporary urban planning practices in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, Research Article, *Planning Perspectives*, Volume 38, 2023, Issue 1 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02665433.2022.2041468>

12. Shilpi Roy, *Urban Policies and City profiles for Dhaka*, 2019

13. S. Jahan, *Urban Planning in Bangladesh; Urban Planning in Bangladesh: A Review*, Edited by Nazrul Islam, "Urban Research in Bangladesh", Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), Dhaka, 1990; Mohaiman, *Dhaka Master Plan Report*, *Planning Perspective*, Volume 38, 2023, Issue 1, 1990

The construction of Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building was a direct consequence of the 1905 Partition of Bengal, reflecting the British colonial administration's priorities. The lives of the indigenous population and their environment were given minimal consideration in these urban schemes, as the central focus of colonial town planning was to serve administrative and economic interests rather than the well-being of the local populace.¹⁴ This approach to urban planning was aimed more at furthering the economic objectives of the colonists than at fostering the development of a growing city for the betterment of its inhabitants.

4.4 Non-availability of Materials and Masons, and Limitations of Transportation

In Dhaka, and more broadly in Bangladesh, the absence of natural stone resources, such as red sandstone, posed a significant challenge in construction, leading to the widespread use of burnt-clay bricks, which naturally possess a red hue. This red brickwork served as a substitute for the red sandstone commonly seen in Mughal architecture across other regions of India.

Transportation issues further complicated the construction process. The transportation of materials faced challenges such as difficult routes, high costs, and logistical complexities. Consequently, white marble, famously mined in Makrana, Rajasthan, and used in iconic structures like the Taj Mahal, was not imported to Dhaka or Bengal during the Mughal period. However, in the case of the Old High Court Building, marble was used on a limited scale, possibly added later in the construction process.

The scarcity of stone in the region also meant that skilled stonemasons were naturally scarce. Employing these craftsmen would have incurred significant costs, including providing them with food and accommodation during their work, which further dissuaded the use of stone materials in local construction projects.

In contrast, the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, constructed between 1906 and 1921, is a notable example of a large marble monument built by the British government in India. Kolkata, as a major center of British colonial power since the 17th century, received considerable attention and investment, unlike Dhaka, which did not hold the same level of importance in the eyes of both Mughal and British rulers.

The relatively lower priority of Dhaka or Bengal in the grander schemes of Mughal and British-ruled territories may explain why there was little investment in monumental projects that required significant resources for construction, maintenance, and management. This is also likely why white marble, a material emblematic of grandeur in other parts of India, was not widely used in this region.

14. G. A. De Bruijne, Colonial City and the Post-Colonial World, *Comparative Studies in Overseas History*, Vol. 5, 2021, pp. 231-232

Instead, the introduction of Lime-Surki provided a white finish that served as a substitute for marble in local architecture.

5. Conclusion

Art and architecture have long held a distinctive place in the cultural and social lives of the people of India, much like in other parts of the world. Indian architecture, in particular, has been profoundly shaped by the influence of colonial powers. The Indo-Islamic architectural style, which emerged as a hallmark of colonial architecture, saw significant evolution in Eastern Bengal, especially during the period surrounding the 1905 partition.

Over time, various cultural influences, including those of the Greeks, Arabs, Persians, and non-English Europeans, have enriched the Indian architectural tradition, creating a unique blend of styles that reflect the country's diverse history.

The two architectural examples discussed here—Curzon Hall and the Old High Court Building—underscore the reality that monumental architectural works often relied on the patronage of the state or ruling powers. These projects were typically undertaken to assert the supremacy of the throne or state, whether for religious, administrative, military, or artistic purposes.

Although both buildings fall under the broad category of Indo-Islamic architecture, they differ significantly in their expression of key features, including color and materials. These differences can be attributed to various factors, such as the political will and design preferences of the rulers, the availability of materials and skilled labor, and the costs involved.