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ECLECTICISM IN ARCHITECTURE

'Laha Bari', A Case Study in the City of Joy

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Abstract: Whenever in history, any race, tribe, group or community has established a colony in another part of the world, they brought their traditions, cultures, architecture, art and lifestyle along with them. In the beginning the colonialists hold on to their own lifestyle. But as the time pass by, the local context, climate and the lifestyle of the native people, start influencing and impacting them and accordingly the colonialist adapts things to fulfill their requirements as well as their aspirations. The interaction gets initiated between the colonialists and the natives on various socio-economic, administrative, and socio-cultural activities. Along with the interaction the exchange of thoughts, idealisms, principals, belief systems, culture, tradition, art, architecture and lifestyle practices etc. also start taking place. The degree of engagement between them then starts influencing the local lives. The natives of that area start replicating those influences in their own way. This is how the global influences the local and the local influences the global, and both adapts each other in their own means and reaches a new dimension. India was no exception, when the British invaded the country. Beginning of colonization in India, had brought about lots of influence on the culture, tradition, art and architecture along with flourishing trade.

The intent of this case study is to explore one of such scenarios and understand one particular genre of such blending between colonial architecture and vernacular architecture of Bengal during British Period. The exercise is to decipher the blending of two different architectural styles, various types of architectural elements and building techniques etc. in the context of British colonial architecture and vernacular architecture of Bengal and the expression of the blending of these two.

Index Terms - Colonization, architecture, influence, blending, style, global, local.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'eclecticism' has been originated from the Greek word '*eklektikos*', which means 'selectiveness or choosing the best'. This befitting small phrase has made its place in architecture also, and what we mean today by 'Eclecticism in Architecture' is a style which the best possible mix of already established historical styles.

During 19th century, western countries introduced lots of new materials in architecture like cast iron, wrought iron, steel, and plate glass because of Industrial Revolution. During 18th to 19th century, the architects chose to use these materials to glorify their past, instead of glorifying the materials. The buildings designed the 19th century maestro was characterized by a series of revival movements, in which styles of the past re-emerged as symbols of modern power. Many Europeans, and Americans, dedicated themselves to the styles of ancient Rome and Greece, which is known as Neoclassicism. The English also revitalized Gothic styles as a reverence to their glorious medieval heritage and named it as Neo-Gothic style. As architects became more comfortable with the concept of selecting certain elements over others and the concept of breaking from strict rules of tradition, eclecticism became more common. Slowly it became the movement of an aesthetic experimentation.

Along the western world, India also experienced this aesthetic experimentation, because of British colonization in India. When the Kolkata or Calcutta become the capital of India under British rule, from 1772 to 1911, the whole city got flooded with public buildings, where new materials were used to express the best of classical styles in an integrated manner.

British rule in Bengal had brought about many socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in the city fabric as well. There was a rise of new merchant class, who were close to the British rulers to reap maximum benefit out of trading. These merchants were the rich landlords of erstwhile Bengal. This new class were called 'Babus' in Bengal. These 'Babus' also took keen interest into new building typologies but at the same time were fascinated by their old mansions in rural Bengal as well. Thus, when these 'Babus' choose to settle down in Calcutta or Kolkata to enjoy urban facilities and lifestyle, they choose to build their house with the best of vernacular architecture of Bengal, woven into best of classical styles.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The paper aims to study the eclecticism in the architecture of the urban mansion of the 'Babus' of Bengal, through a live example – 'Laha Bari'. The main objectives of the paper have been to documentation of the mansion, as researched by reconnaissance survey, interviews and to analysis the prominent features through photo essaying.

III. AREA OF THE STUDY

Around 180 years old 'Laha Bari' ('Bari' is a Bengali word, it means residence), a mansion built in 1857 by Sri Madhu Mangal Laha, a businessman from Kolkata. It is a residential building. Present address of the mansion is 225, 1, Bidhan Sarani, College Street Market, College Street, Kolkata, Kolkata – 700007, West Bengal.

By the 1850s, Calcutta or Kolkata had two distinct areas: 'White Town', which was primarily for British and centered on Chowringhee and Dalhousie Square and 'Black Town', mainly areas of native Indian settlements and was centered on present North Calcutta or Kolkata. This mansion in subject is in 'Black Town' of Calcutta or Kolkata, as designated by the Britishers and still the descendants of Sri Madhu Mangal Laha reside in the house. The study will focus on interpreting the blending of British colonial architecture and vernacular architecture of Bengal in designing and building this residential mansion.



Figure 1a & 1b: Location of 'Laha Bari'

IV. ELEMENTS OF THE STUDY

The urban mansions of 'Black Town' of Calcutta or Kolkata were adorned by grand entrance porticos, decorated classical columns, arcaded corridors around huge courtyards, decorative doors-windows and screens, railings, grand staircases, chequered or coloured flooring and typical wooden roofing. 'Laha Bari' is also no exception to this grandeur. The paper would discuss and analysis the origin of five major elements of architecture in this mansion, namely - columns, arcades, doors-windows & screens, railings, flooring and roofing.



Figure 3: The Louvered Windows



Figure 2: The Columns and arched colonnades



Figure 5: The Roofing & Flooring

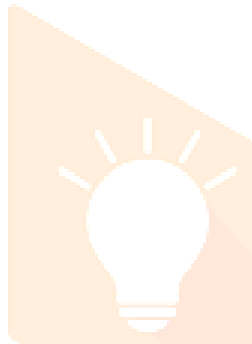


Figure 4: Bifurcated Staircase and Railing



V. JUSTIFICATION

Intense researches have been made on the public and semi-public buildings, built during the British period in Kolkata. Whenever we talk about Colonial Architecture in Kolkata, we mostly talk about Writers Buildings, Metcalfe Hall, General Post Office Building and many more. But these beautiful residential mansions, built by rich zamindars (landlords) and businessmen under British patronage, have never been documented. They are very much an integral part of Kolkata and narrates the story of old socio-economic and socio-cultural facets of Kolkata. Built on the backdrop of Indo-Saracenic and vernacular architectural style of Bengal, these structures have witnessed the beautiful blend of colonial flavours as well. 'Laha Bari' is one of many such structures which exhibits exuberant and mesmerizing architectural elements and the blends between them, to discuss upon.

Notes on Colloquial words:

- Gari Baranda** – Entrance porch, a projected part, where cars can drop and pick up;
- Andarmahal** – The inner portion of the mansion, intercepted by an inner courtyard;
- Bahirmahal** – Outer portion of the mansion, where guest could come;
- Thakurdalan** – The colonnaded high platform where the family deity is placed for worship;
- Nat-mandir** – The raised platform at one end of the courtyard for cultural performances;
- Nach Ghar** – A room in 'bahirmahal', where singers or dancers would come and perform for 'Babus' and their guests;
- Durga Puja** – Worship of the female deity 'Goddess Durga', who considered to be the goddess of power and good omen.

This is an annual Hindu festival which reveres and pays homage to the Hindu goddess, Durga.

1.0 THE CASE

1.1 Background of the structure

This mansion has been built in the year of 1857 and thus has strong influence of Bengal's indigenous architectural style and culture, Indo-Saracenic influences, as well as features and construction techniques borrowed from Neoclassical revival patronized by the British rulers in Kolkata.

Interestingly, a single property on a single plot of the Laha's has four addresses. It's just because of the expansion of the old build 'Laha Bari' and expansion in the family tree.

It all started during 1857, when this property was purchased, when Sri Madhu Mangal Laha's business was rising. The property is then divided between the four descendent of the Lahas - Sri Ramachandran Laha, Sri Parbaticharan Laha, Sri Joygobinda Laha and Sri Kristodas Laha.

1.2 Present 'Laha Bari'

The 'Laha Bari' still holds its position due to its 180 years old 'Bonedi Barir Durga Puja' (*the ceremonial celebration of goddess Durga at a high-profile family*) and the Colonial Building Style. Hence making this mansion an apt location for shooting and frequent tourist visits. However, the collection of sculptures, paintings, art and ancient artefacts makes this family different from other landlord families. Then came the late Sri Bhagbati Charan Laha, the one who made the Bengali Durga puja unique from the rest. Following this, late Sri Prankrishna Laha expanded their business and kept their status in the upcoming years. Presently, the Lahas have shifted to jobs of the recent generations and hence a trust is maintained by the four present brothers of the family. The mansion now has been divided into various fragments, due the later generations. Some of them still holds joint properties and rest are being sold during the years for various reasons.

During the reconnaissance survey, free entry was allowed till the 'Thakurdalan' of the 'Laha Bari' i.e. late Sri Parbaticharan Laha's house. Hence a detailed study of 'Laha Bari' is done for its astonishing features and evolution of spaces.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research has been based on the background study of 'Black Town' of British era followed by a reconnaissance survey of few houses of repute, which are well known for their Durga Puja celebrations. Then the prominent features of these mansions were studied in detailed and an attempt had been made to identify the origin of the special elements in these mansions and understand the evolution of spaces in course of time.

2.1 Influence of Bengal's indigenous architectural style and culture

The living environment and basic archetype of Bengal has been influenced largely by the climatic condition of Bengal, followed by people's daily lifestyle. House forms reflected a synthesis of religion, tradition, culture and ritual as practiced by the people of Bengal.

The base plane (plinth), the vertical protectors/dividers (walls) and the overhead plane/planes (roof) are the three main elements of a typical Bengal house that shows the perfect response towards the warm and humid climate of the region. Orientation has always played a vital role to ensure perfect air flow and keeps away unwanted glare.

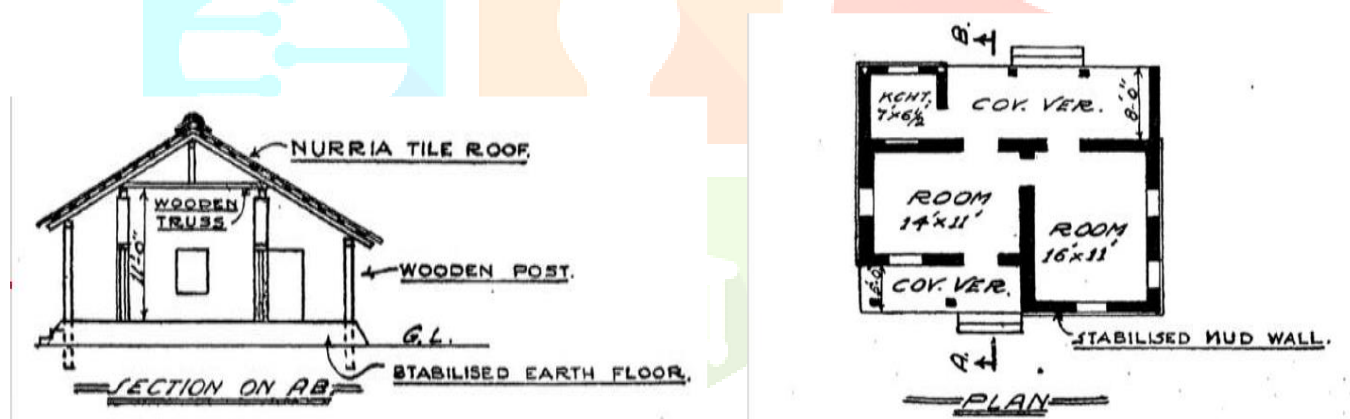


Figure 6: Typical indigenous house form of Rural Bengal

Family has been the basic social unit. Joint family structure has been inherited from traditional agrarian influence. Individualism is hardly found in traditional rural settings - family structure is clearly evident by looking at traditional house form (clustered around a courtyard).

While the British made Calcutta or Kolkata their capital, the new-found rising middle class of the Bengali society started building great houses with an eclectic blend of Colonial taste and traditional ideologies. The chief feature of this evolving architectural form was the square shape with an open to sky courtyard in the centre as a response to established the social institutions and climatic adaptation.

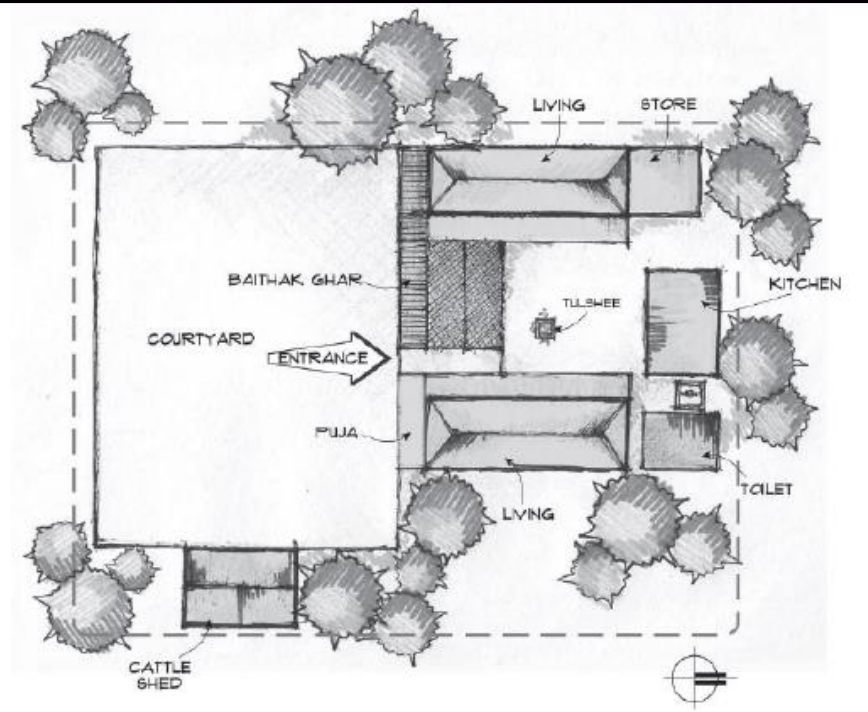


Figure 7: Traditional layout of house for a joint family around a courtyard

2.1.1 Inner Courtyard and Outer Courtyard

The courtyard's introverted plan helped the Bengalis to maintain this social distance between the genders by providing an indoor area for the women within the house, therefore minimizing the need for women to be outside the domain of the house and interact with other men in the society. On one hand, this inwardly oriented plan in the early years of British rule helped many Indians to secretly entertain the British officers to seek their patronage. Again, on other hand, the well concealed courtyard form helped the freedom fighters and social reformers to carry out radical work.

Similar to most other courtyard dwelling in India, these courtyard houses in Kolkata have a simple plan with rooms laid out surrounding the central courtyard. In most of these palatial buildings there is more than one courtyard – the outer being the public courtyard or 'bahirmahal' while the inner courtyard is more restricted to the family or 'andarmahal'. The traditional plan is symmetrical in nature. The rooms are planned according to their functions based on the cardinal directions around the courtyard. The most unique feature of these courtyard mansions in Kolkata, as differentiated from those in other parts of the country are the existence of 'thakurdalan' (puja room) and 'natmandir' (stage for cultural performances).

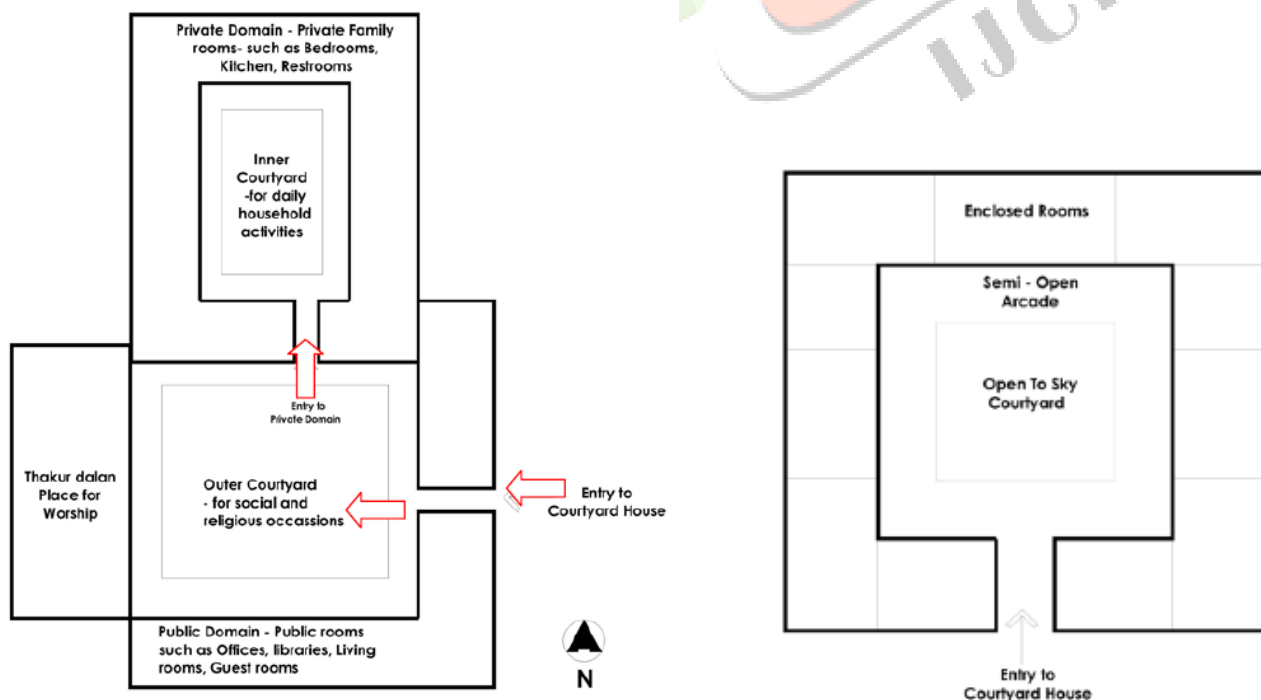


Figure 8: Two typical layouts of residential mansions in Kolkata

2.2 Influence of the 'Vaastu Shastra or Shilpa Shastra' in the design

The craftsmen of Bengal used to refer to the basic principles mentioned in the Indian architectural treatises, the Vaastu Shastra or the Shilpa Shastra, a vast collection of construction principals and techniques of different types of buildings. Vaastu Shastra helped them to determine the orientation of the buildings and its various parts, as it is believed that the stars influence human prosperity and wellbeing. The orientation and the layout of spaces were important not only for light and ventilation but also for good fortune, which was believed to be bestowed on the family because of the direction of worshipping the family deity.

These plans show that the courtyard, the central part of the house, is the rightful place for 'Brahma', the Lord of the Cosmos. Similarly, the treasury is recommended to be located in the north, where the Lord of Wealth resides. The kitchen is located to the south-east corner, the dwelling place of the Lord of Fire. According to the Vaastu Shastra the master bedroom should be placed in southerly direction, for posterity and practicality, as this position would be pleasant, with ample light and breeze.

The principles of Vaastu Shastras, used for designing and constructing a Hindu house, were as important as the orientation of the land, the personal taste of the owners and the aesthetic appeal of the exteriors, during the British rule in Kolkata. The principles could not be followed strictly, particularly in the growing colonial city of Kolkata. In many cases, the principles were used as a guide, and a relaxation of the traditional rules and beliefs followed to pave ways for new ideas. This outcome was also the result of new ways of life and modern ideas borrowed from the British.

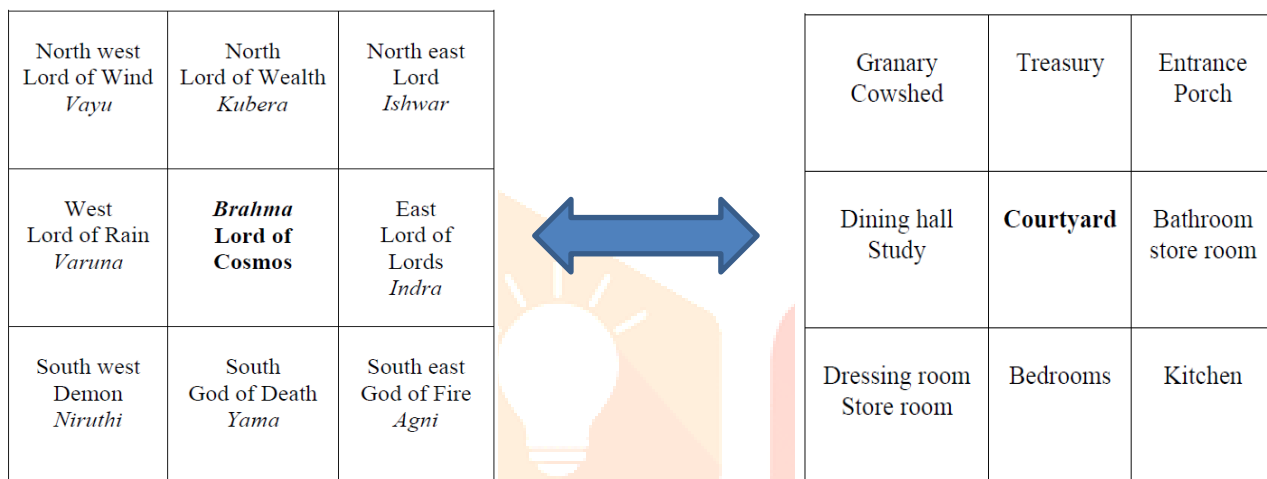


Figure 9: Spaces laid out according to the Shilpa Shastra. Source, Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 310. and the orientation of rooms using the rules of Shilpa Sastra. Source, Bhattacharyya, 2002, p. 311.

2.3 The Distribution and Organization of various Spaces

The 'andarmahal' of 'Laha Bari' was not allowed to be accessed, so the study is restricted to the 'bahirmahal', which comprised of spaces like the outer courtyard, the 'thakurdalan', the 'natmandir', 'naach ghar' and some guest rooms in the ground floor, constructed during 19th century. The building was approached through a 'gari baranda' (porch), which has been incorporated from neoclassical houses of Europe. The rich Bengalis were hugely fascinated by the dance and music. The 'naach ghar' was used to hold 'jalsha' (daily functions) where the dancers or singers used to perform for the landlord and his guests. Thus, there were guest rooms for these guests adjacent to the 'naach ghar'. Durga Puja is the main Bengali festival and the 'thakurdalan' was used to conduct Durga Puja with pompous and fanfare. Till date, the fanfare continues during puja days. The puja held here dates back to 180 years. These merchant families had their own 'Kuladevta' or 'Kuladevi' - personalized deity of the family. The idol of Laha family is known as 'Hara Gouri', which is different from the 'Mahisasuramardini' form, as that form of goddess is believed to be 'Kulodevi', who is protecting the family from all odds since ages. During Durga puja, the courtyard was used as the congregation space. The 'natmandir' was used as a stage for the family members to perform during festivals and at that time the courtyard was used to accommodate the audience.



Figure 10: The Entrance Porch- 'Gari Baranda'

The first floor was accessed by a grand bifurcated staircase to reach the common room with a small hall, bigger guest rooms, stores and terrace. The guest rooms in the first floor were probably used for high profile guests or close guests, as can be judged from their sizes.

The common room and the hall were the spaces where the family members would interact with the invited guests. The stores were used to hold extra furniture for the functions in ground floor.

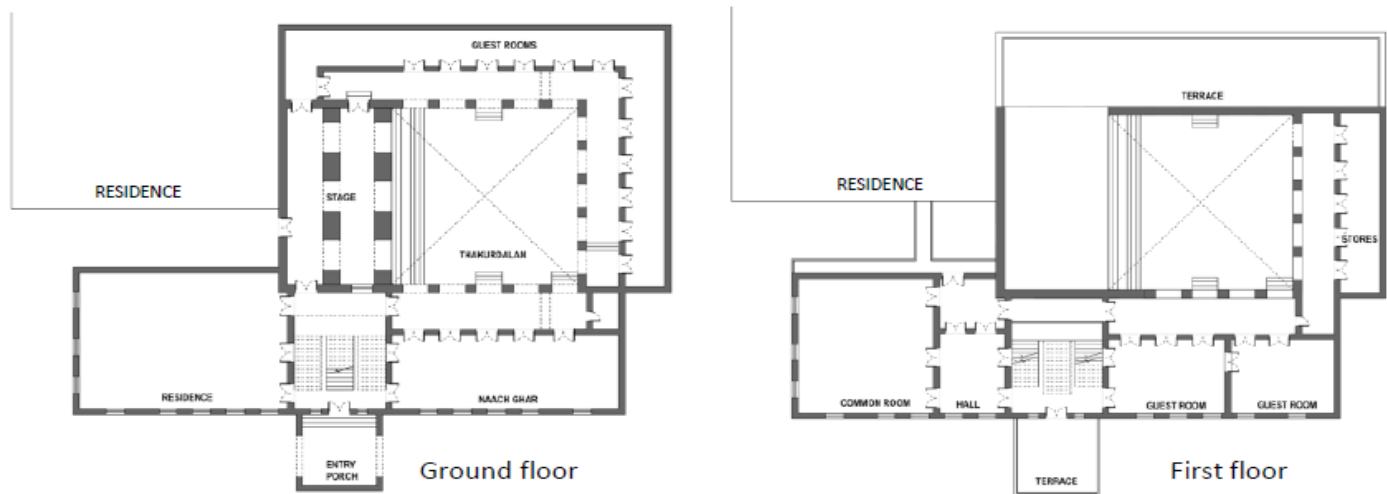


Figure 11:Outer courtyard plan of 'Laha Bari' - as built and used in the 19th Century

2.3.1 Evolution of Spaces

The 'Laha Bari' has undergone evolution of its spaces according to their basic requirements of the family down the history. In the ground floor only the 'thakurdalan' has been restored to perform the traditional Durga Puja. The vertical zoning of the functions sounds quite different than a normal residence, where there are different kitchens for each unit family in the ground floor with a shared living area. Following the first floor consists of the private bedrooms and toilets. The terrace having the God's abode, kitchen and storage. The 'thakurdalan' present on the ground floor open to the sky is the central focus and also acts as a courtyard, presently only used during the pujas, shooting and for special functions.

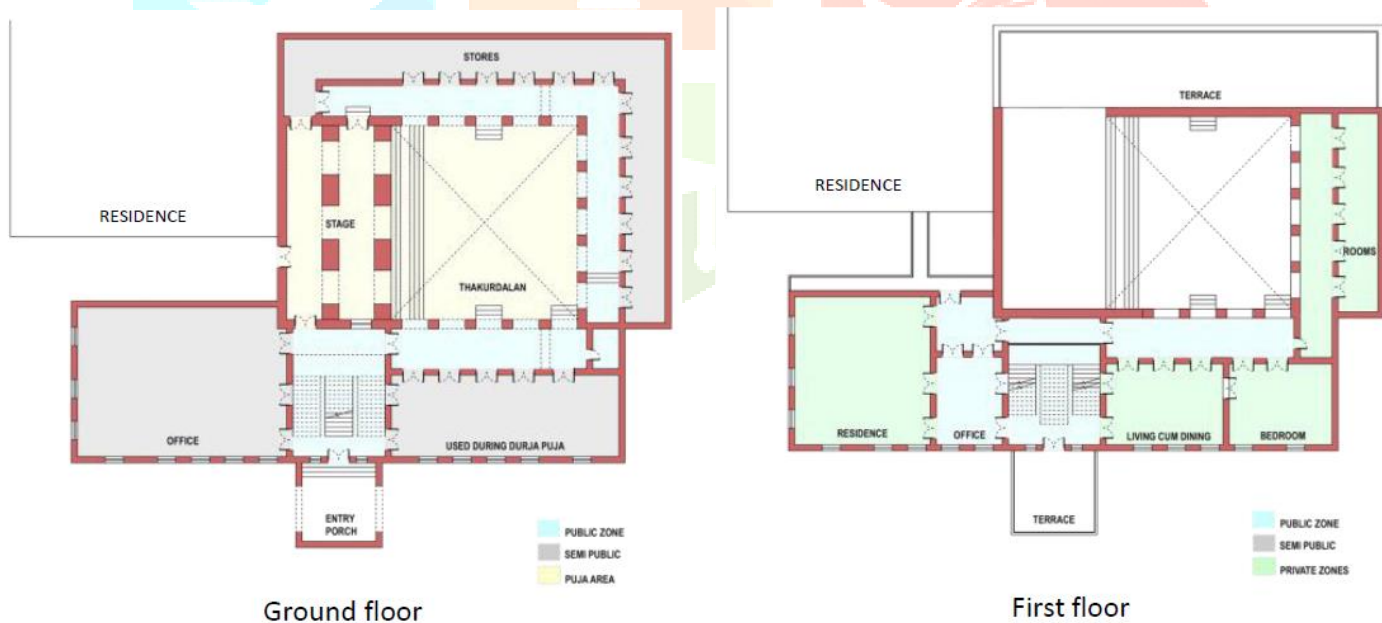


Figure 12:Present space allocation of Bahirmahal - Laha Bari

3.0 STUDY OF THE PROMINENT ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS/ FEATURES

A beautiful blend of vernacular architecture, Indo-Saracenic architecture and colonial architecture can be observed in great abundance in the premises including the stained-glass windows, columns and arcades, doors-windows & screen, railings, flooring and roofing and large porticos etc.

3.1 Columns and Arcades

The Laha mansion is adorned with beautiful columns. These columns were an integral part of the structural system of the mansion, as well as imparted a colonial appearance to the mansion.

The Brick piers hold the round roman arches. The key stone has been coloured to add prominence to construction technique. The motifs on the piers and those between the arches have been borrowed from Bengal's tradition of drawing motifs on floors with rice flour. This is considered as pious in Bengal culture.



Figure 14: Tuscan Columns on exterior facade, showing neoclassical revival (Roman) in the 19th century



Figure 13: Corinthian columns at first floor balcony



Figure 15: Arcaded verandah around Courtyard to save the rooms from glare and rain.



Figure 16: The façade of the 'thakurdalan' has been treated differently to accentuate the space. The plinth has been deliberately made higher to express importance to the deity.

Roman bell arches have been constructed on stout piers, which appears like the bundle columns of Romanesque architecture. The stucco decorations around the bell arches reflects the 16th century temples of Bengals, where the decorations were created through shaping of voussoir bricks.

The façade on the upper floor has 3 sets of roman arched windows in batch of three intermediated with pillars. The recessed decoration of the pillars and the bracket like stucco work at the floor level (corbel) also shows Classical influence.



Figure 19: Roman arches used in Colosseum and Triumphal arches.

Figure 18: Bengal's traditional culture of drawings motifs on floors with rice flour. Examples of some patterns. Similar patterns used to be drawn on mud walls also.

Figure 17: Arches in 16th century terracotta temples of Bengals, where the decorations were created through shaping of voussoir bricks.

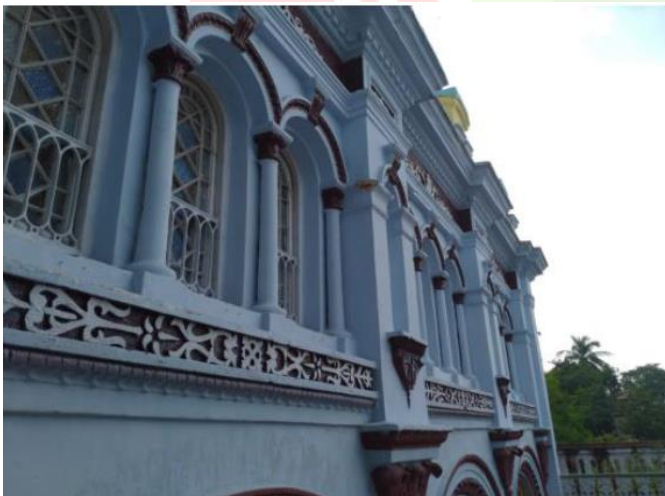


Figure 20: Close-up of Trident motif along first floor slab and the Corbel

3.2 Doors-Windows- Screens

The doors, windows and screens in Laha Mansion were used for safety and security, proper ventilation, to cut off glare and ensure privacy respectively. Other than responding to psychological and climatological requirements, these elements rendered a uniqueness to the mansion by use of full length wooden louvered window, burrowed from western décor, cast iron grills and used of stained glasses.

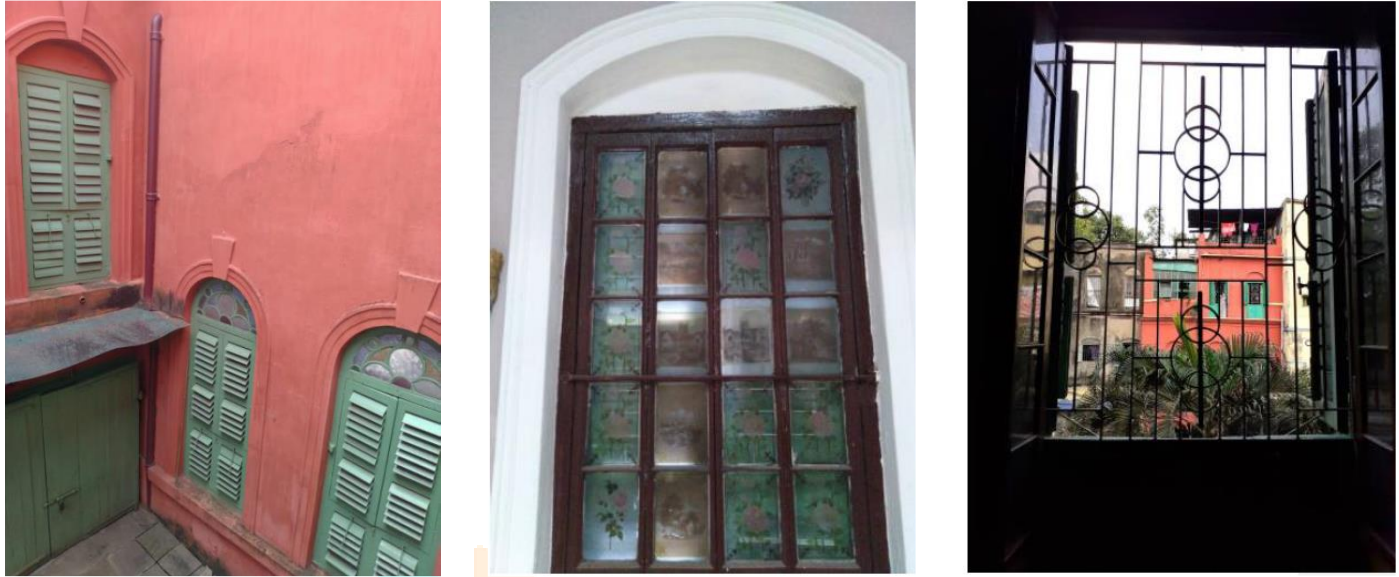


Figure 21: Full length arched wooden louvered windows starting from floor level.

The lower part of the window from floor to sill level is fixed and louvered and the upper part of the window from sill to spring level of the arch is openable and double layered. These jalousie windows open outside and the stained-glass windows with wooden frame open inside. The fanlight is fixed with glass panes and wooden tracery work. The gap for the fanlight has been filled with brick layers at second floor. In between the two layers of the window shutters, lies the cast iron grill. Full length jalousie windows have been incorporated in the mansion as a response to climate to let in more air yet ensure privacy.

The louvered and jalousie doors and windows trace their origin in 18th century French houses. These were mainly used in European houses to maintain privacy and control wind and light, as per residents' preference. The stain glass work was an integral feature of Gothic Architecture, which has been incorporated in these mansions at random to bring about the interplay of light inside rooms, as a prominent neoclassical revival.

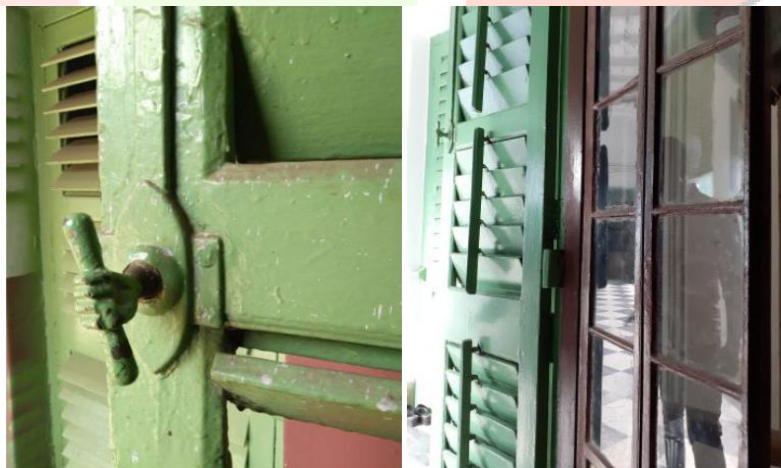


Figure 22: Ergonomic design of door handle

Figure 23: Double layered door

Warm humid climate never demanded double layered doors and window. But the idea of putting them in these mansions has been clearly borrowed from western world. Initially the European houses had glass window shutters with wooden frames or cast-iron frame. But these hampered privacies, when open to bring in air inside and were vulnerable to high wind speed. To protect these windows and doors, external wooden shutters were added. This only saved the windows from winds and also provided an opaque layer over glass windows to ensure privacy. But the problem of ventilation inside the room sustained. Then the solid wooden shutters were replaced first by louvers (fixed) and then by jalousies (movable louvers). This system of double layering also ensured less thermal conductivity to keep the rooms warm during harsh winters of Europe.



Figure 25: Fixed louvered screen in the first-floor balcony to cut off glare



Figure 24: Full length fixed louvered screen used at the side of the bridge connecting 'andarmahal' and 'bahirmahal' blocks

In vernacular houses of Bengal, extensive use of bamboo screens can be observed. It is assumed that, the concept of these screens has been borrowed from the Bengal vernacular style of using 'shital pati' made of mutra plants, to keep a place cool. The rich businessmen preferred to put fixed louvered wooden screen, instead to 'shital pati'.

3.3 Railings

Cast iron was cheap and more ductile compared to wrought iron. Since, 18th Century cast iron is being used to cast gates and railings by using moulds, when hot. The first use of cast iron was made in St. Paul Cathedral campus to surround the cathedral, including seven gates in the year 1710-14. Then during Georgian and Victorian era, cast iron has been profusely used in English houses.



Figure 27: Cast Iron Entrance Gate

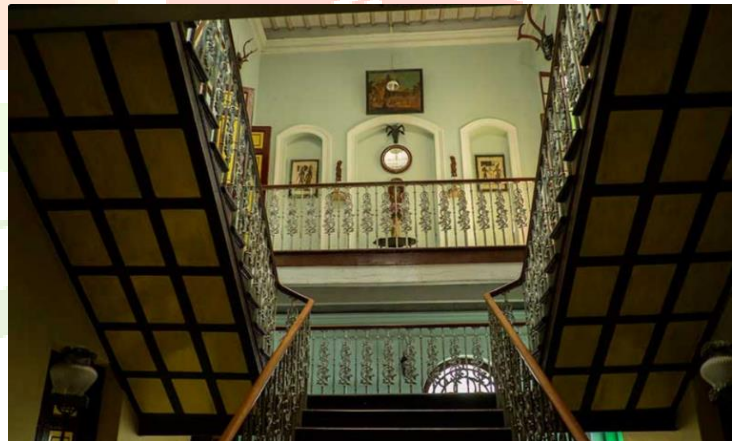


Figure 26: Wide bifurcated staircase to access the upper floor, having cast iron balustrade.

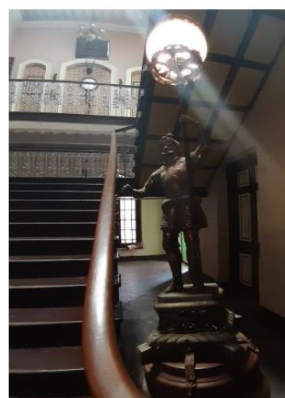


Figure 28a and 28b: The newel post holds a cast iron statue - Gothic Revival
Use of wide decorate staircase - revival of classical antiquity

When the English came to India, they brought the fashion of putting decorative cast iron railings all around the cities they lived in. Kolkata, being the capital, was no exception. The rich businessmen of Kolkata got fascinated by the railings and started putting them in their residences as well.

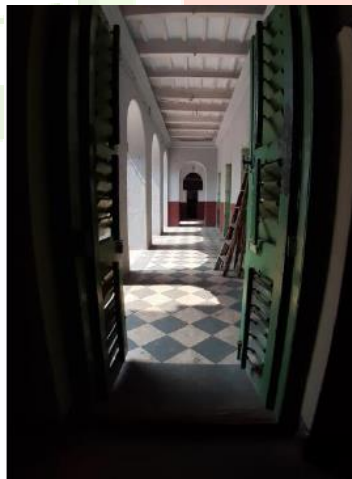
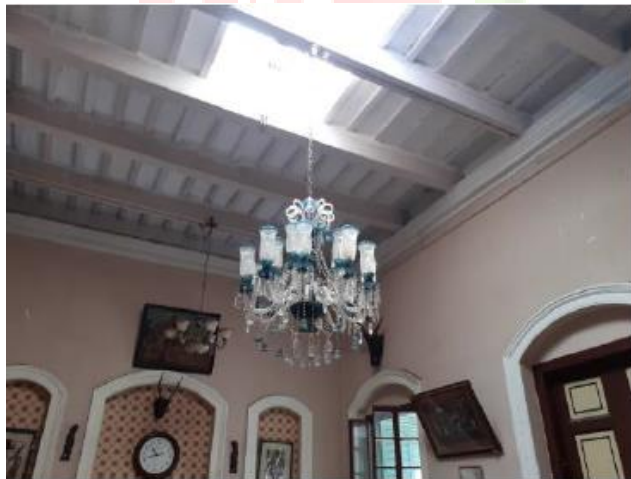


Figure 29: Use of cast iron railings in extended balconies and in windows.

Use of decorative barge board- a Neoclassical Feature

3.4 Roofing

The roofing of these urban mansions of Kolkata was made of terracotta tiles with lime-surkhi mortar resting on wooden beams – ‘Kori- Borga’



Taking inspiration from tradition after construction of vernacular houses, masons of old Kolkata to construct flat roofs. So, the masons laid the ‘Koris’ (slender wooden sections) at close intervals to rest on wider ‘Borgas’ (wide wooden sections) laid across in opposite/perpendicular direction to the ‘Kori’.

Figure 30: ‘Kori-Borga’ roofing system

purlin

‘Kori-Borga’ system of roofing was adopted by the

The vernacular houses of Bengal had terracotta tiled slopping roofs, laid on the purlin and rafter frame. Colonization in Bengal brought in the knowledge of using the lime as building material. Thus, the masons used the best of both the worlds and created flat roofs with terracotta tiles and lime-surkhi mortar.

3.5 Flooring

The flooring of the urban mansions of Kolkata was mostly made of marbles laid with lime mortar or coloured mixed with lime mortar or with lime-surkhi mortar.



Figure 31: Marble flooring inside the house

The Muslim rulers popularized the use of marble as building materials. The Europeans also came with the background of using marbles in the historic buildings. The rich learned business class of Kolkata took advantage of the best building materials to build their mansions to attain elegant, upscale appearance. Limestone flooring is very durable and can handle heavy loads. Thus, the courtyard was finished with lime-surkhi mortar.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Architecture eclecticism of highest order can be observed in the old mansions of North Kolkata, the erstwhile 'Black Town' of Calcutta or Kolkata, where the selected western classical elements found its expression through vernacular construction style, philosophy, and materials of Bengal. Their magnificence amid the chaotic streets and lanes of North Kolkata is surprising even today and serve as a reminder of the area's former character and the vast wealth and extravagance of the Bengali 'Babus' who built these majestic houses. This paper has traced the emergence of the business class and has examined the architectural style that developed consequently, through a single example. These mansions offer an insight into the way of life of Bengal's merchant class which had a profound impact on the broader indigenous culture and society during the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. For the city of Kolkata, the 'City of Joy' today, they are an important connection between the past and the present.

North Kolkata is dotted with such properties of varying sizes, and presently due to financial decline, the family members of most of these mansions are unable to retain the grandeur of these mansions. Some of these properties have been handed over for new real estate developments after completely removing the old fabric. These projects don't match the eclecticism of the neighbourhood and also weakens the connection with the past. Instead, this type of mansions can be identified, documented and then can be concocted to attract Government's intervention, as per their historical and architectural importance, for conserving/restoring/preserving the decaying heritage of Kolkata, the 'City of Joy'. As a way forward to this research work, similar studies of other such properties can be done and the precincts may be identified, and sustainable proposals may be drawn to chalk out the future of these properties, which all are integral and contemporary part of this city.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ms. Madhulika Biswas, 5th Year, B. Arch student, Amity University Kolkata

Mr. Shambo Dutta, 5th Year, B. Arch student, Amity University Kolkata

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