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British Bungalows as an Administrative Centre in Assam: A historical study

Jyotika Deka

Research Scholar, Department of History

Assam University, Silchar, India, 788011

Abstract:

Before the advent of the British, most of the houses in Assam were made of timber, bamboo and thatch (reed) and were structurally perfect and aesthetically beautiful. The Ahom tradition of wooden architecture made stone and brick not a favourable building material for native Assamese artists and artisans. After the arrival of the British, there emerged a new pattern of bungalows known as the British bungalows or Assam type bungalows which was an important characteristic of British administrative centers. As Assam was divided into administrative districts under the British rule and the towns which functioned as district administrative centers were the ones where most of such bungalows were built. Though the colonial administrators mainly constructed the bungalows for the political and administrative purpose but it brought a physical and social separation of the European and the indigenous people. It gradually changed the traditional pattern of houses in the society and the bungalows were developed as the main hub of the political and administrative activity where the offices as well as the residences of the officials were located. The present study will be made to explore the administrative, political, socio-economic importance of British Bungalows in colonial Assam.

Keywords: 1. Bungalows 2. Administration 3. Political 4. British 5. Colonial Assam

Introduction:

The administrative centre that emerged in the nineteenth century Assam developed as per the needs of the colonial administrative set up. These administrative centers were linked to the outside world through different modes of communication. They were marked by features like setting up of trading centers and modern educational institutions, creation of physical and socio-economic structures which were often alien to the region. The establishment of new administrative centers was the result of policy decisions of the colonial government. These centers not only resulted in the physical transformation of a place but also brought about new social values and a changing culture. In fact, these new centers were different from those that had evolved earlier over time through spatial interaction with the region. One of the important characteristics of the new emerging administrative centers was the emergence of a new pattern of bungalows known as the British bungalows or Assam type bungalows. Assam was divided into administrative districts under the British rule and the towns which functioned as district administrative centers were the ones where most of such bungalows were built. In this paper an attempt will be made to study the administrative, political, socio-economic importance of British Bungalows in colonial Assam.

Discussion:

Before the advent of the British, most of the houses in Assam were made of timber, bamboo and thatch (reed) and were structurally perfect and aesthetically beautiful. Shihab-uddin Talish who had accompanied Mir Jumla in 1662-63 commented that in the whole of Assam, there was no building of bricks, stone or mud with the exception of the gates of Garhgaon and few temples. Rich and poor alike constructed their houses with wood, bamboo and straw. The Ahom tradition of wooden architecture made stone and brick not a favourable building material for native Assamese artists and artisans. So, when the king Rudra Singha wanted to build a palace and city of bricks, he found no one in his kingdom skilled in the art. He, therefore, imported from Koch Behar an artisan named Ghanasyam under whose supervision numerous brick buildings were erected at Rangpur. However, the Talatalghar built at Rangpur was not the residential building of the royalty; it was a house for the functioning of the government. The place of royal residence was just on the north of this complex, which was built with timber and thatch. The brick buildings built in the late medieval Assam were influenced to a great extent by the Mughal architecture. The arcades of the basement with painted arches of the Talatalghar exhibits Islamic influence. Similarly, painted arches over the doorways and flat ceilings with the ornamentation of the Ranghar also speak of Islamic style. M'cosh also observed in his writing in 1837 that in the Ahom period "none but the Rajah was privileged to build a house of brick and mortar, none but he could build a house with two round ends to it, and none but the nobles a house with one round end."

After the arrival of the British, the pattern of buildings had not changed abruptly in the early period of their administration. The British found that the houses of the natives were elevated upon terraces of clay, about three or four feet high, the walls were made of large trees roughly hewn, sunk about seven feet into the ground, and covered with mats and reeds, and sometimes plastered with clay. In order to provide against the frequent fires, prudent persons had a range of earthen pots filled with water fixed on the ridge of the house and a ladder by which a man could run up and quench the flames with their contents, or in the event of the fire having advanced too far, the earthen pots could be broken with a stone or a push from a bamboo pole. Many of the houses of Europeans in Assam were built of mat and bamboo. Such a house, which did not boast of either a wooden door or a pane of glass, was built at a cost of Rupees Seven Hundred. W. Robinson also observed in 1841 that the houses of the natives were built principally of bamboo and reeds, and thatched with grass. The floor was usually plastered with cow-dung as it kept out insects. There was practically no furniture in the houses of the poor and simple even in those of the rich. Mats or carpets for the floor on which they were accustomed both to sit and lie, with a few earthen and other vessels for the preparation of their food, formed the inventory in general of their household goods.

In its early period, the British built the public buildings and residential buildings of the station with perishable and inflammable materials demanding periodical repairs and always liable to conflagration due to frequent shifting of the station from one place to another. However, permanent public buildings and improved structure of residential buildings had been built in the second half of the nineteenth century. Allocation of adequate funds and availability of materials and masons had enabled the British authorities to undertake masonry and brick works of public buildings, Magistrate's Court, Treasuries, Circuit Houses and Dispensaries at different administrative centers. Major John Butter commented that when he had arrived in Assam in 1837, there were just a few brick bungalows with glass doors in the province, and every station was lost in jungle and swamp. However, the following decades saw a vast improvement. Bungalows with glass doors were seen everywhere. Roads and bridges of bricks, iron and wood were also constructed. Mrs. Jessie T. Moore, who travelled in Assam in the last part of the 19th century, also wrote about the house of a local Christian widow named Bogi.

Bogi's house at Nowgong Sadar Station had three rooms with the raised floor of earth about three feet high which made it dryer and better than most native houses. The walls were of platted bamboo and plastered inside and outside. They remained a mud colour as they had not been white washed. The roof of the house was made of thatched grass. A little roof at the back of the house covered the kitchen. Many houses had just one room which served as the kitchen, bed room and sitting room.

The emergence of a new pattern of bungalows known as the British bungalows or Assam type bungalows is an important characteristic of British administrative centers. Assam was divided into administrative districts under the British rule and the towns which functioned as district administrative centers were the ones where most of such bungalows were built. The roots of the British bungalow in India lie in the early attempts of British military engineers in the eighteenth century to design a standardized and permanent dwelling based on indigenous domestic structures for the offices of the East India Company. In its later version in the nineteenth century, the British bungalow consisted of a low, one storey, spacious building, internally divided, having a symmetrical layout with a verandah all around and situated in a large compound. The kitchen and servant's quarters were separated in most instances. More elaborate types emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century to indicate the superior social position of its British owners. The verandah also disappeared from the sides and remained only in the front facing the garden and, at times, at the back. Though bungalows generally remained single storied; clerestory windows made their rooms still higher and cooler. The verandah was the most important part of the British bungalow fulfilling a variety of socioeconomic functions. Firstly, it served as an important sitting area. The floor was covered and the pictures and trophies that were displayed on the walls usually had some sentimental values. Secondly the verandah was the place where the British women, in particular, could feel some tentative personal contact with the "natives". In short, the verandah was a sort of bridge built cleverly to fulfill the requirements in colonial domestic architecture. This basic model of British bungalow was adopted with modifications almost everywhere British imperial rule existed at that time in India. The main features of Assam type bungalow in the nineteenth century were the front verandah with subdivided columns and sloping roof with locally available materials like thatch (reed), corrugated iron sheet or earthen tiles.

In the administrative centers, large pieces of land were reserved by the British for construction of administrative buildings as well as the residential buildings. One of the main considerations of town planning was the physical and social separation of the European and the indigenous people. The emergence of administrative centers was characterized by the construction of administrative buildings, European wards or civil lines having the residential bungalows of the officers, cantonment or sepoy lines for the accommodation of the British troops, colonies or patty (Amolapatty, Keyapatty, Dhakapatty, etc.) where the local people in similar socio-economic bracket came to live together. Chandmari was another area of the administrative centers where the British soldiers practiced their lessons for aiming at target. Paltan Bazar of Gauhati was the legacy of sepoy (platoon) camped at Gauhati during British rule. These administrative centers were developed as the main hub of activity where the offices as well as the residences of the officials were located. The political and administrative element in the colonial relationship was represented by the district administrative centre which was a distinct socio-spatial unit developed and occupied by civilian members of the colonial bureaucracy (Judge, Collector, Magistrate, Superintendent of Police) and supporting

technical, medical and socio-cultural services (engineers, civil surgeon, teachers, missionary, etc.). The district administrative centre was thus considered as the capital of the district. A church, a school and a club also became integral parts of these centres. The bungalow for the Deputy

Commissioner of Kamrup District was constructed at Gauhati on the hillock near Panbazar area (known as BurphukanarTilla) during the administration of Captain Bogle. Prior to the construction of this bungalow, district administration was carried out from the temporary houses at the foot of the Kamakhya hill. Captain Bogle also constructed the Collector's office near his bungalow and reserved the area from Latasil to Panbazar for future constructions of European wards or cantonment area as was generally found in British administrative centers elsewhere. The Deputy Commissioner's bungalow, which was built entirely of wood, consisted of three spacious bed rooms, a dining hall, a small library and a large living room that provided sufficient space for throwing a dance party. Besides, there were two store rooms and separate dressing rooms for the Deputy Commissioner and his wife. Fire places were also put in the living room and the main room while each room was provided with hand drawn fans (Pankhas). An iron chest was installed in the master bed room. This was necessary because often important papers and cash used to be deposited at the collector's office by agents at odd hours, sometimes even after the government treasury had closed for the day. Sometimes, agents used to bring money from interior places via boat and anchored just below the bungalow at a private ghat exclusively for the use of the Deputy Commissioner and his agents.

A long poem titled "GuwahatirBibaran" (description of Gauhati) published in June, 1853 issue of Orunodoi, the first Assamese Newspaper, gave a vivid description of the colonial buildings that housed the court building (kutcherry), treasury and the Collector's Office. In 1860, one permanent building with 20 inch thick wall was built for the Record Room (Mahafezkhana) near the treasury at Gauhati. It had a covered verandah running allround in order to provide double protection to the main room. The structure, which still exists, is a brick one having corrugated iron sheet roofing with a solid iron entry gate. The rich natives, who resided at the administrative centers, also started building their houses in the style of British bungalow in course of time. In the last years of the nineteenth century, IkramRasul, who was the Excise Superintendent of Nowgong and later Sylhet, had started the construction of his two storied bungalow at Lakhtokia in Gauhati by bringing irons, windows, doors, etc. from Calcutta by steamer and in 1910, when he completed the house, it became the talk of town. In 1845, the church building, which was a permanent full brick structure with a large square tower and a porch, had been built at Gauhati by a committee of which Major James Mathhie, Major Francis Jenkins, Major F. Foquet, Captain E.T. Dalton, Captain E.A. Rowlatt, Lt. Angew and Lt. H.S. Biver were the members.

When the proposal of shifting the administrative centre from Lakhimpur to Dibrugarh was approved, Major Vetch, the Principal Assistant, submitted a plan for the construction of the Court comprising of the Treasury, Record office and other buildings at Dibrugarh. He wanted the building to be strong and safe for the storage of arms and ammunitions. His successor Captain A. Camber requested Col. Hopkinson, the Commissioner of Assam, for approval of the court buildings and accordingly the government sanctioned Rs.20000/- for the same. Captain Camber in consultation with the Executive Engineer, Gerstein, wisely decided that the new kutcherry building which would be a costly one should be raised at some distance from the river bank so that it would not be affected by the Brahmaputra flood. The construction started in 1866 and was completed nine years later.

Emergence of European clubs also known as Gymkhana club was another important feature of the British administrative centers in Assam. These clubs attracted the British government officers, tea planters and other executives who were separated from their families for long years. Those who had their families with them also desired a common place for social gathering since they were virtually alien to the local community. In 1894, the European club was established at Gauhati in the premises of the present judge's bungalow. It also had three fishing boats anchored in the river for its members. However, no Indian was allowed to become member of the European Club of Gauhati. The only Indians allowed inside the premises were malies (garden workers), cooks, attendants and two barbers. Later, a few Indians were allowed to become members without voting rights and many other privileges.

Conclusion:

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that though the colonial administrators mainly constructed the bungalows for the political and administrative purpose but it brought a physical and social separation of the European and the indigenous people. However it gradually changed the traditional pattern of houses in the society and the bungalows were developed as the main hub of the political and administrative activity where the offices as well as the residences of the officials were located.

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