

Hazi Muhammad Mohsin's Hooghly Imambara: a Tale of Diminishing Glory

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Editor



Hooghly Imambara, an architectural splendour of the 19th century, is a holy shrine not only to the people of Bengal but also to the entire Muslim community of India. It dignifies the western bank of river Bhagirathi-Hooghly with fading grandeur whispering the story of its glorious past.

Hooghly Imambara was originally set up by an eminent Persian merchant Muhammad Aga Motahar in 1717 A.D. He is supposed to have arrived at Hooghly in the very first decade of the 18th century with his salt business. Aga Motahar established a simple one-storied building on the land of present-day Imambara with the aim of residing with his family for the rest of his life. Being a rich person he probably maintained a sophisticated lifestyle. In words of Ibn-I-Imam, “He kept a big establishment of attendants and servants...”—which sounds quite natural for a man of his stature. Though

he was a fortunate man in the matter of wealth, he led an unhappy life with his family. In 1717 he dedicated his abode solely to almighty Allah and christened it with the name “Nazargah Hossein”. In 1735 his son-in-law Mirza Saleh-ud-din added another building to it which was named TAZIA KHANA. Thus finally it emerged as Imambara to the whole Muslim community men.

The present Imambara does not have any trace of the older one.

There is a statement about old Imambara recalled by Dr. Badan Chunder Choudhury, the first Assistant Surgeon appointed to Imambara Hospital in 1842 to George Toynbee, the Collector and Magistrate of Hooghly district. Toynbee noted down in his *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hooghly District* published in 1888:

“The old Imambarah on the site of which the present buildings stand was an ordinary one-storied building. That portion in which the Mutwali used to live was, however, two-storied. The public road passed along its southern side. The door of the old building was large and wide, and roofed. The guards were placed on its western side. This door opened on to an open space, which were under the same roof with the prayer-hall. Pillars of a quadrangular form, painted with black and white stripes, supported the roof. On the southern side of this, lay a range of rooms, some of which were occupied by the officials, others being used for Toshakhana. The Prayer-Hall was on the eastern side of the open-space and its floor was little raised. It was very spacious.”

The present-day Imambara was constructed just upon the debris of older one. It must have been under divine inspiration that Hazi Muhammad Mohsin dedicated the whole of his fortune in favour of imambara: for construction and proper maintenance. In *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, published in 1896, W. W. Hunter puts down:



Md. Mohsin's statue at Mohsin College, Chinsurah

“The principal building in Hugly is the Imambara, a Shiah institution for perpetuating the memory of the twelve Imams, constructed out of funds which had accumulated from an endowment originally left by a wealthy Muhammadan gentle man, Muhammad Mohsin.”

Md. Mohsin, a man of many noble deeds, was born on the 1st day of August in 1732. In the course of time he became the only successor of the entire fortune left by Md. Aga Motahar, the childless couple Mannu Jan Khanam and Mirza Saleh-ud-din and his father Hazi Faizullah. Regarding the relation George Toynebee wrote in his above-mentioned book:

“The present Mutwali informs me that the old building was erected in 1694 in the reign of Auranzeb by Md. Mutahar, of whom Md. Mohsin was in connection through his daughter Mannoojan Khanam”.

Thus gaining the whole property he handed it over through a charitable deed that appears as followed:

I, Hajee Mohummud Mohsin, son of Hajee Fyzoollah, son of Agha Fyzoollah, inhabitant of the port of Hooghly, in full possession of all my senses and faculties, with my own free will and accord do make the following correct and legal declaration. That the zumindaree of pergunnah Qismut Syedpore, etc., appendant to Zillah Jessore, and Pergunnah Sobhnal, also appendant to the Zillah aforesaid, and one house situated in Hooghly (known and distinguished as Imambarah) and Imambazar, and haut (market), also situated in Hooghly, and all the goods and chattels appertaining to the Imambara aforesaid, agreeably to a separate list; the whole of which have devolved on me by inheritance and the proprietary possession of which I have enjoyed up to the present time. As I have neither children, nor grand-children, nor other relatives, who would become my legal heirs and as it is my earnest wish and desire to keep



up and continue the usages and charitable expenditures (Murasum-o-Musaruf-i-husneh) of the nature of fateha, and tuheet, etc., of the Huzerat (on whom be blessings and rewards), which have been the established customs of this family, I therefore hereby give, purely for the sake of God, the whole of the above property, with all its rights, immunities, and privileges, whole and entire, little or much, in it with it, or from it, and whatever (by way of appendage) might arise from it, or relate or belong to it, as a permanent appropriation for the following expenditure; and I have hereby appointed Rujub Uli Khan, son of Shekh Mohummud Sadiq, and Shakur Uli Khan, son of Ahmud Khan, who have been tried and approved by me, as possessing understanding, knowledge, religion, and probity Mootawulless (or trustees) of the said Waqf or appropriation, which I have entrusted to the above two individuals, that aiding and assisting each other they may consult, advise, and agree together in all matters connected with the joint management of the business of the said appropriation, in the manner following. The aforementioned Mutawallis, after paying the revenues of the Government, shall divide the remaining produce of Muhals aforementioned into nine shares, of which three shares, first of all they shall disburse in the observance of the fateha of Huzrut Syudq-i-Kayunat, (head of the creation) the last of the prophets, and of the sinless Imams (on all of whom be the blessings and peace of God); and in the expenditures appertaining to



the Ushra of Mohurrum-ool-huram (10 days of the sacred Mohurrum) and all other blessed days of Feasts and festivals; and in the repairs of the Imambara and cemetery. Two shares, the Mutawallis, in equal proportion, shall

appropriate to themselves for their own expenses; and four shares shall be disbursed in the payment of the servants of the establishment, and of those whose names are inserted in a separate list signed and sealed by me. In regard to the daily expenses, monthly stipends of the stipendiaries, respectable men, pedas and other persons, who, at the present moment, stand appointed, the Mutawallis aforementioned, after me have full power to retain, abolish or discharge as it may appear to them most fit and expedient. I have committed the Mutawalliship to the charge of the two above named individuals as a common (aum) towleut. In the event of a Mutawalli finding himself unable to conduct the business of the endowment, he may appoint any one whom he may think most fit and most

deserving, as Mutawalli to act his stead. Consequently this writing is executed as a deed, this 9th day of Bysakh in the year of hijree 1221, corresponding with the Bengal year 1213, that whenever it be required, it may prove a legal deed.”

But only after a span of six years this divine personality passed away on the 29th of November in 1812. However, it is disappointing to note that the Mutwallis (manager) appointed by Hazi Mohammad Mohsin could not follow the right path they were supposed to. Many more Mutwallis were appointed



thereafter. But the insincerity and dishonesty threw a bigger part of the wealth to totally squander. After a massive upheaval in appointing mutwallis the Government took charge of this Imambara. On 3rd January of 1837 Syed Keramat Ali, a noble architect, was



appointed as Mutwalli. Keramat Ali was a man of versatile genius with proficiency in geometry and science. This man from Jaunpur, Rajasthan got the sole charge of constructing the new Imambara. Following the sequence Goerge Toynbee noted down:

“Considerable discussion ensued about 1830 as to the agency by which these buildings were to be

erected. The aid of The Public Works Departments was at first called in, and Messrs, Burns and Co. were also were asked to submit plans and estimates.”

Just after the visit of Governor General in 1841 the Imambara was decided to be constructed by the present Mutwalli, Syed Keramat Ali under the supervision of the engineers from Housing Construction Department.

The construction started in August 1845 as we find in *Hooghly Past and the Present* by Sambhu Chandra Dey. It took a span of 20 years to complete at the cost of Rs. 8.5 lacks, according to a short biography of Hazi Mohammud Mohsin by Hashmat Ali. Unfortunately 1875 was the last year of Syad Keramat Ali's life. He



handed over whole of his authority with trust to Maulvi Syed Ashraf Uddin, the eldest son of Nawab Amir Ali. He was also a man of respect who created a committee in 1876 to take proper care of Imambara. Thus the long cherished dream of Mohsin came to the reality at last.

Imambara, the angel's abode (Imam—angel, bara —the building to live in) opens with a lofty doorway leading to a vast concrete courtyard. A rectangular tank is there in the middle of the courtyard. This tank is beautifully accessorized with a decorative fountain and surrounded by decorative potted plants that complement the beauty of the entire construction. The colourful fishes play here and there in abundance with joy. The courtyard is surrounded with two-storied buildings which are now used for official purposes. At the east end of the courtyard lies Zaridalan, the main prayer hall of Imambara. Inside the Zaridalan it is very gorgeous. The check patterned marble floor in black and white welcomes you for sitting in a perfect praying ambience. The walls of this room are covered with lines from 'Hadish', the maxims of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad. The room is beautifully decorated with lanterns and chandeliers hanging from the roof with flawless Belgian glasses. Inside the prayer hall there is a seven staired throne of the Imam where he delivers his speeches from every Thursday. The disciples of this Imam take seat just before the Imam's throne. There is also an elegant sitting arrangement for the ladies in both side balconies. There are kept five different Tazias at the innermost side of the prayer hall in memory of 1. Prophet Hazrat Mahammad, 2. Prophet Fatima Zahra, 3. Hazrat Ali, 4. Imam Hasan and 5. Imam Hussain.

The opposite side of the Imambara which faces the river Ganga, too appears grand in its view. This portion contains the English version of Mohsin's Deed engraved on the upper wall of the back side imambara.

There is a concrete Sundial at the open yard on the eastern most side of this institution. This is a 3ft. high concrete table with a fixed hand that still indicates an exact time from the very dawn to the time of sunset.

The most interesting thing in the Imambara was a Turkish bath or Hammam exquisitely decorated with colourful glasses with no window inside. The aura of sunray, filtered through these glasses must have been creating a dreamy ambience which compelled the people to stick inside with an amazing charm.

Another spectacular wonder of this Imambara is its Clock which is placed at the middle of the twin towers erected upon the doorway of the main entrance. Each tower is supposed to be 150 ft. high and takes 152 steps to reach its top. The clock is really an object of wonder with its two dials, one facing the outer side and the other the inner. It has three bells with 30 mds, 40 mds and 80 mds of weight. The smaller bells cling at every 15 minutes' interval whereas the bigger one clings at one-hour interval. This huge clock was brought by Syed Keramat Ali which was manufactured by M/s Black & Hurray Co., Big Ben, London with a cost of Rs. 11, 721 in the year of 1852. The Clock possesses a 20kg winding key which takes two young men to wind the clock for half an hour every week.



An eminent tourist Babu Bholanath Chandra wrote in his book, *Travel of a Hindoo*:



Winding stairs

“One of the noblest buildings in Bengal is the Imambara of Hooghly. The courtyard is spacious and grand. The through in the middle is a little-sized tank. The two-storied buildings, all around, are neat and elegant. The great hall has a royal magnificence. But it is profusely adorned in the Mahomedan taste with chandeliers, and lanterns, and wall-shades of all the colours of rainbow. The surface of the walls is painted in blue and red inscriptions from the Koran. Nothing can be more gorgeous than the doors of the gateway. They are richly glazed all over, and upon them are inscribed, in golden letters, the date and history of the Musjeed.”

But sheer negligence pushes the whole construction to decay. Lack of supervision, indifference of the governing committee, lack of money play key role in the gradual

decay. Plasters are worn out at many places, many glasses are broken and not maintained properly. There are also ample scope to decorate the building with pots and plants, but the holders remain negligibly empty. Many parts are not allowed to see for their miserable conditions with no maintenance. The ‘Hamam’ today is a place of gloom. An electrical stuff screams in despair:

“Everything is lost. I know everything about this Imambara. My father, grandfather, the great grandfather—everybody worked here since the time of its construction. My grand fathers were rich. They were paid Rs.30 with handful of facilities and honour. They passed their lives with plenty of mirth and cheer. The committee was solely devoted that time to providing every comfort to the working staff. There were 108 workers at that time. But now we are only 12-13 maintained by the present committee. I live here only with a monthly salary of Rs.150 without anything else. This committee is poor enough with its decreasing power which is completely different from the committee that was before 50 years.”

According to him “Mohsin created a blue book which clearly states that the



Tomb of Md. Mohsin and others

Caretaker of this Imambara must be a rich, educated and a devout ‘Namazi’ person.” But today the person who gets the authority makes a full advantage of this position and doesn’t hesitate to break all the rules that a responsible caretaker should abide by. Thus every word of the man utters the hidden pain expressed by every brick of this Imambara.

The throne of the Imam is said to have been once decorated with gold and silver creepers. But now they are all gone. The original brass-metal Sundial is replaced by a concrete one. Recent theft of a lamp of Zaridalan shows the practical worth of present-day Imambara. As the sun sets, the Imambara also sinks into oblivion before our helpless, indifferent gaze.

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