



Book Review:

Hundred Years of Bangabhaban

Mohsin, KM and Ahmed, Sharif Uddin et.all. edited, Press Wing Bangabhaban (Press Secretary to the President, President's Office, Bangabhaban), Dhaka, February, 2006, pp. 399, Price Tk. 500.00, or US\$25

Hundred Years of Bangabhaban has recently been published to mark and capture the last 100 years its history (1905-2005), through which recent political history of Bangladesh has largely been shaped. The publication is an initiative of the current President of Bangladesh, Professor Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed. It is a scholarly work, and a major step towards writing institutional history of our region.

The *Bangabhaban* is the office-cum-residence of the honourable President of Bangladesh, and it is from this building the President exercises his constitutional, legal, executive functions and responsibilities. It has a prominent place in the history of Bangladesh.

On 23 December 1971, in the absence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and other leading members of the government met for the first time in a cabinet meeting at the *Bangabhaban*.

The *Hundred Years of Bangabhaban* focuses on the development and history of the growth of this prestigious institution and for that matter Bangladesh between 1905 to 2005 in 3 distinct - British, Pakistan and Bangladesh - phases. Bangladesh has a glorious history and heritage of thousands of years, and the book provides narrative descriptions based on contemporary historical sources to present the history, functions, and tradition of *Bangabhaban* in plain English. It basically encapsulates 100 years of inner workings, political and diplomatic manoeuvring from within this building. The *Bangabhaban* site is about 24 hectares and surrounded by heavy and high walls from all sides, located in the heart of the Dhaka City. *Bangabhaban* assumed much national importance since the independence of Bangladesh, and it occasionally became the nerve centre of all political activities especially when government was in crisis.

The book has nine chapters written by individual authors, renowned in their fields. The first chapter deals with the site and surroundings, and history of the settlement of the area from the time of the Bengal Sultans (1377 onward) and the construction of mosques and *mazars* or shrines in the pre-British period (1610 onward) – the period of Nawabs of Dhaka (*Mughal* period)- up to the British period (mid eighteenth century and beyond).

The second chapter described the historical background of the *Dilkhusha Government House*, which began in 1904-05 and was renamed as *Bangabhaban* after the independence of 1971, when Pakistani rule ended which commenced in August 1947.

The third chapter of the book recounted the history of *Bangabhaban* after 1971. The President's constitutional role and functions are described in the fourth chapter while the fifth chapter deals with history of the reconstruction of *Dilkhusha Government House* in the 60's, which was initiated by Governor Azam Khan but formally opened by subsequent Governor Monem Khan on 17 January 1964.

The internal decoration and ornamentation of *Bangabhaban*, including various art works and paintings that adorn the place, have been described in chapter six. Historical analysis of the soil of the *Bangabhaban* area as well as description of the plants, trees, birds, and insects are provided in chapter seven. Chapter eight provides the life sketches of the Lieutenant Governors, Governors and Presidents since 1905 till today, and Chapter nine included the memories of *Bangabhaban* by former Presidents.

In addition to these, there is a short note on the *Toshakhana* (where gifts and valuables are kept in *Bangabhaban*). The book included historically significant and a rare collection of photos of events and rare item of gifts, and many portraits of eminent personalities, artists, politicians, intellectuals, reformers, writers, and also all former, current and acting Presidents of Bangladesh, who have contributed greatly in the nation building, and made their mark to enrich our society.

It is indeed enlightening to know that without the knowledge of the past, the present cannot be fully understood, nor the future can be well projected without assessing our past. Thanks to its publisher and editors, the book is an important milestone in the preservation of political and historical materials and documenting our treasured cultural heritage, and we are proud of our glorious past. As this is the initial edition of this publication and the first comprehensive documentation of the activities of *Bangabhaban*, it is quite possible that the book will be revised and updated in subsequent years, with additional information included and any earlier omissions and inaccuracies corrected.

Unlike other government publications, which usually are full of party political propaganda and often exaggerated achievements of the government (of the day), I found this publication a balanced and unbiased presentation of our treasured past.

Helal Morshedi
Sydney, 27 June 2007