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Bow Barracks – The Identity of Anglo-Indians in Kolkata: Fight for Survival

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ABSTRACT

Kolkata is marked with many architectural marvels and historic settlements that are in dire need of recognition and conservation. One such settlement is existing in between the congested streets of central zone of main city of Kolkata. It is simple but spacious housing colony in 3 bighas area, called as 'Bow Barracks' now under proposal for demolition by the local government. This settlement is inhabited by a very special community, popularly known as 'Anglo-Indians' that are the offspring of European and Indian parents. These buildings have a history, elegant architecture, unique culture and a mark of a symbolic identity of this community for over a century. The aim of this paper is to highlight this living cultural settlement with its different aspects and issues of today and its past and to demonstrate conservation as a better alternative than bulldozing these buildings for construction of high-rise buildings to realize economic value.

Introduction

This paper is about the architecture and the associated culture of the historic housing complex 'Bow Barracks' situated on Bow Street at Bow Bazar area near the Dalhousie Square in central Kolkata, and presentation of a research exploration about the possible appropriate decision on whether to conserve and preserve this settlement or to demolish it for new high-rise buildings in tune with the present trend of urbanization in Kolkata.

When the researchers were searching for the location, the local people identified the Bow Barracks as “Red buildings where English people reside, near Bow bazaar”. P. T. Nair (1985) a renowned researcher on Kolkata and author, discussed about the existence of 'firanghees' at this area in his book titled 'Calcutta: Origin of the Name'.

During the World War-I in 1918, the British Government required to provide accommodation to the war-participating British soldiers in Kolkata and entrusted the Calcutta

Improvement Trust (CIT, now KIT formed in 1912) with the construction of a barrack (Garrison's mess) on a plot comprising a park on Bow Street (**Fig.1**) near the Dalhousie Square Central Business District (CBD) zone (Nair, 1985). The KIT cleared off trees and junks from the northern side of the park and built a three-storied housing there (**Fig. 2**) for the soldiers in 1918 keeping a park area only on the southern side (Nair, 1985) and creating a road dividing the plot into two plots with the Barracks' buildings (**Fig. 3 & 4**). Quickly after the War stopped, the soldiers departed from this place and the administration handed over the housing settlement to the KIT. At that time, KIT was widening the present Chitta Ranjan Avenue through its Scheme No. VII D (comprising Central Avenue, Bow Bazar and Prinsep Street region) for which, many Anglo-Indians of Tirreta Bazar were displaced. KIT gave them accommodation at this housing settlement on rental basis during 1919-1920 (Roy, 2008). Presently, the settlement includes families of Anglo Indian, Anglo Chinese, Muslim, Hindu Bengali and Gujarati communities.



Figure 1. Location of Bow Barracks at CBD in Kolkata (Source: Google Earth 2016)



Figure 2. Buildings of Bow Barracks (Google image, 2016)

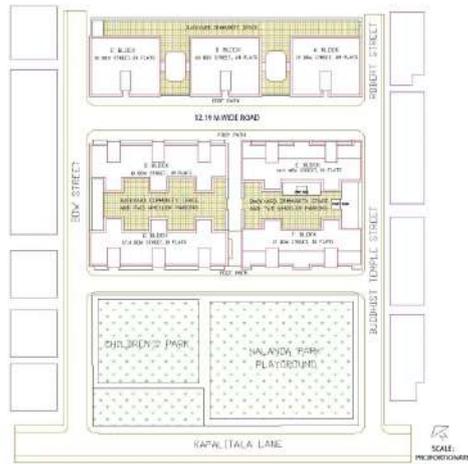


Figure 3. Site Plan of Bow Barracks

A Note on Anglo-Indian Community

Anglo-Indians were a unique community that are the offspring of European and Indian Parents (Gaikwad, 1933; Government of India, 2018). Such group of people started to exist since eighteenth century. European community did not accept them as members of their own community for a long time. In April 1834, in obedience to an Act of Parliament passed in August 1833, the Indian Government granted government jobs to Anglo-Indians (Maher, 1962). Lord Charles Hardinge, Governor General and Viceroy of India during 1910-1916 first referred them as 'Anglo-Indian' in the Census of India 1911 and the Government of India accepted them as an independent, responsible community.

There were once a huge number of Anglo-Indians in Kolkata before independence. They suffered from the feeling of identity dilemma for a long time. Neglect from both the British and the native Indians led to their migration to Europe, USA, Canada and Australia after independence (Cassity, 2014). A lot of them



Figure 4. Urban Form and Space of Bow Barracks

migrated slowly and steadily for better living and job opportunity within other Indian States and abroad. Today mostly the old ones and children from Anglo-Indian community are residing here making the presence of this community a rare one in the society.

Culture at Bow Barracks

Out of 491 people of Bow Barracks (Ward No. 47, EB No. 001800) (Census of India, 2011), the authors surveyed 323 people (about 66% of total population) while others could not be surveyed because of their denial for survey and absence in their apartments. 126 people out of 323 people are Anglo-Indian, 9 people are Anglo-Chinese, 78 people are Chinese, and others representing the Hindu, Muslim and Christian community are from different states of India.

The Anglo-Indians are of general caste who follow Roman Catholic Christianity and celebrate Christian festivals. The Chinese people are Buddhist and celebrate Chinese New Year as their main festival. They also participate with the Anglo-Indians in celebrating Christmas. Other people residing at Bow

Barracks celebrate their religious festivals on their own within their apartments only. However, the Anglo-Indians of Bow Barracks have a rich culture and tradition of celebrating Christmas in an extravagant way that extends from December 24 up to January 01 of the following New Year on the wide road in between two rows of the building blocks (Fig. 5) and attracts people of Kolkata and foreign tourists at this place. Chinese New Year is also celebrated here every year by the Anglo Chinese and Chinese Indian people residing here and at nearby areas such as Teritta Bazar. Dragon dance by the youth during the festival (Fig. 6) is a very interesting and landmark socio-cultural event.



Figure 5. Christmas Celebration at Bow Barracks

Yearly Hockey and Football tournaments also take place on the street between the building blocks with participants from Bow Barracks as well as from outside. There have been several state and national champions, who developed their basics and skill of the games playing here and some of the prominent names among them include Barry Savien, Fredrick Rosario, Christopher Thomas and Cecil Savien, etc. (Pandey, 2015). The residents of Bow Barracks formed an organization titled 'Bow United

Organization' (BUO) in 2004. It manages the residents' unity and welfare, socio-cultural and recreational events and maintenance of the buildings by a mutual funding process (Felix, 2015).

Architecture of the Settlement

The barracks built as Garrisons' Mess suggesting that there would be simplicity in its architecture. The field work reveals that seven three-storied blocks were constructed on two pieces of plots comprising in total 4055 sqm with a 12 m (40 ft) wide road in between the plots (Fig. 3). The northern plot with area 1535 sq m linearly contains three identical building-blocks connected by two service-core offering



Figure 6. Celebration of Chinese New Year in Bow Barracks

accommodation of seventy two one-room apartments. The southern plot with area 2520 sq m accommodates four isolated buildings of two types containing thirty six two-room apartments and twenty four three-room apartments (Fig. 7).

The complex was designed with exposed brick work using basic architectural elements at regular intervals (Fig. 4). The typology of this colonial settlement in rhythmic grid style is

that time within Kolkata city. The linearly positioned seven residential blocks in three rows at Bow Barracks create 'street façades' on the road in between two rows of blocks (Fig. 4) and on the road beside the southern park (Fig. 8).

are linearly positioned along the other roads in grid format. All the seven blocks having the same style and colour as a whole reflect unity, symmetry and balance in the design of the place. The small open spaces in between the blocks give opportunity for doing household activities, vehicle parking and worshipping especially at the demarcated 'grotto' (Fig. 10).

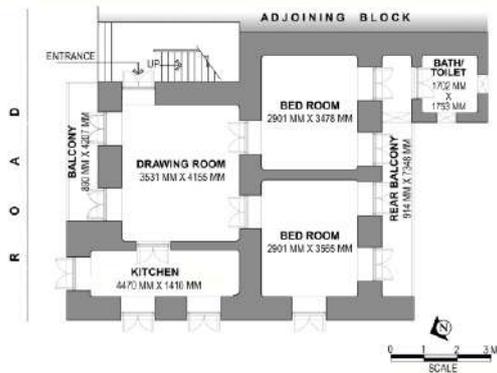


Figure 7. Plan of three - room apartment

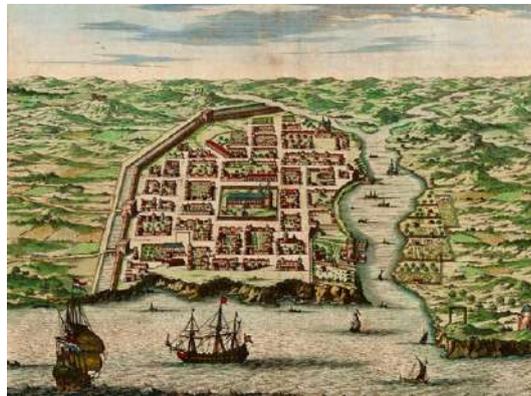


Figure 9. Plan of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (Source: Website 2017)



Figure 10. Prayer Grotto



Figure 8. Park- side façade

This planning layout of Bow Barracks is perhaps influenced from or has similarity with old historic Spanish Colonial town plan, for example, of Santo Domingo in Dominican Republic (Fig. 9) established in 1502, where a compact layout having a main 'square' and a city grid layout forms the basic aspects of physical planning (Sendin, 2014). At Bow Barracks, the 'square' is actually a road which is used for all social activities and the buildings

Issue of Conflict

KIT, the owner of the property, took a good care for them for many years. However, two notices from KIT, first one in 1980-81 and the second one in 1999 were served to the inhabitants asking them to vacate the buildings. These notices stated that the

buildings were in dilapidated state and unsafe for human use. Subsequently, KIT stopped taking rents from them. During the interview, Mrs. Joyce, a resident who is in his 70's, commented, "several pleadings and efforts made by the residents to the KIT for acceptance of rent did not work". There was also an inclination of the government towards the idea of demolition of these building for the construction of new multi-storied housing. In 2002, Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) formed a team for the inspection of the property, as only KMC can declare a building 'unsafe for human use' in KMC area. The team found the buildings at Bow Barracks safe and repairable (Mukherjee & Mandal, 2005). In 2005, the then West Bengal State Government Minister of Urban Development stated that Bow Barracks was in a dilapidated state and could not be renovated (Lyons, 2008., Felix, 2015). The Minister commented that the Government had plan to demolish the buildings and build new apartments in which, the families living in Bow barracks would be offered apartments at subsidised rates. (Mukherjee & Mandal, 2005).

BUO protested against the declaration of KIT for evacuation and offered the KIT that the inhabitants would purchase the flats on as-is-where-is basis with an undertaking that the inhabitants were prepared to bear all future responsibilities and live there at their own risk (Mukherjee & Mandal, 2005). But KIT did not respond to that appeal. KIT's stand remains the same till date. As per Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), a proposal for redevelopment on this site is already in place with pre-bid work completed (KMDA, 2014). The redevelopment proposal has proposed construction of two numbers of twelve-storied

apartment blocks with apartments having covered areas like existing three types of apartments and with more variety (Mitra, 2014).

Demolition for New Development

The old and historic buildings in India are always the last ones to be taken care of. The development in many Indian cities is not being executed through a proper Master Plan. Either the government is working over the development of local infrastructure that can be shown as 'development' by the ruling party, or the promoters and developers are constructing the gated residential complexes, malls and Cineplex wherever possible in the city. In this process, the historic and old residential buildings are targeted to be demolished for construction of new tall and large buildings. Logan (2002) in the book titled 'The Disappearing Asian City', illustrated through various case studies that the conflict between the mandates of global economy, the colonial pasts, the contested ideas of what is indigenous and the effect of development on traditional urban scenario. The book argued that modernization of Asian cities, with tall universal-character buildings demolishing old and historic buildings is producing a physical-ness and blandness that is a loss of aesthetic values, craft and artistic skills and community memories associated with the traditional built forms and thus, leading to erosion of the 'Asian-ness' of Asian cities.

Present Condition of the Buildings

The buildings of Bow Barracks are about hundred years old and have signs of ageing and lack of proper maintenance. Though the overall form, placement of blocks at urban level and

architectural character of the buildings are retained, some minor modifications and changes are visible. For example, galvanized iron or fibre corrugated sheets or burnt clay tiles have been added as roofing over the balcony to give some protection of the interior from invasion of rain during monsoon. Some portions of the exterior walls that originally had exposed-bricks skin are seen having plastered and painted in red colour. Some



Figure 11. Change in windows

original louvered timber windows are replaced by timber-framed glass-pane windows (Fig. 11). Some balconies are guarded with iron grill work. There is leaking of rainwater from some portions of the roofs of some blocks during monsoon. Some corresponding portions of the concrete ceilings have fallen exposing reinforced bars (Fig. 8) and damaging the walls. There is a problem of rising dampness. The old water supply, drainage and sewerage, and electrical layout are damaged and worn out, and need entire replacement with new and proper ones.

The toilet-side walls are also damaged from leakage of water from iron-made drainage pipes and vegetative growth on their joints and immediate walls (Fig. 12). A few residents have done repairing like roof insulation, plastering, floor finish, etc, in their individual flats. However, overall physical conditions of the buildings are not very bad, though they require



Figure 12. Damaged walls with vegetative growth

proper restoration and repair work and immediate maintenance.

Statement of Significance for Bow Barracks

Sir Bernard M. Feilden (2003) described the meaning of 'historic building' as "One that gives us a sense of wonder and makes us want to know more about the people and culture that produced it. If it has survived the hazards of 100 years of usefulness, it has a good claim to being called historic". The operational guidelines of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (2008) for justification of a settlement as 'historic' state that a historic settlement must exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design. As per Central Public Works Department (CPWD) of Government of India, the three key criteria of buildings for heritage listing are historic significance, historic integrity and historic context (CPWD, 2013).

Based on the above-mentioned criteria advocated by international and national bodies, the significant values of the Bow Barracks property can be established thus:

- a) The KIT confirmed that the Bow Barracks complex was constructed during 1918 and hence, the buildings completed an age of 100 years.
- b) The Anglo-Indians are residing here continuously for generations for a century. Later, along with them, the Anglo-Chinese and Chinese people started residing here. They represent a special minor group of communities in Kolkata. However, the red buildings of Bow Barracks mark the identity of Anglo-Indians mainly.
- c) The culture, English lifestyle, culinary habits, participation in sports and the unity of the Anglo-Indians residing here along with the presence of the Chinese community make it a special place of cultural and social importance.
- d) The building blocks designed in simple yet unique architectural style built abutting the street creating a street facade express the colonial character in its architecture. Moreover, layout of the building-blocks in grid type pattern, seeming to be influenced from Spanish townscape like that of Santo Domingo in Dominican Republic (Sendin, 2014), imparts a unique character to the complex.
- e) The open space, especially the road in between the two rows of

buildings where socio-cultural and recreational activities are performed by the residents demonstrating it as an urban plaza, is an important functional spine imparting integral landmark value complementing the red building blocks.

- f) This built-form has not changed significantly over the span of 100 years and retains its original setting.

Cost Estimation: New Development versus Conservation of Existing Buildings

As per scope of development in this land the proposal is to construct 126 apartments with three sizes, 42 sq m one-room apartments, 60 sq m two-room apartments and 80 sq m three room apartments. The apartments would be in five-storied structures on Northern part of land having an area of 1535 sq m and Southern part as 2520 sq m. The two plots have been divided by a 12.19m wide road and as per KMC bylaws maximum Floor-Area-Ratio (FAR) would be 2.25 with respect to this road (Table 1). Hence total permissible covered area may be calculated as:

Total permissible covered area = FAR x Plot area

This would come to be 3454 sq m and 5670 sq m for Northern and Southern parts respectively. Since the proposed buildings are five-storied, the area of each floor would roughly be calculated as:

Area of each floor = Total covered area / 5

Therefore, covered area per floor would be 690 sq m and 1134 sq m for the Northern and the

Southern part respectively. As it is mandatory to provide proportionate car parking space, parking spaces for fifty five cars in total at ground floor of two plots are provided.

Therefore total construction area would be 9124 sq m (3454+5670), and cost of construction @ Rs 22,000 per sq m of floor area would be Rs.20,07,28,000 (as per the 2019 construction cost provided by architect Bhattacharyya, T.K). The covered area in existing three storied buildings on the two

plots is 7783 sq m. The cost of restoration work of the existing buildings as per the quantity of work identified by the authors, and as suggested by a group of architects, a conservationist, and a structural engineer would be (@ Rs.10,000 per sq m of floor area) Rs. 7,78,30,000 (Table 1). This includes structural and physical restoration of the buildings and also laying of all the service systems anew for the entire complex. The useful life of the buildings would be about forty years after restoration.

Table 1. Statement on possibilities and cost-benefit analysis of development and conservation (area in sq m)

Items	Northern land	Southern land
Land area	1535	2520
Width of road	12.19 m	
Floor Area Ratio (FAR) permissible	2.25	
Total covered area permissible (Land area x FAR)	3454	5670
Ground coverage permissible (50% of Land area)	767	1260
Proposed Number of stories	5	5
Total covered area per floor	690	1134
Common service area provided per floor (3-staircases, 3 lifts, corridor, about 15%)	100	170
Numbers / sizes of apartments per floor	14 / 42.14	14 / 8-60 + 6-80
Total number of apartments	63 (7 on ground floor, 56 on other floors)	63 (7 on ground floor, 56 on other floors)
Number of car parking provided	21	34
Cost of construction of building (@ Rs.22,000 per sq m approx. as per June 2019 market rate)	Rs.7,59,88,000	Rs.12,47,40,000
Total cost of construction of all new buildings (total covered area: 3454+5670 = 9124 sq m)	Rs.20,07,28,000	
Total covered area in all 3-storied existing buildings on two lands	7783	
Cost of restoration of all existing buildings including service system renewal (@ Rs.10,000 per sq m as per June 2019 market rate)	Rs.7,78,30,000	

Proposal for Conservation

Based on the above Research, and the discussions with the residents of Bow Barracks, the authors propose that the buildings can add value to the history by increasing its useful life through restoration and conservation. A survey (Appendix 1) done by the authors revealed that 90% of residents would like to live in existing apartments after restoration until the lease expires since they are emotionally attached to their ancestral homes.

Having completed 100 years of age and for having certain important values, the settlement can be declared 'Historic' by the government and restored and protected by the laws of heritage properties. There would be terms and conditions for the residents in order to keep the buildings intact and in continuation with the real spirit of Bow Barracks society. The laws that can be imposed may be that –

1. The residential space cannot be used for any commercial purpose.
2. Any activity by the residents or others causing deformation, dismantle or damage to the property is prohibited.
3. Residents must pay some fees to the heritage fund to be raised by the government for the restoration of the buildings.
4. The residents must pay an amount of money to the government to continue their occupation under the lease of the apartment.
5. Any apartment that becomes vacant due to any reason, such as death of an occupier or migration from the city forever, will be taken over by the government.

Promoting cultural tourism involving Bow Barracks can also generate revenue. Therefore, we can protect the buildings from demolition and the Anglo-Indian community from being displaced.

Conclusion

The research has confirmed that the buildings here are in good condition and partially damaged at some portions more physically than structurally; they do not indicate dilapidation that there is any sign of collapsing of any part of the entire structure of the complex. The cost of construction of new housing development is more than double that of conservation of the existing building stock. The demolition of the old existing structure would mean loss of history, cultural patina, socio-cultural and traditional functional setting, a century old landmark element from the 'place' and change of urban traditional character at a portion of the CBD in Kolkata. No perceived financial gain can compensate such a loss incurred from demolition of the existing edifice.

Acknowledgement

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APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

Research on Bow Barracks Housing Settlement in Kolkata

Name: _____ Age: _____ Gender: M F
 Ethnicity: _____ Occupation: _____ Address: _____
 Marital status: _____

Q1. How many years have you resided in Bow barracks? a. 0-10 years b. 10-20 years c. 20-30 years d. 30-50 years e. 50-75 years f. 75-100 years

Q2. Capacity in which you stay:

A. What kind of apartment do you stay in? a. single room b. two rooms c. three rooms

B. Are you owner or tenant?

C. Do you pay any property tax to Kolkata Municipal Corporation?

D. How much rent do you pay monthly if you are a tenant?

E. What is your contribution towards the maintenance and repair of your building?

Q3. Demographics

A. How many members are there in your family?

a. children upto 18 yrs	M	F
b. youngsters between 18 – 30 yrs	M	F
c. members between 30 – 50 yrs	M	F
d. old people above 50 yrs	M	F

B. Level of Income of your family?

a. Who earns? M F Both
 b. What is the monthly income of the family?

C. Educational level

a. High school b. Intermediate c. Graduate d. Post Graduate e. Higher study

f. Where do your children go for study?

D. Food habits

a. Breakfast b. Lunch c. Dinner

Q4. Does the building serve you well?

A. Architectural functional facility:

I) Which category would you mark for your building in terms of architectural facility? I) excellent ii) good iii) average iv) poor

II) Do you like the architectural character of facades of your building?

B. How does the building serve you in terms of service system?

I) Water supply:

a) How many times does water supply from KMC come to your premises in a day?
 b) Are you satisfied with the water supply you receive?
 c) If you are not satisfied – why?

II) Drainage and sewerage system:

a) Is there a separate septic tank for your building?
 b) Does the sewage load go directly to the KMC sewer-main?
 c) Are the drainage and sewerage pipelines good or damaged?
 d) Are the internal toilet fixtures old or new ones have been installed?

III) Garbage disposal:

a) Is there any specific area where you dispose off garbage?
 b) How is the garbage cleared – by KMC or other agency?
 c) Are you satisfied with the rate of clearance of garbage?

IV) Electricity:

a) Are you satisfied with the electrical supply by CESC to your apartment?
 b) Do you face any problem regarding electrical supply?

- c) Do you have separate meter?
- d) Have you installed any air-conditioner in any room of your apartment?

C. Structural and physical condition:

I) How will you grade your building in terms of its structural and physical condition?

- i) excellent ii) good iii) average iv) poor

II) Have you detected any or some of the following problems in your building?

- a) rising dampness b) leakage of rainwater from roof and wall
- c) dampness in walls of toilets/kitchen d) cracks in walls/floor
- e) bend in ceiling or iron beams; falling concrete
- f) damage in outside walls / plaster g) damage in inside walls / plaster
- h) Damage in windows / doors i) damage in grill works of windows / balcony
- j) damage in architectural details on facades k) damage in staircase l) vegetative growth on walls

Q5. Which caste are you of?

- I) General ii) S.C. iii) S.T. iv) O.B.C.

Q6. Which religion do you follow?

Q7. How are you related to this settlement culturally? Which festivals do you celebrate here together with other people?

Q8. Which sports are played here annually and do you participate in it?

Q9. Do you consider this settlement as historic or not?

Q10. Do you feel emotionally attached to this settlement or not?

Q11. Would you like to stay in your apartment after thorough restoration of your building?

Q12. Would you like to move away to a new apartment elsewhere even if your building is restored properly?

Q13. Why are you not moving away in a new apartment in case you want to do so?

Q14. Will you be able to pay for your share in case a new building complex is built here? Or, Will you look up to the government to take the financial responsibility for you? If so, why?

Q15. Please mention your views, feelings, historical or cultural events that you want to share as a resident of Bow Barracks.

Signature of Interviewee:

Date:

Signature of Researcher: Date: