

Undoing Heroicization of Louis Kahn in Bangladesh

Shayer Ghafur

Associate Professor
Department of Architecture
Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka-1000.
E-mail: sghafur@bangla.net

Images of Louis I. Kahn's Assembly Building—an icon of contemporary Bangladesh—go beyond architecture to symbolize democracy, human rights, and national aspirations. Lately, Kahn's creation in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar has been recurrent news on the media, albeit for odd reasons, concerning additions to his allegedly complete master plan. Few would argue that the controversies and split opinions observed in this case have put us on crossroads regarding our attitude to and dealing with Kahn. Perhaps this is the time we should disassociate ourselves from our 'object' orientation to Kahn's work to 'subject' premise, especially on our relationship with Kahn. With this subject premise in mind, I submit the following critical reflection on local architecture's dealing of Kahn. I invite responses to my views to generate a constructive debate.

I would first touch upon the historical context to start outlining my case. Modern architecture, as a distinct movement, had originated in the Western Europe in the early 1900s. Modern architecture had given mandate to its following architects to make a radical break with the past or revolt against orthodoxy to implement his idealized vision of society. "Modern architecture", writes noted architectural historian William Curtis (1982), "was the expression of a variety of new social visions challenging the status quo and suggesting alternative possibilities for a way of life". With this heroic intention, modern masters like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies van de Rohe had changed the course of architecture, and possibly the way of life these architecture promoted, in their own unique ways. Subsequently, heroic myths were created that emphasized master architect's persona over his (architectural) product. This 'heroicization of architect' had been a western phenomenon with all its attendant implications unique only to the west. But

later, the emergence and implications of 'heroicization of architect' became different in developing countries for the socio-political context in which high profile foreign architects had been hired, for instances, in India, Bangladesh, Turkey or Brazil. When Ataturk in Ankara and Nehru in Chandigarh were instrumental in giving a secular vision for a new city, if not a society, we see a different story in East Pakistan. History tells us that a measure of political compromise, and not a vision per se, initiated the Second Capital Complex—Sher-e-Bangla Nagar—in Dhaka.

De-colonization of the Indian sub-continent had led to the import of modern architecture in East Pakistan—now Bangladesh—since early 1950s. Kahn's planning and design of the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka has placed him higher than other foreign architects of this period and beyond. In addition, his work has situated Bangladesh in world architecture forever. Kahn was destined to become a hero the moment his employer—the then Pakistan government—had accepted west's portrayal of an architect-hero to build a better world from scratch. Initially, Kahn's mystic persona and self-referential ideology had gained approval from a local audience, seldom exposed to modern architecture. Later we note that Kahn was deeply engaged, among others, in espousing social vision for laying out a spatial foundation of future society in Dhaka. An observation is worth quoting in this context—"He [Kahn] believed that the only good society was a genuinely democratic one, and that architecture could, indeed must, sustain and nourish democratic values" (Goldhagan, 2001, 2). One would have little doubt that Kahn's architecture in Dhaka resonates as a priori for a democratic society. However, to what extent and how his architecture—the assembly building complex—has actually reflect-

ed (and nurtured) democracy in Bangladesh is an open question. But if we succumb to the myth that Kahn's ideology and construction have left a seminal legacy for architecture in Bangladesh we confront a paradox. Following hero's footprint, how can we explain Kahn's social vision as embedded in his architecture without continuation to local practice, especially, at a time when society needed it most?

To address this paradox, why Kahn is revered in Bangladesh the way he is has been taken to start-unravel the politics of heroicization. We surely have a case in hand to probe the hidden influences active in the local thought-process that were instrumental in canonizing Kahn's work and portraying it as a perennial inspiration for architecture in Bangladesh. 'Heroicization of Kahn' asks for a critical examination of the ways in which Kahn's project and persona have been understood and later idolized in the (local) architectural imagination. In this short article, I would contend that the heroicization of Kahn is essentially a social construction: an outcome of local mindset rooted in the pre-modern feudal worldview of Bengal. In support of this contention, my views and arguments develop with reference to two Bengal-specific notions employed in the social and literary criticisms.

In undoing heroicization of Kahn, the relevance of the complex concept of 'vakti', in the (Hindu) theological-philosophical premise, is acknowledged first. While vakti emerged as a quintessential spiritual means by which the faithful subjects relate to God. It pervaded major spheres of daily life, albeit in modified forms, to ascribe norms for different familial and social instances. The second notion of de facto 'entitlement', with origin in the moral economy of feudal Bengal, points to a reverse situation where one subordinate feels entitled to share blessings or resources of his superior because it is his moral right (Appadurai, 1984). People who teach divine or earthly issues of excellence, from a high moral ground, are termed 'guru', and are privileged for vakti from his disciples as well as society. Disciples, on the other hand, are entitled to guru's blessings. 'Guru vakti', with two notions taken together, is interpreted for this paper as an age-old dialectic of offering and receiving. That guruvakti is essentially feudal in nature is evident by its two alleged social rationale suggested by Bankim: first, without vakti, inferiors never follow the path of superior; second, social cohesion, unity and development are not possible if the inferiors fail to follow the footprints of their superior (Chattopadhyay, 1973, 615-16). Moreover, that vakti has always offered from lower to upper positions denotes a hierarchy in the maintenance of status quo.

Feudal (re)construction of guruvakti, though seems out of time, finds expression in the local architectural imagination to influence its dealing of Kahn. An absence of 'scientific temper' in architectural imagination in Bangladesh--manifested by an inclusion and propagation of spiritual perspective, and the exclusion of reason, skepticism and sense of progression--has intricately linked to the pre-modern feudal mindset. Like the pre-modern past, guruvakti shown toward Kahn in a modern era has been sustained by an oppressive social and economic organisation, and mediated by the post-colonial education. To pursue reason, to show skepticism, means becoming progressive, and taking responsibility to change the part of the world in which we live in. Since local architectural imagination has no record of accommodating, let alone comprehending this task, and has been unwilling to take the said responsibility, it is engaged in guruvakti in dealing with Kahn to maintain the existing status quo. It is interesting to note that the extent in which spiritual interpretation of Kahn's work began to proliferate had been in pace with the deepening crises of Bangladesh since 1970. It appears that utopia in architecture, even in words, has long been dead and buried under gainful practice.

Guruvakti develops from the self-fulfilling local practice as a tacit ploy employed to cover up its limitation to carryout (i.e. hero in heart) or transcend (i.e. hero in head) Kahn's social vision in tune with time and context. Architecture practice in Bangladesh, since its infancy, has kept a safe distance from politics just as Kahn did. Practice being benign and apolitical, however, maintains a politics of practice just as Kahn did. The heroicization of Kahn has been socially constructed from a misconstrued premise that hero's local followers, as well as former employer, do not mind encroaching upon Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, in the good name of practice (see my article in the Daily Star, 10.01.03 for more detail). Moreover, the faithful even had to ask for judicial intervention in vain for protecting Kahn's work from the Government who's predecessor had employed Kahn in the first place. These are inconsistencies of disturbingly deep magnitude. While inconsistencies prevail, this is indeed the right time to ask why no post-independence Bangladesh regime could match what post-colonial Pakistan regime could do by inviting Kahn for Dhaka, especially, when we observe hordes of foreign experts had invaded the (aid-injected) development field. Will we then see the real nature of forces shaping architecture (and planning) in Dhaka? One never knows.

I should also note the role of the inept post-colonial

pedagogy, reinforced by modernist paradigm, has also been instrumental in creating and perpetuating the heroicization of Kahn. This should not come as a surprise when success of nations' first local school, after 40 years of its establishment, has recently been seen, among others, as "About half of our graduates go to the U.S.A. for higher study and work. USAID [the financier of the school] might cite this as an example of exceptional success in bilateral cooperation" (Ali, 2003, 25). Areas outside design/planning disciplines in Bangladesh have been undergoing paradigm shifts, with more inclusion and renewed emphasis on people and their views. On the contrary, post-colonial pedagogy and mindset (in architecture) continue to foresee the role of the dominant individual, or an all-encompassing single document like master plan, at the centre of local practice.

This article attempted to examine, albeit briefly, the origin and implications of the heroicization of Kahn in Bangladesh. It should be clear by now that this attempt has departed from the discourse that reinforces the myth of Kahn as a visionary individual. Instead, it searched for a social explanation in history. To move forward, with scientific temper, local architectural imagination needs to disassociate from the feudal past and colonization of mind, but not history.

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