

The Restoration of Durand institute Asansol : Preservation of our heritage

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Set amidst the lush surroundings in the company of mahogany trees, Durand Institute with its majestic Tower kissing the azure skyline was the landmark of Asansol, an important city and Divisional Headquarters of East Indian Railways (EIR) in Howrah - Delhi Route.

It was a social and cultural hub, a place to unwind, a place to relax after day's hard work, a country club away from home for Europeans. Its tower was the tallest structure in the town, taller even than the spires of the Sacred Heart Church located at the town square and would be seen even from the railway station.

The Institute, one of oldest institutes in India, was set up in 1878 and was named as European Institute in 1915 and rechristened as **“Durand Institute”** in year 1925 in the honour of Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of India during 1884 to 1894 and architect of Durand line - the international border between Afganistan and Pakistan.

This institute was very popular among the high officials of EIR, right from Calcutta to Saharanpur, who would make a beeline to get an opportunity to dance in the elegant dance hall during the fortnight - long Christmas festival along with friends and family members of agent of East Indian Railways.

With large teak paneled dancing hall, swimming pool, billiards and card rooms, library, tennis and badminton courts, bar room, it was abuzz with social, cultural and sports activities. Evenings were full of fun; kids swarming all over the places, youngsters running and skidding along the dance floor sprinkled with talcum powder, cacophony of housie (bingo), gramophone blaring lively tunes and catchy numbers, animated discussion amongst members quenching their thirst in bar would suddenly come to an end and people would join the dance floor for waltz, foxtrot and other dances in rage back home then.

Even after 1947, for almost a decade, the Durand Institute was open for natives only on the country's independence and republic days for watching a free movie. Old timers recall the commotion, the uncontrolled rush to get into hall to grab a seat and the red stains of pan which would take a week for cleaning

Till the 60s, when the Anglo-Indian diaspora had not migrated, the Durand institute was the absolute centre of social and cultural life in Asansol. It had a huge central dance hall, with a wide nave on one side for tables and seating. The dance floor was normally used for seating for the cinema which had a cinemascope screen installed in the mid fifties.

A different movie was shown every week. It had a lounge area, a bar, cloak rooms, a library, spacious toilets, a cycle room, tennis and badminton courts outside, and a separate two-table billiards/snooker hall.

The famous Tower with the War Memorial Copper Plate, commemorating the sacrifice of railway men in the First World War, is of 22 meters high, from the ground level to its zenith. Four 18.5 long spires adorn at the top of tower.

The Mini Hall : The beautiful oval shaped hall is 31.33 meters long and 13.72 meters wide, interwoven with sixteen square pillars, 6.75 meter high gothic arches, fourteen large windows and a small stage of 5.95m X 4.5m area. Small openings in dome allow enough sunlight to illuminate the hall.

The main Hall, constructed on the site of a swimming pool adjacent to the Mini Hall, is of 31.5 meters in length and 20.475 meters in width. The ceiling of the dome is 11.7 meters high from the floor.

The natives of Asansol had nothing at that time which could rival with the grandeur of the Durand Institute. Even today the building reminds of its past glory. From the large staircases to the arched and pillared interior of the halls, from the big windows and doors to the Burma-teak flooring on the stage, from the tennis court to the billiards rooms, from the sprawling lawns to the shady trees – everywhere it is in evidence.

The famous Magician, P C Sircar (Senior), great singers like Suchitra Mitra, Hemanta Mukherjee, Ram Kumar Chattopadhyay, Arundhati Hom Chowdhury, Manjulika Bhaduri (W/O Railway Ex-DS), Mandira Dasgupta (W/O Railway Ex-Sr.DAO) and many other great luminaries in the musical world had performed in Durand Institute after independence.

The Institute suffered a benign neglect and decline after large scale migration of Anglo Indians post Independence and slowly it degenerated to a marriage hall or a venue for occasional official functions.

We wanted to revive its old glory, restitute its grandeur and restore it as a centre of social and cultural activities of Asansol. A comprehensive renovation plan was finalised after detailed discussion with all stake holders and restoration work was kick started in the month of June'18. It is said that a concerted effort to preserve our heritage is a vital link to our cultural, educational, aesthetic, inspirational and economic legacies - all of the things that quite literally make us who we are.

Work involved extensive repairs, roof treatment, touch of weather coat all around, painting with aesthetic colour scheme, construction of sprawling garden and green lawns, air conditioning of mini hall, refurbishing of interiors, restoration of the teak panelled wooden floor, fitment of modern lightings, diffused lighting on the exteriors, construction of an art and heritage gallery show casing all the heritage photographs, restored furniture, trophies, memorabilia and rare documents of the era for a walk down the memory lane.

Landscape garden with hedges and ornamental trees, jogger's track and lush lawns were constructed in the open space of the campus creating a verdant green scenic oasis in the area heavily polluted due to large scale mining and other industrial activities.

Special diffused warm lightings have been provided all over the building to reveal and underscore its alluring grandeur. Mini hall in night brilliantly creates the ambience of Vienna opera; domes and towers, lit in the night, appear like a painting on the canvas of blue sky.

It was heartening to see and monitor the progress almost on daily basis and finally mighty edifice could be restored back to its old grandeur on 15th August, the day India had a tryst with destiny.

We wanted to catalogue, compile all the historical references and release a "Brochure" on the occasion. We were fortunate to get whole hearted support from the passionate Team of researchers of Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol led by Professor (Dr.) Sajal Bhattacharya, Dr. Santanu Banerjee and Sri Suvojit Chatterjee who made it possible.

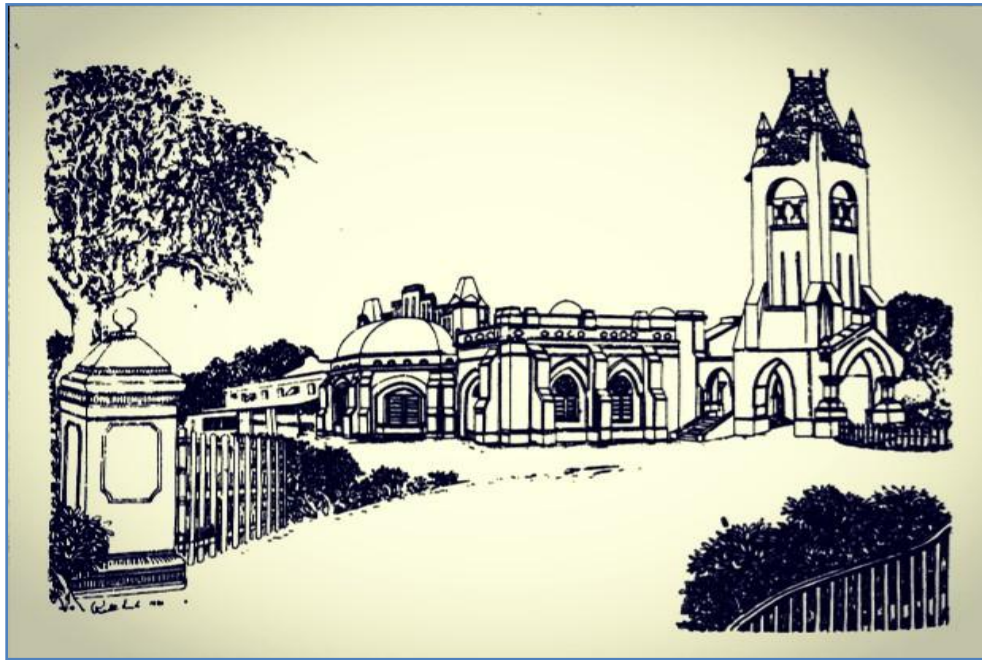
I am also indebted to the team of railway officials and staff, without their tireless work beyond the call of duty and a race against time, the project would not have seen the light of the day.

As a part of Institute Revival Scheme launched last year, our Institutes are coming alive with cultural activities and are providing platform to Railway family members and local artists to display their talent. It is also renewing social fibre and reconnecting people lost somewhere in the faceless virtual world of face-book, whatsapp and internet. History of Asansol is entwined with history of Railways in Asansol, as the town itself was formed and developed after EIR bought large tract of forest land to construct a Railway township.

Durand has been restored back as the landmark of the town and we are planning it to develop as a centre to exhibit our rich heritage where kids and grownups alike can come and go through artifacts in museum, watch the sound and light show and movie on Durand, scan the digital library, and marvel at beauty of the past or simply stroll in the meadows wondering agape at its architectural magnificence.

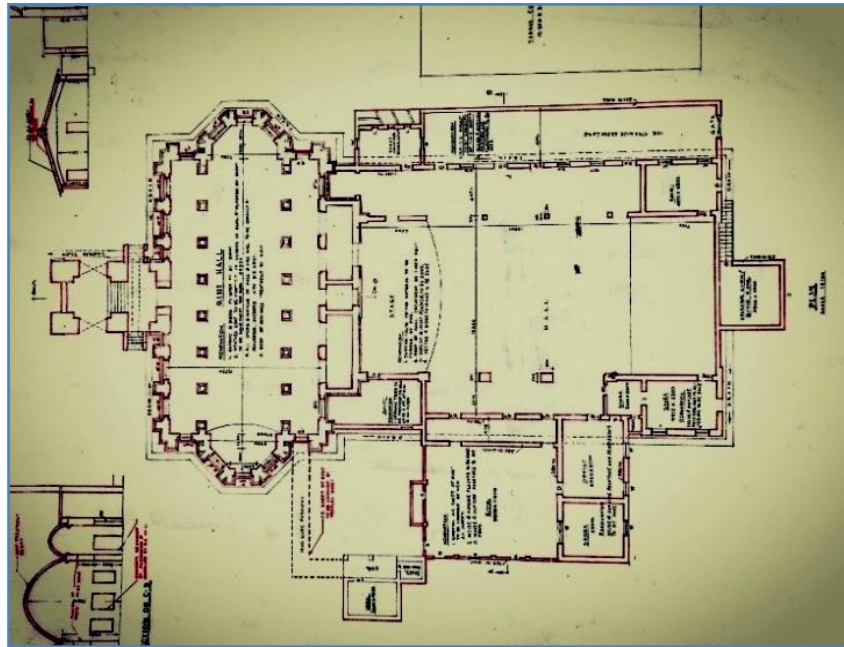
It has been a highly exciting and challenging journey and has emboldened us to restore heritage in the Division where such structures abound every corner, you don't stumble on heritage, it is just waiting to be explored and these historic buildings are waiting with bated breath to tell their story.

**The Eastern Railway – Durand Institute
Now Vivekananda Institute**



**PAINTED IN BRICK RED AND WHITE
A PICTURE TAKEN TOWARDS THE END OF THE LAST MILLENIUM**

SECTIONAL DIAGRAM CLEARLY SHOWING THE ENTIRE STRUCTURE



THE FAMOUS TOWER



THE MINI HALL



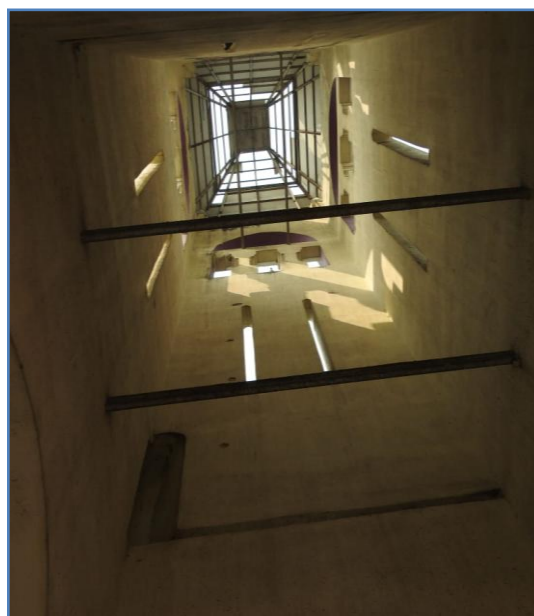
SIR MORTIMER DURAND



SWAMI VIVEKANANDA



ON 18.12.1985, AFTER A MUSICAL CONCERT



TIME OF SUFFERINGS FOR DURAND INSTITUTE

SNIPPETS OF RENOVATION WORKS OF THE DURAND INSTITUTE BEING UNDERTAKEN



UNVEILING BROCHURE ON DURAND – THE MOMENT OF JOY

THE RAILWAY OFFICIALS WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE



An Edifice of Cultural Heritage – “RENOVATED”



NIGHT FRONT VIEW OF RENOVATED DURAND

SUNLIGHT VIEW OF RENOVATED DURAND



NIGHT VIEW OF RENOVATED DURAND



BEAUTIFICATION OF ENTRANCE : LANDSCAPE GARDENING



JOGGERS' TRACK ON THE LEFT SIDE OF ENTRANCE



**BEAUTIFICATION OF GARDEN : DECORATIVE PLANTS
AND
FLOWERING TREES AND MEXICAN GRASS**



IMPROVED DIFFUSED LIGHT TO PROVIDE EUROPIAN LOOK



**PANEL LED LIGHT FOR BETTER ILLUMINATION
ON THE ARCHS / BEAMS**





**PROCURED SIX SETS EACH : SOFA AND CENTRE TABLES
AND
18 ORNATE CHAIRS**



ACCOUSTIC PANEL IN THE INNER WALL OF THE MAIN HALL



AIR CONDITIONING OF MINI HALL WITH 14 SPLIT ACs



REPAIRING OF PVC CEILING WITH ALUMINIUM STRIP



REPAIRING OF STAGE OF MAIN HALL MADE OF BURMA TEAK



ILLUMINATION OF MAIN HALL WITH LED PANEL LIGHTS



HERITAGE PHOTO GALLERY IN MINI HALL

