

On the bank of the river Buriganga in Dhaka the pink majestic Ahsan Manzil (AL) is an example of the nation's rich cultural heritage. It was the home of the Nawab of Dhaka and a silent spectator to many events. It has 31 rooms with a huge dome atop which can be seen from miles around. Ahsan Manzil has been renovated and turned into a museum recently which has now 23 galleries displaying portraits, furniture and household articles and utensils used by the Nawab.

Independence Monument still stands sans tower

WAHIDA MITU

Construction of the Independence Monument (Swadhinata Stambha) that began eight years ago still lies in limbo.

Although 90 percent of the work has been complete, the 100-foot high glass tower is yet to be constructed, project sources said.

Three proposals were made for the construction of the tower. The first was a 100-foot high concrete structure with glass pasting costing Tk 1.75 crore with the total project costing of Tk 81.27 crore.

The second proposal was a 150-foot glass tower at an expense of Tk 67 crore with a total cost of Tk 171 crore.

The third proposal stated "The tower should be 100 feet (including lighting)" and the cost was fixed at Tk 76.03 crore with no

mention of the building materials for the tower.

The construction of the tower became "a political issue" on reduction of the building costs during the regime of the immediate past government, concerned sources said.

"It is not a question of saving money but creating a symbol of independence for hundreds of years ahead. The question is, how much the nation is willing to spend on its independence monument," said Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury, an architect from Urbana, the company that designed the monument.

"Suhrawardy Udyan is a 69-acre park and the second largest open green area after Ramna that has been closed to public for nine years. It must be open to city dwellers as soon as possible," he added.

Star City published a report on the Independence Monument on March 1 2006, where Prof Rezaul

Suhrawardy Udyan, formerly known as Race Course Maidan, was selected for the construction of the memorial, as it was at this point that the Pakistan Army had surrendered on December 16, 1971

Karim, the then state minister for Liberation War Affairs told this correspondent: "The work of the project is in progress and we are expecting it to be complete by June 2006."

But the work is not finished, as the construction of the tower has not started as yet.

Regarding the tower Prof Karim at that time also said: "We invited tenders for the tower for a fourth time and will wait for the response. We will think what can be done regarding the tower after

that. We cannot say anything about the tower right now."

As no organisation had responded to the tenders, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs asked the Department of Architecture to plan a 100-foot tower on the basis of a ground-level feasibility study and based on that, a tower similar to the Swadhinata Stambha design is under process, the sources said.

The Housing and Public Works Ministry has already

handed over the project to the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs for its completion.

The memorial includes murals depicting the history of the Liberation War and the struggle for freedom from 1948 to 1971. The murals were built at a cost of Tk 1.75 crore, sprawling over an area of 67 acres.

The project includes an underground theatre and museum, an amphitheatre, a display gallery and a decorative fountain; work on which is already complete.

Suhrawardy Udyan, formerly known as Race Course Maidan, was selected for the construction of the memorial, as it was at this point that the Pakistan Army had surrendered on December 16, 1971.

Construction of Swadhinata Stambha began in July 1998, when the Awami League was in power, at an estimated cost of Tk 81.27 crore. In 2001, with the addition of the glass tower the

total project cost rose to Tk 171 crore, and completion was scheduled for 2002.

The BNP-led four-party government stopped the construction after taking office in 2001 for alleged irregularities and the work remained suspended for three years. After some revisions, the BNP government during its last tenure revived the project towards the end of 2004 curtailing the cost to Tk 76 crore.

About the irregularities, ministry sources said that any project budgeted over Tk 25 crore must be approved by the government's purchase committee, which the project lacked during its initiation in 1998. But a ministry official seeking anonymity said a 'political decision' stopped the project.

The then prime minister hurriedly inaugurated Swadhinata Stambha on October 22, 2006 without the tower.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.

"All development work cannot be completed in five years"

--Khaleda Zia
BNP Chairperson

Said at a function at her Hawa Bhaban office, on Wednesday. Source: The Daily Star.

"The general amnesty declared by Bangabandhu did not cover those who were charged with war crimes, rape, arson and other offences"

--Sheikh Hasina
Awami League (AL) President

Said at a reception by AL to honour freedom fighters, artists and employees of Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendro on the occasion of Victory Day at Sudha Sadan, on Saturday. Source: The Daily Star.

"What leave, whose leave and why?"

--Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury
Newly appointed controversial Election Commissioner (EC)

Told reporters after a meeting with SM Zakaia, another controversial EC, when asked if he were going on leave, on Monday. Source: The Daily Star.

"But three days do not necessarily mean three days... what if I cannot reach them (political leaders) for discussion?"

--Shafiqul Haque Choudhury
Agricultural Adviser

Told reporters when he was asked about his comment on a possible solution to the current political crisis in just three days, on Thursday. Source: The Daily Star.

"If they do so, they do it so early in the morning that fishermen flee by the time the policemen go there"

--Officer-in-Charge
Cox's Bazar Sadar Police Station

Told a reporter denying having any information on jatka (hilsa fry) selling while indiscriminate netting and sale of jatka is going on unabated at different markets in the city under the nose of law enforcers, on Thursday. Source: The Daily Star.

"How come Mannan Bhuiyan or Sadeque Hossain Khoka utter such a lie, while they themselves fought against these Rajakars?"

--Didar Bakht
Liberal Democratic Party Leader

Said at a rally at Comrade Moni Singh-Farhad Trust Bhaban marking 35th Victory Day, on Saturday. Source: The Daily Star.

"We supervised and helped the field level EC [Election Commission] staff do their work"

--Golam Rasul Shamim
Son of Rafiqul Islam, general secretary of the thana unit of BNP

Told a reporter during his visit to ward 4, 5 of Kamrangirchar where residents alleged EC officials, guided and instructed by local BNP leaders or its front organisations, stayed away from houses and slums occupied by AL supporters, on Saturday. Source: The Daily Star.

Compiled by: Durdana Ghias

Living near the political hot spots

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Office goers, businessmen and residents living near the crucial political spots like Hawa Bhaban, Shudha Shadan, Purana Paltan, Bangabandhu Avenue, road-32 in Dhanmondi have been feeling extremely aggrieved due to increasing political unrest in the city in the recent months.

Hawa Bhaban, the office of BNP chairperson, has been the most talked about political houses of the country in the last five years. Residents of Banani road-13 where the building is situated cannot get out of their houses without facing a crowd of party supporters or on duty police forces. During any kind of political programmes taking place in the building the entry points to the street remain closed. Also there are frequent bans on traffic movement around the area.

Locals said the situation worsened since the election nomination seekers began to crowd the street all the time. They said the most annoying things are the continuous slogans of the party supporters and being inquired by the police every time they go out of their houses or come in.

During special programmes, pedestrians are often checked or inquired by the on duty police. One of the residents who did not want to be named said that he



During the fierce clashes between Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami supporters at Paltan area on October 27, those living and working in that area spent horrifying moments.

faces this kind of treatment whenever there is political tension because he has to take the route while going to the office.

On the other hand, residents of road-5 at Dhanmondi where Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina's residence Sudha Sadan is located, have been going through a different ordeal.

Right opposite the house, there are two tents put up by police and Special Security Force. There are barricades at the entrance to the road. Residents are always inquired about their movements. Continuous presence of party activists turns the environment tense, say the worried locals.

Zahirul Islam who has been

living in the building next to AL leader's house for eight years said that they are hardly disturbed by the political activities inside the house. He however said: "We can feel the presence of intelligence people snooping around us. Visitors are stopped and inquired, but we are getting used to it".

For those working near Purana Paltan, Muktangan, AL central office on Bangabandhu Avenue, BNP central office in Naya Paltan, Baitul Mukarram, Press Club, Secretariat, Bangabhaban, the experience is different.

"For us it is like living near a battle field. We are in the middle of it. Whenever any clashes break out, we are the first ones to be affected", said Abid Hossain, owner of Jatiya Shahittya Prokashoni situated at Mukti Bhaban at Purana Paltan.

"On October 27, the day of the dreadful clash between Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami supporters, we were confined to our building for almost 24 hours. Bricks destroyed our neon signs, tear gas shells were fired and the intense brawl between the two party supporters petrified us and it was not the only day it happened," Hossain recalls.

Being confined is not the only difficulty they face on such occasions. One of the carpet sellers near Baitul Mukarram told Star City that during every political programmes they have to keep their shops shut. "Customers avoid these areas on the days of any political programmes and we lose huge business because of this," he said. "If we don't keep our shutters down it may cause more loss. More than once my carpets were gutted by angry pickets",

he added.

A cloth trader of a market called City Bhaban right opposite the AL central office in Bangabandhu Avenue said: "We keep our shutters down for a while when fights break out or police start clubbing the political activists. We open again when situation improves. It's a risk but this is how we do business here."

In the last few years the Russell Square crossing at Panthapath has become one of the hottest political points.

Tasneem Mahboob, assistant professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka, bought a flat in Dhanmondi road-32 in 2003. "We were so pleased. With the lake in front of our flat, it seemed so peaceful but lively," she said. But unfortunately it did not last for long. "During political programmes, the entrance to the road remains blocked. It hinders our movement. On many occasions I could not get back home for hours after clashes at Russell Square," she said.

Mahboob also feels insecure in her own home fearing mob outburst causing danger to her kids. "My daughter goes to the balcony if she hears slogans. That really scares me." Mahboob gets irritated with the loudspeakers playing whenever there is a political programme or slogans disrupting her children in sleep or during study.

Shopping on the rail tracks...

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Numerous shops at Malibagh kitchen market, one of the largest kitchen markets in the city have been running their businesses on the rail tracks, illegally occupying lands owned by the railway department.

Extending from Gulbagh to the Malibagh rail crossing, a huge segment of the kitchen market spans around the rail tracks with a big number of permanent and makeshift shops.

A large number of these stalls are dangerously placed over the rail tracks, making it impossible for any trains to pass by.

This correspondent saw three railway security officers alerting the people flocking over the rail tracks about the approaching train, rendering a haphazard haste amongst the shop owners and customers who move away to a safe dis-

tance from the tracks only to settle back in the earlier positions minutes after the train departs.

Not just the shop owners, these illegal activities expose hundreds of customers to an ominous danger too.

Shah Alam, a customer who was seen haggling with a peddler while standing over the rail tracks told the correspondent that they have little options.

"Even being aware of the possible danger, we have to shop like this as there aren't any other kitchen markets in the area," he added.

When asked, Monir Hossein, one of the officials responsible for alerting people of coming trains denied any possibilities of accidents. "We blow whistle to clear the tracks from the flocking people and make safe passage for the trains," he said. "No incident of accidents have taken place yet and chances for any happening in the future are

minimal," he said with confidence.

However, locals informed the correspondent that isolated incidents of accidents are not rare on the rail tracks.

"Accidents take place quite often with properties getting damaged and the likes," said Moktar Kamal, a local resident. "But they (authorities) won't do anything until something dangerous happens," he added.

Shop owners alleged that an influential quadrant in the region illegally rent out a huge fraction of the land including the rail tracks and force the innocent business people to pay the money.

"Even floating peddlers has to pay charges to the police to operate within the area," said a shop owner.

When asked about the legitimacy of the position of his shop, Golam Ali, an old trader told this correspondent about his indifference. "We just operate our

business and pay the rental charges, legal issues are concerns best left to the proprietors," he said.

Local citizens alleged that sweeps conducted by police does little to rid the tracks from illegal possessions as they always settle back.

"The occasional steps taken by the authorities turns out to be nothing but eyewashes to calm things down for a short period," said a dismayed local habitant.

The Director of the Bangladesh Railway states department could not be reached for his comments.

However, railway officials told the correspondent that they don't have any immediate plans in regards to this matter. "We rely on the police to rid the lands from illegal occupants and I hear they raid the market quite often," said an official. "Dhaka City Corporation should try and move the kitchen market somewhere else to solve the prob-

lem," he added.

When asked about the matter, Motijheel police officials blamed the vast slum area and floating population living in Gulbagh and the adjoining area for the futility of their efforts. "We do our jobs and conduct routine sweeps to rid the lands of illegal occupants, but we can do little about these people coming back to the spot," said a police official. "Things won't be much different unless all the floating population illegally living in that area are evicted," the official added.

When asked whether it would be possible to remove the kitchen market somewhere else, the ward commissioner of Dhaka City Corporation for the ward no. 35, Sajjad Zahir said, "Dhaka City Corporation doesn't own any space in the area where we can build another kitchen market for the region".



People keep carrying on with their shopping at Malibagh kitchen market on the rail track, oblivious to the danger.