



Travel & Tourism



The Bhawal Raja Palace or a Supermarket?

By Morshed Ali Khan

A Report on the Imminent Destruction of an Old Historical Site

BANGLADESH Parjatan Corporation just ended a month-long multimillion Taka promotional drive in the country, but little does it care that many historical sites in Dhaka's old town are falling apart due to negligence, corruption and bad politics.

One such example is the palace of Bhawal Raja built in the Nolgola area of the old town over a hundred years ago. The palace is situated on an acre (slightly more than three bighas) of land on the bank of the river Buriganga, barely a kilometer away from the Ahsan Manjil.

The Bhawal Raja had his headquarters in Gazipur, 40 km north of Dhaka. But he had this palace built mainly for recreational purpose. The queen used to spend a lot of time in this splendid riverside palace.

Today Nolgola Bhawal Raja Place is a scene of illegal occupation, and vandalism. It is caught up in the middle of a row among the local political factions. Dhaka City Corporation and the Bhawal Raj Court of Wards.

A foundation stone laid in 1986 by Major General Mahmudul Hasan, the then Minister for Local Government and Rural Development, marks the site as the Nolgola Super Market. The actual owner of the site, the Bhawal Raj Court of Wards, had never completed the sale deed with the Dhaka City Corporation.

The Major of Dhaka and the Minister called our Manager to the Secretariate," said a Raj Court of Wards employee on condition of anonymity and forced him to

sign the initial sale deed for Tk 30 lakh behind closed doors."

The deed which was later disputed by the Raj Court of Wards, enabled the City Corporation to move into the premises with their super market project. The lease holders of the palace, a local group headed by one Kuddus Sarkar, refused to move. A legal battle started. Says Kuddus Sarkar, "The Bhawal Raj Court of Wards issued me the lease in 1976 which is renewed every year. My lease is valid and I pay Tk 300 per month. They have no right to evict me."

The palace is now in near ruins. Different parts of it are occupied by different local groups. The main building which needs immediate attention to keep it erect, is house for Sarkar's old plastic recycling. But traces of kingly grandeur still remain. The walls of the Rani's bed room are intact with beautifully carved peacocks on blue stone tiles. The only remaining piece of furniture, a huge milk stone round-table which could not be stolen because of its massive weight, holds a pile of used plastic shoes. The balcony with its round arches shows the skills of our past architects. The walls outside are carved with designs to turn any modern-day architect envious.

Locals told stories of widespread theft. The palace a great deal of furniture, ivory items, and chandeliers, said a group of elderly people, "but they were all stolen and sold in the markets."

To add to the misery of the historical site, recently a Non-



Stone-carvings on a wall of the Maharani's room — A.H. Daily Star

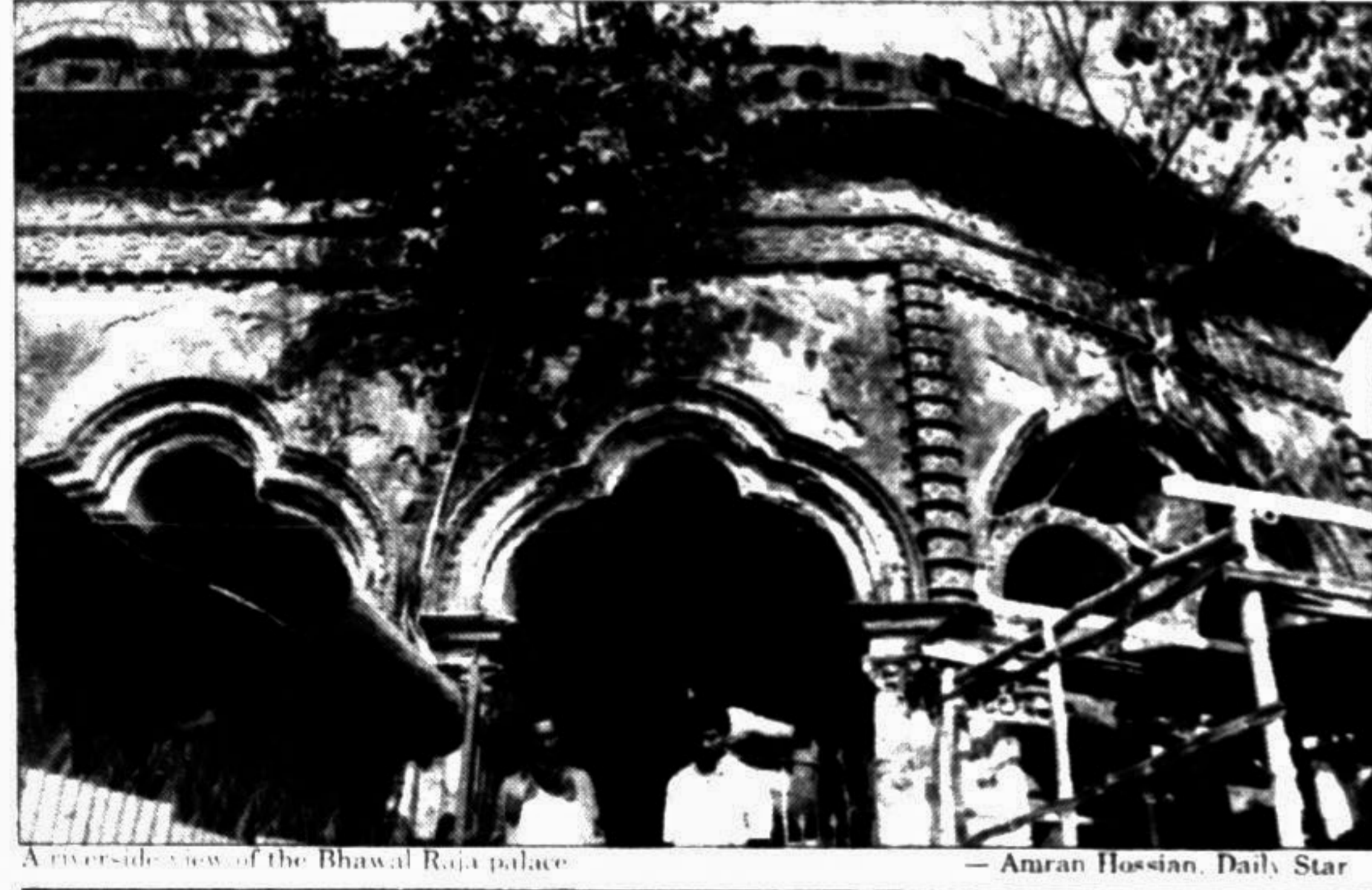
government Organisation YUCEP was authorised by the local ward commissioner and the District Commissioner to run a school YUCEP quickly built several tin-shed struc-

tures and surrounded them with a six-foot high wall to carry on with the project.

When contacted, the Bhawal Raj Court of Wards in Gazipur expressed their surprise at the construction of the school. "We were never consulted before the construction of the school," said an official of the wards on condition of anonymity, "whereas the land belongs to the Bhawal Raj Court of Wards."

Much is happening on the site. Recently a group of musclemen tried to demolish the buildings. The move was stopped by people who think the palace should get back its historical value.

In congested old Dhaka, the site of the palace gives an instant eye-soothing relief. Moreover, it represents our past. Many times before bad politics, corruption and greed consumed us and we did not hesitate to destroy our historical, cultural and architectural heritage. Old Dhaka has seen enough. The Bhawal Raja's palace is about to be added to our misdoings. Can we not save it for the sake of our future generations?



A riverside view of the Bhawal Raja palace — Amran Hossain, Daily Star

A Walk Through Old Dhaka

OLD Dhaka probably possesses the best of our cultural, historical and architectural heritage.

You can discover the mileposts of the past at every corner of the old town. Narrow streets, old buildings with superb art-work, curved verandhas, historical mosques, temples, monuments and the grey-haired old craftsmen concentrating on a piece of work - all

are there to be seen and discovered. But life is never as easy as it used to be. Moving around in the old town on any mode of transport may become virtually impossible. Sometimes the streets become gridlocked for hours - stranding rickshaws, push-carts, and lorries.

A walk in the old town is the best way to see it. Start at Nawabpur Road, near Gulistan

Bus Stand. If you are lucky, you may get a ride on a pony cart up to the old civil court. It will cost you Tk 3. The ponies state of health may unsettle your enthusiasm, but console yourself. They have been in business for generations now. Not long ago pony-carts were the reigning mode of transport in our city.

Your walk starts here, at the court building. Feel free to go around the court and enjoy a

first-hand look at the country's civil courts. Watch out, do not get involved, then you could be passing many moons here.

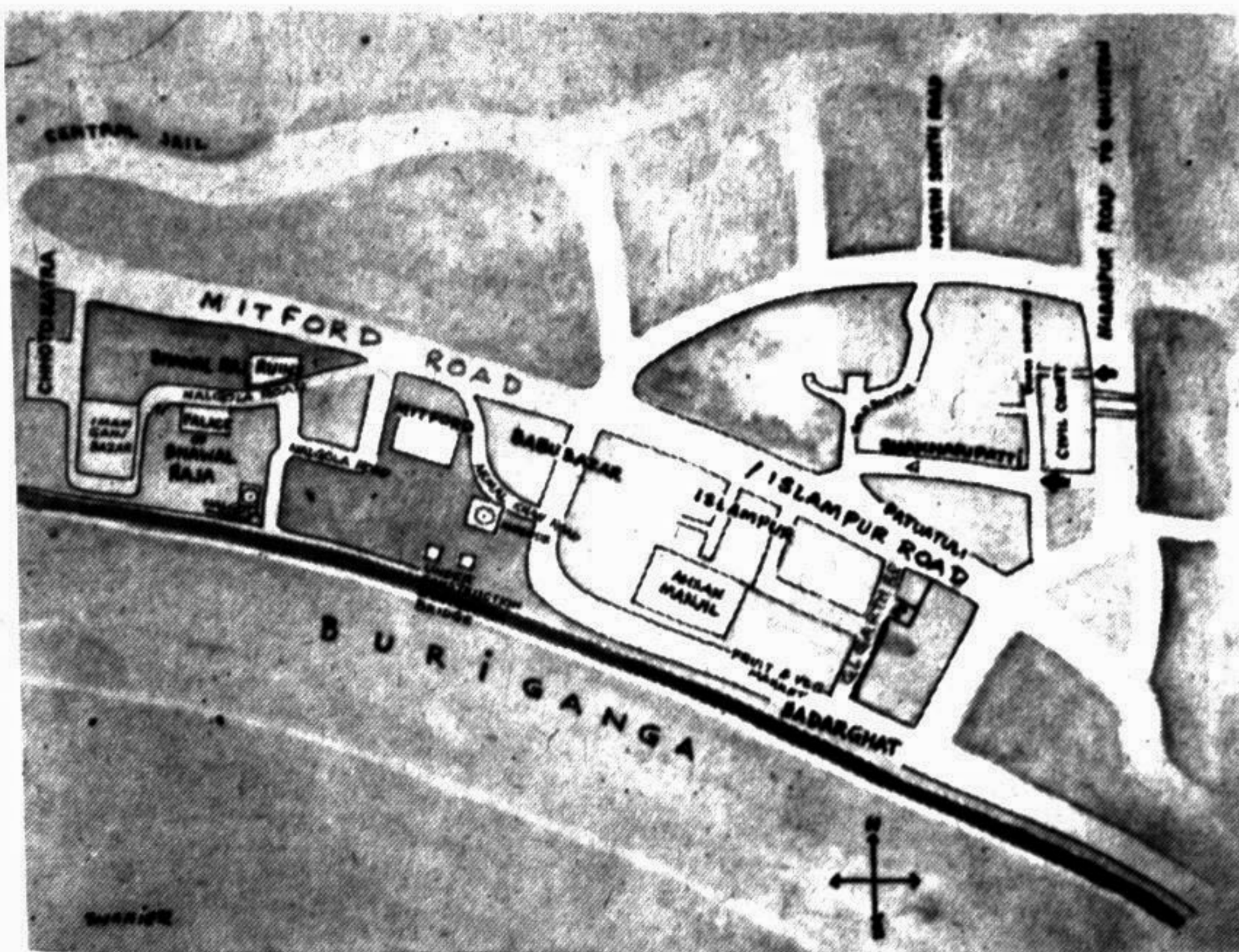
Find your exit from the rear of the court building and you are at the court House Street. As you follow the map, you cannot miss the quack dentists at their road-side practices.

If you have no taste for the shack restaurants for your lunch, the court House Restaurant could be your answer. It serves snacks and traditional *dal-bhat* in a neat and clean atmosphere. Most of its clientele comes from the nearby courts.

Shakhari Patti has its unique character. The buildings are 15x100'-150' and are knitted together as if one is leaning on the other. Hence you cannot miss the working craftsmen. A wide range of trades keeps the place lively. Shakhari shops musical instruments, kites, stone-carving and the occasional sound of music coming from the Hindu temples give the place a special charm for strangers.

As you follow the map, you soon come to the famous Ahsan Manjil. I have not included it in my walk as it takes at least two hours to visit the beautiful museum. Walk through the coconut wholesalers' market and you will be at the water front.

Further down near Mitford Hospital (now known as Sir Salmullah Medical College Hospital) the construction work of the new Buriganga



Bangkok - A Shopper's Paradise

by Nahid and Nishat Hussain

SAWADDEE Kha (Khrap). Greetings from Bangkok! Bangkok has been the first choice of shoppers and tourists from all over the world over the last ten years. But it has not lost its traditional flair to entice tourists. Rather, there are more foreigners flocking to Bangkok than ever before. Bangkok now holds the distinction of having the largest airport in Asia.

You can find what you want in Bangkok be it from the shops on the footpath or department store chains.

Footpath ware range from ceramics, clothes, watches, leatherbags, ornaments, and handicrafts to high tech equipment. Don't let the fact that they are sold on the footpaths fool you. The items sold are of a quality comparable to things available in posh areas.

The language barrier is no problem as long as you have a pen and a paper to write down the numbers. Though the prices are pretty reasonable, one must never forget to bargain.

Prakanong is a shopping area on Sukhumvit Road. It offers items of all types, especially clothes, jewelry, shoes and electrical equipments at reasonable prices. You will never regret a visit to Prakanong when you set foot in this paradise of goods. Usually at the end of each month, the

shopkeepers offer a sale, causing thousands of people to rush to the shops.

Weekend Market, better known as Chatsuchak, is open only on weekends. Here you can get the same things, but you can also buy exclusive ceramic ware made only in Thailand at lower prices. Ceramic ware of various types and quality are available, from simple coloured pieces to gold-lined ornate items. It is one place you have to visit while in Bangkok.

Indian market or 'Pahurat' located at the heart of Bangkok has more to offer, including Indian goods such as sarees and shawl-kameezes. It is owned by the Indian Sikhs settled in Bangkok. You will be pleasantly surprised by the delicate cuisine of South Asian countries. So if you are a South Asian tourist in Bangkok suffering from nostalgia, you can get a taste of native food.

Whether it be South Asian food or Wendy's burgers - Bangkok serves you whatever you desire. There are many roadside joints offering native food. Order *khao phat kai* (fried rice with chicken) or any other dish, and you will definitely get your money's worth.

There are many department stores such as ATM, The MALL, Robinson, Central, and Sogo. These are exclusive posh

areas. Here you can find most of the things found elsewhere in addition to cosmetics, high-tech and foreign goods. You can shop to your mind's delight in a centrally air-conditioned atmosphere which provides an escape from the heat outside. But here you won't be able to haggle over prices. Sales are available at all these department stores, at the end of each month.

Businessmen in transit can have suits and safaris made within six to eight hours. The best tailors are located near Ambassador Hotel on Sukhumvit Road. These are run by crafty Sikhs who offer to tailor your clothes at unusually low prices (Be careful. It's only the price of the cloth).

There are some who may want to add excitement to their daily shopping. Night clubs and discotheques are scattered all over the city. Even the city itself knows how to add spice to make the shopper's day.

You will realise why Bangkok is a shopper's paradise the moment you go there and get more than what you expected from books and travel guides. Thailand is a country with people of great personality. Miss Thailand won the Miss Personality award in the Miss World beauty contest. Choose Bangkok. Visit Bangkok.

Luxury Coaches to Cox's Bazar

COX'S Bazar has suddenly become a very easy vacation. Two luxury buses operate direct services between Dhaka and Cox's Bazar. These are fast replacing the option of taking a train to Chittagong and then transferring to a bus to Cox's Bazar.

These buses are new and wide bodied, the sleeping chairs inside are well-decorated and comfortable, and the attendants are impressive in their manner and dress.

Green Line (phone: 832465) operates air-conditioned buses with bathroom facilities on board. Buses to Chittagong leave Dhaka every hour between 7 am and 5:00 pm every day, and an evening bus leaves at 6:30 pm. Returning buses also

operate on the same schedule. The fare is Taka 230.

There are two direct buses to Cox's Bazar, one leaves Dhaka at 7 am and another at 11:30 pm. The fare is Taka 350 one way. Passengers used to be provided light snacks on board, but now the bus actually provides a meal at a restaurant on the way. Other services on board include mineral water supply and extensive reading material.

Saudia (phone: 415581) operates six direct buses to Cox's Bazar. Each bus has a passenger capacity of 36. The corporation plans to make the buses fully air-conditioned from January 1st.

Buses to Chittagong leave Dhaka every half hour between 6:30 am and 5 pm. Returning

buses operate on the same schedule. Fares to Chittagong are Taka 130 for cars with attached bathroom, and Taka 125 for general cars. Buses to Cox's Bazar leave Dhaka at 7:30 am, 8:30 am, 10:30 am, and 4 pm. The fare for a car with attached bathroom is Taka 195, and Taka 190 for a general car.

Both buses operate from the Fakirapur bus stand. Luxury buses became popular in about 1990. In the last three years, about Taka 200 crore was invested in this business. In the future, the buses plan to expand services to include operations between Dhaka and Khulna, Jessore, Rangpur, and Sylhet next year. With the rise of local tourism, the popularity of these bus lines will also soar. -G.W.

Three Sign Air Pact

INDONESIA, Thailand, and Malaysia signed a memorandum to set up the region's first multilateral pact for scheduled carriers. Each country has designated three cities to which two airlines from each country can offer unlimited frequencies. The new pact is a move to create greater aviation freedom in the Growth Triangle - a tripartite economic liberalisation region defined by southern Thailand, peninsular Malaysia, and the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Secondary airlines like Pelangi, Sempati,

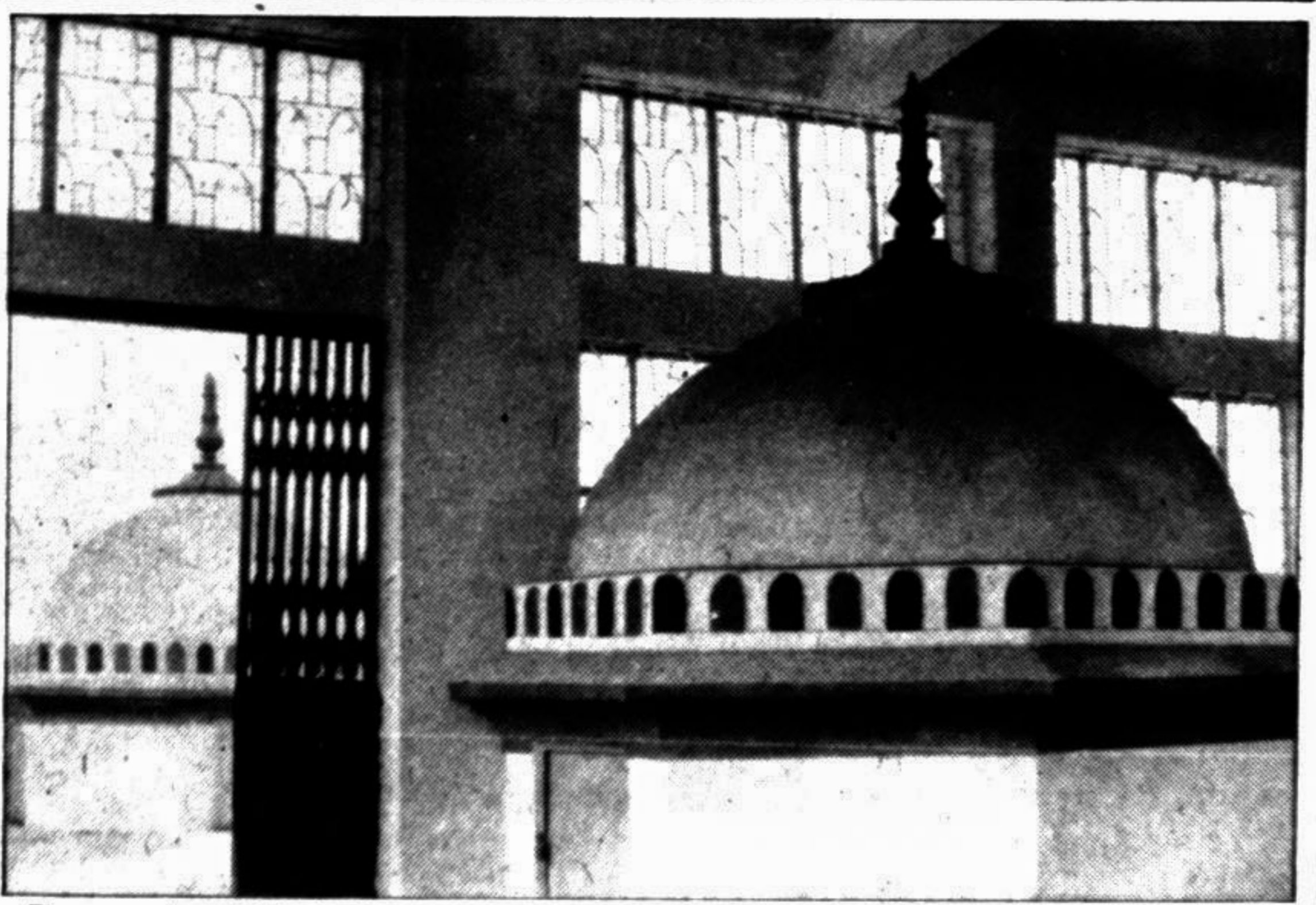
and Bangkok Airways are expected to benefit from this move as they seek to establish footholds in Asia's emerging commercial and tourism centers. Penang and Medan are major tourism and business cities, while the other cities are in lesser stages of development.

The tripartite meeting, which was delayed several times, was finalised in early November. The new pact was presented to the world Air Transport Conference as an example of Asia's gradual move toward aviation liberalisation.

Representatives from Sempati and Pelangi attended the meeting to give insights into which airlines will get the first rights. The airline will have to apply to the civil aviation authorities of each country to operate specific routes.

Though ASEAN has long had an agreement to allow inter-regional charter flights, this is the first time that a pact has been signed to cover scheduled flights. Full ratification of the pact is expected to be at least 6 months away.

-Holiday Aviator.



The seven-domed Nolgola Mosque partially buried by modern constructions — Amran Hossain, Daily Star

bridge is on. This is Babubazar Ghat. The mosque on the corner with green domes is quite old and beautiful.

On Nolgola Road a red-brick bungalow built in the last century will definitely attract your attention.

Nolgola has a very historical mosque. It was built at the same time as the Satmasjit mosque in Mohammadpur in the 11th Hizri (410 years ago) and had the same structure. Unfortunately it was never preserved. Now, a strange

looking modern structure built to extend the mosque from view. The seven domes are there; you may ask the Imam to let you have a look.

Not far from here, you will come to the Bhawal Raja Estate. The Bhawal Raja of Gazipur built the palace on the river bank with all the grandeur more than a hundred years ago. The palace, although in a deplorable state, still bears the traces of the Raja's splendid tastes.

You are almost at the last leg of the walk. The Choto Katara was built by the Nawab Shaista Khan in the year 1663 AD. The structure with a gigantic frontage was built to serve the purpose of a caravan serai.

Here, the walk comes to an end. You may walk further up to take a rickshaw home or go down to the Ghat and rent a country boat up to Mohammadpur for Tk 70 maximum and relax on your way back to the modern Dhaka. -M.A. Khan

Travel Briefs

Biman Acquires French Airbus: Biman okayed the decision to buy two mid-haul airbus 310-300 aircraft for US\$ 155m from Airbus industry by mid-1996. The price may be higher in the final agreement because the supplier will provide training and technical support to the Bangladesh crew. Biman is also looking for bids to wet lease two aircraft to cover its busy schedule until 1996. The carrier runs major risk of scheduled breakdown because of a shortage of aircraft - 9 planes operating in 27 destinations. -Bangladesh Shipping Times.

Emirates Appoints New Cargo Manager for Pakistan: Emirates, which operates from the U.A.E., has appointed F. D. Malik as the cargo manager for Pakistan. He is in charge of Emirates Sky Cargo's operations and marketing in Pakistan, and off-line operations in Lahore, Multan, and Islamabad. Emirates operates 14 weekly flights from Dubai to Pakistan. -Emirates.

Virgin Atlantic Offers Deal: Virgin Atlantic Airways is offering Hong Kong-London-Hong Kong mid-class passengers a special round trip deal for HK\$ 10,000 between now and March 31. Passengers must buy their tickets at least 14 days before departure and start their journey from Hong Kong, with the return trip scheduled no later than March 31. -Holiday Aviator.

Air India to Provide Free Tickets to Allay Plague Fear: Air India offered 500 free tickets to travel agents, tour operators and journalists to counter the negative impact on tourism caused by the recent plague. This was the airline's contribution to the government's efforts to convince international tourists that India is a safe tourist destination. -Monitor.

Tourism in Tibet Flourishing: More than 200,000 tourists have visited Tibet since it was opened to foreigners in the early 1980s, with 30,000 going in 1994 alone. China's Xinhua news agency reports. The remote Himalayan region earned 10 million US dollars from 30,000 foreign visitors in 1994. Xinhua quoted Tibetan tourism official Jigme as saying at the 1994 China Domestic Tourism Fair in the southwestern city of Kunming. -Reuter.

Bangladesh Railway Steps into Computer Era: Bangladesh Railway installed a computer network entitled Computerised Reservation and Ticketing System on November 8. The network has been commissioned under the joint program between Technohaven Ltd. and Bangladesh Railway. The modernisation program was undertaken by the railway to be competitive with the luxury coach lines that have been operating since the opening of the Meghna-Gumati bridge. -BD Shipping Times.

Lufthansa Raises Profit by 51 p.c.: The German national carrier Lufthansa lifted its pre-tax profits by 51% in the third quarter to US\$ 143.79m. It expects to make a profit and pay a dividend to shareholders for the first time in 5 years. The government yielded control of the airline in November to investors in Germany and abroad. It has also decided to spin off its cargo maintenance and information technology services into independent profit centers to continue the streamlining begun several years ago. -BD Shipping Times.

Australian Airlines Plans Expansion: Australian Airlines is trying to start making profits again by expanding its fleet and introducing long haul routes. The airlines bought 2 new Airbus A340s and restructured its organisation to cut losses from 736 million schillings to 400 million schillings and make profits in 1995. -Holiday Aviator.

Saudi-US Disagreement Over Purchase of Jets: The US and Saudi Arabia failed to agree on funding for the purchase of 60 US wide bodied jets by Saudi national airlines according to US Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen. Saudi signed a US \$6 billion dollar contract in February to buy 60 US wide bodied jets from the two US aircraft giants Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. But recently Riyadh asked Washington to defer payment. -Monitor.