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Ahsan manzil



A palace of past glory & memories

THE sun shone with ever increasing brightness as the grand mansion woke up very early every morning ardent with sound and activity. All around were servants, attendants and constables with rifles. The palace premise surrounded by gardens, with stables full of graceful horses and the Ford invariably would catch the eye even if it were hooded with tarpaulin.

The master, the Nawab of Dhaka, Abdool Gunni used to rise early for his regular exercise, be it a little stroll, hunting or just riding. Returning, he had refreshments in the tearoom along with the people gathered there to meet him and then into the inner living quarters for breakfast with his family. The rest of his day he spent on official work of his "Zamindari" or estates and social activities. He also spent time relaxing with his friends at night.

It was a golden era for the Nawab family when Nawab Abdul Gani received the 'Nawab' title by the British Raj in 1875 and received the title of "King Commander of the order of the Star of India" in 1886. In addition to the vast property he

inherited, the favour of the British Raj, had made the Nawab one of the most powerful and influential of Dhaka's elite. The mentioned palatial mansion, the "Ahsan Manzil", commonly known as the Nawab Bari was a symbol of aristocracy, opulence and influence.

In the midst of a wave of lush green open space against the backdrop of the sky and the rippling flow of the Buriganga in front stands proudly a stately monument of the colonial period - the Ahsan Manzil.

The mansion is located on the bank of the river Buriganga near Wiseghat. Built in 1872, when Nawab Abdul Ghani was experiencing the heyday of his life, on the site of a French factory and Kuthi bari, the Nawab named it after his son -- Nawab Ahsan Oollah Khan Bahadur.

This stately monument was heavily damaged in the 1888 tornado but was later reconstructed. The National Museum still preserves a beautiful silver filigree model of this heritage building. With the influence of European Renaissance, the two-storyed grand palace has a wide

picturesque riverfront and stands on a high podium.

The stairway leads directly to the projecting grand triple-arched portal of the 1st floor, the central part of which is crowned by a lofty dome. The front facade has three projections, the central arched portal projection housing the main entrance through the flight of stairs and two other terminating wings at both ends altogether presenting a well balanced architectural composition. The palace is in two symmetrical halves accommodating living quarters of various sizes rooms used for dining and drawing rooms, library and also guestrooms.

On the ground floor there is a spacious darbar hall in the west wing and a grand dining hall in the east. On the east of the 1st floor were the drawing room, library and three guestrooms while the west housed the ballroom and the bedrooms. The arches are all semicircular which conform to the 19th century style.

The influence of the western trend was not only marked in the architecture but also in lifestyle and habits of the then elite. Hence those were

reflected in their palace architecture, furniture and interior decor. Nawab Abdool Gunni had supported various social, cultural and entertainment events for citizens. He had introduced professional horse racing in Dhaka -- which became the most popular entertainment. Unlike many Zamindars and Nawabs who had their estates in the eastern part of Bengal, and lived in great mansions in Calcutta, Nawab Abdool Gunni lived in the Ahsan Manzil. He invited his English friends not only to this mansion but also for hunting in his territory.

The Panchayat or council to settle different disputes, especially the Muslims were mostly controlled by the Nawab and he used Ahsan Manzil for such important purposes. A descendent of Kashmiri origin, Nawab Gunni placed the responsibility of his family to his son, Ahsan Oollah in 1877, who maintained his father's trend and tradition to become a very influential nawab.

A sad story is associated with the Nawab and the Ahsan Manzil. The Nawab had arranged for a balloon ride by a European Lady who would fly

across the Buriganga river and land on the roof of the Ahsan Manzil so that the ladies would share the wonder and rejoice.

But ill fate led to an unpredictable accident by which the European lady had to give up her life and the Nawab had to pay compensation. However, the Nawab had many successful endeavours -- the introduction of electricity and the establishment of the Survey School,

which eventually became the Engineering University. The next Nawab Salimullah, son of Ahsan Oollah too resided in the same mansion although during his time the grandeur and opulence of the family had declined.

Lord Curzon stayed in this palace for sometime as a guest of Nawab Salimullah Bahadur. He could witness at that time the emergence of Dhaka as the

new capital of Eastern Bengal after the first partition in 1905.

Arrayed in large and small plantations placed all over in generous groups and tall palm trees the mansion stands today testifying the splendor and prosperity of the Nawab family that existed and influenced colonial Dhaka. The palace and life in it had been ravaged by the passage of time and history, but after its renovation, has

seen a new dawn filled with rays of memories when it had been turned into a museum for its architectural heritage and historic value.

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