



PUTHIA RAJBARI PALACE



Living next door to oblivion

MORE archaeological than architectural, it tells a different story about a 19th century palace almost stripped bare. Close to a desolate side street stands the towering Puthia Rajbari palace in the northwestern district of Rajshahi.

For anyone curious about the past, it's spellbinding -- like climbing into giddy days, but for anyone willing to know the present, it's sad -- like journeying to the melancholic backwater. Visitors could almost find themselves back in the heady days of 1895 when Rani Hemanta Kumari Devi built the palace in honour of her mother-in-law Maharani Sharut Sundari Devi.

The antique treasure now stands in isolation across an overgrown playground that bears the hallmarks of neglect. A short evening stay in front of the lonely palace is being close to dark shadows that thicken into night or taking a solemn pause for one fleeting moment when past and present overlap. It's just gazing through time's windows on rediscovering dormant splendour.

The palace, a surreal blend of



medieval and modern styles, ended up as the premises for Puthia Degree College in 1973 after a local influential man built the institution on government lease there.

The walls of the palace are now covered in aggressive graffiti -- its

plaster peeling, windows falling apart and metal laceworks rusting. It wears a defaced look as the college authorities reconstructed the building beyond archaeological norms.

Occupation of the palace goes against the Antiquities Act, 1968

that says any person who destroys, breaks, damages, alters, injures, defaces, mutilates, scribes or writes or engraves any inscription or sign on antiquities is punishable with imprisonment up to one year or with fine or both.

The college that has two exten-

sions nearby, built in 1986 and 2000, now runs only its arts faculty in the palace in what a teacher of the same institution called a desperate attempt by Principal Abdul Latif Mondol to keep the huge property under his control.

Officials said the college used the palace as vested property on pay of Tk 20 a month for per decmal of land. They also said the college should have been relocated as the Department of Archaeology took over the palace in 1987 and asked its principal several times to leave the building.

A notice was served on Mondol on April 18, 2003, a senior official of the Department of Archaeology told The Daily Star.

The Deputy Commissioner's Office in Rajshahi served a similar notice on the principal on December 12, 1989 asking him to leave the palace without delay and warned him of legal action in failure.

Mondol denied the illegality of the occupation of the archaeologically protected site and claimed to have spent Tk 17 lakh on reconstruction of the building. He said the college is a safeguard of the palace against encroaches. He

reasoned out that if he had not set up the college in the palace, other people would have destroyed it.

Mondol admitted to having defaulted on the pay of lease money fixed for use of the palace before the archaeology department took charge of it.

"We should have pursued the case further," Additional Deputy Commissioner (revenue) in Rajshahi Mohammad Sirajul Islam said without commenting on how the college was in the Puthia Rajbari even after the authorities issued a slew of notices.

Deputy Commissioner in Rajshahi Mohammad Aziz Hasan thinks the arts faculty of the college can be shifted to any of its extensions. "It is not doing any good to students and studying under a peeling roof is not comfortable," he said. The college should have sought permission from the archaeology department to do reconstruction, he added.

Aziz said Puthia should be developed as a tourist spot and steps should be taken to protect heritage that is slipping into oblivion.

Puthia Rajbari, once fascinat-

ing, is a large complex home to several old Hindu temples and is a testimony to a unified architectural pattern. At the entry to Puthia, formerly a large estate, is a large white stucco temple dedicated to Shiva, modelled on a typical north Indian design and

dating back to 1823.

To the left of the main façade of the palace is the Govinda Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna, which follows a typical Hindu temple shape prevalent in Bengal at the time. It is decorated with delicate terra-cotta panels depicting

scenes from the Radha Krishna and other Hindu epics.

Back of the palace stands another Bangla style miniature temple in the shape of a Bengali bamboo hut but built of brick and adorned with some exquisite terra-cotta designs. Across a large



tank to the right of the palace is another pair of temples exhibiting a variation of styles.

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Story: ARUN DEVNATH WITH ANWAR ALI
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

