

On the banks of the Buriganga in Dhaka stands the pink majestic Ahsan Manzil, 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.

## Baldah gasping for sunlight

Highrises from three sides of the century-old garden cast shadow round the year threatening the rare, exotic plants

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Baldah Garden, which preserves the richest collection of exotic plants in the country, is gasping for sunlight as several high-rise buildings have surrounded three sides of the garden, casting shadow on the plants round the year.

Severe waterlogging during monsoon is another worrying issue. Pollution from adjacent streets is damaging the rare plants and flowers, posing a risk of extinction.

Baldah Garden, which is now a satellite unit of the National Botanical Garden, Mirpur, will be 100-year-old next year.

Situated at Wari in the old part of Dhaka, Baldah Garden stands in the midst of high-rises, offering much needed respite to the city dwellers from jaded city life.

Superintendent of the garden, Ruhul Ameen, said, "The garden misses sunlight throughout the year because of the buildings. The situation worsens during winter. The building on the south poses the major threat as the sun tilts to the south during winter."

Ameen, also a forester,

Department of Forest, added that household garbage are regularly tossed from the 12-storey building adjacent to the garden. Such mindless waste-dumping did not end despite repeated complaints to the building owners.

Waterlogging inside the garden following slightest rain during monsoon is cause of another major concern, the forester mentioned.

Ameen said when the garden was created the surroundings were at lower level. But over the years the heights of the adjacent building and the street have increased, leaving the garden at a lower level, even below the storm water line.

"Since the storm water line is now at a higher level, the garden cannot release water during the rainy season anymore. Water from the elevated drainage systems enters the garden instead, causing serious waterlogging," Ameen said.

"Aquatic plants will not have any problem in this situation. But the sun lovers, which constitute the majority of our collection, will not be able to survive

for long," he said.

A forest department official on condition of anonymity said there is no separate budgetary allocation for the garden. It runs with an amount from the budget for the National Botanical Garden.

The garden used to be the cherished possession of Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury, zamindar of the then Baldah area in Joydevpur (Gazipur). He established the garden in 1909. He collected rare species of plants and nurtured them with profound passion.

During his lifetime he enhanced the grandeur of the garden with plants collected from 50 countries including African countries, Japan, South East-Asian tropical islands, Australia, Mexico, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Java and Sri Lanka.

The zamindar continued to enrich the garden until his death in 1943.

After he passed away, the Calcutta High Court looked after the garden until the Pakistani government took over. Baldah Garden became the responsibility of the Forest Department in 1962.

Stretched around 3.38 acres of land, the garden is divided into two parts. The larger section is named after Cybele, the Greek goddess of fertility. The smaller one is named Psyche, meaning 'soul' in Greek.

Public entry to Psyche is restricted while the Cybele is open to all from 8:00am to 5:30pm. In winter the closing time is 4:30pm. The entry fee is Tk5 per person.

According to Ruhul Ameen, the garden is currently a home to about 17,000 plants from 672 species belonging to 87 families and 339 genera.

The collection of the garden is classified into seven categories - orchids, cacti, aquatic plants, roses, rockery or wall plants, arboretum or larger tree and miscellaneous flora.

Ameen mentioned that original design of the garden and the idea of plant species have been maintained, with a few other additions.

The garden has among its attractions the 'century plant' which is believed to flower only once in hundred years, and was last seen in bloom about 8 years

ago. The Cybele has a pond named Shankhanidhi.

The big sundial in the Cybele section, which shows the time of the day with precision on sunny days, still amazes the visitors.

The famous poem 'Camellia' by Rabindranath Tagore, was actually written while he was staying in the Joy House of the Baldah Estate, overlooking the camellia shed. Joy House used to be a rest house and an amphitheatre of the Baldah Estate.

Among other collection, the garden has rare plants such as naglingom, udaypaddo, raj ashoka, dev kanchan, kanak shudha, arjun, krishna bot, sharod mallika, kabari, palash, gustava, arrow poison, African tulip, magnolia and hundreds more.

Some of these are only available in Baldah Garden.

The Psyche unit of the garden has several varieties of the aquatic plant including Amazon lily. The rare papyrus plant can also be found there.

The eccentric zamindar employed 40 gardeners to take care of the garden in the beginning. Although the number of trees and plants has increased over the last 100 years, the number of gardeners reduced to only 12 at present.

Although many species have died and some were relocated to Botanical Garden, it is still a heaven for botany students, experts and tree lovers. Its magnificence still appeals around 2,00,000 visitors every year.

Abul Hassan, chairman of Department of Botany, Dhaka University, said environmentalists, botanists and the civil society have been vocal about the damaging impact of the high-rises for about a decade but it failed to change the fate of the garden.

"Baldah Garden is not just a recreational centre for the city dwellers. The rarest species in its collection help many botanists in their research work. Our students go there to study about plants that are not available anywhere in the country," he added.

Hassan pointed out that the garden plays a major role in conservation of many threatened species. "Many species are threatened in the wild. Before they extinct from nature it can be reproduced from the mother plant in the garden."



Another highrise just on the other side of the Psyche section of the garden.



A highrise casts shadow on the Amazon lily plants at Baldah Garden.

## They trade risking life and limbs

Kitchen market on rail tracks at Malibagh goes on despite frequent mishaps

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

A passenger train announced its arrival at the Malibagh rail crossing with its shrill horn, triggering a bustle of activities on the railway tracks.

Over a few dozen shop owners rolled their goods off the tracks. They stuffed their fish, vegetables, fruits and chickens in the scant space between the tracks and leisurely waited for the train to pass. Shoppers who were haggling with the hawkers moments ago hastily made their way to a safe distance.

A few minutes later, after the train had crossed the hawkers settled back in their earlier position and the whole market was back as if nothing happened.

This is an everyday scene at the Malibagh kitchen market - one of the largest of its kind in the city. While the number of makeshift shops on the rail tracks has decreased after the railway officials updated the tracks to dual-gauge, there are still a fair number of hawkers selling goods on the tracks putting lives of both the buyers and sellers in perilous danger.

Most of these shops are running illegally on the Bangladesh Railway (BR) land.

Extending from Gulbagh to Malibagh rail crossing, a large portion of the kitchen market spans around the rail tracks with dozens of permanent and makeshift shops haphazardly placed on rail tracks, barely leaving any room for the trains to pass.

Shah Alam, a customer who

was seen haggling with a peddler standing on the rail track said: "Of course hanging around a railway track is not safe. But we have little option as this happens to be the only market in this area."

The whole market has to rely on three security officers who are responsible for alerting the people flocking over the rail tracks about incoming trains.

When asked, Monir Hossain, one of the officers, said, "We blow whistle and alert the people of

coming trains. I have never seen any accidents take place and chances for any happening are minimal."

However, some local residents told this correspondent of small incidents occurring frequently in the area.

"Accidents take place quite often. Goods kept on the rail tracks are sometimes damaged," said Moktar Hossain, a resident of Gulbagh. "But the authorities would not do anything until something really bad happens."

Shop owners at the kitchen market alleged that an influential coterie controls a large portion of the land used by the shop owners and force the traders to pay rentals. "Even floating traders have to pay kickback to the police," said a shop owner.

Asked about the legitimacy of the location of his shop, Golam Ali, an aged vegetable trader told this correspondent that he could care less. "We just do our business and pay the rents. It is not our headache to think about

legal issues," he said.

According to locals, drives conducted by the police hardly become successful in freeing the rail tracks from illegal possessions as the traders always settle back.

"There is an influential group controlling this region. They have underhand dealings with a section of railway staff," said Maksudul Hossain, a resident of Gulbagh.

The occasional drives taken by the authorities are nothing but eye-wash," he added.

Railway officials told Star City that they don't have any immediate plans regarding this matter. "We rely on the police to rid the lands of illegal occupants and they raid the market at regular intervals," said an official of BR.

Contacted, officials at Motijheel Police Station blamed the floating population living in Gulbagh and adjoining area for failure of the drives.

"We do our job and conduct routine drives to free illegally occupied lands, but we can do little about these people coming back to the spot," said an officer at the police station.

Ward councillor of Dhaka City Corporation for this area Sajjad Zahir told Star City that things would be better if the whole kitchen market could be relocated to a more convenient place.

"Dhaka City Corporation does not own any space in the locality where we can build another kitchen market for the area," he said.



Vegetable traders sit by the rail tracks ignoring an approaching train at Malibagh rail crossing.

## Making a costly living

'Shilpata' carvers work amid fine stone dust that often causes TB

DURDANA GHIAS

While meandering through certain lanes in old Dhaka one will see dozens of shops selling shilpata, a stone slab with a stone grinder for smashing spices.

A shilpata is a traditional means of grinding spices used by housewives of both the urban and rural areas.

Even ten years ago shilpata carvers were seen moving door to door calling aloud for attention of the women of the houses to have their shilpata carved anew.

Nowadays these shilpata carvers are rarely seen as people are prone to buy crushed spices from market.

Still one can find many small stores selling and making shilpata in the areas like Shankharibazar, Imamganj and Jinjira.

On a rain-soaked morning last week this correspondent visited Tantibazar when workers were busy carving stone slabs with chisels with constant thuds of hammers. They were sitting in front of little stores amid smoke of stone dust rising from the slabs.

"I know that it is harming me but I have no other skill. Besides, I am getting Tk 7,000 a month for this," said Md Jalil, a shilpata worker for the last ten years.

"Some of my co-workers died of TB because they were into this job for long. Doctors could do little," he said.

But many like Jalil are still working there all day long when it is difficult for anybody to stand there only for a few minutes fine stone dust invades into one's lungs making breathing a difficult task.

"The business is going a bit dull because people nowadays are quite busy and do not want to grind spices at home. Instead they buy spice packets from market," said Srikanta Biswas, owner of a shilpata store and a stone importer.

Srikanta believes that stone is a gift from the nature on which

depends his livelihood. He said the number of shops decreased so much that they do not need to have a committee of shilpata traders. "But I heard there is a committee in Imamganj," he said.

Sand stone is the main raw material for shilpata. It is imported from Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Assam of India.

Besides shilpata business, these shops also make nameplates on white marble stones.

The stones are imported from Italy and Kerala of India.

Although the practice of grinding spices is becoming rare at urban households many still prefer to prepare spices at home to add a dash of extra taste to special dishes.

"We buy packets of powdered spices from market. But still we do grind spices regularly at home because there are some preparations, which needs ground spices for good taste," said Mahmuda, a housewife at Mirpur.



A shilpata carver at work at Tantibazar.