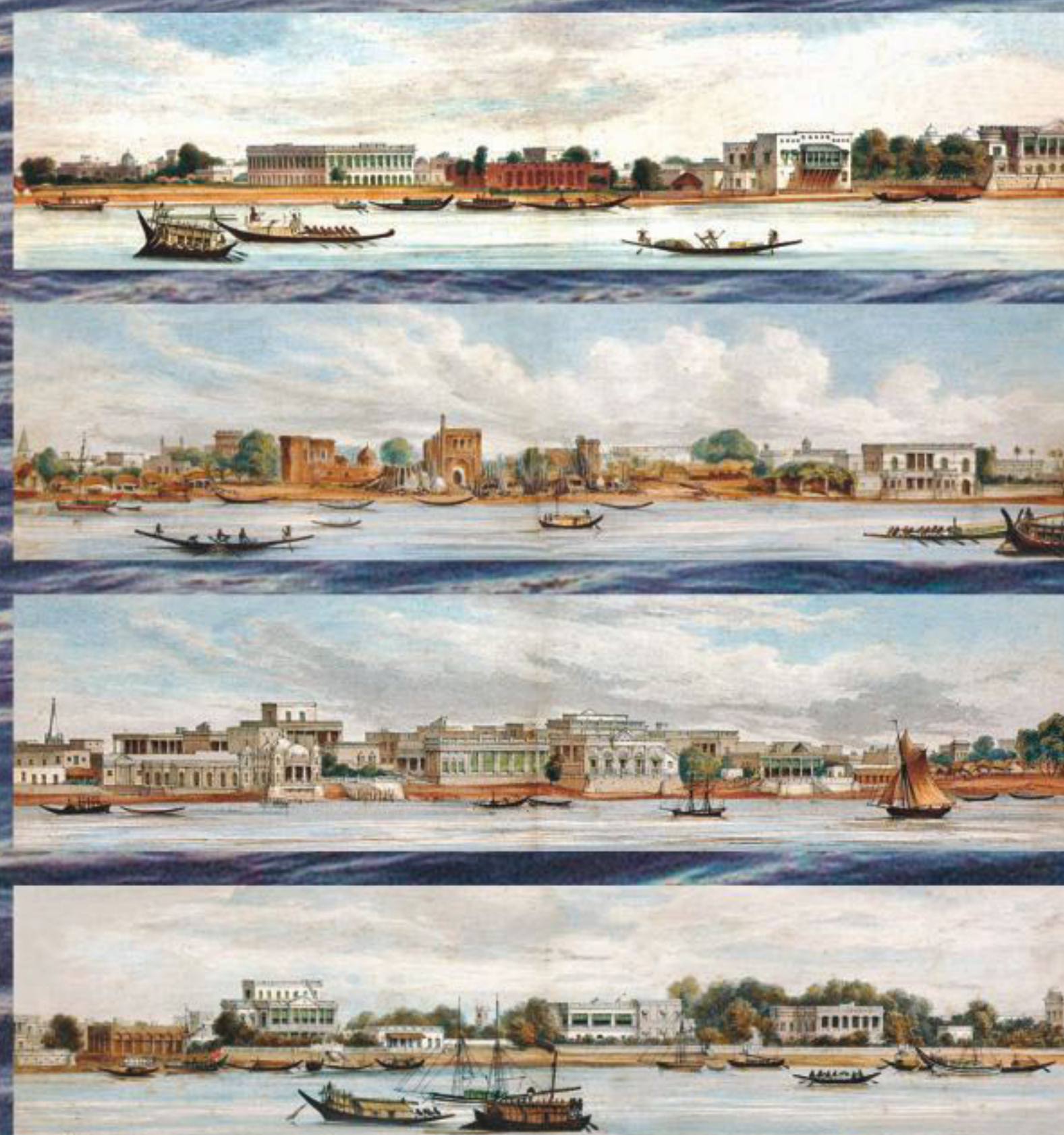


COVER STORY

the lost PANORAMA



Many major cities in the world boast a flowing river by its side. And it is the river that greatly contributes to the beauty or development of these cities. London has the Thames. New York has the Hudson River. Paris is blessed with the Seine. Dhaka, too, has a river it owes a lot to: the Buriganga.

Along the Buriganga, Dhaka once grew to become one of the most flourishing cities. The view from the river would have portrayed that, if we simply cared about its frontline, which features grand palaces, mosques and so on. Instead, we abuse the river and with it, we also abuse its banks.

In 1830, an unknown artist did a splendid work on the riverfront - a panorama that speaks of a magnificent Dhaka. Many of the buildings shown are now non-existent. Although some of them are still intact.

"Among them, unfortunately, many are now obscured or blocked out from river view due to unplanned urbanisation or downright illegal settlements," said Taimur Islam, CEO of Urban Study Group (USG), an organisation that campaigns for the conservation of heritage of Dhaka.

In this chaos, one building that has managed to retain its glory is the Ahsan Manzil, the house of the Nawabs. The Pink Palace is the crowned jewel of the Buriganga's riverfront, with its majestic dome and the imposing facade still visible from a boat. Interestingly, the palace was not like what we see today. According to the old panorama, Ahsan Manzil was neither pink nor did it have the dome, but it was a grand building nonetheless.

Ruplal House did not enjoy the same fate: you can now see only a small portion from the river, and the mansion lacks proper maintenance, with portions of the building now being used as a spice market and

warehouse.

Bought from an Armenian zamindar named Aratun by the father of Ruplal and Raghunath Das, the affluent brothers renovated the property by hiring Martin and Company, an architectural firm in Kolkata.

Ruplal House played the host of many important events, including holding the reception for Lord Dafrin in 1888. Another candidate was Ahsan Manzil, but the Ruplal brothers won this competition against the Nawabs. One reason may be because of the mansion's ballroom, which overlooked the beautiful river in very close proximity.

Devi Nibash is yet another picturesque riverfront mansion. Today, it stands in ruins. With many windows and walls missing from the façade, the remains loudly echo of the glory of its golden days.

"The riverfront has been the area where the elites of Dhaka had built their mansions," Taimur says.

The banks do not just host residences, though. Bara Katra and Choto Katra are also situated near Buriganga.

Prince Shah Shuja (a subhedar of Bengal, son of Emperor Shah Jahan) ordered to build Bara Katra (around 1644) as his palace. However, he never lived there. Bara Katra became a caravanserai to accommodate for travellers.

Choto Katra was built by Mughal subhedar Shaista Khan in around 1663. It is, according

to Bradley-Birt's book, *The Romance of an Eastern Capital* (published in 1906), "...smaller (than Bara Katra) but scarcely less beautiful, designed in the style of architecture that has come to be popularly known as Shaista Khani, after the great Viceroy himself."

Such is the importance of this monument. It is also the final resting place of Champa Bibi, after whom the area is named: Champatoli (there is some debate about her identity; but she was most likely related to Shaista Khan).

The tomb is now obscure, so much so that when you pass by it, you might not even notice it. The mausoleum remains locked, with two small steel gates and a narrow corridor in between. The grandiosity can still be understood, if you are lucky enough to enter inside, with the majestic dome in the ceiling.

Due to lack of proper maintenance, there are spider webs all around. The tomb is not the only thing in Choto Katra that requires maintenance, and spider webs are not the only problem!

What remains of the Katras are its lavish gates and bastions. Many of its other structures have either been destroyed or are now encroached by buildings.

We should have been able to see these monuments from Buriganga; from these monuments, the sight of Buriganga could have been enjoyed. They are very near the river, and surely, they were the gems of the riverfront, as mentioned in *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca* (written by B C Allen, published in 1912), "When the embankment finishes the river is fringed by houses, some of which are both dignified and picturesque, conspicuous amongst which stand out the two fine old Muhammadan ruins, the Bara and Choto Katras."

"When it comes to heritage sites, you cannot just destroy and build according to your own wish. But such seems to be the case," Taimur complains. "For any modification, permission of Urban Development Committee must be needed. There is also a buffer zone around such monuments to ensure that proper background and setting that goes with such sites is maintained."

In the panorama, the Katras look fabulous. Today, you won't be able to see it from the river.

Meanwhile, you can catch some beautiful glimpses of Northbrook Hall. Also known as Lal Kuthi, it was elegantly built with a mix of Mughal and European elements, and was meant to serve as a town hall. During British rule, the grand building was made in honour and to host the reception of Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy of India.

A huge part of the riverfront is occupied by Mitford Hospital. Robert Mitford, who was a Collector at Dhaka, had left his gigantic property to the Government of Bengal for the welfare of its people. After much dispute from his heirs, Mitford Hospital was built, in the mid-1800s. The site on which the organisation stands had been important even before the existence of the hospital: it was where the Dutch had set up their factory.

Back in those times, you could even see Lalbagh Fort from the river, with the marvellous dome of the mausoleum of Pori Bibi in the skyline. In fact, a painting by Charles D'Oyly (another Collector at Dhaka) in the year 1816 shows Buriganga flowing right beside the fort.

The riverfront is dotted with history. It is like a museum, telling stories of aristocracies and trades and transitions. Much of it had been possible for the river itself. Oblivious to this, commercial and residential buildings are rising up, sometimes obscuring, or sometimes downright replacing, these old buildings. If this goes on, an age-old museum will be wiped away.

"People treat Buriganga like its Dhaka's backyard, whereas it is in fact the front yard," Taimur concludes.

By M H Haider

Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

If you are interested to relish in the Buriganga riverfront, an option is to go to one of the heritage walks of Urban Study Group. You may call them at 01819 248 408 or send an email to usg.dhaka@gmail.com.

