



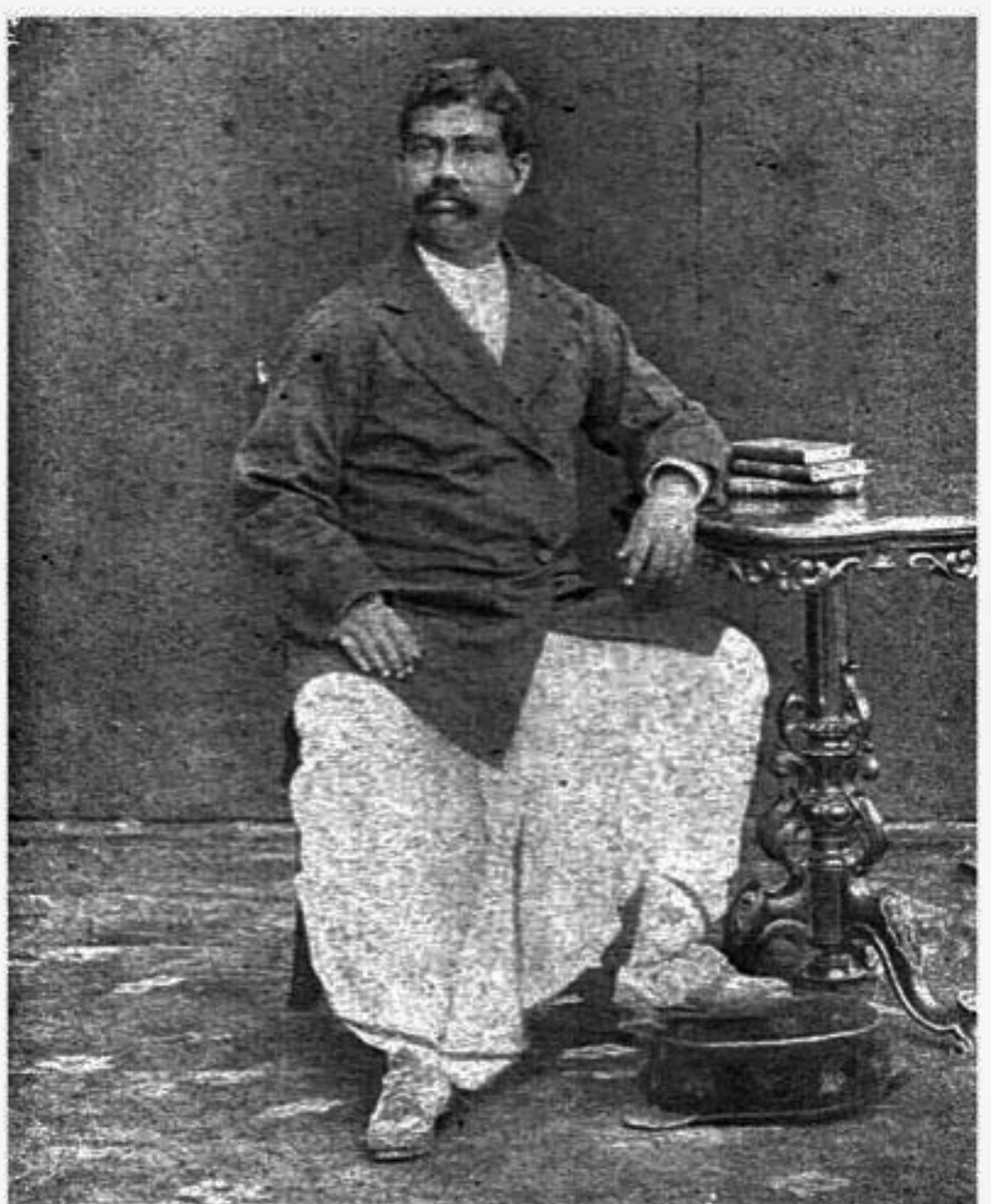
Ruplal House, early twentieth century

COURTESY: MIRA DAS



Ruplal House today

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD IBRAHIM



Ruplal Das

COURTESY: MIRA DAS

RUPLAL HOUSE

Waiting for a light of resurrection

MOHAMMAD IBRAHIM

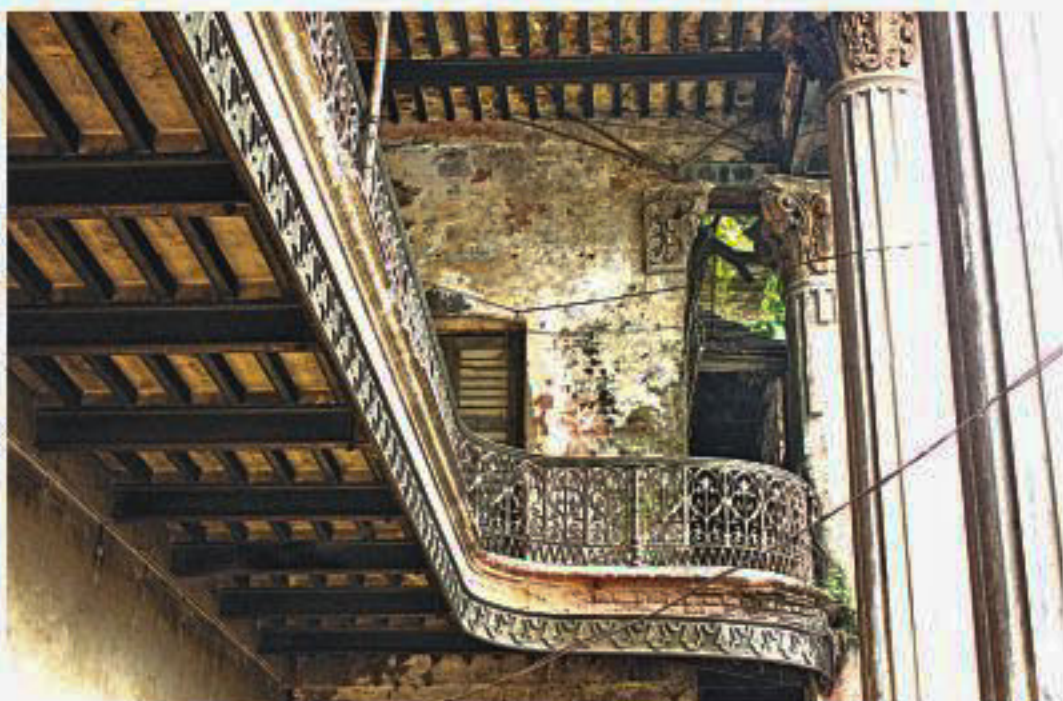
Before my first solo photography exhibition in February 2010, I went to the Farashganj neighbourhood and walked through its narrow streets—something I had never done before. I found myself lost in the glorious past of Old Dhaka. Magnificent architectural structures built on the bank of the great Buriganga River caught my eyes. I was witnessing the decaying beauty of some of the greatest ancient buildings of Dhaka, struggling for survival in silence.



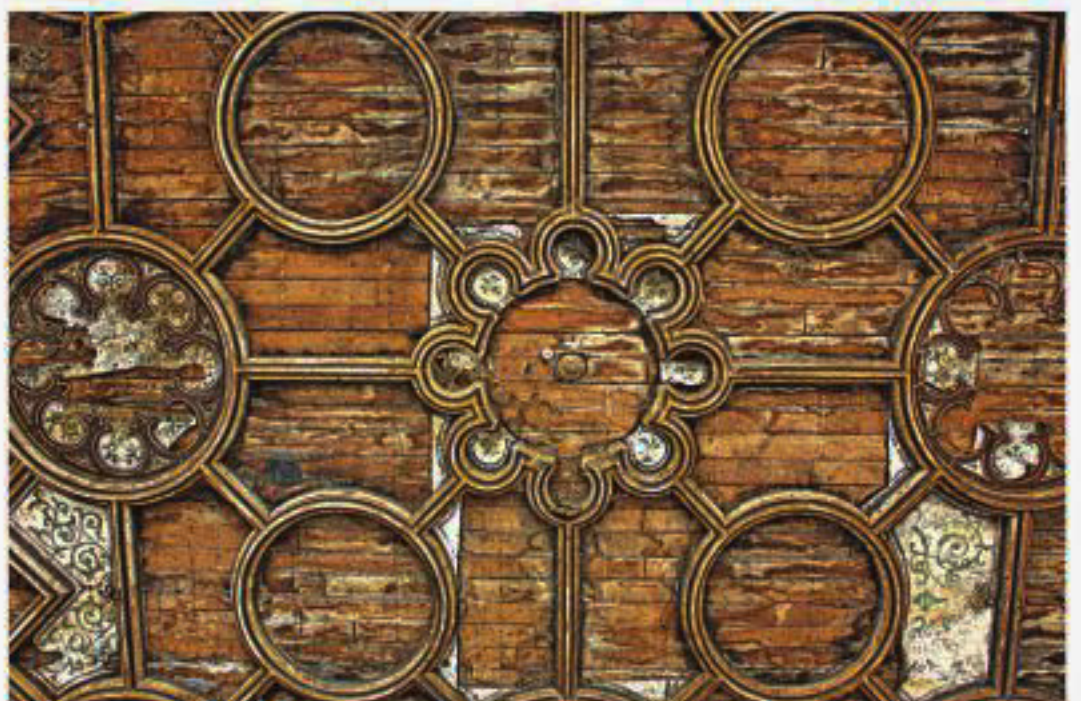
Inside Ruplal House



Spice shops inside the Ruplal House



The northern corridor of the Ruplal House



Ceiling of the central hall room

PHOTOS: MOHAMMAD IBRAHIM

A few days later, while talking to a friend, I was asked whether I had visited the Ruplal House. This was the first time I heard the name of the building. For a few seconds I stared at him and answered "no". He told me that a hundred years back there was no competitor to the Ruplal House except Ahsan Manzil. My curiosity was piqued and I decided to visit the great Ruplal House.

On a Saturday morning of April 2010, I went to Farashganj again. It was difficult to walk through the streets without a handkerchief; the area was fully occupied by the spice markets. I asked a number of shop owners about the location of the Ruplal House but nobody could give me an answer. Suddenly, I found an old building in the midst of the spice markets—I had never seen any structure like this in Old Dhaka. I was pretty sure that I had stumbled upon what I was looking for. I walked around the house and it was a really disappointing

1825. It was later bought by two merchants—Ruplal Das and his brother Raghunath Das—in 1840. A famous architect firm of Calcutta, Martin Company, then re-constructed this building.

The Ruplal House is a fine example of the late Renaissance European architecture introduced during the British colonial period. The "E" shaped two-storied building has three blocks: the Ruplal Block, the Central Block and the Raghunath Block.

The building has approximately fifty rooms and a western-style elegantly designed dance hall with wooden floors at the centre of the upper floor. The corridor of the dance hall faces the Buriganga. Its ceilings were beautifully decorated with glass and wood.

The Ruplal House was the only competitor to the Ahsan Manzil during the British colonial era. It was a centre of art and culture in Dhaka at that time. The Das family had ties with contemporary

opportunities to get into the Ruplal House with my camera. This came during the Eid vacations in 2010 and on the morning of the second day of Eid-ul-Fitr, I entered the house with my camera with no one to stop me. I felt like Alice in wonderland. The different parts of the house, the pillars, the corridors, the wooden stairs, the walls and the beautiful architectural design works amazed me. The most beautiful part was the dance room where the floor was wooden and ceiling was decorated with beautiful glass and wood works. I tried to take as many photos as I could.

I started reading up on Ruplal House and began my search for the family members of Ruplal Das. After months, I finally got the contact of Mira Das, the last living descendant of Ruplal Das' family who was born in Ruplal House in the early 1930s. Mira Das was quite surprised when she received my call from Dhaka. After a few months, in February 2011,

daughter of Hrishikesh Das, was the only lady in the Ruplal House who was a Brahmin. She was well-educated and quite modern in her way of thinking. Jogesh Babu, Mira Das' father, was also a prominent figure of that time and had close ties to the contemporary civil society. People like Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, Syed Mohammad Taifur, Mohitola Mozumdar, Satyen Bose, Shishir Bhaduri and Sharat Chandra were acquaintances of the family.

She remembered that the family owned two cars—one Opel and the other a Chevrolet. The Ruplal House, throughout the year, was the centre of celebrations of different festivals at that time. The house was always vibrant, with relatives, friends, artists and local people gathering there.

This all came to an end during the partition riots. Concerned by reports of communal violence—Hindus and Muslims were being killed in different parts of Dhaka including Wari and Farashganj area—the Das family decided to migrate to Kolkata. Her father Jogesh Das exchanged the Ruplal House for two houses in Baligaon area of Kolkata with a Gujarati Merchant. Unfortunately, the Gujarati businessman never managed to take possession of the house.

On a morning of 1947, the Das family went to the Tejgaon Airport and flew to Kolkata, leaving forever. Since then Mira Das has never come back to Dhaka again. That was the most painful event of her life—communal riots changed the entire course of life for the Das family. Our discussion continued till the evening. When I had to leave, she again became very emotional and started weeping, expressing silently emotions which she couldn't put in words.

After coming back from Kolkata, I became very busy with my personal life—family, office etc. Unfortunately I couldn't manage the time to organise the photography exhibition I wanted till April 2017. A year later of my returning from Kolkata, in December 2012, *Prothom Alo* published my article on the Ruplal House. Finally, in late April of 2017 I managed to organise my second solo photography exhibition in DRIK Gallery which on the Ruplal House. Muntasir Mamoon inaugurated the exhibition. Ronodeep Das, son of Mira Das, along with his family came to Dhaka to join the inauguration ceremony. Mira Das could not come due to being ill but sent me a nice hand-written letter.

Over the years we have lost so many heritage sites of Dhaka's antiquity and still continue to lose more. This 200-year-old wonderful heritage site could be turned into a popular tourist attraction in Dhaka, as has been done with the Ahsan Manzil. We all need to come forward immediately and start the restoration of this magnificent architectural beauty, before it is too late.

Mohammad Ibrahim is a banker with a passion for photography. For the last seven years, he has been working on creating awareness for preservation of the Ruplal House through his photography.



View of the Ruplal House from the Buriganga River, early twentieth century

COURTESY: MIRA DAS



Mira Das, the last living descendant of Ruplal Das who was born in the Ruplal House.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD IBRAHIM

experience. More than seventy percent of the outside wall was damaged. Moss covered them and the building was occupied by spice shops. At the entrance of the Ruplal House the caretaker would not allow me in. Seeing a camera in my hand, he seemed to be a bit panicked. I could find no other entrance into the house. I decided to go to the roof top of a high rise building in front of the Ruplal House. What I saw was an amazing experience—the beauty of the great building, the water of the Buriganga glittering, and the sun's rays reflected on this magnificent structure.

The Ruplal House (formerly known as Aratoon House) is located in the south-eastern part of Dhaka (present day Farashganj area). It was built on the northern bank of the Buriganga river, beside the Buckland Dam. A famous Armenian businessman Stephen Aratoon built the house in

prominent figures of this part of the Indian subcontinent. In 1888, British Viceroy Lord Dufferin visited Dhaka. A grand reception was organised by the contemporary civil society of Dhaka at the Ruplal House honouring the Viceroy, although the Nawab family wanted to organise the same at the Ahsan Manzil.

Currently the surroundings of the Ruplal House, including the Buckland Dam area, consists of one of the biggest spice markets of Dhaka. Wholesale traders of different types of spices have occupied the entire area. Inside the house some families are even residing. The other part of the complex, known as the Raghunath Block, was handed over to a family of Indian origin by the descendants of Raghunath Babu. A good number of spice shops are currently operating in this part as well.

Since I had first seen it, I have been looking for

I went to Kolkata to meet her.

The seventy-plus-aged lady Mira Das was living in an apartment building complex near Gitanjali area with her son Ronodeep Das, daughter-in-law Onjoli Das and granddaughter Pranjoli. When I first met her, she became very emotional. She couldn't stop her tears when I handed over the photo album where I had captured recent photos of Ruplal House. She started pointing out to me the different parts of the house and sharing her childhood memories as she turned the pages of the album.

The day after our first meeting, I was invited to lunch where traditional Bengali cuisine including the much relished *Shorse Elish* was served. Mira Das shared her childhood memories with me on that day.

Mira started her student life in Eden Girls School. Her mother, Kanak Prabha, who was the