

AHSAN MANZIL

A palace by the river



residence) in 1830 and renovated it as his residence. The 'kuthi' was situated at the place where the Andarmahal now exists.

Later in 1869, Ghani built an enormous building just on the eastern side of the said 'kuthi' and named it "Ahsan Manzil" after his son, Khwaja Ahsanullah.

In 1888, Ahsan Manzil was severely damaged during a massive cyclone in 1888 and again, during an earthquake in 1897. The present high dome was added to it when it was reconstructed afresh.

reconstruction started in 1986.

In 1992, the Bangladesh National Museum assumed responsibility of Ahsan Manzil and subsequently turned it into a museum.

What's in the palace

The palace can be categorised in two parts: Rangmahal and Andarmahal.

Rangmahal consists of a meeting room, living room, dining room, library, card room, billiards room and a ballroom.

Meanwhile, Andarmahal served as residential quarters for both male and female family members of the

their wealth. The original iron safes, wooden almirahs, and a colossal chest boasting 94 drawers -- all remain as a testament to their once vast wealth.

Galleries 18 and 20 highlight the nawabs' forward-thinking roles in Dhaka's development.

Nawab Abdul Ghani initiated the city's first filtered water supply in 1878, while Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah introduced electricity to Ahsan Manzil and surrounding areas in 1901.

While Gallery 19, the state



dumping, a jarring contrast to the pristine grounds of the past.

Visitor numbers have dwindled over the years, highlighting a disconnect between the palace's illustrious past and its drab present.

It has now become a tale of two realities: one whispers of a luxurious past, the other begs for preservation.

During multiple visits by this newspaper, it was seen that a significant portion of visitors appeared to focus on casual activities like conversation and taking pictures within the grounds.

Only a few showed any interest in exploring the museum.

The presence of a lift at the entry gate was noted, but its installation is an eyesore amidst the grandeur of this historical treasure.

The lift, moreover, has been non-functional for months, as confirmed by museum officials.

Wishing anonymity, a museum official said the palace lacks proper maintenance and currently has many vacant staff positions.

"The authorities must do something about the chaos that unfolds outside.

Besides, a museum of this scale should be more friendly towards visitors, especially the youth. The galleries and displays should have more detailed information rather than just names," said Kamrul Hasan, a Moghbar resident who visited the palace with his daughter.

Kalabagan resident Shahana Azim said, "I brought my expatriate relatives to visit this grand palace. However, the children were more interested in sitting on the staircase and taking selfies rather than exploring the museum."

"The most important thing for a museum is to have its own identity. Visitors must be captivated by a unique museum visit that takes them away from their daily routines to a world of wonder. The authorities should offer guided or special tours and host events from time to time," said Shahana, a retired professor of Bangla.

Contacted, Bijoy Krishno Banik, keeper of Ahsan Manzil, said they are planning various activities to make the museum experience exciting and interesting for visitors. "However, the main reason for its current state is the lack of manpower. Out of 67 positions, only 27 are filled while the rest are vacant, making it difficult to maintain everything properly," he added.



In 1974, the inheritors of the nawab family planned to sell the Manzil. But Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then president, ordered it to be renovated as a museum. On November 3 in 1985, Ahsan Manzil palace along with its adjoining land was acquired by the Martial Law Regulations



ARAFAT RAHAMAN
and DIPAN NANDY

Leave behind the tangled streets and chaotic symphony of Old Dhaka for a while. Close your eyes and imagine yourself on a gilded boat that glides through the sun-dappled Buriganga.

Your journey ends at the foot of a majestic palace -- Ahsan Manzil. As you disembark, your eyes are greeted by a wide lawn adorned with a garden blooming with fragrant, intoxicating flowers.

As you walk onwards, a rose-coloured staircase awaits, to take you upwards. As you step forward, each step whispers of a forgotten history.

The original rose colour of the structure has not been replicated properly and it is now a bit garish, but that could not diminish its charm.

Entering the building you would find your feet touching the beautifully patterned mosaic floor, which speaks of a bygone era. And the domed ceiling over your head echo with the murmurs of a glamorous, opulent past.

This is no ordinary building. Here, when you move from one room to another, the ambiance brings back the tales of the nawabs of Dhaka and their luxurious lives.

A "Kuthi" steeped in history



Fall of a palace

There was not a single building in Dhaka as impressive as Ahsan Manzil. Its dome was the highest tower of the town, attracting people from near and far.

With time the influence of the nawab family declined in the 20th century. Their descendants became too impoverished to look after such a vast property.

In 1952, the government acquired the nawab state premises under the East Bengal State Acquisition Act. But Ahsan Manzil and neighbouring parts remained out of the acquired area.

However, many poor descendants of the nawab family, as well as needy locals, continued to occupy the palace until the 1970s.

They inflicted much damage to the building by indiscriminately altering its configuration, turning the palace compound into a slum. Government intervention seemed inevitable.

Coming back to life

In 1974, the inheritors of the nawab family planned to sell the Manzil. But Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then president, ordered it to be renovated as a museum.

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royal family.

The museum also features photographs of the palace taken by German photographer Fritz Kapp during his 1904 visit to Dhaka.

Rangmahal has 31 rooms. Now, 23 are accessible to visitors in the museum. Of them, nine galleries (rooms) are displayed recreating the original environment of the palace captured in Fritz Kapp's 1904 photographs.

The remaining 14 depict the history and the activities of the nawabs, paintings, and photographs.

Step into Gallery 3, and you will see a dining hall transporting you to opulent feasts of the past. The hall is adorned with glittering tableware.

Swords, shields, and spears are on display in Gallery 5. Though off-limits now, there is a reconstructed grand staircase. Its railing balusters are decorated with clusters of grape motifs. This stairway was once a gateway to the royal chambers above.

Even the nawabs' guest book there oozed grandeur. Imagine not just signing your name, but etching it into a book coated with gold. Talk about leaving a lasting impression!

Meanwhile, Gallery 7 features an oil painting depicting the founding of the Muslim League in 1906. This room, once the nawabs' Darbar Hall, is where Nawab Salimullah hosted Muslim leaders from across the subcontinent.

Gallery 9, the coffer room, offers a glimpse into

bedroom, hosted notables like viceroys and governors, Gallery 21 served as a space for entertaining guests and holding meetings against the backdrop of the Buriganga, then a sparkling, living river.

One of the special attractions will definitely be the ballroom located inside Gallery 23. Just close your eyes and imagine the grand revelry: swirling gowns and crisp tuxedos waltzing, amid vibrant saris and sherwanis while classical Indian or western music plays in the background. A large oil painting on the wall captures this very essence.

The palace now showcases 3,831 historical artefacts.

A palace crying for preservation

While whispers of the nawabs' glorious past echo within Ahsan Manzil's walls, a stark contrast unfolds outside.

Hawkers have taken over the place, which comes with the mindless garbage



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS, ARAFAT RAHAMAN

The Ahsan Manzil stands on the bank of the Buriganga, at the southern part of Dhaka. The area was formerly known as Kumartuli Mahalla of Islampur.

During the Mughal period, the then landlord of Jalalpur (Faridpur-Barishal) Sheikh Enayetullah built a garden house here.

Around 1740, his son Sheikh Matiullah sold it to the French traders who built a business centre here with palatial buildings.

Later Khwaja Alimullah, the father of Nawab Abdul Ghani, purchased that French 'kuthi' (office and

