

#HERITAGE

The Dhaka Nawabs and their culinary adventures

Overlooking the Buriganga River, Ahsan Manzil stands as an architectural and historical gem of Old Dhaka. The palatial building was home to the Nawabs of Dhaka during the British Raj, a political seat and an embodiment of affluence. Today, it is a museum — a testament to the once powerful dynasty — drawing local and foreign visitors alike. Of course, the foodie in you is bound to ask: what gastronomic delights did this aristocratic family treat themselves to?

Glimpses of the Dhaka Nawab family
Before jumping to food, a basic history lesson is in order for the sake of setting a context. A good way to start is by asking, "What do the people of Dhaka today remember the Nawabs as?"

Some may say they were the landlords who lived in the grand Ahsan Manzil, leading a lavish lifestyle. Others may point out that they paved the political landscape of Bengal. But many people will also fondly discuss the generous contributions the family made to the development of Dhaka.

According to Banglapedia, the family's philanthropic activities included making hefty donations and spearheading projects for the development of water supply, electric supply, education, etc.

Banglapedia further tells us that the colonial British government bestowed the title of Nawab upon Khwaja Abdul Ghani (1813-1896). He was the man who built Ahsan Manzil, named after his son, Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah (1846-1901). Subsequently, Nawab Ahsanullah's son was Nawab Khwaja Salimullah (1871-1915), a legendary politician.

The family's roots can

be traced back to Kashmir.

Dining at Ahsan Manzil

The Pink Palace — so called due to Ahsan Manzil's pink colour — is a majestic edifice, with its imposing staircase, spacious verandas, semi-circular arches, and, of course, the magnificent dome as the crowned jewel.

The sense of splendour continues in the interior of the building. Case in point: the dining hall of Ahsan Manzil!

The amused visitor sees a very long and elegant dining table, with beautiful crockery laid out. One can only imagine the sights, the clinking of spoons and plates, and the overall buzz of this dining hall during the olden times.

To get a better picture, we spoke to writer and researcher Saad ur Rahman, general secretary of Dhaka Forum, who has authored several books on this city's food, culture, and history.

He opined, "I don't think that there was generally much chance to sit alone just with the family in the dining hall, because officials and relatives were always visiting Ahsan Manzil for various purposes and meetings, which would be followed by meals. The table would not be empty."

On the other hand, Yasmeen Murshed, a family descendent — an eminent personality whose many roles include serving as an advisor of a previous caretaker government of Bangladesh — wrote in her book 'Khana Peena: Memories of Food and Family,'

"The dining room was the venue where the family gathered in full force for festive lunches and more formal dinners. The long table would be covered with dishes of food that teased the senses with their combination of aromas, so that one could hardly wait to reach out and fill one's plate."

The menu

The culinary treats of the Nawabs were numerous and varied, as Murshed pointed out in her book, "The list of dishes is as long as the days of the year because variety was prized and jaded appetites had to be stimulated by the harried cooks and the supervising Begums."

Since the dynasty had Kashmiri origins, it comes as no surprise that many of their foods reflected that heritage. To illustrate, according to Rahman, the household used to serve Kashmiri tea, which was alien to our city and is not prevalent nowadays as well. This tea was of two types: *namkin cha* (salty tea) and *sheer cha* (sweet tea).

Continuing with drinks, there was the exotic and rich *namash* or *nimash*, a winter delight described by Murshed as "nothing less than whipped cream in tall cool glasses."

The process involved putting out sweetened milk overnight in the cold air. Then, early in the morning, the laborious churning of the milk would produce the cream, poured into glasses and served.

Another example of a speciality is *khoshka*. "This is basically a goat's head — along with the meat as well — cooked with milk and ghee," Saad ur Rahman said. "It is best to have it with plain rice."

Seems like a royal affair!

Rahman continued, "Kabli polao was very common and popular in the Nawab household. Do not confuse it with the *kabli polao* we are familiar with. It was different, using ingredients like *kishmish*, nuts, *dalim* fruit, saffron, and ghee. It was very expensive to make!"

If all that seems too distant and enigmatic, the dining spread also featured many other items which we are familiar with. In the book 'Dhakai Rondhonshoily' Rahman mentions several iftar delicacies enjoyed by the nawabs that we all know of — albeit the taste or recipe may have been different or with a twist — such as kebabs, biriyani, *doi bora*, and *falooda*.

In addition to Kashmiri recipes, the nawabs' eating habits were, of course, influenced by cuisines and popular delicacies of the Mughal, the British Raj, and Bengal — often cooked with their own preferences or inclinations in mind, as is the case with any household. For example, Yasmeen Murshed states in her book about Bengalis' favourite fish, *hilsa*, "For the Family, *hilsa* was often cooked in yoghurt and flavoured with sugar and tamarind to give it a distinctive sweet and sour taste."

When we visit Ahsan Manzil, we think of the philanthropic works done by the people who once called it their home, the affluence of the family, and the politics they partook in.

One should also remember that the palate is as complicated as politics, and that Ahsan Manzil was a master of both!

Special thanks to Waqar A Khan, founder, Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies, for helping with the research for the article.

Photo: Orchid Chakma

