

NAWABGANJ

Where heritage meets harmony

Nawabganj is not only known for old architecture, but also for a tradition of communal harmony. Alongside temples and mosques, the area has several historic churches.

SAKIB AHMED

A crumbling mansion rises unexpectedly along the main road of Kolakopa Union in Nawabganj, Dhaka, its grand pillars still holding their ground against time. Just an hour and a half from the capital, the riverside estate on the banks of the Ichamati is more than a relic. It is a window into centuries of wealth, memory and local legend.

This is the Kokil Pyari Zamindar Bari, a neoclassical marvel now abandoned but impossible to ignore. Its towering pillars and intricate carvings still catch the eye, even as the building succumbs to neglect.

After the zamindari system ended in 1950, the mansion served as a residence for teachers of Kokil Pyari High School. Locals recall that six to seven families once lived there. On closer inspection, the walls reveal faint sculptures, including one of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty and prosperity.

Yet the history of Kokil Pyari is as layered as the walls themselves.

Who was Kokil Pyari? Locals offer two accounts.

According to one version, Kokil Pyari was a descendant of the Bhagya Kul Zamindars of Bikrampur, who founded this estate. Around 200 years ago, Yadunath Roy acquired the zamindari from the British. He was related by blood to Radharaman Roy, the mansion's builder. Both Yadunath Roy and Radharaman Roy were merchants, trading areca nuts, salt and saris from Barishal to Kolkata and Murshidabad.

Another account says that in the 18th century, a wealthy businessman named Brajen Roy, also known as Sudarshan Roy,

constructed the mansion. Surrounded by a garden, the mansion, built with brick, lime and rods, was originally called Braj Niketan. Over time, ownership changed hands, first to an oil trader and later to a judge, which led to the mansion also being referred to as the Telibari (Oil House) and the Judge's House.

The 500-yard premises of Kokil Pyari Zamindarbari include a Buddhist temple, the house of Shriloknath Saha, Kolakopa Ansar Camp, Ukilbari, Dasbari, Adnan Palace and the Ichamati river. Many believe all these structures were once part of the original estate.

Unofficial sources suggest that Kokil Pyari had five sons. He left his main house to his youngest son and



built four additional houses for the remaining sons.

Within the premises stand two memorial shrines. After Zamindar Kokil Pyari died, his son Radharaman Roy built a shrine in the Bangalee year 1334 in memory of his father. Later, he built another shrine in memory of his



Braj Niketan, now known as Judge Bari.



Our Lady of Holy Rosary Church.

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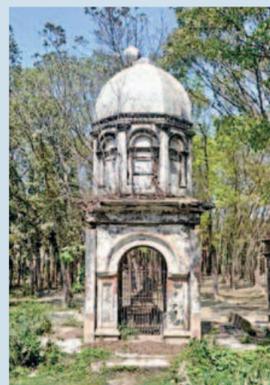
mother. Both shrines originally housed sculptures of his parents. Locals say that during the Liberation War, the mother's sculpture disappeared and the head of the father's statue was broken. The sculptures were reportedly imported from Europe.

Adjacent to Kokil Pyari Zamindarbari is Braj Niketan, now known as the Judge's House. Locals say that around 200 years ago, in the 18th century, wealthy businessman Brajen Roy built it as his residence. Its five elaborately decorated pillars, adorned with pieces of precious glass, immediately draw attention. Eight large windows and a central grand veranda add to its imposing appearance. Surrounded by a garden of diverse trees, the Judge's House still carries a sense of the world it once belonged to.

Moving along the narrow road to the right of Kokil Pyari Zamindarbari, one encounters Telibari, also called Mothbari, by the riverbank. It is currently used as an Ansar and VDP camp and houses 17 Ansar Battalion members. According to local lore, it was once owned by an oil trader named Loknath, hence the name Telibari.



Telibari now being used as an Ansar camp.



Next along the riverbank is a structure called Painna Bari, said to have belonged to Madhubabu, who became wealthy by selling toddy (palm wine). Its walls are adorned with intricate carvings, and the house sprawls across a large area.

Galib Rahman Khan, a banker with extensive knowledge of Nawabganj's history, said, "The buildings in Kolakopa are all late-colonial, dating from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. None of them were zamindar houses. They belonged to prominent businessmen, some traded in oil, others in salt or betel leaves. Most of these houses were abandoned after the Partition of the country."

To the right along the road lies a two-storey mansion on the edge of a large pond, believed to have been built in the late 19th century. The ground floor houses several dark rooms. The building features nine domes resembling granary roofs, with

the central dome being the largest. Some locals refer to this as Khelaram's Vighra Mandir or Khelaram Datar Kotha.

According to Syed Nurul Islam, a septuagenarian who lives nearby, "Khelaram was called a donor because he supposedly robbed from the rich and distributed among the poor. There was an underground passage from the mansion to the Ichamati river, which he used." Towards the end of his life, he reportedly became devout.

However, Galib said, "There are many stories and myths about Khelaram Dutta's Kotha. Putting those aside, documented history shows that it is a late Mughal-era temple, built by Khelaram Dutta himself."

Across Kolakopa village, other old structures remain, each carrying its own story. On entering, the Shri Shri Mahamaya Mandir, built in Bangalee year 1315, stands out, where rituals are still conducted. Nearby, an old house is now home to the Mitra family, whose forebear was once a timber trader. Legend says he struggled to unload a piece of timber from a boat and was guided in a dream to bring it home, leading to the start of a worship practice centred on the timber. Locals believe dreams about it still occur.

In Baktar Nagar, Shikaripara Union, another zamindar house, Ata Khan's Zamindarbari, is visible from across the road. The second-storey building, though now ruined, still shows the outlines of its past. Plaster has fallen away, and large banyan trees grow through the brickwork. Doors and

windows are missing, and the structure appears precarious. Locals call it Sab Bari or Shaheb Bari. A mosque stands nearby.

Based on the mosque's construction style, Professor AKM Shahnawaz of the Department of Archaeology at Jahangirnagar University said the buildings likely date to the Mughal era, though exact dates remain uncertain.

Galib, however, said a stone inscription at the mosque's main gate shows that a woman, Foyzunnisa, built it in 1870 after inheriting the zamindari from her aunt, Janab Hasina. This suggests the mansion was likely built around the same time.

On Nawabganj's architectural history, archaeologist Dr Shahnawaz said these settlements were established in the late 18th century, primarily by Hindu merchants who built multiple palatial residences along the Ichamati for habitation and for trade convenience. "Kolakopa and Bandura in Nawabganj are highly traditional and historically significant areas. These landmarks are important archaeologically," he said.

Nawabganj is not only known for old architecture, but also for a tradition of communal harmony. Alongside temples and mosques, the area has several historic churches. In Hasnabad village of Bandura stands one of the most striking, Our Lady of Holy Rosary Church.

Hubert Joseph Gomes, principal of St Joseph Tutorial in Hasnabad, said, "It is the fifth church in undivided Bengal, built in 1777 by priest Raphael Gomez. It was renovated first in 1888 and again in 2002."

"Over 1,700 Christian families live in Nawabganj. People of all religions have lived here peacefully and harmoniously for generations," he added.