

Ahsan Manzil Museum

Establishment of Ahsan Manzil Museum

Considering the historical importance and architectural significance of Ahsan Manzil Palace, the Government was trying to conserve it since the later part of the Pakistani rule. After the independence of Bangladesh, most of the notable person of the Nawab family went aboard in search of livelihood and work. Unauthorized habitation took place by trespassing and unbearably dirty slums grew up in and around the palace due to negligence of concerned authorities.

In 1974 the owners of the palace decided to sell it by auction. But the then hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, cancelled its auction proposal. He realized its historical and architectural importance and on 2 November 1974 he ordered that a museum and tourist center be established here after its proper conservation. According to the order of Bangabandhu the Bangladesh National Museum submitted a scheme with the estimated cost. But due to the tragic assassination of Bangabandhu the work could not progress much.

At last, during the rule of President Lt. General H.M Ershad on 11 April 1985 A.D. the government by issuing Martial Law Act no.-4/1985 acquired the Ahsan Manzil Palace and some of its adjoining compound for establishing a memorial museum.

After that venture by the government the implementation of the work on the Museum started. But most of the Nawab's House area, along with two-third portion of *Andarmahal*, remained beyond acquisition. The total area of acquired land was 5.65 acres. In 1986, the work began according to keeping the original structure undisturbed and reconstructing the old environment as far as possible. The Bangladesh National Museum become the executive authority under the Ministry of

Cultural Affairs for the implementation of the project, while the reconstruction and beautification of the building and its surrounding areas were to be done by the Public Works Department.

Development plan and architectural design were made by the Directorate of Architecture. Bangladesh National Museum established a new Museum here through the collection and display of the objects in galleries. This became a branch Museum of the Bangladesh National Museum with all its controlling powers. The museum was inaugurated by the then honorable Prime Minister on 20 September 1992.

Collection of objects for Museum:

The plan was made to show different activities and interior domestic atmosphere prevailing in the period of Nawabs of Dhaka. For this purpose various objects relating to the Nawabs and their usable were collected.

Bangladesh National Museum had collected some relics from Ahsan Manzil palace in 1970. Among those, two filigree model of this palace, one grand piano and a cool mat made of ivory are mentionable. Out of two filigree model one is being displayed in Ahsan Manzil Museum. When in 1970s Ahsan Manzil fell into dilapidated condition, valuable articles from here were shifted to Dhaka Nawab Estate Office at Edward house. In 1987 the Museum authorities collected 22 listed items from that lot through purchase.

Historical Background:

Ahsan Manzil Palace is situated on the left bank of the river Buriganga at the southern part of the Dhaka city. It is the most beautiful and historically important building among the architectural edifices constructed in Dhaka during the nineteenth century. It was the residential palace and *sadar kutchery* (headquarter) of the Nawabs of Dhaka. The construction of the main palace building was started in 1859 and completed in 1869 A.D.¹ At that period there was no other building as impressive as the Ahsan Manzil in Dhaka. The dome above this palace was the highest point of the town, which attracted all from a far distance. An extensive lawn with natural beauty and flower-filled garden spread across the southern or river side of the

Palace. The whole Ahsan Manzil is divided into two parts. The eastern building with dome is called *Rangmahal* and the western block with the residential rooms is called *Andarmahal*. It was at Ahsan Manzil that the first use of filtered water and electricity was made, and through this the establishment of urban Dhaka was launched. During the Mughal period a pleasure Garden House of Sheikh Enayetullah, the illustrious landlord of Jalalpur (Faridpur-Barisal), was situated here. ² Around 1740 his son Sheikh Matiullah, sold the Garden House to the French traders who built a business center here with palatial buildings. Khwaja Alimullah the father of Nawab Abdul Ghani, purchased that French *Kuthi* (office – cum- residence) in 1830 and renovated it as his residence. ³ In the “Panorama of Dhaka”, the scenes along the riverside drawn by anonymous European painters in 1830s, the residence of Khwaja Alimullah depicts vividly. ⁴ The French *Kuthi* was situated at the place where the *Andarmahal* now exists. Nawab Abdul Ghani built an enormous edifice just on the eastern side of the said *kuthi* and named it ‘Ahsan Manzil’ after the name of his beloved son, Khwaja Ahsanullah. Ahsan Manzil however, was extensively damaged by a severe tornado occurred on 7 April 1888. The west block, the *Andarmahal* which was the oldest constructions by the French, was completely demolished and then it was rebuilt. At the time of the reconstruction, the present beautiful dome was erected over the palace building. Ahsan Manzil was partly damaged by the earthquake of 1897 as well, and was repaired by Nawab Khwaja Ahsanuallah. In 1985 the government of Bangladesh acquired the palace and established a museum there.

Display of the Museumt

Ahsan Manzil Museum is a palace which relates to the Nawabs of Dhaka and as such it reflects the memories of the Nawabs. Basically the in house atmosphere and the various activities of the Nawabs are displayed in this museum. The palace building with dome was actually the sadar *kutchary* (headquarter) of the Nawabs.

Here the Meeting Room, Drawing Room, Dining Room. Library Room, Card Room, Billiards Room, Ball Room etc. were housed and those were basically established concerning the male members. on the other hand the *Andarmahal* was used as residential purpose and both male and female members of the family lived there. The photographs taken by Mr. Fritz Kapp in 1904 helped to make a fruitful display in this museum.

There are twenty-three rooms where display is made out of thirty one rooms of the palace building (*Rangmahal*). Among these, nine galleries are displayed according to the original environment on the basis of the photographs of Mr. Fritz Kapp. Some household material and broken utensils which were gathered in the store and crockery room of Ahsan Manzil and the old office of Nawab Estate, Edward House were used for display after proper conservation. Besides those, many objects were also collected comparing with the old ones. Necessary furniture and paintings are made and painted anew according to the original from the photographs of the different rooms of the palace taken in 1904. Besides, the other 14 rooms have been decorated depicting the history of the Palace; incidences taken place here in and different activities of the Nawabs by way of collecting information's, documents, relics, painting and photographs. **Introduction to the galleries are as under:-**

Gallery No -1t Introducing Ahsan Manzil -1

Situated on the eastern part of the palace, the original purpose of the room is not known .It is now used for introducing history of Ahsan Manzil .Some photographs and a big painting depict dilapidated and reconstructed condition of the palace . Some crockery used by the Nawabs are shown in the original almirahs. A silver filigree model of Ahsan Manzil with the feature existed before the tornado of 1888 A.D. has also been displayed here.

GalleryNo-2t Introducing Ahsan Manzil-II

The antecedent of this room is also not available .The historical events related with the palace are written here in panels. The architectural feature and gradual development of the palace are shown in photographs. Some ground plan made by the Department of Architecture at the time of its reconstruction are also put here. Some beautiful specimens of chandeliers shade made of cut glass and various utensils are also displayed here.

GalleryNo-3t Palace Dining Room

It was a formal dining room of the Nawabs. Guests from this country and abroad all were entertained here . The room has been arranged on the basis of the photographs of Mr.Fritz Kapp taken in 1904. Chair, table, fan and light fittings are made anew or collected like original ones .The photographs hanged on walls are from the album of the Nawabs, collected from the Edward House. Except the candle stands, all the big almirahs, mirrors and utensils made of glass and porcelain are original and were used by the Nawabs. The ceiling fans are converted to Ac from Dc. system. The floor decoration with beautiful biscuit shaped color tiles have been remade according to old broken materials.

Gallery No -4t Round Room (Ground floor)

The dome of the Ahsan Manzil seen from outside is erected above on this round room. It separates the palace into two equal parts . Above it there is also another round room on the first floor. Just below the dome on the roof there is an octagonal room, where from the beautiful panorama of the Buriganga river was enjoyed. Except the marble round table all the exhibits of the gallery are original and were used by the Nawbs. Those are shield, swords, elephant skull with tusk, buffalo head with horns and wooden partition with perforated decoration.

Gallery No -5t The Grand Stair-Case (ground floor)

Here is an extraordinary wooden stair-case formerly broken in parts, but reconstructed according to the photograph of Fritz Kapp taken in 1904. The mind-blowing decoration used in its railing balusters is the cluster of grape motif. The swords, shields and spears exhibited here were found in the Ahsan Manzil. A door, tastefully decorated with south-east Asian style of wood carving has also been displayed here.

Gallery No -6 t Ahsanullah Memorial Hospital

Nawabzadi Akhtar Banoo Begum, the daughter of Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah established a hospital named ‘Sir Ahsanullah Jubilee Memorial Hospital’ at her own expense. The then Governor of Bengal opened the hospital on 9 July 1935 A.D.

The poor people specially unable, needy and conservative women were admitted there. The hospital was closed after 1940 for unknown reason. Some medical equipments and patient list register were found when the Government acquired Ahsan Manzil and out of those a few are displayed in this gallery.

Gallery No -7t Muslim League Gallery

The room was used as Darbar Hall or Meeting Room of the Nawabs. Here justice was meted out to local people according to traditional *panchayet* system. A strict order was announced in their Zamidary that without Nawab's arbitration none would go to the court of the Government. It is now prepared for Muslim League Gallery in honor of Nawab Salimullah's contribution to its formation. A large oil painting of the leaders who attended the Conference in 1906 in Dhaka is hung here. Some original object used by the Nawabs are also exhibited. A unique octagonal table with tortoise shaped leg from Italy has also been displayed here.

Gallery No - 8t Billiard Room

This gallery has been arranged on the basis of photograph taken in 1904 with remade billiard table, light fittings, sofa etc. Skull with horns of various animals collected by the Nawabs are exhibited on walls. The Nawabs were great patron of modern sports, both indoor and outdoor. The present billiard room shows their keen interest in western indoor games and taste in western life style. Here entertainments were kept ready for their friends and high government officials both native and European.

Gallery No -9 t Chest Room

The room was used as coffer room of the Nawab family. Family valuables were also kept in it. It was almost closed with blind brick walls except a passage shut with a large iron door shutter in north-east wall. The present doors are created by breaking the wall for free movement of the visitors. The exhibited medium and small sizes iron safe and wooden almirahs are the original objects used by the Nawabs. The very big iron chest holding- 94 drawers is an interesting exhibit of this room and its manufacturer was Chubb's patent safe deposit, London. The room proclaims witness of the huge treasury of Nawabs.

Gallery No -10t Introducing the Nawabs

The gallery is planned to introduce the renowned personalities of Nawab family. With life-size oil paintings of Nawab Khwaja Abdul Ghani, Nawab Khawaja Ahsanullah and Nawab Khwaja Salimullah with their biographies also given in short. Besides these, portraits of Nawab Habibullah, Khwaja Nazimuddin and Nawab Khwaja Mohammad Yousufjan are shown here. A genealogical tree of the Dhaka Nawab family in details is shown here. Some personal diary and land lease deeds of Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah are also displayed here.

No 10 (A) t Corner Staircase Room

Different types of porcelain and glass wares used by the Nawabs are displayed here with two very big almirahs. Originally two rooms were here with ground and first floor. At the time of reconstruction a new staircase was built here for the visitor.

Gallery No -11t Portrait-I

The floor of this room is made of wood and it was a residing room. But no furniture or description has been found. The Nawab family was famous for social and political activities. They had close connection with many renowned personalities of that time. Portraits in oil painting of the politicians, landlords, social reformers and educationst of the contemporary period of the Nawabs are hung here. Some coins and medals used by the Nawabs are also shown here.

Gallery No -12t In Memory of Salimullah

It was also a residing room. To commemorate the contribution of Nawab Sir Salimillah, this room has been dedicated to his memory with related photographs, illustrated album, documents and mementos. His private letters and personal belongings have also been displayed. The family members of his time and their illustrated information are also given here. Some official seals with Persian script and personal belongings of them are also put here.

Gallery No -13t portrait-II

This gallery is also arranged to show the great persons of the Nawabs' time. Like gallery No.11, Portraits of poets, litterateurs, intellectuals, scientists, historians of the Nawabs' era are hung here. The ivory works displayed here were found at Ahsan Manzil. A gangway which connected the palace building with *Andarmahal* is the interesting scene of this gallery.

Gallery No -14t Hindustani Room

According to Fritz Kapp's photograph it is known as Hindustani Room. Probably high born guests of northern India used to entertained and stay here. Table, Chair, show-case and other furniture and wallpaper are made in accordance to photograph of 1904 . Some objects are collected keeping similarity with other ones of Ahsan Manzil.

Gallery No -15t Grand Stair-Case (First Floor)

The stair-case has been repaired according to the photograph of 1904. The grape decoration on the railing baluster are made like original. The decorated wooden ceiling and hanging crystal lamps are original but repaired. The photographs on the wall are from the album of the Nawabs. Spear, shields and other weapons displayed here were found in this palace.

Gallery No -16 t Library Room

It was the Nawabs private library. It is also arranged according photograph of 1904. The Nawabs collected different types of books. Of these more than one thousand books on law and justice, novel, science, sports etc. and albums have been purchased from Edward House and are displayed. Furniture, other than almirahs have been made like original. The stained glass (color glass) sheets on windows are fixed anew like the old ones.

Gallery No -17t Card Room

This gallery has also been arranged on the basis of photograph taken in 1904. Almost all the utensils are original and collected from either Ahsan Manzil or Edward House. Special type of Chair, table and show-case are made like originals. The *chinitikery* decoration (broken porcelain chips) on the floor and stained glass sheets decoration on windows are also reconstructed according to old broken materials.

Gallery No -18t Nawabs Contribution to Water Works in Dhaka

This was used as subsidiary room for the guest at the time of the Nawabs. But it has now been arranged for showing objects and information about the first water works of Dhaka. Nawab Abdul Ghani established first filtered tape water supply connection costing about two and –a- half lacks of Taka. Its ceremonial foundation stone was laid on 6 April 1874 A.D. by the then Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrook. The supply connection was opened by F.B. Peacock, Commissioner of Dhaka Division on 22 May 1878. An imaginary oil painting has been made to show the ceremonious event of the time.

Gallery No -19t State Bed Room

The room has been termed in Fritz Kapp's photograph taken in 1904 as State Bed Room Many high officials including the Viceroy, Governor, Lieutenant Governors of British India came to Ahsan Manzil and rooms were kept for these royal guests. It is known that the rooms on the second floor of the eastern side were used for this purpose. But we have got photograph of only one bed room. To show an example of these, the extreme east room has been arranged in old fashion. The furniture, other than bedstead made of brass are made like original. Moreover utensils and most of other objects are taken from Ahsan Manzil and Edward House. No permanent latrine has been found in this place. They used temporary and movable latrines for which always servants were engaged.

Gallery No -20t Nawabs Contribution to Dhaka Electric Supply

This was also a guest room and its floors is made of wood. It has been arranged to showing the objects and information about the first electric supply in Dhaka by Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah in 1901. It was inaugurated by Mr. C. Bolton, Member of the Revenue Board. A medium size generator was established to electrify Ahsan Manzil and important areas and roads of the Dhaka City. An imaginary oil painting has been displayed to show the opening ceremony of electric supply. A list of expenditure incurred by the Dhaka Nawab Estate on charities and public welfare in home and abroad are also shown here on panels.

Gallery No -21t Palace Drawing Room

The drawing room has been arranged on the basis of photograph taken in 1904. Honorable guests were entertained here. Besides, it was used as meeting room for high officials and leaders. The floor of the room is made of wood. The roof is also made of wooden vaulted ceiling and decorated with geometric panel design. The big bowl shaped hanging light made of cut-glass is original one. Collected old Dc. type fans are hung here to give effect of the past. Except two old big mirrors other furniture are made like originals. Most of the utensils and flower vase are collected from Ahsan Manzil and Edward House. The wide open verandah to the south of the room assists to enjoy the wonderful views of the Buriganga along with its front greenery scenes.

Gallery No -22t Round Room (First Floor)

The dome on the top of the palace is erected above on this room. This is the central point of the palace. The upper portion of this room is octagonal to support the lofty dome. Except the marble round table all the exhibited arms and amours of this gallery are from Ahsan Manzil. From its front verandah, the big open stair-case slowly drops down to the south flower garden of the palace.

Gallery No -23t Ball Room

The Gallery has been arranged in accordance with the photograph of 1904. There was no other such gorgeous ball room like this in Dhaka at that time. It was from the time of Khwaza Alimallah that ball dance was arranged for their English friends.

The Nawabs are patron of both eastern and western cultures. Here, they at times arranged Indian classical music and dance, and sometimes western music and ball-dance for the European guest. An imaginary large oil painting of such singing and dancing scenes are placed here to throw some light on the past. The decorative silver throne chair, the crystal chair-tables and the flower vases are original, but the other furniture are made anew comparing with the photograph of 1904. The wooden floor has been reconstructed to some extent but the decorated wooden vaulted false ceiling restored like original.

-13-

**Visit Museum to meet the glorious Cultural
and Natural Heritage of Bangladesh**

Visiting Hours

Saturday to Wednesday

10.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m.

Friday 3.00 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.

Museum will remain closed on Thursday and other
Government holidays

Entrance Fees :

- * Visitors, Bangladeshi (Adult) Tk.20.00 (Twenty) only
- * Children Under 12 Years Tk. 10.00 (Ten) only
- * Visitors Within SAARC Countries Tk.300.00 (Three hundred) only
- * Visitors of Other Foreign Countries Tk.500.00 (five Hundred) only
- * Ticket is not Required for the Disabled.