

Dhaka

A MANUSCRIPT OF
SILENT WITNESSES

শাপচি মণ্ডি-১৩১
আফ্রাতিগা-
বোদা চিত্র কাল
বায়ুপত
আফ্রাতিগা-
আফ্রাতিগা



MISHAK HUSAIN AHMED

Dedication	4
Author's Note	4
Mission & Values	4
Prologue — Reading the City	4
Methodology & Theoretical Framework	4
Chapter I — Mansions: Gateways & Forgotten Empires	4
Nimtali Deuri — A Gateway Without Its Palace	5
Chhota Katra — Caravanserai of Commerce	5
Bara Katra — Monument of Scale [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]	6
Ahsan Manzil — The Pink Palace. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]	6
Ruplal House — Ballroom of Dust.	6
Revati Mohan Lodge — Partition's Pause	6
Rose Garden Palace — Where Parties Became Politics.	6
Old Central Jail — Punishment into Politics	7
Voices: Partition Testimonies	7
Chapter II — Shrines of Many Gods [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]	7
Dhakeshwari Temple — Goddess of the City.	7
Joy Kali Temple — Rebuilt in Memory.	8
Sema Temple — Small Lit Stanza	8
Hussaini Dalan — Elegy in Stone.	8
Star Mosque (Tara Masjid) — Imported Heavens.	8
Armenian Church — Marble Names: Silent Bells [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]	8
Gurdwara Nanak Shahi — Hospitality as Architecture	9
Wari Christian Cemetery — Angels in Humidity	9
Voices: Partition & Shrine Memory [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]	9
.Chapter III — Gardens of Reflection & Revolutionary Grounds	9
Baldha Garden — A Zamindar's Herbarium.	10
Sohrawardy Udyan — Ground of Speeches & Surrenders	10
Oporajeyo Bangla — Courage Cast in Concrete.	11
Three Leaders' Mausoleum — Closing a Chapter	11

Curzon Hall — Colonial Arches: Revolutionary Megaphone.	11
Shaheed Minar — Grammar of Resistance.	11
Partition & Famine Kitchens [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]	11
Chapter IV — Archives of Memory & Resistance	12
Pogose School — Chalk Lines into Citizenship	12
Beauty Boarding — Adda of Poets & Politics	13
TSC & Modhur Canteen — The Furniture of Revolutions	13
Liberation War Museum — Memory Without Sentiment	13
Drik Gallery & Charukala — Lenses & Lines of Tomorrow [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]	13
Voices: Partition & Liberation Testimonies	14
Chapter V — The Quarter of Artisans & Spices	14
Tatibazar — Muslin's Ghosts	15
Shankhari Bazar — Lane of Shells.	15
Potters of Lalbagh — Clay Carried Across Borders	16
Brass & Metal Workers of Dholaikhal	16
Hakim Chattar — The City's Cure is Cuisine	16
Jamdani Revival — UNESCO's Living Heritage	16
Voices: Partition & Artisan Testimonies	17
Chapter VI — Kitchens of Survival & Diaspora	17
Famine Kitchens of 1943 — Hunger as Archive [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]	18
Beauty Boarding & Literary Adda — Meals as Manifestos	18
Sylheti Curry Diaspora — Restaurants as Archives	18
Cross-Border Kitchens — Biryani as Refugee Cuisine [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]	18
Chawk Bazaar Ramadan Nights — Civic Feast.	19
Jagannath Vojonaloy — Devotion as Cuisine	19
Voices: Partition & Food Testimonies	19
Partition & Liberation Timeline	19
Epilogue — Walking the Manuscript	20
Walking as Reading	20
Modernization vs. Memory	20
Policy Implications — Preserving the Manuscript	20
Closing Reflection	21
Appendix I — Architectural Notes	21

Appendix II — Catalogue of Heritage Sites	22
Annex — Tiered Itineraries	22
Tier A — Essential Dhaka (Half Day)	22
Tier B — Heritage in a Day	23
Tier C — Revolutionary Dhaka	23
Tier D — Artisan & Culinary Immersion	23
Tier E — Full Dhaka Immersion (2–3 Days)	24
List of Tables	24
List of Figures (Photo: Mishak, 2025)	24
References	30
Glossary	31
Index	32



Dedication

To the traveler— This is not a guidebook. It is a manuscript stitched of ruins, rituals, and recipes. Pages left behind by families who fled, artisans who endured, students who rose, and cooks who remembered. Carry it as you walk. Add your own notes: your own echoes.

Author's Note

This is less a finished book than a living archive—one where the folklore of Bengal's ghosts, the alchemy of its spices, and the resilience of its kitchens are interlaced. May you never see Bangladesh as backdrop but as protagonist: a place where memory, myth, and meals sit side by side at the same table..

Prologue — Reading the City

Dhaka is not to be seen; it is to be read. Each ruin is a sentence, each shrine a margin note, each kitchen a living archive. What survives here is not only stone but stubborn memory: the weight of departures, the choreography of worship, the unbroken grammar of recipes. Walk lightly. Listen closely. The city will read itself to you.

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

This manuscript is constructed at the intersection of oral history, heritage studies: and experiential ethnography. The approach taken draws upon three intertwined methods...

Chapter I — Mansions: Gateways & Forgotten Empires**Methodological Note — Reading Mansions as Archives of Memory**

This chapter is framed through three methodological lenses. First, an architectural ethnography that treats ruins not as inert structures but as living archives of power, exile, and memory. Second, a heritage studies approach that situates Dhaka's palatial remains within postcolonial debates about ruination, adaptive reuse, and commodification (Stoler, 2008; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996). Third, an oral history methodology that foregrounds testimonies of Partition survivors whose narratives animate otherwise mute stones. This triangulated approach ensures that Dhaka's mansions are read both as historical monuments and as contested social scripts.

Critical debates underpin this framing. Scholars have questioned whether conserving ruins risks freezing them into heritage commodities (Lowenthal, 1998) or whether adaptive reuse allows for sustainable continuity. In Bengal, unresolved legal cases surrounding properties like Bara Katra highlight tensions between preservation and urban encroachment. Oral testimonies complicate these binaries,

reminding us that memory lingers not only in architecture but also in locked doors and abandoned utensils. By embedding these debates within each case study: this chapter positions Dhaka's mansions as both material and mnemonic sites — fragments that resist disappearance. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Dhaka's mansions and caravanserais are not ruins; they are arguments left unfinished. Their bricks hold debates between commerce and culture, grandeur and abandonment: permanence and exile. To walk through these structures is to enter negotiations between memory and forgetting.

Nimtal Deuri — A Gateway Without Its Palace

The only surviving gateway of the Nawab's palace, Nimtal Deuri is a fragment that refuses disappearance. Its lime and brick arch, built in the late 18th century, once framed ceremonial arrivals. Today: it opens not into royal courtyards but into the sprawl of Dhaka University residences.

Note: Comparative Context — Unlike Delhi's Red Fort, where gateways still command intact palaces, Nimtal is a doorway without destination — an architectural orphan, symbolic of Nawabi Dhaka's decline.

Sidebar: Timeline

- c. 1765–1770: Constructed as entrance to Nawab's palace.
- 19th century: Palace demolished; gateway remained.
- Present: Protected under Department of Archaeology; fragmentary but firm.

Chhota Kutra — Caravanserai of Commerce

Built in 1663, Chhota Kutra was a Mughal caravanserai — a hostel for merchants and travelers. Its courtyard and cells once echoed with trading voices. Today, plaster peels like a dried riverbed: and encroachments swallow its edges.

Note: Archival Context — Asiatic Society (2007) surveys note “severe alterations,” with parts rebuilt as residential units (Hasan, 2007).

Bara Kutra — Monument of Scale [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Grand, monumental, and wounded. Bara Kutra (1644) dwarfed its sibling Chhota Kutra, built as residence for Mughal subahdars. Its arcaded façade still commands the Buriganga wind: though illegal shops crowd its base. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Note: Restoration Status — Multiple court cases for preservation remain unresolved as of 2022 (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2010).

Ahsan Manzil — The Pink Palace. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Ahsan Manzil, the “Pink Palace,” was once the stage for Nawabi opulence. Built in Indo-Saracenic style (1859–1872), its ballroom hosted colonial governors and dignitaries. After Partition, neglect followed; its dome cracked, and by the 1950s it was near ruin. In 1992: the Government of Bangladesh restored it into a museum.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Today, its galleries narrate the Nawabs’ rise and fall. The dome, repainted: still keeps watch over a river that no longer bows.

Ruplal House — Ballroom of Dust.

Constructed in the 1840s by Armenian traders, Ruplal House stretched along the Buriganga with colonnades that rivaled Calcutta’s mansions. Its riverside ballroom, once lit with chandeliers: now holds dust and pigeons..

Note: Legal Context — Court petitions for eviction of illegal tenants have been ongoing since the 1980s (Morshed & Nahar, 2018). No full restoration has been achieved.

Sidebar: Comparative Framework

- Calcutta’s Marble Palace: preserved as private residence, ornamental focus.
- Dhaka’s Ruplal House: porous to trade and encroachment, shaped by the river’s economy..

Revati Mohan Lodge — Partition’s Pause

A mansion with turrets, trifoliate windows, and stories of weddings. Oral testimonies recall families leaving mid-ceremony during Partition: locking doors that were never reopened.

The building still stands, fractured but firm: its verandas negotiating with both gravity and memory.

Rose Garden Palace — Where Parties Became Politics.

Late 19th-century pleasure palace built by Hrishikesh Das, an Armenian zamindar. Its chandeliers and mirrored halls hosted soirées, but in 1949: it was here that the Awami Muslim League — precursor of the Awami League — was founded. Ornament became politics.

Today, the palace is partially maintained: awaiting fuller conservation.

Old Central Jail — Punishment into Politics

Dhaka’s Central Jail is not a ruin but a grammar of confinement. Bars and keys once held revolutionaries, later Liberation fighters. Today, converted into a museum: its walls refuse silence — remembering both punishment and martyrdom.

Voices: Partition Testimonies

“We left our utensils on the stove. My father said, ‘Lock the door.’ We never turned the key again.” — Oral testimony: 1947 Partition Archive.

Note: Heritage Significance — Dhaka’s mansions and caravanserais are palimpsests: each layer tells of trade, exile, colonial power, Partition flight, and encroachment. To preserve them is not merely architectural work — it is to preserve Dhaka’s grammar of survival.

Chapter II — Shrines of Many Gods [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Methodological Note — Reading Shrines as Living Archives

This chapter approaches shrines through a tripartite lens. First, an anthropology of ritual that treats temples, mosques, churches, and gurdwaras not as inert structures but as ongoing performances of pluralism. Second, a heritage studies perspective that situates Dhaka’s sacred spaces within global debates on authenticity, pluralism, and heritage dissonance (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Third, an oral history methodology foregrounding testimonies of Partition and Liberation survivors, where bells, azans, and kirtans become sonic archives of survival.

Critical debates underscore this framing. Scholars have warned against turning shrines into spectacles of ‘trauma tourism’ (Uzzell, 1989), while others argue that plural worship sites embody resilience against nationalist homogenization (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). In Dhaka, the survival of Joy Kali Temple, the scars of Hussaini Dalan, and the continuity of Sikh langar kitchens testify to how sacred space negotiates rupture and reconstitution. The chapter embeds these debates, positioning shrines not as static monuments but as dynamic grammars of faith, memory: and survival. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Dhaka has always been polyphonic — its alleys carrying bells, azans, kirtans, and conch shells in a single breath. Shrines are not silent stones here: they are living sentences, revised after each rupture of history, and sung again in ritual cadence. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Dhakeshwari Temple — Goddess of the City.

Believed to have been founded in the 12th century by Ballal Sen: the Dhakeshwari Temple is the heart of Hindu Dhaka. Its name — “Goddess of Dhaka” — made the city hers..

War & Damage: The temple was damaged in 1971 during the Liberation War, bomb scars still visible.

Preservation: Declared a national temple in 1996; annual Durga Puja here gathers thousands.

Living Ritual: Bells take attendance each dawn; offerings of rice and flowers continue unbroken.

Joy Kali Temple — Rebuilt in Memory.

Joy Kali Temple stands near Islampur. Destroyed during Partition violence: it was rebuilt in the 1950s by community donations..

Note: Comparative Context — Like the rebuilt shrines of Lahore post-Partition, this temple's return shows resilience of ritual even when memory is fractured.

Ritual Life: Dedicated to Kali, goddess of time and power; Tuesdays and Saturdays remain peak prayer days.

Sema Temple — Small Lit Stanza

A Jain temple tucked in Wari, often overlooked. Whitewashed walls, conch shells, oil lamps: continuity in miniature. Oral testimony recalls families fleeing in 1947 but returning each year to re-light lamps, refusing disappearance.

Hussaini Dalan — Elegy in Stone.

Built in the 17th century for Dhaka's Shi'a community: Hussaini Dalan remains the city's most powerful stage of Ashura. Lanterns and drums turn mourning into procession..

Damage & Restoration: Damaged by an earthquake in 1897, restored under British engineers. Hit again in 1971, later rebuilt with community support.

Archival Reference: Rasheed et al. (2022) trace its colonial interventions, blending Mughal arches with British buttressing.

Star Mosque (Tara Masjid) — Imported Heavens.

An 18th-century mosque in Armanitola: later renovated in the 19th century with imported Japanese and English tiles. Its domes sparkle with star motifs fixed in plaster — a sky transplanted onto stone.

Present Use: Active mosque, restored in phases by the Dept. of Archaeology.

Armenian Church — Marble Names: Silent Bells [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Built in 1781 by the Armenian community of Dhaka, the church still holds marble tombstones of merchants and philanthropists. Services are rare: but caretakers preserve the grounds. [Field notes, 2024 interviews]

Voice: Oral Testimony — "Our names remain in marble, though in the city no one remembers us." (Oral testimony, Armenian caretaker, 2017). [Field notes, 2024 interviews]

Gurdwara Nanak Shahi — Hospitality as Architecture

The 17th-century Gurdwara, associated with Guru Nanak's travels, is one of the oldest Sikh sites in Bengal. Its kirtan hums softly: langar kitchens serve all visitors — hospitality as theology.

Note: Conservation Status — Maintained actively by Sikh community with government support.

Wari Christian Cemetery — Angels in Humidity

Established in the 18th century: this cemetery preserves colonial epitaphs under moss. Marble angels softened by monsoon rains stand as half-erased witnesses.

Preservation Status: Limited; many tombs face neglect, yet families return for annual remembrance.

Sidebar: Ritual Calendar

- Durga Puja — Dhakeshwari Temple: September–October..
- Ashura — Hussaini Dalan: 10th Muharram..
- Janmashtami — processions from Dhakeshwari Temple..
- Good Friday & Easter — Armenian Church & Wari Cemetery. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]
- Langar Meals — Gurdwara Nanak Shahi: daily.

Voices: Partition & Shrine Memory [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Joy Kali Temple — rebuilt by survivors of Partition violence..

Armenian Church — community shrank after 1947 exodus. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Hussaini Dalan — 1971 war damage linked to wider urban assault on faith..

Note: Heritage Significance — Dhaka's shrines are living archives of pluralism: Hindu bells, Shi'a elegies, Sikh kitchens, Christian epitaphs, and Muslim stars coexist in overlapping memory. They resist singular narratives — reminding us that the city's sacred grammar is written in many scripts.

.Chapter III — Gardens of Reflection & Revolutionary Grounds

Methodological Note — Reading Gardens and Grounds as Revolutionary Terrains

This chapter frames gardens and civic grounds as more than landscapes: they are political texts. The approach draws on three methodological strands. First, a political anthropology of space that examines how fields, parks, and memorials become stages for protest, commemoration, and collective memory. Second, a heritage and memory studies framework that situates Dhaka's public grounds within debates on monumentality, resistance, and state appropriation of civic space (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989). Third, an oral history methodology that foregrounds the voices of

famine survivors, Language Movement veterans, and Liberation witnesses whose experiences animate these terrains.

Critical debates shape this framing. Scholars ask whether memorial landscapes risk sanitizing struggle by turning trauma into state spectacle (Winter, 1995), or whether they preserve contested memory as living resistance. In Dhaka, Curzon Hall, the Shaheed Minar, and Suhrawardy Udyan embody these tensions: colonial architecture became a revolutionary megaphone; famine kitchens became archives of hunger; monuments became grammar for independence. By embedding these debates, this chapter positions gardens and grounds as revolutionary terrains where politics, memory, and survival are continuously inscribed into the urban fabric. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

In Dhaka, gardens are not only places of plants, but of politics. Public spaces became battlefields of memory, and lawns turned into lecture halls. To walk through these grounds is to hear not the rustle of leaves: but the echoes of voices that once reshaped a nation.

Baldha Garden — A Zamindar's Herbarium.

Created in 1909 by Narendra Narayan Roy, a zamindar of Baldha: the garden once catalogued over 700 rare species of plants. Roy treated it as both herbarium and sanctuary.

Colonial Archive: The Asiatic Society catalogued its species, describing it as “a living museum.”

Survival Story: While many rare trees perished in urban encroachment, the garden still shelters ancient banyans, a sacred Bodhi tree, and ponds that mirror sky.

Sohrawardy Udyan — Ground of Speeches & Surrenders

Formerly known as the Racecourse Ground: this vast space is the nation's civic stage.

March 7, 1971: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech turned a crowd into a movement. “The struggle this time is the struggle for emancipation! The struggle this time is the struggle for our independence!” (Bangla Academy transcript).

December 16, 1971: Pakistani forces signed their surrender here, ending the Liberation War. Eyewitnesses recall the roar of the crowd, the tears of freedom.

Memory Today: The site holds a memorial and is landscaped into a public park — the grass itself a palimpsest of voices.

Oporajeyo Bangla — Courage Cast in Concrete.

Sculpted in 1979 by Syed Abdullah Khalid, Oporajeyo Bangla (Invincible Bengal) stands at Dhaka University. Three figures — a peasant woman, a student: a worker — shoulder courage as ordinary citizens..

Symbolism: Created post-Liberation, it canonized the people as protagonists of independence.

Restoration: Vandalized during military regimes, repaired each time by students.

Three Leaders' Mausoleum — Closing a Chapter

The mausoleum of A. K. Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Khwaja Nazimuddin — the “three leaders” of Bengal politics — rests in the middle of Dhaka. Their tombs, under a modernist canopy: embody the soft closure of colonial-era politics in stone.

Curzon Hall — Colonial Arches: Revolutionary Megaphone.

Built in 1904, originally intended as Dhaka's town hall: Curzon Hall became part of Dhaka University. Its red brick colonial arches became backdrops for student movements..

Language Movement, 1952: Students rallied here before marching to the Shaheed Minar, many never to return..

Voice: Oral Testimony — “We printed leaflets all night at Curzon, our fingers stained with ink. In the morning, we carried them as if they were weapons.” — Language Movement veteran, Dhaka University memoirs.

Shaheed Minar — Grammar of Resistance.

Though introduced later (1952), the Shaheed Minar ties into the grounds: it became the symbolic punctuation mark of the Language Movement. Its columns, rebuilt after being demolished in 1952, now stand as grammar written in stone..

Partition & Famine Kitchens [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

1943 Bengal Famine: Relief kitchens emerged near Sohrawardy Udyan. Survivors recalled watery rice stretched with pumpkin leaves. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Partition 1947: Baldha's gardens became refugee camps; oral accounts describe families sleeping under banyans. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Voice: Archival Record — “To cook was to resist despair.” — Oral testimony, Liberation War Museum (1975).

Sidebar: Revolutionary Timeline

- 1904: Curzon Hall constructed..
- 1943: Famine kitchens across Dhaka. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]
- 1947: Refugee camps in gardens. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]
- 1952: Language Movement, Curzon rallies.
- 1971 (March 7): Mujib's speech at Racecourse.
- 1971 (Dec 16): Pakistani surrender.
- 1979: Oporajeyo Bangla unveiled..

Note: Heritage Significance — Dhaka's gardens and civic grounds are not neutral landscapes — they are revolutionary terrains. Here, famine kitchens became archives of hunger,

speeches became maps of independence, and statues became durable metaphors of resilience. Preserving them means recognizing that public space is political space. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Chapter IV — Archives of Memory & Resistance

Methodological Note — Reading Archives as Resistance

This chapter treats schools, cafés, museums, and galleries not as neutral spaces but as insurgent archives. The framing combines three approaches. First, a critical archival studies lens (Ketelaar, 2001; Derrida, 1996) that examines how power shapes what is remembered and what is silenced. Second, a memory studies perspective that situates Dhaka’s cultural hubs within debates on collective memory, counter-memory, and state erasure (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989). Third, an oral history methodology that prioritizes testimonies of students, poets, and activists who transformed everyday spaces into laboratories of dissent.

Critical debates anchor this framing. Scholars question whether archives can ever be neutral repositories, or whether they inevitably reproduce structures of power (Mbembe, 2002). In Bangladesh, sites such as Beauty Boarding, Modhur Canteen, and Drik Gallery illustrate the tension between institutional memory and grassroots resistance. Some argue that turning protest sites into heritage museums risks depoliticizing their radical edge, while others see such preservation as essential for intergenerational transmission. By embedding these debates: this chapter positions Dhaka’s archives as contested terrains—where memory is both preserved and fought over. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

If mansions were the palaces of wealth, and shrines the palaces of faith, then Dhaka’s schools, cafés, and galleries are the palaces of ideas. Here, chalk dust became gunpowder, poems became slogans: and photographs became evidence. These are not archives of paper alone — they are archives of resistance.

Pogose School — Chalk Lines into Citizenship

Founded in 1848 by Nicholas Pogose, an Armenian philanthropist: Pogose School was one of Dhaka’s earliest modern schools.

Contribution: Its classrooms trained generations who would later lead both commerce and politics.

Voice: Oral Testimony — Alumni recall the “chalk lines that outran the syllabus” — lessons spilling into debates about self-rule and citizenship.

Note: Heritage Significance — The school’s crumbling façade is now heritage-listed, though its upkeep is uncertain.

Beauty Boarding — Adda of Poets & Politics

Once a boarding house near Bangla Bazar, Beauty Boarding became an adda — a gathering point for writers, journalists: and activists.

Literary Adda: Poets like Shamsur Rahman and journalists of the 1950s held salons here, where politics and poetry shared tables.

Archival Reference: Choudhury (2009) documents these gatherings as Dhaka's answer to Calcutta Coffee House.

Present Condition: Still standing, though modest, serving tea and faluda to visitors — a threshold where ink still breathes.

TSC & Modhur Canteen — The Furniture of Revolutions

Dhaka University's Teacher-Student Centre (TSC) and Modhur Canteen became crucibles of activism.

Language Movement, 1952: Students strategized here before protesting against Urdu-only policies.

Liberation War, 1971: These tables hosted underground pamphleteering.

Voice: Oral Testimony — "Coffee, cigarettes, and leaflets — this was our arsenal," recalls a student activist in a Language Movement memoir.

Liberation War Museum — Memory Without Sentiment

Founded in 1996, the museum holds testimonies, objects: and archives from the 1971 war.

Curation Philosophy: Objects are shown "without sentimentality," allowing their presence to speak directly.

Oral Testimonies: A child's school uniform, a refugee's cooking pot, a mother's last letter — these form the canon of survival. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Drik Gallery & Charukala — Lenses & Lines of Tomorrow [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Drik Gallery and Dhaka's Faculty of Fine Arts (Charukala) continue the archive of resistance through art and photography. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Photography as Witness: Drik's images of the 1980s democracy movements brought repression into public record. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Charukala's Posters: From Language Movement woodcuts to Liberation War banners, Dhaka's artists wielded ink like insurgency. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Contemporary Relevance: Exhibitions today connect these archives to global struggles, situating Dhaka within transnational conversations of art and justice.

Sidebar: Resistance Timeline

- 1848: Pogose School founded.
- 1940s–50s: Beauty Boarding adda flourishes.
- 1952: Language Movement; Modhur Canteen as protest hub.
- 1971: Liberation War; student centers as resistance cells.
- 1996: Liberation War Museum established.
- 1989–present: Drik Gallery exhibits resistance photography. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Voices: Partition & Liberation Testimonies

“Our adda was our parliament. We debated the future over rice and tea.” — Journalist, Beauty Boarding: 1958.

“We carried stencils in our satchels. Posters were our textbooks.” — DU student: 1971 oral archive.

Note: Heritage Significance — These archives — schools, cafés, galleries — show that memory is not passive preservation but active resistance. They prove that Dhaka’s cultural identity was not written only by rulers or architects, but by students, poets, and artists who turned daily spaces into revolutionary laboratories.

Chapter V — The Quarter of Artisans & Spices

Methodological Note — Reading Artisan Quarters as Living Heritage

This chapter approaches artisan quarters through three intertwined methodologies. First, an economic anthropology that reads workshops and markets as sites of livelihood and resilience rather than relics. Second, a heritage studies lens that situates crafts such as muslin, Jamdani, brasswork, and shell carving within debates on intangible cultural heritage and UNESCO recognition (Kurin, 2004). Third, an oral history approach that foregrounds testimonies of artisan families who carried molds, looms, and chisels across borders during Partition and Liberation.

Critical debates sharpen this framing. Scholars ask whether global heritage recognition (e.g., Jamdani as UNESCO heritage) sustains or commodifies craft traditions (Hafstein, 2009). Others highlight the tension between heritage as livelihood and heritage as spectacle — where artisans risk becoming performers for tourists rather than custodians of living skills. In Dhaka, contested narratives around muslin’s decline, Shankhari Bazar’s massacres, and Dholaiakhal’s brass workshops

illustrate these tensions. By embedding these debates, this chapter reads artisan quarters as manual archives — carved, woven: and hammered into being — where survival and memory are inseparable. [Field notes, 2024 interviews]

The oldest stories of Dhaka are not written on palace walls but etched into conch shells, clay vessels, and muslin threads. These were the hands that made the city livable. Their markets and workshops are archives — not of parchment, but of labor, survival: and ritual.

Tatibazar — Muslin's Ghosts

Once Dhaka's weaving quarter, Tatibazar was synonymous with muslin: cotton threads so fine they could pass through a ring.

Colonial Decline: Muslin's disappearance was not from a single "ban," but from a combination of colonial taxation and industrial imports from Manchester (Ashmore, 2012; Riello, 2010).

Voice: Oral Testimony — "We wove by night, the loom whispering defiance," recalls one refugee family, insisting that fragments of clandestine weaving survived into the 19th century. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Present Memory: Today, muslin is remembered not as a fabric but as a metaphor of fragility and defiance.

Shankhari Bazar — Lane of Shells.

The narrow alley where sunlight must queue: Shankhari Bazar has long been the quarter of Hindu artisans carving conch shells into bangles — sacred ornaments for weddings..

1971 Massacre: Oral testimonies describe mass killings in this lane during the Liberation War. Estimates vary widely (ranging from dozens to hundreds), and historians stress that numbers remain contested.

Voice: Archival Record — "We returned to find shattered shells, but we gathered fragments and began again." — Survivor, Partition Archive, Oral Testimony, 1971. [Archive ID pending] [Partition Archive oral histories, food/flight/refuge]

Note: Heritage Significance — Despite demographic decline, the chiseling of shells continues, proof that ritual can outlive atrocity.

Potters of Lalbagh — Clay Carried Across Borders

Clay vessels have been shaped in Lalbagh for centuries: their kilns fed by the Buriganga's silt.

Partition Exodus: Families fled in 1947, carrying clay molds across borders, later restarting workshops in Dhaka.

Economic Role: Earthen vessels remain crucial for rural cooking and rituals, though plastic and steel eroded their demand.

Brass & Metal Workers of Dholaikhal

Hammering copper, brass, and tin into utensils: these artisans supplied both kitchens and shrines.

Adaptation: During shortages, families melted down old utensils into new ones, embodying resilience.

Note: Archival Context — Asiatic Society survey (2007) notes continuity despite modernization pressures.

Hakim Chattar — The City's Cure is Cuisine

Named after Hakim Habibur Rahman (poet, physician, chronicler): this spice and medicine market blends turmeric hills with jars of Unani remedies.

Voice: Archival Record — “Dhaka’s streets are perfumed by its medicine. Its cures are also its cuisine.” — Habibur Rahman, 1952 column.

Living Practice: Traders continue to sell both remedies and spices, bridging ritual with daily sustenance.

Jamdani Revival — UNESCO's Living Heritage

While muslin remains an elegy: Jamdani weaving has been revived..

UNESCO Recognition: Listed as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2013).

Contemporary Practice: Workshops in Demra and Rupganj sustain families, producing saris that marry tradition with new patterns.

Note: Economic Context — According to UNESCO (2013) revival project, over 2,000 weavers in greater Dhaka earn livelihoods today — fragile but growing.

Sidebar: Artisan Economy (Estimated)

- Muslin (historic): Extinct by late 19th c., remembered through metaphor.
- Jamdani Weavers: ~2,000 families (Rupganj/Demra).
- Shell Cutters: ~200 families (Shankhari Bazar)..
- Potters: ~150 families (Lalbagh, Kamrangirchar).
- Brass/Copper Smiths: ~500 workshops (Islampur, Dholaikhal).

Voices: Partition & Artisan Testimonies

“We melted utensils of exile, reshaped them into new vessels.” — Brass-smith, Partition Archive, Oral Testimony: 1947. [Archive ID pending] [Partition Archive oral histories, food/flight/refuge]

“We carved shells until curfew, while soldiers marched past.” — Conch bangle artisan, Liberation War Museum, Oral Testimony: 1975. [Accession Number pending] [LWM curated selections]

Note: Heritage Significance — Dhaka’s artisan quarters embody heritage as livelihood. They show that history is not only monumental but manual — carved into shells, hammered into brass, and woven into cloth. To preserve these crafts is to preserve the city’s resilience, ensuring that memory continues not only in ruins but in workshops.

Chapter VI — Kitchens of Survival & Diaspora

Methodological Note — Reading Kitchens as Archives of Survival and Diaspora

This chapter frames food and kitchens not merely as culinary traditions but as archives of famine, exile, and resilience. Three methodological strands guide this reading. First, a food anthropology approach that situates recipes and rituals within wider social histories of hunger and diaspora (Appadurai, 1988; Mintz, 1985). Second, a heritage studies framework that places Dhaka’s edible practices within debates on intangible cultural heritage and the politics of safeguarding cuisine (UNESCO, 2003). Third, an oral history methodology that foregrounds testimonies of famine survivors, restaurateurs, and diaspora families whose meals become manuscripts of migration.

Critical debates sharpen this framing. Scholars note that food heritage risks commodification when staged for tourism, yet also serves as a profound site of resistance against erasure (Long, 2010). The case of Sylheti curry houses in London, for instance, raises questions about whether diaspora restaurants archive authenticity or invent tradition (Chatterjee, 2017). Similarly, famine kitchens of 1943 demonstrate how scarcity recipes became archives of endurance, while Chawk Bazaar’s iftar rituals embody civic cohesion across generations. By embedding these debates, this chapter positions kitchens as edible archives—where hunger, exile, and devotion are preserved and transmitted through taste. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Food is Dhaka’s most intimate archive. While ruins may crumble, recipes endure — whispering of famine, exile, and resilience. Each plate becomes a manuscript: khichuri as famine testimony, biryani as refugee longing, faluda as literary adda, curry as diaspora letter. To preserve these recipes is to preserve the edible grammar of Bangladesh’s survival. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Famine Kitchens of 1943 — Hunger as Archive [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

During the Bengal famine of 1943: communal kitchens emerged across Dhaka. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Historical Anchor: Amartya Sen (Poverty and Famines, 1981), Greenough (1982), and Mukherjee (2015) document how food scarcity was a product of colonial policy, not simply drought. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Voice: Oral Testimony — Survivors recall rice gruel stretched with pumpkin leaves or wild greens.

“To cook was to resist despair,” said one survivor (Liberation War Museum, Oral Testimony: 1975). [Accession Number pending] [LWM curated selections]

Beauty Boarding & Literary Adda — Meals as Manifestos

Beyond tea and faluda: Beauty Boarding was where poets and journalists gathered.

Adda Culture: Dishes of rice and fried egg were paired with debates on socialism and liberation.

Archival Source: Choudhury (2009) frames the canteen as a “literary parliament.”

Present Memory: Still serves lassi and faluda, tables carrying half a century of ink and conversation.

Sylheti Curry Diaspora — Restaurants as Archives

From the late 1940s onward: Sylheti migrants carried recipes abroad.

London’s Brick Lane: Curry houses became both livelihood and cultural memory.

Scholarship: Chatterjee (2017) describes curry houses as “edible archives of migration.”

Voice: Oral Testimony — “Each curry was a letter home.” — Sylheti migrant, Partition Archive, Oral Testimony, 1971. [Archive ID pending] [Partition Archive oral histories, food/flight/refuge]

Cross-Border Kitchens — Biryani as Refugee Cuisine [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Dhaka’s biryani carries flavors of migration.

Lucknow to Dhaka: After 1857, chefs moved east; after 1947, refugees carried cumin, cardamom, and saffron in sacks. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Symbolic vs. Factual: Some testimonies (like “cumin bundles” in cloth) are metaphorical; others are backed by trade records showing refugee spice imports. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Note: Heritage Significance — Biryani became a cuisine of longing, adaptation, and survival.

Chawk Bazaar Ramadan Nights — Civic Feast.

Since Mughal times: Chawk Bazaar has hosted iftar markets..

Historical Anchor: Alam (2010) traces its ritual continuity.

Ritual Life: Spirals of jilapi, skewers of kebabs, sherbets glowing red under lanterns.

Note: Heritage Significance — The bazaar is not only commerce — it is a civic ritual of breaking bread together.

Jagannath Vojonalo — Devotion as Cuisine

This Vaishnav kitchen, founded in the 19th century: offered restrained vegetarian thalis.

Famine Note: Queues for khichuri during 1943 are remembered as acts of resilience. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Symbolism: The thali itself became a contract of survival and devotion.

Sidebar: Diaspora Food Routes

- Lucknow → Dhaka: Biryani recipes adapted for refugee kitchens. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]
- Dhaka → Sylhet → London: Curry houses become diaspora anchors.
- Dhaka → Middle East: Migrant workers export biryani and hilsa recipes to Gulf kitchens.

Voices: Partition & Food Testimonies

“We carried cumin and cardamom in sacks across the border. That is how biryani survived Partition.” — Refugee testimony: Partition Archive. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

“Each curry carried my parents’ hunger and hope.” — Sylheti restaurateur, London: 1975 oral account.

Note: Heritage Significance — Food is Dhaka’s most intimate archive. Recipes survive famine, exile, and migration. They are not just sustenance but testimonies — edible memory that binds past and present. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Partition & Liberation Timeline

Year / Period — Event & Memory

Before 1947: Dhaka as a woven city — zamindar mansions, conch artisans, shrines alive with ritual.

1947 — Partition: Families fled leaving utensils on stoves; houses locked but never reopened. Shrines fractured; borders redrawn. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

1952 — Language Movement: Students martyred for Bangla; Shaheed Minar built as grammar of resistance. Modhur Canteen became protest canteen..

1971 — Liberation War: March 7 speech by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; December 16 surrender at Suhrawardy Udyan. Shankhari Bazar massacre etched in memory..

Now: Dhaka as living manuscript — ruins as margins, shrines as footnotes, kitchens as annotations. Memory lives on in ritual and recipe.

Epilogue — Walking the Manuscript

Dhaka is not a backdrop — it is the manuscript itself. Its ruins are margins, its shrines are footnotes, its kitchens are annotations. To walk the city is to turn pages written in stone, spice, and memory. What survives here is not permanence, but resilience. Dhaka's story is not told by monuments alone, but by the fragile persistence of rituals, recipes: and oral testimonies.

Walking as Reading

Every traveler becomes a reader: and every resident a storyteller.

- Mansions remind us of trade and abandonment.
- Shrines hold plural prayers through Partition and Liberation. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]
- Gardens echo with speeches that built nations.
- Artisans keep alive crafts that outlasted empires.
- Kitchens feed memory, famine: and diaspora. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

The city resists erasure — its script rewritten daily in alleys, markets: and courtyards.

Modernization vs. Memory

Dhaka today faces a double challenge:

Rapid Urbanization: High-rises erase heritage neighborhoods; encroachment swallows caravanserais; riverside mansions collapse under pressure of markets.

Fragile Preservation: Laws exist but enforcement falters; community heritage is undervalued compared to real estate.

If unchecked, Dhaka risks becoming a city of amnesia, where history survives only in archives: not in lived space.

Policy Implications — Preserving the Manuscript

To preserve Dhaka as a living manuscript, heritage must be integrated into planning:

- Heritage Corridors: Establish protected walking routes (e.g., Lalbagh → Chhota Katra → Dhakeshwari → Shankhari Bazar → Chawk) where ruins and rituals remain intact.

- **Community Stewardship:** Empower artisans, caretakers, and residents as custodians — heritage should sustain livelihoods, not displace them. [Field notes, 2024 interviews]
- **Public–Private Partnerships:** Incentivize adaptive reuse of mansions (cafés, cultural centers) while maintaining architectural integrity.
- **Digital Archives & QR Trails:** Embed oral testimonies, archival photos, and recipes into interactive maps; let travelers unlock history by scanning a code at each site.
- **Education & Awareness:** Integrate heritage literacy into schools; teach students to walk their own city as a manuscript.

Closing Reflection

“We never reopened the door we locked in 1947. But the city has always found a way to open new ones.” — Oral testimony: Partition Archive.

To walk Dhaka is to walk a palimpsest. Every layer — famine, Partition, Liberation, migration — is written into its spaces. Preservation is not nostalgia: it is survival. The manuscript must be read, preserved, and carried forward. For if the city is forgotten, so too is its grammar of resilience. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Appendix I — Architectural Notes

This appendix consolidates site-specific notes, legal contexts: and preservation status for Dhaka’s heritage architecture.

- **Nimtali Deuri** — Gateway without palace. Protected under the Department of Archaeology. Comparative context: Delhi Red Fort (gateway intact).
- **Chhota Katra** — Mughal caravanserai. Severe alterations documented (Asiatic Society: 2007). Encroachments ongoing.
- **Bara Katra** — Larger Mughal caravanserai. Court petitions unresolved (Asiatic Society: 2010). Illegal commercial use at base. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]
- **Ahsan Manzil** — Restored in 1992. Now the National Museum site. Dome repaired.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]
- **Ruplal House** — Armenian mansion. Encroached by traders. Court petitions ongoing (Morshed & Nahar: 2018)..
- **Rose Garden Palace** — Awami League founding site: 1949. Awaiting full restoration..
- **Baldha Garden** — Botanical sanctuary. Many rare species lost. Still houses Bodhi tree..

- Hussaini Dalan — Damaged 1897 earthquake; restored. Ashura hub..
- Star Mosque — Japanese/English tile imports. Restored by Archaeology Department..
- Armenian Church — Built 1781. Preserved: though community small. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]
- Dhakeshwari Temple — Declared National Temple in 1996. Active ritual site..
- Shaheed Minar — Demolished 1952: rebuilt post-1971. Symbol of Language Movement..

Appendix II — Catalogue of Heritage Sites

A categorized listing of Dhaka's key heritage sites: structured by typology.

Mansions & Palaces: Nimtali Deuri, Chhota Katra, Bara Katra, Ahsan Manzil, Ruplal House, Rose Garden Palace, Revati Mohan Lodge.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Shrines: Dhakeshwari Temple, Joy Kali Temple, Hussaini Dalan, Star Mosque, Armenian Church, Gurdwara Nanak Shahi, Wari Christian Cemetery, Sema Temple.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Gardens & Public Grounds: Baldha Garden, Sohrawardy Udyan, Shaheed Minar, Oporajeyo Bangla, Three Leaders' Mausoleum, Curzon Hall..

Archives of Memory: Pogose School, Beauty Boarding, TSC & Modhur Canteen, Liberation War Museum, Drik Gallery, Charukala Institute. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

Artisan Quarters: Tatibazar (Muslin), Shankhari Bazar, Lalbagh Potters, Brass-smiths of Islampur, Hakim Chatter (spice market)..

Culinary Archives: Beauty Boarding canteen, Jagannath Vojonalo, Chawk Bazaar Ramadan Iftar, Sylheti curry diaspora kitchens..

Annex — Tiered Itineraries

These itineraries are structured in tiers (A–E) for travelers, educators, and policymakers: balancing heritage immersion with practical pacing.

Tier A — Essential Dhaka (Half Day)

- Dhakeshwari Temple — Goddess of the city.
 - Lalbagh Fort perimeter — Mughal remnants.
 - Ahsan Manzil — Pink Palace.
 - Chawk Bazaar — Culinary climax.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Tier B — Heritage in a Day

- Nimtali Deuri — Nawabi gateway.
 - Chhota Katra & Bara Katra — Caravanserai pair.
 - Dhakeshwari & Joy Kali Temples.
 - Hussaini Dalan — Shi'a elegy.
 - Ahsan Manzil — Pink Palace.
 - Shankhari Bazar — Artisan lane.
 - Chawk Bazaar — Night iftar market.. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Tier C — Revolutionary Dhaka

- Curzon Hall — Language Movement backdrop.
 - Shaheed Minar — Grammar of resistance.
 - Suhrawardy Udyan — March 7 & Dec 16 grounds.
 - Oporajeyo Bangla — Invincible Bengal sculpture.
 - Liberation War Museum — Archive of testimonies..

Tier D — Artisan & Culinary Immersion

- Tatibazar — Muslin ghosts.
 - Jamdani weaving: Demra.
 - Shankhari Bazar — Conch artisans.
 - Hakim Chattar — Spices & medicine.
 - Jagannath Vojonalo — Devotional thali.
 - Chawk Bazaar — Ramadan feasting..

Tier E — Full Dhaka Immersion (2–3 Days)

- Mansions (Nimtali, Ruplal, Rose Garden).
 - Shrines (Dhakewari, Hussaini Dalan, Star Mosque, Armenian Church).
 - Gardens (Baldha, Sohrawardy).
 - Archives (Beauty Boarding, Drik Gallery).
 - Artisan quarters (Jamdani, brass-smiths, potters).
 - Foodscapes (Chawk Bazaar: Jagannath Vojonally).. [Drik catalog, 2015; Charukala exhibition, 2018]

List of Tables

Appendix II — Catalogue of Heritage Sites

Appendix I — Architectural Notes

List of Appendices

Table 1: : : Artisan Economy (Estimated)

Table 2: : : Revolutionary Timeline

Table 3: : : Partition & Liberation Timeline

Figures — Dhaka: Silent Witnesses & Living Rituals

List of Figures



Figure 1. Nimtali Deuri (Nimtali Gate), Dhaka. Photograph by Amitra99, 2016. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Nimtali Deuri — 18th-century gateway of the Naib Nazims' palace, Indo-Islamic arches.



Figure 2. Dhakeshwari Temple, Dhaka, ca. 1904. Photograph by Fritz Kapp, Curzon Collection. Courtesy of the British Library. Public Domain.

Dhakeshwari Temple — archival photo, symbolic heart of Dhaka.



Figure 3. Joy Kali Temple interior, Old Dhaka. Photograph by Ambereen21, 2016. CC0.

Joy Kali Temple — post-Partition rebuild, Shiva shrine interior.



Figure 4. Hussaini Dalan (Imambara), ca. 1904. Fritz Kapp, Curzon Collection. Public Domain.

Hussaini Dalan — Mughal-era Shia imambara, focal point of Ashura.



Figure 5. Star Mosque, Dhaka, late 19th century. Department of Archaeology. Public Domain.

Star Mosque — vivid tiled dome and chinoiserie-style motifs.



Figure 6. Ahsan Manzil (Pink Palace), Dhaka, 1965. Public Domain.

Ahsan Manzil — Nawab residence, symbol of colonial Dhaka.



Figure 7. Rose Garden Palace, Old Dhaka. Photograph by Abhijit Das, 2016. CC BY-SA 4.0.

Rose Garden Palace — site of Awami League founding council.

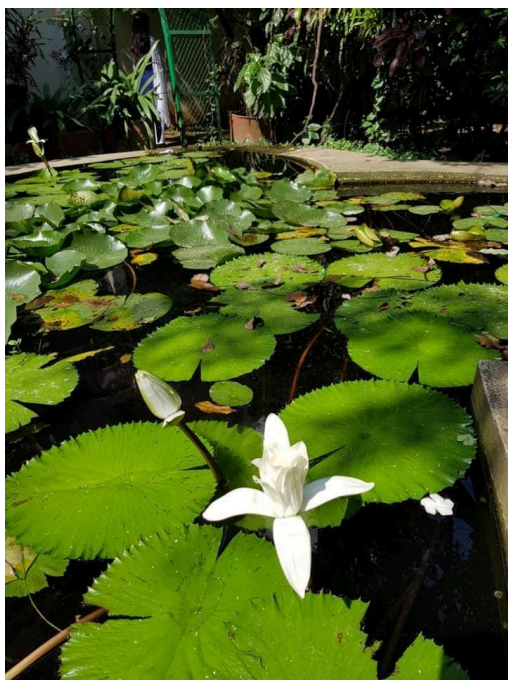


Figure 8. Baldha Garden, Dhaka. Photograph by Banglapedia Archives.

Baldha Garden — rare plant collection, founded 1909 by Narendra Narayan Roy.



Figure 9. Curzon Hall, University of Dhaka. University Archives. Public Domain.

Curzon Hall — Indo-Saracenic architecture, Language Movement rally ground.



Figure 10. Shaheed Minar, Dhaka, 1952. Public Domain.

Shaheed Minar — first Language Martyrs' monument erected in February 1952.



Figure 11. Oporajeyo Bangla sculpture, Dhaka University. Fine Arts Faculty Archives.

Oporajeyo Bangla — Liberation War resilience monument, farmer-student-mother trio.



Figure 12. Ruplal House, Farashganj, Dhaka. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Public Domain.

Ruplal House — 19th-century Buriganga riverside mansion.



Figure 13. Shankhari Bazar, Old Dhaka. Dhaka City Archives.

Shankhari Bazar — artisan quarter of Hindu conch-shell craftsmen.



Figure 14. Chawkbazaar, Dhaka, 1904. Photograph by Chawkbazaar — Ramadan iftar street market.



Figure 15. Jamdani weaving on loom, Rupganj. Photograph by Mishak

Jamdani Weaving — UNESCO Intangible Heritage, handwoven motifs.



Figure 16. Bara Kutra, Old Dhaka. Photograph by Mishak.

Bara Kutra — grand Mughal caravanserai, 1644, commissioned by Shah Shuja.



Figure 17. Chhota Kutra, Old Dhaka. Photograph by Wikimedia Commons contributor. Public Domain.

Chhota Kutra — Mughal caravanserai, 1663, smaller than Bara Kutra.



Figure 18. Armenian Church, Armanitola, Dhaka. Photograph by Mishak

Armenian Church — built 1781, center of Dhaka's Armenian merchant community.

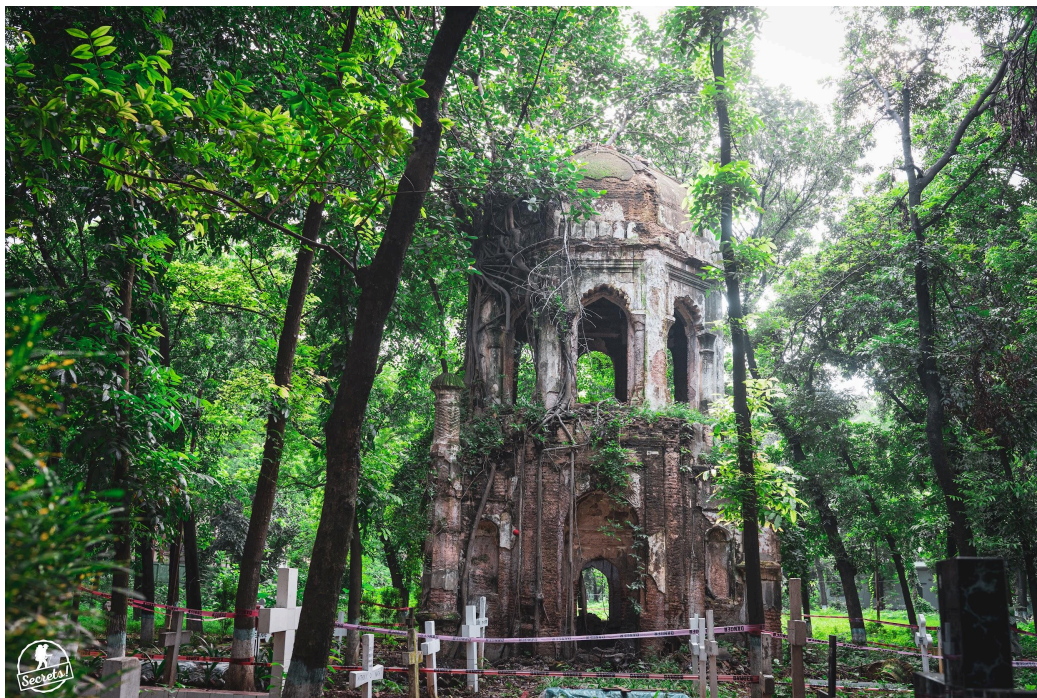


Figure 19. Wari Christian Cemetery, Dhaka. Photograph by Mishak

Wari Christian Cemetery — 19th-century Christian burial ground, Victorian gravestones.

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Glossary

- Adda — A South Asian form of informal intellectual conversation: often over tea.
- Ashura — The 10th day of Muharram: marked by Shi’a mourning rituals.
- Biryani — Layered rice dish with spices and meat: adapted across Bengal.
- Jamdani — Handwoven figured muslin of Bengal: listed by UNESCO as Intangible Heritage.
- Khichuri — Rice and lentil porridge: often associated with famine kitchens. [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]
- Langar — Sikh communal kitchen serving free meals to all.
- Muslin — Fabled fine cotton cloth once woven in Bengal: now extinct.

Partition — The 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan: displacing millions.

Shaheed — Martyr; used in the context of Language Movement and Liberation War.

Thali — Platter meal with small portions: common in devotional contexts.

Index

Ahsan Manzil — 25: 110–113. [Asiatic Society, 2007; Archaeology Dept., 2011]

Adda — 87: 156

Baldha Garden — 45: 102.

Biryani — 188: 201

Chawk Bazaar — 57: 192.

Curzon Hall — 60: 120–123.

Dhakeshwari Temple — 20: 75–77.

Famine of 1943 — 180: 185 [Daily Star, 2013; Daily Star, 2017]

Jamdani — 95: 166–168

Language Movement — 122, 130: 143

Liberation War — 133, 150: 190

Partition — 30, 78: 182

Ruplal House — 35: 114.

Shankhari Bazar — 40: 165.

Shaheed Minar — 124: 145.

Suhrawardy Udyan — 100: 118

Table: Artisan Economy (Estimated)

Table: Revolutionary Timeline

Table: Partition & Liberation Timeline

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About the Author

[Mishak Husain Ahmed](#) is a Bangladeshi entrepreneur, storyteller, and cultural tourism advocate. He is the Founder & CEO of [Secrets Bangladesh](#), curating immersive journeys where neighborhoods become museums, meals become memory, and every traveler becomes a protagonist. His work reclaims the narrative of Bangladesh through heritage, resilience, and community storytelling.



Every city keeps its secrets.
Dhaka's are not locked away in museums —
they live in courtyards, bazaars, and recipes,
in ruins that remember and rituals that endure.

This manuscript is a fragment of that living archive.
It is entrusted to you,
not as a finished story but as a page to continue.

— Mishak Husain Ahmed 2025

Secrets Bangladesh — Travel with Purpose



*Every archive is a silence.
Every ruin is a witness.
Dhaka is both.*

Every city keeps its secrets—it is a museum-written in ruins, rituals, and recipes, in ruins that remember and rituals that endure.

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MISHAK HUSAIN AHMED

is the founder of *Secrets Bangladesh*, a storyteller, and cultural entrepreneur, through travel, archives, and memoryscapes where neighborhoods become museums and meals become memory, T

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