

In Pursuit of a New Horizon in Tourism: Revisiting the Archive of an Ancient But Rich Civilization at Tahirpur ("Haweli"), Sunamganj*

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Abstract: Sunamganj, one of the remotest districts of Sylhet Division, is marked for its spiritual sanctity, rich cultural heritage and ancient civilization teeming with scholarly 'Bouls', 'Spiritual Songsters' and many other performing musicians and stalwart artists with diverse quality, genius and creativity. Apart from being the breeding ground of numerous saints and lyricists, Sufis and musicians, it is also popularly known as the land of 'Hasan Raja' a celebrated saint, lyrist and musician while it is also featured as the spiritual ground of 'Hazrat Shah Arefin'- a spiritual religious leader, legendary figure and preacher of Islam in Sunamganj, which was once a lagging- behind region in terms of religious enlightenment, social advancement and educational enrichment. The underlying article reflects some facts and figures of the bygone glories and achievements of Sunamganj with particular emphasis on Tahirpur, an Upazila of Sunamganj lying towards the western part of the district surrounded by the ranges of the Meghalaya mountain.

The paper mainly concentrates the erudite research on 'Haweli', a Royal Palace which is at the verge of extinction in the jurisdiction of Tahirpur upazila. The paper describes about the various facts and figures of the 'Haweli' at Tahirpur. Its main concentration hinges around to establish the proposition that the 'Haweli' at Tahirpur can emerge as a potential tourist spot.

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Introduction:

Sunamganj is the pathway both to a spiritually rich and culturally prospective civilization embellished with ambience of flora and fauna. The district is split into 11 Upazilas (Smallest Administrative Unit) and this paper would highlight some special features on one of the Upazilas of Sunamganj- Tahirpur with particular emphasis on 'Haweli'- a Royal Palace and the archive of ancient but rich civilization which has unfortunately been exposed to the verge of extinction from the human history. This paper would examine the pros and cons of this Royal Place and also flash some considerable light on its archeological -aesthetic aspects, ecological rationale, topographic harmonies as well as tourism value in the context of Bangladesh and also examine the rationality of its turning into a prospective tourism spot with burgeoning tourists in future. It would later discuss the impact of tourism contributing positively on the ecology and topography of Tahirpur- the mentor of Sunamganj district and also the foster child of the Meghalayas, surrounded by strenuous range of hills, dales and valleys.

1.1 Objective

This article intends to orient the tourists and all those concerned with the tourism administration and business to ponder over this burning environmental and ecological issues and consider 'Haweli' at Tahirpur as a potential tourist spot which would open new horizon and scopes in the realm of tourism in Bangladesh for days to come. It is certain that some spots are still beyond our sight remaining still unearthed, undiscovered and unexplored. This write up throws considerable light on these issues as well. The mushrooming of tourism industry in coastal areas attracts thousands of tourists, dwellers, settlers and opportunists to urbanize the area along with the heavy surge of developers and real-estate agents who rush with their paraphernalia to distort the natural elevation, topography and ecology of such tourist spots in order to turn them into a city of din and bustle and pandemonium. Thus, the paper concentrates mainly on the hypothesis that the establishment of tourist spot in popular and easily accessible places is very likely to expose potential threat to the environment, exert highly negative impact on the ecology, distort the topographical harmony of the respective area in contrast to those places full of natural beauties and bounties, less accessible and considerably remote while at the same time alluring and attractive in nature. The proposed tourist spots are more likely to yield pure enjoyment and solid

entertainment of mental faculty of the tourists while potentially restricting the unwanted mushrooming of tourism industry, localization of market and migration of settlers likewise what happens with the present tourist spots. These tourist spots in question in this report are very likely to exert positive impact on the flora and fauna of the respective region as well.

1.2 Methodology

While preparing this article, the writer has mainly depended on the primary data collected from the place of occurrence yet some data have been derived from secondary source as well. The writer, in effect, physically visited the spot and interacted with the neighbors, elites and the commoners and asked as many questions about 'Haweli' as possible based on a preset standard questionnaire (annex-1). The direct interaction with the common people gave the author some new insights into the issue and also gave vent to both some myth and reality about 'Haweli'. While visit, some important snaps were also taken to juxtapose them with the relevant facts and myths and with a view to enriching the report with some vivid and self-explanatory pictorial representation on the subject matter of the underlying report. While collecting primary data, physical visit and active interaction with heterogeneous group of people formed the major part in the collection of primary data. It is also to be noted that some relevant books, official documents, revenue reports and revenue-related land statistics did serve as the basis of secondary data that have profusely enriched the report. Some printed materials have also been carefully studied to bring the paper under a proper conceptual framework. The paper also reflects some other facts and opinions of the author while he worked there as chief executive and representative of the government (UNO).

1.3 Route Plan to Haweli

The map of both Sunamganj district and Tahirpur is appended here for the convenience of the tourists to understand the route to this traditional 'Haweli'. Tourists may like to visit Tahirpur in the following order and in compliance with the route shown in the map. This guideline describes the direction from Dhaka, the capital, to Tahirpur, the 'Haweli' at South Bordol. The whole journey from Dhaka to Tahirpur and 'Haweli' roughly takes about 10 to 12 hours.

Steps to be followed:

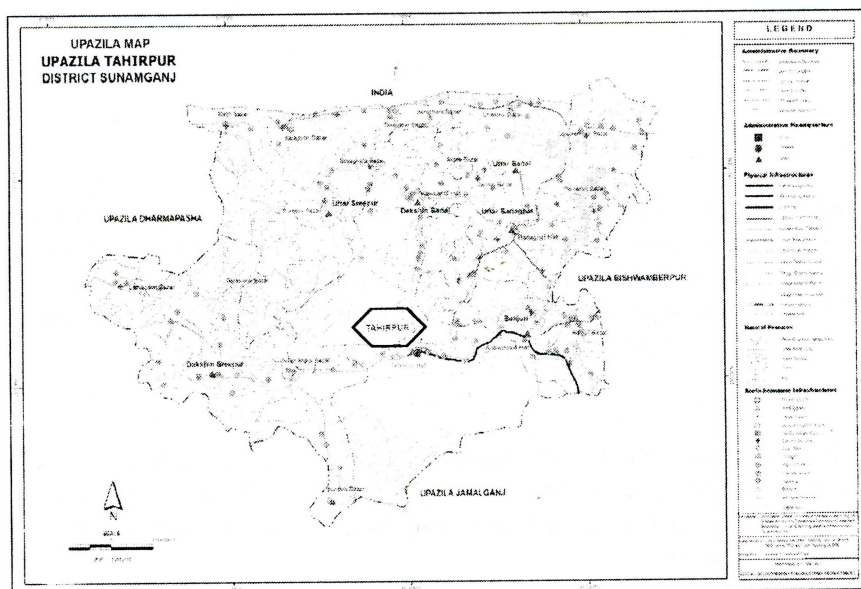
- i) Purchasing a ticket from Bus Counter of either Hanif or Shyamoli at Saydabad for Sunamganj;
- ii) The bus will arrive there at Sunamganj main road, Dhaka Counter within 6-8 hours.
- iii) The tourist may hire a richshaw or can opt for pedestrian journey which would take utmost five to fifteen minutes to reach the Surma river ghat/shore, just on the western part of the Dhaka Counter Bus Stand.
- iv) The country-boat or trawler or normal boat would take the tourist to the other bank of river within maximum ten minutes. The river Surma has to be crossed by width only and the other part of the bank is very much visible from the starting point. That it is nearly 100 meters in width to the most.
- v) The tourist would then have to hire a motorcycle to reach the spot which might take about an hour and a half. One may also go direct from the bank of Surma river to the near by 'Haweli' but he or she would have to again hire motorcycle or walk for ten minutes to reach the place. During rainy season, when the river inundates with water, one can reach any place of Tahirpur by country-boat or speed-boat or canoe boat.
- vi) The motorcyclist themselves serve as the tourist-guide gratis except the transport fare and they have adopted this profession as the basic means of their livelihood.
- vii) A tourist can come back just in the reverse manner and system. Mostly, motorcyclist-cum-guides have fare contact known as up and down cost. So, they help the tourists visit the place and stay with them as long as they are there and then come back with them to the river Surma, which is adjacent to the Dhaka Bus Counter.

2.0 The Haweli: The Detail Description of the Royal Palace

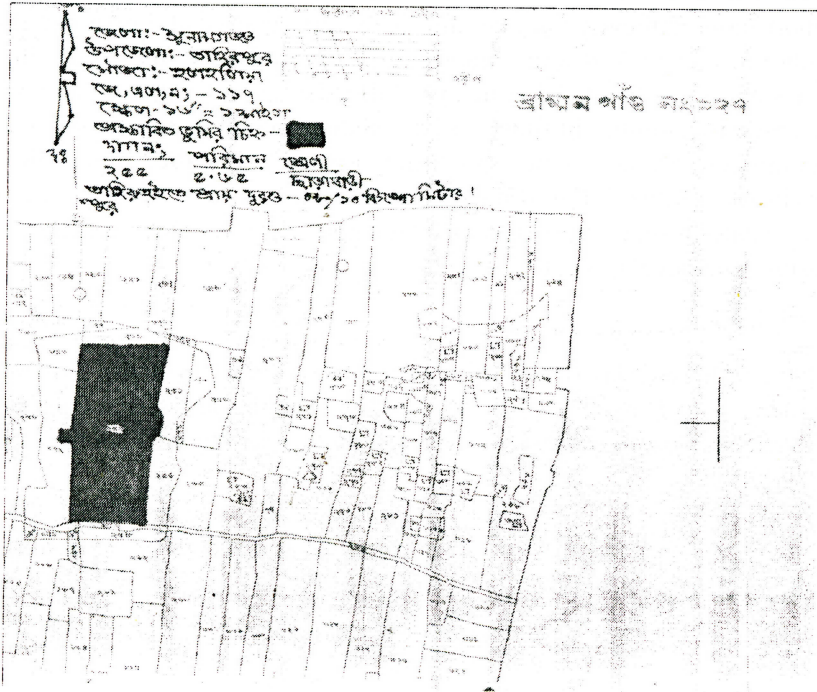
2.1 The underlying place is located in one of the unions of Tahirpur Upazila called Bordol (South). It is also locally known as 'Haweli Dewan Hawri' or 'Raj Bari' or the 'Palace'. The writer of this article being the chief executive of this Upazila, has personally visited the place, talked to the common folk and the elites of this place and endeavored at his level

2.2 Location

'Haweli Dewan Hawri' or 'Raj Bari' or the 'Palace' is under 'Holholia' mauza. The 'Haweli Dewan Howri Bari' or 'Bella King's Palace' is situated at 'Holholia' village of Laur Pargona under Bordol (South) Union of Tahirpur.



2.3 The Cadastral Survey (C.S.) Map:



The author of this paper has extensively studied the C.S. map to locate the actual area, to show the exact geographical position and to ascertain the whereabouts of this Royal Palace. The concerned information along with C.S. map has also been annexed hereto for clear concept and better understanding of this Royal Palace.

The C.S. Map:

It is evident from the C.S map that the underlying relic stretches towards an area of 5.65 acres of land under the Plot No- 255 under Khatian or ledger book No-1 collected from the Assistant Commissioner, Land's Office document.

2.4 Myths About 'Haweli Dewan Hawri' or 'Raj Bari' or the 'Palace' :

During the author's visit to 'Haweli Dewan Hawri' or 'Raj Bari' or the 'Palace', most of the commoners and natives were present describing the factual and fantastic evidence and whereabouts of this Royal Palace. It is known from the natives that about 500 to 600 years ago, there lived a king

named 'Bella'. He was cruel and selfish and basically a cannibal by nature. He used to put those khasias coming from Assam to the sacrificial altar in the river 'Khaimara' in the name of Deity to have the divine pleasure and bliss. Being aggrieved at such cruel act of the king, the Khasias burst into revolt and finally they shot a spell-whiffed arrow at the wife of the king who died on the spot. The king was very shocked at the incident and he left the Porgona bag and baggage along with the family members to another place not known to the natives. This is a very popular hearsay about this king 'Bella'.

After the disappearance of 'Bella' king, there appeared later some 'Zinda Ali Fakir' from Shimul village of Brahmanbaria. He came to this palace as a vagabond and became self-declared caretaker of 'Haweli'. It is heard that he put on red gown and had a sharp 'Sickle' or 'Spade' in his hand. That saint, as popularly recalled by the dwellers of Bordol, stayed there for long but no one knows the exact time or date of his death. His forerunners are still there at the 'Haweli' living under abject poverty. The author of this paper talked to an aged woman who claimed her to be the granddaughter of that Fakir. There was a short interaction with her but she could not provide mentionable information regarding her grandfather rather she thought the author to be some NGO officer and wanted some financial and homestead support for her livelihood. At the 'Haweli' area, 30/35 families are found to have built their habitat and it is known from the revenue office that they are all illegal occupants but no one disturbs them as they are the ancestors of that spiritual fakir, Zinda Ali.

2.5 The Physical Description of Haweli:

While visiting the area physically, it is found that there exist a number of architectural designs and cuttings on the wall which perhaps dates back to 300 to 400 years known from the local source. The building is in a very dilapidated state and most of the signs of this 'Haweli' have disappeared by this time. Inscriptions blurred . . .

This is evident from the pictures shown below:





The excavation of bricks, stones and other building materials by the local people have been going on for hundreds of years and the site is somehow surviving at stake and may be permanently vanished in no time if not immediately preserved by the concerned authority. It is learnt from the local source that stealing and removing of bricks and big and small stones are rampant from time immemorial. A spectator commented that a few years back, he saw more walls and structure but now a few remnants are there. All are gone. While examining the boundary walls and the archives, the author found the walls to be about 03(three) feet wide. The wall has a few layers. Both side of the wall is coated with a kind of reddish clay locally known as 'Surki' which is heard to have been prepared with the wet earth, limestone and some other chemical all mixed together to make powerful glue so as to join the baked special type of brick. The size of the brick is smaller than the usual brick available now-a-days with some inscriptions not clear. Two sets of brick are installed on each side with a big size stone in the middle. The bricks on both sides and stones in the middle seems to be well compacted with that special joining spice. The people have broken the walls and stolen mainly thousands of tons of valuable stones and the process is rampant and uncontrolled for a pretty long time. These stones are sold at a higher rate to the importers and business men and there had never been any measure to stop this theft. The author has also found some marble stones which seem to have been stolen in huge amount earlier. The author has still found some stones of various size and shape with various range of weight, i.e. weighing from 10 kg up to 2 to 3 tons.

2.6 The Haweli at a Glance

The 'Haweli' at present has 07 (seven) boundary walls and two Archways which have been halved by the landslide while the main gateway locally known as 'Singho Dwar' stands inclined to 70° angle.

These Archways are 15 (fifteen) feet long and 07 (seven) feet high. It is known from the local source that one more Archway has already sunken into the earth and no trace of this archway has ever been found.

The author came across a visibly beautiful water tank girdled with valuable marble stones with a wonderful reflection of silhouette for the one who stands on the stoop designed for the king, the then time. It was a 100 (hundred) feet long and 100 feet wide square pond stretching to the eastern part of the 'Haweli'. Stones of different shapes and sizes have been placed on the periphery and the bed of the pond gives a unique view of

the pond especially in the moonlit night. But ill luck would have it; the pond has lost its beauty and charm due to continuous and colossal human sabotage.

The author has fabricated his own imagination and intuition to describe on the existing pond to determine the exact location and original condition of that pond at present. The author to his utter dismay came across one dilapidated toilet and relics of other 3 to 4 broken walls which were also detected while ransacking the historically rich and archeologically important 'Haweli'.

On paying visit to another site, the author found the main residential area of the Dewan king. It seemed to have been aristocratically designed with the taste and delicacy vogue in that time. The residential area of the master bed of the king was measured to be 41 (forty one) feet long and 26 (twenty six) feet wide with 06 (six) doors. The average height of the door was measured to be about 07 (seven) feet. The average thickness of the wall of the residential area of the king, the boundary and the decayed and broken wall were measured to be 03 (three) feet wide.

The palace seems to have been fortified with rich and valuable stones and foliage which are found in almost every structure of this 'Haweli'.

The following pictures yield some flavor of this dynasty:



The Main Gate or 'Singho Dwar'







3.0 Findings:

01. While giving allotment from the Revenue Office, this place was not considered important and worthy of conservation in terms of its archeological and historical value.
02. Like the government, the dwellers and common people are also indifferent having no urge or impulse or zeal at all for the conservation of such an important archeological site.
03. It is also revealed that 0.20 and 0.52 acres are allotted from Plot No-255. Through another khas Land Allotment Case No 2427/90-91, 25870/91-92, 1.5 acre and 2.00 acre of land have also been allotted and thus a total of 4.22 acres out of 5.65 acres have been allotted to the allottees from this 'Haweli'. Thus the 'Haweli' which is about 5.65 acres have already lost 4.22 acres of land due to awkward and unreasonable allotment ignoring the underlying rules and regulation of land management and land administration system of the country.
04. The still un-leased land there simply indicates that these places of land are not supposed to be leased out. Here it is crystal clear that two contradictory principles have been followed by leasing some part of the 'Haweli' while un-leasing or keeping intact a smaller portion, which itself ultimately culminates into a gross anomaly in the allotment process of the land by the then revenue authority.
05. The very practice is also reflective of insincerity and indifference of the common mass, the elites, political top brass and the media as well as local administration both pertaining to revenue and development wing.
06. A place of archeology simply cannot be leased out is the clear and transparent principle of the government and it is also evident from the circumstances that the then authority never acknowledged or perceived the value of this important historical site and never did take any preventive measure for the conservation of such site rather leased it out being motivated by political or local or personal interest or whatever the case may be.

4.0 Recommendation

- i) The awkward and inconsiderate allotments should be immediately cancelled in order to protect this rare archaeological site and the whole area of 'Haweli' should be consequently brought under the direct government control and management.
- ii) The government may of its own initiative create ample of scopes for the preservers, environmentalists, researchers and think tanks to do about something for preservation of this diminishing valuable architectural site or the government on its discretion may outsource this site to some consulting and research agency who ever shows expression of interest in the conservation of this treasure trove of history and archeology.
- iii) Both the legal and illegal occupants should be shifted or ousted from this palace replacing them with another suitable land from the reservoir of other Khas land.
- iv) The unauthorized and uncontrolled excavation work should be immediately stopped. This can definitely help protect this archeological site from being sunken into oblivion.
- v) Active measures can be taken and budget from the concerned head can be allocated and released to categorically and gradually develop this 'Haweli' as a unique tourist spot in conjunction with the connectivity and linkage with another lucrative tourist spot the 'Tangua Haor'- a proposed and unparallel going to be tourist spot at Tahirpur.
- vi) The Royal Palace or 'Haweli' is a treasure trove of anthropology and archeology with rare and valuable stones which are definitely an object of research. Hence, some pecuniary penalty system may be imposed upon those who randomly and irrationally excavate this site. This would definitely help to protect the archeologically and anthropologically significant topography with a rich cultural heritage.

5.0 Conclusion

The palace or the 'Haweli' undoubtedly holds immense possibilities and prospects for Bangladesh and the author of this paper firmly believes that it can unfurl some new or unexplored areas of research and expertise with the underlying facts and information found about the ancient civilization of Bangladesh. It can add new dimension in the thesaurus of ancient conservable civilization like 'Mahasthan Gar' or 'Lalmai-Maynamati' or even 'Mohenjo Daro and Harappa' civilization. Moreover, this can be turned into an ideal research lab for the archeologists, researchers, conservationists, environmentalists and think tanks of the country who perpetually hover for innovation, exploration and creation. The 'Haweli' can also decipher a new and unknown chapter about the culture and heritage of our race paving ways and means for the anthropologists to go ahead with newer findings. The place can very easily be turned into an attractive, high-income yielding tourist spot which would have connectivity with 'Tanguar Haor' tourist spot. This sort of tourist spot has mainly two-fold advantages. These are that, they uniquely serve as treasure trove of beauty and bounty and yield genuine pleasure and pure entertainment to the tourists while being remote and inaccessible; such a tourist-spot would not allure other stakeholders in the urbanization process in contrast to other tourist spots. The second advantage that this sort of tourist-spot can yield is that such tourism centre can bring about a radical change in the socio-economic life of the poverty-stricken natives of Tahirpur. The government should come forward with initiatives and mission, proper budgets and allocation along with a host of archeologists, researchers, conservationists, environmentalists, think tanks and researchers who can make positive, important and valuable contribution in this respect. The author believes that the 'Haweli' should be immediately declared as 'Safe Zone' and be brought under safe-custody and protection network of the government machinery. Upon considering the findings and suggestion and if timely action and measures are taken, it can be concluded with optimism that this important treasure trove of archeology would not extinct rather it would attract tourists, serve as treasure trove of the rich beauties and bounties of Nature, a gnomonic home of information for the archeologists, environmentalists, anthropologist and many other think-tanks of the society.

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