

SHAKHARI PATTI - A UNIQUE OLD CITY SETTLEMENT

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ABSTRACT :

Dhaka is famous for its traditional art and craft for centuries. Many of its old localities bear the names of the trades or crafts which were once practiced there. Shakhari Patti is one such old locality. The name implies that the area began as a settlement of 'Shakharees' or a community of craftsmen specialized in making conch shell ornaments. Most of the inhabitants of this area belong to a specific caste of the Hindu religion and practice till today the traditional craftsmanship handed down to them over generations. In the urban context of Dhaka, Shakhari Patti has its significance in more than one way, Culturally the area houses a specific ethnic group, socio-economically it provides trade and business for a very special kind of crafts and architecturally it offers a development pattern and morphological characteristics that is typical to the area. Recent condition of Shakhari Patti clearly indicates an active process of decay and destruction primarily attributed to unplanned growth, over densification and poor maintenance. The purpose of the paper is to make an objective analysis of Shakhari Patti and identify the area as a case for socio-economic conservation. The paper is based on a survey undertaken by fourth years students of architecture under the guidance of the authors.

LOCATION AND IDENTITY

Shakhari Patti has grown over four centuries along a narrow 10-12 feet wide road, 600 feet long which connects Islampur Road with Nawabpur road. Rows of densely built walk up houses having very narrow frontages, 10-12 feet on the average flank the street. In the street front manufacturing and sale of conch shell and other items are carried out. The rear part of the ground floor and the upper floors are used for residential accommodations. A high plinth, triple arch in ground floor facade, overlooking balconies in the street front and a decorated parapet are the typical architectural features of shakhari patti. Building plots have great depths up to 90 feet compared to their narrow frontal widths. High population density, lack of open (space (percentage of built up area 80% - 90%) inadequate utilities and services, poor sanitation together with other socio-economic factors caused a general degradation of the area and that helped eventual degeneration of the buildings and their environmental condition. At present poor slum like condition persists all over the Shakhari Patti.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

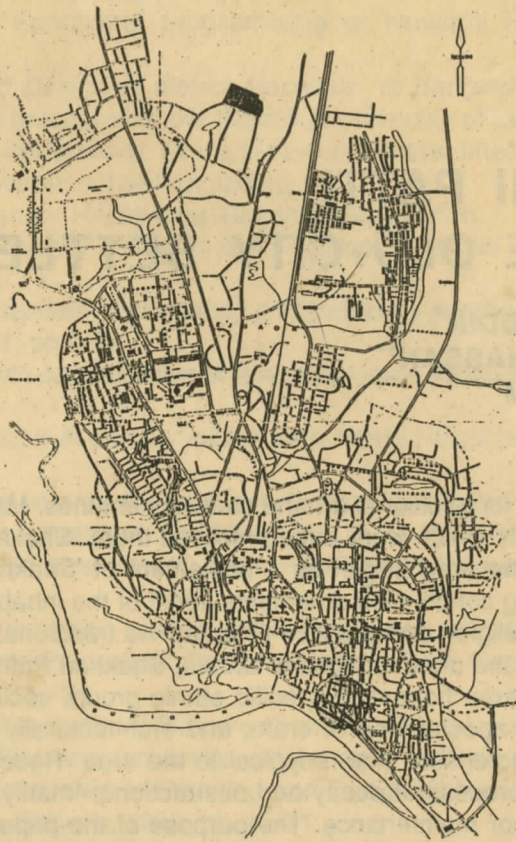
Shakharees were original inhabitants of Karnataka, South India, migrated to this region some 800 years ago and settled in vikrampura, the second capital of the Senas, during the reign of Maharaja

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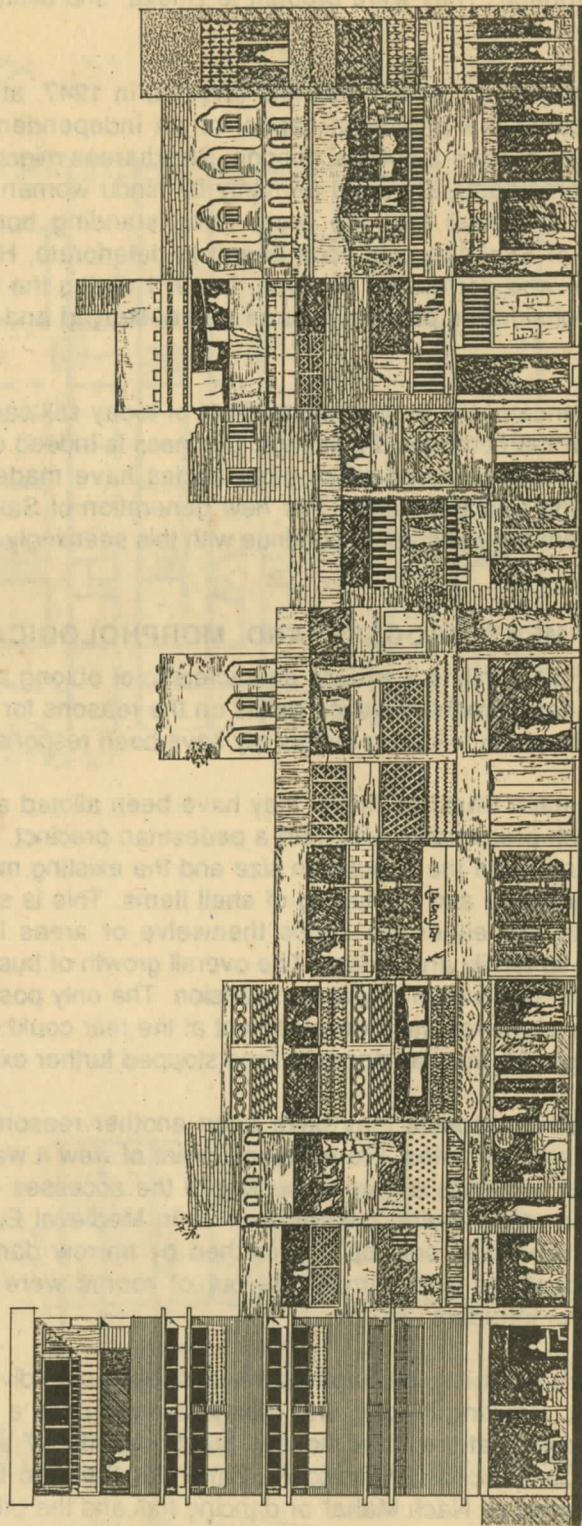
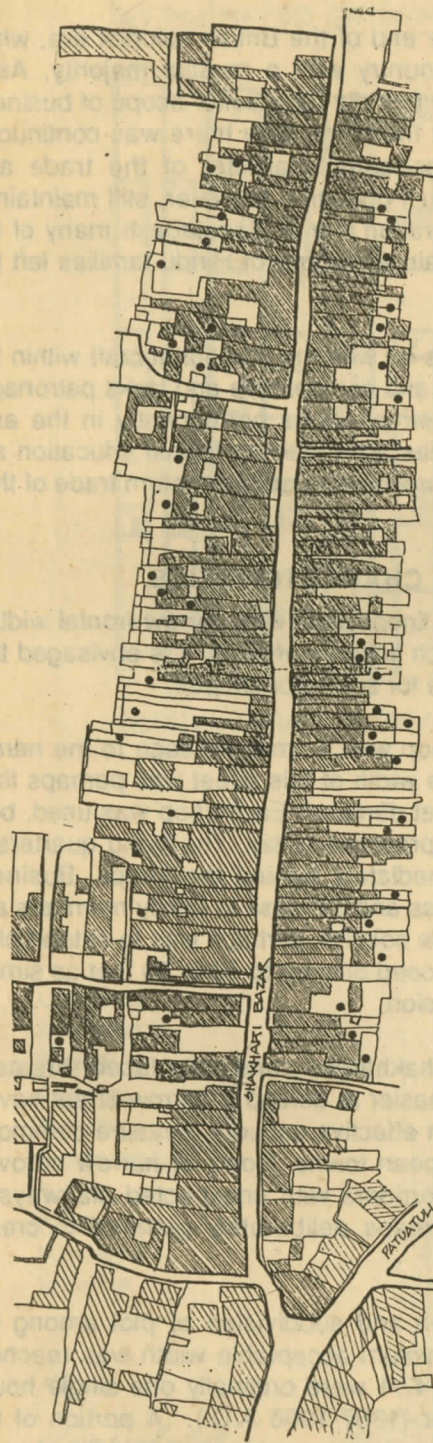
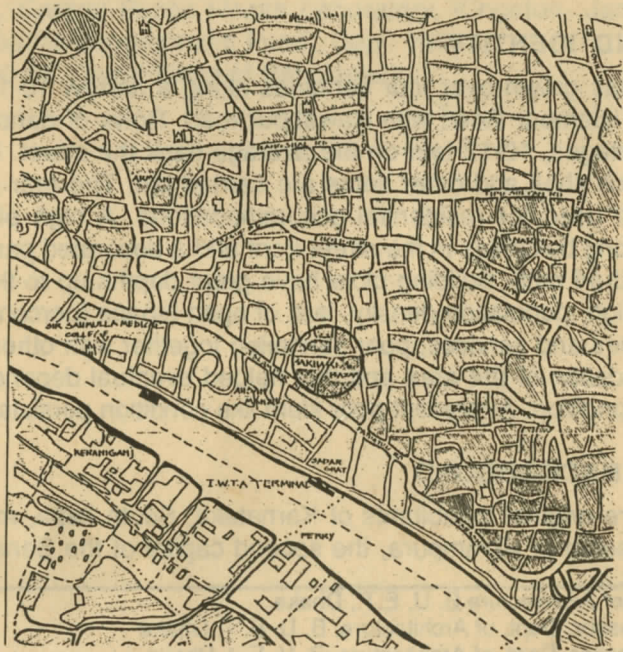
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LOCATION
OF SHAKHARI-PATTI
IN DHAKA CITY.



LOCATION
OF SHAKARI-PATTI
WITH RESPECT
TO OLD CITY



STREET ELEVATION
FIG. 4

Ballal Sen (1158-1179 A.D.). In the following period during the Moghul rule, Sakharees received official patronage. They were brought to Dhaka, and allotted free land in the present Shakhari Patti area.

The continuity of its growth was first arrested in 1947. at the end of the British colonial era, when Dhaka became the provincial capital of an independent country with a muslim majority. As a consequence of such a political change, Shakharees migrated to India for a better scope of business as Shaka ornaments are used primarily by hindu women. At the same time there was continuous infiltration by others into the area. Long standing homogeneous character of the trade and population of Shakhari patti soon began to deteriorate, Hindu Population however, still maintained its majority and dominated the area. In 1971 during the liberation war of Bangladesh many of the houses of shakharee patti were burnt and destroyed and again a number of Hindu families left the country.

As a remnance of the past Shakhari Patti of today still carries on with the traditional craft within the premises of the century old buildings. Business is indeed dull and competetive and lacks patronage. On the other hand a varient of other trades have made their positions permanently in the area alongside the traditional craft. The new generation of Sakhaies are receiving formal education and many of them are reluctant to continue with this seemingly unprospective and low return trade of their forefathers.

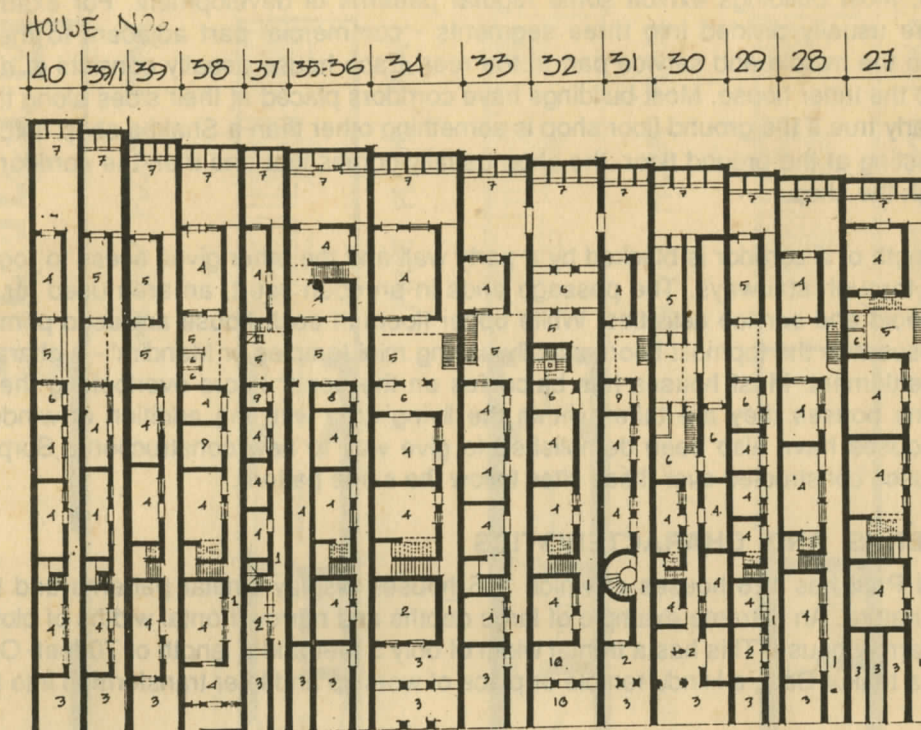
DEVELOPMENT PROCESS AND MORPHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Shakhari Patti exhibits a striking characterstic of oblong and linear plots with narrow frontal widths. No general agreement however, exists on the reasons for such linearity of plots. It is envisaged that one or more of the following factors my have been responsible for such plot shapes:

1. Initially, each Shakhari family may have been allotted a shop with a small frontage to the narrow street, which presumably was then a pedestrian precinct. The width of this street was perhaps fixed in accordance with the population size and the existing market demand. Each shop was used. both for manufacturing and marketing of shell items. This is still practiced today. The living quarters of Shakharees are either the shops themselve or areas immediately behind the shops. Business developed as family enterprises. The overall growth of business and increase in family members and labour force, demanded physical expansion. The only possible solution perhaps was to extend plots backwards. However, such development at the rear could proceed only up to 70 to 80 feet as similar backward growth from an opposite lane stopped further extension.

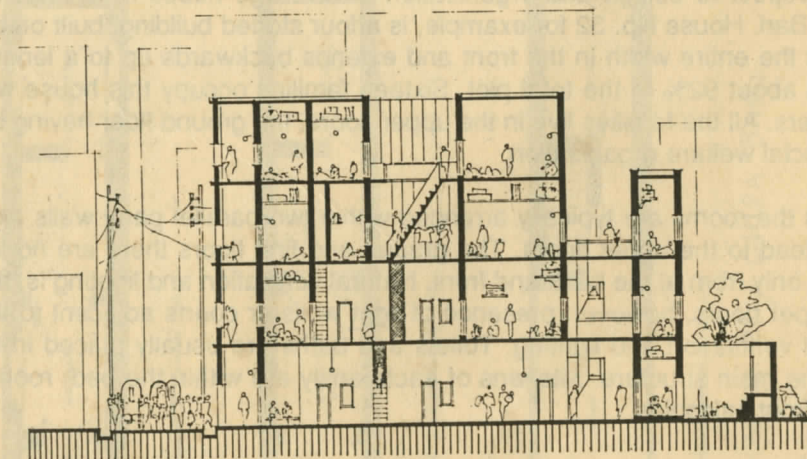
2. The security aspects may have been another reason. Shakharees constantly faced threats of burglaries and robberies. From security point of view it was easier to defend a narrow street having openings at two ends simply by sealing of the accesses - an effective security measure cemmonly practised in many Indian citie as well as in Medieval European towns. Rows of narrow introvert houses which could only be approached by narrow dark corridors with unexpected stairways in different locations and complex layout of rooms were perhaps deliberately planned to create confusion for intruders.

3. Another possibility perhaps was the subsequent division and subdivision of plot among the successors resulting in long and narrow shapes untill a minimum acceptable width was reached. Survey shows that the three houses numbered 46, 47 and 47/1 were originally one single house owned by a landlord of Manikganj, Zamindar Balaram Dhar (1857-1906 A.D.). A portion of the building served as Nach Mahal' or dancing hall and the other part was used for residential purposes. The plot was initially 60 feet by 90 feet. Successers have now divied the original plot into three smaller ones.



GENERAL LAYOUT PATTERN STREET

- 1. CORRIDOR
- 2. WORKSHOP.
- 3. SHOP.
- 4. LIVING.
- 5. BATH.
- 6. KITCHEN.
- 7. TOILET.
- 8. TERRACE.
- 9. TEMPLE
- 10. OFFICE



SCALE: 1/16" = 1'-0"
HOUSE NO. 32 / TYPICAL LAYOUT PATTERN OF HOUSES

Shakhari Patti has developed virtually on a piecemeal basis over a long span of time. In spite of such sporadic growth, most buildings exhibit some regular patterns of development. For example the ground floors are usually divided into three segments - commercial part adjacent to the street, residential part in the middle and service part at the rear. Each house usually consists of a narrow corridor leading to the inner house. Most buildings have corridors placed at their sides along the edge of plots, particularly true if the ground floor shop is something other than a Shakha shop. In case of a Shakha shop existing at the ground floor, the shop usually comes first and then the corridor runs to the house through the shop.

Typically, one length of a corridor is blocked by a party wall and the other gives access to rooms and the upper floors through stairways. The passage ends in an open court, an area used for various domestic, household and service activities. While upper floors in each house are used primarily for residential purposes with the topmost floors usually having mini temples or Mandirs - a characteristic feature of this settlement. Most houses has balconies on the upper floors overlooking the street. However, in some houses they are taken within the living area with the addition of windows. In Shakhari Patti houses have also been demolished to give way to new constructions. Surprisingly enough, new houses constructed over those sites follow the same pattern.

HOUSE PATTERNS AND CHARACTERISTICS

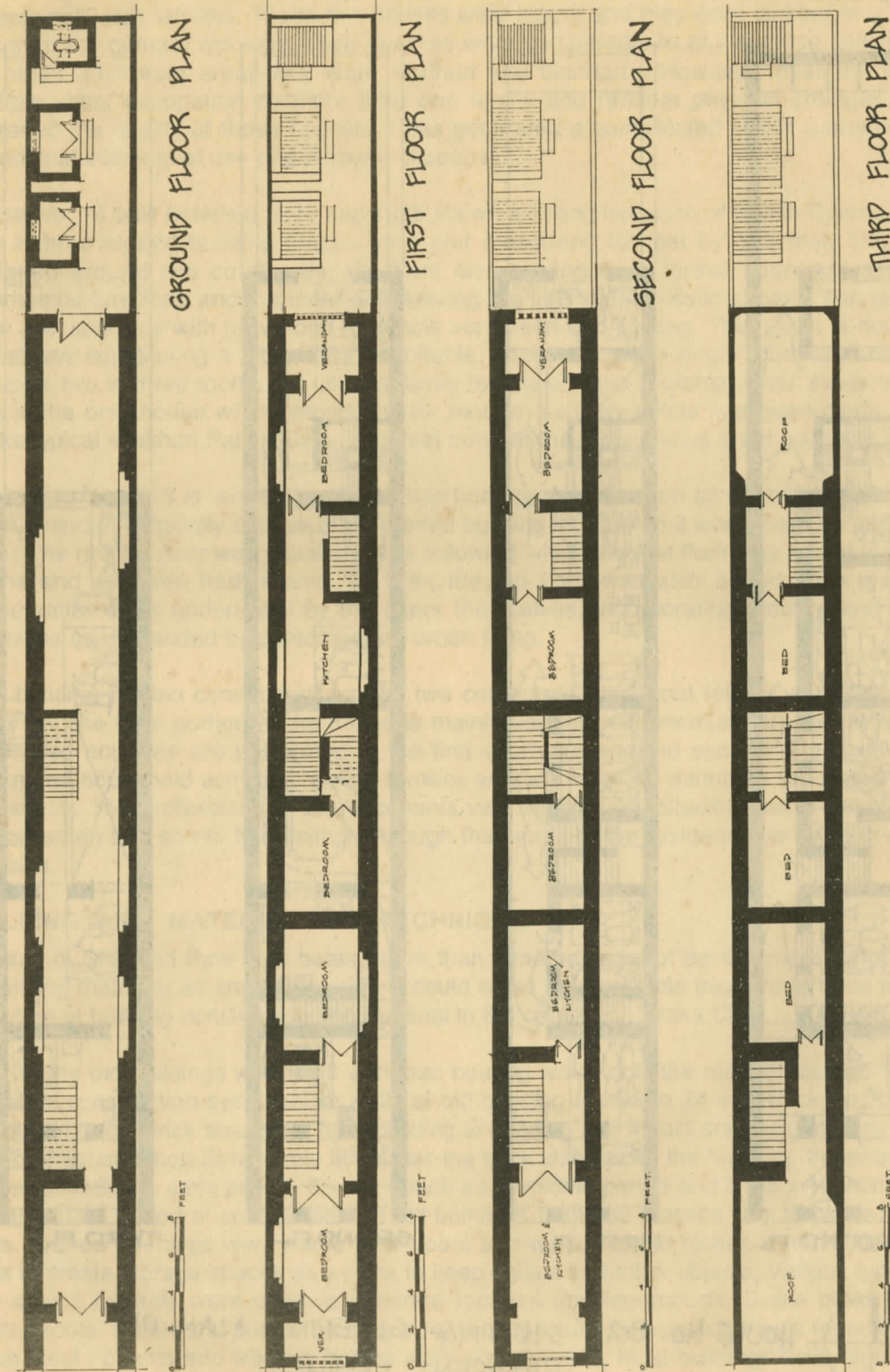
In total Shakhari Patti has 126 houses of which 115 houses display similar patterns and the rest being diverse in nature. An extreme example of large depths and narrow frontal widths of plots is the 'Chipa Bari', or narrow house. This has a frontal width of only 5 feet and a length of 70 feet. Originally it was known as a thakur Ban, a Hindu temple or place of worship and later transformed into house.

A description of 'Chipa Bari' originally known as a 'Thakur Bari', a Hindu temple or place of worship and later transformed into a house would give an indication of the typical use pattern of an old Shakhari Patti house. A total of twelve families are presently presiding in this building. The front portion of each floor consists of a verandah and two bed room, the middle portion consists of one bed room while the back portion has two bed rooms and a verandah at the rear. Interestingly enough each portion is served by separate staircases without creating any cross circulation. Toilets and wash areas are detached from the main house and are commonly shared by all families. No. separate provisions for kitchens exist and family cookings are done in respective bed rooms.

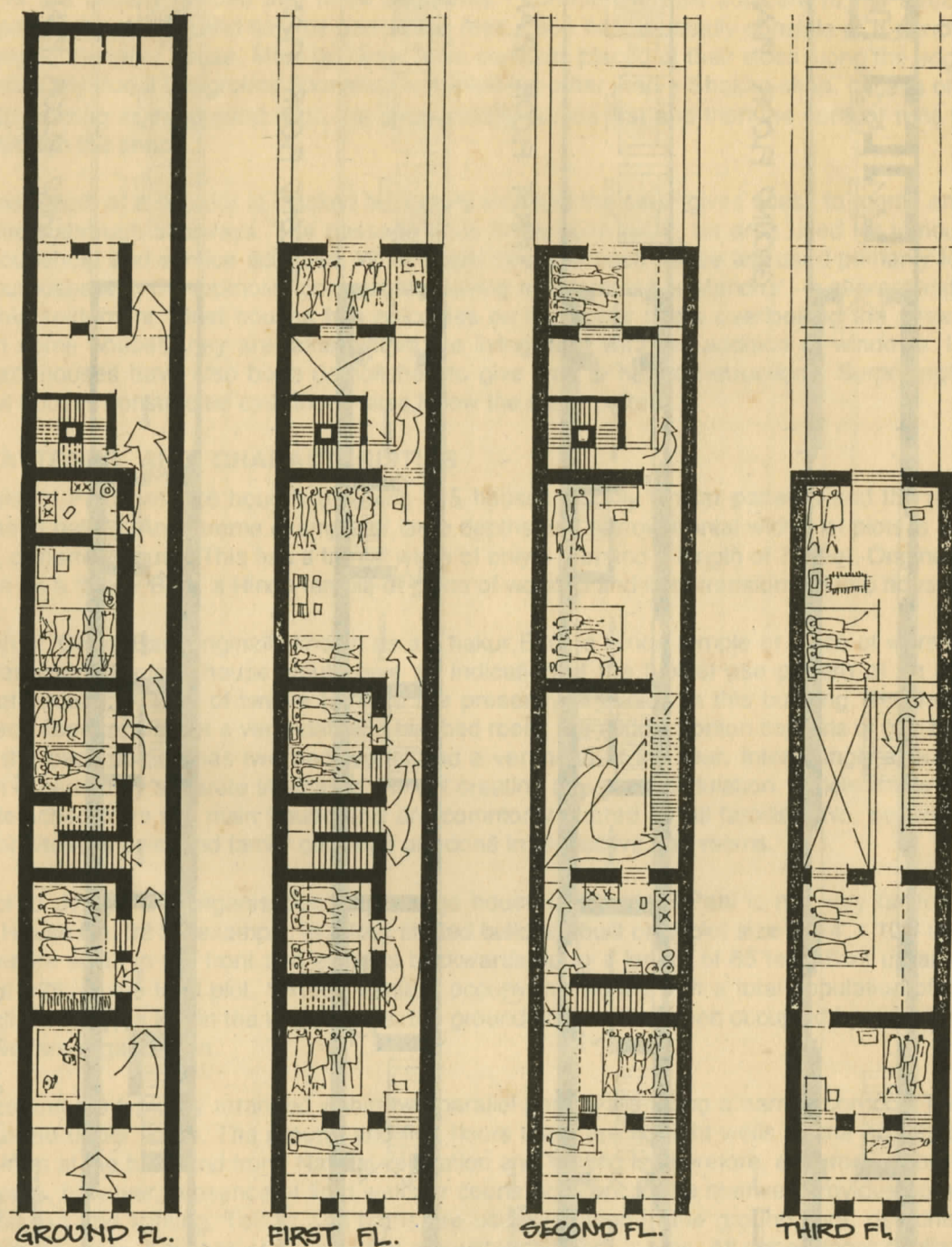
With respect to design and organisation an average house in Shakhari Patti is not very far from Chipa Bari. House No. 32 for example, is a four storied building, built on a plot size of 14' x 105' and covers the entire width in the front and extends backwards up to a length of 85 feet. Built up area covers about 92% of the total plot. Sixteen families occupy this house with a total population of 60 members. All the families live in the upper floors, the ground floor having been occupied by the office of a social welfare organisation.

In plan the rooms are typically arranged within two parallel party walls along a narrow corridor. Two stairs lead to the upper floors. The ground and first floors there are no light wells so the access of light is only from at the back and front. Natural ventilation and lighting is, therefore, extremely poor. In the upper floors, however, presence of light wells or courts adjacent to the stairwell provides some natural ventilation and lighting. Toilets and baths are usually placed in the ground floor, detached from the main structure. Kitchens of each family are within the bed rooms. All upper floors contain street front balconies.

Narrow plot configurations has imposed so much restrictions on the physical growth that the people were left with very limited choices. This typology appears to be a natural outcome of the very socio-physical condition within which the people had to operate.



HOUSE NO. 92 / CHIPA BARI



HOUSE No. 32 / SHOWING SLEEPING PLAN OF DIFFERENT FAMILIES.

Shakhari Patti now appears no more than an inner city slum inhabited by a poor section of Hindu community. In the past this area was occupied in general by middle class people along with some exceptionally rich families. Those rich houses were bigger and they were laid out in a quite different way from the general typology. Their qualities were comparable to any of those buildings located in the hindu aristocrat areas like Wari, Narinda and Gandaria. However, over the years through multiple uses, occupation by more than one family and random physical changes have greatly degraded the quality of those houses. It has generated a complicated layout pattern that confused the original intention of use and purpose of spaces.

House No. 14 built between 1900 and 1925 shows a strong influence of British Colonial Architecture. It is a three storied building placed on a plot measuring 32 feet by 100 feet. The building was designed around two courtyards, the front one serving as a formal courtyard associated with commercial functions and the inner one serving the informal domestic chores. The building plan is open and spacious with provisions for ample ventilation and lighting. The house is now occupied by 13 families constituting a total of 73 inhabitants. There are some single room families and the rest occupies two to three rooms. As usual a family temple or 'Puja (worship) Ghar' exists on the roof top. This is the only house where provisions for modern sanitary toilets has been made in each floor. Unlike typical shakhari Patti houses, its street front or the ground level is not occupied by shops.

The house No. 123 is an unique one. It has been recently built on an old building site following the original model. Originally built as a two storied building in 1894-95 it was totally burnt down by fire in 1971. The ground floor was rebuilt in 1974 following which the first floor was added in 1980 with bed rooms and attached bath rooms. In 1984 the top floor was also added. In a way this was a conservation work undertaken by the users themselves, incorporating modern and technological amenities as demanded by contemporary urban living.

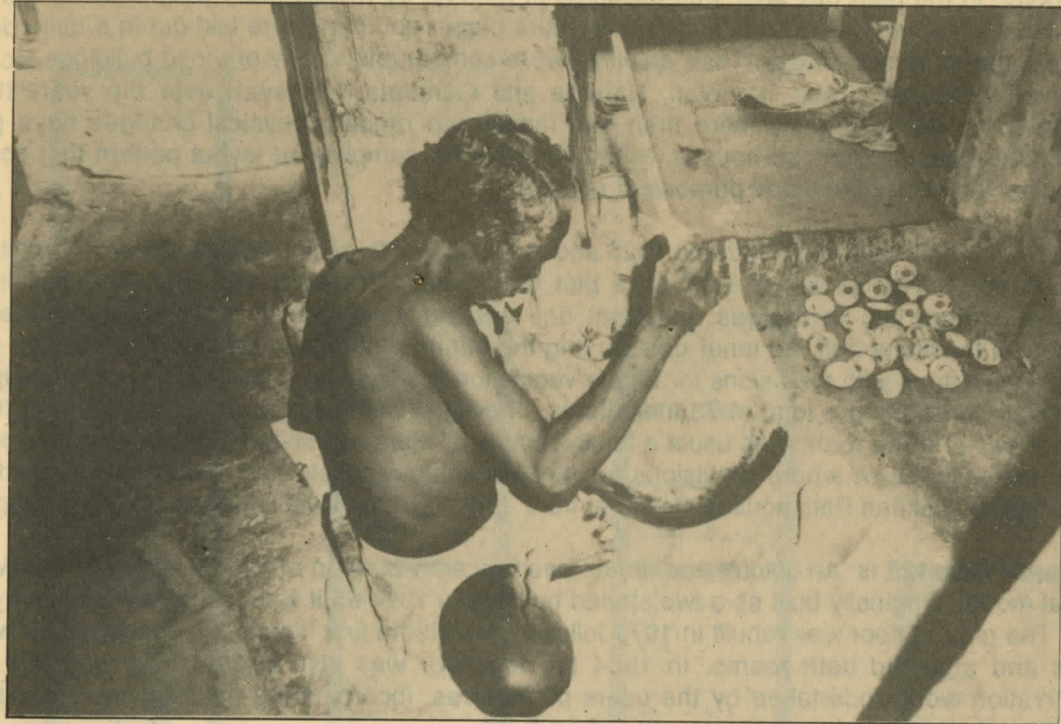
This building is also constructed around two courtyards. Its layout follows some standard activity patterns. The front portion of the house is mainly used for commercial purpose. Most of the male dominated activities are performed in the first courtyard and the second one is used for female dominated household activities. Seven families with a total of 43 members are presently occupying this house. The professions of the occupants vary widely from Shakharees to goldsmiths, artists, businessmen and so on. Interestingly enough that some of the residents are living there as long as 90 years.

BUILDING ART, MATERIAL AND TECHNIQUE

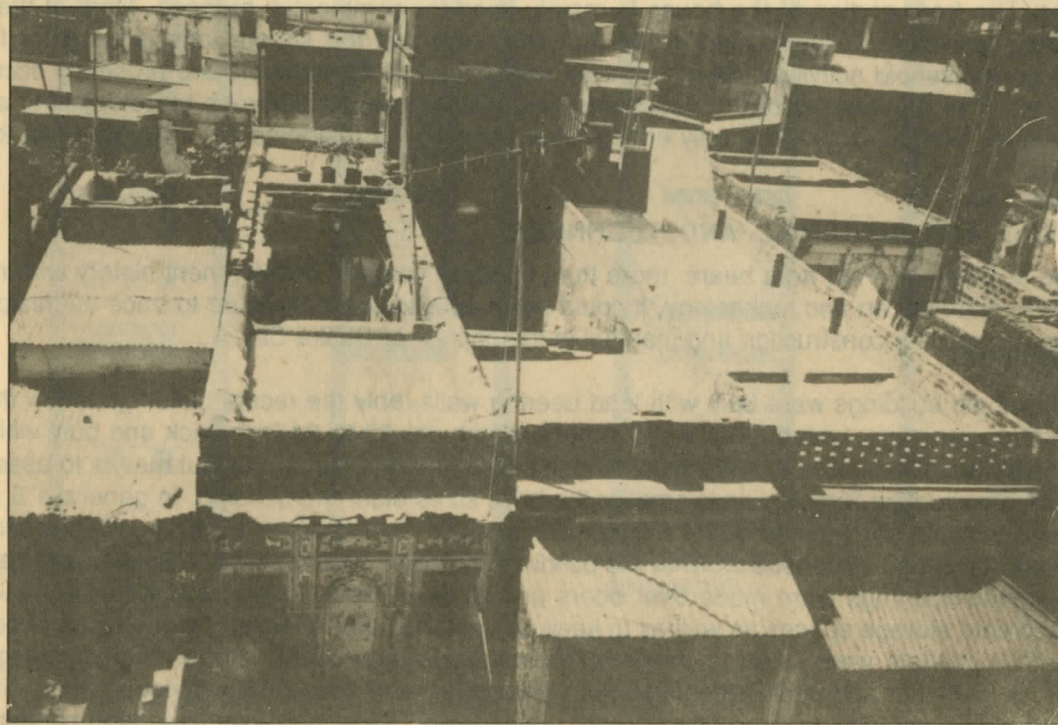
Building of Shakhari Patti area bears more than hundred years of development history with respect to building material, art and technology. It could serve as a valuable treasure to trace the history and evolution of building construction and material in the context of Dhaka City.

Most of the old buildings were built with load bearing walls, only the recent buildings follow the post and lintel construction system. The walls of old building are 20 to 24 inch thick and built with brick, lime and mortar. Brick sizes vary from building to building and in fact are useful means to assess the period of construction. Simple rule is smaller the brick sizes older the building. In general 1.5 x 4 x 6 inch sizes indicate early period, 2 x 4 x 8 inch sizes middle period and 3 x 5 x 10 inch sizes indicate contemporary period of construction. In old buildings common practice was to plaster and paint the walls. Arched openings were made over doors and windows and niches were recessed inside the walls to create storage spaces as well as to keep deities and other objects. Various types of columns with ornate capitals were used to decorate facades and innercourts. Some older building have vaulted roofs. Rafter and purline technique for roof construction was commonly found in buildings for which steel I beams and wooden beams were equally used, Most buildings have high plinths of 2-3 feet above street level. However, ^{there} was no agreement on ceiling heights as they vary widely from

safely while watching the Shakharees at work thereby feeling nostalgia of the past.



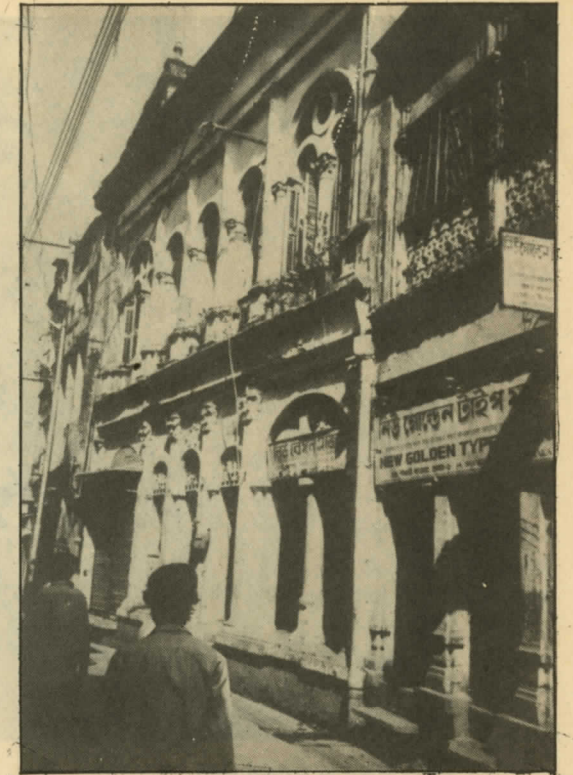
A Shakharee at work



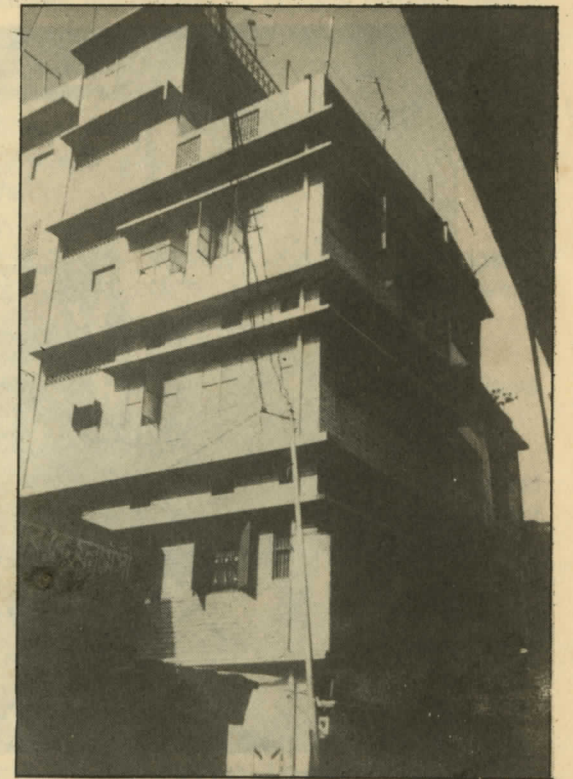
Parapet Walls in roofs Showing Narrow Plot Divisions.



Narrow Street of Shakharee Patti Defined by Building Line



Decorative Facades of Shakharee Patti



New Construction Incongruous to existing Built-Forms



Entrance to Chipa Bari



A one Room Family of China Bari

building to building. In some extreme cases they are so low that they barely miss the head in upright position.

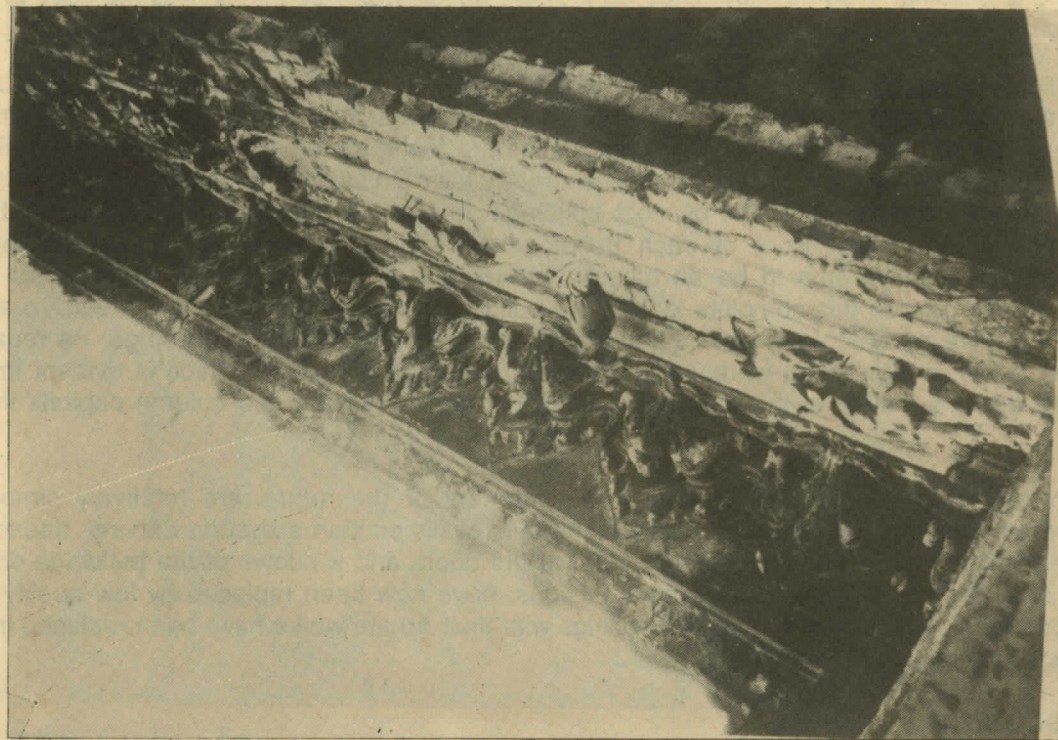
Repetition of some common building features and uniformity in architectural treatment has brought about a harmony and continuity in the overall development of Shakhari Patti area. For example, in the treatment of ground floor facades triple arches are found common to almost all old buildings. Only the ornate works surrounding the arches vary widely from building to building. It is interesting to note that while the rear portions of most buildings are either unfinished or incomplete stage of construction, the street front of each building invariably possesses a finished or complete appearance. There seems to be an inherent desire and a concerted effort on the part of the inhabitants to provide this complete look to the buildings when viewed from the street. To achieve this, decorative parapet walls have often been constructed to terminate buildings. As regards to building crafts, a high stage of development was undoubtedly reached which is evident from the intricate designs visible in the cast iron balcony railings, brackets and column capitals in Nach Mahal.

In contrast to the decorative building fronts interiors of the rooms are relatively simple and unadorned. Only the niches or recesses in the thick walls contain elaborate carving. Interiors are mostly painted white using lime mortar. Most of the doors and windows of the buildings originally made of expensive wood with decorative designs, have now been replaced by low quality wood, steel or mild steel sheets. Old cast iron railings with their ornate works have been replaced in many buildings with ordinary metal grills.

CONCLUSION

The ownership pattern of Shakhari Patti houses are very complex. In recent times many of the ownership are through prolonged occupation rights. Houses are owned by several families and in fact ownership is limited to rooms only and that gives the right to use other services as well. The complex ownership pattern and insecurity due to declining business of Shakharees and dilapidated condition of houses leading to poor rent structure are the primary factors responsible for the degradation of the whole area. Hence, the conservation of Shakhari Patti would mean a socio-physical conservation. Simply because one is not possible without the other. To do such a conservation work the following recommendations are made:

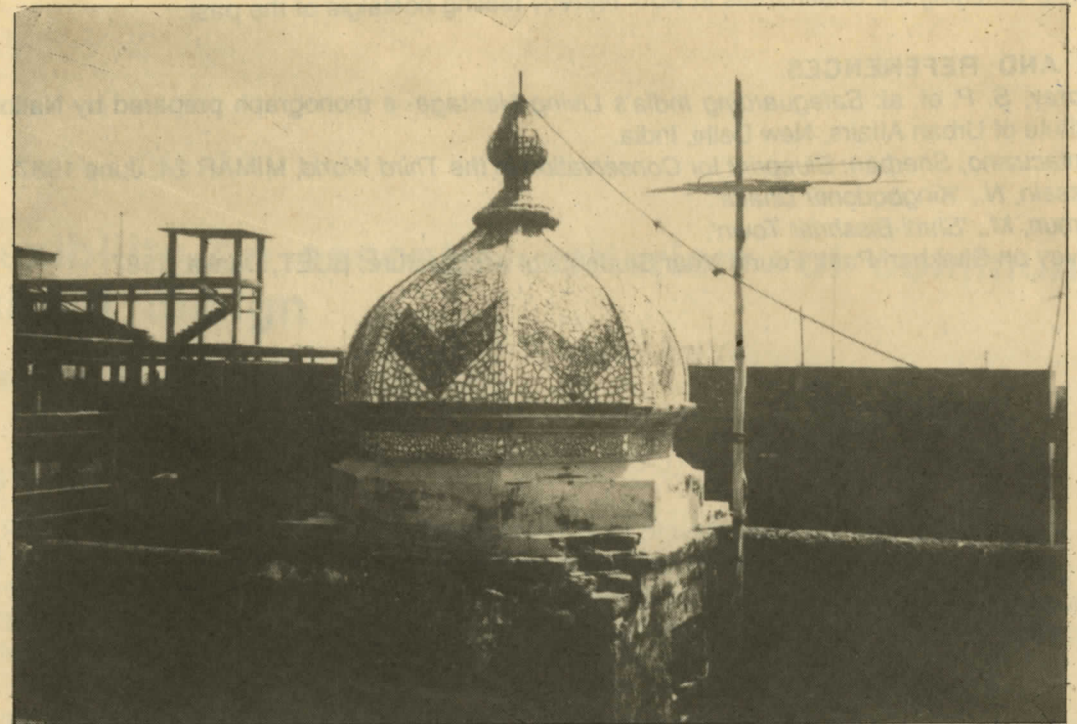
1. Like other cottage industries Shakhari business are to obtain official support and patronage by means of soft loans, better market facilities and easy system of procurement of raw materials which comes from abroad. In this respect Shakharees do not receive any such incentives.
2. Infiltration of other business in that area are to be discouraged or stopped through restrictive laws. The area should be considered as an Artisans Village to encourage the traditional craft.
3. Legislation or by-laws should be formulated to declare the site as an area for architectural conservation to restrict demolition of old buildings and to preserve the traditional flavour. To do that following necessary measures are to be taken to resolve some of the basic problem of the area:
 - (a) Some kind of official ownership right should be given to the users on the basis of which loans can be advanced for property improvement. Any plan for development will simply fail without users participation in Shakhari Patti.
 - (b) Technical assistance will be necessary to improve the houses which should be made available. Better houses will improve rent structure and that will eventually help to lower the density problem.
 - (c) Modern traffic is incompatible for the narrow street of Shakharee Patti. The street has a pleasant pedestrian scale and therefore, should be converted to a pedestrian lane so that one could walk



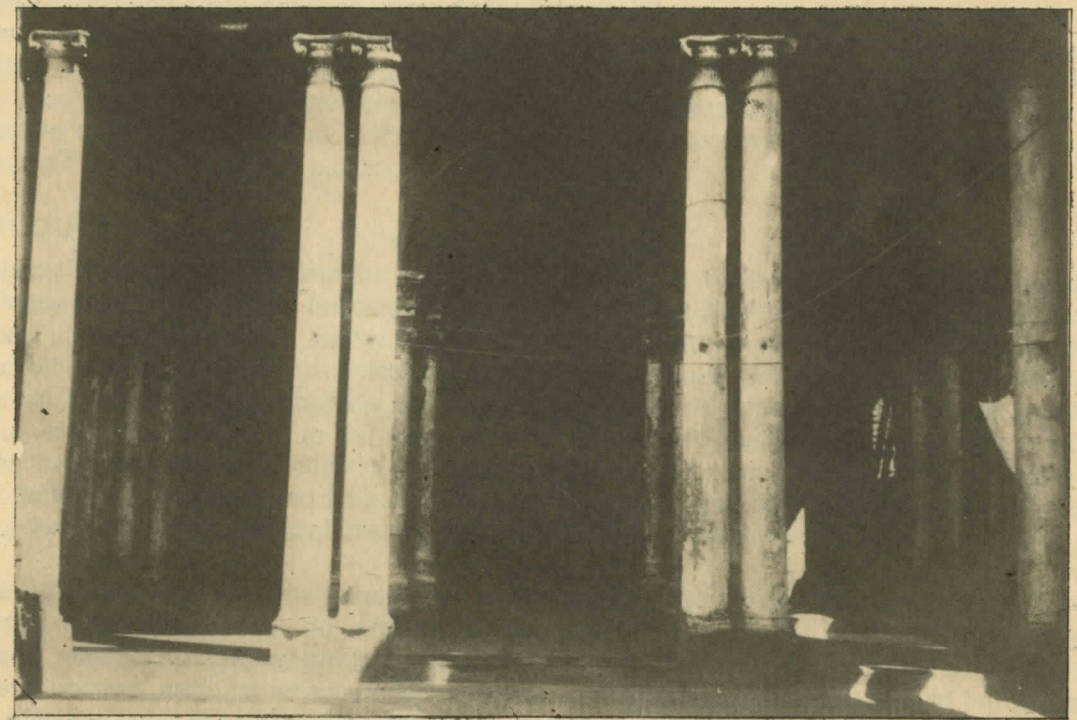
Cornice decoration of 'Nach Mahal'



Decorated drop wall over the verandah of 'Nach Mahal'



Roof top Mandir in 'Nach Mahal' resembling typical dome of a Mosque



Pillars in the dance Hall of 'Nach Mahal'

safely while watching the Shakharees at work thereby feeling nostalgia of the past.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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