

Built in grand style, with classical Greek and Roman influences, and once home to royal and affluent families, India's rajbari palaces are being restored and repurposed as heritage hotels.

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A conch is blown, bells ring, drums are beaten and sonorous Vedic chants sound out against the backdrop of lamps (*diyas*) lit by women clad in white and red saris.

Sandhya aarti is a ritual that takes place like clockwork every dusk at the Rajbari Bawali boutique hotel, connecting the past with the present. Sitting on the lawn in the middle of the rajbari's large courtyard with other guests, I am transported back to an era in which this home's entire family would have congregated in this place every evening.

"Rajbari" is the name given to a particular kind of Indian palace. Strictly speaking, a rajbari housed royalty, while the homes of affluent landlords – hereditary tax collectors from the pre-colonial era – are called "zamindar baris", although the words are used interchangeably.

After Indian independence, in 1947, many zamindars and kings lost their wealth, and some rajbaris were put to income-generating uses, either as film locations or as theatres. Many fell into disrepair and some of those with multiple owners became the object of family feuds. Only a few are still occupied by the families that originally owned them; others are being converted into heritage stays or boutique hotels such as the 35-room Rajbari Bawali.

"Rajbaris were [...] generally inspired by Roman and Greek as well as European architecture, which wealthy people saw on their travels either for trade or studies in those days and were aspirational," explains Ashish Acharjee, a Kolkata-based architect who works on conservation projects and is writing a book about rajbaris.



"With huge Corinthian pillars that gave it a regal aura, high ceilings, Kolkata shutters, arcaded verandas, stained-glass work, pilasters and wrought ironwork, often built around a huge courtyard, these rajbaris were spread all over Bengal. The majority of these palaces were built in the 1700s and 1800s with the help of military engineers, from a limestone and brick dust mixture, with Burmese teak for support. Most rajbaris had a typical structure – the *andar mahal* [women's quarters] and *nat mandir* [temple], as well as the *thakur dalan* [a large platform leading up a flight of stairs from a public courtyard]."

It was just such a rajbari that Kolkata-based jute exporter Ajay Rawla discovered and fell in love with in 2008.

He had been searching the village of Bawali – two hours from Kolkata – and its surrounding area for land on which to build a warehouse.

The palace was derelict and the restoration process started with him getting in touch with all 18 of its owners, who had to be appeased and persuaded to sell. The building was then restored over eight years.

Plumbing, air conditioning and lighting had to be installed anew. Masons from Murshidabad were trained in lime construction at the Aga Khan Foundation, and other artisans were schooled in the art of traditional brickmaking. Care was taken to employ authentic materials and retain a sense of bygone times. Original wooden

shutters were painstakingly removed for reuse in the reborn property. Cast-iron pillars and railings were sourced from old homes that were being demolished in North Kolkata.

The restoration work received an award for excellence from the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and Rajbari Bawali is now a member of RARE India, a collection of boutique hotels, palace stays, wildlife lodges and homestays that offer immersive experiences to travellers.

The approach to the restoration is evident in the columns left half plastered, exposed brick walls and an aged patina to almost everything on the property: distressed walls and furniture, chandeliers of wrought iron and old