

The beautiful Star Mosque at Mahuttuly was built in Mughal style architecture. Mirza Ghulam Pir, a highly respected Zamindar, built the mosque with three domes in the early 18th century. Presently five-domed the surface decoration of the mosque is many twinkling stars created by setting pieces of chinaware on white cement and the front view from afar looks as if they were shining above the earth.

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## Heritage buildings vanishing fast from city's skyline

DURDANA GHILAS

There was a time when a walk through the meandering alleys of old Dhaka would remind one of the rich past of the city. A large number of beautifully designed old buildings used to adorn the streets. But now scores of high-rise apartment buildings have replaced them.

These old buildings and magnificent edifices are vanishing gradually from the city's skyline as the owners of these buildings tend to demolish them to construct apartment buildings, raising concern about conservation of heritage buildings of the 400-year-old city.

"If we cannot save these buildings the rich fabric of the city's old parts will be torn apart," said a conservation architect.

"The city is losing its past glory. If we do not preserve these buildings then one day we will not be able to differentiate old Dhaka. Its wealthy past will be lost forever," said Nasir, a wood trader at Farashganj.

Several old buildings at Shankharibazar, Tantibazar, Farashganj and other areas of the old part of the city bearing the concrete evidence of the city's rich past have been demolished or await demolition.

In several reports published in Star City this year on Barabari at Farashganj, Nimtoli Deuri and a magnificent edifice at Tantibazar presented a picture of vulnerable state of the city's heritage buildings.

Star City also reported the steady demolition and vulnerable existence of old edifices like 600-year old Binat Bibi Mosque at Narinda, 150-year old Ruplal House at Farashganj, 120-year old Bhawal Raja's Kachharibari (tax office) and retreat at Nolgola, and 87-year old Shankhanidhi House on Tipu Sultan Road which has turned into an automobile workshop.

Experts, historians and conservation architects working in this field expressed concern over the state of heritage buildings.

"The buildings from different periods evince architectural styles of those times that help us learn about the particular dominant trend of that period. If we lose these buildings then we will lose forever the concrete evidence of those architectural styles," said Taimur Islam, a conservation architect.

"Though the owners followed Mughal or European style there was a local influence. Available

construction materials and local climate developed a hybrid or a unique style. The more we lose these buildings the more will we lose this knowledge of unique style," he said.

Another problem is many of the buildings are not docu-

mented yet.

"There was no comprehensive studies on different styles of these buildings and many of the demolished buildings were not documented. Therefore we are losing the architectural features forever without recording those

in photos or in a written form," said Taimur.

"A building has an impact on its surroundings. The impact is lost once the building is demolished. So saving heritage should be a part of the urban development process," he said.

Dr Sharif uddin Ahmed, professor, Department of History, Dhaka University, said heritage buildings symbolise the city's history, skill, wealth, taste, culture, architecture and technology.

"Human cannot live only on food he needs to know about his past. If a nation fails to know about its past glory then it loses respect for its country. For an example, many people of the new generation have no feeling for Dhaka. They only see the negative sides of the city. They know nothing about its past," said Dr Sharif.

"The Department of Architecture (DoA) does not have access to many enlisted sites. A social movement is needed to force the government to recover at least 10 sites of the city by land requisition," he said.

But sources said the DoA cannot play its role due to lack of proper laws and other limitations. At present at least 89 posts including 23 of officials are lying vacant in the department. Moreover, there are inaction by the authorities and a lack of awareness about heritage buildings.

Ruplal House has now turned into a big wholesale market of spices, grains, vegetables and

other food items. A signboard stating 'Noorjahan House' is hung in front of a part of the magnificent house at Farashganj.

"Is this a historical site? We don't know. We have been using this site for business for long. We pay Bangladesh Bank a monthly fee of Tk 500 to Tk 2000 using this place. We have constructed godowns to keep our goods here," said Shamsul Alam, an onion trader at Ruplal House.

Barabari in Farashganj is now halfway to demolition. The front façade of the building is magnificently ornate with luxuriant floral motifs. Curved balconies, Corinthian motifs, elevated walkways, foliage design and ornamental friezes adorning the top parts of the surrounding walls are prominent features of the building.

Now the building's front side is flanked by two timber shops selling wood beams and furniture. Besides, there are several factories and tenants occupying the historic building.

The building at 27/1, Kotowali Road (previously Hari Prashanna Mitra Road), Tantibazar, is now almost extinct as the owner of the house demolished the structure terming it 'risky' and 'uninhabitable'.

The other part of the building, with the holding number 27/2, still stands but is now at the risk of crumbling down due to the vibration caused by the demolition work of its twin, said experts.

According to residents of the area the house is at least 70 to 80 years old while conservation architects say that it can be hundred years old.

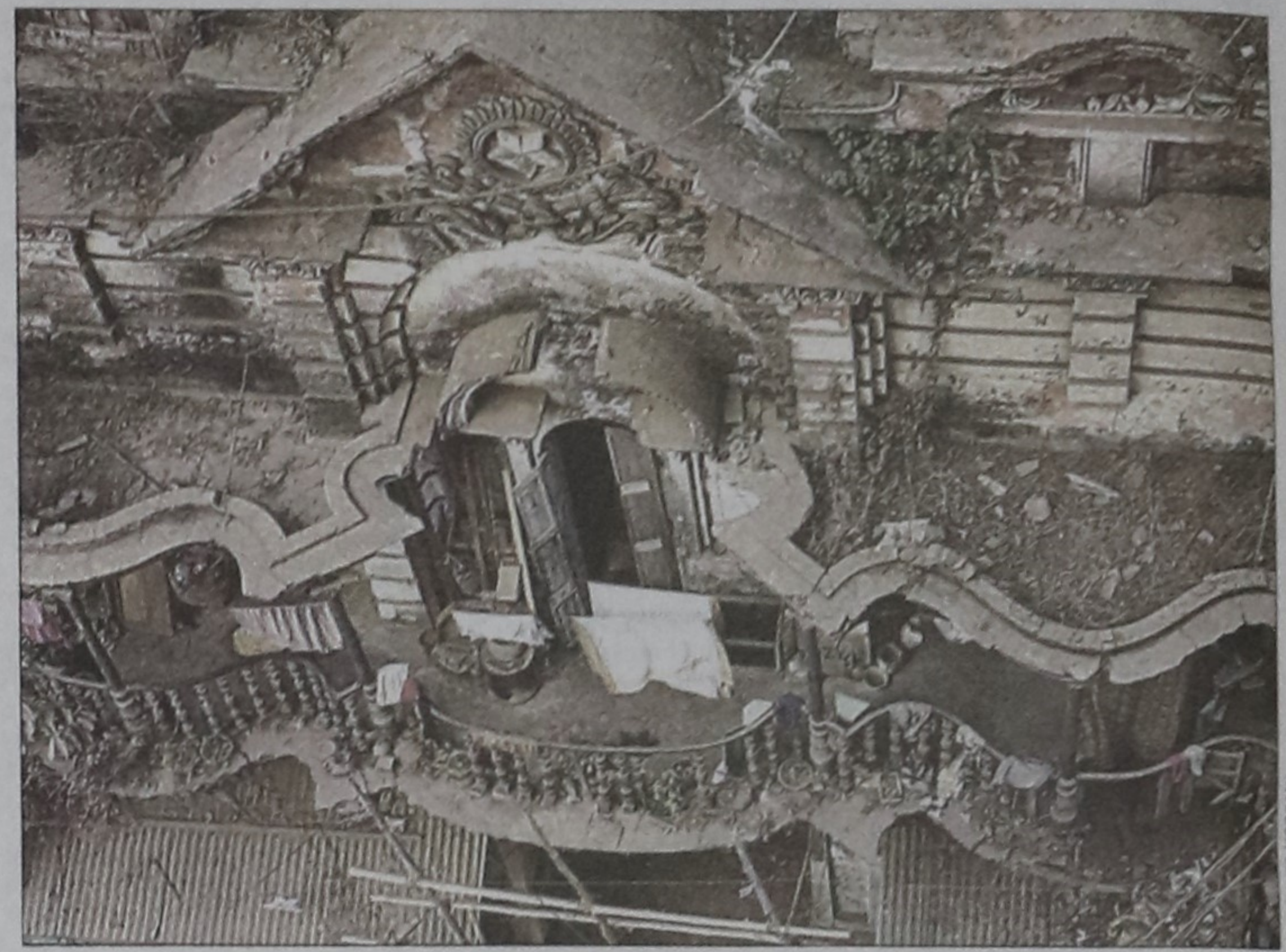
Dr Shafiqul Alam, director, DoA, said the heritage buildings are getting lost due to a combined effect of a lack of awareness among the owners, government funds constraint, limited manpower and absence of proper laws.

Besides, there is no system of compensating the owners. There is no coordination among different government agencies like DCC, Rajuk and DoA, he said. "It is very difficult to protect heritage buildings in the absence of strong government policies to motivate the owners."

"There is a lack of awareness among the owners. They only think about the commercial gains of constructing apartments. So, if we cannot provide the building owners with some incentives, then simply declaring a house as a listed site does not help at all," said Dr Alam.



Top, Shankhanidhi House at old Dhaka's Tipu Sultan Road has turned into an automobile workshop, above, Ruplal House at Farashganj is now a wholesale market of vegetables, grains and spices.



Barabari, a magnificent house at Farashganj, is being demolished.

### CONSERVATION ARCHITECTURE

## Students fear soon there will be no sites for study

Conservation architects and students of conservation architecture fear that they will have to remain content with the photographs, sketches and written accounts of the heritage buildings in future as many of the city's prominent heritage buildings have fallen victims to mindless demolition.

"Studying the old architectural buildings is an integral part of our studies. If we cannot see and draw the features of the building ourselves then the study remains incomplete," said Fahinaz, a student of conservation architecture at the University of Asia Pacific.

"Due to anomalous renovation or missing parts of the buildings sometimes we have to draw from imagination that leaves scopes for wrong

interpretations of its original features," she said.

"Besides, there is a lack of proper documentation. We try to collect old pictures, sketches, maps and stories to know about vanished structures, for an example Lohar Pool," said Fahinaz.

Many of the historical edifices are being renovated and distorted. In Chhoto Katra, a staircase is being built without any permission from the authorities. Bhajhari Lodge, an enlisted historical building, is now totally vanished, said Taimur Islam.

"The authorities do not even know whether the building exists or not. They have kept it enlisted. We have to remain content with the photographs of the building," he said.

"The knowledge of lime masonry and chini tikri is vanishing because nowadays no expert mason is found who is working on this. We can read it from books but the practical knowledge is lost," said Taimur.

Conservation Architect Dr Abu Sayeed M Ahmed said there are two ways to know about past architectural style -- on site evidence and literature. "If we do not know about the real buildings and depend on only books then we may have wrong interpretations."

"From books we can know about the information but by doing carbon tests of the structures we come to know the facts. If the thing does not exist then we have only information, not evidence."

## Impure fuel worries vehicle owners

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

The sale of adulterated petroleum continues in the city with the authorities taking no steps to check the unscrupulous business by a section of fuel dealers.

Car and motorbike users alleged that the adulterated fuel is destroying the engines.

Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) and Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) do not have facilities for testing quality of petroleum.

The BPC and BSTI are aware of the adulteration but they are yet to develop a mechanism to test and monitor the quality of petroleum sold at the city's filling stations.

The dishonest fuel traders are taking the advantage of the absence of monitoring and drive against rampant adulteration, complained the car users.

Abdul Hannan, a motorbike owner, said, "I heard that the pump owners mix kerosene with petrol and octane. I don't know how to avoid buying adulterated fuel."

He said one can recognise adulterated petrol seeing its colour but while refuelling the buyers cannot see the colour of the fuel sold at the pumps.

Hannan said engine of his bike is losing longevity due to use of adulterated fuel.

"For maintaining at least some level of purity, I try to buy

petrol from a particular pump which has the reputation of selling pure petroleum products," he added.

Shahadat Hossain, an automobile engineer, said adulterated petroleum rapidly reduces lifetime of the car and motorbike engines. It damages several parts of an engine like plugs and valves and as a result, the engine fails to run efficiently.

"As a large number of customers come to me regularly to have their engines checked, I advise them to buy petroleum from

trustworthy filling stations," he said.

Asked how one can check presence of kerosene in petroleum, he said, "It is easy. Petrol and octane gets evaporated quickly but kerosene does not. If adulterated petrol is kept in a pot in open air, petrol will evaporate quickly, leaving kerosene in the pot."

Quazi Faruque, general secretary of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), said CAB is aware of the allegation of petroleum adulter-

ation and maintains regular correspondence with BSTI about the matter.

He said BSTI regularly reports on the punitive actions they take against the adulterators.

"We trust the BSTI reports. We do not examine the quality of petroleum."

BSTI officials said they conduct drive against petroleum adulteration but failed to say specifically who is testing adulteration of petroleum and how.

It was learnt that BSTI conducts drives only against weight

manipulation at the filling stations and they do not have any chemical testing facility.

A mobile court on Saturday sealed off a number of pumps at four petrol refuelling stations in Mahakhali area for tempering the pump meters. But there was no such team to test the quality of the petrol.

Nazmul Hoque, president of Petrol Pump Owner's Association, admitted that adulterated petroleum is being sold but said pump owners are not responsible for this.

He said the pump owners buy petroleum from depots without any test. "What we are buying and selling could be adulterated but we are not responsible for that."

Nazmul said pump owners have been demanding establishment of a testing laboratory at every oil depot in the country but the authorities are yet to fulfil the demand.

Sources in BPC, petrol pumps and depots said adulteration takes place in different stages of petrol distribution and selling process.

Sayed Mozammel Haque, director (operations) of BPC, said adulteration usually takes place during distribution of petroleum from depots to petrol pumps.

He however said oil depots are free from adulteration. The Eastern Refinery has the facility for testing chemical status of petroleum products, he added.



### JUICY LITCHIS STILL PRICEY



Mouth-watering litchis have flooded market. Although the quality litchis are yet to come in good quantity the short-lived seasonal fruit remains beyond the reach of the common people. A hundred litchis now sell at between Tk 160 and 250.