

Baitul Mukarram Mosque, situated at Purana Paltan, east of the Secretariat and north of the Stadium is the largest in the city. Three storied and designed like the Kaba Sharif, it has been built on a high platform. Beautiful costly decorations adorn the interior and the flight of stairs with a long lawn, garden and rows of fountains to the south and east.

## Youths bring *puthipath* to life again at DU

DURDANA GHIAS

There was a time when listening to *puthi* sitting under a banyan tree or at someone's yard after dusk was a prime mode of entertainment for the people living in villages and suburbs. But now even in the villages it is hard to find a gathering in the evening to listen to *puthipath*.

*Puthipath* (recital of *puthi*) is an ancient trend where myths, legends and folklores are recited by the poets or good reciters. Villagers used to gather at someone's yard to listen to *puthi* after finishing their daytime jobs.

Now this tradition is coming to city life in a new style. Young city people, especially students coming to the city from different parts of the country, are listening to *puthi*, written by

budding rhyesters, at leisure. Informal friend groups gather on the Dhaka University campus, at student halls, canteens on other places at leisure times and listen to *puthis*. These *puthis* follow the same style and tune of the traditional ones but are written on contemporary urban issues.

"In my childhood I used to listen to *puthipath* in the mosque during religious festivals like Muharram, Shab-e-Barat, Shab-e-Qadr. But the *puthis* with contemporary urban issues are more interesting," said Abdur Razzak, a service holder, who frequents DU campus to listen *puthi* in some evenings.

"When I came to the city to study I missed my mother. But then I heard that someone wrote a *puthi* about a son coming to city and missed his

mother's affection. I became very emotional because it simply matched my story," said Abdullah Al Mamun, a student of Islamic Studies at DU.

Kabbo Kamrul, a young urban professional who writes and recites *puthi* on contemporary urban issues like current politics, trial of war criminals, price hike of essentials, and the struggle of garment workers, vendors, tea stall owners and small traders and entrepreneurs.

"Through the story *Kodam Alir Molom* I have tried to portray the character of a street balm-seller and then inserted his political views into it where he said the balms are needed to heal the country's wounds," said Kabbo.

"Incorporation of urban issues in the *puthi* made it

popular among the middle-class city dwellers," he said.

According to those who used to listen to *puthipath* in their childhood or in the villages the reasons behind the declining trend is the topic of the stories.

"Nowadays people are not interested to know about the stories of Sonabhan, Yusuf-Julekha or Sohrab-Rustam. They want to know about the real life and real stories," said Razzak.

"Besides, in the past villagers needed to gather at some places to converse. But now the use of mobile phones has improved the communication to such a level that people do not need to sit together anymore," he said.

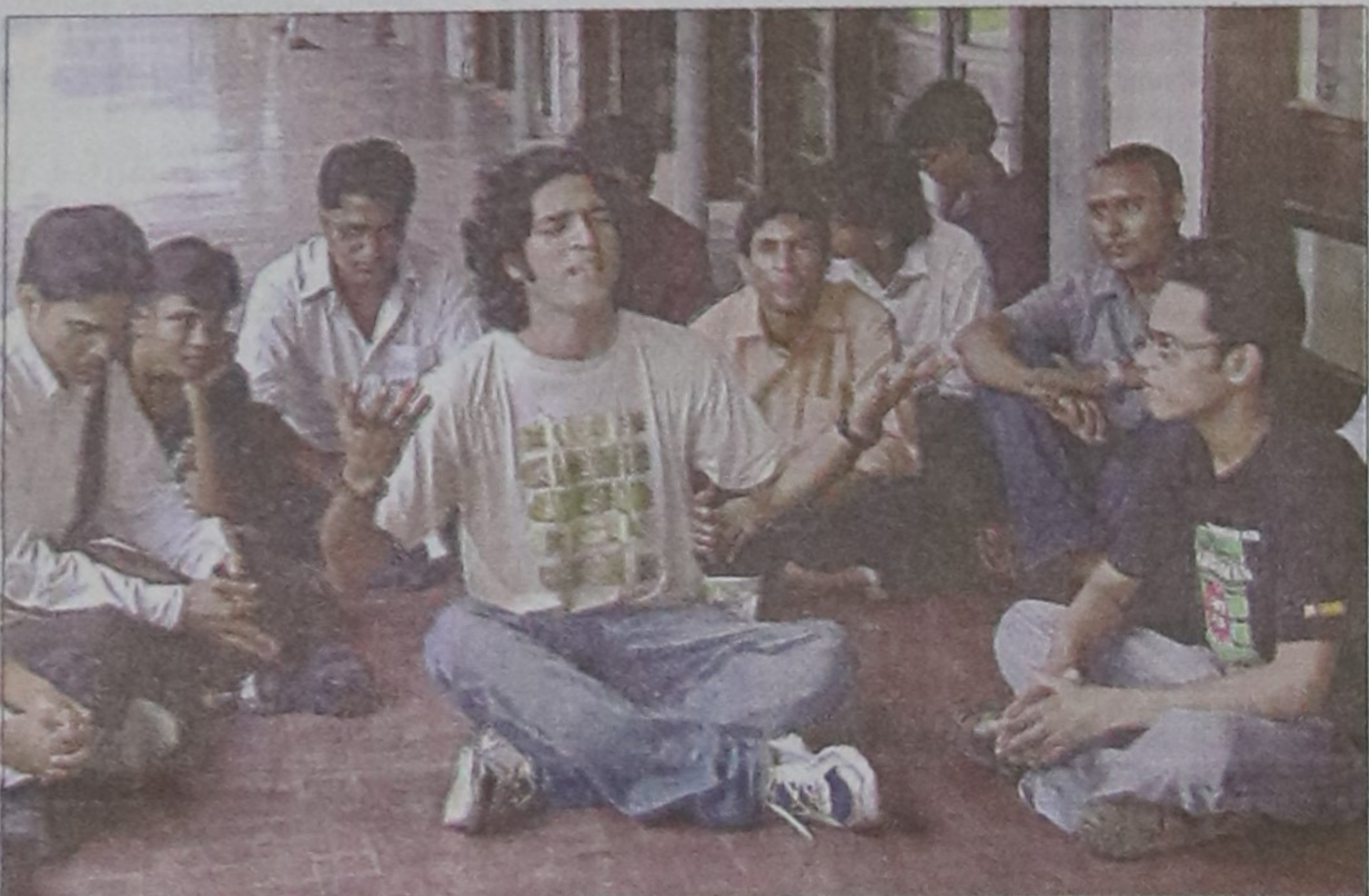
"The practice of writing *puthis* based on contemporary issues is not new. Stories of Ershad Shikdar, local love stories and Iraq War are also relevant issues for *puthis* in the villages. These are called *Pothua Kobita*," said Saymon Zakaria, a *puthi* researcher and manuscript editor, Folklore Department, Bangla Academy.

The tradition of listening to *puthi* has declined in the villages.

"The trend of listening to *puthi* is on the wane in the villages of Netrakona, Mymensingh, Kishoreganj areas. People are now very busy and have other modes of entertainment like watching satellite TV channels. They do not have the time to listen to the story of Ruppban, Ramayan and Gunaibibi," said Saymon, in the light of his frequent visit to these areas.

One reason the trend of *puthi* is on the wane is that the new generation is not coming to take up the helm. "For the last few years I have seen only old and aged men to recite from *puthi*. A major part of the listeners consists of children and women of different ages. It means that once these men are dead there will be no one to take up their places," said Saymon.

"But even if that happens *puthipath* will remain in our culture taking some form. Because tradition is like a river -- even if it dries up it leaves behind a trace to speak of its existence in the past," he said.



A young pathak reciting *puthi* at TSC on DU campus.

## Chitromatika's love for *puthi* lives on

According to Saymon Zakaria, the tradition of *puthi* recital goes back to as far as 12th century during the reign of Madan Pala, the last ruler of Pala dynasty. "It is known that Chitromatika, Madan Pala's wife, used to listen to *puthipath* of Mahabharat from a pundit or 'pathak'," he said.

"Pala rulers were Buddhists. Still we see them listening to a Hindu script Mahabharat. Similarly, when Islam came to Bengal, Muslims assimilated the tradition of *puthipath* during religious festivals like Muharram. The style and

tune are the same -- just the topics are different," he said. In tea gardens, the Monipuri labourers listen to *puthi* with musical instruments like *dhol*, *miridanga*, *korotaa* and harmonium.

"Many old *puthis* were lost because we could not preserve those -- for an example Manik Pir's story. The first part of the Manik Pir's *puthi* kept at the Bangla Academy is illegible. The rest are fifty percent readable. Sometimes we try to collect *puthis* by listening to the 'pathaks'," said Saymon.

## TWO MONTHS INTO PRICE HIKE OF GAS

# Unfair fares rein in as meters of most three-wheelers yet to be adjusted

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

As Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) failed to ensure adjustment of fare in all the CNG-run autorickshaw meters in the city even after about two months of the price hike of gas, most of the autorickshaw drivers are charging unjust fare.

BRTA set May 15 as the last date for adjusting the meters with the new fare chart, which was declared following the price hike of CNG in April. But sources said the new fare could not be adjusted in nearly half of the autorickshaw meters.

Unadjusted meters show wrong fare, leading to altercations between autorickshaw drivers and passengers.

"Meter adjustment on all CNG autorickshaws could not be completed in time as about 75 percent of the companies that sold the meters have disappeared," said Humayun Rashid, director (operations) of BRTA.

Humayun told Star City that meters of about half of the CNG autorickshaws in the city have been adjusted within the timeframe fixed by BRTA.

He said only four out of 17 companies that sold autorickshaw meters are now operating their business. The rest 11 have disappeared.

"Now these four companies are adjusting the meters of all the 17 companies and that is the cause of

the delay," Humayun said.

He said the companies have sought one month more to complete the meter adjustment programme and BRTA has sent the application to the communications ministry.

The government almost doubled the price of CNG in April. The price was raised to Tk 16.75 from Tk 8.5 per cubic metre, leading to hike in gas-run autorickshaw and cab fare.

Sources alleged that the com-

panies who are adjusting the fare chart in meters are illegally collecting money from the autorickshaw owners.

HM Iqbal, general secretary of Dhaka CNG Autorickshaw Owners' Association, said four companies that calibrated CNG meters illegally realised between Tk 600 and Tk 800 from the autorickshaw owners.

"The companies are charging fees although we are supposed to get a one-year warranty and free

meter calibration," he said.

SM Shahzada, owner of SK traders, one of the four companies that are adjusting the CNG autorickshaw meters, told Star City that according to a government notification published on October 29, 2002, the meter sellers are supposed to offer free servicing of the meters under a one-year warranty.

As there was a possibility of fare adjustment within six months of installation of the meters, free meter calibration was also mentioned in the notification, he said.

"But the government did not set any time limit how long the companies would offer free meter calibration. Since there was a time limit for free servicing under the warranty, the companies simply followed that time limit. The meters were installed 6 years back and how can one demand free calibration now?"

A BRTA source said a large number of companies got approval in 2002 to sell autorickshaw meters since political influence played a major role at that time.

"Political influence was so severe that different companies managed to have different terms and conditions approved. To favour a certain company, BRTA was forced to change a number of clauses in the general terms and conditions for selling fare meters," the source said.



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Unauthorised parking of staff buses hired by different government agencies occupies a large portion of the road in front of the Karwan Bazar kitchen market. Haphazardly parked private cars add to the situation making the area impassable for customers and commuters.

## Mindless repair damages forms and features of historic buildings at DU

TAWFIQUE ALI

Authorities of Dhaka University (DU) have allegedly damaged the architectural features of historic buildings like Curzon Hall while repairing and renovating them.

Experts said without thinking about proper documentation and conservation of the buildings, the authorities have caused damages to the originality of forms, features and construction materials through alteration and changes.

Moreover, the buildings of colonial era are being repaired without on-site involvement of experts, said eminent architects and historians.

The university authorities undertook 'repair and maintenance' work of Curzon Hall, SM (Salimullah Muslim) Hall and FH (Fazlul Huq) Hall more than a year back. Masons and labourers of hired contractors are carrying out the intricate job of recreating.

On a number of visits to Curzon Hall, masons were found reconstructing the decayed kiosks and omla kalasha (pitcher-like) ornamentation on their own.

According to experts, repair of such historic buildings must have been based on proper scientific documentation and carried out under intimate supervision of experts.

Dr M Shahidul Ameen, a professor of architecture at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), who also a member of DU's repair committee, said that masons have altered the original style and features of Curzon Hall in many instances.

"I wrote to all the committee members including the vice-chancellor of the university in October last and said that Curzon Hall requires comprehensive conservation," he said. "We must conserve the building with the help of engineers and architects."

He alleged that the university authorities have engaged an inept contractor in the work who has made many mistakes in the way of doing repair.

"Many decorative features have already been damaged," he said. "Authorities have even set up toilets on the terrace of the building releasing waste water on the roof."

Conservationist architect Abu Sayeed M Ahmed said that experts on conservation and heritage should have been involved with the renovation work of Curzon Hall and SM Hall. But the university authorities appear to have no overall conservation plan.

The DU authorities have already disfigured the Curzon Hall creating a number of compartments on the ground floor closing open arcades and corridors.

The masons at work told this

correspondent that they have reconstructed the damaged cupolas, kiosks and kalasha ornamentation (pinnacles) of Curzon Hall on their own. They have used cement and sand instead of original lime and surki (brick dust).

Cement and sand have also been used in reconstruction of the north barrack of Fazlul Huq Hall demolishing the old structure under a Tk 1.65 crore project. RCC (reinforced cement concrete) has been used in this building replacing the original brick roof.

According to Abu Sayeed, Curzon Hall, SM Hall, FH Hall and Dhaka Medical College building are all edifices that bear

But the new wall is so high that it resembles with a prison boundary. "Knocking down the original wall and bringing change to its design is a major deviation," he said.

Prof Muntassir Mamoon, who has extensively worked on Dhaka's history, said that Curzon Hall came into being in the way of Dhaka's being the new capital of divided British Bengal in 1905. It became a centre spot of establishment of Dhaka University.

Significance of Curzon Hall lies in the fact that it symbolises not only Dhaka University but Dhaka city as a whole, he said.

Prof AH Ahmed Kamal, chairman of DU's history department, said his department has no rep-

undertaken the repair work." Temporary repair implies not only damage to the uniqueness of these historic edifices but waste of public money in a recurrent cycle, said competent sources.

Md Shafiqul Alam, director of DoA, said his department was invited to be involved in the work only four to five months back and by that time repair work had already progressed far. In the beginning, the department used to give only advice at committee meeting.

"A major compromise has occurred with repair materials for Curzon Hall," he said.

"Though it should have been mortar (mixture) of lime and



Top left, file photo of repair work at Curzon Hall, and, Top right, a renovated building of the SM Hall and above, a portion of the wall of SM Hall.

STAR PHOTO

testimony to an architectural trend with a blend of colonial and Islamic influence. The blend of two styles developed a new form of distinct local architecture in this part of Bengal.

This form of architecture was in practice until 1950s. Classical features like magnificently imposing central access, symmetrical (wings) buildings on two sides of the central access and freestanding columns as used in Curzon Hall were introduced in the local architectural pattern through colonial architectural practice, he said.

Regarding SM Hall, Abu Sayeed said the original boundary wall was in a good condition and had an eye-level height to facilitate a full view of the Hall.

resentation in the repair committee on Curzon Hall.

DU Vice-chancellor SMA Faiz said Curzon Hall had long been treated in a bad way in the past spoiling its grandeur and features. But nobody raised any voice then. "We are facing criticism when we are trying to repair it with utmost care."

He said that the authorities have involved the Department of Archaeology (DoA) and experts from Buet (including Dr Ameen) in the repair work.

"Carrying out a comprehensive conservation work needs huge amount of money," the VC said. "But we will never get the resource required for such work. On the other hand, we might lose the available fund had we not

brick dust, as it originally was, they have used cement and sand to repair decayed portions of the building."

"Original form and shape of architectural features of Curzon Hall have been altered in the way of repeated repair work," he said.

He said that they stopped applying extra colour on the Curzon Hall, as it was different from the original natural brick colour.

Earlier, an asymmetrical building of Applied Physics Department was constructed as an odd feature to the grand and aesthetic landscape of Curzon Hall.

The Building Construction Rules of 2007 provide for careful and controlled intervention on the important old buildings.