

# Featureless stage, faulty design

National Theatre Stage faces a barrage of criticism 4 years into its opening

ERSHAD KAMOL

The modern light and sound systems installed only four years ago at the National Theatre Stage on Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA) premises at Shegunbagicha are not working properly, theatre activists alleged.

Now the theatre groups have to hire lighting system from outside to stage a drama although around Tk 9 crore has been spent on installing modern light, sound and rasing system at the stage, which opened in December 2004.

Around 100 of the 309 lights at the National Theatre Stage and 50 of the 173 lights at the Experimental Theatre Stage do not work. Dimmer control panels of both the halls do not function, resulting in fluctuation of lights during performance.

Theatre activists said they sometimes experience annoying, static sound during a show. No skilled hand is available at BSA to handle the sound system. For over four months air-conditioning system of the halls do not work.

Considering the problems, the BSA closed both the halls for 20 days from June 1.

When Director General of BSA Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam was asked for comments, he called the people concerned at his office for explanation.

The maintenance engineer of the National Theatre Stage claimed that the halls have been closed for installation of a new air-conditioning system and regular servicing of the light and sound equipment.

However, from the beginning theatre activists were critical about the design and light and sound system of the stage built under a Tk 38 crore project.

"Over the years we have to hire lights from outside, though BSA has spent crores of taka to install lighting system at these halls,"



National Theatre Stage shut for 20 days from June 1 to repair and renovate some of its systems.

said chief of Shubachan Natya Sangsad Ahmed Gias, who is also the organising secretary of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation.

The National Theatre Stage is expected to impress anyone, but the excitement gradually evaporates as soon as a show starts.

Because of the faulty opening of the proscenium arch stage, the audience on the first floor of the gallery can see only half of the cyclorama (the curtain used at the back of the stage). As a result, they miss the lighting effects on the cyclorama.

"This situation has occurred because of the inappropriate height and width ratio of the opening," complained a theatre activist.

Light and set designers complained that BSA has installed

many unnecessary but expensive lights at the National Theatre Stage without taking opinion of the experts.

Light designer Faiz Zahir said, "We have never used special effect lights each costing over 4 lakh taka, as these lights are not ideal for theatre performances. And the dimmer controller panels of both the halls are not easy to operate."

"The last bar that should be about five feet from the cyclorama is only one and a half feet away, destroying the colour effect on the cyclorama. The light distribution of the dimmer controller is not proper too. Only 120 lights among the 309 can be operated by the dimmer controller panel," he added.

Theatre director Tariq Anam Khan said the acoustic system of

the hall is excellent but the other systems are not up to the mark. "Front-of-house (FoH) bar is so far from the stage that it is really tough to set a general light wash at this hall. Moreover, lights fluctuate every now and then," he complained.

"Masking of the stage is not proper too. Instead of the angular wings setting, it has been set straight. Because of that a back-stage activity during a play is visible to the audience sitting at the corners. The droplights of the light batons act as obstacle to the viewers because of the faulty masking," Khan added.

The high officials of BSA also admit the design problems.

"An ideal set-up would have the light source at a 45-degree angle facing the performers. But at present none of the light bars

follow that basic requirement. Excess number of rasing has been used. As a result, the FoH bar is too far from the stage while the last bar is too close to the cyclorama," said eminent director-playwright Golam Sarwar, also deputy director of Department Drama and Film at BSA.

"Installation of a Tk 38 lakh orchestra pit in front of the stage is of no use, rather it has increased the distance between the audience and the performing space," he said.

Asked why the problems were not addressed during the construction period, Sarwar replied, "I was not allowed to enter the National Theatre Stage during construction, though I was a member of the technical committee."

He said the technical committee comprising theatre experts of the country was dissolved after BNP government took power in 2001.

When the then State Minister for Cultural Affairs Selima Rahman was contacted to comment on the cancellation process, she said, "Most of the technical committee members were pro-Awami League, that is why we formed a new committee."

On the irregularities in construction process, she said the then director general of BSA (Ahmed Nazir) knows everything.

Contacted, Ahmed Nazir blamed Public Works Department for the irregularities and said, "We were never happy with the construction work done by PWD. That's why we suggested forming an Engineering Cell at BSA."

He further said, "We totally depended on consultant for the construction of the theatre stage as well as installation of light and sound system."

Prakalpo Upadeshta Limited was the consultant firm, which also designed the National Theatre Stage. However, Engineer Maniruzzaman of the firm claimed that they maintained international standard in the design and construction of the stage.

When the current DG was asked to comment on the current condition of the National Theatre Stage, he said, "There are many problems. Even the platform of the theatre hall has been damaged due to use of low-quality wood."

"Besides, the burners of the Chinese restaurant under the theatre hall constructed under an agreement with Shilpakala Academy in 2004 generate high temperature, which is harmful also to the air-conditioning system. We can't take any action against the restaurant owner as a case has been pending with court," he added.



A partial view of the gallery of the theatre.



The dimmer controller panels under repair.

## Nothing done to protect heritage sites

Over 200 buildings in Dhaka need to be put under urgent conservation scheme

TAWFIQUE ALI

Conservation of invaluable heritage sites in the 400-year old city of Dhaka has always been ignored, leading to destruction of the sites, said noted architects and historians.

Successive governments, though obliged constitutionally to protect the nation's cultural properties, have allowed destruction of the heritage sites one after another.

"In fact, nothing has been done so far to protect these sites," said Prof Muntasir Mamoon, who has extensively worked on Dhaka's history. "Businessmen and the rulers have consistently destroyed our heritage and cultural properties."

The noted historian said, "Destruction of heritage sites and historical monuments started during Pakistan period on a moderate scale but it gained momentum after independence. Heritage properties suffered destruction in an appalling extent during military rule."

Shamsul Wares, an eminent architect, said there would be hardly any testimony to the history, past traditions and lifestyle if heritage properties are destroyed recklessly.

"There are at least 200 heritage buildings in Dhaka that should be brought under conservation scheme immediately," he said. "Conservation of heritage will enhance the image of Dhaka that evolved on the river Buriganga over centuries."

There is a 'heritage council' in India for conservation of cultural properties, he said.

Panamnagar, a township set up by Hindu merchants during the colonial era in Sonargaon, has lost its originality and uniqueness as an architectural heritage site in the way of restoration work carried out by the government.

According to conservationist architects, friezes and other ornamental features of the old buildings are replaced with dissimilar and odd-looking fea-

tures. Details of the ornamental works, their sizes and proportions are lost in the intervention.

In 2006, the World Monuments Fund rated Sonargaon-Panam City as one of the most endangered heritage sites.

Unesco has refused to declare Lalbagh Fort as a world heritage site because of improper restoration work, according to conservationist architect Abu Sayeed M Ahmed. He said Panamnagar may too face a similar fate.

According to experts, Dhaka University authorities have mutilated original architectural features of historic Curzon Hall in the name of 'repair and maintenance.'

Intricate job of recreating decayed eaves, cupola, kiosks and omla kalasha (pitcher-like) ornamentation of the building has been done with masons and labourers without proper scientific documentation and on-site supervision of experts, they said.

Private occupants have demolished inner block of Barabari, a grand lime masonry building of colonial architecture at BK Das Lane in Farashganj.

Ruplal House in Shyambazar has been occupied by traders.

Shankhanidhi House, enlisted as a heritage site by DoA, has been leased out by Dhaka district administration and an automobile workshop is running there.

The 600-year old Binat Bibi Mosque in Narinda has been partially demolished with the government remaining as silent spectator for long.

Aesthetic decorative features of Nalgola Rajbari in Mitford area have been recklessly mutilated and occupied by traders.

Though the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC), the Metropolitan Building Rules of 2006 (revised in 2008) and the Antiquities Act of 1968 require the government to take measures and institute a standing committee to protect the heritage sites, the government has all along been idle on the issue.

At long last on May 27, the government's Nagar Unnayan Committee decided to form the standing committee headed by chief architect of the Department of Architecture.

ASM Ismail, chief architect of

the DoA, said he has sent a proposal to the public works ministry for institution of the committee comprising noted experts in architecture, history, fine arts, literature and engineers and planners. Government is yet to form the committee.

Architect Talmur Islam, team leader of Urban Study Group, which spearheads a heritage conservation movement, has called upon the upcoming committee for comprehensive area conservation in the old part of Dhaka.

Barabari's importance lies in the architectural qualities and significance like space, scale and stylistic order, but the entire BK Das lane requires conservation as the urban fabric of the entire street is an integrated architectural entity, he said.

Shankharibazar, Farashganj, Narinda and Sutrapur are some areas that require immediate conservation because of their historical and archaeological significance, he said.

Apart from these, conservation efforts must also cover cultural landscapes like Shaheed Minar, Ramna Green, Buckland

Bandh, Balda Garden and Ali Mian's Gol Talab (pond).

There are at least 20-25 heritage areas in Dhaka that deserve conservation, Talmur said.

Prof Mamoon said urban settlement in Dhaka had begun long before the Mughal rulers set up a capital here in 1610. Heritage properties here mainly belong to three different eras - Mughal, British colonial and Pakistani.

The architectural and historical monuments belonging to the Mughal period include a number of mosques, Lalbagh Fort and Bara Katara among others in Dhaka.

"Bara Katara has long been illegally occupied," he said. There are some eternal heritage sites like the River Buriganga and its canals, Pilkhana, and Ramna Green, Prof Mamoon said adding that these public properties must not be designated for any exclusive and restricted occupancy.

Md Shafiqul Alam, director of government's Archaeology Department, said the department has a total of 12 enlisted sites and buildings in the capital city.

The list includes Bara Katara, Chhoto Katara, Hoseni Dalan, Lalbagh Fort, Hazi Khaza Shabaz Mosque, Khan Mohammad Mridha Mosque, Ruplal House, Shankhanidhi House, Sat Masjid, North Brook Hall, Rose Garden, Old Eidgah Matth (field), Ruplal House, Shankhanidhi House, Radha Krishan Temple and Bhajhari Lodge.

Barring only one or two, all the enlisted archaeological sites and heritage buildings in Dhaka are out of the department's possession, said Alam.

The department, having 400 enlisted heritage sites across the country with 500 buildings, cannot perform its duty to the desired extent because of manpower shortage and financial constraints, he said. The department has a provision for manpower of 472 staff, while it is currently running with just 339, he added.



Two unprotected magnificent heritage buildings at Farashganj.



Scores of heritage buildings at Farashganj.