

## 400 YEARS OF DHAKA

# Binat Bibi cries for rescue

### The oldest mosque smothered in new structures fears distortion

DURDANA GHIAS

Six hundred-year-old Binat Bibi Mosque, the oldest structure in the city, is counting days amid a dilapidated state when Dhaka prepares to celebrate its 400 years.

The mosque in Narinda dates back to as early as the pre-Mughal Sultanate period according to historians and conservation architects.

Built in 1457 by Bakht Binat, during the sultanate of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah I, it is a precious piece in the history of the city.

Parween Hasan, professor of history at Dhaka University, vividly described for the first time about the splendid past of the mosque in her book.

Single hemispherical dome atop a square room, arches on south, north and eastern sides, octagonal turret, modest orna-

mentation, plaster coating and curved cornices are the original features of the mosque.

On a visit to the site last week this correspondent found the mosque withering away amid pitiable neglect while the grave of Bakht Binat lies uncared-for in a small plot near the mosque.

"It is a gem on the list of our heritage. The people of Narinda share pride in it but they did little to preserve or protect the mosque," lamented an elderly resident of the locality.

The cute original structure of the tiny mosque has been overshadowed by a 4-storey building and a three-storey extension is being built abutting the historic site knocking down its walls.

Just a year ago the mosque was visible from three sides but now only its two domes and lately built front veranda can be seen from the street. The sight is almost obstructed by a boundary

wall and the new building.

In March last year when the mosque committee was hell-bent on building a minaret with piling within a few feet of the old mosque, a group of conservation architects intervened to save the rickety structure. But the move went in vain for lack of state support and funds constraint.

Although law forbids any new structure within 500 feet of a protected site nothing could be done to stop the work as the mosque remains exempted from the list of the Department of Architecture (DoA).

Dr Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, a conservation architect with expertise on mosque architecture said last year they presented the mosque committee a design for the minaret while saving the old mosque.

"We made a proposal for restoring the old mosque in order to manifest its beauty and

making an open plaza surrounding it on our own," said Dr Sayeed, a member of the group.

"We designed seven models of the extension of the mosque to save the old structure and tried to convince the mosque committee. At first they agreed to accept one. We did the measurement of the ground. Then they stopped the work citing Ramadan but later it did not resume due to lack of funds since last September," he said.

"The piling was too close to the original mosque while the extension building generated too much pressure on the soil threatening every possibility of cracks in the original structure," he added.

Muslimuddin, president of the mosque committee, said that they have a plan to make the building 8-storey high so that it can accommodate more people during the Jumma prayers.

About the fate of the original structure he said he would keep it as it is as long as he is alive but he does not know what the next generation would do with it. "I will be happy if the government takes care of the mosque," he said.

He said the mosque committee has a plan to extend the building over the original dome using the pillars on the four sides of it in case they needed more space in future. In that case the dome will be visible only from the veranda on the first floor of the mosque.

About the intervention of the architects last year he said the move did not succeed due to lack of funds.

The mosque has seen four extensions to date. During the first extension around 80 years ago, a dome was built atop a room. Around 20 years ago a 2-storey building was built beside the mosque. During third extension it was turned into a 4-storey building. Finally, the 4-storey building is being extended with another 3-storey structure, besides a high minaret, with the ground floor abutting the original mosque.

About the mosque committee's plan to build a minaret Dr Sayeed said historically there were no minarets in the Mughal and pre-Mughal structures. "Minaret is not a part of the traditional mosque architecture in this country. It is a new feature in the last 70 years. Adding a minaret to this ancient mosque is a kind of distortion," he said.

Acknowledging the role of media reports in saving the 600-year old structure Dr Shafiqul Alam, director, DoA, said that the DoA is going to take steps and send a proposal to the ministry to protect the mosque.

"I went to the place a week ago and saw for myself the condition of the mosque. They have already distorted a fair part of the exterior of the original dome by chini-tiki work. Moreover, they have constructed a twin replica beside it. But the interior of the dome is still intact. So we are hopeful of saving it. Soon we will send a proposal to the ministry to enlist the mosque," said the director.



Binat Bibi stands beside a busy alley at Narinda overshadowed by new structures.

## NEW CELLPHONE SCAM

# Playing a prank for free balance

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Just after midnight, Uttara resident Iftekhar Haque was jolted out of his peaceful sleep as his cellphone rang. Groggy-eyed and irritated, Iftekhar fuzzily answered the phone.

"I accidentally refilled 50 taka in your number," said the unknown caller. "Could you retransfer the money to my number? I would appreciate that."

The creaky voice was rather polite and apologetic. Iftekhar agreed to the request.

As he was about to transfer the balance, Iftekhar suddenly remembered that he did not receive any notifications about account refills in his mobile phone.

He intuitively checked his mobile phone account balance and found that he had the same balance as the last time he checked a few hours ago.

Iftekhar, a private university student, felt he should inform the person about the confusion and tried to call him a few times. But no one bothered to answer

his call. Annoyed with the unexpected late night ordeal, he decided to get back to sleep.

"At that time I was quite convinced that he was telling the truth, but the next morning I realised that he was probably playing a prank on me to get some free balance on his cellphone account," Iftekhar told this correspondent.

Many would agree that phone calls like these are quite frequent these days.

Some forgetful mobile phone users do it to retrieve the call-

time balance that was inadvertently transferred to another number. However, it is the fraudsters that mobile phone subscribers should be wary about.

"While refilling their mobile phone account, a lot of people mistakenly submit a wrong number with one or two incorrect digits. Getting that money back is a rather tricky procedure," said Hasib Mahmud, a customer manager of Grameenphone.

"A lot of people contact the number where the money has been sent and request the owner to retransfer the balance," he said adding, "But using this as an excuse, unscrupulous people try to convince other mobile users to transfer the call time balance."

Over the past six months Jalil Ahmed, a Mohammadpur resident, has received such phone calls on several occasions as he uses more than one numbers.

"I received similar phone calls quite a few times and every single of them turned out to be prank calls," he said.

"Some people do it just for fun. The first time I got such a call, I later found that my account was unchanged. Then I called the person back and accused him of playing a prank on me. When I asked him why did he do such a thing, he simply told me that he felt like doing it and thought it would be fun."

However, Ruksana Khanam, a housewife from Khilgaon, naively trusted a fraudster and transferred balance to his number. "He was really convincing,

His number was almost identical to mine except for a couple of digits," she said.

There are also other forms of hoax calls.

Earlier last month, an unknown caller contacted Tasnim Bashir in his cellphone. The caller told Tasnim that he has won a prize of Tk 2 lakh.

"He told me that I would need to transfer Tk 600 balance to his number immediately to claim my prize," said Tasnim, a school-teacher from Dhanmondi. "Although he was pretty convincing, I knew it was a prank and I cut off the connection."

A spokesman for the mobile phone company that Tasnim subscribes said that these cases have increased a lot in recent times.

"It is really startling to see people resorting to all these hoaxes to earn some extra call time in their phones considering the fact that we have all sorts of exciting offers of bonus call times for them," he said.

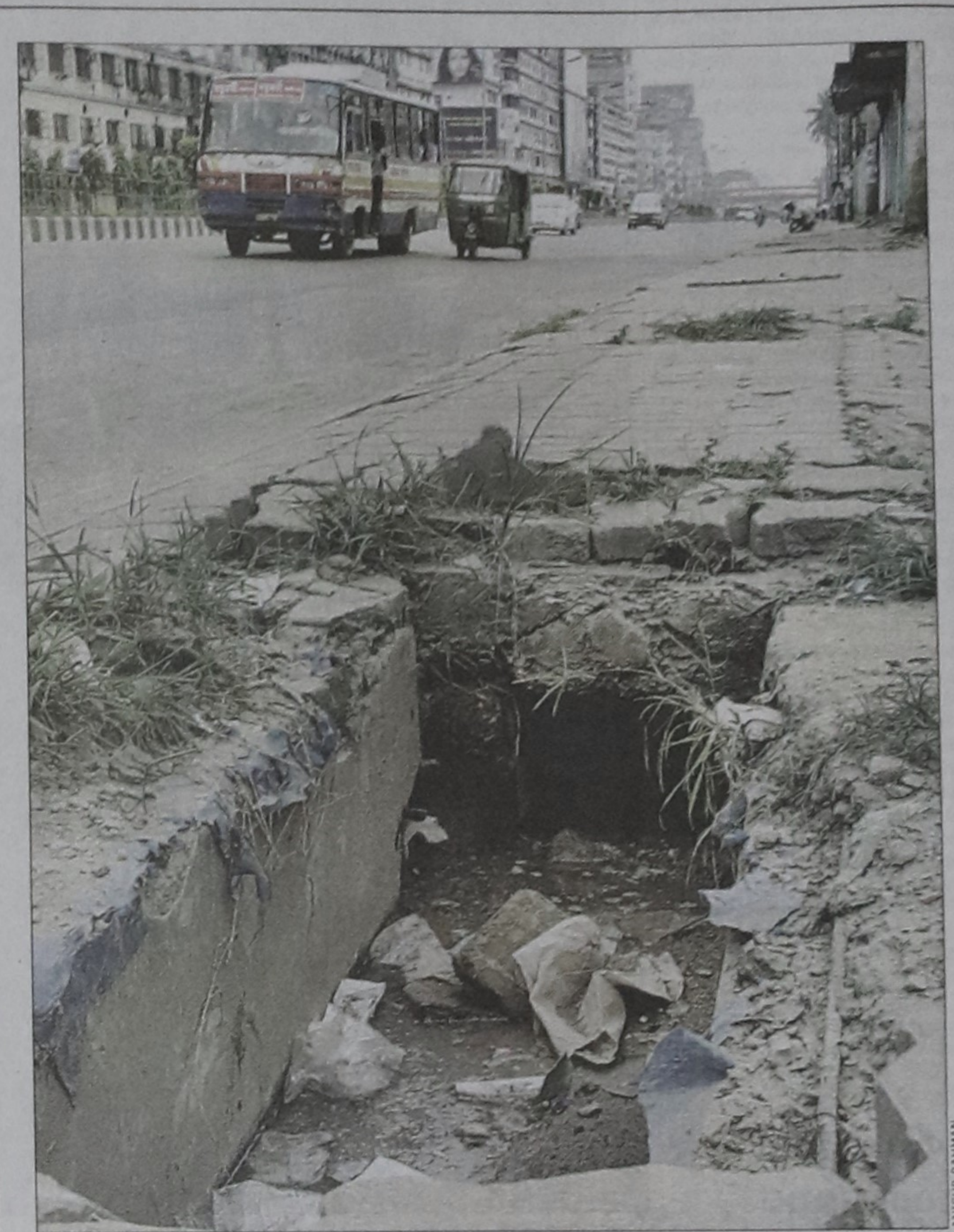
"People should check whether there has been any unexpected transfers made in his account. There has to be a notification of some sort. Many people take the callers' words for granted and send the money without verifying the transfer," he said.

As for people who have inadvertently transferred money in another number, they should contact the customer service of his mobile phone operator and inform the mistake immediately, he added.



STAR PHOTO

Ghost call for transfer of 'mistaken' is increasing.



ANJUR RAHMAN

WATCH BEFORE YOU TREAD: Concrete slabs on a road stretching for half a kilometre near Banani Chairman Bari have broken down at around 40 points. The Dhaka City Corporation is yet to wake up although the number is on the increase.

## RUNDOWN PUBLIC TOILETS-1

# Only 69 for over 1 crore, many shut or unusable

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has set up only 69 public toilets for more than one crore people of the city but about half of the toilets are either closed or unusable at present, resulting in immense sufferings of the city dwellers when outside home.

In recent years, DCC set up 38 public toilets, mostly at parks and inter-district bus and launch terminals. While selecting the places the authorities overlooked some of the busiest points where people have to wait for a long time.

DCC has not set up any public toilets at Farmgate crossing, one of the busiest places of the city. One public toilet is located at the west corner of Shaheed Anwara Park, about half a kilometer from the Farmgate intersection.

There was another public toilet on the road island in front of Ananda Cinema but DCC recently demolished it for beautification of the road.

Expressing frustration, a traffic sergeant on duty at Farmgate said due to absence of public toilet all the traffic ser-

geants and constables deployed there have to suffer immensely. "There is no way when a call of nature comes," he said.

"I have to stay here for several hours every day and when I am uniformed I cannot go to open places," said the sergeant. "It's a difficult situation."

This correspondent on Wednesday evening found a young man rushing towards the wall of the Bangladesh Jute Corporation building in front of the Jatiya Press Club. The man said finding no toilet at Farmgate he boarded a Motijheel-bound bus but he was forced to get off the bus at Press Club to answer the call of nature.

Due to absence adequate number of public toilet such public sufferings are regular at busy points, said an official of DCC. He said there is no public toilet on the whole Satmasjid Road and the long stretch from Science Laboratory to Kalyanpur on the Mirpur Road.

The maiden public toilet near Science Laboratory on this busy road is located between Dhaka College and New Super Market.

DCC constructed most of the public toilets at bus terminals, parks and kitchen markets but did not consider the public gatherings at bus stops and other busy points like Motijheel business hub, the DCC official said.

He said DCC has no survey on the demand for public toilets in the city. On the DCC initiative to solve public toilet problem, he said, "Files of setting up new toilets are moving from one table to another since last two years."

Asked about the closed or pitiable condition of the toilets, he cited improper maintenance, lack of lessees and legal tangles.

About the odd locations of the newly constructed toilets, Shawkat Ali, chief health officer of DCC, said floating people in the city face the toilet problem most. The 38 toilets have been constructed under a health project giving priority to the floating people's need.

He said DCC has funds for constructing at least 40 more public toilets but it is difficult to get land for setting up new ones.



STAR PHOTO

A well-furnished public toilet in Suhrawardy Udyan is not open for the public at all. It remains under lock and key and is preserved for the high officials taking a stroll in the park in the morning.