

Motijheel in downtown was built during the Mughal period. During the time there was a big Mahal for Mirza Mohammad which housed a large pond known as Sukaku Mahal's pond. The area was later named Motijheel. A mazar called Shahjalal's mazar where fairs were organised existed. Motijheel and Dilkusha gardens were in the same place earlier. The road dividing the two places was constructed during the British rule.

e-mail: starcity@thedailystar.net

ANCIENT GURDWARA AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY

Serene on crowded campus

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Devotees slowly begin to gather for the weekly prayer. Men and women with traditional head-gears assemble around the head priest and the holy book. Hymns of verses like 'Prabhu milbe ko pritam lagi' (Lord, I have this ardent urge to meet you) create a spiritual ambience while the devotees listen to them intently.

This is how the believers of Sikhism join together for weekly prayer on every Friday at the Gurdwara, the temple of the Sikhs.

The Gurdwara Nanak Shahi situated on the Dhaka University campus is the only temple in Dhaka city where the Sikh community, the followers and admirers of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, gather to pay their respect and pray.

'Sangat' or religious gathering is mandatory for Sikhs, which

takes place in Gurdwara on every Friday. The temple becomes filled with devotees from 11:00am. Priests present Kirtan (hymns) and verses from the holy book joined by the devotees. The session ends at 1:00pm with 'Guru Ka Prashad' (food of the guru), made of atta, ghee, sugar and milk. Every Sangat is followed by 'Guru Ka Langar' or community kitchen.

"Any God's soul is welcome to have food at the langar," said Bhai Piara Singh, the head priest of Gurdwara Nanak Shahi, Dhaka.

More than five hundred years ago Sikhism began with the preaching of Guru Nanak, who was a believer of one god and strongly emphasised that all men are equal, explained the head priest. Guru Nanak believed that worship and piety has no meaning if they failed to promote

truthful conduct and compassion for the less fortunate.

"Human being belonging to any religion, caste or creed is welcome to our Gurdwara. After every gathering and Kirtan we welcome them to the community kitchen to nourish their souls," said the head priest who has been living in Dhaka since 1992.

Every Friday around 400 people receive free vegetarian food at 'Guru ka Langar'. Another 250 destitute children are also provided with free food every Friday.

Sikhism made its debut in Dhaka when Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, visited Dhaka in 1504. He started spreading his message in 1499 from Punjab and travelled many parts of Asia on foot. During his brief stay in Dhaka he left his ideals in the minds of many. The Gurdwara in Dhaka was established to commemorate his visit.

The temple on the DU campus is believed to have been built at the initiative of a Sikh priest, Bhai Nathan, sent by the sixth Sikh guru, Hargobind Ji (1606-1645), during the reign of Mughal emperor Jahangir. He laid the foundation stone. After that the work continued slowly and it was finished in the year 1830.

When the temple was established it was known as 'Sujatpur Sikh Sangat' as it was situated in the then Sujatpur mouza of Dhaka.

The new religion was later led by ten other Gurus. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji was one of them who stayed at Banglabazar in Dhaka for a while to spread his message.

Today the temple has a single-dome prayer hall surrounded by several smaller quarters. The smaller rooms are linked to the central one with pillared ways. The arrangement enables a large

number of followers to sit together, pray and listen to hymns.

Inside the prayer hall there is a small ornate overhead marble dome called the 'Palki Sahib'. Granth Sahib, the sacred religious book of the Sikhs, is placed under the Palki Sahib, which is basically the symbolic home of the holybook.

The head priest said Granth Sahib contains compilation of teachings of five first Gurus in a scripture form. It contains 1,430 pages. Granth Sahib acts as a guideline for all Sikhs.

Beside the dome rests a handwritten Granth Sahib. It is in original handwriting of the Gurus who visited Dhaka. Covered with yellow sequined cloths, it is placed on an altar.

Five priests are stationed here to preach the religion. The Gurdwara also provides residence facility to foreign devotees who can stay and dine there for free. Currently there are seven rooms for them and five new rooms are now under construction.

One new prayer hall is also being constructed, which will accommodate around 500 devotees at a time. The new prayer hall will be open in November during the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday, the head priest said.

A Sikh Research Centre is also under construction, which is scheduled to open for all in December this year. Books on Sikhism, both in Bangla and English, will be available there.

Suresh Kumar G Singh, president, Bangladesh Gurdwara Management Committee, said, "In Bangladesh there are no resident Sikhs. The Gurdwara is mainly attended by Sikhs living in Bangladesh for business purposes and working as Indian embassy staffs."

Kumar said there is a group of locals who join prayers at Gurdwara on a regular basis. "The members of 'Balmiki' community usually come here. They are followers of Guru Nanak for generations. These people can even read Granth Sahib written in Punjabi and join weekly religious sessions on Fridays and on special occasions."

Balmiki is a faith practised by some Dalits or Harijan community of this continent.

The temple is now run by the management committee with donations from Indian and Bangladeshi devotees.

Kumar mentioned that there are five Gurdwaras in Bangladesh -- two in Dhaka (DU campus and Banglabazar), two in Chittagong and one in Mymensingh. "Other than the one at DU, most of these Gurdwaras are in appalling condition. Some of these facilities have been encroached by illegal occupants," he said.

Kumar urged the government to recover the encroached land from the illegal occupants so that they can extend their facilities and spread the message of Guru Nanak.



The rooftop temple at Shankhari Bazar before knocking down.

Mindless demolition of a rooftop temple

DURDANA GHAS

An ornate temple atop an old building at Shankhari Bazar is being mindlessly knocked down by its owner.

Locals say it fell prey to a land dispute with neighbours. But the owner of the temple claims he decided to tear it down recently as it had become risky.

The joint buildings of holdings 14 and 15 were once proud of this exquisite rooftop temple.

The temple was built atop the building of holding 15 and its entrance was on the roof of 14.

The face of the temple has now lost its plasterwork smoothing away all its decorative features.

The little temple sat on a pavilion on the roof. It had a front veranda with a bay of three arches. The middle arch was semi-circular flanked by two pointed arches. The top of the temple was ornate while it had battlements and a turret at one corner.

"This rooftop temple had been one of the significant features of Shankhari Bazar. It was one of its landmarks," said Taimur Islam, architect and conservation activist working to salvage the last remnants of Shankhari Bazar and other heritage sites in the city.

"Venetian influence was well manifested in the architecture of the temple. For an example, the pointed arches," he said. "Corinthian capital, deco-

rated gabled motif on top of the parapet, projected springers or bottom stones of arches were important features of the temple," said Taimur.

The temple was on an elevated platform. It had a 15x15 feet worship room, he added.

"Decorated cornice and dentil mouldings were other features of the temple. A dentil is one of a series of small rectangular blocks jutting out from a moulding or beneath a cornice. The two pointed arches on both sides were supported by pairs of engaged columns," he said.

Series of arches is an important matter. There were three bays in each arcade, he added.

According to locals the reason behind going for such rooftop temple may be because of shortage of space downstairs.

"The whole structure of the building 14 is ornately decorated. Both 14 and 15 were redeveloped in the early 20th century. Before redevelopment the building had features from Mughal architecture. After the redevelopment the building has a mixture of Mughal and colonial architecture," said Taimur.

Open sky courtyard at different floors is another aspect of the building 14, he added.

"Ionic capitals, double arch, extensive use of metals in the balustrade of the internal courtyard, wrought iron grilles are important features of the building," he said.

Owner of the building 14 Biswajit Datta Bhulu, said he tore down the temple because it

was in a dilapidated state.

"We pulled it down because it was in a very bad state and we wanted to shift the temple on to my roof. It contained idols of Radha-Krishna made of touchstone, which was brought by my grandfather a long time ago. So we decided to shift the temple for the security of the idols," he said.

"Besides, the whole building is listed as a risky structure by DCC," he added.

He said he did not think about consulting anyone before knocking it down as the temple was a property of his family.

"It is our internal matter whether to keep the temple or not because it is the traditional property of the family," he said.

Locals of the area said owners of adjoining buildings wanted to erect a boundary between the buildings.

"Demolition of the temple was a community failure of the residents of the area," said an elderly local seeking anonymity.

"I know very well that the structure was a piece of heritage and a matter of pride for the area. But we could not save it because at the moment it seemed it was the best way to settle the dispute," he said.

Heritage admirers deplored the demolition saying it was like chopping off head because of headache.

"If ownership issues cannot be settled then we will lose more such precious sites to these types of trivial disputes in future," said Taimur.



Above, Gurdwara Nanak Shahi on Dhaka University campus, below right, head priest of the temple sitting inside the Palki Sahib, left, Granth Sahib, the handwritten holy book at the temple.

Why 'extra' fare if passengers hang on to bus doors?

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

On Monday July 21, hundreds of Titumir College students rioted in downtown Mohakhali battling police and damaging buses on the street. Police clubbed the students while the protesters responded by hurling pieces of bricks at the police.

It all started after a bus ticket seller in Mohakhali tried to overcharge a student for a ride.

"We all use this bus service because it has ticket and counter system and it promises a better service. But why pay the extra money if we have to travel all the way hanging on to the bus door?" said Mohammad Al Emran, a student of the college.

"We can avail any other bus services on the same route. They are much cheaper, and offer services that are similar to the ones offered by the counter-

based buses," he said.

Many bus riders agree with Emran. They said that bus services that operate through ticket tokens are actually in some cases worse than local buses.

While these so-called 'sitting service', 'super service' or 'gate-lock' buses do not sell tickets for bus stops in between their ticket counters, they pick up passengers from any point and make them buy ticket for the entire route, Abu Naser from Uttara said.

For instance, Karnaphuli Paribahan, a bus service that runs on Motijheel-Duaripara route, charges a passenger Tk 10 for a ride from Duaripara to Farmgate. Any passenger bound for Rupnagar, Shiyalbari, Mirpur 10, Kazipara or Shewrapara have to pay the same fare.

"They do not have any fare chart," said Saleh.

Bus conductors or operators of such bus services apparently find it more profitable to take passengers for shorter distances, he added.

"Almost all of these services are collecting unjust fares at their own will," said Saleh.

"Gate-Lock" services were found to be charging a passenger Tk 9 for a distance of 6 kilometres between Mirpur 10 and Farmgate while the government-fixed fare for the same distance is supposed to be around Tk 7.

On Gullistan-Dhaka Zoo route, local services are collecting even more than the "sitting services" charge. Samoy Niyontran, a "sitting" bus service, collects Tk 13 for the entire distance while the local services charge Tk 15 for the same distance.

After the recent hike, the fare is Tk 1.05 per kilometre for buses

and Tk 1.08 for minibuses. However, different buses -- especially the ones with ticket counters are charging different fares from their passengers, commuters complained.

While Bangladesh Road Transport Authority tried to regulate the fare collected by different bus services by running mobile court operations, ticket sellers have some tricks up their sleeves to deceive the BRTA officials, commuters said.

"They have the original fare printed on the ticket. Before they sell the token, they simply stamp the new price on it," said Abu Syed Sarkar, a resident of Nikunja.

"So, when any official approaches them, they simply show the original ticket tokens with the regular fare printed on them. But later they sell the same ticket at a higher price."

While buses operating with "sitting service" tag assure passengers of vacant seats, most of their passengers end up travelling by hanging off to the bus door despite paying higher fares. Especially during peak hours, these buses are seen crammed with passengers.

BRTA officials admitted that the mechanism to fight such irregularities in the bus transport sector has proved rather ineffective. They blamed the people involved with the transport business for the failure.

Since the greater majority of the population in the city come from moderate to lower income groups, they have to rely on public transport facilities for their day-to-day activities. It seems that commuting within this city is getting increasingly difficult day by day for them.

