



Devotees at the century-old Golap Shah's shrine in Gulistan.

History of Golap Shah's shrine still a mystery

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Gulistan, one of the busiest intersections of the city, a small, beautifully decorated shrine known as 'Golap Shah Mazar' catches the eyes of pedestrians and commuters passing the area.

For thousands of followers of Golap Shah, the century-old shrine with all its serenity and spiritual ambience is a place for praying and paying respect to the spiritual leader. But a very few people know the history of the shrine.

According to popular belief, Golap Shah came to spread the message of Islam from Yemen around 200 years ago. Some followers believe he came from Iraq. However, historians claim no such spiritual leader is buried there.

Noted historian Prof Muntasir Mamoon in his book 'Dhaka Somogro' (part three) presents an account of the shrine.

During the late 19th century the shrine was under a huge neem tree and it was known as the 'Neemgachh' or 'mazar' (shrine under a neem tree).

Some believed that it was the shrine of Sekandar Shah. However, no one actually knew for sure who is buried there and why it is so special.

Even the elders of that time did not have any idea about the

grave.

Prof Mamoon says the unknown grave gradually began to attract people who believed that it has special spiritual powers. One Golap Shah used to take care of the grave. When Golap Shah died he was also buried right beside the original grave. Thus the name of Golap Shah was attached to the name of the grave.

Prof Mamoon's book described the story of the shrine with information extracted from another book 'Asudegan-e-Dhaka' written by Hakim Habibur Rahman, which deals with issues of 19th century Dhaka including distinguished persons. Hakim's book is considered as a very important primary source of information for researchers working on Dhaka.

People from all religious beliefs come to the shrine to pray every day. The caretaker of the shrine Abul Hasan said Muslims, Hindus and some Buddhists visit the shrine.

The tin-roofed shrine is built on a concrete platform. It is embellished with ceramic tiles in all sides and protected by iron fences. Garlands, colourful wishing strings and incense sticks always remain hanging from all sides.

A coal fire is placed there so that devotees can light their incense sticks. Inside the shrine

remain the two graves covered with colourful rugs. Devotees usually pray facing the graves and holding the fence. They throw money or other offerings inside the fence.

Hasan mentioned the last Khadim (volunteer of the gods) of the shrine died two years ago. Now it is run by caretakers appointed by the shrine committee comprising Dhaka City Corporation staff and Imam of the Golap Shah Mosque.

Every morning and evening recitation from the holy Qur'an takes place at the shrine. The biggest occasion at the shrine, the yearly Mehfil, takes place four days after Shab-e-Barat.

Other than money many devotees bring food items, which are distributed among the poor every day, Hasan said.

"A majority of the devotees are the bus drivers who steer pass the shrine many times a day throughout the year. They toss in a few notes when they start their trip in the morning wishing for safety on the roads," Hasan added.

The shrine is very popular among newly weds who come here wishing for long lasting love. Couples wishing for children are also among the regulars.

There are some who drop by while passing the area. And there are some who just sit there all day long. Livelihood of these people

depends of the devotees. They sell incense sticks, candles, wishing strings and flowers.

This correspondent talked to one of the regular devotees, Fatema, a resident of Dholairpar, Jatrahari. She said, "I pay weekly visit on Fridays and whenever I cherish. I don't have any particular wish. I come here because I find peace."

Shanti Das and Nita Das, a recently wedded Hindu couple, said they married without the consent of their parents. Since they did not get their parents' blessings they came to the shrine. They believe wishing to Golap Shah strengthens bond between couples.

Abul Hasan said the shrine is officially under the supervision of DCC. The Golap Shah Mosque committee also plays a part in its management. Every fifteen days the mazar gate is opened to collect the money, which is later deposited to an account in the Islami Bank. The money is used for the maintenance of the shrine and for special occasions like Mehfil. Around 3 to 4 lakh taka is deposited every month.

DCC officials however said they could not properly take control of the shrine. It is run by self-appointed Khadems who swindle the devotees regularly and run the business of candles, incense sticks and garlands, they alleged.

Hawkers' markets dying out

Holiday markets occupying more footpaths

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

For lack of proper planning and monitoring, the holiday markets and hawkers' markets in the city have become ineffective and failed to ease public sufferings.

Last year, Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) jointly set up two holiday markets and 20 hawkers' markets in the city.

The main objective of the plan was to accommodate the hawkers at some selected spots and keep rest of the footpaths clear for smooth movement of pedestrians.

The two holiday markets in front of Shilpakala Academy and Motijheel Ideal School are expanding in size and occupying more footpaths while a number of hawkers' markets were found almost empty due to lack of customers.

Monir Hossain who got allotment of a shop beside Meteorological Department office in Agargaon said he sits there every afternoon with garment products. He usually sits near the mosque at Agargaon staff quarters, paying Tk 10 daily to the mosque committee.

"As no customer is found before afternoon in this hawkers' market, the hawkers do not open their shops before noon," Monir said.

A total of 282 hawkers got allotment in the market but only 15-16 hawkers have so far set up shops. "A hawker's daily income from here does not exceed 50 taka, so why should they stay here?" asked Monir.

All the shops at this market were found selling garment products. "As all hawkers are selling garments, customers do not have options to buy other things. They need to go to somewhere else for buying other necessary stuff," said Monir.

"While giving allotments to the hawkers, the authorities did not think about this. If we have a variety of products, more customers would have come here," he added.

An official from the estate department of DCC said DCC and DMP conducted eviction drives in the past but for lack of proper monitoring, the drives could not prevent hawkers from occupying footpaths from the very next day of the eviction drives.

He said those initiatives cost a good amount of public money but people did not get rid of sufferings as there were no rehabilitation arrangements for the evicted hawkers.

In January last year, the DCC and DMP again started evicting hawkers and this time the interim government rehabilitated them at the holiday markets and hawkers' markets set up in the open spaces and roadside places.

The spots designated for hawkers are: The open space and roadside places near Alam Market at Zurrain Postagola, in

front of Samad Super Market in Jatrahari, on both sides of the road from Shaheed Faruk Sarak to Khanka Sharif and on the northern pavements of Jatrahari Road, open space on the northern side of Bangladesh Bank in Motijheel and two open spaces adjacent to the roads on the western side of Sonali Bank main branch, Bangabandhu Avenue Link Road in Gulistan, on the pavement on Bangabandhu Avenue and on the Baitul Mukarram Link Road and Muktagon area, on the pavement on the northern side of the Shahbagh Police Station, on the pavement on the western side of Dowel Chatter, on the pavement on the eastern side of New Market, open space on the western side of Gawsia Market, on the eastern side of Mirpur Road from

Gawsia Market, on the pavement on Indira Road near Farmgate, the space adjacent to the Met Office on Rokeya Sarani and specified place at Mirpur-10 area, in front of Purabi Cinema in Mirpur-11, the open space adjacent to Mirpur Stadium, on the pavement in front of Mirpur Shah Ali Market, on the pavement in front of Muktijoddha Market in Mirpur-1, on the pavement in front of Shah Ali Market in Mirpur-1, on the pavement in front of Mirpur Islami Bank, the space adjacent to Gabtoli Bus Terminal, the open space of Roads and Highways Department at Amtoli in Mohakhali, the space near the DCC market in Gulshan-1 (flower market) and the space on the Uttara Rajuk playground.

Mohammad Alauddin, chief

executive officer of DCC said though DCC and DMP jointly set up these markets, DCC have a little role in handling them.

He said according to an official order on February 20 last year approved 11 holiday markets but later the authorities closed nine markets and allowed only two.

Mohammad Jashimuddin, joint chief commissioner and chief of the traffic wing of DMP, said handling the hawkers is very difficult due to shortage of force. He admitted that hawkers still obstruct pedestrians' movement in the city.

On the future plan on the hawkers' markets and holiday markets, he said DMP will provide identity cards to the hawkers rehabilitated at the difference spots.



This holiday market that started in front of the General Post Office (GPO) disappeared after the authorities decided to close it down.



Rundown buses like this ply city streets but they never hesitate to demand 'latest' fares.

Of unfair fares, worn-out buses

CITY CORRESPONDENT

On a soggy, pouring Monday morning, around 40 commuters were sitting breathless on the cramped interior of a city bus.

The windows were shut with the heavy downpour outside. But sprinkles of water still found their way in through dents and holes in the bus and cracks in the windows. The overhead hatches, in spite of being shut let in even the bigger drops of water.

Most of the passengers quietly wiped the drips off their faces and clothes. But the nuisance got at a grey-haired, middle-aged commuter sitting next to a leaking overhead hatch.

"Why the bus is leaking so much," he shouted at the bus helper, "Look at me, I am soaking in water. Even all my papers are getting wet."

His cream white shirt was visibly drenched. And so was the stack of documents he held on his lap.

"All they [bus officials] do is they squish us together inside the bus like chickens in a poultry house, and squeeze out as much money as possible," he said, "you

take such amount for a service alright, but where is the return for that? And this nuisance must not go on."

Within moments, several other commuters inside the bus joined in the protest. Many became agitated and started hurling curses at the bus helper and the driver.

"If you have any complaints why don't you call the company and tell them directly. You can find the number from the flyers in the bus," the helper told the angry commuters.

"Why should I go to your company to complain," a commuter replied, "you represent them here. It is your responsibility to make sure that the services are properly maintained."

The helper replied: "We are just employees of the company. They would not listen to us no matter how many times we tell them for repairs and revamps. They just turn a deaf ear to us."

"But if you people raise complaints instead of us, maybe they [authorities] will do something to improve the quality of services," he said.

It goes without saying that the

city's public transportation service is a sector that has received more complaints than any other in recent times - something which the officials admit themselves.

"While bus fares are getting higher, the quality of the services going the other way around," said an official at the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC).

"Let it be service or maintenance - everything has been deteriorating," he said.

Majority of the hundreds of buses lumbering on city streets are almost worn out with poor facilities for their passengers. Some of them even around 20 years old. Almost all of them have half shattered windscreens. The broken head and rear lights can draw unwarranted accidents any time.

The interiors of the buses can be just as appalling. "The other day I boarded this bus to go to my university. After I took the only available seat, I realised that there was a strong nauseating odour coming out of my seat," said Niamat Hossain, a student of Jagannath University.

"Later I discovered that someone vomited on this seat on the day before and it was not cleaned properly. I myself felt like puking up. Then I spent the rest of the ride standing, keeping away from that seat," he said.

The old, obsolete buses' rusting engines also tend to fail in the middle of a ride without prior warnings. And when that happens, the unfortunate passengers practically beg to the drivers of the next buses to take them in.

Those who cannot squeeze through the desperate passengers inside the next bus are then compelled to look for another mode of transport.

While people are paying higher fares for shorter bus rides, the question remains on the convenience and quality of the services. Commuters say they are not getting the service they should on the amount of fare being squeezed out of them.

"Most of us do not really mind the extra fare as we can afford a few more taka. But the question is, why should we pay that extra money for a ride that is more of a nuisance than a convenience,"

said Jalaluddin Ahmed, a service provider who goes to office everyday hanging on to a bus door.

"There are very few buses that take justified fares for their services. But there are many other buses that claim high fares for poor services - and that is as good as it can get. You cannot expect anything better than that," he said, "it is us, the commuters, who are getting ripped off ultimately."

Transport officials believe the problem lies in allowing import of buses without any detailed planning and studies on their quality and feasibility.

"Majority of the older buses were imported from India, and the newer ones are being imported from China," said an official at the Trans Silva Paribahan Limited.