

Mindless construction puts Mughal-era Eidgah at risk

TAWFIQUE ALI

The oldest surviving Mughal Eidgah structure in the capital stands eclipsed by permanent structures as a local mosque committee has turned a grocery shop into a 'research centre' and is erecting a six-storey mosque on the Eidgah premises without Rajuk approval.

Dhanmondi Eidgah mosque committee is constructing the building and maintaining the research centre without approval from Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) as required by the Building Construction Act and Dhaka Metropolitan Building Rules.

"This Eidgah is the oldest surviving Mughal monument in Dhaka city. There is no second one with the architectural forms and features similar to it," conservationist architect Abu Sayeed Mahmud said.

Popularly known as Dhanmondi Eidgah by the road no-6/A, the 368-year old structure is a listed archaeological site of the Department of Archaeology.

According to Sayeed, it is a monumental structure built during the Mughal dynasty, with historical, architectural and heritage value and testimony of an era.

This is an urban open space and it has been in use for Eid congregation since it was built in 1640. The under-construction building within five feet of the Eidgah has blocked the main entry to it, Sayeed said.

Devotees of Eid-congregation and the aspiring visitors now have to take a detour around the new mosque to get to the Eidgah.

Sayeed feared that the Eidgah structure got weakened by the rig vibration during piling of the new building. "It is a very bad choice of site for construction of a huge building, as it has spoiled the elegant look of the heritage monument,"



The historic Eidgah ... overshadowed and threatened.

said Sayeed.

The monument has also been overshadowed by the grocery shop that the mosque committee has turned into a 'Islamic Research Centre' within ten feet of Eidgah's central Mihrab (central prayer niche).

Dhaka Metropolitan Building Rules of 2008 requires that any development intervention within 250-metre radius of an archaeological and heritage site must seek permission of government's high-powered Nagar Unnayan Committee before approaching the Rajuk Building Committee for plan approval.

Government must protect all the heritage icons of Dhaka city, said Sayeed.

Bangladesh Rifles erected the grocery shop as part of its open market sale programme and left the site recently. Then the mosque committee managed to retain the structure in name of the research centre.

Besides, the committee also runs a Hafizia Madrasa within the Eidgah premises. Dhaka Wasa has a water pump house while Desa runs a complaint centre at the heritage site.

Mubasshar Hussain, president of the Institute of Architects Bangladesh and a member of Nagar Unnayan Committee, said the research centre is no way compatible with the sanctity and historical value of the Eidgah structure.

"It has spoiled the original look of the heritage structure," he said. "Eidgah is not only a historical relic but also an architectural piece and a cultural treasure of the nation."

Neither BC Act nor building rules has exempted mosque buildings from compliance with the design approval, said Hussain.

Atiqul Habib, secretary general of Dhanmondi Eidgah Mosque Committee, said that they kept the grocery shop for research centre as everyone in the committee agreed to it.

Regarding design approval for the new mosque building, he first said that they got it from the Public Works Department (PWD). Then he said that the building design was approved by the Department of Architecture.

"We do not need approval from Rajuk, as the mosque

building is being built under PWD," said committee's treasurer Rezaul Karim. But PWD Chief Engineer Abdullah-Al-Shafi said, "The chief engineer of PWD does not have any authority to do so."

ASM Ismail, chief architect of Department of Architecture, said that they have just endorsed the architectural plan of the building but construction of the building requires design approval from Rajuk under the BC Act.

"They have to obtain approval of the building design from Rajuk," said Ismail.

The chief architect is empowered to approve design only of the government buildings.

The Eidgah spreads over around 3.5 bighas of land.

The mosque committee managed a permission from the public works ministry in the fog end of BNP government to use approximately 14 kathas of land to build a new mosque demolishing the existing old one.

"We are going to demolish the old mosque to complete the new one," said Atiqul Habib.

He said that the commit-

tee has already spent Tk 1.80 crore from 'donation' fund and contribution of building materials for the basement and first and second floors of the new mosque while the entire project requires Tk 12 crore.

He also said that the mosque committee has applied to the embassies of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates for funds but they have not responded yet.

Highly placed sources in the PWD said expressing resentment that the issue of mosques is a problematic phenomenon in enforcing building rules.

Retired high-ups and influential people are active in such mosque committees, who make unacceptable requests and frantic lobbying, said a high official.

"They are so fast in establishing connections with the government's policymakers that agencies concerned cannot keep pace with the normal rules and procedure," he said.

Though the mosque committee started construction work on February 26, Rajuk has been 'unaware' of it. Rajuk's Director (development control) Sheikh Abdul Mannan said that he was not aware of the unauthorised building construction but he would look into it.

Rajuk's authorised officer concerned said, "In case construction is found without approval, we will serve notice as per Building Construction Act."

An inscription of Department of Archaeology, referring to a Persian inscription set over the central prayer-niche, reads that Mir Abul Qasim, Diwan of Subedar Prince Shah Suja of the Mughal Dynasty, erected the Eidgah. It was meant for use twice annually during Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha congregations.



Construction of the 6-storey new structure goes on without Rajuk approval.



The once fair-price shop of BDR, constructed in front of the Eidgah, has been turned into an Islamic research centre.

DCC cleaners sweep streets after sunrise

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

If you are having a stroll or on your way to your office in the morning, there are chances that you would see plumes of dust trailing the broomsticks of cleaners working on the street.

It's nice to see the men and women in green DCC uniform with their broomsticks early in the morning--a time when the city streets are reasonably free. But it is a totally different matter when the sweepers do their jobs at unduly late hours.

"It was around 10:30am the other day when I was walking on the pavement in Rampura. There was a cleaner sweeping the street and there were clouds of dust all around him," said Rafiqul Alam, a resident of Rampura.

"The cloud of dust made my eyes burn. For a few minutes I could not see anything," he said. "I could not stop myself from asking the question: aren't the cleaners supposed to clean the streets early in the morning? What was he doing sweeping street this late?"

Alam is right. The guiding principles of the DCC say sweeping of streets and public areas should be done within 6:00am. And collection of the trash should be finished by 7:00am.

However, DCC officials admitted that the schedules apply only to the VIP areas.

"We aim to finish the cleaning jobs and collect trash from the VIP areas by 7:00am. However, taking

care of other city areas usually takes longer and may stretch up to 10:00am depending on the location," said an official at DCC's Conservancy Department.

And so the city dwellers continue to suffer. They say DCC sweepers spoil their commutes in city streets by doing their job at untimely hours.

DCC cleaners are seen sweeping city streets as late as 10 or 11 in the morning in places such as Malibagh, Karwan Bazar, Farmgate, Tejgaon, Bashabo and Bangla Motor.

Mushfiqul Hossain, a student from Uttara, said "Quite often on my way to the class, I see sweepers

doing their jobs as late as 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning."

Doctors say dust can be harmful to the human body, especially to people who have asthma and breathing problems.

"Dust particles overpower human body's defences and build up in the respiratory systems. This can harm lung tissue," said Dr Iqbal Karim, a private practitioner from Green Road.

"Dust may irritate the lung and trigger allergic reactions as well as asthma attacks. People who already have respiratory troubles may also have serious breathing problems from

these attacks," he said adding that dust can also cause wheezing, runny noses, chronic breathing and lung problems.

Dhanmondi residents allege that DCC cleaners spoil their morning walks by doing their jobs at untimely hours. They say the cleaners sweep the Dhanmondi lakeside walkway between 7:30am and 8:30am when scores of people go to the lakeside for morning walk.

"We are here to keep fit and stay healthy but these sweepers turn out to be the spoilsports," said Jamshed Chowdhury, 54, who looked red and sweaty due to the coughing fit.

"It is not only the morning walkers are affected. As this is the school opening hours, a lot of schoolchildren are also inhaling dust and other toxic particles because of this untimely sweeping," said Abdur Rahim, a resident of Dhanmondi 8/A.

DCC officials blamed the cleaners for not doing their jobs at the scheduled time. "It is difficult to supervise these workers especially with their sheer number and the number of areas needed to be covered," said an official concerned from the DCC zone-5.

"Once in a while we do take measures to raise their [sweepers'] work standards, but it dwindles afterwards because of the absence of proper monitoring," he said.

The cleaners blamed each other for not doing their jobs properly. "I, for myself like to get over with the job as early as possible. But most others tend to waste time dillydallying their jobs," said Karim Ali, a cleaner at Dhanmondi.

"In other countries, it is mandatory for the cleaning staff to sweep streets before sunrise. However, in our country, they do not seem to give a damn about the convenience of people," said Abdur Rahim, a Dhanmondi resident.

According to DCC sources, their conservancy department has 7,156 cleaners for street sweeping along with waste collection and disposal activities.



STYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Pleasure for the buyer but pain for the parakeet. Although the wildlife preservation act prohibits capture and domestication of wild birds and animals, carrying them in cages in broad daylight is nothing uncommon in the city. These two rose-ringed parakeets were snapped from the Karwan Bazar area yesterday.



A DCC cleaner sweeping a street in Hare Road area at around 3 in the afternoon.