

WHAT'S ON THIS WEEK

Theatre
 Play: Raja Ebon
 Onnanyo.....
 Troupe: Prachyanat
 Venue: Experimental
 Theatre Hall, BSA
 Date: March 12
 Time: 7pm

Memorial Meeting on Altaf Ali Hashu
 Organiser: Wshitz Shilpi Ghosh
 Venue: Liberation War Museum
 Date: March 11
 Time: 5pm

Recitation
 Title: Purano Shel Diner
 Kotha
 Organiser: Kotha Abriditi Charcha Kendra
 Venue: Shawkat Osman Auditorium, Central Public Library, Shahbag
 Date: March 12
 Time: 7pm

Solo Art Exhibition
 Title: Reminiscence in Blue Black
 Artist: Md. Shaiful Islam
 Venue: Zainul Gallery, Faculty of Fine Arts, DU
 Date: March 4-10
 Time: 12-8pm

Fancy a bit of French?



(L-R) The ground floor of Ruplal House has become a vibrant wholesale spice market. Neo-classical influences are clearly visible in Rebati Mohan Das' 125-130 year old mansion. Residence of Murapara Zamindar on Hrishikesh Das Road.

NIVEDITA RAITZ VON FRENTZ

Coinciding with the city's 400th birthday, and in an attempt to leave no stone of Old Dhaka unturned, intrepid architects, Homaira Zaman and Taimur Islam conduct heritage walks to arouse interest and awareness among locals and expats alike. As part of the Urban Studies Group (USG), they have been busy documenting landmarks in historic localities.

Starting in Sutrapur, around the corner from the Narinda and Dholaikhal roads intersection, is the single-domed Binat Bibi, Dhaka's oldest mosque. Constructed in 1457, the remaining ruins sport pre-Mughal, Sultani period architecture, including curved cornicing and octagonal turrets. A second dome was built about 80 years ago. Traditionally, Sultani mosques did not have 'chimi tikri' mosaic work commonly found on Dhaka monuments; these were later additions, some non-eroded segments are still visible. An extension with plans to dismantle the entire structure was prevented by local conservation groups.

Many mansions were built during Dhaka's 19th Century revival spurt 100-125 years ago, some with intact doorways, a typical Sutrapur feature. The area has been dubbed 'Banianagar' (merchant town), its residents were once among the most affluent; few families continue living in their ancestral homes. Ironically, Sutrapur has been "conserved by neglect"; by default, there are hardly any new

buildings in the neighbourhood. Sadly, some have lost their original features when owners have tried repairing the facades.

As in Shakhari Bazar, Homaira and Taimur have won the trust of many local people, so walkers are privy to communal living in an amazing lime-washed Mughal period building with a vaulted, beamless ceiling, modified during colonial rule (Shushil Babu's house, 11 Banianagar). True to structures of this time, multiple courtyards make a regular appearance. It turns out that the owner needs an annual government lease to live in his own house!

In a pattern seen in Tanti Bazar, grand old zamindari (land-owning families) buildings are clustered together. A number of houses once belonging to Hrishikesh Das (of Rose Garden fame) still stand, as does the residence of the talented tabla-playing Keshab Banerjee of Murapara. Neo-classical influences are clearly visible in Rebati Mohan Das' 125-130 year old mansion. His was a many-faceted business encompassing jute, construction materials, banking, the immense house overlooking Dholaikhal. "Partially reclaimed in the 1960s, Dholaikhal was completely filled in the early 90s. Sadly, if only we had the environmental laws that are in effect today, the canal might have been saved," added Taimur. The E-shaped building with 2/3 courtyards has very ornate surface decorations, though the stupendous columns have been poorly repaired. Leased to the Civil Defence Department for the last 40 years, the mansion now houses 52 families.

Meandering into neighbouring Farashganj, so named after the market established by the French back in the late 18th Century, the first stop is the 150-year-old Biharilal Jiyu Radha-Krishna temple, which also bears signs of "preservation by neglect". The facades of many 100-year-old buildings are quite plain, but in fairly good condition, several with ornate balconies. Despite the need for substantial work, French rococo influence can be seen on the Boro Bari (Big House), its elegant elevated walkways depicting a twisting vine design in relief. The USG got involved when its owner started demolishing the house last year, resulting in the only instance when RAJUK (body governing Dhaka's urban planning) served a stay order. A chance meeting on B K Das Road with one of the landowner's descendants was an added bonus.

Breezing through the Shia Jamaat Khana (meeting place), Bibi ka Rauza, a mausoleum in memory of Fatima (PBUH), wife of Hazrat Ali (PBUH) said to have been built in 1600, then redeveloped in the 19th Century, next on the itinerary was Ruplal House. Once owned by zamindar brothers Ruplal and Raghunath Shaha, it was rechristened Jamall House after a change in ownership. Taimur disclosed, "One part is called Nur Jahan House by the present occupiers claiming one third ownership of the palace."

Legend has it, that in anticipation of Viceroy, Lord Dufferin's visit to Dhaka, teams were sent to Ruplal House and Ahsan Manzil (the Dhaka Nawabs' seat), to scout the best venue for a ball. The reception was finally held in the

dance hall of Ruplal House in 1888. Now, Defence Department families reside on the first floor, the grandeur of the hall a faint glimmer.

Walking across the sprawling mansion, its faded majesty is very much palpable. The ground floor is possibly the smartest wholesale spice market in the world! Turmeric, bright red chillies, ginger, garlic, fennel -- to name only a few, are displayed in mounds. The onslaught of colours is quite remarkable, a reminder that the vendors are all squatters. Picking one's way through the vibrant, fantastically fragrant 'spice mountains', the path leads to the Buriganga riverfront, doubling up as a fresh vegetable market. The walk ends at the end of B K Das Road, at the Lal Kuthi (Northbrook Hall), built to commemorate another Viceroy's visit, leaving a lingering urge for yet another taste of the old town.

Every cloud has a silver lining and "93 buildings including 13 streets were listed as heritage sites by the government. A government gazette to that effect was published on February 12, 2009" Taimur beams. A number of Sutrapur and Farashganj structures appear on the list, including Binat Bibi, Ruplal House and Northbrooke Hall. Entire streets in these two areas have also been earmarked. The walks have certainly helped changing owners' attitudes, and create a sense of pride that was perhaps previously missing (subscribe to the USG's email list on usg.dhaka@gmail.com).

The writer is a freelance contributor



Artistes of Nriyabhumi Kala Kendra (Noakhali) perform at a programme by Music and Dance Department, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy on March 8.

Subal Das and his musical instruments find eager ears around the country

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

Subal Das is well known as a maker of percussion instruments in Jhenidah. Music enthusiasts and artistes flock to Subal for his quality musical instruments, particularly 'dugi' and 'tabla'.

Subal, 60, is son of the late Shukhlal of Manikganj district. The impoverished family settled in Jhenidah in 1969 as business was lean in Manikganj. Subal was inducted into his current profession by his father. Thanks to Shukhlal, today Subal can make 'dugi', 'tabla', 'dholak', 'khol', 'dhak', 'dotara', 'ektara', 'madol', 'nal', 'congo', 'bongo', 'dugdugi' and 'khamok'. Now his shop, by the Dhaka-Khulna highway, attracts many a music lover.

While talking to this correspondent, Subal said that after moving to Jhenidah things began to look up for the family. Today Subal's younger son Bhabesh does the same work of making musical instruments in Chittagong. Subal's other sons live in Manikganj where he has bought some land. Subal's reputation now extends to all corners of Bangladesh. There are times when he is unable to meet the demands as he has limited number of employees. He has been conferred with several awards from various music institutions.



Subal Das (right) at work.

PHOTO: STAR

Tropical Paradise: Drama by IUB on climate change

IFC, a member of the World Bank Group, has sponsored a 'jatra' on climate change, according to a press release. The IUB Drama Club has prepared the drama, which will be staged at five universities from March 9 to 15.

The drama, "Tropical Paradise," is part of IFC's strategy to get the community involved with the climate change issue. IFC has carried out multiple initiatives in Bangladesh last year to create a buzz around climate change.

"We hope this will be an evolving awareness campaign. We will encourage the students to think about climate change even after the curtains come down," said Afifa Raihana, coordinator, Sustainability, IFC.

IFC is also working with private organisations to introduce clean technology (for example, effluent treatment plants at garments factories) and energy efficient technology (such as modified burner nozzles to reduce carbon

emission from re-rolling mills). IFC is also encouraging banks to provide sustainable finance for investments in clean production.

To facilitate the programmes, IFC has partnered with a student-run SME called THE SOURCE, an event management company that specialises in university events. THE SOURCE conducted all necessary arrangements including logistic support during rehearsals and performances for the play.

"The play should make students realise that there is a lot we can do. For example, the student voice must loudly demand that our leaders take responsibility to help our people, especially farmers, deal with the issue," says Amer Khan, CEO of The Source. The participating universities are: IUB, NSU, East West University, BRAC University and the University of Liberal Arts.



"Eksho Boshta Chaal (One Hundred Sacks of Rice)," a play by Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, was staged at the National Theatre Hall as part of the four-day Japan Cultural Festival that ended on March 7. Directed by Golam Sarwar, the production is a Bengali translation of a play by Japanese playwright Yuzo Yamamoto.

PHOTO COURTESY: BANGLAR CHOKH