

PROFILE

THE MAN WHO UNEARTHS THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

SIFAT MOSADDEK

PHOTO: COURTESY

Working on various projects in Bangladesh for 20 years now, veteran archeologist David Michelmore is no alien to the illustrious history and heritage of the country. Boasting thousands of years' worth of history, Bangladesh hides invaluable relics of the past beneath her which could enlighten us about our deepest ancestral roots. Current methods of archeological excavation followed here, however, runs a risk of damaging or even destroying significant potential discoveries.

The seasoned expert voiced concern over the matter in a lecture titled 'Archeology in Bangladesh: opportunities for upgrading and future development' at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The Department of Archeology in Bangladesh, although has a rich heritage and a firm institutional establishment, still follows methods long outdated and often improper for unearthing structures predominantly made of mud hundreds, sometimes even thousands of years old.

David Michelmore also outlined modern methods of excavation by means of advanced archeological geophysics that could be adopted in Bangladesh to get better results. He highlighted certain barriers in the system like institutional lethargy, encouraging the acceptance of status quo, and an unwillingness to embrace change, and lack of enforcement of legislation that are preventing the upgrade.

Any form transition can be a daunting task. The upgrades in the archeological practices in Bangladesh are no different. However, Michelmore prescribes a smooth means. There are highly experienced and skilled international experts in archeology who, along with having extensive international experience, also boast a deep understanding of our region. Establishing relationships with these specialists on an individual or institutional level would catalyze the transition process to a great extent, and could prove to be a much better alternative to starting from scratch. Michelmore points out Durham University and Professor Robin Coningham as prominent examples.

Shockingly, Bangladesh, with all her glorious history, currently has only 448 protected heritage sites. Lack of legislative enforcement and insufficient active engagement with the local by the authority is threatening proper preservation of these proud monuments as well. It is not that the local people are unaware of the cultural heritage in their respective areas, but they are unaware of its true value. It is time they are effectively communicated with, and made to realize that they should also be very proud of the remains of history in their respective localities. Only then, these people will play an active role in preserving the heritage sites in these areas.

Michelmore emphasizes that the archeological heritage sites are much more than simple structures. The locations of discovery could be transformed into tourist



David Michelmore

sites, and local people could be trained to become guides, adding value to the local economy.

On a personal level, David Michelmore says it is the more imaginative projects that attract him rather than the more expensive ones. A graduate from University of Exeter and earning a Master of Philosophy from University of Leeds for a thesis on the Monastery of Fountains (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site), he has so far worked in 40 countries around the world, including as UNESCO International Technical Adviser, based in the Department of Archeology in Kathmandu, as well as in the UNESCO Principal Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok. He has worked on numerous international projects funded by UNESCO, the Asian Development

Bank, the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the European Union.

In 1992, he founded the Consultancy for Conservation and Development and increasingly concentrated on heritage management and the conservation of heritage sites. David Michelmore looks forward to working in more projects in Bangladesh and in other countries where he is currently working to unravel new discoveries, because it is 'the process of studying and scholarship of finding things out' that he finds a 'fascinating, and enjoyable'. Before arriving in Bangladesh last October, he had been working in Georgia, before which he was working in Iraq. The man shows no sign of tiring any time soon. ■

HERITAGE

WHERE LEGENDS ARE BORN

NILIMA JAHAN

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

This particular place is more than just a residence. It is a haven for young minds to mingle, to think, to live, to learn. It is a haven where legends are made to lead the country. With a glorious history of 60 years; the Rokeya Hall is the oldest hall for women at the University of Dhaka.

The Rokeya Hall stands near Dhaka University Snacks (DUS), adjacent to Nilkhet Road. According to many, the journey of the female hall of Dhaka University started in 1938 with 12 students which used to be called 'Chameli House'. Afterwards in 1956, a separate 'Women's Hall' was set up for the female students of Dhaka University. Later in 1964, in memory of the legendary feminist writer



and social reformer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the hall was renamed as 'Rokeya Hall'.

The garden situated in front of the hall creates an eye-catching and fascinating environment for the students living there. Entering the gate, you would find a library with a large collection of books and guest room on the left. On the right side, there is an office room.

At present, a total of four buildings including one under construction – Shapla, Aparajita, Chameli and 7 March Bhaban are situated there. Though primarily, there were only two—the main building and the Honours Bhaban, another three storey extension of the main building was also set up, known as Aparajita. Later, another building, Chameli, was set up with five floors.

A few years ago, as the Honours Bhaban required a facelift, the authority started constructing an 11 storied building called '7 March Bhaban'. Inside the hall, students have two separate dining rooms and two study rooms. There is also an arrangement for different activities. They can watch television, read newspapers, magazines and play different indoor games. The historic Rokeya hall has several monuments too. Of them, the statue of legend, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is the most significant one.

Rokeya Hall has always been quite vocal when it comes to women leadership, empowerment and overall development. From the back in the past all the way till now, the hall has had many outstanding evidences of bringing out talents and possibilities for the country. Many prominent personalities of the past and present times belong to this hall. Even, Sheikh Hasina, our Honourable Prime Minister, was the secretary of the Bangladesh Chhatro League of Rokeya Hall.

This place also has a valiant history in our liberation war. Archer Blood, the then diplomat general of US embassy in Dhaka, wrote in his book 'The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh' that "fire broke out at Rokeya Hall, girls' dormitory and, when the students tried to escape, the military started firing. From the conversation of military control room and army unit 88, a total of 300 students deaths was estimated". Later, a monument was set up in memory of the killed students in front of the Rokeya Hall premises.

Every year, the students of the hall celebrate national occasions and other

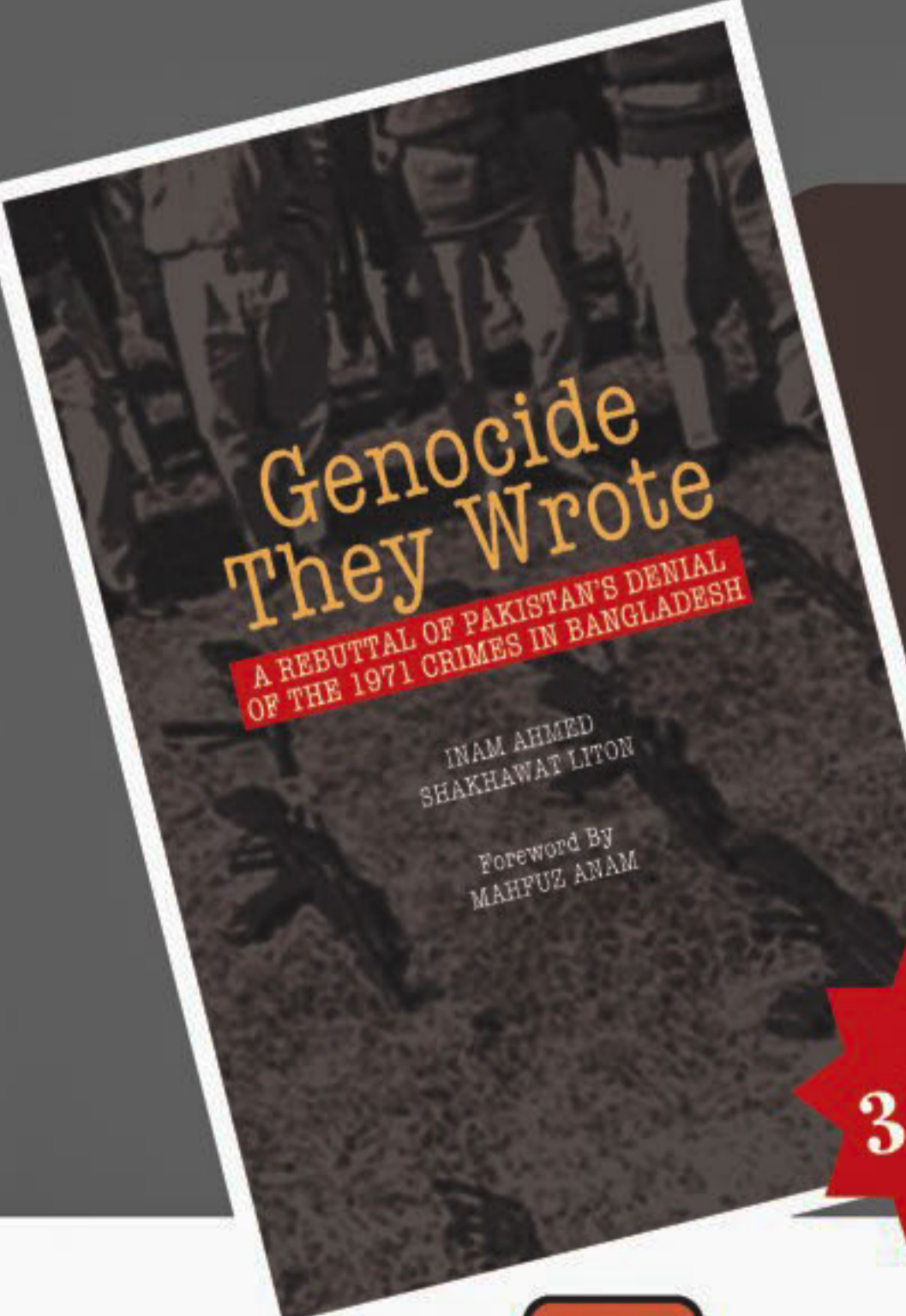


festivals by organising different events. Apart from these, in order to remember Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, they celebrate 'Rokeya Dibash' on 9 December, every year where gold medals and scholarships are distributed to the talented students from 'Rokeya Memorial Foundation', a fund that is used for the welfare of the students of Rokeya Hall.

The members of Rokeya Hall Alumni Association also celebrate their reunion with zeal and festivity. The place gets more amazing when the old members get together and share their sweet memories about their living at the hall.

According to the former students of the hall, the life they lead in the hall was really memorable. When cell phones were not available, they used to communicate with their families and friends through card phones and letters. In order to meet them, well-wishers used to pass small notes with the help of other students in the gate and meet with their loved ones.

Rokeya Hall is not only a mere hostel. Rather it is one of the most historically significant places of the country. A number of books written on Rokeya Hall and how it helps to empower women of Bangladesh, confirms just that. ■




Genocide They Wrote

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PEARLS OF WISDOM



"IF YOU WANT SOMETHING SAID, ASK A MAN; IF YOU WANT SOMETHING DONE, ASK A WOMAN."
MARGARET THATCHER
Former British stateswoman and politician

"THINK LIKE A QUEEN. A QUEEN IS NOT AFRAID TO FAIL. FAILURE IS ANOTHER STEPPING STONE TO GREATNESS."
OPRAH WINFREY
American media proprietor, talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist



"IF FEMINISM WASN'T POWERFUL, IF FEMINISM WASN'T INFLUENTIAL, PEOPLE WOULDN'T SPEND SO MUCH TIME PUTTING IT DOWN."
JESSICA VALENTI
American blogger and feminist writer