

INSIGHT



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

A GLIMPSE INTO HIS WORLD

LEELA, WHERE MINDS COME TO PLAY, PRESENTS 'A PIECE OF WHISPER' BY FAHAD AL ALAM

NAZIBA BASHER

A first glance at Fahad Al Alam will remind one of a line from The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, because like Estha, he “occupies very little space in the world.” The catch is, no matter which little space he is occupying, you can rest assured the space is beautiful- where the moon glows a little brighter, the grass is a little greener and the memories of yesteryear, both monochromatic and in colour, are floating around. Fahad's own little space, his world is quite an experience, an opportunity really- which Leela, an art gallery, performance space and library, has made possible for us commoners to explore.

'A Piece of Whisper', an exhibition of analogue photos by Fahad Al Alam, is much more than just an exhibition. Cartoonist Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy aptly stated, “In photo exhibitions, you expect to just see photos. The words of Fahad's poetry wonderfully placed underneath the photographs also add to the whole feeling- it's a completely different experience.”

The collection portrays the past two years of Fahad's life and his constant journey to home (Naogaon) and away (Dhaka). The contrast between the concrete and clay, the natural and urbanised is what he shows through his images.

The exhibition began on the 16th of this month with much anticipation and zeal, and will continue on till the 29th of April. There was music to sway to- clarinet and guitar, mesmerising poetry recitation both Bangla and English, along with Fahad's delicate words and striking

images. “What I enjoyed about the photos were the sizes- comparatively small, which created an intimacy between the image and the viewer. The closer I got to the image, the more I understood the artist,” says Alia Kamal, painter.

“I never had the dream of becoming a professional photographer. It was something I merely stumbled across. I was studying BBA, and I hated it,” giggles the shy and quiet-in-nature Fahad. In the newspaper, Fahad saw that Dhaka University's Photographic Society (DUPS) offered a course for basic photography. “I called my friend, Taef (Sheikh Mehedi Morshed), and asked him to sign up with me. And then we began our journeys with cameras together...” Fahad remembers. He then went back to his hometown, Naogaon, where his family and fondest memories still reside, to announce that he was going to leave BBA and pursue Media Studies and Journalism in the University of Liberal Arts. Once Fahad bought his own camera, they were inseparable and he has been carrying it, along with many others he bought along the years, ever since.

While Fahad enjoyed all kinds of photography, he was more inclined towards street photography. “That was until I came across film photography, with which I like taking photos of anything that I feel are worth recording in my memory. There is something about analogue photographs that feels raw and timeless, especially the black and white ones. That was how I saw the world- in its rawest beauty. So I then decided that I want that imagery to reflect in my work.” His friend, Sucheta Shegufa, who used to use a film camera herself, lent him hers. “I didn't know anything about it though. So, because I didn't get much support before,

I decided to teach myself. I watched youtube videos for days and nights to learn all about analogue photography. There were some individuals who helped me a lot. I want to thank them all.” After a long trial and error process, Fahad finally mastered the art. He also learned the process of developing film on his own, using alternates to chemicals and other equipment, and has made his own lab out of his bathroom. “I still develop my own photos there.” Fahad also experiments with his photography, where he adds a burnt effect with the use of sunlight or fire during the process of developing. His images are what one would call 'hauntingly beautiful.' There is antiqueness to them, with a touch of mystery.

Along with photography, Fahad likes recording sounds of nature, and also writes poetry. “I write when I feel like there is something I can't express in my photos. I show my own world to people through my images, and while there are bits and pieces of my world here in the real world, there are bits that aren't. Those bits- I write down in poetry.” With his words and images, 'A Piece of Whisper' is truly a glimpse into Fahad's own mind, his own world; in their most naked selves.

He has been a part of many competitions including the Invisible Photographer Asia in 2013, when he was a second finalist. Along with that, he has also taken part in many exhibitions before his solo one, with the inclusion of LL5 curated by Shehzad Chowdhury, curator and co-founder of Leela. “We were friends on Facebook from before. But then one day we bumped into each other outside Bengal Gallery and he asked me to send me a portfolio, after which I



Fahad Al Alam

PHOTOS: COURTESY

HERITAGE

The ruler saw a strange dream: a goddess appeared and told him that she was to be found in a certain area under a particular 'dhakka' tree. Ballal Sen (approx. 1160-1179), the second ruler of the Sen Dynasty of Bengal, went to the place with some of his men and looked for the tree. They found it, and after an excavation, unearthed a statue. Consequently, Ballal Sen built a temple in commemoration of it, known as Dhakeshwari Temple - the temple of the goddess of dhakka tree.

The legend of Dhakeshwari may even predate its founder. Ballal Sen's mother, with the future ruler in her womb, prayed for the safe delivery of her child and vowed that he would one day build a temple.

The mother's wish was fulfilled, and hence Dhakeshwari Temple, arguably the most prominent and celebrated temple of our country, came into being.

TEMPLE AND A CITY

M H HAIDER

Legends and stories surround the temple, including the ones about its origin. Whether the temple is actually this old or not and whether its builder was indeed Ballal Sen of the Sen Dynasty or someone else, are debatable. B.C. Allen, in 'Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers: Dacca', (published in 1912), wrote, "Tradition states that it was founded by Ballal Sen and rebuilt by Raja Man Singh, but no traces of these buildings are left and the present temple is said to have been erected about two hundred years ago by one of the Company's servants."

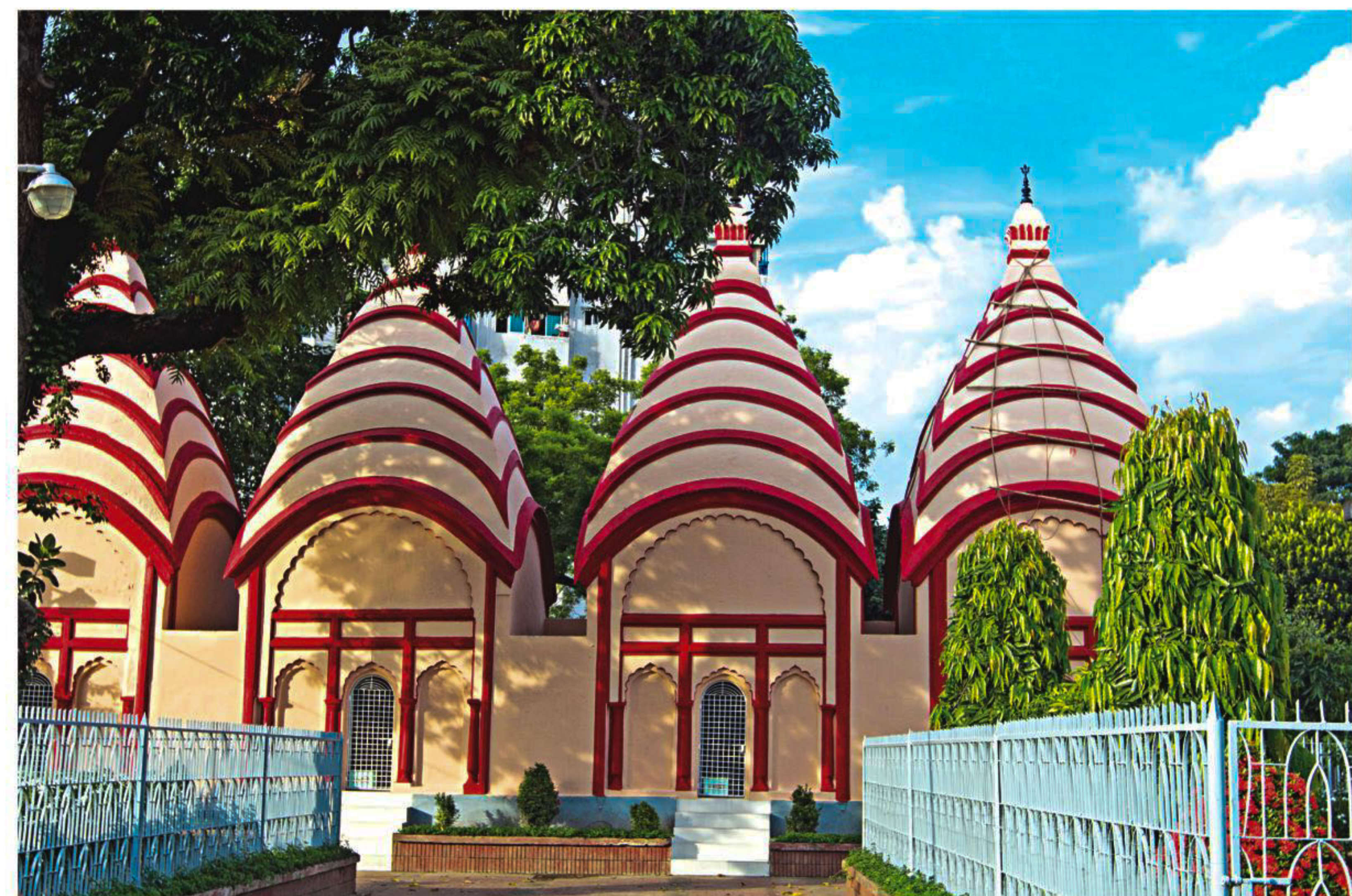
The temple is a major landmark of Dhaka, with the names Dhakeshwari and Dhaka closely attached to each other. One theory of the etymology of Dhaka claims that this city was perhaps named after the temple. The legend involves the use of 'dhak' (a type of drum) to determine Dhaka's boundaries. From a highly elevated stage at the temple, dhaks were played, with the sound of the beating of drums being heard from long distances. It is said that the area covering the distance till which the sound of dhaks could be heard was named Dhaka.

PHOTOS: STAR LIFESTYLE ARCHIVE/SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

Let's not dwell into the correctness of this well-known theory. Instead, let it be a reflection of the sheer influence it played on the city and among its people.

The fascination about the temple is definitely not new. "It was in olden times a most famous place of resort." Allen cited an abstract from 1867. "Every stranger coming to Dacca was expected to lose no time in presenting himself before the goddess..."

True, the abstract went on to say that the temple was 'gradually mouldering and falling into decay', but Allen, when he



wrote his book about half a century later, said that 'the pendulum has swung back once more', that interest about the temple was renewed.

Today too, Dhakeshwari Temple attracts numerous visitors - not just from Bangladesh but from all over the globe. As you enter its premises, you will see four identical Shiva temples, set in a row. The main temple is the home of goddess Durga. There is also a pond in the temple compound.

With the sense of divinity all around - made possible by the statues of deities, the chanting of mantras by priests, the striking sound of the temple bell and the occasional beating of dhak - Dhakeshwari Temple is a place soaked with legends and history that you must pay a visit to. ■