

# What does Shakespeare mean to you?

## IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

commemorate the occasion from different angles. They all had something to say about the Bard. Imtiaz Habib, a professor of Early Modern English Literature at Old Dominion University wanted to do something special at his university. He ended up organising a mega event involving the city of Norfolk and the state of Virginia, that featured an international conference, about eight full length productions of Shakespeare's plays, historical and archaeological exhibitions, and a documentary film which he made. He was invited by Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) to deliver the keynote address on November 3rd to inaugurate an international conference on the occasion. Dr. Habib is one of the leading scholars in anti-colonial empirical race studies of Shakespeare's England and

author of *Shakespeare's Pluralistic Concepts of Character: A Study in Dramatic Anamorphism* (1993); *Shakespeare and Race: Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (2000); and *Black Lives in the English Archives 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (2008), and numerous scholarly essays on colonialism and race in the early modern period. His works have been featured in the British Library's exhibition on the history of London, and he has been interviewed by numerous media outlet including the BBC in London.

At his house in New DOHS, Mohakhali, Prof Habib talks about why he is so fascinated by Shakespeare. "Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the US, is only 40 miles from my university", he says. When the settlers came, Shakespeare was still alive. They were people from Shakespeare's world. Our way of approaching the event was that Shakespeare's world also had an impact on America."

Dr. Imtiaz says that the days of studying literature for the sake of literature are long gone. Any literary art should be considered in its total social context. "Why should you read Shakespeare unless he speaks directly to you?" And that's exactly what he found in a passage in scene 1 Act 2 in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which

mentions "a lovely boy stolen from an Indian King."

An incorrigible inquirer, he wanted to dig deeper. Where in India exactly was this boy from? What does Shakespeare mean by "stolen from an Indian King?" The play was published in 1595, Shakespeare's career started in 1591. How did Shakespeare come to know about India? "To find that out we have to look at the otherwise ignored account of the trip of Ralph Fitch, a London leather seller, to India in 1583."

Commissioned by a group of wealthy London merchants, it was a commercial spying mission to explore business opportunities in India, then a Portuguese colony. The trip took eight years to complete and

took Fitch across the heart of Mughal India from Goa to Delhi-Agra to Kolkata, Chittagong in the East, then farther down to Myanmar, Indonesia, Sumatra and Borneo. "Upon his return and de-briefing by his sponsors which led to his consultancy in the formation of the East India Company half a decade later, his experiences were recorded by that indefatigable Elizabethan advocate of overseas English expansion Richard Hakluyt and published in short form in his *Principal Navigations and Voyages of the English People* in 1598, and more fully by William Foster in 1921."

The chain of events takes a rather dramatic turn from here. "Fitch was

in India for two years out of which he spent 14 months in parts of Bengal, now Bangladesh. What more did he see here except silk, paper and spices? At that time the Portuguese were abducting a lot of young boys and smuggling them back to their country. Later, the English also did it. It is obvious that Fitch witnessed that but didn't write about it."

What does this have to do with Shakespeare? "I argued that a chance meeting between Shakespeare and Fitch was unavoidable. Travellers like Fitch would come back from their journey and talk about it in pubs, a common meeting place for Londoners. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was published in 1595. And Fitch went back to London from India in 1591. A young, aspiring writer like Shakespeare would want to collect interesting materials for his plays and it is likely that he would go to a pub and meet someone like Fitch. Besides, his family having being involved in the leather trade, he knew a lot of people in the leather business. But this cannot be proved although we know it happened. I call it historical dark matter."

The passage was written against this backdrop. "Many plays of Shakespeare mention ships full of merchandise being brought to England. The other side of the story, of course, is loot which the British Empire thrived on.

K.N. Chowdhury and other foremost authorities on Indian economic history have shown that the resource taken from Bengal alone was much greater than what was taken from all other British colonies combined."

What's the meaning of all this? "We want to remember Shakespeare. But in what context? This is one context which would make a lot of people very uncomfortable. But every work of art has an awkward underbelly. If we want to value art, we have to consider the whole, not just the part that glitters. The point of saying all this is that we have a part in the cultural capital that is Shakespeare. This is Shakespeare's debt to our country. For Dhaka and Bangladesh this could start a new conversation about Shakespeare."

Shakespeare was a product of his time and during his time, these things happened. "If we study the social factors, we understand history a little better. If we know how something happened, then there's a chance that we can prevent it from happening in future. And this way we can also do the proper justice to his work," Professor Habib concludes. Shakespeare would have agreed. "No legacy is so rich as honesty."

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team at The Daily Star.



Professor Imtiaz Habib

# A unique solution to three environmental problems

QUAMRUL HAIDER

DURING a recent trip to Bermuda, what impressed me most about this island nation were the tidy pastel houses with stucco exteriors and artistically built brilliant white roofs with grooves perfectly placed amid the palm trees for which the island is famous. The white roofs – signature pattern of the island's architecture – are built not only for aesthetic reasons but also for some distinct purposes.

Despite an idyllic location in the Atlantic Ocean, Bermuda and its 61,000 plus inhabitants face two stark environmental challenges. First, Bermuda is frequently battered by killer hurricanes, whose strong winds can tear houses apart and blow roofs away. As recent as October 13, 2016, Hurricane Nicole roared across Bermuda, pummeling the island with winds up to 115 mph. The last major one was Fabian which battered Bermuda in September of 2003 with

sustained winds in excess of 150 mph.

Second, there are no natural fresh water rivers or lakes on the island. Moreover, the island is set on porous limestone that often results in wells and water ponds collecting brackish salt water that is unsafe to drink. Because of this, residents must find other ways to get drinking water.

The white roofs and the stucco structures are an elegant solution to both the problems. To protect properties from destruction by powerful hurricanes, most of the homes on the island are constructed using a locally quarried limestone called "Bermuda Stone." Some modern structures are built of concrete blocks. Also, Bermuda's building codes require homes to be built with walls at least eight inches thick and be able to withstand 150 mph gusts and sustained winds of 110 mph.

The solution to the freshwater problem is the roof. Made of limestone blocks and sliced into individual slates, the roofs are fashioned in step-

like sloped surfaces with gutter ridges to collect rainwater, the most precious liquid in Bermuda. The ridges direct the water through a long concrete trough to a pipe that filters and funnels it into a tank buried alongside the house so that it can be pumped and used throughout the household.

In order to sanitise the rainwater as it runs off into the holding tank, the slates are coated with several layers of nontoxic white paint – a modern replacement for traditional whitewash. Before applying the paint, the roof has to be washed with a half-and-half solution of regular unscented household bleach and water.

The white colour helps disinfect the surfaces and water. Additionally, they keep the homes cooler during the hotter months, reducing the need for energy-guzzling air conditioners. The roofs must be cleaned of bird droppings and repainted every alternate year. Water tanks must be disinfected once every three months and cleaned every six years to remove any accumu-

lation of sludge.

Building codes require residents to convert at least 80 percent of their roof's surface into a catchment area. Furthermore, a typical underground tank must have a capacity of 68,000 litres. Should there be little or no rainfall for a prolonged period of time, water in the tank is considered enough to last for several weeks.

Around 70 percent of the water used in the island's household comes from roofs. Still, demand for water outstrips supply by about 20 percent during peak tourist seasons. The shortfall is supplemented by water rationing and through desalination and pumping from underground layers of water that sit atop seawater. And often times, people will use salt water wells as a water supply for things such as flushing a toilet in order to save drinking water.

Since the most important part of a Bermudian's home is the roof, the owners, architects and developers scramble to the rooftop for a liberal

dousing of the surface with Bermuda's second most precious liquid – black rum, after a new building's roof is declared watertight.

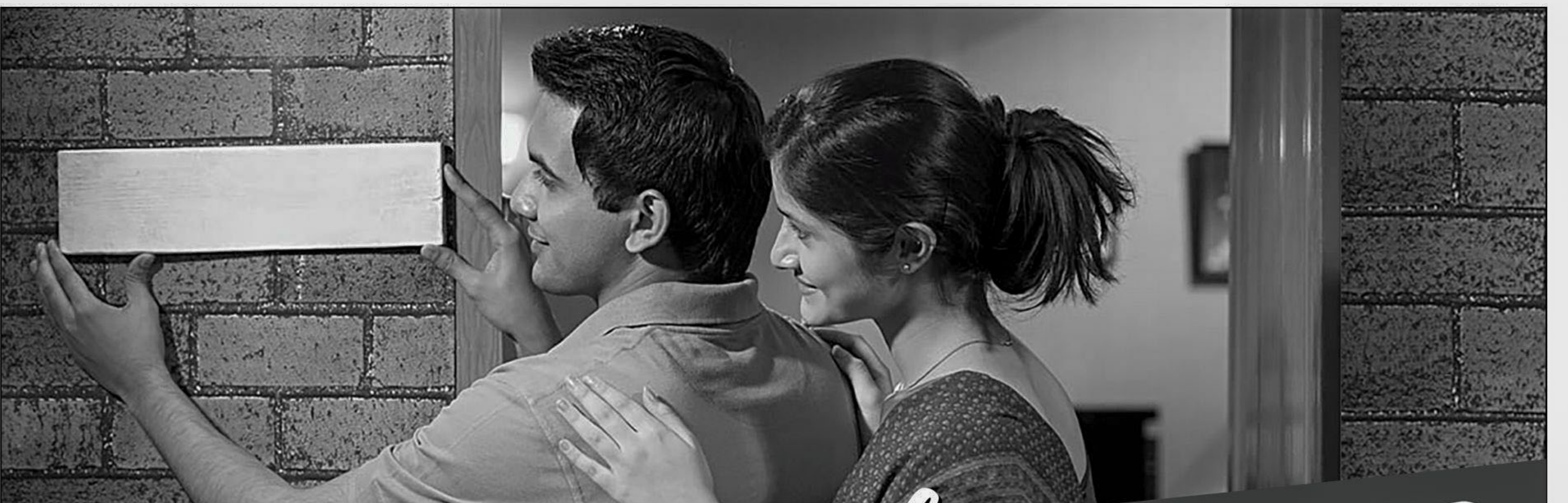
It is estimated that more than 500,000 people in the Caribbean islands depend at least in part on rooftop rainwater catchment systems. Some countries in Central and South America, such as Honduras, Brazil and Paraguay, also use rainwater harvesting as an important source of water supply for domestic purposes, especially in rural areas. Even developed countries like Germany and Australia harvest rainwater and in New Zealand, communities away from the larger towns and cities routinely rely on rainwater collected from roofs as the only source of water for all household activities.

Availability of clean and safe drinking water has been an issue plaguing the rural areas of Bangladesh for ages. The ingenuity of the Bermudians can be emulated by the Bangladeshis too, thereby, solving the drinking water problem.

According to the article "Economic comparison of white, green, and black flat roofs in the United States" published in the March 2014 volume of Energy and Buildings, researchers at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory of California note that a simple white roof reflects three times the sunshine as a green rooftop garden. Thus, by absorbing less sunlight, white roofs offset a portion of the warming effect from greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, they presented evidence that a 1,000 square foot area of rooftop painted white has about the same one-time impact on global warming as cutting 10 tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

Clearly, the white roofs and limestone or concrete walls are unique solutions to three environmental problems – provide drinking water, withstand the wrath of hurricanes and mitigate global warming.

The writer is Professor of Physics at Fordham University, New York.



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