

## BK DAS ROAD

## An architectural treasure trove

M H HAIDER



PHOTO: TOUKIR AHMED TANVEE

The B K Das Road at Farashganj is an architectural treasure trove of Old Dhaka. We have interviewed Dhaka itself about this beautiful neighbourhood. From the influence of the French to the present condition of the heritage buildings and the Buriganga River nearby, we present you a glimpse of Dhaka's thoughts.

**Dhakaitte:** I am grateful that you agreed to sit for this interview, despite your busy schedule. **Dhaka:** I am very busy indeed. But I always have time for a young chap to tell him my tales. Not many people these days have the empathy to listen to my ramblings, though. It seems they have taken me for granted. **Dhakaitte:** I think people expect more from you. One common complaint is the traffic jam. Last week I went to B K Das Road from Gulshan, and it was three hours of commute!

**Dhaka:** People from all over the country come to me looking for work opportunities and education-an enormous pressure! But I try my best. How did you like B K Das Road anyway? **Dhakaitte:** I truly loved it! It is a heritage street. There are a lot of old buildings; and they stand in such close proximity to each other that the neighbourhood seems to be a figment of the past. **Dhaka:** B K Das Road is named after Bashanta Kumar Das- a tribute to a philanthropist. The buildings you see today were mostly built around the early 1900s.

Farashganj, where B K Das Road is located, is where the French had acquired the permission to settle, in 1740, and hence 'Farash' for French and 'ganj' for market. The French influence is apparent if you observe the front block of the mansion called Boro Bari; there are elements of Rococo art. Like many such buildings, it is crying for conservation. Demolishment attempts, too, have been made in the past.

**Dhakaitte:** Many people would like to see rebuilding in the area. **Dhaka:** It is a heritage building. Give compensation to the property owners. Instead of getting rid of such buildings, work with and around them. Turn this mansion into a restaurant, rest house or art gallery. I am old. I have a glorious history. Please stop wiping out my legacy. **Dhakaitte:** Besides Boro Bari, there are other grand mansions on B K Das Road.

**Dhaka:** Yes, Lakshmi Villa is a beauty - grand and elegant. And Mongalalaya, also called Putul Bari, has intricate sculptures on its walls, and a beautiful courtyard. Courtyards are a common feature on B K Das buildings. There are contemporary smaller residences too.

The area is not just about residences. Bibi Ka Rawza, the oldest surviving imambara (a centre for Shia commemoration ceremonies) in Dhaka, is located here. It was established in the early 1600s, although the original structure is

no more. Meanwhile, Sri Sri Priyo Ballav Jee Thakur Mandir is a fantastic illustration of neoclassical architecture.

**Dhakaitte:** Do you have any message for our readers?

**Dhaka:** B K Das Road parallels Buriganga River. Today, she is in a miserable condition. I owe much of my success to her. You must save Buriganga if you respect me and want me to flourish. Listen, I need to go now. I am extremely busy. Stop dreaming and start writing the B K Das Road article.

**Dhakaitte:** Wait, what?! **Dhaka:** Wake up! It was nice talking to you. But both you and I have many deadlines to meet. Goodbye.

**Dhakaitte:** I overslept! And I am now late! But I have a story to tell. *Special thanks to Taimur Islam, CEO and Biraj Vashkar Nath, Programme Officer, Urban Study Group, for sharing insights for the writeup.*

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## Havoc in haor

FROM PAGE 1

but this time crops went under water on March 27. They attributed the phenomenon to climate change.

The flash floods submerged the wetland of Sylhet, Sunamganj, Habiganj, Netrokona, Kishoreganj, Brahmanbaria and Moulvibazar.

Losing the only crop of the year, many farmers in Sunamganj, Kishoreganj, Netrokona, Habiganj and in some other northeastern districts are now selling their cattle and other valuables while many others are leaving their homes for nearby towns to find manual work.

Rashid Ali from Damodar Api village in Dakshin Sunamganj usually sells around eight tons of rice grown in over 10 acres of land. But this year he could not harvest even a kilogram.

"I had seven cows. But I have already sold four of them to repay loans that I took to cultivate rice. I am not sure how would I run my family now," he told The Daily Star.

Farmers from other haor regions also started selling their cattle to tide over the crisis.

Mohammad Mainuddin, 50, member of Sizadpur union in Habiganj's Baniachong upazila, said he had never seen such early flash floods in that region.

"This is the worst situation we can remember. Many people in our village harvest 20 tons of Boro rice every year. But this time they would not harvest even a handful of rice," he said.

Mainuddin explains, the farmers mostly cultivate two kinds of Boro crop that they were supposed to harvest in the last week of Chaitra and the first week of Baishakh (second and third week of April). But this year the flash flood hit 15 to 20 days early destroying all the mature paddies in the field.

**EARLY FLASH FLOOD**  
Prof AKM Saiful Islam of the Institute of Water and Flood Management at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) said when the water level of the Surma river at Sunamganj station of Bangladesh Water Development Board (WDB) crosses the 6.5 metre-mark during March-April, they consider it as the

DISTRICT	CULTIVATED	SUBMERGED LAND
Sunamganj	166,000 hectares	113,000 hectares
Sylhet	76,835 hectares	34,369 hectares
Habiganj	116,510 hectares	27,010 hectares
Moulvibazar	53,426 hectares	17,432 hectares
Kishoreganj	1,65,515 hectares	24,100 hectares
Netrokona	1,84,320 hectares	48,670 hectares

○ Boro contributes 55 percent to yearly rice output

○ Total 1.89 crore tonnes of Boro rice produced last year

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION (DAE)

## DATE OF FLASH FLOOD IN HAOR

2000	April -30
2002	April -19
2004	April -15
2010	April -03
2016	April -17
2017	March 27

Analysis Conducted by: Prof Saiful Islam, IWFM, BUET with the data of BWDB

beginning of flash flood.

He said all the other flash floods since 2000 hit the Haor areas in mid April and by then the farmers were able to harvest a major portion of the Boro crops.

"Last year, the flash flood hit on April 17, but this year the flash flood came on March 27," Prof Saiful said.

He attributed change in season from climate change to this early flash flood. The intensity and frequency of extreme weather has been changing also due to climate change, he said.

"We were not prepared for the situation as well. There are news reports many of the embankments in the haor area were either not repaired or remained damaged.

"So we were not prepared for it," the professor said.

Again, the department of meteorology or Flood Forecasting Warning System doesn't have any special warning system for flash flood.

Samarendra Karmakar, a meteorologist and an ex-director of Bangladesh met office, also pointed to climate variability for this year's early flash flood.

"This year flash flood took place earlier than usual. But nobody can exactly say why this climate variability

happens."

This year easterly low pressure was active and sub tropical high in the Bay of Bengal was weak that caused rainfall in the Himalayan region in India, he said as a possible explanation.

**HOW MUCH CROPS DESTROYED**  
Zahidul Haque, deputy director at the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Sunamganj, said farmers in the haor area of the district cultivated Boro crops in some 1.6 lakh hectares in the district. Of them, around 1.13 lakh hectares have been submerged while crops in about one lakh hectare have been completely destroyed.

"Our estimation says farmers would face a loss of Tk 1 lakh for per hectare of land," he said.

The department is yet to estimate the total amount of financial loss in the area, said Manzurul Hannan, director general of DAE. He said farmers cultivated Boro rice in 4.5 lakh hectares of haor this year and an estimated 1.41 lakh hectares went under water.

However, data collected by our correspondents from the district agricultural offices shows around 2.5 lakh hectares of land was submerged in the flash floods.

Asked, he expressed his hope that the government, despite this havoc, would be able to reach its target of Boro harvest this year due to a good yield in other places of the country.

Boro contributes 55 percent to the annual rice output and was cultivated in 48 lakh hectares of land. Last year, total 1 crore and 89 lakh tonnes of Boro rice was produced in the country.

[Our Mymensingh correspondent



A farmer trying to sort out the remains of his submerged Boro crops to use them as fodder at a village in South Sunamganj and another farmer, inset, holding some crops after cutting them from an inundated field in Habiganj's Baniachong upazila.

## Halkhata goes digital

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They have to call on 16513 from their mobile phones and inform the transactions made, and Hishab will send an SMS confirming the purchase details.

A voice biometrics-based patented technology plays a role from behind, which can receive and process voice data. Different accents of customers and traders are not an issue here.

Zubair Ahmed, founder of Hishab, said the company started developing the

Ruling out the possibility of data misuse, Zubair said the whole thing is protected by voice-based authentication system that uses four-layer security checks.

The Department for International Development, IMJ Investment Partners, a Japanese digital technology firm, and some investors have been investing in the project.

"People in the developing countries are not that much good in technology, which is why they prefer paper-based

FROM PAGE 1 also facilitating the Moghuls in better revenue collections.

Though introduced in 1585, the *Tarikh-e-Elahi*, also referred as Fali San (crop year), was dated from Emperor Akbar's accession to the throne in 1556. The New Year subsequently became known as Bangabda or Bangla year in our part of the world.

Eventually it became customary to clear up all dues on the last day of Chaitra, the last month of solar Bengali calendar, and businessmen treating their customers with sweets. Arrangements of village fairs and other festivities became part of a rich cultural heritage.

Some 432 years later the celebration day - *Pahela Baishakh* (1st day of Bangla New Year) - comes to us today at such a critical juncture of time when a section of people are trying, in vain, to extract 'new meaning' of what has been all through a non-communal national cultural journey.

Pleasantly, though, an overwhelming majority - irrespective of their cast and creed and religious beliefs - consider the *Pahela Baishakh* as a day of merriment, as a day of reinvigorating rich national culture and heritage, and there is nothing irreligious in it.

Describing the *Pahela Baishakh* celebrations as part of the country's tradition, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has also called upon the people to stay alert to misinformation regarding the festival.

"There's no link between the celebrations of Bangla New Year and religion... the festival is part of [our] cultural tradition," she drove home a point hard.

It's true that over the years the New Year celebrations have shed many

rituals while inducting newer forms and events to rejoice but the core value of upholding own language, history, culture and heritage still remain the celebration's centerpiece.

Many old festivals connected with New Year's Day are no longer practiced. On the other hand, new festivals have been introduced. Though agricultural in origins, the *Pahela Baishakh* festivities are now more marked in urban societies than in rural societies.

With a vividly colourful and pompous rally called, *Mangal Shobhajatra* - the centerpiece of the *Pahela Baishakh* observance -- being recently recognised by the United Nations as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' -- this year's celebration is set to reach a new height.

Stray incidents of attack on the *Pahela Baishakh* murals in Chittagong would in no way dampen the indomitable spirit of a nation.

And the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) proclaim, "The Mangal Shobhajatra festival symbolises the pride the people of Bangladesh have in their folk heritage, as well as their strength and courage to fight against sinister forces, and their vindication of truth and justice. It also represents solidarity and a shared value for democracy, uniting people irrespective of caste, creed, religion, gender or age. Knowledge and skills are transmitted by students and teachers within the community."

As the sound of drums beating resonates through the streets, onlookers feel a deep yearning to join *Mangal Shobhajatra* and that is the beauty of it.

People from all walks of life have

been showing enthusiasm more and more for participating in the procession organised by the Faculty of Fine Arts of Dhaka University on *Pahela Baishakh* every year since 1989.

"Such boundless participation of mass people helps spread liberal values, values of culture and love," said Kamal Pasha Chowdhury, an artist and secular activist.

To ensure security during the celebration of the first day of Bangla year 1424, many restrictions have been imposed, including an order that no one would be allowed into *Mangal Shobhajatra* in the middle of the procession.

"That is regrettable" though security is a major concern given the rise of militancy and extremism in recent times, said Kamal Pasha, one of the organisers of *Mangal Shobhajatra*.

However, this is the first time the faculties of fine arts of other public universities outside Dhaka and schools and educational institutions across the country will hold *Mangal Shobhajatra* as suggested by the education directorate.

People from all walks of life will march to the rhythm of drums to share joy of festivity and values of harmony. "This is how we will continue to fight against radicalism, violence," said the secular activist.

Traditional village fairs, folk festivals and *Mangal Shobhajatra* apart, rendition of music by the Chhayanaut artistes under the banyan tree in the open of Ramna remains a rich part of a long tradition. And opening of new ledger book (*Hal Khata*) by business people, having *pantha-ilish* (Hilsa and watery rice) delicacy have all become part of the celebration.

Islamic scholar Syed Ashraf Ali once wrote it was the New Year celebration that enabled Prince Selim (later Emperor Jahangir) to meet and fall in love with Meherunnisa (known as Nurjahan in history). It was again in one such new year festival that the Prince Khurram (later Emperor Shahjahan) first came across Mumtaz Mahal, whom he immortalised through the great 'poetry in marble' - Taj Mahal.

"Had there been no Nababarsha festival, there perhaps would be no Nurjahan, and no Taj Mahal," said the late scholar.

Our very own great Bengali poet Tagore told us not to be afraid of northwester as and when it darkened the evening sky.

In his verse 'Oi Bujhi Kalboishakhi' - Rabindranath Tagore says (as translated by Dr. Fakhru Alam),

"There it comes - Boisakh's seasonal thundershower

Enveloping the evening sky!

What or who do you fear? Open all doors everywhere

Listen to the sky rumble intensely and its loud insistent call.

Respond to its overture with song-lyrics and melodies

Let whatever shakable shake; let anything transient go!

Let everything fragile shatter; let only the permanent stay!"

## Jubo League

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Elias Ahmed, superintendent of police of the district, said two groups of the ruling party clashed over dominance on Char King Union. Police were asked to stay alert as the area was tense, he added.

## Two Simple Steps to Complete the Transaction



1 SHOP Dial Hishab and Speak

2 CONSUMER SMS and Confirm

technology in 2012 and researched a lot before launching a pilot project in 2016.

Quoting a World Bank report, he said transactions in grocery retail made a year in Bangladesh amounts to \$9.2 billion, of which \$4.2 billion is based on credit.

Around 3% of this credit is never paid back, according to a market research by Hishab, and that amount is \$123 million.

Zubair said there are around 15 lakh retail grocer shops and nine lakh sales representatives in the country.

"We are piloting the technology in some places and hope that we will become fully-fledged commercially from next July."

accounts that are time consuming and sometimes create confusion between sellers and customers."

This was the thought behind developing the technology, Zubair said.

Ahsan Habib, territory manager of Dhaka Tobacco Industries, Akij Group, in Gulshan, said they have been using the service for the last one month.

"The service is amazing."

The tobacco company has 200 sales representatives. Out of them 60 are using the service.

"Every day we sell 10 lakh cigarette sticks. So, the volume is huge. Until now, data accuracy is 100 percent. We will use the service for two months on trial basis and then we will expand it across the country," Ahsan said.