

# Shreshth Das Road in Old Dhaka

M H HAIDER

"There are 13 officially declared heritage streets in Dhaka," informs conservation architect Tahir Usman, CEO, Urban Study Group (USG). One of these is Hrishikesh Das Road, near Sutrapur thana. Much has been penned down about the architectural heritage of Old Dhaka; much more is still left to be explored in depth. The relatively lesser known Hrishikesh Das is one such example.

Who was Hrishikesh Das? The late 1800s and early 1900s saw many people rise to a position of affluence and power. Babu Hrishikesh Das belonged to that group of nouveau riche. According to Azimulhasan Haider's book, 'Dacca: History and Romance in Place Names' (1967), he was a banker, brick, tile, and 'soorkey' manufacturer; he dealt in things like coal, lime and timber. He was a merchant. He was a Zamindar.

Back in those times, if you provided funds for public works, you would have the honour of having a road bearing your name. The prosperous Hrishikesh Das financed the construction of this road, which was previously a part of Walters Road.

You surely have heard of the iconic edifice, Rose Garden. This brilliant building was also built by this man.

A Walk down the Memory Lane Hrishikesh Das Road is dotted with British period buildings, mostly residences, built around a century ago. Semi-circular arches featuring colorful glasswork,

decorative pediments crowning over parapets, and the elegant balconies many of which are supported by metal and wooden posts speak of antiquity.

"We also see two temples contemporary of that era. Sri Sri Mondor Gopal Jai Thakur Biho Mandir and Sri Sri Sitanath Jai Biho Mandir.," Taimur adds.

A mere walk down the road is not enough to fully grasp the beauty of these buildings. Many of the homes have courtyards inside. Standing from the road, you will probably not be even able to guess about the courtyards and the narrow corridors and stairways.

According to senior locals, one of the houses (a relatively grand,

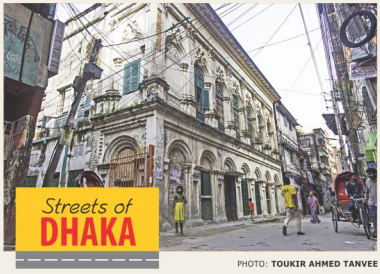


PHOTO: TOUKIR AHMED TANVEE

"Unfortunately, both the temples are losing their heritage value due to negligence and lack of conservation."

There are a large number of old buildings; the 'group effect' produced enormously contributes to the status of this road as a heritage street.

How Streets can be Deceiving!

one, which, following the norm of this street, does not really have any imposing facade) had once belonged to the famous Murata Zamindar family. "A lot of zamindars who had their estates outside Dhaka had also built a mansion in this city," Taimur informs. "The fact that the zamindars were keen on having a

establishment in Dhaka reflects this city's importance."

There is even a building in that road which predates the British period. From the street, it looks quite ordinary. "But if you go inside, you will see vaulted ceiling, hinting Mughal construction style," Taimur points out.

Hayat Bepari's Mosque, built in 1664, is located here. Hayat Bepari also established Narinda Bridge in the same year. Of course, Narinda Bridge does not exist anymore; neither does the original structure of the mosque. Ahmad Hasan Dani, in his book 'Dacca: A Record of its Changing Fortunes' (1962), said that the single-domed mosque "... in style tries to copy Binat Bibi's mosque."

A Detour Near Hrishikesh Das Road are other streets and mansions which are equally important.

Revtai Mohan Das Road is a few minutes' walk from Hrishikesh; near Sutrapur Police Station. This road, which was renamed in about the same time as that of Hrishikesh Das Road, also has a number of old buildings. But the crown is the house of Revtai Mohan Das, which is indeed a very regal and splendid mansion.

Indeed, Old Dhaka's architectural splendour, especially in the context of residences and small buildings, is not about one or a few individual structures. Rather, a street or even a group of streets, together, hold what we say is the charm of Puran Dhaka.

# Hills lost to housing

FROM PAGE 1  
making any headway and the fine net realised.

The large-scale hill cutting destroyed ecology, biodiversity, trees, top soil, crops, and geological formation of the area, according to the DoE.

"Utaran has a powerful group at its helm that has so far razed nearly 150 acres of hills causing environmental devastation..." said Nurul Alam, an inhabitant of adjoining Pashchim Larpuravillage.

Rashedul Islam, a local ruling Awami League leader, said with powerful people from all levels as beneficiaries, everybody turned a blind eye to the destruction done by Utaran.

An Anti-Corruption Commission probe would reveal the graft, he said. The land ministry in 1989 leased out 35 acres of *khlas* land to Utaran but cancelled the lease within a year for violation of lease terms. The cancellation of the lease was later stayed by the High Court.

According to the lease term, Utaran was required to obtain permission of the deputy commissioner for felling trees or razing hills and doing any excavation on the land.

An assistant commissioner on behalf of the deputy commissioner in December 1990 found that Utaran illegally razed the hills on the leased land in violation of a deputy commissioner's order.

According to the 1990 amendment of the Building Construction Act, hill cutting required a mandatory permission from an authorised officer or relevant deputy commissioner, who would permit it only in "greater public interest."

A High Court bench in 1991 first stayed the land ministry's lease cancellation order and in August 1999 upheld the lease order. The court also stalled the environment department's realisation of the fine and the case filed

hillocks and the project goes on behind boundary fences as if it was a "forbidden zone".

"It is unfortunate how the then deputy commissioner recommended leasing out hilly *khlas* land for housing," he said, adding, "Some people resort to dishonest means to make gains but later others have to be answerable."

Shah Masud Anwarul Naser, additional deputy commissioner, said they took an initiative to challenge the HC verdict that made the land lease valid after a land ministry instruction in 2010.

But law ministry solicitors in 2010 preferred not to go for appeal saying that it would not yield anything as the land ministry had not made any move in the previous 12 years.

Asked what they had done, Nur Mohammad Mazumder, joint secretary for *khlas* land at the land ministry, said they formed a committee led by deputy commissioner in 2015 to "look after the issue".

Naser said the committee was tasked to determine required land for Utaran housing and coordinate Utaran's activities, settle individuals' land disputes in the scheme and help land registration for Utaran.

Khushrud Alam, director for legal affairs at the DoE, said, "It is very difficult to obtain a legal relief from the court for a government organisation like us." They did not pursue the case for six years, as the district office did not register the hill, he said.

UTARAN'S SAY Srijalul Islam, Utaran executive member and lead coordinator of the scheme, said, "We have not razed hills that much; we have just levelled some hillocks and ditches. There had never been any hills at the project site. Hills are only around our project. What we have done is development work."

He said Utaran was proud to have

# The trap of Section 57

FROM PAGE 1  
Managing Editor Niharanson Saha Nisu.

The ICT law was enacted by the BNP-Jamaat government in 2006.

Before its 2013 amendment, maximum punishment for offences under the section was 10 years imprisonment and a fine of Tk 1 crore. Besides, police had to seek permission from the authorities concerned to file a case and arrest any person under the law.

After the amendment, maximum jail term was raised to 14 years. And law enforcers were empowered to make arrests without a warrant.

A rough translation of section 57 (1) says: "If any person deliberately publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the website or in any other electronic form any material which is false and obscene and if anyone sees, hears or reads it having regard to all relevant circumstances as to whether it is likely to lead the reader to become dishonest or corrupt, or causes to deteriorate or creates possibility to deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the state or person or causes to hurt or offend any person or class of persons or person or organisation, then this activity will be regarded as an offence."

The Indian Supreme Court in March 2015 struck down almost a similar section, terming it unconstitutional.

The court observed section 66A of the Information Technology Act hit at the root of liberty and freedom of expression, two cardinal pillars of democracy.

During the colonial rule in 1898, a provision was inserted in the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) empowering courts to issue direct arrest warrant against persons, including journalists, writers and publishers of any books or newspapers, if they were found spreading defamatory news.

But now police can make any arrest just after the filing of a case under the ICT Act on charges of defamation.

The punitive measures introduced by the government are also harsher than those made by the colonial rulers. Under the Penal Code of 1860, one may be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.

Rights activists and journalists have criticised a section of 57 from the very beginning and the debate over the provision and demand for its repeal intensified following the arrest of journalist Probita Saha.

The veteran journalist was arrested and sent to jail after he posted a status on Facebook, expressing fear that his minister was dander and LGRD Minister Khanderkar Mosharraf

Hossain, businessman Moosa bin Shabbir and fugitive war criminal Abu Kalam, Azad would be responsible if he were killed.

Following the post, an Awami League leader sued Probita in Faridpur under the ICT act for " tarnishing the image" of the minister. The case is still under trial.

## CASES AGAINST JOURNALISTS (FROM MARCH 1 TO JULY 3)

**July 3:** Nazmul Hossain, a senior reporter of Jamuna Television, was sued for his June 23 Facebook post. The plaintiff, Hazrat Ali Belal, a lawyer of Dinajpur Az Association, named three others for sharing the post.

**July 14:** A case was filed against Kazi Motahar Rahman Babu, editor of local daily in Khulna Somoyer Khabor, and its former reporter Shohag Dewan. Two officials of the district's Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court accused them of publishing reports with misinformation.

**July 13:** A case was filed against bdnews24.com staff reporter Golam Mujtaba Dhruva for his report published two days ago. The plaintiff was a senior assistant judge of Manikganj.

**June 6:** Brac University teacher and senior journalist Afsan Chowdhury was sued. It Gen (red) Masud Uddin Chowdhury filed a defamation case for one of his Facebook posts.

**May 16:** Nijun Chandra Das, Dushmina upazila correspondent of the Asian Age, and Sanjoy Banerjee, dashpa correspondent of the Daikin Janata, were sued. Siderkhal Mostafa, secretary of Dushmina upazila Awami League in Pitakhalhi, filed the case following their reports on torture of a Hindu woman by a local gang who attempted to grab her land.

**April 29:** A private company filed a case against Ahmed Razu, executive editor of Natunson.com. He was accused of publishing two reports that allegedly tarnished the image of the company.

**April 15:** Ali Reza Ripon, brother of Narayanngani City Corporation Mayor Selina Hayat Biv, filed a case against five local journalists for publishing reports that allegedly tarnished their image. The accused are Habibur Rahman Badal, editor and publisher of Dandy Barta, Rajaf Ahmed, editor of Narayanngani ALO; its publisher Mobarak Hossain Kamal, Sifat Ali Raman Linkin, head of news of Narayannganibarta24.com, and its executive editor Mahmud Hasan Kachi.

**March 30:** Journalist Hasibur Rahman Rizu sued Aslam Ali, Kushtia correspondent of Bangla Vision and bdnews24.com, and Hasan Ali, staff correspondent of local Bangla daily Darpan, allegedly for their derogatory posts on Facebook against him.

**March 25:** Morsalin Babel, editor and publisher of Juger Chintia in Narayanngani, sued a case filed against him by Sohel Ali, president of Fatullah thana Jubo League, over publishing of a report.

**March 1:** Rajshahi University correspondent of Dainik Alokok Bangladesh, Mostafiz Mishu was sued for his report on the formation of RUI Chhatra League committee. Minarul Islam, a former leader of the BCL unit, filed the case.

new 'Digital Security Act was in the pipeline."

The new law would explain section 57 and prove that the government has no intent to curb the right to freedom of speech, he also said.

According to a source at the Cyber Tribunal in Dhaka, around 700 cases have been filed under section 57 since

freedom of press and freedom of expression.

"The law minister had clearly said that the provision will be repealed. Yet, we saw a number of cases were filed against journalists and free thinkers. We regret and condemn this," Rezauddin, also the editor of The News Today, said yesterday.

Khandaker Muniruzzaman, acting editor of daily Sangbad, said section 57 is a "repressive law" and one of the main reasons of enacting such a law is to control journalists so that they think twice before writing anything about powerful quarters.

Journalists are not above the law and there is way to take legal steps against them, but implicating journalists under a special law is nothing but serving interests of the powerful, he said.

"The law goes against freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of press. There should be no such law in a civilised, democratic country. It must be repealed," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Shaban Mahmood, president of Dhaka Union of Journalists, said impeding cases against journalists is an impediment to freedom of press. "We heard that in many cases, section 57 has been used as a weapon against journalists only for political reason. This is very unfortunate."

He said they will go for a tougher movement if the section is not repealed immediately.

In Bangladesh, an aggrieved person can send a rejoinder or legal notice to a newspaper, lodge complaints with the Press Council or even file a defamation case under the Penal Code.

But the recent trend is that cases are being filed against journalists under section 57, apparently to ensure immediate harassment of the accused, as one can be arrested under this law even before investigation.

Asked about it, Shaban Mahmood said, "It is an abuse of the law."

Tahmina Rahman, Bangladesh and South Asia director of ARTICLE 19, a UK-based rights body, said section 57 is not only a problematic provision but has a huge potential for violations and abuse against people who exercise freedom of expression.

"The grounds are very broad, not narrowly defined. The section lacks clarity and doesn't provide for the protections that we have in other laws. So, we are not sure how it will be used, there are chances of misuse," she said.

"So we have been calling for repeal of the section. There is no scope for reviewing section 57."

Its proximity to the Sun also makes Mercury hard to see against the bright background of the sun. The faintest view of a craft into steady orbit also makes the planet difficult to see.

The high temperatures also presented such challenges for the engineers, which include the fact that the planet is so hot, and added to project delays, mission chiefs said.



A structure being built without construction permits in Utaran Grehayan Samabay Samity in Cox's Bazar. The photo was taken recently. PHOTO: STAR

with the environment court.

An Appellate Division bench of the Supreme Court later forbade hill cutting but barred further legal action in this regard against Utaran authorities.

Taking advantage of the stay orders and inaction of the land ministry for 12 years and that of the environment court for six years, Utaran flattened the tree-covered hills and ravaged the environment to make room for plots, said the officials concerned.

In 1995, the government formed a committee led by the deputy commissioner to check bill cutting in light of the amended Building Construction Act of 1990.

In a July 2007 circular, the environment ministry ordered cutting hills and said that the DC could only permit hill cutting in "unavoidable national interest."

But now the land ministry is preparing to lease out another 35 acres of hills to Utaran, said the top coordinator of Utaran.

AUTHORITIES' SAY Md Ali Hossain, deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar, said the entire area, where the housing project was being implemented, was full of hills and

quite a number of high-profile members including ministers, lawmakers, politicians, around two dozen former and serving judges and their wards, and high-ranking civil and military officials.

Pointed out that the land lease requires Utaran to obtain deputy commissioner's permission for tree felling and developing the housing estate needs environmental clearance, Srijalul said, "We are getting ready for the process for approvals."

As to construction of buildings without permission, he said, "We have halted unauthorised building construction for the time being."

In addition to 35 acres of *khlas* land, they have also taken possession of 54 acres of private hill land, either through purchase or mutual agreement or in exchange for plots, he said.

Apart from this, leasing of an additional 35 acres of *khlas* land in favour of Utaran in the same *monjia* was under process at the land ministry since 2015, said Srijalul.

There are some inhabitants who do not want to give their land for the scheme," he said, "So we have made deals with private owners for 30 more acres."

# Lone accused arrested

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Meanwhile, forensic test of the victim was conducted at Dhaka Medical College.

A five-member medical team led by Dr Sohel Mahmud, head of the DMC Forensic Medicine Department, collected samples of blood and urine for tests and conducted X-ray and High Vaginal Swab (HVS) on the victim. A team of Banani police then took her to the victim support centre of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

She was taken there to four weeks to get the forensic report, Sohel told The Daily Star.

"As the victim came for the forensic test within 48 hours after rape, we are expecting to get proof of the rape incident," he said.

The 21-year-old college student filed the rape case with Banani Police Station accusing Ivan. In her complaint, she said they had got to know each other on Facebook 11 months ago. They started dating since.

On Tuesday, she called her and invited her to a birthday party that day at his house at Banani on Road-2. But

the girl didn't see any sign of birthday celebration upon reaching there.

She got married in 2011 and gave birth to a girl child two years later. In the complaint, when she started screaming, Ivan drove her out of the house.

In a visit to Ivan's residence, this correspondent didn't see any member of the family.

Rafiqul Islam, assistant commissioner of Gulshan zone, said Ivan is a married person and father of two children. Ivan had met the victim a number of times outside his residence.

"We are not trying to get the CCTV footage of the area to see the victim's movement."

Another source said the victim was a divorcee and mother of a child.

# Journey to Mercury

TO EXPLORE 20  
one of the most powerful of all rocky planets.

Set for launch in 2018, BepiColombo will be the European Space Agency's (ESA) first mission to the innermost planet.

The craft has an unusual design, comprising a central core and two solar panels, which will separate on arrival to go into different, but complementary orbits.

BepiColombo aims to "follow up on many of the intriguing results of NASA's Messenger mission, probing deeper into Mercury's mysteries than ever before," the ESA said.

The joint project with the Japanese agency JAXA, which has cost more than 1.3 billion euros (\$1.48 billion), involves some 33 companies from 12 EU nations, as well as firms from the USA and Japan.

It has been delayed several times, but the mission chiefs are now confident that it is on track to launch in October next year.

Mercury is the "most peculiar of all rocky planets," Alvaro Gimenez, ESA's director of science told reporters at the agency's centre in the Dutch coastal town of Noordwijk.

Its surface is wracked by extreme temperatures, ranging from -450 to 180 degrees Celsius (-842 to 292 degrees Fahrenheit).

It also has a magnetic field, the only rocky planet besides Earth to have one.

But Mercury is so weak that the field does not provide a shield against solar radiation. It orbits just 58 million kilometres (36 million miles) from the sun, making it the planet closest to radiation levels that would destroy earth's