

As alien as it may seem to us today, baby boomers are no strangers to the fad of matchbox collecting. Millennials will remember the pleasure of removing stamps from an envelope, soaking them in water and once dry, sticking them on albums. Coins and banknotes have always been popular and even today an average Joe carefully preserves a ragged note long out of circulation.



Coin of Rukunuddin Ali Bin Mardan. Mint year: Ramadan 609 AH/1212 AD.



The sheer number of visitors at the three-day event was a testament to its success.

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The recently concluded 'Collector's Exhibition' at the Pathshala premises from April 26-28, 2018, was the brainchild of a trio—Gholam Abed, Md Robiul Islam and Shakil Huq—no strangers to the vibrant collectors' community in the city, but names hitherto unheard of beyond their professional fields. From the drawing board to the final execution, the exhibition was a result of their tireless efforts spanning almost a year. Their goal was to simply introduce three different hobbies to the new generation, and show possible avenues to choose and study. The sheer number of visitors at the three-day event was a testament to their success.

Abed, an aviator by profession, is an internationally awarded philatelist (the proper term for stamp collectors) specialising in revenue stamps of Bangladesh. An accountant by profession, Islam treads a different path. His aspiration is to present the gamut of numismatics (the hobby of collecting coins), rather than to focus on a narrow field. Huq has an academic degree in art

and is an established graphic designer. He is not only a collector, but also a pioneer in promoting phillumeny (the pursuit of matchbox collecting) in Bangladesh. He has been successful in explaining the nuances of phillumeny and convincing local matchbox producers to use the fundamentals of phillumeny and make use of it as a marketing tool, and thus cater to the global demand and create a local

organised collectors and the precision of his display at the exhibition only reinforced that reputation.

The largest display amongst the three, Islam's collection traced the evolution of currency from the earliest period to modern coins and bank notes. One of the sections, the *crème de la crème*, was tracing the coinage of Bangladesh from some of the earliest discovered specimens to the latest issues. It also included coins of so-called 'Dead Countries' and special edition coins prepared solely for collectors, some in shapes of guitars!

### Shakil's fire starters

The most visually appealing section of the show, the matchbox collection of Shakil

would have been a welcome addition if volunteers were available to explain at least the basics—an aspect the organisers can consider incorporating in their next venture.

A little girl, barely four, wearing a long green frock and a red tunic, approached Shakil Huq, with the simple query: "Uncle, which is the smallest matchbox in the world?"

A collector with an unwavering will to share his passion, Huq was quick to point it out. The petite child, dazzled at

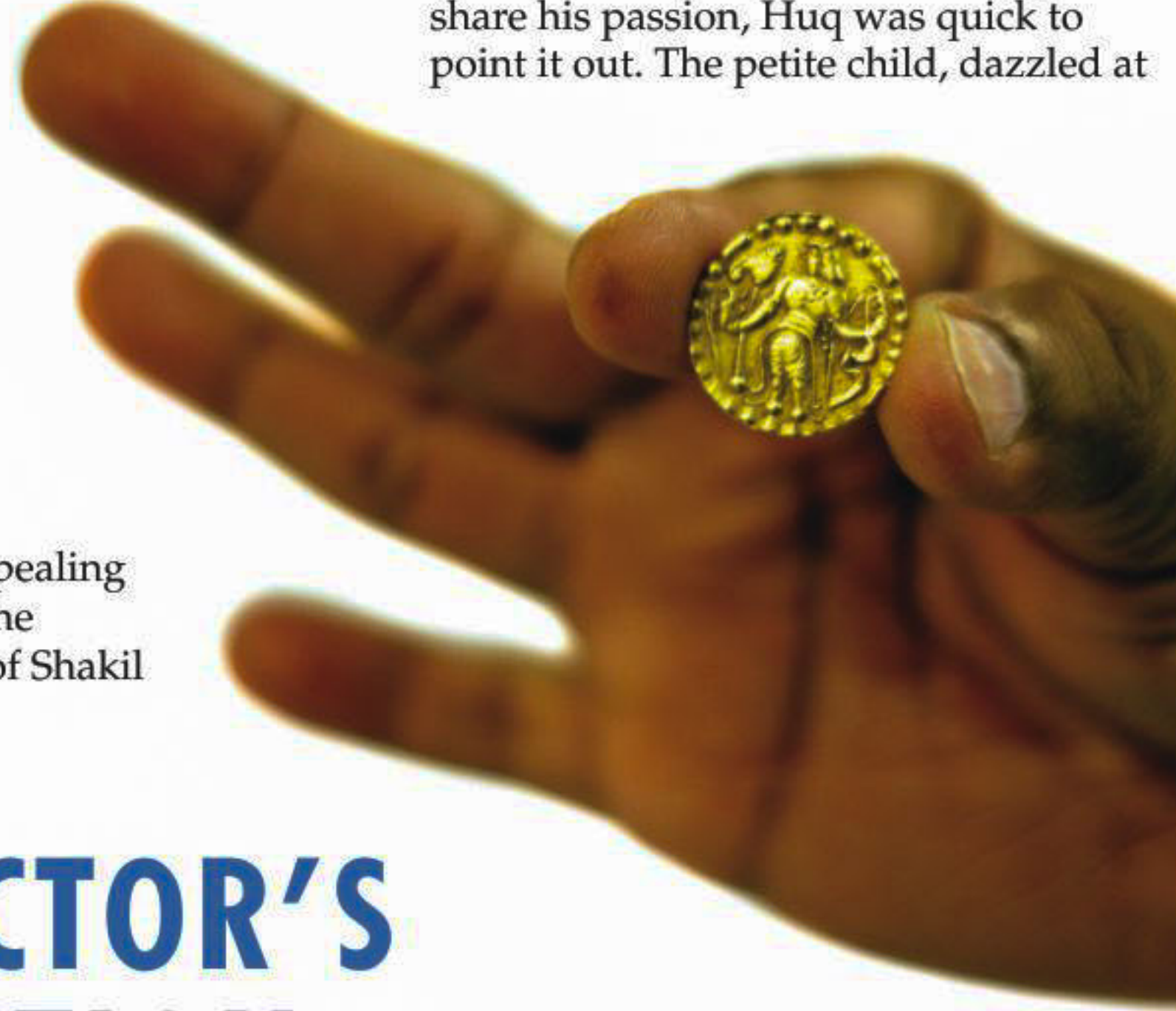
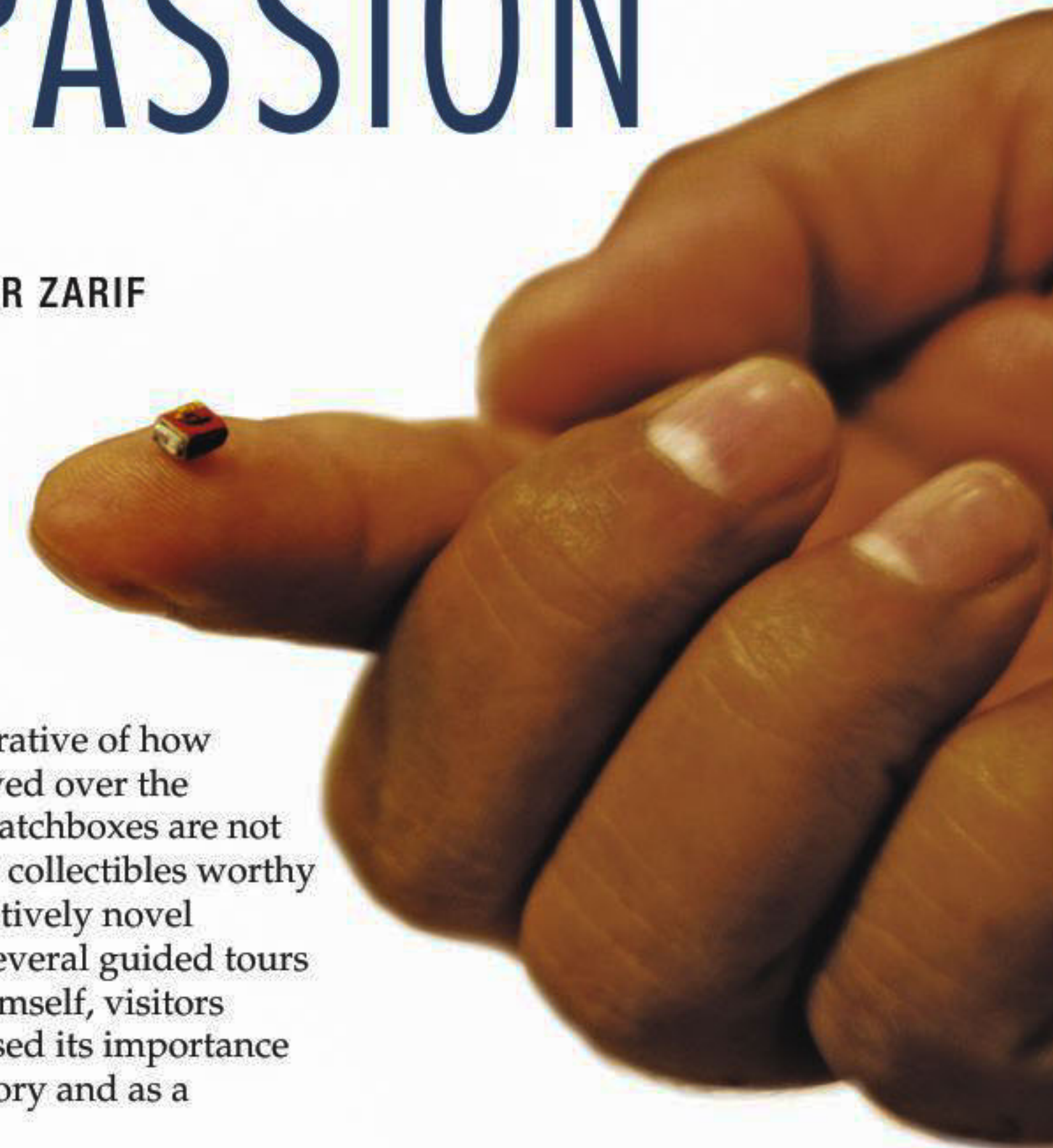


PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

## COLLECTOR'S EXHIBITION A CELEBRATION OF PASSION

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF



The smallest matchbox in the world.

the sight of something tinier than her young mind could imagine, left with a smile. Perhaps that was the watershed moment in the mind of a future collector, and the potential success of the trio's efforts.

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EXHIBITION

The city as we know it is as much a physical space as it is a state of mind. The mindscape—the space we bear in our mind—is constantly in dialogue with the physical city. The real city emerges out of this dialectic. Yet, and quite sadly so, our urban research remains heavily biased towards the physical city, relegating the immaterial associations of the city as secondary, if not outright unimportant.

Dhaka as a physical space, for example, is a city whose public image has repeatedly been in crisis. Dubbed as one of the fastest growing and densest megacities (urban area with over 10 million people) of the world, the city features regularly and quite famously in the bottom rank of numerous statistical surveys on livability ranking, corruption index, and the more recent air quality index (AQI). The saga of everything sad, bad and ugly, encapsulated in harrowing fact sheets, continues to flow for the city.

But the doom and gloom is not all that the city incites. There is another set of ascriptions that Dhaka residents fondly bestow on the city—*praner shohor* (beloved city), *jaadur shohor* (city of magic), *shopner shohor* (city of dreams), *pagla shohor* (mad city) to name a few.

While the first set of epithets describe the city based on its physical, material properties that one can measure, order, and understand logically, the latter, often dismissed as just an emotional and non-serious response to the city, refers to the immaterial, affective and softer properties of the city that are invisible, disorderly, immeasurable—yet, they could be the ones that hold clues to the pulse of the city. Themselves unreasonable, they may be the *raison d'être* as to why the city is the way it is.

There is no dearth of research and planning on the hard city of materiality that we know as Dhaka. Judging from the visible, we identify different sorts of problems, and try to come up with prescriptions to fix them. A majority of urban research, hence, is focused on conditions gone awry—pollution, transport, sanitation, environment, sustainability among all. We address these conditions under different indexes or barometers, which are fixed, like the free-size-fits-all wears. Moreover, the prescriptions these mostly scientific-demographic-technical inquiries generate tend to draw insights from models of differently developed cities from a very different socio-economic composition, in comparison to which poor Dhaka is doomed to be found lacking. Therefore, the prolific urban discourse on Dhaka cannot but produce an overall image of a dysfunctionality from which we seem to have no way out. Thus, we exhaust all our energy and effort only to salvage the physical city from the grips of different ailments, but often with little or more dangerously, with no connection to the heart of the city. The heart of Dhaka recedes further from our grasp at these otherwise well-meaning efforts.

Going back to the second set of epithets mentioned above, what it gives away about Dhaka is what we are missing in trying to understand with the

first set. Let's take Dhaka's most material and iconic crisis—the traffic jam—for example. We consider the traffic congestion as a physical problem alone due to the mixed traffic fleet, scarcity of roads compared to the number of cars in isolation, but do not take into account either the sociology behind the traffic jam, the driving behaviour or the mental belongingness of those who are on the roads. City dwellers no less, people on Dhaka streets need to be reminded constantly of their changed circumstances with directives that are considered as typically and inherently urban, civic behavior—"do not drive on the foot path," for example. It is so, because these are residents who are more

of life in the village. What we call the rural space and ways of life thus is a part of our urban reality that oozes out, uncalled for, every now and then.

You can take the Dhakaite out of the village, but not the village out of his/her mind. It is all the more so because a majority of the urban population is either first, second or third generation migrants from the rural inlands with active relationships with the rural home (that is recurrently cited as a permanent address in their official documents). Moreover, the village one hails from is socially operationalised on many accounts for practical reasons, such as for building communities and intimate social relationships. The rural is a constant

understanding of the diverse ways people make sense of and react to the city includes knowing the dreams, aspirations, frustrations about the city, as well as the tricks and tactics of negotiating the same that may appear disorderly or unreasonable to the uninitiated. But for those who negotiate the city on a daily basis, there is always some method to this madness. The way to get to Dhaka's heart and its mysterious ways is through these chaotic and intangible associations.

Let me end this discussion with an iconic Bangla movie moment when a hapless heroine having no other option has to succumb to the villain's coercion saying, "You will merely have my body,

## ARE WE WILLING TO KNOW MORE OF DHAKA?



Manan Morshed, *Untitled*, acrylic on paper, 2013

comfortable in unrestricted movements, characteristic of other kinds of spatial arrangements, such as those in the village, rather than the choreographed movements demanded by the regular busy city streets. The underpasses we build for safe navigation of the city thus remain deserted and foot-over bridges, under-used.

On another note, we create protruding decks for city dwellers to partake the panoramic view of lakes (Hatirjheel for example), or build fences around public parks with fancy metal bars, and people from neighbouring shanties have no qualms using them as clothes lines, carrying the private chores into the public, characteristic of the organisation

presence here, and like an invisible other space, it conditions how we react to the physical city. Both Dhaka's urban condition and population, are a cross-breed. Hence, the crude antithetical positioning of the urban and the rural on which the idea of the city is commonly understood would not help in understanding Dhaka or its people. Any approach to solve urban problems, while being apathetic to this apparently non-urban disposition of Dhaka, thus will be a lost battle.

Accordingly, deploying reason, and logic alone, one can offer technical fixes that more often than not, falls short in offering sustainable solutions to problems the city is beset with. An

not my heart!" Holding her heart back being her only resistance, she knows that having control of one's body is not control enough. Dhaka is like that damsel in distress—the physical city is under heavy duress and appears to have given in, but she is holding her heart back, patiently, for the caring, and the compassionate, who would care to look beyond the physical and know the heart of the city. In the movie scene someone always comes to the heroine's rescue. May be Dhaka too is waiting—to be understood. Are we willing to take the leap?

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