

# History in Ruins

The slow destruction of Dhaka's heritage sites



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CULTURAL heritage refers to the traditions, values, beliefs, and sense of belonging in a community. It's the shared bond that helps shape our identity. It's the material things, and the tangible and intangible both.

But cultural heritage as we know it today is not simply everything that we've inherited from the past. It is the result of a selection process—"a process of memory and oblivion that characterises every human society constantly engaged in choosing, for both cultural and political reasons, what is worthy of being preserved for future generations and what is not."

The definition of "cultural heritage" is broad, and defining who it belongs to is equally tough given the fluidity of "cultural boundaries". Think of the Mona Lisa—is it part of Italian or French national heritage or both?

What is certain however is that preservation of cultural heritage is integral to retaining the diversity and cultural identity of a people in an era of globalisation where ideas and objects travel across borders more freely than ever. This includes the preservation of heritage sites—it's a hallmark of the importance and respect that a nation lends to its history.

Dhaka, which celebrated its quadricentennial anniversary not too long ago, is home to a vast array of archaeological monuments and sites. But if one looks at the state of some of these heritage sites that have witnessed the rich, colourful history of this part of Bengal, one would notice that these structures bear the markings of utter neglect. The list of such architectural gems that we have failed to preserve is too long to recount but if there's at least one common denominator for the slow destruction of these sites, it's unplanned urbanisation.

## Chaotic urbanisation and the after effects

It's hard to name even one aspect of life that has escaped the wrath of Dhaka's rapid uncontrolled urbanisation—everything from the air we breathe, the roads we travel, our waterways, to the quality of life in general has become hostage to it. In a country where the basic needs of the citizenry are still not being met by a sizeable portion of the population, it is understandable to an extent why the preservation of heritage sites ranks so low in the list of priorities of the government.

But even this doesn't explain why, for example, the heritage list amended by the government on November 29, 2017 dropped 18 formerly listed Mughal and British era structures. Conservationists have called this list "incomplete and faulty." The structures dropped from the amended list include Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall, Salimullah Muslim Hall and Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University along with a number of heritage sites located in Old Dhaka.

Much of the damage done to heritage sites in the historic city of Old Dhaka today is by and large a result of the casualties of chaotic urbanisation. Take the Mughal-era structures of Bara Katra and Chhota Katra in Old Dhaka—the former built between 1644 and 1646 AD to be the official residence of Mughal prince Shah Shuja who later gifted it to his diwan Abul Kasim, and the latter in 1664 AD by Shaista Khan. Today, Bara Katra houses a madrasa while Chhota Katra is occupied by a police station. Much like the two Katras, many such age-old structures today have fallen victim to residential and commercial purposes as constraints of land space in a city that is urbanising faster than it can fathom put further pressure on whatever is left of Dhaka's heritage sites. Bara Katra and Chhota Katra in the present day depict a bleak, depressing picture of the heritage sites standing tall amidst an ugly concrete jungle, as if trying to hold on to the grandeur and prestige they embodied once upon a time. To the watchful viewer, it is a sad reminder of what is at stake: erasure of history going back centuries.



PHOTO: Ragib Hasan/Wikimedia Commons

Chhota Katra, a Mughal era building, in ruins in Old Dhaka.

It is not for nothing that preservationists decried the abovementioned amended heritage list. Along with the outright removal of protection of many heritage sites, the amended list sends the signal that preservation of these sites is subject to change and is open to debate. Fears of preservationists proved to be justified as the

amendment of the list was quickly followed by the demolition of ancient structures—having lost their protection status—built during the British period on Hrishikesh Das Road in Old Dhaka. At least four areas—Farashganj, Shakhari Bazar, Sutrapur and Ramna—have reportedly been taken off the new list. In the last decade

# Will peace get another chance in Jammu and Kashmir?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

BY announcing the conditional unilateral cessation of pro-active operations by security forces against militants in Jammu and Kashmir during Ramadan, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken a decision that is fraught with as much risk as a potential turnaround for the better. This is the first such peace initiative by the Modi government since coming to power four years ago. The last time such an olive branch was held out by the Indian government was also during the tenure of a BJP government headed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee 18 years ago.

The Indian government's instructions to the security forces and the army not to undertake offensive operations during the period of Ramadan came following an appeal by the state Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti. Her appeal reflected the sentiments expressed at an all-party meeting she had convened on the issue about a week ago.

Mehbooba Mufti, whose People's Democratic Party shares power with BJP in Jammu and Kashmir, has of late been under mounting pressure to persuade the Indian government to halt anti-militancy operations through cordon and search, because of rising unrest in the state and increasing involvement of local youth in militancy, many of whom have lost their lives in anti-terrorism operations by the security forces. About 270 terrorists have been killed in 2017 and this year so far. Since January this year, an estimated 30 security men and many civilians have also died.

The announcement of the unilateral halt to anti-militancy operations also came ahead of Modi's visit to Jammu and Kashmir on May 19 when he is expected to lay the foundation of some development projects. The government took the decision after consultations with the security establishment which was not too keen about it, as it could provide terrorists the time to regroup after being under immense pressure

from the security forces. The government is mindful of it and that is why the Home Ministry statement making the announcement public inserted a caveat making it clear that "if it is essential for protecting the life of the common people, the security forces will be compelled to take appropriate action" in the event of terror attacks. That caveat was aimed at addressing the concerns of the security set-up which is bearing the brunt of militancy.

The key question is, what are the chances of such a unilateral gesture by the Indian

motivate those who have been misguided to return to the path of peace."

The government earlier appointed its interlocutor Dinesh Sharma, a retired intelligence officer who has since long been associated closely with Jammu and Kashmir affairs, for exploring the possibility of dialogue with the separatists and a cross-section of the population there. But the rising level of militancy in the last few months has forced the security forces to hit back hard, resulting in shrinking space for dialogue.



Indian soldiers patrolling the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway.

PHOTO: AFP

government bringing the desired results like creating the political space and a conducive atmosphere for initiation of a dialogue with the separatists—and give room to the right-thinking people of the state to isolate the militants and end the cycle of violence? The government said as much when it said that, "it should be our collective endeavour to isolate those who bring a bad name to Islam by their senseless acts of terror and violence... It is important that all peace-loving people should come together to isolate the terrorists and

With the cessation of anti-militancy operations, it is now for the political parties in the state and the Chief Minister in particular to try and reach out to the people who were upset with her party's link with BJP to rule Jammu and Kashmir. The Indian government's initiative should signal that Mehbooba Mufti has the clout to secure the concession from New Delhi. The initiative could also allow the state government to address the issues that people of Jammu and Kashmir have with the powers that be,

whether its the Mufti administration or the Indian government.

The success of the Indian government's initiative will depend on how the separatist groups and militant groups respond to it. The mainstream political parties including PDP and main opposition National Conference have welcomed it. The separatist groups conglomerate leaders Mirwaiz Umer Farook, Yaseen Malik and Syed Ahmed Shah Gilani have dismissed the federal government's initiative as a "cruel joke" and wanted a "permanent halt" to the anti-militancy operations. Militant outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba also rejected the initiative. In fact, doubts already began to creep in soon after the government's gesture when two separate terror attacks took place in the state. That the government is conscious of this find reflected in the Home Ministry statement which said that, "over the last few years, terrorists have indulged in large-scale bloodshed not only in India but also in other parts of the World, even during this holy month."

If the last such unilateral cessation of pro-active operations against terrorists by the Vajpayee government during Ramadan in 2000 is anything to go by, one has to keep their fingers crossed. The Vajpayee government had enforced the cessation in November during Ramadan and later extended it three times till May 30, 2001. But terrorists had kept targeting security forces and made a daring attempt to attack the airport in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir. Very little came out of that initiative by the government.

However, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir today is quite different from what it was 18 years ago or even earlier in the 1990s. At that time, most of the terrorists were from Pakistan but in the last four years most of the militants perishing in encounters with the security forces were locals. That is why one finds sizable turnouts at the funerals of militants and other civilians who are getting killed. More and more local youths are reportedly being drawn to militancy. According

alone, more than 600 ancient structures have been demolished, according to urban planners, archaeologists and architects.

## Development and preservation at odds?

The struggle to preserve Dhaka's heritage sites has laid bare the conflict between development and preservation. The 2009 heritage list published by the government—and the result of the fruits of labour of organisations such as Urban Study Group—was reportedly narrowed down by Rajuk and the Archaeological Department, among others, due to pressure from Housing and Public Works Ministry and private property owners in Old Dhaka who refused to go through the hassle of seeking government permission to modify or repair parts of the building included in the 2009 heritage list. As if the race for acquiring land occupied by historic sites to put up high-rise blocks wasn't enough, conflict of interest between governmental bodies has made things much worse.

It is easy to understand why preservation of historic buildings and the city's "development" is at loggerheads and why building owners and developers see preservationists as their sworn enemy. As cost of living continues to soar and amount of land decreases day by day in Dhaka, encroachment upon historic sites was perhaps inevitable.

It doesn't have to be this way. Activists have proposed that the government follow the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) which is "development rights issued to a land owner as compensation for space ceded to the government" and which is thought to be a good mechanism to make private property owners adhere to conservation guidelines. But TDR sounds too good to be true in the context of Dhaka and perhaps will never come into force in the near future.

The faintest hope of protecting and preserving Dhaka's heritage sites lies in political will—but we know all too well how far that will take us.

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to one report quoting the state police, 18 militants were killed from April this year and an identical number joined the ultras during the same month.

It is at this juncture that the moderates among the separatists and the mainstream political parties and their elected representatives and other peace-loving constituents of the civil society in Jammu and Kashmir have to step in and convince those who have taken up weapons that the cycle of violence and bloodshed needs a break. The fear of militants' bullets had sent many peace-loving members of the civil society and elected leaders of political parties to go mum. But remaining silent is no longer an option and the public opinion needs to be mobilised in favour of peace to pave the way for a solution.

Then there is another angle to the militancy in the state. While welcoming the Modi government's initiative, Mehbooba Mufti pointed to another crucial aspect of India's peace efforts in Jammu and Kashmir when she expressed hope that Pakistan will respond positively to the Indian government's Ramadan initiative. Will the Pakistan army, which stands guilty of sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir as also other parts of India, hold back the militants? Will peace again get a chance in the state?

But signals from Pakistan are far from encouraging, to say the least. A couple of days after India announced the conditional cessation of pro-active anti-militancy operations, four Indian civilians and a BSF jawan were killed in firing by Pakistan border guards targeting civilian hamlets in forward areas in Jammu district. Mehbooba Mufti herself said while India took the lead in starting peace initiatives with cessation of operations during Ramadan, Pakistan has shown no respect whatsoever for this holy month.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent to The Daily Star.

## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



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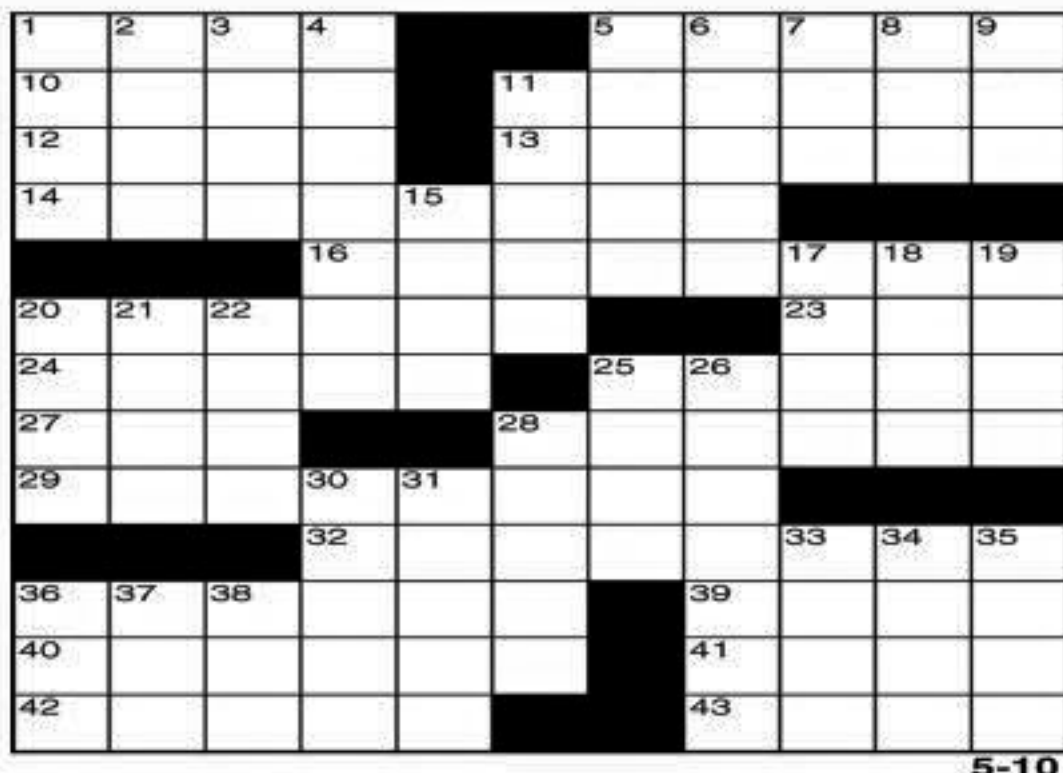
### MUSTAFA KEMAL INITIATES TURKISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, accompanied by 18 soldiers, landed at Samsun, now a Turkish city, initiating what was later known as the Turkish War of Independence.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                       |                                |                        |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| ACROSS                | 39 "Dear me!"                  | 19 Capone's foe        |
| 1 Refining waste      | 40 Riot robber                 | 20 Atomizer's output   |
| 5 Alcove              | 41 Intellect                   | 21 Freshener target    |
| 10 Ship of 1492       | 42 Rich veins                  | 22 Singer McEntire     |
| 11 Isthmus nation     | 43 Different                   | 25 Bank guarantor      |
| 12 Long, long time    | DOWN                           | 26 Seek safety         |
| 13 Paper worker       | 1 Small setback                | 28 Dogpatch boy        |
| 14 Kipling classic    | 2 Place                        | 30 Roofing material    |
| 16 "Jaws" sighting    | 3 Shortly, in poems            | 31 Stashes             |
| 20 Human              | 4 Rap style                    | 33 "Modern Family" dad |
| 23 Penny prez         | 5 Low point                    | 34 Travel stops        |
| 24 Notions            | 6 Bold way to solve crosswords | 35 Junction            |
| 25 Burger side        | 7 Manx, e.g.                   | 36 Maximum amount      |
| 27 Cry loudly         | 8 Rx payer                     | 37 Scary cry           |
| 28 Full-price payers  | 9 Corn unit                    | 38 Baton               |
| 29 Curbside container | 11 Bike part                   |                        |
| 32 Critical element   | 15 Cries of insight            |                        |
| 36 Wear down          | 17 Go under                    |                        |
|                       | 18 "Yeah, sure!"               |                        |

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