

## MUSINGS

A Short, Winding and Legendary  
Dhaka Road

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Fuller Road, the short and winding road in the middle of the University of Dhaka campus, is quite legendary, not only as far as the history of that institution is concerned, but also in the annals of Bangladesh. It must also be one of the most beautiful of Dhaka city's roads, having till now mostly escaped the degradations other old roads of the city have been subjected to due to rampant urbanization. It is steeped in history, but still looks like as if it was built not that long ago. Undoubtedly, it has real character and a distinctive place in the city's life.

Bampfylde Fuller was the first Lieutenant Governor of the province of East Bengal and Assam but held that position for less than a year; Fuller Road must have been named to acknowledge his indirect role in the creation of Dhaka's university. A controversial administrator and a very opinionated man, he had quit his position in a huff after less than a year

If you care to enter the university staff quarters on either the left or right of the road, and if you then ask the guards there to show you around, you will find the graves of intellectuals (or plaques honoring them). These were men martyred in 1971 due to the single-minded determination of the Pakistani army and its Bengali collaborators to eliminate dissident intellectuals who had worked for the birth of Bangladesh, thereby crippling the country at the moment of its birth. If you exit the road on Nilkhet road, you will find a solemnly built commemorative area in another island, containing plaques listing university teachers, staff members, and students martyred in 1971. The sculptures and the plaques are testaments not only to the sheer bloody-mindedness of the Pakistanis and their agents but also to the major contribution made by the university's people to Bangladesh's independence.

I grew up listening to snatches of the

roles its denizens played in our country's pre-liberation stages, as well as the memorable transitional historical moments they had either witnessed or were part of.

As I move in from the "Swadhinata Sangram" island on the Azimpur Road entry point of Fuller Road nowadays, I can see only some signs of the natural beauty the road once had. Gone is the Basketball Court placed in a picturesque setting that SM Hall once possessed, or the lush green grass tennis court of the Hall that my Uncle has talked about and played in before my time. For a long time, there were many statuesque and lovely trees on the SM Hall side of the road. However, the distinctive architectural features of the SM hall building still strike me as very impressive. On the other side, however, the first clear signs of the uglification of Fuller Road are visible in the drab features of the newly built extension of the Jagannath Hall complex.

reiterate what I say in that piece briefly here: This new British Council is, indeed, sleekly designed and has state-of-the-art security, but it is no longer the vibrant center of intellectual exchange it once was, and is now mostly a place visited by those who can afford its wares of British education.

The Vice-Chancellor's residence, however, is undoubtedly still striking. If you have had the privilege of going inside, you must have been impressed by the building as well as the grounds, containing *Krishnachuras* and *Jarul* trees, which when flowering, make Fuller Road look vibrant and colorful—almost a garden in Dhaka city. Indeed, the rain trees, the *krishnachuras* and *jaruls* in bloom, one or two *shirish* and a solitary *sonalu* trees and (still) numerous mango trees play their part in making Fuller Road a distinctive floral phenomenon of the cityscape.

Fuller Road is indeed as beautiful as you could expect any road to be in a bustling, bursting-at-its-seam, and unsparingly chaotic city like Dhaka. It is a road that also has many moods and that you can see in many lights—literally. I lived in Fuller Road for over two decades and frequented it for two more, and thus have had the privilege of viewing the road at different times of the day and on diverse occasions for at least four decades. When I now reflect on what I saw, I am struck by the immense variety of the experiences the road affords to those who live in it and even to passersby.

It was during my prolonged stay in Fuller Road that I got frequent glimpses of the wondrous place it once must have been. Even now, a nature-lover can take delight in its birds, for although the cacophonous crows still reign amongst the bird population of the locality, throughout the day, and especially in the evening, you will see swiftly flying flocks of pigeons, tribes of parrots and incomparably beautiful yellow-breasted holud *pakhic* couples, in addition to the sad-looking, ubiquitous *shaliks* and evening's surrealistic bats. When I first started living in Fuller Road, I would occasionally see snakes slithering by on monsoonal days; mongooses darting away at the sight of walkers is a not uncommon experience even now. Wild dogs roam Fuller Road spots at nights and early mornings. The foxes have disappeared and I have seen a stray monkey only once or twice, but there is still enough

with irritating frequency in evenings the parked motorcycles of busy-seeming student leaders. Nighttime Fuller Road can have a surrealistic feel to it—lighted up but deserted, desolate as in some dreamscape, and as in a dreamscape, hauntingly familiar.

What surely makes Fuller Road truly distinctive though are the festival days that it hosts throughout the year and the processions and parades that cross it throughout the year for one reason or the other. If you list them according to the English calendar year, you can begin with the new year when celebrations continue from the final hours of the dying year and end till the first nightfall of the new one. February is a truly distinctive month in the road—first Basant Utsav and then Valentine's Day see it fill up with young men and women in bright, warm colors and obviously romantic, flirtatious moods. Even solemn Ekushey February, where night-long Fuller Road residents hear the doleful notes of the Ekusheysong commemorating our language martyrs, and where from dawn to afternoon the road is closed to all vehicular traffic, switches to a festive mood by late afternoon, as those crisscrossing it seem bent on leaving the sad notes behind to celebrate all things Bengali. But the most exuberant display you can see in and around Fuller Road is during Pohela Boishakh, when the road turns into a conduit for festival-loving people flowing from fun-filled events to events. Eid days and Durga Pujas, and sarawati pujas too witness suitably dressed young people walking across the road in obviously celebratory moods, lighting up themselves and the people around them, as they either stroll by or stand in pairs or groups here and there in the curving road's embrace.

And the processions and parades? Suffice it to say, that they are motivated not only by politics but this or that reason or cause.

In the three Fuller Road flats I lived in for twenty years or so, I felt the kind of contentment and ease that I did not experience in the many neighborhoods of Dhaka I had lived in before, or the Dhanmondi flat I live in now. Mango-filled trees exuding mango blossom scents, Kamini flowers with overpowering fragrances, wide open spaces where children and boys play to their hearts content and neighbors greet each other familiarly throughout the day made my life in Fuller Road incomparably pleasing. Towards the

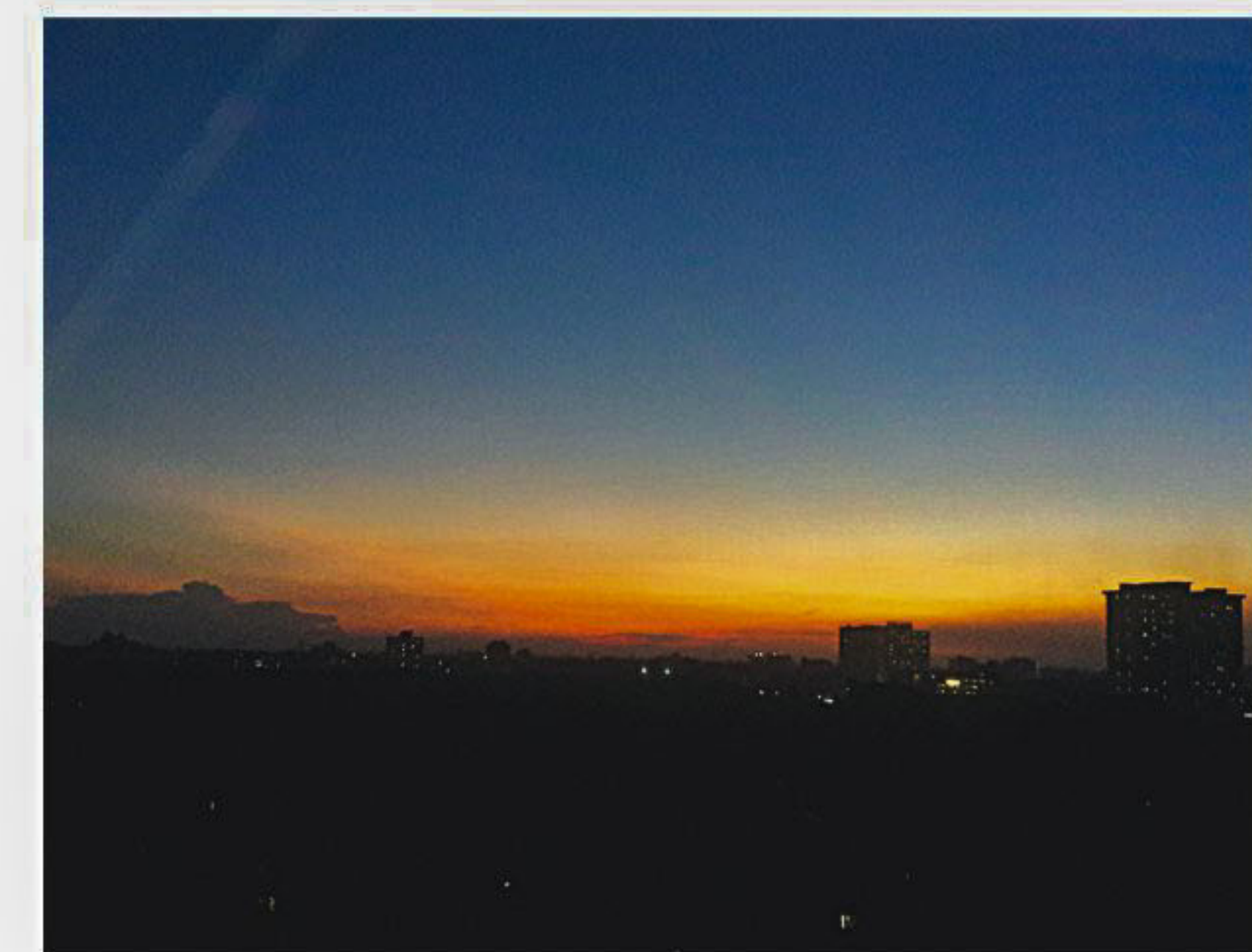


PHOTOS: AUTHOR

at his job. The partition of Bengal had been revoked in 1912, and all Fuller left behind then in his brief stint seemingly was the beautiful Old High Court Building of the city (whose construction he had initiated) and the splendid, sprawling rain trees of the university he had apparently imported from Madagascar. Nevertheless, the naming of the road indicates that he was part of the historical current that would lead not only to the building of the University of Dhaka in 1921, but also to the partition of India in 1947, and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

Fuller Road is thus replete with history. Enter it from Azimpur Road and you will see it flanked on one side by Salimullah Muslim (or SM) Hall, and on the other by Jagannath Hall. The former, of course, is named to honor Nawab Salimullah, one of the university's founders, and someone who had donated a lot of land to the university. Built in 1930-1931, SM Hall is a splendid building, incorporating features not merely of Mughal architecture and gardens, but also of design elements of the colleges and halls that echo another venerable university, Oxford (one reason why the University of Dhaka was once called the "Oxford of the East"). Jagannath Hall comes with an overload of history as well. It, too, was originally modeled after the halls of the University of Oxford and was named after a zamindar of Savar who had contributed to the founding of Jagannath College, which had an organic connection with the university for a long time.

Fuller Road, in fact, is also steeped in the history of Bangladesh. If you enter it from its Azimpur Road entrance, you will see "Swadhinata Sangram," a group of sculptural busts by Shamim Shikder that commemorates the legendary names associated with the university and the birth of Bangladesh.



history of the University of Dhaka and Fuller Road that are relevant here. One of my uncles, for instance, is still fond of retelling an incident when he escaped from the Pakistani police's bloody assault on demonstrators protesting on the 21 February, 1952 against the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language of the nascent state by (West) Pakistani administrators and their cohorts. He had taken refuge at that time in the Fuller Road flat of a European Jewish academic, who was then a faculty member. A few of my teachers have either talked about or written about the movements that continued from that memorable incident till December 16, 1971, describing their involvement with the various other movements that led to the emergence of Bangladesh. They highlight in the process noteworthy moments in the road's history and the

In addition to these two halls, Fuller Road is flanked on one side by the British Council, and university staff quarters, and on the other by Udayan Bidalaya (aka Udayan School/ College) some Faculty and Staff Quarters, the residences of one of the Pro-Vice Chancellors and the Treasurer, and the Vice-Chancellor's house. The two buildings of the Pro-Vice Chancellor and the Treasurer are pretty nondescript as is the Udayan buildings, but the British Council setup is quite notable.

I have written about the British Council's transformation from an open access center for intellectual and cultural pursuits and my own memories of stimulating as well as *adda*-filled days in anguished as well as indignant remembrance elsewhere ("The New East India Company" in *The Daily Star's* literary pages on November 8, 2003), but let me just

flora and fauna around to make you feel an intimate connection with nature in this neighborhood of the city.

But of course, in addition to its nonhuman residents as well as its human ones, Fuller Road is now frequented mostly by people who find its free and open spaces appealing for different reasons at different times of the day. Early in the morning or late in the evening, for instance, you will find men and women chatting away as they do their constitutionals; during the day students saunter across the road while vehicles fill the free and plentiful parking spaces; come evening lovers sit down discreetly in its dark spots, trying to be as close as possible and as far away as they can from prying eyes; with night fall nouveau riche youths park faux sports and/or sleekly painted cars, trying to impress the girls who stroll across the road. Nowadays you will see

end of my Dhaka University career, I moved to a flat on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the newly constructed faculty apartment complex. There I saw what I had never seen before—monsoonal cloud formations, magnificent sunsets (I would not get up in time for sunrises!), the moon in its full glory, and star-studded nights. Heaven seemed to come closer and closer to me then. I truly seemed to have ascended to celestial heights!

But paradise has to be lost sooner or later and can only be regained in this world by willing the mind to vision it from exilic places every now and then. But to have had some close to it in this life through Fuller Road moments is truly something to be thankful for!

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