



Azimpur, Colony, circa 1960 (left) (Courtesy: Dhaka - 400 Years In History); Demolition and building at Azimpur, 2018 (right).



Building the city building by building

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

ALL cities change, and better cities—those that are not at the lowest rung of “most liveable cities”—change through careful planning and crafting of its assets. Dhaka is changing through radical norms, in a fury of demolition and building.

It appears that the architectural and engineering authorities of the state are working full speed in taking down the old walk-up buildings in Azimpur Housing Estate in order to replace them with tall towers. Being one of the earliest designed housing projects in Dhaka, Azimpur has been etched in the memory of the city, as well as in generations of government officials and their families who lived a precious part of their life there (including the present writer from his birth to about five years old). Considering the historical value of Azimpur as an urban fabric, and that it is a prime site of about 50 acres in a premier part of the city, we are looking forward to an exemplary solution to the challenge of renewal and renovation of a well-known neighbourhood of the city.

Those who are seriously committed to the design of housing know that the most critical thing is NOT the production of housing units but the making of a community, and organising of the social life of the place. There are really scant examples of good housing in Dhaka, old or recent. What Dhaka has now is only an additive process with only one residential type: the apartment building producing a homogenous urban fabric. While Azimpur may seem now to be straightforward in its arrangement of buildings and spaces, it is, with its community spaces and open grounds, one of the earliest examples of group housing in Dhaka.

Built mostly in the 1950s, Azimpur has a diverse collection of buildings that also includes some early innovative work by the master architect Muzharul Islam (when he worked at the then Communications and Building Department, the precursor of PWD, and also lived in Azimpur). His buildings in Azimpur are brilliant examples of early modern housing, outpacing in innovation and design quality the more bland buildings in the campus by his English boss Raymond McConnell. Poorly maintained and badly transformed, Islam’s buildings may now seem shabby, but if renovated, they can still demonstrate to the younger generation how smart and thoughtful they were.

It is ironic that people who laud the architectural guru Muzharul Islam as a “pothikreet” have no problem in taking down the buildings that are evidence of his being a path-blazer in Bangladesh’s architecture. In a few years, after all older buildings are demolished, how shall we

know what made Muzharul Islam the most brilliant architect of his time and later times? We need to retain and preserve some select buildings as instructive monuments for posterity.

How then to transform such an area as Azimpur with its poignant history and rich memory? By wanton demolishing or careful crafting?

We keep hearing so many stories of the simplistic solution of demolition-and-building: elegant hundred-year-old building in Farmgate destroyed to put up a new structure, New Market being destroyed to create a multi-story building, buildings on Bailey Road taken down for tall towers... this is a worrisome trend! If this continues, buildings built now will be taken down in a few years at the slightest justification: either

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they have run out of their efficiency or they are aesthetically inelegant. If unthoughtful demolition-and-building were the planning policy for cities, London would have looked like Bashundhara. London is still an excellent example of ensembling the old and new in a seamless tapestry of buildings and spaces.

Demolition-and-building has now become a signature for a larger social phenomenon: How we are keen to destroy our heritage in order to forge ahead towards some undefined, foggy future! Take Dhanmondi Residential Area for example. The original condition of a two-storey bungalow in a lawn was erased for the six-storey apartment-style buildings, which in no time gave way to 12-storey towers. Density increased (as well as the coffers of

the property owners) as did the pressure on roads and services with little facilitation of community development.

We praise the efforts by the government in providing more accommodation for its officials in Azimpur, and if tall buildings are one way to resolve that, we are with it. But when the construction of new buildings involves wanton destruction of older buildings, including those that have heritage, memorial or educative value, we are concerned. We are also worried when the initiative involves only buildings, and not much thought to a master plan integrating landscape and community. We cannot remain fixated only on individual buildings without insight for establishing housing as a community matrix and social fabric. We are also concerned when tall buildings are located with no particular vision in mind. With the same new building types, driven by a homogenising FAR (floor area ratio), all parts of the city are beginning to look alike, mostly bland and uninspiring. The few tall buildings that have popped up in Azimpur are neither good examples of aesthetical elegance nor of virtuous residential living. They are just tall boxes, floors stacked upon floors, with no thoughtful relationship to the ground and surroundings. A site and condition as Azimpur require the highest level of sensitive, knowledgeable and mature architectural response. It would have been ideal to arrange a national competition as the government did for the old Dhaka Jail area.

It appears we have no clue—no science or philosophy—about how to work with the old. Instead of brutally demolishing all buildings, there are other possibilities. A far richer environment can be created by an ensemble of renovating selective older buildings and innovative tall buildings, in a creative co-existence of the past and the upcoming. Only that way we will have arrived in the twentieth-century with intelligence and pride, and a richer urban experience.

In the meantime, we will benefit if authorities and architects transforming Azimpur explain to the larger public what they are planning on this critical site. Such provision of information should be a requirement for any major public land undergoing large-scale change. All of us who are in one way or another involved in the betterment of our environments, and reflect on critical issues that affect the future of the city, are keen to see that one of the most important housing sites in Bangladesh, and a historic neighbourhood in the city, is transformed to a superior example of “housing as community” and not housing as numbers.

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Kuldip Nayar: A Partition storyteller par excellence

SHAZZAD KHAN

MY father, a prolific reader of literature about the historical events connecting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, was a great admirer of Indian writer-columnist Kuldip Nayar. “Don’t miss it,” he would tell me, about Nayar’s weekly column published by *The Daily Star*. I often heard my father say that Muhammad Ali Jinnah used to be called an “ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity”.

My knowledge of that time was mostly from my father’s recollections, books and documents. But after my father’s insistence that I read Kuldip Nayar, I came to realise that if anyone today deserves this ambassador title for their work on India-Pakistan relations, it was Nayar. He was truly a champion of India-Pakistan unity.

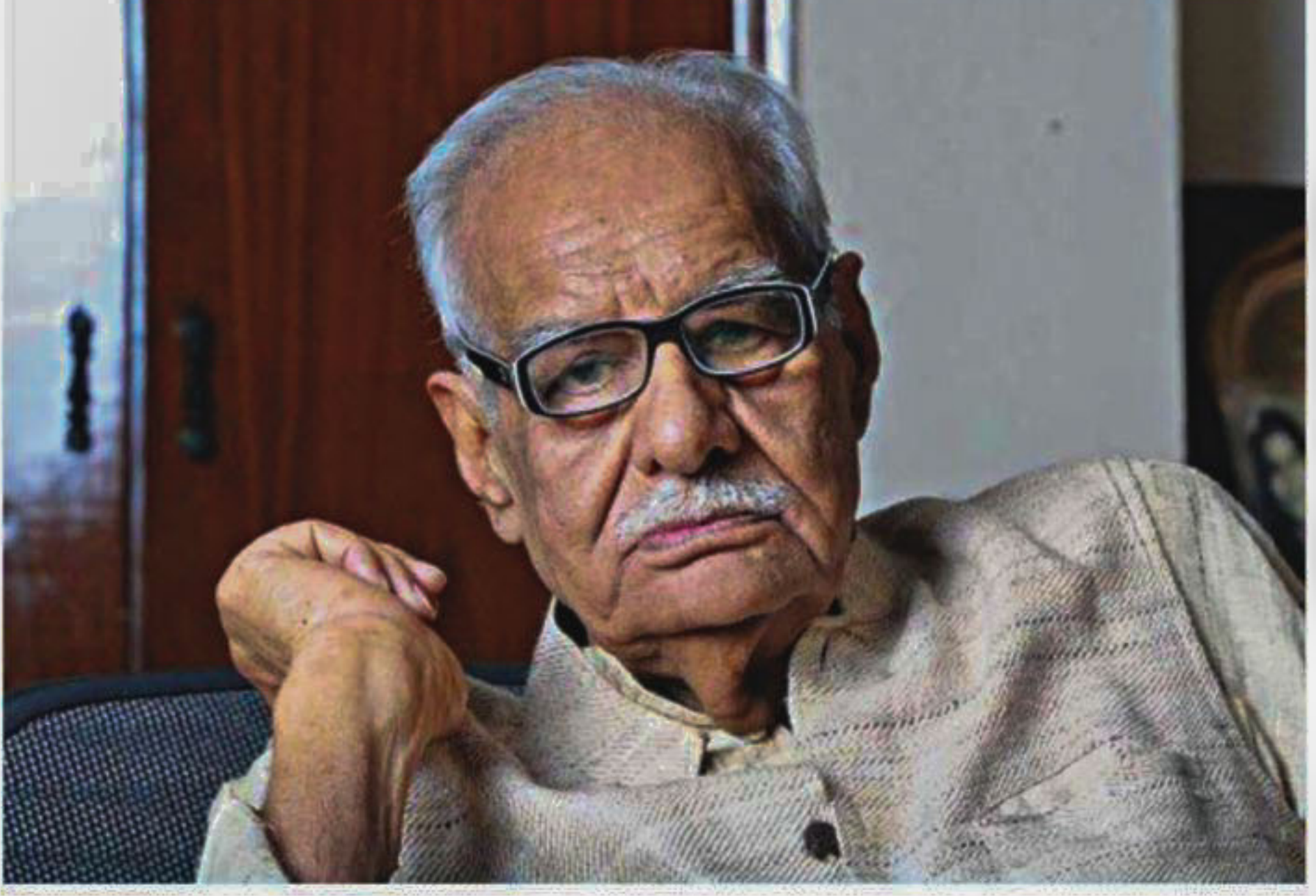
Over the years, reading Kuldip Nayar’s articles on the pages of *The Daily Star* had become a regular task for me. Whenever I saw his article, I would read it instantly. I had a folder on my PC named after Nayar for archiving his articles, which were down-to-earth and penetrating and would give a reader the feeling of being a part of this subcontinent, and also a feeling of brotherhood between Hindus and

that it’s there, we should accept it and live in peace like brothers and sisters.

Kuldip Nayar’s writing style was extremely vivid. In his last article published by *The Daily Star* on August 14, 2018, he described how, while he was crossing the border in 1947 from Sialkot to Amritsar, he was aghast to get the stench of bodies of people killed in the riots triggered by the Partition, and at the same time, how he felt utterly lost as he was unable to help the grandson of an old Sikh who begged him to take him along. Kuldip Nayar wrote that these incidents haunted him all his life. Reading the story, I too felt haunted, thinking what could possibly happen to the child afterwards.

A few years ago, possibly at the Hay Festival (now Dhaka Lit Fest), I learned that he was coming to Bangla Academy. As I met him there, I was surprised to see that he looked somewhat like my own father. And as he was giving his account of the 1947 Partition, I felt as if I was listening to my own father. That was a great moment in my life.

Kuldip Nayar had always been a conscience keeper for India and Pakistan. In an article on Rahul Gandhi’s relations with Narendra Modi, or the one published on



Kuldip Nayar (1923-2018)

*In an article on Rahul Gandhi’s relations with Narendra Modi, or the one published on August 14 in *The Daily Star*, he once again portrayed how insensitively politicians behave, because of which we common people have to suffer.*

Muslims.

Kuldip Nayar’s *Beyond the Lines: An Autobiography* is a mesmerising piece of work. As I read it, it gave me a feeling as if my father was talking to me. Since my childhood, I heard my father say many striking stories of the Partition. While reading the book, I found many similar stories told poignantly by Nayar. Kuldip Nayar never wrote to exhibit his mastery over the language of English but to penetrate into the hearts of his readers. In many English newspapers, including *The Daily Star*, I found writings that could only draw me up to the first paragraph or at best the second. But reading Kuldip Nayar, you would feel as if he were chatting with his readers, always saying that the history of the subcontinent was not inevitable, but now

August 14 in *The Daily Star*, he once again portrayed how insensitively politicians behave, because of which we common people have to suffer. His life’s experience and attachment to historic figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Sardar Patel, Abul Kalam Azad, Subhas Bose and others gave us a picture of what the Indian subcontinent was once and what it is now—how we lived then and are living now.

I pay my deepest respect and love to Kuldip Nayar and pray for his eternal peace. He will forever live in my heart, as my own father will, with his words of wisdom and peace.

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QUOTABLE
Quote

PRIMO LEVI (1919-1987)
Italian chemist, writer, and Holocaust survivor

A country is considered the more civilised the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a weak man from becoming too weak and a powerful one too powerful.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Moroccan city

6 Cast member

11 In the know

12 Bangor's state

13 Piece of gymnastics equipment

15 Mamie's husband

16 Coffee dispenser

17 Tycoon Onassis

18 Coveted

20 "— voyage!"

21 Grass coating

22 Top medal

23 Closet pairs

26 Soup servings

27 Hula swayers

28 Writing tool

29 Hall of Famer

Mel

30 Odorous animal

34 Letter after epsilon

35 Angled pipe

36 Vacuum lack

37 Piece of gymnastics equipment

40 Online messages

41 Spoken exams

42 Valleys

43 "For -- sake!"

DOWN

1 Zealous

2 Not napping

3 Hay bundles

4 Coach Parseghian

5 Lengths of service

6 Improve, in a way

7 Fare carrier

8 Finish gift-wrapping

9 Doing well

10 Cues

14 Ship's staff

19 Midmonth day

22 Departed

23 Enjoyed the mall

24 Strike a cord

25 Best

26 Hotel worker

28 Trend

determiner

30 Banana waste

31 Diamond unit

32 Supermarket section

33 Lock of hair

38 Wire measure

39 Smelting need

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

SCRAP IDOL
ORATE VENOM
WATER AMAZE
ESS SAN LEN
RHODE ISLAND
TILLS PIKES
ARIA SAG
CONNECTICUT
ONE AIR ALE
MEANS ONICE
ARGUE LOREN
SETS STORY

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

CHASE THIS ONE, SARGE!

HA!

HOW'S THIS BACKHAND? GIVE UP?

I WISH SARGE WOULD GET HERE, I'M USING UP ALL MY BEST SHOTS!

2-26

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

FIRST, YOU GET A BUNCH OF THIS STUFF OUT...

...MIX SOME INGREDIENTS TOGETHER...

...AND THEN ACT HELPLESS UNTIL MOM COMES IN AND SAYS, "HERE, I'LL DO IT."

WHAT'S GOING ON?

I'M TEACHING WREN HOW TO MAKE COOKIES.