

Dhaka's origin myth

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



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It is essential to understand the politics surrounding Dhaka's origin as a city. The prevailing mythology is that Dhaka is 400 years old. About ten years ago, the 400th anniversary of Dhaka's founding as a Mughal administrative centre of the Bengal *subah* circa 1608 CE (or 1610) was celebrated with much fanfare. In 2011, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh published a book, *400 Years of Capital Dhaka and Beyond*, offering authoritative support to the idea that Dhaka was founded in the early 17th century. The celebration was premised on the idea that pre-Mughal Dhaka was not yet a city.

Acclaimed historian Abdul Karim encapsulates this view: "Dhaka, a place of some importance in the Sultanate period, came to the limelight of history under the Mughals. The Mughals first established a *thana* (fortified post) at Dhaka to guard the imperial position against the incursions of the independent or semi-independent 'Bhuiya' chiefs... But the city acquired fame and glory only after being capital of the Subah in the reign of Jahangir in 1610 A.D."

The establishment of Dhaka as a provincial Mughal capital seems to have laid the foundation of Dhaka's legend. It was said that during his eastward journey, Islam Khan Chishti (a member of the Fatehpur Sikri Sufi family) was concerned about the geopolitical vulnerability of Rajmahal, the then capital that was prone to enemy attack since it was situated on a river bank. He endeavoured to transfer the Mughal capital to a strategically safer, central location in Bengal. Having stopped at Ghoraghat briefly during the monsoon he continued on with his journey to East Bengal and eventually chose Dhaka as his future capital.

What factors led Islam Khan to select Dhaka as his capital? Historians offer differing reasons. In *History of Bengal* (1813), Charles Stewart argued that Islam Khan transferred the capital to Dhaka mainly as an

imperial defence along the eastern frontier of the empire. For Khan, Dhaka offered a superior geo-strategic location for the surveillance of lower Bengal—especially the southern coastal belt—that had been ravaged by the Maghs and Portuguese pirates.

Whatever the reasons for the Mughal selection of Dhaka as the provincial capital of Bengal, historians of Dhaka city generally appear to be at intellectual ease in identifying the city's birth with the advent of the Mughal governor Islam Khan Chishti. For them, Jahangirnagar—as Dhaka was then renamed after the reigning Mughal

nihilio. The supreme reason was Dhaka's commercial prospects. If formerly, the capital cities of Gaur, Pandua, Rajmahal, Ghoraghat, Sonargaon and others lost their significance and soon got merged up with a rural regime, it was because those cities were planned and set up for military purposes alone. None of these places had any connection with the commercial lifeline of the country." In other words, Dhaka's exceptionalism derived from the ways the Mughals exploited the city's existing commercial advantage and how such an engagement inspired the city's urban growth.



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emperor—transformed from a rudimentary *janapada* to a city, when the *subahdar* reportedly moved his entire civil and military establishment to the northern bank of the River Buriganga.

Historian Sirajul Islam proposed that Dhaka's emergence as a vibrant city under the Mughal regime was due to two intertwining factors: the centralisation of political power and the Mughal comprehension of Dhaka's commercial prospect. Emphasising the latter, Sirajul Islam wrote: "The Mughals did not develop the place as a premier city of the empire ex

The belief that Dhaka emerged as a significant military, administrative, and commercial centre under the Mughals, who understood the strategic value of the city's riverine hydrography, not only bolstered Dhaka's Mughal origin myth but also, ironically, obscured the pre-Mughal periods of Dhaka as a historical subject. Whether the intellectual obfuscation of pre-Mughal histories of the city and its triumphalist identification with a Mughal origin is intertwined with Muslim identity politics or due to the scarcity of archival and archaeological sources or a combination of

both remains a historical riddle.

In 1989, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh held an international symposium on the city of Dhaka titled *Dhaka Past Present Future*. The namesake book that resulted from this symposium featured Abdul Karim's "Origin and Development of Mughal Dhaka" as its first article. Even though Karim didn't exactly argue that Dhaka was "born" with the Mughal arrival, an "origin myth" has long been established. The book did not have a single authoritative article on pre-Mughal urban histories of Dhaka.

The dearth of research on the pre-Mughal urbanisation of Dhaka is itself curious. Why is there a short supply of world-class peer-reviewed research on the city before the arrival of the Mughals? This should raise many critical questions. Is it merely the absence of enterprising historians who would be willing to undertake arduous archival, archaeological, and epigraphic research on this ignored period? Is it collective intellectual laziness to uncritically accept the dominant post-Mughal historical narrative? Or, is the knowledge gap itself an orchestration of a particular identity? A "void" in historical knowledge can speak volumes about a city, its people and their political worldview.

In histories of the ancient maritime world, Dhaka has been mentioned since the early Christian era. In *Oriental Commerce* (1813), William Milburn states that Roman historian Pliny the Younger observed the "presence of Dhaka's textiles in the Mediterranean trade as early as 73 A.D." Dhaka was known within the trading world of the Silk Road, as muslin and fine embroidery were coveted products in European royal courts, as much as they were in Sultani and Mughal durbars before Islam Khan's arrival in the city.

It is likely that Dhaka developed into a modest commercial hub during the epoch of the Sena rulers. The fact that Ballal Sen built the Dhakeshwari temple in the 12th century on the bank of the Buriganga River suggests the existence of a sizeable religious community. The city was a place of some significance under the independent Sultans of Bengal. It was said that the city was a revenue collection centre during the reign of

Sultan Barbak Shah (1459-1474). Man Singh (1550-1614) realised the civil and military leverage of Dhaka and made it a *thana* (military district). Since the 1450s Dhaka was the eastern outpost of Muslim settlers. One extant mosque built during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah I (1433-59) reveals building activities in pre-Mughal Dhaka.

Whether these sketchy pieces of "evidence" suffice for pre-Mughal Dhaka to be called a city merits considerable scholarly attention. The obscure view itself provokes broader questions concerning how we address the problem of writing history. For the new generation of historians, this problem is twofold. First, they need to fill knowledge gaps in the history of Dhaka, particularly from ancient times to pre-Mughal periods. Second, they have to write Dhaka's global history, not falsely isolated "local" history. A global history of Dhaka would show if and how this city flourished across historical eras as a result of migration, trading, movement of religious communities and nomadic tribes, and military invasions, and how these factors intersected with local factors.

I have been reading a fascinating book: Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (2015). The book's larger theme is that nation-centric histories are false stories. In reality, histories and cultural experiences of different regions—east and west, north and south—are connected by a complex web of historical movements of people, goods, ideas, religions, and many more. Just like London's history is hardly confined to the geographic and political entity called England, Dhaka's history is not constricted to Bengal.

We need a new generation of historians to debunk the myth of false origins and narrate the overlapping of histories that helps unpack the complex development of a city.

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Mind over matter

ABHIK ROY

IN Western cultures, which are obsessed with what is new, novel, innovative, and futuristic, being old is often perceived as a shortcoming, and the elderly in such cultures are often shown as irascible, depressed, decrepit, senile people who have lost their *joie de vivre*.

English literature is replete with negative images of old age. Take, for example, the doleful Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, who paints old age in a negative light when he declares that the final and most dismal age is that of "second childhood and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Then there is La Rochefoucauld, who viewed most old people as making a mess of their age and wasting their time, or letting time waste them. Matthew Arnold's perspective of growing old doesn't shine a positive light on old age either. In his well-known poem "Growing Old," he laments the loss of physical beauty and physical strength. For Arnold, old folks are trapped in their bodies like a prison, feeling as if they were never young.

Arnold believes that by the end of life an old person will come to hate his own body and will blame his advanced age for the loss of spirit, strength, and emotion. In "Gerontion," TS Eliot provides a vivid account of both medical and psychological conditions associated with old age such as physical frailty, cognitive decline, sensory impairment, bitterness and the emotional stress of having to face old age and trying to make meaning of one's life.

In "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats describes an old man as "a paltry thing, a tattered coat

upon a stick..." who has nothing to contribute—someone who is waiting to die. In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir spoke passionately about the stigma of old age, about the loss of a valued identity, the self-older people once knew is gone, and it is replaced by what she called "a loathsome stranger" that they can't recognise. In Beauvoir's words, older people in Western cultures have:

A limited future and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to. In many instances it paralyses them. All their plans have either been carried out or abandoned, and their life has closed about itself; nothing requires their presence; they no longer have anything whatsoever to do.

There are examples galore both in English poetry and fiction where we find that old age is treated in the most denigrating ways. Several Greek philosophers referenced aging only in a peripheral manner. In *Republic*, Plato introduced the elderly Cephalus to convey the point that an advanced age is hardly relevant in discussing "justice."

For Plato, such matters were decided only by argument, and age did not have any special role to play. Plato believed that character took time to develop and old people had more time than anyone else to achieve this feat since they were free from youthful distractions. He acknowledged that while not everyone might enjoy a pleasant old age, those most likely to achieve the wisdom characteristic of the good life would seem to be old. This is probably why Plato insisted in *Republic* that the guardians of a wise city should be old. Plato declared that "the rulers should be older, and those who are ruled, younger."

Aristotle created quite a negative image of the elderly. In fact, his comments about the nature of the elderly are quite demeaning. Aristotle said that the older person is cowardly, distrustful, cheap, and inactive. They are also egotistical people who are loquacious by nature, forcing others to listen to their boring stories about their past. For Aristotle, the elderly cared only for what was expedient for them and little, if any, for what was honourable and just. Most notably, the elderly lacked passion. It would seem that for Aristotle, old age not only brought with it the physical symptoms of decay but also made its victim selfish, feckless, and socially inept.

In contrast to the Greek philosophers, Roman philosophers, especially Cicero and Plutarch, viewed older people in a positive light. In his timeless essay, "On Old Age," Cicero defended against the alleged disadvantages of old age: First that it makes us withdraw from active pursuits; second that it makes the body weaker; third, that it deprives us of almost all physical pleasures; and fourth, that it is not far removed from death. In his essay, "On Old Age" Cicero provided ten important observations about aging:

1. A good old age begins in youth: Cultivate the virtues that will serve you well in old age moderation, wisdom, courage in your youth.
2. Old age can be a wonderful part of life: You can live well in old age if you are wise.
3. Youth and old age differ: Accept that as physical vitality declines, wisdom can grow.
4. Older people have much to teach the young, and younger people can invigorate older persons.
5. Old age need not deny us an active life, but we need to accept limitations: We should

try to remain healthy and active while accepting our limitations.

6. The mind is a muscle that must be exercised: We should continually learn new things.

7. Older people must stand up for themselves: Older people will be respected only if they aren't too passive.

8. Sex is highly overrated: We should accept physical limitations and enjoy other aspects of life.

9. Pursue enjoyable, worthwhile activities: Happiness derives in large part from doing productive work that gives us joy.

10. Death is not to be feared: Don't cling to life—a good actor knows when to leave the stage.

For Plutarch, the elderly had the virtues of "justice, temperance and prudence" and they came to their perfection "late and slowly." Plutarch believed that old people possessed these "beauties of soul" and had a special contribution to make to society.

Whether or not Plutarch was right to think that the old were typically more just, prudent and temperate than the young, he had identified it as a philosophical issue concerning older people's proper social role and relationship vis-à-vis their younger fellow citizens.

Plutarch was of the opinion that older people should have an active existence where they get to apply their rich and varied experience gathered over years to the good of the public: "an old man, acting in the state, is a venerable spectacle; but he who wastes away his days in his bed, or sits discoursing of trivial matters, and blowing his nose in the corner of a gallery, renders himself an object of contempt."

In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't

matter a whole lot how old age is portrayed in either literature or philosophy because the deterioration of the human body due to old age is something inevitable and irreversible. This doesn't necessarily imply that we lose our wisdom or drive to engage in activities that we are passionate about.

This is amply demonstrated in the case of great creative artists when they are granted a long life. They appear to find some vital source within themselves that can set even the decrepitude of age at a distance. Merely to roll out the names moves the emotions: Bach, Goethe, Michelangelo, Picasso, Stravinsky, Tolstoy, Yeats—the list goes on. Let's not forget that Ingress painted *La Source* at 76.

At the age of 81, Matisse finished a four-year project to design the interior and the stained-glass windows of the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence. Picasso painted until 3 am on the day he died, which was April 8, 1973, when he was 91. Granted that these examples are of limited use for most of us who are not artistic geniuses, but there will be certain things that we can all excel at in advanced age.

As far as old age is concerned, we have no choice but to come to terms with it. If old age is a matter of grudging acceptance, of being frightened at the prospect of death, of labouring under an oppressive burden, then we will prepare a recipe for life that is marked by bitterness, resentment and, ultimately, despair. Simply put, it's a matter of attitude. Instead of being negative about our old age, why not embrace Mark Twain's point of view: "Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

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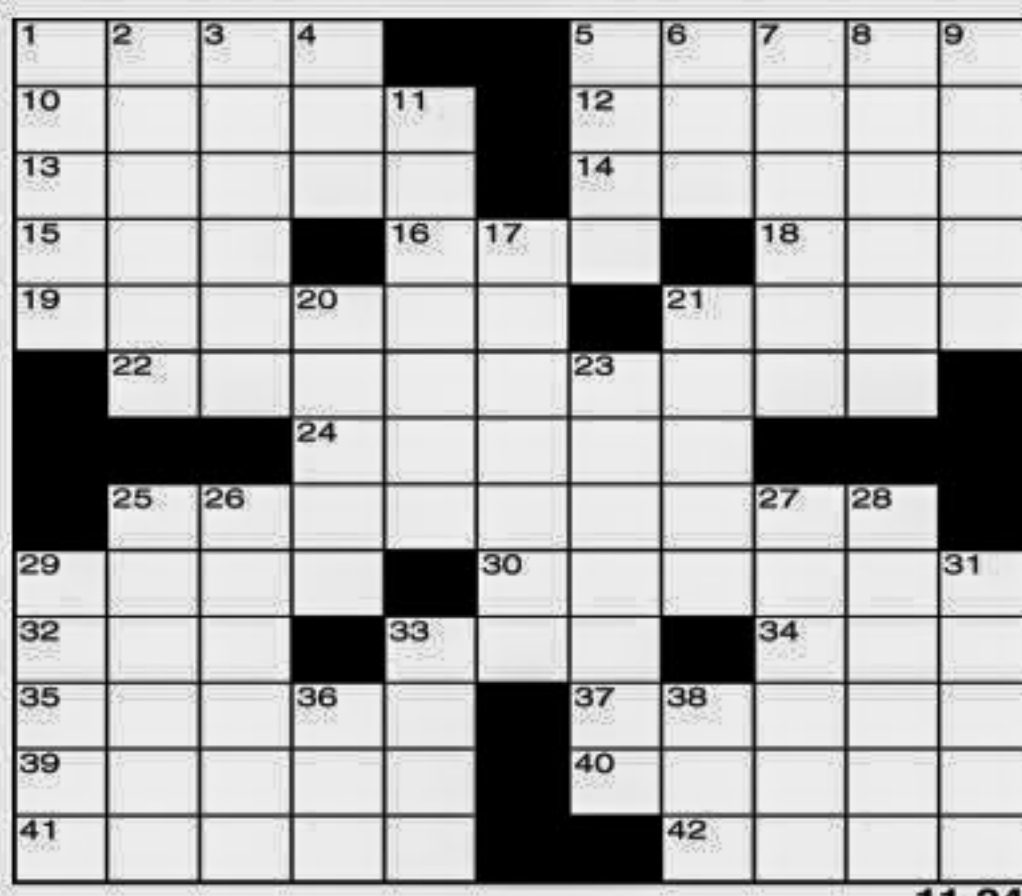
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ACROSS

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| 15 Mex. neighbor | 39 Bias | 23 Truck or trolley |
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