

Eviction in the days of development

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Anyone who has witnessed Ashura in and around of Mirpur may have noticed a two-storey red and gold *taziya*. Tucked inside a one-roomed *imambara* mausoleum on Lane 18 of Mirpur-11, locked behind green warehouse doors, this *taziya* is one of the stranded Pakistani community's best kept secrets. They raised funds to import the monument from Iran in 2002. Housed in a small chamber within the *taziya* is a fistful of soil from the battlefield of Karbala, brought from the Iraqi city with the same name. Every Ashura, the community gets out onto the streets, and rallies around it. The intricately carved shrine is an attempt for this disenfranchised community to have a semblance of heritage.

This *taziya*—and the *imambara* that carefully shields it from the eyes of the general public for most of the year—may

missed the deadline, so we will break it down. Probably this week."

The dispute surrounding the *imambara* can be described in a nutshell: the ward councillor says it was built by encroaching on the road—and the people at the mausoleum disagree.

But that has been the crux of almost all land-related problems of the Bihari community—they say it's their land and someone else, usually a Bangali, says it's not. When the custodian of the *taziya* had urgently called last week to tell me that the bulldozers are at it again, the knee-jerk reflex on my part was "so what else is new?"

The Mirpur Bihari community was first resettled by the International Commission for Red Cross in 1972, in what was then the outskirts of the city. Each family unit was given a sizeable one-roomed camp house. As children gave birth to grandchildren and the population swelled, the inhabitants started chopping up one room into two, adding vertical space, and probably, claiming inches from the streets.

Back then it wasn't as big of a problem since the locality was suburban and far away. The area has been undergoing gentrification over the past two decades—real estate value went up with time and better connectivity, Mirpur DOHS sprung up in the neighbourhood as an elite enclave, the Kalshi flyover and connecting system of roadways were built, and most recently, the neighbourhood was selected to be a stop in the metro rail's inaugural line. And just to show how seriously this neighbourhood takes urbanisation, there is actually a khaki coloured earth digger memorialised as a *sculpture* at the ECB Chattar roundabout!

Now all that is standing between the Kalshi flyover and the metro line is the long strip of Bihari camps that stretch all the way from the sector-10 circle to DOHS, their camps and their squatter settlements.

"Did you know that because of that *imambara* we are not being able to implement a Tk 22 crore project of the government?" says Manik, the ward councillor, "This is impeding development." He uses the word *unnoyon*, a term that over the last decade and more has come to denote what economists call "big-D" Development—i.e. large scale "Development" that changes landscapes and infrastructures, but often fails at inclusivity.

"There was a meeting at the ward councillor's office on March 6 where we were instructed to tear down the imambara in the next ten days or face the government's bulldozer," says Saeed Shahid Hossaini, the main custodian of the taziya, "I don't know what to do."

Currently at least two large *unnoyon*-themed government projects threaten the community with eviction. One is the project mentioned by Manik, although he understated the figure—the actual worth of the project is closer to Tk 600 crore, according to project documents. The project aims to widen narrow roads and spans the entirety of Dhaka North City Corporation. At least a total of 22 roads going through the Bihari camps of Mirpur have been selected for the project. The idea is that the government will claim up to five or six feet in space on both sides of the roads to widen them. Many homes have had to give up their tiny front-lawns, or store-fronts. But when the government agencies came to claim the same 5-6 feet from the houses in the camps, entire families were threatened with homelessness because most of the houses are so tiny, they are basically just that much in length. The *imambara* where the *taziya* is housed is also a one-room structure—although it is a bit longer than the average Bihari home, by a foot or so.

"A few feet taken away from a large flat won't matter but Bihari homes are barely eight feet in width. How do we spare even an inch from there?" says Shahid Ali Bablu, the general secretary of Urdu Speaking Peoples Youth Rehabilitation Movement (USPYRM).

The other project is a plot distribution scheme undertaken by the National Housing Authority. In 1995, the premier housing governance body sold 642 low-cost residential plots to "middle-class"

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PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

The *imambara* that is slated for demolition.

be torn down this week.

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Well, the ward councillor Kazi Jahirul Islam Manik certainly does. "The Biharis

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