

# GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 17, 2021, FALGUN 4, 1427 BS

## Our attitude towards heritage

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He added that buildings go through an aging process over time; it weathers and the plasters and colours are affected, and all these give an old look to the building. In conservation discipline, dealing with such aspects are very important and delicate — respecting the structure as it was in its original form in terms of construction techniques whilst keeping in mind its antiquity and

financial gains of property owners if they can get rid of an old building and have something in place of that which is commercially more prosperous, monetary incentives given to local leaders and ‘muscle men’ who are thus willing to back it up, and gaining popular support in the eyes of many locals when a new and large modern building replaces an old one as it may be perceived as a sign of positive development.

related concerns and unscrupulous activities — has found the judiciary body, generally speaking, to hold an overall positive attitude towards protecting Dhaka’s heritages.

On the other hand, one aspect of history and heritage, on which Bangladesh lags behind, is research. Adnan M. S. Fakir, as the director of the Finding Bangladesh films, has experienced this first hand.

The documentary filmmaker said,

“We need to make history appealing to young people. In schools, history is often considered to be a ‘dry’ subject. Even if you see those signboards that demarcate heritage sites, the information on many of those boards are not very detailed or not written in an interesting way so that people can connect or relate to,” Fakir remarked. “The challenge should be to present history and heritage in a fun and interesting manner.”

Hence, for example, Finding

Chandra Shekhar Shaha, designer and researcher — and an executive member of NCCB — said that such endeavours require multi-faceted support.

“It is not possible for one individual or even one single entity to undertake projects which would help revive or promote crafts,” he said.

He exemplified by mentioning that the WCC Craft City campaign was made successful not singlehandedly by NCCB, but also with the collaboration of various sectors and organisations, such as Bengal Foundation, a number of fashion houses, etc. — and most importantly, the relentless efforts of the weavers themselves.

The veteran designer believes that awareness and interest towards heritage crafts and textiles are still low, with mindless innovations and short-termism making matters worse.

“If you want to make people truly understand and get their attention in something, you have to properly present it first,” Shaha continued. “Bangladesh has such a rich history of textiles; crafts which are our legacies. Do we have a textile museum, though? No!”

In the 50 years of Bangladesh’s existence, when it comes to the broad spectrum of heritage, much has been lost, a lot is under threat, some initiatives have been taken, and some legacies have been protected or revived to an extent. These comprise of a mixed bag that hints towards our attitude regarding heritage: ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’, as the movie title goes!

What will the next 50 years bring?

Shaha looks forward to it. He concludes, “There is no point in playing the blame game. Let’s say for the sake of argument, that in the past 50 years, there were only five initiatives taken to preserve and promote heritage. Now, in the next 50 years, can we aim to have, say, at least 10 good initiatives?”

Photo courtesy: Finding Bangladesh



aesthetics.

Hence, for restoration, Taimur warns, “There is a fine line. If you cross that line, the building becomes absolutely new.”

Anyone who has travelled quite a bit across Bangladesh must have seen — at least once or twice if not more — an old building which has been repainted with obnoxious, bright colours. That’s quite a shame!

Even more shameful are entire demolitions of such buildings. Taimur understands the complexity of the whole dynamics that goes behind such activities in the old part of the capital. He mentions some of them: potential

Sometimes, attitudes and perceptions of locals towards their own heritage is a grey area; it is not a simple black-and-white matter.

The leading Dhaka heritage activist thus advocates for the necessity of working out compensation schemes for owners of heritage-designated properties, because this shall ultimately reduce the motivation behind the wish to get rid of such old buildings.

In order to protect Old Dhaka’s edifices of antiquity, we need sustainable business models, plans, and schemes.

But all is not grim. For example, the heritage activist — who often petitions and appeals to the court on heritage-

“When researching for Bangladesh 2 (which you can watch on Vimeo) uses a lot of animation work for storytelling. Initiatives by Finding Bangladesh give us hope of making progress in creating awareness.

The wide array of crafts, too, requires attention; they comprise of a huge part of our heritage. In this sphere, National Crafts Council of Bangladesh (NCCB) has taken a number of praise-worthy initiatives and endeavours, such as appealing to World Crafts Council (WCC) to award Sonargaon — the weaving centre of the age-old Jamdani — the label of a ‘Craft City’, which was a success.

The team of Finding Bangladesh deals with the youth, with initiatives such as the aforementioned competition. They also make campus visits for movie screenings, talks, and workshops.

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