

MY DHAKA

Our last chance to preserve COLLEGIATE SCHOOL

RBR

As you enter the current Dhaka Collegiate School premises, adjacent to Jagannath University at 1 Loyal Street in Old Dhaka's Sadarghat, you will find no traces of its former glory.

A dilapidated old building, facing the wrath of demolition in the name of urbanisation, is what remains of the first government school in the then undivided Bengal, established on July 15, 1835.

Along with the heritage structure now being destroyed, the current location of the school houses two new buildings, built so haphazardly that it added almost zero aesthetic value to the fact that they were constructed on a 0.75-acre land that once had an old, Portuguese rest house — now used as the school building.

Taimur Islam, chief executive of Urban Study Group, a platform engaged in the preservation of Old Dhaka's heritage buildings, said, "Although the current building is not the first structure to house Dhaka's nearly 200-year-old Collegiate School, the historical importance of the building is great. "In that sense the building is older and there is no room for doubt that the main structure was built during the Mughal period. In view of all these, the historic and evidential value of the building is immense."

For the last few days, the demolition of this traditional two-storied building located in the school premises has continued as the school's alumni association plans to construct a multi-storied building in its stead.

"It is necessary to mention here that in view of the writ case filed by the Urban Study Group, a ban has been imposed on any alteration or any destruction of 2,200 buildings in Dhaka city marked by the Urban Study Group. In such a situation, this action of demolishing this building is being done in defiance of a High Court ban," Islam laments.



PHOTOS: STAR

On March 21, activists organised a demonstration on the school premises protesting the destruction of this historic place.

A banker and freedom fighter, Mezbahul Haque, also a former student of Dhaka Collegiate School who graduated in 1969, said each blow of the hammer has been choking him. He remembers the lush playground, his classroom in the old building, and the headmaster's room.

He fondly recalled how he and his friends sneaked out of the school to join political rallies.

"The school premises were big and posh, which gave us a sense of vastness, discipline, and integrity."

Haque added, "Instead of bulldozing history, they could have renovated and preserved the school and turned it into a Hall of Fame for all its illustrious alumni. It could have been a library for children of the city schools to come and learn about the country's famous sons."

The list of graduates from Dhaka Collegiate School is enviable — Bir Shreshtho Flt Lt Matiur Rahman; Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose, physicist and inventor; Buddhadeb Bosu, Bengali poet; Munier Chowdhury, linguist, martyred intellectual; Khwaja Abdul Ghani, Nawab of Dhaka; Khan Ataur Rahman, film director; Alamgir Kabir, film director; Pranab Mukherjee, former President of India. Yet, we did not think twice about highlighting their work as a historic past and preserving the old building.

Old, dilapidated buildings can collapse due to structural failures and can be threatening to human life and health. However, there is the science of preservation. Cities around the world have their old towns preserved and turned into tourist attractions.

You cannot flatten history or architectural inheritance of old times.

Yet, in Dhaka, we just love to talk big but aesthetically preserving our heritage

building is not part of modern Dhaka's timeline. Dhaka will soon have no stories of the past to tell; all that will remain are the imposing, modern skyscrapers that we see now.

In recent development, a press release provided by Taimur Islam said the school principal consented to stopping the building's demolition as per a court notice.

However, he said the archeology department informed him that this building is not included in the list of protected structures.

"Besides, the demolition of this building was being done upon the instruction of the Office of the District Commissioner and the education directorate."

Islam said, "Our lawyer is preparing to file a contempt petition, which will be filed, hopefully within a couple of days, from the office of former attorney general Advocate Hassan Arif."

GAZIPUR FIRE

Death toll now 16 as one more dies

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Another person who was injured in the Gazipur gas cylinder fire on March 13 died at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery early yesterday.

The death toll from the fire now stands at 16. Lalon Mia, 24, a garment worker, breathed his last around 3:00am at the intensive care unit, said Torikul Islam, resident surgeon of the hospital.

He had 45 percent burns on his body, he said. On Wednesday, Lalon's mother-in-law also succumbed to injuries.

KMCH interns go on 48-hour strike

UNB, Khulna

Interns at Khulna Medical College Hospital went on a 48-hour strike starting 8:30am yesterday, demanding an increase in salary and allowances.

Due to the strike, no doctors were seen in most of the wards and as such patients in the hospital have not been getting their necessary medical services since Saturday night.

Dibakar Chakma, president of the Intern Doctors Council of KMCH and Dr Asaduzzaman Sagar, general secretary of the same organisation, said last year interns and postgraduate trainee doctors staged a demonstration demanding salary hikes, and then the health minister promised to increase their salaries and allowances.

Later, the salary of postgraduate trainee doctors was increased, but the salary of interns was not, they said.

Despite rain, Dhaka's air still 'unhealthy'

UNB, Dhaka

Despite rain, Dhaka's air quality is still "unhealthy".

Dhaka has ranked 11th on the list of cities worldwide with the worst air quality with an Air Quality Index (AQI) score of 152 at 9:00am last morning.

India's Delhi, Democratic Republic of the Congo's Kinshasa and Indonesia's Medan occupied the first, second and third spots on the list, with AQI scores of 273, 168 and 163, respectively.

40pc

FROM PAGE 1

dropped out of educational institutions. Besides, child marriage forced many girls out of schools.

Multiple surveys conducted earlier concluded that the pandemic hit the education in Bangladesh hard.

Compared to 2020, the number of university students fell by 2,49,159 the following year, according to a University Grants Commission report.

Manzoor Ahmed, professor emeritus and founding director of the Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University, said, the enrolments in the secondary and higher secondary levels are low. That's why so many people are out of education.

Besides, 62,104 secondary school students and 14,50,719 primary school-level students dropped out in the same period, according to data from Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (Banbeis) and the Directorate of Primary Education.

In 2022, enrolment in secondary level institutions was 76 percent, higher secondary institutions was 47.70 percent, technical institutions was 2.48 percent and universities was 18.66 percent, according to Banbeis data.

Manzoor said, "We need to increase the number of post-primary educational institutions. An assessment should be done to know where they are needed."

Siddiqur said that the government should take steps to bring back the students who left educational institutions amid the pandemic.

Both Siddiqur and Manzoor said that the government should put more emphasis on technical education.

The BBS report released yesterday also said 18 percent males and 60.85 percent females aged between 15 to 24 were out of education, work or training in 2023. In other words, 39.88 percent of the people in the age group were out of education, work or training.

The literacy rate among people aged seven and above increased to 77.9 percent in 2023 up from 76.8 percent in 2022.

In 2023, the literacy rate was 80.1 percent among males and 75.8 percent among females.

Build society free from sectarianism

FROM PAGE 1

crackdown in Bangladesh," she said.

She remembered with a heavy heart all the martyrs who sacrificed their lives on that most fateful night.

"Swearing on their fresh blood, the brave Bangladeshis took up arms and fought for independence," she added.

The greatest Bangalee of all time, Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, sacrificed his whole life to liberate the nation shackled for thousands of years, she said.

Inner Group: the first push for liberation

FROM PAGE 1

Chowdhury, the group was made up of a select few Bangalee officers of the Civil Service of Pakistan. Other members included journalist Foyez Amed, Ruhul Kuddus and Kamruddin Ahmed.

From the early 1950s, the Inner Group maintained close ties with the Indian embassy and intelligence agencies. Some of its members also held multiple meetings in Kolkata with Indian intelligence officials. The Indian government even committed to allow installation of a radio transmitter in Meghalaya to support the independence movement, according to Afsan Chowdhury's "Bangladesher Swadhinata Andolon" Dharabihikotar Iitahash."

Speaking to The Daily Star, writer and researcher Afsan Chowdhury, said, "The initiative for independence started with Inner Group. The group members were former activists in the student front of the Bangiya Muslim League and were close associates of Bangabandhu.

"Inner Group had a plan to send Sheikh Mujib to London so he could play a key role in raising a powerful movement from abroad. But before that could happen, the military rule was imposed, and the plan fell through."

EAST BENGAL LIBERATION FRONT
In October 1958, as military rule took effect and the activities of the Inner Group waned, some Awami League leaders formed the "East Bengal Liberation Front" in Jamalpur, according to Mohiuddin Ahmad's "Protinayak." Afsan Chowdhury's "Bangladesher Swadhinata Andolon" Dharabihikotar Iitahash", and Morshed S Hasan's "Swadhinatar Potobhumi: 1960 Doshok".

Sub-committees of the front were quickly formed in Jamalpur, Netrokona, Tangail, and Kishoreganj.

The Front, also seeking Indian assistance, aimed to break free from Pakistan through an armed struggle.

In March 1959, several leaders of the Front went to Kolkata, where they met communist leader Suren Ghosh, who introduced them to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

However, Nehru expressed his inability to provide arms to the Front at that point citing the Nehru-Liaquat Agreement between India and Pakistan.

Prominent leaders such as Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Bhasani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haque and writer and politician Abul Mansur Ahmad were all aware of the Front's

activities, according to Mohiuddin Ahmad's "Protinayak".

In the early stages of the Front, Sheikh Mujib even provided some cash assistance, the book adds.

Despite limited political influence, the Front promoted the independence movement by printing posters and leaflets. As Front activists plastered these posters in populated areas, they sparked public interest and caused stirs in government circles.

"While several other groups emerged in the 1960s advocating for independence, their actions were limited. But the East Bengal Liberation Front distinguished itself as the first major force actively pushing for autonomy in East Pakistan," writer and researcher Mohiuddin Ahmad told The Daily Star.

EDUCATION MOVEMENT
The student uprising in the 1960s against the Sharif Education Commission was a crucial catalyst. It fueled a sense of Bangalee nationalism and resentment towards the Pakistani government, paving the way for East Pakistan's eventual independence.

In December 1958, just two months after seizing power, President Ayub Khan established a commission, headed by education secretary SM Sharif, to draft a national education policy.

On August 26, 1959, the commission presented Ayub Khan with a comprehensive 350-page draft report outlining a series of reforms for Pakistan's education system. The commission advocated for making Urdu the language of the people of Pakistan. The proposal also recommended extending the two-year BA programme to three years and eliminating free primary education.

The report sparked outrage among East Pakistani students. They vehemently objected to the proposal. This ignited a student movement that first erupted at Dhaka College, rapidly spreading to Dhaka University and ultimately throughout the East Pakistan.

"Students were looking for an opportunity to protest against Ayub Khan. At a time when Suhrawardy was arrested and the Education Commission report also came out, the latter quickly became the target of their protest," said Mohiuddin Ahmad.

AWAMI LEAGUE-COMMUNIST PARTY MEET

As the movement against the Sharif Education Policy gained momentum,

multiple secret meetings took in November-December of 1961 among AL general secretary Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, communist party leaders Moni Singh and Khoka Roy and Ittefaq Editor Tafazzal Hossain Manik Mia, according to Mohiuddin Ahmad's "Protinayak".

During one of the meetings, Mujib proposed pushing for an independence campaign, the book adds.

Later, Chhatra League general secretary Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni and Chhatra Union leader Mohammad Farhad agreed to launch a unified movement.

In November-December of 1961, Chhatra League leaders distributed leaflets in the dark of night,

Sheikh Mujib secretly visited Tripura to seek the support of the Indian government for the independence movement. Chhatra Union leader Reza Ali was his companion on this trip.

To avoid being recognised, they bought tickets under the names of two other Chhatra Union leaders.

Talking about this trip, Mohiuddin Ahmed said, "Due to a misunderstanding during the trip, Sheikh Mujib spent a night in an Indian jail. That visit by Sheikh Mujib was not successful. He was arrested under the Public Security Act on February 6, the day after he returned to the country."

Upon release after a few months, Mujib held a meeting with Indian

Indian war at the time, India refused to engage in another conflict. So, Delhi asked Dhaka to wait.

Mujib, however, thought that the delay was caused by Indian bureaucrats.

So, in January 1963, he met Chief Minister Sachindra Lal Singh in Tripura to learn the Indian government's stance.

The chief minister departed for Delhi, leaving Sheikh Mujib in Agartala. In Delhi, Nehru informed Tripura's chief minister that India was aware of Mujib's proposal.

Nehru also advised Mujib to communicate with Delhi only through the Indian Embassy in Dhaka.

APURBA SANGSAD
The East Pakistan Students' Forum, formed in February 1962, was at the forefront of the Sharif Commission Education Policy.

The movement was initially limited due to the martial law, but once martial law was lifted on March 1, 1962, the movement against the Education Policy spread like wildfire.

In a student meeting in Narayanganj in September that year, student leader Abdul Aziz Bagmar made the first public mention of independence.

In his book titled "Swadhinatar Soppo: Unmesh O Orjon," Bagmar quotes himself as saying at the meeting, "East Pakistan will be liberated, and no one will return to educational institutions until this victory is achieved."

The students present the meeting took an oath to this effect.

Bowing to student protest, the government eventually scrapped the report of the education commission.

During the student movement against the Sharif Education Policy, a new organisation named "Apurba Sangsad" (Asthayi Purba Banga Sarkar) was born.

This organisation unveiled the formation of a government it envisioned with renowned poet Begum Sufia Kamal as president and Chhatra League leader Abdul Aziz Bagmar as prime minister.

It also released three manifestos demanding independence of East Pakistan.

"Apurba Sangsad was in fact a group within the Chhatra League. But they had no public activities, and all that was done was done in secret. Their third manifesto, 'Bengali in the Course of History', written by Professor Ahmad Sharif, had quite a vision," Mohiuddin Ahmad said.

However, due to the ongoing Sino-



Apurba Sangsad's 3rd manifesto of 1965

Apurba Sangsad's monogram

Ittefaq editor Manik Miah and Sheikh Mujib



Kamruddin Ahmed, member, Inner Group

Ahmad Sharif, theorist, Apurba Sangsad

Abdul Aziz Bagmar, founder, Apurba Sangsad

demanding an independent East Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Awami League covertly campaigned for the East Bengal Liberation Front and distributed leaflets, also pushing for independence.

Talking to The Daily Star, writer and liberation war researcher Afsan Chowdhury said, "In regards to Sheikh Mujib's proposal, Moni Singh contacted Russia for advice. But Russia did not want to get involved. The Communist Party did not participate in the freedom campaign until 1968."

In his book "Protinayak," he writes that in the first week of February 1962,