

Mir Mosharraf Hossain Hall at Jahangirnagar University.

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Death of an ARCHITECTURE

Mir Mosharraf Hossain Hall should be retained and restored



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The Mir Mosharraf Hossain Hall, a student dormitory at the Jahangirnagar University, is a landmark in Bangladesh's contemporary architecture. It will always be included in the top 10 modern buildings of Bangladesh. Designed by the master architect Muzharul Islam in the late 1960s, the design of the dormitory was a result of his sustained investigation of an architectural complex that responded to the parameters of climate, landscape and urban pattern.

Now this iconic building is destined

University represented the complete vision of a university by a Bengali architect.

Conceived of as an integrated campus of buildings and spaces in which a mesh of diagonal geometry integrated with the natural landscape of the area, the master plan presented a forward-looking vision for its time. The tilted square plan of the dormitory reflected the larger geometric order of buildings, common spaces and pathways. I have described it elsewhere that the plan reflected Islam's attempt

and through his masterful buildings and committed work inspired generations of architects. Muzharul Islam received many national and international recognitions, including Shadhinata Padak. When alive, he was a presidium member of the Bangladesh Awami League. The Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB) had taken an initiative of preserving all the works of Muzharul Islam as part of UNESCO World Heritage List which has the blessing and support of the Hon. Prime Minister.

We also pointed out that Muzharul Islam's plan for Jahangirnagar University has been appreciated as original and groundbreaking in the history of planning in Bangladesh as a unique concord between urbanism and nature, and the few buildings that were built as part of the plan were lauded as masterful and world-class. The Mir Mosharraf Hussain Hall is one such building. In the arrangement of the plan and as a building type, there is no parallel to that building in Bangladesh. Buildings like that contribute to the cultural heritage of a country.

We visited the campus and the building on death row, and reviewed the damaging areas that were highlighted in the investigation of the Rajuk consultants. It appeared that only certain points of the whole structure were as vulnerable. If that is the case, we were not sure why the whole complex had to be taken down. We were also not sure why, considering the national status of Muzharul Islam and the international standing of his work, the dormitory building cannot be retrofitted. That should be the only option. We met the vice-chancellor and other administrative officials who all seemed to favour keeping the building. The vice-chancellor recalled his time living in the dormitory as a student.

Mir Mosharraf Hossain Hall is not the only building in the country with such a death knell. It is part of a larger practice. It appears that there is a quiet but relentless campaign to take down whatever is considered old or outdated, in some pretext or another, so that it could be replaced with a new structure (in most cases, by a building of a mediocre quality). We can cite the demolition of a Krishi Khamar building in Tejgaon, the colonial period hostels in Sylhet, and the ongoing issue with the Teachers Students Centre at Dhaka University. This is nothing less than a cultural carnage.

We have seen the world over, especially on many university campuses, some I have been associated with, that every care is taken to preserve the edifices of the past. There is a richer dialogue when the past is preserved with the new following that. Preservation also aligns with the principles of sustainability and conservation. Such a considered position requires an informed and dedicated orientation. But we are seeing all across the country that the fate of heritage buildings rests upon people with "technical expertise" who often lack architectural knowledge and the cultural value of buildings.

We can only plead for a little compassion here. No matter what the expense for retrofitting is, Mir Mosharraf Hossain Hall should be retained, restored and brought back to its original self. The year 2023 was the birth centenary of the country's most famous architect, Muzharul Islam. Many of his buildings, including the Hall, are currently being assessed for the UNESCO World Heritage List. At such a time, we should plan for conservation, not destruction.

Dancing with Sycophancy

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND



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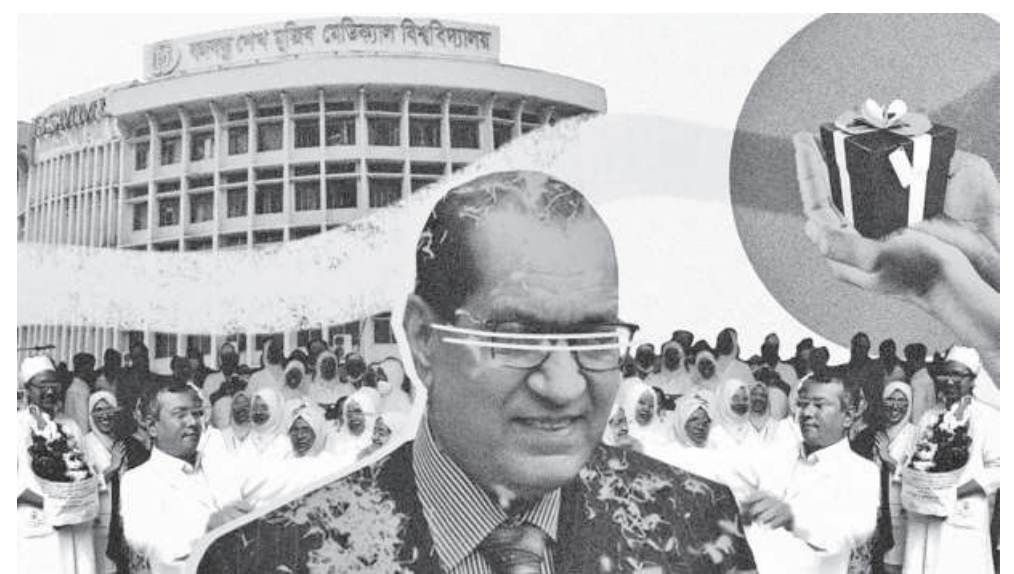
The joining ceremony of noted eye specialist professor Deen Mohammad Noorul Haq as the Vice Chancellor of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) turned into an eyesore as staff members indulged in a spirited dance with band parties to welcome their newly appointed academic administrator. Those engaging in these jubilant dances may have either breathed a collective sigh of relief, bidding farewell to the era of misrule under the former administrator, or strategically positioned themselves for future favour, seeking the attention of their new superior. We have seen such instances in fiction. In the land of Lilliput in Jonathan Swift's satire Gulliver's Travels, for instance, the emperor demands his high officials dance on a rope to prove their worth. Swift's vitriol seems valid if we consider the acrobatic dance as a means of career advancement.

The spectacle therefore raises some serious questions about the state of academic integrity and leadership. We cannot treat this as an isolated incident, as it is symptomatic of a larger malaise within the academic community. When routine changeovers in leadership turn into a circus

at a culture of nepotism and cronyism. The new administrator will do well to avoid factionalism, which often undermines meritocracy and perpetuates a cycle of mediocrity.

But our wishful thinking comes to a rude awakening when we find many of these administrative heads hitting the press for all the wrong reasons. The immediate past Vice Chancellor of Chittagong University, professor Shireen Akhter, has been accused of recruiting 172 employees without any job circulars or recruitment examinations. On her last working day, she appointed 37 third-class and fourth-class employees on a daily wage basis. Probe bodies have already formed to determine the necessity and legitimacy of these posts. It does not take a genius to understand from where the flute music is coming to make the rope dance.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and other high officials, including education ministers, have mentioned in the past that it is often difficult to find the right people for the 150-plus universities that have been established in the last few decades. The academic leaders from the old public universities are often chosen as the vice



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

of flattery, it speaks volumes about the prevailing mindset within the institution. The theatrics of showing a public display of loyalty undermine the credibility of the institution, which is supposed to be the hub of our postgraduate medical research. The incident has eroded public confidence in the integrity of academia as a whole. Last week, we saw a photo of another newly appointed vice chancellor of another public university going viral in which he posed with a heap of bouquets that made him look like a florist.

Thankfully, the new vice chancellor has taken exception. Dr Haq, at his joining ceremony, reminded his colleagues that the only way he could be made happy was by doing their duties. He said that he would not assert his authority, he would rather work alongside them as a friend or a brother. He

chancellors of the new universities. In many cases, these imported faculty leaders are not well received by the locals, as they have their own dynamics.

I recently visited a technical university for an academic purpose and came to learn that its vice chancellor has been reduced to a token figure as he has no control over the teachers' association or the regency board. His failure to lobby for development funds from the central bursary or his ability to bring about any concrete change has stifled the growth of this university with huge potential. This seems to be true for almost all peripheral universities.

Local factors are so dominant in the recruitment process that regionalism becomes the main driving force. Outsiders, irrespective of their academic acumen or research interest, have to cut corners to hang on to their posts. Many such figures prefer to stay in divisional towns with their families, away from their campuses, making their job a window dressing for their CVs. Many of these retired figures have passed their prime and have nothing new to give to their respective institutions. They remain at the mercy of their colleagues and their political pressures.

The dance of the staff welcoming a new VC could have been an innocent, spontaneous gesture. But we cannot deem it as such due to the track record of other vice chancellors. Some of them are guilty of being academically, morally, and financially corrupt. Some of them are guilty of being incompetent and inept. Some of them are in exile as their home institutions do not want them to disturb the power equilibrium. The onus lies on the government to choose the right people for the right places.

The dance drama at BSMMU has underscored the urgent need for professionalism in our academic arena. There is a need for deft academic leadership that remains impervious to flattery and prioritises the national interest. A vice chancellor is not only a managerial CEO but also a custodian of knowledge and steward of academic progress. We expect our academic vice chancellors to rise above the allure of sycophancy and embody integrity and professionalism to not only ensure the upright functioning of their institutions, but also set an example as iconic role models. With such steadfast leadership, there have been many proposals to create a pool of academic administrators who are capable of advancing knowledge and contributing meaningfully to the advancement of the nation and beyond.

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added that he would not want anyone to waste time in his room, leaving behind their duties, or try to confine him to one group or the other. He pledged his neutrality while trying to make visible improvements to the university in the next four years. He assured me that he was very close to the health minister, whom he treats as an elder brother.

While one hopes that these words are not just rhetoric, by reading between the lines, it is possible to diagnose the ills plaguing the academic system and, by extension, other ones. A culture of flattery permeates our institutions, rewarding sycophancy and discouraging dissent. The newly appointed vice chancellor sent a strong message against this culture where academics and professionals are encouraged to curry favour with those in positions of power, regardless of merit or competence. It hints