



NARINDA CEMETERY

Colombo Saheb's tomb saved from ruin

DIPAN NANDY

In the heart of Dhaka, amid the city's relentless pace, a silent grave has reclaimed its dignity.

Known only as Colombo Saheb, the man buried at Narinda Christian Cemetery remains a mystery -- his real name lost to time. Yet his tomb endures, immortalised in one of the earliest visual records of Dhaka: a painting by German artist Johann Zoffany in 1787.

While the city depicted in Zoffany's canvas has transformed beyond recognition, Colombo Saheb's grave has survived -- and now it has been



PHOTO: STAR

brickwork and threatening collapse.

Two years on, the scene is strikingly different. The cemetery's main gate has been renovated, and just beyond it stands the restored tomb -- freed from the slow decay that once loomed over it.

The restored monument was officially inaugurated at Dhaka Christian Cemetery in Wari on September 20.

The restoration was led by Professor Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, who said such work demands both patience and precision. "One cannot afford mistakes in a project like this," he said. "The aim was to bring it back to its original design, without adding anything new. To achieve that, me and my team turned to historical records, relying on rare photographs from 1850 and 1875, alongside Zoffany's painting that had first revealed the existence of the

grave."

Because the tomb was built during the early years of the Mughal period, traditional techniques were used in its restoration. Brick dust and lime formed the base, while natural binding agents such as lentil paste, jaggery and betel nut resin were applied to ensure authenticity.

"The biggest challenge in renovating the tomb was to remove the huge banyan trees that grew on the dome and remove its peaks, so that there was no structural damage," he said.

The work was costly, made possible by support from international heritage groups. The project was funded by the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia, an organisation that has long worked to preserve old cemeteries across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Later, the Commonwealth Heritage

Foundation joined as a partner, ensuring the restoration could be completed.

For the Christian Cemetery Board, the project represents more than the repair of bricks and mortar. "We want future generations to come here not just to see a gate or a few graves, but to feel the depth of history, the soul of the city's heritage," said Father Albert Rosario, the board's vice-chairman.

The story of Colombo Saheb's tomb, however, is only the beginning. Abu Sayeed M Ahmed said talks are already underway to restore fifteen to twenty more tombs and monuments at Narinda.

If completed, he believes the cemetery will no longer be seen simply as a burial ground, but as a cultural park where the city's layered past will be on display.



reborn.

Back in 2023, this correspondent found the tomb in a state of near ruin. A sprawling banyan tree had all but consumed it, its roots choking the

grave.

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Assets of nine of the 10 conglomerates, as well as members of Hasina's family, have already been traced overseas, they added.

"All these assets were built with laundered money," one official said. "Orders are being issued through local cases to seize them."

The task force is made up of representatives from the Anti-Corruption Commission, the National Board of Revenue, and the Criminal Investigation Department of police. The ACC is leading the probe, while the BFIU acts as the secretariat.

An ACC official, requesting anonymity, confirmed the authenticity of the task force document.

Md Akhtar Hossain, director general (prevention) of the ACC, told The Daily Star that as part of the investigation, movable and immovable assets of individuals, including from the 10 companies, have been frozen at different times. He, however, declined to provide any breakdown of the assets frozen.

The task force document shows that about Tk 17,215 crore of the frozen assets include money kept in banks and shares in beneficiary-owner (BO) accounts initially suspended by the BFIU and later blocked through court orders. Of the amount, Tk 1,679.72 crore is in local currency and Tk 36 crore in US dollar (\$3 million) in 1,573 bank accounts of individuals and entities. The rest, Tk 15,500 crore in shares, were held in

188 BO accounts.

Under the Money Laundering Prevention Regulations, 2019, the BFIU can freeze bank accounts for 30 days and then extend the freeze up to seven times itself in cases of suspicious transactions or illegal activities. For further extensions, it needs court orders. The BFIU secured court orders to ensure the freeze in these 11 cases, according to the document.

The media had previously reported

that accounts of Hasina, her son

Sajeeb Wazed Joy, daughter Saima

Wazed Putul, sister Sheikh Rehana,

and Rehana's son Radwan Mujib

Siddiq, among others, have been frozen.

Accounts of several top

businessmen were also blocked,

including S Alim Group Chairman

Mohammed Saiful Alam and his

family; Salman F Rahman, former

adviser to Hasina and vice-chairman

of Beximco Group, along with his son

Shayan Fazlur Rahman and daughter

in-law; Bashundhara Group founder

Ahmed Akbar Sobhan and his family;

and Aramit owner and former land

minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury

and his family.

The accounts of Orion Group

Chairman Mohammad Obaidul

Karim, Managing Director Salman

Obaidul Karim, and their families

have been frozen as well.

Also frozen were accounts of the

Awami League's research wing

the Centre for Research and Information

and its "Young Bangla" project.

The task force document mentions

that in two of the priority cases -- one

involving Saifuzzaman and the other

Beximco -- the UK National Crime

Agency has frozen assets worth Tk 260

million (Tk 4,256 crore).

The owners and founders of

Summit, Orion, Sikder, Nassa and

Nabil groups also saw their accounts

frozen.

Orion Group MD Salman Obaidul

Karim told The Daily Star on August

24 that their personal bank accounts

have been frozen while land and

properties have been "seized".

As for the company, only

transactions for paying salaries or

purchasing raw materials are allowed,

he said.

"We are facing problems with cash

transactions. Many banks are also

refusing to open LCs for us because

they are afraid of the Anti-Corruption

Commission."

He also said they were considering

legally challenging the freeze and

seizure.

Contacted, Ranjan Chowdhury,

vice chairman of Nassa Group, said

they have not yet taken any legal steps

regarding the frozen assets.

He claimed the group's bank

account has been suspended due to

loan defaults, not frozen.

The labour ministry is trying to

help the company pay salaries since

bank borrowing is not an option for

many of its enterprises with defaulted

loans, he added.

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