

Our last chance to preserve Collegiate School



Photo: Star

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.



[For all latest news, follow The Daily Star's Google News channel.](#)

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.



Photo: Star

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.



Photo: Star

"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.

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.



Photo: Star

"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.



Photo: Star

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."