

# Old Dhaka schools in a shambles

*Rundown buildings of several govt primary schools pose risk to children; land of one under illegal occupation*

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At first glance, it looks like the entrance of a tunnel.

If you walk in, you will find yourself in an eerily dark passageway. Two bulbs, hanging from the ceiling, can hardly light up the passageway. At the end of it, you will find a staircase that leads to the first floor of a building.

The floor is dark, and the air smells of damp walls. Plasters on the walls and the ceiling are falling off at places.

Though it seems unbelievable, this is a government primary school on Bongram Road in Old Dhaka.

Islamia UP Government Primary School in Sutrapur now has only four usable rooms on the first floor for its 51 students as the rest have become unusable since long.

"Rainwater drips from the ceiling, and plasters often fall off. We feel frightened while attending classes," said Anaf, a class-

five student at the school.

During the rainy season, they find it difficult to stay in the classrooms, he said.

"When it rains heavily, our teachers sometimes ask us to go home," said Anaf.

Another student, Faruk, said he got scared whenever he walked through the dimly lit entrance of the school.

Teachers at the school said they were having difficulties in holding classes in the dilapidated building.

"The situation took a turn for the worse after the recent earthquake [in April]. We remain in constant fear," said Fatema Sayeda, an assistant teacher.

The number of students at the school has dwindled over the last two decades due to its appalling condition. The school now has 51 students and only four teachers.

The poor state of the school came to the notice of Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman when he

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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

## Old Dhaka schools

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 visited it yesterday.

He also went to four other schools in Sutrapur and expressed disappointment over their poor condition.

Established in 1950 by locals, the school was moved to this building six years later.

The government nationalised it in 1973.

The three-storey school building has 17 rooms -- five on the first floor and six each on the ground and top floors.

The building has turned dilapidated for lack of renovation, and all the rooms on the ground and top floors have become unusable. On the first floor, four rooms are used as classrooms and the other as teachers' room.

The teachers said many guardians took their children to other schools for the sorry state of the school.

"There were 600 students at this school in 1990. When I joined this school in 2010, the number was below 100," said Shahnaz Parvin, head teacher of the school.

Teachers and members of the school managing committee (SMC) alleged that a major portion of the institution had long been occupied by local influential people until 2012. The grabbers held back renovation of the school with the motive for shutting it down.

The head teacher told the minister that the grabbing began in 1980. At that time, the rooms on the ground floor and a part of the first floor were occupied.

But things worsened in early 90s when a man named Belayet grabbed a portion of the school land, she said.

In 2012, the then deputy commissioner of Dhaka evicted the grabbers from the school rooms, Shahnaz said.

She informed the minister that the school now has four kathas of land in its possession while the remaining four kathas are occupied by Belayet's family.

Nur Ahmed Mollah, president of the SMC, told the minister, "He [Belayet] used to live in one room he had built on the school land. He then started occupying school rooms."

Belayet died in 1999. His family members buried him on the school

land and built a mazar (shrine) there, he alleged.

"The mazar was constructed with intent to grab the land," he told the minister.

The shrine carries a nameplate "Fakir Hazrat Belayet Shah Chisti".

The Daily Star tried to talk to Belayet's family members, but they refused.

After visiting the school, the minister wondered how the students could study in such situation. "The school does not have basic amenities."

He said the government would do whatever necessary to renovate the school.

Mostafizur said at least 12 schools in Old Dhaka are in such dismal condition and the government would help them improve their infrastructure.

About the alleged grabbing of Islamia School's land, he said, "We will see the relevant documents and decide on it."

The minister said there was no shrine there when the school was set up or even when it was nationalised.

"We will look into the matter," he added.