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## Cultural Entanglements in the Urban Fabric: A case of festivals in Old Dhaka and its impacts.

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### Abstract

The historic city center of Dhaka, Bangladesh also known as 'Puran Dhaka', holds a lot of history and heritage of the region. This historic site has constantly been neglected and urban development has been done without integrating this part of the city into the plans. As a result, the traditional festivals that take place here annually create a greater impact on the urban fabric of the whole city. This paper will attempt to look at the importance of these traditions, how these festivals influence the urban life of the community and identity, and whether or not it has any significant effect on the economy. Through the use of both primary (interviews with the residents) and secondary sources and SWOT analysis, this paper will attempt to identify the issues faced during these festivals. This paper will also try to suggest some basic remedies based on general comparisons between case studies of similar festivals celebrated globally.

**Keywords:** Urban Fabric; Festivals; Cultural Celebration; Historic City Centre.; Urban Design.

### 1. Introduction

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, was conceived at the banks of the river Buriganga like most other cities of the world. With a current population of 21 million as of 2020 (*Dhaka, Bangladesh Population (2022) - Population Stat, 2022*), Dhaka has a huge population density of about 23,234 people per square kilometer within a total area of 300 square kilometers (*Dhaka Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs), 2022*). Amongst this, 15% (approx. 3.5 million) live in the oldest part of the city where it was first conceived, known as Puran Dhaka (Old Dhaka). This part of the city still holds the rich history, heritage, and culture of the capital from the time of its conception. As a result, it holds many cultural and religious festivals that are famous all over the country. This historic site, however, had been neglected during the urban development and planning phases of the city's master plan and as a result, the festivals that take place in this area throughout the year have a greater impact on the urban fabric of the capital as a whole (Rossi & Rabie, 2021; Rahbarianyazd & Doratli, 2017).

This paper attempts to look at the cultural significance of these festivals both for the people of Bangladesh and as intangible cultural heritage, how these festivals are influencing the urban life of the community as well as whether or not these festivals have any significant economic impact. For the scope of this paper, five of the most important festivals are chosen as case studies. These five case studies are chosen because of their differentiating lengths of the events as well as because of their diverse religious and cultural context. Through the use of both primary sources, mainly one-to-one interviews with the residents of Old Dhaka, and secondary sources, in the form of a literature review, this paper identifies the issues faced during these festivals. Using SWOT analysis and studying similar festivals in other countries this paper also provides some basic suggestions to mitigate the said issues.

### Historic Overview

Puran Dhaka (Old Dhaka), has gone through merely a few changes throughout its 400-year-old life. The history of Old Dhaka can be traced back to the Pre-Mughal period when it is believed to have been "conceived". To understand the values of the heritage sites in this area, one must also look at the historic changes in the urban formation. According to Rahman and Hafiz and Rabbani, Old Dhaka had gone through five main historic phases of development that were categorized by the different changes in power or authority of the city. These phases are as follows:

- Pre-Mughal period,
- Mughal period (1606-1764),
- British period (1764-1947),
- Pakistan period (1947-1971)
- The Independence period (1971-present) (Rahman, 2009) (Hafiz & Rabbani, 2011)

These phases of development still have traces in the form of both tangible and intangible heritage in the area. The exceptional built heritage of Old Dhaka has significance not only to the locals but also in a national and regional context (F. F. Huq et al., 2017). The distinctive character of Old Dhaka can be seen in its topography, its location

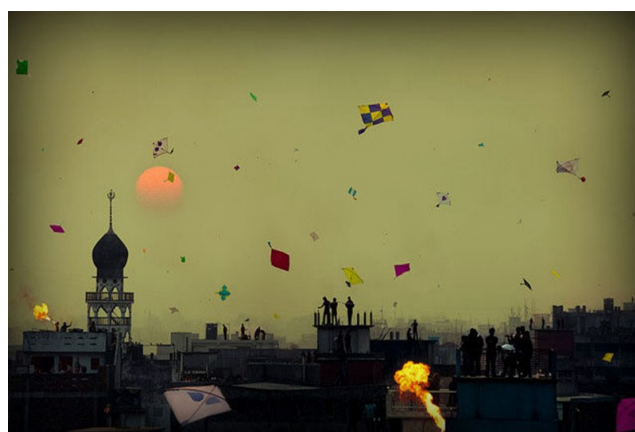
amongst rivers and canals- which was and is still used as a transport system for many businesses along the riverside- as well as its built fabric. Most houses along the narrow labyrinths of Old Dhaka are workshops where craftsmen and women of different religious and ethnic groups work together, which goes to show the religious tolerance and the multicultural diversity of the area (Bangladesh.com, 2022). As a result of this, many diverse forms of religious and cultural festivals take place in the area where people from all walks of life celebrate together.

## 2. Material and Methods

### 2.1 Case Studies

For the scope of this paper, the five festivals that were chosen are as follows:

**Shakrain/ Poush Shakranti:** Shakrain is the oldest festival in Dhaka as well as the most popular one (F. F. Huq et al., 2017). It's the celebration of the last day of the Bengali month of Poush (which usually takes place around mid-January). This is an annual kite-flying event, where people from all walks of life in the area participate by flying kites from the roof of their homes. Kite flying competitions are also arranged and some stalls are set up by the locals who make and sell these kites. The preparation and arrangement of these festivals take about a month before the event. People from all over Dhaka as well as from outside of Dhaka come to take part in the event. Throughout the years this cultural event has evolved to include DJ parties on rooftops as well as light shows, fire spinning, and lantern lighting. While the skies during the day are filled with colorful kites, the night skies are filled with glowing lanterns and firecrackers. The festival usually lasts for a day.



**Figure 1.** Image from a newspaper article: “Shakrain festival begins today.” (Daily Bangladesh, 2018)

**Eid-UI-Adha:** Eid-UI-Adha is one of the largest Islamic festivals that are celebrated by Muslims all over the world. Even though this religious event is celebrated throughout Dhaka, it has a greater impact on the urban fabric of Old Dhaka- which will be discussed in detail later in this paper. At Eid-UI-Adha, many Muslims make an effort to pray and listen to a sermon at a mosque. They also symbolically sacrifice an animal (e.g.: cow, goat, or camel etc.) in an act known as “Qurbani”. The meat is required to be distributed equally amongst the poor members of the society and the relatives of each family. It is required that one buys the animal at least three days to a week in advance and takes care of the animal by themselves to create a bond so that one feels the pain of sacrificing something that they care about in the name of God. This part of the ritual is especially important to note in the urban context as most homes are not designed to include a place for these animals. The festivities of these events last for three days but the preparation begins about a week before the event with the organization of the animal markets and such.

**Durga Puja:** The five-day long Durga Puja is one of the biggest celebrations of the Hindu community of Old Dhaka where they celebrate the worship of Goddess Durga across the old city of Dhaka. The ritual is originally Ten days long but the residents of old Dhaka only celebrate the last five days. The worship begins as a post-monsoon harvest ritual and is celebrated by setting up elaborately and intricately designed “Mandaps” or stages where the statue of the Goddess is set up. These stages are arranged in certain open spaces around the neighborhood. People from all over Dhaka come to give offerings to the Goddess as well as to enjoy the festivities that take place in every other corner of the old city. People with varying religious beliefs also join in to see the beauty and celebrate with the local communities. At the end of five days, the statue of the Goddess Durga is immersed in the Buriganga River with a huge crowd accompanying the goddess on the journey.

**The Iftaar Bazaar in Ramadan:** Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar where Muslims are required to fast from dusk till dawn every day of the month. The time of breaking the fast at dawn is known as “Iftaar”. During this time, at iftaar, a huge assortment of food is prepared to break the fast and no one does it better than the

people of Old Dhaka. This tradition had of great importance in Old Dhaka since the time of the Mughal era. The importance of food amongst the community of Old Dhaka is quite visible during this time as a huge after-market/bazaar is set up in the Chawk bazaar area of Old Dhaka during this time. During the whole month of Ramadan, this iftaar Bazar is well known for selling rare and unique delicacies during iftar and people from all over the city come here to buy food for their families. The market usually opens around 3 pm and remains open till dawn. During this time it is a custom of Old Dhaka to send food or iftaar items to special guests in adorning flat baskets with a high rim also known as 'dalas' (Akhter Sonia, 2016). The end of this month is marked by another big celebration known as "Eid-UL-Fitr" where Muslims celebrate by wearing new clothes and visiting family and friends.



**Figure 2.** Iftar buyers through Chawkbazar on the first day of Ramadan (Alam, 2013).

**Holi:** The Hindu festival of colors, marks the beginning of spring after a long winter, celebrating the triumph of good over evil. This festival is celebrated in March in Bangladesh, corresponding to the Hindu calendar month of Phalguna. In Old Dhaka, Holi has no religious boundaries as people from all over the country join in to splash a myriad of colors at each other. From kids to adults, everyone dresses in white and fills the street throwing colors at each other. Entire streets become vibrant with colors. Water guns are used to squirt color while balloons filled with colors are thrown from the rooftops. Later in the day, families gather to have festive meals at their houses while it is also customary to distribute sweets among neighbors and friends.

## 2.2 Urban Formation

Dhaka city went from being a rural settlement to a densely populated urban hub without much planning effort (Islam, 1996) (S. Huq & Alam, 2003) (Nilufar, 2010). Looking back at the history of urban development it is easy to see that even though the development of Dhaka city started in the Southern part, the present Old Town or Old Dhaka (pre- Mughal period), the extension of the city continued towards the west and the north (Mughal and British period). The development of the city continued towards the north during the Pakistan Period and continued rapidly and in an unplanned way towards all sides of the city (Ahmed et al., 2012). Nilufar, in her paper "Urban Morphology of Dhaka City: Spatial Dynamics of Growing City and the Urban Core" identified four distinct urban patterns in Dhaka. First is the urban fabric of Old Dhaka', which is unique from the rest of the modern-day Dhaka city for still using the Mughal layout with narrow lanes, very compact buildings, and mixed uses. Although there were certain zones of use, for example using riverside for businesses. The streets were mainly built for horse carriages and have not been changed from their historical context even though vehicles as big as trucks are often seen inside because of growing numbers of factories (Nilufar, 2010).

The second urban pattern described by Nilufar comprises the formally planned areas, some of which are right outside the outskirts of old Dhaka. These planned areas did not take into account the organic form of the old Dhaka city structure and hence no efforts were given to merging the two (Nilufar, 2010).

The Third category merges the two styles both organic and grid and makes a fusion of the old and the new and occupies most of the development (Nilufar, 2010).

Finally, the fourth category comprises Shanty towns and informal settlements which are organic and somewhat chaotic in formation, where about 30% of Dhaka dwellers live (Nilufar, 2010).

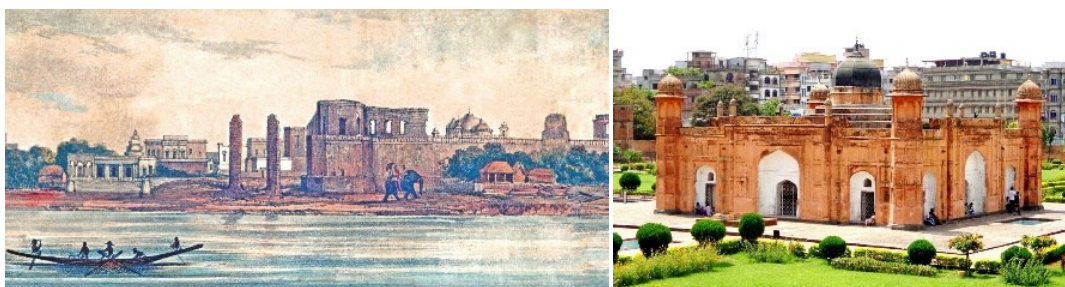
The master plan for Dhaka developed for the year 1995-2015, had no appropriate conservation plans for the heritage of this area. The existing Detailed Area Plan for Dhaka (DAP) is completely devoid of any heritage conservation aspect (F. F. Huq et al., 2017). Moreover, an excerpt from the DAP states "A revitalization process will

*be needed for renewing the haphazard, unplanned spatial structure of Old Dhaka. In the revitalization scheme, attractively developed blocks will be created as commercial, residential, and recreational, with wide avenues, significant open space, and civic amenities. This is the only solution to improve the blighted Old Dhaka and also prevent the future blight”* where surprisingly the historical city has been demarcated as “*blighted Old Dhaka.*” (F. F. Huq et al., 2017).



**Figure 3.** (Left) Streets of Old Dhaka. Image series “Belonging” by Wasif (Wasif, 2013). (Right) Street at night in Dhaka. Taken at Dhanmondi 6 (right on the outskirts of old Dhaka) (Darda, 2014).

Figure 3 shows the difference in the width of a typical street in Old Dhaka compared to a street right outside of Old Dhaka.



**Figure 4.** (Left) The ruins of the Fort and the Palace of the Nawabs of Dacca, called Lal Bag 1874 (Khan, 2019). (Right) The Tomb of Pari Bibi, Lalbagh Fort, Dhaka, shows unplanned development. (Kamal, 2013)

This type of negligence in the urban planning process of the area has led not only to a lot of damage to the heritage buildings of Old Dhaka but also has a bad impact on the lives of the people who live there during the many festivals throughout the year. It also has a greater impact on the urban fabric as a whole as the city almost comes to a standstill during these events due to overcrowding and the fact that these narrow streets cannot hold the number of people that flood this part of the city during these celebrations.

### 2.3 The Downside

The very thought of ‘Festival’ is usually correlated with joy and celebration. However, it brings some basic problems along with them. The most common amongst those are the corresponding chaos and mess, the overcrowded area, massive sound pollution in the surrounding area, several road diversions, and finally a great deal of traffic congestion.

The festivals and celebrations highlighted in this paper, also have their fair share of problems. From the road and property mess created as an aftermath of ‘HOLI’ or ‘Shakraim festival’, the uncontrolled sacrifice of animals on the roadside in ‘Eid-ul-Adha’ celebration, to the long traffic congestion and road diversion due to the immersion in ‘Durga puja’ or month-long Ramadan food markets are just a few examples.

As much as the people of old Dhaka love their traditions and cultural celebrations, it didn’t stop them from having certain complaints and pointing out sections where they expect to see some changes or improvement.

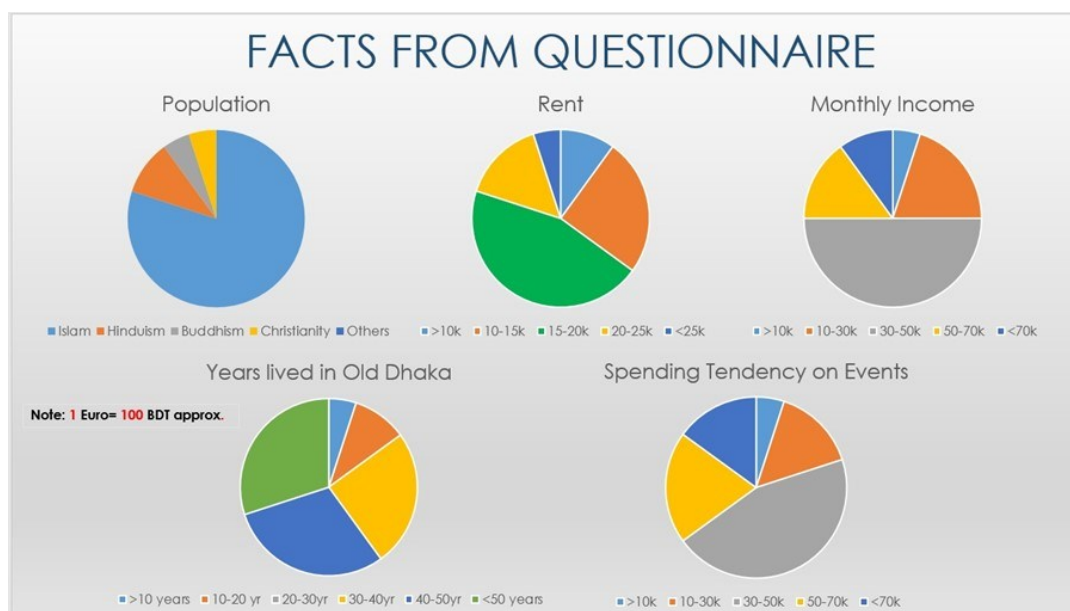
## 3. Results

### 3.1 Facts from the Questionnaire

A questionnaire was prepared to conduct a general survey among the people of old Dhaka and they were asked about the festivals, how much they enjoyed having them being celebrated on such a high scale nowadays and if they had some suggestions or insights about the whole arrangement. The target group was people of diverse religions and income groups who have been living in the surrounding areas for quite some time as it was



imperative that they could differentiate between how the festivals were and how it is changing over the years. The questionnaire includes both open and close-ended questions for an in-depth analysis of the issues that the local community might face during these celebrations. For this purpose, Twenty people between the ages of 50-and 60 years were interviewed over the phone. It was also expected from the locals to be honest in the spirit of mutual understanding.



**Figure 5.** Facts were collected from the participants of the questionnaire survey. (Developed by Authors, 2020)

During the survey, a few questions were asked to the participating locals which helped develop a general idea of the participant's background which was handled with discretion due to privacy concerns and it is strictly for educational purposes.

From the first pie chart, it is clear that the majority of the participants were Islamic followers. It was expected as Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country. The second highest percentage was from the followers of Hinduism. Other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and others were found to be of the minority. The participants mentioned how many years they have lived in the area as well. As it was mentioned before, the target group consisted of people who have been living in the area for a longer time. Hence, the result shows that majority of the participants were living in the area for a minimum of 30 years or so. Another vital point that was asked was their rent payment. The participants were given a range and from the gathered result it was clear that most of them paid around 15-20 thousand BDT (equivalent to 150-200euro approx.). When asked about the monthly income of these people, almost 50 percent of the participants replied with a range of 30-50 thousand BDT (300-500 Euro approx.) where the second-highest range was divided almost equally into both sides (earned more or less). It needs to be mentioned that this income range was based on a fixed income for each month. Some of the participants did mention having external income sources such as business shares or entrepreneur opportunities. Since it was not regular, it was not calculated while making the charts.

The final chart represents the expenses which the same people tend to spend on events. The spending tendency can differ from person to person based on their religion or what kind of celebration they prefer more but it was astonishing to see that the locals spent a lot more on events than what they earn every month. The graph clearly shows that the ranges that have bigger amounts were selected more. This graph was essential to determine how enthusiastic these people are when it comes to the festivals and celebrations, it shows the significance of these festivals to the local people of the area.

#### Questionnaire Key facts:

- The number of visitors is growing almost every year at a considerable rate and with a more wide diversity of people. Due to rapid globalization and with the help of mass media, more and more people seem to know about these festivals and some even prefer visiting Dhaka during these times (especially Holi and Shakrain) to attend these events.
- The local people are happy with the big scale celebration and hopeful that this flood of people taking an interest will be beneficial in different ways. As Old Dhaka has a tradition of business and craftsmanship, the locals are hopeful that this would be economically constructive as well.

- It does create problems and difficulties in their daily lives especially when the events are not regulated and well organized but they enjoy the events and festivity in general.
- The recent growth of these celebrations is changing the original way to some extent so sometimes the locals do not feel the same they did before.
- The locals would prefer the 'less vehicle and happier crowd' scenario.
- The locals are happy with the governmental steps to some extent but the huge traffic situation should be handled better and the clean-up process should be faster.
- They would prefer more security measures to be in place so they are less concerned while welcoming the visitors.
- They (Islam followers) usually keep the animals of sacrifice in their home boundaries if possible or create boundaries and sometimes on roads creating congestion. A huge number of them prefer the sacrifice done on roads as it saves them the hassle of cleaning their area.
- Having said that the animals on road during Eid or '*mondops*' (stage) on every corner during Durga Puja or traffic due to event-related new markets disturb their daily life and movement.

### 3.2 SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis was done concerning these festivals to evaluate each section so that it was possible to figure out how these festivals have an active impact (whether good or bad) and to what extent. The results were as follows:

#### **Strength:**

- Cultural Celebration: These festivals grow a sense of celebration and joy amongst the locals and give them a proper chance to enjoy their culture with their loved ones.
- Promoting Cultural Identity: These very celebrations are the identity of the diverse culture of Bangladesh and its famous old Dhaka. By promoting the festivals, the Bangladeshi people promote their culture.
- Show of religious tolerance and diversity: Bangladesh is a country where ideally all the religious groups are free to enjoy and live in prosperity. The secular behaviour of Old Dhaka is a prime example of how it should be and the celebration throughout the year brings joy to its people regardless of what religion they follow.
- Year-long lively atmosphere: Since the local people of old Dhaka celebrate and participate in almost every festival both general or religion-based, it is safe to say that the area is in a festive and lively mood all year- long.
- Elevating the rich tangible heritage: Through these festivals, it is possible to make people aware of the rich tangible heritage that is present and might create awareness for its conservation.

#### **Weakness:**

- Overcrowded scenario: Festivals or events usually attract a huge number of tourists or people, which if not properly maintained can turn into an overcrowded situation that can become unpleasant for some.
- Sound pollution: A big gathering can be a source of sound pollution and can turn into a problem in terms of the environment.
- Chaotic atmosphere: A diverse crowd usually welcomes a diverse attitude. Sometimes it can be a source of chaos.
- Unwanted disturbance for some: These are situations where one person is not comfortable with a certain event or its preparatory situation which ultimately causes distress for some.
- Traffic congestion: A huge crowd can easily mean a huge surplus in the traffic situation in the surrounding area, which results in unwanted traffic congestion.

#### **Opportunity:**

- Entrepreneurship: These festivals can be a source of income or entrepreneurship for the locals as these events attract a lot of customers. This is already true in the case of Shakrain and Ramadan where locals set up stalls to sell kites and iftar.
- Making connections: Festivals can be a great place to make connections and make new friends. This creates an opportunity to have diverse surroundings.
- Tourism: A proper maintenance and well quality assurance, having safety measures can promote tourism.
- Promoting culture to the outside world: With other big celebrations around the world, the old Dhaka festivals can easily promote their culture to the outside world.
- Generating revenue for conservation purposes: Be it by introducing tickets or some other ideas, generating revenue that in turn can be used for conservation can be considered a brilliant idea.

#### **Threat:**

- Damage to Heritage buildings: If not careful, festival venues which sometimes surround heritage sites can cause damage to the heritage buildings.
- Losing authenticity: The traditional way of celebrating the festivals may face some difficulties in the modern days or the days to come, as new crowds tend to modify these traditions resulting in losing authenticity.

- Security concerns: Having a proper security measure is an absolute must when it comes to festivals or big events.
- Environmental issues: Environmental concerns and protection should be taken into consideration. Otherwise, it can have catastrophic outcomes.
- Gentrification: As events attract a lot of tourists, gentrification can be a major problem, as it happens to hamper the locals to some extent. It can also take away the natural atmosphere of the festival.

#### 4. Festivals Around the world and Comparison:

The paper explored a few festivals which are celebrated around the world. The festivals selected were chosen based on their duration both for preparation and continuity. In addition, it focused on how the festivals were organized or what kind of steps/actions were taken by their respective government or organizers. These parameters helped with the comparison between the festival of the world with the festivals happening in old Dhaka. A short description of the festivals is given below:

**La Tomatina:** The world-famous biggest food fight, named 'La Tomatina' festival mainly takes place in a small town in Buñol, Spain. The festival itself is not that old as it started only back in 1945 but quickly made a name for itself. Every year around 40,000 tomato fighters make their way to this beautiful colorful event and try to make a good memory (Paulomi Dasgupta, 2017). Though the preparation of the event, as well as management, takes a long, the event itself lasts around 1 hour. The organization of this festival is pretty efficient as the clean-up process takes place shortly as trucks containing water wash the visitors as well the roads of the town. Other mentionable steps taken by the government are basic roadblocks and diversions, Ticket entry which helps to create revenue, and high-security measures to prevent any unexpected situation.

**Oktoberfest:** Germany is well renowned for its festivities and beers. The prime example of this is the celebration of 'Oktoberfest'. This extraordinary celebration is well awaited not only for the locals but also for the people from all over the world. The most interesting fact about this is, that it starts in the middle of September and lasts two weeks. The location resides with the Bavarians in Munich and started way back in the year 1810. Each year it is expected that around 6 million people gather for this grand festival (Tiago, 2019). The beer festival usually faces a lot of cases of over-drinking, sickness, or vomiting to say the least. The festival organizers manage red cross tents for emergencies as well as well-built infrastructures specifically designed for these events. Roadblocks and diversion, local transport, expensive events to put some sort of filter, and extreme safety measures are some other features that are put into action in the event.

**Rio Carnival:** One of the biggest carnivals around the world, the 'Rio carnival' is considered one of the biggest cultural gatherings known to this world. As the name suggests, the celebration takes place in the heart of Brazil, the capital of Rio de Janeiro. It originated around 1840 and every year it takes place and brings joy to the people of Rio and tourists alike. The celebration expects by about 2 million people every year (Brazilian Experience, 2016). When it comes to the management of such an event, the organizers took a very interesting approach. Hotels are responsible to manage the transportation for the visitors. So, it is very much regulated. At the same time, the bigger parades are pre-determined, so it is well controlled and easier to maintain the crowd gathering. Among others, road diversion and blocking, ticket system, and security measures at high levels are well-rehearsed steps.

**Table 1:** Old Dhaka festivals of different duration for comparison.

Duration period	Short Duration (1-2 days)	Medium Duration (1 week)	Long Duration (1 month)
Events (examples)	-Shakrain Festival. -Bangla and English New Year Celebration. -Holi.	-Durga Puja. -Eid-UI-Adha.	-Ramadan and Eid-UI-Fitr.
Description	-Festival for all. -Preparation takes longer but the Festival lasts 1-2 days. -Huge Crowd Expectancy.	-Festival for all (Everyone is welcome and does celebrate). -Eid-ul-Adha is a 3-day festival but it takes a week before to organize animal markets and preparations). -Huge Crowd Expectancy. -Immersion ceremony of the Durga puja brings together a big gathering.	-Festival for all. -One of the biggest religious festivals that take place in Bangladesh. -One month of Ramadan and Iftar market followed by the Eid festival. -Huge Crowd Expectancy.

#### 5. Discussion and Recommendations:

The policymakers or government will take into consideration both geographical and cultural differences between different parts of the world before adopting certain recommendations or ideas. However, for the scope of this

paper, some basic remedies and recommendations are suggested based on the answers from the locals of the area as well as from the ideas generated from the case studies, SWOT analysis, and literature reviews.

- Proper security measures should be taken. Having security officials at certain points in the old city during festivals like Holi and Shakraim will make the participants feel safer and hence will have a more positive outcome while promoting these events.
- Ticketing system can be put into action depending on the event. This will not only filter out unwanted guests but will also add to generate revenues that can be put to use to help serve the community as a whole.
- Roadblocks and diversion can be a logical approach. This can help mitigate the traffic issues faced during the events.
- A certain parking facility can be put on the outskirts of the event place to clear the places on the streets that are packed with parked cars.
- Keeping the authenticity and essence of the culture should be preserved at the highest level.
- Heritage site protection is an absolute must and should be included in the detailed master plan of the city.
- Promoting Local businesses during these events will be beneficial.
- To keep the area clean, people should be employed which will last until the aftermath of the event mess is cleaned.
- In places near events, Medical help should be available.
- For a specific area or roads around the event location only 'Rickshaws' should be allowed and to a certain number.
- Lastly if the steps are taken properly and regularly, the festivals should be promoted to make tourism possible.

## 6. Conclusions

Cultural and religious festivals are a way of keeping in touch with one's heritage and identity) Aziz Amen & Nia, 2018). It is an asset for the community, a way to bond and celebrate together. Having such a place in a city where this takes place all year long is a wonderful way toward acceptance and tolerance as well as an ideal way to let the world know about one's culture. Old Dhaka is not only blessed with beautifully designed heritage sites but is also blessed with a rich cultural heritage that is visible in the way they celebrate each of these events.

As evident in this paper, the importance of the conservation of this historic city is something that had been neglected in the past. The development of a better conservation plan for this area will not only be beneficial to the local community but will also have a greater impact on the economy as it will bring more tourism and create more business opportunities for the locals.

These festivals are an important part of the community and present many opportunities that can be used for the betterment of the country as a whole. The protection of all cultural aspects of a society is not the job of only a particular community. Just like how these festivals bring together people from all walks of life to celebrate their identities, it is also important to come together to protect their identities and create an environment that makes these festivities easier to share with the world.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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