

THE CITY WE LIVE IN That Incomparable Town

by Waheedul Haque

CHILDHOOD is a time delightful to recall. There must have been more to it than mere delightful. Dhaka, Dacca it was then, of our childhood was a bright thing to be sure, patently because it comes back to mind with the memories of our early days now gilded by the dying sunbeams of our end of days. Dacca, let me spell it the pre-Ershadian way, was naturally not golden all the way. There were aspects of it that were far more precious than gold. And there were areas where Dacca was cheaper and coarser and detestably bad smelling. It is, however, easy to wake up to such wisdom, if you live not only your childhood but also your maturer and larger part of life in Dacca. To those who have had to leave it in the school years, Dacca is bound to be eternally golden in their minds — and we have neither logic nor fact to tell them Dacca was, as it is now, quite otherwise.

A bright young man, on the threshold of school-leaving — Pogose was the school — was simply doing fine in his Banglabazar residence with the Buriganga promenade and the Coronation Park at one end and Victoria Park and Wari.

the urban retreat of East Bengal zamindars, at the other vying to occupy his afternoons. And partition struck. After competing in college in Calcutta or Cawnpore or Coimbatore he joined service which in the subcontinent means government employment. That stood him in good stead in the marriage market and children were not late arriving. His job required him to go to world capitals and stay there till the satiation of the whims of his superiors.

As part of that he was doing his Dacca stint when I stumbled on him. He was sipping some light stuff, and not at all boozing. But on learning that I too was a Daccate and knew my way about Banglabazar and Sutrapur, Farashganj and Gandaria of the golden thirties, he became somewhat sentimental. "Can I bother you with something very personal sir?" he said desperately. And went ahead without waiting for an answer.

He was a gentleman *per se* and would not burden me with riches culled from a lifetime's sojourning around the earth — and went straight to his point.

"I was for some years in London. The children had by then started going to school. They were all enthusiasm for the Big Ben and pestered me for arranging a tour of the big machine — including its innards. My inability to share their enthusiasm was one day challenged, it had to be. I was blunt. Well, children, Big Ben is big no doubt, but only big. This is nothing to compare with the tower clock we had in Dacca. All of that big and wonderful and incomparable city kept their time by — from miles around. But that was the least part of it. It was such a beauty! I have no appetite for any other clock-tower in the world. They stopped badgering me on this after that."

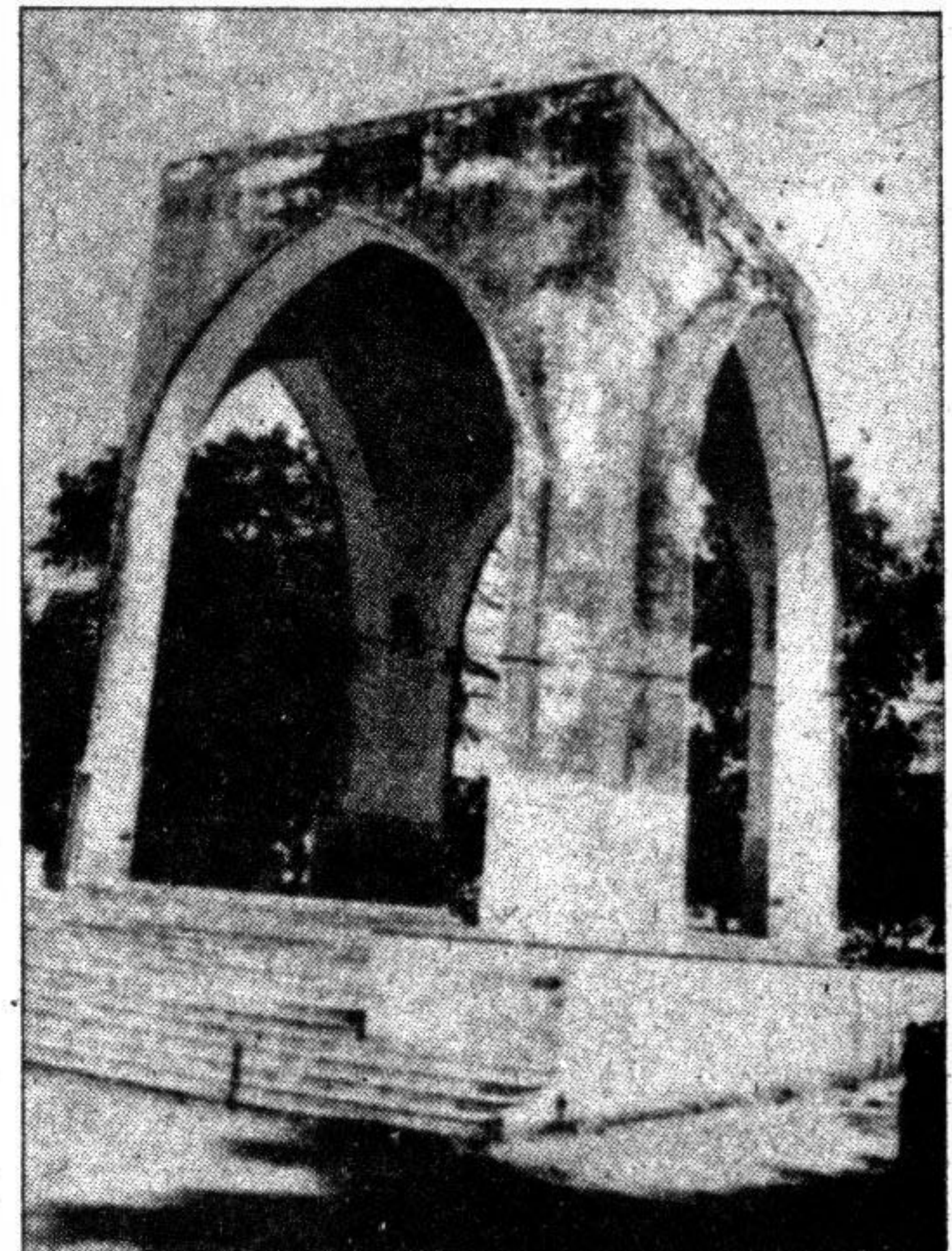
"When I was in Paris, the children wanted me to take them on holiday visits to the many cathedrals of that great city, including the Notre Dame. I sent them with their mother and some uncle of sorts from my office, well prepared to have a good time. I only half-expected they would not again ask me to explain my strange avoidance of the cathedrals. That is I half-learned

such an eventuality — and up it came. I had prepared myself for the ordeal by concocting quite convincing tales. But that came to no help. I blurted out, as if in spite of me, as if it was they who were getting me to say what they feared I would say — Yes, you wouldn't possibly believe that we had in our Dacca a church — the like of which I do not expect to see in my life anywhere else."

"They only said with unbelieving eyes fixed on me. 'You don't say so?' A few years after that, you Bengalees carved out this homeland for yourselves. And your independence landed me in the worst soup of my life. I am not a manipulating type. Yet, as we Bengalees say, I left no stone unturned to see that I am not transferred to Dacca. I started having both bad dreams and sleepless nights. But the inevitable happened one day. I had to report for duty in Dacca. I tried not to bring my family in tow. But my wife is no backyard rustic type. She and the children made to Dacca all right. The juniors were nice in that they asked me to take them to my clock-tower and my spired church, feigning full faith in my tales. I had no way but to return home well after sundown, seven days a week. This continued for some months. And then one evening the girl and the boy met me after supper, specially. With their eyes cast down they mumbled, Pop, we have been to your church. We have seen your clock. Your chauffeur showed us around. Well, we understand. I walked up to the window. Looked out into the dark night. And wept and wept. When I looked around the understanding progeny were long leaving me to my sentiments."

"Do they understand, Mr Haque? Can they? But you, you must. Or I shall go mad."

That was one moment in my life I felt truly flattered — for being born a Daccate. Perhaps I understood. For do not I too believe there wouldn't be in all of God's wide world the kind of crows we used to have in our olden golden Dacca? Neither ravens nor jackdaws but petite town crows called *patikraak*.



Reconstructed monument at Bahadur Shah (Victoria) Park. — Star photo

Urban Situation : Colonial Dhaka

by Architect Mohibul Arefeen Khan

Urban Development Issue

Dhaka was extensively developed during the Mughal era. The Mughals brought the town under a comprehensive infrastructural scheme suitable to their administration. No preconceived urban planning is evident, rather the growth was mainly out of necessity.

The seat of administration attracted people from various walks of life, mainly from trades and commerce who settled in Dhaka at suitable locations accessible from Dholai Khal and the river Buriganga. So various trade enclaves or clusters were formed which were housed in structures of temporary or semi-permanent nature. The major building activities which were initiated by the Mughals comprised mainly of mosques, khatras, forts, roads and bridges.

The whole situation of the urban development was well within an order initiated by the Mughals. Their regal experience and discipline has been depicted in the urban development process. But their

departure, observed by the advance of the order created by them, gave rise to a degree of chaos in urban growth, thus affecting further developments. With the withdrawal of the seat of administration, the focus was shifted. During the later part of the 18th century the emergence of Calcutta as the capital of the British Empire retarded the overall growth of Dhaka. Despite these, Dhaka was often verbally mentioned as the capital recalling its past magnificence. Few people continued their trade, however, slowing the pulse of the city. The expanded Mughal city shrank, the buildings became dilapidated, the vibrant trading enclaves vanished.

This era, beginning from the middle of the 18th century till the middle of the 19th century had no formal or informal urban development boost. No organised body was there to look after urban matters. With the formation of the "Dhaka committee" by the

then elite of the society, began the consideration of urban issues. They identified problems regarding the infrastructure and physical conditions of the city. But the concern was more on personal status-making than on the development of the city in general.

In 1864, the first formal body to deal with the urban issues of Dhaka was formed. "The Dhaka Municipality" was established with a commitment to provide better facilities to its dwellers. For the first time household tax was imposed to raise municipal revenue for its development projects. The local elite were incorporated into the body because of their already established images in the society.

Charity to civic services was encouraged, which was done mainly to gain individual fame and status to win municipal elections, the seat of power of the city and establish close links with the European bureaucrats. There was no other

formal body except the Dacca Municipality to take care of different aspects of urban development.

Dacca Municipality mainly concentrated on the betterment of the road and bazaars and their maintenance. Development of infrastructural facilities like water-supply, sanitation and street lighting were taken care of. But they never dealt with any pre-conceived urban planning until 1905, when Dhaka became the capital of divided Bengal and Assam. Most of the development was restricted within the limit of the Mughal city boundary and on the river-bank stretching from Postogola in

the east to Nawabganj in the West.

In 1917, comprehensive master plan prepared by the then famous town planner Patrick Geddes was published with proposal for Dhaka city's urban development, which unfortunately never saw the light of day.

At that time Dacca Municipality used to give permission for any construction work. The legal procedure to obtain permission for the same was to apply to the municipality with an application and a copy of the drawing, but this procedure was rarely followed.

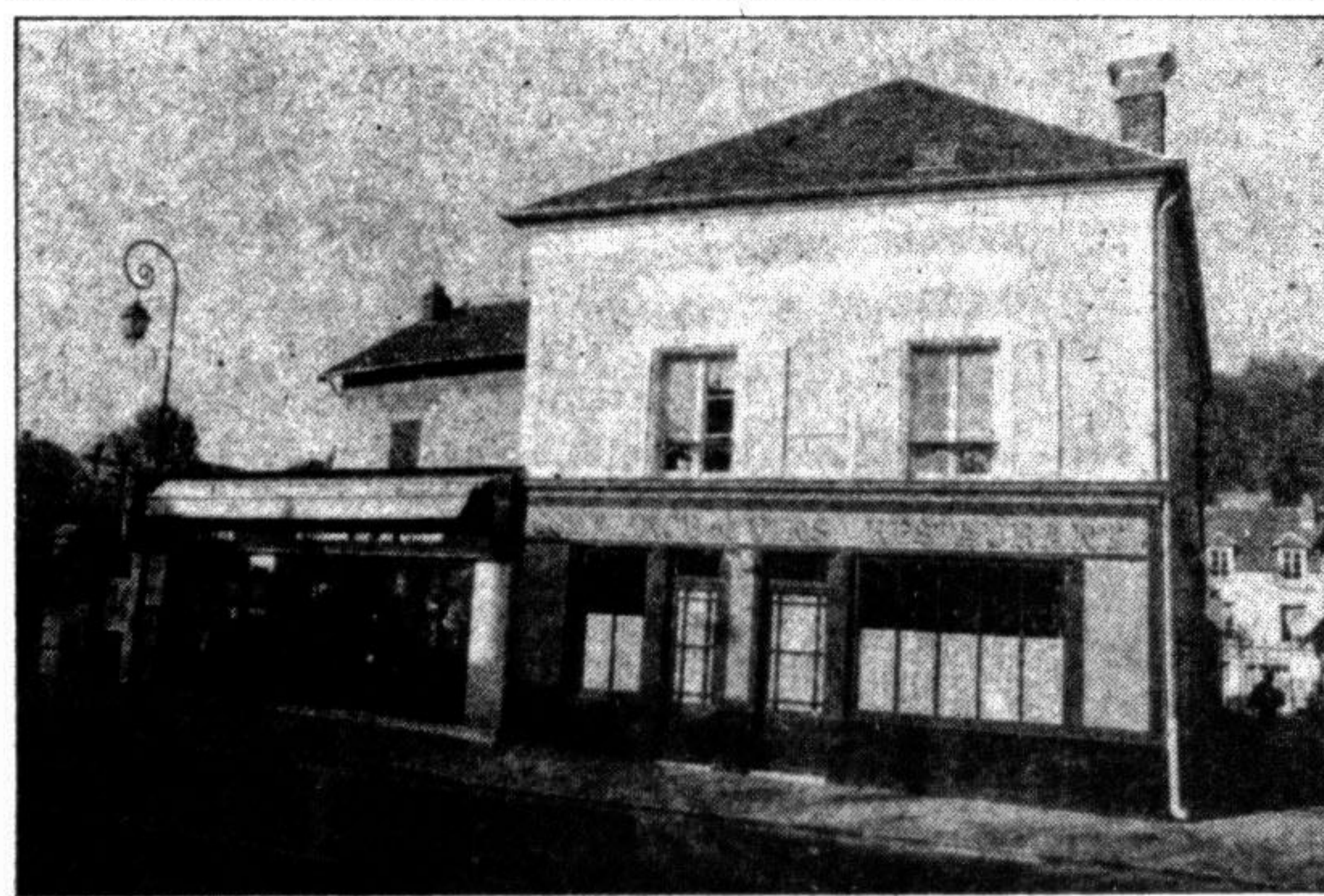
The municipality did seem to be aware of the civic and formal considerations, their

Continued on page 13

The Ravoux Inn: Only Van Gogh is Missing

by Florence Raynal

Thanks to the initiative of a man coming from the northern mists, the inn, where, at the age of 37, Van Gogh passed away, once more lives the period of the Impressionists. It is a project on a wide scale, carried out in respect of his memory. Van Gogh has gone, but his spirit remains.



light, fills visitors who come on this pilgrimage with emotion, in spite of its bareness. Climbing the time-worn wooden stairs, one enters the religious, almost forbidden place.

Nothing arrests the visitor's eyes but the sloping roof and the fireplace. The furniture discovered in the room was not the painter's. The room is empty. Each visitor can furnish it with his imagination. But it is indeed *Monsieur Vincent's* room, as it is the only one which was found in run-down condition. At the time, the room of a person who committed suicide was no longer let.

The adjoining room, which had been occupied by the young Dutch painter Anton Hirschig, has been recreated with furniture from the period, lit by a wavering light like that of a gas-lamp. It conjures up the living conditions of an artist in Auvers last century. Next door, the Van Gogh Institute presents a slide-show on the artist's work in Auvers, a journey through the land of colours. This association plans to create a permanent cultural area and programmes for schools.

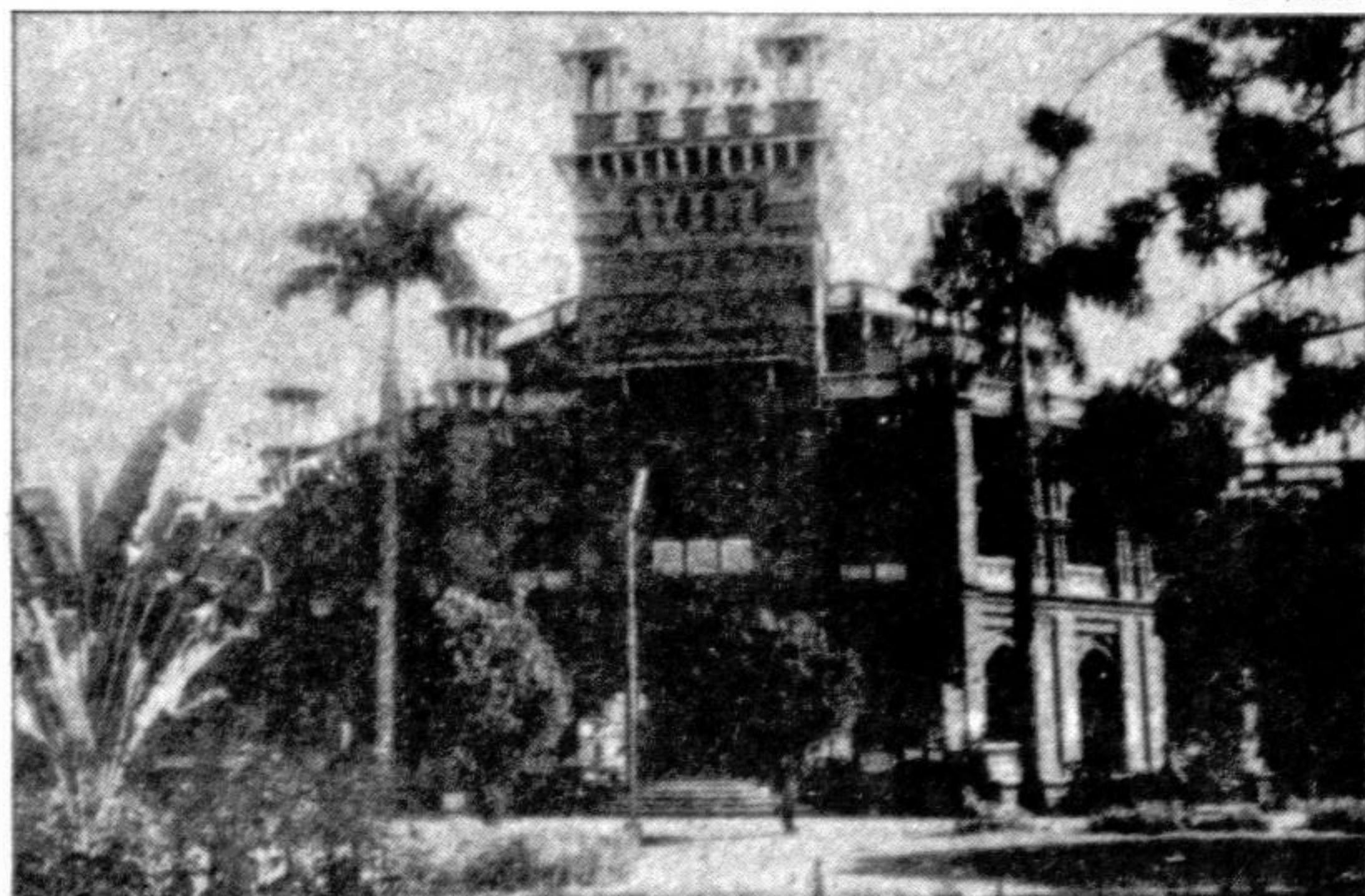
In all his lifetime, Van Gogh only sold one picture and lived in poverty. Now his paintings are the objects of escalating speculation. Thanks to Dominique Charles Janssens and his team, respectful homage is paid to this artist of genius. A whole section of his work evokes Auvers and now, all of Auvers recalls his time there.

The winding path, from the church which he painted with passion, to the wheatfields which swayed beneath his paint-brush, leads to the nostalgic cemetery where he lies. At the foot of a stone wall, a soft carpet of ivy from Dr Gachet's garden unites his grave for eternity to that of Theo, who, wrought by despair, only outlived his brother by six months.

L'Actualite en France



The old High Court building (above) and DU Curzon Hall — the British architectural landmarks. — Star photo



Nearly a century later, in July 1985, a Belgian, Dominique Charles Janssens was a casualty in a road accident a few metres from there. During his convalescence, he read Vincent Van Gogh's correspondence and discovered his last abode and the town of Auvers. So this head of marketing and exports at a big multinational group decided to devote himself fully to a new project: to buy the "Auberge Ravoux" to restore it while preserving its authentic simplicity and to "bring it to life while maintaining its soul". On 18th September 1993, the inn and its adjoining buildings (known as "Maison de Van Gogh") opened to the public.

Valentine Crosnier, the daughter of the mason who had constructed the building, set up a wine-shop there. In 1876, thirteen years later, Arthur Gustave Ravoux became the inn-keeper, and the *auberge* was frequented by the inhabitants of Auvers and its painters. The left side was used for selling wines and the right side for the cafe and restaurant and, according to Valentine Ravoux, the innkeeper's daughter who posed for *Monsieur Vincent*, the back room was "left for the artists".

On 20th May 1890, Van Gogh made the 35 kilometres

train journey from Paris to Auvers, the village which had received Daubigny, Corot, Pissarro and Cezanne. For a modest rent, he lodged at the inn opposite the townhall which he was to paint decorated for the 14th July, and he occupied a room on the second floor. In Auvers, he feverishly immersed himself in his work, completing a canvas a day.

After his death, the cafe changed hands several times and gradually fell into disrepair before being taken over by Roger Taglina, in the middle of the 20th century. The latter was very fond of painting and turned it into a real cafe for artists. He organised exhibitions there and Vincent Minelli made his famous film about Van Gogh, called "Lust

for Life", there, with Kirk Douglas in the role of Vincent. In the 60s, Malraux, Poliakoff, Pignon and Xenakis frequented the inn, which was listed as a historical monument in 1985.

A year later, Dominique Charles Janssens bought the place. With the support of his family and friends, the new owner developed a serious project which was both economically viable and cultural, financed by bank loans and backed by the Ministry of Culture and various foundations. Seven years of hard work and an investment of 34,000,000 francs enabled the first phase of the restoration programme to be completed. The inn has returned to its original function and offers old-style family cooking as well as local

wines. The inn has been restored to its old-fashioned charm with its maroon and faded pink facade, pierced by windows with lace curtains.

Photographs from 1890 confirm that it is a faithful restoration. The old tiling made by specialized craftsmen gives the impression of relief in its black, grey and white patterns. A fresco, which decorates the room in Van Gogh's time, and was discovered during the restoration work, has been preserved. Sturdy old wooden tables, straw-seated chairs, a magnificent zinc covered bar, wine racks and the dark red paint on the walls create a cozy, old-fashioned atmosphere. But, above all, Van Gogh's little bedroom in the attic, lit only by a small sky-