An Architect's Dhaka

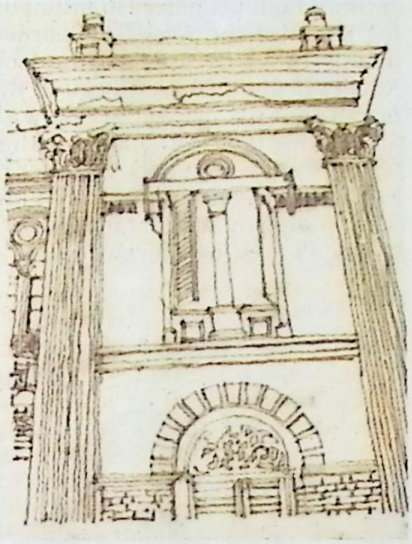
Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

Part-8

Sayeed sir (Abdullah Abu Sayeed) wrote in one of his recent books "Bangali Konodin Raja Chilona (the Bengalis were never kings)". Of course there were few Bengali Kings. One of the greatest kings from South Asia was Bijaysingha who could be easily compared with Napoleon or Akbar. What Prof. Sayeed meant was Bengalis were less experienced in governance and organizations. We had many kings but few of the palaces (to last). What have survived were not palaces, but rather large kuthis (mansions) of the rulers and nouveaux riches.

I have seen Buckingham Palace and Kensington Palace, Versailles Palace and palaces in Brussels, Amsterdam and Dan Haag, palaces in India, Myanmar and Bangkok, palaces in Riyyadh, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, Tehran and Ispahan in India, in Stockholm and Lisbon. Some of them have been turned into museum, some were retained as palaces. Some had kings and queens living there, some others were just maintained as it is without being used. The list is seemingly endless.

These palaces dominate their surroundings not by shear size, but by their setting in the context. Some of them indeed could not have been smaller. Some of them stand just on the street. You could wander around without knowing that you were passing by a palace of a once mighty king, which possibly witnessed ups and downs in the history and the fortunes of the king. What made them outstanding were the settings amidst a landscaped garden, often symmetrically laid out with fountains, sculptures, pavilions and mazes, and on an axis. The vista from a distance prepares you physically and mentally, and the sight humbles your approach; their elegance would engulf you as you draw closer.



I have wondered where our palaces were. Ahsan Manjil is really not a palace but a large mansion of a private citizen. Nimtali Palace was actually a kuthi, possibly a pavilion or bungalow type residential building. I however didn't search for an answer as I knew we didn't have any king. But we had Subehdars and Governors, and now we have Presidents, who of course led kingly lives. They must have lived in palatial houses. This didn't bother me much, until I thought okay, then where did Shaista Khan live, or where did Emperor Shajahan (Prince Khurram) stayed when he came to plunder the city, attracted by its wealth?

I could remember a program I saw on BTV long time ago; the presenter was a famous historian. It was 'Dekha Hoy Nai Chokkhu Melia'. And he took us to a ruined palace on the other side of the river in Jinjira, and described the history and the tales around that cursed building. Then last year there was a reporting in a private TV channel where the reporter was showing traces of that palace, occupied by squatters oblivious of its importance. Possibly the Daily Star too ran a story. I knew that it was connected with the Lalbag with a wooden bridge, and also possibly through a tunnel which has been prohibited to enter for long. Interestingly the second bridge across the river was built more than three and half centuries later with Chinese assistance.

Recently my students did a project in the Central Jail site (what to do with the vast land once the Jail is relocated), and visited old Dhaka for the second time in their life; the first time was when I sent them to document some heritage structures around the Bahadur Shah Park. I heard that a group of senior BUET students are doing the same exercise this semester. I tried to locate the Jinjira Palace emphatically in the Google Earth by drawing an axis from south of the old Fort (Jail) through the Chawkbazaar, Bara Katra gate and Swarighat; but failed to locate it. I was hoping to extend the axis up to the Swadhinota Stambha (Independence Monument in Sohrawardi Uddyan), and develop a strong design concept connecting the old and the new. So I decided to go for it on the other side of Buriganga. Meanwhile I started reading on how or where the Subehdars resided.

Most of the Subehdars preferred to stay in ordinary buildings or inside forts. These were those, for example Islam Khan or Mir Jumla, who were during their reign in Dhaka mostly involved in battles, had no time to build a palace for themselves, and found it convenient and functional to live in the fort. The first Subehdar lived in the old Afghani Fort, which later had two gates- in the East and the West. To the South of it was the Badshahi Bazaar (royal market, now known as the Chawkbazaar); it developed spontaneously without a Charter, which in fact came after the Subehdars left and the capital was shifted.