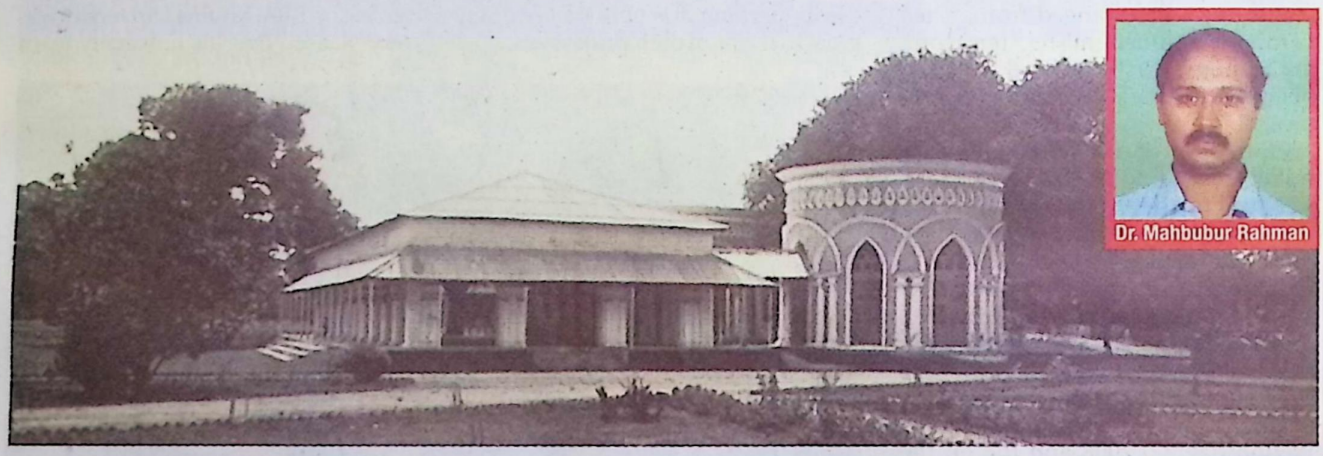
Part Ten

An Architect's Dhaka



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THE Ahsan Manjil was an icon of British Dhaka that otherwise was declining since the Mughals left. Dhaka's importance and fortunes weaned with the capital at Calcutta. Reminiscence of Dhaka's glory was kept alive by various socio-cultural activities of the Nawabs. Their chequered history was indeed the history of Dhaka's urban and political developments in the late-19 and early-20C.

Connoisseur of art and culture, the Nawabs not only introduced and patronised many socio-cultural activities, often in their own premises, but also some of them were writers, poets, and performers. While they acquired taste of many sports and games like hunting and horse racing from the British, members of the extended family had participated in competitive sports, spent large sums for entertaining the British, and donated handsomely in various activities.

Ironically, the catalytic role played by the family in support of Muslim politics and division of India brought about their own demise, as a language and culture based Bengali Muslim community emerged, given territorial identity by the partition. Culturally and socially the Nawabs had already estranged themselves from the majority Bengalis. Few members of the family became ministers after 1947, who mostly pledged allegiance to political, economic and cultural subjugation by the Pakistanis.

However, the Nawabs of Dhaka were also notable builders. Abdul Ghani and Ahsanullah spent a lot for reconstructing and renovating several of Dhaka's historic buildings, e.g. Lalbagh Fort, Buckland Bund, Hussaini Dalan, road to the Shah Ali Bogdadi's Mazaar, Satgambudj Mosque, Lalbagh Shahi Mosque, Kaltabazaar Mosque, Peer Jangi's Mazaar, and the Kadam Rasul sahrine. They built many mansions and gardens all over the city, which are extinct now.

I used to wrongly think that the area Shahbag derived its name from Hotel Shahbag, which now houses the PG Hospital; it in fact is other way round. Shahbag or the Nawab's Garden contained an area that now broadly forms the Dhaka University Arts Faculty area. The whole area between this and the Press Club area, and Nimtali and Palashi to Dhaka Club, was developed by various noble courtiers during the late-Mughal period, revived partly in the 1820s by the British. The Nawabs converted part of it into their own garden.

The Mahalla Sujatpur area had two 19C mansions between the TSC and Bangla Academy premises bought by Alimullah. Upon assuming the charge of the estate in 1868, Ahsanullah decided to construct a villa and acquired adjacent areas and started laying out the garden in 1873 on about 67 acres of land. It took several years to replicate the luxurious Mughal gardens. It had a few kilometre long serpentine lake and a number of natural and manmade embanked ponds with islands in them linked by bridges. The garden was filled with tall shade trees and flower plants, and the ponds were adorned with fountains and fishes of various colours and varieties. The place soon became the subject for the contemporary poets.

Shahbag was the nucleus of the social, cultural and political activities of Dhaka's elite from the end of the 19C to early 20C. Among the mansions in Shahbag was Israt Manjil a two-storied pavilion where there was a Jalshaghar with marbled floors. This and the surrounding apron were used as a skating rink and dance floor. A two storied Nishat Manjil, or club-house for distinguished guests, contained an exclusive family museum holding rare private collections.