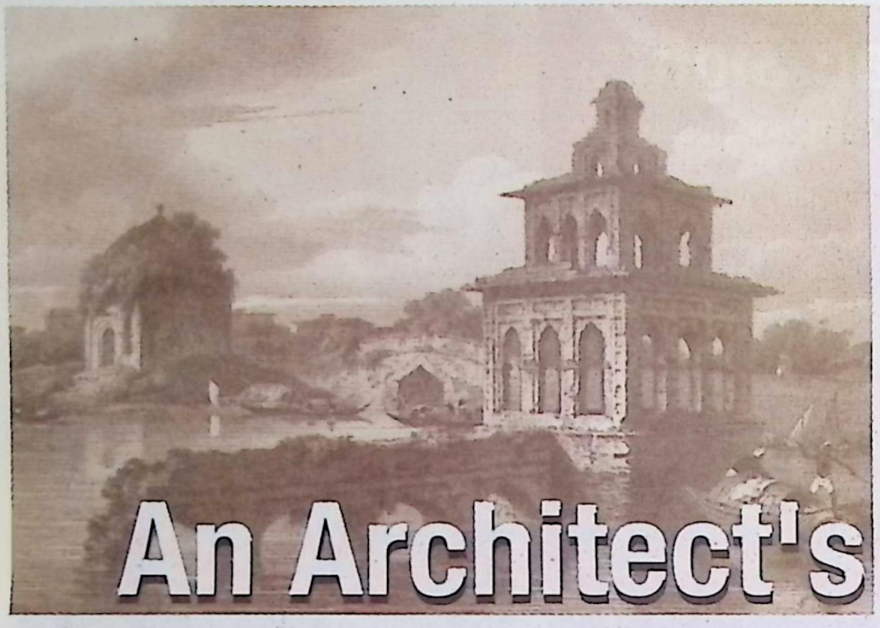
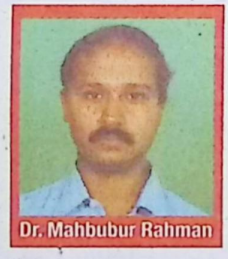


An Architect's Dhaka

Part Fourteen



Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

PLANNED urban development in Bangladesh began in the late fifties with the making of urban development plans for the cities of Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna between 1959-61. Earlier Patrick Geddes prepared a town improvement report in 1917, which the authority did not adopt. Such incidents have happened again and again. For example, the 1959 Master Plan for Dhaka based on unrealistically low population projection was practically redundant after the Independence that changed the scene. Yet it took the authority till 1981 to prepare a set of development programs which was largely shelved except for the part that provided for sites and services plots for the well-offs.

Two other partial planning attempts for the city were made when the British started to expand Dhaka in 1905, and later after 1947 when a British architect under the east Bengal Government made the 'Dhaka Re-Planning'. In all these planning, the authority and planners aspired for the wide landscaped boulevard city which was a concept that developed first in Paris and then in the USA and was based on primarily vehicles with little relevance to slow-moving pedestrianised oriental cities like Dhaka. The organic grain of the city was ignored. However, despite the pervasive pressure of commerce and globalisation, we are still left with some vernacular spaces as much of these plans remain unimplemented.

The Dacca Improvement Trust (DIT) was established in 1956 under the provision of the Town Improvement Act (TIA, 1953), to plan and control the development of Dhaka, Narayanganj and Tongi, which were three separate urban entities with municipalities at that time. In 1959-60 the DIT had a 20-year Master Plan over an area of 610 sq. km (revised to 880 sq. km after independence) prepared by Minoprio, Spencely and PW McFarlane, a British company which in fact undertook such exercises in many developing world cities.

This first full Master Plan for Dhaka did not consider heritage conservation as a component. The Trust implemented very little of this Plan, eventually becoming the largest developer of the country rather than a development control agency forfeiting the trust bestowed on it. Such a contradictory role hindered a democratic growth of the city which the civic society and professionals have been very critical about. On the other hand several attempts to form a powerful metropolitan government since the Independence went futile.

Dhaka continued to expand and develop much on the will and whims of administrators without referring to the Plan or any framework. Yet many such extra-ordinary decisions, for example shifting of the old rail track, or the creation of some major east-west roads, proved to be largely beneficial to the city, which mostly suffers from lack of roads. This was exacerbated by natural topography that forced a finger like northward extension mainly along two corridors, one via Tongi towards Mymensingh and another towards Savar, with intermittent north-south flowing rivers, east-west mostly filled up canals and farmlands in-between.

The Plan designated part of the government farmland to the west of the Tejgaon Airport, where the National Parliament Complex now sits, for housing and allied uses. The area named Ayub Nagar was proposed for building the Provincial Parliament House. The name was later changed to the 'Second Capital' to house the National Parliament Complex of Pakistan, the same way as of making Dhaka the second capital of united Bengal after the annulment of the newly created province of East Bengal and Assam. It was done to appease the Bengalis' rising demand for self-governance since the early 1960s, in the same way of establishing the Dhaka University. During the Mughals too, Dhaka's status was often demeaned out of personal ambitions. After independence the government christened the area Sher e Bangla Nagar.