Part Eighteen

An Architect's Dhaka

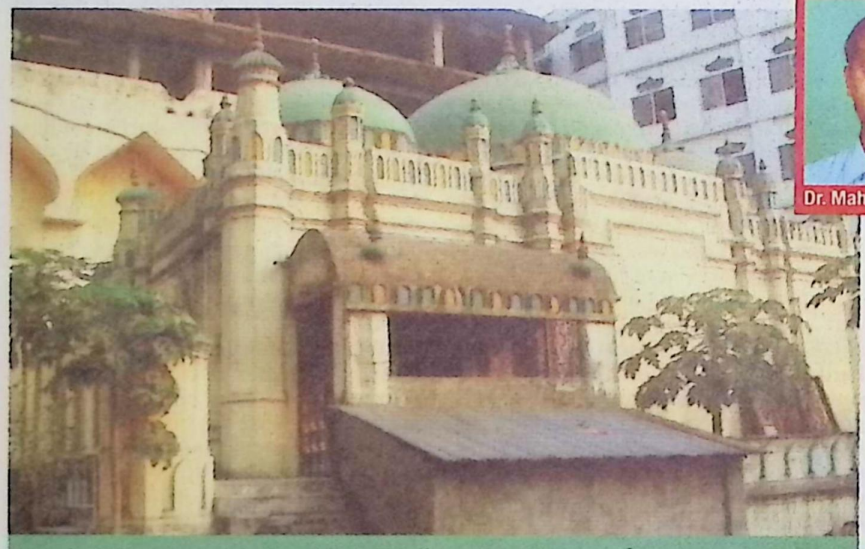


Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

DESPITE drawbacks and undesirable activities, the RajUK initiated a few projects to restore and improve several heritage structures/buildings in Dhaka. Far from being a consistent policy, such attempts owe to personal interest of the high offices, individual initiatives and often the intervention of the highest office. Among these are the monument at the Bahadur Shah Park, Dakhini Mosque in Dilkusha, Ambar Shah Mosque at Karwanbazaar, etc.

Bahadur Shah Park had all the makings of a European city centre with major colonial civic establishments around an oval-shaped island juxtaposed on two main city roads the east-west oldest pre-Mughal road and the first major colonial period axis road connecting the Sadarghat with the expanding city in the north. By late-19C it had mosque, church, school-college-madrasa, bank, news office, library, hostel, etc. set up around the node. It all started with a small European club a century earlier. The premise was called 'Anta Gharer Maidan' as the members used to play billiard. The English later demolished the structure and created a green round-about in front of the St. Thomas Church. The club was shifted to Ramna, which may still own some part of the land on paper around the Park.

It is where the captured sepoys of the 1857 Revolt were hanged though they hadn't actually started the fight in the Lalbag Fort. It was also the scene from where the accession by Queen Victoria and annexation of India was announced amidst much funfair in 1858. The Nawabs of Dhaka took it on them to beautify and maintain the park; there is an obelisk erected by the British in memory of the pre-mature death of the Nawab's grandson. But the other monument, a simple dome on corner walls with four portals symbolises this place. This was erected in 1963 to commemorate the Centenary of the Revolt. Though a design competition was called, it was won by the DIT itself. As then there was no skilled person to make trees for the model, the authority chopped down all the trees of the park. Two years back the DCC (Dhaka City Corporation) undertook a renovation work of the park.



Nearly 350 years old Ambar Shah Masjid at Karwanbazaar, overwhelmed by an ugly pastiche architecture and additions that threatens its authenticity.

Bahadur Shah Zafar the last Mughal emperor presided over an area that barely extended beyond Red Fort. With no imperial ambitions, he indulged in Urdu ghazals. His court, although decadent and pretentious for a company pensioner, included writers of high standing, including Ghalib. Zafar, symbol of unity among all Indian creeds during the revolt against the colonisers led by the local soldiers, took refuge at Humayun's Tomb on the verge of British victory. Major Hodson surrounded the tomb and forced his surrender. Bahadur Shah was exiled to Rangoon in 1858, marking the end of 332 years of Mughal rule in India. He died in exile on 7 November 1862, and was buried near the Shwedagon Pagoda, which became a Dargah that I visited 140 years later. Talks of bringing back his remains to Mehrauli, adjoining the Qutbuddin Kaki's mazaar didn't bear any fruit.

Pakistan views Bahadur Shah as the last vestige of the Muslim state in India, to be resurrected in 1947. India views him as one of its first nationalists actively opposing British rule. In 1959, the All India Bahadur Shah Zafar Academy was founded to spread awareness about his contribution. Movies and dramas have depicted him as hero. There are roads bearing his name in New Delhi, Lahore and Varanasi, and a statue was erected at Vijayanagaram palace. And we have renamed Victoria Park after him.

Shah Jalal Dakhini, a Gujrati saint and preacher, was executed by the men of Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah and buried along with his disciples here in 1475-76.