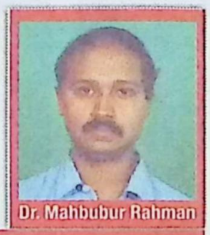
An Architect's Dhaka


Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

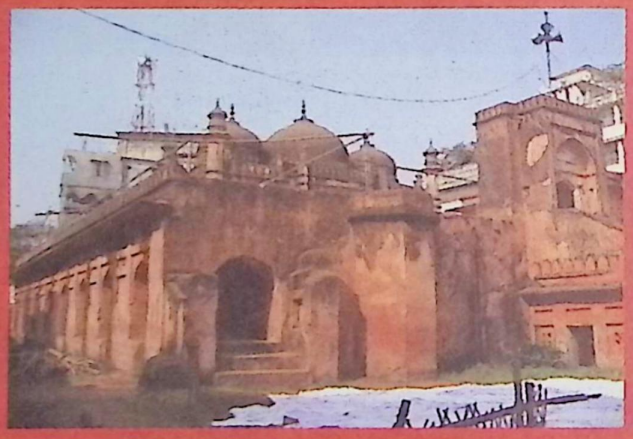
Part Twenty

The Department of Archaeology in Bangladesh is heir to the Archaeological Survey of India, started in 1861 by Lord Cunningham the Father of Archaeology in the Indian subcontinent. With John Marshall as the next Surveyor General, credited with the Manual followed all over the subcontinent, another era dawned in heritage conservation. The Directorate of Archaeology of Pakistan was formed after 1947, with an Eastern Circle at Dhaka. The Antiquities Act 1968 was enacted for the preservation of all antiquities predating May 1857. Through an amendment in 1976, the criterion was redefined as 100 years preceding the date. However, the only large scale excavation DOA ever did independently was in Paharpur in 1938.

The DOA prepares the list of all sites and buildings of special architectural or historic value. Once the list is gazetted, it is responsible for protection and preservation of the building, for which it hardly has the right resource or skill. It has neither prepared an exhaustive list of important heritages in the country, nor ensured the proper protection and maintenance of 372 listed structures all over Bangladesh. Thus there are destructions of more heritage structures, buildings or artefacts frequently.

The DOA submitted a list of some 28 structures and buildings in 23 different sites in Dhaka for protection under the Building Construction Rules 2006 to RajUK. The list, mainly from the seventies, has not been updated since. Many important, old and ornate buildings that deserve preservation are not on the list; viz. Ahsan Manjil, Armenian Church, Binat Bibi Masjid, Bahadur Shah Park, St. Thomas Church, Kabi Nazrul College, Dufferine Hostel, Bibi ka Raoja, Dakhini Masjid, Peer Yemeni Masjid and Mazaar, Dara Bibi's Mazaar, Holy Rosary Church, Joikali Mandir, Christian Cemetery, Ambar Shah Masjid, Saleha Mariam Masjid, St. Gregory Church, Pogose School, etc. The list includes Lalbag Fort structures, Hussaini Dalan, Katra gates, Dhanmondi Eidgah, Satgambudj Masjid, several Shaista Khani mosques, Ahsan Manjil gate and the Ruplal House. A blue board in front of these structures warns people that according to the Antiquities Act any person who destroys, breaks, damages, alters, injures, defaces or mutilates, or scribbles, writes or engraves any inscription or sign on antiquity can be imprisoned or fined. However, this has been inadequate to deter vandalism or illegal occupation. The DOA maintains no vigilance nor does anything worthwhile to preserve the structures for posterity. It itself has often perpetrated misuse or defacing of heritage structures. During one of my recent visits to Katra I found that the DOA is renting out the cells to alien commercial uses harming the structure. Despite the difficult restoration of the Fort, the DOA has earned infamy from detrimental work on the walls and addition of modern toilets within it, ruining the Fort's chance to be in the World Heritage List.

Failing to ensure proper protection of the Satgambudj Mosque, the Department recently painted it white over the pinkish lime plaster. It also failed to ensure proper protection of almost all other structures like the Eidgah and Ruplal House. Similarly during restoration, it has been involved in unethical practices and wrong doing that contributed to destroying the heritage in Panamnagar that we along with the architecture students and young teachers of several universities tried to stop.


Thahkhana of Mirdha Masjid


Main structure of Mirdha Masjid