



Lalbagh Fort

PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

Revisiting Dhaka's Treasures

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The city is older than we think

History is about what is written of it, often about the way the rulers wanted it to be written. In 2006, everybody was scrambling to celebrate the 400 years of Dhaka. But there were settlements here before the Mughals (first Mansingh in 1602 to fight Issa Khan and later Islam Khan for permanent residency) arrived. Given Islam Khan's statesmanship, he could not just select some virgin land for such establishment. Dhaka either as a whole or fragmented into small settlements has existed for at least the last 550 years as references from the mid-15C to areas in and around Puran Dhaka abound.

Pliny the Elder (23-79), a Ptolemaic ambassador in the post-Mauryan court, mentioned exotic exports from this area, which however could have been a group of settlements along Buriganga. That Mediterranean people had traded with this part of the world since 500 BC is evident from the findings in *Wari-Bateswar*, on the same waterway as Sonargaon and Dhaka. The *Aham Rajar Garh* could be the *Sounagarh*—capital of *Gangariddi* that Ptolemy mentioned. Allahabad *Prashasti*—a 3C stone-inscribed eulogy to Samudra Gupta by poet-laureate Hari Sen mentions Davaka or Dobak—a kingdom on the eastern frontier near Dhaka.

Akbarnama mentioned a watch-station (Dhakka) of the Mughals near the present city, placed under a *Thanadaar* (military commander). Callahan's *Rajtorongini* too confirmed this. In *Ain-i-Akbari*, Dhaka-baju (army battery) was mentioned as a *pargana* (revenue district) in *Sarkar Bajuja*, under Sultan Barbak Kamal Shah, with a *Shahar Qazi* in 1460.

There are few pre-Mughal temples along Buriganga, mainly towards the west from Pakurtali where Islam Khan landed in 1610. The origin of Dhakeswari Temple pre-dates Dhaka. Early last century, Bradely-Birt mentioned the buildings were built by a Company Agent 200 years ago. The older temple repaired by Mansingh did not survive. The premise contains two styles of buildings: the renovated older *pancharatna* Durga Mandir lost its original form. Four other *Siva Mandirs* were built by Mansingh, possibly over a 10C temple built by the Buddhists rulers of *Somvar* (Savar); these combine *chouchala* and spire, like in Buddhist temples.

There was a mosque in *Naswala* (Nasara or Christian) *Gali* (Alley) in Girda Killa/Urdibazaar area, built in 1457 by one Khan e Jahan (a title of the Chief Minister). The old Fort was built by Shershah to its east later. Mansingh's soldiers and

auxiliary staff set up camps between the Fort and Dhakeswari Mandir. The 1897 earthquake destroyed the mosque; but one of the *darwazas* stood there till the 1960s. The dated inscription of this mosque is kept at the National Museum.

The area could have been part of Mobarakbad where Sultan Mobarak Shah stayed when ousted from Sonargaon. Two pre-Mughal temples existed nearby at Alishkhana to its south, and to the west at Atishkhana; Churihatta (1649) and Khan Mohammed Mirdha's (1706) mosques may have been built on the ruins of these structures. Churihatta Masjid had a *chouchala* roof derived from North Indian pyramidal type as in the tombs of Akbar and Itimaddowlah. Despite lot of changes, the original chamber retained this feature until the mosque was demolished in 2008!

Mirpur and Katur are pre-Mughal settlements on River Turag. The Shah Ali mosque was built by the Bagdadi prince during 1477-80. Three other old mazaars around prove the existence of urban settlement(s) in the vicinity during the

mosque near the Nur Hossain Square.

The Roman navigator Bartomannus in 1506, and a Portuguese Barbosa a decade later, mentioned of the stupefying wealth and burgeoning international trades in *Bengala*—a town of '52 bazaars and 53 lanes', centered on Banglabazaar and bound by the Buriganga and *Dulai Nalla*. Bengala could have been part of Sonargaon—an urban area consisting of several spread settlements. The Portuguese explorer Joao De Burros showed Bengala in his 1550 map; the only other regional town shown in it was Satgaon on river Hoogly. Ralph Finch, the British Ambassador in Delhi, described the city in 1586, referring to Banglabazaar—the oldest part of proper Dhaka other than the Dhakeswari area, as Bangla Town. There are evidences that the *Shankharis*, *Tantis* and *Basaks* were living in Dhaka long before the Mughals came.

In 2006, the cacophony shifted to 400 years of Dhaka being a capital city though it actually became the capital of Subah Bangla with the arrival of Subehdar Nawab Alauddin Islam Khan Chisti

See inauthentic extensions or embellishment they made while conserving Satgambud and Begumbazaar Masjids, Lalbag Killa, or Painamnagar. This Department listed the structure on the Hammamkhana at the Killa as *Diwan i Aam*, when it clearly was *Diwan I Khas*. Its Masjid is claimed to be built during Shaista Khan's reign in the prevalent style; in fact it could have been built 30 years earlier, before Shaista Khan arrived in Dhaka. To them the tomb at Banshbari belonged to an unknown lady; two historians ascribed it to two different names. Now-demolished *Naachghar* of Sankhanidhi Lodge, recorded just as a simple structure, best exemplifies what happens when a building is wrongly recorded. Shaista Khan supposedly closed the western gate of the Killa when leaving Dhaka. Neither there is a western gate in the Killa, nor in the Katras!

Khan—the longest serving Subehdar in Dhaka, was the most prolific builder too. Mirza Mowlah (Mir Jumla), the next most powerful but short-reigned, was buried in Khijirpur (Hajiganj Fort). One renowned Professor spared no wink to declare to a roomful of luminaries in 2006 that the flimsy gate near the Doel Chatter has survived 350 years since the time of Mir Jumla. The colonial style pillars, actually built by Magistrate Dawes in early-19C, were damaged during the building spree in Ramna early last century. It was later shifted as the road passing through them was widened when Ayub Khan came to inaugurate the Atomic Energy building. One pillar was hit by a truck in 1973 and both were redone.

According to Bradley-Birt, slaves were sold in Chawkbazaar as there was a *Nakhas* there. *Nakhas* is a bazaar at the centers of Muslim/middle eastern/north African cities where grains and livestock are sold mainly on auction; European or American towns also had them. But slaves were just another commodity offered in *Nakhas*, found in old Rome, Egypt or Mesopotamia too. The Bishop wrote that Nimtali Dalan had a 'Baroduari' where *sardars* from twelve *mahallas* of Dhaka would come to meet the Naib Nazim. The fact is, *baradarai*, an integral part of Indo-Farsi-Mughal architecture, is a vestibule for commoners (*baroari*), and Dhaka had more than twelve *mahallas*!

Should we be proud of being ruled by the Mongols or Persians? Or of by the Arab-Turk-Ethiopian Sultans who were more Bengalised? Some people argue that we shouldn't be proud of all the colonial legacies. Well, how can we dig out history when we cannot establish what happened less than 44 years ago!! I am reminded of what Michael Crichton once said "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything."

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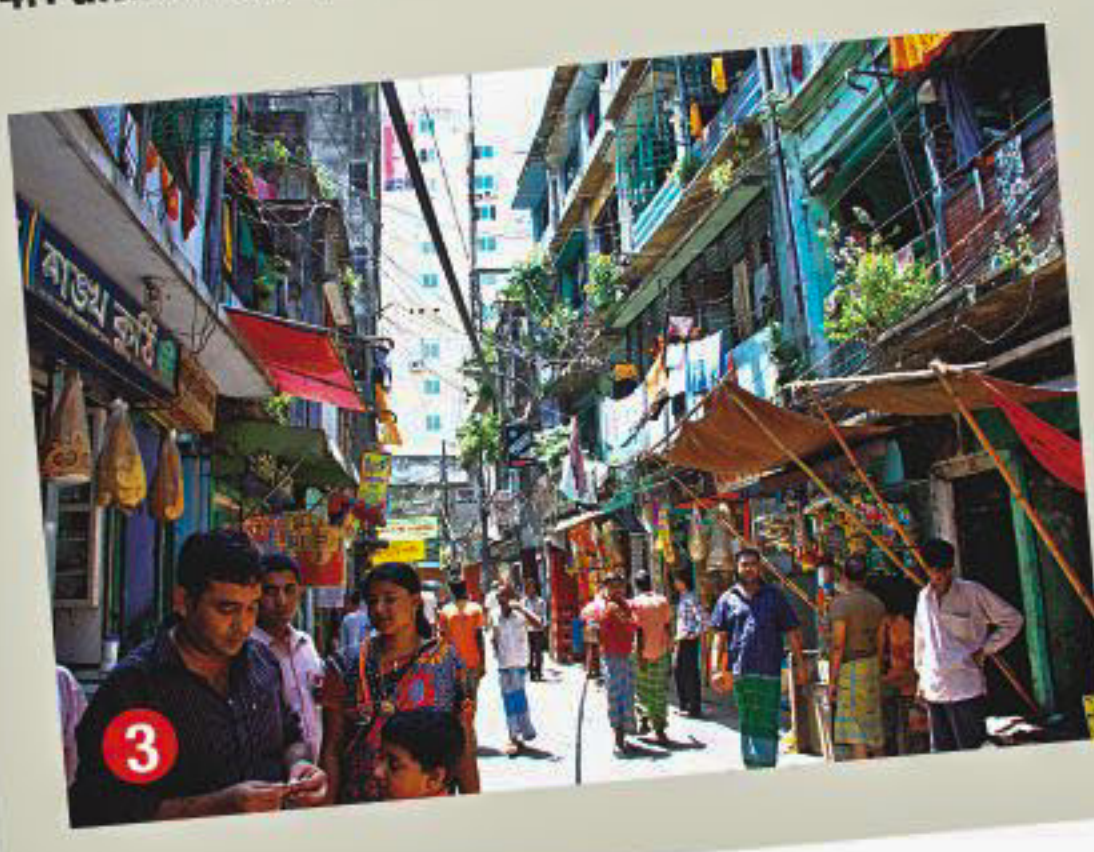


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1&2. Bara Sardar Bari, Sonargaon
 3. Shankhari Bazar
 4. Panam Nagar, Sonargaon



3



4

Ilyas Shahi dynasty 150 years before the Mughals arrived. Among the early buildings are also the *Bibi ka Raoja* on Buriganga built in 1600, and another now-extinct Imambara near the Dhakeswari temple.

Shahar Khilgaon was at the north of Segunbagicha-Motijheel Khals. The mazaar of Shah Jalal Dakhini, a Gujarati Sufi killed by the Sultan's men in 1475, and his mosque are at the corner of *Rajuk Bhaban*. The mosque was renovated by Nawab Ahsanullah and then by *Rajuk*. His contemporary Shah Neyamatullah Buthshikin, a disciple of Khwaja Mainuddin Chisti, was buried nearby. Buthshikin built a one-dome mosque near the *Bangabhaban* gate. Their predecessors came to Sylhet with Shah Jalal about a hundred years after the defeat of Lakshman Sen to preach Islam in the region. There are other historic structures within the *Bangabhaban* premise; many either inside or to its north and west have been destroyed during the British and Pakistan periods except the early-14C Pir Yemeni's mazaar and

Faruqi two years after he decided to shift his capital to Dhaka (from Rajmahal) in 1608. It was named *Jahangirnagar* in 1612. Indeed Dhaka has become the capital on several occasions which is a world record. But in 1610, not as the first capital city in Bengal, which has moved among Rajmahal, Tanda, Lakhnawati, Murshidababd and Sonargaon, all on Ganges-Brahmaputra system.

Narinda is another pre-Mughal settlement on the waterway connecting Dhaka and Khilgaon. There 550 years old *Binat Bibi masjid*—the oldest building in Dhaka, is near extinction. This wasn't even listed as our heritage! Ahsan Manzil, Hosni Dalan or Ambar Shah Masjid were also not listed because these were looked after by bodies other than the Department of Archaeology—the custodian of our heritage. Even listed buildings are defaced, thanks to innovation by the custodian entrusted with their protection. Perhaps they believe in Chuck Palahniuk who wrote in *Invisible Monsters*—"We'll be remembered more for what we destroy than what we create."