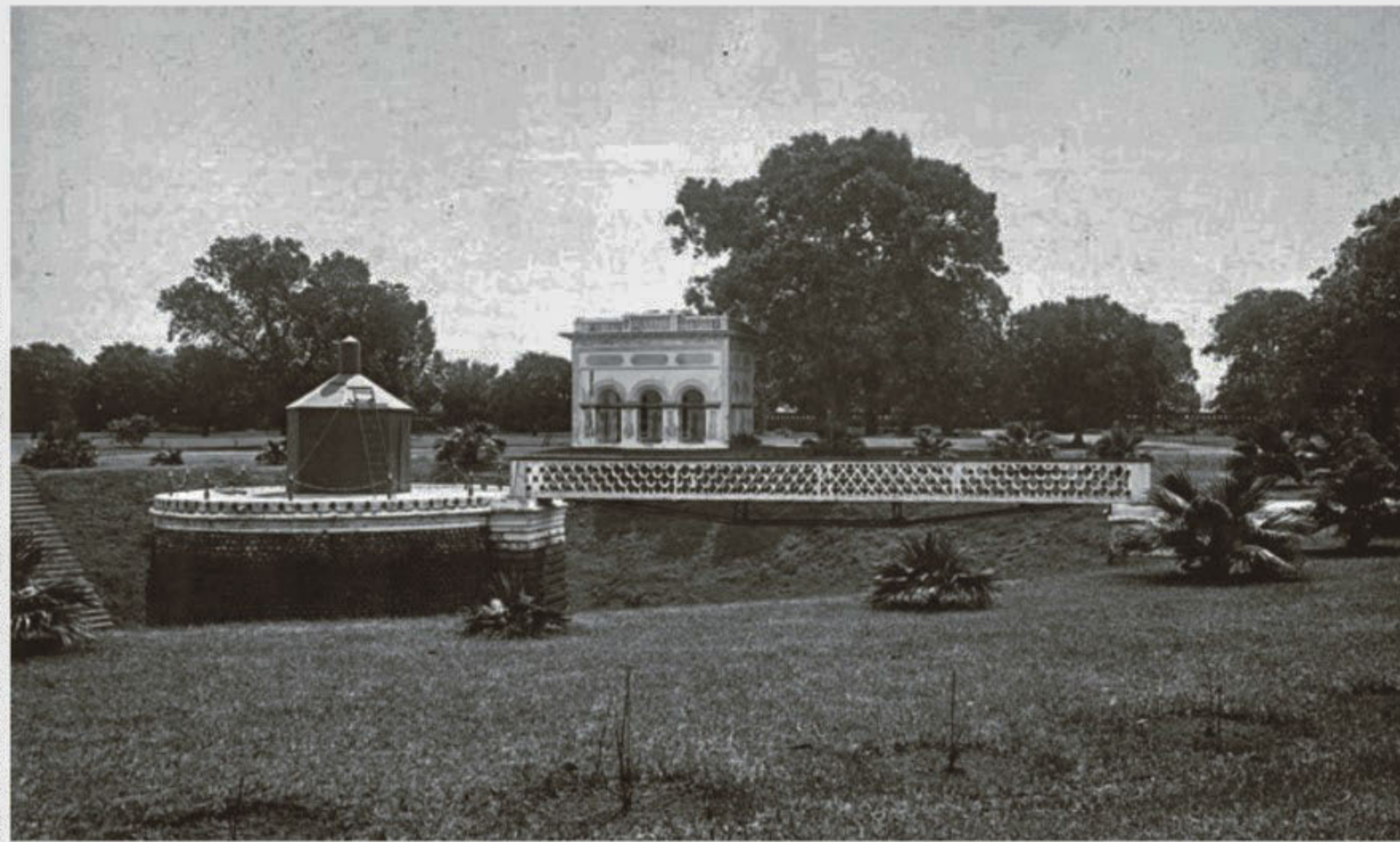


SPOTLIGHT



PHOTOS: BANGLADESH OLD PHOTO ARCHIVE

British officers at Ramna Race Course in 1890.



Nawab's Shahbagh Garden in Ramna.

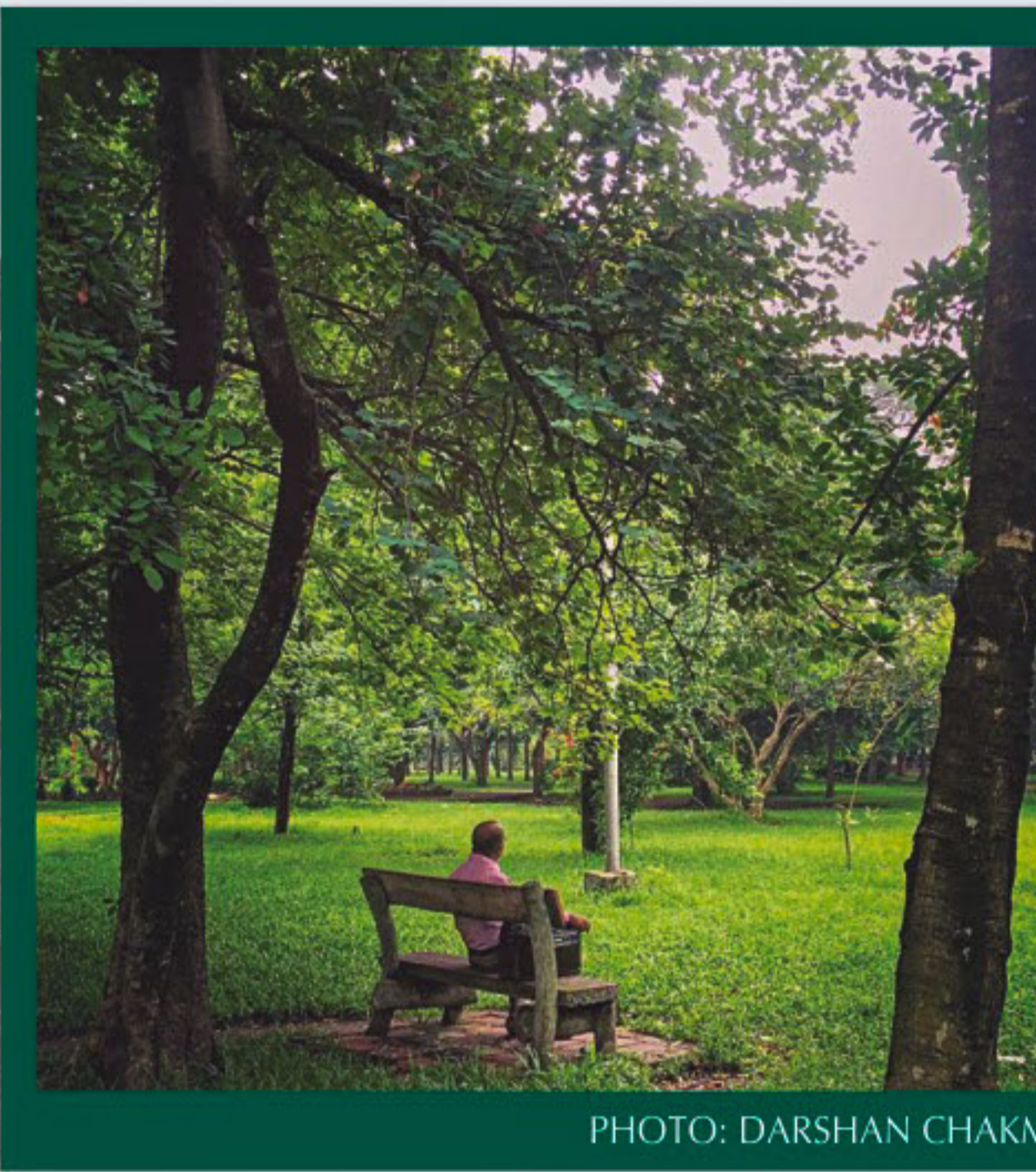


PHOTO: DARSHAN CHAKMA

GREENERIES OF RAMNA PARK AT A GLANCE

- In 1949 Ramna Park had 49 species of trees
- At present it has 211 species of native and foreign species of trees
- There are 87 flowering tree species, 36 fruit trees and 36 medicinal plants, 3 forest species and 2 aquatic species.
- The central lake of the park is 812 metres in length.
- There are at least 20 trees in the park are more than hundred years old.

becomes a little different. In these late hours, visitors are seen to be resting more than jogging, as they come to refresh their body and mind after a long day of hard work. Many people can be seen lying under the trees, students of Fine Arts are seen painting the sceneries before them; photographers are scurrying busy, capturing the nature and the other face of the busy Dhaka.

However, there are lots of objections among visitors regarding the maintenance of this historic park. Halima Akhter, a housewife and a member of Mohila Ongon says, "In the early hours of the day, I sometimes feel unsafe to visit Ramna. The area is huge and security is loose. I hardly see any security guard when I walk through the park."

Abdul Hakim says, "One day, while I was walking, a big, dry, dead branch of coconut tree fell on my head. I was

has taken several drives to ensure security and a healthy environment in the park, however, some of these came at the cost of the citizen's access to the park. To ensure security, citizens have been prohibited to enter the park after 6 o'clock in the evening. All the cultural programmes like Pahela Falgun, Jatio Kobita Utshob which used to be held in the park have now been banned. Only Chhaayanaut is allowed to hold a Pahela Baishakh ceremony in the park. According to PWD officials, "The government is planning to undertake a long term plan to make Ramna Park a reserve garden with an entertainment complex by developing and renovating the adjacent Shishu Park. The security measures in the park have been heightened as there are residences of ministries and high ranking government officials living near the park".

Despite such an adverse situation, Ramna Park is still the everyday part of the

In the centre of Dhaka, the booming city of 50 million people lies a green sanctuary with thousands of trees, spacious green meadows with picturesque walkways, and a serene lake. The place is so peaceful, but so near to some of the busiest areas of the capital city that anybody entering the space will feel like they are lost in the Garden of Eden, where honks of rushing vehicles, unbearable heat radiating from their engines, and footpaths full of rushing pedestrians are replaced by sweet chirps of birds, cool breeze from lush lakeside gardens and walkways covered with flowers falling from blossoming Gulmeher trees.

This piece of heaven inside Dhaka is Ramna Park; Dhaka's most beautiful and popular public park. The place is so cool, that according to a study the temperature of Ramna is at least three degree Celsius less than many areas of Dhaka like Motijheel, Gulistan etc.

The history of Ramna is as old as the city itself. In 1605, when Mughal Subadar Islam Khan Chishty conquered Bengal from the Pathan kings, he established the provincial capital in Dhaka and named it Jahangirnagar. Islam Khan selected Ramna as the quarter of high ranking Mughal officials. The name "Ramna" which is a Persian word meaning "Lawn" was also given by the same renowned Mughal governor. However, after the fall of the Mughal Empire, the entire area of Ramna was abandoned and it was soon covered in thick vegetation.

Some of the colonial rulers of the British East India Company cleared some parts of Ramna Park and demolished most of the Mughal buildings except the mosque and tomb of Musa Khan, which are still standing tall, even now, in the Dhaka University campus. They also established a racecourse which has now been replaced by Suhrawardy Uddyan and a club which is still functioning as Dhaka Club, for their recreation and entertainment. However, Ramna Park got its heavenly garden-like look in 1908 when Dhaka regained its glory of being the capital city, after the partition of Bengal in 1905. The main planner of England's famous Kew Garden R L Prowdlock came to Dhaka and took the initiative to convert the dilapidated Ramna into Ramna Green, the central public park of Dhaka. He was assisted by Fazlul Karim,

DHAKA'S GREEN HEART

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

the key architect of Calcutta's Eden Garden, who was also the key person to give the present shape of Ramna Park. From 1908, it took 20 years to establish Ramna as the recreational centre of Dhaka city. Besides the race course and club for European civil servants, Dhaka's Nawabs also established a deer park and a zoo adjacent to Ramna and named it Shahbagh, the garden of the kings. However, in two other parts of the original park, the present day Shishu Park and Suhrawardy Uddyan have been established later.



PHOTO: SAURAV DEY



PHOTO: DARSHAN CHAKMA



PHOTO: SAURAV DEY



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Still, the greenery of Ramna Park is working as the lungs of the mechanised Dhaka city. It is the main and one of the few places for Dhakaites to rest under the green shades of trees and breathe fresh air. The park awakes in the early morning when joggers and health enthusiasts from all walks of life gather there to keep their body and mind fit and healthy. These regular visitors of the park have also formed different kinds of citizen organisations such as Shotayu Ongon (Society of Centenarians), Kshoniker Milon, Mohila Ongon (Society of Women Joggers), Ramna Usha Shongho (Society of Morning Walkers of Ramna) etc. Some of these organisations have built platforms under large, old trees to perform their activities. A wave of activities also starts near the gates of Ramna Park centering to this mass of joggers.

"Every day I come to this park at 5 o'clock in the morning for one hour of morning walk without any hesitation. Then I take 15 minute-long rest at the Botomul. I buy some fresh vegetables and fish from the peddlers waiting at Boikali gate before returning home by 6:30," says Md. Abdul Hakim, an administrative staff of Dhaka University and a member of Ramna Usha Shongho. "I have been maintaining this routine for more than twenty years," adds Abdul. Every morning hawkers and peddlers occupy the gates of Ramna Park to sell their commodities to the morning walkers. As a result, every morning the main gates of Ramna Park look like small bazaars, although due to the recent tightened security measures none of these peddlers can enter the park premises. In the afternoon, the milieu of the park

severely injured and the hit caused me to bleed profusely from my skull. "If immediate treatment could not be provided I might not have survived that day," adds Abdul. There are a several hundred dustbins in and around the park, most of which are quite empty. However, a lot of garbage can be seen carelessly thrown here and there inside the park. It has been objected that the depth of the lake in the park has been reduced to one third due to the accumulation of garbage thrown on the lakebed. Many organisations use the trees as the sign posts to hang their banners and signboards. Again, some of these organisations have built concrete platforms around the trunk of the trees which have stopped the trees' growth permanently. At present the park is maintained by the Public Works of Department (PWD) which

lives of hundreds and thousands of Dhakaites. In fact, Ramna Park has become the part of our national history and heritage. Bangladesh's Cultural Revolution was ignited in Ramna when some cultural activists from Chhayanaut sang the song of Baishakh to celebrate the Bengali New Year at the time when Pakistani rulers were trying to impose Urdu culture upon us. Thus, one of our indispensable cultural ceremonies, Pahela Baishakh, had begun. Ramna is the place where Dhaka, as a city, started to function and still it is preserving the city's natural harmony. So, renovation measures must be taken to maintain this park as well as this heritage site, but it has to be conducted in such a manner that the place's historic significance and natural beauty remain unaltered and unaffected. ■



PHOTO: AVIPSU ARKO