



The date 1 July, 1921 shall forever be marked as a turning point, as it was the time when Dhaka University was born. But the city is obviously a lot older, and hence, as we celebrate the institution's birth centenary and look back into its past, the curious mind wonders: what exactly was there in the present campus grounds before the university came into existence?

# What was there in the DU area in PRE-DU TIMES?

To answer that, we have to travel much further back in time than the last century, before genesis (of the university) if you will. It's hard to imagine, the large area of land that we have always known to be Dhaka University, as something else! But let's try, with some hints and prompts, to stretch our imagination as we pull time backwards and form a picture of the pre-DU days.

Let's start by erasing from our mind many of the establishments and structures — expect a few, examples of which we will come to later. So, most buildings of the university are gone. Similarly, there is no Shaheed Minar, and Aparajeyo Bangla, and so on.

Instead, think gardens and greenery and palatial buildings — and even a zoo!

But yes, Musa Khan's Mosque was still there — the area was once known as Bagh-e-Musa Khan — and so was Haji Khwaja Shahbaz Mosque. These are two majestic Mughal-era structures in or around the DU campus worth visiting.

The Sikh temple located in Nilkhet Road, too, pre-dates Dhaka University. As for Nilkhet itself, we may think of indigo plantations or warehouses, owing to its etymology, but this is only an educated guess.

There is of course the small and elegant Greek memorial, which now falls under the current TSC premises.

On the other hand, our beloved Madhur Canteen, too, need not be omitted when we are imagining pre-university days. It was not Madhur Canteen yet, but a Jalshaghar or Durbar Hall of the Nawab family, and seeing an old photograph will tease your mind of how similar today's Madhur Canteen premises and yesteryears' Durbar Hall looks.

Perhaps it is an irony that the area of Madhur Canteen and the campus at large, a melting pot of politics, was politically significant even before Dhaka University's birth: the area is seen in history as the place where All India Muslim League emerged from.

Neither do we need to exclude Curzon Hall. During his Dhaka visit in 1904, Lord Curzon laid its foundation. What was the area like around that time, you ask? These few lines, written more than a century ago, may evoke the ambience in your mind:

*"Where once the owl did hoot  
The jackal yell,  
In thickets dwarf and tall,  
There stands today, in state  
A sentinel-*

*The splendid Curzon Hall!"* Hard to imagine the buzzing DU campus like this! If it's any consolation though, amidst the wilderness, with the 'new' Curzon Hall in place (planned to be used as a town hall), Lord Curzon prophesied that soon, the city in the near future will replace all those jungles.

He stayed at Ahsan Manzil as the guest of Nawab Salimullah; and although today, we see Ahsan Manzil as the main embodiment of the Nawab family, the dynasty actually had a lot of properties in the area that we now associate with Dhaka University.

Shahbagh (literally meaning imperial garden) was a palatial affair, with one splendid Ishrat Manzil as the main building.

There was also a zoo owned by the Nawabs in one area of the garden. Renowned historian and physician Hakim Habibur Rahman himself visited it in 1888, where he saw a number of animals, including tigers and bears.

The Nawab family used to organise a festival at Shahbagh in celebration of the New Year of the Gregorian calendar.

Rahman left an anecdote of a tragedy that he witnessed in his childhood during one of those festivals. There was a bridge at Shahbagh across a pond, and during a performance, the bridge collapsed, snatching away a number of lives.

Today, when looking back, a curious historical footnote in his book informs that the place he was referring to is in fact a pond in Charukala!

What do we know of the overall area which we now refer to as Dhaka University, though? Dhaka's history is hazy, and there is no direct answer, but there are hints to tease the brain.

To exemplify, the name Shahbagh itself is reminiscent of Bagh-e-Badshahi; so, a royal garden. Shahbagh, historians believe, was probably a part of it.

Another name which pops up when we look through the history lens at the campus is Ramna. Don't immediately limit yourself to Ramna Park. 'Ramna' was

once, in its own right, a large place spanning Ramna Park, Nilkhet, Minto Road, Curzon Hall, etc. Archaic names, possibly all parts of Ramna, boggle the mind further — Ramna Racecourse and residential areas of the olden times, Mohallah Chistiah and Mohallah Shujatpur (as well as the original structure of the iconic Ramna Kalibari which was torn down in 1971 by the Pakistan army).

To make some sense of it, we can refer to DU's website, which says, "The University was set up in a picturesque part of the city known as Ramna on 600 acres of land."

So, these would be some sporadic imagery of the campus grounds pre-dating the university. Of course, limited by the shackles of time and vagueness of Dhaka's history, a clear view is arguably out of reach.

Haziness also arises on how you visualise the historical structures which still exist today in the campus. Don't be fooled thinking that all looked the way we see them today.

Haziness is part of the charm; the romance of the forgotten past. Dhaka University is soaked in history, and as we celebrate its century-long journey so far, let's also cherish the history of the area that pre-dates the university itself.

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**Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed**

**References:** 'Dacca: A Record of its Changing Fortunes' by Ahmad Hasan Dani; 'Photographic Album of Old Dhaka' edited by Iftikhar-ul-Awwal; 'Dhaka Panchas Baras Pahle' by Hakim H abibur Rahman, translated by Mohammad Rezaul Karim; 'Dacca: History and Romance in Place Names' by Azimussahan Haider; 'Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari (Volume-1)' by Muntassir Mamoon; 'Banglapedia.'

