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THE HOUSE OF THE NAWAB AT 85 PARK STREET AND THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF SIR WASIF ALI MIRZA

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Anonymity unconcern and dispassionate attitude towards legacy – edifices has already defamed the city of Kolkata due to the pace at which this ignorance and selfishness at which, capitalist consumerism in urbanization is turning the city into a cage house of numbers. This indifference is turning flagrant and has ringed a terror buzzer among preservation specialists in Kolkata. A classic example is the Murshidabad House situated in the posh arcade and thoroughfare of the city at 85-Park Street (**Plates 17.1, 17.19, 17.22 & 17.23**). A constructed physical splendor and a historic relevance and memory; the house embraces mammoth prominence but its current condition has transformed it into a conspicuous sample of mutual lethargy.

Once an ostentatious abode of the Nawabs of Murshidabad, the commanding Palladian Pillars, the portico and parts of the roof have all fallen/crushed to rubble and dust, but its custodian the legal section of the various governments of Bengal has remained casual all through about its refurbishment. It says that there happened to exist many such structures under the governments dependence which are in fact trespassed and violated or rather ravaged upon and are in a very depraved and sorry condition. This one is just a name within the list of such edifices, therefore it requires no special attention.

There is a lot of cynicism over the thump of the contractor's gang in the state that can actually be halted; they would deface almost every part of the colonial and classical heritage in brick mortar and stucco that is visible or hidden on the surface. This is how the city palace of the Darbhanga Maharaja on Jawaharlal Nehru Road was delisted from the heritage list and demolished to make way for the tallest building on the roads, dwarfing all other tall buildings on the road. There are several others which have almost faced extinction or have undergone unrecognizable physical orientation; namely the Ghari Bari of Uttarpara, the Snan Bari of Berhampur, the Goswamibari of Srirampur, the Tagore House at Sudder Street, the Tagore's Castle at Pathuriaghata, the Putul Bari and the Ghosh Bari; the Vijay Manzil and several others which are waiting for their total extinction and are being threatened.

G.M. Kaspoor, Convener of the INTACH, Kolkata, says that-“The rate of decay, and the extent of damage are quite alarming. We have written to the judicial department. But we could not move the department even for some minor restoration work so that the buildings could be saved for a few more years. Nothing was done. As if everyone is waiting for the complete caving in of the building so as to facilitate the way for construction of a modern building, sans ... character and history”.

According to Sourav De, a passionate heritage activist and president of city based heritage group-“Save Heritage and Environment; – the building is completely taken over by illegal

squatters. Like Clive House in Dum Dum, squatters have turned the space inside the mansion and the yard behind it into a shanty town from Bihar. Even the porch, yard and wooden staircase have been neatly partitioned into abodes. It is quite surprising for me how it is left to a slow destruction. The wooden doors and window-panes were taken away. It could have been a grand museum or a heritage hotel or anything else. Thinking about the location, after some time the loss would be irreplaceable”.

It is not only the poor people, but some of the rooms have been occupied by Muslim craftsmen from Murshidabad and turned into weaving *Karkhanas*, where cottage industries have jumped up. *Sarees* for the ethnic and designer shops at Park Street are often essentially embroidered and designed here by traditional but poor artisans. A cavernous hole has developed in the marble of the first floor in the projecting section. The house has two wings and verandah's running from one end of the house to the other on both floors.

The property has been in status quo for more than a century. The descendants of Nawab Nazir Mir Zafar Mirza, the first dummy Nawab of the British, used to live here. The last living descendant of Mir Zafar (**Plate 17.16**) who lived here was Sajid Ali Mirza, whose father was Wasif Ali Mirza, second and last Nawab of Murshidabad. On the 11 December 1931, Wasif Ali was forced to surrender the administration of his estate to the government of India after incurring a debt of Rs. 19 Lakhs. On 15 August 1947, the Radcliffe Award allotted the district of Murshidabad to Pakistan and the flag of Pakistan was raised at the Hazarduari palace (**Plate 17.17**). But within two days the two protectorates, India and Pakistan exchanged Murshidabad with Khulna, now in Bangladesh. Thereafter the Indian Flag was elevated at the grand palace on the 17 August 1947. The Indian Government also recommenced the Nawab all his landed – assets including the Murshidabad House in 1953.

This tumbledown and walled villa stands like a beggar, opposite; St. Xavier's College, Park Street now Mother Teresa Sarani, on the corner of Park street and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, previously known as Karbala Road. About ten years back, one of the two huge wooden gates of the compound had collapsed, exposing as if a vast rumpled private lawn in the front of the once ostentatious edifice, now in a dilapidated, disgraceful and ramshackle condition. This villa happened to be one of the Calcutta abodes of the family of Mir Jafar Ali Khan Bahadur (**Plates 17.25-17.26**), known in the pages of history as the archetypal traitor. Mir Jafar as is well known, had been installed in the place of the slain Nawab, Siraj-ud-Daula as the marionette Nawab of the Bengal Subah under the East India Company, for a very short period till his death in 1765. He was succeeded by his second son, Najimuddin Ali Khan, then his eldest son Najabat Ali Khan, thereafter his fourth son, Ashraf Ali Khan and then Mubarak Ali Khan a son by a wife known as Babbu Begum.

Subsequently several peers and also a long list of first born male heirs, came Sayyid Wasif Ali Khan Bahadur; born in 1875, and crowned as the Nawab of Murshidabad in 1906; the title of the Nawab of Bengal being abolished 1880. Wasif Ali Mirza breathed his last days in this villa on the 23 October 1959 (**Plates 17.4, 17.10, 17.12 & 17.13**). By then his estate had been taken

over by the government in rejoinder to his having run up a debit of some 19 Lakhs. His son Waris Ali Mirza was the last to hold the title of the Nawab of Murshidabad and there has been no pure inheritor to this royal lineage after his final worldly departure in 1969 (**Plate 17.3**).



Plate 17.1: A Pre-Independence Black & White Photograph of the House of the Nawab at 85 Park Street.



Plate 17.2: Recent Photograph of a ruined gateway of the Wasif Manzil Palace; situated at the rear end of the Nizamut Quila or the Hazarduari Palace complex.



Plate 17.3: Photograph of Prince Waris Ali Mirza.



Plate 17.4: The Young Prince Wasif Ali Mirza in European contemporary attire of the times.



Plate 17.5: Wasif Manzil palace; the frontal view and entrance.



VE OF THE LAST NAWAB OF BENGAL - WASIF ALI MIRZA PRATIK MUKHERJI

Plate 17.6: The Tomb stone and grave of Nawab Wasif Ali Mirza at Zafarjung, Murshidabad.



Plate 17.7: The Wasif Manzil palace from an angle.



Plate 17.8: The Wasif Manzil Palace before renovation.



Plate 17.9: Old Black & White photograph of the Wasif Manzil Palace with electric Fans noticeable.



Plate 17.10: Nawab Wasif Ali with European friends and Indian aristocrats and others.



Plate 17.11: Black and White reproduction of the full size portrait of Nawab Nazim Humayun Shah the builder of the Hazarduari Palace.

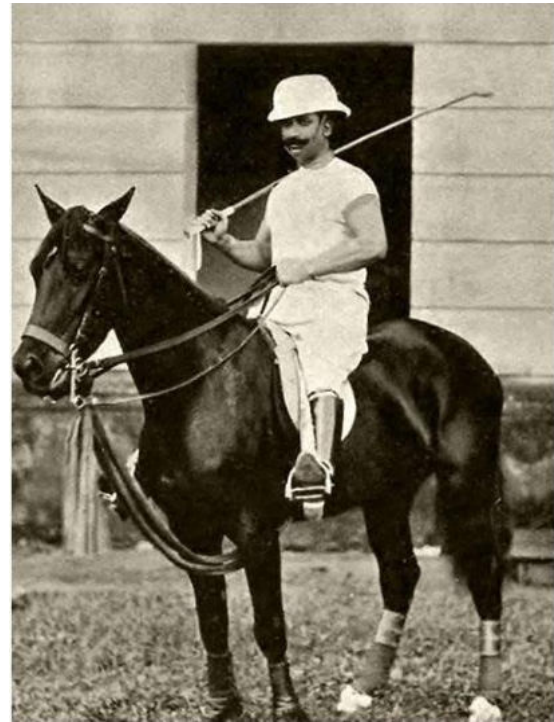


Plate 17.12: Wasif Ali Mirza on his favorite Horse Venus.



Plate 17.13: Wasif Ali Mirza in his court (Coronation) Indian Attire.



Plate 17.14: Lord Clive receiving monetary grant for the European losses after the Battle of Plassey (European Oil Painting – Several copies at the Victoria Memorial Hall Museum and the Hazar Duari Palace Murshidabad –Now Mostly stolen).



Plate 17.15: Ruins of the Rani Mahal or the Nawabs Zenana /Royal Seraglio: Haram Sarah of Mir Zafar and later of the Wasif Manzil Palace, Murshidabad.



Plate 17.16: European oil painting representing Mir Zafar Ali Khan paying his homage and thanks after the Battle of Plassey with the Royal elephant of the defeated Nawab Mirza Muhammad Siraj-ud-Daulah in the background.



Plate 17.17: Recent colour photograph of the Hazarduari Palace.

It is challenging to say precisely when the house on 85 Park Street had come into being, though its colonnaded verandahs and plain columns with ionic capitals suggests some time in the 1850's. Since 1931, when the property was taken over by the government, it had been in a state of slow deterioration and collapsing dissolution. Parts of the cornice and roof have bent inwards, much of the marble railing at the front /façade has vanished; but interestingly in spite of all this squalor, a retinue of noble vagabonds and their wards continue to live in this house within and without; precariously unaware.



Plate 17.18: Ruined Gateway of Mir Zafar’s Palace at Zafarjung popularly called the Namak Haram Deorhi; originally called the Zafarjung Mahal.



Plate 17.19: Recent photograph of the shabby and deplorably ruined condition of the House of the Nawab at 85 Park Street.

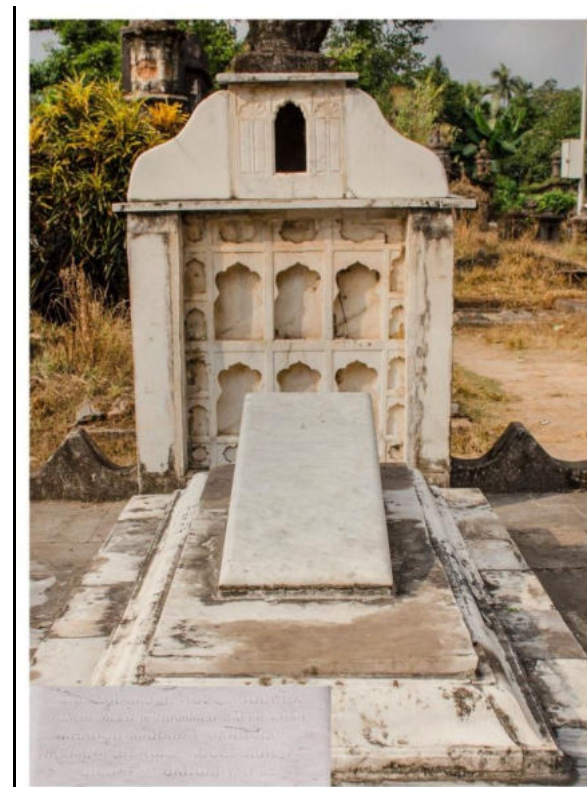


Plate 17.20: The Tomb/Grave of the Traitor Mir Zafar Ali Khan at Zafarjung Cemetery Murshidabad.

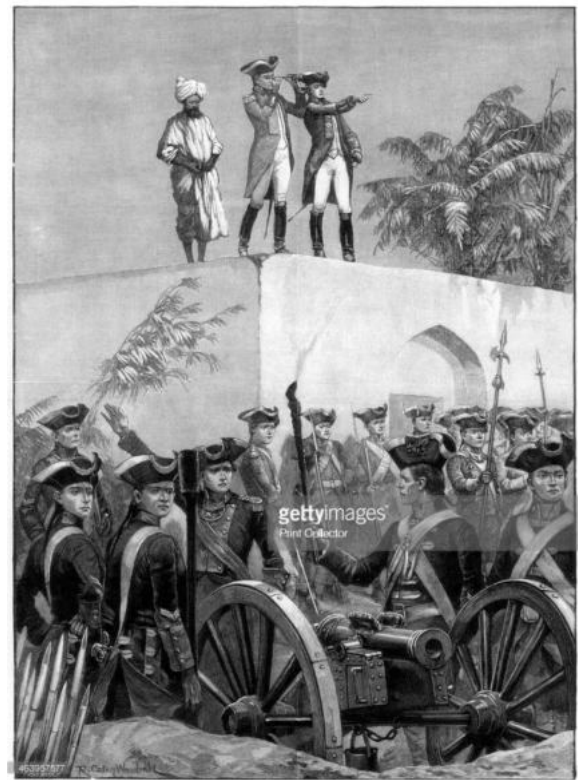


Plate 17.21: Painting depicting lord Clive and Watson on the roof of Siraj’s Hunting Lodge /or Plassey House during the Battle.

Afshaan Mirza, who is correlated to the regal family by nuptial, still resides here and can be found. A few of the erstwhile Nawabs servants live on the premises with their prolific families; while their offspring and chickens run around the patio. Expensive cars are forever parked on the front lawns and on Sundays local juveniles play football within the premises. The

premise also accommodates as mentioned earlier, *saree* embroidery *karkhanas* along with other kinds of business enterprise. If one enters the ground floor through the back doors beside the serpentine stairway, one would discover huge and desolate/but vacant rooms once lavishly wrapped with velvet like cloth and magnificently ornamented, but now violated and unadorned; dead quiet with thick all unclean and romantically evocative of the past grandeur. The furnishings torn away and sold off for survival or having been sent away on rugged wheels to be kept elsewhere perhaps in the curio shops of Park Street, or smuggled away to Bangladesh to be sold to unsophisticated business tycoons as “Nawabi stuff”.



Plate 17.22: Recent condition of the Porch of the Park Street House; divided into shanty like compartments.



Plate 17.23: Vacant hall of room of the House at 85 Park Street; devoid of, chandelier's furniture's and carpets, sold to the auction houses for a living.

After the death of Hassan Ali Mirza on 25 December 1906, his son Wasif Ali became the Nawab of Murshidabad. He received the regal Islamic *Shia* titles of “*Ihtisham-ul-mulk* (Dignifier of the Country), *Raes-ud-Daulla* (Premier of the State), *Amir-ul-Omrah* (Noble of Nobles), *Mahabat Jang* (Horror in War)”. The Nawab Asif Kadir Sir Syed Wasif Ali Mirza Khan Bahadur, also received the honour of Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India; K.C.S.I. in 1910, and the Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order K.C.V.O. in 1912, Oxford.

Wasif Ali Mirza was born at Hazarduari Palace, on the 7 January 1875 A.D. He was the eldest son of Hassan Ali Mirza (**Plate 17.24**) by his first wife Nawab Amir Kulsum-un-nisa Begum Sahiba. He was sent to England for education at the early age of twelve, accompanied by his younger brother, Sahebzada Nasir Ali Mirza (Nasir Saheb) and under the Charge of Mr. Coles, the Principal of the Doveton College Calcutta (Now Park Mansion) as ‘Ataliq’(or tutor). He was educated at Sherbourne, Dorset, Rugby and Warwickshire, then at the Trinity College, the Prince after completing his courses, visited places of importance in England, Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Turkey, Egypt and returned to Murshidabad with his brother, on 27 October, 1895 A.D.

Plate 17.24: Old Black and white Photograph of the Nawab Hassan Ali in the middle with Wasif Ali on the left and Nasir Ali on the right.

He directed the Nizamat on behalf of his father from 1895 to 1899 A.D., Institutionally presided over the Murshidabad Municipality from 1899 to 1901 A.D. He represented Bengal at the coronations of the King Emperor Edward VII and Queen-Empress Alexandra at Westminster Abbey in London in 1902, and of the King Emperor George V and Queen Empress Mary at Westminster Abbey in London in 1911. Wasif Ali Mirza had been a member of Bengal Legislative Council eight times besides taking great interest in Municipal matters; being the Patron of Calcutta Historical Society and was reputed for the efficient management of his estates and public charities. He was also well known for his English and Urdu poems.

He possessed delightful and sophisticated etiquette, and it had been justly thought of him that he had all the qualities of an eastern prince with the demeanor of a Western gentleman. His noble appearance, posture with intellect, attracted the attention and appreciation of every one

with whom he came in communication. His commands of the English language and literature, and his knowledge of English etiquettes, customs, and protocol, learned during a protracted dwelling in England, were a leitmotif of admiration everywhere. He had always taken a deep curiosity in vigorous outdoor amusements, such as cricket, football, and tennis and his love of sport had, enticed him on to the hunting of tigers and pig-sticking. In polo (at which he was a crack player) he had frequently lead a team whose colours were very seldom dropped.

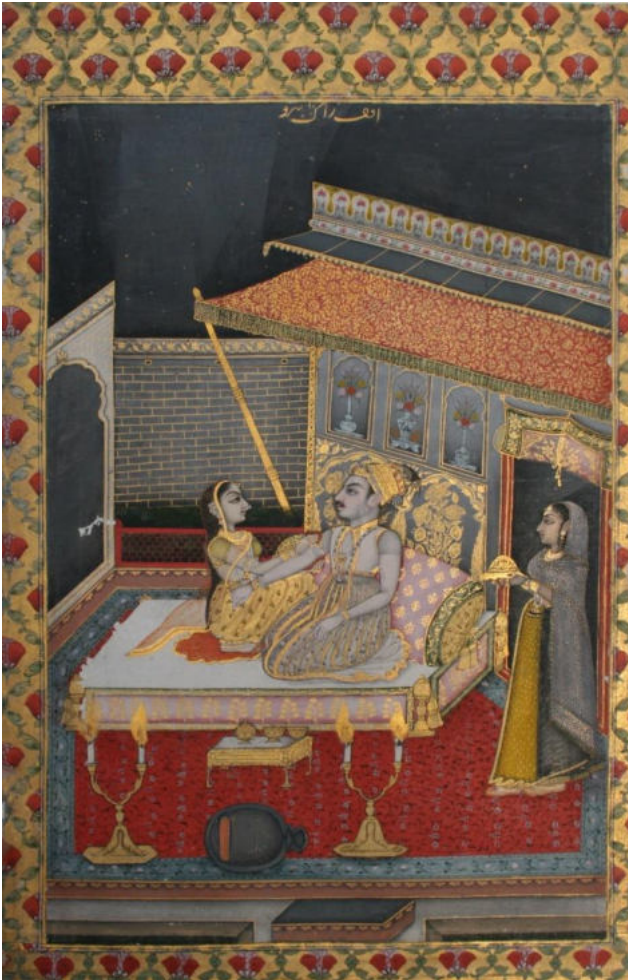


Plate 17.25: Murshidabad Miniature depicting Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah with one of his Mistresses on the Palace roof of Hira Jheel or the Mansurjung Palace.



Plate 17.26: Murshidabad Painting of the Vasant Ragini with Siraj as lord Krishna.

The Nawab was well acknowledged for his English and Urdu poems. He authored the book “*A Mind’s Reproduction*”, (1934). Knowledge of a universal education and replication had led him to the deduction that “intelligence is the most powerful force of creation”. In the Book Sir Wasif Ali Mirza’s prefatory words and many of the reproductions contained in the book seem to be tinted with gloom and despair. Many of the Author’s English garbs, have a idiosyncratic Persian taste. A few outlines from the book are as follows:

“Do not bewildered stand
 Heavens protection is at hand,
 In the race of life we find
 None is ever left behind.
 Depth of meditation
 Is like a fathomless ocean
 Through sorrow’s night of darkest hue
 Comes the light of joy’s awakening morn.
 When duty calls
 Care not what befalls”.

Wasif Ali had also built the Wasif Manzil Palace known as the New Palace (**Plates 17.2, 17.5, 17.7-17.9 & 17.15**), after his name and under the direction and supervision of the Officer of the Public Works Department of the Nadia River’s Division, Mr. Vivian and a Bengali engineer Surendrabarat. This man by the Prince as his supreme abode in Murshidabad, being in the nearest vicinity of the Hazarduari palace; within the estate of the Nizamat Quila between the South or Dakshin Darwaza and the Hazarduari, opposite to the Zurud Mosque and parallel to the Bhagirathi River.

The palace was extensively destroyed in the 1897 earthquake which caused the entire second storey of the edifice to collapse within a few seconds on the 12th of June. The palace was repaired but leaving the second floor vacant. Landscape garden with a hill which lay adjacent to the palace were all destroyed and is not in sight now, except in old archival photographs.

The palace had been planned to look like a European Tudor Castle with the Nawabs Court of Arm’s on it. Now this edifice is preserved by the Archaeological Survey of India and has been altered into a Museum. There is a garden space in anterior of it which has a fountain and several marble sculptures. The garden space is enclosed with a gorgeous iron railing. The main centre point looks like a Norman archway with open-work iron doors. The staircases and statues inside the palace are also made of marble and are worth watching.

The Coat of Arms consisted of the Shield, Supporters: Protected by a Lion on one side and the Unicorn on the other. A Fish Argent proper. The Fish representing the Mahi Maratib; the rank conferred by the Emperors of Delhi. On the top or Crown is a Zulfiqar split on the Double Bladed Sword of Ali, which is the family symbol. The dictum/maxim at the bottom is *Nil Desperadum* (meaning, there is no Cause for Despair) Lion for Bravery, Strength, Ferocity, and Valour; Unicorn for Extreme Courage, Virtue and Strength; Column for Fortitude and Constancy; Sword for Justice and Military Honour.

Sir Wasif Ali was the founder and president of the Hindu-Muslim Unity Association in 1937, named Anjuman-i-Musalman-i-Bangla. Murshidabad had never seen a communal riot but for the 1926 politically concocted riot which had bursted out in Calcutta which the British failed to control even after ten days. They, the British Government had then approached the Nawab

Wasif Ali who managed to infuse discipline and lull after addressing two meetings at Shyambazar and at Park Circus. The Nawabs of Murshidabad have always been patriotic and secular. Murshidabad had become part of East Pakistan for three days, before Sir Syed Wasif Ali Mirza objected and it was reverted to Indian in exchange of Khulna. Wasif Ali had been courted by both Nehru and Jinnah but refused to join politics.

Sir Wasif Ali Mirza Khan Bahadur had besides beautified the town of Murshidabad by constructing an imposing pile of Buildings in the Italian style. He had established a High School in his capital and extended liberal support to local industries within his estate composed of villages in the districts of Murshidabad, Calcutta, Medinipur, Dhaka, Malda, Patna, Purnea, Rangpur, Hooghly, Rajshahi, Birbhum and the Santhal Parganas.

Wasif Ali Mirza (1906-1959 A.D.) was a modern man of the 19th century British and Independent India. He could neither be a “Moon in the Cultural Sky of Bengal”; like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh, living in exile as a pensioner at Metiaburz. Nor could he rise up to the much pampered cultural height of being equated with the “Radiant and Astral, Tagores of Pathuria Ghata or Jorasanko and Santiniketan but he definitely added colour to the multicultural metropolis of Calcutta and much more of Park Street. Wasif Ali did have three principal wives of aristocratic bearing and at least two Mut’ah begums and his descendants still live on either in penury and disgrace at 85 Park Street and at 26 Jawahar Lal Nehru Road, Ripon Street and at the Southern Gateway of the Hazarduari palace or in anonymity in England.

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