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The Islamic Architecture of South Asia with Reference to Bangladesh

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Islamic architecture has a long and glorious history in South Asia. It probably developed in the region in the early part of the eighth century AD.[1] An excavation in Pakistan has revealed many traces of it at the site now known as Bhambore (which may conceivably be Daibul), situated forty miles east of Karachi on the bank of the Arabian Sea. There are signs of a settlement coming to a sudden and violent end in the 12th and 13th centuries.[2] Of the thirteen Kufic inscriptions found so far, two give dates for the mosque of 727 and 907 AD. This mosque measures 128 *x* 122 feet, it has a brick paved courtyard 75 *x* 58 feet having characters on three sides on two rows of pillars and three rows on the west or sanctuary side, where 33 pillar bases are discernible. Curiously, there is no sign of a mihrab in the qibla wall.[3] This Bhambora mosque is the earliest mosque built by the Muslims so far discovered in the Indo-Pak subcontinent or modern South Asia.[4]

The second one is the Khisti Masjid of Lahore built by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. The octagonal Minar and Naskh style of inscription was also available in Sultan Mahmud's period when Muslim rulers did not rule from their capital in South Asia. The capital of Muslim India was founded by Kutubuddin Aybat (the Turkoman slave of Mohammad Ghor) near the site of an ancient city of Prithiraj in 1191 AD. Thereafter, the capital came to be known as Delhi.[5] In 1195 having been appointed Viceroy of the Muslim Dominions in India Kutubuddin started erecting the 238 feet high tower known as Kutub Minar

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1 R. A. Jairazbhoy, *My outline of Islamic Architecture,* London 1961, p. 283.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

3 The Umayyad Mosque of Wasit built by Al-Hajjaj (702 AD) had no mihrab and even in Susa of Iran (722 AD), *ibid.*, p. 284.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

5 Perey Brown, *Indian Architecture (Islamic period),* Bombay 1975, p. 5.

(1199) in commemoration of the event. Beside the Minar, Kutubuddin had begun the Kuwwat-ul-Islam mosque (1191-95) on the plinth of a Hindu Temple of Rai Pithora. The cloister surrounding the mosque was simple with a flat roof on pillars without arches and with corbelled domes over the entrance bay and the sanctuary. The pillars were heavily ornamented with designs of bracelets, armlets, garlands, bell and chain motifs and others. The inscribed arched screen of the facade of the mosque was constructed with care but in a false method.

Gradually, the Sultanate rulers of Delhi built many other monuments in and around Delhi and the Muslim conqueror Ikhtaruddin Muhammad Bakhliyar Khalji reached and conquered Bengal in 1204 AD[6]. Along with him. Sufis and scientists also reached South Asia and they created a human link between the Islamic way of life and the Hindu-Buddhist culture of the region.[7] At this stage, there was no mass migration. The leader with a limited number of soldiers[8] conquered and governed the new country through local citizens. The Muslim rulers left their homeland only with the hope of permanent settlement depending on converting the natives. This conversion was viewed as advantageous as well as admirable. This attitude aroused a common sense of belonging among different converts and rulers. Thus a common or combined technique was used to utilize local skills and material together with the ability to exploit borrowed thought in monuments of common feelings and utility. One such place was the place of prayer or mosque in lieu of Vihara or temple architecture. Not only mosques, tombs, palaces, forts; but also hammams and madrasas were constructed. This architectural developmental work is still going on in modern Bangladesh.

In 1971 Bangladesh emerged as an impendent sovereign state of South Asia from a region originally known as Bangla or Bengal.[9] Its history of Islamic architecture covers a period of more than five hundred years. It may broadly be divided into two phases: the Sultanate and the Mughal. The sultanate monuments of 1338-1538 and the Bara Bhuiyans period up to 1608 include strong regional elements. These elements are reflected in les ornamented surface decorations with traditional terracotta art and the occasional use of intricate

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6 Parameshwri Lal Gupta, the Date of Bakhtiyar Khalgi's occupation of Gauda, Rajshahi 1975, p. 29.

7 Al Beruni the scientist; Shah Jalal Muzarred, the Preacher and Sufi, Shah Jaala Tabrezi, Sheikh Alaul Huq and others.

8 Bengal was conquered only with 18 soldiers.

9 A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed, Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury (ed.), *Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage,* Bangladesh. 2004, p. 1.

stone carving and glazed tiles of Seljukid origin. Other regional elements include the curvilinear cornice, the *chauchala* and small multimode open courtyard (sometimes with cloisters) having corners (round and octagonal), octagonal minarets and gateways. Monuments are also sometimes furnished with dated inscriptions. Though most of the Sultanate monuments are at Gour and Pandua, i. e largely in west Bengal (India), some beautiful monuments are to be found in Bangladesh.

Of the surviving monuments, the stone tomb in Sonargaon near Dhaka built by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azamshah, son of Sultan Sikander Shah of the Iliyasshahi dynasty, is the most attractive.[10] This is the earliest partially surviving structure of the period. It identifies the glorious palace of Sonargaon, the capital of the eastern region of the pre-Muslim and early Muslim period. The fine stone sarcophagus consists of a single block of black basalt forming a keeled top which is placed on a table of the same material. James Wise described it as being surrounded by an enclosure of stone pillars supporting a canopy.[11] The black basalt table was decorated with chiseled work on stone. Today decoration is visible only on its eastern face. The cornice of the table has a line of billet decoration below a beaded ornament - a pattern similar to that of Adina Masjid of Pandua. Moreover, the motif of the trefoil arched niche and hanging lamp design is unique here. Though no inscription is visible in the tomb here, the carved motifs indicate that it belongs to the early Iliyas Shahi period, Sultan Giyasuddin Azamshah was in Sonargaon up to 1399 and ruled *Bangalah,* including Sonargaon, up to 1409 AD.

The second still extant stone tomb of Bangladesh is at Bagerhat. The inscriptional record of the structure undoubtedly marks an epoch of architectural activity in this region. It indicates a date of 863 AH/1459 AD. The Sultanate structure was intended as a tomb for the famous saint Khan Jahan/Ulugh Khan Jahan, a historic personality of the age. The tomb is about a mile and a half southeast of the famous Shait Gumbad Masjid of the Sultanate period. The tomb stands on an elevated site to the north of a pond and adjoins a mosque on the west. The tomb complex is enclosed within a double brick boundary wall. This extensive boundary wall has an entrance on the northeastern corner and three arched gateways on the south. The second enclosure wall contains a gateway opening directly from the south, through which the domed tomb chamber of Khan Jahan is approached. An interesting feature is the provision of a *chauchala* accommodated within a two-centered

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10 Habiba Khatun, Iqlim Sonargaon, *History Jurisdiction Monuments,* Dhaka 2006, p. 139.

11 *Ibid.*

arched passage; the softness of which reproduces a *chauchala* hut design with bamboo rafters. This bears a similarity to the *chauchala* domes and designs in the Shail Gumbad Masjid.

Outside the domed tomb chamber stands the open stone tomb of Ali Muhammad Tahir alias Pir Ali. Here one may possibly get the commonly known identification of these tombs together, i. e *Khanjali dargah* complex of Bagerhat.

The *Khanjali dargah* complex is on the bank of Thakur Dighi, a pond from earlier days.[12] The sarcophagus of black stone is set on three steps of the same material; the whole being covered with beautifully carved verses from the Qur'an and Persian inscriptions giving the date of the demise of Ulugh Khan Jahan. The floor of the tomb was originally decorated with glazed tiles of Seljuqid origin. The colors are white, blue and brown with attractive floral motifs. The squint method transforms the square corners into an octagon carrying the base of the hemispherical dome above. The curved cornice bands gently slope outwards to the round corner towers, each facetted at regular intervals. The towers are crowned with ribbed cupolas, a style followed later in the Mughal dome. A description of the monument is available in a written but unpublished manuscript of 1866.[13] The manuscript suggests that there is a crypt under the building containing the actual grave. "Even a flight of steps was seen and the walls of the underground chamber were found covered with inscriptions". Now there is no opening to an underground chamber.[14]

The town of Khalifatabad, where Ulugh Khan Jahan/Khan al Azam Khan Jahan died in 1459 AD, was founded by Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah. The present name of the place is Bagerhat. That place-name was possibly in use in earlier days and Khalifatabad, the official name of the town, was given to it by the Sultan. The local name is still in use, just like the place-name Dhaka of pre Mughal days. Khalifatabad and Dhaka are of the same period.

The auster tomb of Khan Jahan bears some affinity to the famous Eflakhi tomb of Pandua (India) of an earlier date. Both the monuments are fine examples of a blending of the local Bengali elements such as terracotta motifs, stone door lintels, curved cornices, corner towers and extraneous elements like the drumless dome, the octagonal interior and the squinches.

The Sultanate period is remarkable for the growth of mosque architecture in a simple but richly decorated style and well constructed order. One such example

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12 A. H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal,* Dhaka 1961, p. 137.

13 Iqlim. *Ibid.,* p. 143.

14 Foot note *ibid.,* p. 143.

is the Shait Gumbad mosque of Bagerhat, the largest surviving monument of its kind in Bangladesh. The south-eastern part of modern Bangladesh, the Sonargaon unit or *iqlim* Sonargaon of the state of Bangalah in medieval Bengal, presently known as Bagerhat, was formerly known as Khalifatabad in the 15th-16th centuries. This is also the site of a dignified mausoleum of Khan Jahan/ Ulugh Khan Jahan built in 1459 AD.

Though no inscription is visible in the mosque, it has been dated by different historians on the basis of its style and decoration within a period of 1440-1459 AD[15] Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah of the Iliayas Shahi dynasty ruled from 1436 to 1459 AD The most magnificent and the largest brick built mosque in Bangladesh, the Shait Gumbad Mosque was built by Ulugh Khan Jahan of the court of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah.

The vast prayer hall of the mosque measures 160′ x 108″ externally and 142′3″ x 90′6″ internally. The interior has a somber atmosphere. It is divided into seven aisles and eleven bays by a forest of sixty columns or *Khambas.* These are on slender and carved stone columns of varied designs now covered by bricks. The six columns in each row have been placed at right angles to the *qibla* wall. The columns together with the side walls produce 70 squares and 7 rectangles which are surmounted by seventy-seven domes (or *Kumbos* meaning Gumbaz in Seljuk term) including 7 *chauchalas* in the middle row. The middle row is broader than the others. Here one can find the explanation of the name *Shait Gombuz Masjid* or sixty-domed mosque of Bagerhat. Khambas meaning columns in Bangali and Kumbas meaning domes in Seljuq confused the locals with the pronunciation of the word and as such it is a misnomer.[16]

The almost entirely bare massive walls are slightly battered and about 9' thick. The middle row with the *chauchalas* is broader and a bit higher than the others. Over the centre of the east facade there is a rectangular pediment or dochala type of cornice from which the eaves curve gracefully downward on either side and terminate at the round corner towers. The pediment has a unique type of decoration that may have been derived from the gable-end of the do-chala hut roof typical of Bengal.[17] It bears a resemblance to the gable end pediment of the Damascus mosque.

The middle bay divides the mosque into two halves, each being covered

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15 Pery Brown, 1440. A. H. Dani, 1436-59, S. M. Hasan and Nazimuddin hold the same view. Iqlim, *ibid,* p. 130.

16 Iqlim, *Ibid.*, p. 130; *Kh. Alamgir, Khan Jahan, the Saint,* Dhaka 2000, p. 14.

17 A. H. Dani. *ibid;* Iqlim, *ibid,* p. 132.

by a cluster of 35 domes.[18] The front pediment and the *chauchala* design of the middle bay is unlike any in Bengal. Each *chauchala* has coverings on four sides, curved up to a certain point and then covered by a flat covering. Its ceiling is exactly like any *chauchala* hut ceiling in Bengal emulating even its bamboo frame in the soffit. This *chauchala* dome form may be regarded as a four segmented Bengali vault form over a rectangular space.

The eleven pointed arch facade on the east corresponds to the ten *mihrabs* and postern door on the qibla wall. The central *mihrab* is decorated with carved stones with multi-cuspid terracotta plaster. The spandrels are embellished with expanded lotuses. Through the centre of the *mihrab* hangs a carved chain and bell (in the form of a square). The side *mihrabs* are all made of bricks with similar decoration. The postern gate stands next to the central *mihrab* on the north. Though this is characteristic of Bengal it can also be found in the Seljuk type mosques in Samarra, Kufa, Basra and Egypt. In Bengal, a postern door way is also to be found in the Adina mosque of Panda of the Iliyas Shahi dynasty. There is also a mimber. The most dignified part of the mosque is its massive but simple tapering walls and bastion-like round towers with cupolas and spiral staircases. The towers rise 13′ above the roof level and are pierced by windows. Rain water runs down the roof over these towers. One of the towers was used as a *mazina*.

The northern, southern and back walls are similarly bare but the spandrels of the arches are sparsely decorated with terracotta vegetal and geometric patterns.

The huge red brick mosque in Bagerhat is a quite extraordinary example of a building style typical of west Asia, with strong walled arched doors, a pediment design reminiscent of the Damascus mosque and the postern gate of the Samarra mosque, the imposing gateway on the east together with a big open courtyard probably surrounded by a cloister. The central Asian system of the use of available material and motifs in conquered regions was perhaps applied in the mosque. Recent excavation also indicates that the courtyard was paved with bricks though, at present, no trace is visible.[19] For ablution, the pond was at the back of the mosque. The location and antiquity of Bagerhat is still a puzzle in the history of Bengal.

The city was situated on the bank of the old Bhairab River. It was probably

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18 Iqlim. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

19 Recent excavation report of the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Bangladesh gives supports to this view.

a frontier outpost of the Sultans of Bengal[20] during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah (1436-1459). Khan Jahan probably protected the frontier of Bengal (modern Bangladesh) with the help of naval forces, from his *ribat,* comprising local and Seljuk soldiers who came to Bengal from central Asia. The dried-up bed of the earlier river course is still seen close to the monuments. The river has receded one mile to the east. It is presumed that Khan Jahan proceeded from Pandua to Bagerhat, the South West frontier of the Sonargaon region of Bangala (modern Bangladesh). A recently discovered early Muslim architectural site in Jessore at Barabazar is very important in this regard. The Satagachiya mosque of Barabzar is conjectured, on the basis of archaeological evidence, to have influenced the Shait Gumhad mosque. Before reaching the S. W- frontier, Khan Jahan might have halted and built a monument at Satagaehiya. The 35 domed Satgachiya mosque of Barabazar is in itself equivalent to one wing of the Shait Gumbad mosque, a 77 domed structure (35+35+7). The architecture of the Barabazar mosque shows craftsmanship inferior to that of Bagerhat. Barabazar might have been the site of *Shahr-i-Naw,* a town of Iliyas Shah (1342 - 58) (not yet identified).[21]

In modern Bangladesh there are other sites and monuments scattered throughout the country. These include: Masjidkur mosque Khulna; Ruwailbari mosque, Netrakona Shankarpasha mosque, Hobigonj (1493-1519), Sharshadi mosque, Feni (16th century). The fifteen-domed Rawailbari mosque occupies a fortified site of the same name in Netrokona. It is on the bank of the ancient Betai River, at present only a creek. It was probably a frontier outpost like Bagerhat. Glazed tiles were found here in a building named Buruz mound. It was probably a 15th century fortress with a naval base resembling Bagerhat.[22]

Buildings of the Sultanate Period were of red brick with some stone columns as well as stone revetment. Mud mortars were used in the core, the main mortar being lime. One such building still in situ in Bangladesh is the Chota Sona Masjid of Nawabganj Rajshahi. This brick mosque is covered with stone slabs having ultra refined examples of the stone cutters' art. The mosque was originally roofed with fifteen golden domes including three Chauchala domes in the middle row. The golden style was derived from Abbasid period architecture of Seljuk origin. The *Chauchala* of the Chota Sona mosque differs slightly from those of Shait Gumbad. It is hut shaped with sloping or bent eaves. It was erected by one wall.

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20 Kh. Alamgir; *Resume of Sultanate Architecture of Bengal (Islamic Art),* volume 1, Dhaka 2007, p. 58.

21 *ibid.,* p. 57.

22 *ibid.,* p. 60.

Recent excavation has unearthed an open courtyard on the east of the sanctuary scattered with wonderful tiles, mainly in black, blue, and white, skillfully arranged within widening circles and banded with zigzag patterns consisting of plant and floral motifs within spearhead designs and delicate, elaborate floral tendrils, ornamental diamond and star motifs, etc. The floor with these tiles resembles *Alpana*, a folk art style of decoration characteristic of Bangladesh.

The partly ruined Darasbari Modrasah and Mosque complex is another example of splendid Bangladesh Muslim architecture. The Darasbari Madrasah and Mosjid dates from 1479 AD. The now renovated huge oblong structure half a mile south west of the Kotwali gate is an elegant example of a Bangladesh madrasah and mosque complex (7 bays *x* 4 aisles). According to an inscription it was built during the reign of Sultan Yusuf Shah in 1479 AD. The inscription attributes the building to the son of Sultan Barbak Shah, a great builder, whose inscription offers the earliest evidence of the city of Dhaka.

The inscription is in the Tughra style typical of Bengal. It has the type of indigenous curvilinear roof first used in the Shait Gumbad mosque at Bagerhat and crystallised in the Chota Sona Masjid in 1493-1519. Brick piers, pointed arches and hut shaped *Chauckala* domes all characteristic of the Sultani mosque are seen here. The transition is effected by stalactite pendants. The mihrabs are of brick and finely decorated.

Bagha Masjid is one of the handsome medieval buildings in the Rajshahi district. Both externally and internally the walls of the mosque are tastefully adorned with brick ornamentation of diverse patterns. The facade is divided into two parts both horizontally and vertically and harmoniously panelled. Each panel is decorated with rosette motifs and geometrical designs resembling the stone carving in Chota Sona and Kusumba. The octagonal corner towers identify it as belonging to the Husain Shahi Period.

The Kusumba mosque in the Naogaon (Rajshahi) district was built in 1558. According to its inscription the mosque was built by Sulaiman after the fall of the Husain Shahi dynasty. The six-domed mosque is divided into two aisles and three bays by a row of carved stone pillars. The square spaces above the sanctuary are covered by small, squat, drumless domes of *Bangla Style.*[23] The mosque displays a sumptuous and sensitive type of stone carving.

Katrabo was the first capital of Isa Khan Masnadali, the Bara Bhuiya leader (1599) of the transition period (Sultanate). It is located in the outskirts of modern Sonargaon and Rupgonj. The fortified Palace area contained a (now

23 Nazimuddin Ahmed., *Glazed Tiles as a Decorative Art.* Islamic Art, Dhaka 2007, p. 106.

ruined) hammam on the bank of the huge Dewan Dighi decorated with glazed tiles (now preserved in Bangladesh National Museum). It clearly establishes the fact that the floor decoration with tiles that began in the early days of the Iliyas Shahi period continued and was included in the decorative style of the Mughal.

The pre-Mughal Muslim period is regarded as the Sultanate period of Bengal, when Bengali architecture assumed a definite form, endowing it with a separate identity distinct from the architecture of the Delhi Sultans. Though it started with ideas taken from Delhi during the earlier Islamic era, by the middle of the 15th century it was completely independent from local trends and displayed a new look in line with the aspirations of the local people. Most of the extant examples of Sultani Bangladesh architecture are of religious monuments. Brick is used as the building material occasionally revetted with stone. They are almost always strengthened by stone pillars or lintels quarried from older buildings. The mosques are generally divided into several categories such as square single domed, single domed with verandah, square multi-domed or rectangular multi-domed (3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 15, 28, 35, 77) with vaults in the nave roofed with domes in the form of Bengali Chauchala huts. The roofs are always curvilinear and end in four corner towers rising up to roof level, sometimes round and in the later period octagonal. Recent excavations revealed courtyard type mosques in Bangladesh. All the monuments possess the following important features:

[a] The insertion of a number of mihrabs in the qibla wall corresponding to the number of arched openings in the front wall or facade of the sanctuary or liwan and a maqsura in the form of a second storey attached to the right hand side of the qibla wall. Corbelled pendentives are also a distinguishing feature.

[b] The monuments are always ornamented with terracotta plaques or carved bricks of vegetal, geometric and floral designs on glazed tiles. The use of mud and lime mortar and the use of inscriptions of local design (Tughra style) are also characteristic of the pure Bengali style.

[c] The tombs are always square surmounted by a single dome, with inscriptions in the underground chamber and tiles employed in the decoration.

[d] The madrasa is also a square type monument with cells arranged around a courtyard. In its plan it resembles the plan of the Buddhist temple or *vihara* of the pre-Muslim Bengal.

[e] Some palaces contain the remains of fort wall (Rawailbari) gateways

and hammams. [24] The ruins conform to the local style with heavy walls and horizontal curved mouldings. The method of construction was both arcuate and pendentive. The style crossed the boundary further eastward. In Assam, the entrance gateway of the Kachari Rajas capital displays these characteristics. There are panels of terracotta ornamentation. The period revived the spirit of self identity in South Asian architecture known as the Bangala style, which never lost its character.

The epoch-making date of 1608, the date of the arrival of the Mughal in Bangladesh and at Dhaka, completely changed the architectural scene in the region. This Bengal region of South Asia lost its independence and became a province of North India with its centre in Delhi. This change is discernible in all architectural activities in Bangladesh. Of the extant monuments of the Mughal period mention may be made of the Lalbag fort, the fort mosque and the tomb of Bibi Pari, the mosque of Musa Khan (Dhaka), the Atiya Masjid (Tangail), Dhanmodi Idgah, the tomb of Hazi Khwaja Shahbaz, the Dhakesawari Temple, the Kantanagar Temple (Dinajpur), the Bara Katra, the Choto Katra, the Pagla bridge, the Zinjira palace.[25]

Mughal monuments are built in imitation of the Mughal Imperial monuments in northern India, but on a smaller scale. The material, as in the sultanate period, is brick but always plastered over with panels and receases. The mosques are mostly rectangular with three domes, the middle one being larger than the ones on the sides. Of the arched entrances the middle-ones are bigger and four centered. The domes are bulbous in shape and completely different from those of the earlier periods.

There are mihrabs in the back wall corresponding to the entrance in the eastern wall. A straight cornice is found with a marlon parapet as part of the decoration. Marlon decoration is also to be seen around the base of the dome. There is a finial with a *Kalasa* motif. There are also slender comer turrets. The walls are paneled and there is muqarnas decoration in the gateways. These are all general characteristics of the ornamentation. The plain, simple characteristics of Mughal architecture are to be seen in many Muslim monuments of the country and rich people made substantial contributions to this sphere of architecture. The tradition of building mosques with three domes is still continued.

The most astonishing feature to be noticed here is that the temple

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24 A. B. M. Hasain, "Bengal Architecture though Ages", Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage Dhaka 2004, p. 333.

25 Habiba Khatun, (Islamic Art), ed. *Isakhan and Katrabo in the history of Bengal.* (Dhaka, 2007) p. 126.

architecture of the period continued the combination of the local, Sultani and Mughal architectural style of Bangladesh, as in the Kantaji Mondir. During the British period (1765-1942) Zamindars built monuments characteristic of Western influence. Religious buildings displayed earlier characteristics along with new western motifs. The emergence of the colonial style can be found in the Curzon Hall and the High Court building of the present day. Of course, local motifs like *Chini Thikri* were also in use (Tara Masjid). With the partition of India, Pakistani influence became visible in the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar monuments of red brick.

The modern High Court building of Dhaka bears testimony to stone cutwork in bricks. Islamic architecture was adopted in the S. M Hall building of Dhaka University. In Bangladesh, all religious monuments, particularly the mosques, follow the traditional Islamic architectural style in the iwans *minarets, minors,* corner towers, mihrabs, mimbers and arches in all mosques. New ideas have also been added, as is in Baitulmukuram.

A finest building now in Bangladesh is the secular building of Sangsad Bhaban of Luis Khan. The architects of Bangladesh have also been trying to create new forms in their freedom. Such ideas are reflected in the Shahid Minar National Memorial, a Mausoleum of three leaders. These do not represent earlier the trends of Islamic architecture in South Asia and do not incorporate Islamic elements into their new design.