

From Foreign Forms to Local Identity: The Architectural Legacy of Bengal's First Bengali Sultan

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Abstract

The Indian subcontinent was ruled by Muslims beginning in the 13th century, when Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal in 1204. For several centuries following this event, Bengal was governed by Muslim rulers, most of whom came from other countries. These foreign Muslim rulers significantly influenced the region's politics, culture, and architecture. In the early 1400s, Sultan Jalal Uddin Muhammad Shah became the first native Bengali Muslim, and the architectural forms that emerged during his reign signify a crucial stage in the regional assimilation of Islamic architectural traditions in Bengal. The development of the *Eklakhi* style, characterised by *do-chala* roofs, curved cornices, bamboo-inspired corner turrets, and terracotta ornamentation, flourished during his reign. This study examines the political and cultural context of his rule, analyses the architectural innovations of the period, and traces their lasting influence on other Sultanate and Mughal architecture. It highlights the significance of indigenous architectural forms in shaping Bengal's unique Islamic architectural identity.

Keywords: Bengal Sultanate, Jalal Uddin Muhammad Shah, Islamic architecture, *Eklakhi* style, Local Style

Introduction

The Arabic word '*Sultan*' means 'authority' or 'power'. Primarily, the term *Sultan* denoted the sovereign power of a Muslim ruler in a particular region;¹ namely, one who governs according to *Shariah* law is called a *Sultan*. The territories under his rule are known as the *Sultanate*. These Sultans used to govern their states independently, acknowledging the authority of the Caliphs as representatives of Allah. For this reason, they were also called the Caliphs' representatives. In the Indian subcontinent, the Delhi *Sultanate* was established in 1206 by Qutb-ud-din Aibak, which lasted until the reign of the Lodis, that is, until 1526. On the other hand, some regions saw the emergence of separate Sultanate systems within the vast Delhi Sultanate, sometimes under Delhi's authority and at other times as sovereign rulers. One such important provincial Sultanate was the Bengal Sultanate.

Islam entered the Indian subcontinent through multiple routes, including maritime trade and military conquests. The consolidation of Muslim political authority in Bengal commenced in the early thirteenth century. However, the spread of Islam in Bengal was neither sudden nor uniform. Rather, it was a slow process of cultural acculturation between Islamic customs and the existing Hindu and Buddhist societal frameworks and social structures. Architecture provides one of the

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¹ Britannica Editors, "Sultan," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (Britannica Inc., 2026), under "Sultan," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sultan-Islamic-title>.

most visible material records of this cultural exchange. In the early 15th century, the ascension of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, the first native Bengali Muslim ruler, marked a significant transformation in the architectural and political history of Bengal. Before his reign, Bengal had been ruled by Muslim dynasties of foreign origin, such as the *Khiljis*, *Mamluks*, *Balban Turks* and *Ilyas Shahis*, whose architectural expressions primarily reflected Central Asian and Persian influences. However, the rule of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (r. 1415–1433) marked a vital shift in Bengal’s political and cultural realms. As a converted Bengali Muslim Sultan, he occupied a unique position, enabling him to uphold Islamic governance while embracing indigenous values, resulting in an administration and architectural style that blended local and foreign elements.²

This period is particularly significant in Bengal’s history because it witnessed the emergence of a distinct architectural style that harmonised Islamic forms with traditional Bengali features such as the curved cornice, ‘*chala*’-style roofs and bamboo-inspired corner towers. Most clearly seen in the *Eklakhi* Mausoleum, these characteristics embodied regional aesthetics and responded effectively to Bengal’s climate and material realities. Integrating geometric Islamic designs with terracotta artistry further enriched this architectural identity. Through such innovations, Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah laid the foundation for the subsequent evolution of Islamic architectural styles in Bengal.³

This study explores the historical context of Jalaluddin’s reign, analyses the architectural innovations introduced during his rule, and traces their influence in the later *Ilyas Shahi*, *Hussain Shahi*, *Afghan*, *Mughal*, and modern eras. By examining these transformations, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how the local identity in medieval Bengal was articulated and negotiated through architectural forms.

The remainder of this article is organised into three main sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the political circumstances leading to the rise of Sultan Jalal Uddin Muhammad Shah. The second section examines the architectural characteristics of his reign, and the third section traces the influence of this style across subsequent dynasties.

This study utilises a qualitative historical-analytical methodology to examine the architectural advancements associated with the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah in Bengal. The study integrates diverse forms of evidence, encompassing architectural remnants, epigraphic documents, numismatic data, and secondary historical interpretations, to construct a contextual and material comprehension of the era.

Surviving monuments, particularly the *Eklakhi* Mausoleum and related Sultanate structures, are examined with respect to their spatial organisation, elevations, building materials, and decorative elements. This thorough examination enables the identification of prevalent architectural characteristics, including curved cornices, *chala*-type roofs, brickwork, and corner turrets.

Epigraphic sources found on mosques and tombs are used to construct chronological frameworks and understand patterns of patronage. These inscriptions provide details about dates, the context

² Abdul Karim, *History of Bengal: The Sultanate Period* (Bangla Academy, 1993), 70-73; Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyay, *Two Hundred Years of Bengal’s History: The Era of the Independent Sultans (1338–1538 AD)* (Bharati Book Stall, 1960), vol. 1, 26.

³ Asma Serajuddin, “Tomb Architecture,” in *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2012), under “Tomb Architecture,” https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Tomb_Architecture

of dedications and religious connections, though they do not always clearly state the architectural purpose.

Numismatic evidence, especially coins issued during the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, is used to contextualise political power and ideological stance. While coinage reflects sovereignty and religious legitimacy, its link to architectural creation is regarded with caution and not considered as direct proof of the patron's intentions.

The study utilises both primary and secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed publications, and Banglapedia entries, to contextualise the analysis within historiography. This aids in discerning the prevailing perceptions and theoretical frameworks of Islamic architecture in Bengal. A comparative analytical framework is utilised to comprehend the continuity and evolution of architectural elements throughout various periods. Chosen instances from the Ilyas Shahi, Hussain Shahi, Afghan, and Mughal periods are analysed regarding their distinct architectural features, geographical spread, and functional or symbolic significance. This research examines multiple potential avenues of legacy sharing, including shared craft practices, ecological adaptability, and the utilisation of locally sourced materials, rather than supposing a direct influence.

Finally, the study acknowledges the limitations of the existing evidence. In the absence of explicit contemporary written records elucidating architectural patronage or purpose, interpretations depend on material analysis and contextual associations. Therefore, the conclusions are presented with caution and focus on different types and trends rather than making definitive claims about deliberate design strategies.

The Arrival of Islam and the Process of Cultural Acculturation in Bengal

The mechanism by which Islam developed and spread in Bengal has long been a topic of discussion among academics. According to a commonly held belief, Islam entered the area through various means, including trade, migration, Sufi missionary work, and political expansion. Through the Indian Ocean trading network, Arab and Persian traders had already established business ties with Bengal long before Muslim control was established. Early Muslim settlements were established along the coast and in commerce hubs as a result of these encounters, which brought Islamic cultural and theological concepts to the area.⁴

Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's military conquest of Bengal in 1204 marked a pivotal moment in the early thirteenth century, bringing Muslim monarchs to power. By constructing mosques, madrasas, and administrative buildings linked to the Delhi Sultanate, this conquest made Islam more institutionally present. However, the broad embrace of Islam in Bengal cannot be entirely explained by political conquest.⁵

There were other factors than governmental power that contributed to the spread of Islam in Bengal. Sufi missionaries, especially figures like Hazrat Shah Jalal, were instrumental in advancing Islam by upholding moral integrity, offering spiritual guidance, and engaging in nonviolent missionary work. Islam had reached out to local communities, particularly those disadvantaged by the era's strict caste systems, because of its emphasis on individual piety,

⁴ Abdur Rahman Fuad, "Debates on the Emergence of Islam in Bengal through the Arab-Turkish Existence," *Bilig* 112, (2025): 159-182.

⁵ Fuad, "Debates on the Emergence of Islam in Bengal," 159-182.

generosity, and spiritual devotion rather than coercion. Additionally, Sufi networks built mosques, madrasas, and spiritual centres that progressively incorporated Islamic teachings into Bengal's social and cultural life.⁶

One of the most distinctive features of Islamisation in Bengal was the process of cultural adaptation and acculturation. Sufi missionaries frequently integrated aspects of pre-existing Bengali religious and cultural rituals into Islamic life rather than discarding regional customs ('urf). Islamic principles mixed with regional customs ('urf), language, creative manifestations, and social systems, resulting in a kind of cultural syncretism. This blending of Islamic and native elements is reflected in customs like visiting shrines, writing devotional poetry, and designing buildings. Islam became firmly ingrained in Bengal's social and cultural landscape through this slow, adaptive process, eventually creating a unique Bengali Muslim identity that combined Islamic values with regional cultural customs.⁷

The First Bengali Sultan

During the reigns of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty rulers Saifuddin Hamzah Shah, Bayazid Shah, and Alauddin Firuz Shah, the zamindar (landlord) of the Dinajpur region, Raja Ganesh, became quite powerful. Taking advantage of political turbulence, he overthrew Alauddin Firuz Shah of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty in 1414 and seized power over Bengal.⁸ Upon ascending to power, some historical sources suggest that his reign led to political conflict between the Muslim elites and existing regional power groups over their authority. In this situation, Nur Qutb-ul-Alam of Pandua sought help from Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of Jaunpur, who then launched an expedition into Bengal. Alarmed by this campaign, Raja Ganesh was compelled to surrender himself to Nur Qutb-ul-Alam, convert his son, Jadu, to Islam, and, in 1415, install him on the throne. However, after the Sultan of Jaunpur's departure, Raja Ganesh once again deposed his son Jadu, consolidated power, assumed the title 'Danujamardana,' and even issued coins in his own name. Later, he entrusted power to his younger son, Mahendra, but the converted Jadu ousted both his father, Ganesh, and his brother, Mahendra, and took control of Bengal's throne.⁹

When Ganesh's son Jadu converted to another faith, he was renamed Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah. Although he first came to power in 1415, his actual reign began in 1418, that is, when he ascended the throne for the second time. Since the Muslim conquest of Bengal, no local Bengali ruler had emerged as the Sultan of Bengal. Therefore, Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah was the first Bengali Muslim Sultan. He ruled Bengal with great skill for almost one and a half decades, until 1433. He not only expanded Bengal's territory but also established his authority over nearly the entire region.¹⁰

Due to the prevailing peace, the kingdom's wealth and manpower flourished during the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah. On the other hand, he was also successful as a diplomat. His relationships with the Timurid ruler Shah Rukh and the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, Al-Ashraf Barsbay, were strengthened. Additionally, he was generous and tolerant towards the local non-

⁶ Mahmudulhassan, et al., "Islam in Bangladesh: The Legacy of Hazrat Shah Jalal and the Spread of Islam in Bengal," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 2 (2025): 127-144.

⁷ Mahmudulhassan, et al., "Islam in Bangladesh: The Legacy of Hazrat Shah Jalal," 127-144.

⁸ Mukhopadhyay, *Two Hundred Years of Bengal's History: The Era of the Independent Sultans*, vol. 2, 5-11.

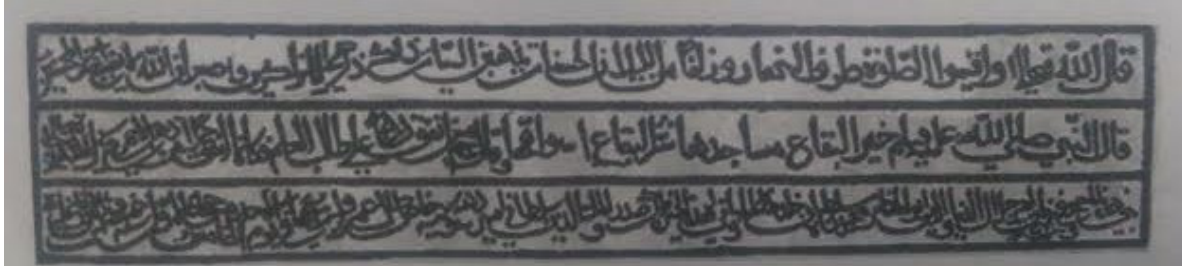
⁹ Muhammad Abu Taher, "Raja Ganesh," in *Banglapedia* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2012), under "Raja Ganesh," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Raja_Ganesh

¹⁰ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal* (Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985), vol. 1A, 160-163.

Muslims. As a result, local Brahmins and scholars received considerable patronage from him. In fact, a Hindu named Rajyadhar was even appointed to the esteemed position of his commander-in-chief. It is worth noting that he received a prestigious robe, or khilat, from the Abbasid Caliphs.¹¹

Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah was a just and kind Sultan. An analysis of the coins minted during his reign reveals that he was a devout Sultan. He established mosques and madrasas throughout his kingdom, as evidenced by inscriptions from his era (Figure 1). He also undertook the reconstruction and repair of mosques destroyed by his father. In addition, he enhanced the beauty of his capital, Pandua, and later the relocated city of Gaur by constructing various buildings.¹²

Figure 1: Inscription related to mosque and madrasa, Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah



Source: Yusuf Siddiq, 2017

Development of Local Architectural Styles

The reign of Jalaluddin, the first Bengali Muslim Sultan by conversion, holds significant importance in the history of Bengal from various perspectives. This period especially marked the beginning of a new era in Bengali architecture. Just as he was a true local Bengali, it appears that indigenous building methods were more frequently incorporated into architectural practices during his reign. The combination of materials and foreign Muslim architectural styles used during the reigns of previous sultans, with Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah's local building techniques, created a distinct tradition within Bengali Muslim architecture. Many historians have described the local construction methods of the Sultanate period as the “Bengal style” in historical architecture.¹³

The finest example of Bengali or native Bengali tradition is the Eklakhi Mausoleum (Figure-2), built during the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah. Located in Hazrat Pandua, Malda, the mausoleum contains the remains of three graves. Here rest Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah and, beside him, his wife and son, Sultan Ahmad Shah.¹⁴ Constructed with a square ground plan (Figure-3), such mausoleums in Bengal are believed to have originated with the tomb of the Delhi Sultan Iltutmish (1233 AD).¹⁵

¹¹ Muhammad Abu Taher, “Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah,” in *Banglapedia* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2012), under “Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah,” https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Jalaluddin_Muhammad_Shah

¹² Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 161.

¹³ A.B.M. Hossain, *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series—2: Architecture* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), 70—71.

¹⁴ Ghulam Husain Salim. *Riyazus Salatin*, trans. Maulavi Abdus Salam (The Asiatic Society, 1902), 118.

¹⁵ A.B.M. Hossain, “Eklakhi Mausoleum,” in *Banglapedia* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under “Eklakhi Mausoleum,” https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Eklakhi_Mausoleum

Figure 2: Eklakhi Mausoleum, Pandua (Maldah, India)



Source: Amitabha Gupta, Creative Commons By 4.0. (Accessed 2024)

Figure 3: Layout, Eklakhi Mausoleum



Source: Dani, 1961

The Eklakhi Mausoleum, distinguished by its single dome, attracts attention for its unique architectural features. Its roof has been constructed in imitation of the '*chala*' roof of rural Bengali huts.¹⁶ The cornice is curved and slopes downward (Figure-4). This domed building, without a drum, is made of readily available Bengali materials: brick, with corner-attached side turrets at all four corners. The concept of side turrets likely originated in the bamboo posts placed at the corners of Bengali huts, which were used to reinforce the structure. Just as these bamboo posts were tied together with rope for stability, similar rope-like mouldings in a ring pattern can be observed on the side turrets of the Eklakhi Mausoleum.¹⁷ Furthermore, in adorning the mausoleum, the traditional local terracotta art of Bengal has merged with Muslim geometric and abstract motifs to achieve a unique balance, one that, though previously used in Muslim architecture, had not been fully integrated until now.¹⁸

Figure 4: Thatched and bamboo hut of rural Bengal



Source: gsnnews24.com (Accessed 2023)

Figure 5: Khan Jahan Ali's Mausoleum and Mosque, Bagerhat, 1982



Source: Muhammad Sirajul Islam, MIT Libraries, Aga Khan Visual Archive/Archnet (Accessed 2023)

¹⁶ The roofs of traditional Bengali huts made of straw and bamboo were sloped downwards from the center, a style known as "*chala*" roofs. Sometimes, this roof curvature was sloped on two sides, which was called "*do-chala*," and other times, it was sloped on all four sides, known as "*chau-chala*." The reason for the sloping roofs and curved cornices is the heavy rainfall in Bengal. Such a roof structure primarily allows rainwater to flow down easily. Therefore, this *chala* roof is an age-old concept in Bengal, where the people of the region have incorporated this idea into their architecture by considering the climate, readily available materials, and their socio-economic conditions.

¹⁷ Ahmad Hasan Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* (Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961), 75-77.

¹⁸ Saifuddin Chowdhury, "Terracotta Art," in *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Terracotta Art," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Terracotta_Art

Through the use of the Eklakhi tomb, the application of local tradition ushered in a new trend in the architecture of medieval Bengal, which has led scholars to classify it as part of what is now known as the 'Eklakhi style'.¹⁹ The term is primarily a modern academic term rather than a contemporary fifteenth-century expression. Historians of Bengal architecture use the term to describe architecture characterised by a square plan, a single dome, curved cornices, brickwork and engaged corner turrets. These features represent the adaptation of Islamic architectural forms to the climatic conditions and local building traditions of Bengal. Later, in Bengal, this style became extremely popular. This architectural style is particularly noticeable in mosques, which are the main religious structures of Muslims. Following the restoration of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty after the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, this style continued to evolve. During this time, the integration of local traditions with other architectural styles infused new energy into the design and construction of buildings.²⁰ A prime example of this is the Khan Jahan style architecture found in the Bagerhat and Khulna regions of southwestern Bangladesh. Looking at Khan Jahan's tomb complex in Bagerhat makes this clear. Like the Eklakhi tomb, it is a single-domed mausoleum built on a square plan. The tomb features the characteristic curved roof, curved cornice, corner towers styled like bamboo poles, and rope motifs, all of which are signs of Bengal's local tradition. In addition, the use of arched pathways with corbels and domes constructed with squinches is indicative of foreign architectural techniques. The single-domed mosque within the complex was also built in the same style as the tomb (Figure-5). On the other hand, to the east of the tomb was another building (now destroyed), believed to have been a kitchen. Its roof followed the Bengali *chauchala* style.²¹

Sufi saint Khan Jahan built numerous mosques across the Khalifatabad region (present-day Bagerhat, Khulna, Jashore, and from Jhenaidah to Patuakhali) in the 15th century. Among these structures, there are examples of both small and grand buildings. However, the finest example of the Khan Jahan architectural tradition is Bagerhat's Sixty Dome Mosque, constructed around the mid-15th century and, with its 77 domes, the largest mosque in Bangladesh (Figure-6). Incorporating the wide central nave of the local contemporary Bengali style, the mosque features a four-sided vault, like the roof beams of bamboo huts, built of bamboo and set atop the roof in the manner of a thatched house. This was the first appearance of such a vault in mosque architecture in Bengal (Figure-7). Such a small-scale four-sided vault can be observed in the Masjidbari Mosque (built in 1471-72 AD) in the Khan Jahani architectural style. The interior of the four-sided vault in this mosque, located in Mirzaganj, Patuakhali, is adorned with terracotta panels designed to resemble the pattern of bamboo fencing typical of the Bengali style (Figures 8, 9).²² The large circular corner towers (two of which have staircases) and the Sixty Dome Mosque's plain exterior evoke the Delhi Tughlaq architectural style. Over time, even as different architectural traditions emerged in the Sultanate of Bengal, the local Bengali style blended beautifully with them.

¹⁹ Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal*, 74-80.

²⁰ Hossain, *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series—2: Architecture*, 71.

²¹ M. A. Bari, "Khan Jahan's Tomb, Bagerhat," in *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Khan Jahan's Tomb, Bagerhat," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Khan_Jahan%E2%80%99s_Tomb,_Bagerhat

²² Parveen Hasan, "Mosque Architecture," in *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Mosque Architecture," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Mosque_Architecture

Figure 6: Sixty Dome Mosque, Bagerhat



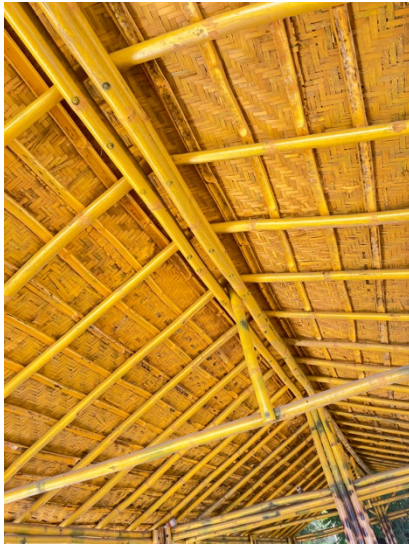
Source: Mowaz Mahmud, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2024)

Figure 7: Chauchala vault of Sixty Dome Mosque, Bagerhat



Source: Sajjad Hossain, BRAC University/Archnet (Accessed 2023)

Figure 8: Use of bamboo beams on thatched-roof



Source: Manoj Poosam, unsplash.com (Accessed 2025)

Figure 9: Chauchala vault in terracotta brick design, Masjidbari Mosque



Source: Banglapedia, 2003

In the second half of the 15th century, Bengali-style verandas began to appear in mosques. Just like the way verandas are attached to huts (Figure-10), similar verandas were incorporated into the construction of the Gopalganj Mosque in Dinajpur (1460 AD), the Masjidbari Mosque in Patuakhali (1471-72 AD), and the Darasbari Mosque in Chapai Nawabganj (1479-80 AD) (Figure-11). At the junction where the veranda connects to the main prayer hall, there are adjoining towers, much like how bamboo posts are used to make connections in huts. Additionally, the roofs of these verandas are covered with domes or cross vaults in the Islamic style. Sometimes, both dome and cross vault styles have been combined in the verandas of these mosques.²³

²³ Parween Hasan, *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh* (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2007), 39.

Figure 10: Rural hut with veranda



Source: rajtimes24.com (Accessed 2023)

Figure 11: Ruined Darasbari Mosque with veranda, Chapai Nawabganj



Source: Sumon Reja, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2023)

During the Hussain Shahi period, numerous structures were built in Bengal. Among these, the most enduring buildings are the mosques. The tradition of mosque construction from earlier times was maintained during this period. However, a new dimension was added to ornamentation. The architecture of this era also prominently reflects Bengal's local styles. The influence of these styles can be observed in buildings in Bihar and Assam as well.²⁴ Among the notable mosques from the Hussain Shahi period are the Bara Sona Masjid and Chhota Sona Masjid of Gaur, the Lattan Masjid, and the Bagha Mosque in Rajshahi. These mosques make extensive use of fine decorative craftsmanship and terracotta art, including stone plaque coverings. Especially in the Bagha Mosque, the motifs for wall adornment prominently feature indigenous flowers, fruits, and vines, along with abundant leaves (Figure 12).²⁵

Figure 12: Wall Ornamentation of Bagha Mosque, Rajshahi



Source: Catherine B. Asher, Aga Khan Visual Archive/Archnet (Accessed 2023)

Figure 13: Kadam Rasul of Gaur (Maldah, India)



Source: Gautam Tarafder, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2023)

At the end of the Hussain Shahi period, the Mughals emerged in India. This period marks the beginning of Mughalization in architecture. Its influence is also seen in Bengal. In this context, the Kadam Rasul (1530–31 AD) of Gaur and the Jahania Mosque (1535 AD) can be mentioned (Figure-13). In these two structures, the pointed dome, lotus-adorned finial, octagonal minarets, and their needle-shaped tips all hint at the forthcoming Mughal style. However, the curved

²⁴ Hasan, *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh*, 67.

²⁵ Hossain, *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series—2: Architecture*, 109–16; Rozina Parveen, *Indigenous Materials and Construction Techniques in Muslim Architecture of Bengal* (Bangla Academy, 2022), 75–76.

cornices of these buildings, reminiscent of huts, and their moulded designs recall Bengal's indigenous architectural traditions.²⁶

After the Hussain Shahi period, Afghan rulers came to power in Bengal. Even in the buildings constructed during their time, evidence of the Bengali architectural style can be found. However, few buildings from that era have survived. The Kusumba Mosque in Rajshahi is one such building from that period. According to the inscription, the mosque was constructed in 1558–59 AD.²⁷ Although it was built during the rule of the Afghan Sur dynasty, this mosque shows no noticeable influence of the Sur architectural style, which had developed in North India. Instead, it adopts the local Bengal architectural style. Along with features such as curved cornices and octagonal corner towers, the Kusumba Mosque stands out for its excessive ornamentation. In addition to the abundance of stone-carved decorations on the interior and exterior of the mosque, it is adorned with designs of flowers, fruits, and vines (Figure-14), as well as motifs of the traditional Bengali pitcher and chain-and-bell, which lend the ornamentation a distinctive character.²⁸

After the Afghans, the power to rule Bengal passed to the Mughals. However, although the Mughals managed to establish dominance over other regions of India, they were initially unable to bring Bengal fully under their control. It was only in 1610 AD that Islam Khan Chishti was appointed governor of Bengal, that Bengal came completely under Mughal authority. This period of lack of control also affected architecture. During this time, a number of buildings were constructed in Bengal that combined the Sultanate style with earlier local traditions of Bengal. From the time of the Mughal conquest of Bengal in 1576 AD to the following hundred years or so, the architecture built by the Mughals displays features of the Sultanate style. Art experts refer to this architectural period as a transitional phase. A few important structures from this era are the mosque at Chatmohar in Pabna (1582 AD), Kherua in Bogra (1582 AD), Atia in Tangail (1670 AD), Sadi in Egarsindur (1650 AD) and the Sarail Mosque in Brahmanbaria (1670 AD). The curved roofs and cornices, as well as the use of corner towers (Figure-15), in these mosques built in the Mughal tradition, evoke elements of the native Bengali style.²⁹

Figure 14: Kusumba Mosque, Rajshahi



Source: ASM Sultan, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2023)

Figure 15: Atiya Mosque, Tangail



Source: Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, 2006

²⁶ Hasan, "Mosque Architecture," in *Banglapedia*.

²⁷ Catherine B. Asher, "Inventory of key Monuments," In *The Islamic Heritag of Bengal*, ed. George Michell (UNESCO, 1984), 85.

²⁸ Parveen Hasan, "Kusumba Mosque," In *Banglapedia* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Kusumba Mosque," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Kusumba_Mosque

²⁹ M. M. H. Bhuiyan and A. B. Siddique, "*The Style of Architectural Features in Bangladesh during the Transitional Phase from Sultanate to Mughal Era Mosques*," (Unpublished manuscript, 2021), 12-13.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Mughal architectural traditions were widely adopted in Bengal. During this time, mosques with three domes, five domes, and elevated platforms became prevalent. The architectural style was distinguished by features such as domes built atop drums, corner turrets rising above the parapet, ornamental finials atop the domes and turrets, flat parapets, and the extensive use of plaster throughout the structure, creating a unique style.³⁰ Although the influence of Bengal's local traditions on Islamic architecture during the Mughal era was limited, it was not entirely absent. Even in this period, structural designs reminiscent of traditional huts were present. For example, in West Bengal's Bardhaman, the tomb of Pir Bahram Sakka (died 1562) reflects Bengali style through its curved cornices and the structure of its small turrets. Similarly, the tomb of Fateh Khan in Gaur entirely mirrors the double-sloped roof typical of village huts (Figure-16). Other instances of this double-sloped style include the two chambers attached to either side of the mausoleum of Khwaja Anwar Shaheed's tomb in Bardhaman, the gate of the Mohammad Shah Mosque in Egarsindhur, the tomb adjacent to Haji Khwaja Shahbaz's mosque in Ramna, Dhaka, the separate chamber on the north side of the Kartalab Khan Mosque (1701–04 CE) built on a raised platform, possibly for the mosque's imam and the two-storied Darbar Hall building inside Lalbagh Fort (Figure-17).³¹

Figure 16: Tomb of Fateh Khan (Maldah, India)



Source: Gautam Tarafder, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2023)

Figure 17: Darbar Hall, Lalbagh Fort, Dhaka



Source: abhijna-emuseum.com (Accessed 2023)

The indigenous Bengali architectural style of the local thatched-roof was reflected not only in mosques or Islamic mausoleums, but also widely in medieval Hindu temples. The first temple built in the thatched-roof style in Pabna appeared during the reign of Sultan Hussain Shah in Bengal. This was the double-thatched roof 'Jor Bangla' temple³² (a roof construction method where the roofs of two double-thatched cottages are joined together) (Figure-18). Along with the double-thatched roofs, temple roofs were also constructed with combinations of four, eight, and twelve thatched roofs (Figure-19). From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, temples of this Bengali thatched-roof style rose throughout Bengal.³³ Some of these still survive today as witnesses to time.

³⁰ Nazly Chowdhury and Babu Ahmed, *Mughal Monuments of Bangladesh* (Traditional Photo Gallery, 2006), 30-33.

³¹ Asher, "Inventory of key Monuments," 46-83.

³² S. M. Hasan, *Mosques of Bangladesh* (Maula Brothers, 2001), 46.

³³ Nasrin Akhtar, "Temple Architecture," In *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Temple Architecture," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Temple_Architecture

Figure 18: Jor Bangla Temple, Pabna



Source: Md. Sarwar Ul Islam Fakir, 2016, Creative Commons By SA-4.0. (Accessed 2023)

Figure 19: Char Chala Temple, Palpara (Nadia, India)



Source: Amitabha Gupta, Creative Commons By 4.0. (Accessed 2024)

The unique Bengali ‘*do-chala*’ style or curved cornices of roofs was adopted not only outside Bengal but also in other regions of India. It is said that Mughal prince Shah Jahan became particularly fascinated by the ‘*do-chala*’ and ‘*char chala*’ styles during his stay in Bengal. As a result, this style was later incorporated into the Diwan-i-Am of Delhi’s Red Fort, the pavilion of Agra Fort, and the Naulakha Pavilion of Lahore Fort (Figures 20, 21). The curved roof became so popular that throughout the seventeenth century, it found a prominent place in several more buildings in Delhi and, in the eighteenth century, in the palace balconies and garden pavilions of Rajasthan. On the other hand, the use of curved cornices in the mausoleum of Raja Bakhtawar Singh of Rajputana clearly highlights the influence of the Bengali style on Rajput architecture.³⁴

Figure 20: Pavilion, Agra Fort (Agra, India)



Source: Anupamg, Creative Commons By-SA 4.0. (Accessed 2023)

Figure 21: Naulakha Pavilion, Lahore Fort (Lahore, Pakistan)



Source: Jawad.hassan8 Creative Commons By-SA 4.0. (Accessed 2023)

The Enduring Legacy of Bengal’s Indigenous Architectural Tradition

In India’s history, Bengal has shone brightly through its unique system of governance and culture. This land resonated under both Buddhist and Hindu rule and later under Muslim rule,

³⁴ Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal*, 181; Hasan, *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh*, 69; Hasan, *Mosques of Bangladesh*, 45.

creating a new history. The Muslim conquest in the first half of the 13th century established their permanent governance in this region. Throughout this long period from the 13th to the 19th century, most rulers were of Arab, Persian, Turkic, and Afghan descent. Among them, the local Hindu Raja Ganesh and his descendants shared power in Bengal for about one and a half decades. Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah was the first local Bengali Muslim ruler. Raja Ganesh's son, Jadu, converted to Islam and rose to power during the mid-period of the Ilyas Shahi Sultanate, leaving his mark on the administration. He was not only a local Bengali Sultan, but also, during his reign, he patronised certain unique aspects of Bengal's traditions. Among these was the application and development of local Bengali architectural styles. The style that began with the Eklakhi Mausoleum, built during the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah, later influenced architecture well into the modern era. The use of brick as a construction material, made from the alluvial clay soil of Bengal, along with the unique thatched hut's 'do-chala' (double-sloped) roof technique, gave birth to a distinctive architectural style in Bengal. The curved roof and cornice of the 'do-chala' hut, the corner turrets modelled after the four bamboo posts, and the rope-moulding design inspired by rope bindings are all elements that became particularly representative in the subsequent Ilyas Shahi and Husain Shahi periods, as well as in the architecture of the Afghan Sultans and the Mughal era. Even after the 16th century, this style found a distinct place in Bengal's temple architecture. Besides the 'do-chala' style, there were also 'char chala' (four-sloped), 'atchala' (eight-sloped), and 'baro chala' (twelve-sloped) combinations seen in the temples of this period. During the Mughal period, this style extended beyond Bengal and had a clear influence on other parts of India. Especially in this subcontinent, various roof forms derived from local 'chala' styles were also used in British buildings or bungalows (Figure-22) for roofing.³⁵

Figure 22: British Bungalow House



Source: Kelsey, 2021

Figure 23: Auditorium of the Teacher-Student Centre (TSC), University of Dhaka



Source: Dhaka Tribune (Accessed 2023)

To prove the dynamism of the modern world, countless brick-and-concrete buildings may be causing the traditional thatched-roof huts of rural Bengal to disappear, but several historical structures from the Muslim era still stand as daily reminders of Bengal's unique identity. At the same time, some architects may be trying to reflect that tradition in modern-style construction. One such example is the mosque of the NAYEM Building in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, where in 1965, Constantinos Doxiadis brilliantly applied this style.³⁶ In addition, the renowned Greek architect Doxiadis, with grants from the Ford Foundation, designed several buildings in what was then East Pakistan. Keeping Bengal's climate in mind, he most likely prioritised local

³⁵ Kelsey, "The Bungalow: A Colonial Residence," *UBC's School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://blogs.ubc.ca/buildingempire/author/kelseyrl>

³⁶ A. B. M. Hossain, "Fath Khan's Tomb," In *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under "Fath Khan's Tomb," https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Fath_Khan%E2%80%99s_Tomb

architectural traditions. For this reason, his designs for the University of Dhaka's Student-Teacher Centre (Figure 23), the College of Home Economics, and the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, among others, bear the marks of Bengal's own architectural style.³⁷

Conclusion

The reign of Sultan Jalal Uddin Muhammad represents a pivotal moment in the history of Bengal, as he shaped a distinct local architectural identity through his cultural legacy. He integrated indigenous forms such as the *do-chala* and *chauchala* roof styles, curved cornices, and bamboo-inspired corner turrets into the established Islamic architecture. Architectural advancements associated with his rule suggest a growing incorporation of local forms, such as *do-chala* and *chauchala* roof designs, curved cornices, and bamboo-inspired corner turrets, into Islamic architectural practice in Bengal. His rule marked a conscious departure from exclusive reliance on foreign models. The “*Eklakhi* style” became the hallmark of Bengal's Sultanate architecture, later influencing the Ilyas Shahi, Hussain Shahi, Afghan, and Mughal constructions. It also influenced the modern architecture in Bangladesh and beyond. It can be concluded that Islamic architecture in Bengal was not a static import but an adaptive and creative process shaped by local environmental conditions, available materials, and cultural aesthetics. This is an example of how Islamic civilisation in different regions absorbed indigenous traditions without compromising its core identity. From a broader perspective, the case of Sultan Jalal Uddin Muhammad Shah underscores the potential for modern architects to draw inspiration from indigenous traditions in designing culturally resonant buildings.

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³⁷ Mahbubur Rahman, “Architecture,” In *Banglapedia*, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2021), under “Architecture,” <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Architecture>

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