

AN APPRAISAL OF KHAN - E - JAHAN STYLE IN ARCHITECTURE

Qazi A. Mowla,* Muhammad Ali Naqi

Discipline of Architecture, Khulna University, Khulna-9208, Bangladesh.

Accepted February 1993

Abstract: A blend of indigenous style and imperial style of Delhi at a time when Bengal was in the process of developing its own identity draws attention of the authors. The style dubbed as Khan-e-Jahan style has been evaluated here in this paper to identify its characteristic features. The factors responsible for the rapid decay and disintegration of many introduced style to this Bengal region include absence of permanent construction materials, natural calamities like flood and change of river course, and moreover the hostile warm-humid climate with the extreme salinity prevailing in the area. All the factors described above raised a Dialectic platform as a context for the builders in Khan-e-Jahan style of Khalifatabad in Bagerhat. This study shows that the building characteristics of the style were familiar with and sympathetic towards the local context, which in turn helped its survival against the hostile forces of nature. These are the distinct characteristics for which some of the finest pieces of architecture evolved under the Khan-e Jahan Style. The features of this style were adopted by the builders of the later date. Thus the style has also survived in a transformed form to give continuity to the development of the Architecture of Bengal.

Keywords: Heritage, Khalifatabad, Brick Architecture, Identity, Sustainability

Introduction

Bangladesh has a rich cultural legacy. The monuments that survived here may not be as grand as elsewhere, but they are not lacking in importance. During more than two thousand years of its history many distinguished dynasties of rulers have ruled and disappeared and have left their mark in the shape of spectacular settlements and monuments, the deserted relics of which are still visible throughout Bangladesh.

Muslim period which started about the beginning of the 12th century AD in Bangladesh left the examples of Art and Architecture. During the six centuries of Muslim rule in Bengal many new settlements flourished only to later become abandoned and turned into ruins. The old city of Khalifatabad now known as Bagerhat – south of Khulna is one of those cities (Fig.- 1). Perhaps Khan-e-Jahan resettled the Muslim colony on an earlier Buddhist-Hindu foundation of 5th century AD that had been abandoned due to hostile nature of the region (Ahmed, 1989). Today Bagerhat is what has once a prosperous Muslim center, has become a backwater to the bustling commercial of Khulna.

* Corresponding author. Tel: +88-(041)-721791, 720171-3, Fax: +88-041-731244, e-mail: <ku@bdonline.com>

General Architectural Characters

Bangladesh was devoid of building materials, of more permanent nature like rock or stone. But the genius of the people was concentrated on the alluvial silt deposit and more durable buildings were built of brick burnt out of this silt.

Although, sometimes stones were imported from far north, but in general, buildings were built of heavy walls, arches vaults and domes, adapting to the structural system suited to the capabilities of the burnt clay. The structural cores in many cases were covered with terra cotta burnt tiles, to protect the structure from the hostile warm-humid climate. These tiles provide base for creative artistic endeavour and thus some of the finest pieces of architecture were created and distinct architectural character evolved (Ahmed, 1980).

The architectural style introduced by Ulugh Khan-e-Jahan, was limited to greater Jessore-Khulna District, and is an uncommon blending of the indigenous style and that of imperial Delhi at a time when due to two centuries of independence the political and cultural life of Bengal was in the process of developing its own identity. The buildings of Khan-e-Jahan present a style that is distinct from the rest of the contemporary architecture of the country, but which bears affinity to a style of architecture created a century earlier around Delhi by Mohammed Tughlaq, bearing a particular resemblance to the Kalan and Khirki mosque (Fig.- 2). In Bangladesh, the style is dubbed as Khan-e-Jahan style (Mowla and Naqi, 1992). Influence of this style may also be observed in some other buildings outside Khalifatabad region – they are six-domed Masjidkur Mosque at Chandkhali, Masjid Bari Mosque at Patuakhali and one domed Hammad's Mosque near Kumira.

However, the style that developed at Khalifatabad was not unique. The buildings of this style that were built before the advent of Khan-e-Jahan are Mosque of Mollah Simla at Hugli (1377 AD), Eklakhi tomb at Hazrat Pandua (early 15th century) and Mosque of Binet Bibi at Dhaka (1457 AD) (Michell, 1984). Since features of Khan-e-Jahan style may be traced in above-mentioned buildings of pre-Khan Jahan period in a scattered pattern, therefore they could not create any impact or to be more precise, cannot be referred to as an independent style.

Special Architectural Features

Bagerhat monuments deserve attention for its distinctive building style evolving in Bangladesh. As mentioned before the architectural style is an uncommon blending of the indigenous and Tughlaq style of Delhi (Hasan, 1979).

In this distinctive architectural group, there are vestiges of many nine-domed, ten-domed and even a seventy seven-domed mosque. Typical mosques in this group are single domed. Common features in this style of building are their Four Corners provided with round, slightly tapering faceted towers, starkly plain and plastered. However, there is an exception e.g. Ten-domed Ronvijoypur Mosque, Reza Khoda Mosque and Zindapir Mosque with octagonal towers which demand detail investigation.

Another interesting feature arousing attention is the seventy seven-domed Shait Gumbad Mosque's usual Bengali curved battlements and unusual straight sloped cornice, on the east, is broken in the center by a small triangular pediment, from which the cornice slopes gracefully away towards the corner towers. This very feature along with, possibly, optical corrections with the help of battlement curvings and differential size of corner towers suggest Roman influence in Khan Jahan style. This is not unlikely because Roman and Byzantine influences are recognizable in the Tughlaq style of Delhi. We know that the fortified city of Tughlaqabad was consciously built after the Roman fashion (Brown, 1942); remaining of that heritage might have been revealed in the Khan Jahan style of Khalifatabad in case of Shait Gumbad Mosque. However, the most noble part played by the Mosque was by the introduction of seven Chauchalla

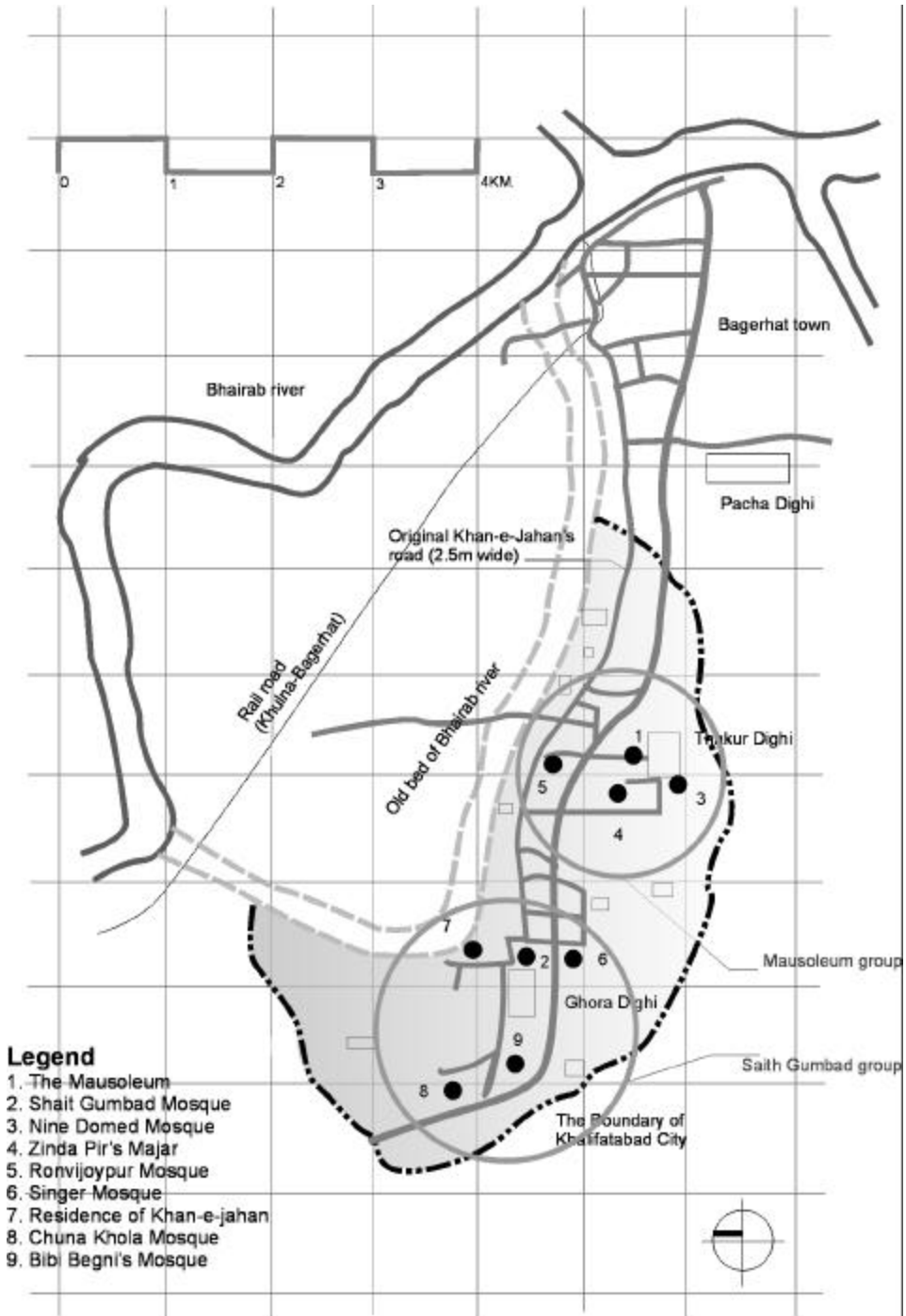
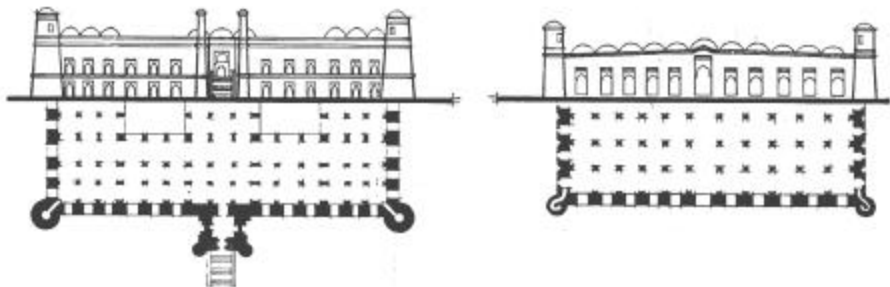


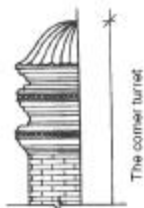
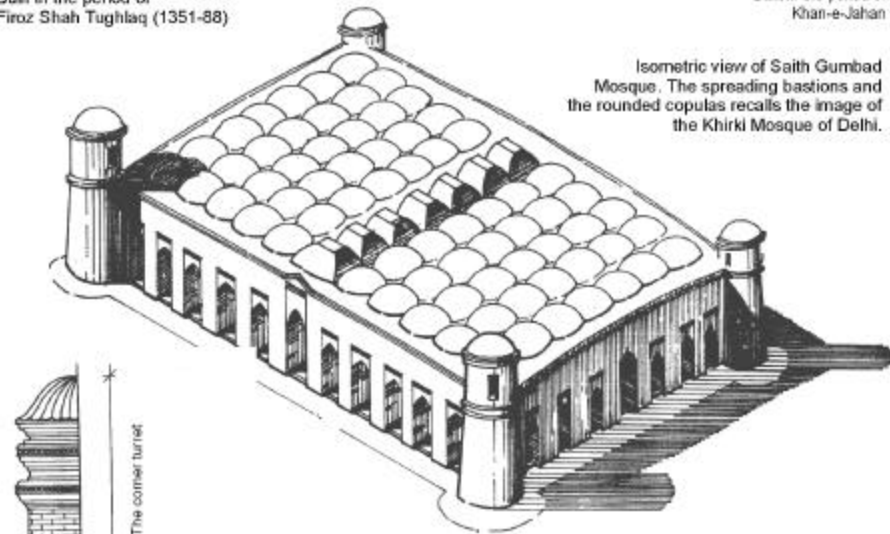
Fig - 1. Khalifatabad City. (Source: modified from N. Ahmed, 1984. Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh. UPL, Dhaka, p. 144).



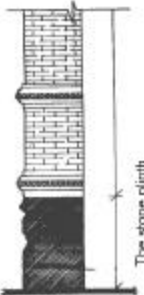
Plan & elevation of Khirki Mosque, Delhi 1375
Built in the period of
Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1351-88)

Plan & elevation of Saith Gumbad Mosque, Kalifatabad
Built in the period of
Khan-e-Jahan

Isometric view of Saith Gumbad Mosque. The spreading bastions and the rounded copulas recalls the image of the Khirki Mosque of Delhi.

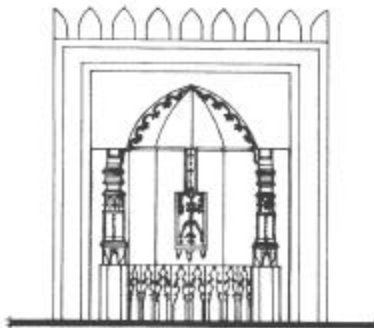


The corner turret



The stone plinth

Corner turret of the Mausoleum



A Typical Mehrib (from Reza Khoda Mosque)

Some typical features of the Khan-e-Jahan Style conforms to the climatic and as well as the cultural environment of the local region. The stone plinth works as a damp proof layer for the building and which is a unique development of the style in harmony with the context. Again the treatments in the Mehrib shows some close relationship with the pre-muslim developments in this region.

Fig - 2. Influences on Khan-e-Jahan Style.

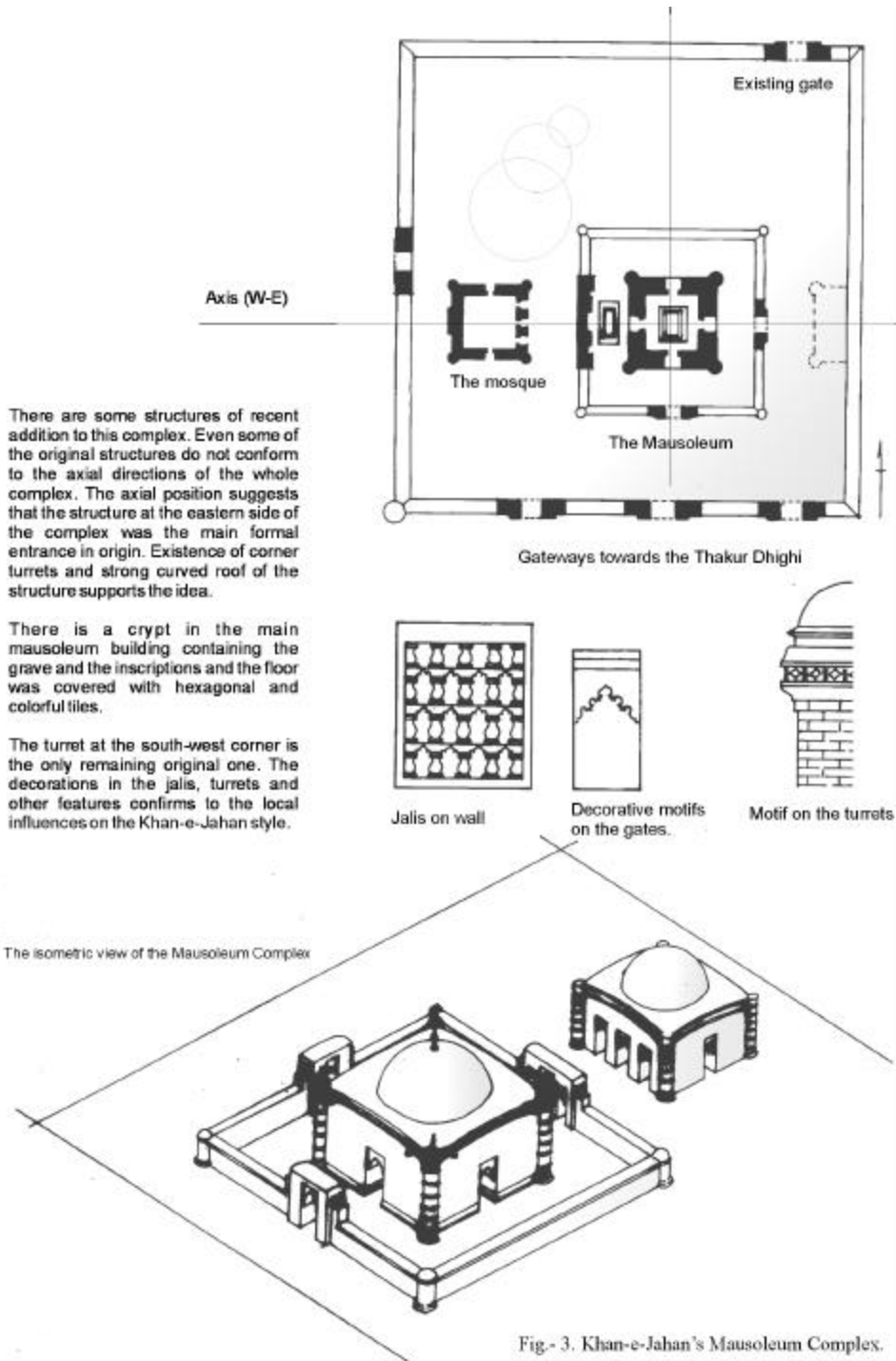


Fig.- 3. Khan-e-Jahan's Mausoleum Complex.

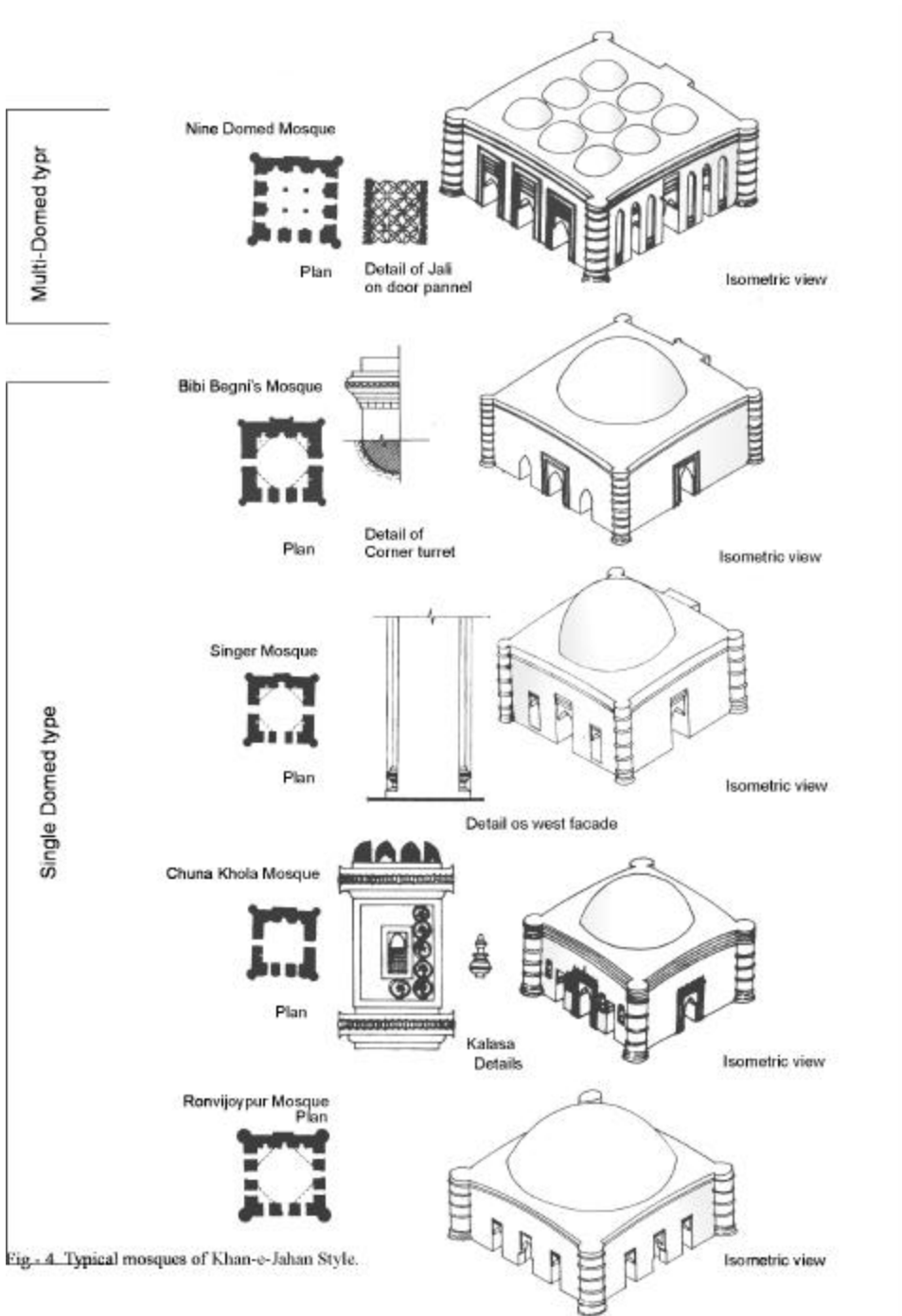


Fig - 4. Typical mosques of Khan-e-Jahan Style.

Bengali domes in the middle row of this building which has become a typical Bengali architectural feature for the days to come and has been repeatedly used in the monuments of the later date (Dani, 1961) (Fig.- 3). Some of the buildings of Khan-e-Jahan style with their special features are shown in the following pages (Fig.- 4).

Epilogue

Khalifatabad, which was long abandoned perhaps due to the changing course of the adjacent river, has been engulfed by the growing vegetation, by farms and encroachment from the expanding local town and settlements. Today only a few buildings are still standing, a few more ruins have been located but many more must have been destroyed altogether. The principal factor responsible for the rapid decay and disintegration of these monuments is the extreme salinity in the area. The floor levels of most of these monuments are, curiously, built in level with the surrounding low country - side. As a result, the buildings perceptually remain saturated with salt-laden moisture, the corrosive effects of which are very apparent on the brick walls and stone columns which often buckle or cave in. Use of stone beneath the walls at plinth level of some of the structures, testify that the builders were aware of the dampness rising from the ground. Another feature, which will not be out of place to be mentioned here, is the method of rainwater disposal in use at the Khan-e-Jahan's Mausoleum. These features i.e. the stone DPC, the rain water disposal treatment, the curved cornice, the use of terra-cotta etc. testify that the builders were familiar with and sympathetic to the geo-climatic conditions of the locality. To sum up, Percy Brown (1942) may be quoted – "...what they achieved may not have been great art, but its construction principles were sound, its appearances were inventive and original and it was peculiarly suitable to the climate and to the purpose for which it was intended."

In the contemporary scenario of Bangladesh, abrupt socio-economic changes are fast debasing design approaches in consistence with the traditional values and images developed by experiments and experiences. In this context, a developing region like Bangladesh needs prompt intervention in setting up a strong sense of direction. This study is to develop awareness for mending the rich built-heritage of Bengal with the present, giving ways to tradition and traditional attitudes in modernity. Thus it will reflect the true aspiration of the people in forming their Architecture, taking inspiration from the struggle of a style that has survived through the ages. A quest of the harmony prevailing in the Architectural history of Bengal will not only bridge up the gaps but will also expose new gamut of thought before the students, researchers and the practicing architects to the present generation of this region for the betterment of the days to come.

References

- Ahmed, Nazimuddin, 1984: *Discover the monuments of Bangladesh*. The University Press Ltd., Dhaka, pp. 137-146.
- Ahmed, Nazimuddin, 1980: *Islamic Heritage of Bangladesh*. Department of Film and Publications, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, p. 40.
- Ahmed, Nazimuddin, 1989: *The Buildings of Khan Jahan in and Around Bagerhat*. The University Press Ltd., Dhaka, pp. 35-52.
- Brown, Percy, 1942. *Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)*. D.B. Taraporevala Sons and Co. Pvt. Ltd. Bombay, p. 41 and 58.
- Dani, A.H., 1961. *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dhaka, pp. 88-93.
- Hasan, S. M., 1979. *Mosque Architecture of Pre-Mughal Bengal* The University Press Ltd., Dhaka, pp. 155-156.
- Michell, G. (ed.), 1984: *Islamic Heritage of Bengal* (AARR) UNESCO, pp. 48-70.
- Mowla, Q.A. and Naqi, M.A., 1992. *Khalifatabad Sangrakshan*. Quarterly Stapattya O' Nirman, I (4), Oct-Dec., 1992.