

Khan Jahan Ali: A Prolific Builder

By Professor Dr Syed Mahmudul Hasan

Judging from the existing ruins, remnants, unexcavated mounds, derelict monuments, spreading over a vast region where Khan Jahan settled and had his *astana* and *khankaq*, it must be stated that he was a prolific builder. As far back as 1983, a team of archaeologists, engineers, surveyors, art historians, funded by the United Nations Development Programme, and led by John Sandy conducted an extensive survey and submitted a comprehensive Report to the Government of Bangladesh for the ways and methods of the restoration and preservation of the monuments, which have been ascribed to the building genius of Khan Jahan. The author observed in one of his publications, "Stretching over more than four miles between the present town of Bagerhat in the east and the Ghora Dighi in the west, the flourishing city of Khalifatabad is now a resort of tourists and devout Muslims. Almost all the ancient monuments, dated from the period of Khan Jahan lie strewn along or near the main road of the former city of Khalifatabad. It is still called Khan Jahan's road."

Before the Department of Archaeology undertook restoration and preservation of the Bagerhat monuments, the site was indeed a place, full of desolate and dilapidated ruins. As spelt out by Nazimuddin Ahmed, "He (Khan Jahan) adorned his capital-city with numerous magnificent mosques, (traditionally 360) bridges, roads, palaces and the public buildings in an astonishing short period, the desolate ruins of which may still be seen for miles around, half-hidden in luxuriant coconut and tall palm groves of the locality. Fairly wide brick-paved roads and highways, still partly preserved, appear to have radiated to surrounding areas of Khulna, Jessore, Bakerganj and even far-off Chittagong. Large tanks with regular staircase landings were excavated in various parts of the town to provide salt-free drinking water in this highly saline zone. Evidently Khalifatabad is the city of Khan Jahan in the same sense as Firuzabad is the city of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq or Fatehpur Sikri is the city of Emperor Akbar. With the sole exception of two, Hussain Shahi Mosque, erected in the 16th century and the Sabekdanga Mosque, built in the 18th – 19th centuries A.D., all the picturesque edifices of Khalifatabad have been ascribed to the remarkable building spirit of Khan Jahan, who had the vision to create a sprawling city, dotted with a variety of monuments. It is stated by historians of Bagerhat that within a span of 45 years, starting from the beginning of the reign of the usurping dynasty of Raja Ganesh (Kans) in 1514-15 down to the year of his death in 1459 A.D., Khan Jahan had

created a vast, thriving and picturesque city out of dense, animal-infested jungles of the Sundarbans.

These monuments are no doubt vestiges of his ever-lasting glory and indelible testimony to his love for architecture. It is said that Khan Jahan's city was densely populated, probably due to large scale conversion, as attested by a large number of tanks or Dighis, excavated for supply of drinking water and also large number of mosques to facilitate the five-times prayer as well the Friday congregational prayer (Juma). It is very strange that the figure 360 played a significant role in the history of the growth and development of the capital-city of Khan Jahan. According to legends, he had 360 ardent disciples, and he built 360 mosques and excavated 360 tanks. A. F. M. Abdul Jalil rightly pointed out that the number 360, the total number of days of the year, has some special significance though the figures may not be accurate. The survey conducted by the UNDP team could only trace innumerable mounds, dilapidated ruins beyond recognition, but still that figure fails to come up to the figure of 360. At present several dozen monuments have been unearthed, restored and preserved, and protected by the Department of Archaeology and Museums.

The importance of the Bagerhat monuments in the context of Muslim Bengal architecture was first brought to light in a report published in the Calcutta Gazette of 1 April, 1790. In the late eighteenth century the Nawab of Murshidabad granted *Jagir* to a Muslim woman by the name of Bahu Begum, which included Bagerhat. It lapsed after her death in 1794 and the East India Company changed this *Jagir* into an annual allowance. Since then the region relapsed into dense forest and become too insignificant to merit any notice. Van Lohuizen pointed out that "prior to 1863 it was still a piece of low jungle land." The then British Government appointed magistrates to administer the region, called "Bagerhat" (a habitat of tigers; *Bagh*, meaning Royal Bengal Tiger; *hat* or market-habitat) in a Map printed in Abid Ali Khan's *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua* (1912). One of the magistrates, who took keen interest in the local antiquities is Regionald Craufuird Sterndale, who in his unpublished manuscript gave a graphic account of the ruins of Bagerhat, along with a few water-colour paintings. Sterndale states that the tomb of Khan Jahan is in a fine state of preservation, though the adjacent buildings have fallen into ruins.

Of all the archaeological sites of the Muslim period of Bengal, Khalifatabad is undoubtedly the most significant and stands only second to the twin capital cities of Gaud and Hazrat Pandua. Even Sonargaon with all of its different types of picturesque monuments falls far short of the elegance and spectacular beauty of the Bagerhat monuments. In some respect it can be regarded as a virtual archaeological gold mine, because not even half of the ancient edifices have survived to tell their story of brick and terracotta building art. Only a few existing monuments have escaped the ravages of time and deliberate pilferage by the local people. Like many of the houses of Malda, the modern town of Bagerhat have been erected by peeling the finest Khan Jahani structures, brick by brick, not only denuding the edifice but also stripping them of their rare architectural and ornamental styles. As a result, the posterity have been deprived of the excellent building ingenuity of Khan Jahan, who not only conceived but also executed these projects. The significance of the

monument was such that UNDP undertook a survey of the site in 1983 in order to salvage the existing monuments from salinity and water logging and to restore them to their original pristine glory. The UNDP team headed by John Sandy suggested “because of the scattered layout of the monuments, it is recommended that two monument areas be created – the first centred around the Shait Gumbad Mosque and the other centered round the Khan Jahan Mausoleum.

In Part IV of the master plan of Bagerhat, prepared by UNDP, published in 1983 it has been spelt out with the exception of a few outlying remains, all the ancient monuments and ruins are situated along or near the main road of the former city which skirted the banks of the old and new dried up bed of the Bhairab River and which is known as Khan Jahan’s road. The original road was 8-10 feet wide. It has now been metalled but in 1877 its brick on edge surface was still in “fair order and much used.” The Report further points out that apart from the two groups, there are quite a few archaeological remains, particularly religious buildings and ruins, dated from the period of Khan Jahan as the nature of brick, style of buildings and the ornamental designs indicate. About 360 mosques and 360 tanks are attributed to the building spree of Khan Jahan, of which only a couple of dozen or so escaped elimination.

Regarding the Mausoleum Complex, Van Lohuizen says, “The area of the former city of Khalifatabad is dotted with the remains of more than fifty ancient monuments and tanks, most of which are unidentified and in a complete state of ruins.” One of the pioneers of antiquarians of the site was R. C. Sterndale, who states in 1866, “The road for about four miles lay through dense groves of palms...Along the centre of the road was a pavement of hard thin bricks laid edgewise about the eight feet wide, the bricks, worn and polished by rain and traffic, till many of them showed a surface like red pebbles. According to local tradition, this road extends from Gour (near Rajmahal) to Chittagong, I myself have met have met with traces of it in a direct line across the Sundarbans to the west; along the road were many traces of brick-walls, the ruins of old mussulman tombs and mosque of the same style of architecture and ornamentation, as the old mosque at Issuripoor. After four miles the road suddenly rose to an elevation of about fifty feet. This is an artificial embankment, covered with dense mass of vegetation and crowned with a strong loop-holed wall of brick entering through an arched Gateway I came into the court of the mosque.” Sterndale also drew a few water-colour painting, the earliest being that of the the tomb of Khan Jahan. Van Lohuizen rightly said that it was “the earliest representation of the monument.”

The Khan Jahan Mausoleum Group comprises the following monuments:

1. Tomb of Khan Jahan, nearby Dargah Mosque, an unidentified building with curved roof, and a cenotaph of his trusted friend and disciple Pir Ali or Pir Muhammad Taher.

2. Nine-domed Mosque
3. Reza Khoda Mosque
4. Zinda Pir Mosque and Mausoleum
5. Ronvijoypur Mosque
6. Chilla Khana Mausoleum site

Overlooking the Thakur or Khanjalis's Dighi, the above group of monuments are some of the surviving Khan Jahani monuments that bear eloquent testimony to the building genius of the patron-saint. Besides, there is another group, similarly overlooking Ghora Dighi towards the west of the Mausoleum Complex. The Khan Jahan Mosque Group comprises the following:

1. The so-called Saithgumbad Mosque
2. Singar Mosque
3. Bibi Begni's Mosque
4. Chunikhola Mosque
5. Khan Jahan's Residential site, associated with Sona Masjid and unidentified riverside ruins.

With a view to bring out the outstanding contribution of Khan Jahan relating to the origin and development of Muslim Bengal architecture in southern Bengal, it would be reasonable to discuss the monuments groupwise, that is with reference to typology. In the words of Van Lohuizen, "The style is a blending of local Bengali elements on the one hand and architectural features derived from the imperial buildings of contemporary Delhi, on the other." With a view to evaluate the contributions of Khan Jahan to building art in and around Bagerhat and the surrounding regions, it would be quite fair to classify the monuments into basically two categories, namely: (A) Religious buildings, (B) Secular buildings. Religious edifices can be divided into (a) Mosques; and (b) Tombs/ Astanas/ Khankahs/ Chillakhans. Secular monuments are of various types: (a) Havelis or Residential quarters (b) Administrative buildings: (c) Kitchens/ Jahazghata; (d) Road (e) Tanks.

It is a well-known fact that the Muslims tenaciously went on building mosques as a kind of righteousness and fulfilment of religious obligation, throughout the world since the first Mosque of the Holy Prophet was erected in Medina in 622 A.D. soon after his Hijrat. This building spree went on unabated, based mainly on the first

model at Medina. Indo-Muslim architecture had also its modest beginning in the 8th century when the Muslim invaders built their first Mosque at Banbhore (formerly the Hindu capital Dibal of Raja Dahir) near Karachi. However, the earliest concentration of mosque building in the Indian sub-continent was around Delhi and Ajmer, as evident in the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque and Arhai-din-ha-Jhompra in the 12th century A.D. The earliest known example of mosque building was observed in Bengal in the District of Hughli, particularly at Tribeni and Chhoto Pandua in the 13th century A.D. These are Mosques of Zafar Khan at Tribeni and the Bari Masjid at Chhoto Pandua. The earliest phase of Muslim architecture of Bengal actually started during the independent Ilyas Shahi rule at Hazrat Pandua in the 14th century A.D., which flourished to a great extent under patronage of Sultan Mahmud Shah of the restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty in the 16th century.

Curiously enough another independent School of Muslim Bengal architecture originated at the same time in Bagerhat under the personal guidance of Khan Jahan of Bagerhat. It is too early to assess the importance of the so-called 'Khan Jahani' style of architecture, as only a few monuments have been unearthed and restored by the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Bangladesh. However, the existing monuments do exhibit a kind of indigenous style that was hitherto unknown in Bengal. The growth of such a style was due to the climatic and environmental impact that was so endearing to the marshy, isolated and mangrove forest of the Sundarbans.

(Source: Syed M. Hasan, *Khan Jahan Ali: Patron Saint of the Sundarbans*, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2004, pp. 60-66)