



Structures in Somapura Mahavihara complex. Apart from a few notable sites like the ruins of Lalmai-Mainamati and Mahasthangarh, there are few traces left of ancient structures erected before the arrival of the Muslims in Bengal.

PHOTO:
MASUM-AL-HASAN

SCOPE OF HISTORY IN THE LAND OF RIVERS

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It is, of course, not an easy feat to understand the history of Bangladesh. Over the course of time, several factors have had influences on how history is perceived here. The strange geography and shifting political perimeters have constantly reshaped this region's art, culture, architecture and ways of living.

A casual glance at the world map will show that Bangladesh is located at a very strategic position. To its north are the Himalayas and towards the south is the Bay of Bengal, which opens out to the Indian Ocean. Additionally, Bangladesh is home to 60 percent of the world's largest delta, the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, also known as the Bengal Delta. Large rivers like Padma and Jamuna flow through the Bengal Delta, which combine, and then join the Meghna river before flowing out to the sea. The deltaic and riverine nature of the land makes alluvium—used to manufacture bricks—readily available. As a result of this, brick has been used

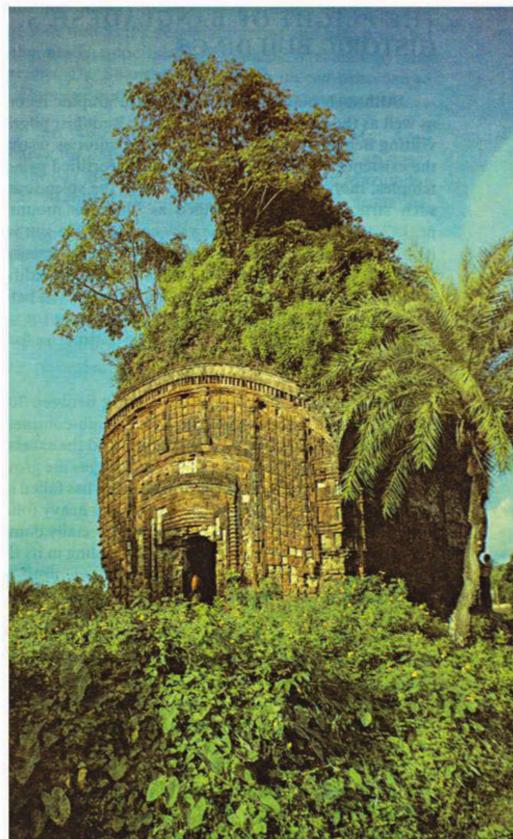


Allakuri Mosque, Dhaka.

SOURCE: BANGLAPEDIA



Google Street View of present day Allah Karim Mosque (formerly Allakuri Mosque), Mohammadpur, Dhaka



The Plight - An overgrown temple.

PHOTO: JOHN SANDAY

as the main building material for much of the traditional architecture in this region.

We know that a large number of cities, fortified palaces, temples, monasteries and stupas existed in Bengal from numerous literary and epigraphic records. We have testimonies of such structures from the accounts of a few Chinese Buddhist pilgrims visiting between the 5th and 7th centuries. However, apart from a few notable sites like the ruins of Lalmai-Mainamati and Mahasthangarh, there are few traces left of ancient structures erected before the arrival of the Muslims in Bengal. Most of the pre-

Muslim buildings were built with highly perishable but indigenous materials like mud, bamboo, reed and wood. There are many reasons which contributed to their demise, but primarily the destructive forces of nature and man are responsible.

The region not only experiences excessive rainfall, amounting to 1600mm to 2000mm every year—which is considered the highest in the sub-continent—but also an excessive amount of humidity that averages well over 80 percent. This humidity encourages growth of wild vegetation. As soon as an old building is abandoned, it is quickly overtaken by vegetation which causes widespread destruction to the structure. Conditions are made worse by the vast and complicated hydrographic system, which is the main reason behind destruction of many great monuments. A large number of ancient sites and monuments have become extinct due to the fluctuation of river courses, which often occur on a large scale.

Perhaps British poet Rudyard Kipling sums up well the temporary nature of such historical monuments in his poem:

*Cities and Thrones and Powers
Stand in Time's eye,
Almost as long as flowers,
Which daily die:*

Additionally, monuments of religious character are increasingly coming under threats due to the unwarranted enthusiasm of certain individuals. Many social or religious groups are interested in modernising old monuments by restoring, renovating and enlarging them. Little do they understand that by doing so, they are getting rid of a monument's original historic character.

One such example is the Allah Karim Mosque (formerly called the Allakuri Mosque) located in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. Formerly a single-domed Mughal mosque from the 17th century, the structure was demolished in the 1950s and a new, modern structure that houses a shopping market and a mosque has taken its place. The modernised building is an atrocious two-story structure that holds none of the charm of the old mosque.

Another example is the earliest surviving mosque in Dhaka, Binat Bibi's Mosque in Narinda, Old Dhaka. It was built in 1457 during the pre-

Mughal Sultanate era by Bakht Binat. The extension project of the mosque was undertaken by the mosque committee without consulting any expert or concerned organisation like the Department of Archaeology. The mosque has seen four restorations till date, and the repeated restoration works and subsequent additions have completely altered the outward appearance of the mosque. Dr Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, former president of Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB), noted that addition of a minaret to a 600-year old mosque is a distortion of its historical character, since minarets were not an element of pre-Mughal structures.

But it is not just man-made distortions of historic monuments or destruction by forces of nature that make construction of a continuous narration of history difficult. The issue is further complicated by the lack of historical materials. Bangladesh's historical domain lacks originating evidence, and there are several gaps in accounts of existing architectural remains. Cities which flourished in ancient Bengal, such as Gange, Tamralipti, Karnasubarna, Kotibarsa, Panchanagari and Rampal, have no surviving evidence, and remain only as legends today. Unlike the west, the history of this region has not been thoroughly explored.

This issue of lack of historical materials is creating another damaging effect. Modern historiography has been largely influenced by the West's colonial domination of the world. As a result, Eurocentric ideologies heavily influenced Western historiographic accounts about the East. It is important to understand the intellectual politics of the West in regards to how the rest of the world is perceived, since Bangladeshi curriculums follow history textbooks written mostly by Western authors.

Early nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) said in his book titled *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, that the kind of social setting required for cognitive thinking only existed in the West. His argument was that the East was a non-evolving part of the world that was unchanging and remained as history's backwater. This philosophy of Hegel greatly influenced historiography of the 19th and 20th centuries. One such example is British architectural historian Sir Banister Fletcher's *A History of*

Architecture. It became a standard history textbook for architects around the world, including in Bangladesh, as it is the first major work of history to include an overview of the architectural achievements of the 20th century.

According to Fletcher, world architecture can be classified into two categories: a historical style that evolved and the non-historical style that did not. He labelled architecture traditions of countries like India, Mexico and China as non-historical since he believed they contributed little to the widespread development of architectural styles. Fletcher argued that most non-Western architectural styles were of little importance in world history as they ceased to develop as cultural forces over the course of time. Fletcher's logic stems not only from Hegel's philosophy but also from views on racial hierarchy.

Therefore, the problem arises when we rely on books written by Westerners and remain unaware of their Eurocentric attitude. Architecture curriculums in universities all over Bangladesh follow this book as the standard for learning world architectural history, thus, unintentionally, giving the students lessons based on Fletcher's Hegelian Eurocentric beliefs. As a result, impressionable young students of architecture end up believing the West's alleged superiority over the rest of the world. The situation is further complicated by a lack of well-researched local teaching materials that could provide other narratives.

In the linear model of history that Fletcher describes in his book, civilisation begins in Mesopotamia and Egypt and reaches its pinnacle in the United States and Europe, where modern architecture thrives. Architectural history of Bengal is taught as a separate course in this country, as if the development of architectural traditions in this part of the world is a separate narrative, cut off from the rest of the world.

This is evident in our learning of history. Architecture students in Bangladesh are taught about the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and the Parthenon in Athens. On the other hand, a lesser focus is given to lessons on the Shat Gombuj Mosque in Bagerhat, the Somapura Mahavihara in Paharpur or the Dhakeshwari Temple in Dhaka. This gives students the idea that

Bengal's history lies in the tangent, isolated from global movements. They graduate with the understanding that learning about this region is secondary, coming only after learning about the seemingly more important parts of history that takes place in the West.

Architectural history is not static as Hegel said, nor is it linear, as Fletcher explains in his book. It travels to various regions and cross-breeds. When history is taught in this way, we deny the complexity in the scope of architecture and history.

While we have archaeological findings, epigraphic records, narratives derived from sculptures and illustrations, these are still not enough to preserve and retrieve historical characteristics and details. The only way to understand and construct the architectural history of Bangladesh is through interpretation, and not from evidence of one source, but from multiple sources. Additionally, we need curriculum and institutional support where we are encouraged to become critical thinkers. Just because our country has had a difficult past does not mean we cannot hope for a promising future. For that, our rich heritage must be valued, conserved and documented before it is too late.

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