

ARCHITECTURE as a mirror of politics

How power, faith, and identity shaped the built landscape of Bangladesh

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Architecture is never neutral. In every society, it is the most visible, permanent, and symbolic tool through which politics announces itself. Every arch, dome, or courtyard carries the weight of intention. In Bengal—the largest delta on earth, where rivers redraw landscapes and civilisations overlap—the story of architecture is inseparable from the story of power.

From the Mauryan conquests in the 3rd century BCE to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and beyond, Bengal's built heritage has embodied ambition, legitimacy, resistance, and resilience. Dynasties and regimes—Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, colonial, and nationalist—scribed their visions on this soil not only through words and policies but through bricks, temples, mosques, forts, and memorials.

This essay traces the relationship between politics and architecture across two millennia of Bengal's history. Each period—ancient, medieval, colonial, and modern—reveals how rulers used architecture to communicate power: sometimes inclusive, sometimes exclusive; sometimes humble, sometimes imperial.

ANCIENT BENGAL: POWER AND PIETY

Mauryan expansion (c. 322–185 BCE)

When Ashoka the Great extended the Mauryan Empire into Bengal, politics meant centralisation and persuasion. Archaeology at Mahasthangarh (ancient Pundranagar) reveals urban consolidation and defensive walls that signalled Bengal's integration into the imperial network.

Even though Ashokan stone pillars have not survived here, their absence does not mean silence. Political presence was articulated through forts and civic spaces—symbols of order imposed on the delta. Ashoka's dhamma, governance through morality, infused these structures with an aura of universal inclusion. Architecture here was not merely functional; it was imperial pedagogy.

Shunga instability (c. 185–73 BCE)

The decline of the Mauryan Empire fragmented the political map of the subcontinent, including Bengal. With the collapse of a centralised power, regional rulers and local chieftains competed for dominance, producing an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. The Shunga dynasty, emerging in this fractured world, leaned heavily toward Brahmanical orthodoxy and sought legitimacy through rigid social and religious hierarchies.

In this climate, architecture became an expression of defensive politics. Fortifications grew thicker, moats were dug deeper, and urban layouts favoured control over openness. Ritual spaces such as temples and ceremonial complexes moved away from the inclusive moral vision Ashoka's patronage had symbolised. Instead, they were designed with stricter hierarchies, reflecting the authority of a few rather than the universal appeal of dharma.

Gupta permanence (c. 320–550 CE)

The Gupta period is often termed the "Classical Age," when religion and rulership merged into a single political framework. In Bengal, archaeological traces at Chandraketugarh and Mahasthangarh suggest the emergence of small brick shrines with sanctums (garbhagriha). These shrines were not architectural experiments alone; they were political emblems in brick. The deliberate shift to fired brick was a declaration of permanence, contrasting with earlier perishable timber or mud-built forms. In essence, the temple became a state-sponsored symbol: its sanctum stood for kingship's sanctity; its alignment with cosmic order legitimised earthly rule.

Yet, very few Gupta temples survive in Bengal today. Their absence is telling: it reflects the fragility of material tradition in Bengal's alluvial landscape, but also how later political powers overwrote Gupta expressions with their own. What remains is less the physical architecture and more the political imagination that embodied the Gupta temple as a miniature cosmos, binding ruler, religion, and territory into one eternal frame.

MEDIEVAL BENGAL: SULTANS AND MUGHALS

Bengal Sultanate (c. 1338–1576 CE)

Sultante sovereignty (c. 14th–16th Century CE)

When Bengal's sultans declared

independence from Delhi, architecture became their most visible political manifesto. Choosing Buddhism—particularly the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions—as their state faith was itself a profound political statement, distinguishing their rule from the Brahmanical lineages of the Guptas. Architecture became their most enduring emblem of this choice. Monastic complexes such as Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri were not simply sanctuaries of faith; they were political landscapes in brick and stone, projecting the Pala kings as universal protectors of the dharma. The vast quadrangular plan of Somapura, with its monumental central shrine and surrounding cells, symbolised the king as a cosmic sovereign at the centre of an ordered realm. Its scale was imperial, intended to rival anything in the subcontinent—making it not only a place of devotion but also a territorial proclamation of power.

The Palas also turned architecture into an instrument of international diplomacy. Their monasteries became hubs of trans-Asian networks, drawing pilgrims and scholars from Tibet, Nepal, China, and Southeast Asia. By financing such institutions, the rulers cast themselves as global patrons of Buddhism, extending their political reach beyond Bengal's borders. Every stone-carved Bodhisattva or meticulously planned stupa was thus a dual symbol: of religious merit and imperial authority.

Sena orthodoxy (c. 1070–1230 CE)

The Sena dynasty marked a decisive ideological shift in Bengal's political and religious life. Where the Palas had projected universality through Buddhist monasteries, the Senas reasserted orthodox Hinduism as state policy, deliberately marginalising Buddhism and other heterodox traditions. This was not only a theological move but a political strategy of consolidation, an attempt to legitimise kingship by anchoring it in caste hierarchy and Brahmanical ritual authority.

Architecture became the medium through which this orthodoxy was spatially enforced. Temples at Deopara, Nabadwip, and other North

The meditative monk stands with a humble grace, embodying simplicity amid the emergence of grand structures. Around him, the thatched huts and rural courtyards evoke the modest soul of Bengal; its architecture born of faith, participation, and collective harmony. Yet behind this calm, the towering geometric frame rises as a symbol of power and innovation—a reminder that even the mega-structures and terracotta marvels of a new era must find balance with the humility of tradition.

Bengal's vernacular traditions. Its multiple domes, hut-shaped vaulting, curved cornices, and extensive use of brick translated foreign architectural vocabulary into familiar local forms. This was more than stylistic choice; it was political negotiation through architecture. By embedding Islamic monuments within the cultural idioms of Bengal, the sultans secured legitimacy among the local population.

Mughal Bengal (1576–1757 CE)

Mughal spectacle (1576–1757 CE)

The Mughal conquest of Bengal re-imposed an imperial order, one that sought to erase the region's independent political imagination and fold it into the larger fabric of the empire. Architecture was their most effective instrument of this authority. Early mosques such as the Atia Mosque (1609) near Tangail consciously echoed the stylistic language of Delhi, with ornamented arches, bulbous domes, frontal terracotta panels, and plastered surfaces marking Bengal as an extension of Mughal sovereignty. Yet the very geography of Bengal, with its restless rivers and malleable soil, forced practical adaptations: the curved cornice, the reliance on brick, and the modest scale endured even in the face of imperial standardisation. These adaptations were not celebrated as local genius, however, but tolerated as necessity.

Under the governorship of Shaista Khan (1664–1688), Mughal architecture in Bengal became increasingly elitist and militarised. Lalbagh Fort in Dhaka, though left unfinished, embodied the essence of Mughal political spectacle. With its axial gardens, fortified walls, and watchtowers, it was less a palace of inclusivity and more a symbol of domination, surveillance, and centralised authority. The fort's incompleteness itself tells a story: the dream of total control could not be fully realised in Bengal's turbulent political climate, yet the gesture toward imperial mastery remained etched in lime-surki thick plaster and brick.

MEDIEVAL BENGAL: SULTANS AND MUGHALS

Colonial Bengal: Architecture of Domination

East India Company (1757–1858)

The Battle of Plassey was not merely a military conquest; it was, more painfully, a betrayal dressed as diplomacy. Bengal did not fall to sheer strength but to intrigue and treachery—a handful of coins and promises overturning centuries of sovereignty. From that fateful afternoon onward, cannons and contracts marched together.

With the East India Company's ascendancy, Bengal's landscape was forcefully re-scripted. Architecture shifted from being an embodiment of community, faith, and local craftsmanship into a rigid instrument of control. What once gave shelter and spirit now became barracks, courts, and prisons—brick sermons on obedience. The irony was sharp: Bengal's wealth financed the very architecture that would cage it.



In this caricatured vision of Mughal grandeur, the ruler stands adorned in jewels and pride, surrounded by domes, arches, and fortified walls—symbols of might and mastery. Yet behind the opulence lies isolation. The fort's high walls separate authority from the pulse of the people. The architecture, though magnificent, becomes a metaphor for distance; where form glorifies the elite but forgets the humble. The satire lies in the smile: power confident yet detached, a kingdom fortified not by faith or unity, but by its own ornamented enclosure.

Courthouses, barracks, and revenue offices rose from the soil not to nurture civic life but to discipline it. These red-brick blocks carried no dialogue with the vernacular fabric; instead, they imposed a vocabulary of intimidation.

British Raj (1858–1947)

The transfer of power from Company to Crown did not soften the political intent of architecture; it only diversified its strategies. Universities, railways, hospitals, and administrative complexes proliferated across Bengal. At first glance, these seemed to carry a rhetoric of progress, symbols of education, connectivity, and public welfare. Yet beneath this facade lay the same colonial logic: architecture as an arm of governance. The Raj sought to transform architecture into a double discourse. On the one hand, to the colonised, it projected itself as the harbinger of modernity, bringing steel, brick, rail lines, and scientific planning. On the other hand, to the coloniser, it reassured the permanence of empire.

The cityscape of Calcutta and other urban centres became saturated with these twin messages: benevolence above, control beneath. A pivotal expression of this duality was the Indo-Saracenic style, which emerged as a calculated political compromise. Curzon Hall (1904), with its domes, arches, and ornamental flourishes, appeared to embrace indigenous aesthetics. But this was no true synthesis of cultures; it was a strategic camouflage. By appropriating selective "Oriental" motifs, the Raj attempted to pacify local sentiment while ensuring that the deeper spatial logic remained resolutely colonial. The structure was still an administrative tool, still aligned with imperial planning, still radiating control. The so-called hybrid style thus operated as a mask, not a meeting point.

PARTITION TO LIBERATION: ARCHITECTURE OF RESISTANCE (1947–1971)

The Partition of 1947 tore Bengal in half... West went with India, East was rebranded as "East Pakistan." From the outset, architecture became a contested ground. The Pakistani state attempted to overwrite Bengali identity with a narrow vision of "Islamic modernism," one that was



SKETCHES AND ILLUSTRATIONS: SAJID BIN DOZA

The polished red-oxide floors and gleaming white façades of the colonial edifices were not just materials; they were statements of separation. The brilliant finish rejected touch; the sheen denied entry. These buildings, adorned in perfection, stood as the Empire's invisible red eyes—watching, judging, and excluding. Architecture here became an aesthetic of authority, where colour and plaster masked control, and beauty itself became a barrier between ruler and ruled.

more ideological than spiritual. This vision sought to suppress the syncretic, riverine, and cultural roots of Bengal in favour of a sterile uniformity aligned with West Pakistan's political agenda. Yet Bengal's soil had long resisted silence, and architecture, too, became a language of defiance.

Modernism as autonomy

Muzharul Islam, the first modernist architect of Bengal, led this resistance not through slogans but through buildings. He rejected both colonial mimicry and West Pakistani impositions. His works, such as the Institute of Fine Arts (1953) at Dhaka University, stood as manifestos of cultural autonomy. The architecture was modern, but not alien: climate-responsive courtyards, shaded corridors, brick masses breathing with tropical light and air. These were not imported monuments of authority; they were spaces of gathering, debate, art, and student politics. In their very openness, they embodied a democratic spirit. His modernism was not a borrowed language, but a Bengal modernism—grounded, humane, and quietly rebellious.

The Assembly paradox

The most charged architectural symbol of this period was Louis Kahn's National Assembly Building (1962–1983). Commissioned by Pakistan as a gesture of legitimacy, it was intended to display state grandeur. Yet the building took on a life of its own, far beyond the intent of its patrons. Its monumental geometries, vast halls, and light-filled voids evoked not authoritarianism but aspiration. The purity of its forms and the dignity of its spaces spoke to Bengalis as if the building itself were whispering: "You deserve democracy."

By the late 1960s, the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban was no longer a Pakistani project; it had been appropriated by the Bengali imagination. Students, politicians, and citizens saw in it not a monument to West Pakistani control, but a temple of a future Bangladesh. In this paradox lay the irony of history: the very architecture commissioned to bind East Pakistan to the state became the most potent symbol of its eventual liberation.

INDEPENDENT BANGLADESH (1971–PRESENT): ARCHITECTURE OF FREEDOM

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was more than political independence; it marked a profound cultural and spatial liberation. Freedom was no longer only about territorial sovereignty; it was about the right to shape space, craft identity, and give physical form to collective dignity. This struggle for autonomy had begun almost two decades earlier with the Bangla Language Movement of 1952, where Bengalis laid down their lives for the right to speak their mother tongue. The Shaheed Minar, a monument to the martyrs of this movement, became the first architectural articulation of resistance in modern Bengal. It was a spatial declaration that language, culture, and identity could not be silenced, and it laid the foundation for the broader liberation that would follow.

In the years immediately after independence, architects-planners translated the spirit of 1971 into the built environment. Buildings became monuments not to rulers or colonisers, but to collective memory, resilience, and democratic participation. The Jatiya Smriti Soudho in Savar, designed by Architect Syed Mainul Hossain, exemplifies this ethos. Rising from the green plains, seven concrete triangles soar into the sky, abstract yet deeply poetic, embodying struggle, suffering, and ultimate victory. Its geometry cuts through the horizon like an open wound, while its silent presence offers reflection and meditation. This memorial is a profound architectural expression of sacrifice and freedom, speaking not through ornamentation or imperial grandeur but through form and space that convey dignity, memory, and collective grief.

Post-independence architecture extended beyond monumental symbolism into everyday civic and educational spaces. Jahangirnagar University, with its open courtyards, shaded corridors, and thoughtfully planned academic clusters, became a space for intellectual freedom and social interaction. Similarly, structures such as NIPA Bhaban and the iconic sculpture Aparajeyo Bangla at Dhaka University emphasised openness and participation, signalling a break from hierarchical colonial rigidity. The design of administrative and corporate buildings, including Khamarbari, BGIC Bhaban, and Jibon Bima Bhaban, reflected a service-oriented approach, emphasising civic responsibility, accessibility, and efficiency rather than authoritarian display.

This era of architecture was characterised by a new understanding of space: liberation was not only political but also spatial. Buildings were no longer instruments of control; they were instruments of participation, resilience, and dignity. Structures responded to the tropical climate, integrated with local cultural sensibilities, and encouraged social interaction. Community and NGO-driven initiatives, including disaster-resilient housing and schools, further reinforced this principle, demonstrating that architecture could serve human need, prioritise welfare, and express democratic ideals rather than merely create spectacle.

In sum, post-independence architecture in Bangladesh articulates freedom in every form: through memorials of sacrifice, educational and cultural spaces that stand in dialogue and creativity, civic buildings that serve rather than dominate, and contemporary projects that integrate global discourse with local identity.

Liberation is not only commemorated; it is lived, spatially and socially, in the very design of the nation's cities, institutions, and monuments.

A critical truth emerges from this historical survey: architecture is never innocent. It is always a negotiation of power—sometimes oppressive, sometimes liberating. The challenge for contemporary Bangladesh lies in sustaining this ethos, resisting the temptation of elitist spectacle, and continuing to craft spaces that engage communities, respect culture, and respond to the environment. In a land where rivers constantly reshape the soil, architecture too must remain flexible, adaptive, and dialogic.

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