Background
Introducing Bangladesh — A Case for Regionalism

Muzharul Islam
Kazi Khaleed Ashraf
Saiful Haque

Introduction

Bangladesh is a part of the Indian sub-continent and its history before 1947 is the history of India. It is located on the north-eastern extremity of the sub-continent bounded to the north by the Himalayas, on the south by the Bay of Bengal and to the east by the dense hilly forests.

From very ancient times, Bangladesh was known as one of the richest areas of India. Culturally and ethnically, along with West Bengal, it forms a unique unified national entity. Present Bangladesh came into being on December 16, 1971. A case study of the architecture of Bangladesh can be a partial one only as it cannot include the architecture of West Bengal for obvious reasons

Due to the location of Bengal in the north-eastern corner of India, people invading India came to this area a certain period after entry into the sub-continent from the West Invaders, such as the Aryans, the Greeks, the Mongols, the Turks and the Afghans entered India from the West and their influence on Bengal was felt much later in modified forms. The only exception was the invasion of the British who first occupied Bengal and then took decades to occupy the whole of India.

People must have lived in this country from very ancient times, but dated history can be traced back to only the 3rd century B.C. Due to the migration of people from the West for easy living since ancient times there must have been cross-fertilisation of cultures. This can be clearly seen in the examples of architecture from ancient times to the present day.

Invasions of people from different cultures had both a positive and a negative effect on the culture of Bengal. Whenever the foreigners or invaders settled down here peacefully they identified themselves with the local people and culture, but whenever the invaders could not or did not wish to identify with the people here, the effect was disastrous on the culture of Bengal.

Factors Affecting Architecture

Certain physical and cultural factors not only act as constraints but also as the source of ideas for the forms and content of architecture in any civilisation.

Topography and climate play an important role in this region. The topography of Bangladesh is basically low lying, flat land, traversed by innumerable rivers and channels. Most of the soil is alluvium, deposited by the river and eminently suitable for agriculture and for the production of bricks and tiles.

The climate is marked by heavy rainfall during four months of the monsoon from June to September, with cool weather for four months from November to February, and hot-humid conditions in between. Except for the monsoon months, sun insolation is intense. The Tropic of Cancer, at 23°N passes through the middle of the country. Due to heavy rainfall, vegetation growth is intense giving a year round verdant colour to the whole country.

Since ancient times the predominant building materials have been the soil itself and timber, bamboo and grass which grow in abundance on this soil.

The economy depending solely on agriculture for thousands of years has always been dominated by rural life. The rural agricultural-economic relationship dominated all aspects of our culture.

A Review of the Architecture of Bangladesh

To clearly visualise the forces which shaped the form and content of architecture in Bangladesh, it is necessary to examine buildings from ancient times to the present day. In Bangladesh, as in any other country two parallel sets of activities in building construction can be identified.

On the one hand, we can see that the rural buildings were constructions (and even constructed today) of easily and cheaply available local materials subject to quick deterioration. The forms were comparatively

simple and changed very little through the centuries.

Parallel to this, building activities also continued in the urban areas which quality-wise were different from the rural scene. In the urban context in Bangladesh many buildings were built in permanent materials, and logically the predominant material was brick. The most important buildings for society, that is the buildings for religious purposes, were whenever possible constructed in brick.

Due to changes of rulers from time to time, the urban scene changed comparatively more frequently and quickly than in the rural areas. Unfortunately, due to the destructive activities of man and the ravages of nature very few ancient buildings survived up to the present day. The destructive nature of the shifting river regimes must be realised to understand the reasons for almost total absence of ancient buildings No traces can be found of the cities which flourished in ancient Bengal, such as Gange, Tamralipti, Karnasubarna, Kotibarsa, Panchanagari and Rampal. There are also many identified archaeological sites which have not been excavated yet for various reasons. We are left with a few monuments which can give a picture of continuity or rather discontinuity in the architectural traditions of the country.

The Ancient Period (3rd century B.C. — 11th century A.D.)

Present Mahastangarh is the only existing remains of an ancient city. It is identified with Pundranagar, a flourishing city during the Gupta-Pala regimes. According to a copper plate excavated from the site, the city dates back to 3rd century B.C. From the existing remains it seems to have been a fortified city raised on a platform with a large number of brick built houses laid out in a comparatively congested urban pattern.

It is evident from Mahastangarh that the technique of making and the using of bricks was already highly developed, though the disappearance of these monuments above ground level makes it difficult to visualise the total form and details. The city was rebuilt successively on the same site in three distinct periods.

The only remains of ancient structures in this region are religious buildings constructed between the 8th and 11th centuries. These include Buddhist viharas, monasteries and temples. Hindu temples of this period are conspicuous by their absence.

The sites of the Buddhist religious buildings extend from Paharpur in the north to Mainamati in the south-east. Of these few existing remains, the most famous and impressive is the Sompur Vihara at Paharpur. Measuring 922 feet (281 metres) (NS) by 919 feet (280 metres) (EW), it is probably the single largest monastery in the sub-continent. It had 177 monastic cells, gateways, votive stupas, minor chapels, water tanks and other structures around the dominant central shrine.

The central structure is cruciform in shape, and raised on three terraces with complex decorative walls with carved brick cornices and terracotta friezes built up with individual plaques. Bas-reliefs in stone covered the lower walls. The fascinating thing in Paharpur is the sophistication in the making of different types and sizes of brick and terracotta, and their use. Even in the present condition of the ruins, the quality of the bricks and of the walls and details make an architect excited about the ancient art and the tremendous possibilities of bricks and tiles even in our present day context

The orientation, the geometric configuration of the structure, the proportions prove that in ancient times the people of Bengal were sensitive to the highest demands of the forms and techniques of architecture. The cruciform stupa on a square base, a unique feature originating in this region, inspired architects in countries far away from Bengal, such as Java and Kampuchea and of course it had a direct influence on temple forms in Burma.

Although the Hindu temple originated in other parts of India, in Bengal it was transformed into local forms which are typically Bengali On the basis of roof-form, they can be identified into three basic types: a) Sikhara, b) Chala and c) Ratna.

The earliest surviving temple is a Sikhara-form in Barakar in Burdwan district (West Bengal) of the 8th century A.D. A later example is the Kodla Math near Bagerhat.

The Chala-form, clearly derived from the rural huts of Bengal, has been the more popular temple form, as is evident from illustrations in ancient manuscripts and plaques and existing structures. There are many variations of this form and the Dhakeswari Temple at Dhaka (early 17th century A.D.) and the Jor Bangla at Pabna are examples. It is interesting to note that in the 16th and 17th centuries, this roof form was used quite indiscriminately in Hindu temples and Muslim mosques.

The Ratna-type is an elaboration of the previous types. The form consists of a central spire surrounded by minor pinnacles. The most impressive example of this type is the Kantaji Mandir in Dinajpur (1692–1723 A.D.).

The Advent of the Muslims: the Sultanate Period (1204–1576 A.D.)

Muslims came to Bengal in the 13th century A.D. from North India and within quite a short period of time became the rulers of the country. Most of the

time for the next three hundred years the connection with Delhi was tenuous and the Sultans of Bengal behaved like independent rulers of the country.

After the initial disruptions, there began a period of great creative activity based primarily on the existing culture of Bengal — there were translations into Bengali of ancient scriptures, poetry in Bengali, research in medicine and sciences, and, of course, flourishing of a distinctive architecture of Bengal, all made possible by the direct patronage of the Sultans of Bengal through their sympathetic understanding of local culture. It was truly "the emergence of Bengal as a nation — with a distinctive language, architecture and literature".

Architecturally, the important aspect of the Sultanate period is the synthesis of regional forms, techniques and traditions with the ideas and concepts of the foreigners. Although, new building types, such as the mosque and mausoleum, were introduced, they eventually found expression through regional forms and features. Some of these features, drawn from the same roots, were used interchangeably in mosques and temples. The specific features of the structures of this period are their form, the structural system, richness of surface decoration, use of traditional brick and terracotta, occasional stone-carving and glazed tile work, use of curvilinear cornice and the Bangla roof.

Examples are the structures in Gaur and Pandua, Sat Gambuz in Bagerhat (1459 A D.), Sura Mosque in Dinajpur (1493 A.D.), Chota Sona Mosque in Gaur (1493 A.D.), Bagha Masjid in Rajshahi (1523 A.D.) and Atiya Masjid in Tangail (1609 A D.).

The Mughal Period (1576 A.D. — 1757 A.D.)

The specific feature of the Mughal period is the idea of political centralisation, when all ideas and ideals flowed down from Delhi This was an imposition of an imperial idea where everything grows and flows out of the concept of the central ruling power. Architecturally this meant the imposition of forms from Delhi by the Governors of Bengal. This was a break with the continuity of the architectural tradition of the region. The complete break came along with the advent of the British.

Mughal structures include mosques, mausoleums and forts Although replicated from the North Indian forms, the Mughal structures in Bengal were more modest in scale and less articulated in execution. The traditional expression of brick was abandoned for a plastered surface. The three-domed mosque was adopted as a Mughal structure as against the variety of multi-domed mosques of pre-Mughal times Also a few of the pre-Mughal innovations were continued or developed to suit Mughal intentions.

Examples in and around Dhaka include the Sat Masjid, Bibi Pari's Tomb, the Lalbagh Fort, the Katra buildings, the river forts (all 17th century), Sangi Dalan in Rajmahal (1740's), Jami Mosque in Rajmahal and the Zarad Mosque in Murshidabad (1740's).

Even when the Nawabs of Bengal asserted themselves as independent rulers, from 1707 to 1757, after the weakening of Mughal power, they hardly deviated from the Mughal building principles. Only after the advent of the British, and when the ruling elites had succumbed completely to European influences, do we notice a growing fascination for European products, as seen by the hiring of a European to design the Nawab's Palace in Murshidabad in the European style in the 1820's.

The British Period (1757 A.D. — 1947 A.D.)

Imperialist cultural imposition, initiated mildly by the Mughals, was total in the case of the British. The British cultural domination was so thorough and devastating that it completely severed the continuity of Bengali socio-cultural and economic life, including the development of regional architecture. The impact of that devastation is felt even today. The activities of the British, cultural, architectural, or otherwise, must be reviewed in the frame of their overall attitude and intention. Their activities, guided by the sole intention of economic exploitation, totally disregarded the culture of Bengal. In fact, by their attitude and behaviour, they almost destroyed the existing socio-cultural scene totally Sir Charles Trevelyan's description of Dhaka in 1840 is worth mentioning as an indicator of the effect of the British activities: "The population of Dhaka has fallen from 150,000 to 40,000 and the jungle and malaria are fast encroaching upon the town... Dhaka, which was the Manchester of India, has fallen off from a very flourishing town to a very poor and small one". Similar descriptions of other towns are also abundantly available.

Meanwhile, Calcutta, a town developed by and for the British, began to flourish as a centre of the British rulers. Here, and later in other parts of the country, they put up their first buildings as exact facsimiles of buildings in Europe, visually executed in the Neo-Classical manner popular in Europe in those days. Examples include Calcutta Government House, Serampore College and Dhaka Old State Bank.

Climate was the first factor which forced a change in the imported European buildings Locally used architectural elements, such as, overhanging eaves, wooden lattice and the verandah began to be incorporated in the British buildings and gave rise to a new type with a strange mixture of elements.

It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that the local elite, completely overwhelmed by the European economy and culture, accepted in totality the British buildings The Palace Complex of the Nawab of Murshidabad (built in the 1820's), the Murshidabad Imambara, Ahsan Manzil in Dhaka are examples as are the many residences of the Zamindars and elites all over Bengal. Thus, both the Englishmen in India and the local elites contributed to create a 'hybrid style' — a pastiche of diverse and discordant elements This trend has influenced the ideas of the ruling class up to the present day.

1947–1971 — Present

In 1947 the British had to leave India, and India and Pakistan emerged as two independent states From 1947 to 1971 present Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan There were no formally trained Bengali architects in this region in 1947. The few architects who were employed by the government were foreigners. The first formally trained Bengali architect started practising in 1953 The School of Architecture at the University of Engineering and Technology produced their first batch of architects in 1966 The School was organised by American architects and the training process for obvious reasons is basically that practised in the U.S.A.

Between 1947 and 1971, the major portion of the design activity was conducted by people who were not architects, resulting in buildings which created a chaotic and undesirable environment.

Even in this adverse situation, two positive events occurred. On the one hand, two famous American architects were commissioned to design important public buildings, Louis I. Kahn to design the Capital Complex at Dhaka and Paul Rudolph the Agricultural University at Mymensingh. Meanwhile formally trained Bengali architects began to practise.

After the independence of Bangladesh, a larger number of Bengali architects started working as independent professionals The independence of the country provided the architects with wider opportunities to get involved in design activity The visual result of these activities was however hardly better than what was happening before independence. Despite this there are indications that conscious efforts are being made to absorb the local spirit and aspirations and translate them into visual idioms and forms. Some recent work show that these efforts are enlightened and touched with sensitivity.

Conclusion

In this condensed survey of architecture in Bangladesh the rich heritage of this country can only be partially expressed. One feature which makes architecture of this region unique is its own forms with its special qualities. Whatever came to Bengal ultimately was absorbed in the culture giving a fresh and new dimension to the existing framework. Up to the advent of the Mughals whatever happened was ultimately Bengali with its roots deep in the tradition and culture of the country. The Mughals came with an imperialist outlook and created the first disturbance in the continuity in the field of architecture The coming of the British saw a severance of all ties with the existing culture of the country.

Architecture sustains its life on living civilisations and living culture Without roots deeply embedded in the culture and the people, architecture is a meaningless shell. Visual cliches and idioms without any reference to the local culture do not produce architecture, or even good buildings. This survey demonstrates a case for regionalism sustaining its vitality from the material and spiritual aspirations of the people of the region.

After 1947, the whole of the Indian sub-continent faced a crisis due to the almost total absence of architects in the country. Neither was there a viable and reasonable system of education for the architects in the sub-continent The few architects who were practising were trained in England, and the English educational system had nothing to do with the Indian culture. Bangladesh, as a part of the sub-continent, faced the same problem. Almost all contemporary works are basically rooted in Western culture, though the architects, local and foreign, have tried to solve problems with local conditions in mind. Perhaps it is not possible ever to bridge the gap in a real sense between the Sultanate period and present day Bangladesh, or the ancient past and the present day scene.

The architects in Bangladesh are working under contradictory pressures. On the one hand the educational system and the architectural world outside are completely dominated by western ideas and western culture. On the other hand there is a tremendous urge to respond to local cultural needs and aspirations. Probably the situation is similar in all the countries of South Asia. There is no reason why any architect in our countries should have a view limited by the boundaries of our countries. It is obvious that technologically and culturally nobody can live in isolation Then there is the question of pride in one's own work and that work can be the product of one's own creative activity. Without deep roots in one's own culture and the heritage of the people it is not possible to sustain a creative life. In this context, the regional manifestation of architecture and other art forms is inevitable. Regionalism can only enrich the idea of world cultures — without it the world becomes very drab indeed!