

TRACING THE JOURNEY OF KHAN JAHAN ALI FROM BAROBAZAR TO BAGERHAT

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Abstract

According to the Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, there is about 423 listed archaeological sites in the country. But, there are many more yet to be unrevealed. Their true value remains unseen to the world if not taken proper action and acknowledgement. Khan Jahan Ali, on his famous journey from Champanagar (currently in Barobazar, greater Jhenaidah district) to Khalifatabad (present day Bagerhat district); he crossed quite a few remote areas and set up human settlements. On his way he built roads, dug large water bodies for fresh supply of water, established mosques and houses for the inhabitants. His unique construction style is quite evident on the structures along the 112.7 km long road distinguished by an old earthen embankment, traversing through (i) Barobazar, (ii) Murali-Qasba, (iii) Poyogram-Qasba and (iv) Khalifatabad (Bagerhat) The road is still known as Khanjali Road. The first segment of this road, known as Hakimpur - Barobazar road contains nine sultanate mosques of which only few have been documented properly by the authorities and the rests are barely mentioned. This study aims to fill up this gap, explore more into the contribution of Khan Jahan Ali on the four settlements he set up and their history by linking them with the monuments.

Keywords: Khan Jahan Ali, Shait Gombud Mosque, Sultani period of Bengal, Barobazar

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The history and the political boundary of Bengal is greatly determined by its geographical position, like many other countries of the world. Being the largest deltaic region created by the silt disposition of mighty rivers as Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna bestowed highly fertile soil and life sustaining resources. Because of this natural fertility, kind climate and fabled riches, Bengal has always attracted new settlers, traders and conquerors (Brammer, 2012; Rashid, 1977).

Traces of urban centers or large cities in Bengal have been found dating back more than 2,000 years. Though the economy was predominantly agricultural; the trades (especially cotton and Muslin, a very fine piece of clothing), both internal and international also flourished. Cities mainly started to take shape as a growth, production and trade center and port. But there have also been administrative, military or even cities for educational and knowledge gathering center (Zakaria, 2015).

In eleventh century, the Turkish Ghaznavid ruler Sultan Mahmud (971-1030) proceeded to the mainland India. Few centuries after his success, Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji (died in 1206) made his way to Bengal in the beginning of thirteenth century. Establishment of a muslim stronghold in Bengal certainly stirred several muslim saints and sufis to come to preach here. Baba Adam Shahid of Dhaka, Shah Sultan Rumi of Mymensingh, Makhдум Shah Dawlah Shahid of Pabna, Jalal-Din Tabrizi of Deotala (in Nawabganj, Dhaka) and Shah Jalal of Sylhet and last but not the least, Khan Jahan Ali of Bagerhat were few of them (Khan, 2013).

2.0 HISTORIC CONTEXT

Khan Jahan Ali of Khalifatabad (present day Bagerhat) possessed the requisite qualities to become both, a ruler and a successful administrator. Although little has been known about his origin and there happen to be many ambiguous myths; there is no doubt about his abilities. He was a prominent practitioner of sufism and was instrumental in converting the locals. Even though, it is still unclear, what has brought him here; was it to establish human settlements in the remote, inhospitable region of Bengal far away from Delhi Sultanate or was he simply decided to live in peace here.

According to Professor Satish Chandra Mitra (Mitra & Mitra, 1963), Khan Jahan took a long voyage to Bagerhat across Nadia (now a district in West Bengal, India) along the river Bhairab, by crossing the mighty Ganges River and appeared at Barobazar in the district of Jhenaidah. Thus Barobazar became the first township, among the four townships: (i) Barobazar, (ii) Murali Qashba, (ii) Poyogram Qasba and (iv) Khalifatabad established by him in Bengal. Monuments of Khan Jahan Ali were mostly documented and made available by the Department of Archeology of Bangladesh in form of different reports. A provisional list of the archaeological sites has been prepared and presented in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1: The Antiquities of Khan Jahan Ali in the Region (D. D. Hossain, Ali, & Hossain, 2003; M. M. Hossain, 2005)

Sl.	Barobazar	Murali-Qasba	Poyogram-Qasba	Bagerhat
1.	Gorar Mosque	Mosque of Garib Shah	Khanjali road that divided the city into two portion: Dakhin Dihi and Uttar Dihi.	Shait Gumbad Mosque
2.	Jor Bangla Mosque	Tomb of Beram Shah	Residence of Khan Jahan Ali	Tomb of Khan Jahan
3.	Satgachia Mosque	Mosque and pond at Maguraghona	100'x100' mound bears relics of a large mosque like the sixty dome mosque of Bagerhat	Tomb of Muhammad Taher
4.	Pathagar Mosque	Mosque at Mashjidkur	Two ancient pond known as 'Andhar Pukur' and 'Saner Pukur'	Thakur dighi
5.	Nungola Mosque			Singar Mosque
6.	Sukkur Mollick Mosque			Bibi Begeni's Mosque
7.	Pir Pukur Mosque			Chunakhola Mosque
8.	Galakata Mosque			Ranabijaypur Mosque
9.	Monohor Mosque			The Nine-domed Mosque
10.	Saudagar Dighi mound			Zinda Pir Mosque
11.	Damdama			Reza Khoda Mosque

■ 3.0 BAROBAZAR

The The first settlement of Khan Jahan, Laid out on an earlier Hindu-Buddhist township known as Champanagar, the settlement in Barobazar was named after the twelve (Baro) saints living prior to Khan Jahan(Ahmad, 1989).. It is said, when he appeared there, the saints welcomed him wholeheartedly. The small township of Barobazar encompasses an area of about 6.44 km and still bears the significance like Gorar Mosque, Golakata Mosque, Jor-Bangla Mosque, Pir Pukur Mosque, Satgachia Mosque, Ghoper Dhupi Graveyard, Namaz Gaon Graveyard, Monohar Mosque, Jahajghata, Damdama protnosthan (translation: archaeological site), Gorar Masjid, Sukkur Mollick Mosque, Nungola Mosque, Khorer Dighi Graveyard, Pathagar Mosque, Badedihi Graveyard, Saudagar Dighi mound, Sanaidar Dighi mound, Adina Mosque etc. Some of them have been traced and shown in a map (Figure 1) and few of the notable structures are described in the following sections.

Pir Pukur Mosque

The Pir Pukur Mosque is the first structure that catches attention on the way from Barobazar Bus stand to Taherpur Road. It is a fifteen domed rectangular-shaped mosque measuring about 62'-3" X 40'-1", standing beside a north-south elongated water reservoir called Pir Pukur Dighi. All the domes disappeared and only the walls survived upto certain height. But the eight free standing pillars in the interior and twelve pilasters engaged on the walls indicate the existence of those domes. The mosque has ornate octagonal turrets at its four corners and horizontal bands on the tower at regular intervals.

Three facade of the mosque in the east, north and south direction have five arched doorways but the western wall is consisted of three semi-circular recessed mihrabs instead of five. There are three beautiful reticulated (Jali) windows on the northern and southern walls of the mosque. There is a tunnel vaulted platform rested on brick piers in the northwestern part of its prayer hall which supposed to be the royal gallery. The Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh revealed this mosque in 1994 during an excavation.

Nungola Mosque

About 200m south-east of Pir Pukur Mosque there situates the single domed square mosque known as Nungola Mosque. There is also a large oblong water tank known as the same name; the Nungola Dighi. The plan shows traces of a prayer chamber, measuring 21'-8" X 22'-3", 5'-5" thick wall and an octagonal engaged turret at each of its external corner. There is still reminiscent of three openings in the east, an additional opening on north and south, and three semicircular mihrabs in the qibla wall. The mihrabs and the corner turrets are decorated with terracotta relieved with geometrical pattern as chain and bell motifs. There are 18" wide eight numbers of pilasters on the walls,

decorated with horizontal bands. Two graves with dressed piece of stone are lying on the south precinct. The mosque was unveiled by the excavation of Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh in 1994 and some ornamental bricks, crockeries, earthen pots, saucers, terracotta beads and toys were recovered.

Shukkur Mollick Mosque

Few meters west of Nungola Mosque another ruined mosque called Sukkur Mollick Mosque was found (approximately 300m south of Barobazar). The mosque is square-shaped and measured 20' X 20' externally with 3'-8" thick wall. The dome collapsed but the walls survived upto some heights. It had three mihrabs in the west wall and three doorway in each of the walls except the west. The central mihrab is projected in the exterior side and the other mihrabs on the side were blind. It also had an octagonal corner turret at each of the external corner. The floor of the mosque was really wellbuilt by a single course of bricks with lime terracing at the top. Some ornamental bricks with various types of floral and geometric designs, earthen pots, oil lamps, terracotta balls, beads and toys were found during the excavation as well.

Gorar Mosque

The elegant Gorar Mosque is the most popular among the mosques of Barobazar with four domes at two rows; the central prayer hall with a larger hemispherical one and a porch with three smaller domes. The porch has three arched openings that leads to the main prayer hall and they are also aligned to three mihrabs on the west. It is believed to be named after a darvish (saint) called Gorai. According to some historians Hosen Shah or his son Nusrat Shah built this mosque. Similar mosques like this can be found in other parts of the country; for example Atia Mosque in Tangail. Many visitors come here to make a wish, submit sacrificial offerings or donate money.

Monohor Mosque

The Monohor Mosque is situated in between Gorar Mosque and Golakata Mosque, approximately 150m south of another mosque namely, Golakata Mosque. This oblong shaped structure measures about 88'-3" in north-south and 63'-8" in east-west direction. There were 24 free standing square brick pillars and it is assumed to be a 35-domed mosque. The multilayered platforms are consisted of as many as four platforms, of them two still survive. Inside the mosque there is a screen that separates the four bays of the corner. Some historian depicts that as a royal gallery or Badshah ka Takht. There was a room built outside the mosque at the north-west corner which appeared to be a room for Imam. It was also revealed during the excavation in 1994 by the Department of Archeology of Bangladesh.

■4.0 MURALI-QASBA

Khan Jahan Ali settled next to a place called Murali-Qasba after leaving Barobazar. To continue his missionary work, he left two of his dedicated followers there named Garib Shah and Beram Shah. The Mosque of Garib Shah near Jessore Collectorate and the grave of Beram Shah near Christian cemetery still bears the reminiscence of that time. Actually he divided his followers into two groups from this point; one group followed him to Bagerhat and others went straight to the Sundarbans(Ahmad, 1989).

It is known that the northern side of the present day Jessore town was known as Murali-Qasba in ancient times. There was also a place called Bogchar, by the old river Bhairab near this town. Virtually, most of the area of Jessore region was known as Murali Qasba in the Sultanate period. It encompasses an area of about four to five mile. The Murali Township spreads about four km to the north-east of the city with Palpara, Bamun para and old Qasba. Sir Cunningham assumed this to be the capital of the Somotat region. Although there is no proof of his statement, but there is no doubt about its antiquity. Some historians also suggested few Vihara in that area. Satish Chandra stated that, the large mound on the western side of Karbala pond is possibly an old Buddhist Stupa. The highway he built to connect these settlements is still known by the name of Khanjalir Jangal(Zakaria, 2015).

■5.0 POYOGRAM-QASBA

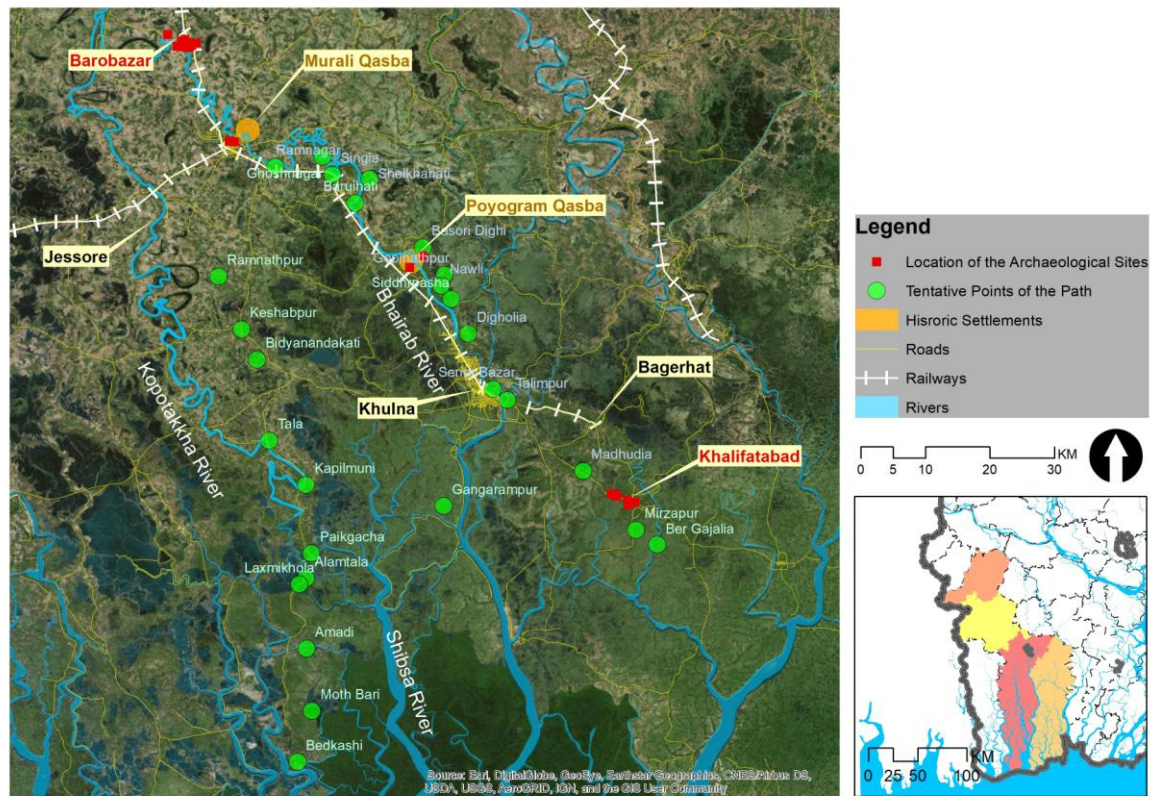
The township of Poyogram-Qasba was a new colony of Khan Jahan only about 32.2 km away from Bagerhat(Ahmad, 1989) and around 35 km southeast of Jessore(Zakaria, 2015). There are still remainings of some old structures (two of them are as large as Shait Gumbad Mosque at Bagerhat among them and are said to have survived as recently as about a century ago(Mitra & Mitra, 1963) and few ancient tanks. This township was roughly divided into two somewhat equal halves by a 15.24m wide Khanjali road, now known as Uttar (North) Dihi and Dakshin (South) Dihi. A grid of other roads and streets sub-divided the town into a rectangular chessboard pattern(Ahmad, 1989).

Unfortunately, none of the mosques survived except there is the remaining of the large mosque is in the Dakkhin Dihi village. Apart from that, the road (Khanjali Road) still exists(Zakaria, 2015). Furthermore, there is a mosque named Shubharara Mosque, few kilometers southeast from Abhaynagar thana in Jessore district and about 8 km north of Dhulgram. According to historian AKM Zakaria, this was probably built by Khan Jahan or one of his disciples(Zakaria, 2015).

6.0 KHALIFATABAD (BAGERHAT)

Khan Jahan Ali adorned his capital-city with numerous mosques (traditionally 360 in number), bridges, roads, palaces and other public buildings in an astonishingly short span of time. But the present day Bagerhat can be distinguished by about fifty monuments and ponds. However, most of them are extinct now (Ahmed, 1984). There are only two surviving monuments well enough to describe the distinct style and significance of Khan Jahan possess by them. One is the tomb of Khan Jahan Ali and the other is the Shait Gumbad mosque. UNESCO has inscribed the mosque city of Bagerhat, as a world heritage site way back in 1983.

Figure 1: Journey of Khan Jahan Ali



Apart from these monuments, UNESCO also includes the mosques of Singar, Bibi Begni, Reza Khoda, Zindapir among the unique monuments. [4][6]. Generally in his buildings, Khan Jahan portrays an affection for the Tughlaq architecture of Delhi, and this particular feature leads actually to the discovery of his origin (Dani, 1961). A survey by Satish Chandra Mitra in 1910, found the city boundary to be 4 miles, starting from the Ghora Dighi on the west and up to the bank of Bhairab River on the east. It spread from the old bed of the Bhairab river, now known as Magrar Creek on the north, upto the Karapara Creek on the south for about 2-3 miles (Mitra & Mitra, 1963).

Shait Gumbad Mosque

Shait Gumbad Mosque is the most magnificent structure of Khan Jahan and apparently is the largest Sultanate mosques in Bangladesh. Situated on the eastern bank of the Ghoradighi (an enormous water tank dug by Khan Jahan), about three miles west of the present Bagerhat town or ancient Khalifatabad. The oblong shaped mosque measured about 148'-6"x101'-4" externally and 123'-3"x76'-2" internally. Divided into eleven equal bays and seven rows, the grids are roofed over either a hemispherical dome or a charchala vault (hut shaped dome). Although the name suggests a mosque with sixty domes (it has sixty columns instead), there are 81 domes in total, including 77 low domes and one dome on each corner. Among the 77 domes, there are seven four-sided pitched Bengali domes on the central nave that leads to the central mihrab. Those unusual shaped dome are the first example of such craftsmanship and the contextualization of Tughlaq style in this region, employed by Khan Jahan.

This huge structure is buttressed by four two-storied corner circular towers, capped by domes that rise above the mosque. The vast prayer hall can be accessible from 11 arched doorways on the east and 7 doorways on the north and south providing adequate light and ventilation to ensure a sombre appearance. The massive brick walls of the mosque are slightly tapered, more common in the Muslim architecture of Delhi.

Tomb of Khan Jahan

Tomb of Khan Jahan stands on a high artificial mound, inside the Dargah complex of Khan Jahan. The complex consists a square tomb building of Khan Jahan, a single-domed mosque, a probable kitchen etc. The tomb is the only monument in Bagerhat of which the original cupolas (domed ceilings) survived. It measures almost 45 feet in height and 30 feet in width. The four exterior angles of the building are maintained with solid circular towers. There are four walls (7'-10" thick) which have stone casings up to a height of about 3 feet in order to protect the building from ground moisture (which is common phenomena in the humid climate of south Bengal).

No terracotta art is displayed in this building. The corner towers are circular, divided by fine bands of mouldings, while the battlements and cornice gently curve, above which rises the hemispherical dome. The iron spike, jutting out over the dome, proves the original existence of a finial. The interior of the dome is also a square with no stone pillars. In their place stone brackets have been used in order to support the squinches that make up the 'phase of transition'. On the floor lies the cenotaph, which has lost its original decoration but has remaining of the tiles (some of which are hexagonal) of various colours and inscribed with Quranic verses (Ahmad, 1989).

Muhammad Taher's Tomb

The Tomb of Muhammad Taher, a close associate of Khan Jahan can be found adjacent to the mausoleum of Khan Jahan Ali with an identical layout. The principal material of the tomb is stone with 99 attributes of Allah engraved on it. This pavilion like structure is open to sky and one of the notable structure in Bagerhat. (Ahmad, 1989).

■7.0 THE EARTHEN EMBANKMENT

The earthen road or Khanjali Jangal is a 112.7 Km long road made by Khan Jahan Ali and his followers from Barobazar to Bagerhat. The first part of the road from Barobazar to Jessore was actually built earlier by someone named Gazi and thus was called Jangal of Gazi. When the road by Khan Jahan was built, the whole pathway got the name Jangal of Khan Jahan or in local dialect, the 'Khanjali road'. The road went into two directions from Murali Qasba. The path lead by Khan Jahan to Bagerhat was along the river Bhairab and the path along the river Kopotakkho goes straight to Sundarban and was led by one of his trusted follower called Bura Khan. (Ahmed, 1984)

The group with Bura Khan started their journey on the same way Khan Jahan did. They built their own road and dug ponds along the road to supply fresh water to the villagers. Their first stopover was at Khanpur and then Bidyanandakati in Keshabpur where they dug an enormous lake. This Khanjali road further connected Maguraghona, Ataroi, Jeyala-Baruihati, Tala, Chapanghat, Khalin nagar, Gangarampur, Ghoshnagar, Kopilminu, Ramnathpur, Gadaipur, Mathbari and Paikgacha. Crossing the Shibsra river it linked Laxmikhola, Gajalia, Alatala and Masjidkur (in Amadi) and extended deep into the forest as far as Amadi and Bedkashi(Mitra & Mitra, 1963).

The path lead by Khan Jahan Ali went about 4 mile south-east from Murali-Qasba to a place called Ramnagar and excavated a pond known as Shahabati Dighi. They went across Singia and Shekhhati to Poyogram-Qasba (currently a village in Phultala thana in Khulna district). Then he left his disciple Taher, and went to Bashuri which still bears a pond excavated by him. In Shubharara he built a single dome mosque and proceeded to Ranagati, Gopinathpur, Nawly, Dhulgram, Siddhipasha to Barakpur. They halted there for a while and continued to Bagerhat through Senhati, Chandnimohal, Senerbazar (at present Mongla port), Talimpur, Srirampur, Lakhpur and Modhudia. (Mitra & Mitra, 1963) Most of the places mentioned above are depicted in the map provided (Figure 1).

■8.0 CONCLUSION

The establishments of Khan Jahan Ali is an extraordinary example of an wise commander and a noble man who spent years after years in remote southern Bengal and laid out well planned settlements and infrastructures in that area. The distinct architectural style and method of construction has given a unique characteristics to them. Though much confusion prevails about his early life, the significance of this great warrior to the development of southern Bangladesh is unparalleled. He has been compared with emperor Shahjahan and termed as influential as him in that region by famous historian A K M Zakaria(Zakaria, 2015). Although UNESCO has inscribed the mosque city of Bagerhat (originally named as Khalifatabad) as a world heritage site, very few know about the first and the other settlements from where he began and continued his journey in this deltaic land. Here, an attempt has been taken to narrate their history and remaining antiquities.

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