

Historical Evolution of "Sahn" in Mosque Architecture from Mughal to Contemporary period of Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the Contemporary context, globalization, urbanization, and technological advancements have redefined the architectural landscape of mosques. Modern designs showcase innovative approaches to incorporating "Sahn" space, catering to evolving societal needs while preserving the spiritual essence and symbolic significance inherent in traditional mosque architecture. This study delves into the intricate spatial concept of "Sahn" within mosque architecture, examining its evolution across three distinct epochs: Mughal, Colonial, and Contemporary. "Sahn" encapsulates the essence of grandeur, sanctity, and spiritual elevation within the architectural framework of mosques. By employing a comparative analytical approach, this research investigates how the perception and utilization of "Sahn" space have transformed over time, influenced by cultural, socio-political, and technological shifts. The Mughal period serves as the foundational epoch, characterized by majestic structures where "Sahn" space was intricately woven into the architectural fabric, symbolizing the divine authority and imperial glory of the Mughal rulers. The Colonial era introduces a paradigm shift, marked by the imposition of Western architectural ideologies and colonial power dynamics. Through an interdisciplinary lens encompassing architectural history, cultural studies, and religious anthropology, this study illuminates the nuanced evolution of "Sahn" space within mosque architecture, shedding light on its enduring relevance and adaptability amidst changing socio-cultural landscapes. By understanding the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, this research offers insights into the preservation and innovation of architectural heritage in contemporary mosque design.

1. Introduction:

A sahn (Arabic: صحن) is a courtyard commonly found in Islamic architecture, particularly as the main courtyard of a mosque. (M. Bloom, 2009) (Petersen, 1996) (The Mosque, 2023) (Davies, 2008) (Bandyopadhyay, 2002) Traditional mosques often feature a large central sahn, typically enclosed by arcades or *riwaqs* on all sides. Positioned in front of the prayer hall on the qibla side the direction Muslims face during prayer the sahn serves as an entry space. (Pedersen, 1991) (M. Bloom,

2009) Most Mosque courtyards include a public fountain for wudu, the ritual purification performed before prayer. These courtyards may be paved with stone or planted with trees. (Pedersen, 1991) Due to the hot climate of the Middle East, sahn also functioned as overflow areas for large congregations, especially during Friday prayers. (Pedersen, 1991) To provide shade and comfort, covered arcades (riwaqs) were often built along the other three sides surrounding the courtyard. (Pedersen, 1991)



Image 1: Large sahn of the Mosque of Uqba, surrounded by riwaq (arcades), in Tunisia. (Photo source: infopediapk, 2024)

Importantly “Sahn” can play a significant role in urban landscapes, influencing urban planning, architectural design, and community development. Understanding their spatial dynamics and socio-economic impact is crucial for sustainable urban development. The Sahn symbolizes the pinnacle of spiritual aspiration, representing the divine connection between Earth and Heaven. It's a visual reminder of the mosque's sacred purpose and its connection to the heavens.

2. Historical Background of Sahn:

The first clearly documented mosque in Islamic history, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, began as a rectangular open-air space. A roofed section supported by columns was soon added. During the 7th and 8th centuries, the mosque evolved into a hypostyle structure centred around a courtyard. (M. Bloom, 2009)

Other significant early mosques- such as the Great Mosque of Kufa, the Great Mosque of Damascus (early 8th century), the Great Mosque of Cordoba (late 8th century), and the Great Mosque of Kairouan (early 9th century) also featured central courtyards. (M. Bloom, 2009) Initially, some courtyards, like those in Cordoba, Kairouan, and Tunis, lacked riwaqs (roofed arcades), but these were soon added to provide shade and became standard elements. (Pedersen, 1991)

While these were all hypostyle mosques, courtyards continued to be a key feature in later architectural styles. The four-iwan plan, common in Iran and Central Asia, arranged four iwans and additional halls around a central courtyard. Similarly, the grand domed mosques of Ottoman architecture, from the 15th century onward, included arcaded courtyards leading to the prayer hall. (M. Bloom, 2009)

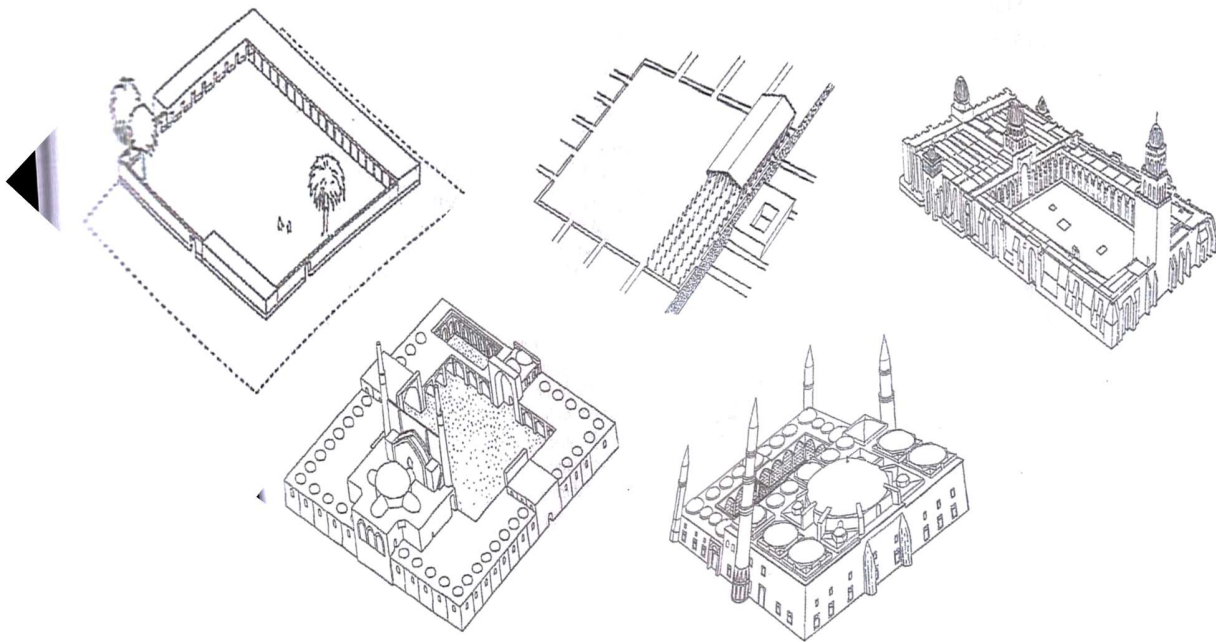
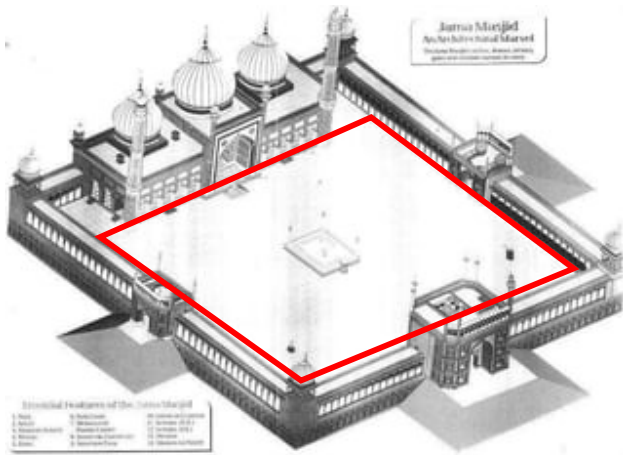


Figure 01: The enlarged house of Prophet Muhammad 624AD, Inspiration for the mosque Architecture where sahn could identified, Figure 02: The sahn of the the great mosque at Kufa, 638AD, Figure 03: The sahn of the Great Mosque of Qairawan, 836-62AD, Figure 04: The sahn of the Friday mosque of Ziyaratgah, Herat, 1482AD, Figure 05: The sahn of the mosque of Uc Serefali, Adirne, 1447AD. (Figure source: Hillenbrand, 1999)

However, A fountain for ablution is necessary for Islamic worship. The worshipper must be in a state of ritual purity before stars to pray. (Michell, 1987, pp20). Generally, the fountain placed centre of the Shan or courtyard. The courtyard afforded an opportunity for architectural display, which the Ottomans, the Safavids and specially the Mughals seized with enthusiasm. In Delhi, the courtyard of the Jami Mosque is surrounded by finely sculptured arches. There is an ablution tank in the middle. (Michell, 1987, pp21). Intermediate between external and internal features is the ablution fountain, generally located in the centre of the courtyard to emphasize the initiatic function of water in Islam. (Michell, 1987, pp35).

In Indian Subcontinent, Emperor Jafar Khan Gazi encroach Tribeni and establish first mosque in this region in 1298 BC. (Helal, 2022, pp28) Then a great number of mosques established by different emperors. From them, Typical three dome Mughal mosques, such as Delhi Jami Mosque, India could be a typical example of containing sahn or Courtyard Mosque. one of the prominent four-iwan (four-porch) mosques in India (Makani, 2015). The accessed by three sandstone gates surrounding the sahn space. The square sahn (courtyard) is paved with red sandstone and faces the eastern gate. Its center lies a marble ablution tank. The sahn (courtyard) of this mosque is bordered by shallow, semi-covered porticos—roofed structures open on (Makani, 2015). both sides This openness—reinforced by entrances on three sides and the fluid visual and physical transition between interior and exterior spaces (Makani, 2015).



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Figure 06: three dome mosque Delhi

Jami Mosque, India

3. Methodology:

The research encompasses a qualitative approach, incorporating both primary and secondary data sources. To gather the necessary data for this study, an extensive literature review and site survey were conducted.

2.1 Literature Review

Conducting a comprehensive review of existing literature on mosque architecture, with a focus on studies related to "Sahn" space and Islamic architecture. Exploring historical texts, academic papers, architectural journals, and relevant online resources to gather insights into the conceptualization and evolution of "Sahn" in mosque architecture. Representational mosques of different period have been taken from different phases of Bangladesh. Analyze the sahn characteristics of the examples in different aspects. Then compare and analysis has been done.

2.2 Field survey and Documentation

Identifying a representative sample of Bangladeshi mosques spanning different historical periods, architectural styles, and geographic regions. Considering factors

such as accessibility, historical significance, architectural diversity, and socio-cultural context in selecting the research sites. A physical survey and mapping of the site were conducted by the authors. This survey involved site visits, photographic documentation of the mosques, and the identification of traditional cultural norms and practices specific to the region. Utilizing qualitative methods to collect data on the architectural features and spatial qualities associated with "Shan" in the selected mosques. Conducting site visits to document the physical characteristics, spatial layout, decorative elements, and symbolic representations present in each mosque. Employing photography, sketches, measurements, and architectural drawings to capture the visual and spatial aspects of "Sahn" space.

4. Historical Evolution of Shan in Bangladesh:

4.1 Sultanate period

Islamic periods start to the region during the Mamluk period of India at 1073 BC by the emperor Mohammed Ghuri. In the Bengal region Islam entered by the great warrior Ikhtiar Mohammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khalji on 1204 BC. (Helal, 2022, pp25) (Ahmed, 2006, pp18). In That Time, new building types, such as mosques and mausoleums were introduced first time in Bengal region. Many mosques built during independent sultanate (1338-1538) (Ahmed, 2006, pp18). During Sultanate period there was no defined Shan space in a mosque of Bangladesh.

However, despite the extensive construction work, these construction projects cannot be considered complete in any way, even though a main building is approximately 20 feet tall, the surrounding areas remain somewhat unplanned. For the ablution of the mosque, there was usually a water reservoir around the mosque, but it was not fully connected to the mosque itself. The Sultanate period was the period of initial development for mosque architecture, with only the main building visible at this time. With few exceptions, mosques during the Sultanate period were small in size and did not have boundary walls or well-organized courtyards. The subsequent overall development of the mosque was contributed by the Mughal period.

4.2 Mughal period:

During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, Bengal was incorporated into the Mughal Empire and the Mughals took control of Bengal after the Battle of Rajmahal in 1576. During this period, Bengal was considered an important province and Mughal architecture, culture, and trade flourished. Mughal architecture was largely influenced by Persian & Turkish architectural styles, which is why the similar style

influenced the mosques to permeate the spaces. In addition, the Garden plays a role in Mughal architecture. The Mughals built large buildings to express their elegance, and along with the buildings & surroundings, they generally incorporate gardens in their building complex.

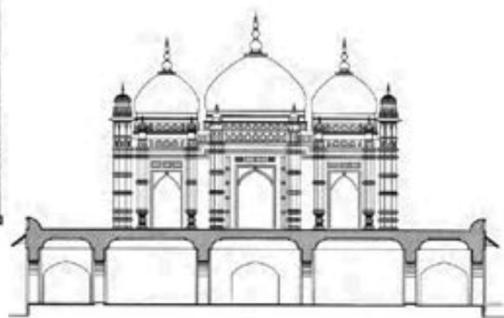
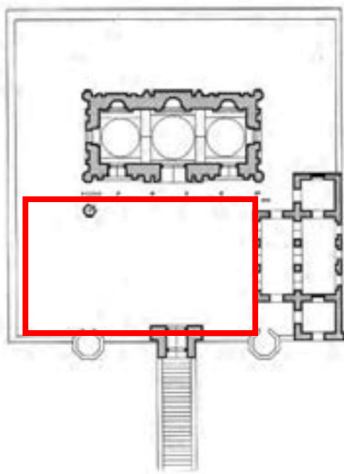
In Mughal period in Bengal, specially in Bangladesh some of the well-known mosque established in different region with the characteristics of Mughal style. Shah



Nimatullah Mosque at Chapainawabganj at 1660 BC contains on the western end separate squarish and paved grand sahn spaces (courtyard) in the front of the main mosque, which is encompassed by a low arcade boundary wall with a simple gateway in the middle of the east side (Ahmed, 2006, pp147).

Image 2: Shah Niamatullah Mosque at Chapainawabganj-Gaur (Photo source: Sultana, 2021)

Khan Mohammed Mridha Mosque complex is encompassed by a 3.6m high boundary wall. A 2.7m wide single flight of steps leads to the roof of the 16 ft raised platform through a gatehouse from the ground, where a rectangular sahn space is found in front of the main prayer hall. In the eastern side of the sahn or platform, there are two octagonal projected spaces, maybe for gathering or discussion in small



groups before or after the daily prayer (Ahmed, 2006, pp163).

Image 07 and Figures 07 & 08: Plan and Front Elevation of Khan Muhammad

Mridha Mosque, Dhaka (Photo & Figure source:

Sultana, 2021)

17th Century Mosque, the Mia Bari Mosque at Barishal is impressive two storied mosque located on a high platform from the ground, gives a majestic look in front of the sahn spaces on the platform. Those specific sahn spaces are used as an extension of prayer space and a rectangular courtyard of the complex as a transition to the main mosque chamber in interior.

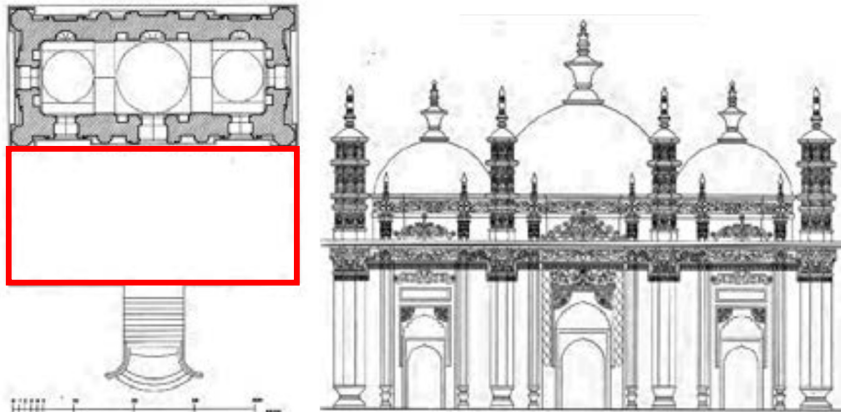
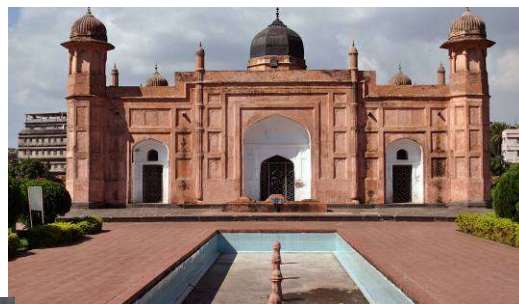
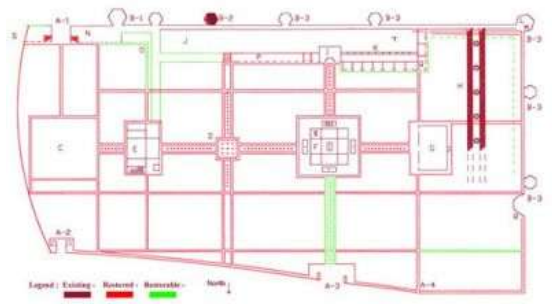


Figure 09 & 10: Plan and Front Elevation of Mia Bari Mosque (Photo & Figure source: Sultana, 2021)

The Lalbagh Fort Mosque is a three-dome mosque, is relatively small for a large site, with a water tank for ablutions in front. The sahn area of the Mosque integrates axis which connect other two structures. The sahn space contain a linear series of fountains (previously ablution) which not



only enrich the

environment of the mosque but also make a soothing sound.



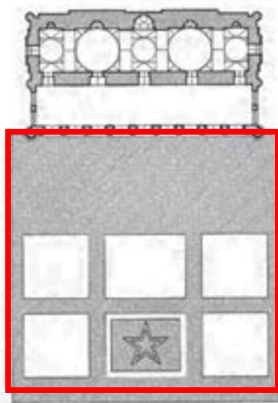
Figure 11 and Image 03 & 04: Lalbagh Fort Mosque

4.3 Colonial Period:

Accurate date of the establishment of Tara Mosque may be unknown, but it was repair in 1926 BC. In the time of British rule in Bengal region the mosque is a decorative style (chini tikri) work mosque (1930s) with a grand sahn. The sahn contains a few green spaces and ablution like stars (Presently fountain). The sahn

space accentuates the value or beauty of the semi-outdoor verandah space connected with the sahn space and make a sacred spatial quality on earth (eternal connection).

Figure 12 and Image and Front view of Tara



05: Plan with the sahn space Mosque at Old Dhaka (Figure source: Sultana, 2021)

4.4 Pakistan Period:

Baitul Mukarram mosque established in 1960 BC, designed by Ar. T Abdul Hussain Thariani a large cube shape model to the Kaabah of Mecca. In the mosque complex, we can see lavishly decorated courtyard or Shan spaces integrated with the full of lucrative gardens and fountain works. Those beauty and sound connected to the people as the eternal garden of Paradise. Also an internal open to sky sahn connect upward with the devotees.

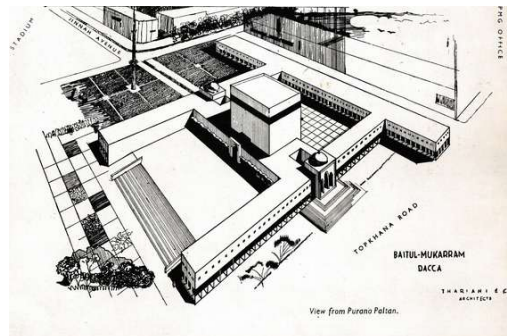
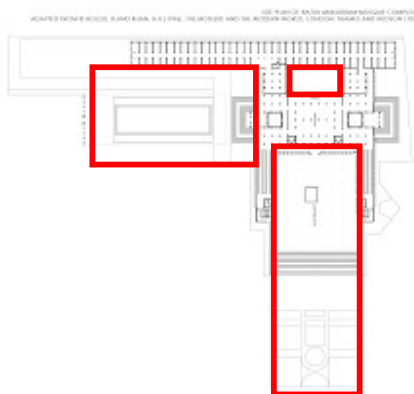


Figure 13 & 14 and Images 06 & 07: Plan and 3D View with images of Baitul Mukarram Mosque at Dhaka.



4.5 Bangladesh Period (Contemporary Direct implication):

The Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jame Mosque at Lalbagh, Dhaka bridges the past and present, drawing its inspiration from the Mughal-era Azam Shah Mosque at Lalbagh Fort. Breaking away from traditional mosque architecture in both form and concept, the design blends heritage with modernity to offer a contemporary reimagining of sacred space. (Art, 2021) Mayor MD Hanif Jami Mosque is such type of mass containing distinctively a courtyard/Shan separating the main functions, a bridge connected two sides, a minaret added on the sun area. Use transparent Glass on the building facade continues interior through the sahn. Here sahn used as a separated and at the same time a connected element of mosque architecture.

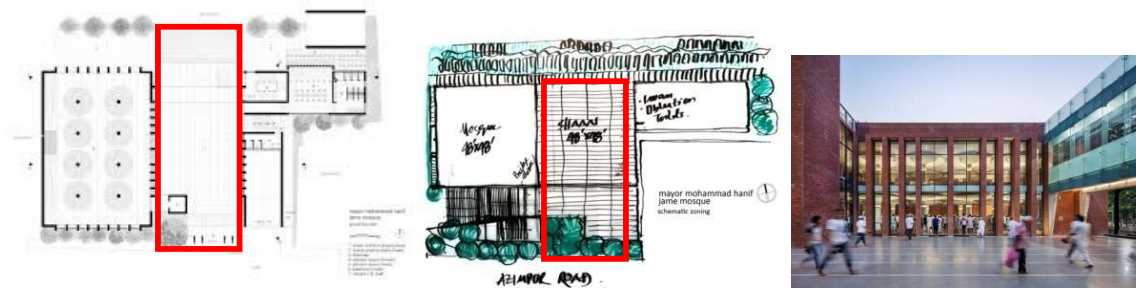


Figure 15 & 16 and Images 08 & 09: Ground Floor Plan, First Floor Plan of Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jame Mosque

In Gausul Azam Mosque, an open to sky Courtyard surrounded by cloister or verandah adjacent the main one domed prayer hall. The courtyard contains a star fountain and avoids excessive decoration. Here in both sides of the cloister used Mughal arch openings. So, the cloister connected the prayer space and the courtyard/Shan together as a semi-outdoor space.



Images 10 & 11: Masjid-e-Gausul Azam, Dhaka



Figure 17 and Images 12 & 13: Chandgaon mosque, Chottogram (2007)

Also, chandgaon mosque situated at chottogram design by architect Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury seeks to fulfill the traditional role of a mosque as both a place of spirituality and as a gathering space for the community.

4.6 Bangladesh Period (Contemporary Abstract):



Figure 18 and Images 14: Bait-ur-Rouf Mosque (2012), Dhaka

In Bait-ur-Rouf Mosque, the entry plaza is a transformed face of traditional sahn space as an interaction of the people and act as a playing, gossiping, meeting etc place for local children & inhabitants. (Gazi, 2021pp 310) Here people gather, participate, passing their leisure time. Elevated above street level, the plinth not only shields the mosque from floodwaters but also offers a communal space for relaxation, creating a gentle buffer from the surrounding urban bustle. (Dezzen, 2025)



Figure 19 and Images 15: Zebun Nessa Mosque (2023), Ashulia

The mosque is designed as a breathing pavilion for the local people (Arch Daily, 2025). The mosque's layout emerges from fundamental geometric forms- a square encasing a circular core- giving rise to four enclosed gardens that function as light courts on each side. In the southeastern courtyard, a perforated metal staircase leads to the crescent-shaped upper floor, a dedicated space for the female workers of the industrial complex. This level serves both as a place for prayer and communal gatherings. A 'Chhatim' tree planted beside

the stairs infuses the area with its delicate fragrance during bloom, enhancing the sensory experience of the space.

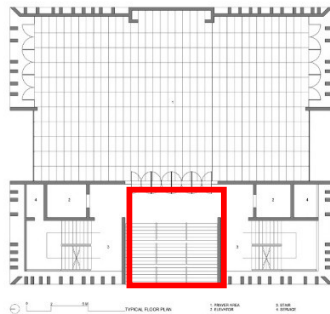


Figure 20 and Images 16: Gulshan Society Jami Mosque

In Gulshan Society Mosque at Dhaka, the sahn space transform into a staircase, which is open and almost open to sky. Two enclosed staircases and one open stair now serve as the meeting place for the local people.

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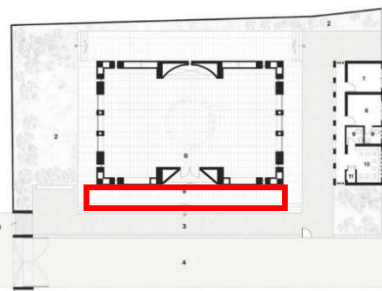


Figure 21 and Images 17: Bait-ur_Raiyan Jami Mosque

In Bait-ur-Raiyan Mosque at Madaripur, the front stairs and the linear platform are interactive places and act as the purpose of the sahn. It is a gathering place for the neighbors and the worshippers.

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Figure 22 and Images 18: WAMY Jami Mosque

In WAMY Jami Mosque at Gazipur, A grand sahn space front of the mosque as a multipurpose social space for the public with Islamic cultural activities.



Figure 23 and Images 19: Model Mosque

In Model Mosque in different places of Bangladesh, contain a vast staircase transform from a sahn space for public interaction and meeting place, sitting place, gossiping place etc.

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5. Discussion and Analysis:

Sahn as an architectural component has changed over the ages. This space has changed due to various reasons such as social conditions, human needs, social activities, the influence of contemporary architecture, climate, culture, the financial status of the people, the patronage of the ruling society, changes in people's tastes etc. However, analysis shows that the architectural sequence of the Shan space, which began in the Mughal period after the Sultanate period, has undergone a major change in very recent times after the Colonial & Pakistan period. For functional reasons, the sahn space is usually placed in front of the mosque and in a central location, but in contemporary architecture, the sahn space is somewhat unmarked, that is, it is blended along with identity of the open space of the building and no specific shape is available at present.

From the Mughal period to the Early Bangladesh period, the Shan space was clearly defined, and, in these times, it was found as an open courtyard enclosed by boundary walls and sometimes with an arcade enclosure. However, in recent architecture, instead of being enclosed by specific boundary walls, the common space is conceived as a much more free and flowing space that transcends the boundaries of the mosque facade and creates unity with the entire social space. That is why open-air structures like those of the Mughal or colonial periods are presently not seen.

In general, their distinct features highlight both Aesthetical and functional aspects of Sahn space are followings:

Features	Mughal Period	Colonial Period	Bangladesh Period (Direct)	Bangladesh Period (Abstract)
Placement	Formal & Front	Formal, Centre & Front	Formal, Centre	Informal and Front
Shape	Rectangular & Square	Rectangular & Square	Rectangular & square	Rectangular
Open-Air Structure	exist	Not exist	exist	Not exist
Water Feature	Absent	Exist	Absent & exist both	Absent
Lush Garden	Absent	Absent & Present both	Absent & Present both	Absent

Artistic Detailing	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
Spatial Definition	Clearly defined	Clearly defined	Clearly defined	Not clearly defined
Arcade or Boundary wall	Surrounded by boundary wall	Surrounded by boundary wall	Surround by Arcade	No physical boundary

In the table, placement of sahn space means the location of the sahn space, which often centrally located, acting as a communal gathering space and emphasizing its significance within Islamic architectural planning. Typically open to the sky, sahn invite natural light and establish a direct connection with nature and the divine, enriching the spiritual ambiance. Water features like fountains and pools are common, symbolizing purity and creating a serene soundscape. They also serve a practical purpose by cooling the environment, especially in warmer regions. Lush Garden of Sahn space is in courtyards often include vibrant gardens, designed as tranquil sanctuaries for reflection. These green spaces represent paradise, a central theme in Islamic belief. Sahn are embellished with intricate tile work, calligraphy, and geometric patterns, exemplifying Islamic artistic traditions. These elements not only beautify the space but also convey spiritual and cultural symbolism.

From the above table it is clear that, although there was a lot of change in the Shan Space from the Mughal period to the early Bangladesh period, a dynamic change has taken place in the contemporary period. In the context of contemporary mosque architecture in Bangladesh, the sahn is found as a transformed space, which is why a new idea has been born in the embodied thinking of mosque architecture of Bangladesh.

Sahn or Courtyard in Mosque Architecture of Bangladesh are historically thoughtful designed to fulfil religious, social, and functional roles. Sahn, primarily due to their direct connection with the open to sky. But in contemporary phase in Bangladesh, in a lot of mosques, use sahn as a people's gathering spaces and social interactions. At present time, professional architects are more connected with the concept of form and space and the scale of the structure, rather than surface ornamentation. There is a tendency toward building many modern mosques which do not contain the traditional courtyard element.

In Mayor Mohammad Hanif Jame Mosque, a key feature drawn from Mughal Mosque architecture is the 'Sahn'- a spacious terrace that extends before the main

prayer hall. Though it provides room for overflow congregations during prayers, its primary function is as a communal gathering space that encourages social interaction. Bounded by Azimpur Road to the south and the Azimpur Graveyard to the north, the mosque stands as a symbolic gateway between the temporal and the eternal, with the Sahn acting as a subtle veil between these two worlds. (Dot, 2021) In Changaon Mosque, specially the sense of Shan space front of the main prayer hall is abstractly a dome and spiritually connected a circular open to sky ceiling with a light as a symbol of spirituality and togetherness. Grand opening of front side of the sahn welcome people to the mosque.

In contemporary period of Bangladesh some mosque defined abstractly where sahn is integrated with the form of the mosque. Skylight ensures from upward sky as a juxtaposition of the spaces of shapes. Formal sahn here is absent, but the mood of the space is present. Spiritual connectivity with the sky is abstractly connected with the main prayer space. Perforated jali with the open to sky spaces represent abstract presence of the sahn space enlightens main prayer space surroundings. In Bait-ur-Rouf Mosque, natural ventilation and the interplay of light transform this neighborhood mosque into a serene haven for spiritual reflection. Its raised plinth remains lively throughout the day, animated by children at play and elderly men conversing as they await the call to prayer. (akdn,2025) In Zabun Nessa, Bait-ur-Raiyan & Model Mosque, Front entry platform with small stair serve as a communal space for the local people.

6. Conclusion:

The evolution of sahn space in mosque architecture across different historical periods in Bangladesh, spanning from the Sultanate to the contemporary era- reflects a dynamic interplay between religious functional, cultural expression, and environmental responsiveness. During the Sultanate period, sahn spaces served as transitional zones that embodied spiritual preparation and architectural harmony, often marked by modest design and intimate scale. As mosque architecture evolved through the Mughal, Colonial, Pakistan and Modern periods, the sahn explored in both form and function, integrating elements of grandeur, community orientation, and climatic adaptation. In the contemporary context, sahn spaces continue to play a vital role, although it is influenced by urban constraints, modern materials, and shifting socio-religious practices. Despite these changes, the enduring presence of sahn space underscores its significance as a symbolic and functional element in mosque design.

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