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## Bahmani Monuments of Kalaburagi: Architectural Heritage of the Deccan

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**Abstract:** Kalaburagi (formerly Gulbarga), the first capital of the **Bahmani Sultanate** (1347–1424), preserves a remarkable ensemble of Indo-Islamic monuments. This article examines the Gulbarga Fort, Jami Masjid, Haft Gumbaz, and Holkundia Necropolis, situating them within the broader cultural and political context of the Deccan. Through architectural analysis and historical interpretation, the study highlights the synthesis of Persianate and indigenous traditions that shaped Bahmani identity.

**Keywords:** Bahmani Sultanate, Kalaburagi monuments, Indo-Islamic architecture, Haft Gumbaz, Deccan Sultanates

### I. Introduction

The Bahmani Sultanate, founded by Ala-ud-Din Bahman Shah in 1347, marked the beginning of an independent Deccani polity. Gulbarga was chosen as its capital, and the rulers invested in monumental architecture to assert legitimacy and cultural prestige. The monuments of Kalaburagi are not only relics of medieval power but also enduring symbols of syncretic traditions in South India.

### II. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and historical research methodology. It is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, research articles, archaeological reports, government publications, and scholarly studies related to the Bahmani Sultanate and the architectural heritage of Kalaburagi. Standard historical methods of source criticism and comparative analysis have been employed to examine the available evidence. Architectural features of the selected monuments—including their layout, structural design, construction materials, decorative elements, domes, arches, inscriptions, and spatial organization—have been analyzed to understand their stylistic characteristics and historical development. The study also compares these monuments with contemporary Indo-Islamic architectural traditions of the Delhi Sultanate and the later Deccan Sultanates to identify similarities, differences, and regional innovations.

### III. Importance of Bahmani Architecture

The monuments of Kalaburagi represent the earliest phase of Bahmani architecture and laid the foundation for the distinctive architectural traditions of the Deccan Sultanates. Unlike the buildings of the Delhi Sultanate, Bahmani structures exhibit a conscious adaptation to the climatic conditions, available building materials, and artistic traditions of the Deccan plateau. Massive fortifications, broad arches, hemispherical domes, and restrained decorative programs became characteristic features that later influenced the architecture of Bidar, Bijapur, Golconda, and Ahmednagar.

#### IV. Historical Background of Gulbarga

Gulbarga district encompasses a vast geographical area and as may be expected, contains a few places of historical importance as well as a few which finds a mention in the Hindu mythology. In former days, Gulbarga was known as Kalburgi which means a ‘stony land’ or ‘stone roofing’ or a ‘heap of stones’ in Kannada. Another version is that Gulbarga was so named to connote a leaf with flower, since ‘gul’ means ‘flower’ and ‘Burg’ means ‘leave’, in the Persian language. Nothing definite is known about the origin of the name, but this much is certain that it was known as Kalburgi in earlier days and was later on changed to Gulbarga. Even now it is not uncommon to hear people calling the place as Kalburgi.

The early history of the Kalaburagi region dates back to the **Rashtrakutas** in the 6th century, who ruled much of the Deccan but left Gulbarga outside their direct control. The **Chalukyas** reclaimed the territory and governed for over two centuries, followed by the **Kalachuris of Kalyani** until the 12th century. By the end of that century, the region fell under the **Yadavas of Devagiri** and the **Hoysalas of Halebid**. Simultaneously, the **Kakatiya dynasty** of Warangal extended its influence over present-day Kalaburagi and Raichur districts.

Kakatiya power was subdued in 1321, bringing the northern Deccan, including Gulbarga, under the **Delhi Sultanate**. During the early 14th century, Muhammad bin Tughluq ruled the Deccan from Delhi, but discontent among his officers led to rebellion. In 1347, Zafar Khan (later Alauddin Hasan Bahman Shah) founded the **Bahmani Sultanate** and chose Gulbarga—renamed *Ahsenabad*—as his capital. Gulbarga remained the capital until 1424, when the seat shifted to Bidar.

The Bahmani era marked a turning point: Sultan Ahmad Shah I Wali encouraged immigration from Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia, reshaping the region’s social, cultural, and religious life while blending with local Hindu traditions. This cosmopolitanism is reflected in the monuments of Gulbarga.

Later centuries saw turbulence. The fort was razed by the **Vijayanagara Empire** but rebuilt by Yusuf Adil Shah of Bijapur after the **Battle of Talikota (1565)**. In 1687, the Mughal Emperor **Aurangzeb** captured the fort and appointed Asaf Jah I (Nizam-ul-Mulk) as governor. By 1724, the Nizam declared independence, founding the **Hyderabad State**, with Gulbarga as part of its territory. After India’s independence in 1947, Hyderabad State was annexed in 1948. In 1956, linguistic reorganization placed most of Gulbarga district within **Karnataka**, while two taluks were transferred to Andhra Pradesh.

#### V. Administration and Cultural Development

The Bahmani rulers established an efficient administrative system by dividing their kingdom into provinces known as *tarafs*, each governed by a provincial governor. Kalaburagi developed into an important centre of administration, military organization, commerce, and Islamic learning. Scholars, theologians, architects, and artisans from Persia, Central Asia, and the Arab world migrated to the Bahmani court, contributing significantly to the cultural life of the capital. Their interaction with local Kannada, Marathi, and Telugu traditions produced a unique Indo-Persian culture that became the hallmark of the Deccan.

#### VI. Important Monuments of Kalaburagi:

##### 6.1. Gulbarga Fort:

The fort was originally constructed by the Hindu monarch Raja Gulchand, and it was subsequently significantly enlarged in 1347 by Ala-ud-Din Bahman Shah of the Bahmani Kingdom after he cut off his ties with the Delhi Sultanate. Islamic monuments such as mosques, palaces, tombs, and other structures were also built later within the refurbished fort. The fort has an area of approximately 57 acres and periphery length of 3 kilometres. The fort is a monumental structure highly fortified with 15 towers mounted with 26 guns; each gun located inside the fort is 8 metres (26 ft) long and is still well preserved. The fort protected by massive double fortification walls, deep moats, and numerous bastions designed for military defence. Several gateways, watchtowers, royal residences, granaries, water reservoirs, and underground passages once formed part of the fortified complex. Military engineers incorporated advanced defensive techniques, making Gulbarga Fort one of the strongest medieval forts in Karnataka. Although many structures have disappeared over time, the surviving remains demonstrate the strategic planning and engineering skills of the Bahmani builders.



Fort Of Kalaburagi

### 6.2. The Jami Masjid:

The Jami Masjid (1367), was built in 1367 by Bahmani Sultan Mohammed Shah I to commemorate the establishment of the capital in Gulbarga following the defeat Kapaya Nayaka of Warangal. The mosque was designed by a Persian architect, Rafi, and built within the Kalaburagi Fort complex notable for its enclosed prayer hall with **81 domes and 250 arches**. Unlike contemporary mosques in North India, it lacks minarets, emphasizing domical architecture inspired by Persian and Central Asian prototypes. The mosque's spatial arrangement reflects both religious function and political symbolism. The masjid, only one of its kind in India, has dimensions of 216 feet (66 m) x 176 feet (54 m) and was built on the lines of the Great Mosque of Córdoba in Spain. The mosque has no open courtyard. The outer passageways surround the prayer hall on three sides and have low open arcades with arches. They form a rectangular layout with ten bays each on the north and the south, and seven bays on the east. The square bays on the corners are topped by domes. The roofed interior bays are covered with low domes, faceted by pendentives. The front yard in front of the mihrab has nine bays with a single large dome. Trefoil interiors and elongated lobes are seen on sloping arches of the drum. The main roof drum is mounted on a cubic clerestory. The wooden screens that existed on the outer arcade openings have been removed over the years. They have been replaced, in recent times, by an arched entrance portal on the north face.



Jami Masjid



Inside view

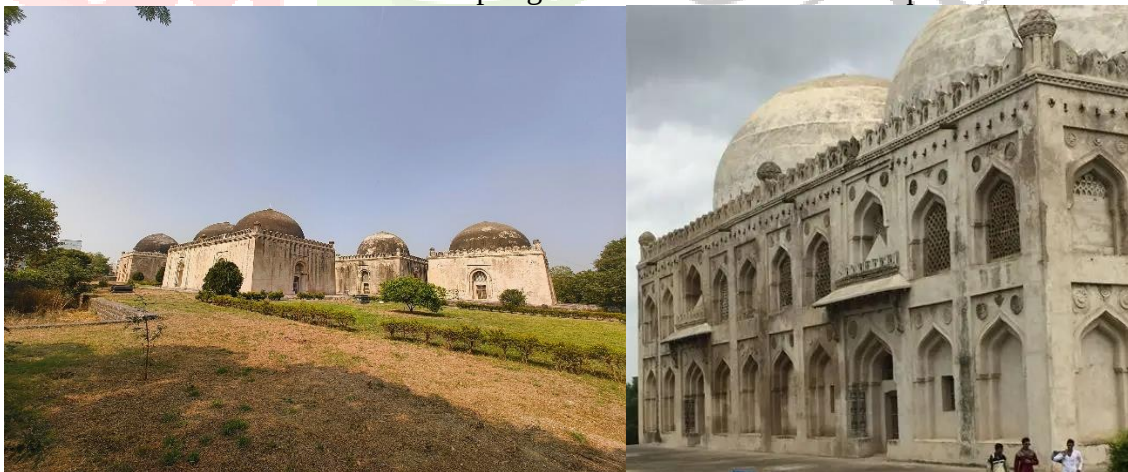
### 6.3. Bande Nawaz Darga:

The tomb of the Sufi saint Bande Nawaz, built in the Indo-Saracenic style. It is a large complex where the tomb of the Sufi saint exists. The tomb walls have paintings; the arches of the dargah are in the Bahmani architectural style while the paintings on the walls and ceiling have a fusion of Turkish and Persian influence. The Mughals also built a mosque close to the tomb. An annual fair or Urs is held here in November, which attracts a large number of devotees of all religious communities.



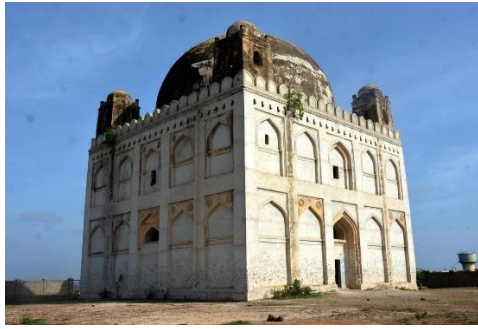
#### 6.4. Haft Gumbaz: The Royal Necropolis

The Haft Gumbaz, also spelt Haft Gumbad are a group of tombs of the Bahmani dynasty. Built during the 14th and 15th centuries, the tombs are examples of early Indo-Islamic architecture. There are seven tombs in total, with four being tombs of the rulers of the Bahmani dynasty. The tomb complex was built between the 14th and 15th centuries. The **Haft Gumbaz** complex, northeast of the fort, houses the tombs of Bahmani rulers including Mujahid Shah, Daud Shah, and Firoz Shah. The seven domes exhibit variations in plan—square, rectangular, and octagonal—while maintaining stylistic unity. Stucco ornamentation, Quranic inscriptions, and lattice screens reveal the Sultanate's Persianate aesthetic, yet local craftsmanship is evident in corbelled arches and decorative motifs. The Jami Masjid is regarded as one of the finest examples of early Indo-Islamic architecture in the Deccan. The mosque is unusual because its prayer hall is almost completely covered, creating an enclosed and serene interior unlike the open courtyards commonly found in contemporary mosques. The central dome is larger than the surrounding domes, emphasizing the *mihrab* and the principal prayer space. The extensive use of arches, piers, and vaults reflects strong Persian and West Asian architectural influences while adapting to local construction techniques.



#### 6.5. Chor Gumbad:

The Chor Gumbad (lit. Dome of thieves), as it is colloquially known, might have been named as it came to have been occupied by thieves. Another name for the building is the Shor Gumbad means Dome of noise, also spelt Shor Gumbaz. This is ascribed to the supposed use of the building as a watchtower. As the soldiers deployed on the turrets would sound an alarm upon spotting any enemy army approaching, which could be heard from a distance. It is situated on a hillock, to the west of Gulbarga Fort. The square-shaped building is surmounted by a massive dome. This dome rises to a height of 100 feet. At four corners of the roof are turrets which are crowned by kiosks. A five feet tall parapet rises above the structure. The walls have arches carved into them, with each wall having ten arches arranged in two stories. There is only one entrance, at the Eastern end. Internally, the tomb measures 74' by 66'. A corridor beneath the dome has arched windows covered by jali screens.



### 6.6. Holkund Necropolis:

Located 28 km from Kalaburagi, the **Holkunda Necropolis** contains seven mausoleums, including rare octagonal tombs. Elevated on a hilltop, the site reflects the Bahmani practice of commemorating nobles and courtiers alongside rulers. Elaborate plaster work and floral stucco designs underscore the Sultanate's architectural experimentation. The Holkunda tombs remain comparatively less explored than other Bahmani monuments, yet they provide valuable evidence of funerary architecture outside the royal capital. The elevated location of the necropolis not only enhanced its visual prominence but also reflected Islamic concepts of sacred landscapes. The surviving ornamental plasterwork, carved niches, and geometric patterns reveal the technical proficiency of local craftsmen working under Persian artistic inspiration.

### 6.7. Firozabad: The Second Capital of the Bahmani Sultanate:

Firozabad, located on the banks of the Bhima River near present-day Kalaburagi, was established by Sultan Taj-ud-Din Firoz Shah Bahmani (r. 1397–1422) as a new royal city. Although Gulbarga remained the official capital during his reign, Firozabad functioned as an important imperial residence and cultural centre. The city reflected the prosperity and cosmopolitan outlook of the Bahmani court, where scholars, theologians, diplomats, artists, and craftsmen from Persia, Central Asia, and the Arab world were welcomed alongside local intellectuals and artisans.

The remains of Firozabad reveal the ambitious urban planning of the Bahmani rulers. Archaeological evidence indicates that the city contained royal palaces, audience halls, residential quarters, gardens, mosques, bathhouses, markets, and elaborate water-management systems. Unlike the heavily fortified Gulbarga Fort, Firozabad was designed primarily as a ceremonial and residential capital, emphasizing royal comfort and architectural elegance. Among the surviving monuments are the ruins of the **royal palace complex**, fragments of **audience halls**, **mosques**, gateways, pavilions, and hydraulic structures. Excavated remains display finely dressed stone masonry, ornamental stucco decoration, arched entrances, and vaulted chambers characteristic of early Deccani Islamic architecture. The extensive use of arches, domes, and Persian-inspired decorative elements demonstrates the growing influence of West Asian architectural traditions while incorporating indigenous construction techniques and local building materials.

## VII. Cultural and Architectural Significance

The Bahmani monuments of Kalaburagi embody a **fusion of Persian-Turkish styles with indigenous traditions**. They illustrate the Sultanate's ambition to establish a distinct Deccani identity, separate from Delhi's influence. The emphasis on domes and arches reflects Islamic traditions, while the adaptation of local materials demonstrates cultural negotiation. Collectively, these monuments narrate the rise and decline of Bahmani power before the capital shifted to Bidar in 1424.<sup>5</sup>

## VIII. Conservation and Tourism

Today, the Bahmani monuments of Kalaburagi are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage, Government of Karnataka. These monuments attract historians, architects, archaeologists, students, and tourists interested in the medieval history of the Deccan. Conservation initiatives have focused on structural stabilization, restoration of damaged masonry, and preservation of decorative plasterwork. Nevertheless, challenges such as weathering, urban expansion, vegetation growth, and inadequate public awareness continue to threaten the long-term preservation of these historic structures. Sustainable conservation, community participation, and heritage tourism are therefore essential for safeguarding Kalaburagi's rich architectural legacy for future generations.

## IX. Conclusion

Kalaburagi's Bahmani monuments are vital to understanding medieval Deccan history. The Gulbarga Fort, Jami Masjid, Haft Gumbaz, and Holkund Necropolis together form a monumental ensemble that speaks of political authority, religious devotion, and artistic innovation. Preserving these structures is essential for appreciating India's architectural heritage and the cosmopolitan legacy of the Deccan. The Bahmani monuments of Kalaburagi occupy a significant place in the architectural history of India because they represent the earliest expression of an independent Deccani Islamic architectural tradition. Their innovative planning, engineering techniques, and artistic synthesis influenced later monuments across the Deccan Sultanates, including those of Bidar, Bijapur, and Golconda. Continued archaeological research, conservation, and public engagement will ensure that these monuments remain valuable sources for understanding the political, cultural, and artistic achievements of medieval South India.

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