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Nayabad Mosque, Dinajpur

Islamic Architecture merged with tradition

Vast deserts stretch as far as the horizon, the clear blue sunny sky hovers above, glittering mirages reflect, a few cactus or palm trees here and there, green oasis like an island in the vast sand extend the hands of solace as caravans follow the desert trails to find a direction. It was in such a surrounding that the first call for Prayer or "Azan" echoed through the sands and reached the new Muslims of Arab through the melodious voice of a newly freed slave under the glory of Islam. But time could not predict then that this religion would one day be deeply rooted in the soils of far away lands like Bangladesh that was dominated by a vast community of Hindu and Buddhists and that bore a completely different setting regarding climate, topography and even culture.



It was on a winter day of 1201, when led by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, a cavalry of 18 troopers appeared before the Main Gates of Nadia, the then temporary capital of Raja Lakhsman Sena and invaded Bengal without much difficulty. With that sudden invasion, the north-west Bengal dramatically passed into the hands of an alien power proclaiming the commencement of a long Muslim rule in the region. However, there is evidence that even before this Turkish conquest, Arab merchants had already established a few colonies in Chittagong in the early 8th 9th century.

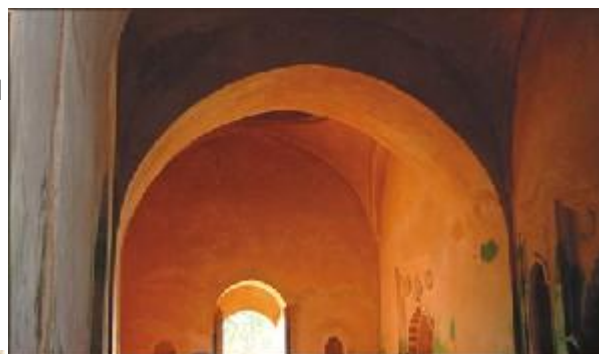
To spread Islam in this country, the Khilji ruling nobility lost no time but addressed themselves and also motivated others to the task of establishing Madrashes, Khankahs, Mosques, Mausolea and Hospices. Mosques were then one of the most representative examples of the Muslim Architecture in Bengal aside from other buildings like palaces, forts, monumental gateways, roads, embankments and bridges. When the Muslims conquered this sub-continent, they were already in possession of a highly developed architecture, with distinguishing building features like the arch, dome, minarets and mihrabs. These eventually became common to the whole Islamic world, fundamentally based on the building tradition of western and central Asia. However, Muslim builders had to depend largely on the available local building material, the mason and crafts-man and the prevailing social and climatic conditions which invariably conditioned the evolution of regional styles.

The Muslims revolutionized the building art in Bengal by introducing new improved techniques and cementing materials, certain common architectural elements generally associated with Islamic architecture but considerably enriched with local factors. The Islamic building art of Bengal maybe broadly classified under two main phases of development. The first begins with the conquest in 1201 to 1576, while the second phase beginning from 1576 is characterized by the development of a uniform imperial Mughal style in the province. According to an eminent scholar, "In contrasts to the green and gold mosaics of Jerusalem and Damascus or the superb colouring of Persian tile work of Spanish design, Bengal offers her marvellous art designs in terracotta that take their inspiration from the jungle scenes of this land."



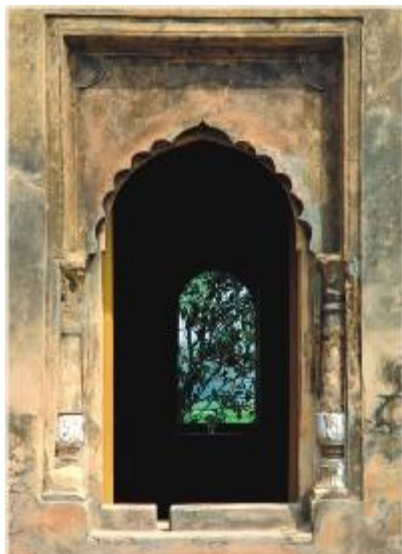
The Nayabad Mosque is one such intelligent building that stands with pride enveloping our heritage. This mosque belonging to the second phase development of Islamic period of Bengal was built by Skeikh Mujib Allah who lived in Parganah Nurour during the reign of Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II in 1785 AD (A.H.1200). During that period the Zaminder was Raja Baidyanath, the last of the Dinajpur Raj family.

The mosque is named after village in which it stands in Police Station of Kaharole and 1 km south west of the famous Kantajir Mandir. Approached by a local road the Dhaka-Panchagar highway, the mosque proper on the western region of a cm high platform. The wall of



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mosque is 1.10 m thick in average and has a room measuring 12.9m X 4.30 m internally. It is a typically three domed oblong structure having four octagonal corner towers with bands at regular intervals. At present there survives a hollow arched Kanjura (Kiosk) crowned over by a shallow cupola only at the top of the north eastern corner tower. Above the horizontal cornice are three hemispherical domes of equal size carried internally by pendentives. Each dome is topped by a cog wheel apex with a tapering finial consisting of alternate flower and pitcher motif. The cornice of the mosque is horizontal and the parapet is plain.

Internally the mosque is divided into three equal bays by the two lateral arches. Each bay contains a

plane concave arched mihrab on its west. The central mihrab however is placed within a rectangular frame and consists cusping in the face of its arch and also decorated with terracotta plaques and merlons. The facade on the east of the mosque is divided into three equal regions of which the central one is slightly projected and is flanked by semi octagonal stylised pilasters on either side. The bases of the pilasters show pitcher design cusped arched doorway. All the doorways are of equal size. The monotony of the façade is relieved by rows of sunken panels containing terracotta plaques with varied motifs, which mostly include flowers, peacocks, foxes etc. The latter two motifs are simply unknown features so far mosque architecture is in concern. The remaining portion of the wall surface is thoroughly plastered. The back wall bears a projection in its middle while the southern and northern walls are provided with cusped arched openings one for each. The courtyard or platform of the mosque is enclosed by a low (1m high) brick wall with only one access from the east. On either side of the mosque are to be seen a number of tombs each of found fixed over the central doorway of the mosque.

Nayabad Mosque was erected at a time when the soil of Dinajpur had already been enriched with one of the most remarkable navaratna temples, the Kantajir Mandir in 1752 AD. The founding Raj family of Dinajpur was still prominent then keeping evidence with architectural edifices reflecting an intermixture of European, Murish and Hindu Style. Thus, side by side existed a multi-religious community, developed different architectural styles having individual characteristics and at the same time playing a common tune of tradition. It is no wonder that the gracious blue sky stretching far to the horizon could sing the songs of freedom, where the reverberation of the Azan or the sound of the Puja rituals merged to become one of heritage irrespective of religion, caste or culture.

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Photo: **Nree**

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