

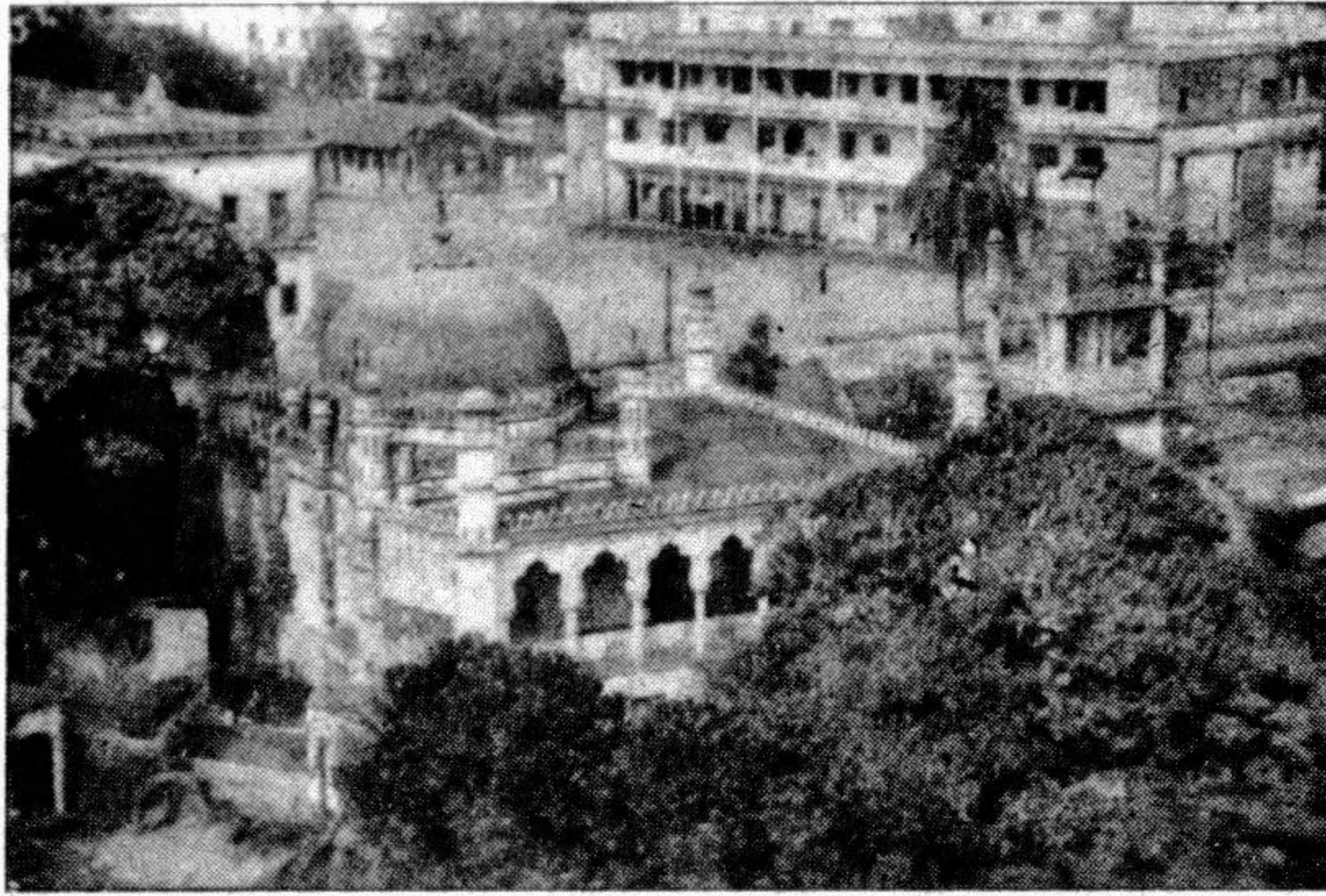
MOSQUES OF DHAKA

Do They Represent the Periods They Belong to?

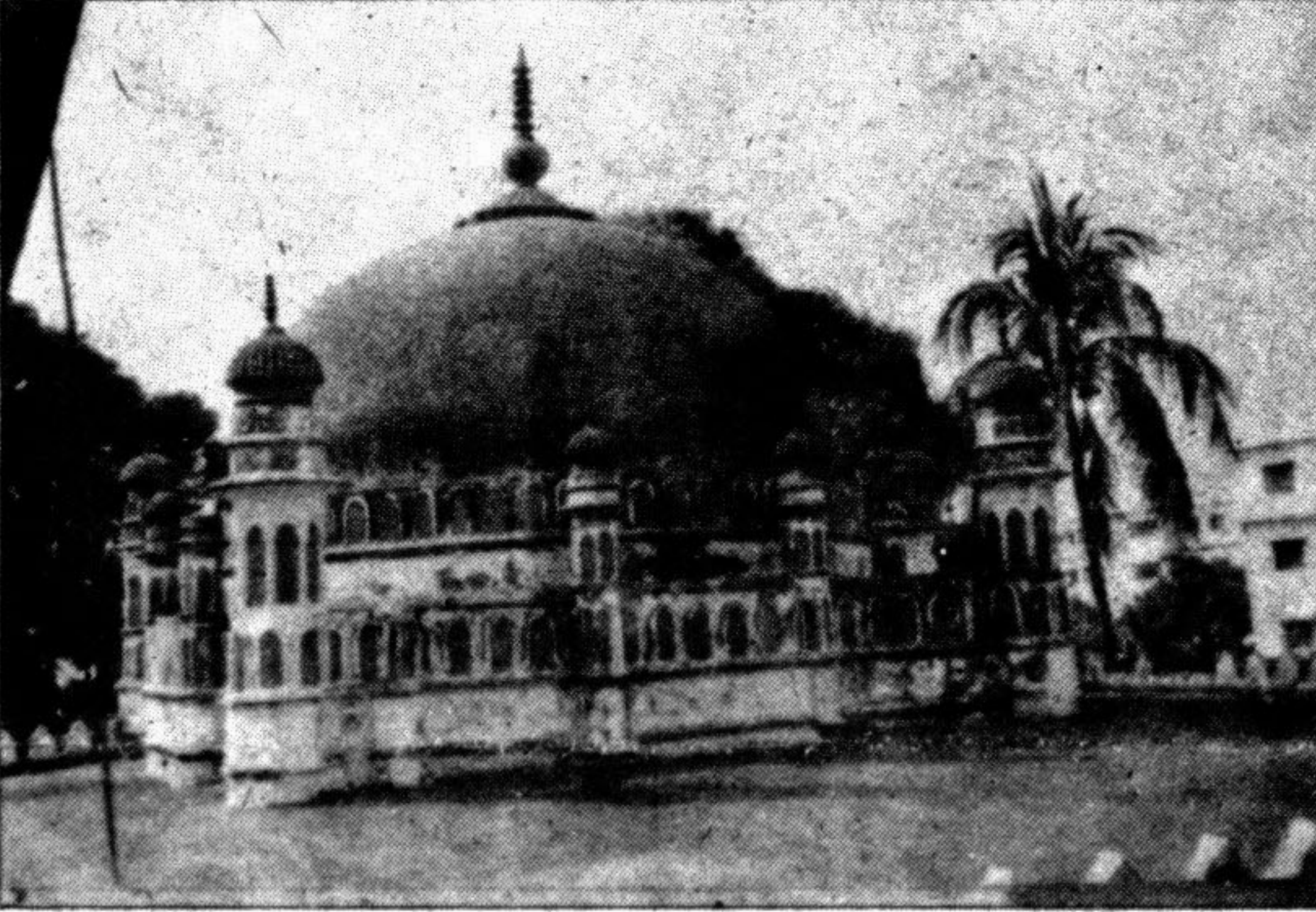
by Khaleda Rashid

THE word mosque has been considered a transmutation from the word *masjid*. Masjid meaning place of prayer was believed to have originated from the Arabic word *Sajjada* which means to prostrate oneself. In fact, the root of these two words — *masjid* and *Sajjada* is connected with many pre-Islamic languages. However, the mosque apparently a place for worship of the Muslims, in reality is a much more comprehensive and complex socio-cultural institution. It is intricately connected with the life and livelihood of more than 700 million Muslims i.e. about one seventh of the mankind of the universe. With Mecca as its hub, the Muslim world is spread out like a gigantic wheel with lines drawn from all the mosques in the world forming the spokes. These lines ultimately converge on a point the *ka'ba* of Mecca. Thus there is a definite concern for orientation and all mosques are aligned towards *Ka'ba* — the axis mundane of Islamic cosmology. It is time that we recapitulate the significance of this institution in our lives. A discussion on the architectural form and style of mosques would highlight this institution's contributions in tracing the local condition, tradition and heritage. The article aims at exposing two ancient mosques, of architectural as well as historical significance, of old Dhaka. Their present conditions are described and potentialities for conservation is discussed.

Fundamentally, the mosque architecture is inward looking and above all profoundly religious in its intent. Initially the mosque was very simple — a space, open or covered, enclosed by walls. But with time, though it took certain form, the growth process of the different elements of the mosque structure followed the famous saying, "Form Follows Function." Communal prayers are always preferred to individual prayers, so for regular assembly of people for obligatory prayers at five times a day every mosque has a hall. To accommodate overflow of worshippers an open quadrangle, platform or verandah is often added. The quadrangle (*sahn*) with a hall formed the fundamental unit of the mosque structure. As all congregational prayers are preceded by a formal call for prayer 'Adjan', a suitable place was required where from the call was expected to reach the furthest points of the community. In the beginning *adjan* was given from high places like roof tops but gradually a tower called minaret was introduced. The word minaret is connected with *ma'ara* meaning light. It is believed that the shape of



Aerial view of the mosque of Sir Salimullah Muslim Orphanage, Azimpur, Dhaka.

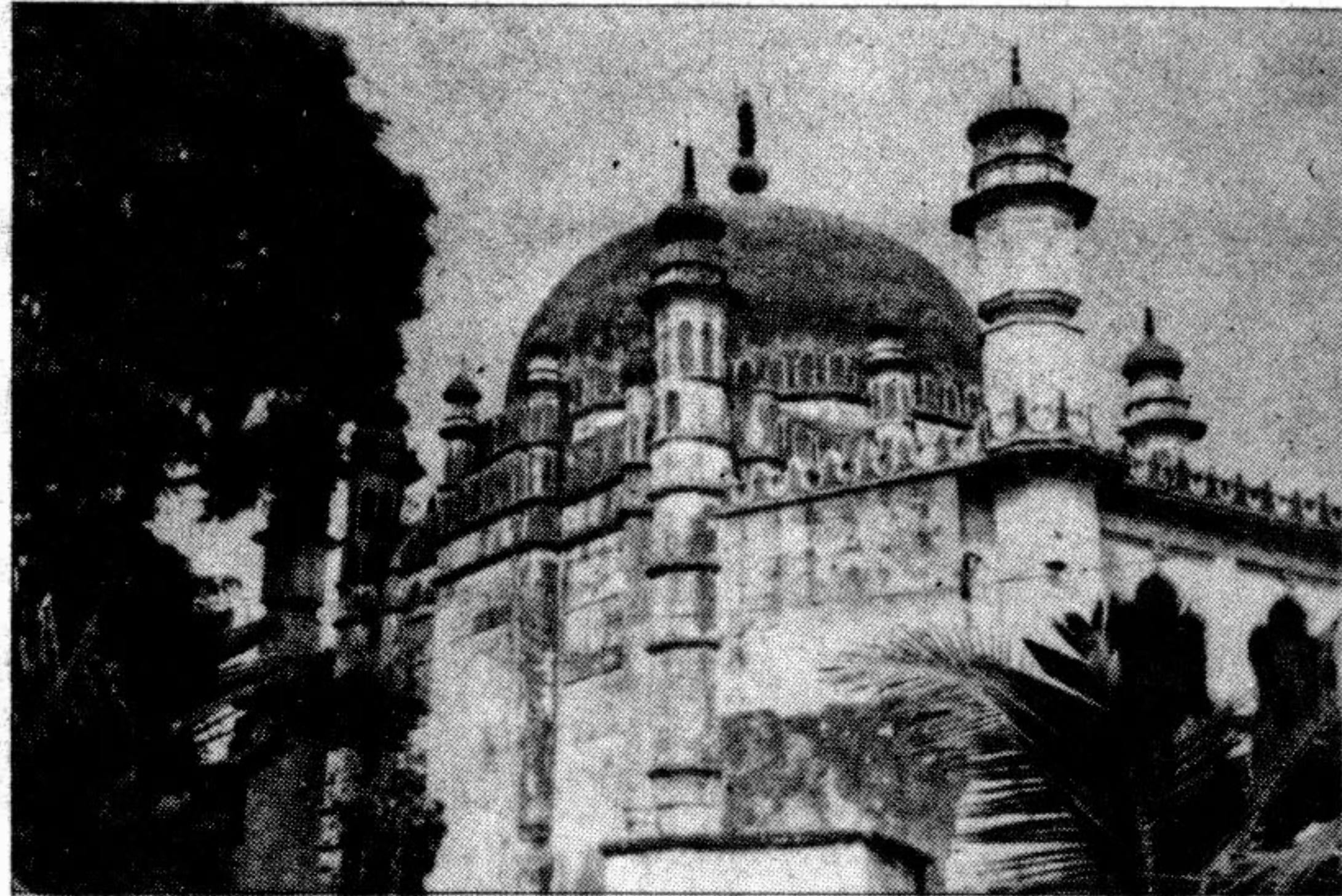


Details of the dome.

minaret was adopted from earlier light houses. Now, ultimately the minaret with its accomplished proportions and beauty has often become a symbol of Muslim settlements. As before offering prayers worshippers are required to perform ablution or *Wudhu*, previously tanks or fountains were

provided near the mosque. Now, of course, an ablution space with piped water supply is often built within or adjacent to the mosque proper.

For centuries, mosque architecture throughout the world adopted many features of the local pre-Islamic architecture, but merged them into a basic spatial quality, a sense of unity, equilibrium and peace within a framework of spiritual aesthetics, material vitality and other worldly anticipation of paradise. Still it is necessary to study the architectural forms and styles of mosques against demand of local conditions. In Bengal, the permanent Mosque



A view showing the pre-Mughal style.

architecture was translated into brick during the Muslim era. Due to heavy shower in Bengal, during the pre-Mughal era the brick and terra-cotta surface became a characteristic feature. With the coming of the Mughals the plaster and along with it, colours were profusely used. In the absence of mosques of earliest Muslim period, it is difficult to visualise their forms. One thing is clear that heavy rain prohibited open quadrangle or *sahn*. Then usually mosques were a compact building having a prayer chamber, with an open grassy space in front and a tank on one side. The pre-Mughal mosques are mainly either single-domed and single dome with a verandah in front or multidomed and multidomed with large central nave. The nave or the central space was sometimes roofed with a barrel vault as at the Adina Mosque or sometimes with the *chauchala* hut roof as at the Choot Sona Masjid. Instead of pre-Mughal's two centered pointed arches, Mughal style introduced various kinds of arches namely flat arch, multi-arched arch etc. The domes also gained height because of the octagonal drum on which it rested. Current approach to mosque design all over the world seems to favour a modern style of formal innovation. However, evidences in Bangladesh demonstrate a

staunch attachment to familiar and stereotyped forms and facades. The size, shape and use of interior spaces of the mosques depended on the volume and location of the structure. Thus the spaces of the mosques may have many meanings uses and multiple dimensions. But "what is really important", said the late Fazlur R. Khan, builder of the world's tallest building "is to create a sense of space, evoking spirituality of the environment, a feeling of peace, harmony and humbleness of the individual." No one integer can be singled out in case of mosque architecture. So a search into the past of guide the future course of the design of mosques might be a step in the right direction for people specially architects of Bangladesh. Dhaka city with more than 400 years of glorious history has a number of distinguishing features. One of them is — it abounds in mosques, so much so that Dhaka is often referred to as the "City of Mosques." This feature is rather evident in the historic old part of the city known as old Dhaka. This is the oldest core experiencing complex, compact and heterogeneous spatial form. Within this closely knit settlement many edifices, monuments and mosques of historical as well as architectural significance are present. The area being very congested and as continuous redevelopment is going on due to economic pressure, some of

these structures have lost visibility from roads and streets. Many of these structures are deteriorating due to neglect and lack of maintenance. Some of them have undergone so many additions and/or alterations that their original form and style is completely destroyed. In many cases, the original structures and their significant facades are barely visible. The two mosques selected for discussion are located in old Dhaka. These mosques are almost 250 years old, each representing a certain period, style and character. The mosque within the Sir Salimullah Muslim Orphanage is on the north-western side of the complex. Though it is within the orphanage, the mosque can be approached and used by the outsiders also. The public entry is from the road running in the east-west direction. The name of the architect, the engineer or the builder is not known nor even the person/persons who contributed towards buildings the mosque. The single domed prayer hall, the variations given to the wall surface by alternate recesses and off-set projections, corner towers all provide evidence that the mosque was built much earlier than the establishment of the orphanage in 1918. According to the local inhabitants, the probable year of construction of the mosque is 1731 AD. The original two-storied mosque approximately 43'0" X 33'0" is symmetrical in plan. The prayer hall measuring 14'3" X 14'3" is on the upper floor and is raised on an earthen platform. Surrounding the prayer hall on three sides there was a verandah. The wall thickness of the prayer hall varies from 2 ft. to 4 ft. The ground floor has two small chambers measuring 7'6" X 7'6" and 7'6" X 8'6" on each side of the earthen platform. In the front at the ground level there are three chambers, the middle larger one is 18'9" X 9'2". Here the walls are 2 ft thick but due to occasional mouldings at places it is more, the corners are even thicker. The provision of light and ventilation in the chambers are poor and inadequate, though it seems they were used by the *Imam* and the *Muazzin* as their living quarters. There is no trace of the original stair that led to the upper floor. In 1935 a 8 ft. wide verandah was added and a new stair was built without respecting the style, character and proportion of the mosque. The previous elegant facade of recessed pointed arches of the mosque has become partially hidden by the extension. In 1970 a minaret was added. It too does not comply with the pre-Mughal style which is so evident in the structure. The additions have given the original look and betrays the style and character of a well proportioned built form. Azimpur Daira Sharif complexes, not far from Sir Salimullah Muslim Orphanage was established around 1740 AD with a mosque made of mud. Gradually with the patronisation of local Muslims, the Daira Sharif flourished. The Daira Sharif was divided into two, namely Chhoto Daira Sharif and Bara Daira Sharif, among the inheritors. Each complex has a mosque of its own. The single-domed mosque of Bara Daira Sharif was built in pre-Mughal style. Later on, a three-domed structure having tombs of the religious leader Shah Sufi Syed Daiyem and his successors was constructed. The mosque and the *mazaar* sharif shares a common wall. The original mosque is a small structure, the prayer hall being 28'3" X 14'0" with alternately recessed wall surface of thickness varying from 3 ft to 4 ft. A verandah on the east was added in 1884. Subsequently in 1908, the verandah was extended. Here too, extensions have hidden the original elegant facade of pointed arches. Contradicting the pre-Mughal style, an ill proportioned minaret was later placed in front of the mosque. Devoid of much open spaces the complex is cramped with built-forms and the mosque is not visible from any side except the east. The two mosques discussed represent pre-Mughal style.

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Harsh Homework for the Forgotten Cinderellas

Sonia Goldenberg writes from Port-au-Prince

NINE-year-old Marceline is one of about 250,000 Haitian "Cinderellas" who keep Haiti's homes running. These young servants, three-quarters of whom are girls, are primarily the children of poor rural parents who cannot afford to support them. Known by the Creole name *restaveks*, from the French *rester avec* or "stay with," the children are sent to work as unpaid domestic workers in the cities. Many parents hope that there they will be able to go to school. But few do. A recent study found that like Marceline, 75 per cent of young domestic servants in metropolitan areas cannot read or write. Marceline has been a *restavek* in the home of her aunt since her mother died two years ago. She comes from the southern town of Bainet, near the port city of Jacmel. Her father is also dead and she does not know the whereabouts of her two sisters or her brother.

She spends her days waiting on her aunt and two cousins in their home in a poor area of Carrefour, a town on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. Marceline wakes at sunrise. First she carries a heavy bucket to a nearby well to fetch water. Then she buys food in the market and sweeps the house. Next she washes the dishes, while her cousins leave for school. She hopes that one day her aunt will send her to school so she can learn to read and write. In the evening, she prepares dinner. After her aunt and cousins finish, she eats the leftovers. Then she goes to sleep, but not in a bed like her relatives — she sleeps on the floor under her aunt's bed. Nor does she have clothes of her own; just used ones that do not fit her well. "If I had a lot of money," she says, "I would like to buy a

The plight of Latin American and Caribbean streetchildren has been well publicised; less known are the hardships experienced by Haiti's *restaveks*, children of the poor sent to toil unpaid in slightly better-off homes. Often ill, frequently abused the children form a vast neglected army of domestic workers.



A group of Haitian "restaveks", or child servants, with a staff worker at the Maurice Sixto Shelter, near Port-au-Prince. Right: Nine-year-old Marceline, who works for her aunt and cousins, is a visitor to the shelter, attending classes in literacy and handicrafts.

beautiful dress and a pair of shoes. Marceline does not have time to play. She once had a doll, until her aunt hid it away. She says her aunt sometimes hits her with a metal stick, and her cousins hit her, too. But now there is a place where children like Marceline can go for a break from the harsh routine of their daily lives, where they can meet sympathetic adults and children who live similar lives. It is the Maurice Sixto Shelter, run by Father Miguel Jean Baptiste, a Haitian priest who has devoted his life to helping the *restaveks*. Every afternoon Marceline goes to the shelter. She is quiet and withdrawn and seems much younger than her age. "Marceline's story is heart-breaking, but it is not unusual," says Father Miguel. "These

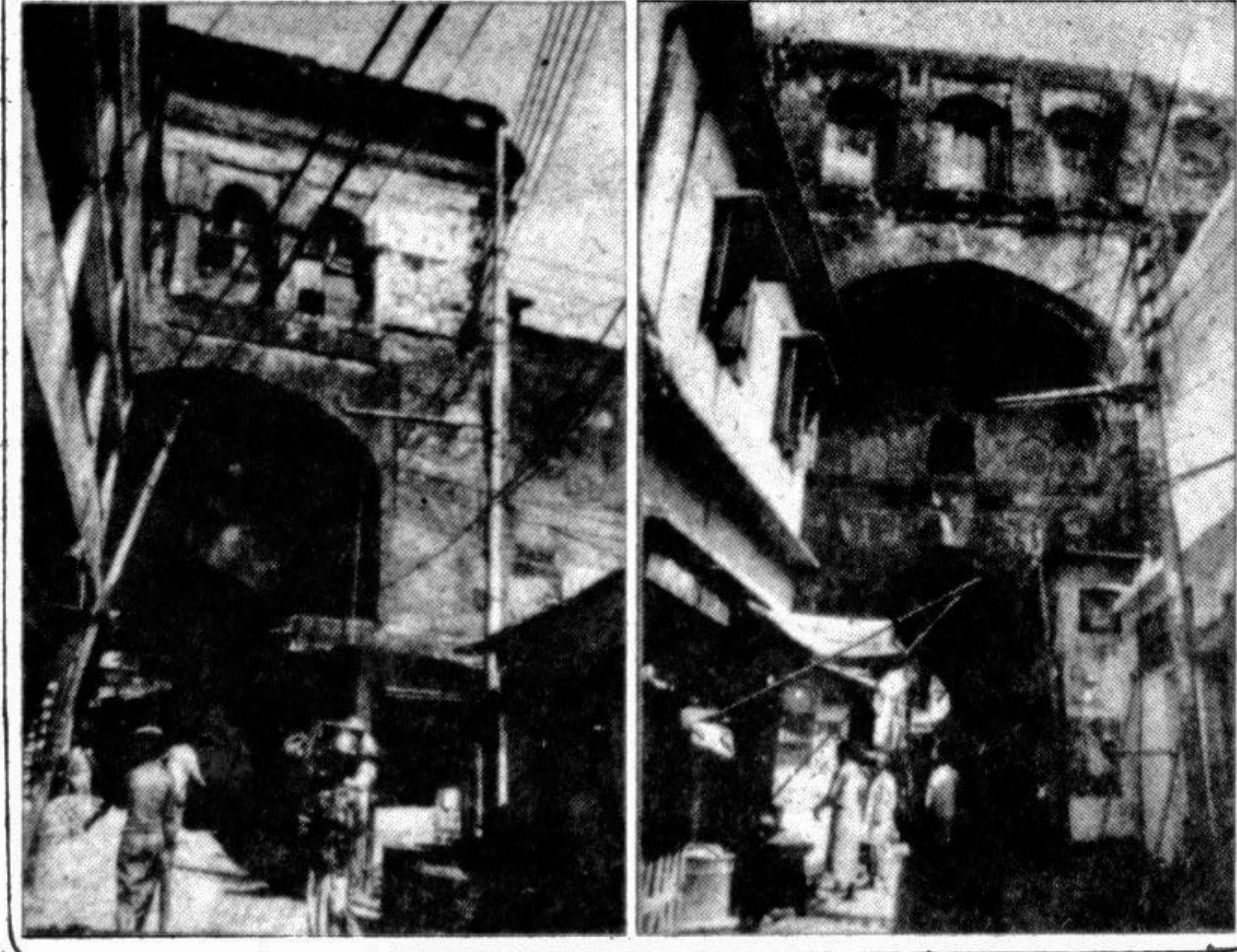
kids grow up with not identity, no love, no respect; they are children to be re-made. At the shelter, he gives them a chance to speak and be listened to. He calls it "de-zombifying." Every day at 4 pm, around 200 children aged 6 to 18 who work as neighbourhood domestics, come to the shelter. For two hours they attend classes in literacy and handicrafts and participate in a workshop on self-reliance. Psychiatrist Nadine Bourdet, the only doctor many of these children have ever seen, visits once a week. Dr Bourdet says the children suffer deeply from not being loved and from the inferior treatment they receive at home. Psychosomatic illnesses such as stomach upsets and headaches afflict 80 per cent of the children, she says. Their

illnesses are a way for their bodies to express the suffering they cannot verbalise. Many *restaveks*, like Marceline, seem physically and mentally retarded for their age, says Dr Bourdet. "What can one expect from a child that has chronic malnutrition, is not loved and receives no stimulation?" she asks. Nonetheless, she thinks the children must be intelligent and strong to survive their condition. She was so worried about a few of them that she took them away, and was amazed to find that their physical and mental development immediately accelerated. Two became the top students in their class, and one jumped a grade. But except for the lucky few who escape, life as a *restavek* is hard. They are beaten and mistreated routinely. Attempted runaways

face severe punishment. Girls are sexually abused. Their original families often ignore their plight. The government has no official statistics on *restaveks*, but Father Miguel and others who work with them believe their numbers are growing fast. With the pauperisation of the country from the military coup and the resulting embargo, the *restaveks* are becoming younger, sometimes as young as five or six, and they are working for. According to a study by the UN Children's Fund (Unicef), most work for families with incomes of less than \$250 a year. Thus, these children are the last to be served in families that cannot satisfy even their own most basic needs. Haiti has few shelters for *restaveks*. Last May, Father Miguel opened a second shelter in Leogane, a city of 100,000 people south of Port-au-Prince. Unicef has provided tables, books and a carpentry workshop for his shelters, and has helped other organisations that sponsor education for *restaveks* in Port-au-Prince and Gonaives. The deplorable treatment of *restaveks* continues although it violates international regulations regarding practices similar to slavery, forced labour and exploitation of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Haiti has signed but not ratified, obliges the country to protect children "from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment". President Jean-Bertrand Aristide has brought wide attention to the plight of street children, but the *restavek* phenomenon remains largely ignored by the Haitian authorities. — GEMINI NEWS SONIA GOLDENBERG is a Peruvian journalist who recently worked for Unicef in Haiti.



The houses of the Kaira and Chhota Kaira survive since Mughal period.



— Star photo