



Kusumba Mosque

The black gem of bengal

ONE of the obvious axioms taught by the history of world architecture is that every nation must use, for construction material available in its own country. Most of the soil in Bengal is alluvium, deposited by rivers, suitable for production of bricks.

Stone as a building material is hardly known to have been used in masonry of the pre-Muslim architecture in Bengal. The surviving Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples in Bengal, for example the Paharpur, Mahasthan and Mainamati Vihara and Hindu temples like as Kodla math and Kantanagar temple, are all brick buildings.

Besides brick masonry, which dominates the buildings of Bengal - a second method of construction, the stone and brick combination in masonry, has also been practised in Bengal. Stone was not available in the country, and therefore rarely used.

Stone, though scarce, was used in most of the finest monuments of Bengal. The use of stone symbolises the economically affluent society like the Mughuls who imported precious and rare stones from abroad to use in their most prestigious mausoleums. Only six stone mosques built during the early Islamic or Sultanate period exist in

greater Bengal.

The Kusumba mosque is one such example in Bengal, which may be termed as Black Gem of Bengal. Stones used in this mosque are dark black-basalt that was transported from Rajmahal hill of Bihar through waterways.

This stone mosque is situated in the village Kusumba in the district of Naogaon. According to an inscription, it was erected by a patron, Sulayman in 1558 during the reign of Ghiyath al din Bahadur Shah.

It is located on the west bank of a big tank measuring 381m x 274 m. There is a big courtyard in front of the mosque surrounded by a low boundary wall. This mosque is still in a good state as it has been well preserved.

This mosque conforms to the typical oblong shaped enclosed mosques in Bengal which happened to be the order of the day. The interior of the prayer hall is divided in two bays and three aisles surrounded by 2.26 m thick walls. The prayer hall, at present, has stone paved flooring, but this was not the original floor level. The lowest stone layer of the surrounding wall and the exposed foundation of the pillar prove that the original level was higher than the present.



The mosque can be entered only from the eastern side that has three pointed-archways; and the northern and the southern sides have two arched openings. These side openings are closed by perforated stone screens up to the lintel.

A long single monolithic stone decorated with rosettes is used as lintel beam. The area (tympanum) between the lintel and the arch is sealed by stones. Anchor stone for holding the door post can be seen on both sides of the three frontal openings, which proves the existence of a pivotal wooden door shutter.

The Qibla wall contains three highly ornamented mihrab niches; among them the northern one is placed at the level of the raised gallery. The walls are built of brick core with stone facing up to the springing of the arches from within

and the whole outside surface, but the arches and the roof are from bricks. Two free-standing stone pillars and eight partly concealed pilasters support the roof of six domes.

Minaret or tower, the essential feature of a conventional mosque in the Islamic world, was discarded in Bengal as well as in the Kusumba mosque. This mosque has only four octagonal corner turrets, one at each corner of the building.

Instead of a minaret of the mosque architecture, a distinctive type of turret is seen as in early Islamic architecture of Bengal. These turrets invariably form a part of the buildings, and are built either as corner strengthening or merely as ornamental appendages.

The Muslim rulers were not only introduced to the Bengali architecture specifically Islamic features such as the dome and the pointed arch, but also to crystallised certain local tendencies in a new tradition that was as much Bengali as Islamic.

The foremost of these was the curve cornices, which was reproduced by the Muslims in their buildings from the traditional rural bamboo hut, which ensured the proper or quick drainage of rainwater. This typical curved cornice is also observed in four facades of the Kusumba mosque.

The north-west corner, consists of a well-designed raised gallery on massive stone pillars. The raised gallery is reached by a single flight of steps/stair from the ground level of the prayer room. There are no traces or proofs of any hand railing along these steps.

This is the only surviving example of an unscreened internal connecting staircase through the place of male worshiper in Kusumba mosque denies all justification of the historian, who termed this type of raised space in the prayer hall as ladies gallery in different Jami mosques in Bengal.

It is more likely a *Badshahi Ka Takht* or King's gallery; a place for the sultans or rulers or builders and their immediate entourage, although this segregation of worshippers into two classes was therefore condemned by the strict as contrary to the spirit of Islam.

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