

TARA MASJID

Wonders of the silent stars

As another day dawns with the Muazzin's call for prayer the hustling and bustling settles over the history embedded different parts of Old Dhaka. In areas like Armanitola, the streets of Bangshal, the Abul Khairat Road wake up to face the present familiar urban menace with the cloud of fumes and dust, the over flowing drains, rickshaw and tempo jams, pedestrians and crowded buildings.

The Tara Masjid and the Koshaituli Mosque closely placed to each other, are also very close and similar in their appearance; both surfaces decorated by the Chini-tikri material. Despite the dense and decaying familiar sights of the surroundings, the Tara Mosque still hold its head high with its dazzling beauty and presents the evidence of Islam dominance in this country. It also has witnesses of different stops of the path of history hidden and revealed between alleys and lanes. The evolution of mosque architecture, if to be stated goes back to the time when Islam emerged as a religion and philosophy.

The first mosques of the world were modelled on the place of worship of the Prophet Muhammad the courtyard of his house at Medina, and were simply plots on ground marked out as sacred. From that time the concept of mosque went through architectural changes under the influence of socio-cultural and local styles, but the building remained essentially as a prayer hall, an open space, generally roofed over with a minaret sometimes attached to it.

Beside the open hall for the devotees is the *Mihrab*, a semi-circular niche reserved for the prayer leader or *Imam* points to the *Kiblah*, the direction of the *Kaba* in Mecca. Sometimes there is a *Mimbar*, a seat at the top of steps placed at the right of the *mihrab* which is used by the preacher (Khatib) as a pulpit. Outside the mosque stands the *Minaret* originally an elevated place but now usually a tower from which the *Muazzin* proclaims the call for prayer five times a day.

Considering the architectural styles of mosques that developed, the early mosques can be divided into two basic styles according to the major ruling periods of the Muslims after their conquest over the Hindus in Bengal. These possessed two styles the Sultani and Mughal.

During the Sultani period dating back to the 12 century, architectural development gained immense importance. At that time along with Islamic Art and Cultural development, many Sufi-saints, architects, skilled artisans came to Bangladesh from different parts of middle-east and in the next 200 years had built mosques, madrasahs, mausoleums and other buildings like palaces, forts, monumental gateways, roads, embankments and bridges.

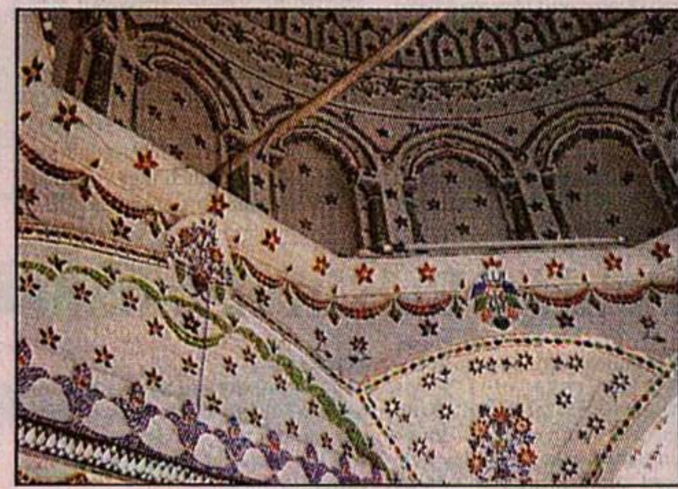
Some Sultani period mosques that widely spread all over



Bangladesh are the Binat Bibi Mosque (Dhaka), the Sat Gambuj mosque (Bagerhat, Khulna), Daras Bari Mosque (Chapai Nawabganj, Rajshahi), Mosque of Baba Adam (Rampal, Dhaka), Goadih Mosque (Sonargaon, Dhaka), Choto Sona Mosque (Chapai Nawabganj), Bagha Mosque (Rajshahi). During the independent Sultani period terracotta and brick built mosques had a unique style of their own. The Mughal style developed during the Mughal dynasty and when the capital of Bengal was shifted from

Rajmahal to Dhaka in 1608, the Mughal architectural style expanded widely which was influenced by the Delhi, Agra and Lahore's prevailing architectural style. Terracotta was almost extinct as the dominant building material as plaster replaced it and side by side with brick and stone. The shape of the dome also changed and so did some architectural features. Examples of the Mughal style mosque are Kusumba Mosque (Rajshahi), Atia Mosque (Tangail), Haji Khwaja Shahhaj Mosque (Dhaka), Mosque of Bibi

One of the most attractive mosques that stand deeply rooted is the Tara (Star) Masjid. This highly impressive and gaudily ornamented mosque belonged originally to the 18th century development. Situated on the Abul Khairat Road, in Armanitola the mosque was originally erected by a zamindar, Mirza Ghulam Pir, grandson of a rich aristocrat of the 18th century Dhaka, Mir Abu Sayeed.



Mariam (Narayanganj), Khan Mohammad Mridha's Mosque (Dhaka), Mosque of Baijid Bostami (Chittagong), Mosque of ShahJalal Dargah (Sylhet), Koshaituli Mosque (Dhaka) and Tara Mosque (Dhaka) etc.

One of the most attractive mosques that stand deeply rooted is the Tara (Star) Masjid. This highly impressive and gaudily ornamented mosque belonged originally to the 18 century development. Situated on the Abul Khairat Road, in Armanitola the mosque was originally erected by a zamindar, Mirza Ghulam Pir, grandson of a rich aristocrat of the 18 century Dhaka, Mir Abu Sayeed.

According to his name, the mosque was originally known as "Mosque of Mirza Shaheb". Later with much reconstruction by Ali Jan Bepari in 1926, the old structure had been completely masked. However, the remodeling and extensive renovation work was done very meticulously with the use of extremely delicate and richly coloured particles of earthen pots from Japan known popularly as "Chini-tikri".

This rectangular mosque topped with three domes was inspired by the glory of Mughal Architectural features. The area is 33ft x 12 ft and there are four towers topped with four smaller domes. The towers soar high in tapering stages and finally up to pinnacles. These towers are complemented by a number of similar turrets crowned by cupolas or small domes to break the monotony of the parapet.

Three doorways from the east and one each at the north and south sides give access inside the mosque. After renovation and extension by Ali Jan, the mosque had an extra verandah on the east with five *Khilan* or arched doorways. Unlike the floral motifs or geometric patterns in the Koshaituli Mosque, the predominant decorative motif used is stars.

The use of glazed tiles in this mosque, its artistic ingenuity of exquisite fineness although an influence of Persian origin takes the pride of indigenous skill. In the centre of the wall a crescent and a star was made with the same Chini-tikri.

Although the charm of this mosque seems to be hidden in the confusion of its present urban sprawl, the area is dominated by buildings with no definite character. Yet old aged buildings like the Tara Masjid remaining under their shadows still declare its own stand as an important flavour of heritage and brings back the past. Altogether it seems that the brilliance of the stars on the mosque surface as those in the infinite sky silently has been witnessing time and the wonders of change that the mystic time has brought.

Story: ZAKIA RAHMAN, Architect
 Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

