

**P**eelkhana, or the Royal Elephants Shelter, was at the northwest periphery of Mughal Dhaka, along with a small cavalry garrison too. The elephants paraded as they walked along Elephant Road up to Begunbari Khal to bathe. True to tradition, the Mughal *Eldghah* was just on the outskirts of the city on the riverbank, further to the east than its present courses, and now silted away because of the expansion of late-Mughal and colonial settlements in Hazaribagh-Rayerbazaar belt that contains many small late-Mughal and Colonial structures.

A few kilometres to the north of Peelkhana was the *Sarai Jafarbad-Katasur* area, possibly a caravan route along the river. A small urban settlement in this area is evident from its geographic and strategic location, origin of the name(s) of the locality, and the remnants of few Mughal period structures, particularly two mosques, one of which was demolished recently, and two tombs, one of which was converted to a mosque.

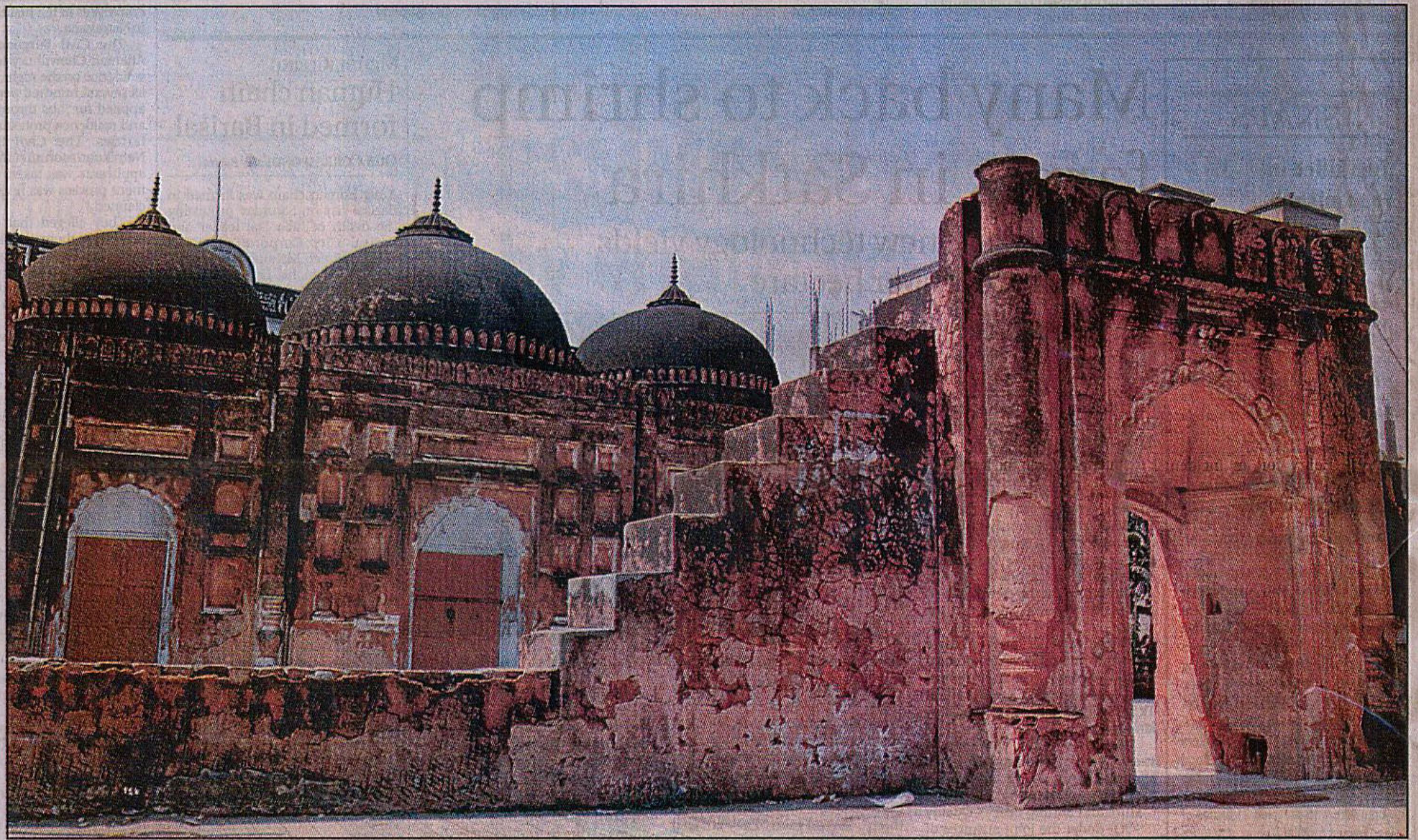
A small rural community with agricultural land in between may have existed, which area in course of time became like a jungle due to disuse, dereliction and abandonment mainly during the British period. This has now become one of the planned and most expensive residential enclaves of Dhaka -- *Dhanmondi*. One major peripheral road of the district to its west -- the *Satmasjid* Road, bearing the name of the most famous of these edifices -- the *Satgambuz Masjid* (Seven Domed Mosque).

The style of the late 17th century structure of the *Satgambuz Masjid* falls within the type of traditional three-domed oblong *Shaista Khani* mosques, which is very common

among most surviving historic mosques in Dhaka. Built on a spacious and solid podium, it has many elements resembling those in *Khwaja Shahbaz Mosque*, *Khan Mohammed Mridha's Mosque*, and the mosque within the *Lalbagh Fort*. Like those structures, this too has three large domes -- a bigger one in the middle flanked by two smaller ones.

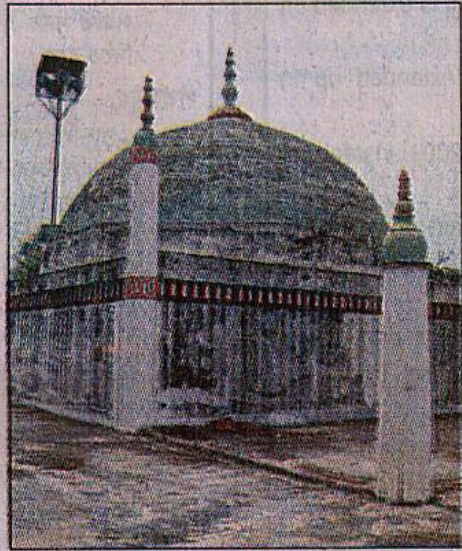
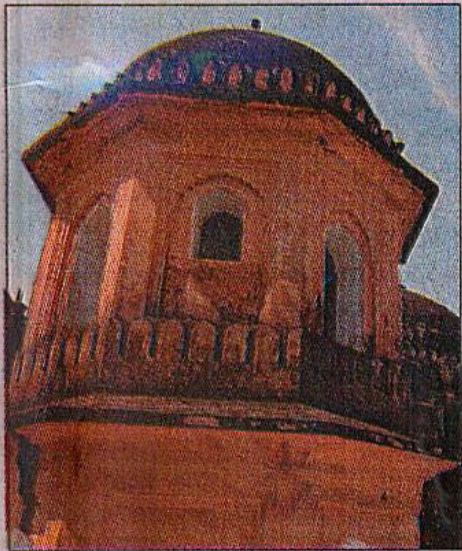
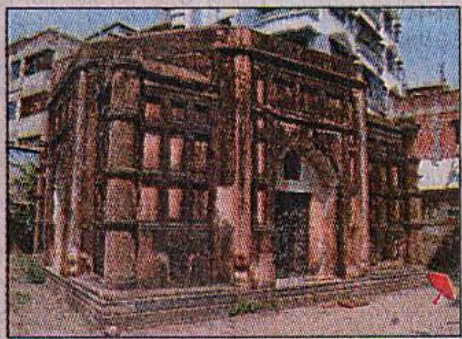
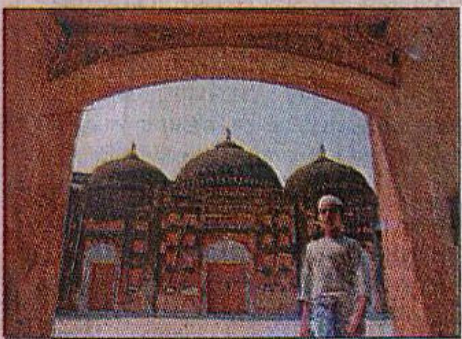
However, its name derived from four dome-topped hollow towers erected at the four corners of the structure. These additional domes may have been constructed to provide the 38'x27' building some structural stability and visual balance, which probably was on the river bank when built. The octagonal towers are double storied, the upper level starts from around half the height of the main prayer hall. Both of levels have arched panels and windows, surmounted by cornice and capped by domes with *kalasha* (pitcher) finials planted on lotus base.

Like similar structures, the entrance to the Mosque is from the east through three arched openings. The central being slightly higher than the others to emphasise the symmetrical and axial arrangement along with the central dome and the *mihrab* or the prayer kiosk facing the *qibla* direction -- typical of mosque architecture worldwide. Heights of the entrances and other openings have however been distorted or dwarfed by elevation of the plinth level as the ground around was constantly elevated to avoid floods. The central entrance is edged with multi-foil arch -- a late-Mughal refinement, while the ones on the sides have mere decoration applied to their



## Mughal edifices of Mohammadpur

# Monuments of northwest Dhaka



external faces some of which may not be original.

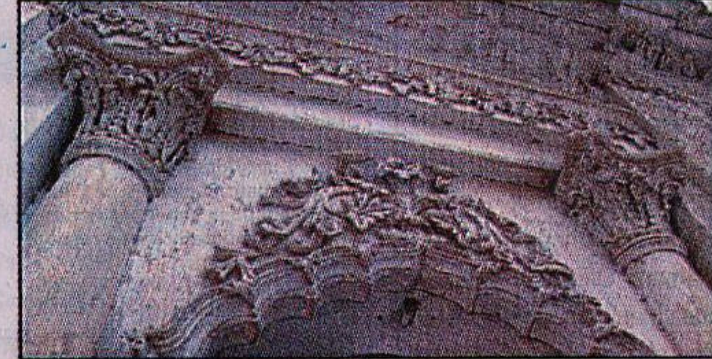
The doors are set in the middle of a framed panel, another typical element of the period and style, to accentuate the chaste appearance of the facade. There are eight small panels on each side of the door, all of which enclose arched niches. There are two slender pinnacles rising on both sides of the panel providing some kind of verticality to this otherwise horizontal and stout structure.

Inside the prayer hall, there are three concave *mihrabs*. The transition from the square to the circle of the dome base is made by pendentives. However, the domes as conventional, rest on octagonal drums, embellished with blind merlons. The brick-lime walls of the naturally cool structure are 4' deep. The abandoned structure was re-embellished with grays from *Nawab Khwaja Ahsanullah*, since when this enlisted structure started to be regularly used again. There is a graveyard in front of the mosque used as late as the 1950s, which originally may have been inside a wider garden that was gradually eroded by river and encroached by buildings.

A tomb structure stands

towards the east-end of the garden on relatively higher ground, with a grave inside, claimed to have belonged to either one of *Shaista Khan's* many daughters or concubines, or a lady of high status. It is a square chamber with a segmented roof built on an octagonal base at above-lintel level, unlike domes as seen atop most of such structures. The orthodox style, known as the *qubba* tomb, was popular in Bengal during the *Sultani* and Mughal periods. Yet the canopy tomb was spatially and structurally simple, and hence less expensive and quicker to build. The tombs pavilion type grammar was somehow little lost due to use of thick walls to hold the roof. One door each in the middle of all four sides, are identical and hence gives the structure an omni-direction, are recessed inside multi-foil arches surrounded by panels and half-octagonal corner piers -- a dominant style of the period.

The Tomb of *Dara Begum*, built on the east bank of a huge pond nearly three acres in size in what is now *Lalmatia Block E* is variously known as *Shahi Masjid* or *Bibir Majid* to the locals. This, converted and extended in a huge multi-storied mosque with sales/display centre at semi-basement level, is



part of the *Jamia Islamia Madrasah* complex, and the pond is used for pisciculture as a source of income. Traditionally the tomb is ascribed either to a daughter of *Shaista Khan* or to the wife of a *Subahdar* before him. Based on the stronger and more sober style, it looks like belonging to some high ranking lady who died before *Khan's* time.

The distinguishing feature of this tomb-mosque is its large dome, 25' in diameter, and the *mihrab* integrated into the thickness of the 7.5' wide walls. The huge dome is a classic example of how these could be erected on a square plan that was gradually converted to an octagonal base with squinch-arches (no circular drum). The dome is flanked

by rather disproportionate and lanky minarets on four corners. The burial chamber turned to the central prayer hall is a 37.5' x 37.5' square with three entrances on each side, all spanned with shallow four-ribbed vaults, except the west. There is a room adjacent to the south of this chamber which has a shallow segmented roof with oval shaped ceiling. To keep symmetry of a mosque another identical room was added. The original entrance doors had multi-foil arches enclosed by shallow flat frontals. True to contemporary style, the west walls had panels outside and niches inside.

The best example of pre-Mughal single dome kiosk mosque in Dhaka, though built in much later

time of 1680, was the *Allahkuri* mosque in *Mohammedpur*. This simple style has been very popular throughout the Islamic world at all ages because of its simplicity. However, unlike the Sultanate or earlier Mughal examples, the mosque was distinguished by the semi-octagonal *mihrab* niche, plastered walls, horizontal parapet, corner towers rising above the parapet and ending in solid kiosks with small cupolas, the dome being placed on octagonal drum crowned by lotus with *kalasha* finial. The building called for attention as it had four axially projected frontons with bordering ornamental turrets, an idea borrowed from axial *tuqantype* gateways of the Persian influenced upper Indian standard Mughal mosques, e.g. *Delhi Jami Masjid* or *Lahore Badshahi Masjid*. Unfortunately this historic and architectural heritage structure was demolished recently to pave way for a supermarket!

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