



The Holy Rosary Church, Dhaka

Catholic Church with a Mughal touch

THE earliest written piece of history on the Catholic Missionaries in East Bengal, now Bangladesh, tells us the four members of the Society of Jesus, in other words, Jesuit priests reached Chittagong in 1599, and for the 2,500 Catholics that already lived in that region, built a small rectory and a church with permission from the king. This church was consecrated in 1600. But it is said that the first Catholic Missionaries came to Bengal in 1517.

The Augustinian Missionaries came to Bengal in 1612 and spreading the faith quickly built churches in various parts of the country. But the Portuguese

attitude towards the local people was unacceptable that it the Mughal Nawab of Bengal became displeased and the Augustinian Monastery in Dhaka was destroyed.

The Catholic Church faced a dark period with the contradictions within the religious communities, and the image of the church was damaged greatly.

But Christianity survived, and the Catholic Church presently has a very strong footing in the dioceses of Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh.

And in the heart of Dhaka, on a vast area of land called Tejgaon that once belonged to the zamindars stands the old building of the Holy Rosary Church, a parish cultivated by the Holy Cross Fathers and Sisters.

The inscription on the pinnacle of the Church shows a date in Arabic numerals 1677, built by the Augustinian Fathers, but in fact the real date of the Church's foundation is unknown. Many say that it was built in the 16th century. Doctor James Taylor's book, "Topography of Dhaka" tells us that this church was meant for the worship of the Nestorian Christians or Armenians of Dhaka, which slowly passed into the hands of the Roman Catholics.

This 17th century building has gone through only two renovations for the last four centuries. The original re-cast flat roof had many damages because of wear and tear and was rebuilt in 1940, retaining its original outlook.

The façade shows the dominance of the Mughal and Hindu architecture although the Portuguese built the church themselves. At the outset the entrance is decorated with four columns, two on either side with their pagoda-like pinnacles

sticking out of the arched hood over the main door. These columns built into the wall are decorated with lines and spiral motifs.

Towards the farther ends of the wall are tower-like structures, both roofed with domes and a cross standing in the centre on top of each dome and having two glass panels once again with the cross in their midst. The two ends of each dome are decorated with brightly coloured fortress-like structures.

Over the arched hood at the entrance, are once again four columns, two on each side, which have been built in from the upper part of the wall, and these stick out of the inverted 'V' shaped face of the wall fringed with scallop-like motifs.

The centre of the face of the wall has the figures 1677 embedded along with the Rosary just below the figures, signifying the fact that this indeed is the Holy Rosary Church.

In the year Jubilee Year 2000, the church was once again renovated by a delegation of Portuguese who very specifically came down to Dhaka for this purpose.

Epitaphs on tombs on the floor of the church indicates the church's Armenian origin and when renovations were carried out in 2000, these tombstones were set on the inner walls of the church. At present there are 46 tombstones, 10 inscribed on marble while the others inscribed on granite slabs.

But the heavy walls remained untouched and they still are strong and firm. The inner area is just rectangular in shape and has nothing special about it, but the farthest end of the church which houses the main altar and the sanctuary (the holiest part of a religious building), too

shows the Mughal dominance.

A carved opening in the centre far above, on the wall at the back of the Church, for all to see stands in radiance the Holy Eucharist. The Church, which served as the central adoration chapel during the Jubilee Year, is again being used for special prayers and Eucharistic adoration and meditation, and is kept open from 7:00 am to 8:00pm daily. The church is never empty. One or two are always gathered in these premises, praying in answer to Jesus' saying "where there are two or three gathered in my name, there I am in their midst". (From the Gospel of St. Mathew-Chapter 18 Verse 20).

The area where the Tabernacle is and the carved in pouch on the wall is again fringed with four columns, two on each side all decorated with spiral motifs. Large open rectangular shaped windows with heavy iron bars running across them bring in the cool breeze from the number of trees that surround the building.

Of the two Catholic cemeteries in Dhaka, the Holy Rosary Church premises houses one. More and more Catholics in the new part of Dhaka are buried here.

Two schools belonged to this parish Holy Cross College for the girls and Notre Dame College for the boys.

Although a new larger

Church building was built and was in use since January 1993, to accommodate the expansion of parishioners, the old Holy Rosary Church maintains the tranquillity and peace where all could come to the Lord as He calls: "Come to me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". (Gospel of St. Mathew- Chapter 11 Verse 28).

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