



SINGER MOSQUE AT BAGERHAT

Urban abuse of a rarity in Islamic architecture



WHILE travelling along the Khulna-Pirojpur Highway, one cannot fail to notice on the left a small red brick structure, an age-old legacy locally known as the Singer mosque, surrounded by traditional peasant's huts. The mosque recalls the glorious past of Ulug Khan Jahan Ali's capital Khalifabad-Bagerhat, the earliest known urban settlement in the southern part of Bengal, and replenishes those golden memories of our cultural heritage.

A legendary Islamic hero of Bengal, Ulug Khan Jahan Ali built, in addition to his large congregational mosque Shait Gambuj Masjid (sixty-minaret mosque), numerous small single-domed square-shaped mosques in the neighbourhood.

Built in the middle of the 15th century, the Singer mosque is located about 250metres southeast off the great Shait Gambuj Masjid in Singer village of Bagerhat.

Khan Jahan Ali introduced the unconventional square-shaped design of mosque. Almost half of the large number of mosques built in Bengal during the early Islamic period was conceived from a square-shaped ground plan. The mosques are very small in size and meant to serve a small neighbourhood. For, it was more practical to build such small mosques to accommodate the people living in the small clusters of huts in a village than to build large one.

The ground plan of a mausoleum in the Islamic world is either square or octagonal. In the Islamic architecture, the square single unit was used mainly for tombs and gates, but rarely for mosques. Furthermore, in the temple architecture of Bengal and its neighbour Burma (now

Myanmar), the square form was used for the basic unit of most of the main sanctums of a temple. It can be presumed that in addition to the square-shaped mausoleum, the central shrine of the Buddhist temple or the Garbagriha of a Hindu temple can also be considered as the inspiration of a square-shaped mosque in Bengal.

The neighbourhood mosque measures 7.82 metres square each internally with 2.1m thick surrounding wall. The mosque has three pointed-arch entrances to the prayer hall on the east and one each on north and south. All the openings have a little recess into the wall with ornamental mouldings above it.

Unlike the typical multi-mihrab mosques in Bengal, curiously the west wall has only one mihrab niche articulated outwards in the middle of the wall. Each side of the mihrab has a niche measuring 57cm by 106cm, placed 107cm above the ground. There are also two smaller candle niches on north and south sides each.

There are no pilasters in the



wall, the squenches springing directly from the wall. The squinches are used in each corner of the hall to transform the square supporting area into an octagonal one, and subsequently five corbelled layers of brick make the round configuration perfect, upon which the dome supports. All the facing bricks of the outer surface along with the corner turrets and curved cornice have been restored.

An essential feature of a conventional mosque in the Islamic world, the minaret was discarded in Bengal as well as in the mosques of Khan Jahan Ali. The Singer mosque has only four circular corner turrets, one at each corner of the building; four mouldings of string courses on the turret divide the shaft into five parts. Instead of a minaret, a distinctive type of turret is seen in the early Islamic architecture of Bengal. These turrets invariably form a part of the buildings and were built either as corner strengthening or as mere ornamental appendages.

The mosque structure and its surrounding area were originally demarcated by a boundary wall with a gate. Its original boundary wall with four corner turrets and a small arched gateway on the east has been recently demolished during the earthwork for the construction of the adjacent highway. Some wedge-shaped bricks were found embedded exactly into the southeast corner of the wall, which proves that the corners of this boundary wall once must have had turrets. Such circular corner turrets seem to be a common architectural feature of this region. But the remains of the former boundary wall and the gate are not visible now probably because they were covered again after the excavation work.

The rare example of a boundary wall along with a gate in such kind of small neighbourhood mosque should be reconstructed urgently so that the sacred ground around the mosque shields the mosque structure from unnecessary commotion, unwanted people, animal hazard and all kinds of pollution. This will revive the original environment that was once meant to create, restore its innovative importance and will be valued more preciously by the

locals, tourists and the people of the country alike.

It will also protect and prolong the longevity of one of our archaeological and architectural heritages.

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