

ONCE UPON A TIME IN DACCA

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Marriages are made in heaven but customs are made in society. In pre-partition and early fifties of Dhaka pairs were united and marriages took place; and there were customs reflecting the ethos of the Muslim society of Dhaka. As time passed on, as modern advancement took over, the customs changed, a time and its custom became history. It still makes an interesting story!

In those times, arranged marriage was the practice. The *Mutashas* or the female matchmakers tied the nuptial knots. A burqa clad woman the *Mutashas* went from family to family conveying the *paigham* (offer). When the choices meet the married ladies of the boy's family is invited to the girl's house. They take a closer look at the girl as to her looks and physical soundness. The visit is preceded by a procession of sweetmeat carriers; the sweetmeat carried on trays covered with red satin shroud with golden frills generally weighed two and a half maund to four maund. *Paan* or betel leaves were also there. It created an awakening in the area that a *paigham* is being sent.

The girl came with a bowed head with the head cover or *aanchal* lowered to hide

the gaze. The matronly ladies first looked at her eyes to assure them that she is not squint eyed. Her locks were unfastened to reach to its full length. Then they took a look at her ankle. It has to be slender for a stub shaped ankle means that she will become a widow. The back is then checked to determine that she does not have a hump of a camel. When the

inspection is satisfactory the *paigham* proceeds. The *Mutasha* or the match maker is given a pair of sandal, an umbrella and a saree.

Panchini or engagement ceremony is an event where the patricians of the two families confer to agree on *den mohr* or alimony, *kabin* Muslim marriage bond, ornaments, dress and on the date of the

wedding. The visitors are welcomed with a quarter glass of *sherbet* followed by sumptuous dinner; *kupta pulao*, *korma* (chicken curry), *rejala* (mutton curry), *shirberen* or a special kind of dessert.

Panchini is followed by *Bala Bali* or "Gaye Holud" marked by many customs with effusion of merriment particularly in the bride's family. The bride is placed on a *chowki* wooden platform with a *paati* rattan mattress with four plantain trees in the four corners and a red sheet overhead. Then *uptan* turmeric paste is applied to the forehead and cheek of the bride and rubbed all over her body. Then *mehedi* or henna design is made on her palm and hand.

Five items - five leaves of *paan*, five strands of grass, five paddy grains, five betel nuts and five green plantains with an earthen lamp are placed on a *kulathreshing* pan. In succession the ladies holding it move the *kula* around the face of the bride in a circle five times and then apply turmeric paste to the forehead of the bride and on their own foreheads.

An earthen pot of *shirbirin* (sweet dish) with a rolled betel leaf tucked into it is placed near the platform. Seven girls or *Balis* and a boy or *Bala* from bride's brothers and sister's families play around and partake of *shirbirin*.

On the day of marriage the boy's family sends sets of dresses for the children of the family of the bride. This is called *Bachkanya*. The boy's family also sends sets of dresses for the seven friends of the bride. This is called *Saatsuhagan* conciliation of seven friends of the bride.

From the day of *Bala Bali* the bride does not take fish till the fish from the boy's side arrives. All this time the bride keeps her gaze shyly lowered. The bride will raise her gaze to see her husband under a red *urnia* shroud overhead in a mirror held between the two! Her prince charming!

Through these customs, efforts were made to endow the wedding with all the elements of a fairy tale. Marriage is a dream. In the colours of the customs the couples of Dhaka lived that dream!

MUSINGS

HERITAGE

SULTANATE ERA MOSQUE IN RUIN

MINHAJ UDDIN, CHITTAGONG

PHOTOS: STAR FILE

It's a wonder how one comes across unique structures from history and that too in Chittagong.

The Hammadia mosque is one of the only two Sultani era structures in Chittagong, still standing in its original form.

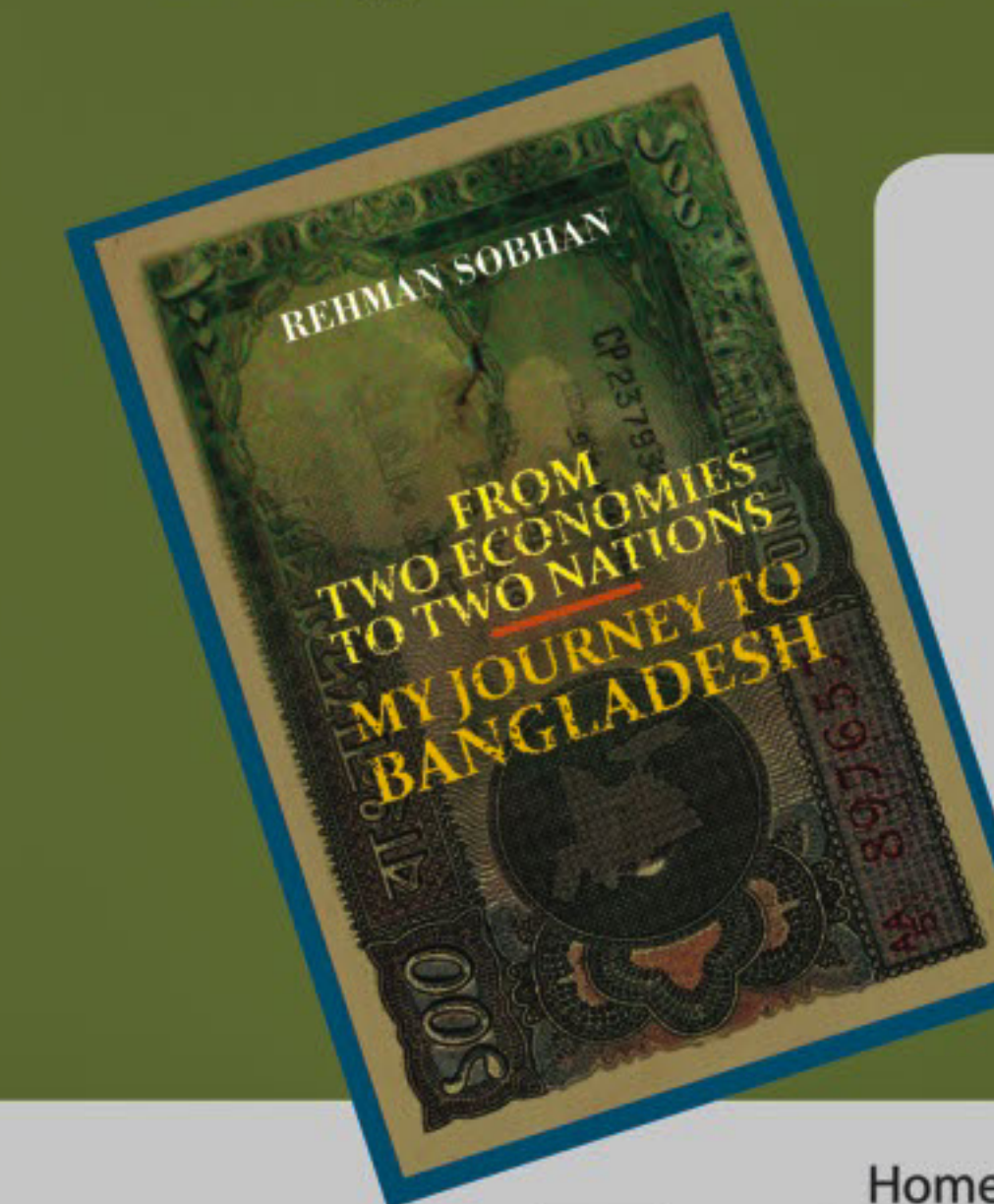
The five-century-old mosque is situated at Masjidda village of Sitakunda upazila, east side of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Choto Kumira. Due to lack of initiatives from the authorities to preserve it, the unscrupulous locals have covered the beautiful antiquity with an extension building from its three sides, this covering its view.

According to historians, the mosque was built in between 1533 and 1538, during the era of the last Sultan of Gaud -- Sultan Giasuddin Mahmud Shah's reign. Historian Abdul Karim came across the mosque in 1966 and discovered it to be of the Sultanate era, based on the Arabic stone inscription. The black basalt stone inscription is still there at the entrance of the mosque.



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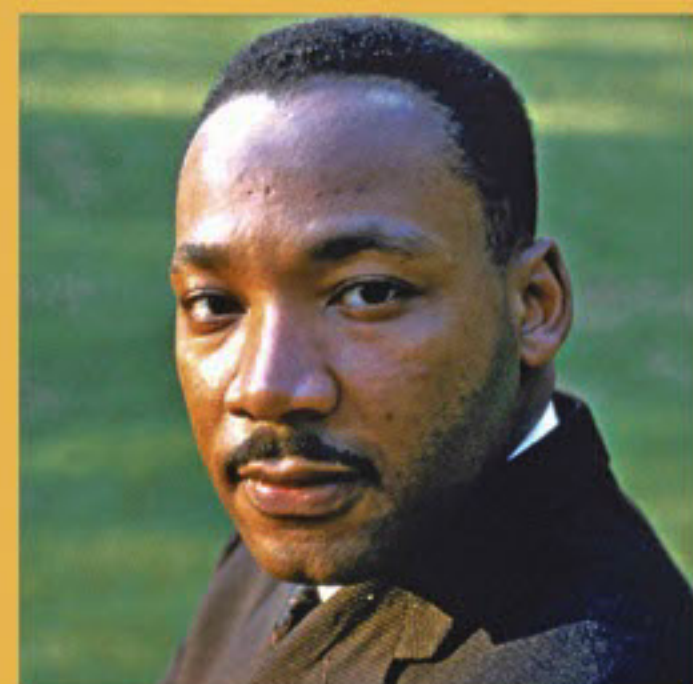
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MARTIN LUTHER KING
American Baptist minister, activist and humanitarian



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