

READING LATE MEDIAEVAL MOSQUES OF BANGLADESH: CASE STUDY ON BAJRASHAHI MOSQUE AND MATUBI MOSQUE OF SONAIMURI UPAZILA, NOAKHALI DISTRICT

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Introduction:

Bajra Shahi mosque located in the village Bajra of Sonaimuri upazila of Present Noakhali district is a Bengal Nawabi period mosque bearing the characteristics of Mughal architectural features. It was commissioned in 1741 CE by one of the local Zamindars (Talukqdars) of this region called Aman Ullah. Another mosque Nawabganj Shahi mosque in the same upazila locally known as Matubi Mosque (named after the village) is a Colonial period mosque. It was constructed in 1814 CE by an administrative officer – Patwari (record holder of lands) called Muhammad Reza (Ridai) Khan Patwari. Both mosques located in Sonaimuri upazila are noteworthy examples of Late Mediaeval period mosque architecture.

The original architectural features of Bajra Shahi mosque exhibit its similarity towards the provincial Mughal design principle; specially Dhaka (Khwaja Shahbaz Mosque, Kartalab Khan mosque) whereas Matubi mosque though following the Mughal layout plan but in terms of design elements followed the Colonial style with its semicircular arches, balustrade columns, fan shaped designs. Also in case of finial treatment of the domes and kiosks one can see the influence of crude embellishment rather than Mughal taste.

Objective of Research:

The objective of this paper is to establish a vocabulary and typology of late mediaeval mosque architecture of Bangladesh. It may be mentioned in this instance that extensive research was conducted on the revival and development of Hindu Temple architecture with terracotta ornamentation of late mediaeval period of Bengal. A concrete typology of Bengal temple is already recognized by the scholars whereas very little is known about the regional varieties of Late mediaeval mosques of Bengal specially Bangladesh. Two mosques of different political scenario (Nawabi period with European influence and Company period or Colonial period) were chosen as case studies of late mediaeval mosques. Furthermore; how the regional variety due to lack of patronage, craftsmen and technology compelled to compromise with the Mughal grammar of mosque architecture and also in some cases adopted European features.

In the process the researchers had to conduct architectural documentation of these two mosques with preparation of layout plan. Identify and analyze individual features of the

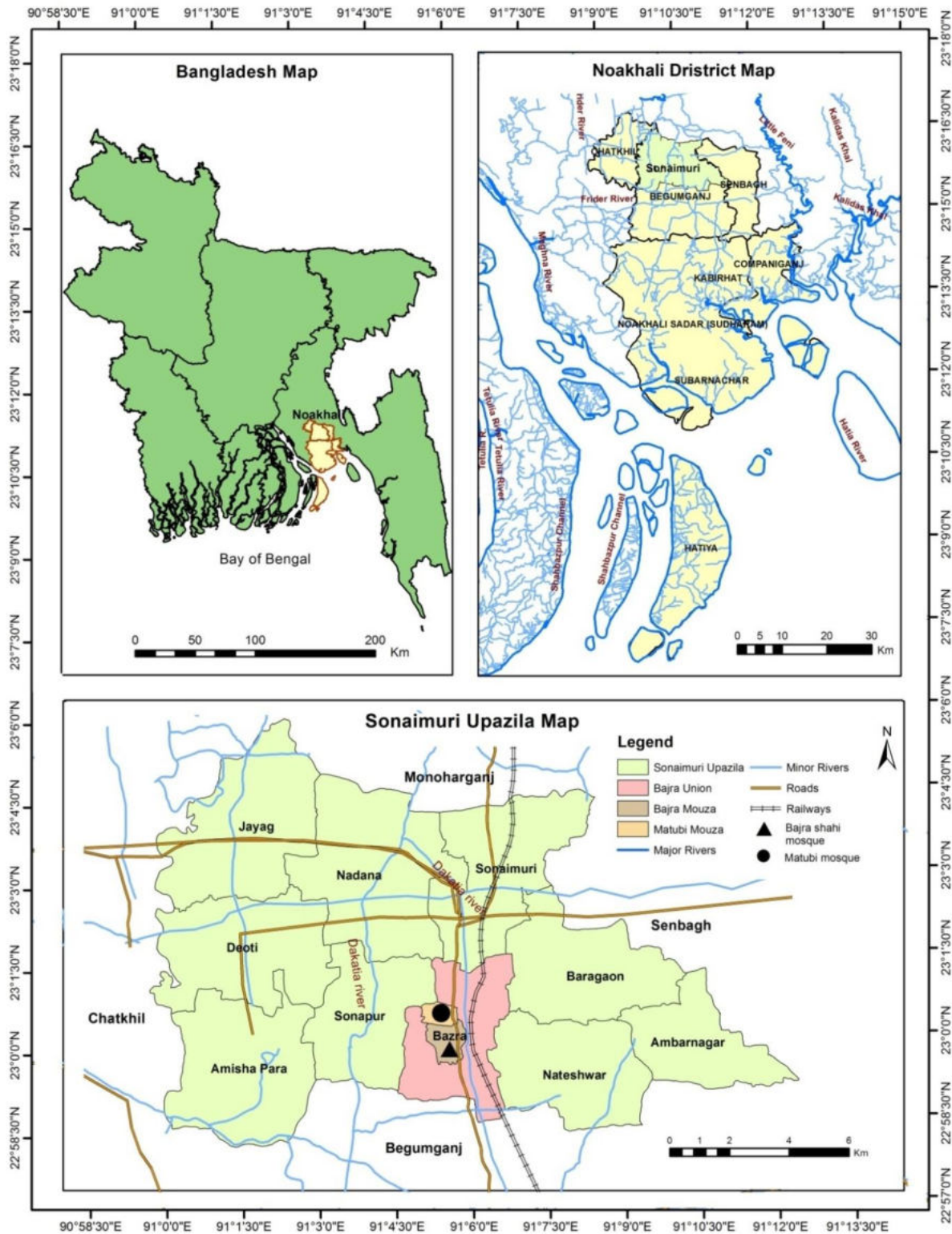
mosques (lay out, measurements of different features, dome installation technique, ornamentation, later renovations and additions). The idea was to compare the stylistic changes took place due to certain factors.

Interpret the influence of social stratum in the execution of architecture. Both mosques were commissioned by persons of different social status (a Talukqdar and a Patwari). Talukqdar – a landholder and Patwari an officer who generally works under the Talukqdar. Thus through the documentation and analysis of the architecture of these two mosques one will be able to understand the different social stratum of contemporary society also the cultural traits of the day.

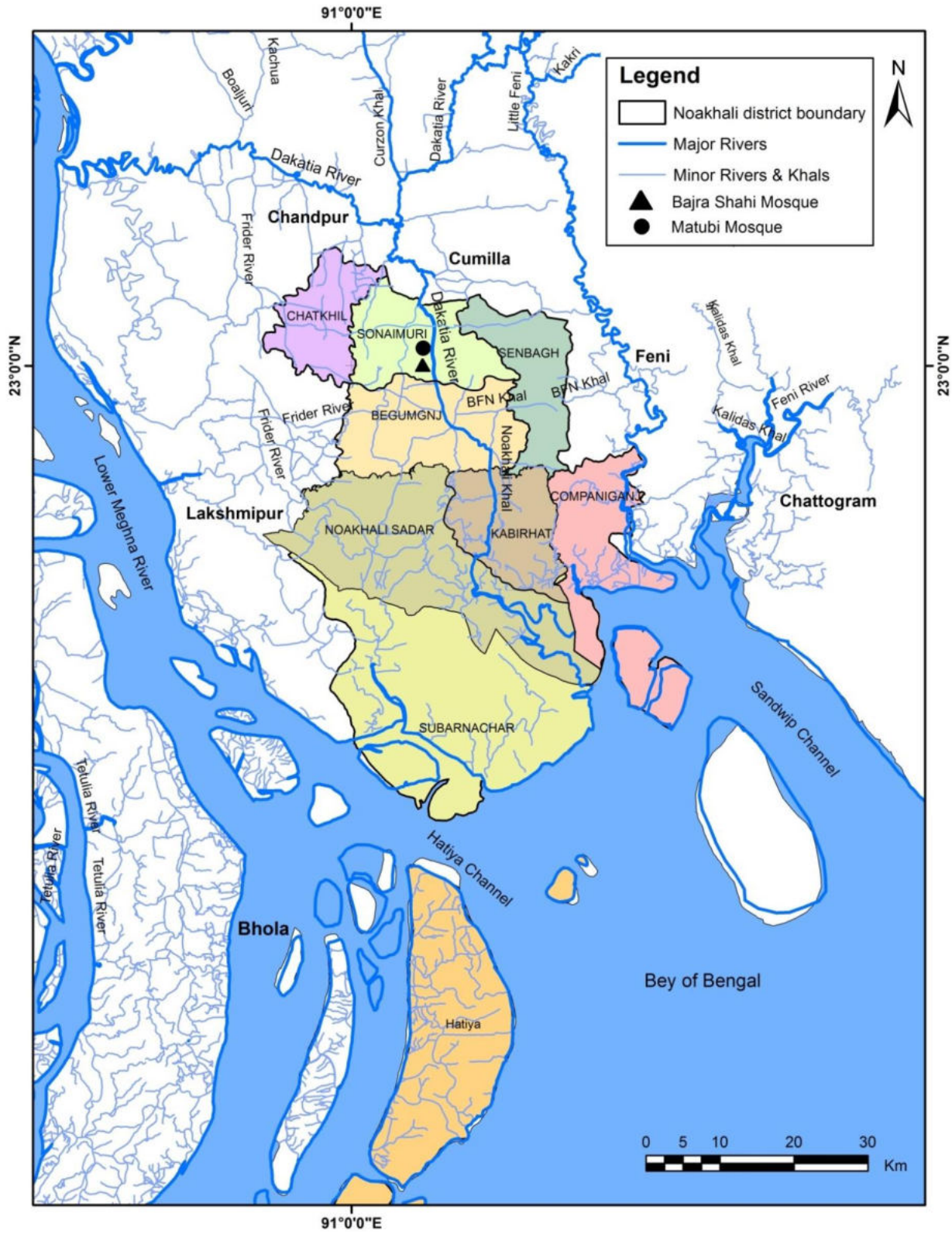
Region and Environment:

Sonaimuri is one of the upazila in Noakhali District, Bangladesh. It is located in between 23°02' and 23°06' north latitudes and in between 91°00' and 91°13' east longitudes. The upazila is bounded on the north by Monoharganj upazila of Cumilla district, east by Senbagh upazila (Noakhali district), south by Begumganj upazila (Noakhali district) and west by Chatkhil upazila (Noakhali district) (**Map 11.1**). The upazila occupies an area of 169.14 sq. km and its population was 3,27,194 in the 2011 census report of Bangladesh. On January 29, 2005, Sonaimuri emerged as a separate administrative upazila, with 10 unions of former Begumganj upazila of Noakhali district through the notification of Bangladesh government (*Bangladesh Jatio Tottho Batayan*). These unions are Ambarnagar, Amisha Para, Bajra, Deoti, Jayag, Nadana, Natেশwar, Sonaimuri, Sonapur and Baragaon. The main river of Sonaimuri upazila is Dakatia (**Map 11.2**). It is an intercity river entering Bangladesh through the Bagasara of Cumilla district, originating in Tripura state of India and a tributary of the Meghna River. The river is separated by the little Feni River and its main stream is connected to the little Feni River by the Chaudagram Khal (canal). Its branches in the south from the Noakhali canal (this canal was excavated in 1660 CE running from the Dakatia river through Ramganj, Sonaimuri and Chaumuhani to divert water flow to the junction of the rivers Meghna and Feni) and west of Sheikherhat in the west near Raipur in Meghna River. At this place, the new and intense stream was in the Meghna River with Chandpur canal (Rashid 1991:57). Sonaimuri upazila is connected to the district headquarters by metaled roads. The Dhaka-Noakhali Highway, locally known as Maijdi-Ramganj road passes through this upazila. The annual average temperature of the upazila varies from maximum 34.3°C to minimum 14.4°C and the average annual rainfall is recorded 3032mm (*Banglapedia* 2011, Bengali, Part 7, pp. 69-71).

Noakhali district represents an extensive flat, coastal and deltaic land, located on the tidal floodplain of the Meghna River delta, characterized by flat land and low relief. Sonaimuri upazila includes a flat and low lying land. It has low elevation and water cannot drain out. The early rainfall fills the ponds, ditches and low lying areas and later rains overflow, keeping the area waterlogged for about six months from May to October. As a result, water stagnation is a common phenomenon during heavy rainfall (Hossain 2009:07).



Map 11.1: Research area district map of Noakhali and upazila map of Sonaimuri.



Map 11.2: River system of Noakhali district indicating Dakatia river.



Plate 11.1: Eastern façade of Bajra Shahi Mosque.



Plate 11.2: Eastern gateway of Bajra Shahi Mosque.



Plate 11.3: Front Elevation of the mosque with gateway.



Plate 11.4: Kiosk and Balcony of eastern gateway.



Plate 11.5: Interior face of the entrance gateway house.



Plate 11.6: Inscription of the mosque.



Plate 11.7: Semi Vault of central arched entrance.



Plate 11.8: Single arched opening on the south side.



Plate 11.9: Side Openings bordered with turrets on both sides.

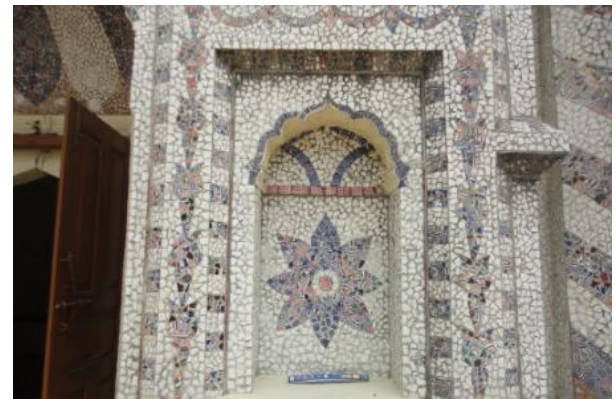


Plate 11.10: Arched alcove within a rectangular panel.



Plate 11.11: Interior view of north wall exhibiting decorations within the surface of arched panels and rectangular panels.



Plate 11.12: Guldasta crowning the turrets to create a skyline.



Plate 11.13: Octagonal Corner tower with *kalasa* base, blind kiosks cupola and finial of southeast corner.



Plate 11.14: *Qibla* wall of the mosque highlighted with nook shaft and side turrets with *Kalasa* base.



Plate 11.15: Three domes and merloned parapet encased with *Chini-tikri* design.

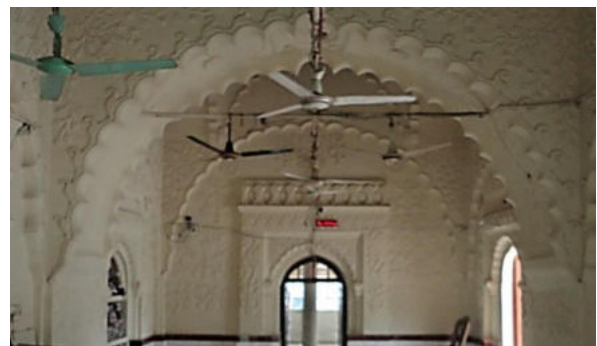


Plate 11.16: Lateral arch of north bay.



Plate 11.17: Semi vault constructed to set dome on the central bay.



Plate 11.18: Springing cusped arches parallel to *Qibla* wall and arched recess on north wall with semi vaults accommodated a dome upon a rectangular space on the north bay.



Plate 11.19: Semi octagonal central *mihrab* of the mosque with *kalasa* design border on both side.



Plate 11.20: Side *Mihrab* on the south bay turned into a cupboard.



Plate 11.21: Side *Mihrab* on the North Bay turned into a bookshelf.

Historical outline

Traditionally Pir Ambar Shah or Omar Shah was the patron saint of Ambarabad in Noakhali District. This man is said to have come to the jungles of Noakhali from Iraq in 1700 CE. He lived there in his boat working miracles and making multitudes of converts by whom the wastes were gradually reclaimed. It is after his boat or Bajra that the locality or the centre of



Plate 11.22a: Vase with flower and branches.

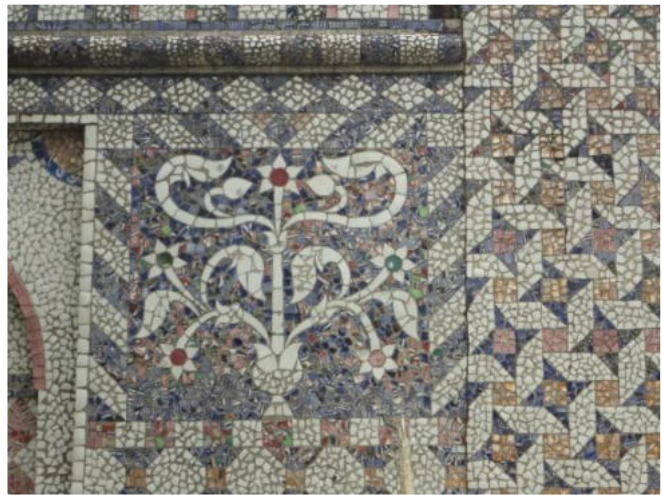


Plate 11.22b: Vase with flower and branches.



Plate 11.23a: Arched alcove design bordered with floral and geometric designs.



Plate 11.23b: Arched panel with geometric designs stars and fan shaped design in spandrel.



Plate 11.24: Floral, vegetal, cusped arch, octagonal designs on the corner tower.



Plate 11.25: Graves of builder Aman Ullah, his brother Sana Ullah and their mother located on the south east corner of the mosque.



Plate 11.26: Hujra of Imam located on the northeast corner of the mosque



Plate 11.27: Present view of the original Matubi Mosque.

his activities came to be known as Bajra and the region was named Ambarabad (Qadir 1967: 353). The area cleared by Pir Ambar Shah and his local followers covered about 175 square miles of land (Richard, 1993: 211-212). In 1722 CE, during the period of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan of Bengal, the name of the Bajra under the Sonargaon Sarkar was named Amurabad, Noabad Bhulua pargana. J. E. Webs locates this pargana “in the west of the district, lying west



Plate 11.28a: Present day Matubi Mosque alias Nawabganj Shahi Mosque.



Plate 11.28b: Present day tablet of the mosque.



Plate 11.29: Large Tank on the west side of the mosque.



Plate 11.30: Farsi Inscription of the original mosque embedded on the parapet of the structure.



Plate 11.31: Eastern façade of the original mosque covered with modern day tiles including the original corner towers with extension on east south and north.

and north of Bhulua with an area of 1244 square miles, containing 960 permanently settled estates with total revenue of Rs. 81,633". Neither any inscriptions nor any direct authentic records are available to confirm the period of appearance of Pir Ambar Shah and his stay in this locality. However no records are available to locate where he was buried. Local people assumed that he was buried either on the northern side of Bajra mosque or between any place of Bajra

mosque and Matubi mosque. At present Ambarnagar villege located within Amanullah union of Sonaimuri upazila probably derived its name from Pir Ambar Shah.



Plate 11.32: South Side entrance of the mosque semicircular arch rests on balustrade type of columns outlined with a rectangular recessed border. Flanked with two arched alcoves. On top a slim rectangular panel (Mughal style) can be seen which is again flanked with arched recess. Spandrel depicts the remnants of Fan designs these were probably distorted during restoration work.



Plate 11.33: Octagonal corner tower with *Kalasa* base and moulding at intervals reminds the Mughal style. Due to restoration features of alcoves are missing.



Plate 11.34: Blind kiosks of corner towers engaged turrets. The corner tower displaying merlon designs, moulding semicircular cusped arch design framed within rectangular panel. The finial exhibiting the lotus and *kalasa* motif but abstract in design.



Plate 11.35a: Interior *Mihrab* wall corresponding to the arched entrances of the eastern wall.



Plate 11.35b: Original feature of the central *Mihrab* was totally renovated and the alcove was pushed inside thus a wide projection was created. The semicircular arch was rebuilt and lost the scale. The cusped arched border bordering the alcove was also renovated and shelves and storage were created.



Plate 11.35c: Newly constructed square projection with an opening of the central *mihrab* from outside.



Plate 11.35d: Distorted tri-partition of the *Qibla* wall from outside, the outline of flanking *mihrabs* are slightly wider than the central *mihrab* area. The central *mihrab* area is projected and flanked by two engaged turrets with *Kalasa* base. The flanking *mihrab* or bay is outlined with an arched design.

It was at the instance of Pir Ambar Shah that the Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah (1719-1748 CE) settled it with two brothers of Delhi, Aman Ullah Khan and Sana Ullah Khan at the very low revenue of Rs.289. It appears in the accounts of 1728 CE as ‘Ambarabad Noabad Bhulua’ at that revenue (Webster 1911: 101). A Persian inscription in Bajra mosque preserves



Plate 11.36: Side or flanking bay (east and west wall) of the interior prayer hall.



Plate 11.37: Semicircular Lateral arch dividing the prayer hall into three unequal bays.



Plate 11.38a: Phase of transition (semi vaults and shallow arched alcoves with cusped design to place the dome on a square central bay of the prayer hall).

the name of Aman Ullah as its builder with the date of its construction being 1154 A.H/ 1741-42 CE (Qadir 1967: 355). Amanuallapur union of Begumganj Upazila and Char Amanullah union of Subarnachar upazila are under the jurisdiction of Noakhali district. Also the Amanullah union of Sandwip upazila under Chattogram district was actually part of Bhulua pargana. The name Amanullah of these places bears the memory of Aman Ullah khan.

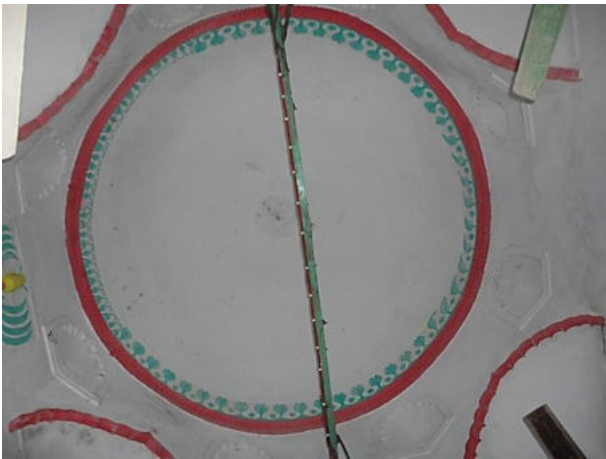


Plate 11.38b: Eight arched shallow cusped alcoves were constructed alongside with the four semi vaults to transmit the load of the central dome.



Plate 11.39: Phase of transition for the side domes achieved through solid blocks and archways supported by northern and southern wall and lateral arches of both side bays.

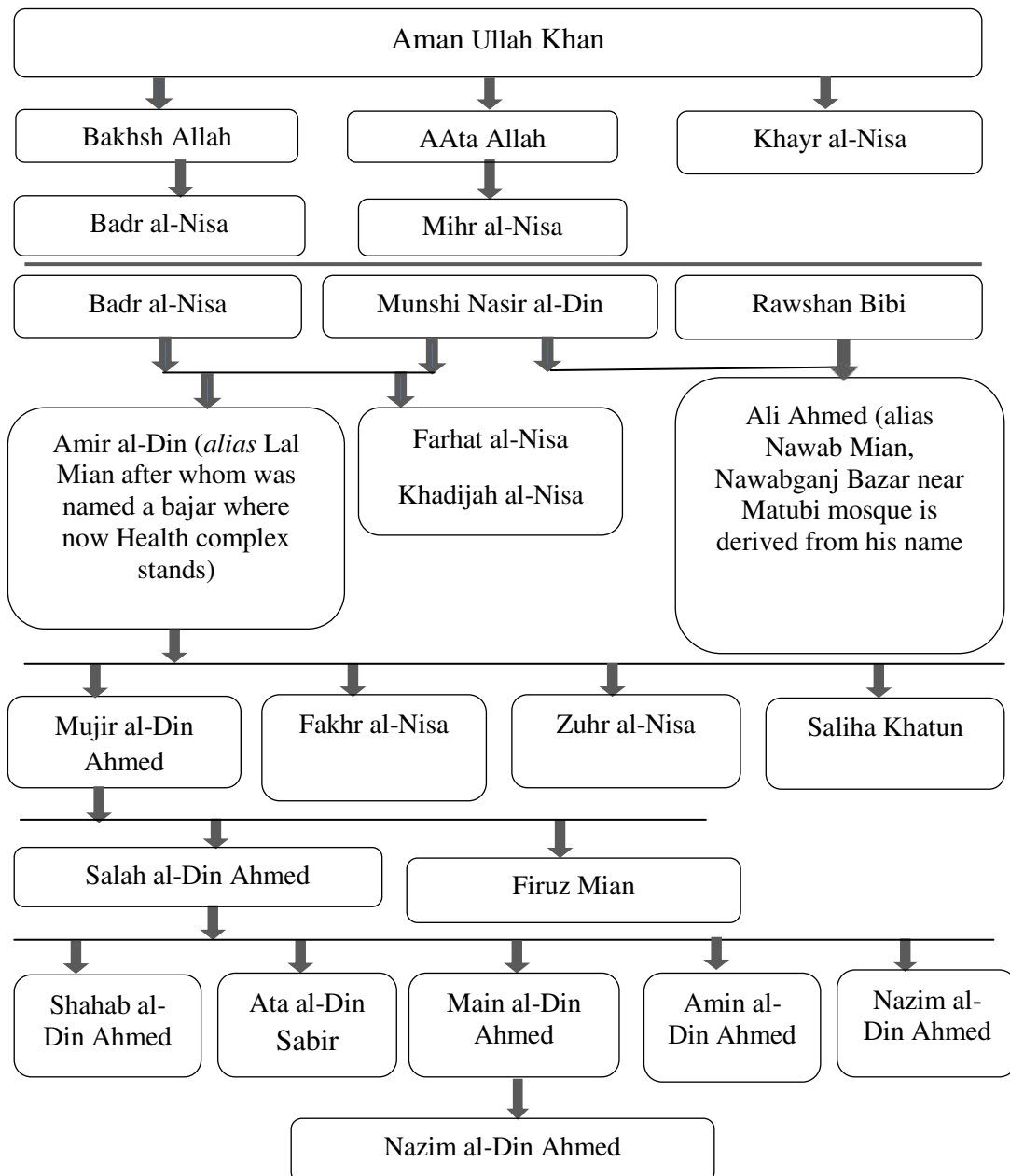


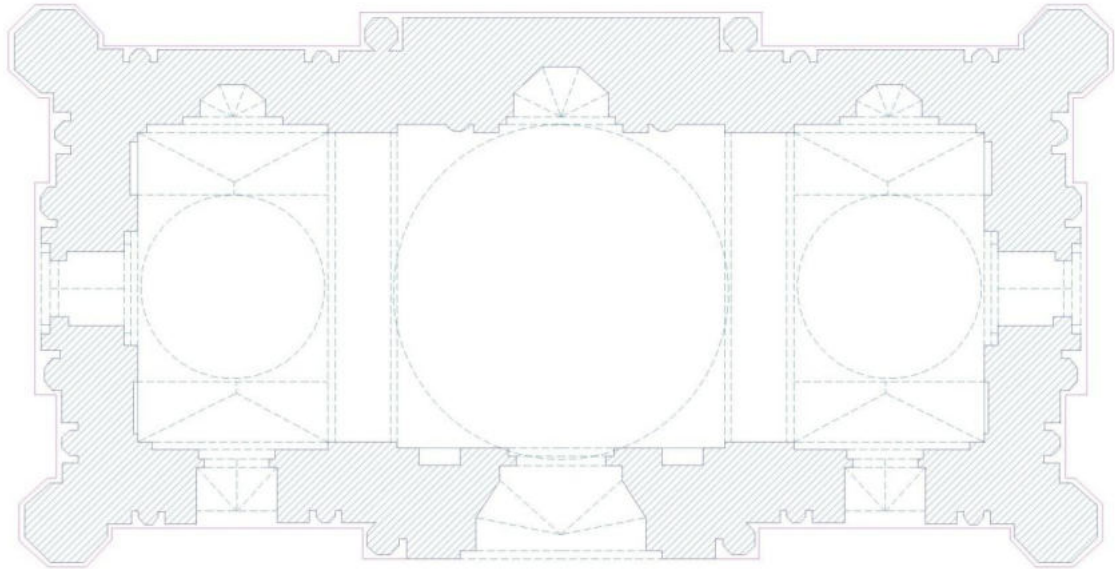
Plate 11.40: Three wide domes (Mughal proto type) resting on octagonal shoulders with abstract lotus design and *kalasa* motifs. The domes are further highlighted by corner towers and engaged turrets thus creating a skyline of the mosque.

A few words can be stated about the Muslim occupation of Noakhali district. The original name of Noakhali district is Bhulua. In ancient times Tripura and Bhulua were known as Samatata. In 1279 C.E. Muhammad Tughral aided Ratnapha of Tripura, afterwards known as Ratna Manikya, to obtain the throne of Tippera. It is probable that the earliest Muslim settlements in Noakhali date from that time. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonargaon, the founder of the independent line of Muhammadan kings, in the year 1340 carried his banner to the north into Sylhet, to the east into Tippera and Noakhali, and to the south into Chittagong (Webster 1911: 16). In the succeeding period, district Noakhali was occupied by Muslims many times, but could not maintain their occupation. It changed hands between them and the kings of

Tippera and Arakan. However some temporary reverses from the Arakanese attacks. In 1611 CE Subahdar Islam Khan of Bengal defeated Zamindar Ananta Manikya of Bhulua (Khan 2018: 442). During the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's reign in 1666 CE, Subahdar Shaista Khan of Bengal conquered the Portuguese by suppressing the Portuguese and Arakan bandits. As a result, Chattogram, Tripura and Bhulua came under the Mughals. As soon as the Muslim rule began, beautiful mosques were built with the spread of Islam in Bhulua.

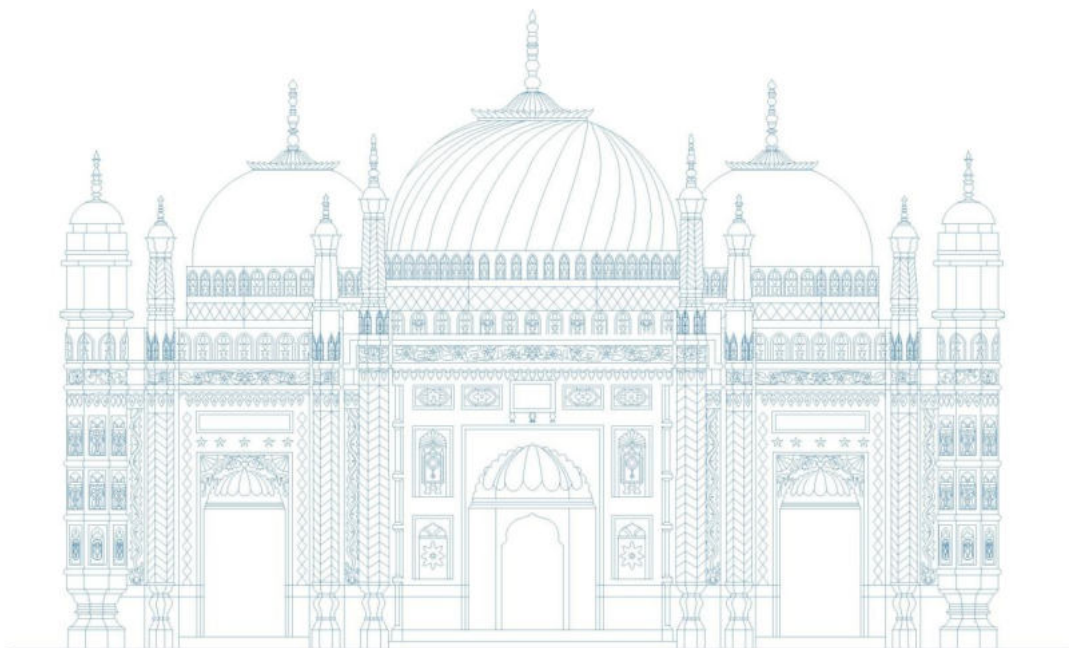
Table 11.1: Genealogy of Builder Aman Ullah (Source: Qadir 1966: 363):





 PLAN BAZRA, MOSQUE.

Plate 11.41: Ground plan of Bazra Shahi mosque.



FRONT ELEVATION OF BAZRA MOSQUE, BAZRA.

Plate 11.42: Front elevation of Bazra Shahi mosque.

Bajra Shahi Mosque:

Bajra Shahi Mosque (**Plate 11.1**) is a remarkable architecture of late Mughal period more accurately Nawabi period of Bengal. This historic mosque located in a rural setting about 20 kilometers north of Noakhali Sadar, 5.22 kilometers south of Sonaimuri upazila and half kilometer north-west from a local bazar known as Lalmia Bazar. Dhaka-Noakhali highway passes through quarter kilometer north from it. According to an inscription (**Plate 11.6**) fixed over the eastern central entrance, the mosque was built by one Aman Ullah in 1741-42 CE during the reign of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah. The six line inscriptions was composed in both Arabic (Naskh style) and in Farsi (Nastaliq style) (Karim, 1992:500). Panels in the left and right of this gateway shows the Bengali and Persian inscriptions in China cut pieces respectively which records that the mosque was thoroughly repaired in the Bangla years between 1318 to 1335 (1910-1927 CE) by the Bajra Zamindars Khan Bahadur Mawlavi Ali Ahmad and Khan Bahadur Mawlavi Mujir al-din Ahmad under the supervision of Abdul Gani Tahsildar and Mawlavi Ali Karim (Imam Bajra mosque). A Persian inscription in cement plaster is fixed on the inner side above the eastern central entrance (now missing) of the mosque also records the same information. Another Bengali inscription on the southern wall of the mosque records that Benazir Ustagar of Chowdhury Bazar Dhaka executed the repair works (now almost invisible due to refurbishing). The present ornamentation of the mosque with mosaic of colored shards of China ceramic was also done at that time (Qadir, 1967: 361-63).

Genealogy shows that Mujir al-din Ahmed is a direct descent of Aman Ullah through Badr al-Nisa and Zamindar Ali Ahmed was the son of her co-wife. The name of the Imam contemporary to Aman Ullah is told to be Hazrat Mawlana Shah Sufi Abu Siddiq. He was succeeded by his descendants Hazrat Mawlana Ismail Siddiq, Hazrat Mawlana Mirza Abul Khayr Siddiq, Hazrat Mawlana Ali Karim Siddiq, Hazrat Mawlana Golam Mawla Siddiq, Hazrat Mawlana Abdullah Siddiq and Hazrat Mawlana Imam Hasan Siddiq (present Imam of Bajra mosque).

Gateway:

The site is enclosed with an outer wall with an impressive gateway on the east (**Plates 11.2 - 11.3**). The structure is situated on high ground on the western side of a big tank. Four slender corner towers were built at each corner of the boundary wall. The gateway was formed with due importance giving the feel of a separate architectural entity. The gateway was given a two storey height with pillared kiosk and a rectangular verandah (**Plate 11.4**) which can be approached through a small staircase on the northern side. It can be assumed there was a similar staircase on the southern side to maintain symmetry. The cupola of the kiosk is highlighted with a finial and flanked by eight slim turrets or *Guldasta*. Also the base of the kiosk is bordered with flimsy and weak merlon projection. Four blind kiosks can be seen on the four corners of the rectangular verandah. Projected with a low height on the north and south two slim corner turrets

on the exterior and two embedded corner turrets in the interior can also be seen. The multi cusped arched entrance is set in the middle of the gateway wall with an Arabic inscription set on top of it. The flanking walls of entry gate are relieved with three arched alcoves on each side. The extended boundary wall is again relieved with comparatively larger alcoves adorned with floral and geometric lines. The parapet wall of the first storey is relatively plain. But the cornice of the second storey is decorated with moulding and blind merlons. It has to be noted that the exterior of the gateway house is encased with Colonial period *Chini-tikri* (fragmented Chinese porcelain) work with floral designs, geometric designs, flowering plants, vase with flowers, etc. A perforated geometric pattern can be seen on the baluster or rail of the balcony which is signature of colonial period design. The interior wall of the gateway is relatively plain and only plastered emboss designs of floral and vegetal motifs and celestial (moon and stars) were engraved on the surface wall. The most interesting feature of this interior part is the presence of Colonial engaged columns (**Plate 11.5**) set within the rectangular frame encasing the arched entrance (relatively wider two centred arch) of the gateway. Moreover; slender balustrade columns were used on the entrance archway's interior face.

Main Prayer Hall (Plates 11.41 & 11.42):

Brick built Bajra Shahi mosque is a typical three domed oblong shaped mosque. The prayer hall like any other Mughal mosques consists of three bays and a single aisle. It measures externally 16.46 m by 8.23 m (54' × 27') with a wall thickness of 1.28 m (4'2"). The eastern façade consists of three arched entrances (see **Plate 11.1**); with multi-cusped design and semi vault on the outer face (**Plate 11.7**). The central entrance and side entrances exhibit a pointed two centred arch at present. However previous record indicates that the side entrances are constructed in beam and lintel (trabeate) method. (See Abu Syed Ahmed: Photo of Bajra Mosque p: 176). Modern day wooden doors are attached with these entrances. The projection and size of the central arched entrance is comparatively larger and more prominent than the side entrances. The central arched entrance is 2.13 m high and 1.16m wide, side entrances are 1.89 m high and 1.08m wide. Northern and southern facade of the mosque has single arched openings (**Plate 11.8**); each openings measures 1.22 m in height and 0.76m in width. All three arched entrances and two side openings (**Plate 11.9**) are vertically bordered with a rectangular frame and octagonal turrets surpassing the parapet. Moreover; nook shaft design and side turrets of central arched entrance on both sides of the rectangular frame elaborated the presence of the central part of the façade. The rectangular frames are relieved with panels and alcove designs –a typical Mughal concept applied for surface decoration (**Plate 11.10**). The stone inscription of the mosque is also placed within a rectangular recess panel just above the central entrance. Similar treatment can be seen on the side entrances of northern and southern façade with rectangular frame, colonettes and panel designs on top. The apex and semi vault cusped arches are decorated with floral designs, fan designs, stars and leaf designs done on *Chini-Tikri*. The interior of side entrances of north and south wall exhibits (**Plate 11.11**) a similar rectangular

frame within which the multi cusped arched entrance is placed. The entire north and south wall is decorated with slightly recessed alcove design and ornate with floral and vegetal motifs done in plaster. The rectangular frame also exhibits inverted leaf design and ornamental merlon designs on the top.

Two side walls are also bordered by two additional octagonal turrets. A total number of turrets of the mosque are twenty (Six turrets on eastern facade, Six turrets on *qibla* wall, four turrets on northern wall and four turrets on southern wall). These octagonal turrets with *kalasa* base and merlon designs at the level of parapet wall are crowned with typical Mughal *Guldasta* motif (**Plate 11.12**).

Four octagonal corner towers with *kalasa* base (**Plate 11.13**) and merlon designs at the level of parapet wall extended over the horizontal parapet. These corner towers terminated into solid blind kiosks with cupolas having *kalasa* finials on top. The surface wall of the blind kiosks is decorated with semi-circular cusped arches which are bordered with slender colonettes. All corner towers have moulding at regular intervals and each interval is decorated by recessed rectangular panel containing blind arched. A slender moulding can also be seen beneath the kiosk which separated this unit from other parts of the corner tower.

Corresponding of the three arched entrances on the eastern wall, the *qibla* wall is internally relieved with three semicircular *mihirabs*. These *mihirabs* are indicated on the outside wall by rectangular projection which is bordered by octagonal turrets extended over the parapet. The projection and size of the central *mihirab* wall is comparatively larger (the shape is distorted due to faulty restoration work) and more prominent than the flanking ones and also bordered with nook shafts (**Plate 11.14**).

Above the roof, three domes are (**Plate 11.15**) set on octagonal drums. The central dome is comparatively larger than two side domes. All domes are crowned with inverted lotus and *kalasa* finials. The inverted lotus motif is pretty slender and relatively natural in comparison to other mosques of that period. The outer face of the horizontal parapet and the octagonal drums are decorated with rows of blind merlons. The blind merlons are very bold in shape (length and width) and also well proportionate with the length of the horizontal parapet. Two rows of moulding can be seen just below the horizontal parapet.

The interior prayer hall of the mosque is divided into three unequal bays by two slightly projected multi-cusped transverse or lateral arches 1.06m in width (**Plate 11.16**). The central bay is square in shape and bigger, while the side bays are rectangular and smaller. The phase of transition of the central dome in central square bay is achieved through four semi vaults on four corners and four other arched recesses in between these vaults. The semi vaults and arched recesses are bordered with multi cusped design (**Plate 11.17**). In case of the rectangular bays by constructing three archways (north/ south side bay, east and west wall), an arched recess on the side walls (north and south) a square space was created to fit in a circular dome (**Plate 11.18**). In

the process a pendentive and a vaulted space was achieved to bear the load of the relatively smaller domes. The shoulder of the central dome is decorated with the ceiling of the dome is currently painted with deep green colour which in reality screened the blind merlon design on the border of the dome.

The central *mihrab* is semi octagonal in shape and highlighted with plaster decoration. It is flanked by a frame (both sides) made out of *kalasa* motifs set vertically one upon another and topped by a slender turret with balustrade column design, *kalasa* and *shikhara* as pinnacle (**Plate 11.19**). The upper part of the central *mihrab* is emphasized with a row of blind merlons. The entire arrangement is set within an arched recess of the *qibla* wall. Side *mihrabs* (**Plates 11.20 and 11.21**) are probably semi octagonal (due to faulty restoration work of the original shape is lost) which measures 1.15m height and 0.78m width. Now-a-days these side *mihrabs* are used for storage purpose.

Originally the outer surface was plastered with lime mortar and powdered bricks. But during the last refurbishment of the mosque; the entire eastern façade of the mosque, corner towers, side turrets and three domes were covered with *Chini-tikri* design (**Plates 11.22a, 11.22b, 11.23a, 11.23b and 11.24**) which became a popular surface treatment material during the Colonial period. The side walls, *qibla* wall and the interior of the mosque were white washed. Most part of the interior wall was decorated with plaster decoration mostly floral and leaf designs, rope designs. The side arched openings on the eastern façade exhibits ‘Fan shaped design’ on the upper most corner of the spandrel along with floral and vegetal motif. On top of it star and flower motif were also appropriately incorporated. The mosque is in a fairly good state of preservation. At present it is a protected monument of the Department of Archaeology (GoB.).

Other Structures

The builder Aman Ullah, his brother Sana Ullah and their mother were buried in the south east corner within the mosque enclosure and a brick structure built over their graves (**Plate 11.25**). Another brick structure constructed as Imam’s Hujra (**Plate 11.26**) exists in the north-east corner of the enclosure which has a vaulted ceiling and externally a flat roof. The local mosque committee extended this structure by adding a room on the western side of it. Now-a-days it is used as mosque committee office room.

Nawabganj Shahi Mosque alias Matubi Mosque

About one kilometer north-west of Bajra Shahi mosque situated another historical mosque called Nawabganj Shahi Jami mosque (**Plate 11.27**). The mosque is locally known as the Matubi mosque (**Plates 11.28a-11.28b**). It is situated near Nawabganj bazar. The Dhaka-Noakhali highway passes through on its east. There is a large tank on the west side (**Plate 11.29**) and a canal of Dakatia river can be seen on the east side of the mosque.

According to the Farsi inscription (**Plate 11.30**) fixed above the central opening, one Muhammad Reza built this mosque in the name of Allah in the year 1221 Bangla Era (i.e., 1814-1815 CE). Another Farsi inscription engraved in cement plaster below the stone inscription records that this mosque was repaired second time by Mawlana Ahmed Allah Sahib in the year 1308 Bengali Era (i.e., 1901-02 CE) (Now missing).

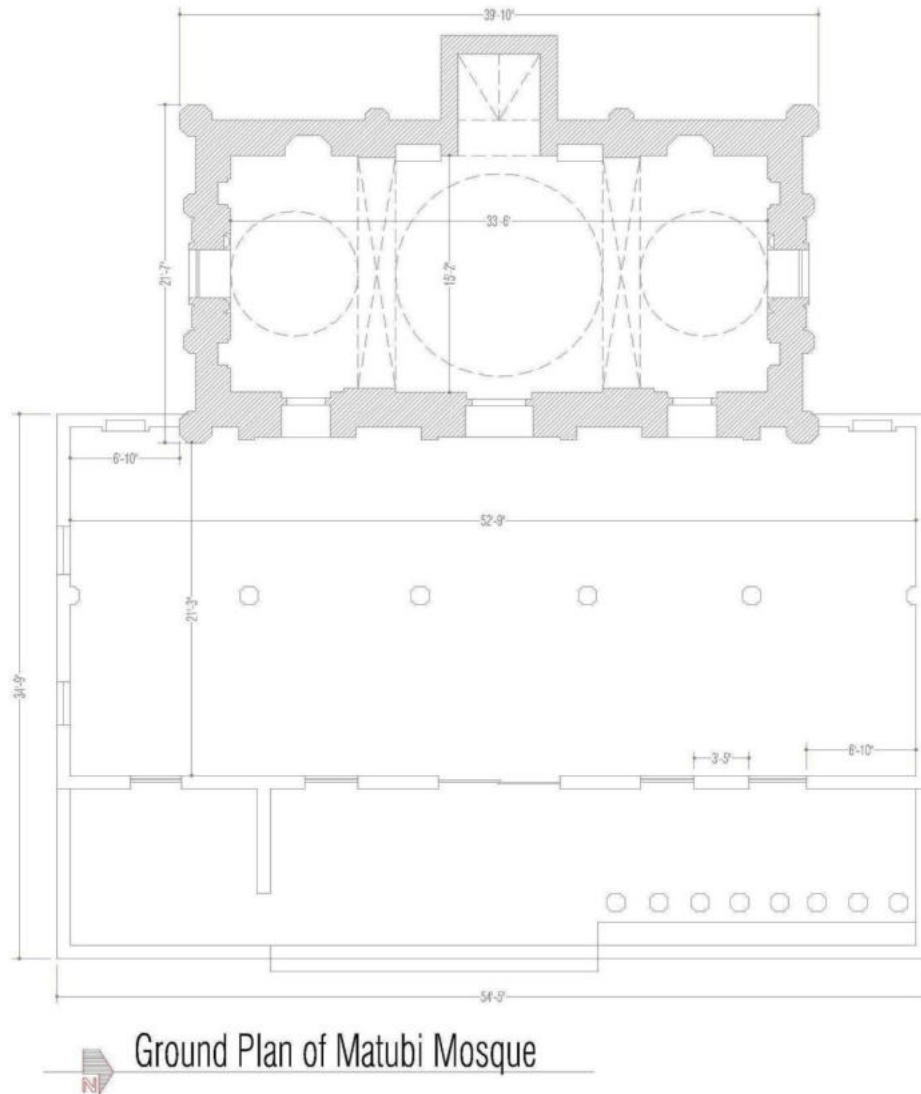


Plate 11.43: Ground plan of Matubi mosque.

Main Prayer Hall (Plate 11.43):

Built of brick and plaster the mosque is rectangular in plan. It measures externally 12.14 m by 6.59 m (39'10" × 21'7") and internally 10.21m by 4.62 (33'6" × 15'2") with a wall thickness of 0.84 m (2'9"). The original mosque has three arched openings on the eastern side which is

now entirely covered with modern day black and white tiles (**Plate 11.31**). The original features of the arches are lost. The projection and size of the central opening is comparatively larger and more prominent than the flanking openings. The north and south side arched opening measures (1.22 m × 0.76 m). At present these openings are blocked with iron grills, which gave them a form of window (**Plate 11.32**). The central opening, side openings on the eastern side and openings on the northern and southern side were originally projected to highlight the openings of the facades and bordered with octagonal turrets on both sides. Due to bad restoration original features were entirely destroyed. The total number of turrets of the mosque is eight (two turrets on eastern facade, two turrets on *qibla* wall, two turrets on northern wall and two turrets on southern wall). The bordering turrets with *kalasa* base are raised above the horizontal parapet and terminated into small cupolas with finials.

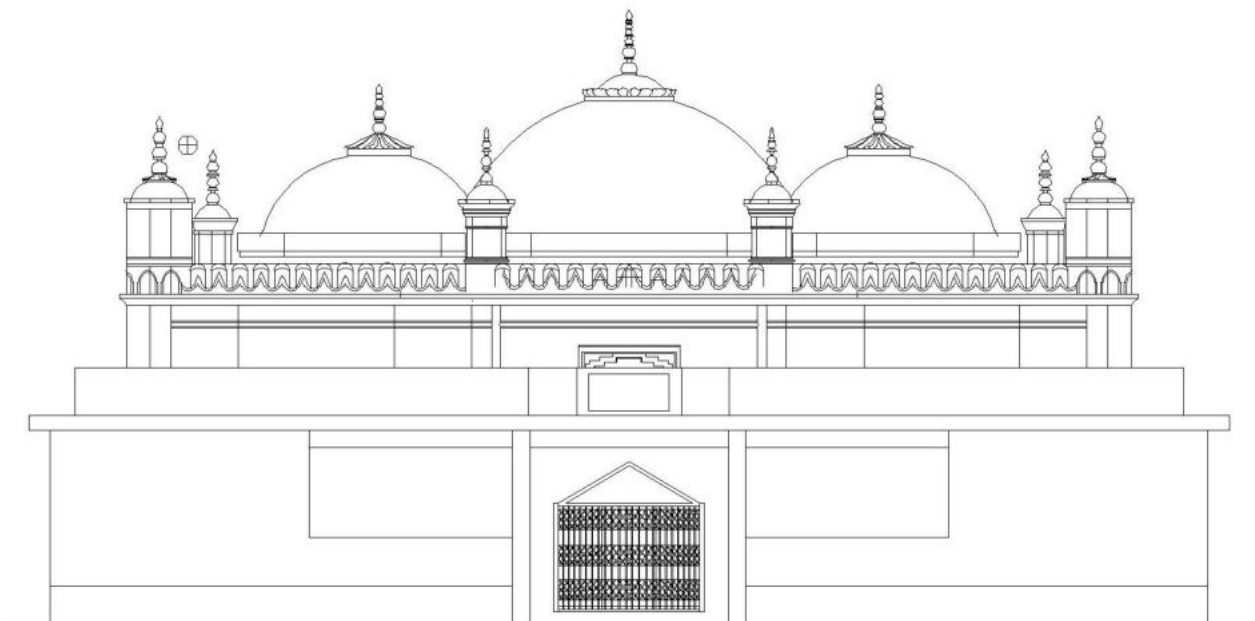


Plate 11.44: Front Elevation of Matubi mosque.

The stone inscription fixed above the central opening is most probably a pedestal of a life size icon. The pedestal with its usual projection was reused by the later generation and most probably the pedestal was detached from the icon at some point of abandonment. The lower border of the pedestal bears flower motif which is most probably a later addition. Four octagonal corner towers (**Plate 11.33**) are carried over the horizontal parapet and terminated into blind kiosks with cupolas having finials as terminating point (**Plate 11.34**). All corner towers have moulding at regular intervals. The surface wall of the blind kiosks are decorated with semi-circular cusped arch placed on slender colonettes and topped with rectangular panel design.

Corresponding to the three frontal openings, the *qibla* wall (**Plates 11.35a, 11.35b, 11.35c and 11.35d**) is internally relieved with three *mihhrabs*. The space of the central *mihhrab* is indicated outside the wall by a semicircular projected and bordered by octagonal turrets with *kalasa* base. It is interesting to note that the wall was probably reconstructed or refurbished. When a person looks at the tri-partition of outer wall one will see the central bay containing the principal *mihhrab* is relatively narrow in comparison to the flanking bays. This is probably an unintentional fault during the repair work of the mosque. Inside the prayer hall the central bay is relatively wider and infact the flanking bays are quite narrow and elongated (**Plates 11.36a-11.36b**). The central *mihhrab* of this mosque is largely reconstructed in recent times. Flanking *mihhrabs* are semi octagonal in shape which measures 1.15 m in height and 0.67 m in width. In the space on top of the side *mihhrabs* some kind of geometric floral design and a crudely shaped recessed rectangular panel can be noticed.

All three openings and side openings are adorned with a rectangular frame which is supported by balustrade columns. In the interior facing a slightly ogee shape can be noticed in the archways.

The interior wall of the northern and southern sides contains two blind niches which are placed within a recess rectangular panel. Except for the side *mihhrabs*, side openings on the frontal side and side opening on the northern and southern side; the *qibla* wall which encases the central *mihhrab* is relieved with arched alcoves with multi cusped design, similar feature can be seen in the interior of eastern wall, in the semi vaulted arches of the side bays.

The interior prayer hall (**Plate 11.37**) of the mosque is divided into three unequal bays by two slightly projected transverse arches, semicircular in shape. The central bay is square, while the side bays are rectangular. The central dome is comparatively larger than the side domes.

The phase of transition of the central dome of the central bay was achieved through semi vaulted arch on all four corners. The Semi vaults are further elaborated with cusped design (**Plates 11.38a-11.38b**). The interior neckline of the central dome is decorated with eight shallow blind alcoves. A rope design can be seen on the edge of the drum. The apex of the domed ceiling is highlighted with a rosette design. The rectangular side bays are covered with two comparatively smaller domes (**Plate 11.39**). The phase of transition of the smaller domes is achieved by squinch method with a semi vault on each corner. The ceiling of the dome exhibits the usual rope design on the border and rosette design in the centre.

The prayer hall is covered by three wide domes (**Plate 11.40**), the central one being relatively larger than the flanking ones. All domes are placed on octagonal drums; crowned with inverted lotus and *kalasa* finials. The *kalasa* or water pots of the finials are quite well defined but the inverted lotus design is more vertical, pointed and abstract. The naturalism is lost here. Ornamental and slightly projected blind merlons can be seen on the horizontal parapet. The

blind merlons are not very bold in shape (length and width) rather indicates a weak and flimsy projection however it is well proportionate with the length of the horizontal parapet. The shape of merlons were distorted due to unscientific restoration. Two rows of moulding can be seen just below the horizontal parapet.

Keeping the main prayer chamber intact, horizontal expansion in the form of pillared hall was constructed on the east so that more people can be accommodated. This mosque is in a good state of preservation due to the series of repair works but due to unprofessional and unplanned restoration work many interesting features of the mosque are lost forever.

Observation:

Bajra Shai mosque was renovated in Colonial period and to add grandiosity, *Chini-tikri* was used to cover the eastern façade of the mosque along with the frontal corner towers, cupolas of back corner tower, *guldastas* of back turrets. The eastern gateway was also covered with similar element. In design principle floral and geometric motifs were used as the main theme with arched alcoves. Most prominent was the flower vase with flowers splaying out of the vase. A faint resemblance with the pietradoura and polychrome designs of Itmat-ud-Duala's tomb in Agra can be found. Vase and flower design executed in form jali design can be seen in the monument called *Bibi-Ka-Maqbara* in 1660 CE. This theme was applied in the *Chini-tikri* of the mosque's wall.

The gateway is an interesting feature of the mosque. The gateway was built in an asymmetric order. It accommodates stairs only on the north side and continuation of a plain boundary wall on the south. Since it is a regional production, Mughal symmetry was not maintained by the artisans. In this two storey gateway arrangement one can see the addition of kiosk and a surrounding balcony. The kiosk richly adorned with turrets and blind alcoves is an inspiration from Mughal architecture. In later phase it was adorned with *Chini-tikri* with semicircular blind arches, cusped arches, lozenge design and merlon designs.

The length and width of Bajra Shahi mosque is relatively larger than the provincial Mughal mosques. The artisans did not follow the standard scale and proportion. The prayer hall is larger in length but disproportionate in terms of its width. Perhaps the length was increased to fit in the lateral semicircular cusped arches (slightly pointed in the apex) to install the domes. The idea was probably to construct wider central dome. However; in reality the space of the bays was narrowed down as a result they could not produce perfect symmetrical semi vaults to bear the load of a wider dome in the centre. In the case of the side domes wide arched design on the north, south, west and east side walls could not achieve the desired height, to solve this problem another smaller archway on the east and west wall and arched recess was constructed to bear the load of the side domes. This local technology to install a dome can be credited to the local crafts man. From outside one can see the finished and perfect central dome and side

domes. Efficiency of artisans can also be observed in the execution of inverted lotus, *kalasa* finial and *guldasta* motifs. The impression of Bengal Mughal provincial style was neatly copied here.

The interior of the *mihrab* wall currently exhibiting a semicircular arch is a result of restoration work however; the semi octagonal alcove of Mughal *mihrab* is still visible. The flanking *mihrabs* though reused for storage purpose still retains the semi octagonal shape. The central *mihrab* is bordered with an interesting design. Instead of the traditional rectangular panel; a column of *Kalasa* motif with lotus design and a pinnacle on top flanks the central *mihrab*. The merlon design on top of the central *mihrab* has clear resemblance with Mughal merlon (three folds in the shape of a leaf) design.

The interior of the prayer hall surface is decorated with plaster design. The theme of the decoration is floral and vegetal motifs along with four centred cusped arched panels. The idea is Mughal but the motifs were probably redone during the Colonial period. This type of stucco plaster design (fully restored and altered) can be seen in Gore Shahi Mosque in Dhaka (1726) although geometric design dominated that decoration. Designs can be also be seen on the rectangular recessed panel of the interior wall on top of the entrance doors. The original design is almost invisible due to modern day plaster work. The panel is Mughal design with its two ends shaped in the form of a flower and design on its surface indicate floral and vegetal motif.

Matubi Mosque as mentioned earlier was commissioned by a local administrative officer who used to work under the local Talukqdar. It was constructed 73 years after Bajra Shahi mosque. The central political power was then in the hands of East India company. This region was basically revenue generating unit for the company authority which was collected by the local Talukqdars or Zamindars. As a result mosque architecture did not receive any sort of central or royal patronization from the centre.

In terms of scale Matubi took an attempt to follow the Mughal measurement and design of single aisle and three bays structure. As seen earlier a local or regional style (Mughal prototype) already developed in Bajra Shahi Mosque, Matubi mosque also tried to follow that style. Due to lack of skilled craftsman and artisan interior prayer hall of Matubi mosque could not exhibit the space organization properly. Furthermore the *qibla* wall in the exterior does not exhibit the tri-partition properly. The central bay generally appears to be narrower than the flanking bays in the exterior. But inside the side bays are narrower than the central bay.

Consequently, while placing the side domes the craftsman had to come up with a new technique. They tried to follow the style of Bajra Shahi mosque but in case of side domes they could not apply it. Apart from the lateral or transverse arch, two thick archways like those of Bajra mosque were constructed on the east and west wall. The north and south wall is relatively straight up to a certain height, then in the phase of transition area (shoulder area of dome) in total four semi vaults with a huge mass was constructed to achieve the desired angles. In this crude manner the phase of transition was achieved to place the side domes.

In case of central bay the artisans constructed vertical wall up to a certain height after accommodating the semicircular arch and then constructed semi vaults in the shoulder level and blind alcoves on the corners to install the dome. The elongated shoulder or drum was hidden outside by constructing high façade walls. The parapet wall with slim ornamental merlon design (badly restored) skillfully concealed the long shoulder. Thus the exterior façade of the mosque was skillfully executed.

Due to major restoration in the exterior eastern façade and expansion, the original feature of the mosque is very hard to identify. Also the arched entrance of the exterior is totally gone. Only some features are visible in the interior wall. The interior wall of the pointed two centred arched entrance is bordered with sleek rectangular panel and the arches rest on balustrade shape columns. The typical fan design in spandrel was further elaborated with local palm leaf hand fan. The original rosette design on top of the apex is highlighted with a half crescent design. The central *mihrab* was totally renovated and the original *mihrab* was pushed back towards west wall. It was probably done to fit in the Imam within the central *mihrab* thus making space for prayers of common people. One can see how crudely the cusped arched design encircling the central *mihrab* was cut to utilize space.

Conclusion:

Both mosques are termed as Shahi mosque (mosque constructed with the patronization of Badshah) but in reality only the term Shahi or royal was borrowed by the local patrons. Bajra Shahi mosque is under the protection of department of Archaeology of Bangladesh but unfortunately Matubi mosque was already in its altered shape. If not unscientifically renovated by local authority, Matubi mosque could be a great example of mosque architecture in the late mediaeval period.

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