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# Community Mosque — A Symbol of Society

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## Introduction

*Masjid* or Mosque — an emblem of religious fervour and a veritable testimony of fraternal unity and solidarity of Muslim Ummah brings forth in a Muslim a host of feelings harmonising with his religious, social, communal and cultural aspirations. From the explicit words of our Prophet, “The earth has been created for me as a *masjid* and a place of purity, and whatever man from my Ummah finds himself in need of prayer, let him pray” (anywhere)<sup>1</sup> it is obvious that a devout Muslim does not require a defined space or structure for divine worship since the whole earth is his prayer house. Yet we see that from time immemorial man throughout the Muslim world has painstakingly erected innumerable mosques. The reason is that from the very inception, mosques have been looked upon not merely as congregational prayer places but as a nucleus of other socio-cultural aspects, and a symbol of identity, strength, peace and justice.

It is evident that wherever Muslims went, they erected mosques to meet the fundamental religious requirements i.e. congregational prayers five times a day. In the very early days, the Prophet himself had used mosques to address his followers and to give sermons on spiritual uplift and socio-political aspects of life<sup>2</sup>. Thus the mosque became the symbol and the central feature of the Islamic way of life and it formed an inseparable part of their settlement in the course of time<sup>3</sup>. Irrespective of country and culture the norm set by the Prophet was ardently followed in all the Muslim countries of the world.

A community in the course of its development collects signs and symbols, belief, superstition, ritual and religion which find expression through a range of socio-religious and cultural institutions both at collective and individual levels<sup>4</sup>. Carl Jung in “Man and His Symbols” defined symbol as something which possesses specific connotation in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning<sup>5</sup>. Malinowski maintained that the symbol is the conditional stimulus

which is linked up with a response in behaviour only by the process of conditioning, and symbolism — ‘the development of conventional art for the coordination of conventional human behaviour’<sup>6</sup>. The mosque being one such symbol provides an umbrella under which people of common belief may unite and interact for concerted human activity, acting as a catalyser to develop community spirit. The purpose and aim of mosque development is, therefore, multi-dimensional. It promotes collective strength, defines hierarchy and allegiance, resolves conflicts within the community, strives for social cohesion, imparts restrictions and controls of human behaviour and influences human dependence on and belief in the Almighty through spiritual enlightenment.

Mosques, all over the world bear glowing testimony to the prosperous Muslim and become the Islamic Socio-Cultural Centre for the community or the communities they serve. In that perspective all mosques can be termed as ‘Community Mosques’. In this paper, however, the term ‘Community Mosque’ has been applied to denote a specific mosque typology in the context of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The large number of mosques present in Dhaka, estimated to be about 1,907<sup>7</sup>, has earned the city the name ‘City of Mosques’<sup>8</sup>. The Department of Architecture of BUET had categorised the mosques into four groups<sup>9</sup>, being:

THE EARLY MOSQUE, built by the Muslim rulers and about three to four hundred years old.

THE INTERMEDIATE MOSQUE (GROUP I), built by rich and influential individuals of different localities of Old Dhaka.

THE INTERMEDIATE MOSQUE (GROUP II), built by inhabitants of different localities in their own area.

THE NEW MOSQUE, designed by trained architects.

It is the third of these, i.e. INTERMEDIATE (GROUP II), which is the topic of study in this paper and the term ‘Community Mosque’ is used to refer to them.

The study is based on the author’s research as well as on an empirical survey of a randomly selected twenty

five mosques in various communities of Dhaka by the second year students of architecture, BUET, under the supervision and guidance of the authors. A great diversity was observed in the design, form, use of material and ornamentation of the community mosques. This indicates a wide range of variations from community to community in the perception of mosque architecture. As such though each mosque follows a common matrix in its development pattern the end results are always different. Moreover, as the community in most cases directly participate in the decision making for design, organisation and management of such mosques, significant information regarding 'popular architecture' can be obtained from the community mosques. These mosques have however so far been ignored as a topic of study, not being considered a significant piece of architecture. The purpose of this paper is two-fold; firstly, to identify the growth pattern and architectural characteristics of community mosques and secondly, the response of the community mosque vis-a-vis the community and people at large.

### Growth of community mosque

The growth of innumerable community mosques in Dhaka City may indicate the scarcity of congregational prayer space. But the existence of more than one mosque within the walking distance of another reveals the dedication of devout Muslims in mosque building activities. Though such activities in the past were confined to individuals only, such as rulers or influential nobles, the concept of community mosque has now provided the public with the opportunity to share the pride and sense of achievement of mosque building among a greater number of people.

There is also a general notion that the conception and growth of community mosques is a relatively recent phenomenon. The reason is that after independence (1974 onwards) a great number of mosques came into limelight with newly constructed tall soaring *minars* and elaborate ornamentation as funds were available through the informal foreign donation. Many of the old mosques of Dhaka however ranging from 50 to 150 years in age started as community mosques. For example, construction of Baitul-Noor-Jam-i-Masjid, Dholaikhal (1860-70 A.D.) and Jam-i-Masjid, Azimpur (1885 A.D.) initially began as small prayer halls with the financing and patronage of wealthy individuals, Haji Md. Yousuf and Nawab Salimullah respectively for the convenience of their particular communities. The subsequent stages of their growth, development and expansion was done by their community people.

It may be seen that over the years each community mosque has developed in its own way, yet a common

growth pattern can be traced to all community mosques from the survey done. It is evident that once the land is available for the mosque, the concerned community then takes up all the responsibilities of constructing and developing it on that land. In most cases the land is donated by an individual family or a group of people. For example, Zinda Bahar Masjid, Zinda Bahar; Tariquea Jam-i-Mosque, Monipuripara; Pyara Bag Jam-i-Masjid, Mog Bazar; Amin Bag Jam-i-Mosque, Amin Bag. Another means to obtain land is to construct a rudimentary makeshift structure for prayer on an abandoned or unused government or disputed plot and subsequently on repeated appeals and persistent efforts of the people, the concerned authority allocates the land for future construction of permanent mosque, since there is an unwritten law that once a mosque is built on a site it cannot be removed from that space. Examples of this are Dhanmondi Residential Area mosque and Tejgaon Station mosque. There is yet another type which develops along with a popular shrine or tomb (Mazar). Examples of such mosques are Motijheel Colony Jam-i-Mosque besides the tomb of Hazrat Peer Jangee Shah and Syed Shah Jam-i-Masjid at Dhakeswari, adjacent to the tomb of Syed Shah.

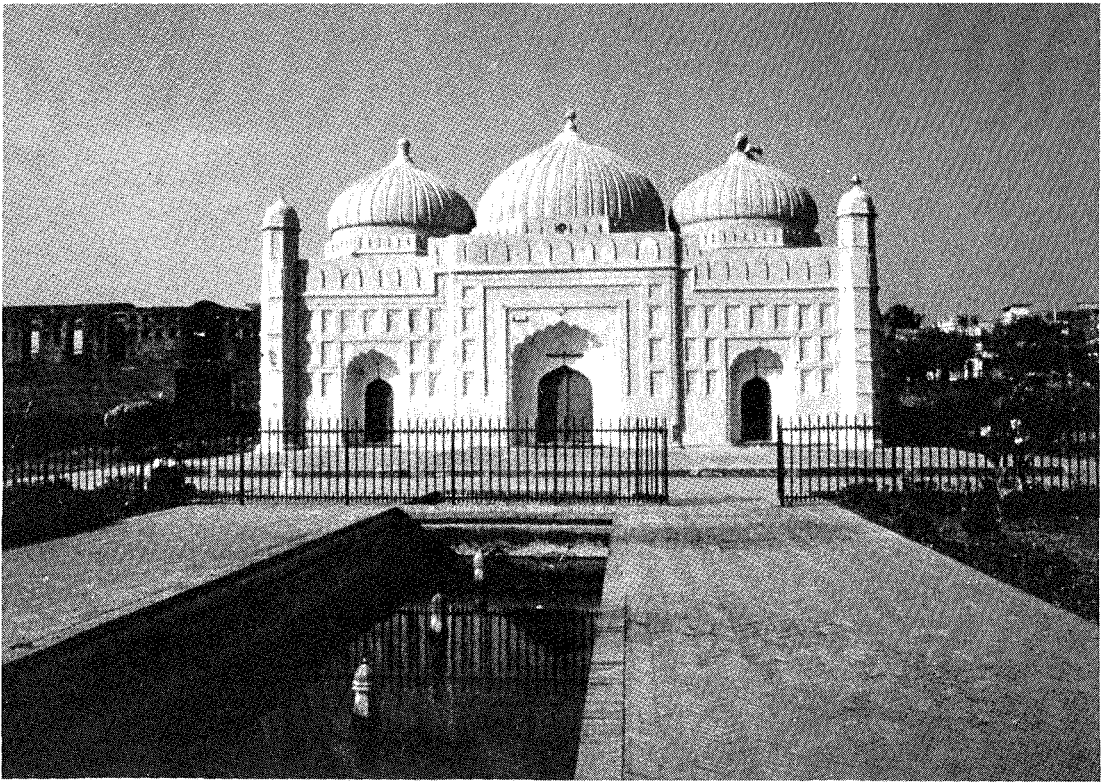
There may be some other isolated instances of growth but they cannot be grouped under an identifiable category.

### Origin of form

The abode of the Holy Prophet consisting of *sahn*, *liwan*, *qibla*, *mimber* and *mihrab* undoubtedly provided a spiritual guideline of form and spatial organisation for all later mosque architecture. Within the guidelines ordained, however, enormous flexibility prevailed to form the ultimate structure of an individual mosque. This flexibility, in fact, has been used to its best in community mosque architecture which is evident in the diversity of their design and spatial organisation.

A retrospective look at traditional pre-Mughal mosques shows the existence of four fixed patterns: (a) the vault- and dome type; (b) the square domed type; (c) the ablong multi-domed type; (d) the curvilinear type<sup>10</sup>. Of the old surviving mosques in the city of Dhaka, the Mosque of Binat Bibi of Narinda (1457) is an example of the square domed type, having a cubical prayer chamber with a dome placed flatly on the roof, octagonal corner *minars*, *mihrab* projected on the western wall and simple arched opening on three sides<sup>11</sup>.

In the words of Mortimer Wheeler, "The arrival of the Mughal did not at once make itself felt in architectural form, but by the middle of the 17th century something approaching a standard imperial pattern had



Form of typical Mughal mosque at Lalbagh Fort, Dhaka

begun to emerge in the architecture of the vice regal capital at Dhaka<sup>12</sup>. In the Mughal period a number of mosques were erected in Dhaka including Sat Masjid (1680), Lalbagh Mosque (1679), Mosque of Haji Khanaja Shahbaz (1679), Mohammad Mridha Mosque (1706). Each of these demonstrates the principal Mughal style of architecture characterised by three domes over a rectangular hall with the facade composed of panels, pierced with triple archways — the central archway is slightly bigger, in proportion with the central dome. The central archway is sometimes projected and the corner towers are crowned with plastered kiosks<sup>13</sup>.

### Physical organisation

In the context of India, Conde described the mosque thus. "It is of various and almost any shape. It is in fact a wall; and in poorer villages, the people dig a ditch, white wash it, ornament it with flowers and convert it into a mosque"<sup>14</sup>. In the context of Bangladesh it begins with a shelter where a roof is an essential element for climatic reasons.

The nucleus of the generic pattern of community

mosque development, is a simple rectangular shelter having a solid wall on the west, the direction of *qibla*. The rectangular chamber is elongated in the north-south direction with shorter walls usually pierced with windows. The eastern wall having one door in line with the central axis gives access to the chamber. In cases of more than one door, the number is always uneven to provide one door definitely at the centre of the wall. At the very initial stage the mosque premises remain unidentified and there is no definite system of placing the mosque structure. Sometimes it may be placed at the centre of the plot on which it stands and sometimes its western wall is placed right on the western boundary. However, the general tendency is to keep more space on the eastern side in order to accommodate large congregational prayer. The inevitable subsequent extension is a verandah along the eastern wall providing both a transitional space between the mosque proper and outside and at the same time additional prayer space if needed. Gradually some temporary structures come into view, loosely built within the mosque premises to cater to some immediate needs like ablution space, toilet and Hujra Khana (Imam's Quarter). Similarly no specific relation is found between the approach from the road and placement of mosque structure.



*Layout of Mughal Mosque, Lalbagh Fort, Dhaka*

Mosque designs perfected in North India during the Mughals, have a strong east-west axis starting at the main entrance gate moving through the central fountain of the *sahn*, the entrance portal of the main sanctuary, the centre of the main dome and finally ending in the *mihrab*. A secondary axis developed by two gate houses on the north and south intersects the main axis at the centre of the fountain. The idea was to bring people into the mosque through a designed sequence of experience. These mosques were ambitious projects whose surrounding developments could be modified according to the design requirements of the mosque. In the provincial Mughal style the mosque was one composite building structure providing access mainly from the eastern facade. So the ideal site condition for a mosque would be a plot extended in an east-west direction with reasonable width having the provision of access from the east to fit the perceived model.

For community mosques there is hardly any scope of site selection and interestingly enough there is no conscious effort in design to drive all people along the central axis through the sequence of approach, unless it happens as a matter of chance. The main entry to the community mosque is primarily determined by the importance of the adjacent roads to the premises.

Even in Baitul Mukarram, one of the landmarks as well as the largest designed mosque in the city, the main entry is not along the main axis but from the south, that is along the Bangabandhu Avenue.

When substantial physical development takes place increasing need for identity, self expression and supremacy over the surrounding environment is felt. A *minar* is then added. At the same time, for further construction and maintenance, shop construction is important as part of the mosque complex to provide it with a permanent source of income. This pattern of association of religion and commerce is not peculiar to community mosques alone, for by tradition, there is a linkage between bazar and mosque, one is complementary to the other. A mosque gets financial security from a bazar and the bazar accrues psycho-religious support for flourishing business from the mosque. The largest mosque in the city Baitul Mukarram and its shopping arcades shows the influence of the same pattern in a professionally designed development.

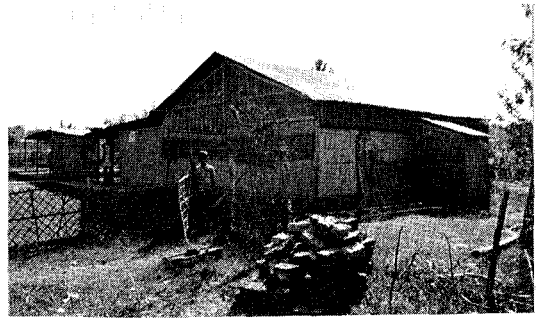
There are numerous other examples of simultaneous growth of mosque and bazar in the Old Dhaka. This pattern is symbolic to the fact that people do not consider religion as an isolated phenomenon, but as an integrated part of their daily life and activity.

### Classification and phases of development

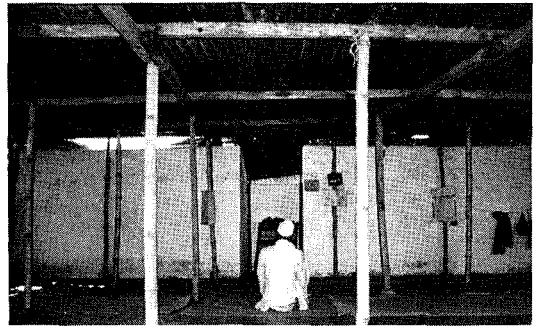
Most of the traditional mosques, with very few exceptions, are single storeyed, designed as a composite whole with or without a verandah in a free relation with the surroundings. They do not require *minars* as a symbol. In the community mosques, structures are loosely built along with the only distinctive element of identity — *minar*, but fairly integrated with the surrounding developments. Traditional mosques are generally classified according to their form and design. For community mosques such classification is indeed difficult as the shape and form of community mosques are greatly influenced by the available site and other constraints. All mosques surveyed show a fairly uniform sequence of development which can be classified into three phases e.g. PRIMARY, INTERMEDIATE and FINAL Phases.

**PRIMARY PHASE.** In most cases the mosque is started with a simple shelter of temporary or semi-permanent nature with the exception of some small permanent structures having stark simplicity. This phase may undergo a number of expansions of temporary nature but actually serves as a real scale study for the design of the intermediate phase.

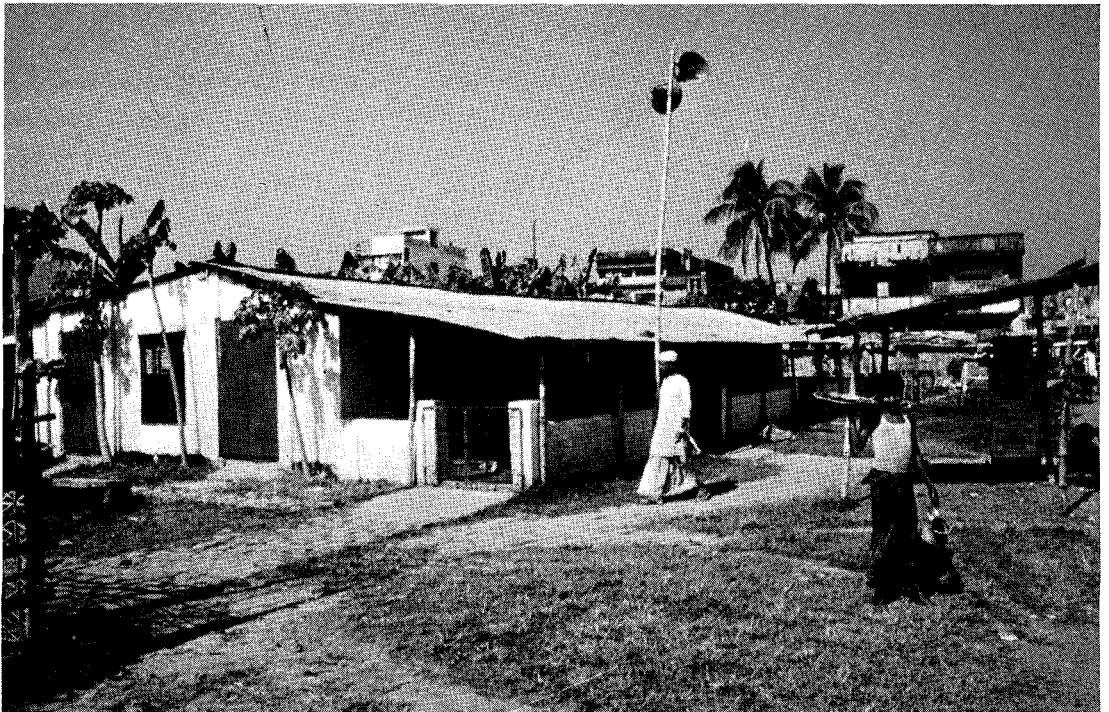
**INTERMEDIATE PHASE.** A development plan is usually drawn up and carried out in a desired manner. It usually involves substantial reorganisation and restructuring of the forms, spaces and activities. Provisions are made in foundations for vertical



*In its primary phase, mosque at Mirpur.*



*Mihrab facade in its primary phase, mosque at Kamlapur.*

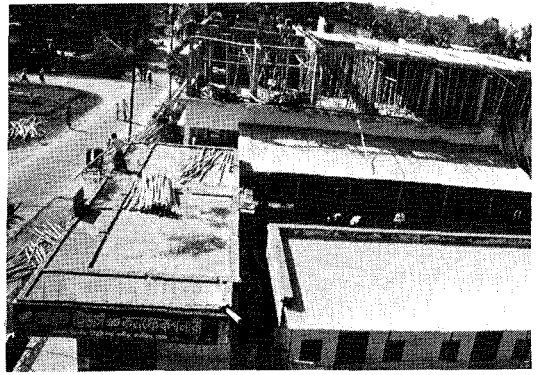


*In transition from first to second phase, mosque at Muhammadpur*

expansion; this is why most of the community mosques in their intermediate phases have flat roofs. The majority of mosques studied here, are at present in their intermediate phases of development. This phase can take a long span of time having subsidiary stages within it with perspective for development in the final phase. A few identifying symbols of mosque architecture like kiosks at the corners, arched openings as the entrance and windows and decorative grills, are added and sometimes ornamented with costly terrazzo and glazed tiles in the interior.

**FINAL PHASE.** This is marked by the desire for identity and supremacy over the surrounding structures and the addition of a tall minaret is an essential part of the final development. A dome is added in some cases to delineate the roof and to define the ultimate shape of the structure and decorative works are applied both inside and outside to give a complete look.

The mosque at Khilgaon Chowdhury Para built in the first quarter of this century on the outskirts of Dhaka City is considered to be the oldest mosque in New Dhaka. This mosque had its beginning from a 'Bangla Ghar' the outhouse of a rural dwelling of a local leader. The structure was built with mud and thus called 'Matir Masjid' (Mosque of mud) a name people still prefer to use. In the course of time as the number of devotees increased an extension verandah of a temporary nature was added and community participation began right from this stage.



*In its second phase of development, Matir Masjid, Khilgaon Chowdhury Para.*



*Ablu-tion area, in its second phase of development, Matir Masjid, Khilgaon Chowdhury Para*

In the next stage the owner donated the land and shifted his house. The original structure was then dismantled and rebuilt in the same manner placing the structure towards the west to create ample space on the east for large congregational prayer. This time a *mihrab* was added with a tin-roofed main hall and a toilet within the premises. The existing ditch was developed with pucca steps for ablution. This development took place during the 1950's.

The following decade was marked by the defined compound with a bamboo fence, a tube-well, shelter for the Imam and an entry point on the east.

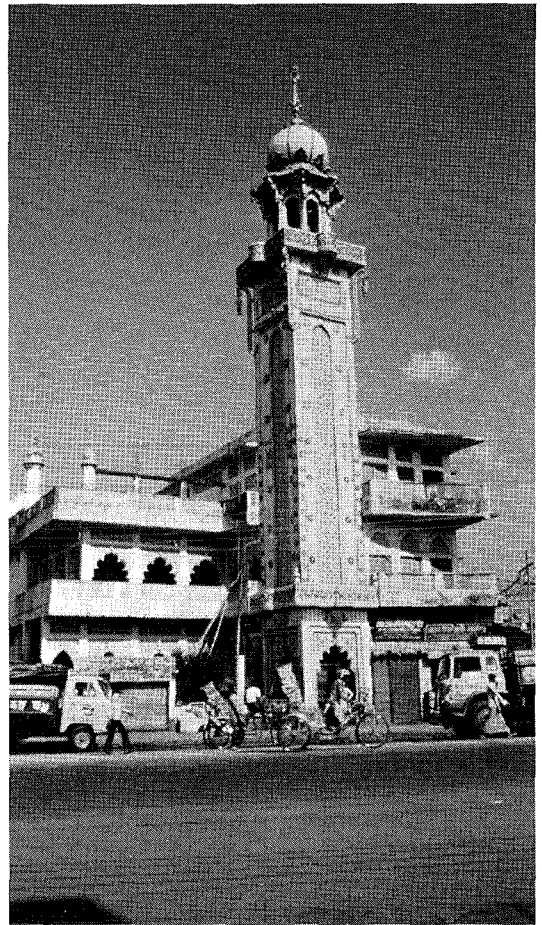
Conspicuous change in form, material and layout plan in 1970's can be considered as the beginning of the intermediate phase of development of the mosque. The mosque proper was enlarged substantially with masonry construction and reinforced concrete roof. New additions comprised of an improved terrazzo floor, decorative iron grilles in windows, a pucca tank for ablution and housing for the mosque-staff. For a constant source of income, shops were designed on the road front and bachelor accommodation (Mess) arose within the premises.

At the beginning of 1980 another verandah was added and the original one was merged with the main prayer hall. The remaining open area was finished with patent stone developed as *sahn*. At this stage all other secondary structures were rebuilt with permanent materials and a stone room was added by the side of the *mihrab*.

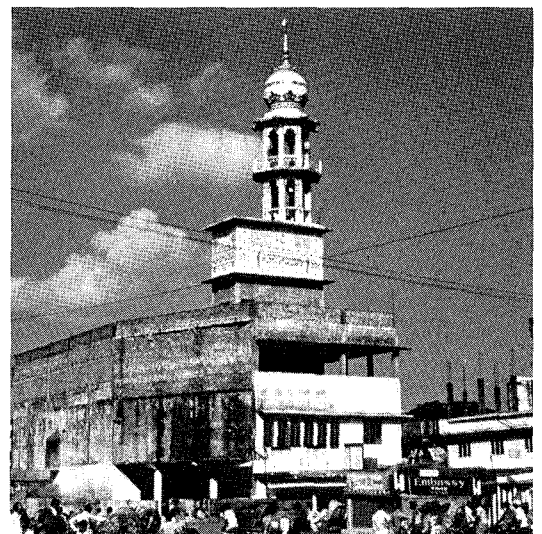
Substantial physical development led to the desire to earmark it as a mosque and efforts were made to add some external decorative features such as *cupolas* and turrets at the four corners of the main structure. Glazed tile decoration to emphasise the *mihrab*, doors and windows was added to the interior.

It is quite evident that once the mosque committee decides the plans for development, resource mobilisation from the community starts automatically and comes in all forms e.g. labour, material and money. Donations from the people are considered to be the primary source of funds other than the regular subscription made by the community members and rents from shops, if any, for a permanent source of income. The development plan may also include additional facilities like *madrassah*, library and orphanage attached to the mosque.

Towards the end of the intermediate phase the entire premises may turn into a built-up area leaving vertical expansion as the only possibility for the future. The upper floor is then punched above the *mihrab* area to keep continuity with the hall on the ground floor. Azimpur Jam-i-Mosque, Azimpur; Baitul Noor Jam-i-Masjid, Old Dhaka; Masjid-e-Baitul Mamur, Dhanmondi, Zinda Bahar Jam-i-Mosque, Zinda



Extensive minar decoration of final phase, Baitul Noor Jam-i-Masjid, Goal Ghat Lane, Old Dhaka



Oddly placed minar on roof top, Baitus Sajud Jam-i-Masjid, Moghbazar

Bahar, are all examples where the main mosque together with its ancillary activities forms a consolidated mass.

The addition of a gate structure or a minaret marks the beginning of the final phase. These two elements are in most cases designed as an after thought and almost never located in suitable places within the total complex in terms of architectural composition. *Minars* sometimes springing from the roof, are visually completely isolated from the remaining structure or sometimes are located right beside the entry where usually little space had been left in earlier plans

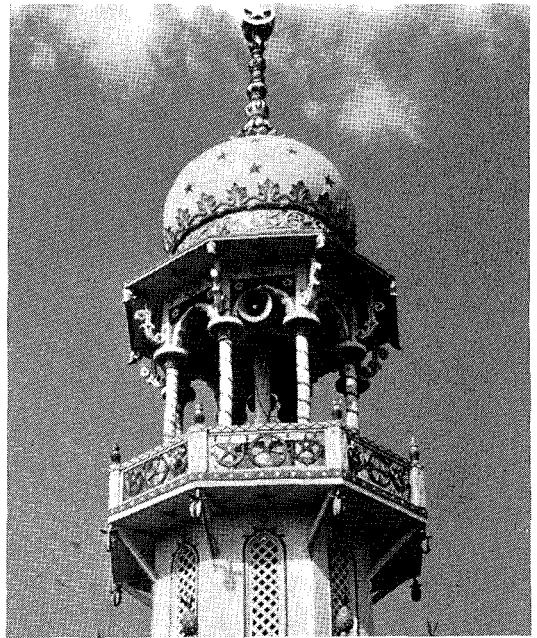
The application of decorative art intensifies at the final stage. Geometric and formal designs with calligraphic patterns are very common. Crescent, star and different kinds of fruits with paint, mosaic, glazed tiles and broken glasses are extensively used in compositions

It is interesting to find out the source of decorative design, facade treatment and symbolism associated with community mosque. Intricately detailed traditional mosques serve as the quarry for decorative inspirations and at the same time professionally designed modern mosques with their streamline design and clarity of formal expression influence the facade treatment of community mosques. In fact we find a fusion of the traditional decorative features with modern light and slender construction techniques.

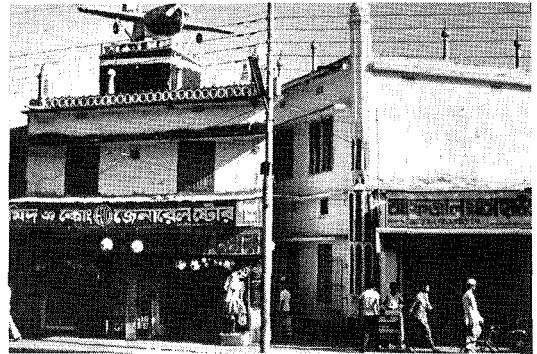
Our survey shows that there is a definite order of preference for decoration starting from the *mihrab*, followed by the entry door panels, columns and so forth. Externally, preference is from *minar* to entry gate and finally the main mosque building. As the shops, an integral part of community mosques, are placed at the road front the overall facade treatment shows a fusion of local commercial art and Islamic design.

Curiously enough, sometimes the symbols used in decoration convey different meanings. The popular symbolic interpretation of the model of an aeroplane placed on the minaret of 'Aeroplane Mosque' at New Market is that it is a vehicle to heaven, whereas it was the desire of the local people to symbolise the modern era through the model of an aeroplane as they believed that there was an air-field in the Second World War where the mosque stands today. The *minar* of Zinda Bahar Jam-i-Masjid extensively decorated with fruit motifs appears to have symbolised heaven. Nonetheless, the purpose was to satisfy the donor who was a fresh-fruit dealer and donated generously for the mosque.

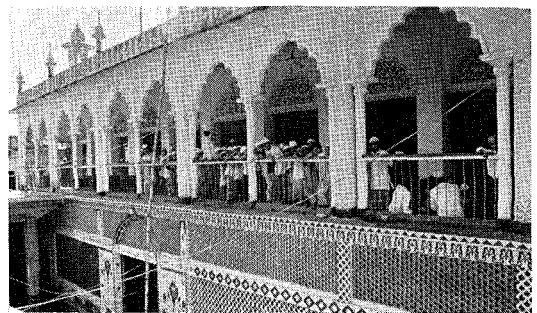
Inspirations for decoration may sometimes come from different countries and cultures. In Zinda Bahar Jam-i-Masjid the upper floor facade is decorated after



Minar decorated with fruit motifs, Zinda Bahar Jam-i-Masjid



Model of an aeroplane used as minar, Aeroplane Mosque, Old Elephant Road



Upper floor facade decorated after a mosque of Tashkent, U S S.R., Zinda Bahar Jam-i-Masjid





*Verandah decoration and design, Matir Masjid*

a mosque of Tashkent, in the U.S.S.R. The mason copied the whole facade from a photograph in a magazine

The final phase may have a beginning but there seems to be no final completion or end of a community mosque. It is an evergrowing dynamic building type. The time taken for a mosque to reach the final phase from its inception varies widely and largely depends on the economic mobility of the community to which it belongs and their aspirations with the mosque. 'Matir Masjid' took nearly seventy years to arrive at the middle of the intermediate phase whereas Cantonment Central Mosque developed on private initiative since 1972 has almost attained its final phase. In the final phase in some cases very ambitious plans are often taken which require professional assistance.

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### **Community Mosque — A symbol of society**

Our urban societies are undergoing a phase of transition from a traditional to a modern way of life with first and second generation urbanites and new

migrants. People inheriting diverse sub-cultures look for new identity in an urban setting. They require a common language to communicate and a common place to interact within the community. Here religion provides the common language and the mosque the common place. The community mosque is, therefore, much more than a place of worship. In the process of religious activities the community feelings, goals, desires and aspirations are expressed which eventually help to shape the community by specifying the parameter of socio-religious control and order and by defining the code of conduct and behaviour.

The growth and the physical transformation of the community mosque have a dynamic relationship with the growth pattern and development of the community. In the formative stage of the community the mosque is founded with a humble structure and it expands as the community consolidates itself. In a flourishing community the mosque is enriched with design, material and ornamentation and conversely in a decaying community the mosque quickly fades and loses its lustre.

The aesthetic preference of the community finds distinct expression in the ultimate design and form of the mosque. In the tradition based societies of Dhaka — old town in particular, the desire for extensive ornamentation gives secondary importance to the overall form of the mosque structure. The use of colour pattern and decorative elements reflects the general taste of the community. In the new city ornamentation is relatively unrefined and in some cases immature compared with the mosques of the old city where ornamentation sets an unwritten guideline of what is to be looked at and what not. In the posh residential areas it has been observed that the community mosque in its final phase undergoes a complete transformation into a professionally designed modern mosque where prime importance is laid on the overall form of the mosque structure with complete rejection of redundant ornamentation.

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### **Conclusion**

The genesis of the mosque as a building type in the region of the sub-continent goes back to the 12th century when Muslim rule was established for the first time. Since then the design of mosques has been one of the prime expressions of the study of architecture. The traditional mosques bear the testimony of a glorious Islamic heritage, and its advanced building art and technique<sup>15</sup>. During the European and post-colonial period, up to present times, the need and creation of other type of buildings has made mosque-building activity relatively insignificant. The task has been transferred from the rulers to the common people. Mosque designs seem to have reached a turning point now. While the professionals were deeply engrossed in adopting western architecture in their own local context, the lay people of the community, left to themselves, were actively seeking an architectural identity for their mosques within the available technology and material.

The community mosque thus became a product of participatory design by the people of the community. The designs borrow elements from traditional and modern architecture, no doubt, but architecture becomes a matter of conceptual experience and hence meaningful to the extent that people themselves establish the setting for individual social relationships and their relationship to their environment. The real architectural merit and importance of community mosque can only be understood if we search for the meaning it conveys, the purpose it fulfils and the response it receives. These mosques being the symbol of the society become the lively expressions of people's architecture in this region.