



ADINA MOSQUE OF PANDUA: BIGGEST ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE OF BENGAL

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The Adina Mosque was built c. 1370 by Sikander Shah, the second sultan of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty. It is an excellent example of sultanate period architecture and was at the time the largest mosque to be built on the subcontinent, a reflection of the power and wealth of the sultan. The mosque is decorated with magnificent intricate carvings, calligraphic inscriptions and non-calligraphic surface ornamentation. The complex designs included geometrical patterns, vegetation motifs, rosettes and abstract arabesque designs. This drawing shows part of the sanctuary interior together with three black basalt carved 'mihabs' or prayer niches. It is called Haerat Pandua, or the "Royal Residence, Pandua," to distinguish it from the other Pandua near Hugli. The original name is said to have been Panduvyz" a, which was gradually shortened to Panduya, and

eventually to Pandua. The Hindus, of course, say that it was so named after the ubiquitous Pandus but I should think the Pandubz's, or water fowl, with which the place abounds, have a much better claim to the honour. Hanspur and Mayurpur, or "Goose town nand" Peacock town;' are wellknown names and in' Buddhist times. There were monasteries called after the goose, the pigeon, and the cock's foot. Pandubiya would therefore be a most natural appellation for any place in a marshy country.¹

The earliest mention that I have been able to find of Pandua is during the reign of Ala-ud-din Ali Shah, who reigned from A.H. 742 to 746, and who is said to have built the tomb of the famous saint J alal-ud-din Tabrezi but as the saint died just one century earlier, Pandua must have been already a place of note during his life-time, or before A.H. 642. This is proved most incontestibly by the numerous Hindu remains, both of sculpture and

¹ Ravenshaw's Gaur, p. 44.



architecture, which still exist at Pandua—some lying loose, and others built into the Adina Masjid, the Ek-lakhi Tomb, and the buildings about the shrine of Nur Kutb Alam. Two very fine specimens are given by Ravenshaw. The Shrine of Nur Kutb Alam, being endowed with six thousand Bighas of land, is generally known by the names of Chhah Haedri and Shash Haedri, or the "six-thousander." The following is Blochmann's account of this holy saint:-
" He is the son and spiritual successor of Ain ul Hak. In order early to practice the virtue of humility, he washed the clothes of beggars and wanderers, and kept the water constantly hot' for ceremonial ablutions." He died in A.H. 851, or A.D. 1447.

"The words *sltams-ul-hz*"dayaf, 'lamp of guidance,' are the *tdrz*'kh of his death. He was succeeded by his sons Rufat-ud-din and Shekh Anwar'." ²

The tomb of the saint is a plain sarcophagus with a canopy supported on

four red stone pillars, and a fifth pillar at the head with a Persian inscription. To the west of the tomb there is a small building of three doorways with a cook-room attached outside. Here there are four inscriptions, of which three are fixed in the verandah of the mosque and one in the cook-room. The oldest of these is a record of Mahmood. in the cook-room, of which the following is Blochmann's translation-

H God. Almighty says, 'every creature tasteth (Qura'n., chap. III, verse 182). He also says, 'when their fate comes, they cannot delay it an hour, nor anticipate it' (Qura'n chap. X, verse 50). He also says, everything on earth fadeth but the face of Thy Lord.'

" Our revered master, the teacher of Imams, the proof of the congregation, the sun of the faith, the testimony of Islam and of the Muslims, who bestowed advantages upon the poor and the indigent, the guide of saints and of such as wish to be guided, passed away from this transient world to the everlasting mansion, on the 28th Zil Hijjah, a

² Blochmann, in Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal, Vol. XLII, p. 262.



Monday, of the year 863, during the reign of the king of kings, the protector of the countries of the Faithful, Nasir-ud-dunya wa-din Abul Muzaffar Mahmud Shah, the king,-May God keep him in safety and security This tomb was erected by the great Khan, Latif Khan,-May God protect him against evils and misfortunes”³

The next mention of Pandua is during the reign of Ilias Shah, who, on the invasion of Firoz Tughlak, is said to have retired from Pandua to Ekdala, Firoz also marched through Pandua on retiring from the siege of Ekdala" It would thus appear to have been one of the royal residences as early as the time of Ilias Shah, in A.H. 754, or A.D. 353. But his son Sikandar, who reigned from 759 to 792.

Adina Mosque at Hazrat Pandua or Firuzabad in Malda district of West Bengal was the largest mosque in medieval times not only in Bengal but

³ Texts and translations of this inscription ,see Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal, Vol. XLII, pp. 271, 289, and 291.

also in the whole of the subcontinent. It was, according to an inscription at its back wall, built in 1373 AD by Sikandar Shah, son of Iliyas Shah. For a sultan like Sikandar Shah, who declared himself to be the 'most perfect of the sultans of Arabia and Persia' in 1369 AD, and eventually the Khalifa of the faithful, the building of such a mosque was a natural manifestation of his power and wealth. Needless to say, a sultan who could compare himself with the Khalifas of Damascus, Baghdad, Cordova or Cairo could also erect a mosque comparable in size and grandeur to the great mosques of those capitals. It is curious that the Adina Mosque compares with the mosques of those cities not only in size, but also in plan and standardisation; in fact, it rivals the masterpieces of the world.⁴ A mosque, described as 'standard', requires a vast rectangular plan with an open courtyard (sahan) surrounded by cloisters (riwaqs) on three sides and the prayer chamber (zullah)

⁴ Blochmann in Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal, Vol. XLII, p. 260



towards the Qibla. The Adina Mosque conforms to all these principles, and hence is a standard type of mosque. The mosque consists of bricks faced with stones on the lower parts of the walls, and of open bricks on other parts. Its measurement 'still need to be properly recorded', but may be approximately accepted as 155×87 m externally with fluted columns on the corners and 122×46 m internally with arcade riwaqs by the sides of the courtyard. The 12m wide cloisters on the north, east and south of the courtyard are three aisles deep. The prayer chamber, measuring 24m in breadth, has five aisles. Dividing the prayer chamber through the middle, a wide vaulted nave runs perpendicular to the Qibla wall. It measures $21\text{m} \times 10\text{m}$ and was once approximately 18m high, but is now fallen. In the absence of a definitive estimate, the domes of the mosque covering squares formed by stone columns have been variously estimated to be 306 and 370. According to Crowe the number is 260. The columns are square at the base, rounded

at the middle, and slanting towards the capitals. The domes carried by triangular pendentives are now fallen except some on the northern cloisters of the prayer chamber. They were of an inverted tumbler shape with an elliptical curve, typical of the dome used throughout the whole sultanate period. The nave, much higher than the cloisters, was covered by a barrel vault, which because of its loftiness dominated the whole structure, and was seen from a long distance. Sikandar Shah made it his permanent residence, and here he built the great Adina Masjid, and the tomb in which he was after wards buried. During the reign of the succeeding dynasty, both Jalal-uddin and his son Ahmad would appear to have lived at Pandua, which was the residence of their spiritual adviser, the famous saint Nur Kutb Alam, as well as of his predecessor, Ain-ul Haq. But soon after the accession of Mahmud I, the court was once more transferred to Gaur, and the city of Pandua began gradually to decay.



It is difficult to ascertain the former extent of Pandua, owing partly to the dense jungle infested by tigers, and partly to the large swamps swarming with mosquitoes, which render any minute examination quite impossible. On the south side, near the tenth milestone from Angrezabad, or 7 miles from Malda, the fields are seen strewn with bricks, and on each side of the road there is a long line of low mounds, the ruins of the shops of the old city. The road itself, which is from 11 to 15 feet in width, is paved with brick-on-edge, and runs in a nearly straight line to the north for 41 miles, to a large embankment which is said to have formed the limit of the town on that side. The breadth of the town no one even professes to know. On the west side of the road it was certainly very confined, as the ground is low and swampy. On the east side, the palace of Sataz'sgarh is just eleven mile from the Adina Masjid. The northern half, therefore, was certainly eleven mile broad. In the southern half, Buchanan was informed that remains of buildings

could be traced for 2 miles to the east, which would make the breadth of this part not less than 21 miles, But a very large portion of this great area of 4 miles in length by 2 miles in mean width must have been covered with tanks and swamps; in fact, the town would appear to have consisted chiefly of one long main street, with many short side streets on both sides. The length, however, as shown by the milestones, is not so much as 5 or 6 miles, as stated by Buchanan, as the remains of brick shops and the paved Road are first observed shortly before reaching the tenth milestone, and the last traces are near the northern em bank. Embankment, close to the fourteenth milestone. Ravenshaw adopts Buchanan's estimate of the size of Pandua, which he says.

It must have been about a mile probably in its widest part. Like Gaur, it is covered with innumerable tanks, some of great age, and nearly all of them having their greatest length from north. To south, as evidence of their Hindu origin", "

Close to this line of paved road stand all the principal remains of Hazrat Pandua. They consist of four groups, extending over eleven mile from the Bardwari at 101 miles, to the Adina Masjid at 12 miles from Angrezabad, These two and the Sataisgarh are on the east side, all the others, including the Eklakhi and Sona Masjids, and the tombs of Ain ul Ha and Niir Kutb Alam, are on the west side. I will now describe them in the order in which they would be visited by a traveller coming from Maldah,

The first building on the right, or east hand, is the Saldmz" Darsidsa, or Salutation Gate," leading to the Bardwarz", or shrine of Jalal-ud-din Tabrezi. This gateway is the western boundary of the land belonging to the shrine, which is called Bais-hazari, or twenty-two thousands," from the number of bighas of land with which it is endowed, equal to about 7,000 acres. The shrine itself stands 1,200 feet to the east of the gateway. The present building is a small paltry-looking masjid, plastered and whitewashed, with a short

inscription recording its erection in A.H. 1075. When Shekh Jalal-ud-din came to Bengal, he began" to destroy idols-in fact, his vault occupies the site of an idol temple. He died in A.H. 641, or A.D. 1244. His first shrine was built by Ala-ud-din Ali, who reigned from A.H. 742 to 746. He is still in great repute, and his shrine is visited by thousands of pilgrims from all quarters.⁵



Fig - Central Nave, Adina Mosque

About the front of the vault much has been speculated: did it hint a rectangular frame like a Persian iwan or was it open

⁵ Abid Ali and HE Stapleton, Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua, Calcutta, 1931



to the apex or screened. The design of the cloister arches with abutments at the sides and a cornice suggests that the vault must have had an iwan-portal which would be aesthetically in harmony with the design of the facade. To maintain that beauty and dignity, it also should have had an open arch at the top. Certainly, it would not be congenial in a wet weather land to have such an open and high arch, but to maintain architectural proportions; the architect could not have done otherwise. Clearly realising this difficulty, later architects, such as those in the gunmant mosque of Gaur-Lakhnauti (late 15th c), the Jami Mosque of Old Maldah (1595-96 AD) and its contemporary, the Jami Mosque of Rajmahal, attempted to create screens above the vault arch, but only to destroy its aesthetic qualities.

Covering an area of three aisles depth, on the northern side of the nave and adjacent to the qibla wall, with seven heavy columns at a row, is an upper storey stone platform. This in all probability is the royal gallery

(maqsura), meant for the sultan and his entourage when at prayer. There are two doorways on the northern side of the west wall of the platform through which the sultan and his party used to enter. The platform of the gallery must have been screen-parapeted, but have now vanished. The beauty of the gallery at present derives from the ten fluted inner columns, and the three mihrabs in front. Those have been beautifully decorated with carvings, tile-designs and inscriptions in thulth calligraphy. The arches of the mihrabs, carried on slender columns segmented in various designs, are fluted like all the other mihrabs of the mosque in the ground floor. Since the platform is an upper storey of the mosque, it has prompted a higher altitude for this part. This can be noticed from outside due to the higher planes of the domes erected over the gallery. A beautiful ornamental piece of architecture within the nave to its northwest corner and on the right side of the principal mihrab is the stone pulpit covered by a hooded canopy. About



eight of the steps are now gone, but the low-cut abstract relief-designs on its side wall, together with the small mihrab within the hooded part speak of the delicacy of the work of the artisans. The pulpit seems to have influenced some later examples, for example, those in the pulpit of the darasbari mosque of lakhnauti and the bari mosque of Chhota Pandua (dated in the late 15th century on the basis of its architectural style).⁶

A much-discussed adjunct of the Adina Mosque is the so-called tomb chamber of Sikandar Shah at the back of the mosque. The discussion was generated by the discovery towards the beginning of this century of a sarcophagus, probably of a later date, within the floor of the chamber. But that this sarcophagus could not be the tombstone of Sikandar Shah, can be proved by the simple logic of the massive stone pillars running through the middle of the chamber, and the existence of the sarcophagus, not in the middle of the chamber, but towards the west end of

the floor. Tombs of kings generally consist of a single-domed structure with the body of the ruler resting in the middle of the chamber and the dome, signifying the vault of heaven, over him. In the present case, the structure had nine equal-sized domes over it, without any emphasis of a single dome in the middle. But the most important thing to note is that the pillars of the structure carried a stone platform at the level of the royal gallery with two entrances to enter it.⁷ A ramp from the west side of the northern space of the platform leading to its top certainly makes it a resting place for the royal entourage before its members entered the gallery for prayers. The so-called tomb chamber was therefore nothing but an antechamber, or a sort of a vestibule to the royal gallery of the mosque. Although no such elaborate chambers are seen in later mosques, small platforms are noticed in the midst of the flights of steps while ascending to the gallery. The two postern doorways

⁶ AH Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal*, Dhaka, 1961

⁷ George Michell (ed), *The Islamic Heritage of Bengal*, Paris, 1984.



flanking the chamber on the ground level in the present case were planned not for the sultan, as was the case in other examples, but for guards or lesser members of the entourage taking their seats on the ground floor of the mosque. The domical platform in the form of a structure with ramp to ascend it on the western side together with a minar near it, makes this side of the mosque more important. Hence lesser care was taken to erect a monumental gateway through the eastern side.

The mosque is now in ruins. The only parts of it that have withstood the test of time are the segments of the west wall, including the back of the vaulted portal. The decorative aspects of the mosque can be ascertained from the structural design of the columns, the pendentives, the mihrabs, the facial terracotta, ornaments of tiles, and the calligraphic inscriptions that can still be noticed in broken condition.⁸ The subject matters of

other non-calligraphic surface or namentation are vegetal motifs of local variety, rosettes, abstract arabesque designs, geometrical patterning, and designs of indescribable complexities. It is important to emphasise here that although the ornamental subject matters maintain symmetry in placing and designing, not a single subject is similar to any other in details. The reason, surely, is the creativity of the builders.⁹ The Adina Mosque set an example in mosque ornamentation, both structural and surface. Later examples based on it produced some of the gems of the

⁸ Blochmann, in Bengal Asiatic Society's Journal, Vol. XLII, p. 253. The coins of this king also give the

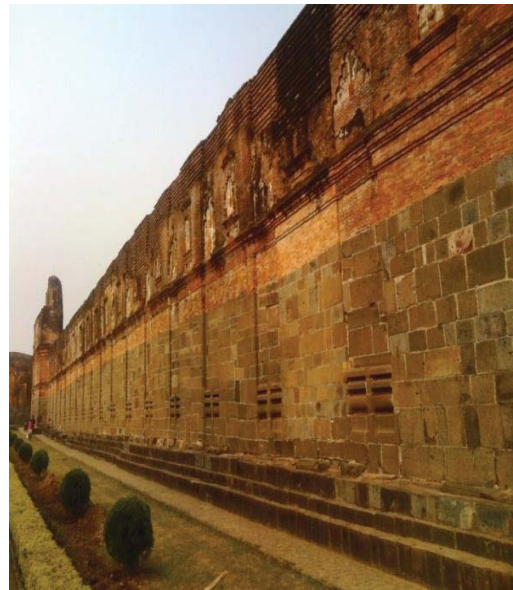
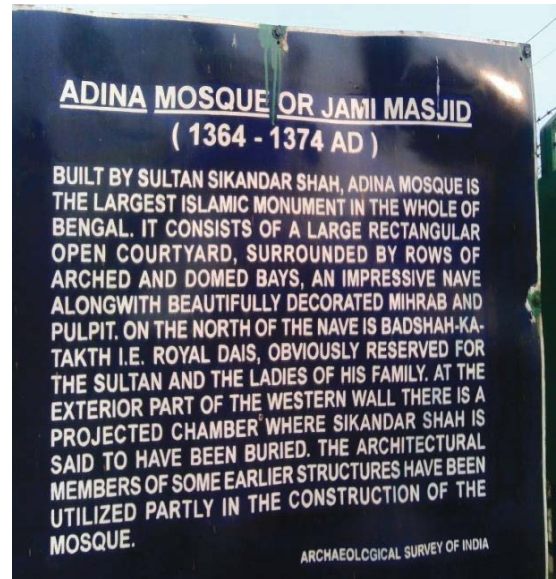
mint of Firuzabad, which is said to be the name of Pandua; but if so the name is older than the time of Firoz Tughlak, who is recorded to have given his own name to Pandua

⁹ Tarikh Firoz Shahi, in Elliot's Muhammadan Historians by Dowson, Vol. II.

sultanate architecture of Bengal.



Lotus of hindu temple is reshaped as icon of knowledge of mosque, kufi script



ASI board , left wall of Adina mosque
(Courtesy of all pics –Purushottam Singh, surveyed on 29.12.2015)