COMMUNITY MOSQUE IS A SYMBOL OF SOCIAL STATUS – A CASE OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN DHAKA CITY

Fariel Khan[1]

[1]*Lecturer, Department of Architecture and Interior Design, College of Engineering, University of Bahrain (UoB), Kingdom of Bahrain*

Abstract

Community mosque has its intrinsic pattern of development distinct from the other mosque typologies in Bangladesh. They are built by the collective effort of the ordinary people and are responsive to the changing need of the community. They convey the legacy of the traditional building craftsmanship in modernization. The mosques usually have a humble beginning but once the basic structure is formed it grows enormously to respond to the endless need of the community. Numerous community mosques grow spontaneously all over Bangladesh making it the most dominant mosque typology in the region. The paper focused on the design concepts of community mosque which are propagated through the collective consensus of the community and interpreted through local architectural language. It is a kind of mould in which typical character of the society is cast; hence it serves as a powerful social symbol.

A historical overview established the fact that community mosques can be considered as the oldest mosque typology in Bengal. Through the literature the author has illustrated the origin of community mosques and their intrinsic growth pattern followed by a generalization on the design and building process which is responsive to the growing needs of the community. Finally a through case study was added to find the architectural value and the participatory design process which attained new design methods to responsive design solutions deeply rooted in local society expressed through a live and endless process of design.

Keywords: Community mosque; Collective effort; Endless need; Intrinsic growth pattern; Traditional building craftsmanship; Participatory design process

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1. INTRODUCTION

Architecture is a media which elucidate the socio- cultural and economic condition of a civilization through its history and heritage. Mosques as building typology always served a significant socio-cultural purpose in any Islamic society besides its essential religious intent. Mosque architecture symbolically carried the massage of Muslim unity and brotherhood at the same time reflected the uniqueness of each Islamic society [1]. Community mosques, as part of mosque typology, spontaneously grow all over Bangladesh, with the initiatives and patronage of the local people as a symbol of their devout spirit and spiritual dedication [2]. The setting of a community mosque involves a range of activities like identifying a site, designing, financing, management, construction and maintenance etc. Community people perform all those activities by collective contribution and direct participation hence, the people in the community take great pride in their mosque. Eventually those mosques serve as a socio-cultural symbol of the respective societies.

The growth pattern of community mosque follows more or less a uniform process of physical development, though the end results are always distinctively different from one another. The development pattern of these mosques has resemblance with the germination of a large spreading tree from a small seedling. The mosques usually have a humble

beginning but once the basic structure is formed it grows enormously to respond to the endless need of the community. Such mosque initiated and developed by the potentials of local organization absorbs and reflects the socio-technical attainments and aesthetic preferences of the community. In general the community mosque is responsive to the changing need of the community. It stipulates piecemeal growth pattern adjusted to the availability of the resources. They convey the legacy of the traditional building craftsmanship in modernization [3].

When these mosques reach their completion level they expresses the popular building art emerging out of local craftsmanship of famous craftsmen representing family tradition and personal choices of people who have donated large sum of money for the beautification[4]. Therefore, to the people the building of a community mosque is not an end in itself but a means to represent an identity of the self- both in the product and the process [5].

1.1 Research Questions

The author has framed several research questions to derive the objectives and the methodology of research to get the final outcome of the research paper. The questions are listed below;

- What we know about a community mosque and its importance to the socio cultural aspects of the community?
- What are the growth patterns of community mosques and how they accommodate or respond to different critical aspects of endless needs of the community?
- How the growth patterns of community mosques differ from the other mosque typologies in Bangladesh?
- What is the architectural value of these mosques are how does it contradicts with the conventional architectural procedures?
- How the community mosques reflect the participatory and interactive design process of the community?

1.2 Research Objectives

Based on the research questions the following objectives have been considered;
- To study the design concept of the community mosques to explore its impact on the socio cultural aspects of the community.

- To find out the historical overview of community mosques in Bengal through literature study and researches done by the other researchers.
- To illustrate the origin of community mosques and their intrinsic growth pattern to find out how it is responding to the growing needs of the community.
- To make a case study to find the architectural value and the participatory design process by the people of the community that is deeply rooted in local society and culture.

2. COMMUNITY MOSQUES –A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As a new building type, mosques appeared in Bengal (fig 1) at the beginning of the thirteenth century AD, with the advent of Muslim rule in the region. In other words; the period of refinement of mosque architecture begins with the Sultanate period in thirteenth century and continued till the end of Mughal era in the mid eighteenth century [6](fig 2,3).
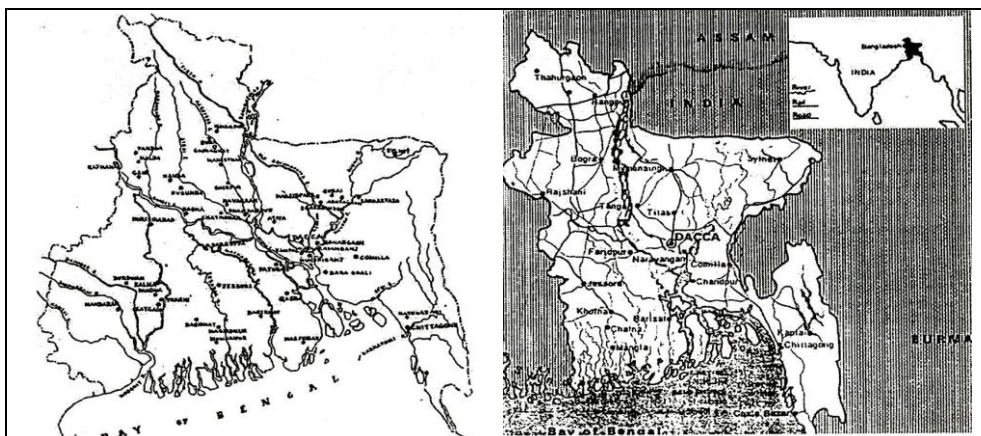
Fig 1: Map of the Bengal region and Bangladesh [7]

Fig:2. Grandeur of a Mughal Mosque, Shait Gumbad Mosque

Ever since, numerous mosques developed spontaneously as rudimentary shelters to enable the spreading Islam in a wider geographical area. The mosques were also built with community participation with leadership or patronage of some pious individuals. Therefore, the concept of the

community mosque had its beginning with the inception of Muslim society in Bengal [8,9,10]

Therefore, community mosques can be considered to be the oldest mosque typology in Bengal. It would not be wrong to assume that the difference is very little between the growth

pattern of community mosque of the earliest time and the present. Absence of historic evidence of such community mosque makes it difficult to arrive at any conclusive assumption. The advent of British colonial rule restrained the pace of growth and development of Mughal mosques while only the community mosques indiscreetly carried the legacy of the past. It played as additional social role of uniting the community to counter the oppression of the colonial power against the Muslim society. Therefore, a sustained effort is observed in every era to attain an ideal model of mosque architecture in all regions.

Community mosques virtually remained out of the grip of the professional intervention. Professionals were skeptical about the scope of their involvement in such design problem. On the other hand the client i.e. Masjid Committee had apprehension and financial constraints in involving professional help in design unless there is a pressing demand for complex structural solution. However, the design was swayed by the professional concept of the new generation of

mosques. The idea of freedom in design had been exploited to its optimal level in community mosques. Common people were encouraged and enlightened by the professionals and the media, that the variety of mosque design is not only possible but a prevailing reality.

A great variety of mosque typologies exist in the Islamic world spanning over a wide geographical region. There is no prescribed model or universally accepted design to follow, yet there are some locally identified symbolic elements that distinguish a mosque from other building typologies. Pursued with this basic knowledge an enormous variety of community mosque flourished, each one is distinct from the other making a complete reversal of the traditional concept of sublime uniformity that dominated the historic mosques. Community mosques are normally characterized by their humble and unpretentious quality and exist in harmony with their surroundings (fig 4 and 5).

Fig. 4: A humble and unpretentious beginning of a Community mosques

Fig. 5: Momin Mosque after restoration by the Archaeological Department of Bangladesh in 2008 [11]

This trend of development of mosque architecture persisted for a long time and is still persisting in many places other than those in metropolitan areas. A dramatic change in shape, size, volume and character of community mosques had been observed since the end of the seventies. The changes were more pronounced in significant locations of the cities.

Two important factors inspired those changes; first is the building boom of the late seventies and second is the availability of financial support for mosque development. The buildings boom not only raised the density of building in urban area but the height of surrounding built-form as well by adding more floors, contributing to an increase in population in the community. This placed a higher demand for prayer space in local mosque. Moreover, for the purpose of identity an increase in volume of the existing mosques

deemed necessary as those were being obscured by the overwhelming new development around.

The government policy of declaring Bangladesh as an Islamic state in 1975 ushered a new era of Islamic co-operation and brotherhood. As a consequence Bangladesh received generous economic support from the oil rich Middle Eastern countries. In the subsequent period considerable national and international funds were made available for mosque development and improvement. In the capital city of Dhaka several community mosques attained a massive volume in shape and in imposing scale, dominating the surrounding areas as a landmark. (fig 6 and 7). All those mosques have a long history and followed a uniform sequence of additive development over a long span of time. The traces of subsequent layers of development are retained in many of those mosques.
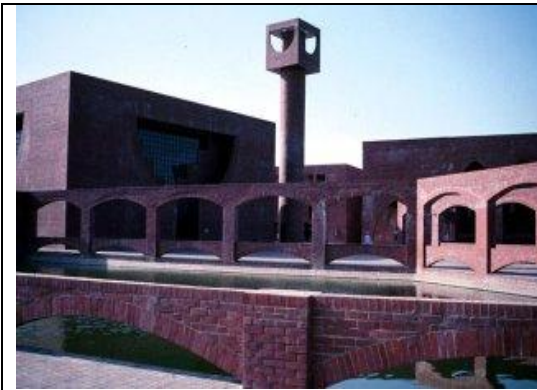
Fig 6: View of ICTVTR mosque, Gajipur, A massive structure of mosque architecture.

Fig 7: Minar of ICTVTR mosque, Gajipur, application of basic geometric form in mosque architecture

3. COMMUNITY MOSQUES AND ITS GROWTH PATTERN

Community mosque has its intrinsic pattern of development distinct from the other mosque typologies built under the official, institutional and private patronage. In terms of sheer quantity it far outnumbered any other types of mosques. Beside the dominance of number, the community mosques have profound significance in socio-cultural and architectural context. Architecturally it absorbs the current complexity of the modern developmental context included in the traditional and local vernacular vocabulary. Each mosque in its maturity presents a passionate experiment of popular building art emerging out of local technical ability and physical reality. The importance of the community mosque however, is not confined to architecture, but encompasses the whole realm of activities associated with its design, construction, management and maintenance [12].

The piecemeal pattern of growth juxtaposed with different layers of development by applying innovative in admixing local and modern technology is the spatiality of the community mosque. In addition to that these mosques play a significant role in the overall community life and living. It addresses many design issues, endless need of the community, interactive relations with the contemporary society and culture. In one word these mosques serve as a symbol of the community.

Usually, the growth pattern of any community mosque follows several stages of physical development with distinct architectural expression at the end. It is developed through the stages of identifying site, designing, financing, management, construction, maintenance and finally entering to the phase of progressive and never ending beatification stage. Since those mosques become the socio-cultural status symbol for community, the people of that respective community are involved directly for the mosque development according to the need and knowledge of the community people. [13]

3.1. Origin of Community Mosque

Community mosque may originate in three different ways;

a. A group of people may being to pray regularly in a vacant land adjacent to their house or workplace and eventually claim the land as a place for religious rituals. In this case the development begins with demarcation of the occupied land and placing a rudimentary bamboo or mud structure for prayer. Those structures are north-south elongated as the west is the general direction of *qiblah* [1] in all over Bangladesh.

[1] Qiblah: Qiblah is the direction of the Ka'aba toward which Muslims turn for their daily prayers

b. A person may donate a piece of land or build a mosque dedicated to the community to fulfill a personal spiritual desire. Here the initial stages of development are similar to the first category.

c. Sometimes the local people also assume the responsibility of very old mosques as their trustee for subsequent development following the same growth pattern of any community mosque. once the mosque is taken up by the community it goes through series of renovation, enlargement and maintenance to suit the present needs. In these cases of old mosques adjusted to the present requirement may have a different beginning according to community priorities, yet the general development pattern of the community mosque is followed in the subsequent stages.

3.2. Stages of Physical Development of Community Mosque

The physical development of community mosque, irrespective of its origin is depicted below;

3.2.1. Stage 01: Initial Stage of Development
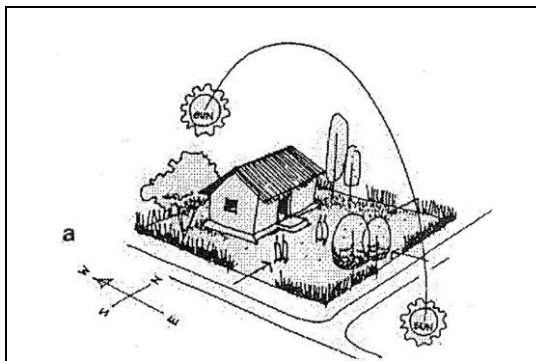
**Fig:9:** Origin of mosques and its relationship with the site


Fig:8: Mosque with single structure

Fig 10: Duchiyardan Village Mosque

It is very common to built an enclosed shelter due to prevalence of monsoon climate in which rain is expected almost all over the year. (Fig 8) The shelters are usually located close to the western boundary of the site keeping space on the east for further development. (Fig 9 & 10). In rural setting the mosques were located near to some pond or stream that provided the water for ablution. In urban areas, well or tube-well were the sources of water located within the site prior to availability of piped water supply.

### 3.2.2. Stage 02: Addition of Verandah and Secondary Structures (Fig 11-14)
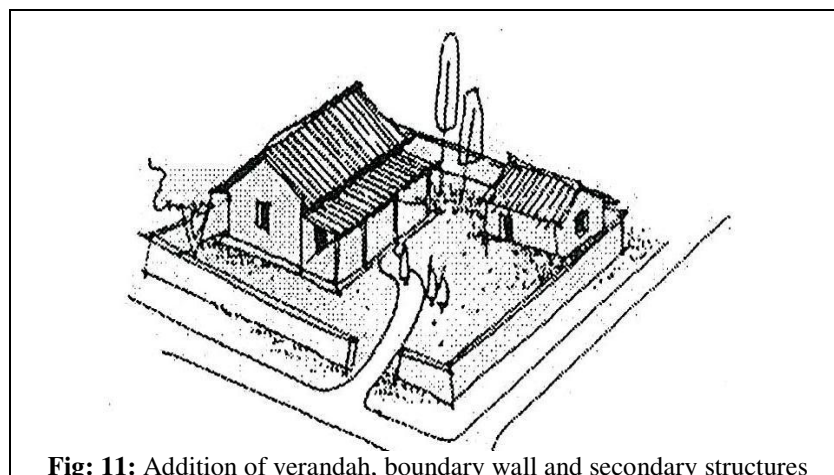
Fig: 11: Addition of verandah, boundary wall and secondary structures
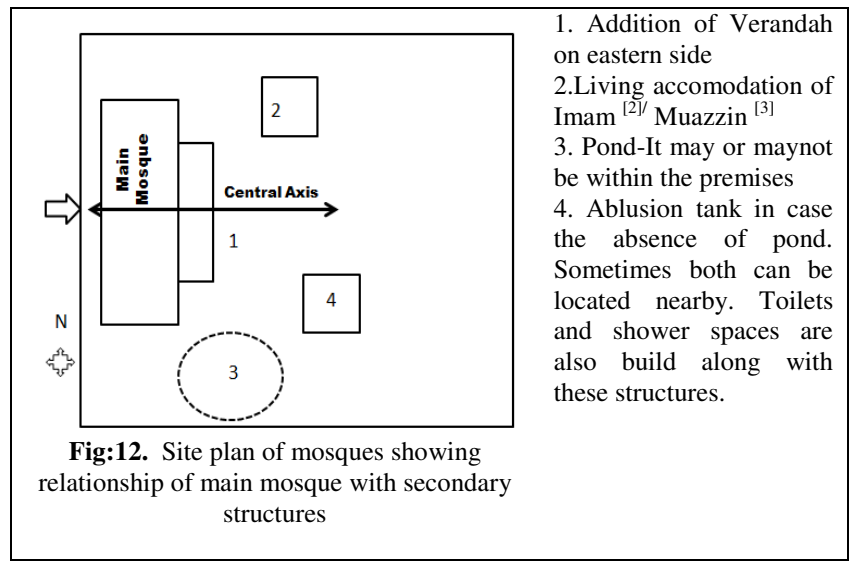
1. Addition of Verandah on eastern side
2. Living accomodation of Imam [2]/ Muazzin [3]
3. Pond-It may or maynot be within the premises
4. Ablusion tank in case the absence of pond. Sometimes both can be located nearby. Toilets and shower spaces are also build along with these structures.

Fig:12. Site plan of mosques showing relationship of main mosque with secondary structures

Most important development of this stage is addition of verandah. This addition of structure has many design implecation according to the following;
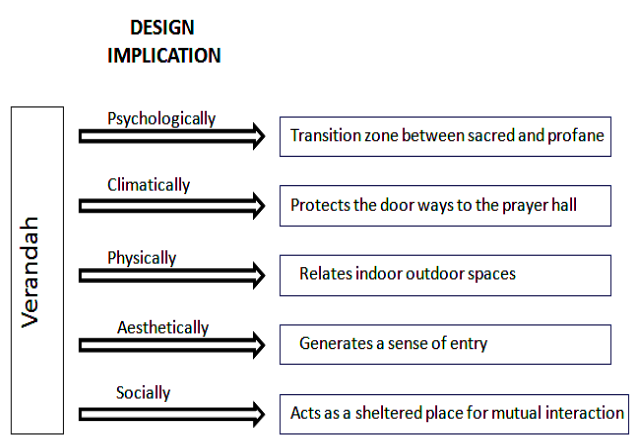
Chart:1 Design implication of verandah in front of main prayer hall.

Addition of prayer hall: Main prayer hall extends and encroch upon verandah to meet the grwing need of prayer - spaces.

Verandah: When the need of more prayer space arises the first veranda which was on the eastern side of the mosque transforms into a prayer space and a new veranda added after that- along the central axis Any future need of prayer spaces will be taken over to the verandah and a new verandah will be built along the central axis.

[2] Imam/ Muazzin: An **imam** is an Islamic leadership position. It is most commonly in the context of a worship leader of a mosque and Muslim community by Sunni Muslims. [14]

[3] Muazzin   is the Muslim official of a mosque who summons the faithful to prayer from a minaret five times a day

Fig:13. Teaching of quran can take place under the shade of verandha or in front of mosque, open to sky spaces.

**Fig: 14.** People praying in front of the mosque

3.2.3. Stage 03: Lateral extension and Modification

(fig: 14)

Lateral extension of main prayer hall: When the extension of main prayer hall happens lateral direction. This situation occurs only when the space on the eastern side is completely exhausted; the *mihrab* [4] will be shifted to maintain the centrality of the main prayer chamber. The new axis aligned with the new *mihrab* rarely coincides with the axis aligned to the entry of the mosque from the eastern side.

[4] Mihrab is a niche or chamber in a mosque indicating the direction of Kaaba

Addition of secondary structures: As the need grows the addition of secondary structures also starts to build. Series of shops along the boundary wall usually comes to support the regular maintenance of the mosque. The access of these shops are kept from the exterior side of the premises. (fig: 14)
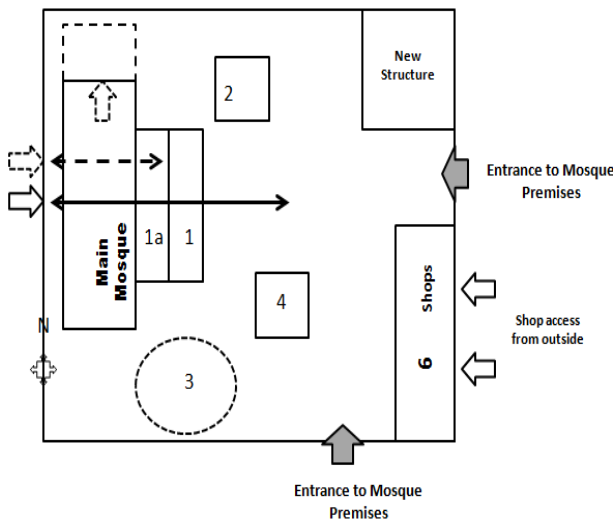
Fig 14: Addition of shops (6) to support the regular maintenance of mosque.

3.2.4. Stage 04: Stage of permanency, vertical extension and endless beautification (fig 16-19)

Permanency of the mosque structure is always a priority in the development process. The transition from temporary to permanent construction starts with the main prayer hall, and then followed according to the importance of the structures.
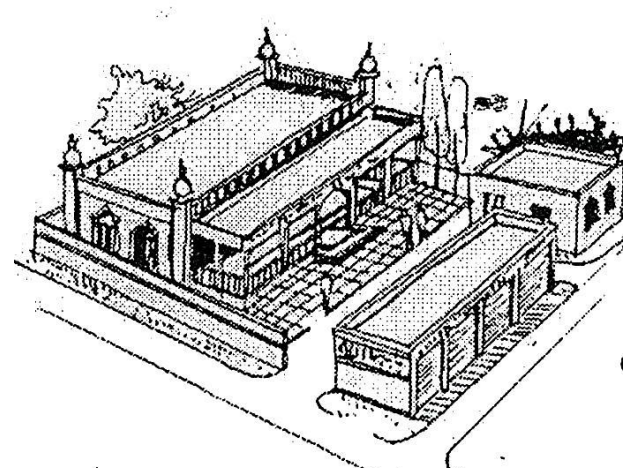
Fig: 16: Stage of development towards permanancy.

Generally the mosque premise is filled with various types of structures; permanent, semi-permanent and temporary built in a random location without considering the originality of the basic structure.

Fig: 17: Vertical extension with permament structures.

When the ground floor level occupies all the vacant spaces then the growth pattern follows the vertical direction like addition of floors, domes, minarets etc.

Beside the addition of prayer space, the mosques enter a phase of progressive and never ending beatification stage- like extensive ornamentation of façades and interior spaces, decorative gates and addition of multiple minarets.
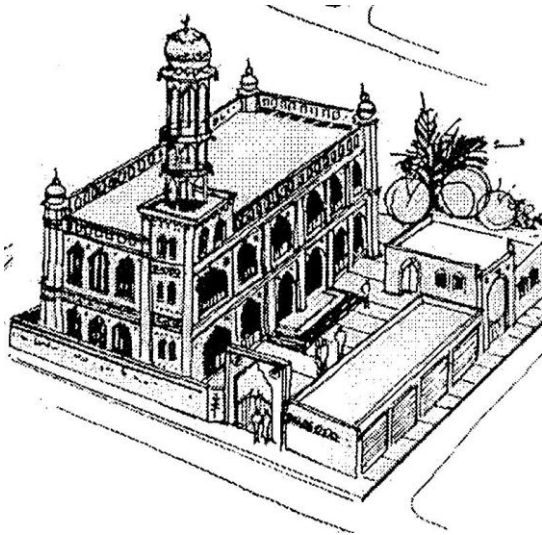
Fig:18. Typical community mosque at its matured stage

Fig: 19: Phase of never ending beautification

However, the matured stage (fig 19) does not imply that it has reached the final phase of completion, since the development process is endless; they rarely have any terminating point. It is significant to note that in every stage there is a visible effort not to nullify the earlier improvements and preserves as much as possible in any addition or alterations. Therefore, the mosque retains the traces of cumulative history of the development process within its ensemble.

4. CASE STUDY OF A COMMUNITY MOSQUE

It has been mentioned earlier that three types of community mosques can be distinguished on the basis of their origin. The first two types (one starts from the scratch on a vacant land and the other from a donated land with or without structure) have a very similar pattern of development. The third type begins with a different pattern of development as it originates from the old mosque. The following case study belongs to the 2nd category

The major findings of this study are based on an academic survey conducted by the students of architecture, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka. The study recorded history of gradual development of this selected community mosque initiated by ordinary people.

4.1 Community Mosque -Matir Masjid [15] (1914)

Donated by: Sheik Abdul Gani
Location: Malibagh Choudhury Para, Dhaka. Initially located in the outskirts of the Dhaka city, and now it is situated well within the metropolitan area.
Date of initial construction: 1914

Historical Background: The name of the mosque is *Matir Masjid* means mosque of mud. It is named after the construction material of the mosque and reflects the humbleness of the donated person. It was probably the outer house (Kachari Bari) of the rural dwelling commonly used for male guests and conventionally oriented outward. The following information has been given to illustrate different stages of this mosque development.

Phase 01: Development during 1920-1950
Main prayer hall had thatched roof (thick wall structure made of mud) and a veranda on the east.
A pond was located on the northern side for the purpose of ablution.
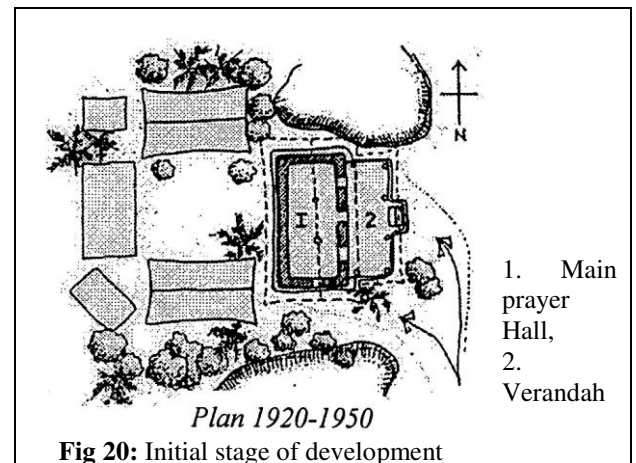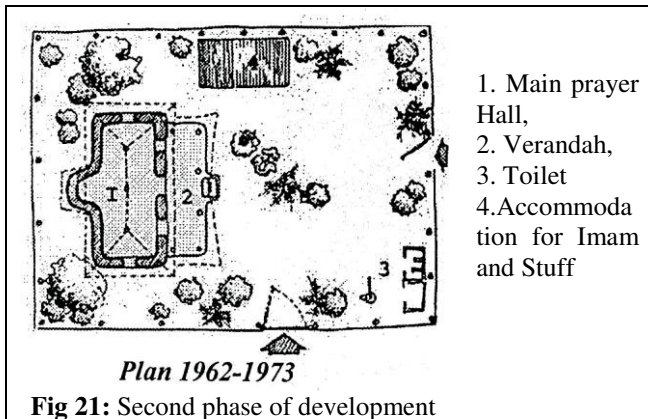It remained in the same physical state for a considerable long period. (fig:20)

1. Main prayer Hall,
2. Verandah

Fig 20: Initial stage of development

Phase 02: : Development during 1962-1973
Significant changes happened in 1962. The site was defined with an enclosure of temporary structure. Here the main prayer hall was kept along the western boundary line keeping more space for future growth in front of eastern side of the mosque.

Pond was filled, tube well and rudimentary toilets were provided in the south-east corner and another small hut was placed along the northern boundary. Entry to the plot was located on the east and south. (fig:21)
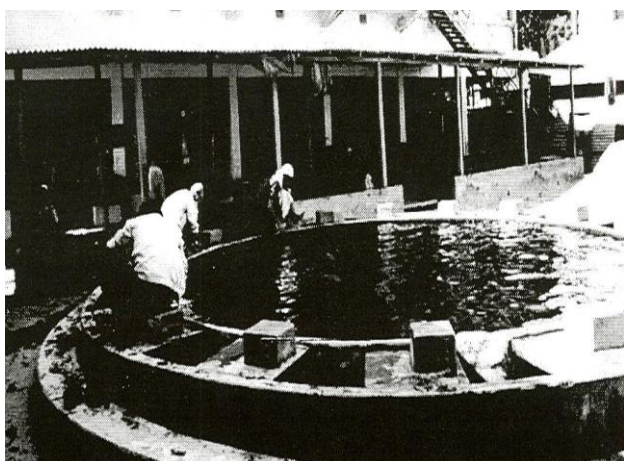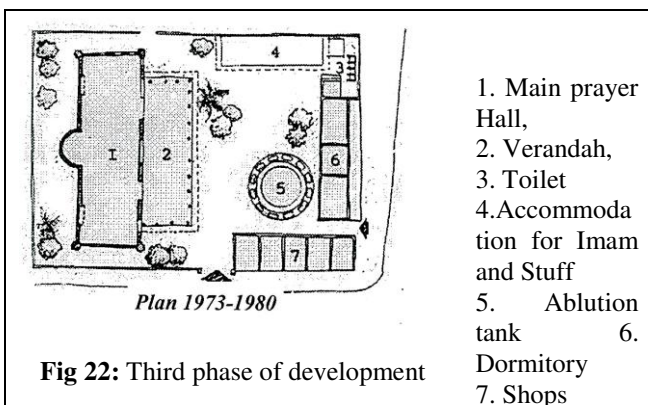
1. Main prayer Hall,
2. Verandah,
3. Toilet
4.Accommodation for Imam and Stuff

Plan 1962-1973

Fig 21: Second phase of development

Phase 03: Development during 1973-1980:

Significant changes occurred during this time (fig 22). The mud structure of main prayer hall was replaced with a permanent building, much larger in size along with a veranda on the east.

The main prayer building had a flat roof with four corner turrets to a have a symbolic expression of mosque.

A large circular tank was built on the south east with the availability of piped water system for ablution (fig: 23). Toilets shifted to north-east corner beside the accommodation of Imam and other stuff. A number of shops were added along the southern boundary. More structures erected on the east side as dormitory.
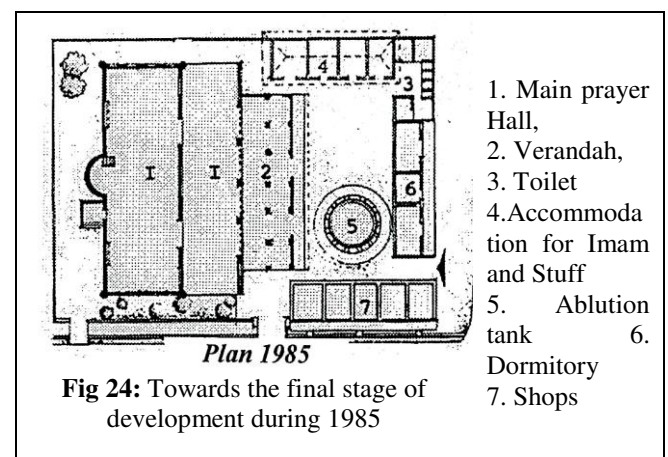

Plan 1973-1980

1. Main prayer Hall,
2. Verandah,
3. Toilet
4.Accommodation for Imam and Stuff
5. Ablution tank 6. Dormitory
7. Shops

Fig 22: Third phase of development

Fig 23: Water tank for ablution

Phase 04: Development during 1985-1991

These stages of developments mainly focused on enlargement of the main mosque and converting the supporting secondary shelters into permanent structures.

The earlier veranda became a part of the main prayer hall and a new veranda was added.

Ablution tank retained its original position and the toilet facilities were improved. A square shaped storage space was added next to the *mihrab*. (fig :24) Entry locations remained the same. Extensive improvements were made in the interior spaces with ornamentation and applications of finer finish materials.

In 1985-The mosque reached to matured stage by adding domes, minarets and gate structures along with an upward development to avail more prayer space. In 1988, development inspired by a generous donation. Two bays were added in the ground floor built with R.C.C. structure replacing the tin shed veranda. Two more bays built later in the space presently occupied by secondary structures on the east.

1. Main prayer Hall,
2. Verandah,
3. Toilet
4.Accommodation for Imam and Stuff
5. Ablution tank 6. Dormitory
7. Shops

Plan 1985

Fig 24: Towards the final stage of development during 1985

In 1991 the first two bays that were built earlier with brick foundation constructed to three floors. An elaborate entrance façade has been designed facing the road on the east. In the latest development work of Matir Masjid, professional structural designers were involved and that is clearly visible from the streamlined character of the façade unlike typical community mosques (fig: 25)

Fig: 25 View of corner turret at different angle of Matir Masjid, 2011

However, the additive sequence of development, which is the hallmark of the community mosque, is easily perceptible in its ground floor layout. At present, the mosque accommodates three thousand people in each Juma prayer, out of which two thousand provided inside the mosque and the rest on the roof top. On Eid days more than 5000 people congregate and they are forced to occupy the adjacent roads to pray. The ever increasing need for prayer space compelled by the growing density of community population will keep the pace of construction and expansion going till its limits is exhausted. Eventually, the humble mud hut of Matir Masjid would turn into a massive and imposing mosque, and its name will remain a tale to tell.

5. CONCLUSION

Finally it is curious to note that the growth pattern of community mosques follows the oldest mosque in Islam, the prophet's mosque in Madinah. That had a similar modest beginning with a rudimentary shelter and eventually became the largest mosques in the world fostered by royal patronage. The mosque underwent several changes and modifications over the centuries and its development process is also endless. Numerous community mosques in Bangladesh are much humble in scale, yet express a desire to expound the local spiritual dedication with equally enriched intent following a similar growth pattern. There is a visible agreement among people in growth and development of community mosque for passionate socio-religious attainments.

Community mosques are formed with an assortment of structures often inconsistent with one another. The unity is derived only through proximity. Therefore, it is possible to generalize the sequence of development, but it is hard to make any generalization on the overall shape and form of community mosque. Each one is unique on its own right. The variation is partly contributed by the configuration of the site, partly inducted by the development of different stages and the rest nourished by the design bias of the community. Professional designers distance themselves from such design endeavor considering those naïve, crude and devoid of creative content. Whereas, the design methods of these community mosques are exploring possibilities of participatory design process to attain more responsive designs. Therefore, these mosques within all its diversities and bizarre variety convey its spiritual content and encode the message of sacred place. In conclusion we can say that community mosques reflect viable means of interactive design process deeply rooted in local society and culture. They may appear naïve and crude but unequivocally creative, yet unpretentious in nature.

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BIOGRAPHY

Fariel Khan, lecturer of University of Bahrain (UoB), hold a Bachelor and Master's degree in Architecture from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) with a specialization on architectural conservation.

She has participated and presented research papers in different seminars and conferences and was selected as keynote speaker in the International Conference (STEX 2006-The Fourth Saudi Technical Conference and Exhibition) held in Riyadh, KSA. As an editorial assistant, she has assisted in research work to produced three books for publication on architectural conservation and historical preservation in Bangladesh with the grant of Getty Foundation.