

# Mosques and Mazar Sharif of Midnapore: A Study of History and Architecture

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## Abstract:

Midnapore, the headquarters of Paschim Midnapore district, can be called a *city of Mosques*. The town is filled with countless Mosques (Masjid) and Shrines (Mazar). As a result of the arrival of many Pirs, Fakirs, and Sufis in the town of Midnapore, many Mosques, Mazars and Eidgahs have been built. The architectural styles of Mosques and Shrines are diverse and attractive. The underlying ideology of Islam has become deeply and fundamentally embedded in the fabric of architecture. The symbol of world peace, Islam, is not limited to the appeal or opportunity for worship of a single person; rather, the well-being of life lies in building unity with everyone, and its architectural designs have become diverse. Just as the taste and cultural identity of the people of a region can be found through the architecture of a region, so too can we get some idea of the ruling class and administration of that region and their character. At the same time, the extent and expansion of administration can also be felt based on the trend of urbanization in the relevant region and its sources. As mosques and shrines were built in various Muslim neighborhoods within the city of Midnapore, traces of Muslim architecture are observed in those areas. As mosques and shrines were built in various Muslim neighborhoods of Midnapore Town, traces of Muslim architecture and Muslim settlements can be observed in those areas. Notable Mosques and Mazars in the town of Midnapore are Dewan Khana Mosque, Rammaj Mosque, Chandan Shaheed Baba Mazar and Mosque, Jora Mosque, Gambhira Baba Mazar, etc. The pinnacles above the Mosque's dome and the various designs inside the mosque add a new dimension to the architectural style.

**Keywords:** mosque (masjid), mazar (shrine), architecture, midnapore, urs, etc.

Midnapore is a ancient and diverse town. It is the district headquarters of Paschim Medinipur in the state of West Bengal. The latitude and longitude of Midnapore town are 22.43° north and 87.33° east. Its average elevation above sea level is 24 metres (78 ft). Midnapore is a city of Mosques (Masjid)<sup>1</sup> and many Shrines (Mazar). It is doubtful whether any other town has such beautiful mosques and shrines. Many of these mosques and shrines were built during the Pathan and Mughal periods. The importance of this place increased greatly during the Pathan and Mughal periods. In the *Ain-i-Akbari*, Midnapore is mentioned as a large city with two large forts. The main road to Odisha passed through this city, and during the Mughal and Pathan wars, the fort was used to control the troops. This place developed into a Muslim settlement and a center for the propagation of Islam at that time. Perhaps the Muslim rulers intended to develop it into a second *city of Medina*. So the name *Medinapur* may not be fictional. The ancient name *Midhunpur* may have been changed to *Medinapur* for some time. Later, the British changed the name to *Midnapore*.<sup>2</sup> Hunter, in his book published in 1876, says; “The majority of people

in the Midnapur District are Hindus, with the other individuals being Muslims, Christians, and hill people who practise indigenous religions. The Hindus number 1,133,290 males and 1,152,278 females; total, 2,285,568, or 90 per cent. of the total population: proportion of Hindu males to total Hindu population, 49.6 per cent. The Muhammadans of Midnapur District number 75,693 males; 81,354 females; total, 157,047, or 6.2 per cent. of the population: proportion of Muhammadan males to total Musalman population, 48.2 per cent.”<sup>3</sup> There were 169,264 people living in the Midnapore municipality as of the 2011 census, with 84,977 men and 84,287 women. In the town, there are 27,238 Muslims and 139,827 Hindus.<sup>4</sup>

Architecture is one of the most important signs of the development of human civilization. One of the best ways to learn about the overall history, traditions, culture, values, etc. of a nation is through the architectural monuments built by that nation. Although the mosque architecture of the town of Midnapore has been destroyed due to the evolution of time and lack of proper preservation, some of the architectures still survive as witnesses to history. The article under discussion attempts to present the architectural styles and aesthetic characteristics of the Mosques and Mazars built in Midnapore. The mosque is the best place. Therefore, the mosque is considered the house of Allah. In the mosque, Muslims perform the basic prayers of the religion five times a day. Since the mosque is the place where the fundamental principles of religion are realized, the role of the mosque in carrying out other religious functions is also relevant and undeniable. It is a gathering place for Muslims, where they meet five times a day to establish a relationship with their Lord (Allah), as well as to keep in touch with each other and build bonds of brotherhood. As a result, their mutual cooperation and love spread throughout society and a civilized society was developed. There is a kind of confusion in our society about the use of the words grave, tomb, and Mazar. The definition states that the place where a Muslim is buried is called a *Grave*. It is stated in the Hadith Sharif, A person's grave will either be a garden in Paradise or a pit in Hell. A garden is called *Rawza* in Arabic. Therefore, since the Prophets and Companions are in Paradise, similarly, righteous believers will also go to Paradise, so their graves can be called *Rawza* in honor. And mazar is also an Arabic word. In Bengali, it means a place of pilgrimage. In this sense, according to *Sharia*, the graves of all believers are mazars, because the graves of all believers are places of pilgrimage and the graves are visited.<sup>5</sup> However, the graves of Pir, Wali-Auliya, Fakir-Darbeshes in our country are called mazars, since people visit them more often.

The main aim and purpose of my article is to analyze the history, tradition and architecture of the Muslim mosque architectures in the town of Midnapore by highlighting the location, construction history, construction style, decorative features and the social, political, religious and cultural image of the region during the Mughal rule. The beautiful three-domed *Dewan Khana Mosque* is located in the Aliganj area near Battalachak in the middle of the city. It is said that the mosque was founded by Refaetullah, the Dewan of Aurangzeb. That is why it is called *Dewan Khana Mosque*. It is a beautiful example of Mughal architecture of the 17th century.<sup>6</sup> The mosque is 70 feet long and 28 feet wide. The three-domed *Abul Farha Mosque* is located in the Mirza Mahalla area. Located in the city's Shahi Mohalla, the three-domed *Shahi Mosque* is a beautiful architectural masterpiece. The three-domed *Rammaj Mosque* in Barastana (Habibpur) Mahalla is one of the most spectacular architectural feats. Locals say that this mosque is more than 200 years old. Currently, the mosque is run by the Mutawalli. The mosque measures 50 feet 3 inches in length and 23 feet in width.<sup>7</sup> The ruins of an old mosque have been found in the Patharghata area (Near Gandhi Ghat) on the southern edge of the town. The locals identify the mosque as the *Patharghata Old Mosque*. The exact name of the mosque has not been found.

There is an old cemetery near the mosque. There burials are not done at present. And just opposite the mosque there is a Mazar Sharif and an old Eidgah. There are traces of many old architectural ruins in that area. Currently, the place is called *Karbala Maidan* by the locals. Every year, in the month of Muharram, Muharram fair and various Islamic events are held. Every year, during Rath Yatra, Rath Yatra fair is held at that place. This place bears witness to the brotherhood and unity of Hindus and Muslims.<sup>8</sup> A mosque named *Saha-Adil Mosque* is found in Sepoy Bazaar. There is a Persian inscription probably engraved on a metal plate on the front wall of this single-domed mosque. It is known that it was built during the reign of Shah Jahan (1626-1656). The mosque was dedicated in the name of a Muslim Pir named Shah Daul.<sup>9</sup> There is a graveyard near it. There is a market named after the mosque, which is called *Saha-Adil Market*.



**Figure-1: Rammaj Mosque, Baraastana, Midnapore**

Source: Collected by the Author



**Figure-2: Patharghata Old Mosque, Karbala Maidan, Patharghata (Near-Gandhi Ghat) Midnapore.**

Source: Collected by the Author



**Figure-3: Dewan Khana, Aliganj, Midnapore.**

Source: Collected by the Author



**Figure-4: Abul Farah Mosque, Mirza Mahalla, Midnapore.**

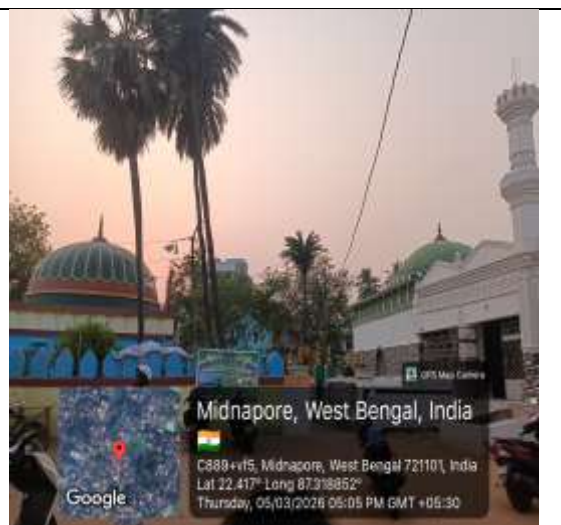
Source: Collected by the Author

The town of Midnapore once hosted a gathering of many Pirs, Fakirs, and Sufis, as evidenced by the presence of several shrines and dargahs named after those saints. The beautiful mosques of Miya Mahalla or Miya Bazar and the *Ala Huzur Urs* festival here are well known throughout Bengal. The great Sufi saint Hazrat Syed Murshed Ali Al Qadri Baghdadi, who is popularly known as *Maula Pak* to his devotees. The shrine of Maula Pak adjacent to the *Jora Mosque* in Midnapore town, his residence Dayara Pak, and the Orash festival of Ganj Pak (wife) located on the banks of the Kansai River attract a large number of devotees and pilgrims. Devotees from far and wide come to the dargah premises to offer chadar and participate in prayers. On the occasion of this Urs festival, a religious discussion meeting was organized in a solemn atmosphere in the premises and courtyard of the Medinipur *Jora Mosque* in a fitting manner under the guidance and supervision of the current successor of the great-grandson (senior) Hazrat Syed Shah Rashid Ali Al Qaderi Al Baghdadi Pak, Hazrat Syed Shah Yasub Ali Al Qaderi Al Baghdadi Pak (Motawalli of the Medinipur Jora Mosque and Shrine Pak, the 36th descendant of the Prophet and the 23rd descendant of Huzoor Ghaus Pak).<sup>10</sup> It is known that about 250 years ago, the great man of this lineage, Hazrat Syed Shah Abdullah Al Jilani Al Baghdadi, arrived in India by sea from Baghdad Sharif via the Chandbali port of Odisha. Later, after staying in Mangalkot for some time, he returned to his country, but left his two sons in India - one settled in Mangalkot and the other in Purnia, Bihar. Both these places are known today as important centers of the Qaderia Tariqa. Since the time of the great Sufi saint Al Huzur Pak, the father of Maula Pak, Midnapur became the main place of pilgrimage for this lineage.<sup>11</sup> Maula Pak passed away on 27th Shawwal 1318 AH, 4th Falgun 1307 B.E. and 17th February 1901 A.D. at 2:11 PM, Sunday, at the age of 48 years, 7 months and 1 day. Therefore, every year—according to the Bengali calendar—on the 4th of Falgun, the Urs Mubarak of Maula Pak is celebrated at the Midnapore Daira Pak and the Jora Masjid Pak.<sup>12</sup> During the Urs festival, thousands of pilgrims gather from different states and districts of the country. A highly decorated special train from Bangladesh carries 2-3 thousand pilgrims for the Urs festival, making it the most attractive aspect of the event.



**Figure-5: Jora Mosque, Miya Bazar, Midnapore.**

Source: Collected by the Author



**Figure-6: Chandan Saheed Mazar and Mosque, Miya Bazar, Midnapore.**

Source: Collected by the Author

A few shrines away from Khanka Sharif contain the tombs of Chandan Shaheed, Mukti Baba, Chandan Shaheed's wife and Muhammad Shaheed. Chandan Shaheed's real name is Hazrat Syed Saha Dewan Razi (R.A.). This name is inscribed on the wall of the Mazar Sharif. Some local residents believe that he came here from Arab countries during the time of Farooq Shiar. Others say that he came to India from Khorasan.<sup>13</sup> The Chandan Baba Urs festival is celebrated on the 6th of Zilhajj. The Chandan Shaheed Mosque is located to the right of the shrine of Chandan Shaheed Baba. The mosque has three domes, which is one of the most important architectural sculptures. The three-domed Yadgar Sahib Mosque (Ghambira Baba) in the Mahatabpur area is a beautiful architectural specimen. Near the mosque is the mazar of Hazrat Dewan Shah Yadgar Sahib. It is said that he was present there during the time of Aurangzeb.<sup>14</sup> The Urush festival is celebrated every year on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of Magh at the Mazar of Hazrat Pir Pahlewan Baba, located at the LIC intersection in Midnapore town.

There is a mazar of Madani Baba near the grounds of Medinipur College. Aurangzeb gifted Maulana Mustafa Madani (RA) a Masjid and property worth lakhs of rupees in the present-day of Midnapore. The name *Madanipur* was derived from the name of this Maulana Madani Sahib, and later it was corrupted to Medinipur. The reign period is Bengali year 1090-91. It is preserved by Furfura Sharif (Kebla Huzur).<sup>15</sup> Arefin Shah Mustafa Madani (RA) was born in Furfura Sharif in 1608 AD. A reformer of the 19th-20th centuries, Furfurar Mujaddid Zaman Shah Abkar Siddiqui (RA) was the sixth descendant of Shah Mustafa Madani (RA). Other notable shrines in the town of Midnapore include Ankarh Shah Baba (Kankabati), Golap Shah Baba, Taku Shah Baba, Dewan Chamru Baba, Buddu Baba, Nashir Shah Baba, etc. This shows the role played by Muslim Pirs and Sufis in the propagation of Islam in this town. The favor of the Muslim rulers in this regard is also noteworthy. Apart from the mosques mentioned above, there are many mosques in the Muslim neighborhoods of Midnapore town. The mosques in the Muslim neighborhood of the town are; Mitthu Mosque (Baraastana), Tikiya Mosque (Mir Bazar), Churiwala Mosque (Sepoy Bazar), Fakir Kua Mosque (Near Busstand), Kala Mosque (Baitul Noor, Miya Bazar), etc.

Muslims, in almost every field, combined local materials and architectural techniques, incorporating regional influences, expanding the scope of Muslim architecture as a whole, and reflecting regional and national characteristics. Hindu architecture is based on the Trabeate system, while Muslim architecture is based on the Arcuate (Khilan) system. The temple spires are formed by long angular pinnacles or adorned with pyramid-shaped towers, and one or as many domes and minarets can be seen on the roof of the mosque. Even though Hindus and Muslims follow their own religions and religious precepts, differences in architectural structures have naturally arisen, just like differences in religious ideologies. Despite such differences, in certain cases, some similarities can be found between both architectural styles due to shape. Muslims were the first to introduce the dome construction method in this country, which was a completely new introduction in this country. As a result, the shape of the pyramid changed to an oval shape. Thus, the tradition of maintenance was implemented in the architectural features of this country. As a result, bulb-shaped buildings began to appear in the cities, ports and villages of this country. In India, this architectural style is called Indo-Islamic or Indian Muslim architecture.<sup>16</sup>

The architecture and construction style of the Rammaj Mosque, Dewan Khana Mosque, Shahi Mosque, Chandan Shaheed Mosque, Ghambira Baba and Abul Farah Mosque are almost similar. The mosque structure combines many features. Among them, two features have emerged as exceptionally important features of Bengali architecture. The first is the beautiful angular appearance of the structure; the second is the wonderful integration of structural engineering. The architect's aesthetic mentality is evident in the

design, decoration, and balance of the building's structure, construction, and various accessories. The second architectural feature is what method was used to construct the roof of the architectural structure? The design plan of the arch system was implemented in the construction of the roof of the mosque. An elongated ribbed vault has been employed for the construction of the central roof. Conversely, a dome has been constructed as the roofing over each square 'Bay,' utilizing the pendentive system to support its weight. In this method of construction, bricks are placed diagonally and horizontally in each successive layer, creating a process of changing from square to circular.<sup>17</sup> There are a total of 5 arched entrances to the Qiblah building of these six mosques, which are long in the north-south direction, including 3 on the eastern wall and 1 each on the northern and southern walls. The entrances to the north and south walls of some mosques are currently closed with iron latticework. The central entrance is relatively large and the north-south entrances are relatively small. The six mosques are three-domed. The central dome is larger than the other two domes, which bears the architectural features of the Mughal era. The three domes are placed on octagonal drums. The top of the domes is decorated with lotus flower designs and pitcher tops, which bear the characteristics of rural Bengal.

The use of local materials can be observed in the construction of mosques. Local materials include fire- and sun-baked bricks, gray sandy clay for plaster, local wood, iron, lime-Surki, etc. The mosques have three octagonal half-domed mihrabs on the west wall along the eastern entrance, and the mihrabs are set within rectangular frames. To the right of the central mihrab is a three-tiered pulpit from which the Imam delivers the sermon. Two wide arches built diagonally from brick pillars adjacent to the wall divide the interior of the mosque into three Bays. The middle *Bay* is square and the two side *Bays* are rectangular. Mosques (Six) have deep recesses, one on the right side of the mihrab on the west wall, two on the north and south walls, and two on either side of the main entrance on the east wall, which were used for lighting. On the upper part of the mosque, there is a closed Marlon<sup>18</sup> design on all four sides along the roof and a multi-layered bracket design has been used, which enhances the beauty of the mosque. Designs of various vines, sunflowers, lotus flowers, and pomegranate flowers are observed in different parts of the mosque. The existence of ponds can be observed on the east and west sides of the mosques. Currently, ponds are observed near the Rammaj Mosque, Chandan Shaheed Mosque and Dewan Khana Mosque. The mosques in the city of Midnapore were located quite high above the ground. Mosques were surrounded by walls three to four feet high. There was a main entrance facing east to enter the mosque. Worshippers used to enter the mosque through that gate. There were stairs on both sides of the entrance, and the muezzin would climb up those stairs and give the call to prayer. Nowadays, except for one or two mosques, most of the mosques have almost completely destroyed such entrances. There are four minarets at the four corners of the mosque. The tops of the minarets are decorated with lotus petal designs and the top is made of kalasa designs. Four more small minarets can be seen in the middle of these four minarets. Arrangements were made to ascend the mosque premises by means of many stairs. Many single-domed mazars and mosques are observed in the city of Midnapore. Some of such shrines and mosques are; Mitthu Mosque, Shah Daul Mosque, Chandan Shah Baba Mazar, Jora Mosque Mazar, Pir Pehlewan Mazar, etc. Lotus designs, creeper designs, and floral designs can be seen in various parts of the mazar and mosque. Due to population growth, mosques have been renovated and expanded in size. As a result, many architectural structures have been destroyed during mosque renovations. Many mosques and mazars have been almost destroyed due to lack of renovation. Most of the mosques and mazars in the town of Midnapore are managed under the supervision of the Waqf. Mosques are a unique architectural style that has influenced the world. Abstract ornamentation has made

this style famous. The importance of brotherhood in Islam is immense. One of the characteristics of Islam is to establish a sense of brotherhood among people. One of the greatest qualities of Islam is to establish a sense of brotherhood among believers by eliminating their mutual disputes and conflicts. The person in charge of the mazar (pir or khadem) plays an important role in maintaining social unity, solidarity, and communal harmony centered on the mazar, in addition to providing spiritual guidance. Mosques and Mazars of the town of Midnapore, with their use of Bengali materials, local influences, construction methods, etc., have played an important role in preserving the architectural history and tradition of the Mughal and later periods. Mosques and Mazars have preserved their historical traditions until the present time and will continue to do so in the future. Unfortunately, some parts of the architecture are currently in a dilapidated state. If these very important structures can be brought under proper maintenance, it will be possible to save many endangered structures from permanent destruction. In addition to repairing broken parts, it is also advisable to monitor whether mosques and shrines are being operated properly. Because mosques and shrines give a clear idea of the socio-economic and political conditions of the time and at the same time highlight the regional culture.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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