

Panbari Mosque: A Symbol of Early Islamic Heritage and Architectural Tradition in Assam

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Abstract:

Islam, meaning submission and obedience to Allah, is a comprehensive way of life that guides human beings in spiritual, moral, social, economic and cultural spheres. It emphasizes peace, equality, compassion, and justice, rejecting violence and social discrimination. Central to Islamic religious life is the mosque (Masjid), regarded as the House of Allah, where Muslims gather for daily prayers, communal worship, and social interaction. From the simple structure of the Prophet Muhammad's house at Madina, mosque architecture gradually evolved, reflecting regional styles while maintaining spiritual purpose and discipline. In Assam, Islam spread mainly in the western region of Kamrup, leaving behind significant architectural and cultural heritage. The Panbari Masjid, also known as Rangamati Masjid, is believed to be the oldest mosque in Assam and stands as an important symbol of early Islamic presence in the region. The study highlights the religious, social, and architectural significance of Islam and mosques in Assam, emphasizing the need for preservation and cultural awareness.

Keywords: Islam, Mosque (Masjid), Panbari Masjid, Islamic Architecture and Assam

Introduction

Islam is an Arabic word that means submission and obedience to Allah. Submission means accepting the commands of Allah, while obedience means practicing those commands in daily life. Through submission and obedience, Islam aims to bring peace, harmony, and balance to both individual life and society as a whole. Islam is not limited only to religious rituals; rather, it is a complete way of life that provides guidance to all mankind from Allah, the Creator of the universe. Islam explains the purpose of human creation, the responsibilities of human beings, and their final destiny after death. It clearly defines the position of human beings in relation to other creatures and the universe. Islam also provides guidance on how to conduct personal and public life. Its teachings cover social, political, economic, moral, and spiritual activities. A person who accepts Islam and follows its teachings in everyday life is known as a Muslim.¹

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Published: 28 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i1.30800>

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¹ Feroze Hussain, Muthavalli of Abbasi Ashurkhana-e-Mubarak Wakf, Thousand Lights, 2011

One of the core teachings of Islam is love, compassion, and kindness toward all human beings. Islam emphasizes cordial behavior and mutual respect, irrespective of differences such as rich or poor, educated or uneducated, master or servant, king or slave. Islam does not preach violence; instead, it promotes peace, equality, justice, and human dignity. Islam also grants equal rights to women and recognizes their important role in society. These values form the foundation of Islamic social life. The teachings of Islam are mainly learned and practiced through mosques. For Muslims, no place is more sacred than the mosque. The word mosque is derived from the Arabic word Masjid, which means a place of prostration. A mosque is a place of worship dedicated to Allah and is often referred to as the “House of Allah.” It is a disciplined and sacred space where Muslims offer Namaz (prayer) five times a day with purity of body, mind, and soul. In the Qur’an, the word Masjid is used many times, but special importance is given to three mosques: Masjid al-Haram at Makkah, Masjid al-Nabawi at Madina, and Masjid al Aqsa. These mosques hold the highest religious significance in Islam. The early development of mosque architecture was based on the house of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) at Madina, which later became Masjid al-Nabawi.²

During the time of Prophet Muhammad, mosques were very simple in structure. They were built mainly for worship and community gatherings and did not have elaborate decoration. Over time, as Islam spread to different regions of the world, mosques became larger and more decorative. The grand structures and architectural beauty seen in present-day mosques are outcomes of historical development and modern influences. Mosques are designed to create a sense of spirituality, peace, and devotion.³ Tall entrances and domes inspire awe and remind worshippers of the greatness of Allah. The design of mosques helps believers concentrate on prayer and avoid worldly distractions. Domes and open spaces also help maintain comfort by keeping mosques cool in summer and warm in winter.

Thus, mosque architecture balances spiritual purpose with physical comfort. Apart from being places of worship, mosques also serve as important social and religious centers.⁴ Muslims gather in mosques five times a day for prayer, strengthening social unity and brotherhood. Special congregational prayer, known as Juma Namaz, is offered on Fridays. Mosques also play a role in teaching Islamic values, resolving community matters, and preserving Islamic traditions. Because of this central role, mosques form the foundation of Islamic religious and social organization. Architecturally, mosques around the world reflect regional diversity. While maintaining basic Islamic principles, mosque designs differ according to local culture, climate, and materials.⁵

In Assam, mosques can mainly be classified into two types. The first type includes reinforced concrete buildings with domes and features influenced by Mughal architecture.

² Giyasudin Khusroo. M, Secretary of Ameerunnisa Begum Sahiba Mosque & Endowments, Triplicane, Dated 3-Oct 2013.

³ R. Nath, *History of Sultanate Architecture*, p.109.

⁴ R. Nath, *History of Sultanate Architecture*, p.106.

⁵ Baruah, Rofiul Islam, *Islamiya Atijya aru Axam. (A Muslim History of Assam: A Study of Similarities of Socio-Cultural Significance of Assamese Hindu-Muslim.)*, p.6.

These mosques often have Quranic verses inscribed on their walls. The second type consists of modest Assam style mosques with iron or tin roofs, built mainly for local communities. There are also small mosques known as Huzuri Masjid, which are used for daily prayers but not for Friday congregational prayers. Islamic culture gained prominence mainly in the western region of Kamrup in Assam. One of the earliest Islamic settlements in Assam was established by Afghan warriors at Rangamati, located in the present Panbari hill area of Dhubri district.⁶ This settlement is considered one of the earliest centers of Islam in Assam.

The Panbari Masjid, also known as Rangamati Masjid, is believed to be the oldest mosque in Assam. It is situated near National Highway 31 in the Panbari area of Dhubri district. According to historical records, the mosque was constructed during the reign of Hussain Shah, the Nawab of Gaur, who ruled between AD 1493 and AD 1519. Hussain Shah was a powerful ruler during the Mughal period in Bengal. The Panbari Masjid is rectangular in shape and stands on a raised platform. It was built using lakhuri bricks and decorated with lime plaster mouldings. The prayer hall is located on the western side and has a façade with three arched doorways. Above the prayer hall are three domes, which add to the architectural beauty of the mosque. At the four corners of the mosque stand four octagonal towers extending above the roof level. An ancient well and a small tank are also found within the mosque complex. There are different opinions regarding the exact date of the mosque.

Some historians believe it was built during the invasion of Assam by Mir Jumla in 1662 under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. However, despite these debates, Panbari Masjid is widely accepted as the oldest surviving mosque in Assam and holds great historical and cultural importance. In 1928, the mosque was rediscovered when a local villager searching for firewood noticed its minarets hidden in the dense forest of Panbari. The news reached the Nawab of Dacca, Sir Salimullah, who sent his nephew Noor Habib to investigate. After confirming the existence of the mosque, the site gradually regained attention.

Today, Panbari Masjid is a sacred place for nearby villagers, though it remains largely unknown outside Dhubri district. Considering its historical value and proximity to the Maa Mahamaya Dham, one of the most important Shakti temples in Assam after Kamakhya, the Panbari area has strong potential to be developed as a major cultural and tourist destination. Proper preservation, awareness, and infrastructure development can help protect this important symbol of Assam's Islamic heritage for future generations.

Discussion

Historical sources clearly indicate that Dhubri district came into contact with Islam earlier than any other region of Assam. The early influence of Islam in this frontier region is evident from several historical references. During the month of Ramzan, Muslim travellers and soldiers are known to have halted at Dhubri, indicating its importance as an early centre of Islamic presence.⁷ The existence of numerous mosques, dargahs, mazars, and other Islamic religious sites further confirms the long-standing habitation of Muslim communities in this

⁶ Bora, M. I, Baharistan-L-Ghayebi, p. 360.

⁷ Rupkamal on his work A Forgotten Chapter of History- Panbari Mosque, 2011

area. Although there is no clear record of any organized Islamic missionary movement or large-scale conversion in this region, it is historically evident that many soldiers who accompanied the Mughal invasions did not return to their native lands. Instead, a section of them settled in Dhubri and nearby areas and married local women. Alongside this, some local people embraced Islam through the teachings and persuasion of religious leaders, gradually contributing to the growth of the Muslim population in Assam.

E. A. Gait, in his Census Report of 1891, observes that the majority of Muslims in Assam were local converts from lower castes and indigenous tribes, many of whom identified themselves as Sheikhs after conversion. At the same time, Gait notes that conversion to Islam occurred relatively late and that the earliest Muslim settlers in eastern Assam were remnants of the army of Turbak, who was defeated and killed by the Ahoms in 1522–23 A.D.⁸ Islamic culture gained particular strength in the western region of Kamrup. One of the earliest organized Muslim settlements was established by Afghan warriors at Rangamati, located in the present Panbari hill area of Dhubri district. This settlement is believed to be the earliest Islamic colony in Assam and was also known as the magazine house of Hussain Shah.⁹ Archaeological evidence, including terracotta objects dating from the 7th to the 17th centuries A.D., has been unearthed from this site. These artifacts are presently preserved in the District Museum at Dhubri. The first recorded contact of Kamarupa (ancient Assam) with Islam dates back to 1203 A.D., when the Turkish army led by Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji attempted a disastrous expedition to Tibet through this region. At that time, Kamarupa was ruled by a king named Prithu, as mentioned in the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*. In the centuries that followed, several Turko-Afghan and Mughal invasions took place. These prolonged military encounters between invading forces and the Assamese rulers gradually contributed to the increase of the Muslim population in Assam. As a result, the Nawabs of Bengal left behind several archaeological remains, mostly in the form of mosques.¹⁰

According to Minhaj-ud-din, the “sign of Islam” appeared in the region only after Malik Yuzbak conquered it and introduced Friday congregational prayers by erecting a mosque.¹¹ This development played an important role in influencing the local population toward Islamic faith and practices. Several ancient mosques in Dhubri district stand as testimony to this early Islamic presence. The most significant among them is the Panbari Masjid, also known as the Rangamati Mosque. Situated on the Panbari hills along the National Highway near Gauripur, it is widely regarded as the oldest mosque in Assam. The mosque was constructed during the pre-Mughal period by Hussain Shah, the Governor of Bengal (Gauda), who established his headquarters at Rangamati after annexing Cooch Behar and western Assam.

This mosque occupies an important place in the architectural and religious history of

⁸ H. C. Goswami (ed.), *Purani Asom Buxanji (A)* (Ref. Dhubri), p. 499

⁹ A.D.Z. Desai, *Mosques of India*, Chaitral, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, p.4.

¹⁰ M.I. Bora, *A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa During the Reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan - Vol I.: Assam: Govt. of Assam, p.54.*

¹¹ E. A. Gait, *History of Assam, Part II*, p. 89

Assam. Another important mosque is the Jame Mosque of Salkocha, built about 200 years ago by a prominent local resident, late Abir Mohammad. The mosque suffered damage during the great earthquake of 1889 but was later reconstructed by his son, Arabuddin Sarkar. The Mosque of Chapgarh, located near Gauripur in the Bhojpuri Beel area, is another remarkable structure. Architecturally, it closely resembles the Rangamati Mosque, featuring octagonal pillars, curved doorways, geometric designs, and floral motifs. The domes and minarets resemble inverted pitchers, reflecting classical Islamic architectural style. The presence of a nearby site known as Mir Jumla's Garh suggests a historical connection, though the identity of the mosque's builder remains uncertain. Surprisingly, this mosque has received little scholarly attention despite its architectural significance. In addition to these, Dhubri district has other old mosques such as the Baro Masjid and the Dhakaipatti Masjid in Dhubri and Gauripur towns. While only a few mosques are of ancient origin, many new mosques have been constructed in recent times due to population growth and religious needs. Another ancient mosque is located at Mankachar in the Hatsingimari subdivision. This mosque is believed to have been built in memory of the Mughal general Mir Jumla, who passed through Panbari during his Assam campaign and later died at Mankachar in 1633 A.D. According to a Persian inscription on the mosque wall, it was constructed in 1689 A.D. Today, it remains an active and flourishing center of worship.

The main purpose of the five daily calls to prayer from a mosque is to remind believers that Allah is supreme and to encourage them to come regularly to the mosque and surrender themselves to Him. True success in human life lies in such complete surrender to God.¹² Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised that pride should not be associated with the construction or size of mosques. Instead of showing pride in grand buildings, mosques should be understood as sacred places that strengthen the bond between God and human beings. In Islam, the mosque is a place of worship meant for the purification of the soul, the development of moral character, and the promotion of mutual cooperation among Muslims.¹³ Congregational prayers on Fridays and special prayers during Eid festivals reflect the unity, discipline, and collective spirit of the Muslim community.

Therefore, the mosque holds great social, spiritual, and even economic importance in the life of a Muslim. It brings people together, refines their inner selves, awakens their conscience, and helps them find solutions to personal and social problems.¹⁴ Traditionally, mosques were built voluntarily by prophets, kings, rulers, religious scholars, and followers of Islam using personal or donated funds. Mosques are not constructed through loans or commercial means but through voluntary contributions made for religious devotion. During the rule of the Koch kings, the Rangamati area was a prosperous frontier region. It served as a strategic post for the Koch rulers and was also used by invading armies of the Bengal Sultans and the Mughals. Some historians believe that the area functioned as the headquarters of Alauddin Husain Shah, and the mosque was used by Muslim soldiers as a prayer hall. Local

¹² M. K. Saikia, *Assam Muslim Relation and Its Cultural Significance*, p. 191.

¹³ Moulvi Mufti Mohamed Ilyas Kasimi, *Imam of Masjid-e-Mamoor*, Mannady, 2014.

¹⁴ A.D.Z. Desai, *Mosques of India*, Chaitral, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, p.4.

tradition states that about 200 years ago, villagers discovered the mosque hidden under dense forest on the Panbari hills. After clearing the area, people began offering Namaz there regularly.

Over time, Panbari hill became known as a sacred place and today the Panbari Masjid is regarded as a holy shrine by the people of western Assam. The natural beauty of the hills, rich vegetation, unique location, and archaeological importance give the site strong potential to develop into a major tourist destination. Recent archaeological discoveries near the mosque include brick platforms, terracotta objects, and a hoard of coins, which are tentatively dated to the Mughal period. Some historians believe the mosque was built between 1493 and 1519 A.D. by Alauddin Husain Shah after his conquest of the Kamatapur kingdom, to celebrate victory and offer prayers.¹⁵ Another view suggests that the mosque was constructed in 1662 during the Assam campaign of Mir Jumla, under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Adjacent structures such as an Idgah and a deep well were likely built during the same period.¹⁶

The Panbari Masjid is a living mosque and remains active for daily prayers. A small Maktab (religious school) is attached to the mosque for basic Islamic education. The mosque has a spacious paved courtyard, three domes, and a minaret, though some of these features were added later. The building is simple, without painted decoration or ornamentation. The mosque is managed by the Panbari Mosque Management Committee, which appoints the Imam and other staff. Religious duties such as leading prayers and conducting services are performed by the Imam. The expenses of the mosque are met through donations from devotees. The Panbari Masjid enjoys deep respect in western Assam, and people donate generously regardless of religion, caste, or creed. During major Islamic festivals such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha, the mosque takes on a festive appearance and attracts thousands of visitors. People come not only from different parts of India but also from countries such as England and Japan. On Fridays, hundreds gather for Jumu'ah prayers, while around 150 worshippers can pray inside the mosque at a time.¹⁷ The Archaeological Survey of India under the Ministry of Culture has taken some steps to conserve the monument. However, local residents feel that these efforts are insufficient and demand stronger measures for preservation. Religious institutions play an important role in maintaining faith, peace, and social harmony, and the Panbari Masjid is no exception. As a public religious institution, it receives voluntary contributions through donation boxes. Many people from Assam, other parts of India, and abroad donate to the mosque, believing that prayer and charity bring relief, peace, and divine blessings. Islam teaches not only how to live a meaningful life in this world but also how to prepare for the eternal life and the Panbari Masjid continues to serve as a center of faith, peace, and spiritual connection with Almighty Allah.

Conclusion:

Every mosque plays an important role in creating unity among people. It teaches self-

¹⁵ R. Deb, *Coochbeherer Itihas*, p.47.

¹⁶ Mohammed Iqbal Patel, Manager of Siddique Sarai Mosque, Poonamalle High Road, Near Ripon Building, Dated 3-Oct-2013

¹⁷ T. Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, p.67.

discipline, moral values, and good conduct. When people sincerely follow these teachings, the benefits spread throughout society. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized that a Muslim should show commitment to Islam through good character and behaviour. Those who possessed such noble qualities were described as Khaira Ummat (the best community). Mosques help in building such a morally strong and united society. To protect India's rich cultural heritage, the Archaeological Survey of India has identified several ancient mosques in the North-East that require preservation.

In Dhubri district, mosques such as the Jame Mosque of Salkocha, the Mosque of Chapgarh near Gauripur, and the Mosque of Mankachar are well known for their architectural beauty and historical importance. Preserving their ancient construction methods and architectural styles is essential. Both worshippers and mosque management committees must understand the importance of conservation. In a country that values unity in diversity, protecting such heritage structures strengthens national pride and democratic values. Even today, many mosques promote communal harmony. On the birthday of the Prophet, people from different religions are invited to share meals, fostering goodwill and mutual respect. During the holy month of Ramadan, special food is distributed in the evenings to break the fast, and people of all religions are welcome. Many Muslims also distribute food and alms through mosques to the poor, travelers, and the homeless, without discrimination. This spirit of charity reflects the true humanitarian values of Islam.

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