

Exploring the History of Non-Hindu Religious Establishment of Maynaguri

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Abstract: *The present paper Exploring the History of Non-Hindu Religious Establishment of Maynaguri tries to describe the cultural richness of the Maynaguri and enhancing the non-Hindu religion history. It contains a detailed history about Islam and Buddhism of North Bengal and how these religions are flourishing in different parts of this area, particularly in Maynaguri.*

Maynaguri is considered as very famous place for Shiva temples and many scholars also describing this but non- Hindu culture and religious establishments didn't get much attentions. For that reason, this article tries to give an elaborate discussion about the spread of Islam and Buddhism in Maynaguri with special reference of Maynaguri Town Mosque and Buddha Shanti Ashramic Bihar.

Keywords: *Buddhism, Islam, Mosque, Maynaguri, Religious Establishments, Shrine etc.*

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Introduction

Maynaguri (Jalpaiguri) has a rich cultural history and is popularly known for its religious establishments and is marked as one of the cultural hotspots of North Bengal. For a long time, numerous, travelers, explorers, and pilgrims, have been visiting this area and sharing their experiences about the cultural richness of this area. Several scholars have written down the historical background of these religious establishments and discussed their importance also, but most of them elucidated the historical background of Hindu establishments and portrayed Maynaguri as the main center of

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Hinduism. However, most of the people of mentioned places indeed belong to Hinduism, and the majority of their establishments were created during the pre-medieval and medieval periods for that reason these issues attracted the scholar's interest but another chief feature of the cultural character of Maynaguri more or less neglecting by predecessors, i.e., the composite culture. This area is not a hub of only Hinduism but also other religious people, since a long time living here, they have had their religious establishments. However, the non-Hindu religious establishment in Maynaguri also has historical importance and is stationed as the symbol of the cultural integration of this place. India is a center of cultural heritage and their glorious past is very long, it goes back several thousand years, but the heritage of India and as well as, West Bengal is the result of the development of the social, religious, economic, cultural, and political life of the indigenous people over thousand years. Two basic components of this heritage, which have at the same time shaped this heritage are the land, the natural and physical environment of India, and the people who have inhabited this land. The generation of the people who inhabited Bengal during the various periods of her history interacted with their physical and natural environment and they have also interacted among themselves. However, if we look into the history of the Mayaguri is also part of the heritage and there have long tradition of history. The gateway of Dooars, Maynaguri, became an important religious and cultural center of North Bengal and this land awaits archaeological enthusiasm with the historical relics to be explored. This present research in "Exploring the History of Non-Hindu Religious Establishment of Maynaguri" is an attempt to focus a serious investigation on the unexplored composite culture and non-Hindu religious establishment of Maynaguri. This effort is undoubtedly the first of its kind to synthesize the forgotten chapter of Indian history. It is realized that case studies of regional, micro-level, and local will help bring to light many untold or unexplored corners of the history of our past and this portion of history has been neglected till now. From this perspective, this proposed study has explored the religion and cultural history of Maynaguri. At present it is situated within Maynaguri Police Station under the district of Jalpaiguri or Dooars region of North Bengal.

However, the Islamic background of North Bengal is very complicated to understand; it is likely that in such a background there is hardly any attempt to bring the entire region to the notice of the people. According to historians, Islam entered North Bengal after 1204 A.D., as a distinct way of religious life. The Muslim soldier Iqtiaar-uddin-Muhammad-Bin-Baqtiar Khilji had overthrown the Sena rule, by defeating and chasing away Laxman Sena the last ruler of this kingdom, at that time the Nadia was a temporary capital of Senas.¹ According to some other opinion Islam was first introduced in Bengal by some Arab traders, not by the invention of Baqtiyar Khilji. Arab traders had indeed started to come to Bengal from the mid of 7th century but in which areas they had spread Islam at that time has yet been determined. However, after discovering some ruined mosques supported these statements. The Arab traders avowedly had come to Bengal before Baqtiar Khilji and they might have practiced *namaz* in the places where they lived and perhaps, they talked about the Islamic way of life with the people who came in contact with them.

Ultimately, this Khilji warrior succeeded through incursive perseverance in establishing himself as the first Muslim ruler in Bengal by capturing the kingdom of Laxman Sena. The areas which were

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subjugated by Bakhtiyar Khilji, particularly Malda and Dinajpur belonged to the Sena dynasty, now experienced all religious and cultural changes and are connected with the Islamic rule of the 'Sariat'. Like the Sena rulers, the Muslim invader Bakhtiyar Khilji destroyed several Buddhist shrines.² Moreover, according to several scholars the high caste Hindus often converted themselves to Islam in place of the guarantee of positions as a land-owning class and their traditional positions in the revenue department of the new Islamic State and under the Muslim rulers to own lands were one of their main objects. This condition not only prevailed in Bengal but also Delhi. During the pre-Islamic period, the lower caste Hindus were never allowed education and even they were not recruited as government officials under the state after introducing most of them embraced Islam because they thought it would give them social status and recognition. Only the higher caste Hindus were employed in the administration and the new foreign rulers also followed this tradition. However, according to historians and other scholars, Islam spread over North Bengal due to such serious causes, for example – (a) In the medieval scenario compared to caste-based Hinduism the emergence of Islam encompassing all aspects of social and individual life thought to be more human and dynamic; (b) The Islamic religious establishment like mosques (prayer hall) and religious teachings of ulemas and Sufis instilled a sense of security against the incursive attitude of the Hindus. The mosques were not only shelter for Muslim devotees but for all helpless and poor people; (c) The philosophical advantages of Islam for its universal brotherhood among the Muslims and the role of the Sufi saints in drawing the attention of people who were tortured and exiled by the higher caste Hindus;³ (d) Respect of Islam to the culture of work and labor and acquisitions the land of peasants, cobblers and blacksmiths and involve the peoples in other craftsmanship;⁴ (e) Introduce of Islamic theocracy facilitating the spread of Islam as the religion of the state;

However, during the Sena period, the Hindu administrative system was dependent on *Manusmhitā*, *Yajñavalkyasmṛiti* and *Naradasmṛiti*, etc. and in that system, there was no spur of unity organizing the people of the state under a roof.⁵ But the new religion Islam established a new administration where the religion and the authority of the state originated from the religious authority, yet the unity of the people in the name of *Allah* at the time of *Namaz* was predominant.⁶ The administration and political economy, trade and commerce individual life, and the social system were based on the all-inclusive and all-pervading structure and discourse of Islam. The Muslim rulers of Bengal from the period of Bakhtiyar Khilji always wanted to spread Islam by announcing it as the state religion and the spread of Islam remained in the priority of Muslim rulers in Bengal.

But, in the Dooars, Islam was being spread by the hand of Nasir-Uddin-Mohammad, son of Iltutmish in 1228 A.D. During this period the upper mentioned area came under the raja Prithu. King Prithu was determined to control the expansion of Muslim domination in his Kingdom but he did not succeed, but as the king who defeated by the son of Iltutmish. Thereafter, after the fall of Prithu's kingdom, large numbers of people embraced Islam. Then, in the second phase of the spread of Islam in the Kamta region inaugurated by the Hussain Shah in 1498 A.D., during this time, Gosanimari was the capital of Kamta Kingdom.⁷ But after the fall of the Khena dynasty of Kamatapur the Maulvis and Muslim Pirs undertook the task of spreading Islam among the *Kafers* very seriously. The third phase of Islamisation

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in the Dooars region began after the second Anglo-Bhutan War. After the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 and specifically when in 1866 Hedayet Ali received rent free lease of 20 taluks in Alipur Duar.⁸ Not only that he holds the position of administrator of this area and under his leadership, the power and position of Muslims became very secure. Perhaps one of the most important causes for the growth of the Muslim population in this area because of Muslim marriage policy in which of person could marry at least four times and the married to Hindu women was most welcome. During that time some Sufi Saints had settled in Kamtapur and they taught the main theme of Islam by using local language. These positive influences of Islam led to the conversion of many people to Islam and increased the number of Muslims in this area. According to Edward Gait, in eastern India specifically in North Bengal, a considerable number of Koches, fishermen and *chandals* drew themselves towards Islam. The Rajbanshi people in the deferments area of Coach Behar and Jalpaiguri district were engaged with different occupations such as agriculture, masonry, and animal husbandry etc., these types of low-graded works were always neglected by higher caste Hindus during this period, probably these are the main region many Rajbanshi people conversion to Islam.⁹

The caste system and inter-caste hatred in Hinduism perhaps created a divisive force among the Hindus while Islam in the name of universal brotherhood kept all the Muslims together. In the mosques, there was no division between the rich and poor. It can be said that, as a unifying force Islam set the best example of social conjunction in the caste-ridden society of Bengal. The mystical and all-loving philosophy of the Sufi saints hugged the lower caste and poor Hindus with the soft arms of humanity.¹⁰ The policy of Zakat was helping the poor and low cast people against the torture of money-landing classes in the agriculture-based rural society and they understood that Islam would be only the path to liberate themselves from the trap and bondages of money-lending classes. Thus, Islam became a new path of existence as well as a new way of life for cultivators of North Bengal where the majority of the population engaged in cultivation. Islamic religious establishments and other architectural buildings gave Islam a long-form institutional character and strengthened its roots in this new land. Hussain Shahi had been built many Islamic religious establishments after the subjugation of Kamtapur for prayer.¹¹

With the beginning of the Mughal period, the center of power transferred from North Bengal to South Bengal and the capital transformed from the Gaur-Pandua to Dhaka. In the eastern part of the North Bengal, they emerged a new Hindu dynasty of Coach and the kingdom named as Kamata-Koach Kingdom.¹² In 1613 the Mughal army defeated Parikshit Narayan, the ruler of Eastern Kamtapur, and captured his kingdom and a great revolt was organized by a Coach Peasants leader named Sanatan but the revolt was crushed. The whole of eastern Kamtapur including the present Dhubri fell under the control of the Mughals and as a result, the Muslim apostles got a new chance to spread Islam in this area. It is a fact that during the Mughal period, the Coach Kings of Coachbehar became subordinates to the Mughal *subedar* of Dhaka and the Hindu kings had to adjust with the Muslim Pirs, Ulemas, and preachers, whoever came to Coachbehar. Thus, conversion to Islam continued in North Bengal. At the time of the Mughal invention of the Coachbehar kingdom in the first decade of the 18th century (1710-11 A.D.) the Raja of Baikunthapur tried to annex a part of the territory of the king of Coachbehar by joining with the Mughals. With the decline of power, the King of Coachbehar lost his control over the

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northern region of Dooars. Taking this advantage, the Raja of Baikunthapur became independent he even adversely interfered with the affairs of the Kamata-Koch kingdom. The Mughals had to make a treaty with the king of Coachbehar and during this time Raja of Baikunthapur had to take in a large number of Muslims as his subjects, for whom he arranged settlements in his territories, and a large number of them was sent beyond Maynaguri areas of the Dooars.¹³ After this elaborate discussion on Islamization we may admit that during this phase, one of the devotees of Islam came to Maynaguri and established a mosque, which has demanded such historical exploration.

Maynaguri Town Mosque

As discussed earlier the history of Maynaguri is rich and antique. Starting from the linga puja to Buddhist ritual to the Muslim faith, all these religions blossoming here at Maynaguri. For a long time, the Muslim faith nourished itself in the ambiance of Maynaguri. The Maynaguri town mosque itself speaks as evidence claiming about the growth and development of the Islamic faith of Maynaguri. Town *Masjid* is the oldest mosque of the Maynaguri block situated at Babu Para opposite Maynaguri Girls High School. Presently the mosque does not, however, provide any kind of aid for maintenance. Due to lack of evidences, we could not trace the history of the mosque. According to some verbal statements of the present successors Nurul Hadi Choudhury had built the mosque. Almost two hundred years ago in the year 1810 A.D., the mosque was built, during that time Nurul Hadi Choudhury was the Zamindar of Maynaguri and almost all the land near the Maynaguri Girls School belonged to him. At that time Muslim people had to travel long distances to offer *Namaz*. Due to this reason, Nurul Hadi Choudhury built the mosque opposite his residence. Furthermore, he donated it to the Muslim people and gave monetary help to the mosque from time to time, he invited architects from Delhi to build up the mosque, and an antique Mughal architectural style is featured in this mosque which is unique compared to all mosques in Jalpaiguri district.¹⁴

As Nurul Hadi Choudhury was very rich and wanted to help the migrated Afghani *Pathans* who came from Afghanistan for business purposes. He had built proper houses for them inside the mosque as these people lived in very bad conditions. Since then all the Afganisthani Pathan Muslims who came to Maynaguri settled in the mosque and they mostly deal in lending money with interest. All the upcoming successors of Nurul Hadi Choudhury including Abubasar Choudhury (grandson of Nurul Hadi Choudhury and Abu Khair Choudhury (son of Abubasar Choudhury) all fulfilled all these responsibilities with great interest. Later it became difficult for the successors of Nurul Hadi Choudhury to handle the task of maintenance of the mosque and they formed a committee consisting of all the important dignitaries of the area to look after the mosque. Since then the committee has been doing the task with great responsibility. Ashique Choudhury the present successor of Nurul Hadi Choudhury lineage informs us that there is no evidence about the organization or formation membership of the aforesaid committee. However, the committee had been working for the past fifty years. We also know from the present successor that every three years the members as well as the president of the committee were changed. At present, there are thirty members of the committee. The general secretary is Mr.

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Zamir Ali Islam and the Ashique Choudhury and the cashier is the Hamider Rahman and the President is Md. Tasrue.

All the festivals and ceremonies are related to the Muslim community celebrating here. Five-time *Namazis* offered in the presence of *Maulana* and as well as five-time *Aazan* also offered by him. *Eid-Ul-Zaha* and *Eid-Ul-Fitr* are also celebrated at this mosque. The ceremony of Muharram is also performed by the Muslim community people of Maynaguri. The Wakf Board is the highest deciding authority of the Indian mosques and all the mosques of India are under this Board. All the major and minor matters relating to the mosque are taken by the Wakf Board. The town mosque of Maynaguri is also under the board and it looks after the maintenance of the Town mosque.¹⁵

Thus, we see that the town mosque has a long history that became unexplored and demanded the attention of scholars to unveil its rich cultural history.

Buddhism

As we have discussed above Maynaguri has a rich composite culture and not only Hinduism, and Islam but also Buddhism followed by the local people of this place. During the Pala period Buddhism became the main religion of the state and the rulers of this dynasty patronized several Buddhist scholars. These scholars by their teachings popularized upper mentioned religion among the local people and slowly, North Bengal was changed into a secure place for Buddhism. There are several monasteries, and shrines we can see in this area, those are bearing the spirituality of Buddhism. As part of North Bengal, the Culture of Maynaguri has also absorbed the teachings and spirituality of Buddhism by the influence of Buddhist people, who living here for a long time. This present study discusses how Buddhism spread in North Bengal as well as Maynaguri.

It is more or less a historical fact Buddhism flourished and developed in eastern India including the part of present North Bengal. During the Mauryan and Gupta periods, the Pundrabardhana became an important seat of Buddhism and Jainism. The Buddhist literature '*Divyavadana*' describes how the Jains of Pundrabardhan depicted a picture of Buddha who was falling at the feet of Mahabir Jaina. In the light of Buddhist literature, Ashoka was upset and sent Buddhist evangelists and soldiers to Pundrabardhan to make Buddhism popular and punished the Jainas. Particularly from the period of Ashoka, Buddhism became the major religion of the people in North Bengal but North Bengal did not contain the entire zone of present North Bengal down the Himalayan ranges.¹⁶

In the Gupta period, the Pundrabardhana as a 'Bhukhti' (province) still witnessed the popularity of Buddhism. Even during the period of Shasanka, the ruler of Gaur, Buddhism became insecure from any stage of decline yet the Shaivism was the state religion under Sasanka. After the death of Harshavardhana, Sasanka, and the Vaskaravarman, nearly for one hundred years, there was political unrest and conflict. But in the field of culture exact situation was not obscure. However, after the ending of '*Matsannaya*,' the Gopala came to power, and with the beginning of the Pala dynasty, a new era of Buddhism in North Bengal flourished. During the Pala dynasty, Buddhism became very popular as it was declared as the state religion. A large number of Buddhist sculptures were found in different parts of North Bengal from this it can be easily understood, how much Buddhism was famous during that

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time. There are sculptures of *Dhyany* Buddha (Buddha in Meditation), Buddha *Avalokiteswara* (compassion-incarnate Buddha), and *Tara* (the Buddhist goddess symbolizing the perfect wisdom of Buddha) in the Malda Museum, Balurghat College Museum and Akshay Kumar Matreya Museum of North Bengal University.¹⁷

Perhaps, all these sculptures belong to the Pala period when the state religion was Buddhism and the practice of Buddhism was very much common. But during the Sena period, the full scenario had been changed, particularly during the rule of Ballal Sena, who had deep faith in Brahmanism and wanted to demolish other religions. He introduced '*Kullinism*' and banned inter-caste assimilation to maintain the pure-blood concept of Kullinism. Due to his religious intolerance attitude, many Buddhist monks were tortured and exiled to other parts of the country.¹⁸ In the '*Gitagovindam*', Joydeva described Buddha as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu but the Brahmins of Bengal and the Sena royal family did not accept the view of Joydeva.¹⁹ By describing Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindus wanted to win Buddhists and thereby wanted to bring them back to the fold of Hinduism.

In the Pala rule the great Buddhist Monks, yogis, and teachers of Nalanda and Vikramshila University had a good connection with the people of Nepal and Tibet, and the people of these countries might have entered North Bengal. During the compilation of '*Charjapadas*',²⁰ North Bengal became a hub of Buddhist culture. The relics and inscriptions found in Paharpur proved that although Dharmapala founded the Sompur University, in the adjacent area of the University, a Buddhist monastery located which might be dated the middle of the 5th century i.e. from the Gupta Period.²¹ After excavation, hundreds of residing rooms of the monks, meditation center, kitchen, dining rooms, wells, and terracotta figurines and coins have been found. It is an interesting thing that out of a total of 63 figurines, the majority are of Siva, *Durga*, *Ganesh*, *Krishna*, etc. accepting a few of *Bodhisattva Padmapani*. Except Some Buddha goddess figurines such as Tara and Manjushree, almost all the terracotta belongs to Brahminical goddesses. It's proved that during the period of the Sena dynasty, rulers of this kingdom and Brahmins and other Hindus who belong to the different cast probably drove away the Buddhist monks and students and took over the position of the establishment of Paharpur, it might be possible that they forcefully converted the Buddhist to Hinduism and it also possible during this course of change the Buddhist sculpture either were replaced or destroyed. But after sometimes history repeats itself and after the invaders of Muslims in Bengal, they overthrew the Hindus from the Paharpur. After that Muslim invaders brought Paharpur under their control. This incident is proved by the fact of findings of coins belonging to the different Muslim rulers from the remains of the rooms in Paharpur. Maybe the Buddhist religion first lost its popularity due to Hindu and later Muslim oppression.

Buddhism did not endure for a long time but a big part of Buddhist and yoga literature which had been written in the Pala period could be preserved by the refugee Buddhists who took shelter in Nepal and Tibet. Perhaps for this reason after a long time the '*Charjapadas*' could be found in Nepal. Anyway, it is more or less clear that Buddhism began to decline from the beginning of the Sena dynasty and completely collapsed with the coming of Islam in Bengal.²² The Sena period was responsible for the beginning of the rising of Buddhism in Tibet particularly in the Himalayan regions of North Bengal.

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In present days because of the socio-cultural set-up of North Bengal, we come across a large number of monasteries and *Gumphas*, particularly in the different areas of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and the Dooars. If anyone happens to visit Dooars and the surrounding areas, particularly in Jalpaiguri district may feel the existence of Buddhist tradition and culture.

Buddha Shanti Ashramic Vihar

The Buddha Shanti Ashramic Bihar is situated on the bank of Jatoda River in Hospital Para of Maynaguri under the Jalpaiguri district. The shrine was established seventy to eighty years ago from the present time. Late Himansu Bimal Barua for celebrating festivals and offering prayers established this shrine. The land of the shrine was bought from a local man with the help of the funds, collected from the Buddhist community people of the area. At the beginning of the few years, the shrine was made of mud and the roof was made of straw. In the later years, it was renovated and completely made of tin shade. At that time the monk who was conducting the prayers and other rituals was named Ananda Mahathir. During that time the idol of Buddha was made by a local architect and it was made of cement. The idol was very simple and just a replica or structure of the meditated pose of Lord Buddha. An orphanage was also built in this shrine but due to the shortage of funds, later this orphanage was transferred from here to Domohoni also came under the Maynaguri block.²³ After this, almost around 10-20 years the Buddha Shanti Ashramic Vihar, had gone through the turmoil condition. Later again it was being renovated with the help of funds donated by the government and the rest by the Buddhist community people of Maynaguri. The tin-shaded shrine was transformed into a concrete building with the help of the monk Late Himanshu Bimal Barua and his relatives. This purpose led to an investment of ten lakhs in which of eight lakhs were provided by the government. In 2009 two new Buddha idols were brought from Thailand which was gifted by Buddha *Mahathera* who was a monk in the Buddha shrine of Kolkata during that time. A school is also being reconstructed for the poor children as they are continuing their studies without paying any fee and new houses were built for monks to live and practice their spiritual journey. Guest rooms are also made for the residing of pilgrims. Now a committee looks after the different problems of the shrine and also maintains the festivals of the ashram.²⁴

On *Baisakhi Purnima*, *Ashari Purnima*, *Bhado Purnima*, and *Ashwani Purnima* festivals are celebrated in a very fabulous way. But the major festival is celebrated on *Vasihakhi Purnima*. In the Morning of this day, the dress of the idol of Lord Buddha is changed and rice with vegetables or some kind of sweets is offered as '*Bhog*'. After this, the monks and the people who belong to the Buddhist community gathered for a morning procession. Again, God is offered '*swayang*' (rice and vegetables) with flowers and fruits. This time everyone is praying to God. Every *Purnima* in the evening *Hartaki*, *Bahera*, *Amla*, *Triphala*, and by mixing few other ingredients a special juice is made which is a medicine offered to the god known as '*Gelano Pathaya*'. Except this, many times juice of Banana is also offered as medicine, and cold drinks are also offered to god as liquor. Between the *Ashvani* and *Kartick Purnima*, one day is selected for performing the ritual known as '*Kothin-Chibar*'. In this shrine

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irrespective of any casts and region faith holders can enter at any time and the poor people are also given food at the festival's time.¹⁹

The life of monks is very tough and they should follow some particular rules through the different processes and also act as spiritual guides of common man who wants to know about Buddhism. However, there are certain steps, and after completion of these steps, one can achieve the respected post of monk. These rules are as follows, the children who are selected as monks are taken to the shrines and kept as volunteers. After three years they are provided with *proabaja* (cloth) after this some mantras are applied to them to pure them. Then for five years, they are learning the teachings of Buddhism. When they become twenty or above, they are promoted from shamans (volunteers) to monks. At this time five monks are offered *upsamprada* after these new monks are offered food and different items to their requirements and they are the same to various other shrines as monks. Like this, the present monk named Purnajyoti of this shrine has come from Bangladesh. After a Shaman gets transferred to a complete monk, he needs to follow certain rules. They are as follows hunting and killing of animal is prohibited, misbehavior is also prohibited and they never led a marred life. The Buddhist monks also have their food two times a day only.²⁵

The shrine has helped the Buddhist community people belonging to this area, for their get together and prayers. The shrine had a strong cultural and religious impact on the various communities residing in the area in bringing unity among them.

Conclusion

In present times the interest for Buddhist people is very less thus, there is a short change for Buddhist community approximately 30 families. But still the monastery not receiving much attention of local people or visitors, other places Buddhist shrines turned into a tourist area but Buddha Shanti Ashramic Bihar not has that much importance. If the government and the local people joined to helped the fund then this shrine will be popular and famous like another Buddhist shrine in North Bengal.



Figure 1: Buddha idols of Buddha Shanti Ashramic Bihar



Figure 2: Maynaguri Town Mosque

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