

Antiquarian Relics of Islamic Section of The Varendra Research Museum: A Methodical Study

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Back-drop: Rajshahi as a divisional town of Bangladesh has a rich cultural heritage. Being situated in the Varendra the district of Rajshahi has got numerous archaeological sites and valuable artifacts scattered all her greater territorial expanse from the time of yore. There is no denying the fact that the Varendra as a rich *Janapada* demarcated on the west by the Ganges- Mahananda, on the east by the Karatoya, on the south by Padma and on north by Tarai and Duar's Jungle witnessed the rise and fall of the various dynastic rules from very ancient time. Hence the remnants of so many civilizations could be noticed over the vast tract of land in the form of archaeological sites and excavated places. The Varendra Research Museum as a rich repository of the artifacts and antiquarian relics of the Varendra region stands with much dignity in the central position of Rajshahi city. It was founded by the direct initiative of the Varendra Research Society composed of the elites of Rajshahi in 1910 C.E. Though not accidental but the birth of the Varendra Research Museum occurred in a dramatic way. In 1909 Rama Prasad Chand read a paper entitled "Archaeological heritage of Rajshahi" in the Vangiya Literary Conference held at Rajshahi. In next year (1910) the Conference of Vangiya Sahitiya Parisad was held at Bhagalpur in which Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy, Akhaya Kumar Maitra and Rama Prasad Chand participated. Accompanied by the famous archaeologist Rakhai Das Banarji and Naresh Chandra, lawyer of Bhagalpur they visited the archaeological sites of the adjoining areas and found enormous artifacts lying scattered in several places. This visit imbibed them for the collection and preservation of the antiquities of the Varendra region.

Being back from Bhagalpur Conference Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy out of his own pocket arranged an investigation tour, in quest of antiquarian relics, in which a band of enthusiastic educationists including Akhaya Kumar Maitra participated. They collected about thirty two sculptures along with a beautiful Chandi image from various places of the Ghodagari Police Station of Rajshahi. For these valuable collections the prominent men of Rajshahi town gave an appreciable reception in honour of Kumar Sarat Kumar and his associates, and requested him to make a permanent provision for their preservation. His reply was in positive, and this hastened to the origination of the Museum in the month of April. The success of the first investigation tour inspired Kumar Sarat Kumar to launch further tours in this regard, and along with Akhaya Kumar Maitra, Rama Prasad Chanda and Sri Ram Maitra made a second tour in Khanjanpur of Jaipurhat in June 1910 to get unexplored antiquities. Here they prepared a plan of Varendra Research Society, and accordingly responsibility was thrust upon Kumar Sarat

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Kumar as President, Akhaya Kumar Maitra as Director and Rama Prasad Chanda as Honorary Secretary of the proposed Society. The Varendra Research Society was formally inaugurated on September 27, 1910 with a view to preserving the antiquities and to conducting the higher researches on them. After the formal inauguration of the Society the investigation-tours were regularly made to the various places of the Varendra in the successive years for the collection of the various types of antiquarian objects. The collection of the artifacts continued unabated under the direct supervision of the Society.

The Government of the then Bengal was when at a fix to select a proper place for the preservation of the collected objects of different types then in 1912 Kumar Sarat Kumar promised to offer a well constructed building in his own plot of land, and this would be done under the supervision of the Society. His promise came to be materialized when the foundation-stone of the Museum was laid by Lord Carmichael, the Governor of Bengal on November 13, 1916, and on the completion of its construction the Museum, where it now stands, was officially inaugurated by the Governor Lord Ronaldshow on November 27, 1919. Thenceforth it was opened for public visit. Akhaya Kumar Maitra remained the Director of the Varendra Research Society from 1910 to 1930, and under his direct participation the collection of various objects for the Museum increased to maximum expectation. Rama Prasad Chanda discharged his duty as Honorary Keeper of the Museum for quite a long span of time. Under the British colonial rule the Society as well as the Museum ran well under the monetary grant of Bengal Government and the financial assistance of Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy. In the congenial environs the Museum's collections reached to such a stage that become the eye-sore of the Indian Museum, Calcutta. But the death of Kumar Sarat Kumar Roy at age of sixty nine on June 2, 1945 incurred an irreparable loss to the well-running of the Society and the Museum as well. Nani Gopal Majumdar remained the Honorary Curator of the Museum for 1925-27. But on his joining in the Archaeological Survey of India Nirod Bandhu Sanyal discharged his duty as Curator till the year 1950.

At the end of the colonial rule India won freedom in 1947, and two independent states emerged with the name of India and Pakistan. The Varendra Research Society was on the point of dying out. The grant of rupees eleven hundred which the Varendra Museum received from the Government was stopped as it could not be transferred from Calcutta to the Government of East Pakistan. Moreover, the sales of the Museum's publications were not encouraging. All these factors stood as hindrance on well-running of the Museum. In this critical moment, Raja Pratiba Nath Roy of Dighapatia, Dr. Itrat Husain Zuberi, the Principal of Rajshahi College and Nirod Bandhu Sanyal, the Curator of the Museum rendered yeomen service to the saving of the Museum from annihilation. Even some influential men of the town with the support of a section of the people tried to close down the Museum and appropriate the land for the Medical School established nearby in 1949. They forcibly brought under their control half of the land in the northern side of the Museum and built an Anatomy Museum of the School. Till the year 1961 it was under occupation of the Medical School. But as soon as the Medical College transferred in the place, where it now stands, the whole place was evacuated for the Museum. Dr. I. H.

Zuberi discharged his duty as Honorary Curator when Nirod Bandhu Sanyal migrated to India in 1950.

The Museum suffered from financial stringency from 1947 to 1964. But the Curators of the Museum in this long period strived much to get the financial grant from the Pakistan Government in order to save the Museum from fall. Even they could build an one-storied house for the library in the north side of the Museum Campus in 1961. It is a very resourceful library containing the rich collections of books and journals. Gradually the economic condition of the Museum deteriorated, and seeing the wretched plight the Museum and Archaeological Department of the Government of Pakistan wanted to take over the Museum under her control. At this moment Professor Dr. Azizur Rahman Mallik, the Head of the Department of History, Rajshahi University and the Honorary Curator of the Museum took adequate steps for its inclusion into Rajshahi University. This move of Dr. A.R. Mallik was supported by P. A. Nazir CSP the Divisional Commissioner & the President of the Museum Management Committee. Accordingly a contract was signed between the Museum Management Committee and the University authority for taking over the Museum by the University on August 24, 1964, and on October 11 of the same year the Museum formally came under the financial and administrative control of the University of Rajshahi. With this change the Museum got a new lease of life and the Varendra Research Society lost her validity.

The administrative and academic head of the Varendra Research Museum was designated first as Keeper, then as Curator and last as Director. From 1910 till to date are inscribed the names of twenty six heads in the Honor Board of the Museum. The first Honorary Keeper was RamaPrasad Chanda, the first salaried Curator was Nani Gopal Majumdar and then from Dr. Itrat Husain Zuberi to Dr. Mukhlesur Rahman- all were Honorary Curators. Afterwards Dr. M. Rahman was appointed as the full-time salaried Curator, and later on he was elevated to the post of Director as well as to the post of Professor of Art History in the Museum. At present Mr. Muhammad Zakaria, M.Phil acts as Director (In- Charge) of the Museum.

Some conservation works have recently been done to the main building of the Museum retaining its original architectural heritage. Keeping symmetry with the main building to its south was erected an architectural annexure to house the collected artifacts. The architectural units and antiquarian relics so far collected exceeds more than ten thousand in number. In every year new addition of antiquities is being done to this Museum. A large number of stone images of various deities from the Palas down to the Senas and rare stone sculptures are among rich collections of the Museum. Besides these, the collections spread over the stone inscriptions (Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit), the copper plates, the terracotta plaques, the glazed tiles, the ceramics and other articles of minor arts. The hand-written *puthis* and the copies of the holy Quran are the fascinating attraction of the visitors. In the coin-cabinet of the Museum are preserved the coins of ancient and medieval periods including the Bengal coinage. Assessed over all this Museum acquaints the present with the past and opens the pages of knowledge to those who are apt to seek.

In the light of these preliminaries I do like to make a synoptic sketch of the artifacts and objects of prominence and significance preserved in the Islamic Section of the galleries and stores of the Museum to create a sort of awareness among the scholars, advanced students and persons interested in the study of these particles. In order of preference these objects are delineated as underneath.

Epigraphs and Inscriptions: So far collected 32 inscriptions (Arabic & Persian) are preserved in the Museum. Most of these inscriptions are of the Bengal Sultanate while a few of them belongs to the Mughal Bengal and the rest are undated and miscellaneous. The purports of almost all the inscriptions of Bengal Sultanate are the construction of mosques and madrasahs, and those of the Mughal period echo the same with a few exceptions .The undated and miscellaneous spread over on various items. A few examples of the important inscriptions of the periods mentioned above are discussed in the following.

The Inscription bearing the Museum Accession No. 3471 was procured from Wazir Beldanga, a village under Nachol Police Station of Rajshahi district. This place having a series of small mounds 2 to 3 feet above the ground level bears witness to the possibility of its being an archaeological site. The inscription under study came to sight from one of the mounds while a certain cultivator was collecting bricks from that mound. Though apparently no traces of building walls of earlier times are to be found in this area, scientific digging of the mounds may unearth some old edifices.

The epigraph is important in the sense that it is the first and the only discovered inscription of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1310-1322), son of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah. Moreover, it has got some other characteristics which are delineated after putting here the text and translation of the epigraph.

Text:

1st part

(i) 1st line:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله - هذا مال الملك الكبير الكريم المؤيد المظفر
المرصود المجاهد المرتبط الغازى

(ii) 2nd line:

مصرف الدولة و الدين اسل الاسلام و المسلمين ابو الملوك و السلاطين المعروف

2nd part

(i) 1st line:

بدينارحب السلطانى لظافر الله اقباله فى عهد يوم السلطان الاعظم غياث الدنيا والدين ابو المظفر
بهادر شاه السلطان بن السلطان اصمد الله قوامين مملكته و مهد براهين

(ii) 2nd line:

سلطنته شهر سنة اثني و عشرين و سبعمائة بناء صفقا لوجه الله لقبل الله منه بخط الضعيف محمد بن محمد بن احمد غفر الله اجمعين-

Translation:

1st part

1st line: (I begin) in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. There is on object worth worshipping except Allah and Muhammad is the apostle of Allah.

This is the treasure of the courtier (who is) generous, assisted, victorious, guarded, fighter, marcher, ghazi.

2nd line: Banker of the government and faith, strength of Islam and the Muslims, father of kings and sultans known as

2nd part

1st line: Dinar chosen of the sultan. May Allah make his advent successful in the time of the reign of the great Sultan Ghiyath al-Dunya wa al-Din Bahadur Shah, the sultan, the son of the sultan. May Allah strengthen the pillars of his kingdom and guide rightly the proofs

2nd line: Of his sultanate, in the months of the year 722 A.H./1322 A.D., masslve structure was built for the sake of Allah. Allah will surely accept it. (It was) engraved by the weak slave Muhammad, son of Muhammad, son of Ahmad. May Allah forgive them all.

The characteristics and appreciation: First, the inscription being in Arabic at the early part of 14th century C.E. supports the contention of the availability of specialized persons in Arabic language in the Court of Bengal Sultanate. Moreover, the stone-carving art in fine hand tells to the flourishing of this aesthetic art at the early phase of the Muslim's conquest of Lakhnawati principality. It is the first epigraph of Bengal Sultanate wherein we get the name of calligrapher-artist Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Ahmad, and it is followed by another epigraph of the reign of Abul Mujahid Sikandar Shah b. Ilyas Shah (1357-1392 C.E.) in which Ghiyath, the *Zarrin Dast* or the golden hand has been mentioned as the calligraphist. It is, therefore, reasonable to presume that the artists in this field were patronized by the Court. Secondly, this epigraph of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah clearly indicates the assumption of his royal power in any months of the year A.H 732/1322 C.E. Because in the inscription under study he is designated as *al-Sultan al-A`zam* or the exalted Sultan indicating his assumption of sovereign power. In addition to his qualities of head and heart the mention of the name of his powerful courtier Dinar possibly in charge of Treasury is aimed to have his assistance at the time of economic necessity. Thirdly the words *بناء صفقا* i.e. massive structure, put in the epigraph, built for the sake of Allah may mean a religious sanctuary in the form of mosque and madrasah. Finally, the absence of *نقطة* or diacritical dots and signs perhaps a single specimen in the whole of Bengal Sultanate epigraphs so far traced, speaks of high excellence of calligraphic nicety with the introduction of *Bihar* style of Arabic writing which scarcely be noticed in other stone-inscriptions of Bengal Sultanate. Thus this epigraph marks high in the study of historical, cultural and aesthetic aspects of medieval Bengal.

The inscription bearing the Museum Accession No. 3171 collected from Navagram, a village under Tarash Police Station of Sirajgonj district demands an in-depth study for its historical derivatives and calligraphic niceties. The stone-slab is dressed and smooth, and the engraver's art is praise-worthy. It belongs to the reign of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459), the first ruler of the later Ilyas Shahi dynasty. Before unfolding the striking features, the text and translation are presented below.

Text

1st line:

اما بعد حمد الله على نعمائه و الصلوة على النبي و احبابه ولما اظهر شعابير الشرع و احركه امنه سلطان العصر و الزمان ناصر الدنيا و الدين ابو المظفر محمود شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه و سلطانه فى خطة رفيعة موسومة بسملاباد و لما اهدى جناب الاعظم

2nd line:

صار اكرم المصر و الاسلام الذى خوطب بخطاب مجلس منصوص مازال كاسمه منصورا ولما عزم لعرف مسجدا ليحمله ذخيرة فى دار الجزاء الى يوم الساعة خان المعظم عضد الاسلام و المسلمين خان الاعظم و خاقان المعظم الغ رحيمخان يبقى الله ثراه و جعل الجنة مثواه و وفقه

3rd line:

الله قلع اعداء الله من الكفار و المشركين و ادارا لانعام على العلماء و المتعلمين مورخا فى الثانى و العشرين من ذى القعدة فى يوم الجمعة سنة ثمان و خمسين و ثمنماية-

Translation:

1st line: *Ammaba'd* (After this), praise be to Allah for His endless bounties and peace be upon the Prophet and his friends. When the insignia (canons) of the Shari'ah was shaken (turmoil and unrest prevailed in the country) then the sultan of time and age Nasir al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Muzaffar Mahmud Shah had given it asylum. May Allah perpetuate his kingdom and sultanate. (He established the rule of law) in such high *Khittah*, which might be named *Simlabad*. When the exalted personality directed.

2nd line: He was regarded as the honoured person of the city and of Islam. He was dignified with the title of Majlis-i-Mansus. Like his name he would remain always victorious (in all his campaigns). When he intended (to perform) any good work, he started (constructing) the mosque so that he might make it saving for the abode of retribution till the day of resurrection. (This man was known as) *Khan al-Mu'azzam*, the helper of Islam and the Muslims and also as *Khan al-Azam* and *Khaqan al-Mu'azzam* Ulugh Rahim Khan. May Allah illuminate his grave, make his abode in the Paradise and give him opportunity

3rd line: To uproot the enemies of Allah from among the unbelievers and polytheists. May Allah give him heart to bestow his rewards repeatedly upon the learned (teachers) and the learners (the students), (This mosque was built) on Friday, the 22nd Dhul Qa'dah of the year A.H. 858/October, 1454 C.E.

Striking features: First, the language of the epigraph is Arabic with excellence in its grammatical composition. This indicates that the cultivation of Arabic learning in the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah reached commendably a high level. The coining of the words is so appropriate as to convey the real meaning for which they are intended. The words like *Khan*, *Khaqan* and *Ulugh* of Turkish vocabulary are extensively used in Arabicized form in Bengal epigraphs to show the racial origin of the military cum executive officers posted in the different administrative units during the Turko-Afghan periods. Here in this epigraph the use of the words *Khan*, *Khaqan* and *Ulugh* bears witness to this proposition. Secondly, a significant word *خطة khittah* has been inserted. The term *khittah* is supposed to mean an administrative unit of the country like the terms *Iqlim* and *Arsah*. Generally the term *khittah* is applied to a town fortified with ramparts and walls whereas the *qasbah* refers to a town not protected by walls. This *khittah* Simlabad by name is presumed to cover an extensive tract of land spreading over some northern portion of Sirajgonj-Pabna, the south-western Bogra and South-eastern Natore-Rajshahi districts on the basis of provenance of the inscription-slab. The internal evidence of the inscription having the word *رفية* high land after *khittah* possibly supports the contention. Thirdly, the name of a new administrator can be known from this epigraph. He is Ulugh Rahim Khan, and the attributes like *Khan al-A`zam* and *Khaqan al-Muazzam* added to his name rank him high in the administrative hierarchy with full military power. Fourthly, Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah was a stern follower of Islam upholding the banner of *tawhid* among the people, and at the same time he patronized the *ulama* and *mutallimun* (teachers and learners) as the inscription under study conveys that notion. Finally as regards the calligraphic nicety and aesthetic beauty it is opined that it belongs to the cursive group of Arabic writing and it is placed under the *Naskh khatt* in a broader sense. But the setting of the vertical strokes and horizontal curves of the letters may reveal its character otherwise. The clustering of the letters at the base of the elongated shafts of *الف (alif)* and *لام (lam)* forming dust to the ground points to the *Ghubar* style of the epigraph. From the apparent features of the elongated shafts of the letters like *alif* and *lam* tapering towards the top it may be termed as the organ pipe of *Tughra* in its ornamental scheme. Sometimes the elongated shafts of the letters with slightly slanting top may resemble the scabbards of the swords. By this ornamental device the extirpation of the enemies of Allah from among the infidels and polytheists is possibly indicated in this epigraph. Thus, it very appropriately corresponds to the theme of the epigraph. Moreover, the elongated shafts of the letters like *alif* and *lam* and the placement of other letters at their feet may resemble the funeral prayer of the deads. However, considering the apparent beauties of the epigraph with the probable ornamental varieties it may be considered a nice specimen of calligraphy incised on the stone-slab.

The inscription bearing the Museum Accession No. 2662 was collected from Kaitahar, a village about eight miles to the east of Jaipurhat town of the same district. The epigraph is stated to have been attached with the mosque built

in the time of `Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519 C.E.). Nothing of this mosque remains except traces of the *mihirabs* in the *qiblah* wall. Before commenting on the theme and calligraphy the text and translation of the epigraph are given below.

Text:

1st line:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الله لا الا هو الحي القيوم لا تاخذه سنة و لا نوم له ما فى السموات و الارض

2nd line (top part:)

خداوند بادشاه عالم فيدنيا و اخرة عظيم تم بناء هذا المسجد دروسيا خانمعظم خاكان اعظم سيد خان
سلم الله فى حد سيد خان

2nd line (bottom part:)

بادشاه تمكاني ابو المظفر سلطان السلاطين حسينشاه سلم الله ست عشر وتسعمائة-

Translation:

1st line: (I begin) in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Meaciful. There is none to be worshipped but Allah alone who is ever alive and eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth.

2nd line: (top part): The Lord of the Universe is very powerful in this world and in the next. Honourable Khan (*Khan-i-Mu'azam*) and the exalted Khaqan (*Khaqan-i-A'zam*) Sayyid Khan completed the construction of this mosque (being a seminary for learning) in his (Sayyid Khan) own zone (or administrative unit)

2nd line: (Bottom part): (This mosque was built) in the year 916 A.H./1510 C.E. (by the exalted Khaqan) during the time of the monarch in power Abul Muzaffar Husayn Shah, *sultan as-salatin* (sultan of the sultans).

Discussion and comments: This is a bilingual (Arabic and Persian) inscription. It is, therefore, reasonable to presume that both the Arabic and Persian languages were studied with equal importance during the reign of Sultan `Ala al-Din Husayn Shah. The contents of the epigraph understudy reveal some important points that help constructing socio-cultural and hierarchical history of `Ala al-Din Husayn's time. First, it is a mosque which is connotated as a mosque cum madrasah with this phraseology of المسجد دروسيا i.e. mosque having the provision of imparting knowledge to the learners. *Khan-i-Muazzam* and *khaqan-i-A'zam* Sayyid Khan referred to in the epigraph is considered to be an executive head of administrative unit of Sultan `Ala al-Din Husayn's time. Secondly, the *julus* title of the Sultan `Ala al-Dunya wa al-Din is dropped and instead the high sounding title of سلطان السلاطين i.e. the Sultan of the Sultans is introduced although in the coins this title is engraved oft and on. Like him many of the Bengal Sultans inscribed this high sounding title in their coins and epigraphs when situation demanded. Sometimes to create an atmosphere of awe in the minds of the opponents and enemies this type of title was adopted in the prevalent media of the time. In case of Husayn Shah the addition of such title is justified because of

his territorial expression, patronization of art, literature and culture and last not the least his benign rule. Finally, to comment on the calligraphy, the text of the epigraph falls in the cursive group of writing and it represents *Naskh* with tendency towards *Nastaliq*. From the joining of the letters as interlaced it might be termed as خط عقودی or 'knotted script' representing the *Tughra qalam* of writing. The elongated shafts of الف (*alif*) and كاف (*kaf*) in this inscription appear like arrows, but instead of creating proper bows, the long tails of ميم (*mim*), جيم (*jim*) and ي (*ya*) etc. have been prolonged to join and form the next letters. The elongate shafts and thin letters in the midst of the body in the ornamental scheme seem to be bamboo cottage with inmates therein as to give vent to its indigenous influence. The mode of decoration and the aesthetic beauty of calligraphic settings attract the notice of the connoisseur of art.

In view of the three epigraphs discussed above it can be concluded that the remaining twenty nine epigraphs displayed in the Muslim galleries of the Museum if scanned properly may unearth valuable materials which could be utilized for reconstructing the medieval history of Bengal.

Coins: The term 'coin' or 'numisma' may be defined as a small unit of bullion (gold and silver) and such other metals with definite shape, having been guaranteed its authenticity by the royal authority with sanctioned protocols in the form of effigies, symbols and legends as the case may be, and having its exchange value. This definition of the coin, therefore, excludes the medals or counter tokens which may have the shape of the coin, but have no exchange value.

It is understandable that the coin was or is closely associated with the monetary system of the kings and monarchs of the past or of the countries ruled by the various dynasties. But what is its concern with the historians and numismatists? The reply is very simple and it is as underneath. The coin-prints contain the effigies, portraits, religious beliefs and aesthetic niceties of the people living in the global regions of the past. In the same way the extensive circulation of coins and the decentralization of the minting system can be considered as a tool to reconstruct the economic history of the empires and countries of the past. Moreover, the oriental coins especially of the Muslims being datable with the name of the reigning rulers can usefully be utilized to fix the date of their accession to the throne along with the time span of their rulers. So it is easily discernable that the coin, though a smallest archaeological unit, can be regarded the most dependable source for unearthing unknown materials to build and rebuild the history of ancient and contemporaneous towns, cities and empires with multidimensional approach. These points taken together have made us to realize the interest of the historians and numismatists in the study of the coins.

Of the various type of artifacts displayed in the galleries and preserved in the stores the coins form the major item of ancient down to the modern time. As per the Accession Registers of the Museum the number of coins reached about six thousands of which about four thousands belong to the Muslim periods of Indian subcontinent and outside of this country. The Muslim coins of this subcontinent spread over the Sultanate and Mughal periods from the start of 13th

century down to the end of Mughal dynasty in 1858 with the transfer of English East India Company's rule to the Crown of England. Moreover, an appreciable number of the Bengal Sultanates coins (1204-1576) are preserved in the coin-cabinet of the Museum. The coin-prints on the both observe and reverse sides have great value to reconstruct some important points of historical events. A few specimen of the coins are delineated here to understand their importance as an archeological unit.

Delhi Sultanate

1. Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban (1265-1287)

VRM No. 2538 A Silver round in shape

Observe the central legend in three lines within raised ornamental circle.

الامام
امير
المستعصم
المؤمنين

Tra. al-Imam, the leader of faithful al-Mustasim



the margin is obliterated.

Reverse The central legend in four lines within raised square boarder.

السلطان الاعظم
غياث الدنيا و
الدين
ابو المظفر بلبن
السلطان

Tra. The exalted Sultan Ghiyath al-Dunya was al-Din Balban, the Sultan.



2. Sultan Muhammad b. Tughlaq (1325-1351)

VRM No. 536 Copper forced currency round in shape

Observe Within single circle in three lines

محمد بن
تغلق
السلطان

Tra. Muhammad b. Tughlaq, The Sultan.



Reverse Within single circle in three lines.

الراجي
رحمة
الله

Tra. The expectant of the mercy of Allah.



Mughal empire of Delhi

1. Jalal al-Din Muhmmad Akbar (1556-1606)
Ilahi Coin Promnlgation of Din-i-Ilahi and the striking of the coin with Ilahi formula.

1. VRM No. 3108 Silver coin round in shape

Observe

گير اکبر بادشاه
جها
و الدين

in three lines

Tra. The upholder of world and religion
Akbar Badshah



Reverse

ماه مهر الهی
ضرب اکبر نکر

in two lines separated by the tail of ya

Tra. The Ilahi month Mihar struck in the
mint of Akbar nagar.



2. VRM No. 2002. Silver round in shape

Obverse

الله
اکبر
جل جلاله

in two lines

Tra. Allah is great. His greatness be
glorified.



Reverse

تیر
الهی
احمد آباد
ب

in two lines

The Ilahi month Tir struck in
Ahmadabad mint.



2. Shihab al-Din Shah Jahan (1628-1658)

VRM No. 3519 Silver round in shape

Observe

لا اله الا الله
محمد
رسول الله

in three lines

Tra. None worth worshipping except Allah,
Muhammad is His apostle.



Reverse

in two lines separated by the tail of ya.

بادشاه غازي
شاه جهان

Tra. The warrior emperor Shahjahan.



3. Shah alam
VRM No. 858

(1759-1806)
Silver coin round in shape

Obverse

حامي دين
شاه
سايه فضل شاه عالم باد
سكه
زدبر هفت كشور

in three lines divided by two horizontal letter shafts

Tra. the defender of faith under the shadow of mercy (of Allah) Shah Alam Badshah sikkah in the seven empires



Reverse

مانس
ميمنت
19
سنه جلوس
ضرب
مرشد اباد

in three lines divided by two horizontal letter shafts

In the year of tranquility in the 19 regnal year struck at Murshidabad.



Bengal Sultanate

1. 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519)

VRMNO. 2006.49 Silver round in shape

Observe

السلطان
الفتاح لكامتا
جاجنكر ومرو
علاء الدنيا والدين
ابو المظفر

in five lines within raised circle.

Tra. The conqueror Sultan of Kamta, Jainagar and (Ka) mru
'Ala al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Muzaffar



Reserve

حسين شاه
السلطان بن
اشرف الحسيني
سيد خلد ملكه وسلطانه
حسينا باد

in five lines within raised circle.

Tra. Husayn Shah Sultan son of Sayyid Ashraf al-Husayni. May his kingdom and sultanate be perpetuated (struck) at Husaynabad.



2. Muhammad Shah Ghazi (1553-1555)

VRM No. 3198 Silver round in shape

Obverse

in three lines within a raised square.

لا اله الا الله
رسول الله
محمد

Tra. None worth worshipping except Allah.
Muhammad is apostle of Allah.



Reverse
غازى سلطان
محمد شاه
خلد الله ملكه

in three lines within a raised square.
Tra. Sultan Muhammad Shah Ghazi. May
Allah perpetuate his kingdom.



Outside of the sub-continent four Arab coins with relevant particulars are delineated as underneath.

Coin No. VRM 2601

The coin is made of silver with the denomination of *dirham* and is *mudawwara* or round in shape having thin fabric. Due to the wear and tear of time the original shape of the coin is a bit hampered with slight cuts in the margin. The central and marginal legends of the coin on the obverse are placed within three raised circles having crescent like stars three times outside the border at equal distance. The arrangement of the legends on the reverse of the coin is a bit different. The central legend is placed within a single raised circle while the marginal legend is placed in between the two raised circles. The coin belongs to the reign of al-Walid b. Abdul Malik (705-715 C.E.). The coin was struck in A.H. 92/ 711 C.E. The coin as deciphered is as follows.

Obverse

Central legend in three lines

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worth worshipping except Allah Alone. He has no partner.

Marginal legend around the central legend

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بواسط اثنتين وتسعين

Trans: In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Wasit in 92 A.H./ 711 C.E.

Reverse

Central legend in four lines

الله احد الله
الصمد لم يلد و

لم يولد و لم يكن
له كفوا احد

Trans: Allah is One, Allah is eternally Besought of all. Neither He begot nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.

Marginal legend

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

Coin No. VRM 2602

The coin is made of silver with the denomination of *dirham* and is *mudawwarah* or round in shape having thin fabric. In spite of wear and tear of time the coin is in good shape. The central and marginal legends of the coin on the obverse are placed within three raised circles having crescent like stars three times outside the border at equal distance. The arrangement of the legends on the reverse of the coin is a bit different. The central legend is placed within a single raised circle while marginal legend is placed in between two raised circles. The coin belongs to the reign of Hisham b. Abdul Malik (724-744 C.E.). The coin was struck in A.H. 110/728 C.E.

Obverse

Central legend in three lines

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worshipped except Allah Alone. He has no partner

Marginal legend around the central legend

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بواسط سنة عشر و مئة

Trans: In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Wasit in the year 110 A.H. /728 C.E.

Reverse

Central legend in four lines

الله احد الله
الصمد لم يلد و
لم يولد و لم يكن
له كفوا احد

Trans: Allah is One, Allah is eternally Besought of all. Neither He begot nor He was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.

Marginal legend

محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: Muhammad is Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious all over other religions although the polytheists desist it.

The two other silver coins of the Abbasid period as deciphered are described below. The silver coin with the denomination of *dirham* bearing the VRM No. 2603 belongs to the reign of Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mansur (754-775 C.E.) while the other bearing the VRM No. 2604 belongs to the reign of Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mamun (813-833 C.E.). The former was struck in 151 A.H./ 768 C.E. and the latter was struck in 198 A.H. / 813 C.E.

VRM No. 2603 (Plate 3)

Obverse

Both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend arranged in three lines is as follows.

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans: None is worthworshipping except Allah Alone who has no partner.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is like this.

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بمدينة السلام سنة احدى و خمسين ومئة

Trans : In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Mandiah al-Salam i.e. Baghdad in the year 151 A.H. / 768 C.E.

Reverse

Like the obverse both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend divided in four lines is as underneath.

محمد رسول الله
مما امر به الامير
منصور امير المؤمنين
جعفر

Trans : Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah. With which the commander ordered - he is Mansur, the Commander of the faithful. Ja'far.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is like this.

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره
المشركون

Trans : In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Muhammad is Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

VRM No. 2604

Obverse

Both the central and marginal legends are placed within a raised circle of the border.

The central legend arranged in three lines is as follows.

لا اله الا
الله وحده
لا شريك له

Trans : None is worthworshipping except Allah Alone who has no partner.

The marginal legend encircling the central legend is as underneath.

بسم الله ضرب هذا الدرهم بمدينة السلام سنة ثمان و تسعين ومئة

Trans : In the name of Allah this *dirham* was struck in the mint of Madina al-Salam i.e. Baghdad in the year 198 A.H./ 813 C.E.

Reverse

The central legend is placed within two milled circles while the marginal legend is placed in between the milled circles and the border circle.

The central legend arranged in five lines is as underneath.

الله
محمد رسول الله
مما امر به الامير
المأمون امير المؤمنين
الفضل

Trans : For Allah. Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah. With which the commander ordered. he is al-Mamun, the Commander of the faithful. al-Fazl.

The marginal legend is like this.

بسم الله محمد رسول الله ارسله بالهدى ودين الحق ليظهره على الدين كله و لو كره المشركون

Trans: In the name of Allah. Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah whom He sent with guidance and true religion so that He would make it victorious over all other religions although the polytheists desist it.

Concluding Remarks

As a tiny archaeological unit, the Muslim coin plays a vital role to the addition of new facts in filling the gap of historical events or helps reconstruct the old fact in a new dimension along with its aesthetic beauty and calligraphic nicety. The

deciphered and studied coins of two dynastic rules put above can fairly be set to substantiate the assumption.

In view of above discussion it is justified to presume that the coins preserved in the coin-cabinet of Varendra Research Museum if catalogued with accurate decipherment and in-depth study in all their characteristic features may enrich numismatic history of pertinent rulers and countries to which they belong.

Architectural Members: A good number of architectural members belonging to the Muslim period could be found in the Museum. Here I would like to introduce a few of these artifacts lying preserved in the galleries or in verandas of the Museum.

1. The *mihrab* of a mosque (Plate No. 1) collected from Mahisantosh and donated by Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray to the Museum. Its Museum Accession No. is 301. The mosque in which it was inserted is presumed to have belonged to the reign of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 C.E.) on the epigraphical evidences. It is said that the mason by joining together the sixteen broken pieces of black basalt gave the shape of a *mihrab* which is believed to have been the central *mihrab* of the mosque of Mahisantosh. Now the *mihrab* apparently seems to have got five vertical portions joined by the technical process of melting lead. The aesthetic beauty of stone carving art in the interior alcove of the *mihrab* is very fascinating, and it attracts the notice of the connoisseur of art. In the middle point of the alcove niche is a pendant carved out very exquisitely, the upper portion of which seems to be a tree with tendrils and a lotus on either side, and the lower portion of which seems to represent a trifoil arch containing a hanging lamp at the bottom. Below this point is a series of small niches filled in with multiform devices embellishing the whole area of the circumference. On either side of the central point of the alcove niche from top to bottom are seen the interlacing geometric devices of ringlets presumed to be blooming lotus clustered in the specified space. Lotus being an indigenous lily its representation on stone carving art indicates to the love of local objects of embellishment and the patronization of local artists. This type of stone carving in the *mihrab* understudy has the speciality of its own having been differed from the *mihrab* decoration either stone carving or terracotta ornamentation of other mosques of the Varnedra region like the Kusumba, Bagha and Chhota Sona mosques. Along with this *mihrab* the architectural members of Mahisantosh group possibly connected with the mosque are described below.
2. The architectural member of grey sand stone bears the Museum Accession No. 310. (Plate No. 2). It has four conventionalized plants with variant features put within four semicircular pointed arches. In between the two arches is noticed a flower stick upholding a bud, three in number. It is very difficult to identify these plants. At the right end the foliage seems to represent *rajanigandha* (night smelled flower) sticks. Next to it the second one may be conjectured a plantain while the third and fourth ones are so crudely carved out that no idea could be formed of their identification.

3. The Museum Accession No. 312 records an architectural member of grey sand stone which has a lantern device carved out on its surface. This lantern device is so nicely and appropriately worked out by the artist that the onlookers will not miss to recognize it a lantern of their use (Plate No. 3).
4. Another architectural member of sand stone bears the Museum Accession No. 321 (Plate No. 4). Here on this stone is also carved out a lantern device, but not so exquisitely and accurately carved as it has been done in case of Museum Accession No. 312 referred to above. This debasement may be ascribed to the artist who had just started his lesson in *Sangh tarashi* or stone carving art. Conversely it may be explained that the lantern device carved out in the former is of superior quality while that of the latter is of inferior type with low price having been within the consuming capacity of the commoners. In that case no reflection could be put in the skill of the *Sangh tarash* or stone carving artist. Pertinently it may be pointed out that the upper portion of the photograph in both the cases representing the terracotta ornamentation does not form part of the architectural members under study.
5. In the Mahisantosh group comes the last architectural member of grey sand stone (Plate No. 5) whose Museum Accession No. is 341. On this stone is carved out an ornate and sophisticated hanging lamp within a rectangular framework of trefoil arch springing from well dressed column on either side. Of the three hanging lamps presented on the architectural members this last one seems to me, though simple, graceful and eye soothing presumably being ready for the use of court personnels and aristocrats. These stone slabs were possibly used as component parts of construction for the outer walls of the mosque of Mahisantosh which had attained the status of *Jami*. The mosque of Mahisantosh was built during the reign of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah in between the years of 1460 and 1471 C.E. Hence these stone members in question may be taken as contemporaneous to the construction date of the mosque. Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that all these architectural members were collected and donated to the Museum by Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray.
6. The Museum Accession No. 731 records a lintel frieze of black basalt (Plate No. 6) collected from Sultanganj and donated to the Museum by Kumar Sarat Kumar Ray. No minute details of its decorative aspects are dealt with in any published works. A look to the stone slab reveals that it is a fine piece of artistic treatment and first order of stone carving art. Furthermore a careful observation shows that it is a profusely decorated door panel divided into eleven sections by three trefoil arched *mihrab* alcoves and two pyramidal like structures. The *ayat al-kursi* or throne verse of the holy Quran with *basmalah* i.e. starting with *bismillah* is accommodated in the whole range of the stone slab terminating in *mihrab* niche of either side. The inscription consists of three horizontal lines from the right to the left except the middle alcove where the addition of *basmalah* makes the number of lines four.

On the terminating ends of both the sides upon a decorated dumpy pillar is a full bloomed tiny lotus. Above the point of the inscribed tablet is a bold band

crowned with three other thin horizontal bands running parallel from the right to the left. The small space in between the two bands is filled in with low relief of dots, the space being three in number. Of the three *mihhrabs* the middle one is slightly wider than the remaining two. All the three *mihhrabs* seem to have sprung from squat but ornamented column on either side. The head structure of the alcove niche along with the intrados is carved out in a crown like design which, I think, illustrates the essence of the throne verse of the holy Quran. The pyramidal structures in between the two *mihhrabs* have contained an ornamented shrub each or a well decorated flower vase.

Scrutinizing the symmetrical setting of the objects in engraving art and the surface decoration of the panel it tempts to opine that it is one of the finest specimen of stone carving art of Bengal Sultanate. Nothing of Hindu elements is detected in its structural composition or decorative scheme. Hence Abdul Qadir's remark "the decorative design of the inscribed tablet bears nothing of Hindu significance" seems quite appropriate.

In the absence of date two inscriptions collected from the same place i.e. Sultanganj could be taken into consideration for ascribing a specified date to this architectural member. Of these two inscriptions one is dated A.H. 835/1432 C.E. belonging to the reign of Sultan Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1432 C.E.) and the other is dated A.H. 879/ 1474 C.E. falling in the reigning period of Sultan Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah (1474-1481 C.E.). Pertinently it may be mentioned here that the lintal frieze understudy along with these two epigraphs is procured from a dilapidated tomb structure of Sultanganj traditionally assigned to a saint known Sultan Shah. The calligraphic setting and stylistic pattern of engraving art of this architectural member have a close affinity with those of the inscription of the time of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah. Hence its tentative dating can be placed in the reign of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah being contemporaneous to around 1432 C.E.

7. A piece of grey sand stone bears the Museum Accession No. 2420 (Plate No. 7). No whereabouts of the provenance and other pertinent particulars of this stone member are available in the records of the Museum. It seems to me that this block of stone was properly sized and set in the wall of any mosque of Gaur area of mediaval Bengal. Within four bordered lines are carved out one full bloomed lotus-rosettee in the middle and the two other in the side ends terminate in half lotus.
8. The Museum Accession No. 2649 records a lintel frieze of black basalt (Plate No. 8) collected from the site of Barasona mosque, Gaur and donated to the Museum by Jotiswar Bhattacharaya. It is presumed to have been inserted in the Barasona mosque on the basis of its stylistic pattern. In that case its dating can be placed in the year of the construction of the mosque in A.H. 932/1526 C.E. The hewn black basalt was chesilled and carved out with the five floral motifs of same pattern and dimension. The stone cutter's art of door lintel is very exquisite and charming. The representation of floral motif with the number five has an inner significance of indication to the five fundamental principles of Islam. It is, therefore, fitting to be attached with the mosque.

9. The architectural member of sand stone bears the Museum Accession No. 3165 (Plate No. 9). The provenance of this stone slab is recorded Navagram in the Accession Register. It seems to be a part of a pillar attached with the mosque. The engraving art of this stone pillar represents a device of hanging chain and bell ornament as it is found in the ornamental scheme of stone carving art of medieval mosques of Bengal. This ornamental device may also be imagined as a hanging lantern which appropriately fits in the constructional and decorative features of the mosque. In determining the date of the engraving art of this stone slab two inscriptions, one of the reign of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459 C.E.) dated A.H. 858/1454 C.E. and other of the reign of Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1531 C.E.) dated A.H. 932/1526 C.E. may be taken into consideration. Both the inscriptions directly testify to the construction of mosque at Navagram of Tarash Police Station of Sirajganj district. On the inscriptional evidences either of the two dates referred to above may be taken as the engraving date of this stone member. On the stylistic ground also the engraver's art may be considered contemporaneous to the later Ilyas Shahi or to the Husayn Shahi periods.

Concluding Remarks and Comments

The following characteristics may be derived from the study of the architectural members referred to above. First, all the architectural members are either of black basalt or of grey sand stone assumed to have belonged to the period of Bengal Sultanate. Secondly, though all the ornamental stone slabs are undated but on their stylistic pattern and underlying evidences endeavor has been made to suggest a tentative time or date for each of these articles. Thirdly, these stone members were closely connected with the construction of the mosque either forming a part of it or being attached as object of embellishment on the wall surface. Fourthly, besides the geometrical interlacing and arabesque linings the most prominent features carved out on the stone members of the said period are lotus-rosette motif and an elongated pendant containing a hanging lamp to illuminate the adjoining places. A sociological interpretation may be sought in the representation of these features. In delineating the lotus-rosette motif a sort of rapprochement between the indigenous (in the form of lotus) and incoming (in the form of rosette) elements was intended. The patrons deemed to be incoming Muslims had full support on this type of reconciliatory policy so that the local people might feel homely with them. The egalitarian spirit of Islam induced them to meet out amiable treatment to all irrespective of any creed and colour. In the second place the representation of hanging lamp is intended to shed light in the form of dissemination of knowledge so that ignorance in the garb of darkness may be driven out. The mosque besides being a place of prayer for the Muslims is considered a centre for imparting knowledge to the learners. Hence this hanging lamp motif is best fitted especially in case of mosque's *mihrab* or wall surface decoration. Finally, the stone carving art reached the height of excellence under the patronization of the Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal at the hands of the local and influx artists.

Besides these artifacts and archaeological units the Museum has a large collection of ornamented terracottas, glazed tiles, porcelains, textiles, paintings and ceramics of the Muslim periods which demand a separate chapter to write in.

It is also imaging to note that the Persian formans and documents approximately 13 in number of the Mughal emperors and their nobles on various subjects are still lying undeciphered in the Muslim gallery of the Museum. They could have been valuable tools for historical study of the time on their proper decipherment. In addition to these Persian papers eight copies of hand-written holy Quran with fine calligraphy ranging from the 17th to the 20th century preserved in the Muslim galleries of the Museum deem to inspire the visitors to cast their glance in the lines of these manuscripts of al-Quran. However, all the antiquarian relics and artifacts displayed and preserved in the Islamic Section of the Museum if studied vertically and to a greater depth would invariably unveil such valuable materials as to bear witness to our rich history and heritage.



Plate. 1 Wazir Beldanga Inscription

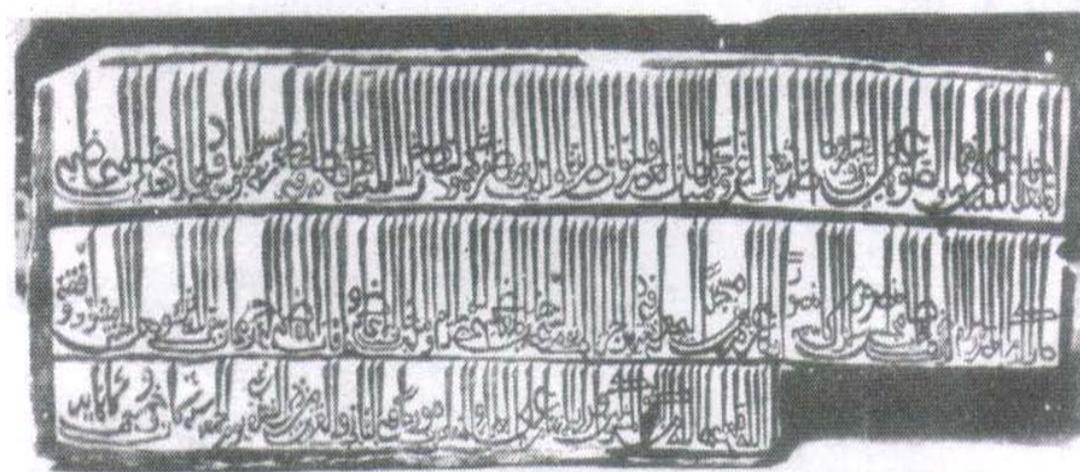


Plate. 2 Navagrama Inscription

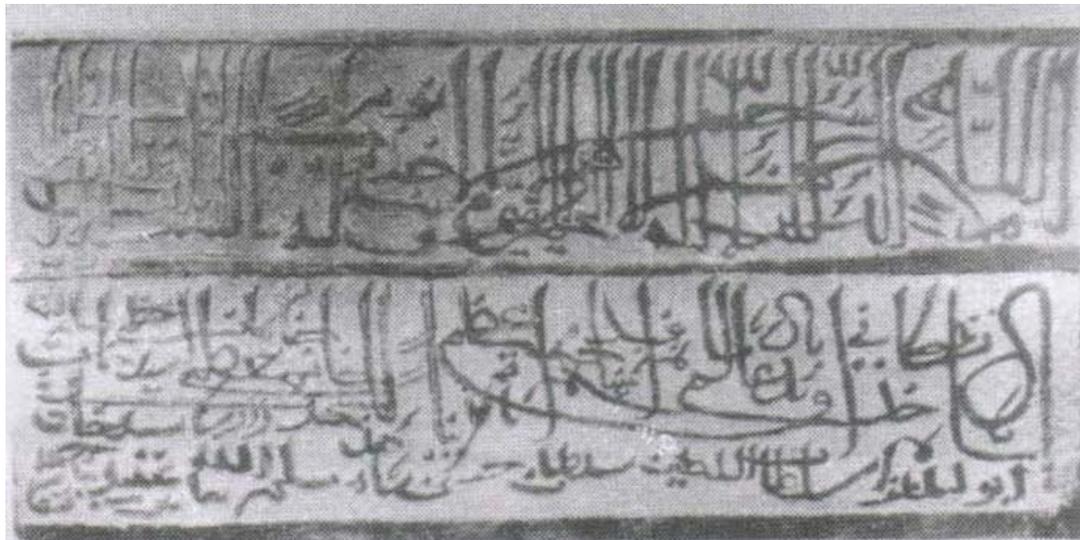


Plate. 3 Kaitahar Inscription

Architectural Members



Plate. 1 Mihrab of Mahisantosh Mosque

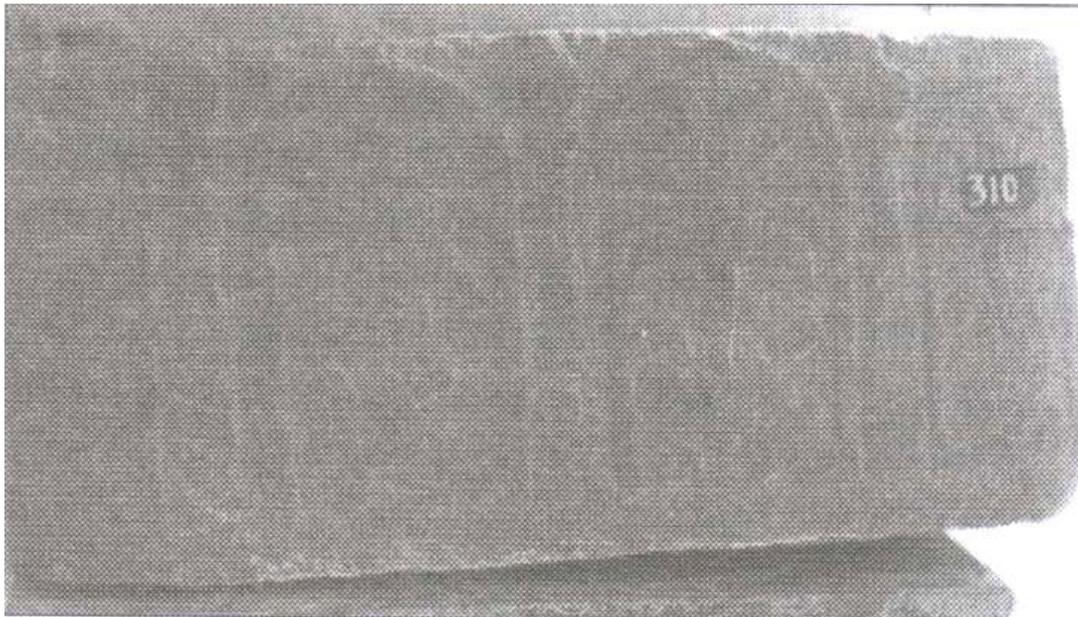


Plate. 2 Plant Design of Mahisantosh Group Architecture

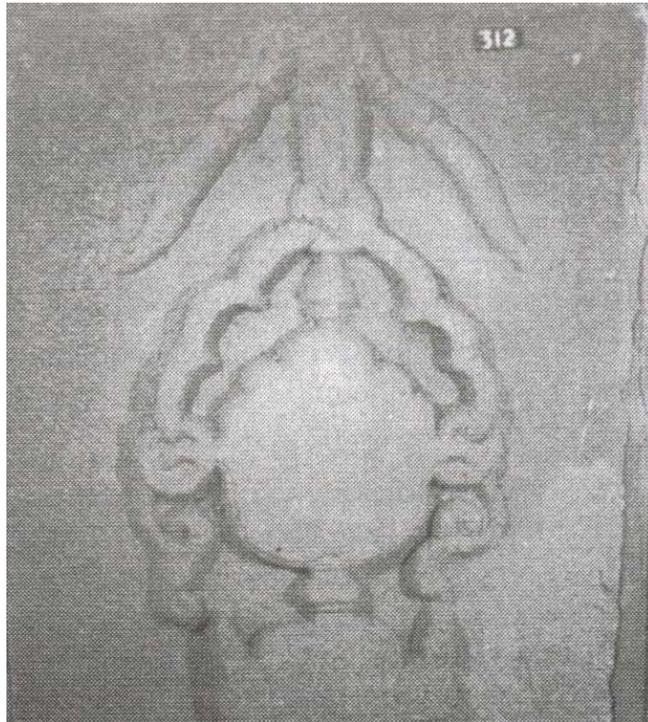


Plate. 3 Lantern



Plate. 4 Lantern



Plate. 5 Hanging Lamps

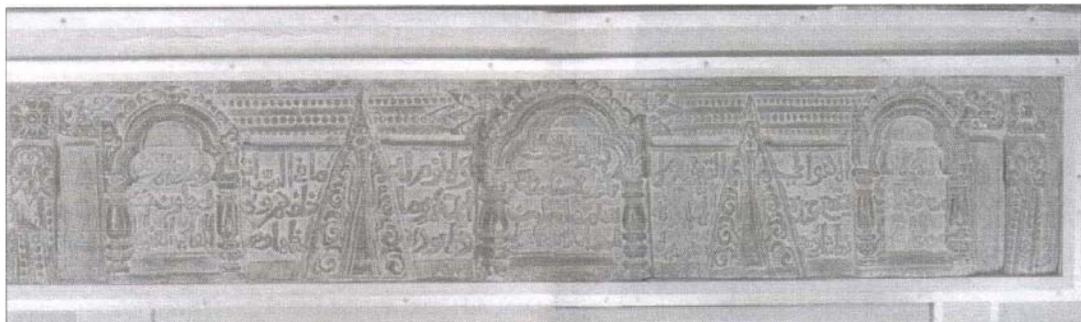


Plate. 6 Door Panel Inscription

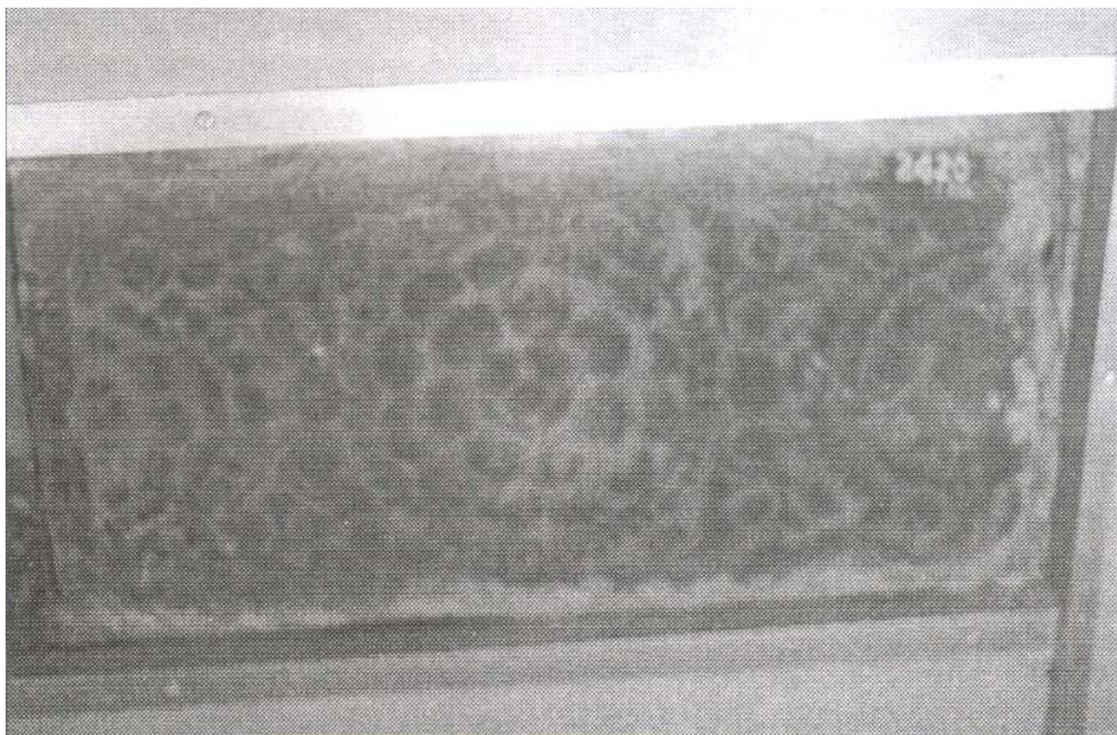


Plate. 7 Full bloomed, Lotus-rosettee

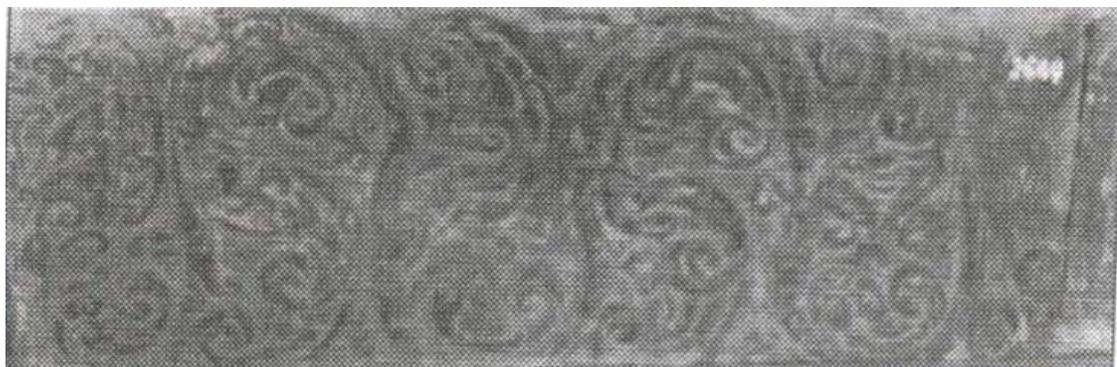


Plate. 8 Floral Motif from Barasona Masque



Plate. 9 Hanging Chain and bell

Four Arab Coins

Obverse

Reverse

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 1



Plate 2

Obverse

Reverse

Obverse

Reverse



Plate 3



Plate 4

(As this is a different type of research paper in its form and characters comprising of the literature-survey and the study of the artifacts in the place of preservation so normal research method in references could not be followed. Hence under the caption of "Sources Consulted" the particulars of relevant matters are placed below.)

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Terracotta, Stone-Carving and Calligraphic Art of Medieval Bengal: An Aesthetic Treatment.

Dr. A K M Yaqub Ali*

[Abstract: The architectural edifices of ancient and medieval Bengal are not denuded of ornamental representation in the form of figurative art, floral designs and abstract motifs. Terracotta and stone-carving as an aesthetic art was not unknown in ancient Bengal. The terracotta ornamentations in the Buddhist *Viharas* and the Hindu temples bear witness to this fact. The stone-carving art profusely worked in the Buddhist and Hindu deities of ancient Bengal attracts the attention of the connoisseurs of art. But the calligraphic art in the truest sense of the term was scarcely noticed on any object of embellishment of ancient-Bengal. On the other hand these three types of ornamental art could satisfactorily be found in the monuments and architectural members of medieval Bengal. Here the time span of medieval Bengal can tentatively be counted from the Muslim conquest at the early 13th to the 3rd quarter of 16th century of the Christian era.

In this short paper an attempt has been made to focus on the fascinating points of terracotta, stone-carving and calligraphic variegations with illustrations from the extant examples of the period understudy. Pertinently it may be mentioned here that in most of the cases the interpretations though of mine are based on facts and substantiated by arguments. One may differ with me on some points, and that will be welcoming for further investigation.]

The architectural edifices of ancient and medieval Bengal are not denuded of ornamental representation in the form of figurative art, floral designs and abstract motifs. Terracotta and stone-carving as an aesthetic art was not unknown in ancient Bengal. The terracotta ornamentations in the Buddhist *Viharas* and the Hindu temples bear witness to this fact. The stone-carving art profusely worked in the Buddhist and Hindu deities of ancient Bengal attracts the attention of the connoisseurs of art. But the calligraphic art in the truest sense of the term was scarcely noticed on any object of embellishment of ancient-Bengal. On the other hand these three types of ornamental art could satisfactorily be found in the monuments and architectural members of medieval Bengal. Here the time span of medieval Bengal can tentatively be counted from the Muslim conquest at the early 13th to the 3rd quarter of 16th century of the Christian era.

In the pre-Muslim period, *Shilpa goshti* or the guild artists seem to have been nourished in Bengal. It is stated that Bitpala son of Dhiman who flourished in the Varendra during the reign of Devapala and Dharma Pala, was a great artist and he headed the 'Eastern school of Art'¹. Similarly Ranaka Sulspani, an engraver of the Deopara Inscription of Vijaya Sena, has been described as the

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crest Jewel of *Varendra ka-silpi goshti* or the gild artists of Varendra². We may, therefore, assume that Bengal in general had an old tradition in the cultivation of art. But in the absence of positive evidence it can not be exactly said what sort of art they had practiced. The terracotta plaques of Mahasthan, Bangada, Paharpur and Mainamati testify to this fact that the artists displayed their skill to enrich the terracotta art. Enormous blocks of stones with sculptural representations of various deities³ in the pre Muslim period bear witness to the artists' skill in stone carving. Both these arts possibly captured the imagination of the local artists in the pre Muslim period. What happened to the fate of the artists at the advent of the Muslims? The Muslim rulers, were not averse to employ the Hindus in the services of the state.⁴ Even the artists after their conversion to Islam could be expected to produce that sort of art which they had cultivated previously. Their descendants possibly carried on the profession of their forefathers. Had it not been so, the terracotta decoration and stone carving ornamentation would not have been found on the mosques and other edifices of the medieval Muslim period in this land. The pre Muslim terracotta plaques represented various human and animal forms throwing light on the folk art of the period.⁵ Islam being against the representation of figures on any objects in any form⁶, the artists had to produce the floral and creeper pattern instead of animal objects on the terracotta ornamentation used in the religious monuments. A good number of mosques⁷ display the artists' skill in terracotta ornamentation. It is noticed that one particular design spreads over hundreds of bricks and each brick has a special place in that design. In order to make up a complete decoration it was essential that all the necessary bricks should be manufactured separately and numbered so that they could be fitted exactly in their places when erecting the building⁸. This type of brick manufacture demands very skilled craftsmanship. It is, therefore, presumed that this art which originated in this land in the pre Muslim period also continued in the Muslim period. The extensive use of this art in the ornamental scheme of the monuments points to its court patronization. Debasement of this art started in the Mughal period due to the lack of court patronization. But the artists continued to practice this art mainly in the Hindu temples⁹ of the 17th and 18th centuries C.E. In most cases, they were patronized by the Hindu nobles and landlords.

The application of the terracotta art, as it is observed, is mainly concentrated in some important parts of the edifices like the *mihirabs* of the mosque, the frame under the entrances, the outer cornice of the walls, the raised mouldings in the middle of the walls, the basal ornamentation in the interior of the dome, tympanums and spandrels of the arches, and sometimes as panels in between the entrances and the facets of the octagonal towers. Various kinds of geometric and floral motifs are represented on the terracotta plaques. Besides these, the most conspicuous motif is the creeper device¹⁰ that embraces in its wild growth anything that comes on the way. A very common and favourite one is a hanging motif originating from the chain and bell and developing into fantastic concept of grape branches and others of the kind. Even the fruit devices¹¹ are noticeable in the terracotta ornamentation. The creeper, floral and fruit devices indirectly reflect on the greenery surroundings and local production. The fundamental difference between the pre Muslim and Muslim terracotta art is that

while the former is mainly moulded and stamped with figure, the latter is delicately carved with floral and geometric patterns.

Havell does not recognize the external influence on the moulding of terracotta art in pre Mughal Bengal; on the contrary he gives due credit to the local artists.¹² The terracotta ornamentation found mainly on the monuments of Gaur, Hadrat Pandua and the surrounding places of Bengal is presumed to have been the work of the craftsmen living in those areas. Some scholars have tried to show the influence of pattern and carved brick work of Persian origin on the terracotta art of this land¹³ A. H. Dani is inclined to trace its local origin though he seems not to deny altogether the external influence on its further development.¹⁴ It is noticeable that the Persians came in the track of Turko-Afghan rulers to this land. The instance of Baba Kutwal Ispahani¹⁵, Jalal al-Din b. Jama' al-Din, the Imam Zadah of Firuz Kuh¹⁶ and Shaikh Ja' al-Din Tabrizi¹⁷ bear witness to this fact. The possibility of the migration of the artisan class to this land can not be altogether ruled out. The brick built Persian mosque and other monuments having various decorative shapes and pattern in stucco were to be seen at Ardistan, Ispahan, Khargird, Sultania, Kashan, Farumad, Maragah, Qa'la-i-Bist, Samarqand, Varamin and Hamadan¹⁸. The masons and craftsmen were, therefore, acquainted with the brick work prevalent in Persia. The monuments of Bengal were mostly built of brick and had similarity with those of Persia. It was easier for the Persian masons coming to this land to practise this art in which they excelled in their own country. The rosettes of seven dots, a common feature in Persian art¹⁹ were likely to have been traceable in the terracotta art of this land with slight modification. The terracotta art of Central Asia was carried by the Saljuqs to Persia²⁰. This Central Asian art tradition received careful treatment in the Anatolian monuments also²¹. The conquerors being Turks are expected to have brought with them the art tradition of their own country to the land they conquered. Therefore, the Persian and Central Asian tradition of brick ornamentation added fresh impetus to the old age terracotta art of Bengal reappearing in the Muslim monuments of the 14th-15th centuries C.E. ²² in this land. We may not know the particulars of the artists producing this terracotta art by which the wall surface of the monuments was relieved from the monotonous bareness. But its extensive use as decorative emblems on the monuments of the Ilyas Shahi and Husayn shahi periods in Bengal leads us to presume that a fairly large number of artists were engaged in executing these works of art.

Stone cutters' art was not unknown to this land. Sculptural representations along with ornamentation on the stone slabs²³ in the pre Muslim period indicate the existence of skilled hands in the art of stone carving. As in the case of terracotta art, in stone carving the artists after the Muslim conquest continued to practise this art.

The art of *sang tarashi* or stone carving could be noticed on the architectural monuments. The artists exerted their skill to incise the stone slabs with the floral, creeper and hanging designs in imitation of the terracotta art of this land.²⁴ The Muslim architects devised the technique of erecting monuments with walls brick inside faced with stone slabs²⁵ to ensure their stability against the inclement weather of this land. This technique has been termed as brick and

stone style by A.H. Dani.²⁶ This combined stone and brick technique was known to the Turks²⁷ who could have possibly influenced the brick and stone style of architecture in Bengal. The art of *sang tarashi* is noticeable on the Adina *masjid*²⁸, Mahisantosh *masjid*²⁹ (dilapidated), Chhota Sona *masjid*³⁰ and Kusumba *masjid*³¹. In some points the art of stone carving in the *mihrab* of Mahisantosh *masjid* resembles that of Adina *masjid*³². Like wise, the hanging motif carved on the stone slabs of the *mihrab* in the Mahisantosh *masjid* bears resemblance to the stone carving of the Chhota Sona *masjid* in the facade as well as in the *mihrab*³³. The stone cutters art in the Kusumba mosque specially in the *mihrab* area seems to be attractive and illuminating. Hence as single instance it is detailed below.

Mihrab, an exterior projection in the back wall creating an alcove inside as indicator for the direction of *qiblah* i.e. Ka'bah³⁴ occupies a pivotal position in the mosque architecture. The presence of this device in an architectural structure prompts the onlookers to identify it with a mosque. So in all the mosques steps are taken to make it prominent constructionally and ornamentally. The *mihrab* of the mosques of medieval Bengal represents the same mark of construction and decoration. The case also fits in the *mihrab* decoration of Kusumba mosque which, as the inserted epigraph testifies, was built by Sulayman assumed to be an official of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1556-1560 C.E.) in 966 A. H./1558 C.E.³⁵

Kusumba is at a distance of 47 k.m. from Rajshahi town by the western side of RajshahiNaogaon highway within Manda police station of Naogaon district of Bangladesh. The scattered brickbats, the ruined structures, the old mausoleum³⁶, a Jami *masjid*³⁷ and a big *dighi*³⁸ near it tend us to assume it a place of some importance in the history of medieval Bengal.

The *qiblah* wall of the mosque of Kusumba has three *mihrabs* facing to the three doorways in the east. The central one being wider and profusely decorated than the two side ones in the ground and a small *mihrab* in the presumed *Zananah* or ladies gallery in the north-western corner of the mosque ascending by a flight of steps to it. As the outer cores are buttressed with stones so the artists have employed their ingenuity to embellish the wall- surfaces with various floral designs, indigenous ornamental devices and abstract motifs by carving stones in the exquisite styles. Some scholars' remark³⁹ regarding the debasement of stone-carving art in this mosque, especially in the *mihrabs* does not seem to me the representation of whole truth. A minute study of the stone ornamentation of the *mihrabs* is surely to lead one to this proposition that the stone cutters' art in the *mihrabs* of Kusumba mosque is ornate and graceful to the eyes of art connoisseurs. Hence an attempt has been made at unveiling all relevant aspects of ornamental devices worked out in the scheme of stone-carving art in the *mihrab* decoration of Kusumba mosque.

It seems relevant to indicate to the constructional framework of the *mihrabs* of the mosque under study. There is exterior projection of the *qiblah* wall from the base to the top in the central *mihrab* whereas the side ones are not externally projected. The central *mihrab* niche is placed within a rectangular

framework measuring 391.16 cm x 259.08 cm. The alcove is 228.6 cm high, 89.2 cm wide and 101.6 cm deep. The *mihrab* to the south of the central *mihrab* is placed within a rectangular frame measuring 373.38 cm x 243.84 cm. The alcove within this frame is 208.28 cm high, 76.2 cm wide and 93.98 cm deep. On the north side of the central *mihrab* is a niche indication downstairs for its parallel niche measuring 106.68 cm high, 39.37 cm wide and 45.72 cm deep placed within a rectangular frame, the measurement of which is 203.2 cm in height and 121.92 cm in width in the upstairs of the presumed *Zananah* gallery.

The most sacred place for the Muslims is mosque. Hence in order to maintain its sanctity and serenity the mosque is kept free from sculptural and pictorial representations on the wall surface or on any part of it for the purpose of embellishment. Because there is theological opposition against the sculptural and pictorial representation on any object may it be for the decorative purpose.⁴⁰ So the artists employed their skill for the purpose of embellishment to the non-pictorial representation in the form of calligraphic ornamentation, geometric patterns, creeper or floral designs and abstract motifs of any object as there is no bar against their representation in the canonical laws of Islam. It is, therefore, found that all over the countries under Muslim occupation during the medieval times the artists were employed to embellish the wall surfaces of the mosques and other monuments with nonpictorial art. The mosque of Kusumba in its *mihrab* decoration falls under this category. An analysis of its ornamental devices on stone slabs is given as under.

A minute observation of the various parts of the *mihrabs* reveals the fact that the engraver artists embellished the surfaces of the walls with indigenous floral, creeper and abstract motifs by cutting the stones in an exquisite manner. The alcove niches of the central and side *mihrabs* along with the spandrels and adjoining parts are formed of the hewn stones joined together. The scheme of division of the alcove into five is supposed to indicate to the five cardinal features of Islam.⁴¹ The alcove of the central *mihrab* is placed between the two stone piers, the base, the shaft and the capital of which are carved out very exquisitely (Plate 1). Of the three carved devices in the base, the middle one resembles a niche like flower vase while the side ones seem to be playing bats. The shaft in its middle position seems to have a lampion hung from upward. Over the capital are carried out the bunches of grapes in a fascinating way. Next to the piers in the left and right are tall pilasters composed of several pieces of stones. On their surfaces is carved out a motif which seems to be stalks of ripe paddy rising out of a vase spread over a block of stone (Plate 2). The paddy stalks are five in number indicating to the five cardinal features of Islam referred to earlier. In between two such motifs is found a rosette which could be presumed a device to enhance the ornamental beauty of stone-cutter's art.

Next let us see the decoration of the alcove niches of the central and southern *mihrabs* with the points of variation. The alcove niche of the central *mihrab*, for the convenience of study, may be divided into three parts—the lower, the middle and the upper. The lower portion has a series of *mihrab* niches carved out with dots below of which could be noticed two bold bands also created with

dots, running parallel to either end (Plate 3). The middle portion is composed of five blocks of hewn stones each representing a replica of cusped niche with hanging lantern *jhar* used for greater illumination (Plate 4). There is no denying of the fact that the carving on the stone is well measured and fascinating so as to create a sonorous effect in the mind of the onlookers. Moreover, around the niche-lantern motif of the alcove niche the representation of small rosettes within geometric frames is perhaps intended to enhance the beauty of decoration and to put importance on the love of flower as its being one of the eye-soothing scene of the paradise. On the upper portion is carved out a series of the bunches of grapes or *bhutta thoka* over which is noticed the repetition of the same motif in miniature in two lines intervened by a series of flower-buds (Plate 5.). Above this line is carved out a series of pointed arches having the representation of small rosettes in their spandrels. Over the band of this terminating point is carved out small rosettes placed within the geometric frames, thereby variegating the modes of decoration. However, on this analysis it may be said that the whole area of the alcove niche of the central *mihrab* has a symmetrical, but graceful decoration befitting for the sacred place of prayers.

The decorative motifs and ornamental patterns of the southern *mihrab* differ from those of the central *mihrab*. The southern *mihrab* like the central one is composed of five blocks of hewn stones joined together. But in this *mihrab* unlike the central one in the middle portion is carved out in each block, a lighting bulb hung from a semi-circular inverse arch and supported by a motif resembling the head-dress of an Arab Muslim. Inside the bulb is noticed a flower-vase surrounded by a galaxy of small stars (Plate 6). On either side of this bulb in the upper portion can be seen prominent rosette motifs. The inverse semi-circular arch upholding the bulb has got two rosettes intervened by a flower-bud. The whole area of the rectangular frame of each block seems to get illuminated with the twinkling stars. On either side of the rectangular frame of each block are carved out rosettes along with an ornamented quadrangle in between the two running from the base to the top.

The northern *mihrab* of the presumed *Zananah* gallery in the upstairs resembling the two other *mihrabs* described above has got its variation in representing a big rosette in the middle portion of the alcove niche (Plate 7). The ornamentation of the side piers and other adjoining areas has got similarity with that of the central and southern *mihrabs*.

The following points may be deduced from the above study of the *mihrab* ornamentation of Kusumba mosque. First the stone-blocks are properly and symmetrically ashlar'd so as to accommodate and focus *the* motifs in their entirety for the onlookers. The division of the alcove niche of the *mihrabs* into five blocks of stone and such like division of the various ornamental schemes indicate to the five fundamental pillars of Islam. Indirectly it reminds the followers of Islam about their cardinal beliefs and rituals. Secondly, the engraver-artists were very cautious in the representation of the decorative motifs that befit to keep the environmental serenity of the sacred place of prayers. To materialize the ideas the artists confined their decorative scheme in the abstract motifs, the floral and

creeper designs and such other representation of indigenous elements. Finally, the engraver-artists added a very striking feature in carving out the various decorative motifs on the basalts with the use of dots. This is perhaps the speciality of the artists who were employed for the embellishment of the wall surfaces of the mosque of Kusumba. We may, therefore, presume that the engraver-artists exerted their skill in making the *mihrab* ornate and graceful. besides their social and religious underlying. to the onlookers and art connoisseurs.

In continuation of aesthetic treatment pertinently now let us examine a few epigraphs of medieval Bengal to assess their aesthetic beauties and calligraphic niceties in the following.

Calligraphy and epigraphy are closely related. On the epigraphs calligraphy produces a sort of rhythm and harmony besides bringing into prominence the various ornamental motifs for those interested in the study of art history. Because calligraphy is the art of beautiful writing. Like the waves of ocean it is very soothing to the eyes of the connoisseurs of aesthetic art. It is ornamental in form, bold in nature and graceful in its ending. Before the invention of alphabets in the East and West, the system of hieroglyph in ancient Egypt, cuneiform in Babylonia and ideograph in China could be considered as symbolic expression of ideas and thoughts on stone-slabs, brick-pieces and other materials of antiquity. In the gradual process of evolution the hieroglyph and cuneiform systems brought to existence the letter-shapes of all Semitic languages including Arabic, and ultimately became the mother of all European alphabets.⁴² Since then the scribes employed their aesthetic ingenuity to mould the letters in various forms retaining their originality for producing grace and beauty in the written text. However, calligraphy attracted the attention of the Arab artists in early Islam, as they could not practise pictorial art on any object of embellishment due to its prohibition in the canonical laws of the *Shariah*.⁴³ The elongated shafts and concave structures of Arabic alphabets are so elastic that they can be easily moulded to create various artistic shapes and motifs. Besides the media of writing calligraphy got momentum as a decorative art with the expansion of the territorial jurisdiction of the Muslims. With the conquest of Bengal at the early 13th century C.E. by the Turks, the Central Asian rich cultural heritage made stride in the culturally virgin soil of Bengal. Calligraphy also stepped in with its train. The Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal (1204-1576 C.E.) built religious and secular monuments wherein the stones were chiselled for writing beautifully in Arabic alphabets. This type of writing falls within the purview of epigraphy, and the stone carving with writing-art combinedly called epigraph. In the absence of the contemporary written materials the study of the history of Bengal depends greatly on the coin-prints and the contents of the epigraphs. The scholars and researchers though devoted their energy to unearth the historical aspects of the epigraphs, paid less attention to find out their aesthetic aspects. Hence on the basis of select specimen the aesthetic aspects of epigraphs are unveiled as underneath.

Extant remnants show that the monuments of medieval Bengal were not left unornamented. Instead they were covered either with terracotta ornamentation or with stone carving representing creeper designs and other indigenous floral

motifs. The aesthetic aspects of the epigraphs executed in the period under study are manifested in various types of ornamentation indigenous in nature. Of the major and minor styles of Arabic calligraphy like *Naskh-thulth*, *Muhaqqaq-Raihan*, *Tawqi-Riqa*, *Ghubar* and *Bihar* which were used on the stone-slabs the most ornamental form, though not an independent style, is the *Tughra* richly cultivated on the monuments. But it is so largely used in the monuments of Bengal that it has exuberantly been regarded as an independent style of Arabic writing. In fact being a synthesis of cursive styles it is an ornamental writing in which the letters are interwoven as to assume a complicated, but elegant decorative shape which is difficult to decipher. The *Tughra* can be formed in calligraphy with the expansion, contraction, prolongation and alteration of the letters as and when it is found suitable.⁴⁴ In the *Tughra* ornamental style besides the animal forms the various kinds of abstract decorative motifs are subject of representation. Many of these decorative motifs reflect on the indigenous aspects of Bengal in various designs and forms. On this point a few epigraphs are selected to have them scanned for throwing light on their abstract motifs and ornamental designs.

An Inscription of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459 C.E.) dated 858 A.H./1458 C.E. (Plate No. 8) contains new information helpful for the reconstruction of the history of medieval Bengal.⁴⁵ But here we are concerned to see its ornamental aspects. It seems to be a simple type of *Tughra* that started relieving the monotonous bareness of the wall surface of religious monuments of medieval Bengal. The elongated shafts of the Arabic letters like *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام) are so gracefully set that they attract the attention of the connoisseurs of art to seek the ornamental motifs. The elongated shafts of the letters may be postulated the straight lines as the standing men and the other letters at their feet be reckoned as the dead over which the funeral prayer is being performed.⁴⁶ Another decorative motif may be conjectured in this way that the vertical strokes of the letters are considered as the bamboo poles used for fencing the cornfield and the letters underneath as shrubs and cornstalks. In case of the former assumption it is related to the last moment of man's life in this world while in the case of the latter it is connected with the foodstuff, the vital means of man's livelihood in Bengal. The last one is more preferable as it reflects on the indigenous element of Bengal.

An epigraph of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 C.E.) dated 868 A.H./1460 C.E. (Plate No. 9) is graceful to looking and ornamental in design representing the 'Fencing view' and 'Swan variety' of *Tughra* in one place.⁴⁷ Fencing around the cornfield and rearing of the swan are the common feature of the rural Bengal. Here in this epigraph the elongated shafts of the Arabic letters *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام) seem to be a series of bamboo sticks used for the fencing and the letters clustered at the bottom are presumed valuable objects meant for protection by the fencing.⁴⁸ The concave letters like *fi* (فى) and *nun* (نون) in the shape of swan put across the slender vertical strokes above the clustered letters add to the beauty of ornamentation. These decorative motifs presented by the calligrapher artists on the stone slabs reflect on certain social aspects of rural Bengal in the 15th century C.E.⁴⁹ It is, therefore, evident that the aesthetic aspects are focused in the calligraphic letterings on the monuments of medieval Bengal.

A striking ornamental motif in *Tughra* form can be noticed in an epigraph of sultan Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah (1474-1481 C.E.) dated 884 A.H./1479 C.E. (Plate No. 10). The stone-cutting art is very nice and soothing to eyes of the onlookers. The horizontal pendants with pointed heads look like the handles of the scimitars and the vertical curves and the clustered letters beneath are conceived of the fighting forces engaged in the battle array charging one another with utmost seriousness in the hope of winning victory in favour of the respective contingent. The letters are so interwoven that they produce sonorous artistic effects amidst the critical moment of war-scene. Sometimes the elongated shafts of the letters like *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام) are postulated as the bamboo poles of the hoisted flags.⁵⁰ In any case there is no denial of the fact that the ornamental designs and aesthetic aspects of the epigraph understudy evoke the admiration of those interested in the study of calligraphic art of medieval Bengal.

Two epigraphs of the time of Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah (1490-1493 C.E.), both having the same date of 898 A.H./1493 C.E. arrest our attention for their calligraphic niceties and decorative motifs. Of the two one (plate no. 11) may be conjectured as 'Thatched Roof' variety of *Tughra* in its ornamental design.⁵¹ The barbed *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام) in whole of the epigraph can be compared with bamboo stockades bearings the thrust of the thatched roof shaped by the crescent like *nun* (نون) and *ya* (ي) placed over the clustered letters at the bottom.⁵² The concave letters joined together above the clustered letters seem to represent a series of *dochala* thatched roof of the bamboo cottage. The clustered letters running all through the epigraph from right to left can be presumed as inmates of the bamboo cottage.⁵³ These features are common for the houses of the general people of rural Bengal. Another decorative motifs may be postulated for this epigraph. This may be the 'Army Barrack' view of *Tughra*. The elongated shafts of *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام) slanting at the top with a pointed projection below look like the handle of the scimitar and thereby refer to the army contingent. The concave letters *nun* (نون) and *ya* (ي) appear to have been the canvas-roof of an army tent. The text of the epigraph just below the concave letters seem to be the fighting soldiers who live under the canvas-roof of the tent. The elongated shafts appear to have been used as tent-poles supporting the canvas roof.⁵⁴ The same device with more addition may be noticed in the Champatali Inscription of 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519 C.E.) dated 910 A.H./1504 C.E. The epigraph belongs to the *Tughra qalam* of writing in which the decorative scheme appears to represent an army contingent presumably consisting of five traditional rows⁵⁵ when it marches against enemy troops. We may, therefore, reasonably infer that the calligraphers excelled in the art of *Tughra* writing on the epigraphs and proved their worth in abstracting *duchala* roofed cottage, the barrack view and the march past of the army in their ornamental scheme of calligraphy. The second epigraph (Plate No. 12) of the same sultan is also fascinating for its decorative scheme adding new features to the first one. With two dimensions of ornamental art i.e. *duchala* roof and the barrack view of the army contingent the third dimension of ornamentation is postulation of 'swan in case' above the clustered letters at the bottom of the elongated shafts of *alif* (الف) and *lam* (لام).

An Inscription of 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah dated 904 A.H./1498 C.E. (Plate No. 13) is presumed to represent a canopy view of *Tughra* formed by four concave letters of *nun* (نون) and *ya* (ي). The clustered letters underneath seem to

be the devotees listening to the sermons of religious orators or engaged in their prayers. It may also be viewed a war flotilla carrying the soldiers to repulse the enemy's attack in the riverine tract of Bengal contemporaneous to the time of the sultan mentioned above. Arshnagar Inscription of the same sultan referred to above dated 907 A.H./1502 C.E. (Plate No. 14) is a best example of ornamental *Tughra*. The vertical strokes ending in the top with a series of shafts of scimitars are thirty-three in number. The engraver's art, in this epigraph, is of high order. The single-lined calligraphy may represent, in its decorative form, a ship which carries soldiers with swords in hand going to charge the enemies in the riverine tract. The text of the epigraph echoes that notion by ascribing the phraseology of *اكرم بر و بحر* (the most honoured of land and sea) to sultan 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah.⁵⁶ The decorative scheme may also bear two other possibilities : first, an army camp, where the tents are kept tight with a suitable number of poles, and secondly, a roof resembling *chala* house. In any case, the artist's skill as noticed in the proportionate arrangement of the shafts and curvatures, finds full play in this epigraph. The bold letterings of *قصر* and *من، بنى، قصر* amidst the elongated vertical strokes suggest the likeness of a curved roof, which is a distinctive characteristic as well as a special feature of medieval Bengal architecture.⁵⁷ It is really interesting to note that overhead and underneath of the inscribed space a series of fifteen small lotus motifs are engraved to enhance the beauty of ornamentation and at the same time to recall the indigenous lotus design on the decorative scheme of the stone slab.

As regards calligraphic art taking all the points into consideration it may be aptly viewed that the epigraphs of Bengal besides containing a lot of information for the reconstruction of historical aspects of medieval Bengal shed lustre on the aesthetic art and decorative motifs of indigenous nature for which the attention of art historians are invited to study their ornamental aspects vertically and to a greater depth.

In conclusion it can be said that though the paucity of materials regarding the study of the subject is a hindrance on its fullest treatment yet so far materials are traced in terracotta plaques, stone-carving specimen of architectural members and calligraphic varieties of epigraphs, have opened the closed-door study of the subject for those interested in diving deep in the study of aesthetic art of medieval Bengal.

Plates

1-14

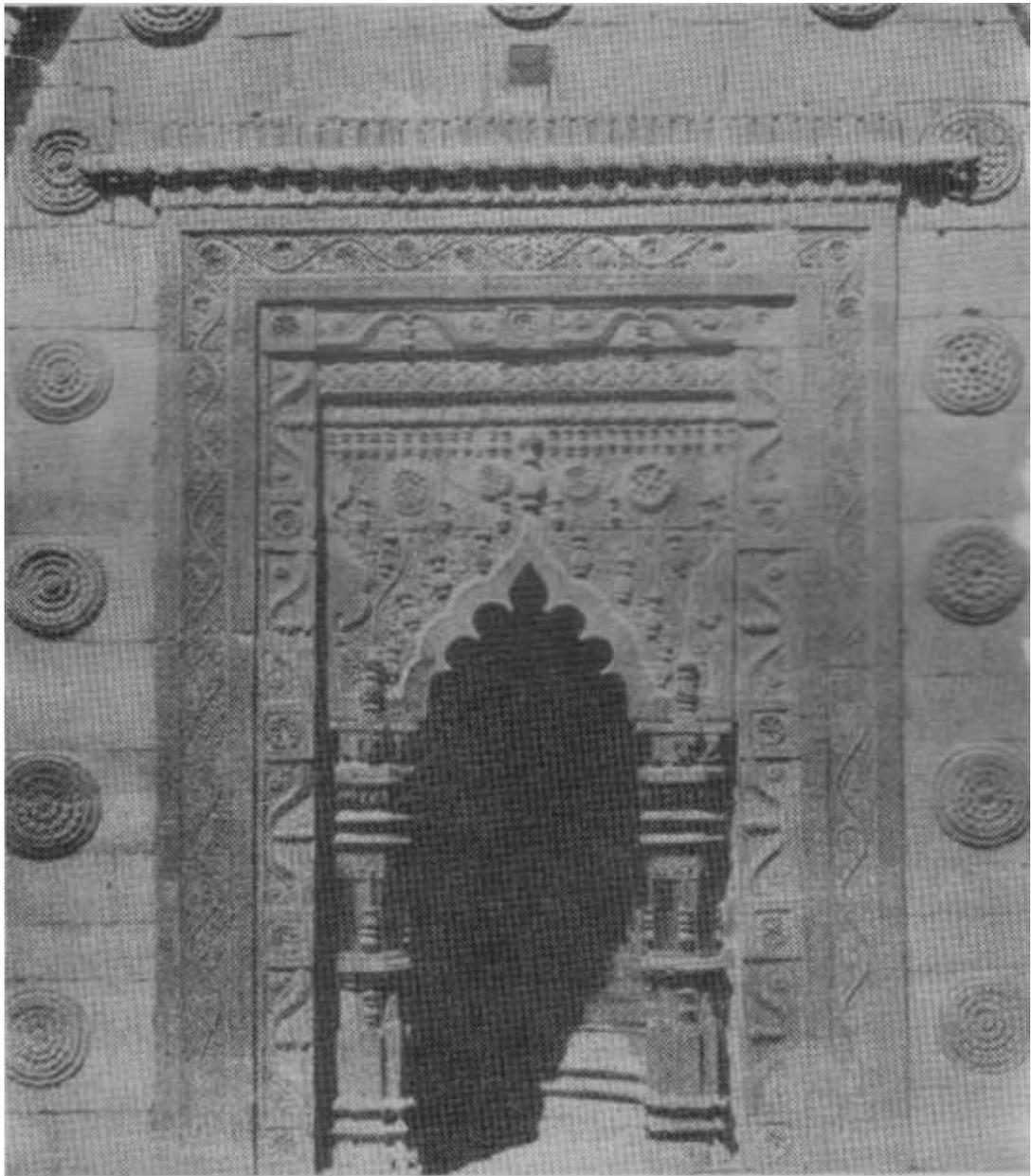


Plate 1. The central *mihrab*, Kusumba Mosque.

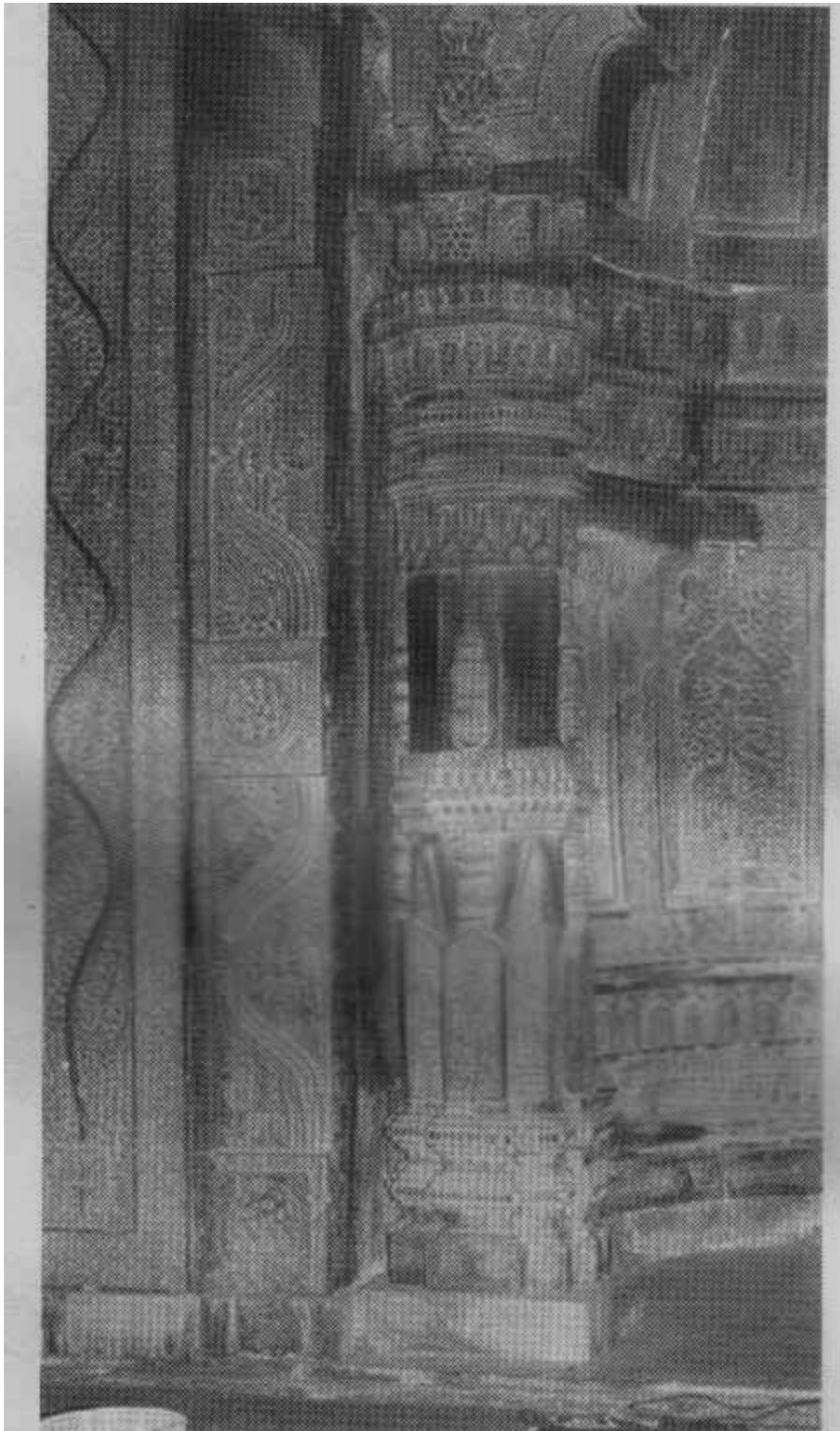


Plate 2. Attached pilaster with paddy stalk and rosette motif, Kusumba Mosque.

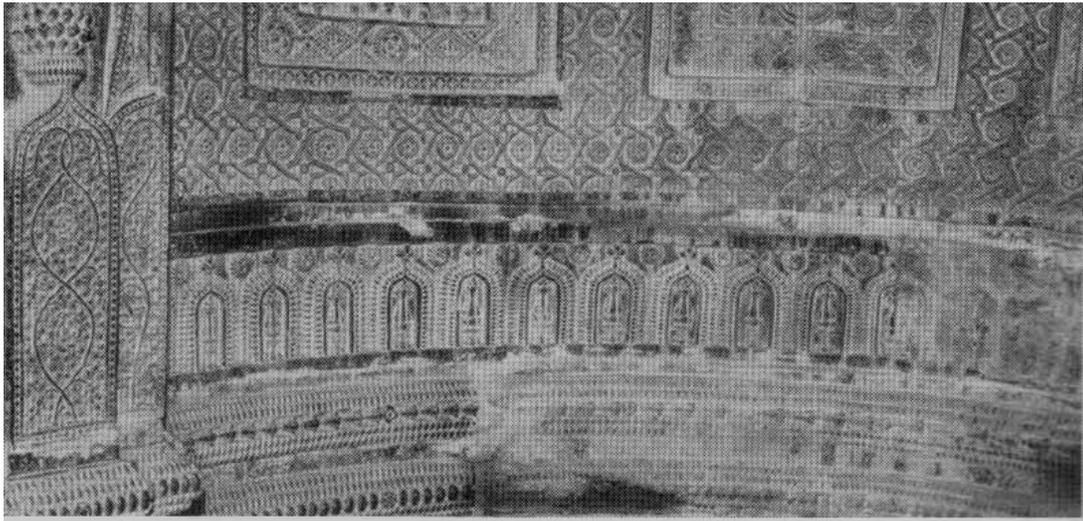


Plate 3. Lower portion of the central alcove, Kusumba Mosque.



Plate 4. Middle portion of the central alcove,
Kusumba Mosque.



Plate 6. Middle portion of the southern *mihrab*,
Kusumba Mosque.

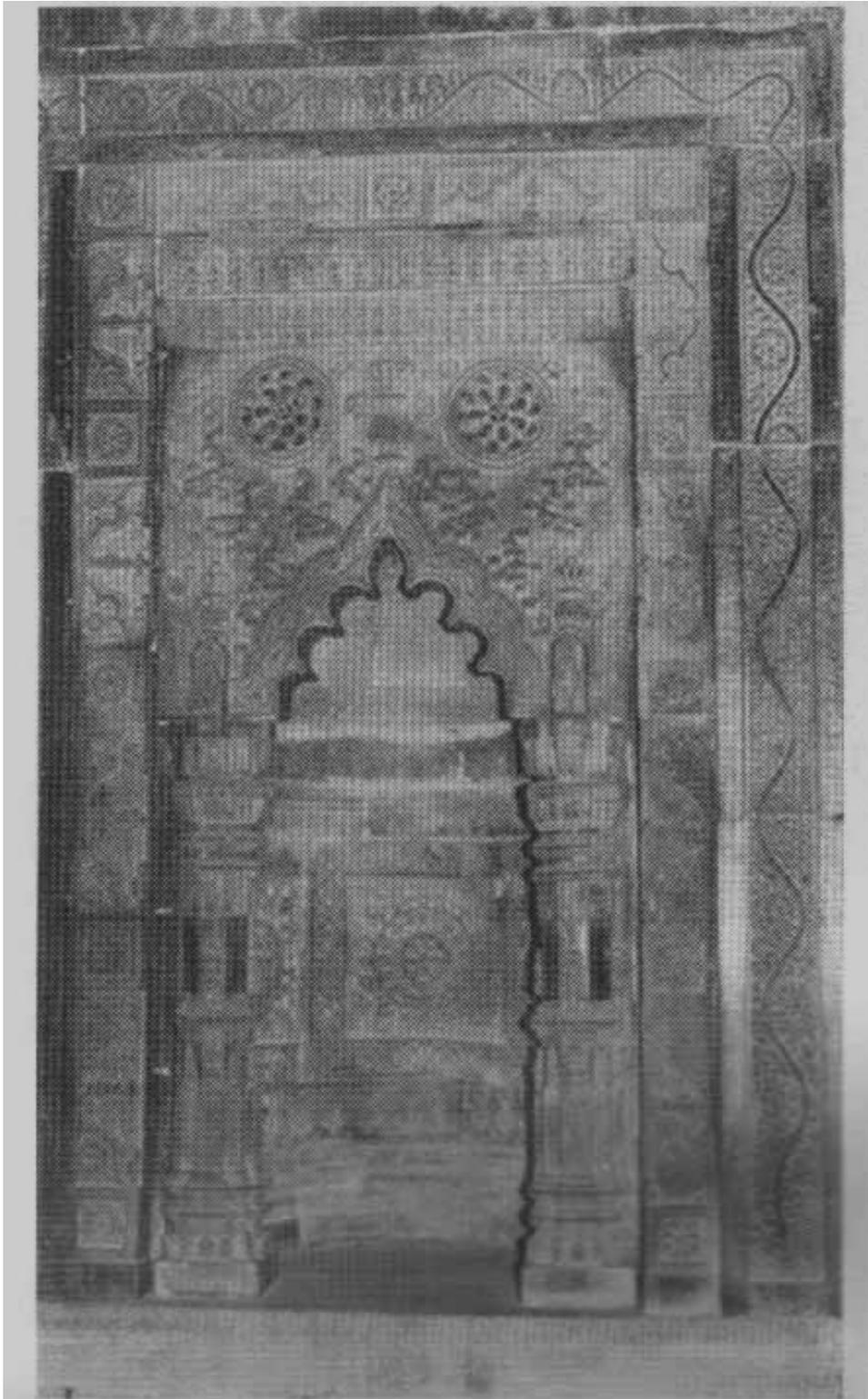


Plate 7. The northern *mihrab* of Zananah gallery, Kusumba Mosque.

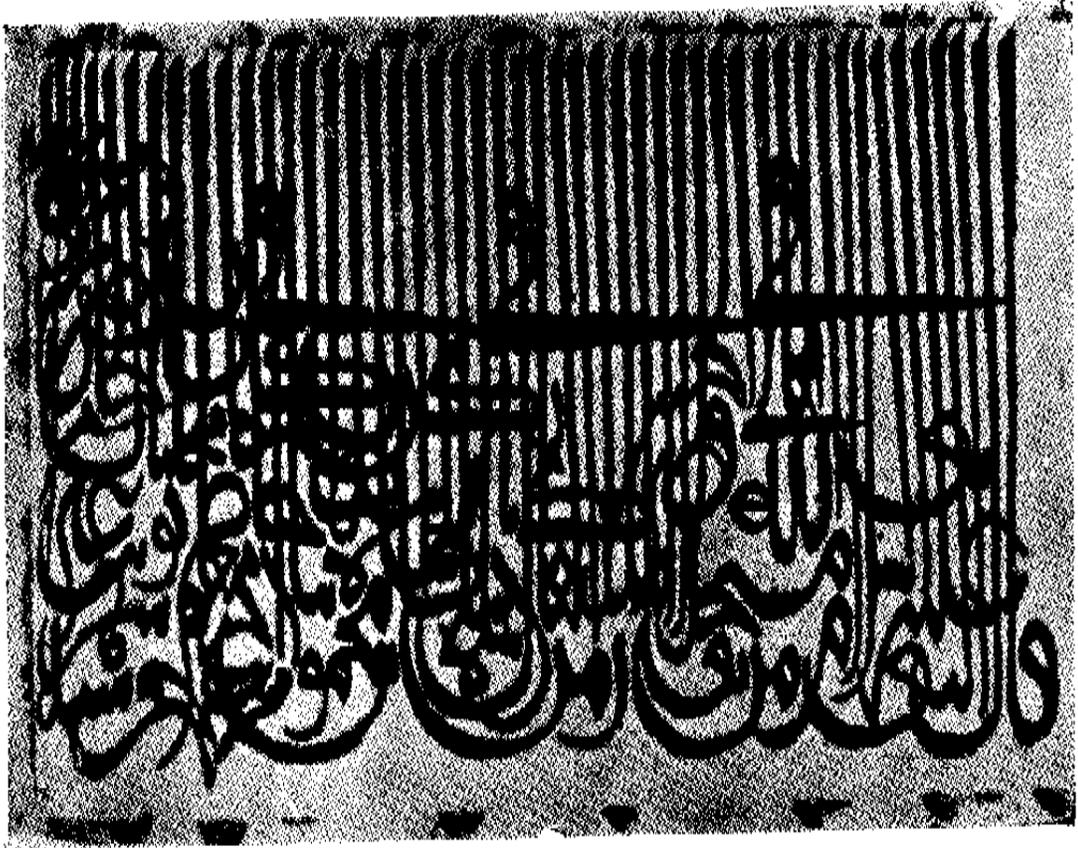


Plate- 9

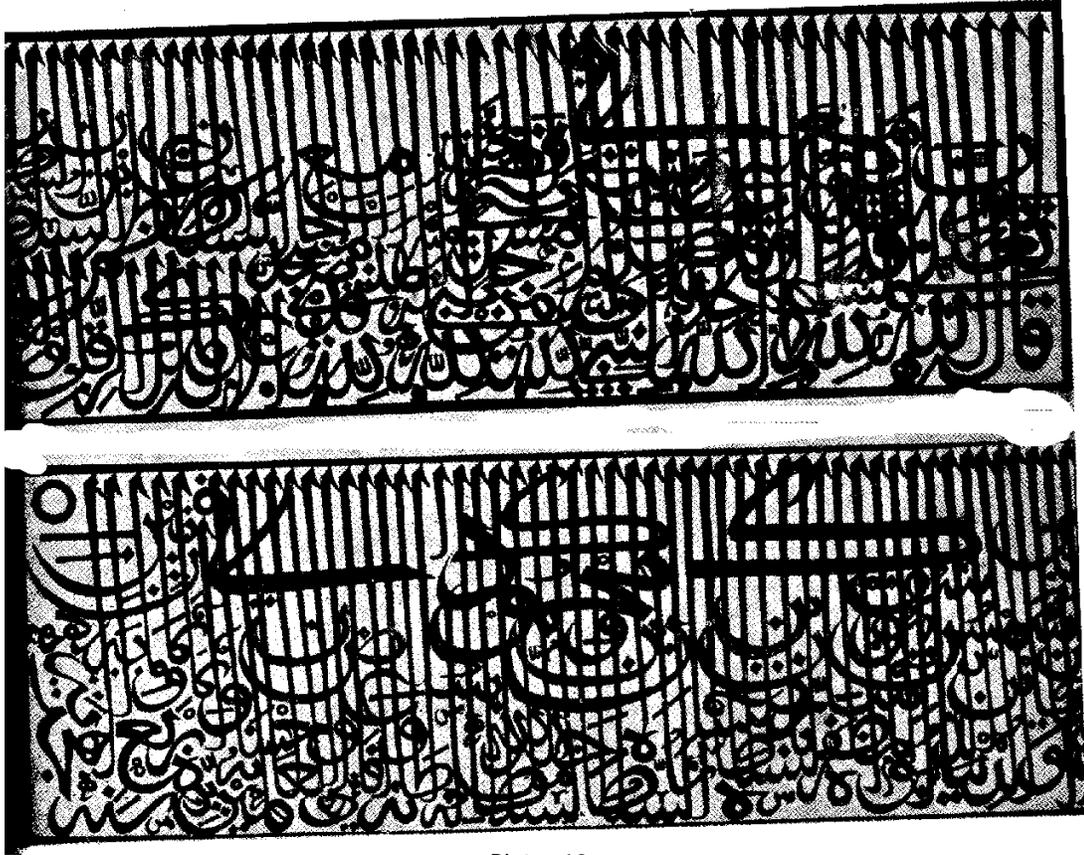


Plate- 10

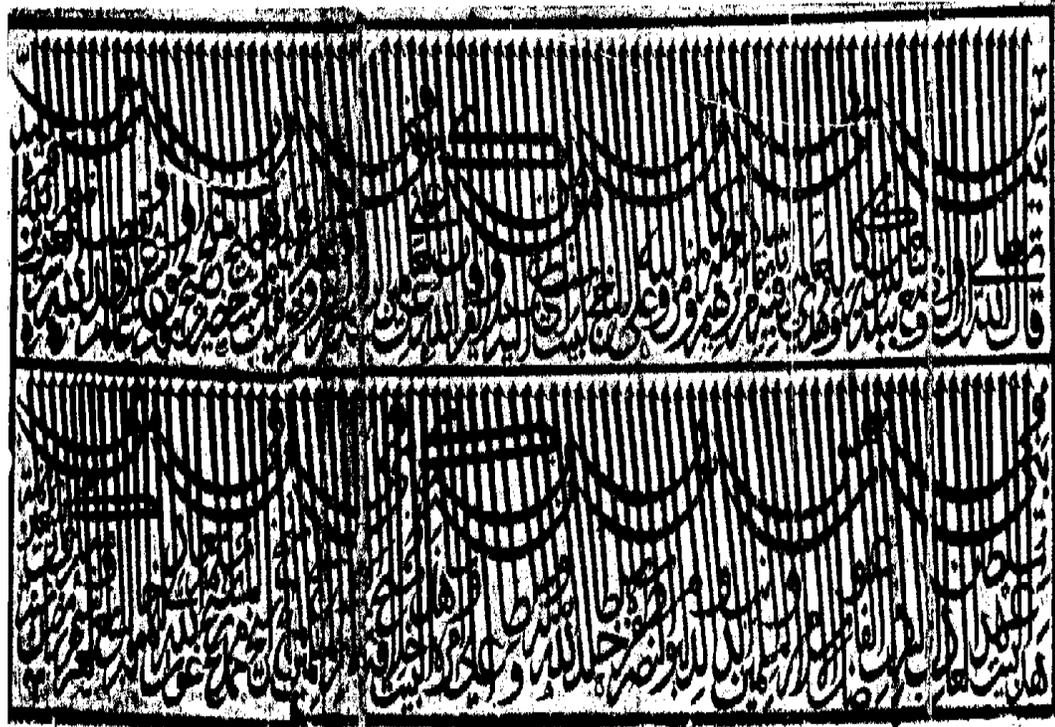


Plate- 11

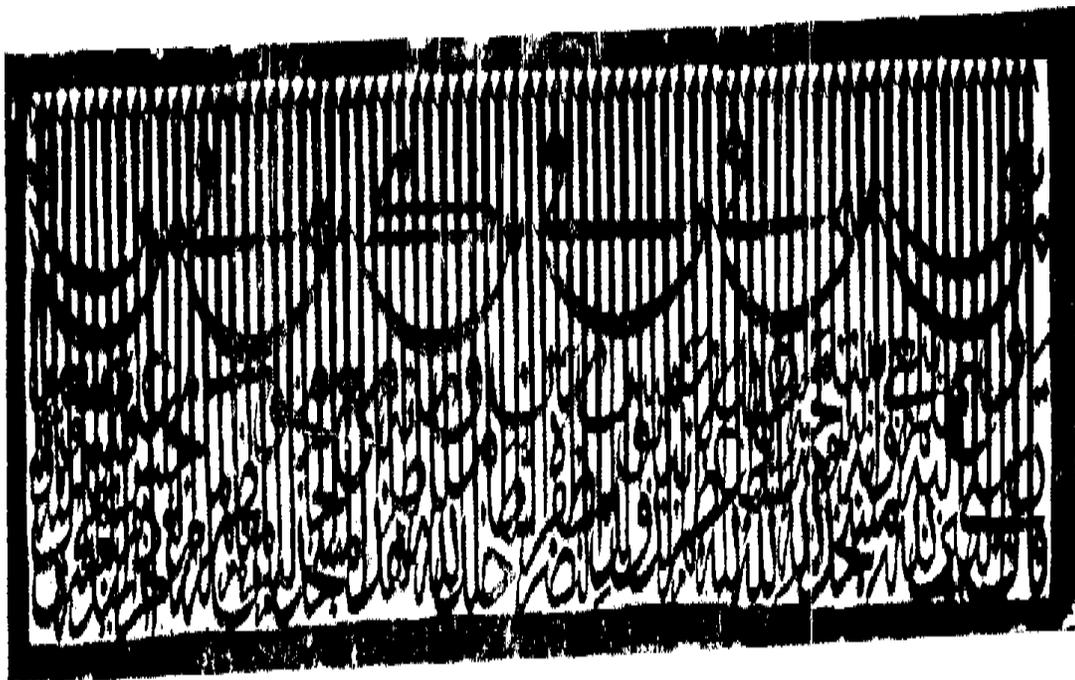


Plate- 12

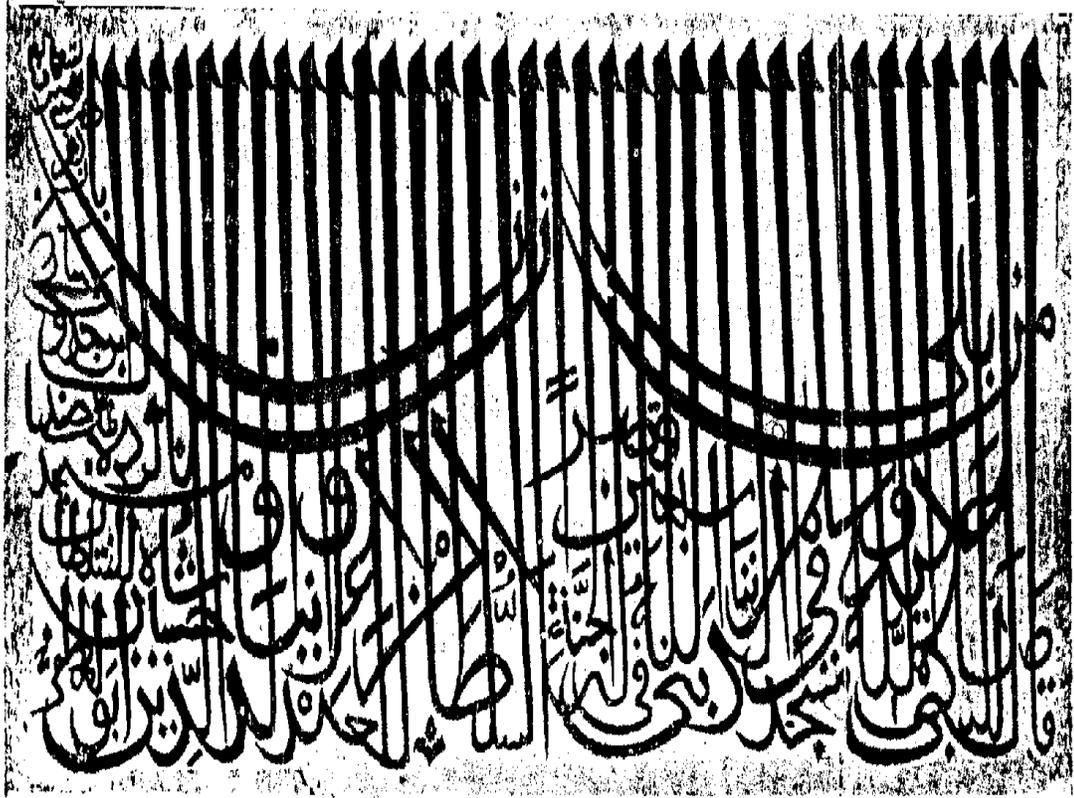


Plate- 13

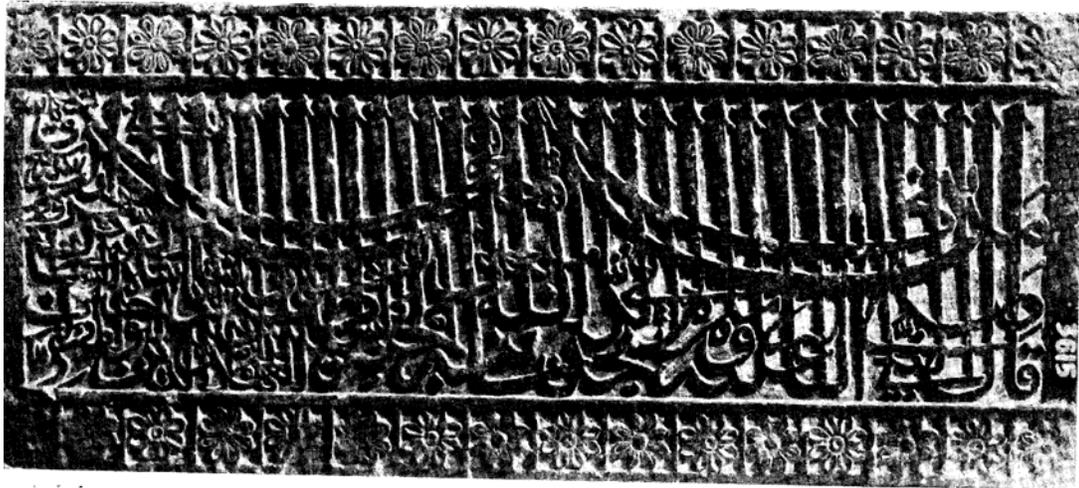


Plate- 14

Dr. Harun Ur Rashid Commemoration Volume, Dhaka, 2011

Notes and References

- ¹ Lama Taranatha, *History of Buddhism in India*, Tr. Lima Chimpa Alaka Chottopadhyay (Simla: Institute of Advanced Studies, 1970), Fol. 138, P.384; V. A. Smith, *A History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* (London: University Press, 1911), P. 348; N. G. Majumdar, *IB*, Vol. III. Pp. 45-46.
- ² *EI*, Vol. I, Pp. 305-15; N. G. Majumdar, *IB*, Vol. III, Pp. 45-46.
- ³ A Large number of black basalts and grey sand stones with sculptural representations tentatively of the 8th to the 12th century A.D. are preserved in the galleries of the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. They exhibit appropriate decorative scheme in stone carving.
- ⁴ Zia al-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, P.593; yahya b. Ahmad Sirhindi, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, P.125; *JAS*, Letters, 1952, Pp. 154 ff; *JBRS*, Vol. XLII, Part 2.1956, Pp. 186-87.
- ⁵ Percy Brown. *Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)* (Bombay: Taraporevala Sons & Co. Private Ltd., Fifth edition, 1968), P. 40.
- ⁶ *Bukhari*, *op. cit.* Vol. II. Pp. 880-81; *Mishkat aL-Masbih*. bab al-Tasawir, P. 385.
- ⁷ Adina mosque at Hadrat Pandua. Darasbari Masjid. Chamkati mosque. Tantipara mosque and Dhunichak mosque at Gaur and Bagha mosque at Rajshahi still display the terracotta ornamentation. cf. Percy Brown. *Indian Architecture (Islamic Period)*,

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- Pp. 39 ff; Zulekha Haque, *Terracotta Decoration of Late Medieval Period Portrayal of a Society* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. 1980), P. 18.
- ⁸ A. H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961), P. 18.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* f.n.11; David McCutth. "Hindu-Muslim Artistic Continuities in Bengal". *JASP*, Vol XIII, No. 3. Pp. 245-47
- ¹⁰ Creeper device is very exquisitely displayed on the walls of the Darasbari *masjid*. cf. Percy Brown, *op. cit.* P. 40.
- ¹¹ Mangoes and jack fruits as terracotta plaques are noticeable on the south western walls of the Bagha mosque In the Inner side.
- ¹² E. B. Havell, *Indian Architecture* (London: John Murray. 1913). Pp. 60 & 122.
- ¹³ S. M. Hasan. "Some Interrelations between Persian Islamic and pre Mughal Bengal Architecture", *Shilpakala*, Vol. 1, Dacca, 1978, p. 52.
- ¹⁴ A. H. Dani, *MAB*, Pp. 17-19.
- ¹⁵ Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* TN, Vol. 1, p. 432.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 436.
- ¹⁷ *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, pp. 102 & 105.
- ¹⁸ *Shilpakala*, Vol. 1. 1978, p. 52.
- ¹⁹ Douglas Barret. *Islamic Metal Works in the British Museum* (London: The Trustees of the Museum, 1949), P. Introduction X.
- ²⁰ Behcet Unsal. *Turkish Islamic Architecture* (London: Alec Tiranti. 1959). P. 82.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² A. H. Dani, *MAB*, p. 68; Zulekha Haque. *op. cit.* p.19
- ²³ The instances are noticeable on the Hindu sculptures preserved in the Varendra Research Museum Rajshahi.
- ²⁴ A.H. Dani. *MAB*, Pp. 19 & 130.
- ²⁵ Chhota Sona *masjid* is an extant specimen of this type of architecture. cf. A.H. Dani, *MAB*. P. 136.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 10.
- ²⁷ Behcet Unsal, *op. cit.* p. 83.
- ²⁸ It was built at Hadrat Pandua in 1375 C.E. by Sikandar Shah b. Ilyas Shah. In size and dimension it resembles the *Jami masjid* of Damascus built by al-Walid, the Umayyad Caliph in 706-15 C.E.
- ²⁹ On epigraphic evidence it is presumed to have been built by Ashraf Khan during the reign of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah in A. H. 865/1460-61 C.E. The place Mahisantosh identified with the mint town Barbakabad is now in the greater Rajshahi district.
- ³⁰ Chhota Sona *masjid* was built by Wali Muhammad during the reign of 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah. It is situated in the suburb of Gaur, now in the Chapainawabganj district.
- ³¹ Kusumba mosque was built by Sulaynian in A.H. 966/1558 C.E. during the reign of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah. It is now in the Manda Police Station of Naogaon district.

³² The division of *mihrab* niche into a number of rows horizontally and vertically, and the stone carving of both the Mahisanosh and Adina mosque resemble each other.

³³ A. H. Dani, *MAB*. p. 138.

³⁴ *al-Quran*. Surah al-Imran. V. 96: It is an oblong rectangular house in the valley of Makkah first built by Hazrat Adam (peace be on him) and then by Hazrat Ibrahim (peace be on him) and his son Isma'il (peace be on him). The Muslims offered their *salat* or prayers towards this house.

³⁵ In two lines the inscription runs thus:

1st line : قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى لله مسجدا يبتغى به وجه الله بنى الله له بيتا مثله فى الجنة : فى عهد السلطان المعظم المكرم غياث

2nd line: الدنيا والدين ابو المظفر بهادر شاه السلطان ابن محمد شاه غازى خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه واعلى امره وشانه وعز جنده وبرهانه بنا كرده سليمان دام عدله فى ست وستين وتسعمائة-

Translation

1st line : The prophet (peace be on him) has said "He who builds a mosque seeking the pleasure of Allah, Allah builds for him a house like it in the paradise." In the time of the honoured and benevolent sultan Ghiyath.

2nd line : al-Din Bahadur Shah, the Sultan, son of Muhammad Shah Ghazi, may Allah perpetuate his kingdom and power, and elevate his position and status, and strengthen his army and evidence, (the mosque) built by Sulayman may his justice prolong in the year nine hundred and sixty six—966 A. H./1558 C. E.

³⁶ An undeciphered epigraph of a cenotaph testifies to the existence of the mausoleum of a court personage in the vicinity of the place. This cenotaph is lying in the courtyard of a house about 1/4 km from the mosque to the east. As deciphered by me the epigraph runs thus: مسند لملك ممالك بر و بحر ملك المعظم المكرم بر يملكك

Translation :

Reclining place for the king of the kingdom of land and sea, the honoured and benevolent king, may your good deed elevate you.

³⁷ For the details of the mosque cf. A. H. Dani, *MAB*, pp. 162-164.

³⁸ Adjacent to the mosque there is big watercourse (*dighi*) running from north to south, and it is presumed that it was dug to supply water for the residents of the area besides serving the purpose of ablution for the *musallis* or devotees.

³⁹ A. H. Dani. *op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁴⁰ *Bukhari* ed. Krehl, Vol. II, p. 43; Yahya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi, *al-Minhaj fi Sharf Sahih Muslim*, Vol. VIII, Bulaq, p. 398. of. T. W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam* (New York : Dover publications, Inc. 1965), pp. 6ff.

⁴¹ Five cardinal features are faith i.e. belief in Allah and his apostle Muhammad, *Salat* or prayers. *Siyam* or fasting in the month of Ramadan, *Zakat* or paying of poor-rate and *Hajj* or pilgrimage to the house of Kabah once in a life. Cf. *Mishkat al-Masabih*, (Karachi edition), *Kitab al-Iman*, p. 12.

⁴² P.K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1968), p. 71.

⁴³ The holy Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (sm.) are the two main sources of *Shariah*. See for the prohibition of pictorial art, *al-Quran*, V: 90; *al-Bukhari, Sahih*, Vol. II (Karachi: Nur Muhammad Library, 1938), p. 83.

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- ⁴⁴ A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, "Calligraphy on Stone-Inscriptions of Bengal Sultanate", *Islamic Culture*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 2, Hyderabad, 1994, p. 70.
- ⁴⁵ The inscription under study being deciphered by the writer was published in the *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum*, Rajshahi University, Vol. 6 (Henceforth *JVRM*). For detail see the above Journal, pp. 101-106.
- ⁴⁶ *JVRM*, p. 106.
- ⁴⁷ A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, "Calligraphy as an Ornamental Art in the Monuments of Bengal Sultanate", *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, 1999 Dhaka, p. 409 (Henceforth *JBA*).
- ⁴⁸ *JBA*, p. 409.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. IV (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1960), p. 105.
- ⁵¹ *Islamic Culture*, p. 76.
- ⁵² *JBA*, p. 409.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 410.
- ⁵⁵ The traditional rows of an army contingent are as follows: *Muqaddamah*, *Muwakhara*, *Awsat*, *Maimanah* and *Maisarah* i.e. Vanguard, Rearguard, Middle Wing, Right Wing and Left Wing. For the detail see A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, "Five Epigraphs of Pre-Mughal Bengal : A Study of their Contents and Calligraphic Styles", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, pp. 372-373, Plate No. 11; pp. 374-376.
- ⁵⁶ *JBA*, p. 410.
- ⁵⁷ *JVRM*, p. 108.