

Sultans and Mosque (The Early Muslim Architecture of Bengal),

by Perween Hasan, I.B. Tauris, London & New York, 2007,
pp. XIV, 241, Ills. 172

The book recently published was undertaken as a research dissertation at Harvard University in the eighties when I was connected with it as a co-supervisor and reader. The book was thus known to me before its publication, and therefore I have little comments to offer today except making a general evaluation that it is a scholarly work on the mediaeval mosque architecture of Bengal, now captioned *Sultans and Mosques*. Some new ideas in the subject, however, have crept in chapter 2 (other two chapters-1 & 3 being preliminary and catalogue) dealing with the origins of 'Bengali Mosque Architecture'.

Professor Perween Hasan's idea of tracing the origin of the plan of *ek-gumbad* mosque is new and certainly provocative. The idea may be accepted as an innovative conception because innovation generates new knowledge and new materials for research. But there can be some opposing arguments too which Professor Hasan knows very well. The opposing theory, then not opposing but original, was initiated by André Godard, the great French Iranologist whose book *Athar-e-Iran* published in the form of archaeological reports in 37 volumes is classic in Archaeology and Art History. Godard theorised the plan and structure of the *ek-gumbad* mosque which he calls 'kiosk' type to the *chahartaq*—the *ek-gumbad* square fire temple (having four doorways, and hence *chahartaq*) of the Sassanians. I personally feel more at home with the *chahartaq* theory because of the following reasons:

Firstly, vaulted *ek-gumbad* mosque and *turbe* (tomb) as a single unit structure originated in Iran, and not in India. *Secondly*, the temple — a small, dark and mysterious deity—structure without fixed orientation can not be the prototype of a mosque the very essence of which is abstraction, light, open and fixed direction towards *qibla*. *Thirdly*, the earlier method of erecting a mosque in Syria, and Iraq—Iran as conversion or re-shaping of a *chahartaq* or *iwan* in Iraq-Iran, and church in Syria, while that in India was 'purposeful demolition the materials of which could be used in the construction of a newly erected mosque. Examples of both the cases are many. But in case of deity-temple

perhaps not a single example could be cited which was originally a temple *in situ*, turned to a mosque. The conversion was simple: in case of a *chahartaq* it was achieved by blocking the qibla-direction door and putting a *mihrab* in its place, and in case of a church by putting a *mihrab* in the *qibla* wall, and opening a door on the opposite side. In India it was impossible, and hence, was the necessity of demolition. About the *iwan* (assembly hall of the Sassanians) there was nothing to change. If the *man* was oriented north—south, the *qibla* was to the south and if it was east—west, the *qibla* was to the west both the directions from Iraq-Iran to the Kaaba was appropriate. *Fourthly*, the idea that Burmese temples could have exercised an influence on Bengal mosque sounds not that convincing because of the simple reason that *Bongala*, then almost devoid of Buddhism because of migration and its mixing up with Hinduism due to the influence of Mahayana philosophy, did not have congenial relationship with Burma as was the case with the earlier Buddhist Samalata rulers or the Palas. Because of good relations in those days there was a great influence of *Vanga* or Pala rulers on the temple architecture of South-East Asia.

The present influence of South-East Asian temples on Chittagong temple-making appears to be a modern phenomenon. Moreover the horizontal veranda in front of some *ek-gumbad* mosques can be better linked up with Arabic or Persian *riwaq* (Bengali *rowak*) than with a square or perpendicular *mandapa* in front of a temple. The ‘discounting’ of Andre’ Godard’s theory by Grabar (p.37) may perhaps be taken as a wrangling issue between two big men — one an excavator and a practical man, perhaps a field commander, and the other an interpreter and a philosopher, perhaps a strategist-diplomat. I have great admiration for both, and in such cases of scholarly disagreement it is perhaps better to follow a middle course. Since an interpretation is subjective and literary and not mathematics both may be taken as acceptable in the present case because in all other aspects there is a real and visual synchronization which is the true spirit of mediaeval Bengali architecture. It should perhaps be pointed out here that it is this synchronization which led to the multiplication of *ek-gumbad* single units to the creation of multidomed mosques not only in Bengal, but also in other parts of the Islamic World.

Professor Grabar’s question of ‘how should one explain the relative absence of minarets in Bangladesh (Foreword, p.2) is legitimate, and may be explained by the theory of an Iraqi-Arab Ghazi Rajab Muhammad who in his Edinburgh University Ph.D. dissertation under Professor Talbot Rice entitled *The Minaret and its Relationship to the Mosque* adequately proves that it was the stem orthodoxy of the *Azams* as against the *Arabs* that negated its inclusion as *madhana* in some regional styles of the former. True to this spirit the Turkish rulers who to prove their legitimacy of ascendancy followed this practice not only in Bengal but in the whole of the Sub-Continent in Pre-Mughal time. The twin towers of Gujrat mosques apparently opposing were structural appendages not that important as *inudhunac*^{1[2]} as significant for beauty, reasons of vanity and prestige’ as

^{1[2]} The *adhan* was performed from the top of the portal in between the towers. There must have followed the ‘roof-top *adhan*’ of the mosque of the Prophet at Madina

Grabar points out (p2) in his general remarks following the Mongol tradition in Iran. it should perhaps be pointed out here that poetic and bombastic eulogies started from the time of the Turkish rule, and it has been amply reflected not only in art subject matters but also in official historiography. The same spirit of proving themselves better and exalted Muslims appeared in innumerable mosque inscriptions of *Bengal* in which the rulers appellated themselves instead of simple *Khalifatullah as khalifatullah bil hujjat wa al burhan* (Khalifa of Allah by deed and testimony).

In defining the cultural identity Perween Hasan has rightly pointed out its roots to the liberal attitude of the Independent Sultans who by cutting themselves up from the mainstream of Delhi found no other alternative but to make themselves one with the local people. The liberal attitude of the Bengalees, it is interesting to point out, seemed clearly manifested from the time of the Khadga, Deva and Chandra rulers of Samatata and the imperial Palas who being themselves stern Buddhists granted lands to Hindus to build temples. By way of gradual admixture the Buddhist and Hindu temples thus became unified in one character as has been pointed out due to the influence of Mahayana Buddhism. The same unified character is noticed in mosque and other religious edifices of the Sultanate Period when materials from Hindu temples were used freely, monastery plan accepted in madrasa building, and trabeate and arcuate systems along with ornamental motifs ran simultaneously almost everywhere. This was the character of Bengali architecture in mediaeval time which has rightly been appellated in present day as 'Bangla style.

Perween Hasan has explained this changing phenomenon admirably in all the chapters and produced a book clear in organisation, free from ambiguity, lucid in style, historical in background and artistic in quality. Her work *Sultans and Moques*, a rhythmic title indeed attractive, will be remembered as an important contribution to Bengals architectural history. Needless to say that she has brought the book to an international standard through its publication by J.B. Tauris based in New York and London. This is a remarkable achievement — an honour to herself and an honour to the academic community of the country. I congratulate Professor Perween Hasan for her excellent presentation.

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^{2[1]} Abridged version of the Presidential Address delivered at the launching ceremony of the book on August 8, 2007 at Omni Books, Dhanrondi, Dhaka

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