

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

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[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. Jama1 al-Din, the Imam Zadah of Firuz Kuh¹⁶ and Shaikh Ja1a1 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 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* (فی) 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،* 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

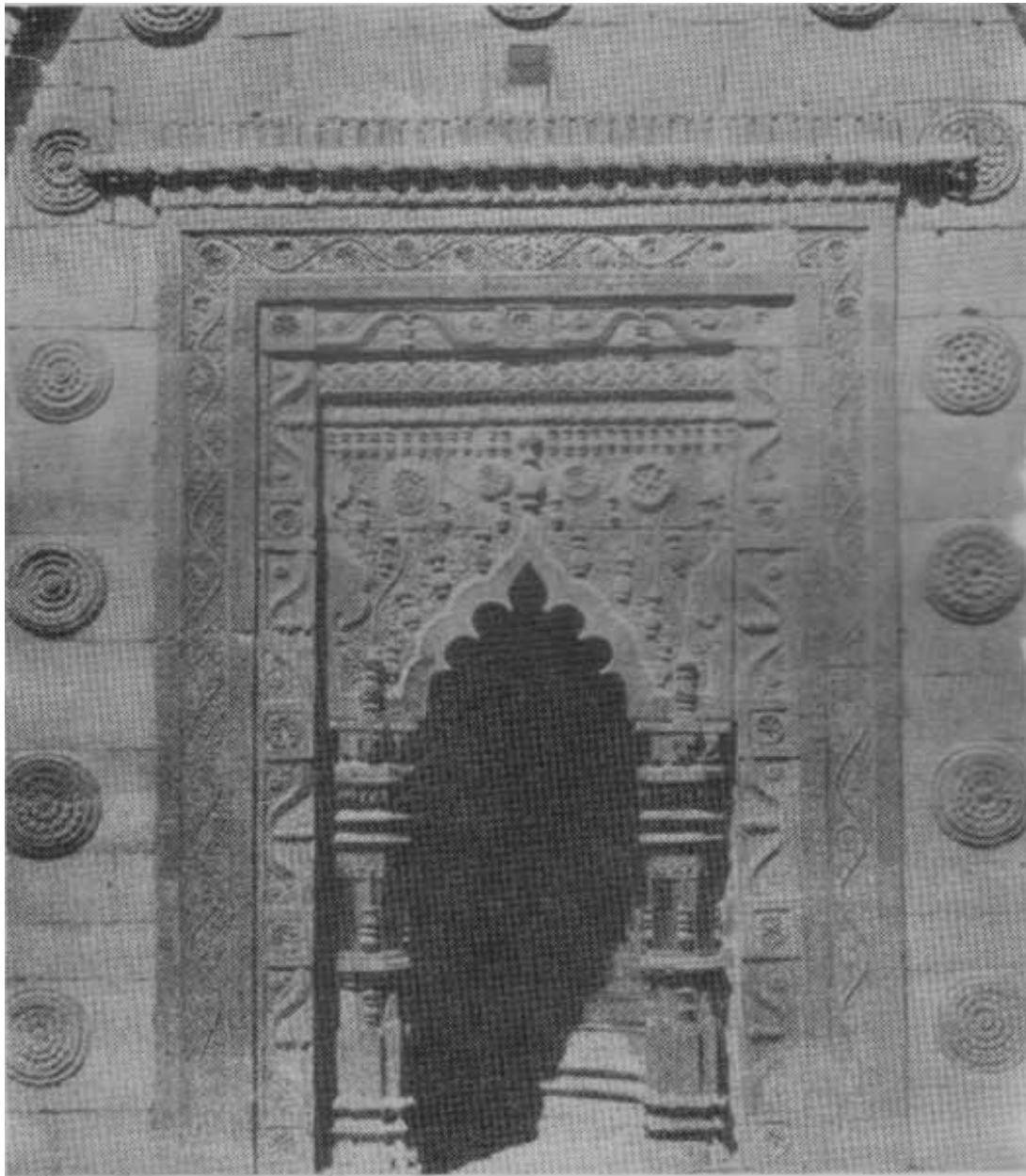


Plate 1. The central *mihrab*, Kusumba Mosque.

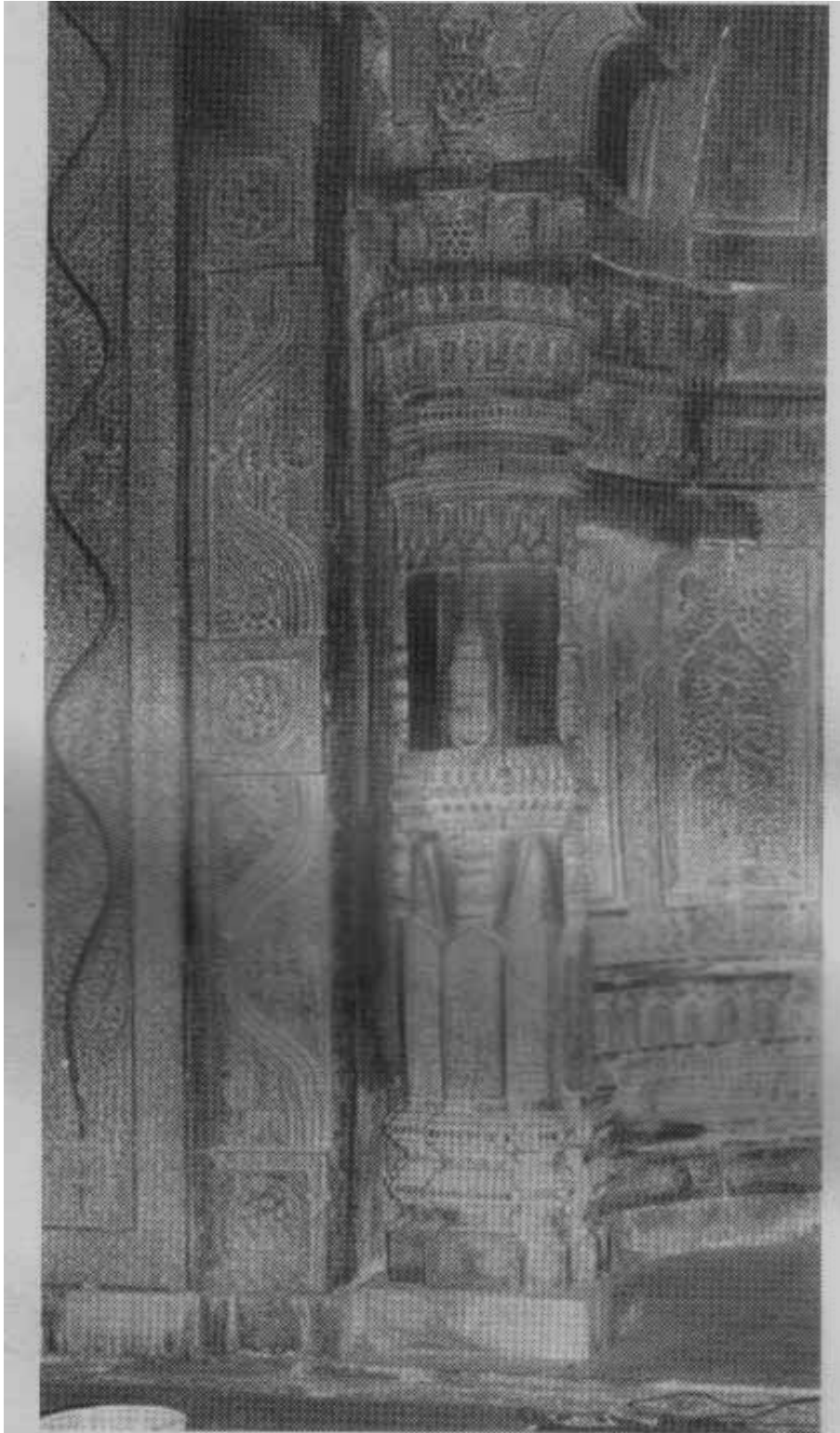


Plate 2. Attached pilaster with paddy stalk and rosette motif, Kusumba Mosque.

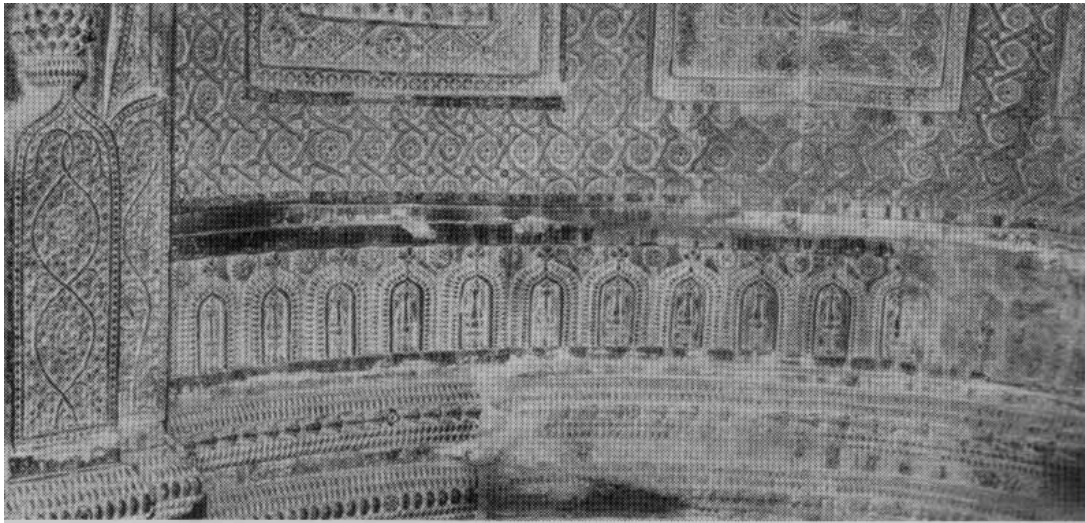


Plate 3. Lower portion of the central alcove, Kusumba Mosque.



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



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

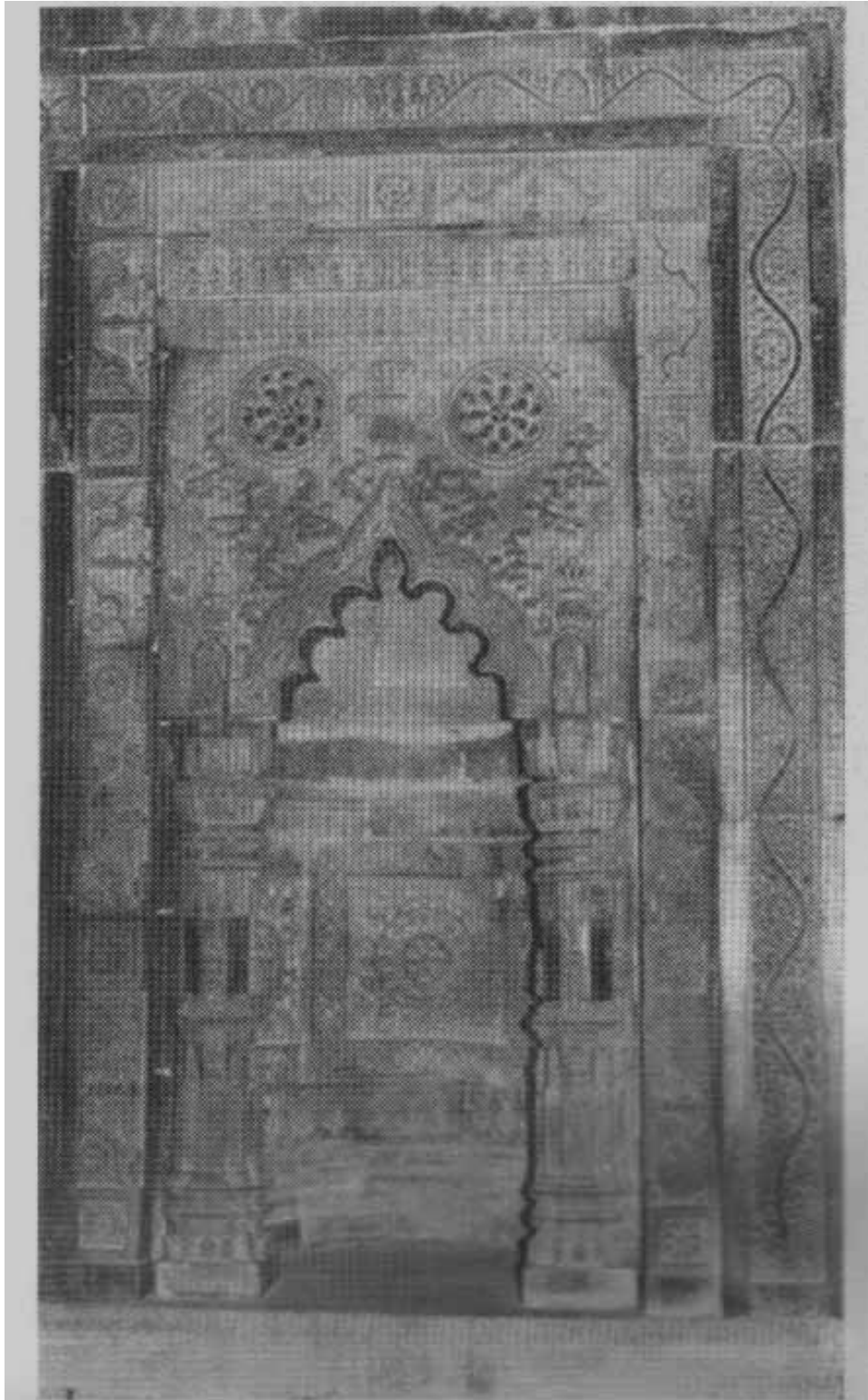


Plate 7. The northern *mihrab* of Zananah gallery,
Kusumba Mosque.

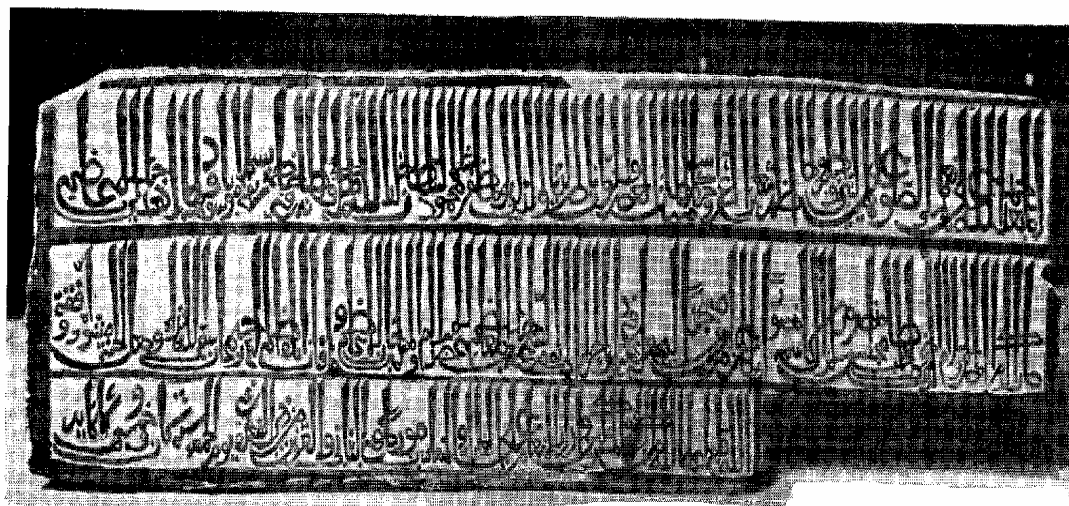


Plate- 8

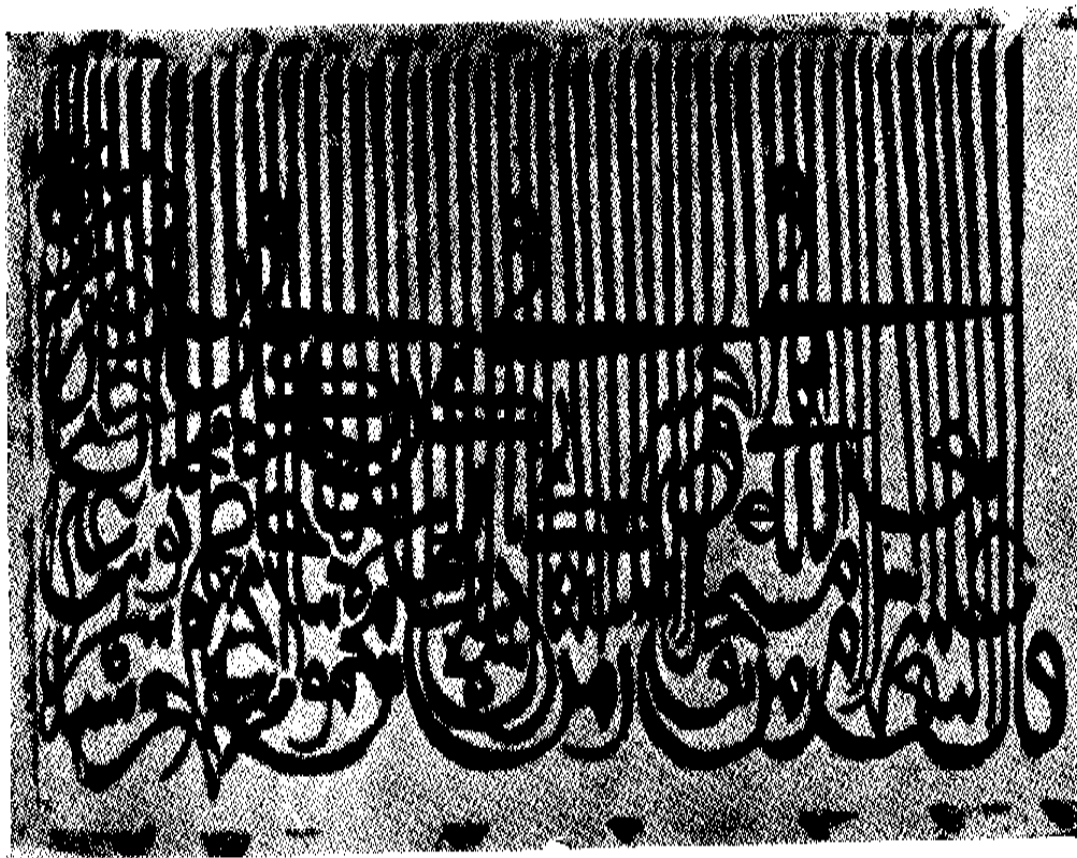


Plate- 9

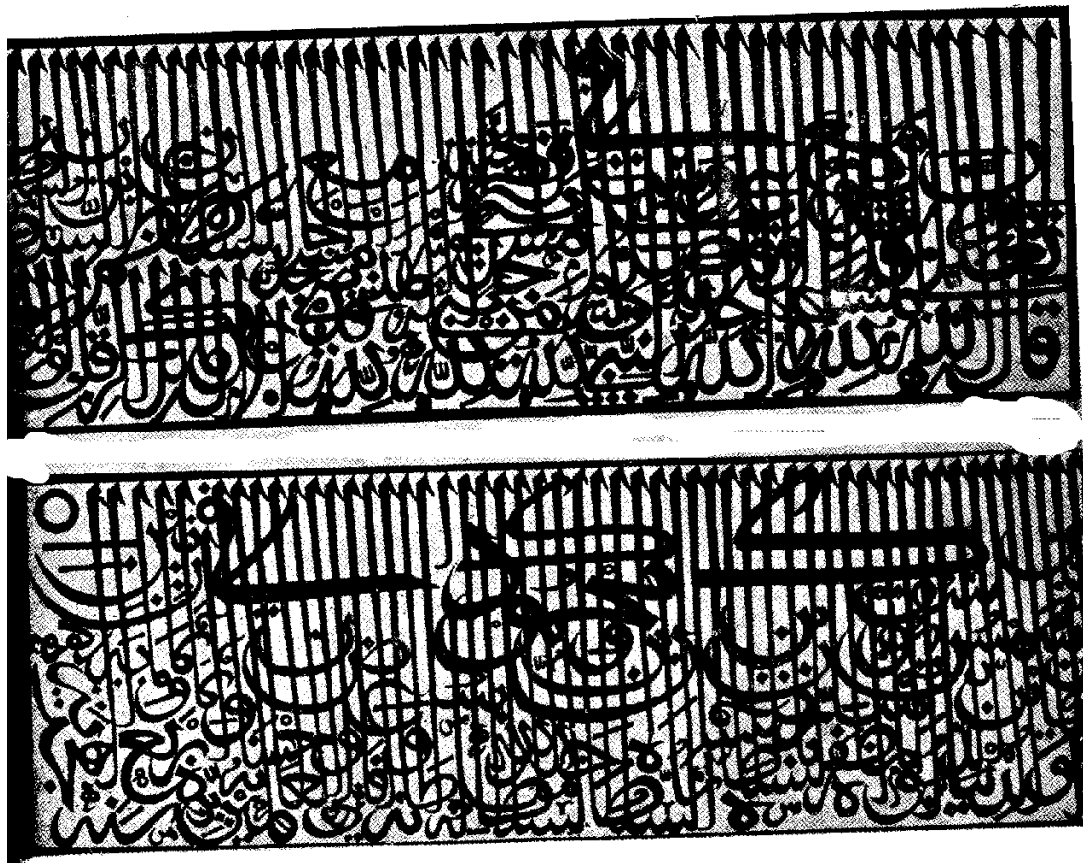


Plate- 10

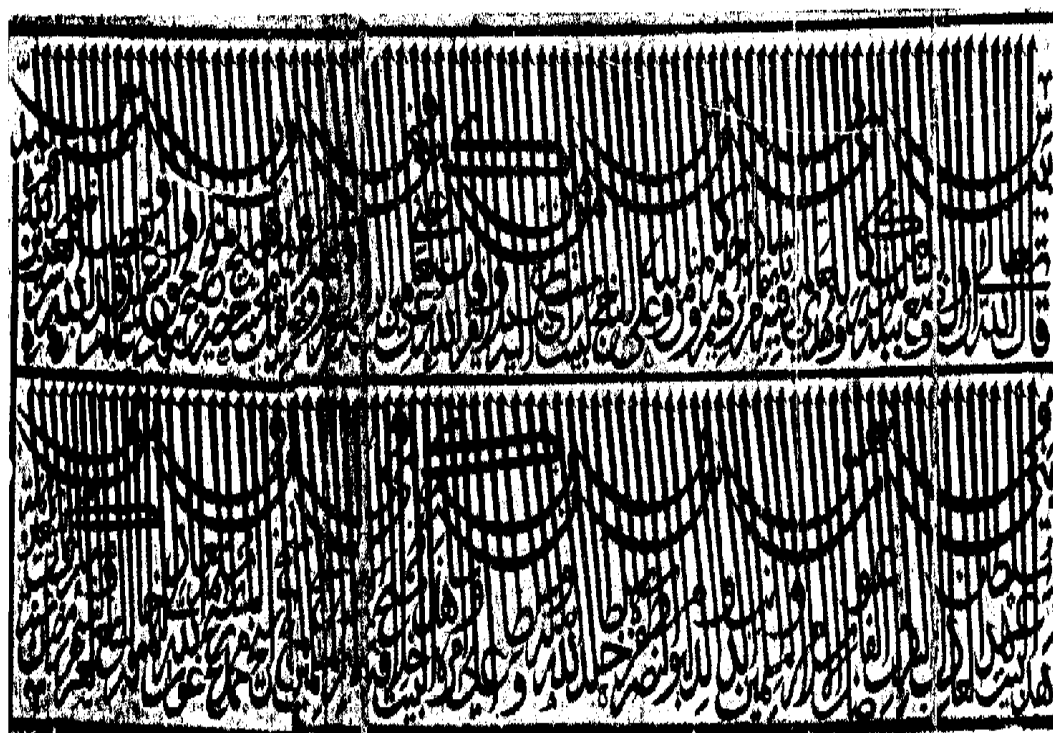


Plate- 11

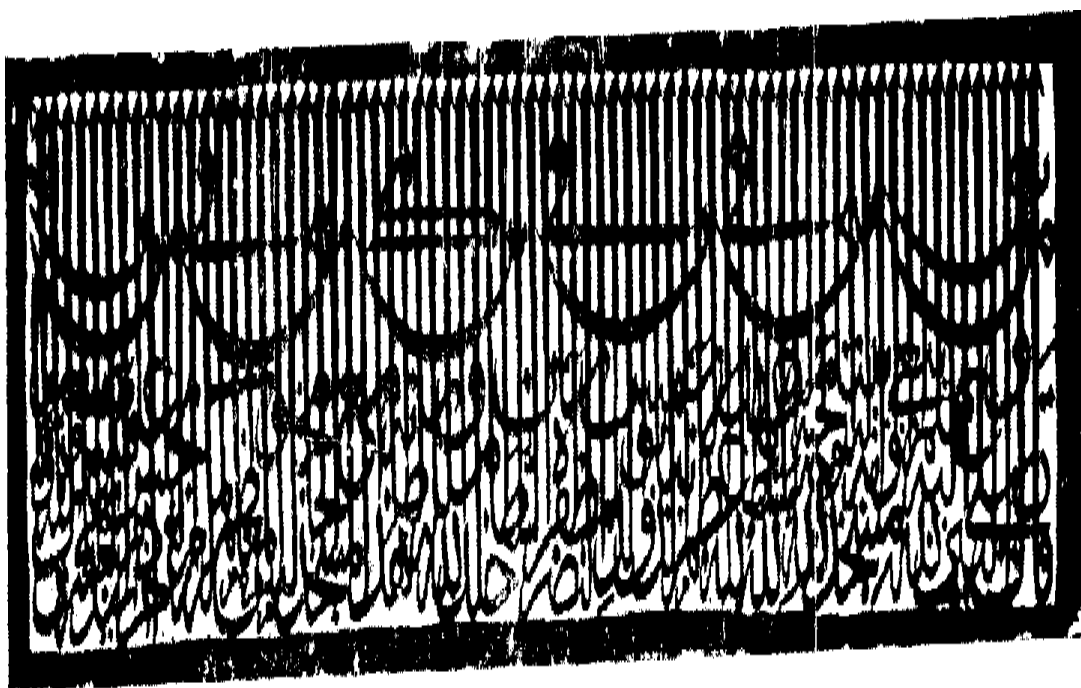


Plate- 12

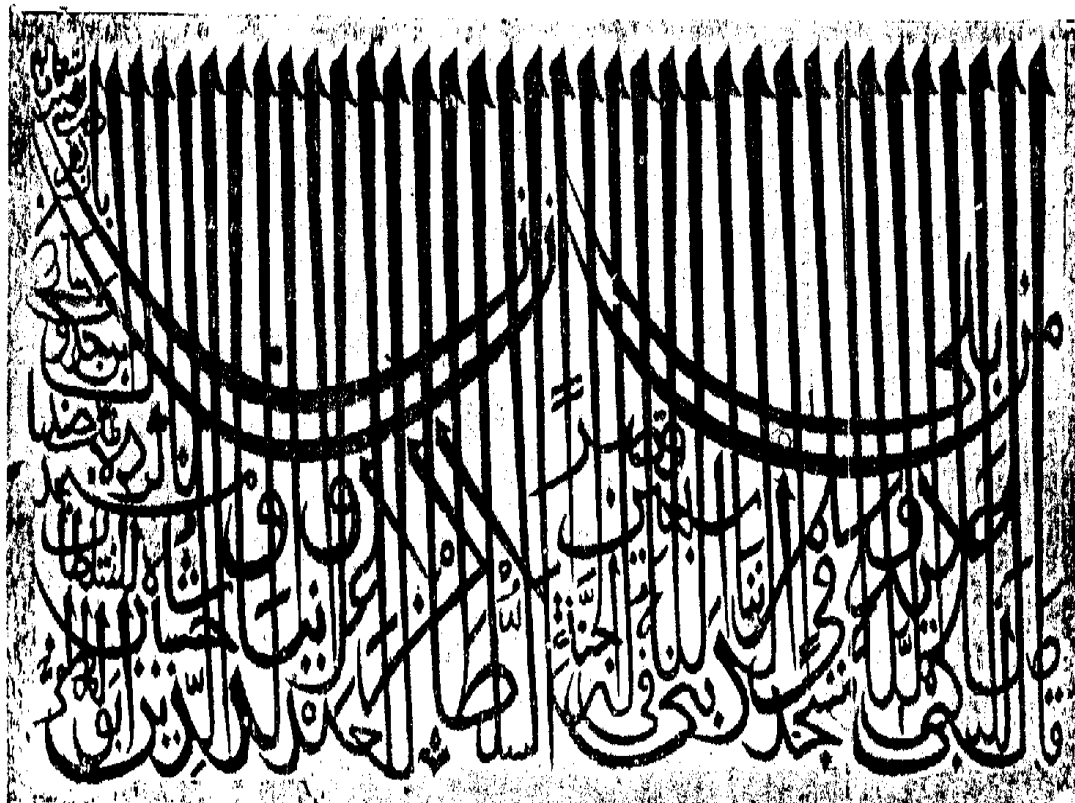


Plate- 13

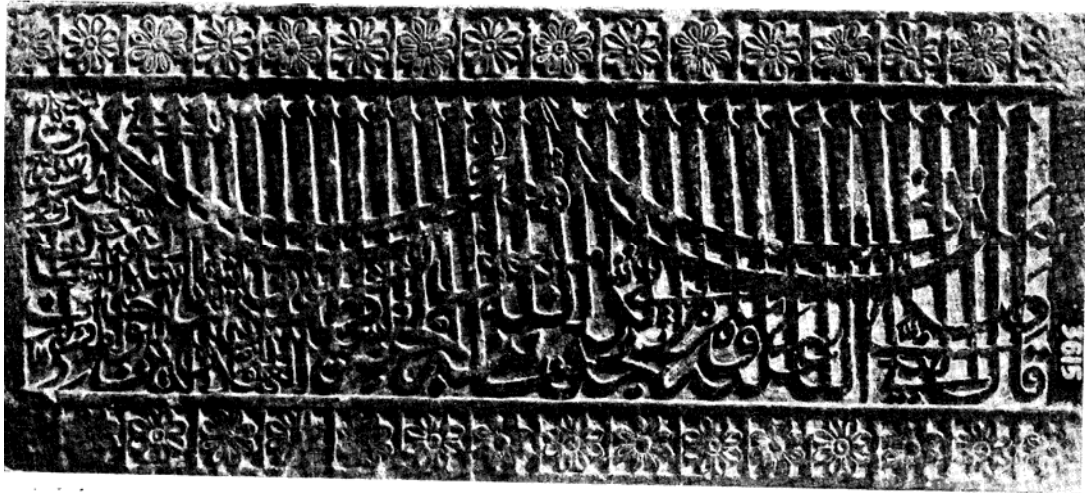


Plate- 14

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 Behect 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 يملك

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 understudy 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.