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AESTHETIC ASPECTS OF STONE-CARVING ART OF MUSLIM ARCHITECTURE OF BENGAL (13TH-16TH CENTURY)

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Abstract: There is no dearth of materials to show that the architectural monuments of ancient and medieval Bengal were denuded of ornamentation; on the other hand these were profusely decorated with the effigies of gods and goddesses, figurative art, floral designs and abstract motifs. History witnesses that as an aesthetic art the terracotta plaques and stone-carving devices in various forms were found to embellish the Buddhist *viharas* and Hindu temples in ancient Bengal. But it is fact that no calligraphic citations and motifs be traced in their sacred edifices due to the non-elasticity of the alphabets in their respective languages. The case is quite different as to the Muslim architecture of medieval Bengal, because of the fact that the stone-cutters's art with indigenous motifs and calligraphic moldings of various types were executed in the monuments. This paper aims at focusing on the decorative and aesthetic aspects of stone-carving art based on a few specimens of the artifacts.

Backdrop:

History witnesses that the architectural monuments of ancient and medieval Bengal were not devoid of ornamentation, rather these were profusely decorated with figurative art, flower-foilage and abstract motifs of various objects. As an aesthetic art the terracotta plaques and stone-carving devices were attractive in the scheme of ornamentation of the monuments of the then Bengal. The Buddhist *viharas* and Hindu temples bear witness to this fact. But the calligraphic ornamentation was found absent in their monuments due to the non-elasticity of the alphabets in their respective languages. The case is different in the ornamental scheme of the Muslim architectural edifices of medieval Bengal. Because in the ornamental scheme of their monuments were noticed a synthesis of terracotta plaques, stone-carvings and calligraphic postulations. Pertinently it may be said that the architectural monuments of 13th-16th century Bengal, particularly of the Sultanate period were amazingly ornamented by the artists applying the above mentioned three technical processes.

For the clear understanding of the subject it may be mentioned that the guild-artists were nourished and patronized by the state authority in pre-Muslim Bengal. An investigation reveals the fact that under the rules of Dharma Pala (c. 770-801 C.E.) and Deva Pala (c. 810-850 C.E.), Bitpala on of Dhiman flourished as a famous artist in the land of Varendra under their patronization, and he was honoured as a pioneer artist of 'Eastern School of Art'.¹ Likewise Ranaka Sulapani, the stone-engraver of Deopara Inscription of Vijaya Sena (1095-1160 C.E.) was regarded as the crest-jewel of *Shilpo-gushti* (guild-artists) of the Varendra.² From all these instances it may be presumed that the legacy of art culture ranked high in ancient Bengal. Due to

the paucity of the reliable sources it is difficult to assert the nature and kinds of art they used to practice at that time. Even then the terracotta plaques found in the Buddhists *viharas* of Mahasthan, Paharpur, Ramgar and Mainamati bear witness to this fact that the artists of the then time employed their skill to make ablaze the terracotta plaque-decoration for the onlookers. In the like manner the stone-cutter's art depicting the religious deities of the Buddhists and the Hindus in their monasteries and temples respectively vouchsafes for the availability and dexterity of the artists concerned.³ Possibly the indigenous artists exerted their skill for the nourishment of these two types of fine arts in the pre-Muslim age. But what was the fate of these artists with the establishment of Muslim rule over this land? Could they stick to their former profession or to choose an alternate one befitting the Muslim conviction? The subsequent events show that the artists continued to and excelled much in their own profession of stone-carving and terracotta plaque-decoration. Due to the religious prohibition of Islam as to the representing of the animate objects for the purpose of any kind of embellishment, the artists opted for inanimate objects, foliage, floral designs and abstract motifs in place of terracotta plaques and stone-carving ornamentation with figurative art. A good number of Bengal Sultanate mosques support this proposition.⁴

Subject-Analysis:

Like the terracotta plaque-ornamentation, the artists exercised their skill in the stone-carving art (*sang-tarashi*) to embellish the mosques and such other sacred edifices under the Bengal Sultanate patronized in most cases by the state hierarchies in the important stations of their territorial expanse. In imitation of the terracotta-ornamentation, the artists put the foliage, floral vase, hanging chain and bell and such other motifs by cutting the stone-slabs of the monuments exquisitely under Bengal Sultanate.⁵ To protect the brick-monuments from the attack of inclement weather of Bengal, the architects invented a new constructional technique in which the middle tier of the walls would be of brick while the outer and inside faces be of stone-blocks. This seems to be a new technique of constructional device which A. H. Dani called 'a synthesis of brick and stone construction'.⁶ The application of *sang-tarashi* or the stone-carving art could be found in a good number of mosque architecture of Bengal, particularly of Adina mosque of Hazrat Pandua,⁷ Mahisantosh mosque (almost decayed),⁸ Chhoto Sona mosque⁹ and Kusumba mosque.¹⁰ Of all the stone-carved mosques the Kusumba mosque is case in point. The most important part of the mosque is *mihrab* as it indicates the *qiblah* or direction of prayer towards Ka'ba at Makkah. It is, therefore, a prominent part within the mosque architecture and gets special treatment for embellishment. An in depth study of the stone-cutter's art in the *mihrab* decoration of this mosque is given underneath.

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 stone 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.¹¹ The alcove of the central *mihrab* is placed between the two stone piers, the base, the shaft and the capital of which are carved very exquisitely (**Plate 1.1**).

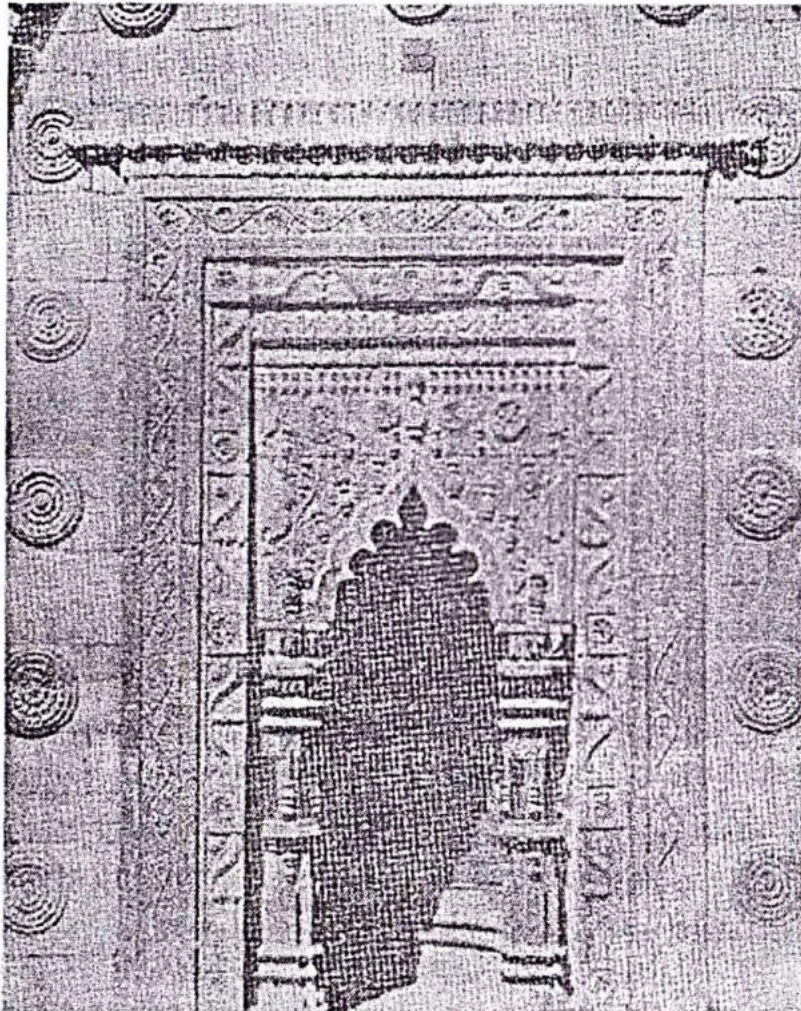


Plate 1.1: The central *mihrab* of Kusumba Mosque.

Of the three carved devices in the base, the middle one resembles a niche like flower vase while the side ones seem to be the plying bats. The shaft in its middle position seems to have a lampion hung from upward. Over the capital are carved 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 spreads over a block of stone (**Plate 1.2**).

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.

Now let us see the decoration of the 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 1.3**).

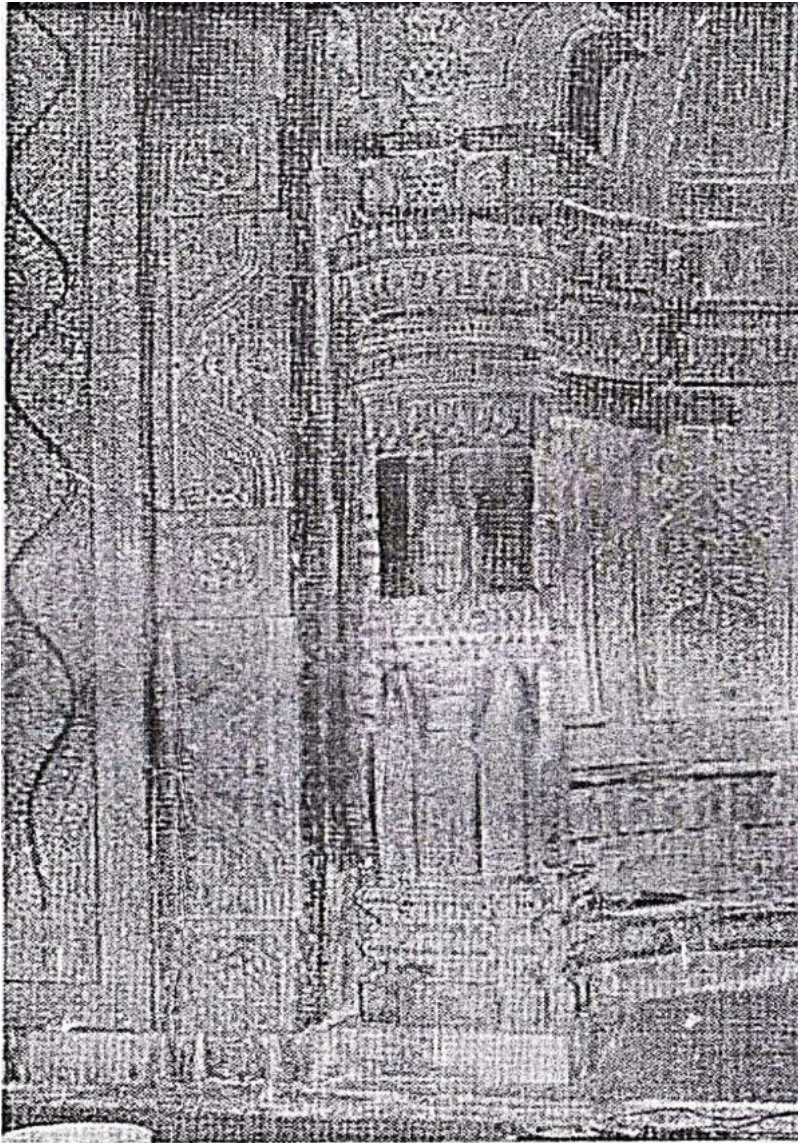


Plate 1.2: Attached pilaster with paddy stalk and rosette motif, Kusumba Mosque.

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 1.4**).

There is no denying of the fact that the carving on the stone is well measured and fascinating 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 grapes or *bhuttathoka* over which is noticed the repetition of the same motif in miniature in two lines intervened by a series of flower-buds (**Plate 1.5**).

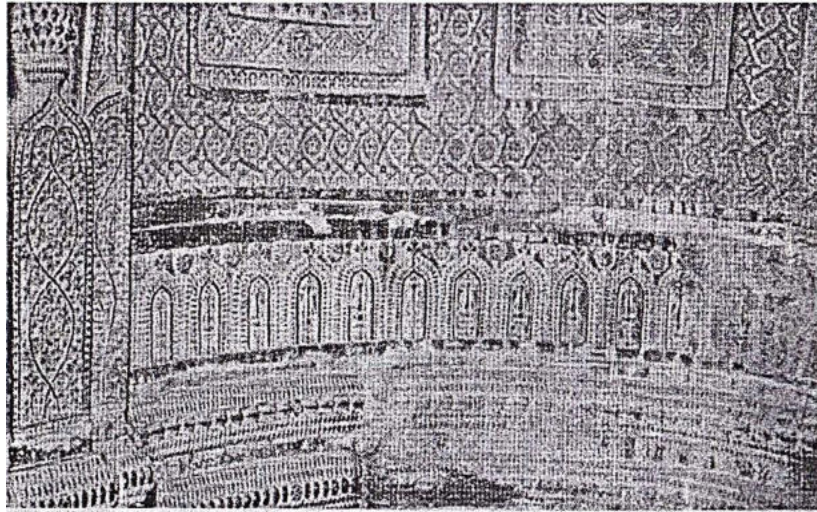


Plate 1.3: Lower portion of the central alcove, Kusumba Mosque.

Above this line is carved 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 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 position is carved out in each block, a lighting bulb hung from a semi-circular inverse arch and supported by a motif resembling the headdress of an Arab Muslim. Inside the bulb is noticed a flower vase surrounded by a galaxy of small stars (**Plate 1.6**).

On either side of this bulb in the upper portion could 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. In the last, from this brief analysis it is evident that the stone-carving art in its multidimensional aesthetic forms with indigenous motifs reached to the zenith at the hand of the artists concerned under Bengal Sultanate.

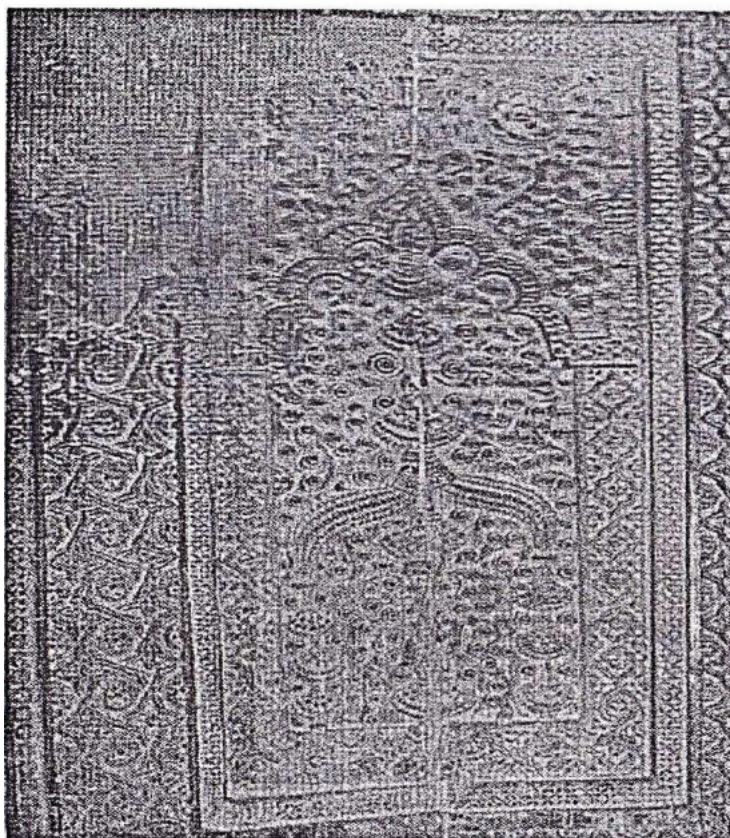


Plate 1.4: Middle portion of the central alcove, Kusumba Mosque.

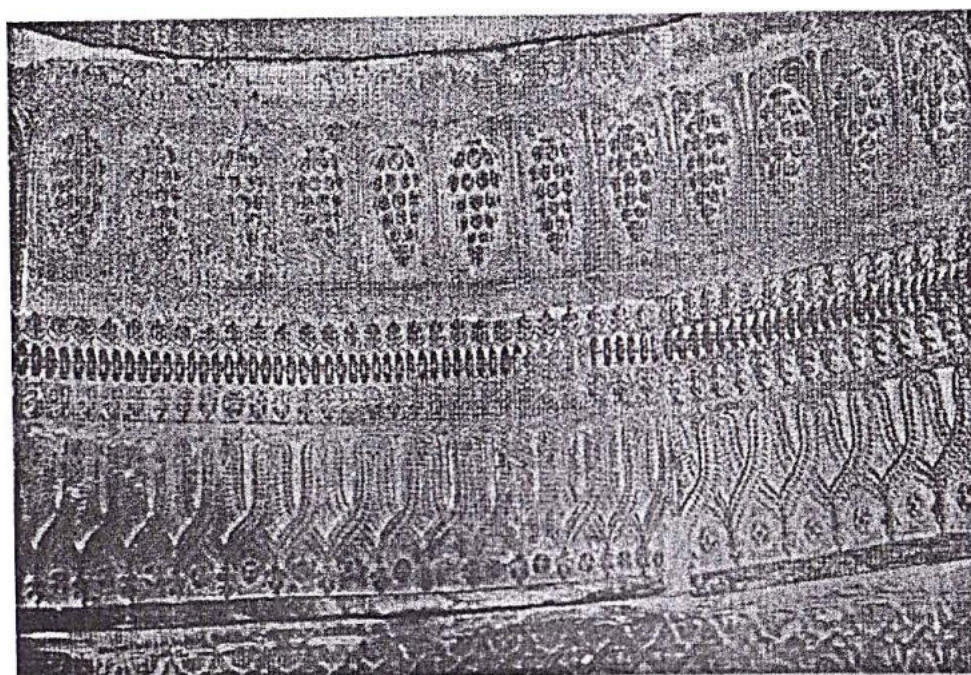


Plate 1.5: Upper portion of the central alcove, Kusumba Mosque.



Plate 1.6: Middle portion of the southern *mihrab*, Kusumba Mosque.

Calligraphy on stone-slabs is treated as another kind of aesthetic art cultivated by the artists under Bengal Sultanate. It is closely related with stone-cutter's art. Hence it needs to be clearly presented with other paraphernalia to follow the trend of discussion. The Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal (13th-16thCentury) took special care in chiseling exquisitely the stone-slabs inserted in their secular and religious edifices so that the Arabic alphabets nicely be engraved on them. This type of stone-carving is called epigraphy, and the particular stone-slab with such writing is regarded as epigraph. In considering its aesthetic value the stone-carver artists were highly patronized by the rulers of the time. To enhance the beauty of decoration, due to the elasticity of Arabic alphabets, the artists exercised their skill to create various motifs on the stone-blocks stuck to the monuments. Various major and minor styles of Arabic calligraphy like *Naskh-Thulth*, *Muhaqqaq-Raihan*, *Tawqi'-Riq'*, *Ghubar* and *Bihar* are found to be carved on the monuments in *Tughra*-writing for the purpose of ornamentation. The *Tughra* form of writing may be achieved by expanding, contracting and one letter being dashed into the other of the Arabic alphabets.¹² Though *Tughra* may not be considered a major style of Arabic writing, yet its immense use and popularity in the ornamental scheme of Bengal architecture are of much value. The ornamental as well as the non figurative art and abstract motifs that were depicted in the *Tughra* are but be postulated as indigenous in nature. In this regard a few specimens of the pertinent artifacts may clear the point.

1. A stone-inscription of the time of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1322-1327CE) dated 722 AH/1322 CE¹³ may specially be mentioned for its unique feature of the absence of *Nuqtah*

- or the diacritical dots and orthographical signs that distinguish one letter from another. No such Arabic inscription could so far be traced in the epigraphic records of Bengal Sultanate. In consideration of the proportionate squat shape of the vertical strokes and horizontal curves of the alphabets it may be termed as *Bihar khatt* or style of Arabic writing. In assessing the decorating motifs of the upper portion of the vertical strokes of the alphabets may be reckoned as arrow-shells used for the safety of the person concerned (**Plate 1.7**).
2. The subject-matter carved on the stone-slab of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah(1442-1459 CE) dated AH 858/1458 CE¹⁴ besides shedding luster on the reconstruction of medieval Bengal is more fascinating for its aesthetic art. Being carved in *Naskh* style its decorative motifs may be postulated in two forms. First, the straight and elongated shafts of the Arabic alphabets *alif* (ا) and *lam* (ل) be imagined as men attending the funeral prayer of the letters laid beneath as dead bodies. The second alternative is that the elongated shafts of the letters be reckoned as the fencing system of the bamboo-sticks of the rural Bengal while the letters in the feet be taken as corns of various kinds protected from any sort of devouring. The first one reflects on the eventuality of human beings while the second one reminds us of the protective measures of the food-grains, the chief food-item of the people of Bengal. The second alternative, I think, fits well in this case (**Plate 1.8**).
 3. The scenario of bamboo-fencing and swan-variety together noticed in stone-carved ornamented *Tughra* of an inscription of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 CE) dated AH 868/1460¹⁵ is beautiful and eye-soothing. The bamboo-fencing around the corn-field and the swan-rearing are the special features of the village life of Bengal from ancient time. The inscription under-study with these characteristics bears witness to the trend of the people's village-life in the 15th century CE (**Plate 1.9**).

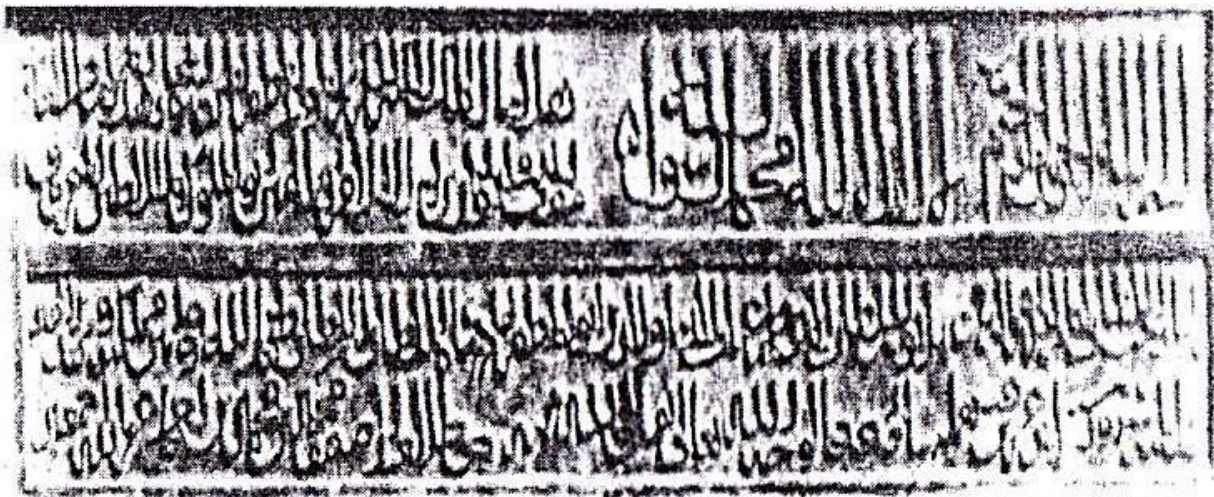


Plate 1.7: Wazir Beldanga (Inscription).

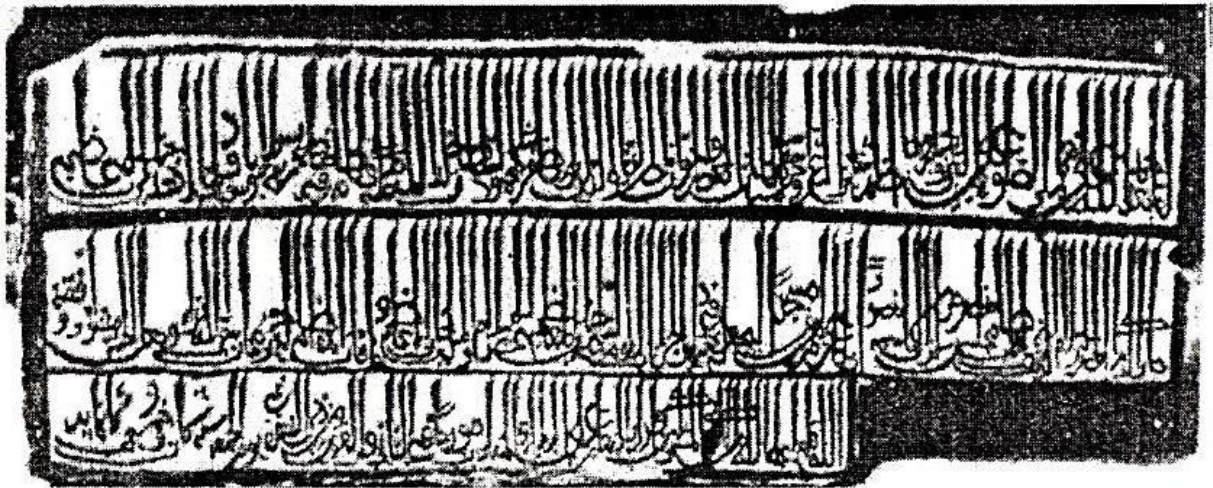


Plate 1.8: Navagrama (Inscription).

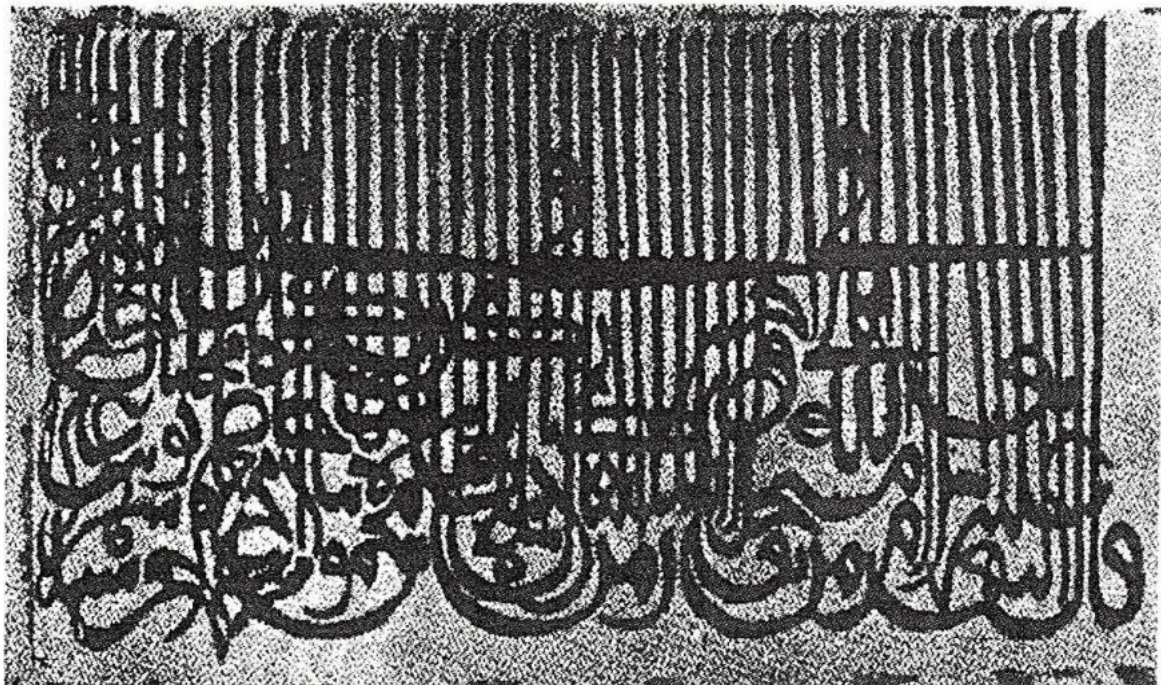


Plate 1.9: Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 CE).

4. An inscription of Sultan ‘Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493- 1519 CE) dated AH 904/1498 CE¹⁶ 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 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 Sultan mentioned above (Plate 1.10).

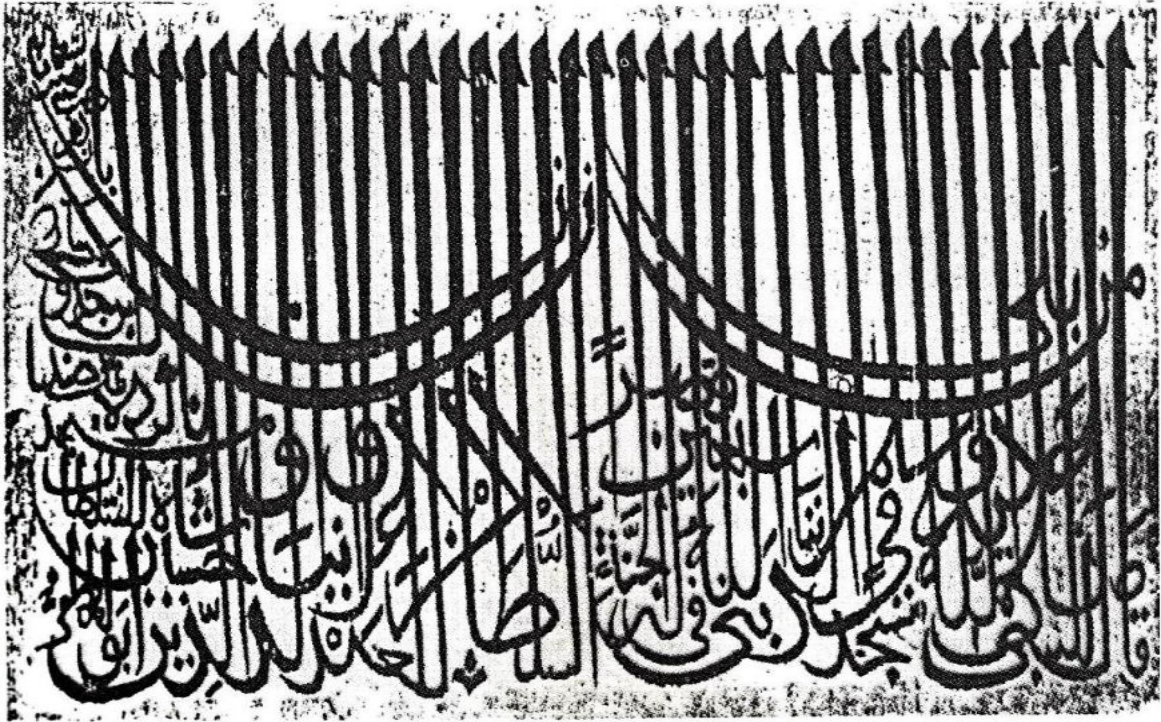


Plate 1.10: Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493- 1519 CE).

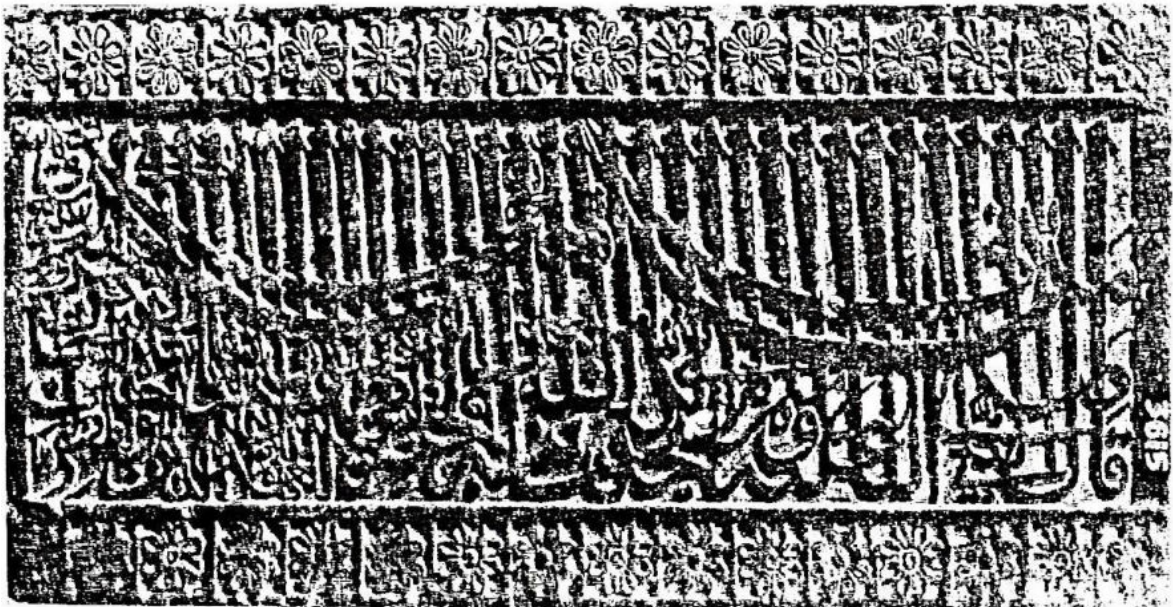


Plate 1.11: Ala al-Din Husayn Shah, dated 904 A.H./1498.

5. Arashnagar Inscription of the same Sultan referred to above dated AH 907/ 1502 CE is a fine example of ornamental *Tughra*.¹⁷ The vertical strokes ending at 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 *akramu barrin wa bahrin* (the most honoured of land and sea) to Sultan 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah. The decorative motif 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 that case the artist's skill as noticed in the proportionate of shafts and curvatures, finds full play in the epigraph. The bold letterings of *qasran* (قصر), *bana* (بنى), *man* (من) and *fi* (فى) among 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. It is really interesting to note that the 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 (**Plate 1.11**).

In conclusion taking all the points into consideration it may aptly be viewed that along with stone-carving art, the epigraphs of Bengal besides containing a lot of information for the reconstruction of historical aspects of Bengal Sultanate shed luster on the aesthetic art and decorative motifs of indigenous nature for which the attention of art historians is invited to study their ornamental aspects vertically and to a greater depth.

Notes and References:

1. Lama Taranatha, *History of Buddhism in India*, Tr. Lima Chimpa Aloka Chottopadhyay (Simla: Institute of Advanced Studies, 1970), Pol. 348 ; V.S. Smith, *A History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon* (London: University Press, 1911), p. 348 ; N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal* (Henceforth *IB*) Vol. III (Rajshahi : Varendra Research Society, 1929), pp. 45-46.
2. *Ephigraphia Indica* (Henceforth *EI*), Vol. 1, pp. 305-15; N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. III, pp. 45-46.
3. A good number of Buddhist-Hindu deities of various forms being carved on the black-basalt and grey-stone of the 8th -12th century CE preserved in the Varendra Research Museum are cases in point.
4. The terracotta plaque ornamentation with various abstract motifs could be found in a number of mosques like the Adina mosque of Hazrat Pandua, the Darsbari mosque of Gaur, the Tatipara mosque, the Dhuniachak mosque and the Bagha mosque of Rajshahi. Cf. Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture* (Islamic period) (Bombay, 1942), pp. 39ff; Zulekha Haque, *Terracotta Decoration of Late Mughal Period: Portrayal of a Society* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1980), p.18.
5. A.H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961), p. 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p.10.
7. This mosque was built by Sultan Sikandar Shah, son of Sultan Ilyas Shah in Hazrat Pandua in 1374 CE. In size and dimension it has some semblance with the great mosque of Damascus built by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid, son of Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan in 706-15 CE.

8. From epigraphic evidence it may be said this mosque was built during the time of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 CE) by his regional administrator named Ashraf Khan in AH 865/1460-61 CE at Mahisantosh. This place has been identified with the mint town Barbakabad. It is now under the Dhamorhat police station of Naogaon district.
9. During the time of Sultan ‘Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519 CE) the Chotto Sona mosque was built by Wali Muhammad in the suburb of Gaur, now in the Shibganj police station of Chapai Nawabganj district.
10. During the time of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1555-1560 CE) this mosque at Kusumba was built by Sulayman in AH 966/1558 CE.
11. The five pillars of Islam are the *Tawhid* or firm belief in Allah and His apostle Muhammad (sm); *Salat* or to say obligatory five times’ prayer a day; to pay *Zakat* or poor-rate once in a year on whom it is to be paid; Sawm or to keep fasting in the lunar month Ramazan every year and *Hajj* or to pay visit to the house of Ka‘bah at Makkah once in life if it becomes obligatory. Cf. *Mishkat al-Masabih*, a compilation of the Prophet Muhammad’s Traditions (Karachi edition), *Kitab al-Iman*, p.12.
12. A K M Yaqub Ali, “Calligraphy on Stone-Inscriptions of Bengal Sultanate”, *Islamic Culture*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 2, Hyderabad, 1994, p. 71.
13. The inscription collected from the village Wazir Beldanga is now preserved in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. Wazir Beldanga, the provenance of the inscription is a village under Nachol Police Station of Rajshahi district. Its language is Arabic. The epigraph is important in the sense that it is the only discovered inscription of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah, son of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah (1301-1322 CE) dated AH 722/ 1322 CE. Moreover, it is the early inscription in which the name of the calligrapher artist (Muhammad son of Muhammad sun of Ahmad) is engraved. Lastly it is the only epigraph of Bengal Sultanate, so far discovered, lacks in (*Nuqtah*) diacritical dots and orthographical signs which are considered to be an element of the *Kufic* style of Arabic writing.
14. The inscription collected from Navagram , a village under Tarash Police Station of Pabna district is now lying preserved in the Muslim gallery of Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. The slab is dressed and smooth, and the engraver’s art is praise-worthy.
15. A K M Yaqub Ali, 1999, “Calligraphy as an Ornamental Art in the Monuments of Bengal Sultanate”, *Journal of Bengal Art* (Henceforth *JBA*) Vol. 4, ICSBA, Dhaka, p. 409.
16. A K M Yaqub Ali, 2004 & 2005, “Aesthetic Aspects and Indigenous Motifs of the Epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate: Based on Select Specimen”, *JBA*, Vol. 9-10, pp. 95-96.
17. *Ibid.*