
ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN BANGLADESH: SPECIFICITY AND INFLUENCE

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ISLAMIC architecture is the veritable expression of Islamic civilization, serving as a harmonious bond and a common factor in the aesthetic development of all the Muslim countries. As a matter of fact, the very essence of Islamic art and architecture, such as arch, dome and vault in building art, and *mihrab*, *minar*, *minbar*, *muqarnas* (stalactite), mosaic, terra-cotta, stucco, glazed tile in the stylistic development of mosque is to be found in the vast domain of Islamic architecture ranging from Morocco to Indonesia. The development of Islamic art and architecture in different Muslim countries would thus appear to be a microcosm in the macrocosm of the wide-ranging Islamic artistic format. It is, however, true that obviously some local elements crept into these individualistic styles of architecture not excluding Bangladesh. The availability of building material, the trend of artistic growth, the skill and expertise of masons and carvers and the overwhelming fusion of extraneous and indigenous sources—as in other Muslim countries like Egypt, Turkey, and Spain—led to the evolution of a typical architectural style in Bangladesh, which is both magnificent and aesthetically satisfying. Built over a long period extending from the 13th to the 18th centuries these monuments are lying scattered in a tolerably good condition in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India). Some of the finest sites worth visiting are Gaur and Hazrat Pandua in the district of Malda (West Bengal), and in Firuzpur (Nawabganj area), Bagha and Kusumbha in Rajshahi, Bagerhat and Masjidkur in Khulna, Goal dih, Rampal and Sonargaon in Dhaka, etc.¹ Islamic architecture in Bangladesh is not only distinctive in style but it has also made specific contributions towards the evolution of singularly

important constructional and decorative devices.

Brick

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Islamic architecture in Bangladesh is the universal employment of burnt bricks as building material. Bricks used in the mosques, tombs, forts, *madrasahs*, bridges, etc., are small, thin and flexible, and are of the most solid texture. The flexibility of brick is such that it can not only help build arch, dome and vault but can also serve as a proverbial decorative media, such as terra-cotta and glazed tiles. To make a comparative study, bricks of pre-Muslim period in Bengal measure 18" × 12", whereas those of the Muslim period are 5" × 3.20" × 1.70". The scarcity of stone, particularly in the deltaic region of Bengal, has made the employment of brick universal, though extreme humidity and luxuriant vegetation have totally devastated some of the finest Muslim monuments in Bengal like the magnificent Adinah Masjid at Hazrat Pandua (P1.1) and elsewhere.² The great richness of the alluvial deposit, which, when burnt, makes excellent bricks, led to the evolution of the typical brick work techniques, as observable not only in the classical Muslim monuments of Bengal but also in later Hindu temples. It will not be out of context to dwell on the tradition of brick building in Bengal with all its striking architectural features as a mere continuation of the brick style of Persia. The connecting link between the two might be Sind (Banbhore, Multan), Gujarat (Mosque of Alif Khan at Dholka) and the Deccan (Mosque of Gulbargah and the Madrasah of Mahmud Gawan at Bidar).³ Rennel expounds, "These bricks [obviously of Gaur] are of the most solid texture of any I ever saw, and have preserved the sharpness of their edges and smoothness of

their surfaces, through a series of ages.”⁴

Stone

It must be clearly understood that there is not a single stone monument in the pre-Mughal period from the 14th to the 16th centuries. However, there are instances where stone is used as ashlar over a skeleton of traditional brickwork.

This stone was either procured locally or quarried from Rajmahal Hill outside Bengal and inevitably formed decorative media for delicate carvings. Such examples are not rare. The central *mihrab* and the Zanana Gallery *mihrab* of the Adinah Masjid at Hazrat Pandua, Malda (West Bengal), as well as the entire surface enrichment of the Chhoto Sona Masjid or Small Golden Mosque (Pl.2) at Firuzpur, Nawabganj area of Rajshahi are finest examples of stone used as building material.⁵ The British Museum has a few examples of such beautifully carved stones from Bengal dated from the 16th century A.D. Another example is to be found in the black basalt *mihrab* of Chhoto Sona Masjid, showing arabesque design in shallow carvings, preserved now in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.⁶

Pointed Arch

The specific contribution of Islamic architecture of Bangladesh, of which mosques are the most representative examples, is the evolution of pointed brick arch style as the form of construction in place of trabeate method of building. To quote Fergusson, “Having nothing but brick it was almost of necessity that they [the Muslims] employed arches everywhere. . .”⁷ pointed arch as a unit of construction was never used by the Hindu or Buddhist architects in India before the advent of Islam. It is evident that the pointed arch of decidedly Persian type penetrated Indo-Muslim architecture as demonstrated by the arched screen of the Quwwat al-Islam Mosque at Delhi and Arhai-din-Ka Jhonprah at Ajmer, dated from the 12th century A.D.⁸ Pointed arch was also used in the earliest Islamic monuments of Bengal, namely, the Mosque of Zafar Khan Ghazi at Tribeni, the Mosque at Chhoto Pandua in the district of Hughli, the Adina Masjid at Hazrat Pandua and Goal-dih Mosque at Sonargaon Dhaka and so-called Saith Gumbaz Mosque Bagerhat. Besides pointed arch, beautiful cusped arches relieve the

monotony of many of the monuments and tombs, as illustrated by the Mosque of Zafar Khan at Tribeni and the Mosque of Chhoto Pandua, dated from the 14th century A.D., and the Darasbari Mosque and the Chhoto Sona Mosuqe at Gaur and the Mosque at Bagha, dated from the 15th and 16th centuries.⁹

Vault

The immense flexibility of brick led to the construction of a peculiar structural device, particularly in Bengal, in the form of a tunnel and ribbed vault, as found in the central *mihrab* of the Adinah Masjid (Pl.1) at Hazrat Pandua, dated 14th century A.D., as well as the Gunmant Masjid at Gaur, dated 15th century A.D. It is needless to say that the Persian tradition of vaulted architecture, as observable in Nayin, Ardistan, Isfahan and Tabriz penetrated Bengal in the 14th century, showing the impact of Persian architecture on the Sultani architecture of Bengal.¹⁰

Dome

As stated earlier, the use of brick led to the evolution of dome which is the most characteristic feature of Muslim architecture. It is almost impossible to conceive a mosuqe without a dome anywhere in the Muslim world and this is particularly true in the case of the Mosques of Bengal. These domes are proverbially small and hemispherical, and built not by corbelling but in concentric circle on the principle of radiating arches. The finest examples of multi-domed structure in Bengal are the Adinah Masjid, which has three hundred eighty four domes, and the so-called Saith Gumbaz or Sixty-Domed Mosuqe at Bagerhat, Khulna, having seventy domes. The techniques applied in raising a dome, as found in other Muslim countries, is either squinch or pendentive. Therefore, the universal use of arch, vault and dome is a great innovation in Bengal architecture, unknown during the Hindu and Buddhist periods.¹¹ Incidentally, the employment of liwan screen arch in front of the central nave, embellished with blind niches in the Adinah Masjid, is a novelty which is undoubtedly inspired by the beautiful arched facade of Islamic monuments of Iran, such as Takht-i-Sulayman, Linjan, Astarjan and Mashhad. The Indian counterparts of arch screen are to be seen at Delhi (Quwwat al-Islam

Mosque), Ajmer (Arhai-din-ka-Jhonprah Mosque), Cambay (Jami' Mosque) and Jaunpur (Atala Devi Mosque and Jhanjri or Screen Mosque).¹²

Enclosed Type

Another striking feature of the Sultani architecture of Bangladesh is the enclosed type of structure. In no other part of India did climatic conditions play a role more determining of the actual architectonic forms of the region, as in Bengal. The nature of the soil and the subsequent use of brick and the humid climate of tropical terrain tended to influence the evolution of mosque as an enclosed type, as demonstrated by the Mosque of Molla Simla, Hughli, the Mosque at Masjidbari, Bakerganj, the Chamkatti Mosque and the Lattan Mosque at Gaur, Sankarpasa Mosque, Sylhet, Galdih Mosque, Sonargaon, Dhaka, the Mosque at Atiya, Mymensingh, Ron Vijoypur Mosque, Bagerhat, Khulna, etc.¹³

Curvilinear Cornice

The most striking of all the characteristics of Sultani architecture is the curvilinear cornice. Fergusson rightly remarks that "Besides elaborating a pointed arched brick style of their own, the Bengalis introduced a new form of roof, which has had a most important influence on both the Muhammadan and Hindu styles in more recent times."¹⁴ This speciality of the Bengal school of architecture lies in the evolution of convex-roof ridges, resembling Bengali thatched huts, both *do-chalah* or two-segmented and *chauchalah* or four-segmented. In the words of Havell, "These thatched cottages of Bengal have curved roofs with pointed eaves, built upon an elastic bamboo framework, which gives them rigidity and acts most effectively in throwing off the rain water."¹⁵ Curvilinear roof is, therefore, the most recognized and thoroughly indigenous feature of Bengal architecture, whose origin may reasonably be traced to ordinary thatched cottages with drooping eaves.

The most predominating influence of pre-Mughal architecture on the temples of Bengal is undoubtedly the curved cornice. Fergusson pleads, "... the Bengalis taking advantage of the elasticity of bamboo universally employ in their dwellings a curvilinear form of roof which has become so familiar to their eyes that they consider it beauti-

ful. . . . It is so in fact when bamboo and thatch are the material employed, but when translated into stone or brick architecture, its taste is more questionable."¹⁶ Though he is very sceptical about the result of the translation of the form, yet the pre-Mughal mosques with prominent curvilinear roofs as well as the *do-chalah* and the *chau-chalah* buildings built in Bengal are aesthetically pleasing and structurally expedient. The two-segmented roof type of building is to be seen in the tomb of Fath Khan at Gaur, dated 17th century A.D. Here following the bamboo framework, as put by A.H. Dani, "the eaves are carved as before and the ridge is generally crowned with Kalasa finials in imitation of the knots found in the original roofs."¹⁷ Other examples of the *do-chalah* type are found in the gateway to the Mosque of Shah Muhammad at Egarasindhur, Mymensingh, dated 1680 A.D., and in the annexe to the north of the Mosque of Kartalab Khan at Dhaka, 1700-1704 A.D.¹⁸ There is no denying the fact that Bengal's curved roof exerted overwhelming influence on the temples of Bengal under Muslim dispensation as well as on the Mughal and Rajput architecture of the 17th and the 18th centuries A.D.

Influence on Hindu Temples and Mughal Monuments

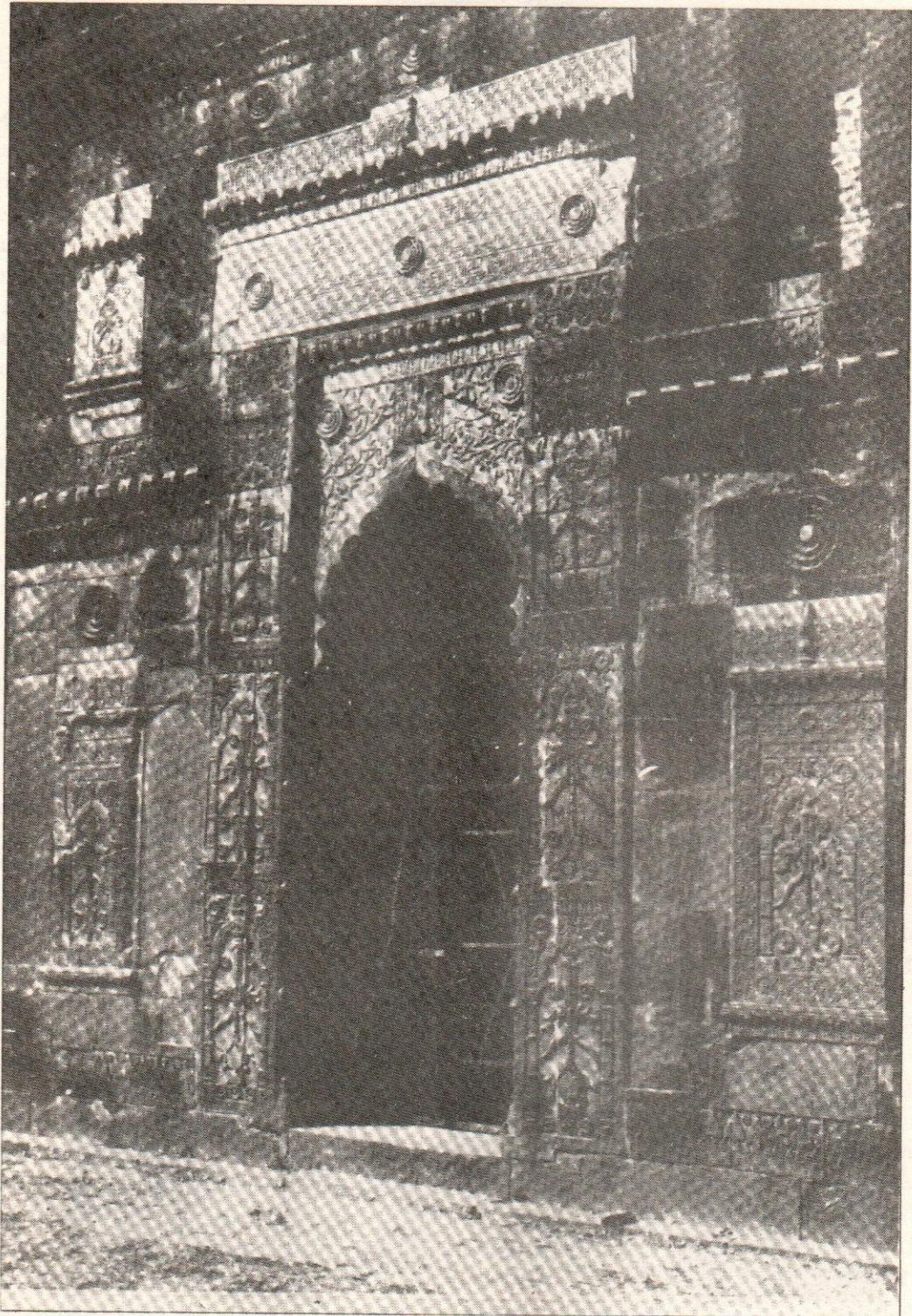
Bloch observes, "it is quite possible that the idea of the *Panch-Ratna* (Five-tiered) temple to some degree may have been suggested by the form of Muhammadan rauza or tomb with its central dome and four corner minarets."¹⁹ The finest example of brick and terra-cotta temples of Bengal is to be seen in the *Nava-Ratna* (Nine-tiered) temple of Kantajee at Kantanagar in the district of Dinajpur, dated between 1704 and 1722.²⁰ M.M. Chakravarti mentions that an old *do-chalah* roofed *Jor-Banglah* temple of the time of Hussain Shah, dated from the first quarter of the 16th century A.D., existed at Bhavanipur, Natore, which collapsed as the result of an earthquake in 1889.²¹ Of the surviving temples of Bengal the most interesting are those with square curved roofed chambers surmounted by a tower in the centre alone or accompanied by 4, 8, 16, corner towers, making them simple *Panch-Ratna* (Five-jewelled) or *Nava-Ratna* (Nine-jewelled) or *Satera-Ratna* (Seventeen-jewelled) temples. The most notable



Pl. 1. Hazrat Pandua, Malda, India, Adina Masjid, Central Mihrab



Pl. 2. Firuzpur, Rajshahi, Small Golden Mosque



Pl. 3. Firuzpur, Rajshahi, Small Golden Mosque, Stone Carvings

examples of these styles are the *Jor-Banglah* Temple at Vishnupur, dated 1572-73 A.D., the *Jor-Banglah* Temple at Kantanagar, and the *Satera-Ratna* Temple at Pabnah, dated from the 17th century A.D., the *Nava-Ratna* Temple at Comilla, dated from the 18th century A.D. These are characterized by curved roof lines and embellished with exquisite terra-cotta works.²²

Like the *do-chalah* type of roofing, *chau-chalah* or four-segmented form is also universally accepted method in Bengal, as exemplified by the *Saith Gumbaz* or so-called Sixty-Domed Mosque at Bagerhat, dated 1450 A.D., the Darasbari Masjid dated 1479 A.D. and the Chhoto Sona Masjid, (Pl.2) in Firuzpur area of Nawabganj, Rajshahi.²³ As contended by Fergusson, "... after being elaborated into a feature of permanent architecture in Bengal, this curvilinear form found its way in the 17th century to Delhi, and in the 18th century to Lahore, and all the intermediate buildings from, say A.D. 1650, betray its presence to a greater or less extent."²⁴ Havell points out that after the conquest of Bengal by Akbar and its final subjugation under Jahangir, Bengal craftsmen migrated to Delhi and introduced characteristic features of their building art to Mughal architecture. In his own words, "From the structural point of view the influences which account for the differences between Akbar's buildings and the Mogul buildings of the seventeenth century came mostly from Gaur and from Bijapur. The break up of the great Bengal building centre towards the end of the sixteenth century sent many craftsmen of that school to the imperial Mogul court, whence they migrated later on into Rajputana. Their influence became apparent in the bent roof of the Golden Pavilion in the Agra Palace, the bent cornice of the Moti Masjid at Delhi, and in the cusped Hindu arches which are characteristic of most of the later Mogul buildings."²⁵

The Golden Pavilion at Agra Fort, commonly known as *Banglah-i Darshan-i Mubarak*, is exactly a replica of the *do-chalah* hut, complete with knots, in marble. In the 18th century similar structure was built in the Lahore Fort, also called *do-chalah* building. Another striking example of *chau-chalah* type of Mughal building is also to be seen in the Lahore Fort, in the Naulakha or Nine

Lac edifice, erected by Shah Jahan in 1640 A.D. As Dani puts it, "Here the main roof is flat but the parapets and the eaves on three sides are curved in the typical Bengali fashion."²⁶ About the influence of indigenous Bengal architecture on Mughal building art, Abu al-Fazl, the court historian of Akbar, remarks that Asia "contained buildings of masonry after the beautiful designs of Bengal and Gujarat which masterly sculptors and cunning artists of form have fashioned as architectural models."²⁷

Architectural Ornamentation

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the architects of Muslim Bengal grasped the spirit of Islamic art. Their mosques are veritable symbols of religious architecture, exhibiting all the skills and expertise of the masons and the carvers. In the field of architectural decoration the Bengali craftsmen made a distinct contribution to break the monotony of the bare walls of the elegant Muslim monuments of Bangladesh. Muslim ornamental art in Bengal resorted mainly to four forms: (i) Terra-cotta or carved brick ornamentation; (ii) Glazed or encaustic tile decoration; (iii) Stone carvings; (iv) Calligraphy.

Terra-Cotta

Commemorating the pomp and pageantry of the long-forgotten artistic heritage of the Sultanate of Bengal, the majestic and ornate monuments of Gaur, Hazrat Pandua, Bagerhat, Bagha and elsewhere are glowing testimony to the elaborate brick carved ornamentation or terra-cotta. The Bengali masons and carvers had a flair for artistic designs and decorative ingenuity, and executed their work with exquisite and delicate charm. Though the age-old tradition of terra-cotta art was applied in the ruined pre-Muslim sites of Mahasthan, Paharpur and Mainamati, yet the fundamental difference between the pre-Muslim and Muslim terra-cotta art is that while the former is mainly moulded and stamped with figures, the latter is delicately carved in low relief with floral and geometric patterns with sharp chisel. The lotus bell and chain, intertwining leaves and foliages, pendants, border design, obtained from the luxuriant jungle life of a terra-queous country like Bengal are of indigenous origin. These motifs were combined with tradi-

tional arabesque designs and imported decorative patterns of Muslim origin such as palm and parasite, rosettes, cusped arches, *jali* or perforated work, lozenge, etc. Thus borrowed from both extraneous and indigenous sources terra-cotta ornamentation was applied to adorn and protect the bare walls of Islamic monuments of Bengal from the 13th to the 16th centuries, as illustrated by the Mosque of Zafar Khan Ghazi at Tribeni Eklakhi Mausoleum and the Adinah Masjid at Hazrat Pandua (Pl.1), the Tantipara Masjid at Gaur, the Darasbari Masjid at Firuzpur, the Mosque at Bagha, Rajshahi²⁸ and the so-called Saith Gumbaz Mosque. Terra-cotta ornamentation is executed with such a grace and delicacy by the highly skilled carvers that it is often mistaken as embroidery. As stated by Henry Cole, "the brick and terra-cotta buildings of Bengal, of which the Gaur and Pandua mosques are singularly good examples possess an importance for the whole of India."²⁹

Glazed Tiles

Besides terra-cotta ornamentation, encaustic glazed tiles as a veritable form of decoration, found favour with the Bengali craftsmen and artisans. In fact, Persian tile work exerted a profound influence on the glazed tile decoration of some of the most magnificent monuments of Bengal, the earliest known example being the Minar at Chhoto Pandua, Hughli (West Bengal), dated 13th century A.D. Some of the finest specimens of glazed tiles are to be seen in the Eklakhi Mausoleum at Hazrat Pandua, Malda, the Firuzah (Turquoise) Minar, the Lattan (Painted) Mosque, the Lakka Chippi (innumerable parti-coloured tiles) at Gaur, the tomb of Khan Jahan Ali at Bagerhat, Khulna, all dated from the 15th and the 16th centuries A.D.³⁰ The Eklakhi Mausoleum illustrates the use of the moulded and enamelled tile work in rather muddy green, blue, yellow, orange and white. The Firuzah Minar owes its appellation to the ornate glazed tile decoration in which turquoise colour predominates. In the tomb of Khan Jahan Ali at Bagerhat, "the steps round the grave are laid with encaustic tiles of various colours, the richness of which withstood the wear and tear of four hundred years without any serious damage."³¹ The walls of the Lattan

Mosque were encrusted both inside and outside with glazed bricks, wrought in different patterns and coloured blue, green and white."³² The author had the privilege to witness innumerable specimens of glazed tiles of exquisite design and variegated colour, belonging to the Bengal monuments of the Sultani period at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Indian Museum, Calcutta; and Varendra Research Society Museum, Rajshahi.

Stone Carving

Bengal artisans of the Sultani period excelled in delicate stone carvings on large slabs of black basalt which are used as casing stone or ashlar masonry of the brick core of the innumerable edifices, particularly mosques and tombs. Such casing is undoubtedly necessitated by climatic reasons. Though stone carving traces its origin to the age-old tradition of high relief of pre-Muslim period, the style and technique used in the Islamic monuments in Bengal is typically low relief, ornately designed and finely chiselled. The superb examples of stone carving resorted to floral designs, arabesque and calligraphic inscriptions. The earliest notable examples of stone carving are to be seen in the central *mihrab* and the *mihrab* of the Zenana Gallery of the Adinah Masjid.³³ But stone carving reached its peak during the Hussain Shahi period (1439-1519) (Pl.3). The conspicuous technique and superb excellence of stone carving is observable in the innumerable Hussain Shahi monuments, namely, the central *mihrab* of the Galdih Mosque, Sonargaon, Dhaka, and the Sura Mosque in Dinajpur. But the most outstanding example of stone chiselling is undoubtedly the central *mihrab* of the small Golden Mosque, Firuzpur, Rajshahi, called "the Gem of Gaur." It is the *tour de force* of stone cutter's art, which is now lying in the cellar of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, in 29 shapeless blocks. The prayer niche of this mosque is made of dark grey basalt carved with arches and formalized floral ornaments. Delicate floral patterns in low relief are also to be seen in the stone casings of the Small Golden Mosque (Pl.3), as well as at the back of Buddhist and Hindu sculptured figures, now lying in the British Museum.³⁴ It is also reflected in the Kusumbha Mosque, Rajshahi dated 1558 A.D.

Calligraphic Inscriptions

One of the most proverbially used and religiously motivated medium of decoration is the calligraphic art executed with an ultra-refined elegance in monumental inscriptions. These inscriptions not only relieve the monotony of the bare wall but also contribute enormously to the reconstruction of the political, social and religious history of Muslim Bengal. Three distinct styles of calligraphic art generally seen are (i) *Kufic*—a stiff angular script generally written on hard materials which was originally evolved in the 4th or 5th century A.D.; (ii) *Naskhi*—a cursive script and (iii) *Tughra*—an ornamental style of a calligraphy in which letters are intertwined as to assume a decorative shape. The inscription over the central *mihrab* in the nave of the Adinah Masjid in the words of Ravenshaw, “exhibits, a strange calligraphic technique, hitherto unknown in Muslim calligraphic history of Bengal, the combination of *Kufic* and *Naskhi*, the bottom lines are *Naskhi*, while the upper one is *coufique fleuri* or floral *Kufic*.”³⁵ *Naskhi* is the universally used style of Muslim Bengal calligraphy, and its stylistic development through various sub-styles is no less interesting than the *Tughra*. But in the delicacy of form and subtlety of arrangement and utmost popularity the *Tughra* style with its elongated letters and ornamental flourishes, surpassed all other forms. *Tughra* flourished under the patronage of the Sultans of Bengal in the 15th and the 16th centuries, as exemplified by the invention of various forms, namely, “Bow and Arrow,” “Boat and Oar,” “Phalanx.” The inscription of Darasbari Mosque, erected by Sultan Yusuf Shah, dated 1479 A.D., illustrates a skilful arrangement of upright strokes arrayed beautifully in rows so as to give an impression of “Muslim Congregation.” As stated by Yazdani, the inscription of Sultan Muzaffar Shah, dated 1493 A.D., “unquestionably represents the high watermark of Bengal mural calligraphy.”³⁶

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Articles Concluded

6TH OF SEPTEMBER AND THEREAFTER

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they belonged to West Pakistan, or had migrated from Bombay, Bihar or U.P., and the expected economic growth was not visible anywhere. Resentment was natural. Pakistan did not fulfil the dreams of poor people. To top it all, there was a Hindu minority in Bengal which exploited the situation.

The September war laid bare a major contradiction in the government propaganda also. On the one hand, it was stated that Pakistan was too poor to defend itself and on the other, it was claimed that the economic developments of the last ten years had transformed the country into the most developed of the developing countries. Decade of development was being celebrated while there had been no tangible change in the life of the poor people.

To sum up, as the US could not achieve all its objectives linked with the 1965 war, the American interest demanded a perpetuation of hostilities between India and Pakistan. The natural culmination of this situation turned out to be the secession of East Pakistan from the Federation with all its ghostly consequences.

Ironically enough, Henry Kissinger went to China on a secret mission, via Pakistan, in July 1971, as a prelude to President Nixon's historic visit, in February 1972, to that country. As a consequence of these visits, America gradually normalized its relations with China, exactly the same thing which, under unavoidable geopolitical compulsions, Pakistan had embarked upon to do and had to pay heavily in terms of its national prestige and territorial integrity.

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