

## BOOK REVIEW

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### BENGAL : SITES AND SIGHTS



The material culture of two distinct geopolitical units: West Bengal, a sovereign independent neighbouring nation, is discussed in detail in this beautifully illustrated, scholarly volume. The editorial task has been shared by two eminent art historians, - Prof. Pratapaditya Pal of India and Prof. Enamul Haque of Bangladesh. Followers of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religions, and dating from 12th century, followers of Islam, have contributed significantly to the history and culture of Bengal. No less is the contribution of the British and other European powers, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Danes and Armenians, who strutted the stage of Bengal in the 17th century.

Prof. Samir Kumar Mukherjee discusses in detail the recent excavations at Mangalkot, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, and archaeological evidence traces the history of the region from its proto-historic days in the 1st millennium BCE. The occupational deposits divided into seven successive periods range from chalcolithic to the Mughal period. The antiquities unearthed comprise seals and sealings, silver and copper coins, terracotta figurines and objects, household objects of utilitarian use, beads of semi-precious stones, and ceramics including Black and Red ware and northern Black Polished ware. The second part of the essay deals with the town of Burdwan and its environs.

In his essay on the excavations around Chander Ketugarh, located in the North 24-Pargans district of West Bengal, Prof. Enamul Haque bemoans the lack of interest shown by both the State and Central Archaeological Surveys regarding this site. However, based on the efforts of a few private antiquarians and an incomplete excavation programme of the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Calcutta University, he has compiled a structured consolidated summary of the material available. He states that the excavations at the five different sites can be studied under seven periods starting with 600 BCE till 1250 CE. Besides exposing ruins of private houses, a temple complex and a rampart wall, antiquities consisting of pottery, terracotta figurines, plaques, toys, ivory, wood and bronze sculptures, utility items, seals and coins, have been found. The great degree of sophistication in design and gesture of isolated male and female figures including *Yakshis*, *mithunas* and *apsaras*, can be seen. The *Yakshi* figures are slim, narrow-waisted with deep navel, display a variety of coiffures, ornaments, and luxurious draperies of different designs and delineations.

Prof. Dilip K. Chakrabarti has described in detail the Buddhist *Stupa* and the monastery complex at Paharpur, located in Bangladesh. It was established by Dharmapala, the second king of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, who ruled approximately in the last quarter of the 8th Century CE. Several excavations of the complex had been taken up in the early twenties and thirties of the last century. K.N. Dikshit published a definitive Report in 1938. The Paharpur Complex has three major components: the Central Shrine, cruciform in plan and raised on two terraces above the basement with a high and hollow central shaft forming the crowing tower or *Shikhara*; 177 monastic cells set along the inner side of the four boundary walls; and a temple dedicated to the goddess Tara. Among the reliefs and images excavated, 63 stone sculptures have been found, which mostly represent Hindu gods and goddesses, especially Krishna. The presence of Hindu themes is not surprising in a Buddhist monument of the 8th Century CE in eastern India because by this time there was a considerable inter-mixing of deities from both pantheons. The

terracottas found primarily depict scenes from daily life, as also a few Brahamical and Buddhist figures. During the 9th to 12 centuries CE, Paharpur was a centre of pilgrimage for monks from Tibet. Lastly, K.N. Dikshit is of the view that the temple plan of Paharpur, most likely influenced temple architecture of Mynamar, Java and Cambodia.

Mainamati, the third Buddhist site located in Bangladesh, is the subject of the essay contributed by Prof. Gouriswar Bhattacharya. Though over fifty ancient sites were discovered after 1947, only three of them, namely Salban Bihara, Kutila Mura, and Charpatra Mura, have been fully excavated, as also a huge monastery of the Paharpur type has been excavated at Salban Bihara. Four phases of occupation of the monastery have been identified and among antiquities unearthed from different levels, mention may be made to inscribed copper plates, gold and silver coins, gold ornaments, large number of images of Buddha, clay seals and oil lamps, earthenware storage jars, cooking pots, and bronze sculptures. An early standing Buddha was discovered *in situ* at Rupban Mura. The 2.44 metre high sandstone image, though broken into two pieces above the ankle, shows Buddha in *abhaya mudra* holding the hem of his garment in his left hand.

Prof. Enamul Haque has contibuted a second article dealing with the ruins of Mahasthangarh, located in Bangladesh. Today it is primarily known for the *mazar* of Saint Shah Sultan Mahi Swar Balkhi. a single domed mosque built in 1718 CE during Mughal emperor Farrukh Siyyar's time, may be seen. From the ruins of several sites, rich archaeological remain of the early phase of Hindu-Buddhist settlements have been found. The objects unearthed include two figures of Ganesha and Garuda, 40 bronze statues representing Buddhist divinities, and terracotta plaques depicting scenes from the Ramayana.

Dr. Naseem Banerji has written in detail about the Adina mosque in Pandua (1374), the Tantipara mosque (1480), and the Kadam Rasul shrine (1530), both located in Gaur. This group of early Islamic structures in West Bengal displays a profusion of relief patterns on outer walls, mihrabs, *mimbars* tympanums and dome bases. She then goes on the describe in details the terracotta decoration both on the exterior and interior spaces, the borders enclosing ornamented centres, filled with repeat geometric design, and overlaid with suspended lamps.

Dr. Ashok Battacharya has written about Bishnupur, a former princely state, located in the South-Western tract of West Bengal. He gives a brief history of the Malla dynasty ruling over it and refers in details to the conversion of King Bir Hamir (1587-1620 CE) from Shakta-Shaiva to the cult of Vaishnavas, which left it ethos in art, architecture, music and literature. In Bishnupur, there are at least 30 temples of importance. They do not, however, belong to any single type, and may be classified under three types : deul, chala, and ratna, Dr. Bhattacharya gives detailed descriptions of the temples built in the three styles. The plaques on the walls of the temples depict scenes from the Krishnalila, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and Puranas.

In his article on Hooghly, name of a stretch of the Ganga, Dr. Gautam Sengupta has written on the district town in West Bengal. Definite historical evidence dates back to hoards of gold coins of the Gupta period (Circa 4th-6th Century CE); and among the sculptures executed during the 9th to 12th centuries CE, mention may be made of the monumental Sudharshana Chakra, a massive Sambhara form of Shiva, a highly sensitive Lokeshvara, and a voluptuous Ganga.

European traders began to develop a keen interest in the area; the Portuguese were the first to arrive in 1535 and were followed by Christian missionaries of different denominations. The first Christian church in Bengal was constructed at Bandel in 1599. The Dutch traders replaced the Portuguese and they built a factory at Chinsura in 1655 and a fort in 1687. In 1824, however, Chinsura was ceded to England. An Armenian Church, consecrated to St. Johan the Baptist, is a surviving monument of the 17th century. The erstwhile French settlement of Chandernagore, occupied in 1697, saw many ups and downs because of the French-British conflict, which was eventually resolved in 1845. One of the earliest churches at Chandernagore is the Chapel of the Sisters of Cluny constructed in 1720; the Sacred Heart

Church was built between 1875 and 1885. Serampore, though a Danish settlement, ceded to the British in 1845, had the Baptist Mission established there in 1800, who erected the Baptist Mission Church. St. Olaf's church built in 1805 is a fine piece of neo-classical architecture. The most impressive building of the town is the Serampore college founded by the Baptist missionaries in 1818. Lastly, mention may be made to the garden-house built by Warren Hastings at Rishra, which he occupied between 1780 and 1784.

The last chapter on Murshidabad has been contributed by Prof. Pratapaditya Pal. Founded in 1704 by Murshid Quli Khan (r. 1703-25), Murshidabad lost its importance when the capital was eventually transferred to Calcutta by the British. Of the mosques in the town, mention may be made to the Katra mosque (1724-25); Chowk mosque (1707); Chote Chowk ki mosque; and Imambara built in the 19th Century; Hazarduari (with 1000 doors) or Aina Mahal (palace of mirrors), was built by Duncan McLeod, a purely European structure, which is loosely modelled on Lord Wellesley's Government House, now Raj Bhavan, Calcutta, A large building called Husainiya took almost 50 years to build (1804-55). It houses the taziyas, which are carried in procession during the annual Muharram observances.

Concluding, it may be mentioned that besides sites and sights of the various places described, brief references at appropriate places have been made to the applied arts and crafts, paintings, music, Ivory carving, textiles especially silk production etc.

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### ***Bengal : Sites and Sights***

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