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Review of "Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh"

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Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh

By Perween Hasan. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. ISBN-13: 9781845113810

Mosques have represented the Islamic culture for centuries. They should not, however, be viewed just as religious constructions, but also as a type of architecture that chronicles the evolution of the concept of Islam. In the context of Bengal, it also challenges the widely believed dichotomy of the Hindu-Muslim binary. Though primarily intended to depict the evolution of mosque architecture during the Bengal Sultanate, Professor Perween Hasan's book *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh* splendidly discusses this point.

The book begins with an excellent Forward by Professor Oleg Grabar. Grabar outlines the relevance and scope of the survey in this short foreword. In the Introduction of the book, Hasan offers a brief bibliographic overview of the subject. The main text of the book is divided into three chapters. The first chapter examines Bengal's geography and culture. The second part of the book surveys Pre-Islamic influences while also discussing the unique elements of Sultanate mosques. The concluding chapter is an inventory of the mosques that have been surveyed. The images and plans of the mosques deserve special mention since they let the reader recognize various fundamental components of mosque architecture such as bays, aisles, domes, etc.

Hasan's investigation starts with a concise study of the historical and geographical factors which added to the creation of a particular Bengal style of architecture. These factors were at the root of the acculturation processes between Muslim and non-Muslim elements, which began with the arrival of Islam in Bengal. Her emphasis on Mosque Architecture in Bengal as a whole,

rather than just as a Muslim action, and re-establishing such improvements as a connection between indigenous and foreign—depicts a consistent interaction in which religious architecture developed over 1,000 years in Bengal. Most of the earlier works on the Bengal Sultanate's mosque architecture lacked this historical perspective. The regional expressions found in such architecture demonstrated the process by which the Sultanate rulers established a distinct regional identity that supplanted their own religious affiliations at times. She also shows how the verbalization of rural images influenced architectural inventions. For example, she notes the use of Chou Chalas (thatched roofs) to cover the central aisle of the mosque as providing a particular vaulting style remarkable to Bengal.

The book's second chapter traces the history of mosque architecture in Bengal and the development of the "Bengal Mosques." In contrast to Islamic customs, the "Bengal Mosque" lacked minarets and Shan (Courtyards). All of the Bengal mosques, except the Adina Mosque, were of an enclosed type. Similarly, there is no ablution fountain in the Bengal style of mosques. Hasan interpreted these changes as a response to Bengal's climatic conditions. She also goes through the evolution of the numerous architectural elements that characterize the Bengal style of mosque. The chapter concludes with an examination of motifs and inscriptions found on Bengal mosques.

The third chapter not only discusses the meaning and evolution of the architecture of the mosques surveyed but also devotes an entire chapter to a detailed analysis of each of the fifty-five mosques described. She classifies these mosques into five distinct categories depending on the political and cultural trends of the period concerned. Hasan's work, which has been praised as one of the most original works on the Sultanate Bengal's Mosque Architecture, departs from several previous propositions. For example, Hasan's claim that the presence of voussoired arches

was a fact in Hindu and Buddhist religious architecture in Bengal, deviates from the existing notions (p. 58). Notwithstanding, Hasan didn't give any explanation on the matter. It is difficult to accept that the voussoired arches existed before the Muslim rule in Bengal considering that first effort to construct a voussoired arch in the Indian subcontinent was made during the reign of Qutbuddin Ai-beg.

Hasan's endeavor to survey fifty-five mosques, all situated in Bangladesh also poses a limitation to her study. Mosques constructed under the rule of Turkish governors (1204-1338) are only present in West Bengal, India. As a result, Hasan does not provide any thorough analyses of individual mosques from the time up to 1338, which may render the analysis incomplete and imply that Hasan has also refused to see the larger picture. Temple architecture saw a revival in the mid-15th century, during which temples copied many features of mosque architecture, allowing the Hindu upper class to situate themselves within a larger Indo-Islamic community. In the following century, the evolving Hindu upper class's affinity with Indo-Islamic culture would culminate in an effort to form "vertical linkages" with the Mughals.

Another significant lacuna in Hasan's research is that it fails to have a suitable conclusion. Professor Oleg Grabar's excellent presentation in the forward of the book poses a number of questions, which Hasan attempted to answer. Though Hasan's sincere attempt yields a good response, it might have failed to raise new questions that would have made the readers explore further. Otherwise, Professor Perween Hasan's fresh approach and rigorous analysis provides the reader with a valuable perspective. Studies on the Bengal Sultanate, especially its architectural past, are a largely unexplored area in both India and Bangladesh. Thanks to poor conservation works and frequent encroachments, the past is vanishing. Works like *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh* tries to preserve that vanishing past. As

a whole, one can say that Professor Hasan's *Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh* makes a valuable contribution in understanding the much neglected Bengal Sultanate and its rich cultural heritage.

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