

## Variation and Decorative Style in *Khan Jahani* Architecture at Bagerhat

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### Abstract

The architecture of the Khan Jahan period in Bagerhat, dating back to the Sultanate Bengal era, reflects a unique blend of aesthetics and subject variety, with terracotta and stone carvings as key decorative elements. This research explores the artistic excellence of these mosques, constructed without formal education, highlighting their religious influences and historical significance. Founded by Ulugh Khan-i-Jahan in the 15th century, Bagerhat's architectural heritage earned UNESCO World Heritage status in 1985. Despite previous studies, this research delves deeper into the aesthetic diversity and structural nuances that define *Khan Jahani* architecture in Bagerhat.

### Introduction

The unique art style of aesthetics and subject variety in mosque architectural decoration, in mosques during the Khan Jahan period of Sultanate Bengal can be seen. The use of terracotta in decorative arts and the medium of stone carving left a brilliant legacy in the early medieval period, mainly during the Sultanate period (1200-1558 AD). Aesthetically, these decorative art styles and subject variations have achieved the excellence of these art aesthetics by following religious restrictions. These decorations of the artists of that time, without any formal education, make us think in a natural way. So our research topic (Subject Variation and Decorative Style in Bagerhat *Khan Jahani* Architecture) is just an attempt to extract the essence of the art. All the mosques of Khan Jahan period selected for our study are located in Bagerhat district. Mainly pottery decoration and a few stone carvings are two different mediums. However, its variety of subjects and construction styles have influenced many researchers to study it. Apart from the exterior of Khan Jahan Ali's mausoleum, the use of lime plaster is not seen much and the mausoleum was painted white and red much later. Ulkh Khan-i-Jahan founded the historic mosque city in the 15th century. Considering the historical importance of the Islamic architecture mosques built during the Khan Jahan period, UNESCO declared Bagerhat district as a city of historic mosques in 1985 and listed it as the 321st World Heritage Site. So far, there have been a lot of books and articles in various magazines are written on this subject, but no complete research has been

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found. Therefore, the main subject of this research is the variety and aesthetics of these architectural decorations of Khan Jahan Ali period.

### **History of the beginning of Khan Jahani Architecture in Bagerhat District**

There are different opinions found on the naming of Bagerhat district. According to the researchers, this city was known as 'Khalifatabad' and 'Habeli Kasba' in medieval times.<sup>1</sup> No epigraphic evidence has been found so far from any part of the Caliphate on the basis of which it is possible to establish the correct identity of the builder of the Bagerhat-Caliphate. However, the grave plaque inside the building locally known as 'Khan Jahan Ali's Mazar' mentions the title 'Khan-ul-Azam Ulugh Khan-i-Jahan'. But the name of the person associated with this designation is not mentioned. And that is why the question of determining the identity of the founder of Caliphate is still an unresolved chapter in history.<sup>2</sup> During the reign of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah (1442-1459) of Bengal, Hazrat Khan Jahan (R.A.) came to this region and for the welfare of the people dug wells, built roads and constructed numerous mosques due to the lack of fresh water. Some scholars believe that the founder of Khilafatabad-Bagherhat, 'Khan-ul-Azam Ulugh Khan-i-Jahan' was a representative of Sultan Nasir-ud-din Mahmud Shah of Gaur. Another writer also opines that the founder of the Caliphate, 'Khan-i-Jahan', was a pious person directly from the court of the rulers of Delhi or a personage of the Amir level. Writers belonging to this group also emphasized on the characteristics of signs in the architecture of Caliphate as a basis for speech. They believe that these structures are influenced by the austere style of Delhi's Tughlaq architecture. But recent analysis has shown that the medieval monuments of Caliphate retain certain features which cannot be found in any other monuments located in Gaur > Lokkhonaboti. Of particular note is the triangular pediment set in the curved cornice above along the central arch-doorway of the six-domed mosque (eastern facade) and the reflection of the same motif in the highest part of the arch of the main Mihrab of the Qiblah wall (now broken). These two motifs are an integral part of Neo-Roman (Hellenistic) architecture. Based on this formula, a possible proposal for the identity of the discussed Khan-i-Jahan can be made. Apart from knowing the history of Gorapattana of Khan Jahani architecture, we get the history of ornamentation in mosques in this subcontinent.

When Muslims came to India in the beginning of 13th century, under Sikander Shah, Bengal became an independent entity for the first time and for the next two centuries distinctive Bengali culture developed which was evident in literature and architecture

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1. Md. Mosharf Hossain, Shihab Uddin, Md. Akbar, Lovely Yasmin, *World Cultural Heritage, Khalifatabad > Bagerhat*, Directorate of Archives, Ministry of Culture, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2003
  2. *Ibid.*

of Bengal. In combination with large domes and corner minarets, local characteristics of curved cornices taken from bent bamboo eaves of village huts and indigenous terracotta decoration was added. Structurally there was also a significant shift from the old Hindu corbelling system to Islamic vaults, dome and keystone arches.<sup>3</sup>

#### **List and detailed description of Bagerhat mosque architecture**

- Sixty Dome Mosque (ষাট গম্বুজ মসজিদ)
- Nine Dome Mosque (নয় গম্বুজ মসজিদ)
- Singair Mosque (সিঙ্গাইর মসজিদ)
- Hazrat Jindapir (RA) single domed Jame Mosque (হযরত জিন্দাপীর (র.) এর এক গম্বুজ জামে মসজিদ)
- Reza Khoda Mosque (রেজাখোদা মসজিদ)
- Ranbijaipur Mosque (রণবিজয়পুর মসজিদ)
- Bibi Begni Mosque (বিবি বেগনী মসজিদ)
- Chunakhola Mosque (চুনাখোলা মসজিদ)
- Shabegdanga antiquities (সাবেকডাংগা পুরাকীর্তি)

#### **A complete list of subject variations and descriptions and pictures of various mosque decorations in Bagerhat**

**Various floral designs:** The most of the geometric shapes are made separately as terracotta pieces or pitches in the floral designs are seen. In floral designs, attempts were made to represent the flowers in a somewhat three-dimensional manner as well as line drawings within the petals. This narrow range also shows the use of perspective which gives a fullness to the art. In picture, we see that the three-dimensional appearances of the flowers have been greatly enhanced to fit them within frames. In the flower in picture, we can see the use of perspective along with line drawing on the petals, which makes the three-dimensional representation of the flower more aesthetic. The next flower terracotta is done using the similar technique, albeit with a different type of flower.

The flower in picture is made in a very simple way, but the numbers of flower petals are pretty special to look at. As we know that the petals of most flowers in the world follow Fibonacci numbers. “Fibonacci series (Fibonacci series) is believed by many to be able to reveal many mysteries of not only mathematics but also nature. The famous thirteenth century mathematician Leonardo Da Pisa (nicknamed Fibonacci), the discoverer of the Fibonacci number himself, said, “The secret of nature lies in the number.” Fibonacci is actually a simple series of numbers. The series starts from 0 and the next numbers in the series are each the sum of the previous two numbers.<sup>4</sup>

3. Priyanka Mangaonkar, ‘Temples of Bengal: Material Style and Technological Evolution’, *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012

4. <https://wikimedia.org.bd>

It means, here all are 8 flower petals! Some very large flower designs are also can be seen in the Sixty Dome Mosque. They are composed of some motifs associated with



*Sixty Dome Mosque. Inside the frame is a 3D full motif terracotta.*



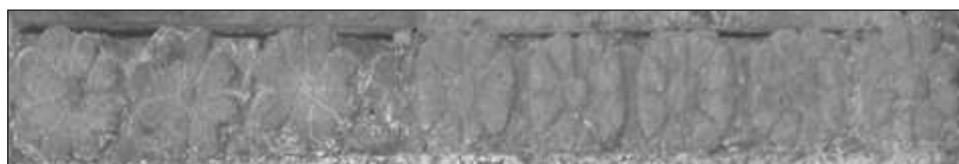
*Sixty Dome Mosque. A full motif terracotta made of 3D, perspective and lines without a frame.*



*Bibi Begni Mosque. Floral motif.*



*Chunakhola Mosque. The presence of 3D construction of the petals in the presentation of the floral motif is very well noted.*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. The number of flower petals are constructed according to Fibonacci numbers.*

flowers instead of making it just a typical flower so that the sight of the audience does not get bored.

The four-petalled flower design is seen in several mosques, but its main feature is the lattice design influenced by it. As we see in picture.

A completely different shape of floral design can be seen in the Reza Khoda Mosque. I am more interested to know about the Reza Khoda Mosque after seeing such a detailed artistic design, although the design is almost similar to it in the Sixty Domed Mosque. Its construction is done through fine carving technique without leaving the flower petals flat. From a distance, the design looks like a grasshopper, but it is a beautiful floral design hanging from the top.

**Different composition of flowers and leaves:** Not only flowers but sometimes a composition of vine leaves with flower petals and presenting them in frames of various designs enhances its visual aesthetics. While taking a closer look at the floral designs, we can see that the artists sometimes tried to design from different angles. As a result, there is variation in the presentation of the subject matter. And the flowers that are designed by the artists of that time can be seen around us. A soft material in flowers is evident in the

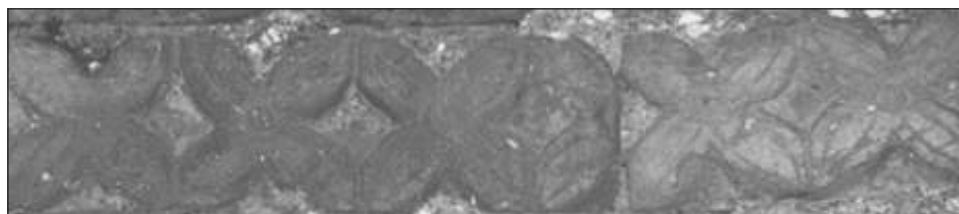


*Sixty Dome Mosque floral design. Some other designs of petal arrangement are sometimes seen.  
This design can be seen in small and big ways in this mosque.*

works of these artists. In other words, there is no difficulty in this artistic construction anywhere.

**Composition of flowers with other designs:** As the design is made only with floral motifs, some other compositions are made with some motifs of flowers and geometric shapes. These designs were essential specially to fill many voids i.e. to maintain visual





*Sixty Dome mosque. 'Jali' designs with such flower petals are seen in many mosques.*



*This is an attempt to three-dimensionalize the budding of new petals  
in the center of the flower can be seen*



*Sixty Dome Mosque*

continuity. In addition, what was surprising about those artists was their modesty as well as maintaining symmetry, they were also conscious of repetition. In other words, they were aware that the same design does not make the viewer bored and with precision they have tried to maintain the balance of the shapes of their designs and have not spoiled the rhythm of the design with more forms. If we look at the design of mosques other than the sixty domes, we see repetitions as



*Reja Khoda Mosque*

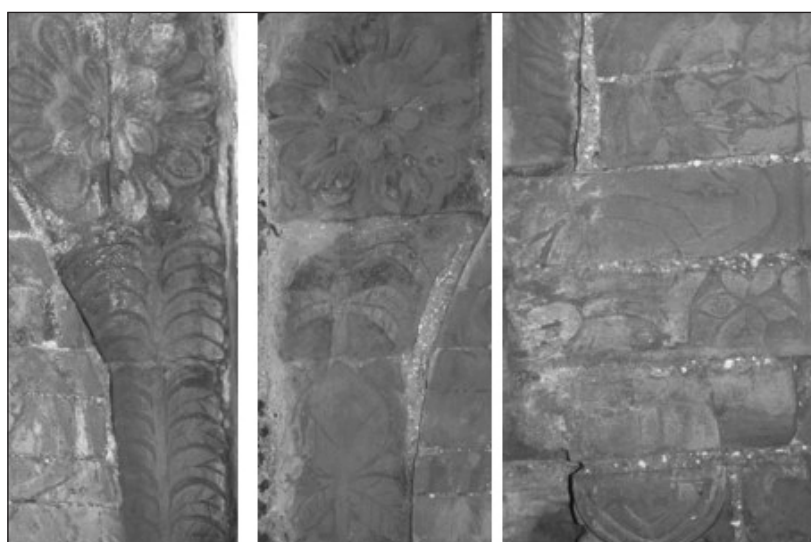
well as a small number of different design entries. Because of the grandeur of the sixty domed mosque, we see the presence of more motifs in this mosque.



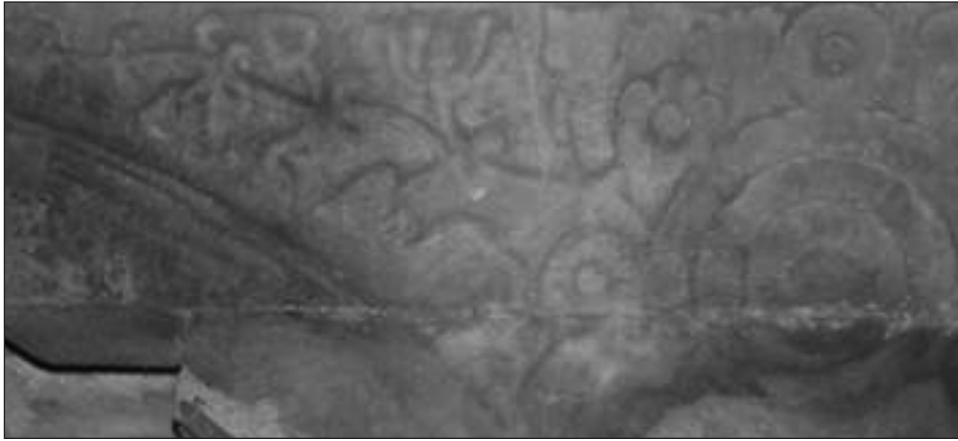
**Design with tree or heterogeneous:** In addition to floral, foliage or geometric designs, mosques have some heterogeneous designs, such as a whole tree or a terracotta of a tree with fruit such as palm trees. The artists of that time made terracotta with palm quite skillfully. And here the artist has shown his skill in keeping the proportions right. Flowers with trees are seen again. Here you can see



*Bibi Begni Mosque. Floral designs at different angles.*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. Flowers with foliage.*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. Stone carving, floral design with vines.*

large coconut or palm trees as well as terracotta of some unknown wild plants with fruits of small bushes.

**Geometric designs:** Some geometric designs come to join other designs, to fill the gaps between one designs to another. Again, the three sides of the mosque's cornice, tower, and gate, especially in the outer part of the mosque and as a border are seen more. The stone columns of the Sixty Domed Mosque are not solid but also have geometric designs.

**Chain design:** Apart from Bagerhat mosques of the Sultanate period, a design can be seen in the Mihrab part like almost all other mosques. A chain descends from the top and sometimes a talisman like or floral design etc. can be seen at the end. Most of these chain designs are destroyed and so are rarely seen in Bagerhat mosques nowadays.



*Bibi Begini Mosque. Design with flowers and vine leaves.*



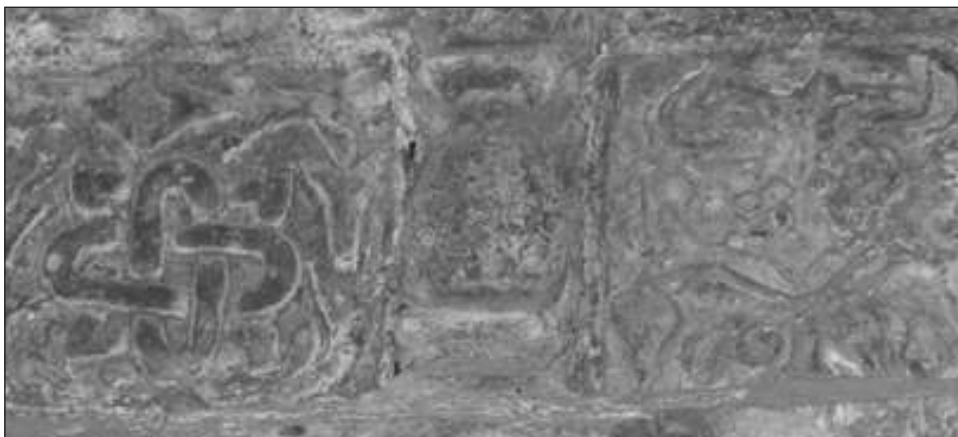
*Sixty Dome Mosque. Terracotta with various motifs including flowers and vines  
(Many such terracotta designs in rows are seen in this mosque).*



*Sixty Dome Mosques*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. Arch motifs on top and Islamic architectural motifs on both sides.  
Flower and vine motifs can be seen in the carved parts inside.*



*Ranbijaipur Mosque*



*Ranbijaipur Mosque*



*Naigambuj Mosque. Inside the Mihrab there are numerous aesthetic designs which are composed of flowers and other motifs.*

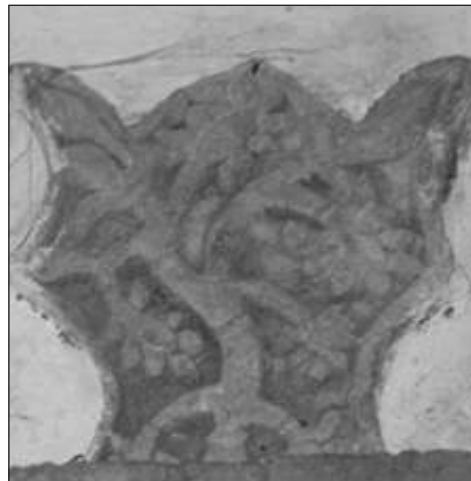
**Bengali folk art style:** There are several designs in the mosque decoration which look a lot like jeweleries and can be compared to the Bengali folk art style. Some of the designs are very similar to Muslim miniature art or Mughal miniature art.

**Overlapping and knitting:** We have already seen evidence of the skill of the artists in Bagerhat Mosque decoration. The archaic craftsmanship of terracotta can clearly be seen in the knitting or overlapping work of the skilled artists. They have created 3D knitting designs similar to rope or wool used in sweater knitting and created





*Bibibegni Masjid*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. The first picture has a tree motif with palm trees. In the next picture, unknown but the proportions seem to be a large tree motif.*





*Ranbijaipur Mosque. Here is a leafy motif with a tree that looks like a betel leaf.*



*Bibibegni Masjid. A motif with palm or coconut tree fruit.*

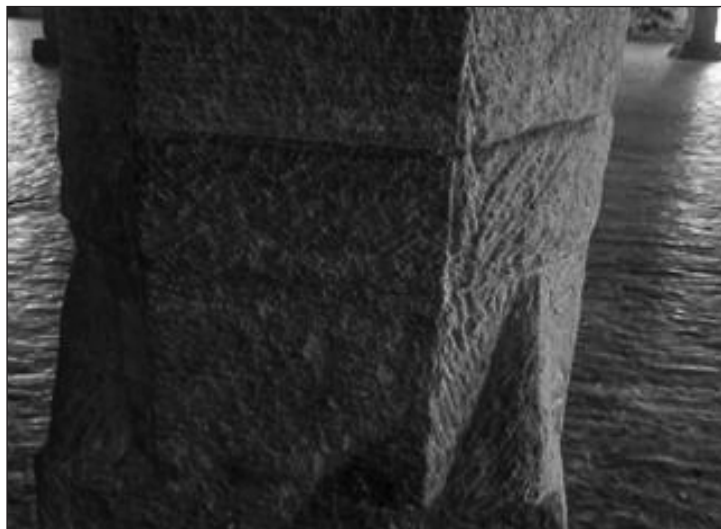


*Ranbijaipur Mosque. Foliage design with some wild trees.*

their art with other motifs. In picture, we see some other design work on the weave. There is a design of flowers in the middle with some ducks surrounding. Although we know that any animal figure is prohibited in Muslim architecture. But they are very well designed and probably the religious restrictions were not as strict as now.



*Bibibegni Mosque. During the Sultanate period, many mosques have different geometric designs. Specially to decorate the exterior of the mosque, such as: walls, arches, corners, entrances etc.*



*Sixty Dome Mosque. The use of geometric shapes can be seen without keeping the stone pillars solid.*



*One Dome Mosque. From the outside, almost all mosques are decorated with geometric designs.*



*Rezakhoda Mosque. The ruins are almost the only mosques with some exceptional designs. Which we don't see anywhere else. Here we see beautiful geometric designs. The design can be seen on the columns on either side of the Mihrab.*

### **Analysis of Aesthetic Judgement**

The much variation and asthetic designs that are found in the Bagerhat msques are not seen anywhere else in the Bengal of Sultanate period. In the mosques of Bagerhat we see almost all the use of clay. Terracotta designs have been seen in this subcontinent since long ago. By the end of the 16th century, a uniquely Bengali style of temples

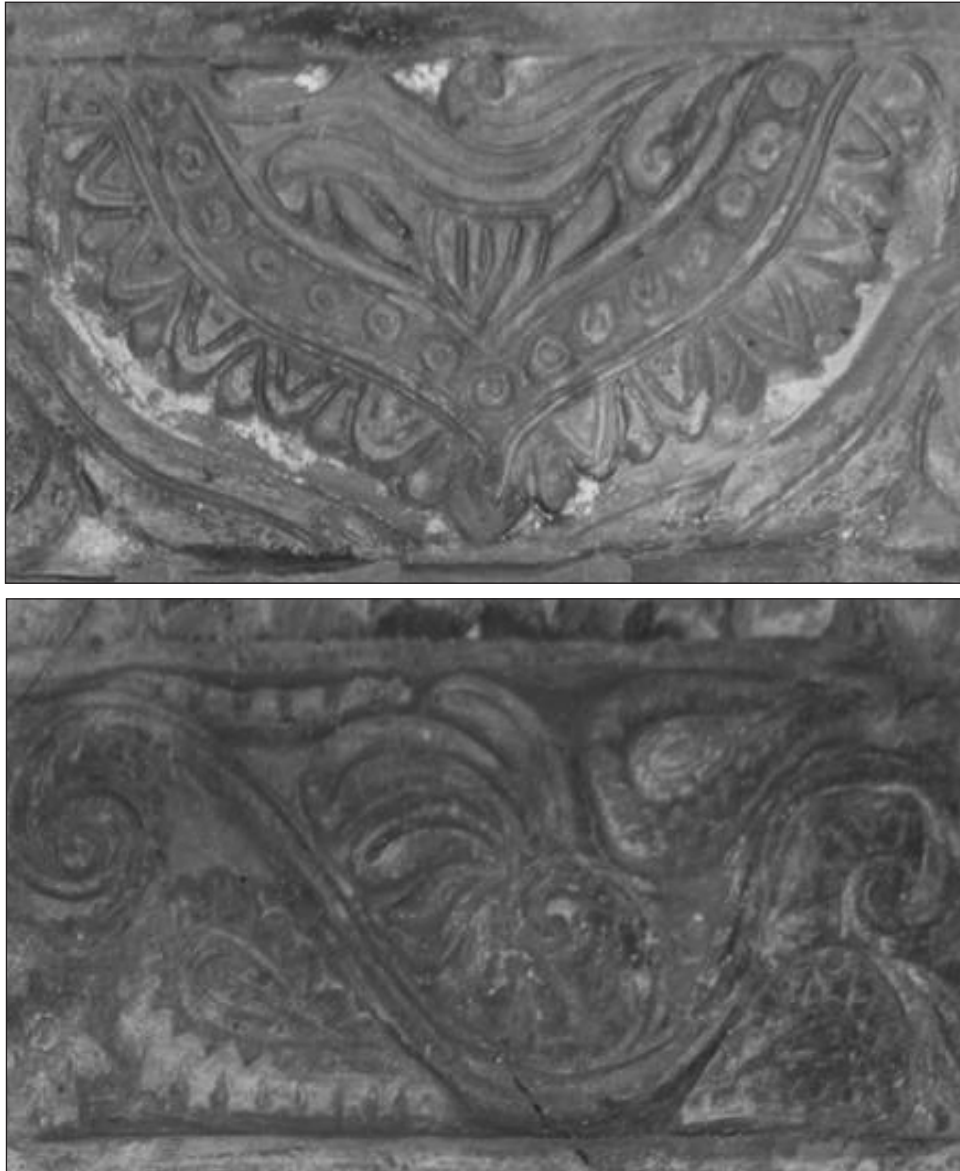


*Nine Dome Mosque. Inside the Mihrab.*



*Rezakhoda Mosque. A bell can be seen at the end of the chain.  
Which cannot be seen anywhere else.*

architecture and sculpture had established itself as the Hindu artistic expression of the new social, religious and Cultural Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the use of terracotta was started in Hindu temples and Buddha shrines, but in the later Sultanate and Mughal period, we see a new style of terracotta art by changing the motifs on the walls of the



*Sixty Dome Mosque*

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5. Bimal Datta, *Bengal Temples*, Munshiram Manoharlal Pub. Pvt. Ltd, 1959, p. 6





*Shabegdanga antiquities*

religious shrines. One of the most remarkable features of the history of this monumental architecture in Bengal is the sharp break in tradition that coincided with the Muslim conquest. Architects working for Muslim patrons developed a preference for covering entire wall surface with finely worked terracotta plaques that incorporated traditional decorative motifs such as the lotus.<sup>6</sup> We know about some basic principles of design that in a good design, if we create it by following certain rules and principles,

6. Priyanka Mangaonkar, 'Terracotta Temples of Bishnupur: Transformation through Time and Technology', *Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design*, Vol. 1, No. 2, August, 2011, p. 4





*Nine Domed Mosque*

we can increase its visual aesthetics. And in the absence of these, a design loses its aesthetics. First of all, if we talk about balance, it must be mentioned that in every design of Bagerhat we notice its remarkable presence. Especially the symmetrical balance of course. If we divide the image vertically, we see a symmetrical balance, and if we divide it horizontally, we see a nice asymmetric balance of the upper and lower motifs. We observe such balance in almost all designs.

Lack of unity makes any design chaotic, confusing and boring. So unity of motifs is very important in the design here. In picture, we notice that overall a well-formed unity is very carefully composed. Conceptual and visual unity is presented here in a very rhythmic way.

A design constructed by relating the motifs in some way rather than being completely the same or completely different creates a harmony that is essential to the aesthetics of the design. Not too much and too much similarity can make a design boring to the viewer. Some variety is definitely needed to make it attractive. In picture, we see its reflection.

The presence of repetition and rhythm is also observed almost everywhere. Although repeated, this amount of distance creates a rhythm between returns that increases the acceptability of a design. In picture, we see horizontal and vertical rhythm.

A common thing must be said, “Muslims see balance and harmony in all things as a manifestation of Allah’s Plan.”

**Conclusion**

Here we see the creation of new motifs as well as changes in many motifs. An attempt to make the shapes 3D as seen in the use of lines in many designs is worth seeing. Design of weaving with terracotta isn't easy, but we've seen many of their



*Shabegdanga antiquities*



*Sixty Dome Mosque*

designs with 3D-like weaving chains and some new motifs overlapping on top of the weaving really got us thinking! Apart from a canvas-like wall, round pillars, both sides of arches, corners of cornices and even the place inside the mosque to keep the Holy Quran in accordance with the architecture shape and without changing the shape, they have also designed them. And such skillful design is never seen anywhere else except in those mosques of the Sultanate period.



*Singair Mosque*



*Sixty Dome Mosque*