

Animal Motifs in Muktagacha Zamindari Architecture

Sajeda Yusuf*

Abstract

The artistic representation of animals has a long-standing tradition in human history, with evidence stretching from prehistoric frescoes to modern architecture. This paper explores the incorporation of animal motifs in architectural decorations, tracing their historical roots and cultural significance. Examples from ancient India, such as the caves of Ajanta, Mavalipuram, and Amaravati, display elephant portraits, while similar motifs can be found in various buildings in Bangladesh, especially in temples and zamindar estates, where both artistic and religious sentiments intertwined. A focal point of this study is the architectural legacy of the Zamindars of Muktagacha, a region in present-day Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Renowned for their wealth and cultural sophistication, the zamindars adorned their monuments with intricate motifs of animals and nature, reflecting both imperial grandeur and religious symbolism. This paper delves into the historical development of Muktagacha under the leadership of the Acharya family, tracing the transformation of the region from a forested land into a hub of architectural and cultural significance. The origins and rise of the Muktagacha zamindari, alongside the use of animal decorations in their monuments, reveal the complex interplay between power, art, and religious expression in the architectural heritage of the region. Through examining these decorative practices, the study highlights how artistic expression transcends time, blending symbolism, religious sentiment, and cultural heritage in architectural forms across different eras.

The decoration of the animal world is nothing new in history, since ancient times, man has expressed his artistic talent and etymological knowledge in the portrait of animals. In prehistoric times, frescoes of humans, animals, and birds have been found in the caves of Lasco in France, Altamira in Spain, and ancient China, Egypt and India. Elephant portraits have been added to the caves of Ajanta, Mavalipuram and Amaravati, India.¹ From ancient to modern times, the decoration of animals is seen in the architecture, in some zamindar buildings in Bangladesh, the decoration

* Dr. Sajeda Yusuf, Retired Professor of Islamic History and Culture, Govt. College, Bangladesh

1. Dr. S. M. Hasan, 'The Mughal School Of Zoological Portaiture, Arts and Letters', *The Journal of India, Pakistan and Cylon Society*, 1963, p. 145

of gods and animals is seen in temple, the construction of these decorations, religious sentiment has worked along with art.

The Zamindars of Muktagacha were renowned for their immense power, vast wealth, luxurious lifestyles, and cultural refinement. Among their many achievements, they erected a number of architecturally significant monuments, distinguished by their aesthetic appeal. This article examines how the Zamindars of Muktagacha adorned their monuments with motifs of animals and nature, which served as potent symbols of both imperial grandeur and religious significance.

Muktagacha Upazila is situated approximately 10 miles west of Mymensingh city² In ancient times, the area, then forested, was governed by independent feudal lords. It was part of Alapsingha Pargana, one of the twenty-two parganas ruled by Isha Khan, a leader of the Baro Bhuiyan. During the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar, this region was recorded in the Ain-e-Akbari Aleishahi.

Alapsingh Pargana comprised 670 mouzas, including those in Mymensingh Sadar, Muktagacha, Fulbaria, Gaffargaon, Ishwarganj, Phulpur, Haluaghat, Netrokona, Kendua, Jamalpur, Nalitabari, Sherpur, and Madhupur. The Pargana was divided into two administrative regions, Tappa Satsikka and Tappa Kumariya,³ Muktagacha was included in Tappa Kumaria. Following the death of Isha Khan, control of the pargana shifted from independent rulers to Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, who conferred part of the territory on the ancestors of Muhammad Mendi of Tikra. Under Muhammad Mendi's rule, the zamindari was split between Binod Ramchandra of Lokia and Ramchandra Roy Bhabani Dev of Putizna.⁴ Eventually, due to financial difficulties, the original proprietors lost control, and the zamindari was granted to Srikrishna Acharya by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan.⁵

Srikrishna Acharya transformed the previously forested area into a habitable settlement.⁶ Following his death, his successors continued to manage the zamindari until its eventual abolition. The Acharya family relocated from Jhakar to Muktagacha after an incident in which Bishnuram Acharya's son was kidnapped by Fakir Monks during an uprising against the zamindars. To ensure their safety, they established their residence in Binod Bari, which was later renamed Muktagacha.⁷ The new name was a tribute to a craftsman named Muktaram, who presented a brass lamp called a Deepadhar or Gacha to the zamindars upon their arrival. Impressed by the gift, the Zamindar Ramram Acharya

2. Nurul Islam (Ed.), *District Gazetteers Mymensingh, Dhaka*, 1992, p. 586

3. F. A. Saschee, *Final Report on the survey and Settlement operation in the District of Mymensingh 1908 to 1919*, Calcutta, Appendix ix

4. K. P. Sen, *Banglar Itihas (Nababi Amol)*, Calcutta, p. 80

5. Sree Kedarnath Mojumdar, *Mymensingher biboron*, Rep. Mymensingh, 1987, p. 7

6. E. M. Lewis, *Report on the History and Statistics, Dacca Division*, Calcutta, 1868, p. 278

7. Shree Jibendra Kishore Achariya Chowdhury, *Ami*, 1st Part, Calcutta, 1979, p. 9

combined Muktaram's name with his creation, thus renaming Binod Bari to Muktagacha.⁸

The Muktagacha zamindari distribution and the subsequent construction of architectural structures highlight the historical significance of the region's ruling elite, particularly the Acharya family. The zamindari's subdivision into various parts, such as Boro Hissa, Modhdhom Hissa, Choto Hissa, Aat Ani Zamindari and Dori Chari Ani reflects a complex inheritance pattern. The architectural contributions made by the Zamindars during their tenure show a deep engagement in the cultural, social, and religious spheres.

Key Architectural Structures and Ornamentation

1. Residences and Kachari (Administrative Buildings)

- Boro Hissa House: Belonging to Rudraram's lineage.
- Modhdhom Hissa House: Linked to Vijayram's descendants.
- Choto Hissa House: Associated with Krishna Chandra Ram. Above structures they owned from Ramram Achariya.
- Aat Ani Bari: Gauri Kishore, the adopted son of Shyamkishore, owned eight
- Anas of zamindari and built this residence. These part came from Hororam and Bishnuram Acahariya's side.⁹
- Dori Chari Ani Bari: Refers to the zamindari property inherited by Raghunandan Acharya. This Part was originally owned by Shibram Achariya.¹⁰

2. Places of Worship

- Hare Rameshwar Temple: Reflects the religious inclination of the zamindars.
- Anandmaye Jor Temple: A significant religious site.
- Temple Built of Stone: A unique temple, possibly showcasing intricate stonework.
- Three Shiva Temples: Dedicated to Lord Shiva, emphasizing the zamindars Hindu beliefs.

3. Amusement Buildings in Mymensingh City

- Shashi Lodge: Likely a recreational residence.
- Alexander Castle: Another leisure building built by the zamindars, demonstrating their interest in leisure and architectural grandeur.

The ornamentation and decorative styles of these structures, although mostly destroyed, are an important topic of study, shedding light on the aesthetic choices of the Muktagacha zamindars. This essay seems focused on documenting the remaining

8. *Ibid.*, p. 9

9. *Ibid.*, p. 12

10. Shree Kedarnath Mojumdar, *Mymensingher biboron*, p. 51

decorative features of these structures and understanding their historical significance. The architectural heritage of Muktagacha reflects a blend of Mughal and Indo-European influences that dominated the zamindari later phase. This transition is visible in the various service institutions, public structures, and decorative styles, along with religious, recreational and residential buildings. The notable aspects include both functional and ornamental architecture, contributing to the unique identity of the region.

Key Architectural Features and Institutions

1. Service Institutions (Without Ornamentation)

- Main Kachari Bhaban and Administrative Building: Now repurposed as the District Commissioner's office and the Court building in Mymensingh.
- SK Hospital: A service institution.
- Vidyamoyee Balika Vidyalaya: An educational institution.
- Rajarajeshwari Water Works: A utility structure, serving the public need for water supply.

2. Architectural Evolution

- Mughal Influence (Initial Phase): Early architectural efforts by the Muktagacha zamindars show a significant Mughal influence, characterized by arches, domes, and Islamic decorative elements. Many of these structures, however, have been lost to time.
- Indo-European Architecture (Later Phase): As Mughal influence waned, the zamindars embraced the colonial Indo-European style, which can be seen in many of the surviving buildings. This style includes open terraces, arched verandahs, large gates, triangular parapets, and extensive use of stone, wood, brick, lime, and surki. The Indo-European style is common among other zamindari establishments across Bangladesh and India.¹¹

3. Compound Layout

- The various palaces, administrative buildings, temples, and service institutions were located within a vast compound, entered through a grand gate. This entrance was 15 feet high and built with Corinthian pillars, featuring intricate details like snake motifs, Sanskrit inscriptions, and lion sculptures.

4. Decorative Styles: The surviving decorations of the structures in Muktagacha highlight:

- Animal Sculptures: Influenced by Indian architectural traditions, these include swans, elephants, snakes, lions, peacocks, tigers, and deities.
- Arabesque Motifs: The intricate use of Islamic floral patterns and plant design incorporated into the architecture reflects the Mughal style.

11. www.murshidabad.net/history/palaces-topics/hazarduari-palace.html, accessed on August 2024

- **Indigenous Influences:** The large pond next to the palace is an example of indigenous architectural preferences, as are the five ghats (staircases) around it, adorned with elephant sculptures. The Jol Tongi, with its beautifully crafted elephant busts on the stairs leading to the pond, is an artistic highlight.



Entrance with Lion Motif

5. Zamindari Residences

- **Boro Hissa, Modhdhom Hissa, Choto Hissa:** These three divisions of the Ramram Acharya estate were transformed into different structures. The Boro Hissa palace is now the sub-registry office, while Choto Hissa houses the Muktagacha Government Shaheed Memorial College.



Swan



Nagas (Snake)



Lion



Peacock



Shiva

- Aat Ani Bari: This iconic palace was preserved by Jagat Kishore and is now under the Department of Archaeology. It exemplifies the Indo-European style with its intricate design and large compound.
- Dori Chari Ani Bari: Once a majestic estate, this building is mostly ruined, with only the front gate surviving. The structure suggests a grand palace, consistent with the zamindari architecture of the time.



Elephant Motif

Market Places

Each section of the zamindari compound had an adjoining market for supplying essential goods, such as:

- Aat Ani Bazar
- Dori Chari Ani Bazar
- Boro Hissa Bazar

- Modhdom Hissar Bazar
- Choto Hissa Bazar
- These markets formed a critical part of the zamindari infrastructure, reflecting the self-sufficiency of the estate.

Cultural Significance

The Muktagacha zamindars blend of Mughal, indigenous, and Indo-European styles, their grand public works, and their artistic decorations offer valuable insights into the history of architectural evolution in Bengal during the zamindari era. The legacy left behind by the structures, despite their current ruinous state, speaks to the zamindars role in shaping not only the region's economy but also its cultural and artistic identity.

‘Aat Ani’ House

The ‘Aat Ani’ House offers a rich architectural and cultural legacy, blending Indo-European and Mughal influences with Hindu religious symbolism, reflecting the values and aesthetics of the Muktagacha zamindars. Here's a detailed look at its architectural features and significance:

Architectural Layout

- Passage and Verandahs: A 50-foot-long north-south passage leads from the main gate to the nave, flanked by rows of rooms. The elevated verandahs (8 feet above ground) provide a grand view of the estate. The passage features 6 square-panelled caves on both sides, originally topped by a tiger mummy, symbolizing power and royalty.¹²

Division into Four Blocks

- Guest House and Residences: The first block housed guest accommodations and kachari buildings, with additional residences for security guards.
- Religious and Cultural Block: The second part includes the Rajrajeshwari Temple and Nat Mandir, where religious rituals and cultural performances took place.

Rajrajeshwari Temple

- Puja Rooms: The temple has three adjacent rooms, with the central room dedicated to worship. The other two rooms were for storing worship materials and preparing the bhog
- Decorative Arches: The temple's semi-circular five-arched verandah is ornately decorated, with two arches adorned with peacocks, two with lions, and the central arch with floral designs. The meeting of animal and floral decorations reflects a harmonious blend of natural elements and spiritual symbolism.

12. Shree Jibendra Kishore Achariya Chowdhury, *op.cit.*, p. 43

- Idols: The temple originally housed ashtadhatu (eight-metal alloy) idols of various Hindu deities, including Durga, Shiva, Saraswati, and Ganesha, symbolizing the zamindar family's deep religious roots.

Nat Mandir (Revolving Stage)

- Theater Architecture: Bhupendra Kishore, an influential zamindar, introduced a revolving stage in collaboration with Kolkata's Setu Sen, a renowned stage-maker. The walls were painted with dancers, enhancing the artistic value of the theater space.

Temples and Religious Structures

- Harorameshwara Temple: Established by Hororam Acharya Chowdhury, this temple, despite renovations, retains its Indo-European and Chinese architectural elements. It featured Durga, Kali, and Shiva idols.
- Anandmaye Jor Temple: A twin temple dedicated to Kali and Shiva, established by Bimala Devi. The temple's architecture is characterized by multi-cusped arches, fierce lions at the top, and a heavily ornamented Kali idol.



Peacock Motif



Lion on Arch

- **Stone Temple:** Located in the Choto Hissa estate, this Shiva temple is believed to have been built by heirs of the same lineage. Lotus motifs and Ganesha idols adorn its doors.
- **Three Shiva Temples:** Built in 1791 by Krishna Chandra Acharya,¹³ these temples feature three black-stone Shivalingas, symbolizing the family's devotion to Lord Shiva.

Muktagacha Zamindars Urban Contributions

- **Shashi Lodge:** A one-story Indo-European structure built by Shashikanta Acharya Chowdhury.¹⁴ The architectural style is an eclectic mix of Western and indigenous influences, with white arches decorated with floral, bird, and peacock motifs.
- **Venus Statue:** The palace courtyard houses a beautifully sculpted white marble statue of Venus, representing Western influence. It rests on a three-stepped circular base, combining artistry with functional elements like the fountain below.

Alexander Castle

- Built in memory of NS Alexander,¹⁵ this two-story structure combines European and Chinese elements. The use of iron and wood, twisted



Ganesha

13. According to the inscription, installed in the Temple.

14. Nazimuddin Ahmed, *Building of the British Raj in Bangladesh*, Dhaka, 1986, p. 87

15. Shree Kedarnath Mojumdar, *Mymensingher Itihash*, Rep. Mymensingh 1987, p. 101 (At that time, N. S. Alexander was working as a Magistrate and District Collector in Mymensingh)

staircases, and ornate Venus statues further emphasize the zamindars' cosmopolitan tastes.

Animal and Divine Motifs

The animal motifs—especially elephants—reflect the zamindar's religious and cultural traditions:

- Elephants: A recurring symbol in Hindu mythology, elephants represent royalty, power, strength, and wisdom. Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity, embodies the power to overcome obstacles and is a symbol of good fortune.
- Peacocks, Lions, and Tigers: These animals are frequently depicted in both architectural decoration and religious iconography, symbolizing beauty, protection, and ferocity.



Venus

Cultural Influence

The architecture of Muktagacha is deeply intertwined with Hindu traditions, and the decorative use of animals and floral motifs serves both artistic and religious purposes. The influence of Western and Mughal styles in the design of temples and palaces also points to the zamindar's openness to multiple cultural influences, all while maintaining a strong connection to their Hindu roots.

This hybrid style, with its intricate motifs, religious symbolism, and public works, reflects the wealth and grandeur of the Muktagacha zamindars, leaving behind a legacy that is still admired today despite the decay of time.

The symbolic use of animals in the architecture and decoration of the Muktagacha zamindar monuments reflects deep-rooted connections between Hindu mythology, religious devotion, and cultural beliefs. These animal representations not only embody divine qualities but also serve as powerful metaphors for virtues that the zamindars revered. Here's a closer look at the symbolism of key animals featured in the Muktagacha zamindari architecture:

Lion and Tiger

- **Lion:** As the companion and ride of Goddess Durga, the lion represents power, valor, and virtue. It symbolizes divine strength and the courage to fight evil forces. In the Muktagacha estates, lion motifs are often seen in architectural features, emphasizing the Zamindar's respect for these qualities in both their spiritual and earthly roles as rulers.
- **Tiger:** The tiger, also associated with Durga, stands for royalty, majesty, fearlessness, strength, and ferocity. Its presence in the monuments speaks to the zamindar's self-image as fearless leaders who command respect and loyalty. The tiger's ferocious energy is also symbolic of the protection provided by Durga, guarding her devotees from danger.

Peacock

- **Lord Krishna's Connection:** The peacock feather worn by Lord Krishna symbolizes divine charm, playfulness, and his ability to enchant the hearts of devotees. In the Muktagacha monuments, the presence of peacock motifs represents this divine grace and the spiritual harmony that Krishna embodies.
- **Goddess Saraswati's Mount:** As the mount of Saraswati, the peacock symbolizes the union of beauty, creativity, and wisdom. This highlights the belief that aesthetics and intellectual pursuits are intertwined, and true knowledge comes through both artistic expression and spiritual understanding.

Swan (Hansa)

- **Lord Brahma's mount:** The swan, as the vehicle of Lord Brahma, symbolizes the ability to distinguish well from evil. It represents the power of discernment and purity. The metaphor of the swan separating milk from water is a symbol of spiritual wisdom—highlighting the importance of discrimination in moral and ethical choices.
- **Parama-Hansa:** The title 'Parama-Hansa' given to spiritual leaders reflects the symbolism of the swan as a being capable of transcending worldly illusions and attaining higher spiritual states.

Snake (Cobra)

- **Shiva's Emblem:** The cobra, coiled around Lord Shiva's neck, is a powerful representation of his control over destructive and creative forces. It

symbolizes time and eternity—the past, present, and future—and the cyclic nature of the universe. In Muktagacha architecture, the presence of snake motifs reflects the zamindar's reverence for these cosmic forces and their belief in Shiva's transcendence over danger.

- Vishnu and Manasā Worship: In Hindu mythology, snakes also hold cosmic significance in the form of Shesha, the serpent on which Lord Vishnu rests, representing stability amidst the chaos of creation. In Bengal, the snake goddess Manasā is worshipped for protection from snakebites and other dangers, and the zamindars' inclusion of snake motifs in their architecture may reflect local customs and devotional practices like Nagapanchami.

Spiritual and Ethical Symbolism

The animals chosen by the Muktagacha zamindars for their monuments represent more than artistic ornamentation. Each animal reflects virtues and cosmic forces that inspire spiritual growth, ethical conduct, and a deep connection to the natural world.¹⁶ The symbolism inherent in these creatures serves as a reminder of humanity's relationship with the divine and the values that govern a righteous life.

The zamindar's deliberate inclusion of such symbolism in their architectural legacy reflects their own spiritual aspirations and cultural identity, which were closely tied to the deities and animals they revered. The enduring presence of these motifs offers guidance on the path of devotion and righteousness, connecting the material world to the cosmic and spiritual realms.

16. <http://www.animalswised.com/sacredanimalsinhinduism601.html>, accessed on August 2024