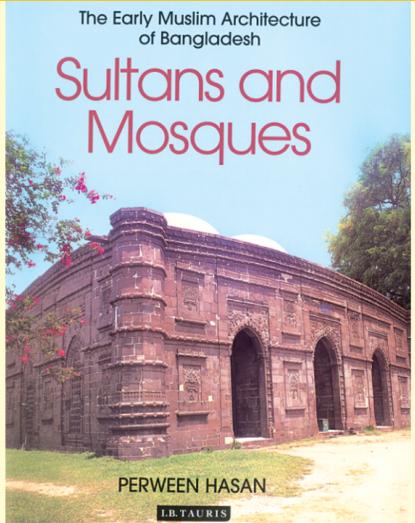


Perween Hasan: On mosque architecture and the psychic mould of today's Bengali Muslim

Dr. Perween Hasan, professor in the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Dhaka University, recently published her book **Sultans and Mosques: The Early Muslim Architecture of Bangladesh** (London: I.B.Tauris and Co Ltd). Though the book originated as her doctoral thesis and is fairly technical in nature, with architectural terms and plans not easily accessible to the layperson, it is on a subject that is inherently interesting to Bangladeshis. How can we not be interested in the mosques around us, not be curious about their origins and history, not wonder about the ideas and environment that shaped them? What do they reveal about the arrival of Islam in the delta from north India and beyond, about its impact and spread, about our own evolution as a nation and state? Dr. Perween Hasan, by focusing her study on the independent Bengal Sultanate period, has written a study that zeroes in on the formative era of mosque-building in the eastern part of Bengal that is now Bangladesh.



Below is a conversation The Daily Star had with Dr. Hasan.

DAILY STAR: Would you please give us a brief overview of your life, i.e. where you were born, your education, your academic career.

PERWEEN HASAN: Born in Kolkata where I started school, my family moved to Dhaka in 1953. Here I started going to St. Francis Xavier's Convent School (now Green Herald), in Lakshimbazar, and took my 'O'levels from there. I studied English at Dhaka University, and started my career as an English teacher in Central Women's and Government Intermediate colleges, before joining the English department at DU in 1969.

After moving to the USA with my husband and two sons in 1973, I was admitted into the Ph.D program at Harvard University, from where I earned an MA in Regional Studies, and subsequently a Ph.D in 1984 (Thesis: *Sultanate Mosque Types in Bangladesh: Origins and Development*). Later that year I joined the Department of Islamic History and Culture, Dhaka University as Assistant Professor. Being also associated with the Women and Gender Studies Department of DU, I offer a course on Women in the Visual Arts, and co-teach a Women and Religion course. Under the Fulbright program, I have been a visiting professor at American universities (Oberlin College, Ohio; University of Southern Maine, Portland). My publications are mostly on the Islamic architecture of Bengal, on aspects of artistic and cultural continuities.

well-suited for historical investigation, as their architectural features can be readily identified as imported or indigenous. These Sultanate mosques form a homogeneous group of monuments in the area, and contrast sharply with those of the Mughal period that followed.

My interest in cultural continuities led me to investigate into the origins of these monuments. They were built in a very regional style that borrowed much of its vocabulary from the thatched huts of Bengal. Always made of brick and decorated with terracotta plaques or sometimes veneered with carved stone, Sultanate architecture clearly formed a continuum with both pre-Islamic Buddhist and post-Sultanate Hindu temples, which were also mostly built of brick. In addition Sultanate mosques also copied the *chala* (roof) of the hut. Therefore we see here a style that is rooted in local architectural traditions. The trend was started by Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (1415-32), the converted son of Raja Ganesh who was the first Muslim king of native Bengali origin.

In the Sultanate period, the leaders of Muslim society, although foreigners themselves, were concerned with presenting Islam in an idiom that was within the experience of the common Bengali. Even today, a Muslim who may not be very well versed with the finer points of Islam is emphatic about her/his Islamic identity. Perhaps the cultural identity and psychic mould of today's Bengali Muslim is rooted in the liberal attitudes of the Independent Sultans of Bengal who permitted Bengali culture to flourish and combined it with Islamic influences brought in from the central Islamic lands.

DS: Reading your book one would get the overall impression that after Bakhtiyar Khilji dispatched Lakshmana Sena in 1204, the basic impulse of the new political authority was towards syncretism, towards accommodation, as expressed in Bengal Sultanate mosque architecture. Yet, this new political dispensation, in order to establish itself, had to uproot the orthodox Hindu ruling Senas. Richard Eaton, in his *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760* (a book that you like) writes that the Senas' vision of a Hindu cosmos found expression in their "monumental royal" temples. You write in your book that "the central mihrab (of the Adina Mosque) shows that, although much of the stone was taken from the earlier temples, it was used with a good understanding of how it worked, in contrast to the helter-skelter manner in which plundered material had been used in the early Muslim architecture in both Bengal and elsewhere."

Is it possible to say that, then, there was a period, until, say, 1415, when the Bengali Hindu convert to Islam, Sultan Jalal al-Din Mohammed began his reign, the battle was between the mosque and the temple, and that this history is somewhat ignored

amid all the 'syncretic' history-writing of Bengal?

PH: Have I given the impression that from 1204 the Muslims were benevolently trying to accommodate the culture of the conquered, and every thing was idyllic? Initially there must have been a lot of destruction of temples and edifices of all kinds. Again, that was one of the ways to assert power in those days.

But my period of investigation is from the Independent Sultanate that starts from 1338. By this time the Muslims had settled down, a minority ruling over a majority of non-Muslims, and for this to continue for over 200 years, there must have been some spirit of accommodation. According to Eaton (and I agree with him), Sena influence was very much restricted to north and western Bengal; central and eastern Bengal remained beyond their religious and cultural influence. Perhaps this is one reason why conversion (or accommodation) to Islam was easier in central and eastern Bengal, because these areas had never been properly Hinduized. Moreover I think that really monumental stone temples of the scale described in the quote by Eaton could not have been many. Most temples were of modest size. The Buddhist monasteries in Paharpur and Mainamati are truly monumental structures, but they are exceptions and there must have been many small Buddhist temples (a few of their foundations have been excavated by the Dept. of Archaeology) being built simultaneously.

The weather in Bengal is not favorable to buildings at all, especially those built of brick and mortar. From the first 200 years of Muslim rule only three mosques remain, all in extremely ruined state (including the ones in Tribeni and Adina). We know that there were Muslim traders and settlers in south-east Bengal even before the conquest, yet there is no architectural evidence of their presence. Also, early temples were of brick or wood, rarely of stone, because there is no stone in this delta. Therefore, destruction was, up to a great extent by nature also.

Sultanate mosque architecture, on evidence of mosque-building materials alone, cannot be termed as a 'battle' between the temple and the mosque. My whole argument is that both temples and mosques were ultimately derived from the forms of the hut, and Jalaluddin sort of iced the cake by curving the cornice. Rather than syncretic, (which I feel is a very strong word), I would like to call this process 'cultural adaptation, or accommodation' which anyone with long-term plans to stay must do.

DS: What about the relative size and grandeur of the mosques in West Bengal of this period, and the far more modest stuff here on the eastern side. Is it a question of form following function, in this case political function? The Bengal Sultanate, in Pandua Gaur and Lakhnawati, uprooted both the Senas and their temples since the latter, like mosques, had a political legitimizing function. The eastern half of Bengal, by contrast, was sparsely populated, with rudimentary communities expanding eastwards through land grants with wet rice cultivation. Here, mosques were built according to community needs, not due to state imperatives. If one therefore studies only the eastern mosques (for whatever reason) isn't it possible to advance the thesis of 'spirit of accommodation' than if one studied the whole?

PH: For most of Muslim rule, the main capital of the Muslims was Gaur or Pandua (both in West Bengal). The first building with the curved hut eave (the tomb of Jalaluddin of early 15th century, known as the Eklakhi Tomb) is also situated in Pandua; so the complete Bengal style fashioned after the hut originates in West Bengal. The eastern part of Bengal was settled after the north and west and it was only during the Independent Sultanate that most of it was brought under Muslim purview. The point is that after the Eklakhi, all mosques, tombs, as well as gateways (at least from the evidence that we have), both in East and West Bengal were made in the Bengal style.

There are some very large mosques in East Bengal too: the

mosques at Mahasthan (on a Buddhist site of a much earlier date, but where a Hindu temple could have existed during the time of the conquest), Shaitgumbad, Shatgachhia, Bagha, Kusumba, Pathrail. Four of the mosques that I have included have platforms on a mezzanine level which were reserved for the king, governor, or other very high official, so these were not all small, single-domed mosques, although the majority were; several were medium sized with several domes. Although I have not done a survey, from what I have seen, I would suspect that even in W. Bengal the majority of the mosques would turn out to be small or medium-sized with single domes. I have argued that whether large or small, it is the square, single-domed unit that became the basic component of all mosques. These units were simply multiplied when a larger space was needed, perhaps for the needs of a larger community but most often to express the power of the builder. The Adina mosque expresses only the power of Sikandar Shah, who had just repulsed an attempt by Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq of Delhi to take back Bengal, so he does not hesitate to call himself *khalfah* and express his affiliation to Arabia and Persia, not mentioning either Bengal or India. There are several such mosques in W. Bengal.

Again, there are more monuments, some with more elaborate decoration that survive in West Bengal than in the east. This is not only because the capitals were there but because of the relatively drier climate. Also Buddhist manuscripts as well as Buddhist/Hindu sculptures recovered from E. Bengal indicate that there were some well-known sites with temples even in the east (though perhaps not as many as in the west). So there must have been a period of destruction in both east and west. To come to any kind of overall conclusion, there must be a similar survey of the monuments of W. Bengal, just as this one is for the east. Until then I don't think we have enough evidence to make a judgment.

DS: There is talk presently about how multi-storied madrasah construction is ruining the 'setting' of these Sultanate mosques, making them look ugly. Can we possibly posit two differing creeds at loggerheads here: one the westernized, educated middle class impulse that values historical conservation (and thereby perhaps a certain reification), and the other that sees a mosque as a living organic being, which traditionally has not been a single unit but a complex of masjid, madrasahs and khanqas? How do you see it?

PH: These old mosques had been left alone in their settings for all these years. The orphanages and madrasahs are very recent phenomena, and they have taken over the ancient monuments with no regard to their value as antiquities. They have bored holes through their terracotta plaqued walls so that RCC pipes can be inserted on which shamianas are hung during Friday prayers. The old mosques have always been used for prayer and no one ever objected to that. But they were not vandalized like this. Is there a shortage of mosques anywhere? There are several mosques in the same neighborhood which can accommodate many more jamaats, why does the old one have to be sacrificed? If this goes on, nothing of historic value will be left. Instead of taking over the few heritage sites that we have, we could educate our people to respect and look after them even while they are used, as they have been for so many centuries.

DS: It is quite evident that an extensive, and arduous, fieldwork undergirds your book. Is there any memorable experience from those days that you would share with us, a lasting impression that you have with you?

PH: I have plenty of memorable anecdotes from my fieldwork, but let me just say that I was amazed at the kindness and hospitality that we received in the villages when we traveled. As we measured and photographed buildings in the hot sun, chairs and 'daab's would appear and people would be ready to lend a helping hand. Walking through a homestead I remember hearing, 'ashen, boshen, ektu paan tamak kheyey jan', and as we excused ourselves, reminding us 'jabar shomoy kheyey jeyen'.

DS: Thank you very much for your experience and time.
PH: The pleasure was all mine. Thank you. Cheers.

Koftas and Coleslaw. And then some!

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

The anti-hero of *The Long Reverie of Partha Sarma* (Penguin India, Delhi, 2007) is a twenty-four-year-old man with no particular ambition in life. Partha has no job and lives off his parents. While he does have a close group of friends that he goes to movies and parties with, he continually feels alienated from them as he sees them move further and further away from him in terms of their professional and social life. His lack of experience in the real world is something that Partha fails to recognize, and at times sneers at, as he puts himself above such things. However, his detachment from the humdrum workings of society and the distance he feels from others his age nonetheless creates a void within him that he attempts to fill making verbose entries into his journals, drinking incessantly and falling into the company of the romantic Ahmadi sahib and the infuriatingly patronizing Kaushik. To them, Partha vents his frustrations at the world, giving them an excuse for their pseudo-intellectual, quasi-senile ruminations. Considering himself above the masses and droves of people who go to work everyday succumbing to the world's mundanity-- Partha is happy to ignore the fact that he has become part of the hoi polloi who are unemployed! He does not manage to find a vocation in life throughout the novel!

I suppose the biggest problem with this novel is that the chief protagonist is not memorable - a serious problem considering that the novel is mostly about him and his thoughts! It is not possible to say that he is likable, or that he is despicable or that his troubles will haunt the mind for any significant period of time. This novel attempts to explore the feelings and thoughts of a young man facing a new, grimy,



hypocritical world and it provides some insight into why he would feel this way. However, all it most persuasively manages to do is leave a bland aftertaste.

The writing is overwrought. The writer is trapezing between indeterminate moods and styles. On one page the hero is twentieth-century over-sensitive "anti-fashion" (p.9) man sniggering at the world and himself (I suspect) and on the next page he seems to gung-ho into nineteenth-century soul-wrenching swoons--now he is stouping and swearing, now he is the weary sophist burdened with bile and melancholia. The wild swings are impossible for the reader to keep up with and made infinitely more nerve-wrecking because Sriram's novel is a trap for flighty philosophical profundities, obtuse diary entries, cringing conversations, cryptic asides, non-doings and a voluble death wish. The book - I am looking for a polite word here - was 'tiresome'. Not because the subject was a bleak one but because it thrashes a bleak subject to death.

The reveries are possibly intended to show the hero's mind as a cauldron of images and random sensations. When one has tired of Partha's tedious prose: wounds are wounds when you're hurt, and their memory lasts--like sense-memory! Fear, like rust, seeps and corrodes. So much energy and feeling: expended to what end? Oh, thinking is useless! And purposeless! The sheer chaos of reality warrants no reflection! Experience doesn't give perspective: experience is opaque! (p.89), there are unwarranted surprises, like TWO whole

pages on how repulsive lizards are. And then there are other ordeals - for example, the heated exchange that a young woman (and Partha's love interest) Akanksha has with her crusty mother on getting the maid to make kofta and coleslaw. Sixty or so pages on to the book, I was about to give up, sadly concluding that *The Long Reverie of Partha Sarma* is a bizarre mash. Kofta and coleslaw.

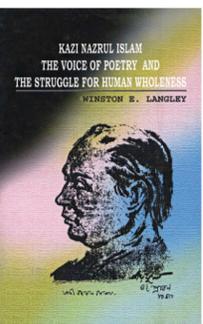
However, I did read on and slowly realized that the book had taken on an ambitious theme which, had it been done with less fuss and a more defined sense of purpose, could have been something to talk about. What redeems the book is Sriram's wry understanding of human relationships - not his excruciating study of ennui smothered with Rilke, Keats, Wordsworth, mystics, Khayyam and so on. He is able to zero in on facets of yuppie life that strains credulity (I can't imagine in what kind of a world an interior designer comes to a party dressed as Mary Poppins or someone dressed as Spiderman shoots gelatinous stuff from a hose) - granted this is very, very weird but somehow the sections where Sriram is more readable are where he stops pontificating and writes in a clean, non-sensense prose - for example, about Mr. and Mrs. Dutt's marital life. Or about a harried young man called Shaurob who is unsure whether he is still in a relationship even though he is in a furniture shop with his girlfriend who is browsing for beds and coasters. I was still counting how many pages I had left to reach the end, but I was ok with a writer who writes "hormones do for love what it does for acne" or "she made him happy, so she controlled his happiness". If one is patient, one is rewarded by sections that are not jaunty hype but written with 'pleasant' (Sriram loves this word!) ease.

Nuzhat A. Mannan teaches English at Dhaka University.

The first Western scholar to study Nazrul

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness by Winston E. Langley; Dhaka: Nazrul Institute; February 2007



In April 2001 going through Volume 6 of the Nazrul Institute Journal, the irregular English publication from the institute, I came upon an essay by Winston E. Langley called 'Kazi Nazrul Islam and the Voice of Poetry in the Affairs of Humankind'. I read it time and again. I was amazed at the way he had evaluated Nazrul--in a very different and comparative way, which was inconceivable earlier. The idea in that essay has now been more elaborately and analytically presented in the book *Kazi Nazrul Islam: The Voice of Poetry and the Struggle for Human Wholeness*. Professor Langley teaches international relations and political science at Massachusetts University, Boston, USA. As Dr. Rafiqul Islam, the chairman of the Nazrul Institute trustee board, states in the foreword: "Langley became interested in Kazi Nazrul Islam in the year 1996 when he attended a Nazrul evening at one of the Bangladeshi friend's house in Boston. His interest in Nazrul grew when he had the opportunity, for the first time, to listen to a few Nazrul songs." Langley writes in his preface that "First, I was introduced to Nazrul's music and felt as if I was totally penetrated emotionally and aesthetically. I, therefore, sought to find out more about him by reading some of his poetry as well as some articles about his personal history. Intrigued, I decided to prepare a paper on what I had discovered."

Prof. Rafiqul Islam rightly termed Langley as the first Western scholar to study Nazrul. It would also not be wrong to state that he is the first critic who has ventured to

examine Nazrul and his literature in a very novel perspective. He has evaluated how Nazrul's work can be worthy even in the era of globalisation. In his own fashion, Langley has argued why Nazrul is not a nationalist, how Nazrul came across the borders of nationalism and extended his horizon worldwide that is termed as globalism today (Nazrul: The Global Citizen). In another essay Langley critically noted the aspects of development, i.e., "the gaining of capabilities which frees one to act" and comments that Nazrul understood that development "was not confined to economic matters" (Development and Globalism, p.141). "Nazrul saw development as broadly cultural, and that is why, whether he was pointing to the actions of literary or scientific intellectuals, or to the efforts of political leaders in their joint or several pursuit of development, he sought to emphasise that practices, tastes, and ways of life are a part of a people's identity be respected," (p.146). But the sorry saga is that, as is the general fate of almost all English language publications here, the book contains some printing and other mistakes which could possibly have been avoided. No doubt, this book will create a new flow in the otherwise cliché-bound school of Nazrul criticism. Here it is worth mentioning that the book must come out in Bangla version as well. We should be grateful to Prof. Langley for his interest and effort. We are also thankful to Prof. Rafiqul Islam in attracting the attention of a Western critic to our National poet.

Critic and translator Subrata Kumar Das's *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Speeches* (with Prof. Mozaffar Hossain) came out in 2005.

Dog Days

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

When you've done
Chasing your tail
Or sniffing along
Other people's trails
When you've done
Guarding other's flanks
And allowing people
The joy of petting you
In lieu of thanks
When you've tired of
Wagging through a dog's life
Then maybe you'll find yours
When woman?

Rumana Siddique teaches English at Dhaka University.

NOTICE : DATE EXTENSION

The Literature Page of The Daily Star will bring out a **Special Eid** issue of English translations of Bengali short stories. All translators, as well would-be translators, who have wanted to be published in a reputed publication, all those who have a favourite Bengali story/s/he thinks ought to be translated should submit their entries.

We are looking for stories that depict contemporary life in Bangladesh, by younger, edgier authors who otherwise tend to be given short shrift in standard translation anthologies and collections. The short stories ideally should not be more than 3000-3500 words, and first-time translators should be aware that it is extremely taxing to translate stories beyond that length. The translations, along with a copy of the Bangla original (if a photostat, then the reproduction should be clear and legible) should be sent to:
The Literary Editor
The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka -1215
Email: starlit@thedailystar.net

Entries should be clearly marked
"For Translation Eid Special."
The last date for submissions is August 30.

Separately, the last date for submission of articles for The Daily Star nonfiction anthology has been extended to October 30, 2007.