"I assured Dr Nazimuddin that I would pay for the expenses if he carried out the excavation in a way that he sought fit. I had sufficient funds for the irrigation project. But he didn't agree to my proposal. The excavation for the irrigation project was to be used for commercial purposes while we needed to excavate the land for archaeological purposes. Nazimuddin argued that he wouldn't be able to tell a lie," says Islam.

The famed archaeologist was able to extract rare coins from only three buildings of the ruined city. There still remain countless buildings, roads, tanks and 'ghats' that need to be excavated, says Islam. As Islam has studied the ancient maps of Bengal, he believes that the city of Ramabati of

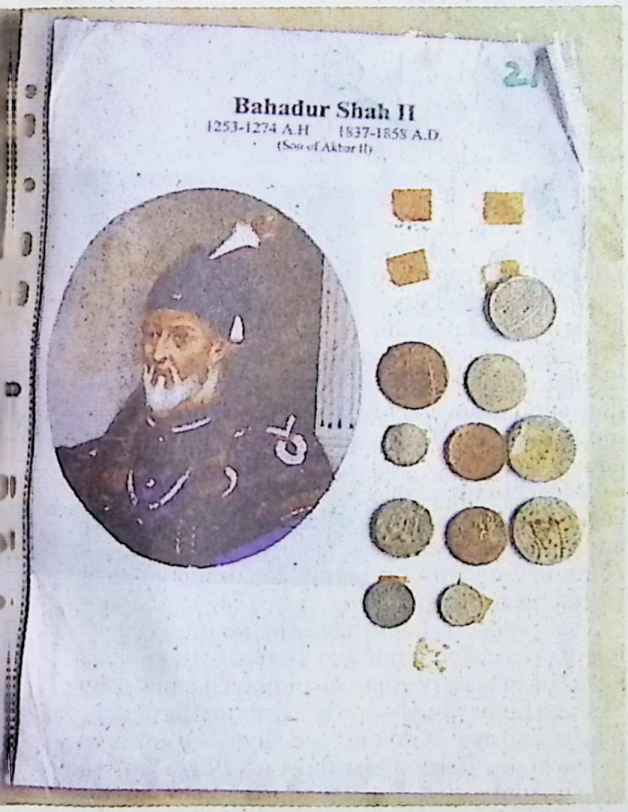


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Islam has a huge collection of rare, ancient coins.

Rampal Dev of ancient Bengal could be discovered if proper study were to be done of the place.

A routine excavation for a government project led to a lifelong interest to learn about history as retold by rare coins. In the process of pursuing his hobby, Islam began to appreciate the historical significance of the coins. As a civil engineer, he didn't have much understanding of the history documented by the coins he collected. As his interest gradually deepened, he sought out the help of noted historians of his time for advice. The list of history books recommended by the experts helped Islam understand how the rare coins he'd



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Md Noorul Islam is an avid numismatist.

collected during his many excavations could help him relate to the happenings of centuries ago.

Most of the coins displayed in the recently concluded photography exhibition "Coins From Bangladesh", organised by Standard Chartered Bank and the cultural group Nymphea, were taken from Islam's collection of rare coins. Dating from the Hindu Dynasties to the Mughal Sultanate to the British Empire to modern times, the coins collected by Islam and displayed at the exhibition offer a detailed understanding of how power dynamics of Bengal switched hands from one monarch to another. The photographic narrative moves from the pre-historic Bengal before moving on to the Pakistan period and finally coming to Bangladesh.

Coins are not just a medium for commercial dealings; they are history in the making. Each symbol engraved on a coin offers you firsthand information of the past that you can only learn about through indirect sources. Coins can tell you about the government, political regimes, economies and religion of an era. Each coin is stamped with the independent identity of its age and reign.

The Janapada series, that include coins of ancient Bengal dating around 6th Century BC, are punch-marked, made of silver and are of an irregular shape. The gold coins of the Early Deva Dynasty, discovered from Slban Vihara in Mainamati, Comilla through an excavation in 1956, offer an insight into the 7th Century AD Bengal reigned by Hindu rulers devoted to religion. A closer look at a coin of that era will show you detailed artwork of a king standing in a particular posture, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other, with "Sri" in Brahmi script stamped in a corner. The reverse side of the coin holds the image of Goddess Lakshmi seated on a lotus with "Sri" in Brahmi stamped in the upper field.

The intricate art of the Hindu dynasties gave way to a focus on calligraphy during the Sultani, Afghan and Mughal periods. The coins of the Bengal Sultanate would usually have the 'kalima' on