

# Representation in Monument Building and Schematic of Terracotta Narratives: Delving into Some Aspects of Gopinath Jor-Bangla Temple, Pabna, Bangladesh

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## Introduction

The *Jor-Bangla* Gopinath temple (plate 1) is one of the two *Jor-Bangla* temples in the present Pabna district of Bangladesh. The other *Jor-Bangla* temple in the district has been converted into a *Mazar* (tomb of a saint). This functional change of the structure has left it completely devoid of any terracotta plaque. My recent survey suggests that there are ten *Jor –Bangla* temples presently in Bangladesh. This Gopinath temple in



Plate 1: Façade of the Gopinath Jor-Bangla temple

Pabna is the only *Jor-Bangla* temple that has been declared a protected monument by the Department of Archaeology, Government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Documentation of this protected monument has been done in mostly descriptive ways by various scholars, which lacks creative interpretations and they are also found mainly in the Bangla texts.

Therefore, the main attempt of the article would be to put forward some interpretation and analysis of the terracotta plaque narrative as a part of documentation and also present the schematic of the terracotta plaques with respect to the architectural design of the temple.

## Location and condition

At the southeastern part of Pabna town is the Kala Chand Para and it is here that the *Jor-Bangla* Gopinath temple is located. Its geo-coordinates are 24°0.090' N and 89°

14.701' E. The temple is visible in the Google Earth Image. It measures  $7.92 \times 7.81$  square meters and faces the east. To the south of the temple is the Kana *pukur* at a distance of about 50 meters. This *Jor-Bangla* temple stands on a slightly curved platform with blind niches at the bottom and stands on the middle of an open space surrounded by houses all around.

No deity is worshiped at the temple now. Radharaman Saha opines that the statue of Gopinath, from which the temple derives its name, was a dual icon of Radha and Krishna. He further goes on to say that, in the year 1910 the deity of the temple was shifted to the local Kali temple within the Pabna town and since then it has remained there, thereby initiating the abandonment<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, Najimuddin Ahmed proposes that, "it (Jor-Bangla temple) was defied before it was completed and therefore, always remained an abandoned shrine."<sup>2</sup>

It is visibly noticeable that high humidity and rain have affected the terracotta plaques resulting in heavy incrustations of salt on their surface. The effect of efflorescence is quite detectable on the bricks and plaques. Moreover, laxity on the part of the authorities to conserve and preserve the 'protected' monument has been an additional factor for the bad condition of the temple. In addition, the open space where this temple is located is transformed into a playground in the evening causing further damage to the structure.

### Historical background

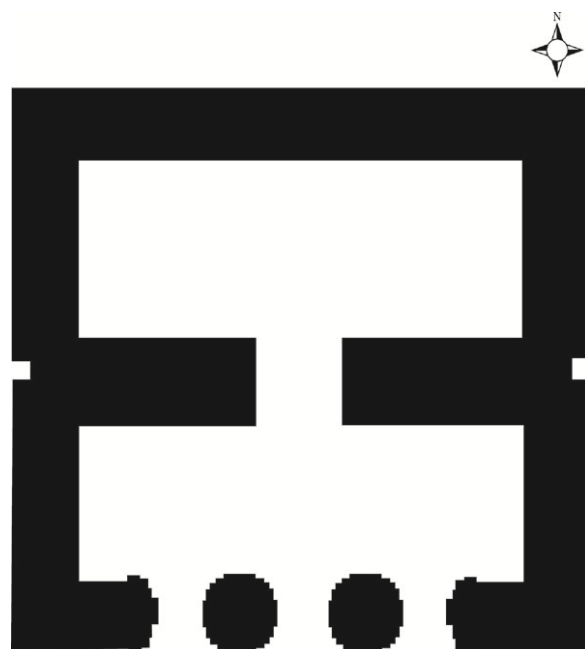
Sixteenth century onwards Bengal witnessed a revival of temple building activity, and these activities were preconditioned by a combination of factors. Politically, it was a period of conquest of Bengal by Akbar and its further consolidation under Jahangir. Also, the emergence of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a result of propagation of concept of *Bhakti* (devotion) to the lord (Krishna) by Chaitanya (1486- 1533) clubbed with a stream of vernacular literature in the form of prose and poetry created the conducive environment for the construction of temples.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the rise in temple building activity there emerged a general tendency towards experimentation with the stylistics in temple design. It is assumed that, for centuries, especially in early medieval period, *Nagara* style was preferred for construction of a temple. This style was almost abandoned during the period under consideration. In fact during this phase, all those associated with the temple building process including the patrons and artisans choose to make changes by experimentation. Of the many styles that evolved through this process of experimentation were classified mainly as *Chala*, *Ratna*, *Rekha*, flat roofed and octagonal<sup>4</sup> types. The *Chala* temple type, which was most popular, has been recognized as the replication of the domestic hut. The *Jor-Bangla* temple type belongs to this *Chala* variety. The *Jor-Bangla* Gopinath temple at Pabna is a simple *Jor-Bangla* temple with the two *Do-Chala* structures joined

together to form the shape of 'M' with the first one to the east acting as the *Mandapa* and the later one to the west is the *Garbha Griha* (fig 1). They have a Bangla vault.

### Problem of accuracy in dating

The most accurate method for dating the late medieval Bengal temples is the inscriptional plaques ascribed on the wall of the temple which usually mentions the date, name of the patron and the presiding deity. In case of the *Jor-Bangla* Gopinath temple here at Pabna, there is no inscriptional plaque to date the monument accurately. Therefore, different scholars have tried to date the temple on the basis of evidence, other than the inscriptional plaque, in an attempt to put this temple in a chronological framework.



General Ground Plan of Jor-Bangla Temples

Figure 1: Ground plan of the Jor-Bangla temple

Radharaman Saha, in his *Pabna Zilar Itihas*, has put forward contradictory data regarding the date of the temple. He refereed to Sri Ramkrishna Chattopadhyay in an answer to a question from a reader in *Prabasi Patrika* (1330 BS) while elaborating upon the date of the temple. Chattopadhyay opined, "It is the popular narrative about this *Jor-Bangla* temple that a Brahman named Brajamohan Crori (possessor of crore taka) established the idol of Sri Sri RadhaGovinda, by building this temple during the period of Nawab Siraj-ud Daulah."<sup>5</sup> In this way, the temple could be dated to 1856-57.

However, Radharaman Saha arguing on the basis of an old document from a person named Bholanath Sanyal and local legends, dated this temple to much earlier than Nawab Siraj. The document dates to 15 Kartik of 1014 BS. He referred to the name of the patron as Brajaballabh, not as Brajamohan. However, there is no reference of the temple or the act of temple building in the document as far as Saha quotes<sup>6</sup>. The authenticity of this document is questionable and verifiable. Radharaman Saha's argument is also not convincing enough. On the other hand, Abul Kalam Mohammad Zakaria has dated this temple to the mid eighteenth century ACE<sup>7</sup>, probably based on the stylistics prevalent in this region during this period.

Both Ratan Lal Chakraborty and Ayesha Begum mention that a *tehasildar* of the Nawab of Murshidabad named Brajamohan Rai Krorori or Brajaballabh Rai Krorori had constructed this temple<sup>8</sup>. In this context, Radharaman Saha has provided some additional information regarding origin of the title 'crorori'. He has quoted that,

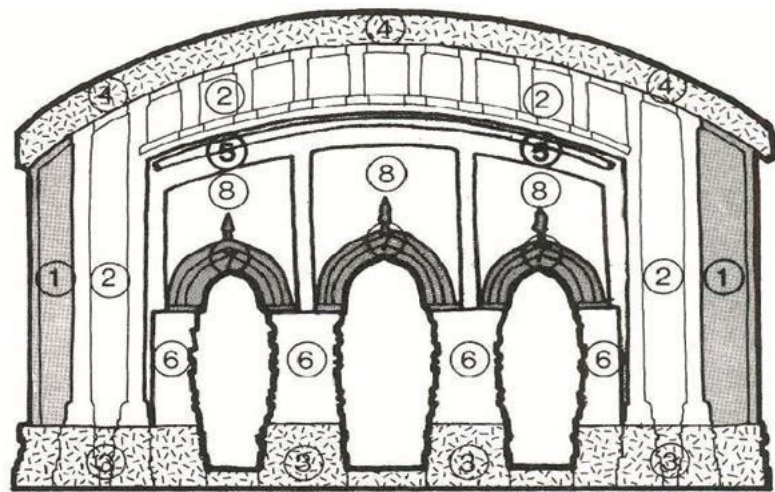
translate of the Nawob Ebrahim & King Dewan's Parwana for the English their paying only Rs 3000 yearly for their trade A.H. 1002-3 A.D.1612-22 "To all Mutsudis, Corrowries, Jagirdars, Gomostas, Phousdars, Jimmadars, Cannongos, belonging to the Subaship of Bengal now in the service or that shall be hereafter..."<sup>9</sup>

Absence of any authentic record and varying difference and disparities in dating the temple through other sources, under these circumstances, makes it difficult to put this temple into a definitive chronological framework.

However, some important points can be identified from the narration of Saha. They are firstly, the patron, Brajamohan or Brajaballabh was the disciple of goswami family. The *goswami* title is particularly identified with the Vaishnavite communities. Secondly, the patron was a follower of some group of Vaishnavite lineage and which is very common in Bengal to be a disciple of a *Guru* on familial basis till today. Thirdly, the patron, moreover, was very wealthy and the sources of his wealth have been controversial. He might have gained his wealth from stealing, or business with Nawab according to the local legends as has been referred by Radharaman Saha. It is evident that the person was not wealthy on the basis of inheritance. And finally, the residing deity of the temple, although not present these days, was that *Radha-Krishna*.

### Architectural components and their thematic distributional co-relation with the terracotta plaques

Two most distinct features of the late medieval Bengal temples are, firstly, the variety of temples types, influenced by both Islamic and indigenous techniques and forms, and secondly the prolific use of terracotta embellishments on the temple surface, particularly on the façade. As the temple has already been identified as a *Jor-Bangla* temple type, the next obvious step is to try and understand the terracotta plaques on the



Schematic Triple-entrance Façade of a Jor-Bangla Temple

- |                    |                        |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1. corner elements | 5. entrance frames     |
| 2. wall panels     | 6. columns             |
| 3. base friezes    | 7. arches              |
| 4. cornices        | 8. panels above arches |

Figure 2: George Michell classification (source: Brick Temples of Bengal, pp 88)

façade with respect to its architectural components.



The model followed to explain the architectural components is the one that has been used by George Michell<sup>10</sup> (fig 2). He divides the frontal of the temple into many small architectural components that includes corner elements (1), wall panels (2), base friezes (3), cornices (4), entrance frames (5), columns (6), arches (7), and panel above arches (8).

*Corner element* (1): Two extreme sides of the temple are referred to as the corner elements. It consists of three vertical sections of plane bricks separated by protruding horizontal floral patterned brick. At the top of this division is the triangular corner element. This section has a sculpture of elephant with its trunk raised up and has been created by joining several pieces of plaques together. However, the plaque containing the section of the elephant face is a replaced piece, evident from the freshness of the piece and the notable stylistic variation from the surrounding pieces (plate 2).



Plate 2: Elephant composed of replaced terracotta segment

*Wall panels* (2): Most of the terracotta plaques in this section are missing and the few that left are on the either sides towards the top. They consist of a series of human and animal figures enclosed within rectangular frames. There are a few plaques which depict persons probably belonging to Portuguese community One of them shows a bearded Christian priest wearing a long flowing robe (plate 3). He is shown holding on to a scepter in his right hand and in the other hand he is holding a bunch of palm leaves that are symbolic of Jesus return to Jerusalem after his resurrection. It symbolizes good over evil.

However, the role of Christianity or trade, or both in the society needs to be studied and analyzed further for they have been placed and represented as important

themes. These plaques are strategically placed parallel to the decoration above the arches.



Plate 3: Christian priest (?)

*Base frieze (3):* The base has further sections because of the presence of three different themes. The lowest level of the base frieze comprises secular scenes. To the extreme left side of the base frieze is a hunting scene where the group is lead by dogs followed by men on horseback; some are even shown on the elephant back. At the end of the trail there are musicians playing the drums. On the extreme right corner base frieze are scenes of a noble man being offered a *Hookah* by his servant, and in another scene a nobleman is admiring his beloved while the attendant is standing behind them holding a *suradani*. The lowest section of the base frieze is separated from the rest of the frieze by a band of swans and the section above it depicts religious themes. The swans are presented in different postures. The use of swans at the base for separating the secular from the non -secular or religious is a common characteristic that is found in many of the *Jor-Bangla* temples.

The use of swan has a special symbolic significance in this section. In Indian literature, swan is often considered as bird with high qualities. It is a bird synonymous to a wandering soul. It is believed to have the qualities of being able to separate milk out of a mixture with water.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the swan is strategically positioned at a place which separates the secular themes from non-secular. The onus therefore lies on to the viewer, to act like swan and differentiate between the secular from the non-secular i.e. non-real from the real. When the decoration is being viewed it is expected that the worshipper transgress the boundary of worldly affairs as depicted by the secular plaques at the bottom of the frieze and enters the world of spiritualism thereby migrating from one zone to another.

*Cornices (4):* The curved cornice section of the temple is relatively simpler in terms of decoration. It is devoid of any decorative element except the use of the beak-head as an ornamental motif.

*Entrance frames (5):* Below this section there is a hood mould which acts like a separation between the friezes below the curved cornice and the arches. The decoration below the cornice is that of a floral pattern.



*Columns (6):* The column section is one of the most exposed areas with respect to both weather and human touch. As most of the ornamental bricks are missing here it is difficult to comment on the theme that was once narrated.

*Arches (7):* The entrance to the *Mandapa* has three arched openings. They are drop arches with cusped foliates. This arch runs parallel with another two layers of arch in receding fashion finally corresponding with the segmented section of the columns supporting the arches. The sections above the arches are separated from the sculptures by following a floral decorative panel running on the lines of the cusps.



Plate 4: Decoration over the arches

*Panels above arches (8):* The central theme for decorating the temple is that of the battle between Rama's and Ravana's army (plate 4). There are not many terracotta plaques remaining on the left and the central arch. However, when compared to the older images the story of the missing plaques becomes clear. The involvement of each character with the corresponding soldier of the other army becomes more visible (plate 5). Both the parties are shown fighting with bows and arrows, swords and spears. Some plaques over the central arch section are missing and when compared to the images taken by ASI during 1930's of the same section makes the story of the missing images plaques very clear. Ravana is shown as *Dashanan* aiming arrow at the army of Rama. The section where Rama should have been present is missing. Only a few monkeys are left and are shown flying.



Plate 5: Individual terracotta plaque

Right behind Ravana is Khumbhakarna. Khumbhakarna is represented here much larger in

size as compared to the other figures. This has been strictly followed keeping in mind the way he has been described in the scriptures. It shows that the artist is very well conscious of the story and its characterization and tries to abide by it. The artist or the *Sutradhar* has been able to captivate the force and the valor of the battlefield in his depiction of the battle scene. Kumbhakarna is shown sleeping and his attendants are attempting to wake him up from sleep by tickling him. However, this imagery is visible from the photographs taken by ASI and is unfortunately now missing.

Within this same space there are a few plaques which are an absolute miss match with the entire scheme (plate 6). A plaque depicts a group of women lying, which is clearly a replaced plaque. The artists assigned to replace the missing plaque did not hesitate to overlap one figure with another. Some observations that can be made about these replaced plaques are, firstly, that these replaced plaques do not match at all with the plaques placed initially. Secondly, the artisans who were assigned to replace the missing plaque belonged to some other community of *Sutradhar* because stylistics of the original plaque is very different from replaced one.



**Plate6: Miss Match terracotta plaque**

The new plaques have much smaller features. The facial appearance, dress, and composition suggest a different school of artistic expression. The original artist assigned to decorate the temple used various types of geometrical pattern as a part of decoration of the costumes. However, the artists commissioned to replace the missing tiles used only circular pattern for decorating the costume of the figures. Thirdly, the later artists were capable of placing more than one figure within a small space. In the original plaques, figures have been positioned liberally within the frame without cramping them. Fourthly, attention towards finer details in costume or expressions is much more vivid in the later plaques.



*Garbha Griha*: The *Garbha Griha* is single arched entrance with foliated cusps. The gap between the *Mandapa* and *Garbha Griha* of the door has been covered by using squinches. This technique of narrowing of the gaps is, however, not used in the later *Jor-Bangla* temples, thereby reverting back to the use of trabeated technique of filling the gap. The decoration around the arched entrance is the only place where the plaque depicts through the anionic representation of Vishnu in the form of *Garuda*, the *Vahana* (mount) of Vishnu. This particular feature might hint towards the Vaisnav affiliation of the temple. Below the arches are two pilasters on either side projecting from the wall. The spandrel section of the arch is filled with 8 *Garudas* each on either side above the arch in kneeling position with folded hands as a mark of respect towards the presiding deity (plate 7). There is a *purna kalasha* over the keystone. Apart from the *Garuda*, the other decorative motives that have been used are fully blossomed lotus and geometrical patterns. The arched entrance is



Plate 7: Garuda at the entrance to the *Garbha Griha*



Plate 8: Side entrance to the *Garbha Griha*

enclosed within a framed boundary with three parallel bands of laterally placed ornamented bricks. Inside the *Garbha Griha* there are three niches on the wall that faces the visitors. One general feature that is noticed in most of the *Jor-Bangla* temples is that there is usually another door (plate 8) on any one side of the

*Garbha Griha* along with the main door from where the deity is visible. The purpose of this additional door is for the priest to enter the *Garbha Griha*. Even in this temple such an additional door is present on the south side-wall of the *Garbha Griha*.

## Temple building as a representation of power and schematic planning of the terracotta narratives

Use of terracotta plaques on temples is a very common style in Early Historic and Early Medieval Bengal. Terracotta ornamentation with non-figurative plaques is also common in medieval mosques. However, it is on the late medieval temples of Bengal, we come to find a certain kind of narrative building through these plaques. This new style of story telling that emerges by the 16<sup>th</sup> century ACE was visibly different from the style of the preceding periods.

The purpose of using these plaques on the surface was not ornamental alone. The patrons who constructed these temples were rich *Zamindars* or rulers of princely states, some specific professional communities and caste groups. The purpose of temple building activity was not religious alone. These particular acts of temple building, and the monuments themselves were modalities and spaces of representing their power, and sometimes, the patrons' new found desires to emulate through contemporary social hierarchy. According to George Michell, these temples were 'public means of expressing power'.<sup>12</sup>

I have already mentioned in the earlier section that the patron of the temple had earned the title – *croropati* (a man possessing wealth equivalent to the value of one crore taka or 10 million taka). It is also evident from the reference and narration of Radharaman Saha<sup>13</sup> that the patron earned his wealth quickly, not on inheritance basis like the landlords in Nawabi regime. Temple building might act in two different ways. Firstly, it could be perceived and interpreted as struggle for the power and identity in contemporary society. The activity of the construction of the temple was a symbol and evidence of the secured wealth and thus the temple became the embodiment of the new power and search for authority and social recognition. And secondly, by representing himself as a pious and religious person, by being the devotee of Radha-Krishna, he sought a familiar way of validating his wealth and the search for recognition and identity in the contemporary social order.

This idea of power and its portrayal were reflected upon the terracotta plaques displayed by the artists on instructions from the patrons. The worshipers coming to the temple were compelled to view the façade decoration from both long and short distance perspectives. The long distance perspective puts before the viewer the overall theme of the decoration. The viewer can view it either from down above or from center to the periphery, or the other way around. Therefore, the most significant or crucial scenes of the theme are placed right at the center i.e. above the arches, which falls at the eye level of the spectator when seen from a distance. The finer details are meant for close viewing which includes the textures on the clothes, the facial expressions, or the body postures.

With regard to the *Jor-Bangla* Gopinath temple at Pabna the schematic decoration of the temple can be divided horizontally into three main sections (fig 3). The base frieze (2) comprises of first two section of the division and includes secular scenes from everyday life at the bottom topped by a row of swans. The rest of the temple comes under the third section. In this section all the decoration is religious.

Figure 3: Division of space for the schematic of the terracotta narrative themes

The central theme is of the battle scene between Rama and Ravana's army at Lanka. On close observation it seems that the artisans had a plan before them for depicting the story of Ramayana. From individual plaques, to decoration over the arches, to the overall narrative on the façade, the same line of arrangement is noticed. The movement of the sculptural plaques is always from the sides to the center. The members of Ravana's army are always placed on the right and that of Rama's army on the left and are shown moving towards the center. The only exception is the arch above the entrance of the *Garbha Griha* that has the presence of anionic representation of Vishnu in the form of *Garuda*.

## Conclusion

It must be noted that the stories depicted on most of the late medieval Bengal temples did not follow the original Sanskrit scriptures. In fact, they were rewritten from the original scriptures by writers in Bengali language. Thus, the story reflected above the arches at the entrance to the *Mandapa* is not Valmiki's Ramayana, instead based on the poet Krittivasa's Bengali version of the Ramayana, written around the latter half of 15<sup>th</sup> century ACE. His work gathered immense popularity among the terracotta artisans working on temples. Zulekha Haque writes that poet Krittivasa's version was publicly recited at village gatherings. This form was known as *Panchali kavya*<sup>14</sup>. She is also of the view that during this period most of the population was illiterate and for them it was not possible to read the scriptures. Therefore, the façade ornamentation on the temples acted as visual imagery of the most popular religious texts on the life of Krishna, Ramayana, and Mahabharata of the contemporary Bengal<sup>15</sup>. According to Tarapada Satra, Rama was seen as an incarnation of lord Vishnu and that the Bengalis did not



differentiate between Vishnu, Rama or Krishna, the latter two being two different incarnations of lord Vishnu. He further goes on to say that irrespective of a Shaiva, Shakta or Vaishnav god as the presiding deity of the temple, themes of Ramayana, Mahabharata or Krishnalila were freely depicted by the artists for decorating the temples<sup>16</sup>.

After discussing terracotta plaques with reference to the architectural elements and the schematic planning of the narratives on the temple façade, it can be said with fair amount of clarity that there actually went a very detailed planning into the themes that were chosen and how they were to be placed. From each individual plaque, to sections within each architectural element, to the overall façade, every inch of this visual imagery, had a meaning to be conveyed. Such planning thereby changed both the purpose and meaning of the temple. The structure bore two functions now. Firstly, it acted as a place of worship and secondly, a visual canvas for representing power and construction of identity. This functional duality thereby poses some questions before us, whose answers are required to help us place the temple within the society and its relation to the society. Details of the second dimension of the late Medieval temples within the context of social and economic history have been ignored by most of the scholars.

We need to go beyond the normalized notion of viewing late Medieval temples as the representation of creativity. It is time to transgress the boundaries of conventional scholarship of mesmerized appreciation. What we need, is to delve into the social history of the Late Medieval temples, or the *Jor-Bangla* Temples. Gopinath Temple of Pabna hints at the intricate relationship between society and culture. I will try to address the social dimension in my next paper.

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### Acknowledgements

*For this article I would like to acknowledge the great help that I received from the many people I met at Pabna for my first trip with regard to with my research work on the Jor-Bangla temples. I would particularly like to thank Sayeed Hasan Dara, Zakir Hussain, Gopal Sanyal, Joy Moitro and Russel Mustafizur Rahman. I am also grateful to Prashanta Mridha for painstakingly accompanying me to the site and wait the long hours for me to finish my work. Deepak Kar has helped me with the drawings. I thank him. I am also deeply indebted to Swadhin Sen for reading several drafts of this article and giving his valuable inputs. I would also like to thank my children for the silent help and support they constantly gave me to successfully complete his article. Finally I would like to thank my father to whom I owe the most.*

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Radharaman Saha , *Pabna Zilar Itihas*, ( Kolkata: Deys Publishing , p. 136.)

<sup>2</sup> N. Ahmed, *Discover the Monuments of Bangladesh*, (Dhaka : U.P.L. , p. 102 )

<sup>3</sup> George Michell, *Brick Temples of Bengal*, ( New Jersey : Princeton University Press, pp. 4-9)

<sup>4</sup> David McCutcheon , *Late Medieval Temples of Bengal*,(Kolkata : The Asiatic Society, p. 3)

<sup>5</sup> Radharaman Saha, *Ibid.*, p. 195

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 195-96

<sup>7</sup> A) Protected Monuments and Mounds in Bangladesh,( Dhaka : Department of Archaeology and Museums, p. 22)

B) A.K. Mohammad .Jakaria, *Bangladesher Prachin Kirti*, pp. 151-152.

<sup>8</sup>A) Ratan Lal Chakroborty , *Bangladesher Mondir*, (Dhaka : Bangla Academy ,p. 77)

B) Ayesha Begum, *Bangladesh Asiatic Society Journal*,(Dhaka : University Grants Commission, p.1)

<sup>9</sup> Stuwart's History of Bengal appendix viii, cited in Radharaman Saha's *Pabna Zilar Itihas* pp 195

<sup>10</sup> George Michell, *Brick Temples of Bengal*, ( New Jersey : Princeton University Press, p 88)

<sup>11</sup> Jean Philippe Vogel, *The Goose in Indian Literature and Art*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill Publication, pp 6)

<sup>12</sup> George Michell , *Brick Temples of Bengal*, ( New Jersey : Princeton University Press ,pp 7

<sup>13</sup> Radharaman Saha, *Pabna Zilar Itihas*, ( Kolkata: Deys Publishing, p.195-96)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pp 172

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp 171

<sup>16</sup> Tarapada Satra, *Paschimbanger Mandir Terracotta*,(Kolkata : bangiya Shahitya Parishad, pp 66)

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