

## **The social and visual impact of Hindu temples in East Bengal under the Mughals**

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In the context of Indian Hindu temple architecture, Bengal is an exception. Apart from a few remains from the Gupta period, the earlier standing Hindu temples date from the sixteenth century AD and form a distinctive group of brick temples which flourished under the Mughals (1575-1757) and later under the British until the nineteenth century. These temples are almost never mentioned in books on Indian Art and Archeology while contemporary Mughal Art and Architecture are subject to much developments, another reason to throw some light on this group of monuments.

The main issue of my paper is to question the social and visual impact of these Hindu landmarks in a region dominated by outstanding Muslim monuments built by the Independent Sultans of Bengal followed by the Mughals. How did the architecture and the terracotta ornamentation of Hindu brick temples integrate the regional heritage, both Buddhist and Muslim ? What self image did the patrons of the temples gave through the iconography of the temples ?

After having briefly defined the historical, cultural and religious context of Bengal during this period, the analysis will focus on Kantanagar temple, one of the most accomplished Hindu monument of North East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) dating from the eighteenth century (**fig. 1**).



Fig. 1 : Kantanagar temple, south façade.

### **1.The historical, cultural and religious background**

Many factors, either political, religious or cultural, set the context of emergence of Hindu temples under Mughal rule. At the time Akbar the Mughal annexed Bengal in 1575, the region has a long past of Muslim rule. The conquest of Bengal in 1204 by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Khalji, son of Bakhtiyar, the general of Delhi Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak is generally considered as the departure of Islamisation of Bengal. But the association of this region with Islam seems to go back much earlier, in the early eight and ninth centuries, with the settlement of Arab merchants in the coastal area of Chittagong, in south-east Bengal. In the same way, the so-called conquest of Muhammad Khalji should not be understood as a premeditated plan to annex Bengal by the Sultans of Delhi, but the outcome of an adventurous expedition to Tibet related by Minhaj-i-Siraj in his book *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* (Zakariah 1979). The Hindu kingdom of Bengal, which was at that time ruled by Lakshmana Sena, happened to be on the way of Muhammad Khalji's troop. The monarch's capital, Lakhnawti or Gaud was taken and Muhammad Khalji confirmed in his conquest of the eastern territory which became dependent of Delhi. After more than a century of instability marked by a large number of rulers (Muslim and Hindus) and political divisions, the Independent Sultans of Bengal (1338-1575) and in particular Ilyas Shah (1342-1358) restored unity and peace in the region. There reign is considered as a period of isolation and independence from Delhi favorable to the development of a regional Islamic art and architecture. Rather than a cultural change, the Mughal arrival in Bengal has thus to be interpreted in this context as an intrusion of strangers in a region cemented by almost two centuries of isolation.

For the Hindu communities of Bengal, the arrival of the Mughals also coincided with the development of a vernacular literary tradition (hagiographies, song lyrics, *mangalkavya*) which carried out a religious revivalism initiated by Chaitanya (1486-1533). His doctrine, based on *bhakti* and popular worship of Krishna radically changed the current situation of Hindus from Bengal, weakened by Muslim leaders and the despotism of traditional *brahmans*. By opening the path to the divine to a wider range of the society, Chaitanya launched a movement which contributed to the cohesion of the Hindu community (De 1961 : 28; Michell 1983 : 3-6; Ghosh 2005). However such a development would not have been possible without the progressive integration of

Hindu Bengali culture, mostly through literature, in the courts of later Ilyas Shah dynasties (fifteenth century) and Hussain Shahi dynasties (1493-1538). A way for the rulers to be in peace with the people. At first the appropriation of Hindu culture was quite brutal, with the re-use of architectural pieces of demolished Hindu temples in the construction of mosques (ex. Bari Masjid at Chota Pandua, 1300). But soon the Muslim and Hindu communities seem to have joined their forces against the Delhi court in view of the claim of a regional identity. The Islamic monuments built during the Sultanate period, particularly at Gaud and Bagerhat, reflect the adaptation of Islamic architecture to a regional style with the integration of typical Bengali features. The mosques, for example, are distinguished from contemporary ones built in other parts of India by their compactness rather than a grouping of several components. The choice of the construction material for the Bengali Islamic edifices, the brick, is also deeply rooted in regional tradition and the terracotta surface decoration adapted, in a different style, from the Pala period Buddhist monuments. The Hindu counterparts of these Islamic monuments from the Sultanate period of Bengal are very poorly represented. Although several inscriptions do mention Hindu temples of this period,<sup>1</sup> no complete structure has survived. The Mughal period temples are thus the earlier Hindu evidences of the cultural regional identity, so specific to Bengal.

Fig. 2: Kantanagar temple before the collapse of its turrets in 1897.

(After Fergusson 1876, p. 467, fig. n°263)

## **2. Kantanagar : a typical temple built by local *zamindars***

The Kantanagar temple, located in Dinajpur district in North-East Bengal (Bangladesh) provides a good example of several aspects of the construction of Hindu temples under the Mughals. It does not belong to the earlier group of temples (late sixteenth, seventeenth century) but to well established a mature style. The temple was built in the eighteenth century (probably started in 1704, interrupted around 1722 and achieved in 1752) by the Dinajpur Raj, a Hindu landlord family (named *zamindar* by the Muslims) which possessed large territories in Dinajpur area. An inscription on the south plinth of the temple states that Raja Prannath began the construction of well-planned graceful *nava-ratna* temple of Rukmini Kanta. In order to fulfill the wish of Raja Prannath, the temple was completed by his adopted son Ramnath in his own town (Kantanagar) in the *saka* year 1674 (1752)<sup>2</sup>. This three storied square temple (almost 16

square meters) of *ratna* type (pinnaced) once had nine turrets of *rekha* design (common north Indian curvilinear) which collapsed during the 1897 earthquake, an original state fortunately recorded by a woodcut (**fig. 2**) published in the nineteenth century by J. Fergusson (Fergusson 1876: 467, fig. n°263). Although incomplete, the temple stands as one of the most prestigious examples of its type, with a well preserved terracotta ornamentation which covers all its surface. Within the group of temples from North-East Bengal (Murshidabad, Dinajpur, Rajshahi and Pabna districts) built in the eighteenth century, Kantanagar temple is also the largest preserved.

### ***Hindu patronage under the Mughals***

The patronage of the temple is also quite typical of this first period of Mughal reign, before the emergence of a new class of aristocrats linked with the economic and commercial development of Bengal around 1800. Contrary to this new class which often came from the lower strata of the society, the patrons of Kantanagar temple, the Dinajpur family, were prosperous hereditary landlords. In view of the extent of their properties, they had been bestowed the honorific title 'Raj' by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the second half of the seventeenth century. As several other families of Hindu *zamindars* (Vishnupur Raj family, Birbhum Raj family, etc.) they enjoyed a certain independence in the management of their territories against the payment of taxes to the Mughal rulers. In a predominant agrarian society the local *zamindars* wielded great power and prestige, a privileged status which was close to the end. With the introduction of Permanent Settlement for the farming of landed estates in 1793, the *zamindars*, enable to pay exorbitant land revenues, would gradually loose their estates. However, at the time of Kantanagar temple construction, the succession within the dynasties of landlords was still granted by the Mughals and recorded in decrees (*sanad*) issued by them. Thus, the succession to Pram Nath's father's property is mentioned in a *sanad* issued in 1679 by Azim-ud-din Mahmud in the reign of emperor Aurangzeb ( Ahmed 1990: 5). Unfortunately, the name of the successor, probably his second son Joydev, is wiped out. The personality of the third son, Pram Nath, who ruled during forty years (1682-1722) is known through the accounts of Westmacott's *History of the Dinajpur Raj* (Westmacott 1872). Pram Nath appears to be a very powerful *zamindar* who not only maintained the ancestral property but did not hesitate to use force to increased his territories. The legend of the origin of the foundation of the great Kantanagar temple is quite significant of his strong and impetuous personality. He was

ordered to report to the court of Aurangzeb to justify the accusations of his rival neighbour, Raja Raghabendra Roy, *zamindar* of Ghoraghat. Finally his was discharged of the false accusations and went to pilgrimage to Brindaban (Mathura) from where he brought back an image of Krishna. The temple at Kantanagar was built to house this precious idol. The choice of the place of implementation of the temple on the banks of the Dhepa river in Dinajpur district, although justified by a legend which involves the deity, is eminently strategic. As most of the Hindu temples from this period, it was erected in an area closely linked to a river and thus connected to riverine trade (Ray 2007 : 70) and at the same time adjacent to the houses from which the *zamindar* governed the estate. At the same time the temple of Kantanagar is clearly isolated from the residential area (*rajbhari*). The leadership and management of the Dinajpur family is unquestionable but the temple is conceived as a public and not a private monument which plays an important role in the local society. Pramnath's successor, his adopted son Ramnath who almost ruled forty years (1722- 1760) over the estate of Dinajpur and completed the temple, is known to have been even more powerful and unscrupulous than his father and to have acquired additional estates. Ramnath's rule is considered to be the highest peak of the prosperity and splendor of the Dinajpur Raj's history.

According to all these informations, the construction of the temple at Kantanagar took place in an ambitious context. The prestigious monument acts as a visual symbol of the authority of the builders in the area. Following the example of many other temples of early Mughal period (Tarapada Santra in Michell 1983 : 53-62), the names of the patrons are alone recorded in the inscription, which clearly indicates their aim of social recognition. Prannath and Ramnath consider themselves as the only responsible for the building of such an impressive monument which must have gathered a great deal of economic and artistic resources. The architects, for example, are not mentioned, at the difference of contemporary temples from West Bengal (ex: *at-chala* temple built by architect Banchaharam at Harirampur, Hoogly District, in 1738). This custom, which became more popular after the middle of the eighteenth century, is significant of a change of social recognition of the architects and craftsmen which was obviously still not the case within the context of Kantanagar temple construction. But the inscription is only one means of representation and identification of the patrons together with the architecture and the iconography of the temple.

Fig. 3 : *ek-bangla* or *Do-chala* temple, Puthia, curved cornice

### 3.The expressive architecture of Kantanagar temple

#### *The architectural context*

If we now consider the broader architectural context, the construction of the temple at Kantanagar took place at a period when the Mughal rule was well implemented in Bengal. Dhaka, the new Mughal provincial capital established in 1608 was adorned with a variety of buildings (palaces, mosques, forts, bridges...), the most imposing being the Lalbagh Fort, a work began in 1678 by Muhammad Azam, third son of Aurangzeb. Compared to the Sultanate period architecture, Mughal architecture in Bengal carried new concepts and changes imported from the Delhi imperial style : the introduction of dominant central domes and tall axial entrances, a preference to plaster rather than traditional Bengali terracotta decorative panels and so on. In the meantime, the contemporaneous Hindu temples had very little to share with Mughal architecture. The tradition of terracotta ornamentation inherited from Pala Buddhist establishments such as Paharpur and adopted by Sultanate architecture was flourishing and literally overwhelmed the Hindu temple architecture. Other features of the Islamic Sultanate period architecture such as the central domed chamber and multiple vaulted side chambers or lobed arches on squat columns were adopted in Temple architecture (Michell 1983 : 9). The most indigenous feature, the curved cornice (**fig. 3**), influenced by the typical Bengali thatched huts with two segments (*ek-bangla* or *do-chala*) or four segments (*chau-chala*), was appropriated by Bengal Islamic architecture of the Sultanate period (*chau-chala* type of dome seen for the first time in the Sait Gumbad Mosque of Bagerhat) and later exercised a great influence on the Hindu temple building. The curved cornice was no more than an interpretation of the bamboo eaves of the village hut perfectly adapted to the frequent rains.

Fig. 4: Mathurapur Deul, from west.

(Photograph of the 30s : ASI/ Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh)

The group of Hindu brick temples from Bengal built in a variety of styles between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries thus provide evidence of both indigenous and pre-Mughal Islamic architecture. Apart from the *rekha* or traditional curvilinear type of temple of Orissan style, two new styles adopted by Bengal brick temples incorporate Muslim constructional features : the hut and pinnacle styles, with a number of variations (see McCutcheon 1972 ; McCutcheon in Mitchell 1983 : 15-51). In East Bengal (Bangladesh), *rekha* type temples are found mainly in the southern districts (Dhaka,

Faridpur, Khulna, Barisal). The Mahurapur Deul (Faridpur district) (**fig. 4**) and Kodla Math near Bagerhat (Khulna district) are both typical of seventeenth century temples of this type. Their gently curved tower is ornamented with horizontal ribbed parallel brick moulding bearing floral motives. Unlike the Kantanagar temple, both are commemorative monuments. According to a legend, Kodla Math was built by Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore in the memory of his court pandit. Quite different, the basic hut style (or *bangla* style) is derived from the domestic house, with an elongated base, two sides to the roof and gable ends (**fig. 5**). Broadly speaking, its appropriation by Hindu temples in post-Muslim period includes arches and vaults. The earliest examples in Bangladesh of simple *ek-bangla* (or *do-chala*) design are a group of four temples dated 1601 from Rudranagar, in Rangpur district, in the northern part of the country, close to Dinajpur.

Fig. 5 : *ek-bangla* or *Do-chala* temple, Puthia.

The other main style of temple, of pinnacled or *ratna* design, well represented at Kantanagar, consists of a square or rectangular box with curved cornice surmounted by one or several towers called *ratna* (jewel). Except for the *rekha* style of temple which seem to be concentrated in the southern districts, the other types of temples have a wide distribution and offer a variety of forms.

Fig. 6: Chhota Sona Mosque, Gaur (from south-east)

(Photograph of the 30s : ASI/ Department of Archaeology of Bangladesh)

### ***The islamic inheritance of a ratna style temple***

If we take the case of the *ratna* style temple of Kantanagar, a style also common to the group of temples from Bishnupur (south-west Bengal) built by the Mallas, several architectural elements can be compared with Islamic ones. Abstraction made of the superstructure and the iconography, the lower story of the temple does not fundamentally differ from the architecture of a mosque of the Sultanate period. Compared to the Chhota Sona Mosque built at Gaur during the reign of Hussain Shah (1493-1538) (**fig. 6**), the Kantanagar temple integrates, in a different style, the same curved cornice, the multiple-arched entrance (**fig. 7**) and, in a soften form, the reinforced corners.

Fig. 7 : Kantanagar temple. Detail of the south façade.

The square plan and the box type volume of the temple are also common to many

mosques of the pre-Mughal period. It is interesting to note how the congregational aspect of the mosque, which supposed large spaces for collective activities influenced the spatial organisation of the temples adapted to a new form of cult. Apart from these Islamic architecture features, Kantanagar temple also displays some elements, as the stumpy many-faceted pillars, reminiscent of previous Hindu tradition. Some other features, as the curved cornice, became so popular in the Islamic architecture of the Sultanate period that their pre-Islam vernacular origin seemed almost forgotten. In the same way, the terracotta surface ornamentation of the mosques, inherited from the Pala period Buddhist monuments, was adopted, in a different style, by the Hindu temples. Islamic architecture of the Sultanate period clearly played an intermediary role between earlier regional traditions and the new Hindu temples while contemporary Mughal architecture in Bengal rejected most of the regional features. However it would be limited to consider the Hindu brick temples from Bengal from the single point of view of pre-Mughal Islamic architecture. These new styles of temple were also primarily motivated by issues linked to a new form of cult.

### ***Temple architecture linked with a new cult***

Dedicated to Krishna, as most of the Hindu temples of Bengal built between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, the Kantanagar temple expresses the popularity of the cult inherited by Chaitanya and his followers. Among the several categories of temples which coexist in Bengal during this period, the Kantanagar *ratna* type is one of the most adapted to the new concept of worship open to a wider range of the population. The architecture of this temple is quite meaningful of the changes from the traditional *nagara* type : incorporation of second or third story and addition of a north-south axis to the conventional east-west axis. According the analysis of Pika Ghosh (Ghosh 2005), both these features relate to the new concept of temple. The upper *cella* of the temple is an adaptation of the festival pavilion and is intended to house the portable images of the god and provide a refuge where Radha and Krishna could share their passion during special ceremonies. The north-south axis corresponds to the new involvement of the community with devotional activities and gathering associated with the cult to Krishna. These changes generated a reorganisation of the temples : big courtyards and a south facade devoted to the community. The decoration pattern of Kantanagar temple can only be understood in this new optic as both Ramayana and Krishnalila narratives begin on



the south facade and continue on the sides of the temple in a divergent way, both unusual features if we have the *nagara* model in mind. Compared to the earliest temple at Bishnupur, the Shyam Ray temple (completed in 1643), the eighteenth century Kantanagar temple seems to have lost some of the original organisation of a Krishna temple. At Shyam Ray temple, over sized representations of Krishna dance in *rasamandalas* are placed on the south façade, a significant location associated with the community rituals (Ghosh 2005 : 148). At Kantanagar, they are found above the arches of the west façade. However the new iconographic pattern linked with a new cult has mislead the author of the main monograph of the site, *Epic stories in terracotta depicted in Kantanagar Temple, Bangladesh* (Ahmed 1990), who systematically described the terracotta decoration from right to left, starting from the south façade. As a result, a number of scenes appeared as an anachronism, without logic. These "inconstancies", "incoherent themes" or "incorrect narrative directions" were wrongly attributed by Nazimuddin Ahmed to the extravagance of the artists (Ahmed 1990 : 36,66, 77...). Some scenes are indeed difficult to replace in a chronological context but they appear as an exception in a well planed whole. This misunderstanding is the reason why a new reading of the terracotta narratives of Kantanagar temple happened to be a necessary preliminary step to consider the temple in its authenticity (Gill 2007).

### **3.The imagery of Kantanagar : affirmation of a social position**

#### ***The temple façade terracotta decoration***

Since the loss of the nine turrets of the superstructure of the Kantanagar temple, the terracotta ornamentation, omnipresent on all faces and all stories, has become the main attraction of the monument. Its ornamentation is characterized by its density, the vivacity of the figures, the smoothness of the modeling and the delicacy of the details (Michell 1983 : 111), a tremendous and meticulous work by a team of artisans. By comparison, the contemporary eighteenth century *ek-bangla or do-chala* temple at Puthia (Rajshahi district) displays a much stiffer, geometrical, repetitive style which is also better spaced out and organised than Kantanagar (**fig. 8 and 9**).

Fig. 8 : Kantanagar temple. East façade.

Fig. 9 : *Ek-bangla or Do-chala* temple, Puthia

Fig. 10 : Schematic triple-entrance façade (Michell 1983 : 88)

At Puthia, the integration of delicate floral motives, almost absent from

Kantanagar iconography, is one of the factor of the greater clarity of the narratives. Despite the disparity in styles, the decorative schema of the faces of the temples is well established in the eighteenth century, without much innovation in the distribution of the themes. A standardisation which allowed George Michell (Michell 1983 : 88) to draw a schematic division of the triple-entrance façades as we find at Kantanagar (**fig. 10**).

The themes depicted in different zones (corner elements, wall panels, base friezes, cornices, entrance frames, columns, arches, panels above arches) occur frequently at the same place in most of the temples. The base, for example, is generally reserved for one, two or three rows of narrative friezes depicting scenes of leisure of the *zamindars* and, above, tales from the mythology, while the panels above the arches are devoted to big dual compositions (often battle scenes from the epics). All these themes are found on other parts of the temple but they occur more frequently in these specific zones.

Now, if we now look precisely to the Kantanagar temple, it is clear that all the figures, motives and scenes are not intended to be read by the devotees gathering around the temple. The upper part of the first level, not to speak to the upper stories, are just beyond the reading capacity of a person standing in the courtyard who could only catch a glimpse of the profusion of details (**fig.11**). The corner columns, for example, are filled with a huge number of small individual figures, often identical, set in individual cartouches. In this luxuriant iconographic whole, the base friezes play a special role in the guidance of the devotee in his path around the temple. It is not a coincidence if these base friezes are at eye level of a person standing in the courtyard, a perfect way to focus its attention. It is also very significant that such a favorable zone in the temple ornamentation has been chosen to depict representation of the noble class to which the patrons of the temple identify themselves.

Fig. 11 : Kantanagar temple from the south courtyard.

### ***The organisation of base friezes of Kantanagar temple***

The two main base friezes of Kantanagar temple have distinctive themes and construction patterns. The upper one, devoted to the story of Rama and of Krishna, is smaller in size than the lower one. It follows, more or less, the principle of a continuous narration with the beginning of the story, a number of successive episodes and an end (which does not necessarily correspond to the end of story but to the end of the episodes related in this specific zone on the temple). The narration of Rama and Krishna on Kantanagar base friezes can be briefly summarised as follow :

### Ramayana

*South façade* (from right to left): beginning of the story of Rama, from his conception to his marriage and return to Ayodhya (**fig. 12**).

Fig. 12 : Kantanagar, south façade. Beginning of the story of Rama.

*East façade* (from left to right) : the exile in Dandaka forest, the abduction of Sita by Ravana, her captivity, the agreement with Sugriva, the crossing of the ocean and finally the battle with Ravana.

### Krishnalila

*South façade* (from left to right) : beginning of the story of Krishna, from his birth to his childhood.

*West façade* (from right to left) : travel of Krishna and Balarama to Mathura to attend the sport festival organised by Kansa which ends by the killing of Kansa. Then follows a series of Krishna's exploits, notably battles to conquer his first wife Rukmini.

*North façade* (from right to left) : Krishna's marriages with his wives, particularly with his third wife Satyabhama, constitute the main topic of the whole face.

Fig. 13: Kantanagar temple, north façade.

On the lower frieze, the general theme is a hunting procession of one or several noblemen. The occurrence of an European ship on the northern façade (**fig. 13**) and several figures with European dress sets the historical context of the scene, with the growth of European trade in eighteenth century Bengal.

At the difference of the mythological frieze, the narration process of the so called « social » frieze is more systematic. On each face, the procession proceeds towards the center, in an unchanging convergent pattern. Except a few details, the same pattern with three stages is repeated on both sides of the façades (either from left to right or from right to left). First the beginning of the procession with the noblemen, his assistants and troop of animals. Second the hunting action, with details of the fights with animals. Third the end of the hunting, with the carriage of the dead animals. The part of the frieze on the central pillars is devoted to single scenes, linked by the general theme but disconnected from the main narration (boats, circus performance....).

### ***Comparison between social and mythological friezes***

Each frieze has its own characteristic, its theme, its historical or mythological

context, its narrative pattern, its reading direction, its specific height. However it is almost impossible to dissociate them from a visual point of view. They are displayed one below the other and both the stories are attractive. Unfortunately, once again, the interpretations of these friezes in several publications (Ahmed 1990; Hoque 2005) is mainly theoretical. The terracotta narratives are identified independently with a total abstraction of the context. There is no correlation with the other frieze, the other figures and motives of the part of the wall, the whole façade, or the temple. It is certainly true to believe that these friezes have been conceived separately, as their distinctive narrative processes clearly demonstrates, but it is also obvious that a certain parallel was intentionally made between the two worlds, the gods and the noblemen. The interpretation of these visuals must also take into account the social context of the building of the temple and the ambition of the wealthy Hindu patrons in a society ruled by the Mughals.

Fig. 14: Kantanagar temple : zamindar on the south façade.

#### *The idyllic world of noblemen*

A closer look to the representation of the noblemen leisure world shows a number of characteristics which we find in other Bengali temples while some of them are more specific to the Kantanagar temple. What strikes at first is the wealth and ease displayed in these scenes. At Kantanagar, the principal subject, the *zamindar*, is invariably potbellied in the fashion of early Yaksha representations, a typical symbol of wealth (**fig. 14**). He is relaxing on cushions and enjoying the smoking of the *hucca* alone or combined with the sight of a dance, music or circus performance. He is always carried, either on an elephant, a palanquin, a cart or a boat. The *zamindar's* attitude contrasts with the activity and movement around him, the huge number of assistants and animals participating to the procession. The contrast also plays on the costume and the ornaments. While the *zamindar* only wears a traditional Indian lower garment and a few jewels (crown, necklace, bangles, armband, torso tread), most of his assistants, except the hunters, wear Mughal style dress : a turban a long tunic tied with a belt and long tight *pyjamas*. Soldiers or imperial body guards who punctuate the procession at regular intervals are systematically dressed with Mughal costume (**fig. 15**).

Fig. 15 : Kantanagar temple, east façade : figures with different types of dresses.

Another category of people, the Europeans, are depicted with standardized small top-hats, short tight jackets with a belt and folded lower parts (which look like a short

skirt), and trousers (**fig. 15**). The horses, camels and elephants, part of the entourage of the *zamindar*, are richly caparisoned (**fig. 16**), in contrast with the hunted wild animals. Finally, in this idyllic picture, the *zamindar* seems the only one casually dressed. It is his princely attitude rather than his costume that bestows him the supreme authority. His wealth is displayed by his assistance, accessories and vehicles.

Fig. 16 : Kantanagar temple, east façade : richly caparisoned horses

The size and ornamentation of the palanquin carried on the shoulders of six healthy men (fig. 14) is an image eloquent enough of the prestige of the nobleman, such as his big pleasure boats. In the same way, the double decked European battle ship with its munitions (pointed cannons) is part of the wealthy circle of the *zamindar* (**fig. 13**). Moreover the European characters do not only appear isolated on specific ships but are fully integrated into the hunting activities of the *zamindar*. On the east face of the temple (**fig. 15**), European gunmen can be seen in a fight against a wild strange animal (probably intended to be a rhinoceros unknown in this region). Beyond the appearance of activities of leisure (hunting, boating), the frequent display of weapons (swords, guns, cannons...) in the entourage of the *zamindar* reminds more of an army more than a simple hunting procession.

Fig. 17 : Kantanagar temple, east façade : zamindar

Curiously, as revealed by a comparative study at Kantanagar, the size and representation of the *zamindar* does not interfere in its symbolic representation. He can occupy a lot of space in the scene and be carefully depicted (several examples on the south façade) or be smaller in size than his nearest assistants (east façade) (**fig. 17**). His princely presence indicated by a number of codes (relaxed attitude, casual dress, smoking of the *hucca*) is sufficient to evoke the leadership of the scene.

Fig. 18 : Kantanagar temple, east façade

### *The world of the gods*

In comparison with the pleasure world of the noblemen, the world of the gods, to be specific the world of Krishna and Rama depicted in the frieze above, is much more tormented. This imbalance can be easily explained by the nature of the themes depicted (a selected moment of the leisure of the noblemen compared with the stages of a whole life of a god). However, in the layout of the temple façades, the comparison of the friezes is an unquestionable fact. From a general impression, the world of gods is less

regular and organised than the world of noblemen. The figures too are more varied (humans, animals, hybrids) and showed in different situation according to moment and context of the action. With the number of important characters who appear in the story, the hierarchy of the figures is less visible than in the representation of the world of the noblemen. Regarding the dresses and costumes of most of the figures, including humanised divine characters (ex : monkeys from the Ramayana), the aim of giving a picture of ancient India society results in a traditional and casual atmosphere, closer to daily life than the one of the upper class noblemen depicted below. In spite of the timelessness of the tale, the mythological representations seem, at moment, more realistic than the idealised picture of the noblemen world. Moreover, the absence of foreign characters in the mythology provides a more homogeneous picture, with the exception of a few intrusions.

Fig. 19 : Kantanagar temple, east façade

For example some of the monkeys of Sugriva's army (**fig. 19**) seem to be dressed with a costume which bears close resemblance to the long Mughal tunic, perhaps a personal touch of the craftsmen living in the Mughal world ? Even in this case, the characters of the mythological world seem poorer than the figures wearing the same type of costume below.

Fig. 20 : Kantanagar temple, south façade

The contrast between the wealthiness of the world of the *zamindars* and the world of the gods is even more striking on a part of the south face of the temple (right side), where a tiny boat carrying Rama, Lakhmana Vishvamisra and the boatman on the Ganges on their way to Mithila (**fig. 20**) is depicted above a big river boat of a *zamindar*. While Rama and the other characters are squatting on a small boat, the *zamindar* below is comfortably enjoying the boat ride with its entertainments and a number of attendants (a total number of 24 figures of all size are displayed on the boat). Obviously the life of the *zamindar* is much more enjoyable !

To summarise, the comparison between the social and the mythological friezes of Kantanagar temple is significant of a number of points. In a temple dedicated to lord Krishna and covered with terracotta figures, the representation of an ideal contemporary world of *zamindars* occupies an important place. In view of the surface decorated, this frieze is relatively modest, but its position at eye level from the courtyard is eminently

strategic. Another relevant aspect is its position below the mythological frieze, a symbolic manner to claim the protection of the gods and to legitimise this way of life. From a content point of view, the mythological tales are far more rich than the *zamindar*'s which are repetitive and predictable. On the other side, the bigger size of the lower frieze, the dynamism, regularism and rhythm of the action, the richness of the details, the prestige of the human and animal figures, all participate to the attraction of the eyes of the devotees and visitors.

#### **4. the creation of an identity : significance of the temples in an Islamic context**

In the light of all these elements, an interpretation of the significance of Bengal Hindu temples in the Mughal context can be attempted with a special focus on the Kantanagar temple. The social and cultural symbol of Hindu temples in a region dominated by Muslim rulers need not to be proved. The sudden burst of such visual symbols of the faith and the culture of a minority is also symbolic of the nature of relation between the centralised Mughal power and the region of Bengal.

After centuries of independence from the Delhi court there was a need to express a regional identity. The development of Hindu temples in Bengal from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century is also closely linked, as we have seen earlier, to the cultural and religious revolution, a revival of Hinduism in a popular form. The temples, through their architecture and iconography, also reflect the important status of the *zamindars* in the local society, their participation to trade activities and their great ambitions. The importance of activity of patronage of temples by local landlords, carefully recorded in inscriptions, is significant of the recognition of the social and economic role of the temples which attracted wealth, bound communities through ritual activities and asserted a local authority. But the aim of the patrons cannot be generalised. For example, in the inscriptions of the Malla kings from Bishnupur in the seventeenth century (ex. Ghosh 2005 : 1), the emphasis is made on the new concept of temple, a house for the pleasure of Radha and Krishna while the Kantanagar temple inscription insists on the type of architecture of the temple. A shift which can be justified by the evolution of the relation of the patrons to the temples and the evolution of the cult itself. Although dedicated to Krishna, the iconography of the façades of Kantanagar does not emphasize this deity : the themes are quite varied and the epics widely depicted.

Another point is the occurrence in the eighteenth and more specifically in the nineteenth

century, of European characters and their vessel ships. These symbols of the growing trading activities of Bengal, an expression of the changing of the society and the participation of Hindu local rulers in the maritime trade to Europe and Middle East (Ghosh 2005 : 20-22) found an unexpected place in the temple iconography. These European features, combined to the Islamic ones of the temples, obviously provided the Hindu temples with a cosmopolitan touch.

### ***The ideals of the patrons and builders***

It is interesting to see how the patrons and builders of these Hindu brick temples identified themselves with some aspects of the cultural heritage and rejected some other ones. They adopted several features of the Islamic Sultanate architecture of Bengal and at the same time dissociated themselves fundamentally from the Mughal contemporary architecture. One of the reason is the regional nature of the Sultanate architecture of Bengal, a cultural identity shared by both Muslims and Hindus. Another one is the linkage with rulers of higher rank to whom the patrons of Hindu temples identified themselves. There is also a will of continuity with the past and since Bengali Hindu rulers are part of a distant past, the closest model is the Sultanate ruler.

If we base our analysis on Kantanagar temple iconography, the representation and self-identification of the *zamindars* is very clear. In the depictions of standardised hunting procession, the *zamindars* act as princes surrounded by a glorious army. They copy the past-times and attitudes of the Sultans and the Mughal rulers (hunting, smoking the *hucca*) and at the same time they claim their own identity. The use of Mughal dress is quite relevant of this point. At Kantanagar, the main character of the scene, the leader, is never dressed as a Mughal but wears more traditional Indian garment and is depicted on traditional river boats, a way to express a regional and indigenous identity. This is not the case at Vishnupur (West Bengal) where elite figures are wearing Islamic dresses (Ghosh 2005 : 88-89, fig. 2.19), a representation interpreted by Pika Ghosh as a way to establish their authority in the context of Islamic political preponderance in Bengal. At Kantanagar the picture is quite different. The Mughal costume is often associated with the soldiers or body-guards of the main character. A judicious shift in the situation, where the Hindu *zamindar* appears symbolically as the chief of the Muslims. The depiction of Mughal costume on Hindu brick temples have also been interpreted as an insignia of the prevailing aristocracy (Ahmed 1990 : 25) but once again, on the friezes of Kantanagar temple, the figures wearing such costumes have subaltern roles. And if



we presume that the patrons identified themselves with the idealised character of the leader, their message, through the iconography of the temple, is quite clear.

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- 1 For example, The Bhatera Tila copper plate from Sylhet dated 1049 refers to the erection of Vatesvara (Siva) at Bhatta Pataka or 'Bhatpada', Sylhet (Ahmed 1984 : 89).
- 2 Ahmed 1990 : 21,22.