
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Terracotta as Heritage Evidence: Legibility, Surface Loss and Conservation Intervention across Islamic and Hindu Monuments in Bagerhat, Bangladesh

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| ABSTRACT

Terracotta ornamentation forms an essential element of the architectural history of Bagerhat, but its perceptibility is compromised due to factors like surface deterioration, decay of materials, disjunctions, repairs and restorations. This study aims to analyze the manner in which terracotta and molded brick ornamentation is arranged, decayed, and perceived in four monuments in Bagerhat, such as Kodla Moth (Ayodhya Moth), Sixty Dome Mosque, Nine Dome Mosque and Singair Mosque. Adopting a qualitative comparative visual methodology, this study investigates a collection of 49 field images from the viewpoint of motif, position within architecture, repetition, visual decay and legibility of ornamentation at four scales – unit, border, field and elevation. The observations made from the site of Kodla Moth were further supplemented with interviews conducted with five artisans and conservators. It is evident that while the sites of the three mosques share a common vocabulary of ornamentation, the use of the vocabulary within the architecture is different: ornamentation in the mosques is selectively used on elements such as entrances, fields, cornices, and other points of focus, whereas the site of Kodla Moth uses a repetition of the ornamentation on its tower-like structure. As regards Kodla Moth, the continued efforts at conservation highlight the visual differences between the weathered historic fabric and the new decorative components, posing issues relating to their compatibility and authenticity. This work proves that repeatable and systematic photography at various scales can document both the state of the ornaments and the conservation effort, without confounding the two observations.

| KEYWORDS

Terracotta heritage, visual legibility, surface loss, conservation intervention, Bagerhat

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1. Introduction

Bagerhat is home to one of the most significant concentrations of brick religious structures in Bangladesh. This fifteenth century site known as Khalifatabad was established under the patronage of Khan Jahan, and its representation at an international level takes the form of the Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1985 under criterion (iv) (Hossain & Barata, 2019; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). The mosques of Bagerhat have been distinguished in terms of a regional language of architecture characterized by massive brick walls, arched cornice, corner towers, domes and selective terracotta or molded-brick decoration. Visual heritage of Bagerhat is not solely Islamic: the more recent Kodla Moth carries forward the district's brick and terracotta tradition into a Hindu architectural/ritual context (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2005; Alam et al., 2022). For this paper, terracotta is considered as heritage information rather than an inventory of decorative elements. A unit contributes to the overall meaning of an arrangement based on its location, size, relief, repetition

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and association with an entrance, mihrab, border, recessed field or vertical architectural line. When a unit is worn, broken, missing, patched or substituted, the result goes beyond the loss of a mere object, since the border may become discontinuous, symmetry may become distorted, relief may become illegible, and the relationship between ornament and architecture may be changed.

The current field research is timely due to the researcher being able to personally witness conservation taking place at Kodla Moth during the 2026 visit along with photographing the existing historic motifs that were degraded and newly fabricated decorative elements created after existing designs. These mosques have been selected for their ability to show a comparison between the organization of the decoration and any signs of wear, degradation, missing elements, deposits, repair or discontinuity that may affect its readability. This paper will not test the chemical makeup of the deposits, the age of each element or even the effectiveness of the conservation. Instead, it will look at what can be discovered responsibly through close visual observations, photographs, documentation and coding.

2. Literature Review and Research Context

2.1 Historical and Heritage Context

The selected mosques are part of Khalifatabad's medieval urban landscape, where brick construction became both expressive and structural throughout Khan Jahan's fifteenth-century growth (Ahmed, 1989; Hossain & Barata, 2019). According to the Department of Archeology inventory, Singair, Nine-Dome and Shat Gambuj are protected monuments. Although Kodla Moth is part of a later Hindu brick-building tradition, its repeated relief, molded units and fired-brick surface make for an insightful regional comparison (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2005; Alam et al., 2022). Additionally, conservation work for Kodla Moth is documented in the Department of Archaeology's 2025–2026 procurement plan, which corresponds to the intervention seen during fieldwork (Department of Archeology, n.d.; Department of Archeology, Regional Office, Khulna, 2025).

2.2 Regional architecture and terracotta vocabulary

Research on Bagerhat has found the presence of a regional style of brick architecture that includes features such as thick brick masonry, curved cornices, dome roofs, corner towers and select terracotta or molded-brick decorations (Ahmed, 1989; Hasan, 2007; Mowla & Naqi, 1999). Hossain & Barata (2019) recontextualize the monuments within the larger historic town of Khalifatabad. Instead of re-typologizing the monuments, the current research analyzes ornamentation in relation to visual scales of observation.

2.3 Kodla Moth and the later Hindu brick tradition

Kodla Moth offers the Hindu analogy that came later. Its brick construction, tower-like form, terracotta articulation, and conservation history are documented in publications supported by UNESCO and the Department of Archeology (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2005; Alam et al., 2022); its wider heritage significance is also acknowledged in Bangladesh's UNESCO Tentative List entry for Mughal and colonial temples (UNESCO World Heritage Center, 2023). This makes it possible to compare without considering Kodla to be a continuation of mosque architecture.

2.4 Recording, authenticity and conservation intervention

Recording is an integral aspect of conservation according to ICOMOS while the Venice Charter also calls for respect for the original materials and authentic documents. Such considerations provide the rationale for photographs distinguishing between original materials, those in deteriorated condition, those which have been repaired and those which have been freshly made.

There have been previous documentations of Bagerhat through digital means, such as the 2019 documentation by CyArk of the Shat Gambuj and Nine-Dome Mosque. The novelty in this work is the fine artsbased comparison of terracotta organization, legibility and conservation intervention in Islamic and Hindu monuments (CyArk, 2019).

2.5 Environmental context and salinity

The environmental risk factor is considered a contextual problem rather than a diagnosis. According to UNESCO, "the physical integrity" of Historic Mosque City of Bagerhat is threatened by "salinity in the soil and air," whereas Afroze (2024) mentions salinity along with dampness, waterlogging, flooding, and climatic stress. The above-stated

references explain the region's worries, but do not provide a reason for any defect mentioned in the current photos.

2.6 Research gap

The architectural history, morphology, regional style, environmental fragility and digital documentation of Bagerhat's monuments have all been studied in previous research. Important baselines at the monument level have been established by earlier documentation, such as digital recordings of Shait Gambuj and Nine-Dome Mosque (CyArk, 2019). Nevertheless, utilizing a common, multi-scale visual coding framework, the literature evaluated for this study has not methodically compared the spatial organization of terracotta ornament and how its current intelligibility is changed across Islamic and Hindu structures within the same regional brick tradition. Additionally, there hasn't been enough focus on linking obvious loss, repairs and newly created adornment with a repeatable photographic record of continuous conservation intervention. By interpreting terracotta as layered cultural evidence whose significance depends on placement, repetition, architectural purpose, visible condition, and intervention context, this study fills that gap.

3 Research Framework

3.1 Research objectives

1. To design and employ a systematic visual coding scheme for recording information on motif type, position, size, relief, repetition, function and state of preservation in the case of the four chosen monuments.
2. To analyze the contributions of terracotta ornament to architectural organization in three Bagerhat mosques connected to Kodla Moth and the Khan-e-Jahan architectural style, finding similarities and variations in terms of architectural form and ritual purpose.
3. To investigate the effects of observable wear, surface loss, breaking, deposits, repair and replacement on ornamental legibility at the individual unit, ornamental band, architectural field and entire elevation levels without attributing these changes to reasons that have not been proven by science.
4. Assessing the worth and shortcomings of repeatable photography documentation as a means to record conservation intervention, as well as future authenticity assessment, using Kodla Moth as the primary intervention subject.

3.2 Research questions

Code	Research question
RQ1	What motifs, spatial arrangements, and hierarchies of composition define the terracotta programs of the four chosen monuments?
RQ2	What similarities and differences can be seen between the three chosen Bagerhat mosques and Kodla Moth in terms of placement, scale, relief, repetition and architectural focal function?
RQ3	How does wear, erosion, breakage, deposition, restoration and replacement influence the visibility of terracotta at the levels of unit, decorative strip, architectural plane and entire elevation?
RQ4	How is a repeatable method for photography and metadata capture able to record the intervention process and also enable future assessment of authenticity?

3.3 Scope and significance

Four monuments with first-hand visual evidence are the only ones included in the study. The main conservation-intervention case is Kodla Moth; comparable mosque cases for decoration distribution, visible condition, and readability are offered by Shait Gambuj, Nine-Dome and Singair. Analytical depth is more important than statistical representation.

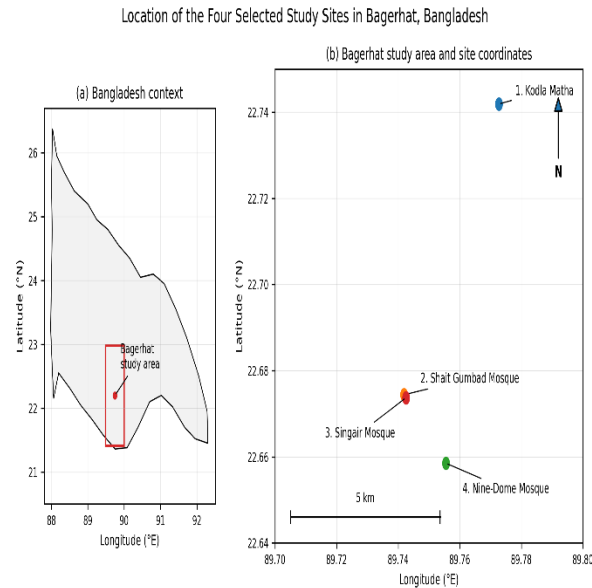


Figure 1: Location of the four selected study sites in Bagerhat District, southwestern Bangladesh: (a) national context of the study area; and (b) Kodla Matha (22.7419°N, 89.7727°E), Shat Gambuj Mosque (22.6744°N, 89.7419°E), Singair Mosque (22.6737°N, 89.7425°E), and Nine-Dome Mosque (22.6585°N, 89.7555°E). Map prepared by the author, 2026.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design and case selection

The methodology adopted in this research includes a qualitative comparative multiple case study approach which is based on visual analysis. The cases were chosen through purposeful sampling according to field accessibility, visible terracotta or molded brickwork decorations, diversity of architectural and religious structures, historical context of Bagerhat and academic documentation.

4.2 Fieldwork and photographic corpus

Direct evidence refers to direct observation and analysis of field notes and photographs that form part of constructed visual records and the value of such records is determined by the position of the camera, distance, lighting conditions, obstructions and relation to more global and local views (Rose, 2016). The confirmed analytical corpus includes 49 photographs: Kodla Matha 32, Shat Gambuj 7, Nine-Dome 6 and Singair 4. Kodla has been observed on 2 April 2026, while the dates of the others need verification.

On April 2, 2026, five conservation workers and terracotta craftsman were interviewed in Kodla Moth. An iPhone Pro-series smartphone was used to record the audio of the chat and field notes were added. The same device was also used for Kodla photography. The published pricing statistics were not independently validated by the market and the interview evidence is contextual rather than representative.

Table 1: Field documentation register for the analysed photographic corpus

Code	Site / date	N	Principal coverage	Key visible evidence
KM	Kodla Moth / 2 Apr 2026	32	Exterior, entrance, plinth, interior, active work zones	Reduced green staining, exposed or lost brickwork, surviving ornament, intervention supplies, and replacement parts
SGM	Shat Gambuj/ 2 Apr 2026	7	Overall elevation, entrance/arch field, bands, wall close-up, interior decorated field	Pitting/Abrasion; staining; joint erosion; chipped/broken or lost projecting
NDM	Nine-Dome / 2 Apr 2026	6	Overall facade, doorway panel, unit close-up, corner-turret bands	White deposits; stains; erosion of relief; damage to units;

				discontinuity
SM	Singair / 2 Apr 2026	4	Principal facade, entrance/cornice, turret bands, close condition detail	Pale deposits; staining; chipped/missing molded units; open joints; local loss/infill

4.3 multi-scale photographic protocol

The photographic sequence progresses from elevation to architecture and then to complete decorative bands and panels, individual components, joints, deposits, cracks, damage and renewals. The basic metadata and corresponding viewing positions need to be maintained such that future revisits will allow similar views. This is based on the ICOMOS guidelines for documentation of identity, date, location, condition and relationship between photographs and documents (ICOMOS, 1996).

4.4 Visual coding framework

Table 2: Operational coding fields for the comparative visual analysis

Coding field	Operational indicators	Analytical purpose
Architectural scale	Monument; elevation; architectural field; ornamental band; individual unit	Prevents isolated detail from losing architectural context
Ornament location	Entrance; mihrab; spandrel; cornice; recessed field; border; tower/ridge	Connects motif to architectural and ritual function
Motif family	Rosette; lotus-like/floral unit; leaf/vine scroll; geometric lattice; pendant; molded border; uncertain formal type	Uses visual description rather than unsupported symbolism
Composition	Repeated; framed; serial; symmetrical; hierarchical; continuous; discontinuous	Identifies rhythm and focal organization
Visible condition	Intact; worn; abraded; powdering; flaking; broken; missing; deposited; discolored; patched; repaired; visibly renewed; obscured	Records appearance without assigning an untested cause
Intervention evidence	Work area; retained unit; stabilized area; repair boundary; new unit; joint; color/relief correspondence	Separates direct observation from interpretation of conservation work
Legibility effect	Unit; border; field; elevation	Records the scale at which loss or intervention changes readability

4.5 Analysis, validity and evidential boundaries

Comparisons among images are made both within and between sites using the same coding categories. General, medium and close-up images are matched in such a way that assertions about gaps, broken edges, restoration areas or rhythm changes are tied to an image sequence. Historical or administrative background information is confirmed via published sources and archives but this does not take the place of fieldwork; photography proves what something looks like, but not its substance, age, authorship or accuracy.

In the case of Kodla, recent work is stated as being visually consistent with old motifs only when the form, size, relief or placement is comparable. Assertions of direct replication, historical authenticity, or proper technique demand measured comparison, specifications or conservation records.

4.6 Limitations

The limitations included accessibility, lighting, inaccessible elevations, work-site restrictions, unequal viewing distance and no matched photographs from history of all sites. no chemical tests, mineral tests, moisture tests, salinity tests and structure tests were carried out. the kodla interview was site-specific data and not sample survey of market and labor force.

5. Results: Visual Documentation and Site Observations

5.1 Kodla Moth: ornament and active conservation intervention

However, Kodla Moth stands out from the mosques in having a tower-shaped body that employs molded edges, vegetal scrollwork, floral/rosette design, geometric lattice and repetitive facade bands in continuous participation in its exterior articulation. In the sequence of 32 images, the visible condition of deterioration consists of worn or damaged relief, missing material with exposed masonry, green growth on the lower plinth level and interior surface loss with pale deposits. Due to the extent of the ornamentation being serial and extensive, local damage could have an impact on both single motifs and overall vertical composition (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2005; Alam et al., 2022).

Evidence of the primary intervention is quite clear and includes: scaffolding and tarpaulins, open loss areas, repair materials being prepared on site, loose or stored decorative pieces and artisans making new pieces to replace the lost ones. Several close-ups reveal the contrast in tone, sharpness, relief and finish between new work and weathered adjoining fabric. This evidence is noted as compatibility and authenticity issues, not for what material or technique was used.

The five-person interview brings in the present-day craft-economics setting. It was stated by the participants that the demand for terracotta is now for either restoring heritage structures or as decorative elements instead of full-scale constructions; also, they estimated the cost of a terracotta decorative piece at around BDT 40-45 compared to BDT 10-12 for an ordinary brick. Larger projects were attributed more to the heritage projects sponsored by the government.



Figure 2: Kodla Moth during ongoing conservation: (a) overall exterior and scaffolded work zone; (b) surviving ornmented entrance; (c) major local loss exposing irregular masonry; (d) artisan handling a newly produced patterned terracotta element; and (e) visual relationship between weathered historic fabric and newly worked areas. Photographs by the author, 2 April 2026.

5.2 Shat Gambuj (Sixty-Dome) Mosque: monumental scale and visible discontinuity

Shat Gambuj offers the reference for the colossal example. Decoration is selective and hierarchical, centered around the entrance, arch opening, molding band, medallion and decorative surface inside, not covering the elevation continuously. The sequence of seven images includes floral and rosette patterns, serial bands of geometry and molding and relief enclosed in the frame, depending on the rhythm of openings and domes (Ahmed, 1989; Hasan, 2007).

The visible condition is uneven in space: the exterior view in close range indicates pitting or abrasion of brick surfaces, dark staining, deteriorated or open mortar joints, damaged molding bricks and some surface loss; the decorated arched interior consists of damaged or missing projections and varied sharpness of relief. The visible condition affects visibility predominantly on the scale of units, borders and focal fields but the overall architecture stays visible. The grey-toned units are not identified with any particular material from photos and none of the defects are attributed to salinity without tests.

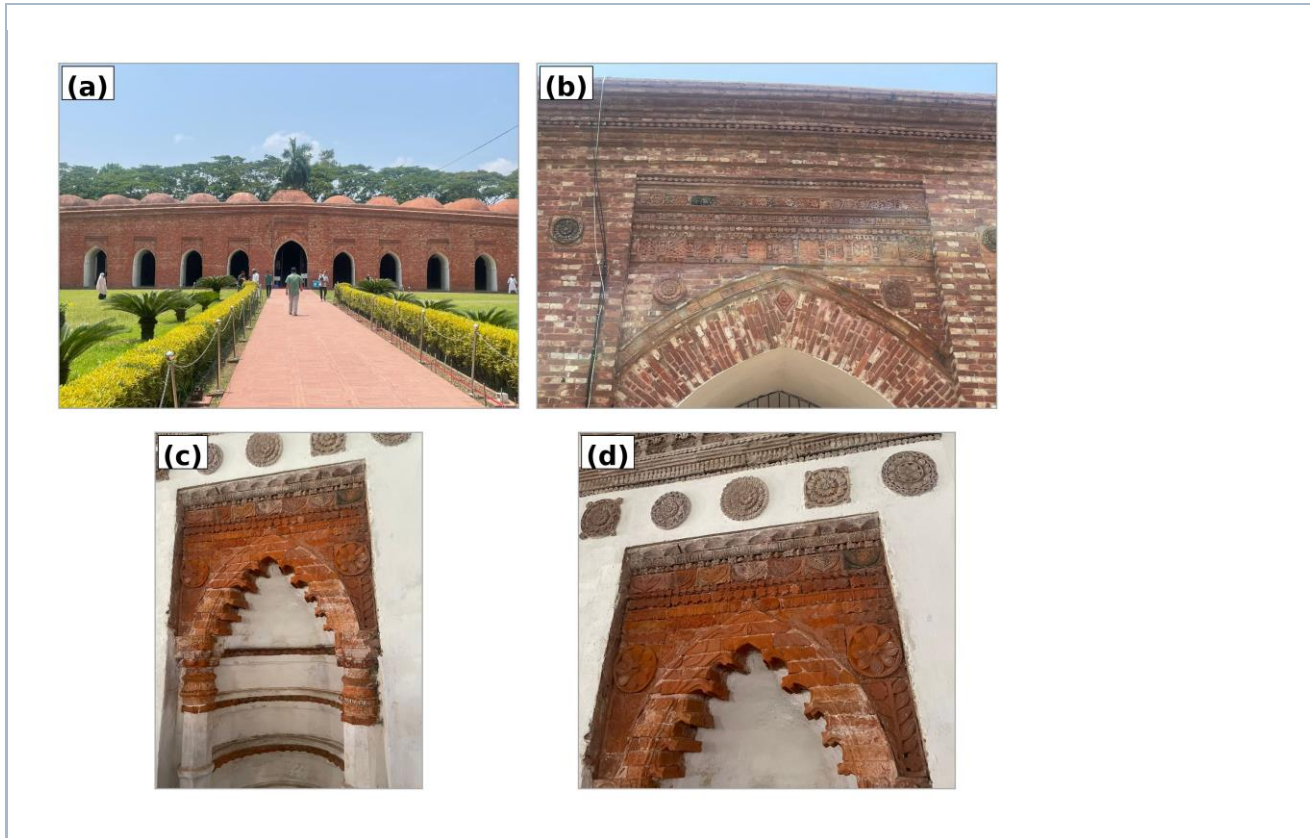


Figure 3. Multi-scale documentation of Shat Gambuj (Sixty-Dome) Mosque: (a) overall elevation; (b) exterior entrance/arch field with serial floral-geometric bands; (c) interior decorated arched field; and (d) close view showing broken or missing projecting ornament. Photographs by the author, 2 April 2026.

5.3 Nine-Dome Mosque: compact hierarchy and selective exterior ornament

The Nine Dome Mosque reveals a patterned use of ornaments which are limited to adjacent vertical fields next to doorways and also circular and beaded moldings on round corner turrets. The repeated field that resembles a half disc/crescent serves as an example of a serial ornament.

The exterior lower zones exhibit evidence of white deposits, staining, worn relief, loss at the edges and breakage. Many repetitive elements have chippings, gaps or breaks where backing or infill is exposed. This interrupts the rhythmic composition of both units and borders without obscuring the entire facade. The photographs illustrate what can be seen but do not identify the chemistry or cause of deterioration.



Figure 4. Nine-Dome Mosque: (a) overall facade; (b) doorway-adjacent repetitive decorative panel; (c) corner-turret molded bands; and (d) close view showing broken, eroded, or missing units and local discontinuity. Photographs by the author, 2 April 2026.

5.4 Singair Mosque: restrained ornament and the visual weight of local loss

The mosque of Singair is the building which has the least amount of decoration among all the samples. The front of the building lacks elaborates details, and only the cornice, small strips around the entrances and engaged towers have decorations. The scarce use of decoration makes each ornament quite important visually.

A closer look reveals chips or missing pieces of molding, open joints, displaced pieces, white stains, black stains or discoloration, patchy losses and exposed gray patch or infill in lower or turret areas. Since there are few decorative elements, a single break will interfere with the pattern. The main impact will thus be felt on unit, border and focal field level.



Figure 5. Singair Mosque: (a) overall facade; (b) entrance/cornice field; (c) corner-turret serial mouldings; and (d) close view showing chipped or missing units and local infill. Photographs by the author, 2 April 2026.

5.5 Cross-site visual findings

Table 3: Comparative findings matrix for the four selected monuments

Site	Ornament distribution	Verified visible condition	Primary legibility effect
Kodla Moth	Continuous serial facade fields, borders, entrance surround	Loss/exposed masonry; green staining; pale deposits; active intervention and replacement work	Unit, border, architectural field, elevation
Shat Gambuj	Selective entrance, arch, molded-band and interior focal fields	Pitting/abrasion; staining; eroded joints; broken/missing projecting ornament	Unit, border, focal field
Nine-Dome	Doorway panels and corner-turret serial bands	White deposits; worn relief; broken/missing units; patchy discontinuity	Unit, panel/border
Singair	Cornice, entrance-top bands and corner-turret moldings	Pale deposits; staining; chipped/missing units; open joints; local infill	Unit, border/focal field

6. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Regional vocabulary, placement and architectural function

In all four cases, flowers/rosettes, vegetal compositions, geometric borders, recessive fields and moldings reveal the presence of a common vocabulary of brickwork in the region without suggesting any copying (Guha & Bandyopadhyay, 2017; Mowla & Naqi, 1999). The difference lies in the location of elements, with mosque decoration being selective and clustered around entrances, arches, interior focal fields, cornices and corners, whereas Kodla makes use of repeated panels and bands in order to emphasize the verticality. Scale of observation is crucial: Shat Gambuj needs large-scale architectural setting, Nine-Dome and Singair can be read at a closer range, Kodla requires both views and records.

6.2 Legibility, visible condition and environmental context

The visible state influences ornamentation at four levels: Worn or damaged relief makes each element less distinct; missing elements disrupt boundaries; discontinuity undermines central framing, while cumulative or irregular changes can affect an elevation's interpretation. Salinity is pertinent to the situation only as background information. The danger posed by salinity of the soil and air is pointed out by UNESCO in relation to Bagerhat and by Afroz (2024) along with dampness, waterlogging, flooding and climate stress. Light discolorations, powdering, flaking or granular loss may be compatible with many causes and so this study notes their color, texture, position and extent but does not speculate on their chemistry.

6.3 Intervention, authenticity and contemporary craft at Kodla Moth

The visible state influences ornamentation at four levels: Worn or damaged relief makes each element less distinct; missing elements disrupt boundaries; discontinuity undermines central framing, while cumulative or irregular changes can affect an elevation's interpretation. Salinity is pertinent to the situation only as background information. The danger posed by salinity of the soil and air is pointed out by UNESCO in relation to Bagerhat and by Afroz (2024) along with dampness, waterlogging, flooding and climate stress. Light discolorations, powdering, flaking or granular loss may be compatible with many causes, and so this study notes their color, texture, position and extent but does not speculate on their chemistry.

Kodla interview also indicates a narrow economic framework: Participants linked big orders for terracotta only to heritage restoration work, whereas contemporary use in private sphere was viewed as decoration on a smaller scale due to high costs. This point is helpful for the discussion of craft continuity but is not a general market conclusion.

6.4 Implications for repeatable conservation documentation

The key methodological innovation lies in the creation of a replicable visual trace. Future photography must include site coding, elevation, frame, direction, scale, sequencing, original images, captioning and field notes so that the changes may be measured against this baseline. This approach understands terracotta as part of the evidence within an architectural system where art-historical analysis can aid conservation without becoming a replacement for materials science and structural engineering.

7. Conclusion

From this analysis, it is clear that there are similarities between the architecture of Bagerhat's chosen Islamic and Hindu monuments in the use of bricks and terracotta but their placement is varied based on architectural type and purpose of focus. The Kodla Moth makes greater use of ornamentation within the tower-like structure while the Shat Gambuj, Nine-Dome and Singair make selective use of ornamentation around the entrance and borders.

The field record also highlights the importance of evidential restraint. Kodla shows active conservation, loss zones, material preparation and replacement; the mosque sequences show site-specific wear, staining, damage and discontinuity. The photographs serve to describe the sites visually for future matching purposes, but they cannot independently determine the material composition or the causes of the deterioration. Salinity is known to be a threat to the region and not a diagnosis of the photographed defect (Afroz, 2024; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

This means that an archive through photography is able to help future conservation because it will preserve what was observable at that particular point of intervention and will separate observation from technical interpretation.

Future observations may help build on this current collection and increase cooperation between art historians, archaeologists, architects and conservators.

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