



**Saraswati, Sarasi Kumar**  
(1906-1980)

**Saraswati, Sarasi Kumar** (1906-1980) historian of art and architecture. Born and brought up in Rajshahi, Sarasi Kumar Saraswati passed MA in Ancient Indian History and Culture from the [UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA](#) in 1930. In his studies of early Indian fine arts, particularly sculpture, iconography and architecture, he took the cue from two stalwarts, [RAMAPRASAD CHANDA](#) and [AKSHAYA KUMAR MAITREYA](#). He was also influenced by the noted art historian Professor Stella Kramrisch, who taught both at the University of Calcutta and Vishvabharati.

He started his career as a Research Scholar in [VARENDRA RESEARCH SOCIETY](#), which launched many pioneering research projects on the history of Bengal. He undertook several exploratory tours in north Bengal with a view to collect information regarding the specimens of art and architecture of ancient Bengal. The reports on these explorations were published in the Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal during 1932-34 and these immediately attracted the attention of established scholars.

SK Saraswati joined as a Lecturer and then became a Reader in the Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta. Calcutta University opened Department of Archaeology in 1963, and SK Saraswati was appointed its first Professor and Head of the Department. He was Professor and Head of the Department of Art and Architecture( presently Department of History of Art) for six years from 1966-1972 at the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. He was also Librarian of the [ASIATIC SOCIETY](#) of Calcutta for some times and the Curator of [VICTORIA MEMORIAL](#), Calcutta.

SK Saraswati was assigned to contribute a chapter on Architecture in the History of Bengal, vol. I, edited by [RAMESH CHANDRA MAJUMDAR](#) (Dhaka University, 1943). He presented a reliable, factually rich, survey of architecture in Bengal up to AD 1200 though materials for this study were meagre.

Particularly significant was his study of the famous PAHARPUR temple in north Bengal, the rather enigmatic plan of which was successfully identified by him as a sarvatobhadra type of architecture which also influenced the structure of the temple at Pagan (Bagan), Myanmar. From the very beginning he studied architecture with a strong archaeological orientation and avoided the enquiry of Indian architecture from a philosophical and mystic point of view, a position taken by several of his predecessors.

When *The History and Culture of the Indian People* was launched in the 1950s under the editorship of RC Majumdar, SK Saraswati was the natural and automatic choice for contributing many chapters on architecture in its volumes. Not only did he provide for a general survey of different facets of Indian architecture with rich empirical details, but also presented the history of architecture from a stylistic point of view. He thus brought to limelight the evolution of the styles of stupas, chaityas (rock cut architecture) and structural temples.

His compact study of different regional variations of temple architecture in north India, the Deccan and the far south gives the reader the best available overview of the all-India patterns of development of temple architecture during the early medieval times. He also contributed important chapters on architecture to the *Comprehensive History of India*, vol. II (edited by KA Nilakanta Shastri) and vol. III (edited by RC Majumdar) and *Jaina Art and Architecture* (edited by A Ghosh). Experts on Indian art history have followed his method of study of Indian architecture from a stylistic point of view. To him goes the credit of writing a full-length monograph on architecture in Bengal.

While SK Saraswati is mainly known as a specialist in the history of Indian architecture, he also left the mark of his profound scholarship of sculpture in his *Early Sculptures of Bengal* and *A Survey of Indian Sculpture*. His principal thrust on the history of sculpture, like that of architecture, was on style and idiom. His remarkable command over the complex subject of iconography (Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain) was another hallmark of his writings on art history. This is especially evident in his *Tantrayana Art, an Album* - an UNESCO project brought out by the Asiatic Society, Calcutta.

One of his most important contributions, during the last phase of his life, was the *Pala Yugera Chitrakala*, where he presented an in-depth analysis of the manuscript paintings of the Pala period in Bengal history. As usual he treated the development of manuscript painting from a stylistic point of view and identified many less known Buddhist deities depicted in these paintings by his sound understanding of Indian iconography. Through untiring efforts, even in his deathbed, he completed a chapter on the history of architecture of Assam (for a volume on the *Comprehensive History of Assam*) and this illustrates his commitment to the study of art history. [Ranabir Chakravarti]