Calligraphy and Islamic culture: reflections on some new epigraphical discoveries in Gaur and Pandua, two early capitals of Muslim Bengal*

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Bengal has an epigraphic heritage extending back to the pre-Islamic period. Inscriptions of various styles are evident in this region, which was rich in stone carving and sculpture. In the pre-Islamic period, however, artists and craftsmen did not use their skill to exhibit calligraphy as such; Sanskrit and Pali inscriptions are generally informative rather than calligraphic in intent.

Epigraphy became more common after the advent of Islam to Bengal and as Bengali Muslim rulers launched into architectural projects. It is difficult to imagine a building of that period without some kind of inscription; it was as if it would have appeared naked or unfinished without. As a result, epigraphic records and inscriptions are plentiful in terms of both artistic accomplishment and historical information.

Historical accounts of the Islamic dynasties in South Asia are numerous, particularly those regarding the central authorities in Delhi. A number of sourcebooks, most in Persian, record the deeds of sultans and emperors. Bengal, however, has a very small share of this rich heritage of historical writing. Whatever might once have existed, very little has survived. One example of a lost source is a Persian manuscript on early Muslim rule in Bengal found by Francis Buchanan Hamilton in a shrine in Pandua in the early nineteenth century and mentioned in his book, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur in the Province or Soubah of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1833). Unfortunately, the manuscript cannot be traced. Several factors, including natural calamities such as flood and fire, may account for the lack of extant sources. The prolonged monsoons and generally humid weather in Bengal pose an additional challenge to the preservation of archives.

Another important factor in accounting for the scarcity of materials on the history of Muslim Bengal was the attitude of imperial chroniclers in Delhi towards this region—very few were keen to record events there because it was so remote from the capital. What was recorded in writing usually reflected the official version of events, such as military expeditions to subdue the region, as there was always a temptation for the governors to rebel. Written in the capital, these texts exhibit not only a generally urban bias, but also the views of central government; thus, they seldom provide reliable information on the region.

Though the epigraphic heritage of Bengal fills many gaps left by earlier historians, its study did not begin until the second half of the eighteenth century, when some Muslim 'ulamā' (often known as Munshī or Mawlavī in traditional Bengali society) began to take a scholarly interest in deciphering the texts. The first scholar to realize the importance of epigraphic evidence for dynastic history and to use it as a source for dating different historical monuments and architectural remains was Sayed Ghulam Hussein Salim Zayedpuri (d. 1817). He lived in Ingrezbazar (Malda) near Gaur, the ruined early Muslim capital of

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Bengal which abounded in inscriptions. He was a pioneer of Islamic epigraphy who examined for the first time inscriptions of great historical interest as early as in the mid-eighteenth century. While compiling *Riyāḍ al-Salāṭīn*—the history of Bengal—(completed in 1788, published in Calcutta by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1893), he studied the epigraphic materials of Gaur and used them in constructing a chronology of Bengal's ruling dynasties. However, it was Sayyid Munshī Ilāhī Bakhsh al-Ḥusaynī Awrangzebādī—an indirect disciple of Sayed Ghulam Hussein—who systematically examined a significant number of the Islamic inscriptions of Gaur, Pandua and adjacent areas. In total he deciphered forty-two inscriptions with astonishing accuracy, most of them for the first time. He used this epigraphic evidence in writing the History of Muslim rule in Bengal, which formed a substantial part of his ambitious project of writing a monumental book on world history. Part of this huge Persian work—*Khūrshīd-i-Jahān Namā*—covered the history of Muslim rule in Bengal, and was edited and published, with an English translation by Henry Beveridge, in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1895. Interestingly, one of Munshī Ilāhī Bakhsh's students, Abid Ali Khan, also took a great interest in the inscriptions of Gaur and Pandua as is evident in both of his works, *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua* (ed. H. E. Stapleton, Calcutta, 1931) and *Short Notes on the Ancient Monuments of Gaur and Pandua* (Malda, 1913).

Early in the nineteenth century British collectors began to take an interest in these inscriptions, motivated principally by their visual appeal. Most of the private as well as museum collections of this period were built upon works removed from their context and often illegally or improperly acquired. However, as interest in Oriental antiquities and art objects developed in the West, many Europeans set out to explore ancient sites in search of them. Cities such as Gaur and Pandua attracted a number of such adventurers, many of whom were little more than plunderers. Some, however, left accounts and diaries of their experience, most of them now preserved in the India Office Library in London, which provide a rich source for materials on inscriptions that no longer exist.

Foremost among the British scholars pioneering this field is Sir Henry Creighton who lived for twenty years (1786–1807), near Gaur and wrote a book, *The Ruins of Gaur* (London, 1817), illustrated with fabulous sketches and architectural drawings. He often refers to inscriptions he found in the old Islamic monuments of the area. Another celebrated British collector of Oriental antiquities was Major William Franklin who visited Gaur at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both his diaries, *Journal of a Route from Rajmahal to Gaur* and *The Ruins of Gaur*, preserved in the India Office Library (Mss. nos 19 and 285), give a clear description of the archaeological remains in the region and record a number of inscriptions.

Franklin was accompanied on his tour by a local guide named Munshī Shayam Prasad, a scholar of Arabic and Persian. At Franklin's request, he prepared a report on the archaeological remains of the area. It, too, has become a valuable source for the epigraphy of the region (Ms. 2841 in the India Office Library, later published by A. H. Dani as an appendix to his book, *Muslim Architecture of Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961)). Another contemporary archaeologist, named Orme, also left a brief report, *The Ruins of Gaur*, now in the India Office Library (Ms. 65: 25), which describes a few inscriptions. Francis Buchanan Hamilton was another early nineteenth-century scholar who noted a number of inscriptions during his tour of the district of Dinajpur in 1807–08. He mentions some of them in his work *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the investigation of the art and archaeology of the region became more scholarly. One of the first studies of this period was by Captain W. N. Lees, who published an Arabic inscription of Sultan Bārbak Shāh in the *JASB* in 1860. Among the important studies of that time is *Gaur, Its Ruins and Inscriptions* by J. H. Ravenshaw (London, 1878), which is particularly rich in illustrations and texts. The formation of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 brought a revolutionary change to the archaeological study of South Asia. Its first director general, Sir Alexander Cunningham, and his subsequent colleagues, took systematic steps to record all existing inscriptions. Other scholars to discover Islamic inscriptions of Bengal during this period were Dr James Wise, Mr E. Vesey Westmacott, Mr Hili and Mr Walter M. Bourke. Many of the rubbings they collected were sent to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, where scholars such as Henry Blochmann deciphered and published them.

Among other scholars to contribute to this field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were R. D. Banerji, Henry Beveridge, H. E. Stapleton, S. Aulad Husain, Rahmat Ali Taish, Hamid Allah Khan and Khan Sahib Moulvi Abdul Wali. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Archaeological Survey of India established a separate section for epigraphy and began to publish its specialized series, *Epigraphia Indica*. *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica*, devoted entirely to the Muslim inscriptions of India, issued its first volume in 1907–08. Eminent scholars such as Ghulam Yazdani, Paul Horn, Denison Ross and J. Horvitz either participated in its editing or contributed scholarly articles. After independence from the British, its name changed to *Epigraphia Indica*, *Arabic and Persian Supplement*. Scholars such as Ziauddin Desai published a number of inscriptions from Bengal. Two important works were published before the independence of Bangladesh and certainly provided models for a comprehensive epigraphic study of the region. The first was *Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* by A. H. Dani (published as an appendix to *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, vol. 2 (1957)), and the other *Inscriptions of Bengal* by an eminent twentieth-century epigraphist, Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmad (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1960). Among recent publications, *Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bihar* (Patna: Jayaslal Research Institute, 1973), by Qeyamuddin Ahmad, and *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992), by Abdul Karim, a prominent historian of Bangladesh, are indeed important additions to this genre. Recent publication of a monumental Arabic work *Riḥla ma'a al-Nuqūsh al-Kitābiyya al-Islamiyya fī 'l-Bangāl: Darāsa Tārīkhiyya Ḥaḍariyya* is an important addition to this field and contains an elaborate discussion of almost 400 inscriptions.[1] All of these works have enriched the field of epigraphy of the region.

One of the most powerful means of expressing human cultural aspiration is the visual, which often carries important messages about the ideology and culture that produce it. The Islamic tradition considers calligraphy a powerful visual form for conveying aesthetic and cultural messages. It often plays a central role in architectural decoration (e.g. the gate inscription of Nīm Darwāza at Miyāneh Dar dated 871/1466–67, plate 1). The effect of Islamic inscriptions can be sensed at the very first sight of a building. To create such effects the calligrapher often has to adopt new methods and practices. Islamic inscriptions are generally rich both in their textual content and calligraphic beauty.

[1] Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Riḥla ma'a al-Nuqūsh al-Kitābiyya al-Islamiyya fī 'l-Bangāl: Darāsa Tārīkhiyya Ḥaḍariyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2004).

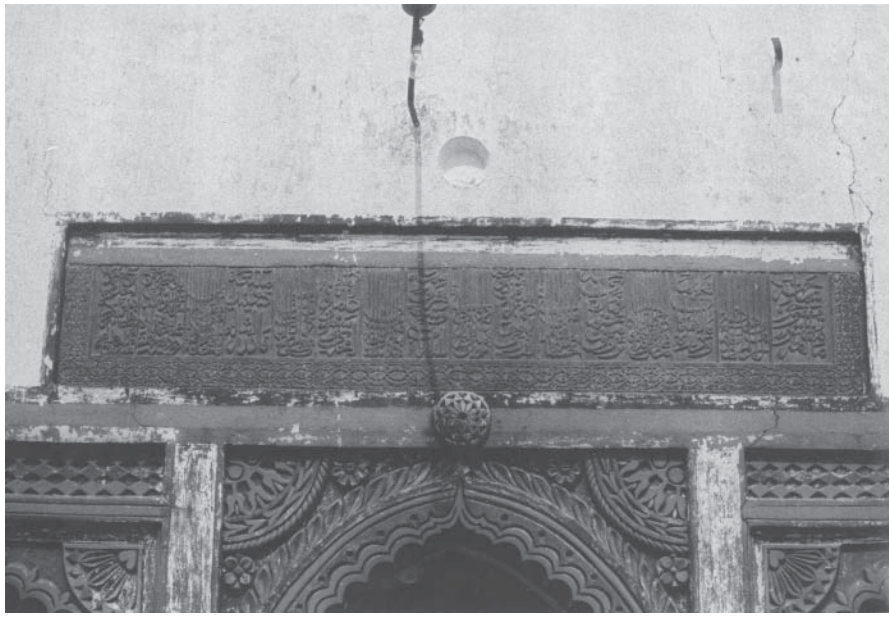

Plate 1. The Nīm Darwāza inscription at Miyāneh Dar in the Citadel of Gaur from the reign of Bārbak Shāh Dated 871 (1466–67), currently fixed on Mīnārwālī Masjid in Mahdipur.

It is the elastic quality of the Arabic script that provides calligraphers in the Islamic world with their most effective tool. The graphic rhythms that join the letters in an interlaced pattern create a magnificent result. In the horizontal direction, the forms interlink and merge in a continuous wave. In the vertical direction, the symmetrically arranged elongated vertical letters often stand out in isolation, as if drawing our attention to a transcendental journey upward (Figure 2; Darsbari inscription in Umarpur dated 884/1479, plate 2). (Figures can be seen on pp. 36–40.) Elongation of the verticals in symmetrical order is one of the common features of Islamic inscriptions (e.g. the Darsbari inscription, plate 2).

At the heart of monumental calligraphy is the glorification of Allah (Figure 1, shapes B and C). A Muslim calligrapher enjoys spiritually decorating a mosque with divine names and adjectives. With the sudden spread of Islam into a vast area in the east (i.e. Bengal), many newly converted Muslims—especially those with a strong tradition of religious iconography and symbolism—found it difficult to imagine the formless God of the Islamic faith. For them, the written form of Allah in Arabic was a great source of consolation providing a mental image that could be used for contemplating and meditating about God without conflicting with the new faith. This kind of religious imagery was particularly common in Bengali mystical folk songs, such as the songs of Lalon, which are still popular in rural Bengal.[2]

Calligraphic and stylistic variations are tied to the message contained in the written form, since particular styles and scripts came to be regarded as more effective for different purposes. In other words, calligraphic expression is often

[2] Examples of these songs can be found in Muhammad Mansuruddin, *Haramuni* (Calcutta, 1942), 9. See also Upendra Nath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baol wo Baol Gān* (Calcutta, 1958), 507.

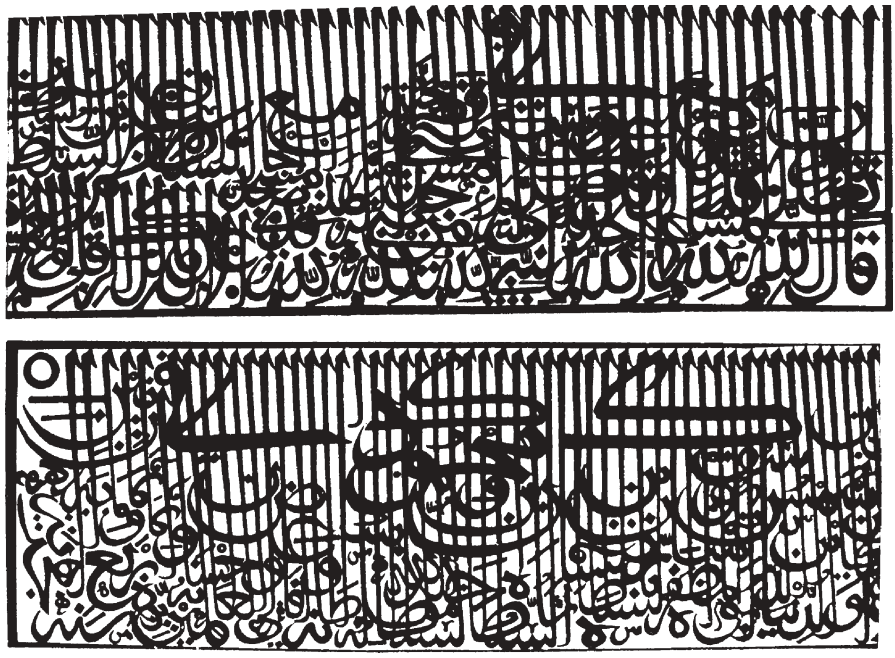

Plate 2. The Darsbari Masjid-cum-Madrasa inscription in 'Umarpur from the reign of Yūsuf Shāh, now in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, dated 884 (1479).

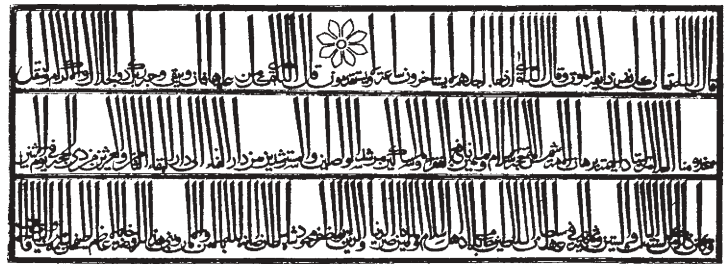

Plate 3. A funerary inscription the Mausoleum of Nūr Quṭb al-'Ālam at Pandua, dated 863 (1459).

influenced by the social, religious, and spiritual message of the setting for which it is intended. The funerary inscription on the tombstone of Nūr Quṭb al-'Ālam in Pandua, dated 863/l459 (plate 3), for example, is rendered in *Bihārī* style (see Figures 5 and 6) on a plain background. It is devoid of any overwhelming decoration because of its funerary purpose. The elongated vertical shafts, arrayed in symmetrical order, start at the bottom with a thin line that grows thicker as it ascends. The unusual elevation of the verticals upward, and their arrangement in a row, can be interpreted as representing departed souls on their journey upward or descending angels with blessings for the participants in the funerary prayers, as well as for the deceased souls. The clustered letters at the bottom may be interpreted as symbols of a congregation lined up for the funeral prayer. An eight-lobed flower in the middle of the upper part of the first line symbolizes the eight heavens, an appropriate motif

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in this setting, since it coincides with the position of the deceased in the arrangement for prayer when the body is placed in front of the funeral congregation (see plate 3).

Throughout its history Arabic script has undergone alterations and experimentation which brought many new calligraphic styles and a proliferation of names for each variation. Often a new name was given to a script even if it showed only slight differences from the others; a vertical slant, an extended horizontal stroke, or the size of a letter were sometimes sufficient to distinguish a particular script from the rest. A simple dot (Figure 10) is the nucleus of Islamic calligraphy as is a simple vertical (see Figure 1, shape A). They continue to be repeated in an infinite pattern age after age, yet the usefulness of their messages never ends. The majestic verticals in Arabic calligraphy remind us of the written form of Allah, where powerful vertical shafts dominate the lettering design (Figure 1, C). A sharp and graceful sword-like vertical (see, for instance, *alif* in Figure 1, A) in Islamic calligraphy symbolizes the power of Islamic dynamism, spirit and justice. In traditional mosque architecture, it is not difficult to imagine the written form of Allah symbolically represented through its minarets and dome. In these traditional designs, one may find minarets in their vertical forms representing the verticals of the letters *alif* and *lām*, and a dome representing the letter *hā*. Quite naturally, religious symbols, decorative motifs and ornamentation vary according to space and time.[3]

While there is a unity and coherent continuity in the calligraphic legacy of the Islamic world, regional developments have further enriched this unique cultural heritage;[4] Bengal serves as an outstanding example of such regional artistic development. A rich calligraphic tradition began to evolve soon after the Muslims' advent in the region. Once Muslim rule took a firm hold in this Islamic hinterland, Muslims began their architectural activities on a large scale and built numerous mosques, madrasas, palaces, castles and forts. Almost all of these monuments contained some kind of inscriptions. A number are inscribed on beautifully decorated backgrounds. The calligraphers used a variety of styles such as *ṭughrā*, *thulth*, *naskh*, *riqā'*, *ruq'a*, *tawqī'*, *rayḥānī*, *muḥaqqaq*, *Bihārī* and *ijāzah*.

The very first Islamic inscription (a bridge inscription in Persian discovered in Sultanganj, about 20 miles south of Gaur, from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' al-Dīn Khaljī; plate 4) of Bengal represents an unusual and non-traditional

Plate 4. A bridge inscription from Sultanganj from the reign of 'Alā' Dīn 'Alī Mardān Khaljī (the first Sultan of Bengal, c. 607–610/1210–13), the first Islamic inscription of Bengal.

[3] Wayne E. Begley, 'Mughal caravanserais built and inscribed by Amanat Khan, Calligrapher of the Taj Mahal' in Frederick M. Asher and G. S. Gai (ed.), *Indian Epigraphy: Its Bearing on the History of Art* (New Delhi, 1985), 283.

[4] For details about Islamic calligraphy in South Asia, see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Āthār al-Ṣanādīd* (Kanpur, 1846); Muḥammad Ghulām, *Tadhkira-i-Khushnawīsān*, ed. H. Hidayet Husain (Calcutta, 1910); M. A. Chagtai, *Pāk wa Hind mēn Islāmī Khaṭṭāṭī* (Lahore, 1976).

calligraphic style somewhat resembling *tawqī'* style, known sometimes also as old Iranian *naskh*. The same style appears more distinctively in a treasury inscription discovered in the village of Wazir-Beldanga, about ten miles south-east of Gaur, from the reign of Sultan Bahādur Shāh dated 722/1322 (plate 5). In this inscription, the endings of all the letters are joined to form an inter-woven and unbreakable chain of writing in each line, a feature known as *musalsal*. This superbly executed inscription has no vocalization or diacritical marks, making its decipherment rather difficult.

The only *Kūfī* writing in Bengal is an elegantly inscribed piece above the central mihrab of Adīna Masjid from the reign of Sikandar Shāh (*c.* 759–792/1358–91; plate 6) where two different calligraphic styles are combined in a single inscription. The *thulth* writing, in bold characters, dominates the greater part of the panel, while a thin band of *Kūfī* writing decorates the upper part of the verticals of *thulth*. Combining two calligraphic styles in a single inscription, especially *thulth* with a *Kūfī* border, was a popular practice in that period (seventh and eighth centuries AH/thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE) in many parts of the Muslim world.[5]

Plate 5. The treasury inscription from Wazir-Beldanga from the Reign of Bahādur Shāh, dated 722 (1322).

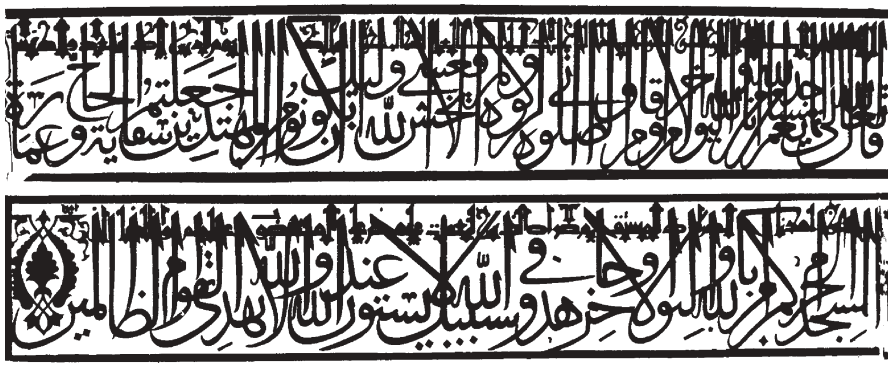

Plate 6. The Central Mihrab inscription in Adīna Masjid in Hadrat Pandua from the reign of Sikandar Shāh (c. 776/1374).

[5] Arabic inscriptions in the Islamic world used *Kūfī* style from the outset, as is evident from early inscriptions in Iran, Transoxania and elsewhere. It was only around late fifth century AH/(eleventh century CE) that cursive-style writing, namely *thulth* and *riqā'*, began appearing in Islamic inscriptions, often accompanied *by Kūfī* style as we see in a Ghazna inscription from the reign of Sultan Ibrāhīm ibn Mas'ūd Shāh (*c.* 451–92/1059–99). For details, see Sheila S. Blair, *The Monumental Inscriptions from Early Islamic Iran and Transoxania* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992). For the early appearance of *Kūfī* inscriptions in the Gujarat and Sind regions and the gradual switch to cursive styles, see Mehrdad Shokoohy, *Bhadreśvar, the Oldest Monuments in India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).

Another style occasionally found in Bengal is *riqā'* which in some respects resembles *tawqī'*, though it is less bold and has slightly more slanting lines, similar to *thulth*. Its horizontal loops and ligatures are often elongated as in *rayḥānī* style. Some characteristics of *riqā'* can be observed in the Khanqah inscription from Sian dated 618/1221, but it is best represented in two exquisite inscriptions dated 707/1307 (plate 7, the Ḥāṭim Khān palace inscription in Bihar Sharif) and 715/1315 (plate 8, the Masjid inscription from Ḥāṭim Khān palace). Both of these inscriptions are fascinating, not only for the intricate patterns of their calligraphic layout, but also for their skilful execution on stone slabs in relief, which elicits both surprise and admiration from the viewer. In the first inscription (plate 7), the endings of all the words are joined to others to create the effect of *musalsal*, or chain of continuity, while some horizontal strokes are deliberately elongated so as to create the impression of waves in the flow of writing. The initial form of the *sīn* in the word *sulṭānuhu* at the end of the first line is a good example of this (Figure 11, B). The letter *hā'* in the word *hādhihi* (the second word on the first line) looks rather like the face of a curious kitten peeping through the clusters of letters (Figure 11, C), and in fact, this version of the *hā'* is better known in Arabic as *wajh al-hirra* or cat's face. The peculiar joining of the *dāl* with the preceding *alif* and *nūn* in the word *'ādīl* in the second line is also interesting for there too the artist has shown considerable imagination (Fig. 11, A).

The second inscription (plate 8) has a somewhat different calligraphic layout, and its letters are more thickly arranged. Nevertheless, there too the calligrapher let his imagination range quite freely. One of his innovations is the word *al-khalā'iq* (Figure 12, A) in the middle of the second line, where the

Plate 7. The Ḥāṭim Khān palace inscription in Bihar Sharif from the reign of Fīrūz Shāh, dated 707 (1307).

Plate 8. A Masjid inscription from Ḥāṭim Khān's palace in Bihar Sharif from the reign of Fīrūz Shāh, dated 715 (1315).

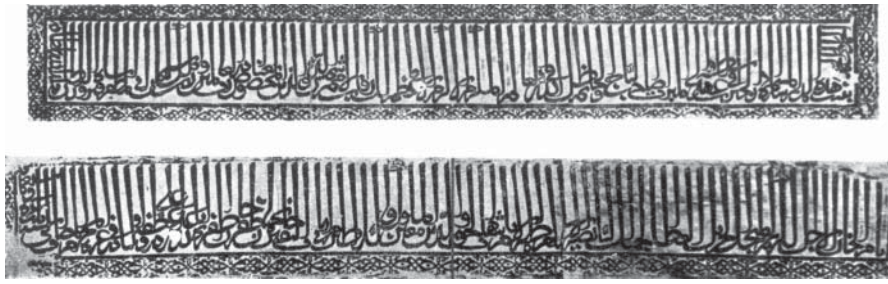

Plate 9. The Madrasa Dār al-Khayrāt inscription in Tribeni from the reign of Fīrūz Shāh, dated 713 (1313).

middle form of *khā* is unusually stretched out and joined to a rather peculiar looking *lām-alif* (Figure 12, B and C). Another striking element is the small crown-like top (Figure 12, D) mounted on the vertical stroke of the letter *kāf*, which is known in Arabic as *shākila*. It appears quite frequently in this crown-like form and is often helpful in distinguishing the verticals of the *kāf* in the cluster of other verticals in the intricate calligraphic patterns of the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal (Figure 13, A, B and C). A style that very closely resembles both *riqā'* and *tawqī'* is *ruq'a* (Figure 17) which is to some extent represented in the madrasa Dār al-Khayrāt inscription in Tribeni dated 713/1313 (plate 9).

Bihārī is rather a rare style which was used mainly in South Asia for copying the Quran. Known sometimes also as Indian *Kūfī*, this style is still used in the Malebar region (modern Indian state of Kerala) for printing the Quran. Only in Bengal do we find a few Sultanate inscriptions rendered in *Bihārī* style (see sketches and diagrams of different letters and words in Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). The horizontal loops in this style are much longer than the vertical strokes. These dominant horizontal loops usually begin from a thin point, then gradually grow thicker as they move left, finally terminating in a sharp point or blunt edge (see examples of letters in *Bihārī* style in Figure 5). Examples of this style can be found in both of the inscriptions—the madrasa-*cum*-masjid inscription from Sultanganj dated 835/1432, and the masjid inscription from Mandra dated 836/1433—so far discovered from the reign of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh, a famous indigenous Muslim Bengali sultan of Bengal. The other examples are the madrasa-*cum*-masjid inscription in Navagram dated 858/1454, the masjid inscription in Mandaroga dated 850/1446, and the masjid inscription in Naswagali dated 863/1459 (see sketches and diagrams of letters and words in these inscriptions in Figures 7, 8 and 9). It is best represented, however, in a funerary inscription on the tombstone of Nūr Quṭb al-Alām in Pandua (plate 3; see sketches and diagrams of its different letters and words in Figure 6), and in an undated Persian inscription from Sultanganj (plate 10).

Naskh is probably the most widely used all-purpose calligraphic style in the Muslim world, and in Bengal, too, a number of inscriptions are rendered in that style. It is interesting to note that the term *naskh* is sometimes applied loosely to a range of related cursive styles. In Bengal, however, the stylistic difference between *naskh* and *thulth* is often so marginal that it is difficult for the uninitiated to distinguish them. Essentially the distinction lies in the slanting of the vertical and horizontal strokes in lettering. While *thulth* has very prominent slanting, *naskh* is essentially devoid of slanting. However, often the slanting in *thulth* in the architectural calligraphy of Bengal is not

Plate 10. An undated Persian inscription from the Sultanate period, originally from Sultanganj near Godagari, now in Varendra Research Museum.

prominent (see, for instance, letter *sīn* in Figure 17, B). There are a number of Islamic inscriptions in Bengal where the task of determining which is used is difficult, both because they do not follow conventional styles and because they accommodate characteristics from more than one style. This led a number of scholars in the field, such as Maulvi Shamshuddin and later on Abdul Karim, to list most of the Sultanate inscriptions of Bengal under *naskh* style whereas they were in fact more characteristic of *thulth*. There are relatively fewer Islamic inscriptions from 1205–1707 when *naskh* is properly represented. Three early Mughal inscriptions—the masjid inscription from Burarchar dated 1000/1591, the Jami‘ masjid inscription from Dohar dated 1000/1591, and the Madad-i-Ma‘āsh inscription from Bhāgal Khān masjid in Nayabari dated 1003/1595 (plate 11)—represent a crude form of *naskh* during that transition period of rule when political instability was prevalent in the region.

Thulth was from the very beginning an extremely popular style in Bengal. It is beautifully executed in bold characters on a foliated background in one of the earliest inscriptions of the region discovered in an edifice in Bari Dargah in Bihar Sharif, dated Muḥarram 640/July 1241. A striking feature of this inscription is the use of elongated vertical strokes, a style that soon became very popular in Sultanate inscriptions. Sometimes the verticals are further stylized by flourishing their upper ends downward in a slant to form a noose-like ligature. This effect is produced by tilting the *qalam* (the reed pen) when it touches the paper or other surface for the first time and then lifting it slightly upwards before making the down-stroke that creates the vertical. In Islamic calligraphy this stylistic feature is known as a *zulf* (a Persian word meaning curly hair of a maiden), *zalaf* or *zulfa* (an Arabic word meaning flattery), the curved body in the middle is called the *badan* (body), and the lower sharp end is the *sayf* (an

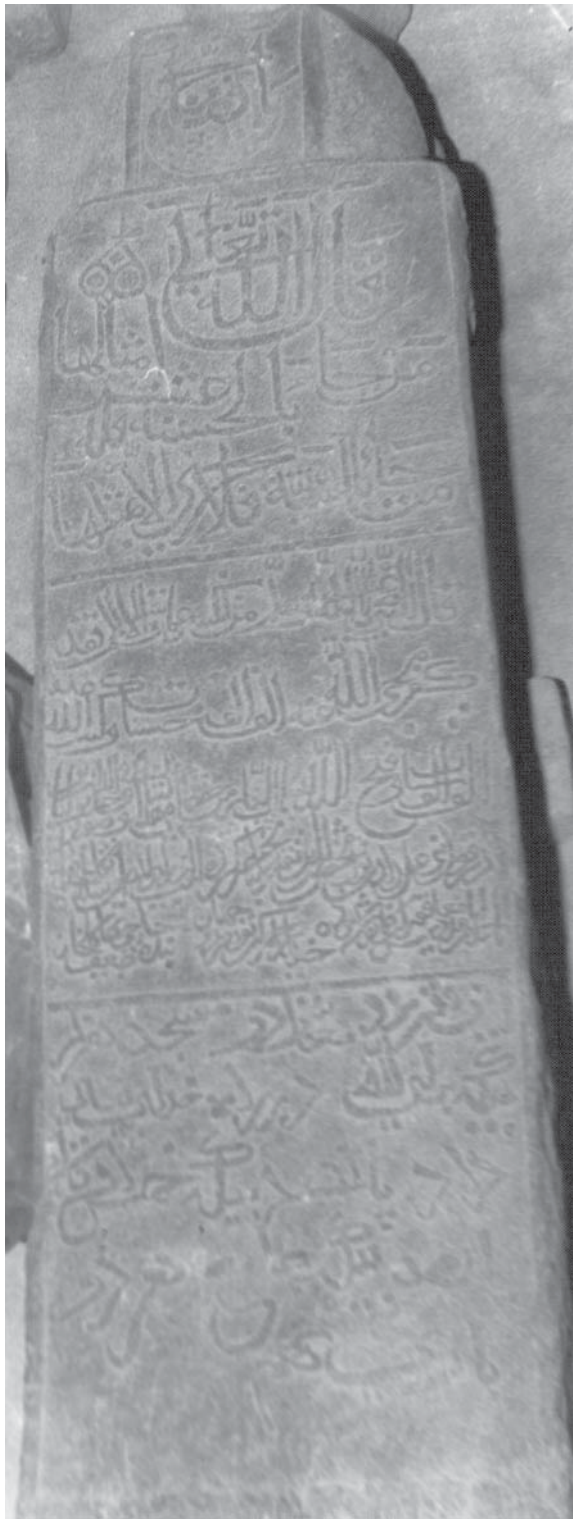

Plate 11. The Madad-i-Ma'āsh inscription from Bhāgal Khān Masjid in Nayabari, from the reign of Akbar, dated 1003 (1595).

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Plate 12. A commemorative inscription from the reign of Aurangzeb, now in Bangladesh National Museum, dated 1116 (1703).

Arabic word meaning sword; see Figure 1, A). A commemorative inscription dated 1116/1703 (plate 12) now in the Bangladesh National Museum and the Darsbari madrasa-*cum*-masjid inscription in 'Umarpur dated 884/1479 (plate 2) are fine examples of *thulth* calligraphy in the inscriptions of Bengal. *Thulth* works best for monumental calligraphy in its *jalī* (bold) form. *Thulth jalī* in an over-imposing bold and slanting form is known as *muḥaqqaq* and was sometimes used for a number of elegant calligraphic works for the Quran. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, has a tombstone (plate 13) beautifully inscribed in *muḥaqqaq*. A somewhat peculiar variety of *muḥaqqaq* can be seen in another inscription dated 887/1482 belonging to a khanqah in Gaur (Figure 14). *Rayḥānī* is another rare style mainly used for quranic calligraphy. It resembles *muḥaqqaq* in many ways but it is less bold and more slanting. It is represented in at least one quranic inscription, now preserved in Varendra Reaserch Museum in Rajshahi (plate 14).

In the early Islamic inscriptions of Bengal, the *ṭughrā* style has the most distinctive artistic features. Shortly after its appearance in the Seljuq court some time in the eleventh or twelfth century, the *ṭughrā* gradually found its way to South Asia, most likely through the calligraphers who fled conflicts elsewhere in the Islamic world and took refuge in India. Unlike the Ottoman *ṭughrā*, which served as an imperial signature or monogram (*'ālāma/shi'ār*), the South Asian *ṭughrā* was a decorative style of writing resembling the Mamluk *ṭughrā* in Egypt, particularly in the regular repetition of the elongated vertical

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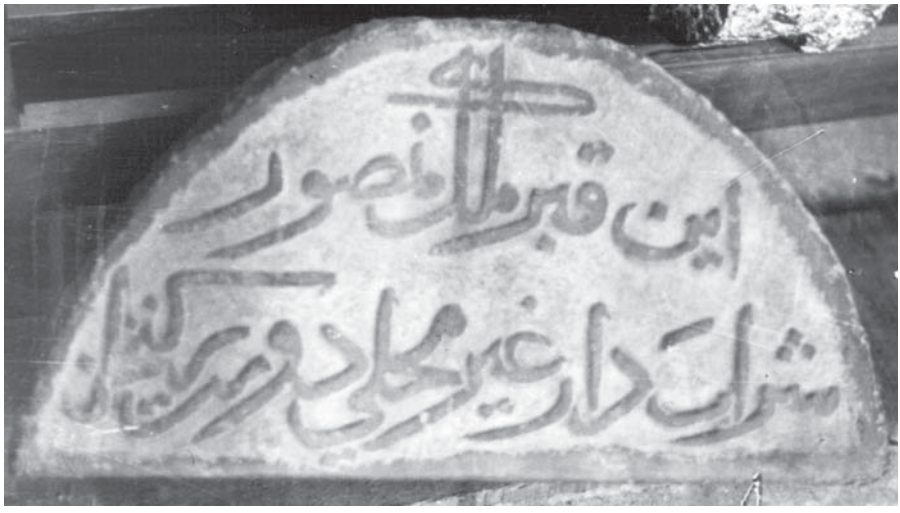

Plate 13. An undated tombstone in Persian from Katabari, now in Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka.

Plate 14. An undated quranic inscription from the Sultanate period in Gaur, now in the Varendra Research Museum.

letters (e.g. the *alif*, see Figure 1, A) drawn from the horizontal band of the calligraphic programme and the symmetrical arrangement of those verticals. This essential feature of the *ṭughrā* is visible in a number of inscriptions in Islamic architecture in South Asia such as the invocations, *al-mulk li-Allah* and *Allah kāfī*, (Figure 1, B) inscribed on medallions at Raja ki-Bain Masjid (*c.* 912/1506) in north India.[6]

Ṭughrā flourished and dominated architectural calligraphy in Bengal during the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[7] Because of its distinctive ornamental style, this regional variety can aptly be called the Bengali *ṭughrā*. The Nīm Darwāza inscription (dated 871/1466–67; plate 1) at Miyāneh Dar in Gaur presents a fascinating example of this regional development. Its surface has been divided into thirty-two calligraphic panels, each alternating *ṭughrā* and monumental *thulth* styles. Interestingly, only in this inscription does the calligraphy resemble the Ottoman *ṭughrā*. In monumental

[6] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd ed., s. v. 'Ṭughrā in Muslim India'.
[7] Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, 'a1-Ṭughrā wa Istikhdāmuhā fī 'l-Bangāl' *al-Fayṣal*, 148 (May/June 1989): 95–100.

Bengali *ṭughrā*, the convoluted uprights (*muntaṣibāt*) of the vertical letters are highly stylized, often bearing the characteristics of the letter *alif* of *thulth* with distinctive features of *zulf*, *badn* and *sayf* (Figure 1, A). While the crescent-like undulating curves represented by the oval letters such as *nūn* (Figure 4, B; Figure 16, C) and *yā*', and in some cases the upper horizontal stroke (*shākilah*) of the letter *kāf* (Figure 12, D and Figure 13, A and B) and the word *fī* (Figure 4, C; Figure 15) are superimposed on the extended uprights of the vertical letters, the main body of the text clusters very thickly at the bottom rendering an extremely intricate pattern of writing (e.g. Masjid inscription in Sultanganj dated 879/1474, plate 15).[8] The calligraphers thus ranged freely in producing different forms and patterns of *ṭughrā*, using their imagination creatively (Figure 3). However, it is not difficult to find a rhythmic pattern in the movement of the letters and the flow of lines in Bengali *ṭughrās*, which often contained a metaphorical expression of life, nature, and the environment of Bengal in abstract forms ranging from the bow and arrow of Bengali hunting life to the boat and oars (Figure 2) or the swan and reeds of riverine rural Bengal (e.g. plate 15). *Ṭughrā* gradually lost its popularity in Bengal in the mid-sixteenth century.[9]

Nasta'līq was introduced in Bengal as a result of the growing influence of the Persian culture after the advent of Mughals to the region. The early Mughal inscriptions bear witness to how political turmoil and instability affect artistic continuity and development. Later Mughal inscriptions from a more stable time show better taste and greater refinement. An example of this is a milestone over a bridge in Chapatali dated 1102/1690 (plate 16) which displays very accurate measurement and proportion in its lettering scheme in *nasta'līq* style (see, for instance, letter lām in Figure 18). A rare form of calligraphy is known as a *shikastah*, in which the lower ends of letters are tilted and twisted, finally merging into the next word. A crude form of *shikastah* can be seen on the tombstone of Ghazi Ibrahim from Rajmahal, dated 964/1554.

Plate 15. A masjid inscription from Sultanganj, from the reign of Yusuf Shāh, now in the Varendra Research Museum, dated 879 (1474).

[8] Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, 'An epigraphical journey to an eastern Islamic land', *Muqarnas*, 7 (1990): 83–108.
[9] *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd ed., s. v. 'Ṭughrā in Muslim India'.

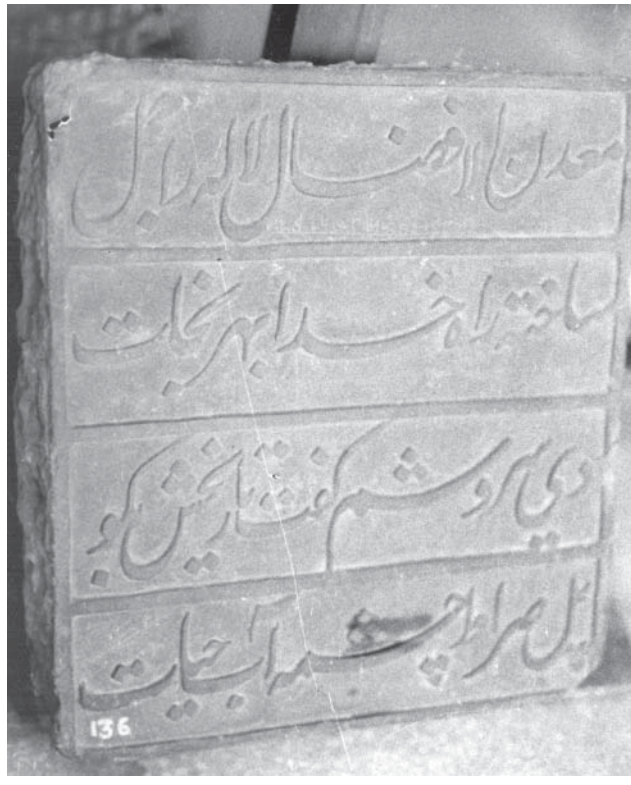

Plate 16. A milestone over a bridge in Chapatali, from the reign of Aurangzeb, now in Bangladesh National Museum, dated 1102 (1690–91).

A somewhat peculiar hybrid style, *ijāzah* (literally, permission from the mentor to exercise freely after completing penmanship training), can be seen in a few inscriptions in Bengal, such as the Shaykh 'Alā' al-Ḥaq masjid inscription, now in Bania Pukur, dated 743/1342, the Gunmant masjid inscription in Gaur dated 889/1484 and the masjid inscription in Sultanganj (plate 15; Figure 16). Though the style has certain established calligraphic rules and measurements, it can easily be confused with *nasta'līq*, *naskh* and *thulth*.

Though the calligraphic elements generally constitute the main decorative feature in the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal, we do find different aesthetic elements and motifs in the decorative layout of some of these inscriptions (Figures 19, 20, 21 and 22). Some superb examples of geometrical and vegetal motifs (Figure 19) can be seen in the undated Persian inscription from Sultanganj (plate 10). The Islamic inscriptions of Bengal indicate an overall cultural continuity of the Muslims of Bengal and their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world. Thus, in spite of their many distinctive local cultural features, one soon discovers in these wonderful epigraphic treasures a vibrant message—unity within diversity—that exists in one form or another almost everywhere in Islamic culture.[10]

[10] For the Islamization process in Bengal, see Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

FIG. 1. Shape A Letter *alif* الألف in *thulth*, Shape B *Allah Kāfī* (p. 13) الله كافي in *ṭughrā*, Shape C *Allah* الله in '*ijazah* in *tughra* style in a Masjid inscription, 861/1486.

FIG. 2. Symbolic representation of boat and oars that can be well imagined in Baliaghata inscription, 847/1443.

FIG. 3. Shape A Arabic word *da 'iman* دائما, Shape B Arabic word *nur* نور, Shape C Arabic word *mu'arrikhan* مؤرخا; Compound letters in different words in Bengal *ṭughrā* in Chilla Khana inscription, 898/1493.

FIG. 4. Shape A *shakila* of *kāf* on vertical letters, Shape B letter *nūn* نون, Shape C Arabic preposition *fi* في; Features of different letters in *thulth* in Bengal *ṭughrā* style, Darsbari Madrasa and Masjid inscription in 'Umarpur, dated 884/1479 (Plate 2).

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FIG. 5. Examples of letters in *Bihārī* style.

FIG. 6. Shape A the Arabic verb *kāna*, Shape B initial form of *sīn*, Shape C the letter *sīn*, Shape D the letter *alif*, Shape E the letter *kāf*, Shape F the letter *ta*, Shape G the preposition *min*, Shape H the compound word *'alayha*, Shape I the word *'ahd*, Shape J *wajh al-hirra* in Bihārī style; Diagrams of letters and words in *Bihārī* style with Bengal *ṭughrā* decorative features in the inscription on the mausoleum of Nār al-'Ālam in Hadrat Pandua, 863/1459 (Plate 3).

FIG. 7. Diagrams of the letter *alif* and the word *al-a'zam* in *Bihārī* style with Bengali *ṭughrā* decorative features as in the madrasa/masjid inscription in Navagram, dated 858/1454.

FIG. 8. Diagrams of the word *al-salam*, (in which a letter *alif* before the last letter *mim* is missing), the preposition *fī*, and the verb *qāla* in *Bihārī* style with Bengali *ṭughrā* decorative features in the masjid inscription in Mandaroga dated 850/1446.

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FIG. 9. Shape A The letter *kaf*, Shape B The divine name *Allah*, Shapes C, D and E The letters *ba, ta* and *alif*, Shape F The Arabic pronoun *hadha*; Diagrams of letters and words in *Bihārī* style with Bengali *ṭughrā* decorative features in the masjid inscription in Naswa Gali, dated 863/1459.

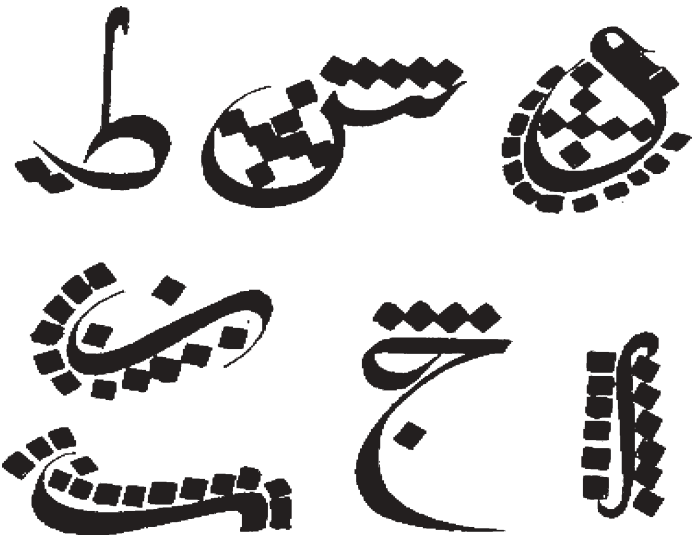

FIG. 10. Examples of some letters in *riqa'* style with majestic dots for calligraphic measurement.

FIG. 11. Shape A: *al-'Ādil* العادل, Shape B: Initial form of the letter *sīn* س, Shape C: *wajh al-hirra* وجه الحرة; Diagrams of some words and letters in *riqā'* style with Bengali *ṭughrā* decorative features as they appeared in the Ḥāṭim Khān palace inscription in Bihar Sharif dated 707/1307 (Plate 7).

FIG. 12. Shape A: *al-khalā'iq* الخلائق, Shapes B and C: the word *lā*, and the letter *alif*, Shape D: *shākilah* of: *al-kaf* الكاف; Diagrams of words and letters in *riqa'* style with Bengali *ṭughrā* decorative features in the masjid inscription in Ḥāṭim Khān palace in Bihar Sharif dated 715/1315 (Plate 8).

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Shape A Shape B Shape C

FIG. 13. The letter *kāf* and its *Shākila* in certain special forms popularly known as *al-kāf al-thu'bani* or the Python shape *kāf*: shape A in a fountain inscription dated 910/1504 now in the British Museum, shape B in a Masjid inscription in Deotala dated 868/1464, and shape C in a Masjid/Madrasa inscription in Naohata from the reign of Balka Khan, 1229–30.

Shape A Shape B

FIG. 14. A peculiar variety of Bengali pseudo *muḥaqqaq* calligraphic style in a khanqah inscription in Gaur dated 887/1482: shape A represents the word *abū* with an extra *alif* at the end, and shape B represents the letter *alif*.

Shape A Shape B Shape C Shape D

FIG. 15. Arabic preposition *fī* superimposed on the top of symmetrically arranged vertical letters found in a number of inscriptions of Bengal: Shapes A and B in a Masjid inscription in Deotala dated 868/1464; and shapes C and D in a Masjid inscription in Sultanganj dated 879/1474 (Plate 15).

Shape A Shape B Shape C Shape D

FIG. 16. Diagrams of certain letters and their different parts in a masjid inscription in Sultanganj dated 879/1474, (Plate 15) rendered in a calligraphic style sometimes known as *ijaza*: shapes A and B represent different forms of the letter *kāf* with a over-imposing *shākila* on the top of the main vertical of the letter; shape C represents three *nūn*s placed one above the other, each belonging to a different word; Shape D represents three dots of the letter *shīn*.

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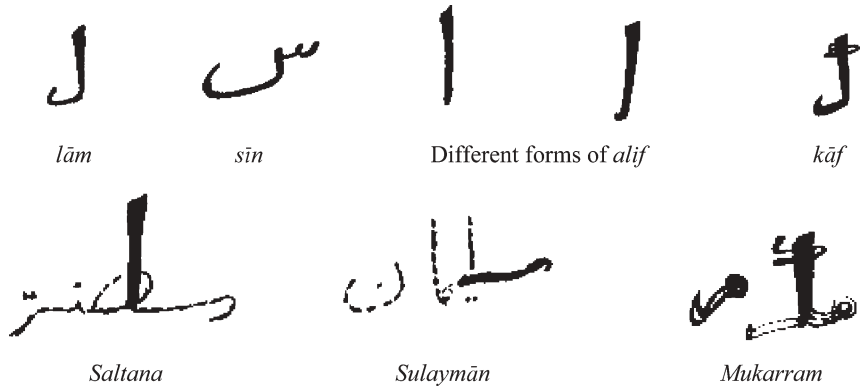

FIG. 17. Diagrams of some letters and words in the Madrasa Dār al-Khayrāt inscription in Tribeni dated 713/1313 (Plate 9) rendered in a calligraphic style close to *ruq'a*.

FIG. 18. The letter lām in *nasta'līq* style in a milestone in Chapatali, dated 1102/1690–91 (Plate 16).

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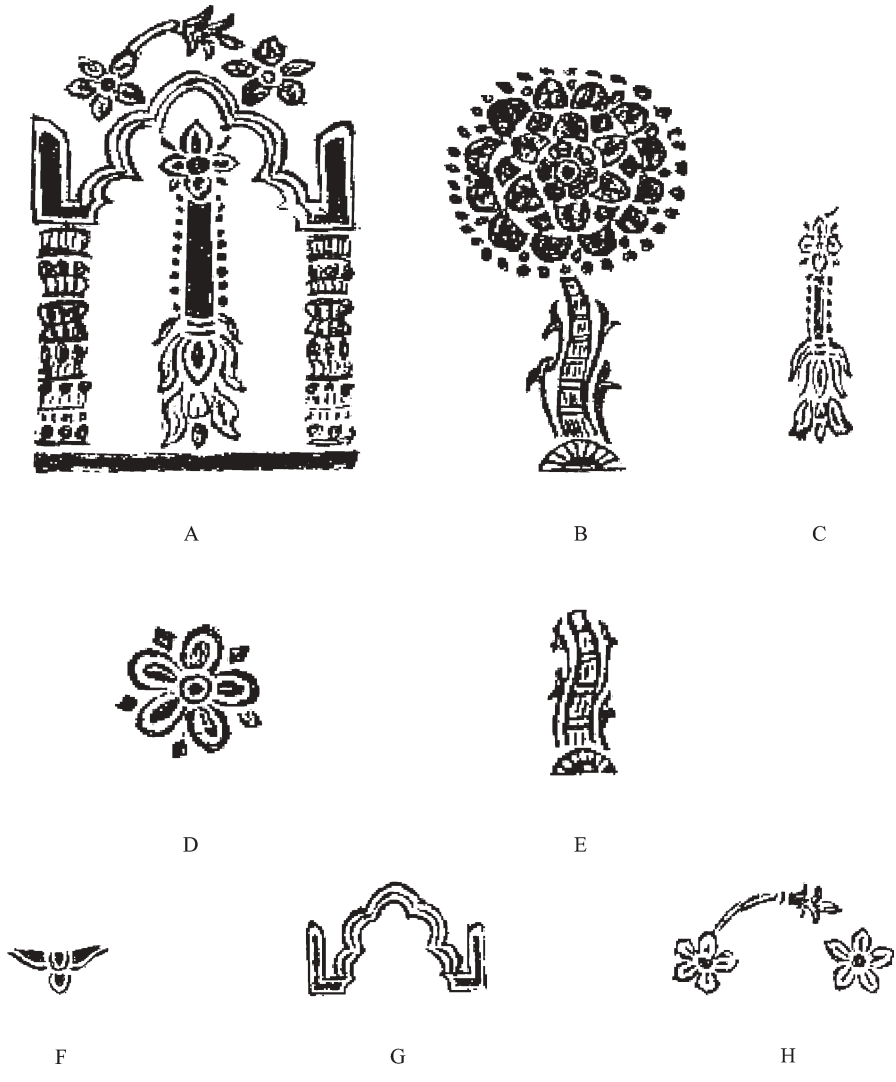

FIG. 19. Vegetal and geometric motifs decorating the background of an undated Persian inscription from Sultanganj now preserved in Varendra Research Museum, which reads: '*amne āmān bād az āfathā'e charkhī*' (Plate 10).

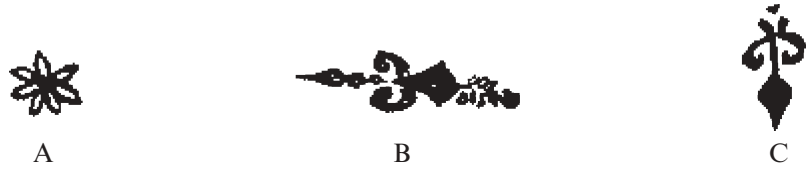

FIG. 20. Certain decorative motifs that appear in a khanqah inscription from Gaur now preserved in Varendra Research Museum dated 887/1482.

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A B

FIG. 21. Some decorative motifs that can be found in 'Ala al-Khan Masjid inscription in Hathazari dated 878/1473.

FIG. 22. Vegetal decorative motifs in a masjid Inscription Sulatanganj dated 879/1474.

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II. *Some new Arabic inscriptions from Gaur and Pandua*

(1) A stone tablet of an unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Pandua from the reign of al-Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Muḥammad Shāh

Original site: An unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Pandua, Malda District, West Bengal, India.

Current location: Fixed on a grave adjacent to the northern wall of the mosque located in the Khanqah of Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn Tabrizi (d. 1244–45) in Pandua, Malda district, West Bengal.

Material; size: Black basalt; 20×9 inches.

Style; no. of lines: Monumental *Bihārī*; two lines.

Reign: Sultan Jalāl al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Muḥammad Shāh (818–35/1415–31).

Language: Arabic.

Type: Commemorative inscription of a Masjid.

Text (Plate 17)

L1 [قال الله تعالى وأن المساجد لله فلا تدعوا مع] الله أحدا قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى مسجدا [بنى الله له سبعين قصرا في الجنة]

L2 [بنى المسجد في عهد السلطان جلال] الدنيا والدين أبو المظفر محمد شاه السلطان خلّد ملكه بناه معظم الدين والدولة الغ عزالدين سلمه الله . . .

Translation

L1 [Allah, the Exalted, has said, 'And verily the mosques belong to Allah only; so do not call anyone] with Allah (72:18)'. The Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said, 'Whosoever builds a mosque, [Allah will build for him seventy palaces in Paradise].'

Plate 17. A stone tablet of an unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Pandua from the reign of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh.

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L2 [This masjid was built during the era of Sultan Jalāl al-Dunyā] wa 'l-Dīn abu 'l-Muẓaffar Muḥammad Shāh al-Sulṭān, may his kingdom perpetuate. Mu'aẓẓam al-Dīn wa'l-Dawla Ulugh 'Izz al-Dīn built it, may Allah protect him.

Discussion

This stone tablet belongs to a very important transitional period of Sultanate rule in Muslim Bengal when an indigenous Bengali ruler, Sultan Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad, reigned in the region after converting to Islam. His rule was a significant departure from the previous traditions for a number of reasons, the most important being that he was a native Bengali Muslim rather than an immigrant. His father was an influential local Bengali Hindu landlord who seized power from a weak Ilyās Shāhī ruler 'Alā' al-Dīn Fīrūz Shāh through a palace *coup d'état*. But eventually he faced growing opposition from the influential 'ulamā' and sufi shaykhs.

As with most of the other parts of the Islamic world, the relationship between the ruling class and the 'ulamā', as well as sufi shaykhs in Bengal during this period, could at best be called a love-hate relationship and was often mired in hidden tension, an uncomfortable state of mutual acceptance that prevails in the region perhaps to this day. 'Ulamā' and sufi shaykhs were particularly concerned about the growing influence of the Hindu elite and bureaucracy who held high positions in state affairs. Among the sufi shaykhs, Nūr Quṭb al-'Ālam, who resisted the growing political influence of Raja Kansa (probably a misspelling of Sanskrit Ganesha), was the most vocal. A powerful Bengali Hindu landlord of Bhaturia in Barindra, Raja Kansa seized power around 1414 and again during 1416–17, but finally lost his bid to impose Hindu Sanskrit culture in the land, as his son Jadu embraced Islam through Nūr Quṭb al-'Ālam. After the enthronement of Jadu, who took the name of Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Muḥammad Shāh, Bengal looked to Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Cairo and the other cultural and intellectual centres of the Arab world for its religious and cultural frame of reference rather than depending solely on the Persian sphere of influence in north India and Central Asia. Conversion of an influential local Hindu elite to Islam had a far-reaching effect as it set an important precedent for the further Islamization of upper-class Hindus in Bengal.

Thus during the reign of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad, another important phase of the consolidation of Islam began in the region in the form of an indigenous Bengali Islamic culture. In his successful pursuit of formal recognition and nomination as amīr by the Abbasid caliph in Cairo, he sent his envoys to Sultan Barsbay in Egypt with royal gifts. He also sent generous endowments to Mecca and Medina to build two madrasas there which became famous as Bengali madrasas. This renewed age-old Arab–Bengal relationship once flourished through the Arab maritime trade activities in the southern coastal line on the Bay of Bengal long before Bakhtiyār's conquest of Gaur. This also helped the Bengali Islamic culture draw closer to important religious centres in Arabia. Though this Bengali Muslim dynasty did not last long (as the former Ilyās Shāhi dynasty was restored in 841/1437), the religious trend could not be averted.

During his reign, art, architecture and culture flourished in a distinctive regional style. Like this inscription, all of his other inscriptions were rendered in *Bihārī*, a regional calligraphic style that flourished in South Asia. The texts of most of the inscriptions of this period are written in pure Arabic with

no Persian words, perhaps a reflection of the policy of Sultan Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh who always preferred cultivating closer relations with the Arab world rather than depending solely on the cultural links with the Muslim sultanates in Delhi and Central Asia.[11]

(2) Commemorative inscription of a religious edifice in Gaur from the reign of Sulṭān Maḥmūd Shāh, dated 847 (1443)

Original site: An unidentified religious edifice somewhere around Gaur in Malda district, West Bengal.
Current location: Collected and preserved at Gaur Social Welfare Mission Museum (Registered with Department of Art and Culture under Government Art and Antiquities Rule 10=973, Lalbazar, P.O.: Uttar Mahdipur, Registration no. S-85650) by its honorary curator Mr Sadeq Shaykh.
Material; size: Black basalt; not known.
Style; No. of lines: *thulth*; single line.
Reign: Sulṭān Maḥmūd Shāh (841–864/1437–60).
Language: Arabic.
Type: Commemorative inscription of a religious edifice.
Publication: None.

Text (Plate 18)

ر . . [خلد الله] . . ملكه وأعلى أمره وشأ[نه] بني . . الله . . على يد شخص المخاطب بعالي الشان شرف الزمان

ابقاه [الله] وبني في التاريخ غرة شهر شعبان سنة سبع وأربعين ثمانماية

Plate 18. A commemorative inscription of a religious edifice in Gaur from the reign of Maḥmūd Shāh, dated 847 (1443).

[11] For further discussion, see Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Riḥla ma'a 'l-Nuqūsh al-Kitābiyya al-Islamiyyah fī 'l-Bangāl: Darāsa Tārīkhiyyah Ḥaḍariyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2004, 430–31).

Translation
… ; May Allah perpetuate his kingdom and elevate his affairs and position, it was built … Allah … at the hand of a person who is addressed as ʻĀlī al-Shān Sharf al-Zamān; May Allah protect him. It was built during the date, the first of the month of Shaʻbān, in the year eight hundred and forty seven.

Discussion
The stone tablet under discussion is only a tiny fragment of what seems to be a fairly large stone inscription that once decorated an edifice (most likely a masjid) somewhere in Gaur. The edifice was erected under the patronage of a person who apparently enjoyed a respectable status in the area as indicated by his title ʻĀlī al-Shān Sharf al-Zamān. Unfortunately, nothing more is known about him. Calligraphically, the inscription represents a rather simple variety of *thulth* when compared with other monumental inscriptions of Gaur during this period.

(3) An inscription of Nīm Darwāza at Miyāneh Dar in the Citadel of Gaur from the reign of Bārbak Shāh, dated 871 (1466–67) currently fixed on Mīnārwālī (Indarawala) Masjid in Mahdipur
Original site: The second gate of Miyāneh Dar (middle gates)—commonly known as Nīm Darwāza (Halfway Entrance)—in Gaur, in the police station of IngrezBazar in Malda district, West Bengal.
Current location: The lower panel, in almost intact form, is fixed over an arch of the façade of a newly built jāmiʻ masjid (still under construction) locally known as Mīnārwālī Masjid or Indarawala Masjid, Mahdipur village, Malda district. A tiny fragment of the first part of the inscription, with which the upper panel of the text started, has been found and preserved by Mr Sadeq Shaykh, Honorary Curator of Gaur Social Welfare Mission Museum (Registered with Department of Art and Culture under Government Art and Antiquities Rule 10=973, Lalbazar, P. O.: Uttar Mahdipur, registration no. S-85650).
Material; size: Black basalt; 111×16 inches.
Style; no. of lines: *Rayḥānī* (akin to monumental *thulth*) and *ṭughrā* interchangeably in 16 rectangular panels in each line; two lines (the upper-line, except a tiny portion at the beginning, is currently missing).
Reign: Sulṭān Bārbak Shāh (864–78/1460–74).
Language: Arabic (except a few Persian words at the end).
Meter: *Baḥr al-Basīṭ*. (مستفعلن فاعلن مستفعلن فاعلن). The meter scheme is not properly observed throughout. A number of verses are thus broken or faulty.
Type: Commemorative inscription from a monumental entrance of a palace garden.
Publication: Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Riḥla maʻa ʼl-Nuqūsh al-Kitābiyya al-Islamiyyah fī ʼl-Bangāl: Darāsa Tārīkhiyyah Ḥaḍariyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2004, 421–2).

Text
Upper panel: The whole line is missing except a very small fragment of the first part of the inscription which reads:

بعد المحامد رنّ الإنس والجان

ابن تقدّم عن حَدَثٍ وعن قُرَنٍ

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Lower panel (Plate 1):

ما امّه مُقتر يرجو سماحته — إلا ولي قادم وهو غني

وداره مالها ثان فاق دائما — ومصّر عهده أمناً و هدى

تروق من حسنها فما رأى احد — بحسنها مثل علت مكانته

ازرى بنا ها عمّار الدنيا مشيّدين — ما زرت سنا في جنة عدن

للدار باب وسيع مشرف سمَهُ — فينتصر بنصرة الله خُلّد سلطانه

إحدى وسبعون عاما وثمانماية — فان تاريخ ذلك ذا شرف

فالله أسأله تشييد ملِكَتَه — مخلد وحده في الأرض مبارك

در دور سلطنت شاه جهانپناه — ركن الدنيا والدين أبو المظفر باربكشاه

[السلطا] ن خُلّد ملكه وسلطانه — ببناء ميانه در بسنة احدى وسبعين [و] ثما[نماية]

Translation
(Remaining fragment of the upper panel):
After praises, as (both) human beings and jinns resounded,
A son (i.e. the author of these verses) came forward to narrate the happenings about the surrounding.
(Lower panel):
Whenever a needy person approaches him cherishing his kindness,
Due to his graciousness, he appears to be prominently wealthy.
His dwelling is unmatched (there is no other of its kind), as it has stood the test of time,
His reign is well settled in peace and with righteousness.
It (the edifice) excels in its charms that none has seen before,
With its exemplary beauty; indeed its position is marvelled.
Its building has humbled architects and builders of the world,
Like the illuminating glamour of Paradise in Eden.
For this dwelling, there is a monumental entrance, a symbol of vigilance,
With God's help, he is always victorious; may his kingdom be perpetuated.
The year eight-hundred-and-seventy-one,
Indeed this date is of great honour.
Thus I seek from Allah furtherance of His gift,
Who alone is the Sustainer on this blessed earth.
In the era of the sultanate of Shāh Jahān-Panāh [the refuge of the universe],
Rukn al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Bārbak Shāh Sulṭān.
May his kingdom and authority be long lasting (continued),
Along with the building of Miyānah Dar, in the year eight-hundred-and-seventy-one.

Discussion
This is undoubtedly one of the finest and most exquisite Arabic inscriptions of the ninth century AH (fifteenth century CE) in the Islamic world. Its beautifully structured rhyme in elegant Arabic literary style suggests that Arabic had a strong impact on the cultural life of Bengal and that it was taught in the

madrasas of this region with great depth. The literary style of these verses has a striking similarity in its composition with Qaṣīda al-Burda of Imām al-Buṣīrī. But since the purpose of the text is as a commemorative inscription, exactness of meter (*Baḥr al-Basīṭ*) in its poetic rhyme could not be observed throughout.

This inscription was recently discovered by the author in a locally constructed mosque in the village of Mahdipur, which arose out of the ruins of the once-thriving capital of Muslim Bengal, Gaur. Though the Muslim rulers of Bengal shifted their capitals several times from Gaur to other places such as Pandua, Tanda, Rajmaḥal, Dhaka and Murshidabad, this ancient city completely lost the patronage of its ruling class towards the end of the sixteenth century. Consequently, its population dwindled rapidly. According to a number of early English visitors—such as Franklin, Creighton and Orme—the city in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had turned into a deserted wasteland enclosed in deep and thick jungles and inhabited by wild beasts.[12] The population of this area grew only after independence in 1947 as a result of the sudden influx of Hindu refugees (particularly certain lower caste Hindus such as Gowala or milkmen) to the region. Most of the houses in the village of Mahdipur as well as in the other villages of the area are constructed with bricks unsparingly pillaged from the magnificent sultanate buildings of the fabulous Muslim capital of Gaur, once named Jannatabad (literally, an abode in Paradise) by the second Mughal emperor Humayun. This age-old custom became a common practice in the area, which robbed this ancient capital of most of its superb architectural heritage. Famous for their solidness, outer guild and ornamentation, these bricks (particularly the enamelled ones) were highly prized and were well sought after for new construction even in many far reaching cities such as Calcutta, the colonial capital of India. With the passage of time, these bricks earned a special name, 'Gauriyo Bricks'.

The inscription is almost identical to another inscription of Bārbak Shāh in the same location, now preserved in the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in its layout, decorative pattern, literary style, date and every other aspect. Thus one can safely presume that both of these superb inscriptions once decorated the façades of the two identical, yet different magnificent entrances located midway between Dākhil Darwāza (to the extreme north of the citadel) and the private palace of the sultans (in the centre of the Badshāhī citadel complex facing the old and original channel of the then mighty River Bhagirathi to the west (which has since dried up)). Both of these entrances are mentioned in these two separate inscriptions as 'Mianehdar', a clear reference to the monumental entrances in the middle of a beautifully paved way leading to the interior of the fabulous sultanate palace. These entrances were outstandingly decorated as can be seen in an illustration of Chānd Darwāza drawn by Henry Creighton towards the end of the eighteenth century. A rectangular location of the size of the present inscription is clearly visible in the illustration just above the second arch in the arcade of Chānd Darwāza.[13] An inscription, dated 871 AH, was indeed seen by Creighton in the debris of the ruined parts of the entrance.[14] He moved this inscription, along with some others, and a number of other valuable antiques, from the area to his Nīlkuṯhī (English indigo factory) in Goamaloty, two or three miles north of Dākhil Darwāza. This was the first collection of the antiquities of Bengal ever

[12] Orme, *Gowre: Description of its ruins with four inscriptions taken in Arabic*, MS. in India Office Library, London, MS. (EUR) No. 65:25; Henry Creighton, *The Ruins of Gaur* (London: Black, Parbury, and Allen, 1817), 2–7.
[13] Creighton, *The Ruins of Gaur*, Plate 3.
[14] ibid., Plate 3 (description).

made, and it in effect turned his Nīlkuthī into a sort of small museum in the vicinity, noted by several European visitors to the area including Buchanan Hamilton. Although Creighton came to Bengal as a fortune seeker who exploited every means to increase indigo production for a maximum profit, often at the expense of local farmers, he gradually fell in love with the ruins of Gaur.[15]

Shayam Prasad—a munshī (scribe/clerk) and a local assistant to William Franklin (an English regulating officer of Bhagalpur)—also noticed the inscription of Chānd Darwāza. Not surprisingly he found its writing extremely intricate, yet stylistically very elegant. After much effort and with great difficulty he deciphered it quite accurately.[16] The whole complex, according to Munshī Shayam Prasad, was popularly known as Qil'a Dawlatkhāna Bādshāhī (royal residential palace and citadel). Both Chānd Darwāza and Nīm Darwāza led to Maḥal Khāṣ Bādshāhī (Ḥawēlī Khāṣ, according to Franklin) or the private palace of the sultans. The private palace was divided into several wings: Dīwān Khāna (popularly known as Darbār Maḥal) or the royal court (mentioned as the Public Hall of Audience by Franklin), followed by Jalwa Khāna or Khāṣ Maḥal (mentioned as the Dwelling House of the Sovereign by Franklin, probably the royal chambers), Bēgum Maḥal (the imperial harem) and Khazāna Kothrī (treasury). The complex served as the main palace of the later Ilyās Shāhī rulers of Bengal, a significant part of which—particularly Chānd Darwāza and Nīm Darwāza—was constructed during the reign of Bārbak Shāh. The main road passing through these monumental gates was flanked by fabulous gardens, orchards, canals and artificial lakes as mentioned in both of these inscriptions.

The Chānd Darwāza inscription was also seen by Major Franklin, as mentioned in his journal.[17] Around December 1810, he found it in Goamaloti and took possession of it,[18] a common practice among European amateur antiques collectors of that time. Franklin also collected a number of valuable Islamic manuscripts from the mosques and khanqas of Gaur and Pandua, as did Francis Buchanan Hamilton (See *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description*) almost in the same period. Among these manuscripts, the one in Persian (unfortunately long lost) that he claimed to procure from Perua (Pandua) seems to be the main source for his reconstruction of the chronology

[15] Creighton lived in the area for almost twenty years (1787–1807). His book—published posthumously—was the first full account of Gaur with many rich illustrations, and is still considered a valuable primary source. The epitaph on his grave (grave no. 150, located at the north-east of the graveyard) in Babulbona, Bahrampur, W. Bengal (unfortunately stolen a few years ago) recorded the following: 'HENRY CREIGHTON OF GOAMALOTY, Date of Death: 2nd October, 1807, Age–44 years; FIRST INSTITUTOR OF A NATIVE SCHOOL, FOR INSTRUCTING POOR CHILDREN IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE'. Thus in addition to being an amateur archaeologist, a natural artist and an accomplished indigo planter, he was also one of the very few pioneers who ventured to set up a vernacular primary school for poor local students. The use of Bengali language for basic education was indeed a revolutionary idea at that time.

[16] Munshī Shayam Prasad, *Ahwal-i-Gaur wa Pandua*, India Office Library, MS. 2841, edited by Ahmad Hasan Dani and published as an Appendix to *Muslim Architecture of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1961), 14–15.

[17] William Franklin, *Ruins of Gaur*. Written in 1810, it was sent by Major Franklin (then a regulating officer stationed at Bhagalpur) from Bhagalpur to the Court of the Directors for Conducting the Affairs of the United East India Company, along with a map, a few drawings (map and drawings have long since disappeared) of the celebrated city of Gaur, and a covering letter dated 12 April 1812. See India Office Library, London, MS. No. 19; the printed version of which is now preserved in the map room of the India Office Library, London. MS. No. C506=W 5761. (It was printed in 1910 in Shillong as an official document (reference no. E. B. & A. S. P. O. (R. & A.) No. 76—100—9-3-1910—G.N.K.) It was acquired on 3 June 1910. Franklin joined the 19th Regiment of Native Infantry in 1788, became Lieutenant in 1789, Captain in 1803, Major in 1810, Lieut. Colonel in 1814, and finally retired as a Colonel in 1824.

[18] Franklin, *Ruins of Gaur*, MS. No. C506=W 5761, f. 3.

of Muslim rule in Bengal.[19] While returning finally to England, he carried with him most of his antique collections. The manner of transporting these tablets (including one now in Philadelphia, measuring 97×35.5 inches) from Gaur to his country home in England remains something of a mystery. These large, bulky stone slabs were first moved from their original location in Gaur, by Creighton, to a Nīlkuthī at Goamaloty towards the end of eighteenth century using bull-carts. When Franklin found them in Creighton's abandoned Nīlkuthī in Goamaloty in December 1810, while visiting Gaur, he took possession of them. In a subsequent monsoon season, when the dried channel of the Bhagirathi river near the Nīlkuthī swelled with water, Franklin managed to send all these inscriptions, along with his own collections, directly to Calcutta in a large boat, from where they were finally shipped to England some time toward the end of 1820s when he left Bengal for good. He donated a number of them to the British Museum, most of which are now stored in its basement depository. When the author examined these inscriptions in 1982, he found Franklin's name (exact text: 'Presented by Colonel Franklin') incised in Latin characters on the upper rims of a number of them.[20]

We have no idea about the rest of his collections, which probably still remain unnoticed in the basements or attics of obscure English country houses without being properly valued by his descendants. This has been the case with a large number of antiques of Bengal acquired by British collectors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A rare exception, however, was the inscription of Chānd Darwāza, which somehow passed into the hands of Thomas Hope, a famous collector of Greek and Roman vases and sculpture. The inscription remained with the descendants of Thomas Hope at his country estate at Deepdene, near Dorking, Surrey (acquired by Hope in 1807), until the Hope collections were auctioned by Christie's in 1917. It was purchased by Mr H. Kevorkian, a US art dealer, in London the same year; he sold it finally to the University Museum, Philadelphia, in 1924, ending the long and uncertain journey of this inscription.[21] Unfortunately, Franklin's most valuable collection, the Persian manuscript on Bengal history that he procured in Perua (in Pandua), has not yet come to light; this could have undoubtedly provided much valuable information on early Muslim rule in Bengal which is not available elsewhere.

Franklin, however, does not mention the name of the second entrance as Nīm Darwāza. Rather he describes it as another gateway, opposite Chānd Darwāza, built of bricks and beautifully decorated with flowered work. It was about 25 feet high and the arch, through which one could enter, was 15 by 6 feet in breadth, which appeared to him as the entrance to Khazāna Kothrī (the sultanate treasury). Its inscriptions (which undoubtedly include the inscription that is now fixed on Mīnārwālī Masjid in Mahdipur), had already been carried away.[22]

While the Chānd Darwāza inscription in the University Museum in Philadelphia remains almost intact, the Nīm Darwāza inscription is badly damaged—the upper portion containing the first line has been lost. Thanks to the Muslim villagers of Mahdipur, who saved the part of the inscription

[19] ibid., f. 19.

[20] One such example is Fīrūz Mīnār inscription (no. 95) of Sultan Sayf al-Dīn Fīrūz Shāh (British Museum inventory no. OA+6415).

[21] Nabih A. Faris and G. C. Miles, 'An inscription of Bārbak Shāh of Bengal', *Ars Islamica*, VI (1940): 141–7.

[22] Franklin, *Ruins of Gaur*, MS. No. C506=W 5761, f. 4.

(containing the second line) because of the reverence for Arabic writing in Islamic traditions. Fortunately, a tiny fragment of the upper portion (i.e., first line) was found by an amateur archaeologist of the village who saved it for a musuem in the village. In all probability, the inscription somehow survived in its original (complete) form until recently. Its upper part was probably broken while the villagers attempted to move this huge inscription to the Mīnārwālī Masjid, though the remaining fragmented parts of the upper line of the inscription could no longer be traced.

The length of this inscription is slightly (almost 13 inches) larger than its counterpart now preserved in the University Museum in Philadelphia. The height of the remaining half portion (i.e. 16 inches) suggests that together with the upper line, the total height of the inscription would have been between 34 and 36 inches. Owing to some damage to the rim that occurred either because of the chiselling process to fit it to its current location or some other factors, the existing portion of this black basalt slab has lost certain parts of its writing, particularly in its upper border. In addition, parts of its rims have been lost because of the unprofessional set up of the inscription within a concrete wall as well as the crude application of whitewash while the building was being painted.

The writing of this inscription is divided into 16 vertical rectangular panels (frames) representing two different elaborate calligraphic styles interchangeably (alternatively) placed in each panel, the very open style of *rayḥānī* (akin to monumental bold *thulth*) in one panel and the compact style of *ṭughrā'* in the next. Unlike the distinctive traditional Bengali *ṭughrā'* style often characterized by the unbroken repetition of elongated verticals which are found in most of the sultanate inscriptions of Bengal, *ṭughrā'* in this inscription rather resembles the decorative style of Mamluk *ṭughrā'* (found, for instance, in the door panels of Umayyad mosques in Damascus) and to a lesser extent the Ottoman *ṭughrā*. The varying rhythm of the calligraphic programme and its symmetrical contrast make this inscription exceptionally graceful.

(4) A commemorative inscription of an unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Gaur from the Reign of al-Sulṭān Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Naṣr Muẓaffar Shāh, dated 897 (1490)

Original site: An unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Gaur, IngrezBazar police station, Malda district, West Bengal.

Current location: Collected and preserved at Gaur Social Welfare Mission Museum (Registered with Department of Art and Culture under Government Art and Antiquities Rule 10=973, Lalbazar, P. O.: Uttar Mahdipur, Registration no. S-85650) by its honorary curator Mr Sadeq Shaykh.

Material; size: Black basalt; 26×10 inches.

Style; no. of lines: Plaited *thulth* in monumental Bengali *ṭughrā*; single line.

Reign: Sultan Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Naṣr Muẓaffar Shāh [Sīdī Badr] (896–98/1491–93).

Language: Arabic.

Type: Commemorative inscription of a Masjid in Gaur.

Text (Plate 19)

قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى مسجدا لله بنى الله له سبعين قصرا في الجنة في عهد [الـ] سلطان شمس الدنيا

والدين ‹أبو›أبي› النصرمظفر شاه سلطان [بنى] هذا المسجد الملك الماس سلمه الله تعالى في الدارين وذلك في التاريخ عشرين

ماه شعبان قدره سنة سبع وتسعين وثمانماية

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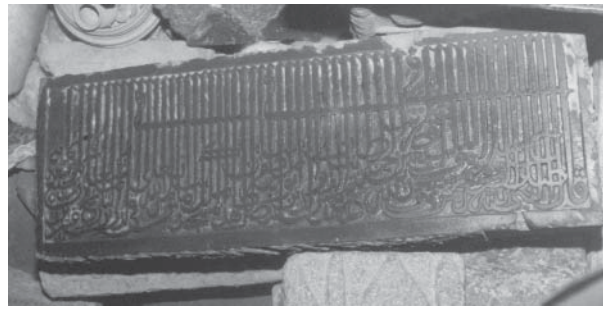

Plate 19. A commemorative inscription of an unidentified Sultanate Masjid in Gaur from the reign of Shams al-Dīn Abu 'l-Naṣr Muẓaffar Shāh, dated 897 (1490).

Translation

The Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said, 'Whosoever builds a mosque for the sake of Allah, Allah will build for him seventy palaces in Paradise'. During the era of Sultan Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Naṣr Muẓaffar Shāh Sulṭān, al-Malik Almās (built) this masjid, may the Almighty Allah keep him in peace in both of the abodes (worlds). This was (done) in the date, the twentieth of the month of Sha'bān, the year eight hundred and ninety seven.

Discussion

This newly discovered inscription is a fine example of Islamic calligraphy from the reign of Sultan Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Naṣr Muẓaffar Shāh, during whose brief rule the Bengal sultanate was extended from Champaran, Bihar to Kalna, Burdwan. He was the last sultan of the four so-called Ḥabshī (Abyssinian) rulers who reigned Bengal for a very short transitional period between the restored Ilyās Shāhī dynasty and the Ḥusayn Shāhī dynasty, for approximately six years during 893–898/1487–1493.

In its calligraphy, we find a continuation of the distinctive sultanante decorative style that prevailed in the earlier sultanate inscriptions particularly featured in the elongation of vertical letters (i.e. *alif, lām*, etc.), their arrangement in a symmetrical order, and the superimposition of the horizontally elongated Arabic preposition *fī* at the top. The text in the inscription cannot be considered perfectly idiomatic, as it needed an Arabic verb *buniya* (constructed by) before the phrase *hadha 'l-masjid* (this mosque) to convey a complete sense. The title *al-malik* (king/lord) used before the name of the patron of the masjid—Almās—seems to have been used to convey the meaning of a powerful lord in the sultanate court, and clearly not to mean a king.

(5) Masjid inscription from Gaur from the reign of Husayn Shāh, now fixed on Mīnārwālī (Indarawala) Masjid in Mahdipur, dated 899 (1494)

Original site: An unidenfied sultanate mosque somewhere around Gaur in Malda district, West Bengal.
Current location: Indarawala (Mīnārwālī) Masjid, Mahdipur village near Gaur.
Material; size: Black basalt, 18.5×9.5.
Style; no. of lines: Plaited *thulth* in monumental Bengali *ṭughrā*; single line.
Reign: Sultan Ḥusayn Shāh (899–925/1494–1519).
Language: Arabic.

Plate 20. A Masjid inscription from Gaur from the reign of Husayn Shāh now fixed on Indarawala (Mīnārwālī) Masjid in Mahdipur, dated 899 (1494).

Type: Commemorative inscription of a masjid.
Publication: None.

Text (Plate 20)

بنى في عهد السلطان علا و‹ء›الدنيا والدين ‹أبو›أبي المظفر حسين شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه بنى هذا المسجد

مجلس خرشيد ادام الله عزه وعلوه في سنة تسعماية

Translation

It was built in the reign of the Sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dunyā wa ’l-Dīn Abu ’l-Muẓaffar Ḥusayn Shāh al-Sulṭān, may Allah make his kingdom and authority everlasting. Majlis Khūrshīd—may Allah perpetuate his honour and greatness—built this mosque in the year nine hundred [1496].

Discussion

This masjid inscription was recently found by the author fixed to the extreme left of the qibla wall inside the Indarawala (Mīnārwālī) Masjid in Mahdipur village. The slab is slightly broken in the upper right corner. Some letters of its raised form of writing are significantly eroded. Recent non-professional white-wash around it has further decreased its legibility. The name of the patron, Majlis Khūrshīd, appeared in various other inscriptions of this period such as a Jāmi‘ Masjid inscription in Chapai Nawabganj dated 898/1492 from the reign of the Ḥabshī (Abyssinian) sultan Shams al-Dīn Muẓaffar Shāh, a Jāmi‘ Masjid inscription in Suti, Murshidabad, dated 909/1504 from the reign of Ḥusayn Shāh, and a Masjid inscription in Chittagong dated 921/1515, also from the reign of Ḥusayn Shāh. As his honorific title *majlis* suggests, he must have held an important office during the reign of the Ḥabshī (Abyssinian) rule in Bengal. He continued in his high position during the reign of Ḥusayn Shāh, and was posted towards the end of his official career as far away as Chittagong. There were several high-ranking officials by the name of Khūrshīd during the Sultanate period in Bengal. For example, the name appeared in

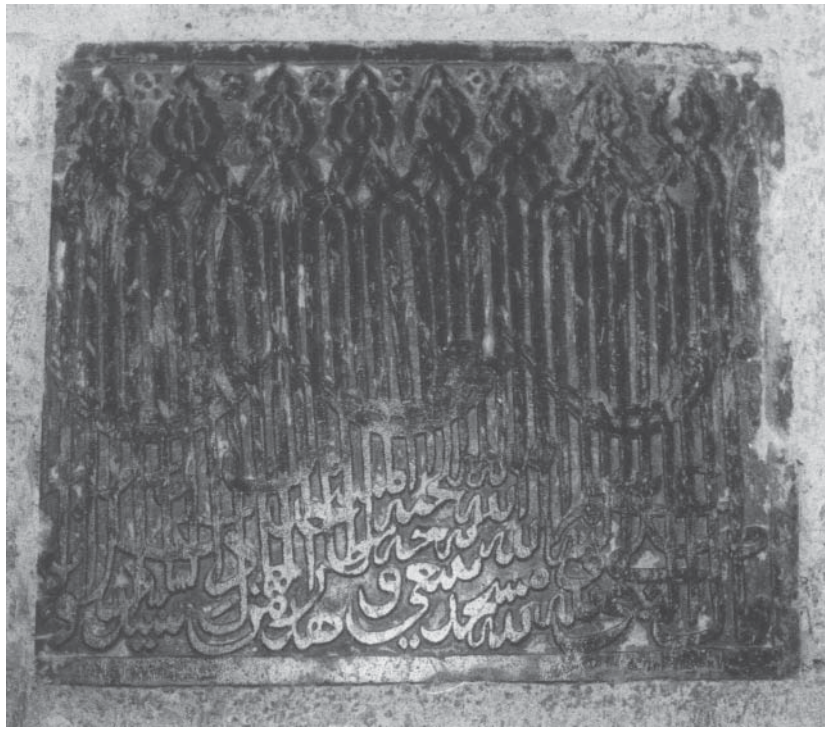

Plate 21. A Masjid inscription of Gaur from the reign of Ḥusayn Shāh now fixed on the Qibla wall of Indarawala Masjid in Mahdipur.

some inscriptions from the reign of Naṣīr al-Dīn Maḥmūd Shāh and Rukn al-Dīn Bārbak Shāh.

(6) A Masjid inscription of Gaur from the reign of Ḥusayn Shāh, now fixed on the Qibla wall of Mīnārwālī Masjid in Mahdipur
Original site: An unidentified mosque in Gaur.
Current location: Fixed on the qibla wall inside Indarawala (Mīnārwālī) Masjid in Mahdipur village near Gaur, Malda district, West Bengal.
Materials; size: Black basalt; 19×19.
Style; no. of lines: Monumental plaited *thulth* with features of Bengali *ṭughrā*; 2 lines.
Reign: Sulṭān Ḥusayn Shāh (899–925/1494–1519).
Language: Arabic.
Type: Commemorative inscription.
Publication: None.

Text (Plate 21)

L1 قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى مسجدا لله يبتغي به وجه الله بنى الله تعالى له [بيتا] مثله في الجنة بنى هذا

المسجد في زمن [الـ]سلطان العادل سيّد السادات علاو الدنيا والد[ين أبو المظفرحسين شاه السلطان خلّد الله ملكه وسلطانه]

Translation
L1 The Prophet—may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him—said: 'He who builds a mosque for Allah seeking Allah's favour, Allah—the

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Almighty—will build for him a similar abode in Paradise'. This mosque was built during the reign of the just Sultan Sayyid al-Sādāt 'Alā' al-Dunyā wa ['l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Ḥusayn Shāh al-Sulṭān; may Allah perpetuate his sovereignty and kingdom].

Discussion

This exquisite inscription has been rendered in an elegant plaited *thulth* style where elongated vertical letters at their upper ends are further twisted and are then finally merged in a unique way to create spiral-shape symmetrical designs flanked by four lobed flower shape decorative motifs. This creative stylistic approach has given the inscription an uncommon monumental effect. Plaited *Kūfī* was quite a popular style for monumental inscriptions in Islamic architecture in the Arab world and Central Asia until the beginning of the thirteenth century, whereas plaited *thulth* was used occasionally from the thirteenth century mostly in the western regions of South Asia. But in Bengal, this architectural inscription is the most striking example of such elegant monumental style.

Unfortunately, the rest of the inscription (at least half of it) can no longer be traced.

(7) Gate inscription of an unidentified Jāmi' Masjid in Pandua from the reign of Nuṣrat Shāh dated 930 (1524–25)

Original site: A Jāmi' Masjid, probably somewhere around Gaur or Pandua, Malda district, West Bengal.
Current location: B. R. Sen Museum in Malda town, inventory no. MMSI - 4.
Material; size: Black basalt; not known.
Style; no. of lines: *thulth*; 2 lines.
Reign: Nuṣrat Shāh (925–39 /1519–32).
Language: Arabic.
Type: Commemorative inscription.
Publication: None.

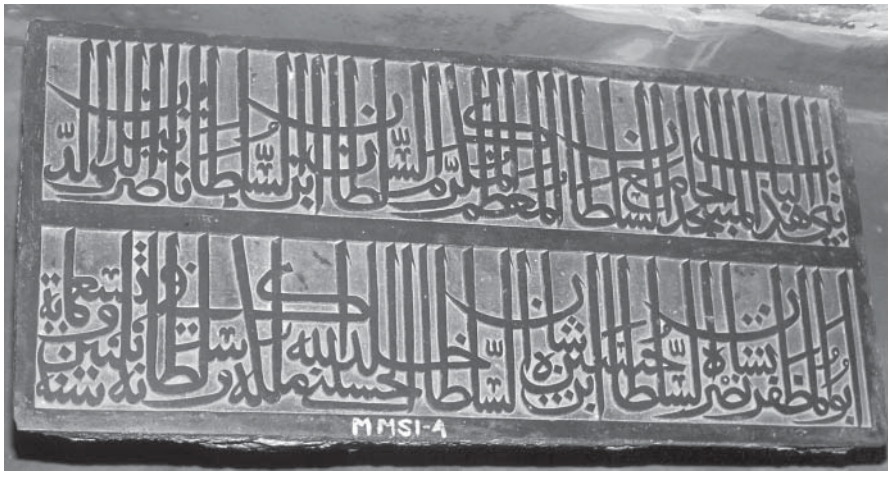

Plate 22. A Gate inscription of an unidentified Jāmi' Masjid in Pandua from the reign of Nuṣrat Shāh, dated 930 (1524–25).

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Text (Plate 22)

L1 بني هذا الباب [ا]لمسجد جامع السلطان المعظم المكرم السلطان ابن السلطان ناصر الدنيا والدين

L2 أبو المظفر نصرتشاه السلطان ابن حسين شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه في سنة ثلاثين وتسعماية

Translation

L1 This congregational mosque door was constructed in the reign of the exalted and honoured sultan—the sultan—son of the sultan, Nāṣir al-Dunyā' wa 'l-Dīn.

L2 Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Nuṣrat Shāh al-Sulṭān ibn Ḥusayn Shāh al-Sulṭān, may Allah perpetuate his kingdom and sovereignty; in the year nine hundred and thirty.

Discussion

Many of the Bengali sultans were not only actively engaged in architectural activities, but also took interest in the maintenance as well as enhancement of previous architectural heritage. In this inscription, it seems that Sultan Nuṣrat Shāh added a new monumental entrance to an already existing mosque in the vicinity of either Gaur or Pandua.

(8) An unidentified sultanate Masjid inscription from Gaur from the reign of Sultan Bārbak Shāh Dated 877 (1473), currently fixed on a Masjid in Horigram

Original site: An unidentified masjid somewhere in Gaur, Malda district, West Bengal.

Current location: Fixed on the eastern wall of a newly constructed Masjid in the village of Horigram, Malda district, West Bengal.

Material; size: Black basalt; 26×8.5 inches.

Style; no. of lines: Typical intricate decorative Bengali *ṭughrā* style; single line.

Reign: Sulṭān Bārbak Shāh (864–878/1459–74).

Language: Arabic, with a few Persian words at the end.

Type: Commemorative inscription of a masjid.

Publication: None.

Text (Plate 23)

قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم من بنى لله مسجدا في الدنيا بنى الله تعالى له سبعين قصرا في الجنة بنى هذا المسجد في عهد السلطان ابن السلطان ركن الدنيا والدين أبو المظفر باربكشاه ابن السلطان محمود شاه خلد ملكه بنا كرد اين مسجد خان محمد سعيد في سنة سبع وسبيعين ثمانماية

Translation

The Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said, 'Whosoever builds a mosque in this world for the sake of Allah, Allah—the exalted—will build for him seventy palaces in Paradise'. This masjid was built during the era of al-Sulṭān ibn al-Sulṭān Rukn al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Bārbak Shāh al-Sulṭān, son of al-Sulṭān Maḥmūd Shāh. Khān Muḥammad Sa'īd built this masjid in the year eight hundred and seventy-seven.

Discussion

The upper part of this inscription, above the main body of the Arabic text, has been decorated with beautiful ornamental designs, namely floral, vegetal and

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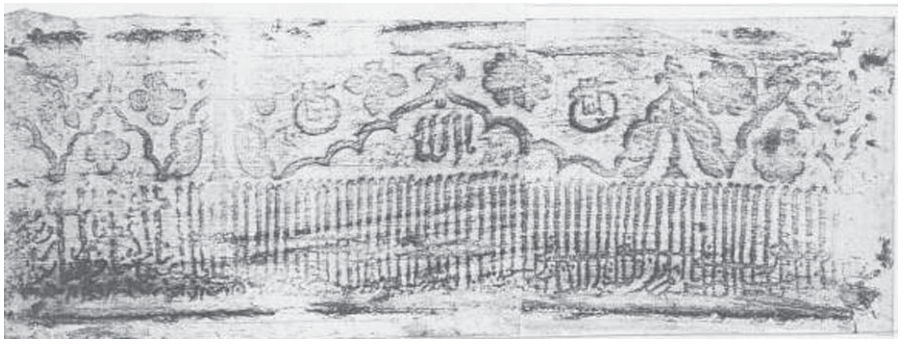

Plate 23. An unidentified sultanate masjid inscription.

geometrial motifs. Right in middle of this rich decorated backgroud, an Arabic phrase *Ya* Allah (Oh God) is inscribed; flanked by a divine adjective *ya* Fattāḥ (Oh Opener) on the both sides. The stone tablet under discussion is only a tiny fragment of what seems to be a fairly large stone inscription that once decorated an edifice (most likely a masjid) somewhere in Gaur. The edifice was erected under the patronage of a person whose name can barely be read. Perhaps one may read it conjecturally as Khān Muḥammad Sa'īd. Since he had the resources to build a mosque in the area, it is reasonable to assume that he enjoyed a high position during that period; unfortunately, nothing more is known about him. Calligraphically the inscription represents a rather simple variety of Bengali *ṭughrā* style when compared with some other monumental inscriptions of Gaur from this period.

(9) An unidentified sultanate Masjid inscription from Gaur from the reign of al-Sulṭān Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Yusuf Shāh, currently fixed on a Masjid in Horigram

Original site: An unidentified sultanate Masjid in Gaur, Malda district, West Bengal.
Current location: Fixed on the southern wall of a recently constructed Masjid in the village of Horigram near Gaur.
Material; size: Black basalt; 23.5×12.5 inches.
Style; no. of lines: Monumental *thulth* in Bengali *ṭughrā*; single line.
Reign: Sultan Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Yūsuf Shāh (879–86 /1474–81).
Language: Arabic.
Type: Commemorative inscription of a Masjid.
Publication: None.

Text (Plate 24)

قال النبي عليه السلام من بنى مسجدا لله بنى الله تعالى له سبعين قصرا في الجنة بنى هذا المسجد في عهد السلطان شمس الدنيا والدين أبو المظفر يوسف شاه السلطان ابن باربكشاه السلطان ابن محمود شاه السلطان وقد بنى هذا المسجد الملك المعظم المكرم ناظر خان في سنة تسع وسبعين وثمانماية

Translation

The Prophet, peace be upon him, said, 'Whosoever builds a mosque for the sake of Allah, Allah—the exalted—will build for him seventy palaces in

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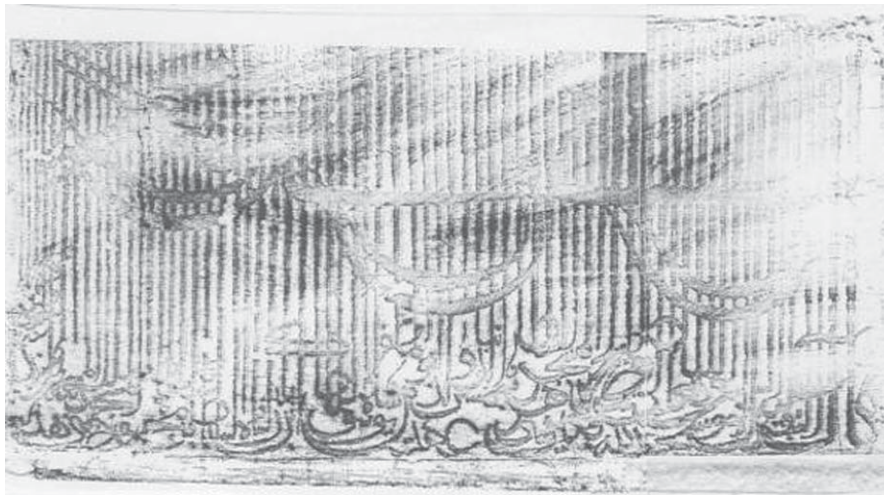

Plate 24. An unidentified sultanate masjid inscription from Gaur from the reign of al-Sulṭān Shams al-Dunyā.

Paradise. This masjid was built during the era of Sultan Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Yusuf Shāh al-Sulṭān, son of Sulṭān Bārbak Shāh al-Sulṭān, son of Maḥmūd Shāh al-Sulṭān. Al-Malik al-Mu'azzam al-Mukarram Nāzir Khān built this masjid in the year eight-hundred-and-seventy-nine [1474 CE].

Discussion

This inscription belongs to the period of Shams al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn Abu 'l-Muẓaffar Yusuf Shāh who ruled Bengal for about six years (879–886/1474–81). He was the third ruler in the line of the restored Ilyās Shāhī dynasty (841–893/1437–87). The last few words, containing important historical clues, namely the date, have been damaged with the passage of time. Therefore, my reading of the date in the text of this inscription is conjectural.[23]

[23] For further discussion, see Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Riḥla ma'a 'l-Nuqūsh al-Kitābiyya al-Islamiyyah.*

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