Calligraphy as an Art in the Architectural Inscriptions of Muslim Bengal*

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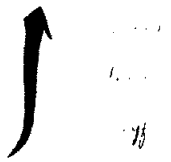
Abstract: "Islamic calligraphy forms an important theme in Islamic architecture. Like elsewhere in the Islamic world, Muslim rulers in Bengal also paid special attention to architectural inscriptions as they built numerous mosques, *madrassahs*, bridges, palaces, castles and forts. Most of these monuments had some kind of calligraphic inscriptions on them since Islamic culture considered calligraphy a powerful medium to convey visual, cultural, and spiritual messages to its people. These inscriptions were rendered in various styles such as *Kūfī*, *thulth*, *naskh*, *riqa`*, *rayhanī*, *muḥqqaq*, *ṭughrā`* and *Bihārī*.

The overall cultural continuity of the Muslims of Bengal and their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world reminds us of the importance of beauty and aesthetic perception in Islamic tradition of architecture as reflected in Islamic calligraphic heritage. Thus, in spite of their many distinctive local cultural features, one soon discovers in these wonderful epigraphic treasures the most vibrant message-- unity within diversity-- that is prevalent everywhere in Islamic culture.

This paper aims at analyzing the inner dynamics of the social, intellectual, and religious transformations of Bengal using its rich Islamic epigraphic heritage".



رأيت شخصك في نومي يعانقني
كما يعانق لام الكاتب الألفا

I saw you in my dreams embracing me
As the *lām* of the scribe embraces the *alif*[1].

Fig. 1. Shape A:
Letter *alif* (الألف) in *thulth*.

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"Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful; He who bestowed knowledge through pen. He taught man that which he knew not."[2] With these verses, the divine message that was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad guaranteed that Islamic culture would forever attach great importance to writing and to the written word with deep respect for the pen and for penmanship. The importance of writing is also apparent in secular literature. Arabic love poetry, for instance, uses the forms of letters in its romantic and ornamented narration as comparisons to suggest the bodily features of the beloved. Similes of this variety can be traced back even to pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The famous early 'Arab poet Labīd describes the scene of a torrential stream in the desert:

> Gushing brooks all of a sudden reveal the traces of habitation
> Like old books whose faded texts have been illuminated by pens.[3]

Hence, written forms can be considered powerful visual means of expressing human cultural aspiration, which often carries important messages about the ideology and civilization that produce it. Even ancient civilizations realized this. The three most important of them, those of the Mesopotamia, the Nile, and the Indus developed their own writing systems, specimens of which are still abundant in inscriptions on stone, metal plaques, and baked clay. The Chinese also attached great importance to the writing. In general, however, they preferred brush over pen in their art of calligraphy.

The written word has a sacred place in Islamic culture because the words of the Qur'ān conveyed the divine message, and the written form of the Qur'ān was considered to be the ultimate religious expression, the visual analogue for the divine message.[4] It was in the written form that the holy scriptures were preserved through ages. Arabic script was thought to be endowed with transcendent power because it was the vehicle that carried God's word; it became in a way the symbol of Islamic belief and authority. Islamic culture employed the written word, not the image, as the herald of its faith. Its writing was formed into a unique combination of the verbal and the visual.[5] That good writing is further enhanced by aesthetic values was the assumption that prompted Muslims to create writing with great visual appeal. The saying of the Prophet Muḥammad that "Allah, being beautiful Himself, loves beauty",[6] underscores the importance Islām attaches to aesthetic perception by human beings. Beautification was all that much more important when the sacred act of writing was performed.

Writing took an art form in Islamic Culture from the very beginning. A number of early Muslim writers elaborately discussed about different

Arabic scripts and calligraphic styles including Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 1000 CE),[7] and al-Qalqashandī.[8] While it was common to teach the art of writing in *madrasahs*, special institutions also evolved over time where the fineness and delicacy of this art were taught elaborately and with a great care. The importance of calligraphy in Islamic culture can also be judged by the high status of calligraphers in Muslim society. From very early in Islām the calligrapher occupied a prestigious position. In Muḥammad's own lifetime, those responsible for writing divine revelation (*waḥy*), the *kuttāb al-waḥy*, were given special status. In the later stages as well, the calligraphers continued to enjoy esteem in the royal courts. The function of calligraphy was not merely an art to be practiced by one particular class of artists; its scope was so broad that it even touched other spheres of knowledge. Niẓām al-Mulk, in his famous treatise on good governance, *Siyāsat-Nāmah or Siyar al-Mulūk*, or the Counsel for Kings, pays special attention to calligraphy, as its acquisition would exalt the majestic qualities of the king. To him there is nothing so fine as the pen.[9] In fact, calligraphy in the course of time became one of the most cherished skills in the royal houses of the Muslim world, and many kings and princes not only learned this art, but also excelled in it. In India, for instance, Sulṭān Maḥmūd is said to have copied the Qur'ān in his leisure time.[10] The Islamic literary heritage is full of materials on calligraphy, on the lives and works of calligraphers, and in praise of the pen and penmanship. While the architects of many famous buildings in the Muslim world remain unknown, the calligraphers of many architectural inscriptions can be identified, either through literary sources or by their signature on the inscriptions themselves.

Fig. 2 Shape A: *shakila* of *kāf* on vertical letters in *thulth* in Bengalī *tughrā'* style in Darsbarī ins. Dated 884/1479; **Plate 2.**

Fig. 2 Shape B: Letter *nūn* (نون) in Darsbarī inscription; **Plate 2.**

Fig. 2 Shape C: Arabic preposition *fī* (فی) in Darsbarī inscription.

In Islamic tradition, calligraphy is thus considered a powerful visual form for conveying aesthetic and cultural message. Sometimes, it plays a central role in architectural decoration (e.g. the gate inscription of *Nīm*

Darwazāh at Miyāneh Dar, dated 871/1466-67, Plate no. 1 in Appendix). 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.

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 (see, for instance, the Darsbarī inscription, dated 884/1479, Plate no. 2 in Appendix). Elongation of the verticals in symmetrical order is one of the common features of Islamic inscriptions (e.g., the Darsbarī inscription).

Fig. 1. Shape B *Allah kāfī* (كافي الله) in a pseudo Kūfī style with elements of *tughrā'*.

Fig. 1. Shape C: *Allah* (الله) in *'Ijāzah* variety of *tughrā'* style in Hatkhola *Masjid* Insc. dated 868/1486; **Plate 3 in Appendix.**

Fig. 3. Shape B Initial form of *sīn*

At the heart of monumental calligraphy is the glorification of Allah (Figure 1, shapes B and C [Plate 3]; Figures 11, Shape B). A Muslim calligrapher enjoys spiritually decorating a mosque with divine names and adjectives. With the sudden spread of Islām 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.[11] On the other hand, frequent appearance of Qur'ānic inscriptions in Islamic architecture symbolizes the idea that Islamic life from the beginning to the end is nothing but a reflection of the divine message. The believer not only tries

to read, recite, memorize, understand and practice this message, but he also visualizes its aesthetic beauty through its calligraphy.

Fig. 3. Shape A: The Arabic verb *kāna* (كان) in Bihārī style.

Fig 3. Shape C: The letter *sīn*

Fig. 3. Shape D: The letter *Alif*

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 influenced by the social, religious, and spiritual message of the setting for which it is intended. The funerary inscription on the tombstone of Nūr Qutb al-'Alam in Pandua, dated 863/1459 (Plate 4), for example, is rendered in Bihārī style (see Figures 3 and 8) 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 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 (Plate 4).

ig. 3. Shape D: The letter *Alif*

Fig. 3. Shape E: The letter *kāf*

ig. 3. Shape F: he letter *ta* (ت)

Fig. 3. Shape G: The preposition *mīm*

Fig. 3. Shape H: The compound word *'alayhā* (عليها)

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 (Fig. 4) is the nucleus of Islamic calligraphy as is a simple vertical (see Fig. 1, shape A). They continue to be repeated in an infinite pattern age after age, yet the usefulness of their messages never ends. In a way it reminds us of a verse from the Qur'ān: "If all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (was ink) with seven seas behind it to add to its supply, yet the messages of Allah would not be completed; for Allah is indeed exalted in power, full in wisdom (31:27)." The majestic verticals in Arabic calligraphy remind us of the written form of Allah, where powerful vertical shafts dominate the lettering design (Fig. 1, Shapes A, B and C; Figure 11, Shape B). A plain vertical in Arabic writing stands for the number "one," and similarly the numerical value of the vertical letter *alif* is also "one". Thus it always remains "one" even if multiplied by one in a repeated infinite process as if they convey the message of *tawhīd* (the divine unity), the pivotal theme of Islamic faith. A sharp and graceful sword-like vertical (see, for instance, *alif* in Fig. 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 *ha'*. Quite naturally, religious symbols, decorative motifs and ornamentation vary according to space and time.[12]

Fig. 3. Shape J:
wajh al-hirrah

Fig. 3. Shape I:
The word *'ahd*
(عهد)

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;[13] 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, *madrasahs*, 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 (*tughrā'*, *thulth*, *naskh*, *riqā'*, *ruq'a*, *tawqī'*, *rayhānī*, *muḥaqqaq*, Bihārī and *ijāzah*.

The very first Islamic inscription (a bridge inscription in Persian discovered in Sulṭānganj, about 20 miles south of Gaur, from the reign of Sulṭān 'Alā' Dīn Khaljī; Plate 5 in Appendix) of Bengal represents an unusual and non-traditional 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 Wazīr-Beldanga, about ten miles south-east of Gaur, from the reign of Sulṭān Bahādur Shāh dated 722/1322 (Plate 6 in Appendix). In this inscription, the endings of all the letters are joined to form an interwoven 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 *miḥrāb* of Adīnā Masjid from the reign of Sikandar Shāh (c., 759--792/1358--1391) 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* (Plate 7). 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.[14]

Fig. 4. Example of some letters in *riqa'* style with majestic dots for calligraphic measurement.

Fig. 6. Shape A: the word *al-khalāiq* (الخلائق)

Fig. 5. Shape A: *al-'Ādil* (العادل)

Fig. 5. Shape B: Initial form of the letter *sīn* (س)

Fig. 5 Shape C: *wajh al-hirrah* (وجه الهرة)

Another style occasionally found in Bengal is *riqā ' which in some respect resembles tawq ī*, though it is less bold and has slightly more slanting lines, similar to *thulth*. Its horizontal loops and ligatures are often elongated as in *rayhān ī* style. Some characteristics of *riq ā'* can be observed in the *Khānqah* inscription from Sian dated 618/1221 (Plate 9 in Appendix), but it is best represented in two exquisite inscriptions dated 707/1307 (Plate 8, the Ḥātim Khān palace inscription in Bihār Sharīf) and 715/1315 (Plate 10, the *masjid* inscription from Ḥātim 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 8 in Appendix), 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 the writing. The initial form of the *s īn* in the word *sulṭānuhū* at the end of the first line is a good example of this (Figure 5, shape B). The letter *hā'* in the word *hādhihī* (the second word on the first line) looks rather like the face of a curious kitten peeping through the clusters of letters, and in fact, this version of the *hā'* is better known in Arabic as *wajh al-hirrah* or cat's face (Figure 3, Shapes H, I and J; Figure 5, shape C). The peculiar joining of the *d āl* with the preceding *alif* and *nūn* in the word *'ādil* in the second line is also interesting for there too the artist has shown considerable imagination (Figure 5, A).

Fig. 6. Shape B: the word *lā* (لا)

Fig. 6. Shape C: the letter *alif* (ا)

Fig. 6. Shape D: *shakilah* of the letter *al-kāf* (الكاف)

The second inscription (plate 10 in Appendix) 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-khal ā'iq* (Figure 6, A) in the middle of the second line, where the middle form of *khā* is unusually stretched out and joined to a rather peculiar looking *lām-alif* (Figure 6, Shapes B and C). Another striking element is the small crown-like top mounted on the vertical stroke of the letter *kāf*, which is known in Arabic as *shākila* (Figure 6, Shape D). 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 (Figures 2, Shape A; Figures 6, Shape D; Figure 7, Shapes E and G; Figure 12; Figure 13, Shape A and Figure 14). A style that closely resembles both *riqā'* and *tawī'* is *ruq'a* (Figure 7), which is to some extent represented in the *Madrasah Dār al-Khayrāt* inscription in Tribeni dated 713/1313 (Plate 11 in Appendix).

Fig. 7. Shape A: The letter *lām*

Fig. 7. Shape B: The letter *sīn*

Fig. 7. Shapes C & D: the letter *alif* (ا)

Fig. 7. Shape E: The letter *kāf*

Fig. 7. Shape F: The words: *sal ṭanaṭ*

Fig. 7. Shape G: Diagrams of the words: *mukarram*

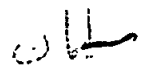

Fig. 7. Shape H: Diagrams of the words Sulaymān

Fig. 8. Shape A: Examples of some letters in Bihārī style

Bihārī is rather a rare style which was used mainly in South Asia for copying the Qur'ān. Known sometimes also as Indian *Kūfī*, this style is still used in the Malebar region (modern Indian state of Kerala) for printing the Qur'ān. 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 8, 9, 10 and 11). 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 8). Examples of this style can be found in both of the inscriptions -- the *madrasah*-cum-*masjid* inscription from Sulṭānganj dated 835/1432 (Plate 13 in Appendix), and the *masjid* inscription from Mandra dated 836/1433 (Plate 14 in

Fig. 9. Shape A: *al-salām, alif* before the last letter *mīm* is missing) in the *masjid* ins. in Mandaroga dated 850/1446; **Plate 12 in Appendix.**

Fig. 9. Shape B: The verb *fīn* Bihārī style in the *masjid* in Mandaroga inscription **Plate 12.**

Fig. 9. Shape C: The verb *qāla* in Bihārī style in the *masjid* in Mandaroga inscription, **Plate 12.**

Fig.10. Shape A: *Alif* (الف) in Bengali *tughrā'* style in Navagram *Masjid* Ins., dated 858/1486; **Plate 15 in Appendix.**

Appendix) -- so far discovered from the reign of Jalāl al-Dān Muḥammad Shāh, a famous indigenous Muslim Bengālī sulṭān of Bengal.

The other examples are the *madrasah*-cum-*masjid* inscription in Navagram dated 858/1454 (Plate 15 in Appendix), the *masjid* inscription in Mandaroga dated 850/1446 (Plate 12 in Appendix), and the *masjid* inscription in Naswagali dated 863/1459 (Plate 16; see sketches and diagrams of letters and words in these inscriptions in Figures 9, 10 and 11).

Fig. 11, Shape A: The letter *kāf*

Fig. 11, Shape B: The divine name *Allah*

Fig. 11, Shape C: The letter *ba*

Fig 11, Shape D: The letter *ta*

Fig. 11, Shape E: The letter *alif*

Fig. 11, Shape F: The Arabic pronoun *hādha*

Fig.10. Shape B: *al-i'zām* in Bengali *tughrā'* style in Navagram ins.; **Plate 15 in Appendix.**

It is best represented, however, in a funerary inscription on the tombstone of Nūr Qutb al-'Alām in Pandua (Plate 4; see sketches and diagrams of its letters and words in Figure 3), and in an undated Persian inscription from Sulṭānganj (Plate 17 in Appendix).

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 often 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.

Fig. 12: *shakila* of *al-kāf al-thu'bani* or the python shape *kāf* in a British Museum inscription from Gaur dated 8910/1504; **Plate 25 in Appendix.**

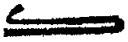

Fig. 13. Shape A: *shakila* of *al-kāf al-thu'bani* in Deotala *Masjid* insc. dated 868/1464; **Plate 26 in Appendix.**

Fig. 14: *al-kāf al-thu'bani* and its *shakila* in Naohata insc. from Balka Khān Khaljī's reign 1229-30; **Plate 27 in Appendix.**

However, often the slanting in *thulth* in the architectural calligraphy of Bengal is not prominent (see, for instance, letter *sīn* in Figure 7, Shape 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 Maulvī Shamsuddīn and later on 'Abdul Karīm, to list most of the Sulṭanate inscriptions of Bengal under *naskh* style whereas they bore 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 (Plate 18 in Appendix), the *Jāmi' Masjid* inscription from Dohar dated 1000/1591 (Plate 19 in Appendix), and the *Madad-i-Ma'āsh* Inscription from Bhagal Khan *Masjid* in Nayabarī dated 1003/1595 (Plate 20 in Appendix) -- represent a crude form of *naskh* during that transition period of rule when political instability was prevalent in the region.

Fig. 15. Shape A: *Abu* (ابو) in *'muḥaqqaq* style in *masjid* Ins. dated 887/14882; **Plate 24 in Appendix.**

Fig. 15. Shape B: *Alif* (الف) in *muḥaqqaq* style in *masjid* Ins. dated 887/14882; **Plate 24 in Appendix.**

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 Dargāh in Bihār Sharīf, dated Muḥarram 640/July 1241 (Plate 21 in Appendix). A striking feature of this inscription is the use of elongated vertical strokes, a style that soon became very popular in Sulṭanate 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 Arabic word meaning sword; see Figure 1, A). A commemorative inscription dated 1116/1703 now in the Bangladesh National Museum (Plate 22 in Appendix) and the Darsbarī *madrasah*-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 Qur'ān. Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka has a tombstone (Plate 23 in Appendix) beautifully inscribed in *muhaqqaq*.

A somewhat peculiar variety of *muḥaqqaq* can be seen in another inscription dated 887/1482 belonging to a *khānqah* in Gaur (Plate 24 in Appendix, Figure 15, Shapes A & B). *Rayhānī* is another rare style mainly used for Qur'ānic calligraphy. It resembles *muḥaqqaq* in many ways but it is less bold and more slanting. It is represented in at least one Qur'ānic inscription, now preserved in Varendra Reaserch Museum in Rājshāhī.

In the early Islamic inscriptions of Bengal, the *ṭughrā'* style has the most distinctive artistic features. Shortly after its appearance in the Seljūq 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 (*'alāma /shi'ār*), the South Asian *tughrā'* was a decorative style of writing resembling the Mamlūk *tughrā'* in Egypt, particularly in the regular repetition of the elongated vertical letters (e.g. the *alif*, see Figure 1, A) drawn from the horizontal band of the calligraphic layout and

the symmetrical arrangement of those verticals. This essential feature of the *tughrā'* is visible in a number of inscriptions in Islamic architecture in South Asia such as the invocations, *al-mulku li-Allah* and *Allah kāfī* (Figure 1, B), inscribed on medallions at Rājā ki-Bain *Masiid* (*c.* 912/1506) and Qil'ah-i-Kuhna *Masiid* (*c.* 948/1541) in Delhi and in the early 17th-century mausoleum of Shāh Dawlat in Maner, Bīhār; a Persian inscription on an *'idgāh* in Jalor, Rajasthan c. 718/1318; an Arabic inscription over the east gateway of the *Jāmi'* Masiid of Ahmadabad, Gujrat, dated 827/1424; and the tomb inscription of Muḥammad Amīn, the Quṭb Shāhī king, in Golconda, dated 1004/1595-96.[15]

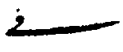

Fig. 13. Shape B: Arabic preposition *fī* (في) in *tughrā'* style in Deotala *Masjid* Insc. dated 868/1486. **Plate 26 in Appendix.**

Fig. 13, Shape C: A different form of *fī* (في) in *tughrā'* style in Deotala *Masjid* Insc. dated 868/1486. **Plate 26 in Appendix**

It was in Bengal, however, where *tughrā'* flourished and dominated architectural calligraphy during the fourteenth, fifteenth and early part of sixteenth centuries.[16] Because of its distinctive ornamental style, this regional variety can aptly be called the Bengali *tughrā'*. The Nīm Darwāzah inscription (dated 871/1466-67; Plate 1) at Miyānah Dar in Gaur citadel, currently fixed on the eastern wall of Minārwalī *Masjid* in Mahdīpur village at Gaur, as well as its counterpart Chānd Darwazah inscription (dated 871/1466-67; Plate 28) present a fascinating example of

Fig. 16. Shape A: *fī* (في) in *tughrā'* style in Sulṭānganj *Masjid* Insc. dated 879/1474. **Plate 29 in Appendix.**

Fig. 16: Shape B: Different form of *fī* (في) in Sulṭānganj *Masjid* inscriptin, **Plate 29 in Appendix.**

this regional development. On each of these two inscriptions, the surface has been divided into thirty-two calligraphic panels, each alternating

tughrā' and monumental *thulth* styles. Interestingly, only in this inscription does the calligraphy resemble the Ottoman *tughrā*. In monumental Bengali *tughrā'*, 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, Shape A). While the crescent-like undulating curves represented by the oval letters such as *nūn* (Figure 2, Shape B; Fig. 16, Shape E) and *yā'*, and in some cases the upper horizontal stroke (*shakilah*) of the letter *kāf* (Figure 6, Shapes D; Figure 12; Fig. 13, Shape A and Figure 14) and the word *fī* (Figure 2, C; Figure 13, Shapes B and C; and Figure 16, Shapes B, C and D) 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 Sulṭānganj dated 879/1474, Plate 29).[17]

Shape C and D: The letter *kāf* (كاف) in *'ijazah* variety of *tughrā'* with a over-imposing *shakila* on the top of the main vertical.

Shape E: Three *nūns* (نون) placed on above the other.

Shape F: Three dots of the letter *shīn* (ش)

Shape G: Vegetal decorative motif.

Fig. 17. Shape A: Arabic word *da'iman* (دائما) in Bengali *tughrā'* style in Chillakhana ins. dated 898/1493. **Plate 30 in Appendix.**

Fig. 17, Shape B: Arabic word *nūr* (نور) in Bengali *tughrā'* style in Chillakhana inscription

Fig. 17. Shape C: Arabic word *mu'arrikhan* مؤرخا in Bengali *tughrā'* style in Chillakhana ins.

The calligraphers thus ranged freely in producing different forms and patterns of *tughrā'* using their imagination creatively (Figure 17; A, B, and C). However, it is not difficult to find a rhythmic pattern in the movement of the letters and the flow of lines in Bengali *tughrā'*s 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 (Fig. 18, Plate 31 in Appendix) or the swan and reeds of riverine rural Bengal (e.g. masjid inscription in Sulṭānganj dated 879/1474, Plate 29). Though *tughrā'* lost its popularity in Bengal in the mid-sixteenth century, it continued to appear for some time in South Indian Muslim kingdoms such as Golkunda, Bijapur, and Hyderabad.[18]

Fig. 18, Shape A and B: Symbolic representation of Boat and Oars that can be well imagined in Baliaghata inscription 847/1443. **Plate 31 in Appendix.**

Fig. 19: The letter *lām* (ل) in *nasta'līq* in Hatkhola *Masjid* Insc. dated 868/1486. **Plate 32 in Appendix**

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 32 in Appendix) which displays very accurate measurement and proportion in its lettering scheme in *nasta'līq* style (see, for instance, letter *lām* in Figure 19; Plate 32). 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 Ghāzī Ibrāhīm from Rājmaḥal, dated 963/1553.

Fig. 21. Shape A: A flower design in a khānqāh ins. from Gaur now preserved in Varendra Research Museum Dated 887/1482, **Plate 24 in Appendix.**

Fig. 21, Shape B: A vegetal decoration in a khānqāh ins. Dated 887/1482, **Plate 24.**

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 'Al *ā*' al-Haq *Masjid* inscription, now in Bania Pukur, dated 743/1342 (Plate 33 in Appendix), the Gunmant *Masjid* inscription in Gaur dated 889/1484 (Plate 34 in Appendix) and the Masjid inscription in Sulṭānganj dated 879/1474 (Plate 29, Figure 16). Though the style has certain established calligraphic rules and measurements, it can easily be confused with *nasta'īq*, *naskh* and *thulth*. Somewhat rare in architectural inscriptions, we do find an extraordinary example of mirror style calligraphy in a unique Arabic inscription in Mahdipur High School Museum in Gaur (Plate 35).

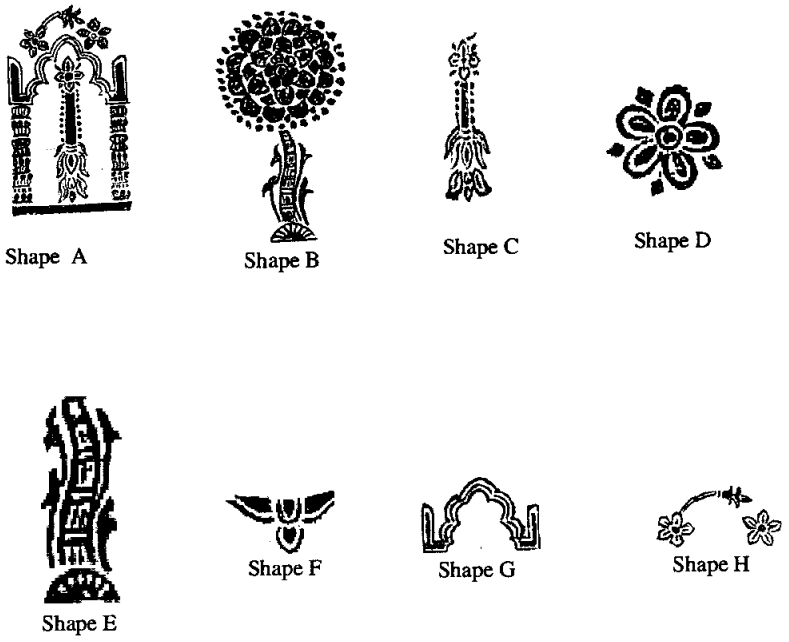

Figure 20:

Different vegetal and geometrical motifs decorating the background of an undated Persian inscription from Sulṭānganj now preserved in Varendra Research Museum which reads as: "*amne amān bad az afatha'e charkhi*" **(Plate 17 in Appendix)**.

Fig. 21, Shape C: Another ornamentation in a *khānqāh* ins. Dated 887/1482

Fig. 22. Shape A: A flower design in a 'Ala' al-Khān *masjid* ins in Hathazari Dated 878/1474.

Fig. 22. Shape B: Another decorative pattern in a 'Ala' al-Khān *masjid* ins in Hathazarī Dated 878/1474.

Fig. 23: Geometric pattern in a *masjid* ins. Pandua, Hoogly dated 882/1477.

Conclusion

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 20, 21, 22 and 23). Some superb examples of geometrical and vegetal motifs can be seen in the undated Persian inscription from Sulṭānganj (Plate 17, Figures 10 in Appdendix). The Islamic inscriptions of Bengal indicate an overall cultural continuity of the Muslims of Bengal and their counterparts elsewhere in the Muslim world, which binds them together as an *Ummah*. 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.

Appendix:

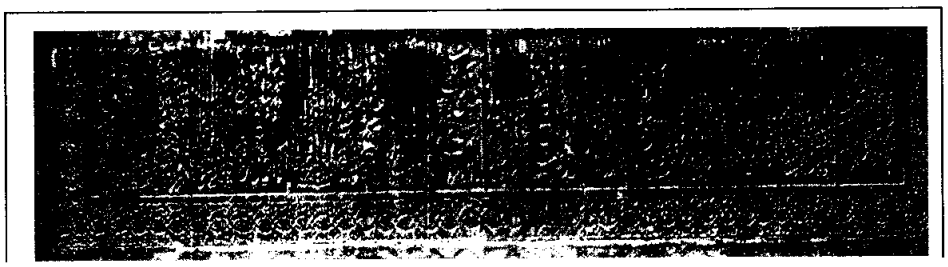

Plate 1: Nīm Darwāzah inscription at Miyāneh Dar in Gaur Badshāhī citadel dated 871/1466-67

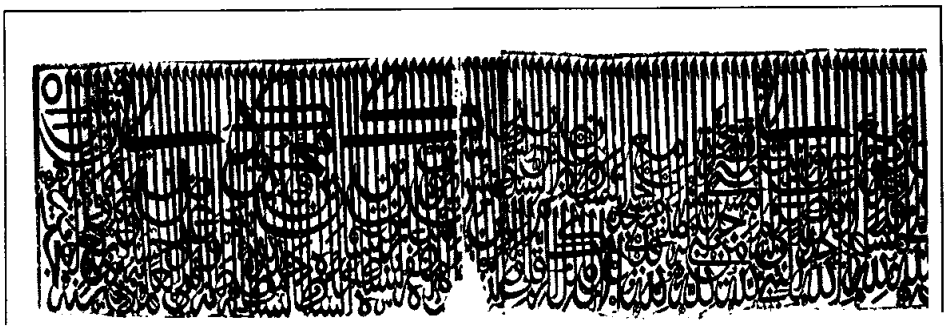

Plate 2: The Darsbarī *Madrasah* and *Masjid* inscription in Umarpur, Gaur dated 884/1479 in *thulth* rendered in Bengali *ṭughrā* style

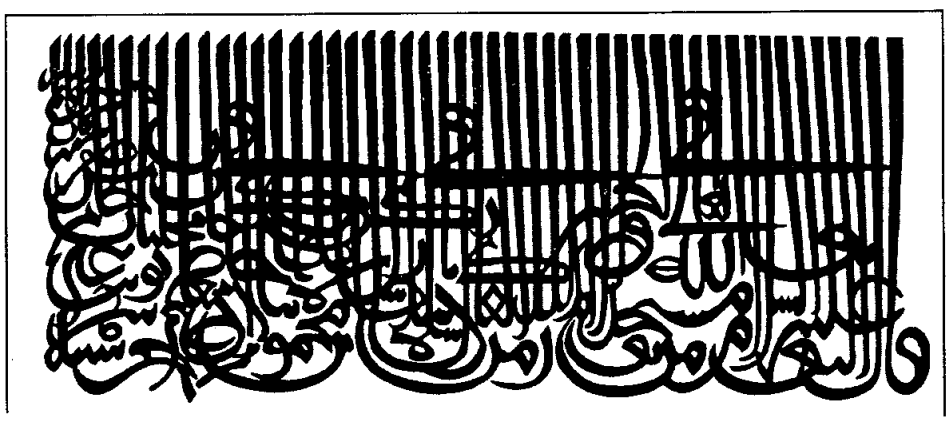

Plate 3: *Masjid* Inscriptions in Hatkhola, Sylhet Dated 868(1460).

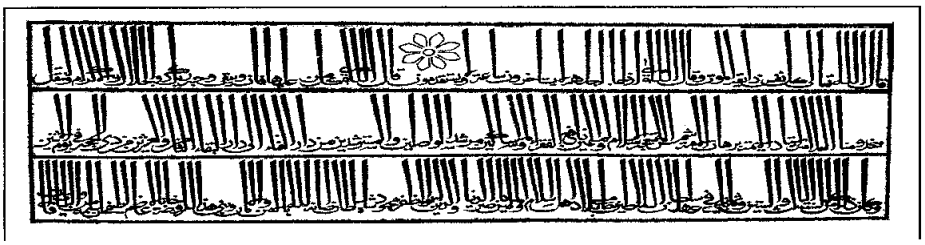

Plate 4: A funerary inscription at the mausoleum of Nūr Quṭb al-ʿAlam in Hadrat Pandua dated 863/1459 (Details of certain individual letters and words in Bihārī style with Bengali *tughrā'* decorative features in this inscription are shown below in **Fig. 3**)

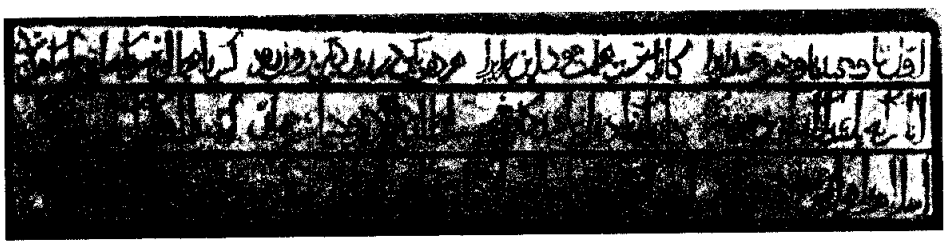

Plate 5: Bridge inscription from the reign of Sulṭān ʿAlāʾ Dīn Khaljī, the 2nd ruler of Bengal c., 1210-1213 CE.

Plate 6: Treasury inscription discovered in the village of Wazīr-Beldanga, about ten miles south-east of Gaur, from the reign of Sulṭān Bahadur Shāh dated 722/1322

Plate 7: *Kūfī* and *thulth* writing above the central *miḥrāb* of Adīna *Masjid*

Plate 8: *Riqā* style calligraphy in an inscription dated 707/1307 in the Ḥatim Khān palace in Bihār Sharīf

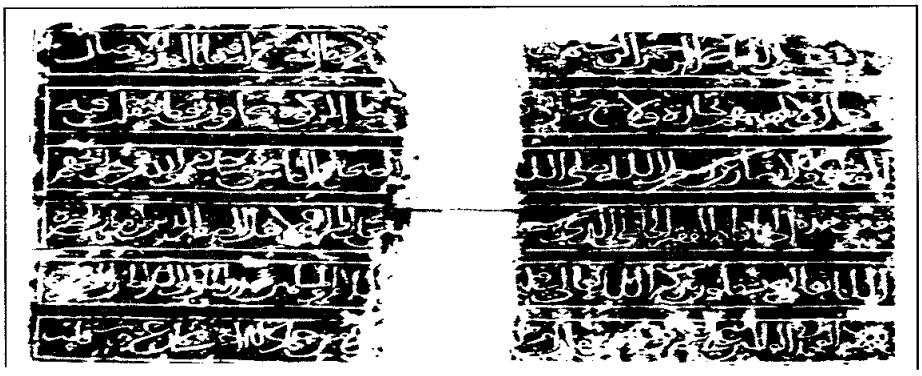

Plate 9: *Khānqāh* Inscription from Sian Dated 618 (1221).

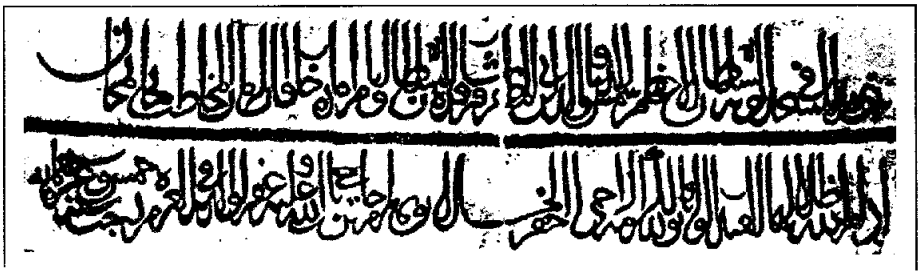

Plate 10: *Riqā'* style calligraphy in an inscription dated 715/1315 the Ḥatim Khān palace inscription in Bihār Sharīf

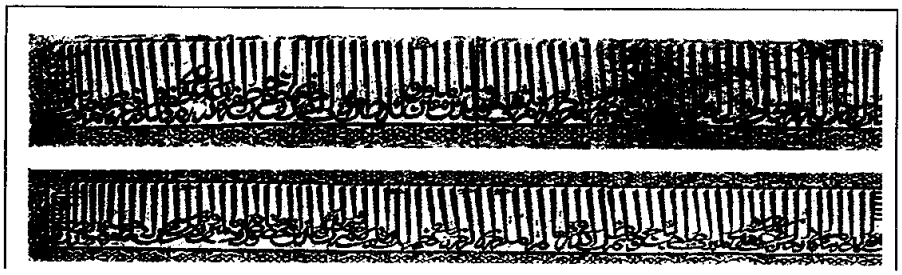

Plate 11: Mādrasah Dār al-Khayrāt inscription in Tribeni dated 713/1313 rendered in a calligraphic style close to *ruq'a*; The diagrams of its letters and words can be seen above (**Fig. 7**).

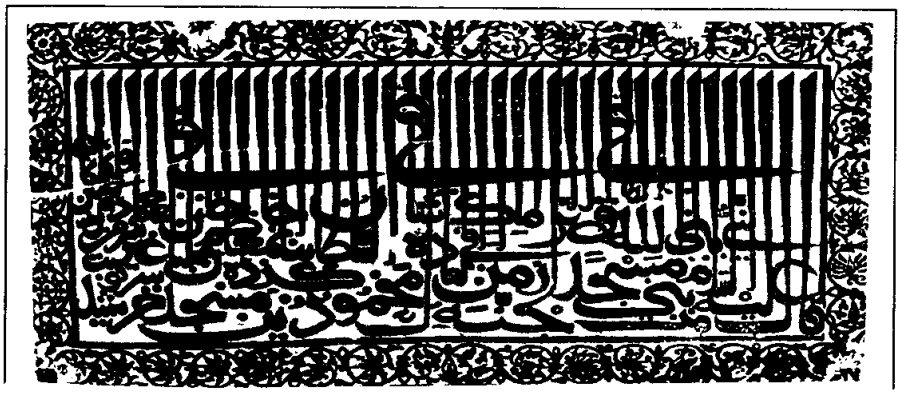

Plate 12: *Masjid* Inscription in Mandaroga Dated 850 (1446).

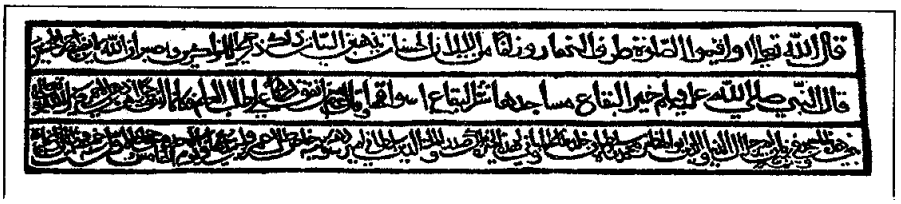

Plate 13: *Masjid* and *madrasah* Inscription from Sulṭānganj Dated 835 (1432).

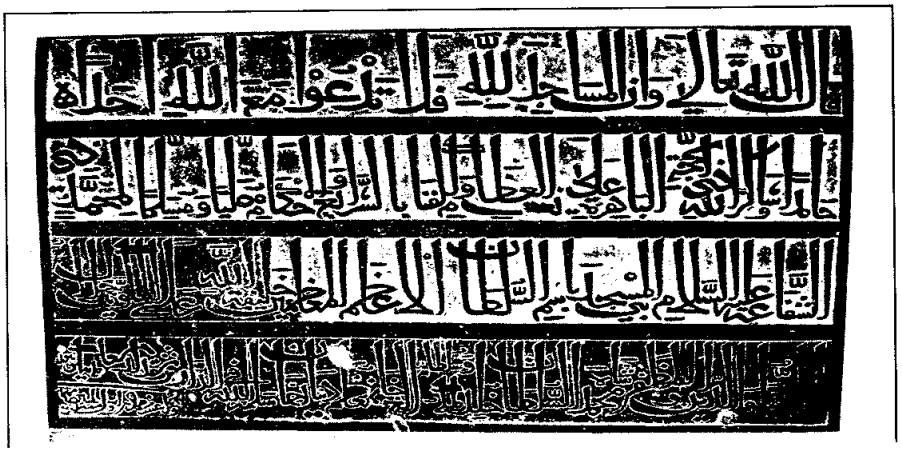

Plate 14: *Masjid* and *madrasah* Inscription from Sulṭānganj Dated 835 (1432).

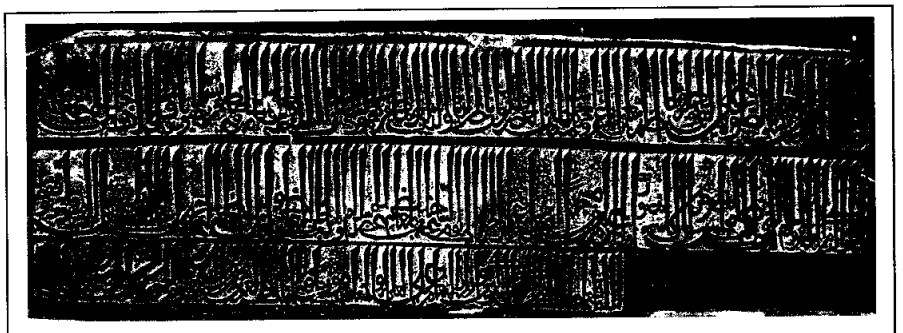

Plate 15: A *Madrasah-Masjid* Inscription in Navagram Dated 858 (1454).

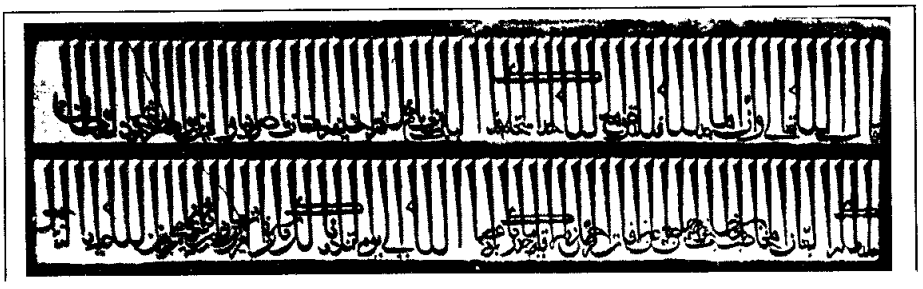

Plate 16, Fig. 11: Diagrams of certain individual letters and words in Bihari style with Bengalī *ṭughrā'* decorative features in the *masjid* inscription in Naswa Galī dated 863/1459.

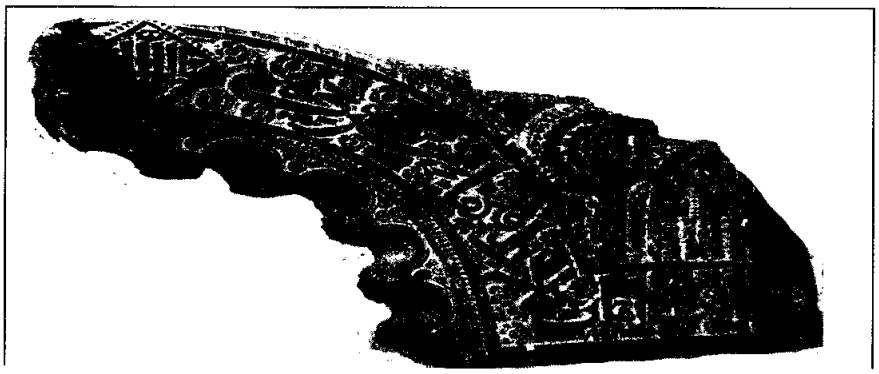

Plate 17: An undated Persian inscription in Bihārī style from Sulṭānganj now in Varendra Research Museum

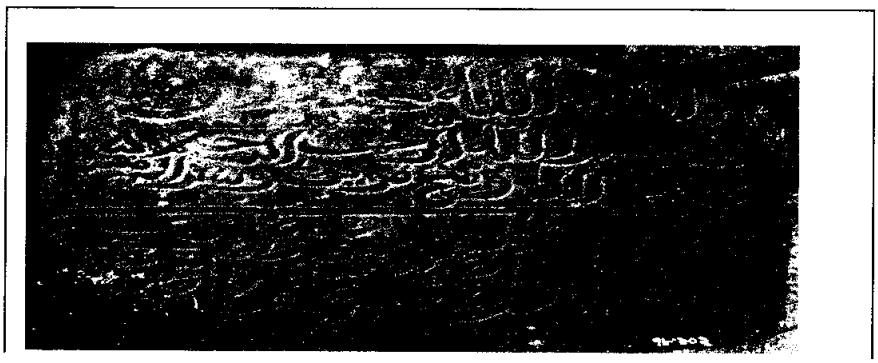

Plate 18: *Masjid* Inscription from Burarchar Dated 1000 (1591).

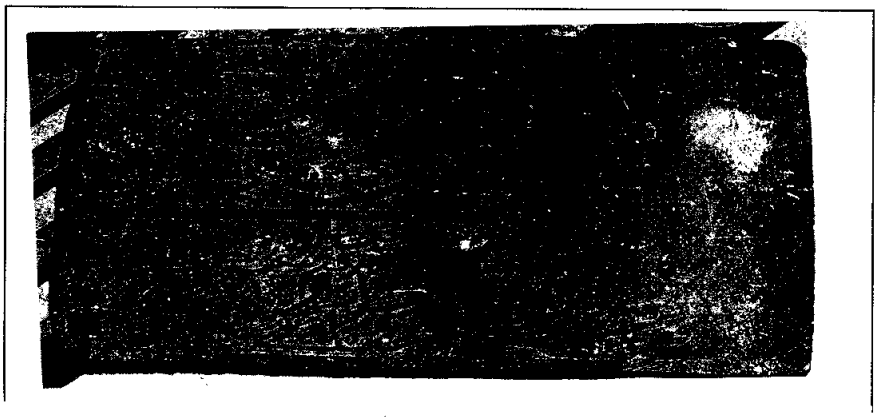

Plate 19: *Waqf* Inscription for a *Jāmi' Masjid* from Dohar Dated 1000 (1591).

Plate 20: *Madad-i-ma'āsh* inscription from Bhagal Khān *masjid* in Nayabarī, dated 1003 (1595)

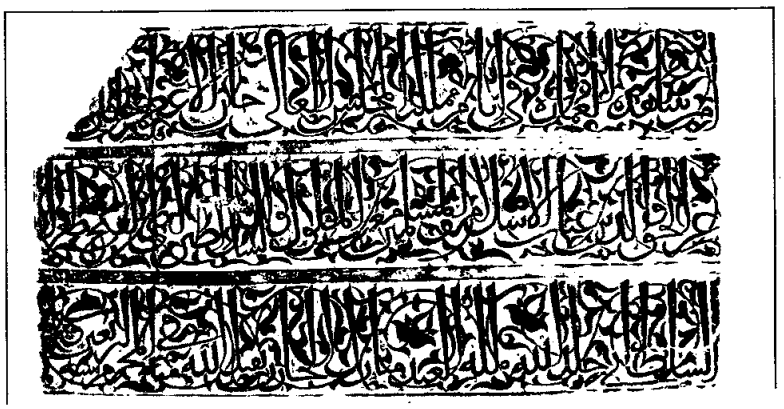

Plate 21: Inscription of an Edifice in Barri Dargāh Dated Muḥarram 640 (July 1242)

Plate 22: Commemorative Inscription in Bangladesh National Museum Dated 1116 (1703).

Plate 23: Commemorative Inscription in Bangladesh National Museum Dated 1116 (1703)..

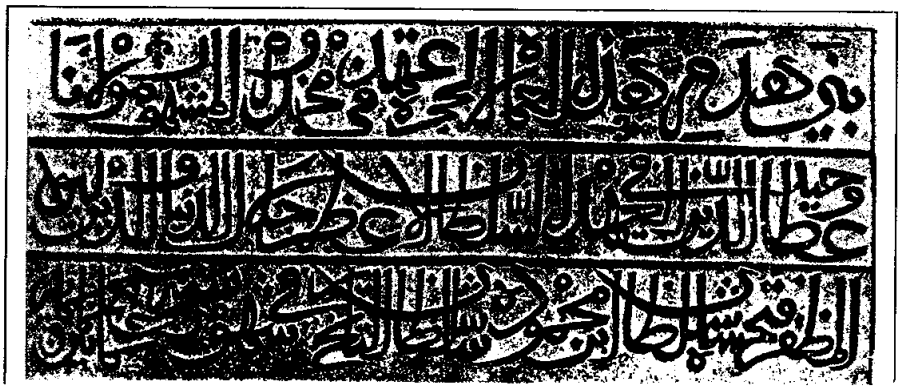

Plate 24: *Khānqāh* Inscription from Gaur Dated 887 (1482).

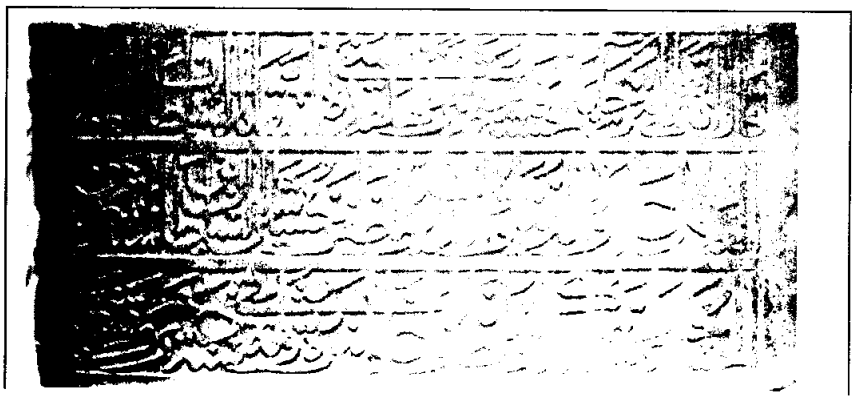

Plate 25: . *Siqāyāh* Inscription from the Reign of Ḥusayn Shāh now in the British Museum Dated 910 (1504).

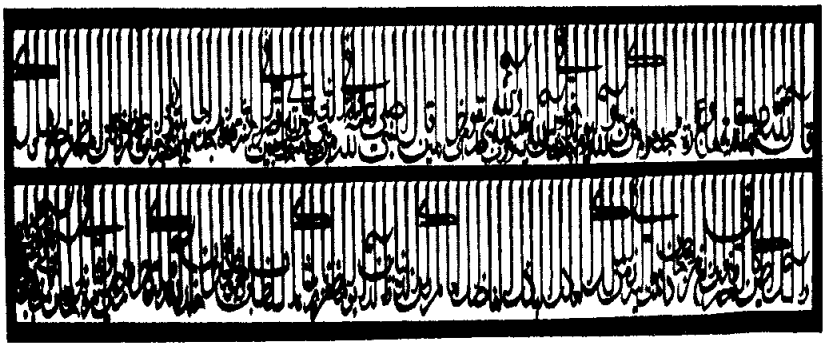

Plate 26 . *Masjid* Inscription in Deotala Dated 868 (1464).

Plate 27: *Masjid-Madrasah* Inscription from Naohata from the Reign of Balkā Khān Khaljī (*ca*. 626-628/1229-1230).

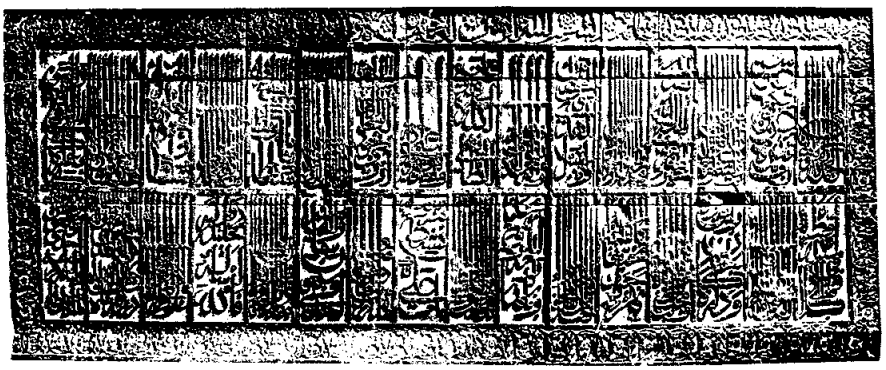

Plate 28: *ṭughrā'* style in Chānd Darwāzah inscription at Mianahdar in the royal garden of Badshāhī Palace in Gaur dated 871/1466-67.

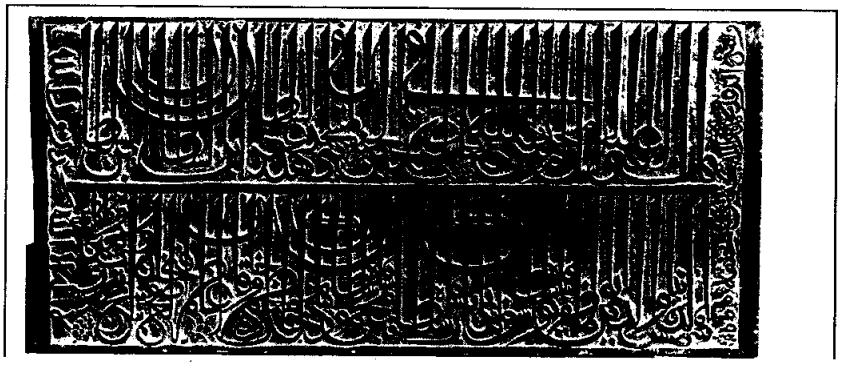

Plate 29, Figure 16: Shapes, diagrams and decorative motifs of certain letters in a *masjid* Inscription in Sulaṭānganj dated 879/1474 in calligraphic style sometimes known as *'ijāzah* rendered in Bengali *ṭughrā'*.

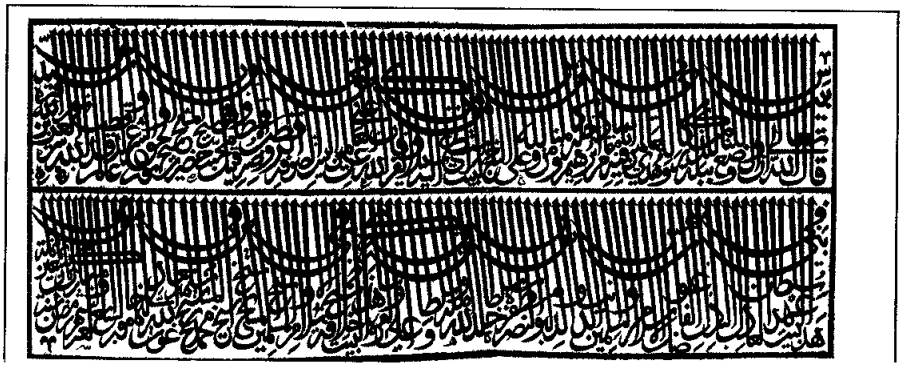

Plate 30: Chilla Khāna Inscription in Haḍrat Pandua Dated 898 (1493).

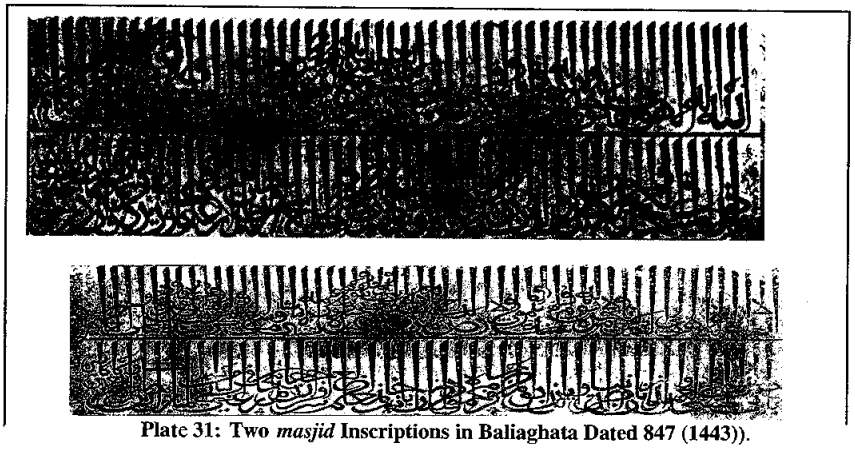

Plate 31: Two *masjid* Inscriptions in Baliaghata Dated 847 (1443)).

Plate 32: Milestone over a Bridge in Chapatalī Dated 1102 (1690-91).

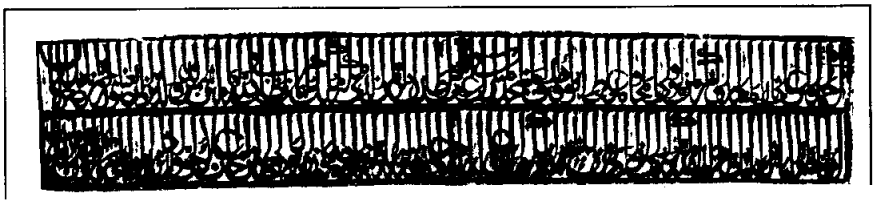

Plate 33: Shaykh 'Alā' al-Ḥaqq *Masjid* Inscription, Fixed Now on Bania Pukur *Masjid* Dated 743 (1342).

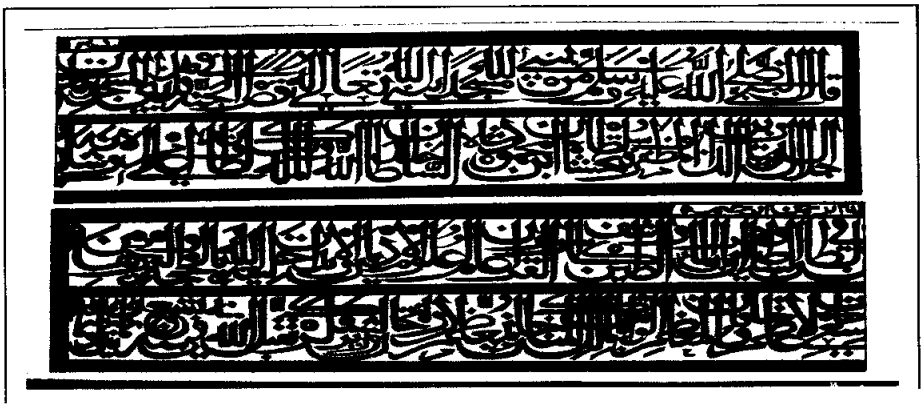

Plate 34: Gunmant *Masjid* Inscription in Gaur Dated 889 (1484).

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[1] al-Bakrī, *Samṭ al-l'ālī*, ed. *'Abd al-'Azīz al-Maymanī Rājkotī* (Cairo, 1936), p. 578.
[2] *Al-Qur'ān*, 96:3-5.
[3] Fu'ād Afram al-Bustānī, ed., *Tarafah wa Labīd* (Beirut, 1961), p. 243.
[4] Erica C. Dodd and Shereen Khairullah, *The Image of the Written Word* (Beirut, 1981), 4 ff.
[5] Thomas W. Lentz, "Arab and Iranian Arts of the Book," *Arts of Asia* (Nov. – Dec. 1987), pp. 76-86.
[6] Al-Ghazzali, *Kīmīyā'i Sa'ādat*, quoted in Ettinghausen," Al-Ghazzali on Beauty," in *Islamic Art and Architecture* (Garland Library of the History of Art 13) (New York, 1979), p. 162.
[7] *Kitāb al-Fahrist* (Cairo: Rahmania Press, 1348), p. 8.
[8] *al-Subḥ al-A'shā*, vol. 3 (Cairo, 1383 AH), p. 11.
[9] *Counsel for Kings*, trans F. R. C. Bagley (London, 1964), p. 112.
[10] *Riḥlah ibn Baṭṭuṭa*, ed. Abu 'Abd Allah Muḥammad al-Lawātī (Beirut, n.d.), p. 424. A popular saying attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad is that "calligraphy is beauty for kings."
[11] Examples of these songs can be found in Muhammad Mansūruddīn, *Haramunī* (Calcutta, 1942), p. 9. See also Upendra Nath Bhattacharya, *Banglar Baol wo Baol Gān* (Calcutta, 1958), p. 507.
[12] Wayne E. Begley, "Mughal Caravanserāis built and inscribed by Amānat Khān, Calligrapher of the Tāj Maḥal" in Frederick M. Asher and G. S. Gai (ed.) *Indian Epigraphy: Its Bearing on the History of Art* (New Delhi, 1985), p. 283.
[13] For details about Islamic calligraphy in South Asia, see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Athār al-Ṣanādīd* (Kanpur, 1846); Muḥammad Ghulām, *Tadhkirah-i-Khushnawīsān*, ed. H. Hidāyet Ḥusain (Calcutta, 1910); M. A. Chagtāi, *Pāk wa Hind men Islāmī Khaṭṭaṭī* (Lahore, 1976).
[14] 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 A.H. (eleventh century C.E.) 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 Sulṭān 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 style (such as *thulth* and *riqā'*) see Mehrdād Shokoohy, *Bhadre˜svar, the Oldest Monuments in India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
[15] *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., S. V. "*Tughrā'* in Muslim India".
[16] Moḥammad Yusuf Siddiq, "al-Tughrā' wa Istikhdāmuhā fī 'l-Bangāl", *al-Faysal*, 148 (May/June, 1989): 95-100.

[17] Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, "An Epigraphical journey to an Eastern Islamic Land", *Muqarnas*, 7 (1990): 83-108.
[18] *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., S. V. "*Tughrā'* in Muslim India".