

Epigraphs of Medieval Bengal

Mode of Decipherment and Utilization for History-writing

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Introduction

The study of medieval Bengal especially of the Sultanate period (1204-1576 C.E.) in her multidimensional aspects depends greatly on the coin-legends and epigraphics due to the paucity of contemporary chronicles and archival records.¹ Hence the history-writing of medieval Bengal in the forties of the last century was more hypothetic than realistic depending on the folk-tales, ballads, local tradition, hagiological literature and such other sources whose veracity could scarcely be tested. But from the fifties of the last century till the recent time on archaeological investigations came to light such tools that helped facilitate the history-writing of medieval Bengal methodically and to a greater depth. The valuable treasures traced in the coins and epigraphs have accelerated the research of Bengal Sultanate and induced the scholars to exert their efforts for the reconstruction of some undecided facts of history. The epigraphs of both secular and religious monuments of the period beginning from the early 13th century to last quarter of the 16th century C. E. have contained valuable information which could scarcely be traced in the contemporary and near contemporary written records.²

Keeping consistency with the theme of the subject a few words are to be said about the terminologies of ‘epigraphy’ or ‘epigraph’ and ‘inscription’. Both the terms in aesthetic art are usually applied to incise letters on stone-slabs inserted on the monuments referring to some events of historical importance. But inscription is applied to all sorts of stone-carving devoid of calligraphic styles or with calligraphic style while the epigraph is closely related to the recognized calligraphic *khatt*. The scholars on this topic have used both the terms without any discrimination. The writing or carving on stone is not like simple writing used in daily affairs, rather the expansion or contraction of letter-shafts, the vertical strokes and horizontal curves create a sort of beautiful stone-carving which is called epigraphy, and on which it is incised, in totality, is called epigraph.³ An expert on this field of study is called an epigraphist.

The Arabic alphabets in their elongated shafts and niche like curvatures are conducive to produce elegant writing on any materials hard or soft; and this facility is absent in case of the alphabets of other languages. Hence both calligraphy and epigraphy are the speciality of Muslim aesthetic artists. Arabic is mostly the language of the epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate although a few epigraphs are found in bilingual i.e. in Arabic and Persian. Hence one who wishes to get specialization in the decipherment must acquire proficiency in both the languages.

A few points are discussed for history-writing of medieval Bengal as traced in the select epigraphs under the following heads:

1. Urban Sites and Area Names;
2. Ecological Upkeep and Benevolent works of rulers and other Personalities;
3. Scepter-insignia and Eulogical Titles of the Sultans;
4. Epigraphy and Aesthetic Aspects.

This paper on proper investigation of the thematic points aims at making new additions to and enhancing the intrinsic merit of history-writing of medieval Bengal.

Subject Outline

Historiography from etymological stand-point simply means history-writing, but in its wider connotation it encompasses a wide range of works starting from the collection of diverse materials, the blowing out the chaffs from the kernel, synchronization and tabulation of the well proved, but multidimensional materials and last of all it terminates in writing. The whole well-knit process taken together may justifiably be termed historiography. Once the concept of historiography regarding the past revolved around the chronicles with minimal reference to the use of artifacts. But to study man in society of the past and medieval times no scholar of the present gets back to utilize the archaeological sources like the coins, the epigraphs and such other artifacts to suit the subject of his study. Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that the epigraphy of medieval Bengal so far procured and deciphered if utilized properly could play pivotal role in the history-writing of the period referred to above. To get a clear understanding of the subject a few cases are delineated below with the citation of the sources deemed proper. First let me start with the beginning part of the paper i.e. Mode of Decipherment.

The decipherment of any intricate and complicated writing is not an easy task. In case of calligraphic writing it is more difficult and time-consuming. Such is the case for the decipherment of the epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate. In point of decipherment the

epigraphs can be treated under two broad headings viz. the simple epigraphs and complicated epigraphs. Both the types of epigraphs follow the styles of Arabic writing like *Naskh*, *Thulth*, *Muhaqqaq*, *Raihan*, *Tauqi* and *Riqa* with the minor styles of *Bihar* and *Ghubar*.⁴ *Tughra* is not an independent style of Arabic writing, rather it is an ornamental form of writing applicable to all the major and minor styles of calligraphic writing. The decipherment of this ornamental form is a stupendous task, and at the same time it is tormenting to an expert epigraphist also. To decipher an epigraph either simple or intricate there is no set-rules, but depends on the skill and intellect of the person specialized in the subject having command on the language concerned. It is more on sustained efforts and observations than on mere theoretical knowledge, and at the same time it demands more patience to devote for days together. However, as my experience goes, a few directions could be followed for decipherment.

In case of simple type of epigraphs an expert can decipher the text without much toil and brain work because text of the epigraph is worked on the stone-slab in a simple and easy way. The main theme of the text is normally engraved in symmetrical order without breaking the sequence beneath the elongated shafts of the Arabic alphabets *الف / Alif* and *لام / Lam*.⁵ In that case an expert one can cast his eyes on each and every word till the last word, and deciphering them all, if satisfied, can write on the paper and seek out the proper meaning along with its implication. Yet in a simple epigraph also an expert even is to spend much time and several attempts to come to the full decipherment.

In case of complicated and ornamental variety of epigraphs nothing could definitely be chalked out for the decipherment, rather it depends solely on the sagacity and insight of the decipherer. In such epigraphs the words to make the sentence are not symmetrically arranged maintaining the sequence, rather in the whole body of text to create various ornamental designs the words are haphazardly put upward, downward and in the left and right so that it vibrates sonorous effects in the minds of the onlookers.⁶ To decipher such type of epigraph which may usually be termed *Tughra* is very difficult, and the expert hand has to ponder over time and time again for its decipherment. The decipherer will have to apply his own skill and technique to make the theme of the text after full decipherment, adequate and meaningful.

Now let us see the second part of the paper i.e. utilization of the deciphered materials for history-writing. This could be discussed under the following heads.

1. Urban Sites and Area Names

The names of capital cities and mint-towns can be traced in the written materials and in the coin-prints under Bengal Sultanate. Besides these urban sites some place and area names could be traced in the epigraphs, the identification of which would come to the use for the history-writing of Bengal Sultanate. An example is cited here. Navagram Inscription of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437 -1459 C.E.) dated 858 A.H / 1454 C.E. refers to Simlabad in the following words *فى خطة رفيعة موسومة بسمل اباد* (in the high tract of land delineated as Simlabad).⁷ The provenance of inscription, Navagram is situated in the Tarash Police Station of greater Pabna district. In considering of its find-place we would like to maintain the tract of land comprising some portions of northern Pabna, south western Bogra and south eastern Rajshahi have in all probability been named Simlabad. The internal evidences of the text of the epigraph support this contention. First, the word *خطة khittah* occurring in the inscription is supposed to mean an administrative unit like terms *iqlim* and *arsah*. Generally the term *khittah* is applied to a town fortified with ramparts and walls, whereas *qasbah* means a town which is thus not protected. But here in this inscription the word *رافية rafia* (high) is added to the *خطة khittah*. Hence it may be presumed that this *خطة khittah* indicates a vast tract of land known as Simlabad which possibly included the town or fort enclosed by ramparts or massive walls. Secondly, the word *رافية rafia* (high alluvial land) which is an adjective has been added to the *خطة khittah*. The land, thus defined as high and alluvial, may be applied to the south eastern part of the Barind (Varendra) plateau.⁸ The extensive tract watered by Padma on the south, the Ganges-Mahananda on the west and Karatoya on the east (the northern probably Tarai and Duars Jungle) is called Barind or Varendri.⁹ Paduvana, probably a corruption of Pabna, though not entirely, but a part of it, falls within the territory of the Varendra. In the Madhainagar Copper Plate the land granted to the done is included in the Varendra within the Pundravardhana bhukti.¹⁰ On the strength of these evidences it may be assumed that a large tract of land to the north and of the find-spot (Navagram) under study was called Simlabad. Further the Inscription contains some politico-social issues of the 15th century Bengal Sultanate that would be more useful for history-writing of the time in question. From the content of the inscription it is learnt that under the Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah the *wazir wa sar-i- lashkar* (administrative-military chief) of this *خطة khittah* or administrative zone was Ulugh Rahim Khan.¹¹

Tribeni Inscription of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459 -1474 C.E.) dated 860 A.H. /1455 C.E.¹² mentions Sajla Mankabad as ‘*arsah*’ and Labala as town. Sajla Mankabad has been identified with an area corresponding to the tract lying between Hugly and Saraswati, extending to the bank of the Kapataksha, and as including at present the whole 24-Parganas, the western part of Nadia and south west part Murshidabad

district. Labala is surmised to be situated in the Hugly district. Thus it covered the Satgaon area under Bengal Sultanate.¹³

Dinajpur Inscription of Rukn al-Din barbak Shah dated 865 A.H. / 1460 C.E.¹⁴ has contained in itself two urban sites of the name 'Jur' and 'Barur' over which *Sar-i-Lashkar wa Wazir* Ulugh Iqrar Khan had the absolute power of administration. Barur has been identified with a Pargana of that name in Purnia district of Bihar outside the western border of Dinajpur. As regards the construction of the mosque and the repair of tomb mentioned under study be taken for the mosque of Gopalganj and the tomb of *Chihl Ghazi* five miles away to the north of Dinajpur town then the location of the site 'Jur' may be surmised around it. Therefore, the sites 'Jur' and 'Barur' spread over an extensive tract of land stretching from Dinajpur in the east to Purnia in the west.¹⁵ In the Deotala Inscription of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah dated 868 A.H. /1464 C.E.¹⁶ the mention of *قصبه Qasbah* Tabrizabad in honor of the eminent sage Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi reminds us of the urban-site Deotala situated 15 miles north of the Sultanate capital Pandua known as Hazrat Pandua and 1/ 2 miles south of the northern boundary Malda district.¹⁷ Another Epigraph of the Sultan wherein *قصبه Qasbah* Tabrizabad is mentioned as Deotala supports this contention.¹⁸ In view of the discussion cited above we may arrive at the proposition that the epigraphs, on proper decipherment and identification of urban sites and area names, as silent tools help stride the history- writing of Sultanate Bengal where cotemporary written materials have no access at all.

2. Ecological Upkeep and Benevolent Works of the Rulers and other Personalities

The rulers of a country, their deputies and officials holding various key posts of administration have their sacred duty to keep ecology in good condition and to accomplish benevolent works for the people so that they could lead a moderate life. But in all cases and times such picture could not be noticed. Under Bengal Sultanate on the epigraphic evidence we have the picture in positive. Ecology sustains to run the human species, the animals and other living objects in growing condition and normal way. On the other hand ecological improvement depends greatly on the unobstructed flowing of water in any form it could be managed. The water-supply in any form to all living beings is expressed by the Arabic terminology *سقاية siqayah*.¹⁹ It has got its reference in the Quranic verse where its utility is acknowledged along with other virtuous deeds. There is no denying the fact that water is the life-blood of all creations. This notion is echoed in the holy Quran where it is stated that “ We (Allah) created everything with life from water.”²⁰ To give water to drink is praiseworthy and is indeed virtuous deed of human beings. The Prophet (sm) of Islam in many of his sayings gave good tidings of salvation

in the world hereafter for those who give to drink water for the thirsty even it be an animal or plant. Being imbibed with this spirit of Islamic idealism the votaries of Islam and the followers of Prophet Muhammad (sm) in all times take the initiative in making waters available for the use of human species and other creations of the Universe and for keeping the ecological balance in the places deemed necessary. Like the Muslim rulers of the globe in medieval times the Bengal Sultans took positive step in this regard. Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that till now we have ten epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate so far deciphered, in which سقاية *siqayah* or water arrangement is spoken of regarding the area concerned. For example one of these epigraphs procured from the Gaur area of Bangladesh and preserved in the archaeological Museum of Paharpur is produced here with text and translation. It is divided into two lines.²¹

1st Line:

قال الله تعالى من جاء بالاحسنه فله عشر امثالها بنى هذه السقاية فى عهد
السلطان المكرم والمكرم علاء الدين ابو المظفر حسين شاه

2nd Line:

السلطان ابن سيد اشرف الحسينى خلد الله ملكه وسلطانہ بانبيہ خان
كرم سعدى خان فى التاريخ سنة سبع عشر وتسعمائة المكرم والمكرم

Translation

1st Line: Allah, the Great said “ He who does good shall have ten times as much to his credit. This water reservoir was built in the time of the honored and benevolent Sultan ‘Ala al- Dunya wa al-Din Abul Muzaffar Husayn Shah

2nd Line : the Sultan son of Sayyid Ashraf al Husaini, may Allah perpetuate his kingdom and sultanate. The builder of the water-course is honored and respected khan Sadi Khan by name in the date, the year being 917 A.H. / 1511 C.E.

Of the ten water-courses mentioned above one belongs to the reign of Sultan Rukn al- Din Barbak Shah of the date 871 A.H. / 1466 C.E., seven to the reign of ‘ Ala al- Din Husayn Shah of the dates 910 A.H. / 1504-5 C.E. , 916 A.H. / 1510 C.E. (three in number) , 917 A.H. / 1511 C.E. , & 1511 , 921 A.H. / 1515 C.E. , 922 A.H./ 1516 C.E. respectively and two to the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah dated 929 A.H. / 1522 C.E. and 938 A.H. / 1531-2 respectively.²² Pertinently it is to be pointed here that the term *siqayah* is used directly in all the epigraphs with the exception of two, one belonging to the reign of Sultan Rukn al- Din Barbak Shah dated 871 A.H. /1466 C.E. and the other to that Sultan Nasir al- Din Nusrat Shah dated 929 A. H. / 1522 C.E. In the former the word *nahr*, the meaning of which is river, is used while in the latter the term *Bayt al- siqayah* or the house of drinking- water. Except these two epigraphs all the

inscriptions referred to above start with the Quranic verse, “He who does good shall have ten times as much to his credit.”²³ This verse of the holy Quran clearly indicates that good word or deed has its reward ten times, and the *siqayah* is included in such virtuous work which will be rewarded ten times for the undertakers. The *siqayah* traced in the epigraphs mentioned above can be taken, in the broader perspective, for any type of water-course be it a reservoir, tank, canal, dighi, artificial lake and such other device for water-reservation. On the evidence of these few epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate we can reasonably presume that water management throughout the territorial expanse of medieval Bengal was adequately done by the scepter and the philanthropist to keep the ecology uncontaminated and at the same time conducive to the health and habitation²⁴ of men and other living creatures of the country. Legend has that during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437- 1459) Ulugh Khan Jahan a saint-General came with more than three hundred companions to the south Bengal of densely jungle Sundarban area, reclaimed it and made suitable for human habitation. *Khalifatabad* identified with Bagerhat of modern Bangladesh was made capital of this region. It was also mint-town of several Bengal Sultans. Tradition goes that Ulugh Khan Jahan, his companions and successive hierarchical personages built three hundred mosques and the same number of water-courses over this area. The extant Sath-Gumbuz mosque at Bagerhat and the epigraph of Khan Jahan-tomb substantiate the occasion.²⁵ It is interesting to note that the noble woman also did not lag behind in such venture of *siqayah* arrangement. The name of ‘Bowa Malti’ as a sponsor of a *siqayah* traced in the Chalisapara (old Maldah) epigraph of the time of Nasir al- Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1532) dated 938 A.H. / 1532 is case in point.²⁶ In the time of our discussion the dug out tanks and other types of water-courses as remnant bear witness to their glorious past.

Related to this important aspect of سقاية *siqayah* or water-supply a few cases of benevolent works could be traced in the epigraphs which would contribute a lot to the history-writing of medieval Bengal. Communication in all ages is an important factor for human habitation on the surface of the earth. It varies from time to time and from place to place. Medieval Bengal is not an exception. Both the land and water routes could be used by the people of the time in Bengal as traced in the epigraphic source. Bengal as a riverine land from the time of yore water communication was given much stress under Bengal Sultanate. The terms ‘*Mir bahr*’ and ‘*Bahr*’ the former having its synonymous English ‘Admiral of Navy ‘ and the latter ‘ Water-stream ‘ occurred in epigraphs.²⁷ The erection of bridges in many times deemed necessary for road and water connection in medieval Bengal also. The mention of *al-Qantarah* (English meaning – bridge) so far traced in at least four epigraphs of the time in question is no doubt a proof of communication facility provided for the people by the state authority and the noble persons.²⁸ However, all these materials searched out in the epigraphs may be of valuable use for the history-writing of medieval Bengal.

3. Scepter-insignia and Eulogical Titles of the Sultans

Following the Transoxian model of their predecessors the Bengal Sultans on the accession to the throne adopted, as epigraphic and numismatic evidences show, the *Jalus* title and some times the eulogical title in addition to their proper names. The *Jalus* title Ala al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Muzaffar, Shams al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Mujahid, Rukn al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Fath and such like Arabic phraseologies express the royal strength and prowess. Prefixing the *Jalus* title the full name, for example, in the first case stands thus Ala al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Muzaffar Husayan Shah. The motive behind adopting the *Jalus* title is presumably to show their royal lineage on one hand and to create a sort of awe in the mind of the subject people as well as the rulers of the neighboring hostile countries on the other.²⁹ Pertinently the use of *السلطان الماعظم* *al-Sultan al-Mu'azzam* (the honored Sultan), *السلطان الاعظم* *al-Sultan al-A'zam* (the exalted Sultan) and *سلطان السلاطين* *Sultan al-Salatin* (the Sultan of the sultans i.e. the greatest Sultan) noticed in the epigraphs needs explanation. As the terminology of *السلطان الماعظم* *al-Sultan al-Mu'azzam* is softer than that of *السلطان الاعظم* *al-Sultan al-A'zam* it is reasonably inferred that the use of the former starts with assumption of power. But with the passage of time when the power is consolidated, and the ruler becomes confident of his strength then he assumes the more strong title of *السلطان الاعظم* *al-Sultan al-A'zam*. Sometimes to meet the situation and to imprint his power in the mind of the people at the assumption of his royal power the Sultan adopts the exalted title of *السلطان الاعظم* *al-Sultan al-A'zam*.³⁰ In case of Bengal Sultan the term *سلطان السلاطين* *Sultan al-Salatin* seems to be an exaggeration, and it is possibly intended to create an environment of his supremacy in the minds of the people in general and the enemies in particular. However, the three terms mentioned above in their positive application are indicative of the independent sovereign power of the rulers.

Of the eulogical titles as noticed in the epigraphs *العدل* *al-Adil* (just), *الباذل* *al-Badhil* (generous), *العالِم* *al-Alim* (wise), *الفاضل* *al-Fadil* (learned), *الكمال* *al-Kamil* (perfect), *الكاشف* *al-Kashif* (interpreter), *قهرمان* *Qahrman* (valiant warrior) and *غوث* *Gawth* *al-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (the resort of al-Islam and the Muslims) are the most striking examples.³¹ The last one i.e. *Gawth al-Islam wa al-Muslimin* is usually ascribed to the name of the Sultan without any reservation as he is theoretically assumed to be the defender of faith. To illustrate this point two cases of Bengal Sultans are presented here. One is that of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah and the other is that of Jalal al-Din Fath Shah. The two brothers were properly educated and trained to meet the challenge of time. Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474) is represented in the epigraphs as *'adil, badhil, fadil, 'alim* and *kamil*. These attributes engraved on the stone-slabs, in the absence of contemporary written materials, highlight praiseworthy qualities of the Sultan. Therefore, on the epigraphic source Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah may be considered a benevolent Sultan who combined in himself the qualities of justice,

munificence, learning, knowledge and sound understanding. His brother Jalal al- Din Fath Shah (1481-1486) who at the advanced age was raised to the throne of Bengal by the nobles, completed training in the art of warfare, got mastery over the interpretation of the holy Quran and acquired knowledge of religions and science of human anatomy. An inscription of Gunamant mosque (Gaur)³² reveals these aspects of character of the Sultan in the following phraseologies.

قفرمان فى المء والطين لكاشف اسرار القرآن عالم علوم اللاديان
والل ابدان

(Tr. Valiant warrior in the sea and land, interpreter of the secrets of the holy Quran and learned in the knowledge of religions and human bodies.)

The Sultans of Bengal are assisted by several officials in various branches of military, judiciary and civil administration. They carry the official titles which befit their positions. The titles derived from the epigraphs are *Wazir*, *Shiqdar*, *Jangdar*, *Sharabdar*, *Jamadar*, *Bahrak*, *Kotwal bek* ‘Ala, *Sar-i-Lashkar*, *Sar-i-Khail*, *Mahliyan Nawbat* ‘Ala, *Sharabdar Ghayr-i- Mahli*, *Jamadar Ghayr-i- Mahli*, *Mir Bahr*, *Dabir Khas*, *Karfarman* and *Dastur*. The most dignified of these officials like *Wazir*, *Shiqdar*, *Sar-i-Lashkar* and *Jamadar* were entitled to have the charge of administrative units under Bengal Sultanate.³³ In addition to the civil powers they enjoyed the executive and military powers. As one was appointed to such important office he could legally appropriate for himself the lofty title of *Khan al-A’zam*, *Khaqan al-Mu’azzam* or *Khaqn al-A’zam*, *Khan al-Mu’azzam* and *Ulugh* to indicate the dimension of his administrative capability.

4. Epigraphy and Aesthetic Aspects

Calligraphy and epigraphy are closely related in form and geometric dimension. On the epigraphs calligraphy in the connotation of epigraphy produces a sort of rhythm and harmony besides bringing into prominence the various ornamental motifs for those interested in the study of art history. Like the waves of the ocean it is soothing to the eyes of the connoisseurs of aesthetic art. It is ornamental in form, bold in nature and graceful in its ending.³⁴ Extant remnants show that the monuments of Bengal Sultanate were not left unornamented. Instead they were covered with terracotta ornamentation or with stone-carving representing creeper designs and other indigenous floral motifs. The

aesthetic aspects of the epigraphs executed in the period under study are manifested in various types of ornamentation indigenous in nature. Of the major and minor styles of Arabic calligraphy like *Naskh-Thluth*, *Muhaqqaq-Raihan*, *Tawqi-Riqa*, *Ghubar* and *Bihar* which were used on the stone-slabs the most ornamental form, though not an independent style, is the *Tughra* richly cultivated on the monuments. Yet it ranked the status of an independent style for its extensive use in the epigraphy of the monuments. The *Tughra* can be formed in the epigraphy with the expansion, contraction, prolongation and alteration of the letters as and when it is found suitable.³⁵ In the *Tughra* ornamental style besides the animal forms the various kinds of abstract motifs are subject of representation. A few examples are reproduced here to give a visual knowledge of epigraphic niceties and aesthetic values.

A simple type of *Tughra* could be guessed in an epigraph of Nasir al- Din Mahmud Shah dated 858 A.H./ 1454 C.E. Here in this epigraph the elongated shafts of the Arabic letters like الف *Alif* and لام *Lam* may be postulated as the straight lines of the standing men and the other letters at their feet be reckoned as the dead over which the funeral prayer is being performed. Another decorative motif may be conjectured in this way that the vertical strokes of the letters are considered as the bamboo poles used for fencing the cornfield and the letters underneath as shrubs and cornstalks.³⁶ In case of the former assumption it is related to the moment of man's life in this world while in the case of the latter it is connected with the foodstuff, the vital means of man's livelihood in Bengal. The last one is more preferable as it reflects on the indigenous element of Bengal. Arashnagar Inscription of 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah dated 907 A.H./ 1502 C.E. is a fine example of ornamental *Tughra*.³⁷ The vertical strokes ending at the top with a series of shafts of scimitars are thirty-three in number. The engraver's art, in this epigraph, is of high order. The single lined epigraphy may represent, in its decorative form, a ship which carries soldiers with swords in hand going to charge the enemies in the riverine tract. The text of the epigraph echoes that notion by ascribing the phraseology of القرم بروب حر (the most honored of land and sea) to Sultan 'Ala al- Din Husayn Shah.³⁸ The decorative scheme may also bear two other possibilities: first, an army camp where the tents are kept tight with a suitable number of poles, and secondly, a roof resembling *chala* house. In any case, the artist's skill noticed in the proportionate arrangement of the shafts and curvatures, finds full play in this epigraph. The bold letterings of الف 'Alif', لام 'Lam', نون 'Nun' and ي 'Ya' amidst the elongated vertical strokes suggest the likeness of a curved roof which is a distinctive characteristic as well as a special feature of Bengal architecture.³⁹ It is really interesting to note that overhead and underneath of the inscribed space a series of fifteen small lotus motifs are engraved to enhance the beauty of ornamentation and at the same time to recall the indigenous lotus design on the decorative scheme of the stone-slab. Further an epigraph of the time of Shms al-Din Muzaffar Shah (1490-1493) dated 898 A.H./1493 C.E. arrests our attention to its epigraphic niceties and decorative motifs.⁴⁰ It may be conjectured as the ' *Thatched roof variety of Tughra* in its ornamental design. The

barbed الف *Alif* and لام *Lam* in the whole of the epigraph can be compared with bamboo stockades bearing the thrust of the thatched roof shaped by the crescent like نون *nun* and ى *ya* placed over the clustered letters at the bottom. The surface of the whole epigraph seems to represent a series of *do chala thatched roof* of the bamboo cottage. The clustered letters running all through the epigraph from right to left can be presumed as inmates of the bamboo cottage.⁴¹ These features are common for the houses of the general people of rural Bengal. These few examples bear witness to this fact that the epigraphy engraved on the stone-slabs if properly examined from aesthetic stand-point it may help much the writing of art-history of Bengal Sultanate in the dire paucity of written records.

Concluding Remarks

Historiography of ancient and medieval times of any global region should take into consideration both the sources of written records and archaeological finds to get its complete form. The modern history has least concern to consult the archaeological source for making its completion. This is why the study of modern history is more popular among the learners than that of ancient and medieval history. The case is not different in the study of South Asian and especially of Bengal history. Because the language deficiency in Sanskrit and her sister dialects in the case of ancient period, and in Arabic and Persian in the case of medieval Muslim period was held responsible for such tendency. With the strong back ground in these languages one must be proficient in the technique and methodology of decipherment of the epigraphs to extract materials for history writing of ancient and medieval Bengal. I have put forth above a few directions regarding the mode of decipherment of Arabic text in the epigraphs and their utilization of deriving materials to reconstruct and enrich the history writing of medieval Bengal. Above all knavish and expert must have the patience and tenacity to decipher and utilize epigraphy a source for history writing of medieval Bengal.

Notes and References

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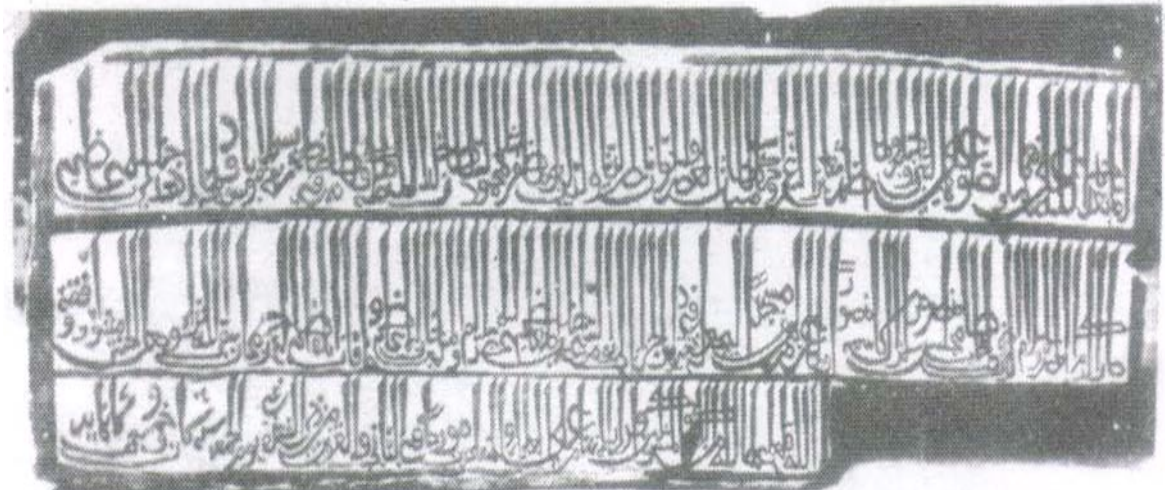
- ² A K M Yaqub Ali , “Epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate: A Search for the elements of Historical Interest”, *Journal of Bengal Art* (Henceforth *JBA*), Vol. 6 , 2001 , The International Centre for Study Of Bengal Art, Dhaka, p.171.
- ³ *JAB* , Vol. 9 & 10, 2004-2005, pp. 89 ff.
- ⁴ A K M Yaqub Ali, *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Varendra, 1200-1576 A.D* (Rajshahi, 1998). Henceforth the source be referred to as *ASCV*.
- ⁵ *JAB*, Vol. 9 & 10, P.92 ; A K M Yaqub Ali , “Two Unpublished Arabic Inscriptions”, *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum (JVRM)*, Vol. 6, University of Rajshahi, 1980-81, P.106 ; *SAPE*, pp. 6-7.
- ⁶ Zafar Hasan, “ Muslim Calligraphy”, *Indian Art and Letters*, Vol. 1x, London, 1935, p. 61.
- ⁷ *JVRM*, Vol. 16, pp.101 ff ; *ASCV*, pp. 371-373. (Plate. 1).
- ⁸ *JAB*, Vol. 6 , p. 174.
- ⁹ *ASCV*, pp. 7-8.
- ¹⁰ N.G.Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. 111 (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1929) , pp. 106, 108, 115 ; *JASB*, New series, Vol. 6, p. 476.
- ¹¹ *JVRM*, Vol. 6, p. 105.
- ¹² S.Ahmed, *IB*, p. 69.
- ¹³ *JAB*, Vol. 6, p.174.
- ¹⁴ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 72-73.
- ¹⁵ A K M Yaqub Ali, *ASCV*, pp. 300-301.
- ¹⁶ S.Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 78-79.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 77.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 81.
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- ²⁰ Al-Quran, 9:19.
- ²¹ The epigraph in question is deciphered by the writer and published in the *Pratnattva* (Plate. 5).
- ²² S.Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 85 ff.; *Ibid*, pp. 167, 185 ff., 194, 209, 232.
- ²³ *Pratnattva*, p. 3.
- ²⁴ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 64-67.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 232-233.
- ²⁷ A K M Yaqub Ali , *SAPE*, pp. 5, 70-73.
- ²⁸ A H Dani, *Bibliography*, p. 121.

- ²⁹ *JBA*, Vol. 6, pp. 171 ff.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 172.
- ³¹ A Karim, *CAPIB*, pp. 146-147,206.
- ³² S.Ahmed, *IB*, p. 123; *JAB*, Vol.6, p. 173.
- ³³ A H Dani, *Bibliography*, p. 108.
- ³⁴ A K M Yaqub Ali, "Calligraphy on the Stone-Inscriptions of Bengal Sultanate", *Islamic Culture*, Vol. LXV111 No.2, April 1994 , Hyderabad, India, p. 68.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 70; *JBA*, Vol. 9 & 10, p. 91. (Plate. 4).
- ³⁶ *JVRM*, Vol. 6, p.106; *JBA*, Vol. 9 & 10, p. 92.
- ³⁷ *JVRM*, Vol. 6 , p. 108; *JBA*, Vol. 9 & 10, pp. 95-96. (Plate. 2).
- ³⁸ *JBA*, Vol. 9 & 10, p. 95; *JVRM*, Vol. 6, p. 108. (Plate. 2).
- ³⁹ *JBA*, Vol. 9 & 10, p. 96. (Plate. 3).
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 94-95. (Plate. 3).
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 94. (Plate. 3).

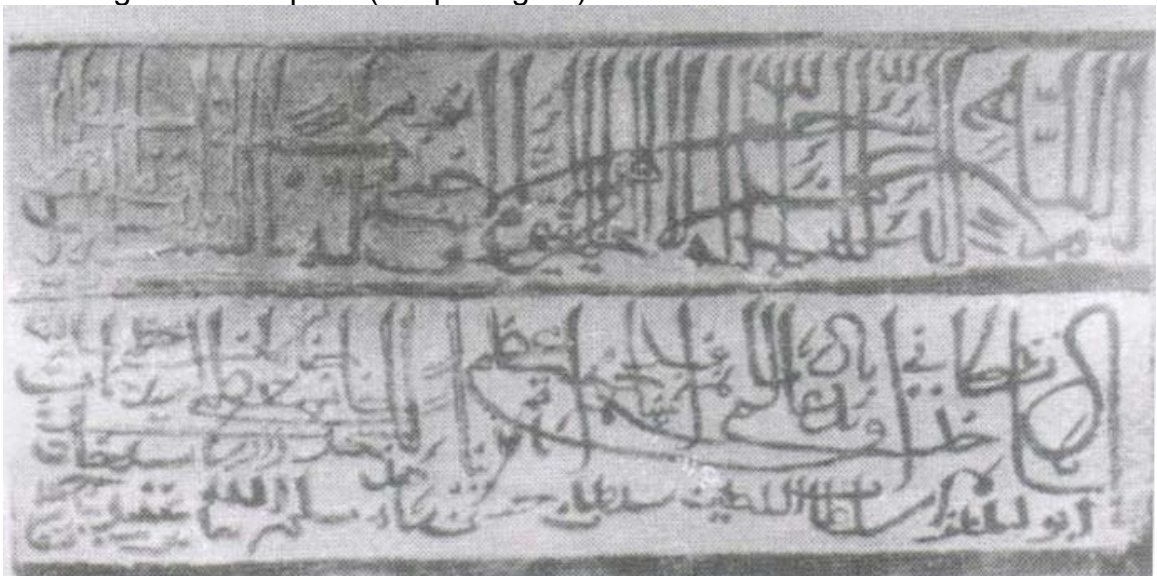
Plates of the Epigraphs



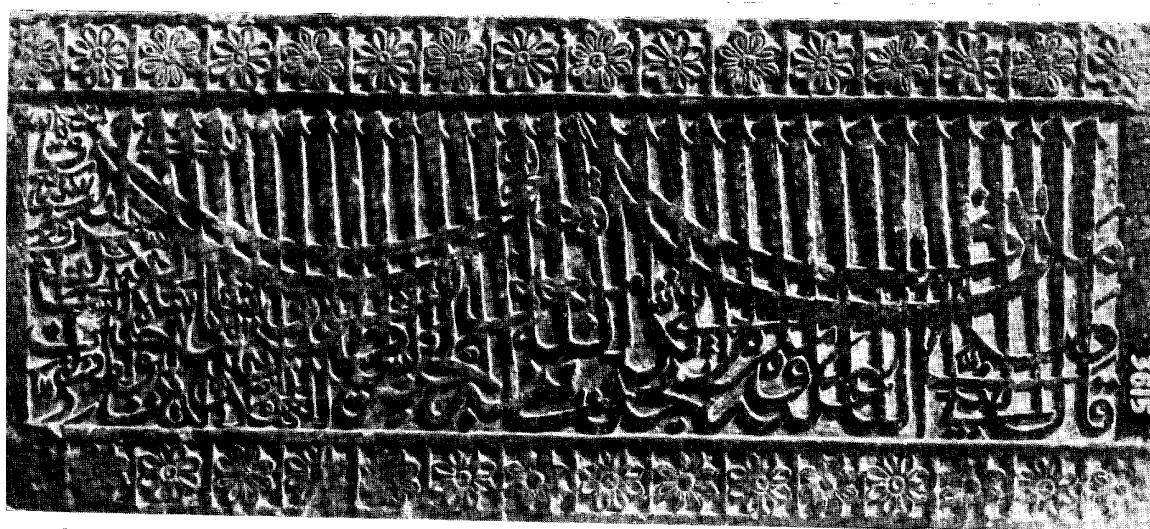
1. Wazir Beldanga Inscription (Without diacritical marks-nuqtah).



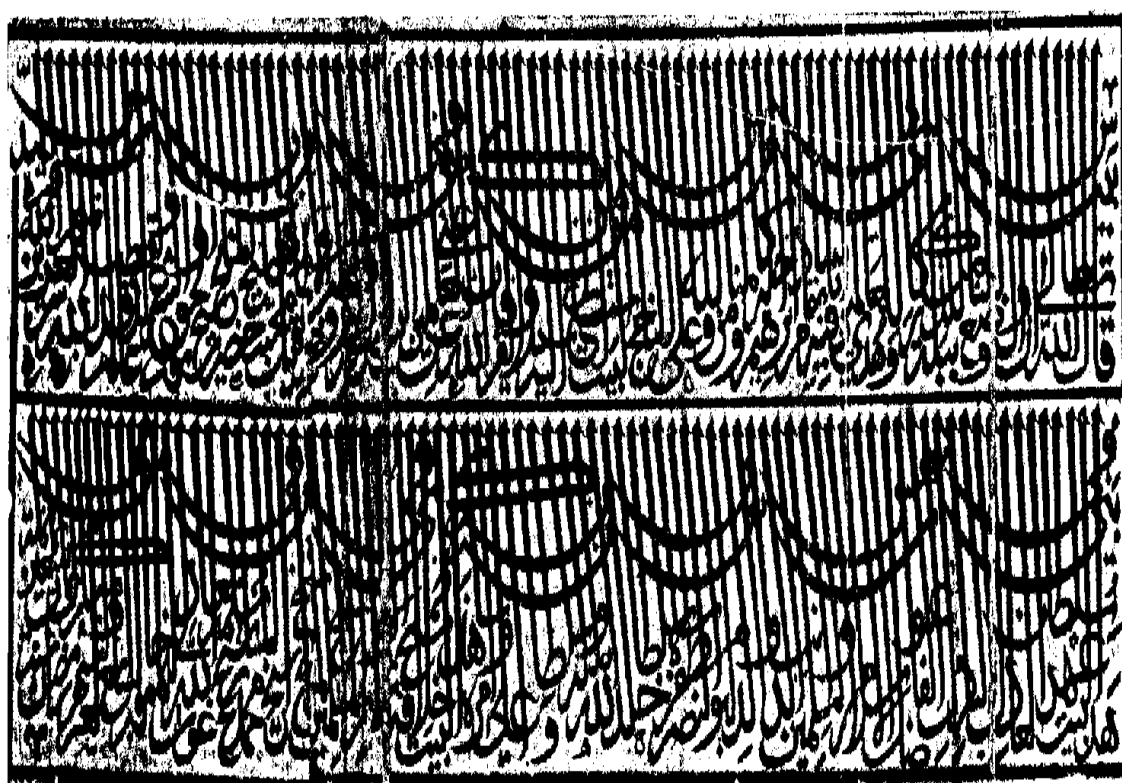
2. Navagrama Inscription (Simple tughra) Plate. 1



3. Kaitahar Inscription (Knotted tughra)



4. Arashnagar Inscription (Intricate tughra- do chala type, ship type) Plate. 2



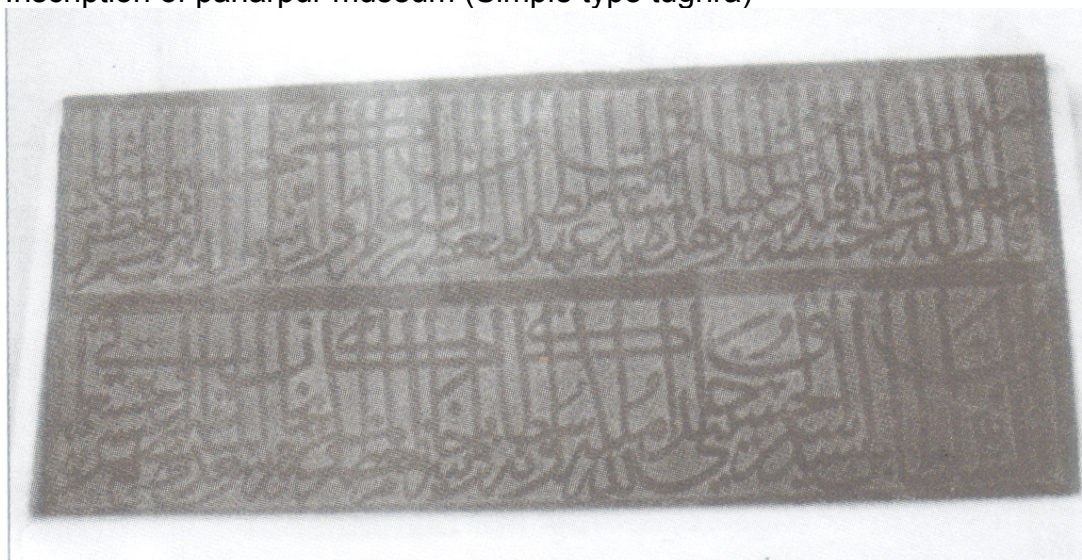
5. Intricate tughra (do chala rural house type) Plate. 3



6. Gazipur, "Gaur Area in Bangladesh". (tughra- ascending type) Plate. 4



7. Inscription of paharpur museum (Simple type tughra)



8. Inscription of paharpur museum (Siqayah- simple type) Plate. 5