

EPIGRAPHY AS AN IMPORTANT SOURCE FOR ISLAMIC HISTORY AND CIVILIZATION

By Professor Dr Muhammad Yusuf Siddiq

Epigraphy in Islamic Tradition:

One of the intellectual achievements of Islamic civilization and its contributions to the science of historiography is its rich legacy of historical texts. This historical output is not limited to chronicles and books on history (such as the *Tabaqat* [Biographical Dictionaries] of various writers¹), but assumed other forms, including inscriptions. Like most other modes of expression in this culture, these epigraphs also reflect the Islamic faith often in their own way. The extraordinary number of epigraphs (see, for instance, the table of Islamic inscriptions of Bengal in the Appendix) also ensures the important role that inscriptions played in transmitting Islamic culture. Inscriptions can be found not only on buildings (charts 1-6), but also on textiles and rugs, metal and glass objects, ceramics and ornaments, not to speak of arms, coins and seals. In some regions, a rich tradition of inscribing on stone existed even before the advent of Islam. Ibn Ishāq, for instance, mentions about a number of Syriac inscriptions which were unearthed while Ka'ba was demolished for reconstruction when the Prophet was about thirty five years of age.² During Umayyad period, Muhammad ibn al-Sa'ib al-Kalbi (father of a famous early Muslim historian ibn-Hishām) took great interest in the Lakhmid stelae and funerary inscriptions that he found preserved in the Churches in and around Kufa.

The use of archaeological materials for scholarly investigation is encouraged in the Qur'an. The word *athar*, which can be found in the Qur'an several places, is used in modern Arabic to mean archaeology.³ Archaeological findings offer many clues to the past; epigraphic studies reveal evidence of rulers who might otherwise have remained unknown. Thus we read in the chapter "Believers" in the Qur'an: "Do they not travel through the earth and see the end of those who had lived before them? They were more numerous than these and superior in strength and [ancient] remains in the land [where they had once lived]. Yet all that they accomplished was of no profit to them"(40:82).

Use of Inscriptions in Islamic Architecture:

Inscriptions were used in Islamic culture since the formative period of Islam. The earliest Islamic inscriptions date from the first/seventh century. They became more common as architectural projects expanded in the Islamic world. It is difficult to imagine a building of the early period without some kind of inscription, as if without one, the building would seem to be incomplete or unfinished. As a result, epigraphic records and inscriptions are plentiful in terms of both artistic merit and historical information. Until the fourth/eleventh century, most appeared on the inside of buildings. After that century, however, inscription began to be used to decorate also the outsides of buildings. During this period, the cursive naskh and thulth, started to gain in popularity while use of the angular style known as Kufi (angular) declined.⁴

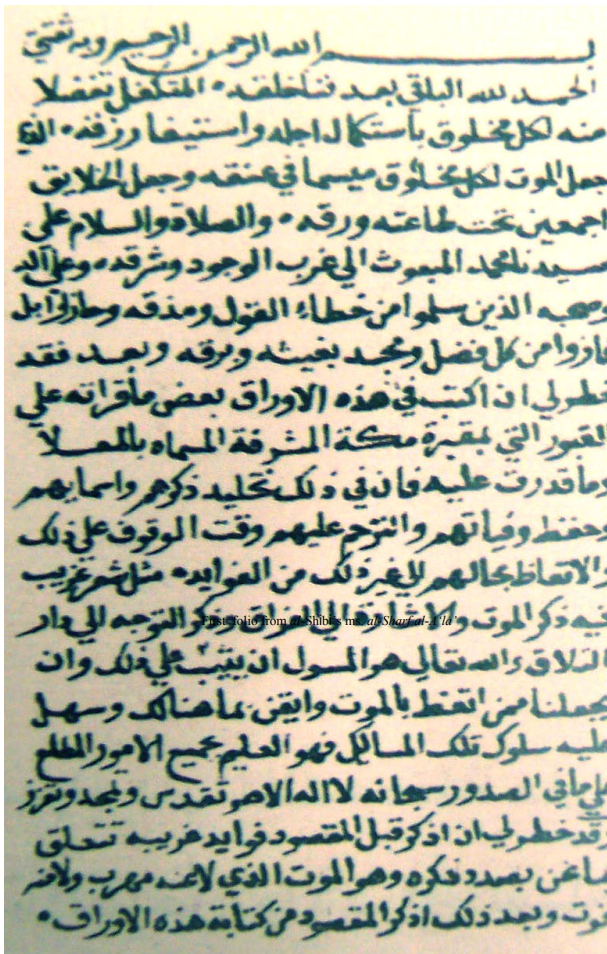
While these inscriptions conveyed messages as text, their calligraphic expression and aesthetic elements quite often constituted a vibrant decorative appeal in an Islamic building. The use of written messages for architectural decoration may be described as a typical Islamic cultural phenomenon. In some buildings, the calligraphic panels are placed too high to be deciphered,⁵ suggesting that their aesthetic impact was more important than the textual message. In fact many early Kufi inscriptions and some Bengali tughra' (a highly intricate and stylized form of calligraphy) inscriptions from the Sultanate period in Bengal are almost indecipherable, again suggesting that aesthetics was more important than content. For those regions influenced by Shi'ism, this development may to some extent have been inspired by its mystical tendency, especially the belief that a hierarchy of knowledge and spiritual development obtains among people so that not all inscriptions may or should be read by ordinary viewers. In a number of Islamic inscriptions, letters are easily confused and uncertainties are created where the logic of the pattern of ornamentation takes precedence over legibility.⁶

However, it is also probable that with many inscriptions, some kind of historical intent was there from the very beginning. Indeed, some of them were intended to be read in the future, perhaps by scholars or more particularly by historians. It is also possible that, being accustomed to the Kufi style, educated Muslims were quite comfortable with the intricacies of Kufi patterns, more so than with the cursive styles (like naskh) that we today consider easier. Kufi script enjoyed a higher status than cursive writing in those days. The selection of an appropriate place for an inscription on a monument was also important, since those parts of the monuments that were most easily seen best served the purpose.

In spite of the great importance that Islam attached to reading, writing and learning, the majority of the rural population in much of the Muslim world remained illiterate. However, the viewing of religious inscriptions, especially Qur'anic ones, was still a source of baraka (blessings). For the ordinary literate person, being able to recognize a text – say, the Throne Verse from the Qur'an (2:255) or sayings of the Prophet on the virtues of building a masjid -- was the important thing, and rather than being able to decipher it accurately and completely. Quite a few inscriptions therefore served an iconographic function, in place of the figurative imagery used in other traditions. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Islamic inscriptions can be called informative in that they provide some simple information such as date of construction, kind of structure, name of the personage by and for whom it was built, etc. Another common feature is certain reiterated formulas that recur in many Islamic inscriptions, in some case repeated interminably. Since most of these formulas are phrases of religious import, they consciously reflect the dominant 'meaning' or 'message' with which the monument is intended to be associated.

Emergence of Islamic Epigraphy:

Inscriptions are found everywhere in the Muslim world from the Iberian Peninsula to the Indonesian archipelago. They were of sufficient interest to draw occasional notices by Muslim historians and writers from quite an early period. Al-Jahshiyari (d. 331/942), for instance, records a number of Arabic inscriptions on the gates of Acre and Sidon as well as on a treasury building in Azarbayjan.⁷ Ibn al-'Athir tells us that in 630 (1232-33), he saw in the court of the congregational mosque of Mosul a stone slab with an inscription which contained useful information about the extension of the mosque during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Mahdi.



First folio from al-Shibi's ms. al-Sharf al-A'la'
different ms. of al-Sharf al-A'la'



First folio from a

Later, fourteenth-and fifteenth-century Arab scholars, such as Taqi al- Din Ahmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrizī (d. 845/1441) and Taqi al-Din al-Fasi (775- 832/1374-1428; taught at the famous Bengali seminary in Makkah, al-Madrasa al-Sultaniyyah al-Ghiyathiyyah al-Bangaliyyah) studied inscriptions as an important source for regional history. Al-Fasi’s work was more methodical in dealing with the epigraphs of Makkah as he surveyed the architectural remains of this ancient city and deciphered their inscriptions. He cross-checked the dates appearing in the epigraphic texts with other historical sources to substantiate in a remarkably accurate way his findings about the history of Makkah.⁸ Still the credit for making the study of inscriptions as a distinct discipline



Another folio from a ms. of *al-Sharf al-A'la'*

goes to Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Shibī⁹ (779-837/1378-1433). His meticulous study of Makkan tombstones and stelae established for the first time a remarkably and unprecedentedly high standard for scholarly epigraphic study. He can truly be considered the father of epigraphy (شيخ دراسة النقوش) (الكتابات الأثرية). Al-Fasi used epigraphic evidences to fill the gaps in historical narratives while compiling his monumental work on the history of Makkah; al-Shibī looked at the inscriptions for their own sake – a strictly epigraphic approach. Not only did he painstakingly decipher a great number of tombstones in the graveyard of al-Ma‘la (popularly also known as al-Mu‘alla), he also recorded such basic information as style of script, date, etc., exactly as a modern epigraphist would do.

However, approaching Islamic inscriptions in a systematic way with an academic interest began in the late nineteenth century, when Islamic epigraphy saw some of its rules

codified as a result of the dedicated efforts of the famous Swiss orientalist Max Van Berchem (1863-1923) who can be regarded as the pioneer of the science of modern Islamic epigraphy in this age. The research methodology, that he established for the study of Arabic inscriptions, not only as an art form, but also as a scholarly field of considerable importance for oriental studies in the fields of language, history, art and architecture. Instead of just deciphering, reading, and translating inscriptions -- a work of considerable skill by itself -- he established the methodology of analyzing each inscription in its cultural and historical context, often culminating in a whole essay covering its particular time and space as well as biographical details of the names appearing

in the epigraphic text. His pioneering works, such as *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*,¹⁰ certainly paved the way to establish Islamic epigraphy on sound footing. Soon after that, the monumental task of cataloguing the Islamic inscriptions began with the publication of the *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* in 1931. More than eight thousand inscriptions were edited in the first sixteen successive volumes of *Répertoire* (Cairo 1931-64) only, which covered the first eight centuries, and the effort continues to this day. In spite of the fact that *Répertoire* remains incomplete in a number of ways, partly because of the discoveries of a number of new inscriptions that came into light after its publication, still it can be considered one of the most useful inventories and the only existing attempt at a systematic grouping of Islamic inscriptions by year and in an approximately geographical order. Scholars such as Tychsen, Reinaud, J. J. Marcel, George C. Miles, S. Flury, Gaston Wiet, E. Herzfeld, A. Grohmann, Jean Sauvaget, Moritz Sobenheim, E. Lévi-Provençal, and J. Sourdél-Thomine have contributed greatly in the field in the Western languages. On the other hand, Hasan Mohammed al-Hawary, Ibrahim Jum'a, Hasan al-Basha, Zaki Muhammad Hasan and Abder Rahman Fahmy and many others have contributed much in the Arabic language. A number of valuable works have also been rendered in other Islamic languages, particularly in Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Bengali, Pushtoo, Bahasa Malay and Bahasa Indonesia.

Importance of Islamic Epigraphy:

Almost every inscription, whether on a milestone, frieze, or tombstone, contains useful

information. The use of inscribed panels was and remains so common that it is difficult to imagine a building in an Islamic culture without one. In miniature painting, buildings are often shown decorated with inscribed panels. Architectural inscriptions are often large enough to catch the viewer's attention; in this way they interact directly with the aesthetics of their surroundings. The horizontal inscriptional band on the *kiswa* (the decorated black cloth used to veil the Ka'ba) as well as *tirāz* (a highly stylized form of embroidered writing on early Islamic textiles) may well have influenced and been influenced by architectural epigraphy.¹¹

In many cases when a region came under Islamic rule or influence, for everyday use the local language was often retained, but Arabic was the official, religious, educational and literary medium. In Central and South Asia, Persian was used in the royal courts, but Arabic remained the language of religion and therefore the *lingua franca* among Muslims. Islamic inscriptions across this vast land used both Arabic and Persian. Rulers used Persian, even though many came from a Turko-Afghan background and some spoke Turkic



First Islamic coins in Bengal issued by Bakhtiyār Khalji

dialects. In South Asia, inscriptions in Turkish are rare since the conquerors hardly ever used that language for writing. Out of the Indian languages, Sanskrit was used in rare cases both for numismatic and epigraphic purposes. The first coin issued by Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Muḥammad Bakhtiyār Khaljī commemorating his conquest of the Gaur region has inscription in both Arabic and Sanskrit. This suggests that the Muslim ruling class patronized the elite culture, perhaps at the cost of the popular one. The first and the third earliest inscriptions in Bengal, executed under the patronage of early Muslim rulers, namely Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn ‘Alī Mardān (607-610/1210-13) and Balka Khān Khaljī (626-28/1229-31), are inscribed in Persian, while a khānqah inscription (dated 618/1221) from the reign of Ghiyāth al-Dīn ‘Iwād from Sian, Birbhum District, not far from an early Islamic centre of Lakhnawr (see map no. 4), dated 618/1221 is rendered in Arabic. Though the first Persian inscription seemingly appeared in the mid-eleventh century (1055-60) in a tomb in Safid Buland in the northern part of Farghana valley in Uzbekistan, Bengal also seems to be one of the first and earliest regions to have Persian architectural inscriptions. Especially after the establishment of Mughal rule in the region, Persian became the dominant language for inscriptions. That Persian was used as early the beginning of thirteenth century in Bengal frontier so far from both Persia and Central Asia, is intriguing.

Thematic Variety of Islamic Inscriptions:

Inscriptions can be difficult to read, and much of the information in them may appear trivial to the uninitiated. Epigraphic sources rarely package and present information conveniently. Rather, they contain scattered bits of data, which need to be put together coherently with the help of other sources. However, one can gradually develop the skills and sensitivity that make their study both useful and interesting. From the point of view of political history, important data in an epigraphic text can be a date, a place name, or the name of the ruler recorded there. A historian can then try to incorporate all this fragmentary information into a historically coherent narrative. Such information can tell us that the area where the inscription was found was indeed under the jurisdiction of the ruler mentioned. If the name of the ruler in the inscription is different from the one usually found in contemporary chronicles, it might mean that some unusual event, such as rebellion, had taken place there which historians for some reason did not record. One such example is the Baramatyabari inscription of Bengal dated 934/1528, which records Maḥmūd Shāh as being the sultan, even though the ruler of Bengal at that time was in fact Nuṣrat Shāh. The inscription suggests that Maḥmūd Shāh may have proclaimed himself the sultan in defiance of the authority of his brother -- the ruling sultan -- Nuṣrat Shāh in 1528, though no such event is recorded in contemporary historical writings. Indeed, many violent events, especially those that went against the interests of the ruling establishment, were not usually recorded by official chroniclers at the imperial court, leaving the reader of the chronicle with the impression that peace and happiness prevailed throughout a ruler’s reign. Generally speaking, dates on inscriptions are more reliable than dates in the texts of historical manuscripts, and therefore they provide valuable clues for reconstructing events in local history. While travelling in the famous city of Multan, the famous traveller Ibn Battūta saw an important inscription in an old Islamic edifice. Through this epigraphic text, he came to know that a ruler of the region Ghāzī Malik fought twenty nine wars against Mongol invaders. Ibn Battūta also noticed a commemorative inscription on the miḥrāb of the earliest Jāmi‘ Masjid in Delhi, which he deciphered. This inscription helped him to find the exact date of the Muslim conquest of Delhi.¹²

The Islamic inscriptions can provide sometimes some indispensable historical clues about political history of a region. The names of quite a few rulers of Sultanate Bengal can only be established on the basis of epigraphic evidence. Quite often, names of local administrators were not recorded by the imperial chroniclers living far away from the provinces. Inscriptions are sometimes the only source to furnish details of the local administration such as the names of revenue collectors, police officers, local army commanders and representatives of the central government in the area and their officials, names that would otherwise be lost to history. These names can be quite helpful as they can be analyzed and interpreted for the historical purposes. Similarly, older or original names of places or administrative units and divisions in use when the inscription was made can be preserved, as can details bearing on social or religious history. Commemorative inscriptions sometimes tell us why the inscriptions themselves were made. The theme of sovereignty is historically associated with monumental entranceways, for example, because they were thought to be proper places to proclaim the sovereign's power. Epigraphic texts can also help us understand religious trends in a region.

While individual epigraphic text may vary, one can often sense a common ground of meaning, a unity of message. The inscription over a masjid entrance is apt to contain Qur'anic verses in praise of God, or other verses or Prophetic sayings that promise divine reward for those who construct and maintain masjids. Inscriptions on mihrabs will often use a verse in which the word *mihrab* (in Arabic) itself appears. The calligraphers also find a great source of inspiration, spiritually and aesthetically, in inscribing on religious buildings *al-asmā' al-husnā'* (the beautiful names of God), the *basmala*, and sometimes a poetic verse on a spiritual theme (usually in Persian, but sometimes also in Arabic). Sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) start to appear on inscriptions towards the end of the eleventh century – there is a minbar inscription dated 484/1081 on the tomb of the head of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, in Ascalon, later moved to the sanctuary in Hebron in Palestine.¹³ Mughal emperor Babar mentions in his famous autobiography, *Tuzuk-i-Babari* known in Persian as *Baburnama*, an elegant inscription that used to decorate the façade of the central jami' masjid, (built by his ancestor, Amir Timur, next to his famous castle) in Samarkand. It contained an exquisitely written Qur'anic verse (إِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ) very popular among mosque inscriptions. Inscribed above eye-level, this monumental inscription was nevertheless so large that, according to Babar, it could be seen from long distance. Common elements in the inscriptions in different parts of the Islamic world indicate that a silent process of universalization of values and tastes was taking place in that world, along with the flow of merchants, travelers, *hadith* collectors, knowledge seekers and sufis (see Map 4).

Both Qur'anic verses as well as *hadith* quoted in the epigraphic text can yield historical clues since they were selected for their appropriateness to a particular setting. Quite naturally, they contain some kind of religious message in the form of verses from the Qur'an or sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*). These messages can be very helpful in understanding religious trends and transformations in the region. The Throne Verse is often and appropriately used for funerary inscriptions and for calligraphy in mosques, as it is considered a source of *baraka*.¹⁴ A particular *hadith* is selected for an inscription on the same principle of appropriateness. So can names with religious connotations: the appearance of the names of the first four caliphs in an epigraphic text, for example, can be taken as evidence that the patron was a Sunni Muslim. If the patron of the building had been a Shi'i, only the name of 'Alī and the direct descendents of the Prophet (particularly the *pak panj tan* or five holy bodies, a popular Shi'i invocation in South Asia) would appear.¹⁵ If, for example, the epigraphic text contains the terms of *waqf* (endowment),¹⁶ as is the case with an inscription from Nayabari, not far from Dhaka, dated

1003/1595 (see also another *Waqf* inscription of a Khanqah in Sitalmat, Bengal dated 652/1254), then the verse selected may contain messages promising rewards for those who look after the endowment and punishment for those who neglect or vandalize it.

Tombstones and stele can also furnish valuable information; they are sometimes the only authentic evidence we have for ethnic immigration to a particular region, since the surnames, titles and more particularly the *nisba* (geographical attribution) of the deceased person on a tombstone will indicate the family's place of origin and the name of his tribe, such as *Kabulī*, *Shirazi* or *Qaqshal*. In addition, the stone may mention the profession of the deceased person or his social status, which can be useful for social and genealogical study.¹⁷ Most importantly, it furnishes us with the most authentic date of the death of the person for whom the tombstone was made.

Inscriptions are found on all kinds of structures -- mosques, madrasas, khanqahs, shrines, mausoleums, forts, palaces, tanks, wells and caravanserais (see map nos 1, 2, 3 and 4) --, and are again often the most authentic record for the architectural chronology in Islamic civilization. Consequently, they are an important source for understanding the architectural activities of a particular region. Many are inscribed on a beautifully decorated background, and studying these decorative motifs can itself be rewarding. Sometimes, it plays a central role in architectural decoration (e.g. the gate inscription of Nim Darwaza at Miyāneh Dar dated 871/1466-67). Quite often, the effect of Islamic inscriptions can be sensed at the very first sight of a building. The majority of Islamic inscriptions record the circumstances of a building's construction, which allows us to date and to identify buildings and their functions. The calligraphic panels are usually so well blended into the overall decorative program that they seem to be an integral part of the architecture in many Islamic buildings, especially in Iran (e.g., Masjid-i-Mir in Mashhad), Central Asia (e.g., the Gur-i-Mir complex in Samarqand) and Turkey. In Bengal, however, it is somewhat different, as inscriptions are not completely blended into the aesthetic unity of the architecture; rather they remain distinctive in their appearance.

Diffusion of Islam meant diffusion of the use of Arabic as the primary religious and intellectual language. That a vast majority of epigraphs were inscribed in Arabic suggests that it had a strong impact on the cultural life of educated Muslims in general, as it was taught to high levels of proficiency in madrasas and other Islamic institutions in all regions. In Central and South Asia, however, Persian was also widely used. Both languages are accordingly found in the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal. The likeness and affinity in the choice of language, layout, theme, literary style and taste in ornament, found in the Islamic inscriptions, point to a remarkable cultural coherence in the medieval world of Islam.

Use of Inscriptions as Legal Deeds

Before the advent of the Muslims in Bengal (the first Muslim conquest under Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Bakhtiyār Khaljī began in 601/1205), copper and other metal plates in general, and stone slabs in some rare cases, were used to record land grants and endowments in the region. Muslims, in general, preferred paper for writing legal documents. Inscriptions were also used sometimes to record endowment for religious edifices as well as for charity or welfare purpose, known in Islamic culture as *waqf*. A famous early fifteenth century Arab historian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrizī (d. 845/1441), for instance, mentioned in details about a *waqf* text inscribed on al-Watātī well constructed under the patronage of vizier Abu 'l-Faḍl.¹⁸ Quite a few inscriptions of Bengal throw light on *waqf* institution of medieval Bengal. In some instances, these epigraphic texts record the very terms of *waqf*,¹⁹ as is the case with an inscription from Nayabari, not far

from Dhaka, dated 1003/1595 (see also another *waqf* inscription of a Khanqah in Sitalmat, Bengal dated 652/1254).

Quite often, a particular Qur'anic verse or a saying of the Prophet is found in these inscriptions that carries some kind of religious message on the basis of appropriateness for that particular *waqf* inscription. The verses selected in these inscriptions often contain messages promising rewards for those who look after the endowment and punishment for those who neglect or vandalize it. The *madad-i-ma'ash* inscription from Nayabari dated 1003/1595 serves as a good example of how epigraphic panels were occasionally used to record legal documents such as *waqf* (endowment) deeds for mosques and madrasas.²⁰ This tradition existed in certain parts of the Islamic world until the eighteenth century, no doubt in part because it had the practical advantage that stone slabs are less likely to perish or be stolen. For example, a complete *waqf* is inscribed in a building in Qazwin in Iran.²¹ There are a number of such inscriptions in Bengal, such as the Dohar inscription dated 1000/1591 and the Barakatra inscription dated 1052/1642 from Bengal. During Mughal Period, we find an institution *diwan-i-risala*, which dealt with religious matters, endowments, and grants of *madad-i-ma'ash*, and which was controlled by the *sadr al-sudur*, who also combined the office of the *kadi-i mamalik* or Chief Judge of the realm.

Globalization and Cultural continuity of the Islamic world: Comparison of Bengal inscriptions with Andalusia Inscriptions:

Two extremely interesting and exquisite inscriptions of Gaur dated 871/1466, that once belonged to two magnificent royal entrances to the Badshahi citadel in Gaur, (namely, Nim Darwaza and Chand Darwaza), deserve special attention as they so closely resemble some fabulous eighth /fourteenth-century inscriptions that appeared at the other end of the Islamic world, in the Alhambra Palace in Granada. The literary style of the verses in these inscriptions has resemblance in a way in its composition with Qasida al-Burda of Imam al-Busiri. But since the purpose of these epigraphic texts is commemorative inscriptions, exactness of meter (Bahr al-Basit) in their poetic rhyme could not be observed throughout.

It is striking indeed to note the conceptual and stylistic harmonies between these sets of inscriptions on royal monuments in Gaur and Granada, capitals of two different Muslim kingdoms thousands of miles apart. Both royal complexes were created over years to serve various functions -- private palaces for the royals, mosques, public courts, castles and gardens. The inscriptions in both do not use the local vernacular, but a very high quality of rhetorical, poetic Arabic for the texts. There is an interesting correspondence in the religious, social and cultural context -- both capitals were inhabited largely by Muslims while the majority of the population in adjacent areas were non-Muslims. Grandiosity of the royal palace as well as water cosmology are among the prominent themes in many of the verses in the inscriptions of both Alhambra and Gaur. The river Darro ran by the side of Granada and a series of irrigational canals watered vast orchards of orange trees in and around Alhambra; several canals, lakes and water pools ornamented the lovely landscape of the royal palace of Gaur, with the old channel of the mighty Ganges flowing to the west of the palace. Reference to these water canals can be found in a verse in the Chand Darwaza inscription that is written as follows:

*A watercourse flows beneath it, like the waters of Paradise,
whose fruits take away need and pain.*

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Plate: Four verses from the second line of the Chand Darwaza inscription at Miyaneh Dar in Gaur, dated 871/1466-67

Likewise, the verses in the second line of the Nim Darwaza inscription echo the aesthetic aspects of the Bārbak Shah's palace, its monumental gate and the fabulous garden around it. The whole setting, compared with the Biblical garden of Eden (جَنَّةُ عَدْن), is an earthly embodiment of the paradisiacal garden or *janna* (الجنة). Perhaps, the idea of *janna* (lit., garden) is more powerfully depicted in the Chand Darwaza inscription using the exact Qur'anic term *salsabil* (السلسبيل) or spring. Excavation by the Archaeological Survey of India on the site during 2002-2005²² (adjacent to Baisgazi Wall of Gaur) clearly indicates the existence of an elaborate system of water channels, cisterns and aqueducts that crisscrossed the surrounding gardens of the magnificent wooden palace, finally to merge with the river Ganges in the west. One of these canals passes through a hidden interior tunnel, running intricately through the middle of the palace, before it links up to a magnificent jetty of a river port at the back of the palace facing the Ganges.



Plate: NaSrid palace garden and pool in Alhambra, Granada where water and plants embellish the landscape with a profound aesthetic expression

Interestingly, the concept of gardens with pools and fountains dominates the theme of a number of verses in the inscriptions of the Alhambra palace in Granada. The Court of Lions was embellished with a majestic water-fountain alluded to metaphorically in the verses inscribed within the palace. One of the verses (inscribed on the Hall of Ambassadors written by the NaSrid vizier lisan al-Din al-Khatib, known also with the title Dhu 'l-Wizaratayn), runs in Arabic as follows:

مَنْ يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي
 يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي
 يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي

مَنْ يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي
 يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي
 يَأْتِيَنِي بِشَاوِي

*Whoever approaches me complaining of thirst,
 I offer him a cool and satisfying drink, unmixed and pure*

Similarly, in the verses of ibn Zamrak inscribed on the Fountain of the Lions, we find a similar metaphor when it says:

*Haven't you noticed the rhythm in the gushing water,
that runs creating graceful currents descending from above*

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Water is projected in all these verses as a fascinating aspect of the art that gave these monuments a special meaning. We also find several other metaphors referring to water cosmology in a number of other verses by ibn Zamrak inscribed in different places of Alhambra, such as *al-ibriq* (الـبريق) or jug and *ina' al-ma'* (إناء الماء) or water vessel. While Burj al-Ma' (برج الماء) or Tower of Water, that used to glorify one of the compounds of Alhambra vanished long ago, Fana' al-Birka (فناء البركة) or the 'Court of the Cistern' along with the 'Room of the Ship' exist to this day to remind us of the aesthetic beauty of water. Similarly, Bab al-Shari'a (ريح عتاب الش) or Gate of Justice also carries the same allusion in that *shari'a* can mean a source of drinking water. The front court of Alhambra, a starting point of the whole complex, was known as Fana' al-Rayhan (فناء الريحان) or Rayhan (lit., basil/mint) Court, where basil and mint plants adorned the view. The term *rayhan* appears in a verse in the Chand Darwaza inscription that runs:

*e provides refuge, like fragrant basil to the soul,
nds, while to foes it is forbidden and remote*

The inscriptions of both Miyāneh Dar in Gaur and Alhambra give expression to basic drive of rulers and ruling classes everywhere and in every age for power and glory, which lose their meaning unless exclusive. Nothing is known about the first line on the upper half of the Nim Darwaza inscription that disappeared long ago without trace. But one can easily imagine that it

contained verses referring to the unparalleled glory of Sultan Bārbak Shāh's power and his fabulous palace. Indeed, several verses in the Chand Darwaza inscription as well as in the remaining part of the Nim Darwaza inscription glorify the majestic rule of the sultan and the exemplary grandiosity of the royal palace. While Chand Darwaza (lit., 'Moon Gate' in Bengali) was a prominent gate in Sultanate palace of Gaur; al-Burj al-Qamari (lit., 'Moon Tower' in Arabic) was an important architectural element in Alhambra. The thematic similarity of the verses in the inscriptions at Miyāneh Dar with a number of verses in Alhambra is striking. For example, we find these verses in Alhambra:

*O son of kings, and of the sons of kings, whose
power the stars submit when your origins are compared
When you erect a palace, there is no equal to it; it achieves
such a glory that all the other glories are subdued by it.*

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A similar theme can be found in the inscription which once decorated the two lion head shaped spouts in the Alhambra bath that end with the following two verses:

*Blessed be he who gave the Imām Muhammad
a mansion which in beauty exceeds all other mansions
Here is the Garden containing wonders of art
the like of which God forbids should elsewhere be found.*

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Verses in Chānd Darwāza inscription praising Barbak Shah as an unmatched and incomparable king on the earth run as follows:

*Is there in the two Iraqs a sultan as generous,
As Barbak Shah, or in Syria and in Yaman.
No! There is not unto him in all God's land ,
An equal in generosity, for he is unique, unparalleled in time.*

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Plate: Chānd Darwāza towards the end of eighteenth century as depicted by Creighton in his drawing “*Ruins of Gaur*”

Though use of poetical motifs became common in Persian inscriptions (particularly in Bengal since the advent of the Mughal in the sixteenth century), they were rarely used before this period in Arabic inscriptions. These poems were specially composed to reflect the glamour of royalty, whether in Alhambra or in the palace citadel of Gaur. We may consider them as topical, as explanatory of the purpose of the building, referring not only to specific elements of the palace (e.g., the monumental gates), but also to its unique setting.²³

Among the distinctive aspects of these two different epigraphic programmes, we notice that the inscriptions of Alhambra are at eye level, for instance around the niches of the walls. Artistically they are well-harmonized with the overall decorative scheme of the building. On the other hand, both the Nīm Darwāza and Chānd Darwāza inscriptions in the Gaur Citadel were placed quite high above eye level making them difficult to read except by special effort by a handful of learned people (e.g., ‘ulama’) in the area. While we know the names of those who composed the different verses inscribed in Alhambra palace, namely, ibn Zamrak (verses on the Rayhan [Basil] Court), ibn al-Jayyab (verses on two halls adjacent to the Rayhan [Basil] Court), and Iṣān al-Dīn al-Khatīb²⁴, we know nothing about the poets who composed the beautiful verses either in the Chānd Darwāza or Nīm Darwāza inscriptions. While much of Alhambra complex is still intact, very little of the sultanate palace complex in Gaur remains extant.

Diversity of Materials and Features in Bengal Epigraphs:

Bengal has a rich tradition of stone carving and sculptures going back to the periods of the Palas (750-1150) and Senas (1095-1300), which was inspired by the religious imagery of Hinduism and Buddhism. In spite of this superb stone-carving tradition, the artists and craftsmen did not in general use their skill for decorative writing in pre-Islamic periods. All that changed with the advent of Islam in the early thirteenth century. Representation and sculpture, though they evolved in other traditions as power symbols often associated with divine power, could not acquire any such significance or appreciation in Islamic culture, whose religious message was so firmly aniconic. Instead, Muslims explored other media to express their artistic zeal, and it was in calligraphy that they found the means to do this. Calligraphy accordingly found a new role in Bengal after the Muslim conquest in 1205, when Bengali artists diverted their traditional stone-carving skills to produce some of the most amazing specimens of Islamic calligraphy in stone, quite a number of which have survived to this day. Calligraphic patterns and styles in the inscriptions of Bengal come in a great diversity, which can be most helpful for determining the period of construction of many monuments whose dates cannot otherwise be ascertained. In addition, they are also a good source for art historical information.

With the passage of time, a special institution, mostly known as Diwan al-’Insha’, came into existence in the leading Islamic capitals, particularly in the Arab world. Responsible for imperial writing protocol and chancery script, this was the office which endorsed the formal text of royal inscriptions for state sponsored architecture. Art and architectural activities required a series of interactive processes that necessarily led to interaction between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. In the case of inscriptions, the patrons (e.g., sultans or court nobles) commissioned the work, a local ‘*alim*’ (Islamic scholar) wrote the texts, a calligrapher designed the calligraphic layout to accommodate the text in such a way that it covered the whole surface of the stone slab. Then he outlined it on the stone probably in charcoal or by incising very light and small dots. A

very skilled stone worker then chiselled away the surface of the slab, leaving the lettering and borderlines on all the four sides in relief form. One might wonder about the origin of the scribes, calligraphers, artists, and craftsmen who left us such a rich legacy of art and architecture including a vast number of Islamic inscriptions. While the *nisbas* (the place of origin) of the scribes and calligraphers found in a number of epigraphic texts indicate that most of them originally came from Iran and Central Asia,²⁵ many stoneworkers, masons, craftsmen and artisans were also locally recruited. Not all the commissioned works were fully completed, for we do find some inscriptions where the calligraphic outlines were marked on the stone, but the chiselling process was never completed, perhaps due to some unusual circumstance.²⁶ Though the epigraphic texts often contained Qur'anic verses and *hadith*, there is little evidence that anyone worried about employing non-Muslim stonecutters to inscribe religious texts.

An inscription can also tell us about the proficiency of stone engravers and rock cutters at a given time and place.²⁷ The kind of stone used for the inscription can often provide interesting clues about stone trade during that period. In Bengal, black basalt was used for inscriptions in most case. Because of its scarcity in the main land of Bengal, it used to be imported from the neighbouring regions, mostly from Rajmahal in Bihar. In cases when a stone was rare and valuable, it was often used more than once; for that reason stone slabs can be found that have inscriptions on both sides dating from different periods. A stone slab from Sian with an Arabic inscription dated 618/1221 is a good example of such a case: the earlier Sanskrit inscription on the other side was left intact.²⁸ Sometimes stone slabs were acquired from ruined and deserted buildings and reused without removing the original decorative motifs. In some epigraphic stone slabs in Bengal, we find traces of Hindu figural motifs, suggesting that they were picked up from the ruins of dilapidated temples and monasteries in the area. This was a utilitarian practice with no malign intentions. Even in the construction of mosques, old building materials were reused,²⁹ in some cases, bought from their previous owners.

Though many inscriptions were made for commemorative purposes, the small amount of space available for the text discouraged unnecessary rhetoric. The messages they contain often give an unadorned account of what happened and thus can be considered a reliable primary source for documentation. Arabic inscriptions are also helpful in guiding us in tracing the palaeographic development of Arabic writing. Very few of the epigraphic texts of Bengal bear the name of the calligrapher. In a way it reflects the cultural values of the past Islamic societies where the creation of an art was more of a social expression of the Muslim *ummah* than an individual creation or an artist's effort to perpetuate his name on his art work.

Comparison of Islamic Inscriptions with Sanskrit Inscriptions in Bengal:

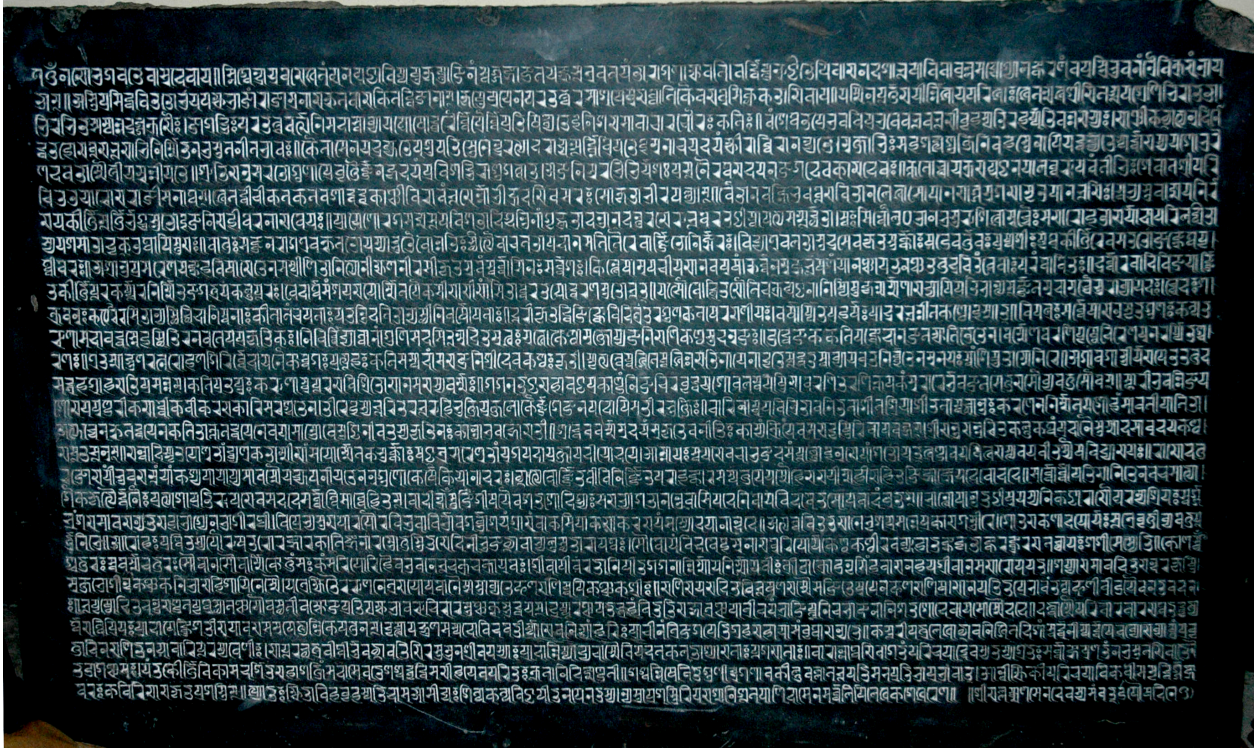


Plate : A Proto-Bengali dedicatory inscription of Lakhshman Sena (inscribed probably during 1182-1185) discovered recently in Bagmari village in Chapai Nawabganj district, Bangladesh

While pre-Islamic (namely Sanskrit and Proto-Bengali) inscriptions are mostly incised; Arabic and Persian inscriptions in Bengal were in general rendered in relief; we find any Islamic inscription in incised form is rare. Sanskrit inscriptions quite often provide the primary historical source for many non-Muslim dynasties of the ancient period in South Asia. This is not usually the case for Muslim rule in the region. In the Islamic tradition, historical accounts were normally recorded on paper in the form of chronicles. However, not all the regions share this rich legacy of history writing to the same degree, and calamities could affect the preservation of manuscripts in one region more than another. This is especially true of pre-Mughal Bengal (1205 -- 1538), where chronicles were either not often written or have not survived. Inscriptions fill many gaps in the early history of Muslim Bengal, which is otherwise not well recorded. These inscriptions are, however, not as lengthy as the Sanskrit inscriptions from the region. One reason was that calligraphic considerations for Arabic and Persian inscriptions required more space than, for instance, inscriptions in Sanskrit. Some of the Sanskrit inscriptions from the Pala and the Sena dynasties of Bengal are so lengthy that they include full genealogy of the rulers. A further reason is that both the Pala and Sena rulers used copper and bronze plate for their inscriptions in addition to stone slabs,³⁰ whereas the Muslims used only stone slabs for a more monumental effect. The letters in Sanskrit inscriptions are also much more compact than letters in Arabic and Persian inscriptions and their calligraphic output is also restricted. There are some Sanskrit as well as bilingual inscriptions (Arabic and Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit or Persian and Sanskrit) from the Muslim dynasties in Bengal (one example is the Nayabari inscription, dated 1003/1595), but their number is insignificant.

Some Conclusive Remarks:

Inscriptions can be an indispensable source for historians. They are a distinctive part of the Islamic cultural heritage in particular. Islamic epigraphic texts serve as one of the primary sources for understanding the early spread of Islam in many different regions. They are a valuable means to cast fresh light on the religious and cultural dynamics of different periods of history. They help us, for instance, to understand the complex history of the consolidation of Islam in the Bengal region which, despite its having no direct geographical link with the rest of the Islamic world, nevertheless has a strong Islamic identity. Epigraphic study can thus amend the old approaches and bring fresh findings that enhance our understanding of regional history. Islamic inscriptions vary from one region to another both in their artistic expression and literary style, but we may also find a unity that prevails in the Islamic messages that most of them convey. The great diversity, that exists historically in the regional cultural expressions in the Islamic world, is truly amazing. But one also discovers interestingly a remarkable cultural continuity in these vast regions, as if ideas travelled from one corner of the world of Islam to the other literary as well as spiritually. With the spread of Islamic civilization, a gradual globalization was taking place in the old world, albeit silently.

Notes :

¹ For instance, Mawlana Minhaj al-Din Siraj al-Din, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, ed. ‘Abd al-Hay Habibi (Kabul, 1342 A.H.), provides much useful information about early Muslim rule in Bengal.

² Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah* quoted in Martin Lings *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Early Sources* (New York: Inner Traditions International Ltd., 1983), 42.

³ The celebrated Muslim historian Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn ‘Ali al-Maqrizi also uses the word *athar* to connote more or less the same meaning in his treatise on the relics and remains of Cairo *al-Khitat wa ‘l-Athar* (Cairo, 1370 A.H.).

⁴ One of the earliest examples of this development can be seen in the Qur’anic inscriptions on the *tabut* of al-Husayn made sometime around 550/1155 in Cairo, in which both Kufi and *naskh* are used; see Caroline Williams, “The Quranic Inscriptions on the *tabut* of al-‘usayn,” *Islamic Art* 2 (1987): 3-13. Another example is Qutb Minar in Delhi built in early 13th century.

⁵ The inscription on the ‘Afar Khān’s masjid dated 698/1298 in Tribeni, Hooghly; the Chhoto Sona Masjid inscription in Gaur from the reign of ‘usayn Shah and Bagha Masjid inscription in the district of Rajshahi dated 930/1523-24 are examples of this kind of calligraphic program, where the inscriptions are placed too high to be easily read.

⁶ R. Ettinghausen, “Arabic epigraphy: communication or symbolic affirmation,” in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. D. K. Kouymjian (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974): 297-317.

⁷ For further details, see *Répertoire chronologique d’épigraphie arabe*, vols. 37 and 43 (Cairo).

⁸ Taqi al-Din Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Husayni al-Fasi al-Makki, *al-‘Aqd al-Thamin fi Tarikh al-Balad al-Amin*, ed. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Qadir Ahmad ‘Ata’, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1998), 419 (See also other editions, e.g., edited by Muhammad Hamid al-Faqi,

Cairo: Muhammad Sarūr al-Sabban publisher, 1378 A.H., and Beirut edition by Mu'assasa al-Risala [n.d.]). al-Fasī also surveyed a number of oldest surviving mosques of his time in Taif and read their existing inscriptions; see, for instance, *Shaf'a al-Garām bi Akhbār al-Balad al-Harām*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), 122 (See also other editions, e.g., edited by 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmuri [Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, 1405]).

⁹ Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muhammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Makki al-Qarshi al-Shibi, *al-Sharf al-A'la fī Dhikr Qubūr Maqbira Bāb al-Ma'la*, ms. no. 354 s.f. 1179 in King Sa'ud University Library, ms. no. 130/900 in Shaykh 'Arif Hikmat Library in Madinah (copied in 1231/1816 by Ahmad al-Azhari), ms. no. 18325 in National Library in Tunisia (copied in 891/1486 by Abu 'l-Qasim ibn 'Alī ibn Muhammad al-Qahtani), ms. no. 6124 in Berlin Library (copied in 1122/1710 by Muhammad Sa'id ibn Isma'il al-Makki). It is interesting to note that the prominent family of Shibi earned fame and respect in Makkah during fifteenth century through their education and cultural activities. Quite a few of this clan hold various high positions in Makkah such as chief justice, mufti (deliverer of legal and religious verdict) and imām of the Grand Mosque. A number of scholars from this family taught at the famous Bengali religious seminary in Makkah named as al-Madrasa al-Sultaniyyah al-Ghiyathiyyah al-Bangaliyyah after its Bengali patron al-Sultan Ghiyath al-Dīn A'ḥam Shāh, the ruler of Bengal.

¹⁰ Max Van Berchem, *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*, in *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, (Egypte, vol. Xix, Cairo 1903; Jérusalem, vols. xliii, xlv, Cairo 1920-2; Syrie du Nord [in collaboration with E. Herzfeld], vols. LXXVII – LXXVIII, Cairo 1955).

¹¹ One can argue of course that it was architectural epigraphy which influenced the *Kiswa* as well as the *tirāz* tradition in the Muslim world.

¹² Ibn-Battuta, *Rihla* (Beirut; Dār Sādir, n.d.); 421.

¹³ A number of writings of the famous epigraphist Max Van Berchem throw light on these issues. See for instance his article: "Note on the Graffiti of the Cistern at Wady el-Joz," *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1915): 85-90, 195-198.

¹⁴ The use of the Throne Verse for funerary inscriptions is quite common almost everywhere in the Muslim world. We find it, for instance, in the inscriptions on the *tabut* of al-Husayn dated 550 (1155) now in the Islamic Museum in Cairo.

¹⁵ The Garh Jaripa inscription dated 893/1487; the Husayni Dalan inscription dated 1052/1642, and the Piyari Das Road masjid inscription dated 1109/1697 are good examples of this kind of epigraphic record.

¹⁶ A number of such inscriptions have been discovered in Bengal. Of these, a Burarchar inscription and a Dohar inscription both dated 1000/1591 and now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, probably belong to the same edifice that is referred to in the Nayabari inscription. Other examples are a Gaur inscription dated 893/1489, now in the British Museum, and a Baraktra inscription dated 1055/1645, in Bangladesh National Museum.

¹⁷ In the Baraktra inscription dated 1055/1645, for instance, Abu 'l-Qasim al-Husayni (who endowed the edifice) uses the *nisba* al-Tabatab'i al-Simnani (from Tabataba and Simnan), and the calligrapher Sa'ad al-Dīn Muhammad uses the *nisba* al-Shirazi (from Shiraz). In a Nayabari

inscription dated 1003/1595, Bhagal Khan, who endowed a masjid, is called Hajji (one who has performed pilgrimage).

¹⁸ See, for instance, *al-Khitat wa 'l-Athar* (Cairo, 1370 A.H.) for details. This monumental work on the relics and remains of Cairo can truly be considered as *magnum opus* in the field.

¹⁹ A number of such inscriptions have been discovered in Bengal. Of these, a Burarchar inscription and a Dohar inscription both dated 1000/1591 and now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, probably belong to the same edifice that is referred to in the Nayabari inscription. Other examples are a Gaur inscription dated 893/1489, now in the British Museum, and a Barakatra inscription dated 1055/1645, in Bangladesh National Museum.

²⁰ The institution of a *waqf* had certain advantages since *waqf* property could not be confiscated easily even by those in power.

²¹ Sourdel-Thomine, "Inscriptions Seljoukides et salles a couples de Qazwin en Iran," *Revue de Etudes Islamiques* 42 (1974): 3-43.

²² Bimal Bandyopadhyay "Recent Excavation of the Area adjacent to Baisgazi Wall of Gaur and Scientific Clearance at Some Adjacent Areas, District, Malda, West Bengal" *Journal of Bengal Art*, volume 9-10 (2004-2005, published in 2006): 12-23.

²³ For a detailed and in-depth discussion on the meaning and metaphor of verses in Alhambra inscriptions, see Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra* (Sebastopol, California: Solipsist Press, 1992), 75-129.

²⁴ James Cavanah Murphy, *History of the Mahometan Empire in Spain*, London, 1816 (See English translation of the Arabic inscriptions of Alhambra in appendix by Shakespeare under the title: A Collection of the Historical Notices and Poems in the Alhambra of Granada); Jules Goury and Owen Jones, *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Details of the Alhambra*, 2 v., London: 1842-45; Sabih Sadiq, "Qasr al-Hamra': Diwan Shi'ri Manqush 'Ala' 'l-Jidran", *al-Faysal*, no. 353 (December 2005), 54-67).

²⁵ We have at least one definite source that informs us about the widespread employment of Muslim craftsmen in sophisticated technology, art and architecture in Eastern India including Orissa. See *Baya Chakara*, trans. Alice Boner, Sadasiva Rathasarma and others, in *New Light on the Sun Temple of Konark* (Varanasi: D. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Office, 1972), 57, 68, 93, 116.

²⁶ The unfinished masjid inscription from Mandra dated 836/1433 presents a visual description about how the calligraphic program used to be outlined on the slab before it was actually inscribed.

²⁷ Hasan al-Basha, "Ahmiyat Shawāhid al-Qubur ka Masdarin li Tarikhi 'l-Jazirah al-'Arabiyyah," *Majallat Darasat Tarikh al-Jazirah al-'Arabiyyah* [Riyadh University Press] vol. 1, no. 1 (1399 A.H.): 81-83.

²⁸ It may be mentioned here that in most areas of the Bengal Delta, stone is not easily available, and therefore had to be imported from places such as Rajmahal in Bihar through its vast riverain routes.

²⁹ A stone mihrab from a ruined Sultanate mosque in Gaur, now in the Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi, is a good example of a reuse of old building materials. Traditional Bengali decorative motives usually found in the temple architecture in Bengal cover almost all of the outer façade. The use of old building materials especially from ruined Hindu temples for the construction of mosques by the Muslim rulers has led some people to assume that mosques were erected after Hindu temples were destroyed on those sites. These unfounded beliefs have

occasionally resulted in communal tensions and the demolition of places of worship in South Asia, such as the destruction of the Babri masjid in Ayodha in India in 1993.

³⁰ See, for instance, Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, "Mainamatir Chandra Bangshiyo Tamra Shasantroy," in *Abdul Karim Sahitya Visharad Commemorative Volume*, ed. Mohammad Enamul Hoque (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1972), i - vii.