

Subject-wise Classification of the Inscriptions on the Architectural Edifices of Bengal Sultanate:

*A Search for the Consistency of the
Beginning Portion of the Text with the
Main theme*

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Introduction

The Muslim rule that started in Bengal with the conquest of Lakhnawati under the leadership of Iktiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204, and from this time onward till its annexation with the Mughal empire under emperor Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar in 1576 can be regarded as the Sultanate rule in Bengal. Bengal was then no doubt a covetous attraction for the jobseekers and the travelers of home and abroad as well. Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that during this long span of time the Bengal Sultans and their appointed deputies in the various parts of their territorial jurisdiction built the secular and religious architectural edifices, and in the inserted stone-slabs they engraved the nature of their works and the related events of importance. The materials to reconstruct the history of the political, hierarchical, socio-cultural and aesthetic aspects of Bengal Sultanate could be sought in the letter-lines of these engraved stones. Till the seventies of the 20th century A.D. the scholars and researchers satisfied themselves with the conventional use of the inscriptional materials and did not dive deep in the slab-prints either inserted in the monuments or lying loose in the places of preservation. But with the passage of time to meet their further search they diverted their attention in their study vertically and to a greater depth. Thereby many untapped materials have been unearthed from this archaeological unit to enrich the history of Bengal Sultanate in her multidimensional aspects. Hence based on this archaeological tool the study of Bengal Sultanate's history becomes more convincing and fact-oriented than before. The main objective of this paper not to elaborate this inscriptional aspect of the stone-slab but to trace out the consistency between the starting discourse and the core points of the engraved text.

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Classification of the secular and religious architecture and the differentiation of the inscribed legends of the stone-slabs.

Of the materials for the construction of architectural edifices of ancient and medieval Bengal mud played a vital role. This mud being properly prepared used to be put in the dice-format and then came out with the brick-shape which was eventually backed in the sun or burnt in the fire. The former was less lasting than the latter. At the early phase of the urbanization of Bengal mostly the sun-backed bricks were used in the construction-works of the architectural structures. This was possibly the main cause for the non-existence of the architectural edifices built in ancient Bengal. But later on the architectural edifices built either with burnt brick or with the combination of burnt-brick and stone still now exist with some restoration works to bear witness to the excellence of the constructional design and ornamental beauty. Of this time span, mainly of Muslim rule the secular type of architecture is represented by the palace, the fort, the bridge, the cistern, the gate-way, the garden and such other edifices while the religious architecture spreads over the mosques, the madrasah-complex, the tombs and the *khanqas* or the hospices of the *sufi*-saints.¹ With a few exceptions the engraved stone in legend was not found inserted in the secular architecture of medieval Bengal. On the other hand the religious architecture was found to have the engraved stone in Arabic legend (a few in Person) inserted in its prominent place like the overhead of the main *mihrab* or the tympanum of the doorway. The engraver-artists showed their skill and aesthetic exposition in putting the epigraphs with various ornamental marks and motifs to arrest the visual attention of the onlookers. Taking into consideration of these two types of architectural edifices the inscriptional legends have been classified subject-wise as underneath to show their differentiation in theme and essence either stuck intact on the monument or lysing loose in the proper places of preservation.

Inscribed legends on secular architecture

Generally the inscribed legends on the stone-slabs of Bengal Sultanate can broadly be divided into two parts viz. the introductory and the main. The introductory part deals with such proposition that acts as a prelude to enter into the main part containing the whole theme of the legends. But a search into the published epigraphical works of the time shows that in almost all the units of secular architecture the epigraphs do not contain the introductory part, rather the whole inscribed legend is considered to represent the entire theme of the subject for which the architectural unit is built.² Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that the epigraphs of the religious architecture starts with such Quranic verse or the tradition (Hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) that reflects on the main theme of the subject coming in the second part. As an example it can be said that an epigraph containing the subject of mosque construction invariably, in its introductory part, puts quotation from the holy Quran or the Hadith that encourages the votaries of Islam to construct the sacred edifice.³ Hence in that case it is not difficult to seek consistency of the inscribed proposition of the introductory part with that of the second or main part of the epigraph. In view of this assertion an example of this type of epigraph containing both the parts is delineated here for clear understanding of the subject.

The stone-inscription in Arabic verse form (a few verse in Persian) regarding the construction of a gateway and a cistern within the palace of the time of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474) is found to have inscribed in the introductory part the praise to Allah and His benediction to the Prophet, his progenies, his *sahaba* (companions) and *tabiyun* (the companions of the companions). This was the starting speech of the epigraph. Then along with the eulogical composition on Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah and his father Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437-1459) the main or the second part was completed recording the date A.H. 871/1466 A.D. of the construction of the gateway and the cistern.⁴ Can any sort of consistency be sought between the introductory part and the main part of this epigraph? If thought deeply it reveals to us that the completion of a work, very important in nature got engraved in the main part of this stone-inscription. According to Islamic edict if any important and lawful work or speech is begun without uttering the name of Allah and His praise then it remains incomplete in its eventual results.⁵ It means that the mercy and adequate help of Allah could not be expected in such case. Hence the words *al-Hamdu Lillah* (praise be to Allah) are prefixed the surah Fatiha to be read compulsorily every time of the *salat* or prayer. After the praise to Allah benediction to His Prophet is expected to enhance Allah's mercy and ultimate success of any doing and saying. It is, therefore, cogent to say that the introductory part of the epigraph understudy containing the praise to Allah and His benediction to His Prophet is quite consistent to the main part in which the core theme like the construction of the gateway and the water course is inscribed.

Pertinent legends of stone inscription of mosque architecture

Mosque is one of the most important unit of religious architecture. During the Sultanate rule a good number of mosques were built in the capital city, the strategic places and other important stations of remote areas of Bengal under state patronization. In almost all these mosques the inscriptions inserted in their prominent places contain the name of the builders, the date of the construction and reigning Sultans in the main portion while in consistence with the purpose of the structure the Quranic verses or the traditions of the prophet or both were inscribed in the first or the introductory part of the epigraph. In most of the cases this verse of the holy Quran is inscribed - "He only shall build Allah's sanctuaries who believes in Allah and the Last Day, establishes prayer, pays the poor-rate and fears none but Allah. For such it is possible that they can be of the rightly guided".⁶ This verse of the holy Quran empathically encourages the believers to construct mosques in their respective areas to get Allah's pleasure. But the prerequisites added for the overall success of the builders in this world and the world hereafter if they fail to materialize in their individual and corporate life then its expected results are not beyond question. When this introductory part of the inscription is followed by the name of the person under whose initiative or direct patronization the mosque is constructed then it can be logically assumed that he is aware of all the prerequisites pertaining to mosque construction and at the same time he is ardently believer of them. Hence it can be deduced that the introductory part of the inscription quoting the Quranic verse in connection with mosque construction makes a bridge in between the beginning and main theme of the epigraph. Often besides the Quranic verse referred to above another verse of the holy Quran is found to be inscribed in the stone-slab of the mosque. This is, "And the mosques are only

for Allah, so pray not unto any one along with Allah".⁷ This verse of the holy Quran indicates that the mosques are the house of Allah on the earth. But it is true that Allah cannot be confined to a definite place to live in. If it be so then His eternity must not be above question. In another verse of the holy Quran it is expressed that Allah is the light of the whole universe and He is Existent everywhere.⁸ The core point of the verses referred to above is that the mosques are His chosen place although His existence is felt every where and as such no Muslim if says his prayer sincerely can make partnership with Allah. To establish *tawhid* or the unity of Allah the messengers and prophets are sent from age to age. In the continuity of this process the last and greatest Prophet Muhammad's endeavour in proper place for establishing *tawhid* was primarily the mosque. In the main part of the epigraph with this Quranic verse is introduced the builder and, therefore, in juxtaposition of these two parts it is logical to say that the main purpose of the person who constructed the mosque is to establish Allah's *tawhid*. On the other hand to perform such deed for the Muslim rulers of the time understudy falls within their religious obligation. In some other mosque's epigraph the first part contains the *Ayat al-Kursi* or the throne verse by which the attributes of Allah along with His all comprehensive power are intended to make wide circulation among the votaries of Islam. Sometimes this Quranic verse is found to be engraved in the stone-slab of the mosque, "He who does a good deed will receive tenfold the like thereof".⁹ Mosque construction is a virtuous deed and it is mostly appreciable to Allah. This is why the introductory part with this verse added to the main part carries special significance regarding the construction of the mosque done by individual persons. (see plates no. I & II)

Under the Bengal Sultanate as the Quranic verses pertinent to mosque construction in introductory part consistent with main part are quoted in the inscribed stone-slabs so also the hadith or the tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) relating to the mosque construction is inscribed in the introductory part of the epigraph. In this regard the hadith is mostly inscribed "He who builds a mosque to seek the pleasure of Allah in this world Allah builds for him a house likewise in the Paradise".¹⁰ In some other hadith of the Prophet in place of 'a house likewise' is mentioned 'a palace' or 'seventy palaces'.¹¹ There is no room of doubt that the introductory part of these inscribed stone-slabs has closely connected with the main part of such epigraphs. But the tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) inscribed in the introductory part has put a condition of the pleasure of Allah to have been as main motive behind the construction of the mosque. It is, therefore, clear that if the motive is not like that then the expectation of the reward as indicated in the tradition is not free from question.

Stone-inscription of madrasah complex

The most important edifice of religious architecture after the mosque is madrasah complex. The epigraphs regarding the construction of madrasah complex are very limited so far published in epigraphical records. As traced only three published stone-inscriptions have directly informed us the construction of madrasah-complex. In the introductory part of these epigraphs can be found such traditions of the Prophet (peace be on him) or such

wordings that inspire the acquisition of knowledge or the discourse on the matter of educational dissemination. From this part a clear vision is achieved about the main theme that contains the idea of the madrasah-construction. In this connection can be mentioned an inscription of the reign of Runk al-Din Kaikayus (1291-1301) regarding the madrasah-construction at Trubeni of Hugli. It records the date of construction of the madrasa in 698 A.H./1298 A.D. The tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) quoted in the introductory part and that makes a linkage with the main theme is, "the Prophet (peace be on him) says, seek for knowledge. Because the acquisition of knowledge is certainly to acknowledge His obedience, the searching for knowledge is obviously the prayer for Him, the mutual discourse on knowledge is but to recite His *tasbih* or the declaration of His holiness and for the sake of Allah, the dissemination of knowledge is a subject of joy for the person concerned."¹² The introductory part of this epigraph bears ahead the good tiding of the construction of an educational seminary incorporated in its later and main part. An inscription of 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519) procured from Firuzpur of the suburb of Gaur regarding the construction of a grand madrasah in 1502 A.D. has in its introductory part the tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) "seek for knowledge even though it be in China."¹³ This first part obviously throws light on the construction of an institute of learning contained in its main part.

Inscription of tomb architecture

Tomb construction falls in the category of religious architecture. A few tomb inscriptions of the Sultanate period are explained underneath for clear understanding of the subject.

The Mahasthan stone inscription of the time of Rukn al-Din Kaikayus (1291-1301) recording the construction of the tomb over the grave of Mir Namwar Khan probably a naval officer in A.H. 700 / 1300 A.D.¹⁴ acquaints us with *maqbarah* architecture in Bengal. The inscription starts with *bismillah* and a tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) in which it is stated that nothing can prevent to enter into the Paradise a person, except death, who recites the *Ayat al- Kursi* or throne verse every day. Then follows the engraving of the throne verse, and taken together it forms the introductory part of the inscription shedding light on the main part that contains the core theme of the subject. Because with death comes the question of putting the dead into the grave over which the tomb is erected. Another inscription about the tomb construction is said to have been found insert in the kitchen-wall of Nur Qutb al-Alam's hospices at Hadrat Pandua.¹⁵ As the name of the person in question is not recorded in the epigraph so from the eulogical sentences of the person in grave it is surmised to have been either Nur Qutb al-Alam or his great grandson Shaikh Zahid.¹⁶ The epigraph consists of three lines the first being its introductory part. In this part are engraved three verses of the holy Quran which are closely connected with the main theme of the subject i.e. the construction of *rawdā* over the grave of pious persons. The verses of the holy Quran in the introductory part are engraved in this order (1) Allah the Great says 'every soul has to taste the pang of death'.¹⁷ Allah says 'when their scheduled time approaches neither it delays an hour nor it precedes a moment'.¹⁸ Allah says 'everything on this earth is perishable except your Lord who is

eternally the Possessor of might and dignity'.¹⁹ These three verses in essence echo the warning that none can escape the icy touch of death. Hence as soon as a Muslim male or female dies he or she is put into the grave in normal condition. Then in special case a tomb is erected over the grave of holy and prominent personages. Pertinently it may be mentioned that this tomb in question was constructed by Khan al- Azam Latif Khan over the grave during the reign of Sultan Nasir al- Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459) in A. H. 863 / 1459 A.D. The stone inscription of Sonargaon inserted in the tomb of Haji Baba Saleh in the reign of Sultan 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519 A.D.) starts with this Quranic verse. "Allah is One and Eternal. He will certainly gather you together in the Day of Resurrection, and there is no room of doubt in it at all. Is there anyone truthful other than Allah in describing any event?"²⁰ The answer is 'none'. The verse of the holy Quran quoted here indicates that every human species is to die, and after death he or she is to stay in the grave till the Day of Doom. It is evidently clear that the introductory part of the epigraph containing the Quranic verse reflects on the main theme expressed in the later part. This *maqbarah* or tomb over the grave of Baba Saleh was built in A.H. 921 / 1506 A.D.²¹ The introductory part of these three epigraphs regarding tomb construction over the graves contain such Quranic verses which directly indicate the death, and as such they are consistent with core theme inscribed in the later part of the epigraphs. (see plate no. III)

Siqayah epigraphs

There is no dearth of epigraphs which reveal the information of *siqayah* construction under Bengal Sultanate. *Siqayah* in Arabic terminology conveys the idea of taking adequate step to supply water for human species, the animals, the plants and other objects of Allah's creation on this earth. The term *siqayah* has got its reference in the Quranic verse²² where its utility is acknowledged with other virtuous deeds. There is no denying the fact that water is lifeblood of all creations. This notion is echoed in the holy Quran where it is stated that "We (Allah) created everything with life from water".²³ To give water to drink is praiseworthy and is indeed virtuous deed of human beings. The Prophet of Islam in many of his sayings gave good tidings of salvation in the world hereafter for those who give water to drink for thirsty. Being imbibed with this spirit of Islamic idealism the votaries of Islam and the followers of Prophet Muhammad (sm) in all times take initiative in making water available for the people in the areas of scarcity.

The Muslim rulers in all ages took adequate step for water supply, as the necessity demanded, all over their conquered territories. The Muslim rulers of Bengal in medieval times especially of Bengal Sultanate did not lag behind in this respect. From the epigraphical sources we come across ten *siqayah* or watercourses of Bengal Sultanate.²⁴ The *Siqayah* as traced in the epigraphs can be taken, in the broader perspective, for any type of watercourse be it a reservoir, tank or canal. In the introductory part of these epigraphs is inscribed, "Allah, the Exalted says: He who does good deed shall have ten times as much to his credit."²⁵ The particular of the *siqayah* construction follows the quotation of the above Quranic verse in the main part of the epigraphs. It is, therefore,

presumed that the *siqayah* construction being a humanitarian work is a virtuous deed and Allah, the Great gives ten times its reward for those who are in anyway connected with this work. Any type of watercourses be it a tank, well, reservoir, canal and likewise is meant for the *siqayah* inscribed in the epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate. It is, therefore, evident that the introductory part of the *siqayah* epigraph has every possible consistency with the main theme of the later part. Hence the epigraphical evidence bears witness to this fact that besides tanks and reservoirs attached to the mosques a good number of watercourses in various forms were dug in all the areas of water scarcity under Bengal Sultanate. (see plate no. IV)

Concluding Remarks

The facts and feasibilities, which may be deduced from the study of the subject-wise classification of the inscriptions, inserted in Muslim architecture - either secular or religious - of Bengal Sultanate are given as underneath.

First, an analysis of materials traced in the deciphered epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate may ensure impartiality in writing and reconstructing the contemporary history of the period under study. Secondly, searching out the consistency of the introductory part with the main theme of the epigraphs it may be presumed that there was no dearth of expert hands in Islamics and Arabic calligraphy during the time of Bengal Sultanate. Moreover, the stone-cutter artists proved their excellence in *sang-tarashi* or stone-carving art in case of epigraphical work. It also indirectly focuses on the aesthetic aptitude of the rulers and their patronization of the artists. Thirdly, in absence of printing and publishing media the Sultans of Bengal and their deputies stored the secular and religious accounts of man's life in the form of calligraphic writing on the stone for the times to come. This is why writing of medieval history of Bengal Sultanate has recently made a great stride inspite of non-availability of written materials. Finally, religious consciousness, adherence to learning and above all the humanitarian works of the Sultans and their officials have been eulogized in every line of carved stones. In considering these aspects it may be said that the humane attitude of the rulers had its reflection on the stone-carving art of the time.

SOURCE: Obtained directly from the author

Plates

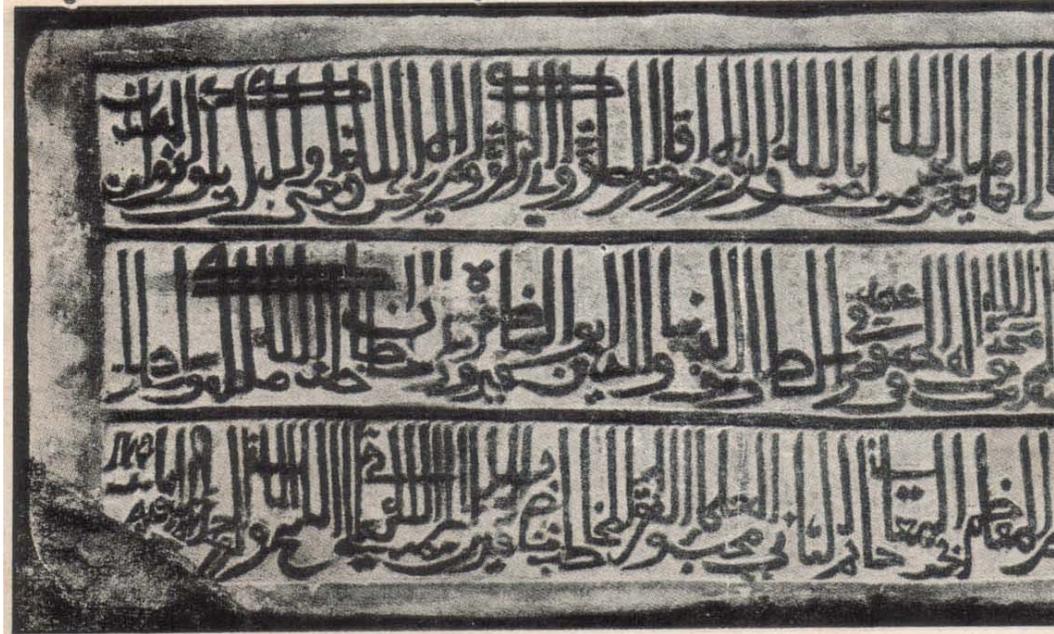


Plate i Saifud-Din Firoz Shah, 880 A. H. Birol, Dinajpur

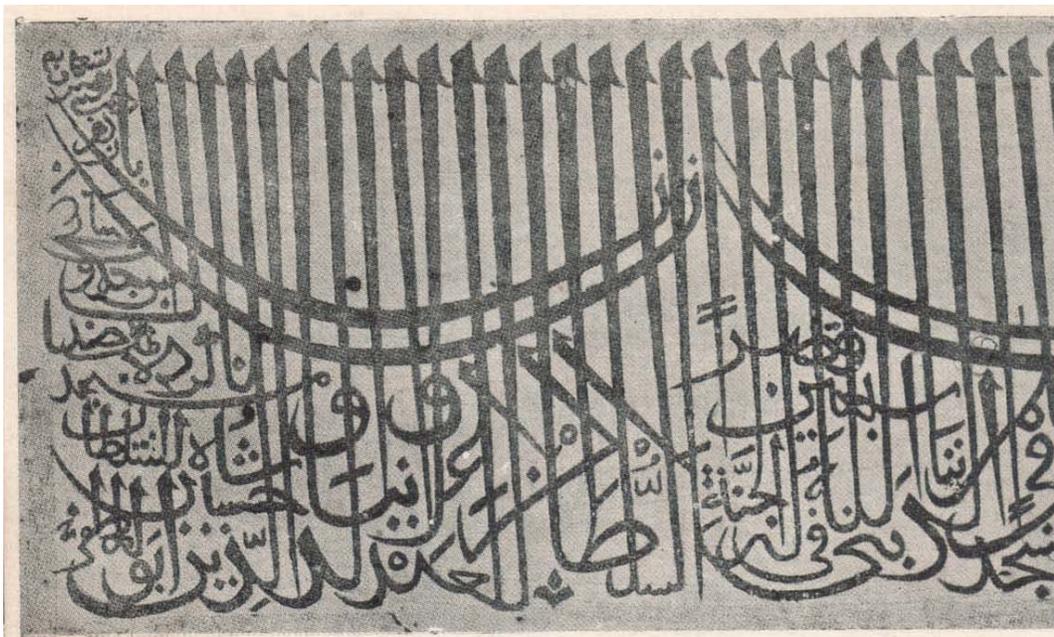


Plate ii Alaud-Din Husain Shah, 904 A. H. Rajshahi

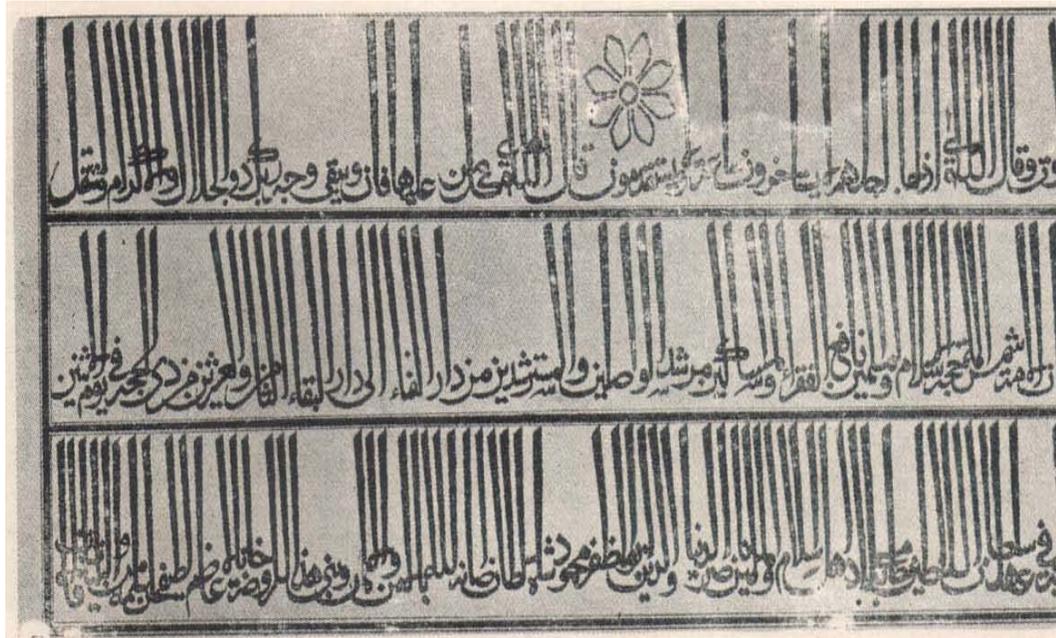


Plate iii Nasirud- Din Mahmud Shah 863 A. H. Pandua

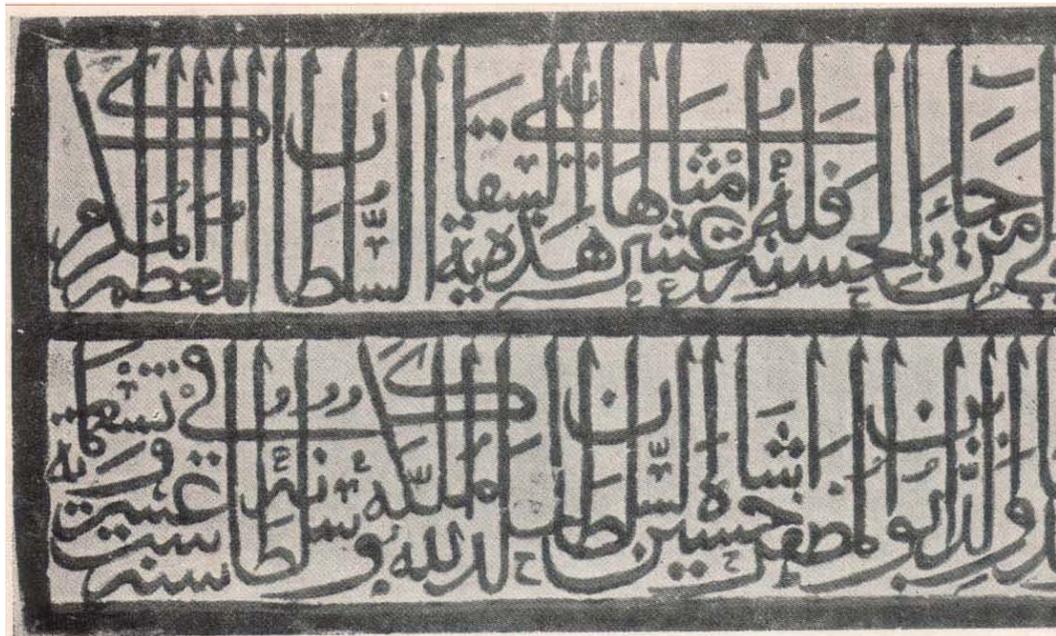


Plate iv Alaud-Din Husain shah, 916 A. H. Indian Museum, Calcutta

Source for all: Shamsud-Din Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal* Vol. IV (Rajshahi : Varendra Research Museum, 1960)

Notes and References

- ¹ Shamsud-Din Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal* Vol. IV (Rajshahi : Varendra Research Museum, 1960), pp. Introduction ix-xi (Henceforth the source is referred to as *IB*).
- ² Example for fort construction cf. Abdul Karim, *Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dhaka : Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992), p. 44; for bridge construction see *Ibid*, p. 139 (Henceforth the source is referred to as *Corpus*).
- ³ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 108, 120-121, 123, 133.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 86-88 (Beginning of the first part الحمد لله ذى الالاء و المنت - رب تنزه عن نوم وعن
(سن)
(بنای میانه در سنة احدى وسبعون وثمان مائة شد
- ⁵ قال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم كل شئ لم يبدأ بحمد الله ويتسمية الله فهو اقطع
- ⁶ For the inscription S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 192; for the verse al-Quran, Surah Tawbah, v. 18.
- ⁷ For the inscription Abdul Karim, *Corpus*, p. 197; for the al-Quran, Surah Jinn, v. 18.
- ⁸ For the verse al-Quran, Surah Nur, v. 35.
- ⁹ For the inscription S. Ahmad, *IB*, p. 108; for the verse al-Quran, Surah al-An'am, v. 160.
- ¹⁰ For inscription S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 108; for Hadith Mishkatul Masabih, (Karachi Edition), p. 68.
- ¹¹ For inscription, *Ibid*, p. 133; A K M Yaqub Ali, "Two Stone Inscriptions of Paharpur Museum: A Study of their Contents and Calligraphic Art", *Pratnatattva*, Dept of Archology, Jahangirnagar University, Vol. 13, June 2007, pp. 1-4.
- ¹² A.H. Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1957), p. 6. Inscription No. 7; S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 19ff.
- ¹³ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 158-159.
- ¹⁴ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 21-23; A K M Yaqub Ali, "Pundranagara: An Emporium of North Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities)*, Vol. 53, No. 1, June, 2008, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, pp. 83-84.
- ¹⁵ S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 19ff.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁷ al-Quran, Surah al-Imran, v. 185.
- ¹⁸ al-Quran, Surah al-An'am, v. 37.
- ¹⁹ al-Quran, Surah al-Rahman, v. 29.
- ²⁰ For Inscription S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 172; for the verse al-Quran, Surah al-Nisa, v. 87.
- ²¹ S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 172.
- ²² al-Quran, Surah al-Tawbah, v. 19.
- ²³ al-Quran, Surah al-Anbia, v. 30.
- ²⁴ *Pratnatattva*, p. 3.
- ²⁵ al-Quran, Surah al-An'am, v. 160.