An Epigraphical Journey through Bengal

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Abstract

The study of the architectural inscriptions of the Bengal Sultanate provides us with a new opportunity to look into the rich cultural history of this hinterland of South Asia. Most of the early Islamic monuments in the region had calligraphic works on them, as inscriptions were considered a powerful medium to convey visual, cultural, and spiritual messages to people. These inscriptions were rendered in various styles such as Kūfī, Thuluth, Naskh, Riqaʿ, Rayḥānī, Muḥaqqaq, Ṭughrāʾ, and Bihārī. This article focuses on some interesting inscriptions discovered in various parts of Bengal. Special attention is given to the analysis of information derived from them in their historical contexts, such as the names of the contemporary rulers, local administrative officers, religious figures, military commanders, and their titles. These findings help us understand the contemporary political, administrative, social, religious, and cultural aspects of the region.

Keywords

Arabic and Persian inscriptions, calligraphy, epigraphy, Bengal, medieval history and civilization.

The name Vanga or Vangala-desa is quite old. One finds it during the reign of Govinda Chandra (ca. 1021–1023 CE) in the Tirumalai Sanskrit inscription of the Rajendra-Chola dynasty where it appeared as "Bhangala Desha."[1] It also appears in the more or less same fashion (in some cases "Bhangala Desham") in a few Tamil inscriptions (namely வங்காளத்தேசம் in Tamil script) in Tamilnadu and some other places in southern India, in addition to a few other Sanskrit inscriptions of the

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[1] Nani Gopal Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal* (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1929), 3:3; Dinesh C. Sircar, *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan* (Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1973), 37.

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Chandra dynasty discovered in Mainamati, Bangladesh.[2] The name Vanga also (connoting East Bengal [e.g., Vikrampura and the adjoining areas] in general) appears in several other Sanskrit inscriptions (e.g., Bhuvanesvar inscription of Bhatta-Vhavadeva, Edilpur copper-plate of Kesava Sena, Madanapada copper-plate of Visvarupa Sena).[3] It also appears in a few Arabic-Persian inscriptions (in the form of Bangal in several Mughal inscriptions, e.g., Sherpur Masjid inscription from the reign of Shāh Jahān (r. 1628-1658) dated 1042/1632. In an inscription dated 881/1476 found in Pichhli Gangarampur village (district Malda), from the reign of Sultan Yūsuf Shāh (r. 879–886/1474–1481), we find a prayer for safety and protection of the inhabitants of Bang from any turmoil and that Bang may sustain till the Day of Judgement. It is only in the funerary inscription of Ḥājjī Sharī'at Allāh dated 1255/1245 Bengali calendar (1839 CE) that Bangāl appears in a plural form as Bangālāt most probably to refer also to the adjoining areas of the greater Bengal (e.g., Assam.

The origin of the name of Bhangala can be traced in "Ganga" (the Ganges in English, the Padma in the later days' usage in lower Bengal) which gradually turned into Bhanga, and then into Banga in the local dialects of Bengali for referring to lower Gangetic plain that was extended to the coastal line of the Bay of Bengal. The suffix "al" (originally "ail" [আইল] in Bengali) was a local native word meaning low mud embankment or earthen mound raised on all four sides of a patch of land to hold salty seawater of the Bay of Bengal for extracting salt. This "al" suffix was later added to Banga sounding very much like "Bangal" altogether. The word "Bangāl" has been best explained by Abū 'l-Faḍl in *Ā'in-i Akbarī* very much in the same fashion. In addition to geographical reference, "Bangāl" also referred (and still refers in colloquial Bengali) to the habitat of the lower Gangetic plain (which is known in English as lower Bengal). The historian Minhāj Sirāj al-Dīn (d. 1266 CE) was perhaps the first Muslim writer to mention the name "Bilād-i Bang." Besides Banga, he also mentions a few other regions (or perhaps sub-regions) in this eastern part of South Asia, namely, Bihār, Bilād-i Lakhanavatī (namely, Gauda Desa), Diyār-i Suknāt (most likely the Samatata region comprising the present Sylhet district),[4] and Kāmrūd (Kamrup).[5] Shahr-i

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[2] For details, see Dinesh C. Sircar, "Mainamatir Chandra Bangshiyo Tamra Shasantroy," in *Abdul Karim Sahitya Visharad Commemorative Volume*, ed. Mohammad Enamul Hoque (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1972), 335-43.

[3] For details, see Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, 3:6-9.

[4] A place by the name of Sakanat appears on a map in an early European work, Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrims* (London: William Stansby, 1625).

Naudiyah (mistakenly transliterated as Nadia, but unlikely to be the same as the present district of Nadia in West Bengal), the capital of Laksmanasena (r. 1178-1206 CE) was probably located on the bank of the old channel of the river Jahnabi (present-day Bhagirathi) which changed its course westward later on. While it may be identified with the present village of Nawada[6] on the western bank of the currently dried river Pagla slightly westward of Mahdipur village in Malda district, West Bengal, it is more likely the village of Nawdapara, an archaeological site near Rohanpur railway station in Chapai Nawabganj district (not far from the city of Gaur), Bangladesh. This assumption is further supported by epigraphic evidence, as several inscriptions of the early Muslim rulers (e.g., a Persian inscription from Sultanganj, about eight miles north-west of Rajshahi city near Bijoynagar [the ancient Bijoypur, the capital of Bijoy Sen] from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī Mardān Khaljī in ca. 1210–1213 CE and the masjid-madrasah inscription from Naohata [near Rajshahi, Bangladesh] from the reign of Balkā Khān Khaljī in ca. 1229–1231 CE) have been discovered in the areas not far from Nawdapara and Gaur.

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[5] William N. Lees, Khadim Hosain, and 'Abd al-Hai, eds., *The Tabaqát-i Násiri of Aboo 'Omar Minháj al-Dín 'Othmán* (Calcutta: College Press, 1864), 148–53.

[6] It is a compound Persian name meaning new village (*nau* means new, and *dih* or *diyah* means village or villages, particularly in the low and marshy land). The name itself bears a great sociological implication as it symbolizes the new settlements that started appearing in this hinterland right after Bakhtiyār's campaign. The more accepted form of spelling in Bengal—*Naudiyah* (*Navadipa* in Sanskrit)—can also be interpreted as "new lamp," which is quite interesting since it symbolizes the advent of light (Islam) in the Bengal frontier with its conquest by Muslim forces. Several villages once bore the name of Naudah in the districts of Malda, Chapai Nawabganj, and Murshidabad, such as the present *mauja* (village) of Uttar Umarpur, on the southeast of Gaur (or more precisely the present village of Mahdipur), about one kilometre west of Kotwali Darwaza. But it is the archaeological site of Nawdapara, near Rohanpur railway station in Chapai Nawabganj district which was most likely the capital of Lakhshman Sen conquered by Bakhtiyār. The site consists of a huge mound of old baked bricks of the type used in the ancient monuments in Gaur and the surrounding area. Local traditions still identify the ruins as Lakhkhan Sener Bari (Lakhshman Sen Palace) which had a back door (for emergency escape, known in Bengali as *Khirki*) opening to a jetty on the Mahananda river. Another set of nearby ruins of a monument is locally known as Nawda Burj (sometimes also as Shar Burj) a victory tower built by Bakhtiyār after his sudden conquest of the capital. The most brilliant discussion on this topic has been done by A. K. M. Zakaria. See *Ṭabaqāt-i Naṣirī*, trans. and ed. A. K. M. Zakaria, 2nd ed. (Dhaka: Dibyaprakash, 2014), 32-60.

Plate 1: An archaeological site in Nawdapara, which contains the remains of the capital of Laksmanasena

The discovery of numerous thirteenth-century inscriptions in North Bengal and many other historical evidences strongly suggest that Shahr-i Naudiyah, the capital of Laksmanasena was the current village of Nawdapara. The grave of Bakhtiyār Khaljī is also not very far from Nawdapara as he was buried atop a mound (that still contains unexplored ruins of the earliest Muslim headquarters there) in a place known as Pirpal near the village of Narayanpur, about eight kilometres southeast of Gangarampur police station (and not far from Devikot, the capital of Bakhtiyār Khaljī) in Dakhshin Dinajpur district. It is important to note here that there is no village, town, place or locality whatsoever in the whole district of Nadia (other than Navadipa) that carries the name of Nadia, Naudiyah or any place phonetically close to this name. None of the original sources (such as *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī*) gives any indication of Bakhtiyār's incursion to the south or south-west Bengal where the present district of Nadia is located. Rather, all of them categorically mentions his military activities which were limited to Lakhnauti and the areas situated northeast, north, and northwest to it (such as Kamrup, Kamta, Bihar etc.).

Plate 2: Tomb of Bakhtiyār Khaljī, in Narayanpur village, Gangarampur police station, Dakhshin Dinajpur district

Thus, it was during the Sultanate period that both the term "Bangāl" both for this particular region (that was later on pronounced as Bangla in Bengali and Bengal in English and many other European languages) as well as for the people living in the region became popular in South Asia and elsewhere in the world. Ilyās Shāh (r. ca. 1342-1358 CE), for instance, was known as Shāh-i Bangāliyāṇ (King of the Bengalis), Shāh-i Bangāl (King of Bengal), and Sulṭān-i Bangāl (Emperor of Bengal). The famous educational institute built by Sultan A'ẓam Shāh (r. ca. 1390-1410 CE) in the city of Mecca in Arabia was named al-Madrasah al-Sulṭāniyyah al-Ghiyāthiyyah al-Banghāliyyah. Using the name "Bengali" for an institute in West Asia, far away from Bengal, further popularized the term Bengal globally. Historically, this also inspired the growth of Bengali nationalism for the first time in every sense.
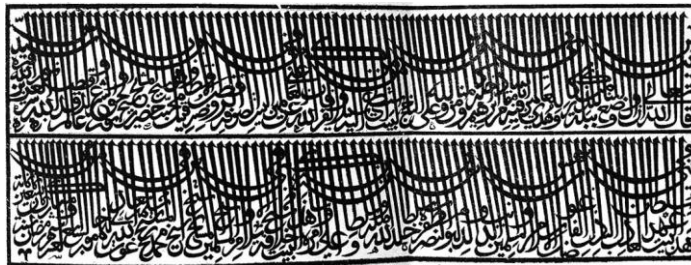
Plate 3: An Arabic inscription in the medieval capital Pandua dated 898/1493 in Bengali *Ṭughrā'* calligraphy with the representation of the swans and reeds of riverine rural Bengal

It was in West Asia that the science of "epigraphy" emerged as an academic discipline as early as the fifteenth century CE when mentors and academics at al-Madrasah al-Banghāliyyah in Mecca started looking at inscriptions with scholarly interest and historical intent. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Arab scholars in this Bengali seat of learning, such as Taqī 'l-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441) and Taqī 'l-Dīn al-Fāsī (d. 832/1428), studied inscriptions as an important source for

regional history. Al-Fāsī's work, for instance, was quite methodical in dealing with the epigraphs of Mecca as he surveyed the architectural remains of this ancient city and deciphered its inscriptions. He cross-checked the dates appearing in the epigraphic texts with other historical sources to substantiate in a remarkably accurate way his findings of the history of Mecca.[7] Still, the credit for making the study of inscriptions a distinct discipline goes to Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shībī[8] (d. 837/1433). His meticulous study of Meccan tombstones and stelae established for the first time an extraordinarily and unprecedentedly high standard for scholarly epigraphic study. He can truly be considered the father of epigraphy.

Plate 4: A Persian inscription in Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi

Inscriptions can indeed be an important source for understanding the civilization and culture of a region. Quite often, they serve as a missing link to the past offering many historical clues not available elsewhere. Despite many distinctive features of each chronological period, we notice a continuity in the epigraphic tradition of Bengal as a whole, be it ancient, medieval, or of the later days. An interdisciplinary approach in a true holistic spirit helps us greatly in getting a broader view and clearer understanding of a region. The history, civilization, and culture of

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[7] Taqī 'l-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī al-Fāsī al-Makkī, *al-‘Iqd al-Thamīn fī Ta’rīkh al-Balad al-Amīn*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1998): 3:419. Al-Fāsī also surveyed a number of the oldest surviving mosques of his time in Taif and read their existing inscriptions. For instance, see al-Fāsī, *Shifā’ al-Gharām bi Akhbār al-Balad al-Ḥarām* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2002), 1:122.

[8] Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Makkī al-Qurashī al-Shībī, *al-Sharaf al-A‘lā fī Dhikr Qubūr Maqbarat Bāb al-Ma‘lā*, MS no. 354 s.f. 1179 in King Saud University Library. It is interesting to note that the prominent family of al-Shībī earned fame and respect in Mecca during the fifteenth century through their education and cultural activities. Many members of this clan held various high positions in Mecca such as chief justice, *muftī* (jurisconsult) and imām of the grand mosque. Several scholars from this family taught at the famous Bengali educational institute in Mecca named al-Madrasah al-Sulṭāniyyah al-Ghiyāthiyyah al-Banghāliyyah after its Bengali patron Sultan Ghiyāth al-Dīn A‘ẓam Shāh, the ruler of Bengal.

Bengal can never be appreciated and evaluated properly without taking into account, for instance, inscriptions of various periods inscribed in diverse characters and varied languages (such as Sanskrit, Proto-Bengali, Arabic, Persian etc.). Bengal seems to be one of the earliest regions to use Persian for architectural inscription.

Plate 5: Alternating *Ṭughrā'* and monumental *Thuluth* calligraphic styles in Chand Darvaza inscription at Mianahdar in the royal garden of Badshahi Palace in Gaur, capital of Bengal, dated 871/1466-67

Most of the epigraphic records from the ancient period (e.g., Sanskrit inscriptions) as well as from the medieval period (e.g., Arabic and Persian inscriptions) begin by some kind of religious formula such as the praise of God. Some of the early Sanskrit inscriptions, such as the Rampal copper plate of Srichandra[9] (ca. 930–975 CE), start with *om* (ॐ Hail, o supreme truth). Likewise, many Arabic and Persian inscriptions begin by *basmalah* (in the name of God) and/or divine blessing formulas (e.g., the bridge inscription of Sultanganj from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' al-Dīn) as well as Qur'ānic verses (e.g., Sian inscription dated 618/1221). Generally speaking, the eulogy of rulers is an important theme found in Sanskrit

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[9] Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, 3:4.

inscriptions (e.g., Rampal copper plate of Srichandra[10]) and also in Arabic and Persian inscriptions (e.g., masjid-madrasah inscription from Naohata from the reign of Balkā Khān Khaljī). Imprecatory verses are another feature occasionally found both in Arabic-Persian inscriptions (e.g., *waqf* inscription for a grand mosque from Dohar dated 1000/1591) and Sanskrit inscriptions (e.g., *madad-i maʿāsh* inscriptions for Ḥājjī Bhāgal Khān Masjid in Nayabari dated 1003/1595 [Saka year 1517]).

Plate 6: *Kūfī* and *Thuluth* writing above the central *miḥrāb* of Adina Masjid in Pandua with two different calligraphic styles combined in a single inscription

Islam seems to enter Bengal in its heydays as a torch-bearer of a new world order representing an advanced civilization of the time affecting the age-old highly Sanskritized regional system led by the upper class of the population. After the advent of Islam in the region, architectural inscriptions became an important medium to convey visual, cultural, and spiritual messages to various people. Arabic and Persian inscriptions of Bengal are rich in textual contents, artistic manifestation, and diversity of forms. They shed fresh light on the cultural dynamics of a crucial period of the history of the eastern part of South Asia. They also help us understand the complex religious transformation process in the region which, despite having no direct geographical link with the central Islamic land, has a sizable Muslim population. Despite the independent character of its historical experience, Bengal has also an important role in Islamic history in the global context ever since it was brought under Muslim rule in the early thirteenth century CE. During the period of powerful independent dynasties of the sultans as well as in the early period of the Mughals, its arts and sciences flourished, the cross-cultural ties of the region were broadened, and Bengal enjoyed great prosperity. It was one of the richest regions in South Asia, nay in the whole world, which started attracting foreign traders as far as from Western Europe. Known as the grain basket of South Asia, its GDP reached nearly 12% of the whole world. It hardly ever witnessed any major famine until the

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[10] Ibid., 3:6-9.

advent of colonial rule in the mid-eighteenth century. Its extraordinary numbers of architectural inscriptions indicate the massive building activities as well as public works during the Sultanate and Mughal periods which are an indicator of a flourishing economy during those times. The title *ḥājjī* (e.g., in Nayabari inscription of Bhāghal Khān dated 1595) appearing in several inscriptions suggest that many affluent Muslims travelled to Mecca by sea routes from various ports of Bengal and the region was well-integrated with the commercial system of the old world through its thriving maritime activities.

While one observes, perhaps with awe, a rich Islamic legacy in Bengal that grew and prospered over the past eight centuries, several intriguing questions regarding the consolidation of Islam in the region remain unanswered. One central question is why this particular region turned into a Muslim-majority area while many other regions in the central, western, and southern parts of the Indian subcontinent did not go through the same transformation. Epigraphic evidences help us in finding fresh clues to many of these issues offering us a hitherto untapped treasure of diverse historical information. At times, they provide the most authentic source of documentation for the early history of Islam in the region. Many of these inscriptions contain some kind of religious message mostly in the form of the Qur'ānic verses or sayings of the Prophet which can help understand religious trends and transformations in the region. Inscriptions of the medieval Bengal also indicate that Arabic and Persian languages became a cultural vehicle of the region regardless of ethnicity, religion, and geographical or racial background. This trend continued until the beginning of the nineteenth century when English gradually replaced them.

Inscriptions can sometimes provide quite valuable information about educational and academic activities and their patronage by the ruling class. A thirteenth-century Sanskrit inscription (dated ca. 1183-1262 Saka/1261-1340 CE) discovered in Malkapuram, Andhra Pradesh,[11] for stance, throws light on the educational ethos of the time such as *vidya-mandapa* (as compared to a madrasah in Islamic inscriptions such as Naohata inscription from the reign of Balkā Khān Khaljī). It also mentions *acharya* and *diksa-guru* (as compared to *Qudwat al-Fuqahā' wa 'l-Muḥaddithīn*, in Bayt al-Siqāyah inscription from Sadipur dated 929/1522-23) and the details of syllabi such as *pada* (words), *vakya* (sentence),

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[11] This huge granite pillar (14.6 x 2.9 x 2.9 feet), containing 182 lines of writing, was found lying loosely at Madadam village in Thullur Mandal. For details, see Sircar, *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan*, 37.

pramanya (mode of proof/the method of validity) as compared to *ḥisbah* and *sharīʿah* in Ẓafar Khān Madrasah inscriptions in Tribeni dated 698/1298. Several Arabic and Persian inscriptions offer names of many important personalities, *'ulamā'*, and religious teachers in addition to providing clues about religious institutions, seminaries (madrasahs), their geographic locations, and exact dating of many historical events. Through analysing these epigraphic evidences, it is possible to develop a classification of significant centres of learning and the possible linkages between them, the transmission of ideas, evolution of important syllabi, student-teacher connections, and intellectual genealogies. While these inscriptions suggest that madrasah institutions played an important role in disseminating education in the region, they also help us in constructing an intellectual history of medieval Bengal. It seems that many of the *maktab*s and madrasahs were open to everyone regardless of religious background, creed, caste, colour, or social status. This tradition continued even after the advent of colonial rule. In a survey done in 1835 in the districts of Murshidabad, Burdwan, and Birbhum, Adam found that a total of 786 Muslim boys and 784 Hindu boys were enrolled in the Arabic and Persian schools (namely, *maktab*s and madrasahs).[12] This trend continues in these districts as well as some other parts of West Bengal where non-Muslim students are also enrolled side by side with Muslims in many high madrasahs. Literacy, indeed, was not necessarily restricted (or limited) to a handful of privileged ones as is generally perceived about medieval Bengal. If we include learning Arabic (and/or Persian) written characters also as an alternative mode of literacy, this form of literacy was much more prevalent than it is commonly thought about. It seems to be a common practice of a sizable portion (percentage) of Muslim children of all classes living in rural as well as urban Bengal to be enrolled in the *maktab*s for their learning of Arabic and Persian written characters and the few extraordinary ones in madrasahs for higher education. Many of this literate class would also learn Sanskrit (and Bengali too in the later days) as they grew up to play more effective and larger roles in society. Still, it seems that all these educational activities hardly ever reached the lowest strata of the Bengali population who are identified in the modern time as Dalits (lowest in the Hindu caste system such as Nomo-Shudras), Adivasi (the original people who inhabited the land before the advent of the Aryans such as the Koch and Mech of North Bengal), tribal (such as Santals of the North-West Bengal)

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[12] *Report of the Bengal Provincial Committee of the Education Commission* (Calcutta: n.p., 1886), pt. 2, para 183; *Bengal Educational Endowment Committee Report* (Calcutta, n.p., 1888).

and nomadic peoples (such as the Bede of East Bengal) of the region. It is important to remember here that Bengali emerged as an established written language slowly and gradually only with the establishment of the Bengal Sultanate after it remained merely a spoken language in the region for quite a long time. Persian, the official language of the time had an upper hand during the medieval period (perhaps more than Arabic, the academic language of higher education) whose long term effect can still be felt in everyday Bengali language, prevalent administrative and legal terminology in the region such as *ẓila‘* (district), *maḥkamah* (sub-district), *‘adālat* (court of justice), and *ḥākim* (magistrate).

Interreligious relations are an important lens in understanding the history and culture of a region in a given period. One of the reasons that the Muslim dynasties lasted for a long time compared to many other previous dynasties was that the Muslim rulers, in general, had a moderate approach to interreligious dealings. Indeed, they were much more tolerant than they are usually given credit for. None of the inscriptions records any willful destruction of any religious buildings or temples during the Sultanate or Mughal period. The tradition of interfaith marriages, for instance, existed as indicated in the Ghaibi Dighi inscription. It records that Lakshmi (a Hindu lady), the mother of Khān Jahān Raḥmat Khān, built a mosque in Sylhet in 868/1464. These epigraphic evidences suggest religious harmony, cultural continuity, and understanding among peoples of various identities in those days. We find, for instance, a devout Muslim Bhāgal Khān inscribing a *waqf* as well as a *madad-i ma‘āsh* (endowment for maintenance of a religious edifice) text in the Sanskrit language for a mosque (Nayabari inscription Saka year 1517) using local vocabulary that seems to be borrowed from Hindu religious culture (e.g., *mahsida mandira dini* meaning, a religious temple [namely masjid]). It also appears that a prominent class of Bengali Hindus acquired a taste for Arabic and Persian languages. Lala Rajmal, for instance, made an inscription in 1102/1690 in Persian during the reign of Aurangzēb (r. 1658-1707) using elegant poetic expressions to commemorate a bridge in Chapatali near Dhaka. On the other hand, Munshi Shyam Prasad, a clerk of an English colonial administrator (Colonel William Franklin) in the early nineteenth century wrote the very first description of some inscriptions of Gaur and Pandua (*Aḥvāl-i Gaur-o Pandua*) in a lucid Persian language. The message of sectarian harmony and tolerance can also be seen in the inscription of Garh Jaripa (inscription dated 893/1487), Bangladesh which contains a very typical Sunni phrase containing the names of four caliphs as well as a Shī‘ī religious formula of twelve sacred Imāms. Accommodation of the two

different sectarian beliefs in the same inscription suggests the prevalence of overall social harmony, religious and sectarian tolerance, and peaceful coexistence in medieval Bengal. This trend continued throughout the era of the Mughal rule until the establishment of European colonial rule which sowed the seeds of a deeply rooted sectarian tension seriously harming the age-old social harmony. It is extremely rare to find out an inscription indicating social or religious tensions that unfortunately taint many parts of modern South Asia during these days. Some of the inscriptions of Aurangzēb's era record the appointment of high-ranking officers in Bengal from the Hindu community as well as various minority sects, indicating the state policy of pluralism and religious tolerance in medieval Bengal. The common policy was, as it appears, to choose employees, based on talent, merit, efficiency, and desirable qualities. Even black slaves (of Abyssinian origin) were successful in occupying high-ranking positions that eventually led to their rule in Bengal as sultans at one point, though for a brief period (as affirmed by thirteen inscriptions during 893-899/1488-1494). Unlike Gujarat, Sind or some other regions, the descendants of these African origins were gradually so well-blended into Bengali masses that it is impossible to distinguish them as a separate ethnic group anymore in the region.

Inscriptions also offer information about the construction of prominent structures, the identity of the patron, the purpose of the monument in question, the date of its construction, and so on. This valuable information helps us reconstruct the sociopolitical context in which a given inscription was put into public view. Inscriptions sometimes form a significant element of Islamic architectural decoration due to their aesthetic appeal (e.g., Chand Darwaza inscription dated 871/1466). In addition to traditional types such as *Kūfī*, *Thuluth*, *Naskh*, *Riqaʿ*, *Rayḥanī*, and *Muḥaqqaq*, many of them were rendered in various unconventional regional innovative styles such as *Ṭughrā'* and *Bihārī* at times representing the natural landscape of riverine Bengal delta in a highly stylized form (see plate 7 Babargram inscription dated 905/1500). Regional varieties of calligraphy, decorative motifs, and ornamentation in these inscriptions are quite intriguing. The high standard displayed in the literary style of these epigraphic texts, their aesthetic exuberance, and calligraphic taste remind us of the cultural continuity in different regions what can be termed perhaps "globalization of the medieval world."
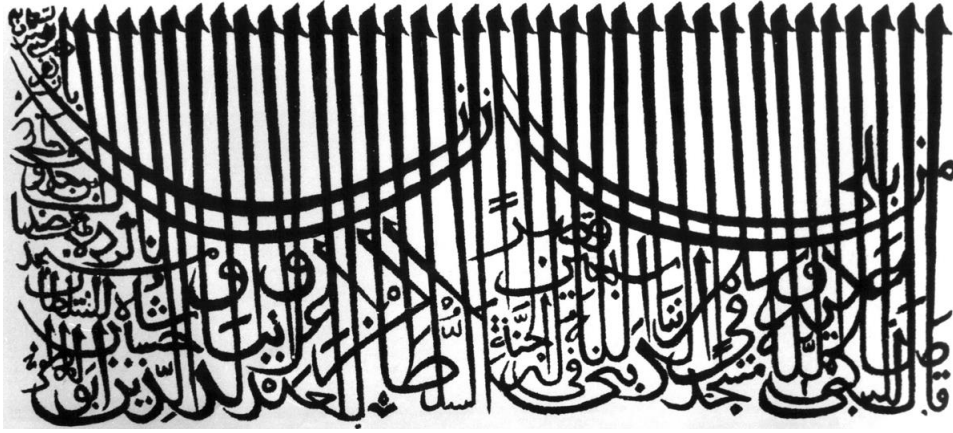
Plate 7: A Ḥusain Shāhī Masjid inscription from Babargram dated 905/1500

Another illuminating feature of the inscriptions of Bengal is the abundant appearance of titles reflecting the cultural ethos of the period. Over-toned in religious fervour, these titles help us in understanding various religious and sectarian trends prevailing in the region. They also indicate the over-indulgence of the ruling class with flashy court culture, a residue of which can still be found in the Arabic part of the Friday congregation sermons.

Epigraphic evidences suggest that Islam gradually assimilated into Bengali life and became part of the natural experience of the land, more as a new civilization refreshing the region with a novel cultural dynamism rather than merely a bunch of ritualistic tenets. Islam thus emerged as a social system that well suited the commoners in rural Bengal. Islam rapidly became a popular lifestyle in the ever-growing picturesque Bengali villages as human settlement expanded along the delta side by side with the spread of rice cultivation and clearing forest areas of its otherwise low marshland. Bengal's ecological balance and natural harmony, symbolically represented in several inscriptions in abstract forms (e.g., plate 7 Babargram inscription, dated 905/1500) left a strong imprint on its local Muslim societies through their popular expression in literature, art, architecture, culture, and folklore. In its spiritual realm, Islam in Bengal was accommodating enough to invite semi-Hinduised tribes, nomads, and various other genres of the local population to a fresh civilizational sphere to the extent that non-Muslims were free to visit mosques (as depicted in an earliest Arabic translation of a Sanskrit manuscript *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt*), khānqāhs, and madrasahs. All these institutions played an important role in the religious, cultural, and social growth in the region.

Bengali year (known in the Bengali language also as *Bangla Bochhor*, *Bangabda* or *Fosholi Shon*), used commonly during later Mughal inscriptions to commemorate the dates of construction of mosques, is one of the most illuminating examples of the cross-cultural and inter-religious influences over centuries among various religious communities in Bengal. It was introduced by emperor Akbar based on the calculation of solar-*hijrī* year (not lunar-*hijrī* year, commonly used by the Muslims for religious observations) to develop a more scientific calculation as well as to improve the tax collection process in harmony with solar agricultural cycles. This new Bengali year became the most popular and celebrated calendar among Bengali masses, both Hindus and Muslims alike. Besides the celebration of "Notun Bochhor" (New Bengali Year), the above-mentioned Bengali year is the only calendar used for all the Bengali-Hindu religious observations including the sacred dates of *puja*s (e.g., Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja etc.).

In an era when the communication revolution has turned the earth into a global village, we need to understand the diverse and complex world of Islam which represents more than one-fifth (nearly 23%) of the human population. A tremendous transformation is taking place almost everywhere in the lives, societies, and political systems of these huge masses. These rapid changes are especially visible in the eastern parts of South Asia. The gradual rise of religious fanaticism in the region is causing a sort of ever-increasing tension between cultures. Unfortunately, one also observes regrettably among various peoples lack of proper understanding of the sensitivities as well as the dynamics of the original Islam that contributed once significantly to the formation of a splendid civilization in the medieval world. The resurgence of Islamic norms and values among Muslims makes it even more important that we understand the history, religion, and culture of the world of Islam in proper context and greater depth. Fortunately, inscriptions of Bengal have much to offer us towards understanding historical Islam. Thus, despite their many distinctive local cultural features, one soon discovers in these wonderful epigraphic treasures a vibrant message—unity within diversity—that is deeply rooted in the pluralistic Bengali culture in this eastern region of South Asia as much as in Islamic culture in a historical and global context.

Appendix
Madad-i Ma'āsh inscription for Ḥājjī Bhāgal Khān Masjid in Nayabari dated 1003/1595

Original Site	Two no-longer extant early Mughal mosques somewhere near the village of Nayabari at Aurangabad Bazar in Manikganj district, Bangladesh
Current Location	Bangladesh National Museum (procured from Ali Ahmad Chowdhury of Dohar on October 27, 1978), Dhaka, inv. no. 78.1578.
Material, Size	Grey basalt; the size of the Arabic-Persian inscription of the slab is 45 x 12½ inches (114.3 x 31.7 cm), while the size of the actual stone slab is 67 x 12½ inches (170.2 x 31.7 cm).
Style/No. of Lines	Crude *Naskh*; fourteen lines
Reign:	*Circa* 1003/1595, during the consolidation of Mughal rule in Bengal in Akbar's reign (963-1014/1556-1605).
Language	Arabic and Persian.
Type	*Waqf* inscription.
Publication	Enamul Haque, "Samrat Akbarer tinti aprakashita shilalipi (Bengali text)," *Itihas* 12, nos. 1-3 (1978); Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, "An Epigraphical Journey to an Eastern Islamic Land," *Muqarnas* 7, no. 1 (1990): 83-108, https://www.jstor.org/stable /pdf/1523123.pdf.

Translation

O Opener! Allah the Highest said, "Whosoever accomplishes a good deed will be rewarded ten times over, and whosoever does an evil deed will be recompensed according to his evil [Qur'ān 6:160]."

The Prophet, peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him, said, "One who destroys any edifice of Islam becomes an infidel. Allah effaces

thousands and thousands of his virtues and enters thousands and thousands of sins against him. Allah also opens for him the door to hellfire. He who protects this structure will receive [his] reward in both habitations." This statement is from the saying of the Prophet about both dwellings. [During the time of] Nawāb Muḥsin al-Dīn, the faqīr, who cast but a faint shadow in this worldly life. It was for the love of Allah that Muḥammad Ḥammād inscribed it. It was built to provide *madad-i maʿāsh* (support for a living) to the imām and faqīr, whoever happens to be so. O Allah, have mercy in both worlds on the humble servant Ḥājjī Bhāgal Khān.

This *faqīr* has endowed for the sake of Allah as well as in the path of Allah the Highest one thousand *bigha*s (1 bigha = 1,600 sq. yards) towards the maintenance of two mosques simultaneously, five hundred *bigha*s for [a masjid for] the five daily prayers, and five hundred *bigha*s for the congregational mosque. For each one of the two mosques, the same allotment is being done.

Discussion

This pillar-like stone slab seems to have originally belonged to a building of a much earlier date reused by Bhāgal Khān. The title *ḥājjī* suggests that Bhāgal Khān was an influential and affluent man. In rural Bengal, *ḥājjī* often signified high social status since only the affluent could afford the pilgrimage to Mecca. The contemporary historical accounts tell us nothing about him.

The gradual switch to Persian from Arabic in this text reflects a significant cultural change in the country with the advent of the Mughals. Especially after Humāyūn returned from his exile in Persia, the region was increasingly influenced by the Persian language and culture that had begun to dominate every aspect of life in South Asia.

The crude writing, poor finishing, and grammatical mistakes in the text suggest that the job was done by a layman scribe hired locally, whose name is mentioned in the inscription as Muḥammad Ḥammād. While calligraphically insignificant, its importance lies in its statement of the endowment for two mosques built by Bhāgal Khān. Though the paper was commonly used for legal documents, and more especially for the endowment of lands, using an inscription for such a purpose had the advantage that it was less likely to be stolen or to perish than a paper document, especially during a time of political turmoil. This is one of the very few Islamic inscriptions in Bengal where one finds an endowment text.

This is the earliest epigraphic record of *madad-i ma'āsh*, an important institution of the official grant system in Bengal, which also existed in other regions of South and Central Asia. *Madad-i ma'āsh* lands were personal, tax-free land grants typically awarded to people who had already founded mosques, madrasahs, khānqāhs or any other form of a charitable religious institution. In many cases, *madad-i ma'āsh* lands were allotted simply to support imāms, Sufis, and those attached to the institution including visitors and the deserving poor taking shelter. The institution was in some ways similar to the Hindu tradition of *devottar bhumi* (property endowed to the service of devi or god/goddesses). Many Mughal *farmān*s containing instructions for *madad-i ma'āsh* can still be found in the district collectorate rooms of the cities such as Sylhet and Chittagong. The income generated from these land grants was also dedicated to the maintenance of the mosques, madrasahs, khānqāhs, and even the *mazār*s (shrines) of popular Sufis and *pīr*s (saints). In the lower delta region (known as Bhati), sometimes *madad-i ma'āsh* lands were given to people who cleared the jungle and established mosques, madrasahs, or any other religious edifice. *Madad-i ma'āsh* institute undoubtedly played an important role in settlements and the formation of agrarian societies in the unpopulated forest areas in eastern and southern Bengal. Though *madad-i ma'āsh* lands were sometimes offered to non-Muslims (particularly to the Hindus in the form of *devottar bhumi*), they mainly benefited Muslims and helped indirectly in the consolidation process of Islam in the region.[13] The *ḥadīth* quoted in the text is not found in *al-Ṣiḥāḥ al-Sittah* (the six most authentic books of the Prophet's sayings) or any other source nor does its style match the idiomatic and literary expression of the sayings of the Prophet. It seems that the author of this epigraphic text was more anxious to ensure the protection of the mosque property than to ensure the authenticity of the *ḥadīth*. He may even have composed it himself apparently with a pious intention and then ascribed it to the Prophet to discourage people from damaging or vandalizing the mosque's property.

The undated Persian inscription of this stone slab is one of the three executed around 1003/1595 during the period of political turmoil in Bengal just before Mughal rule was consolidated there. It is a *waqf* (endowment) inscription for two mosques. It contains a Qur'ānic verse, a *ḥadīth*, and a Persian text that refers to a special form of endowment known as *madad-i ma'āsh*. Since it records the name of same Hājjī Bhāgal

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[13] Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 259-66.

Khān that appears in two other dated inscriptions from the same area, we can safely assume it comes from the same period. Our assumption is further supported by the fact that the slab has Sanskrit inscriptions in an archaic Bengali script on the other side which record the date in Shaka year as the month of Baishakh, 1517 (corresponding to Ramaḍān 1003/April-May 1595).[14] It is important to note here that this part of Bengal was a predominantly Hindu region until very late in the Sultanate period, as the Sena Hindu dynasty continued to control a part of this area for a long time. They also left little in the way of architecture in the area. The Sanskrit text on the side of this slab records the establishment of a *mahsid mandira dini* (lit., the religious edifice of a mosque), by the same Bhāgal Khān, apparently a reference to the two mosques mentioned in the Arabic-Persian text in this inscription.[15] Following is a conjectural reading of the Sanskrit text by Swapan Kumar Bishwas of Bangladesh National Museum (and then, later on, the text was reviewed and translated by Kismatara Khatun [Suma]):

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[14] Nalini Kanta Bhattashali, "Milan Mangal," *Desh* (Calcutta), October 22, 1983, 45-47.
[15] Ibid.

Sanskrit text in proto-Bengali script:

১. সর্ব্বোক্কী পতি চক্রচূড়া

২. *মানবঞ্ছিত শ্রেণি শান . কোন*

৩. কসনানর্ম্মলী কৃতচরণ নম *ন*

৪. *ম*. মহারাজাধিরাজ শ্রী শ্রী ম .

৫. দ আকবর সাহাদেব পাদা

৬. *অনুগত* দানালা . তববরি

৭. *বারিত* দীন শ্রেণি দৈন্য

৮. পদ শ্রী দে*ব দে* বঙ্গল ক

৯. মল প্রকাশ ভাক্করস্যা

১০. *ম শ্রী* হাজি বহাগল খা

১১. নঃ শাকে বারেন্দ বা (i.e., বৈশাখ মাস, ১৫১৭ শকাব্দ)

১২. ন সোমে (i.e., সোমবার) মাধব মা*র্ক্সে*

১৩. মহসীদ মন্দিরা দীনি

১৪. দত্তবান *শুভাবিন্যাধদে*

১৫. নিবেদনাং ময়া কৃতামদক

১৬. স্বয়ঃ করোতিষ্ঠ পালন তস্য (তব্য)?

১৭. দাবাম্নদা মোহভবেবৎ জ

১৮. *ন্য* জন্মান ।। . ১০০০ ।।

১৯. বঙ্গেয় দৃতদানেন মম

২০. তিষ্ঠৎ মাদ্ধশোবামন

২১. শ্লেষমাল্যেডোমিনব

২২. মম ঘর নকুল ভবো

Translation of the Sanskrit Text

L 1   Dedicated to the all-encompassing lord, the highest being on the earth

L 2   the most adorable of all strata.

L 3   A humble offer to the feet of the monarch,

L 4   who is the king of all the kings, the most respected,

L 5   Akbar, the God-like monarch.

L 6   Everyone expresses their allegiance,

L 7   be he aristocrat or humble one,

L 8   [to this] sovereign of the earth, whose feet illuminate

L 9   Bengal like a most distinct lotus.

L 10   The highly respected Ḥājjī Bhāgal Khān

L 11   in the Shaka year—of 1517—this pious act was initiated,

L 12   in the day of—Monday—in the month of Baishakh,

L 13   a *masjid*, an edifice for religious worship

L 14   as a humble offering of mine (i.e., Ḥājjī Bhāgal Khān) with modesty

L 15   and dedicated with utmost pleasure,

L 16   for the sake of religious practice and devotion,

L 17   for ages after ages with profound enthusiasm,

L 18   In the year 1000 after *hijrah*

L 19   This endowment of mine will last forever in Bengal

L 20   A Brahmin will never remain a Brahmin if he usurps.

L 21   If someone fails to protect it

L 22   he will reincarnate as a base creature in my household.

* * *