

Epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate: A Search for the Elements of Historical Interest

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In the absence of court chronicles and contemporary literary sources the study of pre-Mughal Bengalⁱ depends greatly on the legends of the coins and the contents of the inscriptions on the architectural monuments of the period. The valuable treasures in the form of coins and epigraphs have accelerated the research of Bengal Sultanate and induced the scholars to exert their efforts for the reconstruction of some undecided facts of history. The epigraphs of both religious and secular monuments of the period beginning from the early 13th century to the last quarter of the 16th century A.D. have contained valuable information which are scarcely traced in the contemporary written materials. Here in this short paper I would like to bring forth some elements of historical interest as examples from the epigraphs under the following heads.

Honorific Titles with their Possible Implications as Traced in the Epigraphs

In this category the sultans of Bengal along with their executive deputies are considered for discussion. A cursory glance into the epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate shows that two types of honorific titles are ascribed to the name of the sultans. One may be called the *Jalus* or regnal title and the other eulogical or qualitative title. On the numismatic and epigraphic testimony it is reasonably assumed that a sultan just on the assumption of his power, in addition to his proper name, adopts such surname which befits his royal dignity as a sovereign of the state or country. Sometimes with the name of the sultan are added eulogistic phraseologies which shed lustre on some aspects of his character and achievements. The former falls in the first category and the latter in the second. From the study of the epigraphs it seems that the *Jalus* formula contains two parts, the first part with such words as *Ala al-Dunya wa al-Din* and the like represents the prowess in initiation of his Transoxian heritage and the second one reflects on his presumed bold step leading to victory after the assumption of power. The first part of the *Jalus* formula, as the study of the epigraphs shows, refers to the words expressing the extent of power held by the Sultan like '*Ala*', *Rukn*, *Shams*, *Jalal*, *Nasir*, *Ghiyath*, *Shihab* and *Sayf* added with *al-Dunya wa al-Din*. The words on juxtaposition stand as '*Ala*', *al-Dunya wa al-Din*, *Rukn al-Dunya was al-Din* and the like for the remaining.ⁱⁱ All these words carry the sense of strength and valour of the person holding the septre. The second part of the formula is represented by the *kuniyat* (surname) of Abu'l Muzaffar, Abu'l Muhahid and

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Abu al-Nasr – all bearing the sense of ‘crowned with victory.’ⁱⁱⁱ Hence the complete *Jalus* title will combine both the parts, and it stands like ‘Ala’ al-Dunya wa al-Din Abul Mazaffar Husayn Shah for example.^{iv} Sikandar Shah is an exception in not adopting the first part of the *Jalus* title. Abu’l Muzaffar as the second part of the formula is commonly used with the name of the sultan, while Abul Mujahid is ascribed to the name of Sikandar Shah,^v Mahmud Shah II^{vi} and Barbak Shah although the last name has adopted the title Abu’l Muzaffar and Abu’l Mujahid.^{vii} Abu’n Nasr is added with the name of Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah.^{viii} Of these terms Abu’l Muzaffar and Abu’n Nasr express the meaning of victory while Abu’l Mujahid is related to the fighter who wins victory. Thus directly or indirectly they are connotated for victory. The *Jalus* title of Bengal sultan is a continuation of the Delhi sultan’s traditional practice and is destined to create a sort of awe in the mind of the subject people as will and the rulers of the hostile countries.

Pertinently the use of *al-Sultan al-Mu’azzam*, *al-Sultan al A’zam* and *Sultan al-Salatin* noticed in the epigraphs^{ix} needs explanation. As the terminology of *al-Sultan al-Mu’azzam* (the honoured Sultan) is softer than that of *al-Sultan al-A’zam* (the exalted Sultan) so it is reasonably inferred that the use of the former starts with the assumption of power. But with the passage of time when the power is consolidated, and the ruler becomes confident of his strength then he assumes the more strong title of *al-Sultan al-A’zam*. Sometimes to meet the situation and to imprint his power in the mind of the people at the start of his royal power the sultan adopts the exalted title of *al-Sultan al-A’zam*.^x In case of Bengal sultan the term *Sultan al-Salatin* (The Sultan of the Sultans) seems to be an exaggeration, and it is possibly intended to create an environment of his supremacy in the minds of the people in general and the enemies in particular. Moreover, three terms of *al-Sultan al-Mu’azzam*, *al-Sultan al-A’zam* and *Sultan al-Salatin* are indicative of the independent sovereign power of the rulers.

Of the eulogical titles as noticed in the epigraphs *al-‘Adil* (just), *al-Badhil* (generous), *al-Alim* (wise), *al-Fadil* (learned), *al-Kamil* (perfect) *al-Kashif* (interpreter), *Qahrman* (valiant warrior) and *Gawth al-Islam wa al-Muslimin* (the resort of Islam and the Muslims) are the most striking examples.^{xi} The last one i.e. *Gawth al-Islam wa al-Muslimin* is usually ascribed to the name of the sultan without any reservation as he is theoretically assumed to be the defender of faith. To illustrate this point two examples of Bengal sultans are presented here. One is that of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah^{xii} and the other is that of Jalal al-Din Fath Shah.^{xiii} The two brothers were properly educated and trained to meet the demand of the time. Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 A.D.) is represented in the epigraphs as ‘*adil, badhil, fadil, alim* and *kamil*.^{xiv} These connotations engraved on the stone-slabs, in the absence of contemporary written materials, highlight the praiseworthy qualities of the sultan. Therefore, on the epigraphic source Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah may be considered a benevolent sultan who combined in himself the qualities of justice, munificence, learning, knowledge and sound understanding. His brother Jalal al-Din Fath Shah who at the advanced age was raised to the throne of Bengal by the nobles, completed training in the art of warfare, got mastery over the interpretation of the holy Quran and acquired knowledge of religions and science of human anatomy.^{xv} An inscription of

Gunamant mosque (Gaur) reveals these aspects of character of the sultan in the following phraseologies.^{xvi}

قهرمان فى البحر والبر كاشف اسرار القرآن وعالم علوم الاديان والابدان

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

The sultans of Bengal are assisted by several officials in various branches of military, judiciary and civil administration. They carry the official titles which befit their position. The titles derived from the epigraphs are *Wazir, Shiqdar, Jangdar, Sarabdar, Jamadar, Bahrbak, Kotwal bek 'Ala, Sar-i-Lashkar, Sar-i-Khail, Mahliyan Nawbat 'Ala, Sharabdar Ghayr-i-Mahli, Jamadar Ghayr-i-Mahli, Mir Bahr, Dabir Khas, Karfarman and Dastur.*^{xvii} The officials with the rank of *Wazir, Shiqdar, Sar-i-Lashkar, Jangdar, Jamadar Ghayr-i-Mahli* and the like were entitled to have the charge of administrative units under Bengal Sultanate. In addition to the civil powers they enjoyed the executive and military powers. As one was appointed to such important post he could legally appropriate for himself the most dignified title of *Khan al-A'zam, Khaqan al-Mu'azzam* (or *Khaqan al-A'zam, Khan al-Mu'azzam*) and *Ulugh*^{xviii} to indicate the dimension of his administrative capability.

Place Names in the Epigraphs and their Importance for Regional Study

The names of capital cities and mint-towns can be traced in the written materials and in the coin-prints under Bengal Sultanate. Their importance for the study of regional history can not be denied. Besides the capital cities and mint-towns some place names are traced in the epigraphs of Bengal Sultanate. Their location and identification may add new elements to the study of Bengal history. Navagram Inscription of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437-1459 A.D.) dated 858 A.H./1454 A.D. refers to Simlabad in the following words *فى خطة رفيعة مرسومة بسملاباد* (in the high tract of land delineated as Simlabad).^{xix} The provenance of the inscription, Navagram is situated in the Tarash Police Station of greater Pabna district. As regards its location on the basis of the provenance we would like to maintain that the tract of land comprising some portions of northern Pabna, south western Bogra and south eastern Rajshahi have in all probability been named Simlabad.^{xx} The internal evidences of the text of the epigraph shall support this contention. First, the word *خطة Khittah* occurring in the inscription is supposed to mean an administrative unit like the terms *iqlim* and *arsah*.^{xxi} Generally the term *Khittah*^{xxii} is applied to a town fortified with ramparts and walls, whereas *qasbah* means a town which is not thus protected.^{xxiii} But here in this inscription the word *رفيعة* (high) is added to the word *khittah*. Hence it may be presumed that this *khittah* indicates a vast tract of land known as Simlabad which possibly included the town or forts enclosed by ramparts or massive walls.^{xxiv} Secondly, the word *رفيعة* (high alluvial land) which is an adjective has been added to the word *khittah*. The land, thus defined as high and alluvial, may be applied to south eastern part of the Barind plateau.^{xxv} Some scholars are of the opinion that the term *Barind*, (Varendra) is derived from the Sanskrit word *brind* or *wrind* which means heap or high.^{xxvi} It is in this sense of old alluvial land, perhaps, that Minhaj in his *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* called the eastern

side of the Ganges *Barind* and her western side *Ral* or *Radha*.^{xxvii} Moreover, the land on the eastern side of the Ganges is comparatively high than that of the western side of the same river. It is also likely that the word *Barind* or *Barindah* as used by Minhaj Siraj may have been the corrupted form of the Arabic word *Barrin* which means dry and high as against *bahr* (watery) or riverine tract.^{xxviii} Thus it would be logical to assume that the area designated as Simlabad in the inscription was a part of the Varendra. The extensive tract watered by Padma on the south, the Ganga-Mahananda on the west and the Karatoya on the east is called Barind or Varendri.^{xxix} 'Paduvana' probably a corruption of Pabna, though not entirely, but a part of it, falls within the territory of the Varendra.^{xxx} In the Madhainagar Copper Plate^{xxxi} the land granted to the donee is included in Varendri within the Pundravardhana *bhukti*. On the strength of these evidences it may be concluded that large tract of land to the north and west of the find-spot (Navagrama) of the epigraph under study was called Simlabad.^{xxxii}

Tribeni inscription of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 A.D.) dated 860 A.H./1455 A.D. refers to Sajla Mankhabad as '*arsah*' and Labala as town.^{xxxiii} Sajla Mankhabad has been identified with an area corresponding to the tract lying between the Hugly and Saraswati, extending to the bank of the Kapotaksha, and as including at present the whole of 24-parganas, the western part of Nadia and south west part of Murshibadad district.^{xxxiv} Labala is surmised to be situated in the Hugly district. Thus it covered the Satgaon area under Bengal Sultanate.

Dinajpur inscription of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah dated 856 A.H./1460 A.D. has contained in itself the place-name of 'Jur' and 'Barur' over which *Sar-i-Lashkar wa Wazir* Ulugh Iqrar Khan was given the absolute power of administration.^{xxxv} Barur has been identified with a pargana of that name in Purnia district of Bihar outside the western border of Dinajpur.^{xxxvi}

As regards the construction of the mosque and the repair of the tomb mentioned in the epigraph under study be taken for the mosque of Gopalgonj and the tomb of Chihl Ghazi^{xxxvii} five miles away to the north of Dinajpur town then the location of the place 'Jur' may be surmised around it. Therefore, the place 'Jur' and 'Barur' covered an extensive tract of land stretching from Dinajpur in the east to Purnia in the west. In the Deotala inscription of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah dated 868 A.H./1464 A.D.^{xxxviii} the mention of *Qasbah* Tabrizabad named in honour of the renowned saint Shayka Jalal al-Din Tabrizi reminds us of the place Deotala situated fifteen miles north of Pandua and ½ miles south of the northern boundary of Malda district.^{xxxix} Another inscription of the same sultan where *Qasbah* Tabrizabad described as Deotala^{xl} supports this contention. In view of the discussion cited above we may come to this proposition that the place-name traced in the epigraphs if identified and analysed properly may be of much use for the study of regional history under Bengal Sultanate.

The Caliphal Title Engraved in the Epigraphs and its Justification

According to the *Shariah* of Islam, *Khilafat* is a temporal and spiritual institution, and is regarded as a symbol of unity for the Muslim *Ummah*. It originated after the demise of the prophet Muhammad (sm). Prophet Muhammad (sm) is the *khalifatullah* or the vicegerent of Allah in the strict sense of the term while the *khalifah* is considered as Prophet's representative in the discharge of his worldly and religious duties and responsibilities. The sultan is supposed to be the representative of the *khalifah* in the region or area of his occupation and domination. Theoretically the sultan should receive the approval of the existing *khalifah* for the legality of his rule over the people. Unless the *khalifah* does otherwise it is presumed that the sultan is empowered to discharge his duties legally. In acknowledgment of the *khalifah's* allegiance the sultan usually inscribes his name in the coins and reads *khutbah* or Friday's sermon in his name. In case of Bengal Sultanate it is not an exception. But the adoption of *khalifatullah* title by some sultans and in the fourth phase the inscribing of the *kalimah* and the name of four pious caliphs in the coins demand explanation.^{xii} Here we are concerned with the third phase in the development of Bengal Sultans, attitude towards the caliphate. Because the epigraphs bear this aspect of the caliphal title i.e. *khalifatullah*.

The evidence of the coins shows that A'bul Mujahid Sikandar Shah (1358-1389 A.D.) adopted the caliphal title of *al-Imam al-A'zam* and *al-Khalifah al-Mu'azzam*,^{xiii} Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1414-1432 A.D.) the title of *khalifatullah*^{xiii} and Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437-1459 A.D.) and his son Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474 A.D.) adopted the title of *khalifatullah bil hujjati wal burhan*^{xiv} all these titles bearing the implication of moulding the opinion of the people in their favour against any odds. In the epigraphs six sultans adopted the caliph title in such wording as shown against their names below.^{xiv}

1. Abul Mujahid Sikandar Shah : خلدت خلافته (his *khilafat* may be perpetuated).
2. Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah: خليفة الله (the vicegerent of Allah).
3. Nasir ul-Din Mahmud shah: خليفة الله بالحجة والبرهان (the vicegerent of Allah with proof and evidence)
(1474-1481 A.D.)
4. Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah: Do
(1481-1486 A.D.)
5. 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah: Do
(1493-1519 A.D.)

The rules of the *Shari'ah* do not usually permit the sultan to adopt the caliphal title. But in consideration of any untoward situation the '*ulama* and jurist class exercising their power of judgment if opine in its favour then the

ruling power dare adopting such title. With the fall of the Abbasid dynasty in 1258 A.D. a void was created in the institution of the caliphate regarding the discharge of temporal and religious duties for the Muslim *Ummah*. Hence the '*ulama* and the jurists of the time came forward to solve this problem and opined for the delegation of the caliphal duties and responsibilities legal to the rulers of the respective countries of the Muslim world. Even they legalized the use of the *khalifatullah* title for such rulers. The *ulama* of Bengal did not lag behind, rather they took the bold step of approving the use of the caliphal title legal for the sultans of Bengal if and when the situation demanded. In the light of these preliminaries let us see the justification of the adoption of the caliphal title of Bengal sultans as cited above.

Abul Mujahid Sikandar Shah adopted in his coins the caliphal title of '*al-Imam al-A'zam* and *al-Khalifah al-Mu'azzam* while in his inscriptions it is simply recorded 'may his *Khilafat* be perpetuated.' The adoption of caliphal titles by Sikandar Shah was the necessity of time. Because the Delhi sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq invaded Bengal twice to rob Bengal's independence, but Sikandar Shah with the approval of the '*ulama* adopted the caliphal title and united the people of Bengal against the external aggression. Ultimately Firuz Shah Tughlaq had to go back to Delhi without achieving his goal. Therefore, considering the gravity of the situation this bold step of Sikandar Shah is reasonably justified.^{xlvi} The *khalifatullah* title engraved in the coins and epigraphs of Jalal al-Din Muhammad appears to have been justified in view of the situation under which a convert rose to the throne of Bengal. In order to show his zeal for Islam he sent men and money to Makkah, Madinah and Egypt for the construction of mosques and madrasahs and for the help of the distressed. Even he spent enormous money for the reconstruction of the *masajid* and *madaris* which were demolished by his father, Raja Ganesh, in his short ascendancy to power. These activities are included in the rights and duties of the caliph. To legalize his power Jalal al-Din Muhammad went a step further and applied to the reinstated Abbasid caliph at Egypt for investiture thorough the Mamluk Sultan Ashraf al-Byarsbey. The caliph's envoy came to Bengal in 1429 A.D. possibly with the investiture and all other insignia befitting his power.^{xlvii} Emboldened by all these steps he adopted the *khalifatullah* title to present before the people his lawful rule in one hand and to tame the possible refractory nobles and dignitaries in the other. Under this consideration his adoption of the caliphal title seems to be justified.

The first sultan of the restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah assumed the caliphal title in the extended formula of *khalifatullah bil hujjati wal burhan* and engraved it in the epigraphs of his time.^{xlviii} Two other sultans of this dynasty Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah and Jalal al-Din Fath Shah followed his track in engraving that caliphal title in their epigraphs.^{xlix} Though not in the epigraphs, but in the coins Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah assumed this caliphal title in imitation of his father Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah's policy. The adoption of this caliphal title by Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah in view of the political strategy of the time seems to be quite justifiable. Because the adoption of the *khalifatullah* title by the new convert Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah created commotion among the traditional Muslims and the followers of the restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty. So in order to

avert the situation and to pacify his own followers he assumed the more dignified caliphal title of *khalifatullah bil hujjati wal burhan*. Besides this he wanted to intimidate the partisans of the house of Raja Ganesh, and he was successful in his attempt.ⁱ The other three sultans of this dynasty referred to above for their valour and virtuous deeds possibly assumed this caliphal title. 'Ala al-Din Husayn Shah, the founder of the Husayn Shahi dynasty, as a scion of the descendants of the Prophet (sm.) and as a patron of learning and culture has established his claim for the adoption of the caliphal title.ⁱⁱ The Bengal 'ulama and jurists approved this move of the sultans for the interest of the country against any sinister motive of the internal and external enemies.

In concluding remarks we can say that the epigraphs of the period under study besides their calligraphic niceties and artistic values have stored valuable materials which may be utilized for adding something new to and for reconstructing the history of Bengal Sultanate.

Notes and References

- i The period of pre-Mughal Bengal extends from the conquest of Lakhnawati kingdom by the Khalji Turks under the leadership of Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in 600 A.H./1204 A.D. down to the annexation of Bengal with the Mughal empire in 984 A.H./1576 A.D. This long period in Bengal history may be divided as follows:
 - a. The initial period from 600 A.H./1204 A.D. to 739 A.H./1338 A.D. In this period the governors of Lakhnawati who were appointed by the Delhi sovereigns ran the administration of the conquered territories as semi-autonomous rulers, their number being twenty five.
 - b. The period of independence from 739 A.H./1338 A.D. to 945 A.H./1538 A.D. during which twenty four sultans of different houses ruled from Gaur and Pandua.
 - c. The period of the rulers of Sher Shah's family and their Afghan successors from 945 A.H./1538 A.D. to 984 A.H./1576 A.D.
- ii For details see A.H. Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Coins of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1957), pp. 78-93; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. IV (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1960) (Henceforth the source may referred to as *IB*); A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, *Select Arabic and Persian Epigraphs* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1988); A. Karim, *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 1988); A. Karim, *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992). (Henceforth the source may be referred to as *CAPIB*)
- iii See the epigraphs recorded in the above mentioned books.
- iv *Select Arabic and Persian Epigraphs*, p. 70.
- v S. Ahmed, p. 38.
- vi *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- vii A. Karim, *CAPIB*, pp. 157, 159.
- viii S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 143ff.
- ix *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 61, 82.
- x *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- xi A. Karim, *CAPIB*, pp. 146-147, 206.
- xii S. Ahmed, *IB*, pp. 69, 78.
- xiii *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- xiv *Ibid.*, p. 78.

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- xv *Ibid.*, p. 123.
xvi *Ibid.*
xvii A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Varendra, 1200-1576 A.D.* (Rajshahi: M. Sajjadur Rahim, 1998), p. 254 (Henceforth ASCV); A.H. Dani, *Bibliography*, p. 108.
xviii S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 73.
xix A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, "Two Unpublished Inscriptions," *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum (JVRM)*, Rajshahi, 1980-81, p. 102.
xx *Ibid.*, p. 104.
xxi A.H. Dani, *Bibliography*, p. 115.
xxii S. Mukhopadhyay, *Banglar Itihaser Dusha Bachhar: Swadhin Sultani Amal* (Calcutta, 1966), p. 559.
xxiii *Ibid.*
xxiv *JVRM*, p. 103.
xxv *Ibid.* p. 104.
xxvi Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Tr. Major Raverty (New Delhi, Reprint 1970), p. 585 f.n. 7.
xxvii *Ibid.* pp. 584-586.
xxviii A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, "Barind in the History of Muslim Bengal," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society (JPHS)*, Karachi, 1968, p. 81.
xxix H. Blochmann, "Geography and History of Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB)* Vol. XLII, Calcutta, 1873, p. 211.
xxx Niharranjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parva* (Calcutta: Book Emporium, 1356 B.S.), p. 145.
xxxi N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. III (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1929), pp. 106, 108, 115; *JASB* (New series) Vol. V, 1909, p. 476.
xxxii *JVRM*, p. 104.
xxxiii S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 69.
xxxiv *Ibid.* p. 70.
xxxv *Ibid.* pp. 72-73.
xxxvi *Ibid.* p. 73.
xxxvii A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, *ASCV*, PP. 300-301.
xxxviii S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 78-79.
xxxix *Ibid.* p. 77.
xl *Ibid.*, p. 81.
xli A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, *Muslim Mudra O Hastalikhana Shilpa* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy 1989), p. 249 (Henceforth the source may be referred to as *MMHS*).
xlii *Ibid.* pp. 249-250.
xliiii *Ibid.*
xliv *Ibid.*
xlv S. Ahmed, *IB*, Pertinent epigraphs.
xlvi A.K.M. Yaqub Ali, *MMHS*, p. 250.
xlvii *Ibid.*, p. 251.
xlviii S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 53.
xlix *Ibid.* pp. 99, 123-250.
l *MMHS*, p. 252.
li S. Ahmed, *IB*, p. 195; *MMHS*, p. 247.

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