



By Professor Mohammed Yusuf Sidiq

**Plate:** Bridge inscription in *tawqif* style from the reign of Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn Khalji, the 2nd ruler of Bengal c., 1210-1213 CE

In the beginning, I praise and thank God, the One Who in His (divine) wisdom has provided this inn (-like world). At every moment someone is entering into it, while someone else is departing; for no one has the capacity to settle here permanently.

As soon as someone becomes aware of the rapid movement of the cosmos, he soon realizes that there is no other provision for the way [of life] except good deeds. Due to the justice of Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn wa Dunya’ shah-e-jahan (the king of the world), even a lamb does not (need to) hide from a wolf.

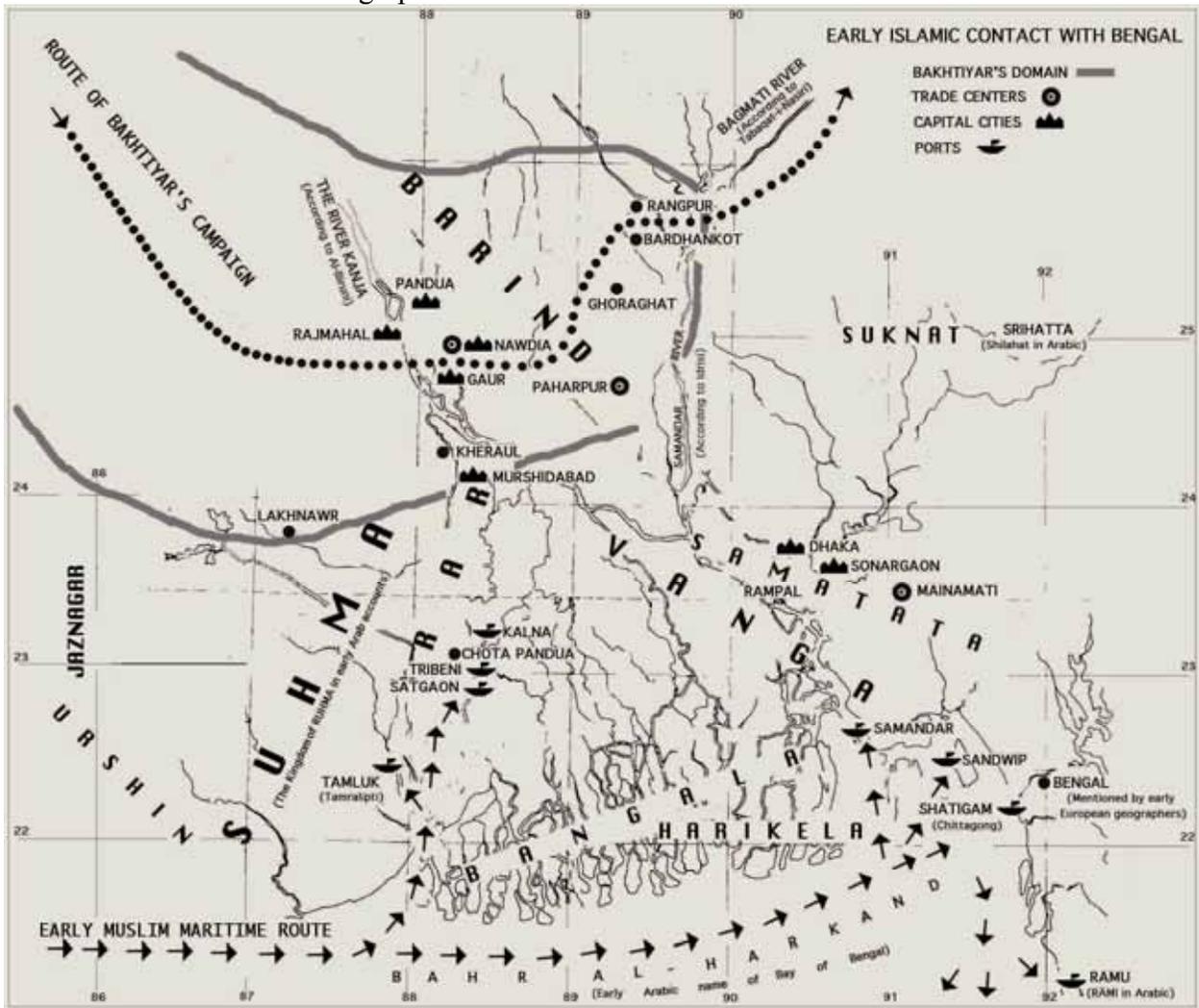
Because of his efforts, Islam grows every moment. By the mercy of (God) the Just, this bridge was completed during his reign. This good action is possible only by the one who is day and night continually engaged in acts of benevolence for everyone -- the noble as well as the commoner.  
(The First Islamic Inscription in Bengal)

With this Persian inscription of Sultan ‘Al®’ Dīn [wa Dunya’ ‘Ali Mard®n Khalji] from Sultanganj (now in Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi University, Bangladesh), an Islamic epigraphic tradition began around 1210-13 in the eastern hinterland of the Islamic world, historically known as Bengal. Just a decade before, it had been ruled by the Hindu dynasty of the Senas and, before that, by the Buddhist dynasty of the Pala (See Map 1). The mystical verses of this first Islamic epigraph in Bengal, deeply imbued in a profound spiritual message, commemorate the construction of a bridge that symbolically connected this newly conquered outpost with rest of the Islamic world. Though ornamenting a secular structure, the text carries some religious elements: divine presence in every cosmic scheme, praise of God, and the transitory nature of life. In a way, this reflects the characteristic Islamic approach which does not formally separate religious life and everyday worldly activities. Indeed most inscriptions in the Islamic world, even if affixed to secular structures resonate with religious expressions, constituting in some way or other, public statements of faith that serve to remind Muslims of some aspects of their

Islamic beliefs. In addition, phrases commonly found in these inscriptions often reflect the public, societal or state trends of their time. Therefore, to interpret these texts in their proper contexts can be quite refreshing exercise for the historian, opening up a rich, hitherto untapped historical source.

The second Islamic inscription from Bengal (from the reign of Sulṭān Giyāth al-Dīn ‘Iwaḍ dated 618/1221, discovered in a Khanqah in Sian, Birbhum, West Bengal) commemorates the construction of a khanqah, a key institution in the spread of the teachings of Islam and its spiritual message (see Map no. 4). The third Islamic inscription from Bengal (from the reign of Balka Khan Khalji, discovered in Naohata, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, now in Varendra Research Museum, commemorates the construction of a masjid and madrasa complex, two other important institutions of Muslim religious, social and intellectual life (see maps 2 and 3).

Bengal has an epigraphic heritage extending back to the pre-Islamic period. Inscriptions of various styles are evident in this region, which was once rich in stone carving and sculpture. In the pre-Islamic period, however, artists and craftsmen did not use their skill to exhibit calligraphy as such; Sanskrit and Pali inscriptions are generally informative rather than calligraphic in intent.



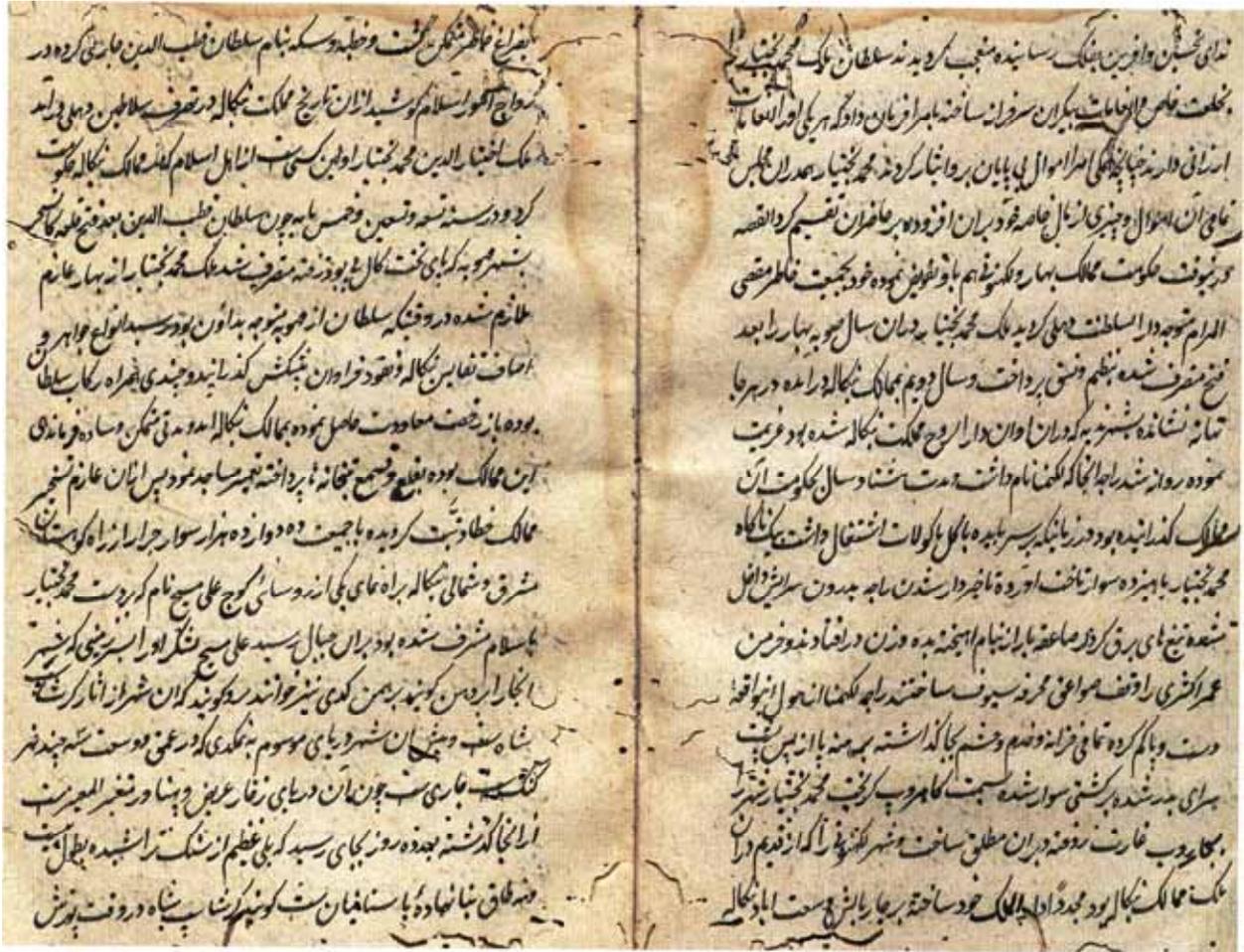
Map 1: Early Islamic contact with Bengal

Inscriptions became more common after the advent of Islam to Bengal and as Bengali Muslim rulers launched into architectural projects. It is difficult to imagine a building of that period without some kind of inscription; it was as if it would have appeared naked or unfinished without. As a result, epigraphic records and inscriptions are plentiful in terms of both artistic accomplishment and historical information.

Historical accounts of the Islamic dynasties in South Asia are numerous, particularly those regarding the central authorities in Delhi. A number of sourcebooks, most in Persian, record the deeds of sultans and emperors. Bengal, however, has a very small share of this rich heritage of historical writing. Whatever might once have existed, very little has survived. One example of a lost source is a Persian manuscript on early Muslim rule in Bengal found by Francis Buchanan Hamilton in a shrine in Pandua in the early nineteenth century and mentioned in his book, *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur in the Province or Soubah of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1833). Unfortunately, the manuscript cannot be traced. Several factors, including natural calamities such as flood and fire, may account for the lack of extant sources. The prolonged monsoons and generally humid weather in Bengal pose an additional challenge to the preservation of archives.

Another important factor in accounting for the scarcity of materials on the history of Muslim Bengal was the attitude of imperial chroniclers in Delhi towards this region -- very few were keen to record events there because it was so remote from the capital. What was recorded in writing usually reflected the official version of events, such as military expeditions to subdue the region, as there was always a temptation for the governors to rebel. Written in the capital, these texts exhibit not only a generally urban bias, but also the views of central government; thus, they seldom provide reliable information on the region.

Though the epigraphic heritage of Bengal fills many gaps left by earlier historians, its study did not begin until the second half of the eighteenth century, when some Muslim 'ulamā' (often known as Munshi or Mawlavi in traditional Bengali society) began to take a scholarly interest in deciphering the texts. The first scholar to realize the importance of epigraphic evidence for dynastic history and to use it as a source for dating different historical monuments and architectural remains was Sayed Ghulam Hussein Salim Zayedpuri (d. 1817). He lived in Ingrezbazar (Malda) near Gaur, the ruined early Muslim capital of Bengal which abounded in inscriptions. He was a pioneer of Islamic epigraphy who examined for the first time inscriptions with an a great academic interest as early as in the mid-eighteenth century. While compiling *Riyāḍ al-Salāṭin* -- the history of Bengal -- (completed in 1788, published in Calcutta by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1893), he studied the epigraphic materials of Gaur and used them in constructing a chronology of Bengal's ruling dynasties. However, it was Sayyid Munshi Ilahi Bakhsh al-Husayni Awrangzebadi -- an indirect disciple of Sayed Ghulam Hussein -- who systematically examined a significant number of the Islamic inscriptions of Gaur, Pandua and adjacent areas. In total he deciphered forty-two inscriptions with astonishing accuracy, most of them for the first time. He used this epigraphic evidence in writing the History of Muslim rule



**Plate:** Folios from the original Persian manuscript of *Riyad al-Salat* (the most comprehensive late eighteenth century source on the Muslim rule in Bengal), recording the conquest of Nawdiyah by Bakhtiyar Khalji.<sup>1</sup>

in Bengal which formed a substantial part of his ambitious project of writing the history of the world. Part of this monumental Persian work -- *Khurshid-i-Jahan Numā* -- covered the history of Muslim rule in Bengal, and was edited and published, with an English translation by Henry Beveridge, in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1895. Interestingly, one of Munshi Ilahi Bakhsh's students, Abid Ali Khan, also took a great interest in the inscriptions of Gaur and Pandua as is evident in both of his works *Short Notes on the Ancient Monuments of Gaur and Pandua* (Malda, 1913) and *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua* (edited by H. E. Stapleton, Calcutta, 1931).

Early in the nineteenth century British collectors began to take an interest in these inscriptions, motivated principally by their visual appeal. For many of them, colonizing of lands and peoples also meant the colonizing of their arts, architecture, archaeological heritage, and even interpretation of their history and culture. Most of the private as well as museum collections of this period were built upon works removed from their context and often illegally or improperly acquired. However, as interest in Oriental antiquities and art objects developed in the West, many Europeans

set out to explore ancient sites in search of them. Cities such as Gaur and Pandua attracted a number of such adventurers, many of whom were little more than plunderers, or at best antique collectors. Some, however, left accounts and diaries of their experience, most of them now preserved in the India Office Library in London, which provide a rich source for materials on inscriptions that no longer exist.

Foremost among the British scholars pioneering this field is Sir Henry Creighton who lived for twenty years (1786 -- 1807), near Gaur and wrote a book, *The Ruins of Gaur* (London, 1817) illustrated with fabulous sketches and architectural drawings. He often refers to inscriptions he found in the old Islamic monuments of the area. Another celebrated British collector of Oriental antiquities was Major William Franklin who visited Gaur at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Both his diaries, *Journal of a Route from Rajmahal to Gaur* and *The Ruins of Gaur*, preserved in the India Office Library (MSS. nos. 19 and 285), give a clear description of the archaeological remains in the region and record a number of inscriptions. The collection that he took with him to England consisted of many monumental inscriptions, some of which he gave to the British Museum. The most elegant piece in this collection, however, found its way through antique dealers to the United States, where it ended up in the museum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Franklin was accompanied on his tour by a local guide named Munshi Shayā m Prasā d, a scholar of Arabic and Persian. At Franklin's request, he prepared a report on the archaeological remains of the area. It, too, has become a valuable source for the epigraphy of the region (MS. 2841 in the India Office Library, later published by A. H. Dani as an appendix to his book, *Muslim Architecture of Bengal*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961). Another contemporary archaeologist, named Orme, also left a brief report, *The Ruins of Gaur*, now in the India Office Library (MS. 65: 25), which describes a few inscriptions. Francis Buchanan Hamilton was another early nineteenth-century scholar who noted a number of inscriptions during his tour of the district of Dinajpur in 1807-08. He mentions some of them in his work *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District or Zilla of Dinajpur*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the investigation of the art and archaeology of the region became more scholarly. One of the first studies of this period was by Captain W. N. Lees, who published an Arabic inscription of Sultan Bārbak Shā h in the *JASB* in 1860. Among the important studies of that time is *Gaur, Its Ruins and Inscriptions* by J. H. Ravenshaw (London, 1878), which is particularly rich in illustrations and texts. The formation of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 brought a revolutionary change to the archaeological study of South Asia. Its first director general, Sir Alexander Cunningham, and his subsequent colleagues, took systematic steps to record all existing inscriptions. Other scholars to discover Islamic inscriptions of Bengal during this period were Dr. James Wise, Mr. E. Vesey Westmacott, Mr. Hili and Mr. Walter M. Bourke. Many of the rubbings they collected were sent to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, where scholars such as Henry Blochmann deciphered and published them.

Among other scholars to contribute to this field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were R. D. Banerji, Henry Beveridge, H. E. Stapleton, S. Aulad Husain, Rahmat Ali Taish, Hamid Allah Khan and Khan Sahib Moulvi Abdul Wali.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Archaeological Survey of India established a separate section for epigraphy and began to publish its specialized series, *Epigraphia Indica*. *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica*, devoted entirely to the Muslim inscriptions of India, issued its first volume in 1907-08. Eminent scholars such as Ghulam Yazdani, Paul Horn, Denison Ross and J. Horvitz either participated in its editing or contributed scholarly articles. After independence from the British, its name changed to *Epigraphia Indica, Arabic and Persian Supplement*. Scholars such as Ziauddin Desai published a number of inscriptions from Bengal. Two important works were published before the independence of Bangladesh and certainly provided models for a comprehensive epigraphic study of the region. The first was *Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* by A. H. Dani (published as an appendix to *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, vol. 2 (1957), and the other *Inscriptions of Bengal* by an eminent twentieth-century epigraphist, Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmed (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1960). Among recent publications, *Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bihar* (Patna: Jayaslal Research Institute, 1973), by Qeyamuddin Ahmad, and *Corpus of the Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992), by Abdul Karim, a prominent historian of Bangladesh, are indeed important additions to this genre. Recent publication of a monumental Arabic work *Rihla ma'a al-Nuqush al-Kitabiyya fi 'l-Bangāl* is an important addition to this field and contains an elaborate discussion of almost 400 inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> All of these works have enriched the field of epigraphy of the region. However, there are still much to be explored in the history and epigraphy of Bengal, and the task is challenging.

The present work has a different approach than the previous works in the field as it aims towards an interpretive study of the Arabic and Persian epigraphic texts of Bengal in the wider context of rich epigraphic tradition of the Islamic world. While focusing on previously untapped sources, the book takes a fresh look into Islamic inscriptions to examine the inner dynamics of the social, intellectual and cultural transformations of this eastern region of South Asia. It explores many new inscriptions including the two earliest Persian epigraphs that appeared within the first three decades of the Muslim rule in the region indicating an early introduction of Persian language and culture in Bengal under the patronage of Khalji rulers coming from Khurasan. None of the previously published works paid enough attention to some extremely important inscriptions during the formative period of Mughal rule in Bengal, particularly during Akbar's era. This present work is the first attempt to discuss a number of inscriptions from the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar, in addition to numerous other previously unnoticed inscriptions from Sultanate as well as Mughal periods that somehow found their ways to different newly built mosques in some far remote rural areas of Bangladesh and West Bengal, including the famous Nim Darwaza inscription of Barbak Shah at Miyaneh Dar in Gaur Citadel, dated 871 (1466-67). In addition to deciphering and editing the epigraphic texts anew, the information derived from them have been analyzed in detail in this book which help us understand the political, administrative, social, religious and cultural scenario of that period. In addition, the cursory information available in these inscriptions about the monuments they belonged to, have been used to reconstruct the architectural history of the region. The chapter on Islamic calligraphy examine these inscriptions as art in details. It discusses a few most distinctive calligraphic creations through a regional style, namely

Bengali *tughra*, in addition to consider the artistic merit of other popular styles, such as Kufi, *thulth*, *naskh*, *riqā'*, *rayhani*, *muhaqqaq*, and Bihari.

The Islamic inscriptions of Bengal thus provide historical clues about early Muslim rule in the region. The names of quite a few rulers of Bengal during this period can only be established on the basis of epigraphic evidence. These inscriptions also furnish details of the local administration such as the names of revenue collectors, police officers, local army commanders and representatives of the central government in the area and their officials, names that would otherwise be lost to history. While these names can be analyzed and interpreted for the historical reconstruction of the past, the titles accompanying them can throw light on the personality of the title bearer and many other contemporary issues.

The Islamic inscriptions of Bengal during the period 1205 -1707 number roughly 400. Unlike the pre-Mughal Arabic inscription, Mughal inscriptions are usually in Persian. Most of them belong to religious architecture, recording construction of mosques, madrasas, khanqahs, shrines, mausoleums etc. Quite naturally, they contain some kind of religious message in the form of verses from the Qur'an or sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*). These messages can be very helpful in understanding religious trends and transformations in the region. One of the primary goals of the present study is to capture these messages and to interpret them in their proper contexts. Indeed, Islamic epigraphic texts serve as one of the primary sources for understanding the early spread of Islam in Bengal as they shed new light on the religious and cultural dynamics of a crucial period of Bengal history. With the diffusion of Islam in the region, the use of Arabic and Persian also started spreading in region the evidence of which we can find in these Islamic inscriptions.

Hence this book not only affects the old approaches, but also brings fresh results consequently enhancing the comprehension of the region's history. It explores the complex history of the consolidation of Islam in a region which, despite its having no direct geographical link with the rest of the Islamic world, has a strong Islamic identity and plays an important role in the Islamic world. It also helps us understand the advent of Islam and its gradual diffusion in Bengal that turned it eventually into a Muslim majority region and made the Bengali Muslims into the second largest linguistic group in the Islamic world.

A well-known French colonial administrator in North Africa once compared the world of Islam to a resonant box: the faintest sound in one corner reverberates through the whole. As elsewhere in the Islamic world, this apt metaphor finds expression also in Bengal, a significant part of which constitutes present-day Bangladesh, which is the third most populous Islamic country in the world. In spite of their distinctive character in artistic expression and textual content, Islamic inscriptions of Bengal form an inseparable part of the epigraphic heritage of the world of Islam. While the aim of this study is confined to the epigraphy of Bengal, it will ultimately contribute to the understanding of larger issues pertaining to the civilization and culture of a region where nearly one-eighth of the Muslim population of the world live today.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Persian MS., Asiatic Society of Bengal, Kolkata, no. P.S.C. – III 872, fol. 23. The manuscript seems to be widely used for a number of subsequent studies and editions of *Riyāḍ al-Salātīn*.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, *Rihla ma ‘a al-Nuqush al-Kitābiyya al-Islāmiyya f i Bilād al-Bangāl: Darāsa Tārīkhiyya Haḍāriyya* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2004), also translated into Persian by Layla Musazadeh, *Katibahaye Islāmi dar Sarzamīn-e-Bangāl*, (Kalak Shirin, Tehran, 2011).