

Rihla ma'a al-Nuqush al-Kitabiyyah al-Islamiyyah fi Bilad al-Bangal: Darasah Tarikhiyyah Hadariyyah
(English translation of the title of this Arabic book:
An Epigraphic Journey through Muslim Bengal: Historical and Cultural Aspects of Islamic Inscriptions of Bangladesh and West Bengal)

by Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq
Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Fikr, 2004, 492 Pp.

The Islamic world has a rich legacy of historical inscriptions ranging from tombstones to varieties of writings often inscribed on architecture. This is particularly true about Bengal which has a rich Islamic Epigraphic legacy, a vibrant scholarly field in its own right that has been the main theme of this laboriously done research work.

The title of the book written in Arabic may be roughly translated into English as “An Epigraphical Journey through Muslim Bengal: Historical and Cultural Aspects of Islamic Inscriptions of Bangladesh and West Bengal,” is a sheer joy to read. The author is a promising cultural historian from Bangladesh. He has the distinction of having been educated in Umm al-Qura University in Mecca as well as in his native Bangladesh. He has held academic positions in the past at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University researching Islamic art and culture. He is currently a faculty member at Sharjah University in the United Arab Emirates. The salience of epigraphy in the studies of Islamic history, art and architecture needs to be stressed. Being strictly contemporary, the epigraphs provide primary source material—both direct and circumstantial—for the political, cultural and social history of the time. At times, the epigraphs are the only source in supplying a missing link in the chronology of rulers, despite the availability of historical literature. Often the epigraphs can corroborate or contradict statements of a historian or can elaborate on details

of a given event or supply accurate names or dates. Administrative information can frequently be gathered through a study of inscriptions. While a majority of the inscriptions is found on such religious buildings as mosques and tombs, secular edifices like forts, city walls, gateways, palaces, tanks, wells, cisterns, gardens, dams, embankments and lakes also have inscriptions. Guns, coins, arms and armor often are inscribed in numerous cases.

Bengal played an important role in the historical dynamics of the Islamic world from time to time. The book begins with a discussion about the introduction of Islam in Bengal and the gradual consolidation of Islamic culture in the region starting from thirteenth century. Quite naturally, Arabic script as well as Arabic and Persian languages -- vital tools of Islamic cultural transmission -- played an active role in the diffusion of Islamic Civilization in the region. Islamic inscriptions in Bengal were rendered in various styles such as kufi, thulth, naskh, riqā', muhaqqaq, rayhani, tughra and Bihari. Introduction of Arabic script and the development of Islamic calligraphic tradition in the region is another major theme at the beginning of this book.

Arabic and Persian inscriptions in Bengal date from 13th century C.E. Bengal is one of the richest region in Islamic inscriptions. Siddiq has meticulously surveyed these inscriptions in a methodical and systematic manner. From the extensive bibliographical references, it is obvious that Siddiqi has read most of the primary and secondary sources in Arabic, Persian, English and Bengali to produce this path-breaking study. Thus it may not be an exaggeration to say that this work is the most up to date and exhaustive survey of the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal. The book discusses many new inscriptions that somehow escaped the notice of previous scholars in the field, such as the prominent epigraphist of the last century Maulvi Shamsuddin Ahmad (*Inscriptions of Bengal*, Volume 4, Rajshahi, Varendra Research Museum, 1960) or historian Abdul Karim (*Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1993). In addition, he has attempted to interpret the previously known inscriptions freshly.

The overall layout of this book itself presents a unique style in epigraphic

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publication. Each inscription is shown through an image and then the text is rendered into modern printing enabling those unfamiliar with inscriptional style to be able to read it without the troubling of laboring to unlock it. This facilitates readers to compare the epigraphic texts with the original photographs of the inscriptions and to get a visual image of the calligraphic layout of these inscriptions. The book is also rich in maps, charts, diagrams and different other illustration.

Thus far, academic and scholarly publications on South Asia in Arabic language are extremely limited, let alone on the regional studies particularly on Muslim Bengal. The present work has thus the merit to be the first comprehensive book on the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal ever published in Arabic. This study will remain the standard book for years to come. I am unaware of any work on this subject with reference to South Asia, where inscriptions have been both shown in modern printing as well as in images in one handy volume. The author deserves our commendation.

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