

Book Review

Aspects of Historical and Cultural Legacy of Muslim Bengal

Historical and Cultural Aspects of the Islamic Inscriptions of Bengal: A Reflective Study of Some New Epigraphic Discoveries, by Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, Dhaka: The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, 2009, HB, pp316, Tk.2000/ US \$ 45.

Professor Dr Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq is a well-known scholar in the field of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization. Having studied and taught at a number of universities in the East as well as the West, he has also undertaken research in the field of Arabic and Persian inscriptions of Bengal. His writings have been received well and they have also been translated into numerous languages. At present he is the H. E. C. Professor of Islamic History, Civilization and Culture at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan as well as a visiting faculty member at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). The book under review consists of eight chapters and four appendices as well as a bibliography and index.

In the “Introduction: Epigraphy of Muslim Bengal”, the author observes that pre-Islamic Sanskrit and Pali inscriptions are generally informative rather than calligraphic in intent. The significance of calligraphy (viz. the art of writing and elegant penmanship) in Islamic culture has been discussed in the book in some detail, with particular focus on the role of inscriptions in Islamic buildings. He disagrees with the earlier scholars that inscriptions of Bengal were mostly rendered in Naskh character. On the contrary, he emphasizes that most of the Sultanate inscriptions are of Thulth character. On page 87 he also observes that Tughra style of writing has some central Asian link with Seljuk antecedent and similarity with Egyptian Tughra. While discussing the calligraphic peculiarities of Muslim Bengal, the author has coined a special term for a particular variety of Arabic calligraphy in the region which he refers to as Bengali Tughra (p24). Indeed, Tughra style of calligraphy can be seen in Egypt and Central Asia, but it also found a special place in the architectural calligraphy of medieval Bengal. Professor A.B.M. Husain also considers this style to be Bengal’s own. In this regard, late Professor Abdul Karim had observed, “Thus the foundation of calligraphic style was very beautifully and firmly laid from the beginning of Muslim rule in Bengal. A further development was arrived at by raising the shafts of vertical letters upwards and arranging them artistically in a row thus to produce an impression of a congregation of Muslims in prayer. In this style the text of the inscription is set in order at the base but the round letters are further twisted to form themselves into ringlets. The raised column of letters is called by some as squadron of

infantry standing in a regular row with lances in hand. In a further development to columns are found to be crossed by segments of carved letters ق, ى and ن which some interpret Bow and Arrow design, other as Boat and Oars, while still others as advancing of Muslim regiment in a triumphal march.”

Inscriptions were considered so important in the Islamic world that a building would have been considered unfinished without it. Inscriptions not only decorated buildings in the world of Islam, it also recorded various important dates including date of construction, repair etc. Inscriptions were widely used in mosques throughout Muslim Bengal. The author has pointed out that while Islamic culture employed inscriptions as an important aesthetic element for architecture, pre-Muslim monuments in Bengal hardly used inscriptions as decorative element. On page 37, for instance, he mentions that both the Pala and Sena rulers used copper and bronze plates for their inscriptions in addition to stone slabs. The reviewer may be allowed to add here that while the Islamic inscriptions were used for decoration, pre-Muslim inscriptions (usually in incised form) were hardly ever made with calligraphic intent. Islamic inscriptions, as the author notes, are relief in nature.

On page 30 the author mentions that copper grants were used to donate lands by rulers. In this connection one copper plate belonging to the owner's of the adjoining lands of the mausoleum of Khan Jahan (d. 1459 AD) may be mentioned here which was later on taken to Kolkata (Calcutta) for litigation purposes and therefore it could not be examined. Thus the author has explained about land grants of madad-i-mash associated with mosques, but la-kheraj lands of Bengal did not receive full attention in this book. In this connection, the author has discussed some fabricated or concocted traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) that can be found in some inscriptions. On page 201, he has given an epigraphic example of such a tradition in Bengal. Here the founder of a mosque fabricates a tradition probably with a pious intention to alert those who were likely to vandalize mosques or any endowed property for public welfare.

Whilst most of the Islamic inscriptions in Bengal were inscribed on black basalt stone, there are some brick inscriptions preserved in the Kolkata Museum. Some brick inscriptions bearing the name of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Abul Muzaffar Mahmud ibn Husain (1532-38 CE) were discovered in the excavation of Jorbangla mound at Barabazar, Jhenidah district. These pieces are at present in the Khulna Divisional Museum of the Department of Archaeology. It is to be noted also that same type of majolica was used in Samarkand in the 14th century. On page 28 the author has expressed his opinion that Sultan Ghiyasuddin Abul Muzaffar Mahmud ibn Husain (1532-38 CE) issued an inscription in 1528 owing to rebellion against his brother Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah (1519-31 CE). But inscriptions or coins issued during the life time of another Sultan with his approval is not uncommon in the history of Bengal. Nusrat Shah also issued coins during his father Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah's (1493-1519 CE) time with the latter's approval. The rebellion of Mahmud, as mentioned on page 186, is not supported by Professor Abdul Karim. After the death of Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah (1519-31 CE), his son Sultan Alauddin Firuz Shah (1531-32 CE) came to power. Mahmud Shah was his paternal uncle. The latter came to power by killing his nephew Alauddin Firuz Shah in

1532 CE. The author has described 5 brick inscriptions of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah in thulth style in page 188. The author has also described the original site of these inscriptions under the heading “An unknown Sultanate masjid somewhere in Bangladesh”. As mentioned above, Muhammad Abdul Qadir has referred to its provenance. These were discovered on the landing place of Jorbangla Dighi, Barabazar, Jhenidah, Bangladesh during excavation. The nearby single-domed mosque is the Jorbangla mosque. The reviewer has also referred to the same inscriptions elsewhere.

M. A. Qadir had deciphered the same in the Journal of Bengal Art. These pieces are preserved in the Khulna Divisional Museum of the Department of Archaeology. On page 189 (plate 6.32.e) it has been published inaccurately and therefore this needs to be corrected in the future. On page 61 the author provides the date of Shait Gumbad mosque at Bagerhat as 1459 CE when, in fact, this is the date of the demise of Khan Jahan. According to Percy Brown the mosque was constructed around 1440 CE. The heading of chapter 3 is “The diffusion of Islam in Bengal and the Articulation of a new order” in which the author discusses how Bengal was Islamised (for example see page 44). While he refers to various theories of Richard Eaton (axe and plough theory, for example), he should have discussed here the work of Khundkar Fazle Rabbee, namely Haqiqat-e-Musalman-i-Banglah. Professor Emeritus A. K. M. Yaqub Ali has also emphasized the importance of epigraphic and other archaeological records in understanding the process of Islamisation in medieval Bengal.

On page 50, the author explains the contact of Ali Mech and his tribe with the conquering Muslim forces of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. He has also discussed the role of the religious scholars (ulama) in gradual conversion of the indigenous people to Islam. He opines that Bakhtiyar was interested to see the local people converted to Islam so that he could rely on them to set up his new administration as well as his ongoing military campaigns. He describes the role of Ali Mech during the Tibet expedition of Bakhtiyar Khalji. But it is very uncertain how a whole community could become so trustworthy to a foreigner. Professor A. K. M. Yaqub Ali has observed, “The soldiers recruited for the Tibet expedition are stated to have been ten thousand in number, and most of them possibly belonged to the Khalji stock, because at such an early date of the Muslim conquest neither the Hindu would dare to seek employment in the army nor would the Muslims trust them in the position involving the security. There is no proof of any Hindu being employed in the army before the time of Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah.”

Unlike what the author would have us believe, there was no mass conversion to Islam during the formative period of Muslim rule. His analysis about the impact of Muslim sea-trade and early Islamic contacts with Bengal are also in variance with what Eaton thinks. According to the author, “On the basis of the Arakanese chronicle, the historian Muhammad Enamul Haq concluded that the Muslim settlers in the Chittagong region gradually grew into a compact and influential community, and eventually organized an independent principality comprising the coastal Chittagong and Noakhali districts. The ruler of this Muslim principality bore the title Sultan.”(p 47) On page 51 he mentions the policy of Muhammad ibn Qasim, the conqueror of Sind, who treated the indigenous people as Ahl al-Kitab. He compares this with the views of the ulama of Bengal who later

took a similar position (probably on the basis of a Hanafi juristic position, such as the opinion of Ibahim Nakha'i, a famous student of Abdullah ibn Mas'ud who served as a Qadi in Iraq, d. 95 AH).

The language of the early Islamic inscriptions in Bengal was Arabic which gradually changed into Persian during Mughal period. This makes the author's assertion that the first inscription of Bengal inscribed in the reign of Alaudin Khalji [1210-1213] and the third Islamic inscription in the reign of Balka Khan Khalji [1229-1231] were inscribed in Persian very different from the views of previous scholars. Ideologically, there should not be any class system in Islam. A slave was put to the rank of a commander-in-chief during the life time of the Prophet and other slaves were elevated to the rank of Sultans in Delhi, Bengal and Egypt. Yet the author has used a very uncommon classification of Muslim society of Bengal compared with the Hindu tradition of Brahmin and non-Brahmin (p. 55). In this connection, it may be mentioned that Muslim class system is horizontal, but Hindu class system is vertical. On pp. 55-56, he has discussed the reformist movement of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid and later on its influence on Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840), Mir Nithar Ali (Titumir, 1782-1831 AD) and Mawlana Karamat Ali, although each one of them followed a different path. Haji Shariatullah of the Faraizi movement was a direct disciple of "Shaikh Tahir Sombal, an authority of Hanafi School" in Makkah and, as a result, he had direct Arab influence. "Titu Mir" also went on a pilgrimage to Makkah in 1822 CE and came in close contact with the great Islamic reformer and revolutionary leader Sayyid Ahmad of Bareilly who inspired him to free his fellow countrymen from un-Islamic practices and foreign domination. Mawlana Karamat Ali focused on preaching Islam in Bengal through peaceful means. The author has also mentioned about Mawlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani (1880-1976), Tablighi Jamat and Ahl-e-Hadith movements though his explanations are too brief.

Though Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji built mosques, madrasahs and khanqahs throughout his newly conquered domain as did his successors, very few examples of such buildings have been found. On page 82 he describes 2 madrasahs. This also proves that there were many other mosque and madrasahs in medieval Bengal. The reviewer thinks that even the Shait Gumbad mosque at Bagerhat was used as a madrasah. In Chapter 5, the author has given a reading of an inscription of a bridge constructed by Sultan Alauddin Ali Mardan Khalji. In this inscription the word sarai (meaning inn-like world) has been used. The reviewer found similarity with another inscription of the Mughal period. It is a plaster inscription above the mihrab inside the Lalbagh Fort mosque, Dhaka. In this inscription the world has also been compared to a sarai. There is another inscription of a bridge (as deciphered by Soghra Esmaili of Tehran) preserved in the Lalbagh Fort Museum, Dhaka. But no inscription of Lalbagh Fort has been included in the book under review.

On page 103 the author has described the conversion of an upper class Brahmin to Islam. He was the Bhojar Brahmin. This type of conversion is also proved by other inscriptions. On page 147 he has mentioned about Pir Ali Muhammad Tahir of Bagerhat, an upper class Brahmin who had converted to Islam. On page 194 he also refers to one Abdullah Bukhari as a scribe of an inscription. His title Bukhari indicates that he was an

immigrant. On page 206 he mentions Qadi Muhammad Sharif Multani, which proves that the latter was from Multan. On page 208 he mentioned the name of another immigrant Sa'duddin Muhammad al-Shirazi, the famous calligrapher of Dhaka as scribe of an inscription of Dhaka. On page 226-27 he mentioned a tomb stone containing the name of Mir Muhammad, son of Mir Muhammad Kasani. Both Shiraz and Kasan are places in Iran. These records indicate that there was considerable Muslim immigration to Bengal. On pages 122-23 he described an inscription of Sultan Shamsuddin Ahmad Shah preserved currently in the Dhaka office of the Department of Archaeology. But actually it is now preserved in the Paharpur Museum of that Department. He has referred to Professor A. K. M. Yaqub Ali but the latter has mentioned that it was collected from the village of Gazipur, even though according to Md. Abdul Khaleque, Regional Director of Department of Archaeology it was collected by the Police Department from a place near the Dargah of Gazi Pir near the vicinity of Gaur area in Bangladesh and eventually given to the Department of Archaeology.

On page 170 the author mentions a three-domed traditional Sultanate mosque. But it is also known to all that all three-domed traditional mosques are Mughal, not Sultanate. The mosque of Chapai-Maheshpur has been described as being located at a strategic position on the Mahananda River. It is a very interesting finding as a resting place of the Bengal Sultans on their naval expeditions or journeys. Old Malda mosque is a similar type of mosque in another strategic position of the Mahananda River. On its opposite side is the Nim Sarai Tower placed in an axis with this mosque. On page 231 he refers to a mosque built near the Dhaka New Market. It was built by a lady named Maryam Saliha. Another important inscription is discussed on pages 219-20 containing the name of Lala Rajmal, a non-Muslim of north Indian origin. It proves that during the rule of Awrangzeb non-Muslims were put in charge of high positions.

This book is much more than a mere compilation of hitherto known and unknown inscriptions of Bengal. The author has put forward several new as well as creative ideas and suggestions; the author deserves much credit for producing such a well-documented work. A large number of photographs, illustrative of different periods, have enhanced this work. Recommended reading for scholars interested in Muslim history and heritage of Bengal.

This review has been checked and edited by Muhammad Mojlum Khan, an acclaimed author, literary critic, research scholar and Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and author of *The Muslim 100* (reprinted 2010; Kindle edition 2011) and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming, late summer 2012). He is a Founding Director of Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK and editor of its website.