

THE CALLIGRAPHERS OF THATTA



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CALLIGRAPHERS OF THATTA: *INTRODUCTION*

The Makli graveyard has received attention of scholars and students of calligraphy time and again. This interest has emanated from the inherent liking of the ruins and rich material it offers for history. Makli in its own right has always been an object inspiring quest and probe. It had a place of great social importance for the people of Thatta, who had evolved and knit many social events around it. We are lucky to have a spared account of cultural life the Makli hills used to evoke, and that account is from the pen of a scholar of not less than the stature/standing of Mir Ali Sher Qani. His *Makli Nama* is a standing testimony to what Makli used to be, in the days gone by.

Apart from so many other facets, including arts and architecture, it has been considered a fit enquiry ground for the development and practice of Islamic calligraphy.

During British period a sort of enquiring attention was given to the archaeological sites in Thatta and Makli. Initial records of *Khan Bahadur Khudadad Khan* were in the shape of his personal jottings of the epigraphical record at Makli. His '*Beaz*' has been variously referred, and its importance is due to the fact that these were the earliest jottings and are valuable as to help in ascertaining any subsequent loss.

The Archaeological Survey of India and its successors the Department of Archaeology and Museums of Pakistan did address

many departmental exploratory quests, but it is unfortunate that no such record was made public. Though the Department of Archaeology has been acknowledged for assisting scholars in their studies, and also putting departmental records at their disposal.

The *Makli Namah* of Ali Sher Qani Thattvi was very ably edited by Late Pir Hussamuddin Rashdi, who had collected lots of related information and supplied the same to the readers, very truthfully in notes and references. This mass of information spans some good six hundred pages, plus the Persian Text of Mir Ali Sher's *Makli Nama*.

Late Pir Sahib's edited work generated lot of interest in Makli Hill monuments and need of more work on its various aspects was greatly felt, obviously the calligraphy was one of these.

The Offices of Department of Archaeology and Museums who remained involved with the Makli Hill monuments, in one way or the other had fairly good material available and could have made a good contribution towards study of calligraphy, had any such task assigned to them personally, and time required for completion of the work given to them.

However M.A. Ghafur put forward a paper which referred to the calligraphers of Thatta, in its heydays. Being a true archaeologist, he collected the material evidence, and brought to notice many signed specimen of the calligraphers, who had contributed to the richness and beauty of Thatta monuments.

But due to political disturbances, and not very conducive atmosphere in official dungeons, the work couldn't see the light of the day. It went to the honor of Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, University of Karachi to publish long awaited paper after 10 years, in 1978.

The work, as the name denotes, focused on identification of calligraphers, by locating the signed specimen of their calligraphy, thus successfully bringing to fore a list of these unsung artists. It however doesn't shed any light on the art and craft of epigraphy in this part of our country. The practice of calligraphy has not only been an art form, it was an inspired branch of a living passion, with lots of reverence involved, and it was guided by the active awareness with regards to day to day development in its various styles and representative formats. With the indulgence of aristocracy and involvement of intelligentsia, the calligraphy was able to maintain not only its balance, but it kept a sort of dynamism, which every intelligent observer will not fail to observe, a sense of forward moment, during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Thatta. No doubt Makli can be dubbed as melting pot of various regional influences, it received not only the calligraphers, but also the major styles, identifiable with famous practicing schools, seemingly the Mughal preferences were long resisted, ultimately succeeding in getting a good home here.

Beyond these time limits the practice was no more general, and it became individualistic, where the status of a good calligrapher was much bigger than a general practitioner. Here the laws of craft

were no more remembered and practice was much less patronized.

The practice of calligraphy at Thatta can be a very interesting and a fulsome study, to this need the present work draws attention, though the author has generously left this aspect to be catered by anyone who deems it important.

This work is based on the field work undertaken quite some time ago. Besides it is taking care of the Makli remains which fall generally under the protected category. The remains outside this officially protected area have not been documental/studied. These are plenty full and indicative of interesting facts. The Thatta district has quite a few other historical remains, where epigraphical material of historical and calligraphic interest is available. The present work, as stated before, has only kept the town of Thatta and protected remains of Makli hill in view.

There is need that the remaining work may be carried out to supplement the work of M.A. Ghafur, so that important evidence from past may be brought to the light, before it is too late.

The *Calligraphers of Thatta* was long in demand, and this timely arrangement for its reprint will be welcomed by the wide readership, interested in our heritage.

Kaleemullah Lashari

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