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The Role of Subcontinental Calligraphers in Preserving Qur'anic Art

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The Role of Subcontinental Calligraphers in Preserving Qur'anic Art

ABSTRACT

This article examines the profound contributions by the calligraphers from the subcontinent to the rich tradition of Islamic calligraphy, exploring their stylistic development, cultural influence, and artistic heritage. Through historical writings, biographical records, and classical tazkiras, the study highlights how South Asian calligraphers not only preserved the traditional scripts but also innovated variations that enriched the Islamic calligraphic heritage. The article explores their journeys by sharing their individual struggles, achievements, and artistic values, this research highlights the central role played by subcontinental calligraphers in sustaining and expanding the aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of Islamic calligraphy. The findings reaffirm that the subcontinent served as a vibrant center where calligraphy flourished as both a sacred art and a cultural tradition, leaving a lasting impression on the Islamic artistic world.

Keywords:

Arabic Calligraphy, Calligraphers, Arabic, Biography, Role of Calligraphers, Islamic Art

Calligraphy occupies a unique place in Islamic art. When Islam rose, its spiritual and aesthetic light deeply influenced the arts of the world. With the blessings of the Arabic language and the Qur'an, calligraphy emerged not only as an Islamic art, but also as a high art with spiritual, cultural, and civilizational aspects.

The early period

At the beginning of Islam, due to the necessity of writing the Holy Quran, calligraphy gained great importance. During this period, the "Kufi script" was dominant, which was used in early Qur'anic manuscripts.

Abbasid and Ottoman period.

With the consolidation of the Islamic caliphates, calligraphy flourished as an art. If we look at the Arabic rule till the end of the seventh century Hijri, there are examples of calligraphy in the context of painting and calligraphy painting during the Abbasid era.

After the 8th century, this art expanded so much that the tendency of Quranic verses was found in the carvings on the doors and walls of the mosques.

During the Ottoman period, Sheikh Hamdullah and Hafiz Uthman gave new dimensions to calligraphy. In mosques, madrasahs, palaces, and public buildings, Quranic verses and Hadiths, along with supplications, began to be written in a refined style. Both Islamic architecture and design began to touch the heights of development.¹

Mughal period, Indian subcontinent

The rise of Islamic calligraphy in the subcontinent occurred during the Mughal period. Beautiful calligraphy on buildings such as the Taj Mahal, the Badshahi Mosque, and the Lahore Fort represent Islamic art. Countless artists created wonders with their pens in this genre. In Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries, thousands of artists worked in different styles². The subcontinent takes pride in the Muslim world that its artists have opened new doors of calligraphy and established the Taj Mahal of innovation in the world of tradition.

Mentioned below are some of the important calligraphers of the sub-continent who used their pen in this field and opened new dimensions of calligraphy.

Ibn Baw'ab

Ibn Bawab was a student of Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Asad Qari Badi. The teacher was very proud of him. All the famous calligraphers of this era are considered to be his disciples. Abu Abdullah bin Jafar al-Baghdadi, who was also a calligrapher, wrote that one day I went to Ibn Bawab and saw that all the calligraphers were present as his students. There was a sheet of the Holy Quran in his hand on which he was writing. When I saw him, I was amazed by his beautiful handwriting. After the praise and explanation, when I inquired how much time he spends on writing every day, he said that I write the complete Quran in three months .

Ibn Bawab completed 64 Qurans in his lifetime. He died in 427 A.H in Baghdad and was buried near Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal. After Ibn Muqalla, the name of Ibn Bawab comes among the best Quranic Calligraphers. Although Ibn Muqalla was the originator of these letters, but none other can beat Ibn Bawab in bringing them to perfection with the observance of rules³

Abu Bakar Jami

His full name was Abu Bakr Jami and Ishaq Jami was his father. His insectary is related to Maulana Abdul Rahman Jami. He used to write very well in manuscripts as well as Naskh and Nastaliq. Countless people learned from him and achieve excellence in the art of calligraphy. He died in 1077 AH.⁴

Abu Hanifah

Abu Hanifah, his real name was Abdul Rahman bin Hasan Zozni. But he was known as Hanifa. He was a great Muhaddith (distinguished Hadith Scholar) and the best calligrapher of his time. No one among his contemporaries compete with him.

His perfection was also that despite writing speedily, the glory of his writing remained unspoiled. He wrote 400 Qurans in his lifetime. He used to charge 50 dinars per Quran. He died in 455 Hijri in Makkah.⁵

Akbar Ali

Akbar Ali, also known as Muhammad Akbar. His real name was Ibn Kifayat Khan. He created a special charm in Nastaliq and Shiqesta script. He was the founder of calligraphy in his family. He belongs to the calligraphers of about the 8th century AD⁶.

Imam Berdi

His name was Maulvi Zafar Hasan, he was said to be of Iranian descent. While the 19th century is his lifetime. His manuscripts are found in the Delhi Museum and the Little Library, Aligarh etc. The beauty of his calligraphy reveals his masterly qualities. However, Dr. Arzoo has called him a calligrapher of the 11th century AH corresponding to the 16th century AD in the list of exhibited manuscripts⁷.

Ibrahim Ghaznawi

Sultan Ibrahim Ghaznavi bin Sultan Masud bin Mahmud Ghaznavi was a good-natured, dearer and consistent ruler⁸. Beyond Lahore, he conquered Ajodhan (present-day Pakpattan), which was 80 miles from Lahore. He was also well skilled in the art of calligraphy. Ibrahim Ghaznavi used to read the Qur'an every year⁹. Sultan Ibrahim was a man who adopted the motto throughout his life that every year he writes a Quran with his own hand and send it to Mecca. Some of his handwritten copies of the Qur'an were also found in the library of the Prophet's Mosque. He ruled for about 40 years and died in 493 / 1098.¹⁰

BadShah Khatoon

She was the daughter of Kutub ud din Muhammad Sultan. Although she was a princess, she still earned her living by copying the Holy Quran in her spare time.¹¹

Taj-ud-din Zarrin Raqam

Taj-ud-din Zarrin Raqam rendered unparalleled services in the field of Calligraphy, in recognition of which the Calligrapher's community conferred upon him the title of "Khatat-ul-Mulk¹²." This title is still inscribed on his tombstone today. He belonged to the Sindhi community and his ancestors had converted to Islam during the Sikh period and settled in Lahore.¹³

After the death of his father, Chaudhry Muhammad Din Sandhu and his mother, his uncle Alhaj Noor Ahmed (disciple of Fazal Elahi Murchoub) taught him Calligraphy. In 1929, he wrote the first line of Alphabets and in 1930, he illustrated the poster of the annual meeting of the All-India Congress with his pen. In 1939, he founded the "Calligrapher's Union" and was elected its first president. He visited Amritsar, Jalandhar, Bombay, Karachi, Rawalpindi and other cities to unite the Calligraphers. Some of his artworks are still present in mosques, buildings, and tombs.

He wrote more than 200 poems, many of which were exhibited at the Bahawalpur Arts Council, and also exhibited in Japan in 1963.

His son, Mohammed Saleem, is also a great Calligrapher. His students include Hafiz Yusuf Siddi, Sufi Khurshid Alam, Abdul Rashid Amritsari, Muhammad Amin Khor, Iqbal Ashraf, Nathu Ram and many other prominent Calligraphers.

Jahan Aara Begum

She was the elder daughter of The King Shah Jahan and the sister of Alamgir. In Calligraphy, his rank was not less than a great teacher. She was the most prominent Calligrapher of her time. She died in 1892 Hijri. Her grave is in the shrine of Hazrat Nizam-ud-din Aouliya.¹⁴

Hafiz Ibrahim

Hafiz Ibrahim was the student of Hafiz Noorullah Khushnowis, who was born in Lucknow. Through his extensive practice, he had achieved such perfection in his writing that it was no longer possible to distinguish between the handwriting of father and the son.

Nawab Saadat Ali Khan asked his father to write the book "Gulistan" for him, but he died before he could complete it. After his death, when the matter disclosed, Hafiz Ibrahim said: "My father had written seven chapters, but the eighth chapter will be written and presented by me." The Nawab remained silent. When Hafiz Sahib presented the book as promised, all the people were unable to tell the difference between the two writings.¹⁵

He also made modifications to the Nastaliq script, which was greatly appreciated and was followed by calligraphy artists in the upcoming periods.

Khurshid Aalam Gohar Qalam

He was born in 1957 in Sargodha district. He learned calligraphy from the well-known calligrapher of Lahore, Hafiz Muhammad Yusuf Sididi. In 1981, an exhibition of calligraphy was held at the Lahore Museum and he won the third prize in traditional calligraphy. He was named after the famous calligrapher Mr. Khursheed Alam Khursheed Raqam.

He wrote calligraphy on many mosques and the covers of numerous books. In 1980, he started the writing of the 20 mann weight of the Holy Quran, each part of which is in a separate volume¹⁶. This was completed in 1989 in a period of 9 years. This manuscript is written in different scripts. Besides this, many Qurans have been written and presented to mosques and important institutions by him. He established an academy in Lahore for the promotion of calligraphy from which hundreds of students have benefited so far.

He has expertise in Thulhut, Naskh, Nastaliq, Diwani and Taghrai scripts. He participated in numerous exhibitions and was awarded with honors. In 1991, he got the medal of excellence. He passed away on 7 December 2020 in Lahore.

Zahida Khanum

She belonged to Istanbul. She learned calligraphy from late Mustafa. Her calligraphy was so good that her teacher even gave her a certificate. She also wrote plaques to be placed in mosques and inscriptions to be placed on graves. She lived till 1129. However, the truth about the death is not known¹⁷.

Syed Hasan Shah

His name was Maulvi Syed Hasan Shah. He was born in Lucknow. He was a great scholar. He was very generous in buying books. Most of his life was spent in Rampur. He had excellence in writing Naskh script. Many people benefited from him. He died in the month of Safar in 1312 Hijri.¹⁸

Syed Anwar Hussain Nafees Al Hussani

Syed Nafees Shah, popularly known as Nafis Raqam, was born on March 11, 1933 in Sialkot district¹⁹. His father Hakeem Syed Nik Alam and father-in-law, and Hakeem Syed Mohammad Alam Maroof, were said to be the Teachers of Calligraphy at that time. He learned Calligraphy from them. Sometime before partition, he went to Lyallpur, from where

he started his education. When the daily newspaper Insaaf was published from Lyallpur, he wrote the front page of it and Allama Iqbal's poem La Ilah Ila Allah on its first publication. The first book that was adorned with the jewels of his writing, was Rahmat-ul-Lilalameen by Qazi Muhammad Sulaiman Mansoor Puri, which was published from Lahore. In 1951, he moved to Lahore and studied in Urdu-Persian Department of Oriental College, Punjab University²⁰.

He was associated with various newspapers as a columnist. He also worked as a private calligrapher. Since 1970, he started teaching calligraphy privately at his home and providing guidelines to students. During this time, thousands of students continued to benefit from him. Initially, he used to teach calligraphy. The reason for this was that more and more people would write the Holy Quran so that there would not be shortage of experts in this field in future. Besides, he also had great skills in Nastaliq, Thulth, Diwani and Kufic etc. He worked on title creation for a long time, in which mostly Nastaliq script was considered suitable. He also took great care in the ratio of colors, which added attractiveness and beauty in his writings.

He prepared Titles for Punjab University, Majlis Tragqi Adab, Central Urdu Board, Iqbal Academy, Persian Research Centre Iran and Pakistan, Institute of Al-Qur'an and Uloom al-Islamiyah, Institute of Islam, School of Madinah, School of Rashid, School of Syed Ahmed Shaheed, Institute of Literature and Criticism, Central Association of Khudam Al-Qur'an, School of Baynat, School of Ahl-e-Sunnah and Jamaat, Dar-ul-Shad and Majlis-e-Majlis for Broadcasting Islam, etc²¹. His artistic journey spans almost half a century.

Zahir-ud-din Babar

Babar attacked Lahore in 5928/1521 AD. He was also an excellent calligrapher. And he introduced a script called the Babri script²². There was a common custom of the Timurids that they wrote the Holy Quran with their own hands and send it to Makkah and Madinah. Babar also established this tradition. Babar's lineage is traced back to his disciple Mir Ali Tabrizi.

Allama Abul Farz bin Juzi

Allama Abul Farz bin Juzi, his original name was Jamal-ud-din Abdul Rahman bin Muhammad Bakri. He was a famous preacher and teacher of Baghdad. His lineage is related to Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique²³. He was one of the students of Ibn Bawab and was an excellent

writer. There are different opinions in the year of his death. His death year in the book “Pedaish-e- Khaat o Khat-ta-tein” is 590²⁴ Hijri, while according to Maulana Shibli Nomani it is 597 Hijri. Sheikh Sadi Shehrazai was also his student.

Obaid Zakani

Apart from being a good writer, he was also a skilled poet. He has prepared a book on Arabic Rhetoric showing his excellence in calligraphy. He wanted to present it to the king but on finding out that a clown had come at that time with whom the king was engaged, he gets shocked and this incident made him deeply saddened.²⁵

فاطمة البغداديّة Fatima al-Baghdadiyya

She belongs to the Banu Abbas era. She was a famous writer and calligrapher of that period. She was the concubine of Musta'sim Billah. Her title was “Gharibiya”. She writes very well. She had achieved perfection in calligraphy in her time and she was counted among the famous calligraphers. She died in 176 Hijri.²⁶

Gohar Shad Khanam

She was the daughter of Mir Imad. Like her father, she excelled in various sciences and arts, especially in calligraphy. It is said that she worked so hard in Nastaliq that she reached the level of teacher. Among all the women in her era, she used to write most elegantly and beautifully²⁷. She also taught this art to her children and soon they too started to be counted among the successful calligraphers. It is said that she lived till the middle of the eleventh century.

Malika Noor Jahan

Her real name was Mehr-un-Nissa. She was the wife of the great Mughal emperor Jahangir. Her stories are famous in literature.²⁸ She was also a poet and a very sophisticated. She took special care of her clothes and mind. In the same way, the level of her calligraphy had also reached to perfection.

Mir Yahya Isfahani

His full name was Mir Yahya Muhyiddin Isfahani. He was also the student of Mir Imad. He had a high place in calligraphy. Once King Abbas asked Mir Imam to recommend one of his disciples for writing a book, he offered him to the King. The king even gave him a reward. He died in the year 1040.²⁹

Mir Banda Ali

His name was Mir Banda Ali. He was a student of Nawab Ahmad Lakhnawi. His hands were numb. But he made this defect a skill, he expressed this condition in his writing with such a quality that it became the glory of the art. He was excellent writer of both Naskh and Nastalik. His manuscripts are preserved in the Department of Manuscripts, Little Library Aligarh.³⁰

Nawab Malika Jahan

Her name was Nawab Malika Jahan, while she was the queen of Nawab Muhammad Ali Shah. She writes well in Naskh script. She was born in Lucknow and left behind a Qur'an and a manuscript biography of Hazrat Sayyidat-un-Nisa which shows her calligraphy talent.³¹

Conclusion:

The rich tradition of Qur'anic calligraphy in the Indian subcontinent reflects the devotion, creativity, and scholarship of the calligraphers. Through their mastery of script, dedication, and deep spiritual engagement to the Qur'anic text, they not only preserved a Nobel art form but also broadened its cultural and stylistic dimensions. The biographies and contributions discussed in this article illustrate how calligraphers from various regions contribute and transmitted the classical scripts while also developing the local styles of Islamic calligraphic heritage.

Their work safeguarded the purity and visual magnificence of the Qur'anic manuscript tradition. Many of these calligraphers served as teachers, innovators, and mentors of knowledge, ensuring that the discipline of khatt was passed faithfully from generation to

generation. In doing so, they preserved not only the physical beauty of the Qur'anic text but also its spiritual presence within the cultural life of the subcontinent.

Ultimately, the legacy of these calligraphers reminds us that Qur'anic calligraphy is more than a visual art. It is an act of devotion, an intellectual pursuit, and a cultural trust. Their contributions continue to inspire contemporary artists and scholars, affirming the subcontinent's enduring role in preserving and advancing the sacred art of the Qur'an.

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