

A Brief Cultural Study of Some Important Perso-Arabic Seals of Adil Shahi (1489-1686 AD)

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Abstract

Bijapur, now a district headquarters in Karnataka, was formerly the seat of the Adil Shahi kingdom of the Deccan which ruled the region for nearly two centuries (1489-1686 AD). The founder of the Adilshahi dynasty, Sultan Yusuf Adil Shah made Bijapur, or Vijyapur the capital of the Bijapur kingdom. The rulers of the Adilshahi dynasty ordered their engravers to engrave the seals in their names. We find many seals of this dynasty representing different rulers, princes, princesses, or officials. The seals of the Adil Shahi dynasty are very peculiar in many facets. Some important seals of the same period will be studied in this small article.

Keywords: Seals, Adil Shahi, Deccan, Ali Adil Shah, Muhammad Adil Shah, Ibrahim Adil Shah.

The seals of the Indus Valley are the oldest in India. Unfortunately, these are not read so far. But these seals help us to date the tradition of sealing at least 4500 years ago in India.

The seals are the chief material to authenticate and are even more important than signatures. The seals are associated with persons, officials, or institutions; hence the owner of the seal always attempts to keep his seal worthy, special, different, and unique. That is why, we notice many variations and specifications in the seals of different people.

Physically, the seals should be either embossed or engraved. The seals cannot be in painted or relief forms because it is impossible to stamp them. For making an engraved seal, the seal engraver cuts the letters inscribed over the surface of a seal while in the embossed seal, he cuts the surface of the metal and leaves the letters as they are. Since, in both situations, the engraver used to engrave and cut the surface, therefore, the art of seal making is called *Muhorkani* and

the seal cutters are known as *Muharkan*.¹ The profession was praiseworthy during the medieval period.

Generally, in Indo-Persian sources, the seals are called *Muhr*. As per my best knowledge, pre-Mughal seals are very rare in India. I never noticed a seal before the Mughal period. However, the tradition of the seal is not very recent in the world. Father Felix believes that the seal was in universal use in Palestine and India. The seals were known as *Challa*, *Anghuthi* (ring), and *Mudra* in Sanskrit and India while *Chapa* (stamp) and *Mohar* (seal) in Persian, and lastly *Khatam* (seal) in Arabic.²

During the ancient period, jasper and porcelain were utilized at large levels to inscribe the text over them. Cylinder seals also were in use at large levels. Cylinder seals were inscribed with three things, the names of the owner of the seals, father's name, and the names of protecting deities.³

Father Felix states that "The practice of authenticating a document by the granter affixing his distinguishing mark or seal was current in the East from the earliest times; and during the medieval period both in the East and in the West the importance of seals was so great, that they were considered the main proofs of the authenticity of all sorts of documents, both public and private".⁴

As it is mentioned, there were very few seals during the pre-Mughal period in India but interestingly, Felix assigns a seal to Balban and claims that a Farman revealing the seal of Balban was displayed in the *exhibition of Delhi Historical and Archaeological exhibition (1911-12)*. Unfortunately, I could not trace any seal on the said document. Either due to the pathetic condition of the picture quality it was worn out or he might be talking about any seal on the reverse side of the Farman whereas, only the front side of this Farman was published by the Delhi Museum of Archaeology.⁵ Fortunately, he gives the complete transcription of this document along with its *Tughra* and Seal. The text of the seal is given below for reference:

ابو ظفر غياث الدين محمد پادشاه غازى⁶

It is reported that the post of *Mohardar* was a significant functionary under *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* who worked under the *Diwan e Vakalat*. We have no seals from this period. No legend of the seal is traced so far. The official documents were sealed by highly ornamented Royal *Tughra* and *Royal Tauqi*.⁷ Amongst Delhi sultans, we have no information about the seals

except the seal of *Muhammad Bin Tughluq*. We have an inscription in support of the post of *Mohardar* during the time of *Muhammad Bin Tughluq*, which records the term *Qazi-e-Mohr-e-Khas*.⁸

In the Deccan region *Bahamanid*, *Nizamshahis*, *AdilShahis*, and *QutubShahis* are reported to have seals. However, *Bahaminds* and *Nizamshahis* have very few seals. And few scholars traced and researched these materials.⁹ Only a few seals from the Adilshahi dynasty are being studied here briefly.

The first seal of this collection belongs to Ali Adil Shah I (1558-79). The text of the quadruple-ruled seal runs in Arabic language and is calligraphed in the Naskh style of Arabic calligraphy. The text of the seal runs as follows:

Text

لا فتى إلا على / لا سيف إلا ذو الفقار
اسد الله الغالب / على ابن ابيطالب

Transliteration

La Fata Illa Ali/La Saif Illa Zulfiqar

Asad Ullahil Ghalib/Ali Ibn-E-Abi Talib



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The above *Musajjah* Arabic legend is very famous amongst the followers of *Ali ibn-i-Abu Talib* -- Shia Muslims. The Adil Shahis were the followers of the Shiite faith; hence we find the

reflections of Shiites in their sources not only in their seals but their inscriptions, coins, documents, books, etc.

Probably, the next seal also belongs to Ali Adil Shah I. This is a Persian prosaic seal executed in the Nastaliq style of calligraphy. The word نمسگه “Namuskohu” is an Arabic phrase; that is why we can consider it a bilingual seal. It also records the Shiite features. The text of the seal reads:

Text

صراط حق نمسگه

Transliteration

Sirat-i-Huque Ali, Namuskohu



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It has floral background and is round in shape. The decorative motif under the two dots of *Alif* of Ali makes it more beautiful which also fills the space under. Big and small flowers with 5, 6, 8, and nine petals are used to make it more attractive. The *Alif* of Ali parted the seal into two portions. We can read it in two ways *صراط حق نمسگه علی* or *صراط علی حق نمسگه* both are correct, and both guide us to connect with the way of Ali. Moreover, according to the Shiite literature, Ali A.S. is the true example of the right path (صراط مستقیم).

The third seal belongs to Ibrahim Adil Shah (r. 1580-1627 AD) who had a great affection toward his favourite word ‘*Nauras*’. He had named many things after this word. Fascinatingly, his seal also records the same word. His seal runs as:

Text

نورس ابراهيم

Transliteration

Nauras Ibrahim



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The *saja*¹³ of seal runs in *Riqa* characters and is divided into two parts by the س of *Nauras*. The word *Nauras* can be interpreted in many ways. The starting of *Nauras* can be taken up in two ways, *nau* may mean ‘new’ and *no* means ‘nine.’ Moreover, he authored a book on music and named as *Nauras*. His *Nauras* is a unique treatise on music and has a high place in the subject. His book has been interpreted in many facets; therefore, we are not willing to discuss¹⁴ it at this point. In this regard, only it can be mentioned here that he (Ibrahim Adil Shah) named many things after this word. Some such things have been recorded by Dr. Nazir Ahmad in his article, for example, *Kitab-i-Nauras* (Ibrahim’s book on Music), *Nauras* (a poet), *Naurasi* (another poet), *Nauras* (a wine), *Nauras* (a song), *Nauras* (a coin), *Nauras* (a flag), *Nauras* (a royal emblem), *Nauras* (an office), *Nauras* (a festival i.e. Eid), *Nauras* (a palace), *Bahisht Nauras* (another royal building), *Hun-e- Nauras* (gold coin), *Naurasnama* (second name of *Tarkh-i-Ferishta*), *Nauras Paikar* (elephant), *Lashkar-i-Nauras* (dancers), *Nauraspur* (a city).¹⁵ The seal has been decorated with beautiful small flowers and cut into oval shape.

Another seal of the same king bearing an Arabic legend containing a Quranic verse from *Sura Albaqra* (Chapter no 2 verse no 130) is traced. The text of the seal runs as under:

Text

و من يرغب/ عن ملة/ ابراهيم الا من سفه نفسه و /لقد اصطفيناه في الدنيا و انه في/ الاخرة/ لمن الصالحين.

Transliteration

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Wa Man Yarghabu/An Millat/Ibrahim Illa Man Safeha Nafsahu Wa/Laqadi Istefenahu Fid
Duniya Wa Inna Hu Fi/Al Akherati/Leminas Saleheen



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The above seal has been written in excellent Naskh and divided into two parts by the word 'فی' just in the middle of the text. The text of the seal is very interesting. However, the above Quranic verse is clearly about the religion and pathway of the Prophet *Abraham*. But Ibrahim Adil Shah is trying to convey this message that his religion and belief are virtuous, and nobody can refuse the righteous path except the ill-informed. The beautiful floral motifs enhance the beauty of the seal.

The next seal of this collection belongs to Muhammad Adil Shah (1627-1656) which contains a Persian couplet and has been executed in the Naskh style of calligraphy. The text of the seal runs in four parts and runs as:

Text

دارد از لطف حق سرافرازی

شاه سلطان محمد غازی

Transliteration

Darad Az Lutf-E-Huque Sar Afrazi

Shah Sultan Muhammad Ghazi



The Persian couplet is divided into parts by the extended Persian letters. Most of the letters do not bear Nuqta (dots) in the couplet. The seal looks like a rising sun which is circled by double rulings. Its legend is very interesting starting from the bottom and going upwards. One significant point may be mentioned here, in the case of metrical inscriptions the seals generally start with the first word of the second line from the bottom. The word ‘*Muhammad*’ has been placed on top which has two associations; one is with the prophet and the second to the king himself.

The inscription of the seal runs in four parts. The first partition is done by the *س* of *Sarfarazi*. The *Kashidah* *ش* of *Shah* creates a new part while *س* of *Ghazi* forms the last part of the inscription. The calligraphy of this seal is of high class. The background of the seal contains some floral designs which are not very visible due to the quality of the impression. The below seal also belongs to the same king which reads as:

Text

شد ز لطف حق محمد را خطاب اخلاصخان

در زمان خسرو عادل شه صاحبقران سنه 1061؟

Transliteration

Shud Ze Lutf E Huque Muhammad Ra Khitab Ikhlas Khan

Dar Zaman E Khusru Wa Adil Shahe Sahibqiran 1061?

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The seal belongs to *Ikhlas Khan*, the prime minister of Muhammad Adil Shah. This is a metrical seal that has a complete Persian couplet of which one hemistich is inscribed within the bigger central circle while the second is out of the circle rather in the margin. The hemistich written in the surrounding outer ring is the first hemistich while the hemistich in the central circle opens the couplet. Although, technically the couplet must have been started from the central circle most probably availability of the king's name did not allow it to be engraved in this way.

Probably the year is AH 1061 which is not noticed in the work of the above-mentioned scholars. The inner circle of the seal looks like a hanging cloak or like an astrolabe. Interestingly, Muhammad Adil Shah enjoyed the term '*Sahib Qiran*'. The word '*Muhammad*' has been placed at the start of the couplet.

Two more seals from the period of Muhammad Adil Shah are reported by Prof. Aziz Bano in her article published in '*Studies in Medieval Deccan History*'. M.A. Nayeem Festschrift edited by Prof. Syed Ayub Ali'. One belongs to *Ikhlas Khan* while another belongs to *Mustafa Amin Khan*. The first seal is an illegible and undecipherable seal. If *Mustafa Khan* is being discussed here. The text of the seal runs as under;

Text

امين مصطفى خان

بنده محمد سلطان

1027

Transliteration

Amin Mustafa Khan

Bandah Muhammad Sultan 1027



The prosaic legend runs in Persian and is executed in the Nastaliq style of calligraphy. The seal has been divided into two parts and interestingly the year ‘Hijri 1027’ is legible at the extreme downside. The word ‘*bandah*’ is the main divider of the seal. The first word ‘Amin’ also may indicate the position of Mustafa Khan in the time of Muhammad Adil Shah.

The next seal of this collection belongs to Ali Adil Shah II: (1656-1672 ad) which has been taken from an article. This is a metrical round seal with a trefoil shape in the middle of the seal. Two heart-type shapes or two betel leaves have been utilized on the end of each hemistich. The trefoil shape in the middle of the seal looks like an eye. The text of the seal runs as follows:

Text

Middle محمد، عبده شاه علی

مهر نبی مهر نگین دلم

حل شده از مهر نبی مشکلم

Transliteration

Middle: Muhammad, Abdohu Shah Ali

Mohar-e-Nabi Mohr-e-Nagin-e-Dilam

Hal Shudeh Az Mohar-e-Nabi Mushkilam



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The seal does not carry any date. It is a beautiful seal cut in *Riqa*'s characters. Generally, we do not find *airabs* in the seals but in the present seal, a few *airabs* have been executed. For example, three *Tashdeeds* are placed beautifully. Most of the words are without dots (غير منقوطة).

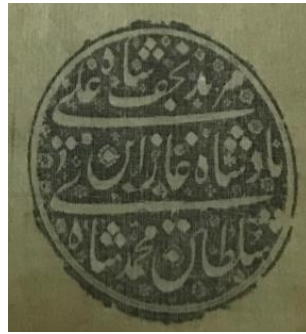
The last seal is found on a Persian document of Ali Adil Shah II, which runs with his father's name. The prosaic *saja*' of the seal runs as follows:

Text

مرید شاه نجف شاه علی ابن سلطان محمد شاه پادشاه غازی

Transliteration

Mureed Shah Najaf Ali Ibn Sultan Muhammad Shah Padshah Ghazi



The text of the seal is written in Nastaliq and divided into three parts by the *س* of *Ali* and *Ghazi*. The decorative motif under the dots of *س* of *Ali* makes it lovelier. Most of the words represent their dots. *Ali* in the phrase "*Mureed-i-Shah Najaf Ali*" has two contexts; one is that *Ali* the king, is the disciple of *Shah Najaf* (i.e., *Ali*). Second is that *Ali* is *Shah-i- Najaf* and *Ali* (i.e. king) is his follower. The background of the seal is decorated with a floral design.

¹ Allah, Ansar (1998). Seals, (in Urdu). In: Colophons, Seals and Arzdeedas, Papers & Proceedings of the Khuda Bakhsh Seminar Held on 28–30 September 1994. Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library: Patna. Pg 83.

² Felix, Father. (1918), the Mughal seals, Journal of Punjab Historical Society vol v. Calcutta. Pg 100

³ Ibid. Pg 102.

⁴ Ibid. Pg 103.

⁵ Coronation Darbar (1911) An illustrated selection of the principal exhibits, Loan Exhibition of Antiquities, Delhi Museum of Archaeology, Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi. Pg 47.

⁶ Felix, Father. (1918), the Mughal seals, Journal of Punjab Historical Society vol v. Calcutta. Pg 109.

⁷ Bhargava, K.D. (1960), Indian Seals (Problems and Prospects), National Archives of India, Delhi. Pg 4.

⁸ The inscription is badly damaged fortunately Syed Hasan Askari and Z.A. Desai have given its reading. Being an extremely important record, the text of the same epigraph may be given here for ready reference which reads:

تمام شد این چاه از فضل الله د {ر}

عهد مبارک شاهنشاه گیهانپناه محمد

بن تغلقشاه لا زالت ملكه نوبت

انعام ملك الامراء عز الدوله و الدين

قاضى مهر خاص مكنه الله بكار

فرمائى بنده محمود يوسف الملقب بلقب ...

بيستم؟ ماه ربيع الاول سنه سبع و اربعين و سبعمائه...

See; Corpus of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bihar by Qeyamuddin and Dr. Desai EIAPS 1961, page 26 plate VI (a).

⁹ Desai, Z.A. (1998). Seals, Colophons, Arzdashten and Arzdeedas (in Urdu). In: Colophons, Seals and Arzdeedas, Papers & Proceedings of the Khuda Bakhsh Seminar Held on 28–30 September 1994. Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library: Patna. Pg 51.

¹⁰ Keelan Overton and Jake Benson, (2019) "III. Deccani Seals and Scribal Notations: Sources for the Study of Indo-Persian Book Arts and Collecting (c. 1400–1680)," in The Empires of the Near East and India: Source Studies of the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal Literate Communities, edited by Hani Khafipour (New York: Columbia University Press,), 569.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ The text of the seal. Saja' is a literary form in which texts of the seal are written.

¹⁴ A great article has been authored by Dr. Nazeer Ahmad. See 'Kitab-i-Nauras', published in Tahqeeqi Mutalaye', Lucknow. Feb. 1985. Pp 36-71.

¹⁵ Dr. Ahmad, Nazeer (Feb. 1985), Kitab-i-Nauras, published in Tahqeeqi Mutalaye', Lucknow. Pg 39.

¹⁶ Overton, Keelan (2016), Book Culture, Royal Libraries, and Persianate Painting in Bijapur, circa 1580–1630 Muqarnas volume 33, Brill, Leiden Boston. Pg 102.

¹⁷ Ibid 574.

¹⁸ Ibid 576.

¹⁹ Ibid