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Islamic Calligraphy and Its Evolution in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

*Islamic calligraphy in South Asia developed through sustained interactions among Persianate courts, Arabic textual traditions, and regional craft ecologies. Beginning with early Naskh and Thuluth inscriptions introduced via Sultanate networks, the subcontinent nurtured distinctive scripts—most famously **Nasta‘līq**, alongside **Bihari** and **Shikasta**—that were adapted for Qur’anic manuscripts, royal farmāns, album folios (*muraqqa‘āt*), and architectural epigraphy. Patronage from the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals, and Deccan polities shaped ateliers that integrated paper-making, pigment technology, reed-pen craft, and codicology. Colonial print and stone-lithography reconfigured training lineages and publics, while the twentieth century saw modernist experiments and, more recently, a digital turn in layout and font design for Urdu and related languages. This article synthesizes script genealogies, materials and tools, sites of display, regional accents (Deccan, Bengal, Kashmir, Punjab), and contemporary conservation ethics. A stylized timeline (Figure 1) visualizes the shifting prominence of scripts from the twelfth to the twenty-first century, highlighting the long*

Keywords:

Islamic calligraphy, Nasta‘līq, Bihari script, Shikasta, Mughal art, manuscript studies, epigraphy, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

Across the Islamicate world, calligraphy is both a textual technology and an aesthetic philosophy. In South Asia, the craft arrived with itinerant scholars, Sufi lineages, and scribal specialists who connected Delhi, Lahore, Jaunpur, Bijapur, Golconda, and Kashmir to transregional circuits of learning. Early **Naskh** and **Thuluth** set the tone for Qur'anic transcription and monumental inscription, while the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries witnessed the decisive rise of **Nasta'liq**—a cursive style prized for its elasticity and lyrical rhythm, ideally suited to Persian and later Urdu. Distinctively South Asian contributions included the **Bihari** script (with wedge-like verticals and rounded bowls) and the bureaucratic shorthand **Shikasta Nasta'liq**, which accelerated chancery writing and private correspondence.

Material infrastructures underwrote these shifts. The reed pen (qalam), burnished paper (āhakshuda kagaz), carbon and mineral inks, and gold leaf formed a technical ensemble refined in royal kitābkhānas and in urban bazaar workshops. Album culture (muraqqa') curated virtuoso panels combining calligraphy and painting, while mosques, dargāhs, forts, and gardens staged epigraphy as public rhetoric—inscribing piety, sovereignty, and memory into brick and sandstone. Under the Mughals, codicological standards merged with imperial taste: scripts were inspected and valued, paper sizes standardized, and margins illuminated with exquisite precision.

The nineteenth century brought print capitalism and stone-lithography, transforming circulation and pedagogy; calligraphers negotiated new publics through newspapers, commercial signage, and textbooks. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, design schools, galleries, and digital types found fresh idioms: Nasta'liq layout engines, Unicode standards, and vector-based mural compositions have expanded the medium beyond the page, even as conservators grapple with environmental stress, pigment instability, and ethical restoration of heritage inscriptions. The result is a layered tradition—faithful to proportion and line yet open to migration, translation, and experiment.

Genealogies of Script and Aesthetic Theory

The **genealogical trajectory** of Islamic calligraphy in South Asia reflects the assimilation and transformation of scripts inherited from the wider Islamic world. Early **Kufic** inscriptions—angular, monumental, and epigraphic—served as prototypes for architectural decoration in the Delhi Sultanate, particularly in Qur'anic verses carved onto mosque façades. From these beginnings, **Naskh** and **Thuluth** became the dominant transcribed hands: Naskh offered clarity and uniformity for manuscripts, while Thuluth, with its sweeping curves and elongated verticals, lent grandeur to epigraphy and monumental writing.

By the fifteenth century, the South Asian scribal landscape nurtured distinctive **regional innovations**. The **Bihari script**, with its bold horizontal strokes, wedge-shaped ascenders, and ornamental roundness, emerged in North India (notably in Jaunpur Qur'ans) as a uniquely local adaptation. In later centuries, the Mughal chancery cultivated **Shikasta**, a dynamic cursive born out of Nasta'liq, enabling rapid writing in administrative contexts. These shifts illustrate how calligraphic genealogies intertwined with political, devotional, and bureaucratic imperatives.

The **canon of calligraphic treatises**—including proportion manuals, pen-cutting (qalamburdan) guidelines, and rules of ductus (ḥarakāt)—traveled with Persian masters and were

localized in atelier (*kitābkhāna*) pedagogy. The **ustād–shāgird** (master–disciple) model institutionalized the transmission of both technical expertise and aesthetic sensibility. Pupils absorbed not only stroke mechanics and geometric ratios but also the discipline of repetition, precision, and spiritual humility.

At the heart of this transmission was the **poetic ethos of khatt (script)**. Calligraphy embodied a triadic balance: **qirā'a** (legibility) ensured scriptural clarity; **jamāl** (beauty) expressed divine harmony through line and proportion; and **tawāzun** (balance) maintained equilibrium in form and spacing. This aesthetic philosophy transformed writing into a devotional and artistic act, where every curve of the pen was a reflection of both the eternal word and human creativity.

Materials, Tools, and Workshop Ecologies

The refinement of **materials and tools** in South Asian calligraphic practice reflects both inherited Islamic traditions and regionally innovated techniques. **Paper technology** was central: sheets were produced from flax, hemp, or mulberry fibers, and prepared through **sizing (āhak-shuda)** using starch and alum, followed by **burnishing (āhamlī)** with stone or shell to create a smooth, lustrous surface. This preparation enhanced ink absorption while preventing bleeding, ensuring durability for both Qur'anic manuscripts and imperial albums. High-quality Mughal manuscripts often reveal layered polishing that imparted a reflective sheen, giving the written word a jewel-like finish.

The **reed pen (qalam)**, usually cut from bamboo or river reeds, was meticulously prepared with precise bevels to regulate ink flow. Different nib angles and thicknesses were reserved for scripts such as Naskh, Nasta'liq, or Shikasta, embodying a codified relationship between tool geometry and letter proportion. **Ink recipes** blended carbon soot with gum arabic and, at times, perfumed oils; mineral-based pigments like **lapis lazuli** and powdered gold were reserved for headings, illuminations, and interlinear ornament. The controlled mixture of metallic powders ensured brilliance without flaking, demanding mastery in chemistry as much as penmanship.

The production of manuscripts unfolded within complex **kitābkhāna (royal workshop) economies**, where interdependence among specialists was vital. Calligraphers supplied the script, but illuminators gilded margins, binders secured quires, and paper-makers sustained the material base. The collaborative nature of manuscript production elevated calligraphy beyond solitary artistry, embedding it within a shared aesthetic ecology. Workshops often operated under imperial or regional patronage, where scribes, painters, and artisans worked in hierarchical yet interwoven teams, reflecting the broader cultural economy of South Asian courts.

Equally important was **quality control**. Imperial ateliers such as the Mughal library (*kitābkhāna-i shāhī*) instituted strict **inspection protocols**: pages were graded by readability, elegance, and proportional accuracy. Hands were valued monetarily, with master calligraphers commanding higher remuneration for superior execution. **Album compilation (muraqqa'āt)** functioned as a form of aesthetic curation—collecting exemplary panels of calligraphy alongside miniature paintings, each folio subject to connoisseurial scrutiny. These compilations not only preserved the legacies of great masters but also codified standards of taste, shaping the trajectory of calligraphy in South Asia for centuries.

Mobility, Translation, and Regional Styles

The trajectory of Islamic calligraphy in South Asia cannot be separated from the **mobility of people, texts, and techniques** that shaped distinctive regional idioms. Calligraphers moved

with courts, merchants, and Sufi lineages, carrying with them styles refined in Persia, Central Asia, and the Ottoman lands. In their new South Asian settings, these scripts were localized, yielding novel aesthetic accents and regional schools.

Deccan calligraphy developed a distinct elongation of horizontal strokes and a vibrant use of **color palettes** that merged Persian Nasta‘līq with local textile and mural sensibilities. In contrast, **Jaunpur’s Bihari script** emerged as a uniquely South Asian orthography, marked by its bold vertical wedges and rounded bowls—particularly visible in fifteenth-century Qur’anic manuscripts. This script combined ornamental weight with textual clarity, distinguishing itself from the cursive traditions dominant elsewhere. In **Kashmir and Punjab**, local workshops emphasized ornamental margins, floral infills, and delicate ink contrasts, aligning calligraphy with broader regional aesthetics of shawl design, miniature painting, and temple–mosque artistic crosscurrents.

South Asia’s **multilingual manuscript culture** further shaped calligraphy’s evolution. Persian and Urdu bilinguality became the hallmark of Mughal and post-Mughal ateliers, where court poetry collections and devotional texts required elegant Nasta‘līq layouts. Simultaneously, scribes engaged with **Sanskrit and vernacular literatures**, producing hybrid manuscripts where Nagari and Perso-Arabic scripts coexisted. This cross-scriptural dialogue highlights calligraphy not merely as aesthetic form but as a technology of **translation and cultural brokerage**, mediating between Islamicate and Indic knowledge traditions.

Underlying these stylistic variations was the circulation enabled by **trade, pilgrimage, and Sufi networks**. Maritime and overland routes brought Persian masters to Gujarat and the Deccan, while itinerant Sufi orders carried not just spiritual charisma but also scribal expertise to regional shrines and khanqahs. Migration of masters and students, whether to Lahore, Hyderabad, or Delhi, seeded **local schools** whose stylistic distinctions reflected both lineage continuity (silsila) and local adaptation. These networks allowed South Asian calligraphy to remain simultaneously connected to transregional traditions and deeply rooted in regional craft ecologies.

Modernity, Digital Turn, and Conservation Ethics

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked a profound shift in the trajectory of Islamic calligraphy in South Asia as it encountered **print capitalism, mass education, and modern visual culture**. Stone lithography and later offset printing democratized access to Qur’anic texts, poetry collections, and devotional literature, transforming calligraphy from a courtly and manuscript-centered practice into a ubiquitous public art. By the mid-twentieth century, calligraphy permeated **poster art, gallery exhibitions, and architectural branding**, where verses of the Qur’an, Urdu couplets, or even corporate identities were rendered in Nasta‘līq and other styles to signal both tradition and modernity. This expansion allowed calligraphy to enter urban popular culture while simultaneously retaining its devotional aura.

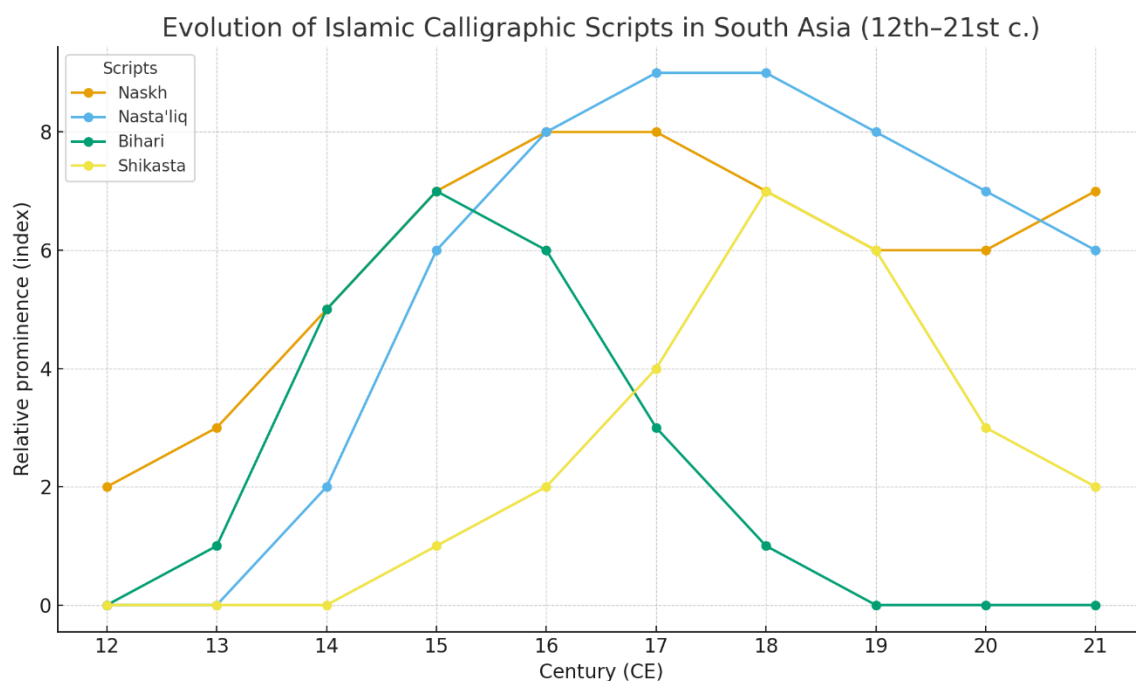
Pedagogically, calligraphy found new homes in **art schools, design institutes, and online studios**, where the ustād–shāgird model was reconfigured for modern curricula. Whereas earlier apprenticeship relied on oral instruction and repetitive practice, contemporary teaching integrates digital platforms, online tutorials, and collaborative exhibitions. This has enabled calligraphy to reach diasporic audiences and younger practitioners, ensuring continuity in a rapidly shifting cultural landscape.

The digital age further transformed practice through **font engineering and computational typesetting**, particularly for **Urdu Nasta‘līq**. Unlike linear Latin scripts, Nasta‘līq requires

complex ligature handling and contextual joining, making responsive typesetting technically demanding. Projects in South Asia and abroad have developed digital engines and Unicode-compliant fonts capable of replicating Nasta‘līq’s fluidity on screens and in publishing. Such innovations extend the reach of calligraphy into digital media, advertising, and social platforms, where aesthetics and readability must coexist in new modalities.

Yet alongside innovation lies the pressing issue of **conservation ethics**. Historic inscriptions, manuscripts, and mural calligraphy face threats from environmental degradation: **pollution, salt efflorescence, humidity, and biological growth** weaken surfaces, while vandalism and unskilled restorations risk erasing original craftsmanship. Contemporary conservation frameworks stress **reversibility, documentation, and minimal intervention**—ensuring that restoration does not overwrite the material and spiritual integrity of original works. In South Asia, where heritage sites are embedded in dense urban fabrics, balancing preservation with access remains a critical challenge.

Thus, modern calligraphy in South Asia occupies a dual space: as a **living art** that thrives in digital and popular culture, and as a **heritage practice** requiring careful stewardship. Its vitality lies in this balance—between innovation and tradition, proliferation and preservation.



Summary

South Asian Islamic calligraphy is best understood as a dynamic negotiation among script theory, material technique, and social display. The subcontinent adapted and re-authored transregional styles—consolidating Naskh in scripture and architecture, elevating Nasta‘līq in poetry and albums, innovating Bihari and Shikasta for regional and bureaucratic needs, and, more recently, harnessing digital typography to reach global audiences. Royal ateliers and bazaar workshops alike sustained a labor ecology that joined paper-making, ink craft, gilding, and binding. Today, the field bridges heritage conservation with contemporary design, maintaining fidelity to proportion and stroke even as it experiments with formats and technologies. The enduring vitality of Islamic calligraphy in South Asia lies in this capacity for translation—across languages, media, and publics.

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