

The Restored Ilyas Shahi Dynasty in Bengal

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Abstract: Following the interregnum of Raja Ganesh and prior to the rise of the Habshi regime, five sultans from the Ilyas Shahi lineage ruled Bengal. These rulers were:

1. Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah
2. Ruknuddin Barbak Shah
3. Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah
4. Nuruddin Sikandar Shah
5. Jalaluddin Fath Shah

The **Riyaz-us-Salatin**, a Persian chronicle, refers to the first ruler of this line as “the grandson of Sultan Shamsuddin.” Based on this account, historians have termed the period from **1434 to 1487 CE** as the ‘**Later Ilyas Shahi Rule.**’

Historian **Sukhamaya Mukhopadhyay** referred to this phase as the ‘**Mahmud Shahi Dynasty**’, while **Syed Ejaz Hussain** followed traditional historiography and labeled it the ‘**Restoration of the Ilyas Shahi Dynasty.**’

This chapter offers a concise overview of the restored dynasty’s rule, dedicating a separate section to each of the five sultans. It also evaluates recent **epigraphic and numismatic discoveries** from the last two decades, which have raised new questions—especially about the actual starting point of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah’s reign.

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Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah: Accession to Power

According to *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, the events leading to the restoration of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty began with the murder of Ahmad Shah, the son of the converted Muslim ruler Jalaluddin Muhammad, by his slave Nasir Khan.

The chronicle recounts:

After Ahmad Shah was killed, Shadi Khan aimed to seize power and appoint himself as the chief administrator. Anticipating this, Nasir Khan killed Shadi Khan and boldly took the throne.

However, the nobles and military chiefs loyal to Ahmad Shah refused to accept Nasir Khan’s authority and had him killed shortly thereafter.

His reign lasted only seven days, or as some accounts suggest, merely half a day.

Following his death, the nobles and generals selected a capable grandson of Sultan Shamsuddin Bhangra and placed him on the throne with the title Nasir Shah.

Although no precise dates for these incidents are provided in the *Riyaz*, older epigraphic and

numismatic evidence confirms that this Nasir Shah was indeed Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah, who marked the beginning of the restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty.

Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah’s Accession and Numismatic Evidence

Mahmud ascended the throne of the Bengal Sultanate in 837 AH / 1434 CE. On his coins dated to this year, he adopted the title ‘Nasir-ud-Dunya wa’ d-Din Abul Muzaffar Mahmud Shah’. Prominent historians such as Abdul Karim, Sukhamaya Mukhopadhyay, and Syed Ejaz Hussain have all accepted 837 AH / 1434 CE as the beginning of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah’s reign, based on this numismatic evidence.

More recently, Md. Shariful Islam has published a set of newly discovered coins attributed to Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud. In his analysis, he examines eight coins issued during this Sultan’s rule. Among them, Coin Nos. 1, 2, and 3 were minted in Firuzabad, bear the date 837 AH / 1434 CE, and are categorized as Type B433 in the Goran and Goenka catalogue.

Coins Nos. 4, 5, 6, and 7—as described by Islam—introduce a new and potentially earlier variety,

possibly challenging the previously accepted chronology of Nasiruddin’s reign.



Earlier Dating and Political Implications

Among the eight coins analyzed by Md. Shariful Islam, four (Coins 4 to 7) bear the **earlier date of 832 AH / 1427 CE**. Of these, **Coins 4 and 5** were minted in **Firuzabad**, while **Coins 6 and 7** were issued from the **Arsah Chatagaon** mint (see Picture 2).

Islam notes a key observation:

“The fact that the obverses of the two Firuzabad coins were struck from the **same die** suggests that the coinage in Nasir al-Din’s name during this year was likely **very limited in circulation**. However, the **reverses** of all four coins, which clearly indicate the **date and mint**, were struck using **three different dies** across **two separate mints**. This variety provides strong evidence that the **date 832 AH** on these coins is **not a minting error**.”

This numismatic evidence directly **contradicts the previously accepted chronology**, which held that **Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah** ruled Bengal in **832 AH / 1427 CE**, and was succeeded by his son **Ahmad Shah** in **837 AH**. This traditional sequence is supported by **Riyaz-us-Salatin**, as well as by the **coins and inscriptions** of both Jalaluddin and Ahmad Shah.

To reconcile this discrepancy, Islam references a **hypothesis** earlier proposed by **Abdul Karim**. According to Karim:

“The numismatic record of Nasiruddin Mahmud suggests that **political conflict** existed among the ruling elites during the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad. A faction was evidently **opposed to the family of Raja Ganesh**.”

Expanding on this idea, Islam posits that **supporters of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty** may have attempted to **regain the throne** through strategic political maneuvering. Therefore, the **coins dated 832 AH** and struck in **two different mints** could signify the existence of an **alternate political faction**—possibly one that had temporarily installed **Nasiruddin Mahmud** as a rival claimant during the **power struggle** against Jalaluddin Muhammad’s regime.

Nasiruddin Mahmud’s Rebellion, Reign, and Administrative Reach

It is likely that **Nasiruddin Mahmud** revolted against **Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah** around **832 AH (1427 CE)** in an attempt to reclaim power. However, this initial attempt seems to have **failed**, and he only successfully **ascended the throne in 837 AH (1434 CE)**. While **Md. Shariful Islam’s hypothesis** appears credible, it remains **provisional**

and must be corroborated by further **epigraphic and numismatic discoveries**.

To date, **18 inscriptions** of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud have been identified from various locations across Bengal. These include:

- **9 inscriptions** referring to the construction of **mosques**, likely of the *waktia* (daily) type.
- **3 inscriptions** related to the building of **Jami (congregational) mosques**.
- Other records document the establishment of a **mosque-cum-madrassa**, **3 bridges**, and **2 khanqahs** (Sufi lodges).

These constructions span regions such as **Bhagalpur, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Malda, Hooghly, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Pabna, and Bagerhat**, and are dated between **1443 and 1460 CE**.

His **coinage** was issued from multiple mints, including:

Khazana, Dakhil ba-Takhtgah, Fathabad, Mahmudabad, Dar al-Darb, Muhammadabad, Chatgaon (Chittagong), Khalifatabad, and Dakhil Balapur.

Based on the distribution of these **inscriptions and coins**, we can deduce the **extent of Nasiruddin Mahmud's kingdom**:

- **Western boundary**: Bhagalpur and parts of Bihar.
- **Eastern boundary**: Mymensingh.
- **Southwestern limit**: Hooghly.
- **Southern frontier**: Bagerhat and Khalifatabad, as attested by inscriptions and mint marks.

Nasiruddin Mahmud also maintained **diplomatic ties with the Chinese empire**, dispatching **envoys via the Chittagong port**, which confirms that **Chittagong and surrounding coastal areas** were under his dominion.

A **temple inscription** from **Orissa**, dated **1455 CE**, states that **King Kapilendra Deva** attacked Bengal, defeated the **Sultan of Gaur**, and adopted the title '**Gauresvara**' (Lord of Gaur). Commenting on this, **Syed Ejaz Hussain** notes:

"No other source references this invasion by the ruler of Orissa. Given the epigraphic evidence, we can infer that the Orissan king may have briefly captured **a narrow coastal strip in the extreme south—possibly Mandaran—and adopted the grand title of Gauresvara.**"

A scholarly debate exists around the **relocation of the capital from Pandua (Firuzabad) to Gaur**. While **Abdul Karim**, based on *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, credits **Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah** with this shift,

Ejaz Hussain, after examining **epigraphic and numismatic evidence**, argues that:

"The capital was moved from Firuzabad to Gaur by **Nasiruddin Mahmud.**"

Likewise, **H.Z. Stopleton**, in *Memoirs*, notes:

"The return of the capital from Firuzabad to Gaur was **probably carried out during the reign of Mahmud.**"

Though **diplomatic relations between Bengal and China** began under **Jalaluddin Muhammad, Nasiruddin Mahmud sustained and furthered these ties**, continuing the practice of **sending emissaries** to the Chinese court.

Diplomatic Relations with China and Legacy of Nasiruddin Mahmud

During the reign of **Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud**, diplomatic relations between **Bengal and the Chinese empire** continued actively. According to the **Ming Shi-Lu** (the official annals of the Ming dynasty), on **23 April 1439**, an envoy from Bengal was received at the imperial court. The record states:

"Bengal sent the emissary Na-ding, Melaka sent the envoys Wei-jia-zhela and Tuo-man da-la, and the Ryukyu Islands sent the envoy Liang Shuibao. They all arrived together to present tribute consisting of horses and regional products. A grand banquet was held in their honor, and they were rewarded with paper currency and other gifts."²⁷

These Chinese records also note the specific **gifts and honors** bestowed by the emperor upon the delegations from Bengal and Melaka.²⁸ This confirms that these **diplomatic exchanges** took place under the rule of **Nasiruddin Mahmud**.

According to various historians, the **duration of Nasiruddin Mahmud's reign** is estimated as follows:

- **Abdul Karim** and **Sukhamaya Mukhopadhaya** suggest a reign of approximately **24 years**, ending in **864 AH / 1459–60 CE**.
- **Syed Ejaz Hussain**, based on inscriptional evidence, estimates **26 years**.
- The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* adds:
".according to another account, his reign did not exceed twenty-seven years."²⁹

Chronicler **Nizamuddin** speaks favorably of his rule, stating:

"All classes of men, from commoners to nobles, from the great to the small, lived in happiness and peace."³⁰

Similarly, historian **Firishta** echoes this sentiment. The construction of multiple public structures—

including **daily-use mosques (waktia), congregational mosques (jummah), khanqahs (Sufi lodges), madrasas (Islamic schools), and three bridges**—throughout Bengal further reflects the **stability and prosperity** of his reign.³¹

Succession and Early Activities of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah

After Nasiruddin Mahmud's death, his son **Ruknuddin Barbak Shah** succeeded him in **864 AH / 1460 CE**. An earlier **mosque inscription**, dated **861 AH / 1456 CE** and found in **Hooghly, West Bengal**, mentions **Barbak Shah** as a *malik* (prince or governor), notably **without** the benedictory phrases typically reserved for reigning monarchs.

Shamsuddin Ahmed interprets this to mean:

“As a prince, Barbak was appointed governor of Satgaon by his father, Mahmud Shah. In that role, he had this inscription created in 860 AH.”

However, **epigraphist Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq**, in his recent publication, re-examines this inscription and notes that:

“As with many old inscriptions, the final section—including the date—is significantly worn. This has led to considerable confusion among historians.”

He further suggests that:

“Given the uncertainty in reading the date accurately, it remains possible that the inscription belongs to a **later period**.”

This interpretation, acknowledging the **abraded state of the text**, is valid and reflects ongoing scholarly debate about the **exact chronology** of Barbak Shah's rise to power.

Military Campaigns of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah and the Legacy of Shah Ismail Ghazi

One of the notable military achievements of **Ruknuddin Barbak Shah** was the **reconquest of Tirhut**, which had come under the control of **Husain Shah of Jaunpur**. According to the **Bayaz of Mulla Taqia**, Barbak Shah revived earlier arrangements from the time of **Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah**, wherein the **fort of Hajipur** and its surrounding regions were retained by the Sultan, while territories north of the **Burhi Gandak (Old Gandak)** were entrusted to the **Raja of Tirhut**. Barbak Shah appointed **Kedar Rai** as his representative to collect tribute from the local ruler.¹

Barbak Shah's military expeditions in **Mandaran** and **Tirhut** are closely associated with the legendary figure of **Shah Ismail Ghazi**, a revered **Sufi-soldier**, whose tombs are found across several regions in northern and southwestern Bengal. The *Risalat-us-*

Shuhada narrates the exploits of Shah Ismail Ghazi during this period as follows:

“During Barbak Shah's reign, Ismail arrived in **Gaur** and gained royal favor by constructing a bridge or embankment across a vast marshland known as *Chuttiah Patiah*. Impressed by this feat, the Sultan dispatched him to confront the **Gajapati king of Madaran (Mandaran/Orissa)**, whom Ismail defeated. Subsequently, he fought two battles with **Kamesar, the ruler of Kamrup**. He lost the first battle, while the second ended without a decisive outcome. Nevertheless, the king of Kamrup eventually submitted and agreed to pay tribute, although the region does not appear to have come under permanent Muslim occupation. Later, the **Hindu governor of Ghoraghat**, possibly envious of Ismail's growing reputation, falsely accused him of conspiring with the king of Kamrup to establish an independent kingdom. A royal force was dispatched, and Shah Ismail was executed.²²

A similar version of this story, preserved through **oral tradition in Hooghly**, was documented by the English historian **Blochmann** and published in the *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society*.³ According to this account, after **defeating the rulers of Orissa**, Shah Ismail Ghazi was **accused by a local Hindu** of attempting to declare independence. The Sultan then **summoned Ismail back to the capital**, and although the saint obeyed the royal order and returned to **Gaur**, he was **executed upon arrival**.⁴

These **two parallel legends**, preserved in different regions of Bengal until the 19th century, portray **Shah Ismail Ghazi** as a **tragic yet heroic figure**—a **Sufi-warrior** serving under Barbak Shah, who played a significant role in expanding the Sultanate's political boundaries. These narratives highlight his involvement in the **military conquests of Mandaran and Kamrup**, and both **epigraphic and numismatic evidence** corroborate that these regions were indeed under **Ruknuddin Barbak Shah's control**.⁵

Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (Reign: 1460–1474 CE)

A total of **21 inscriptions** belonging to **Ruknuddin Barbak Shah** have been discovered, dating from **1460 to 1474 CE**. These inscriptions were found in locations spanning present-day **West Bengal (Gaur, Birbhum, Bardhaman, 24 Parganas)** and **Bangladesh (Naogaon, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Chittagong, Tangail, Barishal)**, as well as **Gazipur in Uttar Pradesh**.^{4 0} His **coins** were issued from multiple mint towns, including **Khazana, Satgaon, Muzaffarabad, Firuzabad, Jannatabad, and Dar-ul-Zarb**.^{4 1}

Ruknuddin's kingdom was expansive—extending westward to Bihar, eastward to Muazzamabad and Sonargaon, with Mandaran marking the southern limit, and Chittagong and Sylhet forming the southeastern and northeastern extremities. Following the tradition of earlier Ilyas Shahi rulers, he promoted local culture, language, and religious tolerance. He extended patronage to Bengali language and literature, a significant example being poet Maladhar Basu, author of *Sri Krishna Vijay*, who, along with his son, served as a minister in his court.^{4 2- 4 3} Many non-Muslims held prominent administrative positions, reflecting the Sultan's inclusive governance.

Additionally, Ruknuddin recruited a significant number of Habshi (Abyssinian) slaves, many of whom were appointed to high-ranking military and civil posts. The *Tarikh-i-Firishat* records that approximately 8,000 Abyssinians served in crucial roles such as the departments of vizierate (wazarat), guardianship (wakalat), and public works (imarat), and were regularly consulted by the Sultan.^{4 4} This group would later play a crucial role in Bengal's political landscape, with some Habshis eventually ascending to the throne themselves.

According to the *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Barbak Shah ruled until 879 AH/1474 CE,^{4 5} a timeline corroborated by epigraphic evidence. His reign is thus fixed between 1460 and 1474 CE.^{4 6}

Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah (Reign: 1474–?)

Upon the death of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah, his son, Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah, ascended the throne in 879 AH/1475 CE. Two inscriptions dated the same year identify him as:

*“Sultan Shams al-Dunya wa'l-Din Abul Muzaffar Yusuf Shah al-Sultan, son of Sultan Barbak Shah al-Sultan, son of Mahmud Shah al-Sultan.”^{4 7}

Although contemporary chronicles provide little detail regarding any military campaigns during his reign, so far 18 inscriptions of Yusuf Shah have been unearthed from Gazipur (UP), Malda, Hooghly, Rajshahi, Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet.^{4 8} His coinage was minted in towns such as Khazana, Dar-ul-Zarb, and Shamsabad.

Based on this evidence, it appears that Yusuf Shah inherited and retained the territories established during his father's reign, and did not engage in significant territorial expansion. Like his father, he is remembered as a learned and competent ruler, and his reign continued the policies of cultural patronage and administrative continuity initiated by Ruknuddin Barbak Shah.

Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah's Reign (1475–1482 CE)

Epigraphic evidence indicates that Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah ruled for approximately seven years, from 1475 to 1482 CE. The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* corroborates this timeframe, noting that his reign lasted for seven years and six months.

Nuruddin Sikandar Shah

Nuruddin Sikandar Shah succeeded Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah. His coins bear the title:

Al-Sultan ibn al-Sultan Nur-ud-Dunya wa'l-Din Abul Mujahid Sikandar Shah Sultan ibn Mahmud Shah Sultan

(The Sultan, son of the Sultan, Light of the World and Faith, Father of the Mujahid, Sikandar Shah, Sultan, son of Mahmud Shah, the Sultan)^{5 1}

This inscription clearly identifies him as a son of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah and thus the brother of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah and uncle of Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah. However, the *Riyaz* incorrectly refers to him as the son of Yusuf Shah, a claim that modern scholarship rightly dismisses.^{5 2- 5 3}

The exact duration of Nuruddin Sikandar Shah's reign remains uncertain. The *Riyaz* portrays him as mentally unfit, claiming:

“As he had no capacity for this important function, the nobles and the leaders deliberately superseded him the very same day.”^{5 4}

However, this assertion is contradicted by recent numismatic findings. Four coins attributed to Nuruddin Sikandar Shah have been published by the Bangladesh National Museum.^{5 5} While all of these coins bear the Kalima (profession of faith) on the obverse, their reverses differ, suggesting the use of multiple dies. Coin Nos. 567 and 569 appear to share one reverse die, whereas Coin Nos. 568 and 570 use a different one.

Notably, Coin No. 567 is dated 885 AH / 1480 CE, and the mint towns indicated on these coins include Kazanah and Dar-ul-Zarb.^{5 6} Based on this data, it is evident that Sikandar Shah ruled for a few months at the very least, long enough to authorize the production of different coin types from multiple dies. Scholar Syed Ejaz Hussain proposes a reign of approximately six months,^{5 7} which appears to be the most reasonable estimation.

Furthermore, a new coin attributed to Nuruddin Sikandar Shah reveals yet another mint town—Khalifatabad, bearing the same date 885 AH / 1480 CE.^{5 8} Khalifatabad is historically identified with modern-day Bagerhat in the Khulna Division. This mint was also used by the founder of the restored

Ilyas Shahi dynasty, Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah, and remained in operation in subsequent periods.^{5 9}

This coin matches **type B58** in the **Goron and Goenka Catalogue**.^{6 0} Its **obverse** displays Sikandar Shah's full royal title, while the **reverse** contains the **Kalima** and the **mint name**. The **Bangladesh National Museum coins** (Nos. **567, 569, and 570**) also follow this stylistic format.^{6 1}

Significantly, the issuance of coins from **three separate mints** (Khalifatabad, Kazanah, and Dar-ul-Zarb) using **distinct dies** reinforces the conclusion that **Nuruddin Sikandar Shah's reign lasted longer than a single day**, likely extending over **six months**.

Jalaluddin Fath Shah

As established earlier through epigraphic evidence, **Jalaluddin Fath Shah** was one of the **sons of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah** and the **brother of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah**. His coins similarly identify him with the following royal titles:

*"The Sultan, son of the Sultan, Glory of the World and Religion, Father of the Warrior, Sultan Fath Shah, son of Mahmud Shah the Sultan."^{6 4}

Both **epigraphic and numismatic sources** confirm that **Jalaluddin Fath Shah** was the **third son** of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah and ascended the throne following the brief reign of his brother, **Nuruddin Sikandar Shah**.

To date, **14 inscriptions** from his reign have been discovered from several regions of Bengal including **Gaur, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Narayanganj, and Satgaon**.^{6 5} His coinage was issued from a number of prominent mints such as **Khazana, Fathabad, Dar-ul-Zarb, Sitpur, Nasirabad, Muhammadabad, Ruknabad, and Madaran**.^{6 6} Notably, one of his **gold coins** preserved at the **Bangladesh National Museum** bears the epithet '**Kajunayed Shahi**', which translates as **"like Junayed Shah"**.^{6 7}

Jalaluddin Fath Shah ruled for approximately **seven years**, from **886 to 893 AH** (1481–1488 CE). His reign came to a violent end in **893 AH (1488 CE)** when he was **assassinated** by **Khwajsera Sultan Shazada**, the Habshi commander of his palace guards.

The murder of **Fath Shah** marked the **end of the later Ilyas Shahi or Mahmud Shahi dynasty**, effectively closing the final chapter of the **Ilyas Shahi phase** of Bengal's Sultanate history. This dynasty, descending from **Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah**, had adhered to the administrative and political traditions laid out by its early rulers. However, over time, the dynasty grew increasingly reliant on its **military elite**, particularly the **Abyssinian (Habshi)**

slaves who had been elevated to significant ranks during **Ruknuddin Barbak Shah's** reign.

This growing **military influence** culminated in a power shift when the **Abyssinians rebelled** and eventually **seized control** of the throne in **1488 CE**, thus terminating the rule of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty with the **death of Jalaluddin Fath Shah**.

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