



THE GREAT WISDOM AND MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ADOPTING
VERSES FROM SURAH AN-NAHL AS THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF
THE EPIGRAPHIC DECORATION OF SHER-DOR MADRASAH

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Abstract: *This article explores the profound wisdom behind selecting verses from Surah An-Nahl (The Bee) of the Qur'an as the conceptual basis for the epigraphic decoration of Sher-Dor Madrasah in Samarkand. Built in 1619–1636 (AH 1042) under the patronage of Yalangtosh Bahodir, the monument forms part of the Registan architectural ensemble. The study examines the theological, symbolic, and philosophical meanings of the selected verses—particularly verses 68–70—and their metaphorical association with the life and mission of Yalangtosh Bahodir. Special attention is given to the symbolism of the bee, divine revelation, justice, moral responsibility, and the transient nature of worldly life. The research demonstrates that the epigraphic program of Sher-Dor Madrasah represents not merely ornamentation but a deeply structured spiritual and ethical concept embedded in architecture.*

Key words: *Islamic epigraphy, Sher-Dor Madrasah, Surah An-Nahl, Qur'anic symbolism, Samarkand architecture, Registan ensemble, calligraphy, Yalangtosh Bahodir, theological aesthetics, moral philosophy.*

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Samarkand has been renowned for its incomparable architectural monuments and rich artistic heritage. Visitors are fascinated not only by the grandeur and vibrant ornamentation of its buildings but also by the inscriptions adorning their portals. These inscriptions function as historical documents, theological declarations, and moral instructions carved into stone and tile.

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda once wrote that the Registan ensemble surpassed all the monuments he had seen in the Muslim East, testifying to the high culture of the peoples of Central Asia. Indeed, the architectural complex of Registan—including Ulugh Beg Madrasah, Sher-Dor Madrasah, and Tillakori Madrasah—represents a harmonious dialogue between different historical periods.

Among these monuments, Sher-Dor Madrasah occupies a unique place due to the conceptual depth of its epigraphic decoration. The selection of verses from Surah An-Nahl as its ideological foundation invites deeper reflection.



Sher-Dor Madrasah

Epigraphy as Sacred Architecture

Epigraphy (from the Greek meaning "inscription") refers to texts engraved or written on durable materials such as stone, metal, or ceramics. In Islamic architecture, epigraphy functions as both sacred message and ornamental form. Qur'anic verses, hadiths, and devotional phrases are transformed into architectural elements through the art of calligraphy.





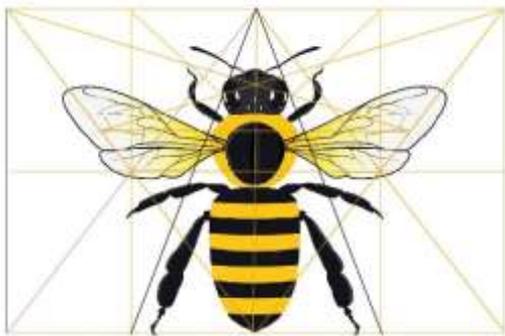
The inscriptions of Sher-Dor Madrasah were executed in Kufic, Thuluth, and Nasta'liq scripts, demonstrating the high mastery of 17th-century calligraphers. The portal inscription states that the madrasah was constructed with the approval of Imamquli Khan and through the initiative of Yalangtosh Bahodir in AH 1042 (1632 CE).

Surah An-Nahl as Conceptual Foundation

Surah An-Nahl (The Bee), consisting of 128 verses, was chosen as the theological framework of the monument. The key verse prominently inscribed on the portal is verse 90:

"Indeed, Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives..."

This verse establishes the ethical foundation of governance and social responsibility. By inscribing it on the madrasah, Yalangtosh Bahodir symbolically affirmed that justice and righteousness should underpin both statecraft and scholarship.



Bee

The Symbolism of the Bee (Verses 68–69)

Verses 68–69 describe divine revelation to the bee:

"And your Lord inspired the bee..."

The bee symbolizes:

- Discipline and divine inspiration
- Tireless labor
- Social harmony
- Production of healing (honey)
- Obedience to divine order

Architecturally and metaphorically, the bee represents an ideal servant of God—fulfilling its mission with precision and harmony. Just as bees construct perfect hexagonal structures (often compared to the golden ratio), architects and builders of the madrasah demonstrated mathematical and artistic perfection.

Through spiritual interpretation, Yalangtosh Bahodir—guided by his Naqshbandi mentor, Khwaja Hashim Dahbedi—is metaphorically likened to the bee. Like the bee gathering nectar to produce honey for others, he gathered knowledge and resources to build institutions benefiting society.

Human Responsibility and Mortality (Verse 70)

Verse 70 reminds humanity:

"Allah created you, then He will cause you to die..."



This verse emphasizes mortality, accountability, and divine knowledge. It serves as a moral warning: worldly power and wealth are temporary, but righteous deeds endure.

By integrating these verses into the architectural program, Sher-Dor Madrasah communicates a complete spiritual message:

- Justice in governance (verse 90)
- Purposeful labor and inspiration (verses 68–69)
- Awareness of mortality and accountability (verse 70)

Thus, the epigraphic decoration becomes a moral manifesto carved into architecture.

Philosophical and Educational Significance

The madrasah was not merely an educational institution but a spiritual guide. Its inscriptions encouraged:

- Faith and gratitude
- Reflection on divine creation
- Ethical leadership
- Preparation for the afterlife

The harmonious fusion of script and ornament makes reading the inscriptions visually challenging yet spiritually engaging. The calligraphy itself becomes an artistic meditation.

Conclusion. The adoption of Surah An-Nahl as the conceptual basis of Sher-Dor Madrasah's epigraphic decoration reflects profound theological wisdom and symbolic intentionality. The verses concerning justice, the disciplined life of the bee, and human mortality collectively form a coherent ethical philosophy.

Through these inscriptions, Yalangtosh Bahodir presented himself not as a rival to earlier Timurid rulers but as their respectful successor, continuing the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Samarkand.

Sher-Dor Madrasah thus stands not only as an architectural masterpiece but also as a visual sermon—calling humanity to justice, diligence, humility, and faith. The monument remains a testament to how sacred text can shape architectural meaning and transform stone and tile into carriers of eternal moral guidance.

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