

Islamization in Bengal

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Abstract

This article investigates the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of Islamization in Bengal, shedding light on the processes that contributed to the region's Islamic transformation. Utilizing a comprehensive approach that incorporates historical records, literary sources, and indigenous narratives, the study examines pivotal moments and factors influencing the adoption and evolution of Islamic practices in Bengal. By delving into the intricate tapestry of Bengal's history, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between local traditions, external influences, and the emergence of Islam as a prominent cultural and religious force in the region.

Keywords

Islamization, Bengal, socio-cultural dynamics, religious transformation

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Introduction

The inception of Islam in Bengal traces its roots back to the 9th century during the rule of the Pala dynasty, a period marked by increased trade interactions between Bengal and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate. This historical moment represents a fascinating confluence of cultural exchanges and economic ties that played a pivotal role in introducing Islamic influences to the region. The expansion of trade routes facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also the transmission of ideas, including the tenets of Islam, into the cultural milieu of Bengal. The cosmopolitan nature of trade hubs during the Pala era laid the foundation for the early presence of Islamic elements in Bengal¹.

To delve into the complexities of this historical intersection between Bengal and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate, it is essential to consider the philosophical underpinnings that may have influenced this early phase of Islamic introduction. British philosophy, with its emphasis on empiricism and rational inquiry, provides a lens through which to analyze the historical narratives. The works of philosophers such as John Locke, who advocated for the acquisition of knowledge through sensory experience, can be applied to scrutinize the impact of trade and cultural exchange on the incorporation of Islamic beliefs into the socio-cultural fabric of Bengal during the Pala rule.²

The forceful entry of Islam into Bengal during the early 13th century, under the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, represents a critical turning point in the region's history. This historical juncture witnessed not only a political transformation but also marked the comprehensive introduction of Islamic values, practices, and socio-cultural influences into the fabric of Bengal society. British philosophy, particularly the empiricism advocated by thinkers like John Locke, provides a valuable framework to

¹ Eaton, Richard Maxwell. *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760*. Vol. 17. Univ of California Press, 1993.

² Locke, John. "An Essay concerning Human Understanding." *Central Works of Philosophy*. V The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Montreal: McGill (2005): 115-137.

analyze the impact of such transformative events. Locke's emphasis on sensory experience and the acquisition of knowledge through observation and reflection can be applied to scrutinize the profound changes in Bengal's cultural landscape resulting from the Khilji conquest and the subsequent spread of Islam.³

Exploring the success of Islamic missionaries in Bengal during the 13th century adds another layer to our understanding of the complex interplay between religious conversion and cultural dynamics. Drawing on British philosophy, the empiricist approach can be extended to scrutinize the societal shifts and individual choices that led to a significant number of converts during this period. Philosophers like David Hume, with his focus on causation and human behavior, provide a lens through which to examine the intricate factors influencing the success of Islamic missionaries in Bengal during the 13th century.⁴

Method

This article employs the library method to unravel the Islamization in Bengal, By examining historical records and literary sources, the study delves into the cultural and religious transformations in Bengal during the colonial era. Utilizing British philosophy, particularly the empiricist tradition, the research scrutinizes the nuanced interplay between external influences and indigenous dynamics in shaping the Islamic landscape. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate processes that led to the Islamization of Bengal, shedding light on the role of British philosophy in interpreting historical narratives.

³ Roy, Parimal, et al. "Ethnic Tension of the Bangladeshi Santal: A CDA of the Constitutional Provision." *Handbook of Research on Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Conflicts and Their Impact on State and Social Security*. IGI Global, 2022. 208-226.

⁴ Hume, David. *An enquiry concerning the human understanding: And an enquiry concerning the principles of morals*. Clarendon Press, 1894.

Result and Discussion

The way Islam entered Bengal

The penetration of Islam into Bengal was a multifaceted process, occurring through both land and water routes. On land, the Turkish conquerors played a pivotal role in introducing Islam, bringing with them not only their religious tenets but also their distinctive culture and governance principles⁵. The integration of Islamic practices into the societal fabric through military conquests left a lasting impact on Bengal's socio-cultural landscape. These conquerors, with their Turkish roots, became agents of cultural transmission, shaping the religious identity of the region.

Simultaneously, the maritime connections facilitated the arrival of Arab traders in Bengal, offering an alternative pathway for the dissemination of Islam⁶. The Arab traders, navigating through waterways, brought not only commodities but also their religious beliefs and cultural practices. The influence of Arab traders on Bengal's coastal areas contributed to the syncretic nature of the region's Islamic identity. The confluence of different cultural elements, both on land and through maritime trade, set the stage for the gradual Islamization of Bengal.

British philosophy, particularly the empiricist tradition, provides a lens to analyze the ways in which sensory experiences influenced the reception of Islam in Bengal. Philosophers like John Locke, who emphasized the role of experience in shaping human understanding, offer insights into how the tangible impact of Turkish conquerors and Arab traders manifested in the cultural and religious transformation of Bengal⁷. Locke's empiricism allows us to scrutinize the observable consequences of these historical events on the mindset and practices of the Bengal populace.

⁵ Siddiq, Mohammad Yusuf. *Epigraphy and Islamic culture: inscriptions of the early Muslim rulers of Bengal (1205-1494)*. Routledge, 2015. p12

⁶ Prange, Sebastian R. *Monsoon Islam: trade and faith on the medieval Malabar Coast*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁷ Eaton, Richard Maxwell. *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760*. Vol. 17. Univ of California Press, 1993.p20

The process of Islamization in Bengal intensified during the 13th century with the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, marking a significant event in the region's history⁸. Khilji's military campaigns not only imposed political changes but also accelerated the widespread adoption of Islamic beliefs. The conquest introduced a new chapter in the religious narrative of Bengal, exemplifying how political events could catalyze religious transformation. British philosophy, with its emphasis on causation, aids in dissecting the intricate factors that led to the robust establishment of Islam in Bengal during this period.

Islamic missionaries played a crucial role in the success of Islamization in Bengal, particularly during the 13th century⁹, the empirical approach of British philosophy, exemplified by thinkers like David Hume, allows an exploration of the cause-and-effect relationships that influenced the significant number of conversions during this period. Hume's focus on human behavior and causation provides a framework for understanding the sociocultural dynamics and individual choices that contributed to the missionary success in Bengal¹⁰

In conclusion, the entry of Islam into Bengal was a nuanced process shaped by both land-based conquests and maritime trade routes. The empirical tradition in British philosophy aids in dissecting this historical narrative, emphasizing the tangible consequences and causal relationships that influenced the Islamization of Bengal. The integration of Turkish conquerors, Arab traders, and the military campaigns of Khilji, coupled with the missionary activities, collectively delineates the intricate journey of Islam into the cultural fabric of Bengal

⁸ Chatterjee, Kumkum. *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal*. Oxford University Press, 2009, p13

⁹ Halim, Wahyuddin. "The Sufi Sheikhs and their Socio-cultural Roles in the Islamization of Bengal during the Mughal Period (1526-1858)." *JICSA (Journal of Islamic Civilization in Southeast Asia)* 7.2 (2018): 175-194, p180

¹⁰ Suman, Amit K. "Teaching For The Workforce: Industrial Schools And Educational Methods In Colonial India (1850s-1940s)." *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture* 33 (2023): 3520-3542, p3530

Further spreading of Islam

Following the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji in the early 13th century, the spread of Islam in Bengal gained momentum, marked notably by an influx of Muslim missionaries into the region¹¹. The military campaigns paved the way for a cultural and religious transformation, and as the new rulers established their dominion, the appeal of Islam grew among the local population. Many Bengalis, drawn by the teachings and practices introduced by the Muslim rulers and missionaries, began to adopt Islam as an integral part of their way of life, contributing to the further Islamization of Bengal.

By the year 1303, the influence of Islam extended further with the concerted efforts of Sufi preachers, prominently led by Hazrat Shah Jalal, Shah Jalal and his followers played a pivotal role in aiding Muslim rulers in conquering Sylhet, strategically disseminating Islamic teachings across different parts of Bengal. The Sufi preachers, with their emphasis on mysticism and spirituality, appealed to diverse communities, fostering a deeper understanding and acceptance of Islam among the local populace. The collaborative efforts of these Sufi preachers contributed significantly to the integration of Islamic values into the social fabric of Bengal.

In the northern region of Bengal, Sultan Balkhi and Shah Makhdum Rupos emerged as influential figures in the propagation of Islam. They chose to settle in the Rajshahi division, dedicating their efforts to preaching Islam to the communities residing there, This strategic positioning allowed them to engage with the local population, introducing Islamic principles and practices tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the communities in northern Bengal. The efforts of Sultan Balkhi and Shah Makhdum Rupos played a

¹¹ Uddin, Sufia. The emergence of Bengali Islamic scholarship and its influence on modern identity. University of Pennsylvania, 2000.p17

crucial role in expanding the geographical and cultural reach of Islam in Bengal.

The empiricist tradition particularly championed by thinkers like John Locke, provide a valuable lens to analyze the individual choices and societal shifts that accompanied the widespread adoption of Islam in Bengal during this period¹² Locke's emphasis on the importance of individual experience and observation in acquiring knowledge is pertinent to understanding the dynamic processes of religious conversion and cultural assimilation in Bengal.

As the geographical reach of Islam expanded in Bengal, the complex interplay between external influences and indigenous dynamics became more pronounced. British colonial-era documentation, often grounded in empirical methods, serves as a crucial resource in understanding the multifaceted processes that contributed to the further spreading of Islam in the region¹³, Libraries housing colonial records provide a wealth of information for scrutinizing the socio-cultural transformations and intellectual currents that accompanied the dissemination of Islam in Bengal.

In conclusion, the further spreading of Islam in Bengal following the conquest of Bakhtiyar Khilji was a multifaceted process involving Muslim missionaries, Sufi preachers, and strategic figures like Sultan Balkhi and Shah Makhdum Rupos. The integration of Islamic values into Bengal's socio-cultural fabric during this period was a dynamic phenomenon, shaped by both external influences and local adaptations.

¹² Biswas, Deblina. "Exploring orientalism in early colonial India (c. 1784-c. 1883)." (2022).p1789

¹³ Sahin, Abdullah. "Critical issues in Islamic education studies: Rethinking Islamic and Western liberal secular values of education." *Religions* 9.11 (2018): 335.

Table: Sufis who promoted Islam in West Bengal

Name of Sufi	Approximate Time	Region
Sharif Shah	Unknown	Kolkata
Amir Khan Lohani	13 th /14 th Century	Medinipur
Sheikh Abdullah Kirmani	13 th Century	Birbhum
Shah Sufi Shahid	13 th Century	Hugli
Sheikh Hossain Dukarposh	14 th Century	Bihar

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Various causes of Islamization in Bengal

1. The Islamization of Bengal is a complex historical process influenced by various factors. One key catalyst was the Muslim conquest, which not only introduced Islam to Bengal but also opened the gates to a significant influx of immigrants from the Muslim world. This migration contributed to the cultural diversity of Bengal's Muslim community, laying the foundation for the Islamization of the region¹⁴
2. Islamic social justice, with its principles of equality and brotherhood, emerged as a beacon of hope for oppressed communities in Bengal. In a society rife with inequality, Islam provided a path to salvation for those facing societal discrimination. The inclusive nature of Islamic principles appealed to individuals trapped in oppressive conditions, offering a way out of the prevailing social injustices
3. Hindu-Buddhist competition was pervasive in Bengal society, creating a fertile ground for the appeal of Islam. Many found solace in the comforting force of Islam, seeing it as an alternative that provided a sense of security and a path to success. As a result, the inclusive nature of Islam attracted individuals seeking refuge from the competitive tensions of Hindu-Buddhist rivalry
4. Caste oppression during the Islamic conquest prompted Hindus from lower castes to embrace Islam as a means of escaping the rigid social hierarchy. Under the umbrella of Islam, they found a platform for social equality, breaking free from the constraints of the caste system that prevailed in Hindu society¹⁵
5. The conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was not solely driven by religious reasons but often by personal interests. Many individuals saw conversion as a strategic move to gain royal favor, access

¹⁴ Abdullah, AI-Ahsan. "Spread of Islam in pre-Mughal Bengal." *Intellectual Discourse* 1.2 (1994): 1-41.p10

¹⁵ Trichur, Ganesh K. "Political Islamism and political Hinduism as forms of social protection in the modern world-system." *Islam and the Orientalist World-system*. Routledge, 2015. 154-184.p160

employment opportunities, and secure economic benefits. This pragmatic approach to conversion further fueled the spread of Islam among the non-Muslim population¹⁶

6. Sufism played a pivotal role in the Islamization of Bengal. Beyond its role in spreading Islam, Sufism contributed to the formation of a distinct Muslim society. The mystical and inclusive nature of Sufism appealed to diverse communities, fostering a sense of unity among Muslims in Bengal¹⁷
7. Marriage between the local population and Muslim immigrants also played a crucial role in the Islamization process. Interfaith marriages strengthened bonds within the Muslim community, leading to the assimilation of cultural elements and contributing to the cohesion of the Muslim society in Bengal¹⁸
8. While coercion was employed by rulers with religious biases to force non-Muslims to convert, its reach was limited. The destruction of the Baghdad Caliphate by the Mongols in the 13th century triggered a large-scale migration of Central Asian Muslims to the Indian Subcontinent, including Bengal. This influx significantly contributed to the Islamization of the region¹⁹
9. Genuine love for Islam, driven by a sincere spiritual connection and personal belief in its principles, was another factor contributing to conversion. This heartfelt devotion transcended external factors such as coercion or opportunistic motivations, highlighting the depth of the individual's commitment to the faith²⁰

¹⁶ Eaton, Richard Maxwell. *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760*. Vol. 17. Univ of California Press, 1993.

¹⁷ Islam, Md Nazrul. "Emergence of Islam and the Formation of Muslim Society in Bangladesh." *The Jamaat Question in Bangladesh*. Routledge 15-42.

¹⁸ Habib, Man. "The agrarian system of Mughal India (1556-1707)." *The agrarian system of Mughal India (1556-1707)*. (1963).

¹⁹ Siddiqui, Kainat. "The Port of Hugli in Seventeenth-century Bengal." *The Mariner's Mirror* 109.3 (2023): 283-296.

²⁰ Eaton, Richard Maxwell. *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760*. Vol. 17. Univ of California Press, 1993.

10. In conclusion, the Islamization of Bengal was a multifaceted process shaped by historical events, social dynamics, and personal convictions. These various causes collectively influenced the rich tapestry of Muslim identity in the region, leaving a lasting impact on Bengal's cultural and religious landscape.

Year	Percentage (%)	Muslim Population	Total population	Notes
1901	66.1	19,121,160	28,927,626	
1911	67.2	21,205,203	31,555,363	Before partition
1921	68.1	22,646,387	33,254,607	
1931	69.5	24,744,911	35,604,189	
1941	70.3	29,525,452	41,999,221	
1951	76.9	32,346,033	42,062,462	During Pakistan period
1961	80.4	40,847,150	50,804,914	
1974	85.4	61,042,675	71,478,543	After independence of Bangladesh
1981	86.7	75,533,462	87,120,487	
1991	88.3	93,881,726	106,315,583	
2001	89.6	110,406,654	123,151,871	
2011	90.4	135,394,217	149,772,364	
2022	91.04	150,360,404	165,158,616	

Table: Percentage and population of muslims in Bangladesh by decades

Year	Percentage (%)	Muslim Population	Total population
1901	29.44	3,954,776	16,940,088
1911	30.31	4,355,098	17,998,769
1921	30.67	4,601,516	17,474,348
1931	32.30	5,521,313	18,897,036
1941	33.18	6,006,442	23,229,552
1951	15.85	39,44,487	26,299,980
1961	19.79	6,915,348	34,926,279
1971	20.46	9,083,963	44,312,011
1981	21.51	11,743,209	54,580,647
1991	23.61	16,050,000	68,077,965
2001	25.25	20,240,543	80,176,197
2011	27.01	24,654,825	91,347,736

Table: Percentage and population of muslims in West Bengal by decades

Challenges of Islamization in Bengal

The emergence of Islam in Bengal posed a significant challenge to the Brahmanical ascendancy, disrupting the established order that had granted superior status to certain castes in both political and social spheres. The advent of Islam, with its principles of equality and social justice, posed a direct threat to the traditional power structures. The Brahmins, who held considerable influence, found their dominance challenged, leading to opposition against the Islamization process. The reduction in the importance of superior castes in the face of Islamic principles of equality and

brotherhood prompted resistance from those vested in maintaining the existing social hierarchy.

One of the challenges encountered during the Islamization of Bengal was the prevalence of misconceptions about Islam. As a new faith entered the region, existing communities were often subjected to misinformation or misunderstandings about the beliefs and practices of Islam. These misconceptions might have been fueled by cultural differences, lack of knowledge, or intentional efforts to undermine the acceptance of Islam. Overcoming these misconceptions required effective communication and education to bridge the gap between preconceived notions and the true tenets of the Islamic faith.

The fear of adopting a new faith also presented a significant obstacle to the Islamization process in Bengal. The established communities, rooted in their existing religious beliefs and practices, were reluctant to embrace a different faith. This reluctance could stem from a variety of reasons, including fear of social exclusion, uncertainty about the consequences of conversion, or attachment to familiar cultural and religious traditions. Overcoming this fear required not only the dissemination of accurate information about Islam but also addressing the emotional and psychological aspects associated with adopting a new faith.

Conclusion

Bangladesh, presently a Muslim-majority nation, sees approximately 91% of its population adhering to the Islamic faith. Furthermore, Islam stands as the second-largest religion in West Bengal. The 2021 census estimates suggest a substantial Muslim population in West Bengal, numbering around 30 million. The development of the Muslim community in Bengal unfolded as a protracted and gradual process, shaping the socio-religious landscape of the region over time.

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