

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Debates on the Emergence of Islam in Bengal through the Arab-Turkish Existence*

Abdur Rahman Fuad**

Abstract

This research focuses on two main topics. The first is the lack of attention to the emergence of Islam in Bengal, according to this study. The second concern is the early interactions of Muslim Arabs and Turks with the Bengal region. When analysing the initial entry of these two groups into the area and their subsequent activities, it is observed that they differ vastly. Before the advent of Islam, Arabs were accustomed to travelling to various regions, including Bengal, for trade purposes. Over time, Arab traders expanded their commercial activities with Bengal ports and contributed to spreading Islam. On the other hand, Central Asian Turks also attempted to connect the Bengal region to themselves through various activities over time. Therefore, there is a need for more in-depth research on this subject. Methodologically, this research evaluates historical arguments and narratives through qualitative research. Moreover, this study relies primarily on secondary sources in Bangla and English. Where necessary, classical Arabic sources will also be taken into consideration. In this way, the research offers a unique perspective.

Keywords

Arabs, Islamization of Bengal, sea route, land route, trade, Turks.

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Bengal’de İslam’ın Ortaya Çıkışı Üzerine Arap-Türk Varlığına İlişkin Tartışmalar*

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Öz

Bu araştırma iki temel konuya odaklanmaktadır. Birincisi, bu çalışmaya göre Bengal’de İslamiyet’in ortaya çıkışına yeterince dikkat edilmemesidir. İkincisi ise Müslüman Araplar ve Türklerin Bengal bölgesi ile erken temaslarını içermektedir. Bu konuda bölgeye söz konusu iki milletin ilk girişleri, ardından sürdürdükleri faaliyetleri analiz edildiğinde zamansal açıdan farklılık gösterdikleri müşahede edilmektedir. İslam’ın ortaya çıkmasından önce Araplar ticaret amacıyla çeşitli bölgelere, Bengal de dâhil olmak üzere, seyahat etmeye alışkındılar. Zamanla Arap tüccarlar Bengal limanları ile ticaret faaliyetlerini genişlettiler ve İslamiyet’in yayılışında katkıda bulundular. Öte yandan, Orta Asya’daki Türkler de Bengal bölgesini zamanla çeşitli faaliyetlerle kendilerine bağlamaya çalıştılar. Bu sebeple konuya dair daha derinlikli araştırmalara ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Yöntemsel olarak bu araştırma, nitel araştırma yoluyla tarihsel argümanları ve anlatıları değerlendirmektedir. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, başlıca Bengalce ve İngilizce ikincil kaynaklara dayanmaktadır. Gerekli yerlerde klasik Arapça kaynaklara da başvurulacaktır. Bu şekilde, araştırma yeni bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kavramlar

Araplar, Bengal’in İslamlaşması, deniz yolu, kara yolu, ticaret, Türkler.

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Introduction

Before it embraced Islam, the Bengal region nearly was a hub of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. The Buddhist Pala dynasty (750-1161) ruled the centre for several centuries before it fell and was then conquered by the Hindu Sena dynasty in the 1170s. On the eve of the emergence of Islam in Bengal, there was a religious and cultural conflict between Buddhists and Hindu Brahmins, representing two opposed dharmic traditions, symbolized in the social context by the Buddhist emphasis on equality and the caste-based social structure of the Brahmins.

Then, the advent of Islam in the region bloomed formally in 1204 (Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* 258), leading to a sudden upsurge in the Muslim population. In this respect, the involvement of the Sufi dervishes was seen as an accelerating factor. Subsequently, Islamization gained massive momentum in the diverse parts of Bengal. Islam reformed Bengal's social, cultural, and religious life throughout this journey. Religious institutions and individuals, especially the sultans, played a critical role in this transformation. Therefore, throughout the mentioned process, there are academic disputes regarding how and when Islam took hold in Bengal and whether religious institutions were established in the early years.

Meanwhile, scientific accounts for this topic integrate more unsolved questions. The literature used in this research also observes that each scholar's judgments do not promote a scientific explanation. That is why it is required to sketch it again. Furthermore, efforts have been made to make sense of the nature of the subject.

Literature Review

The core academic works may constrain the investigation into the essence of actual literary critics. At the outset, two primary sources in Bangla and English were written by two eminent historians, Karim and Rahim, who expressed their opinions on the Islamization process in Bengal. Both scholar's notes represent Medieval Bengal's political, social, and cultural history¹. However, they mainly concentrate on the sociocultural activities of post-Islamic Bengal, which contradicts the current research. Haq, another well-known researcher, litterateur, and educationist in Bangladesh, focused mainly on transforming Bengali Sufi activities, which do not deal with the

goals and scope of the current study². After them, contemporary Bengali historian Chowdhury frequently cited the dynasty tales of Bengal Muslim rulers in his works³.

Dani, albeit somewhat, goes with the objectives of this study. Although he tries to focus on the Muslims' initial interaction with Bengal, the information provided is insufficient for this study. Additionally, scholars Dasgupta, Muhiuddin Khan and Rahman attempted to shed light on the matter, but the calibre of their research prevented them from progressing any further. Both of their accounts are stated in the existing list.

In summary, although the presence of Arabs in the region since the early period of Islam has been discovered, the presence of Turks has not. Researchers have focused on the Arab presence and neglected the Turkish presence. The sources cited in this study are a clear example of this. As indicated, a few scientific studies have shaped this topic, but they have yet to provide a real sense, like the running study. After a bird's-eye view of the following works, the readers will easily find this study original.

Table 1

Previously Considered Journal Publications from the Same Period

Author(s) Name	Year	Title
Al-Ahsan, A.	1994	The spread of Islam in the pre-Mughal Bengal
Al-Masud et al.	2017	The Contributions of Sufism to Promoting Religious Harmony in Bangladesh
Marrison, G. E.	1951	The Coming of Islam in East Indies
Fuad, A. R.	2024	The Fusion of Turkish Religious Thoughts in Central Asian Buddhism and Its Repercussion to Bengal
Masumi, M. S. H.	1967	Bengal's Contribution to Islamic Learning
Dasgupta, A.	1994	The Bauls and their Heretic Tradition
Dasgupta, A.	2004	Islam in Bengal: Formative Period
Islam, M. T.	2012	The Advent of Islam in Bengal: An Economic Perspective
Siddiq, M. Y.	2012	The Advent of Islam in Bengal: An Epigraphic Approach
Siddique, Y.	2008	The Diffusion of Islam in Bengal and the Articulation of a New Order

Research Method

The study leans toward descriptive research using the qualitative method. Dulock proposes more than six definitions to support this study's method. However, the subsequent justification is enough for the study's goal:

... to provide an accurate portrayal or account of characteristics of a particular individual, situation or group; these studies are a means of discovering new meaning, describing what exists, determining the frequency with which something occurs and/or categorizing information... (Dunlock 154)

According to this definition, the entire study will have all the characteristics of descriptive research. In this case, it focuses on categorizing information and elucidating the existing information to create a new sketch.

The study's central hypothesis is when and how Bengal encountered Islam. In doing so, the study walks through two omnipresent key facts – a) Muslim merchants hailing from various directions towards Bengal by sea route and b) The Khilji Turks⁴. Islam spread from the Chittagong Port of present-day Bangladesh by sea. On the other hand, it spread to northern India and arrived via the land route. The article's findings and outcomes follow a judgment throughout the research.

A limitation could be drawn from the classical sources. Arabic sources like *Tabari*, *Tarikh-e Yaqubi*, and *al-Kamil* do not provide information about the emergence of Islam in Bengal. Therefore, the study will strive to access data from other Arabic sources, like *Futuh'ul Buldan*, *Majmaul Buldân*, *Al-Mukabbar*, *Kitab-ul-Masalik*, and *Muruj al-Zahab*. So far, no other classic sources indicate anything about the Bengal region.

Islam in Bengal: The Assessments on Sea Trade and Arab Existence

During the reign of Caliph Omar, the first Muslim fleet to enter Indian waters appeared in 636. This hint is provided in the writings of the historian Tara Chand (Chand 31). However, it is argued that Arabs did not cross a specific boundary between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Mustafa Fayda's citations on this topic are apparent. According to him, during the governorship of Amr b. As in Egypt (640-646), with permission from Caliph Omar, he ensured new Muslim maritime trade between Egypt,

Haramayn, Yemen, and India (Fayda 50). This means the Muslim Arabs appeared in Indian waters in the first half of the 7th century. However, as ordinary Arabs, they had trade relations with the far-east (China) before Islam. On the other side, if we go back to Oman, it hosted two renowned pre-Islamic markets. These markets held significant status as global trade hubs, attracting international traders from regions such as Sindh, India, Persia, and China, who exchanged their merchandise (Baghdadi 265-66). So, it can be an apparent claim that the Chinese rested in Bengal's port for a long and safe journey to the Arab trade fair. Some logic will come in the following phases.

The historical account *Futuh'ul Buldan* narrates that Umayyad Caliph Muawiyah (d. 60/680) dispatched looted gold and silver idol artefacts to India, hoping to fetch a better price. In contrast, Muhammad bin Kasim gifted Umayyad governor Yusuf bin Hajjaj (d. 95/714) with a sea-transported elephant from Sind, which had been brought aboard by a ship (Balâdhuri 375, 452). In this context, it is plausible to argue that this elephant could have been found and brought from Bengal, considering the abundance of elephants in that region. Moreover, Alexander the Great's decision not to invade Bengal out of fear might be attributed to the presence of these elephants (Mannan 3; *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 43).

Apart from that, some said that only the Persians, not Sasanids, emerged in Bengal during the "age of ignorance (Jâhiliyya)" and "early Islamic period" as both merchants and sailors (M. M. Khan 4). Muhiuddin Khan defends Tara Chand's interpretation. According to him:

The Sassanid Empire and the Roman Empire constantly fought between the fifth and sixth centuries. Various restrictions on the land routes were put in place as long as the hostilities lasted. As a result, the Arabs were unafraid to take their time when conducting maritime trade. Additionally, they were hired to conduct business with Arabs by the ports of Malabar (South India), Kolkata (East India), Cheror Bandar (unknown Port), and Chittagong (Bangladesh). These cities saw the establishment of commercial centres in the later era. (M. Khan 39)

Whether Muslims were exclusively active in the maritime trade with Bengal arose in the 7th century because the information regarding other nations was comparatively silent. *The Muslims of Burma*, therefore, assume that the first Muslim seafarers left their footprints in Burma in the ninth century. Furthermore, in 860, Chinese visitors reported the presence of Sassanid (Iranian) colonies on the beaches of Burma. This is because the political and geographic positions may have allowed the Sassanids to grab the region before the Arabs. It may be seen by supporting this statement that Islam attained this tilt even in later times (Yegar 2).

As previously cited, the Islamic message spread over the Bengal region in two ways. Numerous discussions exist about Islam's entry by sea, yet the academic community needs to be humbler about Islam's arrival by land. When providing information regarding this, researchers are sometimes split into two groups, as above.

Regarding the emergence of Islam in Bengal, Chittagong was the top destination for Arab traders. This statement divided historical notes into – 1) Islam before the eighth century and 2) Islam following the eighth century. However, remember that the Arabs who arrived in the Bengal area before the advent of Islam were not Muslims; they only carried on the Far Eastern commercial practices. Throughout the early days of Islam, these people not only followed the rules of trade but also put forth much effort to spread the message of Islam.

The Opinion about the Advent of Islam before the Eighth Century in Bengal
According to some historical claims, Islam arrived in Bengal before the eighth century. It signifies that as soon as the Prophet Muhammad passed away, Islam spread out quickly. Here are some quotations in favour of this time frame.

Researcher Habibullah states that the Arabs had good economic relations with individuals from South and Southeast Asia throughout the Prophets. This policy facilitated the restoration of an autonomous Muslim state in the Gulf (Habibullah 19). After him, Tara Chand says that the first Muslim navy in the Indian Ocean appeared in the year 636 (Chand 31). He wrote this information in his account but only provided logical arguments in the chapter to support this idea, except for the early naval period. His citation

would be clearer if he detailed the features of the fleet that allowed it to pass the frightening ocean and sea destinations. The next point gives a gleam of hope for further clarification.

According to M. Khan, the Arabs arrived on the Indian frontier for the first time in 643 (M. M. Khan 4). A. A. Khan heartily concurs with the statement mentioned earlier. He asserts that the Arabs brought the word of Islam to China, Chittagong, and Sylhet (Bangladesh) at the beginning of the seventh century. Arabs can reach Chittagong if they cross the Indian shore (A. A. Khan 15).

The Opinion about the Advent of Islam after the Eighth Century in Bengal

Then, what about Islam in Bengal after the eighth century? Here, the chroniclers detail the interactions between the Arabs and Bengal. Qanungo sheds light on the subject from a new perception. He contends that travelogues, in addition to coinage, chronicles, terminologies, names of places, and ethnology, are essential for establishing the relationship between Arabs and Bengalis. These elements make it possible to date the start of bilateral interactions to the ninth century (Qanungo 110-11). Like Qanungo, Marrison has attempted to put a date on the early contact between Arabs and the region. He notes that Muslim traders and travellers had been in contact with “this region” since the ninth century. However, he did not share any information concerning the footsteps of the Muslim preachers (Marrison 28).

Moreover, Foez Ullah’s assertion that Muslim sultans landed in Chittagong province before 953 is met with significant scepticism. He suggests it for a later time. If it is, we may say that there is no Sultanate established yet, but it can be talked about as a semi-independent Amir. However, before that, he explains how some Muslim Sufi dervishes and Arab merchants arrived in the Chittagong region between the eighth and ninth centuries. The Arabs had to leave the Port of Chittagong to get to Java. This territory refers to the Java Islands because of the geographical and climatic conditions (Ullah 15-16). The previous data may be correct, although A.P. Phayre also claims an Arab state founded in the Chittagong territory (Phayre 36).

The Relationships between the Arabs and the Bengal

As it is foretold, the Arabs did business with Bengal. Nevertheless, how did they identify this geographical location? Since the 10th century, the Arabs

have been crossing the region by large ships, and they can see the lands of East Bengal from afar. After seeing these (red) lands, they were shouting بر هند (Barre Hind-the land of India) (Mufakkharul 13-33). Minhaz-i Shiraz also drew his attention to East Bengal, which Arabs indicated (Shiraj 5). So, it can be inferred that Barendra's (one of Bengal's ancient regions) development *is based on* "Barre Hind."

Another source examines it from a different angle. The renowned National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh states that "in a south Indian inscription (967 AD), there is a mention of a Brahmin as Varendradyutikarina. Varendra figures prominently in the Sena rulers' inscriptions; on their basis, scholars unanimously hold that the greater districts of Bogra, Dinajpur, Raj Shahi, and Pabna formed the Barendra area" (Chowdhury, "Varendra"). Varendra's use is therefore anticipated to begin in the ninth century, regardless of how it came to be. The assumption can be made that it was known to the Arabs before the ninth century.

In the upcoming paragraphs, the Arab and Bengal relationship can be examined in the following three keynotes: I. The records of the Arab geographers, II. Archaeological evidence, III. Rumours.

The records of the Arab geographers

There are disputes about whether Arab geographers visited the Bengal Region. Hence, the observations of the Bengal historians and the data from Arab geographers will be included first. The Arab geographers used navigational data from sailors⁵. On the one hand, historians would like to appraise such geographers' data. The geographical documentation is compiled along two main axes: (a) trade routes between multiple territories, including Bengal, and (b) ports. Of all the ports, only the *Samandar* port should be investigated for what kind of port it is because the other ports are not related to this discussion.

Ibn Khurdadbeh (d.299/912) claimed that Samandar is a renowned location for rice cultivation. A river journey of fifteen to twenty days also brings "aloe vera." *Kamrun*⁶ and the surrounding areas are famous for this product (Ibn Khurdadbeh, *Kitab-Ul-Masalik* 63-64). Besides, as cited by Karim, Idrisi mentions Samandar as a port where travellers arrive after going down the river from Kashmir. Moreover, this large city grew up near a busy commercial

area, where investing was profitable. Additionally, it says traders generally travelled to and from an island that was a day's journey away from here (Karim, *Chattogram Islam* 4-5). Conversely, Rahim criticises the account of al-Idrisi. He says that Idrisi had never visited the Indian continent. He narrated information that is only sometimes rational. His claims about Samandar, however, are consistent with those of Ibn Khurdadbih (Rahim 27).

The *Kamrun* or *Kamrup* waterway should follow the Chittagong port route, or the adjacent point to this port, across the Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers. Another port channel could not be attached to Kamrup. On the other hand, "People who still live on the banks of Meghna River call it 'Samandar'" (Dani 6-7) gives a clear view of the location of this place.

Besides Kamrup, other Bengal shores had attracted the Arabs' keen attention. Hoduvala believes that Sulayman al-Tajir used the term "Diyar Rahami" to describe the Chittagong region because he had expertise in both professions, as a geographer and a businessman⁷. As a result, most Bengali historians refer to it as Ruhmi and claim it is a part of modern-day Bangladesh (Hoduvala 4-6)⁸. Geographers' travel itineraries, at the very least, support this, claims Rahim. They state that Kamrup City and the sea encircle Rahmi region on opposite sides. In addition, Sulayman and Ibn Khurdadbih also indicated that the famous *Muslin Fabric* (Rahim 28) was exported to world markets from *Rahmi*. According to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, the muslin fabric manufacturing facility, situated along the banks of the Ganges River in Bengal, was an important trading hub (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 47-48). Based on the facts provided earlier, it can be concluded that Rahmi is situated in the Chittagong District. From here, Arab ships docked and left. Additionally, it was common for people who travelled there for commerce to stay there for a while (Fuad and Dadan 7-9).

It is now helpful to briefly discuss how and when Chittagong became a global trade centre and intimately involved with the Arabs. This is an essential factor to investigate for this study.

Ibn Battuta narrates: "When I entered Bengal, I encountered the first city of *Sudqawan*⁹ (also called Satgaon or Satigam). This is a perfect resort on the shores of *Bahr-i Azam* (Bengal Ocean). The Jamuna River and the Ganges meet there and flow into *Bahr-i Azam*" (Ibn Battuta 448).

Moreover, Ma-Huan clarifies Chittagong as “After travelling from Su-men-ta-la (an Indonesian region) for twenty-one days, we reached Pang-Ko-La (Bangladesh). However, we initially proceeded to Chah-ti-gan (Chittagong) (Bhattasali 169).

The following narration is also interesting regarding this topic. Many of the Prophet Muhammad’s companions returned to Mecca and Madina after their departure to Abyssinia. On the other hand, Sa’d b. Abu Wakkas, Kays b. Huzayfa, Urwa b. Asasa, and Abu Kays b. Harris did not return to their country of origin. In the seventh year of the Prophet’s preaching, they embarked on a journey to Southeast Asia with some Abyssinians. They also stated that they got a ship as a present from King Najashi. The sole objective of this mission was to promote Islam. They began by traveling to Malabar (India). They left here and spent the same time in Chittagong as they had in Malabar. Meanwhile, they impacted the local ruler Perumal and a group of individuals (Akhanda 35). However, historical texts from Islam do not have any evidence about this. Such information emerged as oral stories among the people after the Islamization of the Bengal region. Nevertheless, as noted by researcher Cemil Lee, “the historical proofs we have and the centuries interactions with the region are not refuted. However, it is challenging to locate supporting data on this subject” (Lee 29-32).

Here, researcher Zaman brings a different perspective. He reported that during the reign of Caliph Omar, a group of Islamic preachers visited Bengal for the first time. Mamun and Muhaimin served as this group’s leaders. Hamid Uddin, Murtaza Abdullah, and Abu Talib reached Bengal during the second stage. As a result, it is known that five successive delegations reached Bangladesh. Zaman also lists five further delegations from Iran and Egypt. These people built religious sites like the Khanqah (Zaman 168-69). Mannan raises the question of whether this chronicle does not appear in any other sources or is accurate (Mannan 85).

Abyssinian traders and other Muslims, mainly Arabs and Persians, lived on the coastal regions and islands of Bengal, such as Sandip and Hatiya. Rahim remarks that Barthema and Barbosa¹⁰ witnessed this event when they wandered the Meghna shore in the 16th century (Rahim 30). There will likely be a question about the origins of these Muslims. The answer might be the holdings and economic endeavours of the Arabs, particularly

in the Chittagong region. Furthermore, Chittagong was close to the aforementioned coastal regions. Nevertheless, Siddique comments that “factors leading to the diffusion of Islam varied from one region to another. While the Islamic trade and maritime activities in Southeast and Far East Asia played a key role in the Islamization process in a significant part of the region (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia), it played a comparatively lesser role in Bengal” (Siddique 11).

Archaeological evidence

Two distinct coins dating to the Abbasid Period (132-656/750-1258) were found in the Raj Shahi and Comilla areas, indicating that the Arabs landed in Bengal early. Archaeologists discovered these coins in 1930. Coin unearthed in Raj Shahi in 788 dates to Harun Rashid’s rule (170-193/786-809). The second Comilla dates from the reign of Caliph Muntasir Billah (247-248/861-866) (Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* 249; Karim, *Banglar Itihas-Sultani Amal* 62-63). However, the way both took to get there is a point of debate. As a result, two possible approaches are crucial in this context: (1) the coins brought by Islamic preachers or Sufis as pocket money, and (2) the coins brought by merchants (M. M. Khan 63-64). These two facts indicate that since the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate, Arab traders have maintained business ties in various regions of Bengal. Moreover, other non-Arab or non-local merchants travelling between Aden or Basra or similar ports of the Islamic geography, including Bengal, could have brought these coins. A striking illustration of this may be found in the crumbling walls of a Rangpur Mosque dating back to the Umayyad Period in 69 Hijri (Mannan 86-87).

Ibn Khurdadbih’s information can illustrate another point. He points out that – “the correct form of Rahma (already stated above) is Dharma, which stands for the first part of the name Dharmapala, and the king referred to here is Dharmapala who belonged to the Pala dynasty of Bengal and reigned from AD 769 to AD 801 or AD 815” (Ibn Khurdadbih, *Arabic Classical Accounts* 12). If this logic delivers the facts, the Abbasids had good business ties with the Pala dynasty (‘Pala Dynasty: The Great Patrons of Buddhism in India’; Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* 250). The coins may have been found at that time. From this perspective, these coins confirm the commercial relations of Muslim traders with Bengal since the 8th and 9th

centuries. They do not confirm the entry of Bengali people into Islam at large. In the most optimistic view, they show the existence of small Muslim communities as foreign traders with their native partners.

On the other hand, the founding of a mosque in the Umayyad period proves that the Arabs and the locals had a relationship from the earlier time of Islam. Without the help of locals, it would have been impossible for Arabs. Moreover, the traders may have been amazed by the virtues of Buddhist Pala, which he treated them and never forgot. That is why they might be called this tilt *Diyar ar-Rahmi* (The land of Dharma).

Rumors

Bengal's history has some common issues regarding spreading Islam over Bengal. The first one is – one day, an Arab commercial ship was involved in an accident on the Arakan coast. That is why onboard passengers petitioned the local ruler Ma-Ba-Toing-Man-Da-Ear for asylum (788-810). They eventually attained benefits similar to citizenship rights (Karim, “The Rohingyas” 7). On the one side, Chittagong Port is located right next to Arakan; if such trade and settlement developed on the Arakan coast after the accident, it would also apply to Bengal (Chittagong). As a result, it is unfair to mention Arabs as just existing in Arakan.

Another account follows a similar pattern. In 953, Su-La Teing Sanda-Ya, a king of the Rohingya, engaged in combat with Surtan, a neighbouring country. The city of Set-Ta-Going was the scene of this conflict. Haq claims that the name Surtan¹¹ is derived from the Arabic word “sultan.” In his view, certain refers to a sultan's sovereign state. Haq also links the Noakhali to the coastal region of Chittagong with it (Haq, *Purva Pakistane Islam* 17; Karim and Haq 3). Besides, he is supported by Ali (37-40). Karim, however, disagrees with them. He asserts that although it is pretty apparent that there are Arabs in the Chittagong region, discussing the existence of an Arab state stirs up apprehension (Karim, *Chattogram Islam* 16-17). With Karim, we cannot discuss from a state rather than a foreign Muslim trading community with their partners from the natives.

Chowdhury urges inversely. He considered that the Arabs only formed business ties in the eighth century. However, due to Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad¹², Muslims could not settle in Bengal until it was conquered

by the Khilji Turks (600/1204). On the other hand, Arab geographers Ibn Khurdadbih, Idrisi, and Merchant Sulayman would have addressed this subject in their respective works if the Arabs possessed such a settlement (Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* 248-50). Sharif highlights the discovery of coinage from the Abbasid Period and the pre-Ikhtiyar Uddin existence of Muslims throughout Bangladesh. However, he rejects the idea of states with a sizeable Muslim population or many settlers. These individuals only provided insights into a few of Bengal's trading routes. Another reason is that politically, the title of "sultan" appeared to be used from the early 13th century, not before it (Sharif 78).

After evaluating all available data, it seems clear that Bengali and Arabs' first interaction happened in the last part of the 7th century. Minimally, the relationship between the Pala dynasty and the Abbasid from its rising time proves that. For the influence of Arabs, a state might have been founded in the late period when small Muslim business communities lived. Nevertheless, no archaeological evidence had been found.

Islam in Bengal: The Assessments on Land Route and Turks Existence

As mentioned earlier in the text, Bengal Islam spread in two ways, one of which was the land route. This part can be divided into two aspects. The first can be the Tibetan tilt via the Silk Route¹³. The last route is the northwestern territory of India. The Turks entered Bengal from these entrance points. Now, we will assess how both routes played a pivotal role in the Turks' existence and the emergence of Islam in Bengal.

First, we need to consider the pre-Islamic historical ties of Bengal-Turk shortly. The Gaudian people (Bengal) confronted primarily Turkish Ak-Huns in northern India. The Gupta ruler initially halted the Hun influxes. Abruptly, after that, the Huns, led by Toramana (484-515), launched an invasion of Gupta's India, excluding Bengal (Cöhce 983-84; Majumdar 144). During the Western Gokturk rule (582-659), the Turkification of Afghanistan and North India began after the Ak-Hun state's defeat. The Gokturks, who were relatively more tolerant, applied a strategy of dispatching Turkish tribes to settle and control newly acquired regions. Like them, the Buddhist Pala dynasty of Bengal later adopted a similar approach, establishing multifaceted relations with Central Asian Turks (Ögel 59). In

this sense, the north-eastern India origin Buddhism spread in Turkistan. As cited in *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*,

...to the north, the great missionary movement through Turkestan and China had only just begun, while the race migration from the Himalayas into Burma and Indo-China, which made that kingdom a bulwark of Buddhism in the Middle Ages (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* 235).

The Tibetan overland route and its populaces will come first in our investigation to deliberate the Buddhist links to Central Asia. So, it can be delivered that Bengal had an earlier connection with the Tibetan Turks (Eastern Turks). Before pre-Ikhtiyar's military maneuver to Tibet (1206), most of its inhabitants were Turks. According to *Tabakat-i Nasiri*, in the mountainous regions situated between Tibet and the territory of Lakhanawat (Bengal), there are three distinct ethnic groups: the Kunch, the Mej (also known as Meg), and the Tiharu. Interestingly, all of these groups share physical features reminiscent of Turkic people. Furthermore, they also speak a unique language that falls somewhere between Hind (likely referring to the languages of the Indian subcontinent) and Turkic (Saraj 560). The historian Masudi asserts the same argument in his great work (Masudi 41, 57-59).

With mutual understanding, the neighbouring Indians imported affordable horses from Central Asia and Afghanistan via Tibet. To a lesser extent, they also acquired lower-quality horses from regions situated to the northeast, possibly from areas beyond the mountains into Bengal. These horses became called Turki or Tatar horses (Wink 85). In the later period (13th century), the Sena capital of Lakhanawati regularly received approximately fifteen hundred horses for trading. This indicates the persistence of the same trade route, spanning from Bihar through Bengal to Tibet and onwards to China (Dowson 311-12). This strongly implies that Muslim horse traders (from Central Asia) were well-established in Bengal even before the conquest (Siddique 11).

Indian sources also refer to early interactions between (Turkish) Muslims and Bengal. An inscription attributed to (Buddhist) Ratnapala, dating back to the 9th or 10th century, mentions "Tajiks," which appears to reference

the Tajiks of Central Asia. The famous Tajik Horses might indicate this. Chinese sources also utilized the Chinese version of this term, “Ta-shih,” to describe Muslims, and it seems that the exact meaning was applied to this term in the Indian inscription (Siddique 11; Shaw 116).

The trade relationship was not only limited to horses; elephants also came across the topic. As mentioned earlier in the text, Bengal, especially Rahmi, was known for its influence on elephants. It is noteworthy to state that the Ghaznavids Turks seized elephants as spoils during the incursions in India automatically became the property of the sultan, which amounted to one-fifth of the total spoils (Wink 101-02; Haig 19-20; Saltık 97-98). Here, it can be inferred that the Central Asian Turks imported the elephants from Lakhanawati.

Like Arabs, the Sufis, with trading groups, came to Bengal from Central Asia. This linkage might be created when Indians, along with Turks, Tajiks, and Mongols, are listed as guests in a Bukharan khanaqah, or Sufi hostel, during the medieval trade period along the Indo-Turonian caravan routes (Levi 91). So, the Sufis like Shaikh Abbas bin Hamza Nishapuri (d. 900), Shaikh Ahmad b. Muhammad (d. 952), Shaikh Ismail b. Najd Nishapuri (d. 975) and Shaikh Ibrahim Turki (d. 1169) might have come to Bengal with the Silk Route traders to preach Islam in an earlier era of Bengal (Ismail 35). Thanks to the Turkic Sufis’ peaceful missionary activities, “Islam has gained its greatest and most lasting missionary triumphs in times and places in which its political power has been weakest, as in Southern India and Eastern Bengal” (Arnold 263).

Moreover, researcher Öngören explains the cited Sufi names as follows: in Central Asia, Turkish Sufis were addressed as Shaikh until the 12th century (Öngören 52). The prefix-suffixes of their names also prove it. On the other hand, Shaikh ruled khanqahs after the 10th century. Sufi khanqahs were established in significant cities such as Basra, Baghdad, Nishapur, Rey, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Balkh (Uludağ 42-43). By this time, this religious culture had reached the Bengal region.

Secondly, the subsequent three phases are related to initially introducing Islam by land from the north-western border of India. These are – 1) Muhammad bin Kasim’s (d. 96/715) conquest of Sind and Multan (today’s

Pakistan). The phenomenon impacted the Arabian Sea coast but was unrelated to Bengal. 2) Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi's (d. 421/1030) invasion of Indian territories and its lasting repercussions. While it did not directly impact Bengal, it did instill a sense of fear regarding the Turks among the rulers and inhabitants of eastern India. 3) Muhammad Ghorī's (d. 1206) foundation of the Turkish sultanate in India (Rahman 426).

To continue on point two, under Sultan Mahmud, Kanoj (part of Bengal, ruled by the Buddhist Pala dynasty) was first occupied by a Turkish hero. Mahmud plundered and destroyed Kanoj in 1017 AD., then a new city, Bari, was founded afterwards (Sachau XLV). After the Sultan Mahmud and his dynasty, the influence of Islam expanded extensively. Following the conquest of regions such as Sind, Hindustan, Rajputana, Gujarat, and Bundelkhand, the territories of Bihar and Bengal were also brought under the sway of Islam (Titus 6; Elphinstone 611-12).

How was Bengal connected to the Turks after Sultan Mahmud until Islam officially entered the region? Richard Eaton's remark is more fit than any others. He conveys that Bengal's initial significant interactions with Islamic civilization occurred within geopolitical turmoil. This turmoil led to the migration of numerous Turkish-speaking groups from Central Asia to regions like the Iranian plateau and India. These Turks, whether as military enslaved people, adventurers, or refugees fleeing from the Mongol expansion, found their way not only to established Islamic centres like Baghdad, Cairo, and Samarkand but also to its peripheries, including Bengal. Often, these immigrant groups were led by individuals known as "alp" or "alp-eren," who were seen as heroic figures in old Turkic tales – warrior-adventurers whose extraordinary feats justified their way of life (Eaton 71).

The third issue was crucial in Islam's emergence in Bengal, though it had come late rather than the stated factors. It was directly impacted by the conquering of Bengal (1204) and was accomplished thanks to Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad b. Bakhtiyar Khilji. The conquering of Bengal marked the start of the termination, yet it ushered in a fresh era for Bengal. In terms of politics, it sowed the initial elements of Muslim governance in the region. On a societal level, it introduced the region to migrating individuals from various parts of the Muslim world, consequently influencing Bengal's society and culture (Sarkar 2).

As mentioned in this section, between the 9th-10th centuries, Sufi dervishes first spread Islam by travelling from Bukhara, Samarkand, Iran, and the Arab world (Ismail 35). Those Sufis mentioned above probably made their residences in Rangpur and the nearby cities. It is possible to move towards these places when they arrive by land from the north. However, Chowdhury confirms this differently. He assures the existence of any Muslim Sufis in the Bengal region before the conquest of Ikhtiyar Uddin. Before the reign of Ikhtiyar Uddin, there were numerous khanqahs in those areas (Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* 251). The Sufis, who came from Central Asia, only understood khanqah customs. However, as mentioned above, a mosque from the Umayyad era was founded in Rangpur, dating back to 69/688, though it is controversial. Therefore, a ruined wall of it has just been found. So, it should be said that the Islamic movement in the area started in full swing before the mosque was constructed.

Besides, the khanqah activities of Turkic Sufis and the demonstration of religious performance persuaded the locals to convert to Islam. The following Sufis are frequently listed in Bengali literature (Rashid 1-100; Sachse 150-76; Haq, *Bonge Sufi Proverb* 73-74, 95-98):

1. Baba Adam Shahid
2. Shah Mohammad Sultan Rumi
3. Shah Sultan Mahi Sawar
4. Makhdum Shah
5. Makhdum Shah Mahmud Ghaznavi
6. Shaikh Fariduddin Sakarganj
7. Sultan Bayzid Bostami

The other Turk Sufis did the same when evangelizing Islam. Some of them inherited Sufi Turuqs from Central Asia. However, when they came to Bengal, they largely engaged in combat with the native Hindu king. Slaughtering cows is one of the forbidden acts in the Hindu religion. Moreover, some Hindu kings did not tolerate the settlement of Sufis in their land. These issues occasionally sparked hostilities (Sharif 73-74). Despite the hostilities, the “Muhammedan proselytization of India did not begin with coercion and bloodshed; saints made the first conversions (Rahman 432)”.

Sharif's evaluation of these Sufi dervishes seems accurate. He claims that even though cow slaughter was prohibited, these Sufi dervishes completely disregarded the law. Warfare started as a result. Additionally, concerns like emulating the Sufi miracles and people accepting Islam because of being affected by them need to be examined and explored. By presenting some important issues to the kings, these Sufis were permitted to enter such lands. These variables are related to their homelands' social standings and other political pressures (Sharif 82). All these scenarios in this segment expose that the Turks had existed in Bengal before Islam. Nevertheless, later, they participated in Islamic activities like Arabs in Bengal due to their acceptance of Islam at a greater rate in the late 11th century.

Conclusion

It is necessary to evaluate that Islam was introduced to the Bengal region by sea instead of land if Muslim-Arab contacts occurred at the start of the eighth century and not during the early conversions. Additionally, it is vital to give the claims made by historians who research how Islam conquered the region a more objective base and scholarly contribution.

While there are disagreements on Bengal's Islamization, Turk Sufi dervishes and the merchants from Arabs made significant contributions that should never be overlooked. Although khanqahs (Sufi lodges) were not widespread in the early days of Islam, Sufis might have received support from merchants for accommodation. Through this support, they tried to spread the message of Islam among the local population. However, accurately measuring the activities of Arabs and Turkish Sufis in the Islamization of Bengal during these early times is challenging. There is clear evidence of such activities outside our topic in later periods.

Despite this, they have played a significant role in fundamentally altering societal beliefs; even though they were there for business, they paid close attention to religious instruction, preaching, and other associated activities to promote and advance Islam. Additionally, they strove to raise society's moral standards and promote Islam among individuals. These initial procedures aimed to build political and social infrastructure for Bengal Muslims. Additionally, it served as the foundation for Bengal's Islamic history.

Finally, putting aside the disputes over how Islam spread throughout the Bengal region, it would be more accurate to concentrate on how much Islam impacted Bengal society and whether the locals could achieve the structure Islam had in mind after converting.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

Notes

- 1 Find the details from (Karim, *Corpus of the Muslim Coins*; Karim, *Banglar Itihas-Sultani*; Karim, *Social History*) and Rahim's (Rahim 2008).
- 2 Consider (Haq, *A History of Sufism*).
- 3 A well-written account of him is the (Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal*).
- 4 The first Turkish dynasty to conduct expeditions as far as Asam in northern India was the Khilji's. Muhammad Bakhtiyar, the dynasty's founder, was originally from the Khilji's, a nation living in Garamsir, Afghanistan, between Sistan and Ghazni (Özcan 503-04).
- 5 These are mentioned here in his works: Sulayman, *Silsila-ut Tawarikh*; Ibn Khurdadbih, *Kitab ul-Masālik*; Masudi, *Muruj ad-Dhahab*.
- 6 Kamrun or Kamrut may be a corrupted version of Kamrup. Kamrup is in Asam (an Indian province). Wood was produced there. It took fifteen days to ship it to Chittagong. See (Ibn Khurdadbih, *Kitab-Ul-Masalik* 63-64; Rahim 27).
- 7 Rahmi, Rajmi, or Raham are the progenitors of the word Ruhmi. Some scholars claim it started circulating in people's mouths after the 16th century; it was identified as Ramu. On the other hand, Ramu is currently a Bangladesh district situated along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. While exploring the Bengal Region, Relof Fitch also recorded words like Recon (Arakan) and Reme (Ramu) (1585-86). Due to its location on the seaside, Arab traders were also familiar with it. See (N. Islam 264-75; Rahim 29; Ibn Khurdadbih, *Kitab-Ul-Masalik Wal-Mamalik* 65; Dadan and Fuad 185-87).
- 8 Hoduvala criticized the knowledge of others, such as Masudi and Sulayman, in his work.
- 9 The designation of "Sadkawan" as a location is up for question. However, Ibn Batuta's use of the term "Gangetic coast" by the Arabs or Sudkawan (Satgaon/Satigam is also its source) informs us that there was a sizable metropolis on the Bahr-i A'zam coast (Indian Ocean). The saying that the Hindu-frequented Ganges and Jamuna Rivers merge here and then into the sea identifies the location. As a result, we can refer to Sadkawan as the modern Chittagong.

- 10 They were both from Europe. The words they noted about Bengal are essential for its history.
- 11 This means the war will not be held.
- 12 He was the first Islamic commander and conqueror to enter the Bengal territory by land (Özcan 503-04; Fuad, "Türk Komutanı" 474).
- 13 The Silk Road network is generally thought of as stretching from an eastern terminus at the ancient Chinese capital city of Chang'an (now Xi'an) to westward endpoints at Byzantium (Constantinople), Antioch, Damascus, and other Middle Eastern cities (Muqi 10-20).

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