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### **The Blue Sea's Role in the Islamization and Colonization of Bengal: A Historical Analysis of Maritime Influences on Religio-Politics**

**Nur Ullah**

MPhil Student, Department of Arabic, University of Dhaka, nurullahbd92@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

The Bay of Bengal has played a pivotal role in shaping the religious and political history of Bengal. This study examines the historical influence of maritime trade routes on the Islamization and colonization of the region, highlighting interactions among Arab traders, European missionaries, and colonial powers over several centuries. It explores how these processes shaped Bengal's identity and their enduring legacy in modern Bangladesh. Arab merchants utilized the Bay of Bengal as a critical maritime corridor connecting the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East from the early centuries of Islam. These routes facilitated not only the exchange of goods, such as metals, textiles, and spices, but also the dissemination of Islamic culture and practices, laying the foundations for future Islamic empires in South Asia. Subsequently, European colonial powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, exploited Bengal's strategic coastal location. The British East India Company, and later the British Crown, leveraged maritime dominance to establish trade monopolies, control strategic routes, and restructure local governance, transforming the economy and social structures of Bengal. This study employs a qualitative historical methodology, relying on secondary sources such as scholarly monographs, journal articles, archival records, and translated primary documents. Document analysis and comparative interpretation are used to examine patterns of Islamization and colonial interventions, while situating Bengal within a broader South Asian maritime context. The research demonstrates that the Bay of Bengal functioned not merely as a commercial hub but as a conduit for religious and political influence. The socio-political structure of contemporary Bangladesh continues to reflect the intertwined legacies of Islamization and colonization, underscoring the enduring significance of maritime networks in shaping Bengal's historical and cultural identity.

**Key Words:** Bangladesh, Blue Sea, Religion, Politics, Islam, Colonialism

## **Introduction**

The history of Bengal has been profoundly shaped by its proximity to the Bay of Bengal, commonly referred to as the Blue Sea. Functioning as a key maritime highway, the Bay facilitated dynamic cultural, religious, and political exchanges, particularly through the spread of Islam and the establishment of European colonial powers (Karim, 2014). From the early medieval period onward, Bengal's coastline became an active participant in transregional trade networks linking the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Islam, 2003). These maritime channels enabled the movement of goods, peoples, and ideas, ultimately influencing the region's religious transformation and political reconfiguration.

Arab merchants and missionaries played a crucial role in introducing and propagating Islamic culture and practices along the Bengal coast. Over time, Islam gradually became a dominant faith, transforming the social and political fabric of the region (Eaton, 1993). Later, European powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, utilized the same maritime networks to expand their influence. The British East India Company in particular leveraged naval supremacy to establish trade monopolies, control strategic routes, and restructure local governance, reshaping Bengal's economy and society (Bhattacharya, 1954).

This study addresses two central arguments. First, maritime trade networks were instrumental in introducing and entrenching Islam in Bengal. Second, the same maritime routes enabled European colonial powers, especially the British, to gain political and economic dominance over the region. While much scholarship has focused separately on Islamization or colonialism, the maritime dimension linking these processes has received limited attention. This paper examines how the Bay of Bengal functioned as a critical conduit for both religious and colonial influence and analyzes the enduring impact of these historical processes on the identity and social structures of contemporary Bangladesh. By situating Bengal's history within the broader Indian Ocean world, this study highlights how trade, religion, and colonialism were intertwined in shaping the region's transformation and long-term development.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative historical approach to examine the impact of maritime trade on the Islamization and colonization of Bengal. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including historical monographs, scholarly articles, archival records, and translations of primary

documents, to trace commercial, religious, and political interactions over several centuries. Document analysis is used to extract information on trade networks, religious activities, and colonial interventions. Comparative and interpretive analyses are applied to explore patterns of Islamization by Arab traders and subsequent transformations under European powers, particularly the British East India Company. The study also situates Bengal within a broader South Asian maritime context, highlighting the Bay of Bengal as a conduit for cultural, religious, and political exchange. This methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how maritime connections influenced Bengal's socio-political structures, religious landscape, and identity formation, with enduring effects on contemporary Bangladesh.

### **1. Historical Context of Bengal and Maritime Trade**

Located at the delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers, Bengal has historically been one of the most fertile and populous regions of South Asia. Its geographical location made it a natural terminus for inland trade routes and a strategic point for maritime connections across the Indian Ocean world (Hall, 2009). By the first millennium CE, Bengal was integrated into a broader regional economy through the movement of goods, peoples, and ideas via sea routes (Gupta, 2024). This maritime economy, centered on ports such as Chittagong, Satgaon, and later Dhaka and Calcutta, attracted a diverse set of traders from Arabia, Persia, Southeast Asia, and eventually Europe (Alam, 1997).

The importance of Bengal in the maritime world lay in its abundant resources and strategic location. It was a major producer of fine textiles, rice, salt, and ship-building timber. These goods were highly valued in markets from the Middle East to Southeast Asia (Chakrabarty, 2002). Historical records and travelogues, such as those of Sulaiman, Al-Masudi, Ibn Battuta, and later European chroniclers, speak of Bengal as a thriving coastal society deeply engaged in maritime commerce (Elliot & Dowson, 1867). This integration into the Indian Ocean trade system was a key precondition for both the Islamization of Bengal and its later colonization.

Before the arrival of Islam, Bengal was religiously diverse, with dominant traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, and local animistic practices (Karim, 2014). The political landscape was equally fragmented, often divided among various regional rulers and princely states. The lack of centralized authority made the region particularly susceptible to the influence

of foreign traders and religious emissaries who could establish relationships with local elites and integrate themselves into existing political and economic structures.

## **2. Pre-Islamic Bengal and Early Trade Networks**

Prior to the advent of Islam, Bengal was a thriving center of Hindu and Buddhist culture, deeply engaged in regional trade with Southeast Asia and the broader Indian Ocean world (Ali, 2003). Its coastal geography enabled active commerce in spices, textiles, and metals, fostering interactions with diverse civilizations long before Islamic influences began to take root. The expansion of Islam in the Indian Ocean began not through conquest but through commerce. From the 7th century onward, Arab traders began to traverse the maritime routes stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to the coasts of East Africa, India, and Southeast Asia (Nainar, 1942). These early Muslim seafarers did not come as conquerors but as merchants and missionaries, bearing not only goods but also religious and cultural values. The Arabian dhow, propelled by the seasonal monsoons, became a vehicle not just for trade but for Islamic civilization itself (Eaton, 1993). Arab traders first reached the western coast of India, particularly Gujarat and Malabar, but soon extended their networks toward the eastern littoral, including Bengal. The ports of south-eastern Bengal, particularly Chittagong, became key nodes in these Islamic trade routes (Islam, 2003). Muslim traders from Yemen, Oman, and Persia probably established commercial outposts and mosques in these port cities. Archaeological evidence, such as inscriptions and mosque foundations, confirms the presence of Muslim communities in Bengal as early as the 8th or 9th century.

What distinguished Islamic maritime networks from earlier trade systems was their integration of commerce with dawah, or missionary activity. Many Muslim traders acted as informal missionaries, spreading Islamic beliefs through personal example, community institutions, and intermarriage with local populations (Rahman & Muhit, 2025). The concept of Dar al-Islam, the abode of Islam, was extended not just through conquests but through the creation of Muslim-majority enclaves in trading towns. These enclaves often featured mosques, madrasas, and Sufi lodges, which became focal points for Islamic learning and social organization (Shimmel, 1980).

The spread of Islam in Bengal was thus a gradual and largely peaceful process, facilitated by the economic power and cultural appeal of Muslim traders. Unlike in other parts of South

Asia, where Islam arrived through military conquest, in Bengal it was the maritime networks and commercial diplomacy of Arab Muslims that laid the foundation for Islamic cultural dominance.

### **3. Maritime Trade and the Arrival of Islam in Bengal**

#### **3.1. Arab Traders and Missionaries**

The early centuries of Islam saw Arab merchants expanding their trade networks across the Indian Ocean. By the 8th century, Arab traders had established commercial connections with Bengal's coastal regions (Eaton, 1993). These maritime networks facilitated not only trade but also the gradual introduction of Islamic beliefs through Sufi missionaries who accompanied or followed these merchants. The arrival of Muslim traders in Bengal had far-reaching cultural and religious consequences. These traders brought not only new goods but also new ideas, languages, and practices. Arabic and Persian became important languages for religious and administrative purposes, influencing local vernaculars such as Bengali. More significantly, these merchants introduced Islamic principles through daily interactions, religious observances, and philanthropy (Ikram, 1964).

The success of Islamic dissemination in Bengal was closely linked to the adaptability of Islam to local customs and the inclusive approach adopted by Sufi missionaries. Sufi saints, often accompanying or following the footsteps of traders, played a critical role in spreading Islam among the rural and marginalized populations (Rahman, 2018). Unlike the more legalistic or scholastic traditions of Islam that dominated the courts and cities of the Islamic world, Sufism offered a more mystical and emotional connection with the divine appealing to people from diverse religious and social backgrounds.

The khanqahs (Sufi lodges) and dargahs (shrines) established by Sufis became centers of spiritual, social, and economic life in many parts of coastal and inland Bengal (Siddiqui, 2022). These institutions provided education, mediation, and relief to the poor, establishing the moral authority of Islam in regions where state power was limited or absent. Many conversions occurred through such interactions, not through coercion or conquest (Khan & Talukdar, 2021). Over time, Islam in Bengal took on a distinctive character shaped by both Arab and indigenous influences. Local customs were often incorporated into Islamic practices, resulting in a syncretic religious culture. This syncretism, while criticized by more orthodox movements in later centuries, was instrumental in making Islam accessible and appealing to the Bengali populace

(Rahman, 2018)

### **3.2. Maritime Networks Connecting Bengal to the Islamic World**

The Bay of Bengal served as a major corridor connecting the Indian subcontinent with Islamic port cities such as Basra, Muscat, and Aden (Hourani, 1995). The commercial exchange of goods, ranging from Bengal's rich textiles to Middle Eastern spices, was accompanied by the transfer of religious practices, leading to Islam's gradual integration into local culture. By the 13th century, Islam had become a significant religious force in Bengal. While Arab traders laid the early groundwork, the institutionalization of Islam accelerated under the rule of Muslim sultanates (Ali, 2003). The Delhi Sultanate's conquest of northern Bengal in the early 13th century marked a turning point, as political power began to align with the Islamic religious order. Nonetheless, maritime Bengal, especially the south-eastern coast, retained its identity as a space of commercial Islam, where local rulers and merchant elites collaborated with Muslim traders for mutual benefit (Karim, 2014). Chittagong emerged as a prominent Islamic city during this period, functioning as a major port and a religious hub (Muhit & Rabbi, 2025). Islamic architecture flourished, and local rulers endowed mosques and madrasahs to consolidate their legitimacy. The presence of Arab, Persian, and Central Asian Muslims added to the cosmopolitan character of the city, enhancing its role as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia (Stewart, 1847).

The increasing Islamization of coastal Bengal also had demographic implications. Settlements grew around religious centers and trading ports, leading to the emergence of Muslim-majority communities. Many of these communities consisted of converts from lower-caste Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds who found in Islam both spiritual fulfilment and socio-economic mobility (Roy, 2014). The egalitarian ethos of Islam stood in contrast to the rigid hierarchies of the prevailing caste system, making conversion an attractive option. Thus, the maritime corridor of the Bay of Bengal became not just a route of goods but of identities. Islam's establishment in the coastal regions set the stage for its later expansion into the heartland of Bengal, eventually leading to the emergence of Bengal as a major Muslim province in the subcontinent.

### **4. Islamization of Bengal: Cultural, Social, and Political Changes**

As maritime trade flourished, Islamic influence permeated Bengal's social and political structures. Indigenous elites, often motivated by economic incentives, gradually adopted Islam,

resulting in the establishment of Muslim rule by the 13th century (Eaton, 1993). The spread of Islam was further solidified through the patronage of Sufi saints, whose inclusive teachings appealed to marginalized communities. The Bengal Sultanate, with capitals at Gaur and later Pandua, extended its influence over coastal and inland regions alike (Karim, 2013). However, these were the port cities, deeply tied to Muslim mercantile networks, which proved most economically vital. The sultanate promoted trade with the Muslim world by offering tax incentives, building caravanserais and dockyards, and maintaining a relatively tolerant religious policy that continued to attract merchants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Hasan, 2012). Maritime connections also allowed the Bengal Sultanate to assert its autonomy from Delhi and other northern powers. The sultans used naval power to suppress piracy, control coastal territories, and even project influence into Arakan (modern Rakhine State in Myanmar). The importance of maritime military power became evident in the 15th century when Bengal began expeditions across the Bay of Bengal, seeking to control key trade routes and assert regional dominance.

The emergence of an Islamic polity grounded in maritime commerce reinforced the legitimacy of Islam as a political force in Bengal. Inscriptions, coinage, and court chronicles from the period reflect the growing self-confidence of Muslim rulers who saw themselves not just as local powers but as part of a broader Islamic acumen (Akhtaruzzaman, 2002). The consolidation of Islamic authority culminated in the rise of regional sultanates, such as the Bengal Sultanate (14th-16th centuries), which fostered architectural, cultural, and administrative changes that solidified Islam's presence.

## **5. European Colonization and Maritime Dominance**

By the early 16th century, the maritime equilibrium of the Indian Ocean began to shift dramatically with the arrival of European powers. Motivated by the pursuit of spices, gold, and Christian evangelism, Portuguese, Dutch, and later British seafarers disrupted the existing Islamic trade networks that had connected Bengal with the broader Muslim world for centuries (Chaudhury, 2016). Their entry marked a transition from multicultural maritime exchange to aggressive mercantile imperialism.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a presence in Bengal, arriving at Chittagong and Satgaon in the early 1500s. Their strategy combined military coercion with trade

monopoly (Islam, 1991). Armed with superior naval technology, most notably the heavily armed carrack and galleon, they were able to dominate key sea routes and levy taxes on existing Muslim and Hindu traders (Islam, 1991). Though their territorial control was limited, they played a critical role in reorienting the Bay of Bengal's trade toward European-dominated circuits. The impact of the Portuguese extended beyond commerce. As Catholics, they also sought to convert local populations. Jesuit missionaries accompanied traders and attempted to evangelize in Bengal, often with limited success. Nonetheless, their presence set a precedent for the later intertwining of trade, religion, and colonial power, one that would be taken up more effectively by the British in subsequent centuries.

### **5.1. Portuguese, Dutch, and Early European Influence**

European colonial powers first arrived on Bengal's shores in the 16th century, with the Portuguese establishing early coastal enclaves (Campos, 1919). The Dutch followed, seeking control of lucrative maritime trade routes, though their influence remained limited compared to later colonial powers. They followed the Portuguese into Bengal in the early 17th century, operating under the aegis of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch were primarily concerned with profit and generally avoided direct religious interference. They focused on controlling the export of saltpeter, textiles, and indigo commodities that were in high demand in European markets (Brown, 2009). The Dutch established factories (trading posts) in key locations such as Chinsurah and Baranagar, integrating Bengal more firmly into the global capitalist economy. Despite their different approaches, both the Portuguese and Dutch challenged the existing Muslim-dominated maritime networks by introducing new systems of taxation, land tenure, and monopolistic trade practices. Indigenous rulers, who had previously relied on Muslim traders for revenue and information, now found themselves increasingly dependent on European companies. This dependency weakened local sovereignties and laid the groundwork for the next, more powerful colonial force: the British (Mallick, 1977).

These European interventions disrupted the Islamic maritime system in Bengal. The religious networks that had once flowed freely from Mecca to Chittagong now faced political and economic obstacles. As European ships came to dominate the Bay of Bengal, the influence of Arab and Persian traders waned. The long-standing Muslim mercantile elite began to lose its economic base, even as Islam remained socially and culturally embedded in the region ().

## **5.2. British East India Company and Colonial Expansion**

The British East India Company capitalized on Bengal's strategic position to develop trade monopolies, particularly in textiles and raw materials (Marshall, 2006). Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757, British control tightened, leading to the systematic dismantling of indigenous political structures and the eventual incorporation of Bengal into the British Empire.

The British East India Company arrived in Bengal in the late 17th century and quickly rose to dominance. Initially focused on trade, particularly in textiles, indigo, and salt, the Company gradually took on administrative and military functions. The turning point came in 1757 with the Battle of Plassey, where British forces defeated the Nawab of Bengal and established de facto control over the region (Schendel, 2020). Unlike their European predecessors, the British were far more systematic in their exploitation of Bengal's maritime and inland resources. They developed Calcutta (now Kolkata) into a major port city and administrative hub, effectively replacing older Islamic port centers like Chittagong and Satgaon. Under the British, the Bay of Bengal was transformed into a colonial lake, facilitating not just commerce but also surveillance, taxation, and military deployment (Bhattacharya, 1954).

British colonial policies had profound implications for Bengal's socio-political and religious landscape. The dismantling of indigenous trade networks, land reforms such as the Permanent Settlement (1793), and the imposition of Western legal codes disrupted existing Muslim institutions (Sanaullah et al., 2025). Madrasas and Sufi lodges lost state patronage, while Islamic courts were subordinated to colonial jurisprudence. This systematic marginalization of Muslim elites led to a significant decline in their social and economic standing by the 19th century (Marshall, 2006).

Nevertheless, the British also brought new opportunities for engagement. Muslim reform movements, such as those led by Haji Shariatullah and the Faraidi movement, emerged as responses to colonial dominance and the perceived decline of Islamic life. These movements were both religiously purist and socially activist, seeking to restore Islamic values while adapting to new political realities (Rahim, 1978). Importantly, the British used maritime superiority not just to control Bengal but to dominate the entire Indian Ocean region. Bengal served as a staging ground for imperial expansion into Burma, Malaya, and beyond. Ships built and manned in Bengal were deployed across the empire, and Bengal's ports became vital to the global flow of

imperial commerce.

### **5.3. Impact on Bengal's Governance and Economy**

Colonial policies drastically altered Bengal's economic landscape, dismantling traditional industries and redirecting resources to serve British economic interests (Islam, 1991). Additionally, British maritime dominance stifled regional trade autonomy, contributing to widespread socio-economic disruptions (Marshall, 2006). British colonization of Bengal, anchored through maritime control, ushered in a profound transformation of the region's political economy. Traditional agrarian systems were dismantled in favor of extractive colonial revenue models, most notably the Permanent Settlement, which converted zamindars (landholders) into rent-collecting agents for the British crown (Ahmad, 1976). This drastically altered rural power dynamics, marginalizing both peasant communities and the traditional Muslim elite who had thrived under Islamic governance (Mukherjee, 2013). In economic terms, Bengal's centuries-old role as a textile manufacturing hub was systematically undermined. British policies encouraged the import of industrially produced British cloth while suppressing local industries. Maritime ports like Calcutta were used to siphon raw materials, especially jute, indigo, and opium, to Britain and its overseas colonies. The Bay of Bengal, once a bridge for Islamic trade and cultural diffusion, became a pipeline for colonial exploitation (Islam, 1991). The British also reorganized maritime infrastructure, constructing lighthouses, docks, and naval stations. These investments were not for local benefit but to tighten the grip of empire across the Indian Ocean. Coastal Bengal, once cosmopolitan and commercially autonomous, was now part of an extractive colonial system.

## **6. Legacy of Islamization and Colonization**

### **6.1. Socio-political Impacts on Modern Bangladesh**

The intertwined legacies of Islamization and colonialism continue to shape Bangladesh's socio-political fabric today. Islamic identity remains a key component of the nation's cultural framework, while post-colonial governance structures reflect both resistance and adaptation to colonial-era changes (Mallick, 1977). Colonial rule induced a number of religio-political changes in Bengal. The decline of Muslim aristocracy led to a crisis of identity and purpose among the Muslim population. While some adapted through collaboration with the British administration or engagement in reform movements, others turned toward revivalist and separatist ideologies

(Ahmed, 1974).

The British adopted a divide-and-rule policy, which exacerbated Hindu-Muslim tensions. The 1905 Partition of Bengal, though ostensibly administrative, was widely perceived as an attempt to fragment the Bengali nationalist movement by creating a Muslim-majority province in East Bengal (Rahman, 2019). While it was reversed in 1911, the partition set a precedent for religiously defined politics (Rashid, 2001). Colonial education and missionary efforts further disrupted traditional Islamic education systems. English-medium schools promoted Western liberal values while diminishing the role of madrasas and religious scholars (Nurulla & Naik, 1943). This fostered a class of Western-educated elites, some of whom sought to reconcile Islamic identity with modernity, while others gravitated toward pan-Islamic solidarity or regional nationalism (Ashraf, 1982). A key difference between the Islamic and colonial maritime regimes was their underlying intent. Islamic maritime networks, especially during the early Arab trading era, were largely integrative. They facilitated exchange not only of goods but also of religious ideas and cultural practices, often accommodating local customs and identities.

In contrast, European colonial maritime strategies were extractive and exclusionary. Their objective was to monopolize resources, suppress local industries, and impose a hierarchical political order (Islam, 1991). Ports became colonial outposts rather than cosmopolitan hubs. Trade routes were militarized and controlled not for mutual benefit but to ensure imperial supremacy (Ahmed, 1974). This contrast helps explain the different legacies left by these systems. The Islamic maritime tradition left behind a deep-rooted religious and cultural identity that persists in modern Bangladesh. The colonial maritime legacy, by contrast, contributed to economic underdevelopment, political fragmentation, and the institutionalization of religious divisions.

## **6.2. Lasting Effects on Regional Identity**

These historical developments solidified Bengal's position as a religiously diverse and politically contested region, with maritime trade continuing to influence regional economic strategies in modern times (Islam, 2012). The legacies of both Islamization and colonization continue to shape modern Bangladesh. The country remains a Muslim-majority nation with a strong Islamic cultural identity, an enduring result of centuries of Arab, Persian, and Indian Ocean influence. Sufi shrines, Islamic festivals, and madrasas remain vital components of public

life (Metcalf, 2014). At the same time, colonial-era infrastructure, legal systems, and economic patterns persist. The port of Chittagong continues to be Bangladesh's primary maritime outlet, a role it assumed during colonial rule. The administrative divisions, legal codes, and education systems instituted by the British remain largely intact. Religio-political tensions, rooted in colonial divide-and-rule tactics, occasionally flare up in the form of communal violence or sectarian movements. However, Bangladesh also continues to engage with its maritime heritage through initiatives in the Bay of Bengal, regional trade cooperation, and port development, seeking to reclaim its historic role as a connector in the Indian Ocean world.

### **Conclusion**

The Bay of Bengal has long served as a critical conduit for both commerce and cultural transformation in Bengal. Through maritime interactions, Islam was introduced and gradually embedded into Bengal's societal fabric, while European colonial powers leveraged the region's strategic coastal position to establish control and reshape its political landscape. The legacies of Islamization and colonization persist in modern Bangladesh's identity, demonstrating the transformative power of maritime networks in regional history.

This article has argued that the Blue Sea, specifically the Bay of Bengal, was not merely a geographic entity but a dynamic force in shaping the Islamization and colonization of Bengal. Through centuries of maritime exchange, Arab traders and missionaries laid the foundations of an Islamic religious identity that remains central to Bengal's cultural fabric. Later, European colonial powers beginning with the Portuguese and culminating in British imperial rule' reconfigured these maritime networks into tools of conquest and extraction.

While the Islamic maritime tradition was largely integrative and spiritual in character, colonial regimes introduced hierarchical, exploitative systems that altered Bengal's political and economic trajectory. The interplay of these two maritime legacies, Islamic and colonial, produced the complex religio-political landscape that defines modern Bangladesh. Understanding this history helps to contextualize current debates around identity, development, and regional cooperation in South Asia. By focusing on the sea as a central historical actor, this study challenges land-centric narratives of Bengal's past and invites further inquiry into how maritime environments have shaped the destinies of coastal societies.

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