

Muslim–Hindu Relations in the Delhi Sultanate: A Socio-Political Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines Hindu–Muslim relations during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) within the framework of South Asian historiography and Area Studies, combining a critical reading of primary sources with socio-political theory. Rather than reducing the period to narratives of conquest or cultural synthesis, it evaluates it as a multifaceted era in which political accommodations, social hierarchies, religious practices, temple desecrations, forced conversions, cultural exchanges, and identity negotiations unfolded simultaneously. Within this scope, Persian court chronicles, the travel account of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and vernacular voices from Bengal such as the Vaiṣṇava literature and the writings of Vidyāpati, Jayananda, and Vijaya Gupta are examined together, enabling a comparative analysis of Muslim historians’ legitimacy-oriented perspectives and Hindu sources’ ideological concerns. The findings highlight structural inequalities such as the dhimmī status of Hindus, the imposition of the jizya tax, and legal as well as social restrictions, while also drawing attention to spheres of coexistence shaped by Ṣūfī influence, neighborhood interactions, fictive kinship ties, everyday practices, and literary exchanges. The Bengali case in particular illustrates that despite rigid religious boundaries, fragile forms of shared life could emerge. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s testimony reveals paradoxical Hindu attitudes of hospitality and exclusion grounded in ritual purity, while the Vaiṣṇava corpus demonstrates both resilience and adaptation strategies among rural communities under pressure. Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-analytical approach that triangulates diverse genres of sources and critically engages with modern historiographical debates, thereby moving beyond the binary of “conflict” versus “harmony.” Ultimately, the article argues that the Delhi Sultanate must be understood not merely as a political regime but as a formative “contact zone” where identities and practices of coexistence were continuously reshaped. This process not only facilitated the entrenchment of Islam in the Indian subcontinent but also left a lasting legacy that continues to shape the religion-based political dynamics of contemporary India.

Keywords

Indology, Delhi Sultanate, Hindu–Muslim relations, Intercultural encounters, South Asia.

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Delhi Sultanlığı Döneminde Müslüman–Hindu İlişkileri: Sosyo-Politik Bir Analiz

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Öz

Bu makale, Delhi Sultanlığı (1206–1526) döneminde Müslüman–Hindu ilişkilerini Güney Asya tarih yazımı ve Alan Çalışmaları perspektifinde incelemekte; sosyo-politik kuramın eleştirel kaynak okumasıyla birleşen bütüncül bir yaklaşım ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, söz konusu dönemi yalnızca askerî fetihler veya kültürel sentez süreçleri üzerinden değil, aynı zamanda siyasal uzlaşmalar, toplumsal hiyerarşiler, dinsel pratikler, tapınak tahripleri, zorunlu dönüşümler, kültürel alışverişler ve kimlik müzakerelerinin eş zamanlı olarak şekillendirdiği çok katmanlı bir dönem olarak değerlendirmektedir. Bu çerçevede Farsça saray kronikleri, İbn Battûta’nın seyahatnamesi, Bengal’deki Vaişnava edebiyatı ile Vidyapati, Cayananda ve Vicaya Gupta gibi yerel yazarların metinleri birlikte ele alınmış; böylece hem Müslüman tarihçilerin meşruiyet merkezli vurguları hem de Hindu kaynaklarının ideolojik ve dinî kaygıları karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, Hinduların zimmî statüsü, cizye vergisi, toplumsal ve hukuki sınırlamalar gibi yapısal eşitsizlikleri ortaya koyarken; diğer yandan Süfî etkisi, komşuluk ilişkileri, hayalî akrabalık bağları, gündelik pratiklerdeki alışverişler ve edebî etkileşimler aracılığıyla ortaya çıkan kültürel yakınlaşmaları da gözler önüne sermektedir. Özellikle Bengal örneği, dinî sınırların sertliğine rağmen birlikte yaşam deneyimlerinin kırılğan biçimlerde var olabildiğini göstermektedir. İbn Battûta’nın gözlemleri, Hinduların konukseverlik ve saflık anlayışlarıyla bağlantılı çelişkili tutumlarını ortaya koyarken; Vaişnava literatürü, kırsal toplulukların dinsel baskılar karşısında geliştirdikleri direniş ve uyum stratejilerini yansıtmaktadır. Bu çalışma, metodolojik açıdan tarihsel-analitik bir yaklaşım benimseyerek farklı türden kaynakların eleştirel karşılaştırmasını yapmayı amaçlamakta ve modern literatürdeki “çatışma” ve “uyum” ikilemini aşan yeni bir okuma önermektedir. Sonuç olarak, Delhi Sultanlığı yalnızca siyasal bir rejim değil, kimliklerin ve birlikte yaşam pratiklerinin şekillendiği kurucu bir “temas bölgesi” olarak değerlendirilmelidir. Bu süreç, dönemin koşullarında İslam’ın Hint alt kıtasında kalıcı biçimde kökleşmesini sağlamış ve günümüz Hindistan’ının din temelli siyasal dinamiklerini doğrudan belirleyen kalıcı bir miras bırakmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Hindoloji, Delhi Sultanlığı, Hindu–Müslüman ilişkileri, Kültürlerarası etkileşim, Güney Asya.

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Introduction

The study of Muslim-Hindu relations during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) occupies a central position in the historiography of South Asia as well as in the broader field of Area Studies, where the interplay of religion, politics, and society provides a lens for understanding patterns of intercultural encounter. Examining these relations enables scholars to move beyond narrow political histories while also appreciating how cultural, social, and religious dynamics shaped the lived experiences of communities in a region that remains of global strategic and intellectual interest. The Sultanate period marked the first extensive and enduring Muslim political presence in northern India, shaping administrative and military structures along with the contours of social and cultural interactions between Muslims and Hindus. These relations oscillated between conflict and cooperation, negotiation and contestation, and their analysis offers valuable insight into the broader processes of identity formation, cultural accommodation, and religious pluralism in the Indian subcontinent.

This article seeks to offer a socio-political analysis of Muslim-Hindu relations in the Delhi Sultanate, situating the discussion within both historical narratives and contemporary scholarly interpretations. The central aim is not to provide a comprehensive history of the period but rather to highlight the multiple dimensions, including political, social, and cultural aspects, through which Muslim and Hindu communities encountered one another. In doing so, the study emphasizes that the Delhi Sultanate was not merely a political regime but also a space of intercultural formative contact zone where Islamic governance interacted with pre-existing Indic traditions.

The article is structured into several interrelated parts. The scope of the study is limited to the Delhi Sultanate proper, leaving aside the later Mughal era (1526–1857), which requires distinct analysis due to its imperial ideology and longer consolidation. Methodologically, the paper adopts a historical-analytical approach, relying on both primary sources, such as chronicles, inscriptions, and travelers' accounts, as well as secondary literature. Within this framework, textual evidence is analyzed through the lens of socio-political theory, drawing on insights from both Islamic historiography and South Asian studies. One significant limitation of the present research is the uneven nature of the available sources. Muslim chroniclers such as Ziya al-Din Barani (d. 758/1357) and Amir Khusrau (d. 725/1325) often wrote from within the courtly context, emphasizing royal authority and Islamic legitimacy, whereas indigenous Hindu sources remain relatively scarce and fragmented. This asymmetry necessitates a critical reading of the sources, attentive to silences, exaggerations, and ideological framings. Moreover, the study acknowledges the impossibility of capturing the entire complexity of interfaith relations in a single article; instead, it selects key themes, such as political accommodation, social hierarchies, temple desecrations, and cultural synthesis, as representative focal points.

In terms of literature review, scholarship on the Delhi Sultanate has long been divided between two poles: one that emphasizes coercion, particularly the narratives of conquest and temple destruction, and another that highlights cultural assimilation and syncretism. Early colonial historians such as Elliot and Dowson portrayed the Sultanate as a period of

violent imposition of Islam over Hindu society.¹ Later works, however, have nuanced this picture. Richard Eaton's seminal research, for instance, argues that temple desecrations were not merely religiously motivated but often tied to political contestations and assertions of sovereignty.² Similarly, Sunil Kumar stresses the complexities of political authority, where Sultān often relied on Hindu elites and intermediaries for governance, thus creating spaces of cooperation as well as contest.³ In the field of Islamic studies, scholars such as Yohanan Friedmann and Muzaffar Alam have drawn attention to the ways Islamic law, Šūfi practices, and political pragmatism interacted in shaping Hindu–Muslim relations.⁴

The methodology of this article is, therefore, both historical and analytical. It seeks to reconstruct the socio-political realities of the Delhi Sultanate by triangulating different genres of sources and by critically engaging with historiographical debates. By applying a socio-political lens, the article avoids reducing Muslim–Hindu relations either to a narrative of perennial conflict or to one of idyllic harmony. Instead, it recognizes the dialectical processes through which identities were constructed, contested, and transformed in the arena of political contestation. The analysis presented here suggests that Muslim–Hindu relations in the Delhi Sultanate cannot be reduced to rigid religious divisions but were instead conditioned by changing political contexts. Patterns of conflict, such as temple desecrations or military confrontations, often coincided with political upheavals, while patterns of coexistence emerged in times of stable governance. Furthermore, the Sultanate facilitated cultural exchanges, visible in architecture, language, music, and administrative practices, which would have enduring consequences for the subsequent Mughal period and for the composite culture of South Asia.

In conclusion, this article argues that the Delhi Sultanate represents a formative moment in the history of interfaith relations in the Indian subcontinent. While acknowledging the limitations of both sources and scope, the study underscores the importance of analyzing Muslim–Hindu relations as socio-political phenomena, deeply embedded in historical contexts rather than static theological categories. From the perspective of Area Studies, such inquiries highlight how regional dynamics and historical encounters contribute to our understanding of global patterns of pluralism, conflict, and cultural negotiation. This not only situates South Asian history within a comparative framework but also demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches that connect historical analysis with broader questions of identity and coexistence.

1. The Advent and Spread of Islam in the Indian Subcontinent

The arrival of Islam in the Indian subcontinent has been explained in scholarship through multiple trajectories, including trade, migration, and conquest. Early Muslim con-

1 Henry M. Elliot & John Dowson, *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians* (London: Trübner & Co. 1867; repr. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1990), 2/45.

2 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 287.

3 Sunil Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192–1286* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 112.

4 Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 134; Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 78.

tacts with coastal regions such as Malabar and Gujarat were facilitated by Arab merchants, whose commercial and cultural exchanges introduced Islamic practices long before the establishment of Muslim political authority.⁵ Historians have emphasized that Islam's spread was neither linear nor uniform; while military campaigns, such as those led by Maḥmūd of Ghazna (d. 421/1030) in the eleventh century, highlighted the role of political expansion, other scholars argue that Şūfī networks, merchant communities, and local conversions were equally central to the process.⁶ The debate over whether Islam's advent should be seen primarily as a product of conquest or as the outcome of gradual sociocultural integration remains a significant theme in the historiography of South Asia. As such, any discussion of Muslim-Hindu relations during the Delhi Sultanate must first be situated within this broader historical background, where Islam's entry into the region laid the foundations for new forms of religious pluralism, cultural exchange, and political negotiation.

The advent of Islam in the Indian subcontinent was a gradual and multifaceted process shaped by commerce, conquest, and spiritual networks. Early contact occurred through maritime trade, as Arab merchants had long frequented the Malabar and Gujarat coasts, establishing settlements that maintained cultural and religious ties with Arabia.⁷ The Arab conquest of Sindh in 711 under Muḥammad b. Qāsim (d. 95/715) provided Islam with its first political foothold in the region. Yet, as Friedmann⁸ and Aziz Ahmed⁹ observe, this conquest did not fundamentally transform local religious life, and Islamic institutions remained marginal compared to major centers in the Middle East. For nearly three centuries, Islam's influence was sustained primarily through trade and migration rather than organized missionary or political activity. A turning point came with the Ghaznavid and Ghurid expansions. Maḥmūd of Ghazna's campaigns, particularly the raid on Somnath in 1025, symbolized Islamic sovereignty but were motivated largely by political and economic considerations.¹⁰ Irfan Habib¹¹ underlines that these attacks targeted temples not merely as religious institutions but as repositories of wealth and symbols of rival authority. The Ghurid victory at Tarain in 1192 and the subsequent consolidation of Delhi by Quṭb al-Dīn Ayyub (d. 607/1211) in 1206 institutionalized Muslim political power in India, inaugurating the Delhi Sultanate. Kortel¹² emphasizes that the administrative structures of the early Sultanate drew on both Islamic traditions and local Indian practices, creating a hybrid system of governance.

This new political framework coincided with the rise of Şūfī networks. Dātā Ganj Bakhsh

- 5 Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam*, 25; Mohammad Habib, *Madhyakālīn Bhārat* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1969), 44.
- 6 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 117; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sūfism in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2002), 1/89; Satish Chandra, *Dillī Saltnat kā Itihās* (New Delhi: Rashtriya Prakashan, 1992), 61.
- 7 K. A. Nizami, *Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980), 24.
- 8 Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*, 55.
- 9 Aziz Ahmed, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.
- 10 Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (Delhi: Tulika, 2002), 63; Richard M. Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11/3 (2000), 287.
- 11 Irfan Habib, *Medieval India: The Study of a Civilization* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 2003), 77.
- 12 S. Haluk Kortel, *Delhi Türk Sultanlığı'nda Teşkilat* (1206-1414) (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2008), 52.

of Lahore and later Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 633/1236) of Ajmer articulated devotional traditions that localized Islam and resonated widely with Hindu and Muslim populations alike.¹³ Bahā’ al-Dīn Zakariyyā (d. 666/1260) in Multan and his Suhrawardī successors cultivated closer ties with rulers, while more heterodox figures such as La’l Shāhbāz Qalandar (d. 763/1274) inspired cultic devotion that transcended communal boundaries.¹⁴ By combining spiritual authority with cultural adaptability, Şūfis provided Islam with a deeply rooted presence in Indian society.

The Delhi Sultanate’s political history reveals how these religious developments intersected with state formation. The Mamlūk dynasty (1206–90) consolidated control, while the Khaljis (1290–1320) expanded into Gujarat and the Deccan. Bilal Koç¹⁵ argues that the Khalji period introduced a distinct vision of governance based on centralized authority, fiscal regulation, and military professionalism. The Tughluqs (1320–1414) represented the zenith of territorial expansion but also administrative turbulence. Muḥammad b. Tughluq’s (d. 752/1351) ambitious experiments—including the controversial transfer of the capital to Daulatabad—illustrate both innovation and instability. Bilal Koç¹⁶ underlines that the Tughluq era must be understood as a balance between centralizing impulses and local resistance, reflecting the broader dynamics of medieval Indian politics. Firūz Shāh Tughluq’s long reign (1351–88) reinforced pious rulership, marked by mosque construction, canal building, and patronage of Şūfī shrines. Kortel¹⁷ notes that the Sultanate’s bureaucratic apparatus became more elaborate in this period, laying groundwork for later Mughal adaptations. Beyond Delhi, Islam’s spread followed regional trajectories. In Bengal, saints such as Shaikh Jalāl al-Dīn Tabrizī (d. 642/1244) facilitated Islamization through agrarian expansion rather than conquest.¹⁸ In the Deccan, Banda Nawāz Gīsū Darāz of Gulbarga synthesized Persian and vernacular idioms, fostering a composite spiritual culture.¹⁹ In Gujarat, saints like Sayyid Muḥammad Barahman anchored Islam in urban centers, while Ismā‘īlī da‘wa networks propagated syncretic doctrines that appealed to both Hindus and Muslims.²⁰

By the fifteenth century, Şūfī shrines and khānqāhs were widely dispersed, creating a religious geography that connected Delhi to the provinces. Chishti saints, with their ethos of tolerance and use of music in worship, attracted vast followings, while the Suhrawardīs cultivated ties with ruling elites. These spiritual centers became spaces where Hindus and Muslims interacted, forging a culture of shared devotion that transcended rigid communal divisions.²¹ The Delhi Sultanate’s rulers, while often preoccupied with military challenges,

13 Rizvi, *A History of Şūfism in India*, 2/87; K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India in the Thirteenth Century* (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1983), 55.

14 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 119; Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 142.

15 Bilal Koç, “Delhi Türk Sultanlığı’nda Devlet Yönetimi Anlayışı (1206–1320)”, *Çanakkale Araştırmaları Türk Yılı* 29 (2020), 173.

16 Bilal Koç, *Delhi Türk Sultanlığında Tuğluklar Dönemi Siyasi Tarihi (1320–1414)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2021), 85.

17 Kortel, *Delhi Türk Sultanlığı’nda Teşkilat*, 119.

18 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 122.

19 Hasan Askari, *The Şūfī Saints of the Deccan* (Hyderabad: Deccan Historical Society, 2010), 64.

20 Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 261.

21 Rizvi, *A History of Şūfism in India*, 2/221; Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 64.

increasingly sought legitimacy through patronage of these institutions. This reciprocal relationship between state and mysticism illustrates how Islam in India expanded not only by the sword but through cultural adaptation, negotiation, and popular devotion. This reciprocal relationship between state and mysticism illustrates how Islam in India expanded not only by the sword but also through cultural adaptation, negotiation, and popular devotion. By the eve of the Mughal conquest in 1526, Islam had become firmly embedded in the political and social fabric of the subcontinent—a result of conquest, commerce, agrarian expansion, and Şūfī spirituality, all mediated through the institutions of the Delhi Sultanate. This multifaceted background sets the stage for examining Hindu-Muslim relations under the Delhi Sultanate, where political pragmatism, cultural synthesis, and occasional conflict defined intercommunal life.

2. Dynamics of Muslim-Hindu Relations

The process of conversion to Islam in India was extensive, and by the later centuries of the Sultanate, the majority of Indian Muslims were likely descendants of Hindu converts rather than direct migrants from Central Asia or the Middle East. Even among those who traced their ancestry to foreign lineages, generations of cohabitation with Hindu populations rendered reciprocal cultural influences inevitable.²² Although precise quantitative data regarding the depth of such exchanges remain elusive, historical evidence provides insight into patterns of mutual borrowing. Indian Muslim social practices, including aspects of marriage customs, class distinctions, and localized ritual expressions, frequently diverged from broader Islamic norms and reflected adaptations shaped by the surrounding Hindu milieu.²³ Elements of attire, dietary habits, vernacular language use, musical traditions, and artistic forms illustrate a spectrum of mutual impact, especially in North India where both communities interacted most intensively.²⁴

Religious life also exhibited zones of overlap and dialogue. The influence of Şūfī mysticism, particularly through the Chishti and Suhrawardī orders, paralleled the devotional ethos of medieval Hindu saints, such as the bhakti reformers, whose teachings emphasized spiritual egalitarianism and direct communion with the divine.²⁵ Muslim saints were revered even by Hindu communities, though social restrictions such as the refusal to share food or water utensils indicated the persistence of communal boundaries. Conversely, Hindu mendicants, yogis, and astrologers held prestige among Muslims. Hybrid cults, such as the popular worship of Satyapir, drew participation from both faith groups, demonstrating syncretic currents within rural religiosity.²⁶ Even in seemingly marginal customs, such as determining auspicious days for travel, Muslims often adopted practices from Hindu society, reflecting subtle but significant cultural exchanges.²⁷

Intellectual and literary interaction further underscores this reciprocity. Muslim scholars engaged with Hindu systems of philosophy and science, including Vedanta, Yoga,

22 Habib, *Madhyakālīn Bhārat*, 52; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 117.

23 Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 141; Rizvi, *A History of Şūfism in India*, 1/87.

24 Nizami, *Religion and Politics*, 75.

25 Eaton, "Temple Desecration", 287; Rizvi, *A History of Şūfism in India*, 1/221.

26 Nurul Hasan, *Religion, State and Society in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144.

27 Habib, *Madhyakālīn Bhārat*, 59.

Ayurveda, and Jyotisha (astrology), while Hindus benefited from Islamic advances in geography, arithmetic, and chemistry.²⁸ Persian served as a lingua franca of administration and high culture, yet linguistic interchanges between Persian, Arabic, and Hindi produced vernacular literatures that eventually evolved into Urdu. Several Hindu poets and intellectuals composed in Persian, while Muslim literati wrote in Indian vernaculars, illustrating a degree of cross-pollination. Furthermore, Muslim rulers extended patronage to Hindu intellectuals, facilitating cultural production across communal boundaries.²⁹

Nevertheless, these forms of interaction remained confined largely to the peripheries of everyday life and rarely penetrated the deeper structures of communal identity. The fundamental ethos of each civilization remained distinct. The egalitarian impulses within Islamic social ethics—emphasizing fraternity and equality before God—were confined within the Muslim community and seldom adopted by Hindus, who remained bound by the hierarchical rigidity of the caste system and practices of untouchability.³⁰ Similarly, the Hindu tradition's emphasis on tolerance and reverence for multiple paths to the divine found little resonance among Muslim elites, whose zeal for the destruction of Hindu temples persisted from the campaigns of Muḥammad b. Qāsim in the eighth century to the waning power of the Mughals in the eighteenth.³¹ This duality, whereby Hindus practiced religious pluralism while maintaining social exclusivity, and Muslims fostered social inclusivity while upholding religious exclusivity, produced a paradoxical balance marked simultaneously by separation and interaction.

Ultimately, while Muslims and Hindus lived in close geographical proximity, their cultural orbits remained parallel rather than convergent. The superficial borrowings in social customs, art forms, and intellectual pursuits did not fundamentally bridge the deep-seated differences in religious worldview, social organization, and civilizational ethos.³² As a result, despite centuries of coexistence, the two communities largely maintained distinct identities, with limited integration into a shared civilizational tradition. This enduring separation foreshadowed the challenges of Hindu–Muslim relations in the subsequent centuries, where pragmatism, competition, and selective synthesis coexisted without producing comprehensive assimilation.

3. Hindus in the Delhi Sultanate: Legal Status and Social Position

The political and religious framework within which Hindus lived during the Delhi Sultanate created formidable barriers between the two communities. The political supremacy of Muslims was not only complete but also ideologically justified within the Islamic conception of statehood. According to Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the classical conception of Islamic governance envisioned the state as a religious trust administered by the community of believers under the authority of the 'Commander of the Faithful.' Within this framework, full political equality was primarily reserved for Muslims, while non-Muslims were incor-

28 Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 185.

29 Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics*, 91.

30 Habib, *Medieval India*, 103; Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India*, 152.

31 Koç, *Tuğluklar Dönemi Siyasi Tarihi*, 87.

32 Habib, *Madhyakālin Bhārat*, 61; Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 189.

porated into the polity under specific legal and social arrangements.³³ Even Jews and Christians, as *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book), were relegated to a secondary status, tolerated but not integrated as full citizens. For Hindus and Zoroastrians, the status was even more precarious: their presence was tolerated primarily as *khirāj-guzār* (tax-paying subjects) who could be used for economic utility while being subjected to political and civil disabilities.³⁴

Hindus were formally classified as *zimmīs* “protected people” whose right to life and property was conditional upon their fulfilment of specific obligations, including payment of the *jizya* (poll tax). The very term *zimmīs*, as contemporaries noted, conveyed notions of inferiority and dependency, akin to the legal status of a minor under permanent guardianship. Classical Islamic jurisprudence often regarded non-Muslims as subjects whose political and social position required regulation, with jurists advising rulers to ensure that their influence remained within prescribed limits.³⁵ Qur’ānic guidance (Q. 9:29) established the principle of *jizya*, a tax levied on non-Muslims in return for protection and the right to practice their faith under Muslim rule. In addition to this fiscal obligation, non-Muslims such as Hindus were subject to certain legal and social distinctions, including requirements regarding dress, restrictions on bearing arms or riding horses with full military equipment, and limitations on their testimony in courts. Religious life was permitted, though with conditions: new temple construction was generally restricted, the rebuilding of demolished shrines was constrained, and public displays of ritual were discouraged to minimize the potential for intercommunal tension.³⁶ The *Zakhīrat al-Mulūk* of Shaikh Hamadānī (d. 786/1385) codified these obligations, drawing upon precedents established by Caliph ‘Umar. Among the twenty stipulations imposed on non-Muslims were: prohibition on erecting new temples, restrictions on adopting Muslim names or dress, bans on bearing arms, interdictions against public sale of liquor, and exclusion from neighborhoods of Muslims.³⁷ Violation of these terms nullified the guarantee of protection, rendering the lives and property of Hindus vulnerable to legal expropriation. Nevertheless, application of these laws varied by ruler and circumstance. Sulṭān Muḥammad b. Tughluq, often portrayed as relatively liberal, famously denied permission to the Chinese Emperor to construct a Hindu temple at Samhal, replying that “Islam does not allow the furthering of such an aim and the permission to build a temple in a Muslim country can be accorded only to those who pay the *jizya*”.³⁸ His successor, Firūz Shāh Tughluq, adopted an even more rigorous stance, extending the *jizya* to Brahmans who had earlier been exempt. Contemporary historian Baranī, in his *Fatawā-i Jahāndārī*, rejected the Hanafi concession of permitting Hindus to live under *jizya*, insisting instead that “according to Imam Shāfi‘ī the decree for Hindus is either death or Islam”.³⁹ Such testimonies reflect the persistent tension between pragmatic governance and orthodox expectations.

Other chroniclers also reveal the ideological divide. Yahyā, narrating an incident in-

33 Jadunath Sarkar, *The State in India: Past and Present* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1961), 57.

34 Nizami, *Religion and Politics*, 32; Rizvi, *A History of Şūfism in India*, 1/121.

35 Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*, 74.

36 Habib, *Madhyakālīn Bhārat*, 212; Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 88.

37 Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muslim Conduct of State* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1975), 119-120.

38 Hamidullah, *Muslim Conduct of State*, 120-121.

39 Ziya’ al-Din Baranī, *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, ed. S. A. Rashid (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat, 2008 [orig. 1862]), 223.

volving Sultān Ghiyāth al-Dīn Balaban, records how the Sultān avoided standing in respect before a Hindu king, disguising his courtesy by releasing a falcon. The anecdote, remembered and recorded two centuries later, underscores the symbolic weight attached to maintaining Muslim superiority over “infidels”.⁴⁰ Similarly, Afif, writing under Fīrūz Shāh Tughluq, put into the mouth of the Sultān’s vizier the candid admission that the state had two core objectives: “prosperity of the kingdom and destruction of the infidels”.⁴¹

In practice, Hindus rarely attained high political office. With occasional exceptions, administrative authority remained monopolized by Muslims—both immigrants and locally converted elites. Persian chroniclers routinely conceived political society in horizontal divisions of religion (Muslim vs. Hindu) rather than in vertical distinctions between native and foreigner.⁴² Hindus participated widely in lower administrative and agrarian offices, yet their role in policy formulation remained marginal.

The social and religious gulf was reinforced by profound cultural contrasts. Muslim egalitarian ideals, restricted to co-religionists, contrasted with Hindu caste hierarchies and the practice of untouchability. Hindu rituals of purity, dietary laws, and restrictions on intermarriage or commensality insulated communities from one another. The divergence extended to modes of worship, inheritance laws, and even the orientation of sacred practices—Muslims turning westward in prayer, Hindus eastward in devotion. These differences were not trivial; they symbolized two distinct civilizational orientations.⁴³

Thus, although centuries of shared residence created moments of exchange—in language, art, architecture, and philosophy—the barriers remained formidable. The Delhi Sultanate, as even relatively tolerant rulers acknowledged, was conceived as a Muslim polity. Hindus could and did serve the state in subsidiary capacities, but their legal and political status remained circumscribed. As a result, Hindu attitudes towards the Sultanate were marked by deep resentment and cultural defensiveness, awaiting opportunities to reclaim an imagined *Āryāvarta* free of *mlechchhas* (foreigners).

The Hindu–Muslim relationship under the Sultanate was therefore defined not by integration but by parallelism: two communities living side by side, yet largely within their own religious and social universes. As scholars such as K. A. Nizami⁴⁴ and Mohammad Habib⁴⁵ emphasize, the gulf between them was both structural and ideological, reinforced by religious orthodoxy, political exclusion, and social immobility. This enduring cleavage shaped the contours of intercommunal dynamics throughout the Sultanate and beyond.

Although cultural interactions and reciprocal influences shaped everyday life in certain spheres—ranging from language and literature to art, architecture, and devotional practices—these exchanges largely remained superficial, confined to limited social groups and regions. Beneath such layers of accommodation, the structural and legal foundations of the Delhi Sultanate consistently reinforced asymmetry between the two communities. While

40 Yahya b. Ahmad, *Tarikh-i Mubarak Shahi* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1910), 64.

41 Afif, *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi* (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1891), 152.

42 Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam*, 118.

43 Habib, *Medieval India*, 95.

44 Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics*, 61.

45 Habib, *Madhyakālin Bhārat*, 204.

Hindus and Muslims shared spaces and occasionally participated in overlapping traditions, the broader framework of the Sultanate was defined by Islamic political authority and juridical conceptions of social order. As a result, the relational dynamics oscillated between cultural exchange and structural exclusion, preparing the ground for a more systematic articulation of the status of Hindus within the Sultanate's political and legal framework.

4. Historical Narratives and Perspectives on Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Delhi Sultanate

The study of Hindu-Muslim relations during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) has long occupied a central position in the historiography of medieval India. Historical narratives produced in Persian, Sanskrit, and vernacular sources, as well as modern scholarly interpretations, reveal that the encounter between these two religious communities was far from uniform. Instead, it was shaped by shifting political contexts, regional dynamics, and the interplay of cultural and spiritual forces. Early Persian chronicles such as Minhāj-i Sirāj's (d. 682/1283) *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāsiri* and Ziya' al-Dīn Baranī's (d. 758/1357) *Tārīkh-i Fīrūzshāhī* depicted Hindu subjects primarily through the lens of political subjugation and administrative control, often presenting them as the "other" against which Muslim sovereignty was legitimized.⁴⁶ At the same time, inscriptions, temple records, and regional literary traditions in Sanskrit and Hindi offer alternative perspectives, showing not only resistance but also accommodation and adaptation in local contexts.⁴⁷

Significantly, travel accounts such as those of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited India in the mid-fourteenth century during the reign of Muḥammad b. Tughluq, provide valuable insights into Hindu-Muslim interactions at both elite and popular levels. His *Rihla* portrays the cosmopolitan character of Delhi, where scholars, merchants, and mystics from across the Islamic world coexisted with local Hindu elites. He describes the complexity of everyday life: the administration of justice, the functioning of markets, and the circulation of cultural practices that involved both Hindus and Muslims. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's observations, while framed through the lens of a Muslim jurist, underscore that relations between communities were not exclusively defined by conflict but also by shared spaces and negotiated coexistence.⁴⁸

Modern historians have debated whether these relations were defined more by conflict or collaboration. Some scholars emphasize episodes of temple desecration, taxation such as the *jizya*, and the exclusion of Hindus from high administrative offices as evidence of systemic inequality.⁴⁹ Others point to the integrative role of Sūfism, vernacular literature, and agrarian expansion, where Hindu and Muslim communities collaborated in everyday practices, thereby creating a composite socio-cultural fabric.⁵⁰ In this regard, the Delhi Sultanate emerges not as a monolithic structure of domination, but as a complex arena of negotiation, where state power, religious authority, and social interactions intersected. By framing Hindu-Muslim relations through "historical narratives and perspectives", schol-

46 Nizami, *Religion and Politics*, 83–84.

47 Chandra, *Dillī Saltanat kā Itihās*, 144–145.

48 H. A. R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D. 1325–1354* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 2/198–200.

49 Eaton, "Temple Desecration", 287.

50 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 74–75.

ars are able to move beyond simplistic binaries of tolerance versus intolerance. Instead, the Delhi Sultanate period can be understood as a laboratory of cultural encounters, in which structures of authority and practices of devotion continually reshaped the contours of intercommunal relations. This approach highlights the significance of historiography itself—how past chroniclers, travelers such as Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and modern historians alike have constructed divergent, and sometimes contradictory, images of a shared past.

An invaluable dimension of Hindu–Muslim relations in the Delhi Sultanate period can be gleaned from the observations of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the renowned Moroccan traveler and jurist who journeyed extensively across the Indian subcontinent in the mid-fourteenth century, particularly during the reign of Sulṭān Muḥammad b. Tughluq—often considered one of the most dynamic and intellectually open-minded rulers of the period.⁵¹ His *Rihla* provides a vivid, and at times unsettling, portrayal of the socio-political hierarchy, the position of Hindus as *zimmīs*, and the deep fractures that defined inter-communal relations.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa confirms much of what contemporary Persian chroniclers like Baranī described concerning forced conversions, mass enslavements, and the legal inferiority of Hindus. He bluntly states: “other nations embraced Islam only when the Arabs used their swords against them”.⁵² His descriptions of the humiliation of Hindu captives are particularly striking. During the ‘Id festival in Delhi, he observed Hindu princesses, daughters of defeated *rājas*, compelled to perform music and dance before the Sulṭān. These young women were then distributed as gifts to nobles, princes, and members of the Sulṭān’s family.⁵³ Elsewhere, he records that the vizier gifted him Hindu female captives, some of whom were redistributed among his companions, demonstrating the commodification of Hindu lives during wartime.⁵⁴ Even diplomatic exchanges reflected this practice: Muḥammad b. Tughluq is said to have sent to the Chinese emperor “one hundred male slaves and one hundred female singers and dancers, all drawn from the Indian infidels”.⁵⁵ Beyond slavery, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s testimony emphasizes the structural subordination of Hindus. Inhabitants of regions like Habanq are described as *zimmīs*, obliged to surrender half their agricultural produce and render additional services to the state.⁵⁶ His account of Alapūr illustrates how violence was woven into everyday life: the Muslim commandant of the city was notorious for raiding Hindu villages, killing men and enslaving women, until he himself was slain. Even after his death, his slaves retaliated by annihilating a Hindu settlement—executing men, capturing women, and looting resources.⁵⁷ Equally shocking are his reports from South India. As a guest of the Sulṭān of Maḥbar, he recounts scenes of extreme brutality: Hindus executed with their families before the Sulṭān, mutilations carried out during court gatherings, and repeated temple desecrations.⁵⁸ He even witnessed idols displayed at the Quwwāt al-Islām mosque in Delhi, deliberately placed so that worshippers would trample

51 Gibb, *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 2/63.

52 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325–1354*, trans. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1929), 128.

53 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 65–66.

54 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 123.

55 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 151.

56 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 241.

57 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 162–163.

58 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 27–29.

them when entering or exiting.⁵⁹ Such observations underscore the systematic affronts to Hindu religious sentiments. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa also noted the rigid separation of the two communities. He observed that Hindus inhabited contiguous regions adjacent to Muslim settlements but remained socially and culturally segregated.⁶⁰ In cities along the Malabar coast, Muslims resided in exclusive quarters, often clashing with Hindu inhabitants.⁶¹ Segregation was reinforced by Hindu customs of untouchability: Muslims were denied access to Hindu homes and vessels, and even when offered food, it was placed at a distance or served on disposable banana leaves to avoid ritual contamination.⁶² Ibn Baṭṭūṭa himself lamented these practices, contrasting them with the relative hospitality of Hindus in Sri Lanka. On one occasion, he was captured by Hindu raiders near Jalālī and narrowly escaped execution thanks to the intervention of a compassionate captor. Such narratives illustrate the deep mistrust that persisted at many levels of interaction. Yet, they also hint at moments of accommodation and mutual recognition—seen, for instance, in acts of mercy, shared economic exchanges, and everyday coexistence that tempered the sharper edges of religious difference. As he candidly observed, “the Brahmins are revered by the infidels and inspire hatred in the Muslims”.⁶³ The estrangement was thus real, but it existed alongside pragmatic forms of coexistence that allowed both communities to navigate the complexities of daily life.⁶⁴

Indian sources corroborate this image of hostility. Jonarāja’s *Rājataranginī* recounts the religious persecutions of Sulṭān Sikandar of Kashmir, while Gangādevī’s *Madhura Vijayam* laments the destruction of temples and atrocities in South India under Muslim rule. She describes a landscape of desecrated shrines, bloodstained rivers, and villages reduced to despair.⁶⁵ Similarly, the Bengali Vaishnava literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—works such as Jayananda’s *Chaitanya Maṅgala*, the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, and *Chaitanya Charitamrita*—depict Hindus living in fear of Muslim qazis, who forbade public kīrtan processions, demolished temples, and harassed worshippers.⁶⁶ Duarte Barbosa, writing in the early sixteenth century, confirms that “the heathens of Bengal daily become Moors to gain the favour of their rulers”.⁶⁷ Yet these texts also reveal nuances. For example, the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* recounts how, after a violent confrontation, a qāzī softened his stance toward the saint Chaitanya, even claiming kinship with him based on village customs. This indicates that, despite religious bigotry, pragmatic and personal accommodations occasionally existed. However, such conciliatory gestures did not erase systemic inequities or institutionalized oppression, nor did they bridge the profound gulf between the two communities.⁶⁸

59 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 124.

60 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 165–166.

61 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 185–188.

62 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 182.

63 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 189.

64 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 189–190.

65 Jonarāja, *Rājataranginī of Jonarāja*, ed. Srikanth Kaul (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1967), 29.

66 Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1942), 115–118.

67 Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*, trans. M. L. Dames (London: Hakluyt Society, 1918), 2/132.

68 Edward C. Dimock, *The Caitanya Caritamrta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja: A Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 89–90.

In the fifteenth century, Vidyāpati (d. 1450), the distinguished poet of Mithila, provided a vivid account of the conditions faced by Hindus under Turko-Afghan rule. After outlining the fundamental distinctions between Hindu and Muslim social and religious practices, he recounts episodes in which Hindus were compelled to perform unpaid labour, Brahmins were subjected to symbolic acts that undermined their ritual status—such as the placement of a cow’s leg upon their heads or the removal of their sacred threads—while temples were demolished and replaced with mosques, and Hindus endured various forms of verbal and physical pressure⁶⁹. Vidyāpati’s testimony, while reflecting the idioms of devotional literature, offers important insight into the perceived vulnerabilities of Hindu society in this transitional period. His descriptions also resonate with themes later articulated in Bengali Vaiṣṇava literature, where the fragility of Hindu ritual and social life under foreign rule was a recurring concern. These accounts, while underscoring the depth of intercommunal fractures, also point to the fragile possibilities of accommodation that persisted within everyday social and devotional life.

Bengali medieval religious literature, particularly the writings of the Vaiṣṇavas, further reflects the precarious situation of Hindus in this period. As some of the most peaceful and non-political members of the Hindu community, the Vaiṣṇava authors cannot reasonably be accused of political or communal bias.⁷⁰ This literary evidence challenges the view advanced by some historians that, after the initial shock of conquest had subsided, Hindus and Muslims gradually established a *modus vivendi* that enabled them to coexist as neighbours. Contemporary Bengali sources from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries instead point to a more complex reality, marked by persistent tensions and asymmetries of power.⁷¹

Vijaya Gupta, a noted panegyrist of Sulṭān Ḥusain Shāh of Bengal (r. 1493–1519), records a narrative describing the treatment of Hindus at the hands of the Muslim qazis Ḥasan and Ḥusain. His account portrays these officials as engaging in practices that subjected Hindu devotees to ritual indignities. For example, individuals identified by the sacred Tulasī leaf on their heads—a marker of Vaiṣṇava devotion—were reportedly seized, bound hand and foot, and exposed to acts that compromised their ritual status. In one instance, a peon is said to have forcibly removed a Brahmin’s sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) and, in a gesture of symbolic degradation, spat into his mouth.⁷² Gupta further recounts an episode in which a Muslim mulla, while traversing a wooded area, encountered shepherd boys performing worship of the goddess Manasā, using earthen ritual vessels accompanied by devotional music. Outraged, the mulla attempted to destroy the vessels but was physically resisted by the boys. Enraged, he reported the matter to the two qazi brothers, who responded with fury: “What! These vile (*harāmzādah*) Hindus dare to perform their rituals in my village? They must be seized and rendered outcast, compelled to eat Muslim bread!”⁷³ The qazis subsequently mobilized a band of armed Muslims, demolished the shepherds’ hut, shat-

69 U. N. Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, ed. R. C. Majumdar (Mumbai: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 2006), 6/550–552.

70 De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith*, 115–118; Edward C. Dimock, *The Caitanya Caritamṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavīraja: A Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 89–90.

71 Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 115–120; Habib, *Medieval India*, 77–78.

72 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/633.

73 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/628.

tered the ritual vessels, and desecrated the offerings to the goddess. Although many of the terrified boys fled into the forest, several were hunted down and captured. Notably, the mother of the qazis—herself a Hindu girl forcibly married into the family—attempted in vain to dissuade her sons from the assault, underscoring the intimate yet violent interpenetration of the two communities. These episodes, as Ghoshal emphasizes, were not merely isolated excesses but symptomatic of a broader pattern of intimidation and coercion endured by Hindus in late medieval Bengal. They complicate the notion, often advanced by earlier apologists, that Hindu–Muslim relations quickly stabilized into patterns of “neighbourly coexistence”.⁷⁴ A striking parallel can be drawn with the travelogue of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited the Indian subcontinent in the fourteenth century. In his *Rihla*, he frequently noted the precarious position of Hindus under Muslim authority. For example, while describing Bengal and its environs, he remarks on the punitive treatment of Hindu subjects, the destruction of temples, and the enforcement of Muslim legal and cultural norms in conquered regions.⁷⁵ Though Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s observations precede Vijaya Gupta’s account by over a century, they resonate in their depiction of Hindus as a subjugated community subjected to coercion and exclusion. His testimony, emanating from an external Muslim traveler with no vested political interest in Bengal’s internal rivalries, provides independent corroboration of the fraught dynamics that Gupta’s narrative so vividly illustrates. Together, the writings of Vijaya Gupta and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa underscore the persistence of antagonistic communal relations across time. The humiliations described—the desecration of sacred symbols, the forced pollution of caste status, and the destruction of ritual spaces—did not merely constitute episodic violence but reflected deeply entrenched structures of religious dominance. These accounts thus challenge retrospective narratives of facile reconciliation, instead revealing the fragile and contested character of Hindu–Muslim relations in late medieval Bengal.⁷⁶

The Chaitanya-charitāmṛta presents the transformation in the qazi’s disposition towards Śrī Chaitanya as the result of divine intervention. Yet, as Ghoshal notes, a more plausible explanation lies in the political calculation of Sulṭān Ḥusain Shāh (r. 1493–1519) himself.⁷⁷ According to the narrative, soon after an episode of conflict with the qazi, Chaitanya embarked on a journey to Rāmakeli, near the capital city of Gauḍa. Witnessing the unprecedented adulation of multitudes who thronged to see the saint, Ḥusain Shāh reportedly remarked that one followed by such immense crowds, without hope of material reward, must indeed be a saint. He therefore instructed Muslim qazis to refrain from harming Chaitanya and to permit him free movement. However, to infer from this incident that Ḥusain Shāh harbored genuine sympathy for Hindus would be misleading. Contemporary Hindu sources suggest otherwise. Even after the Sulṭān’s order, Chaitanya’s companions voiced suspicion, warning that the ruler—who had previously desecrated numerous temples in Orissa—could at any moment revert to intolerance under the influence of zealous Muslim advisers.⁷⁸ Out of caution, they urged Chaitanya to leave the vicinity of the capital. The case

74 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/632–633.

75 Ibn Battuta, *The Travels*, 221–224.

76 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/631; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 225; Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 215–214.

77 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/634.

78 Ghoshal, “The Delhi Sultanate”, 6/634–635.

of Sanātana, a senior Hindu official in Ḥusain Shāh's court, further illustrates this tension. Sanātana, who had become an ardent devotee of Chaitanya, absented himself from courtly duties under the pretext of illness, devoting his time instead to religious gatherings with Vaiṣṇavas. When the Sulṭān discovered this, he imprisoned Sanātana and later demanded his participation in a military expedition against Orissa. Sanātana resolutely refused, declaring, "You are going to torment our gods—destroying their images and temples. I cannot accompany you".⁷⁹ His principled stance contrasts sharply with the hyperbolic praise found in contemporary Bengali poetry. Vijaya Gupta, for instance, extolled Ḥusain Shāh as an ideal monarch comparable to Arjuna, while another poet astonishingly described the temple-breaking Sulṭān as a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa in the Kali Age. Such extravagant eulogies, far from reflecting historical reality, reveal the extent of Hindu subjugation and moral capitulation after centuries of political servitude. Nevertheless, the advent of Chaitanya appears to have momentarily reawakened resistance and spiritual confidence. The Chaitanya-bhāgavata contains scattered references indicating the precariousness of Hindu religious life under Ḥusain Shāh. Hindus lived under constant fear that even private singing of kīrtan or devotional songs might provoke the wrath of the Sulṭān, bringing dire punishments upon the people of Nadia. Rumors occasionally spread that boats filled with soldiers had been dispatched to arrest those engaged in Vaiṣṇava rituals. Against this backdrop, contemporaries marveled that Chaitanya and his followers could publicly chant and sing near Rāmakeli, in such close proximity to the Muslim sovereign, seemingly without fear.⁸⁰ This moment, however, also reflects the tenuous balance of fear and tolerance that defined a fragile coexistence between Hindus and the Muslim court.

Such incidental references, often more nuanced than hagiographic narratives of conflict, shed light on the climate of uncertainty that characterized intercommunal relations in Bengal even under rulers generally remembered as relatively accommodating. It is important to note that this period marked an early stage of Islam's consolidation in the Indian subcontinent, where the political authority of the sulṭāns was closely intertwined with their identity as Muslim rulers—an alignment that was historically to be expected given the broader patterns of state formation in the medieval Islamic world. For many Hindus, conversion to Islam could serve as a pragmatic means of navigating these structures of authority and alleviating social vulnerabilities. Duarte Barbosa, who visited Bengal during the reign of Ḥusain Shāh, remarked that "the heathens of these parts daily become Moors to gain the favor of their rulers".⁸¹ His observation aligns with indigenous accounts that describe conversions as strategies of adaptation to prevailing conditions rather than simple acts of coercion. Taken together, such testimonies illustrate how processes of religious change in late medieval Bengal were shaped by political and social dynamics typical of an era in which Islam was still embedding itself in the region. The resonance of these dynamics is not confined to the past; the mobilization of religious identity as a basis of political power remains a recurrent theme in South Asia and continues to inform global debates on faith and governance today.

79 Ghoshal, "The Delhi Sultanate", 6/635.

80 Ghoshal, "The Delhi Sultanate", 6/635–636.

81 Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*, 2/175.

Vaishnava hagiographies do not portray Hindu-Muslim relations exclusively in terms of hostility. Certain episodes reveal attempts at establishing bonds of familiarity across communal lines. For instance, after the violent disturbances in Nadia, the local qazi is said to have reminded Chaitanya that, by the customary kinship terminology of the village, the saint's maternal grandfather was considered his own uncle, making Chaitanya his "nephew." This form of fictive kinship illustrates how, despite the absence of intermarriage or interlining, cordial neighborly relations could develop between Hindus and Muslims who lived side by side in the same urban and rural spaces.

Such moments of local accommodation, however, did little to mitigate the larger patterns of religious animosity. The very same qazi, notwithstanding his invocation of kinship, was earlier implicated in anti-Hindu actions, underscoring the fragility of such bonds. On the other hand, Hindu society itself was deeply marked by exclusivism. Social prejudices often overrode humanitarian principles and traditional virtues of hospitality and compassion. The travel narrative of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa offers a stark illustration: he recounts that Hindus refused to provide food or water to a hungry and thirsty foreigner, solely on account of his Muslim faith.⁸²

The literature of the period also refers to sensitive fault lines such as the forcible marriages of Hindu women by Muslims, as well as coercive practices designed to strip Hindus of caste status. These incidents, documented in both indigenous texts and Muslim chronicles, were remembered as recurrent humiliations that deepened the communal divide. It is significant, nonetheless, that all three lines of evidence—Muslim chronicles, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's account, and contemporary Indian literary sources—concur in suggesting that while superficial forms of mutual accommodation did evolve, fundamental differences in belief and identity persisted. There is evidence of cross-cultural influence in language, ritual, and even superstition, but these remained at the level of the external and the social. The deeper core of identity—what it meant to be "Hindu" or "Muslim"—remained intact and could be readily reasserted when circumstances demanded. As Ghoshal aptly summarizes, "it was only necessary to scratch the skin to bring out the Hindu and the Muslim in every Indian, individually or collectively".⁸³

The dialectic between syncretic interaction and the persistence of communal boundaries in Bengal's early modern Hindu-Muslim relations epitomizes the intricate character of interfaith encounters in South Asia. Patterns of accommodation—such as fictive kinship, localized neighborly ties, and cultural exchanges—demonstrate that shared spaces could generate hybrid practices and reciprocal influences. Yet, these moments of convergence coexisted with enduring distinctions, reflected in anxieties over caste purity, episodic conversions, and limitations on religious institutions. Rather than representing a narrative of either seamless harmony or unbroken conflict, this dual dynamic underscores the complexity of intercommunal relations under the Delhi Sultanate and its successor states. It reveals how social, cultural, and political frameworks simultaneously facilitated interaction while sustaining boundaries, thereby shaping a legacy of coexistence marked by negotiation and tension that would resonate in the subcontinent's subsequent history.

82 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *The Travels*, 172.

83 Ghoshal, "The Delhi Sultanate", 6/636.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of literary, historical, and travel accounts concerning Hindu–Muslim relations in Bengal and North India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has sought to unravel the intricate web of coexistence, tension, and adaptation that characterized the region under the Delhi Sultanate and its successor states. Drawing upon indigenous voices such as Vidyapati, Jayananda, and Vijaya Gupta, alongside Muslim chroniclers and the invaluable testimony of the Moroccan traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the study demonstrates how religious, social, and political dynamics intersected in shaping the lived experience of communities. Far from offering a monolithic picture of persecution or harmony, the evidence reveals a more nuanced continuum ranging from violent antagonism to tentative syncretism.

The depictions provided by Vidyapati and Jayananda underscore the vulnerability of Hindu Brahmanas and Vaishnavas to systemic oppression, temple desecration, and social humiliation under Turko-Afghan rulers and local qazis. Such accounts reflect not only the material dispossession of Hindus but also the deliberate targeting of their ritual practices, sacred spaces, and caste markers—acts that sought to destabilize the symbolic foundations of Hindu religiosity. Similarly, Vijaya Gupta’s narratives of the qazi brothers’ aggression against shepherd boys worshipping Manasā exemplify the everyday hostilities that could erupt when religious expression was perceived as defiance. Taken together, these sources confirm that even under rulers praised for their tolerance, such as Ḥusain Shāh of Bengal, the communal divide remained raw and volatile. Yet, the same corpus of Vaishnava literature introduces moments of accommodation, fictive kinship, and neighborhood interactions that complicate the narrative of unrelenting hostility. The Chaitanya-hagiographies, while often attributing political shifts to miraculous interventions, nonetheless point to episodes where rulers refrained from persecuting saints, recognizing their charisma and social influence. These episodes suggest that governance was not solely guided by dogma but also by pragmatic considerations of stability and legitimacy. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of kinship ties—such as the qazi referring to Chaitanya as his nephew according to village custom—illustrates how localized forms of social negotiation mediated across communal boundaries. Although fragile, these ties reveal that religious communities were not hermetically sealed but engaged in ongoing, if uneven, processes of interaction.

The testimony of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who witnessed both hospitality and rejection in Hindu households, further illustrates the paradoxes of intercultural encounters. His accounts highlight not only the hospitality–xenophobia tension within Hindu society but also the ethical dilemmas posed by the pressures of religious purity in a time of political subjugation. The convergence of his observations with indigenous sources strengthens the reliability of these narratives and underscores the importance of triangulating Muslim chronicles, foreign travelogues, and vernacular literature to construct a balanced historiography.

From an Area Studies perspective, these findings carry significant implications. The Bengali experience during this period cannot be reduced to a simplistic model of either communal harmony or perpetual strife. Rather, it exemplifies the dialectic between syncretism and antagonism, where both tendencies coexisted, clashed, and shaped the social fabric in ways that continue to inform South Asian identities. The endurance of Hindu cultural resilience alongside the adoption of certain Islamic practices, the coexistence of

fictive kinship with caste-based exclusion, and the simultaneous fear of persecution with selective moments of tolerance all point to the layered and contradictory nature of cultural contact zones. Moreover, the historiographical reflections embedded in the Vaishnava and Bengali literary corpus challenge modern assumptions about religious conflict. They reveal that local narratives of oppression and accommodation were never neutral, but encoded the anxieties, resistances, and strategies of communities negotiating asymmetrical power structures. To interpret these narratives, therefore, is to engage with the lived realities of subaltern voices often marginalized in Persianate chronicles and courtly histories. This approach offers valuable methodological insights for Area Studies: namely, that the study of regional dynamics must privilege multiple genres of sources and attend to the interplay of memory, myth, and political discourse.

The broader significance of this inquiry extends beyond medieval Bengal. The patterns observed—of domination resisted through ritual resilience, of rulers oscillating between repression and pragmatism, and of societies navigating hybridity under duress—resonate with comparative cases across Asia and beyond. Whether in the Ottoman Balkans, Safavid Iran, or Mughal India, the negotiation between majority and minority communities has always involved similar contradictions of accommodation and antagonism. Thus, Bengal offers a microcosmic lens through which larger questions of religious pluralism, state power, and cultural resilience may be explored. Ultimately, the conclusion to be drawn is not one of definitive resolution but of enduring ambivalence. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Bengal stand as a testament to the simultaneous fragility and durability of communal relations. On the one hand, sustained political subordination and religious persecution inflicted deep scars upon Hindu society, leading to episodes of forced conversion and social demoralization. On the other, the vitality of Vaishnava devotionism, the charisma of figures like Chaitanya, and the persistence of everyday neighborly ties ensured that cultural continuity and renewal remained possible. The contradictions of this era—of saints revered by rulers who desecrated temples, of poets who praised despotic kings as divine incarnations, and of villagers who both feared and befriended their Muslim neighbors—capture the complexity of South Asian history in its most authentic form.

In conclusion, the study underscores that the dynamics of Hindu–Muslim relations in medieval Bengal cannot be assessed through simplistic binaries. Instead, they invite a recognition of plural histories, where contestation and convergence coexisted, and where the possibilities of cultural synthesis were continually tested by the realities of political domination. For scholars of South Asia, this duality offers not merely an object of historical inquiry but a prism through which to understand the enduring dilemmas of pluralism, identity, and power in the region. This process not only ensured the entrenchment of Islam in the Indian subcontinent during the period in question, but also left behind a lasting legacy that continues to directly shape the religion-based political dynamics of contemporary India. This process not only ensured the entrenchment of Islam in the Indian subcontinent during the period in question, but also left behind a lasting legacy that continues to directly shape the religion-based political dynamics of contemporary India. In this sense, the Delhi Sultanate can be understood as a formative contact zone—a historical arena in which sustained encounters between Muslims and Hindus produced enduring patterns of cultural adaptation, negotiation, and contestation.

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