

# THE FUSION OF TURKISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS IN CENTRAL ASIAN BUDDHISM AND ITS REPERCUSSION TO BENGAL

TÜRK DİNİ DÜŞÜNCELERİNİN ORTA ASYA BUDİZMİYLE  
KAYNAŞMASI VE BENGAL'E YANSIMALARI

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Sorumlu Yazar

## Abstract

This academic research is primarily concerned with two fundamental issues. The first objective is to depict Buddhist impacts on Turkic religious thoughts during Islamisation. The second issue is how this syncretic process aided Turks in capturing the Bengal region with the assistance of local Buddhists. The historical tie between Bengal and Central Asia dates to the first century BCE. With time, the northern Indian Maurya empire and the Turkish Huns played an essential role. Through their efforts, Buddhism spread throughout Central Asia. Besides, Islam encountered significant opposition from Buddhism in Bengal and Central Asia. Over time, the Turks erected a Sultanate in Delhi and then hailed Bengal for the same purpose. As a result of an exhaustive search of the academic research on the database, applicable works have yet to be found related to running scholarly works. This study will employ a qualitative approach with a thematic focus. In addition, secondary categorical data from Turkish, English, and Bengali literature will be utilised in the current scholarly study.

**Key Words:** Bengal Region, Buddhism, Central Asian Sufi Tariqahs, Religious Syncretism, Turks.

## Öz

Bu akademik çalışma iki temel konuya odaklanmaktadır. Birincisi, İslamlaşma süreci sırasında Budist etkilerin Türk dini düşünceleri üzerindeki tasvirini yapmaktır. İkincisi, bu sentez sürecinin Türklerin yerel Budistlerin yardımıyla Bengal bölgesini ele geçirmelerine nasıl yardımcı olduğudur. Bengal ve Orta Asya arasındaki tarihî bağlantı, M.Ö. 1. yüzyıla kadar uzanmaktadır. Kuzey Hindistan Maurya İmparatorluğu ve Türk Ak Hunların çabaları sayesinde Budizm, Orta Asya'da yayıldı. İslam ise Bengal ve Orta Asya'da Budizm'in muhalefetiyle karşılaştı. Zamanla Türkler Delhi'de bir saltanat kurdular ve ardından Bengal'i fethettiler. Bu çalışmada, tematik odaklı niteliksel bir yaklaşım kullanılacaktır. Ayrıca mevcut bilimsel çalışmada Türkçe, İngilizce ve Bengalce literatürden ikincil kategorik verilerden yararlanılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bengal Bölgesi, Budizm, Orta Asya Sûfi Tarikatları, Dinî Kaynaşmalar, Türkler.

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## Introduction

Since the 6th century BCE, Eastern India (Bengal and Bihar) was not a part of the Brahminic sphere of influence; it attracted Buddha and his disciples at the outset of their movement and grew to become a significant Buddhist stronghold (Thomas, 1931, 13–14). Sastri discloses that Buddhism was first preached in Eastern India, where it flourished and remained popular for the most fabulous period (Sastri, 1897, 1–2). Later, the Maurya dynasty lasted from 322 to 185 BC and was the only empire to spread Buddhism outside the Indian Ashoka Empire, including Central Asia- the Transoxiana region (Ray, 2007, 185–190). During the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Turkish Kushans provided a heavenly peace for flourishing Buddhism worldwide (Cöhce, 1997, 983). Neelis focuses more on the Kushan, who dominated a frontier that connected Western Turkistan and North India. This power facilitated long-term cross-cultural exchange, trade, and the spread of religion from the first to the third century C.E. (Neelis, 2011, 2/132).

The cited scenario implies that Bengal and Bihar, parts of North India, had established a religious collaboration with the Central Asian Buddhists. The Brahmin Guptas (approximately between 430–and 580) of Bengal cooperated at first with the Central-Asian Ak (white)-Huns (the Persian and Greek literature address them as Hephthalites) who defeated the Kushan in 367. The mentioned Turkish tribe migrated to North India from Ghazni after 375. These influxes were initially halted by the Guptas, who controlled a wide area from the Bay of Bengal to the mouth of the Indus River, and many important measures were taken to prevent such an invasion in the 470s. However, shortly after that, the Hun tribes, under the leadership of Toramana (484-515), embarked on an invasion of Gupta's India except for Bengal (Cöhce, 1997, 983–984; Majumdar, 1973, 144; Modi, 1917, 337).

Then, the Ak-Huns were considered the most powerful political entity of north India from the 5th century to the end of the 6th century. By then, they had made political, military, and cultural ties with the Indian states. After that, this liaison was encountered due to its proximity, leaving traces in the memory of the Indian people for a long time. Besides, the Huns introduced horses and horse culture to India, which flourished in this era (Cöhce, 1997, 984; Milot, 1970, 16). Following their loss of control in Afghanistan in 557 due to the Western Turkic-Sasanian alliance, the Huns would soon find themselves in decline in India and ultimately eradicated by Hindu rulers in the early 7th century (Cöhce, 1997, 984; Majumdar, 1973, 144).

In the meantime, the Turkification of Afghanistan and North India had begun in Western Gokturk (582-659) after the complete defeat of the Ak-Hun state. The Buddhist Pala dynasty (750-1161), who came to power in Bengal a hundred years after Gokturk ruled India, had established multifaced relations with the Central-Asian Turks. It is deserved because the Gokturks were more tolerant of their fellow citizens. However, they applied the same strategy in India as in other regions. Dispatching large numbers of Turkish tribes to settle and maintain control over newly captured areas is one of them (Ögel, 1971, 59). Niyogi expresses that during the tenure of the Buddhist Pala dynasty after the Gupta period, many Tibetan monks travelled to India, thanks to Mahipala's successful restoration of the Pala empire. Scholars from both countries began exchanging knowledge and ideas regularly (Niyogi, 1960, 28).

This relation can be traced from the Ashoka's (an orthodox Buddhist leader of great India including Bengal) period (273-232 B.C.). According to Zeren, Indian culture, including Buddhism, with the inscriptions of King Ashoka, has significant

similarities with those of the Eastern Turks. Among them, “dharma” in Indian culture, which encompasses various meanings such as ‘religious teachings’ or ‘law,’ overlaps in some respects with ‘töre’ in Turkish culture, which constitutes the most important principles of state governance (Zeren, 2016, 103).

After the Pala dynasty, the South Indian-origin Orthodox Hindu Senas came to power, increasing the pressure on north-Indian Buddhists. Furthermore, a campaign of coercion was instituted to compel the locals into adopting Hinduism. Barriers were initiated in worship places. Moreover, Hindu scriptures were pushed to be read rather than Buddhist ones. As a result, some Buddhists could not find trust in Bengal and fled to neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia (Karim, 2013, 13–40; Mannan, 2006, 55–56). Those who remained later witnessed the hailing of Islam by Central Asian Turks to Bengal in 1204.

### Literature Review

Bengal and Central Asia are geographically important for researchers because both belong to Islamic geography and have in-depth bilateral histories from earlier epochs. Nevertheless, except for some relevant academic works, we have yet to touch upon the running topic we marked already. From the perspective of Turkish academia, many works were found on Turkish Buddhism (Turkish Buddhism geographically covers the vast area of the Transoxiana region from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the Turks accepted Buddhism greatly (Walter, 2014, 21–38) yet a general evaluation of Turkish Buddhism still needs to be discovered. That is why a substantial study was done on it. Though the ongoing research is conducted in English, it trails the same consequences as Turkish literature. The related academic previously published dataset will give a bird’s eye view of a literary gap in favour of the current study.

Authors	Article Titles
Walter, M.N.	Buddhism in Central Asian History
Sela, R.	Central Asian Muslims on Tibetan Buddhism, 16th-18th Centuries
Von Hintuber	A Mile Stone in Exploration of Central Asian Buddhism
Nattier, J.	Church Language and Vernacular Language in Central-Asian Buddhism
Dotson, B.	Transfer of Buddhism Across Central Asian Networks (7th To 13th Centuries)
Liu, X.R.	A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam
Yumiko, I.; Mckay, A.	The Early 20th Century Resurgence of the Tibetan Buddhist World Studies in Central Asian Buddhism Preface
Mckay, A	The Early 20th Century Resurgence of the Tibetan Buddhist World Studies in Central Asian Buddhism Introduction
Werner, K	Reflecting Mirrors. Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism
Atmaca, E	The Rite of Passage in Karay Turks: Marriage
Bin, Y	The Bengal Connections in Yunnan
Mukherjee, R	Ambivalent Engagements: The Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean World
Kartashova, T.	On The Genre Profile of Bengal Medieval Spiritual Music

Sarker, A.	Popular Religion in The Pala Period: Evidence from Iconographic Study of Four Female Deities From Northern Bengal
Prasad, B.N.	Votive Inscriptions on The Sculptures of Early Medieval Samatata-Harikela, Bengal: Explorations in Socio-Religious History
Cengiz, A.K.	Fragments of the Old Uyghur Avijay in the Serindia Collection
O'brien-Kop, K.	Meditation, Idealism And Materiality: Vivid Visualization in The Buddhist 'Kizil Yoga Manual' and The Context of Caves
Barman, R.k.; Sarkar, S.	Navayana Buddhism And The Scheduled Castes of West Bengal
Dessein, B.	Buddhists, Hellenists, Muslims, And The Origin Of Science
Hall, K.R.	Fifteenth-Century Melaka's Networked Ports-of-Trade And Maritime Diasporas in The Bay Of Bengal And Western Indian Ocean
Tokyurek, H.	The Konul Concept in Old Uyghur Turkish
Klümkeit, H.j.	Buddhism in Turkish Central Asia
Lee, E.J.	The Way Of Being A Social Worker: Implications For Confucianism To Social Work Education And Clinical Practice
Chakravarty, S.	The Bauls of Bengal
Isi, H.	On The Expression Of Sumer Similar To Sumeru Tag in Old Uyghur Turkic Text
Blackburn, AM	Buddha-Relics in The Lives of Southern Asian Polities
Doerfer, G.	Japanese Research On Turkish Buddhism
Dejong, Jw	Japanese Studies On Turkish Buddhism
Klümkeit, Hj	Early Turkish Buddhism And its Literary Monuments
Klümkeit, Hj	Turkish Buddhism in Japanese Research
Rahimi, M.	Impact and Traces of Traditional Turkish Beliefs Among Iranian Turks
Shaw, S	Yasodhara in Jatakas
Monteith, F.	Towards A Landscape Archaeology of Buddhist Cave-Temples in China
Bernard, C.b.; Chen, R.x.	A Fall into The Pit Remarks on Tocharian B Kosko, Koskiye
Pal, S.	Religious Patronage in The Land Grant Charters of Early Bengal (Fifth-Thirteenth Century)
Altin, G.	Uyghur Altun Yaruk (Introduction, Text And Index)
Rigsby, C.A.	Three Strands of Nothingness In Chinese Philosophy and The Kyoto School: A Summary and Evaluation

Siddiqui, S.	Parallel Lives or Interconnected Histories? Anagarika Dharmapala And Muhammad Barkatullah's 'World Religions' in Japan
Ustunova, K.	What Does Throwing Apple Tradition in Erzurum Weddings Tell?
Isi, H.	Charity Concept As An Individual Salvation Method in Old Uyghurs
Sen, S.	A Passage of the Old Uyghur Four Brahman Story
Tokyurek, H.	Expressions Related to the Concept of Death in Old Uyghur Turkish
Kreisel, DK.	The Psychology of Victorian Buddhism And Rudyard Kipling's Kim
Barua, D.M.	Pali Studies in Colonial Bengal: Bengali-Speaking Buddhists' Strategy to Distinguish Themselves from Hindus
d'Hubert, T.	India Beyond The Ganges: Defining Arakanese Buddhism in Persianate Colonial Bengal
Milligan, MD.	The Economic Power of Women in Early South Asian Buddhism
Copp, P.	Seals As Conceptual And Ritual Tools in Chinese Buddhism, Ca. 600-1000 CE
Chen, JH.	Pancavarsika Assemblies in Liang Wudi's Buddhist Palace Chapel
Gulcali, Z.	Dream Motifs in Old Buddhist Uyghur Literature
Yakup, A.	An Old Uyghur Fragment of The Lotus Sutra From The Krotkov Collection in St. Petersburg
Veselic, M.	The Allure Of The Mystical: East Asian Religious Traditions in The Eyes of Alma M. Karlin
Sawaya, Ma; Renders, H.	Buddhist Visual Culture: Changes In Yama's Attributes And Their Meanings
Duceur, G.	The Bodhisattva At The Scriptorium: Redaction History And Dating
Han, J.	The Gaganaganjapariprccha And The Sky As A Symbol Of Mahayana Doctrines And Aspirations
Shaw, J.	Archaeologies Of Buddhist Propagation in Ancient India: Ritual' And Practical' Models Of Religious Change
Wu, Sh. & others	Evolutionary Process And Development Implications of Traditional Trade Routes in The Himalayan Region
Scherer, B.	Translating The Lotus Sutra into Social Action: Hermeneutics And Public Dharmology
Yoshida, Y.	The Buddhist Sogdien Texts in The Berlin Turfan Collection And The Origin Of The Buddhist Sogdien Word For Bodhisattva
Ray, HP.	Buddhist Monuments Across The Bay Of Bengal: Cultural Routes And Maritime Networks

Sen, T.	Maritime Southeast Asia Between South Asia And China To The Sixteenth Century
Uzunkaya, U.	Meditation, Samsara, And Confession: Fragments Of Old Uyghur Text On Various Issues
Lodrick, D.O.	Symbol And Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture
Van Schaik, S.	Married Monks: Buddhist Ideals And Practice In Kroraina
Geary, D.	Rebuilding The Navel Of The Earth: Buddhist Pilgrimage And Transnational Religious Networks
Husemann, JH	Located Imagination - India in The Shuijing Zhu Of Li Daoyuan (?- 527)
Zappulli, DA.	Towards A Buddhist Theism
Karadavut, A.	On The Words <i>Onluk Yuzluk</i> of Old Uyghur Law Documents
Chakrabarti, Dk.	Buddhist Sites Across South Asia As Influenced By Political And Economic Forces
Revere, N	Facts And Fiction: The Myth of Suvannabhumi Through the Thai And Burmese Looking Glass
Frost, MR.	Beyond The Limits of Nation And Geography': Rabindranath Tagore And The Cosmopolitan Moment, 1916-1920
Uzunkaya, U; Karaayak, T.	Old Uyghur Fragments of A Commentary Of Cheng Weishi Lun (6th And 8th Leaves)
Yildiz, H.	Old Uyghur Turks' Concept of the Devil
Truschke, A.	The Power Of The Islamic Sword in Narrating The Death Of Indian Buddhism
Kaplan, U.	From The Tea To The Coffee Ceremony: Modernizing Buddhist Material Culture In Contemporary Korea
De Silva, P.	Thinking And Feeling: A Buddhist Perspective
Lee, SS.	Recent Publications On The Art And Archaeology Of Kucha
Blackburn, AM.	Buddhist Connections in The Indian Ocean: Changes in Monastic Mobility, 1000-1500
Lammerts, DC.	Narratives Of Buddhist Legislation: Textual Authority And Legal Heterodoxy in Seventeenth Through Nineteenth-Century Burma
Barua, D.M.	Magadha To Chittagong Buddhist Migration: The Colonizer-Colonized Contestation Over Arakanese And Bengali Ethnic Belonging
Vargas O'bryan, I	Falling Rain, Reigning Power in Reptilian Affairs: The Balancing of Religion And The Environment
Baykuzu, TD.	The Lost Books Of Hsiung-Nus And The Sutras
Lewisohn, L	Rabindranath Tagore's Syncretistic Philosophy And The Persian Sufi Tradition
Rambelli, F	The Myth Of The South Indian Iron Stupa (Nanten Tetto) in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism
Dongak, ASO	Tuvian Fairytales Based On The Mongol Story Plots: Magic Dead Man Collection Of Short Stories

Kalkir, N; Baskan, S	The Inclination Of The Gokturk Khagans To Be Estranged From Their Own Cultures And Reasons: Taspar Khagan And Isbara Khagan
Hansen, IA	Buddhist Influences on the Idea of the Unconscious
Tournier, V.	A Tide Of Merit Royal Donors, Tamraparniya Monks, And The Buddha's Awakening in 5th-6th-Century Andhradesa
Dmitrienko, Nm; Golev, Ia	About Grigoriy Potanin's Buddhist Collection
Uzunkaya, U.	Fragments Of Old Uyghur Commentary On The Vimalak Rtinirde A-Sutra
Findlay, R.	Coastal-Inland Interactions in Burmese History: A Long-Term Perspective
Singh, K	Cultural Dimensions Of India-Thailand Relations: A Historical Perspective
Sotirova, I	Tangun And Tangra, And Their Role in The Construction Of The Korean And The Bulgarian National Consciousness
Barman, R.K., Sarkar, S.	Navayana Buddhism And The Scheduled Castes Of West Bengal
Meinert, C.	Piety, Power, And Place in Central And East Asian Buddhism
d'Hubert, T.	India Beyond The Ganges: Defining Arakanese Buddhism in Persianate Colonial Bengal
Walter, M.N.	Buddhism in Central Asian History
Nattier, J.	Church Language And Vernacular Language in Central Asian Buddhism

During the quest for correlated academic contributions in the research databases, the most often occurring keywords “Turkish Buddhism,” “Central Asian Buddhism,” “Bengal Buddhism,” and “north-Indian Buddhism” drove the work forward. After analyzing the above-mentioned scholarly works, it is observed that none meets the prime concern of this running title.

### Research Method

This study follows the thematic analysis using the qualitative method. The cited concept encompasses all aspects of thematic analysis. Dawadi states, “Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method researchers use to organize and analyze complex data sets systematically. It is a search for themes that can capture the narratives available in the account of data sets. It involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data” (Dawadi, 2020, 62). The study uses this definition to conduct the thematic qualitative method under the three frameworks. Of them, the first two, as religious and philosophical frameworks, played a crucial role in Bengal and Central Asia. In a short sense, it will investigate how Central Asian Islam, i.e., Turks, was influenced by Buddhism. The third one is a non-denying fact that the Turkic Sultanate of India spread Bengal Islam. At this time, the fusion of religious and Sufi philosophical thoughts offered the Turks, already affected by Buddhism, to play a political role in Bengal. However, some trade links help it.

The article discusses Central Asian Buddhism and its hegemony over Turks through the syncretic process. Later, by following, it negotiates how the Turks found a firm ground in Bengal with Buddhist assistance. In this case, the study will consider mainly the theme of Central Asian “Turks” and “Buddhism” rather than describe the Buddhist history of Bengal. Nevertheless, on occasion, the Bengal history of Buddhism will be noticed for comparing and better capturing the context.

Besides, we occasionally used North India instead of Eastern India, though it was a sovereign tilt. Because many kingdoms rose to power in eastern India, they expanded their territories northward. Furthermore, throughout the Islamic era, political and religious influences in Bengal came from the Northwest Territories. The study will concentrate on Central Asian Buddhism and how it closely worked with Turks, and then it will persuade Bengali Buddhists to collaborate with the Turkish manoeuvres (1204) in Bengal.

### 1. Buddhism and the Central Asian Turks

It is well known that Buddhism splintered into two branches due to Hindu influences: the traditionalist Hinayana and the universalist Mahayana. The Mahayana cliques absorbed certain local beliefs, whereas the Hinayana did not. Thus, Mahayana set out from northern India; throughout time, it met with numerous nations, such as the Scythians, Bactria, Huns, Uyghurs, and others. In the meantime, the Mantra Yana and Vajrayana schools emerged in India during the 8th century, just copied from Tantric Hinduism, giving rise to the Mahayana school (Tümer, 1992, 6/353–354).

By the 1st century, Mahayana Buddhism had made its way from Kashmir to Eastern Iran, across the territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and into China via East Turkistan (particularly the towns of Khotan and Turfan). The Buddhist-influenced state formed by the Huns in North China after the fall of the Great Hun State (469) introduced Buddhism to Eastern Turks for the first time (Zeren, 2022, 689). By the time, with the assistance of Kushan, Mahayana Buddhism had spread to West Turkistan by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Tümer, 1992, 6/353–354). In this developing process, Mahayana continued to disrespect local customs rather than the combined religious culture and beliefs they made. Considering this, by the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Turks had fully embraced Buddhism despite first being introduced to them in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Erşan - Akdeniz, 2019, 87).

Though it is a Pandora's box regarding the time Turks adopted Buddhism, Baykuzu argues that despite the efforts of certain priests, Buddhism did not catch on among the Gokturks before the 6<sup>th</sup> century and ultimately failed to spread beyond a small number of Kagans. However, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Huns welcomed Buddhism massively and launched the earliest Buddhist Sutra translations (Baykuzu, 2007, 194). Another researcher drew attention to the same view. According to it, it is very likely that Buddhist teachings were conveyed to the Western Turks before 680 since this religion had the infrastructure to reach the masses of Western Turks (Klimkeit, 1990, 54–55).

More deniable facts exist that the Western Turks of that period clinched Buddhism, and we have no more conclusive proof. However, Klimkeit claims that the Western Turk colonized Bagram region was home to several Buddhist temples founded by the Turkish Khanate (Klimkeit, 1990, 55). Another historical proceeding testifies that Buddhist monks utilized the Silk Road to promote the Buddhist religion in Turkistan, remarkably in Bukhara, Balkh, and nearby cities. One concrete consequence is the



abundance of Buddhist temples in Bukhara (Turan, 2005, 82–89).

In this regard, Turkish Buddhism had a significant impact on Uyghur (Günay - Güngör, 2009, 172–173; Kafesoğlu, 2007, 130–131). A similar idea conveys İzgi. He confirms that the Uyghurs, who coexisted with Buddhist Indians, Persians, Takhar, and Chinese in the 10th century, were intensely influenced. In this case, Buddhist monasteries, temples, and libraries profoundly contributed (İzgi, 1989, 60–61). Sarıtaş explains more. In his view, when the Uyghurs embraced Brahmanism and Buddhism between the 10th and 13th centuries, they translated religious and medical texts from Chinese, Tibetan, Tokharian, Sogdian, and Sanskrit. In doing so, they introduced many elements of Indian culture into Turkish culture (Sarıtaş, 2011, 6–14).

Biçer notes differently. He says the most influential religion among Turks before Islam was Buddhism. The Uyghurs widely accept it, particularly as devout Buddhists who have propagated their doctrines to the rest of Turkistan (Biçer, 2018, 122–123). Apart from this, another expert, Macun, remarks on the Transoxiana Buddhist supremacy and exposes the architectural style of India. According to him, lotus flower ornamentation, typical of Uyghur art, was spotted during the Sultanate era of India. The Turks also brought the dome style used in the Hakani and Seljuk periods to India (Macun, 1990, 347).

After the Uyghurs, scholar Klimkeit asserts that the Sogdians (the modern-day boundaries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) disseminated Buddhism and Christianity. The mentioned region was another vital hub of Buddhism after the Uyghur. They connected Turkish territories with their mighty empire. Although the Sogdians had a specific effect on the Turks, it was mainly in the arena of religion (Klimkeit, 1990, 57–58). On it, Aydınli goes differently. In his observation, the Sogdians were related to Orthodox Hindu Aryans who eventually migrated to Bengal from Europe via Neasia and Iran. The Turkistani Aryan branch of Sogdians probably arrived in Transoxiana about the year 1200 and mingled with the indigenous Saka tribe. In his assessment, most historians agree that the Sakas are recognized as a Turkish tribe (Aydınli, 2019, 79–80).

After an introductory presentation on Turkish Buddhism, the study needs to focus on the process of Islamicization of Turks. This sub-section aims to define the Buddhist influences on Turkish Islam. One of the most remarkable historical developments of Turks in Transoxiana is the conversion of several Turkish tribes to Islam under Kashgar's "Hakani Turk" in the 930s. Adversely, the first Turkish Muslim ruler was the Karakhanid Satuk Bura Khan (d. 344/955). At the initial phase of Turkic Islam, a coin issued in 405/1014 provides insight into the political connections between the Karakhanid and the Abbasid. Abbasid-Turkish ties can be traced back to the reigns of Caliphs Mamun (198/813) and Mutasim (218/833). Nevertheless, Karakhanid originated from Ordu, also known as Kashgar, a base for Buddhist culture from 750 (Esin, 1978, 163; Hitchens, 2022, 25/7–8; Mert, 2021, 669).

Meanwhile, during the Abbasid era, the Barmak family, descendants of Buddhist monks, held significant administrative influence in the early stages of Abbasid rule. They governed Baghdad for five centuries (132-656/750-1258), exerting control over a substantial area of the Islamic world. Notably, the Barmak family had authority over the Buddhist monastery of Naw Bahar near Balkh and other Iranian monasteries in the past (Yusuf, 2009, 370). Though the Muslim operation in the mentioned regions, the Buddhists existed. Because the Arab Muslim existence in Central Asia primarily aimed at economic interests rather than a mission to spread Islam, only Arabs could

be Muslim during that time. Non-Arab convert Muslims (mawalis) challenged early Islam (Elverskog, 2010, 44). It seems that including Turks and Buddhists, the *Mawalis* formed a great unity against the Arabs in the earlier Abbasid Caliphate. This way, the political contact may have influenced the beliefs of the Muslim Turks, who later migrated to Bengal.

However, in the early stages of (Turk) Buddhist-Muslim interaction, northwest India and Central Asia experienced significant political and religious upheavals. Surprisingly, Buddhism managed to endure amidst these tumultuous times. Arab geographers noted that cities in Transoxiana regions still had “infidels” and “idolators” during the tenth and eleventh centuries (Jafri, 1961, 8,14,18,33,36). The Turks comprised most of it (Koca, 1996, 263–264).

Although Buddhism remained the most popular religion among the Uyghur Turks until the early 13th century, it is known that they began to accept Islam as early as the 9th century due to their interactions with Muslim merchants and dervishes, mainly in Turfan (Günay - Güngör, 2009, 179–180; Kitapçı, 2004, 140–147). From the above, we can infer that the Uyghurs maintained religious coexistence with the Karakhanid despite the Buddhist influence they experienced for at least three centuries after proselytizing Islam.

Interestingly, despite common beliefs, the Hakani Turks were encouraged to convert the Burkanis (Buddhists). It is unlikely that the Khans of the Kashgar, Khotan, and Uyghur from East Turkistan were not Buddhists, even if they did not accept Buddhism. This is because prominent scholars like Yusuf Khass Hajib and Mahmud of Kashgar (11<sup>th</sup> century) only dealt with Buddhist terminology and monastic jargon before the advent of Islam (Esin, 1978, 166). Additionally, the Islamic institutions of Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Bala Sagun, Yarkent, and Kashgar were Buddhist basements in the earliest times. It makes sense when discussing the earliest Turkish Islamic history. Even the Turk Beys have always been interested in building mosques, churches, and palaces. The legacy of Islamic civilization and its architectural advancement could be seen even before the Turks adopted Islam. The massive minarets of Turkish architecture were one of them (Taşdemirci, 1988, 271–272).

On the other side, while Islam helped bring peace and unity in West and East Turkistan, it took until the latter half of the 15th century (1473) for the Uyghurs to reunite culturally and militarily. At this time, the Karakhanid Muslims served as an enormous obstacle to spreading the Chinese culture from the East. This unity of Turks seized Buddhist Khotan around the 11th century. Consequently, between 926 and 1220, Karakhanid Turks ensured the region’s power and made a Muslim civilization (Esin, 1978, 150; Taşağil, 1998, 18/251–252). However, the civilization they made was in a syncretic way. By it, they brought it up to India.

## **2. Syncretic Way of Turkish Religious and Philosophical Thoughts Through Buddhism**

Islam in the Transoxiana region inspired the Sufis and their philosophical thoughts, which obsolete mainstream Buddhist doctrines and sects had already manipulated. It suggests that Sufis-Buddhists prioritized religious harmony through syncretism. Although this is a natural process, no one has stopped the religious fusion, not even the Emperors, Sufis, or merchants. Edward Said’s remark is appropriate in this regard. In his view, “... all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure; all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (Said, 1993,

xxv).

Regarding India, we can interpret it in the same manner. The composite culture in India, not as a mutual eradication of Islamic influences but as a collaboration instead of corrosion and cooperation instead of confrontation, would not be surprising. This is because the concept of “religious syncretism” in India first envisioned the fundamental forms of religious beliefs and then led to a tendency for reconciliation (Martin, 1996, 215–217). Because, in the Indian subcontinent, the Turks have coexisted with locals for generations. Here, though, Şahin establishes a solid point. Her claims that the Indian rulers from the 7th to the 10th century were notables from different Turkish and Afghan tribes. Most of those were Afghan armies, ensuring dominance was in their hands (Şahin, 2018, 128). If this is true, we should expect the relationship between India and central Asia through Buddhism to grow closer in the upcoming century. Overall, the Turks established the Delhi Sultanate in the later period, which could be traced to them, where Buddhism greatly squeezed religious affairs. That is why Islam might flourish swiftly there.

Considering the Turks’ syncretic ways upon the stated framework, it can be disclosed that Buddhist thoughts permeated all, including the great personalities, philosophies, and Sufi tariqas. The renowned Sufi and “Pir-i Turkistan” Ahmad Yasavi (d. 1166) reportedly had some linkages to Hindu religious culture when he persuaded the Turks to Islam on the Western Front during the mid-eleventh century. Though this claim is contradictory, he practised current filling, breath retention, and two “methods of surrender and obedience” taught by the Yasaviyya tariqa. It might be because Buddhism demonstrated similar Hindu philosophical doctrines to the Turks (Esin, 1978, 177). Moreover, Yasavi’s birthplace was replete with Buddhist shrines. On it, the Yasavi sect obeyed the Buddhist nuns’ practice of having their heads shaved. Esin asserts that Yasavi spent considerable time in Bukhara, though it was a Buddhist castle. It is also noted that the original Ahmat Yasavi complex (in Turkish Külliye) was built by Hakani Turks, who got inspiration from the Turkish-Buddhist architectural style (Esin, 1978, 177; Esin, 1989, 2/162).

Balkh, a city close to Bukhara, was another Buddhist hub. How did Buddhism influence Islam there? Some figures will help us understand its significance in the region. The Balkh remained with 100 Buddhist monasteries, 1 Hindu temple, approximately 100 Stupas, and as many as 3,000 Buddhist monks up to the Arab conquest (644) (Pines, 2003, 354). At the same time, the Mongolian city of Karakoram had two mosques, one church, and twelve temples of different nationalities. It also states that in many other places within Turk boundaries, mosques, churches, and pagodas may all be found side by side (Günay, 1998, 57).

It is reported that the ruins of Buddhist stupas in Central Asia have been used to unearth Sufi tombs and artefacts. Köprülü marked some views from this perspective. The tombs of some Turkish saints in Central Asian regions, especially in Khotan, were in old Buddhist monasteries. Turkish traditional practices played a substantial role in their later becoming places of worship. Moreover, he continues with the remarkable similarity between the miracles of Turkish saints and those of Buddhist saints and the infiltration of some Hindu folklore (Bengal) on Yasaviyya Tariqa (Köprülü, 1970, 144–145). Apart from folklore, Esin’s (Esin, 1995, 31–37) view, as cited in (Zeren, 2018, 141), that “Tantric Buddhist Uygurs’ and Bektaşî (the Murid of Yasavi) Sufis’ concepts, terms, symbolism, and rituals, give us some hints regarding some inherited features from old Turkish religious traditions and Buddhism to Turkish Sufism.”

To continue receiving Indian culture, the village of Kasri Hindav (Hindu palace) in Bukhara, where Bahauddin, leader of the Naqshbandi sect, was buried, eventually became a Buddhist pilgrimage place. This location was renamed “Kasrul Arifin” (Gnostics’ palace) in later years (Ahmad, 1964, 126). In the meantime, the similarities can be traced in Bengal. During the Muslim period, those Central Asian religious products appeared in Bengal. An example could be set according to the references, such as *Buddha Makam*. Before the arrival of Islam in Bengal, these Makams served as Buddhist Viharas. However, after Islam, the Buddhists of Bengal who worshipped there changed it into a mosque by removing the deities (Barua, 2007, 55).

Besides the influence of mainstream Sufi tariqas by Buddhism, the nomadic Muslim Turkish tribes’ lifestyle choices and practices contradict those of the long-time Muslims established in Bukhara and Samarkand. Moreover, the Kazakh-Kyrgyz Turks of Bukhara, who had already converted to Islam, were referred to by the 15<sup>th</sup> century’s Islamic scholars as ‘polytheists.’ Also, Karluk Turks of Samarkand were labelled ‘polytheists’ around the turn of the 12th century. On the other hand, when Mahmud of Kashgar examined Shamanism’s rituals and beliefs, he did not apply the formula of “nauzu billah” (we seek refuge in Allah). Moreover, the Chagatai Mughals of India find it fascinating to trace a similar tradition in the 16th century (Inan, 1952, 19–21, 29). This is not part of this thesis but indicates a religious syncretism in Bengal.

As mentioned above, the Turks coexisted with Indians from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, in Central Asia, they were inhabited by Indians and Persians. At this time, they were familiar with Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Judaism. Until the 10th century, Buddhism was the most widespread among the Turkic people in Turkistan (Esin, 1977, 232). In this perspective, the Turks and Indians shared the same religious view of their reverence for the natural world. Mountains, hills, trees, rocks, rivers, underground streams, forests, iron, and swords were all thought to possess mysterious powers. They, too, were ethereal beings. They also conceived of numerous gods, such as the sun, moon, star, lightning, thunder, and lightning (Avci, 2020, 521).

On the other hand, Buddhist Tantra had been developed besides the faith in nature. Its strength was seen in robust institutions, prolific art, expansion, and cultural influence. It was spread internationally with notable missionaries like Santarakṣita and Padmasambhava, fostering growth in Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Consequently, key pilgrimage sites like Bodhi Gaya drew scholars and seekers from Asia to India (Ray, 1420, 588; Shaw, 1994, 33).

In this opportunity, the Ghaznavid Turkish raids that started towards the end of the tenth century marked the beginning of a new era of Islamic conquests in India. When the Muslim Turkish conquests began, Buddhism had largely retreated from India (might be from Western India) (Öztuna, 2005, 1/824). However, before heading to India, between 961 and 1187, the Ghaznavids ruled over regions including Transoxiana, northern India, and Khurasan. They became well-known for their campaigns to conquer new territories and spread the Islamic faith, focusing on their expeditions in India (Bayur, 1987, 1/65). Moreover, the Ghaznavids had a solid relationship with Indian Ak-Huns as a claim that “a significant number of Turkish population (Ak-Hun), likely rooted in the Turk Shahs, managed to penetrate the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and maintain their presence. They played crucial roles in Mahmud’s military campaigns during his expeditions into India” (Cöhce, 1997, 984). That means they were well-known about the local Buddhist and Brahminic culture. It made easiness to operate military expeditions.

On the other hand, the Ghaznavids were under the Samanid Empire (where the Turks' religious mind was verily affected, as Fuad Köprülü emphasizes especially) till 999. In 1032, Benares was captured, marking the expansion of influence into Bihar (Bengal) (Öztuna, 2005, 1/825). This was only possible due to the soft policies of the Buddhist Pala dynasty. However, the Pala maintained a strong partnership with the Turks in manifold spheres. Niyogi says that despite being Buddhists, the Pala monarchs (750-1161) of Bengal and Bihar followed a tolerant approach towards other faiths. While they undoubtedly revitalized Buddhism, there is no proof that they enforced their religion on others (Niyogi, 1960, 20). The Buddhists did not seem to disappear in Bengal due to the Turk's interference. The orthodox Brahman was the cause of the displacement of Buddhists in Bengal (French, 1928, 20–21). That is why the Buddhists helped the Turks manoeuvre (the discussion comes later) regarding the Bengals' capture of the Hindu Sena dynasty.

As mentioned, the (Bengal) Palas dealt extensively with the Eastern part of Turks in trade, religious and cultural functions. Of them, tantrism was not limited to the institutional area; the adapted versions of Buddhist Tantric yoga influenced by Islam, closely linked to the evolution of Sufism in Bengal, involve practices deeply integrated into the local culture. Since the Bengal Tantric bloc, its themes have been established in Tibet and inner Asia. This tantric bloc maintained trade between northern India and inner Asia (Elverskog, 2010, 84). The second one is the horse trade by the Silk Route. With it, Bengal navigated its fate by engaging in religious, trade, and political matters. Minhazi Shiraj mentioned in his *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* that the Turks were the “merchants and had brought horses for sale” in Bengal (Shiraj, 1970, 1/557).

One question is how Bengal connected to the Silk Road. As the answer, a yearly trade fair in Turan attracted Indians from as far away as the Ganges River and Bengal. The merchants who attended would typically remain in the city for two to three years (Levi, 2002, 94). However, the impact was not confined to the commercial sphere; it also ushered in significant shifts in religious thought, as already cited. The dissemination of religions across Asia sparked. Once Buddhism was well-established in East Turkistan, local priests and monks like Fa-Xian in the 5th and Xuan Zang in the 7th century felt a pull toward visiting India through Bengal via Silk Road. Likewise, Foltz did not forget the Central Asian Sufis. The Sufis also attached themselves to Silk Road caravans to lower and inner Asia as early as the tenth century (Foltz, 2010, 12). According to data, these Sufis might have been encouraged by the Buddhist monks or traders who were used to come to northern India.

This link might be created when Indians, along with Turks, Tajiks, and Mongols, are listed as guests in a Bukharan khanaqah, or Sufi hostel, during the medieval period of trade along the Indo-Turonian caravan routes (Levi, 2002, 91). So, the Sufis like Shaikh Abbas bin Hamza Nishapuri (d. 900), Shaikh Ahmad b. Muhammad (d. 952), Shaikh Ismail b. Najd Nishapuri (d. 975) and Shaikh Ibrahim Turki (d. 1169) (Ismail, 1989, 35) might have come to Bengal with the Silk Route traders to preach Islam in Bengal.

Moreover, researcher Öngören explains these Sufi names as follows. In Central Asia, Turkish Sufis were addressed as Shaikhs until the 12th century (Öngören, 2010, 39/52). The prefixes of their names also prove it. On the other hand, Shaikh ruled Khanqahs after the 10th century. Sufi Khanqahs were established in significant cities such as Basra, Baghdad, Nishapur, Rey, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Balkh (Uludağ, 1997, 16/42–43). As mentioned previously, these locations were influenced by Buddhism. By the time this religious culture reached North and Eastern India.

Like Bengal, Muslims and non-Muslims observed the Khanqah activities in Central Asia. The khanqah of Shah Jalal (d. 1346) was open to all. Visitors came with presents, whether they were Muslims or not; that did not matter (Tanci, 1983, 449–450). Another root of religious fusion in Bengal is commemoration. Each year, commemorative ceremonies (Ur's) are conducted at the tomb of Jalaluddin Tabrizi (d. 1244?) between 1-22 Rajab (the seventh month of the Islamic calendar), with the participation of Muslims and non-Muslims (Ceyhan, 2011, 40/222–223). Ajmer's Moinuddin Chishti (d. 1236) could be another well-known example.

Another branch of Sufis is Pir. It initiates followers (murids) into mystic institutions. These Pirs and murids coexisted with the Buddhist influences in Afghanistan. Immigrants from Afghanistan, Persia, and Iraq carried the belief in Pirs and the practice of visiting their shrines in India, along with their religious orders. In Bengal, the Pirs encouraged Hindu-Muslim religious fusion (Rahman, 2018, 55).

Sometimes, the shrines blended a sophisticated culture that encouraged yoga practices rooted in indigenous traditions like the Natha cult and Sahajiya Vaishnavism. Despite their local origins, immigrants presented these practices within the framework of Islamic beliefs and classified them as essential components of Sufi practices (Hatley, 2007, 351–52), like in Central Asia. All these religious activities of local people are primarily well organized in Northern India.

Throughout these religious scenarios, how the Central Asian-based mainstream Sufi Tariqas such as Naqshbandi, Suhrawardy, and Chishti continued to practice Islam across India, including Bengal, according to Cebecioğlu, to establish their credibility with Hindus as sincere religious scholars, Sufis first introduce themselves subtly in Vaishnava and Shaivite beliefs and practices. They then tell the Hindus about a new name for the Supreme God, namely Allah, a new Avatar named Muhammad, and increasingly a new sharia and a new way of life. He said they impacted Indian Sikh and Bakhti doctrines (Cebecioğlu, 1992, 163). The latter stages of the Turks in India (the spread of Islam) came naturally easy because they were already familiar with India's topography, climate, culture, and religious syncretism. After all, the whole study affirms that the political and spiritual approaches and beliefs of Central Asian Turkish through Buddhism had a tremendous impact across the Indian subcontinent. These connections assisted them in running the Sultanate.

### **3. The Political Assurance and the Buddhist Judgement in Turkish Manoeuvre**

The Turks, who previously inhabited the Gangetic ports and (Bengal) delta areas for trading purposes, paid attention to local politics. Those settlements might have been established centuries prior. By then, Turki adventurers joined the primary Turki state of Delhi, like the Turk Muslim commander Ikhtiyar Uddin's (reign: 1202-1206) operation to great Bengal (Chattopadhyaya, 1990, 444). Not only for trading purposes, but they also found this tilt like their Central Asian homeland. The religious thoughts they saw in inner Asia were the same as those discovered in Bengal. In all these situations, political integrity came to the front.

As mentioned earlier in the text, the Sena, a group of Orthodox Brahmins, emerged after the Pala kingdom collapsed. So, while Buddhism died out in West Bengal, it survived in some parts of Bihar while retaining its distinctive character. In the East, however, the Brahmin influence was less; Buddhists could still be seen (Barua, 2007, 58, 63–64). At the same time, Muslim Turks came into Delhi and started to grab the

nearby regions. Considering the preceding issues, Ikhtiyar Uddin hastened to north India. Bengal was of its other territory.

Here, the discussion will demonstrate how the annexation of Bengal by Khalji Turks was carried out in collaboration with Buddhists. Besides, the following arguments made by (Shiraj, 1970, 1/557) can be made to shed light on the issue.

- The arrival of Ikhtiyar Uddin with 18 cavalries and their subsequent conquest of Bengal
- The Buddhist monk's prophecy advised King Lakshmana Sena (reign: 1178-1206) to escape the palace.

We will now evaluate two issues raised by the Persian historian Minhaj (d. 1260), who is well-distinguished by all as Minhaj-i Siraj for his renowned *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* works. Both of his points claim logic and scientific inquiry as follows.

At first, prioritizing the effort to conquer Bengal with only 18 cavalries is essential. It seems illogical for Ikhtiyar Uddin to capture Nadia with 18 warriors because King Lakshmana (d. 1206) Sena had a powerful military during his time. From the Ikhtiyar Uddin's side, with 200 cavalrymen, he successfully took control of Udannapur Bihar (fortress). Govinda Pala controlled Bihar at the time. Nevertheless, Bihar's border security was lax. Ikhtiyar Uddin is believed to have had little trouble taking this stronghold (Fuad, 2022, 447). On the other hand, it would be challenging to dispatch troops to Bengal immediately following the Bihar expedition. However, it would have been possible if he had sent the troops an update on weather and highway links.

The conquest of Bengal occurred around a year and a half after the fall of Bihar. Minhaj was mute on this issue. We can infer the total number of cavalries on the expedition. According to Minhaj, Ikhtiyar Uddin's cavalry numbered 10,000 during the Tibetan campaign, which followed the Bengal expedition (Shiraj, 1970, 560). Most or maybe half of them may have taken part in the subjugation of Bengal. As noted before, he would not have wasted time advancing into Bengal after Bihar if his army strength had been adequate. However, he had been warned about Lakshmana Sena's large army, so he prepared for them. In this scenario, thousands of warriors, not just eighteen, took part in the conquest of Bengal.

The Buddhist prophecy and the recommendation to King Lakshmana Sena to flee the palace are other striking points of this study. Approximately a year before the capture of Nadia, Lakshmana Sena dispatched spies to Bihar to gather details. He planned to use these spies to learn about Nadia, which was to be attacked. The founder of the Delhi Sultanate Qutbuddin Aibak (d. 1210) had already extended Turkish dominance up to (Uttara Pradesh) the Eastern border. The Sena family worried about the danger of war drums.

Moreover, after Bihar was occupied, many refugees began going to Gauda. Some of these new arrivals may have seen Ikhtiyar Uddin in Bihar. It is also likely that Buddhist officials at the King's palace (Gauda) heard details about Ikhtiyar Uddin's height and built from these evacuees. Here is a myth related to this incident. The myth is that the palace's patronized Buddhist monks, advisors, and astrologers advised the King to flee the city. They based their recommendations on a Brahmanical text and presented them to the King. According to this information, the Turks will first take Bihar and then Gauda. The King also inquired about Ikhtiyar Uddin's fitness because he was the local commander. The news shocked the ruler and his army, but it was accurate. Unfortunately, the academic world has been silent on this matter.

We have said already that the Buddhists and Nath, known for their vengeance against the Brahmans, will attack first by creating a chance. If the speculation is correct, these adversaries called Ikhtiyar Uddin in Bihar, who assured them of his unwavering support. In Gauda, no one can expect success from a daring assault with only 18 cavalries if there is no surprise of reinforcements. He was doomed to fail since Ikhtiyar Uddin had come to India from afar and begun an expedition without gaining updates on military bases, natural impediments, and weather conditions. A few Hindus might be willing to help Ikhtiyar Uddin out, but it could be due to personal interests. However, the Buddhist community provided him with all kinds of support. The Taranatha's interpretation tells us at least that. In his view, if accurate, this could lead to an intriguing investigation into the social and political circumstances of the area, with the monks serving as messengers for the Turks potentially offering valuable insights (Chattopadhyaya, 1990, 444). Then Bengal went to the Muslim hand and power in 1204.

### Conclusion

Buddhism was a foreign religion among the Turks for over a thousand years. Throughout this extended duration, it blended with the Turks' native religion of Tengrism, resulting in the emergence of Turkic Buddhism and unquestionably leaving certain marks and impacts in Turkish historical narratives. That is why the interests of Turks in India may be traced back to the first century B.C. However, the real Turkic influence in India began with the foundation of the Ghaznavid State (975-1187) and Sultan Mahmud's rule (990-1030). Both Turkish pioneers were mainly from Buddhist-influenced Afghanistan. At the end of the 12th century, the Ghurid (1187-1206) took over from the Ghaznavids. These Ghurid were able to determine the courses of Islam in Bengal.

Although the Turks had met India before, Bengal was a privilege. Regardless of the commercial, religious, or Sufi connection, it reinforced the previously established bond and relationship when the actual time came in. Even if political support was received, the help of the Bengal Buddhists was needed to transform this region into an Islamic land. It should be mentioned that religious syncretism affected Central Asian religious cultures, which were later imported to India, especially in Northern India, including Bengal. Buddhism played a crucial point in the end.

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