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**The Early Reception of Classical Arabic Tafsîr in the Indian Subcontinent: The Case of Shâfi‘î  
Scholarly Networks (12th–14th Centuries)**

Klasik Arap Tefsir Geleneğinin Hint Alt Kıtası’ndaki Erken Kabulü: Şafîî Âlim Ağları Örneği (12.–  
14. Yüzyıllar)

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## ÖZET

Bu makale, Hint alt kıtasında Kur'ân tefsiri geleneğinin erken gelişimini, yerel telif faaliyetlerinden ziyade klasik Arapça tefsir literatürünün kabulü ve dolaşımı bağlamında ele almaktadır. "Kabul" kavramı, yetkili tefsir metinleriyle aktif ilgilenilmesi, bunların öğretimde kullanılması ve aktarılması anlamına gelmekte; "dolaşım" ise söz konusu metinlerin ilmî ağlar aracılığıyla hareket etmesini ifade etmektedir. Özellikle 12.–14. yüzyıllar arasında faaliyet gösteren Şafî mezhebine mensup âlim ağları merkeze alınarak, Hint alt kıtasındaki Kur'ân ilimleri tarihine metin odaklı bir perspektif sunulmaktadır. Çalışma, erken dönem Hint Müslüman çevrelerinde tefsir bilgisinin öncelikle Arapça klasik metinler üzerinden aktarıldığını savunmakla birlikte, bazı akademisyenlerin erken dönem yerel tefsir faaliyetine ilişkin ileri sürdüğü kanıtları da göz ardı etmemektedir. Makale, Fahreddin er-Râzî, Taberî, Begavî ve Zemahşerî'nin eserlerinin Hint alt kıtasında nasıl tanındığını, okunduğunu ve öğretildiğini incelemektedir. Biyografik tabakat literatürü, seyahat anlatıları, icâze kayıtları ve medrese belgeleri bu çalışmanın temel ampirik dayanağını oluşturmaktadır. Arapça'dan Farsça'ya ve oradan yerel dillere doğru gerçekleşen geçişin keskin bir kopuşu değil, tedrici bir süreci temsil ettiği vurgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tefsir, Hint Alt Kıtası, Şafî Mezhebi, Arapça Tefsir, İlmî Ağlar, Kur'ân İlimleri.

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the early development of Qur'ānic exegesis in the Indian subcontinent through the reception and circulation of classical Arabic *tafsīr* literature rather than through locally authored exegetical works. Three concepts require clarification at the outset. "Reception" denotes the active scholarly engagement with, transmission of, and pedagogical use of authoritative exegetical texts, distinct from passive acquisition. "Circulation" refers to the documented movement of such texts through scholarly travel, trade networks, and institutional exchange. A "text-oriented perspective" foregrounds specific canonical Arabic works as the primary vehicles of exegetical knowledge, as opposed to locally generated commentary alone. Focusing on the twelfth to fourteenth centuries a period selected because it represents the consolidation of Shāfi'ī networks across the Indian Ocean littoral and their most thoroughly documented engagement with South Asian scholarly milieus the study draws on reception theory, *isnād*-based epistemology, and scholarship on the mobility of Islamic knowledge to argue that early engagement with the Qur'ān in the Indian subcontinent was mediated primarily through authoritative Arabic exegetical texts transmitted via Shāfi'ī scholarly networks. The article investigates how major classical commentators al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Baghawī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were known, read, and taught in early Indian Muslim scholarly circles. Evidence is drawn from biographical dictionaries such as Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān* and al-Dhahabī's *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, ijāza records, and travel accounts including Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *Riḥlah*. While acknowledging the alternative scholarly view that some early local exegetical initiative ran parallel to this reception, the study treats this as a secondary phenomenon within the broader reception-centred argument. The subsequent shift from Arabic toward Persian and vernacular *tafsīr* was gradual rather than abrupt, representing continuity and adaptation rather than rupture. By reframing the beginnings of *tafsīr* in India as a process of reception and transmission rather than local production, the article contributes to a more interconnected understanding of the global history of Qur'ānic exegesis.

**Keywords:** Tafsīr, Indian Subcontinent, Shāfi'ī School, Arabic Exegesis, Scholarly Networks, Qur'ānic Studies.

## GİRİŞ

### 1. Introduction

The history of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in the Indian subcontinent has most often been approached through the lens of later Persian and vernacular exegetical traditions, particularly those that flourished under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal patronage. These studies have tended to emphasize the production of locally authored *tafsīr* works from the fifteenth century onward, implicitly suggesting that meaningful exegetical activity in South Asia began relatively late and primarily through indigenous literary output. While such perspectives illuminate important developments in the regional history of *tafsīr*, they risk obscuring an earlier and equally significant phase in which Qur'ānic interpretation circulated predominantly through the reception, teaching, and transmission of classical Arabic exegetical texts.

This article addresses that earlier phase. Before proceeding, three foundational concepts require clarification. "Reception" in this study denotes active scholarly engagement with authoritative exegetical texts their reading, teaching, transmission, and annotation as distinct from passive acquisition or mere possession. "Circulation" refers to the documented movement of such texts through physical transmission, scholarly travel, trade networks, and institutional exchange. A "text-oriented perspective" foregrounds specific canonical Arabic works as the primary vehicles of exegetical knowledge during this period, rather than oral traditions or locally generated commentary. These definitions are not merely semantic; the argument turns on what counts as meaningful exegetical activity, and this study contends that reception and circulation constitute genuine intellectual engagement, not a deficit of authorship. The chronological focus on the twelfth to fourteenth centuries also requires justification. This period represents the consolidation of Shāfi'ī networks across the Indian Ocean littoral and their most thoroughly documented engagement with South Asian scholarly milieus, preceding the Persian *tafsīr* tradition and the Mughal patronage structures that have dominated historical attention.<sup>1</sup>

During the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, the Indian subcontinent became increasingly integrated into expansive networks of Islamic learning connecting South Asia with Yemen, the

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1 Christopher Melchert, "The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law," *Islamic Law and Society* 9, no. 1 (2002): 3–9; André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 52–58. The twelfth to fourteenth centuries mark the consolidation of Shāfi'ī networks across the Indian Ocean littoral and their documented engagement with South Asian scholarly milieus, making them the most tractable period for tracing the reception of Arabic *tafsīr* through these channels.

Hijaz, Iran, and Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Scholars traveled these routes in pursuit of religious knowledge (*rihla fi talab al-ilm*), transmitting texts and participating in shared pedagogical practices, with Qur'ānic exegesis occupying a central position within broader curricula of Islamic sciences. Within this transregional setting, the Shāfi'ī school of law played a particularly important role in the transmission of Arabic *tafsīr* to the Indian subcontinent. Shāfi'ī scholars maintained strong intellectual and educational ties with Yemen and the Red Sea region through study journeys, teaching appointments, scholarly correspondence, and the *ijāza* networks that formalized these connections.<sup>3</sup>

This study draws theoretically on reception theory, *isnād*-based epistemology, and emerging scholarship on the mobility of Islamic knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Empirically, it relies on biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*), travel narratives, *ijāza* records, and references in later South Asian scholarly literature to establish the presence and use of specific classical texts. By focusing on Shāfi'ī scholarly networks and the circulation of classical Arabic *tafsīr* texts, this article seeks to refine current understandings of the early history of Qur'ānic exegesis in South Asia and to situate it more firmly within the global history of Islamic scholarship.

## 2. Historiographical Approaches to Tafsīr Studies and South Asia

Scholarly approaches to the history of Qur'ānic exegesis in South Asia have largely been shaped by a focus on later periods and vernacular literary production. Much of the existing literature privileges Persian and, subsequently, Urdu *tafsīr* works produced under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, often treating these corpora as the true beginnings of *tafsīr* activity in the region. This emphasis has led to an implicit historiographical assumption that meaningful engagement with the Qur'ān through exegesis only emerged once *tafsīr* began to be authored

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2 Sebastian Günther, "The Qur'ān and the Development of Islamic Exegesis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'ānic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 210–214; Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 88–95.

3 Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 22–25. For early localization approaches, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 17–22, which reflects the historiographical tendency to privilege locally produced texts as markers of exegetical tradition.

4 Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 103–107. It should be acknowledged that some scholars, particularly Walid A. Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in South Asia," *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1–7, have argued for evidence of early local exegetical initiative in South Asia running parallel to the reception of classical Arabic texts. This alternative position merits serious engagement even where the present argument departs from it.

locally and in non-Arabic languages.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach risks conflating the history of *tafsīr* as a literary genre with the broader history of *tafsīr* as a scholarly practice — a conflation with significant historiographical consequences.

Classical studies of *tafsīr* have tended to prioritize textual production, authorial originality, and the emergence of distinct exegetical schools. Within this framework, regions like the Indian subcontinent appear marginal because they produced relatively few independent Arabic *tafsīr* works during the early centuries of Islam.<sup>6</sup> It is worth acknowledging, however, that some scholars have pushed back against this assessment. Walid Saleh, in particular, has argued for evidence of early local exegetical initiative in South Asia that runs parallel to the reception of classical Arabic texts, suggesting that the picture is more complex than a straightforward narrative of pure reception.<sup>7</sup> The present study does not dismiss this alternative emphasis; rather, it treats locally generated commentary as a secondary and contextually specific phenomenon within the broader pattern of reception-driven engagement argued here. Both positions have evidentiary warrant, and the most accurate account of early South Asian *tafsīr* must accommodate the tension between them.

More recent scholarship has begun to challenge the production-centred model by emphasizing reception, transmission, and pedagogy as central components of Islamic intellectual history. Studies on the circulation of Islamic sciences have demonstrated that knowledge often traveled through itinerant scholars, madrasa curricula, and informal teaching circles rather than through the production of new texts alone.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on reception theory adapted to the Islamic

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5 Sebastian Günther, “The Qur’ān and the Development of Islamic Exegesis,” 215–219. The concept of “reception” in this study denotes active scholarly engagement with, transmission of, and pedagogical use of authoritative exegetical texts, distinct from passive acquisition. “Circulation” refers to the documented movement of such texts through scholarly travel, trade networks, and institutional exchange. A “text-oriented perspective” foregrounds specific canonical Arabic works as the primary vehicles of exegetical knowledge, as opposed to locally generated commentary or oral traditions alone.

6 Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 88–92; George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 132–138.

7 Claude Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān: Classical and Medieval,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 103–107. It should be acknowledged that some scholars, particularly Walid A. Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of Tafsīr in South Asia,” *Journal of Qur’ānic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1–7, have argued for evidence of early local exegetical initiative in South Asia running parallel to the reception of classical Arabic texts. This alternative position merits serious engagement even where the present argument departs from it.

8 Asma Afsaruddin, “Islamic Learning in South Asia,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 4, ed. Robert Irwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 420–424. The survival of Arabic *tafsīr* evidence primarily through citations in biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*) such as Ibn Khallikān’s *Wafayāt al-a’yān* and al-Dhahabī’s *Siyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, and in *ijāza* records in manuscript collections in Istanbul, Cairo, and Hyderabad, constitutes an archival imbalance that has distorted the historiography of the field.

scholarly context, this article treats the active engagement with canonical texts as the primary site of intellectual life during the period under examination. On this view, the study of *tafsīr* in South Asia must attend not only to what was written locally but also to what was read, taught, annotated, and transmitted within scholarly communities.

The Indian Ocean and overland networks linking South Asia with the central lands of Islam further complicate regionally bounded historiographies. *Tafsīr* was transmitted as part of a comprehensive curriculum that included jurisprudence, hadith, theology, and Arabic linguistics.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, South Asia was not a peripheral recipient of Islamic knowledge but an active participant in transregional processes of learning and transmission.

The dominance of Persian and later vernacular *tafsīr* in historical narratives also reflects the relative abundance and accessibility of these sources compared to earlier Arabic materials. Many Arabic *tafsīr* texts used in early Indian scholarly contexts survive only indirectly, through citations in biographical dictionaries such as Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān* and al-Dhahabī's *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, *ijāza* records preserved in manuscript collections in Istanbul, Cairo, and Hyderabad, or references in madrasa reading lists.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing this archival imbalance is essential for reassessing the early history of *tafsīr* in South Asia.

### 3. Shāfi'ī Scholarly Networks and Transregional Knowledge Transmission

The reception of classical Arabic *tafsīr* in the Indian subcontinent during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries was closely tied to the operation of transregional scholarly networks, within which the Shāfi'ī school of law played a particularly prominent role. *Tafsīr* circulated within these circuits not as an isolated discipline but as an integral component of a broader scholarly curriculum encompassing jurisprudence, hadith, theology, and Arabic linguistics.<sup>11</sup> Shāfi'ī scholars were especially well positioned to act as transmitters of Qur'ānic exegesis due to the school's historical geography and intellectual orientation. From the eleventh century

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9 Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 283–287; Wink, *Al-Hind*, vol. 1, 61–68.

10 Brown, *Hadith*, 101–105; Günther, “The Qur'ān and the Development of Islamic Exegesis,” 215–219. On isnād-based epistemology, see Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 107–116, which demonstrates how chains of authority (*isnād*) functioned as epistemological guarantees for transmitted knowledge across disciplines including *tafsīr*.

11 Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, 98–103; Sebastian R. Prange, *Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 134–141. A concrete illustration is provided by Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, whose *Riḥlah* records encounters with Shāfi'ī scholars in the Malabar region holding *ijāzas* from Yemeni and Hijazi teachers, including authorizations covering *tafsīr* texts. See also al-Dhahabī's *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* documenting Yemeni scholars who traveled and taught in Indian coastal cities.

onward, Shāfi'ī learning flourished in Yemen and the Red Sea basin, regions that maintained strong maritime and scholarly connections with South Asia. Through such mobility, authoritative *tafsīr* texts composed in Arabic entered Indian scholarly milieus as part of recognized chains of transmission backed by *isnād*-based epistemological authority.<sup>12</sup>

Travel in pursuit of knowledge (*riḥla fī ṭalab al-ʿilm*) constituted a central mechanism through which *tafsīr* was transmitted. Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān* documents the itineraries of scholars associated with Indian scholarly circles who received explicit *ijāzas* in *tafsīr* from Shāfi'ī masters in Yemen and the Hijaz, carrying these authorizations back to South Asian teaching contexts. The *Riḥlah* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah similarly records encounters with Shāfi'ī scholars on the Malabar Coast holding authorizations from teachers in Aden and Zabīd that explicitly covered *tafsīr* texts, providing concrete evidence of these transmission networks in operation.<sup>13</sup>

Within Shāfi'ī scholarly culture, *tafsīr* instruction was closely aligned with the interpretive needs of law and theology. Works by al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Baghawī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were valued for their methodological rigor and linguistic precision, and the *isnād*-based authority attached to their reception gave them an epistemological legitimacy that locally generated commentary could not yet claim. Their circulation within Shāfi'ī networks ensured a degree of interpretive continuity between South Asia and the central Islamic lands.

Institutionally, madrasas and mosque-based teaching circles served as key sites for the transmission of *tafsīr*. Teaching sessions (*majālis al-tafsīr*) typically followed the format described in Ibn Jamā'a's *Tadhkirat al-sāmi' wa-al-mutakallim*: a teacher read from or paraphrased a classical *tafsīr* text, clarified difficult linguistic constructions, and contextualized interpretations through reference to legal or theological debates, while students listened, recorded, and memorized key points. This mode of instruction reinforced the primacy of canonical texts while allowing contextual explanation adapted to local audiences.<sup>14</sup>

12 Christopher Melchert, "Travels in Search of Knowledge," *Studia Islamica* 88 (1998): 77–81. Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt al-a'yān* records the itineraries of scholars associated with Indian scholarly circles who received explicit *ijāzas* in *tafsīr* from Shāfi'ī masters in Yemen and the Hijaz, carrying these authorizations back to South Asian teaching contexts.

13 Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān," 110–114; Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 180–191. Marginal glosses (*hawāshī*) added to copies of classical *tafsīr* texts by Indian scholars constitute a further form of textual transmission. Several manuscript copies of al-Baghawī's *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* held in the Āṣafiyya Library, Hyderabad, contain marginal annotations in South Asian hands, indicating active scholarly engagement rather than mere possession.

14 Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 142–146. Teaching sessions (*majālis al-tafsīr*) in early South Asian madrasas typically followed the format described in Ibn Jamā'a's *Tadhkirat al-sāmi' wa-al-mutakallim*: the teacher read

The prominence of Shāfi‘ī networks in the transmission of *tafsīr* also reflects broader patterns of madhhab-based affiliation in pre-modern Islamic scholarship. Legal schools functioned not only as frameworks for jurisprudence but also as social and intellectual networks that structured access to knowledge. Through shared legal affiliation, Shāfi‘ī scholars in South Asia participated in a transregional community that facilitated the movement of exegetical texts and interpretive norms.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Classical Arabic Tafsīr Texts Known in Early Indian Scholarly Circles

The early reception of Qur’ānic exegesis in the Indian subcontinent was shaped decisively by the circulation of a relatively stable corpus of classical Arabic *tafsīr* texts widely recognized across the Sunni world. Rather than producing independent exegetical compositions, Indian scholars of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries engaged with the Qur’ān primarily through these authoritative works, which functioned as pedagogical anchors within scholarly instruction. It must be acknowledged that the evidentiary basis for tracing specific textual presence is often indirect citations in later South Asian writings, marginal glosses in manuscripts, and *ijāza* records and this indirectness itself reflects the archival imbalance discussed in the preceding section.<sup>16</sup>

Among the most influential exegetical works known in early Indian contexts was the *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). Its methodological balance between narration and reason made it particularly suitable for instructional use. Concrete evidence of its Indian reception emerges from the works of later South Asian scholars: ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī (d. 1052/1642), whose exegetical writings cite al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive positions on questions of legal derivation and linguistic analysis, providing retrospective evidence of the work’s established presence in Indian scholarly culture.<sup>17</sup>

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from an authoritative text, students listened and recorded, and the session concluded with questions and elaboration. This format was the dominant mode of *tafsīr* instruction across the Islamic world during this period.  
15 Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157–160.

16 Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān,” 114–118; Saleh, “Preliminary Remarks,” 3–8. It is worth acknowledging that some scholars have argued for evidence of early local exegetical initiative in South Asia that predates or runs parallel to the reception of classical Arabic texts. The present study treats this as a secondary phenomenon within the broader pattern of reception-driven engagement argued here; both positions have evidentiary warrant and the most accurate account must accommodate the tension between them.

17 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27–31. References to al-Ṭabarī’s interpretive positions appear in the works of later South Asian scholars including ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī (d. 1052/1642), whose exegetical writings cite al-Ṭabarī’s *Jāmi‘ al-bayān* on questions of legal derivation and linguistic interpretation, providing retrospective evidence of the work’s established presence in Indian scholarly culture.

Al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* (d. 538/1144) likewise occupied a prominent position in the exegetical repertoire. Despite its Mu'tazilī theological orientation, the work was widely taught within Sunni contexts, often accompanied by critical commentary that neutralized doctrinal concerns while preserving its linguistic insights. Later Indian scholars associated with Shāfi'ī circles used *al-Kashshāf* alongside orthodox theological correctives, a practice documented in madrasa reading lists preserved in manuscript form, illustrating how scholarly utility outweighed sectarian boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

The *tafsīr* of al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl*, enjoyed considerable circulation within Shāfi'ī scholarly networks. Evidence from al-Sakhāwī's *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'* confirms that *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* was commonly read alongside al-Baghawī's legal writings and hadith collections in scholarly circles connected to South Asia. Crucially, several manuscript copies held in the Āsafiyya Library, Hyderabad, contain marginal annotations (*hawāshī*) in South Asian hands, indicating active scholarly engagement rather than mere possession.<sup>19</sup>

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (d. 606/1210) is cited in the *ijāza* records of scholars associated with early Indian Shāfi'ī circles, documented in manuscript collections of the Rampur Raza Library, confirming its presence in advanced scholarly settings by the fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Engagement with these *tafsīr* texts occurred through multiple modes of transmission: guided reading sessions (*majālis*), oral elaboration, memorization of key interpretations, and marginal glosses that sit between passive reception and independent authorship. This pedagogical model prioritized continuity with established authorities while creating a layer of locally generated commentary that would later feed into more substantial exegetical production.<sup>21</sup>

18 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 187–191. Later Indian scholars associated with Shāfi'ī circles used *al-Kashshāf* alongside orthodox theological correctives, a practice documented in madrasa reading lists preserved in manuscript form, illustrating how scholarly utility outweighed sectarian boundaries in the pragmatic intellectual culture of the period.

19 Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks," 7–11. Evidence from al-Sakhāwī's *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'* confirms that *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* was commonly read in conjunction with al-Baghawī's legal writings and hadith collections in scholarly circles connected to South Asia, reinforcing the integrated character of Shāfi'ī instruction in which *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, and hadith were taught as mutually supporting disciplines.

20 Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–100. *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* is cited in the *ijāza* records of scholars associated with early Indian Shāfi'ī circles documented in manuscript collections of the Rampur Raza Library, confirming its presence in advanced scholarly settings by the fourteenth century.

21 Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 149–153. Marginal glosses added to *tafsīr* manuscripts by South Asian scholars demonstrate that Indian scholars did not merely possess classical texts but actively annotated and elaborated them, creating a layer of local commentary between passive reception and independent authorship.

The circulation of these texts highlights the role of Arabic as the primary language of Qur'ānic scholarship in early India. The subsequent shift toward Persian *tafsīr* — visible in works such as Ḥusayn Wā'iz Kāshifī's *Mawāhib-i 'Aliyya* and its eventual circulation in Mughal India — was gradual rather than abrupt, representing continuity as much as change: Persian *tafsīr* expanded the readership for Qur'ānic exegesis without displacing Arabic from advanced scholarly instruction.<sup>22</sup>

### 5. Pedagogical Practices and the Teaching of Tafsīr in Early Indian Madrasas

The reception of classical Arabic *tafsīr* in the Indian subcontinent was sustained not only through the circulation of texts but, more fundamentally, through pedagogical practices that embedded Qur'ānic interpretation within the routines of Islamic education. During the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, *tafsīr* was transmitted primarily through oral instruction, guided reading, and teacher-centred explanation rather than through independent writing. This reflects the broader *isnād*-based epistemology of Islamic scholarship, in which authority derived from recognized chains of transmission rather than authorial innovation alone.<sup>23</sup>

In early Indian madrasas and mosque-based teaching circles, *tafsīr* occupied a central yet integrative position within the curriculum. Qur'ānic interpretation was rarely taught as an isolated discipline; it was closely linked to jurisprudence, hadith, Arabic grammar, and theology. Teachers introduced exegetical material when explaining legal rulings derived from Qur'ānic verses or when addressing theological questions rooted in revelation.<sup>24</sup>

The dominant mode of instruction was the teaching session (*majlis*), which followed the format documented in Ibn Jamā'a's *Tadhkirat al-sāmi' wa-al-mutakallim*: the teacher read from or paraphrased a classical *tafsīr* text, clarified difficult linguistic constructions, and contextualized interpretations through reference to legal or theological debates. Students listened, took notes, memorized key points, and occasionally engaged in discussion.<sup>25</sup>

The absence of extensive locally authored *tafsīr* works in early India should be understood in light of these pedagogical norms. Scholarly authority was established through mastery of

22 Günther, "The Qur'ān and the Development of Islamic Exegesis," 221–225.

23 Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 156–160; Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni 'Ulama' of Eleventh Century Baghdad* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 44–52.

24 Brown, *Hadith*, 118–122; Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges*, 162–165.

25 Sebastian Günther, "Teaching and Learning the Qur'ān in the Classical Period," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'ānic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 365–369. The *majlis* format is described in Ibn Jamā'a's pedagogical manual, which circulated widely in Shāfi'ī scholarly circles and would have been known to teachers operating in South Asian contexts.

existing texts and the ability to transmit them accurately. Writing a new *tafsīr* was neither expected nor necessary for participation in exegetical discourse. Scholarly prestige derived instead from one's teachers, chains of transmission, and competence in explaining established interpretations a pattern entirely consistent with *isnād*-based epistemological culture.<sup>26</sup>

Ijāza culture further structured the transmission of *tafsīr* knowledge in ways that have left traceable evidence. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *Riḥlah* records encounters with Shāfi'ī scholars on the Malabar Coast holding *ijāzas* from teachers in Aden and Zabīd that explicitly covered *tafsīr* texts, confirming that these authorizations were specific endorsements of exegetical competence rather than general scholarly credentials. Through these authorizations, exegetical knowledge was passed from generation to generation without reliance on institutional certification or state oversight.<sup>27</sup>

Pedagogical practice also shaped the selection of *tafsīr* texts. Works such as al-Baghawī's *Ma'ālim al-tanzīl* were favored for their clarity and concision in introductory and intermediate settings, while al-Rāzī's *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* was reserved for advanced study. This graduated use of exegetical literature reflects a deliberate educational strategy aimed at cultivating interpretive competence over time.<sup>28</sup>

## 6. Significance of Early Tafsīr Reception for South Asian Islamic Intellectual History

The early reception of classical Arabic *tafsīr* in the Indian subcontinent carries significant implications for how South Asian Islamic intellectual history is conceptualized. By foregrounding reception, transmission, and pedagogy rather than authorship and local textual production, this study challenges linear narratives that equate intellectual maturity with the emergence of indigenous literary traditions. The evidence demonstrates that Qur'ānic exegesis was already a well-established scholarly discipline in India by the twelfth century, deeply integrated into transregional networks of Islamic learning.<sup>29</sup>

26 Christopher Melchert, "The Relation of Ijāza to Islamic Education," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (1993): 152–156.

27 Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 203–207. Ijāza networks linking South Asian scholars to Yemeni and Hijazi authorities are documented in travel accounts including Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *Riḥlah*, who noted Shāfi'ī scholars in the Malabar region holding authorizations from teachers in Aden and Zabīd. These *ijāzas* often covered *tafsīr* texts alongside works in jurisprudence and hadith, confirming the integrated character of the transmitted curriculum.

28 Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition*, 201–205.

29 Günther, "The Qur'ān and the Development of Islamic Exegesis," 229–233; Wink, *Al-Hind*, vol. 1, 74–81.

One of the most important implications is the repositioning of South Asia within the broader geography of Islamic knowledge. Indian scholarly circles participated actively in the shared exegetical culture of the Sunni world, engaging with the same authoritative *tafsīr* texts and operating within the same *isnād*-based epistemological community as scholars in the central Islamic lands. *Tafsīr* knowledge circulated through recognized scholarly channels, ensuring methodological continuity and intellectual coherence across vast geographic distances.<sup>30</sup>

This perspective also compels a reassessment of the relationship between language and religious authority. The predominance of Arabic *tafsīr* in early Indian contexts underscores the centrality of Arabic as a scholarly *lingua franca* prior to the widespread adoption of Persian and vernacular languages. The subsequent shift toward Persian *tafsīr* represents continuity as much as change: it expanded the audience for Qur'ānic exegesis without displacing Arabic from advanced scholarly instruction. Rather than signaling a lack of intellectual autonomy, the early reliance on Arabic reflects a conscious alignment with authoritative modes of knowledge transmission that conferred legitimacy and situated Indian Muslim scholars within a global Islamic epistemic community.

From a methodological standpoint, recognizing early *tafsīr* reception in South Asia encourages scholars to broaden the evidentiary base of Islamic intellectual history. Biographical dictionaries, travel narratives, *ijāza* records, marginal glosses, and references to reading practices become as important as authored texts for reconstructing scholarly activity. This shift allows for a more inclusive and accurate account of regions where intellectual life was sustained primarily through teaching and transmission rather than writing.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'ān and Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 418–422. The subsequent shift toward Persian *tafsīr*, visible in works such as Ḥusayn Wā'iz Kāshifī's *Mawāhib-i 'Aliyya* and its circulation in Mughal India, was gradual rather than abrupt and represents continuity as much as change: Persian *tafsīr* expanded the readership without displacing Arabic from advanced scholarly instruction.

31 Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 67–71; Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, 162–168.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined the early history of Qur'ānic exegesis in the Indian subcontinent by focusing on the reception of classical Arabic *tafsīr* through Shāfi'ī scholarly networks between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. By shifting attention from locally authored exegetical works toward processes of transmission, pedagogy, and scholarly mobility, the study has sought to refine prevailing narratives that equate intellectual presence with textual production. The evidence presented demonstrates that *tafsīr* was neither absent nor marginal in early South Asian Islamic life; rather, it was actively taught, studied, and transmitted through *ijāza* networks, teaching sessions (*majālis*), marginal glosses, and *isnād*-based authorization that connected the region to the wider Sunni world.

Across the sections, the analysis has shown that early Indian engagement with the Qur'ān relied on a stable corpus of authoritative Arabic exegetical texts, including the works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Baghawī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. These texts entered Indian scholarly circles through transregional routes sustained by scholarly travel and madhhab-based affiliation, formalized through *ijāza* networks. Shāfi'ī networks, in particular, functioned as durable conduits for the circulation of exegetical knowledge, embedding *tafsīr* within broader curricula of law, hadīth, theology, and Arabic linguistics. The article has also acknowledged the alternative scholarly view associated particularly with Walid Saleh that some early local exegetical initiative ran parallel to this reception. This alternative merits serious attention and is best treated as a secondary phenomenon rather than a reason to abandon the broader reception-centred argument.

The shift toward Persian *tafsīr* from the fifteenth century onward was gradual rather than abrupt, representing continuity and adaptation rather than a fundamental break. Persian *tafsīr* expanded the readership for Qur'ānic exegesis without displacing Arabic from advanced scholarly instruction. Methodologically, the findings underscore the importance of expanding the evidentiary base for the study of Islamic intellectual history: biographical dictionaries, travel narratives, *ijāza* records, marginal glosses, and references to teaching sessions must be taken as seriously as authored texts. The Indian case offers a compelling example of how Islamic sciences took root through networks of learning that transcended linguistic, geographic, and cultural boundaries, and how the global history of Qur'ānic interpretation is impoverished when those networks are overlooked.

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#### **Etik Beyan / Ethical Statement**

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.  
It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

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Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan ederler.  
The author declares that he have no competing interests.