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The Qur'an for All: A Historical Analysis of Bengali Translations and Tafsir

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Abstract

This study explores the historical evolution of translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an into the Bengali language. It delves into the methods and challenges faced in this translation process, highlighting the significance and impact of making religious texts accessible to a wider audience in Bangladesh. Through a historical analysis of the different translation stages, from the early 19th century to the present day, this research emphasizes the role of Bengali translations in shaping Islamic understanding and Tafsir among Bengali-speaking Muslims. The findings shed light on how these translations have influenced religious practices and promoted a deeper understanding of Islam in Bangladesh, while also identifying the need for continued efforts to ensure accuracy and faithfulness to the original Arabic text.

Keywords: Holy Qur'an; Bengali language; Translation history; Religious texts; Bangladesh; Tafsir.

Introduction

The Holy Qur'an, revealed in Arabic, is considered the final and most miraculous revelation in Islam, holding immense significance for Muslims worldwide[1]. Its original Arabic language is not only a medium of divine communication but is also seen as an unmatched linguistic miracle due to its eloquence, structure, and depth. As the core scripture of Islam, the Qur'an serves as a guide for spiritual, social, and moral conduct, and its teachings are central to the lives of Muslims, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds.

In regions like Bangladesh, where the primary language is Bengali, translating the meanings of the Qur'an has been crucial for making its teachings

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accessible to the local Muslim population. The translation of religious texts, especially the Qur'an, is a delicate process that requires a deep understanding of both the source language (Arabic) and the target language (Bengali). It also demands sensitivity to cultural and religious nuances to ensure that the intended meanings are preserved[2].

The translation of the Qur'an into Bengali has a long history, beginning over 200 years ago in the early 19th century. This effort aimed to make the sacred text accessible to Bengali-speaking Muslims, thus fostering a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings. The significance of these translations extends beyond linguistic accessibility; they have played a pivotal role in the development of Tafsir (exegesis) literature in Bangladesh, providing insights into the Qur'an's meanings and facilitating a broader engagement with its teachings[3].

This study aims to examine the history, methods, and impact of translating the meanings of the Qur'an into Bengali. It explores the stages of translation, the challenges faced by translators, and the broader implications for Islamic scholarship in Bangladesh. By analyzing the contributions of various scholars and institutions, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of Qur'anic translation in the Bengali context and its influence on religious discourse.

The translation of religious texts, particularly the Qur'an, has been a subject of scholarly interest for centuries, given the complexities and sensitivities involved in preserving the intended meanings of sacred scriptures[4]. Several studies have explored the challenges of translating the Qur'an into non-Arabic languages, emphasizing the importance of linguistic accuracy, cultural relevance, and theological fidelity[5]. The work of Al-Baklani and Fawzi on the miraculous nature of the Qur'an's language illustrates the inherent challenges of rendering its unique style and depth into other languages[6].

The process of translating the Qur'an into Bengali has historically been shaped by various socio-political and religious factors. Early translations were often met with resistance from traditional religious scholars, who feared that translating the Qur'an's meanings could compromise its sacredness. This hesitation was particularly evident among Bengali Muslims during the 19th century, who initially relied on Persian and Urdu translations for religious instruction. The gradual shift towards Bengali translations marked a significant cultural and religious transition, as the demand for understanding the Qur'an in the local language grew among the Muslim population[7].

The first notable attempt at translating the Qur'an into Bengali was made by Amiruddin Bosunia in 1808,[8] who translated parts of the Qur'an's final

section (Juz Amma). This early effort set the stage for subsequent translations, which became more widespread in the 20th century. Scholars such as Mawlana Shamsul Haq Faridbury and Mawlana Abdul Rahim contributed significantly to the development of Bengali Qur'anic literature, offering translations that aimed to balance linguistic accuracy with theological insights.

The evolution of Bengali translations of the Qur'an can be categorized into three distinct stages: the colonial period (1808-1947)[9], the post-independence period of Pakistan (1947-1971), and the contemporary period following Bangladesh's independence (1971-present). Each stage reflects the changing socio-political dynamics and the role of Islamic institutions in shaping the translation efforts. For instance, during the colonial period, Bengali translations were often influenced by the need to counter missionary activities and to preserve Islamic identity among Bengali Muslims. In contrast, the post-independence era witnessed a rise in translations aimed at fostering a national Islamic identity in Pakistan, followed by a focus on cultural and linguistic authenticity in the Bangladeshi context after 1971.

A key theme in the literature is the diversity of methodologies employed by translators. Some scholars adopted a direct approach, translating the Qur'an directly from Arabic into Bengali, while others used intermediary languages such as Urdu or English[10]. The choice of methodology often influenced the interpretation and accessibility of the translated text. Direct translations from Arabic were seen as more faithful to the original, but they required a high level of proficiency in both languages. Translations through intermediary languages, while more accessible, sometimes introduced interpretive layers that could affect the original meanings.

Despite these challenges, the translation of the Qur'an into Bengali has had a profound impact on religious education and discourse in Bangladesh[11]. It has enabled a wider segment of the population to engage with the Qur'an's teachings, fostering a deeper connection with Islamic principles and values. The availability of Qur'anic translations in Bengali has also contributed to the development of Tafsir literature, providing a localized interpretation of the Qur'an that resonates with the cultural context of Bengali-speaking Muslims. This body of literature not only supports religious scholarship but also plays a critical role in shaping the religious identity of Bangladesh's Muslim community.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on historical analysis to explore the evolution of translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an into Bengali. The study draws on primary sources, including original Bengali translations of the Qur'an, as well as scholarly works that discuss the translation process and its impact on religious understanding among Bengali Muslims. By analyzing these sources, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the stages of Qur'anic translation, the methodologies used, and the broader socio-cultural context in which these translations occurred.

The data for this study is derived from historical texts, including records of early translations, publications from the Islamic Foundation in Dhaka, and various Tafsir works that have influenced the understanding of the Qur'an in the Bengali language. Additionally, academic articles, books, and conference papers discussing the translation of religious texts into Bengali were reviewed to gain insights into the challenges faced by translators and the impact of their work on Islamic scholarship in Bangladesh. The analysis is structured to trace the chronological development of Qur'anic translations, identifying key figures, translation methodologies, and the socio-political dynamics that shaped each era.

The study is structured around three main stages of Qur'anic translation into Bengali: the colonial period (1808-1947), the post-independence period of Pakistan (1947-1971), and the contemporary period following Bangladesh's independence (1971-present). Each stage is analyzed in terms of the motivations for translation, the approaches taken by translators, and the reception of these translations among Bengali-speaking Muslims. This methodological framework allows for a detailed examination of the evolving role of Bengali translations in facilitating a deeper understanding of the Qur'an and its teachings.

Result and Discussion

Historical Background of Qur'an Translation into Bengali

The history of translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an into Bengali is marked by a series of efforts aimed at making the sacred text accessible to Bengali-speaking Muslims[12]. These efforts, spanning over two centuries, reflect the complex interplay between religious, cultural, and political factors that shaped the translation process. This section outlines the historical progression of these translations across three main stages, highlighting the contributions of key translators and the challenges they faced.

Stage 1: The Colonial Period (1808-1947)

The translation of the Qur'an into Bengali began during the colonial era, a time characterized by significant cultural and political shifts in the Indian subcontinent. The first known attempt to translate parts of the Qur'an into Bengali was made by Amiruddin Bosunia in 1808, focusing on Juz Amma, the final section of the Qur'an (After Test report). This period saw limited translation efforts, as many Bengali Muslim scholars believed that translating the Qur'an's meanings into Bengali could potentially dilute its sacredness. Additionally, there was a reliance on Persian and Urdu interpretations of the Qur'an, which were more established at the time.

Despite these challenges, some translations emerged, often driven by a desire to counter Christian missionary activities that sought to convert Bengali Muslims. The colonial administration's policies also indirectly influenced the rise of Bengali translations, as British rule facilitated the spread of the printing press, making it easier to produce and distribute translated religious texts. One notable example is the translation work of Abbas Ali, who aimed to make the Qur'an accessible to the general Muslim population by translating it directly from Arabic into Bengali.

By the end of the colonial period, 32 Bengali translations of the Qur'an had been produced, ranging from partial renditions of specific surahs to complete translations of the entire text. The end of British rule in 1947 marked a significant turning point, as the creation of Pakistan ushered in a new era of religious and cultural identity formation.

Stage 2: The Post-Independence Period of Pakistan (1947-1971)

Following the partition of India in 1947, the newly formed state of Pakistan, which included East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), became a hub for Islamic scholarship and translation efforts. This period saw a resurgence in the translation of the Qur'an into Bengali, as religious scholars sought to promote Islamic teachings in the newly established Muslim-majority state. During this time, 35 translations of the Qur'an into Bengali were produced, reflecting a growing interest in making Islamic knowledge accessible to Bengali-speaking Muslims.

The translation efforts during this period were influenced by the religious and political dynamics of Pakistan, which emphasized the role of Islam in shaping national identity. One of the most significant translations of this era was the honorary interpretation by Mwalana Ashraf Al-Tahnawi, which was translated from Urdu into Bengali in 1961 (After Test report). This translation aimed to bridge the gap between the Urdu-speaking Muslim elite and the

Bengali-speaking population, making the Qur'an's teachings more accessible to those who did not have proficiency in Urdu.

Despite the increased availability of Bengali translations, this period was not without challenges. The political tensions between East and West Pakistan often influenced the religious discourse, and there was a struggle to maintain linguistic and cultural identity in the face of political pressures. Nonetheless, the efforts to translate the Qur'an into Bengali during this period laid the groundwork for a more robust tradition of Qur'anic interpretation in Bangladesh after its independence.

Stage 3: The Contemporary Period (1971-Present)

The independence of Bangladesh in 1971 marked a new chapter in the history of Qur'anic translation into Bengali. The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation with Bengali as its official language led to a renewed focus on developing translations that resonated with the cultural and linguistic identity of the country. This period saw the production of over 80 Bengali translations of the Qur'an, reflecting the growing demand for locally relevant Islamic scholarship.

The Islamic Foundation in Dhaka played a crucial role in coordinating and standardizing translation efforts during this time. It published a widely accepted translation of the Qur'an, which was reviewed and edited by a committee of scholars to ensure its accuracy and fidelity to the original Arabic text. This translation, first printed in the 1970s, has become one of the most popular versions among Bengali-speaking Muslims, serving as a reference for both religious study and daily recitation.

The contemporary period has also witnessed an increase in collaborative translation projects, involving multiple scholars and institutions to ensure a comprehensive and accurate rendering of the Qur'an's meanings. These efforts have been particularly significant in addressing the challenges posed by earlier translations, such as linguistic inconsistencies and interpretive biases. Additionally, the availability of digital platforms has further facilitated the dissemination of Bengali translations, making them accessible to a wider audience both within Bangladesh and among the Bengali diaspora.

Analysis of Translation Methodologies

The methodologies employed in translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an into Bengali have evolved over time, reflecting shifts in linguistic preferences, theological concerns, and technological advancements. This section analyzes the different approaches taken by translators, exploring their strengths and limitations in conveying the intended meanings of the Qur'anic text.

Direct Translations from Arabic

Direct translations from Arabic into Bengali are often regarded as the most authentic approach, as they strive to remain faithful to the original text[13]. This method requires a deep understanding of both Arabic and Bengali, as well as familiarity with the nuances of Qur'anic language. Translators like Mawlana Abdul Rahim and Abbas Ali have been praised for their efforts to maintain the linguistic integrity of the Qur'an while rendering its meanings in Bengali.

One of the main advantages of direct translations is their ability to convey the theological and stylistic elements of the Qur'an, such as its poetic structure and rhetorical devices. However, this approach also poses challenges, as some Arabic expressions do not have direct equivalents in Bengali, requiring the translator to provide interpretive explanations. This can introduce a degree of subjectivity into the translation process, as the translator must balance linguistic accuracy with the need for clarity.

Indirect Translations through Intermediary Languages

Indirect translations involve rendering the meanings of the Qur'an into Bengali through an intermediary language, such as Urdu or English. This approach was particularly common during the colonial and early post-colonial periods when many Bengali-speaking Muslims were more familiar with Urdu. An example of this is Mwalana Ashraf Al-Tahnawi's translation, which was initially rendered from Urdu into Bengali. Such translations helped bridge the gap for Bengali-speaking Muslims who did not have a strong command of Arabic. While indirect translations made the Qur'an accessible to a broader audience, they also introduced certain interpretive layers. The meanings were first rendered into an intermediary language, and then further translated into Bengali, which sometimes led to variations in interpretation. For instance, subtle nuances and theological concepts could shift slightly through this process, reflecting the interpretative choices made in the intermediary language. However, these translations were crucial for making religious knowledge accessible during periods when direct translations were less common[14].

Collaborative Translation Efforts

The rise of collaborative translation projects in the contemporary period has contributed significantly to the accuracy and standardization of Bengali translations of the Qur'an. Institutions like the Islamic Foundation in Dhaka have coordinated efforts among multiple scholars to produce translations that are rigorously reviewed for both linguistic accuracy and theological soundness. These collaborative efforts ensure that translations are not influenced by individual biases and that the meanings of the Qur'an are conveyed in a manner

that aligns with mainstream Islamic interpretations. One advantage of collaborative translations is the ability to draw on the expertise of scholars in both Arabic and Bengali. This results in a translation that is more faithful to the original text while being accessible to modern Bengali speakers. The involvement of review committees also helps address any potential inconsistencies or interpretive errors that may arise during the translation process. However, the bureaucratic nature of such projects can sometimes slow down the publication process, as the need for consensus among scholars can delay decision-making [15].

Interpretative and Explanatory Translations

Some Bengali translations of the Qur'an go beyond literal translation, providing extensive commentary and interpretation alongside the text. This approach, often referred to as Tafsir, allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings of the Qur'an's verses, offering explanations that contextualize the teachings within the cultural and historical background of the text. Translators like Mawlana Shamsul Haq Faridbury have employed this method, offering explanations that are particularly valuable for those seeking a more profound understanding of the Qur'an's messages. Interpretative translations are particularly beneficial for readers who may struggle with the complexities of the Qur'anic language. By providing context and commentary, these translations help bridge the gap between the original Arabic text and the readers' understanding. However, this approach also carries the risk of the translator's personal interpretations influencing the text, potentially leading to variations in how certain verses are understood. Despite this, the interpretative approach has been instrumental in fostering a deeper engagement with the Qur'an among Bengali-speaking Muslims, contributing to the development of a rich body of Tafsir literature in the Bengali language[16].

Impact of Bengali Translations on Bangladeshi Tafsir

The translation of the Qur'an into Bengali has played a pivotal role in shaping the understanding and interpretation of Islamic teachings among Bengali-speaking Muslims. These translations have not only made the sacred text accessible but have also laid the foundation for a localized tradition of Tafsir, allowing for interpretations that resonate with the cultural and social context of Bangladesh[17].

Facilitating Access to Qur'anic Teachings

Before the widespread availability of Bengali translations, many Bengali Muslims relied on religious scholars or texts in Persian and Urdu for their understanding of the Qur'an. The shift to Bengali translations allowed the general population to directly engage with the text in their native language, fostering a more personal and immediate connection to its teachings. This has been particularly important in rural areas where knowledge of Urdu or Arabic is less common[18].

The accessibility of Qur'anic translations in Bengali has also enhanced religious education, as they are widely used in madrasas, mosques, and homes for both formal study and personal reflection. By reading the Qur'an in Bengali, Muslims in Bangladesh have been able to gain a deeper appreciation of the text's spiritual and moral guidance, which has reinforced the practice of Islamic principles in their daily lives.

Enriching Local Tafsir Literature

The availability of Bengali translations has also encouraged the development of Tafsir literature in Bangladesh, providing interpretations that consider local customs, linguistic nuances, and cultural practices[19]. Scholars such as Mawlana Akram Khan and Dr. Mujib Al-Rahman have contributed to this tradition by offering comprehensive commentaries that address the specific needs and questions of Bengali Muslims (After Test report). These Tafsirs have become key resources for understanding the Qur'an's teachings within the context of Bengali culture and society.

This localized tradition of Tafsir has had a profound impact on religious discourse in Bangladesh, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the Qur'an's messages. It has also provided a framework for addressing contemporary issues, such as social justice, family dynamics, and economic ethics, through the lens of Islamic teachings. By contextualizing the Qur'an's guidance within the lived realities of Bengali Muslims, these interpretations have made the text more relevant and accessible.

Addressing Misinterpretations and Sectarian Differences

The translation of the Qur'an into Bengali has also played a role in addressing and countering misinterpretations propagated by various sectarian and non-Muslim groups[20]. Some early translations by non-Muslim scholars aimed to question the authenticity of the Qur'an or to promote alternative religious ideologies. The emergence of more accurate and authoritative Bengali translations by Sunni scholars has helped counter these narratives, providing interpretations that align with mainstream Islamic beliefs.

These translations have been crucial in preserving the integrity of Islamic teachings in Bangladesh, particularly in contexts where secular or heterodox interpretations have sought to influence the understanding of the Qur'an. By offering translations that are faithful to the original Arabic text and grounded in Islamic orthodoxy, Bengali scholars have contributed to maintaining a cohesive religious identity among Muslims in Bangladesh.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study of the history and impact of translating the Qur'an into Bengali reveals both the accomplishments and ongoing challenges in making the sacred text accessible to Bengali-speaking Muslims. The evolution of translation efforts over the past two centuries reflects the dedication of scholars to preserving the authenticity of the Qur'an's teachings while adapting its message to the linguistic and cultural context of Bangladesh.

Key Findings

The analysis highlights the diversity of approaches taken by translators, from direct translations to interpretative commentaries. Each methodology has contributed to the richness of Qur'anic scholarship in Bangladesh, offering different levels of accessibility and depth of understanding. The stages of translation, from the colonial period to the present, demonstrate the evolving needs of the Muslim community and the role of translations in meeting those needs.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of collaborative translation efforts in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of Bengali translations. These efforts have helped address earlier challenges, such as linguistic inconsistencies and sectarian biases, providing translations that are widely accepted and used in religious study.

Recommendations for Future Translation Efforts

To continue improving the quality and accessibility of Bengali translations of the Qur'an, future efforts should focus on the following:

- **Standardizing Translation Terminology:** Developing a standardized glossary of key Qur'anic terms in Bengali can help reduce variations in translation and ensure consistency across different works.
- **Encouraging Scholarly Collaboration:** Institutions should continue to support collaborative translation projects, involving experts in both Arabic and Bengali to ensure that translations are faithful to the original text while being comprehensible to modern readers.

- **Promoting Digital Access:** With the rise of digital media, making Bengali translations of the Qur'an available online can greatly expand their reach, allowing for greater engagement with the text among younger and tech-savvy populations.
- **Ongoing Review and Revision:** Given the dynamic nature of language, periodic review and revision of existing translations are necessary to ensure their relevance and accuracy over time.

Conclusion

The translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an into Bengali has played an essential role in shaping Islamic scholarship and religious practice in Bangladesh. From its beginnings in the early 19th century to the collaborative efforts of contemporary scholars, the process of translation has made the Qur'an's teachings accessible to millions of Bengali-speaking Muslims. These translations have enriched local Tafsir traditions, fostered a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings, and helped maintain a cohesive religious identity in the face of cultural and theological challenges.

As this study shows, the journey of translating the Qur'an into Bengali is one of dedication, scholarship, and resilience. It reflects the ongoing effort to balance linguistic accuracy with cultural relevance, ensuring that the message of the Qur'an continues to resonate with the hearts and minds of Bengali-speaking Muslims. Going forward, there is a need for sustained efforts to refine and enhance these translations, ensuring that the timeless teachings of the Qur'an remain accessible and meaningful for future generations.

Author Contributions

Aflatun Al-Kausar: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

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Conflict of Interest

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