



# The Influence of Christian Missionary Activities on Bengali Muslims: A Historical Study of Sheikh Munshi Zamiruddin

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**Abstract:** This research explores the impact of Christian missionary efforts on Bengali Muslims under British colonial rule, centering on the personal and religious transformation of Munshi Sheikh Zamiruddin (1870–1937). As a prominent colonial region, Bengal experienced vigorous missionary campaigns following the Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833. Influenced by Christian teachings during his academic years, Zamiruddin initially converted to Christianity. However, after studying Islamic literature and engaging with Muslim scholars, he ultimately reverted to Islam. His story captures the broader religious and intellectual struggles of the era, illustrating both the influence of missionary work and the determined preservation of Islamic faith in colonial Bengal.

**Keywords:** Christian-missionaries, Islam, evangelism, Bengali Muslim, charter act of 1813, converted, reverted, orientalist movement.

**Introduction:** The topic related to “Bengal” has been selected for two main reasons. First, Bengal served as the key hub for political, commercial, and intellectual developments in India. Second, as the British East India Company’s empire expanded, various missionary societies gradually established their presence in northern India, often beginning from Bengal. In this sense, the North India Missions can be seen as extensions of the Bengal missions, giving Bengal a special importance over other regions.

The history of Protestant Christian missionary work in Bengal began with the arrival of William Carey <sup>1</sup>(1761-1834) in 1793. However, by the Charter Act

<sup>1</sup> William Carey (born August 17, 1761, in Paulerspury, Northamptonshire, England – died June 9, 1834, in Frederik Nagar, now known as Srirampur, India) was the founder of the English Baptist Missionary Society in

of 1813, missionaries were officially allowed to enter territories under the control of the East India Company. After the twenty years of 1813 the territorial restriction was fully lifted with the Charter Act of 1833, which granted missionaries complete freedom to operate across India.

Following these developments, major missionary societies from England and Scotland established themselves in Bengal and set up numerous stations of mission. The subsequent period saw dedicated and vigorous efforts to spread Christianity among the local population.

Conversely, several key developments helped shape a social environment more responsive to missionary efforts. These included the introduction of Western education, the abolition of sati in 1829 and the establishment of press freedom in 1835, and the emergence of numerous newspapers and periodicals in both local languages and English. Together, these changes laid the groundwork for a growing and influential public opinion. At that time, there were a total of 71 missionary stations and societies operating in Bengal. Of these, 30 were concentrated in and around Calcutta (Kolkata), while the remaining stations were spread across various nearby districts. However, four Baptist missionary stations located in Dinajpur, Dhaka, Barisal, and Chittagong were geographically isolated and largely fell outside the main sphere of missionary activity.

### Beginning of the idea of Christian Missionary

King Louis ninth of France, who led the Eighth Crusade, expressed in his will that if a military defeat of the Muslims was not possible, then a war of ideas should be launched by studying Islam. Consequently, **the orientalist movement** was initiated with two main goals. The first was to misrepresent Islam and highlight the supremacy of Christianity. The second was to facilitate Western

1792. Carey's mission in Srirampur became a model for modern missionary work. He became a Baptist in 1783 and 3 years later, he published a pamphlet titled 'An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens', which inspired the formation of the English Baptist Missionary Society. In 1793, Carey and Dr. John Thomas became the society's first missionaries and travelled to Calcutta (now Kolkata). In 1801, Carey was appointed to teach Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi at Fort William College. His translation work was extensive: he translated the Bible into Bengali, Oriya, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese, and Sanskrit, and parts of it into 29 other languages and dialects. He also co-edited a grammar of the Bhotia language and prepared six other grammars in various tongues. Carey and Marshman created dictionaries for Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi and translated three volumes of the Hindu epic Ramayana. With a printing press established in Serampore (Sri Rampur), Carey edited and published botanical works by William Roxburgh, including *Hortus Bengalensis* (1814) and *Flora Indica* (1832), and helped distribute prose literature for educational use. His influence went beyond education, he advocated for social reforms, including the abolition of infanticide and the practice of sati (widow self-immolation). He also promoted the involvement of Indians as missionaries and played a key role in founding the Agricultural Society of India in 1820.

control and influence in the Eastern regions. Consequently, many centers and academic societies<sup>2</sup> were established.

### Arrival and Activities of Christian Missionaries in India

In 1453, the Ottomans captured Constantinople, gaining control over the traditional trade routes that linked the East and West. At the same time, Venetian and Genoese merchants established a monopoly over trade between Europe and Asia, denying access to emerging Western European nations, particularly Spain and Portugal. As a result, merchants from Western Europe began seeking alternative and safer sea routes to reach India and the Spice Islands of Indonesia, known as the East Indies. Concerned about the security and control of their trade, they aimed to break the Arab and Venetian monopolies, avoid Turkish hostility, and establish direct trade links with the East.

Portugal and Spain made the initial efforts. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, a Christian from Spain, embarked on a journey to find a sea route to India but instead ended up discovering America. Later, in 1498, Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese Catholic (whose voyages were partly

driven by a desire to spread Christianity) successfully found a sea route from Europe to India. He sailed around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope and eventually reached Calicut. Subsequently, in 1510, the devout Catholic Portuguese commander Afonso de Albuquerque captured Goa. Later, in 1599, a group of merchant adventurers formed an association to trade with the East, which became famously known as the East India Company.

Over time, the East India Company expanded its trade operations and began to consider establishing political control over India. One major reason was the high taxes they had to pay on raw materials purchased in India and shipped to England. They believed that by gaining control over India, they could avoid these taxes. After the death of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal Empire began to weaken, creating an opportunity for the Company. Seizing this chance, the Company obtained a **royal decree** (Farman) in 1717 from the Mughal ruler Farrukh Siyar, which exempted them from paying taxes on raw materials.

Muhammad Mohar Ali, in his work “The Bengali Reaction to Christian Missionary Activities 1833-1857”, explains that during the late 18th and early

<sup>2</sup>Among them Asiatic Society of Bengal was established in 1784 by a civil servant of East India Company named Sir William Jones (1746-1794). After that the Bombay Asiatic Society was set up in 1804, and the Asiatic Society of Great Britain was established in London in 1823.

19th centuries, many Christian missionaries arrived in India to spread their religion.

Although the arrival of William Carey and John Thomas in Bengal in 1793 is often considered the official start of Protestant missionary work, other missionaries were already present before them, laying the groundwork for Carey and Thomas. Carey and Thomas initially entered Bengal without official permission and settled in northern Bengal in 1800. They lived with Danish Baptist families in Serampore and began their missionary efforts with great dedication, especially in Bengal. The Charter Act of 1813 later officially permitted Christian missionaries to enter India without restrictions. Following this, Christian missionary activities in Bengal received varied responses from the two major native communities: Hindus and Muslims. Hindu reactions were frequently published in journals and newspapers such as **The Prabhakar**, while Muslims actively defended their beliefs and practices against missionary attacks and criticisms.

**(A) Missionary Activities in the Indian Context:** In 1839, Rev. C. G. Pfander (1803-1865) authored several works critical of Islam, most notably his book “**Mizanul-Haqq**” (The Balance of Truth, written in Persian, translated into Urdu and other languages), which focused on debates between Christians and Muslims. In this book, he not only challenged the foundations of Islam but also questioned the divine origin of the Qur’an, arguing that it was a human creation rather than a revelation from God. Furthermore, he criticized the Prophet Muhammad, portraying him as a sinful individual, while contrasting him with Jesus, whom he described as sinless.

As Muslims became increasingly aware of Christian missionary propaganda, many Muslim scholars began engaging in intense debates with their Christian counterparts. One of the earliest and most prominent figures in this effort was Maulana Rahmatullah Kairanwi. He famously debated the missionary Pfander in Agra in 1854. Following this debate, Maulana Rahmatullah wrote a book titled “**Izhar-ul-Haq**” in response to Pfander’s “**Mizan-ul-Haqq**”.



In this book, he raised serious questions about the authenticity of the Bible, refuted Pfander's criticisms of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, and highlighted the Prophet's superior morality and character.

**(B) Missionary Activities in the Context of Bengal:** This spirit of intellectual and religious defense spread, leading to many debates taking place in cities such as Calcutta and other regions in Bengal. One noteworthy incident occurred on 5 February 1841, when Reverend John James Weitbrecht (1799-1852) visited a Muslim village in Burdwan. There, he was openly challenged by a local Muslim scholar, who was strongly supported by the villagers. This confrontation inspired many Muslim scholars and writers in Bengal to produce books criticizing the missionaries' tactics and defending Islamic beliefs. Some notable centres of such activity included Rangpur and Dinajpur.

These responses by Muslim intellectuals significantly hindered the missionaries' efforts to spread Christianity within Muslim communities. In spite of that many Muslims did convert to Christianity and embraced their new faith. Some of them subsequently became prominent priests and preachers (including Mir Hadi, Kazi Aynuddin, and Munshi Nasiruddin). Among them, one particularly notable figure was Munshi Sheikh Zamiruddin (1870–1937), whose life and conversion are considered significant.

### Life Of Sheikh Munshi Zamiruddin

Sheikh Zamiruddin was born in the village of Garadob-Bahadurpur in Nadia district present day in west Bengal (in Meherpur District of present-day Bangladesh) in 1870 A.D. His father's name was Sheikh Amiruddin. He was a staunch Muslim.

### EDUCATION

**Primary Education:** Sheikh Zamiruddin's father enrolled him in a village maktab (Islamic school) at the age of five to teach him Islamic religious education. After receiving education at this maktab, he began to observe fasting and perform prayers (namaz). Later, he was sent to a Bengali school to learn the Bengali language, and within a few days, he completed his primary education there.

**English Education:** After learning Bengali at the Bengali school, he was sent to another school. However, due to some difficulties at that school, his father sent him to Krishna Nagar.

### Acceptance of Christianity

**Meeting With Christian Missionaries:** While studying in Krishna Nagar, Munshi Sheikh Zamiruddin came into contact with Christian missionaries. He read books such as "The Prophet's Testimony of Christ", "Muhammadan Ceremonies" and "Reasons for not Being a Musalman" and many literatures on Christianity and became attracted to that religion, declaring Islam to be false. In his autobiography titled "My Life and the Story of My Conversion to Islam", he writes that:

তাঁ হারা আমাকে বড় স্নেহের রকতন; আবার আরম্ভও তাঁ হরিগকে বড় ভরিরেরতাম। পকর জননে রমসনারী আমাকে 'বাইকবল' ও 'ইসলাম ির্শন' ইত্যারি েতেগুরল খ্রীষ্ট ধর্ম্শ সংক্রান্ত পুস্তে প্রিন েকরন; আরম তাহা অরত যত্ন পূর্শ ে পাঠ েরর। ডি পুস্তে স্নয আরম সমস্তই বুরিকত পাররতাম এমন নকহ।...

এই প্রোকর খ্রীষ্ট ধর্ম আরম আসি হই।

(Translation: They showed me great kindness; and in return, I also held them in great respect. Later, a certain missionary gave me several Christian religious books such as the Bible and Philosophy of Islam. I read them very carefully. It was not that I understood everything in those books. Wherever I did not understand something, I would mark that place with a pencil and, as time and opportunity permitted, I would go to the missionaries and get it explained. When I used to go to them to understand those books, they were very pleased and explained everything to me with great care. Anyway, as I continued to read those books, I developed disbelief in Islam and faith in Christianity. In this way, I became attached to Christianity.)

In his heart, a further belief was born that...

“খ্রীষ্ট পাপীর প্রায়রিত্ত েররয়াকেন, রেস্ত হজরত মুহাম্মি পাপীর প্রায়রিত্ত েকরন না।”

(translation: “Christ has atoned for sinners, but Prophet Muhammad does not atone for sinners.”)

**Finally, on Sunday afternoon, December 25th, 1887, he was baptized and admitted into the Christian community at the age of 17 by Reverend Mr. Sullivan.** After embracing Christianity, he took the name of John Zamiruddin. When the news of his conversion to Christianity reached his family members and relatives, he described their reactions in his book, which is provided in the footnotes. Later, he expresses his regret, saying that:

“ঐ সময় যরি ‘স্বরািকি রত্বস্টান’ নামে পুস্তে স্পকতন এবং মুন্সী স্মকহরুলয়ার মকতা প্রচারে স্পকতন তাহকল রত্বস্টান হকতন না।”

(Translation: Had he come across the book ‘Rodde Christian’ at that time, and had he met a preacher like Munshi Meherullah, he would not have become a Christian.”)

He also says that:

“তখন যরি বুরিতাম স্ময় বাইকবল রবে ত হইয়াকে। কেহময়ী জননী োাঁ রিকত লারগকলন, রপ্রয় রপতা ও প্রাণ সম ভ্রাতা তে দুঃখ প্রোর্ েররকত লারগকলন; অকনযরা তে রনন্দা ও রতরস্কার েররকত লারগকলন রেস্ত স্নেহ আমাকে বুঁইকত পররকলন না স্ময় রত্বস্ট ধমশরমকযয আর মুসলমান ধমশসতয  
।”

(Translation: If only I had understood then that the Bible had been distorted. My affectionate mother began to weep, my beloved father and my dearest brother expressed deep sorrow; others hurled criticism and condemnation. Yet, no one was able to convince me that Christianity was false and Islam was true.)

After receiving baptism, he studied for some time at a school in Krishna Nagar. From there, through the kindness of Reverend Jani Ali, M.A. (Cambridge), he went on to study at the boarding school in Mirzapur, Kolkata. When the missionaries expressed their desire to appoint him to missionary work, he chose instead to pursue further education. With the help of Reverend Jani Ali and Reverend Butler, he enrolled at Allahabad Divinity College and studied there for several years. Later, he was appointed as a missionary and served in Allahabad. During that time, through his preaching and writings, he converted many Hindus and Muslims to Christianity. In his own words, he writes that:

এই সময়কাল আরম্ভ মুসলমান ধর্মের রবরকে তীব্র বলখনি ধারণের রক্সা অকনোকনে মুসলমান তনয়কে খৃষ্টান ধর্মশীর্ষিতের। আর আরম্ভ স্নয় স্নেবল স্নলখনি চালনাের রক্সা অকনে স্নলােকে খৃষ্টীয় ধর্মশীর্ষিতেরিতের রক্সারে এমন নকহ; প্রচার দ্বারাও অকনোকনে রহন্দুমুসলমানকে খৃষ্টীয় ধর্মশীর্ষিতের রক্সারেলাম।

(Translation: During this time, I took up a strong pen against the Muslim faith and converted many Muslim youths to Christianity. And not only did I convert many people to Christianity through my writings, but I also brought numerous Hindus and Muslims into the Christian faith through preaching.)

From Allahabad, he was sent to Kolkata for missionary work and there he took advanced training in theology and linguistics at the C. M. S. Cathedral Mission Divinity College. After working in Kolkata for two years, he returned to his home district of Nadia and continued his missionary preaching there.

### Disbelief in Christianity

While carrying out missionary work in Kolkata, Sheikh Zamiruddin, following the orders of the C.M.S. Conference, went to Shikarpur. Around that time, in 1892, a large public debate took place in the Kushtia region between Muslims and Christians. There, an incident occurred which led him to embrace Islam for the second time. He writes that:

“এরিন আরম্ভ মধুগাড়ী নামে পল্লীকত তাম্বুর মক্ধয় র্নের রক্সা স্মোরাণ ররকের বাঙ্গালা অনুবাি পাঠের রকতরে, এমন সময়কাল সুরা সকের ৫ নং আকয়কত উপরিত হইলাম। ... যাহা হউে বাইকবল স্নয় পররবরতশ ত ও রব্ ত হইয়াকে।”

(Translation: One day, while resting in a tent in a village called Madhugari, I was reading the Bengali Translation of the Holy Qur'an. As I reached verse 5 of Surah As-Saff, I came across the following: Jesus said, after me will come a messenger, whose name will be Ahmad. 'As I was reading this verse, it felt as though someone whispered into my ear that this statement was once in the Bible, but the corrupt Christians had removed it. In any case, it became clear to me that the Bible had indeed been altered and distorted.)

After that, he began to study the matter in depth and eventually came to understand that the original Bible no longer exists anywhere in the present time the Christians had altered and distorted it.

### Attraction to the Brahmo Faith

While staying in Allahabad, he studied at the “Madrasah Ilm-e-Ilahi”. During that time, he came into contact with Bengali Brahmos and began to study their religious texts. He even participated in their prayer gatherings (Upasana). At one point, he developed the thought of going to Kolkata to formally embrace the Brahmo faith. In preparation for this, he began reading the writings of Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884). He gradually started to like the Brahmo ideology.

### Return to Islam

Zamiruddin narrated an incident regarding his return to Islam, the summary of which is as follows:



One day, while wandering in Kolkata, he came across an advertisement that a Brahmo scholar, Nagendra Nath Mitra, would be delivering a lecture at Albert Hall on “Muhammad and His Religion.” He quickly went there to attend the lecture and he found Nagendra Nath praising Prophet Muhammad and Islam highly in his speech, while pointing out the flaws of Christianity. This made Sheikh Zamiruddin reflect: “The people whose faith I was about to accept are themselves praising Islam and criticizing Christianity. “After listening to Nagendra Nath’s lecture, he began studying Islamic religious texts along with works by Muslim scholars. He says:

রবকর্ষ আমার পরম ভরিভাজন মুনর্ী সমাহার্মি সমকহরউল্লা সাকহব ে ত “রকে-খ্রীষ্টয়ান” ও “িরলকলাল ইল্লাম” ও শ্রীযুি সমাহার্মি স্রয়াজডৌন আহমি ও সর্খ আব্দর ররহম সাকহব ে ত “ইল্লাম তত্ত্ব” (১ম ও ২য় খণ্ড) পাঠ েরগান্তর পরবত্র মুসলমান ধকর্শ আমার দৃঢ় রবশ্বাস হয়।

(Translation: In particular, after reading “Rodde-Christian” and “Dalil-ul-Islam” by my most respected and revered Munshi Mohammad Meherullah Sahib, as well as the two volumes of “Islam Tattva” authored by Mr. Mohammad Reyazuddin Ahmed and Sheikh Abdur Rahim Sahib, I developed a firm belief in the holy religion of Islam.)

After that, he decided that he would neither remain in Christianity nor embrace the Brahmo faith. Rather, he would return to Islam. When he returned to Islam, he described the reaction of the Muslim community. He wrote that many in the Muslim society were reluctant to accept him, but with the support of some scholars (ulema), he was accepted back into the community.

রেস্তু নীয়া সজলার অরর্িত মুসলমান সমাজ আমাকে সমাকজ লইকত অরনচ্ছুে হইল। ... র্যামপুর রনবাসী শ্রীযুি হাজী মীর রাহাং আলী, ধানকখালা রনবাসী শ্রীযুি মুনর্ী মইনুৌন আহমি ও শ্রীযুি সুরে সগলাপডৌন আহমি ইত্যারি সাকহবানরিকগর যত্র ও সচষ্টাকত সমাজ আমাকে গ্রহণ েররল।

(Translation: However, the uneducated Muslim community of Nadia district was unwilling to accept me back into the society. ... But through the care and efforts of respected gentlemen such as Haji Mir Shahadat Ali of Shyampur, Munshi Moinuddin Ahmad of Dhankhola, and Sufi Golapuddin Ahmad, the community accepted me.

## Conclusion

The spiritual journey of Munshi Sheikh Zamiruddin offers a valuable perspective on the complex religious and intellectual aspects of colonial Bengal. His early conversion to Christianity, influenced by Western education and missionary outreach, reflects the strong appeal of missionary efforts under British rule. Additionally, widespread famine and the deteriorating economic conditions particularly among Bengali Muslims, played a significant role in making communities more vulnerable to conversion. These efforts were often rooted in personal engagement, institutional support, and intellectual outreach. However, Zamiruddin’s eventual reversion to Islam reflects a deeper narrative of resistance, self-reflection, and revival within the Muslim community.

His return was not impulsive but based on a critical examination of both Christian and Islamic doctrines. Influenced by Muslim scholars like Munshi Meherullah and texts such as “Rodde-Christian” and “Dalil-ul-Islam” he re-evaluated Christian theology and found

renewed conviction in Islam. This intellectual transformation highlights the role of indigenous Muslim scholarship in countering missionary narratives and preserving religious identity.

Zamiruddin's experience also underscores the social challenges faced by converts who sought to return to their original faith. His reacceptance into the Muslim community required the intervention of respected local leaders, reflecting societal concerns over trust and communal integrity.

His brief engagement with Brahmoism, a reformist monotheistic movement, further reflects the rich religious pluralism and ideological experimentation of 19th-century Bengal. Yet, his ultimate decision to return to Islam reaffirms the enduring spiritual and cultural significance of the faith for many Muslims during this era.

Zamiruddin's life exemplifies the broader spiritual struggles and intellectual resistance faced by Bengali Muslims under colonial pressure. His story not only reveals the complex impact of missionary work but also testifies to the resilience of Islamic consciousness. Ultimately, it serves as a testament to the power of faith, knowledge, and community in navigating the trials of religious transformation in a colonized society.

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