



Old Bangla prose

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BY my faith! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing anything about it!

-Molière, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670)

[Monsieur Jourdain in Act Two]

The history of Bangla prose is generally described from the beginning of the nineteenth century. But most scholars agree that some examples of Bangla prose can be found from the sixteenth century. They say that prose from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century is scattered and limited to records and documents. The development of Bangla prose, on account of continuity and essence, is noticed from the nineteenth century.

But a few other factors, though unspoken of, are related to this. The knowledge of theory and logical sense, the culture and creativity that is required for prose literature — many thought that before western influence, these things could not develop here. Besides, the establishment of the Fort William College (in 1800) and the achievement of the English rulers in encouraging the composition of student text books in Bangla prose have given importance generation after generation. As a result, it was common and natural for people to start regarding the scattered fragments of Bangla prose from before that time with contempt.

But, it was not unknown to anybody that long before the western influence there was a rich culture of prose writing in the Indian subcontinent. The literature in Vedic, Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit languages were not all in verse. The Yajurveda and Brahman, Aranyak, Upanishad and Kalpasutra, and even Mahabharat, Vishnu Purana and Bhagavata Purana had prose in them. Sanskrit sayings and tales, Pali horoscopes and the Prakrit prose of Jains — these had no western influence. The biographies and histories written in India for 600 years in Farsi prose had no trace of western influence either.

In many new Aryan languages related to Bangla, the development of prose had started very early. In Singholi, examples of prose can be seen from the twelfth century — according to some from the tenth century — in Gujarati, from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, in Marathi from the thirteenth century, in Oriya and Maithili from the fourteenth century, Assamese and Braj language from the seventeenth century.¹ Therefore, there is no reason for the development of Bangla prose not happening before the nineteenth century.

But just stating this does not prove anything — for that, we need examples. Fragments that prove this has been collected over the last 100 years. But the difference of opinions among scholars about their unnaturalness, language and time of composition has meant that the complexity of the problem of the early history of Bangla prose remains.

Kailash Chandra Ghosh was probably the first one to opine (1885) that the start of composition of Bangla prose could be seen from the sixteenth century or a bit earlier. As proof, he mentioned some prose regarding Vaishnava Sadhantatta (discipline), but his reasoning was weak. He had

stressed on the style of language and on the etymology of words, and had considered Biddapoti and Chandidas as the first prose writers of Bangla.² But the early history of Bangla prose cannot be reclaimed from the origins of words and the manner of speaking. The dialogue was related to the spoken word, and what is spoken has always been prose. There is no reason to justify calling Biddapoti and Chandidas the first prose writers of Bangla. This is because, the prose of Biddapoti is not in Bangla, and of texts which are found to be written by someone call Chandidas, it is difficult to ascertain which Chandidas it is, or if they are in fact written by him at all. But Kailash Chandra's achievement is that he directed our attention to the Vaishnava-Sahajiya writers³ and hinted at the possibility of the development of Bangla prose before the English period.

Dinesh Chandra Sen (1896) had agreed to an extent with Kailash Chandra. About the pre-nineteenth century Bangla literature, he says:

*It is not that there are no examples of prose literature, but that it is insignificant. But before I show the development of prose literature in the second part, I think it is important to mention briefly the examples of ancient texts that have been discovered. That small, scattered body of prose literature can be considered the base for the modern Bangla literature.*⁴

In his *Bishwakosh* (1907) Nagendranath Basu added a history of ancient prose literature, where he mentioned 44 compositions from before the English-influence.⁵ Even though he could not mention the time of writing of these manuscripts, the influence his discussion had on literature historians can be seen in Dinesh Chandra's book, *Bengali Prose Style* (1921). There, Dinesh Chandra considers the conception of Bangla prose from the tenth century.⁶

On the other hand, Siva Ratan Mitra was not overcome by so much emotion, although, he too did not shy from expressing his opinion (1922):

*... there existed a considerable amount of Bengali prose-writing long before the Serampore Missionaries or the Pundits of the Fort William College, or even Raja Rammohan Ray, in the early years of the nineteenth century even dreamt of 'creating' a general prose-style. The existence of these specimens of prose-writing will in itself remove the impression, still obtaining in some quarters, that Bengali prose is entirely a creation of the nineteenth century.*⁷

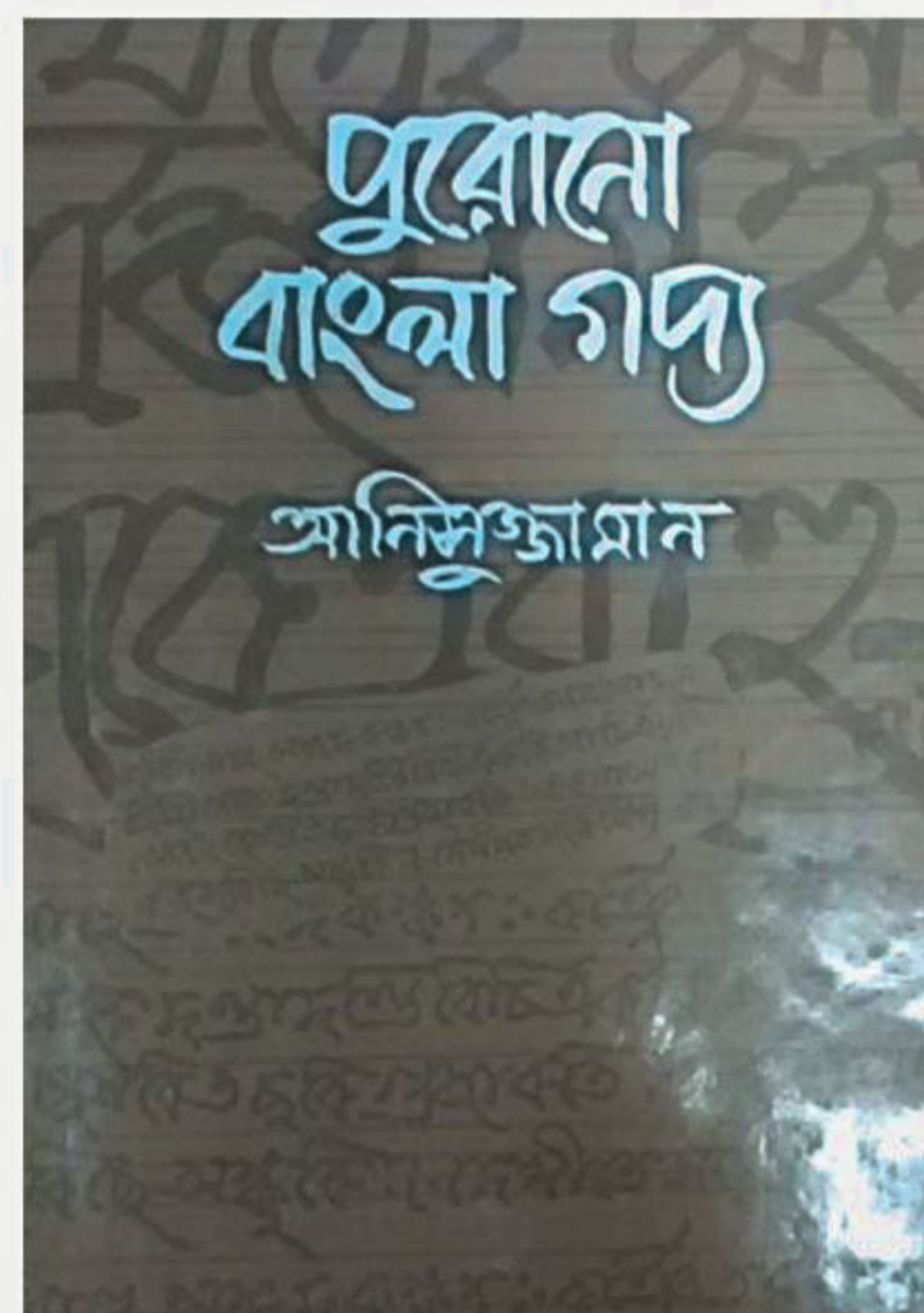
That, even 80 years after Siva Ratan Mitra's voicing of this opinion, this notion has not been dispelled, is not so much our fault, as it is of the scholars. The most inclusive discussion on the pre-nineteenth century Bangla prose is probably in Sushil Kumar Chatterjee's *History of Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1919). But he says: Indeed, the achievement of early Bengali prose is not only very late but, speaking generally, it amounts to almost nothing.⁸

On the other hand, Sajanikanta Das termed the time up to 1943 as the dark ages of Bangla prose in his *Bangla Sahityer Itihas* (1946). According to him, these dark times were dispelled through the printing

of *Kripa Shastrer Orthobhed* in Lisbon. It is not that he was unaware of the existence of Bangla prose from before that time, but he was of the opinion that there was no way to verify the authenticity of those texts.⁹ Therefore, we should remain thankful to either the English or the Portuguese for the birth of Bangla prose.

In 1800, that is after the establishment of the Fort William College, was the beginning of serious engagement in Bangla prose writing according to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. But, he saw an effort in assimilation of foreign backing and local history:

*Out of the large number of forms, dialectical, and archaic, which prevailed in Middle Bengali, specially in the verb, documentary and epistolary Bengali of the three centuries 1500-1800 was evolving a standard language for prose, in which only a few recognised forms were used; and the documentary and epistolary Bengali, based as it was on the speech of the 15th century, or it may be, of the 14th, was adopted as the Language of ordinary prose composition, when the advent of western learning brought in a sudden demand for a prose style.*¹⁰



Sukumar Sen reminded (1934) us again that ancient Bangla prose did not only mean documents-records or letters.

Discussing essays on Vaishnava saints, he says: 'At the beginning of the eighteenth century the style of Bangala prose had already taken a rough shape — this can be understood from the example mentioned above.'¹¹ But he still mentioned that, 'The development of prose literature in ancient literature was unexpected, as this is based on knowledge of theory and logic.'¹²

I have already mentioned that this opinion along with the role of Fort William College has always stopped us from paying attention to our ancient Bangla literature. The differences between prose or prose-style and prose literature had also influenced the thought process of many. Besides, there was no effort to collect the scattered and fragmented remains, and there was no effort to look for more material. As a result, no definite idea about pre-nineteenth century Bangla prose could form in our minds.

Along with the known examples of

some old Bangla prose, some previously unknown examples of pre-nineteenth century prose are now available to us. From this we can venture to say that continuous examples of prose from the sixteenth century — both practical and emotive — are being found today. There are many historical reasons for the availability of texts from that time. Ilyas Shahi sultans had patronised the Bangla language and Bangla literature. Therefore, there was a widespread use of Bangla—not in the personal sphere, in the letters of kings and princes, in business, in documents and

Bangla had attained an ideal shape and become the medium of expression for the common people

records. We have not been able to find any government letters from the sultan period, but more than one letter signed by Mughal rulers from the seventeenth century can be found.¹³ There is no evidence that the Mughals had patronised the Bangla language; therefore, it would not be illogical to assume that this practice is a remnant from the time of the Sultans. As a result of a debate about Vaishnava ideology in the court of Murshid Quli Khan, there is a joyptro written in Bangla stamped with the seal of the Nawab.¹⁴ During the time of the East India Company, till 1853, the use of Bangla in official works is also an indication of this custom. In the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, the language used in the government works of the kingdoms of Assam, Cachar, Cooch Bihar, Tripura and Mallabhum was Bangla. The letters of Maharaja Nara Narayan written in 1555 are testament to that.

But an even more productive role was played by the Vaishnava mahajans. They had chosen Bangla as the medium of preaching the Gaudia Vaishnava religion. This practice had gone beyond the poetry and into the prose. In the seventeenth century, when none of the Six Goswami of Brindaban were alive, and there was no recognised leader of the Vaishnava community, then the Margabhed (difference of paths) issue became a big problem in Vaishnava practice. Due to the theoretical debate between the Boidhiponthe and Raganugaponthi Vaishnava, the effort and need of explaining the Vaishnava practices were rejuvenated. Towards the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was development of the Vaishnava Sahajiya community. They had tried to talk about theory in Bangla. In reality, in the way Buddhist Sahajayana saints were the pioneers of Bangla poetry, the Vaishnava Sahajiya saints were the pioneers of emotive prose in Bangla. In the seventeenth century the Christian missionaries followed this path, and in the eighteenth century, Smriti Shastra was written in Bangla prose.