



The first-ever bangla grammar and dictionary by a portuguese priest

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EVEN the school children at the primary school level today would tell us that the very first Bangla grammar and dictionary was written by Father Manoel da Assamção. But why was it so? Why was there no Bangali scholar to do that? Presumably poets and scholars of the time remained busy in versification with their knowledge of Sanskrit. Even a Muslim poet like Alaol of the 18th Century proved himself to be a grand master of Sanskrit classics. Here we have another aspect of our subject, that Father Manoel did not only compile his justly famous *Vocabulario em idioma Bengalla e Portuguez* which included a "Breve compendi da gramatica Bengala"¹, he started also a new style of writing, well known as prose style. Obviously, people in Bengal used to talk in prose, but it was not available in literature as norms had not yet been determined. Few letters and documents regarding business and property remained as the witnesses of the past. So, Father Manoel's two books published from Lisbon in 1743 were the first-ever prose writings also in book form. It was in Roman letters as Bengali letters were yet to be used in printing (1778). It was, therefore, a great achievement on both accounts.

But who was Father Manoel? Not much detail is available on him. It seems that he was born in Evora, now considered as world heritage by The UNESCO (1983) in Portugal. He came to our part of the world, i.e., Nagari – Bhawalpur of the then East Bengal, may be in 1695 and was engaged as *Religioso Ermita de Santo Agostino da Congregação da India Oriental and Reitor da Missão de Saint Nicholas de Tolentino*. Before him, the Jesuit Fathers from the last years of the 16th Century to the end of the 17th Century seem to have attempted to compose Bangali prose for their propaganda purposes, but all were written by hand and most of the manuscripts were lost and forgotten.

In Bengal, there were 15 Portuguese religious missions, of which the prominent one was at Nagari –

Bhawalpur, dedicated to Saint Nicholas de Tolentino. There is still in existence a church founded in 1663. Along with my colleagues – Professor Mansur Musa – former Director-General of the Bangla Academy and at present, Head of Department of English and Linguistics, Professor Dr Aatur Rahman Khan, former Founder-Head of the Department of International Relations and Dean of the University of Jahangirnagar and presently Head of the Department of Politics and Governance, and his assistant Mr. Asif Chowdhury, Lecturer in Politics and Governance, all in Gono Bishwabiayalaya (University) at Savar, Dhaka, I visited the Mission on October 14 this year, and was greatly impressed by the living cultural

elements so near to my working place. Nagari is about one hour's car journey from the Mausoleum of the Martyrs at Savar. It is a vibrant place for educational and religious activities with a high school that was established in 1920 and a new church started in 2012. We were particularly interested in the house where Father Manoel worked on the grammar and the dictionary. Professor Musa had previously visited the place and showed us the rooms where the great priest worked or took rest. Although the original house was later demolished, a new building was constructed based on the earlier model.

Now, what is the book? Smaller in size it has just 592 pages. The first forty pages contain the grammar and the rest is the dictionary. This is what we have learnt from the first presentation of the work as "Facsimile Reprint of The Original Portuguese with Bangla translation and Selections from his Bangla-Portuguese Vocabulary Edited and Translated with Introduction hereafter, *Vocabulario* by Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in 1931. The grammar portion was well taken care of but the dictionary side had some problems. Dr S.K. Chatterjee, whom Tagore has honoured with the title of *Bhasacharya* "Master of Languages", frankly admitted that he could not copy the *Vocabulario* entirely. It is interesting to note that he had copied this large volume by his own hand in 1922 from the British Museum (now the British Library) and published it from the University of Calcutta. Earlier, the *Vocabulario* was collected by two English Orientalists and Sir George Grierson mentioned it in

1903². In the opinion of Dr Chatterjee, the "entire dictionary" should be published but 84 years had passed and it was not done. In fact, this along with some other comments by him had inspired us to go on to do further studies on the subject. So, on October 24, I left for the UK and on October 27 this year, I examined the two copies of the *Vocabulario* at the British Library and on the November 10 at Biblioteca Publica of Evora.

Here we must recall that the earlier Portuguese intrusion in India saw the pirates in priest's clothing. When during the last half of the 17th Century, the young priest of Bhushna, an estate in East Bengal, was captured by the Portuguese and later freed and converted by an Augustinian friar, Father D. Rozario and named by him as Dom Antonio de Rozario (1643-1695). Later Dom Antonio himself claimed that he had converted 20,000 infidels from his estate or around the area. Besides, a group of priests like Marcos Antonio Santucci, Dominic de Souza, Gomez and others had been working to produce Bangla texts. However, as we have mentioned earlier, they were lost or could not see the light of day, as initiatives to print them were not taken.

So, the credit went to Father Manoel da Assamção for getting the favour of the Archbishop of Evora in publishing the texts and in leaving some manuscripts thereof.

On the other hand, Dr Chatterjee made special comments on the Priest Manoel that besides his translation of *Crepar xastrer Orthbhed*, another important text, he must be offered a very high place as the first grammarian and lexicographer³. It is evident that the first two bilingual dictionaries "French-Bengali dictionary" by Augustin Aussant (1785), and *A Vocabulary in two parts, English and Bengalle and vice versa* (1799, 1802) by Henry Pitts Forsters followed the footsteps of Manoel.

As we mentioned earlier, Dr Chatterjee regretted that he could not copy the entire *Vocabulario* which he did for the grammar, so this should be published in its entirety. And that is why, a man of my advanced age had to undertake this long journey from Bangladesh to the UK (to consult the 2

deen" (He who works well, gets good results from the Lord).

Two scholars from Bangladesh dealt with this subject for their PhD degrees at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London during the late sixties and early seventies. But it seems that at times they are extremely subjective and have lost track of understanding the full significance of Manoel's work. The first scholar Dr Abdur Rahim Khondkar, my colleague and good neighbour in the Rajshahi University campus published his dissertation entitled *The Portuguese Contribution to Bengali Prose, Grammar and Lexicography* from the Bengali Academy, Dhaka in 1977.

The second scholar, Professor M.A. Qayyum, our respected senior colleague, did an extensive study on early Bangla grammar, published from the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka (1982). He had, however, something positive to say while comparing Manoel's compilation with that of the English grammarian Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's (1751-1830) work. Dr Qayyum writes,

"If Halhed had taken the trouble of studying the *Vocabulario* with the aid of an interpreter, he could, we think, have improved the grammar in several ways."

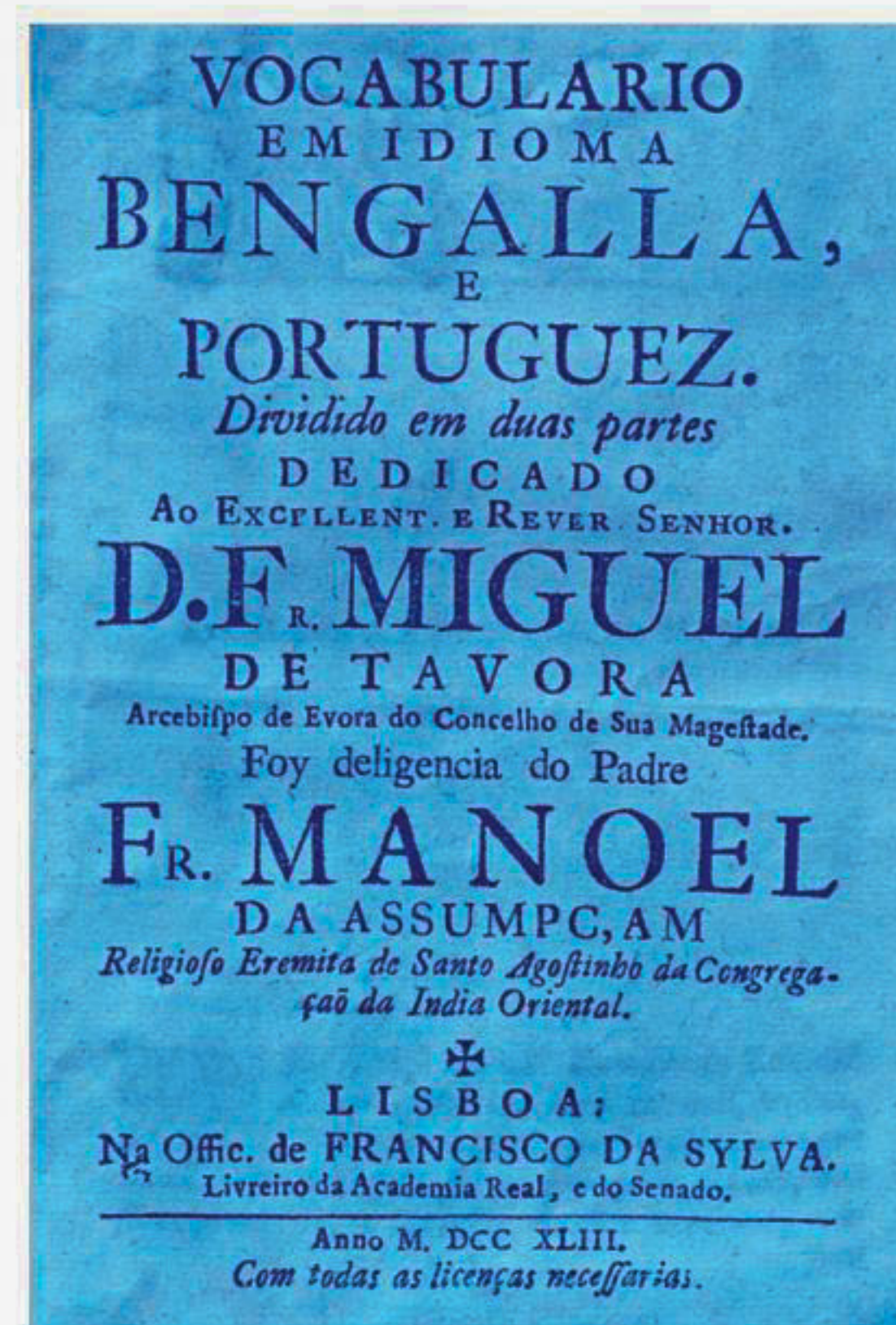
On four specific grounds he further examines the problem; first, "the *Vocabulario* clearly distinguishes the 3rd person honorific (*Tini, ini, uni*) from non-honorific (*se, e, o*) forms..." Secondly "the *Vocabulario* gave complete and (though at time dialectal) accurate nominal and pronominal declensions..." Thirdly, "the verb 'to be' in the *Vocabulario* is for its period, correctly conjugated." Fourthly, "the *Vocabulario* was aware of the existence of the future imperative."⁴ In Halhed these seemed to be missing. There are many other aspects in the small forty page grammar by Manoel which we cannot enumerate here. However, Professor Qayyum found that,

"The two works agree in only two aspects: firstly, both classify nouns according to whether their stems terminate in consonants or vowels; and secondly, both complain of the excessive use of compounds involving the verb 'to do' in place of simple verbs."⁵

Two examples had been cited, "xondhe carite" (to doubt) and "noxto carite" (to destroy).

But the extraordinary acumen of scholarship was evident in the dictionary part of the grand volume. Here or in the text *Crepar Xastrer Orthbhed*, we find many particularities of the East Bengal dialect of bygone days:

"aixo pola, tomi quetta" = (come boy, who are you) "maia" = daughter, girl "xuhor" = city



copies at the British Library) and then to proceed on to Portugal, particularly to Evora where I would get the printed and manuscript copies of the early works in this field. Good efforts are always rewarded. So, ours are.

Now, in short, what is there in this justly famous oeuvre? The grammar portion, i.e. first forty pages were translated by Dr Chatterjee with the help of Priya Ranjan Sen, a Calcutta University colleague who had some knowledge of Portuguese and French, while Dr Chatterjee had only of French and Latin. As for its significance, we find in it more than what one can expect from such a beginning of the beginning.

Now, look at the two phrases from Manoel – "Ai Kitab Amar, tomar" (this book is yours and mine) or "ze bhalo carzio core tãhare purbhu Bhogabhog