



The language question in 17th-century Bengal

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ACCORDING to received wisdom, Bangla language was just fine until the fateful emergence of Fort William College. The pundits and the Sahibs of this college on the eastern bank of Hooghly River fiercely mauled, mutilated, and marred our mother tongue beyond recognition. Word had been married to thought and the literate had been immersed in the popular until this event drew an iron curtain of alienation. Thus goes the Fort William myth, and like all myths, it contains a grain of truth: most of the folks on the payroll endorsed a stilted prose. Yet like other effortlessly reproduced wisdoms, it needs to be qualified with some *ifs* and *buts*.

In 1972, Dr Afia Dil completed her PhD from Stanford University. In her thesis, she argued that there are two communal dialects of Hindus and Muslims of Bengal. She fancies that certain loan borrowings from other languages, certain religio-communal terminology and peculiar dimorphisms like *pani* and *jal* constitute the basis for no less than two separate dialects for Hindus and Muslims. The problems with Dil's study are too many to enumerate here—including her flawed positivistic methodology, misspecification of the problem vitiated by a faulty understanding of culture and history, the thin and tenuous evidential basis riddled with basic errors, and many more. Thus goes the second myth of communal dialectology.

Probably 1952 language movement would be a key to exposing the fallacy of the two myths we have flagged above. The



Map of Bengal in mid-17th century, clearly identifying Sundiva.

SOURCE: LE SR. SANSON D'ABREVILLE, L'ASIE EN PLUSEURS CARTES NOUVELLES, ET EXACTES; ETC EN DIVERS TRAICTES DE GEOGRAPHIE, ET D'HISTOIRE, PARIS, 1650.

English, or Urdu-Hindi and the hypogloss of Bangla.

The language debate in early modern Bengal—a language movement of sorts—can add at least one angle for a proper perspective of the issue.

In early modern Bengal, the scribal elite considered the native language a base tongue that shouldn't be elevated into the realms of proper religious discourse. In the same religious "community", certain languages enjoy elevated status while vernaculars like Bangla were considered non-religious, if not downright profane. The bile was often more severe against the script than the language. Thus grew an outcrop of medieval literature written in Bangla language but Perso-Arabic script.

Yet, Bangla thrived. Despite official language of the Sultanate court being Perso-Arabic, natives widely participated in the ruling circles and the gradually acculturated court patronised Bangla works. When the patronage from Gaur dried up with the advent of Mughal era, the poets still found support from local potentates.

The case for and against writing in Bangla was made in fierce polemic. Rourava Narak was designated for those

expounding Ramayana and Puranas in Bangla, where the dreadful Ruru serpent would devour the flesh of the inmates. Bengali Muslims composing religious tracts in Bangla were dubbed blasphemers and sacrilegists. If lives were not at stake, afterlives were.

The poets choosing to write in Bangla fought back, first with a whimper and then with a bang. The pioneering Bengali Muslim poets—who were Sufis—defended their choice of language. Shah Muhammad Saghir and Kazi Sheikh Mansur both argued that Bangla language was just an instrument, an exterior shell that solely has the function of conveying the religious truth. Haji Muhammad—another important Sufi poet—defended Bangla in three steps: first, he flat out denied the possibility to write about religious content in the Indic script. Then he said that he couldn't help writing a little bit finding no other resort, and finally he advised that one should not ignore the content just because it is written in the Indic script.

Do not ignore it in view of the Indic script, Because when the summum bonum [the mystical first letter] is availed in the Bangala script

On what ground would you disregard it? (translation author's)

The venerable Saiyad Sultan developed a distinct theory—as showed by Ayesha Irani in her masterful study—of how translation itself is a critical step in the transmission of religion. He mentioned how, after Allah revealed the Quran to the prophet in the Arabs' mother tongue, the message of the religion was conveyed through translation to the Khurasanis, Javanese, Choliyas, and other peoples. This provides him with sufficient precedence to justify his translation for the sake of people of Banga. The twist is that Sultan called Bangla the Hindi language, but we should not be confused here: he merely meant that Bangla was an Indic language.

It was for Abdul Hakim, however, to give a full-throated defence of writing in Bangla, as I tried to discuss in my paper on Hakim (2016). The poet of Sandwip remains shrouded in the mist of the past, beyond the famous excerpt on Bangla language. A *pushpika* by a copyist is the main piece of evidence tentatively establishing Hakim's floruit in the 17th century. The famous extract *Bangabani* from his theological poem *Noornama* is found in only one manuscript copy of the work. Although Hakim is celebrated as a major voice defending Bangla language in the wilderness of "medieval" Bengal, solid research on his person and work are hard to come by.

Hakim's story is familiar: like Sultan, Mansur or H Muhammad, he was drawn to compose in Bangla to convey the messages of religion to an audience uninitiated into Arabic and Persian. He took pains to clarify that there was no aversion to Arabic or Persian. But the role of languages in theology and theophany is not transcendental, but merely instrumental. God understands all languages, and sends his scriptures in the language of the receiving people.

When it comes to writing the attributes of Allah and the prophet, there is no divergence of sense whether it is written in Arabic, Persian, or the Indic language.

The stories of God and the prophet are to be written in every literature, whether Arabic, Persian, or Indic.

Hakim explains that Arabic was the language of revelation for Arabs, for Urians Ur, for Ionia Ionian, for Syria Syriac:

Whatever languages men may speak in respective lands

The Lord understands all languages—whether it is the Indic, the language of Bengal, or any other.

Anyone may invoke the Lord in his/her own tongue. (translation author's)

Hakim goes further in this theoretical vein and mentions that "there is no hierarchy of scripts", since the main goal is "knowing the law and guidance". The script merely "expresses the intrinsic message".