



The war between Turanian King Afrasiab and Rustam's Grandson Baruju. The photo was found from the Punthi of Shahnama, kept in the National Museum of Bangladesh.

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# A Tale of Two Languages: How the Persian language seeped into Bengali

Think of some of the words we use most often in our daily lives in Bengali. The word for 'pen'—*kolom*; the word for 'sky'—*asmaan*; 'river'—*doria*; 'land'—*jomeen*. Think of the standardised farewell greeting of *Khoda Hafez* even among some non-Muslims in social situations, and the knowledge of most Muslim Bengalis of the Arabic script, even if they do not understand the language. Derived from Persian and Arabic origins, these words, expressions, and practices, among countless others, have become so deeply ingrained in Bengali that we seldom spare thought to their foreign lineage. But a glimpse into the history of these linguistic concoctions reveals just how porous and pulsating language can be, and how rich Bengali has become over the centuries as a result of travelling cultures.

As Suniti Kumar Chatterjee explains in *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (1926), Bengali predates the age of the province of Bengal in pre-partition India, originally a part of the Eastern Indo-Iranian or Aryan branch of the Indo-European languages. Having previously

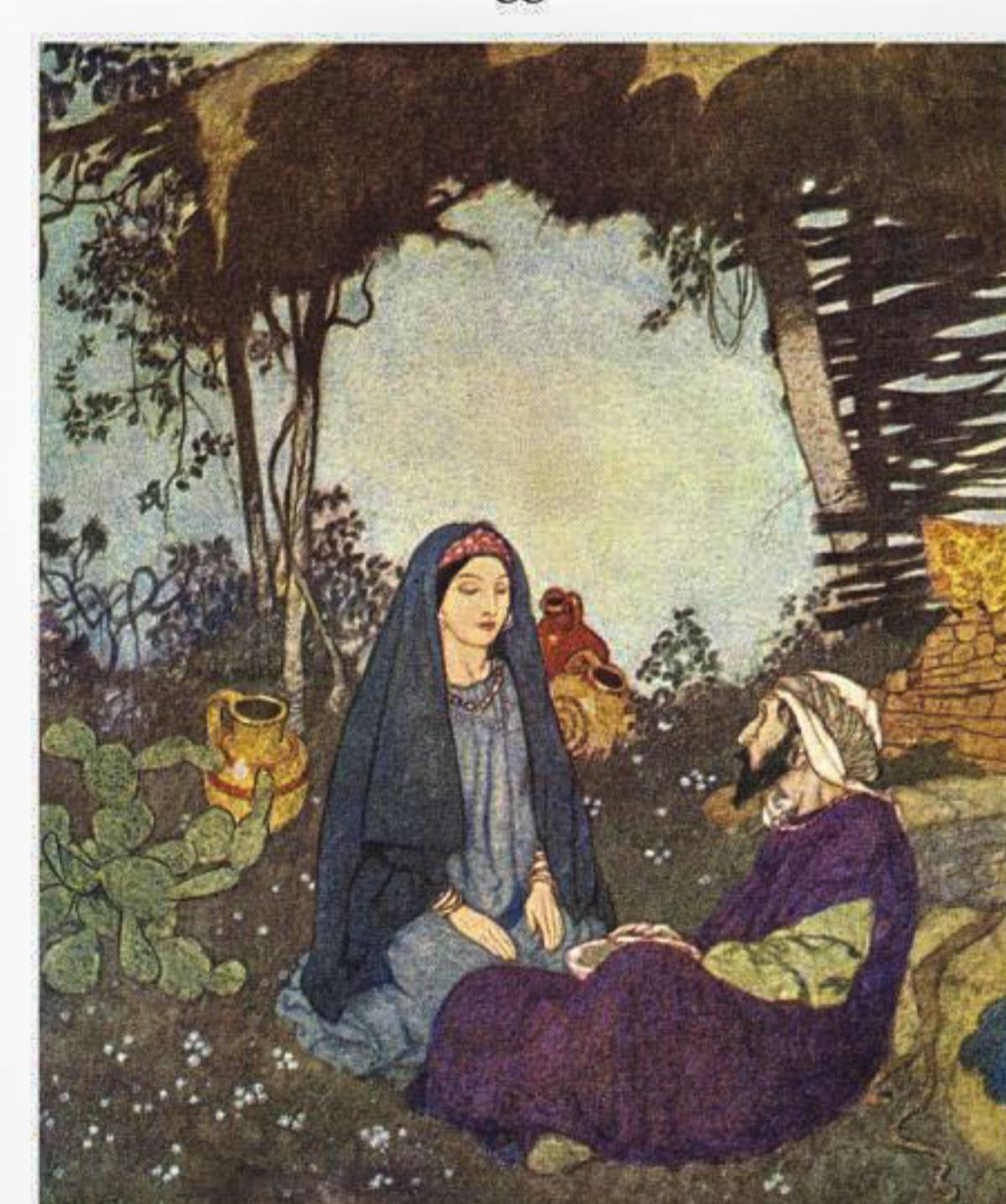
settled in Eastern Iran, Aryan speakers supposedly came to India around 1500 BC, when the first Vedic hymns are said to have been produced. Among the oldest references to Bengali include the ancient Brahmi script found in Ashokan rock edicts, the Bengali commercial and industrial works from the Kusana period mentioned in the Greek *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (1st century AD), Bengali place names found in inscriptions of old books from the first half of the 5th century AD, and a glossary of 300 words in a 'scattered' Sanskrit commentary on the *Amara-kosa* by Bengali Pandit Vandhya Ghatiya Sarvananda from around 1159 AD.

The Persian influence on Bengali dates back to the 13th century Turkish invasion of India. The year 1206 saw the migration of many Persian and Central Asian poets to India, resulting in the assimilation of Persian literary trends into the Indian cultural landscape. While the influence on the Delhi headquarters was particularly evident from the development of Urdu—a mixture of Hindi and Persian languages—its impact on Bengal

stemmed from a number of sources over several centuries.

Firstly, the Muslim kings of the 15th and 16th centuries are said to have been "active patrons of Bengali literature", according to Chatterjee, while the practices of the Sultan's court are also said to have pushed Bengali chiefs into mastering Persian as part of their job. Secondly, the Iranians flocking into India, many of them Shia Muslims, settled in the (present-day Bangladeshi) cities of Murshidabad, Dhaka, and Hugli among others, and took up positions as Ulamas, teachers, and poets in Bengal, much like the Arab sea-traders who had entered through the ports of Chittagong earlier in the 8th century. The result was a growing popularity and eventual mythologisation of Persian tales among Bengali people—such as that of Laili and Majnu, Yusuf and Julekha, or the works of Ferdousi, Jami, and Nizami—and an absorption of Persian words into the Bengali language. Some 10,000 Bengali words came to be influenced by Persian, and around 5,000 were borrowed directly from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Persian remained the official state language of Bengal for 600 years, until the British changed it to English around 1836.

This entry and eviction of Persian has been flagged for decades as



Persian tales such as Laili and Majnu became popular in Bengal.

milestone events in the development of the Bengali language. But it is the nature of the Persian impact, and not the fact of the impact itself, that contains a more intriguing message—a reminder of how language, human thought, and history operate. Afia Dil, in her article "Impact of Arabic Language on Bengali Language and Culture" (2012), singles out the *Manasavijaya* written by the poet Biprardas Piplai as "evidence of the influence of the language of the Muslim rulers" on Bengali. Using Qazi Abdul Mannan's analysis of the poem, Dil first highlights a stanza which translates to: "The Qazi declares the court open, Taking up the Qu'ran the sacred book...". It offers a glimpse into how Muslim courtly and religious practices appeared in the work of a Hindu poet at the end of the 15th century. Assuming the accuracy of the translation and focusing only on these lines at our disposal, we also notice how the present tense and clear focalisation of the language situate the reader within the scene of the Qu'ran being opened.

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