



The Persian influence on Bengali dates back to the 13th century Turkish invasion of India.

PHOTO: HISTORYDISCUSSION.NET

After page 10

The absence of a past tense in the narration, the accurate spelling of the Qu'ran, and the reference to it not as the book of another religion but simply as "the sacred book" wipe out the lines separating Muslim beliefs, the Hindu narrator, and the reader, whatever his/her background. It points towards coexistence, instead of mere familiarity, among the Hindus and Muslims during the time of this poem.

Dilalso mentions how 20 nouns out of the 40 words selected from this poem have Perso-Arabic origins, as well as other instances of 'Dobhasi' (duo-lingual) literature, including a Brahman poet's work *Chandimangalin* 1589 (20 out of 68 words Perso-Arabic), and Hindu poet DvijaGiridhar's *Satyapirerpachali* from the 17th century (24 out of 39 selected words Perso-Arabic), among others. While the earlier example of *Manasavijaya* reflected the socio-cultural coexistence of Muslim practices among Bengali Hindus, these other duo-lingual works highlight how this coexistence trickled into the Bengali language, tying up Persian and Arabic words into the very fabric of Bengali, colouring its expressions, its phrases and sections of words in a gradual yet intricate pattern. When the British and Hindus sought to replace it with English 600 years later, the publication of the 'Musulmani' books proved just how deeply Persian and Arabic had infiltrated the Bengali language.

The books, published from the 18th century onwards, contained poetry, history, religious stories and tracts, and instructions for daily life read by ordinary Bengalis like shopkeepers, boatmen, servants, etc.

In his Introduction to *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, Chatterjee recalls how, "A young generation of Musalman poets and prosateurs [were] [...] transforming the stilted literary Bengali into a natural language [...] and keeping true to its native spirit as a Sanskritic language". Meanwhile, he adds, some Urdu-speaking Maulavis were also establishing a form of "Musalmāni Bengali" that used Persianised language and retained the Bengali metre to tell adapted versions of Persian romances and other Muslim stories. The publications, of which 24,600 copies were printed for sale, included stories about the Prophet Muhammad's life and family, biographies of other historical religious figures like Moses and Kaliph Omar, famous love stories, and other Islamic tracts and teachings, according to Abhijeet Ray in *James Long'er Bangla Boier Shaatti Catalogue*. A typical 'Musalmāni' Bengali book (a five-page folio) was likely to have 31.74 percent of the words from Perso-Arabic descent, compared to 40 percent Persian words in an Urdu *ghazal*, according to Chatterjee. Most interestingly, unlike the regular Bengali books that open from right to left, many of these 'Musulmani' books still had a cover opening from right to left, but the text inside ran from the back page onwards. The pages, therefore, were numbered accordingly, meant to be turned from left to right the way the Qu'ranis read.

These stubborn remnants of Persian influence in the face of the British decree highlight the independent working mechanism of languages, which in turn influences the content of books published in a space. Regardless of the official ban on Persian as a state language, its influence

on Bengali seems to have exerted much stronger control in the 18th-19th centuries, evolving from the periodic appearance of Muslim practices in Bengali works in the 15th century, to entire publications devoted to Muslim stories and teachings printed in the 19th century; from Muslim words and expressions nestled amidst Bengali vocabulary earlier, to an entire directional shift in the Bengali script later.

It pushes one to appreciate the dual dimensions of a book, particularly the 'Musalmāni' books. On the one hand, these publications were a product, i.e. a direct result of the enduring influence of the Persian language on Bengali. They serve, therefore, as relics from which we can gather clues about the sociolinguistic forces that caused them. At the same time, they were tools through which Bengali Muslims under the British rule maintained a distinct identity through their published literature. Given that published books point towards a demand, a market for that literature, the popularity of these 'Musulmani' books in the 18th-19th centuries reveals how both writers and readers maintained a distinct Bengali Muslim identity during this time. Considered collectively, these messages contained in the Bengali 'Musulmani' books push us to think more critically about the books found from a certain space. We are reminded that nuances exist even within a single language, and that they contain a multiplicity of histories even within individual words and phrases.



Punthi published in 1957.

PHOTO: BANGLADESH ON RECORD

While these influences were originally taking effect, however, scholars of the 18th-20th centuries were debating whether it ought to be seen as a corruption of or an improvement to the Bengali language. It's a question pertinent to the study of any language, even today: as languages travel and spill into ever-expanding territories, do we resist the changes they bring to our speech in the spirit of preservation, or do we embrace the shifts as they come?

Sarah Anjum Bari can be reached at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com