The diverse and continuing evolution of Bangla

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A story that has long been repeated is that Bangla derives from Sanskrit. The truth—the *satya*, *sachcha*, *shacha*, *hacha* or *hasa*—is much more complicated.

Some things are clear. Bangla's core—the bulk of its basic nouns like *hat* (hand) and *pa* (foot), its verbs and the way they're conjugated, the little pieces of hard-to-translate elements (and I don't mean so-called "untranslatable" words like *obhiman*—I mean little words like the *to* in *bhalo korechho to!*)—these were all inherited from Bangla's ancestor language. But here I don't mean Sanskrit (or technically, Old Indo-Aryan), which ceased to be a spoken language by the 6th century BCE, well before the Indo-Aryan cultural world even reached Bengal. Given this gap of over 1500 years between spoken Sanskrit and Old Bangla, what is our linguistic ancestor?

The Prakrit core and the long shadow of Sanskrit

Modern linguists describe Bangla's predecessor using terms relative to our own reality, but of course no speaker called their language "Proto-Bengali-Assamese", "Eastern Apabhrangsha" or "Spoken Magadhan

The Gupta (late Brahmi) script for "Sanskrit". PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

Prakrit". While Classical Sanskrit was reserved for formal use, everyday communication in Medieval Bengal would have been in one or more "Prakrits", the languages that developed naturally (*prakritik bhabe*) from the accumulation of hundreds of years of tiny changes to spoken Sanskrit.

By the time these Prakrit languages arrived in early Bengal, they were substantially distinct from Sanskrit. For example, the complex, irregular verb system of Sanskrit—where the past tense of *kar-omi* (I do) is *a-kar-avam* (I did)—was completely scrapped in Prakrit. In fact, the way we mark past tense in Bangla today with *l*-based suffixes—where the past

of *kor-i* (I do) is *kor-lam* (I did)—began as a Prakrit pattern using the suffix *-illa*. Furthermore, pronunciation had changed so much that words like *satya* (truth) had evolved into *sachcha* even by the Buddha's early Prakrit (c 500 BCE), and over a millennium later, evolved into Old Bangla *shach* (I'll return to this word in a moment).

The bulk of our basic vocabulary underwent exactly this process: take a Sanskrit word, make tiny changes every generation for a couple of millennia, and it becomes Bangla. These are *tadbhava* words, derived from Sanskrit through Prakrit to Bangla by natural evolution in pronunciation. These are distinguished from *tatsama* words, Sanskrit words that

did not go through that evolution. But how does a 2,500-year-old Sanskrit word appear in Bangla without evolution?

Bengalis are notorious for loving Sanskrit, even more than other South Asians do (is it because Bengal was never truly Sanskrit-speaking, and this is our way of compensating for it?). So, as the elites of Medieval and Modern Bengal were already familiar with Sanskrit, they were comfortable borrowing a Sanskrit word or two (thousand) into their everyday speech, much like cosmopolitan Bengalis today draw effortlessly from English. This reintroduction of so much Sanskrit into what is effectively its linguistic granddaughter is part of what distinguishes Bangla from its closest sisters such as Assamese.

Let's return to "truth". You might have thought, ah! I know *satya*, we pronounce it *shotto*. So how does *shach* fit into all this? *Shach* or *shacha* is arguably our authentic word for "truth", derived from *satya* through the natural evolution of Sanskrit to Prakrit to Bangla, but was replaced by a cryogenically frozen *satya* through the

Sanskritisation of written Bangla, and has since entered mainstream speech as *shotto* or *shotti*. As a result, with *shotti* bringing a Sanskritic air of sophistication, our own *shacha* became associated with being uneducated. You'll hear it in a further evolved form, in Dhakaiya *hacha* or Sylheti *hasa*, but you might not have realised that this is not just a local word, but was in fact previously the only Bangla word for "truth", before *satya* was revived after some 2,500 years after its natural passing. The same thing can be said for *rat* vs *ratro* (night), *shaj* vs *shondhe* (evening), *majhe* vs *moddhe* (within), *nun* vs *lobon* (salt): countless native Bangla words compete for linguistic space against their own Sanskrit grandparents.
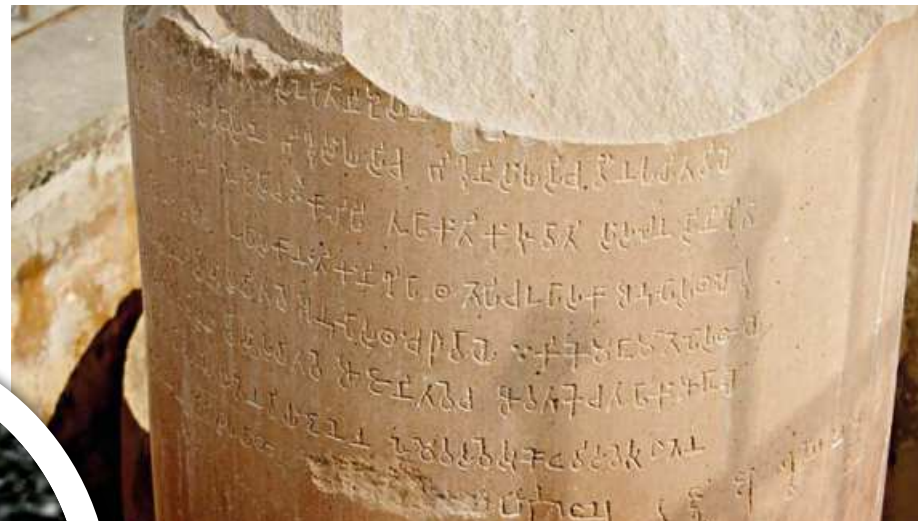

A pillar of Asoka, with the Brahmi script used to render an early Prakrit, in Sarnath, India. PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

The role of pre-Indo-Aryan languages

We know unfortunately little about what was spoken in the kingdoms of ancient Bengal, before adopting the incoming Prakrits of the Indo-Aryan culture expanding down the Ganges. However, vestiges of those non-Indo-Aryan languages are presumably baked into what makes our Bangla itself different from other Indo-Aryan languages, since of course, the majority of the proto-Bengali population would have only eventually learned Prakrit as a second language. Many of us know from personal experience that when learning a second language, you often bring bits and pieces of the accent and grammar of your first language into the second. In fact, we find clues to our pre-Indo-Aryan languages in the tendency east of the Padma to pronounce *chh* and *j* as *s* and *z* (*zaitese* for *jaitechhe*), our inability to distinguish the *murdhonno no*, or our fondness for the *ng* sound (as in the name *Bangla* itself). It's worth noting that the minority languages of Bangladesh also have these properties, suggesting that proto-Bengalis may have shared at least some linguistic features observed in the non-Indo-Aryan

languages of Bangladesh today.

Contact in the modern era

During the 200-year-long Mughal rule of Bengal, the Bangla vocabulary expanded to include Persian words for concepts in the legal system (*dorbar:* court, *ain:* law), administration (*jela:* districts, *khajna:* revenue), military (*kella:* fort, *tir:* arrow), and religion (*roja:* fasting, *namaj:* prayer). Although they amount to only three percent of words in a typical Bangla dictionary, Persian words are so firmly established they could easily masquerade as native to the language. Consider the following sentences, where the Persian-derived words are underlined (many of which were in turn borrowed into Persian from Arabic):

Besh gorom dekhe chadorer kono dorkar nei. Aste kotha bolchho keno? jore bolo! rastae beshi aoaj hochchhe. Choshma dao, porda shorao! khoborer kagoj porbo. Aenata shorie dealta kemon khali-khali lagchhe. Dokan theke hajarta jinish kine anlo. Golap baganta ami khub pochhondo kori. Jaegata ashole kharap na!

Trade with the Portuguese introduced words that have become indispensable around the house, like *chabi* (key), *janala* (window), *istiri* (ironing), *almari* (wardrobe), *botam* (button), *fita* (shoelace), *shaban* (soap), *balti* (bucket), *gamla* (basket), and of course the indigenous names of many fruits brought from the Americas: *pepe* (papaya), *anarosh* (pineapple), *ata* (custard apple), *sofeda* (sapodilla), *kaju* (cashew), and countless others. But no European language has had

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as overwhelming a presence as English, which has successfully taken on the role previously held by Sanskrit and Persian, in providing a source for vocabulary to complement, replace, or preclude the coining of native Bangla words.

The Bangla script

The earliest form of writing in the post-Vedic Subcontinent was the Brahmi script, popularised during the 3rd century BCE reign of Asoka, who decreed that his edicts of non-violence (after a particularly bloody war) be engraved on columns across the Mauryan Empire. The very idea of writing as mass communication was