



# The promise and challenge of Bangla in the digital age

## SELECT WEB RESOURCES ON BANGLA LITERATURE AND CULTURE

### »» BOIHERHUT

This is a closed group on Facebook for Bangla book lovers. You can also go to Amazon.com and search “boiherhut”—over 70 titles will show up.

### »» AMARBOI

An archive of over 5,000 Bangla books from both Bangladesh and West Bengal, freely downloadable at Amarboi.com.

### »» LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORDINGS OF BANGLA WRITERS

Audio recordings of some of the giants of Bangla literature reading from their own work, including Humayun Ahmed, Shamsur Rahman Sunil Gangopadhyay and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Other writers include Selina Hossain, Mahasveta Devi, Nirmalendu Goon and Sankha Ghosh. Link: <https://www.loc.gov/acq/ovop/delhi/salrp/bengali.html>.

### »» TAGORE WEB

Songs by numerous artists, and short stories, novels, poetry, essays, etc of Rabindranath Tagore at tagoreweb.in.

### »» LIBERATION WAR ARCHIVE

An astonishingly rich archive of books, documents, essays, audio and video on Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 at [liberationwarbangladesh.org](http://liberationwarbangladesh.org).

## ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

Every Ekushey, we renew our pledge to the language martyrs of 1952 that we will ensure that our beloved Bangla continues to flourish. To redeem this pledge, we need to remember a critical fact: The continued survival of a language depends on how well it adapts to the changing technologies of the age.

Where is Bangla headed? Can we feel secure in the knowledge that Bangla will not only survive but also thrive in the digital age?

The digital age offers both enormous promise and challenge. Language and culture flourish under complex social and political circumstances. Having said that, there are historical moments when technological innovation becomes a game changer.

and periodicals, modern Bangla was born. A variety of factors led to the rebirth of Bangla, but the introduction of printing provided the key impetus.

Fast forward to the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The digital age is another quantum technological leap that was a global cultural inflection point. Digital technology and the Internet revolutionised language and communication. Its most significant contribution was to offer universal access to the printed word. Once limited to a chosen few who could type, now even a first-grade kid could write her school report on a laptop at home.

As the digital revolution spread all over the world, it became disturbingly clear that all languages are not created equal. Affluent, technologically advanced nations

show up as junk text on anybody's screen. In desperation, some designers displayed Bangla text as graphic files. In such circumstances, a Web search in Bangla was a fool's errand.

Bangla has come a long, long way since then. Mass usage of Bangla on the computer is comparable today with any other developed language—a breathtaking achievement since the bad old days. How this came about is a quirky story. It was in Bangladesh—where official usage of the language is ubiquitous—that the need for professional Bangla word-processing software was most deeply felt. Amid a number of abortive attempts, Bijoy word-processing software came to rule the roost. The software became—and still is—the industry standard in Bangla publishing in Bangladesh. But mass usage was still



ILLUSTRATION: STAR

Consider German printer Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type, circa 1450. This quantum technological leap completely changed how printed material reached the public. Books and periodicals, once the domain of calligraphers, were no longer limited to an extremely small elite. Mass publications led to exponential growth in dissemination of ideas.

Bangla had to wait over three and a half centuries until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Christian missionaries introduced printing. Contact with Europeans at this time resulted in an intellectual efflorescence of upper caste *bhadralok* Bengali Hindus. With the founding of Fort William College in Kolkata, and a robust exchange of ideas with a newly enabled culture of books

adapted to new digital changes with alacrity, while languages like Bangla (and other South Asian languages, for example) fell way behind. Although Bangla did not wait as it did for the printing press, it was definitely a latecomer to the digital party. It faced serious setbacks in the beginning. There wasn't a user-friendly Bangla word-processing software, so it was very difficult to type (this led to the God-awful use of “Banglish”—typing Bangla in Roman script). In the beginning, a gaggle of players developed Bangla software, but there was an amateurish, boutique feel about the efforts.

The advent of the Web presented its own set of problems. There was no standard for Bangla font. Web pages had different installed fonts, which could

a pipe-dream because Bijoy came with a catch. It had its own Bangla keyboard. A user had to master a separate keyboard in addition to the traditional QWERTY Roman keyboard of the computer.

So while Bijoy brought Bangla up to speed in the digital age, its socio-cultural effect was regressive. The need to master a separate Bangla keyboard proved too onerous for the general computer user. Only a select few whose profession demanded it—typists and print industry people—mastered Bijoy. All of this was reminiscent of the pre-digital era when access to the printed word belonged only to a chosen few who could type or set type.

It was not long before a remarkable new Bangla software stepped into the breach. The true credit of universal usage