



## The hidden politics behind writing Bangla in Roman script

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the script will not harm the language; Roman scripts are scientific, Bangla is not; a single script can be used to learn Urdu, Bangla and English; it will strengthen the bond between the two wings of Pakistan; many countries such as Turkey and Indonesia have adopted Roman scripts (and they would soon become the most widely used scripts in the world); if India insists on all provincial languages to be written in Dev Nagri including that of West Bengal, Bangladesh will be the only country using Bangla alphabets; Bangla is a difficult language, which is contributing to the illiteracy of the nation; foreigners will find it easy to learn Bangla in Romanised scripts; and Romanised Bangla is typing-friendly.

Hye renders a point-by-point rebuttal to expose the fallacy of the arguments, to add: "Given the geographical and linguistic differences, the national solidarity of Pakistan should consider the following issues. People across the borders need to mix freely, win the hearts of the others, restore the balance in distributions of wealth, equal opportunities in jobs, avoid the master/



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slave mentality, practice cooperation, ensure justice" (free translation).

For Hye, the attempt to Romanise Bangla is an insult to any nation proud of its heritage. He also reminds readers that Mualana Muhammad Akram Kha, who chaired the East Bengal Language Committee in 1949, gave his opinion against such introduction of Roman scripts. Conversely, Golam Mustafa felt

that Arabic scripts could be adopted in place of Roman ones. He argued that Urdu, written in Roman scripts, would lose its Islamic character. Since Arabic was the script of other provinces of Pakistan, it would make sense to write Bangla in Arabic for locating Pakistan in an Islamic culture. However, he also realised the huge task of converting already written literatures in Bangla in a new script, and

was not very keen on any such shift.

Responding to the Islamicisation of Bangla with the import of 80 percent Arabic-Farsi words, Ajit Guha wrote, "Language does not have a religion. There is no religious language. If Bangla is the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims, then the people can best articulate their Islamic religiosity through this language."

Reading about the discourse that was available in the pre-independence period made me reflect on the mental chains that colonialism entails. Today, there is a new trend of writing Arabic expressions, as suggested by the internet. People all too often correct you on how to write an Arabic word in English. Many of our Bangla words are losing their usage with the advent of the new media lingo. Typing Bangla in English (Latin script) is not an innocent act; it has its own politics. It has its own economy. Pressing one or two has a different implication when we look back to understand the significance of February 21.

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## Navigating Bangla literary translations

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Bangla speakers translating a Bangla text into English might be tempted to keep many of the Bangla words or Bangla constructions to give a sense of the original. Sometimes, they do the exact opposite. For example, should one translate the word *anchal* or retain it? Many years ago, Miss AG Stock was translating a poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam with the help of a Bangla speaker. In the poem, two culture-specific words were translated into English. Perhaps the Bangla co-translator felt that no English-speaking audience would be familiar with the words. Thus the words "*anchal*" and "*bhatiyali*" were changed to "*skirt*" and "*boat*."

*Amar Sonar Bangla* by Tagore also uses the word *anchal*. How does Wikipedia translate our national anthem? The Bangla line reads: "*Ki anchal bichhayechho boter mule, nodir kule kule.*" The translation reads: "What a quilt hast thou spread at the feet of the banyan trees and along the bank of every river."

Instead of using inappropriate equivalences, it is better to use the culture-specific Bangla terms. In fiction, one can always embed the explanation if necessary in the line or paragraph. The translator with a command of English, who also knows that there are cultural differences which cannot be translated, would retain the original words. Perhaps the best translators try to adopt a middle path—stay as close to the original text without becoming absurd.

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## The diverse and continuing evolution of Bangla

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novel in the Subcontinent, and on top of that, the fact that this early writing was in the local Prakrits rather than Sanskrit reflected that Asoka knew that even imperial proclamations must be in the language of the people if they are to be effective.

The Brahmi script remained stable for 700 years after those first Edicts, notably regular in its system of consonant symbols and vowel markings, with simple, angular shapes, easy to transcribe on stone columns, cave walls or copper plates. Only in the Gupta Empire of the 4th century CE did this system begin to change. In a sense, scribes never stopped using Brahmi; each generation had just made small local changes until it evolved into the myriad of scripts we see today, from Tibet to Sri Lanka and ultimately out to the Philippines.

Some of the more conscious changes to the Brahmi script arose because scribes shifted to writing Sanskrit, which although largely dormant for almost a millennium by then, saw a resurgence under the Guptas. And with its more complicated sound system, Sanskrit required changes to the script. Brahmi needed new consonants and vowels: Prakrits had one *s*-sound, so Brahmi only needed one letter *so*, but Sanskrit had three, which we still call *talobbo sho*, *donto sho*, and *murdhonno sho*. Symbols that we call *oi-kar* and *ou-kar*, plus two *ri-kar*'s and even two *li-kar*'s were derived especially for Sanskrit. And most notably, consonants had to combine not just with vowels, but also stack onto other consonants—what we now call *juktakkhor* or *juktoborno*. This expanded Brahmic system remains the core of all

modern Indic scripts today, including the Bangla script.

### Bangla's future

While a script can display signs of inertia, especially in the age of standardised fonts, the evolution of a spoken language never stops. Generations upon generations of speaking vernacular Sanskrit led to the many Prakrits, and from one eastern Prakrit came Bangla. The process has no reason to stop; mass media and globalisation can suffocate linguistic diversity, but it cannot stop language change. As such, Bangla will continue to grow with each generation, but how?

The once-substantial influence of Persian has largely subsided, and in its place, it appears English will continue to serve as the language from which we freely borrow new basic terms as well as technical vocabulary (which Sanskrit helps us with as well). Persian's role in religious vocabulary, however, has already been replaced by appealing to Arabic more directly, as we see in trends such as shifting from Persian *Khoda Hafez* to *Allah Hafez*.

Aside from these externally-focused trends, we can also look at change within Bangla. Each regional variety of Bangla is the local descendant of the various Old Bangla dialects that derived from eastern Prakrit. But not all varieties are treated equally; that of the Nadia-Kushtia region (in which *jaitechhi* becomes *jachchhi*: I'm going) swept across Bengal as a new standard since the 1800s, and is likely to encroach further on other regional varieties due to its exclusive position in formal education. It's commonplace to find Bengalis who can understand their grandparents' Noakhailla or Puran Dhakaiya but can only speak in this

so-called "*shuddho*" Bangla.

Given the sheer numbers of speakers, it's thankfully unlikely that regional varieties of Bangla will disappear. But more than English, *shuddho* Bangla will serve as the strongest factor in shaping exactly how these varieties will change in the future. And as both a linguist and a speaker, my hope is that we document Bangla's continuing evolution without having to sacrifice its own diversity, thousands of years in the making.

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