

## Bengali

People often make particular linguistic variants straightforward indexes of identity. This lacks analytic validity but reveals the linguistic ideologies upon which the politics of nationalism often turn (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Following Stewart (2001), we should be cautious of modern notions that linguistic form (e.g., Bengali discourse full of Sanskrit- or Perso-Arabic-derived words) directly reflects an author's politico-religious stance or a Hindu or Muslim identity conceived as a pure essence.

Ask Bangladeshis what divides Muslim from Hindu speech and they will mention *pani* (vs. *jāl*) 'water'. This favorite index actually derives from Sanskrit. Yet, the "Muslim" value of *pani* is a social fact. Such facts warrant attention to ideological representations of "Perso-Arabic" lexemes in Bengali – and suggest that lists of loanwords require reanalysis in terms of ideologies.

### 1. SEMANTIC DOMAINS

The semantic categories of Arabic loanwords in Bengali reveal the history of Bengali Islam. "The ordinary Bengali words for 'paper' *kagoj* (Arabic *kaḡad*) and 'pen' *kolām* (Arabic *qalam*) [are] both . . . corrupted loanwords" (Eaton 1993: 293). Muslims spread literacy in Bengal, and associated terms reflect that fact.

Bengali Muslim kin terms are also mostly Arabic. Muslims usually call fathers *abba*; Hindus use *baba*. Some loanwords like *mullah* or *imām* designate Muslim social categories or reflect institutions of Mughal governance, e.g. the (now honorific) title *qāḏī* (*kāzī*). Then there are labels designating high birth – *sayyid*, *šex*, *ašraf* – which played a significant role in Bengal's social history (Ahmed 1981). Bengali Muslims use different honorifics from Hindus, e.g. *šabeb* (like 'Mister'). Muslim names are also typically Arabic. The 19th-century Islamization of Bengal involved rural Muslims rejecting their "Hindu" (Bengali) names (Ahmed 1981:106).

Other salient loanwords denote ritual acts – e.g. *haji*. In late 20th century Dhaka, Bengali newspapers were peppered with such terms; their use peaks during Ramadan. Musa (1995:93) lists 28, including *axeri munajat* 'final prayer', *id mobārak* 'happy Id', *zakāt* 'alms', *janāza* 'funeral prayer', and *mīlād mahfil* 'gathering to celebrate [the Prophet's] birth'.

### 2. PHONOLOGY AND GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES OF LOANWORDS

Phonological nativization of loanwords has been the rule in the past. Arabic /a/ in unstressed syllables has followed Bengali rules of vowel harmony to become /o/ in syllables preceding a high vowel (/u/ or /i/). Arabic consonants were generally replaced with their closest Bengali counterparts. The spelling of Arabic-derived terms has recently undergone "reform". The Islamic Preaching Mission, once the Toblig Jamat, is now the Tablig Jamayat; *mowlanas* are now *maulanas*, at least in writing (Musa 1995:93). Most Arabic loanwords are nouns, typically appearing in otherwise purely Bengali contexts and receiving Bengali affixation (*masjid-e*, 'in the mosque') rather than Arabic morphology such as the definite article. Phrases like *bissō-ijtemā'* 'world gathering' or *šiyām-sadhōna* 'fasting-asceticism' that join Arabic loanwords with Sanskrit derivatives are common. The 17th-century rise in non-nominal Arabic elements borrowed into Bengali was reversed in the 18th century – probably reflecting the declining fortunes of Persian under British hegemony (Mannan 1966:73). Among the non-nominal borrowings is the Arabic *zābir*, used by the early 18th-century poet Vidyapati (Mannan 1966:67) in a verb phrase *karilo zābir* 'make manifest'. This illustrates the way Arabic loanwords can appear in Bengali verb phrases by virtue of the latter's capacity to form compound verbs using nouns or adjectives and the Bengali pro-verb *kar* 'do.'

### 3. COUNTS AND FREQUENCY OF ARABIC AND ISLAMICATE ELEMENTS IN BENGALI

There are no large corpus-based linguistic studies of Bengali, let alone of the frequency of Perso-Arabic terms in actual instances of contemporary Bengali discourse. Writing in pre-Partition Calcutta, S.K. Chatterji counted 2,500 Perso-Arabic terms in Bengali (Chatterji 1934:210; Ahmed 1981:121). Writing 30 years later in Islamic East Pakistan, Hilali (1967) listed 9,000 such loanwords. But the relation of such "counts" to actual usage is unknown.

We find a range of loanword frequencies in a small corpus of carefully transcribed, naturally occurring Bengali speech of various registers. In "Latifa's" 1992 lament (Wilce 1998) only 6 per-

cent of total word tokens were Perso-Arabic loans. By contrast, in the Bengali “translation” of an Arabic prayer offered at a 1991 wedding (Wilce 2002), about 33 percent of the total words are Arabic loans.

Arabic-laden prayers and other speech registers – and metadiscourses on the frequency of loanwords – reflect linguistic ideologies inseparable from postcoloniality and competing nationalisms (Irvine and Gal 2000). Such ideologies played a clear role in the history of Bengali.

#### 4. HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Apparently, it was the Hindu poet Bharat Chandra in his poem *Mansingha Kāvya* (1752) who coined the term *dobhaṣi* Bangla ‘dual language’ (Haq 1957:174) for a register using many Perso-Arabic loanwords. Some *dobhaṣi* literature was written in the *nast’aliq* script, or in Bengali written from right to left.

Haq argues that *dobhaṣi* reflects the 19th-century Wahhabi movement in southern Bengal. Abdul Mannan, who wrote the definitive treatment of *dobhaṣi* literature in 1966, sees its origins in earlier Mughal patronage of Bengali. The first work on record “which has preserved evidence of the influence of the language of Muslim rulers [on Bengali] is the *Mṛn savijy* of Bipradās Piplāi”, a Brahmin (ca. 1495 C.E., Mannan 1966:59).

Bharat Chandra wrote the following (from *Onṇadamṅgṇ*):

<p><i>na rōbe pṛasad gunl.</i> <i>na hōbe rōsal</i> <i>ot eb o kōbi bhāṣa</i> <i>yaboni misal</i></p> <p><i>ye hok se hok bhāṣa</i> <i>kavyo rōs lōye</i></p>	<p>[Persian, Arabic, Hindustani] lack grace and poetic quality. I have chosen, therefore, the <u>the mixed language of the Muslims.</u> The ancient sages have declared: “Any language may be used. The important thing is poetic quality” (Mannan 1966: 69–70; emphasis added)</p>
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This precolonial aesthetic of mixture gave way to a drive for purification.

In the 19th century, *dobhaṣi* Bengali borrowed even more Perso-Arabic lexemes, perhaps (ironically) reflecting forces unleashed by Halhed’s (1969/1778) *Grammar of the Bengal Language*. Halhed considered foreign elements pollutants in the “pure Bengalese”. He acknowledged “the modern [mixed] jargon of the kingdom” but declared the loanwords unintelligible outside large cosmopolitan towns (1969:xiv). Following Halhed’s lead, British Orientalists and Hindu pundits working in Calcutta (Ft. William College) produced a Sanskritized register successfully

promulgated as “standard Bengali”. The intensification of Perso-Arabic borrowings in 19th-century *dobhaṣi* was thus a reaction to Orientalism and the Sanskritization of Bengali. As emerging Hindu and Muslim leaders competed for populist appeal, they declared the others’ favored register (Sanskritized vs. *dobhaṣi*) “unintelligible to the masses”.

Some of Halhed’s successors – e.g. William Carey – at least for a time rejected linguistic purism. “A multitude of words, originally Persian or Arabic, are constantly employed in common conversation, which perhaps ought to be considered as *enriching* rather than corrupting the language” (Carey 1801:iii; emphasis in original). But Qayyum (1981) notes that later editions of Carey’s *Grammar* omitted these words. Around 1850, British missionary James Long dubbed the Islamized form of Bengali “Musalman Bengali” (later called Musalmani Bangla – a form relevant to producing targeted translations of the Bible).

Around 1900, members of the Hindu Bengali intelligentsia, such as Dinesh Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore, made “Bengali literature” central to their “romantic nationalism” (Chakrabarty 2004). They believed that “the national [Bengali] literature” could engender a mystical union of the divergent groups of Bengali speakers, transcending the Hindu-Muslim divide. While they somewhat naively advocated this vision, Muslims in the united British Indian state of Bengal formed a Muslim Literary Association (1911), sensing that the Bengal Literary Academy (formed in 1893) was in some subtle way simply a “Hindu Bengali Literature Society”. But it was subtle. Hindu romantic nationalists did not advocate anything like the expurgation of Perso-Arabic words from Bengali. That was not what alienated Muslim literary figures. What the Hindu romantics did so successfully was to promulgate a lexically Sanskritized Bengali that somehow appeared to be both the unmarked form of the language and the prestige variety.

#### 5. MUSLIM ATTITUDES TO OFFICIAL SUPPORT OF BENGALI

Colonial control required understanding and *ranking* various forms of Bengali. Two visions competed, ascribing to Bengali an enduring Hindu “essence” or a growing Islamic influence. The first branded Musalmani “unintelligible”. The second prompted colonial officers and some Muslim leaders to propose a “separate language” for Bengali Muslims (Ahmed 1981:122). But colonial intelligentsia made Sanskritized Bengali represent not only a primordial essence but a prestige standard.

Muslim opposition even to a Musalmani variety was a reaction to the putative Hindu essence of Bengali and to Musalmani's reputation as an "unsophisticated *patois*" (Ahmed 1981:126; cf. Qayyum 1981).

That some (not all, Anisuzzaman 1996) Muslims of the mid-20th century rejected Bengali language education indicates Bengali had become a bone of contention. Today, Bengali historians debate whether Partition was the fruit of the Raj's divide and conquer policy or the resolution of "essential" differences. Metadiscourses about Bengali are part of that tortured history.

#### 6. THE STATUS OF BENGALI IN THE EAST PAKISTAN AND → BANGLADESH ERAS

After Partition, the provincial East Pakistan government appointed an East Bengal Language Committee whose policy goals, summarized under the banner *śhōj bangla* 'Simple Bengali', were: "i) that . . . Sanskritization . . . be avoided as far as possible by the use of simple phraseology . . . ; ii) that . . . expressions and sentiments of Muslim writers should strictly conform to . . . Islamic ideology; and iii) that the words, idioms and phrases in common use in East Bengal, especially those in the Puthi . . . literatures be introduced in the language more freely" (Chowdhury 1960, as translated by Dil 1986:454).

The reference to the *dobhāṣi* Puthi literature makes clear that the "idioms . . . in common use" were Perso-Arabic. Pakistan had strong motivations for replacing Sanskritic with Islamicate derivatives. Appeals to linguistic "simplicity" may sound democratic but, in Pakistan and elsewhere, often serve other agendas (Bauman and Briggs 2003).

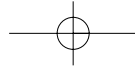
In the late 1980s, Arabic expressions began displacing Persian ones among Muslim Bangladeshis; Muslims began using *allāh ḥāfiẓ* rather than the Persian *xoda ḥāfiẓ* 'go[o]db[ewith]ye'. In 1995, Bangla Academy Director Monsur Musa wrote: "Nowadays, in certain Bengali newspapers, an eagerness to substitute Arabic words for prevailing Persian terms can be seen. These newspapers use *ṣalāt* instead of *namaz*, *ṣiyām* instead of *roja* – and *allāh* is considered better than *xoda*" (1995:92; translation mine). Musa noted that the Arabic words in announcements of religious events made them quite hard for the average Bengali to understand – an echo of older claims?

#### 7. CONCLUSION

While for some, proliferating loanwords represent an impure accretion on the language of the land of Bengal, for others they can signal the true identity of the Bangladeshi nation-state – an Islamic identity (Farukhi 1990). And there are many positions in between, for example those who celebrate Bengali authors' *playful* use of Perso-Arabic loanwords (Anisuzzaman 1996). The contemporary Bengali scene is a broad span over rapidly moving *pani*.

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