

## Racial and Linguistic Phenomena of Late Ancient and Medieval Bengal

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### Abstract

The article deals mainly with the racial and linguistic identity of Bengal during the period from the eleventh century through thirteenth century AD. Endeavour has been made to show first how the Bengal delta was populated from the ancient times and then how the language of its people evolved out of different phases of their existence in various territorial combinations under successive Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rulers. The paper also focuses on how the origin of Bangla and its development has been analyzed by scholars.

### Racial Aspects

Regarding the origin and racial affinities of the people of Bengal, no definite information is available. But it may be explained that the growth of Bengal delta took place in stages and the human response to occupy it has always been dictated by its geographical setting. The older deltas were populated first and then the other deltas, which were formed later, in subsequent periods. It appears that the older delta in North Bengal was first to receive people as was near the Chotanagpur plateau. Yet it cannot be exactly known when this first settlement took place. It is presumed that it did not attract the peoples for permanent settlement in the Stone Age as it lacked the supply of stones needed for the manufacture of implements.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this, as the entire area was once densely covered with tropical forest and it was practically impossible to clear it for settlement, large settlements could not take place before the Iron Age. Before bronze and iron came into being, a few primitive peoples might have inhabited Bengal's older deltas. Then, when the Aryans invaded northern India, non-Aryan and some Dravidian tribes might have fled to Bengal probably to avoid persecution and serfdom.<sup>2</sup> After that, the victorious Aryans gradually began to penetrate into eastern India, but its process was very slow. Until seventh century BC the Aryans were unable to enter beyond Bhagalpur in Bihar. So far it is known from the *Satapatha Brahmana* about the seventh century BC that the Aryan *Yajna* fire, the symbol of the Aryan culture, started penetrating

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1. A. K. M. Shamsul Alam, *Scultural Art of Bangladesh*, Department of Archaeology and Museum, Dhaka, 1985, p. 23

2. *Ibid.*, p. 23

eastward. But it was stopped on the western bank of the Sadanira river in Bhagalpur as the land on the eastern side was marshy and inhabited by rude savages.<sup>3</sup>

However, on the basis of *Puranic* traditions it has been suggested that the five tribes of the *Pundras*, *Suhmas*, *Angas*, *Vangas*, and *Kalingas* entered India by sea and first settled along the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal and gradually extended their power and influence up the Ganges.<sup>4</sup>

But the confusion about the early inhabitants of Bengal did not continue for long. In the *Mahabharata*, we see Pandava Bhima undertaking a whirlwind campaign throughout different regions of Bengal. He defeated and killed Pundraka Vasudeva, the lord of the *Pundras*; he also subjugated the king of the *Vangas*, the lords of Tamralipti, Karvata and Suhma and the people inhabiting the maritime regions. We can therefore reach a conclusion from the above discussion that Bengal during the fourth century BC was inhabited by a number of tribes, some of whom had considerable power and could, in times of need, combine to resist the invaders from upper India. Some of these tribes entered into an alliance with the Kurus. As in the *Bhimsa Parvana* of the *Mahabharata*, we hear of a thrilling account of a fierce encounter between the scion of Pandus and the mighty lord of the *Vangas*. In *Ramayana*, the *Vangas* are mentioned as one of the peoples entering into intimate political relations with the high born aristocrats of Ayodhya, which indicates unmistakably the newly gained political importance of Bengal.<sup>5</sup> The place names are also interesting as some of them clearly indicate Aryan origin.<sup>6</sup> It is most likely that by the fourth century BC the gradual infiltration of the Aryans into Bengal established some colonies, which became in course of time, the nucleus of the ancient cities in Bengal.

But Risley has rightly rejected this view.<sup>7</sup> From a study of the head and nose forms of various local groups, he came to the conclusion that the population of Bengal is primarily composed of Mongolian and Dravidian elements with a remote strain of Indo-Aryan ancestry. The most recent and authoritative study, now available, is made by D. N. Majumdar and C. Radhakrishna Rao, who made a statistical study of an unusually large sample from both East and West Bengal. D. N. Majumdar's general statement probably provides all the information, which we can accept at present. He writes, "The bulk of the population of Bengal is of mixed origin; yet they constitute a homogeneity and a type, today, which distinguishes them from the people of other states, adjacent or remote, and the hybrid origin of Bengal has been reflected in the growth of the Bengali culture, and Bengal's achievements in the fields of art, architecture, science and social awareness. Excluding the few foreign elements in Bengal which can be located with

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 23

4. F. E. Pargiter, *The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*, 2024 (First 1913), p. 293

5. R. C. Majumdar (Ed.), *The History of Bengal*, Vol. I, University of Dacca, 1963, p. 8

6. A. K. M. Shamsul Alam, *Scultural Art of Bangladesh*, *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 24

7. W. Crooke (Ed.), *The people of India*, 1915, pp. 40-41

precision, the race elements in Bengal are (i) the Mediterranean, (ii) the Proto-Australoid, and (iii) the Mongoloid, both of the Tibetan and Burmese types, with occasional pockets of brachycephals, who do not form the mass of the population even among the higher castes.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Linguistic Aspects**

Bengal came into being as a political entity in the eighth century under the Buddhist Pala kings. Through the centuries it has maintained a surprising linguistic and cultural unity under successive Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim rulers and in various territorial combinations. One of the outstanding characteristics of the Bengalese is their delight in language.<sup>9</sup> They love their language and deeply enjoy the creative and artistic use of the language in song, drama and other literary forms.

Yet the linguistic situation of Bengal has been very complex for the influx and mixtures of different peoples over the centuries before the Christian era. Nothing definite is known about it. Attempts have however been made by scholars to find out the origin of Bangla language, which has been analyzed in the following way.

Bangla belongs to the Eastern branch of Indo-Aryan groups of languages, and is most closely related to Assamese. Though Assamese has an overlapping dialect distribution, it is a distinct standard language, next to Oriya and the three Bihari languages—Maithili, Magadhi and Bhojpur. The fact that Bangla, Assamese and Oriya are very closely related has been noted among others by Grierson, S. K. Chatterji and Shahidullah. All of them have shown that Bangla and Assamese are more closely related to each other than either Bangla and Oriya or Bangla and the Bihari languages. Pattanayak attempts to show by a method of internal reconstruction that Oriya, Assamese, Bihari and Hindi belonged to the same group of languages at one time. To him, the first branching off took place between Oriya, Assamese, Bihari and Hindi, and then Oriya branched off from Assamese and Bihari. And Assamese and Bangla were the last to be separated. The common history of Bangla and Assamese is symbolized by their use of the same script. On the other hand, the very different histories are shown by the use of a ‘southern’ kind of script for Oriya and by the present dominance of Hindi in the Bihari region.

According to Grierson, the early languages of the Indo-Aryan family were divided into two main branches, the eastern and the western. Sauraseni belonged to the western branch and was spoken in Saurasena, at present the areas around the city of Mathura. It was Magadhi which belonged to the eastern group and was the vernacular of the then Magadha, now known as Bihar. Bihari is the direct descendent of the Magadhi which developed into a number of varieties like Gaudi,

8. D. N. Mojumdar and C. Radhakrishna Rao, *Race Elements in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1958, p. 110

9. Afia Dil, *Two Traditions of the Bengali Language*, the foreword by Charles A. Ferguson, The Islamic Academy, Cambridge, 1991, p. 11

Dhakki and Utkali or Odri. Oriya is the descendent of ancient Utkali. The Bangla of North Bengal and Assamese developed from Gaudi. And Dhakki or the Magadhi of Dhaka developed into modern eastern Bangla.

S. K. Chatterji maintains that the history of Indic or Indo-Aryan speech as a whole has been divided into broad periods:<sup>10</sup> (1) Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) 1500 BC-600 BC; (2) Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) 600 BC-1000 AD; and (3) New Indo-Aryan (NIA) 1000 AD to modern times. The typical language of the first period is Vedic Sanskrit as found in Vedic hymns. In the Middle Indo-Aryan period, a number of varieties sprang up and those varieties were known as Prakrits. And there was a literary variety based on the speech forms of the North-West and West Midland Brahmins (Gandhara, Panjab). Sanskrit was the name given to this literary variety though the Vedic was also known as Vedic Sanskrit.

The spoken varieties of the Middle Indic period were further divided into a number of branches: Udicya (meaning North-West) in Gandhara and the Panjab, Praticya (meaning South-West) in Gujrat area, Madhya-Desiya (meaning Midland) in Pancal area, Pracya (meaning Eastern) in Kosala area, Dakshinatya (meaning Southern). The Pracya or the Eastern branch was subdivided into Magadhi and Ardha-Magadhi. Both Magadhi and Ardha-Magadhi developed into Magadhi Apabhhransa and Ardha-Magadhi Apabhhransa. After 1000 AD, it was Magadhi-Apabhhransa which branched off into the Bihari group of languages on the one hand and Bangla, Assamese and Oriya on the other. From the latter group, Oriya branched out first, and Bangla and Assamese were the last to be separated from each other.

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah agreed with SK Chatterji that Prakrit was divided into a number of branches. But he speaks of the Eastern group branching out into a number of languages, of which Magadhi and Gaudi are two. According to Shahidullah, Gaudiya Prakrit (200 AD) developed into Gaudiya Apabhhransa (450 AD) which was again subdivided into Oriya, Bihari and Gauriya Desi Bhasa (600 AD) or Kamarupi, which finally took the shape of Bangla and Assamese.

During the ancient Bengali period ranging from 950 to 1200 AD, the Pala kings were the rulers in Bengal. They were Buddhists and Pali was their religious language. Buddhism was a revolt against the rigid caste system in the Hindu society. So the choice of Pali, Prakrit, was a deliberate and planned attempt on the part of Buddhist thinkers and preachers to break the monopoly of Sanskrit and the upper castes in Hindu society.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore interesting to observe the beginning of the growth of other Prakrits under the patronage of the Buddhist rulers. The earliest extant literature in Old Bangla was *Charyapada* songs composed by Buddhist mystics.

10. R. C. Majumdar (Ed.), *The History of Bengal*, Vol. 1, *op.cit.*, 1963, p. 376

11. Afia Dil, *Two Traditions of the Bengali Language*, The Islamic Academy, Cambridge, 1991, p. 22

The earliest available literature in Bengali consists of a number of fifty songs<sup>12</sup> (which are popularly known as *Charyapada*) and these *Charyapadas* are composed by different *Siddhacharyas*, preceptors, who belonged to the Buddhist *Sahajiya* cult. Although some quarters have raised a question about whether the linguistic character of these songs is genuine Bangla, it has been ascertained, after a through examination of the linguistic character of these songs, that “the language of the *Charyas* is the genuine vernacular of Bengal at its basis.” Despite sporadic intrusion of a few Maithili and Odiya forms and also of the influence of Sauraseni Apabhhransa, the essential linguistic nature of these songs cannot but be admitted to be Bangla. Besides the general consideration of phonology and morphology, the use of some idioms, phrases and proverbs unmistakably show its Bangla character. The language of *Dohas* published with the *Charya* songs is admittedly Western Apabhhransa. Between the authors of the Western Apabhhransa *Dohas* and those of Bangla songs many names will be found common. It is not enough to identify the authors of *Dohas* and those of the *Charyapadas* only by the commonness of names in the list of authors. If we compare the *Dohas* with the *Charyapadas*, we will find that the authors present a striking similarity in their religious attitude, in theories and practices and in the manner of literary representation, in imagery, phraseology and vocabulary. And this may prove that the authors of the *Dohas* and the *Charyas*, where common names are found, might have been identical. But we must at least admit that both the *Dohas* and the *Charyas* represent the same school of thought and they belong to the same literary school. A question may arise as to why the poets who composed songs in Bangla should have composed songs also in *Sauraseni Apabhhransa* on the same subjects. It may be explained by referring to the prominence and popularity of Western *Apabhhransa* during the period between the ninth century and the twelfth. It might have been so through the prestige of North Indian Rajput princes, in whose courts dialects akin to the later form of *Sauraseni* were used, and whose bards spread and popularize such dialects in almost all parts of India from Gujrat and Western Punjab to Bengal.<sup>13</sup>

If we discuss the nature of these *Dohas* and songs from the religious, cultural and literary points of view, we shall find that they belong to a particular province of India. And they may be regarded as representative of earliest stage of Indo-Aryan vernacular religious poetry.<sup>14</sup> On a colossal inspection it is seen that many of the authors of these songs, besides a good number of writers of Buddhist Tantric texts and commentaries,

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12. Mahamahopadhyaya Haraprasada Sastri discovered these songs first from the Darbar Library in Nepal in 1907. These songs were edited by him and published about ten years later under the auspices of Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, and it was captioned as *Bouddha Gan-O-Doha*
  13. Dr. S. K. Chatterji, *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, 1926, p. 113
  14. Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1969, Rep., 1976, p. 514; Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1969, Rep., 1976, p. 5

belong to the province of Bengal or to the close neighbourhood of Bengal.<sup>15</sup> As we have insufficient data about the authors of the *Dohas* and the *Charyapadas*, it is not possible to ascertain the exact time when the *Siddhacharyas* flourished and composed these songs. But it is known that they flourished during the reign of Pala kings in Bengal, which extended from the eighth to the twelfth century AD of the *Siddhacharyas* Lui-pa is generally taken to be the first. Lui-pa and Dipankara Sri-jnana were the co-writer of the book, *Abhisamaya-vihanga*. Dipankara Sri-jnana was born in 980 AD and went to Tibet in 1042.<sup>16</sup> He preached religion in Tibet for long fourteen years and died in 1056 AD. So it may be supposed that *Abhisamaya-vihanga* was written sometime by the first quarter of the eleventh century AD. Lui-pa was senior to Sri-jnana, and therefore he may reasonably be supposed to have flourished sometime in the second half of the tenth century.<sup>17</sup> Dr. S. K. Chatterji maintains that it is possible to identify *Panditacharya* Sri-kanha-pada, who flourished during the reign of Gobinda-pala, with the Kanha-pada of the *Charyapada*. Thus, he wants to place Kanha-pada of the *Charyapada* in the second half of the twelfth century AD.<sup>18</sup> Thus it is generally held that these poets of the *Charyapadas* and of the *Dohas* flourished sometime between the tenth and the twelfth centuries AD. But to Pandit R. Samkrityayana, Saraha-pada, not Lui-pada, was the earliest of these *Siddhacharyas* of the Buddhist Sahajiya cult. He has been supported by a number of earlier scholars also. Saraha-pada has his disciple in Savara-pada and Lui-pada was in his turn the disciple in Savara-pada. Lui-pada was therefore the third in the chronology of preceptors. Saraha-pada was the disciple of Haribhadra, who again was the disciple of the well-known Buddhist scholar and writer Santarakshita. Haribhadra was a contemporary of King Dharma-pala of the Pala dynasty, who ruled in 770 to 815 AD.<sup>19</sup> Saraha-pada must therefore have flourished sometime in the tenth century AD. Pandit Samkrityayana therefore holds that the Buddhist *Dohas* and songs were composed within the period extending from the eighth century to the twelfth century AD. Pandit Samkrityayana has also given a chart showing the chronology of the disciples.<sup>20</sup>

The Sena kings who followed the Palas were Brahmins. During the rule of Sena kings the Prakrits, including Pali, were once again replaced by Sanskrit as the language of administration. They patronized the Brahmin pundits, who were the scholars of Sanskrit and brought about a revival of Hinduism. There is considerable evidence to show that the Sena kings and the Sanskrit scholars of the time had great

15. *Ibid.*, p. 7. See also, introduction in the *Bouddha Gan O Doha* by M. M. H. P. Sastri

16. *Ibid.*, p. 7

17. M. M. H. P. Sastri has mentioned it in his Presidential Address in the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad in B.S. 1329

18. Shashibhushan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, *op.cit.*, 1976, p. 8

19. *Doha-kosa*, pp. 12-13

20. *Ibid.*, p. 21



distaste for the vernacular languages including Bangla. The following Sanskrit couplet represents this sentiment:

*Astadas puranani ramasya caritani ca  
Bhasaya manabah srutva rauraba narakah brajet*

(If a person hears the stories of the eighteen Puranas or of the Ramayana in the language of the people, he will be thrown into the Raorava hell.)<sup>21</sup>

The Middle Bengali period coincides roughly with the period of the Muslim rule in Bengal lasting from 1204 till its replacement by the British rule in 1764. The Muslim rulers constituted first Turks and Afghans and later the Mughals. But the language of administration was Persian all throughout. The religious language of these rulers and the Muslim population was Arabic. But the common everyday language was mostly Bangla. The literature of the Middle Bengali period was all in verse and was mostly produced under the patronage of Muslim rulers and their chiefs—both Hindus and Muslims. The poets and scholars who were patronized by them were both Hindus and Muslims. Kazi Abdul Mannan has discussed this Muslim patronage in detail in his *The Emergence and Development of Dobhasi Literature in Bengal* (Up to 1855 AD). The Muslim rulers commissioned translations from Sanskrit sources. They also encouraged production of literature on themes that were popular at that time. It is possible that one reason among others for this patronage might have been to undermine the dominance of Sanskrit and the Brahmins. It is also possible that the Muslim rulers wanted to keep in close contact with the common masses of the land. Patronizing the scholars they might have shown their intimacy with them. It is therefore seen that Hindu and Muslim poets and scholars were equally patronized by the court. But the earliest among them were mostly Hindus. No evidence is available to any difference in the language used by these men of learning.

The Hindu poets mainly devoted themselves to three topics, all related to religion: (a) translations and re-creations of the great Hindu epics of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*; (b) the *Mangal Kabya* (Poetry of Invocation), long narrative poems about the local and popular deities, written with a view to winning their favour; (c) lyrical poetry, written about the divine love of Radha and Krishna, known as *Lila. Srikrishna-Kirtan* can be cited as the most important creation in this category.<sup>22</sup> Vidyapati was patronized by Sultan Giasuddin to compose lyrics on Vaisnava themes.<sup>23</sup>

21. D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1911, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., p. 7

22. Sisir Kumar Das, *Early Bengali Prose* Bookland Private, Calcutta, 1966, pp. 1-4

23. Qazi Abdul Mannan, *The Emergence and Development of Dobhasi Literature in Bengal*, Second Edition, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1974, p. 7

The first break from this pattern of literary compositions was brought about by the Muslim poets. They introduced new themes and literary forms from Persian, Arabic and Turkish. And what is more important is that they introduced secular subjects. Several scholars have acknowledged this contribution of the Muslim poets to the Bengali literature—especially their innovations through romantic narrative poems and love ballads.<sup>24</sup> While the Hindu poets were primarily engaged in composing devotional songs and poems, the Muslim poets produced both devotional works and secular literature. Thus, in addition to the three types of poetry described above, a variety of new literary forms were evolved. There are, for example, (a) narratives and ballads; (b) lyrics: Sufi mystic songs, *yoga* and *baul* songs (songs of the wandering minstrels); (c) didactic or instructive poems based on both Islamic and non-Islamic subjects; (d) a form of elegy based on the Persian *marsia* (song of lamentation on the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (SM), and members of the family and friends of the Imam at Karbala).<sup>25</sup>

The name of *Vanga* was used long before the Bengali language reached a certain position.<sup>26</sup> Since the ancient times, the boundary of Bengal changed in different periods. During the period from the middle of the eighth century AD to the early part of the thirteenth century, changes occurred in various ways in the boundary of Bengal. The Sanskrit language and literature, caste systems and the ideas of Vedic gods have influenced in many ways the religions and society of Bengal. The Bengali language has been enriched *tatsama* and *tadbhaba* words, which have been derived from Sanskrit. Bengal grammar has also been written in the model of Sanskrit. Until the twelfth century AD the influence of Sanskrit on the development of the Bengali language and society was strong. During the rule of Muslims, the Aryan culture gradually changed. As it did not receive any royal patronage, the Brahmanical culture took shelter amongst the high caste people of the Hindu society. On the other hand, a transformation was taking place in the arena of folk-culture. Folk gods and goddesses, the inanimate symbols and signs of worship among the *Kauma* society, which had been at the non-Aryan level, came out on the forefront of the society since the thirteenth century AD. As a result, those folk gods and goddesses find expression in the worship methods of *Smriti Puranas* and later in the *Mangal Kavya*.<sup>27</sup>

24. Sukumar Sen, *Islami Bangala Sahitya*, Burdwan, 1951, p. 5

25. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Some Hindu poets also experimented with these subjects, e.g., Radha Charan Gop wrote what might be called *marsia*, in the later part of the 19th century. Gop's *marsia* is called *Imamyner Keccha* (The story of the Imams)

26. A. Bhatyacharya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta, 1977, pp. 59-60

27. Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Bangladesher Samskritir Swarup O Sambhabna*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1994, p. 8