

**The Question of Language and the Foundation of the Identity of Bengali
Muslims in Nineteenth Century Bengal**

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Abstract: *Language plays a very significant role in the culture and identity of a community in the society. The question of language of the Bengali Muslims is not exception in this regard. Language played a very crucial role in the establishment of the identity and attainment of their political goal. The lower class Muslims commonly known as Atrap, formed the majority of Muslim populace in Bengal and they regarded Bengali as their mother-tongue. Their political identity, first as the East Pakistani and later as Bangladeshi, was largely circled around the language question. This article discusses about the growth and development of the language of the Bengali Muslims and the various issues connected to it.*

Keywords: *Bengali Muslims, Atrap and Ashraf, Do-bhashi, Punthi, formation of identity*

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Muslim community in Bengal had been faced with a crisis of identity. There had been many problems of community life. The question of language was one of the issues. The language issue of the Bengali Muslims is a very significant and pertinent subject with regard to the identity and the culture of the Muslims in Bengal. The issue of language gave impetus to many broader questions, very much integral to the culture and

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subsequent developments of the Bengali Muslims. The political, religious and social sphere of the Muslim people was greatly affected by this issue. Generally speaking, this issue was the result of centuries of developments, mixing of culture with the Hindus, distinction between the *Ashraf* and *Atrap*, political changes etc. The language issue even effected the Bengali Muslims after the creation of East Bengal first, and then during the 'Language Movement' for the state of Bangladesh.

Bengali Muslim leaders and intellectuals who were primarily guided by the self-preserved spirit of the Muslim community appeared to regenerate the Muslim society leading to their material advancement in the socio-economic and political set up and the language played a significant role in this development. The issue of language in the modern cultural discussions about Bengali Muslims began in the early nineteenth century with the rise of a standardized, Sanskritised Bengali as well as the Muslim revivalism during the latter half of the century. Bengali Muslim literary cultures in the past include a rich and diverse history of writing, patronage, and literary history. The period between 1204 and 1764 A.D., known as the 'Middle Period' of Bengali literary history witnessed the connectedness of Muslims and Hindus in pre-modern Bengali literature. This period was dominated by the subsequent Muslim rulers and the poets and writers of all communities were under the court patronage and began to develop a local tradition of writing in Bengali. Chandidas, Krittibas, Sayyid Sultan, Shah Muhammed Sagir, Sayyid Hamza were some of the prominent names in this regard. Like Hindus, the Muslim writers also produced a range of literature in this period. Shah Muhammed Sagir, the first Muslim to write extensively in Bengali, wrote many literature of esteemed quality in Bengali. From the late fourteenth through the early eighteenth century, Muslim writers wrote in Bengali about both religious and secular themes.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Muslim writers continuously exhibited self-consciousness about writing in Bengali even at a time when its status was questionable alongside traditional languages like Arabic and Persian. Here, the *Ashraf* and *Atrap* division among the Muslim community played a very significant role. The *Ashrafs* regarded themselves as the pure Muslims and their language of Arabic and Persian as the true language of the elite

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and ruling class. The urban Muslim aristocrats remained indifferent to the Bengali language because of their insistence for maintaining social superiority. On the other hand, the *Atrap* class of the Muslim community, especially in Bengal were mostly those people who were forcefully converted to Islam or those lower caste Hindus who willingly converted to Islam to save themselves from the expensive and divisive Hindu religion. The majority of the Muslims in Bengal belonged to the *Atrap* section and they were treated as second class Muslim by the elite *Ashraf* section. As the *Atrap* section were closely related to the Hindu culture and tradition through the ages, it was easier for them to use Bengali language than the elite language of Arabic and Persian. Therefore, for the Bengali Muslims, in general Bengali was their mother-tongue and Arabic and Persian were still far away from their reach. Most of the Muslims in the countryside had made Bengali their vehicle of expression and wrote it with unsurpassable facility and charm and made a distinct contribution to the development of modern Bengali literature designed to regenerate and strengthen the Bengali Muslim society through the process of its Islamisation and modernization.

The emergence of *Do-bhashi* (two-language) or *Musalmani Bangla* gave a distinct characteristic feature to the language of the Muslims in Bengal. The two terms, 'do-bhashi' and 'Musalmani Banga' are not exactly accurate, as words and phrases from many languages, including Persian, Arabic and Urdu were used without a self-conscious religious identity in this form of Bengali. The majority of writers who used this form were Muslim, though, the Hindu publishers during the nineteenth century clearly promoted this form of literature by selling their publications and at times writing in the form as well. Shah Garibullah, Sayyid Hamza, Abdul Majeed Bhuiyan were some of the prominent Muslims of the period who used this form of language in their writings. This form became very popular among the all community of people in Bengal and the Bengali printing press played an important part in its wide circulation and popularity. It is to be noted that the Do-bhashi literature written by the Muslim poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, played an important role in strengthening the Muslim society.

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In official educational and government circles, the Musalmani Bangla became less relevant compared to the newly standardized Bengali language which was developing from a variety of spoken and written forms into a standardized modern vernacular with a teachable grammar and identifiable origins by the late nineteenth century. Hindu pundits and the Orientalists played a significant part in the development of this standard Bengali language. They gradually developed Bengali grammar and dictionaries that depended heavily on Sanskrit, and Hindu terms. The Sanskritised Bengali form, later became the official and accepted form of Bengal. Until the early nineteenth century, no standardized conception of Bengali had existed as large amounts of Persian and Arabic words were included in Bengali speech and writings in literature. Moreover, a large portion of the scribal and bureaucratic elite communities of Calcutta, both Hindus and Muslims, were familiar in Persian as a matter of Practical necessity, the Persian words and forms were well known to literate Bengalis of the early nineteenth century. But Perso-Arabic elements were gradually omitted from the standardized form of the language through the late nineteenth century, when Persian and Arabic words were seen as altogether foreign to the newly minted standardized Bengali press and the Bengali Hindu writers educated in the vernacular educational system. Modern writers started to transform the Bengali language for a readership that reflected a Hindu-ization of the language. Words of Sanskrit origin were accepted as proper Bengali and Sanskrit was crowned as the mother of the language. Although, the literature about the Muslim themes continued to published in old Musalmani Bangla form, but compared to the standardized and allegedly 'proper' version of the Bengali language, they were perceived as marginal and flawed. Gradually, the Musalmani Bangla form began to lose its relevancy and significance. Another reason that the 'Muslim' component of Bengali literature gradually became separated from Hindu forms was the gradual rise in Muslim revivalist itinerant preachers and organizations that developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The issue of Musalmani Bangla was one of literary and cultural distinctiveness, from both the Hindu-colonial promotion of standardization, as well as the Muslim Ashraf classes of Bengal, who stayed far away from such language. Therefore, this sort of language existed outside the scope of both elite Muslims who learnt Persian and Urdu and wrote in Urdu and

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English and formally educated Bengali Hindus, who would distance themselves from this language. However, Musalmani Bangla did thrive outside of the simply oppositional space of linguistic distinctiveness. The great Muslim revivalists and preachers who flooded East Bengal from the 1820s onwards did not focus on Arabic, Persian or Sanskritised Bengali in their writings. Many of them used a form of Musalmani Bangla, already enmeshed in Bengali Muslim life.

The Muslim writers from the later part of the nineteenth century, gradually began to embrace the Sanskritic, standardized Bengali that had been used by Hindus since the earlier century. Muslim writer like Mir Musharraf Hussein had the same proficiency in the new language form as any other prominent Hindu writer of the time. He was widely praised for his skill in writing standardized Bengali. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, not only were Bengali Muslims reading standardized Bengali literature produced by Hindus, but were writing critiques of it as well.

The political developments and the issue of identity of the Bengali Muslims that began to rise from the late nineteenth century greatly challenged the language issue of the Muslims of Bengal. Bengali Muslims formed modern institutions to debate issues regarding language and politics that would be accessible to both Hindus and Muslims. All these formed a foundation of Bengali Muslim literary culture that would grow in the subsequent decades. Bengali Muslim leaders and the intellectuals who were primarily guided by the self-preservative spirit of the Muslim community appeared to regenerate the Muslim society leading to their material advancement in the socio-economic and political set up during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Bengal.

Soon after the annulment of the division of Bengal in 1911, one of the most significant developments regarding the Bengali Muslims in the field of literature and their thought process took place, which in future helped shaping the political thought of the Bengali Muslims. It was the formation of *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samiti* (BMSS) in 1911. The credit of establishing this Samiti goes to some prominent Bengali Muslim writers and community leaders like Mohammed Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Muzaffar Ahmad, Mohammed Shahidullah and

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Mozammel Huq. This organization lasted until 1923. Its main objectives were to promote Bengali literature among the Muslims, encourage Bengali writings about Muslim themes, and also to promote friendly relations between Hindus and Muslims. The founding fathers of the organization were well aware of the fact that the pro-Hindu organization *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*, which was patronized by Hindu luminaries like Romesh Chandra Dutt, Nabin Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore, was not providing enough platform for the Bengali Muslim literati and somehow the feeling of the alienation from the Parishad motivated them to form an organization of their own where they could put forward their cause. The Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Samiti aimed to redress the relative lack of Muslim writers active in Bengali literature and held several conferences at Calcutta, Chittagong, and throughout West Bengal to promote the Bengali Muslim literature. In addition to providing a meeting space for budding Muslim writers in Calcutta, the Samiti and its magazine, the *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika*, aimed to educate Bengali Hindus about Muslim History and civilization, because in the words of Muzaffar Ahmad, ‘generally, the educated Bengali Hindu did not know much about Muslim civilization.’

One of the significant questions that the Bengali Muslims and the literati had to face was the language question. The sense of belonging to a separate culture or the sense of Muslim identity was most powerfully expressed in the debate over the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims. Although the issues like the need of religious education, making of text books catering to Muslim interests, modernization of education, and greater importance to Urdu had been discussed and debated with much enthusiasm, but the most controversial one was perhaps the cultivation of Bengali language. With regard to the question of Bengali language, the controversy centred round the issues of whether Bengali should be regarded as mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims and whether it would be their national language and should the Bengali language be modeled both in its form and contents so as to be easily identified as Muslim.

The identification of Bengali Muslims with Bengali language and literature could be noticed in the first decade of the twentieth century and it became a trend among a section of the Bengali Muslim waiters during the later part of the second decade of the century. The paper

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Naba Nur asked in its editorial that except Bengali what could be the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims. Those who wanted to give this place to Urdu were trying for the impossible. One particular Bengali Muslim writer and activist in the 1910s contributed many writings on the subject of global Muslim identity in the wake of new changes. This activist, Ismail Hossein Siraji, openly supported the Bengali language for the Bengali Muslims. Unlike the luminaries of the early twentieth century Indian Muslim politics, like Al-Afghani, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, or the Ali Brothers, Siraji's writings were all in Bengali. Siraji not only wrote in Bengali, but he also wrote articles promoting the usage and literary development of the Bengali language, fitting into the Bengali Muslim commitment to both language and religion shared by nearly all Bengali Muslim writers of the time. Writers belonging to Pro-Bengali group regarded the attempt of the writers to create a separate literature of the Muslims as an indication of narrow mentality. They believed in communal harmony and were in favour of considering Bengali as the common language for both the Hindus and Muslims, the two sister communities of Bengal. They pleaded for the cultivation of Bengali considering it necessary for the development of national, social and cultural facilities of the Muslims.

Although, many intellectuals and writers in Bengal were promoting and usling Bengali as the language of Bengali Muslims, in the 1920s a public force in Calcutta supporting Urdu as the medium of instruction for Bengali Muslims in the educational institutions gained momentum. This agitation had been going on since the early 1910s when it was initiated by Fazlul Huq. In a 1913 statement about the construction of Dacca University, Huq strongly advocated the option of Urdu for Bengali Muslim students. In 1922, he also promoted the cause of Urdu as the medium of instruction for Bengali Muslim students and Bengali for Bengali Hindus, to which the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* replied that for the 99 per cent of Bengali Muslims who speak Bengali from the cradle what should be the mother tongue? Only a handful few could speak Urdu or Persian. The sentiment that Muslims have a specific need for Urdu instruction, even though Bengali is the language spoken at home, informed a heightened Urdu-Bangla controversy in the legislative sphere and was reported in Calcutta papers from 1926 to 1929.

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Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika, from its first issue, advocated for the Bengali language to be used by the Bengali Muslims. It urged Bengali Muslims to join the rest of the world in developing their community according to modern ideals through the cultivation of Bengali language and literature. It encouraged the Muslim writers to express their ideas in high quality Bengali. This was by no means the first time that Bengali Muslims were promoting Bengali amongst their co-religionists through the magazine. This was also a reaction to the use of Urdu as a symbol of universal Indian Muslim identity. Mohammed Shahidullah address to the Samiti, published in the its first issue of the Patrika, explained how Bengali Muslims had to use five languages- Arabic for religious instruction, Persian for high culture, Urdu for daily life in Indian Muslim social circles, English for jobs, and Bengali at home. This often resulted in the lack of fluency in all five languages. Shahidullah argued a way forward through the development of a vernacular language. He advocated that the Bengali had to be the first language that Bengali Muslim children learnt, with other languages taking a secondary place. Mohammed Akram Khan was of the view that because of the suspicious nature of the Muslim religious leaders that the Bengali language is the language of Hindus prompted them to neglect its important among the Muslim mass.

Although during the early twentieth century, many Muslim writers regarded Bengali as the mother tongue but not as the national language of the Muslims. Religious sentiment seemed to have coloured their views on nationality. The dominant urge was to assert their identity as Muslims without giving up their identities as Bengalis. They sought to maintain a balance between regional loyalties, which was their attachment to Bengali language and culture and their identity as Muslims and the consequent attachment to Islamic cultural tradition with its Middle-East origin. On the one hand, they claimed their identity as the sons of the soil, clinging to its language and culture, on the other; they did not like to be described as imitators of Hindus. Sheikh Abdur Rahim believed that the Bengali Muslims were only a part of the greater Muslim nation. Thus the Bengali language in its existing form as developed by the Hindus was not suitable for developing Muslim national spirit. A Muslim Bengali language and literature should, therefore, be modeled in terms of Muslim national ideals and spirit with borrowing from Arabic,

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Persian and Urdu. Shahidullah entered a debate about Bengali that started in the 1910s regarding the usage of various words of Perso-Arabic origin. The Bengali language includes words like *iswar*, *swarga*, *narak*, *upashana* and *upabash*, words that are unmistakably Hindu and so the usage of Muslim words such as *paigambar*, *behest*, *dojakh*, *feresta*, *namaz* and *roza* had to be fully accepted if Hindus and Muslims were to share the development of the Bengali language. Shahidullah embraced both sameness and difference. Sameness included an unabashed participation in Bengali culture that was recognizably both Hindu and Muslim, but also a concerted effort to establish a distinctively Bengali Muslim literature, style and sensibility. Unlike the Muslim writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century who could use words without concern about how any particular community would interpret their usage, here we can find the balance between the Bengali language and the use of Perso-Arabic words.

The use of Perso-Arabic words into Bengali language was an issue of debate among the Muslim literati of the time. But gradually, this debate became insignificant and instead, they started focusing on the inclusion of Islamic ideals into Bengali literature. In Syed Emdad Ali's landmark 1918 essay 'Bengali Language and Muslims', the author argued that importing Arabic and Persian words will make little difference to Bengali Muslims, but incorporating Islamic ideals in the literature should be the goal of modern Bengali Muslim literati. This view was supported by many intellectuals like Abdul Karim Sahityabisharad, Akram Khan etc. Akram Khan saw in this idea an opportunity to ameliorate conflicts between Hindus and Muslims and to erase stereotypes. He also encourages the religious scholars and leaders to write and speak in Bengali in order to communicate with the masses of Bengali Muslims. Akram Khan in his presidential address during the third session of the *Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Sammelan* (1918-1919) emphasized that Bengali had been the written and spoken language of the educated Bengali Muslims from the advent of Islam in Bengal and it would remain so in the future. He, however, believed that Arabic, being the language of Muslim holy books, was most suitable as a medium of communication among the Muslims all over the world. Hence it should be regarded as the national language of the Muslims. This view was based on the concept that Muslim nationhood was religion-oriented, rather than territorial. Akram Khan advised the Muslims to

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reflect the Muslim religious and national ideals in their literature by drawing heavily from rich treasures of the Arabic and Persian literature. He, however, was in favour of introducing Perso-Arabic and Urdu words when their exact Bengali equivalents were not available. Urdu, in his opinion, should be cultivated in the interests of the preservation and development of Muslim nationalism in India.

Conclusion

The language question of the Bengali Muslims remained a pertinent one even after the partition of Bengal in 1947. The part of Bengal became the East Pakistan with the majority of population being the Muslims. They had their own culture and way of life. Though, the people of East Pakistan never wanted to become a part of Pakistan, whose language and culture were vastly different from them. Their goal was to become an independent entity with their own language and culture. In this case, they felt betrayed by their leadership. But the real problem was about to start. The state of Pakistan wanted to impose their culture and language upon the East Pakistan. After the independence, Urdu was declared as the national language of Pakistan. It sparked extensive protests among the Bengali-speaking majority of East Bengal. The students of the Dhaka University and other political activists defied the law and organized a protest on 21 February 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on that day. The death provoked widespread civil unrest. After years of conflict, the central government relented and granted official status to the Bengali language in 1956. The Language Movement catalysed the assertion of Bengali national identity in East Bengal and later East Pakistan, and later became one of the most important issues in the Bangladesh Liberation War.

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