

## PERSIAN HERITAGE OF BENGAL

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Text of the inaugural speech delivered by Mr. Jawhar Sircar at the inauguration of the international seminar on “Persian Heritage of Bengal”, organized by the Iran Society on February 15-17, 2019, to commemorate the 75 years of its existence.

I congratulate the Iran Society of Kolkata for stepping into its 75<sup>th</sup> year — which is no mean achievement. I also compliment the Iran Society for conducting a 3-day International Seminar on the subject: ‘Persian Heritage of Bengal’. It is, indeed, the most appropriate occasion for deliberating on this topic, as Bengal is certainly a major beneficiary from its six centuries of association with Persian language and culture.

As we are all aware, Islamic culture entered Bengal with Arab traders and preachers from the 8<sup>th</sup> century but it made its real impact from 1204, when Bakhtiar Khilji ousted the ruling Hindu Sena dynasty of Bengal. Thus Bengal became one of the earliest provinces of the newly-established sultanate of Delhi that was established by the Persianised Turks. This conquest ushered an era when Bengal came under the sway of the medieval Iranian world that had evolved under the Abbasids. The local Turki rulers preferred to use Persian as their lingua franca, because different ethnic Turki and Afghan groups within their formation had their own distinct languages and dialects of Central Asia and

Afghanistan, but Persian would generally be understood by all. Only one group in Turki-dominated Central Asia spoke and wrote in an Eastern form of Persian and this was the Tajiks whose language and culture were prevalent not only in modern day Tajikistan, but also in the prominent principalities and cities of Bokhara and Samarqand, in Uzbekistan. We mention this specially, as the earliest Persian specialists in Islamic Bengal were largely Tajiks, before Persians from Iran and co-linguist Daris from Afghanistan entered this province in larger numbers later on.

Muslim rulers in Bengal introduced, soon after their arrival, several important institutional features that they had copied from Persia and these left their impact on the life and culture of the local people. The first major implant was the Persian tradition of monarchy and statecraft, which incidentally, was pre-Islamic and relied heavily on imported slaves for domestic, military, and political service. The second major feature was the high degree of commercialisation that followed, which created an economy that was considerably monetised. Both were strange to Bengal but they were successfully grafted and Gaur and Pandua soon replicated a court culture modelled on the Sassanian imperial paradigm. Bengal was exposed to a definitive style of governance that rested on a reasonably transparent and accepted legal code, enforced by a trained bureaucracy, which was considerably different from the earlier Hindu and Buddhist regimes. So successful was this Persianised system of governance that it continued even after the sultanate of Bengal broke off from the central Delhi sultanate in 1352 and proclaimed total independence. As a parallel development, we find that the Iliyas-shahi sultans also emphasised “on both the institution of the caliphate and with the Iranian cultural world generally” (Karim, 1960, p. 18). The great Adina Mosque in Pandua that was constructed in 1375 projected a

distinctly imperial aspect — quite reminiscent of the grand imperial style of Sasanian Iran. In the 1430s, we see how the grand Eklakhi mausoleum of Jalal-ud-din introduced the distinctively Bengali influence on Persian culture, on a very grand scale. This mausoleum also carried the stamp of the Buddhist architecture of Bengal and, in fact, subsumed the local, folk idiom of building construction. A new typically Bengali style of architecture emerged under the active encouragement of the sultans.

What is less known is that before the Persianised Turks took over in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, most of Bengal did not have any metal coinage at all. Naturally, therefore, both trade and the economy were necessarily sluggish and cowries could only cover low value transactions. Strangely however, the Hindu kings in the region possessed large amounts of uncoined silver as part of their treasure, and this obviously attracted conquerors and plunderers. Each phase of the penetration of Muslim rule in Bengal in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the increased minting of coins bearing the stamp of legitimacy of the sultan. According to Deyell, this led to an economy that was bulging with silver coins, the *tanka* of Bengal ramped up the earlier very slow-moving wheels of trade and manufacture (Deyell, p 227). Political relations were soon re-structured and each grade of ruler was measured in terms of revenue and resources, usually in terms of coinage. One of the greatest contributions of Persian statecraft was a professional and salaried administrative structure that was transparent and graded. Local officials, thus, depended less on the arbitrary use of force to enrich themselves or even to survive.

The next major impact was in terms of the emergence of the Bengali cultural identity, that arose from its language and individuality. As we shall see, the language developed somewhat

later than other deviates of either Sanskrit or Old Tamil. As late as in the twelfth century, poet Jayadeva wrote his *Geet Govinda* in Sanskrit and this classic is considered to be the common property of Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Assam, as none of these regions had developed their own language till then. The point is that when the Muslims conquered Bengal a few decades later, Bengali was in its early stage of development and was yet to be formed or recognised. Linguists opine that Bengali or Bangla had been evolving slowly from the period from the tenth or eleventh centuries, when the verses of the collection known as the *Charyapad* were possibly composed.

We need to examine closely how the Turki rulers and their official Persian language played in ‘liberating’ Bengali as an independent language in the fourteenth century. Nearly a century and half after the Muslim conquest of Bengal, a revolution took place when the Sistani Turki ruler, Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah united all the different parts of Bengal for the first time ever in history. In 1352, Ilyas Shah declared himself independent from the sultanate of Delhi and declared himself as the overlord of the people of Bengal as ‘*Shah Bangalian*’. This is the first time that Bengal enters historical records as one definite kingdom or country — not by the name of its various parts like Gaur, Satgaon, Paundra, Varendra, Rarh, Samatata, Harikela Vanga or Sonargaon (Murshid 35). The Ilyasi-shahi and succeeding dynasties not only declared but actually ensured that Bengal was recognised as a separate, autonomous Sultanate for over two centuries, though Delhi made several attempts to recapture it. As the independent Ilyasi-shahi rulers needed the support of local people to thwart the attempts by Delhi to regain this land, they were the first formal authorities in history to encourage the articulation of the language and culture of the Bengal region, which was quite distinct from the rest of north

India. Though this fact has been underplayed in western Bengal by the Hindu elite, the fact remains that Bengali as a language broke free from Sanskrit and its derivatives only during the rule of independent sultans, who recognised the language of the common man of these parts.

Brahman priestly and scholar castes in Bengal were not impressed and continued to use Sanskrit, largely ignoring the local language of the lower orders. However, a poor rural Brahman poet like Chandidas could, however, not care less for such caste injunctions. He led the way during this period by composing the first real work in Bengali, *Srikrishna Kirtan*. Its date has not been fixed with certainty but it was surely within a century of the establishment of the independent sultanate in Bengal. Around the same time, we also come across Vidyapati of Mithila, who blossomed more than two hundred years after Bengal was captured by Turkis. He continued to write in Abhahatta from Mithila in northeastern Bihar, but he was claimed by other three eastern people, viz, the Bengalis, the Odias and the Assamese, as the language continued to be common. An important point to note is that Muslim writers also took full advantage of this breakthrough in communicating with the masses of Bengal. Shah Muhammad Sagir became the first composer to introduce Persian and Arabic words and concepts in his classic *Yusuf-Zulekha*, possibly in the early decades of the fifteenth century, where he stressed on the teachings of the holy Quran and the ethics of Islam through love stories culled from religious lore. It took, however, nearly two hundred years for Bengali to emerge as a distinct language in terms of script, syntax, grammar and pronunciation.

We get direct evidence about the popularity of Bengali from the Chinese traveller, Ma Huan, who visited Bengal between 1425 and

1432. He recorded that though Persian was the official language in the sultan's court, the Bengali language was quite universally present here (Ma Huan, p. 161). Around this time, it is believed that Sultan Jalaluddin inspired Krittivas Ojha to translate the Ramayan from Sanskrit to Bengali. This he did, which is indeed a landmark in the development of the language, but he also inserted several typically Bengali ideas and components. During this century, Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah encouraged his Hindu courtier, Maladhar Basu to compose his *Srikrishna-Vijay* in Bengali, around 1480. In the next few decades, rulers like Nusrat Shah, Paragal Khan and Chhuti Khan gave the first real boost to the development of Bengali language and literature. The contribution of the Persianised Turki rulers of Bengal in the development of Bengali is much more than is acknowledged at present. As a result of its close the proximity to the sultans and the language of Iran, it is only natural that the Bengali language contains numerous Persian and a lot of Arabic words as well. Bangladeshi scholars have counted more than 5000 words and expressions in Bengali that are of Perso-Arabic origin, more so from Persian. Interestingly, as Hilali points out "some of these words and expressions were metamorphosed into Bengali forms almost beyond recognition in respect of phonology and spelling" (Hilali, p. v). This means that the Persian words and phrases are so heavily accented in Bengali and spelt differently that neither their Bengali speakers realise that they are uttering a foreign language, nor do those who hear feel so.

I have an interesting postulate to offer where the vocabulary of the Bengali language is concerned. Unlike other north and west Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit or Arabic, like Hindi or Urdu, Bengali usually uses the same word 'eat' (khaa) to denote smoking and drinking. At a literary level, however, there is a Sanskrit tatsama word 'pana' that came in later to signify 'drink'

and also another term ‘dhumrapana’ to mean smoking — but these are hardly ever used in colloquial usage or in common parlance. It is my submission that the root of this can be traced to medieval Persian that had this same practice of using ‘eat’ to cover all three. Later Persian however brought in some difference but it is reported that even now, speakers of the Iranian, Dari and Tajik, the three major descendants of medieval Persian usually fall back on one verb ‘eat’ to express both smoking and drinking. There is hardly any other explanation that comes to my mind to explain how Bengali acquired this trait — other than from the nursery of a Persian-speaking court, where it was nurtured after birth.

Then, in Bengali, we note that verb is not conditioned by gender. Nouns in the Bengali language do not have genders and hence there is no direct noun-verb-adjective relationship. The verb is common to all nouns and is not dominated by the gender of the actor or of the object or the organisation. We may note that the Persian language of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries did not also follow gender based construction of sentences. But we need to note that the Bengali language has been impacted by the Tibeto-Burman languages that were in use in the region for long and it is quite likely that Bengali picked up this gender-less construction from them. One conjectures that this gender-free trait in Bengali may surely have been triggered by its local ecology and local circumstances, but it may have gained acceptance and respectability under the overarching influence of Persian-speaking rulers,

As we move on from the sultans to the Mughals, we find that the second emperor, Humayun, came under the irresistible influence of Persian culture when he had to leave India and take refuge in the court of Shah Tahmasp Safavi of Persia, between

1540 and 1545. Since then, the Mughals adopted numerous customs and cultural expressions from the Safavid court and this was, in turn, passed on to Bengal in a fresh dose from 1576, when Akbar conquered Bengal. We find strong evidence of the second influx of Persian civilisational elements in Bengal in the stucco decoration that is so characteristic of the Mughal imperial architecture in the new provincial capital of Bengal, i.e, Dhaka. The Lalbagh fort is a very good example. Equally important was the migration of the Ashraf-elite from north India and from Persia and Central Asia into Bengal. This strata consisted of administrators, soldiers, literati, and even Sufis and this group made a profound impact on both the local Muslims and the Hindus of the province.

The last area of Iranian influence that I mention is in the revenue system enforced by the Mughals. Unlike the independent sultans of Bengal who had maintained revenue records in the Bengali language, the Mughals brought with them an administrative system that was literally weighed down by Persian terms, expressions and systems. This was essential as the Mughals believed in regularly transferring their highest officers from province to province and Persian was insisted upon as the only common language. It was used by their senior officers throughout the empire and this Persian speaking elite of the Mughal administration left its indelible stamp on Bengal. This is evident in land revenue, village life, court affairs, the judiciary, the police and the army — in fact, on the entire political, economic and social life of Bengal. Persianisation was further reinforced by Murshid Quli Khan in the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when he set up his independent Nawabi of Bengal soon after Aurangzeb's death. He gave high revenue posts to those Hindus who were well versed in Persian administrative practice and this set a chain reaction down different levels of Bengali Hindus and Muslims, to learn Persian



and adopt the Persian way of life — from the Rajas and zamindars to the *munshis* and *keranis*.

Finally, we come to the British who adopted this Persian framework of administration, land revenue and justice after the Battle of Buxar and the award of the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. In fact, instead of setting up a typically British system of administration, the British took a lot of pains to learn the complicated Persian terms and nuances of post-Mughal and Nawabi Bengal. Though British concepts replaced and modified revenue and criminal administration in very slow steps, it never emerged fully independent of the Persian administrative paradigm. I can vouchsafe and say that where district administration and land revenue are concerned, they remain considerably immersed in the culture of Persian administration that was introduced by Akbar and Todar Mal more than four centuries after they did so.

The influence of Persian language, culture, military and administration is just too deep in Bengal's life and history to admit any debate. Our life is so immersed in them and they are so inextricably a part of our blood that we often do not even choose to remember the original Persian ancestry of this culture. It consists of words, terms, phrases, institutions, attitudes, responses and beliefs. They are, in fact, the very hallmarks of our plural culture and it is only the very myopic and extremely foolish who attempt to classify our genes as local and imported, Indian and foreign, Hindu and Mussalman.

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