On Arabo-Persian Elements in modern Bengali

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Bengali is well known as a Sanskrit-oriented language, but the existence of Arabic and Persian elements is quite obvious. This is quite natural, as Bengal was under the Muslim rule over five hundred years, and the majority of the local population converted to Islam.

As S. K. Chatterji points out[1], Arabo-Persian influence on Bengali has been mainly lexical; whereas Persian has influenced Hindi not only lexically but also idiomatically or sometimes even grammatically. This difference between Hindi and Bengali is due to the geographical conditions. Hindi was the language of *Madhya Desha* (Central country) where the center of a Muslim rule was established, but Bengal was far from the center of a Muslim rule.

According to S. K. Chatterji's count on the basis of Jñādendra Mohan Dās's *Baṅglā Bhāṣār Abhidhān* (Calcutta, 1916) which contains some 75,000 words and compounds, the total number of Arabo-Persian words is about 2,500 (3.30%)[2]. My own count on the basis of *Bangīya Shabda Koṣa*[3] (New Delhi, 1966-1967) shows that Arabic words are about 700 and Persian words are about 650, hence the percentage of Arabo-Persian words in this dictionary is slightly less than 3%. Perhaps this can be taken as an indication of a change. Though the number of Arabic words is slightly more than that of Persian words, the frequency of Persian words appears to be more. This is due to the fact that whereas Arabic has more technical terms, which are

1) *The Origin and the Development of the Bengali Language* (*O. D. B. L.*), Calcutta, 1926, pp. 201-202.

2) *O. D. B. L.*, p. 218.

3) This dictionary is of a high standard, though the entries are less than *Baṅglā Bhāṣār Abhidhān*. But Arabic *dokan* 'shop' is mistakenly explained as Persian. (p. 1135)

limited to religion, politics and administration etc., Persian vocabulary is used for things of daily life. Arabic words (Turkish words, too) are very rarely borrowed into Bengali directly, most of them have come to Bengali through Persian. Therefore Arabic sounds have been already Persianized.

Below are the examples to show how Arabo-Persian words appear in Bengali: —— (A. means Arabic, and P. means Persian.)

"Babu, tomar jemɔn ekṭi laṛki ace, temni deše amar o ekṭi laṛki ace. ami tahar i mukhkhani šɔrɔn koriya tomar khõkhir jonno kichu kichu mewa (P.) *hate loiya aši, ami to šouda* (P.) *korite aši na".*

ei boliya še apnar mɔsto ḍhila jamaṭar (P.) *bhitɔr hat calaiya diya buker kache kotha hoite ek ṭukra mɔyla kagoj* (P.) *bahir korilo. bohu jɔtne bhãj khuliya dui hɔste amar ṭebiler upɔr meliya dhorilo.*

dekhilam, kagɔjer (P.) *upɔr ekṭi choṭo hater chap. photograph nɔhe, teler chobi* (A.) *nɔhe, hate khanikṭa bhuša makhaiya kagɔjer upɔr tahar i cinno dhoriya loiyace. meyer ei šɔrɔn cinnoṭuku buker kache loiya rɔhmɔt proti bɔtšɔr kolikatar rastay* (P.) *mewa* (P.) *becite aše.* (Rabindranath Tagore, *kabuliwala*)

("Babu, you have a little girl; I too have one like her in my home. I think of her, and bring some fruits for your child——they are not for sale". Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper from near his breast. Unfolding it with great care, he placed it with both hands on my table.

It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph, not a drawing, merely the impression of an ink-besmeared hand laid flat on the paper. Keeping this memento of his own little daughter next to his heart, Rahamat had come year after to Calcutta to sell his fruits in the streets.——Translation as quoted in Bidhubhusan Dasgupta's *Learn Bengali Yourself.* ((Calcutta, 1966))

jadɔb mukhuje o (P.) *madhɔb mukhuje je šɔhodɔr chilen na, še kɔtha nijera to bhuliyai chilen, bahirer lok o* (P.) *bhuliyaichilo. doridro jadɔb ɔnek kɔšṭe choṭo bhai madhɔbke ain* (P.) *paš kɔraiyachilen ebɔm bohu cešṭay dhɔnaḍho*

jomidarer (P.) *ækmatro šontan bindubašinike bhratribodhurupe ghɔre anite šɔ-khom hoiyachilen. bindubašini ɔšamanno rupoši. prothɔm jedin še ei otul rup o* (P.) *dɔš šɔhosro ṭakar kagɔj* (P.) *loiya ghɔr korite ašiyachilo, šedin bɔṛobou onnopurnar chokhe anɔndasru bohiyachilo. baṛite šašuri nɔnɔd chilo na, tini i chilen grihini. choṭobodhur mukhkhani tuliya dhoriya protibašinider kache šɔgorbe boliyachilen, "ghɔre bou ante hɔy to emni ! ekebare lokkhir protima". kintu dui dinei tãhar e bhul bhãgilo. duidinei ṭer pailen, choṭobou je ojɔne* (A.) *rup o* (P.) *ṭaka aniyache, tahar cotur gun ɔhõkar obhiman o* (P.) *šõge aniyache. ækdin bɔṛobou šamike nibhrite ḍakiya kohilen, "hã ga, rup ar ṭakar pũṭli dekhe bou ghɔre anle kintu e je keuṭe šap!" jadɔb kɔthaṭa biššaš korilen na. matha culkaiya bar dui tai to tai to koriya kachari coliya gelen. jadɔb otišɔy šanto prokritir lok. jomidar* (P.) *šerestay* (P.) *nayebi* (P.) *ebɔm ghɔre ašiya puja ɔrcna koriten. madhɔb dadar ceye dɔš-baro bɔchɔrer choṭo, ukil* (A.) *hoiya šɔm-proti bæbɔša šuru* (A.) *koriyachilo. še ašiya kohilo, "bouṭhan, ṭakaṭai ki dadar beši* (P.) *holo? dudin šɔbur* (A.) *korle ami o* (P.) *to rojgar* (P.) *kore dite partam",*

(Sarat Chandra Chatterji, *Bindur Chele*)

(Yadav Mukherji and Madhav Mukherji were not uterine brothers——this had been forgotten not only by themselves, but also by other people. With much trouble, poor Yadav had made his younger brother Madhav pass the law examination, and after much efforts succeeded in bringing Bindubasini, a rich landlord's only daughter to his house as his sister-in-law. Bindubasini was extraordinarily beautiful. At the first day when she came to live with her husband with a promissory note of ten thousand rupees, Annapurna, Yadav's wife, was in tears of joy. As there was no mother-in-law or sister-in-law at home, she was the only housewife. Raising Bindu's face, she said proudly to the ladies of neibourhood, "Can there be such a wonderful bride to bring home? She is just like the idol of Goddess Laxmi!" But within two days it was disclosed that she had been mistaken. She came to know within two days that Bindu's pride and conceit were four times more than her beauty and money brought by her. One day Annapurna called her husband secretly and said, "My dear, you brought the bride to our house seeing

beauty and a packet of money, but she is a cobra!" Yadav did not believe her story. He, scrathcing his head, saying "Is that so? Is that so?" twice or thrice, went to office. Yadav was a very peaceful-minded person. He was just working as a deputy at a landlord's office, and then passing his time worshiping and praying God at home. Madhav was ten or twelve years younger than his brother, and he had recently begun his profession as a lawyer. He came and said, "Say, did my brother require much money? If he had endured two days more, I also could have given him money by doing the business".) (Translation is mine.)

The frequency of Arabo-Persian words in Bengali is, of course, not fixed but flexible depending on the type of literature and writer who uses it. The most typical Persianised novel (romance) in Bengali is said to be the "Baṛā Dāstān Amīr Hāmzā", and this includes 31.74% Arabo-Persian words[4]. It is unavoidable to lean on Arabo-Persian in historical or religious subjects based on Islamic culture and tradition. But it is noteworthy that even this type of story includes much fewer Arabo-Persian words than Urdu. In the works of Rabindranath Tagore, the most eminent Bengali writer, more Arabo-Persian words are found than those of Bankim Chandra Chatterji, but less than those of Sarat Chandra Chatterji[5].

Roughly speaking, the percentage of Arabo-Persian words in modern Bengali would not be higher than 10%. In the daily conversation of Bengali among the upper or middle classes of Hindu, the percentage of Arabo-Persian words is said to be 7.1%, and the Hindu women of the upper classes use lesser than that[6]. This is a very interesting phenominon. The reason would probably be that women have fewer chances to associate with the people of outer circle. Muslims are likely to use somewhat more Arabo-Persian words than Hindus, but they are confined to the terms concerning religion, relations (eg. *bhai šaheb* 'elder brother' instead of *dada*), the expressions of

4) *O. D. B. L.*, p. 211.

5) I have limited the study to Bengali fiction only.

6) *O. D. B. L.*, p. 211.

greetings or gratitude (eg. *šalam walaikum* 'good morning' 'good afternoon' etc. instead of *nɔmɔškar, šukriya* 'thank you' instead of *dhɔnnobad.*), and some adverbial experssions (eg. *thoṛa* 'a little' instead of *ekṭu*). The last one would be rather the influence of Urdu.

I am not of the opinion that "Musalmani Bengali" is a seperate style or dialect from ordinry Bengali. The difference of style in Bengali is not according to religion. It lies between colloquial style (*Calit Bhāṣa*) and literary style (*Sādhu Bhāṣā*). Today the *Sādhu Bhāṣā* is rarely used except in the cases of writing novels, and a formal document, or delivering a formal speech. *Sādhu Bhāṣā* is based on Middle Bengali of about 500 years ago, hence it prefers a stiff style of the Sanskrit type. Naturally more Arabo-Persian words are used in *Calit Bhāṣā* than in *Sādhu Bhāṣā*. The *Sādhu Bhāṣā* seems to be losing its prestige due to education and massmedia.

As regards the semantic changes of Arabo-Persian words in Bengali, examples may be given as follows: ——

ašɔl means 'origin' in Arabic, but means 'real' in Bengali.

Similarly——

chobi 'picture' < 'resemblance' in Arabic

demak 'pride' or 'vanity' < 'brain' in Arabic

gorib 'poor' < 'foreign' in Arabic

photur 'poor' > 'defect' in Arabic

talak 'oath' < 'divorce' in Arabic

nikah 'widow marriage of a Muslim' < 'marriage' in Arabic

šada 'white' < 'simple' in Persian

beš 'good' < 'more' in Persian

phɔšɔl 'harvest' or 'crops' < 'season' in Arabic

gum 'corpes' < 'lost' in Persian