

The Cultural and Linguistic Affinity in Defining the Identity of Bengal

**Dr. Md. Abdus Samad
Samia Yesmin**

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Introduction

Language plays a vital role in permeating one's thoughts, mediating the relations with others, and creeping into dreams since "...human knowledge and culture are stored and transmitted in language, which is so ubiquitous that we take it for granted..." (Langacker, 1970, p. 3). So language is the most precious possession a society grows with. It is evident from the long but fragmented history of the Bengali language that it has been helping to nourish the 'Pride and Hope' of the people looking for a national identity on their distinctive cultural and linguistic backdrop. Mother, Mother Tongue, and Motherland—these three concepts are linearly interwoven in the train of Bengali thoughts, leading to the quest for a distinct national identity of the Bengali-speaking population. Defending the language to the people of Bengal always seemed to be remarkably analogous to protecting their land. From this angle, the issue of language has been considered an instrument for fighting the cause of cultural, territorial, and national identity. The spirit of the eastern Bengal people for the Language Movement and the Bangladesh Movement was primarily derived from such a background.

Cultural and Linguistic Affinity of Bengal and its Identity Formation

Bengal has been a geographical entity in epigraphic and literary records since the 11th to 13th century AD (Majumdar, 1943, p. 18). Bengal is a melting pot of races. It, therefore, has a mixed culture. However, her deep-rooted heritage is amply reflected in her architecture, literature, dance, drama, music, painting, and people's lifestyles. She has her Language, Bengali, which boasts a rich literary heritage. The Cultural and linguistic affinity and the representation of nature played a very significant role in defining the identity of the Bengal region. Like many other regions of the world, in the case of Bengal, the cultural

and ecological issues have been ‘intertwined’ (Sharma, 2012, pp. 146-84). For Bengal, the basis of identification was the territory rather than anything else. By the 16th century, “we find the use of Bengali in literary texts both in the sense of people of Bengal and Bengali-speakers” (Anisuzzaman, 2017, p. 44). Historically, we find the commonality of many poets urge to uphold the prestige of their mother tongue.

The dependence of the people of the region on the monsoonal climate for their crops and livelihood has made them the believers of absolute powers, i.e., the goddesses Kali and Durga, who are regarded as the omnipotent of nature and responsible for their safety and well-being. This is evident in the Bengali Hindu society that the emergence of many gods and goddesses is fundamentally connected to many natural processes manifested in the interaction between people and their ecological ambience. Amongst the most important environmental factors, water is the foremost one that formed the cultural life of the Bengal region, as there is an extensive network of rivers and various other water bodies.

Although the emergence of Islam in the cultural frontier of Bengal “gave rise to a different metaphysical framework for the appropriation of nature, the centrality of water in the popular mind remained unchanged” (Iqbal, 1992, p. 56). A kind of syncretism that symbolised a secular, non-orthodox, and flexible cultural worldview was born with the inter-cultural development where the concept of the gods and goddesses was mixed with the life of the Sufis (Ahmed, 1981). A critical appreciation of nature and its manifestation in Bengal is seen in the writings of Abul Fazl, who sought an ecological understanding of the region of Bengal. Abul Fazl observed the land and landscape of the region and argued that the kings of Bengal used to construct grand *al* (embankment) in the ancient period, and in this connection, the region was known as *Bangalah*.

The cultural identity of modern Bengal is a product of a long process of racial and cultural interactions among various racial and cultural groups that came to the region over the past five thousand years (Huda, 1986, p. 181). Bengali nationalistic feelings found an outlet in the eulogy of the Bengali language through early, medieval, modern, and contemporary linguistic aspects. The language consciousness of the Bengali-speaking people has been a precursor of nationalism in Bangladesh. It may be argued here that while the political,

economic, or social history of a land chronicles accurate and relevant facts and incidents, the history unfolded by the creative writings offers the unrecorded ethos and an account of an abstract psychic voyage towards deciphering the identity of an individual and a nation. The modestly unfolding truth is that an esoteric relationship exists between the Bengali language and the creation of Bangladesh. The history of the emergence of Bangladesh, subsequently described as the Bangladesh Movement, is not only an enumeration of facts, figures, and incidents about socio-political upheavals, but it also emanates from a more extensive and deeper cultural and linguistic base. While the political and social base of the creation of Bangladesh visibly stems from the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, its cultural base, at least, dates back to a period as early as the eighth or the tenth century. *Charyapada*, the first poetic work in Bengali, was composed then.

An element of social awareness has traditionally marked Bangla poetry since its very inception. The awareness subsequently gave birth to major patriotic themes in Bengali poetry. Her poets visualised Bangladesh as an independent political entity far ahead of her politicians and political thinkers. ‘Sonar Bangla’ or ‘Golden Bengal’ is essentially a poetic idea, and Rabindranath Tagore wrote his famous poem on ‘Sonar Bangla’ in 1905 following the partition of Bengal at the time long before the politicians dreamt of Bengal as an independent nation. Although the influence of Rabindranath eventually failed to prevent the second partition of Bengal in 1947, six years after his death, it now seems to have proved strong enough to survive that disastrous event. Twenty-four years after the second partition of Bengal, East Pakistan transformed itself in 1971 into the sovereign republic of Bangladesh. No factor contributed more positively and decisively to this transformation than Bengali Muslim’s love of the Bengali language. That love was nourished and reinforced by the Bengali poet’s writings (Roy, 1974). Western political thoughts and influences in nineteenth-century Bengal triggered the idea of political nationalism. Cultural nationalism proceeded with political nationalism, which nourished the latter in its course.

The consciousness of racial roots activated the poetic quest for the identity of Bangladesh and grew out of a poetic dream. The region of Bengal is, by and large, a land of poets and poetry. Undoubtedly, the creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign state was possible due to vigorous political movements. Still, the

premise for independence set by linguistic and cultural affairs is essential. Independence was a decisive result of Bengali's nationalistic feelings, which were found to be an outlet in the language in the first place.¹ Bengali, an Indo-European language, remains the most unifying factor in Bengali nationhood. Though the official recognition of Bengali as a literary medium came not before the Muslim conquest of Bengal around the 13th century, the Bengali poets had been eulogising it long since. Even poets writing in Sanskrit uttered words of praise for it. In Sanskrit literature written in the tenth century, the Bengali language is compared with the sacred currents of the Ganges (Huda, 1986).

Bengali is the mother tongue of the inhabitants of Bengal, especially those living in the eastern part of the Bengal region. But much water had flown down the Ganges before Bengali came to be identified as the spoken and written medium of expression of the people living in the eastern part of the Gangetic delta. It is very relevant to note that the geographical identity of the country, Bangladesh, could hardly be defined before the claim of Bengali as a literary medium was established. The greater Bengal, consisting of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam, spoke at least three languages: Bengali, Oriya, and Assamese. But for a long time till the 13th century, the literary medium of the region was Sanskrit, as the Brahmin elite did not regard native languages as worthy of scholarly work (Shahidullah, 1985).

After the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the 13th century, the Muslim rulers, especially the Turkish Sultans, began patronising Bengali as their subject's official and literary medium. In doing so, the Sultans found effective ways to counter the influence of Sanskrit, the official language of the ruling class. The famous Bengali poets and writers, i.e., Syed Sultan, Abdul Hakim, and a few other Muslim poets of the medieval period, wrote a lot, eulogising the role of the native tongue in men's lives. Since then, the people speaking Bengali developed a distinct regional identity within a larger administrative territory, Bengal Subah, that does not include Orissa, Bihar, and Assam. So, recognising Bengali as a people's language significantly determined the country's geographical boundaries. Shibnarayan Roy observes,

It is, however, with the coming of Islam to India and the establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal in the thirteenth century that Bengali began to develop rapidly, and by the beginning of the 15th century, a standard

literary Bengali was established which came to be used all Bengal, which gave to the people of the land a definition and identity that have survived the many fluctuations in their political geography and fortune. (Roy, 1974)

Dinesh Chandra Sen reveals that Bengali was an unacknowledged literary medium of ordinary people in the eastern part of Bengal (Sen, 1954). The history of the land is somewhat analogous to the history of language and poetry. It would be apt to conclude that Bangladesh, geographically reckoned as 'frontier land' at the south-eastern side of the Indian subcontinent, was primarily visualised by her poets as an independent habitat of a 'vernal race' well before her politicians and political thinkers imagined it. In this regard, it would be very pertinent to address here that there is a definite difference between the linguistic and poetic affinity in the eastern and western parts of Bengal since the beginning of the 20th century.

The confluence of two large river systems- the Brahmaputra flowing from the northeast and the Ganges from the northwest symbolises the union of two ancient peoples in the heartland of Bengal. Historians agree that the proto-Australians, coming from the northeast, and the Dravidians, a linguistic group from the northwest, formed the original racial-cultural stock of the Bengali people. It was subsequently enriched by the Alpines (an outdated term for ancient West/Central Asian groups (e.g., Turkic, Iranian) that migrated to Bengal, contributing to its ethnic diversity) from the West and, to a lesser extent, by the Vedic Aryans (Proto-Nordics) inhabiting northern India (Ray, 1995, p. 71). The next round of mixing occurred during the five hundred years of Muslim rule, beginning with the Turko-Afghan-Mughal influx in the 13th century, significantly impacting Bengali society. The final round of cultural interaction was the meeting of the East and West under two hundred years of British colonial rule. The interaction was at the level of ideas and institutions profoundly impacting Bengal society's character. The political, economic, and cultural interactions with the West ignited the latent fire of nationalism among the educated Bengali middle class.

Bengal has been blessed with this natural phenomenon, which has helped her people become the most freedom seekers for a long time. Although Bengal was located hundreds of miles from its power centre in Delhi, it was always desirous of independence whenever an opportunity was available. No wonder

the towns and cities of Bengal acquired the name *Bulghakpur* (Rebel City) in the court of Delhi. Bengal lived up to its reputation as a rebellious province during the British Raj.

After two consecutive partitions of the Bengal region, the eastern part was centrifugally driven apart after a bitter, if short, armed struggle for liberation. The Bengalis took the arms because they had been threatened with the danger of being an extinct region. This threat was basically on their identity. Immediately after the emergence of Pakistan, the rulers refused to acknowledge Bengali as a state language. However, 56% of the total population of Pakistan who lived in her eastern wing were Bengali-speaking people. The rulers jeopardize the Bengali language and culture by introducing many strange reforms (i.e., attempting to teach the Arabic alphabet to Bengali). Ironically enough, all these official designs contributed significantly towards converting the Bengali language into a political weapon, and a vigorous movement gained momentum within a couple of years after Pakistan's birth. Being the only nation in the world, the heroic sons of Bengal sacrificed their lives for the cause of their language. A poet of the Bengali language pledges to sacrifice the last drop of his blood to uphold the dignity of his mother tongue:

I've dyed its dress with the blood
 From tender breast
 As smoke from fired bullets
 Weaves its magical veil.
 If the sacrifice of lives be ever needed
 To uphold the dignity of this tongue
 Forty million souls would be ready to bleed
 And fulfil its great expectations (Islam, 1983, p. II).

For centuries, the Bengalis have regarded Motherland and Mother Tongue as two sides of the same coin. The essence of the language movement lies in the fact that it converted the peace-loving nation into a rebellious one. Revolt seemed to be the only rescue for them. The logic lies in their very rights to survive as a nation. This militancy guided the language issue into a broader movement for self-reliance, leading to the country's independence. Thus, the language consciousness worked in various ways, inspiring the struggling masses and giving birth to a separate nation and state.

The general ecological condition of the Bengal region, along with varied elements, has played essential roles in perpetuating her separate entity. Foremost, ecology played a vital role in the emergence and consolidation of identity and culture, which the region's people cherish and practice. The geophysical conditions, rivers, climate, and many other ecological factors have regulated the significant historical personality (Alam, 2007, p. 43). The region's geographical location and environmental conditions are most important. Because of its location, Bengal has been subject to migrations and a melting pot of pre-historic cultural regimes from all three regions. The ecological regime, monsoonal climate, and giant water network contributed to developing Bengal's distinctive culture and identity.

The tradition of intermixing among different groups in a historical process played a formative role in the emergence of the Bengali nation (Iqbal, 1992, p. 70). Bengal's inherent tenacity and tenacious vitality endured here as an entity through the historical journey of a thousand years of nature (Ray, 1995, p. 698). Historians of Bengal have emphasised the unique natural environment of Bengal, which is comprised jointly by man and nature, and gave birth to the emergence of an independent and individual identity of Bengal. An expert in Bengal history and geography explains,

... its (Bengal) vast level plain with its highland fringes and lowland depressions, water plants and aquatic life as well as variety, colour, and profusion of its flora and fauna- all these and such other features have left some mark in almost every sphere of life and activities of its people; in arts and crafts, architecture and sculptures, pieces of literature and music (Rashid, 1979-81, p. 160).

The idea of Bengalis was incepted and further shaped in the medieval period with the development of the Bangla language and literature, culminating in the British colonial period. Ironically, the prospect of an 'enduring language-centric national development' within the Bengal region failed due to communal politics. Thus, communal politics paved the way to breaking the pan-Bengal language identification, and ultimately, the 'Bengal nation' was divided into two parts with the partition of India. The religion-based middle-class leadership primarily created the Hindu-Muslim antagonism to secure political support on a communal basis. At the same time, it would be pertinent to note that the failure of the national integration between the two wings of

Bengal has a connection with the ecological set-up and the ecological otherness of the land. The region of Bengal which consisted of and culturally engaged by a majority of lower caste Hindus and Muslims, while both upper caste Hindus and Muslims were failed in this regard. This concern could be clarified as follows:

The alienation of an essential segment of people riparian and the fluid deltaic environment of Bangladesh had sown the seed of divisiveness that eventually culminated in the partition of Bengal. Though Bangla remains the language of the majority in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, how a cultural response to nature, aesthetic imagination, cultural symbols, vocabulary, and economic activities have been expressed remains relatively different, if not conflicting (Rashid, 1979-81, p. 178).

A conscious attempt to identify oneself with their language, culture and homeland surfaced itself in the 19th century and after (Anisuzzaman, 2017, p. 46). Iswarchandra Gupta's expression of love for Bengal and her language, Michael Madhusudan Dutta's eulogy to Bangla language and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's scorn for the Bengalis literary expressions give a clear picture of the unity and plurality of the Bengali people. While the British formed a single race, the Bengalis had multiple elements in them. Rabindranath Tagor defined the cultural identity of Bengal in a much clearer form. Tagor says that "Bengalis are Bengalis not because of any artificial lines drawn on a map of their land, they were so because they spoke the same language" (Anisuzzaman, 2017, p. 54). Tagor writes,

The history of Bengal is a history of divisiveness. The division of East Bengal, West Bengal, Radha, Varendra is not only geographical division-associated with it is also division of the inner self (*antar*), there was no social agreement either. The stream of unity that had flown within all these was the unity of language. That we have been called a Bengali for so long can be explained by the fact that we happen to speak Bengali (Thakur, 1355 (Bengali), p. 391).

The land of Bangladesh has been imagined both as Mother and Beloved, of which the Mother image is unquestionably the stronger one as the idea of cultural nationalism that preceded that of political nationalism was mainly expressed through it. Language consciousness that began at least in the tenth century took the shape of linguistic nationalism much later and rose to its peak in 1952 with the Language Movement. The spirit of this movement provoked

the people of the land to come out from the narrow religious nationalism propagated by the Pakistani ruling class. Linguistic and cultural nationalism became complementary to each other. This process of evolution amidst structural changes in society and politics eventually made the region's people ready for freedom, fighting in unyielding intrepidity toward independence. Land, ecology, culture, language, and liberation are some of the essential components corresponding to different phases of the history of Bangladesh that were rational in responding to the emergence of a nation-state. The poet expresses his solidarity with the beloved Bengal:

Life or death will remain in my eyes, and
the grass of this Bengal in my bosom (Dasgupta, 1376 Bangla, p. 177).

Concluding Remarks

Independence is the dearest of things a civilised man longs for. It is also the most important pre-condition for the harmonious development of an individual and a nation. The history of civilisation is remarkably analogous to man's struggle to emancipate himself from all constraints. Rangalal, an early eighteenth-century Bengali poet, asked, 'Who does not want to live with liberty? Tell me, who?' The Bengalis remember this as a proverb as of now. Interestingly, the notion of independence has undergone dramatic changes in Bengal with the coming and going of various rulers. Finally, independence came to be identified with the idea of achieving a separate homeland for the Bengalis as a whole. Today, independence is synonymous with the very existence of the people in Bangladesh. An eminent historian of Bangladesh opines about the autonomous and individual Bengali national identity as follows.

The rivers and boatmen move and flow, and the floods come and go, but the spirit of the Bengali man keeps steps in tune with their own words. As they enjoy life in music and mirth, they dance to the tune of nature and present the works of their worlds to show that this is Bengal as built by the people of Bangladesh (Dani, 1997).

In the age of globalization, the Bengali identity faces some challenges of one sort or another, from the processes of alienation and from the impact of Hindi films and television channels. Anisuzzaman says,

Only the future can tell how will it fare or what turn will it take. I have every hope that its indomitable spirit will overcome the unfavorable ground realities. In future the Bengali identity may come into conflict with other identities of the individual and the collective, but I am certain that it will have no quarrel with the universal human identity (Anisuzzaman, 2017, p. 52).

The historical truth is that the people living in the eastern part of Bengal that forms today's Bangladesh could hardly be brought under total subjugation by any foreign rulers for an indefinite period. The history of Bengal has seen the rise and fall of many royal dynasties and invaders, all coming in waves to rob the land of its legendary riches and treasures. Kings, emperors, and colonialists have come and vanished in turn, but the people are still surviving as a separate nation-state.

Note

1. Here the term 'Bengalee' refers to the people of Bengal, whereas 'Bengali' stands for the language they speak.

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