



THE WORD CARAVAN : GLOBAL IMPACTS ON THE BENGALI DIASPORA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250302032>

Abstract

The impact of Portuguese invasion on the socio-cultural environment of Bengal has been a melting pot of linguistic, religious and social changes from late fifteenth century. Nautical memoirs of Portuguese seafarers, stray accounts of historical and political events along with imaginary narratives written by Portuguese sailors allow us to understand how the advent of Vasco-da-Gama on May 20, 1498 marked a maiden era of interactive collaboration between Europe and India. In this research, I have tracked the effects of cultural interface through a study of Portuguese loan words in Bengali which would enable us to identify the patterns of cultural exchange that can be of great benefit to other fields of study. Tracing Portuguese- Bangla cultural base, the first published bilingual dictionary by Manuel-da- Assumpção reminded us that there has been a pivotal influence of two different ethnic languages which have flourished since the beginning of sixteenth century in the coastal belts of Bengal and the paper hence attempts to explore variations in semiotic, culinary, nautical and linguistic idiosyncratic styles, much before the beginning of British cultural hierarchy.

Keywords: *Portuguese influence, culture, Purism, religious beliefs, Ramprasad Sen, lexicon, memoirs, cultural confluence, firinghees, Borrowed words, grammar, Kabi - songs*

It has been only a three hundred year pathway since the Neanderthal native remembered his mud houses beside a rivulet around a small village Sutanuti – the land of substance for Job Charnock who landed to Calcutta in 1600. Much after Vasco-da-Gama, it was for the outstanding leadership of Afonso de Albuquerque that the Portuguese first visited Bengal in 1517, only 33 years after Bartholomew Diaz landed at Calicut on the East Coast. In 1580, Akbar granted the Portuguese a character to settle in a village on the banks of the Hoogly, 25 miles upstream from the present day Calcutta. Later in 1670, there were about 20000 Portuguese and their descendants in Bengal,. The Portuguese were the discoverers then followed the Dutch and the British. The first English factory was near the Mahanadi in Orissa in 1633, before they formed colonies at Balasore. It was from this very moment that the prejudiced man of Calcutta began his voyage with the outbreak of a new order of things, cultures, views and thoughts. The change was inevitable, though the evolution of the Bengali language from its primordial fulcrum of Sanskrit had been difficult. The legacy of Kalidasa, Banabhatta, Sudrak alongwith the magnificent collection of Vedas, Samhitas, Puranas had to be overpowered by a minority sect preaching for the spontaneous growth of the spoken language – that was moderated, reformed, altered and deconstructed unconsciously by the masses.

It was around 1598 that a Portuguese missionary wrote a book in Bengali with an objective of preaching Christianity. Researches say that his name was Domingo de Souza. Later in Lisbon, the first Bengali book “Crepar Xastrer Orthobhed” printed in Roman alphabets paved the way to a new worked of printing technology. But the Roman script brought in vehement criticism by the learned elite. In 1864 Sir Rajendralal Mitra voiced his opinion as :

The benefits which European scholars, officials and missionaries are to derive by substituting the Roman characters in their writing and printing the Indian dialects, are what have been most elaborately discussed, but little attention has been shown as to the advantage which the natives are to derive by accepting the Roman as a substitute for their national alphabet.

Nevertheless, eighteen years after, transliteration sprouted more antagonism by Shyamacharan Ganguly :

Transliteration then, as applied at present to Bengali largely, non-phonetically written as it is, as characters which have come to be transcribed into Roman characters after a certain recognized method, is attended with certain drawbacks. The object of writing being the representation of sounds as they are uttered by the human voice, every system of writing that does not exactly

represent words, as they are spoken, must be held responsible as throwing unnecessary difficulties in the way of those who have to learn and write.

The early documentation of Calcutta from 1690 to 1757 was only for its deities; otherwise it was a hamlet by a river never giving importance compared to 'Gaur' or 'Nabadwip' – the principal vortex of the erudite. The battle of Plassey in 1757 actually sealed all doors of Muslim supremacy and through this optimum flaw the British sovereignty announced 'itself'. The East India Company in the initial stage extended its patronage to Perso – Arabic learning and the year 1781 saw the foundation of the Calcutta Madrasas laid down by the Governor – General Lord Warren Hastings. This was followed by the establishment of the Asiatic Society under Sir William Jones in 1784 and finally Fort William College in 1800 – completed the onset of a growing city, brimming with intellectual excellence. So William Dune, the editor of "The World" in October 1791 had rightly said :

In splendour London now eclipses Rome and in similar respects, Calcutta rivals the head of empire. But in no respect can she appear so eminently so, as in her publications. If in Europe, the number of publications gives the ground to ratiocinate the learning and refinement of particular cities, we may place Calcutta in rank above Viena, Copenhagen, Petersburg, Madrid, Venice, Turin, Naples or even Rome in the Bengali.

The dissolute 'babu', the frumpy, village girl, the road – urchins following a 'sahib', the beggar, the 'bhistiwallah, the ignorant translator have all ventured to change the roads from anonymous to a well-defined structure of the vernacular. 'What to speak and 'what to write' two distant poles. Deep within the native lexicon , Portuguese, Dutch and English usage gradually poured in : Before the advent of the sea-pirates, Perso – Arabic and some Turkic clusters probed into Bengali vocabulary. But from the later half of the sixteenth century, a surplus of borrowed words from Portuguese, Dutch, French and English bridged the dichotomy of two poles – Oral and written Bengali.

The orthodox pundits of the Sanskrit College wanted the vernacular to be unadulterated. The East India Company took charge of Bengal in 1772 and after hundred years of silence , an angry young man of Calcutta had to speak against the so-called conservative notions persisting among the literary circles. In a most convincing and persuasive voice he recommended a "free commingling of nations from all corners of the world" . Further he said –

Purism is radically unsound and has its origin in a spirit of narrowness. In the free commingling of nations, there must be borrowing and giving. Can anything be more absurd than to think of keeping language pure, when blood itself cannot be kept pure ? No human language has ever been perfectly pure, anymore than any human race has been pure. Infusion of foreign elements do, in the long run, enrich languages, just as infusion of foreign blood improves races. Seeing then that languages as men speak them, must be mixed, impure, heterogeneous.

The hybrid and complex network of word-influx has been most evident for the Bengali language since the age of mystic poets in the 10th century. We may also cite the example of Ram Proshad Sen (c.1720-1781) whose intimate relationship with Kali, the Hindu goddess, inspired him to write lyrics in a different tongue. Ram Proshad chose the local dialect, i.e. the vernacular of the masses which is not governed by staunch religious morals. The poet preferred the ordinary speech, where we find words like 'decree', dismiss, 'council'. Portuguese words like 'binti' 'firiNgi' occur in lyrics of Dewan Ramdulal Nandi and Rasik Chandra Roy.

The publication of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's 'A Grammar of the Bengal Language at Hoogly in 1778 marks the beginning of an era of the printed Bengali character reproduced from pre-fabricated letter forms. Charles Wilkins was the designer, architect and manufacturer of the first successful Bengali fount. Under the governorship of Warren Hastings (1732 – 1818), the British were convinced powerfully that there is a need to learn and practice the languages of their subjects in Bengal. Hastings encouraged the translation of British regulations into vernacular languages and compilations of grammars and dictionaries. He selected Halhed to translate a digest of Hindu laws from the Persian in 1770 entitled in Sanskrit 'Viv ā rd ā rnavasetu' resulting in the publication of ' A code of Gentoo Laws, or Ordinations of the Pundits (London, 1776): Hastings also solicited Mr. Wilkins to prepare a fount of Bengali types and submitted an application to the council for the establishment of an independent press of the East India Company. In a letter to the Court of Directors, Hastings had written –

Mr. Wilkins having informed us that he had completed the construction of a set of Type of the Bengal Language, and the printing of the Grammar of that language, and the Governor General having reported to us that much expense had been incurred in bringing this art to its present degree of perfection; that it might be applied to public use and preserved from being lost; we resolved as a further encouragement to the labours of Mr. Wilkins to establish a printing office under his direction for the purpose of printing such papers as are confined to settled forms whether in the Persian, Bengal or English character.

India office Library and Records Report : Bengal letters received, Feb 1779 – March 1780 pp. 39-40; letter dated 9th Feb 1779.

The title page of Halhed's 'Grammar' states that the book was composed for the benefit of the outsiders 'firiNginamupokararthON' – the word 'firingi', comes from the Portuguese 'francez'. So the year 1778 had been the onset of the new written language which adopted words from foreign languages. The amount of Portuguese influence in borrowing

words, cultures and food habits was on an increasing graph as printed Bengali characters came into vogue. Prior to ‘upanyas’ or the novel in Bengali, it was ‘koilkata Kamalalay’, a book by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, where the innumerable spontaneous usage of Portuguese and English words land us altogether in a new world. Syntax or Punctuation had been missing, but the author’s use, of a vilerant narrate with words, like ‘Brandy’ ‘Sarap’ ‘Paoruti college vegu dictionary Supreme Court. He also enlisted colloquial Bengali words by both sexes their meanings alongurith some common English words used in daily speech like ‘Nonsuit,’ ‘double’ ‘come on’, ‘company’ ‘court’, ‘Decree’, ‘Dismiss’ ‘duke’, ‘Premium’, ‘collector’, ‘captain’ ‘judge’, ‘warrant’ ‘agent’ ‘treasury’, ‘bill’, ‘sergeant’, ‘discount’ etc. His later work ‘Naba bibi bilas’ says of varied foreign races and people from other lands like ‘firiNi’ ‘iNraj’ ‘forasio’ where all the three words are Portuguese. Hathed’s ‘A grammar of the Bengal Language’ had on its cover page three lines in Bengali meaning that the sole objective was to express knowledge to help the outsiders and the book has been written in ‘Ingreji’ which comes from the Portuguese words ‘Ingles’ or English. We shall also remind ourselves that, the last of the ‘Mangalkabya’, or medieval Bengali poetry by Bharatachandra written around 1750, referred to poppy seeds – ‘Posto’ as it is termed in Bengali – ‘Keho dei bhā ng posto ā phing garal’. The introduction of poppy grains as an intoxicating agent was by the Portuguese pirates and invaders. Later it had also become one of the most significant preparations of Bengali cuisine and perhaps ‘Annadamangal’, bears its earliest document.

Between the second phase of the Eighteenth century and first phase of the nineteenth century Kabigān or the period of kabiwalas came in vogue. Dr Sushil Kumar De. classified this particular age as :

“The existence of Kabi-songs may be traced to the beginning of the 18th century or even beyond it to the 17th, but the most flourishing period of the kabiwalas was between 1760 and 1830”.

One of the most significant contribution to Bengali literature were, the love lyrics of Antony Firingi, a Portuguese by birth, residing at Behala in Calcutta. His original name was Hensman Antony.. The songs written by him and also written during a duel with him by Ram Basu or Bholanath Nayak called Bhola Moira had words like ‘Padre’, ‘FiriNgi’ which are Portuguese in origin. His liberal feeling towards all religions, choice of words and ready wit were the key to Antony’s successful career. In one of his poems addressing to the mother-goddess he said –

“Antony Firingi” says, oh mother won’t you show me sympathy?

For I know not prayers nor rituals being an outsider by birth, [Antony Firingi” bole, tui amai doya korbi kina, bOl ma matoNgi, ami bhOjon sadhon jani na ma, jete firiNgi]

Rupchand Pakkhi or R.C.D. was one of the Kabiwalas who was born in 1914. His ancestors lived near lake Chilka in Orissa. His songs neither attacked anyone nor blamed other contemporary poets as Kabigān demanded. But on the other hand, they were full of wit and humour and did never want malign any fiend of foe. The following two songs were composed in a bilingual tone :

Let me go, ore dwari
I visit to boNshidhari
Eschi Brojo hote, ami brojer brojonari.
Beg you doorkeeper,
Let me get, I want to see clock-head,
for whom our Radhe dead,
Ami tare search kori,

This narrative signifies the monologue of sakhis of Radha and in another written in a similar mixed language combining English and Bengali words speak in Radha’s voice :

Amare fraud KORE kaliya damn! Tui Kothai geli
I am for you very sorry, golden body holo kali.
Ho my dear dearest, madhupur tui geli krishno!
O my dear ! how to rest, hear dear Bonomali
Poor creature milk-girl, tader breast e marli shel,
Nonsense tor naiko akkel, breach-of contract korli

One of the most outstanding sources of valuable documents of the eighteenth and nineteenth century bengali household are the accounts and memoirs of the European travellers who attained an original insight deep into the lives of contemporary Bengal. “The British presence in India changed its nature from that of peripheral, littoral aliens to that of colonial rulers involved, in some measure, with the masses of local people, whether, willingly or otherwise.” On the occasion of dentition problems of her child Mrs. Sherwood provides us with a tangible picture of female attendants, often called ‘ayah’, a Portuguese word, in her account -

'I... had a long conuersation with the old ayah, and the advice she gave me was so important that I ever afterwards acted upon it whilst in India... when you reach your home, said the old ayah, you must get a daye [wet nurse] for the little beebec...

(The life and times of Mrs. Sherwood (1775-1851) ed. by F.J. Harvey Darton, 1910 pp 268-9)

The interesting usage of the word ayah, reveals its frequent presence in the Bengali household, mainly through the oral conversations of the women, who worked as wet nurse, attendants or house keepers for the European families in colonial Bengal. The following words enlisted form Portuguese have been borrowed during the spell of the Portuguese regime in Chittagong (named as Porto Grande or the Great Harbour) and Saptagram (named as Porto Piqueno or the Little Harbour). As the maiden invaders, voyagers and discoverers happened to be the Portuguese, we would begin our research from the adaptation of Portuguese loan-words in the Bengali vernacular in the 16th-17th centuries. But, it shall be worth mentioning that the earliest records of the language is only, available from the 18th century. 'Padre' 'firiNgi' 'ingreji' are one of the oldest specimens of words borrowed from the Portuguese lexicon. The aboriginal crowds in Bengali, the nautch girls, the illiterate village wetnurse called Piarii, the dark-skinned native woman taking an evening bath in the nearly pond played as a life-sap, through which the surreptitious tides of words and phrases flowed in from a whole new world of trade and adventure.

List of Borrowed Words

I.P.A	PORTUGUESE
ata	ata
alkatra	alcatrao
iNrej	ingles
Toka	touca
almari	armario
alpin	alfinete
anaros	ananas
entar	entaro
ae-a	aia
olandaj	hollandez
Kopi	couve

I.P.A	PORTUGUESE
toala	toalha
kafi	cafe
kamij	camisa
korenta	quarenta
kaju	caju
kakatua	cacatua
krush	cruz
terenta	trinta

tamak	tabaco
khana	cana
khnopa	coifa
kerani	cscrevevente
gOrad	grade
gamla	gamella
jolap	jalapa
pipa	pipa
piric	pires
pOrat	prato
pauruti	pao
padri	padre
pansi	pinace
pnepe	papaya
peara	pera
perek	prego

I.P.A	PORTUGUESE
promara	primeiro
bOeam	boiao
borga	verga
binti	vinte
biskut	biscoito
besali	vasilha
behala	viola
botol	botelha
botam	botao
boma	bomba
bombeTe	bombardeiro

I.P.A	PORTUGUESE
mairi	maria

marka	marca
mastul	mastro
mistri	mestre
resto	resto
surti	sorte
fOrashi	francez
firiNgi	francez
shaban	sabao

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Dr. Ballari Ray Chaudhury: Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration/Consent for Publication: Not Applicable.

Competing Interest: No

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Publisher's Note

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