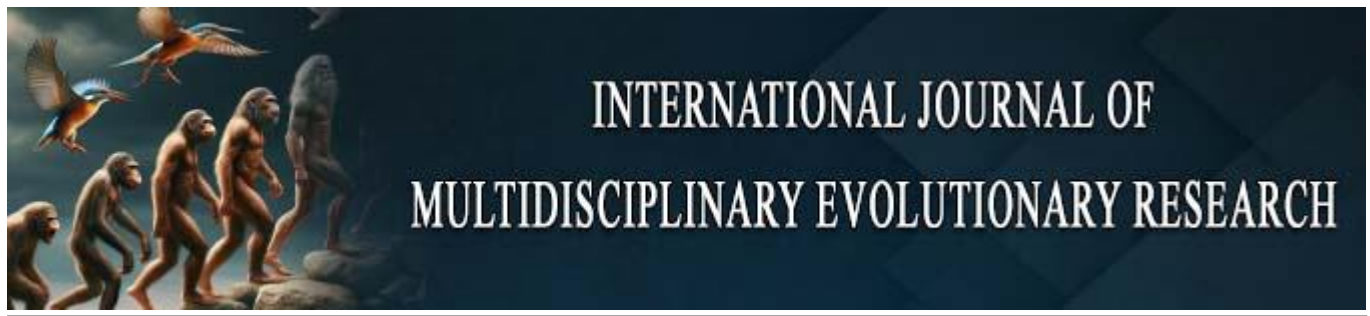




Cultural Assimilation and the Persian Influence on Bengali Literature

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Article Info

P-ISSN: 3051-3502

E-ISSN: 3051-3510

Volume: 04

Issue: 01

January - June 2023

Received: 08-02-2023

Accepted: 06-03-2023

Published: 04-04-2023

Page No: 106-108

Abstract

Following the Turko-Afghan conquest of Bengal in the early thirteenth century, nearly seven centuries of cultural assimilation profoundly shaped the Bengali language and literature under the influence of the ruling class's Persianate traditions. Muslim writers composed original works in Bengali and adapted Islamic themes, introducing numerous Persian and Arabic words into the vernacular while retaining existing literary forms. They modified conventions such as replacing Hindu invocations in *Mangalkavya* with *hamd* and *na't*, following Iranian epic traditions. This influence is evident in *dobhasi* literature, romantic narratives (e.g., Alaol's translations and adaptations of Nizami and Jami, Bahram Khan's *Laila Majnu*, works on Yusuf-Zulekha and Amir Hamza), historical and religious epics (Syed Sultan's *Nabi Bangsha*, poems on Karbala and the prophets by Heyat Mahmud and others), and mystic literature shaped by Sufism (philosophical expositions, *murshidi* and *Baul* songs). Persian also contributed themes, forms such as the *ghazal*, *metres*, *imagery*, and a lasting religious-cultural vocabulary (*roza*, *namaz*, *khuda*, etc.). Overall, Persian-Bengali interaction produced a deep linguistic, literary, and cultural synthesis that enriched Bengali literature and the identity of Bengali-speaking Muslims.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMER.2023.4.1.106-108>

Keywords: Persian influence, Bengali literature, cultural assimilation, *dobhasi* literature, romantic narratives, Sufism, *Baul*, *Nabi Bangsha*, Alaol, *hamd* and *na't*, Turko-Afghan Bengal, Islamic themes in Bengali

Introduction

After the Turko-Afghan conquest of Bengal in the early thirteenth century, a long period of cultural assimilation began and continued for nearly seven hundred years. During this period, the Bengali language and literature were significantly influenced by the languages and cultural traditions of the ruling class. The efforts of Muslim writers to compose original works in Bengali and to present Islamic themes in the Bengali language led to the introduction of numerous Persian words into the vernacular.

In most cases, Muslim writers retained existing literary forms while making certain additions and modifications to reduce or remove elements that were considered distinctly non-Islamic. For example, they replaced the invocations to Hindu gods and goddesses traditionally found at the beginning of the *Mangalkavya* with *hamd* and *na't*—praises of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), respectively—following the Muslim, particularly Iranian, literary tradition. This practice was common among Iranian writers of epics and long narrative poems, including Ferdowsi Tusi, Saadi Shirazi, and Fariduddin Attar. Similarly, when Alaol ^[1] (c. 1607–1680) composed *Padmavati* ^[2], which tells the story of a Hindu princess, and when Qazi

¹ Sen, Dr. Sukumar, Urdu tr. Shanti Ranjan Bhattacharya, *Tarikh i Bangla Adab*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, p. 247

² *Qissa i Padmavati* has been written in Persian poetry by Husain of Ghazni and there is also a version in the Bhakha language in verse, by Malik Muhammad Jaisi. There is another in Persian rose by Rae Gobind Munshi, who wrote it in 1652 A.D. and called it *Tukfat ul Qulub*, which is also a chronogram for that year. In the year 1796 A.D., another translation into Urdu verse was written by two poets, the first part by Mir Ziya uddin 'Ibrat and the last by Ghulam 'Ali 'Ishrat. Beale, Thomas William, *An Oriental Biographical Dictionary*, 1972, p 309

wrote Sati Maina ^[3], another tale centered on a Hindu princess, both works began with praises of Allah and His Prophet.

Persian also influenced what is known as *dobhasi* literature, literally means the literature of two languages. Even today the practice of using Arabic and Persian words in order to describe a typically Muslim context is very common. Thus, in *dobhasi* literature, if a Muslim court was described, a Muslim king addressed, Islamic thoughts and ideals and the Quran or the holy books referred to, Muslim saints and learned men mentioned, Arabic and Persian words were used.

Romantic Narratives

There was sizeable Persian influence on the different genres of Bengal literature, the most important perhaps being the romantic, humanistic love story. Bengali translation of *Haft Paikar* ^[4] of Nizami Ganjawi by 'Alaol (c 1607-1680 AD), the famous Bengali poet is considered as the first Bengali literary figure to translate from Persian to Bengali, may be mentioned in this regard ^[5]. *Padmavati*, *Saif ul Mulk Badiujjaman* ^[6] (Incomplete) are among other works of the author. *Yusu- Zulekha*, an adaption of Jami's poem of the same title was composed by Shah Muhammad Sagir, may be considered as the most significant writer in this field.

Khan, Daulat Uzir Bahram (c 16th century) medieval Bengalee poet from Fatehabad or Ja'frabad in Chittagong district, son of Mubarak Khan, a minister of the ruler of Chittagong. One of his ancestors, Hamid Khan, was the principal courtier of Hussein Shah, Sultan of Gauda. Hamid Khan settled in Chittagong where he was a *jagirdar*, or landlord, of two parganas. Bahram Khan's real name was Asa'uddin. After the death of his father, he was made minister by Nizam Shah Sur, the ruler of Chittagong.

Bahram Khan wrote two long narrative poems, *Laila Majnu* and *Imam-Vijay*, both of which have their roots in Arabic literature. The Indian poet Amir Khasrau and the Persian poets Abdur Rahman Jami and Abdullah Hatifi had also written poems on the theme of *Laila Majnu* in 1298, 1484 and 1531 respectively. It is believed that Bahram Khan based his poem on one of these versions.

Bahram Khan was the first poet to write a Bengali poem on the tragic love story of Laila and Majnu. However, while the Persian versions of *Laila Majnu* are basically mystical, Bahram Khan's highly rhetorical version is a poem of secular love. Other Bengali writers who wrote about the ill-fated lovers include Muhammad Khater, who wrote a *dobhasi* Puthi in 1864, and Shaikh Fazlul Karim, who wrote a narrative poem in modern Bengali in 1903. The theme of *Imam-Vijay* is the tragic battle of Karbala ^[7].

Daulat Qazi of Arakan (c 1600-1638 AD), author of *Chandrani* or *Sati Maina*; *Yusuf-Zulekha*, authored by Abdul Hakim (c 1620-1680 AD); Quraishi Magan Thakur, author of *Mrigavati*; *Amir Hamza* written by Abdul Nabi; Heyat Ma'mud (1693-1760 AD), author of *Jungnamah*; *Mirgavati* ^[8] written by Mumammad Muqim to name a few are deserve mentioning.

Amir Hamza a popular medieval narrative poem describing

the victories of the legendary warrior hero Amir Hamza. Abdul Nabi of Chitagong was the first to compose *Amir Hamza* (1684) in Bengali based on the Persian text, *Dastan i Amir Hamza*. He was followed by Fakir Garibullah and Syed Hamza who jointly composed a poem on the same subject. Garibullah towards the middle of the 18th century composed the first part of their monumental work consisting of 70 episodes. His disciple Syed Hamza completed the remaining part in 1794. This version, written in Dobasi Bengali cheaply printed, became more popular than Abdul Nabi's poem, which was in manuscript ^[9].

Historical Narratives

The first important writer in this tradition is Syed Sultan (c 1555-1648 AD), an eminent poet from Chittagong. Sultan was noted as a composer of poems based on oral narratives or scriptures. He wrote several books, including *Nabi Bangsha* ^[10] (Family of the Prophet), *Jnanpradip* (Light of knowledge), *Jnanchautisha*, and *Jaikum Rajar Ladai* (Battle of King Jaikum). He composed some poems in couplets. His *Jnanchautisa* is primarily an abridged version of *Jnanpradip*; both works deal with yoga and Sufism. *Jaikum Rajar Ladai* is based on the battle of a king.

His most noted work is *Nabi Bangsha* and is based on *Qasas ul Ambiya* in Persian, and covers the entire range religions of history from genesis and is to the work and life of all the prophets till Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh). The work also includes some mythological deities in the lineage of prophets. But it professes the glory and greatness of Islam and is a work of epic stature.

In *Nabi Bangsha* he describes the life and history of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) from the creation to the death of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, at Karbala. ^[11] Muhammad Khan had earlier written a book titled *Maqtl Hussain*. The central theme of these poems is the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain. The entire story leads to the catastrophe at Karbala but does not end with it. In every poem from Muhammad Khan's *Maqtl Hussain*, the earliest book so far known in this tradition, to *Muharram Shareef* of Kaikobad, there is a *marsia* (elegy), following the death of Hazrat Imam Hussain. The chief characteristic of these laments is the freedom with which the imaginations of the poets roam from earth to heaven and describe not only the lamentation of trees and the skies and the earth, but also of the angels and departed souls.

Sultan had a good command over Bengali and he could explain many difficult-to-understand aspects of Sufism and Islam lucidly. Edited by Ahmad Sharif, all his works including *Rasulcharita* had been published in a book form (1978) by the Bangla Academy ^[12].

Heyat Mahmud (18th century) Bengali poet, was born in the village of Jharbishila under Ghoraghat in Rangpur district. His father, Shah Kabir, the diwan of the Ghoraghat administration, was also a poet.

Heyat 's poetic talent was hereditary. He composed poems between his duties as Qazi of the Ghoraghat administration. He wrote four books of poems: *Janganama* (1723),

³ Sen, Dr. Sukumar, Urdu tr. Shanti Ranjan Bhattacharya, *Tarikh i Bangla Adab*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, p. 243

⁴ Sen, Dr. Sukumar, Urdu tr. Shanti Ranjan Bhattacharya, *Tarikh i Bangla Adab*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, p. 249

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Wakil Ahmed, banglapedia.search.com

⁸ Sen, Dr. Sukumar, Urdu tr. Shanti Ranjan Bhattacharya, *Tarikh i Bangla Adab*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 241-252

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Sen, Dr. Sukumar, Urdu tr. Shanti Ranjan Bhattacharya, *Tarikh i Bangla Adab*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1975, p. 252

¹² Haq, Khandker Muzammil, banglapedia.search.com

Sarbabhedavani (1732), *Hitajnanavani* (1753) and *Ambiyavani* (1758). The *Janganama* is based on the tragic story of Karbala and was influenced by Persian poetry on the same theme. *Sarbabhedavani* is a book of didactic poems, and is based on *Mufarrh ul Qulub* ^[13], a Persian paraphrase of the *Hitopadeca* translated by Tajuddin Mufti al Maliki. At the instance of Mufti Tajuddin Maliki (lived during the time of Sultan Mahmud Shah, ruler of the Sharqi Kingdom of Jaunpur d. 1457), a scholar of Sanskrit, translated *Hitopadesa*, the Indian classic of fables. He dedicated the work to his friend, the governor of the province (Bihar) and named it *Mufarrh ul Qulub*, completed in c. 1455 ^[14]. *Hitajnanavani* discusses religious ethics and principles of Islam as well as Sufism. *Ambiyavani* contains stories of the prophets' lives, starting with Hazrat Adam to Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh). This voluminous book is considered Heyat Mamud's masterpiece. Heyat Mamud is the last representative of the medieval style of poetic composition ^[15].

Mystic Literature

The Sufis played a significant role in preaching Islam in this country. Both the literary and folk traditions in Bengali were shaped by Sufi mysticism. The literary tradition fall into two categories: philosophical exposition of the theory and practice of mysticism, and the tradition of songs, mainly *padavalis*. The folk tradition consists mainly of the traditions of Baul and Murshidi songs ^[16], which describe the different stages that a disciple should pass through in order to reach the final stage of illumination and self-annihilation.

Among the writers of the philosophic tradition are Haji Muhammad and Syed Sultan.

Haji Muhammad's *Noor Jamal* is more philosophical than Syed Sultan's *Jnan Pradip*. Haji Muhammad tells his readers about *Shariat*, and then goes deep into the philosophical expositions of different theories about *wahdatul wujud*, pantheism. He also discusses the different theories of Ibn-ul-Arabi and Mujaddid-i-Alf-e-Sani. The popular *murshidi* and *baul* songs are deeply philosophical. Most of the murshidi songs found in Bengal are influenced by Maulana Jalal Uddin Rumi's *Masnavi* and Shaikh Fariduddin Attar's *Mantiq utTair*.

Baul

A mendicant Folk sect, generally inhabiting the districts of Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jenaidah, Faridpur, Jesspre, and Pabna and associated with devotional songs known as Baul songs. Bauls practice secret devotional rites, centering on the belief that the human body is the seat of all truths. In this there is a fusion of the Sahajiya and Sufi concepts of devotion with Sufism enjoying some predominance. Bauls do not believe in organized religion and do not frequent mosques or temples. They are iconoclasts and humanists who believe that all human beings are equal, irrespective of caste and creed.

Little is known about when the sect originated or of the origin of the word 'Baul'. By the 15th century, however, the sect had made its appearance as is evident from the use of the term in Shah Muhammad Sagir's *Yusuf wa Zulekha*, Maladhar Basu's

Srikrishnavijay, Bahram Khan's *Laila Majnun*, and Krishnadas Kaviraj's *Srichaitanyacharitamrita*. Regarding the origins of the sect, one recent theory suggests that Bauls are descendants of a branch of Sufism called *Ba'al*. Bauls have *ghars* (literally, house, lineage) or guru-traditions. These ghars are named after the principal Baul gurus: Lalon Shahi, Panju Shahi, Delbar Shahi and Panchu Shahi ^[17].

Punthi literature written in the Persian script provides another important example of the influence of Persian on Bengali language and literature. Khan Bahadur Hamidullah, a Persian poet and historian from Chittagong, observes in his *Ahadith al-Khawanin* that Alaol may also be regarded as a Persian poet, as reflected in his literary style, choice of subjects, and use of similes ^[18].

The influence of the Persian language on Bengali literature can be observed in several significant ways. First, thousands of Persian words became incorporated into the Bengali vocabulary. Second, Persian themes, popular tales, romances, and narrative traditions were introduced into Bengali literature. Third, the *ghazal*, an important Persian literary form, was adapted into Bengali poetry, particularly through the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam. Finally, Persian poetic metres, imagery, and metaphors also influenced Nazrul's poetry, contributing to its distinctive literary character.

The influence of Persian was not limited to language and literature; it also extended to the religious beliefs, practices, and cultural vocabulary of Bengali-speaking Muslims. Words

such as *roza*, *namaz*, *wudu*, *khuda*, *paighambar*, *behisht*, and *dozakh*, among many others, continue to be commonly used in Bengali Muslim communities. Their continued presence demonstrates the lasting impact of Persian on Bengali linguistic and cultural life.

In conclusion, the interaction between Persian and Bengali created a significant process of linguistic, literary, and cultural exchange. Persian enriched Bengali vocabulary, introduced new literary themes and forms, and influenced poetic techniques and religious expression. The incorporation of Persian elements into Bengali literature was therefore not merely a linguistic development but part of a broader cultural synthesis that shaped the literary and cultural traditions of Bengal.

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¹⁴ Ethel E. *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, vol. I, Oxford, 1903

¹⁵ Wakil Ahmed, banglapedia.search.com

¹⁶ Murshidi song or Gan devotional folk songs that evolved and flourished mainly through Sufis. The word 'murshid', derives from the Arabic 'ershad', and means 'to order or give advice'.

¹⁷ Wakil Ahmed, banglapedia.search.com

¹⁸ Hamidullah, Khan Bahadur, *Ahadith al Khaywanin* (Calcutta, 1871), pp. 54-55 (quoted in *Thaqafat i Pakistan*, undated), p. 204