

# Re: Bangla Desh

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- *From:* "Neeraj Mathur" <[neeraj.k.mathur@xxxxxxxxxx](mailto:neeraj.k.mathur@xxxxxxxxxx)>
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On 30 Jan, 17:46, Joachim Pense <[s...@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:s...@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> wrote:

The "Desh" in "Bangla Desh" looks like the Sanskrit word "Desha" 'country'. Is it borrowed from Sanskrit into Bengali, or is it inherited from that word?

Is it unusual to have a Sanskrit loanword in the language of a Muslim Society, even prominently in the name of the nation?

First, generally speaking, NIA tends to have reduced all three OIA sibilants into just one, although others have re–arisen at various times in certain languages. In the Central and Western regions – including the areas of Hindi and Punjabi – that sibilant tended to be [s]; in the Eastern region, including Bengal, that sibilant was [ʃ]. This means that an OIA word like /deSa–m/ would come naturally into Hindi as /des/ (replaced in Standard Hindi by a re–borrowed /deS/ from Sanskrit, and thus having a poetic/archaic character, being what you'd find in Braj and other rural dialects), but in Bengali as /deʃ/. This means that it is impossible on phonological grounds only to know whether the word is a survival or a borrowing – the outcomes would be identical.

On the other hand, it is very likely that the word in question, certainly in the way it is used, is a Sanskrit reborrowing.

The socio–linguistic history of Bengali is very different from that of Hindi/Urdu or Punjabi. While I have elaborated at length here on how Khari Boli developed a Persianised and then a Sanskritised set of literary registers which were in competition with each other, eventually becoming associated with the Muslim and Hindu communities respectively during the rise of nationalism and the struggle for independence from Britain (leading to the bilateral communal massacres of Partition in 1947), the development of Bengali has received little attention here. I'm not the best person to tell the story, either.

Essentially, Bengali's literary registers were developed much earlier than those of Khari Boli were, and almost entirely under Sanskrit influence. Unlike in Central India, where the dialects that developed

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literary registers were replaced by a different one in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Khari Boli in its guises as Urdu and Hindi triumphing over Braj, Avadhi, various forms of Rajasthani, etc), Bengali's literary language from its 'middle' period is pretty much the direct ancestor of the modern standard language. As writing conventions remain very conservative, there exist in Bengali both a written register which essentially represents the Late Middle phase (called 'Sadhu Bhasha' using Sanskritic transliteration, 'the good speech') and a more modern variety (called 'Chalit Bhasha' or 'the going/current speech').

Crucially, Bengal did not develop the same kind of communal tensions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that Central India and the Punjab did. All Bengali people were united in their language, and took equal pride in its literature (while, conversely, few Hindi-speakers think of Ghalib as one of them). This translated into lower levels of violence at Partition – though certainly not devoid of ethnic conflict, of course.

After Partition, the main leaders of Pakistan were men from the Central region, Delhi/UP/Punjab or other major cities like Bombay (since after all, the original purpose of the Muslim League was to secure the rights for Muslims where they were minorities; the separation of just the majority areas was a fairly late idea, and one which did not address this problem at all). Having suffered through the carnage to get there, they were often very much more zealous than local leaders – and they all went West, to Karachi and Islamabad. Punjabi was close enough to Khari Boli that the Urdu-speakers were able to dominate; the result was a disenfranchisement of the Bengali speakers in East Pakistan, despite numerical superiority (around 55%, I think). The demand for an independent East was filled with local nationalism, and this stressed the Bengali language. 'Bangladesh' means 'the land of those who speak Bengali ('Bangla' in that language)', and this stress on local identity did not require or even desire a religious communal identity.

For language, the upshot of all of this is that there are not distinctive 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' varieties of Bengali, as there are in Khari Boli (Urdu and Hindi). Bengali is heavily Sanskritised, particularly in its most formal registers, with a Perso-Arabic component that is far more limited than even Punjabi or spoken Khari Boli's.

So when you speak of Bangladesh as a 'Muslim society', it is important to recognise that its people, at least at the time of their independence from Pakistan, saw themselves as part of a 'Bengali-speaking society' first and a 'Muslim community' second. There are no qualms about the provenance of a word like 'des', since it simply suggests an archaic / formal character in Bengali, rather than the sectarian / religious connotations that such words would have in Khari Boli-based languages.

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I hope that's clear and / or useful!

Neeraj Mathur

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