



TEACHING AND LEARNING PERSIAN IN BANGLADESH: RELEVANCE AND APPLICABILITY

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Abstract: *Persian Language and Culture has a long and impactful history of influence over the land of ancient Bengal, now known as Bangladesh. Majority of people of Bangladesh are Muslims. Islam has been propagated in this country mainly by the Sufi Saints of Persia. There is a constant influx of Persian words in Bangla language, which is more than ten thousand in number; some of them are religious, some are official and some are general. If we omit these words from Bangla, our language will lose its natural fluency. Bengali cultural and religious festivals like Pahela Baishakh, Halkhata, Ashura etc are predominantly influenced by Persian culture too. Numerous poets of Bengali literature have used Persian words in their poetry, acknowledging the direct influence from Persian literature and Persian Poets. Many books have been written in Persian prose and poetry by Bengali writers, which are symbols of our valuable cultural Heritage. There is no doubt that our origin of history, language and literature is directly connected with Persian language. Therefore, there is no substitute for the practice of Persian language to properly transfer this history from generation to generation. Sadly, in today's independent and sovereign Bangladesh, the relevance and applicability of learning Persian is being questioned in various quarters and negative approaches are coming even from highly educated sections of the society. In this context, we will try to present the inevitable applicability and relevance of teaching and learning Persian on the basis of logic and historical authenticity.*

Key Words: *Applicability, Bangladesh, Bengali language and literature, Persian language and literature, Relevance.*

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a global village where language is the best medium for communication between the world citizens. Learning different languages increases our communication skills and chances for better opportunities. In Europe, everyone is generally fluent in at least three languages. Currently in Bangladesh too, considerable importance is being given to learning multiple world languages, to be equally competitive on facing the global challenges. However, Bangladesh has a very ancient history of connection with multiple languages. Persian language is one of them. Persian is the language of knowledge, wisdom, civilization and culture; and Persian literature is one of the most decorated segments of the world literature. Persian is the official language of present Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Bangladesh has a strong bond with Iran and the acknowledged Persian language and literature since the pre-historic period. For almost seven centuries (1203/4-1837), that means from the beginning of the Muslim rule to the middle of the British rule, Persian was the official language of whole of the Indian subcontinent, including the ancient Bengal (Amiri, 1374). Islam spread throughout the region through this language and language-speakers. As an integral part of this subcontinent, Bangladesh is no exception. And therefore, Bangladesh has deep spiritual relationship with Iran and Persian language from historical, religious, lingual, literal and cultural aspects. As a result of this relationship, Persian words have constantly infiltrated the Bengali language, numbering more than seven thousand. Undoubtedly, our origin of history and cultural heritage is directly connected with Persian language. So, there should not be any confusion about the applicability of teaching and learning Persian language in Bangladesh. But unfortunately, the relevance and applicability of Persian teaching and learning is being questioned in our country and negative approaches are coming from the educated and elite sections of the modern society. So, it is high time to showcase the immense importance of teaching and learning Persian in the context of modernism.

Here in this research article, I am going to discuss the applicability of teaching and learning Persian language in Bangladesh from different aspects as- historical, cultural, spiritual, lingual, literal and modernity. A short content is also included about the challenges on the way. Due to insufficient research on the selected topic, number of related reference books are quite less. Books and websites that have been used as the referential resources to write this article, are mentioned in the reference section. We

hope that our article will present justified answers to those doubts or questions about the applicability of Persian in present-day Bangladesh.

RELATION OF BANGLA AND PERSIAN: BRIEF DISCUSSIONS

It will be relevant to discuss briefly about the relation between Bangla and Persian. We all know that local Bengali culture, language, literature and spirituality has huge impact from Persian language and culture. But not everyone is familiar with the history of the origin of this impactful relation. Bangladesh was a part of ancient Bengal, which was well-known as a prosperous area in the history of world civilization. And present-day Iran, was one of the focal points of the ancient Persian region, known as the cradle of a glorious civilization. Since the beginning of history, the Persian civilization and the Persian language have been in contact with the subcontinent and both civilizations came into close proximity to each other. Through the seaports of the river-based region of Bengal, various types of vessels plying for trade traveled to the Persian Gulf. As a result, Persia had not only a commercial relationship with the subcontinent, but also a cultural one which later extended to the royal court, society and art-literature of the land (Banglapedia, 2003: 179). The development of Persian language and culture that started with the arrival of Muslims in Bengal, spread to all corners of this region by the Persian Sufis in the Sultanate and Mughal period. Not only local Muslims, but also noble Hindus and followers of other religions used to practice this rich language and literature (Anjuman, 2005: 56). The importance of East India Company employees learning the Persian language in the 18th century, underlines both the extensive use of the language in Mughal times in Bangladesh, and also its continuing use in the early period of British administration (dhakatribune.com). English was patronized and replaced as the state language by removing Persian to make the Bengali nation ignorant and alienated from the history of past glory. Because the British wanted the Bengalis to be separated from their distinct history, traditions and identity. As a result of their action, the present generation of Bangladesh has lost touch with the ancient history and valuable works of their forefathers. We will be able to understand the relevance and overall applicability of practicing Persian in Bangladesh only if we can grasp this matter well.

APPLICABILITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING PERSIAN LANGUAGE IN BANGLADESH

As we mentioned earlier, Bangladesh has a supreme relationship with Iran and Persian language and culture from historical, cultural, educational, lingual, literal and religious aspects. Islam has been propagated in this country mainly by the Sufi Saints of Persia (Amiri, 1374). There is a constant influx

of Persian words in Bangla language, which is more than seven thousand in number. Bangladeshi cultural norms and festivals, religious rituals, names of people and places and foods, study materials, local languages; in short, every aspect of life has direct connection and deep influence of Persian language and culture. We will discuss about the applicability of teaching and learning- in short practicing- Persian, from these different aspects respectively.

FROM HISTORICAL ASPECT

Persian is inextricably linked with the past history and tradition of Bangladesh. It is needless to say about the relevance and necessity of teaching and learning Persian in Bangladesh. Only historians and root researchers are aware of how close and inseparable the relationship is between Persian, Bangladesh and Bengali language. But sadly, due to the ignorance about our own history and traditions sometimes negative comments are visible from different circles of the society; which is very disappointing and unfortunate at the same time.

So far, it is not possible to say exactly how many books have been written in Persian language in the Bengali-speaking region, but it is easy to imagine that the number will be close to a thousand (Majidi, 2006). Many ancient handwritten Persian manuscripts are still preserved in several museums including Bangladesh National Museum, departmental and central libraries of various public universities of Bangladesh etc. Many families have private collections of ancient Persian texts and manuscripts as valuable heirlooms, which they are unable now to decipher. Regarding this, extensive and thorough research is required to obtain the accurate and complete information, which is not possible without learning Persian properly.

Also, the township of Bangladesh is a minefield of ancient history. In this region, many priceless monuments and archeological exhibits of the long Muslim rule are spread all over Bangladesh (Rahman, 2007). It includes various historical inscriptions, coins, epigraphic and numismatic evidences and calligraphic artworks. Deciphering and translating the unknown information of these historical and priceless inscriptions, coins, monuments and doing proper and accurate research on them requires expert researchers who know Persian language and its style. It is through them that we can save and preserve the true history and heritage of our nation. So, there is no substitute for Persian learning for the accurate transmission of history and tradition of Bangladesh.

FROM CULTURAL ASPECT

Culture can be described as the complete way of lifestyle of a community. Culture is the collective of ideas, customs, social norms and behaviors, arts and other manifestations of a population that are passed down from generations to generations (languages.oup.com). In Bangladesh, in a sense, the influence of Persian culture is more noticeable than the language.

Let's talk about the names first. The influence of Persian words in the naming of people or places of Bangladesh is majorly noticeable. Male names like- Ali, Ahmad, Sohrab, Jahangir, Farhad, Farzad, Hossein, Reza, Nader, Salman etc; and Female names like- Ava, Farah, Laila, Mehnaz, Mahtab, Mehjabin, Mariam, Naznin, Nilufer, Sara, Sitara, Parvin, Yasmin etc. all these are very common household Bengali names, that came directly from Persian language.

Local places like cities and towns and markets names of Bangladesh also consists of huge Persian-origin words. 'Ganj', 'Pur' and 'Bag' are three mostly used parts of names for places in Bangladesh, that is purely originated from Persia; like- Narayanganj, Kishoreganj, Sirajganj, Hajiganj, Sunamganj, Habiganj and Chandpur, Dinajpur, Jamalpur, Faridpur, Gazipur, Meherpur, Sherpur and lots more. Only Dhaka city has direct use of Persian words in many places name; like- Gulshan, Gulistan, Gulbag, Lalbag, Hazaribag, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Shahbag etc. Bangladeshi foods are also greatly inspired by Persian food styles and the names are also very common in Persian language. Like- Naan, Shabji, Polao, Kabab, Halua etc.

Bangladeshi cultural festivals are also greatly influenced by Persian festivities and cultural heritage. Bengali cultural and religious festivals like Pahela Baishakh, Halkhata, Nowruz, Ashura, Fateha-e-Yazdahom, are influenced by Persian cultural and religious heritage. Religious programs like Akheri Chahar Shamba, Fateha Khani, Kul Khani, Chehnam, Walima etc. are Persian originated culture too.

Folk culture of Bangladesh has also a great influence of Persian culture. 'Murshidi', 'Baul' songs are the most practiced and famous folk traditional songs of Bangladesh, where uses of Arabic or Persian words to typically describe Muslim context, is a very common phenomenon. And these kinds of songs are mostly influenced by the mystical dimensions of the most remarkable Persian Sufi poets like Hafez, Mawlana Rumi and Saadi. Another major Bengali folk tradition is 'Puthi Path', which is greatly influenced by Persian 'Marsiyyeh' songs (Billah, 2019: 51).

So, in short, we can say that from cultural aspect, Bangladesh has a strong bond and connection with Persian culture and heritage.

FROM LINGUAL ASPECT

The Persian language penetrated so deeply into the life of the people of the region that due to its all-pervading influence, the original local language was transformed into the new Bengali language. Persian language was infiltrated by the Muslim rulers during the adolescence of the Bengali language. Islam and Sufism played the key role as the cultural element. Since Persian was the medium of communication of the Muslim rulers, who were greatly influenced by the Persian language and culture, they stated Persian as the administrative language since the beginning of their rule (Khuda Baksh, 1930). As a result, thousands of Persian words infiltrated Bengali language in contact. Numerous Arabic words already used in Persian were also added to the Bengali vocabulary at that time. Moreover, many new words were created by combining Bengali words with the vocabulary of these two languages. Learning Persian became a cultural habit of Bengalis as it was directly associated with the culture of the rulers. The promotion and spread of Islam and Sufism also played a leading role in this regard. But in spite of that, Persian became the language of the masses, not only the language of Muslims. No narrow view of treating Persian as the 'Muslim language' had not undermined the cause of learning it (Sahebi, 2020). Persian was adopted by the vast masses of Bengal as a cultural language. Today, there is a constant influx of Persian words in Bangla language; some of them are religious, some are official and some are general. If we omit those words from Bangla, our language will lose its natural fluency. These words are so fluently used in the speech of our daily life that it is almost impossible to think of them separately as non-Bengali words (parstoday.com). For example: chehara (face), ayna (mirror), Kagaz (paper), Garam (hot), taza (fresh), pa (foot), Komor (waist), magaz (brain), kabarestan (graveyard), pir (old man), awaz (voice), bag (garden), Ostad (teacher), Sharam(shame) and so many more. So, the applicability of Persian language from the lingual aspect is totally unquestionable.

The applicability of teaching and learning Persian language in the education sector of Bangladesh can be discussed from another aspect. That is the importance of learning it as a foreign language (Prothom Alo Online). Because it is easier to learn as a foreign language; our social and cultural history is intertwined with this language; most of the valuable and incomparable literature of world has been written in this language; and as Persian is the language of love, wisdom and humanity, its learning and

practice makes a person better. Therefore, there can be no more applicable language than Persian as a foreign language for the people of Bangladesh if they want to have a developed humane mind.

FROM LITERAL ASPECT

Since ancient times, Persian literature has been practiced in the literature of Bengal region regardless of caste and religion. The largest part of medieval Bengali romance poetry was translated from Persian literature. Question-and-answer literary works were added to Bengali literature from Persian sources, whose purpose was to impart knowledge through the propagation of ethics (Chowdhury, 2015). Bengali literature has developed into various branches of literature such as Morsiya, puthi, biographies, liberal romantic expressions from Persian literature. Bankim Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore, Satyandranath Dutta etc enriched their works by using Arabic-Persian words (Anisuzzaman, 1987: 55). The main feature of the poetic literature of our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, is the excellent but fluent and dynamic use of words from different languages, most of which are Persian words, terms and expressions. He is the best example of using Persian words and terms in Bengali literature. From Nizami Ganjuvi's translation of *Sikandar Nama* and *Laili and Majnun* poetry to contemporary Bengali poetic works, many Bangladeshi poets have expressed the treasures of Persian literature in their own language and style. When discussing the life and literary works of Multilingual expert Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, Muhammad Barkatullah, Moniruddin Yusuf (the complete translator of Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* in Bengali), mention of Persian language and literature will definitely come up. Famous history books like *Tabaqate Nasiri*, *Siyarul Mutakhhirin*, *Tarikh Firozshahi*, *Riaz-us-Salatin*, *Tarikh Humayun Shahi*, *Tarikh Bangalah*, *Mozaffarnama* were written in Persian in this region (Majidi, 1998). Therefore, knowledge of Persian is inevitable if we want to practice or research any kind of Bengali language prose, poetry or history. And therefore, applicability of teaching and learning Persian language is mandatory.

FROM SPIRITUAL ASPECT

Being a Muslim-dominated country, Sufism or mysticism is a major part of religious practice in Bangladesh. Sufism entered the Bengal territory through the Persian-speaking Awliyas and Dervishes. Sufism alone has made the greatest contribution to the propagation, spread and establishment of Islam in Bangladesh. The contribution of Persian Sufi culture and Sufi literature in the practice of spiritualism in Bangladesh is undeniable. It paved the way of development of Bengali religious philosophy and literature.

The biographical sketches of the Sufis reveals that they were the real pioneers of building the spiritual life of Bangladesh through Islamic faith and practice of Sufism. As said earlier, in ancient age, Hindu *Bhaktism*, Buddhist *Sahajiya* philosophy and *Vaishnav* religion of love existed in Bengal for a long time (Wahab, 1999: 91). The philosophers of Hinduism were also working to spread their own ideas at the same time of quick expansion of Sufism in Bengal (ibid: 92). The Sufi followers became more liberal than the followers of North India by the influence of liberal Hindu and Buddhist ideology of Bengal. For that reason, the Sufi and Hindu ideology get closer. As a result, a liberal and universal ideology of love named "*Baul*" became more popular in Bengal that has a great impact on Bengali culture as well as the literature, even today. According to many scholars, the Hindu *Bhakti* movement became very popular by the direct influence of Sufism in Bengal (ibid: 93). They also believe that there is an impact of the "*Sama*" of the Sufis in the carol of Sri Chaitanya. In the medieval period, the impact of Sufism is found in the fields of Folk songs like *Murshidi*, *Marfati*, *Bhatiali*, *Maizbandari* etc. which are composed basically on the basis of the life of the Sufi saints (Biswas, 2016: 167). These songs are still the part of Bengali rural spiritual life. So, the applicability of Persian Sufi doctrine in shaping the local spirituality of Bangladesh is undeniably proven.

FROM MODERN DAYS ASPECT

The applicability of practicing Persian in Bangladesh is not only considered from the point of view that this language has enriched our literature, civilization or culture, but also in the current social context, the practice of this language and literature is very important for us. The moral decay that we see around the society today, the lack of ethics at the individual level is observed everywhere in our society, one of the ways to overcome it can be the practice of glowing Persian literature in the light of ethics, and the nurturing of Sufi philosophy that instills the love and compassion of Persian spiritual philosophy in the minds of the nation.

Maintaining inter-religious harmony is one of the major societal challenges in current global context. Root of most of the wars and conflicts in today's world is the practice of extremism. People should be brought back to humanity, to brotherhood. And in this case, Persian language and literature can play an important role as an ideal means of inculcating tolerance towards all religions. Exactly the image we saw in ancient and medieval times. The Persian language became a means of practicing harmony for all, regardless of caste and religion.

Another major factor of Persian learning in modern Bangladesh is to strengthen Iran-Bangladesh inter-relation. The entire world today is called 'Global Village'. And in this village, the countries that have the strongest mutual and cultural ties are the ones that are ahead in terms of unity and solidarity. Iran and Bangladesh can showcase exemplary landmark in this regard. In the sectors like literary translations, interpretations, films and media, international trades and archeological marks, the relevance and applicability of Persian language is unparalleled.

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING PERSIAN LANGUAGE IN BANGLADESH

At present, under the pressure of the strategy of the capitalist and materialistic consumption state system of Europe-America, the humanitarian branches of the whole world are fighting for existence today (Irr.modares.ac.ir). Humanity and love have become secondary issues in modern world. Greed and self-satisfaction are seen everywhere. There is only one way out of this; and that is to be enlivened with human sense, to be enriched with humanitarian knowledge to improve the mind and soul of people. It is well known that the position of the Persian language as the language of knowledge, wisdom and humanity is definitely the foremost among the world's languages. But in today's consumerist cruel world where struggle to survive is the only reality, it is very difficult to continue the practice of humanity. Even if people want to practice the sense of humanity, society and environment become their biggest obstacle. Keeping the practice of Persian in Bangladesh uninterrupted is therefore facing a big challenge today. Roughly speaking, hundreds of students are getting educated every year from the Persian departments of various public universities in Bangladesh; But the brutal reality is that they have to face various problems due to lack of specific employment-guaranteed system. Numerous talented students are falling away from the practical field of Persian education due to the thought of tension free future and secure employment. Realizing the need to learn the language that the nation's best talents are learning by spending the most valuable time of their life, it is the demand of time to create its practical usefulness. Such a system of foreign language education should be coordinated through sound and far-reaching planning. But for that, first of all, we need to change our perspective. To call a language redundant or irrelevant or non-applicable means to under-estimate its power (Hassan and Nur, 2022: 296).

Another big challenge of teaching and learning Persian language in Bangladesh is lack of up gradation of educational content and unavailability of good text books. Both the language teaching and learning

system at the university level must be modernized and made timely and effective. Lack of resources, lack of familiarity with modern methods of teaching with efficiency has weakened the position of Persian in our present educational system. There is no substitute for proper training of respected teachers, students and researchers to overcome this weakness. Along with that, the scope of work of the language departments should also be expanded. It is important to maintain the quality of education (ibid: 297). It is more necessary to provide quality education and training to a certain number of students than to pass the test to hundreds of them, so that they can grasp their historical, social, cultural and professional contact with the language and read and analyze to understand each level correctly from the beginning to the end of the language they are learning.

CONCLUSION

Language is an ultimate power. The history of Persian language is connected with the history of the origin of Bangladesh and Bengali language. There is no alternative to learning Persian to transfer this history from generation to generation. As long as the Bengali language and literature survives, the knowledge and applicability of the Persian language and its practice will also be relevant for the sake of knowing the correct history of the origin and development of the Bengali language and literature and the vocabulary used in this language. At present, a large part of the youth of the country has reached the last limit of degradation by leading their life in an unethical way. Therefore, from this perspective Persian language and literature, which is full of love and ethics, should be taught seriously in our educational institutions to bring this doomed youth back on the right path. Lastly it can be said that teaching and learning Persian language is really an easy task if it is conducted right sporting way. By making the teaching process modernized and comfortable, a teacher can help a learner learn this language effectively. Persian occupies a place of prestige in our country and we need to maintain that for the sake of our own good.

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