Origin of the Bengali Language[1]

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Abstract: I thank the Kolkata Society for Asian Studies for giving me the opportunity for delivering 'Suniti Kumar Chatterji Memorial Lecture' for this year. With all my respect to Late Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, and all Indian Linguists I am entering into my observation regarding the problem to find out the source or origin of the Bengali Language.

The origin and development of the Bengali language genealogically is established by the eminent linguists. It is known to us that, National Professor late Suniti Kumar Chatterji in his monumental work, "*The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*" [ODBL] (1926) reconstructed the root of Bengali grammatical words and established grammatical rules based on historical principles. In a word, he has glorified our Mother tongue Bengali language, when we were under the bondage of British rulers.

The genealogical identification of Bengali language was established long ago by the European scholars. Prof. S. K. Chatterji referred their names in the Preface of his book ODBL. According to him,

> "From Morris and Skeat, Sweet and Wright, and Jesperson and the rest, and from Helfenstein and Bruggmann, -masters of Indo-Aryan philology like Uhlenbeck and Wackernagel, Whitney and Pischel, Beams and Bhandarkar, Hoernle and Grierson and others were naturally approached and studied for guidance and light: and I began also to look round myself, to observe facts in the words as written and as actually spoken." [ODBL, Preface, xi, Rupa & Co, 1985]

At present we have no doubt that, the Bengali language is originated from Old Indo-Aryan language family. And this Aryan language genealogically falls under the group of Indo-European language family. S. K. Chatterji himself confessed that he was guided by the scholars who were regarded as scholars of Indo-European languages, and we find that when he was a student of Post Graduate class, the idea of investigation of Bengali language struck him. He studied historical and comparative method of investigation of a language and found that the problems of Indo-European languages are equally connected with Bengali language.

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It is clear to us that, Prof. Chatterji was influenced by the historical and comparative method of language investigation, and accepted the opinion that the Bengali language is the descendant of Indo-European Language family. During the years 1919 to 1922 he came in touch with many scholars. Of them L. D. Barnett, F. W. Thomas, Daniel Jones, Sir E. Denison Ross, R. W. Chambers, E. H. G. Grattan, Robin lower, Antoine Meillet, Jules Bloch, Sylvain Lévi, Paul Pelliot, Jean Przyluski and Sir George Grierson are remarkable. Dr. L. D. Barnett supervised his work. Prof. Chatterji studied Prakrit, Sanskrit, Persian, Gothic, Old Irish, Old English, Indo-Aryan Philology, Phonetics etc. Naturally, he was inspired by the scholars of London and Paris. When Prof. Chatterji studied in Europe, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was not alive. He died on February 22, 1913. Though his lectures published in book form "*Cours de linguistique générale*" in French language in the year 1916, compiled by his two former students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, his ideas on Structural Linguistics and Synchronic Grammar was not yet known by the majority of linguists. Saussure was considered as the father of 20th century modern linguistics. Prof. Chatterji studied modern phonetics from Daniel Jones and he remarked that, Daniel Jones was his teacher and also 'a warm friend and helper' of him.

George A. Grierson noticed that the Bengali grammarians are silent about the history of Bengali language and are not interested in describing the original form of Bengali language. Grierson opined that the Bengali language is a descendant of 'Māgadhī Prakrit', an official language of Magadha. Grierson wrote,

> "With the shifting of the political gravity at a later epoch, it became superseded as a literary form of speech by dialects current farther to the West, but as a spoken language it has developed into the modern Bengali, Oṛiyā, Bihārī, and Assamese." [ODBL, Foreword, 1925, vi]

Actually the European scholars had established the genealogical identity of modern Bengali language applying the Historical and Comparative methodology. August Schlecher (1821-1868), a German Linguist was influenced by pre-Darwinian biology and followed natural science. His attempt to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European [PIE] parent (mother?) language and his model known as '*Stammbaumtheorie*' or family tree model published in his book "*Compendium der vergleichenden Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*" in the year 1861-62 established the relation between old and modern languages.

Let us take a view of linguist I. J. S. Taraporewala. In his book "Elements of the Science of Language", published in the year 1931, he discussed that India presents an amazing collection of languages and dialects. Actually the population of India is made up of several racial Strata. And these languages are 'lying one over the other'. According to him, we have a whole collection of Non- Indo- European languages overlaid by the Indo-Aryan Languages.

Most Non-Indo-European languages used by aboriginal semi civilized tribes. We know that very few of them have written records and a great many of them do not pauses any written literature.

They have their own oral literature and cultural activities which they perform. Prof. Taraporewala commented,

> "Among these languages, however, we find many a clue to words and phrases used among the modern Aryan languages." [Taraporewala, 1931, 208]

Taraporewala noticed a very common linguistic attitude. We found that, when more than one language family come in contact with one another, due to several reasons, may be it regional co-habitation, or a business place or any other platform, the exchange of linguistic corpuses play an important role. And as a result, language mixing becomes an essential factor of language development. Co-existence of Aryan and Non-Aryan languages in a particular regional domain, such borrowing of word or phrases is quite common criteria of language change and development from time to time. Prof. S. K. Chatterji opined that Sanskrit conquered India and outside India. It indicates the importance of synthesis of the two cultures Aryan and non-Aryan. We find in his "*Indo-Aryan and Hindi*", he claimed that the speakers of non-Aryan language communities adopted Aryan language.

> "The Aryan language, within a few centuries after it became established in India, as it gradually began to be adopted by masses of non-Aryans, started to take a new turn." [Chatterji: 1969: 82]

Particularly, in my opinion, without any historical and comparative knowledge of linguistic attitude, descriptive or structural even generative vehicle of linguistic conception is one sided game. In respect of Bengali language, the task of a generative grammar is to discover the Internalized grammar of a native speaker. And this internalized grammar of a native speaker resulted through many stages of development of language or languages. The linguistic heritage native speakers of a particular language possess in their mind, actually in several domains of their brain inherited from time to time.

It is a known fact that, the Austric, Tibeto-Chinese, Davidian and Indo-European are the main four language families in India. Beside these four language families there are some unclassified languages also. Taraporewala followed Sir G. A. Grierson's "*Linguistic Survey of India*" and S. K. Chatterji's "*ODBL*".

Pater W. Schmidt put together the Malay-Polynesian or Austronesian languages under Austric family. According to some scholars this Austric family is also connected with some aboriginal languages, which have a long past oral heritage in India. In my opinion, most of these oral languages at present are extinct languages. They adopted a dominant language surrounded by their local or migrated habitations.

But during my fieldwork in West Bengal my observation is that, some of these aboriginal people are gradually adopting Bengali as their Mother Tongue. Younger generation are speaking other than their Mother Tongue. In West Bengal, the dominant language as well as a killing language is

Bengali. But who knows the past history of the people who live in Bengal and speak Bengali as their Mother Tongue? Are they belongs to those extinct language families at present which have no trace at all? They adopted Bengali surrounded by their present or past habitation. In Bengal, are they a part of Bengali speakers? This will be discussed latter.

At present, Munda or Kol language as one of the Austro-Asiatic branch of the Austric languages, is divided into two main regional branches, i) Eastern and ii) Western. West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa are main areas of this Eastern branch and the main languages of this branch are Sāntali, Mundari, Bhumij, Koḍa, Ho, Korwa etc. The word 'kol' means 'man' but the Sanskrit meaning is 'pig'. Grierson wanted to avoid Sanskrit meaning named this language family as 'Munda'. Grierson also sometimes accepted the word 'kherwari' [Bhoumick: 2008: 3]. But Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji preferred the word 'kol' with its original meaning as 'man'.

These languages are surrounded by dominating Aryan languages. Pater W. Schmidt and Grierson believed that Munda grammar is very close to Turkish grammar. Mr. Skrefsrud in his "Sāntali Grammar" marked some characteristics of Munda speech which have influenced other languages of India. Prof S. K. Chatterji inspired Dr. Suhrid Kumar Bhaumick who worked in this field and he believed that Santali and Bengali are closely connected languages. I appreciate his effort. Prof. Bhoumick's method of research is based on comparative studies. But sometimes in finding conclusion, he was guided by some pre-assumptions which he believed. He made a conclusion that, we have no doubt that, civilization spread throughout the Asia and Europe from India [Bhoumick: 1985: 47]. I do not agree with him.

In India, maximum languages of Tibeto-Chinese family are Tibeto-Burman than Thai-Chinese. Some of the Tibeto-Chinese group of languages are Sunwar, Gurung, Magari and Lepcha are considered as Non-Pronominalised Himalayan Group. The various branches of Tibeto-Burman language families such as, North Assam, Middle and South Assam, Arakan-Burma are connected in a complex manner with so many dialects. Kiranti, Dhimal, Meithei, Lushei etc. are important. Bengali has some influences over these languages. And it may be possible that as these languages are neighbouring languages Bengali was influenced by these languages.

The main region of Dravidian language family is naturally far from our Bengal territory. Kurukh and Malto fall under the Intermediate group of the Dravidian languages. It is interesting to note that, some scholar like Bishop Caldwell found nearer relation with Ural and Altai families. Dr. G. U. Pope found that Dravidian language is related with Aryan languages in morphological features. Prof. O. Schrader tried to show their affinity with the Finno-Ugric family [Taraporewala: 1931: 221-222].

Taraporewala mentioned three stages of Indo-Aryan languages in India as Prakrita. He also followed Grierson's model of Inner and Outer language groups. According to him Eastern Hindi is Intermediate language. Prof. S. K. Chatterji criticised this inner and outer division of Indo-Aryan language. Grierson and Taraporewala considered Eastern languages like Behari, Oriya, Bengali and

Assami are Outer Languages, whether the Inner Languages are Northern, Central, Southern and Western. Central one is the pure group of Indo-Aryan or Aryan language family.

In ODBL, Prof. Chatterji noticed that, during three periods of Indo-Aryan language, Old-Indo-Aryan (1500 B.C. – 600 B.C.), Middle Indo Aryan (600 B.C. – 1000 A.C.) and New-Indo-Aryan (after 1000 A.C.) the main characteristics of this language affected most of the dialects. He discussed briefly such phonetic, morphological and syntactical characteristics.

Taraporewala wanted to use the term Primary Prakrita, Secondary Prakrita and Tertiary Prakrita instead of Old Indo-Aryan, Middle Indo-Aryan and New Indo-Aryan respectively. He placed spoken language as opposed to Sanskrit and accepted Sanskrit is the oldest dialect of literature. According to him, Bengali as one of the Eastern language family falls under the Outer group of language like other Eastern languages Bihari, Oria, Assamese etc. Bengali is divided into two groups, literary dialect and spoken dialects. We know this spoken dialect is also divided into main five dialects.

While writing *ODBL*, Professor S. K. Chatterji expressed his ideas that, actually he followed the modern philologists of that time, who were the scholar in the area of Comparative Linguistics. Professor Jules Bloch accepted the methodology of Comparative Philology and plan in describing the origin and development of a modern Indo-Aryan language, Marathi in his work "Formation de la Language marathe" and Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji adopted his plan. Professor Chatterji observed the racial, historical and cultural background of the native speakers. Prof. Chatterji gave importance in forming linguistic rules for Bengali and other modern Indian languages.

Like modern linguist Professor Chatterji also believed that concrete linguistic corpus is essential for scientific research. He confessed that,

> "I have tried my best not to be dogmatic, and although I had to speculate and hypothesize at times to explain facts, I hope I have not let loose my fancy to roam freely, unchecked by restraints of science." [ODBL: xiv]

Prof. S. K. Chatterji noticed some exceptions and remarkable ideas but still he remarked about his work that, many of his views expressed in his book, may be ultimately proved to be wrong in future. He noticed that, the Sanskrit words are borrowing words in Bengali, while the genuine Bengali forms are marked as vulgar or '*asādhu*'. The Spirit of the Indian and European Scholars expressed in their Bengali Grammars hurt him. They failed to shake off the Sanskrit idea. He observed that,

> "To make confusion worse confounded, the spirit of scholasticism is not yet dead: we have elaborate grammars of Sanskrit masquerading as Bengali grammar, in which the genuine Bengali forms have been branded as vulgar (*asādhu*) beside the so-called 'polite' (*sādhu*) forms borrowed from Sanskrit". [ODBL: xv]

Dr. Sukumari Bhattacharji remarked that, Professor Chatterji gave importance of Pre Aryan substratum in the Aryan speech. We find that, he mentioned the border of the Bengali language. There are several aboriginal language families and dialects. Bengali like other modern Aryan languages in India is still spreading at the expense of the aboriginal tribal languages. This point is very important. We know Professor Chatterji's famous book 'kirata-Jana- Krti', where he marked the Sino-Tibetan influences on the language and culture in India. He also emphasized Newari language of Nepal, the Bodo language of Bengal, Tripura and Assam. He wrote on the Meithei language of Manipur and some other Tibeto-Burman languages. These languages have some affinity with Indian languages and culture. Dr. Sukumari Bhattacharji remarked,

> "He emphasises the composite character of the Indian people in both race and culture - a synthesis of the once diverse cultures of the Aryan and non-Aryan peoples (Aryan, and Austric of Nishada, Dravidian and Mongoloid or Kirāta" [Bhattercharji: 1979: 5]

It is a known fact that professor Chatterjee followed historical and comparative methodology in his early life but later on he gave traces on the Descriptive and Structural approach. Like Ferdinand de Saussure he believed language as a human phenomenon. He wanted to develop his ideas and tried to analyse a language as a fragment of speech. He considered that, language is something dynamic and it has a creative approach. It is not artificial or a static one. With a heartiest regard to late National Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, I am expressing my observation in brief.

It is interesting to note that, Taraporewala wanted to indicate language-mixing by an arrow sign. He explained that an arrow indicates that the language shades off into the other by imperceptible degree through a succession of mixed dialects. If we follow the table number-XIII [Taraporewala: 1931: 260] we will find that Maithili or Tirhutia language is connected with Bengali, Northern dialects of Oriya group are connected with Bengali, Assamese Mayang is connected with Bengali. And these languages formed mixed languages. Similarly, Bengali Western Rarhi dialect of Purnia connected with Behari language and Midnapore dialect mixed with Oriya. Bengali Vanga or Eastern group Haijong connected with Tibeto-Burman, Chakma is also connected with Burmese language and Kamrupa connected with Assamese. Taraporewala commented,

> "Mixed dialects of Bengali and Assamese arose as a necessity in order to keep up communication with the numerous aboriginal tribes. One of the most interesting of these is the Jharevā dialect of Assamese which is a regular "pidgin", made up of Bengali, Garo and Assamese." [Taraporewala: 1931: 260]

This observation is very interesting and actually in discussing our language we had often forgot in analysing such mixed Bengali.

Philologists and Linguists proved by their Historical and Comparative studies that languages of the world are classified in several branches. They also found some unclassified languages. These languages are not related with any main branches. The Scholars of Historical and Comparative

Philology established from time to time, it is interesting that the languages of India are not of the same language family. There are four main language groups, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Sino-Tibetan or Mongoloid language families and some other unclassified languages.

The historians proved that a group of Aryan language speaking people entered India. Are they only one group? It never is possible because all Aryan speakers are not belonging to the same group and they entered in India in several times and took shelter in different areas. It may be possible. They gradually conquered one after one area where already the people of different language communities and different races entered before them and made their homeland. Prof. Chatterji wrote in his "*Kirāta-jana-kṛti*",

> "The intermingling of different races and cultures, which took place in varying proportions and under special local conditions in the different areas of India, gave rise to certain composite types with more or less common characteristics." [Chatterji: 1974:3]

We should follow the researches made by the anthropologists. Prof, Chatterji also followed them. In a word India is a multi-lingual country where several aboriginal races live together with new comer races that came in India from time to time. Co-existence of Mother Tongue of these aboriginal and tribal communities with main classified language communities is a remarkable feature in Indian context. Now we are going to conclude our observations. We find in "*Kirāta-jana-kṛti*", Prof. Chatterji believed that our cultural heritage is depending on various cultures. He wrote,

> "Can we think of Indian History and Civilisation, particularly in Eastern India, without the contributions of the Licchavis and the Newars, the Koch, Kachari, Tipra and other Boḍo peoples (details of whose services are now matters of research), the Ahoms, the Jaintias and the Manipuris?" [Chatterji: 1974: 184]

When Professor S. K. Chatterji raises such question regarding Indian history and civilization we find our solution. No doubt linguist K. P. Tamsang (1915-1985), who worked in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, reacted against the foreign writers who worked on Lepcha community. He said,

> "I studied all the voluminous books written on Lepchas by different authors but very sad to say that most of the facts I read therein are absolutely incorrect. They are badly worded, open to misinterpretations and dangerous to the interests of the Lepchas."[Tamsang:1983:]

K. P. Tamsang denied the migration theory of the western scholars and proved that, Lepchas fled towards Tibet crossing the Himalayas. To them their original homeland Himalayans was 'Mayel Lyang', the land of hidden paradise. It is sufficient to say that, we should search our own lingual identity and should revise our past lingual identity.

When the Europeans worked on Indian oral and aboriginal languages, they tried to bring into some formula in which they are accustomed. Such as,

> "The Lushais are a fine intelligent tribe of Mongoloid hillmen inhabiting parts of the wild forest-covered mountainous region forming watershed between India and Upper Burma." [Lorrain: 1990: v]

But when Mr. Lorrain claimed that, they choose simple Roman script for them, we find a philanthropic mind. But when he thought "our system" will be followed by them, then the study of an aboriginal language may be formulized by the civilized enriched language community like English.

It is clear that, the Aryan people came in contact with the Pre-Aryan and Post-Aryan language communities in different age. Indian philologists gave importance to the spoken dialects rather than written artificial Sanskrit language. And may be, for this reason Prof. Chatterji divided Aryan languages like Udīcya, Pratīcya, Madhya-dēśīya, Prācya and Dākṣiṇātya as regional dialects originated from Spoken Dialect in one side and Literary Dialect on the other. Prof Chatterji mentioned Non-Aryan influence upon Aryan Language.

The basic theoretical conception followed the assumption that we are speaking an Aryan language, named Bengali. But our racial identity is that we are not that race who used Aryan as their Mother Tongue in the pre-historical age. This conception is no doubt miss-leading and contradictory.

Each and every language has its own structural features known as language system. This system is governed by internalized grammatical rules, which a native speaker bears mentally. This system inherited a native speaker of a particular language as his or her possession. This language habit is expressed by the utterance of a native speaker, which is unique in a word. Now it is clear that, the language habit mainly depends on the utterance or sound production of a particular language, mainly the language the native speaker acquired by birth and is accustomed with that speech. If we try to realize what Abul Kalam Manzur Morshed wanted to express in the following sentences, we shall find the reality. He wrote,

> "Though SCB is spoken by the bulk of the educated class both in contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal, there exist several divergent dialects of Bengali. Some of them, due to phonological and morphological differences, are not intelligible to SCB speakers." [Morshed: 1985: 5]

Such difference between Standard Colloquial Bengali [SCB] and farthermost regional dialects is not mutual intelligible due to something non-Aryan elements present in Bengali language. Let us assume that the speakers are governed by their internalized speaking habit, which may be non-Aryan habit of utterance or may be Aryan, and who is able to trace the origin?

We compared grammatical words and morphological features. The Scholars discussed word formation, sound change pattern etc. But we should compare Segmental, Supra-segmental pattern, Syntactic structures of Bengali language comparing with the Aryan and Non-Aryan languages. It is a fact that so many spoken words used by native Bengali speakers are disappearing from time to time. Still there are so many regional 'desi' words, and we failed to find out their source.

We accepted a dual opinion that, the Bengali as an Indo European language gradually took its modern form changing from time to time. But we considered those 'dēśi' words which have no Aryan background are the original Bengali language. Let us assume that, the speakers of Bengali language of different areas are using the words without knowing their language heritage.

I do not know the solution at all. The words are the leaves of a language. The substitution process can replace a word. But an internalized grammar retained. Therefore, the pronunciation systems, morphological features, syntactic structures of Bengali language in many times do not match with the Sanskrit grammar. I have discussed such syntactic relation of Bengali with non-Aryan languages in my book, "*Bangla Sangbartani Byakaran*" (The Bengali Transformational Grammar, 2016, pp 241-252).

Should we revise this genealogical tree which shows the origin of the Bengali language or prepare another root of the origin of Bengali language? I dare to say, how it will be possible? It is established long before by the eminent linguists that, the Bengali language is one of the modern Indo-European languages.

Moreover, those who are accepting Bengali as their Mother Tongue and following the phonological, morphological and syntactic rules of Bengali language are not Aryan. Prof. S. K. Chatterji noticed such rules afterwards. He wrote in his book "*Indianism and the Indian Synthesis*",

> "In most of the New Indo-Aryan languages, we note, as in Dravidian, the absence of the affix for the dative-accusative case for neuter or inanimate nouns." [Chatterji:1962 : 177]

Prof. Chatterji also noticed some syntactical rules present in Indo-European speech also are present in English and Sanskrit. He commented,

> "But New Indo-Aryan has completely abandoned this practice, and follows Dravidian (and Austric Kol) in having a new syntactical device with the ordinary (and the only) form of the adjective standing for both the comparative and superlative." [Chatterji:1962 : 177]

Is it true that they are rejecting the rules of their Mother Tongue, which they preserved as a native speaker? Assume it, that this process of language rejection of minor oral pre-Aryan language groups happened during the whole period after the Aryan speakers came in contact with those pre-Aryan minor language communities who had no writing system for their own. They gradually

adopted that language and accepted a writing system through accepting education. This process of transformation took long time.

At present we the people of India, speaking a dialect of Aryan language and do not know what our original linguistic identity is. Assume this is our irony of fate. Aryan language as a dominant language played a great role in killing oral languages. We should remember that Rabindranath Thakur wrote in his poem '*vangavira*' that, Maxmuller told, we are Aryan. On hearing this prestigious identity, leaving our work we are lying idle.

''মোক্ষমূলর বলেছে ''আর্য'',
সেই শুনে সব ছেড়েছি কার্য,
মোরা বড় বলে করেছি ধার্য,
আরামে পড়েছি শুয়ে।''[বঙ্গবীর, মানসী]

Though afterwards Maxmullar corrected his idea that, 'Aryan' is not a race, it is a name of a language family. Thank you.

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