

## *The Colonization of Bengali Language and Culture: A Study of the Colonial and Postcolonial Periods*

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**Abstract:** Linguistic and cultural domination is a powerful mechanism of control, and its analysis is essential to understanding the long-term effects of colonialism. Under British colonial rule, the imposition of English as the language of power and the introduction of Western culture marginalized the pride of Bengali language and culture, creating a class divide and fostering a sense of inferiority among the colonized. The Pakistan era further exacerbated these challenges, with efforts to impose Urdu sparking widespread resistance and culminating in the historic Language Movement of 1952. Despite systemic suppression, the resilience of the Bengali people in preserving their cultural identity manifested itself through intellectual, artistic, and grassroots efforts. By analyzing policies imposed by these ruling authorities, the research highlights the marginalization of the Bengali language and culture. It will also emphasize the social and cultural consequences of domination.

**Key Words:** Cultural and Linguistic Colonialism, Psychological Subjugation, Western Education, Bhadrakol Class, Language Movement.

### **Introduction**

Before the tragic event of Plassey (1757), no Indian ever thought that they would have to learn the language of the British merchant class. Before Plassey, it was the Europeans who learned Bengali for commercial purposes. However, this situation soon began to change, and circumstances reversed completely. From the 19th century, colonial subjects began to learn European languages, particularly English. There was government patronage, and the lure of employment too which led Bengalis to start learning the English language. Over time, the use of English language became a symbol of prestige, civilization, and power. Consequently, the colonizer's language established dominance over Bengali language and literature.

Language is inextricably linked to culture; they are interdependent.<sup>1</sup> Instead of fostering vibrant Bengali culture, a trend emerged towards the imitation of foreign cultures, particularly those of English origin. This trend was significantly facilitated by the direct support of the government and Christian missionaries. A powerful social class also emerged within society who played a significant role in fostering and promoting European culture. The profound impact of culture on the human psyche has been widely acknowledged. Cultural identity was lost and subjugation to the British occurred. However, through sustained efforts by writers, intellectuals, politicians, and the ordinary people of India as a whole, lost pride was gradually regained, leading to freedom from colonial rule in 1947. Yet, true independence was not achieved. The Pakistani government then imposed linguistic, cultural, and political oppression on East Bengal, igniting a powerful movement of resistance for freedom.

Colonial authorities in both the British and Pakistani periods systematically marginalized the Bengali language and culture through education, administration, and propaganda, fostering a pervasive sense of inferiority. While scholars such as Golam Murshid, Badruddin Umar, Shripantho, Rameshchandra Majumdar, Binoy Ghosh and many others wrote on the topic, they did not deeply analyze how language and culture were colonized and its long-term effect. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring:

- How Bengali language and culture was colonized during the British period and how their legacy continued till the Pakistan period.
- The long-term effects of this colonization on Bengali society and culture.

### **Methodology**

This article considers reports on language and education, particularly the Macaulay Report and the recommendations of the Nathan Commission, alongside contemporary newspapers

such as *Tattwabodhini* and other periodicals of the time, to understand the socio-economic context. Relevant books on contemporary history, language, and socio-culture have been reviewed. The research ensures factual accuracy through cross-checking with primary sources. Primarily employing a qualitative methodology, the study also incorporates some quantitative data. The analysis engages with intersecting perspectives like class, socio-economic conditions, and gender, to provide a comprehensive discussion.

### **Defining the Concept**

Cultural and linguistic colonialism refers to the process by which colonial powers impose their language and culture on the governed populations, devaluing their indigenous languages, cultures, thoughts and identities. A common characteristic observed in nearly all colonial contexts globally is the systematic and strategic imposition of the colonizer's language and culture upon the colonized populations. Colonial powers, over time, made deliberate and calculated efforts to extend their control beyond the economic and political spheres to encompass the very fabric of society. This involved a concerted effort to supplant or marginalize indigenous languages and cultural practices, often through the establishment of official languages, educational systems, and cultural institutions etc.

During British colonial rule in Bengal, along with political and economic exploitation, there was a systematic process of linguistic and cultural colonization. This was a deliberate and well-planned effort to suppress the native language and culture, leading to profound social and cultural effects on the people. Similarly, after the creation of Pakistan, a similar process of colonizing the Bengali language and culture took place, further marginalizing the identity of the Bengali people.

This process is deeply rooted in the sociology of power dynamics. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony highlights how ruling classes consolidate their dominance by

disseminating their language, culture, and ideology throughout society. This long-term process diminishes the value of the colonized people's languages and cultures, further entrenching the ruler's control over their identity and thought systems.<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, in his important work *Language and Symbolic Power*, studies how language relates to power.<sup>3</sup>

This pattern of linguistic and cultural colonization was not unique to Bengal; it also occurred in Africa, as described in the writings of Frantz Fanon, who explored the deep psychological impact of colonialism on native populations and their cultural identity. Frantz Fanon provides a profound analysis of cultural and linguistic colonialism, emphasizing its psychological and cultural ramifications. According to Fanon, this linguistic and cultural domination fosters a sense of inferiority, dismantling the colonized people's respect and confidence in their own culture.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explores these ideas further:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Evolution of Bengali Language and Literature Through Time:**

History shows that shifts in politics and governance have direct and indirect impact on language and literature. While Europe focused on creating art and literature based on religious ideas, Bengal produced rich, human-centric works like *Charyapada* and *Khana's Bachan (Khana's Sayings)*. However, the turmoil following the rise of the Sen dynasty disrupted this literary flourishing. Shortly thereafter,

invasions by foreign Muslim forces ushered in what is often referred to as the "dark age" of Bengali literature. The severity of this void in Bengali language and culture gave rise to a popular proverb: *Turki Nachan* ("Turkish Dance"), symbolizing disorder and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

After several centuries, Bengali language and literature began to revive, both through original works and translations. During this period religion significantly influenced literature. Examples include *Mangal Kavya*, translations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and Persian-inspired works like *Yusuf-Zulekha*, *Layli-Majnun*, and *Jangnamas* and biographies. Folk songs also gained popularity during this time. Writers and translators like Baru Chandidas, Kana Hari Dutt, Manik Dutt, Mukundaram Chakraborty, Bharatchandra Ray Gunakar, Syed Alaol, Chandrabati, and Daulat Qazi played key roles in this revival of Bengali literature.<sup>6</sup>

The arrival of Vasco da Gama in India marked the beginning of a sustained European presence on the subcontinent. Before establishing colony in India, Europeans had already begun learning the Bengali language for their own purposes. Indeed, many of the earliest texts on Bengali language learning were written by Europeans. The first printing press in the subcontinent was also introduced by Europeans (the Portuguese, in 1498). Manuel da Assumpção is credited with writing the first Bengali grammar book, *Vocaulario e Idioma Bengal e Portuguez; Dividido em Duas Partes*, published in Lisbon in 1743. Another European, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, authored *A Grammar of the Bengali Language*.<sup>7</sup> Charles Wilkins, often regarded as the father of Bengali typography, designed the Bengali script and established a Bengali printing press in Hooghly in 1778. The first Bengali prose work was published by the Serampore Mission in 1800. In 1800, Governor-General Lord Wellesley founded Fort William College in Calcutta.<sup>8</sup> The primary purpose of this institution was not to provide higher education to Indians but

to teach regional languages, particularly Bengali, to British and European officials.

### **The Colonization Process of Bengali Language and Culture during the British Period**

The linguistic and cultural colonization during British rule was a long-term, strategic effort by the ruling class, facilitated through the patronization of Western culture and the coexistence of natives with Europeans. The impact of an evolving economy, shifts in social structures, and psychological influences led to the erosion of pride in the Bengali language and culture, ultimately pushing them into the shadows of colonial rule, reinforcing the permanence of colonial dominance. In this research, I will analyze this process from two key aspects:

- The colonization of Bengali language through the systematic expansion of English and Western education.
- Cultural colonization shaped by European influence, the patronage of European culture, and, most importantly, its alignment with the capitalist economy.

#### **1. The Systematic Undermining of Indigenous Education and Language:**

Initially, the East India Company did not interfere significantly with local languages, education, or culture. For instance, while the government did sponsor the establishment of the Banaras Sanskrit College in 1791 and the Calcutta Madrasa in 1780, it did not interfere with their curricula. The situation, however, changed rapidly. The government systematically implemented measures that replaced the promotion of native language and education with the imposition of the rulers' language and western education. This was, in essence, a form of undermining indigenous linguistic and educational traditions. The following measures taken by the government illustrate how a gradual and

systematic approach was employed to colonize indigenous language, education, and culture.

- The Charter Act of 1813 marked a turning point, allocating £100,000 for the promotion of education in India. In 1824, it was declared that this fund would be used to promote western education.<sup>9</sup> Lord Macaulay's Minute of 1835 advocated for the teaching of western knowledge and the use of English as the official language in India.<sup>10</sup> It was also declared that those educated in English and western subjects would be given preference in government jobs. As a result, the demand for English education grew exponentially. Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay became the primary centers for English education. The Wood's Despatch of 1854 led to the establishment of universities in these three cities. While this despatch recommended the use of vernacular languages at the lower levels of education, English was mandated for higher education. Thus, the compulsion of English at higher levels indirectly led to an increased demand for English education at lower levels as well.<sup>11</sup>
- The growing demand for English, coupled with government patronage, led to the introduction of English language programs in various educational institutions. Calcutta Madrasa in 1824, Calcutta Sanskrit College in 1827, and Banaras College in 1830 established departments and seminars for English language instruction. The curriculum included works by Shakespeare, Bacon, John Milton, and other literary figures. East Bengal was not left behind in this trend. Schools teaching English were established in Dhaka during the same period.<sup>12</sup> In fact, when Dhaka University was founded in 1921, English was one of the twelve departments.<sup>13</sup> English served as the medium of instruction for all departments too, except those specifically focused on languages. This indicates

the pervasive influence of English in higher education during that time.

By making English mandatory in education and prioritizing those educated in western systems for jobs, the government effectively disregarded indigenous education. In place of native language, literature, and culture, European languages, literature, and culture gained prominence, which ultimately led to a sense of inferiority.

## **2. European Cultural Domination and Incorporation:**

Cultural colonization occurred in multiple dimensions, making its analysis highly complex. It operated in subtle ways while exerting far-reaching effects, particularly leaving a long-term psychological impact.

- From the outset of British East India Company rule, Calcutta emerged as one of the most populous and prominent commercial hubs. As the Company's trade expanded and its imperial dominion solidified, Calcutta experienced a corresponding surge in its European population, particularly British officers, administrators, and merchants. A significant portion of these British officers were posted to various remote regions of the country. Calcutta served as their primary destination for leisure and recreation, especially before Simla became a popular hill station. As the epicenter of British social life in India, Calcutta offered a plethora of entertainment options, including parties and clubs.<sup>14</sup> Gradually, this indulgence in luxurious lifestyles and entertainment-centered, club-centric European culture expanded its dominance over indigenous traditions and culture.
- Many of them married Indian women, contributing to a cultural blending. Between 1757 and 1800 alone, there were 1,581 such registered marriages in Bengal. As the European population in the region grew, the number of these marriages likely increased as well. Naturally, these unions gave rise to an Anglo-Indian



community. This generation, unsurprisingly, leaned more towards European culture, which dominated over native traditions in their lives.

<b>Category</b>	<b>At Calcutta (1757-1800)</b>	<b>At out-settlements</b>
Military Servants (Army & Navy)	262	472
Civil Servants	148	9
Medical Servants	14	4
Chaplains	2	-
Outside the service of the Company	299	8
Undetermined Case	349	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1074</b>	<b>507</b>

*Table: Showing Anglo-Indian marriages in Bengal during 1757-1800<sup>15</sup>*

- Many of the unmarried officers sought the company of local prostitutes. Their lifestyle had a profound, albeit indirect, impact on Bengali society. Contemporary newspapers reveal a rapid proliferation of prostitution in Calcutta. The moral decline of contemporary urban society becomes evident from the *Tattobodhini* newspaper published in 1846.<sup>16</sup> Europeans were more involved in this prostitution. “The presence of European and Eurasian prostitutes in Calcutta even more than Indian prostitutes seemed to engage the attention of the colonial authorities in 1870. In a detailed report given by an anonymous missionary gentleman, we find that of the 525 Christian women engaged in prostitution in Calcutta in 1871, the largest number were Europeans and Eurasians.”<sup>17</sup> Even educated young men were found to be entangled in the vices of prostitution and alcohol. As a result, in many contemporary literary works, Calcutta is described as a 'city of sin'.

Over time, the culture of individuals closely associated with the ruling class gradually asserted dominance over or blended

with indigenous traditions. This influence was not limited to the elite but trickled down to different layers of society, including middle and lower-tier families. The allure of European customs, luxury, and entertainment gradually seeped into everyday life, altering perceptions of status and modernity. As a result, traditional values and practices were either sidelined or reshaped under the influence of colonial ideals, ultimately creating a cultural landscape where indigenous identity was increasingly overshadowed.

### **The long-term Effects**

Colonial rule in India brought profound changes to Bengali society, particularly through the introduction of English education and western cultural influences. While the British intended to create a class loyal to their rule, this exposure also led to significant shifts in intellectual thought, social structures, and cultural identity. The emergence of a western-educated elite reshaped ideas of progress and reform, but it also created a disconnection between them and the masses. Simultaneously, the adoption of European lifestyles gave rise to hybrid cultural forms, such as the extravagant yet superficial Babu culture. The following discussion examines these effects from two key aspects:

#### **1. The Influence of English Education on Indian**

**Intellectuals:** The primary objective behind the colonial government's promotion of English education and western knowledge was to cultivate an educated class that would serve as a foundation for their rule. This was achieved through two primary means: a) directly creating a class of clerks to fill lower-level government positions and b) fostering a psychological allegiance to the British. The latter strategy proved to be more enduring. This educated class, deeply influenced by English culture and thought, would become ardent supporters of the empire.

- The government's strategy was highly successful. English education gave rise to a new middle class and elite, who were employed in various professions and

businesses.<sup>18</sup> Emerging from the early 19th century, this class became the bearers and propagators of English language and culture. Sociologists have termed them the 'bhadralok' (gentlemen). They are primarily associated with urban-based lifestyles. Iftikhar Iqbal has also mentioned the presence of 'bhadralok' in rural society, who were linked to landownership. He provides a list of these individuals based on census reports.<sup>19</sup>

<b>Division</b>	<b>1901</b>	<b>1911</b>	<b>1921</b>	<b>1931</b>
Burdwan	634,175	674,031	658,352	746,632
Presidency	565,066	614,038	696,886	807,410
Rajshahi	133,543	153,277	180,195	205,355
Dhaka	608,653	655,232	769,907	861,696
Chittagong	264,925	302,363	384,865	511,325

*Table: Bhadralok population in the Bengal delta.*

- Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) was a pioneer in promoting English education among Bengalis. He authored *Bengali Grammar in the English Language* (1826) to facilitate English language learning. He wrote 33 English books in 14 years (1815 to 1829).<sup>20</sup> During the debates about the merits of indigenous versus western education, Rammohan advocated for English education, arguing that Sanskrit would hinder India's progress. He believed that interaction with the English could lead to India's advancement.
- Contemporary and subsequent figures like Tarachand Chakrabarti, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay were products of this western-educated class. They not only learned English and adopted English culture but also contributed significantly to literature.<sup>21</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, the most influential writer of the 20th century, also wrote in English, publishing works like

*Personality and The Religion of Man*. He won the Nobel Prize for his English translation of *Gitanjali, Song Offerings*. Among the Muslims who played a significant role in the expansion of western education, the names of Nawab Abdul Latif and Syed Amir Ali stand out prominently.

- Madhusudan Dutt went beyond merely learning English; he converted to Christianity and adopted the name 'Michael'. Lalbihari also embraced Christianity. However, despite his deep admiration for English language and literature, and his aspirations to establish himself in England, Michael Madhusudan Dutt was disappointed to find that the English did not embrace him as wholeheartedly as he had embraced their language, culture, and religion. This disillusionment is evident in his poetry

'বঙ্গভাষা'

হে বঙ্গ, ভাঙারে তব বিবিধ রতন;-  
 তা সবে, (অবোধ আমি!) অবহেলা করি,  
 পর-ধন-লোভে মত্ত, করিনু ভ্রমণ  
 পরদেশে, ভিক্ষাবৃত্তি কৃষ্ণণে আচারি।  
 কাটাইনু বহু দিন সুখ পরিহারি!  
 অনিদ্রায়, অনাহারে, সঁপি কায়, মনঃ,  
 মজিনু বিফল তপে অবরোগ্যে বরি:-  
 কেলিনু শৈবালে, ভুলি কমল-কানন!  
 যল্পে তব কুললক্ষ্মী কয়ে দিলা পরে,-  
 “ওরে বাছা, মাতৃকোষে রতনের রাজি,  
 এ ভিখারী-দশা তবে কেন তোর আজি?  
 যা ফিরি, অজ্ঞান তুই, যা রে ফিরি ঘরে।”  
 পালিলাম আজ্ঞা সুখে; পাইলাম কালে  
 মাতৃভাষা-রূপ খনি, পূর্ণ মণিজালো॥

This poem reflects how neglect of one's own language led to a figurative taste of begging. The scarcity of historical records makes it difficult to ascertain the extent to which this phenomenon affected other individuals like Michael.<sup>22</sup>

- However, these intellectuals, through engagement with western thought, spearheaded a period of cultural and intellectual renewal in Bengal. This "Renaissance" differed significantly from its European counterpart. Rammohan Roy, a prominent figure in social reform, authored "Prabartak O Nibartaker Sambad" and "Goswami Shahit Bichar" to denounce the practice of Sati (widow immolation), achieving considerable success.<sup>23</sup> In 1829, the government outlawed this practice. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar subsequently led the movement to legalize widow remarriage, culminating in the passage of a government act in 1856. Many intellectuals also voiced their opposition to the confinement of women, but the extent of their success is still a topic for research, particularly from a class perspective. During the time when laws such as the Sati Act or the Widow Remarriage Act were enacted, there was widespread peasant discontent in both East and West Bengal, particularly against the zamindars (landlords) and mahajans (moneylenders). This unrest sometimes escalated into significant, yet often isolated, armed struggles between the oppressors and the oppressed, like the Great Revolt and the Indigo Rebellion. However, a key question arises: what role did the newly educated, elite class play during this time?
- While Rammohan Roy spoke out against the practice of Sati, it was during this time that the Faraizi movement and Titumir's movement was taking place. These movements were basically driven by peasant resistance against exploitation and excessive taxation by the zamindars, not religious causes.<sup>24</sup> In this

context, what was Rammohan's role? Rather than offering support to these movements, Rammohan Roy remained silent. In fact, he directly supported the indigo planters.<sup>25</sup> In 1813, during a meeting in Calcutta's Town Hall with Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasannakumar Tagore, he stated that the more interactions and trade we have with European-educated 'bhadralok', the more our society, literature, and politics will flourish.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, he expressed that in any native resistance against the British, he hoped the British would emerge victorious. The British may have seen him as non-threatening and thus provided him opportunities to speak in the British Parliament.<sup>27</sup> Possibly he adopted only the ideas of monotheism and women's rights from western culture, but not the liberty.

Later, during the 1857 revolt (or the First War of Indian Independence) and the Indigo Revolt, the educated middle class, or the new elite, did not side with the locals. In fact, many members of this class opposed them. This also indicates how much disconnected they were from the feelings and struggles of common people. Consequently, while western society and its reforms influenced them, the revolutionary ideals of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" from the French Revolution never truly resonated with them.

**2. The Rise of Hybrid Cultural Forms and Social Degradation:** We can observe a direct influence of European culture on Bengali society, mostly in urban areas. The impact of British culture on indigenous traditions and lifestyles, along with the blind imitation of British language and customs is most prominently observed in the Babu class of Calcutta. In the mid-19th century, a new cultural phenomenon known as the Babu culture emerged in Calcutta. The Babus, as they were called, rose to prominence due to the changing economic landscape and their subsequent wealth.<sup>28</sup> In his work,

"Nababābūbilās", Bhabānīcharan Bandyopādhyāy provided one of the earliest accounts of these Calcutta



elites. After coming into contact with Europeans, they adopted the European lifestyle, choosing to embrace its customs and values. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from their native roots, they adopted distinct clothing styles and, like the British, often attended parties, drank alcohol, and returned home late in the night.

Figure: Shod in shoes, draped in a dhoti, adorned with a turban, and carrying an umbrella the quintessential Bengali Babu clerk.<sup>29</sup>

The Babus were synonymous with aristocracy in Calcutta society, and their lifestyle was characterized by excessive spending and luxury. Their religious festivities, such as pujas, were elaborate affairs, often announced well in advance with much fanfare, including newspaper advertisements. These extravagant displays were not motivated by religious piety but rather by a desire for social prestige and recognition.<sup>30</sup>

Despite their efforts, the Babus were not able to speak English fluently like the English 'bhadralok'. They would

frequently use English words in their conversations, not just with foreigners, but with their fellow countrymen as well. Their imperfect pronunciations, often incorrect and comical, became the subject of ridicule by contemporary writers.<sup>31</sup>

The blind imitation of the English and the outward display of their culture were not confined to the Babu class alone; their influence extended to the younger generation of the time. The youth flattered the Babus, just as the Babus ingratiated themselves with the British officials. This dynamic was not one-sided. While the British often treated the Babus with disdain, the Babus mirrored this behavior by mistreating their fellow countrymen. Much like the British viewed Indians with contempt, the Babus and those in their orbit looked down upon the less affluent and rural populations. They even neglected the language and occasional coarse expressions used by their household workers, particularly women who had migrated from villages.

Reports from contemporary newspapers reveal that even religious leaders were not immune to their influence. Hindu priests, who could barely read sacred texts, often succumbed to the lure of money, conducting rituals for material gain. From consuming beef to spending nights with prostitutes, the Babus engaged in various acts that defied social norms. They legitimized their every vice, making their unethical practices a defining feature of their lifestyle.<sup>32</sup>

The influx of people into Calcutta had a significant impact on both family and social bonds. The patterns of migration to Calcutta during that time reveal a vivid picture. Gradually, their ties with rural society began to erode, leading to a growing disconnection. In many cases, familial bonds also started to fracture, reflecting the strain of changing dynamics.<sup>33</sup> This cultural and social decline weakened the foundation of our collective identity, leaving a profound impact on our thoughts, perceptions, and intellectual framework. The erosion of moral values further amplified this degradation, intensifying its influence on the fabric of society.



## **Postcolonial Experience**

The independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 brought the partition of India, creating two states: India and Pakistan. Pakistan was conceived as a homeland for Muslims and divided into two geographically separated regions West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The act of cultural suppression, paired with systemic discrimination and economic exploitation, fueled widespread dissatisfaction in East Pakistan. The discontent evolved into a powerful movement for autonomy, culminating in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

- 1. The Movement for Language:** In the newly formed state of Pakistan, the first blow to East Bengal came in the form of an attack on its language. Even before the independence, conspiracies against the Bengali language had begun.<sup>34</sup> From 1947, the central government of Pakistan, led by minister, Fazlur Rahman, initiated efforts to marginalize the Bengali language, aiming to impose colonial control over it. Despite resistance, they continued their efforts to write Bengali in the Arabic script.<sup>35</sup> The ruling class began incorporating Urdu alongside English in vital areas such as postage stamps, currency, and train tickets. This imposition extended to job examinations, where questions were set in Urdu and English, clearly disadvantaging Bengali-speaking candidates. Students and intellectuals realized the long-term discrimination this would entail, sparking widespread opposition.<sup>36</sup> In 1948, Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared Urdu as the state language, and in 1952, Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin reiterated this declaration. In protest, students and people from all walks of life rose up in resistance. The world witnessed a blood-soaked event on February 21, 1952.

## 2. Cultural Repression Under Religious Pretexts:

The ruling class not only attacked the Bengali language under the guise of religion but also targeted Bengali literature and culture. They repeatedly labeled Kazi Nazrul Islam as a poet of Islamic ideology and Rabindranath Tagore as a poet of Hinduism. However, they failed to acknowledge that Nazrul and Tagore shared a deep respect for each other, as evidenced by their dedication of books to one another.

The political repression extended to cultural celebrations, such as obstructing the centenary celebration of Rabindranath Tagore in 1961. During the 1965 Pakistan-India war, the government banned the broadcast of *Rabindra sangeet* (songs by Tagore) on radio and television, further suppressing Bengali cultural expression. In 1967, the debate over *Rabindra sangeet* escalated, with some Pakistan-backed intellectuals claiming that it was contrary to Pakistan's cultural values, leading to its official ban in August 1967.<sup>37</sup>

The government also attempted to suppress centuries-old Bengali traditions. For example, during the 1967 budget session, a member of the National Assembly declared the celebration of *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year) as part of Hindu culture, despite its origins during Emperor Akbar's reign. Similarly, the annual tradition of drawing *alpana* (decorative floor art) on the streets to honor the language martyrs on February 21 was restricted, with the government citing it as a Hindu practice and banning Muslims from participating.

But Bengali artists, intellectuals, and students all protested against these colonial efforts. Artists continued to paint *alpana* as a form of resistance. Cultural groups like Chhayanaut, Bulbul Lalitkala Academy, and Oikyotan protested the ban on Rabindra sangeet by organizing concerts and performances, defying the government's repression.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, these efforts to suppress Bengali culture were

defeated with the 1969 mass uprising and the 1971 Liberation War, marking the end of the cultural and linguistic repression.

### **Concluding Note**

Bengali language and culture have consistently faced challenges both before and after the Partition of India. Throughout this period, governing powers attempted to colonize Bengali language and culture in several ways to serve their own political and social agendas. A primary tactic employed in this effort was the imposition of a dominant language as the official medium of instruction, education and administration, effectively marginalizing the native tongue. This strategy manifested in the adoption of English during the British colonial period and, subsequently, Urdu during the Pakistan era. During British rule, the active promotion of European culture significantly impacted Bengali society, influencing its festivals, ethical values, and even individual identity. Blind imitation of British culture diminished self-esteem and intellect. It was not until the late 19th century that independent-minded individuals emerged to challenge this. Following Partition and the creation of Pakistan, a new form of cultural colonization emerged. The use of Islam as a tool to justify restrictions on Bengali festivals and cultural expressions created further obstacles to the free practice and evolution of these traditions.

From the very inception of Pakistan's independence in 1947, a powerful resistance movement arose in response to linguistic and cultural aggressions. This movement was characterized by widespread and spontaneous participation from individuals across all segments of Bengali society, demonstrating a deep commitment to preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. This early resistance laid the groundwork for future struggles to protect and promote the Bengali language and cultural heritage.

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