

ELŻBIETA WALTER
(University of Warsaw)

On the Incompatibility of the Bengali Script and Pronunciation

Abstract

The Bengali language has its own syllabic script. However, it was originally invented to write Sanskrit. Therefore, as regards its concept and structure, it is a true copy of the *Deva-nāgarī* script, which is one of the most excellent systems of writing, suited perfectly to the phonetics of Sanskrit. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same in the case of Bengali. The Bengali script and pronunciation do not always go hand in hand with each other. In some cases, the discrepancies between the script and pronunciation are very great. As a result, reading Bengali can sometimes be very difficult (especially for foreigners). The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the differences between the Bengali script and its pronunciation system, by example of the notation of vowels, semivowels, diphthongs, consonants and consonant clusters.

The Bengali language has its own syllabic script. Syllabic means that each character for a consonant carries an inherent vowel [ɔ], sometimes pronounced as [o], and this phenomenon will be discussed below as a flagship example of the incompatibility of this script and Bengali pronunciation.

In the history of the Bengali writing system, we can distinguish four stages of development: Proto-Bengali, Old Bengali, Premodern Bengali and Modern Bengali (Dimitrov 2002: 29). The Modern Bengali script is the outcome of the evolution of the Proto-Bengali script. In the 15-16th century, the Bengali alphabet was already fully developed. The modern script was formalised in 1778 when Charles Wilkins introduced printing in Bengali. In the 19th century a few characters were modernised and as a result of the introduction of printing the Bengali characters received their contemporary standard shapes. As for the origin of the Bengali script, the scholars can only agree that it comes from the *Brāhmī* script, which is the ancestor of most of the Indian alphabets. About the details of that process scholarly opinions vary. For example, according to Bühler (Diringer 1972: 361) the Proto-Bengali script evolved from a variant of *Nāgarī* used towards the end of the 11th century in eastern India. On the other hand, S.N. Chakravarti (Chakravarti 1938: 351-381) believes that the development of the Bengali writing system

took an independent road. According to him, from the eastern variant of the monumental North Indian script known as *Gupta* two branches evolved: eastern and western. From the western variety the *Siddha-māṭṛkā* script originated, and from that the *Nāgarī* script, also called *Deva-nāgarī*, which was used to write Sanskrit, while the eastern branch developed independently from the 7th to 9th century, gradually taking on features of the Proto-Bengali script, which came into being in the 10th century. One cannot, however, exclude some influence of *Nāgarī* on the Proto-Bengali script.

The Bengali script was originally invented to write Sanskrit.¹ Therefore, as regards its concept and structure, it is a true copy of the *Deva-nāgarī* script, which is one of the most excellent systems of writing, suited perfectly to the phonetics of Sanskrit. Unfortunately, one cannot say the same in the case of Bengali. The Bengali script and pronunciation do not always go hand in hand with each other. Divergences must surely have already been present at the period when the Proto-Bengali script was being formed, and with time, while the language developed, they even broadened. In some cases, the discrepancies between script and pronunciation are very great. As a result, reading Bengali might sometimes be very difficult (especially for foreigners).

It should also be mentioned that not only were *tat-samas* (Sanskrit words) written according to the Sanskrit orthographic rules, but “the ghost of Sanskrit” also haunted Bengali words (*tad-bhava*). For example, the Bengali relative pronouns ‘which, what type of’ and the verb ‘to go’, written in the beginning as জে, জাহা, জিনি and জাওআ later on adopted the consonant য *ya* instead of জ *ja* because of the Sanskrit relative pronoun *yad* ‘which, what type of’, and the verb √*ya*, ‘to go, move’ (Chatterji 1975: 227).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the differences between the Bengali script and its pronunciation system, by example of the notation of vowels, semivowels, diphthongs, consonants and consonant clusters.

Vowels

In the Bengali alphabet there are nine letters representing vowels: অ, আ, ই, ঈ, ও, উ, ঊ, এ, ঐ, however in Standard Colloquial Bengali there are only seven vowels: [ɔ], [a], [i], [o], [u], [e], [æ]. The difference comes from the fact that, firstly, in the Bengali language there is no notion of vowel length, the single vowel [u] responds to the letters উ and ঊ, and one vowel [i] to the letters ই and ঈ. It does not mean, however, that there are no long vowels in the Bengali language. Each vowel can be pronounced long but length is not its distinctive feature. Words of one syllable, when isolated, have their vowel long, but when these words are made longer by the addition of inflections or affixes, they become short. For example, words such as দিন *din* [di:n] ‘a day’, গঁদ *gōd* [gō:d] ‘gum’, বোন *bon* [bo:n] ‘a sister’, মা *mā* [ma:] ‘a mother’ have the vowel long. But

¹ There are only three new letters in Bengali that are not found in the *Deva-nāgarī* script: ড় *ṛa*, ঢ় *ṛha*, ঞ *ya*.

with an inflexion suffix their vowels will be short, for example দিনের *diner* [diner] ‘of a day’ or গঁদে *gōde* [gōde] ‘in gum’.

Secondly, the pronunciation of the Sanskrit vowel represented by ঋ *r* has changed. In Bengali it lost its syllabic sonorant feature. Nowadays it is pronounced as [ri] – a combination of the consonant [r] and the vowel [i], and its presence results in gemination of the preceding consonant, for example the word অমৃত *amṛta* is pronounced as [ommrito].

Towards the end of the Middle Bengali period there appeared however a new vowel – [æ] that did not have its own letter in the Bengali alphabet and was present only in word-initial position. Most often to represent it in an absolute word-initial position, the letter এ is used, more seldom the letter অ্যা (generally in English words), while after consonants one can use ষ, ঞ or ঙ. We see thus that the same letter এ or ষ represents two different vowels [e] and [æ], for example the word দেশ *deś* ‘a country’ is pronounced [de:ʃ], but the word খেলা *khelā* ‘a play, game’ is pronounced as [kʰæla]. Other examples: একা *ekā* [ækā] ‘one; alone’, but একটি *ekṭi* [ekʈi] ‘one’. There exist, of course, rules governing when to pronounce the characters এ or ষ as [æ], but they are complicated and have many exceptions. It is not the place here to present them as we only want to point out the problem.

The second letter that has a double pronunciation is অ, whose case is even more complex as this letter represents the vowel inherent to each consonant character. Theoretically, this is the vowel [ɔ], but in the Bengali language there is a tendency to pronounce it as [o], although this pronunciation does not find its way into the orthography, for example the word পট *paṭ* ‘a canvas for painting’ is pronounced as [pɔ:ʈ] but the word পটি *paṭi* ‘a bandage’ is pronounced [poʈi]. Similarly, the word মশা *maśā* ‘a mosquito’ is pronounced [mɔʃa] but the word মসী *masī* is pronounced as [moʃi]. In these particular examples the changes of pronunciation are results of the application of the rule of vowel harmony, but in other examples the pronunciation of the vowel [ɔ] as [o] is not that obvious. For example the word ভাল *bhālā* ‘good’ is pronounced [bʰalo] in compliance with the rule of the Standard Colloquial Bengali requiring all final [ɔ] to become [o] and with the fact that in the majority of disyllabic adjectives the word-final [ɔ] is pronounced as [o].

With the vowel [ɔ] there is also another problem, namely in the Modern Bengali Language it is generally not pronounced in word-final position, even though at the end of a word there is no *hasanta* whose task is to mark the absence of this vowel, for example the words হাত *hāt* ‘a hand’ [ɦa:ʈ], আকাশ *ākāś* ‘a sky’ [akaʃ] are pronounced without word-final [ɔ]. There are however some exceptions to this rule. Thus the vowel [ɔ] is pronounced in word-final position in the following cases (we should remember that the pronunciation is always [o]): when it is proceeded by a consonant cluster; when the proceeding syllable ends with *anusvāra* or *visarga*; when the word ends in -ঈ, -ঊ, -হ. These are only some of the rules of the word-final pronunciation of the vowel [ɔ]. Examples: কর্ম *karma* [kɔrmo] ‘a work’, হংস *haṁsa* [ɦɔŋʃo] ‘drake’, দুঃখ *duḥkha* [dukkʰo] ‘sorrow’, প্রিয় *priya* [prijo] ‘a beloved person’, গাঢ় *gārha* [ga:ʈʰo] ‘thick’, দেহ *deha* [deʃʰo] ‘a body’.

In the Bengali language one finds words of identical spelling but with different pronunciation, for example কাল *kāl* ‘black’ is pronounced as [kalo], but in the sense of ‘time’ it is pronounced without the final vowel, i.e. [ka:l]; similarly the word মত *mat* in the meaning of ‘similar to’ is pronounced as [mɔto], however in the sense of ‘opinion’ – [mɔ:t]. To avoid misunderstanding, different spelling has recently been introduced: কালো ‘black’, মতো ‘similar to’.

Semivowels

In the Bengali language there are four semivowels, but only one of them has its own letter: [ɔ̃] = ঝ. The other semivowels are represented by characters representing vowels: to represent the semivowel [i̯] the letter ই is used, to represent the semivowel [ɔ̃] the letter ও, while the semivowel [u̯] is represented by the letter উ. Semivowels occur in the Bengali language as the second component of a diphthong. The Bengali language possesses a large number of diphthongs (various scholars give various numbers, let us assume here that there are sixteen of them), although in the alphabet there are only two separate letters for them. The application of characters representing vowels to stand for diphthongs may result – though these are quite rare cases – in inaccuracy of pronunciation, for example not knowing the context of the word পাই *pāi* one can pronounce it as [pai] or [paj]. The word pronounced as [pai] means ‘the very leg’ and is a compound of the word পা *pā* [pa:] ‘a leg’ and an emphatic particle ই [i], meaning that it is just the leg that we are talking about, and the combination of আই *āi* [ai] does not form a diphthong. By contrast, the word পাই *pāi* pronounced as [paj] means ‘I get’ and it is the first person of the verb ‘to get’ in the simple present tense.

Moreover, two Bengali semivowels appear in the form of euphonic glides: the semivowel [ɔ̃] as an euphonic glide is written with the letter ঝ, while the semivowel [ɔ̃] with letters ও, ঔ, and ঞ. Examples: মায়া *māyā* [maja] ‘illusion’, হাওয়া *hāoyā* [ḥawa] ‘air, wind’, কুয়ো *kuṇyo* [kuwo] ‘a well’.

Consonants

In the Bengali language there are thirty five letters representing consonants, while the number of consonants is thirty. Some characters representing consonants are of identical pronunciation, for example জ *j* and ঞ *y* are pronounced as the consonant [j]; শ *ś*, ষ *ṣ*, and স *s* (with a few exceptions) are pronounced as the consonant [ʃ]; ন *n*, ণ *ṇ* and ঞ *ṇ* as the consonant [n]; ত *t* and ঠ *ṭ* as the consonant [t].

On the other hand, two letters have a double pronunciation: the consonant ঞ *ṇ* is in general pronounced as alveolar [n], but in the word মিনা *miṇā* it is pronounced as a nasalised semivowel [ɔ̃] (or more precisely a glide) – [miṇ̃a]. While the letter স *s* is in general pronounced as a postvelar [ʃ], and in some cases it is pronounced as

alveolar [s]. This is the case, for example, in careful pronunciation of English words and in consonant clusters before *t, th, n, r, l, k, kh, p, ph*. The rules are however very complicated because the pronunciation depends on the position in a word, for example স্থান *sthān* [stʰa:n] ‘a place’, স্নান *snān* [sna:n] ‘a bath’, অশ্লীল *aślīl* [ɔsslil] ‘obscene’ (though in the latter case the pronunciation [ɔʃʃlil] is also possible), ঋদ্ধ *skandha* [skondʰo] ‘a shoulder’, but নমস্কার *namaskār* [nomoʃkar/nomoʃkar] ‘a salute’.

It should also be noted that two Bengali letters, ন *n* and স *s*, though they are spoken of as *dantya* ‘dental’ are never pronounced as dental but postalveolar.

Consonant clusters

Most problems are related to the pronunciation of consonant clusters. In most cases they are pronounced by articulating their components one by one. There are, however, some ligatures which have specific pronunciation rules, among them ligatures ক্ষ *kṣa* and জ্ঞ *jñā*, as well as the ligatures of which the first component is the consonant হ *h*.

Ligature ক্ষ is theoretically a combination of letters ক্ + ষ *k+ṣa*, the phonetic value of which in Sanskrit is [kʃa]. However, in Bengali the pronunciation of this cluster has changed and its value is that of ক্+খ, therefore it behaves as a conjunct of the letter ক্ *kh* with so-called য-ফলা *ya-phalā*, (see below). In word-initial position it is pronounced as [kʰ], for example ক্ষুধা *kṣudhā* [kʰudʰa] ‘hunger’, while medially and in word-final position as [kkʰ], for example পক্ষ *pakṣa* [pokkʰo] ‘a wing; a side’.

Ligature জ্ঞ is the conjunct of letters জ্ + ঞ *j+ñā*, and in Sanskrit it is pronounced as [jña], e.g. [jña:na] ‘cognition, knowledge’. In Bengali, the character behaves like a conjunct of গ্+য *g+y* with the following vowel nasalised. So in word-initial position it is pronounced as [gɛ̃], e.g. জ্ঞান *jñān* [gɛ̃:n], but in medial position and at the end of a word its pronunciation is [gg], e.g. আজ্ঞা *ājñā* [aggã]. There are, however, some exceptions, e.g. the word বিজ্ঞান *vijñān* ‘a science’ is pronounced as [biggɛ̃n]. One should pay attention to the nasalisation of a contiguous vowel in the pronunciation of this conjunct.

The rules of the pronunciation of consonant conjuncts are very complicated when their first element is the letter হ *h*. If the second component of the ligature is the letter ণ *ṇa*, ন *na*, ম *ma* or ল *la*, the ligature may be pronounced in two ways: [ɦ] may come after the consonant which it precedes in writing, or is silent itself while doubling the connected consonant, e.g. the word অপরাহ্ন *aparāhṇa* ‘an afternoon’ may be pronounced [ɔporanɦo] or [ɔporanno], while the word ব্রাহ্মণ *brāhmaṇ* ‘a brahman’ as [bramɦon] or [brammon]. The ligature হ্ *h + y* is pronounced in the initial syllable as [ɦɛ̃], in others as [ɦʃʰ], e.g. হ্যাঁ *hyā* [ɦɛ̃:], ‘yes’, সহ্য *sahya* [ɦoɦʃʰo] ‘endurable’. Whereas the ligature হ্ *h + v* is pronounced as [qʊʰ] or [qʃ], e.g. আহ্বান *āhvān* ‘an invitation, a call’ may be pronounced as [aʊʊʰan] or [aʊʃan].

Some letters occur as the second element of consonant conjuncts in the form called *phalā*, which means ‘a consonantal symbol added to another letter’. They modify the preceding consonant, and sometimes even the contiguous vowel. In the form of *phalā* one

can see: ম *ma*, য *ya*, ব *va*, র *ra* and ল *la*. The two former ones behave in a very similar way: in the initial syllable they are silent but modify the contiguous vowel, e.g. *ma-phalā* may (but it is not a rule) cause nasalisation of the contiguous vowel, e.g. শাশান *śmaśān* [ʃaʃan/ʃāʃan], and *ya-phalā* modifies the following [ɔ] or [a] into [æ], e.g. ব্যস্ত *vyasta* [bæsto] ‘busy’. On the other hand *va-phalā* is silent in the initial syllable of the word and does not bring about any changes of the contiguous vowel, e.g. দ্বার *dvār* [da:r] ‘a door’. By contrast, *ra-phalā* and *la-phalā* in the initial syllable of the word are pronounced in the order of their occurrence. They do not bring about any changes to the contiguous vowel either, e.g. প্রতি *prati* [proti] ‘every, each’, ক্লেশ *kleś* [kle:ʃ] ‘a trouble, sorrow’. In word-medial position all the above-mentioned *phalās* make the preceding consonant doubled in pronunciation, e.g. পদ্ম *padma* [pɔddɔ] ‘a lotus’, গদ্য *gadya* [goddɔ] ‘prose’, অশ্ব *aśva* ‘a horse’, শত্রু *śatru* [ʃottɾu] ‘an enemy’, শুক্ল *śukla* [ʃukklo] ‘bright’.

Gemination of the (preceding) consonant may also be caused by the letter ঞ which has the phonetic value of [ri], as well as by *reph* – the sign of the Bengali consonant letter indicating the preceding [r] sound (in this case it is gemination of the following consonant), e.g. দৰ্প *[dɔr(p)po]* ‘vanity’. It is considered, however, that this gemination is partial – that is why it is marked in brackets.

Visarga

One should also pay attention to *visarga*. In the Bengali language it is only pronounced at the end of a word in exclamations, e.g. আহ *āḥ* [a:h]. In a medial position it is silent but its influence appears in gemination of the following consonant, e.g. দুঃখ *duḥkha* [dukkʰo] ‘sorrow’. At the end of a word it is not pronounced either, but it does not cause gemination of the consonant, it just changes the pronunciation of the contiguous vowel [ɔ] into [o], e.g. ক্রমশঃ *kramaśaḥ* [kromoʃo] ‘gradually’.

Conclusion

On the ground of the above-mentioned examples it becomes obvious that the Bengali script is not compatible with its pronunciation. The same vowels and consonants are represented by various letters, while in turn some letters may have various pronunciations. The pronunciation of consonant conjuncts, especially of those with *phalās* is very complicated. As for orthography, it is definitely much easier for people (and particularly in writing of the Sanskrit *tat-sama* words) who have some knowledge of Sanskrit. Otherwise, the name of the goddess Sarasvati সরস্বতী *Sarasvatī* [ʃɔroʃʃoti] might be written in several ways, e.g. স্বরস্বতী *Svaraśvatī*, সরস্বতী *Saraśvatī*, স্বরস্যতী *Svarasyatī*, শরস্বতী *Śarasvatī*, স্বরশ্বতী *Svaraśvatī*.

A knowledge of Sanskrit does not help, however, in the correct pronunciation of Bengali words. For this one needs to know some rules, which unfortunately, as we have

seen, have lots of exceptions. Bengali pronunciation is one of the most troublesome issues in mastering the Bengali language, and most difficult are the pronunciation rules not represented in writing, first of all the pronunciation of the vowel [ɔ], which theoretically is inherently present in every consonant as [o].

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