

HISTORY OF BENGALI LITERATURE

History of Bengali literature may be divided into three main periods: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern.

The different periods may be dated as follows:

1. Ancient period from 650-1200.
2. Medieval period from 1200-1800,
3. And the modern period from 1800 to the present.

❖ **Ancient period (650-1200):**

1. **Ancient period** The conquest of Bengal by the Mauryas in the 3rd century BC led to the spread of Aryan languages in the Bengal delta. The [bangla language](#), however, developed from [prakrit](#), through [apabhrangsha](#) and [abahattha](#) and outside the direct influence of Aryan languages.
2. The earliest extant specimens of ancient Bengal are the 47 spiritual hymns now known as [charyapada](#) composed by Buddhist monks.

❖ **The medieval period (1200-1800) :**

The medieval period may again be divided into three periods:

1. **Early medieval**-also known as the period of transition- from 1200-1350;
 2. **High medieval** from 1350-1700, including the pre-Chaitanya period from 1350-1500 and the Chaitanya period from 1500-1700;
 3. And **late medieval** from 1700-1800.
- 1) **Early medieval: Period of transition (1201-1350)** The anecdotes, rhymes and sayings of [dak](#) and [khana](#) may be dated to this period. The Apabhramsa of the *Charyapada* became more Bangla in character. Among the specimens of this period is Ramai Pandit's narrative poem [shunyapurana](#) (13th-14th century). Another example of early Bangla is a collection of lyrical poems in Apabhramsa entitled *Prakrtapaingala*.
 - 2) **High medieval: Pre-Chaitanya period (1350-1500)** During this period, Bangla literature developed in three main areas: [vaisnava literature](#), Mangala literature and translation literature. This period also saw the beginning of Muslim Bangla literature in the form of romantic and narrative poems. The greatest of Vaishnava writers was the poet Baru Chandidas (14th century) who rendered [jaydev's](#) Sanskrit lyrics about [radha](#) and [krishna](#) into Bangla. The names of several poets who went by the name of [chandidas](#) have been found in the Middle Ages: Adi Chandidas, Kavi Chandidas, Dvija Chandidas and Dina Chandidas. **Chaitanya era (1500-1700)** [sri chaitanya](#) not only introduced the Gaudiya school of Vaishnavism in Bengal, but also inspired a powerful group of writers to write biographies about him,
 - 3) **Late Medieval period (1700-1800)** The close of the medieval period was in many ways a period of decline. The decline of the Mughal Empire, the inroads of the European trading powers and the establishment of the British halted the natural flow of literary creation. However, the tradition of Vaishnava literature, mangalkavya, and translation work continued. The main literary productions of the period include padavali and mangalkavya.

❖ **Modern period (1800-Present):**

(Introductory Points)The modern period of Bangla literature is usually dated from the foundation of Fort William College in 1800. The distinguishing features of Bangla literature of this period were:

1. The rise and development of powerful prose literature;
2. The influence of Sanskrit scholars on prose during the first half of the 19th century;
3. The influence of western literature;
4. The diversification of subjects;
5. The rise of periodical literature;
6. The elevation of colloquial language to the status of a literary language;
7. The development of new poetic genres. The writers of this period were inspired by the ideal of creating a universal, eternal and independent literature.

(Dated Short Points) The modern period :

The modern period begins in 1800 and can again be divided into six phases:

1. The era of prose from 1800-1860,
2. The era of development from 1860-1900,
3. The phase of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) from 1890-1930,
4. The post-Rabindranath phase from 1930 to 1947,
5. The post-partition phase from 1947 to 1970,
6. And the Bangladesh phase from 1971 to the present.

(Detailed Phase Notes)The modern period may be divided into six phases:

1. In the first phase (1800-1850), the era of prose, Christian missionaries and Sanskrit scholars ushered in modernism through their prose writing. In the second phase,
2. the era of development (1850-1900), Bengali writers, influenced by the west, created novels and poems that have stood the test of time.
3. The third phase, the era of Rabindranath Tagore (1890-1930), was dominated by the poet, and, although shorter, was prolific.
4. The very short fourth phase, the post-Rabindranath Tagore phase (1930-1947), from the era of Rabindranath Tagore to the partition of India, is regarded as a separate phase outside the Tagore influence.
5. The fifth phase, the post-partition phase (1947-1970), saw the political division of Bengal and the bifurcation of Bangla literature into the literature of West Bengal and the literature of East Bengal/East Pakistan.
6. The six and latest phase is the Bangladesh phase.

✓ **Modern period: The era of prose (1800-1860)**

1. Bangla prose writing developed in the 18th century mainly for administrative and proselytising purposes.
2. Dom Antonio's *Brahmin-Roman-Catholic-Sangbad*, for example, was the first Bangla book to be printed towards the end of the 17th century. The foreign rulers also felt the need to learn Bangla, leading to the compilation of dictionaries and the writing of books of grammar. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed wrote the first Bangla grammar, *A Grammar of Bengal Language* (1776), to help the English learn Bangla. The book was printed in 1778 from Hughli Press, and [Bangla](#) script was used in its examples and quotations.
3. [William Carey](#) (1761-1834) came to Bengal for missionary work but became famous as the pioneer of Bangla prose. In 1800 he published *Mathi Rachita Mangal Samachar*, a Bangla translation of the bible, from serampore mission. He later joined Fort William College and devoted himself to writing textbooks.
4. *The development of Bangla periodicals and newspapers* The appearance of Bangla periodicals and newspapers in the second decade of the 19th century helped create and develop Bangla prose.
5. The missionaries of Serampore published the first Bangla journal, *Masik Digdarshan* (April 1818). Other well-known regular and irregular periodicals published between 1818 and 1831 include *Samachardarpan* (1818), edited by John Clark [marshman](#); *Sambad Kaumudi* (1821), edited by Tarachand Dutta and Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay; *Samachar Chandrika* (1822), by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay; and *Bangadut* (1829) by Neelmoni Halder.
6. The journal significantly furthered the literary efforts of Bengalis.
7. *The rise of the Bangla novel* [peary chand mitra](#) (1814-1883) and [kali prasanna singh](#) (1840-1870) were the first Bangla novelists. Peary Chand Mitra was a fine essayist, writing on a variety of varied subjects. However, he also wrote the first Bangla novel, *alaler gharer dulal* (1858). Using the pen name of 'Tekchand Thakur', he used [chalita bhasa](#) or colloquial language to narrate his story of Bengal society. His language, the common people's language with its mixture of Arabic, Persian and Hindustani vocabulary, was fondly called 'alali prose'.
8. *The development of sadhu bhasa* The principal architect of 19th century Bangla prose was Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Writing textbooks and articles, Vidyasagar developed a form of [sadhu bhasa](#) or formal prose that influenced future writers.

✓ **Modern Period: The era of development (1860-1900)**

1. The first modern Bangla novelist was [bankimchandra chattopadhyay](#) whose fourteen novels include *Durgeshnandini*, *Kapalkundala*, *Krishnakanter Will*, *Bisbrksa* and *Ananadamath*. . He also edited a literary monthly, [bangadarshan](#) (1872).

- Other significant writers of the time include Bankimchandra's elder brother [sanjeeb chunder chattopadhyay](#) (1834-1889) who also was well known for his novels as well as *Palamau*, an excellent travel story. Rabindranath's elder sister [swarna kumari devi](#) (1855-1932) wrote novels as well as poems and plays. Her social novels reflect the moral conflicts of contemporary society. She also edited [bharati](#).
- Essay writing* This genre was initiated by Bhudev Mukhopadhyay and reached its zenith at the hands of Bankimchandra. It was enriched by Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's thoughtful essays on a variety of subjects.
- Bengali Muslim writers* Following a change in their political attitude, middle-class Bengali Muslim writers emerged in the 19th century. Prominent among them were [mir mosharrif hossain](#) (1847-1912), Moulvi Mohammad Naimuddin (1832-1907), Dad Ali (1852-1936), [kaikobad](#) (1857-1951), Sheikh Abdur Rahim, Reazuddin Ahmad Mashadi, Mozammel Huq, Munshi Muhammad Reazuddin Ahmad (1862-1933).. Mir Mosharrif Hossain wrote nearly 30 books including novels, plays, [satire](#), poetry, musical plays, and essays. His best known writing is, however, [bisad-sindhu](#), based on the incidents at Karbala.
- Mozammel Huq wrote both prose and poetry. His poetry was inspired by the idea of a Muslim renaissance. He also translated Persian works into Bangla, including the first part of *Shahnama*. The first Bangla biography of Prophet [muhammad](#) (Sm) was written by Sheikh Abdur Rahim.
- The era of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* [michael madhusudan dutt](#) (1824-1873) began writing in English but soon moved to writing in Bangla. Madhusudan was followed by [hemchandra banerjee](#) (1838-1903) and [nabinchandra sen](#) (1847-1909), who were inspired by nationalism and [hinduism](#). Hemchandra's epic *Brtrasanghar* (1875), based on the *Mahabharata*, and Nabinchandra's book of poems *Palashir Yuddha* (1875), reflect their nationalistic feelings. Kaikobad was a Muslim poet who wrote [mahashmashan](#) in the tradition of Hemchandra and Nabinchandra.
- Lyrical poems* The new trend of lyric poetry was manifested in [kavigan](#) and Jatra. [tappa](#) (a light classical variety of amorous songs), especially the songs of [nidhu gupta](#) also known as Nidhubabu became popular during this period. *Modern dramatic literature* Madhusudan Dutt established modernism in Bangla plays as he did in Bangla poetry. He began writing Bangla plays after noticing the paucity of good plays in Bangla. Madhusudan's first play, *Sharmistha* (1859), was based on the *Mahabharata* story of Sharmistha-Devayani-Yayati. His second play, *Padmavati* (1860), was based on a Greek classical story. In this play he also used blank verse for the first time.

✓ **Modern period: The Tagore phase (1890-1930)**

- Rabindranath Tagore was an extraordinary man who made major contributions to all genres of Bangla literature. He wrote an immense range of rich and varied forms of poetry, plays, dance dramas, novels, short stories, essays and over two thousand songs. Although he was known as 'Vishvakavi' (world poet) and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for his book of poems *Gitanjali*, he was also a writer of superb prose, fictional and non-fictional.
- The most popular novelist of this period was [sharat chandra](#) Other writers of the period include [pramatha chowdhury](#) (1868-1946), whose essays and linguistic style greatly influenced a group of writers. He established the position of colloquial language in literature and also introduced the format of French short stories in Bangla literature. [chattopadhyay](#) (1876-1938).

✓ **Post-Rabindra phase (1930-1947)**

The anti-imperialist movement that began in Bengal following the First World War and the socialist revolution in Russia also affected Bangla literature. Though Rabindranath was still writing, around 1930 new writers emerged along with new interests. In 1923 *Kallol*, a literary journal, began publication in Kolkata where these new writers were published.

✓ **Post-Partition era (1947-1971)**

The most important development in the intellectual history of Muslim Bengal was the establishment in Dhaka of the [muslim sahitya samaj](#) in the thirties. The group's principal source of inspiration was [abul hussain](#) (1896-1938) and its main writer was [kazi abdul wadud](#) (1894-1970). The Samaj's mouthpiece was [shikha](#) which proclaimed the idea of free thought.

✓ **Bangladesh era**

The literature of Bangladesh may be divided into three phases: first phase 1947-1957, second phase 1958-1970 and third phase from 1971 onward.

- First phase (1947-1957)** This phase extended from pre-partition days to the pre-Ayub period. East Bengal faced a host of problems, such as an influx of refugees, economic distress and communal disturbances, as

well as the Pakistani regime's hostile attitude to East Bengal and Bangla. Soon after the creation of Pakistan, the people of the eastern region realised the absurdity of a state based on religion. The decision to make [urdu](#) the sole state language of the country caused Bengalis to protest, culminating in the [language movement](#) of 1952. This awareness of their linguistic rights laid the foundation for the first phase of Bangla literature.

- **Second phase (1958-1970)** The literary and cultural activities in Pakistan and especially in East Pakistan were thwarted following the promulgation of martial law by the army chief Ayub Khan in 1958. Restrictions on open politics, establishment of dictatorship in the garb of democracy and similar other measures aroused the Bengalis against the regime. The people's uprising in 1968, the students' movement in 1969 to realise their 11-point demand, the victory of the Bengalis in the general elections of 1970 but the refusal of the Pakistani junta to transfer power to them, the liberation war of 1971, the victory won by the Bengalis and the establishment of the sovereign state of Bangladesh all there deeply affected the social life of the people and were amply reflected in the Bangla literature of the 1958-1970 period.
- **Third phase (1971-)** The liberation war of 1971 and the independence of Bangladesh marks the third phase of the literature of this region.