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Not Twins: How Bengali Differs from Hindi

Bengali **"BONG-laa"** (/ˈbaŋla/) is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language spoken primarily in Bangladesh and India's state of West Bengal, with large diasporas worldwide. It's written in its own script (Bangla), carries centuries of literary tradition (from **Rabindranath Tagore** to modern song and cinema), and sits at the heart of a distinct regional culture known for hospitality, adda (unhurried conversation), and food traditions that celebrate fish, rice, and sweets. Hindi **"HIN-dee"** (/ˈɦɪndi/) by contrast is a Central Indo-Aryan language written in Devanagari and spread across much of northern and central India, with its own vast literary and cinematic ecosystems. The two are related, yes—but related isn't nearly "the same."

Given the similarity in how a lot of individual words sound in Bengali and Hindi, a lot of Indians and even foreigners have the idea that they are basically the same language. I have even had people try to discount Bengali as an additional language that I speak, which is simply not accurate! While Bengali does share many similarities with Hindi, it is very much its own language and Bengalis very much have their own distinct culture and ways of life.

What sets Bengali apart (the big structural stuff)

1) No grammatical gender (Bengali) vs. gendered grammar (Hindi).
In Bengali, nouns and adjectives don't change for masculine/feminine; there's one third-person pronoun for "he/she": সে **se** — "shay" (/ʃe/). The adjective ভালো **bhalo** — "BHAH-loh" (/bʰalo/) stays the same for everyone.
In Hindi, nouns and adjectives inflect for gender and number: लड़का **laṛkā** — "lur-KAA" (/ləɽka:/) vs. लड़की **laṛkī** — "lur-KEE" (/ləɽki:/); अच्छा **acchā** — "uh-CHAA" (/ətʃ͡a:/) vs. अच्छी **acchī** — "uh-CHEE" (/ətʃ͡i:/).

2) Person–honorific rich verb endings in Bengali (six common patterns) vs. simpler person split in Hindi.
Bengali verb morphology tracks person and formality directly in the ending. With করা **kôra** — "KOH-rah" (/kɔra/) "to do" (simple present):

- আমি করি **ami kori** — "AH-mee KOH-ree" (/ami kɔri/)
- তুই করিস **tui korish** — "tui KO-reesh" (/tui kɔriʃ/) *(2nd person intimate)*
- তুমি করো **tumi koro** — "TOO-mee KOH-roh" (/tumi kɔro/) *(2nd person familiar)*
- আপনি করেন **apni koren** — "AHP-nee KO-ren" (/apni kɔren/) *(2nd person honorific)*
- সে করে **se kore** — "shay KOH-reh" (/ʃe kɔre/) *(3rd person non-honorifi.)*
- উনি করেন **uni koren** — "OO-nee KO-ren" (/uni kɔren/) *(3rd person honorific)*

Colloquial Hindi often relies on a smaller person split in verb stems and pushes person marking into auxiliaries (हूँ **hū̃** — "hoon" (/ɦũ:/), हो **ho** — "hoh" (/ho/), है **hai** — "hay" (/ɦɛ/), हैं **hain** — "hain" (/ɦɛ̃/)), while gender/number agreement is pervasive.

3) The copula in the present.
Bengali frequently drops an overt "to be" with adjectives and nouns: আমি ছাত্র **ami chhatro** —
"AH-mee CHAHT-ro" (/**ami t͡sʰaʈro**/) = "I (am) a student." Existence/possession uses আছে
ache — "AH-cheh" (/**at͡ʃʰe**/).
Hindi needs the copula: मैं छात्र हूँ **main chhātr hū̃** — "meh(n) CHAAT-r hoon" (/**mɛ̃ t͡ʃʰaːʈr̩
hū̃ː**/).

4) Negation placement.
Bengali negates post-verbally with না **na** / নেই **nei** — "nah / nay-ee" (/**na**/ , /**nei**/): আমি যাই না
ami jai na — "AH-mee jai nah" (/**ami d͡ʒai na**/).
Hindi typically places नहीं **nahī̃** — "na-HEEN" (/**nəˈhĩː**/) pre-verbally: मैं नहीं जाता/जाती
main nahī̃ jātā/jātī.

5) Script and sound system.
Bangla script differs from Devanagari and encodes an inherent vowel closer to **"aw/ô"** (/**ɔ**/),
shaping pronunciation: কলকাতা **Kolkata** — "KOHL-kaw-tah" (/**kolˈkata**/). Bengali also
cherishes retroflex flaps (ড়/ঢ় → "ṛ/ṛh"), and many **v**-like letters surface as a soft /**b**/ ~ /**v**/
depending on context.

6) Classifiers in Bengali.
Counting typically requires classifiers: দুটি বই **du-ṭay boi** — "DOO-tay boy" (/**du ʈeɪ bɔi**/)
"two books," একজন মানুষ **ek-jon manush** — "ek-JON MAH-noosh" (/**ek d͡ʒon manuʃ**/) "one
person." Hindi does not use general numeral classifiers.

7) Case marking and possession.
Bengali uses suffixes like -র **-r** for genitive: আমার বই **amar boi** — "AH-mar boy" (/**amar
bɔi**/) "my book," -কে **-ke** for accusative/dative. Hindi marks oblique with postpositions
(का/की/के **kā/kī/ke**, को **ko**, से **se**, etc.), with gender agreement in possessives (kā/kī/ke).

Shared ground (why people think they're "the same")

- **SOV word order** and **postpositions** are the default in both.
- A big pool of **shared Sanskrit/Tatsama** vocabulary keeps many roots recognizable
  (e.g., "name" नाम/নাম **nām/nam** — "naam" (/**naːm**/); "work" কাজ **kāj** — "kaj"
  (/**kaːd͡ʒ**/) vs. Hindi काम **kām** — "kaam" (/**kaːm**/)).
- **Aspirated vs. unaspirated** stops and **dental vs. retroflex** contrasts live in both
  systems.
- Daily speech in both borrows freely from **Perso-Arabic** and **English**.

Why the distinction matters

Mutual familiarity can be high for some domains, but the **grammar you have to learn**—gender agreement, verb endings, negation placement, classifiers, copula behavior, script conventions—differs in ways that change how you **think and speak**. If you've learned Hindi, Bengali will still ask you to build **new reflexes** (no gender agreement, classifier use, honorific-sensitive endings, postverbal negation). If you've learned Bengali, Hindi will make you **track gender/number** and **copulas** rigorously.

Bengali and Hindi are cousins, not twins. They share ancestry and plenty of vocabulary, but they **encode reality differently**—in gender systems, verb morphology, scripts, negation, classifiers, and copular strategies. Respecting that difference doesn't diminish either language; it clarifies the learning path and honors the distinct cultures that speak them.