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Not Twins: How Bengali Differs from Hindi

Bengali "ben-GAW-lee" (/**bɛnˈgɔːli**/) is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language spoken primarily in Bangladesh and India's state of West Bengal, with large diasporas worldwide. It has its own script, a massive literary tradition (from Tagore onward), and a distinct regional culture—**adda** ("UHD-ah," friendly long-form chat) and a famed cuisine of fish, rice, and sweets. Hindi — "HIN-dee" (/ˈɦɪndi/) — is a Central Indo-Aryan language written in Devanagari and spread across northern/central India with its own vast media and literature. The two are related, yes—**but not 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/adjectives don't change for masculine/feminine; there's no *obligatory* gender agreement.

- ভালো **bhalo** — "BHAH-loh" (/**bʰalo**/) = *good* (stays the same for everyone)

In Hindi, many words do change with gender:

- अच्छा **acchā** — "uh-CHAA" (/**ət͡ʃːaː**/) = *good* (masc.)
- अच्छी **acchī** — "uh-CHEE" (/**ət͡ʃːiː**/) = *good* (fem.)

2) Person–honorific rich verb endings (Bengali).
Colloquial present tense of করা **kôra** — "KOH-rah" (/**kɔra**/) = *to do* shows person and formality in the ending. (Per your requested forms for 3rd person, shown below.)

- আমি করি **ami kori** — "AH-mee KOH-ree" (/**ami kɔri**/) = *I do*
- তুই করিস **tui korish** — "tui KO-reesh" (/**tui kɔriʃ**/) = *you (intimate) do*
- তুমি করো **tumi koro** — "TOO-mee KOH-roh" (/**tumi kɔro**/) = *you (familiar) do*
- আপনি করেন **apni koren** — "AHP-nee KO-ren" (/**apni kɔren**/) = *you (honorific) do*
- এ / ও **e / o → ay / o kore** — "AY / oh KOH-reh" (/**e kɔre, o kɔre**/) = *this/that person does*
- এরা / ওরা **era / ora kore** — "EH-rah / OH-rah KOH-reh" (/**era kɔre, ora kɔre**/) = *these/those people do*

3) Copula in the present.
Bengali often drops "to be" with nouns/adjectives:

- আমি ছাত্র **ami chhatro** — "AH-mee CHAHT-ro" (/**ami** t͡sʰa̪t̪ro/) = *I (am) a student*
- আছে **ache** — "AH-cheh" (/**atʃe**/) = *there is / (someone) has*

Hindi requires a present copula:

- मैं छात्र हूँ **main chhātr hū̃** — "meh(n) CHAAT-r **hoon**" (/mɛ̃ t͡ʃʰaːt̪r hũː/)
  - हूँ **hū̃** / हो **ho** / है **hai** / हैं **hain** — "hoon / hoh / hay / hain" (/**hũː, ho, ɦɛ, ɦɛ̃**/) = *am / are / is / are (pl.)*

4) Negation placement.
Bengali uses a post-verbal particle:

- আমি যাই না **ami jai na** — "AH-mee jai **nah**" (/**ami dʒai na**/) = *I don't go*
- নেই **nei** — "nay-ee" (/**nei**/) = *there isn't / doesn't exist*

Hindi negates pre-verbally:

- मैं नहीं जाता/जाती **main nahī̃ jātā/jātī** — "meh(n) na-HEEN JAA-taa/JAA-tee" = *I don't go (m./f.)*

5) Script & sound.
Bengali uses its own script and an inherent vowel close to **"aw/ô"** (/ɔ/), which shapes word-pronunciation:

- কলকাতা **Kolkata** — "KOHL-kaw-tah" (/**kolˈkata**/)

Hindi uses Devanagari and contrasts /**v**/ and /**w**/ differently than Bengali; both languages contrast **dental vs. retroflex** stops, but Bengali also has distinctive ড়/ঢ় **ṛ/ṛh** flaps.

6) Classifiers (Bengali).
Counting typically needs a classifier:

- দুটি/দু-টি বই **du-ṭi boi** — "DOO-tay boy" (/**du ʈeɪ bɔi**/) = *two (CL-general) books*
- একজন মানুষ **ek-jon manush** — "ek-JON MAH-noosh" (/**ek dʒon manuʃ**/) = *one (CL-person) person*

Hindi normally counts without general classifiers.

7) Case & possession.
Bengali uses suffixes:

- **-র -r** (genitive): আমার বই **amar boi** — "AH-mar boy" (**/amar bɔi/**) = *my book*
- **-কে -ke** (accusative/dative): তাকে ডাকো **take ḍako** — "TAH-keh DAH-koh" (**/take ḍako/**) = *call him/her*

Hindi marks relations with postpositions:

- **का/की/के kā/kī/ke** — "kaa/kee/kay" = *of (masc./fem./pl.)*
- **को ko** — "ko" = *to/for*
- **से se** — "seh" = *from/with*

*(Examples: **मेरी किताब merī kitāb** = "my (fem.) book"; **मुझे mujhe** = "to me.")*

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

- **Default SOV word order** and **postpositions** in both.
- A pool of shared Sanskrit-origin vocabulary keeps many roots recognizable:
  - **नाम / নাম nām/nam** — "naam/naam" (**/naːm/**) = *name*
  - **काम / কাজ kām/kāj** — "kaam / kaj" (**/kaːm, kaːd͡ʒ/**) = *work*
- Both contrast **aspirated vs. unaspirated** stops and **dental vs. retroflex** series.
- Daily speech in both borrows from **Perso-Arabic** and **English**.

Why the distinction matters

Mutual familiarity can be high in everyday topics, but the **grammar you must internalize**—gender agreement (Hindi), classifier use (Bengali), copula/negation behavior, person–honorific endings, script conventions—differs in ways that change how you **form sentences**. If you've learned Hindi, Bengali asks you to stop tracking gender and start tracking **classifiers** and **post-verbal negation**. If you've learned Bengali, Hindi asks you to **track gender/number** and use a present **copula** consistently.

Bengali and Hindi are cousins, not twins. They share ancestry and a fair slice of vocabulary, but they **encode meaning differently**—from gender systems and verb morphology to negation, classifiers, and scripts. Treating them as distinct doesn't diminish either language; it clarifies your learning path and honors the distinct cultures that speak them.