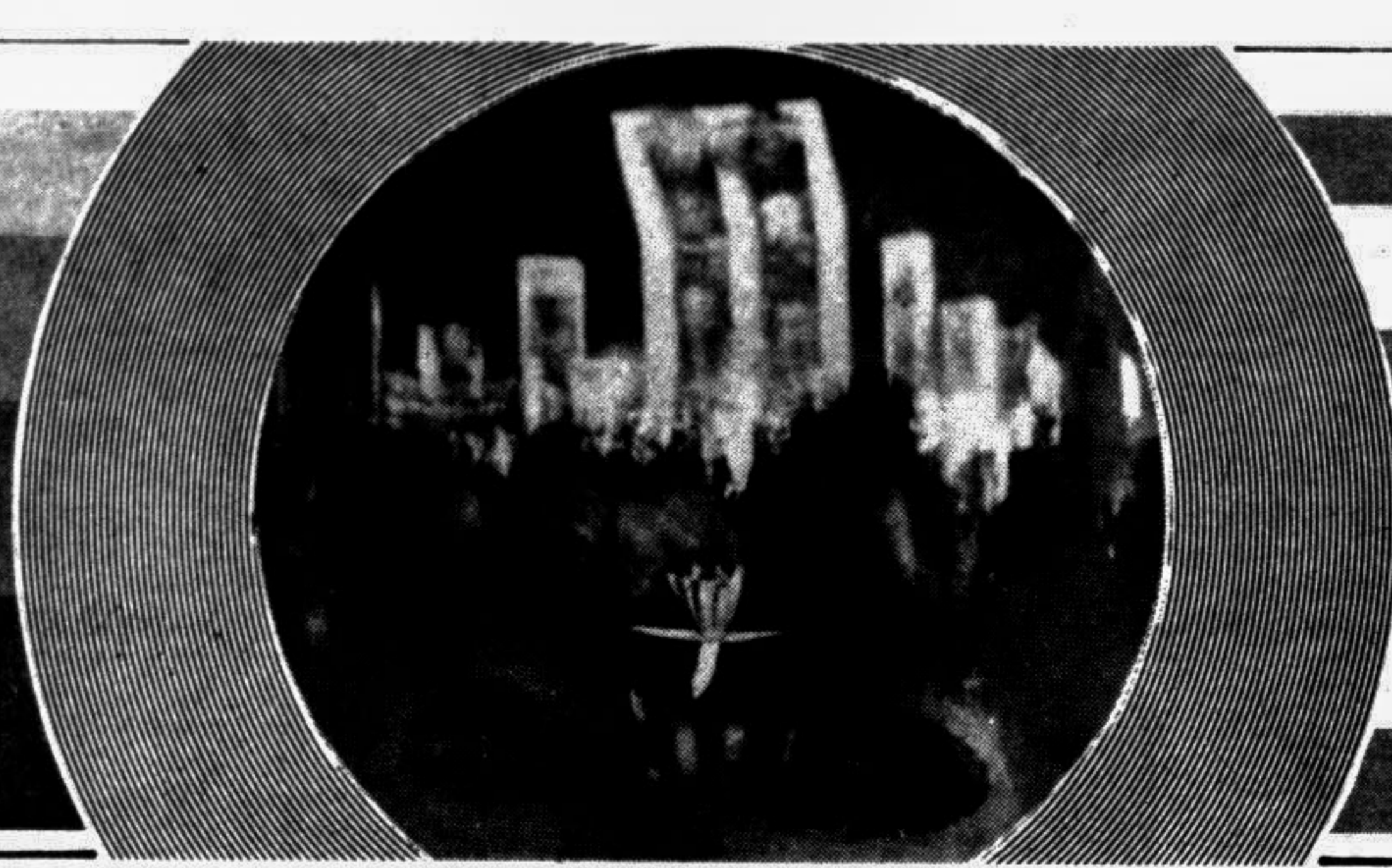


একুশে একুশে Ekushey



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The State Language Movement and Liberation Struggle of Bangladesh

by Shah AMS Kibria

FEBRUARY twenty first is a unique day in the life of the nation. Admittedly this day neither enjoys the status of our Independence Day nor is it associated with the joy and glory of the Victory Day. Indeed twenty first February is observed as a National Mourning Day. In my view, however, this is not the right description of this great day. The term Martyrs day does evoke the spirit of the event to a great extent but does not fully bring out its significance.

We all know that on this memorable day in 1952 a some of our bravest young men were felled by the bullet of the Pakistani rulers and their blood reddened the streets of Dhaka. However, as an eye witness to the event I do not recall only the shock and sadness of the firing incident; I recall the day as one of defiant protest and resistance. As a matter of fact, this was the day on which the Bengali nation started to shed the illusion of a Pakistan held together only by the bond of religion.

The wanton killings during the Movement woke them up from their slumber and made them conscious about their real identity. It is for these reasons that the day evokes in my mind mixed feelings and emotions. On the one hand I can still vividly see in my mind's eye the ghastly sight of the bleeding youths being carried to the Medical College Hospital; on the other hand, I can also remember the courage and firm resolve on the faces of thousands of young faces. No more obeisance to aliens even if those aliens happen to be co-religionists. The spirit of rebellion was in our blood. The youth of Bangladesh was ready to shed blood for their language, culture, heritage but above all, for the honour and freedom of their nation. That historic day, in my judgement, was the beginning of our struggle for liberation. Students of history know that when the English king imposed a tax on tea imports by the American colonies, a few brave citizens of Boston boarded the ships in the port and threw the tea chests into the sea. Was it merely a protest against the imposition of an unfair tax? It was, in reality, a rebellion against the authority of the King of England.

The colonists opposed taxation without representation. Besides, the loyalty of the colonists, at least the vast majority of them, to the crown had weakened. The Boston tea party was therefore not merely a local incident of defiance of authority but the expression of the sentiments of all the American colonies. It symbolised the beginning of the American War of Independence. The protest by the students of Dhaka on twenty first February on the language issue and the firing incident of that day was a similar event. It marked the beginning of our struggle for independence.

While serving abroad as a diplomat, I had a few opportunities to come back home and take part in the observance of the Shaheed Day during both the pre and post-independence periods. While observing the events of the day and in talking to people I always had the feeling that somehow the entire nation seems to spontaneously understand and appreciate the significance of this day. It is perhaps for this reason that right from the beginning of the month of February there is a gradual build up of nationalist emotion which culminates on the twenty first of the month. I have also noticed that the ordinary people observe the day not just by mourning for the martyrs but as an occasion of glory and pride. On this day they take pride in being Bengalees. They take pride in their language, culture, history and heritage. They also remember with gratitude the brave youth who, forty two years ago, stood up to the alien rulers and refused to submit to them. These are, to my mind, the real reasons for the deeply emotional nature of the celebrations of the day. Prior to 1952 the direction

of the political life of the people of Bangladesh rested in the hands of leaders of mediocre calibre who did not have the guts to stand up to their West Pakistani masters.

In fact, the people felt that they were drifting aimlessly like a ship without rudder. It was obvious to many Bengalees who could think clearly and objectively that Pakistan, created on 14 August, 1947 as a home land of the Muslims, was neither a logical nor a natural state. It lacked almost every thing which a modern nation state is supposed to possess. The Bengalees in Pakistan had fallen into a trap. Despite this realisation, a large segment of the educated and upper class Muslims were so fearful of the neighbouring Hindu community that they chose to cling to this absurd political structure. They did understand that a Bengali Muslim and a Punjabi or Beluchi Muslim may say their prayers standing side by side in peace and tranquility but that does not make them members of the same nation. For the same reason a Saudi Arabian and an Egyptian or an Iranian Muslim or Turkish Muslim do not belong to the same nation despite the fact that they all share the same religious faith.

The Saudi Arabian and the Egyptian not only share the same faith, they also speak the same language and share the same cultural heritage. Yet their national identities are different. I do not know how many among us tried to analyze the question deeply but many of us did suffer from a gnawing feeling that in 1947 we had just exchanged rulers. Instead of being ruled from London we were being ruled from Karachi. The new rulers did not have a sense of identity with us. Nor could we share with them our hopes and aspirations. It is for this reason that our protest in 1952 was so strong, so bitter and so profound in its impact.

Every movement has to

global and therefore too fragile to hold the two wings together.

Confused thinking on our identity was replaced by the clear belief that the basis for Bengali nationalism was a dearly loved language, shared culture, common historical memories, geographical unity and a shared heritage of a thousand years. The nationalism that motivated us from 1952 onwards was essentially secular in character. Perhaps I should add here that for some people the controversy whether we were Bengalees first and Muslims second or vice versa continued for a long time. But such hesitations and self-delusions were eventually swept away by the inexorable and relentless march of events.

It must be admitted in any analysis of the political evolution of Bengal that during the decade of the thirties and especially during the forties, the Muslims of Bengal were under the deep spell of the two-nation theory propounded by Jinnah. The election results of 1946 is a convincing evidence of its hold over the Muslim masses. Scholars will no doubt throw more light on this phase of our history.

Since I myself happened to be in my teens during those fateful years I can recall some of my feelings and emotions. Most Muslims in Bengal and Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam (I was one of them) were fearful of domination by the relatively more advanced Hindu community and sought protection under the two-nation theory.

We chose to embrace the non-Bengali Muslims of other provinces of India as a shield against our immediate neighbours with whom we have lived in peace for hundreds of years. Not only did we go for this strange alliance, we even surrendered our leadership to the non-Bengali Muslims from other provinces. It may be recalled that the "C" Group un-

riety of historical reasons, were far ahead of their Muslim neighbours in education, business and other fields. They had a dominant position in the government bureaucracy. They were far more affluent than the Muslims who were mostly farmers. Despite these advantages the Hindu community made very little effort to pull up the Muslims from poverty and backwardness. As a matter of fact, many Hindus did not even accept the Muslims of Bengal as Bengalees.

It cannot still forget the anguish suffered by us when a famous writer like Sarat Chatterjee in his novel Srikanta wrote about Bengali Muslims as if they were not Bengalees. Novelist Bangkim Chandra Chatterjee, a great writer, had also done more than his share to alienate the Muslims of Bengal by equating Hindu revival with national renaissance. The superior airs of the Hindu elite antagonised the rising Muslim middle class. The Hindu zamindars could not accept their Muslim peasant tenants either as their equals or even their own kind.

Small wonder that under these conditions the two communities chose two divergent political paths and eventually went for the partition of Bengal.

When they smoke cleared after the death, destruction, rape and arson and mass uprooting of families following the partition of India, the Muslims of East Pakistan had the opportunity to survey their gains. It was not much. Yet they were under such strong spell of the Pakistan idea that even the "truncated and moth-eaten" East Pakistan did not discourage them. However, what discouraged them soon was the realisation that they did not have any effective control over the affairs of even the truncated and moth-eaten part of the country.

The West Pakistani ruling elite were openly contemptuous of the Bengalees. Most of them considered the

Ekushey's Nation-building Message

by Mahfuz Anam

THIS is the forty second time that we are commemorating the Ekushey — our language movement day, marking the sacrifice of our student martyrs to establish Bangla as one of the two national languages of the then Pakistan. What was ostensibly the occasion to pay respect to the departed soul of the language martyrs, was in reality our way of mobilising the nation behind the struggle to establish Bangla as a state language, and intensify the movement to gain, for ourselves, the right to self-government. Out of the 41 times (excluding today's) that we have commemorated this great event, 19 times we did under the then Pakistan, and for the rest 22 times we did so in the sacred soil of independent and sovereign Bangladesh.

The reason I mention this fact, is because I think there should have been a qualitative difference between the way we observed the occasion in the then Pakistan, and the way did so after our victory in 1971.

As far as I understand it, there are three distinct messages of Ekushey. The first and the foremost is political. The second is cultural. The third message is that of nation building. The political message of Ekushey February is obvious, and one that we, as a very politically conscious people, seem to have understood instinctively, and acted upon wholeheartedly. The message meant that the state structure of Pakistan will have to be forced to accept Bangla as one of the two state languages as the first step. Then, subsequently to force the state to give Bangla and the Bengalis, their due importance in running the affairs of the country. Implied in it was the sure feeling that if the Pakistani state structure would not permit the growth of the natural, distinctive, and the democratic aspiration of our people, then we will have to chalk out our separate path, as we subsequently did.

The historical developments of the fifties, sixties and

finally that of the Liberation War, testifies to the fact that we, as a people took the political message to heart, and acted upon it with all the force, determination and sincerity at our command.

For the next nineteen years, from 1952 to 1971, an unbroken chain of events of political struggle gradually led the freedom loving Bengalee people to take the only dignified option available within an oppressive state structure — that of independence.

The second message of Ekushey, was cultural. As the cloud of the euphoria of creating Pakistan — in which the contribution of Bengalee Muslim was greater than any other communities that later formed part of Pakistan — cleared, it became obvious that there was something more to national identity than the mere affinity of religion. For Muslims all over the world, religion is of tremendous significance. But again, like the Muslims of rest of the world, it is not enough to form the totality of national identity.

So the question of culture naturally assumed an increasingly greater importance. It meant that our literature, our music, our poetry, our songs — all the aesthetic aspects of our existence must find the most creative and unfettered expression.

Here again, if we look at the developments during the decade of the fifties and sixties, we find that we as a people waged a constant struggle to develop our culture and create for ourselves a distinct identity. This process naturally set us on a collision course against the ethos of Pakistan as defined by the rulers of the day. With the passage of time we continued to develop our own cultural identity which more and more set us apart from Pakistan. Not only in the aesthetic sense, but also as culture defined in terms of our day to day life, it became increasingly obvious, with the passage of time, how distinct we were as a people from that

west Pakistan.

Ekushey's cultural message continues to be with us. It is something which is a part of evolution of any vibrant nation. As we all know, the issue of our cultural identity continues to evolve and there are aspects of our cultural life that continues to go through a process of redefinition and rediscovery. This is only natural and testifies to the vibrancy and inner dynamics of our cultural evolution.

"It is the third message of Ekushey, which is the main thrust of my piece today. I feel, and do so rather strongly, that it is the nation building message of Ekushey, which has got lost under the more immediate political and cultural struggles of the decades of fifties and sixties. Here lies the irony. For it appears that 'Ekushey Agenda' of the Pakistan days seem to have dominated the 'Ekushey Agenda' of the post liberation days. Meaning, that what appeared to be of immediate and urgent need, when we were struggling against the state structure of Pakistan, did not radically change, after that state structure was destroyed, and a whole new reality emerged in December 1971.

It is my view that after the birth of Bangladesh, the national building message of Ekushey should have gotten far more emphasis and national attention than it got. It is our failure to do so, which is one of the main reasons why we lag so far behind in developing our poverty stricken country. Time is at hand to change all that, if we wish.

If I may be permitted to suggest, the most meaningful way of commemorating Ekushey now, 23 years after the birth of Bangladesh, is to take Ekushey's national building message to be the most important and urgent one, and give it the highest national focus and priority. Among the nation building task lying ahead for us, the one that suits the spirit of Ekushey most, is

that of Human Resource Development, expressed precisely in terms of Education for All. Therefore in my view, the best way to commemorate Ekushey now would be to make it the centre piece, the converging point, the centre of gravity for all the governmental and non-governmental efforts in spreading education throughout the country.

As I had said in a recent piece, and at the risk of appearing to be repetitive, I would like to suggest that our professing respect for our mother tongue sounds hollow when more than 70 per cent of our people cannot effectively read or write the language. What sort of a pride in Bangla are we talking about when we have failed to create conditions which permit, the greater majority of our people, to acquire the most rudimentary level of the language skills.

The magnificent beauty of our poetry, the excellence of our literature, the world class stature of our plays and short stories remain confined to a microscopic minority. The vast majority of our people remain unexposed to it. These people are confined only to the oral tradition of our language, and as such deprived of the superb literary achievements of our authors and thinkers.

The massive intellectual poverty amidst which we force the majority of our people to live, is creating a dangerous long term impact on the growth and regenerative capacity of our culture. If the majority of our people cannot either contribute to, or enjoy the fruits of literacy and other creative achievements, then obviously our literature and language will so be extremely poor. It may effect become bankrupt.

Given these striking facts, I would like to strongly suggest that the spirit of Ekushey should be turned more and more towards nation building efforts, especially concentrating on the national drive towards Education for All. Let us unite on the singled minded purpose of making our nation a literate one.



Freedom fighters at the Shaheed Minar.

have an ideological foundation. Under the leadership of Cromwell the British parliament had taken a principled position. Parliament, as the people's representative, was the highest authority in the state and it was on this belief that the Parliament took up arms against the King and eventually executed him as punishment for his misdeeds against the nation. The underlying principle which motivated the people was the belief that the people are the source of all power. Similarly, the French Revolution and the American War of Independence had very strong ideological foundations.

In the same way our Language Movement triggered the re-awakening of our consciousness about fundamental unity and provided the ideological basis for the subsequent struggles of the people in unshackling themselves from alien rule. A few bullets fired by the police on our unarmed students gave us the message, loud and clear, that there were no genuine bonds between the peoples of the two wings of Pakistan. A common religion was certainly an important factor but it was too general, too

dey the British Cabinet Mission Plan consisted of Bengal and Assam. The elected Muslim League members of the two provinces elected Nawabzada Liaqat Ali Khan, a man from the Uttar Pradesh of India as their leader. Even now I find it baffling to understand how our leaders from Bengal and Assam could be so spineless as to accept the imposition of a leader from outside. Apparently, it was Jinnah's decision and nobody dared to protest. Perhaps they were haunted by the memory of the expulsion of Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq by Jinnah. Or, perhaps they thought that the Urdu-speaking Nawabs of northern India had a historical right to rule over us.

Be that as it may, the sad part of the history of that period is that our neighbouring Bengalee Hindu Community also fell under the influence of the two-nation theory. On paper they opposed the two-nation concept as they officially shared the secularist ideals of the Congress party propounded by Nehru but in practice they acted in a manner which belied their professions about secularism. The Hindu community of Bengal, for a va-

Bengalees inferior to them in every respect. What is even worse and perhaps hurt the Bengalees most, some of them even questioned their Islamic faith. In retrospect, one can see that the parting of the ways which ultimately came was really a matter of time. The peoples of the two wings never felt in their hearts that they were part of one nation.

It was in 1948, when the enthusiasm for Pakistan among the Bengali elite was still strong, that the first blow on the foundation of Pakistan was struck. Curiously it was done by no other person than the founder of Pakistan himself. In a meeting in the Curzon Hall in Dhaka Jinnah declared that Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the State language of Pakistan. Though some courageous young men in the audience rose in protest, public reaction in the country against Jinnah's declaration was somewhat limited and muted. It did not trigger a mass movement though some thoughtful people began to see the light.

The process of disillusionment started. Some intellectuals began to wonder what kind of independence have we

The Language Movement and the Limits of Deconstruction

by Azfar Hussain

In his *Decolonizing the Mind*, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o mentions at one point: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe." Noticeable as it is, it is not only the choice of a particular language which matters for one in his struggle for self-definition, but what is, indeed, equally important is the way in which a language is used, or in which a language enjoys its scale, scope, status and space. In other words, choice is necessary, but not sufficient. What is needed is a politicisation of this choice in terms of its assertion of power. Its appropriation of space in which choice finds itself. Our Language Movement, as it is known, was not simply an existential struggle for choice, or for that matter, self-definition; it was primarily a political struggle for space — a space inhabitable in a variety of ways.

Coming back to the question of use of language in the Ngũgĩ sense, one needs to notice that the partition of India which was an apparent consequence of an anti-colonial struggle against the British could not exercise the goblin of colonialism as such, and that the emergence of Pakistan itself was nothing but an initiation of yet another phase of colonialism in our political history. It is this very ethos of colonialism which determined the use of language — which reproduced and reinforced the archetypal, binary divide between the "self" and the "other", between "us" and "them" over the linguistic issue itself. Yes, languages — both Urdu and Bangla — were used during the Pakistani colonial period. But, while Urdu became the language of the colonizer "self" for the

sheer reason of its power achieved in economic and political terms, Bangla was subjected and pushed to the margin, to a politically and culturally inferior status, to the position of the *Other*, always to be dominated and dwarfed in the interest of the colonial power itself. Indeed, when it was assertively and aggressively announced that "Urdu, Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan," the texts of cultural and linguistic colonialism were only reconstructed and reproduced almost in the British style. And what was then conceived as the 'State Language Movement' in 1952 (later, it came to be known as the 'Language Movement' involving an extended territory of suggestions) was nothing but an attempt, primarily in political terms, to deconstruct such texts, to deconstruct 'colonial power and discourse (that) is possessed entirely by the coloniser', to use Edward Said's words.

In order to look at the anti-colonial and essentially political nature of the Language Movement, let us interpret, in brief, the texts of cultural and linguistic colonialism evoked by the use of Urdu. This language — Urdu — was not certainly the language of the majority in the then Pakistan, but Bangla certainly was. Then, the numerical strength of the *Other*, as Frantz Fanon now and then suggested, is always a source of psychological and political terror to the colonizer who is led to hide or diminish it in terms of imposition and repetition of the images of his worth and superiority — more constructed, more rhetorical than real. Attempts were made, ineffectively though, to justify the *raison d'être* of Urdu as the state language for being superior to Bangla. In other words, it was a rhetori-

cal justification of the superiority of the minority to the majority, a glorification and canonization of the "self" over the "other" as a strategic stay against the potentially deconstructing forces of "the number that is power". Further, one of the ways of dwarfing the numerically, as well as otherwise, strong *Other* would be to undermine it not only at the base, but also at the superstructural level — to weaken it both economically and culturally. This was very much a strategy of the colonial power and discourse appropriated by the then Urdu-speaking Pakistani rulers whose attack on language was nothing but a means to perpetuate cultural exploitation on the Bangla-speaking colonized. One may be aptly reminded here of the Gramscian suggestion that to exploit culturally is to begin exploiting linguistically in that, to use Wittgenstein's words, "the limits of the world are the limits of the language" — the loss of language leads to the loss of power, and the appropriation and expansion of language leads to the establishment and consolidation of hegemony. Needless to mention, colonialism in Pakistan for its nourishment not only needed economic exploitation, but also needed cultural one only to reinforce the former in a more effective manner, thus perpetuating what is called *colonial hegemony*. And it is against this whole weave of relations — against all such texts of cultural colonialism — that the Language Movement was launched with an explicit political force. In 1952, as we all know, instantaneous protests were made in the street, and blood had to be paid as price. But, one needs to notice here very carefully that the whole cultural issue of colonialism manifested in

"Urdu, Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan" was then being fought primarily at the political level, and this political fight against an already established colonial cultural hegemony was not sufficient, though this fight persisted, positively of course, leading to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971.

One should not certainly undermine the importance of political struggle for a nation's freedom; but, then, a political struggle without its equally strong cultural and ideological counterpart can only achieve limited, or virtually no, success. Of course, the Language Movement *per se*, as an ideal text, can be invoked endlessly, suggestively and positively to manifest the ethos of freedom, democracy, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and the urge for establishing all positive rights — economic, social, cultural, linguistic, and so on — that one can conceive of. But, then, the text needs to be located in the very world we inhabit. And ours is the world where this ideal text cannot appropriate its befitting space only because of the fact that not only the anti-colonial, liberation struggle has been de-harmonized with its cultural counterpart, but also that this very struggle itself has lost its needed continuum. The consequence is nothing but a creation of *texts of voids and blank spaces* which are being increasingly filled in by anti-liberation, imperial and neo-colonial forces finding expression in the almost untrammeled and uninhibited emergence of fundamentalism not only in political terms, but in cultural terms as well.

In other words, the language movement and the liberation movement envisaged as a continuous cultural struggle are very much unfinished collective tasks to which there is