

TEENS and TWENTIES

Speaking Spoken English in Bangladesh

by Maqsoodul Haque

1975:
A joke goes about our circle of friends. A 'khat' (translation follows as you go on with this article) returns from England in a state of culture shock. Nudity, obscenity, loose morals, pre marital sex, post marital infidelity, violence in disproportionate proportions have laid waste to his sense of 'values'. However the greatest thing about England he allegedly told one of our friend is 'the average man in the street is very educated and cultured — they all speak in fluent English!'

1976:
The year was a turning point in my life. One more year in college, and then — where? I have an artistic bent of mind, or so I thought. The Institute of Fine Arts or as popularly called, Arts College beckoned me.

Those were the days of bell bottoms and tight tee-shirt. Boys and girls wore 'platform heel' shoes — which was literally covered with the pants bottom. You could add at least four more inch to your height. The 'flares' as the bottoms were called; could be 40 inches and your thighs could be as tight as you wanted them to be. For me and my fashionable friends, the students of Art's College looked almost like us. To be dressed otherwise was to be termed 'khat' — literally 'paddy field' translated to mean rural, rustic, peasant stock, village like — backward.

My friends and I, had one other thing in common. We spoke most of the time, which was all of the time: in English. It was a fashionable snobbery we indulged, as speaking anything, but the Queens language decided whether you were with the 'in' or 'out' crowd. We spoke with an American twang. We were always 'in' with our right English jargons and appropriate mannerisms! You did not say 'cool' in those days, you were 'hep', you did not smoke a cigarette — you 'fagged', and you did not 'party' like they say it these days, you went to a 'mixed party' — where girls and boys 'mixed' sort of!

The 'mixed parties' were day time affairs. The venue would usually be a friends house, their parents 'conveniently' absent or 'abroad'. We covered thick curtains or stuck black papers to all the windows in a bid to black mother sun out to bring on a synthesized night when it was like three in the afternoon!

In comparison 'parties' of today are vibrant, dusk to dawn affairs. We danced with ceiling, pedestal fans and music systems (the term 'turntable' and 'tape deck' had just entered popular usage replacing record, cassette players) on full blast. Very few people had A/C in their house like they do today: unless they were filthy rich (we avoided them) so that, when we danced cheek to cheek, we were not having a 'close' dance or 'dirty dancing', as is referred today, we were 'sweating into each other! And ofcourse we all spoke English!

But the future — what does it hold for me? Somebody asked me to 'go check out the Art College. A friends eldest sister volunteered to let me

'get a hang of the place'. She asked me to come over the next Saturday, at eleven in the morning. I went over appropriately attired — and found a ravishing beauty coming my way. Wow, she was 'our kind, her dress said it all. Excuse me, I am looking for so and so

1982:
I meet a strange guy going back to UK. When I ask, what he does for a living, he tells me he is a Banker. There was an LTI (left thumb impression) in place of a signature on his Passport. Obviously he is lying, so I begin to question him

so or 'your sisters so and so' in proper Bangla. No English!

1988:
Its 9:30 am one morning and Dikusha Commercial Area has a treat. Everybody stares at members of a local heavy metal band who walk into my office to meet me. Smart young men, they are dressed in a veritable cocktail of Bon Jovi, Megadeth, Iron Maiden, Metallica, Guns and Roses etc. They wear leather and chain, and sport unshaven face, shoulder length hair, broad belts with studs, dirty high boots and bandanna. They also wear an attitude.

I enjoy talking to them as they remind me of my non conformist younger days. They speak a Bangla, which is quite foreign if not unintelligible. I notice a 'twang' in the way the sentences are phrased. Hey, I tell myself the landscape of Bangladesh has gone through a change, this is the tip of the soundscape. Only problem, despite the fact that they could talk in details about all their Western heroes even to the minutest details of guitar licks and riffs and sing in well tolerable English, their language of preference is this new foreign sounding Bangla — not English! I am disappointed.

1991:
An eulogy. A candle that burns twice as bright, extin-

summoned his secretary who looked up the stars schedule and announced that indeed two days later was to be the 'maharut' of a film.

Now the nuts and bolts. The location was a stately suburban mansion with a huge lawn — not a regular studio. A 'maharut' for the less initiated with the 'filmy' world is an occasion, where the first shots of a film is made, the first clap stick 'clapped'.

It calls for raucous celebrations with an assortment of cinema crew, hero, heroines, 'junior artists' (extras), sycophants, 'make-up' man, light-man, cameraman, and a human species mysteriously called 'Production'. Anybody who was anyway remotely connected with the incumbent film was there. Sprinkled into this masala or salad are fans, producers, their relatives, and relatives of relatives and so forth.

'Camera' 'light' 'rolling and action' — the demure Babita appeared from nowhere, did her bit. A fly flew in from somewhere disturbing the perfect frame which the director had composed and he promptly flew into a rage screaming — 'Production'. Two helpless soul appeared and went at the fly with a can of mosquito repellent. 'Madam' as

from thin air.

Make-up men were furiously at work on the face of the 'Boss', as Zafar Iqbal was reverently called, as I stepped in to say hello. He hugged me and made me feel very important, which was characteristic of him, all the while introducing me to many of his friends, colleagues and who else have you. Something did strike me as very peculiar. The 'Boss' was jabbering continuously in English? Not that there was anything wrong about his English, it was only that he was talking to literally 'everybody' in the Queens language.

I was convinced other than a handful, nobody understood him. Everybody nodded their head yes, yes, yes, 'yes' or 'no, no, no, no'. Some weird cats interjected 'ofcourse, ofcourse', the less interested just smiled or gave a blank expression that betrayed their inner most feelings — lost. Zafar Iqbal's English was progressively beginning to annoy me.

I asked him, 'what the hell is going on — why aren't you talking in Bangla?'. He pulled me aside with a look of shock writ large on his face, and told me ever so politely — 'don't you realise boy, this lot will respect you, consider you hep or 'mod' (read, 'ashionable) only if you speak in English? Don't you realise what power you

the 'production' lads talking among themselves, of how 'educated and cultured', the 'Boss' was as an actor, and what 'impeccable English spoke'. Since I was the 'bosses' friend and could communicate



with such ease. I must be equally 'educated and cultured'.... they wondered aloud.

I did not know that this would be my last meeting with Zafar Iqbal. His last words in his dying hours to doctors attending him were also in English. A hapless, helpless 'I love you doctors, you have tried your best!'

1992:
A rock concert where a rookie band is making its debut. The object of curiosity, a Bangalee lead singer who has come in fresh from the States. He is a head banging rocker who grabs the microphone and screams expletives in English.... only English. He gesticulates with his index finger raised upward clearly demonstrating his attitude. The motley crowd of six thousand strong reacts violently to his 'English gaal'.

The show ends, and a mob starts chasing our debutante with chairs, sticks, lathis and oh those very, very embarrassing bamboos! Police on duty extricate him to safety — otherwise rock in Bangladesh would definitely had its first martyr that evening! The message for rest of the rockers — English songs are okay, because the audience does not know any more than the name of the cover artist or the title they are 'replicating'; but 'English gaalis' though very fashionable with Axe Rose is still a far away thing for 'khat' Bangladesh!

1993:
A pesky journalist from a vernacular daily questions me as to why all the Bangladeshi rock bands have these English names, while they all sing in Bangla? Being a singer for an English sounding band, that recently switched to 'Bangla only' tag, I tell him tongue in cheek, that every few bands with Bangla names have survived like us for eighteen years. Why — he keeps pressing, expecting me to intellectualize.

I engage in some Bangla

verbosity and tell him 'I believe we Bangalees as a race have this foreign fixation, and anything foreign sounding is perhaps more acceptable to us than others. Anybody that has in English name affixed to his name or his band, is expected to be — well 'hap', 'cool' etc, and his 'standards' are judged accordingly. The journalist is disappointed with my answer — but knows I am telling him the truth.

1993:
Two students from the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation tourism school are assigned to a familiarisation course in the office, where I work. I am designated to train them. The male students has a neatly tied knot on his business like shirt and blue pant — there is not a trace of intelligence on his face! His two toned shoes sparkle. The frame on his eye glasses are Christian Dior. He gives me a complex! The female students had an exquisitely motified Pakistani dress. She looks terrible with it.

The male does most of the talking. It is in atrocious English, which I digest for about ten minutes before reacting. I ask the two of them point blank, if they would prefer to speak to me in Bangla. The male blurts out, 'no, no, no, our instructions are always, always talk in English — twentyfour hours if necessary. Their instructor in the school is a foreigner. The local teachers in a bid to please the foreigner, or perhaps make their jobs easier, have given them the local instruction, to shun their 'native' language! I insist on speaking to them in Bangla anyway. They were wasting my time. I could well figure out their limitations and was sure that they couldn't even pass a spoken English test.

I wanted them to understand everything, I was teaching them while they were my 'students'. I was already exhausted trying to teach them in English during working hours — which I had to re-translate in Bangla during lunch or after office.

1994:
Dinner at a suburban Chinese restaurant, where the ambience is mellow and the food delicious. The waiters (stewards) are gentle and extremely courteous. Only problem, they all speak in English, even if you are asking questions in Bangla! I ask the one taking my order if he is a foreigner to which he reacts with a dumfounded expression. 'No Sir, I am a Bangalee' — was his proud answer in English. Ofcourse he was, I could make out from his features and accent.

My next question, freezes him. 'Can I have your permission to speak to you in Bangla?' 'By all means Sir — after all we are all Bangalees.' He replies again in English. I ask him why he constantly jabbars in English? The blunt answer 'customers have a low impression and often question the standards of any restaurant, where waiters and stewards don't speak in English. Management instruction Sir — please do not mind!'

I get irritated, I slurp on my soup. I am growing up.



of the second year, can you help me find her' was the simple sentence which I articulated as carefully as possible, and hurled at the 'hep gal' spiced with my twangiest American accent. I had to impress her. She looked devastated and smiled wryly, exclaiming in pure Bangla — 'I do not understand a word you are telling me. Please translate it into Bangla.'

My ego and pride both took a severe thud on the face. Good God, this one is a 'khat'. I got around finding my friends sister, and met more of the 'out' lot dressed up like the most fashionable 'in' lot in town, which was no one else but 'us'. No English? Unreal.

1977:
I join the University of Dhaka in the Department of English! My friends join 'equally fashionable Departments, like International Relations (IR), Management, Finance, Business Administration. English remain our lingua franca.

1981:
I finish my Honours examination and start hunting for a job. The wanted columns only have jobs for people with 'experience'. I have no proverbial maternal or paternal uncles to help me! I am on the verge of giving up when a friend shocks me by saying, 'you don't have to worry about experience, you can speak in English — you can always apply! Taking his advice, I walk into a Travel agency looking for Sales Executives, where I lay on my twang on the Sylhetise speaking proprietor. An hour later, I walk out with an appointment letter — Taka 1000 per month to begin with. A lot of money in those days!

closely. He senses my apprehensions and goes on the defensive. 'I don't work in a bank, but have been maintaining an account for the last twenty years. I go there every week to deposit all that I earn as unemployment benefits. I have experience which can be a Banker's envy!! It was heavily accented with Sylhetise, but he spoke in, you guessed 'right in English!'

1985:
I meet a smashing young lady who tells me that she has known me for years. This is a bizarre situation as I wrack my brain without luck, and apologise for my blurred memory. A second clue, she was in school with me? It is a while later I realise that this is Halima who went away to the States with her parents in 1976. She is a brand new person — with a brand new, quite foreign sounding name: 'Malha!'

1987:
I am at the head office of Biman. A shocking news comes in. Pilot and ground handler in a fistcuff. Now the literal punch line: An 'English gaal' leads to an altercation and a 'punch-up' bringing all operations to a stand still.

The pilot not getting the better of the ground handler, unfortunately used the English expression IDIOT, meaning as the Dictionary states 'a person too deficient in mind to be capable of rational conduct'. High level management intervention cools down the situation. Somehow, Bangalees react violently to an English 'gaal!'. I warn myself, henceforth — no idiot, Stupid, Nonsense or any foreign sounding expression in any 'verbal altercation'. Use a proper 'your mothers so and



guishes just as fast. Zafar Iqbal (deceased) movie actor, singer and star extra ordinary, departed from planet earth quite suddenly, in 1991. He was a hero who could transcend generations and was my elder brothers friend, as he was mine.

A restless soul, he was a ladies heart throb and gent's heart burn, with a penchant for the theatric's in 'real' life. He lived his life — as his acting, and it was only natural that he became anxious when I told him casually one evening, that I have never witnessed a film being shot. He promptly

the crew reverently referred to Babita, remained unperturbed and prepared for the shot again.

This time a little girl with a neatly tied hair bun walked in, rose in one hand and autograph book in the other. 'Production' — somebody shouted again, and a petty fellow in a petty uniform of a policeman, appeared and promptly took charge of public disorder. A third attempt is made and aborted. Time for a break, and once again somebody cried out Production, and bottles of soft drink, hot tea, samosas, singaras materialized

wield with English? Having made his dramatic monologue to me, he went ahead with his shot with Babita which was perfect. Before disappearing into the winter night — 'Madam' who also did her bits in English with the 'Boss'. 'See You', 'Good night', 'ta ta' and 'bye'. Everybody clapped!

As the evening wore on, the sycophants warmed up to Zafar Iqbal as he began his discourses of 'adda' in English. I took leave. In parting, he said 'take care my man, stay and play safe — will you?'. I heard

It has become a terrorized country where the people are virtually paralysed with fear. The places are all deserted and destroyed. Wherever you look, there are scattered and battered dead bodies and wherever you go, the faces of the hungry and disease ridden people fill your vision. For the people of Rwanda hope battles fear. Dare they hope when there are so many things they are scared of? Dare they wish for freedom?

When the Rwandan civil war broke, millions of Hutus fled across the border into Zaire. They left their homes, properties and relatives behind — some have lost their children. Others their husbands, brothers, mothers and wives. They have run away to save their lives and in trying to save theirs, they have lost the ones they truly loved. These people have now become desperate to return to Rwanda to try and find whatever they have lost, but many of them can't. The civil war wouldn't let them.

Sad though it is, but the Hutus and the Tutsis themselves are to blame for what is happening. Recently, Time Magazine has reported that nonsensical rumours are spreading across the country between Hutus and Tutsis. This is not only increasing the pressure between themselves but is also discouraging the people to return to their homes and causing unnece-



... a cholera victim... grave July 20... refugees have... their country. — AFP Photo

Where Hope Battles Fear Rwanda: A Shadow of Darkness

by Farhana Yusuf

encourage us to go on and see them grow up into worthy and successful individuals. Is it therefore not our duty to heal the would for them to make it a better place to live? Thousands of children have lost their parents during the civil war. They have no home, no place to live and most of the children hardly have anybody to look after them. Some roam around crying for their parents with a look of intense fear in their eyes, others like stricken by hunger. Their rib cages are sticking out and all they have is skin and bones. Even their limbs and frail bodies have been marked by cuts and bruises. Hundreds of children have been seen lying enclosed in the streets of Zaire, some already dead others moaning weakly. The deadly cholera epidemic has killed thousands in Goma.

Their condition is so pathetic, that it is like a death match — unfeared yet real and alive. In many wintry mornings, dozens of people were seen huddling outside a medical camp waiting for the doctors to arrive. The wind whips through the camp and

they shiver as they, virtually have nothing to protect them. In this situation, a small boy mutters, 'I'm so cold, mother,' and his mother covers his skeletal shivering frame with a blanket.

She is not sure whether he's suffering from diarrhea, dysentery or cholera. She presumes he may be dead before he can even be diagnosed, and it seems that she is right. Only moments later, this small frail boy shudders violently and takes his last breath.

Around five hundred corpses, some in mats and blan-

kets others exposed, stretch for miles along the streets waiting to be collected by the burial squads. Many have been putrefying for days on end. But the most amazing thing is that most of the thousands of Rwandan refugees pay little attention to these scattered dead bodies. They are so used to these scenes that it hardly draws their attention now.

They carry on with their lives searching for means of food. An old shoemaker has been seen mending a pair of shoes only inches away from a small dead boy. Just imagine the situation. Thousands of children have been killed by bullets while trying to flee with their parents and those who did not die instantly bled to death gradually there are almost 5000 children who are staying in refugee examples

out of which only four children are so far united with their parents.

How long are these children going to remain in refugee camps? When will this civil war end? Is there still any chance of freedom? Time will tell us everything. But we can't just rely on time because time does not wait for anybody. It goes on without stopping — without waiting. But what is now happening in Rwanda cannot go on — it has to stop soon. The question is: 'when?'

We are all eagerly waiting for the day or rather the time when Rwanda will emerge from darkness and into light.

This writing has been prepared with extensive help from CNN, BBC Time Magazine Newsweek

Fill out this form and send it to us, and you will be a member of Teens & Twenties Club. Send in your writings, illustrations, and cartoons. It is an ideal opportunity to express yourself through the print media.

Name: _____
 Age: _____
 University/College: _____
 Subject: _____
 Full address: _____
 Telephone No: _____