



conversation

# Imagining Language and Forging Resistance

This is a conversation in New York between Farhad Mazhar, Managing Director of a Bangladeshi organisation called UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternatives), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Avalon Foundation Professor of Humanities at Columbia University. At the time of the conversation, Farhad was in New York from a round of lectures on the role of microenterprises in developing societies.

GCS: Let me ask you a little bit about the history of your activism, and also the way in which activism and resistance have developed in Bangladesh in a broad way.

FM: Let me try to start with my own personal engagement. I was born in 1947. As a student, I was always active, participating in student movements. At that time, in the sixties, the major movement in Bangladesh was the Bangladesh movement for self-determination. The rise of a peculiar nationalism; I say peculiar because it was happening in a sub-colonial country like Bangladesh.

Think of yourself as me in the sixties. You are a bit confused. You are active in this struggle; you are a little bit aware, you have read a little bit of Marx, a little bit of Stalin. You also know a little bit about Mao. And then you struggle with yourself to understand the national question. You are familiar with imperialism, but your Bangladeshi experience doesn't fit into this whole concept of imperialism. On the one hand, you see linguistic nationalism appearing. In 1962, in East Pakistan, we had our own Bangla language movement. On the other hand, the legacy of Pakistan as a nation is not gone at all. The subcontinent had just been divided in 1947. Even in the '60s people were arguing "We have got to have a Pakistani culture." At the same time there was also this kind of Bangladeshi nationalism. It was the same thing as the Pakistani nationalism, a kind of Western paradigm of nationalism.

Then there was another force that no-one noticed. The whole global capitalist system was emerging at that time, something I see only as I look back on that time. This showed up in the developmental model which Pakistan was pursuing. That model said that inevitably you would have to exploit agriculture and go for industrialisation, urbanisation. Ironically, one major consequence of this process was the emergence of Bangladesh. All the Harvard economists and the Harvard development experts went to Pakistan and said that Pakistan had to exploit the agricultural hinterland in the East. And soon Bengali nationalism was released through this exploitation. So you see that this emergence of Bangladesh and also the separation that took place was the consequence of liberalisation which we can see now. In the early '90s, in its fully developed mode. How can you explain nationalism in Bangladesh now unless you look again at the whole globalisation process? In '90s you see it one way, back in the '60s you saw it in a completely different way. Even in '70s and '80s you saw it in a different way. It has really unfolded.

GCS: But in the '60s since you didn't know that it was going to be like this, the nationalism was expressed against the idea of an East Pakistani culture.

FM: Yes, you could say that I, the people of my generation didn't understand. It's interesting, we were using the word "imperialism" at that time, we were quite involved in an anti-imperialist struggle, an anti-colonial kind of struggle based on the history with the British. Even the Bengali nationalism used the same discourse.

GCS: Before we go on to the next question, talk a little bit about the history of the language movement of 1952: I know how important you think that was, in terms of your own history of conscientisation and activism.

FM: In '47 the Subcontinent was divided. The ruling class of Pakistan tried to develop a homogeneous Pakistani culture by the mediation of the state, the coercion of the state. They wanted a state language, and it had to be Urdu. And the Bangladeshis — the Bangalis of East Pakistan protested. Notice how I used the two words, Bangladeshi and Bangali inter-changeably. This reflects some of the contradictions of our political culture. The Bangali didn't accept that Urdu should be the only state language, we protested and then the protests were suppressed, the police opened fire, people got killed, there were martyrs. Around this movement a real mass movement developed, people got organised and they started to become conscious of their own language and culture. That was, I think, one of the most significant turning points for the history of Bangladesh, 1952.

But for myself in that period, my problem was two-fold. It was quite clear that there was oppression going on in the national culture and that I needed to oppose it. But on the other hand, being a Marxist, having some idea of the concept of internationalism I had a faint idea that nationalism was not to be my path. So this was the dichotomy and

contradiction within which I grew up. And my reservations about nationalism were soon justified. After this bloody war of self-determination that we waged for 9 months, in the constitution, the Bangalis excluded the right of the Chittagong Hill Tribes, as minorities. So also was the plight of the Biharis. This is ironic because if you go back through history, you find that some of the early Bangla language riots had actually been started by Bangali Biharis. And even today we have in Bangladesh the stranded Pakistanis whose situation is quite hopeless. All through the '70s, being a poet and a writer, I knew that I had to defend my language and my culture. At the same time I could not be entrapped into this paradigm of nationalism.

GCS: How did you discover that you were a poet?

FM: That's a very heavy question for me. Even today, I don't think I've discovered that I am a poet. I write poems because... I hate to use the word habit, because I love writing poetry, I love to express myself that way. And somehow I also realised that some of my friends also loved my poems.

As I grew up, slowly, I felt a responsibility to write poems.

GCS: When did you feel that there was a sort of poetry-shaped hole in your head?

FM: That was quite early in my life, when I was, say, 11 or 12 years old. I was listening to a lot of Kirtans and singing a lot and wrote my first poem.

GCS: Tell me, I'm not a poet at all, was it a loss or a gain to be a bit different from others?

FM: I didn't think I was, as a poet. Sometimes there is a glorification of poetry or a glorification of poets. I never felt odd in that way. I only felt odd at times when something would come to my mind, something that I would like to know more about, or some metaphor, or idea or images that came to my head and I just could not get rid of it. It's then that I started thinking of myself as a little bit irrational or abnormal and I would start to feel guilty about this. It took me a long time to realise that this irrationality was really a good thing.

GCS: You said, so very interestingly, that being a poet, you knew that you had to defend your language, at the same time you knew that nationalism was not the right path. And within this dilemma, your activism grew. And now, I may be wrong, but being a poet, one feels, a little, at least in the 20th century, that one is apart. On the other hand, you must believe in the collective. Is that also a dilemma?

FM: When you feel the collective, then certain things are clear. For example, your collective is grounded in the class question. But many of the middle class or even elites are also joining in your struggle when you are under national oppression. So that raises quite an interesting issue. What, for example, is this thing called the Bengali collective? People start using these words and concepts to their own benefit, so you have to really fight to regain those territories with your own class interests or gender interests. I wanted to introduce that word as well, because later you see clearly that you cannot address everything from just a class point of view, there are other areas as well. Although in my younger period that was not so clear. Even though I knew, at that time, I was aware of it, it was more of a paternalistic sort of thing. More of a kind of equality kind of thing, that men and women have to be equal.

GCS: And now?

FM: I don't think it is a question of equality only. Equality you can always address as a democratic question, but I think that the issue is much deeper. If you want to address the whole issue of patriarchy, the whole issue of social reproduction, you have to go much deeper, you have to think in very different terms, not simply in terms of equality.

GCS: So you have to work with certain kinds of structural notions or what? When you are thinking in terms of forming a collective that is sensitive both to questions of class and questions of gender.

FM: The only way is by really working from what is happening with real living women and then working towards a theory from that point of view, you don't do it the other way around. You don't start with a preconceived idea of a collective. You start with this notion, you work with it, and keep this notion open so that you can always change.

GCS: But on the other hand, you do have to have a certain kind of general set of assumptions even to be able to recognise problems as problems, isn't



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that true?

FM: Of course, that's true.

GCS: So this is where... You must realise I don't care at all about the idea of proceeding from theory. I don't even know what theory is that I would proceed from. Equality to me is a hopeless basis on which to build any kind of programme. On the other hand, what is the alternative vision apart from a problem solving approach? The question of exploitation is always useful because it is a problem. It is an unquestionable evil, it is both class-sensitive and gender-sensitive. And you can work at a very broad level without ever having to state your presuppositions. But that's a little bit different from saying as you just said, that as long as I was young and thought of class I could base myself on equality; as I grew older and I became sensitive to the issue of gender I felt that I had to go deeper. What does one find when one goes deeper?

FM: You know, the classical approach of emancipation of human societies was more or less enunciated in terms of the class question. And within it, we addressed the women's struggle in a more or less paternalistic way. We knew that there were women's issues, and there were women comrades, and you had to be nice to them. That was, more or less, how we grew up; we had more or less not even realised that a woman's question existed.

GCS: Yes, we just happened to be a little bit different, that's all.

FM: You took it for granted that once these class relations are gone, the women's question would also be automatically solved. But soon you realise that things are not so simple. And then you start thinking, what does it mean, men-women relationships? What is the emerging locus of power; what is this thing called patriarchy, how to locate it, how to fight against it? Can you fight it with your old theories based on a class analysis? Do you need a new theory? Do you need an independent women's organisation apart from your working class organisation? But then, interestingly, the Bangladesh women's movement solved this issue for us, because they never wanted to separate their movements from the broader social movements. I don't think the working class group alone could have solved it. And from our group, or myself, individually, we always thought that, even though we did not have the theoretical answer to that, we should support and study the spontaneous women's movement.

GCS: I want to come back to the question of class, because of your recent arrest. I wonder if you would care to talk about the events leading up to the arrest and your vision of uniting various kinds of struggles in the country under a broader recognition of class alliances within them.

FM: You and I always spoke about class and a little bit about the women's movement. But there is another broader movement emerging in Bangladesh as well... the whole environmental and ecological question; much more interesting and complicated, not in terms of being difficult, but intellectually more challenging, politically more complex. I publish a journal, a fortnightly, fairly popular, 48-page, read by political cadres and also the developmental activists. This journal covers environmental issues, women's issues, trade union issues, working class issues. And is always linking different movements to a general trend and giving some guidance about what direction to give our

political activity. So that was one threat to the government. Then there is my work on the population issue. We always insisted that population control was a racist ideology to lower the number of the black or the brown or the poor. So the government was extremely angry and they were looking for an opportunity to arrest me and silence me.

GCS: Because the journal linked different kinds of struggle, that's why.

FM: Basically, that's why. The article they picked up to punish me was one where I analysed an event, a rebellion in the paramilitary force. These forces are made up of people from very poor peasant families. And they were demanding some kind of minimum wage and job security. And after two years of negotiation and some promises, the government suddenly refused to give them the benefits. There was widespread reaction, the government brought in the military, opened fire and killed more than 50 people. In a long article where I wrote about this, I also tried to link this rebellion with two other movements. First, with another peasant movement which was demanding fertilizer because with structural adjustment and removing of agricultural subsidy fertilizer price was going up; the government fired on them as well. Next, with the question of working class movements; since Bangladesh did not go through a true industrial revolution what we have is a semi-peasant semi-worker. So, by weaving all these resistances together, I said that these were an indication of a new kind of movement emerging. And these groups are challenging not only the state machinery but the whole globalisation process. This is very important to understand. And all of this is happening at the grassroots level. The traditional political parties, left or right, have failed miserably, they cannot even understand the new aspirations of the people, the new strategies for spontaneous organising. This is why the government felt so threatened by my article.

GCS: Would you care to talk about the actual mechanism of your arrest and release, because we here in New York were quite involved and interested in the progress of that and keeping up with it day to day.

FM: I was arrested under the Special Powers Act, a preventive act that is used by the executive organs of the state, by the bureaucrats because they do not have to show any cause. So, one evening the police simply came and threw me into the jail. But the judiciary... they released me when my advocate made a writ petition for Habeas Corpus. This contradiction between the executive and the judiciary that is emerging in Bangladesh is quite significant, it does not fit into any of the traditional theories of the state, whether you talk of the relative autonomy of the state, or old Marxist or even modern versions of the state. This was a big lesson for me. I learnt a lot from reading the verdict that the judiciary gave on my case, which set a precedent at the judicial level anyway.

GCS: Let us go back to the idea of the growing movements of resistance. Tell me about this independent resistance in the context of Islam. What is the situation of Islam in terms of both resistance as well as conservatism.

FM: Well, in the context of Islam, it is very important to realise that there is nothing like one single Islam. First, Indian Islam is not the same as Middle-Eastern Islam. Again, within Indian Islam, you find many variations even

in the main-stream. Then if you look at Marfuti Islam, or Sufi Islam, you see yet more schools of Islam.

In Bangladesh, the link with Islam started with the struggle against colonialism. Until 1857, Muslims in the entire subcontinent remained mentally closed to the English language and ideas, thinking they will get power back. But then, after 1857, they realised they had to catch up, in many areas of competition, in their thinking, their ideas. So, on the one hand, this created an anti-colonial kind of movement; and on the other hand it also created a kind of communalism, not at all progressive. Think of the Wahabi movements. The Bangladesh Rightist Islamic forces of now are the result of a long process: challenging the forces coming from outside, and also modernism, based on an idea of a pure Islam.

But it's important to remember that in 1971 Bangladesh actually rejected the forces of Islamisation when we rejected the Pakistani state. The struggle for a secular state, a clear separation of religion and the state, was a major part of the agenda. But the nation failed miserably to incorporate the question of Islam in re-interpreting its own culture. In 1971, the main ideology was Bengali nationalism, useful even though it had its origin in the 19th century nationalism of Bankim and others which was, more or less, Hindu revivalism. In 1971, a continuation of this ideology was the only thing available to confront Pakistan with. To that extent, it played a progressive role in Bangladesh. But then, after the liberalisation, they didn't question this 19th century Bengali Hindu nationalism but kept it intact, did not try to determine what was going to be the role of Bengali Islam, of Buddhism, of the many different Hinduisms. And that has created the conditions for the rise of a Bangladeshi nationalism that is much worse, very communal, wanting to delimit the culture by the religion. The same Pakistani logic has thus come back; and it is stilling our struggle for a secular state.

Added to that you can see the whole Western construction of Islam. At the same time, in the name of development and population control, the developmental community is nourishing fundamentalism. You have to channel a huge amount of funds to train the Imams in the mosques because, they say, the Imams are the members of the civil society. And this makes the Imams very powerful. So this so-called Islamic fundamentalism, in Bangladesh, is coming from outside not within. The earlier fundamentalism we had, we knew how to deal with. But this is a new kind of fundamentalism which we really don't know how to handle because it is very much linked with the whole globalisation process. And then these same people will then blame you because of the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Recently some NGOs had organised a big 150,000-strong meeting of poor people in Dhaka city where they criticised the macroeconomic policies, structural adjustments, World Bank policies, and also reminded the developmental community and the Bangladeshi government that the whole issue of poverty must not be forgotten. In the process they also criticised the rise of fundamentalism encouraged by this external funding. But when this same news was reported in some Canadian newspaper, the *Globe & Mail*, they said that it was a rally of 100,000 women protesting in Dhaka against fundamentalism, which is far from the complete truth. All the Western media have taken this challenge of the poor people against structural adjustment, against the World Bank, against financialisation, against this kind of global strategy of capital, into a simple struggle against fundamentalism.

GCS: A certain kind of shame against their own culture.

FM: This is quite interesting, because actually the feminist movement is quite strong in Bangladesh, they don't need any help from outside to confront the fundamentalism in Bangladesh, they are quite capable of doing it themselves. Jahanara Imam did it until she died of cancer; and there is quite a capable young leadership now.

GCS: I have another question which was... once we started talking about Islam, the multifarious roles of Islam in various parts of the political processes in the country, it was quite clear that it was really a dynamic and active thing. I would like to ask the question that would look at its flip side. What then is the role of, or appropriateness of, or historical consonance of an idea of secularism in a state like Bangladesh?

FM: Secularism means something

very different when applied to our society, than in the West. In European history, the Church owned property. So there was an economic conflict between the Church and the people, the Church and the king. So there arose a movement against the Church and that spearheaded the separation between the Church and the State. That was entirely a political separation. But in Bangladesh, the Mosque is not an economically exploitative institution, it is an ideologically exploitative institution. So it demands a completely new strategy to fight these institutions, even if you think in terms of the secular state in very conventional terms. On the other hand, you know as an activist that there is nothing called secular culture, there can at best be a secular state in the sense that you can really separate your state from a religion.

GCS: The system can be secular.

FM: But the Western system is very much Christian in its cultural values, its base is Christian, as indeed they sometimes claim to be, explicitly. Obviously the kind of cultural situation we have now is really unacceptable to us, we really need to change it. Our concern is that given these economic changes at the national, local and global level, what are the advantages of this kind of a cultural transformation as well?

GCS: People call you both a Hindu sympathiser and an Islamic fundamentalist. How would you silence these peculiarly contradictory accusations that I have, myself, heard levelled against you?

FM: First of all, I sometimes think that it is not worth silencing some of these voices. Because there are a lot of stupid people around who do not understand some of the difficult issues that we are trying to handle. The question important to me is how to proceed with my own struggle.

I don't believe in a universal culture. I definitely believe that any struggle you do is always within a particular moment and a particular context. At the same time I am not a romanticist. The cultural context will also have to change in this transformation that is going on in the world historical arena, I am not afraid of that. The question is this, what is to be the nature of this change. And then you definitely have to enter some kind of an engagement with all the different cultures which are a part of your milieu. In Bangladesh, I think that Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism in a broad sense, are the resources that the people are at home with. They are being influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by it. Now the question for Bangladesh is this, to what extent at this particular moment, what of these resources will they keep, what will they reject and what will they transform. So people who are familiar with my writing, they know what I reject, what I am transforming... because I am using many of the Islamic words in a completely new way. When I use a word, I say that I am engaged in a process of dethologisation. I am using many of the metaphors and words of theology, but actually to destroy the theology. So the task in Bangladesh is actually the destruction of the theology. The task is not the restoration of the theology.

GCS: At the same time in the music of Bangladesh, that is to say the rural non-elite theological tradition, some really rather powerful motifs and arguments are already being employed in this process.

FM: Definitely, the whole Baul tradition for example; these are the interesting experiments by which they have dethologised their culture within the paradigm of theology. This is occurring in our culture completely in a different way than, for example, secularisation occurs in Western culture. So you have to take note of that.

GCS: I am glad I asked you that question because I happen to be quite familiar with the way of your work, we have been friends for a very long time. I am also very familiar with the work of a powerful feminist and activist, long your co-worker and now your wife, Farida Akhter on whose stuff I have written a great deal. I know how your collective works, and therefore when I hear these allegations independently as well as, of course, with amusement when I am in Bangladesh because of course you people are around me, I really feel the need to confront it with some kind of argument, and I believe that you have just given me that. I think that this is the appropriate moment to end and so, thank you and good night.

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