

The language question

Internationalism in the context of globalisation

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INTERNATIONALISM and Globalisation are not identical; they cannot be. For they are very different in both substance and appearance. Whereas Internationalism is based on mutual tolerance, indeed respect, among nations; Globalisation is an imposition of the powerful on the weak. The one believes in the freedom of the people; the other in the freedom of capital; the two objectives being not only contradictory, but indeed opposed to each other.

Language, apparently, belongs to both Internationalism and Globalisation. But there is a fundamental difference between the two in respect of their attitude toward language. Globalisation has no faith in variety, despite its pretense. Its basis and values are essentially those of capitalism and capitalism is a relentless promoter of uniformity. The varieties it allows are variations on a theme, the theme being profit-making. Capitalist uniformity is that of the market and not of the garden, it does not nurture plants, it only produces commodities. Both as a system and an ideology, capitalism encourages the making of profit and personal pleasure, and in doing so alienates the individual not only from the community but also from his own self. For all these Globalisation, which is the new guise of capitalism, is undemocratic precisely in the same sense in which Internationalism is democratic. Globalisation would be happy to have only one language, that of the marketplace, and by extension that of the dominant country ruling over the globe. The supremacy that the English language enjoys at the moment is in no way owing to the numerical strength of its native speakers. Demographic estimates tell us that the Chinese language is more widely spoken in the world than the English language; but the English language gets precedence over others. The Bengali-speaking population occupies the sixth position, numerically, and yet they are, in reality, a marginalised people. The reasons are obvious: language is subservient to Globalisation and is, in no way, its master. The English language rules not because of England but because of America, which is the leader of the global coalition not so much against terrorism as for the protection of capitalism.

Language is more than a medium, it is also a bond. It brings people together and, at the same time, distinguishes them from others, creating variety for the world at large. What we call nationalism and culture are rooted in several elements, the most important of which is language. Globalisation, let us state again, is subversive of variety and promotive of deracination. Its trade and commerce instigate uniformity of taste and manners, and its advertisements stifle what is local. This context makes the local language a very useful space where a people can stand, con-

front the world, defend itself and, at the same time, receive influences which are positive and healthy. The mother tongue, moreover, is like the mother's milk, it nourishes the native speakers. And no education is better than the one given through the mother tongue.

Capitalism, today, is no longer the progressive social and economic force it once was; but that does not signify that feudalism is better, in fact it is worse. When George Bush declares war against Bin Laden he uses language very similar to that of his declared enemy, but the way of life Bin Laden recommends has no leg to stand upon. Globalisation is not particularly enamoured of fundamentalism; it has no reason to be. But its real enemy are not the fundamentalists, they are the democrats who believe in tolerance, variety and rights of culture to exist and flourish. The first prerequisite of the democratic sociopolitical dispensation is secularism, and language is essentially secular, in spite of the religious uses to which it has been put, from time to time.

The state language movement of Bangladesh was, as it began, a local phenomenon. Its significance was, of course, great. For it was the first popular upsurge against the newly-established state of Pakistan by the very same people who had made it possible for that state to come into being. Fifty-six per cent of the population of Pakistan lived in East Bengal, and it was their vote that had

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decided that a separate state should be born to bring about a change in their insufferable economic fate. That they should raise their voice against the imposition of Urdu as the only state language was not unnatural; but it was unexpected by those who were in control of the state. That the movement did not augur the state well was not realised by those who had become masters. They did not take long to concede to the demand; and in the first constitution of Pakistan Bengali was accepted as one of the state languages along with Urdu. But that did not satisfy the people, who continued to struggle for their emancipation along the line envisaged by the language movement and ultimately established Bangladesh based on linguistic nationalism as opposed to the religious nationalism on which Pakistan was based.

In substance, the state language movement of the Bengalis was both anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. That was how it began. The non-Bengali wielders of power were bent upon treating East Bengal much in the same manner as the British had treated India in the near past. They had imposed their language on the

helpless local population; the new authority of the new supposedly independent state wanted to impose theirs on the people of East Bengal. The intention was to perpetuate internal colonialism. East Bengal reacted to the new rulers in a manner not very different from what they had done in respect of the British rulers. The state language movement signified the beginning of a process which was destined to liberate East Bengal from the new colonialists. Compromise was impossible because the language question had made it clear that the goal of achieving economic emancipation, which was the real objective behind their voting for the establishment of a new state, was not likely to be reached within the framework of Pakistan.

The state in British India was bureaucratic in organisation and capitalist in economic policy. The independent state of Pakistan continued to be of the same character, despite apparent changes. It was a conglomeration of civil and army bureaucracy that ruled, and the developments in the economy persisted in the same capitalist line as before. That the independence had brought nothing more substantial than the transfer of

power from the British to the local rulers was becoming increasingly evident. The attempt to impose Urdu on the Bengalis worked as an eye-opener.

In the area of culture feudal values and attitudes prevailed, in East Bengal too. The rules encouraged them. They had declared the state to be an Islamic Republic, and would have liked it to be autocratic although personally most of them lived a way of life which was particularly characterised by its distance from religion. They were capitalist in indulgence as well as aspiration.

Communalism has been the source of much social and political misery for the Bengalis. The two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, had lived together for centuries without fighting each other. It was after the British came that religious difference degenerated into sociopolitical communalism, leading, ultimately, to the disastrous partition of Bengal. Communalism, in reality, was nothing more than a competition between the more advanced Hindu middle class and the fledgling Muslims middle class in matters of job opportunities and political position. The competition was delightfully

encouraged by the British. The nationalist movement in Bengal was initiated by the Hindu middle class for the simple reason that they were more advanced than their Muslim compeers; but instead of identifying the British as the enemy, despite their knowledge as to who the real enemy was, they put up conveniently for themselves and dangerously for history, the Muslims as their enemy, who were, in reality, no more than newly-grown-up competitors. Nationalist movement was, in consequence, split into two and both became, in inclination, revivalist rather than democratic. The economic ideology that the leadership of both communities believed in was, ironically but not unexpectedly in view of their class interests, identical; inasmuch as they were firm believers in capitalism, despite deceptions.

Communalism had entered the languages as well. The Hindu middle class had tried to Sanskritize Bengali; in reaction the Muslim middle class wanted to persianize it, if possible. The attempts often took on an absurd character. For example, over-enthusiastic believers in the religion-based nationalism of Paki-

stan tried to introduce the Arabic script for Bengali on the plea that the existing script was of Sanskrit origin. Their efforts included editing even the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam, who they had declared to be very dear to their hearts, in the light of Pakistani nationalism. They would have loved to introduce a division in the cultural history of Bengal on the religious line.

It was in this context of the capitalist-feudal amalgam that the state language movement was more than a rebellion against the state. For it had a positive vision in front, which was to establish a state and a society which would be at once, secular, anti-capitalist and anti-feudal. The freedom movement in British India was not anti-feudal even when it was fiercely anti-imperialist. The so-called extremists who believed in armed insurgency swore in the name of religion and did not allow the Muslims to join their ranks.

The left movement was, of course, both anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. But it had not succeeded in mass-mobilisation. In fact, its activists were drawn mostly from the educated middle class and did not really know the language which would bring people to their fold. Moreover, the state repression on them was severe. And what had also happened after 1947 was that most of the members of the Communist party including that of the leadership had migrated to West Bengal, finding East Bengal a very difficult place to work in.

The state language movement was therefore of great historical importance. It filled in a vacuum and indicated a way to move ahead towards the goal of economic emancipation, for which the people had agitated for decades, indeed centuries.

Fifty years have passed since that fateful day in 1952. Much has been gained. We have a new state, of which the state language is Bengali. People have the right to choose their own government. Bangladesh is known all over the world.

But the dream of emancipation remains unachieved. We are still a marginalised people and an unwilling victim of globalisation. Our dependence on capitalist lenders and donors is increasing by the day, rather than decreasing. Within the state itself Bengali has not won the place it was expected to do. The ideals of a democratic state as envisioned by the state language movement and envisaged in the original constitution of the state are no longer effective, to say the least. Three different systems of education prevail, indicating the widening class-cleavage. Ideally, language seeks to ignore the divisions of class and religion. But in Bengal there has always been the difference even between those who speak Bengali, in respect of both choice of words and pronunciation. The English-educated elite, moreover, considered itself superior to those who did not know the use of that language. And the English language in Bangladesh today enjoys a prestige not inferior to the one it enjoyed in colonial days. In learning English in the days gone by there was both interest and a sense of dishonour, working simultaneously. That sense of shame no longer exists. At higher levels of education as also in higher judiciary English is still the official language.

Why has this happened? The most potent cause has been globalisation, within the frame of which capitalism -- both as a system and an ideology -- is functioning unabated.

And yet 21 February has been accepted internationally as the Mother Language Day. This has happened not because the world at large has grown a sudden interest in the Bengali language. No, the world does not care for Bengali, which is not at all surprising when we ourselves do not care for it as much as we do for English. The fact of the matter is that nationalities and cultures want a space to stand upon; and the mother language is more qualified than anything else to provide them with that space. Patriotism, most certainly, is not enough; and is, indeed, the last refuge of imperialists and the like, but not of those who believe in, and seek to promote, internationalism, without which internationalism, the future of the world is likely to be bleaker than it is now.

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Paying homage to the language martyrs.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

21st February: Look back in ambivalence

HAYAT SAIF

IT is significant that today is the fiftieth return of an auspicious day in the calendar. Auspicious because it made us aware, though cruelly, of a betrayal incomparable in history -- Ea betrayal from without as well as from within. A complete loss of trust galvanised a people into action that, through a relentless struggle of about two decades or so, culminated in a bloodbath unsurpassed in magnitude which finally ended in a catharsis giving birth to a nation-state. The day is auspicious because, fifty years ago, it marked the beginning of a national ethos that characterised a large population and bound them together into a single entity. Auspicious because the incidents that followed empowered us to draw nourishment from our own soil stirring roots into the spring of our rejuvenescence. Significant because half a century later we may now look back, not necessarily in anger if you like, but in a kind of ambivalence even a kind of quiet contemplation, towards our inner being as a unique people. Significant because half a century

has elapsed since the firing, an act of repression, that ironically for those who fired, bestowed martyrdom and set on motion a movement that resulted in our liberation. The firing was ordered by a ruling government that was supposed to be the government of the people which, however, it was for only less than half of them. Significant because that overt act of repression represented a total disregard to the general feeling of the people irrespective of caste or creed. That day, therefore, set into action the innate craving of a people to liberate its subjugated self from an evil power. That witnessed the beginning of struggle for survival culturally, economically and socially. It prompted us to discover our own inner strength that lay deep in our culture symbolizing our entire way of life through our language, our mother tongue -- Bangla.

That day suddenly made us aware of the delusions that we lived through in being enticed into the blunder of a two-nation theory. It was a sense of danger, an ominous feeling of insecurity of having been unwittingly fallen a victim to a domination for a sec-

Without Ekushey we would not be what we are today. Without Ekushey we would not be what we aspire to be tomorrow. We are a sovereign nation today because of Ekushey. We better resolve today to imbibe in us the essence of Ekushey and orient our cultural and political steps so that we may realize the dream that we had dreamt fifty years ago, and firmly move towards a future free of repression, deprivation and hunger.

ond time by an alien culture which was somehow similar and yet so very different from us. It inevitably created in the minds of the thinking few a sense of loss, a feeling of inexorable bondage. During the nineteen thirties and the forties these very people aspired for freedom were tricked instead into a trap of servitude and blatant exploitation.

The basis of the state called Pakistan was not only weak but also artificial. The rift showed even within a few months of independence from the British rule on the 14 of August 1947. It is recent history, but it is worthwhile to clear our vision. In the first phase of the language movement the seed of freedom was sown in the minds of the educated few. It found impetus due to the animosity and jingoism of some arrogant

Urdu-speaking government officials who were working at that point of time in the then East Pakistan. They had a lopsided view of reality, a curtailed vision of life. The anti-people and therefore anti-Bengali attitude as well as their atrocious high-pedestal mentality gave a further momentum to the movement. The bitterness that was created centring round the language issue gave rise to a denunciation of such dominating tendencies of the then West Pakistani jingoists.

That the Pakistanis of this kind, who started to think themselves superior and privileged disregarding the fact that the verdict of the people of the then East Pakistan in the referendum was crucial to the birth of Pakistan, believed that the Bengalees were no factor and their cultural being did not exist is the

context of Pakistan and they even started behaving to that effect. This had become clear to the intelligentsia even before the incident of firing on the 21 of February 1952. On the 24 of August 1947 just after the independence from British rule, some political activists and students conceived and organised a convention on the language issue. The convention resolved that Bangla would be the state language of East Pakistan, an official language as well as a medium of instruction. All-Pakistan state language would be decided on dialogue and people's mandate. There were also acts of betrayal by our own people who represented us in the central government as well as the provincial government. On the other hand there were people like Dr Muhammad Shahidullah who was

among the first few to put forward the justifications for Bangla to be the state language rather than Urdu.

But whatever were the actual incidents that preceded 21 February 1952 the fact remains that the language issue became central to our struggle for existence, a struggle that was intimately related to our national ethos in expressing our deep concern for protecting our place under the sun. That our premonition was true became clear later on.

It did not take too long for us to be disillusioned with the dream of a homeland induced by a very transient phase of this sub-continent's history. Pakistan was to be an overly theocratic state or at least so she was made out to be by her exponents. The religious factor became a bit of a fraud as

soon as the regions comprising it became actually independent. It, therefore, took less than a year for vast numbers to realize that a state could not exist by dogma. It perhaps became clear even to the founder of the state himself. He, however, sounded rather unconvincing when he expressed the view that people of various religious faiths could safely co-exist in his dreamland of Pakistan: 'the Muslims will cease to be Muslims and the Hindus cease to be Hindus', etc. Nobody listened to such wisdom, particularly when personal ideals and group interests came to surface in dealing with larger issues of state. Urdu was declared to be the only state language of the country called Pakistan when the majority spoke, thought and dreamt in Bengali. This declaration was the denial of the rights of a culturally vigorous people to preserve their own traditions and cultural heritage and in fact their existence as a people was threatened. The later history of the movement centring round this issue is well known. It is, however, important to realize that the 21 symbolizes our struggle for survival as a people and it

put into clear relief the fact that the language question was basically a question of survival of the Bengali-speaking population in economic, social and cultural terms.

It is impossible to forget the 21 February. It is central to our existence today. It stands for the very best in our tradition and culture. It is the symbol of the most inalienable, the most intimate and the most sacred in our hearts. In this country of six seasons spring comes last and in its ambience of love, colours and now paths 21 is held high in our esteem. Without Ekushey we would not be what we are today. Without Ekushey we would not be what we aspire to be tomorrow. We are a sovereign nation today because of Ekushey. We better resolve today to imbibe in us the essence of Ekushey and orient our cultural and political steps so that we may realize the dream that we had dreamt fifty years ago, and firmly move towards a future free of repression, deprivation and hunger.

Saif is a poet and essayist.