

# The forgotten harbinger of the language movement

Dhirendranath Datta acted courageously, and he was willing to take any kind of risk in his valiant fight for rescuing his mother tongue from the cultural aggression of the repressive colonial ruling elite of Pakistan. Whatever he did to defend his mother tongue at a critical juncture of our history, he did out of his deep conviction.

M. WAHEEDUZAMAN MANIK

THE Bengali language movement did not begin all of a sudden on February 21, 1952. Rather, it took place in the then East Bengal in several distinct phases in the early years of Pakistan. The formative phase took place in two stages. The first stage started immediately before and after the emergence of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, and the second stage took place in the early months of 1948, but they were not mass uprisings by any standard.

Yet, the restive student community and the intelligentsia were able to garner more mass support throughout the then East Bengal for making Bengali one of the state languages of Pakistan. Those initial reactions against the unilateral imposition of Urdu as the only state language prepared the progressive forces of the eastern province of the then Pakistan for launching an effective Bengali language movement in early 1952.

The final phase of the Bengali language movement began in early 1952 after Khwaja Nazimuddin, the then prime minister and a life-long anti-Bengali collaborator, declared in a public meeting at Paltan Maidan on January 26, 1952, that Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan. There is no doubt that his provocative speech can be singled out as the immediate cause of the 1952 phase of the language movement.

Any credible assessment of the organised efforts toward establishing Bengali as a state language would add credence to the fact that the language protests and demonstrations in the early years of Pakistan had a clear bearing on the extent and magnitude of the historic movement in February, 1952.

The language movement was not the making of any single individual or any particular political party. Many student leaders spearheaded it in all of its phases. Although the marginal roles of some of the participants have often been magnified through systematic distortions, exaggerations, manipulations and invented memories, there had been ample opportunity in those turbulent early years of Pakistan for many patriots for participating in that defining struggle.

Indeed, there were many actors who were involved in the different phases of the language movement. Of those genuine language activists, Dhirendranath Datta's (1886-1971) name can be

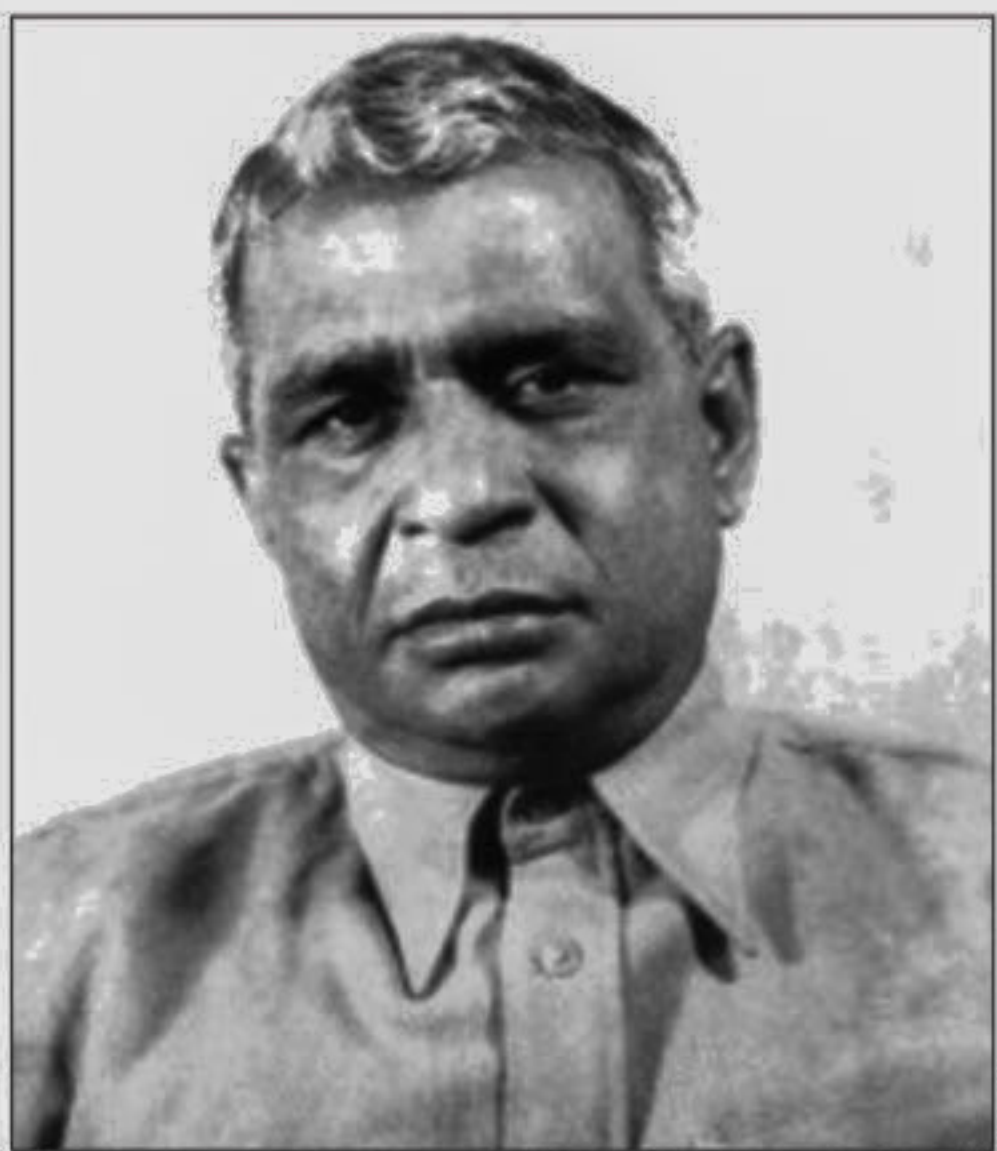
singled out as the illustrious forerunner of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement. Indeed, he was the harbinger of the movement in the early years of Pakistan. He made history on February 25, 1948 by demanding that Bengali be recognised as one of the state languages of Pakistan, even though his amendment was a proposal for adopting Bengali as one of the official languages of the central legislature of Pakistan.

The unresolved language controversy continued to surface during the early months of independent Pakistan. The rejection of Bengali and the unilateral imposition of Urdu as the "only" state language spawned a feeling of distrust and discontent among the student community and the progressive forces of the then East Bengal. In fact, the language issue exposed the hidden anti-Bengali agenda of the Punjabi-Mohajir dominated central government of the new nation of Pakistan.

There is a plethora of evidence to suggest that the patriotic forces of East Bengal had started mobilising and enlisting public support for making Bengali one of the state languages of Pakistan immediately before and after August 14, 1947. There is no doubt that those initial efforts against the ulterior motives and anti-Bengali policies of the Pakistani ruling elite were not mass protests. They were confined within the pages of newspapers, pamphlets, articles or statements.

The language movement started taking a more concrete and volatile shape throughout the then East Bengal in the early months of 1948. There were many language activists who were in the vanguard of the formative phase in 1948. Yet, Dhirendranath Datta's role was undoubtedly seminal in the process of jumpstarting our resistance against the anti-Bengali forces. His courageous speech in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP) on February 25, 1948, in favour of making Bengali one of the state languages ignited the 1948 phase.

Among all the genuine leaders of the formative phase, Dhirendranath Datta's role was pivotal in building up an organised resistance against the anti-Bengali forces who were deliberately engaged in repudiating the Bengali culture and language. Instead of supporting or endorsing his fair amendment for adopting Bengali as one of the official languages of the CAP, his proposal was quickly labelled by the Punjabi-Muhajir domi-



Dhirendranath Datta

nated government as an "anti-state" and "anti-Muslim" ploy for destroying the "Islamic" character of the new nation of Pakistan.

His patriotism and the loyalty of those few legislators who lent support to the amendment were openly questioned on the CAP floor. Finally, the Muslim League dominated CAP quickly rejected Dhirendranath Datta's historic amendment.

His amendment was consciously designed to accomplish much broader societal goals for the people of the then East Bengal. He was fully aware that his demand might be deliberately misconstrued by the ruling coterie of Pakistan. Since he was from the minority community, he also knew that his "patriotism" would be under the scrutiny of Pakistani ruling elite.

Dhirendranath Datta's demand also exposed the hidden anti-Bengali design of the non-Bengali ruling coterie. Despite the fact that the communally motivated ruling coterie had started disseminating blatant falsehoods and slanderous distortions about the legislators from the minority community, he fearlessly continued to demand, both at the CAP and East Bengal Legislative Assembly (EBLA), the adoption of Bengali as one of the state languages.

Although the ferocity of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement had waned during the years between the middle of 1948 and early January 1952, the activists and the progressive political forces, including Dhirendranath Datta, remained vigilant against the ulterior design of the anti-Bengali Pakistani political elite of the central government and the pro-Urdu provincial government of the then East Bengal.

Dhirendranath Datta was not murdered by the retreating Pakistani occupation forces. His murder was planned. He was not a random casualty of cross fire. Nor was he a victim of mistaken iden-

tity. The Gestapo style abduction of Dhirendranath Datta (along with his youngest son Dilip Datta) by the brute Pakistani soldiers from his Comilla residence on March 28, 1971, and the cruel methods through which he was tortured to death, lend credence to the fact that the collusive Pakistani ruling elite did not forget his pivotal role in the making of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement.

It is obvious that the genocidal Pakistan army was fully aware that Dhirendranath Datta was not only an ardent defender of Bengali language but was also vocal against various anti-Bengali policies and ploys of the central government. His brutal elimination at the beginning of Bangladesh's liberation war was also designed to cripple the nation intellectually. His murder made it obvious that the Pakistani military junta wanted to deprive the Bangladesh government in exile of his participation during the liberation war.

Instead of just thinking morally and ethically, Dhirendranath Datta had acted morally and ethically by speaking in favour of saving the mother tongue of the majority people of the then Pakistan. His moral stand and action can be characterised as Aristotelian "ethics of virtue" as he did believe that the best way of developing "skills of virtue" was by practice. As said by Aristotle a long time ago: "The virtues we get first by exercising them. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."

Dhirendranath Datta acted courageously, and he was willing to take any kind of risk in his valiant fight for rescuing his mother tongue from the cultural aggression of the repressive colonial ruling elite of Pakistan. Whatever he did to defend his mother tongue at a critical juncture of our history, he did out of his deep conviction.

The historic Bengali language movement in all of its phases was one of the most defining moments of Bangladesh's history, and the foundation of the language-based nationalism that led to the emergence of Bangladesh was clearly laid down during the formative phase of the Bengali language movement.

The sacrifices of the language activists and the language martyrs of that glorious movement did not go in vain. The lasting legacies of the Bengali language movement and the language martyrs have transcended the test of time. Indeed, Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta's courage and his sacrifices as a dauntless defender of the Bengali language and culture will be remembered beyond the boundaries of time.

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## Amazing drop in crime rate

ENTIRE industries are disappearing before our eyes. Blacksmiths vanished in 1890. Makers of vinyl records went bust in 1990. Pop singers who could write actual tunes vanished in 1976. And now another group is facing extinction: robbers.

The number of common crimes in cities is falling fast, according to a study of 30 countries by Jan van Dijk of Holland's Tilburg University and his colleagues. Levels of crime are lowest in Hong Kong/China, Japan and Spain, he discovered.

The news was shared by a worried reader whose area of expertise is criminal law. "Particularly hard-hit is the UK, which used to be proud of its crime tradition, with a host of celebrity thieves from Charlie Peace to the Great Train Robbers," he said.

A huge drop in the cost of DVD players from Asia has been identified as the main cause of growing unemployment among British burglars, according to research published last week. Home break-ins in the UK have fallen by more than 50 per cent in the past 10 years.

Unlike other disappearing groups, such as makers of horseshoes and readers of broadsheet newspapers, career robbers get little sympathy and have almost no chance of getting government grants to keep their skills alive.

Will taxpayers finance the last remaining burglar to do his stuff in a museum somewhere?

"Probably not," said our lawyer source. "Burglary lacks the charm of other age-old traditional activities, such as pottery, lace-making and official corruption."

Experts reckon the few remaining thieves are looking for salvation to Apple Inc, which

# Reason triumphs over Bt brinjal

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INDIA has done something unusual. It has defied the long-established trend of capitulating to corporate power on the seeds issue. After public consultations, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh decided against commercially releasing genetically modified brinjal (baigan). The brinjal, developed by US multinational Monsanto with Indian company Mahyco and two agricultural universities, had been earlier approved by an official expert committee.

Mr Ramesh deserves special praise for heeding farmers' concerns about GM foods. His public consultation approach sets a good precedent. It should become part of the official decision-making process.

Imposing the moratorium couldn't have been easy. Monsanto -- which controls 84 percent of the

global GM seeds market and wields great influence in the US and Indian governments -- aggressively lobbied for Bt brinjal. Much of the corporate media also falsely depicted all GM technology as the key to India's food security.

Monsanto adopted a Trojan Horse strategy, working through universities, Indian Council of Agricultural Research laboratories, and Mahyco, a Maharashtra-based company linked with Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, which Monsanto partly owns.

Bt Brinjal is made by inserting into the plant's genetic code a gene from the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis* to produce pesticidal properties. Science doesn't exactly know the risks from the insertion of alien genes on the recipient organism, the likelihood of transfer of those genes to human systems -- and, hence, the impact on health.

Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin says he

"would be surprised if we don't get one rude shock after another" from GM foods.

India grows 2,200 varieties of brinjal, with an output of 8.4 million tonnes. The risks of introducing GM brinjal remain unknown. The studies on the basis of which clearance was sought for Bt brinjal from the Genetic Engineering Approval (renamed "Appraisal") Committee were all done by Monsanto and its collaborators.

Most only look at acute toxicity and allergic reactions, such as skin irritation, but not the long-term effects of brinjal ingestion. These studies are based on 90-day tests on rats, which, Monsanto claims, are equivalent to 21 human years.

However, many scientists disagree and advocate a new testing protocol. They say normal brinjal has several natural toxins, which could become potent if the genetic material is reordered.

Scientists don't completely know if the toxin produced by the inserted gene in the brinjal breaks down in food or in the human gut. Even Monsanto admits it might remain active in an alkaline environment. And the human digestive system is (mildly) alkaline. We must therefore adopt the Precautionary Principle -- approve a technology only if it is proved safe for all living organisms and the environment. Until then, its development must be confined to the laboratory level.

Affirming the Precautionary Principle for Bt brinjal doesn't mean opposing GM technology or plant biotechnology as such. Farmers have for centuries practised seed selection and grafting to domesticate wild races of food plants.

Industry representatives say the Bt brinjal embargo will discourage private sector research and investment in GM food. In reality, the private sector has only been told to behave responsibly. In fact, Mr Ramesh has been soft on the GEAC, which ignored Mahyco-Monsanto's bypassing of procedures for importing genetic material and cultivating Bt brinjal.

This case should help focus attention on important issues like corporate control of seeds, effects of GM plants on biodiversity, and independence of scientific research.

Corporations make GM seeds such that the farmer cannot reproduce them and must return to the breeder-companies every year. They also want an intellectual property rights regime under which the farmer cannot even reproduce seeds for his/her own use. This is unacceptable. Decisions about rejecting or approving a GM crop must take into account the control issue, besides safety.

Preserving biodiversity is a high priority for South Asia, one of the world's greatest centres of genetic originality. We cannot afford genetic con-

tamination and risk transmission of alien material to plants. GM crops pose that risk.

MNCs like Monsanto exploit mismanaged and under-funded ICAR laboratories and agricultural universities, some of whose researchers crave easy funding. This creates a conflict of interest. If the researcher isn't independent, the quality and integrity of his output may be questionable.

We cannot afford that. We all have a right to safe food and an environment free of genetic contamination and biodiversity loss. There must be close multi-stage peer-group monitoring of corporate-funded research, especially in respect of food.

GM isn't relevant to India's food security. What matters is sustainable, climate-responsible agricultural development based on India's natural endowments and constraints, including half its farmers' dependence on rain-fed agriculture.

A larger lesson is the consultation process used. Thousands of people -- including farmers, consumers, scientists, food safety and security activists, environmentalists and ordinary citizens -- were given a chance to express their views in public assemblies in seven cities.

This healthy model of decision and policy-making is superior to the prevalent closed, anti-democratic procedure. It lets excluded social classes express themselves on matters vital to them.

We must always consult the underprivileged on issues that affect them -- employment guarantees and food security laws; land acquisition for mining, industry, irrigation and infrastructure; and energy and water projects which have environmental impacts.

Today, Nepal's Kondivra, who have conserved Orissa's ecosystem and biodiversity for centuries, face displacement from projects which will destroy the Niyamgiri mountain.

If such people were treated as citizens, and heard, government functionaries might realise their agency and rationality, and respect their dignity and self-worth. Governments may yet decide to ignore their concerns, but they at least would have to record the reasons for doing so.

Why, a high official never exposed to the dispossessed and underprivileged might suddenly develop sympathy for them and factor in their interests while designing a project.

This would be a good way of promoting participatory democracy which is sensitive to ordinary people's concerns, respects their rights, and empowers them. By embargoing Bt brinjal, Mr. Ramesh may have done a greater service to democracy than he intended.

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ELCOSPOT

makes small cool things. "It is these expensive personal items which are the most attractive to thieves today as they still retain value and can therefore be sold on," criminology lecturer James Treadwell told Reuters. No doubt Apple boss Steve Jobs is thrilled at this show of support.

I once interviewed a burglar who had written a book about his former life of crime. "I wish I was back in my old profession," he lamented. "The publishing business is full of crooks." I told him: "True, but in private industry we traditionally don't say 'crooks', we say 'businessmen'. It means the same thing."

The most interesting comment came from a Dutch reader. Several European countries now have an activity called Lockspots, he said. Contestants have to pick locks, break through sealed doors, open safes and so on. Lockspot contestants have to pledge never to use their skills for anti-social purposes. "It keeps them busy and out of trouble," he said. "And they're useful to know if you lock yourself out of your home."

One reader asked an intriguing question: will the fall in the number of criminal acts lead to humanity achieving crime-free societies? I doubt it. Given the mysterious disappearance of cookies and other sweet treats in my house, I can't even achieve a crime-free society in my own kitchen.

But going back to housebreaking, the last time I had to call a locksmith to get me into my own home, he charged US\$80 for a job, which took him two minutes. "That's robbery," I said. "That's business," he replied. I told you.

This week we are going to discuss various aspects of crime and punishment. Tomorrow: Is a crime-free society possible? Hear about the small place with 4.2 million surveillance cameras.



What price brinjal?

To know more about other acts that are disappearing, visit our columnist at www.vittachi.com.