

The inevitable decline and the unlikely fall

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THESE is no denying that there has been a steady decline in the quality of the Bengali used by the Bengalis in Bangladesh despite the increase in population and the widening of the circle of the educated. The situation is worsening continuously. The problem is more than academic, and is connected with the larger question of the future of Bengalis all over the world inasmuch as Bangladesh is the epicentre of all developments of the Bengali-speaking people. Language, we know, is not a mere instrument for verbal communication; it is also a means of thinking creatively and connecting oneself with the world effectively. That is why suppressing and distorting a language amounts to stifling of the very ability of its speakers to think, imagine and connect. To be sure, the misery of a people and the misery of their language are intimately connected in a dialectical cause-and-effect relationship. The decline in the quality of our Bengali is, therefore, indicative of an internal malaise that demands immediate and serious attention.

Decades ago, George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-four*, painted the picture of a nightmarish world in which the dictator of a country exercises his authority over his people through insidious manipulation of, and control over, the language they speak. The dictator's

to have produced an inflation, causing harm to quality. Those who are supposed to be educated pronounce words improperly, write incorrectly and allow their speech to be vulgar. Aberrations that we would have called appalling in our use of English are permitted by us in gay abandon. In fact, there are some who take pride in their ignorance and abuse of Bengali, considering the defect to be a sign of elitism and sophistication. Instead of being held up to ridicule they find themselves hoisted as role models. Things have taken such an unseemly turn that speaking Bengali correctly sounds artificial and insistence on grammatical exactness looks pedantic. Linguistically, we have every reason to feel ashamed, and perhaps alarmed. That we are indifferent to the problem indicates that there is darkness at the very noon of our prosperity. Are we then going down intellectually? This should be a very legitimate question to ask.

But why and how did this happen? To put it plainly and squarely, this is due to the incompleteness of our struggle for liberation. We thought we were liberated on 16 December 1971. That this is not true is borne out by very many evidences, and among the reliable ones is our linguistic decline.

The liberation struggle did not begin on 25 March 1971 at midnight nor did it end on 16 December the same year at noon. It dates back to the past, to the battle of Plassey itself. And during its

bourgeoisie and became a people's war with the toiling masses as its driving force. The bourgeois leadership prevaricated, floundered, and eventually failed to rise up to the occasion. That it was able to keep its tenuous control was due to several helping factors, namely, support from India, disarray of the leftist forces and the organizational linkage among Awami League workers. Leadership and the people stood apart from each other because of the difference in their agenda. Whereas the leadership wanted a quick transfer of power, keeping the state apparatuses as they were; the people expected emancipation from tyranny that could be achieved only through a radical transformation of the state and society. At the end of the war the leadership managed to gain more than it had bargained for. It obtained unfettered power to rule, plunder and get rich. The working class which had paid heavily found itself as deprived as before. The country advanced materially, but the inequality between the classes increased instead of diminishing. The gulf separating the privileged and the deprived widened and deepened with prosperity of the few being achieved at the cost of many. Political independence was visible, but the dream of liberty of the people remained unfulfilled.

The decline in the quality of Bengali is directly connected with, and also indicative of, this incompleteness of the

But these novels create fantasies and discourage serious thinking. While we are on the subject of literature, it is pertinent to take note of a recent tendency in some of our talented writers to take up English as their medium. This is not unexpected in view of the bourgeois development that has taken place in the society. What is significant, however, is the separation along the class-line between readership of the English writings and that of Bengali writings. While the rich feel themselves inclined to English writings, the less privileged remain contained within the Bengali circle. In a way the gain for English looks like a loss for Bengali and it is quite likely that the separation will widen in the coming days.

Then there is the role of the media. The media is smart and powerful and its influence is tremendous. But in respect of the promotion of the use of the Bengali language, its impact has not been positive. Neither the governmental powers that be nor the owners of the media have any taste for free discussion and open debate on important national questions. The focus is almost overwhelmingly on entertainment. Very often the television channels practice what is nothing short of vulgarism. The language they use suffers because of distortion. Also there is the invasion of Hindi serials and advertisements. Thanks to the power of Indian channels, we, who were anti-Urdu during the

Since the British rulers had their confidence and were more or less unselfconscious of their usurpation, they did not find it necessary to hinder the cultivation of Bengali, and Bengali literature continued to develop during their rule. The Pakistanis, however, were not sure of themselves and thought it necessary to deepen their authority through linguistic control. The locally-bred rulers who rule now are self-conscious and their improper use of Bengali is indicative of their hidden desire of distancing themselves from the public and establishing their superiority in relation to the common man. At the same time it is also true that they do not represent the very best of their own class. In fact those who figure prominently and wield governmental power belong to the inferior stratum of the rich. Thus many of those who manage to get elected to the National Assembly speak a language distasteful to the properly-educated. Some display vulgarity of a type which is worse than coarseness. And yet these leaders are the people who get heard because of the media and figure as role models because of their power. Parliamentary speeches are generally expected to provide the best form of prose. For us that is a far cry.

The rulers claim to be nationalists, but their nationalism turns out to be empty of patriotism; in reality they are no less anti-people than the declared anti-nationalists of the past. The Pakistani rulers were engaged in an open conspiracy to disfigure Bengali. They had failed. But the local rulers are bent upon imposing their ignorance, indifference and vulgarity on the cultivation of our language. One of the distortions that they been successful in carrying out is the expulsion of vowel lengthening of words, making the victimized words look like phantoms of the original. The action is not only wasteful but also harmful. One of the features on which the Bengali language can pride itself on is the close correspondence between the spelling and the sound of words. Every word, moreover, has its particular history and its peculiar appearance; disturbing them amounts to violence and seems to be all of a piece with the casual and unfriendly attitude of the ruling class to the speakers of the language. In the new orthographic dispensation the word denoting an economic class has lost its long vowel. The new spelling is perhaps symptomatic of the inverted class hatred that the ruling class nurtures towards the exploited classes. The important question remains, how can a ruling class that takes such license with the language that belongs to the entire people expect those who are under their ideological hegemony to act responsibly in other fields?

The decline, therefore, has been inevitable. It is due to the concentration of power in the hands of the self-adulating bourgeoisie that managed to take over state power, owing to the incompleteness of our liberation struggle. The enemy is capitalism, which is the ideology of the ruling class and the decline is due to the anti-people conduct of those who rule.

But it is unlikely that the language will have a fall. The arithmetic is simple. Firstly, Bengali has its demographic strength; it is spoken by a people who constitute the fifth largest population of the world. So large a population cannot afford to go down. Secondly, capitalism which is the real enemy of the people all over the world has been identified as such and is being fought both locally and internationally. It is in this struggle that the ultimate hope of mankind lies. We in Bangladesh have in our own way fought against it and must continue to fight, and in this war we will certainly have the moral support of all nations engaged in the anti-capitalist struggle.

One can suggest academic and cultural measures for improvement of the standard of Bengali; but these measures have to be part of the total struggle for emancipation. Language is the intellectual home a people; a home that capitalism is bent upon destroying. And it is on our refusal to be homeless that the future of the Bengali language as well as that of the Bengalis will depend. To make the refusal effective we need to equip ourselves continually, intellectually as well as morally. The Orwellian nightmare cannot be the final fate of mankind; it cannot be ours too.

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design is to strangle the people's creativity, limit their power of thinking and force them to see things in the way he dictates, turning them into subjugated two-dimensional beings. Well, what looked like science fiction in 1948, the year the novel was written, has not, much to the unhappiness of mankind, proved to be fanciful. The dystopia has, indeed, come to be true, although with the vital difference that the Big Brother the novelist warned us against has not proved to be Communism as he thought it would, but Capitalism which he ignored. The ogre, whom he imagined to be Stalin, was really Hitler. Stalin is dead, Hitler flourishes. Today we are under the ubiquitous and wide-awake surveillance of the Big Brother.

That this should be the case with us too is unacceptable. For one thing, we take pride in our linguistic identity, and, for another, we claim, not improperly, that we have set up an independent state of our own through a nationalist struggle which originated from an uncompromising demand for unhindered freedom to use our language. The fact of the matter is that our nationalism itself is language-based.

But the decline in the use of our mother tongue is evident. The highly educated section of our people do not feel inclined to use it creatively; the semi-educated use it slovenly, and the uneducated has no access to its correct form. The educational explosion seems

tortuous advancement it remained nationalist in appearance but socialist in content. The leadership was nationalist, it had to be; and what the leaders wanted was transfer of power to their own selves. The people, who were the driving force behind the struggle, expected a social revolution capable of ensuring their emancipation from the fetters of the foreign rulers and also, simultaneously, from the clutches of the local landlords, money-lenders and tradesmen. So far as East Pakistan was concerned, the transfer of power in 1947 made the Punjabi bureaucracy the new rulers to the detriment of the expectations of the rising Bengali bourgeoisie. A quarrel between the two was, therefore, inevitable, and very soon it took on a public form owing to the threat of the imposition of Urdu on the Bengali-speaking people at large. To be sure, the State Language Movement was anti-Urdu but not anti-English. The English-educated Bengali middle class would not have objected to the continuation of English as the state language to the degree they did to the prospective imposition of Urdu. The truth really is that the middle class was prepared, albeit unknowingly, to let English stay where it was, because they had, through perseverance, acquired some skill in its use.

The State Language Movement gained momentum and turned into an upsurge for independence. The war that ensued in 1971 was led only nominally by the

liberation struggle. The general expectation was that Bengali would be the language of the new state of Bangladesh, and that the language itself would be much enriched, gaining the capacity to readily accommodate and fruitfully express new ideas, experiences and products of wisdom and imagination. It was only natural to hope that through the cultivation of Bengali we would be able to deepen our links with history and heritage as well with the world outside, and that we would find it easy to make all our cognitive acquisitions our own possessions, stimulating creativity in the process and expanding the sympathies and that we would be liberated intellectually. That certainly has not happened.

We had expected that Bengali would be the medium of education at all levels, making education real, abiding and creative, and that enlightenment would bring the classes together and make them move towards a social revolution. In reality what has happened is just the contrary. Education and the mother tongue have not been able to help each other.

Undoubtedly, literature is the most reliable measure of the richness of a language. We have books, plenty of them; but most of them are of indifferent merit. There was a time when our literature was heavily poetry-oriented. Today there are the popular novels, and a phenomenal rise in their readership.

Pakistani days, have become pro-Hindi after liberation.

The bourgeoisie that has emerged as the ruling class in Bangladesh does not care for Bengali. It has its reasons, the most potent of which is its linkage with the capitalist world. Its manners, conversation and way of life itself tend to be imitative of European models. Invariably, the offspring of this class are reared through the English medium and cherish the aspiration to go and live abroad. For them *Thirtieth Night* is more real than *Pahela Baishak*. And it is not without significance that the celebration of 21 February now begins at midnight and not at dawn as it used to do before 1972. The doors of national culture have been opened to illegitimate European influences, surreptitiously as well as publicly. Had our erstwhile foreign rulers, made such attempts we would certainly have resisted, but since the new rulers are domestic we find ourselves incapable of even protesting.

In this unhappy land of ours the rulers have always been distinctly different from those they ruled. As was to be expected, those of foreign origin did not speak Bengali. But since 1972 we are being ruled by a class comprising local politicians, businessmen, civil and military bureaucrats and professionals all of whom are local. Their deliberate neglect, habitual abuse and heartless distortion of the mother tongue are tantamount to an unacknowledged conspiracy.