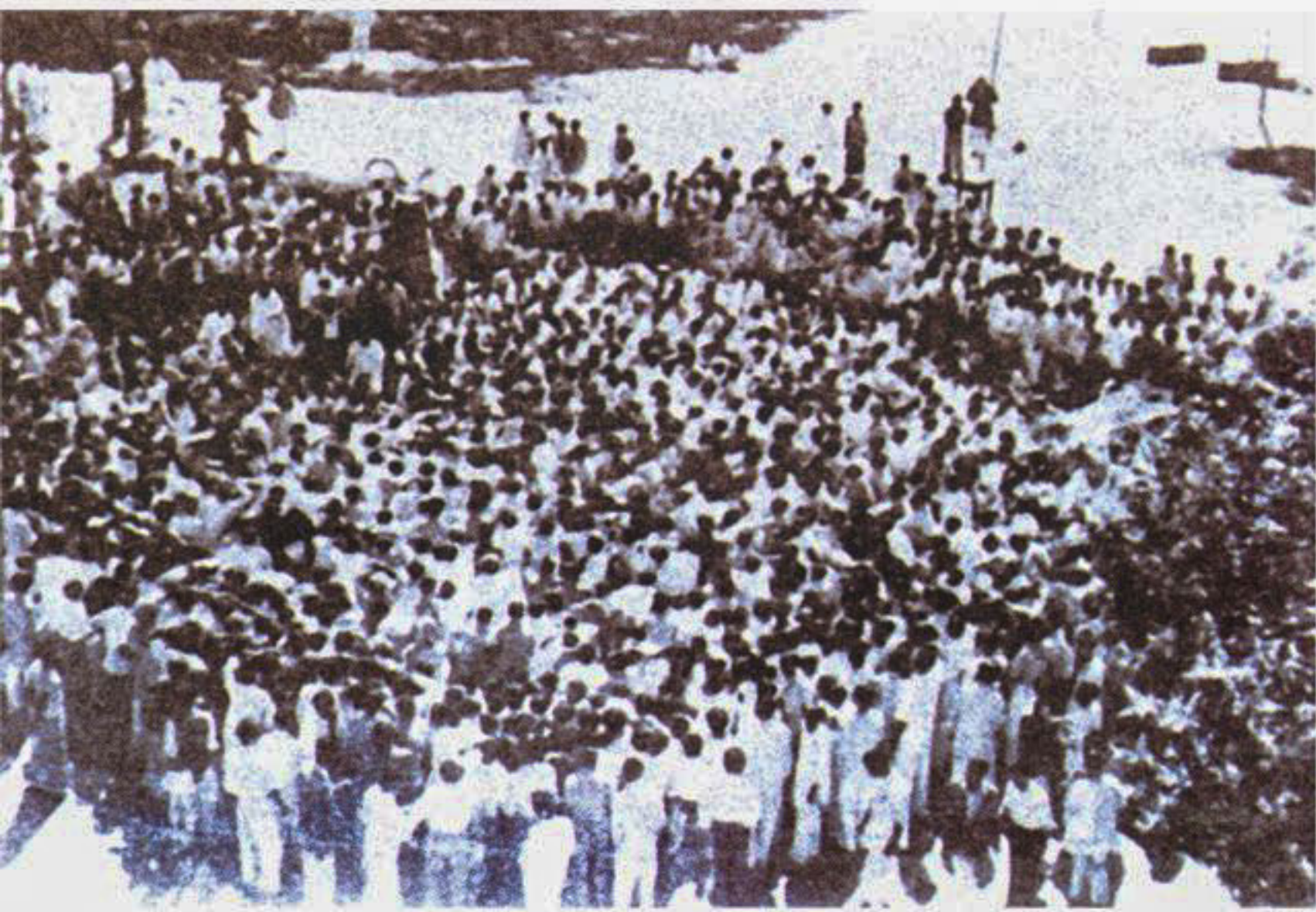


Ekushey February movement and the Ellis Commission Report

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

PAKISTAN was established on the basis of Two-Nation Theory. The Language Policy of the Government of newly-independent State was based on communalism. The Pakistani ruling class tried to impose Urdu as the only State Language of Pakistan with an ulterior motive to stifle the growth of language, literature and culture of the people of East Bengal. If it was not resisted at the very beginning, the socio-political and economic developments of East Bengal would have been hampered. The process of de-communalisation had begun in the early 1950s centered around the language issue.

A couple of months before his death, Abdul Matin, the leading activist of the State Language Movement, said to me in an interview, "The lan-



The students are preparing to violate Section 144 on the old Arts Faculty premises of Dhaka University. PHOTO: PROFESSOR RAFIQUZ ISLAM

guage movement was not only a cultural or political movement; it was a movement for the economic emancipation of the middle and lower middle class people of East Bengal. That is why the agitation was started spontaneously by the class three and class four employees of the provincial secretariat as early as September 1947."

Matin said, immediately after the independence on August 14, postal department forms were printed in English and Urdu. The Eden Building employees raised their voice against the decision of the authorities and demanded the government include Bengali along with English and Urdu. There was a fear among the government employees that in the future the Bengali employees who were not conversant in Urdu risked losing jobs. The educated youth who were not conversant in Urdu had no chance of getting jobs in services of the central

government. The Urdu-speaking mohajer from India would have the chance of getting job in the government offices. This feeling agitated the minds of the educated middle class and thus movement for inclusion of Bengali as a State Language gained momentum. The debate on the language issue had begun among the academics, students, progressive politicians and litterateurs.

Pakistan came into being as a multi-national state; the mother tongue of one nation was different from the other. Bengali, a rich language, was the mother tongue of nearly 55 per cent of the population. As the subcontinent was a British colony, English was the official and link language. In spite of all efforts of the ruling elite Urdu could never become the link language of Pakistan. The people of the two wings of Pakistan would have to rely on English for communication.

Tamuddon Majlish, a cultural and literary organisation headed by Abul Kashem, played a pioneering role in the first phase of the State Language movement. It started campaigning in favour of Bengali. A two-day conference of youths was held in Dhaka on September 6-7, 1947, three weeks after the independence of Pakistan. The conference adopted a resolution urging the government to make Bengali 'the State Language of Pakistan'.

With the initiative of Tamuddon Majlish and some nationalist youths, the National Language Action Committee was formed in 1947. The Action Committee demanded Bengali be made the only State Language of Pakistan and in a resolution called a province-wide strike on March 11, 1948 to realise their demand. The anti-government feeling was running high among the people. The strike was successfully observed.

Urdu was declared to be the only state language of Pakistan because Pakistan was supposed to be an Islamic state. And Urdu written in Arabic script was supposed to be a vehicle of Islamic culture. Jinnah was against declaring Pakistan as an Islamic theocratic state. He categorically spelt out in his Constituent Assembly speech that religion has nothing to do with the affairs of the state.

In his historic address at the Race Course ground meeting, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, said: "Whether Bengali shall be the official language of this province is a matter for the elected representatives of the people of this province to decide. I have no doubt that this shall be decided solely in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants of this province at the appropriate time." Jinnah was aware of the Bengali sentiment of the people of the province. Regarding the State Language of Pakistan, he categorically said, "Let me tell you in the clearest language that there is no truth that your normal life is going to be touched or disturbed so far as your Bengali language is concerned. But ultimately it is for you, the people of this province, to decide what shall be the language of your province. But let me make it very clear to you that the State Language of Pakistan is

going to be Urdu and no other language."

Jinnah's announcement angered the students and the youth. The National Language Action Committee submitted a memorandum to Jinnah demanding Bengali as one of the two state languages of Pakistan. The issue was somewhat subdued for the time being.

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in October 1951. Governor General Sir Nazimuddin became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was he who added fuel to the fire. At a meeting at Paltan Maidan on January 27, 1952, Nazimuddin uttered, what Mr. Jinnah had said, that the people of East Bengal would decide what would be the language of the province, but the State Language of Pakistan would be Urdu and no other language. The students raised their voice against this comment and demanded withdrawal of the decision. The students lost their patience. The Dhaka University National Language Committee called a strike on January 30, 1952 in protest against Nazimuddin's comment.

The students' Union of the Dhaka University called a strike at all educational institutions of the province on February 4 in protest against the arbitrary decision of the government regarding the State Language issue. Meanwhile, the government announced that the session of East Bengal Legislative Assembly would be held on February 20. The students at a meeting decided to call a general strike across the province on February 21 demanding Bengali as one of the two state languages of Pakistan. An All Party meeting was held at the Dhaka Bar Library on January 31 with Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, President of the Awami Muslim League in the chair. A 40-member All-Party Action Committee was formed with Maulana Bhasani as the convener. Among other members of the committee were Abul Hashim, Ataur Rahman Khan, Anwara Begum, Kazi Golam Mahbub, Abdul Matin and Oli Ahad.

The Dhaka District Administration imposed section 144, banning meeting, procession etc. in the city. A protest meeting was held by the National State Language Action Committee at the University campus on February 20. Abdul Matin and Oli Ahad, among others, said that if the government order was not violated it would mean surrender to the government. So the students took the decision in favour of violation of the government order.

In the morning of 21st February the students began picketing at different places in Dhaka city. A large number of working class youths also participated in the agitation. Police forces were deployed near the University Arts Building and Medical College. Deployment of police force agitated the students. At a meeting the All Party National Language Action Committee decided to violate the section 144. By noon the students moved towards the Medical College hostel (behind the Central Shahid Minar). Police opened fire. Several persons were killed and many injured. Among the dead were Abul Barkat, Rafiq Uddin, Abdus Salam and

Abdul Jabbar. They created history.

On March 13, 1952, the government in a notification constituted an enquiry commission with regard to the firing that took place on 21st February to ascertain whether 1) 'the firing by the police was necessary' and 2) 'the force used by the police was justified in the circulation of the case.' The one-man enquiry commission was headed by Justice Thomas Hobart Ellis, a judge of Dhaka High Court. The report of the commission was submitted to the government on May 27 and it was made public on May 31.

Justice Ellis utterly failed to realise the sentiment of the people. He served the purposes of the government. In his report, he said:

"I have satisfied myself from the relevant entries in the registers that 27 rounds were fired in all and that as a result of those 27 rounds 9 casualties were caused which have resulted in four deaths. Remembering that when the police open fire they do so with the deliberate intention of killing - I cannot hold from the number of casualties shown taking in conjunction with the number of rounds fired that was any use of excessive force. The firing was controlled and was effective."

In the language of the commission report: 'I have also satisfied myself from the registers of Medical College Hospital that the casualties caused by the police firing are as stated in the enquiry before me. It is true that the registers show that a large number of persons was affected by tear gas and also injured by lathis or by falling on the ground but that is not unexpected in view of the fact that the police expended a large quantity of gas grenades and shells and made two determined lathi charges.'

Justice Ellis concluded, 'On a consideration of the statements' made by the witnesses in the enquiry 'the firing by the police was necessary; the force used by the police was justified in the circumstances of the case.'

Earlier the Action Committee and some other organisation decided to boycott the enquiry 'as they disapproved of the limitations' of the commission. They said the commission should be impartial, enquiry should be conducted publicly and two non-government representatives should be included in the committee. In a statement published in the weekly Sainik, the All Party Action Committee rejected the report of the Ellis Commission.

Had there been no language movement there would not have been any nationalist movement based on Bengali nationalism. The unity of the people found political expression for the first time in 1952. The Language Movement of February was not limited in the area of State Language; it also covered the whole area of Bengali culture. The Language Movement of 1948-52 had laid the foundation of a nationalist movement that culminated in the War of Liberation in 1971.

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Bengali and English: The current state of affairs

NAHELA NOWSHIN

AS we commemorate the bloody and glorious Bhasha Andolon today, we are reminded of the vicious force of the English language as an institution of oppression and exploitation. For Bengalis, the English language has historically meant learning to surrender themselves as an "object" to a structural, linguistic and racist order.

In 1835, Lord Macaulay first addressed the need to teach English in the South Asian subcontinent in order to create an English-taught class of natives who would be able to act as translators for 'rulers' and 'subjects.' Macaulay, who played a major role in introducing English to colonial India and saw Britain as the highest point of civilisation, hoped to create demand for European institutions by reinforcing the use of English. The English language, that was originally intended to serve the interests of colonialists, has now evolved into something very similar to Macaulay's vision of linguistic imperialism.

63 years after Rafiq, Salam, Barkat and Jabbar were shot dead on 21st February 1952 for demanding Bengali as state language, what can be said about the current state of Bengali and English?

ENGLISH IN MODERN DAY BANGLADESH

English, the former de facto official language, remains integral to all facets of life in modern day Bangladesh. Post-liberation, the status of English was relegated to a foreign language.

Although not officially recognised as a second language, it would not be a stretch to think of English as the second language of Bangladesh given its wide use at both national and local levels. English is now the modern global lingua franca i.e. the language of communication among speakers of different languages. The ever-growing significance of English to social, economic and political aspects soared in the last decade thanks to globalisation, which paved the way for increased unification of the world's economic order (e.g. garments' industry, IT sector, etc.) The hegemonic status achieved by the English language has undeniable effects on job prospects and livelihood in general in many parts of the world where expertise in English drastically affects one's social mobility. Needless to say, in Bangladesh, the ability to communicate in English - the dominant language of social and economic development - is an issue of paramount importance.

There are three classes of education system in Bangladesh: Bengali medium, English medium and the Madrassa. One of the things propelling the rise of English is the increased profitability of English medium institutes compared to Bengali ones or madrassas, and the large number of private universities (more than 50), all of whose medium of education is English. Proficiency in English, however, has emerged to be an acute problem for many coming out of Bengali medium schools and madrassas.

Bengali medium schools can be classified into two types; government schools and kindergarten schools.

Kindergarten schools' (Viqarunnisa, Holy Cross) curricula, however, consist of more English textbooks than do those of government schools. Madrassas - of which there are also two types, Dakhil and Kawmi - emphasise learning Arabic, Persian and Urdu rather than Bengali or English. As a result, those belonging to government schools and madrassas are more prone to face challenges in university and adversities in the job market because of a lack in English proficiency.

Also to be noted is the poor state of English, primarily in rural schools. Due to a lack of skilled, properly trained teachers proficient in English, inadequate teaching methods and substandard physical facilities, effective implementation of the English curriculum at the primary level in these rural regions has not been possible. The teachers' poor proficiency in English leads them to instruct mainly in Bengali. Research findings suggest that most teachers in urban areas use a combination of Bengali and English as the instructional language whereas those in rural areas teach almost totally in Bengali. It must be pointed out that the mixed levels of language proficiency of students affect teaching methods as well. These practices play a large role in the development of pupils' thinking through language, and language through thinking, and ultimately shape their spoken and written English skills.

Sociolinguistic identities are intertwined with social stratification. That is to say, one's class in society has bearings on his or her linguistic abilities. In

Bangladesh, some of the main variables in social stratification can be described as rich versus poor, and urban versus rural. Most of the upper-class/rich that are concentrated in urban regions tend to have superior proficiency in English due to their use of English outside the classroom. But overall, individuals proficient in Bengali drastically outnumber those proficient in English as an overwhelming majority of the population are educated in Bengali medium institutes which is why boosting proficiency levels of English - the dominant language of economic activity - seems to be more daunting than addressing problems associated with proficiency in Bengali.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE USE OF BENGALI

In the post-liberation era, Bangladesh (like most countries) saw the English language being further embedded into the fabric of our society thanks to satellite TV, internet, mobile phones, etc. Even modern vernacular Bengali has become characteristic of the fusion of English and Bengali words, also known as 'Banglish'. The government tried (with some success) to limit the use of English in the years immediately following independence when nationalistic sentiments were still high. But in modern Bangladesh, increased exposure and usage of English in almost all aspects of life necessarily meant a reduced emphasis on practicing Bengali, especially in English medium schools.

The overall degradation of quality education and increased amounts of

time spent on the internet (where the command of instruction is English) are largely to blame for the adulterated use and reduced practice of Bengali. The shift from skill-based to content-based teaching over the years along with common instances of exam paper leaks have also resulted in poor learning habits such as memorisation and regurgitation of information instead of thorough understanding of a particular topic. The education sector has not grown proportionately to population (whose growth since 1971 exceeds 130 percent) resulting in a huge gulf between the number of students and available seats in colleges and universities. The rate of primary school enrollment is dismal with a literacy rate below 60 percent. Although the government backs NGOs such as BRAC with programs like Non-Formal Education Centers (NFE), they have failed to provide the much-talked-about compulsory primary education for all and free education for girls up to grade 10. Also, the privatisation and commercialisation of education has had detrimental effects on the sector - further tipping the scales in favour of the wealthy while prolonging the cycle of destitution for the poor. Removing such institutional obstacles is vital if we are to boost literacy rates, and improve the state of written and spoken Bengali - especially among those who cannot afford an expensive education.

ENCOURAGE BILINGUALISM

A coherent and comprehensive national education policy is the need of the hour (compulsory primary

education, stipends for female students, etc.) An overhaul of the education system (especially Bengali and English medium schools) is necessary to make education more affordable and to achieve: effective teaching methods, proper personnel training, a functional HR development strategy and deployment system that incentivises personnel, and balanced curricula that (more or less) equally emphasise learning Bengali and English. Institutions like the Bangla Academy should play a central role in the pedagogy of Bengali and in the promotion of the language by showcasing its richness. Instead of a specific form of Bengali being thrust upon us, Bengali (like other languages) must be allowed to spontaneously thrive and evolve.

We must rid ourselves of the prevailing, noxious attitude that deems knowledge of the English language more valuable than Bengali. One must acknowledge that improving the state of both spoken and written Bengali and English in modern day Bangladesh is essential. However, we should be aware of the irony that lies within the "mastery" of the English language as it was once the very language spoken by the master.

English should be recognised as a necessary tool for the modern man to navigate and survive in a globalised world, whereas Bengali defines our blood-earned national identity - the love of which our martyred language heroes died protecting.

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