



# Mother tongue and the other tongue

REBECCA HAQUE

LET me begin by stating a simple axiomatic truth: as an inheritor of an ancient civilization, a colonial history, and its concomitant linguistic legacy, I speak in many tongues. Cradled in the culture of the Indian sub-continent, I have been nurtured by the words and songs of the tribes of the entire world as they traversed my motherland, crossing centuries sailing down the Cape of Good Hope, across the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, riding beyond the Silk route and the Mediterranean, galloping down the peaks of the Pamir plateau and the

and battle, commerce and exploitation. However, post-colonially, our proficiency in the English language has proved to be a positive, progressive advantage in a fiercely competitive market economy. After an initial period of strong emotional reaction against the use of English at all levels soon after Liberation, we now realise that knowledge of English means empowerment in every sphere of life. English is now universally accepted as the cosmopolitan means of communication. Personal, social, and economic growth can be achieved by learning to use this second language as efficiently as our own mother tongue. Today, when I see a

your wagon to a star, move to greener pastures, speak new words; but, be still, restless heart, and sing the songs of the motherland to your children. This is the essence and sentiment of nostalgia. In her poem "History is a Broken Narrative", from her fourth volume, Augatora (2000), the acclaimed Gujarati-American poet Sujata Bhatt muses,

*"You take your language where you get it.  
Or do you  
get your language  
where you take it? (Manchester:  
Carcenet, p.40)  
More passionately, in the poem*

Of course, we have to read this long poem in its entirety to feel the force of Bhatt's own intense tussle with the English language and her native Indian regional dialect. This dialectical, dialogic tension is in all of us who write and speak in two tongues.

"Search for My Tongue" blends vernacular words into the texture of the poem's central motif. The symbolic contrast between a flowering tree and language growth makes us traverse the cultural and linguistic boundaries of postcolonial discourse. Paradox and dislocation unite to thrust us into open contestation with empire, imperialism, and colonialism. Similarly, in Upamanyu Chatterjee's splendid first novel, the bildungsroman English, August: An Indian Story (1988), much of the protagonist's postcolonial angst revolves around his complicated relationship with language, starting with his Darjeeling English-medium schooling to his relaxing interludes with Marcus Aurelius and Patherpanchali later in adult life as an officer in the elite Indian Civil Service. Chatterjee's narration opens dramatically with a scene in New Delhi, at one in the morning. Agastya, the protagonist, and his Bengali chum from school, Dhruvo, are bawdily recalling the Darjeeling days: "Amazing mix, the English we speak. . . . Urdu and American," Agastya laughed, ". . . I'm sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease. . . . And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya." The narrator comments that in his school-days, Agastya suffered bouts of identity-crisis, envious of the white-skinned Anglo-Indians with their Tibetan girlfriends: "he [Agastya] then blurted out, he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent. From that day his friends had more new names for him, he became the school's 'last Englishman,' or just 'hey English', . . . and sometimes even 'hello Mother Tongue.'" (New Delhi: Rupa Pbk. 1994, pp.1-2)

On my part, I can affirm with honesty that I had no such identity-crisis as an adolescent, but I did confront racism for my brown skin, both in England and in (West Pakistan). Without undue hubris, I can affirm that, like many of my Bengali peers, I speak English with panache and sophistication, as flawlessly as any native speaker of the Queen's English. To wit, in England, the English ask me, "Where did you learn your English?" But, leaving English and irony aside, for me the more important, politically conscious decision is to investigate, as a Bangladeshi on this momentous event of Ekushey February, the history of my problematic relationship with the Urdu language? Do I choose to speak this other tongue of the oppressor, today?

With English as my first language, and Urdu the second, in Sialkot, in my

kindergarten years, I understood Bangla as my parents spoke only English and Bangla at home. But neither I nor my brothers could speak Bangla. Later, in three years in Comilla, during the Ayub regime, the natural adaptive linguistic facility as a talkative child enabled me to speak fluently in my mother tongue. We were tri-lingual now: my brothers and I speaking to our parents in Bangla and English, but unconsciously reverting to Urdu amongst ourselves. This habit persisted until we were repatriated to Bangladesh in December 1973. We siblings then consciously decided to suppress the urge to speak Urdu publicly and privately. It was not that we hated the language; we, proud Bangladeshis, were taking a stand against the violation of human rights, against the murderous attempt to deprive us of our mother tongue. We would not speak Urdu in Bangladesh. All of us can read and write Urdu. We enjoy the poetry of Ghalib and Iqbal – I can never forget the immortal lines of Iqbal's "Shiqwa". I speak Urdu in India with delight, and in Deccan Hyderabad, at Charminar, they could place me surely by my looks, but were unsure of my nationality because of my fluent and flawless Urdu. Extremely puzzled, they were insistent, where are you from? Which country? which city?. And, of course, where did you learn our tongue –apni zabaan?

Amar Matri Bhasha? Bangla Bhasha. I have become proficient in reading and translating my mother tongue. I speak a form of Bangla which exponents of discourse analysis would probably term "polite discourse". The culture of Bengal is my heritage, and my forefathers tilled the alluvial soil of Dhamrai, Savar, six generations ago. The great songs and folktales of the Gangetic Delta were gifts given to me by my parents in my childhood, and the themes of the great novelists were explained to me to assuage my curiosity by my mother and father, both of them voracious readers of Bangla novels. I knew the names of Sarat Chandra and Bankim and Buddhadev even before I could spell in any language. I remember my mother's clear sweet voice singing Rabindra Sangeet. Now, I am reading some famous Bangla works in the original, and have translated and published a few Bangla short stories into English. But, as is Nature's way, after failing to learn to write Bangla in childhood, the adult hand struggles to find competence in writing the Bangla script.

Today, I vow to steady my right hand and practice assiduously, so that, tomorrow, I can gently guide my Aussie grandson to trace the outlines of the alphabet of my mother tongue. His other tongue.

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dunes of the Gobi desert.

Shattering the myth of the Tower of Babel, we now proudly uphold the culture and mother tongue of our Nation, whilst celebrating in equal measure a brave new world of the Bangladeshi diaspora, with cultural plurality, multi-ethnicity, and mixture of languages. If the culture of any nation is best reflected in its literature and language, then we today are undoubtedly global voyagers harmoniously integrating to dissolve political boundaries – to glory in the mesh and meld of multilingual multiculturalism. Historically, our relationship with imperial Britain is fraught with blood

concerted effort by both government and private agencies to empower our people at the grass-root level with knowledge of communicative English, I applaud their initiative to arm every person with this linguistic tool for advancement beyond the borders of our own country.

Languages and cultures change and evolve through migrations and acculturation. Individuals too need to grow, to adapt to changing geo-political, social, and cultural environments. Nothing in nature, or in human society and community, is fixed. Everything is fluid, and subject to the forces of flux. The trusted adage urges, Go with the Flow: hith

"Search for My Tongue", from the earlier prize-winning collection Brunizem (1988), Sujata Bhatt writes,  
*I ask you, what would you do if you had two  
Tongues in your mouth,  
And lost the first one, the mother tongue,  
And could not really know the other, the foreign tongue.  
You could not use them both together even if you  
thought that way. . . .  
Every time I think I've forgotten,  
I think I've lost the mother tongue,  
It blossoms out of my mouth.  
(Manchester: Carcanet, p.39)*

# Ekushey's probhat feri was different

SHAHNOOR WAHID

N the late fifties and sixties people of this part of Bengal used to show respect to the martyrs of 21st February a little differently. There was more solemnity than show, more grief than grandiosity, in their expression of solidarity with the cause. As a growing child and later as an adolescent during that time I witnessed how the residents of Wari, where we used to live in those days, took preparation to walk to Azimpur Graveyard early in the morning with flowers in their hands. Young boys and girls used to visit every house in the locality the evening before to collect flowers as almost every house had flowers in the garden. In some cases, they collected flowers from various houses very early in the morning when the entire household slept. It was one theft no one complained about.

I have seen our elderly relations and neighbours, as old as 50, joining the silent procession which usually started at 6 a.m. Boys and girls also joined them though they understood very little the full import of the solemn occasion. White pajama and white kurta with a shawl covering the upper part of the body was the dress for men, and white sari with black border that of women. February those days used to be colder than today so a shawl was necessary for the elderly people. And

most of them took that long walk from Wari to Azimpur barefooted to show respect to the martyrs.

When I was old enough to join the marchers I saw hundreds of men, women and adolescents coming from different parts of the city such as Gandaria, Narinda, Tikatuli, Gopibagh, Shegun Baghicha, Motijheel, Kamalapur, Nawabpur and other parts of Old Dhaka - all bound for Azimpur. The discipline was remarkable. There used to be no slogan, no pushing and elbowing, and no political party banner. It was totally a people's show devoid of any political hue.

This needs to be mentioned here that though the dedicated workers of the communist parties, especially of the Chhatra Union, worked hard throughout the week in every residential area, they never carried any banner or asked for recognition of their work. They worked silently to create greater awareness among the Bengali people of the evil designs of the Pakistani rulers. The Pakistani administration watched the Bengali outpouring with great disgust and disdain, however, keeping a safe distance. Visiting the graveyard and showing respect to the Language Martyrs was something they could neither understand nor appreciate. But the thick skulls could little realise that the seeds of total independence were being sowed on the soil every Ekushey.

At the graveyard, people showed utmost restraint and respect while placing flowers on the graves. Reverence and pain writ large upon every face, many sent a silent prayer towards the heaven for the salvation of the martyrs. Except for a few newspaper photographers with their antiquated cameras, there was no TV camera those days hence no pushing, pulling or elbowing, as it happens today. In the beginning, for some years, mothers of some of the martyrs used to join the processions and offer prayers at the graves. At one stage they also joined their beloved sons in the eternal journey across the cosmic realm.

As I have been growing older with time, I have been observing the changes that were taking place in the style and character of observance of the Amar Ekushey, especially in the last thirty years or so. Today I find it more fanfare, more glamour, more commercial and a little bit artificial. The boi mela is a commercial venture though necessary for promoting writing in Bangla. But the carnival like environment outside decries the sacrifice of the martyrs. I feel a balance has to be maintained between the two aspects of Amar Ekushey.

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