

# On the language of identity



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**I**DENTITY – an ambiguous term and the definition of which lacks conceptual clarity much like the term 'globalisation' itself which, many will argue, defies conventional categories due to its multifacetedness – is the feeling of belonging or *sentiment d'appartenance*, to a social group by way of ethnicity, religion, language, culture, ideology, etc. The 'national identity' today can be understood as an amalgamation of individual identities of people living in a heavily globalised world in which interdependence between economies leads to increased interaction, including linguistic exchanges on both the local and global level. Linguistic identities, in particular, are part of the broader 'social identity' and refer to a sense of belonging to a community or group mediated through the resource of language. The far-reaching effects of globalisation touch on all spheres of life, and their implications for linguistic identities in the present day have been the subject of rigorous academic study for quite some time. Given the significance of today, February 21, which marks the 65th anniversary of the Language Movement that elevated the ethno-linguistic rights of the Bengali people onto the national stage and catalysed the struggle for independence of erstwhile East Pakistan, the time seems apt to talk about how we, as Bangladeshis (that includes the multitude of ethnic minorities),

understand the self through language in the modern day. How has globalisation and English as the global lingua franca affected the dominance of Bengali – spoken by the majority – in modern day Bangladesh whose very birth was rooted in, amongst many things, the fight against linguistic discrimination and cultural oppression? Is the importance of Bengali fast eroding, as many would argue, in terms of being a meaningful marker of self-identity? What about that of the mother tongue of the various ethnic minorities throughout the country who have distinct linguistic features of their own? Ninety-eight percent of Bangladesh's population is both ethnically and linguistically Bengali, and the rest of the two percent are comprised of over forty ethnic minorities including the Chakma (the largest ethnic group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts), Marma, Mro, Oraon, Murong, Khasi, and Garo, to name a few. For natives of the country, the dominance of Bengali, despite the penetration of English into the various facets of our lives, is obvious in Bangladeshi society, and its status is a direct consequence of 'majority rule'. In fact, it is the distinct languages of the ethnic minorities that are in danger of being lost, which is, in effect, a precursor to the erasure of entire communities. One of the first stages of minorities' 'assimilating' to the dominant Bengali culture is having to give up their native language – for purposes of business, employment, education, etc. What this ultimately leads to is a sort of linguistic homogenisation and an erosion of the pluralistic identity of the society at large.



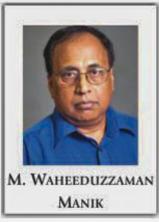
Bengali holds an incredibly commanding role in the day-to-day affairs of people's lives. In Bangladesh, one can get by just fine not being able to speak a word in English. Globalisation may have brought us higher exports, foreign direct investment and remittances, and worsened social disparity, but the idea that English, the language of international communication, is a threat to the linguistic identity of the Bengali-speaking majority of

Bangladesh is a myth easy to buy into. It is an exaggeration when we say English is a menace to the pre-eminence of Bengali in modern society because Bengali is the principal working language of our national economy and will remain so for a long time. This unfounded view is perhaps a microcosm of the prevalent 'anti-western culture' sentiment that irrationally views the infiltration of any element of the West as harmful.

On the contrary, it is the Bengali language whose very dominance threatens to weaken the foundations of minorities' linguistic identities and understanding of the self through their native language. Even though people belonging to ethnic minority groups speak their native language at home the majority of them are unable to write in their own language. The national education policy that overwhelmingly favours Bengali over

minority languages is the root cause for their endangerment. The good news is that the Bangladesh government, at the beginning of this year, distributed pre-school educational materials in the native language of five ethnic minority groups. It's a start. However, there are still no textbooks for Class I and above in the five languages and around sixty percent children of ethnic minorities remain out of coverage. There is a cruel irony in ethnic minorities – whose own languages are under existential threat – celebrating Ekushey. Commemorating the rise of Bengali, a language whose history is so intimately tied to a people's linguistic rights, a language which has begun to encroach upon the very linguistic rights of the minority 'other' in present day Bangladesh. Jhumpa Lahiri, in an article in *The New Yorker*, writes about the intricacies of belonging to a language, and the schisms between the self and the mother tongue when the latter seems like a foreign language. She writes, "When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement. You speak a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment. An absence that creates a distance within you." This reflects the reality of 'alienation through language' for the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh who, like Lahiri, must feel like they are in 'linguistic exile', and whose mother tongues are foreign in a land of their own. The writer is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

# A literary history of the Language Movement



M. WAHEEDUZZAMAN MANIK

**T**HERE is no doubt that the "language issue" did not prominently manifest in Bengal province before, during, after the general elections of either 1936-37 or 1945-46. It is a fact that by the time when the 1946 elections were held, almost all of the 33 million Bengali Muslims were on the side of creating Pakistan as a separate Muslim nation-state. Yet the core Bengali Muslim leaders had always expressed their loyalty to the Bengali language during the Pakistan movement whenever the question of substituting Urdu for Bengali language became an issue. It is being increasingly recognised that there was a literary context of the Bengali language movement because a large number of leading Bengali Muslim scholars, writers, poets, singers, professionals, journalists, intellectuals, civil service employees, students, teachers, and leaders had wholeheartedly supported the movement for Pakistan. Their writings, speeches, and, of course, their presentations in the cultural and literary conferences and the annual meetings of several literary associations lent their heartfelt support for the Pakistan movement. There is no doubt that a substantial body of pro-Pakistani literature had quickly emerged in Bengal, and the main thrust of such an effort was geared toward popularising the concept of Pakistan among the Bengali-speaking people. The plethora of pro-Pakistani Bengali literature that had promptly emerged in 1940s was heavily laden with Arabic, Persian, and Urdu jargon in an effort to Islamise the Bengali language. This brand of writers and self-declared exponents of Islamic identity had started importing Islamic words and idioms to Bengali literature with religious zeal. The Muslim owned Bengali dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies such as *Azad*, *Ittehad*, *Millat*, *Muhammadi*, *Mahe Nau*,

*Noor*, etc., provided them readily available popular outlets to champion the cause of Pakistan movement. In his appraisal of the literary context of the Bengali language movement, Humayun Azad characterised the "pro-Pakistani literature" that had appeared in the then East Bengal before, during, and immediately after the emergence of Pakistan as "*Bishbrikha* (poison tree) of reactionary literature." According to him, the two-nation theory of

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1930s and the Lahore or Pakistan Resolution of 1940 had clearly motivated the Bengali Muslims to "communalism" which had adversely affected the literary field of the then East Bengal. The communally inspired Bengali Muslim writers started producing pro-Pakistani literature since 1940 with great deal of enthusiasm that had represented more of communalism than the true expression of life experiences of common people. Humayun Azad also forcefully argued that "most of those writers who took the leading role in creating and disseminating pro-Pakistani fervour were not at all creative writers. Some of them were journalists, and many of them belonged to the category of

journalists, and some were politicians or politically motivated writers, and of course, some of them were motivated essayists..." (Humayun Azad, *Bhasha Andolon: Shahittik Potobhumi*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1990, p.1). The establishment of the "Purba Pakistan Renaissance Society" in Calcutta in 1942 and the "Purba Pakistan Shahitya Sangstha" in 1943 in Dhaka provided a new momentum to the Pakistan movement at a critical juncture of Bengal's history. The professed objective of the "Purba Pakistan Renaissance Society" was to cultivate unadulterated Bengali culture and literature through control over all aspects of Muslim Bengalis. The main goal of the "Purba Pakistan Shahitya Sangstha" was to "Pakistanise" the Bengali language and literature through large-scale replacements or substitutions of traditional Bengali words and idioms with Arabic, Persian, and Urdu vocabularies and idioms. Characterising both of these Pro-Pakistani literary associations as "communal and reactionary," Humayun Azad underscored in unambiguous language that "the propagation of the cause of Pakistan movement was the chief "mantra" of these two communally inspired organisations." However, the most relevant question in our present context is to find out whether or not these pro-Pakistani literary bodies had supported Urdu to be a substitution for Bengali language in the new nation of Pakistan. The answer is in the negative, and any objective appraisal of these pre-independence Bengali literary bodies must attest to the fact that their support for Bengali never wavered even during the pinnacle of the Pakistan movement. The most poignant point is that the champions of the pro-Pakistani literature and literary bodies had wholeheartedly endorsed and supported the demand for making Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Relying on several well-documented studies, Tariq Rahman, a distinguished Pakistani linguistic scholar on language problems of Pakistan, succinctly pointed out

the context and the ground of the making of the demand for adopting Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan: "By the late 1920s, other organised bodies for the promotion of Bengali also came to be formed. One such organisation was the Dacca Rationalists. It supported Bengali rather than Urdu as the language of Muslim education in the 1930s.... The threat to Urdu was noticeable enough to make its supporters form an All-Bengal Urdu Association in 1933. They condemned Bengali as a Hinduised language (a view persisted in West Pakistan till 1971), and said that Urdu alone should be taught to Muslims.... In 1937, at the Lucknow session of the All India Muslim League, a resolution recommending Urdu as the lingua franca of Muslims all over India, was opposed by the delegates from the Bengal (province).... In 1944, the East Pakistan Renaissance Society of Calcutta formed by radical intellectuals, demanded that Bengali should be the official language of East Bengal" (Tariq Rahman, *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 83-84. For details, see Chapter 6 titled "Bengali Language Movement" pp. 78-102). Pursuant to Lord Mountbatten's declaration on June 3, 1947, the creation of Pakistan through the partition of India was imminent. The Uttar Pradesh based Urdu-speaking stalwarts of the All-India Muslim League (AIML) had already begun mobilising their support and resources in favour of establishing Urdu language as the lingua franca of Pakistan. There is no doubt that the "ethnic identity" of Bengali-speaking Muslims was not prominent during the Pakistan movement. In other words, religious fervour had played a pivotal role among the Bengali Muslims at the height of Pakistan movement. Yet the Bengali-speaking Muslim middle-class, teachers, students, intellectuals, leftist activists, and other progressive forces vehemently opposed the absurd idea of making Urdu the lingua franca of Pakistan. The saliency of linguistic identity of Bengali Muslims clearly surfaced in the formative

years of Pakistan even before the euphoria of the emergence of a Muslim nation started evaporating from the eastern province of Pakistan. Various political forces of the then East Bengal also started mobilising support for adopting "Bengali" as one of the state languages of the new nation even before the emergence of Pakistan. Once Pakistan became a reality on August 14, 1947, the unresolved language controversy continued to surface during the early months of independent Pakistan. It needs to be underscored that the Central Government of Pakistan had already started the unilateral use of "Urdu" in money order forms, postal stamps, currencies and coins, railway tickets, and official letterheads and forms even without formally declaring or adopting "Urdu" as the "only" state language of Pakistan. The Bengali-speaking stalwarts of Pakistan movement started emerging as the ardent defenders of Bengali language in independent Pakistan. Even the common people of East Bengal started suspecting the hidden motives and ploys of the Pakistani ruling elite. Much to the chagrin of the founding father of Pakistan and the Karachi-anchored Urdu-loving Punjabi and Muhajir dominated Central Government of Pakistan, the progressive forces of the then East Pakistan demanded that Bengali should be nurtured and protected as the lingua franca of Bengali Muslims. They also forcefully demanded that Bengali should be immediately recognised as one of the state languages of the new nation of Pakistan. Indeed, those Bengali-speaking progressive forces including the Bengali doyens of Pakistan movement were in the vanguard of the formative stage as well as the 1952 phase of the Bengali language movement. The writer is from Clarksville, Tennessee, USA where he is Professor & Chairman of the Department of Public Management & Criminal Justice at Austin Peay State University. E-mail: zamanw@apsu.edu.com; manikzz@hotmail.com

**A WORD A DAY**

অনির্বাণ

PHOTO: SHAHRUKH IKHTIAR

Something that cannot be extinguished.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

ACROSS

- Indian turnover
- "Believe" singer
- Wry
- Frenzied
- Turn
- In -- (lined up)
- Gives off
- Vestige
- Hotel room feature
- Au -- potatoes
- Mystique
- Writer Tarbell
- Boxer Walcott
- Crayon makeup
- Facility
- Bestow
- Brass ingredient
- Manicure targets
- Columbus' home
- Marionette mover
- Go ashore
- Bakery worker
- Threat phrase
- Cartoonist Thomas

DOWN

- 40 Kane's portrayal
- Fathers
- Kitchen come-on
- Recurrent theme
- Running wild
- Plops down
- Serving feat
- Healer Barton
- Hamlet's pal
- Polluter's crime
- Ivanhoe's love
- Serving aids
- Massive
- Manual readers
- Reggae's birth-place
- Runs out
- Shameless woman
- Mutually profitable
- Vigilant
- Completely
- Like Loki
- Sweet treats
- "Somersby" actor
- Market indicator

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32

33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

2-4

GAITS TIBER  
RECAP ATONE  
IRENE ROUTS  
PIC COT IRE  
EAR IRS LET  
SLEWED ALES  
ARSENIO  
ARMY RADNER  
MAC TIM CRO  
ADO ONE UNO  
NINER TUBES  
DUETO AREST  
ASSES GISTS

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

I LIKE SLEEPING IN TENTS BETTER THAN IN THE BARRACKS

WHY?

ALL OUR FEET GET AIRED OUT

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

DARREL, CAN YOU HOLD WIFEN WHILE I USE THE BATHROOM?

SURE.

YOU SAID YOU WERE JUST GOING TO USE THE BATHROOM!

I DIDN'T SAY WHAT FOR!