



Bangalis' lost love for Bangla

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When British colonisation of India ended in 1947, Pakistan was established and India gained its independence, great hope was born in the hearts of the newly liberated people, including those of what is Bangladesh today. Naturally so, as after hundreds of years, they had for the first time, gained the right to shape their own lives in their own land.

But things did not quite turn out as imagined, especially for those living in the erstwhile East Pakistan. They were denied the same treatment as that given to those living in the West and, eventually, the government of Pakistan, dominated by officials from the West, decided that Urdu alone would be the state language of all of Pakistan.

Many representatives, mainly of East Pakistan, protested this. They suggested that both Bangla and Urdu be made the state languages of Pakistan to be fair to people from both the East and the West. Their reasonable proposal was, however, rejected outright. And even though the East was, for a long time, deprived by the West; with people still continuing on with their lives regardless, they had, finally had enough, when they realised that they were on the verge of being robbed of their own language.

Despite reluctantly adjusting to the other denials of their rights and opportunities by the West, this, the people of East Pakistan could not accept, mainly because of their attachment to Bangla and its relevance to the Bangali culture. Because people realised that they often speak their mind and dream their dreams, in their own language. This, their true feelings, they preserved even to this day, through poetry and songs like the great Abdul Latif's 'Ora Amar Mukher Kotha Kaire Nite Chai'.

According to Professor Shyamoli Akbar of Language Education Department, Institute of Education and Research at the University of Dhaka, there is something very special about the Bangla language. The different dialects of Bangla, in various regions, "have their own original flavours and essence". Back then, "people respected these differences and simply accepted them naturally". Yet, "they preferred to speak in their own regional/local dialects. They never shied away from it." This shows that Bangla was not a communal language. That the vast majority of all those who called themselves Bangali spoke Bangla, regardless of religion, ethnicity, etc.

Although there was no standard form of Bangla on paper, people proudly spoke the language in their own dialects because it was the best way they knew of expressing their love for it. On September 15, 1947, Tamuddun Majlish issued a pamphlet titled 'Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla Na Urdu?' ("Pakistan's State Language: Bangali or Urdu?"). In it, a strong case was made to make Bangla the only language of instruction in offices and courts of East Bengal.

On 23 February 1948 in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in Karachi, Dhirendranath Datta called for Bangla to be made one of the official languages of

Pakistan. Similar calls came from all fronts and, yet, the government of Pakistan refused to budge from its initial position. During the many protests and strikes that followed, large number of activists were apprehended and sent to jail by the Pakistani government. One of those individuals was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Fortunately, following continued protests from students and political activists, he was released shortly afterwards.

However, it was not only students and political activists who were fighting to safeguard their beloved language. Factory and office workers, rickshaw-pullers, farmers and people from all walks of life banded together in something quite extraordinary. One could argue that it was this solidarity of theirs, brought about by their attachment to the Bangla language that eventually led to the events of February 21, 1952; which culminated over time, to the spirit that drove and determined the outcome of 1971 during the Liberation War. So, in no way did the Language Movement that brew over time, play a small role in developing a unique form of unity among the people, centred



on Bangali nationalism, which eventually gave them the courage to sacrifice everything they had during the Liberation War for the right to self determination.

Another undeniable fact is that the Bangla Language Movement, to this day, remains an unmatched accomplishment. Nowhere in the world have people struggled so valiantly simply for the sake of speaking their own language. There is, in fact, no other example in known human history that can match the Bangla Language Movement. And, of course, this is one of the main reasons why, since 1999, the entire world has been celebrating the International Mother Language Day every year, on February 21.

Disappointingly, however, once the Bangalis succeeded in their Liberation War, which one could argue, was initially inspired by their attachment to their language and the Language Movement, it was

that same language that they started to trivialise and even ignore. This is not to say that people did not bother to learn or speak other languages during or after the Liberation War. There were many people then and before who had studied the likes of English and received significant recognition in scientific, philosophical and various other fields through the use of foreign languages. But, the major difference was that they did not believe that without learning foreign languages, they could never succeed.

Even though people were researching and working with the Bangla language before, after liberation, people's mentality changed with regard to it. The local dialects as well as Bangla in general started to be ignored. Local dialects started to die out and today, the same emotion towards the Bangla language and the cultural ties with it has not only been lost, but people do not even know about its existence from past times. A language is what represents the emotion and culture of its people. So, without understanding the historical tie that Bangladeshis once had with the Bangla language, how could people today

respect their language, culture and nation, or even understand their essence?

How this change came about can be debated. But there is no denying that once Bangladesh gained its independence, people slowly started to look at Bangla as inferior compared to other languages. One example of this is that even though the constitution itself says that Bangla should be the state language, we are yet to see that turn into reality. In 2014, the High Court even had to issue an order for the use of Bangla in all courts, signboards, number plates of vehicles and the names of mass media. Till today, however, we see that order being ignored all the time.

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In 2014, the High Court even had to issue an order for the use of Bangla in all courts, signboards, number plates of vehicles and the names of mass media. Till today, however, we see that order being ignored all the time. Whereas during the time of the Language Movement people defied the law to speak their language, today, even the

ignored more and more with the passage of time is the recent textbook debacle. When the education system itself is failing so miserably to teach Bangla, can one really blame the students for what they are learning? Is such a glaring failure not a clear example of an unwarranted apathy towards the language and an unspeakable ignorance on part of its promulgators?

Is it difficult to see then, how such apathy over time, has resulted in people speaking half Bangla and half English or Hindi, without any and all concerned about how they are corrupting the beloved language of their forefathers? Is it any wonder why teachers of Bangla are now the most neglected? Why only people who could not manage to enter other fields are now studying Bangla, whereas before, for a time even after 1971, people who could pursue a career in other fields such as medicine, engineering, etc. would rather pursue one in Bangla?

The answers to these questions, if one is being honest, should be quite clear. And yet, no one seems to care about any of this. No one feels any emotion when realising that the language that their mothers and fathers died fighting for too, is now being left for dead. All people seem to care about is how smartly they can spout out a few English sentences, even if it is in broken/wrong/poor English.

Of course, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause for all of these changes. Or point our fingers at one particular group and hold them responsible for it, although surely, the continuing political unrest since 1975, socio-cultural problems, etc. have had their own negative effects. But one critical factor that has definitely contributed to it has been the change in our mentality compared to that of our predecessors, and those who were valiantly chanting in and around February 21, 1952, "Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai".

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