



An imaginary interview with THE BANGLA LANGUAGE

I must say that the 1952 generation took the right decision whereas the millennial generation is heading towards a disaster regarding the question

SHISHIR BHATTACHARJA

Dear mother tongue, a whole month, the entire February is reserved exclusively for you. From the very beginning of this month, intellectuals, home and abroad, start to lament in their write-ups, talk shows, and in social media saying that you are not the de facto state language of Bangladesh. On the 21st of February, the Shaheed Minar is covered with tons of flowers, millions of people assemble in processions with posters and festoons all over the country, even abroad. Several million yards of of official black fabric are cut into badges to be language. pinned on the upper wear as a sign of mourning. Despite all that we do in your honour, oh ever complaining mother, you do not seem to be at all satisfied!

> My dear children, you have learned how to pay a tribute, but not how to contribute. Most of what you are capable of, I must say, is mere show off! You people needed a secular festival like the 21st of February, and you got it. Now that this day has been recognised by some foreign authorities as the International Mother Language Day, your joy knows no bounds. You Bengalis are always anxious to know what foreigners think about you and you always need foreign validation.

That's quite interesting! It seems that you are not happy with this international recognition?

Not as much as you seem to be. How can I forget that the 21st of February had nothing to do with the idea of mother language? It was in fact a state language day. The most common slogan during the language movement in the early fifties was "Rashtrobhasha Bangla chai!" which means "We demand Bangla to be a state language of Pakistan." In fact, no nation needs to worry about its mother tongue, although most nations would like their respective mother tongue to be recognised as the state language, or at least one of the state languages of the country.

For your kind information, dear mother tongue, Bangla is recognised as the only state language in the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh. Then, in 1987, the authorities issued Bengali Language Implementation Act according to which all records and correspondences, laws, proceedings in court and other legal actions must be written in Bangla in all courts, government or semi-government offices, and autonomous institutions in Bangladesh.

If Bangla was the *de facto* state language according to your constitution, then, was there a need for a mere act of government? Be that as it may. Since 1987, have you ever seen a person or an institution to be punished for violating that act and/or the constitution? Government institutions like BGB, Teletalk, etc. are named in English. Courses are taught in English in private and public universities. In courts, verdicts are written in English. And you are trying your best to knock Bangla out of the educational system in favour of English.

Ask the chairman of UGC whether he believes that Bangla should be the medium of instruction in higher studies.

While what you say is unfortunately true to some extent, I can nevertheless give you some good news. In the administration, letters are now being drafted in Bangla and bureaucrats are writing their notes in Bangla. Some judges are also writing their verdicts in the language.

I am surprised that such meagre developments make you so enthusiastic about the true status of Bangla in this country after fifty years of its independence. Well, let me give you bad news regarding my use as the de facto state language: English BCS and English version. From now on, one may sit for BCS examination in English, if they wish to. You had introduced English version at the secondary level in the eighties and now you are about to introduce it at the primary level as well. Although you publicly show a great concern for Bangla, these two decisions are evidence that in the very core of your heart, you nevertheless nourish a chronic disdain towards your mother tongue.

Let me explain, why both these decisions would be harmful for the nation in general. First, bureaucrats are mere servants, and the public is their master - the reason for which they are called "public servants" or "civil servants". If a servant does not excel in the master's language, how would they be able to serve the master? Can you imagine a developed country like France or Germany, or one like China or Vietnam, allow its "would be public servants" to pass its entrance examination in a language other than the

official one? Second, if English version and English BCS projects do at all succeed, it will eventually create two classes of people and bureaucrats, respectively. Existence of class presupposes class struggle, as Marx claimed. So, no state or government should take a decision that may be the cause of struggle and unrest in the society in the long run.

Third, in the English version, students shall learn mathematics, history, science, etc. in the English language only. As they shall use more English and less Bangla, their competence in Bangla will never be what can be expected of an educated native speaker.

Fourth, Chomsky claims that a child cannot acquire a language, unless her language parameters are set based on input received from other speakers of that language. Children in Bangladesh get most of their linguistic input from some dialect of Bangla, not from English, and therefore, English version students will not excel in English either.

Fifth, you do not have enough teachers capable of teaching various subjects in English, even in the cities. Incompetent teachers, like contagious patients, cannot but spread bad learning and bad teaching in the society.

Be that as it may, if these government projects do not fail, and I sincerely hope they do, they will produce students and bureaucrats mediocre in English, and

It is unheard of in the history of nation states, that a nation ever denied the mother tongue of the majority to be the state language and preferred instead a foreign speech, specifically the speech of the colonial ruler.

at the same time, dull in Bangla. Their English and Bangla are bound to suffer from severe grammatical and lexical deficiencies so that none would become average bilingual that your policymakers are expecting them to be, but most of them would turn out to be "semilinguals", excelling neither in English nor in Bangla.

I strongly disagree with you, dear mother tongue! We cannot afford Bangla to be the only de facto state language, for the simple reason that we are not as rich as Japan, China, France or Germany! Moreover, Bangla is not a developed language like English or French. We must learn Enalish, because we bear the legacy of a colony of the great British Empire, and we need to maintain our contacts abroad in English which is, fortunately for us, the international language of our time. My dear, learning a language and making that language the very medium of instruction are two different things. You must learn English as a language, as they are doing in China or many other countries. But no other nation did the blunder of making a foreign language the very medium of instruction. It is unheard of in the history of nation states, that a nation ever denied the mother tongue of the majority to be the state language and preferred instead a foreign speech, specifically the speech of the colonial ruler.

Even when nations like China or Japan were not as rich as they are today, they chose the mother tongue of the majority to be their de facto state language Once upon a time, French was a highly valued language in Russia, but since the communist revolution in 1917, Russian was chosen and used as the state language. The Chinese nation has made noticeable progress in every aspect of life; they had their robots land on the Moon and on Mars without using any English.

Again, it's not because you are poor that you are unable to establish the mother tongue of majority as the state language of Bangladesh. I am convinced that you are poor, and you will remain poor, because you are unable to make Bengali the de facto state language. I must say that the 1952 generation took the right decision whereas the millennial generation is heading towards a disaster regarding the question of official language.

This disaster or blunder is not new. In the second period of the Middle Ages (1000 - 1500), European nations chose Latin, a dead language since at least the 5th century, as their medium of instruction, instead of their respective vernaculars. Latin was mother tongue of almost none in the then Europe, it had to die again due to lack of fresh input from living languages. Gradually English, French, German, etc. became the mediums of instruction, languages that had once been prohibited within the school boundary. I would be happy if my information is wrong, but I have been told that there are schools in Dhaka where students are prohibited even to converse in Bangla.

English will never become the state language in Bangladesh. It always was, is, and will be at best a "stage" language. Some good performers at some stage will speak and write it well, and that is all that we will get. There are natural constraints that English will never be able to cope with. If you do your job, which means, make me the de facto state language today, you may have sustainable development in a few decades. If I do my job at my pace, it will certainly take time and you will have your development in a century or so. Until then, you will continue to go to the Middle East for selling your uneducated labour or perish in the Mediterranean while trying to enter Europe as illegal immigrants.

Tell me one thing, if the English medium education system could provide jobs, why are most executive jobs in Bangladesh held by foreigners? Why can't most graduates of your private universities and English medium occupy these posts? Unemployed, English medium graduates must go abroad, either for education or for immigration: a total loss for the country, because millions of foreign currencies are being drained out of the country in form of tuition fees and other costs. I see English medium schools as EPZs (Export Promotion Zone) whose commodities are mainly for export, unless they have some defect in which case you could buy them cheaply in Bongobazar or New Market.

But we do not have good textbooks in Bangla! How can we give world class education without excellent textbooks?

You may think of a translation project of several million taka and let the capable teachers of respective subjects translate the best textbooks available abroad. Pay them well and you will have good, world class textbooks in Bangla within five years. Nations like Japan and China have been busy doing this for centuries.

Remember that in order to survive, a language must have four types of recognition: social, political, economic, and international. For example, English has all the four recognitions; Garo has none. I achieved social recognition in the Middle Ages and political recognition in the 1950s. I have neither the economic nor the international recognition. In order to achieve the former, you must make me the de facto state language. For the latter, you must open Bangla learning centres like Alliance Française or British Council in big cities of the world. You need to introduce Bachelor's and Master's in "Bangla as a Foreign Language" if you plan to train teachers who will effectively teach Bangla to foreigners. You must think of tests like TOEFL or IELTS, for Bangla.

To finish with, dear mother tongue, do you wish to say something to the Bengali people in general?

You sing in chorus in the morning of February 21: Can I forget the fact that you had been tinted red, oh 21st February, with the blood of my brother? But the very next day, you forget everything that have been said during the whole month. Do keep me in your mind throughout the year and never forget that I am, therefore, you are.

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LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

The Momentous Phase

At 2 PM the police took position and the East Pakistan Rifles were also brought in to assist them. The police fired at the students near the Medical College gate where there was a large crowd of students.



Kamruddin Ahmad (1912-1982) KAMRUDDIN AHMAD

education.

Prime Minister Khwajaj Nazimuddin visited East Bengal in January, 1952, and addressed a public meeting on the 26th of January where he declared that Urdu alone must be the State Language of Pakistan. His announcement came as a rude shock especially because he was the man, who as the Chief Minister of East Bengal in 1948, entered into an Agreement with the Committee of Action of State Language to recommend to the Constituent Assembly to make Bengali as one of the State Languages. The terms of the said Agreement, inter alia, were:

 The East Bengal Assembly (which was in session at that time) shall adopt a resolution for making Bengali as the official language of East Bengal and the medium of instruction in all stages of

> 2. The East Bengal Assembly shall by another resolution recommend to the Central Government to make Bengali one of the State Languages. The students and the political elements in East Bengal were taken aback.

A Committee of Action, representing all political parties and other interests, was formed to launch a movement. The first sitting of the representatives was held in the Dacca City Muktear Bar Library. The next meeting was held at 158 Mughaltooly, Dacca, to chalk out the programme of action.

On the 19th of February a meeting was held at Nawabpur Road, where it was decided that the general strike and the proposed procession should be peaceful on the 21st. On the 10th afternoon, another meeting was held and It was decided that the Committee believing as it did in constitutional method of agitation would not break any provision of Law and if there was any such attempt by any affiliated group of the Committee, the Committee would stand dissolved. It was also decided that the Committee would be in continuous session from early morning at their office at Nawabpur Road.

At about 9 AM in the morning of the



21st of February, the members of the Committee of Action were informed that the students of Dacca University were not in agreement with the decision taken by the Committee of Action and they had decided to break the law if necessary. As Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure was promulgated by the District Magistrate on the previous day, the procession was called off. The students, however, decided to have processions in batches towards Jagannath Hall, where the Assembly Session was going on. The Committee of Action In the circumstances decided to depute some representatives to convince the students of the University not to come in clash with the police who, however, failed to persuade them.

At 9:30 AM in the morning, some boys were arrested from Nawabpur Road for picketing before the shops. At about 10 AM, in accordance with the de-cisions taken by the students, the first batch of the students marched in procession and reached near the Medical College gate when they were arrested and put into a van and taken away by the police. The next batch followed with the same result and this procedure continued until about 1:30 PM. when the police decided to use tear gas. A police cordon was thrown around the Salimullah Muslim Hall. Because of the use of tear gas the students became

Azad, February 22, 1952

The Ministers took shelter In the Cantonment area and for about a week police oppression continued both in the city of Dacca and

very agitated and they started pelting at the police. At 2 PM the police took position and the East Pakistan Rifles were also brought in to assist them. The police fired at the students near the Medical College gate where there was a large crowd of students. There were newly-constructed kutcha huts which were alongside the gate. After a few rounds were fired at the students they dispersed and a report of innumerable persons killed spread like fire. Automatically, all vehicles stopped plying which were on the roads in spite of the call for hartal. Three dead bodies were brought to the Medical College and they were sent to the morgue, at that time unidentified.

By 3 pm. the members of the Assembly which was in Session insisted that Mr. Nurul Amin, the then Chief Minister, should go to the place of occurrence, but Mr. Nurul Amin refused to accept the suggestion. Moulana Tarkabagish, Khairat Hossain, Mrs. Anwara Khatoon with all Congress Members of the Assembly walked out of the Assembly followed by Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, Editor of the Azad at that time, and announced his resignation in protest against the firing on the students. Army was called out and they started patrolling the streets. Barricades, however, were placed so that they could not enter into the old city. The Army started patrolling from Sadarghat

to the University area. Halls were all surrounded by the army and police and the students were not allowed to go out. The then Inspector General of Police at that time, took the command himself and cordoned the Halls. On the following day some more people were killed by the Army who started shooting indiscriminately. The dead included a clerk of the Dacca High Court and a rickshaw puller. The Central Committee of Action was dissolved on the basis of the resolution the Committee adopted earlier. The leadership was taken over by the Youth League and the University students. The students raised funds, hired microphones and placed them on the roofs of the Halls and addressed the students continuously from there. The Ministers took shelter In the Cantonment area and for about a week police oppression continued both in the city of Dacca and Narayanganj. In Narayanganj the worst affected place was the house of Khan Sahib Osman Ali, whose house was ransacked by the police, the inmates were dragged out, even the women and children were not spared. The Headmistress, Morgan Girls' School, was arrested and put into jail. The leaders of the Movement In Dacca went underground, but they were arrested within a week from an abandoned house in Purana Paltan. With their arrest the Movement entered the second phase, a new Committee of Action was set up with Mr. Ataur Rahman Khan as Convener, as Kazi Golam Mahboob the first convener went underground. Many people were arrested including Messrs Abul Hashem, Shamsul Haque, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and innumerable students and workers. Although the movement inevitably lost its original momentum within a month, yet it continued to dominate the Biharis and minds of the Bengalees.

Kamruddin Ahmad actively participated in the language movement in 1948. In 1952, he was a member of the All-party State Language Action Committee.

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The Language Movement Revisited

MOHAMMAD AFZALUR RAHMAN

The implications of the language movement were multifaceted and far-reaching in the social, cultural and political life of Pakistan and later on in Bangladesh from 1971 onwards. The language movement began in 1948 (though the origin of the issue could be traced further back in time as many historians did) and came to a closure with the event of February 21, 1952, when Bangalee youths laid their life for the demand of Bangla to be one of the state languages of Pakistan. Though the language movement had begun in some form in late 1947 and early 1948, the movement of 1952, despite the continuation of the same demand, was different in its vastness, significance and the involvement of people.

While the movement of February-March 1948 was limited to a small section of people, the movement of 1952 – first the protest after Pakistan's Prime Minister Nazimuddin's declaration on January 26, 1952, that only Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan, and then the police firing of February 21 leading to the martyrdom of Salam, Barkat, Rafiq Jabbar, and Shafiur – readily involved people of all walks of life in the language movement. The news of youths being killed on the streets of Dhaka (Dacca then) spread like wildfire across the length and breadth of the East Bengal province; not even the distant backwater regions remained untouched, despite the limited mobility back then in terms of communication. Even students of primary schools, both boys and girls, took to the streets to support the movement. A few weeks after February 21, Dhirendranath Dutta, whose name is inseparable from this episode of our history, said on the floor of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, "I have gotten the opportunity to mix with children in the districts. The children who can barely speak are uttering the slogan: 'Bangla shall be the state language." Such was the

extent of the reach of the movement against intellectuals who aired their in 1952. against intellectuals who aired their support for the movement and

Badruddin Umar, the foremost chronicler and historian of the language movement, identified that, in addition to the shock and rage against the killing of students in Dhaka, the corruption, authoritarianism and mismanagement of the Muslim League government and the dismal economic situation were also responsible for the rallying of such a vast number of people behind the language movement. The way people came out in support and solidarity with the movement shook the very foundation of the already unpopular Muslim League government in East Bengal. For a time, it seemed the government might be toppled at any moment.

A few weeks after February 21, Dhirendranath Dutta, whose name is inseparable from this episode of our history, said on the floor of the **Constituent Assembly** of Pakistan, "I have gotten the opportunity to mix with children in the districts. The children who can barely speak are uttering the slogan: 'Bangla shall be the state language."

On another plane, wide-reach was also manifested in the use of force and coercion by the state machinery. In no time, the government came down on the protesting masses with all the might at its disposal. The way the nervous, shaky government responded to the emergent situation is a textbook example of how any government infested with corruption and with an authoritarian bent responds to mass movements and protests. A smear campaign was launched

against intellectuals who aired their support for the movement and condemned the police brutalities. Disinformation and rumours were being willingly spread against the movement and its organisers.

The government conjured up imaginary enemies hailing from other communities and countries as an attempt to show that all these were the handiworks of the enemies of Pakistan. Moreover, the government and intellectuals patronised by the state also found "election stunt" and "red hand" in the movement.

Schools, colleges, and university dormitories were barricaded and cordoned off by the police and military, and students and teachers were arrested and thrown into jail to languish there for months. In the few days following February 21, the police and military opened fire on the protesters on multiple occasions – many were killed, hundreds wounded. A protester named Asmat Ali, aged only 14, received a bullet injury on February 22, 1952, in Nawabpur Road and was subsequently arrested and put behind the bar. This poor child was dragged eleven times to the court before he could be bailed out after over a year of his incarceration.

How did the language movement and the demand for Bangla to be a state language reverberate in the official circle, especially in the provincial and central legislatures and constitutional assembly? In the then official parlance and mainstream media, the language movement had been dubbed as "language controversy", "language riot", or "language disturbances" from the very beginning. There was a consistent endeavour to depict the language movement as the dancing of irrational, emotional and erratic Bangalee youths to the tune of manipulative enemies of the state. Even after the event of February 21, this notion did not disappear; instead, it was reinforced.

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Only Bangla will be our state language

ABUL MANSUR AHMAD

I sincerely sympathise with the efforts of Dhaka trying to make Bangla the state language of East Pakistan.

Among other reasons, I would like to make Bangla the state language of East Pakistan for the following reasons:

1. A truly democratic state cannot be established without the language of the people and the state being the same.

2. If Urdu is made the state (1898-1979)language, the educated society of East Pakistan will become 'uneducated' and 'unfit' for government service overnight. By replacing Persian with English as the state language in the mid-nineteenth century, British imperialism made the Muslim educated society 'uneducated' and 'incompetent' in government work overnight.

Abul Mansur

Ahmad

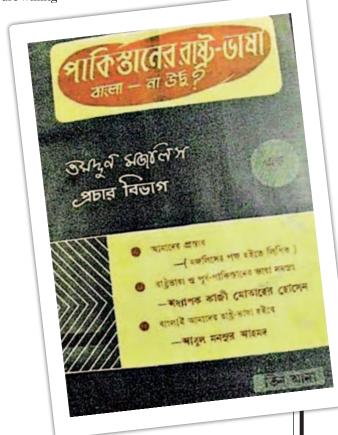
3. The propaganda being spread about how Bangla will be kept as the medium of education even if Urdu is made the state language will turn into political deception. The breadth and depth of knowledge in the state language that one possesses will be the criterion of competence in all fields of life.

4. What is being said about Urdu being easier than Bangla is just a propaganda. In fact, Urdu is much more difficult than Bangla.

5. The well-known and beautiful Lakhnauvi script of Urdu is not suitable for scientific work like printing, typewriting etc. Kolkata and Egyptian fonts are confusing and difficult to learn. In both cases, printing the script is complicated.

6. The allegation that the Bangla language is close to Sanskrit and influenced by Hindus is false. The allegation that the Bangla language is unsuitable for Muslim culture is also incorrect. The Bangla that we want as the state language is not Bangla of Vyakaran Manjusha; it is the Bangla spoken by the people of East Pakistan.

7. We have no dogmatism about the alphabet. If the Bangla alphabet is proved to be unqualified for the pursuit of science even after making some possible changes, then we are willing



A truly democratic state cannot be established without the language of the people and the state being the

to use the Roman alphabet. If the Urduwalas also agree to use the Roman alphabet instead of the Arabic, then the biggest argument in favour of Urdu is lost. The biggest appeal for Urdu to the Muslim masses is that it is written in Arabic

In addition to the seven arguments I have given above, there are many other arguments that are not worth any less in real life.

If any proposal for discussion on the merits and demerits of Urdu and Bangla is raised in the Constituent Assembly, then it is mainly the students of East Pakistan who should make an effort to ensure the advocacy for Bangla is competent and sufficient. Because their role as the intelligentsia of East Pakistan is immense.

Abul Mansur Ahmad was an eminent Author, Journalist, and Politician.

The article first appeared in a booklet titled 'Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla na Urdu'. The booklet was published by Tamaddun Majlish in September 1947.

The article is translated from Bengali by Mayabee Arannya.

State Language and East Pakistan's Language Issue

QAZI MOTAHAR HOSSAIN

The language that the people of a country speak is the natural language for that country. This poses the question then, how could there be a problem when it comes to the language of East Pakistan? This really is peculiar – what's natural is often not easily understood using complex thoughts. Let me try to be

Consider a country where 99 percent of the people speak Bangla, and the remaining 1 percent speak English, Urdu, Hindi and so on. Let's further consider that the latter group has established themselves in that country by moving there through business means or as rulers, and they lord it over those who are less educated and less wealthy. Therefore, they are habitually disrespectful to the people and language of the country. They think it's an unnecessary waste of energy to learn the language of the country in order to deal with the people, and the idea itself is an affront to their self respect. Then again, a conquered and exploited nation has no self respect of its own, neither does it suit them to have any. Especially when it's possible to learn the language of the conqueror and stay in their good graces, earn their satisfaction as well as to create opportunities to make a living. What's even more important is the fact that by preserving this great chasm between the general populace and themselves, it's possible to feel a certain degree of respect. Those lucky few who are blessed by the exploitative conquerors end up with all the benefits, in the name of the public, as their leaders. This is quite natural in our current society, because there's no fear in denying the unfortunate and the voiceless their rights. On the contrary, not doing so might show a lack of intelligence.

This, roughly, is the background to the mentality behind the language issue in Bangladesh, and especially East Pakistan.

The Mughal-Pathan kings nourished the Bangla language

The royal language of the Pathan court was Pashto, and it was Farsi for the Mughals. Even though the Mughal Pathans were foreigners, they adopted this land as their birthplace, and they encouraged the local language to flourish so they'd be able to know the place better. Especially in Bangladesh, with the patronage of Pathan kings, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were first translated into Bangla. Other than that, the Bhagavad and the Puranas were written at this time as well. Before that, the Bangla language was quite malnourished, and the language was looked down upon by the scholars as the tongue of the everyman. Scholars at that time would protect their holiness and superiority in an artificial layer of Sanskrit. The Pathan subedars of Gour would disregard this insubordination by the scholars with kingly kindness. For the benefit of the public (and maybe to quench their thirst for stories at the same time), they'd have these Puranas and Ramayana-Mahabharata written down. Needless to say, there is no substitute to these texts when it comes to preserving the continuity of local culture and keeping the ideals of the ethical and characteristic traits of the countrymen intact. It's largely due to this that even a mere farmer from India is able to amaze Western scholars by presenting themselves as somewhat of a philosopher. In reality, the reason Bengalis were able to assimilate and absorb superior traits from the Islamic civilisation into theirs is because the local language received encouragement from foreign rulers. On the other hand, Muslim rulers and the general public were able to make further breakthroughs in Islam by coming into contact with Hindu hertiage, thereby proving practically the opennes of Islam as a religion as well as its suitability to all.

In the Mughal era, especially the courtiers in the Arakan court spent enormous sums of money to elevate the status of the Bangla language. Muslim poet laureates Daulat Kazi and Sved Alaol achieved immortal feats by writing Bangla poetry. Their language was enriched with words from Sanskrit, Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Prakrit and so on, but they didn't force the import of difficult words from any specific language, they wrote poetry in the language that was used by society, or the language that was easy to understand. Even though the Mughal-Pathans were mainly foreigners, they

adopted this country as their own. They didn't want to take over local ideals with the strict sovereignty of Pashto or Farsi, rather the Mughal-Pathan badshahs and subedars gave the local language royal patronage in an effort to create connections with the country. Thus, people were able to learn the court language and maintain national sovereignty at the same time. Moreover, they were able to soak themselves in foriegn ideas and make improvements on them as well. After that came the English rule. Soon, English became the state language. The Hindus welcomed their new lords and their language with open arms, but for many reasons, the Muslims couldn't. Even in Ram Mohan's era, from his own quotes, we can surmise that when comparing gentlemen from the Hindu middle class and the Muslim middle class, the Muslim would have been superior in intelligence and efficiency. But within a short period of time, for reasons mentioned above and the royal doctrine of division, Muslims fell behind in economic, social, as well as state affairs. An alien hatred and jealousy took hold between Hinds and Muslims. Even the Bangla language found itself divided. Highly educated scholars took it under the wing of Sanskrit and made it the bearer of Hindu culture. And the half educated Muslim *munshis* created a type of Islamic literature laden with Arabic and Farsi influences. Both sides took it to the extreme. But Bangla survived through the power of intellect and social institutions, and munshiyana Bangla almost went extinct. It should be said that now, in the era where masses hold priority, scholarly Bangla has

But today, English lordship has come to an end the disaster at Plassey in 1757, the failure of the

Wahhabi movement in 1830-40, the tragic outcome of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 – all of history came to fruition in 1947 when the national flags of victory were flown. And immediately, a tremendously important responsibility has presented itself in front of Hindu and Muslim people as well as leadership. Within the next 10 years, we can hope that through well thought out planning and the struggles of all the citizens of this country regardless of faith, race, and creed, we will be able to eradicate poverty, disease, illiteracy, and internal conflict and establish East Pakistan in a position of pride. To get rid of poverty, it's vital to get rid of social discrimination, to defend ourselves from foreign exploitation, and no matter what resources we have, to make sure we get fair exchange for them. The public and the leadership must be vigilant to make sure that those with evil intentions can't create obstacles for the mental growth of East Pakistan, by meddling in the education system or creating barriers of language.

We are the best example of how barriers of language can cripple a nation, the Hindus and Muslims of India and especially the Muslims of East Bengal. English became the state language as well as the medium of education, which resulted in the expenditure of high levels of mental strength to spend 10 years learning knowledge that should have taken only 5. But because of the foreign language, that knowledge itself remains unclear. Students could only be heard repeating long quotations that are devoid of understanding. Another sector took huge damage, which was the British education policy in India. Textbooks for science related subjects and curriculum were selected in such a way that, instead of effective education, only bookish knowledge could be learned. Thus, this country has no shortage of BSc, BL, or MSCBL, but there are only a few industries. Although, it can't be denied that English education brought with it some benefits as well.



Qazi Motahar Hossain (1897-1981)

Neglect of the mother tongue is the reason behind the downfall of Bengali Muslims

On top of the general crippling of India's Hindus and Muslims, there were two additional reasons behind the numbing of Bengali Muslims. The first is the neglect of their mother tongue, and the second is baseless attraction towards Urdu by mistaking it for a religious language. Thus, Bengalis began to forget the Farsi culture preached by the Muslim badshahs, and they stopped attempting to preserve Islamic heritage using Bangla as well. No matter how much one argues in favour of Urdu – there is no doubt that it is an alien language! Because Urdu doesn't have a connection with the blood of the countrymen, it was no longer possible to preserve Islamic heritage with it. In reality, it is impossible to connect a handful of half learned words and phrases and use that to preserve national and religious heritage. Whatever was being done with *punthi* literature was doing enough to quench the needs of the Bengali Muslim farmer. But due to the neglect of the academics or their disrespect, this too is about to get lost. Which brings us to the reality that, for Bengali Muslims, there remains no such thing as a true civilisation. The language of others and the language taught to them by others is all they have. They are foreigners in their own country, and foreigners seem to be their own people. All of this results in their general disinterest, in their helpless dependence on the West, and their lack of faith in themselves. Clever Westerners are taking full advantage of this. They know that if you come to Bengal with a large turban, you can become a saint, or at least take the seat of a *moulavi* and make some money. It's like how an urban shopkeeper might swindle a rural customer. In reality, Bengali Muslims are a laughing stock and easily exploitable not only to the West, but to all in the East, the West, the North or the South.

Mother tongue is the medium of education The reason behind this misery and inferiority complex is that we have neglected our mother tongue Bangla and grown habituated to speaking empty, unclear words. We don't find strength in these words because they are not engraved into our hearts. Currently, the influence of English is waning, and at the same time, it's possible for Muslims to collectively develop a Bangla language in East Pakistan that is free from extreme Hindu influences while preserving the Hindu-Muslim heritage. It is now our responsibility to fill this gap in Muslim philosophy and nourish our mother tongue and bring pride to our whole nation. Till now, Muslims have been comfortable simply putting the blame upon the shoulders of Hindus, saying that Hindus have filled the Bangla language with Hindu philosophy, but this won't work in East Pakistan. Here, the responsibility of presenting Islamic heritage is left mainly to Muslim literateurs. So now, it's time that Muslim scholars create Bangla literature instead of sticking to punthi literature, and by doing that they

will be able to introduce their countrymen to Muslim civilisation and culture. This is how the mother tongue will be enriched to its fullest, and how Islamic philosophy can properly become one with the hearts of the countrymen, eradicating the misery and inferiority complex they suffer from. We will never prosper by subjecting ourselves to Urdu. Urdu isn't Allah's favourite language, neither is Bangla less favoured. It's also not the case that Urdu is a religious language for Muslims simply because it came from Arabic. In its roots, Urdu is a hodge-podge language created by the multinational soldiers of the Mughal king, but that doesn't make it any less respectable. Urdu is enriched with words from Arabic, Farsi, Prakrit. Over time however, Arabic Urdu and Sanskrit Urdu have come out as two distinct concepts. Other than that, there is considerable difference between the Urdu spoken in Lucknow, Delhi, Lahore, Hyderabad and the likes. The amount of original literature written in Urdu might be low, and it might not be as developed, but Urdu really has flourished when it comes to translated literature. I don't criticise or disrespect Urdu, but I do consider the

Of course, a complete life does not refer to a self-centred one, it refers to a life lived with others. Which is why it's important to learn different languages to maintain working relations with those who speak different languages. But this learning should happen on top of a foundation of education that is complete in the mother tongue, and not instead of the mother tongue.

attraction of Urdu to Bengali Muslims to be dangerous. When I observe that an obscene love song in Urdu is celebrated by the common Bengali gentleman as praise for Allah or when I see that excellent Brahma music written in Bangla is considered haram, that is when I realise that neither ignorant devotion nor ignorant criticism hold any true value. It is nothing more than an illusion of sounds. How much longer will we remain obsessed with this illusion? We have to look at the real world, we have to move in tandem with the flow of life. Therefore we have to function like humans, and not like daydreamers or like mechanical dolls. We have to break free of illusion, open our eyes and examine matters. That is the way of true freedom for us. The only way to get there is through proper practice of our mother tongue, and to learn of everything that is beautiful, alluring or appreciable, in our own mother tongue. And no tongue other than Bangla can be our mother tongue.

Of course, a complete life does not refer to a selfcentred one, it refers to a life lived with others. Which is why it's important to learn different languages to maintain working relations with those who speak different languages. But this learning should happen on top of a foundation of education that is complete in the mother tongue, and not instead of the mother tongue. Needless to say, those who live around us, the ones with whom we share the space next to us, they are the ones we have our closest relationships with – which is why they get priority over others who are further away. Thus, after the foundation of the mother tongue, other languages should be learned as necessary. So, elementary education should only comprise the mother tongue, there can be one or two other languages added to the curriculum for the last three to four years of matriculation. That way, the learning of these second or third languages will be faster and easier to access.

The medium of education must be the mother tongue. To keep up with the world, maybe English would be the most beneficial for us. But putting too much emphasis on it right now is completely unnecessary. An Urdu that is somewhere in between scholarly Urdu and moulavi Urdu would be the most suitable if we want to communicate with people and neighbours of the different provinces of the state. To that end, currently there is much need for reform of Urdu as well. If vain pride and blind fanaticism could be put aside, the difference between Urdu and Hindi could be reduced to create a robust, and thus easy Lingua Franca suitable for the Pakistan and Indian union. If this language was taught in the last or the third and fourth class of matriculation, this would make students masters of a vast expanse of culture; and those who give up education in the elementary or secondary stage would be freed from the unnecessary stress that comes with learning a language, and be able to learn compulsory knowledge and taste one's own culture in their mother tongue.

The Bangla, Urdu, or Roman alphabet could be introduced as necessary

There is no point fussing over script. It really doesn't matter if the Urdu script or the Devangari script, or the Bangla script or even the English alphabet is used. Of course the matter should be given an excess of thought, but keeping ease of typing and reading in mind, and the fact that a script shouldn't take up too much space to write, if an alphabet is found that ticks all the boxes, it could be adopted as an ideal script.

Other than being the medium of education and being a sovereign language, another aspect of the language issue is the question of the state language. Till now, the English were our lords, thus English was the state language, meaning the court language was the state language. Of course, state language refers to the language that will be used to write court rulings, the language whose education will pave the path for high ranking in government, the language that will be used in the state's letters and documents. In short,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

I HAVE NOT COME TO WEEP

Every time there is injustice, every time those in power order or allow the innocent to be killed, the spirit that inspired Mahbub Alam Chowdhury to write his poem flares again.

NIAZ ZAMAN

In her memoir, translated into English as An Unknown Woman (2016), Jowshan Ara Rahman describes how the first poem on February 21, 1952 came to be written. Mahbub Alam Chowdhury, to whom she was engaged to be married, was the editor of the Chittagong monthly magazine Shimanto and the convener of the Chattagram Zilla Sorbodoliyo Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad, the all-party National Language Movement of Chittagong District. On the night of February 20, 1952, Mahbub, while working in the office of the Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad, came down with chicken pox.

Late on February 21, the news of the police firing on students in Dhaka reached Chittagong. Despite his high fever, Mahbub composed a long poem dedicated to the language martyrs: "Kandte ashini – phanshir dabi niye eshechhi" (I have not come to weep but to demand the gallows). That same night, copies of the poem were printed. A day or two later the poem was read out at a public meeting at the Laldighi Maidan.

Mahbub's incendiary

Mahbub Alam Chowdhury (1927-2007)

poem was confiscated and all available copies destroyed – though, as it happened, a police officer gave a copy to his sister, asking her to copy it down in her khata. This would later be recovered and the poem printed in its entirety. Meanwhile, fearing that he would be arrested, Mahbub was able to evade the police by fleeing in a burqa.

What was there about Mahbub Alam Chowdhury's poem that aroused the anger of the authorities? Perhaps because it demanded capital punishment for those who had shot and killed the protestors demanding Bangla as the state language. Perhaps because the number of deaths attributed to the police firing might incite further protests. As far as is known, there were five persons who died in the police



firing that day: Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, Abul Barkat, Abdus Salam and a young boy named Ohiullah. Shafiur Rahman succumbed to his injuries the next day. It is thought by many even

today that there were others killed as well in the police firing but that the bodies were hastily removed and buried. However, the number of forty in Mahbub's poem has not been corroborated by anyone. Using whatever information he got – some of it incorrect -- Mahbub wrote this moving poem. For example, he wrote about women being killed. Though women were in the procession – in fact, women were the first to emerge from the university campus – there is no record of women being killed that day.

Despite this misinformation, Mahbub's poem is powerful, demanding justice for those killed even while mourning the loss

of young lives

I have not come where they laid down heir lives

under the upward-looking krishnachura trees, to shed tears.

I have not come, where endless patches

Glow like so many fiery flowers, to weep. Today I am not overwhelmed by grief, Today I am not maddened with anger, Today I am only unflinching in my determination.

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury
The poet imagines the effect of the
killings on the families and loved ones left
behind: on the child who will never rush
into his father's arms, on the housewife
who will wait in vain for her husband, on
the mother who will never clasp her son in
her arms, on the beloved who will not see
her lover again. He has not come to weep,
the poet says, for those who gave their
lives for their language, for their culture,
for their poets and their poetry, but to
celebrate them.

I have not come here to weep for them who gave their lives under Ramna's sunscorched krishnachura trees

for their language those forty or more who laid down their

for Bangla, their mother tongue, for the dignity of a country's great

Mahbub's

powerful,

demanding

those killed

mourning the

loss of young

justice for

even while

poem is

culture, for the literary heritage of Alaol, Rabindranath, Kaikobad, and Nazrul, for keeping alive the bhatiali, baul,

kirtan and the ghazal, those who laid down their lives for Nazrul's unforgettable lines: "The soil of my native land Is purer than the purest gold."

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury
The dirge that accompanies the
probhat feri, "Amar bhaier rokte rangano
ekushey february ami ki bhulite pari"
(Can I forget the twenty-first of February
steeped in the blood of my brothers), is
a song of remembrance and mourning.
There is anger there too as well, but it is
the iteration of the opening lines that
accompany the barefoot procession
on the day that people remember. By

contrast, "I Have Not Come Where They

to the translation by Kabir Chowdhury

- is, from the very beginning, an angry poem, a poem of determination, even while being an elegy. At the same time, it is a poem that encapsulates what being Bangali means. It is almost epic in scope as it embraces the land and people of Bengal, the writers who have glorified its spirit. The complex of grief and anger, of celebration and remembrance make it unique.

In his essay "Twentyfirst February," in *Essays on Ekushey: The Language Movement 1952* (1994), Khan Sarwar Murshid noted how the commemorations of Ekushey had become part of "a Government supported orthodoxy." The earlier fervour where individuals with small bunches of flowers in their hands walked slowly to pay their homage to the language martyrs has been replaced by political bands and institutional groups vying for position in front of the television cameras.

The fire that inspired Mahbub's poem seems to have died down where the Ekushey commemorations are concerned. The gate from which the procession emerged – now part of the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital – is lost behind makeshift shops and hordes of rickshaws. Only, if one looks up, can one see the plaque commemorating the event that took place there.

The killers of Rafiquddin, Jabbar, Barkat, Salam, Ohiullah and Shafiur Rahman were not punished. But, yes, Bangla became a state language along with Urdu. The events of 1952 have led to the recognition of the importance of mother tongues. On November 17, 1999, UNESCO adopted a resolution proclaiming February 21 International Mother Language Day. The day is no longer just Shaheed Dibosh, Language Martyrs' Day, but a day which recognizes the right of every individual to speak in his or her own language.

However, every time there is injustice, every time those in power order or allow the innocent to be killed, the spirit that inspired Mahbub Alam Chowdhury to write his poem flares again.

Niaz Zaman, Advisor, Department of English and Modern Languages, Independent University, Bangladesh, is a writer and translator.

The Language Movement Revisited

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

From the very early days of Pakistan's founding, its ruling elite tried to establish the notion of "Muslim self-rule and Islamic ideology" as the raison d'être of its existence, as it had also been the war cry of Muslim League politics in the pre-1947 days.

Moreover, the Muslim League organisation wanted to rule the newfound state in the same way the party itself had been ruled in the 1940s under the single leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

In the process of forming the nation and shaping the constitution based on the representation of

the people of Pakistan, whenever the question of Bangla as a state language (spoken by the majority of the country) appeared in the scene, it undermined the overarching concern of safeguarding the so-called Muslim interests. Therefore, we see, repeatedly, the government either wanted to sweep the language question under the carpet or endeavoured to dissuade the Bangalees from their demand.

Even after the unprecedented movements of 1952, when a Muslim League member of the Constituent Assembly moved a resolution to make Bangla one of the state languages of Pakistan, the government again put a hold on the decision for a later, more appropriate day. But the event of February 21, 1952, was of such significance that it was impossible to ignore the demand for Bangla to be a state language after that. Ultimately, in 1954, Bangla was added to the Basic Principal Committee Report as a state language of Pakistan alongside Urdu and finally was enshrined in the 1956 constitution of Pakistan as a state language.

Mohammad Afzalur Rahman is currently pursuing his PhD at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

East Pakistan's Language Issue

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

the state language is the language behind whose education the government will allocate the most funds, and the language that, when learned, will allow for someone to be considered highly educated in the eyes of the state.

The subjects are now kings. Thus their language is the state language Therefore, it is natural and appropriate that the state language of East Pakistan should be Bangla. The jingle of Urdu can already be heard from the mouths of some subservient Bengalis. But their powers of judgement cannot be praised. The attraction of Urdu and the reasons behind it have previously been discussed. Sayings such as these are expressions of the malnourished hearts of these 'mechanical humans'. This will break the spine of the Bengali nation. This will result in the Bengali Hindu Muslim freeing themselves from the English to turn themselves captive in the hands of Punjab, Sindh and Baloch. Powered by blind religious fanaticism, many are clamouring for Urdu. But I have already said that true religious understanding and knowledge of heritage will never enter the heart of Bengalis if it is not done through the Bangla language. For this, translation committees need to be formed and religious and other important matters pertaining to civilisation need to be translated from foreign languages

without further delay. Neglecting this responsibility now will result in scraps in the future which will neither be able to fill the need nor give satisfaction. There will never be any permanent prosperity for the nation like this. The egoism that is concealed behind the claims that Urdu is the superior language, the religious language or the aristocratic language will no longer work. The renaissance people will no longer be fooled by the tricks of the few or the cunning of the so called aristocrat. On the contrary, if you want to hold government service in East Pakistan, you must prove yourself by appearing for Bangla language exams until the secondary level. Otherwise, after the apprenticeship period, employees who can't prove themselves will be suspended on the grounds of lack of qualification and lack of sympathy towards the public.

Bangla and Urdu should both be adopted as the state language of Pakistan

In the entirety of Pakistan, Bangla speaking Hindus and Muslims are the majority. Still, we are not in favour of making Bangla the state language of West Pakistan, because that will hinder the natural progress of the West Pakistani public. Therefore, Urdu or Pashto will be the state language of West Pakistan and Bangla will be the state language of East Pakistan. This system is not indecent in any way, as modern and developed countries such as Russia and Canada are examples of

multilingual countries. If adjacent states within Russia can have multiple state languages, then East Pakistan and West Pakistan, which are fifteen hundred miles apart like Punjab and East Bengal, can definitely have two state languages, and that would be natural. In Russia, public sentiment holds sway, meaning the people are the true kings, thus the idea of forcing a language from a different province to be adopted as the state language can never find ground. In our country too, in the new state of Pakistan, the people will prove that they are king, the exploitation by those who hold titles won't be allowed to go on for much longer. If there is an attempt to force Urdu upon the Bengali Hindu-Muslims, that attempt will fail. Because smouldering dissatisfaction does not stay repressed for too long. Soon then, the relationship between the East and the West might cease to exist. It's the responsibility of the prudent politician to keep an eye on the public sentiment, and adopt principles and systems that are fair, and helpful to the progress of the entire nation.

Qazi Motahar Hossain was a renowned Educationist, Scientist and Litterateur.

The article first appeared in a booklet titled 'Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla na Urdu'. The booklet was published by Tamaddun Majlish in September 1947.

The article is translated from Bengali by Azmin Azran.



INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY SPECIAL

MONDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2022, FALGUN 8, 1428 BS

The Baily Star 👃

The pervasive problem of linguistic discrimination

SHAHIDUL ISLAM

We did not fight against any language, not even Urdu. Our language movement was a fight against a ruler of a ruled nation. Language itself has no power to exploit others. However, it can become a tool of exploitation for a ruler. After the partition in 1947, within a year, the people of the then East Pakistan realised that they were trapped by another coloniser in place of the British. The new Pakistani rulers wanted to use East Pakistan as a vicinity for their exploitation. So, they almost immediately targeted Bangla, the language spoken by the East Pakistani people, to destroy the morale of the East Pakistanis and make them subservient to the West Pakistani ruling elite.

Thomas Macaulay, a British lawmaker, addressed the British Parliament on February 2, 1832, and said that until and unless they destroyed the strong morality and integrity of Indians, they would not be able to continue their rule forever. The Pakistani ruling clique also understood this and declared that 'Urdu and Urdu will only be the state language of Pakistan'. We denied and revolted. That is why some people may think that we fought against Urdu and initiated a hate campaign

LANGUAGE WORRIES

in West Bengal

PABITRA SARKAR

Why worry about your language?

From the later decades of the last century, a new worry has descended on mankind — that about the endurance, decay and death of the language.

"How long will my language live?" ask many people. "Can we call it hale and hearty — the way we speak it now?"

The Ethnologue, an American journal, publishes yearly reports on the world's linguistic health, and these have, rightly, alarmed not linguists alone, but also people who are concerned about the state of their language or human language in general. Earlier this century, it informed us that about half the languages (about 14,000) that human beings had begun speaking are already dead, and out of some 7,000 now surviving, half will not be spoken before this century is over.

However, at the very outset, we want to assure our readers that our own language, Bangla, glorified by the martyrdom of its sons and daughters in Bangladesh and India and further, esteemed globally after February 21 was declared as the International Mother Language Day, is not threatened by immediate or even near, extinction. It does not figure anywhere in the UNESCO list of "endangered languages". Words of concern are however exchanged here and there about its state of health. Why?

The reason is, we, by which I mean people who have been more or less exposed to English education, do not always speak what is called "pure" Bangla. We speak a variety of Bangla, often called "Banglish", translated as "Bangreji", which is a queer mixture of both, close to a pidgin. In it, English words and phrases are

power and usefulness, and therefore the prestige of Bangla, is much less. And when we speak English, or even Banglish, we are immediately placed in the sacred social category of babus and sahibs, while people with no English are marked non-babus - a lower caste in the new social ranking. We, the neo-Brahmins, speak a language that places us a cut above the ashikshita (read people with no English but otherwise quite educated) chhotoloks (a word we "babus" want often to utter but stop before doing that).

Is that a real reason for worry?

Well, yes and no. First, a word about the changing life of languages. A language veers from the end of "maintenance" to the other extreme, "loss". Depending on the complex contexts in which it is spoken, and the attitude of its speakers, its movement towards the end may be slow or fast. A Bengali boy of immigrant parents in the USA, living among English speakers, will lose his language faster than one living among Bengali compatriots. The loss can be arrested somewhat if the

> An "educated" Bengali speaks with "but", "so", "just", "thank you", "OK, OK", "actually", "practically", "obviously", and a hundred other English words and phrases appearing gleefully in their Bangla.

parents help the boy by speaking Bangla to him. At our home countries, too, the maintenance of our language depends on the intention of the parents. As we all see now, that of the parents here is heavily tilted toward their wards learning English more than Bangla.

And the attitude of the parents counts a lot. As we all know, English, as the imperial language, had a much higher prestige and power here even in the mid-19th century, when the Empire was still young in our land. My favourite quote is from the farce Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata ("Is this what is called civilised behaviour?", 1859) of Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824 - 1873), in which a group of spoiled young men, off-springs of the nouveau riche, decided to assemble in a prostitute's parlour to have some good time.

Some of them had reached the parlour early, but the leader, who was supposed to bring the drinks, was being late. When he finally arrived, he offered profuse excuses, but a friend, sort of a leader-aspirant, said, in English, "That's a lie." This made the leader furious, who shouted. "Ki? Tumi amake liar bolo? Tumi janona, ami ekhuni tomake shoot korbo!" (What? You call me a liar? You just wait. I'm going to shoot you!) He, of course, had no gun on himself. The two "friends" are about to come to blows, but others hold them apart and soothingly say that friends should not break into a fight over such a trifling matter. Naba, still resentful, said, "Trifling? What do you mean by 'trifling'? He called me a liar, and you mean that's trifling? Why didn't he call me mithyabadi in Bangla, and if he did, no son-of-a-bitch would have complained. But 'liar'? That's too much!"

The situation in West Bengal

The same malady continues to pester our speech in West Bengal, reinforced by the new rat race for English medium schooling by middleclass and proto or aspirant middle-class parents. They speak English of a kind with their children, and scold them if they say, "Maa, dekho, tramline e ekta goru." The mother would

usually say, "Don't say goru, baba, say 'cow'." It is a mortal offence for the children if they call the household animals or common birds

and animals by their Bangla names. Many of our "educated" persons speak a Bangla littered with English words, and will look and behave dumb if they are asked to avoid that. I report the events of very common quarrels

in a crowded bus in Kolkata that we witnessed so frequently before the pandemic. Someone had, unknowingly, stepped on the foot of his strap-hanging neighbour, who shouted out in pain, and said, I translate his Bangla - "Hey, you, why have you trampled my feet?" The offender replied in an apologetic tone, "Sorry, Dada, I wasn't aware of it!'

The sufferer isn't pacified and continued to grumble, "'Sorry,' he says, as if saying 'sorry' will drive away my pain! Why don't you be more careful when you're in a crowded bus?" The other, protesting, said, "I said 'sorry', didn't I? Such things happen in a bus! You should've travelled by taxi!" That made the other flare up and argue why the other didn't choose a taxi for travel. This way the exchange heated up and up, to reach a point when one yelled "Shut up!", in English.

The moment this "Shut up!" is uttered, the quarrel is suddenly lifted to a much higher level. The other breaks in shrill scream, "Ki, 'shut up'? You shut up! Bhadrata jane na, abar Engreji jharchhe! Dekhbe moja?" and he almost attempts to hit him, a problem-ridden effort in a crowded public vehicle, but the other passengers intervene, and the two are separated, and forced into an uneasy peace.

Often our Bangladeshi friends complain of the domination of Hindi in Kolkata parlance. It is apparently true, as on Kolkata streets Hindi is the prevalent tongue. It, in fact, has been so for long. Most of them come for shopping at New Market, where Hindi is the prevalent tongue of transaction. Those who come for medical treatment, and are hospitalised, have to tackle North-Eastern and South Indian (mostly Keralan) nurses who know little Bangla, and use Hindi instead. But Hindi has not been able to penetrate the Bengali household that much, although young men often use dialogues of Hindi film heroes for effect. The fact is that the Bangla of the average Bengali gentlefolk is not much encroached by Hindi, as it is mercilessly ravaged by ill-scattered English words.

This is, of course, not just a worry for Bangla. The other provinces of India have their variety of Banglish — Hinlish, Tamlish, Punlish you have them all. If you watch news on Indian television, you will find Indian political leaders of all colours speak their language, be it Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or Gujarati with a liberal mixture of English words in it, so Bangla in West Bengal is no exception. As long as the society holds a language in inordinately high esteem, and its own language is deprived of the same in proportion, the latter will continue to suffer the ignominy of degeneration into a kind of "pidgin", even if this sounds somewhat overstated.

An "educated" Bengali speaks with "but", "so", "just", "thank you", "OK, OK", "actually", "practically", "obviously", and a hundred other English words and phrases appearing gleefully in their Bangla. To listen to them for any length of time is a pain and punishment for one who wants to hear Bangla as Bangla. When pointed out as a linguistic vice, the speaker nonchalantly says, "Why, English is also an Indian language, isn't it?"

This is a dumb argument. There is seldom a trace of any other Indian language in his Bangla. I know things in Bangladesh are much better. But one keeps their fingers crossed.

Pabitra Sarkar in an Author and former Vice Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata.



Once Leo Tolstoy said, "The strength of the **Government lies in the** people's ignorance, and the Government knows this, and will therefore always oppose true enlightenment."

against the language. In reality, we fought against the Pakistan rulers who used Urdu to subdue the Bangalee people. Urdu was not the mother tongue of any of the four provinces of West Pakistan. They thought Bangla was the language of the Hindu people. We fought for Bangla and Urdu to both be the state languages of Pakistan. As many political scientists have said, this was the beginning of Bengali nationalism.

After 24 years of struggle and the war of liberation in 1971, we won, Pakistan itself disintegrated, and the People's Republic of Bangladesh emerged in 1971.

A new history began. The education system has been completely destroyed. Madrasa education and English medium schools are on the rise. Privatisation of education is a death blow to the national education system, making education a sought-after commodity. The standard of education has lowered. Once Leo Tolstoy said, "The strength of the Government lies in the people's ignorance, and the Government knows this, and will therefore always oppose true enlightenment." The present education system produces millions of so-called educated people living in medieval darkness, and religiosity has taken the place of secularism, one of the main pillars of democracy.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

liberally scattered, and often we jump Bangla altogether to move into an English sentence or two. In linguistic parlance these are called "code switching" and "code mixing", which make our language an intermediate one. This happens, because we live in a bilingual environment where both the languages are used. Also, because in West Bengal, there is a craze for English medium schooling for children, who are often discouraged to speak Bangla even at home. Thus, English and Bangla, life partners in this bilingual household, do not lead an innocuous or loving conjugal life.

In many South Asian families, English is the dominant partner; more powerful, more esteemed, more highly valued. Meanwhile, the

একুশ মানে মাথা নত না করা, একুশ মানে মায়ের ভাষায় মনের কথা বল আন্তর্জাতিক মাতৃ ভাষা দিবস উপলক্ষ্যে সকল ভাষা শহীদ এবং ভাষা সৈনিকদের জানাই সশ্ৰদ্ধ সালাম ন্যাশনাল ব্যাংক লিমিটেড

Nationalist forgettings

A lesser-known debate on heritage and language in the early days of Pakistan

In Mostafa's reckoning, Pakistan had accomplished a comprehensive "revolution", which went completely unacknowledged in Karim's speech.

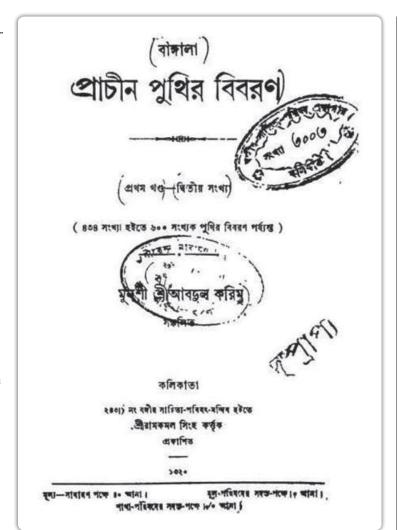
PRIYAM PRITAM PAUL

In 1950, just a little more than two years into the partition of the South Asian subcontinent, the octogenarian Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad (1871-1953) delivered a lecture in Chittagong, on the language and heritage of the Bangla language in the context of newly founded

Karim had spent his entire life discovering the forgotten literary archive of Bangla, putting together a massive number of literary specimens of Bengali Muslims. He gained considerable acclaim from the Bengali intelligentsia in the undivided Bengal: almost all of his edited manuscripts came out from the Vangiya Sahitya Parishad established in 1893.

In his Chittagong speech, Karim made observations about the possible trajectory of Bangla language and literature in the wake of partition, which he had to willy-nilly accept since he was not involved in politics. Karim mentioned in his speech that there is no "shortcut" to a considerable position in literature. One has to go down to the very roots of Bangla language and literature and link it with the new scientific and rational stances. He highlighted in his speech that Bengali Muslims had a rich tradition in the ancient literary genres

Bangla reached a high stage by imaginative contributions from litterateurs like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore, and Kazi Nazrul Islam. He argued that all literary



Mostafa sounded alarm that Karim's idea of continuity of the Bangla language was not only deeply problematic but shook the very core of Pakistan by being aligned with the concept of a "united India". Besides, Mostafa noted that Karim's speech resonated with the speech of Dr Muhammad Shahidullah delivered in the previous year at the Dacca session, where the latter mentioned that it is true that people here are Hindus and Muslims but the bigger truth stands that they are Bengali. For Golam Mostafa, both Sahityavisharad and Shahidullah had an important role in the cultural upbringing of Bengali Muslims in the final phase of united Bengal, but after achieving Pakistan, their lifelong discernment had been suspicious in terms of core creeds of the fledgling state.

Golam Mostafa also cast aspersions on the literary contributions of Kazi Nazrul Islam who had been named by Karim along with Bankim, Madhusudan, and Tagore – as an iconic figure for any Bengali literary aspirant. Mostafa identified Nazrul as a sympathiser of "united India" who failed to rebel against the Hindu pantheon. For Mostafa, the projects of Bankim, Madhusudan, and



Tagore were crystal clear in that their literary creations were concentrated mainly on Hindu traditions, except in stray instances like a poem of Tagore, named Shahjahan, based on Muslim

To top it up, Mostafa questioned the

of Abdul Karim, terming it fraudulent. With shrill self-assurance, Mostafa mentioned that he had previously put suggestion to this "old man" to keep silent about ancient literature or punthi sahitya. He believed Karim had caused a huge disaster by handing over his discoveries to Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939). He suspects the Muslim writer of ancient specimens could have a matter of deception, because the entire discourse was made by scholars Dinesh Chandra

authenticity of the entire lifelong project

Golam Mostafa, a famous literary figure of Bengal, had a considerable contribution in consolidating modern Bengali Muslim's literary manifestation. Mostafa used to sing the songs composed by Tagore, an author he greatly admired. However, he experienced personal traumatic incidents in his family during the partition of Bengal. His take on Sahityavisharad had been jarring, but this literary incident signifies the gravity of the situation prevailing just after the creation of Pakistan.

After the incident, Sahityavisharad wrote a letter to Dr Muhammad Shahidullah where he mentioned Golam Mostafa's criticism. In this personal letter, he argued that the way Mostafa discarded the merits of older Bengali literature had been foolish; that he wanted to erect a tower without laying the foundation – a vain wish. Karim further noted that Muslims of Bengal could not create a worthy literature during the span from late nineteenth century to 1950. Mostafa imagined that the creation of Pakistan was an event that authorised dismissal of the entire corpus of ancient Bangla literature.

Jingoism – a certain conception of the modern – and belief in a deterministic relationship between politics and culture that pushed a poet like Golam Mostafa into denouncing older traditions and disowning Nazrul. Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon incident in history that only happened in the early stage of Pakistan. Approaches and assumptions like that appear time and again in language, cultural, and social realms where power seeks to decide the terms of our existential relation to our past and our language, culture, and social

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STRUGGLE for the State Language

DR MAHMUD SHAH QURESHI

Shortly after the establishment of Pakistan, differences between the two wings came out as startling facts. In the intellectual quarters of East Pakistan, their mother tongue Bangla was being totally ignored. Protests were organised outspokenly. I remember joining the processions as early as 1948. I was a student of class eight back then at the Government Muslim High School in Chattogram. I had just arrived from my village school in Rangunia a few months ago. My class fellows and I volunteered to participate in some activities in favour of our mother tongue, like selling some pro-revolutionary publications in the streets or joining more processions of students. The movement's climax was reached when on 21st February 1952, some young protesters were killed in Dhaka. The news reached Chattogram on the same evening, and poet Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury, though ill at the time, had composed a long poem with fiery lines like "Kandte Ashini, Fanshir Dabi Niye Eshecchi" (I have not come to shed tears where they laid down their lives- translation by Kabir Chowdhury). We spent long hours in the evenings shouting slogans at the Laldighi Maidan. There were more processions and continuous strikes.

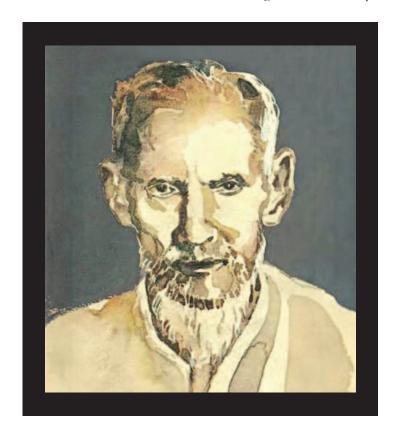
In July 1954, I had an interview with Dr Muhammad Shahidullah and joined the Department of Bengali at the University of Dhaka as a student. I had Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Zahir Raihan and others as close class

In 1955, we celebrated 21st February in the most revolutionary way possible, under the circumstances. The police arrested most of us, but we still carried on with the movement from Madhu's canteen until the evening.

From 1956, there had been no 'struggle'. The authorities had accepted Bangla as a national language. But there were continuous political movements in the 1960s. The revolutionary spirit of our generation reached its peak in 1971 during the last freedom fight against Pakistan. With the establishment of Bangladesh, we have permanently ensured the foundation of a state language.

Professor Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi is an eminent Bangladeshi scholar. He has been honoured with numerous accolades, including Ekushey Padak and French Legion

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Abdul Karim Sahityavisharad (1871-1953)

geniuses - from William Shakespeare to Rabindranath Tagore – paid heed to ancient folk elements and created entirely new things by amalgamating tradition with imaginative assimilation of changing times. He noted that, as Pakistan came into being, certain literary figures were giving unviable directions in the realm of Bangla language and literature. Karim concluded that fraternity, love, and inclusivity is the way to go for engaging the people in literature.

After that conference, famous poet and editor Golam Mostafa (1897-1964) wrote an editorial in his literary journal Naobahar where he vehemently criticised Karim's speech in Chittagong. The key plank of Mostafa's diatribe was that the core of Sahityavisharad's speech went against the principles of Pakistan. He boastfully mentioned that Karim's speech was published with very poor arrangement, which was unprecedented from his own account.

In Mostafa's reckoning, Pakistan had accomplished a comprehensive "revolution", which went completely unacknowledged in Karim's speech.

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All literary

Cover of

Abdul Karim

Sahityavisharad's

imaginative assimilation of changing times.

Poet Golam Mostafa (1897-1964)



The pervasive problem of linguistic discrimination

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

In 1948, the UN General Assembly had taken the human rights charter (26) that 'everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.' In 1959, the UN General Assembly had again decided that 'the child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages.' In 1835, when Persian was replaced

by English as the medium of instruction, William Adam, a Christian clergyman, continued in his famous education despatch that 'the government should establish a national education system through the medium of the Vernacular tongue. If the use of the language of the people will enable every man to understand the statement of his own case, even when he is wholly ignorant of this mother tongue except as a spoken language, how much more complete his protection

will be if he knows it as a written language'.

Now I can say categorically that our ruling classes failed to fulfil these regulations of the UN or human rights organisations and the decision given by William Adam almost two hundred years ago. Our mother tongue has been neglected from the very beginning of our independence. Every government paid much more attention to English and religious education by allocating extra money for their

development. Moreover, our national constitution upholds only the Bangla language as the state language of Bangladesh, ignoring the languages of the 45 aboriginal clan groups who have been living here for thousands of years. British colonisation has gone, and so has the Pakistani semi-colonisation, but linguistic discrimination still persists.

Shahidul Islam is a former Professor of Applied Chemistry at Rajshahi University.

"Most of the commentators are unaware of the importance of the events between 1948 and 1952."

In conversation with Marxist thinker and author Badruddin Umar

happened after 1971 in literature, culture, and research in this country? When literature, culture and research has seen no development, how do you expect the development of the Bengali language?

What The Daily Star (TDS): What was your involvement in the Language Movement

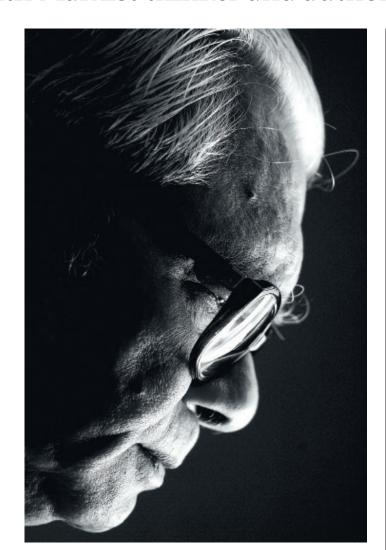
> Badruddin Umar: As a general student, I participated in every public event of the Language Movement in 1952. On February 21, for example, I was present at the Amtala meeting where students debated whether or not to violate Section 144. Eventually, when they broke Section 144, I was in the procession. When police opened fire on the students, I was at 12-number shade which was adjacent to the Medical College gate. Barkat was also there. I saw him get struck by a bullet.

I was neither a leader nor an activist of the movement. I was only a close observer. It helped me a lot in writing my book on the Language Movement and cross-examining the information shared by various people involved with the movement whom I interviewed for my research.

such an extensive research project on the Language Movement? Badruddin Umar: In 1969, I undertook the plan to write a book on the Language Movement. Earlier, when I was a faculty at Rajshahi University, I wanted to write about the post-partition history of East Pakistan. However, since

TDS: What motivated you to undertake

my family migrated to East Pakistan in 1950, I didn't have much information about the early years of East Pakistan, and I couldn't make much



Badruddin Umar NASIR ALI MAMUN (PHOTOSEUM)

didn't do anything for the betterment of the common people. They indulged exploitation. Another major cause of resentment was the food crisis that had been plaguing the region since the partition. The food crisis disenchanted the peasants and general people with

I have extensively written about this crisis and the sufferings of peasants and labours in my book. Many people say that I added those things unnecessarily. They don't have any perspective of the movement. A movement like the Language Movement in 1952 cannot take place without a strong social basis for it. They want to portray it as a movement of students, teachers and intellectuals, and, according to them, the reason behind the movement was the killing of students by police firing.

Mao Tse Tung said that a single spark can start a prairie fire. In 1952, East Pakistan was on the verge of explosion. The firing incident was just a spark. Most of the commentators on the movement are unaware of the importance of the events that happened between 1948 and

TDS: Religious nationalism was a key force behind the creation of Pakistan. However, five years into Pakistan's existence, we see emergence of linguistic nationalism among Bengalis surrounding the question of state language. How did that

shift happen? **Badruddin Umar:** During the colonial period, there were several contradictions, including communalism, colonialism, regional disparities, and language. However, two contradictions came to the forefront: colonialism and communalism. The former paved the way for the independence of British India, while the latter caused the

eventual division of the country.

With the partition of India along communal line and migration of a large number of people belonging to Hindu community, the earlier basis of communalism ceased to exist in Pakistan. New conflicts over language, race, and regional disparity emerged. These contradictions started to develop since the early days of Pakistan and reached a climax in 1952. Many say that the 1952 Language Movement paved the way for 1971. I don't agree with them. The development of the contradictions over the course from 1947 to 1971 is what led to the eventual emergence of Bangladesh. The 1952 Language Movement is but a dot on the road to independence.

Communists failed to identify these contradictions properly. They failed to differentiate between "national development" and "nationalism". The

I have extensively written about this crisis and the sufferings of peasants and labours in my book. Many people say that I added those things unnecessarily. They don't have any perspective of the movement. A movement like the Language **Movement in 1952** cannot take place without a strong social basis for it.

former is about the development of education, culture, living standard and so on while the latter is always aggressive. Nationalism is closely related to fascism. Therefore, the progressive left movement collapsed in the 1960s. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman filled this gap and brought a nationalist programme of politics at the forefront.

TDS: What did you mean by "return of the Bengali Muslim to their homeland" in your book?

Badruddin Umar: A section of Muslims in this country used to hold a belief that Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc were their actual homeland. With the development of national consciousness, they started owning the Bangla language as their mother tongue and the country as their homeland.

TDS: What was the impact of the 1952 Language Movement on the future course of politics in East Pakistan? **Badruddin Umar:** I don't think it is the right approach to look at the 1952 Language Movement as a separate event. Rather, it was a part of the continuous development of contradictions which started in 1947 and reached a peak in 1971. However, you can say that the Language Movement put a huge impetus behind the development of these contradictions.

TDS: Although Bangla is now the state language of Bangladesh, it is still neglected. What is your opinion? Badruddin Umar: In reality, Bangla is not respected as the state language in Bangladesh. English dominates the scene. The upper class sends their children to English medium schools. They shed crocodile tears for Bangla on February 21. They are hypocrites. Their children can't even read Bangla. They have no knowledge about the great literary tradition of Bangla.

I was reading an article in The Daily Star recently which revealed the extremely poor condition of research in this country. Allocation for research is insignificant, with less than 100 crores allocated for the research. Most worryingly, they are even unable to spend this miniscule budget.

Thousands of students graduate from schools and colleges every year, but they don't know anything beyond their textbooks. If you look at the literary scene, there have been no notable figures in recent years. All the major poets were the product of the sixties. So, what happened after 1971 in literature, culture, and research in this country? When literature, culture and research have seen no development, how do you expect the development of the Bangla language?



headway

with the project back then. When I started working on the Language Movement, I contacted Kamruddin Ahmad. He was a very learned and honest person. He was also closely involved with the political developments in this region for a long time. I was greatly benefitted from the multiple discussion sessions with Kamruddin Ahmad. He provided me a perspective on the socio-political development in East Pakistan since the

partition.

TDS: You mentioned in your book that there is a big difference between the two phases (1948 and 1952) of the Language Movement. What's that difference? Badruddin Umar: In 1948, people of Old Dhaka were very hostile to the student's demand for recognising Bangla as a state language. Students involved with the movement were even physically assaulted by them. But, in 1952, the same people actively supported and participated in the Language Movement. All the events of February 22 occurred in that area. I started to think about this shift in their attitude seriously. I tried to investigate the causes behind such a change.

Firstly, I found the unmindful repression by the Muslim League government. The government tried to suppress any kind of protest against the regime pre-emptively. They

