

## 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

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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.

**Shishir Bhattacharja** is a Professor at the Institute of Modern Languages, University of