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# The pervasive problem of linguistic discrimination

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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

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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.

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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.

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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