Nationalist forgettings

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

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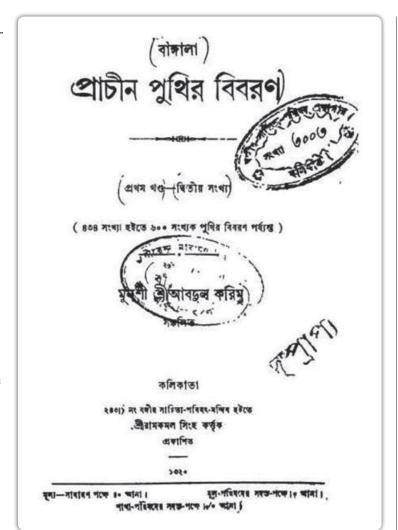
PRIYAM PRITAM PAUL

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

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 Golam Mostafa, a famous literary

authenticity of the entire lifelong project

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

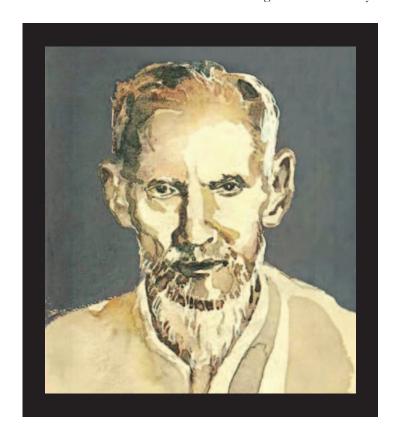
Shortly after the establishment of Pakistan, differences between the two wings came out as startling facts. In the intellectual quarters of East Pakistan, their mother tongue Bangla was being totally ignored. Protests were organised outspokenly. I remember joining the processions as early as 1948. I 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



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.

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To top it up, Mostafa questioned the

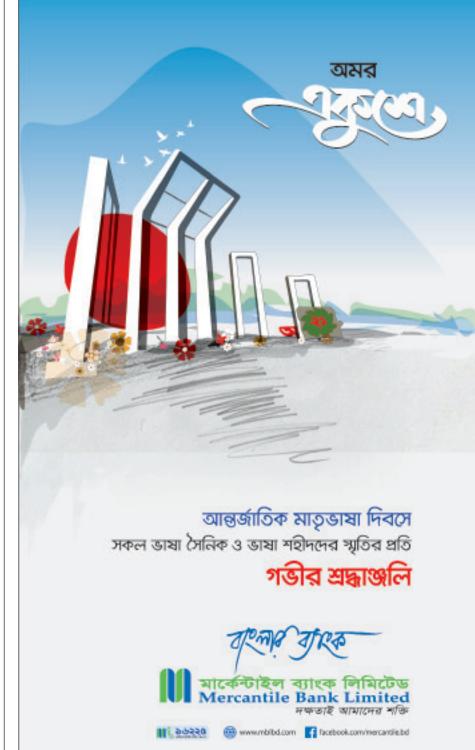
All literary geniuses from William **Shakespeare** Rabindranath Tagore- paid heed to ancient folk **elements** and created entirely new things by amalgamating tradition with imaginative assimilation of changing times.

Cover of

Abdul Karim

Sahityavisharad's

Poet Golam Mostafa (1897-1964)



The pervasive problem of linguistic discrimination

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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.

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