



# Bengali as a vehicle of abstract thought

**Our thought is relatively shallow. It does not have its roots in the total being of the writer and for this reason radiates no life-giving energy to the mind of the community. ... Our vanity, the home spun notions of our provincial minds, our faith in convenient digests of western thought are among our banes. Our debt to sources other than indigenous is well known, and yet we have not assimilated a fraction of it.**

MUNIER CHOUDHURY

Buddhadeva Bose in one of his essays expresses the opinion that Bengali prose, “in less than a couple of centuries has achieved remarkable maturity.” He, however alleges that it has yet notable deficiencies. Deficiencies, I mean, not in performance, but in potency itself! Reflecting on these supposed fundamental limitations of the Bengali language, he further says: “Bengali prose therefore, is now all right for description, narration and dialogue, the accessory of fiction and *belles-letters*, but seems just to fall short of speculative, critical and philosophical writing.”

Had this been the opinion of an ignorant foreigner or that of an infatuated worshipper of foreign idols, we need not have taken it seriously. But this is the view of a writer among whose many achievements must be counted his astonishing ability to discuss difficult aesthetic questions in charming prose and therefore calls for comment at length.

As the question is about the limits of Bengali as a language and its inherent tendencies, the present discussion must keep in view the entire range of our prose literature. To my mind, that would be the best way of dispelling the misgiving of people who needlessly despair of the future of Bengal.

Ram Mohan Roy created a new epoch as a prose writer at a time when Bengali had not developed punctuation marks or the notion of agreement between clauses according to the genius of the language. His *Vedanta*, published in 1815, was the first step towards a fully blown and modern prose. This pioneering effort, naturally hesitant and unsure of itself, is significantly a work with a spiritual theme. Bengali prose thus made its beginning in the abstract realm of philosophy.

After twenty-five years appeared Akshoy Datta on an intellectual scene profoundly disturbed by the conflict between native culture and foreign culture. There was no hypocrisy or self-deception in the response of the

times to new ideals and ideas of life. The impact of it all affected the very heart of society and the individual, and the resultant awakening was so deep and real that Bengalis avidly set about assimilating western and Indian knowledge. In their attempt to know, not merely through English translation but at first hand, the best that has been thought in every language they learnt Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit on the one hand, and Latin Greek, French and German on the other. It was this serious sense of purpose and scholarly pain that made possible the revolution in thought and language in the nineteenth century. Akshoy Datta was important not only as a reformer of language but as an exponent of new ideas. His work entitled *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti* (Nature and Human Nature) does not merely contain a freight in information. His discussion of the laws of nature, the constitution of human nature, the question of human happiness, shows that Bengali had already acquired the power of logical analysis and of representing the complex structure of abstract thought.

The book, *Bajhya Bastu O Manab Prakriti*, is not a wholly original work. When however, a great idea leavens or a great change occurs in communal life, and the individual is roused by his insight into it to make its significance clearer to himself and to others by studious effort, language, under the stress discovers its possibilities. Datta was aware that he had used words which were not easy for an ordinary English educated reader to understand. He, therefore, sought to remove the difficulty of such readers by adding to his work a glossary of the unfamiliar words with their English equivalents. In doing so his aim was to facilitate the study of western science and philosophy through the medium of Bengali. His assumption was that his English-educated audience understood the English equivalents he supplied, and for this reason, he gave his alphabetical glossary the caption ‘English Rendering of Words Compiled’. That he did not tentatively call it Proposed Bengali

Equivalents of English Words is also a proof of his great faith in the possibilities of the Bengali language.

Vidyasagar was a contemporary of Akshoy Datta. The emancipated mind and love of knowledge that gave distinction to Datta’s prose also inspired the prose of Vidyasagar, whose mature skill as a writer was mended by Tagore in these words: “He insisted that you must say what you want to say simply, beautifully and in an orderly manner... In fact, Vidyasagar introduced order into the disorderly crowd of Bengali prose, gave it the sense of period and structure, taught it restraint and neatness, and thus increased its flexibility and functional effectiveness. Vidyasagar’s prose is valuable because the mind that it mirrors has extraordinary qualities. One result of his constant study of Sanskrit philosophy was that to him even abstract thought became as clear and definite in outline as sensible images. His consciousness of the modern *Zeitgeist* and a deep faith in western philosophy made the secular content of this prose of irresistible appeal. It was the work of a vastly erudite logician and naturally had a solid logical structure. The spirited but lucid, didactic yet argumentative prose of *Bidhaba Bibaha* (Widow Marriage. 1855) radiates, in its flair for sarcasm and ridicule, the steady heat of the midday sun.

It was however Bankim who realised fully that the Bengali language, if properly tapped, could express the whole gamut of human thought and feelings. The novelist has left the mark of this conviction in his own wonderful and various creation. He imprinted on the face of our prose his realisation, simple as it is, that language is complex or simple, strong or mild, ornate or plain, strictly according to subject matter. Bankim discussed abstruse ideas of western philosophy in his Miscellaneous Essays with such ease and naturalness that it ought to evoke the admiration of our usually unperceptive readers.

Bankim achieved, while attempting

abstract definitions of literature, a subtle and suggestive prose, extraordinarily free from verbiage and capable of rendering complex thought with effortless ease. Even when one does not agree with him, one feels the charm of his manner and his power of lucid persuasion.

Eighteen seventy-two saw the publication of *Banga Darshan* and 1891 that of *Sadhana* presented Tagore to us. In *Sabuj Patra* (1914) Pramatha Choudhury made his appearance, officially as it were, in the field of Bengali prose. After him came to mention a few names at random, Ramendrasundar Trivedi, Buddhadeva Bose and Annadasankar Roy. Two Muslim writers also produced significant works in Bengali. Humayun Kabir wrote his *Emmanuel Kant* and Qazi Abdul Wadud his *Goethe*. Ramendrasundar wrote his aesthetic criticism in a language characterised by a tendency to overanalysis. He however displays an unexceptionable wealth of facts and thinks in words aptly chosen and tautly woven in the fabric of his prose. Pramatha Choudhury treated Trivedi’s subject in a racy conversational idiom, and opened up the limitless horizon of a prose able to explore the infinite resources of our spoken language. In his hands dry abstraction seems to glitter by contact with the artist’s refined sense of beauty.

Rabindranath served the profession of letters for sixty-five years. There is hardly an important branch of knowledge on which he did not shed light. In his superb prose, during the period. His mind ranged at ease over aesthetics, philosophy, science, politics, sociology, painting and sculpture. Years after his death, he still remains without a peer in skill, facility of language and the richness of ideas as an interpreter of abstract thought. That no region of thought, however, difficult and far lying is today inaccessible to the Bengali language could be illustrated from his writings alone. It is needless, of course, to add that the writer’s medium must possess what Annadasankar calls virtue and fire. I am convinced that as

a vehicle of abstract thought Bengali today is well past its adolescence and youth. Owing to the interest of our thinkers in metaphysics and religious discussion, their anxiety to apprehend the fundamental reality of life poetry the State and the universe this aspect of our language has developed most. It seems as if the ceaseless experiment of more than a century, with the resources of our language, was designed to cause its fullest unfolding in this direction rather than in any other. In respect of conveying objective, scientific, and technical information our language is indisputably deficient. But this must be understood in the light of the fact that science has not entered our practical life yet in more than a rudimentary form. Hence Bengali is yet to absorb the great scientific and mechanical revolution of our times.

It must, however, be admitted that the prose found in abstract writing in Bengali is in quality and structure far from satisfactory. The reader here is unaware of the resources of the language while the writers blame its inherent incapacity. The reasons for this unhappy state of affairs must be many and I am unable to go into them all. I should, therefore, content myself by analysing a few works published in recent years and attempting an estimate of their merits in general terms.

When Syed Sajjad Husain writes on national heritage I do not reproach his style, nor do I commend it. The writer does not perhaps pay much attention to style in discussing the abstract questions of cultural tradition. But his aim has been realised. A valuable idea which is neither novel nor complex, but deserves wide currency, has been put across in clear language. It does not matter very much that Sajjad Husain uses English phrases like sense of values where he could easily find an appropriate Bengali phrase for it. His ideal is not the kind of prose whose quality is determined in every word, clause and sentence used, but the logic and compelling pressure of an idea imperiously demanding expression.



# Remembering Zahir Raihan A Language Activist and Trailblazer

**It was well known that Gaffar and Zahir were the heroes of the 21st February movement in 1952. Zahir was very serious and talked very little but soon became famous for his first short story book *Surjagrahan*.**

MAHMUD SHAH QURESHI

In 1954, when I was admitted into the Dhaka University Bengali honours course after an interview with Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, a host of talented fellows were to be my friends in the next four years. They are Abdul Gaffar Choudhury, during the most part of the first year, Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal and Anwaruddin Khan (of the department of Economics) for a good part of the second year and Zahir Raihan for many afternoons in the third and fourth year.

Even from the outset, it was well known that Gaffar and Zahir were the heroes of the 21st February movement in 1952. However, in 1954, Zahir spent most of his time at Modhu's Canteen, foretelling the future of the senior student leaders. He was very serious and talked very little but soon became more famous for his first short story book publication *Surjagrahan*. Upon being insisted by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Zahir assisted me in participating at a Sahitya Sangsad soiree. Under the leadership of the young teacher A K M Aminul Islam, Zahir then organized



Zahir Raihan is standing at the door along with Mahmud Shah Qureshi and others during their tour of India and Pakistan.

the students to seek help from the Chief Minister Ataur Rahman Khan for a donation to support our Indo-Pak tour.

We were offered 3 or 5 thousand rupees for a tour covering Calcutta, Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Pindi and

Peshawar, with Dr Ahmed Sharif and his wife accompanying us. Zahir, Anwarul, and I were the senior-most male students, and we were accompanied by five young ladies from our class on the trip. To augment our funds, we arranged a charity film show

at the Gulistan Cinema Hall, and I had a good experience working with Zahir during this show.

Upon our return, Zahir did not join the university class, as he was working for a Lahore film called "*Jago Hua Savera*" in an office near the Gulistan Cinema Hall. During the afternoons, I would visit him and then we would go to the Kasba restaurant, which was a place that Syed Shamsul Huq often frequented. Zahir would sometimes leave us to talk to Syed Huq, and we had some wonderful moments of friendship with some of our male and female class friends. As Zahir did not finish his studies, I left most of my notebooks with him for a future attempt at the examination.

In 1965, after receiving my doctorate degree from the Sorbonne in Paris, I spent my summer vacation at home. During this time, I was invited to Zahir's home for tea, and later he took me to my residence in his car. We discussed his future film project on world peace, and he asked me for help with the project's French version.

After returning to my home in 1968, I joined the newly-formed University of

Chittagong. In December 1970, I met Zahir at the film studio while being escorted by my friend, Professor Nurul Alam. I went there to hand over a letter of invitation to my wedding ceremony. Zahir was in the company of the film actor Razzak.

Zahir was too busy at that time and he could not leave for Chittagong.

In 1971, we met at the Deputy High Commission's Bureau in Calcutta. He asked me to take special care of Professor Syed Ali Ahsan and to inform him of any help. Later, I visited his Calcutta residence once to discuss getting an appointment for rent. On returning to our independent homeland, Zahir remained busy trying to find his older brother, Shahidullah Kaisar. But eventually, he himself got lost. I still cannot forget that tragic event. Zahir is remembered well by our countrymen, and there are monuments or marks of remembrance for him everywhere.

**Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi is an eminent Bangladeshi scholar. He has been honoured with numerous accolades, including Ekushey Padak and France's Légion d'honneur.**

## Bengali as a vehicle of abstract thought

FROM PAGE S1

It is when a writer faces such a crisis of self-expression that the native capacity of the language is on test. Something of the excellence, in abstract writing that results from a close penetration of the subject by an alert sense of beauty, is occasionally in evidence in the literary criticism of Syed Ali Ahsan. He is a conscious craftsman and is anxious to inform his style with what is distinctive in his thought. By a turn here and a twist there he unexpectedly changes the effect of a word or syntax worn with familiarity. Sometimes it does lead to the exhibition of needless virtuosity; but it often sharpens the awareness of a lazy reader or gives pleasure to an attentive one. This has been made possible by Ali Ahsan's close familiarity with the whole exciting course of evaluation of Bengali prose. The same knowledge of the past heritage of the Bengali language enables Abdul Hai to lend to his translation of M N Roy's *The Historical Role of Islam* the charm and readability of an original work. The mass of material in Hasan Zaman's *Dharma Neropeksho Rashtra O Islam* (*The Secular State and Islam*) demonstrates his painstaking scholarship but the truth which emerges from them does not anywhere shine. In this connection, I must mention Syed All Ashraf's *Kavya Parichaya* (*On Aesthetics*) and Abdul Hai's *Sahitya O Sanskriti* (*Literature and Culture*). Whatever one might think of them as research documents their style has a grace and lucidity appropriate to the subject. It is in this sense that Abdul Wadud's *Muslim Manisha* (*Muslim Genius*) too deserves praise. Many useful facts have been presented by the author in a not unpleasing style, but nowhere does his thought attain the level of abstraction which could be said to test conclusively the limits of the expressiveness of the language he uses. I should like to emphasise this. It is possible to illustrate my point from other works equally valuable, but there is really no need for it. The truth is that we have not done with any absorption, any serious philosophical or conceptual thinking whose subtlety, complexity, depth, or imaginative sweep is beyond the expressive capacity of our language.

The fault lies deep. Our thought is relatively shallow. It does not have its roots in the total being of the writer and for this reason radiates no life-giving energy to the mind of the community. The claim that we have experienced a deep awakening in our minds owing to the cataclysmic realisation of an ideal demanding urgent expression cannot, I fear, be taken seriously. Even where there are signs of such an awakening, it has not found utterance in adequate terms because of the refusal to take pains. Our vanity, the home spun notions of our provincial minds, our faith in convenient digests of western thought are among our banes. Our debt to sources other than indigenous is well known, and yet we have not assimilated a fraction of it. A comparison of this creative poverty of a politically free people with the many pointed richness of the Renaissance experienced by a politically enslaved Bengal in the nineteenth century would make the cause of the discrepancy between the two phenomena apparent.

We must not seek the cause of our misfortune in language alone. The Hindu mind, having at its disposal the massive resources of Sanskrit, heir to the versatile tradition of its philosophy and logic, encountered western thought with confidence despite its unfamiliarity, and absorbed it without

any consciousness of a permanent linguistic handicap. This source of strength is no longer available to us. While the revival of Sanskrit in the context of our national culture is not possible, to many not even desirable, we are ignorant of the intellectual riches of Arabic and Persian as languages. What is worse, we failed even where it was possible to accomplish something. In other words, we have not taken the trouble to study the Bengali language deeply or carefully enough. None need be surprised that Bengali is deficient as a vehicle of conceptual thinking.

In the essay referred to earlier in the paper, Buddhadeva Bose holds that "our prose shines naturally in short and simple sentences... long and complex ones with involutions, parentheses and periods are comparatively hard to achieve. Not pestered with too many prepositions, and able to dispense with conjunctions, genders, plurals, articles and often with verbs themselves (sometimes the verb is just left out and sometimes it is better so), it has an eminently desirable lightness as well as (for one cannot, it seems, have something for nothing) a capacity for looseness that can at times be quite distressing." These limitations, according to him, render Bengali unsuitable as a medium of conceptual thought. Again, I differ from Buddhadeva Bose. I can easily illustrate from Bose's own writings and those of Pramatha Choudhury and Annadasankar that it is possible to convey serious thought without the least loss of dignity in a light manner supported by short sentences. According to modern linguists, the grammar or structure of no language is either favourable or unfavourable to the expression of conceptual thought. Compared with the complex grammar, now committed to writing, of the language of some American Indians, the grammar of Arabic and Persian would seem child's play. The subtlest and the most ancient philosophical thinking in the world was done in classical Chinese which is virtually a language without grammar. Verbs in the speech of the Hopi Indians do not divide time into past, present and future. While describing action, they convey the sense of times continuity as well as its relativity. Had Einstein been born into this community he would have arrived at his theory of Relativity far sooner and expounded it better. In the light of modern linguistics, it is unscientific to seek to determine the range of expressiveness of a language on the basis of its formal features.

I do not see why anyone should grieve because an English phrase cannot be exactly translated into Bengali. Who would deny that rendering a Bengali phrase in other languages is at times impossible or equally difficult? To say that the Bengali word *niti* is faulty because it has more than one meaning is naive. No word, much less an abstract word, has in any language but one meaning. The word 'principle' in English means a variety of things in different contexts: 'he held water to be the first principle of all things'; 'moral principles'; 'he has ability but no principle'; 'in all these instruments the principle is the same' etc. There are other meanings of the word which it is not necessary to illustrate.

*This article is taken from the book titled 'Contemporary Bengali Writing', which was edited by Khan Sarwar Murshid.*

**Munier Choudhury was a prominent Bangladeshi writer, playwright, and educationist.**

## The tale of Bangla College

FROM PAGE S3

Abul Quasem, an educator, served as the unpaid initial principal of the college. At the time of Bangla College's establishment, there were no Bengali textbooks available for higher studies. In order to promote Bengali as a medium of education and simplify the teaching of science, Mr. Quasem authored several Bengali Science textbooks and created more than a thousand new, easy-to-understand terms, which is a testament to his dedication and passion towards this cause.

In his book 'Amader Bhashar Roop' (The nature of our language, 1968), Abul Quasem's idea behind such an arduous effort is well-reflected, where he emphasizes that presenting knowledge and science in a simpler way makes them easier to understand. He also highlights



Principal Abul Quasem while teaching at Dhaka University, 1956. Source: 'Principal Abul Quasem o Bhasha Andolon' by Mustafa Kamal

the importance of avoiding unnecessary decorative language in books on science, as using such language can make the subject unclear and confusing, rendering the book ineffective. Science is meant to be comprehended, not just enjoyed like art and fiction. However, writers must still ensure that the language is straightforward, and the presentation is appropriate.

The establishment of 'Bangla College' was a challenging journey. In the initial years, the college principals, vice-principals, and professors had to teach without any pay. A few received minimal compensation, but most served without any remuneration. Abul Quasem, who played a significant role in the language movement, served as the college's principal for eight years without any pay. When the college authorities requested the allocation of a house from the government, the government agencies did not directly provide a suitable house. Abul Quasem searched for abandoned houses. However, the authorities rejected the college's request for a house in Dhanmondi, stating that the government had other plans for it. The college's request for a second house in Azimpur was also turned down, as it was intended



(From right to left) Principal Abul Quasem, Md Toaha, and Dr Nurul Haque Bhuiyan pictured at the historic Amtala, a memorial to the Language Movement. Source: 'Principal Abul Quasem o Bhasha Andolon' by Mustafa Kamal

to be purchased by an officer of the Agriculture Department.

After multiple unsuccessful attempts, Mr. Quasem eventually turned to his friend Abdul Mannan, who was the headmaster of Navakumar School in Bakhshi Bazar, for help. With Abdul Mannan's persuasion, the school administration agreed to allow "Bangla College" to operate as a night college in the Navakumar school building. The college officially began its activities at the Navakumar Institute in June-July 1962, and the first class was inaugurated in October of that year. The Science Department opened in the first year, followed by the Commerce and Humanities Departments in the second and third years, respectively.

Since there was no office space available in the Navakumar school building, Abul Quasem, who was the college principal, rented a furnished office on the ground floor of his apartment at 32/2 Azimpur for several years. Furnishings for the college were acquired through the help of friends, employees of the Majlis, and Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, among others. After much persuasion, the college was granted the board's consent and university affiliation. However, the university administration denied the postgraduate degree.

According to Abul Quasem's memoir, the government was appealed to purchase a suitable location for the construction of Bangla College and Bangla University. However, after several fruitless attempts to find a site in Dhaka city, the decision was made to go for a dilapidated building in the then-forested area of Mirpur. The government was requested to obtain this property, but despite opposition from Bengali officers, the highest government committee during the Pakistani era approved the acquisition request in 1964. The university was allocated approximately 12 acres of land.

Assistance was sought from Mr Ferdaus Khan, a highly regarded mentor of Mr Quasem and then-director of the education department, to pay for the land and plan for the construction of Bangla College's campus. Mr Khan's

efforts led to the government approving a significant amount of funding for the college's development. This funding was used to pay for the land in instalments and complete the construction of two floors of the main building, a portion of the dormitory, and a portion of the laboratory for the degree program. In 1969, after the partial completion of the college building, the day section was inaugurated, and classes began. B.Sc. and B.Com. classes commenced on October 4, 1969.

The establishment of Bangla College was supported by prominent newspapers of the time, such as Daily Ittefaq, Daily Azad, and Pakistan Observer. During this period, the Bengali-medium education system gained popularity and was implemented in many educational institutions.

Initially, some Bengali scholars



Foundation stone of Bangla College

strongly opposed the creation of Bangla College, arguing that students who learned through the Bengali medium would be at a disadvantage in the job market. Some even ridiculed the idea of establishing a "Bangla Maulbi." Despite this, the Bengali medium of instruction gained popularity quickly, and the performance of Bengali-medium students was quite satisfactory, with a pass rate significantly higher than that of government colleges at the time.

During the War of Liberation in 1971, the college was occupied by Pakistani forces and their non-Bengali Bihari collaborators, who replaced the college's signboard with another inscribed with "Urdu College" and closed it for the entire period of the war. After the war, the college started anew with fresh initiatives. In 1985, it was nationalized, and in 1997, Honours and Masters courses were introduced under the National University.

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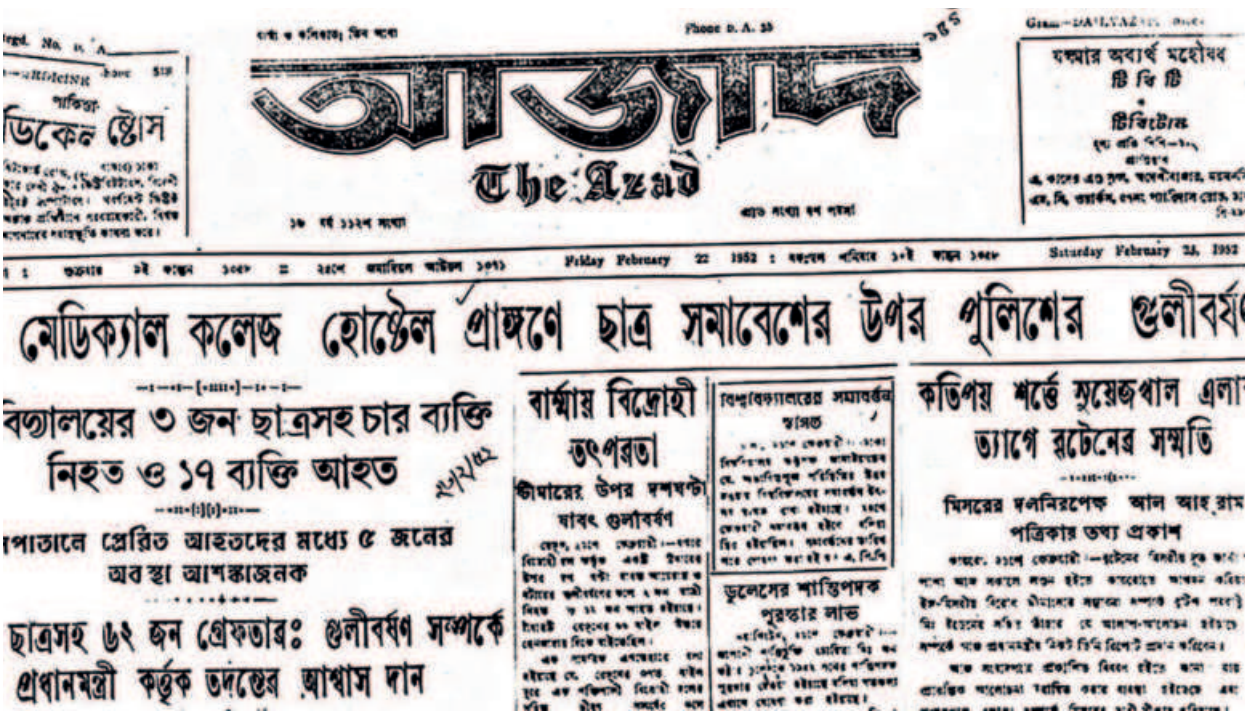
# An unexplored facet of the language movement’s historiography

**What was the role of the ordinary people, whom we call the ‘public’, in the language movement? And why did they participate in the movement on such a wide scale? If the birth of language-based nationalism is to be considered since 1952, then what was it like at the initial stage?**

AHMED KAMAL

It is February 2002, the month of the fiftieth anniversary of our language movement. The contribution and inspiration of the language movement have been enormous in many of our cultural and political achievements during the past fifty years. The seed of our language-based nationalism started to grow from the very womb of the language movement. This view has earned almost universal acceptance in the historiography of our educated middle class. On the other hand, serious debates are still raging about the leadership of the language movement from different political positions. But no such debate is visible on the importance of the people’s role. This is because, there appears to be unanimity that the task of the people is to follow the directives of the political parties or the political leadership. So where is the scope for such a debate? Debates can take place on issues such as the roles of various leaders in the movement or the accomplishments of different parties. Although these debates have not contributed much to our understanding of history, at least the names in the list of the language veterans have increased as a result. These veterans are quite well-known to us. They belong to the middle class, are university educated and overt or covert members of one or the other political party. The task of weighing them in the weighing machine of history started since 1952. Some have even resorted to fraud.

I want to discuss a neglected side of the historiography of language movement. For example, what was the role of the ordinary people, whom we call the ‘public’, in the language movement? And why did they participate in the movement on such a wide scale? If the birth of language-based nationalism is to be considered since 1952, then what was it like at the initial stage? I want to start a debate on these aspects after half a century, as much discussion on these questions could not be noticed in the past. Let us first take up the question of people’s participation. Pakistan came into being in August 1947 as desired by the people. Before a year could elapse, the first clash on the question of language took place at Palashi Barrack of Dhaka city after 11 am in the morning of 12 December 1947. When a group of around 40 people riding a bus named ‘Mukul’ started to shout slogans in favour of Urdu, someone from among the people who had assembled in front of Palashi Barrack and Ahsanullah Engineering College shouted slogan in favour of Bangla language. Reacting to this, the passengers of the bus, who were however described in the official report as hooligans, attacked the assembled people with sticks. The



Azad, 21 February 1952.

names of those injured, as found in the official records, were the first victims of repression in the language movement. They included one guard, four cooks, two students and the rest clerks of government offices. It is possible to conclude from this description about the social and economic status of those who protested and faced repression.

Next came the clashes of 21 and 22 February 1952. Let us look at the list of martyrs in those incidents. Abul Barkat was a student. Rafiquddin used to work in his father’s press. Abdul Jabbar was the owner of a small shop while Shafiqur Rahman was an employee of Dhaka High Court. Wahidullah was the son of a mason and Abdul Awal a rickshaw puller (although the latter two were claimed to have been killed by motor accident in the official records, the cause of Wahidullah’s death was mentioned as ‘bullet wounds’). Besides, the diary of Tajuddin Ahmad dated 22, 23, 24, 25 February 1952 mention about spontaneous strikes of the people. That means, strikes were observed in Dhaka and elsewhere in the province without directives from any leader or organization. The ‘Shaheed Minar’ was erected on the night of 23 February. The then student of Medical College - Sayeed Haider - who was the designer of this Minar, had mentioned that apart from two masons, many canteen boys gave hands for completing its construction. They were the core workers of that time.

An important event took place on 29 February when the Head Mistress of Narayanganj Morgan High School, Momtaz Begum was arrested for actively participating in the language movement. While a large number

of people, obstructed the police van when it approached Chashara station, she was being transported to Dhaka after her arrest. Badruddin Umar wrote that a large number of those who obstructed the police van were ‘ordinary people’ who did not have the capacity to educate their children at Morgan High School. Why did such a huge number of people resist Momtaz Begum’s arrest? The clashes with the public became so widespread after the 21st that the government was in a way forced to concede to the demand for language.

At a time when 85 percent people of East Bengal were illiterates, why did the ordinary people join this movement for language rights? What was the linkage in the unity of the illiterates and the educated middle class? And what was the level of people’s participation? This is the subject of my discussion. Was the language movement such a pure gold that there was no blight in it? Should not the drumbeat of one or two accomplishments of the ordinary people become audible amid the crescendo of glory surrounding the role played by the educated middle class? Was there any other question related to the mobilization of people in the language movement? Has any experience been preserved on this braiding in our national archives or in the experiences of the living, which contradicts the myths, especially those created after the emergence Bangladesh as a nation-state? If these questions are explored, then we can get an idea about the role of the ‘illiterate’, ‘ignorant’ and ‘superstitious’ collective called the ‘public’, their inherent nature and above all their

consciousness. Badruddin Umar, who has authored three documentary volumes on the language movement, holds the view that the way this movement spread to the villages outside Dhaka proved that a deep concordance was already established between the social, economic, political and cultural problems of the people and the language movement of 1952. Our historiography lacks a logical explanation of how this unity was achieved.

I shall only attempt to offer a preliminary explanation of how the protests by the educated middle class and the illiterate peasants and labourers were woven together. It has been proved in recent research on nationalism that in pre-capitalist societies the contradictions that exist between the state and the peasantry create space for the elite aspiring for state power to unite with the latter. This aspect should be considered seriously while exploring deeply the question of participation of the masses in the language movement.

People’s disillusionment with the food policy, market price of agricultural commodities, the behaviour of bureaucrats and the members of law enforcing agencies - especially the police - in the newly created state of Pakistan are important inputs for our discussion. We know that the cordon and levy systems introduced throughout East Bengal following food shortages after 1947-made the life of the peasants miserable. Added to this was the repression of the police and the bureaucracy. The nature of police repression would be apparent from a few statistics. On the

pretext of maintaining law and order, the police opened fire at the public 38 times in 1948, 90 times in 1949, 110 times in 1950 and 50 times in 1951. Descriptions of police-people clash during this period abounds in official records. There were reports of people-police clash even on flimsy grounds. From a news-item published in the 16 October 1947 issue of ‘Dainik Azad’, it could be gathered that around 3000 people had taken away from police 200 boats earlier seized for breaking the cordon law. Descriptions of many such incidents are found in the official documents of the period.

In 1952, the police engaged in maintaining law and order had almost lost their legitimacy among the people. On the other hand, the agricultural economy was facing a disastrous situation. Late Tajuddin Ahmad has mentioned in his diary dated 29 February 1952: “Jute price unusually went down since middle of February, from an average of 40/- P.M [per maund], top and 28/- P.M. bottom to 25/- P. md top and 15/- P. md bottom. Last year in these days any kind of jute was about 50/- per maund, upto 65/- highest in village markets”. Tajuddin Ahmad also mentioned that the middle and lower middle class peasants were seriously affected due to the wrong policies of the government. He further observed that a deep frustration pervaded the minds of the peasants from the middle of February. On the other hand, the price of rice was very high similar to the previous year. Rice was being sold at Taka 15 per maund. Tajuddin Ahmad wrote that the economic condition was disastrous. The state of the economy as described in his document and the actions of the police as evident in contemporary official documents make clearer the logic of spontaneous participation of the peasants and labourers in the movement of the educated middle class for the right of language. In such circumstances, it is not difficult to understand why the peasants and ordinary people were participants in the mobilizations of the language movement. But to appreciate the cause of unity between these two classes, the language, metaphors, imageries and heritage of protests should be comprehended properly. Above all, the nature of people’s consciousness should be understood. I hope to inaugurate this discussion on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of our language movement.

*Translated by Helal Uddin Ahmed. This article was first published in The Daily Star on February 21, 2002.*

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# The tale of Bangla College

## Pioneering the use of Bengali as a medium of higher education



Principal Abul Quasem with faculty members and first year college students of Bangla College, 1962.

HOSSAIN MUHAMMED ZAKI

On September 1, 1947, a group of students and faculty members at Dhaka University established Tamaddun Majlish, a cultural organization aimed at promoting the Bengali language. The organization addressed issues related to the status of Bengali as a state language by holding meetings and taking various initiatives. On September 15, they published a leaflet titled ‘Pakistaner Rashtia Bhasha: Bangla na Urdu’ to advocate for Bengali as the state language. Abul Quasem, a Physics professor at Dhaka University, drafted a language demand that Tamaddun Majlish published at the beginning of the book.

Principal Abul Quasem was a pivotal figure in advancing language-related matters, and his contributions played a critical role in the success of the institution, now famously known as Bangla College. In 1955, the Bangla Academy was established, as a continuation of the language movement that originated in 1952. Two years later, in 1957, the Bengali language was officially recognized,

greatly increasing its value as a medium of instruction.

Mr. Quasem was a vocal proponent of the establishment of Bangla College and spoke passionately about it at Curzon Hall on two separate occasions - February 21, 1959, and again on February 21, 1961.

During a meeting, he stated: West Pakistan has made significant progress in its efforts to make Urdu the official language and medium of instruction by establishing the Urdu College many years ago. The Government of Pakistan has provided the Urdu College with substantial funds and territory. Despite numerous efforts, we have been unable to establish a Bangla College for the purpose of introducing Bengali at all levels. The government is equally silent on this issue. If the government fails to take action, we will soon establish a Bengali institution to promote the language.

The “Bangla College Preparation Committee” was formed to make the establishment of “Bangla College” a reality. The first meeting was held on February 15, 1961, at Bangla Academy, followed by

additional sessions on February 19 and June 18 of the same year. During the meeting on February 19, Abul Quasem’s proposal for the establishment of a Bangla College in Dhaka was overwhelmingly approved. This was viewed as a crucial first step towards establishing a Bangla University. A conference was held on March 4, 1962, at the Writers’ Guild Bhavan on the grounds of Bangla Academy, paving the way for the formation of Bangla College. Most of the meetings were led by Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah and attended by notable figures such as Principal Ibrahim Khan, Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahman Khan, Poet Jasimuddin, Poet Golam Mostafa, and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin.

Dr Muhammad Shahidullah was elected as the first president of Bangla College, with Principal Ibrahim Khan serving as the general secretary. Khan Bahadur Abdur Rahman Khan (later Jagannath College Principal) was elected Vice-President, and former DPI Abdul Hakim was elected Treasurer.

# The missionaries and the evolution of the Bengali language

When questioned about the efficacy of learning Bengali, Carey answered, “Were it properly cultivated, it would be deserving a place among those which are accounted the most elegant and expressive.”

MOU BANERJEE

In his foreword to Bernard Cohn’s magisterial book *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge*, Nicholas Dirks commented that for the British, in India, “Language was to be mastered to issue commands and to collect information.” Bengal was the province where the British imperial project started to take shape after 1757, and the Fort William College was set up by Lord Wellesley in 1800, to train young British administrators in the languages of command. The Fort William College was fundamentally important in the evolution of the Bengali language, which led to the Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century, and contributed to the extraordinary political and literary revolution that defines Bengali culture to this day.

There is an important ideal that Wellesley had in mind when he set up the College, that has now been forgotten – “To maintain and uphold the Christian religion in this quarter of the globe.” All professors and lecturers had to swear an oath that they would not teach anything contrary to the Christian faith. It is not surprising then, that the Sahibs at the College were either devout Christians or missionaries or both. The most famous example of such a Sahib would be the Baptist missionary of Serampore, William Carey, known to posterity as “The Father of Modern Missions.” Carey was appointed the head of the Bengali language department at Fort William College in 1801. He soon found that though Bengali was the language of Calcutta and its hinterlands, it was a neglected language in the curriculum. Sisir Kumar Das in his book *Sahibs and Munshis*, documents the relentless battle Carey had to fight to keep Bengali language education on an equal footing with Hindustani and Farsi at the Fort William College between 1801 and 1830. When questioned about the efficacy of learning Bengali, Carey answered, “Were it properly cultivated, it would be deserving a place among those which are accounted the most elegant and expressive.” Carey, as the head of the Bengali language department at Fort William College, needed Indian teachers. He also needed to solve the problem of a lack of primers that the young civilians at the College could use to learn Bengali.

Missionaries, from Carey and the Serampore Baptists onwards,



William Carey and his pundit Mrityunjaya Bidyalankar.

understood the importance of cultivating Bengali, the language of the milieu they inhabited. For the Serampore Baptists, this led to a huge project of learning Indian languages, beginning with Sanskrit and Bengali. They began the work of writing new grammars to facilitate translations and cultivated close ties with Indian intellectuals. To disseminate this knowledge widely, Carey’s associate, the printer William Ward, set up a printing press at Serampore. The most important technician at this press was Panchanan Karmakar, who had assisted the British typographer Charles Wilkins in creating the first wooden Bengali typeface in 1778, to print the first Bengali grammar by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed. Karmakar had been lured away to Serampore by Carey and Ward, and he created another Bengali typeface for Carey’s Bengali translation of the New Testament in 1801.

This is where an interesting collaboration emerges between the

Serampore Baptist Mission and the Fort William College. If we consult Brajendranath Bandopadhyay’s list of *pundits* and *munshis* employed as Bengali language instructors at Fort William College, it becomes very clear that all of them were hired as a result of Carey’s recommendations, and they cultivated close connections with the Serampore Baptist Mission in return. Carey, in his roles both as an educator and as a missionary, needed competent linguists and translators who could help in the collection, translation and interpretation of classical Sanskrit and Bengali texts, which could be then printed and disseminated widely. His wide circle of acquaintances and associates at Fort William’s Bengali department solved his problems.

In this early flowering of the Bengali language in the print medium, we find the names of pioneering authors of Bengali texts like Mrityunjaya Bidyalankar, Ramram Basu, Goloknath Sharma, Tarinicharan Mitra,

Chandicharan Munshi, Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay, Ramkishore Tarkachuramani, Mohanprasad Thakur, Haraprasad Roy, and Kashinath Tarkapanchanan, employed at Fort William College under Carey’s supervision and a part of his patronage network. Among these authors, Mrityunjaya Bidyalankar’s translation from the Sanskrit of the *Thirty-two Thrones (Battrish Singhasan)* and his *Beneficial Advices (Hitopadesha)*, Ramram Basu’s *Garland of Alphabets (Lipi Mala)* and *The History of Pratapaditya (Pratapaditya Charitra)*, Chandicharan Munshi’s Bengali translation of the Farsi *The Parrot’s Tale (Tooti Nama)*, and Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay’s *The History of Maharaja Krishnachandra Ray of Nadia (Maharaj Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram)* are important documents.

These are not only best examples of early Bengali prose but also represent developments in Indian modes of translation-theory and an Indian historiography. Brajendranath called Mrityunjaya Bidyalankar the first “conscious artist” of the Bengali language. These literary works, used widely as pedagogical aids in Bengal at least until the 1870s, were all initially published at the Serampore Mission Press. In thirty years, only briefly interrupted by the great fire of 1812, the Serampore Mission Press printed over two hundred thousand books in more than forty Indian languages, including Bengali. Among these were the first printed versions of Krittibas’s Ramayana in five volumes and Kashiram Das’s *Mahabharata* in four volumes in 1802. Sajanikanta Das commented that all future Bengali versions of either the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* were modelled on the Serampore editions.

The missionaries inaugurated the great age of print revolution in India and helped to create a Bengali public sphere where British policies were debated by Indians. This first period of the vernacular public sphere began with Rammohan Roy’s debates with the Serampore Baptists between 1815-1820 and continued up to the ban on Sati in 1829. Many of the important teachers and officials at the Fort William College figured prominently in public sphere debates between 1810 and 1830. For example, Mrityunjaya Bidyalankar, who left Fort William College in 1816 to become the head *pundit* at the Calcutta Supreme Court, was a leading critic

of the Sati ritual. It was his written opinion in 1817, to the Chief Justice of the Sadar Dewani Adalat at Calcutta, that can be considered the first protest against this inhuman ritual by an Indian intellectual. His opinion is also the unacknowledged inspiration for the much more widely remembered pamphlets against Sati written by Rammohan Roy, published in 1818 and 1820.

Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Christian convert and one of the greatest innovators of poetic form, rhythm and meter in the Bengali language, began his linguistic experiments after a long and frustrating period of writing in English. His inventions include the epic *Meghnad Badh Kabya*, a retelling of the Krittibas *Ramayana* in the mode of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; the Bengali sonnet or *Chaturdashpadi*; as well as the *Amitrakshar Chhanda*, based on the iambic pentameter in blank verse. In his sonnet *Banga Bhasha (The Bengali Language)*, he eulogized the splendid riches of one’s *Matri bhasha*, mother tongue. Bengali, to Madhusudan, contained all the Bibidha Ratan characteristic of a highly developed language. It was a bejewelled net that could capture all human emotions and experiences and express their many varied registers in a multitude of literary forms. The evolution of Bengali from its older crude prose form of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to the highly sophisticated modern version that Madhusudan praised and that we are familiar with, happened within a span of barely half a century. It was a process that undeniably started at Fort William College. We therefore should not forget the role of visionaries like William Carey, who saw the potential of Bengali language, and fostered the network of Indian linguists and teachers who first shaped the modern Bengali language into its written forms, before it was refined further by Indian polymaths like Ishwarchandra Bidyasagar, Bankimchandra, Rabindranath, Mir Mosharraf Hossein and Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad.

Our pride and our hope, O†gv†i Mie, †gv†i AvkvO, our Bangla Bhasha, owes a great debt to Bengal’s forgotten Christian missionaries.

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# The Battle over Punthi Sahitya’s Legacy: Abdul Karim’s Perspective

An influential editor of that time mentioned that they would love to uphold the tradition of the Punthi Sahitya but with a selective approach. Only contents that reflected the virtue and heroism of Islam would be included as the heritage of Pakistan.

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad passed away in 1953, just a year after the historic language movement. That same year, he gave his final speech on Radio Pakistan in Dacca, providing an overview of the core of Punthi Sahitya, which had been the focus of his lifelong endeavours.

He provided a clear definition of Punthi Sahitya and the different types it encompassed. According to him, Punthi Sahitya referred to the literature that was not influenced by Western culture, and it was a shared heritage of both the Hindus and Muslims. However, the two communities had different approaches in their contributions to this literary tradition.

Karim divided the course of this literature into some broad categories. He found that Muslims’ works of literature were diversified, whereas Hindus’ contributions were primarily religious. Hindus had tirelessly churned out such kavyas for centuries in the forms of Ramayana, Mahabharat, Shivayan and various Mangal Kavyas where the literary motifs were mostly aimed at depicting the deeds and magnanimity of deities to achieve *Moksha* or emancipation.

Muslims also significantly participated in composing religious literature. They passionately exposted

Islam’s lessons and beauty to the native people. He said most of these texts were translations from Arabic and Persian, though these verse-makers didn’t translate them literally, rather they imaginatively used various localized metaphors and attributes in their works.

Karim posited that it was the Muslims who laid the foundation of the secular and romantic genre in Bengali literature. He said Daulat Kaji first anticipated this form, being a realist narrator. Such romantic literature often included translations from Arabic and Persian literary compositions, but the Bengali Muslim authors transformed these human stories into almost original through imagination and fantasy. Karim named a few famous medieval poets who wrote both secular and religious forms of literature, like Magon Thakur, Alaol, Abdul Hakim, Sabirid Khan, and so forth.

Besides the religious and secular-romantic genres, Karim stated that the mystic and ethereal form was another characteristic of Punthi Sahitya. This form was greatly influenced by the Sufism of Iran, Vaishnavism of Bengal, and the literature of Hindu Yoga. He observed that this form of composite literature emphasised the inner mind that transcends boundaries. Most of the saints in this land did not place much

significance on the ritualistic aspects of religion, but rather highlighted the inner state of religion.

In the wake of Pakistan’s establishment, Abdul Karim’s lifelong pursuit of retrieving and deciphering the old specimens of Bengali literature was challenged by a section of Pakistani intellectuals striving to mold a version of Bengali language history that aligns with Pakistan’s state ideology.

An influential editor of that time mentioned that they would love to uphold the tradition of the Punthi Sahitya but with a selective approach. Only contents that reflected the virtue and heroism of Islam would be included as the heritage of Pakistan. He emphasised the need to sanitise the entire Punthi Sahitya heritage by purging it of Hindu elements, even at the cost of sacrificing the composite nature of Bengali literature.

The editor added that the influence of Vaishnavism among Bengali Muslims had been the root of their decadence. It isn’t clear what he meant by attributing Bengali Muslim ‘decadence’ to Vaishnava influence. But one could imagine that he drew an assumption from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who – in his attempt to invent nationalism in India – had made an ideal type of Sree Krishna, aligned with heroism and statesmanship, unlike the (Gaudiya) Vaishnava version



of Sree Krishna, who is depicted as more affectionate and lovable.

It’s interesting to note that the Pakistani editor employed the same logic as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay when trying to establish the literary roots of Pakistan. This editor sought to exclude the composite heritage of ancient Bengali literature, as nationalism often picks and chooses certain forms of inheritance to

construct its legacy.

The origin of Vaishnavism in Bengal is a contested topic. Pramatha Choudhury wrote in 1931 in the Monthly Prabasi that Vaishnavism in Bengal developed as a response to Islam in India and that the creed of Islam considerably influenced it. Arguably, Choudhury’s position is the opposite to that of the Pakistani editor, but jingoism leaves no room for multiple interpretations or opposing viewpoints. Thus, that brilliant editor attempted to disown the entire course of ancient Bengali literature while simultaneously narrowing the scope of Bengali literature into one selective channel.

Abdul Karim was well aware of the limitations of nationalistic thought in fashioning a ‘Pakistani language’. He had discovered many Punthihs that made him confident to think differently. In 1950, just three years after the partition of Bengal, he wrote that a broader perspective was needed to discuss Bengali Punthihs. It would be foolish to limit the scale. He argued that ‘as the aspects of knowledge are vast, similarly, literature doesn’t have borders. Racism is impossible in literature.’

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