



Dr Md Shahidullah.

VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

# Dr Shahidullah's thoughts on India and Pakistan's language problem

**In 1920 at Shantiniketan, Shahidullah delivered an insightful lecture where Rabindranath Tagore presided over the event. The problem of Indian languages was the central theme of his lecture: he pointed out that overcoming the limits of being "many races" was needed for the Indian nation.**

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Even before the partition of India, the question of language was an issue of debate, which eventually turned into an acute dilemma for both Pakistan and India. Against this backdrop, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah actively delved into the discussion of language, a key component of state formation and mechanism. His intervention in this subject, to this day, remains remarkable.

It is a well-known fact that when Dr Ziauddin Ahmad, the former vice chancellor of Aligarh University, proposed Urdu as the state language for Pakistan in July 1947, Shahidullah instantly protested. At that time, Shahidullah was serving as the principal of Bogra Azizul Haque College after retiring from Dhaka University in 1944. It was not as such that he was against Urdu in his famous article of 1947, when Pakistan was yet to turn into an independent state, but rather his position was against assigning Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan.

He argued it would be a mere

replication of India, as Congress was pushing for Hindi as the only state language. He posited that Dr Ziauddin's cherished dream of Urdu being ensured and secured for the medium of instruction in learning, neglecting regional languages, is not only unscientific but would surely be a move that contradicts with the spirit of provincial autonomy and right of self-determination.

Shahidullah additionally stated that Urdu was not a vernacular language in any province of Pakistan like English, although the colonial master of England would be insignificant in independent Pakistan. Nonetheless, English would continue to remain important as it is an international language, containing the expressions of speculative thinking and scientific experiments. Thus, he suggested that it would be a wise decision for English to be made a state language both in India and Pakistan. Moreover, he argued for Bangla, as it had already garnered global recognition as a literary language, citing the sizable Bangla-speaking community, which ranks as the seventh

largest in the world.

Shahidullah highlighted that if any language is to be made the second state language of Pakistan, after Bangla, it could be Urdu. Additionally, he mentioned the example of placing multiple languages like what Canada, Belgium, or Switzerland have done, not entertaining any single one as the state language.

In 1920 at Shantiniketan, Shahidullah delivered an insightful lecture where Rabindranath Tagore presided over the event. The problem of Indian languages was the central theme of his lecture: he pointed out that overcoming the limits of being "many races" was needed for the Indian nation. He extensively discussed that the strength of any language mainly depends on state patronisation, religion, literature, and business. The penetration of English in this subcontinent was seen to be too overwhelming due to the sponsorship of the British emperor. Furthermore, English gained its international acceptance as a medium of critical thinking for a long while. Besides, he

mentioned that English proved its strength through businesses.

Except in the realm of religion, Shahidullah hinted English vehemently entered every sphere of the educated minds, encompassing literary imagination and political aspirations as well. Needless to mention, Sanskrit and Arabic achieved the esteem of religious languages by Hindus and Muslims. Subsequently, he spoke about Bangla, which emerged in the Buddhist period, received patronisation from the Muslim rulers, and developed as a great literary language in the British colonial time.

However, he mentioned that most people remained illiterate in the last phase of colonial times, thus the challenge of learning any other language had been so acute. Therefore, he was examining the potential of all the languages of India to become the most common language, which would not replace or dominate any other regional language and rather would work as a common lingua franca.

Hindustani was one of the most colloquial languages, but

unfortunately, it witnessed a separation through its Hindu and Muslim users, as Hindi and Urdu emerged following the adoption of different scripts and the power of borrowing vocabularies. He argued that initially, the breach between these two groups appeared negotiable. However, the rivalries between them escalated to a point of no return, extinguishing any lingering ray of hope for reconciliation.

Nevertheless, according to Shahidullah, if English, as a foreign language, was not granted to take the role of the common language in this continent, Urdu undoubtedly had more prospects of becoming the common language of India. After Urdu, he deemed Bangla to be the next, while Hindi remained later on the list. Paradoxically, Shahidullah, one of the most renowned linguists in both India and Pakistan, opined Bangla should be given the first priority to become the state language of Pakistan despite Urdu existing as the most common language of undivided India.

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## Ekushey February during the Pakistan period

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In their editorial commentaries, newspapers like Ittefaq and Sangbad sometimes juxtaposed the self-aggrandising and ambivalent nature of contemporary Bangla politicians with the courage and ultimate sacrifice of the martyrs of February 21.

Pakistani nationalists and the dailies that adhered to the government line, too, commemorated the day with due importance. It will not be irrelevant to mention that such dailies usually portrayed the establishment of Bangla as an official language of Pakistan as concomitant to the establishment of Pakistan. They also put emphasis on the importance of creating a different Bangla than West Bengal. During the autocratic rule

of Ayub Khan, the question of establishing the honour of the mother tongue Bangla and implementation of Bangla in every sphere of life became a trope in the commemoration of the Language Movement in the 1960s. Professor Anisuzzaman, in an essay written in the mid-1960s, mentioned that one aspect of the Language Movement had been realised, but the spirit needed to be carried on.

The last three occasions of February 21 under united Pakistan were especially significant in honing the spirit of protest and defiance. The Shaheed Dibosh or Amar Ekushey of 1969 was celebrated amid the anti-Ayub mass movements in East Pakistan, breaking all government prohibitions. The provincial capital saw hundreds of thousands of people

marching towards the Shaheed Minar. Shamsur Rahman in his poem "February 1969" wrote about people from every walk of life came to the Shaheed Minar:

I am a weary farmer from the distant Palash Toli,

Like a worn out canvas from the medieval era,

I am a boatman in the River Meghna, the constant companion of monsoon clouds and stormy winds,

I am a labourer in the jute mill,

I am the pupil of the eyes of the deceased Ramakanto Kamar,

I am the melancholy potter of the paved yard,

A silent witness to the desolation of the

nearly abandoned village,

I am a weaver without a loom ... weaving thick and intricate fabrics,

Blending friendship in the rhythm of the loom,

I am a pitiful clerk of the revenue office, snubbed and burdened with too many dependents

I am a student, a bright youth, I am a budding writer of modern times.

Not only in Dhaka, but also in all other cities, towns, and the countryside, the scenes were reminiscent of February 21, 1969. February 1971 came after the devastating cyclone and the Awami League's victory in the 1970 elections, amid widespread deep-seated rumours and suspicions about the military's willingness to

hand over power to the Bangalees.

On February 21, 1971, throughout East Pakistan, from early morning onwards, people started pouring into the Shaheed Minar. Streets, alleys, and by-lanes all became flooded with people raising slogans and singing protest songs, along with Amar Sonar Bangla, the soon-to-be national anthem of Bangladesh. Alongside these activities, people were also collecting funds for the cyclone-affected people of southern Bengal. The day was observed with renewed pledges for upholding the spirit of sacrifice and struggle.

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