

THE LINGUISTIC DEBATES IN BANGLADESH THROUGHOUT HISTORY: A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the paper depicts discussions about languages in Bangladesh from the Mughal Period to the present day. For linguistics and human rights, the government's policies, legislation, and activities relating to language policy in Bangladesh have been criticised. With historical references, the discussions among Bangladeshis over various language concerns are described. The report also attempts to investigate historical arguments concerning foreign language education in Bangladesh among various socio-political and community groups. It also sharply criticises political decisions on linguistic issues, as well as their socio-political consequences. Furthermore, the paper emphasises the importance of creating a democratic language policy in Bangladesh that reflects linguistic human rights.

Keywords: Language in the Mughal Period, Language in the British Period, Language in Pakistan Period, Language in Bangladesh Period, Language rights for Indigenous people, language debate, Linguistic human rights

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

INTRODUCTION

The debate over languages in Bangladesh has been going on since ancient times. Conflicts, movements and intense multi-faceted geopolitical debates over language have taken place in this geo-political land called Bangladesh before and after independence. During the Mughal period, Persian was used as the official language in present day Bangladesh. When English education was promoted in this country during the British rule, there was indecision, psychological and socio-political diversity and debates among the people of this country about English language education, which has existed since independence.

The Bengali nation has never been able to agree on any specific language policy. On the contrary, political self-analysis, selfishness, and dilemmas were constantly present in them. In the formulation of language policy, the interests of the nation have always been influenced by political interests.

Language Policy And Debates During The Mughal Period (1202-1757)

The Bengali region was ruled for a long time by foreign Muslim rulers. All these Muslims had no blood or linguistic resemblance with the rulers (Mughal rulers) or with the people of Bengal. As a result, they brought a new language and royal power. The Mughal rulers declared and used Persian as their official language instead of their mother tongue, Turkish. It is noteworthy that during the Mughal period, most of those who adopted Persian for constitutional needs were Hindus (traditional religion). Although the Hindus of India had learned Persian well for employment, they had not given up their native languages in any way. On the other hand, the

separatist Muslims adopted the Persian alphabet for their own needs and created a mixed language called Urdu in combination with the Indian languages. (Sofa, 1977/1981, pp. 23-24). As a result, in the eyes of a large section of Bengali Muslims, Persian and Urdu were regarded as sacred as Arabic. In addition, since both were the official language and the language of the ruling class, the respect and devotion they inspired to increase manifold. As a result, during the Mughal period, those who tried to compose literature in Bengali had to endure social disgrace and condemnation. Abdul Hakim (1620-1690), one of the most important Bengali poets of the time, wrote, 'He who was born in Bengal condemned the Bengali language, I insulted them, and thus I doubted in their identity.' (Khuda, 2019). Therefore, it is clear that the debate over language was clearly present in Bengali even in Mughal times. At that time, Bengali Muslims were trying to learn Arabic, Persian and Urdu according to their apparent ability. These three languages were respected socially and in usage. On the other hand, although they used Bangla, it was not socially and practically respectable at all.

Joshua Fishman (1967) presented diglossia to apply to situations where historically unrelated languages were used together, a prestige language for H, a colloquial one for L. He proposed that there might be more than two language varieties used within a diglossia community. For example, in Fisman usage, even multilingual countries such as Nigeria, where English functions as a national wide prestige language, which is learnt in school, and local languages Hausa and Yoruba are spoken natively, are described as being diglossic. (Fishman, 1967) (Kyriakou, 2019) (Simanjuntak, Haidir, Junaidi, & Pujiono, 2019). (STEPKOWSKA, 2012)

This Bangladesh was definitely a multilingual and diglossia country during in the time, according to Fishman and Diglossia. Arabic, Persian, and Urdu were the languages of education and employment, and all three were largely considered respectable. Local Bengali, on the other hand, was a generalised less prestigious language. Bangladesh was a Diglossia country about a half-thousand year ago, based on this. Bengali linguists, on the other hand, did not even say or want to proclaim this explicitly there at all.

Some scholars claim that the Bengali language and literature developed during the reign of the Muslim sultans because the Mughal sultans contributed in the language's development. In this regard, Syed Solayman Nadvi said,

'The Hindu kings' following the Muslim sultans and emirs sparked an interest in promoting Bengali language writers and granting Bengali literature devotees a position in the court. Ever since, numerous writers and scholars have been honoured and supported in the court of Bengali kings, encouraging them to devote their lives to the service of the Bengali language. (Nodbi, 1958, pp. 34-35)

However, many Bengali scholars oppose this view. According to them, the Mughal sultans had no state role in the development of the Bangla language. They contend that 1) there were not more than six patrons of Bengali literature among Muslim sultans and their followers during the nearly 600 years of Muslim rule in Bangladesh. 2) In the Middle Ages, not only in Bengal, but in all the provinces of India - even in those countries where there was no Muslim domination and no mention of the patronage of the Sultans, the local dialect was developed into a literary language. (Majumder, 1987, p. 333)

The socio-cultural-political conflict over language at that time led to the dilemma and social tension of the Bengali-speaking people. Moreover, this language debate has been going on since then.

Language policy and debates during the English Rule (1757-1947):

Rabindranath Tagore (181-1941), a Nobel Laureate in the Bengali Language and a renowned Bengali personality, emphasised the importance of learning in one's mother tongue (Bengali) in order to develop one's own talents. That is why in 1918, he told Michael Sadler, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, for the betterment of the University of Calcutta. (International Mother Language Day 2020: English is compulsory but Bengali is essential, 2020)

Despite being one of the leading writers, reformers and developers of the Bengali language, Rabindranath wanted to make English one of the primary languages for children. This is because he also employs several foreign teachers to teach English at the university he founded, Visva-Bharati University. He is also the author of several English grammar books.

To clarify this point, we can take the example of Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay (1890-1977), academic, linguist and writer. In the essay 'Bengali Language Context', he said that apart from teaching the mother tongue to students, English education must also be taught well. If children are given the opportunity to learn various sciences through their mother tongue, as their educational burden becomes lighter, they will be able to devote more time and energy to English language education. In other words, mother tongue should have priority in education. It is clear from his statement that he placed more emphasis on improving English education. In addition, he tried to find out how students could devote their thoughts and work to English lessons. For example, in those days, Bengali teachers gave more books that are English to school students, but fewer Bengali books. (Ahmed, 2013, p. 17)

Rabindranath Tagore and Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay were both influential Bengali scholars of the English period. Nevertheless, they did not think that modern education could be taught only in the mother tongue except English. According to him, modern education in any way was dependent on English. Therefore, they did not withhold on the students to teach English.

Besides, some claim that the British rulers played a major role in the development of the Bengali language during their rule. For example, the first Bengali grammar was composed in 1778 named 'A Grammar of the Bengali Language' by Nathaniel Brassey Hallhead, The first Bengali monthly journal, Digdarshan, was published in 1818 by Clark Marshman. In May 1818, he also published the first Bengali newspaper, Samachar Darpan. (Anisuzzaman, 1969, pp. 21-22).

Most of the time during British rule, the relations between the people of East Bengal (Bangladesh) and the British fluctuated. If we analyze the autobiographies of the people of that time, we will see that at times, they were extremely grateful to the English, and later they became rebels. (Ahmed, 2013, p. 17)

After the establishment of the Bengal Muslim League, a section of the Muslims of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) considered the British to be the only hope of the Muslims. All the letters and official documents of the Muslim organisation Anjuman-e-Islam were made and documented in English. (Ahmed, 2013, pp. 52-61)

Language policy and debates in Pakistan (1947-1971):

In Bangladesh (Former, East Pakistan), there was direct political conflict and language clashes in the early Pakistani period. The struggle to introduce Bengali as the state language at all levels began in 1947. There was also controversy among people in the region about the official language of East Pakistan. Since the people of the region had long used Urdu as one of the sacred languages, and because Urdu was the language of the rich and educated people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), a request from some people of the region was to keep Urdu as the language of instruction, official or educational facilities. Apparently, Urdu was the language of East Bengal politicians and leaders. Examples include Mohammad Akram, Maulana Moniruzzaman, and Maulana Azad. (Ahmed, 2013)

On the other hand, most of the population of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was formed through various cultural movements, starting with the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement strengthened especially during the Bengal period (1906). At that time, in order to strengthen the Bengali language as a means of unification or unity between the two Bengali-Speaking communities, both Bengali (East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh and West Bengal) tried to create awareness of cultural linguistics and literature. The remnants and consequences that were existed among people in parts of Bangladesh, it was continuing even after the formation of Pakistan (1947).

The language movement in East Pakistan began with after a speech of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 1st Governor-General of Pakistan, in Dhaka in 1948 in which he proposed Urdu as the state language of Pakistan (East Pakistan / Bangladesh and West Pakistan/Pakistan). He is commonly known in Pakistan as Quaid-e-Azam (Great Leader) and Baba-e-Qaum (Father of the Nation). The speech was followed by protests from some sections of the city-centric cultural movement in the region of East Pakistan. When a cultural movement was formed to make Bengali the state language of Pakistan, the politicians of the region tried to use it as a political weapon against the central government. As a result, the language movement is no longer cultural. Rather, it becomes a political movement, occupied by politicians.

As a result, although the movement and experience of the language movement created a sense of independence politically among the people of Bangladesh but it did not make any visible contribution to the development of the Bengali language. In addition, Bangladesh (East Pakistan) had no role to play in the development of Bengali language and literature. Therefore, it can be said that the language movement in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) was mainly a political movement, with which the development, propagation and reproduction of Bengali language was not visible.

The debate over language has always been intense in Bangladesh. The people of this region have never had a universal language consciousness or language policy. For example, not all people in the region supported the language movement. Nor did they all wanted to make Bengali the state language or medium of instruction. To give more examples, one of the most influential Nawabs of Bengal, Nawab Abdul Latif, proposed Urdu as a medium of education. AK Fazlul Haque, the Chief Minister of Bengal and one of the most influential politicians of East Bengal (Bangladesh), proposed Urdu as a medium of education for the people of the region. Although the language movement was organised in Dhaka, the local residents of Dhaka

opposed the language movement for a long time. (Sofa, 1977/1981, p. 25). They supported making Urdu the state language instead of Bengali. Therefore, the debate on language in Bangladesh has existed all the time.

Language policy and debates in Independent Bangladesh (1971- present):

However, according to some, the first seeds of the East Pakistan independence movement were sown through the language movement. Even after the formation of the independent state of Bangladesh after 1971, the debate on language is still going on. The reason for this is the failure to formulate a just language policy and the development of extreme nationalism after independence. Therefore, Linguistics human rights was absent in policy-making. People from different ethnic groups live in Bangladesh. After the independence in 1971, a number of people thought that the use of English in this subcontinent is a legacy of colonialism. (Ahmed K. M., 2019). Some scholars thought that being a part of the Indian Subcontinent, it has seen dramatic developments of English as the language of the dominators, rulers, oppressors and the decision makers (Akteruzzaman & Islam, 2017). However, so, they patronized only Bengali language as state language in constitution. Article 3 of the 1972 constitution (the first constitution of independent Bangladesh) clearly states, ' Bangla is the state language of the republic'. (The state language of the Republic is Bangla.) (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh: Act No. of 1972). This article of the constitution is clearly a threat to the language rights of people belonging to different language groups, races, and tribal or indigenous language groups in this country. A state cannot belong to a language logically and technically. As the state has no power to speak physically. Determining the state language means extreme nationalism, influencing racism as well. Here, in the article of the constitution in Bangladesh, instead of 'state language', if the word 'official language' were mentioned, it would have shown respect to people of other language groups. Therefore, this article of the constitution of Bangladesh has undoubtedly set an example of state language-socialism. As a result, the debate regarding language was started in the beginning of independent Bangladesh with the drafting of the constitution. Therefore, the status of language in the constitution of Bangladesh violates the linguistic human rights of mass people as well as indigenous people in Bangladesh. Besides, linguistic tension toward different races and tribal or indigenous linguistics groups were also created. They were lagging behind in education, work and social benefits. Mentally, indigenous people began to feel like second-class citizens for language policy in constitution. According to survey, more than 3 million indigenous people in Bangladesh have developed indigenous languages. (Hajong, 2019) The indigenous people of Bangladesh are forced to learn Bengali for academic and professional purposes. Language shifts are created within the tribes or indigenous citizens under constitutional pressure and obligation. Which threatens their cultural development and language development. (Chakma, 2014) (Hajong, 2019) There are about 36 different languages in Bangladesh in about 45 different ethnic groups or indigenous communities (Sujon, 2013). In Bangladesh, on the other hand, 54 indigenous groups have different and diverse cultures. An anthropological scientific investigation found 41 indigenous languages in Bangladesh (Hajong, 2019). However, in Bangladesh, many languages are constantly being lost for the above reasons. (Sikder, 2019)

On 8 May 1974, the government passed a law using Bengali only for all public works in the state. The Prime Minister has been pleased to order that, hence forth, all forms and stationery to be used in the Ministries and Departments shall be printed in Bengali only (Babaco, p. 13). Subsequently, on January 24, 1979, the law on the use of Bengali language in all levels of office courts was introduced in Bangladesh (Memorandum-No-ED (AD-2) -258 / 78-102 (300)). (Babaco, pp. 3-4) The special aspects of this law are summarized as follows:

- (A) The use of the Bengali language as a whole in administrative work is ensured.
- (B) To create Bengali terminology for the introduction of Bengali at all levels of national life.
- (C) Numerous letters, instructions, forms, etc., used in the work of the office court. We have to create the style of what will be the Bengali look.
- (D) Preparation of textbooks in Bengali.
- (E) The ambassador or the head/leader of the delegation abroad speaks Bengali.
- (F) To give more importance to the English language in every school, college, and university for the sake of the dignity of the Bengali language. Bengali should be used everywhere in government work except where English is not used.
- (G) The system of learning Bengali for foreigners should also be strengthened.
- (H) Train qualified translators and interpreters.
- (I) All government, semi-government and autonomous offices are required to implement the above decisions immediately.

Although the use of Bengali language in this law is urged at all levels, there remains controversy. It is not stated here what will be the standard form in Bengali. The big question is which of the two forms, 'Sadhu Riti' (Chaste language/ elegant form/ Sadhu Bhasa or chaste language, is an old written form of the Bangla language) and 'Chalit Riti' (Colloquial Bengali), will be used for official purposes. `Colloquial language is now in common currency. While Sadhu Bhasa is literary, Chalita Bhasa is the language of daily use` (en.banglapedia.org). According to traditional grammatical principles, the combination of these two forms is regarded as grammatically mistake. Moreover, even though these two are considered as standard forms, the issue of regional languages becomes another big question. Because it goes without saying that, there is no standard Bengali user among the people of Bangladesh. There are hundreds of regional languages (dialects) in this country. As a result, in a country where there are many dialects of the same language or the same language group, regional language management and policy have never been adopted. As a result, problems still exist between the so-called standard Bengali and numerous regional language groups. The main responsibility of the state was to respect, preserve and use the language of the people of each regional language group, which was never done. As a result, this law did not carry much importance in the language thinking of the common people. Later on May 3, 1979, His Excellency the President again directed that from now on all the notes, summaries or proposals presented to him should be in Bengali; otherwise, he would not accept them. (No. 1/46/79-General-1143 (43)) (Babaco, p. 5)

Then on December 26, 1989, the Government of Bangladesh passed a law stating that a meeting of the Committee of Secretaries on the Use of Bengali Language in the Office Court held on 31-3-69 decided that all the work of the Office Court should be done in Bengali. (Babaco, p. 7) | Through this Act, between the two so-called standard 'Sadhu' and 'Chalit' styles of standard

Bengali, the government declared the 'Sadhu Riti' (elegant form) to be acceptable and the Chalit (Standard Colloquial Bengali) Bengali language to be rejected. This officially created a diglossia situation in the country. Ferguson (1959) stated that Diglossic languages have one variety that is used for 'high' (formal, literacy) purposes. The H-Variety has the most prestige. Conversely, L-Variety is used for informal, mostly spoken purposes, lacks prestige, may be seen as 'vulgar'. (Ferguson, 1959) (Kyriakou, 2019, p. 335) (STEPKOWSKA, 2012, pp. 200-201). Following this theory by Ferguson, in Bangladesh, the 'Sadhu' form of the Bengali language gets high status and the common form (Chalit) is given low status. In this way, Bengali language became a diglossia language in Bangladesh. In addition, this creates an intense linguistic controversy in Bangladesh.

People are disregarding these laws, as they do not have the right to speak the language of the common people. Bangladesh as a state does not acknowledge the regional or tribal/ indigenous languages as acceptable, and has not conducted any kind of language survey on the language usage of the people. Ignorance of people on the language law in Bangladesh was acknowledged by the state itself on February 12, 1984. It said, "Since the establishment of Bangladesh, the Heads of State and Government have repeatedly issued orders for the introduction of Bengali in all levels of government work." This order has been partially enforced somewhere, but not anywhere. This caused outrage among the people, and despite full goodwill, the government faced unwelcome criticism. (Reference No-Sapam (Babaco).-57/83-40(500)) (Babaco, p. 19)

Then in the same year, on March 8, 1987, the government promulgated the Bengali Language Act, 1976. So that it has been said, '(1) After the introduction of this Act, documents and correspondence, questions and answers of the court of law and other legal functions must be written in Bengali in all areas of Bangladesh except by government offices, courts, semi-government, autonomous bodies except in foreign countries. . (2) If any person applies or appeals in any language other than Bengali in the workplace mentioned in sub-section 3 (1), it shall be deemed illegal and invalid. (Babaco, p. 1)

Instead, on July 29, 1987, the government again issued a new ordinance, 'Bangla Language Introduction Act, 1987'. However, proposals are being received from some ministries for the permission of this ministry for promulgating laws / rules in English. (Babaco, p. 2)

It is clear that the people did not consider the use of the Bengali language useful at all levels. Because, this so-called standard Bengali is not the language of the common people, rather it was considered insulting to their mother tongue (regional languages). Declaring only standard Bengali as the state language except all the regional language groups of the state made Bangladesh a diglossia country.

Article 23 of the Constitution states, "The State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture." (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (ACT NO. OF 1972))

Here, the state constitutionally assumes responsibility for the upbringing and development of only the national language (Bengali-Sadhu), but deprives other ethnic groups, regional languages, and indigenous languages of their language rights.

At a meeting on 28 May 1996, a letter from the National Board of Revenue regarding the use of the Bengali language in the office-court was discussed in detail. Although the first and third meetings of the Committee of Secretaries decided to use Sadhu language in the office-court, the then Secretary Mr. Fayez Uddin Ahmed raised the issue again in his discussion with the then Minister on 20-2-1980 and the Minister agreed to use both. The matter was directed to be presented at the meeting of the Secretary Committee. At this meeting, a thorough decision was taken after a thorough review. (Babaco, p. 8)

This state law on the use of Bengali language repealed the 1979 law on the use of 'Sadhu bhasha' style. Moreover, through it, the official use of both 'Sadhu' and 'Chalit' varieties of Bengali language were officially permitted. It is to be noted that the policy of the use of Bengali language in the state law in Bangladesh or the policy on any type of language is acceptable etc. did not reflect the attitude of the people of this country. On the contrary, attempts have been made to regulate and artificially use language in Bangladesh through the state apparatus. As a result, people of different races and languages have been repeatedly deprived of their language rights. Any anthropological language survey has not been done in Bangladesh yet. No government has taken any strong initiative to ensure the use of Bengali language at all levels including administration, state management, expansion of education and technology, language development and establishment of language rights and dignity of the hill people. (Islam S., 2017)

Although various laws have been passed for the use of Bengali language in Bangladesh, no visible role has ever been seen in language development, language democratization, language development, language modernization and language reproduction. As a result, the usefulness of using the Bengali language in practical fields was not created. In the case of law, science and technology, the vocabulary of this language is also limited, and its use is obsolete. For example, a court ruling on the use of the Bengali language was passed long ago.

According to the Bengali Language Introduction Act, 1987:

(1) After the commencement of this Act, except in the case of foreign relations, in all other cases records and correspondences, laws, proceedings in court and other legal actions shall necessarily be written in Bengali, by Government offices, courts, half-official and autonomous institutions everywhere in Bangladesh.

(2) If any person puts forward an appeal or petition at any of the institutions mentioned in subsection 3 (1), in any other language than Bengali, it will be considered as illegal.

(3) If any manager or civil servant ignores this Act, he shall be considered to have behaved in an unbecoming way under the Civil Servant Order and Appeal Rules, and steps may be taken against him according to the Civil Servant Order and Appeal Rules. (Act No.2 of 1987)

The Bengali Language Implementation Act of 1987 instructs all the courts in Bangladesh to use only Bengali as their official or working language. However, the use of Bengali language in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has not been effective yet. Lack of legal terminology in Bangla is one of the reasons given for not using Bangla in court. (Islam, 2019) (Ferdousi N., 2017) (Ferdousi, Bengali language situation in the judicial system in Bangladesh, 2009), (Ahmed K. M., 2019). This demonstrates that until the Bengali language can be reformed into the democratic language, it is impossible to make meaningful use and preservation of any

language through law. All national language communities should have their linguistic diversity officially recognized. In the thoughts and beliefs of the people of Bangladesh, Bengali language was always a second-class language. In independent Bangladesh (present since 1971), the English language is considered the language of civilization, science, and respect. Moreover, the regional languages are the language of the love of their soul, the language of the mother. As a result, the so-called standard Bangla language never took a place in their eyes. The people of Bangladesh who have the ability to use the language independently feel comfortable and honoured to use enough English. On the other hand, the people of Bangladesh are personally proud to use regional languages (dialects). As a result, regional languages are predominant in dramas, movies, publicity, and literature in this country. However, the state has always discriminated against all these regional languages. As a result, the so-called standard Bengali language introduction law has to be passed repeatedly in Bangladesh. 'On 17 February 2014, the High Court Division has issued a rule to take measures for implementing and ensuring the use of Bengali language everywhere, including signboards, banners, electronic media advertisements, nameplates, and vehicle number plates, within 15 May 2014' (Ferdousi, How far the use of 'Bangla' in the Court of Bangladesh?, 2017).

In Bangladesh, the Civil Service (Examination for Age, Eligibility and Direct Recruitment) Rule 21, 2014, under the heading 'Language in answering the test', states 'They (Exam authority) will prepare the same question paper in Bengali as well as English for the BCS examination (36th BCS), and they have not taken this step to make the students interested in BCS through the English medium and because they have a shortage of English skilled manpower in administration. (Chowdhury, 2017). After passing this law, it indirectly acknowledged the dependence of English in Bangladesh. Besides, it was proved to the people that universal use of the Bangla language in administration and official work is not possible.

There are three different education systems in Bangladesh. One is English medium, one is Arabic medium, and the rest is secondary level. (Babla, 2017). Under the Private University Act-1992, private universities in Bangladesh have adopted English as their Medium of Instruction. (Rahman, Singh, & Karim, 2020) (Datta, 2016) (Islam M. M., 2013) (Hamid, Jahan, & Monjurul, 2013) (Ahmed M. K., 2020) (Rahman M.). The use of English as a medium of instruction in all Bangladeshi public universities presently contradicts the earlier 'Bengali Implementation Act.' As a result, it is apparent that Bangladesh could not able to establish a long-term language policy.

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that languages in Bangladesh are an issue of sociopolitical debate in different periods of time and political regime. In academic, professional, and political factors, the people of Bangladesh are constantly in indices of confusion and sociopolitical tension over language. Language conflicts in Bangladesh are mixed with political motivation and targeted for political achievement. The constitution and laws related to language in Bangladesh do not reflect the demands of common people as well as indigenous citizens. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Bangladesh is a diglossia country to a large extent. People's linguistic debates and approaches are changing dramatically in the age of globalization.

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