

## **Legal and political intervention on language issues in Bangladesh: A sociolinguistic perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article outlined the legal and political intervention on language issues in Bangladesh from a historical sociolinguistic perspective. More specifically, it chronologically criticised the constitution and laws issued regarding language for the time being by state holders. In his article, the author tried to present the current issue and the question of language policy and planning in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it showed the drawbacks of previous language acts in Bangladesh. Consequently, the article illustrates the contextual interplay between language policy and linguistic rights in Bangladesh. This article used data from primary sources (constitution and government orders, ordinances, and circulations, etc.) to draw some preliminary conclusions about the challenges involved in the language controversy. One of its central themes was the linguistic rights of ethnic people, minor communities, and indigenous language speakers respectively. This article investigated how state politics and language historically affected each other. The analytical framework of the article is built on Language Education Policy (LEP) as a conceptual framework of Baldauf and Ingram (2003) which is one of the most widely researched theoretical perspectives in language policy and planning. The findings confirmed linguistic hegemony and dominance in Bangladesh by constitution and law. The most important contribution of the article was the sociolinguistic overview of the significant language laws of Bangladesh chronologically. It provided recommendations on the development of democratic language policy in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** *Language in the Mughal period; Language in the British period; Language in the Pakistan period; Language in the Bangladesh period; Language rights for indigenous people; Language debate; Linguistic rights.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language debates in Bangladesh have existed since ancient times. There have been conflicts, movements and intense multi-faceted geopolitical debates

over language in Bangladesh. During the Mughal period, Persian was the official language of today's Bangladesh. There was uncertainty, psychological and socio-political

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diversity and a debate between the people of this country about the medium of education and officious language in Bangladesh.

The Bengali nation was never able to reach an agreement on a sustainable and people-oriented language policy. However, there was constantly political self-analysis, selfishness, and dilemmas among them. In formulating language policies, national interests have always been influenced by political interests.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study was based on a conceptual framework of Baldauf and Ingram's (2003) Language Education Policy (LEP) which allows the researcher to focus on education, society, politics, or even the environment to realize the connections between once seemingly disparate elements. According to Harrison (2013), LEP deals with language in education policy, which is inevitably entrenched in matters of non-dominant actors ('minority'), including multiculturalism, inclusion/exclusion in curriculum, knowledge construction, societal domains, economic disparities, land and resource ownership/management, and so on.

The framework is useful for interpreting conclusions based on secondary data collected from internal sources (constitutions, legal

orders, and political declarations) and external sources (scholarly publications).

Secondary data analysis denotes the analysis of data collected by someone else in the broadest sense (Boslaugh, 2007). To search peer-reviewed articles, a systematic search was conducted in SCOPUS and Google Scholar, filtered by different years with relevant keywords (e.g. 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 rights, etc.).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Language policy and debates during the Mughal period (1202-1757)**

For a long time, the Bengali region was ruled by foreign Muslim rulers. There was no blood or linguistic similarity between the rulers (the rulers of the Muslim Empire) and the people of Bengal. As a result, they introduced new languages and royal powers. The Mughal rulers declared and used Persian as their official language instead of their mother tongue, Turkish. During the Mughal period, most people who adopted Persian for constitutional needs were Hindus (traditional religions). Although Hindus in India had learned Persian well for employment, they had not

given up their native language in any way. 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). As a result, Persian and Urdu were considered sacred to Bengali Muslims. Furthermore, since both were the official and dominant language, the people of Bengal increased respect and devotion to these languages. As a result, during the Mughal period, those who tried to compose Bengali literature had to suffer social shame and condemnation. For example, Abdul Hakim (1620–1690), one of the most important Bengali writers, wrote the scenario of his time, when people born in Bengal condemned and insulted the Bengali language. (Khuda, 2019). Therefore, it is clear that the language debate clearly existed in Bengali even during the Mughal period. At that time, Bengali Muslims tried to learn Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, based on their obvious abilities. These three languages were respected in society and usage. However, if people used Bangla, they were not considered honored in society.

Fishman (1967) presented diglossia as situations where historically unrelated languages were used together, a prestige language as H-variety and a colloquial one as L-variety. He proposed that there might be more than two languages used

within a diglossia community. For example, in the usage of Fishman, even multilingual countries such as Nigeria, where English functions as a national prestige language, which is learned at school, and local languages like Hausa and Yoruba are spoken natively, are described as diglossia (Fishman, 1967; Kyriakou, 2019; Simanjuntak, Haidir, Junaidi, & Pujiono, 2019; Stępkowska, 2012).

According to Fishman's (1967) definition of diglossia, Bangladesh was certainly a multilingual and diglossia country during this period. Arabic, Persian, and Urdu were the languages of education and employment and all three were considered largely respectable. Local Bengali, on the other hand, was a less recognized and less respected language. Based on this, Bangladesh was a diglossia country about a half-thousand years ago. On the other hand, Bengali linguists did not say or even wish to explicitly proclaim this. Some scholars argue that the Bengali language and literature developed during the Muslim Sultanate because the Muslim Sultanate contributed to the development of the language. Importantly, following the inspiration of Muslim sultans and emirs, there was interest in promoting Bengali language writers and granting Bengali literature devotees' positions in the court. Ever since then, many writers and scholars were honored and supported at the court of Bengali

kings and encouraged to devote their lives to the service of the Bengali language. (Nodbi, 1958).

However, many Bengali scholars oppose this position. According to them, the Mughal sultans had no state role in the development of the Bangla language. They claim that 1) during the nearly 600 years of Muslim rule in Bengal, there were no more than six patrons of Bengali literature among Muslim sultans and their followers. 2) In the Middle Ages, not only in Bengal, but in all 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 developed into a literary language (Majumder, 1987).

The sociocultural and political conflict over language at the time led to the dilemma and social tensions of Bengali speakers. Furthermore, this linguistic debate has been ongoing since then.

### **Language policy and debates during the English rule (1757-1947)**

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a Nobel Laureate of the Bengali language and a renowned Bengali personality, was also in a dilemma on language policy for education in Bengali. He emphasized the importance of learning in one's mother tongue (Bengali) to develop one's own talents. On the contrary, he also wanted to make English one of

the primary languages for children. Therefore, he also hired several foreign teachers to teach English at the University of Visva-Bharati, which he founded. He is also the author of numerous English grammar books.

To clarify this point, we can take the example of Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay (1890-1977), an academic, linguist, and writer, who emphasized academics to devote more time and energy to teach English well and also promoted Bengali learners to allocate their thoughts and work in English lessons; As a result, Bengali teachers gave school students more English books than Bengali books at the time (A.M. Ahmed, 2013). Rabindranath Tagore and Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay were influential Bengali academics, linguists, and academics during the English period; both argued that modern education was embedded in English and that it was possible only to learn English well.

In addition, some scholars claimed that during the British regime, British leaders played an important role in the development of Bengali. For example, the first Bengali grammar was composed in 1778, named 'A Grammar of the Bengali Language' by Nathaniel Brassey Hallhead, and the first Bengali monthly journal 'Digdarshan' was published in 1818 by Clark Marshman. In May 1818,

Clark Marshman also published the first Bengali newspaper, Samachar Darpan.

During the British regime, the social and political relations between the people of East Bengal and the British were mostly fluctuating and unstable. For example, sometimes they were grateful to the British rulers; on the contrary, sometimes they rebelled at the same time against the British rulers (A.M. Ahmed, 2013).

Importantly the establishment of the Muslim League of Bengal, a group of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) believed that the British were the only hope for Muslims. Therefore, all letters and official documents of the Muslim organization Anjuman-e-Islam were made and documented in English (A.M. Ahmed, 2013).

### **Language policy and debates in Pakistan (1947-1971)**

Since the beginning of India-Pakistan's separation in 1947, there were constant political tensions between the eastern and western wings of Pakistan. Political tensions between the two wings intensified in the language question immediately after the establishment of Pakistan. Although the language movement began in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to establish Bengali (Bangla) as the state language of Pakistan, there was also controversy

among the people of East Pakistan about Bengali as an official language status. The reason was that the people of East Pakistan had long used Urdu as one of the sacred languages and Urdu was the language of the rich and educated people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Therefore, some academics and politicians demanded that Urdu be retained as a medium of education, official activities, and socio-cultural activities (religion and entertainment, etc.). Evidently, Urdu was also the language of prominent East Bengal politicians and influential leaders; for example, Mohammad Akram, Maulana Moniruzzaman, Maulana Azad, and so on (A.M. Ahmed, 2013).

However, most of the people of eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh) participated in various socio-cultural movements, including the Swadeshi movement. The Swadeshi movement (1906) strengthened the spirit of Bengali language in the then East Bengal (then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh). At that time, Bengali served as a means of unification between West Bengal (now India) and East Bengal, thus raising awareness of Bengal culture, language, and literature. The remnants and effects of the Swadeshi movement among the people of some parts of Bangladesh continued even after Pakistan was formed in 1947.

The language movement in East Pakistan began after a speech by

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the first Governor-General of Pakistan, in 1948 in Dhaka, where he proposed Urdu as the state language of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah is considered the Quaid-e-Azam (great leader) and Baba-e-Qaum (father of the nation) in Pakistan. His speech was followed by protests from some sections of the city-centric cultural movement in eastern Pakistan. When a cultural movement was formed to make Bengali the state language of Pakistan, East Pakistani politicians tried to use the movement of language as a political weapon against the central government. Consequently, the language movement was no longer cultural, but became a political movement occupied by politicians.

The language movement as a pseudo-movement with political intentions created political issues and movements; it did not make a significant contribution to the development of Bengali. As a result, Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) had no role to play in the development of the Bengali language and literature. Therefore, it can be said that the language movement in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) was mainly a political movement, in which the development, propagation and reproduction of the Bengali language were not found.

The people of Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan) have never had a universal collective awareness of

language or a language policy. For example, not all people on the territory supported language movement. In addition, several of them did not want Bengali to be the official language or an educational medium in Pakistan. To give more examples, one of the most influential Nawabs in Bengal, Nawab Abdul Latif, proposed Urdu as a medium of education. AK Fazlul Haque, Bengal's chief minister and one of the most influential politicians in East Bengal (Bangladesh), proposed Urdu as a medium of education for the people of the region. Although the language movement was organized in Dhaka, the local residents of Dhaka opposed the language movement for a long time (Sofa, 1981). They supported the use of Urdu as a national language, not Bengali.

### **Language policy and debates in independent Bangladesh (1971-present)**

It is important to note that the first seeds of the East Pakistan independence movement were sown through the language movement. The debate on language issues continued even after 1971, when Bangladesh became an independent state. Bangladesh has not developed adequate language policies and plans due to extreme nationalism and language chauvinism. Consequently, the linguistic human rights of people of different ethnic groups and people of many languages were absent in

policy making. In 1971, many people believed that the use of English in this subcontinent was a legacy of colonialism (K.M. Ahmed, 2019). Some academics believe that the subcontinent of India has witnessed dramatic developments in the use of English as a language of domination, rulers, oppressors and decision makers (Akteruzzaman & Islam, 2017). However, they promoted only Bengali as a national language in article no. 3 of the Constitution of Bangladesh (1972) clearly states that Bangla is the state language of the republic. The Constitution clearly poses a threat to the linguistic rights of people who belong to different languages, races, tribal, or indigenous languages in the country. Logically and technically, it is not possible to assign a state to promote only one language of the country without considering other languages. Recognition of national languages sometimes leads to extreme nationalism, which technically also leads to racism. If the constitution of Bangladesh had chosen the "official language" instead of the "state language", it would have shown respect for people who speak other languages. This started the language debate at the beginning of Bangladesh as a country in 1972. Therefore, the language status in the Constitution violates the human rights of the language of the people and indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. Additionally, linguistic tensions were

also created among different languages and speakers of indigenous or tribal languages. Other language speakers, except Bangla, lacked education, employment, and social benefits. From a psychological point of view, indigenous people started to feel like second-class citizens due to Bangladesh's language policy. According to a study, more than 3 million indigenous people in Bangladesh have different indigenous languages (Hajong, 2019). The indigenous people of Bangladesh are required to learn Bengali for academic and professional purposes. Language changes occur within tribes or indigenous peoples under constitutional pressure and national obligations (Chakma, 2014; Hajong, 2019). Furthermore, Sujon (2013) estimated that there are about 36 different languages in Bangladesh, spoken by about 45 different ethnic groups or indigenous communities. On the other hand, in Bangladesh, 54 indigenous groups have different and diverse cultures. Furthermore, a scientific anthropological investigation also found 41 indigenous languages in Bangladesh (Hajong, 2019). However, in Bangladesh, many of their languages are constantly lost (Sikder, 2019).

On 18 May 1974, the Establishment Division under the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs of the Bangladesh government passed a law that denotes that only Bengali would be used for all public works in the

country from then to make and print all forms and stationery used in all ministries and departments.

Subsequently, on 24 January 1979, a law concerning the usage of Bengali language at all levels of offices was passed. The special aspects of this law are summarized as follows (summary):

(A) It is essential to ensure that Bengali would be the only language of all administrative works.

(B) Ordered to create Bengali terminology to introduce Bengali to all levels of national life.

(C) Order to create the Bengali style in official letters, instructions, forms, etc., to use in all government offices.

(D) Write textbooks in Bengali, especially on medical science, technology, science, etc.

(E) The ambassadors or the head/leader of the delegations abroad have to speak Bengali or must manage Bengali interpreters.

(F) All schools, colleges, and universities should give Bengali more importance than English to preserve the dignity of Bengali.

(G) The arrangement of training Bengali for foreigners should also be more initiative.

(H) Ordered to provide training to qualified translators and interpreters.

(I) All government, semi-government and autonomous offices must immediately implement the above-mentioned decisions.

The use of Bengali as officious language then led to controversy over the standard Bengali form. The significant question was whether between 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), would be used for official purposes. In Bangladesh, the colloquial language is widely used. Sadhu Bhasa is a literary language that originated in Kolkata, India; People were not used to speaking the form and did not even know it well. 'Chalit Bhasa' was a widely used and widely known language of the Bangladeshi people. In traditional grammar, the combination of these two forms is considered a grammar error. Moreover, according to the prescriptive Bengali grammar, these two are considered standard forms. The issue of regional languages, varieties, and dialects became another significant issue in the language controversy. Importantly, there are few users of "standard Bengali" among the people of Bangladesh. Furthermore, there are hundreds of regional languages (dialects) of the same language or the same language group, the regional languages in Bangladesh. As a result, a linguistic

conflict rose in the so-called standard Bengali over the mass speakers. The main responsibility of the state is to respect, preserve and use the language of the people of each regional linguistic group, which has never been done in the Bangladesh period. As a result, this law was not of much importance in the language awareness of mass speakers. Later, on 3 May 1979, The President of Bangladesh ordered that all notes, summaries, and proposals must be submitted in Bengali; otherwise, he would not receive them.

Then, on 26 December 1979, the Government of Bangladesh passed a law and decided that all the work of the courts and offices should be done in Sadhu Riti Bengali. By this law, the so-called standard "Sadhu Riti" was only accepted in government official activities, and the other varieties of Bengali languages are considered to be rejected by the government. This order created a situation of diglossia in Bangladesh. Ferguson (1959) stated that the situation of diglossia is when one variety is used for 'high' (formal literacy) purposes and one variety is used for 'low' (informal) purposes, importantly, the H variety is prestigious and the L variety is used for informal, mostly spoken purposes, lacks prestige, and can be considered vulgar (Ferguson, 1959; Kyriakou, 2019; Stepkowska, 2012). Similarly, in Bangladesh, the form of "Sadhu" in Bengali is elevated to a high status,

whereas the forms of mass speaking (Chalit Riti) are lower. In this way, the Bengali language became a diglossia language in Bangladesh. Furthermore, many linguistic disputes have arisen in Bangladesh.

Some people had ignored Bangladesh's language laws because they did not find the status of their practicing languages in official recognition. According to the constitution of Bangladesh and language laws, regional varieties, languages, tribes, and indigenous languages are not recognized. The government has not conducted ethnolinguistic research on language policy and planning in Bangladesh. On 12 February 1984, in public order, the government acknowledged that the implementation of language laws caused anger among the people and found negative criticism from the public domain.

According to the Bengali Language Introduction Act, 1987 (summary):

(1) All documents and correspondence laws, legal procedures, and other legal acts must be written in Bengali in government agencies, courts, semi-officials, and autonomous bodies, except for foreign relations.

(2) In any institution, it would be illegal to make appeals or petitions in any language other than Bengali.

(3) Any administrator or officer who violates this Act would be take action against him according to civil service law.

Subsequently, some ministries in Bangladesh claimed to use English for official activities and were unwilling to use Bengali 'Sadhu Riti' as officious language. To protest, on 29 July 1987, the government rejected the demand of different ministries and again ordered, under the Bangla Language Introduction Act (1987), that all laws, orders, ordinances, and circulations must be made in Bengali.

It is clear that people did not warmly welcome the use of the Bengali language based on Sadhu Riti in official activities. As the so-called standard Bengali is not the language of the masses, it is considered insulting to Bangladesh's mother tongue (the regional languages). Furthermore, the state constitutionally only promotes and takes initiatives to develop only the national language (Bengali-Sadhu), but deprives other ethnic language speakers, regional language speakers, and indigenous languages of practice in official activities.

Then, a part of the government office claimed the usage of both the 'Sadhu' and 'Chalit' Bengali forms in government activities. In opposition, on 28 May 1996, the Ministry of Establishment of Bangladesh rejected the claim and

ordered that only the 'Sadhu form' would be accepted for formal documents. It has proved that the use of the "Sadhu Riti" standard was often opposed by many state bodies. Furthermore, the government attempted to regulate and artificially establish the language "Sadhu Riti" in Bangladesh using the government apparatus. Consequently, people of different languages have repeatedly been deprived of their linguistic rights. According to S. Islam (2017), the Government of Bangladesh has not taken a strong initiative to ensure the use of the Bengali language at all levels, including administration, state management, expansion of education and technology, language development, and establishment of language rights and dignity of hill people.

Although Bangladesh has adopted various language laws, it has no practical policies or plans for the development and promotion of all languages, including Bangla. Therefore, the lexical development of law, science and technology in Bengali has been very limited until now. As a result, Bangladeshi courts are still unwilling to practice judicial procedures in Bengali because there is no lexical development of the court language. Similarly, the lack of legal terminology in Bangla is one of the reasons for not using Bangla in court (Ferdousi,2009,2017; K.M. Ahmed, 2019; M.M. Islam, 2019).

However, Bangladeshi people are personally proud to use regional languages (dialects). As a result, regional languages are dominant in the drama, film, advertising, and literature of the country. However, the state has always discriminated against all these regional languages. To ensure the implementation of the Bengali Language Implementation Act (1987), several orders were passed in Bangladesh due to the unwillingness of the people and the impracticality of language laws as well. On 17 February 2014, the High Court Division issued a rule to implement and ensure the use of Bengali in all places, including signs, flags, banners, electronic media advertisements, nameplates, and vehicle number plates by 15 May 2014 (Ferdousi, 2017).

In Bangladesh, English is now considered the language of civilization and science and is respected in academic, social, and practical matters. Consequently, Bangladeshis who can speak English feel comfortable and are respected by others.

In 2014, Bangladesh, the Civil Service Commission ordered under Rule 21 of the Examination for Age, Eligibility, and Direct Recruitment) Rule 21 that the government job exam question paper would be prepared in English along with Bengali language for the BCS (Bangladesh Civil Service)

examination to make students interested in learning English and ensure English-skilled manpower in government administration in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2017). Following the adoption of this order, it almost recognizes the dependence on English in Bangladesh's public services. In addition, it also shows that it becomes difficult to run public services only in Bengali.

There are three dominantly different education systems in Bangladesh. They are considered English, Arabic, and other Bangla mediums (Babla, 2017). According to the Private University Act (1992), private universities in Bangladesh must be English medium under the university grant committee regulations (Datta, 2016; Hamid, Jahan & Monjurul, 2013; M.K. Ahmed, 2020); M.M. Islam, 2013; Rahman, Singh & Karim, 2020). Importantly, English as a teaching medium in all private universities in Bangladesh is inconsistent with the Bengali implementation law. As a result, it is clear that Bangladesh is still unable to formulate a sustainable language policy and planning.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the languages of Bangladesh are the subject of socio-political debate at different times and in different political regimes. From an academic, professional and political point of view, Bangladeshis are constantly at

the crossroads of confusion and social and political tension over language. Language conflicts in Bangladesh are combined with political intervention aimed at political achievement. The language provisions of the Constitution and the language demand of Bangladesh do not reflect the needs of the masses and indigenous citizens. All languages

spoken in Bangladesh as language diversity should be recognized as linguistic diversity by the Constitution. From a sociolinguistic point of view, Bangladesh is largely a country of diglossia. In the era of globalization, the debate about language problems has changed dramatically.

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