
Pakistani Leadership's Response to Linguo-Cultural Challenge in East Bengal

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The language issue was the most original and basic issue that proved to be a challenge for Pakistan's leaders as a test of their capacities for appeasing Bengali nationalist movement in East Bengal. This cultural challenge was a first threat to the unity of Pakistan that supported the Bengali movement on a large scale. This paper examines the strategies and policies which Pakistani leaders adopted to respond, to the challenge that was posed by lingual and cultural issues. The paper will also highlight actions and tactics of the leadership in dealing with the language question.

The Cultural Challenge – Recognition of Bengali Language

The Bhasha Ondolan, the movement which campaigned for the use of Bengali in the domain of power in East Bengal and fought to make it one of the official languages of the state, alongside Urdu, was not merely, or predominantly, a linguistic one, it was a political campaign of the greatest significance for the new state. It was in fact East Bengal's first challenge to the hegemony of the Urdu speaking Bengali aristocracy and West Pakistani ruling elite.¹

Agitation for Bengali Language

The Bengali nationalist movement originated from the attempts for, the preservation of the Bengali language. In the days when the Bengali organisations were formed, the most burning issue that vexed the Bengali mind and created one of the first tests for Pakistani leadership in the context of East Bengal was the question of national language of Pakistan. The discontent that it generated and the protest that followed over it were the first signs of Bengali Nationalism. It brought various discontented groups together and contributed to bridging the gap between the nationalist intellectuals and the masses.²

The cultural issues endangered the unity of Pakistan and supported the separatism in East Bengal in the first decade after Pakistan's creation. During the civilian's rule, the cultural issues created great difficulties for the leadership and heightened the Bengli movement to peak. After the Martial Law of 1958, Bengali cultural and lingual issues were used to keep the Bengali Movement alive even though without any serious danger to the Bengali itself culture. Martyr's Days, commemorating 21 February were continuously observed to enhance the nationalist feelings. According to a Confidential Report of Intelligence Branch, Martyr's Day was more Vocal in 1961 and on that day the procession in Dhaka was about a mile long. Again the enthusiasm of Martyr Day was unprecedented in 1966. The *Pakistan Observer* noted to that biggest mass meeting since 1954 was held on that day.³ A vigorous drive was made by the East Pakistan Students League (EPSL) to popularize Bengali language through a week-long programme. Street-corner meetings and widespread picketing resulted in an almost overnight shift to Bengali.⁴

Students passionately opposed Ayub's idea of Roman script for the Bengali language. Likewise other cultural events like anniversaries of Bengali poets Nazrul Islam and R-N Tagore were celebrated.⁵ Despite constitutional guarantees, the Bengalis remained suspicious about the intentions of the Central

government to their language and culture. Speeches of some East Pakistani members of Central Cabinet in relation to Bengali language, literature and culture generated doubts during the later stage of the Ayub regime. Some Bengali activists feared that Central government had hired some Bengalis to promote a policy of purging Bengali of its alien content.⁶ In 1966, Tamaddun Majlis decided to launch a four day "Use Bengali Language campaign" all over the province. The campaign concluded with the observance of the Martyr Day.⁷

The decision to ban Tagore's poetry on radio Pakistan in 1967 and adverse statements of some ministers against the Bengali new year's day evoked a sense of consternation and indignation among the intellectual circles in East Pakistan. Sangskriti Sangsad a leading cultural organization of Dhaka University organized a mass demonstration against the ban on Tagore's poetry and called upon the people to resist the 'conspiracy' against Bengali literature and culture. The opposition members of East Pakistan Assembly also criticized government over these developments. At a meeting of Bangla Academy, educationists resented the government decision and demanded the withdrawal of the order. This was also supported in a meeting of the cross-section of citizens of Dhaka.⁸

The students also demanded the use of Bengali in education, in the courts of law, and in administration during their anti-Ayub agitation in 1968 and early 1969. Moreover, EPSL launched a campaign to force people to use Bengali, at least as far as signboards etc. were concerned. According to Rounaq Jahan there were hardly any English or Urdu signboards left in Dhaka.⁹ Notwithstanding some incidents, the Bengali nationalists could not find any chance to escalate the situation and manage any major event like 21 February 1952 on linguistic or cultural grounds. The separatist elements kept using the cultural and lingual issues to win the support of Bengali public.

Response to the Lingual Challenge

The ruling leaders of Pakistan regarded Bengali as only a provincial language. They had decided that the lingua franca of Pakistan must be Urdu. Jinnah viewed that for official use of the province of Bengal, the people's representatives could choose the language of their choice but only Urdu could be the lingua franca because, he thought, it embodied Islamic culture and Muslim tradition more than any other provincial language.¹⁰ Khawaja Nazimuddin also saw no alternative to Urdu as the official language. He said that he would make a firm stand for Bengali as the provincial language of East Bengal and the medium of education in the province.¹¹ Likewise Sardar Nishtar, emphasizing "unity of language" as the "main foundation of a country" declared that "only Urdu, and not Arabic or any provincial language, could be the national language of Pakistan".¹²

Pakistani leaders even opposed Bengali as one of the languages of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. When a Hindu member of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, Dhirendranath Datta, in the first session of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 23 February 1948, put a motion for the amendment in the Assembly rules to allow Bengali to be used in the House along with Urdu, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, Khawaja Nazimuddin, Mr. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, Mr. Tamizuddin and others opposed it and it was consequently rejected by the house.¹³

The Pakistani leaders considered the Bengali language agitation as arising from the activities of those who wanted to destroy Pakistan. Jinnah considered the language controversy a conspiracy of the enemies of Pakistan, Indian press and fifth columnists. Jinnah responded the 'effort of creating split' in Pakistan by warning the people to 'beware of' these disruptionists.¹⁴ He observed that every government worthy of the name must deal with such gangsterism firmly by all the means at its disposal.¹⁵ These views of Jinnah were followed by other leaders of the time. Khawaja Nazimuddin commented that under

the cover of a seemingly genuine agitation there were some who wanted to disrupt the administrative machinery of the province with the interior motive of striking at the roots of Pakistan.¹⁶ Nazimuddin regretted that the issue was raised *in that form by members of the Congress*. According to Governor Noon, it was a conspiracy between the communists and some of the Hindus of Calcutta, and certain political elements in East Pakistan who wanted to replace the Minister and the students were made the escape goat. Noon took agitation as a blessing in disguise which had brought to surface the most dangerous and nefarious designs of the enemies, the Hindus who, according to Noon, spent quite a large amount of money in organising the whole show.¹⁷

Leadership of the country during the period 1947-52 though firm in dealing with disruptionists, tried to deal with the question politically, through dialogue and in a spirit of compromise. Consequently a deal was made with State Language Committee of Action (SLCA) before the visit of Jinnah in East Pakistan on 19 March 1948. Nazimuddin sought the Khawaja help of Muhammad Ali Bogra to enter into negotiations with the SLCA. A committee of SLCA negotiated with Khawaja Nazimuddin and eight point Agreement was signed. All the terms of SLCA were incorporated in the eight point agreement mutually signed. The two main terms, along with other demands about the release of political prisoners, withdrawal of the ban on newspapers effected during the agitation, declaring the agitators 'patriotic', no victimisation for the participation in the agitation, and withdrawal of Section 144 from the districts, provided that the East Pakistan Assembly would adopt a resolution for making Bengali as the official language of East Pakistan and the medium of instruction at all stages of education; and the Assembly by another resolution would recommend to the central government that Bengali should be made one of the state languages.¹⁸

The agreement resulted in the resolution declaring Bengali as the official language of East Bengal along with English and the

medium of instruction in East Pakistan, was moved and passed by the Assembly, but the other one addressed to the Centre was not moved. Jinnah himself resorted to hold a meeting with SLCA in order to ease and convince the supporters of Bengali language, though, as Umar observes, the meeting turned out to be very bitter, and ended in a fiasco.¹⁹

Political cooptation was also used to tackle the agitation. Governor Noon co-opted one MLA from Sylhet, Mr. Moinuddin Ahmad regarding the writing of the Bengali language in Arabic script. Four Members of Legislative Assembly of Sylhet had joined hands with him.²⁰ Some prominent leaders were removed from the political scene. Muhammad Ali Bogra and Tafazzal Ali were given ambassadorial jobs.²¹

The Working Committee meeting of the East Pakistan Muslim League, by December 5, 1947, unanimously decided that Urdu would not be forced on the people of East Pakistan. Maulana Akram Khan, President of the East Pakistan Muslim League, was directed to issue a press statement to this effect.²² The provincial leadership of Muslim League, in the face of Bengali, forwarded the idea of Arabic as national language. The provincial Muslim League, in its council in January 1951, despite the opposition of councillors led by Hamid al-Haq Chowdhury who pleaded that a language could not be imposed on people, carried the motion supporting Arabic as the national language by forty-eight to thirty-six votes.²³ Education Secretary of East Pakistan, F.A. Karim also gave suggestion which was adopted by the Central Minister for Education, Mr. Fazlur Rahman and Governor. Feroze Khan Noon.²⁴

Governor East Pakistan thought that there was no way without accepting Bengali as one of the State languages. Therefore it must be accepted if written in the Arabic script. He believed that the Hindus would create the trouble but no Muslim could oppose the Arabic script.²⁵ While thwarted in their attempt to

make Arabic the national language, the '*ulema*' of East Pakistan launched a campaign for the introduction of *Pak Bangla*, a name given to Bengali written in the Arabic script. The intensity of this campaign can be judged from the remarks of a Bengali religious leader Maulana Ghulam Muhammad – who described the efforts to replace the Brahmani (devnagri) script of the Bengali language by the Arabic script "as a holy jihad".²⁶

Following the recommendations of an advisory Board of Education headed by Mr. Fazlur Rahman, the Education Minister, and the central government established twenty one adult education centres in different parts of East Pakistan to teach primary Bengali through Arabic script. The East Bengal government also set up a Language Committee to carry out the Islamization of Bengali.²⁷

With regard to the language agitation of 1952 the rulers did not realize its political implications and treated it as purely a law and order matter. And to meet it, an order banning processions within the limits of Dhaka city was issued under instructions of the provincial government²⁸ Most of the language activists including Maulana Bhashani were arrested during the agitation. They remained under arrest for more than one year and were released after Awami League observed 17 April 1953 as a 'political prisoners' release day.' The student-activists of Awami League were expelled from their educational institutions.²⁹ Governor East Pakistan was glad that the Government resisted the demand for a Police enquiry of the 21 February incident because the confidence of the Police Force and other officers was most essential. Governor hoped that the Chief Minister would hold his hand for appointment of a committee of enquiry demanded by Pakistan Muslim League until complete peace was restored.³⁰

A counter campaign in favour of Urdu was promoted. Governor East Pakistan patronized a movement to secure lakhs of signatures all over the province in support of Urdu started by

Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam.³¹ The activists led by the non political and non-governmental leaders like Maulvi Abdul Haq held the strike and demonstrations in Karachi on 22 April 1954. They marched to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to demonstrate against the institution of any language other than Urdu.³² The Minister of Education of Sindh, Peer Elahi Bux presided over the meeting of establishment of the Anjuman-e-Urdu with the single objective of propagation of Urdu in the whole country. Peer Elahi Bux, Professor Haleem, Begum Habib-ur-Rehman, Muhammad Din Taseer, and Waqar Azeem were elected as the members of sub committee to fulfil this objective.³³

The ruling leadership considered that their propaganda had been very weak, almost non-existent. The Government point of view had not the chance to go before the public.³⁴ Governor Noon observed that Muslim Leaguers were doing nothing to educate the public opinion about language controversy while the Bengalis were starting their signatures campaign for Bangla in contrast to one launched by Noon for Urdu. Noon had thousands of pamphlets (76000) Governor printed at the cost of Rs. 6050³⁵ to launch propaganda campaign through individuals.

Till 1952, the leaders looked reluctant in making Bengali a state language. Even decision in this regard was not made soon after 21 February and policy of postponement was adopted. Ruling ML member Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Nur Ahmad was first allowed to bring the resolution regarding Bengali being one of the State Languages in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, on April 10, 1952 then Government itself postponed it with the words "that there being no immediate necessity of taking a decision here and now." When Shaukat Hayat said that 'by postponing the issue, by postponing the evil day once again, we will be starting trouble which may result in the complete disruption of Pakistan" and advised to have the Bengali language as one of State languages' even A.K. Fazlul Huq supported the postponement of the issue because he wanted to have proper

assessment. He did not want to lose and shelve the question but wanted to get an opportunity. Chattopadhyaya told that if Mr. Nurul Amin had moved that Resolution on the 20th February the whole agitation would have fizzled out. There would have been no cause for the agitation. He said it was a very urgent matter. The sooner it was decided, the better, so that people would not be back into the agitation but if it was postponed in this way without a final decision that would give cause for fresh agitation.³⁶

It was in May 1954 that Bengali was accepted as one of the state languages and credit of this goes to Muhammad Ali Bogra's leadership. Being the representative of Bengalis elected in the second Constituent Assembly (CA) from the constituency of East Pakistan, he supported the views of Bengalis for Bangla language. He viewed that it would be undemocratic to adopt a language against the will of the people.³⁷ Bogra's action was directly executed in the name of the unity and solidarity of Pakistan and it was the purpose for which he appealed for the support of the press and the public.³⁸

The chapter "Language of the Republic" was brought before the House by Prime Minister Bogra and accepted without any amendment. It read that the official languages of the Republic should be Urdu, Bengali and such other languages; Urdu and Bengali could be spoken in parliament in addition to English; and for examinations for the central services, all provincial languages should be placed on equal terms.³⁹ The stance adopted by Bogra aroused opposition for him in West Pakistan.⁴⁰ Punjabi members of Constituent Assembly of Pakistan except Shaukat Hayat absented from Assembly on the presentation of the formula.

Almost all observers agree that there was no reason to keep the language issue unresolved for a long period.⁴¹ Rafique Afzal while comments on the tackling of the language issue that the time chosen was inopportune and the method was un-statesman-like.

The strength the supporters of Bengali, had gained by their constant and patient propaganda, after Jinnah's visit in 1948, was grossly underestimated.⁴² Safdar Mahmood has observed that the language controversy was dragged on unnecessarily due to the unwise policy of the Centre. Once it had become clear that the demand was supported not only by the opposition but also by the party in power, the Central Government should have recognized the reality.⁴³ Dr. Sajjad Hussain is of the view that had the issues been explained to Bengali people and had a referendum been held even in early 1950 or 1951, the vote would have been overwhelmingly in favour of Urdu. The political leaders who were in power did not have the intelligence to grasp its real aims or anticipate its strategy, and proceeded to confront it either with incredible ineptitude or with concessions which fed the appetites they tried to appease.⁴⁴ Hasan Zaheer thinks if Urdu had not been insisted upon so vehemently, it was likely that in the natural course of events, a common language, although with different scripts, would have been evolved.⁴⁵

If it was desired to re-orient the East Bengali culture the answer did not lie in using repressive measures. Muslim intellectuals could have been encouraged and supported financially to produce literary books of equal quality and with a greater Islamic tinge than those produced in Western Bengal and greedily devoured by the Muslims of East Bengal.⁴⁶ It was not proper to suppress and taunt the Bengalis on account of their cultural affiliations.

The actions of governments before the Ayub regime accommodating Bengali language – i.e. acceptance of Bengali as the second language in 1956, appearance of Bengali script on currency notes, postage stamps and official documents and permission for Bengali members to address parliament in the Bengali language – had weakened the importance of the issue. And Ayub, responding to the talks for revising the language formula, made it quite clear by declaring that the issue over the national

language was settled once and for all and it would not be reopened and the Constitution 1962 provided that "the national languages of Pakistan are Bengali and Urdu."⁴⁷

The ruling leadership during the Ayub regime remained nonetheless apprehensive as well as antagonistic to Bengali culture and language. Ayub Khan expressed his adverse comments against Bengali language saying "It is quite clear to me that with two national languages we cannot become one nation."⁴⁸ *Governor Monem frequently called policemen to resist intellectual infiltration from the enemy.*⁴⁹ A conscious policy of "Islamization of Bengali" language was pursued. Ayub called the people and intelligentsia to develop a common language by drawing from vocabulary of all the languages of Pakistan and reinforcing the same with Arabic and Persian words. Ayub also proposed for the adoption of Roman script for both Urdu and Bengali as in his opinion, this was scientific and conducive to national unity.⁵⁰

Some official measures were taken to make the officials adopt Bengali language. Government officials posted in East Pakistan from the West were encouraged to learn Bengali but it was not made compulsory for them to acquire certain proficiency within a specified period of time.⁵¹ The exchange of cultural and student delegations was used to establish cultural connections between the two wings. This did not succeed because the delegations from East visited big cities only and went back with the impression that West Pakistan was much more developed than East Pakistan.⁵²

Conclusion

Pakistani ruling elite, both in the civilian and military governments, could not handle the cultural and lingual challenge of Bengali movement properly. They delayed the resolution of controversy regarding the status of Bengali as one of the national languages. The affiliation of the Bengalis with their culture and language was not measured a in proper way. The abhorrence to the Bengali culture was common attitude of Pakistani leaders. The

measures taken in reconciliation with cultural demands of Bengalis – delayed recognition of Bengali as second official language of Pakistan in 1956, the use of Bengali script on Pakistan’s official stamp papers, documents, currency notes and postage stamps, in addition to approval of usage of Bengali language in parliament – were belated, half-hearted and without political will. Therefore they did not hit the target of appeasement of Bengali nationalist movement.

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