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Politics of Nationhood and Linguistic Human Rights



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Abstract

Language being a cultural construction is by nature exclusionary. In multilingual countries, like most South Asian countries, dominance of one language over others in the domain of education and official transaction becomes highly contested and resented as it creates dominant groups and minority groups, being an emotive issue of cultural construction. As we know, linguistic rights are an integral part of human and civil rights which is concerned with the individual or collective rights of people to choose and exercise their own language in communication and education in both private and public spheres. Imposition of one dominant language over the other is considered as violation and usurpation of these rights and annihilation of group identity. Language as a basic right became instrumental in the identity issues and thereafter resulted in the creation of nations along linguistic lines in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular. When Pakistan adopted Urdu as their official language the Bengali speaking population of East Pakistan felt a hegemonic imposition of a second language on their own. They refused to make Urdu their lingua franca and hence a civil war erupted that finally culminated in East Pakistan's separation from Pakistan and the creation of a new Bangladesh. This paper attempts a postcolonial analysis of how language became a symbol of mobilization in politics in the division of Pakistan into two nations: Bangladesh and Pakistan. As a point of literary reference this paper will refer to Tahmima Anam's debut novel *A Golden Age* published in 2007.

Keywords: Linguistic Rights, Resentment, Identity, Nation, Pakistan, Bangladesh

Introduction

Linguistic human rights are an integral part of socio-cultural justice. Language being a cultural construction is by nature exclusionary. In multilingual countries, like most South Asian countries, dominance of one language over others in the domain of education and official transaction becomes highly contested and resented as it creates dominant groups and minority groups. It becomes a source of resentment since language is an emotive issue of cultural construction. As we know, linguistic rights form an integral part of human and civil rights, which concern the individual or collective rights of people to choose and exercise their own language in communication and education in both private and public spheres. Imposition of one dominant language over the other is considered as violation and usurpation of these rights and annihilation of group identity. Language rights discourse presupposes state domination and is characteristically counter hegemonic.

Objective of the Study

This paper attempts an analysis of how language has been a symbol of mobilization in politics resulting in the division of Pakistan into two nations: Bangladesh and Pakistan. This counter hegemonic retaliation along linguistic lines needs a socio-historical analysis of the linguistic situation and power politics in postcolonial Pakistan. This paper uses the postcolonial theory of nation and nationhood and analyses the impact of politics of language in creation of a nation and how the colonized abrogate the language of the colonizer. While discussing theory and social dynamics this paper focuses on the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan and will cite from Tahmima Anam's book *A Golden Age* (2007) as literary reference.

Review of Literature

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson in their essay "Language Rights: Principles, Enactment, Application" (2017) discuss the history of linguistic human rights and analyse the extent to which constitutional texts in national and international law provide support for

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minority languages, especially in education. Robert Jeff Bale in his article "In Defence of Language Rights"(2016) discusses the language education policy in Canada. He analyses Richard Ruiz's language-as-right orientation to language policy and critically reviews the political and economic challenges language rights pose so far as framing a national education policy in Canada is concerned. Christina BrattPaulston in her essay "Language Policies and Language Rights"(1997) discusses the then newly developing field of language rights. Her essay is concerned with issues of language planning the principal concerns of which were territoriality versus personality principles and individual versus collective rights. The essay argues that language rights are an issue of migration of third world people into the United States which made United States formulates the Bi-Lingual Education Policy in 1968. She states that "Formerly colonized areas and nations continue to show a concern for language rights, but this concern typically surfaces under other headings, such as official languages, medium of instruction or language standardization"(74).

Language and Nationhood

Language as a basic right became instrumental in the identity issues and thereafter resulted in the creation of nations along linguistic lines in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular. The people of Pakistan during 1947 - 1970 were internally undifferentiated as a single Muslim block but were distinctly multilingual. When Pakistan adopted Urdu as their official language the Bengali speaking population of East Pakistan felt a hegemonic imposition of a second language on their own. They refused to make Urdu their lingua franca and hence a civil war erupted that finally culminated in East Pakistan's separation from Pakistan and the creation of a new Bangladesh in 1971. The horror of the civil war that led to the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 has been fictionalised in *A Golden Age*, a novel written by Tahmima Anam. *A Golden Age* narrates the story of Rehana, a widow, and her family who were culturally Bengalis and Muslim by religion. They lived in Dhanmondi area of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Rehana and her children, Sohail and Maya were directly involved in the war of liberation and had to suffer the gory consequences thereof. The novel narrates how the people of the Urdu speaking West Pakistan discriminated against the Bengali speaking people of East Pakistan. Rehana's sister Marzia, who lived in Karachi, in West Pakistan tries to coax her to move with her children to Karachi. "Marzia had behaved as though Rehana had betrayed them all; she had said things like, 'Your Urdu is not as good as it used to be; must be all that Bengali you are speaking.'" (21) Rehana felt further insulted when her sister not only mispronounced the word Bengali as "*Bungali*" but she also referred to the servants working for her in Karachi who were "*Bungalis*".

For the Bengali speaking East Pakistan, West Pakistan posed a threat that would through coercion; military oppression and policy formulation subjugate and colonize them both linguistically and

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culturally. In another context, in the colonization of European nations Vivek Chibber discusses the impact of colonization that merits mention in the context of West Pakistan's hegemony over East Pakistan. He writes, "For Nationalist leaders, the external threat were no idle worry. It does not need repeating that their countries *had been colonized*. They knew, firsthand, the cost of military weakness or economic dependence. For the countries that had escaped outright colonization, military intimidation was a common experience"(265). East Pakistan's proclaimed nationalist leader Sheikh Mujib led the revolution and was trusted as a 'canny politician' (Anam 33). Anam's voice of the youth of East Pakistan, Sohail, says, "if you knew anything about the country you would know that West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and yet we get nothing – no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our own bloody language!" (33) Language becomes the ultimate bone of contention. West Pakistan is seen as ideologically biased in imposing the superiority of Urdu over the ethnic Bengali spoken by the multitude in East Pakistan.

In his essay 'The Philosophy of Language Rights' Albert Chen writes:

Language rights are the rights of individuals and collective linguistic groups to non-interference by the State, or to assistance by the State, in the use of their own language, in perpetuating the use of the language and ensuring its future survival, in receiving information and State provided services in their own language, and in ensuring that their exercise of other lawful rights, particularly fundamental human rights (e.g., the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to receive education, the right to employment), will not be handicapped or subject to discrimination for linguistic reasons. 49.

The discourse suggested by Chen is against the dominant State power that dictates the terms of language use both in official and educational domains. Language, as Peter Whiteley observes, has as its primary frame of reference "nation-state and global politics" (712). Demand for linguistic rights can be related directly to the anti-colonial feeling of the people of the region.

Colonialism with its dominance and hegemony imposed a linguistic imperialism; imposing that English is the medium of official transactions thereby undermining the importance of the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of South Asia. Prior to 1835 production of literature in learned native tongues were supported and patronized by the rulers, but in 1835 Lord Macaulay in his infamous Minute upon Indian Education, stated 'that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia'(cited in Wikipedia).

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Whereby, linguistic imperialism of English language was established over Sanskrit, Arabic and other regional languages. After independence from the British, South Asian Governments sought to maintain the same linguistic policy in order to dissolve or assimilate fully the indigenous culture of South Asia so as to observe power relations as in colonial times. Das 1572

The new Pakistan nation-state promoted the use of Urdu as its national language cutting clean from English which was the language of the British colonizers and was also the lingua franca of India from which it had seceded. What the new Pakistan did not consider was its plural nature. The Bengalis, who inhabited East Pakistan and were major stake holders of this new nation-state, were determined to defend their own language and thereby their distinct identity. Geographically and culturally, Punjab and East Bengal were the biggest states in the corpus of the new Pakistan and imperialism through hegemony of Urdu language was contested bitterly among the two. As a postcolony it was necessary for Pakistan to improve the welfare of its inhabitants fairly. Instead, it resorted to a single agenda of imposing monolingual policies which perpetrated a fear of cultural annihilation in the Bengali speaking East Pakistanis. Anam's fictional depiction leads us to the student uprising in Dhaka University. The students formed an unruly mob:

'Joy Bangla!' they shouted. 'Death to Pakistan! Death to Dictatorship! 'Sala. Bastard Bhutto's convinced Yahya there can't be a Bengali running Pakistan.' 49

Language became the agent of the discourse of power and politics. The Punjabis and the Bengalis both considered their cultural identities to be superior to the other. Neither wanted their own language, which is a symbol of their cultural identity and self-respect, to be predicated to that of the other's. Thus, the language movement in the postcolony Pakistan, in fact formed a part of the ethnic assertion of East Pakistan which resisted the perceived domination and injustice of the ruler in West Pakistan. If the Urdu language would be allowed to become the official language of Pakistan then the entire people of East Pakistan, that is the Bengali Population, would be rendered illiterate in one stroke and would not be considered eligible for any governmental employment. They would in fact be subjected to linguistic apartheid which the Bengali political leaders in Pakistan and students in universities vehemently opposed. The Government of Pakistan tried all means of violence to intimidate the uprising. We read a fictional account of an engagement party that was affected by the shelling,

The shelling at Peelkhana was close enough to make Rehana's chest rattle. She heard shouts. A siren sounded in a looping, circular wail. Fiery sparks illuminated the horizon; a deep sound like faraway thunder reverberated through the air; then came smoke, and a small hush, as though it was over. But it wasn't.

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Seconds later it started all over again.... Suddenly they heard everything: the killing of small children, the slow movement of clouds, the death of women, the sigh of fleeing birds, the rush of blood on the pavements. 64-65

The new Pakistan's argument in favour of installing Urdu as national language was that although prior to 1947, when the Muslims of South Asia conversed in their own regional languages like Pashto, Baluchi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Sindhi etc., the Urdu language acted as the vehicle for larger common issues of the Muslim people of the Indian Subcontinent. An important argument in favour of Urdu was also that most of the literature of the Muslims of South Asia was written in Urdu. Also that, Urdu was an Indian language created by the Mughal emperors for communication between the Hindu and Muslim population in India. The *Ashraf* and the *Ulama* took part in the linguistic apartheid. They considered Urdu to be superior to Bengali and refused to accept Bengali in religious transmissions. It was left to the Sufi Pirs who came to Bengal to Islamise the Bengalis. Hence, the Sufi's who came to Bengal to propagate Islam had to empathize with the cultural values and customs of the Bengalis and adapt Islam to the local flavour. Thus religious conversion did not entail cultural or linguistic conversion of the people of East Pakistan.

This religio-historical background of Islamisation of the Bengalis speaks volumes about their resentment and opposition to accept the linguistic domination of Urdu in the new Pakistan. The Bengali politicians of Pakistan ignored the attachment of the Muslim league leaders to Urdu. Their language was their cultural identity and they did not believe that their language would be dominated by any other language in post independent India. Whiteley in his article discusses the Boasian cultural concepts of language rights discourse which is relevant to the argument in this paper. Boas states that language rights has a place in the "interstices of global power in which resistance to the nation state is framed in terms of indigenous rights" (714) and of course, human rights and development. The Pakistan Government which should have addressed these cultural and psychological concerns of its pluralistic society chose instead to impose Urdu and thus, infringe upon the sacrosanct cultural territory of the Bengalis. The deep seated rejection of linguistic domination, economic exploitation and colonization took the shape of revolt which started from Dhaka University.

Ever since '48, the Pakistani authorities had ruled the eastern wing of the country like a colony. First they tried to force everyone to speak Urdu instead of Bengali. They took the jute money from Bengal and spent it in factories in Karachi and Islamabad. One General after another made promises they had no intention of keeping. ... But in 1970, when the cyclone hit, it was as though everything came into focus. ... they had waited for the food trucks to come and watched as the water rose and the bodies

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washed up on the shore; how they had realized, with mounting panic, that the food wouldn't come because it had never been sent. Anam 38-39

The betrayal of the government of Pakistan at the time of national crises sparked anger in the Bengali speaking people. It rendered the ideology of domination of Pakistan state larger than life. In spite of the fact that both Urdu and Bengali language to the same Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family, they are mutually intelligible. While the Bengali script is derived from the Brahmi script of Sanskrit, the Urdu script is a modified version of Persian derived from the Perso-Arabic script and looks Middle Eastern in style. Urdu facilitated the filtration of Islamic values and culture from the Middle East to the newly formed Islamic state of Pakistan. It served to amalgamate the Muslim population there with the other Muslim cultures of West and Middle Asia. But this was not the case in Bengal. Bengalis hold their language in high esteem and see it as a socially legitimating essence, which they protect as their human rights. Their linguistic human rights have taken quasi-religious overtones and are resistant to domination.

After independence in 1948 a Bengali member of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly proposed that Bengali should be used alongside Urdu as the official language of Pakistan. But both, the then Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan and President Jinnah vehemently opposed this. They stated that Pakistan was the dream of a hundred million Muslims of the Sub-continent and the language of these hundred million Muslims was Urdu. This hurt the sentiments of the Bengalis of East Pakistan and the revolted against linguistic apartheid of the Pakistan government and the seeds of a new nation Bangladesh was planted in March 1948 when Jinnah went to address university students in East Bengal to convince them not to succumb to provincialism, in which he failed completely. The Bengalese were angry that only Urdu and English appeared in bank notes, coins, postage stamps, official government stationary and radio broadcasts, whereas Bengali language was summarily ignored and absent therein. A movement or revolution was started by the students of Dhaka University demanding the inclusion of Bengali language in all spheres of Government transactions. People from all walks of the society from academics to politicians to civil-servants to trade unions to common people joined the movement. Adding fuel to the fire the Central Government of Pakistan tried to change the Bengali script to Perso-Arabic script in which Urdu was written. The language movement gained strength and a huge demonstration was instituted on 21 February 1952 with the support of all opposition parties. This was put down with police force claiming many lives. The Government's action resulted in accelerating the movement in denouncing one common national language. Bengali nationalism was rooted in the language issue which the power centre of West Pakistan dismissed as 'emotional' and 'provincial'. The refusal of West Pakistan to accept the importance of Bengali language and its refusal to incorporate the language as a national language or a second language violated the linguistic rights of the people of East Pakistan, to

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which the people of East Pakistan reacted violently. The civil war that ensued, ultimately, got East Pakistan a bloody freedom from West Pakistan in 1971. Anam sums up the horror of civil war when she makes Rehana describe it to her husband's grave: "Dear husband, ... the war will end today..... That those nine months of war were like nine generations, brimming with lives and deaths; that Sohail [her son]¹ had survived, while his friends had died; and that here was the city, burned and blistered and alive" (311).

Conclusion

Although one tends to agree with Silverstein that no culture or language can isolate itself in the face of globalization and that, anthropologically, culture as a terrain-bound system is now destabilized, yet it must be agreed upon that language forms the psychological aspect of a culture and gives it its distinct identity basing upon which the world has seen many bloody wars and the formation of new nations. This falsifies Silverstein's assumption that "absolute autonomy of culture-language-identity, definitely no longer exists" (2003) Like religious performances, language is a psycho-social determinant and an instrument in political ideology of nation formation. Linguistic rights are human rights. Skutnab-Kangas and Phillipson's suggestion that "depriving individuals or groups of linguistic human rights reflects a sophisticated contemporary form of racism" (2). Linguicism or linguistic apartheid can only lead to destabilization of nations as testified by the violent histories of Nations particularly the history of formation of Bangladesh.

Notes

¹ Parentheses mine

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