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HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel, eds.

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The Pakistan Experiment and the Language Issue

Willem van Schendel

The partition of 1947 created two new independent states, India and Pakistan. The eastern part of Bengal joined Pakistan. Pakistan was a highly ambitious experiment in twentieth-century state making. And yet, from the beginning the state was beset with enormous challenges. This excerpt from a recent survey history of Bangladesh explains how these challenges worked out in East Pakistan and why political struggles soon crystallized around the issue of the Bengali language. This historical background is indispensable to understand the intense emotions surrounding the national language in Bangladesh today.

Under its new name—East Pakistan¹—the Bengal delta now joined a unique experiment in state making. There were three reasons why Pakistan was a very special state. First, it was founded upon religious nationalism. Religion was supposed to cement a new national identity, something that had not been tried before—the only other modern example of a religiously based nation-state being Israel, which was founded a year later than Pakistan. Second, Pakistan was a state administering two discrete territories, separated from each other by about 1,500 km of Indian terrain. West Pakistan was by far the larger of these two wings but East Pakistan was more densely populated. In fact, most Pakistani citizens lived in East Pakistan: the first population census in 1951 revealed that Pakistan had seventy-eight million inhabitants, of whom forty-four million (55 per cent) lived in East Pakistan.

These two factors combined with a third: Pakistan did not become heir to any of the colony's central state institutions. India, on the other hand, inherited the capital New Delhi as well as most of the civil bureaucracy, armed forces and police. The bulk of the colony's resources and industries, and its major port cities of Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta), also went to India. By contrast, Pakistan inherited largely raw-material producing regions. Whereas the new rulers of India supplanted the British in the

old centre of colonial power, the new rulers of Pakistan had a much harder time to establish themselves. In other words, Pakistan was uniquely experimental: no other post-colonial state combined the loss of its administrative hub, the need to govern two unconnected territories, and the ambition to found a national identity on a religious one.

In the eastern "wing" of the country the situation was especially difficult. In August 1947, "the new East Pakistan government was hastily housed in a College for Girls [Eden College in Dhaka], with a large number of improvised bamboo sheds added to it for greater accommodation. On partition, East Pakistan received only one member of the former Indian Civil Service [the elitist corps of colonial bureaucrats, the 'steel frame' that had kept the colony together] who belonged to that region. Six others were hastily promoted from the Provincial Civil Service."² As a result, the civil service of East Pakistan was largely non-local and decision-making was in the hands of officials with little knowledge of East Pakistan's needs. An official publication described the predicament of the administrators in heroic terms: "For the many directorates there was no accommodation at all and these were sent to outlying districts. One Minister sat in a boat on the Buriganga river, disposing of files and transacting official business. Hundreds of officers chummed together in ramshackle tenements. Even camps were a luxury and bamboo constructions sprang up to provide shelters for officials and staff who were used to comfortable Calcutta flats and rooms."³

The General Officer Commanding (East Bengal), who arrived in January 1948, later reminisced: "The provincial government . . . was newly formed and poorly staffed. But worse still, it was politically weak and unstable. There was no army. All we had in East Pakistan at the time of Independence were two infantry battalions [one with three and one with only two companies]. We had very poor accommodation: at Headquarters there was no table, no chair, no stationery . . . we had virtually nothing at all; not even any maps of East Pakistan."⁴

These initial uncertainties and the artificial nature of Pakistan's unity fuelled the desire for a strong, centralised state. The ruling party, the Muslim League, benefited from the prevailing mood in Pakistan, which was one of euphoria. Having attained a sovereign homeland, Muslims could now safeguard their political, religious and cultural rights and they could complete their economic emancipation. But it did not take long for them to realise that the road ahead was anything but smooth: the two elements that most Pakistanis shared—an Islamic identity and a fear of India—proved insufficient to keep them united. Immediately fights broke out over the equitable distribution of resources, both material and symbolic. Only three months

after independence a first serious crack in the edifice of Pakistan appeared over the question of the national language. It was the initial portent of enormous tensions over how the new state should be organised. These strains would gradually spoil the prospect of building a Pakistani nation. Right from the beginning, they took the form of a confrontation between Pakistan's two wings over issues such as language, autonomy, food security and economic policy. In the unfolding drama of Pakistani politics, the Bengal delta would play the role of the disenfranchised sibling clamouring consistently and unsuccessfully for rights withheld. Throughout the twenty-four years of the Pakistan experiment, the country's various rulers shared two nightmares: to be humiliated by India and to see control of the state pass democratically to East Pakistan. The latter fear would be their undoing. It animated an extraordinary political obstinacy that would, in the end, lead them to wage war on the majority of Pakistan's citizens. This strategy blew up in their faces, resulted in their utter humiliation by India, and left them no other choice but to separate themselves from East Pakistan and hang on to what was left of their power in Pakistan's western wing.

In 1947 the new Pakistani elite faced the difficult task of welding its citizens into a united Pakistani nation. Immediately the question came up in what language Pakistan's state business should be conducted. The Pakistan Educational Conference of November 1947 proposed Urdu as the national language, a suggestion that was opposed by representatives from East Pakistan. A few months later an East Pakistan member of the Constituent Assembly tabled an amendment to allow the Bengali language to be used in the Assembly alongside Urdu. He was sharply rebutted by the prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, who averred: "Pakistan has been created because of the demand of a hundred million Muslims in this subcontinent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu . . . It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language."⁵

This was quite an extraordinary statement in view of the fact that Pakistanis spoke dozens of languages and that Urdu was spoken by only 3 per cent of them. Bengali was very clearly the principal language of the country: it was spoken by 56 per cent of all Pakistanis. So why was the prime minister so adamant about Urdu?

The language issue stood for a more general cultural and political divide within the fledgling state. Muslim politicians in Bengal had imagined Pakistan differently from their counterparts in Northern India. The Bengalis had dreamed of a land free from the economic domination of Hindus and they imagined a leading role for themselves as representatives of the majority of

Pakistani citizens. North Indian Muslim politicians, on the other hand, had pictured themselves as the natural leaders of Pakistan because they considered themselves to be the guardians of the Muslim renaissance movement in South Asia and, therefore, arbiters of the future of all Muslims. They insisted that their vision of Pakistan should rightfully take precedence.

From the beginning, the "North Indian" view dominated the institutions of state. There were two regional groups that endorsed it. The first became known as the *Muhajirs* (= migrants). They were largely members of Urdu-speaking intellectual and trading elites from North India who moved to Pakistan's cities in their hundreds of thousands and immediately exerted an influence on politics and social life that was way out of proportion to their numbers. What made them unusual immigrants was that many of them expected the local population to adapt to them rather than the other way around. They took hold of almost all higher positions in the administration and the executive power. Most of these immigrants settled in West Pakistan but over 100,000 Muhajirs made their new homes in East Pakistan. The second regional group was Muslims from Punjab. They were heavily over-represented in the armed forces, manned the state administration and controlled valuable irrigated land. The Punjabis progressively outflanked the Muhajirs to become the hegemonic power in Pakistan. This was symbolised in 1959 by the transferral of the capital from Karachi (Pakistan's prime Muhajir city) to the Punjab garrison town of Rawalpindi, and from there to newly constructed Islamabad a decade later.

The Bengali political elite took exception to the North Indian view of Pakistan's future. The country's new rulers, concentrated in West Pakistan, used Islam as the political idiom to justify their actions and this caught the Bengalis in a quandary: their protests were easily dismissed as un- or anti-Islamic. This was no mere tactical ploy on the part of West Pakistani politicians. There was a widespread perception in West Pakistan that Bengali Muslims were not only socially inferior but also lesser Muslims because they did not adhere to many of the cultural practices that North Indians considered properly Islamic. The message from West Pakistan was that however passionately Bengalis might think of themselves as Muslims, they fell short of the mark and they could not be fully-fledged Pakistanis unless they shed much of their Bengali-ness. In this climate the dilemma for politicians from East Pakistan was that they needed constantly to underline their Islamic *bona fides* and at the same time defend a regional interest.

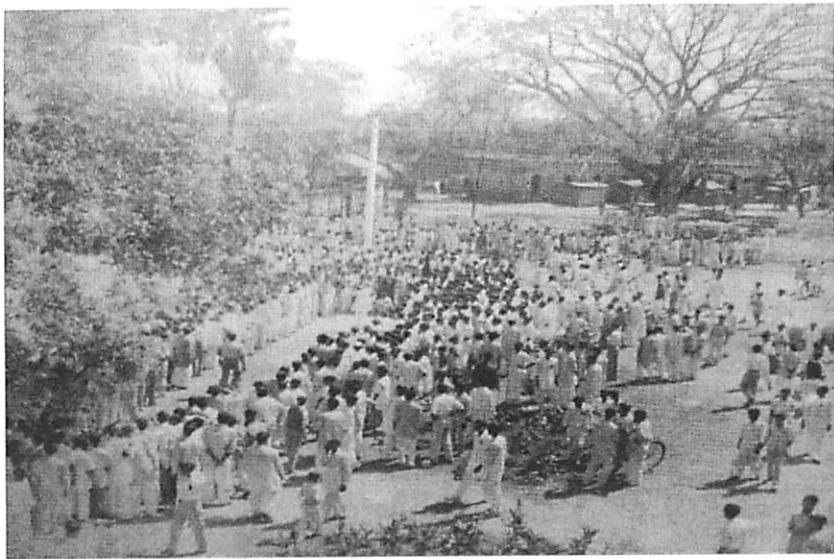
The language issue became the focal point of this conflict because imposing Urdu was part of a mission to "Islamise" East Pakistan. Many in West Pakistan knew very little about the Bengali language but thought of

it as in need of "purification" from Hindu influences. To them the Bengali script (evolved from Sanskrit), the Sanskritic vocabulary of Bengali and the dominance of Hindus in the Bengali literary pantheon were all irksome. The Bengali Muslims' obvious attachment to their language and literature was puzzling, and their rejection of Urdu rather suspect.

When students in East Pakistan came to know about the plan to make Urdu the national language, they held meetings and demonstrations and then formed the first Language Action Committee in December 1947. Things came to a head in March 1948 when general strikes were observed in East Pakistan's towns and the movement's leaders were arrested and injured. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Governor-General of Pakistan at the time, visited Dhaka a few days later. Addressing a large audience, he stated that the Bengali language could be used in East Pakistan, "but let me make it clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore, so far as the state language is concerned, Pakistan's language shall be Urdu. But as I have said, it will come in time."⁶

This uncompromising attitude led to rapid disillusionment with the Muslim League government amongst East Pakistani intellectuals, civil servants, politicians and students. This was not just a matter of regional pride, cultural identity and democratic principles but also a reflection of frustrated career ambitions. Urdu-speaking candidates were preferred for jobs in the state bureaucracy and, in East Pakistan, this excluded almost all locals (fewer than 1 per cent spoke Urdu as a second language) and favoured North Indian immigrants.

The Language Movement, or *Bhasha Andolon*, gave rise to a new type of politician in East Pakistan: the Bengali-speaking student agitator. Throughout the Pakistan period students at schools, colleges and universities often played a decisive role in turning political grievances into popular resistance and forcing the Pakistan state to change its policies. The most critical event of the Language Movement, and a pivotal moment for the Pakistan experiment, occurred in early 1952. There was a growing sense of deprivation and disappointment in East Pakistan and a feeling was spreading that a new form of colonial rule had replaced British imperialism. The Language Movement, which had declined after 1948, reignited when the new prime minister of Pakistan, Khwaja Nazimuddin, came to Dhaka and addressed a large crowd at a central green. When he pronounced that the people of East Pakistan could decide what would be the provincial language but only Urdu would



21 February 1952: students are gathering on the Dhaka University campus to defy the government's ban on demonstrations in favor of the Bengali language. Used by permission of the Heritage Archives of Bangladesh History, Rajshahi.

be Pakistan's state language, he received a very angry reaction. Students responded with the slogan "We demand Bengali as a national language!" (*rastrabhasa bangla chai!*). Dhaka University went on strike and a number of organisations called a protest meeting, chaired by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani. Bhashani was a long-term supporter of the idea of Pakistan who had broken with the Muslim League in 1949 to form a new party, the Awami [People's] Muslim League. The meeting sharply denounced the decision to make Urdu the state language and also rejected a government plan to introduce Arabic script to write Bengali. It decided to call a general strike (*hartal*) and demonstrations throughout East Pakistan on 21 February 1952.

The government imposed a ban on these demonstrations in Dhaka and although some organisers hesitated to violate it, many students were determined to persevere. Thousands of boys and girls from schools and colleges all over Dhaka assembled on the campus of Dhaka University together with university students. They then started marching and shouting slogans. As soon as they passed the campus gates armed policemen baton-charged them. The students retaliated by throwing bricks, upon which the police used tear gas and then fired into the crowd. Many were injured and five people, including a nine-year-old boy, were killed. Over the next few days

more demonstrations, killings and arrests occurred, and a memorial was hastily erected on the spot where the first killings had taken place.

This memorial was removed by the authorities and recreated several times before it was replaced by a concrete monument, the Martyrs' Memorial or Shohid Minar (*shahīd minār*), in 1962. Today this monument continues to be a focal point of national identity politics and there are martyrs' memorials in every delta town. The twenty-first of February (*Ekushe*) became a key national holiday and in 1999, following a proposal by the Bangladesh government, UNICEF created International Mother Language Day, celebrated annually on 21 February.

The events of 1952 were critically important, and not just because the Pakistani armed forces had turned murderously violent against fellow Pakistanis demonstrating for their rights, thus exposing the brutal nature of the state's leadership. This had happened before, e.g., in July 1948 when the army put down a police revolt in Dhaka. What made 1952 a defining moment was that it marked a sharp psychological rupture. For many in the Bengal delta, it signified the shattering of the dream of Pakistan and the beginning of a new political project, still hazy and fully supported by only a few: the search for a secular alternative to the communal idiom of Pakistan politics and for an autonomy that the delta had last experienced in pre-Mughal times.

Notes

1. Initially, the eastern wing of Pakistan was known officially as "East Bengal." It became "East Pakistan" in 1956.
2. A. M. K. Maswani, *Subversion in East Pakistan* (Lahore: Amir Publications, 1979), 84–85.
3. *Five Years of Pakistan (August 1947–August 1952)* (Karachi: Pakistan Publications, 1952), 243.
4. Muhammad Ayub Khan, *Friends Not Masters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 22.
5. Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Muslim Bengali Nationalism* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, and Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1994), 21.
6. Z. H. Zaidi (ed.-in-chief), *Jinnah Papers: Pakistan—Struggling for Survival, 1 January–30 September 1948*, Vol. VII, Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project, Government of Pakistan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003).