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Mutual Dependence of Power and Language

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[This paper is the side product of quite a queer investigation into the language policy of the Indian Railways. Apparently Indian Railways adopt the three-language policy in the station name displays all through its vast network – English, Hindi and the official/dominant language of the particular region in which a station is located. In the Hindi speaking belt, however, the necessity of the third regional language is not often felt or sometimes even ruled out. But there are other instances when a station name board displays a fourth language! During a train journey undertaken by the researcher as fieldwork for another research study, the station name board in Durgapur came into notice. Durgapur is an industrial township in the state of West Bengal where official local language is Bengali. Thus, the station name board was expected to be written in English, Hindi and Bengali. But, there was the fourth language script that found its place in it – Urdu. A station name board would accommodate a language only if there is a considerable population speaking that particular language in their day to day life. This led the researcher to farther investigate into the role and position of Urdu in Bengal (both present Indian state of West Bengal and neighbouring Bangladesh) and the relations Bengali shared with it at different points of time. The revelations of the investigation are stated here.]

Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* (1980), describes knowledge as being conjunction of power relations and information seeking which he terms as 'power/knowledge'. He states that 'it is not possible for power to be excercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.'[1] Foucault here emphasizes that knowledge is not dispassionate, rather an integral part of struggles over power. It also draws the attention to the way that, in producing knowledge, one is also making claim for power. Hence, for Foucault it was more accurate to use the newly formed compound 'power/knowledge' to emphasise the way that these two elements depend on one another. "Thus, where there are imbalances of power relations between groups of people or between institutions/states, there will be a production of knowledge. Because of the institutional imbalance in power relations between men and women in Western countries, Foucault would argue, information is produced about women; thus we find many books in libraries about women but few about men, and similarly many about working class but few about the middle classes."[2]

Now, we should examine the role of language in the process of knowledge formation. For illustration purpose we would refer to examples from the status of the Bangla language in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era. The 'knowledge', most of us will agree, in Foucaultian sense is a tool for creating a discourse in terms of power and hegemony. This knowledge is created in order to influence 'others' in an influencing way. What can be a better tool than the language itself in creating a particular knowledge? In fact it is the language which asserts the authenticity and superiority to a particular knowledge and often it is the language of the influencing class that is accepted in

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[1] Foucault, Michel. *'Prison Talk'* in *Power/Knowledge*. 1980
[2] Mills, Sara. (2007). *Michel Foucault*. Routledge. India. Pp 69

the knowledge formation process. The language as such should be highly prestigious yet unattainable by the basic strata of the society in order to put absolute authority in the hands of a few. Religious texts and books of laws throughout the ages across cultures are created in this manner along with other fields of knowledge. Again the created knowledge must not only be in the language inaccessible to the ground level, also at the same time should be institutionalized in order to create the power relationship working in harmony. The power relation puts an individual in a position which is attainable going through or conforming to the norms set by the influencing group. During the first census carried out in Bengal in 1872, Muslims formed 48 percent of the population of the province.[3] Most of them were working class who were referred to as *atrap* (*ajlaf*) in UP and Bihar. At the other end of the social hierarchy were the Muslim aristocrats and gentlemen called the *ashraf*. The *ashraf* often spoke Urdu, and official works during the period were carried on in Persian. In fact, so strong was the feeling that the Bengali culture was not Muslim that a 16th century poet believed the translating religious books into Bengali was sinful. This 'sin', however, was politically necessary because ordinary Bengali Muslims were very close to their Hindu neighbours in most aspects of behaviour. The Muslim elite attempted to reform them and used the Bengali language for the purpose, however, sinful it may appear to be, yet could not be avoided. Out of the necessity of describing the Islamic concepts and rituals the Bengali of the Muslim writers was essentially different from Hindu Bengali. It was Musalmani Bangla or Dobashi which is a 'variety of Bengali which has a heavy admixture of words and some derivational affixes borrowed from the "Islamic" languages: Persian, Arabic, Urdu and Turkish'.[4] Bengali was at that point of time highly Islamized through the substitution of Sanskritic lexical items by Perso-Arabic lexicon; an ideologically inspired language planning.

No doubt this new kind of Bengali enjoyed a far better and respectable position than the previous one. It has become an example of the power conditioning a language and in return using it as a device for creating knowledge. Knowledge in this case is that of authenticating the religious teaching and preaching. Since ordinary Bengali spoken by the popular mass is rejected in this case and conditioned highly in producing religious texts, it is undoubtedly a clear example of power exercise where the reconditioned Bengali works as the tool for establishing firm power relationship.

Now, with the coming of the British, the advent of printing, and increased consumption of the printing word, there came a literary 'renaissance' in Bengal. Interestingly this renaissance initially resulted in the rise of the Hindu middle class, the *Bhadralok*, and an efflorescent in Sanskritic Bengali literature.[5] Bengali Muslims across the classes lag far behind in the race of power and wealth under the British patronage. The army, the higher administration, and the revenue were in British hands, and even the lower echelons of the judicial and civil bureaucracy were closed to the Muslims as the court language changed from Persian to Bengali. This had happened in 1837 whose account to be found in Hunter[6]:

> The Hindus poured into, and have since completely filled, every grade of official life. Even in the District Collectorates of Lower Bengal, where it is still possible to give

[3] Census-B 8172: Gen. Statement 1B

[4] Dil, Afia. (1993). *Two Traditions of the Bengali Language*. National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research. Islamabad. Pp 63.

[5] Kopff, David. (1969). *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance : The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835*. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles. Pg 193-216

[6] Hunter, W. W. (1974). *The Indian Musalmans. Are they Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* Premier Book House. Lahore. Pp 141

appointments in the old fashioned friendly way, there are very few young Musalman officials.

Jobs were now available by learning the language(s) used in the domains of power.

Thus, two contradictory movements continued simultaneously: the acceptance of the Bengali identity and the assertion of the Muslim identity. The Bengali neo-elite group also required to learn the language of the new ruling class, i.e. English which they gladly accepted. The Persian-Bengali controversy was not the only reason for the lack of opposition to English. The Bengali literate population's, like many others in remaining parts of India, this enthusiasm for English was because of its facilitation of upward social and economic mobility. It was a symbol of elitism and associated its Indian users with power, modernity, and social prestige. Those who learnt English managed to place themselves in the power apparatus of the state such as prestigious Indian Civil Service (ICS).

Now, among the Muslim society, as has been mentioned in the previous paragraph, the population got divided into two parts on the Muslim language issue. The section asserting the Muslim identity demanded the restoration of Urdu and appointment of Urdu (and sometimes Persian) teachers in the Government aided Muslim schools. This group was, notably stronger than the other group. Maulana Akram Khan, a religious leader of the Muslim league declared in 1918 that the question of whether Urdu or Bengali was the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims was 'the most preposterous question of them all'.[7] For quite some time this controversy prevailed along with English versus vernacular controversy. If the latter one is prevalent in the domain of political power relationship, then the former was prevalent in the domain of the religious power relation. Here it is clearly a shift from the earlier Mughal period's religio-political power relation to two distinct power relationships in the domains of politics and religion each asserting their own influence on the language in order to put some kind of identities.

Now, post Raj period stays to witness some different issues. With the British leaving India and formation of East and West Pakistan, the East Pakistan (East Bengal earlier) the once Urdu-Bengali controversy again took place. It was triggered off when Dhirendranath Datta, a Hindu member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, raised the question of the use of Bengali along with Urdu and English, in the Constituent Assembly. To this, the then Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, replied:[8]

> 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.

But this was to the disappointment of the popular mass. It is evident from numerous letters to the editors in the newspapers, strikes, processions and news paper articles etc. The state inspired Language policy was that of asserting the Muslim identity through Urdu. Major politicians including Jinnah were against recognizing any other language other than Urdu as the state language. The final most important reaction came out from the student community in 21st February 1952 which led to violence between the students and the state apparatus and eventually numerous casualties. Dhaka Assembly now tried to minimize the damage by moving the following motion:[9]

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[7] Helal, Bashir al. (1985). *Bhasha Ondoloner Ittihash*. 3 Vols. Bangla Academy. Dhaka. Pp71.
[8] Legislative Assembly Debates: Pakistan 25th February 1948: 16
[9] Legislative Assembly Debates: Bengal 22nd February 1952: 89

> This Assembly recommends to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan that Bengali be one of the state languages of Pakistan.

However, the motion came too late to pacify the students, the official point of view of the ruling elite and of West Pakistanis in general was so different from that of the Bengalis that they failed to understand the language movement.

After a series of political events Bengali was considered as a co-official language along with Urdu in 1955. The demand for and against Bengali in the whole series of events took place in two different domains. Apparently it was a clear ethno-political issue, but in a deeper level, this was a case of seeking ethno-cultural identity challenging the state imposed medium instead of the vernacular one in East Pakistan and while treating the whole issue becomes a case of exercising political power relationship and hegemony on parts of the high elite class. The West Pakistani part in this case, of course tried to exercise the authoritative power through Urdu, which was counterstriked by the East Pakistan through the demand of another language parallel to Urdu. In East Pakistan, (former East Bengal and now Bangladesh) the language, i.e. Bengali itself has become the tool for asserting identity and also a victim of imposing a different identity. The lesson the ruling elite drew from the rise of the Bengali ethno-nationalism was that of expression of ethnicity should be suppressed. It was for the first time that the dominance of the Centre (?) was successfully challenged through ethnic appeals and a pattern was set for similar developments in future.

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