

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

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Abstract

The question of language and identity has been a very contentious issue in Pakistan since its inception. As the creation of Pakistan was predicated on a single 'Muslim nation,' it was easily assumed that this nation would be monolithic and especially only have one common language, which was deemed to be Urdu. However, while Urdu was the lingua franca of the Muslim elite in northern India, in large parts of Muslim India it was almost an alien language. Therefore, the meshing of a religious identity with that of a national identity quickly became a major problem in Pakistan as soon as it was created.

Focusing on the first year after its creation, this paper assesses the inception of the language issue in Pakistan in 1947-48. Taking the debate on language in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in February 1948, and the subsequent views of the founder and first Governor General of the country, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, during his March 1948 tour of East Bengal, this paper exhibits the fraught nature of the debate on language in Pakistan. It clearly shows how a very small issue was blown out of proportion, setting the stage for the grounding of a language rights movement which created unease and resentment in large parts of the country, ultimately leading to its vivisection in 1971.

Keywords: Pakistan, Language, East Bengal, Bengali, Urdu, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan National Congress, Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan was born in August 1947, in two parts—'wings,' as they later became to be known. However, these wings had a problem: between them lay nearly one thousand miles of territory which was the new India (for a long time the government and people in Pakistan referred to modern India as Bharat, to differentiate it from united India, which legally had given birth to two new countries, but which continued in 'Bharat' in the popular imagination.), and which, within a few months of independence, became enemy territory. But this was not the only problem for the two wings. There was only one thing in common between the two: religion. The overwhelming majority of both wings were Muslim, but that was about it. Independence and partition added to this complexity with the fact as noted by S. M. Huda, Office of the Economic Advisor that while in Western Pakistan the non-Muslim population decreased from about 24.6% according to the 1941 census to about 5% within a few years, in Eastern Pakistan the 30% strong non-Muslim population only gradually declined and stood at nearly 20% in the first decade after independence (Zaidi, 2002) (Census of Pakistan, 1951). There was also a third major distinction between the two wings: while Western Pakistan was

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composed of several ethnicities who spoke different languages, Eastern Pakistan was largely homogenous ethnically and was mono-lingual mostly. Hence, the two ‘wings’ were lopsided and how this falcon was going to take off and remain steady in the air remained to be seen.

Eastern Pakistan also had a different historical trajectory than Western Pakistan. While most of Western Pakistan had been under British rule for just about a century, and a large part of it were the princely states, Eastern Bengal had been under the British for over two centuries. This fact led to a different mode of political, cultural and social development in Bengal as compared to Western Pakistan. It is true that Eastern Bengal and Sylhet were the hinterland for the Calcutta based pioneers of the Bengal Renaissance, yet they still had proximity, and while not Bhadrakol, still had a sense of cultural belonging and identity¹. After all, India first Nobel Laureate was the polymath Sir Ranbindranath Tagore, who was given the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1910, and who’s poetry flowed almost as the blood of every Bengali—be it Hindu or Muslim. A sense of cultural unity, distinctness and pride, was something visceral for the Bengali people and it remained with them through the transition of about two thirds of the Bengal presidency to Pakistan on August 15, 1947.

The language issue arose in the immediate aftermath of independence—it had to be decided which language, or languages, would the new Muslim nation speak, officially and colloquially. While it seemed that the elevated position of English would have no threat in Pakistan for the foreseeable future [and as it happens to date], the tussle therefore began over a rather interesting term ‘national language.’ Hence, Pakistan became a country where the official language—the language in which all government functions are undertaken and which is the medium of instruction in higher education, was undisputedly English, but where there was a debate on the ‘national’ language where one wasn’t quite sure what the status really meant but felt passionately about it nonetheless².

¹ For more on the Bengal Renaissance see, Dasgupta, S. (2007). *The Bengal renaissance: Identity and creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, and Bandopadhyay, S. (2001). *Bengal, rethinking history: Essays in historiography*. New Delhi: Manohar.

² On the question of Official versus National languages and their different connotations see, Lecomte, L. (2014). *Official languages or national languages?: Canada's decision*. Ottawa, Canada: Library of Parliament. The Report concludes that, ‘There is a difference between the legal status of an “official language” and that of a “national language” in that an official language generally bestows language rights on citizens.’ Hence, in terms of law official languages are more enforceable and critical. In the Pakistan case the quarrel was more about the ‘national’ language, without much thinking about its implication as an ‘official’ language, though eventually provision was made to make the national language(s) official.

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

Despite the unclear legal nature of the term ‘national’ language, a fierce debate soon arose pitting Urdu versus Bengali in Pakistan. A month after independence in mid-September 1947 a pamphlet was circulating in Dacca arguing that Bengali should be made the court language and medium of instruction in East Bengal. It even went as far as to advocate that Bengali be made co-equal with Urdu at the centre. (Jaffrelot, 2004) A ‘Tamaddun Majlis’ [Cultural Association] was also set up around the same time by students at Dacca University which argued the aims of the pamphlet. (Jaffrelot, 2014). This Association was soon joined by the Rashra Basha Sangram Parishad i.e., the State Language Committee of Action founded in October 1947, when it became clear that official nomenclature, bank notes and the rest would be only in Urdu with no taint of Bengali. Thereafter there was a protest in Dacca and a meeting at the Dacca University deplored the omission of Bengali—the language spoken by the majority of Pakistan’s people from official discourse. The fiercely national Bengalis had also now decided to ‘protect’ their language.

The Debate in the Constituent Assembly

February 1948 was almost six months after independence. It was also almost six months since the first session of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP) had ended after a jubilant four-day session. Hence, a session was called by the President, His Excellency the Governor General Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, to meet early on the 23rd day of February, 1948. But the CAP was a peculiar animal. It was one chamber but had two roles and therefore the same people met separately for its two roles. Its first role was to act as the Federal Legislature of the country and conduct its day-to-day business; the other incarnation was to act as the sovereign constitution making body of the country—the Assembly from its inception had a split personality. Often the press confused the roles, and as hindsight has assured even the members, the executive and even the judiciary confused these roles. In any case, the legislative incarnation of the CAP met on the first day, followed by the constitution-making body meeting the next day³.

The non-Muslim members of the CAP were not as worried about their status as they were on the eve of the first session some six months ago. Six months ago they thought that their future as non-Muslims was doomed under a Muslim government. However, their fears has been allayed by the powerful speech of the President of the CAP itself, which assured them that citizenship, not religion, would form the basis of the state. As Jinnah has stated there would be no ‘majority’ or ‘minority’ in Pakistan—all would be equal citizens of the state. Hence, elated by their previous experience, most of the non-Muslim members of the CAP entered the Assembly chamber with confidence. They were now full and equal citizens of Pakistan and were now to exercise their duty

³ For how the dual nature of the CAP created confusion see, McGarth, A. (1996). *The Destruction of Pakistan’s Democracy*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Dr Yaqoob Khan Bangash

to deliberate upon the actions of government as the elected representatives of the people.

As the members had not had much time in the first session to deliberate on the rules of business, the first item on the agenda was their adoption for use in the CAP. The CAP used a version of the rules adopted by the Central Legislature of British India, but of course they had to be amended to display the new sovereign nature of the CAP. As the day started, some of the non-Muslim members of the CAP, energised as they were by Jinnah's speech, began to flex their muscle since not only were they confident today, they represented the most populous part of the country, containing nearly 55% of the population.

The most charged member of the Pakistan National Congress that day was Mr Dharendra Nath Datta. Eager to exercise his right as a CAP member he rose to his feet with amendments to the rules as soon as the house assembled. Mr Datta wanted to get going and was proposing one amendment after another to the rules. Almost the whole sitting on the first day of the CAP sitting as the sovereign body was taken up by his amendments; so much so that by the time the house was adjourned he still had a few proposed amendments pending!

The next morning when the house again assembled at eleven o'clock in the morning, everyone knew that Mr Datta will be again on his feet suggesting amendments. True to form, Mr Datta rose up after the initial discussion on a rule and proposed:

Mr. President, Sir, I move:

“That in sub-rule (1) of rule 29, after the word “English” in line 2, the words “or Bengalee”, be inserted.” (“CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2”, 1948, p. 15)

The sound of this amendment being read alerted everyone in the house and almost everyone began to closely hear what Mr Datta had suggested.

Gaining strength from the eager looks of the other assembly members, Mr Datta explained:

Mr. President, Sir, in moving this—the motion that stands in my name—I can assure the House that I do so not in the spirit of narrow Provincialism, but, Sir, in the spirit that this motion receives the fullest consideration at the hands of members present. I know, Sir, that Bengalee is a Provincial language, but, so far our State is concerned, it is the language of the majority of the people of our State...Out of the six crores and ninety lakhs of people inhabiting this State, four crore and 40 lakhs of people speak the Bengalee language...Sir, I consider the Bengalee language is the lingua franca of our State. (“CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2”, 1948, p. 15)

This much was certainly true: the eastern part of Pakistan, while smaller in land mass, contained a larger population which almost completely spoke the Bengali language. Hence, Mr Datta was making a plea that Bengali—together with English and Urdu, be permitted in the Assembly. He also went further and argued that Bengali should be made a state language—again not replacing either Urdu or English, but with them, since its absence in official discourse, especially in eastern Pakistan, was creating a lot of practical problems. He continued:

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

...the common man even if he goes to a Post Office and wants to have a money order form finds that the money order is printed in Urdu language and is not printed in Bengalee language or it is printed in English. A poor cultivator, who has got his son, Sir, as a student in the Dacca University and who wants to send money to him, goes to a village Post Office and he asks for a money order form, finds that the money order form is printed in the Urdu language. He cannot send the money order but shall have to rush to a distant town and have this money order translated for him and then the money order, Sir, that is necessary for his boy can be sent. The poor cultivator Sir, sells a certain plot of land or a poor cultivator purchases a plot of land and goes to the stamp vendor and pays him money but cannot say whether he has received the value of the money in stamps. The caules of the stamp, Sir, is written not in Bengalee but is written in Urdu and English...The language of the State should be such which can be understood by the common men of the State. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 16)

Mr Datta's speech certainly had its merits. Surely, the language of the majority of the people of the state should be considered as one of the state languages. Datta was not clamouring for either Urdu or English to be done away with, but was asking for an addition of the Bengali language so that a 'Trinity' of languages could be co-equal in this new schema of Pakistan. Of course, the 'poor cultivator' was slightly a special case, since with less than 10% of the population of East Bengal being literate at the time he seemed to be able to read, write and understand Bengali!

Not to be left behind, Mr Prem Hari Barma, Datta's fellow Congressman from East Bengal, quickly rose to his feet to support his colleague. Mr Barma reiterated that this amendment was not drawing away from either the status of Urdu or English but simply adding Bengali to that constellation. He exclaimed: 'Sir, this amendment does not seek to oust English or Urdu altogether but it seeks only to have Bengalee as one of the media spoken in the Assembly by the Members of the Assembly.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 17)

One could clearly see the irritation and annoyance caused by this amendment on the face of the Prime Minister. Therefore, as soon as Mr Barma sat down, Liaquat Ali Khan quickly rose and regretted that Mr Datta had even proposed this amendment. He said: 'I wish the Hon'ble member had not moved his amendment and tried to create misunderstanding between the different parts of Pakistan.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 17) He then emphatically stated that Bengali was to have no national status in Pakistan, since, according to him, the national language of all the Muslims of India was Urdu, and Urdu alone. With force in his voice, Liaquat thumped:

He [Mr Datta] should realise that Pakistan has been created because of the demand of a hundred million Muslims in this sub-continent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu and, therefore, it is wrong for "him now to try and create the situation that as the majority of the people of Pakistan belongs to ~ne part of Pakistan, therefore the language which is spoken there should become the State language of Pakistan. Pakistan is a Muslim State and it must have as its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nation. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 17)

Liaquat went on to stress that he was not against Bengali as a provincial language, indeed he supported Bengali in Bengal, but as a language for the whole of Pakistan he could not support the language which was spoken by the majority of the country's people as a state language. He argued:

Urdu can be the only language which can keep the people of East Bengal or Eastern Zone and the people of Western Zone joined together. It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can only be Urdu and no other language. Sir, as I have said, there is no intention on the part of the Government or anybody else that Bengalee should be done away with. As a matter of fact, I have always felt and it is my personal view, based on long experience, that you should not teach a child in any other language, except his own mother tongue. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 17)

While the non-Muslim Bengali members of the CAP were still in shock at the diminution of their beloved language at the national level, and the Muslim members from western Pakistan, especially from Sind, North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, were wondering how many of their constituents understood Urdu, Liaquat attacked Mr Datta with creating dissent and discord among the nation. He charged: 'when the notice of that amendment was given, I thought that the object was an innocent one. The object to include Bengalee was that in case there are some people who are not proficient in English or Urdu might express their views in that language, but I find now that the object is not such an innocent one as I thought it was, The object of this amendment is to create a rift between the people of Pakistan.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 17) Liaquat almost labelled supporting the resolution treasonous and its rejection critical for the survival of the country. He said: 'It is really the most vital question, a question of life and death for the Muslim nation not only for Pakistan but throughout this whole sub-continent and I most strongly oppose the amendment which has been moved. I hope the House will not lend its support to such a kind of amendment, if ever it comes forward in future.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 18) Many in the house then wondered how and why could acceptance of a language, and that too of the majority population of the country, elicit such a strong reaction? Why would the equal status of Bengali with Urdu and English, threaten the survival of the Muslims of South Asia? And how could the Bengali members of the house—both Muslim and non-Muslim, feel comfortable in a state which so vehemently rejected co-equal status to their language?

The strongly worded speech of the Prime Minister simply confounded Mr Bhupendra Kumar Datta, who was intently listening to the proceedings. He was simply aghast at the language used by the Prime Minister which more or less called those supporting the amendment as traitors set on destabilising the country. He exclaimed: 'I am surprised at the speech the Honorable the Leader of the House has just made. I wish he had not made some of the remarks he chose to make. They will have unfortunate repercussions elsewhere even in certain sections in Pakistan.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 18) He further wondered what sin the other Mr Datta had committed by requesting that the House—the representative assembly of all the people of

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

Pakistan, also accept the language of the majority population as co-equal with English and Urdu. He pleaded:

It cannot be questioned that Bengalee is the spoken language and known to the majority of the people of Pakistan...The Bengalee people are put to a disadvantage in every manner. The capital of the State is far removed from the place where the majority of the people dwell and then this language bar is put against the majority of the common people of the State. This is certainly not a tendency towards democracy: it is a tendency towards domination of the upper few of a particular region of the State. We are not yet pressing it to be the lingua franca of the State. We are merely demanding that it to be included as one of the three languages to be permitted here. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 18)

Sensing that the debate was getting out of hand, and not focusing on what the amendment was really about—i.e., the addition of Bengali to the languages permitted by the House, the minister for Refugees and Rehabilitation, Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, clarified that under the rules, the President of the CAP could allow a member to speak in any language. He said: 'As a matter of fact there is no bar against any Member of this House expressing himself in Bengalee if he want to do so. May I remind the Honourable Members that according to rule 29 the Chairman may permit any Honourable Member who cannot adequately express himself in any of those languages (that is Urdu or English) to address the Assembly in his mother tongue?' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 19) But by then the issue was not just of speaking in Bengali when the member spoke none of the two official languages, but of the right of a Bengali speaker to speak in his/her mother tongue, even though he/she spoke Urdu and/or English. The question was no longer of 'allowance' or 'permission,' but of 'right.'

Raja Ghazanfar however, reiterated the stance of the honourable Prime Minister that Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan. He emphasised the 'one state, one language' notion, and insisted that since Urdu was the unique language of all the Muslims of South Asia, it alone should be the national language of the country. He said:

There is only one State and that is the State of Pakistan and all these provinces are different provinces of the State of Pakistan. There is only one State and there shall be one language, the State language and that is Urdu...It is not a question of whether Urdu is a Punjabi language or it is a Western Pakistan language. Urdu is not a language or dialect of Punjab, it is not a dialect of Sind, nor is it a dialect of the North-West Frontier Province, but it is the language of the Muslim culture and the Muslim civilisation is, therefore, our national language. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 19)

The premier of East Bengal, the honourable Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin, was watching these deliberations carefully. He was the representative of the people of East Bengal, both Hindus and Muslims, and therefore had to tread the rope very carefully. He knew that he could not dismiss the importance of the Bengali language completely, but as an Urduized Bengali, he could not make himself support parity of Bengali with Urdu

either. He therefore supported both sides by championing the cause of Bengali within the province of East Bengal, but supported Urdu at the centre. He noted: 'as far as inter-communication between the Provinces and the Centre is concerned, they [the Bengalis] feel that Urdu is the only language that can be adopted. But there is a very strong feeling that the medium of instruction should be Bengalee in Educational Institutions and as far as the administration of the province is concerned, the language used in administering the province should also be Bengalee. I am glad to find that the Hon'ble the Leader of the House has made it clear that there is no question of ousting Bengalee from the province...' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 20) This stance would soon make the well-mannered and quiet Khawaja from the Dacca Nawab's family very unpopular among the people of his own province even though he would successively become the second governor-general and second prime minister of Pakistan.

The leader of the Pakistan National Congress, Mr Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya, had been noting the debate with unease. He was flabbergasted by the course of the debate, where a simple amendment to put Bengali as an additional language for the CAP, had resulted in a debate on the question of a national language and the nature of the state. Even the survival of Muslims in South Asia had been made dependent upon the fortune of this amendment. Perturbed by this rather bizarre turn of events Mr Chattopadhyaya decided to speak. He didn't want to repeat the arguments made by his colleagues in the Congress party, but simply wanted to bring the question back into perspective. However, the remarks by both the Prime Minister and the minister for refugees, made him think about the nature of the state. He had been among those elated by the speech of the Quaid-e-Azam not six months ago, where he had made citizenship, not religion, as the basis for the state. But now Mr Chattopadhyaya could only hear mention of a 'Muslim nation' and a 'Muslim state.' Several times he gazed upon the president of the house—the same man who uttered those prophetic words on August 11, 1947, but could see no emotion. True to the office of President, Jinnah remained aloof from the discussion, only intervening procedurally and without any favouritism towards either side. Therefore, Mr Chattopadhyaya saw no choice than to speak and vent his frustration at what the debate had descended into. He rose and said:

Mr. President, Sir, it pains me to hear the Hon'ble the Leader of the House when he says that Pakistan is a Muslim State. So long my idea was that Pakistan is the peoples' State and it belongs to the Muslims as well as to the non-Muslims, If today the statement of the Honourable the Leader of the House is accepted then it is a matter of serious consideration for the non-Muslims whether they have any right to take any part in the framing of the constitution as well: That is really very important question because in that case, Muslims only, and it is also desirable, should frame their own constitution. ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, pp. 20-21)

Coming to the actual content of the amendment, Mr Chattopadhyaya clarified that it was not about Bengali as a state language, nor about replacing Urdu or English; it was simply about allowing CAP members to speak in Bengali as well as English and Urdu.

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

He pleaded: 'Here the amendment says-s-it never said about the State language-c-how the proceedings of the House are to be conducted. There is mention of Urdu as well as English. He only wants to add Bengalee.' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 21) The submissions of the members of the Pakistan National Congress however fell on deaf ears. The Muslim members of the CAP were convinced that the survival of Pakistan depended on the notion of 'one state, one language' and they kept referring to India, where recently it had been agreed that Hindi would be the official language of the state, to argue that the state language need not be the language spoken by a majority of the population. It seemed as if even after independence the point of reference for Karachi was still New Delhi and the deliberations in the Indian Constituent Assembly—now very far in its discussions, were having a clear and lasting effect on its counterpart in Pakistan. Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan, Khawaja Nazimuddin and Mr Alhaj Muhammad Hashim Gazder from Sind—all who spoke against the amendment mentioned India and underscored that the issue of the state language should not be tied to which language was spoken by the majority of the people. For example, Mr Gazder explained: 'I would like to ask the mover of this amendment why has our sister dominion, India, adopted Hindi? There is only one reason, Sir, that they want to have a national language to unite all Indians... The idea behind was to unite the nation without any regard whether people understand it or not...' ("CAP Debates Vol. 2. Ser. 2", 1948, p. 21) This was certainly a very novel manner in which to consider language. Rather than choosing languages which were understood by the largest number of people in a country, the CAP members were content with one language, which was not spoken or understood by even a substantial minority, to become the national language of the country. Hence, when the amendment was put to vote, it miserably failed as even the Muslim Bengali members of the CAP failed to support the inclusion of their own mother tongue as a language of the CAP. The decision on Pakistan's official language and lingua franca seemed to have been made.

Jinnah and Language

During the CAP debate on language, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah as the president of the Assembly stayed impartial. One could see his uneasiness with the stance of the members of the Pakistan National Congress, but even though he had strong views on the subjects, Jinnah decided to stay quiet. He was supposed to tour East Pakistan in March 1948, and so thought that that would be the best time to broach the question and settle it, once and for all. One would have thought that Jinnah dressed in Savile Row suits and being one of the best English barristers of his time might set aside the squabble between Urdu and Bengali as immature and focus on English as a language for the future—especially since he was only proficient in that tongue, but his tour of East Bengal exhibited a different tone.

In his decade of days in East Pakistan, Jinnah spoke on the topic of language repeatedly, and strongly. Speaking at his first public gathering in Dacca on March 21,

1948, Jinnah had a broad smile as he viewed the swarming maidan in front of him. The area was full of people as far as the eyes could see, perhaps a million souls, and they were all chanting, Pakistan, Zindabad [Long Live Pakistan], and Quaid-e-Azam Zindabad [Long Live the Great Leader]. Jinnah was beaming with joy at what he had achieved—a sovereign homeland for the Muslims of South Asia. He was proud that even with the several hardships that partition and independence had brought, the people were full of zeal and enthusiasm for the new country—this was the mettle of strong nations, Jinnah thought to himself. As he conjured the new nation of Pakistan, Jinnah also wanted the country to have one state language, one lingua franca. He had heard the debate in the CAP and the public protests against the imposition of Urdu in East Bengal and was adamant to put an end to the debate, once and for all. After all, he was the founder of the country—the Great Leader, and his word would and should be final.

Therefore, in an ironic turn of events Jinnah adjusted his monocle and began reading his rather long and detailed speech to the people of East Bengal, albeit not in Urdu, which he was going to argue for, and nor in Bengali which his audience could understand, but in the King’s English—the language he himself was most comfortable in. The crowd didn’t care which language the ‘Shahinshah’—Emperor—of Pakistan spoke in—they simply hung on to every word he spoke, and every pause in his speech brought loud cheers⁴. However, when he spoke about the question of language, the cheers were slightly mellow—some in the audience, those graduates of Dacca University and other institutes of higher learning had actually understood what he was saying. Jinnah had exclaimed:

...Whether Bengali shall be the official language of this Province is a matter for the elected representatives of the people of this Province to decide. I have no doubt that this question shall be decided solely in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants of this Province at the appropriate time...But let me make it very clear to you that the State Language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Any one 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...Therefore, so far as the State Language is concerned, Pakistan’s language shall be Urdu. (Zaidi, 2002)

Students immediately responded to this speech, and it was reported by Tajuddin Ahmad, an eyewitness, that ‘Quaid-i-Azam’s speech hurt every person of this province everybody is disgusted he was expected to be above party.’ (Rahman, 1996) Others reported that ‘people broke down a gate, destroyed a picture of the Quaid and protested against the Quaid’s pronouncements.’ (Zaidi, 2002) The Great Leader was not above board any longer.

⁴ Jinnah’s personal influence was such that even two years after his demise the Dawn newspaper was opining that ‘the populace had already begun to greet the Quaid-i-Azam as “Shahinshah-e-Pakistan” [Emperor of Pakistan]. Had he so desired, 80 million willing hands would have rejoiced to put a Crown upon his head.’ (1950, September 11). *Dawn*, p. 5.

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

A few days later, Jinnah spoke at the convocation of Dacca University. Jinnah knew that students were mainly at the forefront of the agitation to give equal position to Bengali with Urdu and therefore decided to reemphasise his views on language again. Here Jinnah not only highlighted the practical need for one language, as he had done a few days earlier, he underscored the cultural and religious significance of Urdu for Pakistan. In what was also a mini lecture on culture and identity, Jinnah, again in his immaculate English and in a tone as much as of educating as admonishment said:

For official use in this province, the people of the province can choose any language they wish... There can, however, be only one lingua franca, that is, the language for intercommunication between the various provinces of this State, and that language should be Urdu. Its State language must be Urdu, a language that has been nurtured by a hundred million Muslims of his sub-continent, a language understood throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan, and above all, a language which, more than any other provincial languages, embodies the best that is in Islamic culture and Muslim tradition and is nearest to the languages used in other Islamic countries. (Zaidi, 2002)

There was an immediate reaction from the students assembled there with several chanting, 'Na, Na, Na!' to make sure that their Great Leader had heard them⁵. But not only did Jinnah dismiss the demand for the co-equal status of Bengali, he also labelled it as not 'Islamic' enough, and therefore unsuitable as one of the state languages of a Muslim country. As an English speaker Jinnah could, however, be forgiven for not knowing that people in East Bengal or for that matter in large parts of west Pakistan too, still did not read, write or understand Urdu.

The cat was out of the bag. Jinnah or west Pakistan did not have a problem with Bengali per se—the Bengalis could continue speaking their language as they pleased in distant East Bengal. The problem was that Pakistan was an Islamic/Muslim state [the distinction was never made between these two terms in Pakistan's early years and they were used interchangeably], and only an Islamic/Muslim language could be its state language and lingua franca, and that language was Urdu alone⁶. Several people in East Bengal too, despite being Bengalis themselves, supported the cause of Urdu on this contention. For example, Mr Badruddin Ahmad from Dacca wrote to Jinnah a few days before his tour of East Bengal and narrated 'East Pakistan's Immediate Danger.' In his detailed enumeration Ahmad warned against the 'cultural conquest of the Muslims by the Hindus...' in which attachment to the Bengali language was one central feature. (Zaidi, 2002) Lamenting the decline of Persian and with it the Muslim culture and influence Ahmad charged that as a result, 'The hapless Muslims thus left adrift began to swim with the current, and took to the Bengali of the Hindus, a

⁵ For more details on the Bengali movement see, Jahan, R. (2001). *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: The University Press.

⁶ For the debate on Bengali's 'Muslim-ness' and Urdu's Islam see Chapters 5 and 6, Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

language free from all Islamic influence...The continued influence of such a literature could not fail to develop an inferiority complex in the Muslims, and but for the non-proselytising nature of the Hindu religion a large number of them would perhaps have gone back to fold of Hinduism.' (Zaidi, 2002) To the charge that imposition of Urdu might lead to the cultural degradation of Bengali, Ahmad had a very clear answer: '...for Muslims there can be but one kind of culture and that is the Islamic culture, and, from the Islamic point of view, it does not matter in the least, if the Bengali or any other culture is destroyed. They cannot, like all other Muslims, go on shouting the national slogan Islam Zindabad and at the same time unlike them hug to their bosoms a culture begotten of heathen literature.' (Zaidi, 2002) Ahmad, who had been in government service, noted that he had been aware of such 'un-Islamic' tendencies of the Muslims of Bengal and that the time had come to put an end to such practices with the strong hand. He continued: '...my official tours took me into the interior of the country, which enabled me to see how 99 percent of the Muslims of Bengal thought and lived. I was surprised and rather shocked to notice that the Muslims of my province had nothing in common with our co-religionists of those independent Muslim countries and very little with those of northern and western India. It looked as if they were an entirely different people though passing by the name of Muslims.' (Zaidi, 2002) He realised that the reason for this state of the Bengali Muslims 'lay in the fact that they did not know any Islamic language, and received their primary and middle education through the medium of Bengali and higher through that of English, both non-Islamic languages.' (Zaidi, 2002) Hence the solution was simple and straightforward: '...unless the system of education prevailing in the province is without any further delay thoroughly overhauled, so as to make the learning of Urdu compulsory,' a dire future was awaiting Pakistan. (Zaidi, 2002) 'Any opposition from any quarter should be suppressed with a strong hand and without the least hesitation,' Ahmad exhorted Jinnah in his long missive. (Zaidi, 2002) To put it simply, Bengali was Hinduised and the Bengali Muslim under its influence had become a Muslim only in name, and therefore needed to be 'educated' in a 'Muslim language' in order to become part of a 'Muslim culture.'

Lawyers and religious scholars in East Bengal were also at the forefront of advocating Urdu as the sole state language. A memorandum by the Chittagong Bar Association to Jinnah during his visit categorically stated: 'We reiterate that we fully agree with the policy adopted by the Govt. of Pakistan in the matter of State language...' (Zaidi, 2002) Similarly, the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam in Chittagong stressed the important of Urdu in their address of welcome for Jinnah in their city. The Jamiat stated: 'We strongly support your recent declaration of the State language of Pakistan which you made at Dacca.' (Zaidi, 2002) They further noted that 'The Jami'yyat considers it its duty to make this fact that to Quaid-e-Azam that the overwhelming majority of East Pakistan is in favour of Urdu,' and that the possessed innumerable testimonials to support their assertion. (Zaidi, 2002) They also hastened to add that they 'highly appreciate your statements which you make now and then that the Pakistan Government will be based on Qur'anic principles. It is a heart-felt desire that sooner

Language, Identity and the State in Pakistan, 1947-48

the Government started on Qur'anic principles the better.' (Zaidi, 2002) Hence, the learned Maulanas were staunch in their support of Urdu and eagerly awaiting the introduction of the sharia and 'Islami Nizam' as their resolution prayed.

At the other extreme, the Joint State Language Committee was adamant in its preservation of Bengali at the national level. Their leaders knew that Bengali was being labelled as Hinduised, and they called Muslims in name only. Therefore, when they presented their memorandum to Jinnah on March 24, 1948, they argued that they too were Muslim like the vast majority of Pakistanis, and that Bengali could also be a language of Muslims. At the outset, the memo clarified that the Committee was only composed of 'Muslim young men/ladies representing Dacca University and other institutions,' so that the change of being Hindu led could not be labelled against them. (Zaidi, 2002) They then narrated the fact that Bengali was spoken by the majority of Pakistan's population, that several modern states—like Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland, had more than one official languages, and that the Bengali language was rich enough to be a state language. However, the emphasis was on the 'Muslim' nature of the language, so as to assuage the concerns of their compatriots who saw only Hinduism in the tongue. The Committee argued that 'the Muslim poets and authors like Alwal, Nazrul Islam, Kaikobad, Syed Emdad Ali, Wajed Ali, Jasimuddin and host of others have enriched the language by their contribution.' (Zaidi, 2002) They also emphasised that 'this language had been developed by Sultan Hossain Shah of Bengal as a court language against Sanskrit and fifty percent of its vocabulary comes from Persian and Arabic languages.' (Zaidi, 2002) They even pleaded that their leaders have all been stalwarts of the Muslim League and government officials including 'Moulana Akram Khan, Hon'ble Nurul Amin, Hon'ble Habibullah Bahar and other Bengali speaking ministers, and officials like Mr. Zakir Hossain, I.G.P., Mr. Ismail, D.I.G., and other high Govt. officials...' so as to counter the propaganda against them. (Zaidi, 2002) Hence they prayed: 'that in a completely democratic country every citizen has certain fundamental rights and the right to agitation and movement constitutionally, and this movement for the Bengali language will be continued till our right is vindicated.' (Zaidi, 2002) These supplications and arguments however fell on deaf ears—Bengali was not Muslim enough and so did not qualify to become a state language in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The question of language, and hence identity, has always haunted Pakistan. With both East and West Punjab two halves of the same people, East and West Bengal also singing from the same hymn sheet, millions of Sindhis in India toiling hard to preserve their language and culture, and Kashmiri pandits from Allahabad putting the most well-versed Urdu scholars from Karachi to shame, Pakistan has always wondered what has set it apart. As I have argued elsewhere, a part of Pakistan's identity has been to be 'Not India,' i.e., rejection of everything considered 'Indian.' (Bangash, 2015)

This of course meant differentiation of language, culture and identity. Since Pakistan was founded on the ‘Two Nation’ theory premised on utter and complete separation between Hindus and Muslims, how could ‘Muslim Pakistan’ have anything in common with ‘Hindu India.’

In her important work, Alyssa Ayres argues that: ‘throughout the world, debates about national identity inevitably revolve around the politics of culture, in which language serves as a cause, a solution, a muse for the national self, and a technology of the state.’ (Ayres, 2009) Therefore, the question of the ‘national’ language is not only a linguistic question but also one of power and control, and a defining feature for the state.

While Urdu was supposed to be ‘protected’ from the ‘threat’ of Hindu—Hindi in India, one would have thought that it would not feel the need of the same heightened security and protection in Muslim Pakistan; after all, Urdu was a Muslim language and Pakistan being nearly 80% Muslim was now its natural homeland. However, even though the armed convoy of Urdu reached Pakistan safely during the carnage of the summer of 1947, the Muslim homeland seemed a bit alien. Despite the large number of migrations from the UP and Bihar—where Urdu was the mother tongue, the percentage of people who spoke Urdu as a first language stood at an abysmal 3.3% in the first census of Pakistan in 1951. Bengali led the way as the mother tongue of about 54.6% of the total population, followed by Punjabi at 28.4%, Pashto at 6.6%, and Sindi at 5.3%. (Census of Pakistan, 1951) Even when the figure for Urdu as an additional language were added in west Pakistan the percentage only just managed double digits at 14.7%. Such indices made Urdu more akin to English in Pakistan, rather than as the lingua franca of the country, spoken and understood by all.

The question of Urdu, its role and position, and its centrality to the identity question in Pakistan has haunted the development of the state since its inception. The debate over language not only created bad blood between the two wings of the country within a few years after independence, it sowed the seeds for a secessionist movement in East Bengal, which finally led to the vivisection of the country in 1971. However, even after the departure of almost all Bengali speakers from the fold of Pakistan, the question of language has yet to be resolved. Even as late as September 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan, headed by the then Chief Justice, Justice Jawwad S. Khawaja, ordered the implementation of the dormant Article 251 of the Constitution of Pakistan which mandated the adoption of Urdu as the official language within fifteen years of the promulgation of the 1973 Constitution. This provision, while piously enacted, was never implemented as Pakistan’s educational system has wholesale moved to the adoption of English as a primary language since the 1990’s and primary because the elite in Pakistan is both English speaking and only knows how to read and write best in English. Hence, the quest for Pakistan’s language and identity continues.

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Dr Yaqoob Khan Bangash

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