

# Language, Culture and the Creation of Bangladesh

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*The objective of this article is to analyse the role of language and culture in the creation of Bangladesh. The ethno-linguistic identity of the people of East Pakistan became a source of othering and oppression in Pakistan's nation-building process. The West Pakistani elites were unwilling to account for Bengali language and culture in the national identity of Pakistan. As a result, demands for representation, rights and respect of the Bengali people emerged out of the eastern province, which were denied by the Pakistani government and successive military juntas. A recurring denial of recognition and representation hardened the demands for autonomy and culminated into the demand for complete independence of East Pakistan. While multiple factors impacted the success of the Bangladesh Liberation War, language and culture were instrumental in motivating and sustaining the self-determination movement. Thus, this article attempts to revisit the Bangladesh Liberation War from the lens of linguistic and cultural identities, to understand how language and culture became determining forces for an independent Bangladesh.*

*Keywords: Ethno-Linguistic identity, Bengali Nationalism, Language oppression, Cultural othering, Self-determination, Diaspora, Bangladesh*

In 1947, India and Pakistan became two independent nations, born of a violent partition. Pakistan was a geographical oddity as the two provinces of the nation remained separated by almost 2,000 kilometres of the Indian landmass. The two provinces were topographically varied, culturally unfamiliar and linguistically different from each other. The

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only linking factors between these provinces were Islam and the memory of British colonialism. Soon after attaining independence, the difference between the two provinces began to cloud the strength of the common linking factors. West Pakistan was the administrative seat of the nation and all major bureaucratic and military institutions were based out of it. Also, most of the administrative and military positions in Pakistan were held by the West Pakistani elites (mostly Punjabis and Sindhis). As a result, there was a greater concentration of effort and energy into the issues of the western province; and the eastern province was treated like a satellite unit. While a major chunk of revenue and resources for Pakistan came from the eastern province, it was not given priority in the developmental expenditure. In addition, East Pakistan was under-represented in the government and the military. This disparity gave rise to a sentiment among the population of East Pakistan that they had moved from the colonial rule of the British to the colonial rule of West Pakistan.

East Pakistan was largely homogeneous in its ethno-linguistic character, with the majority population identifying as Bengali and speaking the Bangla language. In terms of population too, they formed the single-largest community in Pakistan. Thus, to feel adequately represented, the Bengali population demanded that Bangla be recognised as one of the national languages of Pakistan. However, the Pakistani administration was averse to adopting Bangla as a national language. They believed that Pakistan should have one national language for the sake of maintaining unity in the nation, and that language must be Urdu. As mentioned earlier, Pakistan was a geographical oddity with multiple contending cultural identities and hence, the Pakistani administration was trying to develop the national identity based on a common language and culture that spoke closely to their religious identity. Therefore, they mandated that the media and educational institutions must exclusively use Urdu. This was unacceptable for the Bengali population in East Bengal and to sections of the Sindhi and Punjabi population in West Pakistan, who did not have a cultural affinity to Urdu. Mass protests erupted in Dhaka on 8 December 1947, in opposition to imposition of Urdu, giving birth to the first major rift between the two provinces of Pakistan in the form of the Language Movement or the 'Bhasha Andolon'.

The Bhasha Andolon gave a new life to Bengali nationalism that had existed in the pre-1947 phase in the Bengal province of the Indian subcontinent. This Bengali nationalism had somewhat been subverted

to the demands for a separate country for Muslims, but it had never disappeared from the lexicon of the Bengali people. Thus, Bengali nationalism was not a new concept that had developed out of the Liberation War. Ideological visions for a united Bengal had been in place right from 1905, when Bengal was partitioned for the first time. In 1947, when the communal division of the subcontinent became evident, some public intellectuals and political figures called for an undivided, independent Bengal to emerge. It was H.S. Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose who presented the proposal for an independent, undivided Bengal in April 1947.<sup>1</sup> The proposal was rejected by the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, citing heightened religious polarisation in Bengal.<sup>2</sup> However, the idea of an independent Bengal had continued to lurk under the surface, even after the Partition. Thus, when the Bengali identity was being marginalised and targeted, Bengali nationalism resurfaced as a political agenda. It was an accessible concept and an effective tool to mobilise people.<sup>3</sup> The population of East Pakistan had come to recognise language and culture as a major collectivising force that could amplify their demands to the Pakistani government. The same language and culture would go on to be the basis of an independent Bangladesh decades later.

This article aims to revisit the journey of Bengali nationalism from its nascent state in the *Bhasha Andolon* to its virile state in the ‘*Mukti Juddho*’ (Liberation War). The article undertakes a historical analysis of the period between the ‘*Bhasha Andolan*’ and the eventful 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. There has been an explication of the major political developments that led to the independence of Bangladesh, where language and culture were major propellants. While the political disenchantment and the prolonged denial of rights finally led to the calls for independence; we enquire into the role of language and culture in the political disenchantment and the denial of rights.

As we step into the 50th year of the Bangladesh Liberation War, it would be useful to revisit one of the core components that fuelled the calls for an independent Bangladesh. The article has been divided into different sections, which trace language and culture as a source of othering, oppression and solidarity. The next section tries to analyse how the cultural differences between the two provinces of Pakistan became evident and manifested themselves into calls for the autonomy of East Pakistan. The following section looks into how language and culture became the cause of oppression and led to a military crackdown on

the people of East Pakistan. The penultimate section traces the global networks of solidarity, built on language and culture that helped sustain the Liberation War. The concluding section sums up three distinct impacts of language and culture and how they gradually solidified the demands for independence.

#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS A SOURCE OF OTHERING

It was with the Bhasha Andolon that, for the first time, the Bengali population of East Pakistan asserted their linguistic and cultural identity in conjunction with their Pakistani identity. In 1947, when the state language of Pakistan was being deliberated upon, a one nation, one language policy became the popular choice of the West Pakistani elites, with Urdu being the language of choice. The Pakistani leadership believed that Urdu would reassert the Muslim identity of the nation and bind the provinces together in a singular national identity. Urdu was hardly spoken in East Pakistan, the people of the Eastern province had little affinity to the language. Thus, the exclusive use of Urdu as a medium of education and in official communication was discriminatory towards the Bengali-speaking majority community of East Pakistan. The Bengali population saw this forced imposition of Urdu as a negation of their linguistic identity. As a result, protests erupted on 8 December 1947 in Dhaka, with the people demanding recognition of Bangla as a national language.<sup>4</sup>

The Bhasha Andolon was sustained for over four years. In this period, leaders of East Pakistan organised several rallies, meetings and called for strikes in opposition to the language policy. The motion to include Bangla as a national language was introduced by Dhirendranath Dutta in the Constituent Assembly on 23 February 1948, but was opposed by Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan.<sup>5</sup> As time passed, the population of East Pakistan started to grow more restive due to the recurring denial of their demand. In 1949, when the Awami League was formed, the people of East Pakistan found renewed hope in the representation of their interests, giving the Language Movement a fresh life. The Awami League, under Maulana Bhasani, devised a new protest itinerary in 1952. On 21 February 1952, protest demonstrations and hartals (strikes) were called for in defiance of Section 144. Protesting students from the Dhaka Medical College were met with a baton charge by the police. They grew agitated and the police opened fire at them, killing three students and a nine-year-old boy and injuring several protesters.<sup>6</sup>

The police repression made the protesters more resolute in their demands. It also forced the administration to gradually discard their 'one state language' stance. The East Bengal Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution recommending Bangla as a state language in 1952; and on 7 May 1954, the Constituent Assembly finally recognised Bangla as a state language along with Urdu.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Language Movement, first, laid bare the colonial attitude that the Pakistani administration had towards the eastern province. Second, it was the first non-communal movement that East Pakistan had seen since the Partition, forging bonds of solidarity based on ethno-linguistic identity rather than religious identity. Third, it brought Awami League forward as an important voice of the people of East Pakistan. These three reasons were going to increase the already stark differences between the two provinces.

The Bengali language was the mode of access to religion in Bengal. The Muslim masses who had no knowledge of Arabic had to access their religion through fables and folklore in Bangla, as the Qur'an had not been translated to the Bengali language in the sixteenth century when Islam travelled towards eastern undivided India. The masses in Bengal would access all social, political and religious information through Bengali language. Even when Urdu and Persian became the official languages of choice for Muslim elites in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they could not replace Bangla among the masses. The vacuum that was left in Bangla literature by the lack of patronage from Muslim literati was filled by Hindus. Thus, the imagery and worldview created in the Bangla language community was an amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> The masses in East Pakistan were informed by this unique cultural-linguistic sensibility that was rooted in the Bangla language. This stood in sharp contrast with the cultural sensibility of West Pakistan, which was more rooted in Islamic religiosity.

Owing to the vast cultural differences, the West Pakistani elites had a stigmatised perception of Bengalis. They believed that the Bengali population was religiously frivolous and martially incapable—a stigma that was deepened in the wake of the Bhasha Andolon. They also considered the Bengali masses to be irritants to the efficient governance of Pakistan. Further, there was clear disparity in the allocation of developmental funds allotted to the two provinces, as also a disparity in terms of representation in key administrative and military positions. East Pakistan had a recurring feeling of being deprived of resources and opportunities, with much of this deprivation linked to the cultural

differences that existed between the two provinces.<sup>9</sup> The East Pakistani population was also indifferent to the major causes that West Pakistan was focusing on, primarily the Kashmir issue and the militant anti-India sentiment.<sup>10</sup> This attitude added to West Pakistan's stigma against their Bengali brethren. In addition, the ethnic traditions of East Pakistan were unwelcome in West Pakistan, for instance, the Bengali women dressed in saris and donned a bindi irrespective of their religious identity. This was seen as an undermining of Islamic traditions by a section of West Pakistani elites. The cultural differences between the two provinces were thus visible in the everyday realities of the population, like food habits, clothing and language. These realities gave birth to stereotypes, which led to stigma, which finally boiled down to a sense of detachment.

The differential treatment of East Pakistan by the Pakistani government soon became a political issue and propelled the calls for greater autonomy of East Pakistan. The people realised that unless they are adequately represented in a democratic government, the colonial treatment of the Bengali people would not stop. In 1966, the Awami League, sensing the strong demand for autonomy of East Pakistan, came up with a six-point programme to strengthen Pakistan's federal structure. The six-point programme and the calls for greater autonomy stemmed from a secularised Bengali nationalism that the Awami League subscribed to: it was a composite of Bengali culture, language, folklore, mores and the general Bengali environment, from which Bengalis could receive inspiration and be motivated to strive for the uplift of the society.<sup>11</sup>

The six-point programme called for: a genuine federal constitution; restricting powers of the federal government to defence and foreign affairs; two separate currencies for the two provinces; devolving fiscal policies to the federal units; separate foreign exchange earnings of each wing; and a separate militia for the defence of the east wing.<sup>12</sup> The programme represented the lack of faith that was simmering in East Pakistan against the Pakistani government, as well as East Pakistan's desire to have a greater say in its own administration and defence. These six points went on to become the main election agenda of the Awami League and the root of the final breakdown of relations between the two wings.

The general elections in Pakistan in 1970 exposed the cultural differences that manifested themselves into partisan voting patterns. The Awami League, under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was contesting the elections, riding the wave of populist sentiment that sought greater autonomy for East Pakistan. Awami League's supporter base involved

the significant Bengali Hindu minority, progressives and leftists. The influence of these groups increased the realms of secularism within Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan and attuned it to a unique cultural sensibility that was contesting the dominant West Pakistani influence on the nation. Meanwhile, in the western province, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was contesting the election to consolidate and retain the supremacy of Punjabis and Sindhis over the military and administrative units of Pakistan, and the cultural narrative of the nation. A third entity, the military government of Yahya Khan, was hoping to retain power and prominence even after the general elections. Wanting to maintain his status quo position as the President of Pakistan, it was in Yahya Khan's interest that there was no great shuffling in the power dynamics of Pakistan. The military administration thus covertly supported Bhutto in the hope that the Awami League would be unable to secure a majority mandate in the elections. A senior officer visiting Dhaka in December 1970 assured his colleagues that they would not 'allow those black bastards to rule over us'.<sup>13</sup>

In the run-up to the elections, East Pakistan had to face two major natural disasters. In July 1970, floods caused large-scale damage to life and property and in November 1970, tropical cyclone Bhola hit the province. The cyclone was the worst natural calamity that the eastern province had seen in decades. Rural Bengal was razed to the ground, crop fields were submerged, dead bodies were piled up along the coast, cattle were washed away and a large number of people were left homeless. The death toll was close to 2,30,000 people. The government's response to the crisis was languid and lackadaisical. President Yahya Khan took an aerial survey of the affected areas on his way back from China; and no other West Pakistani leader paid a visit to the affected areas.<sup>14</sup> Also, the government's relief efforts were inconsistent and sparse. The international community was much more proactive in the delivery of aid to the affected areas and the affected people.<sup>15</sup> Mujibur Rahman categorised the government's response as 'criminal negligence', reasserting that East Pakistan was being treated as a colony and a market.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the people of East Pakistan felt ignored and alienated by their government, strengthening the demands for autonomy. This feeling of alienation, coupled with the undercurrents of Bengali nationalism, became the major determinant of East Pakistan's voting pattern in the general elections of 1970.

On 8 December 1970, the election results were declared. These results were as polarised as the cultural milieu of Pakistan. The Awami

League secured 160 seats out of the 162 in East Pakistan, giving them the absolute majority to form the government in Pakistan. The single-largest party that emerged victorious in West Pakistan was the PPP; the Awami League failed to secure any seats in the western province. The results were contrary to the military government's expectations as Yahya Khan had hoped that the elections would lead to a hung parliament, which would finally call for fresh elections.<sup>17</sup> However, the Awami League's landslide victory gave them a legitimate claim to form the government and design a constitution. The military government feared that the six-point programme would now turn into reality and the military's position would be greatly reduced in the administration of the country. Also, Bhutto wanted to play a greater role in the government and constitution formation in Pakistan; he did not want to play a subsidiary role to the Awami League in the National Assembly. As a result, the military government and the PPP forged a secret alliance to prevent the Awami League from forming a government in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

The military administration delayed the formation of the National Assembly, constantly coercing Mujibur Rahman to come to a consensus with Bhutto on the six-point programme.<sup>19</sup> However, no such consensus was reached as the PPP was vehemently opposed to greater autonomy for East Pakistan. Further, the military administration covertly coaxed the smaller parties in West Pakistan to avoid the National Assembly.<sup>20</sup> On 15 February 1971, Bhutto's PPP declared that they would not be attending the National Assembly. The major reason cited for the boycott was the Awami League's insistence on the six-point programme.

In the meantime, the legitimately elected Awami League and its supporters in East Pakistan were growing impatient. The military government's colonial mindset was becoming evident to them as they were being denied constitutional justice. Public meetings and rallies were being carried out day and night in East Pakistan to register their protest against the delay in convening the National Assembly. Seeing a surge in public unrest, Mujib had to restore the faith of his constituency. He declared: 'No power on earth could subjugate the Bangalees anymore' and 'we will die but we will not surrender'.<sup>21</sup> The process of othering was now complete: the two provinces stood in opposition to one another on social, cultural and political fronts.

#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS A SOURCE OF OPPRESSION

The military government in West Pakistan had no intention of peacefully transferring power to the Awami League. While negotiations for the

National Assembly continued, the army was asked to continuously increase its presence in East Pakistan. The plans for a military crackdown had been set in motion as early as 20 February 1971. Yahya Khan was simultaneously trying to build a political consensus against Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League, citing their separatist tendencies.<sup>22</sup> On 1 March 1971, the National Assembly was postponed sine die. This caused massive outrage in East Pakistan as the Bengali population felt betrayed. The more radical sections of the Awami League and the student community in East Pakistan now began demanding a unilateral declaration of independence. However, Mujibur Rahman was cautious not to make any such declarations he believed could invite violent confrontations with the army.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, he did not want to exhibit complacency at the postponement of the National Assembly, so he called for a six-day protest demonstration which included strikes, rallies and public meetings. When Mujib addressed the crowd of supporters on 7 March 1971, he raised his fist in the air and declared: 'Our struggle this time is a struggle for independence.'<sup>24</sup>

The people of East Pakistan began a non-cooperation movement against the Pakistani government, in the form of non-payment of taxes and withdrawal from government services. The student community in Dhaka formed the Central Students Action Committee of Independent Bangladesh and chose Tagore's 'Sonar Bangla' as their national anthem. On 7 March, the government imposed curfew in Dhaka, but the protesters broke the curfew and continued with the demonstrations.<sup>25</sup> This led to the army opening fire at the protesters, killing 172 people—a repeat of the repression that had taken place during the Bhasha Andolon. Contrary to the army's expectations, the Bengali population did not bow down to the martial law and became more resolute in their demand for independence. The demonstrations represented an overwhelming sense of Bengali nationalism and Bengali pride embodied in the calls for independence. The cultural identity that had been a source of discrimination was now being reclaimed and reasserted for not just equality but also independence.

Several rounds of negotiations were held between 15 and 24 March, but all of them were unsuccessful. The military government was trying to coax the Awami League to settle the constitutional matters with the PPP. Initially, the Awami League was pressing for the repeal of the martial law and a quick transfer of power to the civilian government in the provinces. Yahya Khan, however, was averse to repealing the martial law, stating that it would create a legal vacuum and make the transfer

of power to the civilian government more difficult. On 16 March 1971, Yahya Khan, flustered with the direction of the negotiations, told General Tikka Khan: 'The bastard (Mujib) is not behaving. You get ready.'<sup>26</sup> The approach of the military government was clear: either the Awami League surrenders to its terms or there would be a military crackdown.

Unaware of the plans of a military crackdown, the Awami League continued working on the draft constitution. On 24 March, members of the Awami League sought to meet the West Pakistani officials to finalise the draft constitution, but their request was denied. With the plans for a military crackdown already underway, Yahya Khan had given up on the idea of a peaceful settlement. On 25 March, Yahya Khan finally met the military officials in Dhaka and gave them the green signal for a military operation that was to begin that night. He simultaneously gave orders that all West Pakistani delegates must leave Dhaka the next morning. At 11:30 p.m. on 25 March 1971, Operation Searchlight began. All doors for constitutional justice were shut for East Pakistan, but the war for the liberation of Bangladesh had just begun.

The military crackdown was brutal and was targeted specifically towards the Bengali-speaking population. The worst affected by the crackdown were the Bengali Hindus who had stayed back in East Pakistan after the Partition. The Pakistani government conveniently pinned the responsibility of the unrest on the Hindus, considering them as agents of India. Students who came out on the streets to protest were shot at, houses were looted and the Bangladesh flags were torn down and burnt. On 26 March, Yahya Khan addressed the nation, blaming the Awami League for attacking the solidarity and integrity of Pakistan, and promised that such a crime would not go unpunished. Mujibur Rahman was arrested and sent to West Pakistan and the Awami League was banned.<sup>27</sup>

The military crackdown had one intention only: to rid East Pakistan of any and every secessionist tendency. In trying to achieve the same, the army went on a murderous rampage, killing men, women and children. Anyone that the army suspected to be a Hindu or a rebel was shot at sight. Villages were burned down or pillaged to 'cleanse' them of rebels. As Anthony Mascarenhas puts it in his narrative-altering article of 1971: 'This is Genocide conducted with amazing casualness.'<sup>28</sup> Indeed, genocide it was—a targeted killing of Bengalis in East Pakistan. The Pakistan Army used cultural markers, such as language and attire, to target and murder Bengalis. Earlier, the same language and culture had

been used to stigmatise Bengali-speaking population. This stigma led to a denial of constitutional justice and finally, resulted in the inhuman repression of the population in East Pakistan by the Pakistan Army.

The oppression of the population of East Pakistan had begun long before 1971 and any and every demand for equal treatment was met with police brutality or military repression. The rightfully elected Awami League was symbolic of the aspirations of the Bengali population. Thus, when the Awami League was denied its place in the National Assembly and ultimately banned by the Pakistani government, the Bengali population perceived it as an obliteration of their aspirations, leaving no reason for them to believe in the constitutional processes of Pakistan and continue to live as second-class citizens in their own country. The secularised explications of Bengali culture had been a major eyesore for the Pakistani government. They believed that the calls for autonomy stemmed from the growing allegiance to secular values that were propelled by the Hindus in East Pakistan. Thus, the oppression was targeted towards the secularised Bengali nationalism and all its adherents, especially non-Muslims.

#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS A SOURCE OF SOLIDARITY

While language and culture became a source of othering between the two provinces of Pakistan, they also led to the development of various networks of solidarity within and outside of East Pakistan. The Bengali-speaking population, particularly in India and in the West, were drawn to the cause of Bangladesh. The oppression that the population of East Pakistan was facing at the hands of the Pakistan Army became a cause for rallying and seeking international intervention. The Bengali diaspora led campaigns across the world to develop awareness about the Liberation War, and also to materialise networks of aid and assistance.

On 26 March, when Operation Searchlight was set in motion, Bengali officers mutinied against the Pakistani military. They refused to take up arms against their language brethren. The erstwhile officers joined the Bangladesh Liberation Army to rally for the cause of independence.<sup>29</sup> As the crackdown intensified and more people were killed, the Bengali diaspora community refused to pay remittances to the Pakistani government as a sign of protest. This led to a fall in Pakistan's remittance income to one-third. The diaspora community in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) organised themselves and began producing news reports and public documents to increase awareness. They also organised lectures and teach-ins to promote

the cause of Bangladesh. The diaspora in the US tried to reach out to sympathetic senators and congressmen to lobby for Bangladesh, and also to pressurise the US to restrain Pakistan from brutality. The efforts of the Bengali community were successful in capturing the attention of several activists and humanitarian organisations.<sup>30</sup> Action Bangladesh was started by a group of young internationalists and activists in Britain who started protesting against the Pakistan Army's atrocities in East Pakistan. Organisations such as Oxfam, Pugwash and Commission of Churches also took up the cause of increasing the outreach of Bangladeshi voices.<sup>31</sup> The humanitarian organisations tried to use their own networks to convince various governments and international organisations to press on Pakistan to refrain from further violence. The efforts of these organisations and the diaspora community led to a paltry but steady flow of aid to the Bangladesh Liberation Army and the refugees who had fled East Pakistan.

On the other hand, the Indian states bordering East Pakistan also faced an indirect impact of the crisis in East Pakistan. The persecuted Bengali population in East Pakistan started fleeing to West Bengal, Tripura and Assam for sanctuary. These states saw an inflow of close to 10 million refugees<sup>32</sup>, leading to severe pressure on the resources. The Bengali population in India was aggrieved by the treatment being meted out to their language brethren. Regional newspapers, while reporting the crisis in East Pakistan, blamed the Pakistani government for their vindictive approach towards the Bengalis. Student groups in Bengal carried out protests condemning the brutalities of the Pakistani Army, while simultaneously urging the Indian government to intervene in the crisis. Bound by the same language, familial ties and shared cultural history, the Bengalis on the Indian side of the border were naturally drawn to the cause of an independent Bangladesh. The idea of the 'desh', which had so far represented a place of belonging, now had a chance of real existence. Bangla 'desh', or the land of the Bengali people, was an idea that had existed even in the pre-independence era; and it had captured the imagination of the linguistic community beyond religious identities. The Bangladesh Liberation War gave fresh hope to that idea and drew support from Bengalis across the world. The Awami League was also careful to tread the secular line, so that they could retain their broad support base. Indeed, Awami League's secular politics helped in drawing sympathies from India. The Indian administration was much more sympathetic to a moderate Mujibur Rahman, as opposed to a

hardliner like Bhutto, during the Pakistani elections of 1970. Thus, the idea of persecution of Bengalis created an important bond of solidarity that, ultimately, led to the materialisation of the dream of an independent Bangladesh.

During the war, the heart-wrenching sights of refugee camps in West Bengal, with widespread poverty, disease and hopelessness, became a talking point across the world. These sights had a great impact on another Bengali hailing from West Bengal, Pandit Ravi Shankar. Some of Ravi Shankar's own distant relatives had to flee East Pakistan in the face of the crisis, and his sympathies were with Bangladesh. He, therefore, decided to raise funds to help the refugees. Ravi Shankar recorded several Bengali songs with the Apple Records and donated the proceeds to refugee relief.<sup>33</sup> In addition, he organised 'The Concert for Bangladesh' with George Harrison in New York's Maddison Square Garden to raise funds for relief operations. The concert, attended by the greats of Western music, including Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Eric Clapton, was a huge success. It was able to raise close to 2,50,000 dollars.<sup>34</sup> The funds, funnelled through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), were used for refugee relief. The concert was instrumental in bringing about greater awareness regarding Bangladesh. It was also instrumental in inspiring several other artists across the world to express their solidarity with Bangladesh. An oppressed cultural identity had made its way into popular culture and gained wide acceptance within the international civil society. Be it Joan Baez, or Allen Ginsberg, or John Lennon or Sunil Gangopadhyay, all were connected in solidarity towards Bangladesh.

Bangladesh was, thus, able to make its place in the minds of the international civil society. The allegiance to the Bangla language and the Bengali culture had propelled Bengali people across the world to support the liberation movement. The Bangladeshi government-in-exile, based out of Kolkata, became the nerve centre for the coordination of efforts towards the independence movement, and all networks of solidarity fed into the efforts of this government-in-exile. 'Joy Bangla' (All hail Bengal), the slogan for the Liberation War, became the common call for the Bengali community across the world.

#### CONCLUSION

It was language that lay at the core of the creation of Bangladesh. Starting from the Bhasha Andolon to the Liberation War, the larger aim remained the same: to reassert the ethno-linguistic identity of the

majority population of East Pakistan. However, the calls for complete independence came about gradually, after a prolonged denial of recognition, respect and rights. The mobilising power of ethno-linguistic identities became a blind spot for the Pakistan government. In their effort to subjugate the cultural dissenters, they further alienated their own citizens, giving rise to a self-fulfilling prophecy that the Bengalis were trying to break up Pakistan.

In the nation-building process of Pakistan, the Bengali language and culture could not find a place in the imagination of the West Pakistani elites. As a result, the much-needed bonds of fraternity and horizontal solidarity that make a nation were absent between the two provinces of Pakistan. On the other hand, the continued negation of the Bengali identity, and the recurring and compounding oppression on the people, gave rise to strong bonds of comradeship among the people of East Pakistan. Thus, when the Pakistani national identity was contested by the Bengali national identity in East Pakistan in 1971, the latter emerged victorious.

Since 1947, East Pakistan had been looking for constitutional justice, in the form of representation and opportunities; and when it was denied the said justice, grievances simmered. The Pakistani government did not recognise these grievances emerging out of the eastern province. In an attempt to unify the nation, the Government of Pakistan tried to raze the ethno-linguistic identity of the people in East Pakistan. The oppression, which had begun in the form of neglect, increasingly took the shape of obliteration. As the oppression of the Bengali identity increased, the demands for independence hardened. None of the initial demands of East Pakistani people were targeted against the unity of Pakistan; they simply sought greater representation! However, the Pakistani government's repeated denial of resources and representation led to demands for autonomy within a federal structure. The Pakistani government mistook these demands as secessionist tendencies and led a targeted attack on the Bengali population, so that they were coerced into subverting their Bengali identity to the Pakistani identity. Owing to this recurring increase in invalidation of the Bengali identity, the Bengali population felt that any compromise they made on demands for autonomy would only validate the government's oppressive tendencies, leading to further marginalisation of their identity. Thus, when the West Pakistani elites finally gave up on negotiations on 25 March 1971 and the army began Operation Searchlight, the masses and leaders of East Pakistan saw no

other option but to struggle for complete independence. The calls for complete independence were a direct result of the military junta's inability to treat East Pakistan at par with West Pakistan, as also its inability to deal with dissent through pacific means. Be it the Bhasha Andolon, the students' movements or the protests against the postponement of the National Assembly, the Pakistani government resorted to the use of force on every occasion. This attitude further convinced the Bengali people that they were second-class citizens in their nation.

The Bangladesh Liberation War was supported by multiple networks, including diaspora community, humanitarian organisations, international civil society and the Indian government. The diaspora community was the most rooted in the crisis and had the highest allegiance to an independent Bangladesh. They raised awareness for Bangladesh and garnered sympathy for the persecuted Bengali people. In the war, the diaspora community was linked to the actual crisis by familial and cultural links. Their innate relationship to the Bangla language and the Bengali culture propelled their strong response. Language and culture have an immense binding force, that can evoke loyalties beyond political and geographical borders. The 'Mukti Juddho' exhibited the loyalties of the Bengali people across the world towards their language brethren.

Language and culture do not possess the brute force of arms, hence they cannot determine the outcome of a war independently. Yet, language and culture were the propellants behind the Liberation War: the source of differences, the source of solidarity and the source of constant motivation for the Mukti Bahini. If we look back at the popular slogans of the Liberation War, we find a common thread of loyalty to the Bangla language and the Bengali people. 'Joy Bangla', the official slogan of the Liberation War, expresses allegiance to an independent Bangladesh, which subverts the religious nationalism of 1947 to the ethno-linguistic nationalism. It also called for glory to the Bengali identity that had been marginalised and persecuted in Pakistan. 'Bir Bangali Astro Dhoro, Bangladesh Swadin Koro' (Brave Bengalis take up arms for the liberation of Bangladesh) was a call to the Bengali people, urging them to pick up arms for the cause of Bangladesh. The slogan was used to signify the responsibility that all Bengali people had towards their language community and was also a push-back against the stereotype that Bengalis are meek and non-martial. A third slogan, 'Amar Desh, Tomar Desh, Bangladesh, Bangladesh' (We owe our allegiances to our country Bangladesh), gained popularity amongst Bangla-speaking people across

the world. It invoked the sentimental connotations of a 'desh' or a country, which represented a sense of belonging. People in West Bengal were particularly drawn to this slogan and felt united with the larger language community in the struggle for an independent Bangladesh. The Liberation War created a sociality among the Bengali people, built on language, oppression and a common hatred for the Pakistani military junta.

On revisiting the war 50 years later, I have tried to go back to the root of differences and analyse the role of language and culture in the creation of Bangladesh. To sum up, the creation of Bangladesh had as much to do with the cultural aspirations of the Bengali people as it had to do with the cultural suppression by the military junta. The successive governments in Pakistan had never made a real effort at understanding and accommodating the people of East Pakistan in the process of nation building, and this had long-term effects on the psyche of the people. There was never any fair cultural exchange between the two provinces that could bind them together beyond religion. As mentioned earlier, the popular sentiment among the Bengali people was that they had replaced one colonial rule for another. In addition, the Pakistan government was unable to deal with dissent tactfully. Be it the Bhasha Andolon or the protests following the general elections, the government's response was violent suppression, which became an important cause of the rift between the government and the people of East Pakistan. Also, the narrow partisan interests of the military government and the PPP led to an unfair denial of the Awami League's electoral victory. A smooth transition of power to the civilian government could have halted the violent break-up of Pakistan. At the core of government's inability to pacify East Pakistan was cultural othering that had taken deep root in the two provinces. This othering gave way to oppression, and prolonged oppression resulted in secession.

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 is an important learning experience for all nations with diverse cultural identities. National identities are a powerful and contested space, usually inhabited by a dominant community. However, if the dominant community is unable to recognise the various contesting currents and sedate them at a nascent stage, the dominant community may lose its control over the discourse of national identity.

NOTES

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