

## **Pakistan and the Language Movement**

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Islam was formally declared as the ideology of the Pakistan state. Yet in fact, from the very beginning it was not the principles of the religion of Islam but religious communalism which was practised as the so-called ideology of Pakistan. Practically few of the leading figures of the Muslim League and the central and provincial governments practised religion in their private lives and those among them who practised it did so as a personal spiritual exercise like many of their other co-religionists. Thus the private lives of the leading lights of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan were as secular and even irreligious as the lives of the 'unbelievers' and the ordinary pleasure hunting types. Religion was used by these people neither to make their own or anybody else's life more religious and divine. They made a purely secular use of religion and thereby tried to protect and promote their class exploitation of the toiling masses. The language policy of the Pakistan government has to be understood in this context.

Urdu was declared to be the only state language of Pakistan because Pakistan was supposed to be an Islamic state and Urdu was supposed to be a vehicle of Islamic culture. But in fact, according to Islamic principles no language could claim any special position and, therefore, there was no special religious bar against Bengali being accepted as a state language even of an Islamic state. The reason why the ruling classes of Pakistan preferred Urdu to any other language was that Urdu was the language of their own. Knowledge of and acquaintance with Urdu was limited not only in East Bengal but also in the various provinces of West Pakistan. The only difference in this case was that the middle class Bengalees knew very little Urdu and their own language Bengali was a very advanced language, whereas the upper and middle class West Pakistanis had a fair acquaintance with the Urdu and their own regional languages were not as developed either as Bengali or as Urdu. Urdu, thus, was the language of the 'elite' and the exploiting classes of West Pakistan in particular and Pakistan in general. It is for this reason that Urdu was preferred to either Bengali or any of the regional languages of West Pakistan.

When the rulers of Pakistan decided to impose Urdu on the whole of Pakistan as the only state language they had no other justification except the religious one. They argued that since most of the Islamic literature was in Urdu and for decades it had been used by the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent as a vehicle of Islamic culture no other language can be more suitable than Urdu to become the state language of the biggest Islamic state of the world.

But that was certainly not the end of it all. On the one hand, they tried to impose Urdu on the Bengali speaking people and on the other, they tried to suppress the Bengali language in every possible manner. Thus the language policy of the Pakistan government was not only limited in the area of state language but it also covered the whole area of Bengali culture. Their failure to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan actually made them more determined in their attack on the language and culture of the Bengali speaking people of East Pakistan. This attack consistently continued till the 16th of December, 1971. Thus, in spite of the formal recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan under the 1956 and 1962 constitutions the language movement in East Bengal did not end before the end of Pakistan in East Bengal.

It could not have been otherwise. Under the cover of religious arguments and distinctions of Hindu and Muslim cultures the rulers of Pakistan state were trying to promote their class interests and that was what constituted the essence of communalism. This communalism had many aspects and their language policy was one of them. Through this instrument they tried to

stifle the growth of education and culture and socio-political developments in East Bengal and keep it under effective control for an indefinite period. Their language policy was, thus, integrated totally with their general policy of national repression in East Bengal and, accordingly the Bengali language could not be made free from their attacks without defeating their more general policy of national repression.

The government of Pakistan and with that their communal policy, have now been defeated in East Bengal and a new opportunity has opened up for the development of the Bengali language and Bengali culture. How far these developments will take place on democratic lines will depend on the type of economy that is developed in Bangladesh and also the tolerance that will be shown by the new ruling classes towards those who would dare to criticise and oppose them.

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