

The Constitution and Education Policy of Bangladesh and the Place of Minority Languages

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Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, CHT people have been approaching the government with demands for provision of safeguarding their language, culture, heritage and the distinctiveness of identity. The moves for these demands have been made both inside and outside the national parliament. But the urge, appeals and demands of the CHT people were not taken into consideration while the national constitution was drafted and accepted in the parliament in 1972. As a result, the one and only member of the then parliament from CHT walked out from the session of parliament. The trend of urge, appeal and movement of the indigenous ethno-linguistic minority peoples of Bangladesh is still going the same way. In this brief article, I intend to look critically into the constitution and education policy of Bangladesh to find the place of the ethno-linguistic minority peoples of Bangladesh and to advocate for addressing the diversity and plurality of languages and their need.

However, the constitution delineates that Bangladesh will be a 'unitary' country, where Bengali will be the state language. According to Hossain & Tollefson (2006), "The new constitution of Bangladesh...placed the Bengali language at the centre of Bangladeshi nationalism" (p. 248). Not only this, the constitutional narrative of the independence struggle highlights the central role of the Bengali language,

The unity and the solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained a sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972, p. 1)

This declaration would not be harmful to the minority peoples if the constitution, at the same time, had recognized the variety of ethnicities and languages, and if it had guaranteed the protection and development of the variety of languages and cultures. Rather article 23 states,

The state shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and arts that all sections of people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture.

This article discloses the theoretical set of values that is called 'assimilationist ideology'. As it is defined that the objective of cultural conservation is 'to foster and improve national language', which is Bengali, all other ethnic languages are discarded. Hossain & Tollefson (2006) are astonished, as they exclaimed, "No provision addressed the many minority languages" (p.248). Baker (2006) interpreted this attitude as follows,

The politically and economically dominant group often has a vested interest in preserving its privileged position by asserting that its majority language is a symbol and creator of a unified and integrated nation. (p.400)

Though the plurality of ethnicity and languages is not clearly recognized in the constitution, it has an open-ended clause (clause 4 of article 28) which enables the government to initiate any special steps for disadvantaged people. It reads,

Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for advancement of any backward section of citizens.

In the light of the above clause, government can pass any law and policy in the parliament for the protection and development of minority languages and cultures if it had been forgotten at the time the constitution was adopted. It is even possible to amend the constitution to provide constitutional recognition to the ethno-linguistic minority peoples. In this regard, we can refer to the constitutional amendment of India (see Article 29(a), 350A and VIIIth amendment cited in Annamalai, 2001). Bangladesh has also amended its constitution more than a dozen times.

If constitution is the spirit of a nation, education policy is the agenda for the spirit. We can see the reflection of the assimilationist spirit of the constitution in the education policy of Bangladesh. Just like the spirit and aspiration of the national constitution, the education policy has also totally ignored the existence of plurality of ethnicity and languages. The fully fledged education policy of Bangladesh was passed in the national parliament only in 2000. Prior to that, three educational commissions were constituted to guide the education system of Bangladesh. These included the Kudorat-E-Khuda Education Commission (1974), Commission of 1987 and 1997. All the educational commissions and even the national education policy (2000) stayed silent, blind and passive about the special needs of the ethno-linguistic minority peoples, which is a clear rejection of the understanding and agreement of the CHT Peace Accord, 1997. Hossain and Tollefson (2006) commented,

“Like the Constitution, the Commission’s report presented an ideology of Bangladesh nationalism in which the Bengali was the embodiment of national aspirations and culture. The commission also provided a pedagogical rationale for Bengali-medium instruction. The Report claimed that Bengali has many advantages as medium of instruction, particularly its value in developing students’ “natural intelligence, original thinking and imagination” (p.249)

The pedagogical claim, in particular, clearly discloses the stance of the commission- who it was representing and whose voice it was making heard. Thus both the constitution and the education commissions are safeguarding the vested interest of the dominants and pushing the non-dominants towards marginalization.

However, some key words and statements have attracted my attention, which are beautiful and ambiguous at the same time. They are beautiful if we look at them from the perspective of the dominant group of the society, but they are full of ambiguity if we examine it from the perspective of the non-dominant groups. Some of these key words and statements that appear in the objectives of education and the strategy for primary education of the National Education Policy (2000) are as follows,

- (i) 'Creating opportunity of equal standard education for all through mother-tongue'
- (ii) 'establishment of cultural values',
- (iii) 'building of international brotherhood, non-communal and harmonious relationships among the peoples',
- (iv) 'flourishment of national history, heritage and cultural stream and passing them to next generation'
- (v) 'Opening equal opportunity of education for all' etc.

I believe that the plurality of ethnicity and identity and the diversity of language, culture and heritages of the country were not considered when the national education policy was adopted. As a result, it has generated ambiguity of meaning and demonstrated its inability to fulfil the 'national demand'. With the word 'national', I understand it to mean all citizens of the country with their diversity of identity and culture. But from the practice of Bangladesh and from my experience since childhood, I perceive 'national' to mean only the dominant Bengali-speaking people, not the ethno-linguistic minority peoples- not the Tripuras, Chakmas, Mandis, Marmas and others. From childhood, we are taught that 'Bengali is our mother-tongue', 'We heard and learned it from the mouth of mother', but it is not true for me and other minority people at all. We heard and learned Bengali from school. The language we heard and learned from the mouth of our mother is different from Bengali. In light of this experience, I want to ask the following questions for the corresponding points stated above,

- (i) Does mother tongue mean only the mother tongue of Bengali speaking children or does it also include the mother tongues of ethno-linguistic minority children?
- (ii) Will the national education policy (NEP) establish the cultural values that I learned from my Tripura community?
- (iii) Will the NEP introduce and promote my identity, culture and values alongside the 'national' ones so that all the people can develop cognitive flexibility and mental readiness to accept and respect each others identity and values, which is the necessary foundation for 'building of international brotherhood, non-communal and harmonious relationships among the peoples',
- (iv) Does 'national' mean the one including my one or just the one of the dominant group?
- (v) Does 'equal opportunity' mean that the ethno-linguistic minority children will get the opportunity to have education in a language (their ethnic languages) that they understand well just like the Bengali speaking children get?

I know that either there is no answer for my questions or the answer is 'no'. Hossain and Tollefson (2006) in this regard, expressed their grief, "To date, the government has no language policy for the ethno-linguistic minorities of Bangladesh" (p.243). If the same theory and idealism of the nineteen century- assimilation and uniformity- goes on in the twenty-first-century, we as a nation will only fall behind. So, we must adopt the policy of 'harmony in diversity' and policy of 'productive diversity'. So, I will advocate adopting productive diversity in the same vein of Cope and Kalantzis (1997) as they contend,

From London to Los Angeles, and even from Athens to Tokyo, cultural and linguistic diversity is increasingly a feature of the peoples who populate the streets, the schools and businesses. Those nations

that are able to adapt and facilitate these differences are the ones that will go forward without blood on the street...Traditional notions of nation that construct national homogeneity by suppressing varieties of language and custom are no longer relevant (p.262).

Otherwise, we will only fall behind as a nation. Hossain and Tollefson (2006) has precisely argued, "Until the educational challenges facing speakers of other languages are incorporated into language policies, their education will continue to be inadequate" (p.255). We can find the reflection of their warning in the ADB Report (2001), which discloses that the drop out rate of CHT primary students is the highest in the country. Apart from the impact on education, there are many other socio-economic and political consequences that underlie the vacuum of language policy for ethno-linguistic minorities. However, the necessity for the introduction of minority languages as the medium of instruction (MI) in local primary schools did not go totally unrealized by the policy makers. We can find the reflection of this realization in at least two government documents, as follows,

- (i) Article 33(a2) of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997
- (ii) Primary Education Development Program II

Besides, the National Education Policy 2000 also mentioned in its introduction that an "International Institute of Mother Tongue" would be established for the teaching, training and research of the various languages in Bangladesh. I hope that the international institute would not look into the foreign languages alone; it will also take care of other languages of the home.

Though the national education policy document does not clearly mention anything about the introduction of ethnic minority languages as the MI in local schools, the PEDP II designed a plan for 'Tribal Languages' within the inclusive education plan, which would be- if implemented- the first ever education program in CHT languages though this is a five year project. Although the program was agreed and funded by both government and donor agencies, it has not yet been implemented in practice. The set dateline for the implementation of the project is July 2003 to June 2009. As it has not been implemented in the last four years, there is no hope that it could be implemented in the one remaining year r.

Thus it is crystal clear that the problem of introducing the minority languages as MI in local primary schools is not the lack of resources and funds, nor the lack of expertise and knowledge. The problem is with the intension of assimilation and suppression, which will give nothing to the nation but which will take away everything from the minority peoples. But, in contrast to this notion assimilation, which is left out by many nations, a paradigm shift needed to address the issue of plurality and diversity for more civilized, modern and productive statehood which not only recognize the minority peoples, but also guarantee their existence and nurture for their prosperity.

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