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The Issuing of a Symbiotic Disclaimer Out of the Socio-Linguistic Hegemony: Percussive Bengali and the Languishing Indigenous Tongues inside the Bangladeshi Main

Nitish Kumar Mondal, M.A. (Double)

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It quickly upsets our conscience, and stirs us into a sense of the gripping shock, apart from the fact that it finds a channel to the atavistic heart of a distant ache, so very uncaringly thrust into the national consciousness. It is high time the phenomenon of the indigenous people and the controversy around their language question was seriously addressed. Inside the Bangladeshi main here, at present, this quandary slowly begins to worsen and one can feel its far-reaching effects. To cap it all, the indigenous few have to suit themselves to, and survive a parasitic and alien existence due to their being a seemingly unprogressive minority. And this simply is a telling window on how their distinctive tongues - the minority's tongues - all along got to put up with a step-motherly treatment. However, it is worthwhile to notice how many dialects, for instance, Borishal's dialect, Puran Dhaka's dialect, Sylheti dialect, and a few others side by side, the colloquial tongue has spawned many of their numbers in the sixty four districts of Bangladesh; and interestingly enough, despite their being dialects and colloquial tongues, they are reinvigorated and rejuvenated in everyday practice at home, and outside at myriad workplaces, as well as in myriad walks of life. Wherever the globe-trotting people speaking a variety of Bangladeshi dialects go, or live outside here - in the Bangladeshi main, they breathe fresh life into them (dialects) by practicing them every once in a while. The truth is, they have with them (in their memory and knowledge) the written and pure form of what they say (speak) albeit with a host of twists and

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turns. Simultaneously, in direct comparison to them (the Bangladeshi dialects and colloquial tongues), the pining aboriginal tongues here - the languages that scarcely have any written form - seem to fall and lag far behind; and in no way can we serve them both.

There can be no doubt about this matter. Of course, there is no denying the fact that the concern for a number of indigenous tongues (as many as thirty two tongues) is one of the most neglected and sidetracked affairs in the history of Bangladesh. In here, the languages of aboriginals seem to have a very bleak status in the race with other languages such as Bengali or English, or even the Bangladeshi dialects. And while the indigenous people have their respective (other) problems, their deep-rooted and pathological language problem can only add insult to their pains and injuries in the pluralistic society. Because of the language hegemony, largely the socio-linguistic hegemony that comes as an unwelcome assault on them, the cumulative locus of the indigenous tongues - even though they are their mother-tongues - at slow gradations, get deadened, and consequently turn faceless, and disappear in the long run. The linguistic inroads made by Bengali, along with English, and other native and international tongues have caused this. The indigenous few feel hopeless at the linguistic crossroads that inevitably brings them down to a perennial ethnic juncture. As long as they, the aboriginal people, try to speak to their own linguistic origins, their levitating voice roams and lingers, but can't reach the pulse of their own motherland: Bangladesh whose declared state language is Bengali, and nothing else, no exception allowed. In a nutshell, this unfortunately, is the scenario of a tragic circumstance that prevails until now, while the hegemonic language - alias the mother-tongue of the Bangladeshis - remains as the ruling Bengali.

The principle that the larger fish will gobble up the smaller ones is an age-old story. In Bengali it is known as "Matsannay". Furthermore, it is one simple way how symbiosis takes place. It obviously is the way how the mighty will boss people around, bounce forth and impart (wherewith to impose) the commonsense of his superiority over others, i.e. the smaller fry who will serve the mighty to their eclipse. The leading mighty in his position will win an indemnity that remains and will remain inviolable. And at the end of the day, it sounds all natural when a disclaimer goes on as to this and that has taken place, the mighty ones will be free of any responsibility for the smaller ones' dwindling state. The same is true of the Bengali language along with other internationally recognized languages as puissant as English who tend to make the existence of the indigenous tongues difficult and permanently

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at stake. Furthermore, the crux of the problem is – when you call somebody Bangladeshi you are calling him that on the basis of his having citizenship on the basis of his living here. Then, the tribal people are also Bangladeshis as they are living inside the Bangladeshi main. Now, could we expect that their language should be Bengali? Perhaps, we could not. And this really should not be. It necessarily does not need to be so, since the truth or the irony is that the indigenous people here have to be Bengali-speaking as well as bi-lingual; and the fact that their mother tongue is not Bengali is public knowledge. When one tribe talks to another tribe, they have got to use Bengali as a kind of a lingua franca. When they are to talk to the inlanders or the Bengali speaking natives of the plain, again they have to use Bengali as a via-media of communication with no options left. And very likely, outside home they get little chance to enjoy any free-speech, any likely linguistic freedom from the grip of Bengali. To practice a linguistic liberty for them would mean they would have to get confined within the limits of their own tribes and tribal villages.

While the world has become a global village, a cosmopolitan city, for the tribes living here it is not likely to be experiencing anything like that, since they must feel complacent with their respective tribal tongues inside the borders of their primal villages. With their single indigenous tongue they can't communicate with the outer world. And they have hardly any means to do that. Their economy is poor; they are largely rootless. The government of Bangladesh who ought to be concerned about them, the aboriginals, their problem-children, takes little care of them. They are yet to be acquainted with the gifts of modern science and technology. For instance, the language and the medium of instruction for a computer basically happen to be maintained through English or French and other languages of international standard. Unfortunately, their (the aboriginals') second language is Bengali, and not English or any other international tongue, without proper knowledge of which they could not participate in the onward journey to advancement; neither could they in any way rock the world!

After all, it is not they but we, the native Bengali speaking people, enjoy English as our second language. The opportunities we enjoy today in respect to translating Bengali directly into English is restricted to the speakers of the indigenous tongues. There are hardly any indigenous lexicons made available to make that job easier for them: the Saontals, the Marmas, the Tipperas, the Chakmas, the Moorangs and the rest of the tribes living here in the Bangladeshi mainland. Other than their own

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tongues that speak of their inheritance, the genuineness of a legacy, the speakers of the indigenous tongues must, in order to survive, learn Bengali first, and only then they can go for learning other international languages like English or French and many others. In fact, when somebody's mother-tongue itself is struggling to survive, let alone stand on its own, it appears that all the other opportunities offered by today's world seem like a delusion. The fact is that their language queries have found no resolution yet and this has brought them near the brink of a kaleidoscopic confusion and depression.

Moreover, in this process, the aboriginals of Bangladesh, come in contact with what is for them a non-native language, together with a socio-linguistic culture that is not their own, the authenticity and the exclusive test of their mother tongues get diluted, and they gradually tend to forget their language, tradition, linguistic and cultural legacy which is to be expected. Being spoken nearly by a minority group of only one percent (1.03) of people, their tongues cannot reach the heights of the hegemonic tongue, i.e. Bengali spoken by a majority of ninety eight percent (98%) inside Bangladesh. Besides, Bengali has the rights to linguistic fame for its being practiced in the literary field by poets, writers, novelists as potent as the Nobel-laureate world poet Rabindranath Tagore, the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibananda Das, Shamsur Rahman, Humayun Ahmed, Imdadul Haque Milan, and numerous others who have devoted their heart and soul to bring Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi culture, and the Bengali language the promise of a great future. The test of Bengali as a literary language is undeniable as well. Apart from that, with their sanctified blood, the language martyrs of 1952 have proven Bengali's worth and rich ancestry. Therefore, with Bengali there resides a climate of affection here. Besides, Bengali is the seventh strongest among all the spoken languages worldwide. As a matter of fact, the indigenous tongues cannot help being putty in the hands of the powerful language practiced here. So, as the beauty of the moon dies out in the presence of the sun, Bengali's gigantic and almost sacred presence can only subdue other languages' growth and existence here.

On the whole, the tendency of mono-lingual dominance and a socio-linguistic hegemony would unfortunately lead to the extinction of the indigenous tongues here. Further, hegemony, as we all know, is the idea advanced by the Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, that appraises: "that a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its

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ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression” (Abrams, 1999 p.151).

According to Bangladesh Asiatic Society (5th part of ADIBASHI JANAGOSHTHI) and the census report 2001, there are about 1205978 tribal people in Bangladesh. And among them the largest tribe is Chakma numbering to about two lakh, and fifty three-thousand of Chakma people who are markedly educated and more prosperous than any other tribes living in Bangladesh. One reason why most of them are educated is that they, a descendant group of the Chinese-Burmese language group and of a mixed origin, reflect mostly the Bengali influence than any other tribes in Bangladesh. Here comes the crystal clear testimony of how a certain devaluing of one's own tradition, language, heritage, ethnicity and culture is enacted in exchange of an insurance that a good command of Bengali inside Bangladesh; it is an entry ticket to social mobility and a guarantee of prosperity. Thus comes the demise of the indigenous tongues. However, the verification of the surmise that the indigenous tongues are languishing can be made clear when the ominous comment passed by the sub-divisional officer namely Mr. Page is heard:

As far as can be ascertained the Daingnets appear to be of Tibeto-Burman origin with a strain of Chittagonian blood and speaking Bengali. In features they are somewhat like the Goorkas of Nepal and differ from the hill- tribes of Arakan....They do not intermarry with other races, speak a corrupted Bengali, and are descendants of Mussulman slaves of the king of Arakan. Daingnets are decreasing in numbers, an indication that they are gradually ceasing to exist as a separate tribe and are being absorbed into the general Chin community (Smart, 1917 p.94).

When a tribe (as few as the Daingnets themselves) ceases to exist, it seems to be clear how their indigenous tongues can face the threat of extinction today. Mr. Page commented on that indigenous affair long since. And now it is the twenty first century and one decade past when the world has seen at least (according to UNESCO) 2498 languages slowly perishing from sight just because they are not patronized. There are hundreds of languages spoken by a people of 675 crores. And the indigenous tongues spoken by a minuscule number of ethnic groups inside the Bangladeshi main can very easily perish without the least indication. Our neighbor country like India has thousands of languages at stake; Nepal has many endangered languages while it is well known that hundreds of languages all around Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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the world have experienced total extinction, and today hundreds of languages remain in a precarious position. Our country in this regard is no exception. Her indigenous tongues are as neglected as ever, and they will surely encounter the fate of an existential crisis. The Daingnets of the Chittagong hill tracts can't help being extinct for they have been a separate and a seemingly expatriated entity; while side by side, their languages get feeble, jeopardized and extinct day by day.

The Chakma, the Marma, the Saontal, the Tippera, the Moorangs and many others have their primeval and linguistic origins in this Indian sub-continent. They could be very few in number in here i.e. Bangladesh; but the fact is - they are comparatively large in number in the regions like Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Tripura, Assam and many other provinces of India. And their numbers swell to around and more than 31 lakhs according to the 1961 census. However, irrespective of their number, their arcane language and culture are those things that certify their identity. Their society, their culture, their language and literature are those that have made them unique. And they must be proud of what they have as language and literature. As tribes, their languages have peculiarly exclusive taste found nowhere else. A mere glance at the Saontali verses can tell us the beauty of their thought, the strength of their philosophy, and the puissance of their tongues at length:

Dare sakam sage mena

Eshnurulagith chandopalo: lagith

Ningmayo jana makan noa dhartire

Bangdayo tundo chando bang-dayo bangaa (Jalil, 1991 p.74).

The age-old meaning in the verse above is that a tree is in leaves because the leaves are waiting to finally fall, while certainly the human beings are here (on this earth) because they are to meet their final destiny i.e. death. This verse unfortunately has no written version of its own. It is simply spoken of, or sung, as folklore songs are always sung in their (saontali) society. It is sad to note that like many obscure language songs in this world, the above song sung by the saontals can only be uttered, recorded or transmitted into English only through the via-media and trajectory of Bengali: and the saontali accent, the authenticity of intonation, of punctuation, the philosophical note, the arcane strain - all seem

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to be lost and overshadowed by being adjusted and attuned to Bengali language's properties. The knowledge that the implicative intricacy, the sophistication of meaning of this incantatory and engaging verse apart from the richness of the exclusive tongue are almost similar to that of the poem: "Spring and Fall" composed by the English poet G.M Hopkins [1844-89]. All its beauty could have been conveyed to the world directly if their language had been used by millions of people, practiced through literary forms that are in written forms as the way Hopkins' poem was practiced:

Leaves, like the things of man, you

With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

Ah, as the heart grows older

It will come to such sights colder

By and by, nor spare a sigh

Through world of wan wood leaf meal lie;

.....

It is the blight man was born for,

It is Margaret you mourn for (Hopkins, 1993 p.1551).

On the whole, the Saontals or the other tribes in this literary process fare no better as far as knowing the worth of their language, and fathoming their own socio-linguistic culture and literary heritage. Languages actually live only through practice - spoken as well as written; while most of the languages of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh (like many other tribal languages in this world) regrettably have only spoken version, and none of the thirty two languages have any kind of a written form. That probably is the reason why their languages now-a-days are subject to a nationally accepted treatment of unanimous negligence.

Contrary to this picture, the Chakma have made an exception and made a real difference. They have managed to publish a novel in the Chakma language namely *Febo* in the recent years (19 February Language in India www.languageinindia.com 12 : 6 June 2012

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2004). That actually paves the way for further literary works from the indigenous people, to proceed forward in time. It really shows the high-spirited way the minority and the indigenous people can work toward having a written documentation of their distinctive tongues. After all, writing literary works in one's own tongue is the best way to keep that tongue alive, and the other indigenous and unique tongues. And as long as they continue to do this, the indigenous tongues can claim their rights to live, and be further strengthened. That makes and should make considerable sense for the indigenous few. The pen, of course, is mightier than the sword!

Inside the Bangladeshi main here, there has always been a common apathy and a cumulative disgust aimed towards the indigenous people and their tongues. There are a number of reasons behind this. The tribes are very self-involved and reserved in nature. One instance of this is that they don't usually intermarry with others in their neighborhood. The upshot is that they can't mix with people (who do not belong to their group) of the same country which they inhabit. For that matter, the native peoples of our country i.e. Bangladesh do feel like they do not want to mix with them, the self-involved peoples who don't like to share at all, and even, they feel a kind of xenophobic fear to intermingle with them (the tribes) while in the meantime, the tribes or the indigenous peoples suffer a shut-in existence, and a likely linguistic stasis. Their languages neither take from nor give anything to another. Further, it is unfortunate when native people like Charulal Mukharjee get a chance to make such unfair comments like: "O they will hit anything that flies except aeroplanes, and that swims except boats" (Bhaddra, 1983 p.57). So, the tribal people are considered to be ogres, uncivilized and incurable brutes that can only be avoided and hated – that is the impression one gets. Further, in a similar fashion their languages too are most probably considered to be have no worth of their own, unless or until they are fused with the mainstream language.

However, fusion - fusion of language, culture, literature and heritage may be worthwhile and be the order of the day, but it leaves them, the indigenous people, uneasy and taken aback since it (fusion) means there will be no tribes or indigenous peoples anymore. The government must take it seriously and think about them and their exquisite tongue's survival lest it would become too late for the aboriginals that they can't recognize themselves, and readily forget who they really are. It is a world of democracy; and it undoubtedly is their democratic right to get the authenticity of their language

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invariably kept whole, unharmed and bona-fide. Their uncompromising indigenous tongues must be given and guaranteed their due honour.

“Long jeid na ka kinthaei” (Mamun,2009 p.14) is a Khashia proverb meaning the human race is originated from the woman. This simply is reflective of a different kind of philosophy, or is that the spirit of Feminism. Here is the beauty of the indigenous tongues that lie bare in front of us. In fact, one single proverb can change our life altogether. So, what harm it would do if the indigenous tongues were kept alive and free of any threat of intrusion and interpolation? No harm. Rather, it would benefit us in numerous ways. Through prioritizing and delving deep into the indigenous tongues - who knows, we might learn some special truths about our culture and ancestry. It is worth some research..

The Bangladeshi government needs to bring a few changes in her constitution so as to clearly mark the areas of explicit concerns for the indigenous peoples, and their many languages. Proper care can be taken of the indigenous languages if sufficient books are written in their tongues and are supplied to them. And it must be made sure that they are studying them. More than half of their children drops out of school each year just because they are not nurtured in their familiar ways of study. That is to say, they are to study in the Bengali medium schools and institutions. Bengali is as foreign to them (the tribal peoples) as French or English is foreign to us, the Bengali speaking peoples. Just in order to posit Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan, the valiant Bengali youth laid down their precious lives. Likewise, when it is a question of mother-tongue, even for the minorities’ languages, may be the indigenous people will try to resolve it anyway. As a matter of fact, their education system needs to be as modernized as Bengali. Then, they must be taught English, rather than Bengali and the medium of instruction should be their own respective tongues.

However, it is not so very easy for the Bangladeshi government of a developing country like ours to patronize all the thirty two indigenous tongues as equally important and significant to consider at a time. Hence, picking up several languages (three/four) from the all the 32 indigenous tongues considering their especial linguistic traits, the number of people speaking in a language, cultural heritage, and future promises guaranteed by them etc., as the languages to be the main ones for the aboriginals is crucial. The establishment of the public universities can be a better provision offered only for the indigenous people of Bangladesh. And also other countries where peoples speaking indigenous Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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tongues could also do this so as to ensure their sound indigenous and international education. Or, in the public universities, separate departments should be there for studying indigenous tongues and cultures. UN convention for the indigenous peoples must be followed side by side. The tribes of a country can play a significant role in advancing the prosperity of a nation. Without them, the country can not strengthen its economy, education and saturate the full course of its growth - linguistic, intellectual, economic, political, international and holistic. And if they continue to be prisoners in the custody of a socio-cultural hegemony and a socio-linguistic duress, the future and holistic progression is far from achievable. The Bangladeshi government must be looking forward to free them, the indigenous people, from any such socio-linguistic and hegemonic enslavement. Howsoever, then, creating an atmosphere where the indigenous tongues can be practiced fully must be ascertained, and instead of Bengali, English must be prioritized as a lingua franca for the ethnic groups of Bangladesh. As for maintaining a national and patriotic order, with the hand-in hand cooperation of Bengali and English, the indigenous tongues need be co-opted also, to reach further distances and move ahead in the future.

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