

Book Review

Tariq Rahman. *Language and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996. 320 pp. No price listed, cloth.

Tariq Rahman has written a judicious and informative book about a topic that has, all too often, been the subject of polemics, for language movements in Pakistan have been associated with the drive for Bengali independence, and with the bloody struggle for power between Sindhis and migrants from India (*muhajirs*) in Karachi. These clashes had a historical precedent in the controversy between advocates of Hindi and Urdu as symbolic of national identity, among Hindus and Muslims respectively, in the years prior to partition. The complex relationship of language, ethnicity, religion, and power is a tangled web that requires patience and objectivity to understand, and that Rahman has done an exemplary job of deciphering.

This work covers, in fact, a multitude of inter-related topics: the Anglicist-Orientalist debate in early colonial education policy, the Urdu-Hindi controversy during the nationalist movement, and various ethno-linguistic movements since the independence of Pakistan: not only Bengali, but also Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Siraiki, Punjabi, Kohistani, and so on. Rahman also discusses the debate between advocates of Urdu vs. English as the medium of higher education in contemporary Pakistan. It is safe to say that Rahman's book is an indispensable study of the thorny subject of language movements and their relation to political power in contemporary Pakistan.

To write this book, Tariq Rahman had to digest a tremendous amount of information, travel to regional capitals and libraries, and interview linguists and political activists in all the provinces of Pakistan, as well as Bangladesh and Britain. The work displays the enormous effort that went into it and repays a close reading. It is a gold mine of information and an essential work of reference, with an exhaustive bibliography. Appendices list language-wise periodicals, television and radio time allocation (although the electronic media are not otherwise discussed), and district-wise distribution of languages spoken, the latter also rendered visually in maps.

While other works have dealt in greater detail with the Orientalist-Anglicist debate and the Hindi-Urdu controversy, Rahman situates these and other language movements in contemporary theories of identity and nationality formation, whether instrumentalist or primordialist, invented or imagined. He asks a number of questions at the outset (p. 5) that he hopes to answer: (1) Do people make efforts and even resort to violence to preserve their language, or do they use language as a symbol to get political and economic dividends? (2) Is identity a permanent feature or does it change under varying economic and political pressures? (3) Has language always been a marker of identity, and is it a marker of identity now? (4) Do leaders and intellectuals manipulate language as a symbol of identity to create ethno-nationalism? If so, why? (5) Are language

movements and ethno-nationalism[s] created by enemy agents and communists in Pakistan? The last question he poses in order to refute it; the first is less an either/or than a both/and proposition. Rahman examines each of these questions in relation to the various language movements he studies. He further reflects on how language relates to both religious orientation and class power in the jab and parry of Pakistani politics, whether military or civilian.

All of the foregoing may make it sound as if Rahman's book is either drily theoretical or so crammed with detail as to be heavy going. On the contrary, this reviewer found the book to be very readable, often compelling. The author explains his theoretical concepts and defines his terms in the early chapters, and then tells the stories of the intimate relationship of language, ethnicity, and politics in the several regions of Pakistan. His coverage of the Bengali language movement, that provided the impetus for the autonomy campaign in East Pakistan and the ultimate emergence of Bangladesh, is particularly empathetic. This review will look in detail at Rahman's analysis of three among the language movements that he examines: Bengali, Sindhi, and Punjabi, their similarities and particularly their differences.

The Bengali language movement emerged almost immediately after partition as the East Pakistanis sought to have their language recognized along with Urdu for official purposes. Urdu had become the symbol of Muslim nationalism, and most Pakistani government officials and military officers felt that it should be the sole national language. Bengalis, however, were more numerous than West Pakistanis, and began to feel that the rejection of their claims for equal language status amounted to cultural imperialism by the officialdom, drawn largely from Urdu-speaking *muhajirs* or from the West wing. Jinnah came to East Pakistan during the first year of Pakistan's existence (and the last year of his life), and dashed the hopes of East Pakistanis that he would be above the fray by rejecting out of hand the claims of Bengali to be a national language. Things got worse. By 1952, feelings of being ignored and exploited by the government had grown in the East. The Prime Minister, Khwaja Nizamuddin (an East Pakistani, but from the Calcutta upper class and an Urdu-speaker), on a visit to Dhaka, reiterated that Urdu would be the only national language. Strikes and demonstrations ensued, and on February 21, police fired on a student demonstration, causing several deaths. The Bengali language movement now had its martyrs. A monument to their memory (*shahid minar*) was quickly erected, demolished, reerected. Bengali voters rejected the Muslim League in the provincial elections of that year, the first sign that Islam was not a sufficient cement for the new state.

Bengali was eventually recognized as one of the national languages of Pakistan and appeared along with Urdu on postage stamps and rupees. But its script continued to mark it as a "Hindu" cultural artifact in the eyes of West Pakistanis, and the Bengalis' devotion to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore — banned for a time from All-Pakistan Radio — only reinforced that sentiment. As the

Pakistani power elite suspected Bengali loyalty both to Pakistan and to Islam, the East Pakistanis' desire for cultural autonomy and economic and political parity grew. Calls for autonomy by the Awami League led by Shaikh Mujibur Rahman emphasized the colonial relationship between the two wings of Pakistan. They had a point. The foreign-exchange earnings of the East wing's tea and jute were being used to finance industrial development in the West. These economic grievances reinforced the Bengalis' cultural resentment and sense of political disenfranchisement. In the Bengali case, then, language was the basis for a distinctive identity, but the economic and political issues between East and West Pakistan were ultimately crucial in the emergence of separatism.

In the case of the Sindhi language movement, some of the same elements are present, especially the cultural and political resentment of Sindhis against Urdu-speaking *muhajirs*, and the Sindhis' displacement by the same outsiders in the administration of their province in the years following partition. But in other ways the scenario differs. For one thing, *muhajirs* immigrated in such numbers that Sindhis became a minority in their own cities, especially Karachi, and remained dominant only in the relatively backward rural areas. Lacking the majoritarian heft of Bengali, Sindhi lost out as an administrative language and medium of instruction in its homeland. This was particularly ironic, as Sindhi had emerged as a marker of a distinctive regional identity only in the 1930s, at the initiative of Muslim politicians seeking Sindh's separation from Bombay province. Sindh was a Muslim majority region, recognized as such by the British colonial authorities, who had also favored the adoption of an Arabic-based script for Sindhi as a way of conciliating Muslim opinion. Now, the Muslim nation of Pakistan downplayed Sindh's separate identity, especially during Ayub Khan's regime, when West Pakistan was amalgamated into one unit.

After the independence of Bangladesh, West Pakistan was all that remained of Pakistan, and its four provinces of Sindh, Baluchistan, Punjab and the Northwest Frontier re-emerged as arenas of identity politics. Sindhi, the language of the rural landed elites and peasant masses, was disdained as low-status by the Urdu-speaking urbanites. The rural-urban divide thus played a major role in the Sindhi-*muhajir* contests over status and power in recent years. Bengali, by contrast, could consistently claim a literary status equal to Urdu, and an identity with the educated elite of the former colonial metropolis, Calcutta, even though the majority of pre-partition Bengalis were rural and Muslim.

The Punjabi language movement is, Rahman implies, in some ways incomprehensible. The majority of Pakistanis, following Bengali independence, are Punjabis. Punjabis have dominated in the army and are thus well-placed in the power structure. Educated Punjabis are literate in Urdu and are comfortable using it in their literary and official lives. *Muhajirs* came to the Punjab in significant numbers, but they tended to be East Punjabis. In other words, the status, power, and regional rivalries that are found in the Bengali and Sindhi movements are hardly present in the case of Punjabi. Historically, the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab used

Persian, and later under the British, Urdu was the local language of administration. In the late nineteenth century, Punjabi Hindus became active in promoting Hindi, and Sikh reform movements championed Punjabi written in the Gurmukhi script. Punjabi-speaking Muslims downplayed their vernacular tongue in favor of Urdu, which was not only the official language, but also had the added prestige of a rich literature, associated with former courts and urban sophisticates. Additionally, like Hindi for Punjabi Hindus, Urdu for Punjabi Muslims was symbolic of their religious identity. Gurmukhi Punjabi had religious resonance only for Sikhs, and the British administration decided against making it a medium of instruction in the interests of not isolating Sikh students from wider opportunities (such as employment in the military).

For these reasons, therefore, a Punjabi language movement among Muslim Punjabis would seem counterproductive. And yet, Punjabi language activists worked toward the recognition of Punjabi, written in the Urdu script, as the language of primary education and local administration in the province. They also asked for a chair of Punjabi literature at Punjab University, literature that included the Sikh scriptures. That these activists tended to be urban intellectuals, *literati*, and secular and progressive rather than conservative, led the central government to regard the Punjabi language movement as both anti-national and anti-Islamic. While they succeeded, ultimately, in establishing literary studies at various institutions of higher learning and in enhancing the vibrant literary life of Lahore with a number of very active Punjabi associations, the Punjabi activists did not succeed in gaining recognition for their mother tongue as a medium of instruction or administration. The Punjabi movement, according to Rahman, is more sentimental than anything else. It has succeeded in raising the status of the language from a rural *patois* to a medium of poetic literature and given it a presence in the popular media, but otherwise, Punjabi remains a language of intimacy and informality, not an instrument of power.

These regional language movements asserted local identity, culture, and claims of equal status to the national language, Urdu, a language that arose out of the Delhi dialect *khari boli*, and became a Mughal *lingua franca* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The native speakers of Urdu in Pakistan are few, *muhajirs* and their descendants, but at least until recently, they remained relatively urban, more educated, and hence higher status than the local language speakers. Urdu has succeeded, with state patronage, in becoming the recognized literary and administrative language of Pakistan. On the other hand, the higher prestige of English among the Pakistani educated elite means that English remains the ascendant link language, which assures the continuation in power of a highly privileged few. Rahman's work is consequently that seeming contradiction in terms: an objective work that nevertheless carries conviction as its subtext. The state, he notes, spends more money on English-medium schools than on Urdu ones, and the power elite supports the continued use of English as the language of higher education and government, and as the "open sesame of an exclusive club" (p. 244). English is also the link to the

outside world, the international scientific and technical community, commerce, and trade; hence the elite are reluctant to give up the advantage that Pakistanis (and, one might add, Indians and other British post-colonials) have in their tradition of English education. Rightly so. Even the less affluent, Rahman notes, support English as a medium of upward mobility and modernization.

If I have any criticisms of the work, they are minor. Rahman does not ignore, but nevertheless gives inadequate coverage to the interests and patronage of neighboring countries, India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in these linguistic and ethnic movements. The electronic media, increasingly the arena from which literates and illiterates alike receive their information, is barely mentioned. Nor does he fully discuss the international economic pressures (as opposed to the internal ones, which he does take into account): globalization, emigration, and remissions from the migrant economy, that influence both central language planning and regional jockeying for position. On balance, however, this is a complex and valuable work that should find an audience beyond the discipline of linguistics, among social scientists, historians, and political and social activists.

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