

Book Review

K M de Silva

Rahman, Tariq, *Language and Politics in Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1996, Pakistan Rs 475.

A reading of Tariq Rahman's excellent study of *Language and Politics in Pakistan* serves to remind us that in the immediate aftermath of independence South Asia's language planners had been very complacent as they set about implementing changes in language policy (in India and Pakistan) or unilaterally repudiating the language settlement reached prior to independence (as in Sri Lanka). In post-partition India it was left to the Constituent Assembly to fashion the framework of independent India's language policy. Tariq Rahman's book shows us that in Pakistan, as it was in 1947, language policy was decided on by the political leadership without the benefit of free and open debate in the national legislature as in Sri Lanka, or the Constituent Assembly as in India. In the first decade after independence all three nations, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, were to learn how difficult it would be to replace English by an indigenous language (as in India and Pakistan) or by indigenous languages (as in Sri Lanka). While both India and Pakistan sought to replace English with what were, in effect, minority languages, Hindi and Urdu respectively, and faced serious political problems, in Sri Lanka too where one of the two official languages, Sinhalese was spoken by a clear majority of the population, indeed by over three-fourths of the population, the attempts to ensure its primacy by legal enactment also disturbed the civil peace of the country for five years or so from the mid-1950s.

Tariq Rahman's volume shows that the critically important challenge to the integrity of the state in Pakistan as it existed from 1947, came first in a struggle over language, and it came from the Bengalis in the eastern wing of the country rather than from Baluch or the Sindhis in the north west and west of the country. The earliest signs of the potentially destabilising effects of the clash of linguistic nationalisms in post-independence South Asia had come in Pakistan.

Urdu had united the Indian Muslims before the partition of the *raj* and it was hoped and assumed that it would unite them in the new state and help transcend provincial and ethnic loyalties to create a new Pakistani nation. But when the Urdu-speaking migrants to West Pakistan sought to impose Urdu as the official language of the new state, a policy that was supported by M A Jinnah himself, they completely underestimated the extent of the opposition that this policy provoked. Urdu was spoken by less than 10% of the population of the new country and was hardly used in East Pakistan where the overwhelming majority of the people spoke Bengali, and where, in fact, the majority of the population of Pakistan lived.

Opponents of Pakistan's ruling élites felt that the imposition of Urdu would undermine the indigenous languages and culture in both wings of Pakistan. In general there was opposition from four sets of people, principally from East Pakistan's Bengali population, but from three others as well, the Sindhi language movement, the Pashto language movement, which was very strong in the 1950s, and which the government of Pakistan mistrusted and discouraged. And the fourth was the Baluch language movement.

Tariq Rahman's assertion that language is at the centre of the power structure of Pakistan and that an understanding of language policy and reactions to it provides insights into the way power is distributed in Pakistan, is justified by even the most cursory examination of the way that country's politicians and élite handled, or, to be more accurate, mishandled the definition and implementation of language policy. What was true of the opposition to Pakistan's efforts at introducing a national language to large and sceptical groups who constituted a majority of the country's population, was equally true of Sri Lanka's efforts at repudiating a language policy settled four years prior to independence and where the opposition came from a minority of the population.

In Pakistan "ethnicity" was generally stigmatised as provincialism. It was assumed and hoped that this provincialism would eventually disappear, eroded by the forces of modernisation, and political integration at a national level. It did not, and the provincial languages survived even if they did not prevail against Urdu. Where a provincial language did eventually prevail was in East Pakistan which broke away in 1971 into the independent state of Bangladesh..

The Bengali-speaking people of East Pakistan began an agitation as early as 1948 against the move to impose Urdu on them. By the early 1950s the movement against Urdu was well-established there, and marked the beginning of the slide to separation. Although Bengali was recognised as one of the state languages of Pakistan in the constitution of 1956 the

Bengali majority was far from assuaged by this concession. Quite apart from the emotional aspect of linguistic nationalism, there were the economic considerations in the language conflict: material advancement through employment and upward social mobility. The struggle for the recognition of Bengali had been stimulated by these as well, and in regard to them the ruling élite in the western unit of Pakistan had been, and continued to be singularly unsympathetic.

As in India, so also in Pakistan, the attempt to convert a minority language into the official language proved to be a long drawn out struggle. In both countries the struggle helped to ensure the survival of English as a national language. When a new constitution was introduced in 1973, in the wake of the successful separatist campaign in East Pakistan, provision was made for a 15 year period of transition – in article 251 of the constitution – for the replacement of English by Urdu. English remains as powerful in Pakistan today as it was before that constitutional provision was introduced.

Language planners in our part of the world paid little heed to the experience of the nations of Central Europe in the 19th century as they grappled with language reform. Then as now language was linked with power, and naturally changes in language policy provoked resistance and violence from those who felt their interests were threatened. The roles are reversed today, and the post-independence history of language policy in South Asia will be able to provide insights and examples of great value to Central European politicians as they grapple with a renewal of the problems that first arose in the 19th century there in regard to policy changes in language, and to the protection of language rights of minorities. Those same problems have now arisen in the Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Language planners and politicians there would do well to read Tariq Rahman's monograph on *Language and Politics in Pakistan* as a cautionary tale. Within the confines of that volume they will find a summary of all the problems that a political system confronts when its leaders seek to impose changes in language policy and face disgruntled minorities who feel threatened by those changes, impending or real. Pakistan, after all, is one of the few post-colonial states to be dismembered by a successful separatist movement. One of the stimulants of that separatism was linguistic nationalism. The man who said that "A language is a dialect that has an army and navy" was speaking a profound truth.

K M de Silva is Executive Director, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, Sri Lanka and formerly Professor of Sri Lanka History, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.