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Language, Identity, and Power: The Bengali Language Movement and Cultural Politics

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Introduction

This book argues that language is not merely a vehicle for meaning but a material and symbolic infrastructure of power. Across Bengal, contests over script, schooling, and speech became ways to authorize rulers, draw communal boundaries, and mobilize people into the streets. From colonial print culture to post-Partition identity politics, Bengali was fought over as a right, curated as a heritage, and wielded as a claim to dignity and self-rule. Tracing these entanglements illuminates how the Bengali Language Movement emerged not as a sudden eruption in 1952 but as a culmination of longer struggles over who could speak for the people, and in what tongue.

Our central proposition is simple yet far-reaching: when a language is publicly recognized, standardized, and taught, it reorganizes political life. This study follows the infrastructures that made Bengali legible to states and resonant for citizens—printing presses and paper routes, examination syllabi and school inspections, radio programs and songbooks, neighborhood libraries and clandestine pamphlets. These infrastructures connected elites to subalterns, cities to hinterlands, and domestic spaces to campuses and courts. They also created new vulnerabilities: censorship regimes, communal polarization, and a politics of inclusion that often required exclusions—of dialects, scripts, and speakers who did not fit the emerging norm.

Methodologically, the book combines archival research with tools from sociolinguistics and political history. It reads newspapers, textbooks, court rulings, and organizational minutes alongside posters, processions, and oral histories. Concepts such as language ideology, enregisterment, and indexicality help explain how particular forms of Bangla came to signify refinement, piety, militancy, or citizenship in distinct arenas. The analysis attends both to policy—what governments mandated—and to praxis—what people actually did with language in homes, schools, mosques, temples, factories, and on the street. The result is an account that treats linguistic choice as a social act with legal and electoral consequences.

The narrative begins in the colonial period, when vernacular printing flourished under regimes of surveillance and subsidy. Grammars, dictionaries, and schoolbooks sought to fix a standard Bangla even as they circulated competing visions of community. Education policy—especially the primacy of examination systems—translated linguistic hierarchies into life chances, producing a vernacular middle class who built reading rooms, debating societies, and mutual-aid presses. Yet the same infrastructures also carried sectarian polemics, and the partition of Bengal in 1905 revealed how language could be a banner for both solidarity and fracture.

After 1947, when new borders redrew allegiances, language policy became a crucible of legitimacy. In East Pakistan, the demand that Bangla be recognized alongside Urdu galvanized students, teachers, and workers into a mass movement whose emblematic moment arrived in February 1952. This book situates those martyrdoms within a broader topography of mobilization—campus strikes and neighborhood vigils, processions framed by religious symbolism, women’s participation as organizers and mourners, and the tactical uses of songs, slogans, and posters. The subsequent institutionalization of memory—monuments, calendars, and commemorative rituals—transformed linguistic protest into cultural nationalism.

Yet the story is not only East Bengali. West Bengal’s debates over script reform, medium of instruction, and the status of minority languages unfolded in parallel and sometimes in tension with developments across the border. Questions of standardization confronted the richness of regional varieties—Sylheti, Chittagonian, Rangpuri, Rajbanshi, and others—raising dilemmas that persist wherever a single language is asked to speak for a plural people. Courts and constitutions alternately narrowed and widened the space for multilingualism, revealing the law as a terrain of both constraint and creativity.

The final chapters carry the narrative forward to the aftermath of 1971 and into the present, when diaspora and digital media have reconfigured Bengali publics. Online forums, community schools, and transnational campaigns extend the repertoire of mobilization while recasting old questions: Who owns a language? What counts as authentic speech? How can linguistic pride be disentangled from chauvinism? By placing the Bengali experience in conversation with other language movements, the book distills comparative lessons for activists and policymakers seeking more just regimes of recognition.

Taken together, the chapters show how language organizes political possibilities—structuring who can be heard, how claims are framed, and what futures seem imaginable. For sociolinguists, the book offers a historically grounded account of how forms of talk become forms of power. For political historians, it demonstrates how cultural infrastructures shape state-making and mass politics. And for organizers, it suggests strategic insights into building coalitions that honor linguistic diversity without sacrificing political clarity. If language is a house we live in together, then this is a history of how that house was built, contested, repaired, and sometimes set ablaze—only to be rebuilt again with different rooms and doors.

CHAPTER ONE: Language as Claim: Theory and Method

Language, in the conventional view, often appears as a transparent medium, a simple conduit for thought and communication. We speak, we write, and meaning flows, ostensibly unhindered. Yet, this seemingly straightforward process masks a deeper, more intricate reality: language is rarely neutral. It is, in fact, deeply implicated in the construction of identity, the negotiation of power, and the articulation of political claims. For the millions who participated in the Bengali Language Movement, language was anything but transparent; it was a battleground, a symbol, and a potent instrument for demanding recognition and shaping destiny.

To understand how Bengali became a site of such intense political mobilization, we must move beyond simplistic notions of language as a mere tool. Instead, we embrace a theoretical framework that recognizes language as a social practice, interwoven with history, culture, and power dynamics. This chapter lays out the conceptual tools that will guide our exploration, offering a nuanced perspective on how linguistic choices and practices acquire profound social and political significance. We begin by considering the concept of language ideology, which helps us unpack the often-unspoken beliefs and assumptions people hold about language and its speakers.

Language ideology refers to the shared beliefs and feelings about a language or a specific way of speaking. These ideologies are not innate; they are learned, often unconsciously, through social interactions and cultural institutions. They shape our perceptions of what constitutes "proper" or "powerful" language, influencing everything from educational policies to individual conversational choices. In colonial Bengal, for instance, certain forms of Bangla might have been associated with erudition and high social standing, while others were dismissed as "vulgar" or "unrefined." These judgments were not inherent to the linguistic forms themselves but were products of prevailing language ideologies.

These ideologies are rarely neutral; they often reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies. When a particular dialect or accent is deemed superior, it often correlates with the social and economic dominance of its speakers. Conversely, the stigmatization of certain linguistic varieties can marginalize entire communities. Understanding these ideological underpinnings is crucial for dissecting how language became a marker of communal identity in Bengal, distinguishing between groups and fueling political divisions. The "proper" Bengali, as defined by certain elites, often excluded the diverse linguistic practices of rural populations or religious minorities, laying the groundwork for future tensions.

Another vital concept in our analytical toolkit is "enregisterment." This term describes the process through which linguistic forms become associated with particular social identities and activities. Think of how a specific legalistic jargon becomes enregistered with the legal profession, or how certain slang terms become associated with youth culture. Enregisterment is not a static process; it evolves over time, as linguistic forms are used, circulated, and reinterpreted within different social contexts. It is through enregisterment that language acquires its indexical power – the ability to point to or signify something beyond its literal meaning.

For the Bengali Language Movement, the enregisterment of Bangla was a critical factor. Over time, through print culture, educational institutions, and literary movements, specific forms of written and spoken Bengali became enregistered as the language of Bengali identity, culture, and political aspiration. This was not a monolithic process, of course. Different groups championed different forms and styles, leading to internal debates and contests over what constituted "authentic" Bengali. Nevertheless, the overarching trend was the gradual enregisterment of Bangla as a potent symbol of a distinct community with legitimate claims to self-determination.

The concept of "indexicality" further refines our understanding of how language operates politically. Indexicality refers to the way linguistic signs "point to" or "index" social meanings and identities. A particular pronunciation, a choice of vocabulary, or even a grammatical construction can index a speaker's social class, regional origin, or even their political allegiance. These indexes are not arbitrary; they are built upon shared social knowledge and cultural understandings. When someone speaks in a certain way, their linguistic choices unconsciously or consciously signal who they are and where they stand within a given social landscape.

In the context of the Bengali Language Movement, various linguistic indexes became crucial. The choice to speak or write in Bangla, particularly in contexts where Urdu was being promoted as the national language, became a powerful index of Bengali identity and a rejection of imposed linguistic hegemony. Similarly, the use of certain vocabulary or poetic forms could index a commitment to a particular cultural heritage or political cause. These linguistic choices were not merely about conveying information; they were performative acts that signaled solidarity, defiance, and belonging.

Our methodological approach combines the rich insights of archival research with the analytical precision offered by sociolinguistics and political history. We will delve into a wide array of primary sources, including colonial government records, educational curricula, newspapers, literary magazines, legal documents, and personal testimonies. These archival materials provide invaluable windows into the specific linguistic practices and debates that animated Bengali society over several decades. We will examine how language was discussed, legislated, taught, and contested in both

official and unofficial spheres.

Newspapers, for example, will be meticulously analyzed not only for their content but also for the language they employed, the scripts they favored, and the debates they ignited about linguistic norms. Textbooks will reveal the standardized forms of Bangla promoted in schools and the underlying ideological assumptions about language and nation. Court rulings and constitutional debates will lay bare the legal frameworks that governed language use and the ways in which linguistic rights were argued and adjudicated.

Beyond written documents, we will also consider the material culture of language: the printing presses that produced texts, the bookshops that distributed them, the reading societies that fostered literary engagement, and the public spaces where language was performed and contested. These "infrastructures" of language – the physical and social networks through which language circulated – are central to our argument. They demonstrate how language, far from being an abstract entity, is deeply embedded in the tangible realities of social life.

Furthermore, our analysis will extend to less formal but equally significant linguistic practices. Oral histories, when available, offer insights into how ordinary people experienced and shaped the language movement. The study of protests, slogans, and public speeches will reveal the performative dimensions of language in political mobilization. How did specific phrases become rallying cries? How did songs and poems contribute to a shared sense of identity and purpose? These questions move us beyond the written word to explore the lived experiences of language in action.

Crucially, this book attends to both policy and praxis. Policy refers to the official mandates and regulations concerning language – what governments legislated, what educational institutions prescribed, and what cultural bodies endorsed. Praxis, on the other hand, refers to what people actually did with language in their daily lives – how they spoke, wrote, learned, and protested. The gap between policy and praxis is often where the most interesting and significant social and political dynamics unfold. Government attempts to impose a particular linguistic order often met with resistance, adaptation, or subversion in everyday practices.

For instance, while colonial policies might have promoted a specific form of "standard" Bangla, the vibrant linguistic landscape of Bengal undoubtedly continued to feature a rich tapestry of dialects and regional variations. The tension between the desire for standardization and the reality of linguistic diversity is a recurring theme throughout this book. It highlights the inherent complexities of language planning and the resilient nature of local linguistic practices. Our approach seeks to capture this dynamic interplay between official pronouncements and lived realities.

By combining these theoretical insights and methodological approaches, we aim to

provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of the Bengali Language Movement. We seek to demonstrate how language, as a material and symbolic infrastructure, shaped communal identities, authorized political claims, and mobilized people into collective action. This is not simply a historical narrative of events; it is an exploration of the deeper linguistic and cultural forces that propelled a region towards self-determination and ultimately, nationhood. The choice of a language, after all, is rarely just a choice of words. It is, more often than not, a claim to power.

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