

Urdu was my mother tongue and it was the only language spoken in my family and in the small community of Urdu speakers who had gone to settle in the eastern wing of the country when it was one country. I was born in the eastern province of Pakistan which in the year 1971 established itself as an independent country called Bangladesh.

My father had gone there as he was working for an English firm that had its business in the eastern part of the country. Bengali was the dominant language of the people of this province. We were looked upon as outsiders by the wider community of the east. For them people who spoke Urdu belonged to western wing of the country.

There was unrest among the people of the eastern province as their language, Bangla, had not been chosen as the national language of the country. It was the Urdu language, along with English, that had been given the status of the national language of Pakistan. The Bengalis, were greater in number than those who spoke Urdu whereas the language policy of the country stated categorically in the 1956 constitution that both these languages (English and Urdu) would serve as the national languages of the country. Numerically, the speakers of Bengali hugely outnumbered any other ethnic group in the eastern part of Pakistan.

The Bengali Language movement developed into the move for liberation or independence of Bangladesh. Eventually turning violent which caused killing on a mass level. I lost my uncle who was shot dead primarily because of his identity that was shaped by his being Urdu speaking.

I was four when my family fled to the Karachi. In the western part, we came in contact with other regional languages which we had never heard of such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushtoon and other minority languages.

My colleagues at school would make fun of my accent. They would call me Behari. The term was almost

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like an abuse in the society. People would laugh when someone was called by this name. I remember running back to my home upset at being called Behari by my street-friends and by others as well. This linguistic bullying had a devastating impact on me.

As I spent most of my childhood in the west, it was natural for me to learn the dominant Urdu accent spoken in the city where we lived, Karachi. This dominant accent of Urdu was actually a mix of the accents of Punjabi, Pashto, Balochi and Sindhi. It was difficulty for my parents to acquire this new accent which for them was far removed from being the accent of Urdu spoken in India. In order to hide my identity I avoided introducing my parents to others. Introducing them would mean that other people would find out that we were Beharis.

I went to an English-medium school where the subjects were taught in English and comparatively teachers had better proficiency in the English language than in other languages. I learnt English and worked very hard at it as I wanted to be respected socially and financially secure. My first job made me more conscious of the fact that I did not know a particular accent of English that was in fact a remote variety of Indian English.

I enjoyed learning and teaching English. I was absolutely fascinated by those who could speak this language fluently. For me these people were educated, enlightened and modern. Besides, I can see very well the respect these speakers of English had in the society. I

did a Bachelor's degree in English followed by a Master's degree in English Literature and English Linguistics. I was in love with English. But now I realise, that I was not. There were other reasons for this madness.

I went to the Goethe Institute to learn the German language for six months but I could not continue any longer as my university studies began. However, I find it useful when I get the chance to exchange a few words whenever my brother's family comes to visit us from Germany.

Still today, despite all the so-called qualifications and social and financial mobility I have achieved, I do not want any trace of that Behari accent to surface in my speech. I am not confident telling my country fellows that I was born in the Eastern wing because then they will call me Behari. I do not want my children to become a part of this community. I have deliberately left many such good people only because of the fact that my association with them would construct my image in the society as a Behari. The community of Beharis who migrated to western Pakistan (Karachi) mostly live in a particular locality in Karachi. Despite their second generation status in the country, they are not accorded respect by the speakers of other more dominant languages.

Are people victims of the languages they speak or do they have some control over their lives and thinking through their dominance over one or more languages? ■

# Tongue

