5.0 Introduction

The education system is perhaps the easiest of all the systems that can be successfully manipulated in order to sustain the socio-economic stratification and power-relations in any country. This is particularly true for the developing countries.

In Bangladesh, the vested interests, in and out of the government, have been manipulating the educational infrastructure through carefully planned strategies. They have ensured that on the one hand, education would always remain a 'golden deer' for the majority—thus never reaching them, and on the other, it will be accessible to a handful of privileged minority who would be fit enough to perpetuate the legacy of the class-ridden social milieu.

One may recall the famous dialogue of the Hirok Raja (Diamond King) from Satyajit Ray's classic film Hirok Rajar Deshe (In the Kingdom of Diamond King). At one point, the autocratic Diamond King ordered his education minister to shut down all paath shalas (schools) all-over his kingdom. He stated his logic in a satirical style:

The more they read  
The more they know,  
And the more they disobey!

Very clear cut logic. The king had no pretence. He categorically made it a point that he was there to protect his and his followers' interests, the interest to perpetuate autocracy, feudalism, privilege and social class divisions. As long as these were ensured, no force on earth could drag them out of their palaces. Like the Diamond King of that film, the powerful lobbies of Bangladesh too need to safeguard their positions. These positions can never be put under any threat unless the masses are educated.
Language is undoubtedly the most effective instrument in this system of education through which these manipulative quarters can operate as they wish. Thirty years after independence, the absence of any clear cut language policy regarding even MT Bangla—leave alone English—drives home the point further. The politics of language, not the teaching of language, is what has been installed in Bangladesh step by step.

5.1 The colonial root of language politics in Bangladesh

In his ‘Decolonizing the Mind’, the Kenyan writer Nguyi wa Thiongo mentions at one point:

The choice of language, and the use to which language is put is central to people’s definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe.²

The point to notice is, it is not only the choice of a particular language that matters for one in his struggle for self-definition. What is equally important is the way in which a language enjoys its scale, scope, status and space. In other words, choice is necessary, but not sufficient. What is needed is a politicisation of this choice in terms of its assertion of power, its appropriation of space in which the choice finds itself. It is in this line that our Language Movement of 1952 was not merely an existential struggle for choice. It was primarily a political struggle for ‘space’—a space inhabitable in a variety of ways.

Coming back to the question of use of language, one may find that the emergence of Pakistan after the partition of India was an initiation of yet another phase of colonialism in the political history of Bangladesh. It is this very ethos of colonialism which determined the use of language—which reproduced and reinforced the archetypal division between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. More clearly, between ‘us’ (the West Pakistanis) and ‘them’ (the East Pakistanis) over the language issue itself.

Admittedly, both Urdu and Bangla were used during the Pakistani colonial period. But, while Urdu became the language of the colonizer ‘self’ for the sheer reason of its power achieved in economic and political terms, Bangla was subjected and pushed to the margin, to a culturally and politically inferior status, to the position of the ‘other’—always to be dominated and dwarfed in the interest of the
colonial power. One may now wonder how the same thing has happened in post-independent Bangladesh with English replacing Urdu, though in a slightly modified way.

Indeed, while it was assertively and aggressively announced by Muhammad Ali Jinnah that ‘Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan’, the texts of cultural and linguistic colonialism were only reconstructed and reproduced in the British style. We know how the British followed their ‘English only’ policy for thirty years after Macaulay’s Minute in 1834.

Nevertheless, the Language Movement was therefore an attempt, primarily in political terms, to deconstruct such ‘texts’ of the Pakistani colonizers, to deconstruct the colonial power that was possessed entirely by them.

We will come to the issue of English and Bangla in the following section. But in order to understand the nature of the hegemony of English over Bangla, we should go through the East Pakistani experiences of Urdu and Bangla. So we need to briefly interpret the text of cultural and linguistic colonialism evoked by the ‘use’ of Urdu.

The Urdu language was certainly not the language of the majority in the then Pakistan. In fact, it was not even the language of any province in West Pakistan. Urdu was the MT of below 3.5% of the entire Pakistani population. But the Pakistani government had to select Urdu as its language owing to its ‘communal’ or ‘sectarian’ approach, which would enable it to prove its distinctiveness from India.

Hence, despite the fact that Bangla was the language of the majority in Pakistan, it was not accepted as a state language alongside Urdu.

The numerical strength of this ‘other’ [the East Pakistanis] was always a source of psychological and political terror to the colonizers who were led to hide or diminish it [Bangla] in terms of imposition and repetition of the images of his worth and superiority—more constructed, more rhetorical than real.

(Hussain, 1996)
Therefore, attempts in various quarters were made, ineffectively, to justify the raison d’être of Urdu as the state language for being ‘superior’ to Bangla. In order words

It was a rhetorical justification of the superiority of the majority, a glorification and canonization of the self over the other as a strategic stay against the potentially deconstructing forces of ‘the number that is power’.

(ibid)

The Pakistanis believed that the easiest way to control the numerically strong ‘other’ would be to undermine it not only at the base, but also at the superstructural level, that is to weaken the East Pakistanis both economically and culturally. This was the very strategy of the colonial power and discourse appropriated by the then Urdu-speaking Pakistani rulers whose attack on the language was a means to perpetuate cultural exploitation on the Bangla-speaking colonized. And who does not know that to exploit culturally, one must begin to exploit linguistically. Thus, the loss of language leads to the loss of power, and the appropriation and expansion of language leads to the establishment and consolidation of hegemony.

The British colonizers had proved this in all their colonies. The colonialism in Pakistan for its nourishment needed not only cultural exploitation but also linguistic exploitation in order to reinforce the former effectively. And it is against this entire weave of relations, against all such texts of cultural colonialism, that the Language Movement was launched with an explicit political force. The whole cultural issue of colonialism manifested in ‘Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan’ being fought primarily at the political level ultimately led to the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971.

5.2 Dynamics of the power of English

It is almost trite to mention that the hidden motive of the British colonizers behind introducing English and Western education in this region was not to educate or enlighten the majority. English was meant to be inextricably related to the interest of upper class minority instead of being the language of the masses. Thus, it operated as a powerful tool of social class formation in the Indian subcontinent. Prior to the British, the Mughal rulers had done exactly the same with Persian language.
However, after 1947, one of the foremost issues that was to be solved was the issue of language—whether or not to continue with the language of ex-colonizers. This issue has been a pertinent one in case of every country immediately after its freedom from the colonial shackles. The Pakistani authority was in a dilemma of choosing between English and Urdu as the prime language of intranational activities.

But as we have seen in the previous section, instead of becoming an issue of choice, it turned out to be an issue of imposition of ‘self’ on the ‘other’. The East Pakistanis were left with the only option of fighting against the neo-colonialism.

Now the question is: amid such controversies, what was the case of English? Did English lose or gain?

The clear cut answer is, English continued to gain. Its status as the language of prestige and power gathered powerful momentum during the Pakistani regime. And after the emergence of Bangladesh, despite the apparent halt of its momentum for the time being, it managed to enhance its position in the vested quarters even better than the previous regime. Because, by then these quarters had realized the truth—English was the tool to manipulate and sustain socio-economic class formation.

The best proof of this is the emergence of a parallel system of education through English medium kindergartens within a short time of our independence. If one takes into account the straightforward recommendation of the first Bangladesh Education Commission—that a universal primary education scheme, which would be compulsory and free, has to be established (Commission’s Report 1974:26)—then one has reasons to get amused. Because, in such case, there could not be any other system that was contradictory the basic ideals of the universal primary education scheme.

Whatsoever surprising it might be, the reality is, with the direct patronization of the newly rich class and the existing elites, the parallel education system had been gaining strong footing over the years—with the government as an inactive witness.
There is no point criticising anyone who sends his child to these English medium schools—as firstly, regardless of its high expense, it is attractive; and secondly, in contrast, the government system is poor and lustreless. Naturally, the lower strata of the society have been pursuing the latter. This entire trend of class-division in the education sector is a thorough reflection of the predominant disparity of our society. Then the point is, it has been, is being, and will be, maintained with deliberate calculated effort.

Given the responses in table 13a & 13b in chapter 3, where the guardians have expressed positive ideas about the English medium schools, one may raise the question: in today’s globalised world, should we speak against English medium education system or rather encourage it? The question may be put in a harsher manner. That is, should we depreciate those who can afford to, or are willing to, buy English education with money?

The answer should be apparent from the following facts. First, our concern is about the primary level of education where the government policy is to promote compulsory and free universal education scheme. That means an atmosphere should be created where any child from any corner of the country must go to school and study without hindrance. Of course over the years some progress has been made—with the share of expenditure on primary education rising from an average of 50% to about 65% during the latest plan period (Haq and Haq, 1998:57) and also the adult literacy rate increasing by one and a half times within 1995 (ibid). But then, there is also the fact that though primary education in principle is accessible to all, the ‘hidden costs’ of education prevent a large majority of poor children from attending schools (ibid:56). This ‘hidden costs’ refer to the truth that the real annual cost per child in the government formal primary schools is $ 51 (ibid: 127). This expense is an obvious burden for the poor who have every desire to send their children to government schools. In this connection, it has to be decided whether our foremost aim should be to uplift and reinforce the governmental system and give maximum opportunities/benefit to the poor or to allow any parallel system only for making the rich richer, and ultimately richest.

Second, in a country like ours education sector is not like financial or other sectors where privatisation should be acceptable. Encouragement of this type of
privately managed parallel system is always doubtful because of the simple fact that the poorer strata are harshly marginalised – resulting in their children’s inability to survive in the long run. That is what has happened in Bangladesh. This is sheer injustice toward the majority, as well as a direct negation of the ideal of educational equality. Prolonged continuation of this parallel trend in the name of providing ‘quality education’ would only lead to the devastation, and eventually to the collapse of our entire education system. Consequently, our national integrity would be severed.

One may also take notice of the fact that, though our Constitution (framed in 1972) recognises the right of the child for having free and compulsory primary education, the Compulsory Primary Education Act was not passed until 1990 (Chowdhury, Choudhury & Nath, 1999:2). This delay in such a crucially fundamental aspect should be hardly surprising after so much discussions. The powerful elites justifiably need to carry on with the legacy of class-divisions and injustice. About them, Hans Dua says succinctly:

...There is no doubt that they enjoy high social prestige and status partly, because of their training and resource and partly because of their positions in various organization and institutions. In spite of their limitations they are able to legitimize their role in society and perpetuate their control and power. It is because of their social position and power on the one hand and control of the institutions and state apparatus on the other that they can be considered, as Gramsci (1921:26) points out... as the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government’s ....In this process they may be aided by the institutions norms and legal apparatus and facilitated overtly or covertly by the state.

(Dua, 1994:32)

These observations stand valid for the post-independent Bangladeshi context. Prof. Monsoor Musa in one of his widely read Bangla article7 discusses the reasons as to how English could manage to perpetuate its hegemony in Bangladesh instead of turning out to be a useful language of communication during that period. His arguments can be summarized as follows:

The genuine opportunity to replace English and thereby activate Bangla came between 1947 and 1952, which the Banglaees [of East Pakistan] failed to utilize at all. Why? Because they had lost all their energy and motivation in their
struggle against Urdu—whereas just at that time many other independent nations witnessed severe upsurge against the language of colonial rulers.

As days passed, the gradual transformation in the world’s economic infrastructure made situations more complex, with English language strengthening its footing in the new global order. English started to become the language of global financial sector, and soon attained control of the other sectors. Neo-colonialism emerged in new shapes and measures. English was no more being called as a colonial language. It became the de facto language of international communication.

The independence of Bangladesh occurred during this period when English language was attaining its new global status. And by then, the privileged elite sections of the Bangladeshi society, in continuation of their status in the Pakistani regime, adapted themselves in the new regime. These sections have been the products (and byproducts) of English education over the years. English was deeply blended like a shadow with their socio-economic settings. How could they wipe out their shadows? So even when we went out with begging-bowls to the doors of donors, this shadow (English) proved to be the greatest asset.

Monsoor Musa further maintained that, this is why in the post-independence era, we could not do without English. Even if Bangla was not being implemented anywhere, there was no hindrance for the people of this powerful strata to become secretaries, ministers and so on. These people never put up any effort for implementing Bangla.

Subsequently, the implementation of Bangla in all spheres of life has been made ornamental as a matter of government directives/circulars and tall talks in public meetings/seminars. Never was Bangla associated with the economic structure of our country, which is the main pre-requisite for making any language functional.

The consequence has been that, we have failed to learn English through our ‘two hundred year’ effort, and have been consistently relying on imported ‘native experts’ to develop our language skills. And, simultaneously, we have been pathetically lagging behind in terms of communicating in our MT correctly. In this chaotic context, the privileged ones have been sustaining their positions, leaving the huge bulk of the underprivileged in oblivion.
5.3 English in curriculum: a deliberate perpetuation of dispute

It was indeed surprising that despite MT Bangla’s status as the State Language, post-independence Bangladesh witnessed the perpetuation of Bangla-English controversy. As regards Bangla, there was a series of government orders and notifications as to where and how it should be used (we will highlight these in the following section). However, in case of English which was accepted by all as an important SL besides MT, there was never any general consensus regarding its status in the education system.

Let us now take a look at the English issue proposed in the first Bangladesh Education Commission Report published in 1974. Headed by eminent scientist and educationist Dr Qudrat-e-Khuda, this Commission came out with specific recommendations concerning English in the curriculum. We will see how this particular issue was sidelined from the very beginning.

Recommending the duration of the primary level from class 1 to class 8, the Commission clearly proposed that there would be no other language up to class 5 except MT. In its chapter 4, it maintained:

Even after the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction at all levels of education, the necessity will remain for English to be learnt as a compulsory second language. It is not necessary to learn any language other than Bengali up to class V. From classes VI XII, however, a modern and developed foreign language must be learnt English will continue as compulsorily. For historical reasons and for the sake of reality, a second compulsory language.

(Commission’s Report, 1974:15)

Subsequently in its proposed table of syllabuses and subjects to be taught at the primary level, we find that an SL was absent till class 5, and it started from class 6 [appendix 2].

Accordingly, the Commission proposed that if its Report were accepted, steps for its implementation would have to be taken up seriously and sincerely. For example, primary and secondary curricula would have to be reconstituted from top to bottom in light of the new education policy. The Report in its Chapter 28 maintained,
It is not possible to frame a curriculum valid for all times. The curriculum has to be adjusted with growing individual and social demands and its relation to the broadening of knowledge. This is specially applicable in our country for the next ten years. Our existing curriculum must be improved to translate the recommendations made in its report into reality. We, therefore, recommend that a curriculum and syllabus committee should be set up immediately with the express purpose of modifying and improving the existing curriculum in the light of our recommendations.

(ibid: 216)

Hence, after the government accepted the Report, a National Curriculum Committee (NCC) was formed. It started to frame detailed curricula of the primary education as per the Commission’s recommendations.

Nevertheless, the problem occurred when the issue of English came up. Despite the Commission’s very clear recommendation, several members of the NCC were in favour of teaching English from class 3 (Siddiqi, 1994: 48). By the way, English had already been existing from class 3. After many debates when the NCC members failed to reach a consensus, the matter was sent to the higher level of administration. The ‘higher level’ kept intact the previous system, i.e. English was allowed from class 3.

Therefore it is evident how this particular question of an SL, instead of being decided at its rightful place—the NCC—was ‘decided’ by a different authority: the administration.

A question that is very much pertinent is that while the NCC handled the other curricular issues, why this issue of English could not be solved within NCC, and thus had to be decided by the higher authorities?

Let us move some steps further. While English kept operating from class 3 for quite a long time, why did the need arise to install it from class 1? One may be amused to find that the excuse given in this regard was: English from class 3 onwards has not been effective for the real learning of the students; in other words they were not able to learn English properly (ibid). Therefore, this ‘solution’ took place by extending the duration of English learning—and that too at the early stage, not at later stage, of children’s educational career. That means, there was this conscious effort to impose the hegemony of English right from the beginning of students’ career—as a result of which the average child would never be able to
acquire either MT or English properly. Because the more the demand of English on students' time, attention and ability grows, the more deficits appear in other subjects, including MT. And in fact, students would not be able to grasp any subject properly at this premature stage. This crisis has later been further compounded by other problems, like teacher-shortage, woeful learning environment and so on.

We need to take notice of another fact that, Arabic was introduced compulsorily in the primary level in 1988. This was done in the name of religious education.

Hence, the ultimate fact is, the premature innocent child—right at the start of his life in school—has been compelled to ‘study’ two additional foreign languages besides his MT. It does not require any clairvoyance to judge the unrealistic and unscientific nature of such practice from moral, economic and linguistic perspectives. But after all, this is a part of the politics of education.

5.4 Mother tongue and administrative orders: the lack of sincerity

In order to switch over from one language to another as the medium of intranational correspondence and functions, two things are essential: issue of government directives and the implementation of such directives. It is valid for any country in any region. In the USA, English became the official language due to administrative order (Musa, 1995:45). It was the case with Swahili in Tanzania, Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka, Bahasa in Indonesia and Malaysia or Turkish in Turkey (ibid).

In the same line, there has been a series of administrative decisions and orders regarding Bangla in Bangladesh. Before going through these, let us first see what was said in the Noor Khan Education Policy (in the Pakistan era) regarding language:

The Government has decided in 1954 to introduce national languages into official use by 1974 but unfortunately nothing was done to implement this decision. It is considered necessary as far as possible and to complete the process of introduction of the national language into official use by 1975. It is felt that the announcement of a firm date for the change-over to national languages would, by itself be an impetus to the adoption of these languages in the administration and other activities of national life. One of the important measures in this direction should be to make it compulsory for all central
government employees to acquire working knowledge of both Urdu and Bengali by 1973.

(quoted in Musa, 1995:46)

The government decided in 1954 that the national languages (Urdu and Bangla) would be brought under official use by 1974; but it was never implemented. And after 1971, there was no question if implementation either. Nonetheless, from 1954 to 1970 the government had a span of 17 years to operate regarding this language issue—even in a small scale. But it is evident that the government had no real intention to do anything positive.

This lack-lustre approach continued in the Bangladesh era as we will see later. Before that we need to have a glimpse of the type of official decision orders.

1. After Awami League emerged victorious in the 1970 general elections, a report of the vernacular daily ‘Sangbad’ of 16-02-71 stated that, Sheikh Mujib had said, official language (of East Pakistan) will be Bangla.

2. In 1972 after attaining power the Awami League government ordered to use Bangla in official works. A newspaper report of 08-02-1972 quoting the Education Minister Yusuf Ali mentioned that the government had adopted the proposal to implement Bangla in all spheres of national life.

3. On 14-02-1973 the President Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury called for a faster implementation of the programme for pursuing Higher Education through MT. At the same time he called upon the educationists and linguists to come forward with proper solution of the problem of Bangla glossary in scientific and technological education.

4. In March 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ordered as the President for implementing Bangla instead of English in all official activities.

5. On 12 March 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman via a directive no.30/12/95-General- 729/1 (400) officially directed to preserve all files of government semi-government and autonomous bodies in Bangla. He stated that this order would be applicable for correspondence with foreign countries and
embassies. It was further mentioned that punitive measures would follow if this was not obeyed [original Bangla version of the order is in Appendix 3].

6. Almost a repetition of the previous directive was issued on 23-10-1975 by the next President Khondker Mushtaq Ahmed via a directive no. 30/12/75-General-3701(300).9

7. The official attempt to implement Bangla gained a new momentum in a short period. On 23-9-1978, the then President Ziaur Rahman in a Cabinet meeting (meeting no. CM-32/78) conveyed that a special meeting of the Council Committee would take place on 28 December 1978 concerning the issue of widespread use of Bangla.10

8. Accordingly the meeting was held on 28.12.1978 (meeting no. SCM-48/78). Extract from the minutes and decisions of the meeting adopted in English are given below:11

(a) The Bengali Language is an integral part of our nationalism and was a key element in our struggle for independence. The failure to use and apply the language at all levels of national life is a sad commentary on our declared intentions and sincerity. All work and files concerning the Cabinet and the Ministries may be conducted in Bengali from now onwards. Report on command over the Mother tongue should be made a part of the ACR of each officer.

(b) Stress should be laid on preparing the coming generation from the very elementary school-level for application and use of Bengali in all activities of life and living. A responsible committee may be formed to ensure preparation of textbooks in simple and lucid Bengali, rather than the difficult language in which many school textbooks have been written. Imposing the use of the language from the top will not been fruit unless adequate preparation is made at the base level.

(c) The Report of the National Education Committee is being awaited pending receipt of which no further committee should be set up. A number of steps have been taken to expand the use of Bengali in practical life. Instructions at College and University level are being given usually in Bengali and students have an option to appear in the Examination in English also. In the armed services and the police, the word of command has been changed into Bengali. The PSC (Public Service Commission) may conduct the examinations in Bengali which will influence the University and the officers to adopt wider use of Bengali. The Departmental Examinations and the in service training programmes of Govt. employees may also be conducted in Bengali. With sincerity of purpose, it will not be difficult to use Bengali at all official levels. The language itself will develop and grow in quality with practice. The language must rid itself of the grip of the
'pundits' and must reach the people. That is the way it can be made simple, effective and progressive.

(d) We must take lead and sincerely play our role to the best of our ability. Others will follow us. There is no need to fix a target date for the eventual switch over to Bengali. The work may start now and instead of going for publicity, necessary executive orders may be issued.

(quoted in Ahmed, 1994:206-207)

9. On 04-04-1976 President Ziaur Rahman reminded the educationists and other agencies of their responsibilities about maintaining the dynamism of Bangla language. He said that besides education sector, everyone should sincerely attempt to use state language Bangla in the administrative sector as well as in other spheres of life. There could be no scope for negligence in using Bangla as the medium of education plus other aspects of national life.

10. On 13 February 1979, there was news in the national dailies in regard to the government order about the introduction of Bangla in all walks of life. The news mentioned that a Cabinet meeting stressed the need to ensure adequate supply of Bangla typewriters as well as sufficient training of shorthand-writers and typewriters for through use of Bangla language in administration.

A decision was taken for writing books of Bangla glossary for all subjects to be published from Bangla Academy.

The meeting further decided on the need of creating specific Bangla styles for the purpose of administrative operations, exchange of scientific and technical information, military and civil affairs and so on.

Another decision was taken to expedite the textbook-writing scheme in Bangla – especially in Medical, Engineering and other subjects of higher education, and for this to establish appropriate organisations.

It was also decided that, ambassadors and head of delegates touring abroad would avail themselves of the best possible opportunity for giving speeches in Bangla, and keep interpreters with them.

The cabinet asked each school, college and university to put comparatively more priority on Bangla to English in order to uphold the prestige and dignity of
Bangla. The meeting in the end decided that apart from those official works where English was a must, use of Bangla would have to be compulsory. Special courses for creating skilled interpreter and translators would have to be started in universities.

5.4.1 The ultimate result of these directives

In spite of so many strong official directives over the years, the actual implementation of Bangla in all spheres remained a distant dream. No such administrative attempt, encouragement or planning was evident on the basis of these. It implies that these directives were issued just for the sake of issuing—to earn cheap popularity, so that on the one hand public remained happy and on the other the politics of language was sustained.

We can take one instance as a proof. The decisions revealed in point 10 in 5.4 was published in the newspapers on 13 February 1979. It was just 7 days before the observation of Language Martyr’s Day i.e. 21 February. And who does not know the amount of ‘Bangalee emotion’ that is normally generated among all during the month of February. It would not be untrue to say that during this month the ‘love’ for Bangla language and culture turn out to be exaggeratedly hypocritical. Because, all linguistic emotions disappear from everyone’s mind as soon as the month of March arrives. So little wonder that after such drastic government decisions in 1979 (and also in the previous years), nothing was done to do anything fruitful.

Even a Bangla news report of 28-2-1980 titled ‘Directive to use Bangla’ said,

The Jute Minister Mr. Abdur Rahman Biswas has ordered to use Bangla in all the offices of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation from today (Thursday) onwards.

Orders after orders on small and large scales were given on various occasions, but with little effect. The dedication, the sincerity and above all the patriotic zeal have been absent on everyone’s part – be it the government of the opposition or the public.

The problem was further complicated by the issue of whether to use shadhu or chalit Bangla in the administrative work. We will see that this debate was quite unnecessary in those circumstances, as it only delayed the implementation of Bangla, making people confused over the issue.
A Government Circular on 9 February 1980 stated that all official and judicial works have to be conducted in *shadhu* Bangla as per decision taken by the Cabinet Secretarial Committee on 31-03-79 and 27-11-79 respectively.

Accordingly *shadhu* Bangla started enjoying considerable use in several spheres till *chalit* Bangla replaced it for all practical purposes. Firstly, *shadhu* Bangla proved to be less economical in terms of time. Monsoor Musa cited an example of a selected Bangla sentence written both in *shadhu* and *chalit* forms. It was seen that while in *shadhu* one had to write 161 morphemes, in *chalit* one could do with only 109 morphemes. At the same while typing the typist had to use considerably less strokes in *chalit* form regarding the verb and pronominal patterns. This reality automatically favoured the later switchover to *chalit* form. Secondly, the ‘myth’ that *chalit* form was incapable of bearing functional load, and hence unable to express serious expressions, successfully perished over the years. It became the most effective form of expression from serious philosophical discourses to latest technological advancements. It was soon found that the *chalit* forms could express any official expression more suitably and briefly. These are from the linguistic perspective.

Even from the perspective of language planning, one can see that when the order was issued in favour of *shadhu* Bangla, already *chalit* was existing in the curriculum, and hence in SSC and HSC answer scripts. The point was raised by concerned public that it would be ridiculous to carry on with such double standards—encouraging students to use *chalit* in the curriculum one the one hand and asking the same people in their later administrative lives to use *shadhu* form. As a result of these issued *shadhu* Bangla lost ground and *chalit* gained its status in official use.

At present, Bangladesh operate internally in Bangla and 1987 Bangla Implementation Act (described in 1.7.2 in Chapter 1) has contributed to this consolidated position of Bangla. But the point is, it could have been done much earlier had not such unnecessary *shadhu-chalit* debate occurred and sustained.
5.5 ELT and the power-coercive strategy in Bangladesh

That our ELT context has been frequently dominated by the whims of people in power is evident from two clear examples as will be discussed below. We would borrow the term ‘power-coercive’ from Chin and Benne (1976) in order to put our arguments succinctly. Chin and Benne have presented three strategies of implementing innovation or change in any sector – the power-coercive, the rational-empirical and the narrative-re-educative strategies.

In power-coercive strategy people in power force others to change while in rational-empirical strategy, information is provided on which they hope that people will act. In the narrative-re-educative, the assumption is that people act according to values and attitudes prevalent in a given society and culture. Therefore accepting change may require changes in deep-seated attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

However, it is the first one we would highlight because of its relevance in our society. The term power-coercive strategy itself suggests, it is based on sanctions of some sort (through laws and legislation) to force people to change or act in some way considered to be beneficial by the power-strata. The ‘success’ of this approach depends on a whole gamut of factors ranging from political to personal domains. Applied to educational or more precisely, to ELT innovation and reform, it is seen as authoritative and emanating from a centralised administration.

The following two examples concerning ELT management would show how the sector has been under the blatant manipulation of power-coersiveness.

Example One:

A textbook ‘English for Today Book VIII’ was written for classes 11 and 12 in 1986. As soon as it was published, enormous storm was generated by several quarters as a result of which the book had to withdrawn.

But to understand the fact we need a brief narration of the background events. We need to go back to November 1975 when an English Language Teaching Task force was set up by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to assess the situation of ELT in Bangladesh and suggest ways of improving it. The Task Force, investigating
the ongoing ills and demerits of ELT situation, came up with several recommendations of which, one was

An appropriately graded syllabus should be introduced at each level and textbooks related to the needs and abilities of the students should be prepared

(Report of the ELT Task Force 1976:3)

A National Curriculum and Syllabus Committee (NCSC) was set up in July 1976 to design syllabuses for different classes, as well as separate committees formed for each subject area. At about the same time, an English Language Workshop was organised at Bangladesh Education Extension and Research Institute (BEERI) – now National Academy of Education Management (NAEM) – in association with the British Council to evaluate the teaching of English at the HSC level. The workshop examined the syllabuses, textbooks, examination system and teaching-learning methods.

The workshop identified three kinds of needs for learners of English in Bangladesh. These are (a) social (b) occupational and (c) study needs. The first is very small (since the natural medium for most social intercourse in Bangladesh is Bengali)... Occupational needs are few, but at the same time, very important. Bangladesh will need a number of scientists, engineers, diplomats, doctors, pilots, specialised administrative personnel etc., who will need the kind of English, spoken or written, appropriate to their jobs....

Study needs are the ones which affect most keenly the student population of Bangladesh. The medium of instruction at universities in Bangladesh is in some faculties Bengali, in some English (especially in science subjects), and in some a mixture of the two.... Most of the textbooks they use are in English, again especially in scientific and technical subjects, and this situation is unlikely to change for a long time... The present HSC course is manifestly unsuited to meet these objectives. It is almost entirely literary in character and does not match HSC students' perceived levels of ability in the language.

(Harrison, 1976: Document 1)

Regarding the proficiency level of the HSC students and their study strategies, it was said,

...about three-quarters come from a rural background and despite having had at least seven years of instruction in English, not more than 10-15% can read the textbook with reasonable facility or carry on a simple English conversation. The proportion capable of writing a simple letter amounts to a mere 5%. Students in general are poorly motivated: they find the study...
material extremely difficult and fear the examination for the same reason. In order to succeed in the exam, they usually memorize prepared answers from books of commercially produced notes, which also contain translations of, and commentaries on the more difficult parts of the textbook.

(Kerr, 1976, Document 2)

The Workshop recommended that a new textbook should be specially written for HSC students with the following characteristics:

a. reading material which is graded in linguistic difficulty and less literary in character.

b. copious practice material for developing the skills of reading and to a lesser extent writing.

(ibid)

Significant was the observations of English Syllabus Committee of NCSC that said,

It follows that the English syllabus should be functional rather than literary and that every attempt should be made to break down the traditional bookish attitude to both education and English,


Apart from narrating the objectives and contents of the syllabus, the NCSC categorically specified topics to be included in the new textbook

These should be relevant to the lives, interests and study needs of the students, and to the goals of the country's development: topics used at lower levels e.g. nutrition, personal and public health, population education, agriculture and industry may be recycled at more advanced level of information. Others may be added from areas like transport, applied scientific research done in Bangladesh, local government, education psychology, law, language, bilingualism, etc.

(ibid:80)

We can notice two crucial points here. One, the textbook had to be written according to the principles laid down in the syllabus; two, there was no suggestion anywhere that the textbook would have to be written by native speakers of English.

Hence, textbooks started to be composed from 1978 – beginning with class 3. ‘English for Today Book VIII’ was the last one in this series. All the books were written in conformity with the recommendations of the NCSC Report.
However, 'English for Today Book VIII' was written by Bangladeshi teachers of English who were mostly from the college level. After the manuscript was prepared, it was reviewed by a group of teachers, educationist and other professionals.

But as soon as it was published severe criticisms were hurled at it and its authors. The criticism can be summarised as follows:

a) The texts were un-English. They cannot be called pieces of literature. Learners would not get the authentic flavour of the tongue.

b) The essays were very poor, written by a set of obscure writers who can by no stretch of imagination be called masters of English prose or eminent scholars.

c) The topics were unimaginatively selected.

d) Sentences were unidiomatic and grammatically unacceptable.

e) The book was unsuitable for teaching English and could be at best compared to the third rate essays in bazaar note books.

These ‘languages’ of criticisms were published in the English dailies which are compiled in Rahman (1988). English daily ‘The New Nation’ carried out an article ‘English or Babu English?’ which had the following language of criticism:

English for Today Book VIII is a rape of English language itself. There is no better way to make a mess of language than by learning it from foreign writers of no standing... Any linguist would shudder at the language used in this book.

Quaid-e-Azam, Nehru and Gandhi have all written masterpieces of English but they are all very much bookish, they cannot be considered as literary pieces and can never be models for the students.

Students learn from a model but unfortunately English for Today Book VIII is not a model of English and hence the very purpose of the book is defeated.

(Sameena, 1986:7)

We can see from the criticism that there was hardly any linguistic justification/explanation behind all these. Nobody could explain from grammatical viewpoints why the book was ‘un-English’ and unsuitable for classroom learning. It was clear, the real fury of the critics lay in the fact that it was not written by ‘native
experts’ (the rationale being that non-native speakers of English were incapable of writing English textbooks).

Rahman (1988) conducted an ‘acceptability experiment’ with 11 specific sentences from that book which were labelled as ‘un-English’ or ‘unacceptable’. He examined the extent of ‘acceptability’ of these 11 sentences by taking note of analytical reactions of 16 highly educated native speakers (comprising American, British, Australian, New Zealander, Irish, Scottish and Welsh) working in Bangladesh in responsible positions. 11 of them were specialists in ELT and had degrees in TEFL. It was interesting that, the 16 native speakers did not at all ‘react’ like our Bangladeshi ‘English knowing’ scholars and journalists. What were ‘mistakes’ and ‘incorrect uses’ in the local critics’ eyes were ‘deviant’ in the native speakers’ viewpoints. As Kachru said,

A native speaker of English, not familiar with the cultural and linguistic pluralism in South Asia, considers these language types lexically, collocationally and semantically deviant... Nevertheless, in South Asian and African English, it is through such formal deviations... that language acquires contextual appropriateness.

(Kachru: 1983b:29.)

By and large, they did not deem the sentences ‘unacceptable’ – only some degree of incomprehensibility was there due to the cultural distinction.

Inari Hussain, a faculty of English in Dhaka University, was one among the various scholars who defended the book. She put forward two possible reasons for choosing Bangladeshi writers rather than British, American or other speakers of English.

In the first place, it is now widely accepted in English language teaching that there is no particular theoretical advantage in being a native speaker of English for teaching English as a foreign language or for producing teaching materials for TEFL. The varieties of accepted and acceptable English for educational purposes cover a wide range of native variants from Australia to USA and non-native ones from Africa, Asia and Europe... Whatever the teacher’s mother tongue may be, his English will remain the model for the students.

(ibid)

She went on to say that our students need not learn ‘English’ English, ‘they are required to achieve the standard of English the educated Bangladeshi speakers of
English have. Surely the writers of English for Today deserve recognition as such (ibid).

She considered the second reason for choosing Bangladeshi writers as cultural. She thought that materials written for English or American students would be narrowly ethnocentric and therefore unsuitable for students in Bangladesh since transference of course materials from one environment to another can lead to serious breakdown of communication and learning. All the pieces in 'English for Today' had been written keeping this difficulty of students in mind. They related to the social, cultural and physical environment of Bangladeshi students or aimed at extending the general boundaries of their knowledge.

The writers and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board should be congratulated rather than blamed for the selection of the materials in this respect.

(ibid)

With regard to the third objection, Inari Hossain commented that it was an impossibility to produce a course-book that would please everybody nor was it the objective of a course-book to do so. Any teaching material could be stimulating for students depending on the skill of the teacher or circumstances of learning (ibid). She considered the 'selection' well-balanced and better than the previous anthology:

If we compare this selection with the pieces of Maugham, Saki, Herrick, Wordsworth and Browning that were included in the previous HSC syllabus, we can see that what the present selection lacks in literary quality, it compensates for it is the more suitable language material for students of humanities, science and commerce.

(ibid)

But the book was withdrawn in the end and was replaced by a slightly-modified version of the earlier literature-based anthology. No effort was made by any quarter to create a forum for a responsible discussion about the book. It was simply withdrawn. Arifa Rahman, a faculty of the Institute of Modern languages at Dhaka University points out the power-coercive factor in this regard:11

In fact the issue became the personal crusade of the then education secretary who happened to have an English literature background and therefore considered it totally unacceptable that literature was not being used. The NCTB quietly withdrew the book and replaced it with the previously
designated textbook in the syllabus, a literature-based anthology. Although socio-linguistic issues around norms and acceptance of language are obvious here, the main point in the management of the innovation is clear. It was a failure precisely because a power-coercive model had been used. The outcome may have been different had there been a public relations exercise with discussion, debates and a free flow of information among the relevant parties, in other words, had the innovation been 'marketed'.

(Rahman, 1999)

Example: Two

This is a saga of another ELT 'reform' in a blatant power-coercive style. This took place in the early 80s when the English Association of Bangladesh was holding a 3-day national seminar at Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka. Participants from all over the country were engaged in threadbare discussion regarding the ELT issues. With valid arguments, it was unanimously proposed that English should be introduced at a higher level than was being done at that time (which was class 3).

We can use Arifa Rahman's words on what happened next:

Exactly the next day the President of the country announced at a public meeting that English "would be taught from class 1"!!! We, the English teachers were shell-shocked! Who had made the decision? Where were the resources? How was it going to be implemented? Where were the teachers? The only thing that comes to mind at this point is Nwagwu's (1997) warning that any society which stimulates uncoordinated growth of its education system and then fails to support this growth adequately, creates "an environment of crises".

(ibid)

Besides this whimsical introduction of English from class one, one would find equally whimsical the reintroduction of English into the tertiary level without any discussion debate or consultation with the appropriate members of the profession, the users or stakeholders. One thing should be noted here, nobody has reservations about English at the tertiary level, and our example should not be misinterpreted.

Our point is: it was a complete imposition via the power coercive strategy. The only difference was while in other cases direct orders would do, in this case the power strata had to do it indirectly, i.e. use UGC to implement this decision.

Arifa Rahman justifiably says:
The result: students now get 14 years of English. Two studies into the modalities of this nation-wide venture have been made by the University Grants Commission. That it is going to have an impact on the performance of the learners is a dubious claim but that it is an enterprise that will gravely test the will, the capacity and the resources of the tertiary administration is a certainty. The three absolute necessities of language-based learning – small class size, appropriate materials, qualified ELT practitioners make the whole issue a mind-boggling exercise. Raynor (195) estimates it would entail creating 7000 new posts for English teachers to cater for a student body of 300,000 each year. Once again, an uncoordinated educational growth without the necessary supporting infrastructure has all the ingredients for a potential “environment of crises”.

(ibid)

From the two instances mentioned above, it is clear that as regards various deficiencies that have been prevailing in the ELT sector in Bangladeshi schools and colleges, there is little hope of meaningful change as long as the power-lobbies keep on intervening.

5.6 Higher education and medium of instruction: obscurity prevails

A confusing state regarding the medium of instruction (MoI) exists at the tertiary level. This is also an indication that there are certain quarters that do not want to let things go smooth even in the highest sector of education.

It is a well-known fact that our university education is predominantly dependent on English books and journals. Our country is not in a position to manage the academic functions at the university level with translated books. We have neither the resources nor the time to keep pace with the rapidly advancing knowledge of the world. Though it was the initial plan of the government to arrange the translation of books and journals, the initiative was never taken. And when it was taken (Bangla Academy undertook a scheme quite long ago) it was already late. Right now in this cyber era, it is thoroughly unrealistic to even think of it.

Nevertheless, there should be a clear policy in the university with respect to its MoI in various disciplines. But the interesting fact is, different universities have different policies in this regard.

In the ‘World of Learning’ published from London (1978-79: 134-136) one would find the following information. English is the MoI in the Universities of Dhaka and Rajshahi as well as in Bangladesh University of Engineering and
Technology (BUET). In University of Chittagong and Jahangirnagar University the MoI is bilingual i.e. English and Bangla.

In the ‘Commonwealth Universities Year Book’ (1981:166-199) there is hardly any change of information. It says that the MoI of Bangladesh Agricultural University and BUET is English. Dhaka University and Rajshahi University have English as their medium. In Chittagong University MoI is English, but one can use either Bangla or English in the Examination scripts. In case of Jahangirnagar University it is both Bangla and English.

This inconsistency at the university level is very surprising. It proves that the question of medium at the highest level of learning is still unresolved. Neither the universities nor the government has taken any positive steps in this connection.

5.7 Language is an asset, but we have made it a liability

Any BA first year student of Linguistics would know that the knowledge of any language is an asset or wealth of an individual. Windows on diverse societies and cultures will keep opening up if one starts attaining proficiency in more and more languages.

But instead of learning a language properly and adequately, if one keeps ‘studying’ a language only for the purpose of ‘crossing the hurdles of examinations’, that language becomes a genuine liability. This has been the case with both English and Bangla in our society. A recent survey by some linguists revealed that the English skills of our average university-going students are equivalent to the skills of the students of class seven (Musa, 1995:142).

Today we are faced with this biggest question: should we attain English as our asset or carry on with it as our liability? If we want to do the former, we have only one way out—to redefine the space called English in our society.

Prof. Serajul Islam Chowdhury justifiably asks:

What should be our objective to learn English? Not imitation, but creation.
[We need to learn English] not with the aim to follow, but to invent. We will learn English within the structure of our independence, with a view to make that independence meaningful and expanded – in order to demolish the rusticity and feudalistic blindness that have engulfed our mind... 

(Chowdhury, 1992: 88)
Prof. Chowdhury further asserts:

The fear of Englishmen has gone. Now the fear of English has to be wiped out with the help of the knowledge of English.

( ibid: 87)

Eventually he puts forward his crucial suggestion:

In this new era, there is no need to teach English to everyone every stage on a compulsory basis. Many will not study English at the higher level. Only those, who intend to do research, who will work in the domains of international communication and business, will study English according to their needs. Those who will engage themselves in literary creativity will specifically learn English.

( ibid :8)

Coming back to Monsoor Musa’s article, he highlights the instances of Bangla, English and Arabic—the three languages that have existed in Bangladesh since long. In the same line with Prof. Chowdhury he suggests that

Prior to everything we have to first fix the appropriate position of these three languages in Bangladesh. And then find out the areas where each of these three languages is suitable and necessary. Not only that, we have to establish our mental outlooks and aptitudes related to these languages. No language is pure or impure, colonial or democratic. Language is a cultural system set up on one’s biological capability. It can be used both as copulative and prohibitive agents. If learned, language is an asset. If not, then it is a liability. That is why we need to identify the domains and nature of activities, which will be suitable for the respective languages. Only then we will be able to make our objectives meaningful.

(Musa 1995: 144)

In the end, Prof. Musa puts forward a very crucial suggestion. He says that we have to admit the importance of language learning (as a whole) in our education system, thus creating the opportunity for all to learn any foreign language, as well as to earn his living through that language (ibid).

There can be no denying that unless something like this is done the manipulation of power/status in relation to social class formation will perpetuate further. And also the exact place of English and Bangla in our education system, as well as among the masses, will remain a chimera. The responses of the educated urban people reflect that they have truly seen the realities better than anyone else.
Notes:

1. In original Bangla it was ‘Erajawto beshi pawre / towto beshi jaane / towto kawn maane’. Late Utpal Dutt played the role of this ‘Hirok Raja’. The film was made in 1979.

2. This was quoted in an article written by Azfar Hossain, Associate Professor of English at the Jahangirnagar University, published on 21 February issue of ‘The Daily Star’ in 1996.

3. Muhammad Ali Jinnah said this at the Curzon Hall in Dhaka University in 1948 at a big student gathering. His utterance resulted instant sharp protests of ‘No!’ ‘No!’ from the students.


5. West Pakistani authority, along with their East Pakistani collaborators propagated the view that Urdu, being similar to the Arabic script, was Islamic in nature – thus qualitatively different from the Devnagari script which was Sanskrit – like, and hence un-Islamic in nature and tradition.

6. Apart from the propaganda of Urdu’s affinity with Islamic tradition, there was also a deliberate attempt by the Pakistani authority actively backed by a small section of Bangalee intellectuals and officials (during 1948-1952) to initiate writing Bangla in Arabic script. Their logics were: firstly, Bangalee Muslims who had to learn Arabic for reading the Holy Quran, would find it very easy to acquire mastery in Bangla if they started writing it in Arabic alphabets. And secondly, as there was no typewriter in Bangla, whereas there was in Urdu, the ‘new’ system would enable all to use typewriter successfully.

This attempt eventually failed not only due to vehement opposition from educated people, but also due to the obvious linguistic impracticability of writing Bangla in Arabic scripts.

7. Monsoor Musa wrote this article ‘Considerations regarding the Introduction of Bangla’ [in Bangla] in 1982 which he read in the weeklong Language Martyrs’ Day lecture series at the Bangla Academy in Dhaka. It was later included in his Bangla book ‘Language Planning and Other Essays’ in 1995.

8. These facts (1—5 and 9—10) are mentioned in Monsoor Musa’s Bangla article ‘Bangla Language and Administrative Orders’ from his ibid book.


10. In Bangla, *shadhu* was considered as the standard form and *chalit* as the colloquial form. Several linguists had even mentioned the existence of these two forms as a mark of diaglossic situation in Bangla which has been discarded later by linguists like Fergusson et al. Nonetheless, during the 18th and 19th century, *shadhu* style was substantially nourished and used in all literary and philosophical discourses while *chalit* style was used only in dialogues and speeches. At present, *shadhu* is regarded as an archaic form while *chalit* is being used in all aspects of standard as well as colloquial discourses.
From her paper ‘ELT Innovation and Cultural Change: A Bangladeshi Perspective’ that she presented in the ELTIP conference at the British Council in Dhaka in 1999.

This has been translated by this writer from a Bangla article Bangladeshe Ingreji (English in Bangladesh) by Prof. Serajul Islam Chowdhury, a topmost educationist and social thinker as well as a faculty of English Dept, Dhaka University. The article is from his book ‘Uddane O Uddaner Baire’(In and out of the Garden) published in 1992.