

Islam, hajj and the English language

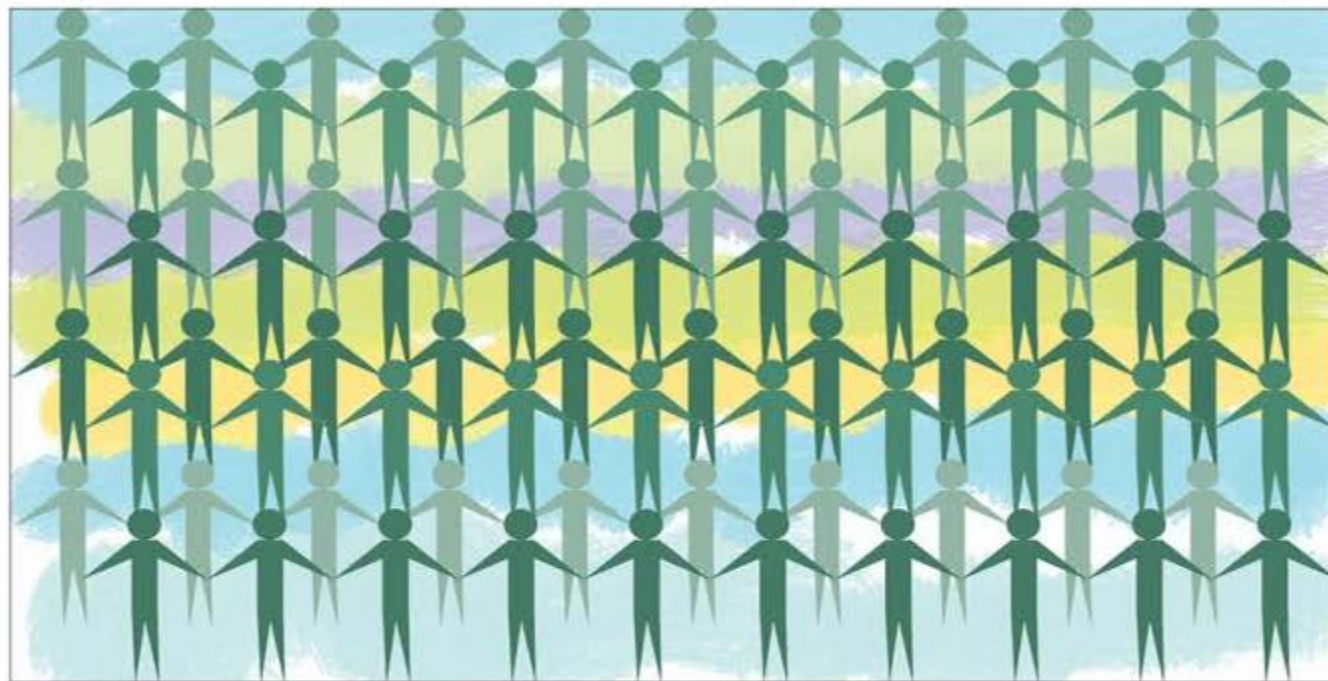
by Md Mahmudul Hasan

THIS monumental book titled *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005), MacEwan University professor of English literature Amin Malak states: 'Being associated with conquest and colonialism, English is seen as inherently inhospitable to Islam' (p. 2). Although this sense of irreconcilability between Islam and English is now considered a matter of the past, there is still simmering antagonism towards the language among certain sections in Muslim societies.

Later in this essay, I shall point out that this purported hostility between Islam and English has no realistic basis. Nor is it actualised in Muslims' language life and language use. I shall do this based on my recent experience of performing hajj. I shall also suggest that English has become an important language of the global Muslim community in the same way it has turned into a language of the global South. I shall demonstrate that English, the language of the erstwhile coloniser, has also become the language of Islam — a religion that is adopted by hundreds of millions in the East and the West.

Historically, English as a higher-education subject was first introduced in British India during the 1830s — before any other country including even Britain. In the home country of English, the first tertiary institution that started teaching the subject was Cambridge University, and that was no earlier than 1917.

In the early phase of British colonial rule in India, Muslims in the region first resisted English intrusion into their land and avoided English education largely for the reason Amin Malak has adumbrated in the quote mentioned above. Additionally, since



the British took power from them, Indian Muslims developed a sense of rejection for the coloniser's language, which resulted in them lagging behind other religious groups, especially Hindus. Among the native communities, by virtue of their relative English proficiency, Hindus practically monopolised and held critical administrative, judicial and political positions in colonial India. Conversely, largely for their lack of English education, Muslims were outside the bureaucratic system and hence remained a marginalised and dominated community for a long time.

The legendary educationist Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98) took stock of the existing reality and emphasised the importance of English education for Muslims. He launched a move-

ment to spread Western learning among Muslims and, in January 1877, founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College which later grew into Aligarh Muslim University. He promoted Western education among Muslims and overcame the Muslim antipathy for English to an extent. During the colonial period, his college 'produced graduates who filled the vacancies in government offices normally reserved for the Muslims.'

Fast forward, in the context of Bangladesh, even though English is studied by students of almost all educational backgrounds, there is still some ideological resistance to the language, and that is largely for rhetorical reasons. In this respect, I had interesting experiences during my hajj trip early this year.

In Makkah, I happened to listen to a Bangladeshi man who is known as an Islamic scholar. In his speeches, he spoke Bangla and often codeswitched to English. His use of English words and expressions had some sophistication, and this seemed to have earned him — among the audience — some prestige as a modern Islamic scholar with a command of the English language.

However, while his Bangla speech was sprinkled with English words and expressions, in the same breath he also castigated and condemned English as a language of the West and of the non-believers. The self-contradiction in his stance was obvious and couldn't be ignored.

However, Muslims' language life in the holy precincts of Makkah and

Madinah nullified what the supposed Islamic scholar was telling us about English during his speech. English (not Arabic) is the common language among the pilgrims in both Makkah and Madinah. Millions of Muslims of diverse national and linguistic backgrounds gather in the holy cities during the hajj season and the rest of the year, and only a small percentage of them are native Arabic speakers. Most of the pilgrims use English when they communicate with their fellow religionists from various parts of the world.

English is also the medium of communication between the pilgrims and the police officers and other officials tasked with maintaining order and public service delivery in the holy places. On a few occasions, in order to brush up on my rusty Arabic, I asked for direction in Arabic but the security personnel in the holy precincts of Makkah and Madinah replied to my questions in English. It seemed to me that they were programmed to speak English while communicating with non-Arabs. I also saw non-Arab pilgrims not proficient in English asking the security personnel questions in their own languages accompanied by bodily gestures, but the responses from the local staff were always in English.

Thus, in Masjid al-Haram areas in Makkah and Madinah, English is undoubtedly the most spoken language.

Maps, signages and other informative materials in Masjid al-Haram areas in Makkah and Madinah are in both Arabic and English. For practical reasons, in cases — for example, as regards toilet facilities and the temperature of drinking water — the information provided in English is more prominent. Thus, English plays a crucial role in providing informa-

tion to, and facilitating communication among, international pilgrims; it is also the means of communication between them and the local staff.

All these suggest that the notion that English is a colonial language and hence is shunned by Muslims is invalidated if we look at the linguistic ecology in Makkah and Madinah during both hajj and umrah seasons. English has shifted from its colonial associations and has morphed into a tool 'that represents a means to an end.'

If we consider the hajj and umrah gatherings in Makkah and Madinah as a microcosm of global Muslim communities, it can be safely said that English is the common language that has become their language of choice and unites them as one people. English stands out as the most important lingua franca for communication between Muslims from diverse linguistic backgrounds — linguistically, it helps bring the global Muslim community together.

More than a decade ago, in a journal article titled 'Islam's Encounter with English and Ismail al-Faruqi's Concept of Islamic English' (2014), I argued that there is a strong 'relationship between Islam as a global religion and English as a transnational and universal language'. Islam as a global religion needs a global language, and in the current state of international affairs that language is definitely English because both the religion and the language 'are plural and truly global'. My hajj trip to Saudi Arabia reinforced and vindicated my view that there is a strong connection — not hostility — between Islam and the English language.

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