

## Introduction: The Bengali Language Movement

The Bengali Language Movement (*Bhasha Andolôn*) was a political movement in former East Bengal, which began in 1948 and reached its climax in the killing of 21 February 1952. After years of conflict, the movement ended in the adoption of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

## Background of the Language Movement

The question of what would be the state language of Pakistan was raised immediately after its creation. The central leaders and the Urdu-speaking intellectuals of Pakistan declared that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan.

The students and intellectuals of East Pakistan, however, demanded that Bangla must be the official language and the medium of instruction in East Pakistan and for the central government it would be one of the state languages along with Urdu.

The first movement on this issue was mobilised by Tamaddun Majlish headed by Professor Abul Kashem. Gradually many other non-communal and progressive organisations joined the movement, which finally turned into a mass movement.

Fazlur Rahman, the central education minister, initiated to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan. On receipt of this information, East Pakistani students became agitated and held a meeting on the Dhaka University campus on 6 December 1947.

The first Rastrabhasa Sangram Parishad (Language Action Committee) was formed towards the end of December 1947.

The Constituent Assembly of Pakistan was held at Karachi in February 1948. It was proposed that the members would have to speak either in Urdu or in English at the Assembly.

**Dhirendranath Datta**, a member from the East Pakistan Congress Party, **moved an amendment motion** to include **Bangla as one of the languages** of the Constituent Assembly. **The central leaders**, including **liaquat ali khan**, prime minister of Pakistan, and **Khwaja Nazimuddin**, chief minister of East Bengal, **opposed the motion**.

On receiving the news, **students, intellectuals and politicians of East Pakistan** became agitated.

**On 11 March 1948 a general strike** was observed in the towns of East Pakistan in protest against:

- The **omission of Bangla from the languages** of the Constituent Assembly,
- the **absence of Bangla letters** in Pakistani **coins and stamps**,
- and the use of **only Urdu** in **recruitment tests** for the navy.

**Strikes** were observed from **12 March to 15 March**.

**Muhammed Ali Jinnah**, the governor general of Pakistan, came to **visit East Pakistan on 19 March**. He addressed two meetings in Dhaka, and reiterated that **Urdu would be the only state language** of Pakistan.

This **declaration was instantly protested** with the **Language Movement spreading throughout East Pakistan**.

**The people of East Pakistan started losing faith in the Muslim League**. A new party, the **Awami Muslim League** was **formed in 1949**.

In such a situation, the **Dhaka University Language Action Committee** was **formed on 11 March 1950**.

The **Pakistan government** completely **failed to understand** the depth of **feeling underlying the language movement** and the **demand for regional autonomy** for East Pakistan

There was a **growing sense of deprivation and exploitation** in East Pakistan and a realisation that a **new form of colonialism** had **replaced British imperialism**. Under these circumstances, the **Language Movement got a new momentum in 1952**.

## Events of 1952

On 27 January 1952, Khwaja Nazimuddin said that the people of the province could decide what would be the provincial language, but **only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan.**

There was an instantaneous, **negative reaction** to this speech among **the students** who **responded with the slogan, 'Rashtrabhasha Bangla Chai'** (We want Bangla as the state language).

**A strike** was observed at **Dhaka University on 30 January.** The representatives of various political and cultural organisations **held a meeting on 31 January** and an **All-Party Central Language Action Committee was formed.**

At this time **the government also proposed** that **Bangla be written in Arabic script.** This proposal was also vehemently opposed.

**The Language Action Committee decided to call a hartal** and organise demonstrations and processions **on February 21 throughout East Pakistan.**

As preparations for demonstrations were underway, the **government imposed Section 144 in the city of Dhaka,** banning all assemblies and demonstrations.

**A meeting of the Central Language Action Committee** was **held on 20 February** under the chairmanship of Abul Hashim. Opinion was divided as to **whether or not to violate Section 144.**

**The students** were determined to **violate Section 144** and held a student **meeting at 11.00 am on 21 February** on the **Dhaka University** campus, then located close to the **Medical College Hospital.**

**Thousands of students** from different **schools and colleges** of Dhaka assembled on the university campus while **armed police waited outside** the gate. When the **students**

emerged in groups, shouting slogans, the police resorted to baton charge; even the female students were not spared.

The students then started throwing brickbats at the police, who retaliated with tear gas. Unable to control the agitated students, the police fired upon the crowd of students.

Three young men, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar and Abul Barkat were fatally wounded. Many injured persons were admitted to the hospital. Among them Abdus Salam, a peon at the Secretariat, subsequently succumbed to his wounds. A nine-year-old boy named Ohiullah was also killed.

At the **Legislative Assembly building**, the session was about to begin. Hearing the news of the shooting, some members of the Assembly, including **Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish and some opposition members**, went out and joined the students.

In the Assembly, Nurul Amin, chief minister of East Pakistan, continued to oppose the demand for Bangla.

The next day, **22 February**, was also a day of **public demonstrations and police reprisals**.

The public performed a **janaza** (prayer service for the dead) and brought out a mourning procession, which was attacked by the police and the army resulting in several deaths, including that of a young man named Shafiur Rahman.

Many were injured and arrested. On **23 February**, at the spot where students had been killed, a memorial was erected. In **1963**, the temporary structure was replaced by a concrete memorial, the **Shaheed Minar** (martyrs' memorial).

## **Results of the Movement: Rise of the Bengali Nationalism**

The **language movement** gave rise to a new type of politician in East Pakistan: the **Bengali-speaking student agitator**.

Throughout the Pakistan period **students at schools, colleges and universities** often **played a decisive role** in turning political grievances into **popular resistance** and **forcing the Pakistan state to change its policies**.

The **East Bengal Legislative Assembly** adopted a **resolution** recommending the **recognition of Bangla** as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

The **language movement continued until 1956**. The **movement achieved its goal** by **forcing the Pakistan Constituent Assembly** in adopting both **Bangla and Urdu as the state languages** of Pakistan.

Since **1952, 21 February** has been **observed every year** to commemorate the martyrs of the Language Movement.

With **UNESCO adopting a resolution on 17 November 1999** proclaiming **21 February as international mother language day**. It is an honour bestowed by the international community on the **Language Movement of Bangladesh**.

All of those **above-mentioned factors** significantly **influenced** the rise of Bengali Nationalism. The **immediate outcome** of this feeling **was the massive win of the United Front** over the Muslim League in the **elections of 1954**.

## Conclusion

What made **1952 a defining moment** was that it **marked a sharp psychological rupture**. **For many** in the Bengal delta, it signified the **shattering of the dream of Pakistan** and the **beginning of a new political project**, still hazy and fully supported by only a few: **the search for a secular alternative to the communal idiom of Pakistan politics** and **for an autonomy** that the **delta had last experienced in pre-Mughal times**.

### Source of the texts:

1. Banglapedia
2. *A History of Bangladesh* by Willem van Schendel