

Bengali Language Movement

(Early stages of the movement)

- The present nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh were part of undivided India during the British colonial rule.
- After the partition of India in 1947, Bengali-speaking people in East Bengal made up 44 million of the newly formed Dominion of Pakistan's 69 million people.

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- The Dominion of Pakistan's government, civil services, and military, however, were dominated by personnel from the western wing of the Dominion of Pakistan.
- In 1947, a key resolution at a national education summit in Karachi advocated Urdu as the sole state language

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- Opposition and protests immediately arose.
- Students from Dhaka rallied under the leadership of Abul Kashem, the secretary of Tamaddun Majlish, a Bengali Islamic cultural organization.
- The meeting stipulated Bengali as an official language of the Dominion of Pakistan and as a medium of education in East Bengal.

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- However, the Pakistan Public Service Commission removed Bengali from the list of approved subjects, as well as from currency notes and stamps.
- Public outrage spread, and a large number of Bengali students met on the University of Dhaka campus on 8 December 1947 to formally demand that Bengali be made an official language.

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- The linguist **Muhammad Shahidullah** pointed out that Urdu was not the native language of any part of Pakistan, and said, "If we have to choose a second state language, we should consider Urdu."
- The writer **Abul Mansur Ahmed** said if Urdu became the state language, the educated society of East Bengal would become 'illiterate' and 'ineligible' for government positions.

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- The first Rastrabhasa Sangram Parishad (National Language Action Committee), an organization in favour of Bengali as a state language was formed towards the end of December 1947.
- Professor Nurul Huq Bhuiyan of the Tamaddun Majlish convened the committee.

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- **Dhirendranath Datta** proposed legislation in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to allow members to speak in Bengali and authorize its use for official purposes.

Agitations of 1948

- Students of the University of Dhaka and other colleges of the city organized a general strike in 11 March 1948 to protest the omission of Bengali language from official use, including coins, stamps.
- In the height of civic unrest, Governor-General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah further declared that "Urdu, and only Urdu" embodied the spirit of Muslim nations and would remain as the state language.

Events of 1952

- In 1952, Bengali students in East Pakistan rose up and protested against the Pakistani government for declaring Urdu as the national language.
- The Urdu-Bengali controversy was reignited when Jinnah's successor, governor-general Khawaja Nazimuddin, staunchly defended the "Urdu-only" policy

Events of 1952

- On 31 January, the **Shorbodolio Kendrio Rashtrobhasha Kormi Porishod** (All-Party Central Language Action Committee) was formed in a meeting at the Bar Library Hall of the University of Dhaka, chaired by Maulana Bhashani.
- The action committee called for an all out protest on 21 February, including strikes and rallies.

Events of 1952

- Students of the University of Dhaka and other institutions gathered on the university premises on 4 February and warned the government to withdraw its proposal to write Bengali in Arabic script.
- It insisted on the recognition of Bengali.
- As preparation for demonstrations was going on, the government imposed Section 144 in Dhaka.

21 February

- At nine o'clock in the morning, students began gathering on the University of Dhaka premises in defiance of Section 144.
- The university vice-chancellor and other officials were present as armed police surrounded the campus.
- By a quarter past eleven, students gathered at the university gate and attempted to break the police line.
- Police fired tear gas shells towards the gate to warn the students.

21 February

- The vice-chancellor asked police to stop firing and ordered the students to leave the area. However, the police arrested several.
- Enraged by the arrests, the students met around the East Bengal Legislative Assembly and blocked the legislators' way.
- When a group of students sought to storm into the building, police opened fire and killed a number of students.

21 February

- As the news of the killings spread, disorder erupted across the city.
- Shops, offices and public transport were shut down and a general strike began.

Events After 1952

- The Shorbodolio Kendrio Rashtrobhasha Kormi Porishod, with support from the Awami Muslim League, decided to commemorate 21 February as Shohid Dibosh (Martyrs' Day).
- Demonstrations broke out on the night of 21 February 1954 with various halls of the University of Dhaka raising black flags in mourning.
- Police arrested students and other protesters, who were released later despite refusing to post bail.