

Language Movement

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The **Language Movement** (Bhasa Andolan), was a political movement in former East Bengal (today Bangladesh) in fifties of last century advocating the recognition of the Bengali language as an official language of the then-Dominion of Pakistan in order to allow its use in government affairs, the continuation of its use as a medium of education, its use in media, currency and stamps, and to maintain its writing in the Bengali script.

When the Dominion of Pakistan was formed by the partition of India in 1947, it was composed of various ethnic and linguistic groups, with the geographically non-contiguous East Bengal province (that was renamed in 1956 as East Pakistan) having a mainly Bengali population. In 1948, the Government of the Dominion of Pakistan ordained Urdu as the sole national language, sparking extensive protests among the Bengali-speaking majority of East Bengal. Facing rising sectarian tensions and mass discontent with the new law, the government outlawed public meetings and rallies. The students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law and organized a protest on 21 February 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on that day. The deaths provoked widespread civil unrest. After years of conflict, the central government relented and granted official status to the Bengali language in 1956. In 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February as International Mother Language Day, in tribute to the Language Movement and the ethno-linguistic rights of people around the world.

The Language Movement catalyzed the assertion of Bengali national identity in East Bengal and later East Pakistan, and became a forerunner to Bengali nationalist movements, including the 6-Point Movement and subsequently the Bangladesh Liberation War and Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. In Bangladesh, 21 February is observed as *Language Movement Day*, a national holiday. The Shaheed Minar monument was constructed near Dhaka Medical College in memory of the movement and its victims.

Background

The present nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh were part of undivided India during the British colonial rule. From the mid-19th century, the Urdu language had been promoted as the *lingua franca* of Indian Muslims by political and religious leaders, such as Nawab Khwaja Salimullah, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk and Maulvi Abdul Haq. Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language of the Indo-Iranian branch, belonging to the Indo-European family of languages. It developed under Persian, Arabic and Turkic influence on apabhramshas (last linguistic stage of the medieval Indian Aryan language Pali-Prakrit) in South Asia during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire. With its Perso-Arabic script, the

language was considered a vital element of the Islamic culture for Indian Muslims; Hindi and the Devanagari script were seen as fundamentals of Hindu culture.

While the use of Urdu grew common with Muslims in northern India, the Muslims of Bengal (a province in the eastern part of British Indian sub-continent) primarily used the Bengali language. Bengali is an Eastern Indo-Aryan language that arose from the eastern Middle Indic languages around 1000 CE and developed considerably during the Bengal Renaissance. As early as the late 19th century, social activists such as the Muslim feminist Roquia Sakhawat Hussain were choosing to write in Bengali to reach out to the people and develop it as a modern literary language. Supporters of Bengali opposed Urdu even before the partition of India, when delegates from Bengal rejected the idea of making Urdu the lingua franca of Muslim India in the 1937 Lucknow session of the Muslim League. The Muslim League was a British Indian political party that became the driving force behind the creation of Pakistan as a Muslim state separate from British India.

Early stages of the movement

Britain's holdings on the Indian subcontinent were granted independence in 1947 and 1948, becoming four new independent states: the Dominion of India, the Union of Burma (now Myanmar), Dominion of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and the Dominion of Pakistan (including East Bengal, from 1956 East Pakistan, 1971-today Bangladesh).

After the partition of India in 1947, Bengali-speaking people in East Bengal, the non-contiguous eastern part of the Dominion of Pakistan, made up 44 million of the newly formed Dominion of Pakistan's 69 million people. 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, and its exclusive use in administration, academic institutions, communication system and in media. 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. However, the Pakistan Public Service Commission removed Bengali from the list of approved subjects, as well as from currency notes and stamps. The central education minister Fazlur Rahman made extensive preparations to make Urdu the only state language of the Dominion of Pakistan. Public outrage spread, and many Bengali students met on the University of Dhaka campus on 8 December 1947 to formally demand that Bengali be made an official language. To promote their cause, Bengali students organized processions and rallies in Dhaka.

Leading Bengali scholars argued why only Urdu should not be the state language. The writer and politician Abul Mansur Ahmed said if Urdu became the state language, the educated society of East Bengal would become 'illiterate' and 'ineligible' for government positions. 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. Later, Parliament member Shamsul Huq convened a new committee to push for Bengali as a state language. On 23rd February 1948, while the session of the national parliament was going on in Karachi then Bengali member Dhirendranath Datta proposed legislation in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to allow members to speak in Bengali and authorize its use for official purposes. Datta's proposal was supported by legislators Prem Hari Burman, Bhupendra Kumar Datta and Srish Chandra Chattaopadhyaya of East Bengal, as well as the people from the region. The then Prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan and the Muslim League denounced the proposal as an attempt to divide the Pakistani people, thus the legislation was defeated.

Agitations of Students of the University of Dhaka and other colleges of the city organised a general strike on 11 March 1948 to protest the omission of Bengali language from official use, including coins, stamps and recruitment tests for the navy. The movement restated the demand that Bengali be declared an official language of the Dominion of Pakistan. Political leaders such as Shamsul Huq, Shawkat Ali, Kazi Golam Mahboob, Oli Ahad, Abdul Wahed and others were arrested during the rallies. Rally leader Mohammad Toaha was hospitalised after attempting to snatch a rifle from a police officer. Student leaders, including Abdul Matin and Abdul Malek Ukil took part in the procession.

In the afternoon of 11 March, a meeting was held to protest police brutality and arrests. A group of students marching towards the chief minister Khawaja Nazimuddin's house was stopped in front of the Dhaka High Court. The rally changed its direction and moved in the direction of the Secretariat building. Police attacked the procession injuring several students and leaders, including A. K. Fazlul Huq. Continuing strikes were observed the following four days. Under such circumstances, the chief minister Nazimuddin signed an accord with the student leaders agreeing to some terms and conditions, without complying to the demand that Bengali be made a state language. He, however, assured that the demand would be duly considered/

In the height of civic unrest, Governor-General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah arrived in Dhaka on 19 March 1948. On 21 March, at a civic reception at Racecourse Ground, now Suhrawardy Uddyan, he claimed that the language issue was designed by a "fifth column" to divide Pakistani Muslims. Jinnah further declared that "Urdu and only Urdu" embodied the spirit of Muslim nations and would remain as the state language, labeling those who disagreed with his views as "Enemies of Pakistan". Jinnah delivered a similar speech at Curzon Hall of the University of Dhaka on 24 March also. At both meetings, Jinnah was

interrupted by large segments of the audience especially young people and students. He later called a meeting of a state language committee of action, and overruled the contract that was signed by Khawaja Nazimuddin with the student leaders. Before Jinnah left Dhaka on 28 March, he delivered a speech on radio reasserting his "Urdu-only" policy. But it was a mockery as he was not himself used to speak in Urdu due to his extreme fascination of speaking in English.

Shortly thereafter, the East Bengal Language Committee, presided by Maulana Akram Khan, was formed by the East Bengal government to prepare a report on the language problem. The Committee completed its report on 6 December 1950, but it was not published until 1958. The government, however, suggested that Bengali be written in Arabic script, as a potential solution to the language conflict.

The Urdu-Bengali controversy was reignited when Jinnah's successor, governor-general Khawaja Nazimuddin, staunchly defended the "Urdu-only" policy in a speech on 27 January 1952. On 31 January, the *Sharbadoliya Kendriya Rashtrabhasha Karmi Parishad* (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 central government's proposal of writing the Bengali language in Arabic script was vehemently opposed at the meeting. The action committee called for an all out protest on 21 February, including strikes and rallies. In an attempt to prevent the demonstration, the government imposed Section 144 in Dhaka, thereby banning any gathering.

February 21 morning

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. A section of students ran into the Dhaka Medical College while others rallied towards the university premises cordoned by the police. The vice-chancellor asked police to stop firing and ordered the students to leave the area. However, the police arrested several students for violating section 144 as they attempted to leave. Enraged by the arrests, the students met around the East Bengal Legislative Assembly, which was at the building inside of present Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University, and blocked the legislators' way, asking them to present their insistence at the assembly. When a group of students sought to storm into the building, police opened fire and killed a number of students, including Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar. As the news of the killings spread disorder and chaos erupted across the city. Shops, offices and public transport were shut down and a general strike began. At the assembly, six legislators including Manoranjan Dhar, Bashantakumar Das, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Dhirendranath Datta

requested that Chief Minister Nurul Amin would visit wounded students in hospital and that the assembly be adjourned as a sign of mourning. This motion was supported by some treasury bench members including Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, Sharfuddin Ahmed, Shamsuddin Ahmed Khandakar and Mosihuddin Ahmed. However, Nurul Amin refused the requests.

22 February

Disorder spread across the province as large processions ignored section 144 and condemned the actions of the police. More than 30,000 people gathered at Curzon Hall, the present Science Faculty of Dhaka. During the continued protests, police actions led to the death of four more people. This prompted officers and staffs from different organizations, banks and the radio station, and students of colleges to boycott offices and school and colleges, and join the procession. Protesters burned the offices of two leading pro-government news agencies, the *Jubilee Press* and the *Morning News*. Police fired on a major *janaza*, or mourning rally, as it was passing through Nawabpur Road. The shooting killed several people including activist Shafiur Rahman and a nine-year-old boy named Ohiullah.

Continued unrest

Through the night of 23 February, students of Dhaka Medical College worked on the construction of a *Shaheed Smritistambha*, or Monument of Martyrs at that place which is now the complete Shaeed Minar. Completed at dawn on 24 February, the monument had a handwritten note attached to it with the words "*Shaheed Smritistambha*". Inaugurated by the father of the slain activist Shafiur Rahman, the monument was destroyed on 26 February by police. On 25 February, industrial workers in the town of Narayanganj observed a general strike. A protest followed on 29 February whose participants faced severe police beating.

The government censored news reports and withheld exact casualty figures during the protests. Most pro-government media held *Hindus* and *communists* responsible for encouraging the disorder and student unrest. The families of Abul Barkat and Rafiq Uddin Ahmed had been charged by the police with murder, but the charges were dismissed by the police later. On 8 April government report on the incidents failed to show any particular justification for police firings on the students. When the constituent assembly reconvened on 14 April, proceedings were stalled by members of the Muslim League when legislators from East Bengal sought to raise the language issue.

Events after 1952

The *Sharbadaliya Kendriya Rashtrabhasha Karmi Parishad*, with support from the Awami Muslim League, decided to commemorate 21 February as *Shaheed Dibash* (Martyrs' Day).

On the first anniversary of the protests, people across East Bengal wore black badges in solidarity with the victims. Most offices, banks and educational institutions were closed to observe the occasion. Student groups made agreements with college and police officials to preserve law and order. More than 100,000 people assembled at a public meeting held in Armanitola in Dhaka, where community leaders called for the immediate release of Maulana Bhashani and other political prisoners. However, West Pakistani politicians such as the then education minister and a Bengali Fazlur Rahman aggravated sectional tensions by declaring that anyone who wanted Bengali to become an official language would be considered an "enemy of the state". Bengali students and civilians disobeyed the restrictions to celebrate the anniversary of the protests. Demonstrations broke out on the night of 21 February 1954 with various halls of the University of Dhaka raising black flags in mourning.

Reflections in cultural front

The Language Movement had given a few dimensions in the area of literacy horizon. It had given a new track of cultivating our culture. The fact is the language movement had given a foundation of our cultural field in a newer perspective. We had a renaissance in nineteenth century what had given a resurrection in art, literature and culture; however that was in undivided Bengal. But language movement had demarcated a new line of literature, art, history and culture- as a whole our belief in Bengali nationalism. Accordingly 1950's and 1960's were our golden moment in our literary horizon which produced a good bunch of promising writers, singers, lyricists, dramatists, etc. That golden time of last century had motivated up growing younger people to invest them in creativity and that continued until first decade of present century. But with the thrust of some destructive technologies, we have just forgotten what we were. We have right now no urge to engage ourselves in typical creativity as we mostly are dependent on machine, and machine-dominating technologies. We are just now living in a barren society. It is simply a shame and forgetting our golden past.

At the night of 21 February, renowned author Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury emotionally penned a poem 'Amar bhaiyer rakte ragano Ekushe February', Ami ki bhulite pari.... '. It was supposed to be the first poem of 21 February, but it got the trademark of carol song of Martyrs' day. As the lyric was so rhythmic for that it was tuned later by composer Shaheed Altaf Mahmud and became very popular, emotion-pulling to the every citizen and reflected the spirit of Bengali nationalism. However, before the tuning made by Altaf Mahmud, the lyric was tuned initially by another composer Abdul Latif that was not made popular.

As 'Amar bhaiyer rakte ragano' was made the song of nationalistic spirit, other poem written by Mahbubul Alam Chowdhury of Chittagong titled 'Kandte ashini, Phasir dabi niye ashechi' had got the prominence of first poem of 21 February.

What Mr. Dhirendranath Datta, member of the then Constituent Assembly did in 1948 and Altaf Mahmud in 1952, for that, both of them had to pay their prices. As they were earmarked by the Pakistani authorities, both of them were brutally killed in 1971. We paid a price for our nationalism in this manner.

During 1952 February movement, prominent litterateur Munier Chowdhury was in jail. It was claimed that how many people were killed in February movement was not clear as the bodies of huge number of victims were dumped by the police underneath of the earth inside of the jail or here and there. In order to give the idea of Pakistani polices' cruelty and brutality, Munier Chowdhury had written a drama titled 'Kabar' and he had somehow managed to stage that drama inside of jail. What he did in 1952, for that, Munier Chowdhury like Dhirendranath Dutta and Altaf Mahmud had to pay his lives in 1971. He was killed by the Pakistani occupying authorities.

Since the events of February 1952, poems, songs, novels, plays, films, cartoons and paintings were created to capture the movement from varied point of views. Notable artistic depictions include the poems *Bornomala*, *Amar Dukhini Bornomala* and *February 1969* by poet Shamsur Rahman, the film *Jibon Theke Neya* by Zahir Raihan, the stage play *Kobor* by Munier Chowdhury and the novels *Ekushey February* by Zahir Raihan and *Artonaad* by Shawkat Osman.

