



## Language-Based Nationalism: A Historical Analysis of Bengali Language Movement 1952

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the Bengali language movement in 1952 as the base of Bengali nationalism under the theoretical framework of language and nationalism. The idea of "one nation, one language", in linguistically diverse regions like Pakistan, often results in the state's oppressive policies to suppress the other languages and neglect the sentiments associated with them. Bengali language movement got its base right after the creation of Pakistan but gained its momentum in 1952. The state's obvious response was suppression, resulting in converting the language movement into a nationalist ideology, which provided the base for the separation of East Pakistan in 1971. The paper qualitatively argues that the colonial impression of adopting one language as a national symbol resulted in making Urdu Pakistan's national language; this colonial notion developed a sense of deprivation among the regional languages like Bengali with rich historical and cultural background, stemming from the idea of separate nationalism.

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## 1. Introduction

Bengal has played the most important role in the Pakistan movement for being the Muslim majority province. Bengal's secession from the rest of the state in December 1971 resulted in the political leadership of the day being unable to resolve the grievances Bengal had accumulated against the state. The Bengali language problem was the first grievance that eventually incited Bengalis and served as the primary catalyst for their split from Pakistan. Though it was a tough decision to make, for a new country like Pakistan when facing a powerful neighbor like India, Bengalis, who make up the majority of the province's population, had a right to demand Bengali, be the official language. Having another official language could compromise the integrity of the country because Urdu has been a crucial symbol of Muslim identity throughout the entire independence struggle (Rahman 2012). The Urdu-Bengali controversy began when Dhirendranath Datta, a Hindu member of Pakistan's Constituent legislature, raised the issue of Bengali language usage in the legislature together with Urdu and English. In response, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan stated that Pakistan was established due to the need of the 100 million Muslims living on this subcontinent, who use Urdu as their language.

The assertion made by Khawaja Nazimuddin that the people in his province liked Urdu more than Bengali, infuriated the Bengali movement's activists even more. However, the province's views proved to be divided. The majority of people's opposition to Urdu was evident in newspaper articles, letters to the editor, strikes, and processions. During this period, Governor-General Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah visited Dhaka. During a march at Race Course Dhaka on March 21, Jinnah declared resolutely that the Bengali language issue had no direct bearing on the lives of the people (T. Rahman, 2015). He underlined that Bengalis have the freedom to choose their provincial language, which they may choose to be Bengali, but that Urdu is the only official language in Pakistan. "This is significant since a single state language is essential to a united nation. Furthermore, those involved in politics around the Bengali language

question are Pakistan's opponents (Jinnah, 1989).” Similar thoughts were voiced by Jinnah at the University Convocation five days later.

Later, when a group of students met with Jinnah, the students were unhappy to learn that the country's potential disintegration was Jinnah's main reason for opposing the languages of the two states. Remembering that the Bengali elite at the time had dual allegiances is, crucial. A section of the Bengali elite thought that the language movement was a plot supported by Indian spies, communists, and the Muslim League's political adversaries. Jinnah reiterated this belief in his both speeches at Dhaka (Jinnah, 1989). Senior Pakistani officials shared this opinion, which was also promoted by the West Pakistani press, particularly the *Morning News*. Furthermore, Jinnah was presented with a petition endorsing Urdu and denouncing Bengali supporters as enemy agents upon his arrival in Dhaka. According to one research, Jinnah likely reinforced his conviction that the issue was being exaggerated by a group of crowd rousers with this biased account (T. Rahman, 1996). The above introduction provides enough historical background of the Bengali language movement. This paper is primarily aimed at discussing the Bengali language movement as the pioneer and symbol of Bengali Nationalism resulting in the separation of East Pakistan in 1971. For this purpose, some primary sources, like Jinnah's Dhaka speeches, Assembly debates, etc. have been used along with newspaper archives. This discursive analysis is based on the qualitative research approach.

## **2. Literature Review**

Persian became the official language of the subcontinent when the Mughals arrived in India in the sixteenth century. A new dialect named Urdu evolved during this period. Subsequently, this language came to represent Muslim unity throughout the Mughal dynasty's dominion over India (Barzegar, 2013). Language has the power to unite a country. Since a nation naturally chooses its own language, no one can force language upon it. Language determines a society's culture, customs, and traditions (Mahboob, 2002). Urdu was designated as Pakistan's official language by Muhammad Ali Jinnah upon the country's independence in 1947. He frequently defended Pakistan's stance of using exclusively Urdu as its official language. East Pakistanis preferred Bengali to Urdu as their national language and were unwilling to embrace Urdu as such Zaheer (1994). The majority of scholarly publications have come to the conclusion that East Pakistan's problems were driven by cultural and economic disparities. Due to the enormous 1,000-mile gap between East and West Pakistan, there was a communication breakdown, which was another geographical factor contributing to the issue. The primary grievance of Bengalis was that, since they constituted the majority, they should have the authority to designate Bengali as their official language (Bangash, 2018). Bengali people's perceptions of their deprivations are heightened by these grievances (Christiansen, 2019).

To further their demands, they established various groups (Van Klinken & Aung, 2017). Protests were initiated, particularly by Dhaka University students (Jabeen, Chandio, & Qasim, 2020). To put pressure on the authorities to change their choice to have one nation, one language, they organized protests and open forums. On March 11, 1948, Dhaka University students declared a public demonstration (Christiansen, 2019). The strikes and discontent took a severe turn in 1952. Some student organizations called for the strikes. East Pakistani citizens began to press for Bengali to become the region's official language. The government was put under pressure by these protests and strikes. Section 144 was implemented by the government to prevent the students from protesting. On February 21, 1952, Dhaka University students convened on campus (Shahadat, 2011). Hundreds of students disobeyed section 144 by coming together from all across the city to voice their outrage. Two students and three other people were killed as the police used baton charges and apprehended students. This made things worse. The academic researches, discussed above, have usually focused on the Bengali language movement as one of the causes of the separation of East Pakistan. This research is an effort to understand the significance of the Bengali language in the development of Bengali nationhood among the people of East Pakistan.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

Out of all the secular concepts that have encouraged people to enter politics over the past 200 years, nationalism has shown to be the most durable and is still largely embraced today. Creating politically restricted states or areas with well-demarcated borders, where all citizens would belong to a linguistically and culturally homogeneous group or nation, is the aim of

nationalist movements. For the most part, nationalist discourse has revolved around the concept of "one state, one nation, and one language" (Barbour & Carmichael, 2000). Various ethnic groups speaking different languages coexisting in the same state is seen negatively in this discourse. The main purpose of a national language is to culturally unify the nation such that its state, nation, and language are all consistent. From the first nation-states to emerging in Western Europe some 200 years ago, the nationalist discourse has emphasized the vital role language plays in the creation of modern states (Hobsbawm, 1996). Moreover, the notion that a nation and its language are intimately intertwined has had a tremendous impact and continues to do so, not only in Europe but also in other modern-day regions of the world. Though some are more so than others, every nation-state has a diverse linguistic and cultural terrain. If state, nation, and language are to be matched, then what should be done with minority languages and their speakers? Different nation-states have taken different tacks when it comes to minority languages and their speakers. The same policy was adopted by the Pakistani state, while dealing with the Bengali language movement.

One way to preserve the appearance of homogeneity is to deny the existence of minority languages. Another is to try and assimilate minority language speakers by population exchanges, expulsion, or even genocide. Lastly, minority language speakers can be recognized and given certain linguistic and cultural rights. In the end, some languages fade away or shift to the periphery, while others rise to prominence and even spread outside of their original language region (Hobsbawm, 1996). The main lesson these tales impart to us is that languages are dynamic, ever-changing systems. Every now and then, language can adjust to more general socioeconomic changes. But often, it is the consequence of conscious attempts on the part of cultural and political elites to elevate one language or dialect above another, for a variety of political purposes. In the case of Pakistan, Urdu was elevated above all the regional language. Following World War II, colonies that gained their independence instinctively saw Arabic in Algeria, Hindi in India, Sinhala in Sri Lanka, and Urdu in Pakistan as the cornerstones of their national education systems (Barbour & Carmichael, 2000). This was a dangerous illusion, as the only ways to establish national linguistic homogeneity in multiethnic and multilingual places are mass compulsion, deportation, or extermination unless there is a willingness to shift languages.

#### **4. Discussion and Findings**

The goal of language policies influenced by the state was to downplay Bengali identity while highlighting the Muslim identity of the people living in Bengal. The Aga Khan made a bold suggestion on February 9, 1951, to declare Arabic Pakistan's official language. More realistic recommendations included replacing the native Sanskrit words with Perso-Arabic words and switching the Bengali character to Arabic. In summary, this was an attempt to Islamize Bengali language, and achieve the goal of uniting Pakistanis around Islam. However, from the Bengali perspective, Bengaliness was seen as incompatible with both the Islamic and the Pakistani identities by those in West Pakistan. The federal government of Pakistan set up twenty adult education centers in various districts of East Pakistan, implementing the education minister Fazlur Rahman's recommendations to teach Bengali using Arabic script (Umar, 1989). On December 7, 1950, the East Bengali government established a language council intending to convert Bengali to Islam. Those who were well-known for highlighting the Islamic identity of Bengali Muslims made up its membership. Nonetheless, prominent proponents of the Bengali language, like as Dr. Shahidullah and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, were also among those who favored preserving the Islamic identity of Bengali Muslims.

Maulana Akram Khan, the Chairman, became well-known on April 15, 1951, in Karachi, when he declared that those in East Bengal who did not support Urdu were against Islam. According to Abul Kalam Shamsuddin's report of the first meeting, the only committee member to oppose to the suggested revisions—which included changes to the grammar—was Babu Ganesh Bose, a Bengali professor at Dhaka University. But Shamsuddin ignored Bose, claiming that their goal was to liberate Bengali from Sanskrit's hegemony (Qasmi, 2023). The Committee's final report, released in August 1951, suggested teaching Urdu and Bengali (non-Sanskritized) as second languages to strengthen the cultural ties between the two halves of Pakistan. But the Committee's suggestions stayed under wraps, maybe because it supported state-sponsored initiatives. Nevertheless, questions in the Legislative Assembly expressed concerns that Bengali will be written in Arabic script. Press letters also voiced worries that Bengalis would lose touch with their literary and cultural heritage and turn into the cultural property of West Pakistan. Students at the Dhaka University Bengali Department addressed a nine-point memo to the

Pakistan Education Advisory Board expressing their opposition to changes being made to the script of their language (Helal, 1985). Emotions were running high as meetings were held in multiple places. Though the plan was never carried out, state initiatives to Islamize Bengali persisted.

The government's action incited the West Pakistanis to feel oppressed and hated, which fueled the anger in East Bengal. Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin visited Dhaka at this frenzied period and, like Jinnah, declared Urdu to be the sole official language of Pakistan. He also emphasized Urdu's standing as the nationalist emblem of Pakistan. The next day, the PM's story was heavily criticized in editorials and letters published in the press, which sparked swift and furious reactions. Following his visit, there was a significant pro-Bengali protest in Dhaka. After this tour, the PM was hailed as an aristocratic Bengali who was unaware of the actual language emotions of the Bengali people and a dupe of West Pakistanis (A. Rahman, 1984). This proved that Maulana Abdul Hameed Bhashani was a true leader of the Bengali people, able to relate to them and motivate them to oppose the imposing of a foreign language on fifty million people. Street processions and protests soon became routine; on February 4, the biggest demonstration in East Bengal's living memory occurred. The East Bengal government banned The Pakistan Observer on February 13 after it published editorials the day before that contained anti-Islamic remarks. The Bhasha Ondolan supporters perceived this as just another attempt to silence the voice of the Bengalis, as the Pakistan Observer was an enthusiastic supporter of Bengali. Because of how arbitrary the government's actions were, Khairat Hosain, a member of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly, was not even permitted to propose a resolution to address this prohibition (Ataur Rahman, 1990). In response to a strike announced on February 20 against the status quo, section 144 was implemented in Dhaka.

However, the outcome of this war was an episode that altered the political landscape on both sides. A planned student rally at Dhaka University on February 21 was called off to challenge Section 144 and launch a batch of protests into the city's streets. An altercation with the establishment turns violent as a result of this student demonstration. Chief Minister Nurul Amin of Bengal subsequently justified the government's response to the protest on the province assembly floor by citing the students' attacks on government and public vehicles, their mistreatment of police officers, and their forced closing of the market. The government's official statement, which stated that these students hurt some police officers with stones they flung, was read out by the chief minister. The District Magistrate gave the police the order to fire because of the unrest that was becoming violent. But rather of scattering, the mob turned against the police. Due to the protestors' resistance, the police were obliged to fire at them, leaving three people dead and seven injured. Nine individuals were murdered when 39 gas grenades, 72 tear gas shells, and 27 rounds of gunfire were fired; these were three students and six citizens, according to an investigation team chaired by Justice Ellis of the Dhaka High Court. Due to discrepancies in witness accounts, Nurul Amin was able to ridicule placards at Mymensingh that claimed 165 dead, eleven of them were females. Although there had been deaths, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin noted that no source could be trusted (Shamsuddin, 1968). The repressive force of the state had claimed the lives of Bengali citizens.

Perceived as acts of martyrdom, the deaths turned into the most powerful emblem of opposition against West Pakistan. The demonstrators were unabated by the establishment's brutal control. Rather, it increased public resentment and rage, which sparked more agitated responses. The Muslim League's reputation was also impacted, and people who supported and adhered to the party because it was credited with founding Pakistan were estranged from the governing class. For example, upon learning of this incident, A. K. Shamsuddin resigned from the Provincial Assembly. Chief Minister Nurul Amin defended the government's action, which was sharply criticized by Dhirendranath Datta, Maulana Turkabagish, Khairat Hosain, and Shamsuddin Ahmad during the Provincial Assembly's emergency meeting yesterday night (Muniruzzaman, 1973). Ultimately, the opposition protested by leaving the House. A. K. Shamsuddin gave a scathing speech at a meeting of Dhaka University students the following day, and a martyr monument (*shaheed minar*) was then erected in honor of the martyrs (Huda, 1994). The student resorted to violence and challenged the cops when they attempted to remove the martyr memorial. In an attempt to soothe public sentiment, the chief minister filed a motion in the provincial assembly that suggested Bengali be added to Pakistan's list of official national languages, to be recommended to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. However, this was

insufficient to calm the enraged feelings of the masses and students, who now demanded that the CM and his government quit.

More rage and protest filled the next few days. The demonstrators were repeatedly subjected to the coercive might of the state. The demonstrators also took drastic measures; government buildings were set on fire, and the *Morning News* offices—which had long been against Bengali—were set on fire. In response, the authorities detained well-known academics and politicians who opposed the administration. Abul Hashim, the former General Secretary of the Bengal Muslim League, Govindlal Bannerjee, Khairat Hosain, Maulana Turkabagish, and Monorajan Dhar were among those detained. On the Assembly floor and in other places, they had all opposed Nurul Amin (Franda, 1970). Newspapers said that on February 26, there were 28 further arrests in Dhaka, including university professors P. C. Chakraverty, Munier Chowdhari, and Mazaffar Hamid Chaudhari. Z. A. Suleri, who was assigned by the Council of Pakistan Editors to look into the *Pakistan Observer's* ban, was inadvertently detained but released right away (Umar, 1989). Both the general public and government policymakers in West Pakistan were ignorant of the language movement. Bengalis' concerns about language or representation in the assembly were not acknowledged; instead, they were branded as Indian spies posing a threat to Pakistan's security. All that was mentioned about East Bengalis was that they disagreed with Pakistan's Islamist ideology and were communists. Bengali language supporters were labeled as enemies of the nation and traitors of Islam by Urdu advocates like *Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-Urdu* because of the widespread promotion of this idea by the West Pakistani press. Such opinions were expressed by East Bengal's chief minister, Nurul Amin, during his Provincial Assembly discussion on March 24, 1952 (T. Rahman, 1996). In addition, he accused the movement of having communist support. This charge was reinforced by the fact that four out of the twelve members of the Bhasha Ondolan action committee were communists (Helal, 1985).

Most lawyers in East Bengal were communists, but communists also frequently became teachers to propagate their views. Apart from the influence of leftist communist ideology on the Bengali nationalist movement, it is also true that the Communist party did not have the popular support and structural strength required to secure key political posts, perhaps because of the government's strict control. It was therefore reliant on other powerful political entities, such as the student unions or the National Awami Party (NAP). The people found the communist concept of money and power distribution appealing because it made them feel oppressed, betrayed, and marginalized. The establishment found this theory worrisome (Rashiduzzaman, 1982). The ongoing oppressive hegemony of the elite in attempting to suppress the movement heightened the sense of deprivation instilled in the masses, hence increasing public engagement in the Bengali nationalist movement. In response, the establishment perpetuated a stereotype of Bengalis in West Pakistan by accusing the movement of being anti-state (Jahan, 2019). It was pointless to expect West Pakistanis to feel any pity for the Bengalis with such ideas. Because of this, following the events of February 21, both halves of Pakistan were completely at odds with one another: East Pakistanis were traitors and India's spies, while West Pakistan was a despot for East Pakistan.

## **5. Conclusion**

The 1954 provincial elections demonstrated the East Pakistanis' open rejection of the Muslim League as their duly elected representative. In 1953, the Nizam-i-Islam party, the Awami League, the Krishak Sramik Party of Fazlul Haq, and a coalition of opposition groups led by Maulana Bhashani formed the United Front (also called Jugto Front) (Islam, 1968). With 215 out of 237 Muslim seats, the United Front scored a landslide win thanks to strong public support for its 21-point platform. Only nine seats were won by the Muslim League, indicating that it was no longer popular with the general public and that the proto-elite could still wield political power. The ruling class in West Pakistan persisted in its anti-Bengali policies even after conceding defeat, which led to the United Front's ministry being dismissed on May 29, 1954, at the age of just three months. Recently appointed Governor-General Iskandar Mirza issued an order for the arrest of the United Front's leadership, which included 35 members of the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who later supported the separatist movement in East Pakistan, was also imprisoned. They were put behind bars on charges of inciting violence between Bengali and Bihari at the Chandragona Paper Mills in Chittagong. The Basic Principles Committee Report to the Constituent Assembly included a paragraph designating Bengali and Urdu as national languages, which modified the Murree Pact on July 10, 1955, making Bengali an official

language (T. Rahman, 1996). Nonetheless, the One Unit plan was established by the same report, bringing the numerical majority of East Pakistan to parity with West Pakistan.

To put it succinctly, the sacrifice of numerical power was made in exchange for an outcome that would only have symbolic significance. However, certain Urdu advocates, chief among them Abdul Haq, expressed their disapproval of Bengali's heightened status and maintained that Urdu could be Pakistan's only national language and state tongue (Haq, 1952). Suhrawardy, the leader of the talks, defended the deal by pointing out that it recognized regional autonomy, but Fazlul Haq denounced the parity formula as a betrayal of East Bengal's majority rights. Consequently, Bengali and Urdu were declared to be state languages in the 1956 Constitution. It was supposedly the end of the language movement. Nonetheless, the East Bengali intelligentsia's political and cultural life was resonant with the emblem of *Ekushe*, as the twenty-first of February was known (Chaudhary, 1992). Its critical importance is attested to by the plays, essays, and poetry on this subject in particular as well as by the language movement in general. Actually, in the political sphere of what is now Bangladesh, *Ekushe* and the *Shaheed Minar* remain the most potent symbols of resistance (Ahmad, 1989). They gave emotional impetus to demands for political and economic change that manifested as opposition to oppression and injustice, akin to what was originally felt on February 21st. Bengali was declared a national language in the 1956 constitution, but Bengalis felt that their language was not given the same respect as Urdu.

Urdu was used as the language on banknotes, postal and railway signs, and even national media. The long-promised *Shaheed Minar*, a symbol of Bengalis' struggles for linguistic identity, was still unfinished and held great significance for them. The poetry of Tagore was another point of dispute, to name only cultural ones. Bengali nationalists opposed the government's ban on Tagore because he was a symbol of their own Bengali culture and it was non-Muslim. The renowned Six Points of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which were announced in February 1966, gave the Bengali autonomy movement a concrete form Jabeen, Chandio, and Qasim (2020). The Awami League activists and Sheikh Mujib himself made it abundantly evident that the autonomy they desired would be used to preserve the Bengali language and culture, even though none of the principles explicitly related to language. To enhance and promote Bengali, the East Pakistan Students League, the student section of the Awami League, really pushed the people to speak it. Because all the signage in Dhaka is translated into Bengali, it can be challenging to find Urdu-speaking people. During their anti-Ayub protests in 1968 and 1969, the students asked that Bengali be made the official language of courts and other government institutions. As a result, the broad feeling generated by the Bhasha Ondolan now fueled counter-hegemonic, anti-West Pakistani aspirations, such as the demand for a confederation founded on the Six Points (Helal, 1985). Consequently, throughout General Yahya's tenure, the anti-Ayub movement and the election campaign relied heavily on allusions to the martyrs of February 21 and the use of the Bengali language.

### **5.1. Recommendations**

Since this paper focused solely on the Bengali language movement, other factors that led to East Pakistan's secession in December 1971, are not included. However, these extraneous elements—military or political—paved the way for an external expression of Bengali nationalism that devalued the Bengali language. The language served as the foundation for Bengali nationalism, but as the movement gained traction, other issues took precedence over the language. The nation's first ethnic movement of its sort, the Bengali language movement fought against the central government's hegemony and promoted the advancement of other ethnic groups. The Bengali nationalist movement influenced and inspired the separatist movements in Sindh, Balochistan, and Khayber Pakhtunkhwa to fight for their rights. Unfortunately, the Pakistani government was unable to successfully manage these activities, and the widespread perception of these ethno-political movements is still that they are pro-communist and that they are spied on by India. The paper recommends that the Pakistani state and government institutions have to shed off the colonial notions of national unity and solidarity based on singular language, religion, ethnicity, or political ideology. This region was always diverse in its socio-cultural, religious and ethnic identities; therefore the institutions have to respect this diversity. The state needs to adopt a policy allowing provincial governments to promote their regional languages, ethnicities and cultures so that people can stay connected to their historical roots. For instance making regional languages compulsory at school level, promoting competitions of

regional language poetry and prose writings, making regional languages dramas and movies, etc. This will not harm the national unity, instead will increase the sense of protection and liberty.

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