

The Bengali Language Movement and Emergence of Bangladesh

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This paper offers a brief history of the Bengali language movement in Pakistan from 1948 to 1952 and depicts the events how Bengali was incorporated as one of the state languages of Pakistan in its constitution in 1956. It also describes how that constitution was scrapped by the Military rulers of Pakistan in 1958 and marked Bengali as one of the national languages of Pakistan in 1963 constitution promulgated by the military junta. So, Bengali language, the language of the majority citizens of Pakistan had to wait to be a state language till the establishments of the independent Bangladesh through prolong political agitation and a bloody war of liberation in 1971. Ultimately, Bengali was made the state language of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh in its constitution of 1972.

It has been suggested that the freedom struggle of Bangladesh originated from the Bengali language movement. In a way this is correct, as the basic inspiration of the freedom struggle of the Bengali-speaking people of Pakistan came mainly from linguistic nationalism.

Statistically Bengalis were the majority community of Pakistan- about fifty-five percent of the total population. The Urdu-speaking Pakistanis were mostly immigrants from India. They were mainly concentrated in the city of Karachi, the newly-formed capital city of Pakistan. The Urdu-speaking people of Pakistan were not more than three percent of the total population, though Urdu was widely understood and used in West Pakistan. The West Pakistani languages, such as Panjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtu were written in Urdu or Arabic script like that of Persian. On the contrary, the Bengali (Bangla) language had its own script different from that of Arabic or Devanagari script.

The Language Controversy

The language controversy of Pakistan started even before the creation of Pakistan. Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, a former Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh University of India had suggested that Urdu should be the state or official language of the future state of Pakistan. Simultaneously Dr. Md. Shahidullah, a

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noted Bengali linguist from Dacca University, opposed the suggestion and put forth arguments in favor of Bengali as the future state language of Pakistan. He wrote:

If Urdu or Hindi instead of Bengali is used in our courts and universities that would be tantamount to political slavery (Shahidullah 1947: 34-35).

Dr. Shahidullah's above comment was the beginning of the language controversy of Pakistan and the Bengali language movement. As soon as Pakistan came into being, a booklet came out in Dacca, the capital city of the province of East Bengal or East Pakistan, on the 15th of September, 1947- entitled *Pakistaner Rashtra Vhasha, Bangla na Urdu* (Pakistan's state language Bengali or Urdu). In that publication it was proposed that:

1. Bengali language shall be the following :
 - a. medium of instruction in East Pakistan
 - b. medium of court communication
 - c. medium of office communication
2. The language of the central government will be both Urdu and Bengali (Mazlis 1947: 1-2)

The above proposals were the manifestation of the aspirations of the Bengali-speaking people of Pakistan.

Unfortunately, the Central Government of Pakistan failed to appreciate the depth of feelings of the majority community of Pakistan and to allot the rightful place for the Bengali language in state affairs. As a consequence, the "Rashtra Bhasa Sangram Parishad" (the state language committee of action) was formed by different students and cultural organizations of Dacca in the month of October 1947. The committee vehemently protested the exclusion of the Bengali language from the newly issued money, postal stamps, coins, and office forms of the Government of Pakistan. On the 5th of December, 1947 the teachers and the students of Dacca University had their first street demonstration in favour of Bengali. On the following day, another protest meeting was held in Dacca University against the government-sponsored Education Conference, held in Karachi, which recommended that Urdu should be the only state language of Pakistan.

The Language Movement (1948)

In the second session of the Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan, held on the 25th of February, 1948, Mr. Dharendra Nath Datta, a member from East Pakistan moved an amendment on the rules of procedures of the Assembly. This amendment sought to

give Bengali equal status along with Urdu and English as the state language of Pakistan. Speaking on the amendment, Mr. Dutta told the House:

Bengali is a provincial language but so far as our state is concerned, it is the language of the majority of people of the state.....Out of sixty nine million people on Pakistan, forty-four million people speak the Bengali language....The state language of the state should be the language which is used by the majority of the people of the state, and for that, I consider that Bengali language is a lingua franca of our state....I am voicing the sentiments of the vast millions of our state, and therefore Bengali should not be treated as a provincial language. It should be treated as the language of the state (Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan Proceeding 1948: 15-16).

Understandably enough, Mr. Dharendra Nath Datta's argument and amendment was opposed by Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, on the following grounds:

Pakistan has been created because of the demand of a hundred million Muslims in this sub continent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu.... Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have as its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nation (Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan Proceeding 1948: 17).

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's argument was emotional and fallacious in that the hundred million Muslims of the undivided India were never a mono-lingual or Urdu-speaking community. Indian Muslims are historically multi-lingual and the Bengali-speaking Muslims have always outnumbered the Muslims of other language groups of united India.

Indeed Mr. Dutta's arguments were of no avail in the Constitutional Assembly. The language policy of the Pakistan government was resented by the people of East Pakistan. The students of Dacca reacted sharply and a protest strike was observed in Dacca on the 26th of February, 1948. An "All Party State Language Committee of Action" was formed. Under the auspices of this committee a general strike was observed as a protest day throughout East Pakistan on the 11th of March, 1948. The party in power, the Muslim League, took recourse to force. As a result hundreds of people were injured as the police used tear gas and lathis. Nearly a thousand people were thrown into prison. In fact, the student community bore the main brunt of the government onslaught. Despite police action the protests and demonstrations continued with unabated fury until Mr. Khawaja Nazimuddin, the chief minister of East Bengal, signed an eight-point agreement with the leaders of Committee of Action on the 15th of March. Two most important clauses of the agreement were the following:

In the April (1948) session of the East Bengal legislative assembly a special resolution will be moved to propose to the constituent assembly of Pakistan to make Bengali one of the state language of Pakistan and to give Bengali the same status with Urdu in the competitive examinations of the central services of Pakistan. In the month of April another resolution will be moved in the East Bengal legislative assembly to make Bengali the official language of the province of East Bengal in place of English. Besides that, Bengali will be the medium of instruction (Omar 1970: 81).

Immediately after the signing of the agreement, Mr. Mohamed Ali Jinnah, the Governor General of Pakistan came to visit Dacca. While addressing a mammoth gathering of the 21st of March, 1948, he pontifically issued the following:

Let me make it very clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore, so far as the state language is concerned, Pakistan's shall be Urdu (Jinnah 1948: 89).

Mr. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan and father of the nation, reiterated the same while addressing the Dacca University Special Convocation on the 24th of March, 1948:

There can be only one state language. If the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison, that language in my opinion, can only be Urdu (Jinnah 1948: 95).

Mr. Jinnah's categorical and emphatic support for Urdu was greeted with protests in Dacca meetings. A deputation on behalf of the state language committee of action waited upon Mr. Jinnah and submitted a memorandum demanding Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan, but to no avail.

Mr. Khawaja Nazimuddin, the chief minister of East Bengal too, contrary to his erstwhile commitment to the eight point plan he had signed with the committee of action, moved the following resolutions in the East Bengal legislative assembly on the 8th of April, 1948:

- a) Bengali shall be adopted as the official language for replacing English in the province of East Bengal; and it will be implemented as soon as the practical difficulties are resolved; and
- b) The medium of instruction in educational institutions in East Bengal shall, as far as possible, be Bengali, or the mother tongue of the majority of scholars in the institutions (East Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings 1948: 165).

The resolutions, adopted by the East Bengal legislative assembly, further aggravated the situation, as the watered down version fell much short of the normal expectations of the people of the eastern region. Dr. Md. Shahidullah sharply reacted against the resolution at the first Bengali literary conference of East Bengal, held at Dacca on the 31st of December, 1948. He penned his burning effusions in the following way:

It is true that there are Hindus and Muslims. But what is transcending is that they are in essence Bengali. This is a reality. Nature with her own hand has stamped the indelible mark of Bengali in such a manner of our appearance and language that it is no longer possible to conceal it (Shahidullah 1949).

In fact what Dr. Shahidullah metaphorically emphasized was the distinct ethnic and cultural entities of the Bengali-speaking people of Pakistan. But the rulers of Pakistan did not accept the reality that Pakistan was a multilingual and multi-national state.

Language Planning : 1949-50

On the 27th of December 1948, the education minister of Pakistan, Mr. Fazlur Rahman, suggested to the All Pakistan Education Conference that for the sake of Islamic ideology, the old and traditional scripts or writing systems should be changed in lieu of Arabic or Urdu script which should be adopted. As a result the Central Pakistan education advisory board, also at its meeting of 7th February, 1949 strongly recommended the Arabic script for all Pakistani languages. It should be mentioned that had this recommendation been put into motion, the Bengali languages literature would have been adversely affected. The other west Pakistani languages had already been using the Arabic script. Such a move again promoted sharp reaction among the students of the Dacca University. A protest memorandum to the education advisory board was immediately sent in the following vein:

The attempt of introducing Arabic script for the Bengali language, which has a rich heritage tradition, is an attract on our language, literature culture. This attempt has created a fear of few colonial design and slavery in the minds of Bengalis (Omar 1970: 263).

Despite the protest, the Pakistan government started twenty adult education centers in different parts of East Pakistan to teach primary Bengali through Arabic script. A huge sum of money was spent on such an experiment. Over and above, the government set up a committee on the 9th of March, 1949 to bring about reforms in the Bengali language. The East Bengal language committee submitted its report to the government on the 7th of December, 1950. The

Committee had this to say in regard to the style and diction of modern Bengali writing:

1. that the Sanskritization of the language be avoided as far as possible by the use of simple phraseology and easy construction in vogue in the speech of East Bengal.
2. that the expressions and sentiments of Muslim writers should strictly conform to the Islamic ideology (East Bengal Language Committee Report 1949: 102-03).

What the report wanted to say by “Sanskritization of the language is avoided” was to exclude the Sanskrit words from Bengali and replace them by Urdu, Arabic or Persian words to “conform to the Islamic ideology.” But Bengali like other Indo-Aryan languages including Urdu had assimilated larger numbers of Sanskrit or old Indo-Aryan words in the course of its thousand years of evolution and it would be impossible now to undo this historical process. The language committee also dealt with Bengali grammar and again showed its predilections on the Sanskrit influence:

3. that all the Sanskritic principles having no direct and important role to play in the principles of Bengali grammar, be omitted and only genuine Bengali principles existing in the language and envisaged in this report be found out and established as the principles of Bengali grammar.
4. that the unintelligible technical terms of Sanskrit grammar imported to Bengali grammar which made the confusion worse, be substituted by the simple non-technical terms of Bengali language (East Bengal Language Committee Report 1949: 102-03).

The grammar of all the Indo-Aryan languages had been analyzed after Panini’s classical Sanskrit grammar, and all these grammars were bathed in Panini’s terms for grammatical descriptions. The East Bengal language committee wanted to change this historic practice. The Committee also suggested drastic modifications of the Bengali writing system and issued a model chart as a guide. The most important part of the Committee’s recommendation is, however, mentioned below:

5. that Urdu be studied as a second language in the secondary and higher stage of our education in order that we may make the linguistic, social, political, and cultural bonds between the two wings of Pakistan closer and deeper (East Bengal Language Committee Report 1949: 102-03).

The recommendations of the said committee were highly tendentious and at once politically motivated in that they were meant to “create” a new-fangled Bengali different from that of West Bengal. Needless to add, the report was jettisoned by the linguistic scholars and Bengali intelligentsia.

The Language Movement: 1952

A plethora of political, ideological, constitutional, and economic problems had been progressively burgeoning since Pakistan emerged. The two wings of Pakistan were virtually plagued with the quoted controversies. As the year 1951 wore on, the problems multiplied further. Against this background as the new year 1952 rang in, the Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr. Khawaja Nazimuddin again declared at the Dacca session of the ruling Muslim League party on the 26th of January, 1952 that “Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan.”

This announcement triggered off the language controversy and a new phase of the Bengali language movement was inaugurated. A new all-party (excepting the ruling Muslim League) state language committee of action was formed, and the 21st February 1952 was declared as State Language Day. The government promulgated prohibitory orders banning all sorts of meetings, processions, and demonstrations. Dacca University students defied government bans, held protest meetings, brought out massive demonstrations. This brought them into direct clash with the government. The police and para-military forces resorted to widespread tear gas shelling, clubbing, and finally shooting. As a result, several students were killed, hundreds were injured, and thousands were arrested. A reign of terror was let loose by the government but the language movement did not stop. The students killed were declared martyrs as they had laid down their lives for their beloved mother tongue.

Martyr’s column was immediately raised on the spot where the first student was slain. “Ekushe February” or 21st February” became the red letter day to the Bengalis. From 1952 onwards the Bengalis of Pakistan drew their inspiration from the sacrifices of the 21st of February in all their subsequent struggles. As a matter of fact, the 21st of February has shaped the future destiny of the Bengalis of Pakistan and it is now considered that the freedom movement of Bangladesh owed its genesis from that date.

The General Election of 1954 and the Language Issue

That the magic figure of 21 became a symbol of struggle, national unity, and emancipation, became clear when the major opposition political parties of East Pakistan formed a united front on the basis of a 21 point program to fight the ruling Muslim League Party in the first general election of East Pakistan held in March 1954. The United Front pledged that in the event it won the election and formed a government the following steps would be taken:

1. Bengali shall be made one of the state language of Pakistan
2. Arrangements will be made to impart education through the mother tongue only

3. The United Front will change the residence of the chief minister (as the then chief minister of the province Mr. Nurul Amin was responsible for the 21st of February killings) and that the residence would be converted into a center of research for Bengali language and literature. (The Bengali Academy is housed in that building at the movement.)
4. In memory of those killed on the 21st of February a befitting martyrs' column will be set up at the spot of the killing and compensation will be given to their families. (A "Sahid Minar" or "Martyrs' Column" is there now.)
5. The 21st of February will be declared as the "Sahid" or "Martyrs" day and made a government holiday (Musa 1974: 402-05). (This is now a national holiday.)

The United front fought the general election of 1954 on the basis of the 21 point program, registered an overwhelming victory and formed a government in East Pakistan.

The Pakistan Constitution of 1956 and Bengali

As a result of the victory of the United Front in East Pakistan the voice of Bengal could now be heard in the Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan in Bengali. What's more in the First Constitution of Pakistan in 1956, Bengali was made one of the state languages of Pakistan. The 1956 Pakistan Constitution stipulates the following:

1. The state language of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali.
Provided that for period of twenty years from the Constitution Day, English shall continue to be used for all official purposes for which it was used in Pakistan immediately before Constitution Day, and Parliament may by act provide for the use of English after the expiration of said period of twenty years, for such purposes as may be specified in that act.
2. On the expiration of ten years from the Constitution Day, the president shall appoint a committee to make recommendations for the replacement of English (Constitution of Pakistan 1956: 14).

The Constitutional stipulation was interesting in that the implementation clause was kept in abeyance for twenty years. The Bengalis were not particularly happy about this. However, the United Front Government in the East Pakistan took the necessary initiative to set up a "Bengali Academy" at Burdwan House (the former chief minister's residence). The Bengali Academy was set up on the 12th of June 1957 with the Departments of Research, Translation, Complication, Publication and Sales, Culture, Folk, and Library. The Bengali Academy Act was passed by the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly on the 3rd of April 1957 to "promote the culture and development of the Bengali language and literature in East Pakistan."

The Military Rule in Pakistan

The military coup of 1958 witnessed the abrogation of the 1956 constitution – a blow to the constitutional guarantees that were allotted to the Bengali language. The new ruler, General Ayub Khan, proposed to introduce roman script for all Pakistani languages and set up an education commission. The National Educational Commission of Pakistan submitted its report to the government in August 1959. The Commission suggested the setting up of two Boards – one for Urdu and the other for Bengali – immediately for the development of the national languages. The main concern of this Commission was, however, to bring Urdu and Bengali nearer and to create a “common language” – an idea cherished by the Pakistani rulers of West Pakistan for a long time. Thus, the Commission maintained:

The supreme need should be recognized of bringing Urdu and Bengali nearer to each other by increasing the common element in their vocabularies and by putting such common elements to extensive use. This trust should be entrusted to a committee comprising members drawn from the two national Boards suggested by us for the development of Urdu and Bengali (Pakistan National Educational Commission Report 1959, 1968: 293).

But the Urdu or Bengali scholars were not enthusiastic about bringing Urdu and Bengali nearer artificially. Thus, the dreams of a common Pakistani language like “Bhasha Indonesia” were never realized.

General Ayub Khan promulgated a new constitution for Pakistan in 1963. In this constitution, the provisions for languages were as follows:

1. The national languages of Pakistan are Bengali and Urdu, but this article shall not be construed as preventing the use of any other language and, in particular, the English language may be used for official and other purposes until arrangements for its replacement are made.
2. In the year one thousand nine hundred and seventy-two, the President shall constitute a commission to report on the question of the replacements of the English language for office purposes (Constitution of Pakistan 1963: 119).

If the relevant language clauses of 1956 and 1963 Constitutions are compared it can be seen that they are basically similar differing only in minor details. What is more is that both the Constitutions had similar tactics of delaying the practical implementation. However, a “Central Board for the Development of Bengali” as suggested by the National Education Commission of Bengali in 1969 was set up in June 1967. The primary function of the Board was to “promote national values

and develop Bengali to the level at which it can become the effective media of the instruction at the higher stage of education.” The aims and objectives of the Central Board for the Development of Bengali were:

- a) to develop Bengali language and literature.
- b) to remove the existing difficulties in Bengali particularly in the field of Natural and Social Sciences as well as in technologies in order that it become the medium of instruction at the higher educational level.
- c) to co-ordinate the work of other organizations engaged in promoting literary and scientific effort in Bengali (Central Board for Bengali 1967: 1).

The Bengali Development Board during its four-year existence had some useful work to its credit. The most important one was the evolution of a modern key-board for a Bengali typewriter and the manufacture of the machine with foreign collaboration.

Language Planning in East Pakistan

The Bengali Academy in Dacca appointed a committee in April 1963 to reform Bengali grammar and the writing system. The recommendations made by this committee, if implemented, would have drastically changed the nature of the language that would not only have severed ties with the past traditions of the Bengali literature, but also with that of West Bengal. Responsibility for implementation of the Bengali Academy’s recommendations was entrusted to Dacca University. Despite opposition from Bengali experts and linguists, the Academic Council of the Dacca University in its meeting of August 3rd, 1968 decided to implement it with minor modifications. In the meantime, Field Marshal Ayub Khan the President of Pakistan, in a meeting at Dacca on September 25th, 1968, suggested the creation of a “common” or “National” Language from Bengali and Urdu for Pakistan. But all these moves of reform and creation of a Pakistani language ended in a fiasco, due to the mass anti-Ayub political upsurge in 1969 which brought the downfall of Ayub Khan.

Mass Movement of 1969 and the Bengali Language

The vanguard of the Anti-Ayub Mass Movement was an “All Party Student committee of Action” which, on the basis of an 11-point program, successfully directed the mass upsurge and brought about Ayub’s fall. One of the points of the program was “Education at all levels must be given through the mother tongue; Bengali language must be introduced in the law courts and government offices.” It was during the mass movement of 1969 that Bengali nationalism reached its highest point. In the first All-Pakistan General Election of December 1970, the Bengali nationalists contested the election. The Awami League, champion of the

cause of Bengali nationalism, fought the election on the basis of a “Six-Point Program” which envisaged full provincial autonomy for East Pakistan in administrative, economic and cultural affairs. The Awami League, won all but two East Pakistani seats of the National Assembly. Mr. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Awami League leader, became the majority party leader of the Pakistan National Assembly. The legal logical thing would have been to invite the Awami League Party to form the Central Pakistan Government and transfer power to civilian rule. But the rulers of Pakistan totally disregarded the verdict of the people and instead of transferring power to the elected representatives of the people, unleashed a war of genocide on the Bengalis of East Pakistan from March 25, 1971.

Bengali nationalists declared East Pakistan as the Independent State of Bangladesh and fought back. A bloody war of liberation continued until the 16th December, 1971 when the Pakistan Army conceded a total defeat and surrendered and “The Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh” come into being.

The Constitution of Bangladesh and the Bengali Language

In the “Preamble” of “The Constitution of the Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh” adopted on the 4th of November, 1972 it had been declared that:

We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our Independence on the 26th day of March, 1971, and through a historic struggle for national liberation, establish the independent Sovereign Peoples’ Republic of Bangladesh; pledging that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national liberation struggle, shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution (Constitution of Bangladesh 1972: 1-4).

Among the Fundamental Principles of State Policy laid down in Bangladesh Constitution, Nationalism has been defined as:

The unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained a sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism (Constitution of Bangladesh 1972: 1-4).

About the state language of Bangladesh the provision is precise and simple: The state language of the Republic is Bengali”

Since liberation, the stress has been on the introduction of Bengali language at all levels of national life in Bangladesh. Bengali is now widely used as a language of office, court, and higher educational affairs. Now the language planners of Bangladesh find themselves not adequately prepared for this situation. In the

process of rapid changeover, numerous problems are cropping up everywhere and these problems are being solved by the actual users and not by the planners. It has been discovered that in an office the officers and the clerks are the best language planners, as in a classroom the teachers and the students are the best translators. No manual, no dictionary of technical terms, has yet been compiled adequately.

In Bangladesh, the language problems are being solved through a variety of public and private initiatives rather than through an administrative framework. From these experiences in Bangladesh, it can be said that the best language planning is possible when the language is in action.

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