

## Language Movement of 1952: Background of Independent Bangladesh

Muhammad Rahat Hossain<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of History, Kalkini Syed Abul Hossain College Kalkini, Madaripur

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2025.v13i04.001>

| Received: 17.02.2025 | Accepted: 25.03.2025 | Published: 07.04.2025

\*Corresponding author: Muhammad Rahat Hossain

Lecturer, Department of History, Kalkini Syed Abul Hossain College Kalkini, Madaripur

### Abstract

### Review Article

The Language Movement of 1952 in East Bengal began as a cultural struggle but evolved into a powerful political force that laid the foundation for the independence of Bangladesh. This review traces the historical context of the movement, highlighting how the imposition of Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan disregarded the linguistic identity of the Bengali-speaking majority. The study explores the series of events, including student protests, government suppression, and the eventual recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages in the 1956 constitution. The article argues that the movement catalyzed a national awakening, fostering Bengali nationalism and shaping the trajectory of subsequent political uprisings that culminated in the Liberation War of 1971. The paper underscores the Language Movement's significance in the creation of a distinct Bengali identity and its role in dismantling religious nationalism in favor of democratic and linguistic rights.

**Keywords:** Language Movement, Bengali nationalism, 1952, East Bengal, Urdu imposition, Pakistan history, student protests, identity politics, independence of Bangladesh, cultural resistance.

**Copyright © 2025 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the Language Movement of 1952 started as a cultural movement, over time it took the form of a political movement and made Bengalis aware of their rights. The Language Movement inspired Bengalis in every movement after 1952, including the 1954 elections, the 1962 education movement, the 1966 six-point freedom movement, the 1969 mass movement and the great war of independence in 1971. The destruction of Pakistan began with the Language Movement and ended with the birth of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the seeds of independent Bangladesh were laid in the Language Movement of 1952.

The state of Pakistan was born on the basis of this slogan: Muslims need a separate homeland in the Indian subcontinent. Naturally, religion was the basis of Pakistani nationality. According to the 1951 census report, about 97% of West Pakistan and 80% of East Bengal were Muslims. But although most of the inhabitants were of the same religion, their languages were different. The percentage of the population of Pakistan on the basis of language in 1951 was as follows:

Language Population

Bengali 56.40  
Punjabi 28.55  
Pushto 3.48  
Sindhi 5.47  
Urdu 3.27  
Balochi 1.29  
English 0.02  
Others 1.52  
Total = 100.00

The movement that was carried out in East Bengal from 1947 to 1952 against the conspiracy to make Urdu, the language of the majority population of Pakistan, the language of a very insignificant number, i.e. only 3.27 percent, the state language, excluding Bengali, is called the Language Movement. Although the main objective of this movement was to make Bengali one of the state languages of Pakistan along with Urdu, it later played a role in the great freedom struggle. On February 21, 1952, the Bengalis had to establish their demand with their own blood.

The Language Movement began long before 1952. In 1901, Syed Nawab Ali Chowdhury spoke at the Provincial Education Conference held in Rangpur, calling for the recognition of Bengali as a national language. In 1918, Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah

presented a strong demand for the establishment of Bengali as a common language in the subcontinent. In 1937, Maulana Akram Khan, in 1947, Tamaddun Majlis, Dhirendranath Dutta and language thinkers paved the way for the movement.

Since the birth of the Pakistan state in 1947 on the basis of the two-nation theory, neglect and deception towards East Bengal began. The Pakistani ruling class first attacked Bengali, the language of the majority population. The Western ruling class began to view the Bengalis with suspicion from the very beginning. They believed that

1. The Bengalis of East Bengal were not completely Muslims, but rather Hindus;
2. The Bengali language and culture were not Islamic at all;
3. India's influence in East Bengal was very great.

To solve these problems in East Bengal, the Pakistani rulers a) kept the Bengalis under the control of West Pakistan and made them true Muslims; b) To uproot Hindu culture by making Urdu the state language and c) To Islamize Bengali, to abolish Sanskrit and original Bengali vocabulary, to break the institutional framework of Bengali language and literary practice.

Neglecting Bengali language and trying to impose Urdu as the official language of Pakistan has been observed since the establishment of Pakistan. Only English and Urdu are used in Pakistan's currency, postage stamps, money order forms, railway tickets, etc. Bengali was excluded from the subject list of the Pakistan Public Service Commission and in the recruitment examinations of the Navy and other departments. Even in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, only English and Urdu were selected as the official language of the Pakistan, excluding Bengali, the language of the majority. On November 27, 1947, the decision to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan was taken at the Karachi Education Conference. Such a conspiracy against Bengali language created considerable anxiety and anger in East Bengal. The debate on the state language question started even before the establishment of Pakistan.

On May 17, 1947, the influential leader of the Muslim League, Chowdhury Khalequzzaman, declared in his presidential address at the 'Urdu Conference' in Hyderabad that 'Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan'. In July 1947, the Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh University, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, proposed to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan in the context of making Hindi the state language of India. Against this proposal, Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, with enlightened arguments, proposed to make Bengali the state language. Apart from Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, in 1947, writers such as Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haque,

Abdul Haque and others published articles strongly supporting making Bengali the state language. In September 1947, the cultural organization 'Tamuddun Majlis' established in Dhaka at the initiative of Professor Abul Kashem published a book recommending both Bengali and Urdu as the medium of education and the language of the office and court in East Bengal. In 1947, a strong public opinion was created among the educated society and student community of East Bengal in favor of Bengali as the state language. In addition to writing in newspapers and magazines, the demand for Bengali was also strengthened by establishing various political-cultural organizations. The newly formed 2/1 political organizations also spoke on the question of Bengali language. On September 6 and 7, 1947, at a workers' conference of the 'Democratic Jubo League of East Pakistan', it was decided to make Bengali the medium of education and the language of law and court in East Pakistan, to leave the decision of what would be the state language of the whole of Pakistan to the people, and that the decision of the people should be accepted as final.

The educated Bengalis and the student community realized that if Urdu was made the state language of Pakistan, then Urdu speakers would get priority in government jobs, business and all other fields and would gradually swallow the Bengalis and establish their dominance. This meant the death of the Bengali identity. In other words, the residents of East Bengal would be re-bound in the chains of subjugation. Therefore, the Bengali educated community and the student community were forced to choose the path of movement against the decision to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan.

On February 23, 1948, in the first session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, the leader of the Congress parliamentary party, Dhirendranath Dutt, moved an amendment motion demanding the inclusion of Bengali along with Urdu and English as the official language of the Constituent Assembly. But since that motion came from a Hindu member, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan announced in the session of the Constituent Assembly that Bengali was being proposed to break the bond of unity among the Muslims of Pakistan and announced that Urdu would be made the state language. As a result, the proposal was rejected. In protest against Liaquat Ali Khan's declaration in the Constituent Assembly, all the intellectual classes, including students, teachers and journalists, organized a systematic movement in East Bengal. On February 26, 1948, students in Dhaka went on strike to protest the declaration of Urdu as the sole state language. During the strike, students from various institutions in Dhaka marched in the Ramna area, chanting slogans in support of the Bengali language.

Realizing the need for an organization to activate the Bengali language struggle, the 'Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad' was formed on March 2, 1948 at Fazlul Haque Hall in Dhaka. This council included two representatives each from Tamuddan Majlish, Gana Azadi League, Ganotantrik Jubo League, Salimullah Muslim Hall, Fazlul Haque Muslim Hall and other student hostels, East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League and the student organization of the Communist Party called Chhatra Federation. Shamsul Alam was nominated as the convener of the council.

The Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad called for a general strike throughout East Pakistan on March 11, 1948. On that day, when students gathered outside the Secretariat demanding the declaration of Bengali as one of the state languages, the police resorted to massive stick charge, resulting in at least 50 students being seriously injured. The movement resulted in indescribable torture and arrests by the government police and goons.

But this movement could not be stopped. As the intensity of the movement gradually increased, the Chief Minister of East Bengal, Khwaja Nazimuddin, was forced to sit in on discussions with the Rashtrabhasha Sangram Committee on March 15, 1948, and signed an 8-point agreement. The agreement included granting Bangla, the state language, equal status to Urdu, as one of the state languages of Pakistan, the release of those previously arrested, the withdrawal of Section 144 from various parts of the country, the lifting of the ban on newspapers, and an admission that the language movement was not inspired by the enemies of the state.

Just four days after the signing of the 8-point agreement, the Governor-General of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who visited East Bengal at the invitation of Nazimuddin, announced in a public meeting at the Race Course Maidan on March 19, 1948, completely undemocratically, excluding Bengali, the language of the majority, and making Urdu the only state language. Similarly, when Jinnah declared Urdu as the sole state language at the special convocation of Dhaka University on March 24, as before, the students protested by shouting 'Ghar Ghar'.

Jinnah's East Bengal stalled the successful language movement. Jinnah was able to convince many that the language movement was a manipulation of the communists. The aim of the agitators was to destroy the unity of the country. His popularity and the immense respect of the common people for him led many agitators to withdraw from the movement. Even the Tamuddan Majlis withdrew its program. However, the anger over the language continued in the minds of the students. Students celebrated March 11 every year from 1948 to 1951.

In September 1950, a new debate began on the question of language. The Constitutional Principles Committee of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly proposed to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan on September 28, 1950 and submitted an interim report to the Constituent Assembly. In protest against the report of the Fundamental Principles Committee, a Sangram Parishad was formed in Dhaka and the committee held a national conference on 4 and 5 November 1950. On the proposal of the Fundamental Principles Committee, Bengali and Urdu were proposed as the state languages of Pakistan and on 12 November, protests were held in East Bengal. As a result, the Prime Minister of Pakistan withdrew the report.

When Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated in 1951, Khwaja Nazimuddin became the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Then, at the end of January 1952, the language movement was revived by a statement made by Khwaja Nazimuddin. Nazimuddin had the credit of creating problems rather than solving them. On 27 January 1952, he announced, imitating Jinnah, at a public meeting at Paltan Maidan in Dhaka, 'Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan, not any other language.' In protest against his senseless statement, the 'Dhaka University State Language Sangram Parishad' called for a student strike and meeting on 30 January 1952. In the meeting held on 30 January, it was decided to hold a student strike, protest procession and student assembly in Dhaka on 4 February. In order to make the language movement widespread, an all-party meeting was held on 31 January in the afternoon of the same year at the Bar Library in Dhaka under the chairmanship of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, President of the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. In the meeting, the 'All-Party State Language Movement Council' consisting of 40 members and 28 representatives from the East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League, Tamuddan Majlish, Islamic Brotherhood, Youth Union, East Pakistan Muslim Awami League was formed. The council supported the program on 4 February and announced a program of strike, protest procession and meeting in the entire East Pakistan on 21 February. In fact, the budget session of the East Bengal Management Council was scheduled to begin on 21 February. That is why the 'All-Party State Language Movement Council' declared this day as 'Language Day' and organized a strike and protest program. On 12 February, the English newspaper 'Daily Observer', which supported the language movement, was banned.

For the next 20 days, the student leadership continued to prepare extensively for this Language Day in Dhaka and the province, holding road meetings, demonstrations, distributing pamphlets, putting up posters, etc. The atmosphere was heated throughout the province and the ruling Muslim League was somewhat frightened. In such a situation, on February 20 at 3 pm,

a government announcement was made that Section 144 would be imposed in Dhaka for an indefinite period from the next day, February 21. Everything turned upside down. The government made extensive preparations for possible clashes. On the night of February 20, a large armed police camp was set up on the Dhaka University grounds and armed police patrolled the university area. An emergency meeting of the 'All-Party State Language Struggle Council' was called at the Awami Muslim League office at 94 Nawabpur Road at 8 pm on February 20 to take a decision to deal with the situation. Almost half of the members were absent from the meeting. The chairman of the meeting, Mr. Abul Hashim, discussed for only about thirty minutes and took a vote on the question of 'withdrawal of the hartal and violation of Section 144'. As a result, the proposal was passed with 11 votes in favor and 4 against (1 Comrade Towaha was neutral). As a result, the decision not to violate Section 144 was taken and the meeting ended.

Since the question of establishing Bengali as one of the state languages was a question of life and death for the students. That is why, after learning about the latest 'escape-oriented' decision of the All-Party State Language Working Committee, a secret meeting of 11 student leaders was held on the banks of the pond in Fazlul Haque Hall late at night on February 20. The decision of this meeting was that Section 144 should be violated even in the face of arrest, lathi-charge, tear gas and even gunfire. Because after making such extensive preparations, there was no way to retreat. The names of these 11 student leaders and their later identities are given in brackets:

1. Zillor Rahman (Honorable President (former), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh),
2. Mohammad Sultan (late, leftist leader),
3. SA Bari AT (late, former Deputy Prime Minister of BNP),
4. Anwarul Haque Khan (late, Information Secretary of the Mujibnagar government),
5. Manjur Hossain (late, eminent physician),
6. Gaziul Haque (eminent lawyer)
7. Habibur Rahman Shelly (honorable justice of the Supreme Court)
8. Syed Kamaruddin Hossain Shahud (professor, Dhaka University)
9. Abdul Momen (Awami League leader)
10. MR Akhtar Mukul (journalist and radio host) and
11. Anwar Hossain (identity unknown)

The discussion on whether to violate Section 144 or not continued until midnight on 20 February, so there was no time to publicize the decision of the meeting. Thursday, 21 February 1952, 8 Falgun 1358 Bangabhab, 24 Jamadiul Awal 1371 Hijri. As per the

previous announcement, on February 21, students started gathering in groups at the Dhaka University premises. Since Section 144 was in force on the streets, students from various institutions came towards Dhaka University in pairs. The student meeting started at 11 am. The meeting condemned the decision of the 'All-Party State Language Sangram Parishad' and decided to declare the Sangram Parishad extinct and break Section 144.

When the fragmented processions were on their way to break Section 144, the police waiting on the street arrested them and took them to a truck. But how many people will the police arrest? Finally, the police started a reckless stick charge on the processionists. Unable to stop the processionists in this too, they threw hundreds of tear gas shells. The students dispersed in the face of the police attack. But within a short time, they 'climbed the low wall between Dhaka University and the Medical College and gathered again near the main gate of the Medical Hostel.' The aim was to convey the demand for Bengali language to the members joining the East Bengal Legislative Council. ...The students continued to march bravely until about 2 pm and received arrests. At about 3:15 pm, the MLO and the Minister began to come to the council from in front of the Medical College. The more the students chanted slogans and gathered in the procession, the more the police attacked. They entered the Medical College Hostel after firing tear gas several times and chasing them. The police opened fire on the students after entering the hostel premises. Abdul Jabbar and Rafiquddin Ahmed were martyred on the spot. Around 17 people were seriously injured. They were shifted to the hospital. Among them, Abul Barkat was martyred at 8 am.

There is considerable disagreement about the number and identity of the martyrs in the February 21 incident. Due to the leaders' hiding immediately after the February 21 incident, many of them were unaware of the identity and number of bodies, and in addition, the police removing most of the bodies from the hospital at night also raised various questions later. Not all of them died on February 21, but some of the injured died several days after the incident. According to official records, at least 6 people were martyred on that day and later in the February 21 incident. The article 'History of the 21st' by essayist Kabiruddin Ahmed, included in the collection 'Ekushe February' edited by the late Hasan Hafizur Rahman (1st edition: 1953), sheds some light on the subject. Kabiruddin writes, "The death of eight people is known beyond doubt." Although the details of the names and identities of the eight martyrs are missing from this article, the information "the death of eight people" is particularly important. The following are the identities of the 8 martyrs:



SL No.	Name of the martyr	Date of martyr	Identity	Birth	Father's name	Mother's name	Place of birth	Address
1	Rafiq Uddin Ahmed	21-02-1952	2nd year student of Commerce Department of Manikganj Devendra College	1932	Late Abdul Latif	Rafiza Khanam	Paril	Upazila: Singair District- Manikganj
2	Abul Barkat 16/6/1927	21-02-1952	Student of M.A. class in Political Science, University of Dhaka	16/6/1927			Babla, Bharatpur	Dhaka address: Bishnupriya Bhaban, Purana Paltan, Dhaka
3	Abdul Jabbar	21-02-1952	student like the language soldiers	Could not be found	Late Abdul Quader		Panchaira	Upazila: Gafargaon District: Mymensingh
4	Abdus Salam	Bulged 21-02-1952 Died: 07-04-1952	Clerk of the Industries Department	Not found exactly	Late Md. Fazil Mia		Lakshmanpur	District: Feni
5	Shafiur Rahman	22-02-1952, Nawabpur Road	Student of the University Law Class and employee of the High Court	24/01/1918	Mahbubur Rahman		Konnagar, Hooghly (India)	Dhaka Address: Hemendra Das Road, Dhaka
6	Ahiullah	22-02-1952, Nawabpur Road	Child labourer (?)	1942 (approx.)	Mason Habibur Rahman	According to the weekly newspaper Saptahik Notun Din (Editor: Abdul Quader), Ahiullah (11) was shot dead on Nawabpur Road on 22 February and the police removed the body.		
7	Abdul Awal	22-02-1952, Curzon Hall Area	Unknown		Mohammad Hashim			
8	Unknown Boy	22-02-1952, Curzon Hall Area	Completely Unknown					

Thousands of students and public began gathering in the Dhaka University area since morning in the wake of the February 21, 1952 incident. The students and public present offered a funeral prayer at Curzon Hall area in memory of those killed in the February 21 movement and took out a mourning procession. When the police opened fire again on the peaceful procession, Shafiur Rahman and 4 others died on the spot. The agitated public set fire to the office of the pro-government newspaper 'The Morning News' located in Rathkhola. Unable to control the situation by deploying the army along with the police, Nurul Amin hurriedly brought a resolution in the Legislative Council to recognize Bengali as the state language of Pakistan and the resolution was passed unanimously. On February 23, 1952, a spontaneous strike was observed throughout East Pakistan. The party's State Language Movement Council called for a general strike throughout East Pakistan on February 25. At night, students started building a temporary memorial in memory of other martyrs of the language movement at the site where Barkat was martyred. The construction of

the 'Martyr's Memorial' was completed at 6 am and the plaque of the memorial was unveiled by the father of martyr Shafiur Rahman at around 10 am. Nurul Amin's government deployed the army and police everywhere on the roads and within 48 hours almost all the top leaders associated with the language movement were arrested. On 25 February, Dhaka University, the birthplace of the language movement, was declared closed indefinitely to suppress the student protests. On 26 February, Azad editor Abul Kalam Shamsuddin reopened the Shaheed Minar. The army and police demolished the 'Martyr's Memorial' erected in front of Dhaka Medical College. Finally, the Pakistani government recognized Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan in the 1956 constitution.

The first Martyr's Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm and respect on February 21, 1953. Students made a symbolic Martyr's Minar with black cloth and paper in place of the defunct Shaheed Minar of the Medical College. On February 16, 1956, February 21 was officially declared as Martyr's Day.

Ayub Khan's military government canceled February 21 as a holiday in 1959. In the face of public protests, this holiday was reinstated in 1969. Even after Bangladesh became independent, this holiday cancellation remains in effect to this day.

On November 17, 1999, 188 countries of the UNESCO General Assembly unanimously decided to recognize February 21 as International Mother Language Day. The following year, i.e., from February 21, 2000, 188 countries of the world, including the United Nations, celebrated International Mother Language Day for the first time. Since then, the day has been celebrated every year around the world.

The significance of the 1952 Language Movement in the history of Bangladesh's independence struggle is immense. The Language Movement had a far-reaching impact on the politics of Pakistan. Political, economic and constitutional issues were also involved in the Language Movement. Due to the hostile attitude of the Muslim League towards the Bengali language issue, the dominance of the Muslim League in East Bengal was eroded as new parties like the Democratic Party, Jubo League, Awami League etc. emerged from this party. As a result, the party suffered a crushing defeat in the East Bengal Provincial Council elections of 1954.

The language movement was initially a cultural movement. But over time, it took on a political form. Many political parties and politicians got involved in this movement. As a result, the idea of independence began in East Bengal. Later, the language movement served as an inspiration in the movements. The language movement gave birth to a kind of provincialism. After that, whenever any demand related to the interests of East Bengal was raised, it gained the support of the people of East Bengal.

February 21, 1952, was the first well-organized and successful mass uprising of mass consciousness in Bangladesh. From this movement, the politics and culture of East Bengal flowed in a new direction. The fascination with Pakistan and the religious obsession with politics began to fade rapidly. Gradually, the demand for autonomy began to take shape.

After the establishment of Pakistan, the Bengali nation first became aware of its rights and initiated into the fire of struggle around the language movement. The people began to unite in the demands related to the interests of East Bengal.

The Language Movement significantly increased the role of the middle-class Bengali society in East Bengal. This transformed the student community into a political force in East Bengal. Within two months of this incident, a new student organization called the Chhatra Union emerged. Later, the student community played the main driving role in every movement and struggle.

It was through the Language Movement that Bengalis became aware of their separate national identity. This movement gave birth to language-based Bengali nationalism, which is completely opposite to communal religious nationalism. Through this, democratic values, national consciousness and non-communal consciousness were born, which served as the basis for all subsequent movements.

In fact, though the Language Movement of 1952 began as a cultural movement, over time it took the form of a political movement and made Bengalis aware of their rights. The language movement inspired Bengalis in every movement after 1952, including the 1954 elections, the 1962 education movement, the 1966 six-point freedom movement, the 1969 mass movement and the great war of independence in 1971. The destruction of Pakistan began with the language movement and ended with the birth of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the seeds of independent Bangladesh were laid in the 1952 language movement.

## REFERENCES

- From Language Movement to Independence: M.R. Akhtar Mukul;
- History of Bangladesh 1947-71: Dr. Md. Mahbubur Rahman;
- History of Bangladesh (from ancient times to 1971):
- Dilip Kumar Saha, Dr. Md. Shahjahan, Md. Anarul Haque Prang; Current Affairs, February 2012;
- Kishore Kantha, February 2007,
- Weekly Ananda Bangla, 12 February 2012