MUJIB
THE LANGUAGE OF RESISTANCE
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During the partition of British India, the largest province, Bengal, was divided in two portions: eastern Bengal and western Bengal. Eastern Bengal, which the natives colloquially refer to as "Purbo Bangla" (East Bengal) became part of Pakistan, and became the largest province of Pakistan - "East Pakistan." Western Bengal, which the natives colloquially refer to as "Poshchim Bangla" (West Bengal), became part of India, and became a state within India known as "West Bengal". West Bengal remains a state of India till today. East Pakistan separated from Pakistan and became Bangladesh.

In the British India, the Bangalis have always been fierce proponents of enriching their linguistics, literature and cultural affairs. Even during the height of British colonial dominance, Bangali social thinker Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. The Bangali Renaissance, which took place from mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, was arguably the most dominant cultural and linguistic progression in India during the colonial era. It was similar to the European Renaissance in the middle ages. It shaped the spirit of the Bangalis to understand the importance of cultural and linguistic rights. The Bangalis henceforth held their language "Bangla" dearly.
Due to socio-political developments (much of it being across religious lines), the Bengal separated into two parts. The Bangla language movement, which jumpstarted in 1952 in East Bengal (which became East Pakistan), is one of the most significant chapters in the history of Bangali people. The movement sought that linguistic and cultural rights of the Bangali population be ardently recognized by the authority – the Government of Pakistan. As the movement kicked off, the Bangalis created history by sacrificing lives for their linguistic right.

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In 1947, Bangalis living in East Bengal became a part of the newly emerged Pakistan state consisting of two provinces - East and West Pakistan. The two provinces were separated by 1600 km of geographic distance and stark differences in culture, ethnicity, customs and language. The Central Government of Pakistan was set up in West Pakistan. The Center was dominated by the elite class of West Pakistan who took control of most of the state machinery.

From the beginning, the Central Government of Pakistan launched a systemic cultural and linguistic discrimination towards the Bangalis. The first attack was on their language. Rulers of Pakistan tried to establish that Urdu, a language spoken only by the political elites and some people of West Pakistan, would become the sole state language of Pakistan. Bangla was spoken by 55 percent of Pakistan’s population (44 million out of 69 million). The Bangalis resisted immediately. Bangali student leaders, politicians, and community organizations protested the language policy of the central government for several years. They demanded that Bangla must be given the status of the state language of Pakistan.

The language movement got fierce in early 1952, when the top brass of the Government of Pakistan reiterated that only Urdu would become the state language of Pakistan. This caused uproar in East Pakistan and led to widespread protests on 21 February by various Bangali groups. During the protest, several protesters were shot and killed by police. The Bangla Language Movement continued for years after the events of 21 February, 1952. The movement set the stage for the politics in East Pakistan for the next two decades. The language movement eventually paved the way for a broader fight for self-determination of the Bangali people.

Students demonstrating in front of Dhaka Medical College, February 21, 1952
Youth activist Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as Mujib, was one of the few student leaders who played critical role in shaping the language movement into a mass movement. Beginning from 1948, as a member of progressive student fronts, he was pivotal in organizing mass gatherings, rallies and strikes for building awareness against the discriminatory language policy of Pakistan.
Early realization of linguistic rights

At the very early years of life, Mujib got drawn into the movement for Pakistan spearheaded by Muslim League. In his own interest, he formed Muslim Student’s League in his hometown Gopalgonj. After his matriculation, as a student of Kolkata Islamia College, he was active in Muslim League’s political programs. After the emergence of Pakistan, Mujib came to Dhaka - the center of East Pakistan and took admission in the Law department at University of Dhaka. Shortly after, he formed the East Pakistan Muslim Students’ League.
Language movement broke out when young Mujib was organizing the student front of Muslim League in East Pakistan in 1948. Mujib, being proud of his Bengali identity, was proactive during the strikes and protests against the language policy of Pakistan government.

The matter of state language was first raised by the Bengali parliamentarian Dhirendranath Datta in the National Assembly on 25 February 1948. He demanded Bangla to be recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan. In response, the then prime minister Liaqat Ali Khan said, “Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nation... and that can be no other language but Urdu.” As a reaction to that, a ‘Direct Action Program’ for state language started in Dhaka. A strike was observed on 26 February, 1948. Students of Dhaka University and other educational institutions brought processions on that day.

Mujib, a 28 years old young leader started attending the meetings of activists of different socio-cultural and political organizations. They decided to wage greater movement against the language policy of the government and in view of this an ‘All Party Action Committee’ was formed. A strike was called on 11 March, 1948 to press the demand of recognizing Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

'Secret documents of intelligence branch on Father of The Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' reveals his contribution to the Language movement beginning from the later 1940s. In this photo from a later period, he is being followed by the intelligence.
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During the early days of March 1948, Mujib organized students in the southern districts of Faridpur, Jashore, Doulatpur, Khulna, and Barishal to build public-support for the movement. During the strike, Mujib led the protesters in Dhaka city. Shortly thereafter, the police assaulted and then arrested him and his associates. The Government of Pakistan was later compelled to release all of them. A meeting of a student’s body in Dhaka was held on 16 March, 1948, with Mujib as the chair. The meeting took a number of bold decisions to force the government to accept their demand without further delay.

The student protests continued and gained momentum during Governor General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s week-long visit to Dhaka in March 1948. In the addresses at the Racecourse ground and a convocation of University of Dhaka, Jinnah stated that “only Urdu shall become the state language of Pakistan.” He was greeted with large and voluble protests by students at the convocation. Jinnah would not change his stance.
The language movement sparked when Khwaja Nazimuddin, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, restated that "only Urdu shall become the state language of Pakistan" on 27 January, 1952. Mujib was in prison during the time, due to his activism. During February 1952, imprisoned Mujib was admitted at the Dhaka Medical College. While in captivity, Mujib stayed in constant touch with those waging the movement to realize Bangla as the state language. He passed on key directives to make the movement a success from the confines of his prison. On 14 February, he started a hunger strike in the prison.

During a strike on 21 February, the protesting students tried to defy Section 144 imposed by the government. Police opened fire and killed a number of students including Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar. Saddened by the demise of several protesters in the language movement, Mujib strongly condemned the action of the police in an open statement. On the face of a hunger strike, he was released on 26 February, 1952.
In 1952, Mujib visited China to attend a peace conference, there he delivered a resounding speech in Bangla, taking the mother language movement to a global audience.

Mujib became successful in his attempt to convince his political mentor Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy to support the right for Bangla to be one of the state languages of Pakistan. In this connection, a deliberation of Suhrawardy supporting Language Movement was published in the issue of weekly Ittefaq dated 29 June, 1952.

I have come to know that they are going to send me back to jail soon since they believe that I’ve been busy politically in the hospital. Come again to meet me tomorrow night...The next night all these people came to see me one after another. We decided in the meeting in my room to observe 21 February as State Language Day and to form a committee that day to conduct the movement to establish Bengali as the state language.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
in this autobiography *The Unfinished Memoirs*

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Mujib played a vital role in organizing and observing the first anniversary of the 21st February assault in 1953 as a fore-front leader. On 21 February, 1953, he led the procession commemorating the language martyrs. He again raised the demand for declaring 21st February (which became popularly known as ‘Ekushey’ in Bangla) as ‘Shahid Dibosh’ (martyr’s day) and Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan with immediate effect.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led the procession commemorating the language martyrs on February 21, 1953
Crucial years of mid 1950s

In 1953, Mujib (at his 33) was made the general secretary of Awami Muslim League. He got elected to the East Bengal Legislative Assembly (provincial assembly) on a ‘United Front’ coalition (consisted of various East Pakistan-based progressive parties) ticket in 1954 and served briefly as the minister of agriculture and forest. Later Mujib was elected to the second Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and served from 1955 to 1958. In 1956, he joined a second coalition government as minister of industries, commerce, labour, anti-corruption and village aid, but resigned in 1957 to work full-time for party organization.

On 17 January, 1956, Sheikh Mujib demanded that the daily minute or the notes of the Legislative Assembly be published in Bangla. On 7 February of the same year, taking part in the discussion on the draft constitution in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, he made a pointed reference about the inclusion of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan. He reiterated that since Bangla was the language of 55 percent people of Pakistan, Bangla should become a state language of Pakistan.

Mujib and other Bangali politicians strongly advocated for Bangla to be given the status of one of the state languages of Pakistan. Finally, Bangla came to be recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan in February 1956, and article 214(l) of the constitution of Pakistan read out as “The state language of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali.”
FOSTERING BANGLA AS A STATESMAN

As a statesman, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman worked relentlessly for the development of Bangla language. He as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh initiated a number of bold steps to introduce Bangla in every sphere of life.

On 25 September, 1974, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered a speech in Bangla at the 29th General Assembly of the United Nations (UN). Mujib became the first Bangali to deliver a speech in Bangla at the United Nations (UN) and thus took Bangla Language to the apex global platform for the first time in history.
In 1972, under his leadership, Bangla was declared the state language of independent Bangladesh. All official correspondences of the government would be in Bangla from 1973 onward.

In 1972, under Mujib’s leadership, Rabindranath Tagore’s song “Amar Sonar Bangla” (my golden Bengal or my beloved Bengal) was made the national anthem of the newly independent Bangladesh.

In 1972, Mujib invited the then most prominent Bangali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (commonly known as the “Rebel Poet”) to make the newly independent Bangladesh his home. Hence, Nazul came to Bangladesh. Mujib declared Nazul the national poet of Bangladesh, which till date remains a core feature of identity for Bangladeshis.

Mujib’s education policy for a newly independent Bangladesh, emphasized on fostering the Bangla language and culture. Bangla language was made prominent to the lives of Bangladeshis.

Mujib understood the importance of self-identity. He understood that language was vital to claiming rights of the people. Perhaps that is the reason the free country, Bangladesh, that he sought was named after its language. This notion was very unlike the naming of Pakistan or India. His struggle and his works reflected his advocacy for Bangla. He himself, was a great Bangali orator. Mujib’s historic speech on 7 March, 1971, in Bangla, is included in the Memory of the World International Register (a list of world’s important documentary heritage maintained by UNESCO). In honour of the Bangla Language Movement, on November 17, 1999, the UN declared 21st February as the ‘International Mother Language Day.’
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Celebrating the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

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