

Received: 03 June 2024, Accepted: 25 June 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33282/rr.vx9i2.90>

Language and Political Schism: Analyzing the Root Causes of East Pakistan's Separation

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Abstract

This article analyzes the impact of language policy on the political schism between East and West Pakistan during 1947-1958, which ultimately led the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971. The central government's imposition of Urdu as national language overlooked the linguistic and cultural identity of Bengal as well as Bengalis. This decision provoked extensive protests and riots, resulting in a profound political divide between East and West Pakistan. This study seeks to elucidate how language issue led to political marginalization and intensified the desire for autonomy in East Pakistan. It answers the question, in what ways did the enforcement of Urdu as the national language exacerbate the political divide and lead to the eventual secession of East Pakistan? This study uses analytical research methodology through the examination of primary sources including historical records and policy documents and governmental policies while in secondary sources political discourses and assessment of literature is used. The enforcement of Urdu as national language overlooked the linguistic identity of the Bengali-speaking majority in East Pakistan, engendering alienation and discontent. This strategy marginalized a substantial segment of the population and served as a cause for socio-political instability. The research underscores the significance of inclusive language policies in heterogeneous communities.

Keywords: East Pakistan, Bengali Identity, Political Schism, Linguistic Diversity, Socio-Political Marginalization.

Introduction

Language is essential in defining national identity, enhancing cultural unity, and facilitating social integration. Nonetheless, when linguistic policies neglect the diversity inside a nation, they may engender division. The situation of East and West Pakistan exemplifies how a misaligned language policy with cultural reality resulted in significant political ramifications. After the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, the central government aimed to designate Urdu as the exclusive national language, highlighting its symbolic association with Islamic identity and its prevalent usage among the elite of West Pakistan. This judgment egregiously overlooked the linguistic makeup of East Pakistan, where the predominant language is Bengali, a tongue steeped in cultural heritage and integral to the region's identity.

The enforcement of Urdu as the national language encountered significant opposition in East Pakistan, inciting riots, protests, and an increasing sense of estrangement. Bengali-speaking areas viewed the action as a language imposition and a broader effort by the central government to diminish their cultural and political relevance. The protests on February 21, 1952, in Dhaka, which resulted in the fatalities of multiple people, marked a pivotal moment in the quest for linguistic and regional autonomy.

The imposition of Urdu as the national language reflected profound structural disparities between the two regions. East Pakistan made substantial contributions to the national economy, especially via its export-oriented jute industry; nonetheless, it faced political underrepresentation and economic marginalization. The language dispute emerged as a focal point for Bengali nationalism, intensifying calls for increased autonomy and finally facilitating the independence of Bangladesh.

This study examines the intricate relationship among language, politics, and identity, highlighting how the enforcement of Urdu served as a catalyst for the political divide that resulted in the formation of Bangladesh. It underscores the central government's disregard for the linguistic diversity of East Pakistan, where Bengali were dominant as well as Bengali was majorly spoken. This decision of implementing Urdu as National Language caused extensive

rioting and protests and it resulted in a persistent political schism between the two wings of Pakistan.

Issue of National Language

During 1947-1955, West Pakistan comprised three provinces: Punjab, Sindh, and NWFP; six states; FATA; Balochistan region; and a capital area, whilst East Pakistan consisted solely of one province, East Bengal. In 1955, West Pakistan was unified in a single province, resulting in two provinces, i.e. West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Bengali was the language spoken by about 90% Bengalis, which comprised 56.5% of total population and Urdu was spoken by merely 7% of Pakistan's population. Nonetheless, Urdu was comprehended in nearly all metropolitan regions of Pakistan and it was intricately linked to the Indian Muslim legacy as well as Pakistan Movement (Dar, 2014).

After independence, the language conflict was started with the inaugural National Education Conference in November 1947, where the topic of the medium of instruction and national language was inevitably raised. Urdu was proposed as an option because as it was recognized as lingua franca among Indian Muslims. The conference suggested in a conditional way and Urdu was designated as the national language of Pakistan but as educational medium was entrusted to provincial administrations' discretion. The conference's recommendations were conditional that they prompted Patras Bukhari to wryly observe that "the country possess no fewer than six languages with equal status and Urdu would be prioritized for cultural unity. Provincial languages would be afforded maximum opportunities for growth and development. For the sake of progress, English will be ranked highest while Arabic and Persian would be accorded a prestigious position for historical reasons" (Bukhari, 1985).

This meeting was not only occasion for the discussion regarding the status of Bangla. In October, a State Language Action Committee was established in Dhaka, which expressed vehement disapproval of the symbolic marginalization of Bengal from the national consciousness. This was exemplified as Bangla's exclusion on various state artifacts, including newly issued postage stamps, coins, and government office forms of Pakistan, (Isalama, 1994) and its removal from approved subjects by the Pakistan Public Service Commission (Umar, 2004). Furthermore, the

federal Minister of Education publicly asserted that Urdu ought to be the national language of Pakistan (Umar, 2004).

In February 1948, Khwaja Nazimuddin, the then Premier of East Bengal and a member of the Bengali ashraf class, reacted to a suggestion that Bengali be designated as official languages. He stated in Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, “there exists only one state of Pakistan, which could possess only one language, and that should be Urdu. Bengali might remain the official language of the Provincial Government of East Bengal and the medium of instruction in educational institutions in East Bengal” (Toor, 2009).

Pakistan’s eastern province saw unrest due to the central government’s decision to designate Urdu as national language. Language advocates in East Bengal asserted that the Bengali should share this status with Urdu. They contended that Bangla possessed a lengthy and illustrious history as compare to Urdu. On 28 March 1948, Jinnah’s declaration of Urdu as the national language during his visit to East Bengal caused significant tension between the central government and the provinces (Jalal, 1990). The Bengali demand for Bangla to attain equal status with Urdu was perceived as an act of high treason in a speech at Punjab University’s Urdu Conference (Dawn, 1948) and it was regarded as a denial of Urdu’s assertion as the indissoluble bond of Pakistan’s unity.

In 1949, the East Bengal Language Committee was established to investigate the standardization, simplification, and reforms in Bengali language making it to more effectively serve as a national language. The Committee was asked to propose methods for aligning the Bengali language with the essence and culture of the populace of East Bengal specifically and of Pakistan broadly (Committee, 1958). The East Bengal Language Committee was also tasked with examining the potential for a script change to enhance the dissemination of Bengali throughout Pakistan and to distance it from its ‘Sanskritic’ heritage (Committee, 1958).

During first session, language concerns were raised which unfolded inherent diversity between the political class of both wings. In 1950, Basic Principle Committee (BPC) of Constituent Assembly presented its report in which Urdu was recognized as the only national language of Pakistan so Bengali leadership felt aggrieved and perceived the report as work for a unitary

central government and they would become a colony of Pakistan (Zaheer, 1994). Demonstrations were started and even the leadership of Provincial Muslim League condemned the report (Ahmad, 1967) even Bengali newspapers considered this as a conspiracy to impose a fascist rule on East Bengal and denounced the report and demanded the withdrawal of these recommendations (Umar, 2004). In addition, it was presumed that the BPC report by far the most serious mistake committed by ML (Bhuiyan, 1982) and ultimately full scale national movement forced the government to postpone the constitutional discourse on BPC (Umar, 2004).

The unequivocal rejection acknowledged the grievances of the Bengali population incited a five-year language movement, culminating in police gunfire on a peaceful demonstration in Dhaka on 21 February 1952. The issue was heightened then and students initiated a campaign to elevate the Bengali language to national status. A vigorous public response emerged that caused several deaths of student demonstrators in Bengal. The language movement was extensively disseminated within public of Bengal and especially in students that perished in tragic encounter, which later became commemorated in East Bengal as *Ekushey*. The provincial government used force that engendered increased support for the language movement across the province (Umar, 2004).

The interests of the West Pakistan's ruling elite in consolidating power frequently conflicted with Bengali demands for membership in the nation-state. From the perspective of increasingly authoritarian ruling elite, the calls for democratization in national politics and culture embodied by interrelated issues such as the national language dispute. The advocacy for a federal state, and the critique of Pakistan as an Islamic state rendered East Bengal a problem necessitating neutralization. This was achieved through the implementation of two converging narratives that depicted East Bengal had stronghold of subversive elements, including Hindus and communists with intention of undermining Pakistan while the other portrayed East Bengali culture as irredeemably influenced by Hinduism. Both narratives mutually reinforced and collectively sought to undermine East Bengali claims for equitable representation in the nation-state (Toor, 2009).

Urdu was enriched by the Muslim nationalist intelligentsia as the sole element of the shared Indo-Muslim culture that remained unaffected that is why the suggestion to recognize Bangla as

Pakistan's second national language was considered as challenge to the concept of a unified Muslim nationhood. Muslim nationalists in whole Pakistan regarded Urdu as the natural choice for country as it was 'lingua franca' of Indian Muslims (Khalidi, 1986).

Geographically Pakistani state was non-contiguous as both wings divided by 1200 miles of adversarial Indian Territory. The national language debate exacerbated the concerns, leading to anxiety regarding potential cultural non-contiguity. The situation in East Bengal about language rights epitomized the crisis of the nation-state and the contradictions induced significant anxiety among nationalist and Muslim League. In this national-cultural insecurity, all requests for regional or provincial rights, like the language dispute, were perceived as a direct affront to the legitimacy of state, as they underscored the notion that Pakistan was not yet a fully realized nation (Toor, 2009).

The national language problem was central to nearly all the crises and challenges confronting the Muslim League during this period due to undemocratic nature of its leadership. The Muslim League had dissipated the moral influence so it responded to all threats with official brutality (Jalal, 1995). This repression was indicative, but not uncommon among postcolonial regimes, as Safety Acts, Security Bills, Press and Publications Ordinances, and Emergency declarations were implemented. These means were subsequently justified through a language of sedition, in which East Bengal played a significant role. Following the sad events of 21 February, the nationalist press in West Pakistan and the discourse of the central Government in the Constituent Assembly were abundant with allusions to subversive groups operating in Bengal.

Pakistan Times referenced the Civil and Military Gazette's editorial, which asserted that 'misguided students were exploited by political opportunists for their own nefarious purposes' and observed that 'reports indicated that many Hindus distributing anti-Urdu literature were among those arrested' (*Times*, 1952). Raj Kumar Chakraverty, Congress representative from East Bengal, articulated this situation stating, 'whenever turmoil arises in Pakistan, it was ascribed by the populace to the enemies of the State, with insinuations suggesting that Hindus were perceived as these adversaries' (Chakraverty, 1952). Bhabesh Chandra Nandy expressed that it has become a trend among frivolous individuals to accuse and question the patriotism of Hindus in Pakistan (Nandy, 1952).

The issue was addressed by government and Malik Firoz Khan Noon, the Governor of East Bengal, urged the central government to address the matter in the legislature. On 28 February 1952, he communicated to the Prime Minister that this issue must be resolved definitively, and asserted that it was imperative to recognize Bengali as one of the state languages, albeit in the Arabic script. The more promptly this resolution should be enacted, the sooner this disagreement would be resolved (NDC, 1952). East Bengal was labeled as troubled region, and characterized as a heaven for various seditious groups, ranging from Hindus to Communists. It was said that the Bengalis would not want to contest unity in the cultural and linguistic domains, which was seen essential for the unity and solidarity of nation (*Times*, March 5, 1952).

During a cabinet meeting, on 12 March 1952, Nazimuddin proposed that a strategy should be devised regarding the language issue prior to its introduction in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and the legislature. It suggested that the government should seek to defer the matter until April 1952 until the presence of Chief Minister of East Bengal as it would be more advantageous course of action (Kiran, 2016). It was determined that if opposition raised the language issue, the government should assert that the Basic Principles Committee and other bodies that had previously addressed the matter, and that would be incorporated into the constitution. This perspective was based on nation's unity as linguistic issue could jeopardize it (Kiran, 2016). The decision needed more consideration necessitating a postponement of the ultimate decision.

The language debate of 1952 enabled Central Government to justify the augmentation of the Executive's extra-judicial powers by using emergency situations. For the League government, this entailed the enactment of multiple Safety Ordinances and Security Bills, derisively termed Insecurity Bills by the Opposition. One of the Bills presented at the session of the Constituent Assembly subsequent to the Ekushey events was a Central Public Safety Ordinance that permitted preventive detention, censorship and prohibition of newspapers, and the discretionary enforcement of Section 144 (Toor, 2009). Mushtaq Ahmad Gurmani, the Interior Minister, stated that those laws were intended to stifle the liberation movements of the country. Those restrictions were designed to stifle the movement aimed at overthrowing foreign power and the

safety and security of the State at that period signified the protection of the interests that governed the nation (CAP, 1952).

Mian Iftikharuddin highlighted the irony that the laws previously imposed were associated with the struggle for independence, were now being reinstated for the free citizens of Pakistan under the guise of serving their best interest (CAP, *Debate on the Restriction and Detention (Second Amendment) Bill, November 14, 1952*). Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya expressed that who would qualifies as unassociated with subversive movements according to this definition. The ambiguous terms lacked a definitive explanation (CAP, *Discussion on the Security Bill, April 22, 1952*). Mushtaq Ahmed Gurmani contended in a debate regarding the Central Safety Ordinance that freedom was only meaningful when it aligned with law and discipline (CAP, *Constituent Assembly Debates, March 27, 1952*).

In 1953, A. K. Fazlul Haq resigned as Advocate General of East Pakistan due to conflicts and reorganized the Krishak Sramik Party (KSP). Following the removal of Suhrawardy group, which was actually Bengali nationalist factions, the Bengali political elite began to perceive the East Pakistan Muslim League as a representation of tyranny and a conduit for West Pakistan's interests. As the provincial elections approached, the majority of political parties formed an alliance named as United Front (UF) in East Pakistan to oppose the Muslim League. There were several objectives of the UF with one of obtaining autonomous status for educational institutions and to implement Bengali as the medium of teaching in the province (Bhuiyan, 1982).

Nazimuddin's ministry was dismissed and Muhammad Ali Bogra promoted agenda of Governor General. The decision of One Unit once and questions over changing the name East Bengal, separate electorates, language and provincial autonomy were frequently raised. A Bengali member in Assembly termed the political situation as a volcano and warned the central government that "do not dance over the volcano and do not play with fire" (Rahman, *Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Debates, August 25, 1955*).

It was contended that the 1954 elections would occur between League and United Front, significantly bolstering the UF's propaganda against the ML (Ahmed, 1971). UF collaborated with the Congress and Communists, but the rigid strategy implemented by the League

government at prompted the Bengali vernacular elite to support linguistic nationalism (Jahan, 1972). Furthermore, the UF leadership highlighted the distinctions between Bengalis and non-Bengalis throughout the province (Mehmood, 1989). This disseminating resentment and animosity opened conflicts in mills, factories, and other workplaces (Rahman, 2012) while factionalism was already prevalent from the outset, comprising many hostile forces (Jahan, 1972). The elections conducted in March 1954 culminated in a decisive defeat for the ML so the decisive triumph of UF was perceived as a revolt of the East Bengalis via the ballot box (Bhuiyan, 1982).

UF's decisive triumph caused political and ideological rifts and radical and conservative factions within UF confronted one another. The distribution of portfolios exacerbated the existing disparities between the Awami League (AL) and the Krishak Sramik Party (KSP). UF cabinet was alleged to have endorsed the incitement of riots in the province to further their political objectives (Ali, 1954). The language movement had incited unrest, riots, and agitation in the province, where ethnic disputes between Bengalis and non-Bengalis was escalated because the UF secured a resolution from the Provincial Assembly recognizing Bengali as one of the state languages as they pledged in their manifesto. The UF asserted that CAP members from East Pakistan did not genuinely represent the Bengali populace so they must be replaced and nominees designated by them (Aziz, 1976).

For acceptance of Constitution, cooperation of Bengali political forces was utmost necessary in the Assembly, so in 1955, PM Chaudhry Muhammad Ali and Bengali political leadership signed a pact at Muree, in which major Bengali reservations were accommodated. This Pact was composed of One Unit, autonomy for East Pakistan, parity of both the wings, joint electorates and Bengali language to be accepted as one of the state languages of Pakistan (Nisar, 2021). This truce cooled down the ongoing controversies and healed the political environment and then a long awaited constitution was promulgated in March 1956.

Conclusion

The formative period of Pakistan was profoundly chaotic era in Pakistan's history, characterized by severe confrontations between the central government and provincial authorities. The

political, social, and administrative concerns illustrated the difficulties in creating national identity among different and frequently opposing regional ambitions. The conflicts, stemming from language, governance, and autonomy issues, highlighted the challenges faced by an emerging state in reconciling central authority with the rightful claims for provincial rights.

The language was highly contentious issue that demonstrated the central government's inability to recognize the cultural and linguistic variety of its populace. The emphasis on Urdu as the national language, despite Bengali being the predominant mother tongue in East Pakistan, demonstrated a disregard for regional nationalities. The Bengalis viewed this policy as an endeavor to undermine their cultural and linguistic legacy. These factors resulted in extensive protests, rioting, and an exacerbation of the divide between the two regions of Pakistan. The opposition in East Pakistan revealed the deficiencies of the central government's nation-building strategy and underscored the perils of neglecting stance of multi-ethnic state. The events related to the language debate created estrangement and mistrust that led the tragic partition of East Pakistan in 1971.

Notes

Ekushey: It is Bangla for the number '21'. The events of Ekushey and the memory of the language martyrs are an important part of the nationalist narrative of Bangladesh, which seceded from Pakistan after a bloody civil war in 1971. UNESCO recently declared 21 February to be International Mother Language Day.

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