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## **Contribution of Students and Intellectual Persons to Protect the Bengali Language against Urdu Intrusion 1947-1952**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The impacts of language movement were far-reaching in the social, cultural and political life of Pakistan and later on Bangladesh. The language dilemma had started after the creation of Pakistan in 1947. A bone of contention was language between the East and West Pakistan, which language would be the state language of Pakistan? Most of the West Pakistani leaders wanted that Urdu is the best language for Islamic Pakistan. In that situation, Dhirendranath Dutta first proposed on 23 February 1948 in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to allow members to speak in Bengali and authorise its use for official purposes. The situation was deteriorated when Governor-General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah arrived in Dhaka on 19 March 1948. On 21<sup>st</sup> March, at a civic reception at Racecourse ground, he declared that “Urdu, and only Urdu” embodied the spirit of Muslim nations and would remain as the state language. He added that those who disagreed with his views as “Enemies of Pakistan”.<sup>1</sup> The students of school, college, University and political activists defied Jinnah’s declaration. They organised a series of protest to safe Bengali language. The language movement reached its climax on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1952 when police killed students. The deaths provoked widespread civil unrest. As a result, after

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years of conflict, the Pakistan government granted official status to the Bengali language in 1956. The UNESCO declared 21<sup>st</sup> February International Mother Language Day in 1999 to commemorate the language movement. This paper will explore the causes of language movement. The paper also looks at the contribution of students and intellectual persons to save their language.

**Keywords:** Language, Bengali, Urdu, Students, Intellectuals, Movement

## **Language Movement**

Pakistan and India became independent from British rule in 1947 based on a two-nation theory with the Muslim majority areas falling under Pakistan and the Hindu majority areas under India. From the begging day of Pakistan, their state policies were opposing India, torture minorities, spread Islamic fundamentalism and cultural modification. Pakistani leaders knew that it would be very difficult for the imminent new state of a two-winged Pakistan to coalesce. Because there had long distance between two part of Pakistan and the fundamental differences of culture. The peoples of the two parts whose respective majorities were Muslim but who nevertheless possessed distinctly contrasting features of culture and language. The ruling elites, almost entirely based in West Pakistan, single-handedly decided to make Urdu the only official language of the new country, whereas majority of the population living in east Pakistan could not speak Urdu as Bengali was their main language. Urdu was and still is a minority language in Pakistan. Today less than 8 percent people of Pakistan speak Urdu as their mother tongue. After creation of Pakistan in 1947, the constituent assembly of Pakistan allowed Urdu and English as their official language. As a result, they neglected Bengali language. In that time 98 percent people of East Pakistan spoken on Bengali language and it was also Pakistan's most populous province. Dhirendranath Dutta was a great person of East Bengal. He was the first proposer of Bengali to be one of the state languages of Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> He fearlessly advocated for protecting mother language of Bengali people. He claimed that Bengali language should be declared official language of Pakistan. In the constituent assembly of Pakistan, he proposed that the national language should be the language spoken by the majority of the people of the country. In this point Bangla should be the lingua franca of Pakistan. His words were a plea for linguistic inclusivity, rooted in the belief that a country's language should reflect the voice of its people. However, his proposal was met with resistance and the assembly rejected the plea to recognize Bangla as an official language. This discriminatory behaviour of West Pakistan ignited a fervent language movement. Then prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan, recognizing the significance of Dhirendranath's words,

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foresaw the potential implications. He cautioned Dhirendranath, saying that his words could cause potential secession of the eastern wing and which could stem from such divisive language policies. The rejection of Bengali as an official language stirred deep sentiments among the Bengali speaking people and was fostering among them a determination to assert their linguistic rights. After returning to Dhaka following his bold, indeed seminal speech, students of Dhaka University went to greet Dhirendranath Dutta at the airport. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was leading this student team. Bengali students and some intelligentsia were inspired by the Dhirendranath Dutta's language right concept. They started movement for acquiring mother language right.

East Pakistan was deprived of different opportunities by the discriminatory policy of West Pakistan. East Pakistan was victim of social, economic and cultural exploitation. They wanted make East Pakistan as a radical Islamic country. They wanted to modify Bengali culture from Islamic culture. First of all, they targeted Bengali Language. The West Pakistani leaders wanted to imposed Urdu in place of Bengali because Urdu is related Islamic culture. And other intention was to implement Urdu to properly dominated east Bengal. Most of the West Pakistani leaders did not understand Bengali language so they decided Urdu is to be the only language of Pakistan. The creation of Pakistan was defect from the beginning. The distance between east and west Pakistan was over 2500 km. There was no connection through land or water between these two parts of Pakistan. Although their religion was same but their culture was different. There was only similarity of religion Islam but their language, food habit, clothes, lifestyle and others were very different. Yet the west Pakistani leaders imposed their culture and language into Bengali people. Bengali language and Hindu were main impediment to implement their policies. After partition of India, around 26 percent Hindu population live in East Pakistan. Most of the Hindu population were rich and educated. They also occupied different jobs of East Pakistan. As a rest they were aware of social, political and economic policy of West Pakistan. From the first day after creation of Pakistan, the leaders targeted Bengali language and Hindu people. Anyhow they wanted to eliminated these two obstacles of Pakistani state. But Bengali Muslim was more friendly with Hindu than west Pakistan. Because most of the Muslim in Bengal was converted from Hindu and Buddhist religion. And they have been living mutually for thousand years. Bengali Muslim and Bengali Hindu are better neighbour than the west Pakistan. As a result, the west Pakistani discriminatory policy did not tolerate the Bengali Hindu and Muslim.

Dhirendranath Dutta was born on 2 November 1886 in Brahmanbaria

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District of East Bengal. He was educated at Nabinagar High School, Comilla Zilla School and Ripon College in Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> Dutta began his career as a school teacher. He was very active in the local community and was a leader of the relief effort following devastating floods in 1915. He formed the Mukti Sangha, a welfare organization, after becoming inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. His relief work continued up to the devastating Bengal famine of 1943. He joined the Comilla District Bar in 1911 and continued to practice until he was advised to give up his profession in favour of politics by his political comrade Chittaranjan Das. He took a firm stand following the Bengal Partition of 1905. He vehemently opposed partition, working closely with other anti-partition activists such as Surendranath Banerjee and Rabindranath Tagore. Dhirendranath Dutta joined the Indian National Congress from Mymensingh district and was first elected to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1937. He was arrested by the British rulers of India for his participation in the Quit India movement of 1942. He vehemently opposed the creation of Pakistan on religious lines. When it became clear that partition of India was inevitable and that his home district of Comilla would be in the new Muslim majority state, he opted to remain in East Bengal. He was invited to be part of the constitutional committee to draft the legislative framework of the new country before the actual independence of Pakistan. Dutta continued to represent his constituency as a Hindu member of the renamed Pakistan National Congress. On 23 February 1948 in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in Karachi, he made a historical speech calling for Bengali to be made one of the official languages of Pakistan. On February 25, 1948, during a discussion on the Rules of Procedure of the Constituent Assembly, Dhirendranath in his speech ignited the debate on the lingua franca of Pakistan, which subsequently had a far-reaching impact on the course of the language movement. In his amendment motion, Dhirendranath demanded that in sub-rule (1) of rule-29 along with Urdu and English, Bengali should be included in the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly, which was also functioning as the central legislature of Pakistan. As a justification behind the need for such an amendment, he went on to say that of the roughly six crore and ninety lakh people inhabiting the state, four crore and forty lakhs spoke the Bengalee language.<sup>4</sup> So, sir, what should be the state language? The state language should be the one which is used by the majority of the people of the state and for that, I consider that Bengali is a lingua franca of our state. Dhirendranath clarified he didn't move this proposal in a spirit of narrow provincialism but rather, in the spirit that this motion receives the fullest considerations at the hands of the members present. As always, on this occasion too, Dhirendranath Dutta raised the question of the sufferings and inconveniences of ordinary people of east Bengal in their everyday life due to train tickets, stamps, money order forms being printed in the Urdu language

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alone. He asked if money order forms were not printed in Bengali, how a poor cultivator in rural Bengal would send money to his son studying at the then Dacca University. He was fully aware of the fact that among students and intellectuals a discussion had already begun for making Bengali the official language and medium of instruction in the province and educated youths of the university were playing a pioneering role, going as far as to form an action committee in December 1947. Dutta later acknowledged that it was not an official decision of the Congress party; he raised the issue on his own. But once the amendment was motioned, voices were being raised by many of his party, among others, Prem Hari Barman and Bhupendra Kumar Dutta being among them. All the Bengali members of the ruling party opposed Dhirendranath in unison. Liaquat Ali Khan, the prime minister of Pakistan, rightly understood the far-reaching implications of Dutta's demand made at the constitution-making body of the country. Liaquat Ali considered Dhirendranath had not moved his amendment and accused him of trying to create a misunderstanding between the different parts of Pakistan. Ignoring the very reasonable proposal of Dhirendranath, Khan preemptively said that being a Muslim nation, only the language of a hundred million Muslims of the sub-continent which was Urdu according to him would be the lingua franca of Pakistan. Khawaja Nazimuddin, the chief minister of East Bengal, confidently claimed that "the overwhelming majority of the people are in favour of having Urdu as the state language of Pakistan as a whole. Dhirendranath's motion was refused at the assembly but it struck a chord with a wide range of people outside the parliament. Outside the assembly, the demand to make Bengali one of the official languages and medium of instruction till then was limited to a close circle of Bengali students and intelligentsia. Dutta's speech provided the proponents of Bengali with the opportunity to reach a wider section of the people. The deafening silence of the Bengali representatives of the government party and the reactions of Liaquat Ali and Khawaja Nazimuddin made people immensely angry. On the following day, students of Dhaka University, Medical College, Jagannath College and Engineering College, as well as from many schools spontaneously took to the streets and called for a province-wide strike to be held on March 11, 1948. Dhirendranath Dutta again raised the language issue on April 6, 1948 at the East Bengal Provincial Assembly in which he was deputy leader of the opposition party. When Khawaja Nazimuddin moved the government resolution 'Bengali as official language and medium of instruction' at the provincial assembly, which was a highly petered out version of the accord. Dhirendranath brought forward three different amendments in the resolution. He proposed that in the government resolution, the clause "the assembly is further of the opinion that Bengali should be one of the state languages of

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Pakistan” be included. He urged the assembly to recommend the central government to introduce Bengali immediately in all currencies, telegraphs, postal stamps and official documents.<sup>5</sup> Another demand by way of amendment was including a clause in the resolution, urging the central authority to introduce Bengali as a medium and one of the subjects for all competitive examinations. Dhirendranath might have thought in a more familiar milieu of the provincial assembly in the wake of such a widespread agitation he would be able to pursue the government side, but all his motions were rejected on the ground that these issues were beyond the jurisdiction of the provincial government. His activities were not limited only to the question of language. He was one of the earliest proponents of a joint electorate in Pakistan. For the minorities of Pakistan, not least the Hindus of East Pakistan, introduction of a joint electorate meant a considerably diminished number of central and provisional assembly seats. But Dutta pushed for it strongly on the ground that a non-communal form of politics would be better for the minority community despite most of his colleagues’ vehement opposition. He wanted to speak not only for the minorities but for the people of every other denomination too. In the central legislature he fought tooth and nail on every issue where the interests of East Pakistan, which he terms as “my unhappy province” on several occasions, was at stake.<sup>6</sup>

There were discussions about Bangla’s status as a language in the new state among some of the Bangali politicians and intellectuals but no one apart from him could dare to voice that in a national platform like the Constituent Assembly. And this demand didn’t come through a party decision of Congress rather it was an individual move by Dhirendranath Dutta albeit Congress Constituent Assembly of Pakistan members Prem Hari Barman, Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Rajkumar Chakravarty supported the amendment.<sup>7</sup> But because of their political ideology and compromising attitude no Bangali Muslim League member of the CAP spent a single word in support of the dignity of Bangla language. Moreover, the Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan, the Chief Minister of East Pakistan Khwaja Nazimuddin and some other influential ministers and members of the CAP attacked the intent and content of the proposal on March 2, 1948, the day on which the historic amendment was formally defeated by a voice vote. Dutta was vocal about establishing the status of the language of the poverty-driven peasants of East Bengal, but the parochialism of pro-Urdu leaders did not allow them to understand the intellectual argument that he had made. The outright rejection of Dhirendranath Dutta’s amendment had serious impact on the student community and intelligentsia of East Pakistan.

Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the central education minister Fazlur

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Rahman campaigned for the implementation of Bengali language written in Arabic script.<sup>8</sup> At the Nikhil Pakistan Teachers' conference held in Karachi on 29 December 1948, Fazlur Rahman proposed to write Bengali language in Arabic script for the sake of Islamization of the language. East Bengal provincial education department secretary Fazle Ahmed Karim Fazli and Fazlur Rahman established a society called '*Hurful Quran Samity*' in order to introduce Arabic letters in Bengali. On the other hand, someone proposed Romanisation of Bengali language. Famous linguistic Muhammad Shahidullah believed that Bengalis could learn Urdu at the same time as learning English, he also believed that: when Arabic becomes the state language of Pakistan, the creation of Pakistan will be justified.<sup>9</sup> In the response of such awkward proposal, the students of East Pakistan organised strike all over the province. The prominent leaders of language movement were Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Shamsul Haq, Kazi Golam Mahboob, Shawkat Ali, Abdul Wahed, Oli Ahad and other students organised severe protest to save Bengali language. First language question raised from *Tamaddun Majlish* on 15 September.<sup>10</sup> It questioned that Pakistan's state language will be Bengali or Urdu? On 2 March in 1948, the '*Rashtra Bhasha Shangram Parishad*' was established by Bengali politicians and intellectuals to agitate for recognition of the Bengali as a state language of Pakistan. Nurul Huq Bhuiyan was also played an important role for organising '*Rashtra Bhasha Shangram Parishad*'. Later it was expanded and renamed as '*Sharbadolio Rashtra Bhasha Shangram Parishad*' in a meeting held at Fazlul Huq Muslim hall. They observed a protest day on 11 March in 1948, by staging strike and processions where hundreds of students were tear-gassed, stick-charged and arrested. But in the face of continuous pressure by fearless language protestors on March 15, 1948, the provincial Chief Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin negotiated with them and released their fellow activists ahead of a tour of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father and governor general of Pakistan, to East Pakistan. However, on 21<sup>st</sup> March in 1948 from Dhaka's Race Course Maidan, Ali Jinnah declared, let me make it very clear to you, it is no doubt that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language.<sup>11</sup> Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. He also reiterated "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan at the Convocation of Dhaka university's Curzon Hall on March 24 fueled the language movement again.<sup>12</sup> Jinnah's declaration hurt the sentiments of Bengali dominated East Pakistan. The state language issue had remained dormant in the interlude years between mid-1948 to 1951 as the government didn't take any decision about state language due to the death of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Throughout these years, as an inspiring parliamentarian, Dhirendranath Dutta boldly continued to place the demand, both at the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan (CAP) and East Bengal Legislative Assembly (EBLA), to adopt Bangla as one of the state

languages. On 11 March in 1950 the Dhaka University Language Action Committee was formed with Abdul Matin as its convener. December 6, East Bengal Language Committee, presided by Maulana Akram Khan, was formed by the East Bengal government to prepare a report on the language problem. The Committee completed its report. Prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated on October in 1951. Khwaja Nazimuddin became new prime minister and came to Dhaka on January 27, 1952. He addressed a meeting at Paltan Maidan and clearly declared that the people of the province could decide what would be the provincial language, but only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. Next day, the students of Dhaka university arranged a protest meeting call the prime minister and the provincial ministers as puppets of West Pakistan. On January 30, a strike was observed at Dhaka university area. The representatives of various political and cultural organizations held a meeting on 31 January chaired by Moulana Bhasani. At this time the government also proposed that Bengali will be written in Arabic script. As a result, *Shorbodolio Kendrio Rashtrobhasha Kormi Porishod* decided to declare February 21 as the day for strikes throughout East Pakistan. Gaziul Haq and Abdul Matin led student procession. Students of Dhaka university and other institutions gathered on the university premises and warned the government to withdraw its proposal to write Bangla in Arabic script. A meeting of the Central Language Action Committee was held under the chairmanship of Abul Hashim on 20<sup>th</sup> February in 1952. In the meeting opinion was divided as to whether or not to violate section 144. The students were determined to violate section 144. The students violated section 144 and held meeting at 11am on the Dhaka university campus on 21 February in 1952. Soon the Vice-chancellor came and asked them to stop. Under the leadership of Abdul Matin and Gaziul Haque students were continued their protest. Students retaliated with police. As a result, police fired as they were proceeding towards the Assembly Hall. Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdus Salam, Abdul Jabbar and Abul Barakat were died by police firing.<sup>13</sup> A nine-year-old boy also was killed by police firing. According to government report, 29 people died on this day.<sup>14</sup> Students condemned the actions of police and resentment spread out all over the province. At the provincial assembly Six legislators including Boshonto Kumar Das, Manoranjan Dhar, Dhirendrantah Dutta and Shamsuddin Ahmed requested chief minister Nurul Amin visit wounded students in hospital.<sup>15</sup> They also appealed the assembly be adjourned as a sign of mourning. To commemorate language martyrs, Abdul Gaffar Choudhury wrote a famous protest song "*Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano Ekushe February*"<sup>16</sup>. It is the most influential song of the language movement. On 22 February in 1952, organised a protest meeting and brought out a large mourning procession, which was attacked by the police. As a resulting in several people were died, including that of a young man

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named Shafiur Rahman. On 23<sup>rd</sup> February, at the spot where students had been killed, a memorial was erected. Government orders crackdown of student leaders and prominent figures. On 24<sup>th</sup> February, the memorial with a handwritten note attached to it saying *Shaheed Smritistombho* was inaugurated by the father of Sofiur Rahman. The government gives full authority to the police and military to bring the situation in Dhaka back to normal within 48 hours. Next day on 26 February, *Shaheed Smritistombho* was destroyed by police. At that time Dhirendranath Dutta made fiery speeches in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly and claimed a complete explanation from the chief minister of East Bengal about the police firing on the students. On 27 April, all party Central Language Action Committee held a meeting at the Bar Association Hall. At the meeting delegates urged the government to release prisoners, relax restrictions on civil liberties and adopt Bangla as an official language. The constituent assembly resolved to grant official status to Bengali language on 7<sup>th</sup> May in 1954. On 21<sup>st</sup> February in 1956, the anniversary of the Martyr Day was observed for the first time in a peaceful atmosphere. The Government supported a major project to construct a Shaheed Minar. At last, on 29 February in 1956 the Bengali language was recognized as the second official language of Pakistan and article 214(1) of the constitution of Pakistan was reworded to the state language of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali. Later UNESCO declared 21<sup>st</sup> February as International Mother Language Day in 1999 for acknowledging the Bengali language movement.<sup>17</sup> Bengali nation would be remembered Dhirendranath Dutta, Prem Hari Barman, Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Rajkumar Chakravarty and others for contribution to Bengali as a state language of Pakistan. Dhirendranath Dutta is inextricably linked with the language movements. He led to a cultural efflorescence in East Bengal which in turn paved the way for the establishment of Bangladesh. Because of his alleged links to the emerging underground Bengali Nationalist movement, supposed members of which included Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he was barred from participation in national election through the imposition of Elective Bodies Disqualification Order. After this, he refrained from active politics but kept on supporting the rising nationalist movement from behind. Due to his continued defiance of state discrimination and authoritarianism in Pakistan, at the onset of the Bangladesh liberation war, Dutta was arrested at his house in Comilla on 29 March 1971 and taken with his son, Dilip Kumar Dutta, to Maynamoti Cantonment and tortured to death.<sup>18</sup>

The Bengali students and intellectuals' persons sacrificed their life to protect their language. Their blood and movement recognised Bengali as the state language of Pakistan. It was the first milestone in the world history for sacrificing life to safe mother language. Dhirendranath Dutta's demand to make

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Bengali the state language was a very bold initiative. These words of his served as the seeds of the national language movement. The language martyrs will be alive for their heroic scarifies. Their movement saved a nation's language, identity and culture. Language movement was the foundation of Bengali nationalism. From this movement they get spirit of nationalism and they have progressed on the path of struggle to achieve independence in 1971. Bengali people were able to give birth to independent Bangladesh.

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