

# Formative phase of the Language Movement

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ON this day of twenty first February, in Bengali, simply Ekushey, the nation solemnly pays tributes to the immortal martyrs of the Bengali language movement. Although the commemoration of 21<sup>st</sup> February has been transformed, over the years, into an occasion of the cultural celebration of our Bengali heritage, paying respectful tributes to the language martyrs has remained to be the fundamental and inspiring spirit of the immortal Ekushey February. The saliency of the Twenty First February has made the historic movement for establishing Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan synonymous with the 1952 phase of the Bengali language movement. Yet it needs to be underscored that the glorious language movement for making Bengali as one of the State languages of the then Pakistan did not, or could not, start all of a sudden on February 21, 1952. In fact, the Bengali Language Movement (Bangla Bhasha Andolon) in the then East Bengal or East Pakistan took place in several distinct phases.

The formative phase of the historic Bengali language movement took place in two stages: while the first stage of the formative phase started immediately before and after the emergence of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, the second stage took place in the early months of 1948. There is doubt that the language movement at both of these stages of the formative phase was not mass uprisings by any standard. Yet, those initial reactions or resistance against the imposition of Urdu as the only State language of Pakistan had prepared the progressive forces of East Pakistan to launch a more sustainable Bengali language movement in February 1952. The restive student community and the intelligentsia in the formative phase of the language movement were also able to garner mass support and public awareness throughout East Pakistan for making Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan. Although the ferocity of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement had waned during the years between the middle of 1948 and January 1952, the Bengali language activists and the progressive political forces had remained vigilant against the ulterior design of the anti-Bengali political elite of the Central Government of Pakistan and the pro-Urdu provincial Government of the then East Bengal.

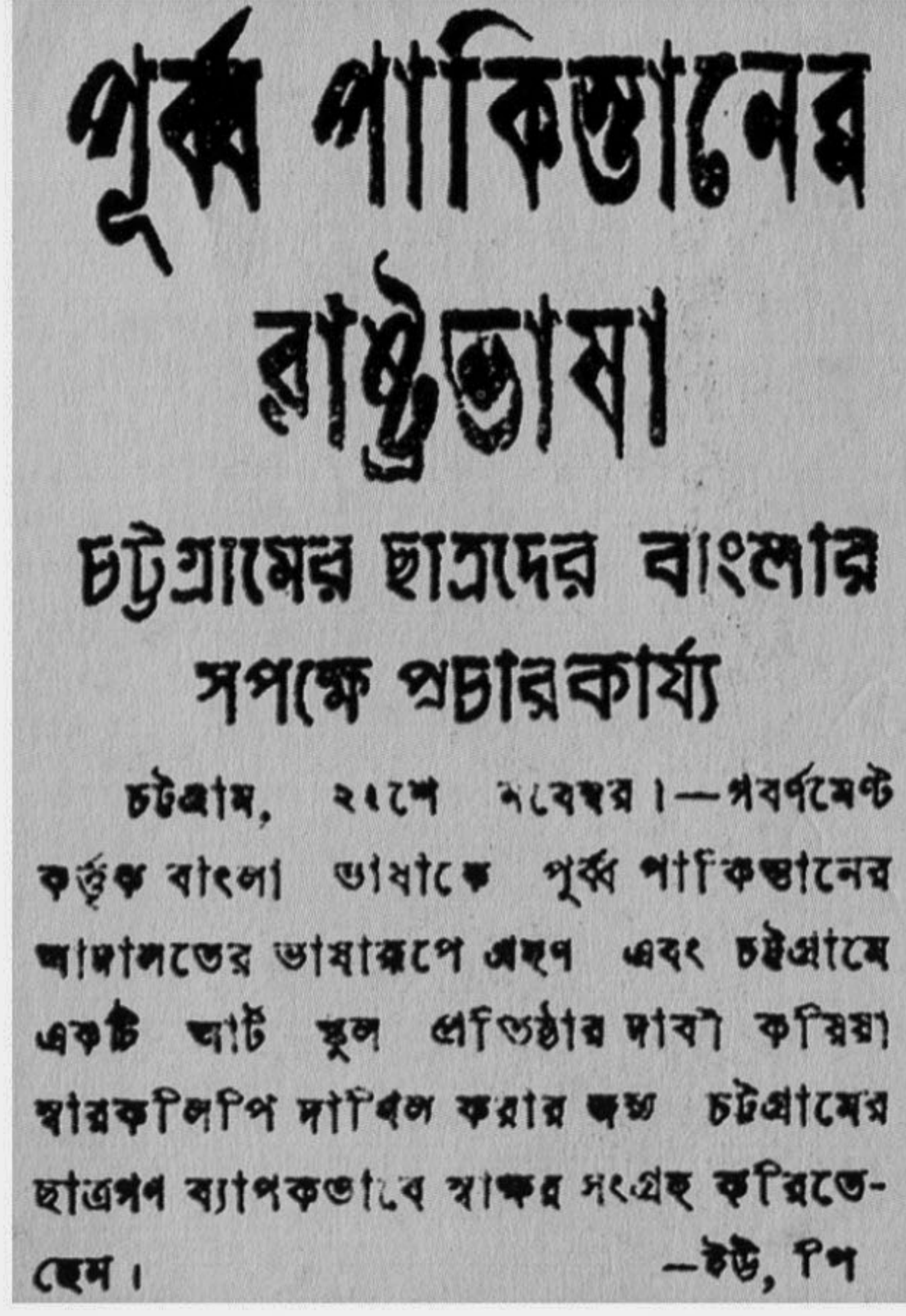
The final phase of the Bengali language movement began in early 1952 after Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Prime Minister of the then Pakistan, declared on January 26, 1952 in a government-sponsored public meeting at Paltan Maidan that "Urdu would be the only State language of Pakistan." His provocative speech can be singled out as the immediate cause of the 1952 phase of the Bengali language movement. However, the 1952 phase of the Bengali language movement can also be characterized as the culmination of the formative phase of our organized resistance against the unilateral adoption of Urdu as the lingua franca of Pakistan. It is within this broader context, an attempt has been made in this commentary to discuss the extent, magnitude, poignancy, and significance of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement. In other words, the chief intent of this article is to provide an appraisal of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement which took place in several stages during the early years of Pakistan.

## THE ROOTS OF THE FORMATIVE PHASE OF THE BENGALI LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

The roots of both the formative and the 1952 phases of the Bengali Language Movement in East Bengal can be traced back to the widespread support of the non-Bengali leaders of the All-India Muslim League (AIML) in favor of making "Urdu" as the lingua franca of Pakistan, the emerging Muslim State. For instance, one of the professed objectives of a 14-point Manifesto, prepared by the Central Parliamentary Board of the AIML in June 1936 clearly underscored the "protection and promotion of the Urdu language and Script." The 25-point program "setting out the special needs of Bengal," drawn in the summer of 1936 by the Central Parliamentary Board of the AIML, contained many of the lofty and ambitious goals. Yet, those objectives did not recognize the need for "the protection and promotion" and adoption of the Bengali language and script. The Urdu-speaking leaders of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) also spawned the idea that "Urdu" should be the official language of the "Bengali Muslims."

Although the prospect of carving out a Muslim State was at a rudimentary stage in 1936 or in 1937, the concept of Pakistan caught up the imagination of the Bengali Muslims by early 1940s. The idea of carving out a Muslim nation-state was never imposed on the Bengali speaking Muslim population of Bengal province. By the time when the 1946 elections were held, almost all of 33 million Muslims of the Bengal province were on the side of creating Pakistan as a separate Muslim nation-state. There is little wonder why the language issue did not prominently manifest in Bengal province during the general elections of either 1936-'37 or 1945-'46. There was no dearth of Muslim leaders for championing the cause of Urdu to be the State language of the Muslim nation both before and after the emergence of Pakistan. However, the Bengali speaking Muslim middle-class, students, intellectuals, leftist activists, and other progressive forces vehemently opposed such an absurd idea, and they demanded that Bengali should be the lingua franca of Bengali Muslims. They also underscored that Bengali should be treated as one of the state languages of the new Muslim nation of Pakistan. Indeed, these progressive forces were in the vanguard of the formative phase as well as the 1952 phase of the language movement for establishing Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan.

Pursuant to Lord Mountbatten's declaration of June 3, 1947, the creation of Pakistan through the partition of India was imminent. The Uttar Pradesh based Urdu-speaking stalwarts of the All-India Muslim League (AIML) had already begun mobilizing their support and resources in favor of establishing Urdu language as the lingua franca of Pakistan. A debate on the language issue took place in June-July, 1947 between the proponents and opponents of Urdu as the "only" State language of Pakistan, a nation-state which was soon to be carved out of British India. For example, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, Vice Chancellor of Aligarh University, declared in a Conference on Urdu language that only "Urdu" deserves to be the official language of a Muslim nation-state. However, his advocacy for Urdu did not go unchallenged. Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, a renowned and respected Bengali scholar, forcefully protested this kind of discriminatory proposal. In a thought provoking article titled



"Pakistaner Bhasha Shamashya" ("The Language Problem in Pakistan"), published in the Daily Azad, July 29, 1947, he effectively refuted the irrelevance, uselessness and unfairness of Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed's advocacy for the imposition of Urdu as the only lingua franca of Pakistan. He emphasized that "Bengali being the mother tongue of 55% of the total population of Pakistan deserves to be the State language of the new nation. Once Bengali is being adopted as the State language, we may then deliberate to determine the question whether or not Urdu can also be afforded the status of one of the State languages of Pakistan."

Various political forces of East Bengal also started mobilizing support for making "Bengali" as one of State languages of the new nation even before the emergence of Pakistan. For instance, in July 1947, some disgruntled and left-leaning Muslim Leaguers, and independent minded political activists had formed the "Gono Azadi League" (GAL) under the leadership of Kamruddin Ahmed, one of the pioneers of the early phase of the Bengali language movement. Although this party was no more than a political faction, this provided a political platform or cover for many of the non-communal Muslim League dissidents in the early months of independent Pakistan. The Gono Azadi League was in the vanguard in the difficult task of mobilizing public support for Bengali throughout the eastern province of Pakistan. It was forcefully emphasized, among many other pro-Bengali statements, in its manifesto titled Ashoo Dabee Kormoshuchee Adarsha ("Immediate Demands, Course of Action, and Ideology") that "Bangla will be our State language. All necessary steps need to be taken immediately for making Bangla language suitable for all parts of Pakistan. Bangla shall be the only official language of East Pakistan."

Once Pakistan became a reality on August 14, 1947, the unresolved language controversy continued to surface during the early months of independent Pakistan. The Central Government of Pakistan had

already started the unilateral use of "Urdu" in money order forms, postal stamps, currencies and coins, railway tickets, and official letterheads and forms even without formally adopting "Urdu" as the "only" State language of Pakistan. The rejection of Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan by the unilateral imposition of Urdu as the "only" State language had spawned the feeling of distrust and discontent among the student community of the then East Bengal. Even the common people of East Bengal started suspecting the motives and ploys of the Pakistani ruling elite.

The most enlightened segment of the student community of Dhaka University started to oppose various policies and ploys of the then Central Government of Pakistan even before the year 1947 ended. The Democratic Youth League (DYL) played a pivotal role in the formative phase of the Bengali language movement. Founded by the leftist and progressive students of the then East Bengal on August 5, 1947, the Gonotantiric Jubo League (the Democratic Youth League--DYL), held a Youth Conference in Dhaka on September 6 and 7, 1947 for the purpose of determining its future course of actions through open deliberations to protect the integrity of Bengali language and culture. One of the professed resolutions of the Youth Conference urged the Central Government of Pakistan to recognize the distinctive features of the language, literature, and culture of various regions of Pakistan. The issue of regional autonomy was also emphasized in the resolution. The DYL took the leadership in forging unity among various pro-Bengali forces to build up a resistance movement against the imposition of Urdu as the only State language of Pakistan. In spite of the governmental repressive measures against the DYL members in the name of eradication of "communism," the dedicated workers of the short-lived DYL were the vanguards of both the 1948 and 1952 phases of the Bengali language movement.

Founded as a cultural organization in Dhaka on September 1, 1947, the Tamaddun Majlish had played a historic role in the defense of Bengali, our mother

tongue. Although the main intent of the Tamuddun Majlish was to invigorate Islamic spirit and culture among the citizens of the new nation of Pakistan, the vigorous role played by this pro-Islamic organization made it clear to the Bengali speaking Muslim population of Pakistan that the demand for adopting Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan was "not at all motivated by the anti-state elements and communists of East Bengal." On September 15, 1947, the Tamuddun Majlis published a well-written booklet titled "Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla Na Urdu?" ("Pakistan's State Language: Bangla or Urdu?"). Among the authors of this historic booklet, Kazi Motahar Hossain, Abul Mansur Ahmed and Professor Abul Kasem (the General Secretary of the Tamuddun Majlish) made a strong case in favor of introducing Bengali as the only language of instruction, offices and courts of East Bengal. They also forcefully articulated the demand for Bengali to be one of the State languages of Pakistan.

The above mentioned seminal booklet was not only a succinct justification for adopting Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan but also contained a full-blown proposal, authored by Abul Kasem, a lecturer in Physics of Dhaka University, in favor of Bengali language. Given the landmark nature of the demand for recognition of Bengali, the gist of that proposal is listed as follows: "1. Bengali will be: a) the medium of instruction in East Pakistan; b) the court language of East Pakistan; and c) the official language of East Pakistan. 2. Urdu and Bengali will be the two official languages of the Central Government of Pakistan. 3. (a) Bengali will be the first language for the purpose of education in East Pakistan which will be learnt by 100 percent of people; (b) Urdu may be treated as the second language or inter-wing language in East Pakistan which can be taught as a second language to those people who will be working in West Pakistan. It will be more than adequate if Urdu is learnt by only 5% to 10% of population of East Pakistan. Urdu may be taught in higher classes at the secondary school level in East Pakistan; and (c) English will be the third or international language of East Pakistan. 4. Both English and Bengali will be used for a few years as the official languages in East Pakistan" (For details, see Badruddin Umar, "Purba Banglar Bhasha Andhoolon o Totkaleen Rajneeti, Mowla Brothers, 1970, p. 14).

The First Rastra Bhasha Shangram Parishad had played a defining role in the formative stage of the Bengali language movement. Aimed at providing an organized resistance against the anti-Bengali policies of the Central Government of Pakistan and to lodge protest against the irresponsible and slanderous comments about Bengali language and script made by Fazlur Rahman, the Central Education Minister, the Tamuddun Majlish took the lead in the formation of the first "Rastra Bhasha Shangram Parishad" (State Language Movement Council) in October 1947. It needs to be mentioned that Fazlur Rahman, the anti-Bengali ruling coterie, was one of the champions of introducing "Urdu" as the only State language of Pakistan. Although he was himself a Bengali-speaking individual from Dhaka district, he had recommended Arabic script for writing Bengali. While his anti-Bengali stand had earned him a reputation among the anti-Bengali

ruling clique, the progressive forces of East Bengal, especially the students and teachers of Dhaka University, were outraged with his shameless anti-Bengali stand on the language issue. While Professor Nurul Huque Bhuyain of Dhaka University was elected to be the Convener of the first Rastrabhasha Bhasha Sangram Parishad, Professor Abul Kasem, the General Secretary of the Tamuddun Majlish, played a pivotal role in that rudimentary stage of the language movement. Professor Abul Kasem, almost a forgotten hero of the formative stage of the Bengali language movement, provided a yeoman's service for garnering widespread public support for adopting Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan. He also succeeded in enlisting wholehearted endorsements of the younger generations in general, and the teachers and students of Dhaka University and other educational institutions in particular, in support of the quest of the Bengali speaking people of the then Pakistan for establishing Bengali as one of the State languages.

The first Rastra Bhasha Sangram Parishad provided the needed organizational structure and leadership for launching the language movement in later part of 1947 and in early months of 1948. For instance, the first protest meeting was assembled at the campus of Dhaka University on December 6, 1947, under the auspices of the first Rastra Bhasha Sangram Parishad, to protest the unilateral decision of the National Education Conference, held in Karachi, for adopting Urdu as the only State language of Pakistan. The protest meeting had attracted a large number of students, teachers and informed public from Dhaka University and other educational institutions. While the protest meeting was presided over by Professor Abul Kasem, a number of students and teachers including Munir Choudhury, Abdur Rahman, Kallayan Dasgupta, A.K.M. Ahsan, S. Ahmed, and Farid Ahmed, the then Vice President of Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) addressed the public meeting. The speakers discussed various aspects of the language issue and vehemently protested the conspiracy that had been hatched out by the Punjabi-Mohajir dominated Pakistani ruling coterie against the very fabric of Bengali language and culture. They urged the people of East Bengal to be ever vigilant against the heinous attack on the rudiments of Bengali cultural heritage. Finally, a resolution in support of adopting Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan was proposed by the then DUCSU Vice President Farid Ahmed (who has essentially remained an unsung hero of the formative phase of the Bengali language movement) and unanimously approved by those in attendance. (For details, see Badruddin Umar's seminal book, "Purba Banglar Bhasha Andhoolon o Totkaleen Rajneeti, Mowla Brothers, 1970, pp. 20-21).

It was on January 4, 1948 when the East Pakistan Students' League (EPSL, an assortment of pro-Suhrawardy Muslim students of the defunct All Bengal Muslim Students' League (ABMSL), was formed. Many of the younger Muslim leaguers who later organized a convention of the dissidents (Workers' Camp) in January, 1948 were in the forefront of the newly formed EPSL. In fact, the urgent need for vehemently protesting the anti-Bengali policies