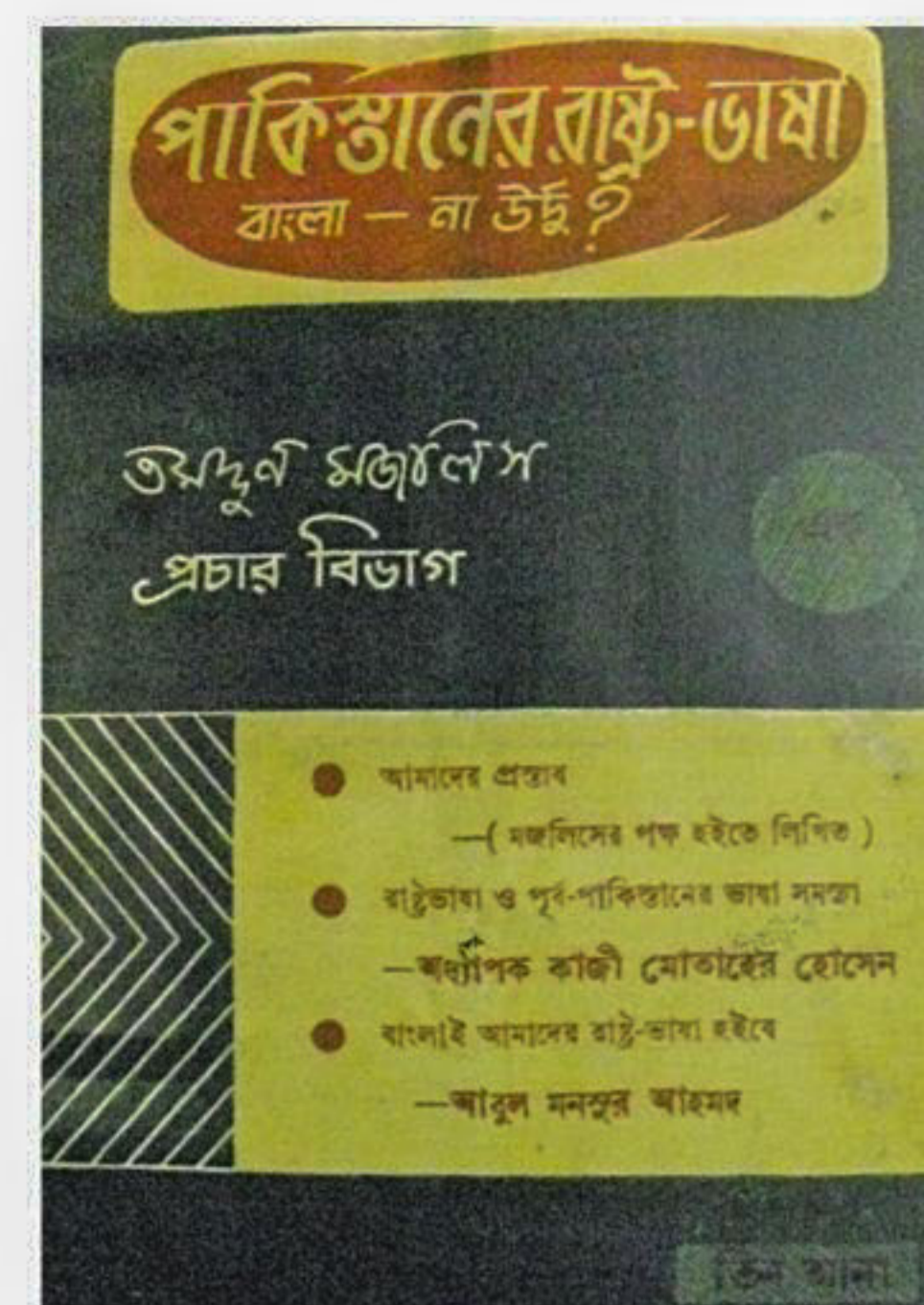




A caricature by cartoonist Kazi Abul Kasem



THE ORIGINS OF THE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

Principal Abul Kashem is an unforgettable entity of the history of the Language Movement. On September 1, 1947, under his leadership, Pakistan Tamaddun Majlish, the initiating organisation of the Language Movement, was established. On September 15, 1947, he published 'Rashtrabhasha Bangla Na Urdu?' the first booklet containing the demand for Bangla as a state language. He was also the founder of the Language Movement mouthpiece, Weekly Sainik. Here we publish translated excerpts of an interview with this rare historical figure. The full version of the interview was published in 'Bhasha Andolon Shatchallish Thake Baana' that was compiled by Mostafa Kamal.

How was the Language Movement initiated?

The Language Movement was initiated through the Tamaddun Majlish (TM). On September 1, 1947, it was established in 19, Azimpur. I was the professor of Physics Department and used to live in 19, Azimpur. I would think deeply about Bangla as a state language and a medium of instruction. I shared my ideas with my friends. Syed Nazrul Islam and Shamsul Alam were directly involved in the establishment of TM on September 1, 1947.

What were the primary actions that TM took to create awareness about Bangla as the state language?

Organising literary meetings and seminars in different places, including the university campus, was among the many primary initiatives of TM. These meetings used to take place at the lawn, which, back then, was adjacent to the south-west of the University of Dhaka, and at the Muslim Hall auditorium. Moreover, to create public opinion, we used to publish statements and handbills. The first book that demanded Bangla as State language, *Pakistaner Rashtrabhasha Bangla Na Urdu?*, was published, by me as its editor. The main point of the book was that the language which ensures that the strength of the nation is not wasted, and the language which its citizens can easily learn, speak and write, should be the State language of the country.

What kind of attention did *Rashtrabhasha Bangla Na Urdu?* receive from university students?

To be honest, we didn't find even five people from the campus to buy this book. The attainment of Pakistan had captivated the whole nation. At this time, everyone used to try to make us understand how "dangerous" it would be to raise the issue of more than one state language, and how "unrealistic" a proposal it would be for Pakistan, in particular, to have two state languages.

Did you carry out any activity outside the campus back then?

Yes. We discussed this issue with certain government officials and litterateurs, and attained some success there. At that time, we collected the signatures of several eminent personalities of the country, and prepared a memorandum. The memorandum was presented to the government and published in some newspapers. The local newspapers of that time did not give this issue much importance. *Ittehad*, based in Kolkata and headed by Abul Mansur Ahmed as its editor, and the *Weekly Insaaf*, gave tremendous support to this cause.

How did *Sainik* start its historic journey?
Sainik, a weekly publication, was first published on November 14, 1948. A few sincere employees helped me to publish this revolutionary newspaper as the mouthpiece of TM. It played a historic role in the Language Movement.

Please tell us about the initiatives taken by TM in the campus to popularise the demand of Bangla as a state language.
 TM held discussions and literary gatherings at the halls of Dhaka University on a regular basis. In October 1947, we organised a large gathering at Fazlul Haq Hall. The then Minister Habibullah Bahar presided over the meeting. Eminent persons like poet Jasimuddin, Qazi Motahar Hossain and some ministers also spoke at the programme. This initiative stirred a lively discussion among the students of the campus.

When was the Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad formed? Why did you feel the necessity to establish such a platform?

After the meeting at Fazlul Haq Hall, we, the members of TM, decided to form the Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad. There were various discriminatory practices against Bangla, such as using Urdu and English in postcards, money order forms, rail tickets and currency and omission of Bangla from the syllabus of Pakistan Central Public Service Commission.

The Education Minister Fazlur Rahman even plead that Urdu should be the only state language. Unfortunately, students, teachers and the intellectual community were quite lenient about the degrading status of their mother tongue. We feared that the government would try to impose Urdu as the only state language, exploiting this state of leniency. So we took the initiative to mobilise

In November 1947, the Secretary of the Pakistan Central Public Service Commission issued a circular to the public universities on the syllabus of civil service exam. There were 31 courses, of which nine were on languages such as Urdu, Hindi, English, German, French and even dead languages like Latin and Sanskrit. But Bangla, the language of the majority of Pakistan, was omitted from the syllabus. This was proof of sheer disregard and negligence to the Bangla language. I sent a statement of protest to *Ittehad*, severely criticising this evil intent of the government. It was published around the end of December, along with an editorial by Abul Mansur Ahmed, who also vehemently opposed the government's decision. Later the concerned ministry regretted their mistake as an inadvertent one. This casual response infuriated us more.

Can you share with us the story of the

with baton and tear gas. Many students were injured and many others arrested. As a result of the movement of March 11, the demand of Bangla as the state language gained new momentum.

On the other hand, a movement promoting Urdu started to gain force. Several meetings were organised by noted Moulana Din Muhammad in several localities around the state. They submitted a petition signed by hundreds of thousands of people to the central government. The then *Morning News* of Dhaka and *Jugheri* of Sylhet started a malicious campaign against the language movement. On the other hand, the *Ittehad* of Kolkata and the *Weekly Sainik* and *Insaaf* of Dhaka extended their full support behind the language movement.

I contacted the railway workers and central employees' organisation and requested them to join the movement. On March 22, a meeting was organised at the university followed by a rally. Proceeding peacefully, the rally reached the High Court but a group of sycophants and saboteurs engaged in some unpleasant activities. The following day, once again, a protest rally was organised which was stopped by the police near the Secretariat. A commotion between the mob and the police broke out. The police charged baton and tear gas and arrested hundreds of activists. Many others were taken to Tejgaon and Narayanganj to be released later.

How did the dialogue with the Nazimuddin government start and how was the language treaty signed with the government?

We got the news that Muhammad Ali Jinnah was coming to Dhaka. We also heard that he instructed Prime Minister Nazimuddin to reach an agreement. Mr. Nazimuddin wrote me several letters saying that the government was ready to meet the demands of the language movement and wanted to discuss the matter. I forwarded the letters to the Shangram Parishad.

The Shangram Parishad held two meetings with Mr. Nazimuddin, laying out the following conditions:

1. Bangla should immediately be declared the official language of East Bengal at the government, judiciary and education level.
2. A proposal should be passed in the state legislature of East Bengal and sent to the central government so that the latter recognises Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan.
3. Those arrested during the language movement should be freed without any condition.
4. The ban imposed on *Ittehad*, *Amritabazar*, *Anandabazar*, *Jugantor* and other newspapers should be lifted.
5. No government employee should be penalised for participating in the language movement.
6. The government should issue a press release saying that the language movement was not launched and carried out by "enemies of the state".
7. Mr Nazimuddin must apologise for the actions taken by his government for resisting the movement

After a lengthy negotiation process, Mr Nazimuddin accepted all conditions except no 2, 4, 5 and 7. We said that the movement would not be suspended unless and until all conditions were met and we started preparing with renewed energy. Eventually Mr Nazimuddin agreed to meet all our demands and we signed an agreement with the government.

What was the situation after the arrival of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his declaration

in favour of Urdu?

Quaid-e-Azam came to Dhaka on March 19. On March 21, while addressing hundreds of thousands of people at the Race Course Ground, he said that the people of East Bengal would decide what was going to be the official language of East Bengal. But he also strongly said that Urdu shall be the official language of the central government. At that meeting, we distributed a manifesto on behalf of Majlish demanding that Bangla be made the state language. We, on behalf of Sangram Parishad, met with Quaid-e-Azam. We engaged in a prolonged debate, and in the end, the discussion bore no fruits. Then, when Quaid-e-Azam made a declaration to the effect that Urdu shall be the state language in the convocation at Curzon Hall, many protested then and there.

After that, in a session of the Assembly, Khawaja Nazimuddin placed a proposal as per one of the demands of the agreement, on behalf of the government, which stated that Bangla be made the official language of East Pakistan and it was adopted unanimously.

But Nazimuddin did not raise the proposal to the Central Government. When we asked the Nazimuddin about it he replied -- Quaid-e-Azam, who is our Father of the Nation, told us that Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan. Thus, if he raised the proposal, it would be tantamount to showing disrespect to the Quaid-e-Azam.

From '48 to '52, there was no major movement regarding language. After the Assembly recognised Bangla as the official language and medium of instruction in educational institutions in '48, activists became somewhat inactive. At this time, I formed 'Dhaka Majlish' in an attempt to raise awareness amongst the Urdu supporters in Dhaka.

Now we would like to know about the bloody chapter of '52.
 The bloody chapter of '52 began through declaration of Khawaja Nazimuddin in Paltan in support of Urdu as the state language.

This time representatives of TM, PurbaPak Chhatra League, Awami League, Youth League, Islamic Brotherhood and other organizations formed the State Language Working Committee. This committee initiated the programme to observe February 21 as "Protest Day". There was massive response from the mufassils.

The government abruptly imposed Section 144 on February 20, which only amplified the discontent of the people. In an emergency meeting presided over by Mr. Abul Hashim in Nawabpur, it was decided that the movement would proceed without violating Section 144.

Students gathered at the premises of the Medical College Hostel and began to protest Sec 144. At one point of the clash, the police open fired on the students. The bullets took many young lives, making a martyr of Barkat, Jabbar and others.

In protest of the shootings, hartal was observed all over the country on Feb 22. There was more shooting that day at a demonstration near the High Court, and more protesters killed and injured. Many more were arrested.

Military was deployed in different parts of the city. In the mufassils, too, the protests took a strong shape. The extent and spirit of protests surpassed those of movements against the British.

There were arrest warrants for all of us, including the convener of the Sangram Parishad. Me and the Shainik editor, Abdul Gafur had to stay in hiding for a month.



Principal Abul Kashem during the Language Movement.

people against this one-sided decision.

How did the Parishad start working?

We went to meet the Education Minister Fazlur Rahman at Nazira Bazar. We had a heated debate over the question of Bangla as a state language. He treated us badly and that infuriated us. We took an initiative to present a memorandum on the demand of Bangla as a state language. We collected thousands of signatures in favour of this demand and submitted the memorandum to the East Pakistan government. We appealed to the government to immediately declare Bangla as the state language and the medium of instruction in East Pakistan.

Can you remember the statement issued against the decision of Pakistan Central Public Service Commission to omit Bangla from the syllabus of Civil Service Exam?

protest meeting held at the Beltala against the proposal of the Karachi Education Conference?

The news enraged students and intellectuals. We organised a protest against the proposal at Dhaka University. I presided over the meeting. It was probably the first open gathering at Dhaka University on the issue of state language.

Did the Rashtrabhasha Shangram Parishad take a lead role in launching the programmes of March 11, 1948 demanding Bangla as the state language?

Yes, a meeting was held by the Shangram Parishad on March 7 at the Fazlul Haq Hall where it was decided that a strike would be observed on March 11 in Dhaka and across the state. The programme was highly successful. The police charged the crowd