

SPECIAL FEATURE

Another Falgun

Murtaja Baseer (B. 1932)
Bloody 21st
 Signed in English l.m., 1952
 25 x 17.5cm
 Linocut print
 2nd edition: AP 7/11
 Provenance : Artist Collection



On 7 May, 1954 the constituent assembly resolved with the Muslim League's support to grant official status to our language. Bangla was recognised as the second official language of Pakistan on 29 February, 1956. Its words read "The state language of Pakistan shall be Urdu and Bengali."

The political history of the pre-1971 Pakistan is chaotic, but not without a string of continuation. Post partition, the realisation of a national identity as Bangalis was as vibrant a feeling as our greater identity as Pakistanis. Inevitable as it was, these contrasting identities ceased through the ultimate separation on 26 March, 1971.

From the very beginning, even before the division of the Subcontinent on 15

August, 1947 certain demands surfaced from what was to be the Eastern wing of Pakistan.

The people expected peaceful co-existence along with our western wing, under the banner of PAKISTAN, but not subjugated in any form — political, economic or social.

And it would be wrong to say that only the Bangalis felt this urge for parity. The population of Pakistan was diverse in culture, tradition, and their political views. While the promises of a promised land were high, post 15 August, much of it was shattered, and as history narrates, it was the Bangali population that suffered most.

The 1940s was a turbulent time in the Indian subcontinent; shortly after the end of World War II the peoples' demand for freedom was ever high and division of the land between Pakistan and India seemed inevitable.

Even before the formation of Pakistan, the probable difficulties facing the new nation were being addressed and the matter of the State Language was in the forefront. In an article appearing in The Daily Azad, noted educationist and linguist Dr Mohammed Shahidullah challenged the advocacy of Urdu as state language over all other spoken tongues. He, along with other figures and political parties, rejected all discriminatory rhetoric regarding the official language of Pakistan. They argued that the one language policy will only marginalise the people, the very notion that the new

country was hoping to eradicate.

Following separation, the language debate continued resulting in the initial days of resistance in 1948.

On his maiden visit to the eastern wing of the country, the founder and Governor-General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, arrived in Dhaka on 19 March, 1948. At the height of civil unrest and public opposition, on 21 March, during a public meeting at the Racecourse Ground, he gave his historic speech in front of a jubilant crowd.

Yet, the glee soon turned into despair. Jinnah went on to say that the language issue has been raised to create a division among the Muslims of Pakistan. He further reiterated the policy of the powers that be, saying that Urdu is the language that embodied the spirit of the new Muslim nation.

Later, Jinnah delivered a similar speech at Curzon Hall and on the radio. His stance was straightforward — an 'Urdu-only' policy. He even retracted from the commitment made by Khawaja Nazimuddin with student leaders regarding the language issue.

In 1952 the Language Movement saw renewed fervour and the fateful events of 21 February paved way for the establishment of Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. That was a history told time and again.

The very idea that the whole nation will have to comply with a language foreign to them gave rise to some practical problems. In our present times, when the Internet is

accessible by the mass, it is quite difficult to fathom the impact of having only a single language in every day work, starting from the legislature, to finance, to even schooling.

Language played an important role in shaping the political scenario of Pakistan and the resentment felt for an unbiased acceptance fuelled our strife for freedom.

Today, red and green, in a nut-shell, defines Bangladesh. The green is quintessential Bengal — a lush land with trees growing in abundance, the field yielding crops and the harvest enough to sustain life. The red — our struggle to achieve such a blissful setting.

As a civilisation, we have experienced trauma as we have experienced joy, and to each of these emotions we respond. The sombre Ekushey, which was once a day marked for the loss of our brethren, is now observed as a salutation to the rich diversity in languages, both within Bangladesh and across the globe.

Language binds humanity in one string, each pearl representing a culture and the ultimate rosary representing the richness of human expressions. The shades of Ekushey have not eclipsed the mourning black, but somewhat made way for a subtle shade of grey. While we still mourn the loss of lives, we also cherish and pay homage to what their sacrifice has given us.

— LS Desk

Picture source: Galleri Kaya