

A booklet that changed the course of history

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The State Language of Pakistan: Bangla or Urdu was not only a booklet that first addressed the issue of language in the newly created Pakistan but also served as a foundation for our inception as a nation. For any national or revolutionary movement to take root, it must have a proclamation describing its ideological slant. In order to create the background for the movement and carry it on further, the proclamation has a historical importance. It is because of this realisation that a booklet outlining crucial aspects of the movement was published by 'Tamaddun Majlish', an Islamic cultural organisation in erstwhile East Pakistan. Titled *The State Language of Pakistan: Bangla or Urdu*, the 18-page booklet was edited by the organisation's founder Principal Professor Abul Kashem.

Syed Nazrul Islam, Bangladesh's first interim president and a language movement veteran, candidly described the background of publishing the booklet, widely regarded as the proclamation of our language movement. He was quoted in a book titled *The Subject of Language Movement: Certain Documents* written by Badruddin Umar and published by Bangla Academy as saying:

"Abul Kashem and AKM Ahsan used to live in Azimpur. They first took the initiative. At a room in the West House of SM Hall at Dhaka University, they discussed the matter with us. Subsequently, we later met again, this time at their place in Azimpur.

Shamsul Alam, an assistant sales officer at East Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation, Matin Chowdhury, AKM Ahsan, Principle Kashem, Nurul Huda and I came to a decision that it was imperative that we protest the efforts to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan.

However, we also decided that before waging a movement we should release a booklet arguing why Bangla deserved to be made a state language alongside Urdu. Professor Kashem agreed to write the booklet. In addition, when approached, Qazi Motahar Hossain also consented to contribute. A letter was sent to Abul Mansur Ahmad, requesting him to contribute to the booklet, which he did."

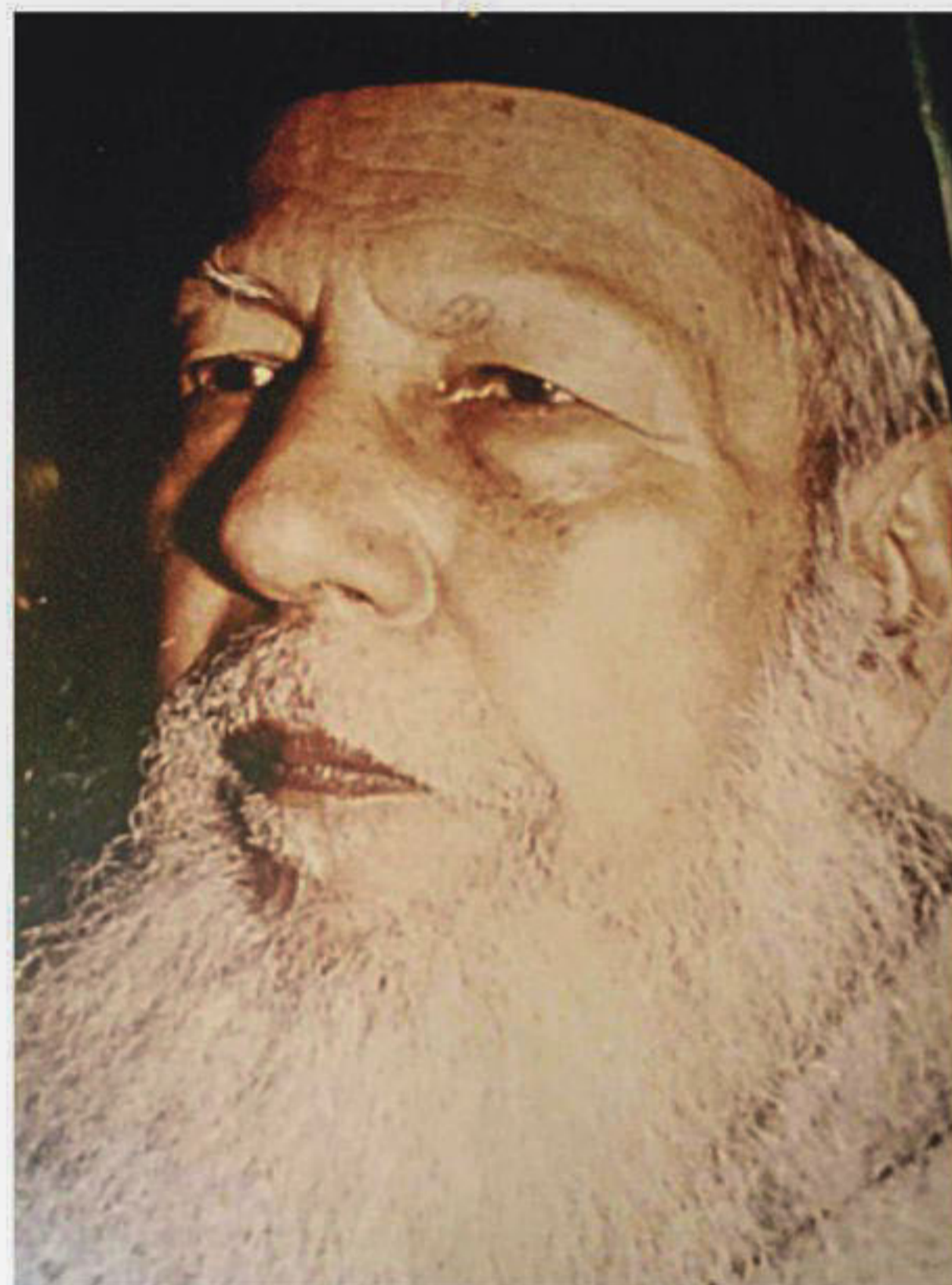
Unbeknown to those involved in the publication of the 18-page booklet, it would later serve as the proclamation of the Language Movement. It cost three annas. The printer's key read, "Publisher – Professor MA Kashem, Tamaddun Majlish, Ramna, Dhaka; Printer: AH Syed, Baliyadi Printing Works, 137, Bangshal Road, Dhaka; First Edition: September, 1947."

On September 15, Tamaddun Majlish held an informal seminar, titled "Make Bangla and Urdu the State Language of

Pakistan," in a dormitory at Dhaka College, then known as Government Intermediate College. The seminar included a lengthy discussion about the proclamation. The discussants agreed to take necessary steps to wage a movement in light of the paper. It was the first seminar organised concerning the issue of language.

Among those present at the seminar were Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, Principal Professor Abul Kashem, Dr Qazi Motahar Hossain, Principal Ibrahim Khan, poet Jasimuddin, Professor Kazi Akram Hossain, Professor Shamsul Huq, Shahed Ali and Sanaullah Nuri, according to the latter's book, "When I Was a Journalist."

There were three articles in the booklet, *The State Language of Pakistan: Bangla or Urdu*. On behalf of Tamaddun Majlish, Principal Abul Kashem wrote an article titled 'Our proposals'. Dr Qazi Motahar



Kaji Motahar Hossain

Hossain discussed on 'State language and the language problem of East Pakistan.' Abul Mansur Ahmad, the then-editor of *The Daily Ittehad*, penned a piece, headlined 'Bangla shall be our state language.'

In the article penned by Abul Kashem on behalf of Tamaddun Majlish, the demand to make Bangla one of the state languages of Pakistan was clearly mentioned. He proposed,

1. Bangla will be:
 - a. A medium of education in East Pakistan
 - b. A state language to be used in courts in East Pakistan
 - c. The state language in East Pakistan
2. There will be two state languages of the federal government
3. a. Bangla will be the first language of the education department in East Pakistan. All students in East Pakistan will learn this

language.

b. Urdu will be the second or inter-state language. Only those interested in jobs elsewhere in Pakistan will learn in this language. The language can be taught in the secondary schools as a second language.

c. English will be the third or international language. Those wishing to work beyond the country's borders or those interested in learning science can be taught in English."

Principal Professor Abul Kashem further noted, "Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah has acknowledged the right to self-determination of every province of Pakistan. Even in the Lahore Resolution, sovereignty and independence are guaranteed for every unit of Pakistan. Therefore, each unit must be given the freedom to choose its own official language."

Urging the people of East Pakistan to



Abul Mansur Ahmad

partake in the language movement, Abul Kashem wrote, "The efforts (to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan) must be resisted. A serious movement has to be waged against it. In order to launch our movement, we are publishing articles of some of the renowned litterateurs of the country. At the same time, we are calling on every citizen of East Pakistan to take part in the movement."

As the people resolutely responded to the call, public support for the Language Movement gained momentum. Announcing the programmes of the movement, he wrote, "We have to arrange meetings at every school, college and town and pass a resolution against the efforts to impose a non-native language upon us and send it to the Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and other leaders. Every member of the Gana Parishadh (the

assembly) must be educated so that they don't pave the way for the suicide of the Bengali people by supporting motions against Bangla."

Professor Dr Qazi Motahar Hossain, in his article titled "State language and the language problem of East Pakistan," contended that it was imperative that both Bangla and Urdu be made the state language of Pakistan.

"In the entire Pakistan, the Bangla-speaking people, combining Muslims and Hindus, are the majority. Even then, we do not want Bangla to be made the state language in West Pakistan because such a move will impede the natural progress of the people of West Pakistan. Therefore, the state language for West Pakistan will be Urdu or Poshtu and for East Pakistan it will be Bangla."

Warning of the adverse consequences that might befall the country if Urdu was made the only state language, he noted, "If attempts are made to impose Urdu on the Hindu-Muslim population of East Pakistan as its sole state language, they will go in vain. Discontent cannot be repressed for long. In that case, I fear, the relation between the East and West may cease to exist."

By mentioning the possibility of "a cessation" in relations between two parts of Pakistan, Dr Qazi Motahar Hossain courageously and craftily hinted that it may result in calls for independence in East Pakistan. Consequently, as foretold by him, the Language Movement did pave the way for our independence struggle, which would be led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, resulting in the creation of Bangladesh. Therefore, the influence that the booklet had on preparing the ground for the Language Movement, independence of Bangladesh and our separate nationhood is undeniable.

Abul Mansur Ahmad, in his piece, put forth a set of arguments for making Bangla as the state language of East Pakistan.

"If the language of the masses and the state is different, a democratic nation in its true sense cannot be built. If Urdu is made the state language, the educated class of East Pakistan would overnight become "uneducated" and "ineligible" for government employment. In the mid 1800s, British imperial rulers have made English the state language replacing Farsi, making the Muslim educated class "uneducated" and "ineligible" for government jobs. The argument that Bangla will remain to be the medium of education even if Urdu is made the state language is, in effect, deceptive and a fallacy. For any individual, the standard of "eligibility" will be determined by how much knowledgeable he is in the official language of the state."