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The women who broke the barricades

CHEMAN ARA

The Language Movement is an indelible incident in the history of the Bengali nation and Bangla language. It took decades of effort, sacrifice and endurance of our forefathers to bring Bangla to the doorstep of 1952.

The chronological history of it all cannot be described in this small article. I would like to begin my discussion of the journey of our language from 1947—from the inception of Pakistan. Immediately after the creation of an independent Pakistan, a cultural organisation named Tamaddun Majlis was formed on September 1 under the leadership of Abul Kashem, a young professor at the University of Dhaka (DU) back then. The organisation's office was situated in Building no. 19 in the Azimpur residential area. Its main purpose was to explore new avenues in forging a national identity in line with

the culture and customs of the nation. As the first step towards the goal, the Majlis chose to secure the recognition of Bangla as a state language from the ruling class. To accelerate its demand, Tamaddun Majlis, in no time, published a pamphlet authored by three scholars. The publication of the pamphlet caused quite a stir in the conscious section of society.

I was a seventh grader back then. Bangla is our native language; we speak in this language. We were elated to know that Bangla was going to be a state language. We were acquainted with Professor Abul Kashem. Making use of this opportunity, my sister Momtaj and I became activists of the Majlis. We would often visit the office on weekends and help the seniors in various activities, which included making posters and banners. We even saw a handful of women visiting the office. Among them were Jebunnisa Begum, Doulatunnesa Begum, and Anwara Begum. All of them had attained higher education. These women believed in the ideology of the Majlis and were outspoken on the issue of language.

Women, unlike today, did not have freedom of movement back then. Their lives were saddled with many barriers. The practice of general education was very limited for the women who came from conservative Muslim families. They



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

were mainly taught Urdu, Arabic, and Persian languages. Surprisingly, soon after the establishment of the new state, a wave of renaissance hit the Muslim girls across the country. The female enrolment rate in schools and colleges began increasing. Parents became more interested in providing their girls with the opportunities of higher education. This eventually resulted in an increasing number of female students at DU. The number of Muslim female students there was very insignificant before an independent country was established.

The Language Movement reached its peak between 1947 and 1951 when the number of female students at DU was around 80. These girls played a glorious role in the movement by joining shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. Dr Safia Khatun was the general secretary of Dhaka University Women Hall Union in 1951-52, and she became the vice president of the union in 1952-53. Under her leadership, female students of the university went to schools and colleges and encouraged students there to take part in the movement.

The female students of this period who made their place in the history are Sufia Khatun (daughter of Justice Ibrahim), Shamsun Nahar, Rawshan Ara Bachchu, Sara Taifoor, Kazi Amina,

Mahfil Ara, Khurshidi Khanam, and Halima Khatun.

Anwara Khatun was a prominent figure among those who were not a part of DU but were involved with the Tamaddun Majlis. She was a member of the provincial council and a distinguished member of the Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad formed in 1952. Gaibandha's Doulatunnesa, a member of the provincial council in 1954, was another trailblazer. Names of Nadera Begum, Hamida Khatun, Nurjahan Murshid, Afsari Khanam, Ranu Mukherjee and Lili Haque also shine through in the history of the Language Movement. Begum Sufia Kamal and Nurjahan Murshid led a rally protesting the brutality of February 21.

Begum Doulatunnesa too led a protest procession. A proposal for condemnation of the shooting on protesters during a February 28 procession was accepted under the leadership of Nurjahan Murshid and Layla Khanam. Subsequently, Lulu Bilkis Banu and others joined the movement. One Hamida Selim Rahman from Jashore wrote an article in defence of Bangla, which was published in the daily Azad in 1947. She became the joint secretary of Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad. Headmistress of Narayanganj Morgan School Momtaj Begum led the local movements demanding Bangla's recognition as a state language.

Girls from Sylhet also took part in the Language Movement in 1948 and sent a delegation to the then Prime Minister Khawaja Nazimuddin, led by Zobeda Khatun Chowdhurani, who was a leader of the Muslim League in Sylhet.

Chittagong has always played a pioneering role when needed for the country and the nation.

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