



ANWARA KHATUN: The outspoken voice

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"A nation that does not respect its mothers is destined for destruction."

So spoke Anwara Khatun at a historic legislative assembly speech on February 22, 1952. A language activist and parliamentarian of East Bengal, she was one of the most notable women to shape the Bangla Language Movement of 1952.

Anwara Khatun was born in around 1925 in Mirpur, Dhaka. She became a wife at the age of six. Over the course of her life, however, she reached far beyond the social restrictions placed on women in her time, and worked to help others around her achieve the same.

Her passion lay in social work and governance, as is attested by the accounts of her life in M A Mahbub's *Jara Amar Bhasha Shongrame*. Earning degrees in MA, BT, and LLB—a rare achievement for a woman in British India—Anwara Khatun became elected as a member of the East Pakistan parliament in 1946 and once again in 1954, when the East Pakistan United

back to Bangladesh from Assam.

Many a consultative meeting of the revolution was housed at Anwara Khatun's residence on 23 Green Road. But she was more than just a host—she became involved with the Awami League party from its conception in 1949 and on March 2, 1948, participated in the formation of the second Shorbodolio Rashtrabhasha Shangram Parishad, and the third Shorbodolio Kendrio Rashtrabhasha Kormio Parishad, both founded to demand for Bangla to be made the state language. With utter devotion, she contributed to the planning leading up to the strike programme observed across Dhaka and the rest of East Bengal on March 11, 1948.

On January 31, 1952, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani presided over an all-party meeting held at the Dhaka Bar Library Hall; Kazi Golam Mahbub was invited to join the Shorbodolio Rashtrabhasha Shangram Parishad. Anwara Khatun participated in both. In the fraught days of February 1952, Anwara remained an outspoken voice at legislative meetings. She was the first woman to speak out against the bullets fired upon the student protesters on *Ekushey* February. The very next day, on February 22 at an East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Anwara demanded the unconditional release of everyone arrested from the previous day's protests. She demanded for the victims to be compensated, for the officers who had attacked the student protesters to be punished, and for the abolition of policies that allowed the government to torture civilians.

"The words uttered by [Chief Minister] Nurul Amin seem to mirror those of the East Bengal Prime Minister Mr. Nazimuddin," Khatun allegedly declared at the legislative council meeting. "Four years

from that occasion, on the Paltan *maydan*, Mr. Nazimuddin now tells us that 'Urdu shall be the only state language'. It appears as if his words of reassurance delivered to us three years ago were nothing but bluff. It feels like we still haven't gotten our freedom. The police violence is proof of that. Let alone the men—even women haven't been spared their brutality."

On one hand was her forthright and proactive fight for the movement as a member of the parliament—steps that ideally shouldn't be tagged as a gendered act. Along with Legislative Assembly members Maulana A Rashid Tarkabagish and Khairat Hossain, she staged a walkout from the Assembly session protesting the passivity of Chief Minister Nurul Amin during the *Ekushey* February violence. In later years starting from 1966, Anwara Khatun would go on to lead the Awami League party in the absence of its male leaders, sent to prison during the Six Point Movement. This active involvement in the revolution as well as in state politics in later years seems to have stemmed from a neutral and genuine commitment to justice and leadership. Meanwhile, of particular significance as a woman was her role in helping organise women activists and bringing other women to the fore of the Language Movement.

"Women were attacked in the police violence," she emphasised in her fiery speech on February 22. "Among them was Ms. Sufia Ibrahim, the daughter of Justice Ibrahim of the Dhaka High Court, and Ms. Rowshin Ara, a third-year BA student. A total of eight women were injured. The honourable minister has created such an environment that even girls are being subjected to abuse. I cannot fathom what kind of future these events are driving us towards."



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

Front held its election. Her husband Advocate Ali Amzad Khan being the founding president of the Awami League party, Anwara developed close working ties with the likes of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Maulana Bhashani. She played an active role in bringing the latter

LAILA NUR: A force of resilience

MALIHA KHAN

Laila Nur first stood up against the Pakistan government as a schoolgirl of only 15, just about to sit for her SSC exams in 1948. At a meeting of the local Muslim League's women's group at the town hall in Comilla, she was incensed to hear the leaders dismiss Bangla as the language of 'Hindus'. An irate Nur then stood up to say these notions were baseless. "I said that Bangla had the capability to be the state language—and looking at the numbers of Bangla speakers, only Bangla should be the state language. The decision to make Urdu the state language was completely unreasonable." Having expressed an unpopular opinion, Nur was told to leave quickly—the police were everywhere and she could be arrested. "I was scared for the next few days... the only comfort I had was that I had said nothing wrong."

Laila Nur, Language Movement veteran, academic, writer, and translator, was born on October 5, 1934, in Daudkandi, Comilla. Her childhood was spent in Bihar where her father worked. She passed her Higher Secondary School Certificate

(HSC) exams in 1952 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Dhaka in 1956.

While in college, she continued using her voice in favour of the language movement—expressing her opinions in writing as the movement progressed over the years. While a student at the University of Dhaka in 1955, the Pakistani police and army kept a stern watch on campus. "The girls hung up big black flags on the roof of the hostel—the army entered forcefully and took those down." That was the night of February 20—the following day she would be arrested.

On the morning of February 21, Nur and her fellow female students had started their meetings and peaceful protest. At around noon, an army truck came and started beating them with batons. Nur along with Husne Ara escaped to the library balcony. "When the army came to handcuff me, I rebuked them saying—Don't touch me! Just tell me where to go." They were told to get on the truck and were taken away, but only the two of them weren't in handcuffs thanks to Nur. More



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

than 20 female students were arrested that morning. The students slept on the floor of a jail cell that night, alongside the female prisoners. They were charged with breaking section 144.

Nur was freed after 21 days in jail, but her fight didn't end. Later in life, Nur continued to carry on fighting for the goals of the language movement, saying that Bangla was yet to be used everywhere,

citing the High Court.

Nur credited her knowledge at such a tender age, to be able to stand up to much older women and local leaders, to her father who kept their house stocked with books; she and her siblings were all well-read. Following her graduation from DU, she joined Comilla Victoria Government College in 1957 as the first female member of the faculty. When asked what her life's success has been, Nur said, "In my teaching life, thousands of students have passed through my hands and become established. This is my success. Rafiqul Islam, who proposed declaring February 21 as International Mother Language Day, was one of my students."

Nur retired from teaching in 1992. She continued writing—for newspapers and magazines—and has translated works of noteworthy poetry into English. In 2014, Nur received the Binoy Sommanona Award for her contribution to the Language Movement and to the field of education. She died in May 2019.

Sources: Interview with Bashar Khan of Anannya magazine; Interview with Sohrab Hasan, Prothom Alo (March 8, 2016)