

How the youth gave us independence

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The youth have always been a pivotal part in the journey of Bangladesh, adding to our rich history by demanding reform wherever necessary. Bangladeshi youth have constantly exhibited strength in their resilience, unity, and the willingness to fight oppression in various scenarios. Be it during the period of war or a state of muted political tension, Bangladeshi youth have never shied away from having their voices heard in public.

It was in September 1947 – post the Indo-Pak Partition – that the Bangladeshi youth banded together for the first time to protest against the West Pakistani government's unjust food policies. The Democratic Youth League was formed by University of Dhaka (DU) students who were politically left-leaning, in an effort to combat the famine that had crippled the East Pakistani population from 1947 to 1951. In the words of historian Badruddin Umar, the food crisis of 1947 was "...very extensive and caused great hardship and misery to millions of people in East Bengal... Added to that suffering was the disillusionment of the people in general... who had dreamt of a happy, trouble free and peaceful life during the Pakistan movement and were now facing even physical liquidation and the threat of it in the new homeland for the Muslims."

A fire had been birthed by the growing sense of discontent amidst the two halves of a fragmented Pakistan. The Bangladeshi youth now fully acknowledged their political agency.

On March 11, 1948, the elderly political leaders of West Pakistan were met with an unexpected turn of events: a general strike throughout Dhaka city, held by members of the State Language Movement Council, in protest against West Pakistan's rejection of Dhirendranath Datta's proposal to include Bangla as a spoken language in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. Part of the State Language Movement Council consisted of young left-leaning politicians, who lead the strike. Amongst the picketing youth in front of the Secretariat Building was a young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 28 years old and the leader of the then Muslim Students' League.

The voices of dissent arising from the oppressed Bengali population had begun to gain momentum through



the youth. A collective resistance was gradually coming to formation.

February 21, 1952 was a fateful day. The politically and economically oppressed Bengalis had had enough. Protesting students from DU took to the streets to make themselves heard throughout the nation. The protests had already been several months in the making due to the small-scale language movement initiatives led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his youth organisation consisting of Shamsul Huq, Shawkat Ali, Tajuddin Ahmad, and many more young leaders. It was eventually Khawaja Nazimuddin's treacherous announcement declaring Urdu to be the state language for all of Pakistan, which sparked outrage all over East Pakistan. Nazimuddin's speech was a direct violation of the eight-point agreement he had earlier signed in a meeting with members of the Language Action Committee. An unforgivable act of betrayal which prompted student leader Kazi Gholam Mahub to form the State Language Committee. February 4, 1952 was declared "Protest Day", followed by even more student protests on February 11, culminating in the general strike held on February 21. Pandemonium broke out on the morning of the 21st. Police attacked the chanting protesters with tear shells and bricks, ultimately opting for the usage of assault weapons which resulted in the deaths of several university students, namely Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, Abul Barkat, and Abdus Salam.

The matters had come to a head. A new partition began to loom on the horizon.

By the time it was 1962, East Pakistan

had already been further oppressed by Ayub Khan's declaration of martial law which culminated in the introduction of the Constitution of 1962. Ayub Khan put into effect a new kind of tyranny to victimise the East Pakistani populace even more. The youth wouldn't stand for it. The growing educational disparity between the 2 halves of Pakistan was hard to miss. Throughout the 50s, school enrollment in the West had increased by 143.72 percent while in the East the increase clocked in at a shocking 6.2 percent. Tensions eventually boiled over when Ayub Khan upped the ante of his dictatorship with the announcement of the SM Sharif Education Policy. The new national education policy was discriminatory to say the least, as it sought to de-prioritise education for the Pakistani citizens via language barriers and increased educational expenses. Thus, on the morning of September 17, East Pakistani students took to the streets to voice their opposition against the education minister's offensive policy, demanding equal access for all in the education system. The students were once again met with violence with a minimum of three being reported dead due to police brutality.

Ayub Khan thought he'd crushed the rebellion. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Up until the Liberation War broke out in 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had formed a strong alliance with the students. There were student demonstrations on June 7, 1966, in support of the Six Point Movement launched by the Awami League, where protesting students once again found themselves under fire from Ayub Khan's military police. A large number of arrests were made soon after, with protestors being detained indefinitely. The military dictatorship was finally overthrown in 1969 due to a collective student effort through the Mass Uprising campaign from 1968-1969. The International Socialist Review described it as "...a social

crisis of revolutionary proportions which brought down the regime of Ayub Khan."

After Ayub Khan's downfall, another one of Pakistan's military generals, Yahya Khan, took over. The protesting student groups didn't back down, and later expressed their outrage towards Yahya Khan's political manipulation after Pakistan's General Elections in 1970. Yahya Khan kept postponing the meeting of the Pakistan National Assembly. The political climate grew increasingly tense following a speech from Mujib. The Dhaka University Central Student Union and the East Pakistan Student League came together for meetings which often ended in protest marches.

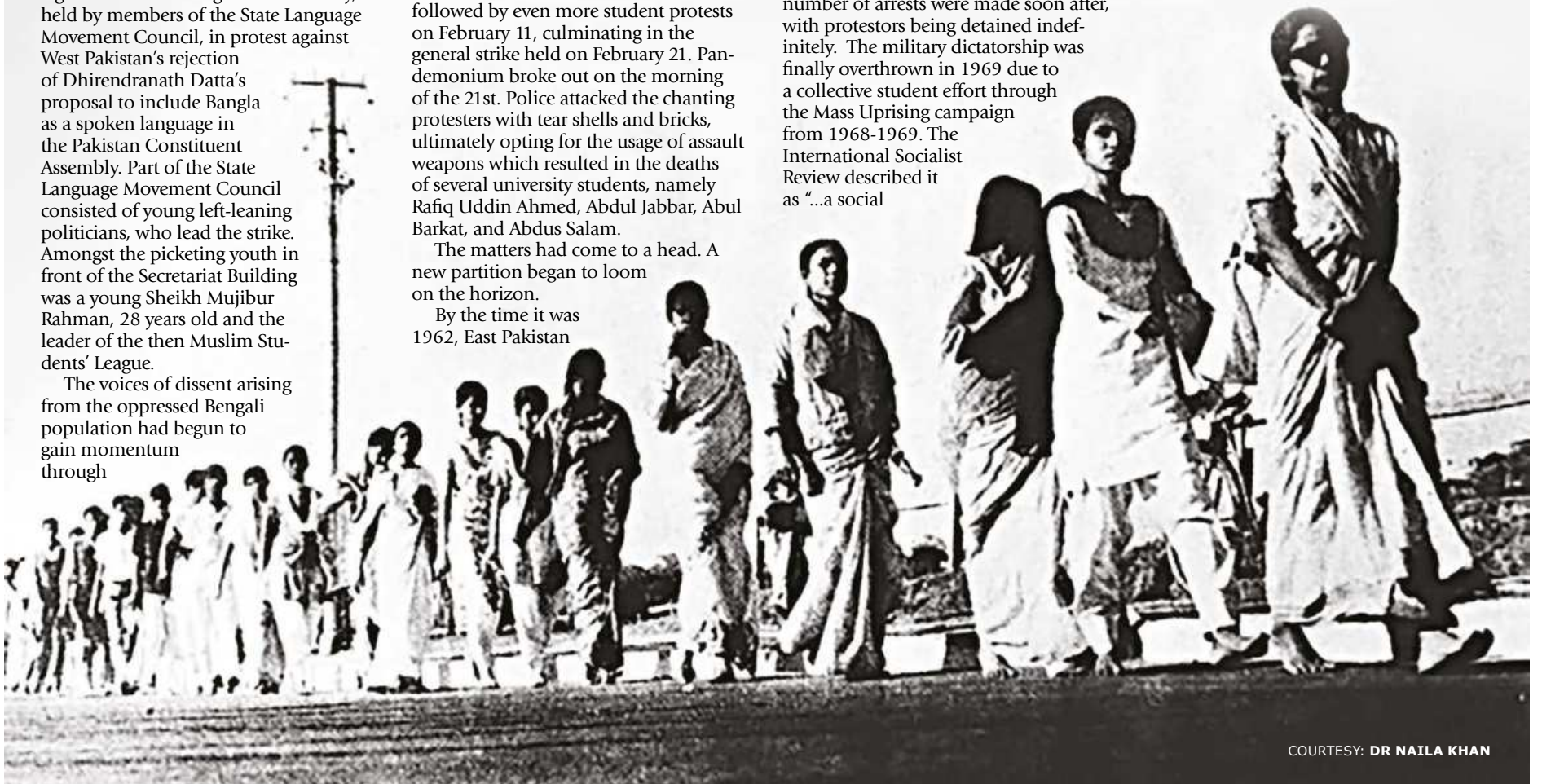
Then came the darkest night of all. March 25, 1971. West Pakistan's brutal response to the student protests in East Pakistan.

In her book, *Dead Reckoning* (2011), journalist Sarmila Bose described the incident calling it "a night of infamy" where "...The spectacle of a military regime sending the army to crush a 'rebellious' university put the conflict in the starkest possible terms for most people and earned the regime lasting condemnation."

The former youth leaders of Bangladesh didn't have much of a youth. But they were relentless in their fight to be heard.

The least we can do is remember their fight. Remember that we are, have been, and forever will be, in their debt.

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