



# Ekushey February during the Pakistan period



ILLUSTRATION:  
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The Language Movement began in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of Pakistan, spurred by the demands of student organisations in the then East Pakistan. It was a crucial component of a broader set of demands addressing the realities of East Pakistan. The events of February 21 marked the culmination of the Language Movement—termed a language controversy by the then government—which had its roots in the late 1947 to early 1948 period. Historians in East Bengal typically distinguish between the events of 1947-48 and 1952 based on their reach, impact, and underlying causes. The first phase of the Language Movement was initially galvanised by the demand for Bangla to be the language of procedures in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan by Dhirendranath Datta, and by Jinnah's unequivocal declaration at Dhaka's Race Course Ground that "Urdu and only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan.". The second phase gained momentum following then Pakistan Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin's statement in the last week of January 1952, affirming that only Urdu would

be the state language of Pakistan.

Until 1952, student organisations in East Bengal observed March II as the "protest day" throughout the province to commemorate the fact that on this day in 1948, for the first time, hartal was observed demanding Bangla as a state language. The police firing on the protesters in Dhaka on February 21, 1952, and the killings of Barkat, Rafique, Jabbar, and others took that demand to such a critical height that, despite reluctance on the part of Pakistan's ruling class, Bangla's status as a state language of Pakistan was ascertained. Therefore, we see in the 1956 constitution of Pakistan that Bangla was acknowledged, and again in the 1962 constitution under Ayub Khan's rule.

In addition to establishing Bangla as a state language of Pakistan alongside Urdu, the martyrdom on February 21 instilled an unprecedented emotion in the psyche of the younger generation in East Pakistan. The immediate outpouring of poems, stories, songs, and publications, as well as the construction of hundreds of monuments at educational institutions throughout the province were a testament of this emotion. The cultural and literary flourishing in East Bengal was not only a result of the Language Movement but, more significantly, of the events of February 1952.

Since 1952, February 21 has become an inevitable component of the social, cultural and political life of East Bengal. The day has been observed as Shaheed Dibosh or Martyrs' Day throughout East Pakistan. A demand was raised from different quarters for declaring February 21 a public holiday. The significance of the demand can be discerned from the fact that it was one of the demands of the 21-Point Programme of the United Front.

The commemoration of February 21 as Shaheed Dibosh met with strong opposition from the government as the latter deemed such observation antithetical to the national unity of Pakistan. That is why the first Shaheed Minar (monument of martyrs), erected on February 23, 1952, was razed to the ground just four days later by the police and military amid a crackdown on the protesters—through arrests, police warrants and harassment by law enforcers. For instance, in 1955, five students of Dhaka University were arrested for being involved with the observance of February 21.

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SOURCE: MY GOLDEN BENGAL

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani after the foundation stone laying programme of Shaheed Minar.

reality of Pakistan, not least the province of East Pakistan, and the mood of popular demands. The United Front government under AK Fazlul Haq did not last long enough to actualise the promise of making February 21 a public holiday. Later on, on February 16, 1956, the United Front

the observance of the day to some extent. Barefoot morning procession to the Shaheed Minar with flowers, chanting slogans in support of political, cultural, and economic demands, prayers at the graves of the martyrs, and organisation of seminars—all these were parts of the

law, students and cultural activists continued to observe the day as usual, though the authorities of schools and colleges displayed ambivalence.

However, the 1960s marked the resurgence of political movements in East Pakistan. Lifting the ban on political activities and the recognition of Bangla as a state language in the 1962 constitution once again eased the official mode of celebrating February 21. Most importantly, there was an acceleration of democratic movements, including that of students, workers, and peasants, during this decade that was organically linked with commemorating Ekushey.

Prabhat Pheri, cultural activities, seminars, and prayers continued to be held as before. Newspapers earnestly published special issues on February 21. On this day, as protesters renewed their vows to restore democracy and the rights of the people of East Pakistan, progressive and pro-Bangla newspapers published editorials emphasising the significance of the day and paying homage to the martyrs.

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government declared the day "Martyrs' Day". It was declared a provincial holiday as well. The formation of the United Front government and the recognition of Bangla as one of Pakistan's state languages by the constitution in 1956 led to a leniency by the government towards

observance of February 21. The introduction of martial law and the imposition of a ban on political activities, as well as public processions and meetings, temporarily made the commemoration of February 21 difficult. Despite the strict martial



SOURCE: BANGABANDHU FOUNDATION

Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman march barefoot to pay tribute to the language martyrs on February 21, 1954.