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THE IMPACT OF THE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT on our national psyche



The Language Movement became a cornerstone of the Bangalee national psyche, symbolising resistance to external threats and shaping collective identity through historical and cultural performative (rather than constative) engagements. It was not merely political, but existential—intimately tied to the preservation of the Bangla language, literature, and cultural heritage.

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The words crafted by Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury—*‘Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano Ekushey February’* (My brothers’ blood dyes the streets of 21st February)—encapsulate the very essence of Bangladesh’s identity, forged through passionate resistance to the authoritarian imposition of a neo-colonial official language policy and the assertion of an unbreakable bond between language and an incipient national consciousness. *‘Ami Ki Bhulite Pari’* (How can I forget that crimson stain?) is more than a mere lament for the blood spilt on February 21, 1952; it is a rallying cry for the cultural and political revolution that laid the groundwork for Bangladesh’s eventual independence, encompassing the power of language in the formation of a mythogenic collective cultural identity, and beyond.

It is through language that a nation articulates its collective memory, expresses its aspirations, and creates the narratives that sustain its cultural and political existence. Even as language evolves, it remains a site of resistance, belonging, and identity, constantly shaping national selfhood. Historical struggles to preserve linguistic heritage—whether resisting colonial impositions, asserting indigenous tongues, or codifying dialects—underscore its centrality in nation-making. As Benedict Anderson suggests in *Imagined Communities*, language is the foundation of national identity, fostering a shared sense of belonging among people who may never meet. The nation is “imagined” because its members are united—not through direct interaction but via a shared linguistic framework—where print capitalism, public discourse, and cultural symbols transform language into a unifying force that sustains

collective national consciousness.

The 1952 Language Movement and the revival of Hebrew illustrate the transformative power of language in shaping national identity and political struggle, though in distinct historical contexts. The Language Movement was a defiant resistance against linguistic imperialism, as the people of the then East Pakistan fought to preserve Bangla as the core of their linguistic and cultural identity against the imposed dominance of Urdu, not even a majority language. It represented a reactive process of identity formation in an unfriendly and hostile political environment. This struggle proved pivotal in the eventual emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. In contrast, the revival of Hebrew was a cultural reclamation, transforming a liturgical language into a modern spoken tongue, fostering unity among Jewish communities, and strengthening their national identity. Although the Bangalee linguistic-cultural identity predates India’s partition by over a thousand years, its connection to the creation of a separate nation—through yet another partition—was catalysed by the Language Movement. This narrative continued to evolve thereafter, shaped by the shifting sociopolitical contexts of the nation.

Parallel movements across the world illustrate how language serves as a powerful force in shaping national and cultural identity. The Catalan and Basque language movements in Spain and the Quebecois struggle for linguistic rights in Canada—all underscore the deep nexus between language and cultural identity. From the Gaelic revival in Ireland to the Maori language revival movement in New Zealand, these struggles reflect how linguistic assertion becomes a site of resistance, self-determination, and national consciousness.

The Language Movement became a cornerstone of the Bangalee national psyche, symbolising resistance to external threats and shaping collective identity through historical and cultural performative (rather than constative) engagements. It was not merely political, but existential—intimately tied to the preservation of the Bangla language, literature, and cultural heritage. Martin Heidegger’s concept of language as the “House of Being” suggests that language is not just a communication tool but the very structure that organises human existence. Without it, a profound sense of homelessness arises—an existential void mirrored by the cultural alienation felt during the Language Movement. The imposition of Urdu in East Pakistan represented a strategic attempt by the repressive regime to supplant Bangla as the shared official language, undermining the existential foundation of the majority population. This estrangement resonates with Homi J Bhabha’s idea of the “unhomely,” capturing the disjunction and displacement typical in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

However, the Language Movement played a pivotal role in transforming this imposed estrangement into a site of resistance, reclaiming Bangla as both a home and a foundation for national consciousness. Jacques Derrida’s assertion that “there is nothing outside the text” emphasises how language constructs reality itself. Our histories, identities, and national consciousness are mediated through linguistic structures, sensory stimuli, and cognitive frameworks. Every perception, every claim to reality, is filtered through these structures, shaping our understanding of the world. The Language Movement exemplifies this truth: language is at the core of national identity, a dynamic force that

not only shapes but also resists efforts to displace it, preserving the integrity of cultural and political identity. It is a dynamic text—subject to continual reinterpretation and reconfiguration—that challenges and deconstructs any canonical, primordial identities. Its legacy persisted in the movements leading up to the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath, including the 2024 July–August uprising.

Badrudin Umar, in *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Totkalin Rajniti (The Language Movement in East Bengal and Contemporary Politics)*, argues that the Language Movement was not merely a linguistic struggle but a pivotal moment in the political discourse on Bangalee identity, signalling the emergence of a nascent nationhood. The forced imposition of Urdu, as Umar notes, reflected a political disregard for the distinct cultural and linguistic identity of the then East Pakistan’s people, deepening their alienation and sparking resistance. This phenomenon culminated in the deaths of several students on February 21, 1952, amplifying political consciousness and setting the stage for Bangladesh’s eventual independence in 1971—an assertion of political sovereignty, cultural integrity, and economic survival.

The 1905 movement against the British partition of Bengal (Swadeshi Movement) was a defining moment in early Bangalee nationalism, opposing the colonial division along religious lines designed to weaken Bangalee unity. However, it did not directly engage with nation-state identity politics. In contrast, the Language Movement of 1952, built upon this nationalist foundation, forged its own path, prioritising linguistic and cultural autonomy. The Language Movement was crucial in the formation of Bangladesh’s national identity, catalysing the pursuit of sovereignty.

While the Bengal Renaissance—centred in Kolkata and shaped by figures like Tagore and Nazrul—influenced the movement, the Language Movement was grounded in Dhaka, where a distinct resurgence of Bangalee identity emerged, free from Kolkata’s legacy and tutelage. It blended egalitarianism and secularism, though the model of secularism in Bangladesh has since become contested. Originally enshrined in the 1972 constitution, it has evolved with shifting political dynamics, increasingly shaped by the rise of religious conservatism. This development has blurred the lines between religion and politics in complex ways, sidelining the Language Movement backstage while foregrounding the history, as it plays out through dynamic narratives, continuously reframed by changing sociopolitical contexts.

Homi J Bhabha’s concept of the nation as a continuous, contested process of narration offers valuable insight into Bangladesh’s evolving political and national identity. As a pivotal moment in the country’s history, the Language Movement could be seen as the foundational “text” that continued to unfold. Initially emerging as a bulwark against a repressive regime to preserve linguistic and cultural autonomy, it quickly transformed into a conduit for shaping the broader trajectory of Bangladesh’s nationhood. This resistance was not merely reactive; the movement actively engaged in the construction and redefinition of national identity in opposition to external forces, particularly the Pakistani state. In Bhabha’s own words, “In each of [the] ‘foundational fictions,’ the origins of national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affirmation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation.”

SEE PAGE S2