



BANGLA LANGUAGE and literature after '47



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The partition of British India in 1947 posed significant challenges to the state-building process in both India and Pakistan, including in Bengal, which faced the complexities of being divided between the two new nations. The Bangla language, which had thrived during the colonial era, suddenly found itself in an uncertain position within these newly formed states. After partition, the status of Bangla became deeply intertwined with religious identity, leading to a drastic shift in its socio-political landscape. Consequently, Bengal's literary figures engaged in deep reflection and practical discourse, seeking to understand the future role of Bangla in the context of nation-building.

As the Bengal province was divided, the composition of its population also changed. East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, while West Bengal remained a part of India. However, Calcutta, the undivided capital of Bengal until 1947, remained in West Bengal, while Dhaka was once again attained as this province's capital city. While both India and Pakistan concentrated their efforts on making Hindi and Urdu their state languages from the beginning, the question of what status Bangla would hold in these new states became a matter of concern. Literary figures sought to reconcile the high status Bangla had once enjoyed with the realities of the new political

landscape.

For instance, poet Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) authored an extensive article in May 1951, titled *Bangla Bhasa o Sahityer Bhabishat* (*The Future of Bangla Language and Literature*), where he analysed the condition of the language in the context of post-partition Bengal. As one of the prominent figures among the modern poets of the 1930s, he critically assessed its future, exploring both its historical developments and prospects in a new, rapidly shifting context.

He stated that while English had been the state language of India, it would not retain the same position in the post-independence state, as India had already designated Hindi as its official language. However, he argued that Hindi was a far less developed language with a less significant literary tradition compared to English. At the same time, he acknowledged the crucial role English had played in enriching Bangla. He noted that, despite the challenges, English had greatly influenced Bangla. When Bangla first came into contact with English around 150 years ago, the latter was a far more developed language and thus helped foster not only Bangla literature but also critical thinking within the Bangla intellectual circles.

Jibanananda remarked that Bangla writers had greatly benefited from English for centuries, absorbing its power deeply. However, in independent

India, Bangla no longer needed to borrow anything from Hindi, except perhaps for job-related purposes. While English had elevated Bangla, exchanging it for Hindi now would be a “loss and erosion” for Bangla. Though it might appear as prejudice against Hindi, this sentiment reflected the challenges faced by Bangla literary figures during that time.

The primary reason for the differing status of Bangla and Hindi lies in the rapid development of Bangla during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Jibanananda noted that, due to the contributions of Rabindranath Tagore, Bangla reached a literary sophistication comparable nearly to French or English. Notably, Tagore became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

Before this, Bengal had served as the British bridgehead since 1757, with Calcutta functioning as the colonial capital from 1772 to 1911. The city became an intellectual and educational hub, attracting students and scholars from across India and beyond to its numerous institutions of higher learning. Throughout this time, Calcutta remained a vital transnational trading centre. Many government and educational institutions were based in Calcutta. As the seat of the Council of the Governor-General of India and the viceroy, Calcutta also witnessed the rise of prominent institutions such as Hindu College, which later became the renowned Presidency College.

Although Calcutta lost its status as the capital of British India in 1911, the presence of Rabindranath Tagore—an iconic figure of Indian culture and civilisation, yet distinctly a Bangla poet—continued to draw scholars and academicians. Bengal had a thriving literary culture, but by the 1930s and 1940s, its literary standards declined compared to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

With independence came the division of Bengal, and Bengalees were split between India and Pakistan, losing their once-undivided territory and population. Jibanananda observed that the size of a state does not necessarily determine the vibrancy of its language. He pointed to Greece and England as prime examples, where, despite relatively small territories, Greek and English gained prominence in global arts and literature—Greek in antiquity and English in modern times. However, Jibanananda noted that Bengal had already been weakened by famine before partition, compounded by large-scale migration both before and after. He highlighted that West Bengal suffered immensely from the influx of refugees from East Bengal and the economic losses caused by partition. As people struggled for basic survival, their focus shifted to bread-and-butter issues, making the prospects for Bangla language and literature in West Bengal seem overwhelmingly bleak. But the gradual decline of Bangla literature, according to him, had already begun there, even before the calamities of riots and mass migration.

In addition, he explained that while Bangla and its standard verbal form had almost entirely dominated West Bengal—spearheaded by the educated society—by the 20th century, the influence of standard Bangla began expanding alongside local dialects, most of which were Eastern Bangla dialects. He argued that these Eastern Bangla dialects represented the most organic variations of the language. However, due to partition, this evolution was disrupted, as communication between the two parts of Bengal became very difficult due to the separation of the newly formed states.

Jibanananda Das observed that the language issue in East Pakistan had become increasingly serious over the years, particularly concerning the question of Pakistan's state language. However, he expressed hope that Bangalee Muslims in East Pakistan would strive to establish Bangla as one of the state languages, which, in turn, would benefit the status of Bangla in West Bengal. Writing in 1951, his prediction proved true after the events of February 21, 1952. Ultimately, Bangla was officially recognised as one of

Pakistan's state languages in 1956.

After the Language Movement of 1952, the literary community of East Pakistan, particularly the younger generation, embarked on a new creative journey driven by the ideals of non-communalism, modernity, and experimentation with forms. This newfound spirit was reflected in numerous significant publications and literary circles, marking the rise of a new wave in East Pakistan's literary landscape. Munier Chowdhury (1925–1971) was one of the most prominent figures in this movement. In 1952, he was arrested for protesting against police repression and the killing of students on February 21. He remained in detention until 1954, during which time he wrote a one-act play, *Kabar* (1953), which was staged inside the jail with prisoners playing various parts. Later, he became one of the most influential professors at Dhaka University, leaving a lasting impact on both academia and literature.

Munier Chowdhury delivered a lecture in 1969 on the emerging new wave of Bangla literature in East Pakistan. In his speech, he highlighted key shortcomings of contemporary Bangla literature, including excessive rusticity, suburbanism, localism, and oversimplification. He stressed the need for a shift towards civility, refined knowledge, intellectual depth, and cultural sophistication. Chowdhury acknowledged the significant progress made by young literary figures of the 1960s in this direction, and wholeheartedly welcomed their efforts—particularly praising *Kanthalaswar*, a literary journal edited by Abdullah Abu Sayeed, despite not being a part of their literary circle.

Jibanananda once observed that Bangla language and literature had been in decline in undivided Bengal since the 1940s. However, a counter-development emerged in East Pakistan during the 1960s. The poet of *Rupashi Bangla* passed away in 1954 and did not witness this literary resurgence in Dhaka, but in his article, he expressed hope for the literary future of Bangla on the eastern front. Despite being under an oppressive regime, East Pakistan experienced a renewed spirit in Bangla language and literature, a phenomenon reflected across various literary forms—a point later emphasised by Munier Chowdhury. Notably, Badruddin Umar argues that the literary vibrancy of the 1960s under Pakistani rule remained unmatched in independent Bangladesh. This suggests that the rise and decline of Bangla language and literature cannot be understood in absolute terms but rather as part of a complex and evolving trajectory.

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The impact of the language movement on our national psyche

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The Language Movement's legacy, much like Said's notion of travelling ideas and Lacan's *objet petit a*, is neither static nor confined to its original moment but remains a dynamic force, continuously reimagined in Bangladesh's unfolding political narrative.

Following independence, this narrative continued to evolve through political struggles, reflected in ongoing debates about democracy, freedom of expression, fundamental rights, religious and minority indigenous rights, secularism, and justice. These issues forced the nation in-the-making to confront questions that demanded the prevailing identity be renegotiated and re-narrativised. The July-August uprising further exemplified this contested process, as mass protests against an authoritarian government marked a new chapter in the redefinition of the political order. Citizens, dissatisfied with the status quo, utilised the uprising as a platform to challenge the existing political framework and assert their vision for Bangladesh's future.

Edward Said's *Traveling Theory* also offers a lens through which to understand the Language Movement as a text that continues to unfold, adapting to new political contexts while retaining its foundational significance. Much like Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire that structures the subject's longing—the Language Movement functions as a recurring point of reference in Bangladesh's national consciousness, embodying an ideal of linguistic and



The battle for linguistic rights in Bangladesh has transcended mere preservation; it is now a fight against cultural homogenisation, through the external loci of control.

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cultural sovereignty that is never fully realised but continually pursued. Just as linguistic theories evolve when they move across cultural, racial, and geopolitical spaces, the Language Movement has undergone reinterpretation across historical moments—from the fight against linguistic imperialism in 1952 to its legacy in the 1971 Liberation War and the July-August uprising. While the movement initially asserted linguistic identity as a site of resistance, its meaning has expanded, shaping ongoing struggles over political

sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and democratic aspirations. The Language Movement's legacy, much like Said's notion of travelling ideas and Lacan's *objet petit a*, is neither static nor confined to its original moment but remains a dynamic force, continuously reimagined in Bangladesh's unfolding political narrative.

In the end, the stability of any political order hinges not only on institutional mechanisms but also on the collective will of its people—a continuous reaffirmation of shared

belonging and purpose. As Ernest Renan famously asserted, the nation is a “daily plebiscite,” a recurring act of commitment that must be actively renewed. Central to this process is the interplay between collective memory and collective forgetting, which forms the national psyche. The memories that a nation chooses to remember and those it chooses to forget shape the boundaries of its identity, marking the contours of inclusion and exclusion. Yet, when national identity is tethered to linguistic hegemony, this daily reaffirmation becomes exclusionary, creating a centre-periphery binary that marginalises indigenous communities and ethnic minorities while also entrenching existing inequalities within the dominant linguistic group itself. In moments of upheaval, this dynamic is further amplified, as the terms of inclusion and exclusion are renegotiated. Without a conscious and deliberate engagement with these fractures—one that acknowledges the multiplicity within the national fabric rather than suppressing it—the very idea of a cohesive national community risks becoming a hollow ideal, failing those whom it purports to represent. The future, then, depends on an ongoing negotiation—one that is never settled but always in the making.

February 21 this year marks the silver

jubilee celebration of International Mother Language Day, grounded in the 1952 Language Movement, which highlights the vital connection between language and national identity. While Bangladesh's initiative led UNESCO to recognise the day in 1999, its spirit has been co-opted by political forces and vested interests, particularly by the ousted government, to suppress freedom of expression and dismantle liberal democracy. This year's theme, focused on linguistic diversity, resonates deeply with Bangladesh's ongoing struggle, where globalisation threatens linguistic erosion, with dominant languages overshadowing others and undermining the foundation of language-centred national consciousness. The battle for linguistic rights in Bangladesh has transcended mere preservation; it is now a fight against cultural homogenisation, through the external loci of control.

On this day, Bangladesh must move beyond ritualistic homage and reaffirm the importance of mother-tongue education and multilingual policies, while also reclaiming the true, untainted spirit of the Language Movement—undaunted, unbowed, ushering in a dawn of a new beginning, rooted in the wisdom of the past.

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