



LANGUAGE, LAND, LABOUR, AND LIBERATION

Reclaiming the radical roots of Ekushey



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Every time the question of language surfaces it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore.

- Antonio Gramsci

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.

- Frantz Fanon

The Movement's political dimensions were inseparable from its cultural implications. The battle for linguistic rights reflected deeper socio-economic struggles, as language relations mirrored class relations. The participation of peasants, workers, and marginalised communities ensured that the Movement transcended middle-class concerns, transforming into a broader anti-colonial and democratic project. This mass participation laid the groundwork for subsequent political movements, including the Liberation War of 1971.

If I draw upon—and combine or even constellate—the insights of the Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci and the Caribbean anti-colonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon, I might argue that the question of language is more than merely linguistic; that it is simultaneously a social, political, and cultural question—even a complex and contested site of both anticolonial and class struggles. I will return to these interconnected Gramscian-Fanonian conceptual nodes later. For now, let me begin with some general observations on our 1952 Language Movement, through which, however, I will critically interrogate certain standard or official narratives—narratives marked by the violence of erasures and elisions.

Of course—as I have argued elsewhere—our middle-class, soggy, sentimental nationalism continues to celebrate the Language Movement of 1952 on February 21—Ekushey February—in its own way, year after year. And, in doing so, it erases, obscures, and even occults the sites of real material contradictions and antagonisms—contradictions that involve, among other things, questions of class and gender. This routine celebration thus persistently evacuates Ekushey of its radical content and emancipatory aspirations. Moreover, given the trajectory of our mainstream political culture that has evolved since the birth of Bangladesh as a sovereign state—a culture that was decisively shaped by anti-people, anti-democratic, and even fascist elements, a culture that has by no means come to its end today—the Dhaka-centric yearly “celebration” of Ekushey repeatedly exposes how it has been reduced to a narrow “cultural” event—as if it has nothing to do with the emancipatory aspirations and struggles of the oppressed in Bangladesh.

But Ekushey February is more than a historical moment; it is part of a larger history of mass movements—peasant uprisings, workers’ struggles, and even indigenous rebellions—in the then East Pakistan. Drawing on Badruddin Umar’s monumental, people-centred, three-volume work *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Totkalin Rajneeti*, one can trace the roots of the Language Movement back to 1947–1948, when the first waves of resistance emerged from peasants, workers, *adibashis*, and communists, despite their internal differences and tactical pitfalls.

But official, middle-class narratives of the Language Movement often accentuate the roles of prominent leaders—sometimes important as they were—while remaining audibly silent about the struggles and sacrifices of the genuinely oppressed: women, peasants, and workers. Without their persistent resistance, the 1952 Language Movement would not have gained momentum, nor would Bangladesh have emerged as a distinct state in 1971. The true protagonists of both the Language Movement and the National Liberation Movement were these so-called “ordinary” people, with peasants, workers, women, Indigenous communities, and different minorities playing remarkable roles.

Thus, history writing itself remains a contested terrain—an ongoing site of struggle—where absences, silences, and omissions are far from neutral or innocent.

The challenge then decisively resides in recuperating and reclaiming the radical content of our Language Movement, although this does not mean a simple return to the past. History, after all, offers no straightforward return. We cannot go back to 1952 or the preceding years that set the stage for that historical event. What we can do, however, is rediscover and reinterpret the movement’s significance in light of our present conjuncture—one shaped by the possibilities opened up by the July uprising of 2024, yet still marked by persistent inequalities in production relations and power relations that structure everyday life in Bangladesh.

With this in mind, I intend to address some questions that remain largely unexamined in our standard narratives of the Language Movement.

Here, I find Nafis H’s relatively neglected piece, “Language for Liberation: The Class Struggle Behind Ekushey February,” particularly instructive, as it foregrounds the often-overlooked roles of marginalised communities. As Nafis H reminds us: “Today, as [...] *adibashis* struggle to maintain their existence, it bears remembering that Ekushey February stands on the sacrifice of not only Bengalis but also *adibashis*.” Badruddin Umar similarly argues that the Language Movement did not erupt suddenly; its socio-economic and political roots had been forming since at least 1947.

Indeed, East Pakistan was then a classic case of internal colonialism under West Pakistan, with structural disparities becoming flagrantly evident soon after the Partition. For instance, by 1952, West Pakistan had developed 22 times more electric distribution infrastructure than East Pakistan. Healthcare spending plummeted in the east, while nearly 99% of foreign aid went to development projects in West Pakistan. Between 1947 and 1952, East Bengal faced successive crises: widespread food shortages, government corruption, skyrocketing prices of essentials, rampant smuggling, and a scarcity of non-agrarian jobs. In Sylhet, the food crisis even degenerated into famine as the government’s policies drove farmers into hardship. The salt crisis of 1950–51 further exacerbated suffering when the government prohibited imports from India and

Rautara, Shyampura—those villages that rose in rebellion! Remember the sunlit eyes of those Indigenous peasants in the middle of the epic of the autumnal harvest? Remember!

The Hajong Rebellion, meanwhile, emerged from the relentless exploitation of Indigenous Hajong peasants, who lost their lands under British rule and were crushed by the Tanka system, which imposed fixed and ever-increasing taxes in kind. In July 1949, the Pakistani government killed 40 Hajong villagers in their sleep and tortured seven activists to death. Yet the rebellion persisted with remarkable resolve, led by figures like Kumudini Hajong and Rasamani Hajong—the first woman to be killed. Their slogan was clear and uncompromising: “*Jaan debo tobu bhaat debona*” (Slay us if you must, but our rice stays ours!).

Alongside these peasant rebellions, communists also mobilised workers, staging 26 strikes involving more than 12,000 participants within just four months between August and December 1947. Without these interconnected struggles—peasant, Indigenous, and working-class—the Language Movement of 1952 would not have moved beyond its middle-class origins to become a genuine mass movement.

Of course, Ekushey February itself remains a watershed moment in our history. On that day in 1952, thousands of students gathered in front of the old arts faculty building of Dhaka

Bangladesh’s political economy today. The land question, for instance, remains fraught with class-based inequalities and the dispossession of minority communities. The ongoing struggles of tea workers in Sylhet exemplify this dynamic, as they fight for their land amid corporate and state collusion. Labour, too, remains a site of acute exploitation. Once justly described by Samir Amin as part of the “periphery of the periphery” under global capitalism, Bangladesh’s labour force, particularly its female workers, endures some of the world’s harshest working conditions despite official narratives of development.

Labour here is not a homogeneous entity; rather, it comprises various categories of workers subjected to varying degrees of proletarianisation. The labouring body, particularly the gendered body, becomes central to understanding the language of struggle that emerges from these conditions. Jean Jacques Lecercle’s concept of the “labouring body,” with its biological, social, and experiential dimensions, underscores how language is rooted in the material realities of labour and exploitation.

Turning to the language question, we find resonances with anti-colonial theorists like Ngugi wa Thiong’o. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi asserts that language fundamentally shapes people’s relationship with their environment and the world. While Rabindranath Tagore also engaged

singular, elite-centric identity.

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However, the linguistic landscape of Bangladesh remains marked by inequalities today. The dominance of English in elite and institutional settings perpetuates a class divide, privileging a small, affluent minority while marginalising the majority who communicate primarily in Bangla, Indigenous, or other languages. This linguistic hierarchy mirrors broader social inequalities, as access to English often determines access to education, employment, and social mobility. Regional dialects and Indigenous languages face even greater marginalisation, reflecting the ongoing dynamics of cultural and linguistic colonialism.

Globalisation—often glorified as a force for connectivity but, in reality, a euphemism for capitalism’s latest stage—exacerbates these inequalities. As Ngugi and Fanon both recognised, the spread of dominant languages often serves as a tool of cultural imperialism. In Bangladesh, the valorisation of English within educational and corporate spheres creates a linguistic hierarchy that aligns with global capitalist interests. The result is a deepening of class divisions, with linguistic competence in English functioning as a gatekeeper of privilege.

This internal linguistic divide also manifests in attitudes towards Bangla itself. Some members of the urban elite take pride in their inability to speak or write in Bangla, positioning themselves as cosmopolitan while dismissing the cultural and historical significance of their mother tongue. Such attitudes reflect a colonial mindset, perpetuating the belief in the superiority of global, market-friendly languages over locally rooted ones. And, of course, the languages of Indigenous peoples and other minorities remain the most marginalised in the country, while Bangla asserts itself as the dominant tongue.

Thus, the unfinished nature of the Language Movement, like the liberation movement, calls for renewed engagement with the politics of language. This engagement must move beyond nostalgic commemorations to address the structural and ideological forces that continue to marginalise linguistic and cultural diversity. It requires a collective effort to challenge the ongoing legacies and active forces of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism that shape our linguistic practices and policies.

Ultimately, the struggle for linguistic justice remains inseparable from broader struggles for social, economic, and political emancipation. As Fanon reminds us, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.” In Bangladesh, reclaiming the radical spirit of the Language Movement means not only defending Bangla but also ensuring that linguistic, cultural, and social practices reflect the principles of equality, justice, and dignity—the three core principles of our national liberation movement that were recently reclaimed by the July uprising itself—for all communities. Only then can the unfinished project of our Language Movement move towards its emancipatory horizon. And, at the risk of sounding “utopian,” I contend that this moment in our history demands a new politics—indeed, a new revolutionary politics—without which building a “new Bangladesh” will remain impossible.

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

forced East Pakistan to purchase overpriced salt from Karachi, causing a 200-fold price surge.

To add to this already grim scenario, partition had drained approximately 1.33 billion rupees from East Bengal by 1948–49 alone. These material conditions, along with the struggles of peasants, workers, and Indigenous communities, laid the foundations for the 1952 Language Movement—an event far more complex and politically charged than the sanitised narratives we routinely encounter during the Awami fascist regime in particular.

To fully grasp the significance of the Language Movement, we must consider the earlier waves of resistance in East Bengal—an internal neo-colony—before 1952. Three key movements stand out, revealing how poor peasants—Hindu and Muslim alike—along with Indigenous peoples and communists, got united against the *zamindari-jotdari* system and the ruling classes.

These include the Tebhaga Movement of 1946–47, the Nachol Rebellion of 1949–50, and the Hajong Rebellion of 1949–50.

The Nachol Rebellion, led by Santal activist Mata Sardar and communist leaders Ramen and Ila Mitra, saw peasants of all communities rise against exploitative *jotdars*. Though initially successful, the movement was violently repressed by the Pakistani state; activists faced brutal torture, and Ila Mitra was imprisoned and tortured. I can’t help but recall lines from a Bangla poem I wrote in my late twenties: “Remember Chandipur, Dharol, Ghasura, Jagdai, Kendua, Napitpara,

University, chanting “*Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai*” (We demand Bangla as the state language). Defying Section 144, they faced police bullets, with five killed and many more injured. As one of my poems aptly put it, “Bangla was written in blood in 1952.”

The Language Movement, to which students provided a conjunctural but decisive voice, quickly morphed into a mass movement, as Badruddin Umar’s work meticulously documents. Language itself emerged as a significant site of class struggle, with peasants and workers playing crucial roles in shaping the Movement’s emancipatory and anticolonial ethos. From the outset, the Movement directly challenged what might be termed linguistic colonialism.

Many conventional accounts fail to explore the intersection of language and colonialism, thereby missing the deeper relationship between decolonisation and democratisation. Such narratives rarely consider the broader political and social implications, particularly the potential for the total emancipation of Bangladesh’s “ordinary” people: women, peasants, workers, and marginalised ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities, our Indigenous peoples included. The language question remains unresolved in our history, deeply entangled with issues of land, labour, and the body—the four material sites of both oppression and opposition. Without freeing these sites from the systemic forces of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, genuine emancipation remains elusive.

This formulation, while broad, becomes evident when we examine

with the relationship between language and being, it was Kazi Nazrul Islam who explicitly identified language as a site of anti-colonial struggle. For Nazrul, as for Ngugi, language is more than a medium of communication; it is a political praxis that challenges colonial and class-based hegemonies.

Our Language Movement was not simply about choosing Bangla as the state language; it was about asserting self-definition against an imposed linguistic regime. The movement thus functioned as a political act of resistance against linguistic and cultural colonialism, particularly against the attempts to impose Urdu as the sole state language. The partition of India serves as a crucial backdrop here. Partition was driven by colonial power structures, middle-class political interests, and inadequate cultural resistance to British domination. The creation of Pakistan ushered in a new phase of internal colonialism, with West Pakistan dominating East Bengal economically, politically, and culturally.

The attempts to impose Urdu signified this cultural colonialism. Despite Bangla being the majority language, the state sought to establish Urdu as the unifying linguistic standard. The assertion that “Urdu, Urdu alone, shall be the state language of Pakistan” paralleled British colonial linguistic policies, which sought to marginalise Indigenous languages and cultures. The 1952 Language Movement was thus both a political and cultural struggle, directly confronting this attempt to erase linguistic diversity and impose a