

Bangladesh: Language for Liberation: The Class Struggle Behind Ekushey (21st) February

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February 21, 1952 remains one of the most significant dates in the history of Bangladesh, a landmark day in the context of the 1971 liberation war. To understand how the Bhasha Andolan (Language Movement) became a mass uprising, we must look at the class struggle that led up to the movement.

February 21, 1952, is widely acknowledged as a watershed moment in the history of Bangladesh. The killing of students at the hands of an oppressive Pakistani state that neither spoke the language of half of its constituents nor cared about their material interests was the major catalyst in a [series of events](#) that culminated into adoption of Bangla as state language in 1956, a landmark moment for the subsequent liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. Since 1999, when it was recognized as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO, *Ekushey* February (Feb 21) has become a symbol of multilingualism and cultural diversity.

To understand how the *Bhasha Andolan* (Language Movement), originally confined within the boundaries of intellectual arguments and the economic anxiety of an embryonic middle-class, turned into a nationwide struggle that crystallised the demands for autonomy, sovereignty, and an end to economic discrimination, we must look at the broader socio-economic and political landscape. This is necessary because the establishment of Bangla as a state language in pre-1971 Pakistan would not have been possible without the uprisings of peasants and workers, led by communists, between 1947 and 1952.

Today, as Bangla [risks erasure](#), violence against non-Muslim minorities [rise](#) and *adibashis* (indigenous tribes) struggle to maintain their [cultural existence](#), it bears remembering that *Ekushey* February stands on the sacrifice of not just Bengalis, but also *adibashis*. Furthermore, the history of class struggle and multiculturalism behind the Language Movement will forever remain as stark reminders of this shared struggle.

Internal Colonialism in Post-partition Pakistan

...That adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specifically provided in the constitution for minorities in these [geographically contiguous] units and in these [Muslim majority demarcated] regions for the protection of their religious, cultural, economic, political, administrative and other rights and interests in consultation with them. - *Lahore Resolution* (1940)

The politics of the 1947 partition was as much related to class interests as it was to communal ones - the Hindu-Muslim conflicts in pre-partition India developed along two clear economic lines as demonstrated by Atiur Rahman and Lenin Azad in *Bhasha-Andolaner Aartho-Shamajik Potobhumi*.

They show that the two raw materials that were crucial drivers of the pre-partition Indian economy, jute and textile, came from the Muslim-majority regions of East Bengal and Punjab where farmers were dissatisfied with the prices they got from Hindu industrialists.

The second area of conflict arose in non-agrarian sectors - the Hindu middle-class and *petit-bourgeois* had greater access to education, jobs and business opportunities as compared to the Muslims, especially thanks to their collaboration and cooperation with the British. Even the Muslim elites were unable to compete with the Hindu industrialists, thus creating an economic anxiety among the middle and upper-class Muslims. While Pakistan was generally pronounced to be a country where Muslim interests would be protected, especially those of the suffering peasants and farmers and the Muslim working class, the idea of Pakistan was propagated by Muslim landed aristocrats and elites in India looking to further their own interests. This strategy, therefore, already set up East Bengal to get the shorter end of the stick post-partition.

In his 1955 survey *Economic and Commercial Conditions in Pakistan*, F. B. Arnold observed the inequalities between East and West Pakistan at its birth. In 1947, only 1.58% of all farmland was equipped with irrigation systems in the East compared to 78.41% of all farmland in the West; in the Sindh region, 100% of all farmland was already utilizing artificial systems. While no modern farm equipment was made available to the East even by 1953, the West had widespread tractor use as early as 1946. Moreover, industrial development in the East in 1947 was scant - out of the 17 textile and spinning mills, only three were located there.

Despite being underdeveloped at the onset, the East Bengal population believed their material lives would improve post-partition. But it was all for naught - analyzing the economic conditions a few years post-partition, Rahman and Azad demonstrated how East Pakistan became an internal colony for West Pakistan. By 1953, the West had developed 22 times more electric distribution than the East. Healthcare spending continued to decline in the East while the revenue collected by the central government from the East was rarely invested back in the region. A 1954 *Overseas Economic Survey* by Britain showed that almost 99% of foreign aid from the US, New Zealand, Australia and France was used for development projects in West Pakistan.

The discriminatory policies of the Pakistan government did not only prevent development of East Pakistan, but actively suppressed it. The *Weekly Shainik*, published by the progressive Islamist organisation Tamaddun Majlish, highlighted the multiple crises plaguing the region between 1947-1952 - food shortages in almost every major district, rampant corruption among government officials and collusion with jute middlemen (majority of whom were non-Bengalis), skyrocketing prices of necessities, smuggling, black-marketing, and a lack of non-agrarian jobs. In Sylhet, the food crisis devolved into famine as the government, who had forced farmers to sell their paddy at low prices, failed to provide rice to the starving masses at an affordable price.

Similarly, during the 1950-1951 salt crisis in East Pakistan, the government's Salt Control Act prohibited salt imports from India, ignored salt production capabilities in various areas of East Bengal, and forced East Pakistanis to buy salt produced in Karachi that led to a 200-fold increase in market price. This was compounded by Pakistan's refusal to devalue their currency in 1949 when the Pound sterling and the Indian rupee devalued by 30.5 per cent. Instead of lowering prices of consumer goods in East Pakistan, this decision resulted in increased transfer of goods into India where they fetched a higher price. At the time, Pakistan was still importing daily necessities, while exporting raw materials; the decision to not devalue the Pakistani rupee resulted in India imposing an import ban, which created more black markets and smuggling opportunities- conditions that further exploited jute farmers in East Pakistan.

Finally, there was very little inflow of capital into East Pakistan from India even as capital outflow in

the form of smuggled goods continued unabated. In fact, Rahman and Azad calculate that between 1948-49, 1.33 billion rupees had moved out of East Pakistan to India as a consequence of the partition. However, the majority of market share remained in the hands of Hindus, especially Marwari businessmen, who were reluctant to invest in a region where they would not return to live.

জান দেবো তবু ভাত দেবো না/ Jaan Debo Tobu Bhaat Debo Na (Would rather give my life than my food)

For a colonised people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity. — Frantz Fanon, [The Wretched of the Earth](#) (1961)

The Muslim-majority peasants and farmers, bound within sharecropping and other feudal policies imposed through the *zamindari* system of land ownership, formed a significant portion of the popular base for Pakistan advocacy pre-partition. Due to the communal nature of the class difference (Hindu majority landowners vs Muslim majority peasants) in East Bengal, the Muslim peasants intuitively wanted to get rid of their Hindu *zamindars* and *jotdars* (who oversaw the cultivation in *zamindars'* lands). However, it should be noted that the anti-feudal *Muslim Krishak Praja Party* (KPP), the vocal proponent of peasant and farmers rights in Bengal, [allied themselves](#) with the Muslim League (led by Muslim landowners in Bengal) after getting snubbed by Congress in 1937.

After the horrific famine of 1943, caused by [Winston Churchill's](#) policies, the peasants and farmers in East Bengal rallied under communist leadership against the *zamindari-jotdari* system of land ownership. The [Tebhaga Andolan](#) aimed to reduce the amount of crops to be paid as tax from a half to one-third of the harvest. Although it was brutally repressed, it ignited other peasant rebellions across East Bengal that broke through communal lines and united *adibashi*, Hindu, and Muslim peasants. These rebellions unmasked the vicious nature of the Muslim League government, and the extent to which they would go to deny the rights of those they had promised to liberate.

The Nachol rebellion closely followed the end of the *Tebhaga Andolan* where peasants in the Rajshahi division of East Bengal rebelled under the leadership of Saontal leader, Matla Sardar, and communist leaders Ramen and [Ila Mitra](#). Centered around Nachol *thana*, the rebellion started in March 1948, and the well-organized peasants-Hindu, Muslim and Saontal-were able to take the *jotdars* by surprise; in a matter of few months, the *Tebhaga* policy was applied throughout the Nawabganj district.

The success however did not last long - the assassination of five police sentries and a constable sent by the government to investigate the area by Saontal activists led to a brutal response by the government. Soldiers, armed with rifles and machine guns, arrived at Amnura station eight miles from Nachol, and began a systematic extermination of Saontal villages. Ramen Mitra and Matla Sardar, along with their Saontal volunteers, were able to escape to India, but Ila Mitra and her cohort were apprehended.

Saontal activists were violently tortured by the police to get them to identify Ila Mitra as the mastermind behind the rebellion. At one point, the police beat to death a Saontal activist in front of Ila Mitra's eyes; later, they exacted brutal torture on her when she was imprisoned. As Satyen Sen writes in *Bangladesher Krishaker Shangram* (1976), no details of such police violence were published in contemporary Pakistani newspapers. The only way the details of torture borne by Ila Mitra became public was through Mitra's testimonial at court during her defense at the end of 1950, later printed and distributed by communists across the region.

Another landmark insurrection was led by the Hajong Tribe who had lost their lands in the

Mymensingh district to the British through the [Garó Hills Act \(1869\)](#), thereby forced into serfdom under the *tanka* policy. Under this policy, the *zamindar* decided the amount of tax to be paid in crops, which remain fixed regardless of production and increased annually, thus binding the peasants into transgenerational debt. Time and again, the Hajongs rose up against this policy, but their protests were either quelled by toothless reforms (such as the ones in 1940), or violently repressed, as seen in 1946-47.

Post-partition, in secret meetings held by communists in 1948, an armed revolution was deemed necessary to abolish the *tanka* policy. Renowned communist activist [Moni Singh](#) had already been building relationships with the Hajongs; during the 1943 famine, the communists were able to win the Hajongs' trust by providing them with relief. Thereafter, under communist and *adibashi* leadership, armed conflict between Hajongs and the government kept escalating between 1949-50, with increasingly vicious repression tactics undertaken by the government.

In July 1949, 500 soldiers surrounded Jagoripara village in Kalmakanda and killed 40 residents as they were sleeping; in the same month, police arrested 50 peasant activists and tortured 7 of them to death. Despite such losses, the Hajongs remained resolute, taking up the slogan "*jaan debo tobu bhaat debo na*".

In the mid-1950s, aiming to curb the violence, chief minister Nurul Amin declared the abolition of the *tanka* policy and asked the Hajongs to end their rebellion. Given their contemporary state of disarray, communist leaders decided to end the campaign following Amin's declaration.

But as soon as the campaign was called off, the government began its vicious displacement campaign against the Hajongs, driving most of them away to the states of Assam and Meghalaya in India. According to Sheshir Rajan's *Roktey Bheja Garo Pahar*, between 1948-1951, Pakistani army and their collaborators killed 103 people, injured 500 men and women, arrested 10,000, starved 1500 to death, and grabbed land in around 70 villages. Communist leaders were either arrested and imprisoned or they had to escape to India.

লক্ষ লক্ষ লোক ভুখা হায়ে, যেহ অজাদি জুহুতা হায়ে (Lakho Insaan Bhukha Haye, Yeh Azadi Jhoota Haye (Lakhs of people are hungry, this freedom is a hoax)

In his assessment of the political landscape of the Language Movement, scholar M. M. Akash identifies three main lines of political thought that joined forces to claim Bangla as the state language – first, Islamic progressivism (e.g. Tamaddun Majlish), secondly Western liberal bourgeois democracy (Awami Muslim League, Muslim *Chaatro* League) and finally, revolutionary socialism (Communist Party of Pakistan, *Jubo* League). The progressive Islamists and communists were prominent in the movement between 1948-50, while the liberal bourgeois thought engulfed the other two strains in the following years especially given the weakened form of the Communist Party at that time. This shift in the influence of the communists led to some liberal leaders of the movement such as Oli Ahad downplaying the role played by the Left in the Language Movement, but a closer look at their activities says otherwise.

In February-March 1948, at the Second Congress of Communist Party of India in Kolkata, the Communist party adopted B.T. Ranadive's [Calcutta Thesis](#), which posited that the formation of India and Pakistan were bourgeois victories and failed to liberate the peasants and working class. Therefore, an armed struggle against such bourgeois states, carried out by separate Communist parties in these two states, was the only way forward. Subsequently, on March 6, 1948, the Communist Party of Pakistan was formed; the East Bengal Organizing Committee took to the streets with the slogan "*laakho insaan bhukha haye, yeh azadi jhoota hain; saacchey azadi chhinkey lao*" (Lakhs of people are hungry, this freedom is a hoax, let's win real freedom).

Besides organising peasants, the communists also played a significant role in building up militant trade unions among East Pakistan railway and spinning mill workers. Workers in East Bengal, who had ushered in the new state of Pakistan, were fast disillusioned - led by communist leaders, they staged 26 strikes and walkouts between August 14-December 31, 1947, with more than 12,000 workers participating. In 1948, Dhaka University employees went on a two-and-a-half-month long strike joined by students; then student leader Sheikh Mujib was arrested at one of these demonstrations. The government used these protests to mass arrest dissidents and political activists, whom they described as anti-Pakistan elements.

Between 1948-49, differences in political ideologies led to internal conflicts between conservative leaders and the communists. The tension intensified when Dr. Malik, chairman of Trade Union Federation, Pakistan, joined the reactionary Nazimuddin government in October 1948 as a minister, and finally boiled over when a strike by the leftist railway workers union on March 9, 1949, was reprimanded by the Federation. Capitalising on the increasing alienation with the tactics adopted by striking railway workers, the Federation expelled the leftist unions on August 13, 1949, thereby drastically reducing the influence of the communists among workers.

In *May Dibosh Bishwayon: Bangladeshey Sramik Andolan*, Shekhar Dutta counts a total of 255 strikes and walkouts with 132,843 participating workers between 1948-1953, most of those organized by Communists despite their setbacks. The workers were not only protesting for better wages, but increasingly against the socio-economic discrimination, state violence and repression, and of course, later, the demand for Bangla to be instituted as the official language.

Reflecting on the activities of the communists between 1947-1952, Mahbub Ullah asserts that the adoption of the Calcutta thesis was a grave mistake (*Purbo Banglar Baam O Communist Andolan 1947-1971*), a view that was in line with the 1950 editorial in *For Lasting Peace, for People's Democracy*, [Cominform's](#) organ. The editorial had discredited Ranadive's "[intertwined revolution](#)" idea and urged Indian communists to "unite all classes, parties, groups, and organizations willing to defend the national independence and freedom of India".

Compounded by their setbacks in the peasant rebellions and trade unions, and the increasing disagreement over the way forward, the communists in Pakistan became disorganized. Simultaneously, the government continued its hard crackdown on left activists and politicians - on April 24, 1950, communist prisoners in the Rajshahi jail were shot by police, killing seven and injuring 33. The following March, communist leaders across Pakistan were once again arrested on charges of planning a coup under the [Rawalpindi conspiracy](#).

After the various setbacks, the East Bengal Organising Committee met in the mid-1950s and decided to focus their efforts on the nascent Language Movement in collaboration with liberal groups. They formed *Jubo League*, a mass organization, in April 1951; *Jubo League* activists later served as the vanguard of the demonstrations, leading up to February 21, 1952 and beyond, in the Language Movement. However, the peasant wing of the Communist Party did not recover till 1958 when they reorganized under renowned leader Maulana Bhashani.

মোদের গরব মোদের আশা, আঁ মরি বাংলা
Bhasha (Our pride our hope, the immortal Bangla language)

In his *Purbo-Banglar Bhasha Andolan O Totkalin Rajniti* (1979), the historian Badruddin Umar identified the key reason why the Communist Party failed in its mass uprisings - the mass appeal needed for an armed struggle against a state was non-existent in the recently formed East Pakistan. While the economic discrimination and state violence could not be ignored, the masses, especially the Muslim farmers, peasants and working class, still believed in the idea of Pakistan even as they

started turning against the Muslim League government. But the adoption of Ranadive's thesis prevented the communists from using that opportunity, which was deftly co-opted by the more liberal bourgeois formations such as the Awami Muslim League.

However, without the mass agitation led by communists between 1948-50, it would not have been possible for the Language Movement to escape the boundaries of the middle class and intellectuals, or the mass uprising to take place following the events of February 21, 1952. As M.M. Akash points out, many of the activists leading the movement had strong social and political ties to the rural areas, where the government's economic policies and repression had affected their own relatives and friends.

Thus, the communists' rural and urban organizing, and subsequent rebellions, protests, strikes and walkouts, played a key role in breaking down class and communal boundaries, while uniting the East Bengal population in demanding Bangla as the state language of Pakistan. The demands for autonomy and sovereignty coalesced under the surface into a Bengali nationalist identity that would later lead to the independence of Bangladesh.

At a time when [disaster capitalism](#) and [xenophobia](#) are converging in Bangladesh, this history of the class struggle behind the Language Movement serves as an important reminder that Bangladesh was founded on multiculturalism, and the sacrifices of peasants, workers and communists across communal lines, without which the history of Bangladesh would have been written differently.

Nafis Hasan (@cannafis_) is a Bangladeshi Postdoctoral Scholar at Tufts University (Boston, MA). He is also a climate organizer with the Democratic Socialists of America and an editor of Science for the People magazine.

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