

Ekushey: The Bengali origins of International Mother Language Day

Bengali was accepted as an official language in Pakistan four years after the demonstrations that started on 21 February 1952 and left 19 students dead; a date that was later to be observed as the 'International Mother Language Day' all over the world.

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Near the university in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka, there is a striking concrete sculpture – the Shaheed Minar, or Martyr's Monument. It was erected to remember those who lost their lives in the fight to get Bengali accepted as a state language of Pakistan, alongside Urdu. The fateful events

marked by this monument took place on 21 and 22 February 1952, and, wherever there are Bengali communities, this day is commemorated as Ekushey – Twentyfirst.

In 1999, in honour of the Bengali struggle, UNESCO declared 21 February as International Mother Language Day.

When the British left India in August 1947, they divided this part of their former empire along religious lines into predominantly Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan. Pakistan was made up of two parts: West Pakistan, home to the new Pakistani government and its bureaucracy, and, far away on the other side of India, the Bengali speaking lands of East Pakistan.

The new state of Pakistan was troubled from the start, and it was not long before the people of the East began to feel that they had exchanged British colonialism for a new colonialism by West Pakistani elites. Like the Kurds in Turkey, they saw themselves as under an internal colonialism, and important in this was the colonialism of language.

The issue in Pakistan was the central government's insistence that only Urdu would be recognised as a state language, effectively ensuring the continued dominance of the central areas of West Pakistan. Unlike in the Kurdish case, Bengali speakers were actually in the majority, as the population of East Pakistan was both more numerous and less ethnically diverse than that of the West, but it was the Urdu speakers who had the positions of power.

Before the end of 1947, students in East Pakistan were protesting plans to make Urdu the sole state language. In February 1948, an amendment that would have allowed the use of Bengali in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly was voted down. Growing protests culminated in a general strike on 11 March. Despite appearing to make concessions to the protesting students, the government soon made it clear that they had no intention of meeting the students' central demand. Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself emphasised, on a visit to Dhaka, that "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan".

The language movement only grew, along with understanding of the new colonial relationship with West Pakistan. In 1952, after the Pakistani Prime Minister reiterated, in Dhaka, the government's refusal to accept Bengali as a state language, there were strikes at Dhaka University, and a call was made for demonstrations across East Pakistan to be organised for 21 February. The government responded by banning all assemblies and demonstrations, but the students decided to defy the ban and go ahead with their plans.

On the 21st, thousands of students from different institutions gathered at Dhaka University. When they emerged from the campus, they were met with police baton charges; and when the students resisted, the police responded with live fire. Three students were fatally wounded, and a peon and a nine-year old boy also lost their lives to police fire.

This state violence was compounded the next day when the mourning procession was attacked by both the police and the army. At the end of these two days, nineteen students were dead. It was a terrible toll, but these events proved a key moment in a campaign that, four years later, culminated in the acceptance of Bengali as an official state language.

This wasn't the end of course. Fifteen years later, in 1971, East Pakistan won independence, as Bangladesh, after a brutal liberation war. Freedom from the latest Bengali-speaking elites is still only a distant dream.