

Language Movement in the Western Border: In Search of the Role of Women

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Abstract: The Language Movement of 1948-1952 was not merely an expression of the demand for language; it was also intertwined with the socio-economic, political, and cultural existence of the people of East Bengal. At every stage of this struggle against the Pakistani rulers, women actively and diversely participated. Women played a significant role not only in Dhaka, the epicenter of the language movement, but also in various distant bordering districts and sub-districts. Female students from schools and colleges, as well as ordinary women, made noticeable contributions. The conservative society of that time did not see women's participation in street protests and movements as normative behavior. Familial obstacles added to social conservatism. Nevertheless, despite all barriers presented by a backward society, women participated in the movement for the dignity of the mother tongue. Considering the socio-cultural circumstances of that time, it was not easy. While some research has been done on the women involved in the language movement in Dhaka and other divisional cities, the role of the women of various districts on the western border of the eastern wing of Pakistan went largely unnoticed by scholars. Many of their names are still unknown. The comprehensive history of the language movement cannot be written without acknowledging the contributions of women of all classes and locations involved in this movement. The primary purpose of this paper is to find answers to what role the women of the western bordering districts played in the language movement, what was the backlash they faced for participating in the movement and how the contributors have been evaluated by the greater society including the state. To do so, the research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Autobiographies, newspapers, books and scholarly articles are the basis of this paper. Following a historical analytical research method, this qualitative research paper concludes with the findings that in the language movement, there was multi-faceted and significant participation of women in every bordering district of the western part of the then eastern Pakistan. However, while some women have been recognized, a considerable number of them, especially from rural areas remain unnoticed and neglected.

Key Words: Women, Language Movement, Cultural exploitation, Western border, Marginalisation.

Introduction

One of the most significant events in the national history of eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, is the Language Movement of 1948-1952. It is also a cultural movement built around the Bengali language, mother tongue of the majority people of the region. The cultural movement that emerged through the state language movement eventually turned into a struggle for dignity and existence. The language movement was not merely an expression of the demand for the recognition of Bengali language as one of the state languages; it was also intertwined with the socio-economic, political, and cultural existence of the people of eastern Bengal. In fact, the movement was an overall protest against the discriminatory behavior of the Pakistani rulers and their anti-eastern Bengal attitudes and actions. There was spontaneous participation from men and women of all classes and professions in the struggle to prevent the establishment of Urdu as the lingua franca of the newly born state of Pakistan. Women, overcoming all the restrictions of movement in a backward society, participated in this movement. They made significant contributions with their courageous and determined attitudes during those fiery days of resistance and protest.

Given the difficulty of assessing the role of women in the language movement across all of eastern Bengal's border districts in a single article, the present paper focuses on the districts of the western border of the province during the movement (1948-1952). These border districts include Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jessore, Khulna, and Kushtia. Interestingly, these districts were all under the then Rajshahi division. The rationale behind selecting those districts is their relatively distant location from the epicenter of the movement, comparatively less literacy rate of these bordering districts except Chittagong Hill Tracts and less province-wide political importance due to the smaller number of non-agricultural labour force in these districts.¹ It is better to mention here that women's participation in the language movement was also seen in various subdivisions within these districts and these subdivisions are also included in the ambit of this article. Admittedly, these districts and sub-divisions (most of which became districts after 1984) already have literature (some of which is not actual peer-reviewed research) on the language movement. However, the role of women in the

movement is rarely found in those writings. On the other hand, district and sub-divisional accounts of women's society's response and activities in the movement, to the extent available, present only a partial picture rather than the whole scenario of the western frontier. Consequently, the overall picture of the role of women in the language movement of those border areas is missing in the existing knowledge domain. Certainly, it is necessary to form a comprehensive picture of the role of women in those relatively backward bordering districts that will help us to understand the range of the language movement that cuts across gender divides and encompasses the whole spectrum of the Bengali-speaking people. This paper intends to fill a significant lacuna in the epistemology of the language movement of 1948-1952.

This research employs a historical-analytical research method and draws upon both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include census reports, contemporary newspapers, periodicals, and autobiographies or memoirs. However, the study recognizes that these sources may reflect subjective perspectives, biases, or memory lapses rather than objective truths. Secondary materials, such as research articles, essays, books, and edited volumes, have also been consulted, though their interpretations and conclusions may be influenced by the biases of previous historians. The study acknowledges these limitations and seeks to approach both sets of sources critically within a qualitative historical framework.

This article is divided into two sections. The theoretical section explores under what circumstances a community forms collective resistance and which elements of culture being attacked trigger such resistance. The other section presents and evaluates the multifaceted participation of women in various districts, subdivisions, and rural areas of the western border during the Language Movement.

Theoretical Framework

Why do resistance movements happen, and when? When does a community collectively build resistance? Under what circumstances does armed resistance become essential for them? In what context does the intensity of resistance vary? These questions are relevant to any cultural or political movement. Sociologists have conducted extensive research to

find satisfactory answers to these questions, resulting in numerous argument- and data-rich research works. American sociologist Ted Robert Gurr provides insights into the causes of mass uprisings.²

His main points are:³

Intrusion	Cultural cores	High intensity of collective Violence
	Relative Deprivation	
Intrusion	Cultural Peripherals	Low intensity of collective Violence
	Relative Deprivation	

Two types of circumstances can initiate resistance or rebellion within a society. First, when the policies and actions of an external exploitative force impact the fundamental cultural elements of that society, there is a strong possibility of intense collective resistance. The elements on which a community's identity, distinctiveness, and existence depend are referred to as fundamental cultural elements, such as language and culture. Second, even if such situations arise concerning the peripheral cultural elements of a community, resistance will occur. However, in this case, the resistance may not be as intense, widespread, or result in a fundamental change by equally stirring the entire community over a long period. Peripheral cultural elements, when distorted by exploitative processes, may agitate the collective consciousness of a community, but their existence will not be threatened. In both cases, relative deprivation acts as a common factor in creating resistance. In a colonial structure or an exploitative process, a sense of deprivation gradually develops among the subjugated and exploited communities. When the gap between the aspiration to enjoy legitimate rights based on cultural elements and the rights actually received in the prevailing situation becomes stark and continues to grow, relative deprivation occurs.⁴

Ted Robert Gurr's theory is relevant in the context of the cultural and political movements organized in eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, from 1952 to 1971. After the creation of

Pakistan in 1947, the language, history, heritage, and culture of eastern Bengal began to be attacked. When the western ruling elite's first step of exploitation and oppression targeted the mother tongue, a resistance movement started in the eastern part of the country. The 1952 Language Movement created a powerful collective resistance against West Pakistan. According to Ted Robert Gurr's theory, whenever a society's fundamental cultural elements are attacked, collective resistance arises. The Bengali cultural movement that emerged through the language movement gradually turned into a struggle for existence. On the other hand, the pro-Pakistan government continued various official and unofficial activities to hinder or halt the development of Bengali culture. When military rule was imposed at the end of the 1950s, the attacks on Bengali culture became more intense. Through autocratic rule, the government severely hindered and attempted to distort the practice of eastern Bengal's literature and culture. Notable among these were the imposition of Urdu as the state language, conspiracies to introduce Arabic and Roman scripts instead of the Bengali script, opposition to Rabindranath Tagore, distortion of Kazi Nazrul Islam's literature, and creating various obstacles to the work of progressive artists, intellectuals, and organizations. Resistance began as a protest against these attacks on fundamental culture elements. However, economic exploitation and political dominance were also active behind this cultural repression. This situation led to a sense of relative deprivation among the public. The people's latent anger from a sense of betrayal and oppression began to surface. This eventually led to the most intense collective resistance, which culminated in the Liberation War of 1971.

On August 14, 1947 immediately after the creation of Pakistan, the Western ruling elite began their exploitation and oppression by attacking the mother tongue prompting a movement in East Bengal. From the very beginning of this movement, women were actively involved. From July 1947, in response to the statements in various newspapers and declarations that presented Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, many women in this country began to voice their opposition and support for the Bengali language.⁵ During that

time, there were numerous discussions, meetings, and debates across the country on the issue of the state language, and women also participated. Initially the language movement was limited to statements, discussions, and meetings in newspapers, but it gained a new dimension in 1948. The movement that started in 1947-48, demanding that Bengali be made one of the state languages, increased awareness among women. Before the Partition, women had not particularly participated in any street movements or struggles in Dhaka or other divisional cities. The 1948 Language Movement was the first of its kind where women had taken part directly and played a significant role. In continuation of this, widespread participation of women was observed in the final phase of the 1952 Language Movement. Khawaja Nazimuddin's speech on January 27, 1952 which declared that Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan reignited the state language controversy and triggered the second phase of the movement. This phase of the language movement was not confined to Dhaka city alone but spread beyond district and subdivisional towns to remote villages. In the following section, this paper intends to show the role of women of aforementioned districts in the language movement.

Rajshahi District

The language movement began in Rajshahi as early as 1948 and gained momentum in early 1952. On February 21, Rajshahi observed a day-long strike. That afternoon, a public meeting was held at Bhuban Mohan Park under the presidency of Dr. SMA Ghaffar. At this meeting, Jahanara Begum sang the song "Bicharpoti tomar bichar korbe jara - aj jegeche sei jonota" ("Those who will judge you, the people, have awoken").⁶ When news of the shooting at students' demonstrations in Dhaka on February 21 spread to Rajshahi, Ataur Rahman led a decision to organize a strike, protest marches, and meetings on February 22. On the following day, in preparation for the rally and protest meeting, Hafiza Begum, Feroza Begum, Hasina Begum, and Khuku collectively initiated a campaign using a palanquin. In the absence of a microphone, they had to use a traditional cone-shaped loudspeaker (chonga) to make themselves heard and encourage women's participation.⁷ On February 22, a massive protest march included the participation of female students.

Monowara Begum, a ninth-grade student from Promothnath Girls' School, played a leading role in encouraging female students to join the march. She gathered the students by giving speeches against the oppressive rulers and the shooting at the march. Tenth-grade students Hafiza Begum Tuku, Jahanara Begum, Mohsina Begum, and others assisted in organizing the march. Teachers, including Headmistress Nurmahal Khatun, Hazera Begum, Monsura Begum, Minoti, Sneha, Geeta, Halima, and Nirupama, supported the movement. The long march started from the school, passed through Sagarpara, Kalpana Hall, Alupottir Mor (intersection), and then to Bhuban Mohan Park, joined by students from Jubilee School. There, Monowara Begum, Dr. Mohsina Begum, and others delivered speeches.⁸ Language activist Akhtar Banu reminisced about this event:

On the open stage of the park, Monowara Apa and Mohsina Apa gave fiery speeches alongside the male students. Their speeches were intensely passionate. Listening to the news of the martyrdom of our brothers in Dhaka, the police brutality, and the injustices of the ruling authorities, tears flowed from my eyes like a waterfall of sorrow. I didn't understand everything, nor did I grasp the meaning of all the strong words, but an innocent emotion continuously moved my heart. Jahanara Begum's voice also stirred everyone deeply.⁹

A notable aspect of the language movement in Rajshahi was the significant participation of women. Jahanara Begum, Begum Monowara Rahman, Mohsina Begum, Hafiza Begum Tuku, Hasina Begum, Rowshan Ara, Khurshida Banu, Feroza Begum, Phulu, Nurmahal Khatun, Hazera, Abeda, Minoti, Sneha, Geeta, Monowara Begum, Hasna Begum, Halima, Monsura, Nirupama, Sara Khandakar, Binapani Basak, Arju, Julekha Begum, and Akhtar Banu played prominent roles in the marches, meetings, and organizations.¹⁰ Women actively and vocally participated in the language movement in Rajshahi. One of Rajshahi's notable language activists, Abdur Razzak, mentioned:

Women participated in meetings and marches and also played a role in collecting financial donations. Their significant role was in communication; they worked as couriers. Their participation was a major step forward for progress. This served as a supportive force for women's participation in subsequent movements.¹¹

In Rajshahi, women actively participated in organizing movements, creating and distributing posters, raising funds, exchanging news, and joining meetings and marches. The plaque of historical language movement leaders in Rajshahi, constructed by the Rajshahi City Corporation, includes the names of women language activists such as Jahanara Begum Begu, Mohsina Begum, Jerina Begum, Kulsum Begum, Monowara Begum, Hafiza Begum Tuku, Hasina Begum Dolly, and Rowshan Ara Khuku.¹²

Natore, a sub-division of Rajshahi district also witnessed the flame of language movement. In Natore, Begum Shamsunnahar, under whose leadership, the *Mahila Bhasha Andolon Samiti* (Women's Language Movement Committee) was formed on February 21, 1952. The committee organized public meetings at various educational institutions and open fields to build public opinion for recognizing Bengali as one of the state languages.¹³ In protest of the shooting at student demonstrations in Dhaka, the Women's Language Movement Committee of Natore organized a large procession on February 21, which marched through the entire town. Later, a meeting was held at Chowdhury Sahib's field, chaired by Begum Shamsunnahar. The meeting demanded the recognition of Bengali as a state language. This news was published in the daily newspaper *Azad*:

Natore, February 29: In protest of the shooting in Dhaka, the Women's Language Movement Committee of Natore organized a large procession, which marched through the entire town. Subsequently, a meeting was held at Chowdhury Sahib's field under the leadership of Begum Shamsunnahar. After speeches, the meeting demanded an impartial investigation into the shooting, punishment for those responsible, and the recognition of Bengali as a state language.¹⁴

Begum Shamsunnahar was already highly respected women in Natore for her various social activities. That's why her call to action saw spontaneous participation from Natore's women in the language movement. Among those who joined her in the movement were Anwara Khatun, Jahanara Begum, and Saleha Khatun, all members of the Natore Women Language Movement Committee.¹⁵ Additionally, the participation of students from Natore Girls High School in the language

movement was noteworthy. The students boycotted classes and joined the marches, actively participating in the movement.¹⁶

The sparks of the language movement began in Naogaon during its initial phase in 1948. On March 11, 1948, a strike was observed in Naogaon of Rajshahi. Among the female students participating in the movement were Ayesha, Jyotsna, and Momena.¹⁷ In 1952, the language movement intensified in Naogaon. On February 12, 1952, a meeting of students and political activists was held at the madrasa ground in Naogaon town. The meeting adopted a resolution demanding Bengali as the state language and called for a general strike and protest day on February 21. The meeting concluded with motivational songs performed by Hira, Benu, and Feroza Begum.¹⁸ On February 21, 1952 the strike was successfully observed in Naogaon. Students from schools and colleges marched, demanding Bengali as the state language. On February 24, in protest of the student killings in Dhaka, students from a school in Niamatpur police station area held a protest march. Additionally, Shamsunnahar of Naogaon was an active worker in the language movement in Rajshahi. When the military banned the wearing of black badges in 1955, the students of Naogaon adopted black sarees as a symbol of protest.¹⁹ Different activities related to the language movement in Naogaon continued until Bengali was constitutionally recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan in 1956.

Khulna District

The language movement in Khulna began on March 11, 1948, with the province-wide general strike. Representatives from the Muslim Students League, Student Federation, Student Congress, and College Student Union held a meeting on this occasion. They decided to publish a pamphlet and write posters with lac dye (alta) on old newspapers. One of the organizations supporting the Bengali language movement, mentioned in the pamphlet, was the *Mahila Atmaraksa Samiti* (Women's Self-Defense Association).²⁰ Prominent among the female students leading the 1948 Language Movement in Khulna were Anwara Khatun, Reba, Lutfun Nahar, Fatema

Chowdhury, Rabeya Khatun, Sajeda Helen, Krishnadas, and Sufia Ali.²¹

During the second phase of the language movement, women's participation in Khulna was significant. On February 21, 1952 students from Khulna Coronation Girls' School took the initiative to write and put up posters supporting the Bengali language on their school walls.²² When the news of the shooting and killing of students in Dhaka on February 21 reached Khulna on February 22, it added a new dimension to the language movement there. Female students in Khulna became active in the movement. Regarding this Rokeya Mahbub Shiri, a student leader at Khulna Coronation Girls' School, said:

On February 22, we learned at school that several students, including Salam, Rafiq, and Barkat, had been martyred by police firing in Dhaka on February 21. Upon hearing this, the students decided to wear black badges. However, we couldn't find any black cloth. One student, Laily, wore a black saree to school. The other students gave her another saree to wear and cut her black saree into badges, which we wore.²³

On February 23, Khulna observed a strike, protest meetings, and marches demanding Bengali as the state language. Led by student leaders such as Majeda Ali, Anwara Begum, Rokeya Khatun (Shiri), Lutfun Nahar (Helen), Rabeya, Krishna, and Farida Majumdar, around 500-600 students participated in the march, marking the first march by women in the city.²⁴ Anwara Begum, one of the leaders, wrote:

... At that time there was only one women's college in Khulna, R. K. Girls' College. There were about thirty-five students in total in the IA and BA classes. We were BA students. The high schools for girls were Coronation Girls' High School and Railway B. R. Singh Girls' School. We boycotted classes and marched with the girls. Teachers from B. R. Singh Girls' School supported us, while the headmistress of Coronation Girls' School, Taslima Abed opposed us. There was an argument with Taslima Apa, and she even threatened that she would call the police. Nevertheless, we managed to bring the girls out.²⁵

That day, anti-government posters were openly put up. Regarding the student march on February 23, Majeda Ali of R. K. Women's College recalled: Holding posters, we marched in rows of two from the PTI School intersection to Mahendra

Hill (now the intersection at Bangladesh Bank) along the entire Ahsan Ahmed Road. Ratna and Krishna brought large *Chonga* to amplify our slogans. The slogans included 'Nurul Amin, leave your seat,' 'We demand Bengali as the state language,' 'We will not let the blood of the martyrs go in vain,' 'Down with fascist rule,' and 'We will not accept Urdu as the state language.'²⁶

The march proceeded from Ahsan Ahmed Road, through Jessore Road, around the Picture Palace intersection, and finally reached Mahendra Hill. The march and meeting, with speeches from student leaders, ended at Mahendra Hill. The march drew significant attention in the city, with people on both sides of the street encouraging the participants with applause.

On the afternoon of February 23, a large public meeting was held at the Municipal Park, presided over by M. A. Gafur. On February 24, an all-party state language struggle committee (Sarbadaliya Rastrabhasa Sangram Committee) was formed in Khulna, with M. A. Gafur as the convener. The committee organized strikes and public meetings. Gradually the movement spread to the suburban areas of Khulna. On Language Day in 1953, women in Khulna again held separate marches and gathered in the park for a meeting. Rokeya Mahbub Shiri said about this:

When February 21 came again in 1953, the girls participated spontaneously. They wrote festoons with lac dye (alta) and wore badges. Many were not allowed to leave their homes, but they woke up early and came. The girls gathered in front of the school, but the doors were closed. So, we brought a ladder from the hostel and climbed over the school wall into the hostel. Thus, the girls' march on February 21, 1953, was quite large. Though many parents pulled their daughters out of the march, many girls still participated. We marched to Ladies Park, where we held a meeting about the language movement. Most of the leading girls spoke, including myself.²⁷

At the beginning of the language movement, participation and awareness among the people of Bagerhat sub-division were very low. On February 21, 1952 when a nationwide strike was called, the strike was observed in Bagerhat's schools and colleges (except for Muslim High School). On February 26, 1952, students from Bagerhat's schools and colleges

organized a mourning procession, which included female students. Students from various schools and colleges gathered at the then Ramnarayan Park adjacent to P.C. College. A meeting was held at noon, where the main demand of the speakers was that Bengali become one of the state languages.²⁸ The same demand was uttered in Satkhira's language movement. Female participation was evident even in that remote bordering area. School students Golera Begum and Sultana Chowdhury were among the women who came forward in Satkhira's language movement.²⁹

Jashore District

Awareness about the dignity of Bengali language was seen in Jashore (earlier Jessore) in 1947. Hamida Rahman, a student of Jashore Michael Madhusudan College and a member of the Student Federation, protested against the efforts to oppose the Bengali language in a letter titled "The State Language of East Pakistan" published on July 10 in the Communist Party's mouthpiece *Swadhinata*, published from Kolkata.³⁰ Her deep affection for the language was evident in her protest note. She wrote:

As Bengalis, just as we claimed the entire Bengal within East Pakistan, why should we not demand Bengali as the state language of East Pakistan today? It is very disappointing to see arguments against making Bengali the state language on the popular *Azad* page of East Pakistan. ... Do we have to forget all our Bengali literature and art? ... Pakistan is a state of the people. Therefore, its language should be the people's language. Shouldn't the language spoken by 45 million people in Bengal, the language in which literature is written, the language in which emotions are expressed, be their own? Can we believe that the official language of the independent Pakistan will have no connection with the people's hearts?³¹

In 1948 a strong movement developed in Jashore. Hamida Rahman was the first to protest against the slander of the Bengali language from Jashore. She was a leading organizer of the language movement. Every school and college in Jashore observed a full strike, and on that day, school and college students participated in a procession led by Hamida Rahman, the joint convener of the Jashore State Language Struggle Council (Rastrabhasa Sangram Parishad).³² The procession led by Hamida Rahman started from Momin Girls'

School and ended in front of the Jashore Court. In front of the court, she gave a brief speech urging the government to recognize Bengali as the state language. On March 13, 1948 many people of Jashore became fully involved in the struggle for the language. By eight o'clock in the morning, a procession started from the college campus. The procession was led by Hamida Rahman, assisted by Ruby Ahmed and Sufia Khatun. Additionally, the women of the Jalai Patty brothel played a significant role that day. When the police eventually surrounded the area, nearly forty students were hidden inside the brothel and locked from the outside by the women.³³ Due to her active role in the movement, the police conducted raids at various places to arrest Hamida Rahman. Unable to arrest her, they issued warrants in various police stations in her name. She was a member of the Communist Party, which advised her to surrender, but she chose to go into hiding and returned her party card. These complications prevented her from participating directly in the 1952 Language Movement.³⁴ However, Council's processions of February 23 and 24, 1952 demanded an investigation into the shooting incident in Dhaka and the recognition of Bengali as one of the state languages. On February 28, Martyrs' Day was observed in Jashore. A procession started from Madhusudan College at 10 am., and after the procession, a public meeting was held at the Town Hall grounds at 1 pm.³⁵ Female students and cultural workers were present at the procession and the public meeting.

The call of Council of Jashore to spread the movement across the district didn't go in vain. On February 21, 1952 a strike was observed at Alamdanga Atikuzzaman High School in Narail. On February 22, a procession from Rupganj College called on the female students of Dilruba School in Narail to join the procession. Riziya Begum, Baby, Rabi, Ruby, Shefali, and Bulbul were among the girls who participated in this procession.³⁶ On February 21, 1952, in Jhenaidah subdivision of Jashore district, the organizers of the movement decided to shut down educational institutions, markets, shops, and bus services in Jhenaidah. Posters were written and posted on the streets to spread the news of the strike, and a procession was planned for the morning of the day of

the strike. There were also discussions on how to involve women in this movement. When contacted Begum Monowara Ahmed, a teacher at Junior Girls' School, asked two students, Hasna and Bela, to assist with this matter. Hasna and Bela agreed to help. It was decided that they would gather all the students at school the next day. The response from the girls to the program was enthusiastic. However, for this, Bela's father (then Deputy Magistrate Ekramul Haque) and Monowara Begum faced backlash from the authorities.³⁷ On February 21, students from the High English School, the adjoining primary school, Junior Girls' School, and Kanchannagar Primary School closed their schools and came out spontaneously. When the procession started at 10 am many female students participated. Leading female language activists in this program included Snigdha, Chhanda, Putul, Anwara Khatun, Jahanara Khatun, Hasi, Monowara Khatun, and Hosneara Mahbub.³⁸

Kushtia

In Kushtia and its surrounding areas, activities related to the language movement were also noticed. Early in 1952, school student Shahida Khatun took the initiative to unite the people of Kushtia on the language issue. When news of the police shooting on students in Dhaka on February 21 spread to Kushtia, the public became agitated. Protest meetings and processions were held in various places in Kushtia on February 22 and 23. On February 23, strikes were observed in various educational institutions. Female students also participated in these movements, with students from Kushtia English Girls' School playing a leading role. They observed a complete strike on February 23. In a mourning meeting presided over by Shahida Khatun, the government's repressive policy on the students during the February 21 procession in Dhaka was strongly condemned, and sympathy was expressed for the families of the martyrs. Female students also participated in the movements on February 24, 28, and March 5 of 1952.³⁹

The Language Movement of 1948 and 1952 also touched the town of Chuadanga. On January 2, 1952, a procession of 50-60 people paraded through the town, demanding Bengali as the state language. After the procession, a meeting was held

where Usha Chatterjee spoke.⁴⁰ A meeting was held in the Town Hall on February 4, urging readiness for self-sacrifice to establish linguistic rights. Local girls' school students spontaneously participated in the movement. A procession of female students paraded through town.⁴¹ The news of the shooting in Dhaka on February 21 reached Chuadanga through newspapers. On February 23 a large protest procession was held with students from V.J. School and Girls' School in Chuadanga. Female students, including Bela, Panna, and Pakhi participated in leading the procession. A student strike was observed in Chuadanga on February 25 with students' spontaneously joining. After the procession, a meeting was held in Ali Hossain's mango orchard, where Usha Chatterjee, Ila Haque, Bela, Hena, and others delivered their speeches. On March 22, V.J. School students came to Girls' School in a procession and invited the female students to join the procession. The students joined under the leadership of Reba. In addition to Reba, Ruby, Hena, Anwara, Beli, Bulbuli, Pakhi, Bela, and Panna led the students. Notably, Bela's education was stopped due to her participation in the language movement.⁴²

In Meherpur, the language movement began as early as 1948, demanding Bengali as the state language. The movement gained momentum again in April 1951. In February 1952, a Language Movement Struggle Committee (Bhasha Andolon Sangram Committee) was formed. The movement continued through class boycotts, protest processions, and meetings from February 22-24. Despite government restrictions, Martyrs' Day was observed from 1953-1955 in Meherpur. Notably, school girls also participated in processions and assemblies during this time. Students from Ripon Girls' School joined the procession under the leadership of Shukla Ganguly.⁴³

Rangpur District

The language movement in Rangpur began from the historic educational institution, Carmichael College. When a procession left Carmichael College to march towards the city, students, teachers, and the public from other educational institutions joined in to demand the establishment of the Bengali language. During the movement, the organizers in

Rangpur, Professor Golam Azam and Professor Jamiruddin Ahmed were arrested. News of their arrest sparked outrage among the students and the people of Rangpur. A protest meeting was organized on the Carmichael College campus where speeches were given by many including Mili Chowdhury and Nilufar Banu Dolly.⁴⁴ After the meeting, a massive procession of students, teachers, and the public set out towards the city. As the procession reached in front of the District Judge Court, the judge was delivering a verdict in English. Mili Chowdhury entered the courtroom and shouted that the verdict should be announced in Bengali, not English. At one point, she snatched the pen from the judge's hand and broke it, leaving everyone in the courtroom, including the judge, bewildered.

On February 27, students of Patgram High School and Girls' School organized a procession and marched around the marketplace, chanting slogans like "We want Bengali as the state language", "We demand an investigation into the police firing", and "We want the release of the detained students". In addition to Mili Chowdhury, other notable contributors to the language movement among female students in Rangpur included Masuda Chowdhury and Mrs. Dolly.⁴⁵ Behind the scenes, Begum Aftabunnahar provided significant support and patronage.⁴⁶ The language movement also gave rise to a progressive cultural group in Rangpur that continuously encouraged students and the public through literary and cultural activities. Women who played leading roles in these cultural activities included Sajeda Rahman, Shamima Zaman, Mrs. Dolly, Mrs. Mili Chowdhury, Pratibha Samaddar, and Chitra Dasgupta.⁴⁷ Their cultural activities played a crucial role in instilling the core spirit of the language movement among the public.

The people of the sub-divisions of Rangpur also joined the movement. In Nilphamari, the movement began on February 4, 1952. Nearly all the students of Nilphamari High School and Nilphamari Girls' High School participated in strikes, processions, and meetings. On this day, for the first time in Nilphamari's history, female students took part in public meetings and processions.⁴⁸ A general strike was observed in Nilphamari on February 7, with the general people and students marching around the town, demanding that Bengali

be made one of the state languages. After the procession, a public meeting was held, chaired by Zakirul Alam, where speakers included Sufia, Rahela, and Feroza Begum.⁴⁹ Throughout the month of February, strikes, protest marches, and assemblies continued, with notable participation from women in all activities. In Gaibandha, the language movement gained momentum in 1952. On February 21, 1952 a full strike was observed to demand Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. From the morning, all shops in the town remained closed. Students from local schools, colleges, and girls' schools went on strike. At eleven in the morning, a procession of about fifteen hundred students marched through the town, chanting various slogans.⁵⁰ Among the women involved in organizing the movement in Gaibandha, Daulatunnesa Khatun was the most prominent one.⁵¹

Dinajpur District

The language movement in Dinajpur town began as early as February 1948, primarily involving school students. On February 29, approximately one thousand students from Parbatipur, Gyanankur H.A.E. School, Rail Primary U.P. School, and Girls' M.E. School boycotted classes and marched to gather at the high school grounds.⁵² On February 21, 1952, a spontaneous strike was successfully observed in Dinajpur. A procession of students started at eleven in the morning from the current Dinajpur Medical College building and marched through Munshipara, Maldah Patty, behind the jail, and past Lily Cinema Hall, ending at the then high madrasa grounds. The students, exhausted and thirsty from the long march, were provided water by women led by Kachimoni and Khukumoni.⁵³

Female students from Dinajpur Government Girls' High School and Swardeshwari Girls High School were involved in the 1952 Language Movement.⁵⁴ Halima Akhtar, an eighth-grade student from Dinajpur Government Girls High School, attended all the language movement meetings held at the Dinajpur District School grounds. She along with other tenth-grade students from the same school, including Selina, Rokeya, Shamsunnahar, and Abida, actively participated in the processions and meetings.⁵⁵ Other active female participants in the Dinajpur language movement included

Hamida Haque, Momtaz Begum, Amina Danesh, Rowshan Ara, and Jannatul Ara.⁵⁶ Continuous strikes, processions, and meetings were organized in Dinajpur until February 26. The wife of lawyer Kader Box took on the role of chairperson at several meetings.⁵⁷ The significant presence of women at these meetings drew everyone's attention. For participating in the language movement, Amena Khatun along with others, was arrested in Dinajpur town on March 2, 1952.⁵⁸

The language movement in Joypurhat sub-division primarily began in 1952. Before this, there was little activity in the movement due to the opposition of local Muslim League leaders. Among those who played a role were Anuradha Bhattacharya, Shamsunnahar, Jibonnesa, and Manjushree Chakraborty.⁵⁹ The wave of the language movement also reached the then sparsely populated Panchagarh. However, the student-led movement was limited to peaceful strikes, processions, meetings, and sometimes picketing. Rezia Khatun played a vital role in all these programmes.⁶⁰

Evaluation

The Bengali Language Movement (1948–1952) was a decisive response to the intrusion upon Bengali's fundamental cultural core by Pakistan's ruling elite, whose attempt to impose Urdu as the sole state language directly challenged the cultural core of Bengali identity. Language, being the primary marker of collective consciousness and self-definition, became the most crucial element of cultural resistance. Drawing upon Ted Robert Gurr's theoretical framework of relative deprivation, the movement can be interpreted as a reaction to the growing disparity between the Bengali people's aspiration to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage and the political reality of exclusion imposed by the central authority.⁶¹ Gurr's analysis suggests that when a society's fundamental cultural elements such as language and religion come under systematic attack, a sense of deprivation transforms into intense collective resistance. The Bengali women's activism, as being part of the collective resistance, in these districts was not only a local expression of solidarity with Dhaka, but also a profound manifestation of collective defiance rooted in a shared sense of relative deprivation and cultural intrusion. Therefore, this framework

helps illuminate why the Bengali Language Movement quickly evolved from a linguistic protest into a broader struggle for political and cultural autonomy.

Within this larger resistance, Bengali women emerged as important, though often under-acknowledged agents of change. Their participation, particularly in districts such as Rajshahi, Jashore, Khulna, Rangpur and Dinajpur, illustrates how cultural deprivation generate a form of resistance. Despite operating within a deeply patriarchal and conservative social structure, women took to the streets, organized processions, distributed leaflets, and inspired students to mobilize for the cause of linguistic justice. Figures such as Hamida Rahman in Jashore, who initiated public awareness on the state language question as early as 1947, and Mili Chowdhury in Rangpur, who later raised the demand to write court verdicts in Bengali, represent the ways in which women transformed both intellectual and domestic spaces into sites of political action. These acts of defiance correspond to Gurr's assertion that cultural deprivation, when experienced collectively, can mobilize even the most marginalized sections of a community into active resistance.

In 1951, only 11.3% of women in East Bengal were literate, and only 5.3% were economically independent.⁶² Most women, particularly in rural areas, were deprived of education. Despite these circumstances, women of these discussed areas participated in the 1952 language movement. Given the societal realities of that time, this was not easy. They faced various obstacles- social, familial, institutional, and religious. Women's overt participation in the Movement was not readily accepted in conservative section of the society. In Dhaka and Narayanganj, women moved around in horse-drawn carriages and rickshaws with curtains. They were often confined to their homes. The situation was even more conservative outside Dhaka where along with social conservatism, family barriers also came upon women as heavy hands. Women activists faced a form of backlash that was not only political but also deeply familial and social. Language activist Taleya Rahman said, "The main obstacle was the family. They would prevent us from going out. I had to sneak out".⁶³ Many women were forced to discontinue their

institutional education. In Chuadanga, a school girl named Bela was stopped from continuing her studies for participating in the movement. Similarly, in Khulna, language activist Majeda Ali was expelled from her hostel. Hamida Rahman had to face arrest warrant and thus went into hiding that ultimately ruined her career. Such testimonies underscore the layered nature of deprivation that women experienced political subjugation under the Pakistani state coupled with patriarchal control within their own households. Yet, unlike their male counterparts, women's activism was often circumscribed by social conservatism, which viewed their presence in public spaces as transgressive.

In this context, the concept of the "inner and outer domain" proposed by Partha Chatterjee becomes particularly relevant.⁶⁴ The nationalist imagination in colonial and postcolonial South Asia often divided the world into a spiritual "inner" domain of cultural purity (associated with women and home) and a material "outer" domain of political and economic activity (associated with men and public life). The women of the Language Movement, by stepping into public protest spaces, effectively blurred this division and redefined the boundaries of nationalist participation. Their struggle, therefore, was not simply for linguistic rights but also for symbolic entry into the "outer domain" of political citizenship.

Despite their significant contributions, women's roles in the Language Movement have largely been represented in descriptive and celebratory terms, without sufficient analytical engagement with the power structures that limited their recognition. In Dhaka and other divisional cities, many women eventually received state honors such as the Ekushey Padak or were commemorated by cultural organizations like Tamaddun Majlish, Udichi, and Padatik Theatre Group. Yet this official recognition was uneven and selective. Women from rural or semi-urban areas who faced greater social resistance and bore heavier personal costs remain largely invisible in the national narrative. This disparity reveals what feminist scholars such as Kumkum Sangari and Nira Yuval-Davis term the "gendered politics of memory," in which the contributions of women, particularly from non-elite and peripheral regions, are systematically marginalized in favor of

those who fit dominant, urban-centric narratives of nationalism.⁶⁵

The memorial at Bhuban Mohan Park in Rajshahi is emblematic of this erasure: out of sixty-four names listed as Language Movement activists in Rajshahi, only nine belong to women. This limited representation, despite evidence of widespread female participation across Rajshahi, demonstrates how national memory reproduces hierarchies of visibility. Such selective remembrance is not merely an oversight but a product of structural processes that valorize institutional affiliations and class privilege over grassroots engagement. In this way, the politics of recognition mirrors, the politics of participation: women who operated within elite or urban circles were more likely to be remembered, while those from rural districts who often defied both family and social norms were silenced in the collective memory.

From the perspective of Gurr's theory, this continued marginalisation can be interpreted as a post-movement form of relative deprivation in the domain of historical recognition. The same structures of exclusion that provoked the initial resistance have persisted within the politics of memory. The women of the western frontier districts who resisted both external domination and internal patriarchy, thus face a double erasure first from the historical narrative of the movement itself and later from the institutional frameworks that shape public commemoration.

Thus, a critical evaluation of the Language Movement requires not only a descriptive account of women's participation but also an understanding of how systemic factors of class privilege, urban bias, and patriarchal historiography shape the recognition and erasure of their contributions. In this light, the Language Movement stands as both a story of collective emancipation and a reminder of persistent inequalities in the politics of memory. Unless these silenced narratives of rural and marginalized women are recovered, the historiography of the Language Movement remains partial, weakening the very unity it sought to forge.

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