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**Research Article**

## Language, Identity and Resistance: Bengali Muslim women in the Movement of 1952

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### Abstract

The language movement of 1952 was a turning point in the lives of Bengali Muslim women for their socio-political emancipation and public identity. The women broke the patriarchal norms of society and involved themselves wholeheartedly in this movement for the defiance of Bengali as the state language. They courageously faced the police brutality by challenging the social restriction of their houses, which confined them to domestic spheres. Unlike the anti-British independence movement, where the women's involvement was limited, the language movement provided the platform for collective Muslim women's activism for the sake of Bengali. Despite their significant contribution, the roles of Muslim women have largely been overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. Only the records of a few women have been documented, such as Roshan Ara Bachchu, Sufia Kamal, Sufia Ahmed, Sanjida Khatun and Begum Habibur Rahman, who contributed significantly to the language movement of 1952. Thus, the present study would examine the transformative impact of the language movement of 1952 on Bengali Muslim women by emphasising their courage and determination in shaping linguistic nationalism and women's empowerment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1952 marked a significant milestone in the progress of Bengali Muslim women as the language movement brought profound changes in their lives. The women were ignoring the brutal lathi-charge of police, tear gas and the fear of the bullet and walked the street to protect the honour of their mother tongue at that time. They broke the inner confinement of their houses and came to the battlefield by disregarding the threat of 'talaq' (divorce) for the sake of their mother tongue. The participation of Muslim women in the anti-British independence movement was not widespread. Infact, their political role began with the language movement. Amid the turmoil of the nation's formation, the efforts of Muslim women affirmed their place both as women and as human beings within the society. Although many women actively participated in the language movement to defend their mother tongue Bengali, their contributions have faded away from mainstream history. In the historical context, we find the names of a few women who took a significant role in the language movement, but very limited informations are available about them. The noteworthy women, such as Roshan Ara Bachchu (1932-2019), Sufia Kamal (1911-1999), Sufia Ahmed (1932-2020), Sanjida Khatun (1933) and Begum Habibur Rahman etc wrote their role in the language movement of 1952. There were some incidents that also documented the strong-minded Bengali people's demand for recognition of their mother tongue Bengali.

The struggle for national identity led to the partition of the country. The creation of Pakistan, envisioned as a land of dreams, brought great joy to the Muslim community. In 1947, Urdu was declared the state language of Pakistan. As a result, Bengali was excluded from the Central Public Service Commission examination of 1947. The deprivation of the Bengali language led to widespread protests. On 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1947, a memorandum was submitted to the chief minister of East Pakistan for the demand of Bengali as the state language<sup>i</sup>. The Tamuddin Majlis was formed on 2nd September, 1947 and the Second National Council was formed on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1948, to press the demand for Bengali as the National language. This led to a widespread strike on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1948 opposing the order to write Bengali in the Arabic script.

Thus, the protest started in 1947 reached its peak in 1952 when the Prime Minister declared Urdu as the state language, disregarding the majority Bengali people. This angered the innocent Bengali and students confronted the police. The article 144 was defied and the subsequent police firing led to the deaths of several students, such as Abdul Barkat, Abdul Jabbar, Abdus Salam and Rafiuddin. Thus, a mass movement was started to mobilise the public in defiance of Bengali. The widespread sacrifices of the Bengali people forced the Pakistan government to recognise Bengali as the state language. The various writings in the Bengali periodical also discussed the issue of language, such as the editorial of the periodical 'Begum' in an article 'National language of Pakistan', advocated to be made the national language<sup>ii</sup>.

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to analyse how the Bengali Muslim women broke their prolonged conservatism and participated in the language movement of 1952 with great courage. This movement reveals the cultural consciousness and advancement of Bengali women. Although the books and articles have been published on the language movement of 1952, all these works are from a general point of view. So, this work has tried to fulfil this gap by highlighting the women's participation in the language movement.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data have been collected from newspapers and periodicals, which served as primary sources and other informative writings related to women's participation in the language movement were used as secondary sources. The article is written by following the analytical research method.

## 4. UNSUNG HEROES OF LANGUAGE MOVEMENT SUFIA AHMED, RAUSHAN ARA BACHCHU AND OTHERS

From the very beginning of the struggle, the women were involved in linguistic rights and played a significant role in the language movement after 1952. One of the eminent language activists, Sufia Ahmed documented her involvement in language struggle in an essay 'Bhasar Jonno Abeg Badh Bhangeni'<sup>iii</sup> (passion for language has not broken) in 1997, which reveals a growing sense of women's liberation and political consciousness. She stated that her father Ibrahim, a judge by profession, nurtured in her a deep attachment to her mother tongue which inspired her active involvement and leadership in the language movement of 1952. She emphasised that 'the consciousness to prevent the Bengali language and culture from annihilation challenged the traditional gender boundaries<sup>iv</sup>.

During this time, women's education within the Muslim society was highly limited, with only a few girls entering the field of education. They received their education by staying at a hostel, which restricted their engagement with the outside world. This situation remained challenging for those girls who had received higher education at that time. In this context, the march of boys and girls together and their confrontation with the police signified a qualitative change in Muslim society. Sufia Ahmed wrote that 'the boys had to seek permission from the proctor to talk with their female classmates. Within such a conservative environment, the participation of students with the support of their teachers in such a big movement emerged as a revolutionary event<sup>v</sup>.

Although the Muslim women had long been constrained by rigid social customs, they took part in the movement under adverse circumstances. Thus, Sufia Ahmed narrates the events of women's participation in the language movement of 1952 like this,

'When they enrolled at Dhaka University, the girls were scarcely seen in public. While travelling by rickshaw, the hood

was wrapped with cloth and any interaction between male and female students required permission from the proctor. In this conservative environment, the language movement emerged in which no distinction was made between the boys and girls. All the students joined the movement to protect their language and the women also spontaneously came out to participate in this movement despite the prevailing social constraints. Thus, the language movement of 1952 marked the true beginning of women's awakening<sup>vi</sup>.

Sufia Ahmed wrote about the spirit of the language movement of that day. In November 1951, she went to Turkey with a cultural group that also included the students of West Pakistan. The Pakistani authorities banned the singing of the Bengali song there. Thus, the Bengalis started the non-cooperation in protest and refused to attend the program for one day. The students from West Pakistan tried to continue the program without them, but ultimately gave up. As a result, the authorities were forced to permit the singing of the Bengali songs<sup>vii</sup>.

Another stalwart who led the language movement as a student was Roshan Ara Bachchu. Her essay entitled '*Rashtrabhasa Bangla Chai*' (Demand for Bangla as the State language), provides an informative account of the historical language movement. She critically described the glorious role of girls and paid tribute to the contributions of students, teachers, politicians and common people of that time.

The essay also reveals her participation in the movement from 1949 during the visit of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali to East Pakistan. During his address at Curzon Hall, the students highlighted the issue of discrimination and unemployment against the East Pakistanis and presented a memorandum regarding the demand for East Pakistan along with the demand for Bengali as a state language. Roshan Ara Bachchu, as a volunteer, requested Liyqat Ali to speak in favour of the Bengali language but he remained silent and made no comment<sup>viii</sup>. This indifferent attitude was mainly targeted to suppress the voice of the Bengali peoples which became evident in 1952. On 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1952 the Prime Minister Khwaja Nizamuddin announced at Paltan Maidan that the Bengali language would not be recognised<sup>ix</sup>. Thus, the students expressed their anger and organised a meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1952 at Dhaka University for the demand of Bengali as the national language. Their protest took the form of a procession that circled the main road of Dhaka, leading to Nawabpur. In this possession, the girls also participated but they did not undertake a long journey due to conservatism in society; they were involved in crossing the Curzon Hall and then returning to the main hall. As the political consciousness arose among the Muslim girls, many defied these restrictions and participated in various associations secretly. A few notable women took part, such as Sufia Khan, Sufia Ali from Kulna, Baby Apa, Suraiyya Doli, Nadera from Khulna, Roshan Ara Bachchu and later on Rokeya Begum. The students were mainly responsible for creating posters. On 4<sup>th</sup> February, hartal was held while Black Flag Day was observed in East Pakistan from 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> February. Besides the poster making, the girls acted as

organisers. They spread consciousness about the importance of their language to other students. On the early morning of 21<sup>st</sup> February, Roshan Ara Bachchu, Rokeya Begum and Samsunnahar left for the girls' school to ensure the girls' participation in the language movement<sup>x</sup>.

The Muslim women confronted the police during a tense period, seeking to understand their rights and challenging the restrictions imposed under Section 144. They stepped forward fearlessly. The police stood with rifles in their hands to maintain order, while the young women showed the remarkable courage, valuing their mother tongue more precious than their own safety. They took the responsibility to protect fellow students from arrest and stood at the forefront of the struggle.

The students joined the movement by chanting the slogan of 'We want Bangla as the state language'. The courageous efforts of Muslim women Sofia and Halima opened the door for all students to take part in the procession<sup>xi</sup>. The servants of protecting religion in an independent country used lathi-charge and spread tear gas on the people of their own religion, even the women and children were not spared. The procession also continued despite all these hurdles. The students were arrested arbitrarily, regardless of gender. Roshan Ara Bachchu and Sufia Ahmed were seriously injured in the movement, but still the procession moved forward, which reflected the militant spirit. The guardians and teachers also gave way to the determined courage of Muslim women. One of the students, Saleha Begum of Kulaura, Sylhet, was sentenced to three years in prison by DC Dk Pawar for hoisting a black flag at her school. This punishment prevented to continue her education and subjected her to humiliation and imprisonment due to her involvement in the language movement. The other courageous students, such as Hamida Khatun from Khulna Girls' School and Jobeda Khatun, also emerged as the shining faces of this movement.

Mumtaz Begum (1923-1967), headmistress of Morgan High School in Narayanganj, inspired the people of Narayanganj to unite in a movement, urging them to take an oath upon the blood of the martyrs. Her defiance led to her imprisonment and when she refused to accept release on bond, her husband divorced her. Thus, her well-established family became shattered. A life without dignity was unacceptable to her, as the struggle for language offered women a powerful means of protest<sup>xii</sup>. Therefore, this movement endowed Muslim women with a unique character and strength, which was a rare event not only in the history of Muslim Bengal but also in the history of Bengal.

The history of such women's heroism is about to fade today. Roshan Ara Bachchu highlighted the vital role of women in the language movement with great importance and also remembered the contribution of students with great respect and discussed the active involvement of the general public in her writings.

The students defied the police's lathi-charge and tear gas, moved forward and violated Section 144. The Pakistani government issued an order to open fire and Barkat and many others died immediately. After firing, the students' movement

turned into a mass movement. Roshan Ara Bachchu described this incident in her writing as,

'Artists refrained from performing. People closed vehicles and shops. On 21<sup>st</sup> February, the life of Dhaka was normal except for the university and various educational institutions. But after the firing, it spontaneously took the form of a mass movement. The fire of protest spread all around. The government, private offices and courts were closed. Artists refrained from giving radio programs, and people stopped at the vehicles and shops'<sup>xiii</sup>.

Anowara Begum (1918-1988), Khairat Hussain (1911-1972) of Rangpur and Ahmed Ali of Comilla protested this incident and adjourned the session<sup>xiv</sup>. The government also rejected his motion. An extraordinary event occurred at that time. The pro-government member of Pabna gave up his illusion of power and joined the language movement. Roshan Ara Bachchu expressed,

'While six students, the future leaders of our country, lie bloodied, we remain sheltered and breathe easily, she could not remain in comfort and declared her departure from the council house in protest of the oppression of the oppressors and in humanity. She urged all the members to walk out as well. Along with opposition members Dhirendranath Dutta, Abdul Kalam Shamsuddin and members of the Congress party, she boycotted the budget session, left the council and went to a medical college to see the martyrs and the injured. After this incident, the people gathered everywhere to see the martyrs, which aroused the militant movement<sup>xv</sup>.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February, a funeral in absentia was held including Maulana Hamid Khan Bhasani (1880-1976), Sher-e-Bangla Ak Fazlul Haque (1873-1962), Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish (1900-1986), Khairat Hossain, General Secretary of the Awami Muslim League<sup>xvi</sup>. After the funeral, the blood-stained clothes of the martyrs were tied to bamboo poles and a militant procession began, violating Section 144.

The Pakistani minister and bureaucrats underestimated the courage of the people who took refuge within the army cantonment. The army was deployed to suppress the government movement. The police started firing but the Bengalis ignored all that. They risked their lives and marched forward. Everyone wore black badges and a strike was observed.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> February, the college students built the first Shaheed Minar at the spot where Shaheed Barkat was shot. Despite the curfew, the fearless students pursued their goal at the risk of their own lives. The next morning, thousands of people joined this struggle for the survival of the struggling students. The procession paid tribute to the martyrs with flowers. Many girls took off their gold ornaments to continue the movement. The strike was observed throughout the country until 25<sup>th</sup> February<sup>xvii</sup>.

The police were helpless to stop this movement. The killing of Bengalis led to bloodshed and the movement persisted. The government rushed to destroy the shelter of the movement. On 26<sup>th</sup> February, the police and army surrounded the Salimullah Muslim Hall of Dhaka University for twenty-four hours and

arrested thirty protesters. On the same day, ten medical students were arrested in the same manner. During the siege, the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, Moazzem Hossain, the provost of Muslim Hall, Dr Osman Gani and the registrar were forced to stand outside like wooden dolls. The house tutor of Muslim Hall, Professor Mofizuddin Ahmed, was also arrested.

The authorities knew that arresting the protesters could not stop the protests. Their goal was to break the spirit of the language movement. The memorials of the martyrs were demolished and removed. However, the flame of the struggle had ignited in the minds of the people, which could not be extinguished by the Pakistan government. Inspired by the spirit of the students, prominent leaders such as Abul Hashim, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Khandaker Mushtaq Ahmed, Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, Pulin Dey, Dr Ajmal, Khairat Hossain, Fazlul Karim, Anwarul Haque, Sadeq Khan, Latif Chowdhury, Hedayet Hossain Chowdhury and Mujibul Haque etc., were arrested. When the politicians failed to act, the students of the Dhaka University stood as the symbol of the nation's hopes and aspirations.

Another great luminary of the language movement was Sufia Kamal, who expressed her thoughts on the language struggles in her autobiography '*Ekale Amader Kal*' (Once is our tomorrow), highlighting the essence of language consciousness. She wrote that she could not tolerate the attack on the Bengali language. Although Urdu was still the spoken language at her home in Shaistabad, she led the movement with unwavering determination. She was inspired by the spirit of Bengalis and wrote that the language movement of 1952 was a new history in the world and the children of Bengalis were not afraid to die. The mother of Bengal did not hesitate to maintain her tradition also<sup>xviii</sup>.

She felt proud of the Bengalis' role, but the contribution of women left a deeper impression. She made her untiring effort to bring the Muslim women out of the blockade and their fearless presence in the procession surprised her. She documented her observation on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1952 as,

'It was 8<sup>th</sup> Falgun, Ekushey February, 1952, the immortal Ekushey glorious martyr's day. The autocratic ruling classes showed the bravery of the Bengalis, their sacrifice and the women stood as mothers and fighters, not just mourners. During the procession, we hold the hands of the barefooted children and ignore the police attack. Though we were forced to retreat, the sheer force proved powerless<sup>xix</sup>.

Sanjida Khatun's '*Ekhush Amake Bhasha Diyeche*' (21<sup>st</sup> gave me language) tells the story of the Bengali mind of East Bengal's dream of Pakistan, their broken dream and the burning resistance to protest. This essay was the story of a girl who was unaware of the greatness of language in advance. This article tells the story of a mother who had previously not been a heroine. The language movement of 1952 made them aware, gave them language and inspired them to protest fearlessly<sup>xx</sup>. Her essay '*Ekushey February: Mass Music and Movement*' reflects the courage and heroism of that time, which was expressed through words and melodies that inspired the nation. There was an incident of firing news. The firing helped the

people trapped in the retreat to protest. Sanjida Khatun wrote that the residents of old Dhaka, although they themselves spoke a kind of Urdu, came forward in solidarity with the movement to make Bengali the state language. Women also suppressed their sincere fears and joined this movement in their own way. A meeting of women was called in a house on Abhay Das Lane to demand the blood of Nur Amin (1893-1974). On the way to that meeting, the eyes of non-Bengali soldiers were red. The fear of the killer soldiers made the chest tremble, but stubbornness proved indomitable. This fear of stubbornness taught people to ignore the bloodshot eyes of the soldiers. Sanjida Khatun narrates,

'This story was not about heroism or danger, it's about how Ekushey February became a part of everyday lives. It taught us that growth begins with facing fear and offered lessons too profound for words<sup>xxii</sup>.

It was the first language against fear, a language that resisted those who claimed women's maternal charm as reason, sought to silence their resistance and defend the oppressor. Its tone was fierce, saturated with anger.

The music was a powerful medium to convey the essence of political movements to the masses. The role of music was also important in the language movement. Many songs were written and Sanjida Khatun wrote about that song in '*Ekushey February: Mass Music and Movement*'. From the starting of 1948 to 1952, a powerful mass music movement was created through one song after another. Songs were no longer just a demand for language, it became a symbol of achieving one's own rights. Sanjida Khatun wrote,

'One movement after another had gained strength around this day to protect not only language but also to defend any rights<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury (1934-2022) wrote the poem. Some parts of it were composed by Abdul Latif (1927-2005) and Altaf Mahmud (1933-1971). The unique creation, beginning with 'The twenty-first of February strained with my brother's blood/ Can I forget?' draws on the words of Sikandar Abu Jafar (1918-1975), set to music by Sheikh Lutfar Rahman (1920-1979). The tune echoes the footsteps of the people's struggle of the present time, 'the struggle of the people will continue'. Sadhan Sarkar (1929-1992) set the tune to the words of Abubakr Siddique (1936) as,

'Barricade beyond fence', Abu Bakr Siddique's 'biplober raktrang' became colourful in the magic of Lutfar Rahman's tune. Abdul Latif set the oath to save the standard of the words of his fathers in the tune of his own words<sup>xxiv</sup>.

The song that the Pakistani rulers had taken the initiative to ban in the name of Islam became the language of protest. Based on this movement, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) became more relevant in the festival of protecting the culture of East Bengal. The songs of rebellion of Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul (1889-1976) and Subhash Mukherjee (1919-2003) put a dance of liberation in the blood of the agitated people. Salil Chowdhury (1923-1995) came with his protest songs. It was during this time that the poem '*Bidrohi*' (Rebel), written by Nazrul Islam was set to music. Altaf Mahmud and Shaikh

Lutfar Rahman gave the music. Sanjida Khatun wrote, 'In the law of rotation, as the struggle for freedom and the urge for self-discovery arose, the periodical songs of Rabindranath and Nazrul became relevant in our movement'<sup>xxv</sup>.

Habibur Rahman, the mathematics teacher of Rajshahi University, was martyred in the Liberation War of 1971. No one knew about the incident of his death. While remembering this great teacher, his wife Begum Habibur Rahman talked about her husband's support for the language movement. As a teacher during the language movement of 1952, he was an ardent supporter of that movement. Not only a supporter, he constantly wondered why he, as a teacher, could not participate in the movement and why he could not remedy the oppression of students and the common people. Begum Habibur Rahman wrote about it,

'I saw it during the language movement of 1952. Maybe they were walking around the house and saying, 'They were killing our sons, we could not do anything except March and an injustice had begun'<sup>xxvi</sup>.

When the heat of this movement spread throughout the country, he reassured. Begum Rahman writes,

'When the language movement spread throughout the country, he no longer had to live with the same dark face as before and was quite happy<sup>xxvii</sup>.

His patriotism was deeply rooted. It also instilled in the liberation war. The language movement, which opposed the ruler, gave rise to an even bigger struggle.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that the Muslim women participated in the language movement of 1952 with courage, which became a platform for them to prove their worth to society. The women who participated in this movement with the students was an initial step to establish Bengali as the state language. They also faced the brutal lathi-charged of police for the sake of their language. Through the act of sacrifice and courage in the struggle, the women gathered the strength to carry the movement forward and they prepared themselves to develop their femininity and human nature as freedom fighters. Thus, it can be said that the heroic role of Bengali Muslim women in the language movement of 1952 was an inspiring example for others.

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