

AIR Spotlight - The Quest for a Linguistic Identity and the Birth of a Nation

AIR Spotlight is an insightful program featured daily on the All India Radio Newsonair. In this program, many eminent panellists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, a discussion on the birth of the nation of Bangladesh.

Context:

The article revisits the [Bangladesh Liberation War](#) through the lens of linguistic and cultural identities, to understand how language and culture became determining forces for an independent Bangladesh.

Language as the blood and soul of the country:

- Language connects people and the values enshrined by language live through ages. The basic inspiration of the freedom struggle of the Bengali-speaking people of Pakistan came mainly from their quest for a linguistic identity.
- The history of class struggle and multiculturalism supported the language movement of the Bangladeshi people.
- The freedom fighters of the Bangladesh liberation movement say that language-based patriotism grew among the people of Bangladesh and it resulted in the freedom of Bangladesh.
- Bangla is the symbol of Bangladesh's sovereignty, devotion, and sacrifices made by the freedom fighters.
- Bangla is one of the sweetest languages in the world and it has the contribution of many great poets such as [Rabindranath Tagore](#), etc.
- Bangla language was the main spirit of the liberation war. Bangladesh and Bangla languages are synonymous with each other.

'Bangla' language as the root cause of the Liberation War:

- The question as to what would be the state language of Pakistan was raised immediately after its creation.
- The central leaders and the Urdu-speaking intellectuals of Pakistan declared that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan, just as Hindi was the state language of India. The students and intellectuals of East Pakistan, however, demanded that Bangla be made one of the state languages.
- The ruling elites, almost entirely based in West Pakistan, single-handedly decided to make Urdu the only official language of the new country, whereas the majority of the population living in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) could not speak Urdu as Bangla was their main language. But the ruling class refused to acknowledge East Pakistan's linguistic right.

The Language Movement: Timeline and Events

- The language movement was a struggle for culture and self-preservation. This movement took place to protect the dignity of the Bangla language and culture. The timeline and events of the language movement are discussed below:

1947: The beginning:

- In 1947, the British government granted independence to Pakistan on 14th August. But the Pakistani establishment began to exploit the people of Bengal culturally, politically, and economically.
- Only 8% of Urdu-speaking people were thinking of making Urdu the state language of Pakistan whereas more than 56% were Bengali speaking. The people of Bengal strongly protested against this decision.
- Although two separate independent states, Pakistan and India, were born based on bi-ethnicity, the Bengalis were a completely different ethnicity.
- East Bengal became a union of non-communal consciousness. People from all walks of life, starting from students and people, formed mass resistance irrespective of religion and caste.
- On the Racecourse Ground in Dhaka on 21st March 1947, Jinnah gave a severe blow to Bengali nationalism. He said the national language of Pakistan would be Urdu, not any other language.
- The same announcement was made again at the convocation of Dhaka University on March 24, 1947. He said, "Urdu and only Urdu shall be the State Language of Pakistan". The students present then started protesting.

1951: The movement at its peak:

- By 1951, the demands of the state language movement continued to grow. On 23rd February 1951, East Bengal's educationists, writers, journalists, and intellectuals issued a memorandum to the then Chief Minister Nurul Amin for the introduction of the Bengali language at all levels.
- On February 21, 1952, Section 144 was issued all over the country. From that morning onwards, students started gathering in groups in front of the faculty of arts at Dhaka University.
- The objective was to be vocal in demanding the Bengali language and to ensure full rights of mother tongue. "I want Bangla as the state language" was heard in the air all around.
- Forgetting all differences, everyone started a mass movement against Pakistan to protect the dignity of the mother tongue.

1956: The Victory of the language movement:

- As a result of the strong movement, the Muslim League suffered a miserable defeat in the general election of 1954.
- The government of Pakistan was compelled to declare Bengali as one of the state languages in the 1956 constitution.
- Hence this was one of the ultimate defeats of the government of Pakistan.

Significance of the movement:

The importance of the language movement is immense in awakening the sense of rights and independence of Bengalis. Following are the major positive outcomes of the movement:

Influence on political, social and cultural activities:

- The language movement has, directly and indirectly, influenced all political, social, and cultural activities since 1952.
- The influence was so far-reaching that a relationship was established between the common and political people. Trust was established with each other, which accelerated the nation's liberation struggle.

Resistance against exploitation:

- It was through the language movement that the first rebellious attitude against the rule and exploitation of Pakistan was manifested in the Bengali heart.
- It can be said that the language movement was the beginning of the realization of all kinds of rights for Bengalis.

Provides a boost to self-confidence:

- This movement instilled morale and strong self-confidence in the minds of people which evoked a sense of nationalism.

Inspiration for the Liberation War:

- While multiple factors impacted the success of the Bangladesh Liberation War, language and culture were instrumental in motivating and sustaining the self-determination movement.

Conclusion:

Bangladesh has now established a unique position on the world map. The name of Bangladesh is being used loudly in world politics. The article discussed the unsung language soldiers and their stories who sacrificed their lives for their mother tongue-Bangla.
