

Dhaka as Capital of Bangla Speaking State: Historical Perspective

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The evolution of Dhaka into a megacity and the capital of a Bengali-speaking state is a remarkable phenomenon, especially considering its humble origin. Understanding how this transformation occurred is the central theme of this article earlier presented at the International Seminar held in Dhaka titled ‘The Language Movement and the Emergence of a Bangla-speaking State’.

What would be the Lingua Franca of a Capital City of a State depends much not only upon the native language of the region from which it rises as its capital but also its political, social, and cultural history and some other related matters.

As we have just mentioned, the lingua franca of a capital city is shaped not only by the native language of the region but also by its intricate political, social, and cultural history. Several factors contribute to this evolution, including migration patterns, political evolution and socio-economic developments. In the context of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, these elements have played significant roles in the emergence of Bangla as the national language. Bangladesh is home to a rich tapestry of languages, comprising 44 indigenous languages, including 17 Tibeto-Burman, 10 Indo-Aryan, 7 Austroasiatic, and 2 Dravidian languages. This linguistic diversity highlights the country’s complex ethnolinguistic landscape, reflecting the historical amalgamation of different communities and cultures over centuries (Van Schendel, 2009, pp. 32-33). The rise of Bangla as the predominant language in Dhaka is particularly notable, especially given the region’s colonial past and its associated linguistic influences.

The establishment of Bangla as the official language was significantly influenced by the Bengali Language Movement of the 1950s, which underscored the cultural and emotional significance of the language. This movement played a pivotal role in shaping the linguistic identity of the nation,

leading to the recognition of Bangla as the state language. Furthermore, the British colonial rulers introduced English as the administrative and educational language, adding another layer to the linguistic dynamics of the region. Despite these external influences, the resilience of Bangla and its adoption as the national language in post-independence Bangladesh underscores the deep-rooted cultural identity associated with it. So, changing Dhaka into a city where Bangla is spoken is not just about population shifts; it shows the larger historical events and cultural claims, highlighting how the Bengali Language Movement and various language and culture influences have shaped the city's language scene. Dhaka is characterised by its vast rivers and water bodies, situated on the last bluff of higher ground in a predominantly low-lying country. This strategic location offered safety and attracted a diverse population, including peasants and various other professionals, for many centuries. During the early medieval period, Muslim rulers and ordinary Muslims began to inhabit the area. However, their presence did not immediately elevate Dhaka's significance. The diversity of the inhabitants did influence the local lingua franca, though not substantially, as the population primarily spoke Bangla and other regional languages.

This gradual process continued until the Mughal era, when an influx of people from different backgrounds, including Muslim rulers and officials, began settling in and around what is now known as Old Dhaka. The major transformation began under the rule of Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great (1556-1605), who aimed to expand his empire eastward. One of his prominent generals, Raja Man Singh, initiated the colonization of the area, marking the beginning of a new historical chapter for Dhaka. Despite these developments, no single language emerged as dominant; instead, a variety of languages and dialects were spoken.

The turning point came during the reign of Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627), who pursued the expansion of the Mughal Empire into the eastern and northeastern parts of South Asia. He dispatched General Islam Khan, with an army of 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers also cavalry and Navy to complete this mission (Taifoor, 1952, 1956). The strategic advantages of Dhaka made it the ideal center for operations and the new capital of Mughal Bengal. The arrival of a large army and administrative staff not only increased the city's importance but also influenced its linguistic landscape. Persian was the official

language, while a blend of Hindi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic became the common medium of communication among the diverse inhabitants. Yet, the choice of Dhaka as the capital of this newly acquired territory was not immediate. It was a strategic decision that required careful consideration. Nonetheless, Dhaka emerged as the focal point of Mughal power in the region, marking the beginning of its ascent as a significant urban center. (Taifoor, 1952, p. 51 provides further insights into the people and events of this era).

As noted previously, Dhaka's strategic location positioned it favorably for launching conquests in the eastern or northeastern regions of South Asia. Consequently, Islam Khan naturally selected Dhaka as both his operational headquarters and the new capital of Mughal Bengal.

The arrival of a substantial army not only elevated Dhaka's importance but also transformed its linguistic landscape. Initially lacking a dominant lingua franca due to its sparse population and limited significance, the need for a common language intensified with the influx of ruling elites, administrators, merchants, suppliers, and various service providers.

In the early days, as has been already noted, Dhaka did not have a dominant lingua franca, as the population was sparse and the region lacked political, economic, and social significance. However, the influx of various groups, including ruling classes, administrative elites, merchants, food suppliers, arms dealers, service providers, and political leaders, created a necessity for a common language of communication. During the medieval period, particularly under the Mughal rule, Persian (Farsi) was the official language though spoken practically by the higher echelon of government of the ruling class, while the majority of soldiers and petty officials spoke Urdu, a blend of Hindi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. This linguistic development stemmed from the gradual Middle Eastern influence in the region (Eaton, 1996).

Despite a sizable portion of Dhaka's populace speaking various Bengali dialects and other languages, Farsi and Urdu emerged as the dominant tongues, revered for their association with secular prestige. Farsi, serving as the official language and favored by the aristocracy, epitomized sophistication and elite status.

Meanwhile, in the surrounding countryside, encompassing Subah Bangla, Bengali dialects thrived as integral components of the evolving Bangla language. This cultural milieu in Dhaka marked a pivotal juncture, with Urdu, originating as the language of military encampments, usurping Farsi's position to become the city's primary language.

Moreover, Urdu's ascendancy transcended its military origins, evolving into a refined medium for intellectual discourse and standard communication across the subcontinent by this period.

Thus, almost overnight, Dhaka found itself steeped in Urdu language and culture, despite Farsi (Persian) maintaining its status as the official language and the preferred tongue of the ruling and upper classes. This dominance permeated every aspect of the city's life, evident in its cuisine, attire, etiquette, and musical traditions.

For close to a century, Dhaka thrived as the capital of an expanding Mughal Eastern Empire, which encompassed vast territories. The resulting wealth generated by the region naturally manifested in physical expansion, infrastructure development, educational and cultural advancements, and culinary innovations within the city. Dhaka burgeoned into a thriving hub within the renowned Mughal Empire, renowned not only for its governmental functions but also as a key center for international trade, commerce, banking, and notably, the world-famous Muslin Market. Even during the times of adversity, such as when it lost its provincial capital status, Dhaka's annual muslin production remained valued at an impressive 24.50 lakhs of rupees as in 1747; (Karim, 1964, p.88)

At the pinnacle of its existence, Dhaka's provincial administration was overseen by top-tier officials, often members of the imperial family or esteemed military and civil leaders. This ruling elite, predominantly of foreign origin and fluent in Persian, Arabic, or Turkish, rendered Dhaka akin to a foreign enclave. Yet, intriguingly, it was Urdu, commonly known as Hindustani, that emerged not just as a rising but as the de facto lingua franca of the city.

A parallel transformation unfolded in the countryside, where the majority spoke various Bengali dialects. Despite this, the influence of Persian, Arabic,

and Urdu introduced by administrators, military personnel, traders, and bankers began to permeate local communities, albeit to a lesser extent.

An example of Persian cultural influence in Dhaka is evident in the death anniversary celebration of Mirza Nathan's father, as detailed in the 17th-century chronicle *The Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* (Persian: بهارستانغیبی), written by Mirza Nathan, which documents the history of Bengal and Cooch Behar. Professor Ahmad Hassan Dani recounts this event in his book on Dhaka: "Mirza Nathan celebrated the six-monthly feast of his late father, attended by all the Khans. Islam Khan, unable to attend on the day due to illness, visited the next day and offered many excuses. The feast featured a variety of delicious food, drinks, and fruits. Every Qur'an reciter received a pair of shawls, and rose otto was royally sprinkled" (Dani, 1962). Mirza Nathan elaborates on the grand feast: "He invited all the noted officers, including the Subahdar, the Diwan, the Bakhshi, the Qazi, and the Mir 'Adl. All the Khans gathered at Mirza Nathan's house. As it was Friday, Islam Khan attended the congregational prayer, ordering fines for officers absent from prayer. Mirza Nathan took responsibility for the fines, ensuring they stayed. An imperial Farman sent to Islam Khan arrived, brought by Baz Bahadur Qalmaq's son. The Khan left to receive it by boat. Upon his return, the heavily drunk comrades avoided Islam Khan and dispersed. Mirza's servants poured rose water on their dresses and scented the air with ambergris, transforming the wine-smelling room into one with the fragrance of paradise. The festivities continued for seven days and nights" (Dani, 1962, p. 73).

Following, the unfortunate rift between the esteemed Finance Minister, Diwan Murshid Quli Khan, and Prince Subahdar Azim Uddin Shah, Dhaka endured significant hardship when the capital of the thriving Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa province was relocated to Muksudabad. This process, initiated in 1702 and concluded in 1717, resulted in the renaming of the city to Murshidabad in honor of Murshid Quli Khan. Despite these upheavals, Dhaka's linguistic and cultural fabric remained largely unchanged.

The newly appointed Deputy Subadars, or *Naib-Nazims*, of Dhaka were from the same religious, cultural, and social backgrounds as their predecessors. They upheld the established traditions and authority, albeit with diminished political power compared to their counterparts in Murshidabad. Nevertheless,

a close relationship between the two cities persisted, maintaining the continuity of Mughal cultural influence for an extended period.

This continuity persisted until the Battle of Plassey in 1757, which drastically altered the socio-political landscape of India. The conquest by the English East India Company ended the Mughal era and began a new chapter in Indian history. However, changes did not occur overnight, and Mughal governance, education, and culture continued until 1835, when the British made English the official language of the country, significantly impacting Dhaka and Eastern Bengal.

Remarkably, despite these upheavals, Dhaka's public life and urban culture remained largely unchanged. However, the city's economic fortunes plummeted due to the deliberate destruction of its flourishing textile industry, including the renowned muslin, by the British East India Company's detrimental policies. Thousands of industrial workers left Dhaka, seeking livelihoods as farmers in the countryside.

Rajani Palme Dutt eloquently captured the devastation wrought upon Dhaka's once-thriving industrial life by stating that under the 'pax Britannica' 'populous manufacturing towns like Dhaka and Murshidabad were rendered desolate, akin to the devastation caused by war or foreign conquest.' This excerpt underscores the profound impact of British policies on Dhaka's economic landscape, shaping its trajectory into the modern era (Sharif, *Dhaka*, 1986.).

In this backdrop, a notable event was the arrival of a Kashmiri Muslim family in Dhaka in the early 19th century. Initially trying their luck in various parts of the province, one scion eventually settled in Dhaka. This family, known as the Khwaja Family of Dhaka, rose to prominence, becoming the richest and most distinguished family in the city and entire East Bengal. They became close allies of the British rulers and the most influential Urdu-speaking leaders in Dhaka and, subsequently, East Bengal and East Pakistan, eventually earning the title of Nawab. Khwaja Abdul Ghani of this family received for the first time the title of the Nawab of Dhaka from the English.

In Dhaka, different varieties of Urdu were spoken, incorporating many Bengali words. One well-known variety was spoken by a group of Urdu-speaking people who arrived in Dhaka in the 18th century, known as the Khushbash or

Sukhbas (Taifoor, 1956, p. 53). Thus, in pre-independence Dhaka, Urdu was a dominant medium of communication, and its presence was significantly felt in this historic city.

Arrival of Khusbash People and Kuttis

According to S.M. Taifoor, a group of Urdu-speaking people arrived in Dhaka in the 17th century from northern India in the company of the ‘umera’ (nobility) and came to be known as the Khusbash or Sukhbas. Though their Urdu had a slightly different accent compared to the refined Urdu of the upcountry, they considered themselves a more respectable group of Urdu speakers (Taifoor, 1956, p. 53). Their presence significantly strengthened the Urdu vocabulary in Dhaka, making it a dominant language and cultural segment of the city.

Simultaneously, various Bengali dialects also contributed to the linguistic landscape of Dhaka. A notable dialect that became part of Dhaka’s linguistic culture is the popular ‘Kutti’ dialect. Following the devastating famines in Bengal in the late 1760s and 1770s, a group of laborers migrated from the countryside and settled in the canal zones of the city (Dulai River or Khal) to seek livelihoods. According to Taifoor, they were descendants of aboriginal tribes whose primary occupations were husking paddy and chipping off brick concrete for the buildings of the zamindars who settled in Dhaka (Taifoor, 1956, p. 52). As husking is known in informal Bangla as ‘kutna’, they came to be known as Kuttis, meaning those who husk paddy. Taifoor observes that the Kuttis of Dhaka spoke a peculiar Bengali jargon that made them a source of humor among other Bengalis, who were considered to have a more refined way of speaking (Taifoor, 1956, p. 52). Nonetheless, the Kuttis were known for their humor, and the Kutti dialect eventually became a popular and humorous part of Dhaka’s linguistic culture, persisting despite educational advancements gradually phasing it out.

As the East India Company began its serious trade efforts from Dhaka, they communicated with local administrative heads and officials in Urdu-Hindustani and other languages when necessary. This trend continued even after the British became rulers, maintaining communication with locals in Urdu and English. The Khwaja family, who developed close ties with the English, conversed in both English and Urdu. The Khwajas continued to communicate with the local populace in Urdu, solidifying their status as the

premier family of the city and promoting the use of Urdu over indigenous Bengali. By the end of the 19th century, Bengali had not developed in Dhaka as significantly as in Kolkata. Consequently, the political, administrative, and commercial language in Dhaka remained dominated by Urdu for a considerable time, even up to the birth of Bangladesh. By then, however, standard Bangla had made significant progress in Dhaka, contrasting with the mofussil headquarters and countryside of East Bengal.

GROWTH OF BANGLA IN DHAKA

The English East India Company's rule brought revolutionary changes to India, significantly impacting Dhaka and the development of modern Bangla culture in the city especially through the adoption of English as the official language as well as the medium of education. In 1835, the Company replaced Persian with English as the official language of the government and introduced an English education policy. This policy led to the gradual integration of the English language into the country and a new educational system that produced an educated Bengali populace. Dhaka benefited significantly from this policy, particularly in terms of English education and the rise of middle-class culture. The boys of Dhaka, including those from the Urdu-speaking Khwaja family, began learning English, which expanded their horizons and facilitated communication with English officials.

Simultaneously, an incredible development of the Bengali language began, especially in Kolkata, which also influenced Dhaka. Although not to the same extent as Kolkata, Dhaka saw the rise of Western cultural influences and the cultivation of English. Literary societies, Bangla storybooks, novels, and newspapers began to emerge, transforming Dhaka into a center for Bengali language cultivation. However, Dhaka's rise as a Bengali cultural hub was not as prominent as Kolkata's, and the city remained under the influence of the Urdu-speaking gentry, particularly the Khwaja family.

The establishment of Dhaka University marked a significant turning point in the growth of the Bangla language, literature, and Bengali culture in the city and throughout East Bengal. Despite the dominance of Urdu-speaking elites, Dhaka started to develop its own cultural identity.

After the creation of Pakistan, Dhaka played a pivotal role in the struggle to make Bangla one of the state languages of Pakistan, facing strong opposition

from the new rulers. This struggle catalyzed Dhaka's emergence as a center for modern Bengali literature and culture for the entire Bengali population of East Bengal. The transformation of Dhaka into the nucleus of Bangla culture and civilization immediately after Pakistan's creation was a remarkable development.

Pre-Pakistan Period

During the discussions and debates surrounding the independence of India and the creation of two separate countries, India and Pakistan, the issue of the state language for the new Muslim-majority country was highly contentious. Urdu emerged as a prominent candidate, especially as top leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan unequivocally endorsed it. They argued that Urdu, being a sophisticated language closely associated with Islam and Arabic, was a natural choice for the state language of Pakistan, which was envisioned as a homeland for Muslims. This stance was adopted with little room for further debate, as Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan were keen on swiftly establishing Urdu's dominance.

On August 14, 1947, Pakistan gained independence, comprising two geographically and culturally distinct regions separated by a thousand miles. Shortly after, Jinnah proclaimed Urdu as the state language of Pakistan, efforts to promote Urdu quickly followed. Urdu being introduced in money order forms and postal stamps, signaling the impending removal of English from official documents. Fazlur Rahman, the central education minister, particularly spearheaded initiatives to confirm Urdu's position as the sole state language.

In Dhaka, the capital of East Bengal (the eastern region of Pakistan), there was initially no strong opposition to this decision. The first Chief Minister of East Bengal, Khwaja Nazimuddin, whose family language was Urdu, supported the elevation of Urdu. His family, including his great-grandfather Nawab Khwaja Abdul Ghani, had long been proponents of Urdu culture in Dhaka.

The Partition of India also led to significant demographic changes, with thousands of Urdu-speaking refugees (*Muhajirs*) migrating to East Bengal. Many settled in Dhaka, bolstering the city's Urdu-speaking population. This influx further complicated the linguistic landscape, as these new residents often supported Urdu over Bangla as the state language and sometimes opposed the Bangla Language Movement.

Despite these challenges, Dhaka emerged as a crucial center for the Bangla Language Movement during the Pakistan period, ultimately becoming the capital of independent Bangladesh. The University of Dhaka and its students played the pivotal roles in this transformation. Established in 1921, the university had a storied history of resistance against British colonial rule. After the creation of Pakistan, the university became a hotbed of activism, with students and teachers championing the cause of Bangla as a state language, culminating in the historic Language Movement.

On September 1, 1947, merely two weeks after Pakistan's independence, a group of students and faculty members founded a society named *Tamaddun Majlis* (পাকিস্তান তমদ্দুন মজলিস)- an Islamic cultural organization in East Bengal. This organization, founded by Professor Abul Kasem of the Department of Physics at Dhaka University, emerged as the vanguard of the historic Language Movement in what is now Bangladesh. Notably, Tamaddun Majlis initially grappled with the linguistic weakness of Dhaka, evident in its inclination towards non-Bengali languages such as Farsi, Arabic, and Urdu, reflecting the city's cultural heritage.

It's worth recalling that even before Pakistan's formal inception on August 14, 1947, the issue of the state language had been effectively decided, with leaders like Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan proclaiming Urdu as Pakistan's official language. Two weeks following its establishment, Tamaddun Majlis published a booklet titled *Pakisthaner Rashtra Vasha Bangla na Urdu* (Pakistan's State Language: Bangla or Urdu), sparking a crucial debate. This marked a pivotal moment as Dhaka, despite its historical affinity towards non-Bengali languages, emerged as a staunch advocate for Bangla.

Of particular significance was the presence of Khwaja Nazimuddin, Chief Minister of East Bengal, who staunchly supported Urdu language and tradition, despite Dhaka's newfound fervor for Bengali. This transition underscores Dhaka's journey from a city with a non-Bengali cultural heritage to the capital of a Bengali nation, firmly rooted in the Bangla language.

Our narrative traces back to the founding of Tamaddun Majlis and culminates in Dhaka's ascension as the capital of a sovereign state based on the Bangla language in 1971. In this miraculous evolution, the student communities of Dhaka University, both male and female, played instrumental roles.

It's essential to recognize that the Language Movement marked the first major struggle undertaken by the people of the region following Pakistan's creation, foreshadowing the monumental Liberation War of 1971, born out of subsequent struggles and courageous actions.

As it was established by the top leaders of Pakistan that Urdu would be the State Language, preparations were initiated to actualize this decision, despite its absence in the constitution. Actions were taken to implement this extra-constitutional policy, such as the use of Urdu on postal stamps and money order forms, as has been, previously noted. Furthermore, attempts were made in official discussions to discredit Bangla, with the then Education Minister, Mr. Fazlur Rahman, portraying Bangla as an inferior language and script. In response to these derogatory remarks, Tamaddun Majlish decided to counter such unfounded allegations by establishing an organization to expose the government's malicious intentions. This pioneering organization, named *Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad* or State Language Committee of Action, was formed on October 1, 1948. Several prominent figures associated with the Language Movement assumed key roles within this organization. Professor A S M Nurul Haque Bhuiyan of Dhaka University was appointed as its Convenor, while Professor Abul Kasem served as its Treasurer. Professor Kasem played a pivotal role in recruiting young students, faculty members, and other individuals primarily from Dhaka University to join the movement. These responses and initiatives provided the necessary human resources and leadership to start the Language Movement. The active protest and resistance began towards the end of 1947 and the beginning of 1948. The first anti-government meeting regarding the State Language was convened on December 6, 1947, at Dhaka University campus under the auspices of the newly formed *Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad*, with Professor Abul Kasem presiding. The primary aim of this protest meeting was to oppose the unilateral decision of the National Education Conference, held in Karachi, to designate Urdu as the sole State Language of Pakistan. Subsequent protest meetings involved the participation of additional organizations and leaders. A significant development occurred when the *Sarbadaliya Sangram Porishod* (সর্বদলীয় সংগ্রাম পরিষদ) or All-Party State Language Action Committee, was formed during a special meeting attended by leading members of various action committees, including Tamaddun Majlish. This pivotal decision was

made in the historic Fazlul Haq Hall of Dhaka University, with Shamsul Alam, a dedicated activist of Tamaddun Majlish, elected as its Convenor.

Tamaddun Majlish was the first and most important organisation in Bangladesh's Language Movement. It garnered support from diverse groups, representing the Bengali population, including both traditional and conservative Muslims, on language and other pertinent issues. Widely regarded as the authentic voice of the Bengali populace, Tamaddun Majlish enjoyed wholehearted support from Muslim elites, students, educators, journalists, writers, and cultural figures. The success of Tamaddun Majlish lay in its adept navigation of the language movement for five years, transforming it into a national cause by rallying people from all walks of life, irrespective of their social or political affiliations. However, the path was fraught with challenges, as the opposition included influential individuals, staunch proponents of Urdu, and other Islamic organizations across Dhaka and the nation. In Dhaka supporters of Urdu also did their most to make Urdu as the National Language. They also organised demonstrations and held meetings to promote Urdu.

Despite these obstacles, protests persisted, spearheaded by Tamaddun Majlish and other student organizations and activists. However, the East Pakistan Government, alongside other adversaries, remained resolute in rejecting the demands. They resorted to stringent measures, deploying police forces, arresting movement supporters, and incarcerating them. Consequently, East Bengal, particularly Dhaka, became a tumultuous and perilous arena marked by unrest and agitation.

In addition to Tamaddun Majlish, numerous other organizations and students from across East Bengal played pivotal roles in the Language Movement, significantly altering the traditional character of Dhaka, which was previously dominated by non-Bengali cultures.

It needs to be noted that among many others Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived in Dhaka from Kolkata to pursue studies in law at Dhaka University, where he quickly immersed himself in local politics. As one of the student leaders, Sheikh Mujib played an active role in various pivotal events. For instance, he participated in the Democratic Juba (Youth) League's formation in September 1948, where resolutions supporting Bengali language rights were adopted.

Furthermore, Tamaddun Majlish's *Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad Campaign* in 1948, rallying for signatures in favor of Bengali language demands. His leadership extended to drafting a manifesto in December 1947, which outlined 21 demands, prominently featuring language rights, and he was a key signatory to this historic document. Returning to our main narrative, East Bengal Chief Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin, a staunch supporter of the Urdu language, initially showed reluctance to engage in discussions regarding the language issue. However, within a year of independence, Dhaka emerged as the epicenter of Bengali nationalism. Despite various efforts, Pro-Urdu Prime Minister of East Bengal, Khwaja Nazimuddin, eventually agreed to engage in dialogue with mainstream leaders and student representatives of the Bangla Language Movement.

On March 15, 1948, a meeting took place between leaders of the All-Party Rastra Bhasha Shangram Parishad and Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Urdu-speaking Chief Minister of East Pakistan. Although Nazimuddin did not immediately support the demand to recognize Bengali as a State language of Pakistan, he acknowledged in writing that the language movement was not instigated by enemies of Pakistan. This resulted in the release of many arrested language demonstrators and the rescinding of some arrest warrants.

Despite prevailing anti-Bengali policies of both the Central and Provincial Governments, these concessions from a non-Bengali Chief Minister were significant. However, whether Nazimuddin was genuinely convinced by the arguments of the pro-Bangla student leaders remains unclear. The imminent visit of Muhammad Ali Jinnah might likely to have influenced Nazimuddin's decision to avoid unrest in Dhaka during Jinnah's visit.

Unfortunately, Jinnah's declaration at a public meeting and later at Dhaka University convocation that Urdu would be the State language of Pakistan undermined Nazimuddin's strategy. Furthermore, political developments following Jinnah's death complicated matters. Khwaja Nazimuddin, the arch-enemy of the Bangla language, was appointed Governor General of Pakistan, reinforcing his stance on the State language.

Dhaka continued to be a stronghold of non-Bangla culture, especially with the influx of non-Bengali refugees and the departure of the Bengali speaking Hindu population during post-Partition. Additionally, the presence of a

significant number of Army personnel from West Pakistan, civil servants, businessmen, and others who favored Urdu further entrenched non-Bangla culture in Dhaka.

Further complicating the political landscape, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination led to Khwaja Nazimuddin assuming the role of Prime Minister of Pakistan on October 19, 1951.

Shortly after his return from Karachi as the newly appointed Prime Minister of Pakistan, Khwaja Nazimuddin made a crucial announcement at a massive public gathering in Paltan Maidan that Urdu would be the sole State Language of Pakistan, disregarding his previous agreement with Dhaka's students and politicians. This declaration marked a pivotal moment in Pakistan's history and transformed Dhaka into a city poised to become the capital of a Bangla-speaking nation.

Nazimuddin's announcement served as the catalyst for a significant rift in Pakistani society, pitting the pro-Bangla State language advocates against those supporting Urdu as the State Language. This division ultimately contributed to the disintegration of Pakistan.

Recognizing the existential threat to Bangla language and Bengali culture, Bengali students and other groups mobilized to protect their heritage. This mobilization culminated in the tragic events of February 21, 1952, when several students and civilians in Dhaka lost their lives in clashes with the police. The incident reverberated not only within Dhaka and Pakistan but also shocked the global community, highlighting the lengths people were willing to go to defend their mother tongue.

Although the constitution of Pakistan belatedly recognized both Bangla and Urdu as State Languages in 1956, neither language flourished, and East Pakistan faced restrictions under the authoritarian rule of General Ayub Khan. During his dictatorship from 1958 to 1969, Ayub Khan marginalized East Bengal, expressing disdain for its people, culture, and language, which he deemed non-Islamic, as evident in his autobiography *Friends, not Masters* (1967).

On the contrary, a new era was dawning in Bengal determined to alleviate the political and economic hardships endured by Bengalis and restore Bangla, the

language of the masses, to its rightful prominence. This struggle found its epicenter in Dhaka, now the capital of East Pakistan but formerly a bastion of Urdu and Persian culture in Bengal.

However, the battle was far from straightforward, particularly with Ayub's backing by the Pakistani Army, largely comprised of personnel from the West. Furthermore, there were Bengali collaborators and a sizable population of so-called Biharis who migrated to East Bengal post-1947 and harbored strong anti-Bengali sentiments. Amidst this oppression and exploitation, a significant transformation was underway in Dhaka. Once a hub of Islamic and Persian culture, and a city where Urdu prevailed almost as the lingua franca, Dhaka was gradually evolving into a Bengali-centric city with Bangla as its dominant language.

Bengalis across the capital and the nation rallied for liberation. Dhaka, once considered non-Bengali, now fervently supported not only economic liberation but also emerged as the champion of a Bangla-speaking land with a rich history spanning a millennium. This history is distinguished by a deep-rooted commitment to individual freedom, religious tolerance, and a profound love for humanity, cherished by both rulers and the populace alike.

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