

## Amar Ekushey

Catch some of the spirit and move on

**E**KUSHEY February is a reference-point of central importance in our lives, because in it lies the umbilical cord of our nationhood. In that sense, it remains the fountain-head of all the best in terms of our inspiration to move ahead. We marked the fiftieth anniversary of the language movement last year, but have we achieved what we had aspired for, especially in the wake of the attainment of national independence in 1971. The movement was not just a linguistic and cultural one, it heralded the beginning of a much bigger, broader movement that shaped our identity as a nation and made us look for an exploitation-free society. We are no doubt immensely proud of the fact that this special day has acquired international recognition, but we are disappointed over the fact that the legacy has not been utilised in carrying forward the tasks we hold so close to our hearts for national advancement.

The movement that began on the streets of Dhaka fifty years ago with the objective of establishing our mother language as a state language of Pakistan ultimately gave us a solid intellectual platform to move ahead. That was a gain which could never be erased. But the real gain of which we could be prouder has always eluded us. Progress in social, economic and most importantly educational sectors has left a lot to be desired. There can never be a better time than now to delve deep into the matter and take stock of where we stand in those areas.

When our nation finds itself in a political disarray due to polarisation and confrontation in national politics we need to imbibe the spirit of unity Ekushey February has left us as a precious legacy. The universal appeal of the day should not be allowed to be compromised by anything whatsoever. The spirit of social equality and secularism emanating from the day is our best possession. There should be enough emphasis on increasing the literacy coverage as well as on continuous research on how the language could be more efficiently utilised for rapid national advancement. It is rather disgraceful that the literacy rate is still at a low level in a nation whose youths sacrificed their lives for their mother language.

## Accountability concern of the govt. welcome

The word 'indemnity' better be shed from the bill now

**T**HE government has taken a meaningful last-minute pause in legislating the patently controversial indemnity ordinance into an act of parliament. Following what the law minister gracefully termed detection of a 'typographical error' in the original draft of the bill to indemnify actions under the joint forces operation, its passage has been suspended to bring in the necessary correction. The original wording of the key clause was too sweeping admitting of no room whatsoever for accountability to be demanded from any member of the armed forces even under the ambit of the latter's own laws.

The 'correction' is to keep the option open for disciplinary action to be processed by the authorities of armed forces and law-enforcement agencies against their own personnel, if required, under the Army Act or other departmental rules and regulations. So, a safeguard is being consciously built into the proposed law against enjoyment of any blanket immunity by armed forces personnel in regard to their past deeds.

It is obvious that a degree of introspection and soul-searching has worked in the government to avoid being unconscionable in passing a law that has intrinsic human rights implications. This is indicative of a sense that the government does not wish to be indulgent of excesses or acts of indiscipline by any of its agencies. While welcoming this move towards keeping an aperture open for demanding accountability within the armed forces, we must say that this does not go far enough in responding to the principal concerns raised by the indemnity bill itself.

Law is an indivisible concept. Whether it is civil and criminal laws or the Army Act, they all emanate from one source -- the single fountainhead, which is the Constitution of the Republic. So, if the nature of any alleged offence is as serious as death in custody and other gross violation of human rights and there is an attendant denial of the fundamental right to seeking a legal remedy for it, then the whole purpose behind the existence of Constitution, the supreme law of the land, will stand defeated. We have been relentlessly critical of the indemnification idea on the highly valid ground that it militates against the core spirit and letter of our Constitution. It is an extraordinary measure adopted during war or civil unrest and that too in an area-specific manner. Such is not the setting for the present drive for indemnification.

To indemnify all actions taken under the joint operations a few months back is to put certain segment of the government above law. The paramount principle of Constitution and civilised governance that all citizens are equal before the eye of law cannot be trampled giving a wrong signal to the outside world. Now that provision for trial under military law is being contemplated, we would like the word 'indemnity' to be replaced by another term in the nomenclature of the bill proposed to be enacted soon.

# Ekushey, forever



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

**T**HERE are Days of national and international significance that celebrate victory of one kind or another. There are Days that commemorate events of historical importance. There are also Days that make universal declarations about humanity's cherished aspirations and goals. And then there are Days of mourning and of solemn remembrances of the dead. Ekushey is all these and more. That it embodies and represents a multitude of meanings bestow on the day a distinction that can hardly be equalled, not to speak of being surpassed, by any other day observed nationally and internationally. Because of this unique significance Ekushey is not a day frozen in time and will never be so. It welds the past with the present and continues to be a bridge to the future.

It began with the single-minded demand for recognition of Bangla as a state language. Ensuring honour for mother tongue, the language of the majority, was the immediate goal. In that simple and straightforward struggle there was assertion of other, more fundamental rights. These did not come to the surface in the white heat of the language movement. But there was no mistaking about its potentials for these even when they were dormant. Perhaps because of this portent the rulers

of the time were determined to subjugate the people of this part of the world politically, economically and culturally. Any popular demand spearheading a movement became the target of their wrath and suppression. They refused to give Bangla its rightful place in the affairs of the nation. They knew mass movements would start with demand for recognition of Bangla, the mother tongue of the majority and then snowball into bigger and more

serious deliberations and plan of actions panopoly of rituals continue to dominate the celebration. It cannot be overemphasized that now emotion alone cannot do justice to the cause of Bangla. What is needed is hardheaded thinking and determined efforts. Ekushey embodied the spirit of equality and all the rights that democracy bestows on and promises to people irrespective of their caste, creed or colour. It was this significance of Ekushey that

the majority. The fruits of independence are being enjoyed by the privileged few. Those who speak for the deprived and disempowered do so only sporadically. What is worse, this occasional grandstanding is done to build their own future. In Bangladesh today it is not only absolute poverty that is staggering, inequality between the rich and the poor is also widening and is moving like a juggernaut. The statistics on national averages

their demand for enjoyment of equal rights. This significance of the Day cannot be ignored or missed because of the gradually unfolding legacy and promise of Ekushey. Just as it could not be confined to the sphere of language in the past, a different role cannot be envisaged now either. Like a mountain stream hitting the plain, it has become wider and bigger, in meaning and impact. It has built a momentum of its own independent of what established institutions and authorities may wish.

One measure of the widening of its significance is the observance of the day in celebration of international mother language. Ekushey now belongs to the people of the world. Mother language has gained this importance because of its sacred and emotional bonds that bind people together. International Mother Language Day also recognises the need to preserve languages that are threatened with gradual extinction. It is one more manifestation of the amazing power of Ekushey to re-invent itself continually, almost like a living organism that mutates into new forms. Looking at the continuing saga of amazing Ekushey it is now hard to foretell that its potentials for new incarnations are all over. By becoming universal Ekushey has opened new windows of hopes and aspirations as well as upheld assertion of human rights. Its power to remain relevant, both at home and abroad, remains unchallenged and is now beyond question. Given this trend, Ekushey will be forever.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

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momentous issues. With hindsight it should be admitted that they were prescient, almost clairvoyant.

In its first incarnation, Ekushey was all about language, use of Bangla in higher education, in offices and in the parliament. In short, Bangla was to be used in all walks of life. To-day, after long fifty years since the language movement, Bangla is being used fully in government offices, partly in courts, also partly in commerce and business and partly in higher education. It is the last, the partial use of Bangla as a medium of and means for higher education that is most disappointing. It is also a matter of shame and great embarrassment. Now there is no antagonistic force, no adversary who can be accused of trying to foil attempts to use Bangla. In fact this freedom and opportunity prevailed soon after recognition of Bangla as a state language

ness on the part of those entrusted with responsibilities in this regard. It is a great irony that government offices, reviled as centres of reaction, are regularly using Bangla, while in seats of higher learning students, as well as teachers, struggle with books written in English because of the lack of books in Bengali. The most important and enduring role of our mother tongue, use as a medium of higher learning, has so far remained unfulfilled. This is most deplorable and disturbing. Unless this goal is achieved, use of Bangla in other spheres will remain stymied. It may even be reduced to a language for literature alone.

Ekushey reminds us about this unfinished task and it will continue to do so as long as it remains unrealized. It is a great conundrum that in the annual observance of Ekushey this failure is given so little attention. In place of

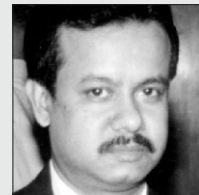
nurtured demands for equal rights for Bangalis in former East Pakistan, which, before long, took shape in the form of demand for autonomy. Faced with opposition and suppression and ultimately subjugation, the unmet demand for equal rights gave birth to Bengali nationalism. It eventually led to the war of liberation, which culminated in independent Bangladesh. Independence was achieved at a great cost of 'blood, sweat and tear' contributed by men and women from all walks of life. Ekushey thus vindicated its power outgrowing the original role.

In Ekushey's new incarnation, independence was the immediate goal. Like Ekushey, independence was the symbol of the hopes and aspirations of a people who were denied their rights. Today after more than thirty years the basic rights remain on paper for

about health care, education and social welfare hide the extent of deprivation at the levels of economic class, gender and minority groups. Even democracy, when it is at work, has been sequestered by the rich and the powerful. Use of money and muscle have made a sham of democratic election in many places. This being given, it is futile to expect accountability of those who are elected and transparency in governance.

Because of this miasma, the significance of Ekushey today transcends the bounds of language and culture. It will continue to remind people about the equality of rights and ensuring the enjoyment of the same. As in other developing countries some groups or others will continue to find themselves disadvantaged and deprived, politically, economically and socially and perhaps for a long while. Ekushey will embody their hopes, aspirations and also

# Saleem Samad's story



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

odour. They frequently pulled him from his cell for interrogation, and the interrogating officer regularly thrashed his kneecaps with a baton, and once even held a pistol to his head, threatening to blow it off. They also threatened to hurt his son and wife if he didn't tell where the hard drive of his computer was hidden. Further to that Saleem suffered from dysentery, ate disgusting meals and endured fear and anxiety during his deten-

tion. How he suffered was pathetic, but why he suffered was even worse. Here is a man, who couldn't be formally charged with anything -- crime, blasphemy, heresy or sedition. He hadn't written or said anything that could jeopardize the reputation or security of the country. He had not been proved either a rebel or a rabble-rouser. Yet, he was accused of treason for giving local support to the crew of Britain's Channel 4,

which was making a documentary in Bangladesh. This is where things become muddled. What was the real reason for his arrest? The government claimed that the Channel 4 crew was shooting a contrived documentary on the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh, and Saleem Samad was abetting them. On the other hand, Saleem Samad wrote in the 10<sup>th</sup> February issue of the *Time* magazine that

holds power with the fundamentalist Islamic groups that are changing the secular character of the country, and, as a result, Hindus and Christians were fleeing to neighbouring India. He also alleged that the government played host to jihadis from Afghanistan and beyond, while it systematically muzzled journalists and opposition leaders who tried to get the story out. He referred to Operation Clean Heart

charged from a festering wound.

But somewhere in the construction of his story in the *Time* magazine, it has been spiked with incongruity and excess. His references to the jihadis, Operation Clean Heart and fleeing of the country by Hindus and Christians in thousands sounded more like what others wanted to hear than what he wanted to tell them.

Saleem Samad writes towards the end of his story that he feels

If anything, there is a larger prison, which has incarcerated the truth and stopped its march. And that march has stopped for everyone, Saleem and all of us. It is because we are now the prisoners of convenience, not conscience, where irreverence for truth has become the hallmark of our ideals.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, a professor emerita of history at the Graduate School of the City University of New York, claims that there is a connection between irreverence and patriotism. According to him, the idea of "patriotism" is not in good repute in America because the Americans have forgotten to teach and preach the virtues of patriotism. They had lost "reverence for laws", which distinguished their country, which made it unique and which deserved their reverence. That reverence was lost because the Americans had forgotten their history, and where they have not forgotten their history, they have maligned it.

Saleem Samad has undersold his story in the *Time* magazine. Those who wanted to hear got more than what he wanted to tell them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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and mentioned that 4000 people were arrested during the crackdown, out of which 44 died in custody.

One must never doubt that Saleem Samad is a patriot. Likewise, one must also never doubt that he has serious questions about the government. Let us not forget how he suffered in custody, that he fought against what he thought was a repressive government. His story needed to be told with the urgency of pus dis-

he has emerged from a small jail only to enter a much larger prison. One couldn't agree with him more. "The truth is on the march, and nothing shall stop it," Emile Zola announced, when he was sentenced in 1898 to imprisonment and removed from the roll of the Legion of Honour. He tried to defend Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935), a French Jewish army officer, who was falsely charged with giving military secrets to the Germans.

two foreign journalists had managed to get 80 per cent of their film footage out of the country before their arrest. He is convinced that, if broadcast, the film would show the world how Bangladesh was being transformed into a repressive nation.

What is the truth then? Are we concerned with the image of the country, or is it the image of the government that is an issue here? According to Saleem's story in *Time* magazine, the government

matic wing of Bangladesh embassy would turn up to receive him. Diplomats also attend airport to receive VIPs and high officials. Going and coming to and from airport entail considerable time and expenses from government exchequer. The present trend of receiving, seeing off and looking after VIPs and senior officials by diplomats should have been done with to save money and time, and for concentrating on substantial work.

It is suggested that officers in the foreign office should be assigned to External Resources Division, Export Promotion Bureau, Bangladesh Investment Board, and Manpower Bureau etc. from time to time on a routine basis for a period of one month to gather knowledge about modus operandi of these organizations and Bangladesh's prospects in the fields of export of products and manpower. There has been a persistent complaint of lack of understanding between officers of some missions and their different wings. In the embassies, officers from ERD, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Information are working in different wings located in important countries of the world. Since each wing is an integral part of the embassy, therefore, concerted efforts should be taken

for different wings to work in complete harmony. Officers working in the diplomatic wing should eschew narrow feelings, if any, for greater interest of the country.

As defined by Otto Von Bismarck, then Chancellor of Federal Republic of Germany, foreign policy is merely an extension of domestic policy. If domestic policy is not formulated and executed in a planned and pragmatic manner, the image of the country will certainly be affected abroad. And in case of bad image, a diplomat could hardly convey a good message to the receiving state.

In addition to negotiating and exchanging views on problems with the host government, an embassy official is responsible for reporting on major developments within that country and their implications for relations with Bangladesh as well as economic, scientific and technological developments. Recent situation on Bangladesh-India borders appeared to be tense, particularly after push-in attempts by BSF. Firing and counter firing by BSF and BDR made the situation further complicated. One school of thought holds the policy makers in the foreign office of both countries responsible for deteriorating relations.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain is a former diplomat.

# Of relations and role of diplomats

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

**D**IPLOMACY in the contemporary world has undergone profound changes. Relations today between states have to keep pace with the fast changing and rapidly unfolding panorama in international arena. The conduct of official relations between states with a view to harmonising one's national interest with the interest of other states, the management of crisis and even actual hostilities, necessitate professionally trained diplomats, both at home and abroad.

While working at Bangladesh missions the diplomats are expected to represent their country, promote its bilateral or multilateral links in political, military, economic, cultural, scientific and educational fields, protect its nationals, collect information for formulating policy, advance its economic, developmental and commercial objectives by negotiating with tact, patience and a sense of timing. Public relation matters very much in advancing the interests of a country. Through public relations a diplomat is required to cultivate and promote mutual friendship, goodwill and understanding. Only sitting at the desk of a diplomatic mission a diplomat could hardly deliver service to the country he represents.

He shall have to be mobile and cultivate key personalities in the administration, media, parliament, senate and in the opposition parties and also opinion makers.

Diplomats working in the ministry should have frequent interaction with officials of other relevant ministries apart from visiting places in the country to acquaint themselves with the situation on the ground to meet the requirements of the inquisitive minds abroad. The Foreign Ministry should also utilise the services of Bangladesh Institute of International Strategic Studies (BISS) as well as the Law Institute.

Viewed from these angles, we may look at the state of affairs at our missions abroad as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. My experience of working in Bangladesh foreign missions in the past is that most of the diplomats, by and large, feel comfortable working at the desk. Ironically some of our Ambassadors even work on the basis of man-hour at the missions. Supposedly they would be hardly interested in the mobility of other diplomats. But calling on counterparts in other foreign embassies, attending functions of the expatriate Bangladeshis, hosting dinner or lunch occasionally for diplomats of foreign missions are, by and large, included in the programmes of

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Ambassadors.

Ambassadors with wide range of knowledge in international relations, economic and public relations should be chosen. Sensitivity of relations should be taken into consideration while selecting Ambassadors particularly for places like New Delhi. Bangladesh being a poor country cannot afford the luxury of controversial or less performing envoys. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should monitor the activities of Bangladesh embassies. Apart from routine briefing on the visit of foreign dignitaries to Bangladesh, and Bangladesh VVIPs' visit abroad, both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Bangladesh missions abroad should follow up the actions to be initiated. Most of the time the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the embassy concerned remains inactive following such visits.

Since diplomacy encompasses

also economic and technical assistance emphasis should be laid on the expansion of relations in the economic and technical fields.

Presently we are passing through a difficult period. Berlin-based Transparency International identified Bangladesh as number one corrupt country, US administration categorised Bangladesh as one of the terror-risk countries while Indian politicians blamed Bangladesh of harbouring insurgents from the eastern states of India and a section of international media labeled Bangladesh as a safe haven of Al-Qaeda terrorists. Therefore, the image of the country is at stake. The onus lies with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its missions abroad to shake off the blemishes. The formation of lobby groups and friendship associations in America, Europe, India and Pakistan will go a long way in promoting relations. Dynamic diplo-

macy is a *sine qua non* in the conduct of foreign relations. It is also advisable to cultivate members of opposition in Parliament, besides cultivation of relations with MPs of ruling party.

In America, a caucus was formed in the congress in March, 2001. Only 20 congressmen, mostly from the Democratic Party, are members of the caucus. Sri Lanka also formed caucus in American congress at the same time, but the number of members in Sri Lanka-American caucus stands at 40. It may be noted that Armenia came into being as an independent state in 1991, but the number of members in Armenia-America caucus has exceeded one hundred.

Bangladesh's ready-wear garments industries will soon be facing stiff competition in the international markets. The country needs to diversify its economic base and work towards improving competi-

tiveness of the sector vis-à-vis a more open trade regime in 2005 and beyond. In America, North and South Carolina states dominate in textile industries. MPs from the two Carolina states practically protect the interest of American textile industries. Their views wield influence in American congress. Whereas no member of the congress from these two states has been included in Bangladesh-America caucus. This position amply reflects upon the state of efficiency of our diplomats in Washington. There are a number of professional Bangladesh origin groups operating there. Unfortunately Bangladesh embassy in Washington does not maintain close liaison with these groups.

Most of our diplomats perform protocol duties often without rhyme or reason. For example, if a Foreign Minister lands at airport in Washington, all members from the diplo-