

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

When Two Becomes One

Ekushey is a living example that subsumes seemingly oppositional ideas.



BLOWN' IN THE WIND
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

While at the University of Arizona, we had a visiting professor from Stanford University, Prof. Joshua Fishman. Touted as one of the doyens of sociolinguistics, Prof. Fishman is known for his role in reversing language shift, particularly in reviving indigenous languages all around the world. I caught his attention in a large class with a quip. When asked about the first image that came to our minds after hearing the word “language”, I replied, “the smile of a mother” or Shaheed Minar, the monument erected in honour of the language martyrs of 1952. Intrigued by my response, he hurled a volley of follow-up questions, and eventually enquired, “Are you a Bengali who knows about Islam, or a Muslim who knows about Bengali?” Embedded in the question of the orthodox Jewish scholar was the presupposition that these two identities—religious and cultural—are not mutually inclusive.

Yet here we are in Bangladesh proving it otherwise. Ekushey is a living example that subsumes the seemingly oppositional ideas. Surely, it did not happen at one fell swoop, and definitely not on one day. It has a long history that dates back to many stories of oppression, marginalisation, deprivation, disillusionment, trampled hopes and shattered dreams triggering off a resistance. *Ekush* is the name we give to the resistance that shaped our national identity. *Ekush* is our symbolic hope and pride.

A national body with two wings and

one religious soul, craftily designed by an amateur cartographer, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, was a non-starter. Perhaps the search for a home for the Muslim population was a political reality in 1947. With limited access to education and bureaucracy, the Muslims were feeling disenfranchised under the colonial rule. The focus shifted to religion for a political upheaval; the issue of culture, however, was not fully factored in. Soon after the Partition, the political leaders of West Pakistan realised the significance of language for national integration; so did our emerging educated middle class that foresaw the economic and cultural trap that awaited the new nation if Urdu was to become the official language as desired by the central government.

Students, the vanguards of society, were the first to protest. As early as December 1947, the Rastrabhasha Sangram Parishad (Language Action Committee) was formed, which remained alert to any possible transplant of a foreign language. The resounding “no” that exploded the eardrums of the neo-masters was reciprocated by gunshots. An attack on February 21, 1952 on the agitating students demanding Bangla as the official language left scores killed. A 19-year-old Gaffar Chowdhury wrote a poem standing next to an injured activist, which was published in a newspaper, and was put to a tune first by Abdul Latif and then by Altaf Mahmud. Ever since, the poem *amar bhaiyer rokte rangano...* (“a day stained with my brother’s blood/ can I ever forget February the twenty-first?”) has become the song that epitomises our national sentiment.

Bengalis irrespective of their religious creed join the *probat feri*, a procession to the language memorial on the morning of February 21. Many

would do so after saying their morning prayers. They would sing in chorus and carry floral offerings, remembering the dead souls on a day that defined our nation and that is tinged with both cultural and religious politics—an idea to which Prof. Fishman was referring. *Ekush* (21) has merged the two into one. It is a day that has morphed into a date that bridges divisions.

Bangladesh is an organic growth

as the International Mother Language Day, signifying the symbolic spread and endorsement of the idea that language defines our essential existence. The scope and challenge of Ekushey have thus widened, and the onus is on us to learn to respect and accommodate other languages.

It is a shame that the overwhelming presence of media, as an atrophy of what is known as globalisation, often

Debate and studies too

He is very positive, and stays away from futile dreams

To tell you the truth, he can’t get his Bangla right” [my translation]

The urge to speak in English and disregard Bangla has also become a fad in our part of the Bangla-speaking territory. Often our new-moneyed class thinks it demeaning to express themselves in their native tongue. Mimicry of the west can only lead to a hybrid nation that yields in quantity, but takes away its essential quality to germinate. The glory and glamour of *Ekushey* that I mentioned need constant nurturing. It can be done through giving due importance to Bangla as well as through learning to respect the languages of others.

When I was growing up, we lived in a culture that promoted community spirit. Stealing flowers from your neighbour’s garden on the eve of *Ekushey* was approved; publishing wall magazines with plenty of mistakes and slanted lines with ink blotches was tolerated; having small cultural and sports clubs in every locality was common, and joining the morning procession followed by a trip to the book fair was a must. But today’s apartment culture has created a post-nuclear fragmented society where we rather watch the procession of agenda-ridden bodies on the TV. While we take pride in *Ekushey*, we also take it for granted. I guess the stories of disenfranchisement that I briefly mentioned need revisiting so that our new generation becomes aware of the sacrifices made by our previous generations for us to see the smile in our mother or the flowers that adorn the feet of the Shaheed Minar.

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A man holds a miniature version of Shaheed Minar on the premise of the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka on February 21, 2019.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

where national identity is synonymous with our language. Bangla-desh—literally, the Bangla Country—is our motherland where our mother tongue is the essence of our identity. We can put on foreign garb, speak many other languages to correspond and communicate at a professional sphere—but that does not take away from our national consciousness. In 1999, UNESCO recognised Ekushey

makes us forget who we really are. A satire written by Bhabaniprasad Majumdar has recently captured the doubts that our cousins in West Bengal are suffering from. His poem, *Banglata Thik Ashe Na*, reads like this:

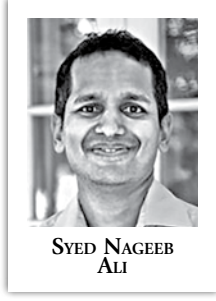
“My son is rather serious, he hardly ever smiles

To tell you the truth, he can’t get his Bangla right

He can say rhymes in English

Celebrating Common Threads

A son’s tribute to his father



SYED NAGEEB ALI

February 21 is an important day for our country and for the world. This is the day when we remember the sacrifice that brave martyrs made for the Bengali language and culture. It is also the day that people around the world celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. But while the nation and the world think of today as International Mother Language Day, it has a different meaning for me. To me, it is a day that is inextricably intertwined in my mind with my father, Syed Muazzem Ali. This is particularly so this year as it is the first such day without him. The first of many *Ekushays* without him, I expect.

My father was part of the extraordinary team that made sure this day would be commemorated globally. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the government of Bangladesh made a formal proposal for the International Mother Language Day to UNESCO, he was posted at the time as the Bangladesh Ambassador to France and Permanent Representative to UNESCO. He did his utmost to make sure that the proposal would be accepted, obtaining support from partner countries. Ultimately, the resolution was passed unanimously so that the entire world recognises

the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity on the same day as we remember the sacrifice a generation made for our language. I know that he felt very fulfilled and fortunate to have been part of the team that made it happen. I too feel grateful that he could be part of it, and after his passing, for me, this could be a part of him and his legacy.

The second reason that I associate him with this day is remembering the many discussions we had at the time about cultural and linguistic diversity. It was December 1999, soon after the

UNESCO resolution had passed. I was then an undergraduate studying mathematics and economics, and was visiting my parents over winter break. During one of our many long conversations, my father spoke about the importance of making sure that different languages and cultures survive together, and that these voices weren’t lost in the waves of globalisation. I remember questioning him why it was important to preserve a language if it weren’t being spoken.

“Wouldn’t it be more useful to just let the languages perish and for

us all to coordinate on one common language?” I remember asking. He responded: “Son, economics cannot capture everything. There is a different value to linguistic and cultural diversity.” But just like on many other occasions, he accepted with a chuckle that his children held a different point of view.

It turns out that both he and I may have been wrong: there is a value to linguistic and cultural diversity, as my father would argue, but this can be captured by economics. What I did not realise then, but do so now, is that at least two aspects of language have economic value.

The first is that the vocabulary we use to express ideas necessarily has an effect on the ideas that we have. What might be black or white in one language is expressed in shades of grey in another. To the extent that innovation often calls upon people to think of the world differently, perhaps a world where we speak a multitude of languages will foster having a multitude of ideas.

The second is a clear externality effect that I was ignoring: the choice of preserving a language or not is felt not only by the current generation but also by future generations. These generations do not have a say in whether the language is passed onto them, but in choosing to not pass that language on to them, they experience a loss of literature, fiction, culture, and ideas. They lose the chance to glimpse the beauty of an idea expressed in one

language that is obscured by every other.

The final reason that I associate my father with the International Mother Language Day is that there are aspects of him, and some I see in his generation, as being quintessentially Bengali. There is a certain charm, a whimsical nature to the humour and jokes, a ray of sunshine... all of these were qualities of him that drew inspiration from his love of Bangla literature. There was a style of speech and conversation that made him at home in Dhaka, in Sylhet, in Kolkata—anywhere where Bangla was being spoken—that made him less at home in San Diego or Boston. Bangla was a source of energy for him, and he was a source of energy for others. As someone who primarily thinks in English, I know that this is something I cannot recreate or reproduce for my children; I may not even be able to explain it to them at this stage. But with my father’s loss, I feel a loss of that energy that came from his inherent Bengali-ness.

My father didn’t sacrifice his life for Bangla in the way that the martyrs did. But he put his life to making sure that their sacrifice would be remembered. And today, I remember both those who gave their lives for Bangla, and my father who drew so much of his life’s energy from Bangla.

Syed Nageeb Ali is a Professor of Economics at Pennsylvania State University, USA. He is the son of late Syed Muazzem Ali, a former foreign secretary and career diplomat of Bangladesh.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 21, 1965
Malcolm X assassinated
Malcolm X, who articulated concepts of racial pride and black nationalism in the United States, was assassinated this day in 1965 and became an ideological hero after the posthumous release of ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X’.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Reach across

5 Washroom sight

10 Way of speaking

11 Venus’s sister

12 Guinness of film

13 Guileful

14 Double loops

16 Blonds

20 Like some kicks

23 Garden visitor

24 Magnet ends

25 Lombardy city

27 Period of history

28 Gadget protector

29 Hardly blue-blooded

32 Urban dwelling

36 Director’s cry

DOWN

1 Rough guess

2 Game with mallets

3 Over again

4 Cravat

5 Bed on a boat

6 Stand

7 Brief time

8 Tattoos, slangily

9 Dissenter’s vote

11 Vermont resort

15 Tacit approvals

39 Proceed slowly

40 Is appalling

41 Oklahoma city

42 Pains in the neck

43 – a one (zero)

21 Canceled

22 Murdered

25 Prepare potatoes

26 Reply to a knock

28 Half of a chess set

30 Pain in the neck

31 Takes a gander

33 Radius partner

34 Evening, in France

35 Water whirl

36 Inquire

37 Letter before psi

38 Great weight

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

C	O	R	D		C	A	L	F
A	M	O	U	R		M	A	I
B	A	M	B	I		A	T	O
A	N	A	L	I	N	S	E	E
L	I	N	D	E	N	S		
S	Y	R	U	P		R	A	P
L	I	P				R	U	N
S	A	G				L	I	N
L	I	N	C	O	L			
A	D	O	R	N		E	L	A
P	U	R	E			R	A	T
S	P	E	W					

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott