



A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT ON THE LANGUAGE MARTYRS' DAY, FEBRUARY 21, 1991.

## LIVING TRIBUTE

by S. Bari

Every Sunday, our house resounded with young voices chanting "Sharthoko janon amar janmehhi ey deshe." Across the lake, snow glistened on the Alps, and in the little cream-coloured villa, the children learnt Bengali. My father taught them. Like all the other hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi expatriates, he wanted his children to speak the language of his fathers. And we did.

It wasn't easy. I dreaded the weekly sessions learning "Amader chhoto nodi" by heart, pictures of a world so foreign and unrelated to the one I knew. My Bengali would express itself in hybrid phrases like "Come-chhi" ("I'm coming"). Parents are afraid to confuse their children with two languages, but after some initial bumbling, a child is easily comfortable in several different tongues. At one stage, sooner or later, all expatriate children refuse to speak anything but the vernacular of the country they are raised in. My parents would not answer anything I said in English, and as a result of what must have been persistent and patient effort on their part, my sister and I are fairly fluent in Bengali.

For foreign-born Bengalis not to gravitate towards their mother tongue is an understandably commonplace phenomenon. Friends, classmates, shopkeepers, and boyfriends, not to mention movies and television, surround them with another language, the language they hear and identify with most. The natural conformism of children and adolescents lead them to reject Bengali as a mark that sets them apart from their peers. But a generation that has just come of age is going to college, entering the work-force, and marrying, and many of them regret their inability to communicate in the language of their parents. One's mother tongue is no longer automatically one's first language, and often it is not even the second.

Bengalis abroad are enthusiastic about cultural gatherings and keeping their values alive. But despite the ubiquitous complaint, "My children don't speak enough Bengali", few parents actively pursue a solution. Some even take pride in their offspring knowing only the language of the adopted country, though they will vehemently declare the opposite. Most offer the excuse that jobs and housework keep them too busy to teach the children their language.

Simultaneously, the younger generation embraces a kind of perverse snobbery: speaking, or even understanding, Bengali is considered 'nerdy'. Teenagers will go out of their way to distance themselves from the language. We would pretend not to know Bengali very well: this was like a status

symbol. Only when a certain level of emotional maturity is achieved does one recognize the advantages of having a grasp of one's language of origin.

The heritage of language, that tie of blood, is the heart of one's racial and cultural identity, an identity Bangladesh was created upon, and an identity that eludes and plagues all second-generation Bengali expatriates or immigrants. To belong to the country and the society we grew up in, we must first know where we came from, accept it, and then be proud of it. The most difficult step is acceptance, yet till we accept, we cannot gain the full respect of the society we live in and feel a part of. Speaking Bengali eases that first step, and puts one's self-identity in a balanced perspective. It links what we could have been with what we are.

Family bonds are based on language. When we visit this country, the ability to communicate with aunts, cousins, friends and grandparents establishes another foundation-stone in our heritage. Without this linguistic advantage, one loses out on a wealth of relationships. The flip side of this advantage is that society believes language reveals culture: but just because one speaks Bengali one cannot be expected to understand all aspects of social or cultural life, nor to share the values of people here.

Hybrids are always unpredictable. So it is with these hybrids, maybe spouting Bengali, but also determined to go to the school dance. That delicate balancing-act we put on every day of our lives, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or subconsciously, takes its toll.

It is depressing to make the intense effort of learning and using a language, only to come to Bangladesh and discover that familiar snobbery at work here, too. It is hard to find anyone uttering a complete sentence in Bengali in everyday conversation: leaving apart terms and phrases that are unavoidable, words like "Dady" and "Aunt" are considered chic, even in circles where no one speaks proper English. "You know such difficult words, we always use simple Bengali", said one girl. "Instead of 'tired' you say 'kanto'." "Since when is 'tired' a Bengali word?"



Another source of amusement for those of us who have spent our entire lives 'abroad' are the new arrivals. After a scant two years in San Francisco, in Leeds, or in Geneva, they have "forgotten" all their Bengali. This desperate attempt to integrate leaves them floundering, for they have not absorbed America or Europe yet they have abandoned Bengali. When Tagore writes "Khaneko sneho kolo chhadi, chinite aar nahi par", he seems to be predicting this phenomenon.

Immigrants, it is said, must adapt. Slough off the past and begin anew. But now, as the results of immigration are coming in, we see that Italians, Greeks, and Chinese all still share some bond with their home countries. So will Bengalis. Our lifestyles and values differ from our parents, but continuity is just as much a part of life as change, and language provides that continuity.

At the same time, language, any language, enriches the human being. In addition to blood ties and mother tongues, a second language adds dimension to one's thinking. We have the rare advantage of being in a position to claim mastery over two languages at least.

It is a source of constant wonder when the children of expatriates are found to speak Bengali. Either the curious and incredulous ask, "Can you read and write?" Or the assumption is, "you must have gone abroad only recently". No, my parents left 24 years ago. In his busy schedule, my father makes time to teach friends' children their mother tongue, and after long days at work, my mother made us write letters 'home' in Bengali.

Few countries have a day set apart to commemorate a language. Many men have died for independence; few have died for their language. To that most emotional, most personal, and most primordial bond between man and language, a whole nation pays tribute today.

Far away, overseas, Bengalis are also paying tribute, every day, by teaching their children the language men have died for. Those children are a living tribute, struggling to master a language that was theirs by right but must now be earned.

Perhaps more than any other day, February 21 has earned itself a special place on the collective psyche of the Bengali nation. It is one of the most intensely debated events in nation's long history of struggles, yet it is also one with which people remain completely at peace. No confusion, no controversy.

Over the years the day has inspired more speeches, poems and books — volumes upon volumes of free-thinking literature — than even the most dedicated of archivists would probably manage to list. From the moment news of the day's events — martyrdom of youngmen with a language to defend, but with nothing to defend it with except their mother tongue itself — spread from Dhaka to towns and villages in the interior of the country, February 21 entered the very life-blood of the nation's history.

Since then, the very word "Ekushey" has embodied the spirit of the nation's struggle in defence of its language, culture and way of life.

The appeal of the day cuts through virtually every barrier. Generation gaps disappear here, political ideologies lose their battle lines when confronted with Ekushey, religious divides become insignificant, even irrelevant. Nothing moves the Bengali soul greater than words uttered in its mother tongue, Bangla; and nothing stirs the rebel in the outwardly placid and compliant Bengali man more than assault on his language.

But why Ekushey? February 21, 1952 was not the beginning of the movement to defend Bangla, to defend its honour as the mother tongue of the Bengali people and the source of Bengali culture. Nor did the day usher in the movement to establish Bangla as one of the state languages of the infant state of Pakistan. Nor did Ekushey signal the triumphant finale to the struggle for Bangla.

Historically, the Bangla language movement owes a great deal to two distinct individuals of diverse background: Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah and Mr. Dharendra Nath Dutta.

When, in July of 1948, the Vice-Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, expressed his learned opinion that Urdu should become the state language of soon-to-be-born Pakistan, in the same manner that Hindi was the state language of India, the Pandora's box cracked open.

Dr. Shahidullah, one of the most respected linguists and literateurs of the subcontinent, took it upon himself to put the picture straight.

While the Muslim League and other influential organisations remained silent on Dr. Ziauddin's less-than-brilliant idea, Dr. Shahidullah issued strong protest through an article in Calcutta's Daily Azad. As English was to be removed as state language because it was

## Ekushey: The Point of No Return

By Sabir Mustafa

foreign, he did not see why its place should be taken by Urdu which was native to north India, but not any of the five provinces of Pakistan. Dr. Shahidullah maintained that only after Bangla was accepted as the state language of Pakistan could the case for Urdu be even considered. He further observed that to impose Urdu on Bengal's schools, universities and courts would be to introduce another form of colonialism, contrary to the principles of autonomy and self-determination. His demand that Bangla should be the state language of East Pakistan went against what the Muslim League central leadership was apparently scheming.

As the conspiracy to impose an alien language on the Bengali people — and thus break their national and cultural identity — gathered pace in West Pakistan, the student community of Dhaka University began to come on their own. An angry student body held its first-ever meeting on the lan-

guage issue on December 6, 1947, and demanded an unequivocal decision to make Bangla the first among the state languages of Pakistan. It even went so far as to warn the daily Morning News for its persistently anti-Bengali propaganda.

Meanwhile on February 23, 1948, Dharendra Nath Dutta landed himself in rather hot soup at the first session of Pakistan's People's Assembly, by demanding that Bangla should be made an official language of the Assembly, as were Urdu and English. He was assailed from all corners, with the most lethal arrows of verbal abuse being tipped with communal poison and fired by none other than Liaquat Ali Khan himself.

Khawaja Nazimuddin excelled himself in his efforts to please his masters by claiming that the majority of East Pakistanis actually wanted Urdu to be the only state language! Twenty-three years later in

late March, 1971, the Pakistan army took revenge by murdering Dharendra Dutta in his hometown of Comilla.

But the simmering discontent soon came to a head. March 11, 1948, witnessed student strikes and demonstrations all across the country, with day-long street battles with the police in Dhaka. The pressure mounted and Nazimuddin gave in. Or so it seemed. He signed a "treaty" with student leaders on March 15, agreeing to make Bangla the official medium in East Bengal, and promised to propose to Pakistan People's Assembly that Bangla should be given equal status with Urdu. To many leaders and observers, it seemed, the game was over.

So, the question remains, why Ekushey? Obviously, game wasn't over, but had only begun! Having calmed the students with his "treaty", Nazimuddin soon did an about-turn — by reprising Jinnah's

old song about Urdu being the only state language of Pakistan. Nazimuddin was sitting on top of a volcano, and he didn't know it. Or if he did, he thought it was extinct, its life-energy having dissipated over the past four years. How wrong, how fatally wrong he proved to be. The volcano of Bengali emotion exploded on February 21, with an all-devouring fury that not only blew away Nazimuddin and his Urdu ideas from the scene, but also contained enough force to rage on until the very state of Pakistan disintegrated. February 21 captured the public imagination like nothing else that had gone before. When young men are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, then that becomes the point of no return. Ekushey thus became, in the field language, culture, even nationhood, the Bengali people's point of no return. It marked a high point in the struggle for self-determination.

The assault of Everest in March, 1971, was only possible because of the conquest of 1952. The martyrdom of 1952 did not ensure that no more lives would have to be sacrificed, but it guaranteed that from then on Bengali people would walk with his head held high. It is from the vantage point of Ekushey that the summit of liberation could be glimpsed.

শুধু কথায় নয়,

কথায় এবং কাজে সর্বস্তরে বাংলা ভাষার প্রচলনের মধ্য দিয়ে ডেল্টা লাইফ  
এবারের একুশকে বরণ করছে।

জীবন বীমায় আমরাই প্রথম সকল পলিসি দলিল বাংলায় সম্পাদনের ব্যবস্থা  
করেছি। গ্রামীণ বীমায় দু'বছর থেকে পলিসি দলিল বাংলায় সম্পাদন করা হচ্ছে।

ডেল্টা লাইফ ইনসিওরেন্স কোম্পানী লিঃ

১১, দিলকুশা বাণিজ্যিক এলাকা, ঢাকা - ১০০০।

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