

Interview with Badruddin Umar

Bengali is Yet to Take its Elevated Position

SELDOM do politico-economic historians surpass the heroic figures who actively participate in the making of history. Badruddin Umar, university professor-turned politician, has earned such a rare honour for his trend-setting works on language movement.

His seminal work, *Purba Banglar Bhasha Andolon O Tatkaleen Rajniti*, an individual and pioneering initiative, dwarfs even endeavours made with institutional support and elaborate preparation through any organised mechanism.

Umar, to bring out clarity the history of language movement, did not limit himself within the confines of the events, rather included the then political scene to make understand the context of the language movement.

He thinks that the historical perspective of the language movement and its significance cannot be truly depicted, if it is viewed as a countdown of some isolated events.

According to him, the language movement is to be understood through a clear conception, interaction and the impacts of history and the class character of the Pakistan movement, development of the classes after the emergence of Pakistan and the contradiction among them.

To put it in other words, he reasons, it is incomplete to study language movement without detail analyses of political, social and economic factors contributing to it, and similarly the emergence and nature of Bangladesh will remain incomprehensible without knowing the relation to and significance of language movement.

An Oxford graduate, Umar, a professor of philosophy and political theory, left Rajshahi University to actively participate in politics. His recent works — though raise controversies, according to some, for its Stalinist's overtones — are widely considered as authoritative on our language movement.

Therefore, The Daily Star talked to Umar to know about the objective of the language movement, the obtaining situation in Bangladesh, nationalism and religion.

The excerpts of the interview follow:

**The Daily Star (DS):** A movement has a starting point and another when it ceases or begins definitely to peter out. When did language movement cease to be a movement? What remained of it after that?

**Badruddin Umar (BU):** No movement worth the name can have a starting point like a one hundred metre race. Every movement arises out of a socio-economic base and within a definite cultural and political framework. The language movement is no exception in this regard. Thus the initial development of this movement can be traced back to the nineteenth century marked by the rise and development of modern Bengali language and literature. Iswar Chandra Vidya-sagar, Rabindranath Tagore and many others realised the importance of imparting instruction to the students in Bengali and made efforts to that end. The question of the State language is basically related to the question of medium of instruction. The significance of this relationship will be clearly understood if we look at state languages in other countries of the world. It is difficult to imagine a country where separate languages are used for State official purposes and for imparting education. One of the reasons why the State language movement happened in Pakistan was because an attempt was made here to separate the language of the State and the language of instruction. In India they have imposed only one State language for the whole union and there is considerable resentment against that in all non-Hindi speaking areas of that country. Though at present there is no violent movement against Hindi, yet in India the language question may act as a

detonator in developing regional movements which may blow up the present unity of India.

**DS:** Can the objective of the State language movement be said to have been achieved with Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan in the 1956 constitution? If not, was this achieved with the adoption of 72 constitution? Is the State language of Bangladesh Bengali in any meaningful sense of the term? How would you describe the State language situation of Bangladesh now?

**BU:** The recognition of Bengali as one of the State languages of Pakistan in the 1956 constitution was a partial victory and hence in spite of this victory much remained to be achieved. And what remained to be achieved has not yet been achieved in spite of the fanfare of 1972 constitution and all the demagogic utterances and rhetorics of the Awami-Bakshali leaders, and the military leaders who came to rule Bangladesh after 1975. Thus in spite of all the declarations regarding the State language, in spite of all the ritual tears

which are shed during the holy month of February by the custodians of this country's national culture, the Bengali language is in a real bad shape. Very little or practically nothing has been done to create conditions in which instruction may be imparted to our people at all levels through the medium of Bengali. This is true in spite of the fact that Bengali has been officially made the medium of instruction at all levels.

In fact, the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction up to university level without fulfilling necessary conditions for that has created an anarchic situation in the field of education. To make this point clear it must be said that the gross negligence of the successive governments in providing necessary books in Bengali and the virtual abolition of English as a compulsory second language has created a dichotomy in the entire educational system. Thus education is being imparted through Bengali but there is no arrangement for making necessary text books, reference books and other related reading materials available in the

problems which affect the educational institutions, particularly the universities and colleges arise out of this failure to provide books in the language in which instruction is imparted leading to a gradual deterioration of the standard of education. In the absence of good and suitable books, trash notebooks and low-level text books written by some so-called educationists and writers at present flood the market and block the mental development of the students. The matter does not end here. The gradual deterioration of this standard of education creates a situation in which students fail to answer questions dished out to them formally at the examination halls and practically force the students to take resort to thievery and other unfair means. Much of the crimes that happen in the educational institutions today are inextricably linked to this situation. Without going into further details, it may be said that this situation also inspires business motive among a section of the teachers who, in order to make up the deficiencies of the students take up private instructions, write trash note books and even provide unfair advantages to their pupils. The political guardians of the ruling classes also take full advantage of this situation and try to use the students, and even teachers, for political purposes which have nothing to do with the welfare of the pupils and the advancement of education and culture.

**DS:** Pakistan imposed religion as the basis of nationhood. Language movement taught a more scientific basis for that: language, the rationale of the emergence of Bangladesh lay in that change. Now that religion is coming back as the basis although in the grab of territorial nationalism, how would you react to the suggestion that this is compromising the existence of Bangladesh?

**BU:** Bangladesh has emerged as an independent State through a historical process and this state will stay as it is in its present geographical form. The existence of this State is not likely to be disturbed on account of the basis on which this State is run. Thus Bangladesh will retain its present boundaries irrespective of its being based on language, religion or socialism.

At present religious revivalist elements are active, to some extent in Bangladesh but there is no possibility of their coming to State power. Their appearance on the political scene is temporary and it is bound to increasingly become less and less effective in the politics of this country. This is because the social, political and economic situation of Bangladesh is becoming increasingly radicalised.

It may not be out of place to mention here that much of the

of fate that it was the Hindu representatives in this provincial assembly who, only about half a century later, in 1947, voted in favour of partition of Bengal? On the point about the beginning of our struggle for freedom, one may talk about the Pathan kings or the Sena Dynasty or even go as far back as the Pala dynasty. One may talk about the rebellion of Titu Mir and other peasant leaders. All these efforts, spontaneous and often unorganised, must have played a role in moulding the Bengalees as a nation. But the consciousness and a consensus about our true identity and the motivation for freedom in the framework of a state of our own emerged only after the historic movement of 1952.

Thus the process that began in violence and bloodshed in 1952 ended some twenty years later in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state. Twenty years is not a long time in the context of the struggle for the emancipation of a nation but for us those were twenty vital and crucial years. It was a matter of good fortune that during such a critical period a giant of a man—Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assumed the mantle of leadership. His charismatic leadership was undoubtedly a major factor in our success in the struggle. He organised the nation and gave them a definite goal. Unlike other leaders he did not yield or weaken under pressure. He will remain, for all times to come, the greatest son of this land that we lovingly call, despite its material poverty, as the golden Bengal.

**The Language**  
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no alternative at the moment. Once again the point needs to be emphasized: both political and cultural struggles need to be strengthened, and they need to complement each other organically, for which people's participation at all levels is indispensable.



Badruddin Umar

Interview with Ahmad Rafique

It's Yet to be a Commoner's Ekushey

MORE often than not, the warriors who want to change the course of history have to earn it at the expense of themselves in varying degrees. Ahmad Rafique, a final year student of Dhaka Medical College in 1952, was not able to sit for the examination as an arrest warrant was issued against him by the government for his participation in the language movement.

The story does not end here. He had to be in the college for another two and a half years to compensate for only four months. Although he received his MBBS degree, he was not allowed to take his internship for his involvement in the movement and also for his leftist leaning. So, he never got the opportunity to be in the profession proper.

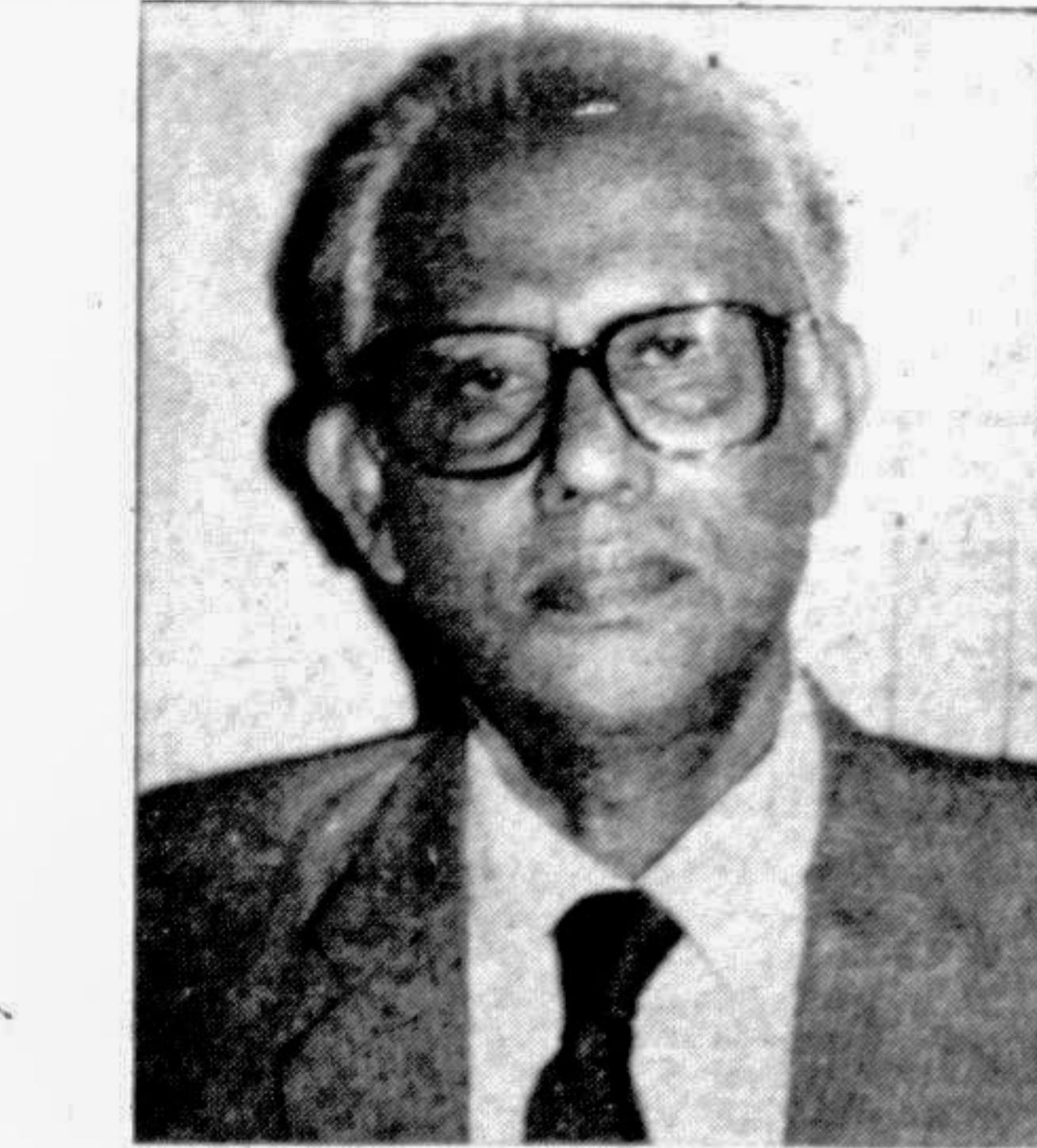
Born in 1930 in Shahbajpur village under Brahmanbaria dist, Rafique joined non-communal progressive politics from his very school life. A notable essayist, Rafique was awarded Bangla Academy award for analytical essays. He also wrote, along with Abdul Matin, a book on language movement titled '*Bhasha Andolon Ethash O Tatparjo*'. The Daily Star talked to Ahmad Rafique to know about an eye-witness's version of February 21, 1952.

The excerpts of the interview follow:  
**The Daily Star:** Could you please relive the moments before the police firing on 21st Feb, 1952.

**Ahmad Rafique (AR):** Well, even after 42 years it is possible to reconstruct the scene to relive the moments before the police firing on 21st February 1952. The students after being dispersed by lathi-charge and teargas attack left the Arts Building and stayed together inside the Medical College Hostel and on the road in front of the college gate. By 1 p.m. the excited students formed a huge gathering that was bursting with rage to reach the Assembly House in order to place their demand for Bangla.

With Slogans '*Rastra Bhasha Bangla Chal*' police Zulim Chalbe na' almost without break, the students were trying to cross the police barrier amidst lathi-charge and teargas shelling. But they were driven back by the determined police forces. By 2.0 clock the number of the protesting students increased to a few thousands and they were moving towards the road like huge waves only to be repulsed by the police actions. The hostel gate was flung open and this 'cat and mouse' game continued for some time. The police contingent was probably little unnerved and resorted to severe teargas shelling which was replied by the little school-boys by way of brick-battling. The whole area looked like a battlefield, battle between the armed police and unarmed students.

It was sometime after 3 pm (according to the Govt report exactly at 3.20 pm) the authority, unable to calm-down the agitated students decided to strike and ordered to open fire on the unarmed students assembled inside and outside the hostel.



Ahmad Rafique

**DS:** Do you think that the occasion had become like that more because of the Pakistan government's intransigence than because of a planned preparation for it?

**AR:** I do not think promulgation of Section 144 was necessary as the declared programme of Ekushey was supposed to be peaceful. Further, the situation on 21st February noon was not desperate enough to open fire on the unarmed students who were fighting the police force with slogans. I believe intransigence as well as despotic attitude of the government helped to create the occasion as it is remembered today. In one sense Ekushey is their own creation.

**DS:** Among the martyrs on the day, who do you think had a more active participation in the language movement?

**AR:** None of the martyrs actively participated in the movement except shaheed Rafiquddin Ahmed who was known to be an active student worker.

**DS:** It is now claimed — sometimes also counter-claimed — by some that they had extensive discussions before taking the decision to break Section 144. What do you remember about the preparatory meeting?

**AR:** So far I remember, the politically conscious students were all excited after promulgation of Section 144 and they were in a mood to defy that order. The reaction was spontaneous and the air was emotionally charged. By the

evening the students were discussing the issue in small groups in the halls and hostels and the majority of them were in favour of continuing with the programme by defying the Section 144. Meanwhile the activists started contacting the students in different halls and hostels under the circumstances, whether a particular group of students sat at mid-night for discussion and decision was not at all important. The decision was already in the air and that's why the students rally on 21st morning did not allow Shamsul Huq, the spokesman on behalf of all-party committee to talk much and they all opted for violation of Section 144 without delay.

I personally feel, that was the day of the general students who were restless to carry-out the Ekushey programme. And despite blood-shed and death, the victory of Ekushey Movement was the result of a decision reached by general students.

Claims and counter-claims are nothing but fabrications to establish one's heroism in connection with violation of section 144 and so-on. This is because Ekushey was established on the defiance of 144 and it earned the character of people's movement because of police-firing.

**DS:** What political aim did the occasion serve before and after the final confrontation between the processionists and the police — by extension the Pakistan government?

**AR:** The aim of the language movement was to establish Bangla as one of the state languages and in all spheres of life. Whatever may be the success, the goals could not be achieved without confrontation with the Govt. And Ekushey could not have been Ekushey if the line of compromise was followed. The political parties at that time could not see this truth and did neither realise

the significance of our demands nor the importance of the movement. Time has shown and events have proved that the rebellious students were right not the political parties and their henchmen students.

**DS:** Now about the context — political, economic and social — of the language movement controversies have been raised from different corners. Should we assume that these are deliberately done to undermine the occasion or to bring out the truth and how?

**AR:** Here controversy was of two dimensions. One is entirely on selfish motive to establish particular person or party as the hero or axis of the language movement. This is no doubt deliberate. But the second point of controversy is due to difference in political outlook. I don't subscribe to the views of over-glorification of the role of peasants and workers in the language movement. That was not correct. Their participation was temporary, and spontaneous, and not political.

On the other hand the mainstream agitators' participation, including the leadership was from the literate and elite class. The spirit of language movement was to establish the democratic rights of our language and culture based on ethnic heritage, and socio-economic and political interests were bound to be mingled with it.

So, it depends on how you look at the events, how you analyse them whether with myopic eyes or with coloured extended vision. The fact remains that the language movement was the movement of the elite class who fought for their own class interest and not for the interest of the people at large. After the emergence of independent Bangladesh the elite class was happy that their aspirations were fulfilled and they have no reason in translating the Ekushey spirit in reality. As such they enjoy the observance of the day.

**DS:** Ekushey has so far remained an affair with the elite of society, it is yet to meaningfully touch the lives of the common and illiterate people. Unless it does, can this occasion really deliver what is expected of it?

**AR:** Ekushey is therefore an affair with the elite class of our society. Its observance is therefore confined within the high-ups. The common people or the village folks don't consider Ekushey as their own and Ekushey could not so far touch their aspirations in any way. We may only hope that Ekushey might one day become Ekushey of the commoners.

**Interviewed by**  
**Rashed Mahmud Titumir**

The State Language Movement

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achieved in which our beloved mother tongue will be denied the status of an official language even though the majority of the people of the newly created country spoke in that language. They began to realise that we had become independent only in name; real state power rested in the hands of the West Pakistani ruling elite in a distant city across India. These thoughts, considered reasonable in those days by the rulers, began to gain currency. What began as rumblings in 1948 rapidly gathered speed and turned into a hurricane in 1952 and swept away many of the illusions of the forties decade.

It has to be admitted, with regret, that even after the Language Movement of 1952 many Bengali Muslims continued to cling to the Pakistani idea. Some of them did so because of personal interests but others lacked the clarity of thought to see through the mist of religious and communal sentiments.

Fortunately for us, the leadership of the nations did not rest in the hands of such weak, and short sighted people. Perhaps it is a natural response of a nation to a real threat to their identity. After 1952, the leadership of the nation was assumed by more forward-looking persons and the hold of the old-school Muslim Leaguers started to weaken rapidly.

The resounding victory of the United Front in the 1954 provincial election was almost a rejection of the Pakistan concept. In fact, it would not be unfair or an exaggeration to say that it was the Language Movement of 1952 which prepared the fertile ground for the United Front victory. But the unseating of the Muslim league government in Dhaka was merely an external manifestation of a profound and fundamental change which was triggered on 21 February in 1952.

The real change was the gradual crystallization of Bengali nationalism, based not on religious or communal considerations, but on factors such as our language, culture, history, geography and heritage. The leadership that emerged during this phase was largely free from communal venom and religious bigotry. One may recall here with pride the changes that took place in the Awami League. The party not only shed its communal name but under the dynamic leadership of Sheikh Mujib it truly assumed the characteristics of a people's party with strong organisation at the grassroot level.

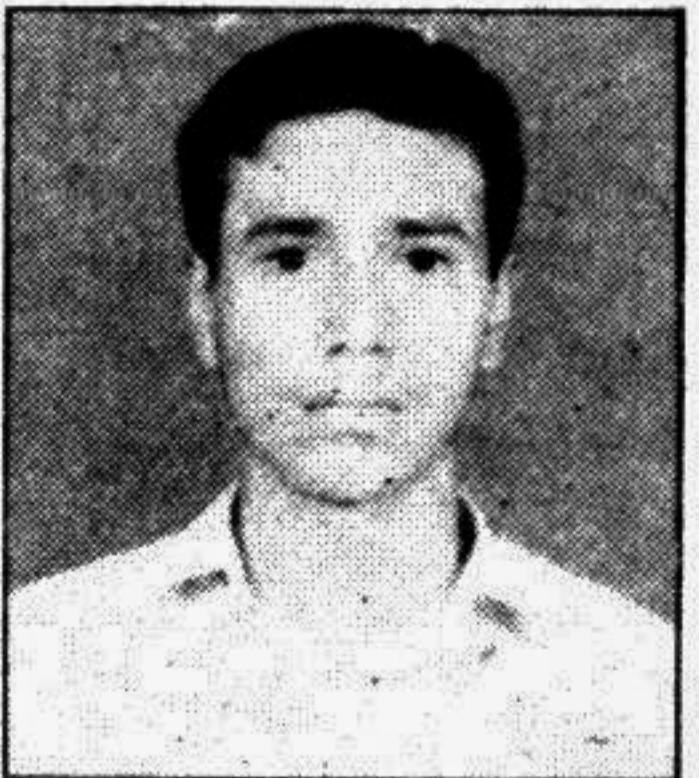
The six-point charter of demands formulated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1966 was essentially based on the nationalist foundation laid by the Language Movement of 1952. Such a radical and bold formula needed an ideological underpinning which was ready by 1966.

It may be noted that the six-point demand was supported not only by the members and supporters of Awami League; it had become, soon after Bangabandhu presented it, the near unanimous demand of the entire Bengalee nation. Would it have been possible if the vast majority of the people continued to believe in the two-nation theory of Jinnah? If they did, they would have also opposed it as did Ayub Khan. But by 1966 the disenchantment about Pakistan was nearly complete.

The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War had struck the concept a further blow. People could see that Pakistan was really not a factor in the security of Bangladesh. The inevitable conclusion, therefore, was that to live in honour and freedom, with our own language and culture and also to promote our economic interests we needed a state of our own free from the constraints imposed by the Pakistani ruling elite.

What Does Ekushey...

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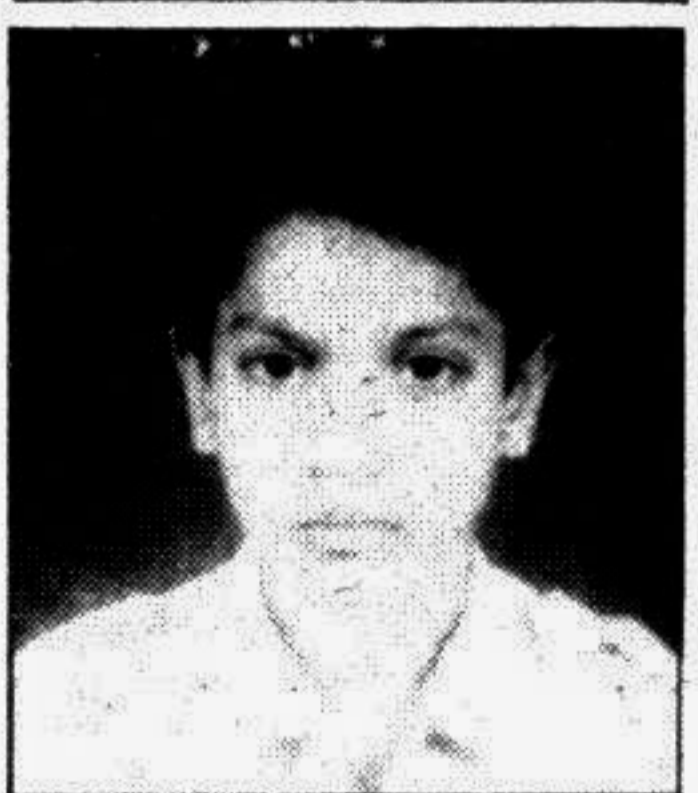
Iftekhar Uddin Shamim  
Class X  
Armanitola Govt. High School

Among the days which attribute special significance to our national life, Ekushey surpasses almost all others in its importance. On this very day back in 1952 — our people learnt to resist any kind of injustice and oppression, received a sense of national identity and above all, inspired the people of this country to fight for their rights. This day, which 40 years ago, voiced our rightful claim on the language of our country and was only a cultural revolution at the beginning was later transformed and became instrumental in bringing about the ultimate freedom of our country through another blood-bathed revolution. That is why Ekushey has almost become an event synonymous to everything that our culture, politics, national ideals and beliefs represent.

This sombre occasion, Ekushey, will only find its due honour when we carry out its real message to the mass in all nooks and corners of the country and that message is implementing Bangla in all aspects of our national life.

commitment. On this day, we should commit ourselves to development, creativity and everything that stands for beauty, truth and freedom. We should infuse the spirit of Ekushey into the everyday affairs of our life. If all our works manifest the refined emotion of this sombre occasion then only will the cause of this day not be defeated.

(Translated from Bangla)



Asaduzzaman  
Class X  
Armanitola Govt High School

Ekushey February is a red letter day in the history of our country. It is a day of immense significance. This day also entails the painful memories of the loss of some of the best sons of this soil. Many youths made their supreme sacrifice on this day to uphold the cause of language and freedom. Ekushey paved the way for a free and independent Bangladesh; it has a very important role in our national life. This day does not only represent a heroic event of our nation's past, it symbolizes the beginning of this country.

Actually, Ekushey symbolises the struggle for achieving our democratic rights as a whole. The formation of Pakistan after the British Raj was never enough to bring about the desired emancipation of our people. The Pakistani rulers systematically used its repression tools against the Bengalees. That is

why they planned the rape of our language which we hold so dear to our heart. When the innocent people of this country came to know about the decision of Urdu being made the only state language of Pakistan, they burst into a frenzied rage and instantly protested it. So they started the Language Movement.

During the culminating phase of that movement on February 21, 1952, the Bengalees brought out a huge procession disregarding section 144 in protest of the government decision. The police falling to control the enraged crowd, opened fire. Many people died and as a result the whole of East Pakistan virtually came out in the streets to protest the police action. Students like Salam, Barkat, Rafiq and Jabbar bathed the streets of Dhaka with their precious blood.

To mark this sombre occasion, this day is observed throughout the country in a befitting manner. But the essence of the day, through the years has found its place in the hearts of the Bangladeshis.

(Translated from Bangla)

Md Asad Ullah Galib  
SSC Candidate '94  
Armanitola Govt High School

Ekushey February is a day of special significance in the life of a Bengalee. It is not just another calendar day, but a day that gave birth to history. It is a wonder how this day united a whole people on a common platform, an instance that not too many countries of the world have experienced. This movement that resisted the rape of our language and national identity is a red letter day in the history of our country.

Ekushey has brought a positive change in our political consciousness. It has taught people to discard the anti-people ideals of fundamentalist politics and has imbued the people with a ready strength for resistance against any social or political bias. Ekushey's conveyed message seems to have been the guiding force in our liberation struggle in 1971. So, we are deeply indebted to Ekushey and the spirit of this auspicious day.

Ahmed Arifur Rahman  
Class IX, Prabhati  
Armanitola Govt. High School

February 21, 1952, is a historic day which has inspired the people of this country beyond any measure from time to time. This very day reminds me of the immortal song, *Aamar Bhaier Rakte Rangano Ekushey February*. Aami ki