

Magazine

HERE were more reasons than one to confuse the experience with nightmare. Late night shows on our local television, unlike the practice in permissive western or westernised nations, feature those that are rated to be least entertaining. Instrumental or vocal recitals of raga music qualifies for this slot for very understandable reasons although in the neighbouring big country with whom we share the same musical culture, serious music often occupies prime time broadcast. In the west late night spots tend to border on a motley of erotica while the children in the house have been tucked well into their beds. The idea here is to dump the uninteresting and unamusing and visually poor things past the divide formed by the English language news bulletin.

In such a scheme of things it is reasonable that talks on *Shilpa Sathiya* or the arts and literature should also be pushed to chunks which the televetters can switch off without a sense of missing on something and go to bed with his or her mind wholly set on bedding plans or anticipation or misgivings or whatever. In fact, these uninteresting dings could serve well as sleeping pill substitutes for many if only the insomniacs or the bedophobes cared not to button the bright and babbling images under a dark shroud of silence.

Early this month I was half sleeping and half gazing from a half lying position — and not quarter as much listening — in the half hope that the BTV late night classic would soon drown me into the fullness of a supine position and a blotted out consciousness. That was not to be. On the screen I saw images of three gods come down from some playfully ironed Brechtian play. Some

funbling and faltering bloke was attempting some wise-talk before extracting Chinese footpath quack dentist fashion, very expert indeed, out of the gods mouths what seemed to be smuggled nuggets of gold. When the subject of the exercise became clear to me — lexicography — my sleepiness left me without leaving a trace. Not because I am lexicographical buff — which incidentally applied equally or even perhaps more to the characters on the screen: a non-entity of a compere, a professional linguist, a professor of English literature and another who teaches Bengali in the university but due to my ignorance of and unfitness for knowing people who matter in the academic I could not not recollect as being an authority on anything.

On the dock was one of the recently published Bangla Academy dictionaries — specifically the one that was accepted as the best received one and one whose selling performance was said to be astounding. The compere was far from being fair and neutral, putting all the time very much loaded and leading questions and adding visual of a particular bent of newspapers' denunciation of the dictionary. The linguist who is known to be father good at his specialisation was cornered by the compere into exercising to chart a safe course and he did this through rather unprofessional pragmatism, if errors have crept in some of the definitions and examples of some of the entries — which can occur mostly through procedural ineptitude, which I believe is the case here — then that can always be rectified, he said. Very correct indeed. Correct is also his conclusion that such errors do not call for wholesale withdrawal of such ponderous things as lexicons. But very evidently he was on the defensive, for whatever

My Patches of Disquiet

Waheedul Haque

reason, looking for some escape route and never enjoying what was supposed to be a dialogue of top men of letters. He deftly, yet very uneasily, avoided giving his views, lexicographical and linguistic views on the three or thirty entries that have been made into an issues of national import. He was looking so nonplussed by the nature of the attack amounting to a professional linguist being pushed to pass judgement on the political desirability of the elaboration of a number of dictionary entries.

And, not by quite covert suggestions, he was being asked to corroborate the position that the publication should suffer for its crime. He tried to escape into some professional position, citing the complexities of a lexicographical undertaking, but very very unconvinced.

By now my hypertensive blood flow had started gaining in pressure uncongenial for my plans for the rest of my days. I respected the man and in fact still do so. I was quite enable to take the picture of him covering before a barrage of motivation inanities.

Then it was the turn of the celebrated lady professor to skirt the issue by such arguments as would have made her interlocutors — the compere and he for whom the programme was clearly devised — laugh out of their serious attempts to impale the dictionary, its editor and compilers and publisher, a sudden flash dawning on them on the silliness of their campaign. She said, the thing is earning money even from across the

border. This must be kept up, things like these never happened before with the Bangla Academy. If me doesn't like some lines in it, this can always be looked into and if need be corrected.

Hers was also an evasive and yet a wise stand. But zealotry and wisdom have never cohabited in the history of civilisation.

Now comes the gushing zealot of whose credentials I am not quite sure as I have already confessed. He comes, he talks and he both steals and shames the show. Even the compere who must have hired this honourable man exactly for the latter's capacity to clinch the issue by taking extreme and thoroughly unacademic positions on subjects of high academic specialisation.

He is also a Ph. D. and that could of course help. But the gentleman overshot the tarmac. The compere kept on blushing at his unagreed-before antics. And my bubbling blood pressure slumped with a third. Making me sick, sick, sick.

Herr Professor, for he seemed to have arisen right from Adolf Hitler's corps for educating the SS and the Brown Shirts, first of all decreed that the crimes committed in the dictionary were unrectifiable for the criminals were unrepentant and because it was more a question of reforming their approach — *drishtibhangi*, that is — that mattered more than cleansing the guilty lines. The dictionary should be forfeited forthwith — nothing less would do. The guilt? These lines stood to diminish our independence and sovereignty and compromised

our honour as a nation. Hardly lexicographical bloomers these or otherwise the inquisitor could have gone for that first. Why immediate forfeiture? Because by the time these lines are replaced lakhs upon lakhs could be reading these criminal sentences and getting messages not at all in keeping with the independence, sovereignty and honour of our state. After all a dictionary is not a thing to be trifled with.

Herr Professor's righteousness was making him impervious to feeble attempts by the compere to keep the former on track.

But such an invidious conspiracy as the impugned dictionary cannot be an isolated event. In tandem, came from Bangla Academy, as a design against the steady development of the Bangla Language, a spelling dictionary and a pamphlet giving out the Academy's principles and formulations on the question of the much too anarchic state of Bengali spelling.

The inspired great man called for immediate banning together of all three. The only charge he had time to squeeze in against the spelling dictionary and pamphlet was that these recommended spelling the word *pakhi* — bird — with a shortened *e-kar* which, according to him was against what was in vogue and was sure to plunge Bengali spelling into an uncontrollable surge of anarchy.

Such was the honourable teacher's grasp of the whys and wherefores of Bengali spelling. The suspicion is he is neither conversant with the issues and considerations and resulting exaltations in the arena of Bengali spelling — all aiming at rationalising the system so that each word is spelt only in one way, nor is he a great reader of modern Bengali literature where at the instance of Rabindranath, as well as due to the approval of

the Calcutta University Spelling Reforms, now about six decades old, *tadhabava* words such as *pakhi*, *badhi*, *kumri*, have progressively been shedding their long vowels and going for the short ones.

In a society aspiring to be just and fair and egalitarian, the right of the individual even to his pet fetishes and prejudices is to be accepted, even upheld. But not at the expense of other people's beliefs or the society's sustaining mores, norms and values. The honoured teacher is free to have all kinds of antiquated and quite irrelevant idea of things. But hiring him to enlighten the nation on lexicographical issues or questions of graphemics was an error of the order of hiring same one to speak on the latest in particle physics or the mitochondria.

The media, controlled, managed or whatever, are full of such errors, deliberate or unintended. What disturbs me is the accomplished fact that someone has been paid to campaign for forfeiture or withdrawal of books — the last thing expected of a civilised people's government — paid from the public exchequer and offered valuable TV exposure time to air his motivated zealotry. Are we then in for a dose of authoritarian control on what they should think and publish, something for which the fundamentalists have been driving the society hard? As it is, our society is not a model of one steeped in knowledge and culture, tolerance and fearless rationalism. Whichever demand or action pushes it further into a cesspool of unthinking slogan mongering and regimented reactions to activity in the field of learning and writing, culture and cultivation of the arts and sciences, plunges me into a bottomless hole of infernal disquiet.

Nightfall
by Samir Asaf

Let alone the green mountains, the blue sea, Now upon night's sail!

The waking eyes drawn to the music, Dance with darkness, unafraid.

Silent waters seduce a crowd of strangers, Broken waves surrender to the shores.

Forgotten candles under the moonlight stare: Birds sing away the perfume of embrace!

A Youth Accursed

by Monica Das

Every cloud that bore the wind into that city. Shed a sigh upon that heart.

Who held every nuance in the aberrations of the beams of the sun?

The waves that poured out through the leaves, Hardened the cursed soil that shredded much of its green.

To crunch the bitter sun — an unnecessary farfel of nothing. Youth's dregs are now in the flail of condemnation. To be washed in the aeon's dew-drops.

Nazrul's Poetry and Song

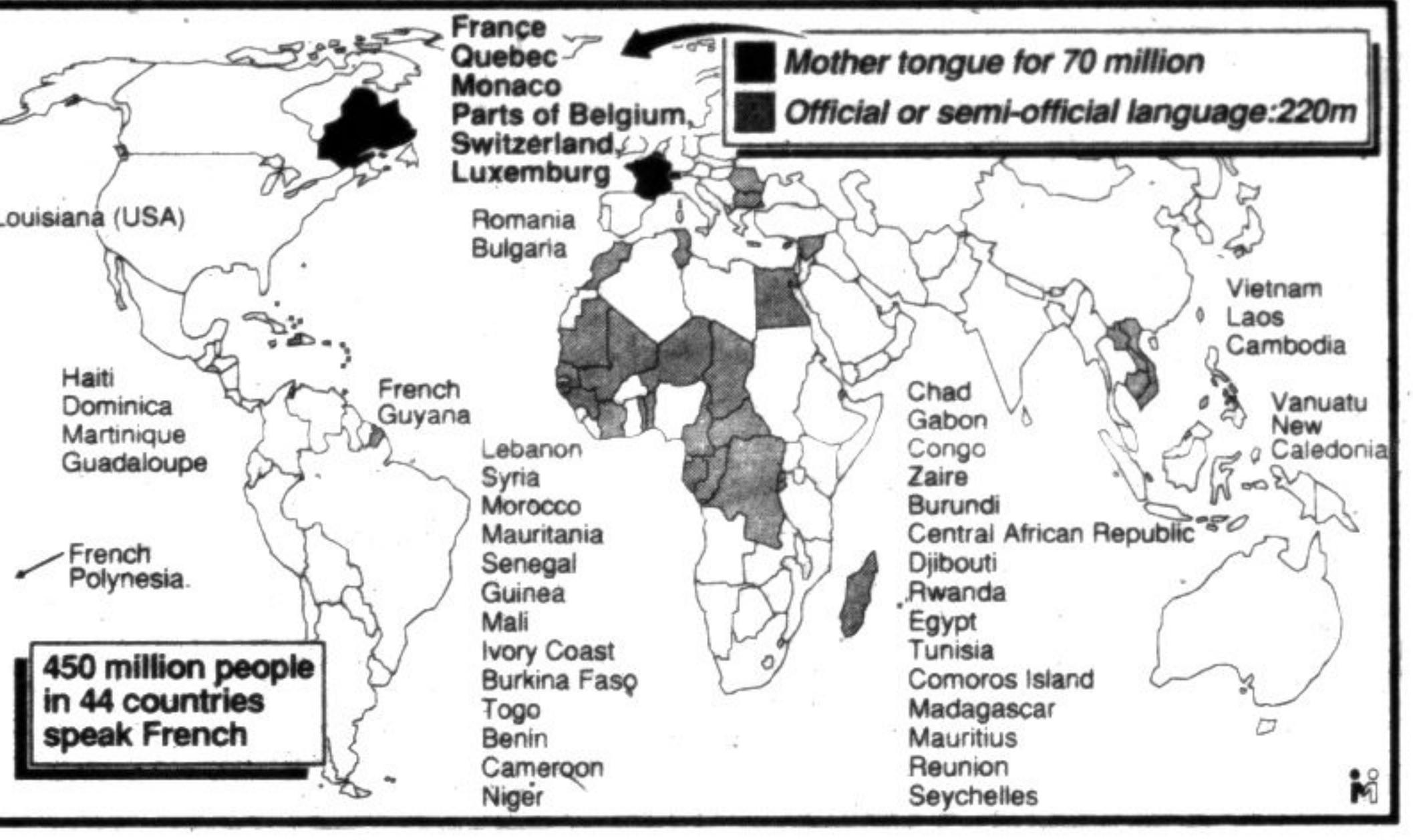
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The masses of his country irrespective of religion, cult and creed. Like a real national poet, Nazrul listened to the desires of his people, cravings of their hearts and echoed them in his ownself. Like a real rebel he waged a ceaseless war to free his countrymen from all shackles. Nazrul's poems and songs were addressed to the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden. His literary creations, full of fire and flames, stirred the soul of the people and made them march towards the path of freedom.

Nazrul wrote during the colonial British rule entirely in a chained atmosphere. But no obstacle could dampen the spirit of the rebel poet. He was imprisoned but nothing could stop his fiery pen. The force

and spirit of Nazrul's poetry is still a dominant force in shaping the minds of the people, even in the changed circumstances. Particularly the Muslim mind is imbued with the spirit of his message. Nazrul's Islamic songs and poems are considered to be eternal sources of inspirations for the Muslims. On the other hand, his poems and songs based on the Hindu mythology and traditions are the fountains of inspirations for the Hindus. Besides these, his poems and songs have universal appeal for their enchanting beauty, magical sublimity and uniqueness of both form and content which are peculiarly Nazrulian.

The writer is the Executive Director of Nazrul Institute.

The French-speaking world



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This stately book contains some rib-ticklers. For example, government-appointed pundits have decided the word "clip" in video-clip must be replaced with *agafe*, the French word for staple.

The Culture Ministry is preparing decrees to ensure application of its law relative to the use of the French language.

Not that French was being neglected in those spheres. And whether in Paris or Marseille, few signboards shout exclusively in a foreign language, though some foreign words have slipped into advertisements. Those words will have to be eliminated under the new law and replaced by

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If things go according to plan, police will be watching mouths, billboards and TV screens for intrusive foreign words. Any unwarranted, alien-sounding squeak will be clobbered with fines of up to 10,000 francs. And anyone obstructing the police in their duties could face six months in

jail and a 50,000 franc fine.

It still is not clear how Toubon plans to exterminate foreign words that have seeped into the French language over the centuries. A computer was called an *ordinateur* from the start, software has always been *logiciel* and computer hardware is *matériel*. So no prob-

lem there.

But most French people call a sandwich a sandwich, especially the cafe-owners and bakers' shops that sell them rarely a *casse-croûte*, the rough French equivalent. A ferryboat is *ferry*.

There are also a number of curious distortions. A *lunch* in ordinary French means a party with drinks and canapes. A public transport bus is known as a *bus*, but a private bus is commonly called a *car*.

On top of that a host of not-so-French terms and unique provincial expressions still proliferate. For French as it is spoken by the elite did to exist as a country-wide language a couple of centuries ago.

Many of what are now France's provinces spoke pretty differently then. Primary schoolteachers in France are called *instituteurs*. The name goes back to the post-French Revolution era when teachers were sent about the country instituting French. "This is the life," we told ourselves again.

Only once was it clouded. That was towards Christmas, when the Germans counter-attacked and broke through in the Ardennes.

Hut squads of German storm troopers in American uniforms infiltrated deep into France, some of them as far as the capital itself. Paris panicked.

Late one night during the flap the phone rang in our flat and a man speaking gutteral French asked if Madame Arletty was there. Where told she was not, he rang off without another word. The German boyfriend? Who else?

The Ardennes attack was Hitler's last fling in the West. In a German counter-offensive in the Ardennes woods from December 16, 1944 to January 28, 1945 some 200,000 were killed or wounded. When it failed, Paris breathed freely again: here the war was now really over; the leader of the Free French Forces, Charles de Gaulle, later to become President of France, was in the Elysee; all was right with the world; and the city had been left virtually unscathed.

So her flat on the Quai de Conti stood empty, with Marie, her cook-housekeeper, as caretaker; and the lawyer who looked after Arletty's affairs, fearing the flat might be requisitioned if it stayed empty, was anxious to find as tenant or tenants, preferably Allied military personnel. That's where the two war correspondents

came in. They pleaded that the law ran against the principle of free enterprise and the liberty to communicate. And "free communication of the thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious human rights," states France's 1798 Declaration of Human Rights.

Barring abuses of such freedoms, as defined by law, "all citizens can speak, write and print freely," the Declaration underlines. In handing down its decision, the constitutional court did indeed cite the sacred text.

France's scientists, however, nearly found themselves gaged by French traditionalists at the start of this latest campaign to institute French.

But an attempt to push the French language into the colony Cambodia quickly ran into trouble. Early last year France proposed to help finance higher technical education there, on condition that French should be the medium of instruction.

SALIL SARKAR is on the staff of Radio France International, based in Paris.

Francais Fights Back, but Franglais Lives on

"Big bang" and "brainstorming" can stay, but "video-clip" is out. Gemini News Service reports on the latest round of struggle by France's language police to stem the seemingly irresistible inflow of English words and phrases. Salil Sarkar writes from Paris

FRENCH language above all, proclaims Culture Minister Jacques Toubon. Not quite, decrees France's Constitutional Council, a sort of supreme court that examines whether or not laws conform to the constitution.

French language should be mandatory, admitted the court's sages in a recent ruling, but in everyday life people can use words and expressions of their own choice, in whatever language they please. Even when on public service, people will not be forced to employ official terminology concocted by France's rulers.

So as it stands, *les boom* (a big dance party) will remain super, for French teenagers. Politicians like failed Socialist

presidential hopeful Michel Rocard can again talk publicly of a *big bang* in French politics to improve their chances. Business-people can once more resort to *brainstorming*.

But court ruling or not French stays mandatory for advertisements, instruction manuals, public signboards, internal company documents, job contracts, university dissertations and various other areas of life.

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