

Some Reflections on Recent History

Time to Redeem

Amar Ekushey, the fountainhead of our national being and personality comes melodiously back, inspiringly back, as it must, year after year in the continuum of time.

But then amidst all its timelessness we ought to take a pause today, fortyfour years since that martyrdom for our mother tongue and particularly in the silver jubilee year of our national independence to determine the status of our self-fulfilment against the touch-stone. The essential thing to realise about Amar Ekushey is that it not only confers honour on us as a self-elevating occasion but also wins us a good measure of international esteem; the latter because dying for one's language is regarded as a unique phenomenon in world history. People have died for other causes but not really for the sake of a language. And that is where others admire our spirit, our refined cultural trait and the dour defense of an innate right to self-expression, sought to have been trampled by an imposed *lingua franca*. Seen in that light, the obligations must mount.

What memorial service are we revering the martyrs of the Language Movement with and how loyal are we proving ourselves to our mother tongue when in that very language 68 per cent of our people can neither read nor write? The liberally estimated 32 per cent literacy in country which had reached nationhood a full quarter of a century ago is a national shame that must be effaced in half that time period. Else we are doomed, what with our emotional honesty and effervescence and appreciations for it.

Furthermore, Bangla is yet to be introduced in all courts of the country. Wider, deeper and more effective use of Bangla should be easier now when as an international language, English, has had a reaffirmed place with the former in our country today.

Let the representative best of the current Bangla literature be translated into major international languages, so that it can form a part of the world literary mainstream.

Reformer's Demise

Deng Xiaoping, architect of China's socialist reform and economic liberalisation, is no more. Although his death has come not as a surprise — for he was 92 and had been suffering from ill health for quite sometime, the great leader's absence might have an impact of sorts on Chinese politics and perhaps on the on-going economic reform process. Deng's credit lies in the fact that he could successfully introduce the recipe for socialist China's turn-around at a time when the Soviet Union faltered. It goes also to his credit that China brought an end to the legacy of uneasy and at times violent changes at the top and is now settled for a peaceful transition of power. Long before his death, Deng abdicated power in favour of a younger leadership. The man is an epitome of flexible leadership at the

top from which a highly benign influence percolates down the ranks and thus the nation derives the maximum benefits.

It is not surprising that western media, immediately after the aged leader's death, have gone as far as to suggest that his absence might trigger a large-scale upheaval. That sounds quite premature. Well, the power struggle between the liberal and the radical factions of the Communist Party of China cannot be ruled out, but that does not mean the country will revert to policies they have abandoned for a long time. Chinese economic performance is so creditable that the radicals cannot reverse the process even if they want to. After all the open-market policy is producing enviable results. His successor Zhang Zemin is no push-over. The career bureaucrat may not have wielded power like his more illustrious predecessor, but his low profile and his image free from any stigma — such as the Tiananmen massacre — are indeed of advantage to him.

So, those who consider that China is at the cross-roads may indeed be proved wrong. Deng not only prepared his nation for the reform but also for the challenges of the new millennium. The hand-over of Hong Kong by the British to Chinese authority and the special preferential trade status given to China by the USA show the strength of that nation. Deng slowly but surely led his country to this stage and by giving up his official position for a substantial duration, he had only prepared the leadership for handling the responsibilities in his absence.

Deng's place in history is assured. We condole his demise.

Undesirable

The Bangladesh Chhatra League has reportedly earned the dubious distinction of becoming the violator of a code of conduct it had agreed to abide by at a meeting of the student and cultural organisations with the Bangla Academy. The student organisation, it is learnt, has set up as many as 80 stalls on the road in front of the Bangla Academy selling them to different book-houses or establishments. What if other student and cultural organisations follow suit? After all, it is the ruling party's student front that has shown the way.

The BCL is not in power but its parent political organisation is. And this is reason enough why it should be incumbent upon the student front to behave responsibly and reasonably. So far the ruling party has not been particularly patronising to its erring student or young activists. Yet the impression is there is a lack of coordination or control when it comes to the behaviour of cadres down the hierarchy of its different party fronts.

This is bound to send a wrong signal to the party affiliates and a dismal message to the nation at large. Is the ruling party aware of the danger? We would very much expect that the power-wielding tendency will soon be brought to an end. This does not help the rule of law nor the cause of social harmony.

PLENTY of writings, speeches and thoughts have gone by about the great Language Movement and more of such intellectual exercises will continue to enrich nation's store of knowledge in the future. The people are well aware of its unique contribution as a precursor of our heroic struggle for liberation. More than half of our present population were not even born then and, as such, deserve well to be educated.

When one looks back to the olden days, one tends to ponder about the political movements on this beloved land of ours during the period of, say, our lifetime. The earlier political movement was the fruition of centuries of periodic, but sporadic, movements which culminated in British quit India and in the creation of two independent states in its place. More than four-fifths of present Bangladeshis were not even born then, in 1947. History owes the then unborn a lot more in terms of knowledge.

In retrospect, one may hold that important events in history often take place as if a new edifice is constructed on the dust of an old one. Very few now speak about the Pakistan movement, as if it is a taboo, since the Bangladesh movement was, in the opinion of some, a mere negation of the Pakistan movement of those days. This perception stems from the fact that because perhaps one generally loses the objective impartiality in assessing events which are either current or those having taken place in the recent past. In order to record history correctly, the chronicler must not be one who himself is a part of the scene. On the contrary, he or she should be able to assess the situation of a distant past.

That is why one keeps wondering about those of us who were old enough to have witnessed history in the making or had an opportunity to participate in it in one way or the other. Some of our young compatriots would perhaps be bewildered to fully comprehend what they already know that Muslims of Bengal, almost all and sundry, were pioneers in the movement for Pakistan un-

der the banner of the Muslim League headed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. He was known as Qaid-e-Azam and Bengali Muslims also, however strange may it seem now, respectfully addressed him by that title. Our great national leaders, such as A K Fazlul Huq, H S Suhrawardy, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, were not only ardent advocates for Pakistan but also constituted sturdy pillars of the Pakistan movement, at least for some time. Our pre-1947 intellectuals of ripe age, almost without exception, likewise were proudly associated with the cause. These are truths which formed history, cannot be denied and must not be disowned. Every episode of a popular mass movement had a definite purpose to fulfill at that particular time and has its own value.

I recall vividly the unbounded enthusiasm of people, witnessed by me as a school student, in the historic Direct Action Day meeting convened by Suhrawardy on the 14th August 1946 in Calcutta. I still shudder with horror to recount my narrow escape from certain death in the communal riot that erupted in the same evening on our way back on foot (transport was on strike) from that meeting. I was saved by the most unexpected and divine kindness of a Hindu gentleman, who most graciously directed us through a passage to safety. Should I, for example, now construe, at the bonus end of my life, the then action of mine to be a mistake? I would be hard put to subscribe to that view, despite the fact that, strangely enough, twenty-five years later from that event in Calcutta and over twenty-five years ago from now I severed connection, in order to join the Bangladesh movement, with the same Pakistan to achieve which I, among others, had, albeit accidentally, risked my life!

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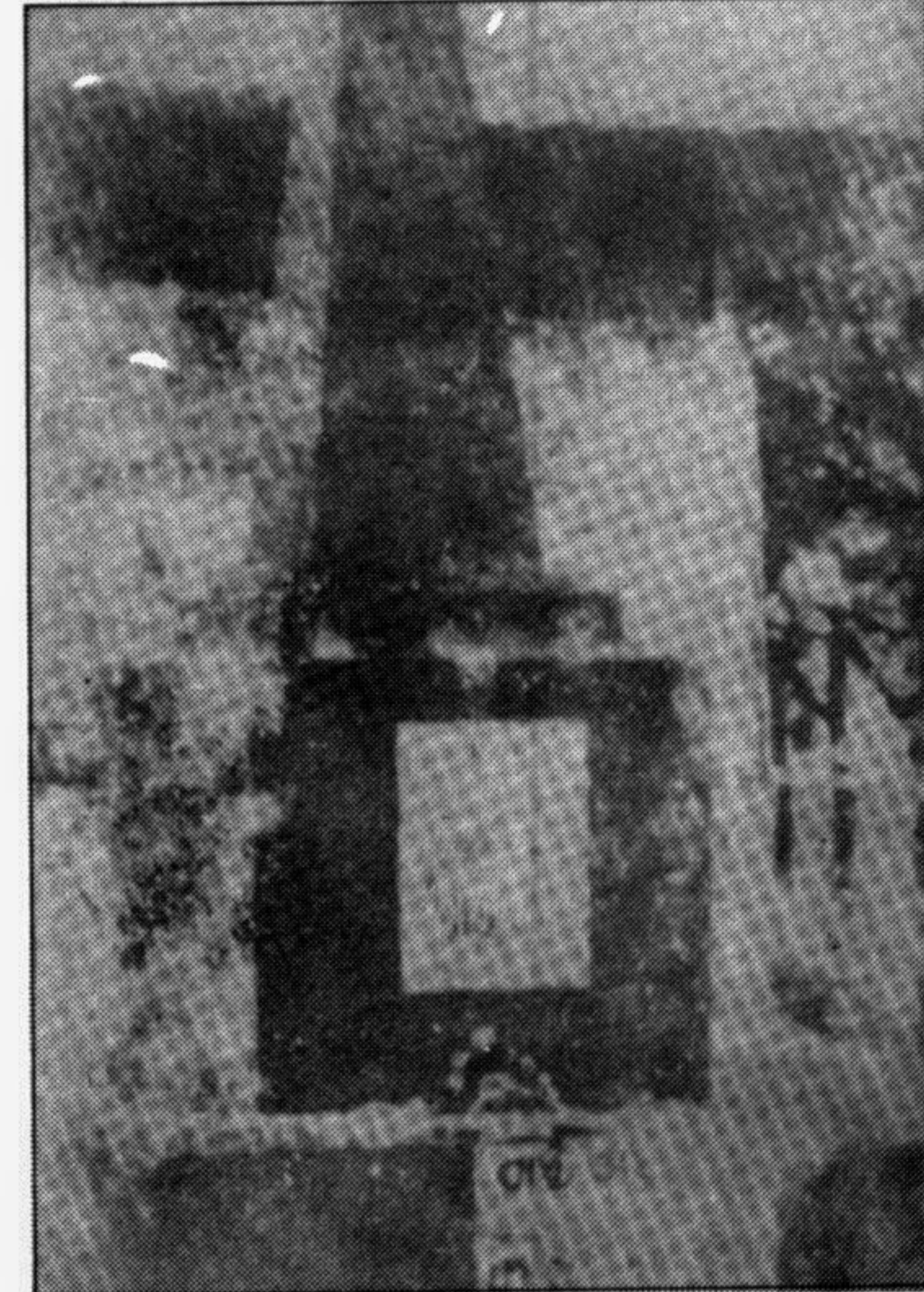


Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

outcome of their movement due to the raw deal it received from the effective rulers based in the western wing. The first of the heaviest blows came from the

very founder of Pakistan, Jinnah, who tried to impose an alien language on the culturally proud people of the then East Pakistan. He reiterated this in



23 February 1952: The Shahid Minar was built in one night.

his speech in Dhaka in 1948. It evoked loud protest. The seed of the Bangladesh movement was sown. The halo of Qaid-e-Azam dropped for good in this part of the country.

By 1954, the same Muslim League was totally rejected by the people in the general election and the United Front was installed in its place. Later on, martyrdom of the great Language Movement of 1952 gradually, step by step, took the shape of the War of Liberation. The Pakistan that the people here had fought for was no more, as aspirations of the people remained unfulfilled and injustice, hegemony and atrocities were committed by the autocratic rulers from one wing on the democratic minded people of the other.

On the glorious day of the 21st February 1952, I had the privilege of witnessing the history to unfold itself, rather became a minuscule part of it. I was then a student of first year in Dhaka University. I was not involved in direct politics and my interest in students politics bordered on somewhere between indifference and minimal participation. But the Language Movement was a different issue, a national cause, which brought together the overwhelming majority of students, irrespective of their political opinion, on one platform. Along with my friends, we joined the historic meeting under the famous mango tree in front of the Arts building, which is now the eastern wing of the Medical College. The students decided to violate peacefully, by courting arrests, the restrictions imposed by the government against holding assembly and procession.

After some time, some of us went to the adjoining Medical College Hostel where I had a number of friends. At the gate, there were constant skirmishes between students and police. The latter was guarding heavily the approach to the road leading to the then East Pakistan Legislative Assembly, the Ja-

gannath Hall. The students pushed forward trying to break the police cordon and the police pushed us back into the gate again. This see-saw struggle continued for quite some time. We were tired. I took a break and wanted to go to the room of a friend in the hostel. It was probably the fifth barrack from the gate. There was a water tap there by the side of the lane. I was thirsty and went to have some water from the tap. All of a sudden, someone came, as if out of nowhere, and pushed me sideways and started drinking water. I was surprised, much annoyed but resigned, thinking classically that his need must have been greater than mine.

All of a sudden, there were bursts of rifle shots. What we were apprehending finally came true. The police opened fire. Before I could fix my gaze on the scene of occurrence near the gate, I heard a loud cry beside me. The young man, who was drinking water at the tap, sat down, holding his foot with both hands. A bullet had hit him at the ankle, which was then nothing but a lump of flesh and blood strewn with fragmented white bones. The scene was nauseating, to say the least. I was stunned, turned into a stone in horror. Had he not pushed me away half a minute earlier, I would have been in his place. Students coming out of all over the place carried him immediately to the emergency. I followed them in a trance.

With a heavy heart, I came back to the Arts building. Students in groups were still going out of the gate, in a rare feat of discipline, in to the street and voluntarily giving themselves up to the police outside. My mind had not yet gotten over the shock. I was wondering whether the unknown youth, who had unwittingly saved my life, would remain alive or not. Mechanically and naturally, I joined the next group of students and went out of the campus. The awaiting, rather expectant, members of the law enforcing agency, without a word, pushed us up in a truck. By the time they brought us to a heavily congested, rather overflowing, Nilkhet police station, the sun was about to set, covering the outside with the sombre darkness which had already engulfed the inside, our heart.

Realising the Dreams of the Martyrs

by M Arshad Ali

lovingly by all the patriotic hearts in the very sanctuary of their hearts — hearts that are emboldened when faced with problems of national dimensions. To the innermost heart of their own land they are known. As the stars are known to the night. They are, in deed, the luminous stars that lay hidden and invisible from our view i.e. when the national sky is free from dark clouds, but become invisible in the darkness of night i.e. when the bleak gloom hovers over the national horizon. In other words, the martyrs appear on the mental horizon of our countrymen and instill them with strength and courage in times of national crises as borne out by facts and experience time and again.

With every February revolving, the mother Bangladesh sheds tears for her dear sons, but there is a glory that shines upon her tears and 'there is music in the midst of desolation' — the music thousands of the people chant in the morning of the immortal Ekushey re-sounding the entire surroundings and rededicating to the ideals the martyrs held aloft through the sacrifice of their invaluable lives. Now what is this ideal they laid down their lives for? This, in the ultimate analysis, is the defence of the freedom of the people and of the country.

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Vigilant people safeguard the freedom of the na-

tion. Vigilance is, however, the product of education among other things. The illiterate fail to realise all the ramifications of rambunctious colonisation. They are subdued most meekly to the boisterous subjugators trampling down all their values under their whims and caprices with the ultimate object of rendering the subjects morally bankrupt. The dominators can perpetrate their moral atrocities unhindered upon a mute illiterate people because they are steeped in ignorance and superstition. They are very easily beguiled by the false propaganda of the rulers because of their lack of knowledge and awareness of the actual state of affairs and of the tremendous progress the world has made in the field of human advancement and welfare. It is almost axiomatic that higher the percentage of literacy, the higher the standard of living, the greater the freedom from poverty and malnutrition and disease, and no country achieving all these that stand for quality of life, nay another name for it, has ever remained subjugated. A people with a wide-spread educational base coupled with flourishing culture has never been found to be under the shackles of bondage.

This the Britishers whose colonising sun once never set could well comprehend and thus conceived for the Indians an education system based

on the traditional British policy of "Divide and Rule." The British never planned, nor did they ever intend, to develop the population into human resources which would be imbued with the consciousness of the actual needs to their own society, and of their accountability to it, knowing full well that such a real life-oriented education would be fraught with destructive possibilities to their colonial aggrandisement. They aimed at turning out a group of English-speaking people who would be isolated from the broad masses and scornful of their way of life — "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect." And Macaulay was right, as this education system gave birth to a class of educated Indians who were totally alienated from the native way of life. They consumed European culture at the cost of the indigenous one, and detached themselves from their own people and society. Fed by foreign culture under British patronage the native elite developed a serious attitude of antagonism against the prevalent manners and customs which they dubbed as detestable superstitions and taboos.

Moreover, these newly-educated young men were infected with a peculiar affliction — the more they mimicked the Europeans in fashion and manner,

in thought and deed, the more they suffered from an inferiority complex compared to the Europeans. This inferiority complex, in turn, engendered in them an abhorrence for the common Indian people. The great majority of the people — the labouring classes who eked out a living by the sweat of their brow — were held in contempt. The people tended to be averse to free thinking, independent vocations or manual labour.

The independence of Pakistan that raised high hopes for the down-trodden people of the area now constituting Bangladesh could not continue to pulsate their hearts much longer. The government that was established had to play to the tune of the "Punjabee" vested interest. They followed the suit of the British colonial masters in a rather grotesque manner. They declared, "Urdu and Urdu only shall be the state language of Pakistan." The British government introduced the English education system which along with creation of clerks could also turn out a good number of persons who were capable of elevating themselves to higher plane of mental and intellectual maturity because with the system of education an initiation was made into the western lore of humanities and social and natural sciences.

The British imperialism brought with it some of its heritage that had a humanising influence whereas the Punjabee imperialist mindset could not

conceive of the higher things of life nor was the Urdu education that they attempted to establish enriched with the wealth of knowledge that even a degraded system of English education could boast of. The English education that could not produce the whole man was going to be replaced with a system of education (had the Pakistani ruling clique become successful) that would not have been capable of fashioning even a dwarf. It was neither the possessor of the vast stock of literature like English nor could it become the vehicle of knowledge of science and technology. The result would have been a lapse to a wider illiteracy. The other possibility that the introduction of Urdu was fraught with was almost a total isolation from the world of knowledge. The conscious and valiant sons of Bangladesh could foresee this state of things to come and forestalled their apprehension from coming true.

The independent Bangladesh therefore owes a duty to her worthy sons who laid down their lives for her freedom and the achievement of their goals — the eternal vigilance that is generated by a universal education fit enough to inculcate the spirit of good citizenship to all her living children. The dreams of the martyrs can no longer remain unrealised.

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Language Movement 1997?

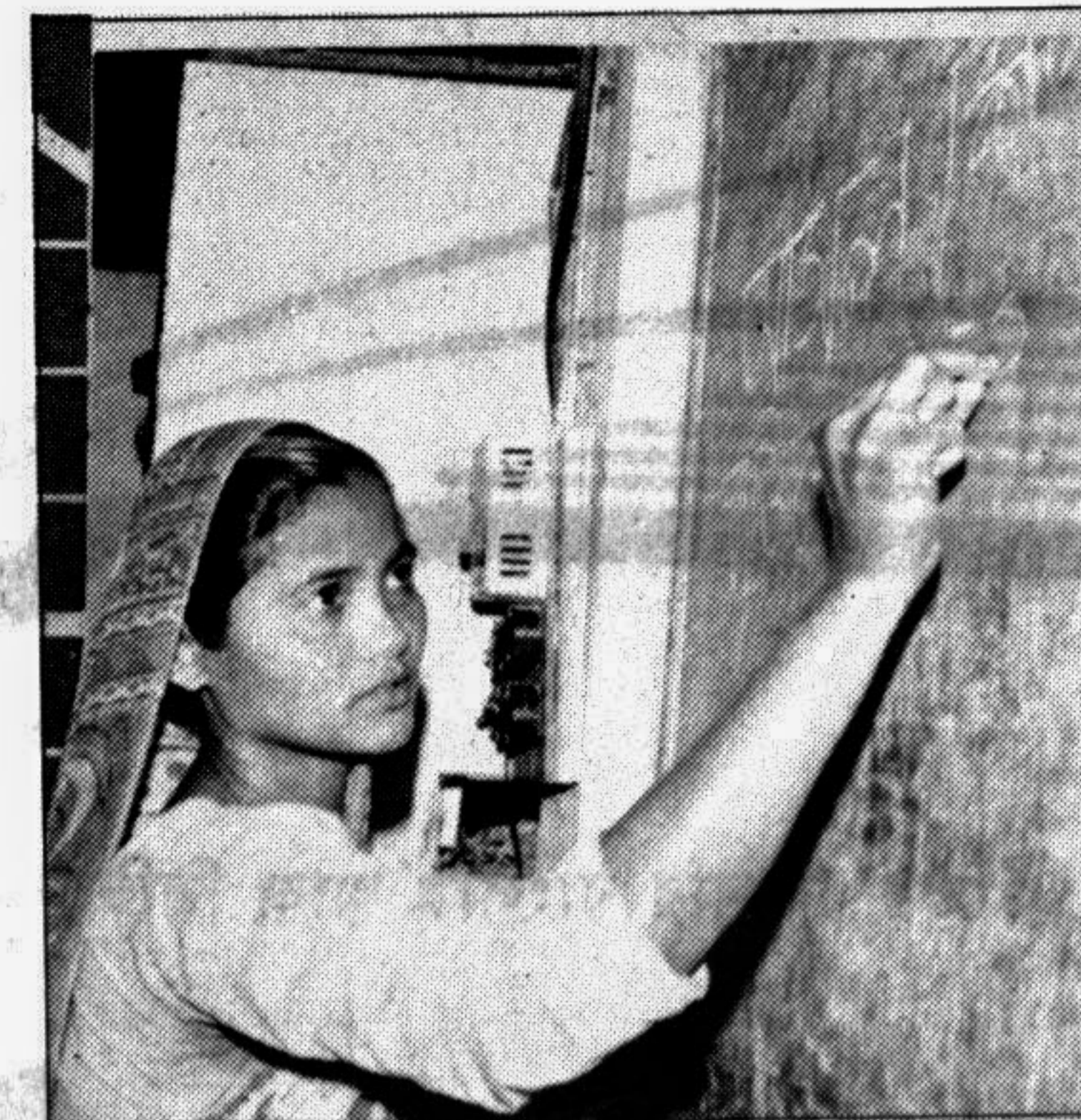
by John Hastings

pressor stayed put in fear or just hoping for any peaceful outcome, but the longing of the masses for liberation, even if the struggle had to be anything but peaceful, is unquestionable.

Whereas now? The case for universal access to education is a case for justice. It is one of the fundamental human rights. It is a crime to allow any citizen to be deprived of the means of ordinary written communication. Being unschooled condemns the poor to stay poor, and to be literate and not to care enough to do something about that must rank as a sin.

Education For All (EFA) is a case for freedom too. Non-literate people are imprisoned within their world of speech and hearing, victims of rumour and exploitation, culturally confined. A majority illiterate nation is strapped, economically and mentally. A bound nation can never be proud; for its 'liberated' status always has to be qualified.

But where is the people's united commitment? Are people clamouring for Education For All? EFA is so far something offered by the government and various NGOs, in the shape of Non-Formal Education classes run by paid workers. It doesn't look very different from the old formal education. It is also evident that hardly anywhere are further study facilities like libraries being set up, therefore much of the money spent will have been wasted because for want of exercising the new skill lakhs and lakhs of the "new literates" will lose it



Self-education in Comilla

again. Nor is there enough money to reach even half of the villages in need. People are certainly glad enough to get a foothold on basic education, but so long as it all depends on people with power and money there is no popular clamour for EFA. One can be sure that without

the basis of a people's movement this new goal of justice and freedom will not be attained as surely as the other two were.

The first hint of a people's movement has been seen in the District of Lalmonirhat, the area of the so-called 'Total Lit-

eracy Movement". We wait to see how many there will retain their new skill, and whether the education they have acquired is the sort that liberates them.

People want jobs, but given their awareness that there will always be far too few to be handed out on a plate, people are very unlikely to want an education geared to unfulfillable expectations. They would like a new kind of education. What we have at present — all over the world — is Education For A Select-Few, the product of an old principle, namely, that education is not for the poor but to enable the rich to rule. That principle contradicts EFA. Hardly anyone may now be conscious of that principle, but both poor and rich have come to accept it, and the modern educational system still reflects it. So the struggle for Education-For-All has to be not just for education for more people, but for a different sort of education, one that is appropriate for everyone. A popular movement will happily base itself on that.

There is a sign of a people's movement with that concern at the centre. In 61 of Bangladesh's 64 districts, over a million people are now linked up to a self-education system called "Nijera Shikhi". In contrast to the government's and NGOs NFE programmes, unpaid volunteers are its backbone. That sounds hard, but paying them would kill the popular movement which fuels it.

The people plan and run their own classes. They are not 'organised', 'monitored' and 'e-

valuated' by some external agency. In the case of 82 unions, the parishad chairmen have taken the initiative and declared they will get illiteracy eliminated from their unions in four years. Costs like slates, chalk, exercise-books and lighting are raised by local committees. The Nijera Shikhi non-profit Company in Dhaka provides self-education books, and a mini-library for each 80-100 new literates.

The learning system is designed for learners to learn creatively, be aware that literacy and numeracy are power-tools in their hands. They will not join the queues for non-existent jobs. They will be entrepreneurial and launch their own economic undertakings. They will not be dominated by teachers, text-books and examinations, made passive and obedient to a system that maintains the privileges of the few. They will enjoy Bengali culture and give back to it by writing their own stories and visions. We eagerly look forward to seeing whether this movement will spread like a forest-fire across Bangladesh. It may be the only hope we have for seeing a literate Bangladesh by the year 2006, enjoying a new sort of education — Education-For-All.

The large majority of Bangladeshis were not admitted to the old Education-for-the-privileged-few. No wonder they are saying "We'll teach ourselves!" May this year's Ekushey give new impetus to the People's Second Language Movement.