

The Magic Cornucopia

Whatever may take the precedence in this state's calendar of yearly events, formally — about all of those issued from the magic cornucopia of Ekushey. The true precedence is Ekushey's, carved irremovably on the hearts of the knowing and feeling sons and daughters of this soil.

The Bengalee people's national achievement, so much conspicuously political in its outer trappings, was never fashioned wholly through political doings. At the root was the growing need to find the roots and get away from the mental fetters bonding our souls to medieval bigotry and obscurantism.

Ekushey opened the floodgates of political, cultural and agitational education and motivation. Leading to the bloody and victorious Liberation War. Ekushey has given us all things that redeem our poorly existence as a state and society.

There must not be any school in Bangladesh, howmuchsoever private, where speaking Bengali is a punishable offense for the tender pupil.

Annan in Baghdad

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is now in Baghdad with probably the mission of his life. With his ability to discover a mutually acceptable option holding key to a possible avoidance of the military confrontation, the whole world is focused on him.

Whether Annan would push for the proposal to have diplomats accompanying the UN inspectors on visits to the 'presidential sites' or for the other option of appointing a new group of inspectors possibly including some from the UN special commission or the man of the moment would hit upon a solution that is off the map now is something we have to wait a while to know.

Indeed hope is mankind's and in this case, Kofi Annan's lone aid. Welfare Bodies in NCBs Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria informed the Parliament on Wednesday that government was formulating a set of rules to crab trade unionism in the banks.

All these people, whatever their professional background may be, are highly political persons and are unfit for the functions of a secretary. By placing these people at the helm of the government, the PSC, successive governments had violated the constitutional character of this institution and undermined its sanctity.

But after about eight months, we see only half-hearted efforts in river-dredging. We know the river Jamuna's water current requires at least 2 km width, not the present aver-

THIS is for the forty-sixth time that we are commemorating the Ekushey — our Language Movement Day, marking the sacrifice of our student martyrs to establish Bangla as one of the two national languages of the then Pakistan.

The reason I mention this fact, is because I think there should have been a qualitative difference between the way we observed the occasion in the then Pakistan, and the way did so after our victory in 1971. As far as I understand it, there are three distinct messages of Ekushey.

The first and the foremost is political. The second is cultural. The third message is that of nation building. The political message of Ekushey February is obvious, and one that we, as a very politically conscious people, seem to have understood instinctively.

The message meant that the state structure of Pakistan will have to be forced to accept Bangla as one of the two state languages as the first step. Then, subsequently, to force the state to give Bangla and the Bengalis, their due importance in running the affairs of the

Education Will be the Greatest Wealth Producer in the 21st Century

by Mahfuz Anam

21st century will be a civilisation of the Mind, as it has never been before. If we are to be a part of that New World, we need to shift our energy towards the goals. I think Ekushey is the most appropriate occasion to do so.

country. Implied in it was the sure feeling that if the Pakistani state structure would not permit the growth of the natural, distinctive, and the democratic aspiration of our people, then we will have to chalk out our separate path, as we subsequently did.

The historical developments of the fifties, sixties and finally that of the Liberation War, testifies to the fact that we, as a people took the political message to heart, and acted upon it with all the force, determination and sincerity at our command.

For the next nineteen years, from 1952 to 1971, an unbroken chain of events of political struggle gradually led the freedom loving Bengalee people to take the only dignified option available within an oppressive state structure — that of independence.

The second message of Ekushey, was cultural. As the cloud of euphoria of creating Pakistan — in which the contribution of Bengalee Muslims was greater than the other communities that later formed part of Pakistan — cleared, it became obvious that there was something more to national identity than the mere affinity of religion. For Muslims all over the world, religion is of tremendous significance as it is for us.

So the question of culture naturally assumed an increasingly greater importance. It meant that our literature, our music, our poetry, our songs — all the aesthetic aspects of our existence must find the most creative and unfettered expression.

Here again, if we look at the developments during the decade of the fifties and sixties, we find that we as a people waged a constant struggle to develop our culture and create, for ourselves, a distinct identity. This process naturally set us on a collision course against the ethos of Pakistan as defined by the rulers of the day.

Not only in the aesthetic sense, but also as culture developed in terms of our day to day life. It became increasingly obvious, with the passage of time, how distinct we were as a people from the people of West Pakistan.

Ekushey's cultural message continues to be with us. It is something which is a part of evolution of any vibrant nation. As we all know, the issue of our cultural identity continues to evolve and there are aspects of our cultural life that continues to go through a process of redefinition and rediscovery.

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It is the third message of Ekushey, which is the main thrust of my piece today. I feel, and do so rather strongly, that it is the nation-building message of Ekushey, which has got lost under the more immediate political and cultural struggles of the decades of fifties and sixties.

Here lies the irony. For it appears that 'Ekushey Agenda' of the Pakistan days seem to have dominated the 'Ekushey Agenda' of the post liberation days. Meaning, that what appeared to be of immediate and urgent need, when we were struggling against the state structure of Pakistan, did not radically change, after that state structure was destroyed, and a whole new reality emerged in December 1971.

It is my view that after the birth of Bangladesh, the nation-building message of Ekushey should have gotten far more emphasis and national attention than it got. It is our failure to do so, which is one of the main reasons why we lag so far behind in developing our poverty-stricken country.

If I may be permitted to suggest, the most meaningful way of commemorating Ekushey now, 26 years after the birth of Bangladesh, is to take Ekushey's nation-building message to be the most important and urgent one, and give it the highest national focus and priority. Among the nation-

building tasks lying ahead for us, the one that suits the spirit of Ekushey most is that of Human Resource Development, expressed precisely in terms of Education for All. Therefore in my view, the best way to commemorate Ekushey now would be to make it the centre piece, the converging point, the centre of gravity for all the governmental and non-governmental efforts in spreading education throughout the country.

As I had said in a recent piece, and at the risk of appearing to be repetitive, I would like to suggest that our professing respect for our mother tongue sounds hollow when more than 70 per cent of our people cannot effectively read or write the language.

The magnificent beauty of our poetry, the excellence of our literature, the world class stature of our plays and short stories remain confined to a microscopic minority. The vast majority of our people remain unexposed to it.

The massive intellectual poverty amidst which we force the majority of our people to live, is creating a dangerous long term impact on the growth and regenerative capacity of our culture. If the majority of our people cannot either contribute to, or enjoy the fruits of literacy and other creative achievements, then obviously our literature and language will so be extremely poor. It may in fact become bankrupt.

The nation-building message has become a far more urgent issue today, than it ever was before simply because the rest of the world is moving so very fast. The information technology (IT) revolution has made the possibility of catching up with easy. But simultaneously it has raised the cost of failure. In other words whatever we may have missed by not focusing on nation building earlier, we are going to miss a thousand times more if we continue in the same track now.

The future belongs to knowledge, far more than it ever did before. Human creativity will be the real producer of wealth in the 21st century, which can only be given full play with education.

On the occasion of the 46th anniversary of Ekushey, I cannot emphasise enough how urgent and necessary it is to redirect the spirit of our Language Movement into a massive struggle to remove illiteracy, provide universal primary education, impart skills training to our educated youth and launch an all encompassing human resource development programme.

21st century will be a civilisation of the Mind, as it has never been before. If we are to be a part of that New World, we need to shift our energy towards the goals as suggested earlier. I think Ekushey is the most appropriate occasion to do so. (This is a revised and updated version of an article written earlier)

Amor Ekushey: The Restorative Spirit

Let us on the day of Amor Ekushey accept the truth that Ekushey agenda is yet far away from realisation. Mere rituals on this day and little following could do more harm than good.

EVERY year we observe Amor Ekushey with due solemnity. In the dawn of this day, we sing songs in honour of those who shed their blood in 1952 in their impeccable vow to see Bengali as state language.

Ironically, establishment of Bengali as state language is generally portrayed as the basic aim and objective of the Language Movement. Thus, in this effect, an evaluation of Ekushey February more often than not tends to hover around as to whether and to what extent Bengali has replaced other languages in our national correspondence, curricula etc. Grievously, we fail to realise that the frontier of Ekushey expands much more beyond the border of mere language issue. It was, in fact, a war against misposition of minor-

ity view on the majority. Bengalees of that time, constituting more than half of the Pakistan's total population, were forced to surrender their due share on more than one accounts. Bengalees were routinely ransacked on socio-economic and political fronts.

They won elections but never could sit on the citadel of power. In the general election of 1990 Awami League, led by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, emerged as the majority party to rule Pakistan. The aftermaths are well known. People's verdict was 'hijacked' by the guns where weapon of language had to yield to the language of weapon. A war of liberation was imposed on the people of this part of the then Pakistan. However, the only time Pakistanis surrendered to the Bengalees was on 16th December 1971. Thus the movement that was sparked off in the name of the language, in consequence, landed with liberated war and an independent Bangladesh.

The basic tenet of Language Movement is protest against deprivation, destitution and deuced motives that the Pakistanis attempted to impinge on Bengalees. An evaluation of Amor Ekushey should, there-

fore, hinge on whether we could establish a society where three 'Ds' do not exist at all or whether, to say the least, their pervasive presence could be contained? Amor Ekushey should be a day of mourning as well as of monitoring. Each year on this day the party in



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

power should present to the nation an account as to how much of the pledges and promises of the martyrs could be respected and if not, why.

One such modest attempt at evaluation was made by a series of research articles compiled in a recently published book: 'Bangladesh at 25 — An Analytical Discourse on Development'. The remarks on the performance of our economy, society, politics and culture that came out of the analytical discourses converge at the conclusion that since independence, achievements were far short of expectations. The performance record does not at all ravish rather, disconcertingly,

power rather than pursuing democratic routes. Successive governments heavily barked on bureaucracies for achieving their socio-economic goals.

Since independence, Bangladesh was under military or quasi-military rule for about two-thirds of the period. The economy grew at snails pace of close to four per cent per annum. Almost half of the population groan under poverty — a level that runs higher than even that of early 1960s. Democratic governance of the society languished in the absence of people's representation at all levels. Needless to mention that all the above mentioned failures go to mock at martyrs of the Lan-

guage Movement and Liberation War. They could only sleep in peace when a sizeable portion of the agenda for which they sacrificed lives could be achieved.

The list of failures should not, however, hide few of the tidings on positive development that Bangladesh reaped home over the years in the fields of economic liberalisation, population control, foodgrain production, electoral process and transition to parliamentary form of government.

The country needs to strengthen the institutions that are supportive to growth and development. The bells are chiming for a pragmatic entry into the next millennium. One could argue that a much larger satisfactory performance

hangs around the case of putting Bengali as state language and in placing our national language in the spheres of communications. We would like to put forth a point to ponder. The spirit that the use of mother tongue, as elsewhere in the world, could help economic development does not seem to be abhorred by the larger section of the educated community. Thus some of those mourning in the morning of Ekushey February are found to send their children to English medium schools. They seem to relish a English way of life. Many of us are convinced that teaching and learning in Bengali precludes job opportunities at home or abroad. We all seem to run after English as a vehicle for our socio-economic uplift. All these fumes and fogs are not at all in consort with the spirit of the Ekushey agenda. A nation that wants to survive and thrive can hardly shore up its failures in the face of humiliation to and hypocrisy with mother tongue. The sooner we realise this reality, the better it is.

Let us on the day of Amor Ekushey accept the truth that Ekushey agenda is yet far away from realisation. Mere rituals on this day and little following could do more harm than good. Let us revamp the restorative spirit of Ekushey.

OPINION

Industries Galore

Rubab A Khan

From what the commerce and industries minister disclosed at the parliament the other day, we are almost certain that this country is going to be the most industrialised one in Asia, if not in the world, very soon. During the question-answer period in the Parliament on 9 February '98, the minister in charge of industries Tofael Ahmed quoted fantastic figures for around 18 months from June 1996 when his party was voted to power.

The growth of industrial sector during this period, as backed up by figures, has been staggering. According to Ahmad 22,042 units of industries were established throughout the country during June '96 to December '97 by the tireless efforts of the democratically elected government. The list of achievement does not end there. Another 2224 new industrial units have been registered with the Investment Board under the Prime Minister's office and still further 23 new units were established under BEPZA in Dhaka and Chittagong. This is no doubt an awe-inspiring experience for the people of Bangladesh. If an 18-month old government can do so much then what will happen if this trend continues, and there is, at least for the time being, no reason to believe on the contrary.

For another three-and-half years of this popular government's tenure. To crown it all, we may as well believe that with such an unassailable record, they will be returned to power in the next elections for another 5-year-term and the success will inspire them to follow the same policy of industrialisation with more vigour and zest, and if I may be permitted to say without any malice, each and every home in this backward country will be an industrial unit. I am not very good at arithmetic but any layman like me can see a growth in geometrical progression in this vital sector of economy as Malthus saw the

horri-fying growth in population. The figures were presented on the floor of the House. And anything disclosed in the parliament is supposed to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Out of this imposing number, 19365 were categorised as 'cottage industry'. Now, the definition of a cottage industry may vary. A potter's wheel can fall into this category so can the newborn's quilt-making house. But do the BSCIC have the experience or the logistics to record each and every cottage industry in the country? As far as I know these cottage industries do not require any permission from BSCIC or any other government department or agency. These neither require any imported machinery nor any raw material. So, how could the minister be sure about the exact number of such industries?

We know the figures are supplied by the relevant government offices and agencies. They can only provide information relating to registration and permission. But can these offices say with any amount of certainty that so and so unit is functioning properly after six months or a year after its establishment? Perhaps not. But this is the age-old system followed by all previous governments and relevant ministries gave similar statements or replies in the Parliament. Tofael Ahmad is also no exception. But before doling out such unbelievable statistics couldn't he ask his conscience whether he was doing the right thing? That he was neither misleading the nation nor cheating on himself?

If anybody goes by the figures and try to draw his own conclusion about the number of new industries being set up during the tenure of this government he will come up with figures that can baffle even the genie of Aladin's lamp.

To the Editor...

Why's PSC politicized?

Sir, The Public Service Commission (PSC) is a highly respectable and responsible constitutional institution in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, over the years, this body, which is supposed to work neutrally, has been polluted by political appointments. Successive governments have allowed this institution for political favour distribution. Some professors of soil science have been appointed as chairmen of the institution, and some other persons of such dubious backgrounds were appointed members of PSC.

All these people, whatever their professional background may be, are highly political persons and are unfit for the functions of a secretary. By placing these people at the helm of the government, the PSC, successive governments had violated the constitutional character of this institution and undermined its sanctity. This trend will soon lead to a total collapse of this institution's respectability.

May we ask the government to appoint neutral personalities, such as retired judges or retired secretaries as the chairman of PSC from now on? Please stop using PSC as hotbed of politics. A Concerned Citizen Dhaka

River-dredging

Sir, At a seminar on 26.7.97, Minister for Food and Agriculture Mattia Choudhury declared that she had been fighting for dredging the rivers instead of embankment through the foreign aid agencies. Certainly, we profusely appreciated her stance.

But after about eight months, we see only half-hearted efforts in river-dredging. We know the river Jamuna's water current requires at least 2 km width, not the present aver-

age 5 km. Therefore, large scale dredging of the Jamuna would help both effective navigation and building substantial cultivable land on the banks by deposition of the dredged soil.

The Meghna at Chandpur made a half-circle from the Padma confluence to the river port by engulfing vast land of Matlob and Chandpur areas. The western straight main basin has been silted due to siltation. If the old western river-basin is dredged for more water flow and navigation, the crores of taka project to protect Chandpur port will not be required.

Smaller rivers also require dredging. For example, the rivers Buriganga, Turag and Balu are being encroached illegally by self-serving people from both sides. Siltation gives the culprits more opportunities. The government must arrange for river-bed survey and large-scale dredging for protecting the riverine ecosystem, controlling flood and easing navigation.

M A S Molla Member, BAAS, Dhaka

Northern Bengal pays more

Sir, Northern Bengal is paying more for travel and for imported goods due to the crossing of the river Jamuna by commercially-run BIWTC ferry. The ferry in other road crossing is run by Roads & Highway and the toll charge is minimal. In Iraq, for example, the price of imported goods is same all over the country. Can't we follow the same system so that the people of one region pay more than the other for the imported goods?

The people of northern Bengal expected that with the completion of the bridge over the river Jamuna the fare for travel and transportation will be similar to that of other parts of the country. But the tolls for crossing the bridge approved by the

Cabinet recently appear very high: bus (small) Tk 630, bus (big) Tk 1350, car, jeep Tk 410, motor-cycle Tk 30, truck (small) Tk 740, Truck (medium) Tk 990.

Seraful Islam Dhaka

Crimes in Chittagong

Sir, Thanks a lot for your editorial Crimes in Chittagong published on February 13, 1998. Your suggestion — 'Put Chittagong under special consideration'. Home Ministry should form a task force to look into the factors abetting or sustaining the major criminal phenomena like holding people to ransom — is very wise.

But we are utterly surprised that instead of re-enforcing the police force, we learned from 15th February issue of a Bangla newspaper that the government has withdrawn 150 armed police and 150 armed Ansar from Chittagong and posted them elsewhere.

We are stunned by this non-chalance of the government. How could a government whose duty is to protect people, act like this? Nur Jahan East Nasrabad, Chittagong

Gingrich on BBC

Sir, On Feb. 2, '98, the BBC broadcast an interview of Mr Newt Gingrich, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, a very powerful Republican leader. Inevitably during the questioning the interviewer asked Mr Gingrich his opinions on President Clinton's recent predicament concerning the allegations of sexual misconduct with various women, particularly with Monica Lewinsky. But each time he declined to be drawn into the controversy stating merely that facts and proofs must be weighed before

coming to any conclusions.

It is quite well-known that Gingrich is a relentless critic of Clinton but the way he supported the President was simply amazing. There was no indication that he would be happy to see Clinton impeached and ousted from the White House, even though the occasion was opportune for making some caustic remarks about the lapses of a Democrat President!

Mr Gingrich's behaviour should lesson for our political leaders. But the pity is that our leaders don't learn anything from examples! They wove at simply turn to any forum, at home or abroad, to give vent to their malicious feelings. The image of the country means nothing to them. That is why the present-day political leaders of our country would never qualify for a place in the history. At least many people would presumably agree with this assessment! Abu Molsin 41, Siddheswart Circular Road Dhaka-1217.

Let's do some real diplomacy!

Sir, Our attention has been drawn by a news item on 12-02-98 titled, 'export trophies to be distributed today, government unhappy over bureaucrats' performance in attracting FDI'. In the report, we found the words 'economic diplomacy', 'one-stop-service', 'our own industrial park', 'stronger taka', 'real autonomy of EPB' etc. It was stated that most of the commercial and economic counselors abroad are not capable of promoting trade. The last but not the least remarks was that the High Commission to Canada failed to detect importers involved in fraudulent import using quota of Bangladesh etc. Now the responsibility lies on ministry of commerce and ministry of foreign affairs. M Ali Dhaka