

Academy Aiming to Play Historic Role

Professor Syed Anwar Husain, Director General of the Bangla Academy, talks to Mir A Zaman and Ekram Kabir

PROFESSOR Syed Anwar Husain has been at the helm of the Bangla Academy since February of 1997. Over the last two years, he has often found that being the Director General is not a rosy proposition. Sincere and ambitious too some extent, he has contemplated quite a few steps to make the Academy more effective in promotion of Bengali language and literature. To gain a better understanding of the problems and prospects of the Academy's various activities, The Daily Star talked to him at length at his office. Here are some excerpts:

THE DAILY STAR (DS): The establishment of the Bangla Academy is a concrete achievement of the Language Movement. The academy came into being to promote Bengali literature and language. But many say that the academy has not been up to the task. How would you respond to that?

SYED ANWAR HUSAIN (SAH): Such allegations are justified to some extent, but not entirely. Bangla Academy has never had adequate resources to do the job it is always asked to do. In fact there remains always a great deal of gap between aspirations and actual achievement. The explanation lies in the resource constraint. For example, when I took over Bangla Academy in February 1997, I tried to do a sort of stocktaking of the resources that I had at my disposal. I was literally stunned to find that there were as many as 120 posts vacant. This is one side.

On the other side, when I look for adequate funds to do some ambitious projects that I wanted to do, I was briefed that Bangla Academy didn't have enough funds to go for this kind of projects. I had submitted another ambitious project to the government, about the history of the Liberation War. The project went through bureaucratic red-tapism for over 16 months. About a couple of months back, I was at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee for cultural affairs. I lost my patience when I said, we won the Liberation War in nine months, but my war to write the history of the Liberation War has been taking 16 months.

So these are some of the problems, especially relating to the resource constraint. That is, I think, the major reason why Bangla Academy has not been up to the task.

To say that Bangla Academy has not been up to the task entirely would be a rather simplistic generalisation. Just look at the quality of the work done so far by Bangla Academy. Our books are always in demand. I have been to the Calcutta book fair. I was standing in front of our book stall and, at one stage, some of the buyers literally mugged me, saying that they wanted more copies of Bangla Academy publications, which I could not deliver at that moment because of governmental regulations. So we had demands, orders, coming not from home only, but from abroad also. That shows clearly not only the quality, but also the demand that there is for our books.

DS: How much money do you get from the government for running the academy?

SAH: For the regular sector, we get somewhere around 300 to 320 lacs a year, but actually we need more than five crore. The deficit is managed from the sale profits of our books. Also for two sector allocations, one is for research publications and the other for text book productions. There we get a somewhat adequate allocation, but there again we have another problem. We don't get sufficient number of standard scripts either for research publications or for text books.

For instance, sometime around 1995, Bangla Academy and the Dhaka University Grants Commission jointly sponsored a workshop on talking about how to solve the problem of getting quality manuscripts. At the end of the three-day workshop, it was unanimously agreed that participants drawn from many colleges and universities would submit manuscripts, both for research publications and text books and the number would be around 600. So we got the commitment for 600 manuscripts. This was a really significant number. But out of these 600 manuscripts, we got only two manuscripts in reality. After evaluation, both these manuscripts were found not suitable for publication.

When I took over, I immediately sent out letters to chairmen of the departments of various universities, covering all the faculties, requesting them to send back names of the course teachers who would be requested to do some translations. In other words, we were asking them to translate so that the students would get some workable reading material. I sent out 153 letters and I got replies from only 28 chairmen. I am ashamed to say that the chairman of my own department didn't bother to send a reply to me. So this is one side of the problem.

DS: Has the question arisen, how much do you really need and how much money has the government actually given to you? Have there been any developments in that regard?

SAH: This is a developing country weighed down with resource constraints. Whatever money the government has, has to be distributed or allocated according to priority. In the priority list we have to be somewhere, and that's how we get money. That money would never be sufficient in relation to our total needs. There will always remain a gap between our need and actual allocation.

DS: So your plans may be too ambitious in terms of available funds?



SAH: Psychologically speaking, we have to have highly ambitious projects, otherwise how can we go up?

DS: There has to be some relationship between what you want and what you can achieve.

SAH: Not really. First you have the Liberation War project. It's a two phase project. One part consists of writing the Liberation War history in small volumes on the 64 districts of Bangladesh. We will also have small volumes on the contributions of our freedom fighter, even the children. In the process you have about 71 volumes. The other part of the project concerns editing our already published and literally sold-out volumes of the Freedom War. This two part project would cost only three crore taka. So it is a realistic project, not much of money is necessary.

DS: We feel that Bangla Academy has not really generated interest among the academics. Why is that?

SAH: I don't really agree with that. Whenever we have had programmes like Amar Ekushey and when we try to chalk out the programmes, trying to fit in persons in different programmes, we can have only four discussants and one paper reader and one chairman per programme. But when we do that, we receive allegations that this person has been left out, that person has been left out. That means some more persons are interested to perform on the Bangla Academy stage.

Almost everyday over the last two years that I have been here, I receive at least a couple of calls, a couple of letters, requesting some space in the Bangla Academy programme, either in the discussion programme, or the singing programme.

Then there is the part about that I didn't get sufficient reply from the 153 letters of request.

DS: That explains why the translation wing is not working.

SAH: Originally Bangla Academy had a full-fledged translation department. Translation was and still is one of the major functions of the Bangla Academy.

But back in 1993, because of the recommendations of a committee, Bangla Academy was switched into four departments from the nine departments. And the translation department now is functioning as a very small sub-department in a big department.

DS: Is there any embargo on Bangla Academy from taking funds from other sources?

SAH: No, there is no such thing as an embargo on Bangla Academy from taking funds from other sources where the government is concerned. We have had certain research projects

that were funded by donor agencies. For example, there was a project on folk lore of Bangladesh. Ford Foundation funded that. There are small instances of funding from private persons. For example, you can look at the mural, which depicts our history from 1952 to the 1971 Liberation War. That didn't cost a single penny from Bangla Academy or the government. We have done that with funds received from various private organisations.

DS: Do you have any mechanism for generating your own resources, like when you publish books, what happens to the returns?

SAH: In fact, sale proceeds are our major and only source of extra income. That helps us sustain Bangla Academy. But that's the part of another depressing story. Books do not sell well, not up to the extent we expect. For example, we had in our store house books worth about 30 to 40 crore. We have outlets throughout the country, 46 agents selling Bangla Academy books. We also have an agent in Calcutta in India. Our books are in high demand, still not up to a sufficient extent. Some books sell better than others, but we cannot be like a commercial organisation, publishing books on entirely commercial grounds. We have to publish books on academic grounds. But a lot of academic books do sell well.

DS: Would you say that the readers take Bangla Academy seriously in terms of your publications? Do they go for your books or for other publications?

SAH: Well, serious readers are small in number in every country across the world. Just look at the sale proceeds of the Bangla Academy book stall during the book fair. Last year during the 22 days of the book fair, we sold books worth 22 lac. On the night of 21st February, we broke all previous records by selling books worth 2 lac 22 thousand taka. This year, on the first day, we sold books worth 65,000 taka. Last night our sales proceeds amounted to 85,000 taka. That is significant. So I have the feeling that serious readers do have reasons to prefer Bangla Academy books, because these are useful and cheaper in price from some other commercial books.

DS: Now about the book fair. It has certainly grown in popularity, but there have been complaints that this fair has been politicised. The inauguration of the fair has almost always generated controversy. Do we have to have the Prime Minister inaugurate this fair always? Shouldn't there be an alternative for the sake of avoiding this political turbulence?

SAH: I do agree that there could be an alternative. The book fairs that have been held during my tenure, I have had two fairs so far, have been opened not only by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister happens to be a writer and also happens to be a life member of Bangla Academy. Her life membership number is 1176. Secondly, you might have perhaps noticed that I have initiated a process of having a second special guest who happens to be one of the leading intellectuals of the country, like last year when the book fair was opened the second special guest was Dr. Nilima Ibrahim. No controversy could be there about her because of her identity as an intellectual. Then we had National Professor Kabir Chowdhury as a special guest.

DS: What impact did Bangladesh have in the Calcutta International Book Fair?

SAH: This was for the first time that Bangladesh became a participating country in an international book fair like the Calcutta book fair. So from the publicity perspective it was indeed a significant event for Bangladesh. Secondly, this is for the first time that a large number of intellectuals from the country, numbering about 81, participated in many capacities, in the discussions that were held at the book fair. So it was a projection of Bangladesh, a projection of Bangladesh's literary and cultural activities to the readers of the neighbouring country. So from the cultural perspective, it was something of an achievement.

DS: Some local publishers say, that publishers in West Bengal had requested entry into this book fair. Is this true?

SAH: I am aware of a demand like this. I went to the Calcutta book fair two days after it had been inaugurated by our Prime Minister and I was browsing through the newspapers and I came across this news item that the publishers wanted to have a space in the Ekushey book fair. But I didn't react favourably to this because after I look over here at Bangla Academy, I have been trying to appeal to the nation that the right perspective, the theory and the philosophy on which this fair is based, that is quite unlike any commercial fair. It is based entirely on the spirit of 21st February, and that Language Movement back in 1948 to 1952, symbolises our cultural assertion and, for that matter, this Ekushey book fair, represents our cultural autonomy.

So this book fair is only for the writers, intellectuals and publishers of this country, not for any other country. It is absolutely a national book fair. At the Calcutta book fair, I took the opportunity as Chairman of the session to state this clearly and unequivocally, that this is the spirit of the Ekushey book fair, but you are most welcome to another book fair, of course. That is the Dhaka Book Fair, which is international in character.

DS: Thank you very much for your time.

The Week in Review

Monica Still Feels

Monica Lewinsky declared in her videotaped deposition on Feb 5 that President Bill Clinton never suggested she file a false affidavit to deny their affair.

She also said that she had 'mixed feelings' for Clinton and objected when her congressional enquirer referred to her relationship with Clinton as 'salacious'.

Sundarbans' Glory

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Feb 4 officially unveiled the World Heritage Sites plaque at a ceremony.

The world's largest mangrove was formally recognised as the World Heritage Site by the UNESCO on Dec 6, 1997. This was the first time that UNESCO recognised a mangrove forest as a world heritage. The 1,400 sq km of forests were recognised as of 'exceptional universal value'.

Hospital Hazards

The government has purchased five highly polluting incinerators for two hospitals without prior approval of the Department of Environment (DOE).

The incinerators can pollute the air 'significantly' mainly from extremely toxic dioxin and furans produced during combustion of chlorinated plastics like polyvinyl chloride (or PVC). Long term burning of chlorinated wastes causes various diseases, including cancer.

The incinerators were procured under an ADB assistance to destroy hospital wastes including highly polluting plastics. The total cost of the incinerators was about Tk 72 lakh.

Book Fair Begins

The Amar Ekushey Boi-Mela began on Feb 5 with young enthusiasts flocking into the Bangla Academy premises to have a firsthand look of the month long fair.

The main attraction of this year's fair seemed to be the big digital screen set up in front of the Information Centre to keep visitors informed about different events, location of stalls and new books.

HPSP Off the Mark

The government's much awaited health sector reform programme was formally launched on Feb 4 in four unions of Jessore district.

This is a component of a 2.9 billion dollar five-year reform plan of the health ministry titled Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP).

Blast Kills Babies

Two children were killed on Feb 6 while their parents were critically burnt when unspecified amount of explosives exploded inside their earthen oven at a Motijheel thana slum.

The dead were identified as Abdur Rahman Mia, 6, and Kajoli, 12, children of Shantu Mia, 35 and Shumena Begum, 30.

The incident occurred at 1 pm when Shumena Begum was cooking using paper and polythene bags collected by her children as fuel.

Railing Against Rajuk

Residents of Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara demanded clear demarcation of the areas of all water bodies in the neighbourhood as an effective measure to control rampant encroachment and land filling.

They said they would sue Rajuk as its action was in direct violation of a Supreme Court order issued on July 2, 1998. Rajuk's act also flouted a prime ministerial direction to stop filling water bodies and prohibited creation of plots on the lands or waters of Gulshan lake.

Hussein Is Dead

Long Live Abdullah

King Hussein of Jordan, who became a key force for stability in the turbulent Middle East in more than four decades as ruler of his strategically placed nation, died on Feb 7 of complications from cancer. He was 63.

As a veil of sadness fell upon the people of Jordan, Crown Prince Abdullah was proclaimed King.

Oxy Gas Flowing

US oil giant Occidental started supplying gas on Feb 7 to the national grid from the Jalalabad Gas field.

Doing Their Best: Scouts on a Jamboree

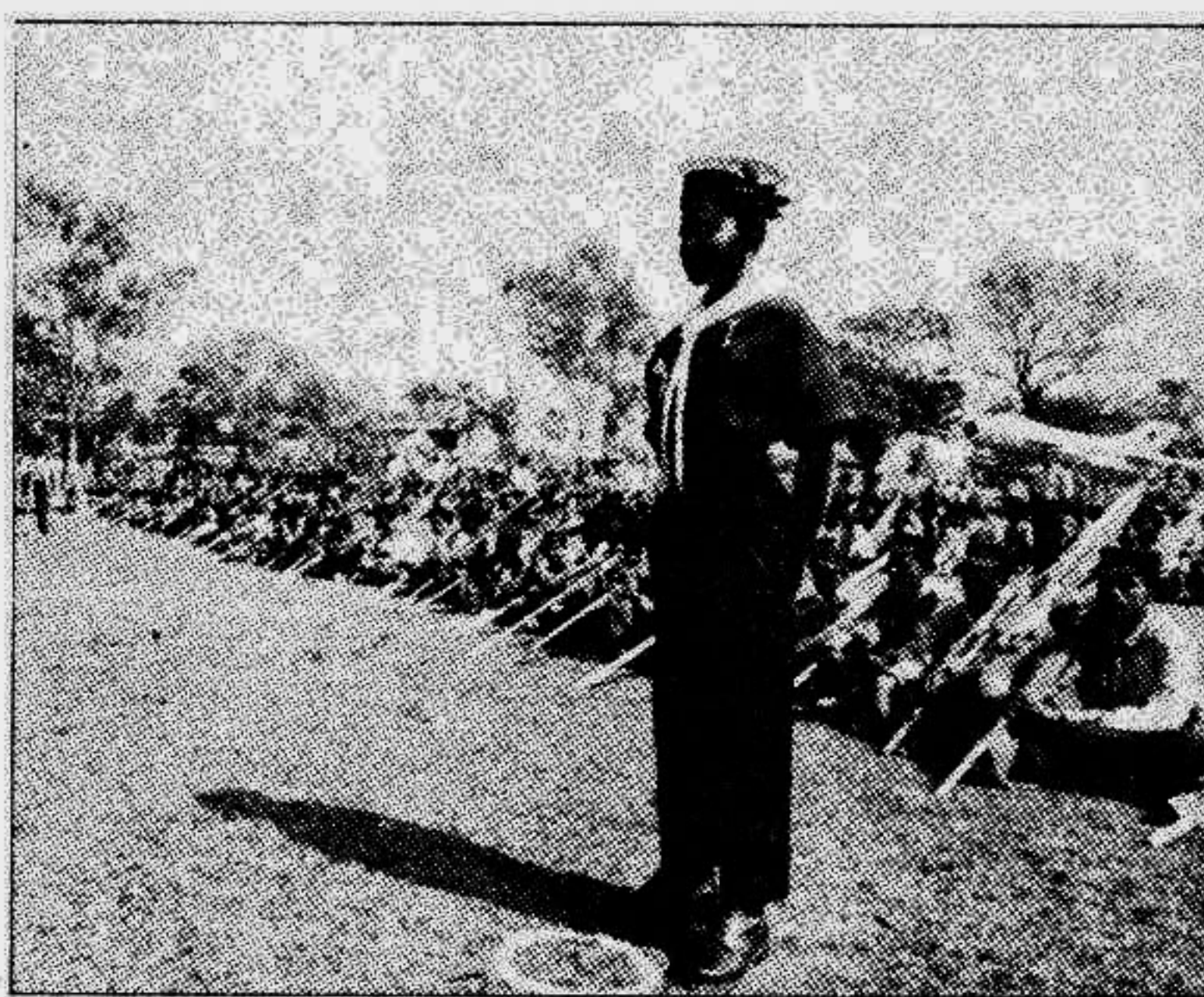


Pondering by the Pond: Two Indian Scout girls enjoy a moment of quiet



Friendship: Scouts from Bangladesh and Bhutan sing along to the same tune

Over 10,000 Scouts gathered at Mouchak in Gazipur this week for the Sixth Bangladesh National Scouts Jamboree. Scouts from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan joined their comrades at the Jamboree, which has become a celebration of youth. Daily Star photographer Zahedul I Khan was on the spot to capture few moments of the celebration and camaraderie.



Stand Firm: Young Scout leads the pack



Happiness: Girl Scouts' expressions say it all



Flying the Flag: Girl Scouts wait for the ceremony to begin