

Ekushey and Literacy

The love for our alphabets rather than being reinvigorated after the birth of Bangladesh seems to have diminished, when judged by the yardstick of what we have done with it. Indeed how can one explain the poor functional literacy rate still obtaining in a country that has been privileged for the last 27 years to have had mother tongue as the sole medium for imparting basic education to its people?

The official rate of literacy is 51 per cent. But loosely based as it has been on the ability to sign rather than a broader level of proficiency in reading, writing, doing sums and filling out forms etc. the government figure reads over-optimistic.

Of the approximately one crore 70 lakh children enrolled with the primary schools, run or aided by the government and the NGOs, 60 per cent, that is one crore two lakh complete schooling at that level. Of that figure approximately 20 per cent are known to acquire the required competence to take up studies at the secondary level where the cut-off point in terms of the transition to functional literacy rests. The fact that 92 per cent of the children of school-going age enter the primary education stream is a welcome development, but nothing to be celebratory about, given the drop-out rate and the extent of skill generated in terms of functional literacy.

The adult literacy campaign which has to do with huge carry-overs of illiterate or semi-literate souls evidently faces a stupendous challenge. But this is also an area where a great potential exists to spread literacy under crash programmes. We can match the near hundred per cent literacy figure of Sri Lanka in five years' time if we are determined to turn one crore unlettered adults into literate persons every year. This is where the consciousness of Ekushey needs to be utilised in a bid to galvanise the local communities wholly into action all over the country.

The allocation to the education sector remains a paltry 2 per cent of the GDP but what causes a greater disappointment is that most of this money goes into payment of salaries and construction of buildings. The expenditure pattern needs re-prioritising.

Neither the sacrifices of Ekushey would be redeemed nor can the vital socio-economic indicators read any better than at present so long as we are stuck with an unsatisfactory spread of literacy rate.

Law and Order

The Minister for Home Affairs Rafiqul Islam BU has raised a few eyebrows with his observation on the murder of Kazi Aref Ahmed. On Wednesday last he said that the murder did not mean the country's law and order situation was in bad shape. He made this point on the basis of the history of extremist violence in the southwestern parts of the country, implying that such acts are result of terrorist activities peculiar to that region. While there is an element of truth in the point, we are unable to agree with him because the overall law and order situation is not much different from what prevails in the southwest.

The minister spoke at a time when public displays of armed power in the streets of Dhaka, by both the ruling Awami League and opposition BNP, are allowed to pass without police intervention. For instance, on Feb 9, a BNP activist was shot dead in broad daylight by 'AL goons'; on the same day, a policeman was fatally wounded in a bomb attack by 'BNP terrorists' in the capital. These events took place in the backdrop of armed clashes in Dhaka and elsewhere. Such events are taking place with impunity, giving the impression that the law has been put on hold. In addition, other criminal activities such as acid attacks, murders, robbery, muggings etc., are continuing unabated.

While it is understandable that the minister wishes to present an optimistic view of the situation, he ought to take care not to give a misleading view. The overall law and order situation is fairly grim, which cannot be improved without effective police action to contain crimes in general and political thuggery in particular. We expect the minister to take well-focused and firm actions to pursue criminals and deter criminal activities. For this, he needs broad public support for whatever tough actions he may plan to take. He cannot get this support unless he acknowledges the reality of the law and order situation prevailing in the country.

Poor Patients Indeed

There are genuine poor people in this country and there are also people who choose to become 'poor'. The intriguing revelation came at the parliament Thursday as no less a person than Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed produced a list of 1088 'poor patients' of the country who received financial assistance from the Prime Minister's office, in reply to a question from a ruling party MP. The list is, of course, very imposing since it included ministers, MPs, ruling party leaders and activists, bureaucrats, a national professor, low paid employees of PM's office and a judge, among others, who drew as much as Tk. 3.52 crore from the PM's fund to meet medical expenses. Why on earth should many of them need, leave alone receive, charity? Though unfortunate, this is also a clear indication of the rot that has set in the so-called high society of the country.

We do not know how many discretionary funds the PM's office has and the minister's reply does not depict the exact nature and sourcing of the fund nor does it give any indication about the size of it. The idea of having such funds, at the disposal of the PM's office, which can be fruitfully utilized in helping out genuine poor people in their hour of need, is always welcome. But their operation and accounts-keeping need to be totally transparent; otherwise there will always be chances of misuse as is apparent from the report that much of the help meant for the poor actually went to solvent people including ruling party elements. Hence a clear policy for the operation of the fund must be formulated by the government.

From Grief to Festivity

by Professor Anisuzzaman

It is not without a profound feeling for the dead whom they have never known in person that people stand in queue from midnight to following midday; it is not without a proper sense of respect that so many meetings and functions are organised in remembrance of a few who sacrificed themselves for the good of all. In the process the day wears a festive look.

THE sun was setting in Dhaka on the 21st February 1952 as I was treading back home along the railway lines behind the Medical College and the Arts Building of the University. Recapitulation of the events of the day was kaleidoscopic: the meeting at the Arts Building premises, the courting of arrests by willful violation of Section 144 of the CrPC, the use of tear gas by the police, brick-batting the police by the students, the shooting, my lifting a young boy with bullet injuries across the fence so that he could be taken to the emergency room of the Medical College Hospital, the setting up of the microphone at the Medical College Hostel from where speeches were delivered by many, including members of the Provincial Assembly, and briefly, the imposition of the curfew.

The city had come to a standstill as soon as the news of the killings of students spread. The employees of the radio station rushed out of their office in the vicinity of the university. The Railway employees stopped running the trains. A few shops, open on the day of a general strike, drew their shutters. It was not clear at the end of the day who the winners were in this conflict between the mighty government and the students determined to press their demands to make Bengali a state language.

On the 22nd, some of us went to the Magistrate's court to seek bail for friends arrested on the previous day. But they confessed in front of that they had willingly violated the restrictions imposed by the government on gathering and movements and were, consequently, sent to jail. There were mourning processions and *gayehana janaza*: setting fire to two newspaper offices by angry crowds; more shootings, more death. East Bengal was enveloped by an overwhelming sense of loss and outrage.

The first anniversary of the day was observed by going barefooted to the Azimpur graveyard and placing of flowers at the spot where the first martyrs fell. A couple of songs, composed for the occasion, were sung by small groups. It was still a somber affair.

In 1955, the government banned the observance of the day. The order was violated. A black flag flew atop the Arts Building; we gathered inside the premises to hold the memorial meeting; the police burst in through the gates charging with lathis; we ran helter-skelter — myself to the stack of bookshelves in the library. Some, including girls, were arrested on the spot, swelling the number already taken in the custody earlier in the mourning from the university area.

Next year there was some jubilation, on the day for the

first time, the first constitution of the country was going to be adopted in a month's time and it was agreed that Bangali and Urdu would be two state languages of Pakistan. We sensed victory without forgetting the price that has been paid. We were grateful to the martyrs more than ever.

As the country reeled under Martial Law and the constitution stood abrogated, there was a sense of despair and agree on the day in 1959. In early February 1962, following the arrest of Shahid Suhrawardy, the students publicly registered their protests against the regime and whatever was said and done on the 21st February, it was actually directed against the rule of Martial Law. The provincial government under Governor Azam Khan, in a more of reconciliation, decided to complete in some fashion the work of erecting the Shaheed Minar, and the day was observed in 1963 around the new construction.

The 21st February of 1969 became very much a part of the mass upsurge that ousted General Ayub Khan and freed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, now Bangabandhu, from captivity. The mourning was, however, reinforced by the killings of Dr Shamsuzzoha at the University of Rajshahi and Sergeant Zahur Haq at the Dhaka Cantonment. It was, I suppose, also later that year that the newly-

appointed provincial governor under the second Martial Law regime placed floral wreaths at the Shaheed Minar. The day was observed in 1970 in the midst of the euphoria that had engulfed East Pakistan following the general elections of 1970 that signalled the victory of the people. Within the next few weeks, the Shaheed Minar was raised to the ground by the Pakistan Army when they unleashed their brutal force against the same people.

In 1972, the Shaheed Minar was still in ruins but the enthusiasm of the people, who had just won their freedom, more than compensated for the loss. On the day next year we already had a constitution that proclaimed Bengali as the state language of Bangladesh. The victory appeared to have been complete and the rejoicing of the people, not without a sense of gratitude for the martyrs, overlook the sense of loss.

Very soon the rejoicing would turn into indiscipline and violence. At the Shaheed Minar girls were harassed; rival student groups fought each other to display the portraits of their respective leaders; political figures were manhandled by their opponents; floral tributes were trampled by arrogant party workers accompanying their leader who did nothing to stop them.

Yet the scene presented on the 21st February is not one of



Sacred touch at the sacred cenotaph

total disorder and breakdown of norms. It is not without a profound feeling for the dead whom they have never known in person that people stand in queue from midnight to following midday; it is not without a proper sense of respect that so many meetings and functions are organised in remembrance of a few who sacrificed themselves for the good of all. In the

process the day wears a festive look. Perhaps, with the passing of time, and, especially, with the triumph of the cause this is bound to happen.

But let us be careful that the festive mood does not spoil the spirit of the day. We should not and cannot, afford to cease to learn from the sacrifices of the language martyrs whose selfless dedication made history.

Ekushey Comes Back to Inspire Us

by Mahfuz Anam

Why the success of pre-liberation Ekushey could not be repeated after our independence? Why did we fail to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity laid open to us by our independence? Why the unity that made us so strong against such a formidable enemy as the Pakistani army collapsed after '71 allowing for the revival of reactionary and obscurantist politics in the free soil of Bangladesh?

Pakistani rule, commemorating Ekushey became a major means of uniting our people and organising them for the struggle to gain our economic, cultural and political rights.

As we observe Ekushey today, most of us will perhaps fail to realise the central role it played during the decade of the fifties and the sixties. During that critical period, Ekushey lay at the root of our realisation that the Pakistani state structure did not ensure the socio-economic and cultural future for the Bengalees who formed the majority population of the new state. In other words we, the Bengalees, had to create a mass movement against the rulers of Pakistan and force them to give us our rights. As years went by, and as the rulers of Pakistan revealed their agenda of discrimination and subjugation of the Bengalee people, the movement for economic and cultural emancipation turned first into the struggle for provincial autonomy, which later became movement for independence. Thus Ekushey sowed the seed that later culminated in our War of Liberation in '71.

We would like to see the significance of Ekushey in two distinct phases — pre-Liberation ('52 to '71) and post-Liberation

('72 onwards). In the pre-Liberation phase, as briefly described above, the significance of Ekushey was to inspire us to fight for our socio-economic and cultural rights which later turned out to be our movement for independence. It can be termed as the nation-forming phase.

The post-Liberation phase, which we would like to call the nation building phase that began from '72, did not see the same success of the spirit of Ekushey that the previous phase saw. In other words it is this writer's view that Ekushey was more successful in inspiring us to fight for our rights than in making us implement them after we were able to establish our own free and independent state.

Our most significant failure has been that in independent Bangladesh we did not see the growth and development of Bengali culture in all its magnificent and diverse glory as we had reasons to hope and expect. Perhaps in the area of literature and performing arts, we saw some significant work, but in terms of seeing an overall cultural rejuvenation, something akin to a cultural revolution in independent Bangladesh, we cannot claim to have seen anything

close to it.

The question naturally arises: why? Why the success of pre-liberation Ekushey could not be repeated after our independence? Why did we fail to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity laid open to us by our independence? Why the unity that made us so strong against such a formidable enemy as the Pakistani army collapsed after '71 allowing for the revival of reactionary and obscurantist politics in the free soil of Bangladesh? Why a culture that was so beautiful and creative in protest became so very dull, imitating and essentially uncreative after freedom? The answer obviously is that it is easier to unite when survival is threatened than to work together when that threat no longer exists.

However in this writer's view, the fundamental reason for the failure of cultural revival or growth in independent Bangladesh is the emergence of military dictatorship in '75 following the murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Any military coup is bad enough. But one that comes through a brutal murder of the supreme leader of our Liberation War is far worse. One fundamental goal of this military

takeover was to pervert all the values on which our Liberation War based which included those represented by our Language Movement. Thus secular principles became the first casualty and the use of religion in politics came in vogue. History of our Liberation War began to be re-written and an overall environment of cultural perversion set in. This situation prevailed till the revival of democracy in '91.

After the fall of Ershad's military-backed autocratic government, a government was placed in power for the first time after '75 through a free and fair election. A sovereign parliament was put in place that amended the constitution and restored the parliamentary form of government enshrined in our original constitution. For the first time since BKSAL was promulgated in January '75 democracy was allowed a free reign and the possibility of cultural revival seemed at last to be at hand.

Why haven't we been able to reverse the process of cultural degeneration following the restoration of democracy? The cause, in our view, lies in the nature of politics that we seem to have got with the restoration of democracy. Instead of creating an environment in which

"thousand flowers" could bloom, we ended up with one in which only the BNP or the AL flowers could grow. In other words, instead of an environment in which free flow of thoughts and ideas could grow, develop and flourish, we had a situation in which — for the first five years — we heard of nothing but "Shahid Zia's Dreams" followed by the last two and half of "Bangabandhu's Dreams". It is as if no other person ever existed in this country and that nobody had any contribution in anything that happened in this country. It was a culture of adulation and sycophancy that came out in place that of cultural creativity that we needed so badly.

That is where we are on this 47th anniversary of our glorious Language Movement that set us on the path of freedom and independence. As we prepare to celebrate the occasion we are seized with trepidation and fear about what will happen; whether or not innocent and young lives will be lost in the mad rivalry between our two major parties. One by one the events that used to unite the nation is beginning to divide us. Ekushey remains an honourable exception, though last year we had an unfortunate incident following the apparent death of the BNP chief at the Shaheed Minar.

It is possible for us to take a step back, on this sacred occasion, and rethink as to what we are doing and where that is taking us?

From Mourning to Celebration to Degeneration

by Sabir Mustafa

The whole arrangement should inspire awe among casual visitors, and the general populace should immediately be able to get a clear feeling about the deep socio-political importance of the place. Even when political parties and student groups continue to make a farce out of Ekushey in the name of celebration, there is a pressing need to preserve the sanctity of the Minar and salvage some of the historical spirit of the day.

OVER the years, the observance of Ekushey has undergone significant qualitative changes. Some would say the changes were inevitable and they reflect the transformed nature of the day's significance. Others would differ and suggest that the changes reflect the general degeneration of ethics and cultural values in society. There are elements of truth in both the positions, but neither can be taken as the whole truth.

As recently as the early 1970s, there was a strong element of sobriety attached to the observance of Ekushey. The atmosphere around the Central Shaheed Minar was sombre, the crowds were disciplined, and the general ambience was one of quiet reflection. This was more in tune with the occasion, because Ekushey was a day of remembrance. It was about language, about martyrdom for the dignity of the mother tongue.

Observing Ekushey meant remembering the martyrs, their sacrifice, their dreams. There was little scope here for anything else other than expression of determination to uphold the ideals that inspired students of Dhaka University to rebel against the Pakistani neo-colonial rulers in 1952. The Ekushey rebellion signified defiance in the face of repression; but it was a peaceful violation of repressive laws, in line with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent assertion of civil disobedience. But the day's significance ran far deeper. The day symbolised the Bengalee people's yearning to establish their identity as a distinct cultural entity. It was the precursor to the evolution of Bengalee nationalism, which finally led to the establishment of an independent nation-state.

Forty seven years after the event, Bangladesh stands as a free, sovereign nation where

Bengalee language and culture are free to bloom. The goals of the Ekushey appears fulfilled. To some, this has caused a qualitative change in the meaning of Ekushey, by turning it around from a day of mourning to a day of rejoicing, from a day to observe to a day to celebrate. Once the character of the day itself underwent such a dramatic transformation in the perception of a significant number of people, then the observance of the day itself had to change.

Some of the rituals remain the same: the music is the melancholy tune of Altair Mahmud, the attire is predominantly white and black. But in many other ways, changes have occurred. Young men no longer walk silently towards the Minar, they march in processions, shouting slogans which have more to do with aspirations or anger of today than sacrifices of yesterday. The mournful ambience around the Minar and throughout the city has virtually been replaced with a festive mood. It's a national holiday and everyone is out enjoying it.

But this change in the mood of the occasion, from mourning to celebration, has caused a general breakdown in discipline even at the foot of the Minar. In the days gone by, midnight was the time to be at the Shaheed Minar. But now, except for a tight security for the arrival of the President and later by the Prime Minister makes it impossible for the

general public to enjoy the same kind of freedom. In a way, the security aspect has worked to alienate the public from the observance ceremony and distance them from the Minar itself.

Once the security cordon is lifted, the scene turns anarchic. Element of respect associated with the monument and the occasion are nowhere to be found. People used to come at midnight with families, but that is rarely the case now. Few women are seen at the Shaheed Minar before sunrise. The heightened level of hooliganism and indiscipline has forced many women to stop going to the Minar altogether. Few bother to take their shoes off right until they reach the top of the altar. This is in marked contrast to earlier times, when people used to walk barefoot through the streets to reach the Minar.

But perhaps the worst acts of indiscipline and disrespect are shown by political parties and student groups affiliated to them. These groups create extraordinary scenes of chaos on and around the Minar through their shouting, rushing, pushing etc. When senior political leaders arrive, the situation deteriorates even further.

In recent years, a number of incidents at the Shaheed Minar have shocked even those who have supposedly become used to the changed environment. Political groups have instigated

violent incidents at the monument which is supposed to inspire awe and deep respect among the general masses.

In the mid-1980s, student groups aligned to the Awami League and BNP competed with each to hang portraits of their respective leaders on the Minar. Some of these leaders such as Tajuddin Ahmed had much to do with the Language Movement. But others like Gen Ziaur Rahman had absolutely nothing to do with Ekushey. But more importantly, the Language Movement was not the work of any one leader or any one party. Yet, a strange and totally illogical hegemony complex had taken over the student groups and they turned the observance of Ekushey into a farce by their public clashes over "possession" of the Minar.

Then in 1993, a group of unidentified students ransacked the Minar area, defaced all the wall murals and tore the red sun behind the main structure of the monument. It appeared that they had got into a tussle with students of the Arts Institute who were giving the place a face-lift days before the 21st. Angered by the art students' refusal to do their bidding, the hooligans set about erasing the murals and tearing the decorations. To some, this was an act akin to desecration of a holy place. To others, it merely reflected the depth to which some student groups had sunk in their quest for author-

ity. Suffice to say, the culprits were never officially identified.

The most shocking incident, however, took place last year. It shocked most because the incident was perpetrated by members of the entourage of a former prime minister, in her presence.

In late morning, when BNP chief and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Khaleda Zia came to the Shaheed Minar, the large number of activists accompanying her suddenly broke into a frenzy. Some were showering flower petals on Khaleda which in itself was an astounding scene, since Ekushey is not an occasion for personal veneration nor is the Shaheed Minar the place for such rituals. But then the more unruly elements in the mob attacked the altar, kicked and tore and threw about all the other bouquets and flowers that had been laid there. Within minutes the entire altar, which had been beautifully bedecked with flowers, were a devastated look, as if a heinous tornado had just swept over it.

What all these events demonstrate is that, once the mourning element was allowed to lapse from the observance of Ekushey, the day's character merely began to reflect the general degeneration of values in society at large. Rowdism, hooliganism, outright criminality, intolerance, political hegemonism — all these "values" which dominate to-

day's political arena and student politics, have established their presence in the observance of Ekushey particularly around the once-venerated monument, the Shaheed Minar.

Who is to blame for this? Or should anyone be blamed?

Now, there is no doubt that an element of celebration had to, due to historical necessity, dilute the atmosphere of mourning on the 21st. After all, the liberation of the country meant that the ultimate goal of the martyrdom had been achieved, and there was indeed a need to celebrate rather than carry on mourning. But some occasions, like monuments, need to be preserved in their original historic forms. And Ekushey is certainly one of them.

One of the reasons why Ekushey has lapsed into such anarchy is because the Minar itself is shown little respect by the Dhaka University authorities who are supposed to be its custodian. The Minar is cleaned up only for the observance of Ekushey, but it remains in a neglected state throughout the rest of the year. It is a resting place for stragglers.

Yet, a monument of such national significance ought to be maintained and cleaned every day, with adequate security to ensure that it is not used as a mere park. The whole arrangement should inspire awe among casual visitors, and the general populace should immediately be able to get a clear feeling about the deep socio-political importance of the place. Even when political parties and student groups continue to make a farce out of Ekushey in the name of celebration, there is a pressing need to preserve the sanctity of the Minar and salvage some of the historical spirit of the day.