

Language
Martyrs'
Day

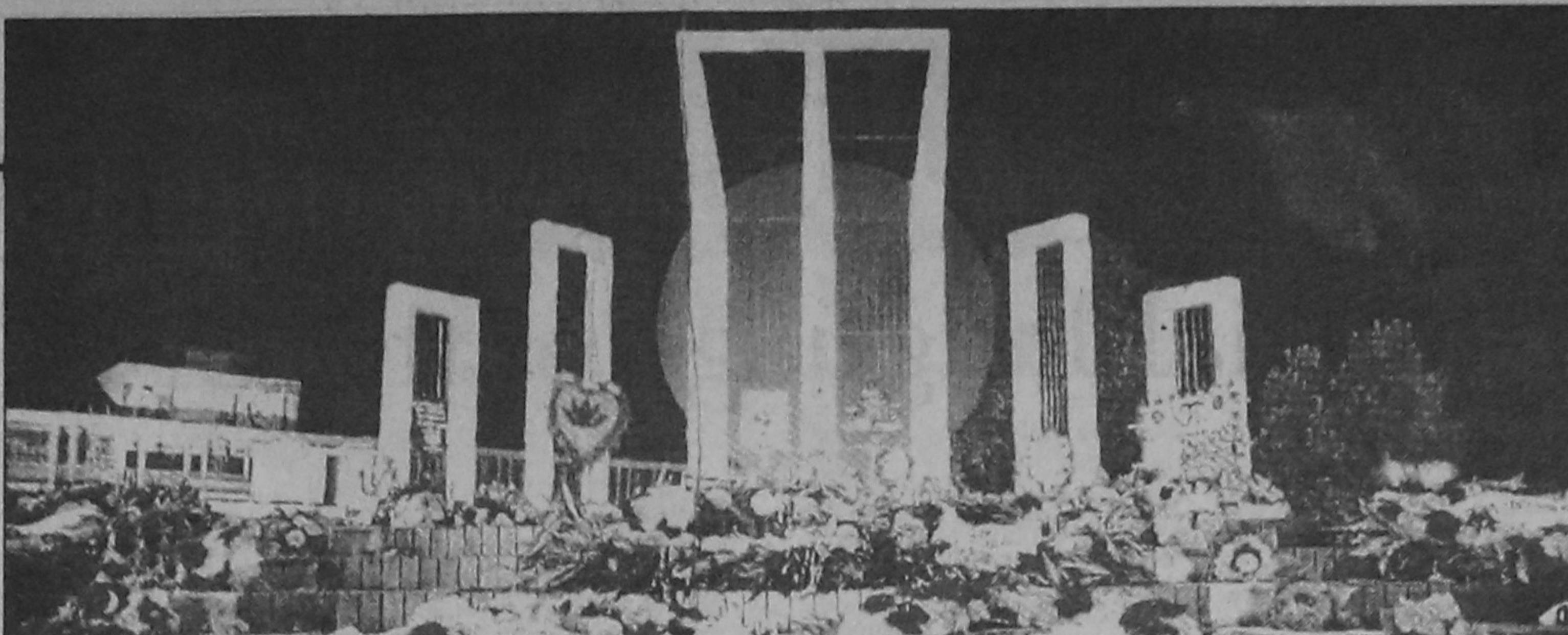
by Dr A R Chowdhury

IT HAS BEEN forty-eight years since the martyrs of the language movement shed their blood to secure the sanctity of our mother tongue. Any division of time is artificial. Even anniversaries. But they can be moments for deeper reflection. We look backward, most often in gratitude, and then forward with new resolve.

This year the celebration of *Ekushey February* has a special significance. UNESCO has declared the day as the international mother tongue day. Given the recognition that it rightly deserves, *Ekushey February* has come to symbolise the struggle against evil forces. It has come to symbolise the difference between right and wrong; between standing up for one's inalienable right and meekly submitting to the whims of the oppressor.

The significance of this day is no longer confined within the boundaries of our country. It now symbolises the fight of each and every oppressed community against their oppressor.

On the eve of the *Ekushey February*, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last week announced the formation of a language institute to further the cause of the Bengali language. Such an announcement is highly laudable. The need for such an institute has been felt by experts and policy makers in this area for a long time. This institute can definitely con-



Language education and policy: Some reflections

tribute in resolving some of the uncertainties facing the use of Bengali in all spheres of life. A language question arises whenever there are language problems requiring a solution. In this sense, there is hardly any country in the world in which there is no language question. The language question in Bangladesh arises from the fact that the colonial experience during the British rule has led to the importation of English which has taken on the roles of national communication, administration and medium of education from early primary to university level.

Thus the language question in Bangladesh is compounded by the addition of an imported language whose strength doesn't lie in numbers of speakers, but rather in the superior roles assigned to it. Since the English language was spread through the educational process and education was, and still is, largely restricted to a few, the population came to be divided into an elite that could speak the official language and the masses that were either illiterate or literate only in Bengali.

The crux of the language problem in Bangladesh is, therefore, the pursuit of solutions to language choice in different spheres. For instance, in education, to ensure that as many children as possible are given a meaningful education and that illiteracy is eradicated

among both children and adults; and in communication and administration, to ensure that participation in local and national affairs is not restricted to the few who can use English but is organised in such a way as to make mass participation possible.

The study of the colonial educational policies in British India will reveal that it led to the conscious breeding of an elite. The education envisaged

erned, and the many who were governed, the one unable to talk the language of the other.

The colonial legacy will be a recurrent factor in the language policy of this country. In practically all fields (education, communication, politics, administration, etc.) the question has always been whether or not it is desirable or even possible to break away from the existing practices, and if so at what cost. This constant

education, science and technology, and this same language will serve as their window to the outside world. In this context, the colonial legacy proves to be an advantage in that such a language already exists in English.

The question that remains to be settled is the scope that it should have in relation to Bengali. Should these requirements dictate a policy that aims to make everyone function in

of illiteracy. Since literacy liberates untapped human potential and leads to increased productivity and better living conditions, it is not surprising that countries with the highest rate of literacy are also the most economically advanced.

Similarly, mass communication with its emphasis on flow of information can provide a suitable climate for national development which, in turn, is concerned with total

Various models of language planning provide a paradigm as to how this should be done. However, language policies pursued in this country over the last few decades have been generally characterised by avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, and declaration without implementation.

was an elitist one: English for the few who would later train the many in their indigenous languages. This, of course, presupposes that the few will also be proficient in their own languages. The major twist of this policy in British India was that the few succeeded in English largely to the detriment of their own languages; and, rather than being able to train the masses, they became alienated from them. The use of English as such divided the people into two nations, the few who gov-

erned between retention and change constitutes the major point of departure as well as dilemma for language policy makers in Bangladesh.

A modern state requires for its proper functioning high-level manpower, technology and contacts with the outside world. The complexities of these demands impose a constraint on the language policy in Bangladesh. Whatever the policy makers do with Bengali, they will need a major world language for access to higher

English or should varying degrees of participation be recognised involving the exploitation of Bengali for certain functions and English for others?

National development is often defined narrowly in socio-economic terms. But even within such a restricted definition, the role of language is important. This can be shown in the link between literacy and development. The world's poorest countries are also the countries with the highest rates

of human development. And the only way to ensure mass involvement is to pay more attention to the use of Bengali in education and the mass media. Given Bangladesh's high illiteracy rate, there does not seem to be any other viable alternative.

Language education may involve the use of a language as a medium of instruction or simply for initial literacy. Which language is selected for which purpose and at which level of education are all options that,

took a bold and right decision in 1952. The status of numerous threatened languages of the world gave a rare insight into the gravity of the language loss, and I was led to believe that nothing should be taken for granted. Even within the span of only three generations a language can become entirely extinct. I look at some of the Bangladeshi children who are now growing up in the United States and fear the impossible. On that note, however, the silver lining is that it is a group of expatriate Bangladeshis living

Mother Tongue Day comes as recognition of cultural pluralism. I think this declaration is a tribute to the fact that even in "a global village," in words of Dr Fishman, "people will continue to live their daily lives, to raise their children and to transmit their linguistic and non-linguistic heritages largely in terms of more particularistic, co-existing villages." On the flip side of the coin, I am not surprised to know that our global "big brothers" initially argued against the proposal to call February 21 an international

warrior. At a metaphorical level, this story tells us how the colonizer teaches his language to the colonized and benefits from it. The rise of Babu class in British India is a case in point. In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Prospero teaches Caliban and Ariel his language in order to control them. The first think that Caliban did was to curse Prospero with his "newly learned art." In reality, however, a new language often causes the erosion of the native mother tongues. Therefore, the postcolonial atmosphere tends

Clearly the onslaught of English had its toll on the indigenous languages of North America. It was indeed a sorry sight

to see elderly women breaking down into tears for the loss of their languages. It was heart-wrenching to learn about the octogenarian woman from one of the Washington tribes who was the only speaker left of her language. Even at that age, she was planning to start a school to teach her community of their mother tongues.

With 150 million speakers of Bengali language worldwide, we probably cannot even dream of losing our mother tongue to a foreign language. Such comfort comes from the simple fact that a selected conscientious few

in Canada who have taken the primary initiatives to earn the international recognition for *Ekushey*.

Surely the UN's declaration came into effect as the world community realised the larger significance of mother tongue. I cannot agree more with poet Shamsur Rahman who observed that "Amar *Ekushey* is a Bangladeshi's gift to the world." However, having said that, I think we should not also forget that the decision is a triumph of all marginal groups.

In an age obsessed with globalisation, the declaration of

to show allergic reactions to His Master's Voice.

As a former colony and a present marginal, least-developed country we have probably taken this issue a little further by successfully locating Mother Tongue into the center. At least for one day in a year, the Irish in Ireland and the Basque in Spain will think of the contribution of our language martyrs Salam, Barkat, and Jabbar. And in some part of the world, someone will sing for our language martyrs in the manner of Fakir Alamgir or Shumon Chatterjee.

I find the recognition of Mother Tongue Day is recognition of women as well. The feminists who are constantly engaged in finding their niche outside the patriarchal design should find this decision refreshing. The Judeo-Christian tradition holds that God gave Adam the power to name all the objects in his freshly minted universe. Many feminists maintain that human consciousness emerges from mother's language. For instance, an aboriginal group of Australia thinks that language transmits from the mother to the child through breast-feeding. A biologist may rationalise this with gene theory but almost all societies link language with mother. (I wonder what do the Germans think of mother tongue in their fatherland).

From a feminist perspective, the materiality of language becomes synonymous to maternity. *Amar Ekushey* is thus a tribute to the cadences of mothers' voice that introduce the world to us.

The UN decision is a pride that we all cherish and share. It is a return to our own mother, our source, and our soul. I know I am guilty of complicating a simple expression of pride. And that comes from the limitation of writing in my Second language. Let me conclude referring to the Chilean Noble Laureate Gabriela Mistral. She wrote about the Absent Mother, "All the teachers that came after you, mother, have taught me only what you taught me in the first place, and they needed many words to say what you could say in just a few."

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