

**Ekushey urges  
Good-bye to negative politics**

**E**KUSHEY, the magic date of tremendous appeal to the Bengalee mind embodying the spirit of our nationalist assertion in this part of Bengal is a reference-point for inspiration, both nationally and internationally, the latter by virtue of the UNESCO's declaration of the day as the International Mother Language Day. Our focus today being on how we have harnessed the Ekushey spirit in meeting national aspirations, it is only briefly but certainly not casually that we will lament here over our inordinate delay in making available adequate literature on the historic Language Movement to the UN member-states necessitated by UNESCO's declaration of 21st February as the Mother Language Day. That honour entails responsibility has escaped our consciousness.

On this day almost half a century ago, the Bengalees asserted their right to mother tongue spearheading thereby a struggle for cultural identity and economic freedom that was to culminate in the birth of Bangladesh as a political entity on the global map. To what use have we put our hard-earned national independence, the crowning glory of the process triggered by Ekushey five decades ago? On the establishment of a homeland of our own on the political level, having all the attributes of statehood, we lunged forward craving for rapid economic development with distributive justice to make the people happy and to untap the groundswell of their emotional and creative energies for the greater good of the country.

All this remains a dream even to this day, three decades after attainment of political freedom. Politics has been so divided, acrimonious and destructive that pro-people agenda have been side-stepped by the mainstreaming of slanging matches. With only some months left for the national elections, where is the logic, even an iota of it, behind the Opposition's 'intensified' move to bring down a government which is set to be dissolved in July anyway? Similarly, the ruling party's repressive policies against the opposition is not making the atmosphere any more conducive to polls than what the opposition is doing to mar the prospect of it.

Ekushey should have a sobering influence on them to come to terms with the need of the hour, which is to put the politics of dead-end behind them all at once.

**Good move  
Replace archaic laws**

**W**E welcome the law reform bill, to be placed before the Jatiya Sangsad imminently. Entitled the Bangladesh Laws (Revision and Declaration) (Third Amendment) Act 2001, the proposed bill would nullify or amend 312 outdated laws. The process of law reform is invaluable, but we would like to point out that nullification of certain laws would not be enough. They must be accompanied by a concurrent formulation of laws that would replenish the system relevantly and comprehensively. The government is urged to focus on this aspect as diligently as it has done on the present proposals.

The task before the government has been considerable, since past regimes have paid little attention to law reform. By allowing outdated laws to survive and accumulate, they have done this country a great disservice. In a developing society, the existence of archaic laws is an anachronism that conflicts with progressive forces. So while we commend our lawmakers for looking at laws over a period of 20 years, from 1951 to 1971, we would like to say that the process of reform is by no means over. Glaring inconsistencies still exist, emanating from laws such as the Police Act, for instance, dating back to 1860, which contains provisions that have no relevance today. The evaluation of fines and penalties is so incongruous in the present economic context that their application not only fails to act as a deterrent, but also makes the practice itself ludicrously meaningless. Similarly, the body of law that regulates certain forms of information exchanges such as broadcasting, runs against precepts enshrined in a democracy. Similar arguments apply to the Official Secrets Act as well. The demand for reform of criminal and civil codes with these principles in mind is obvious. Lawmakers are urged not to rest on their laurels. They must purge the system of malcontent and replace the outdated with what is more relevant and just.

DR A R CHOWDHURY

**I**T has been forty-nine 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.

Ekushey February represents our yearning to rediscover our national identity. Today, it represents the fight for national identity the world over. Last year, UNESCO had declared the day as international mother tongue day. Given the international 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.

This year the celebration of Ekushey February has a special significance. The nation is going through a period of political uncertainty and turmoil. Recent intrusions made by the fundamentalist forces in our political arena should be a cause of concern for all. The only way to politically face these forces would be to solidify our own national identity and culture. Once we can recognise and appreciate what we have, it would be easier for the general population to unmask the evil designs of the fundamentalist forces. What would be better today than thinking of something relating to the Bengali language that would help us to preserve its sanctity and protect our national identity. On the eve of the Ekushey February, I would, therefore, like to bring to the attention of the government and the intelligentsia the necessity of forming a language institute to further the cause of the Bengali language. 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 contribute 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.

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

In practice, however, there are constraints, which may be historical, economic, socio-cultural, pedagogic or political, which limit the freedom of choice.

In particular, the colonial legacy seems to determine current educational practices as it has proved virtually impossible in all but a few cases to break away from the inherited practices. The main point of contention is usually the role of Bengali in education in relation to education in English. In Dhaka, for example, the later has been the major medium of instruction even from the primary level. The need for secondary and higher education tends to favour the continuation of the practice.

However, empirical results reported from various studies done in Africa and other regions show the negative impact of such policies and indicate the need to try out alternatives. For example, in Africa, this has led to experimentation in the use of African languages as medium of instruction at the primary level. Even when positive results have been forthcoming from the experiments, such is the strong hold of the past that change in the direction of the positive findings has been resisted or slow in coming. Hence the challenge facing the policy makers in language education is not only to ensure a meaningful education in Bengali, but also to evolve a viable programme in which both Bengali and English teaching reinforce each other.

The various areas in which the language question arises call for a coordinated plan of solutions. This must involve the formulation of policies and the provision of mechanisms for their implementation. 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. There is a general feeling among our intelligentsia that language problems are not urgent and solutions to them can wait. It is true that the effects of not taking action on a language question may not show up in the same way as those of not taking action on, say, an economic problem. But the fact that the effects are hidden does not make them less serious or mean that they will somehow disappear. Not only the avoidance of the language problem unjustified, the attitude of making pronouncements that cannot be implemented is also a form of avoidance. The longer a solution to a language problem is delayed, the more difficult it will be eventually to solve it.

Dr A R Chowdhury teaches at the Marquette University, Wisconsin, USA

**Language education and policy: Some reflections**

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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 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 governed, 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, administration, politics and development), 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 pull 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-

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 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 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, in theory, educational institutions are free to decide upon.

**Towards building a literate nation**

*Needed a positive, transparent and well-coordinated approach*

A B M S ZAHUR

**A**PPROXIMATELY half of the total 75,000 primary schools are run by the government. It has been found that most of the government primary schools offer poor quality education. In 1991 the dropout rate for government primary schools was sixty per cent. A five-year cycle in a government primary school takes on average seven years to complete. Though there has been some decrease in the rate of dropouts during the last ten years the situation is far from satisfactory even now.

Government schools are over centralised. Many of the present problems of government run primary schools can be traced back to the nationalisation of primary schools in 1973 which brought 36,165 schools under the control of a centralised bureaucracy with a complex multilayered and inflexible system of management. The disjunct between the management of schools and the communities which they served resulted in sharp deterioration in service standards. Some attempts are now being made to improve the system by delegating some powers and responsibilities, improving teacher training and encouraging communities for more participation in the development efforts. However, the ultimate solution lies in handing responsibility over to local government.

Despite indecision, delayed actions and weakened capability in implementing the policy one perceives that the government is wishful in raising the level of literacy in Bangladesh. However the emphasis on development of primary education in the country is not enough. Without success in the overall improvement in the primary education the educational development programme in the country will not be effective and meaningful. Even with limited resources it appears that more positive results may be obtained if the following hindrances can be eliminated to some extent:

- (a) Lack of motivation of both students and teachers;
- (b) Lack of infrastructural facilities;
- (c) Lack of adequate number of qualified teachers;
- (d) Too much emphasis on recruiting female teachers; and

(e) Corruption  
The teachers are most important for developing interest of the community they serve in educating their children. If the teachers are not motivated properly their mere routine participation would not give the desired result. The teachers may be made to understand that their role as teachers is not only to improve the quality of the people but also to assist in building the nation. In simple and straightforward fashion they should be advised that faster economic growth of the nation depends much on improving the quality of education

attention could be given by the then dictatorial regimes. Needless to say that without proper qualified teachers the quality of primary education can never improve. Neither Zia's nor Ershad's regimes perhaps dared to incur the displeasure of retrenching or reducing the number of unqualified or under-qualified teachers. Thus most of the government primary school educated children remained relatively under-educated. However, improvement of quality of teachers cannot be done overnight. The less educated younger teachers up to 40 years of age may be advised to upgrade their education

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and good quality primary education has a profound impact both directly and indirectly on the growth of the nation.

Lack of infrastructural facilities is common among developing countries, particularly in least developed countries. This hindrance may, however, be overcome through positive response from different multilateral and bilateral aid agencies. It is encouraging to note that donor agencies have shown enough interest in this regard in Bangladesh. However, the existing development planning needs further qualitative improvement. More pragmatism and less politics is certainly desirable in obtaining greater benefit by the people.

It is well known that the level of education of primary teachers before 1973 was very low because of their low status. During the last 28 years though more qualified teachers have been inducted improvement has reached nowhere near desired level because no adequate

and skill and older teachers (above 40 years) may be allowed to retire with benefit. The training facilities of the teachers may be improved and expanded. It may not be difficult to obtain grant or soft loans from donor agencies for development and expansion of training facilities.

The present policy of filling in 80 per cent of vacant posts by female primary teachers, though apparently laudable as a step toward encouraging women to participate in greater number in the development effort of the government, has some concomitant problems which is seemingly weakening the existing school administration. This perhaps is resulting from the fact that vast majority of the women teachers come from lower middle class strata of the society which is still. These classes are extremely conservative and as such most of the women there are not allowed to develop the thinking that they are as good as men. To remain submissive or subservient to men is still considered as a virtue in such

societies. The male primary teachers also come from same strata of society. As such many of them still stick to the belief that by birth women are inferior and so it often becomes difficult for such male teachers to take orders from their women colleagues. Even the community they serve is still suspicious about the ability of women. As such sometimes they hesitate to extend cooperation to the women teachers. Thus the government may consider reducing the percentage of recruitment of female teachers at the moment and increasing it gradually thereafter. Furthermore, it may be a good idea to introduce placement of teachers in such a way so that where the head teacher is a woman, the asstn head teacher must be a man and vice versa. Such an arrangement will improve the school administration to a considerable extent.

There is a proverb in Bengali that a corrupt person can earn extra penny even if he is engaged in counting the waves. Thus it is not surprising to see that in a free government primary school in a corrupt society they are earning illegally in the form of collecting different fees from the students (admission fee, examination fee, sports fee etc.). When the government is encouraging the people to send their children to schools, payments of such fees by the poor parents is certainly discouraging them.

During the last 29 years no government has been able to handle the education policy with dexterity. It was expected from the democratic rule of the Awami League that some remarkable improvement may be seen in the field of education. It is regrettable that it has not been possible for them to come up with something better. Whatever they did in the field of education their performance in the field of primary education is certainly not much commendable. Within months the tenure of Awami League may be over. However, at this belated stage they may decide to show their sincerity of purpose through giving more attention to improve the historically weak and inefficient administration of the education department.

ABMS Zahur is a retired Joint Secretary.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

**PHOTORIAL**

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

**Decline of a swimming pool**



STAR PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

The swimming pool behind the TSC cafeteria has been lying unused for a long time. The water is putrid with accumulated debris and waste from different sources. No doubt, it is a happy breeding ground for mosquitoes and unknown insects. We wonder why this swimming pool has been allowed to fall into this state? It poses a health hazard and it is such a big waste!

**Develop the IT industry**

This is a suggestion to the Bangladesh government. We have been reading about the Bangladesh IT task force, but do we know who they are? What is their background? We know that one of the main IT advisors to the prime minister is Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, a professor in civil engineering at BUET.

My suggestion is that we could take assistance from chief executive officers or CEO's of major international companies such as Oracle, HP and others like them. Both the Bangladesh government and our embassy in the US should pursue this matter and make the right contacts to obtain the right expertise for our IT industry. We should do this as soon as possible.

Let us look at the example of South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki who has said that he is enlisting the help of the world's 'top tech' brains, including India's Rajendra Pawar, to help develop South Africa's IT industry.

In his state-of-the-nation address to parliament, Mbeki said the "Presidential International Task Force on Information Society and Development" included Oracle Chairman Larry Ellison and Hewlett-Packard Chief Executive Carly Fiorina.

I would suggest that those interested in the IT industry should subscribe to Silicon India Magazine, by going to [www.siliconindia.com](http://www.siliconindia.com) (it's free). I have been subscribing to this for more than two years.

Muhammad S. Rahman(Sayeed)  
Frankfort, KY USA

**"Having her cake"**

I feel compelled to write after going through a letter written by Mr. Robert Kader from Chittagong under the caption "Having her cake" (February, 14th). Criticism and or critical analysis of a subject matter or an individual is always made in order to discern the quantum of the finer side and the coarse side in the subject or in the individual under criticism. But it is unfortunate that when most of us intend to criticize, we mostly indulge in personalising it. A critic should bear in mind that criticism and cynicism are not synonymous and should not be mixed up.

The interpretation made by Mr. Kader of the statement of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina "the real friend of Islam and is doing everything possible for the development and in spreading this great religion" is not correctly perceived. Islam is the religion of peace, and it teaches tolerance for other religions and above all love for humanity. Therefore, if this wholesome message is preached or spread, be it by the Prime Minister or any one, it can in no way be said to be against secularism or religious harmony.

I am an apolitical person, and I have tried to convey my view point in the spirit of comparing notes, and not from any political point of view. I dare say that I stand open to correction in my conjecture.

Mohammed. Idris  
Dhaka

**Nation before self-interest?**

The peoples' representatives have now taken up arms openly on the streets to make their point. Parliament is but a facade, giving them license to do as they please. They are above the law. The ordinary people, who have always been pawns in the hands of leaders and politicians, are today watching their beloved country suffer. The educational system is in ruins, the economy is sputtering, society is decaying, the law and order is in the most deplorable condition.

After 30 years the people are being treated with violence, while a few are benefiting from the fruits of the liberation war in which three million lives were lost. Is there to be no respect for the sacrifices of the martyrs? Is their ever going to be a national conscience to build the country? Are we ever going to put the nation before the self?

Akku Chowdhury  
Banani, Dhaka

**Independent inquiry**

We strongly endorse your editorial "Stop this spiralling violence" (February 16). You have rightly focused on the degree of political violence especially the involvement of a minister. Political violence has recently escalated ominously with murders, bomb blasts and sabotage in broad daylight. No PSA cases have been instituted against the ruling party members. Sheikh Hasina seems to have forgotten that

she is the prime minister of the people of this country, not the MP of the Awami League. Your second heading, "PM should prove true to her words" is a challenging question that reflects the voice of the people, by the people and for the people. It has become imperative for the prime minister to translate her words into action.

Will the PM institute a judicial independent inquiry headed by a justice and nominated by President Shahbuddin to delve into the Uttara Killing and alleged culprit Sardar Belayet Hossain Mukul and Dipu Chowdhury, the son of the State Minister for Shipping Mufazzal Hussain Chowdhury Maya?

Vox Populi  
Dhaka

**Corruption is the culprit**

We are all aware of the existence of corruption as the prime barrier to our future prosperity. Government officials from the top to the bottom are infamous for their contribution in this aspect. Recent events have made the future even bleaker with the addition of dubious religious leaders. The illiterate people, as well as a good portion of the educated community are followers of 'peers'. They do not seem to realize that these 'peers' exploit ordinary people using religion to attract them.

Unless education and moral values are given utmost importance, this form of social exploitation will soon overtake other problems.

Hasan Mahmud  
the University of Dhaka.