

# Ekushey: The Spirit of National Assertion

The Daily Star Special Supplement, February 21, 2001

## Twenty-first February: Its significance

HARUN UR RASHID

**T**WENTY-first February is Language Martyrs Day. It is a day of national mourning and introspection. It is almost fifty years to the day since the tragedy occurred and what do we have to show for it? If there is one answer that every one may agree on, it is simply that the foundations of Bangladesh were laid on 21st February 1952 when students and a few other young persons sacrificed their lives for honour and status of Bengali language.

It is also a day of pride and strength that young Bengali individuals paid the highest price for our mother tongue. We salute the martyrs and pray to Allah for the salvation of their souls.

Of all the languages in the Indian sub-continent, Bengali is the first to develop a literature of a very high order and merit and is still the model of other languages in the sub-continent. Bengali has the uniqueness to assimilate words from other languages and a typical fusion of these could be found in many Bengali writers who were scholars in Sanskrit, Persian and English languages. Bengali language was raised to its highest order and fame by Rabindranath Thakur/Tagore (1861-1941), the first Asian winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

Language is an issue on which our people naturally feel deeply. It is an issue on which passions are easily roused. We love our language and can die for it. Bangabandhu's slogan "I am Bengali, my nationalism is Bengali" provided the base of the language movement.

Bengali language represents the thought, culture and heritage of Bangladesh in its manifold forms. To a Bengali no subject fascinates him/her more than the discussion of Bengali literature. Any one who wishes to gain an insight into the conditions of life in Bangladesh and to peer into social complexities cannot do better than to study Bengali language and literature.

Pakistani rulers, supported by their insensitive bureaucrats, attempted to impose on us Urdu just because they decided arbitrarily in March 1948 that they should have one state language and that language could only be Urdu and no other language, although Bengali was spoken by 56 per cent of the population in Pakistan. (Punjabi by 37 per cent, while the remainder spoke Pushtu, Sindhi, Baluchi and Urdu.)

The Bengalis argued that there should be two state languages—Bengali and Urdu. But nothing persuaded the ruling class to change its mind to put both Bengali and Urdu on an equal footing and recognising them as the official languages of Pakistan. The struggle to gain Bengali language its rightful place continued and reached its highest pitch on 21st February 1952.

To narrate the events very briefly leading to 21st February tragedy, the immediate starting point was 27 January 1952. On that day there was an announcement at a public meeting in Dhaka by the then Prime Minister that the recommendations of the Basic Principles Committee of the Constituent Assembly that Urdu alone would be the national language of Pakistan proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. The students were infuriated on this decision.

On 21st February, 1952, at 3 PM the Budget session of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly (located near

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S.M.Hall) was scheduled to start. The students decided to march to the Assembly to protest against the decision. The Dhaka district administration imposed Section 144 prohibiting a gathering more than five persons to contain the demonstrations. The University students defied the ban. There were skirmishes between police and students on the way to the Assembly. At 3.30 PM the police opened fire on the order of a magistrate and two young men Abdul Jabbar and Rafiquddin Ahmed died on the spot while Abdul Barkat, critically injured died in the hospital that evening. The rest is history.

The demonstration on the language issue by the students should not be perceived in isolation. The political atmosphere was stifling at the time and there was no effective way of expressing popular views. To cite an example, a large number of by-elections were kept pending for long periods by the government of the day. In the absence of by-elections, the language issue became the rallying point to express dissatisfaction on policies of government. Had there been by-elections, the government would have found the mood of the electorate prevailing at the time and some speculate that the tragedy would not have occurred.

We commemorate this day year after year because this is a day of defining moment and of loud declaration that justice over oppression and hope over despair triumphed in the long run. The blood spilled on the ground did not go in vain. We hold this day very dear to our hearts because few other nations can look back such event with pride as we do. UNICEF has recognised the contribution of Bengali people for their mother tongue and 21st February will be celebrated by every nation as the Language Day.

The day affirms the importance of umbilical connection between mother tongue and a Bengali person. It underscores that mother tongue is the best medium of education, although another foreign language could be added as a second language. Mass education through Bengali medium is intrinsic to the success of democracy in the country and to neglect education to children is to neglect the bedrock of democracy. There appears to be a blind spot in public perceptions of what we are actually commemorating. There is a general impression that the day is commemorated routinely in stereotyped fashion. It does not seem to focus sharply on the causes the martyrs stood for. Did we translate the ideals into action for which sacrifices were made on this day? How do we measure it? One of the primary tests appears to be: can every Bangladeshi over the age of five read and write Bengali? The literacy rate as of 1997 appears to be 45.1 per cent of children over 5 years, 47.3 per cent children over 7 years and 51 per cent of population over age of 15. (Statistical Pocket Book, 1998, Bureau of Statistics). The score card does not seem to be very satisfactory. Our Constitution in its Article 17 envisages free and compul-



sory education to all children and states that illiteracy should be removed "within such time as may be determined by law." We should pause and ponder as to why did we fail to provide education to all children as stipulated in the Constitution? Apart from financial and other constraints, is there anything that can be done to make Bengali language easy reading for children?

There are a few issues that may be raised while we commemorate this day.

First, like all languages, Bengali is the creation of living speakers. Its forms are never fixed and it is perpetually changing. This raises a question: Is Bengali language uniform? A lawyer educated in Dhaka or in major cities and a farmer in an isolated village do not speak alike. Some use words and expressions that others never

not say nor say what one would not write. On the other hand, some argue that what is acceptable in conversation may be inappropriate in writing. The bottom line is does the elevation of literary diction too far above the speech of common people impede learning of Bengali?

Third, is the spelling of Bengali chaotic? What is about the state of Bengali grammar? Can they be simplified? There is a view that time has come for reforming spelling and basics of grammar so as to make them easy for Bengali learners. It is suggested that our experts may revisit the issue.

Fourth, of all issues to language, none appears to be more vigorously debated than Bengali (both spoken and written) of Bangladesh and that of West Bengal of India. Are Bangladeshi Bengali and West Bengal's Bengali one language or two? If it is one language, which one is the standard Bengali? I leave it for the experts to decide.

Finally, it is intriguing that we commemorate the day on the basis of Gregorian calendar (introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582). Twenty-first February of 1952 had a corresponding date and month of the Bengali year. There is a view that it will be appropriate that we commemorate the day by the Bengali calendar. However since the UNICEF adopted 21st February as the Language Day, it seems that we have now missed the

## Reminiscing Ekushey from afar

AH JAFFOR ULLAH

**W**HEREVER Bangalees live abroad, no matter whether it is in New York, Chicago, Toronto, or London, they will celebrate this year's Ekushey belatedly. Unfortunately, this year's Ekushey falls on weekdays. That means the celebration has to wait just 3-4 days before the weekend sets in. In some communities, they may even postpone the celebration for a month or so when they would lump two celebrations, i.e., Ekushey and the Independence Day. It hardly matters what the leaders of these overseas communities do, but the fact remains the same and that is there will be some sort of celebration in a community centre or in a church room reserved for these kinds of activities. There will be speeches and some cultural soiree to augment the verve of the festivity. This is all well. After all, the overseas Bangalees deserve to have a day of their own. The other holidays that come and go in the foreign land do not have any real meaning to expatriate communities. Therefore, it is not unusual to see Bangalees getting not overly excited over Eid reunion celebration or over Sarodjo Utshab centring Durga Puja as they do over Ekushey or Independence Day.

Ekushey celebration in a foreign land has some special significance. It is truly our celebration. In Eid-reunion or in Puja celebration one might encounter people from other parts of the world. But it is a different story when it comes to Ekushey celebration. Bangalees from both Bengals would come under one roof to pay homage to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives at the prime of their life for their mother tongue. What did happen in 1952 on this day is rare and there is no instance like that in human history. The erstwhile East Pakistan was in essence a colony of West Pakistan. The colonial ruler wanted to muzzle the voice of the majority living one thousand mile away, an idea that was simply preposterous and outrageous.

I think we have an obligation to our next generation. We should tell in clear terms to our kids that our journey to emancipate Bangalee people from the yoke of subjugation started in the early 1950s right after Pakistan was carved out from Indian subcontinent. Right after the passage of Lahore Resolution in 1940, which gave boost to the original idea of Chaudhuri Rahamat Ali, the

Cambridge don, for an independent nation for Muslims of India. At that time, some misguided Bangalee-Muslims thought to abolish our Bangla Dev Nagri alphabet because it looked too close to Sanskrit. These sycophant leaders also proposed that we should write Bangla sentences from right to left in Persian script or in Urdu. Thanks to late Dr Shahid Ullah of Calcutta University and others who also spoke negatively about this outrageous idea of Persianization of Bangla.

We also have to remind our next generation that Bangla was in sad shape under the aegis of Muslim League who ruled Pakistan from 1947 through 1954. During those days, our masters in Karachi looked upon it as a pariah language. Mr. M.A. Jinnah's Curzon Hall speech in the spring of 1948 was a watershed in the modern history of our region. Our uncles and grandfathers were all waiting for the catalyst. Mr. Jinnah died only few months after the infamous Curzon Hall speech and the rest was history. The next

three years were filled with speculations. What would happen to our mother tongue? Do we have to learn Urdu to become a full-fledged Pakistani? The grownups were terrified because there was this eerie feeling about the ominous prospect of our mother tongue. There were some heated debates mostly among students in the colleges and university. And then barely four

years after Mr. Jinnah delivered the ultimatum of Urdu to be the only state language of Pakistan all the unforeseen trouble reared their ugly heads in Dhaka. I remember very clearly that on that day my father came unexpectedly early from his office, the Secretariat at Segun Bagicha. He was both terrified and agitated. All the children of our locality at Tejgaon were asked to go indoors. When all these happened I was merely a 5 year old boy living just two and a half mile away from the epicentre of the trouble that is the front entrance of Dhaka Medical College.

Mind you, the status of Bangla Bhasha didn't change after the bloodshed of February 21, 1952. As I reflect the events of those days from afar, I am astounded why it took so long for our Punjabi masters to understand that Bangalees' demand was an equitable one.

I was a precocious boy still attending my primary school run by a Christian Missionary Organization

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Alpana paintings on streets also mark the occasion.

## Thinking about language

### The value of Bangla re-visited

SYED NAGEEB MUSTAFA ALI

**A**s another Ekushey February comes, I return to vivid images that I know my mind has shaped from pictures and stories of valiant students fighting to communicate in their own tongue, and being cruelly gunned down by Pakistan's forces. I was born twenty-five years after the language movement, and I know that my mind's eye cannot do justice to the suffering of our martyrs. What is unjust today is how we, as a country, are allowing Bangla to crumble. Whilst globally, February 21 may be the day we crusade for the preservation of mother languages, domestically, on every other day, one finds educated Bengalis championing English as a medium of instruction. Within Dhaka city, the numbers in O'levels have soared, and all for economic reasons with which I sympathize. But we must recognize that this is eroding the Bengali culture for which a generation was sacrificed.

It is said that to keep up with the 21st century, one must have an educated population in English to reap the benefits of computers, foreign labor earnings, so on and so forth. This is based on a normative assumption: the well-being of our people is ultimately more important than the preservation of Bangla. This assertion is not without logic. After all, one may ask how will Bangla be served if all those who can speak it are destitute? What I disagree with is the empirical argument that it is our education in Bangla that holds us back from sprinting into this millennium.

Think of language as a code. It provides a system through which we partition information and knowledge. Having cognitive bounds, human beings use this partition to understand and differentiate objects. Thus, incorporated within a language is a certain "evolutionary rationality" that corresponds to its use. For example, when we compare prices in stores, we have learned to use words such as "high" and "low" because it is only price levels that are relevant. I am yet to meet a person who classifies store prices as "arithmetically prime" and "arithmetically non-prime." Languages of a certain area evolve to reflect the experience of individuals who speak it; that the Inuit have many words for ice while Bangla cannot differentiate between snow and ice is thus unsurprising (I am uncertain what to make of my native tongue, Sylheti, having five words for a physical punch; in this regard, I would hope that we Sylhetis are truly all talk and no action). That language is a code does not demean language; rather, that it serves as a code heightens its splendor.

When people argue that we should shift to English medium instruction, it is being asserted that in today's economy, English serves as a better code than Bangla. Now, that may prove true for certain groups within the population, such as those who plan to go abroad, or work for multinational firms. But surely there exist bounds on this employment. For the population in the rural areas, English may in fact be a worse code than Bangla. Farmers

would be hard-pressed to express the six seasons in English; it would be difficult to partition our seasons into the four discrete categories (summer, autumn, winter and spring) that English speech necessitates. Nor, for example, does English permit us to partition pickles and vegetables (like squash) the way we do in Bangla. And this is simply the beginning. I'm sure over repeated generations, Bangla has evolved to have specific code for our agricultural "experience" that other languages lack. If language affects thought and communication, it surely has implications on economic activity and coordination. Thus, it would not serve a large group within our population to shift to English.

Even when it comes to simply adding to our citizens' repertoire of languages, there is some need for caution. The use of languages exhibits strong economies of concentration: not only is it easier to learn French in France, for example, but one's deep knowledge of Victor Hugo would be, alas, of little avail while working the tea gardens of Sylhet. Anywhere where we should like to teach a large population English must be conducive to allowing a large network of English speakers. Ipso facto, this restricts us to urban areas. Undoubtedly, teaching workers English

will decrease training and communication costs for multinational firms, and foster growth. Yet, that growth will, for the most part, remain restricted to the urban areas and widen the already enormous rural-urban gap. This rural-urban gap is like two lands separated by a wide deep cleft. The more we make one flourish, and keep the other barren, the more people will try to jump across. Some will make it but most will fall. And the soil under the garden of Dhaka city is already collapsing.

The real challenges we ultimately face are not in tongues, but in expanding our formal economy and enforcing legal rights; in developing both rural and urban areas, and providing between them secure bridges. Despite the horrid poverty, and the seeming chaos, we must keep faith in our nation and remember that it is young, but at the same time, we should remain aware of what it is that we must do. Teaching our population English may take us part of the way, but it certainly will not take us all the way through.

At the same time that we develop, we must protect our literature and the good within our values. Though we will not be for the worse if we shed our conservatism with women's rights, we would have lost something deeply valuable if we embraced a market capitalism that pays little heed to the poor. Similarly, our literature contains profound lessons for us, being that our language and culture have evolved to reflect our experiences. Oliver Twist, for all its beauty, has less to do with me than Tagore's "Home and the World" (Ghore Baire); where I need to search for connections with Oliver Twist, the conflict between nationalism and cosmopolitanism that marks Tagore's tale resonates within me. Along the same

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The Central Shahid Minar throbs with visitors.

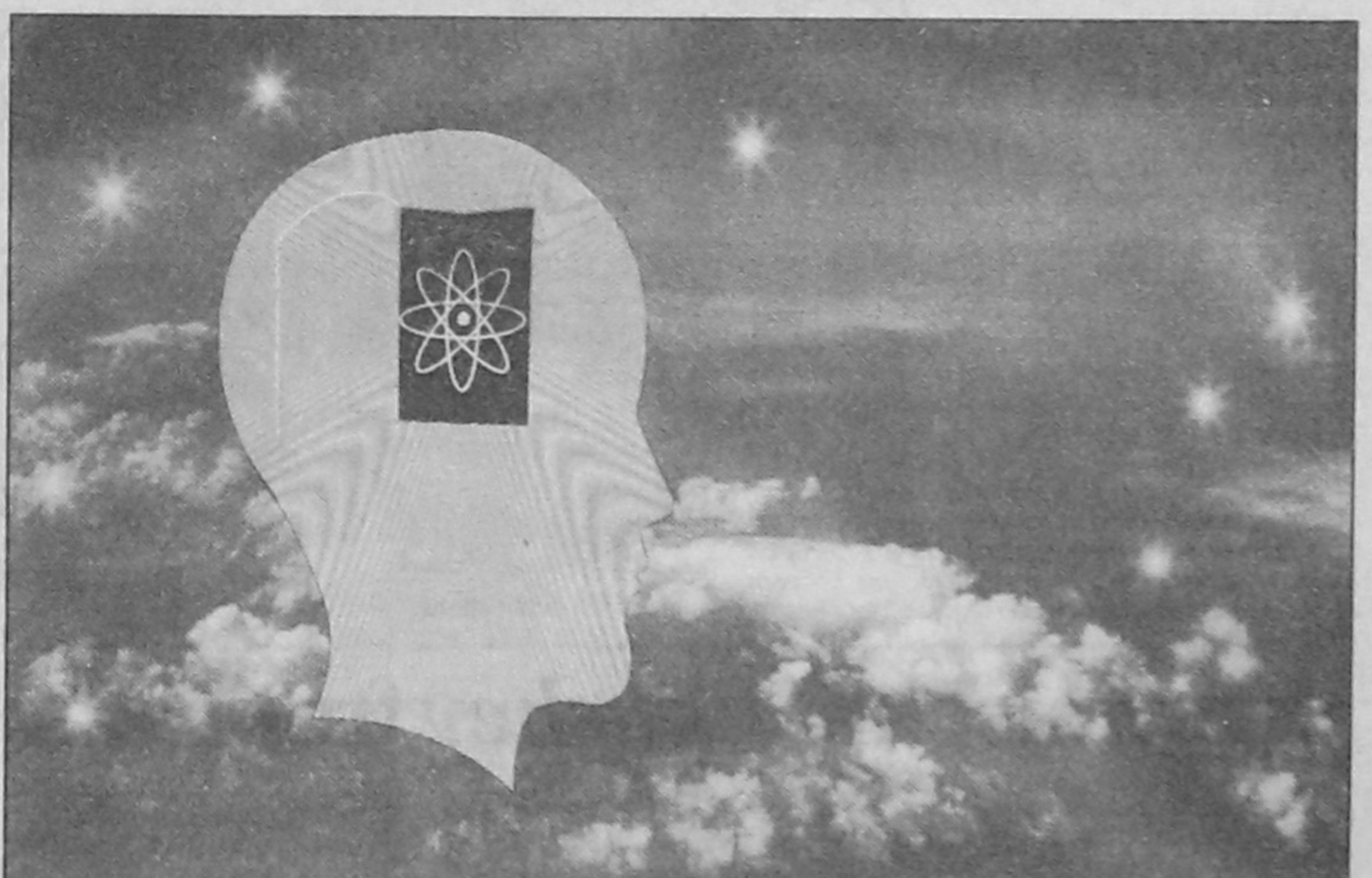
use. Does it mean that there exists a language of the poor and a language of the rich? It can be argued that language elevates some people above others and perpetuates the class barriers in the community.

Second, it appears that the standards for speaking and writing Bengali are different. Furthermore Bengali literature has acquired two written forms: one is the chaste or elegant Bengali (a bit Sanskritised) and the other is colloquial Bengali. A great literature has to be understood by the common people and not remain pedantic and difficult to understand.

Some believe that it is desirable to close the gap between the speech of books and that of life. It could be argued that one should neither write what one would

opportunity to do so. Twenty-first February is a day that provides opportunity to consider achievements and failures. The past makes sense only when it is seen in its own time. The challenges are specific: how Bengali language can be reached out quickly to those who cannot read and write. The issue for the day is whether it helps Bangladeshis confront the task of educating every one in the country. Our task remains unfinished like an unfinished symphony. We will be judged by our deeds and not by our words.

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