Looking beyond Boi Mela

Interview with Director, Bangla Academy

On an occasion like the Ekushey Bangla Academy becomes the focal point of attention. It is a symbol of our cultural identity and a centre to peg our literary and creative imagination. Established in 1955 it has over the years left its imprint in our intellectual firmament by holding seminars, publishing collected writings of our leading writers, poets and essayists and most importantly serving as a platform to the country's creative and intellectual growth. The academy also holds the book fair, Ekushey Boi Mela, every year the single most inspiring event for the country's publishing industry as well as for the writers when hundreds of new titles arrive at the fair within a span of three weeks. Selina Hussain, Director of Bangla Academy, and one of the foremost novelists of contemporary Bangla literature and winner of the prestigious Bangla Academy Purushker, speaks to Ziaul Karim of The Daily Star about the academy's different programmes, the spirit behind holding Ekushey Boi Mela and gives answer to some of the criticisms levelled on the academy's performances.

The Daily Star: There is a growing feeling among a section of the citizenry that an academy of letters like Bangla Academy should not waste its time and energy in holding a book fair which could be the responsibility of something like the Publishers' Guild or the Jatiya Grantha Kendra that deals particularly with the publishing industry and that the Academy should devote its time in promoting

the country's arts and culture. Selina Hussain: If you look at Boi Mela just as an annual event where people come and choose titles of their choice from the shelves will be a contrived idea of what the Boi Mela is all about. Bangla Academy is the result of a nation's dream it provides the writers and readers a unique

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The Ekushey Boi Mela

events and Ekushey February lectures. It is also an

expression of the nation's emotions associated

with and intellectual aspiration attached to lan-

guage movement. Naturally Bangla Academy

would be the symbolic space for the book fair to

be held. Holding the Boi Mela comes from the

academy's commitment to the society. The book

fair organised by Jatiya Grantha Kendra is com-

pletely different in nature and spirit than those

held professionally to create a bridge between

buyers and sellers. On the other hand at Ekushay

Boi Mela writers, readers, poets, artists, critics

congregate to celebrate our language and culture.

This mela is the centre of all our activities regard-

ing Ekushey celebrations. If the mela holds the

nation's cultural aspiration then the Academy is

writers, like playing the window to the arts and

literature of the world then it should be holding

international seminars, writers' conferences or

writers- in-residence programmes and the likes.

The only international conference that the acad-

emy ever held was in 1974. We don't want to see

Bangla Academy operate within narrow confines,

more so at a time when we are living in a global

engagements for our writers. Back to interna-

Ekushey February has been declared

International Mother Language Day by UNESCO.

workshops for young writers in the past. These

creative writing pogrammes organised by the

academy generated tremendous interest among

were fantastic forums for interaction between

SH: You are right. Yes, Bangla Academy should

atmosphere.

DS: If the academy aims at interaction between

the symbolic embodiment of that aspiration.

SH: In our young writers' programme budding writers and poets were given opportunity to prepare their manuscripts under the guidance of renowned writers and these were published by the academy at a later period. Again budget became the villain to close down the programme. I agree with you that these programmes are vital in initiating interaction between writers.

DS: You must be aware that UPL has recently published an international journal on arts and letters to give our writings a global exposure. The Academy has failed on that account. Don't you use.

to achieve cultural and linguistic freedom and the yearly journal, Bangla Academy Journal, almost number of books translated over the years is simply book fair upholds that spirit. It is more than a fair, since its inception which is now suspended due to lack of editorial hands. But I must say that we opportunity to interact in the backdrop of cultural failed to achieve the international standard that



Selina Hussain

tional exposure these efforts are of basically no

DS: The Academy has, so far I know, a transla-SH: The Academy has been publishing a half- tion wing, but if one looks at the catalogue the appalling -- there is nothing that can represent our art and culture; works that are being translated from world literature into Bangla are also negligible in volumetric analysis.Look at Shahitya Academy, Delhi, almost all the great writings in the Indian regional languages have been translated into English under its initiative.

SH: We did take translation work seriously and you might remember we translated quite a lot from classical literature.

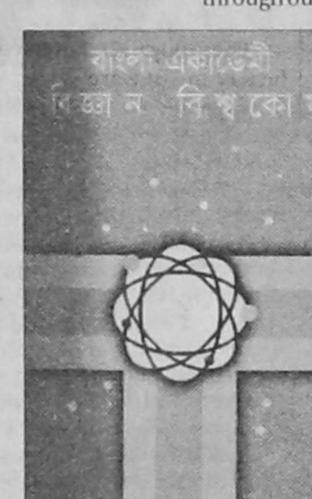
DS: Do you think that is enough compared to the number of titles published every year?

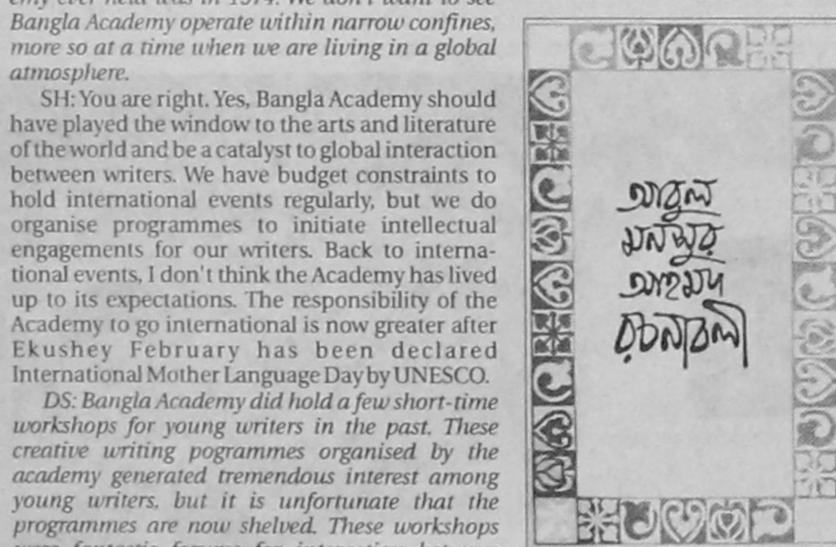
SH: Certainly not. We have started translating from contemporary Bengali literature in a very huble way, but I must tell you that we have decided to take translation seriously. There is also lack of good translators and scholars don't show much interest in translation.

DS: Most of the titles published from Bangla Academy are text book references. What we would like to know from you is, should a research institute and an academy of letters concentrate on publish ing references to such a large scale? But mos importantly where are the research works that we expect from the Academy?

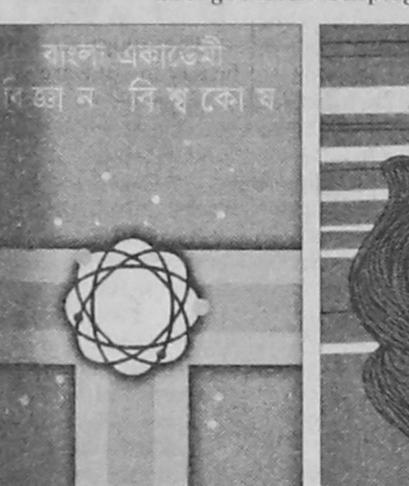
SH: We have a dictionary cell which is active in compiling and preparing different types of dictio naries. Compiling dictionaries demand a lot of research in different areas. The dictionaries that are being published from the Academy are in great demand. We are working on science encyclopedia project now with two volumes already out and the third one is in the works. We have projects through which we are regularly publishing research works on our freedom struggle. We are also regularly publishing PhD theses done by research scholars of the different universities through our research programme.



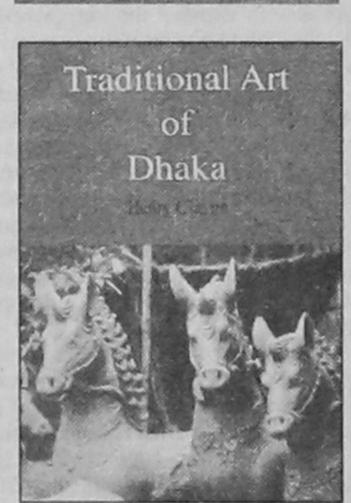




Some of the publications







Looking back at February 21

DR MAJOR MUHAMMAD MAHFUZ HUSAIN, RETD.

HE veterans of the historic language movement and people of Bangladesh expressed their happiness and satisfaction over the UNESCO decision to observe the 21st February as "International Mother Language Day" all over the world. By this UNESCO proclamation, the martyrs of our language movement have received the international recognition of their sacrifice for Bengali as a state language in the then Pakistan.

The action on the peaceful language movement processionists by the armed law enforcing personnel on 21 February 1952 was not an isolated event, rather it had links with all previous movements for language. This movement started when M A Jinnah declared at Ramna Race Course (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in March 1948 that only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. He was addressing a big public meeting of about half a million people. I was sitting with my student friends at a distance of about 50 metres from the stage. The moment Jinnah uttered those words we, the students present there, resented, stood up and shouted 'no, no'. We came out in a procession and shouting, "Rastra bhasa Bangla chai" (we demand Bengali as our

state language movement became a national issue for people of the then East Pakistan and we held frequent meetings and processions with banners proclaiming our legitimate demand. We were always intercepted by law enforcing personnel wielding bamboo sticks and

lobbing tear gas shells. In May 1948 we the students of Government Dhaka Intermediate College came out in a procession to attend a meeting in support of Bangla language at the premises of Fazlul Haque Muslim Hall of Dhaka University. Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque addressed that meeting and at the end of his address he said that he had 200 Nazim Uddins in his pockets (Khawaja Nazim Uddin was then Chief Minister of East Pakistan). We reciprocated his inspiring speech with thunderous applause and came out in a procession in the street to express our legitimate demand for Bangla as

state language. In February 1949 when I was a first-year student of Dhaka Medical College we came out in a procession to attend a meeting at the Dhaka Hall (now Shahid Ullah Hall) premises of Dhaka University. At that meeting Farid Ahmed, a lecturer in English of Government Dhaka Intermediate College, declared his resignation from government service and extended his full support to the students for realisation of Bangla as a state language. After a short speech he led our procession on that day. We started from there and proceeded towards Provincial Secretariat through Abdul Ghani Road where we met Minister Hasan Ali from Dinajpur who also extended his full support to our legitimate demand. We came out from there and entered the residence of Syed Mohammad Afzal, Minister for Lands. He, too, supported our legitimate demand. We then entered into the residence of Minister Nurul Amin, who also

we passed through Kakrail and reached Minto Road where we met Hamidul Haque Chowdhury, Minister for Finance and Habib Ullah Bahar, Minister for Health, at their residences and they promised to take up the matter with Central Government in Karachi. We passed through Shahbagh Avenue and entered into Burdwan House, the official residence of Chief Minister Khawaja Nazim Uddin (now Burdwan House is our Bangla Academy). He was not present at his residence and we handed over our memorandum to his private secreHall area and dispersed. Later on we found that all those Ministers gave us false promises just to avoid further agitation.

Then onwards many more processions were brought out by students in Dhaka city and every time we were intercepted by the police. In those days, in the processions, came in contact with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Enayet Karim, Munier Chowdhury, Sarder Fazlul Karim, Oli Ahad and others, Ataur Rahman Khan, Mohammad Sultan, Gaziul Haque and many others were actively associated with this mother language movements. Ataur Rahman Khan and a group of advocates looked after cases of arrested students without remuneration. remember an Urdu speaking profes-

tary. From there we reached Curzon third man we received was Salam who sustained bullet injury in his left upper abdomen. He was operated upon by Professor Novak of Clinical Surgery. Splenectomy was performed but he died after a month from gangrene developed of his abdominal wound. Rafiq was not a student and was about 22-23 years old. Abul Barkat was an MA student of Dhaka University and was about 23-24 years old. Salam also was not a student and was about 24 years old. After sunset the students of Dhaka Medical College hostel decided to construct a monument (Shahid Minar) in the same place where all those three young men were killed/severely injured by bullets. The location was between room No 6 of barrack No 12 and Eastern gate of the hostel. The Shahid Minar was

armed police. They fired tear gas shells and bullets. In that police action Shafiqur Rahman, a clerk of Dhaka High Court was killed. I saw his body in the morgue of Dhaka Medical College. He was a fair complexioned stout built young man of 27-28 years. When he was killed his wife was about to give birth to their first child. After completion of Shahid

Minar on 23 February 1952 in the early morning, hundreds of people were visiting it to pay respect to the martyrs. They donated money to the mother language committee placing coins and currency notes on the base of the monument. A young lady removed the necklace from her neck and placed it on the base with tears in her eyes. This was a unique example of expressing feelings for the

Army was deployed in Dhaka city since the incidence of firing on February 21 and they were patrolling the streets. A curfew was imposed from 8 pm to 5 am from evening of February 21. Army fired on a peaceful procession of school boys in Bangshal-Nawabpur junction on February 22, 1952 at noon. Shafi Ullah a school boy aged about 10-12 years was killed. I saw his body in the morgue of Dhaka Medical College. In the upper pocket I of his shirt there was a sketch of butterfly drawn by him. So loving he was! It may be mentioned that Jabber was killed by bullet on February 21, 1952 and was picket up by police. I did not see his body.

Radio Dhaka was functioning with recorded songs only, since the firing on February 21, by non-Bangalee employees. We wanted to stop that programme. We made a squad of 8-10 students of our hostel to implement the scheme. I was one of them. We left our hostel at about 4 am on February 23 during curfew hours one after another on bicycles maintaining sufficient gap so that patrolling military personnel could not see us. We passed by the side of Dhaka University Medical Centre along Mymensingh Road and reached Farmgate in Tejgaon. Then we passed through Government agriculture farm (now Sher-e-Bangla Nagar) and reached Mirpur road near today's Asad Gate. We placed our bicycles on the road to obstruct the incoming transport carrying engineering staff for opening the radio transmitter in Mirpur. They reached within half an hour.

We stopped their transport and asked them to go back but they resisted. We attempted to puncture the tyres and they quickly drove towards Dhaka city. We waited for an hour after their schedule time. The employees of all offices in Dhaka city observed strike on that day and administration of the government

was completely paralysed. On February 24 in the early morning police in groups raided different barracks of Dhaka Medical College students hostel and arrested many students. I was performing ablution for morning prayers. Luckily, they ignored me thinking that I was a 'pious' student not involved in the state language move-

On February 26 in the afternoon sonnel came the Shahid Minar and demolished it. The brutal action of that government provided an opportunity to observe Shahid Day by our people every year. The opposition political parties United Front defeated that anti-people government in the next general election in 1954 by a huge margin. The United Front formed government in then East Pakistan under the leadership of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque and declared Bengali as official language of East Pakistan. They also ordered for construction of Shahid



The first Shahid Minar erected on Feb 22-23, 1952 by DMC students

sor, Dr Mahmud Hussain of History Department of Dhaka University while speaking in a meeting at Dhaka Bar Library supported our legitimate demand.

In those days Dhaka Medical College Students Hostel was the centre of all student movements in Dhaka city as it was near the provincial Assembly Hall (Jagannath Hall auditorium of Dhaka University was renovated as East Pakistan Assembly Hall). I lived in room No 2, of barrack No. 13, of students hostel. Our immortal martyrs monument (Shaheed Minar is situated in that On 21 February 1952, from

morning the students were assembling on road sides and inside the hostel to lead a procession towards the Assembly Hall. The armed police took their positions to stop the demonstrators. I was on duty in the Emergency room from 2 pm to 8 pm. In those days the Emergency block was located in the present Director's administrative block. In the afternoon at about 4 pm the students wanted to proceed towards the Assembly Hall but the armed police stopped them and opened fired, resulting in a few casualties. Some students came running to get some stretchers to bring in the injured

First, we received the deadbody of Rafiq. A bullet had pierced h is forehead and skull. Next was Abul Barkat with bullet injury in left groin. It bled profusely his from left femoral blood vessels. He was operated upon by Major Alinson FRCS a British Professor of Surgery. His left lower limb was amputated. He was given few bottles of blood but succumbed to the severe injury. The

Remembering the martyrs

is folly indeed.

it was one and a half feet high. From that platform a column of about four square feet at base erected up gradually narrowing to about two square feet at the top. The height of the Shahid Minar was about 14-15 feet. This which was constructed by the students of Dhaka Medical College themselves with the help of some labourers. Some student leaders were actively associated with the construction. They were Golam Mowla, vice-president and Abul Hashem, general secretary of the Students' Union. Some more student leaders namely Sharf Uddin Ahmed, ex-general secretary, Muhammed Zahed, Abdul Alim Chowdhury, Ahmed Rafiq and many truckloads of police and army perothers actively participated. From morning, on 22 February 1952, hundreds of men and women started visiting the blood stained site. Students of all schools, colleges and Dhaka University observed

completed overnight (between 22

February and 23 February 1952 with

bricks, sand and cement which were

available in the nearby area as some

going on. The Minar had a platform

measuring about six square feet and

construction of the hospital was

strike in Dhaka city. The Bangalee employees from different offices came out in processions and visited the site of killings. Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, Editor of the daily Azad, and many other leaders visited the site and paid their respect to the martyrs. Gaibana Janaza was conducted. After the mass prayer a procession started from there towards the provincial secretariat. When the procession reached near the gate of old High Court the processionists were attacked by

Minar in the same place but with more space. Shahid Dibosh and Shahid Minar inspired our people in all political movements including our Liberation War which ultimately gave birth to an independent "People's Republic of Bangladesh"

Reminiscing Ekushey from afar

young and established writers.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5 near Farmgate, Dhaka. A year after the shooting down of students of Dhaka University and some unfortunate Rickshawallas, the situation was still tense all over the town. Tejgaon's Farmgate area was then a sleepy northern suburb of Dhaka. The centre of protest activity in our area was Tejgaon Polytechnic High School. The rumour had been that before a week of February 21, 1953, some college students came to the school ground with some pamphlets. They distributed those to the senior students and asked them not to attend the classes on the anniversary date. In that year, our parents also thought that it would not be a good idea to send the kids to school. February weather was well suited for outdoor activities. As such, we didn't mind boycotting the schools. Our house was not too far from the main roadthe Old Airport Road (used to be called Mymensingh Road in those days). The traffic was virtually nil. No buses went to thoroughly disgusted over the way Mohakhali, Kurmitola, Tongi, or Mirzapure-Tangail on that day. Later, we heard through the grapevine that boys from neighbouring Polytechnic school staged a very successful strike by barricading the main thoroughfare near Holy Cross College. The narrow road hugging the Holy Cross College was the only main road all through the 1950s. Only in 1961 when Queen Elizabeth

the very first time, that the government decided to built the four-lane road, which is the main road passing through the Farmgate area noIn 1954, Pakistani government still did not recognize Bangla as one of the some college students came to were handing out these materials to older boys. Just as the previous year, a successful strike was launched. The main road was virtually empty. I remember we went there just to sit in the middle of the road for the heck of it. That was symbolically our protest from the halcyon days of our youth. I saw the older boys would occasionally deflate the tires of

By this time, the Bangalees were Dhaka. some Muslim League leaders of East Pakistan were behaving and selling out the interest of our province. The first opportunity to oust these sycophants came in 1954. There was an adult suffrage in that year. And guess what? The Muslims League politicians were roundly defeated by

bicycles or rickshaws. It was the

thrill of our life in those days.

were no words from Karachi as to whether Bangla would be consid-

commemorated its third year annistate languages. Therefore, high versary. By now, we have grown a school and college students all over little older. We could venture out to vance of Bhasha Andolon Dibas, the East Pakistan were furious by now. the main road to see if there is any Again, we heard from older boys that action going on over there. The road would be literally deserted. The There was an anguished feeling Tejgaon Polytechnic school with sleepy little suburb of Tejgaon some leaflets and black badges and looked like a ghost town. Occasionally, one could hear the rebellious yell "Rashtro Bhasha the death anniversary of the mar-Bangla Chai." One of our great pastimes in those days was to hand out to an adult a tiny black piece of cloth so that they could attach those to their shirt sleeve to show solidarour province. Because of Juktafront government in power, in that year, It is also heartening to know that we saw a little bit of relaxation in kids could attend Ekushe Boi Mela police activity on the main roads of in Bangla Academy's compound in

Andolon were great days for us, the day's events with those of the early kids. We were too little to understand the intricacies of politics of different picture. My generation subjugation. However, the sad face and our parents have sacrificed a lot of our parents and acquaintances for Bangla Bhasha. Some of them would remind us that something are no longer alive to see the fruit of was terribly wrong in our homeland. By the time it was 1956 and 1957, we me immense pleasure now to see all the politicians belonging to a loose began to understand the signifiunion of opposition politicians who cance of the tumultuous event of because a few brave souls had conwere more sympathetic to the February 21, 1952. By this time, the fronted the government head on to writes from New Orleans

Probhatferi, arranging walking tours *of some powerful Muslim League to Azimpur cemetery to lay flowers ered one of the state languages of next to Shahid Salam and Barakat's graves. Come to think of it, those In 1955, the Bhasha Andolon day two names introduced to us the significance of the word Shahid.

In the early days of the obserentire Bangalee nation would go through a period of mourning. about the killings of students and Rickshawallas. These days, there is a mix of jubilation in commemorating tyrs. I quite do not know what goes through the mind of our young generation as they celebrate this day. They must be proud to know me. He then played the Kavi Guru's that in the year 2000 the UN had ity for the Language Movement of declared this day to be observed as amplified speaker to give me the the Universal Mother Language Day. Dhaka. This is really spectacular. Those early years of our Bhasha Nevertheless, when I juxtapose the days of Ekushe in 1950s, I see a very their sacrifice. But it certainly gives

Il decided to visit East Pakistan for Rashtro Bhasha Andolon. Still there schools were organizing protest the step-motherly attitude politicians from Punjab, Sindh, and NWFP who thought Bangla was not good enough of a language to be considered as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

Now that I live far away from the land of Bangla language, I understand the sweetness of the sound of my mother tongue. It is simply a pleasure for me to hear sweet sound of Bangla words. The Internet has come to feel the gap, though. The other day, my eldest son Rashad, who was born in America, logged onto a music site call Napster. He downloaded the digitized voice of poet Rabindranath without telling recitation through the external thrill of my life. Hearing Rabindranath's voice in a distant foreign land is quite something! now long to hear the recitation of Jibanananda Das's poem from Ruposhi Bangla or even some exotic poems of Bishnu Dey could titillate 2001, I will open a Bangla book of poem and read few lines from selected pages. On that day, I will promise not to utter any foreign words. Would it be good enough for me to atone my soul?

A H Jaffor Ullah, a senior research scientist,

Thinking about language The value of Bangla re-visited **CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5**

vein, when Syed Mujtaba Ali writes of one of his teachers (quite the character in his own right) who is paid Rs. 25 my mind. May be on February 21, whilst Rs. 75 is spent on his English superintendant's taken our world hostage. Literature echoes our reality; it is a tool for us to see our lives and ourselves. To neglect it Sorrow, Tagore had penned the following lines:

> This is not to argue that our population should not be exposed to the sea of foreign literature; there are many charms and pearls to be found therein. Yet, this is not immediate on our priority list. Few can fill their minds and hearts with literature while walking stilted with

stomachs burning of hunger.

The Bangla language captured the minds of Bengali youths nearly half a century ago, and instilled in them the passion with which they fought to preserve it. If we do dog, we can see that that same grotesque inequality has not protect Bangla today, it is their memories that we offend and our lives that will suffer. In Ungrateful

> "From the depth of darkness punctuated by scattered stars/came a rebuke: 'when Het you grasp me you call it a deception,/and yet when I remain concealed,/why do you hold on to your faith in me with such conviction?"

Let us not be rebuked by Bangla.

Syed Nageeb Mustafa Ali writes from Boston.