

Amar Ekushey

Live up to its spirit

EKUSHEY defines the one shining moment in our history when the nation stood firm in the face of an aggression by the colonial rulers against its most prized possession -- language. It shaped the social and political events that followed so decisively that Ekushey has rightly been termed a turning point in the history of our movement for a separate cultural and linguistic identity, which culminated in the movement for an independent Bangladesh. We remember today the martyrs of the Language Movement with a deep sense of indebtedness and great respect. They taught us that a nation must always be ready to pay a price for self-assertion.

Those who sacrificed their lives for the dignity of our language demonstrated that a self-respecting nation could never bow down to the pressure that the colonial rulers exerted through deciding to ignore the language of the majority. That was the first step on the part of the Bangla-speaking majority population of the then East Pakistan to assert themselves for a just cause. It was a victory for truth and justice.

The Language Movement also created the intellectual platform to be used as the springboard for all progressive movements in the fifties and the sixties. It was the source of inspiration to the people up against the might of a repressive regime that cared little for the sentiments of the majority.

Fifty-two years on, it is time for the nation to go for some soul-searching on the day. Have we really been able to live up to the spirit of Ekushey? Have the dreams of the martyrs been fulfilled? The sad truth is that many of our goals have not been attained. We have failed to pay due homage to the martyrs by upholding the ideals that they died for. Our progress in the education sector has not been satisfactory, a fact made clear by the slow progress in pushing up the literacy rate, and Bangla is still neglected in many areas of our national life.

The international community has recognised the importance of the event by declaring February 21 International Mother Language Day. Thus the glorious saga of sacrifice now finds its due place in the world at large -- beyond our frontiers. Let's vow to live up to the spirit.

Toxic leak in Anwara

Environmental safety must be prioritised

It is gratifying to note that the authorities are taking swift action with respect to the toxic leak from a fertiliser factory that poisoned a canal and killed nearly 100 head of cattle earlier this week in Anwara upazila in Chittagong.

The Department of Environment demonstrated admirable alertness in promptly serving a show cause notice on the polluter CUFL, and it appears that CUFL will be celled to account for the incident.

For its part, CUFL, while denying negligence, has pledged to compensate the owners of the poisoned cattle for their losses.

So far so good. However, filing show cause notices and pledging reimbursement cannot be the end of the matter. It is imperative that the DoE follow up on its initial indictment, and ensure that the matter not be swept under the carpet and that CUFL not be let off the hook if determined to be negligent.

By the same token, it is imperative that the government follow up to see that CUFL's pledge of reimbursement is fulfilled, and that the farmers whose cattle were poisoned really do receive the full measure of the compensation due to them in a timely manner.

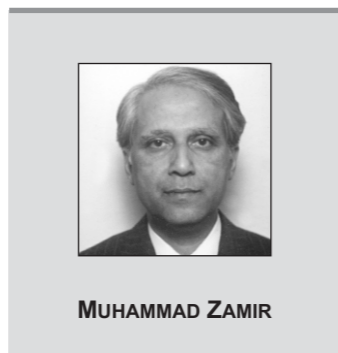
It is all very well to initiate legal proceedings and make offers of recompense, but it is quite another thing to see such measures through to the bitter end.

More important, however, is an inquiry into how such a toxic leak occurred in the first place and the imposition of preventative measures to ensure that such things do not happen in the future. It is high time that we gave environmental safety the priority that it warrants.

The nation has seen rapid industrial growth in recent years and we would be the first to concede the benefits of such advancement to the economy. However, while we do not wish to choke industrial growth or regulate industry out of existence, it is crucial that we acknowledge that environmental safety must go hand in hand with such advancement. There is nothing to be gained by permitting an industrial regimen that pollutes the environment and the atmosphere with impunity and without penalty.

Let us hope that this regrettable incident in Anwara will result in a renewed commitment to environmental protection. After all, next time it might not just be cattle who are poisoned by toxic waste.

The ethos of Ekushey February



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

AT 3.10 pm on 21 February, 1952, the streets near the Medical College Barracks in Dhaka were drenched with the blood of students protesting arbitrary imposition of what was unjust and wrong. As most of us know, the police opened fire without warning on peaceful, unarmed groups of students on the orders of District Magistrate Qureishi. They were defying the imposition of Section 144. Two students of Dhaka University, Abdul Jabbar and Rafiquddin died on the spot. Two others passed away late in the evening the same night -- Abul Barkat, another student and Abdus Salam an employee of a printing company located in Badamtoli. Both died in the operation theatre. Ninety-six others received bullet injuries. The next day, further protests led to the death of an employee of the Dhaka High Court and Shafiur Rahman, a student of the Law Faculty of Dhaka University. They died when police opened fire in Nawabpur in Dhaka.

Since then, Ekushey February has continued to evoke powerful emotions in the hearts of all Bangla speaking people throughout the world. The core values that this day represents transcends geographical boundaries. It has since become a symbol of the strength that can be generated through people's unity. It is today a source of inspiration that helps us to identify what is right and what is wrong. It reminds us of justice and our conscience.

Amar Ekushey was the first serious step taken by us our quest during the darkest days of disarray, we have sought and received understanding and unity in its ethos. It is a special day whose character has now received international recognition. On 17 November, 1999, the UNESCO General Conference unanimously adopted a resolution tabled by Bangladesh proclaiming Shaheed Dibosh as the International Mother Language Day. Such an international acceptance can only be interpreted as a suitable tribute not only to those who decided to protest against injustice on that day, more than five decades ago, but also for the entire Bangla speaking population, wherever they might live in the world. This was an important victory not only for Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government but also for those who believed in the preservation of linguistic pluralism and multilingual education.

Language, as most of us know creates its own denotations and connotations -- some of it literary and cultural and others political. There were consequently several sensitivities associated with

Bangladesh's efforts (in Paris and various cities in Canada and the USA), based on the principle that there was need to create greater awareness for the protection and preservation of fast-disappearing mother languages of the world.' It was a difficult journey that succeeded because of understanding and goodwill.

Koichiro Matsuura, the Director General of UNESCO, in a message issued last year on this day, explained that all countries should

celebrate the international Mother Language Day by promoting development and teaching of respective Mother Languages. This was a significant suggestion. Languages are tools of communication. They are the ultimate expressions of human creativity. They also provide a link between the past, present and the future. Their evolution most often reflects the enrichment that has taken place through cross-mixture with other languages and cultures.

It is heartening to note that observance of this Day is slowly gaining momentum. Several countries in Europe, Africa and Mexico have taken steps to highlight the indigenous content of their culture on this Day. They have underlined through these measures that languages are an integral part of humanity's intangible heritage.

In Bangladesh, we cannot just sit back and bask in the glory of international acclaim. We now have many additional responsibilities and we should approach these with great seriousness. We have to actively participate in the preservation and evolution. There should also be a Department in this Institute responsible for exhibiting not only specimen but also information on those dead languages that played a special role in the progress of world civilization. It should be able to carry out research about the influence of other languages on Bangla. The Institute, in cooperation with other international cultural institutes should be able to organise cultural programme in different languages. The Institute should also take the lead to recognise the contribution made by eminent litterateurs in different languages.

Achieving these objectives will take time and also financial resources. I am confident however that with careful planning, these aims can be accomplished. I shall now turn to Bangla and its usage within Bangladesh. The first question that faces all of us is whether we are doing enough to impart appreciation of this language within the socio-political fibre of our country. That is the litmus test. Yes, every Ekushey we go through the rituals. We place flowers on different

monuments and Minars. We walk bare feet to the Central Shaheed Minar. We sing particular songs associated with this day. Then what? The flowers wither and with that in most cases the enthusiasm to practice Bangla in different walks on our lives.

Partially, the reason for this is in the globalisation of culture and commerce. Article 3 of our Constitution recognises Bangla as the state language of the Republic. Act II of 1987 with its inadequacies

also lends some support to the use of Bangla in the official domain. Such stipulations have however gradually given way to the growing supremacy of English as a common international language.

A recent survey has indicated that nearly 55 per cent of all international communication (by e-mail or post) is carried out in English and over 74 per cent of all research papers are in English. In addition, the vast majority of foreign donors, funding agencies, bankers and consultants recommend use of English for all varieties of legal conveyances and documents. It has now become the main medium of expression. It is also the mother language of at least 450 million people (including the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the many islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific). It is also claimed by various surveys that nearly the same figure speak English in different countries all over the world.

This preponderance is obviously creating its own dynamics particularly in the urban areas in Bangladesh. Worrisome aspects

are emerging out of this equation. English medium of instruction in most cases is becoming the preferred choice if family resources so permit. In this system, students are ending up with only rudimentary Bangla. A different class is being created within the social structure. They are only superficially aware of their rich indigenous literary and cultural heritage.

Something needs to be done about this. The Government in its wisdom should continue to encourage the learning of English in every stage of the educational process. At the same time, they should also try to evolve ways and means by which Bengali cultural elements -- folk-lore and literature -- can be easily understood both by Bangla speaking children and those desiring to learn Bangla. In this context it might also be useful to simplify Bangla spelling and grammar. This will facilitate the spread of this language and its acceptance in other areas of the world.

The Bangla Academy should also undertake a serious review and prepare a plan of action on how to keep Bangla alive among the children of expatriate Bangladeshis living in non-English speaking countries of Europe and the Middle East and also in English language speaking areas like the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK. If these children lose Bangla as part of their lives, we have lost many future Ambassadors of our unique Bengali ethos. We will be that much poorer. The universality of the language and the advantages of it being a symbol of the International Mother Language Day would be that much less.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

POST BREAKFAST

The government should try to evolve ways and means by which Bengali cultural elements -- folk-lore and literature -- can be easily understood both by Bangla speaking children and those desiring to learn Bangla. In this context it might also be useful to simplify Bangla spelling and grammar. This will facilitate the spread of this language and its acceptance in other areas of the world...The Bangla Academy should also undertake a serious review and prepare a plan of action on how to keep Bangla alive among the children of expatriate Bangladeshis.

The ghost of David Kelley continues to haunt

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

THE haunting started, as readers are undoubtedly aware, with the apparent suicide of the British Ministry of Defence scientist who was the principal source of information for BBC Radio 4 reporter Andrew Gilligan's controversial despatch on the government's "sexed up" dossier on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Well, by now we all know the hollowness of the claims of both the Whitehouse and the Whitehall regarding the so-called WMD. Let's consider just a couple of brief quotes from that much-hyped September 2002 dossier the British government produced and published before taking the final decision to go to war: "Iraq possesses extended-range versions of Scud missiles.... capable of reaching Cyprus, Eastern Turkey, Tehran and Israel. It is also developing longer-range missiles....Iraq's military forces are able to use chemical and biological weapons. They are able to deploy these within 45 minutes of a decision to do so." And the British Prime Minister in the foreword of the dossier: "Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological weapons. His planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes."

There was a Parliamentary debate on the dossier on March 18 last year following which the British Government decided unequivocally to join forces with the United States in taking military action against Saddam Hussein, which both sides described as pre-emptive strike. Now consider Mr Tony Blair's admission during the Commons debate of February 4 on the Hutton Inquiry -- barely a week after the Commission's report absolved him and Downing Street of any wrongdoing in the David Kelley affair -- that he did not know the claim that Iraq could deploy WMD within 45 minutes referred only to short-range battlefield arms. "I have already indicated exactly when this came to my attention," he said: "It was not

before the debate on March 18 last year." As a result of that debate, MPs voted in favour of war and on March 20 British and American troops invaded Iraq. So what Mr Blair was now saying is that on the eve of the war he did not know that the so-called weapons of mass destruction were no more than battlefield weapons of short-range deployability. The Tory leader Michael Howard lost no time in seizing upon Mr Blair's remark, accusing him of a "serious dereliction of duty" over the war in Iraq as he had deliberately chosen not to ask the "simple and obvious question" to establish exactly what kind of weapons were referred to in the Government dossier on Saddam Hussein's arsenal. "If I

learnt from the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee who must have, at some point between the publication of the September 2002 dossier and the March 2003 debate, explained to the Prime Minister the "crucial distinction" between battlefield weapons and so-called WMDs. Using language that came as close as Parliamentary rules allow to calling Mr Blair a liar, Mr Cook -- who resigned as Commons Leader over the Iraq war -- said: "I find it very difficult to reconcile what I knew and what I am sure the Prime Minister knew at the time we had the vote in March."

The Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, on the other hand, contradicted himself more than once. Asked by the Commons Defence

away on a government trip to Eastern Europe. He also caused widespread astonishment by saying that as far as he was concerned "the question of what kind of weapons system could deliver weapons of mass destruction was not something of any great debate publicly in September 2002."

But a veteran Labour MP and prominent anti-war activist has come up with a more direct attack accusing the Prime Minister of misleading the Commons, a Parliamentary offence of the gravest nature. Not mincing words, he has said: "I fear the awful truth is that Blair did jolly well know on March 18 that any weapons of mass destruction were battlefield weapons -- and suppressed the

believed expertise in legal matters. Lord Hutton does not quite understand the purport of the laws concerning the media. His report has not done his own reputation much good, and although it has earned the Prime Minister a temporary reprieve it has failed to ensure that he is comfortably out of the woods. The ghost of Dr David Kelley is still out haunting, and a really strong dose of exorcism will be needed to put his tormented soul to rest.

Tougher anti-terror laws
BRITISH Home Secretary David Blunkett's proposal for a major extension of the existing anti-terrorist legislation in order to

before the act is committed. "We have to have prevention under a new category," said Mr Blunkett: "which is to intervene before the act is committed, rather than do so by due process of after the act is committed when it is too late."

But representatives of ethnic minority communities have reacted angrily to the Home Secretary's remarks. A spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain said: "The (proposed) new laws are draconian and a total over-reaction -- all they will do is instil fear into the Muslim community. There is already a considerable amount of fear and disquiet in the Muslim community about existing legislation.... Why when there has been no attacks of any form here, are these laws being rushed in?" A lawyer who represents a British terror suspect currently in detention in Camp Zero at Guantanamo Bay said that Mr Blunkett's attitude was "extremely disappointing" for those who were fighting unlawful detention by the US. Another senior lawyer has been even more scathing in her condemnation of the Home Secretary's proposals: "It is as if David Blunkett takes his lessons on jurisprudence from Robert Mugabe," said Baroness Kennedy: "He really is a shameless authoritarian.... It really is an affront to the rule of law."

The Home Secretary, however, is unrelenting. He is determined to extend the scope of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 so that prosecutors can take action against suspected British extremists even though the evidence may not be strong enough to win a conviction under existing laws. This may mean lowering the burden of proof in such cases from "beyond reasonable doubt" to "the balance of probabilities". Mr Blunkett says he will welcome a nationwide debate on that issue: "It is about the threshold of evidence and the nature of those involved being accredited and trusted not to reveal the sources."

LONDON LETTER

Lord Hutton's report failed to take into account and sort out the contradictions in the statements of both the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary. But although his report vindicates Mr Blair and directly criticises the BBC for falling short of the editorial responsibility expected of it, I cannot agree more with the Corporation's erstwhile Director General Greg Dyke that despite his widely believed expertise in legal matters, Lord Hutton does not quite understand the purport of the laws concerning the media... The ghost of Dr David Kelley is still out haunting, and a really strong dose of exorcism will be needed to put his tormented soul to rest.

were Prime Minister and had failed to ask this basic question," he added: "I would seriously be considering my position." However, although Mr Howard's claim that the Prime Minister's admission provided ample grounds for demanding his resignation may sound like political rhetoric, the words of the former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon also raise new question marks over Mr Blair's claim to have been unaware of the true nature of Iraqi weapons when the Commons voted for war last year. Mr Cook told the Commons that he was "surprised" by Mr Blair's claim of ignorance of the nature of the weapons. He asserted that he had known the facts early last March and he had told Mr Blair what he had

Committee to explain how he knew the truth about the 45-minute claim while Mr Blair did not, he replied: "We both had access to the same intelligence." Then last summer he told the Hutton Inquiry that he had read newspaper headlines reporting the 45-minute warning the day after the Iraq dossier was published. But on the day after the Commons debate on February 4 this year he claimed that he had not seen any newspaper reports on the dossier, released on September 25, 2002. Asked about the front-page headline "45 MINUTES FROM DOOM" in the next morning's edition of a popular tabloid he said: "I did not actually see that newspaper or indeed any other newspaper referring to that issue at the time," claiming he had been

information from the House of Commons before the crucial vote. Had it not been suppressed, more Labour MPs would have joined us in voting against the war and maybe enough to stop the war."

Lord Hutton's report -- which I cannot feel feeling is astonishingly naive -- failed to take into account and sort out the contradictions in the statements of both the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary. I do not understand why, being the highly experienced and competent legislator he is generally regarded to be. But although his report vindicates Mr Blair and directly criticises the BBC for falling short of the editorial responsibility expected of it, I cannot agree more with the Corporation's erstwhile Director General Greg Dyke that despite his widely

enable the authorities to take pre-emptive action against British terror suspects has been condemned by community leaders and civil rights lawyers all over the UK. The Home Secretary is legally obliged to revisit the counter-terrorism legislation currently in place by 2006. But he believes that in the light of the "new global suicide terrorism" it has become imperative to address these issues long before that. During his recent six-day tour of the Indian sub-continent, he revealed some of the plans he is considering, which include keeping sensitive evidence secret even from British defendants and their lawyers in order to protect intelligence sources and secret trials before vetted judges. The measures could mean the arrest of a suicide bomber

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



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Law to muffle noise soon

"Ban on hydraulic horns, bar on loud speakers likely."

The above was a headline in the front page of The Daily Star dated February 16, 2004. This is a wonderful news. I would like to congratulate the minister and the state minister for forest and environment. Ban on hydraulic horns and loudspeakers should have been there from many years, but better late than never. Noise pollution is a serious health hazard and is totally preventable. No civilised nation has to bear so much

noises as the people of this country have.

I live in Zakir Hussain Road in Chittagong which is a residential area and there are a school, a college, a university and at least six hospitals and nursing homes in this area. Everyday innumerable number of buses and trucks use this road for 24 hours using hydraulic horns and loud speakers. I can understand that the passengers may like to enjoy the songs but why must it be transmitted through loudspeakers subjecting the residents, patients and students not only to disturbances but also serious health hazards e.g. high

blood pressure, heart attack, headache, insomnia, indigestion etc.

Noise pollution must be minimised, if not stopped, by enacting the law soon and implementing the law effectively. Like the ban on polythene, this will also be appreciated by the people of the country.

Dr. F Karim
Chittagong

Maglev melodrama II

Last year I saw a number of letters in the DS pointing demerits of Maglev train; I thought it delivered the

message to its promoters. I thought our far sighted leaders have realised that Maglev is not yet beneficial for us, not until we address our other priorities first. Tasks which are connected to transport sector and until solved, these projects will make the scenario even more complex. The Maglev system between Dhaka and Chittagong (or for that matter monorail between kurmitola and Kamalapur) is far from justifiable.

Mr. Zabidur Rahman's letter (DS 13.2.04) raises yet another question. He thought about the civil works and the manual labour input,

which is a tiny fraction of the not yet commercially or economically viable and tested system anywhere in the world. The technology involved here is Hi-Tech. It is expensive to maintain and will need expatriates to service. We have a rail link between Dhaka and Chittagong, say 250km. It takes 6 hours in either direction. Why can't it run faster?

Last September while travelling on the Euro star Express from London to Brussels, at 200mph I was excited at the speed. The non stop train ride was as quiet and smooth as a high altitude flight.

There were no level crossing between points and track is completely fenced against human and all kinds of animals. I felt sad as I remembered that the train between Kurmitola and Kamalapur, a distance of 19km, runs at an average speed of 10mph.

There are much cheaper and appropriate solutions to these transport problems. If we only bring in expatriate trainers we can solve it with our local workforce, normal materials, involving local resources, and at a fraction of the cost anticipated for the Maglev. The only thing that it cannot accommodate is

the foreign suppliers with their kickbacks.

Rezaur Rahman
London

Textbook delay of the Open University

I am a student of Bangladesh Open University's (BOU) HSC programme. I am a working person and I am very happy, and at the same time I feel fortunate, that because of this programme I am able to continue my studies beside my work. There are many, like me,

studying in BOU who otherwise wouldn't have been able to continue their studies. But usually every year students of BOU don't get their textbooks in stipulated time and that is very frustrating. It seems that this year also there will be no exception. Already classes are being held without books. I request the authority concerned to look into the matter seriously and take necessary steps to solve the problem once for all.

Mohammed Moh
T & T College, Mohakhali, Dhaka