

# Celebrations are in order but society is disintegrating

the international recognition is a unique honour accorded to a unique date that saw bloodletting by gallant Bangalees for safeguarding their own language, culture, and identity.

Celebrations and congratulations are, therefore, in order on this day in Bangladesh. It may be mentioned that the process that led to the international recognition of 21st February as the International Mother Language Day was effec-

enlightenment, and economic and social progress.

But how things are in Bangladesh with respect to economic, political, and social environment? Indeed, Bangladesh was born into the promise of a society that would provide equal opportunities to all its citizens in respect of all aspects of human living. This has been enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh.

In the economic arena, there has

through proper education, training, and healthcare and of improving their economic conditions through self-employment, wage employment, and ownership of assets. They also do not have access to dominant political and social processes. They are the excluded, the downtrodden. The rich are rich not always because they have legitimately acquired their income and wealth. The processes through which many of them have become

challenge that the nation faces relates to security of life and property. Deaths by road accidents, killings by anti-social elements, political killings, violence of various forms, violence against women, toll collection from business people and others, mugging, and dacoity at homes, banks, and shops and business houses are now commonplace. Newspapers are full of such horror stories almost everyday. The picture is not only highly depressing

under past colonial and autocratic rules.

The overall situation appears to be fast acquiring similarity to Nero's Rome. The process of social disintegration in Bangladesh is assuming alarming proportions. It is the government's primary responsibility to find a socially acceptable way of stopping the rot. The responsibility cannot be avoided by blaming the opposition. It is also important that political parties in opposition behave responsibly. But, in an environment characterised by the Nero syndrome, behaving responsibly may very well mean for various opposition political parties and others concerned that the only option available to them is to unite and act together to find the way out.

Can one cherish violent political confrontations? Certainly not. Indeed, no one in his/her right mind can cherish it. But regarding how things may evolve, much will depend on how the government approaches the unfolding scenario. The government may seek to achieve conciliation or add more fuel to accentuate confrontation. If the government opted for a conciliatory approach, the starting point can be the following, as The Daily Star editorial on 14 February 2004 says: "We must remind the BNP and its leaders that .....if their 46 per cent [of the votes] gives them legitimacy to rule then AL's 41 per cent entitles them to receive all the respect and dignity of a party that enjoys that many voters' confidence". Otherwise, people may have to brace themselves for the unfolding Nero syndrome to play out, whatever the outcome.

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tively initiated by a group of Canada-based Mother Language lovers from different nations, including two Bangladeshis named Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam, by petitioning the United Nations. What a coincidence: we have here two persons by the names of Rafique and Salam again. However, for action to be taken by the UN, a proposal needed to be formally made by a member state. The opportunity was seized with great determination by the then Bangladesh Prime Minister and Education Minister. They determined and timely move culminated in the adoption of the resolution to establish 21st February as the International Mother Language Day by the UNESCO General Conference on 17 November 1999.

But celebrations cannot be enough. The 21st February no longer belongs to Bangladesh alone, it is also the whole world's. But since it is our Mother Language Day that was the basis for this international glory accorded to the date, we must carry the responsibility imposed on us, as a result, with dignity. This means ensuring that every citizen of the country has equitable access to education,

rich are characterised by corruption and black money. The political power has also been achieved by many on the basis of money and muscle power, with the money power having been acquired through corruption and even criminal activities. Above all, there are collaborative arrangements among the various power groups, which are mutually beneficial and strengthen their individual and collective socio-economic and political power.

In the political arena, confrontation is the order of the day. There is no tolerance for the views of others, no respect for anybody who holds different points of view. Political opposition is not at all tolerated. The police assault on elected representatives is condoned, even no regret is expressed by the power that be. In my understanding, people's representatives enjoy certain privileges and should be shown due respect. The non-conformists among intellectuals and other social groups are sought to be managed and, if that is not possible, their work, life, and living are made difficult.

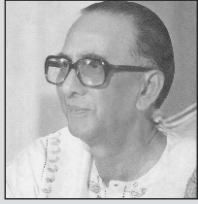
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but also one that signifies unfolding social disintegration. In respect of all crimes including political killings and killings by perpetrators of violence, seemingly political patronage ensures that no action is taken against the killers and criminals, provided they are one way or another within the fold of the ruling parties. There is no guarantee of life and property on roads, at homes, at shops, anywhere at all; and the situation is fast deteriorating. A rising tide of political and economic criminalisation has become the order of the day, law and order condition is awful and deteriorating, corruption is pervasive, sanity has taken the back seat, fairness and tolerance have virtually disappeared, and the rule of law is in disarray. The government's response to this fast deteriorating social environment seems to be to blame the opposition for all ills. Seizing of opposition party offices and merciless beating up of opposition political leaders and workers by police in what we claim to be a democratic society are clearly undemocratic but what is more disturbing is that these acts are reminiscent of modes of behaviour

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## Twenty-first February speaks for all languages



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

The May Day  
Does not speak for Chicago city alone.  
It does not speak for the workers of Chicago alone.  
It does not speak for the workers of the world alone.  
It speaks for all mankind.

The TWENTY-FIRST FEBRUARY also  
Does not speak for Bangladesh alone.  
It does not speak for the Bangla-speaking people alone.  
It speaks for mother tongues of all people.  
It speaks for all mankind.

(Dhaka, 20 February, 1997)

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government

## Ekushey is about ultimate sacrifice for great cause

ERSHAD KHANDKER

COLONIAL powers left a legacy of gerrymandering land in their possession to suit various interests. Land borders and territory carved and divided on the basis of expediencies created by 200 years of colonial rule. Sometimes the preponderant factor was purely political. According to the two-nation theory, Indian sub-continent was to be divided on the basis of religion. Question of cultural affinity was not taken into consideration did not become a prominent issue at that time. Hossain Shahid Suhrawardy as Chief Minister of undivided Bengal and Sharat Chandra Bose, brother of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, tried to keep Bengal together. But to no avail. The Muslim community was eager to get their own nation, convinced that any other arrangement would lead to domination by the other community.

Pakistan was born, divided into eastern and western zones with 1000 square miles of Indian territory lying in between! The cultural difference, language and even nature of the two people, were so far apart. West Pakistani politicians, deluded by their power gained by machinations and manipulations thought of grand designs of domination. The seed of a fratricide was sown.

What is so amazing about Ekushey February is the background of courage and sagacity shown by the student community at that time. After all, colonial history and the flagrant communal divisions were not in too distant past. The bigwigs of the Muslim League were thinking that the pre-eminence of Urdu was fait accompli. No doubt that the students were the first to realise the importance of protecting the value of their mother tongue and the greater question of their political right i. e. the right of the majority Bengali. The magnificence of the realisation is a matter of amazement for anyone who knows the socio-political and economic realities of that era.

On 11 March 1948, Bengali students congregated in front of the secretariat with the demand to declare Bangla as one of the state languages. The Police with their bayonet charged, came down on the agitating students and many were injured. The fight for Rashtra Bhasha began.

Twenty first February 1952 was declared as a state language day and students and people of all walks of life came out, to fight for the right to speak and practice their own mother tongue. Many suffered injuries but some valiant sons of the soil made the ultimate sacrifice to save Bangla. In the next 16 years the Bengali nation gave a strong account of themselves in the quest for getting the political recognition of their rights. Ekushey was the starting point, the first call for self-assertion. The language movement was based on the just and democratic aspiration of the majority. Bangla was spoken by 55 per cent of the then Pakistan population. Rashtra Bhasha Andolon, or the struggle for the state language, only speaks volumes about the understanding and respect the people of Bangladesh have for democracy.

Amar Ekushey, 21 February has been declared as World Mother Language Day. The many who suffered and the martyrs who made the ultimate sacrifice are in our thoughts this day. We salute them for the gift they have given us. The world salutes them for giving a lesson to that love for the mother tongue is worth dying for.

ErsHAD Khandker is a senior journalist.

# Bangla -- a legacy of the Muslim era

SYED ASHRAF ALI

LANGUAGE was the immediate gift of God -- that is what Webster claimed, and Bangla, the blood of our blood and the bone of our bone, is no ordinary language. We the Bangladeshis, are grateful to Allah that He has, in His infinite Mercy, blessed us with a language which not only has a great tradition behind but also occupies a unique place in the annals of history. Bangla, the hearthrob of 140 million Bangladeshis, indeed is no language of common rank or trifling merit.

It is a language capable of expressing the finest modulations of thoughts and feelings, never failing to respond to the ever-changing play of life, a literature worthy to be taught in any university in the world -- a language which, in the words of Tagore, "belongs to the procession of life, making constant adjustments with surprises, exploring unknown shrines of reality along its path of pilgrimage to a future, which is as different from the past as the tree from the seed."

That is not all! Bangla, the apple of our eyes, occupies a unique place in the annals of civilization simply because it is the only language in the world for the recognition of which people have smilingly embraced bullets and shuffled off the mortal coil, the only language on this globe for the legitimate and rightful status of which people have braved the bitterest ordeals, have faced the gravest trials and tribulations, have unhesitatingly accepted the cold and cruel kiss of death, the only language on earth the struggle for which has helped a nation achieve an independent and sovereign state. No language on the clay of this cold star can boast of such unparalleled devotion, dedication and sacrifice from those speaking it. No wonder, *Amar Ekushey*, the wellspring of our deepest emotions about our cultural heritage and the harbinger of all our hard struggles, has been singled out of the 4000 mother languages and blessed with the unique honour of the International Mother Language Day.

The renowned Mahastan Plaque discovered by Baru Fakir in 1931, considered by some as the earliest evidence of "primitive" Bangla (the famous Charya-Charya Binischaya is, however, almost universally accepted as the earliest available specimen of Bengali literature), testifies to the fact that Bangla is no newborn baby in the cradle of languages. Although it originates from the Eastern Prakrit group of the Indo-Aryan family of languages, its history dates back to the Aryan days. Some scholars even go to

the extent of claiming that the emperor Ashoka, and even Lord Buddha, occasionally used a certain type of Bangla "Lipi" while communicating with their subjects and disciples in the eastern regions of this subcontinent.

In the pre-Aryan days the people living in Bengal were of Dravidian, Mongolian, Bhot-Chin or Kolomboda origin. They used to speak in Dravidian, Bhot-Chin or Munda languages.

It was in Gupta era that Bengal had first contact with the Aryan civilisation. But before any intimate or effective acquaintance could be established with the Aryan civilisation, the Pal kings turned Bengal into one of the citadels of Buddhism.

After the Pals came the Sens who ruled over Bengal for nearly one hundred years. To them also Bangla was the language of the untouchables.

It was the conquest of Bengal by the Muslims in 1201 AD which ushered in a new era for Bangla, providing it a congenial environment and proper facilities to thrive into a major language. When the Muslims first conquered Bengal there was hardly any Bengali Literature worth the name. Nor was the language cultivated by the educated class. The language of the Charya-Charya Binischaya, now referred to as Charyapads, comprising 47 poems making a total of some 480 lines, according

every sphere of activity and in every domain of thought. Hindus and Muslims alike welcomed the royal patronage and enjoyed its benefits with all their heart. Ramaya Pundit eulogised in unequivocal terms the Muslim conquest of Bengal. In Niranjaneer Rushma, a section of his Shunnya Purana, the Muslims are portrayed as religious incarnate releasing people from the tyranny and oppression of the Brahmins and the Sen rulers. No wonder, Promatha Chowdhury has unhesitatingly admitted: "Bangla literature had its genesis in the Muslim era."

The renowned historian Dr Muhammad Mohar Ali gives a vivid description of the commendable

Shah's general and Chittagong governor Paragal Khan and at his instance translated a part of the Mahabharata into Bengali. Chhuti Khan, son of Paragal Khan, patronised poet Sriker Nandi who translated the Asvamedha Parva of the Mahabharata under his orders. Nusrat Shah himself sponsored another translation of the Mahabharata, but that work has not hitherto come to light. Another poet, Dvija Sridhara, composed an epic named Nidyasundra under the patronage of prince Firuz Shah, Nusrat Shah's son. (Muhammad Mohar Ali, History of the Muslims of Bengal, Riyadh, 1985, PP. 856-858).

The Muslim rulers indeed made every effort to patronise Bangla. Baru Chandidas of Srikrishna-Kirtan was blessed with a royal invitation to sing at the court of Gaur. Maladhar Vasu of Srikrishna-Vijaya could complete his works with much-needed royal patronage for seven years from Sultan Barbak Shah. Kritivas also had the unique distinction of being personally garlanded by the Sultan himself. None indeed can deny the fact that the patronage of the Muslim kings was the most effective and greatest factor in Bangla's transition from the spoken stage to the written one.

Mention may be made in this connection that Bengal had also numerous Muslim writers in those days. Great personalities like Muhammad Sagir of Yusuf-Zuleikha fame wrote fearlessly and freely ignoring totally the hoodwink of the then orthodox Mullahs. Syed Sultan, Haji Muhammad, Sheikh Mutalib and Abdunnabi also openly advocated the cause of Bangla. In the thirteenth century the illustrious father of Hazrat Nur Kutubul Alam, who migrated to Bengal from Punjab, even went to the extent of affixing the title Bangalee to his name and he was known all over Bengal as Sheikh Alaul Huq Bangalee.

And it was the Muslim poet Abdul Hakim who was the first litterateur to criticise in writing the nefarious activities of the Bangla-haters as far back as 17th century. He had the courage and conviction to urge the enemies of Bangla either to change their attitude or to leave Bengal for good. The people of Bengal had indeed started struggling for the legitimate rights and recognition of their mother tongue -- a struggle which continued for centuries, and being rejuvenated by the historic *Ekushey*, culminated in the very birth of an independent and sovereign state known as Bangladesh.

As we celebrate and mourn on *Amar Ekushey*, a spark of light, indefinable and beautifully etched in the mind, which links the sadness scrawled on the Shaheed

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The Aryans realised that the first step to pollute or cripple a culture is to destroy or distort its language. As a result of systematic oppression by the Sanskrit and Prakrit speaking people the innocent indigenous inhabitants of Bengal started forgetting their languages. But Sanskrit was no effective spoken language, almost everything it had at the time was in black and white. So a section of the people started speaking in a particular type of Prakrit known as Gouriya-Prakrit. The Gouriya-Prakrit being used by the non-Aryans, Dravidians, Kot-Chins, Mundas and Kols took a distorted form and many a word from their dialects had slow but steady access into it.

Slowly and silently this distorted form of Gouriya-Prakrit (Gouriya Apabhramsa) gave birth to ancient Bengali language. But the people who used to speak in this ancient form of Bangla were looked down upon as an inferior caste by the Aryans. It was claimed that anyone who spoke in this 'disgraceful' dialect of the untouchables would inevitably go to hell. It is really unfortunate that although Bengal reached the peak of glory in almost every domain of thought during the reign of Gopal Dev and his descendants, who ruled over this part of subcontinent for more than three hundred years, the Bangla language could not make any remarkable progress. The reason was plain and simple -- the then Hindu society always despised and hated this 'ignominious dialect of the untouchables'. Written form of Bengali was yet to

to competent sources, was "but poor fragments of the literature which owed its origin chiefly to earnestness of Tantrik Buddhists for popularising their creed and which was just evolving out of Laukika."

Whatever might be the exact date of the Charyapads it is generally recognised by scholars that no vernacular language could have found a scope for free literary expression under the Brahmanical system which preceded the coming of the Muslims and which interdicted the study of any but the Sanskrit language. Bangla, would have surely been nipped in the bud had there been no patronage from the Muslim kings like Sikander Shah, Hussain Shah, Barbak Shah and Paragol Khan.

The Muslims could not be expected to make any distinction between Brahmins and non-Brahmins in any legitimate sphere of activity, all of them, being equally eligible for acquiring knowledge and official positions according to merit. The Muslims not only welcomed Bangla with an open heart but they literally gave a new birth to this hitherto neglected language. By 1350 AD Muslims had united different regions of Bengal and started becoming patrons of Bengali language and literature, thus providing an impetus to new literary productions in Bengali.

Blessed with the royal patronage the swelling waves of Bangla started reaching every nook and corner of Bengal. It reached the high and the low, the rich and the poor and played a dominant role in

Muslim patronage of Bangla: "The first notable literary production in Bengali was a translation of the Ramayana by poet Kritivas during the first quarter of the 15th century, most probably during the reign of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1431). The poet praises the Gada ruler for his patronage and also states that the work was commissioned by him. The next notable work was by poet Maladhar Vasu, an inhabitant of village Kulin in Murshidabad district. He lived during the time of Sultan Yusuf Shah (1474-1482). Under the later's patronage the poet composed his Srikrishna-Vijaya on the basis of the 10th and 11th chapters of the Bhagavad-Gita. The poet also received the title of Gunraj Khan either from Barbak Shah or from Yusuf Shah. The poet takes care to state that he composed the work because the Sudras, the lowest caste of the Hindus, were not allowed to read the Puranas in their originals. Some other poets also flourished during the Ilyas Shahi period.

During the Hussain Shah period a number of important poets like Vijayagupta, Vipradas Piplai, Yasoraj Khan, Kavindra Parameshwara and Sriker Nandi composed their works. Early in Hussain Shah's reign (1493-1519) Vijayagupta composed his Padma Purana most probably in 1494-95, while Vipradas Piplai wrote the Manasamangala, an epic on the snake cult, about the same time. Also during the same reign Yasoraj Khan composed his Srikrishna-Vijaya. Kavindra Parameshwara received the patronage of Hussain