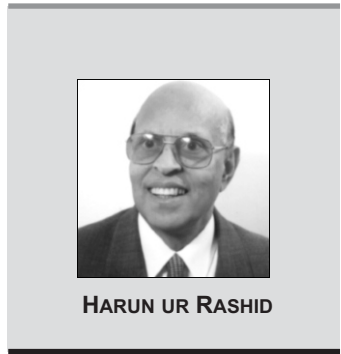


# Are we achieving the goal of the language martyrs?



HARUN UR RASHID

FEBRUARY 21 is a day of national mourning and reflection. It is the Language Martyrs' Day. It is fifty-five years to the day that Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar and Salam sacrificed their precious young lives for the honour and preservation of our mother language, Bangla.

February 21 is not only the Bangla Language Martyrs' Day in Bangladesh, but is also being observed as International Mother Language Day.

It was in 2000 that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day.

This day has become a mile-



## Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed's 40 days in office

The people are ready to give some time, though not necessarily an unlimited period of time, as long as they remain convinced that the caretaker government's main objective is to hold a free, fair and credible election and hand over power to a truly representative elected government, and that they are serious and sincere in their efforts for achieving this objective.

HUSAIN IMAM

FORTY days have passed since Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed was sworn in as the chief of the newly constructed caretaker, more appropriately interim, government, and there is no denying that these 40 days have been eventful.

Much to the delight of the people, Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed has been able to disband a highly controversial and incompetent Election Commission and reconstitute it with persons believed to be competent enough to deliver the goods.

He has, thus, removed one of the stumbling blocks that stood in the way of holding a credible election.

He has been able to round up and put behind bars quite a large number of godfathers and political bigwigs, including some ministers and MPs, who abused state power and took the country for a ride.

He has, thus, been able to send a message across the country that nobody, however big he may be, is above the law, although there may be question about the criteria on the basis of which these people are being apprehended.

He has cleared the deck of some old and incompetent persons in the ACC, and assured the people that he would continue his drive against corruption and violence until he and his government were fully convinced that money and muscle would not be able to influence the next election.

It seems that Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed is determined to clear the deck of all the debris that stood as a barrier not only to holding a free, fair and credible election, but also towards establishing a meaningful and sustainable democratic system in the country.

How far he will succeed, only time will reveal. Some cynics may say that the things that the government of Dr Ahmed could do in such a short span of time was possible only because of the state of emergency and the support of the armed forces. As far as I am concerned, it does

## BOTTOM LINE

February 21 is more than a language movement for the people of Bangladesh. Many historians think that February 21 laid the foundation for a separate state on the basis of Bengali nationalism, which was aptly summed up by Bangabandhu Shekh Mujib when he said: "I am a Bengali, my nationalism is Bengali."

stone in recognition of the right to speak, promote and preserve all mother languages across the world.

Bangladesh can rightly take credit for taking the initiative for the declaration by the Unesco. Therefore, it is a day of pride for all the people of Bangladesh that the supreme sacrifice made on this day in 1952 has eventually led to the recognition of preservation of mother languages world-wide.

### What actually occurred on February 21?

The Pakistani rulers wanted to impose Urdu on the Bengali people, although they constituted 56% of the people of united Pakistan.

The people of former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, strongly objected in 1948 when

Mr. Jinnah announced it in the Curzon Hall. Mr. Dharendraanath Dutta, a member of the Constituent Assembly, argued in the assembly that Bangla language ought to be one of the state languages of Pakistan. But all these demands fell on the deaf ears of the Pakistani leaders.

The starting point of the tragedy of February 21 was January 27, 1952, when the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Khwaja Nazimuddin, announced at a public meeting that Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan. The students were infuriated at this announcement.

On February 21, 1952, agitated students, both male and female, of Dhaka University decided to violate Section 144 (prohibiting an assembly more than five persons) in order to proceed towards the East

Pakistan Legislative Assembly to present their demand.

At 3:30 PM, when they were on their way to the student's hostel of the Dhaka Medical College (where the monument stands), the police open-fire on them, under orders by a Magistrate (a West Pakistani).

Jabbar and Rafiq died on the spot, while Barkat, critically injured, died that evening in the hospital. The two other martyrs died in hospital as well. The rest is history.

### Importance of mother languages

Mother language is the language in which a baby child communicates for the first time with its mother and father. It is a language that a person never forgets, wherever that person may live.

The mother language is a prism that determines the first notions of the world to a baby child. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and thought is inseparable.

It is the mother tongue that represents thought, culture and heritage of an individual.

Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called language "the body of thought." This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

About 6,800 mother languages are thought to exist today. But social, demographic and political factors are all contributing to their rapid disappearance.

Language experts say that half of that number is likely to disappear, as smaller ethnic societies are gradually being assimilated into mainstream national and global cultures.

For example, the language, "Middle Chulym," now spoken by a handful Siberian townsfolk (45

in number), has been integrated into the Russian language, and once the last fluent speaker dies the language will become extinct.

What is lost when a language is lost is another world, according to many language experts.

Valuable ethnographic and cultural information disappear when a language dies, leaving a gap in understanding of the variable cognitive structures, which the human brain is capable of.

Studies of different languages have revealed vastly the different ways of representing and interpreting the world.

For instance, some Native American and Australian aboriginal languages reveal a completely different understanding of the relationship between human beings and nature, and how it affects their lives.

Language experts believe that as mother languages disappear, a few dominant languages will exist, such as English, French, Spanish and Chinese, for commerce, education, science and culture in the world.

The disappearance of mother languages will be a severe blow to linguistic diversity, cognitive science and cultural studies.

Preservation of Bangla language is an issue about which the people of Bangladesh feel deeply, and rightly so.

It represents the thought, culture and heritage of Bangladesh. Anyone who wishes to gain an insight into the conditions of life in Bangladesh, and to peer into social structures, cannot do better than to study Bangla language and literature.

Of all the languages in South Asia, Bangla was the first to develop a literature of a very high order, and still holds the model for other languages.

Bangla writers in the past and present have enriched the language by transfusing Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English languages into it.

Bangla was raised to its highest by Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore) when he was awarded, in 1913, the Nobel Prize for Literature.

One must not, however, forget that learning other languages is useful in an inter-connected

world, and to be a multi-lingual is an asset for any person.

Since English has become the language for commerce, higher education overseas, and computers, one may not neglect learning it as well.

### Have the ideals of the Martyrs' Day been fulfilled?

During almost 36 years of independence, the question for everyone is whether the authorities and civil society have achieved the real aim of the day.

The test is whether all people, irrespective of age and gender, can read and write. Free adult education is necessary for mature people. Free education, together with free learning equipment and school dress for poor children, is imperative.

Another question is whether people at the bottom of the social ladder understand the words used by the news media. There is a view that different words and expressions used by the elite perpetuate the class barriers in society.

It could be argued that one should neither write what one should not speak, nor should speak what one should not write.

Some educationists argue that the gap between the language of books and media and that of ordinary people in the countryside needs to be bridged. So Bangla grammar needs to be simplified.

The time has come for reforming Bangla spelling so as to make it easy for Bangla learners. The bottom line is: does the elevation of literary diction too far above the speech of common people impede learning and writing in Bangla?

Every Bangladeshi has a right to read books in Bangla. But the price of Bangla books is very high because the paper and other materials for publishing books are costly.

The authorities concerned may consider exempting tax and custom duties on printing paper and other materials so as to make books easily available to readers at an affordable price.

At the same time, the publishers must see how books can be



The first Shaeed Minar, immediately built after the incident of February 21.

made cheaper by selecting less expensive paper, soft cover and simple design.

The Ekushey February book fair at the Bangladesh Academy premises will achieve its purpose if visitors to the bookstalls are able to buy books, not just browse through them. A knowledgeable nation does not grow automatically. It needs to be carefully developed and nurtured.

Another point for consideration is that, given the huge number of visitors to the book fair, the Bangla Academy may seriously consider opening Ekushey book fairs in various residential parts of Dhaka so that all people, especially the elders, could visit, enjoy and buy books.

The long queues at the Bangla Academy book fair discourage many elderly people from visiting the fair.

There is a view that February 21 is observed more with rituals,

forgetting its true significance. It does not seem to focus sharply on the causes the martyrs stood for.

Many think that the book fair has turned into a commercial market, exploiting the sentiments of people.

The time has come for reflection and introspection as to how the language martyrs are to be remembered, and their goal achieved.

February 21 is more than a language movement for the people of Bangladesh. Many historians think that February 21 laid the foundation for a separate state on the basis of Bengali nationalism, which was aptly summed up by Bangabandhu Shekh Mujib when he said: "I am a Bengali, my nationalism is Bengali."

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

## Can Nagorik Shakti deliver?

Let us not pretend that we do not know these parties and their modus operandi, let us not pretend that our political culture is robust and mature enough to take on any vile scheming from the opposition. So the question as to whether NS can survive the trials and tribulations of the road ahead is key.

S. I. ZAMAN

IRONICALLY, the golden era of the Bengalis was during the heydays of the British Raj.

The first people in British India, beginning 1757, who actually made some noises pertaining to self-government, and who were heeded to by the then British colonial administration, were the Bengalis.

While the rest of India was entrenched in a feudalistic society, devoid of any progress other than petty feuds and internecine strife among pretenders to powerless thrones, Bengalis were making breakthroughs in literature, in scientific research, in arts and in music.

"What Bengal think today, India thinks tomorrow," although a much used cliché, yet it does have an historical foundation. Even during the 24 years of Pakistani military junta rule, we could find one or two notable Bengali political figures.

The British are long gone -- the Pakistanis are history -- but now we have a new breed of political masters who connive and collude with each other to grab power, and then get busy in making easy money at the expense of national interest.

And never more so than now, they are less busy in winning the "hearts and minds" of the people they are supposed to represent. Of course, there are few exceptions, but these do not make the rule.

The Bengalis have a history of suffering under oppressive regimes from c 1200 AD onwards. The last one to leave the scene (with blood) was the Pakistani military junta. Consequently, there is a permanent scar in the Bengali psyche -- pathological mistrust, skepti-

cism, political larceny, political ego-centrism, self-seeking, unscrupulous and dodgy dealings, amorality are all symptomatic of that permanent scar.

Get rid of these and one might just be able to salvage what little decency there is in this nation of ours.

Now that these power-hungry politicians are being kept at bay, thanks to the present care-taker government (CG), things are running at normal pace.

The present CTG is doing a smashing job -- but whichever political party eventually takes over, you can bet your prized Lexus that the ensuing drama will be the same.

The same leaders and their cohorts would come out with their I-told-you-I would-come-back grins and phony V-signs as though they were the harbingers of some messianic quest. If indeed there is any!

Nevertheless, the present political lull should not make us too complacent. This is only the beginning of a long haul. For a comprehensive over-haul, the CG needs to re-structure some of the key departments and their functioning.

This country is full of natural resources, man-power, intellectual power and perseverance, what we need now is total resolve to get rid of the vicious circle of power-politics, corruption and more power-hungry politics.

The new political party, Nagorik Shakti (NS), floated by Nobel laureate Dr. Yunus, is certainly a good start; and certainly a noble mission. Nevertheless, the path of a "do-gooder" in Bangladesh is littered with thorns.

Even if he manages to conjure up a national government insulated from all sorts of political scheming, he would be, nonetheless,

which can transform it into a virtuous circle once and for all.

However, corruption is so entrenched in the socio-political life of Bangladesh that, to be rid of this, the only way forward is to evolve out of it.

A new party with grand vision coming into the limelight is not an unprecedented phenomenon in Bangladesh. JSD and BNP both emerged in the mid-70s from a nation in political turmoil and utter despair. However, both these parties failed to deliver any semblance of progress or to fulfill people's aspirations.

Of course, during their (BNP and JSD) formative stage, the AL was a party with different factions and hardly any popular support. And while the AL was roaming in the "wilderness," these parties were basking in the knowledge that they had the people's mandate to rule and to benefit.

There are more "ifs" and "buts" hovering over the fate of this nation right now than ever before. It is now or never! The time is ripe for soul-searching and stock-taking!

We have had chances in the past, but we failed to take them. Even if NS manages to achieve a landslide victory in the election, and subsequently forms a national government, can it contain the onslaught of vile, ruthless and un-parliamentarian ploys of the opposition?

Unless, of course, the high profile leaders from these parties defect and move to NS, the ruling party, NS, has to live with the incessant scheming of these parties.

Let us not pretend that we do not know these parties and their modus operandi, let us not pretend that our political culture is robust and mature enough to take on any vile scheming from the opposition. So the question as to whether NS can survive the trials and tribulations of the road ahead is key.

Dr. S. I. Zaman, is a Visiting Academic, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada.