

For the love of language, heritage

Documenting history of Language Movement

Vashandolan Museum inaugurated



Newspaper clippings of Language Movement up to contemporary period at the museum

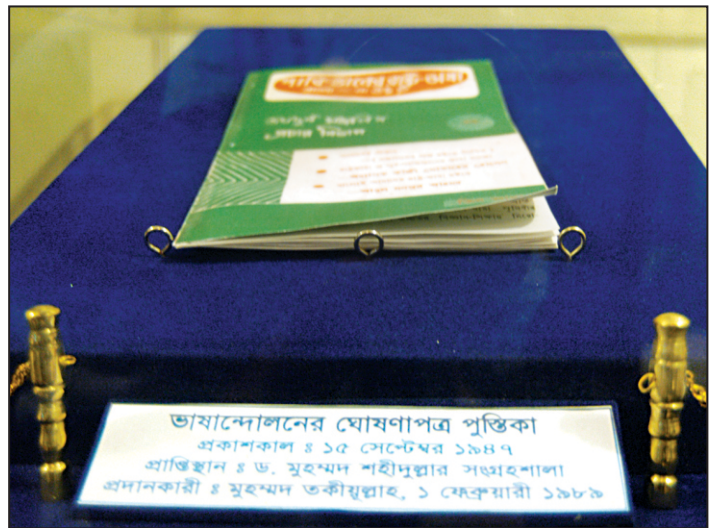
ERSHAD KAMOL

THOUGH the spirit of Language Movement has had a great impact on our national, political and cultural history, so far no meaningful initiative has been taken at the government level to preserve and exhibit the documents of the glorious movement of 1952. Fifty-five years after the Language Movement, a museum named Vashandolan Museum at road number-10 in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, has opened recently and is patronised by a private organisation named Language Hero Kazi Golam Mahub Memorial Trust. The museum exhibits the documents, both photographs and various pamphlets and newspaper clippings of that time.

The predecessor of Vashandolan Museum was Bangladesh Bhasha Andolan Museum, which was initiated in 1989 by MA Barik, a researcher on the Language Movement. Activities of the museum fall into six divisions: exhibition, research, documentation, computer and film, publications and library, and administrative.

Though the museum has been temporarily opened in a small room, it features all of the available documents. Twenty-eight photographs, mainly donated by Mohammad Taquiullah, Mohammad Amanul Haque and Professor Rafiqul Islam, feature the Language Movement as a whole from 1948 to 1956.

The question as to the state language of Pakistan was raised immediately after its creation. The central leaders and the Urdu-speaking intellectuals of Pakistan declared that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. The students and intellectuals of the then East Pakistan, however, demanded that Bangla be made



The booklet, published on September 15, 1947, by the publicity wing of Tamaddun Majlish, featuring the declaration of Language Movement

Right to language

AHSAN HABIB

Preserving endangered languages is a vital part of securing the culture and heritage. Indigenous languages of Bangladesh need to be preserved and maintained within the framework of the state as some of the languages are endangered.

Though language contributes significantly to the integration processes in education systems, legal systems, the media, the workplace, political life and public services, languages of the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are absent in these areas. "There is hardly anywhere they are allowed. Indigenous languages have no access to government activities. These languages are absent in the areas that represent the productive activity of the

state. What about our right to language?" questions Mithun Chakma, a young activist.

"Diverse traditions of indigenous cultures have been transmitted by languages, in oral traditions and latterly in written literatures. So when language transmission itself breaks down there is always a large loss of inherited knowledge," says Dipayan Khisha, young editor of a magazine working on indigenous issues.

Indigenous people of Bangladesh have a rich tradition of literature. At a period the oral medium served the people as a stock for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of the nations could be found in oral traditions. Many communities have written texts using their own script. At

clippings of dailies such as Azad."

Photographer Amanul Haque and Professor Rafiqul Islam's (the latter was a student at that time) photographs basically feature agitation by the students of All-Party Central Language Action Committee, which was formed with Kazi Golam Mahboob as its convener. Many of these photographs are the only available documents of demonstrations and processions by the students violating Section 144 at the Dhaka University area on February 21, 1952.

Moreover, Amanul Haque has taken a photograph portraying the damaged skull of Shaheed Rafiquddin, a victim of the fateful day. Shah AMS Kibria also had taken same photographs of Shaheed Rafiq's skull, which is also on display at the museum.

Other photographs taken by Amanul Haque and Professor Rafiqul Islam feature incidents from February 1952-1954 when the then East Bengal Legislative Assembly adopted a resolution recommending the recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan. The Language Movement continued until 1956. Member Adel Uddin Ahmed (1913-1981; Faridpur) made an important amendment proposal, which was adopted unanimously by the Assembly (16 February 1956). Both Bangla and Urdu were thus enacted to be the state languages of Pakistan.

Vashandolan Museum does not only display the photographs of the turbulent period, it also exhibits a collage of martyrs of February 21 massacre such as Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, Shafiqur Rahman, Abul Barkat, Abdus Salam and Ohiullah.

Moreover, portraits and biography of political leaders, student leaders and intellectuals who have made an immense contribution to our Language Movement are also on display.

The research centre is geared to preserve the historical and other information of the International Mother Language Day as well as to help research fellows on the topic both at home and abroad.

"The research centre will comprise of a rich library, archives, documentaries, diaries and the written events of the Language Movement," continued Peary. "We have already collected many documents for the research centre and will publish them after a few final touches. As these documents are on the verge of extinction, we are publishing an encyclopedia on Language Movement comprising 2,500 pages. We have published five research papers in this regard. And Dr Ziauddin Ahmed, has already completed a 20-minute documentary in this connection."

Peary Mahub further said that if they are allotted land from the government, they would be able to preserve the documents of the Language Movement even better.

present most writers write in Bangla, though few write in their own language using Bangla script. Literary works in the author's own languages are rare.

Many indigenous languages like Munda, Kurukh, Hajang, Khumi, Pankho, Lusal, Sadong, Rajbangshi, Bongshi, Chak, Khyang are endangered. Rabindranath Soren of Jatiyo Adibashi Parishad says, "Education in our own mother languages must be propagated for the preservation of the languages. Demand for the use of mother language in imparting basic and primary education has gained momentum after the UN has recognised it." His organisation runs an experimental school in Godagari Upazila in Rajshahi to teach Santali language up to class three. The text-books are written in Santali language using Bangla alphabets. Some NGOs and community organisations have taken initiatives to establish schools that would teach the mother languages of the respective community.

Some other indigenous groups in different areas are working towards the inclusion of indigenous languages at the primary school level to ensure indigenous children are better able to access the predominantly mainstream curriculum.

However, the government is yet to take any significant initiative to preserve the languages. The activities of Tribal Cultural Institute in Rangamati and Bandarban and Tribal Cultural Academy in Birisiri are mainly limited to organising cultural shows on national days, on important social and public occasions and at the time of VIP visits. The efforts are not adequate and have failed to leave an impact on the society at large.

Indigenous leaders believe that the need of the hour is the constitutional protection of their language and culture and the sensitisation of the state education system to the needs of indigenous children. The latter's cultural traditions and their language, so far, have been overlooked by the state education curriculum, but are crucial for preservation of their languages.

'Roopkatha': The estranged and ignored kin



Clockwise (from top-left): Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed, an illustration of folklore and a fable-inspired painting by Abdus Shakoor Shah

KARIM WAHEED

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, mothers used to tell children bedtime stories: of clashes and palace politics between *Shurani* and *Duorani*, blood curdling accounts of *Rakshas* picking up the smell of humans before devouring them, seven childless queens giving birth simultaneously after eating a magic root/herb given by a *sadhu*, talking birds -- *Bangoma* and *Bangomi* -- leading princes to treasures guarded by vicious demons, a cursed Konkaboti awaiting her saviour and so on.

But gone are those days. Blonde, blue-eyed Cinderellas and Harry Potters have invaded that special place in the hearts of urban Bengali children. Kajolrekhas, Konkabotis and Dalimkumars are now just fond, fading memories of a generation that never bothered to introduce these tales to their successors. Trapped in some badly printed books, adorned with unimpressive illustration -- these stories now collect dust in someone's forsaken collection.

Talking about the dying tradition of Bangla fairy tales or *roopkatha*, noted educationist and founder of Bishwa Shahitya Kendra, Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed says, "Fairy tales and folklore are the most creative and powerful aspect of a culture. Their USP is the capability to inspire masses. Take the reference of a kingdom going to a state of coma, in several *roopkatha* -- 'Haathishaley haathi ghumaye, ghorahaley ghora, Raja ghumaye, Rani ghumaye, ghumaye bon-er pakhira...'. Clearly a metaphor for death of conscience. Then comes a prince and saves the day. This theme of good overcoming evil is universal."

"Yet these tales were very true to our roots, our

heritage and beliefs. Like the story of *Monimala*: Deep below the surface of water is the palace of a sea-god and everything in that enchanted domain is made of snakes. This reference to snakes demonstrates what this species meant to the people living in this land; Manosha, the snake goddess, reigned supreme in medieval Bengal.

"This was more or less an oral tradition and between late 19th century and mid 20th century, this tradition and sort of literature reached its zenith. This period was more like a Bengali renaissance, and the phenomenon of *roopkatha* becoming huge was spearheaded by Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury and Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder. Specifically, Majumder's *Thakumar Jhuli* became an inseparable part of growing up."

Why are these fables losing ground then? Professor Sayeed's response: "For a number of reasons. First of all, I believe it is the responsibility of schools to get children acquainted with their heritage, their culture. More and more middle and upper middle class families are sending their little ones to English medium schools that don't see the necessity of familiarising their students with our traditions, literature, namely these *roopkatha*. For the last two centuries, Bengalis have been known for their superiority in English in the subcontinent. Back in the cultural heyday of Bengal, there were no English medium schools. The educated urban Bengali knew the way of the world and yet maintained strong ties with his/her roots. Now it has become more like 'take everything western and discard your identity'."

"Then there is the fact of globalisation. In an open market, everything depends on capital, marketing and availability. The global media is



Folk motifs as seen in our contemporary art

FAYZA HAQ

Samarjit Roy Chowdhury, famous for the folk elements in his painting says, "Folk elements are in profusion in the works of Zainul Abedin, Qamrul Hassan, Qayyum Chowdhury, Rashid Chowdhury and Abdus Shakoor Shah. They have taken the motifs and presented them in their own individual way. I too have tried to use primary colours and lines to create a flavour

said that if any of us were to go abroad, we should carry one of these dolls which have a rich cultural heritage. Mohammed Kibria does a lot of abstract work today but decades back his work too harked back to our folk art."

Qayyum Chowdhury says that most of our serious artists feel that if they present folk art in a modern way this will be a definite contribution to our wealth of art. Modern artists collect their materials from different

have their roots in our traditional crafts in the villages. In Qamrul Hassan's paintings, the colours and lines are taken directly from *lokhir shora* and from *pot chitra* although presented in his own way. Earlier on, Jamini Roy had, on the other hand, used the lines and colours directly, without making much changes," says Qayyum Chowdhury.

Lalarkh Selim says that folk art has been used from time immemorial by the general people until industrial-

popularised folk art by opening a museum on it where one found *nakshi kantha* and other folk art elements. Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hassan took elements from folk art and put them in their painting after the British left India.

"When Pakistan was the oppressor, again folk art became a symbol of the cultural identity of the Bengali people," says Lalarkh. This went beyond religion because folk art traditions



Paintings by Qayyum Chowdhury (L) and Samarjit Roy Chowdhury

of our *gram Bangla*. One cannot forget our traditions. I've taken the inspiration from items such as *shora* and *pot chitra*. I've used lines and colours from clay dolls fashioned by unknown artists."

Samarjit says that artists should respect traditions. As a child he remembers going to the fairs and buying clay horses and elephants. "Zainul Abedin had a cupboard full of folk toys of clay and wood. He

sources. Apart from folk art, Bangladesh doesn't really have any other background of art, he says. This search for the identity is not necessarily true of all artists, but some artists use folk motifs directly, others adapt them to their taste and style. "Today our folk art has nearly disappeared and our painters only use them as inspiration. Thus we see kites, fish, boats, village women, birds and butterflies which

isolation crept in. She explains that the art was needed for functional and ritualistic purposes, such as *pot chitra* (painting on scroll), which goes back before the birth of Christ and was used for moral lessons. Traditional art is a part of traditional life. In the British period, when Bengal became a colony, she says that the people working in the cultural field found greatness in folk art, and found a way of identifying with it. Gurushodi Dut

reached out to the distant past. Lalarkh says, even before the Aryan invasion, as seen in the *alpana*. It is a manifestation of the people as they lived and grew with nature. After the Language Movement, people became conscious of their Bengali identity and folk art crept into the mainstream art of Bangladesh in the works of Safiuddin Ahmed, SM Sultan and others, she adds.



PHOTO: AMIRUL RAJIV