

Rediscovering the Spirit of Ekushey

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COMING from a generation who was born after Bangladesh gained her independence, one might wonder how I view The Language Movement that took place twenty-four years before my birth. Born in the mid-seventies clearly makes me a Bangladeshi by birth ... unlike my parents and my grandparents who were born at a time when, no one in the area that now constitutes Bangladesh, imagined that one day, we will have our own sovereign nation where our people will have the freedom to practice and speak our mother-tongue as well as implement and express our own distinct culture and custom in every sphere of our daily lives without the fear of any sort of foreign persecution. The British were clearly foreigners who ruthlessly dominated us for 190 years. With the exception of the fact that religion enjoined us with Pakistan which was the basis of the Partition of 1947, the pre-dominantly Punjabi-speaking ruling elite were also foreigners who ruthlessly dominated us for 24 years after the British left. I am sure my parents and my grandparents have their own account of what life was like during those eras. I've heard lots of stories from parents about their lives when they lived during that turbulent era and they have narrated their life-stories to me in a manner that made the past come so alive that if I were given a "time-machine" to go back and re-live that era, I would know exactly what to expect!

When I went to school in Bangladesh, the history of Bangladesh was taught in a rather "text-book" sort of fashion. It was not very detailed. But it gave me a clear picture of the fact that as a people we were oppressed. My earliest memorable experience of the celebration of Ekushey February was in fact in Islamabad, Pakistan where my father was posted to work at the Bangladesh Embassy there. The year was 1984. It was my first true celebration of Ekushey February which was held at the Bangladesh Embassy premises on February 21st, 1984. Even at the tender age of 8, I had a very clear sense that I was in the "enemy country" whose leaders were responsible for shooting and killing our beloved brothers, whose deaths I was mourning that day. I think that was the first time in my life where I got a living glimpse of a vital part of our history that we were celebrating. My mother always played a vital role in my life when it came to being culturally active on occasions like these. She forced me to sing a song that day in front of all the embassy officials and their families. If I recall correctly, I think I sang "Moder Gourob Moder Asha ... amori Bangla Bhasha". There were other songs that were sung in chorus by my mother along with other aunties like "Ora amar mukher kotha kaira nitey chaey" and of course, "Amar bhaiyer roktey rangano Ekushey February". It is very hard for me to describe how I felt that day. I was very young and my knowledge was very limited as far as the details and causes of The Language Movement were concerned. All I knew, at the tender age of 8, was that the West Pakistani ruling elite ordered the police to shoot and kill our brothers for daring to