

Lives of language martyrs still little known to people

Textbooks do not have their biographies

DURDANA GHAS

More than half a century after the historic Language Movement, the lives and works of the martyrs who made supreme sacrifice for the mother tongue are still almost unknown to people as hardly any research has been done on this subject.

According to researchers, the exact number of the Language Movement martyrs could not be known yet.

The Language Movement veterans and people involved in research on the movement said the school textbooks also contain very little about the lives of the martyrs and others who contributed to the movement.

"From my school textbooks I came to know about the names of the language martyrs. Other than that I know nothing about them," said Mamun, a banker.

"According to the textbooks there were processions and the police opened fire, killing some people. But it is not clear how did it happen," he said.

Monima Siddika, a lecturer of accounting at Daffodil University, said: "I have learnt very little about the movement and the martyrs from my text-



names -- Abul Barkat, Abdus Salam, Md Rafiquddin, Shafiur Rahman and Abdul Jabbar," Mahub said.

"Last year we came to know about another martyr, a little boy of eight, named Ohiullah. He was studying in class three. His body was taken by the police from the spot. His grave however could not be traced," he added.

"Many bodies of the victims were taken away from the Dhaka Medical College morgue at the dead of night and buried at the Azimpur graveyard. But only three graves were identified," he said.

He said that in some cases even the photos of the martyrs could not be collected. "The picture of martyr Salam was painted by sculptor Rasha. Artist Shyamol Biswas painted the picture of Ohiullah based on facial description provided by our museum."

Prof Dr Mirza Mazharul Islam, a language veteran and chief consultant of surgery, Birdem, said the responsibility of including more about Language Movement and martyrs lies with the government.

"The significance of the Language Movement is no less than that of the Liberation War. I would rather call it language war where we all were soldiers. We had an enemy and we had to fight the opponents. This language war bore the seed of the Liberation War," he said.

"I want proper respect to be bestowed on the martyrs. The first step of honouring them can be including the biographies of the Language Movement martyrs in the school textbooks," said Prof Islam.

"I want to know more about the lives of the language martyrs in the textbooks like those of Birsresthos," said Sadia Hossain Adrita, studying at the Viharunessa Noon School.

Admitting inadequate information on the language martyrs in the textbooks Prof Dr Md Masiruddin, chairman, NCTB, said that any individual can write to him regarding the issue.

"If any individual feels like there is anything important left in the textbooks he can apply to me pointing out reasons. The application will be forwarded to the members of the curriculum committee. Then it will be forwarded to the NCCC [National Curriculum Coordination Committee] which will evaluate the application," he said.



STAR PHOTO

Above, busts of five well-known language martyrs, top, a mural on the Language Movement on the other side of the sculpture at the Bangla Academy.

books. To know about them I had to seek other sources like newspaper articles but will all children do the same like me?"

"Textbooks should contain more about the movement," she added.

MR Mahub, director,

Bhasha Andolon Museum, said: "We should include more about the Language Movement and the martyrs in the textbooks. It is our misfortune that we can glean so little about them from the textbooks."

About little research on the subject, he said, "Why we have

to say there are some 'unknown martyrs? Why could not we find them out?"

"We could not know the exact number of the Language Movement martyrs because many of the bodies were hauled away by the police. We managed to know only five



STAR PHOTO

Museum that heralds the history of a movement

Bhasha Andolon Museum doing it for about two decades without any state support

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Despite limitations and lack of support from the government, the Bhasha Andolon Museum, established to preserve the memories of the historic Language Movement of 1952, carries on its efforts to enlighten the younger generation about the glorious past of the nation.

Started with small collections in 1989, the museum on Dhanmondi road-10 has some rare evidence of the historical episode that include photographs, documents, paper clippings, memorabilia of the martyrs and those who fought for the mother tongue.

"State is the responsible party to uphold the history of a nation. Since they did not come

forward with any effort even after 55 years of the language movement, someone has to take the initiative," said MR Mahub, director of the museum.

"A museum on our Bhasha Andolon [Language Movement] is necessary for the new generation to learn more about the language movement. We only remember the episode when February comes. We have to do more than that," he noted.

"The history is gradually fading away. The Bhasha Shoiniks [Language Movement veterans] who could tell the next generation about our glorious past, will no longer be with us. We have already lost many of them. So we must bring together their memories and the important evidence of the move-

ment," said Mahub.

The museum has separate sections on research, exhibition, documentation, computer and film, publications and library, and administration, operated by enthusiastic volunteers.

Currently the museum has in its display the memorabilia, portraits and biographies of 30 Language Movement veterans, political leaders, student leaders and intellectuals who have made an immense contribution to our movement.

The same volunteers have been collecting the valuable items for the last 17 years.

Original copies of newspapers including Saptahik Shoinik, which was considered the voice of the movement at that time, pamphlets and manu-

scripts are on display.

The research centre comprises a library with a large number of books, archives, documentaries, diaries and written documents of the Language Movement.

The museum so far published 10 books related to the movement. A 2500-page encyclopaedia on the Language Movement is now in the final stage of publication.

The museum also made a documentary film with rare interviews of 20 Language Movement veterans who have already passed away.

Photographs donated by Mohammad Taqiullah, Mohammad Amanul Haque and Professor Rafiqul Islam are on display, portraying the movement from 1948 to 1952.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

Traditional sweepers face hard time as others take away jobs

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

The professional sweepers are facing hard times as mainstream people are gradually replacing them in their only profession that is cleaning the city.

Considered as untouchables, a lower caste of the society, the sweepers now struggle to cope with the situation, as they have no other skills. They are deprived of many fundamental and basic rights, monetary solvency and social support.

"All sorts of filthy things and nasty smell are part of our lives and we clean them with bare hands. This is what we do every day," said Mina Rani, a resident of Ganaktuli sweeper colony in the city's Hazaribagh area, describing their regular job.

Kanpuri by origin, Mina Rani is a member of the sweeper community that has been traditionally engaged as cleaners, a very unpleasant but indispensable profession for society.

But things have changed in recent times.

"The job of cleaning the city wastes is now a matter of competition. Now we have to compete with others for an occupation that no one else ever wanted before," Mina added.

The traditional sweepers who now call themselves 'Dalits' are originally descendants of immigrants from Kanpur, Nagpur and Andhra Pradesh of India, brought here by the British in 1830s to provide all sorts of menial services for the colonial rulers.

Most of these people are



STAR PHOTO

A common sight at a Ganaktuli alleyway.

Hindus. A few of them are Christians. They mainly speak Telegu, Kanpuri, Jabbarpuri, Hindi and a distorted form of Bangla adopted later.

There are no recent surveys on these people. However, according to a late 1990s survey of the United Nations, as many as 5.5 million Dalits were living in Bangladesh.

According to Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR), an

organisation working for the low caste people, around 32,000 sweepers live in Dhaka city. Among them, around 3,000 are employed by the Dhaka City Corporation for its cleaning and waste collection activities. The rest are employed by government and non-government agencies.

The sweepers live in 18 sweeper and Dalit colonies in the city. DCC set up such colo-

nies at Ganaktuli, Dayaganj, Dhalpur, Sutrapur, Agargaon and Gabtoli embankment. Around 5,000 more live in 13 smaller settlements in Naryanganj and Savar.

Their job includes sweeping the streets and offices, clearing clogs in the sewerage lines, cleaning up manholes, water reservoirs, hospital wastes and handling unidentified dead

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Students worshipping Swaraswati, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom, on Monday at a mandap at the Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University. The hall is one of the major organisers of Swaraswati Puja in the city.