

The heritage of Ekushey

It is a day for collective introspection

EVERY observance of Ekushey is a remembrance of the young men who made the supreme sacrifice in defence of the Bangla language this day in February 1952. They did so in order for all of us to be free to speak in that language. It is thus that we pay tribute to Salam, Jabbar, Barkat, Rafiq and all those others who scaled the heights of martyrdom and in doing so left us all a legacy that we were to consistently build on. In the broader sense of the meaning, therefore, every observance of Ekushey is a recapitulation of the story of men who made the first of many sacrifices in the larger interest of the Bengali nation culminating in the emergence of independent Bangladesh through a determined, spirited war of liberation in 1971.

Today, at a distance of time from the struggle launched in 1952, it is natural to ask whether we as a people have been able to uphold the legacy that the martyrs of Ekushey left for us. It is certainly true that the Bangla language has been honoured through February 21 being recognised as International Mother Language Day. And yet there is that perceptible feeling in us that the degree to which Bangla should have been a part of our education, indeed of our day-to-day approach to life, has not quite been attained. Nations with self-esteem constantly make efforts to have themselves defined by the emphasis they place on their distinctive cultural heritage, of which language happens to be the most important underpinning. It is from such a perspective that we need to ask ourselves today if we have met the test. This is important, for, one's understanding and use of one's language are what lead one to an appreciation of cultures in the wider world. That's why we also need to recognise and indeed promote the cultural and linguistic heritages of Bangladesh's indigenous peoples.

As we trek to the Shaheed Minar this morning, or offer silent prayers for the martyrs of Ekushey at home, let us resolve that the dreams inherent in the struggle of 1952 -- one of democracy and human dignity -- will be realised soon for all of us to be able to make our humble contributions, individually as well as collectively, to the building of a happy, prosperous future for Bangladesh.

Verdict for change in Pakistan

There should be no looking back

THE Pakistanis have delivered the message loud and clear -- they want unconditional restoration of democracy. This is good news for the country that has been bumping along a rugged political course, as President Musharraf's plan of maintaining his grip over power clashed with the political parties' demand for a return to democratic rule.

When the country's future looked rather bleak, as religious militants resorted to widespread violence, and the politicians appeared to be helpless, people have exercised their voting right to shape Pakistan's political destiny on a positive note. It's another example of people's power eclipsing the forces opposed to it.

Now that the voters have made known that they want power to change hands, with the PPP and the Muslim League (Nawaz) emerging as the two leading parties, President Musharraf should accept the results in good grace -- all the way. Even the defeated parties should come forward to give democracy a real chance to take roots in Pakistan's highly volatile and complex political setting.

The peaceful election has belied the apprehension that the election would be marred by violence and bloodletting. Though the voter turnout was not high, only 35%, Pakistan can now look forward to a fresh beginning, after politics was showing all the signs of getting lost in extra-constitutional maneuverings and machinations.

A wholesome development is that religious extremism, undoubtedly an area of major concern for Pakistan, has not made any impact on the elections. People have, by and large, voted for the parties having a moderate image.

The real challenge, of course, lies ahead as the political parties will have to steer Pakistan out of a crisis, deepened by strident regionalism, through providing a stable government. Many possibilities are open to them, but they have to make the most out of the situation created by voters' rejection of Musharraf's quasi-military rule. Alongside bringing back internal order, the new government will have to make special efforts to refurbish Pakistan's image in the outside world, which has been badly bruised by the rise of militancy in the garb of religion in recent months.

That said, Pakistanis have kept the hope of overcoming the odds alive, however insurmountable they might appear. And the politicians' task, at this point of time, is to fulfill the popular expectations by putting the country back on to the democratic track.

We don't want a let off commission



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WE understand that the "truth commission" (albeit under a new name -- it is good that the government has thought it fit to abandon the idea of naming it truth commission) is all but ready to be delivered to the people, whose aim it will be -- from as much as we can glean from whatever is available to the public so far (very little is made known to the public and, apparently, there is no intention on the part of the caretaker government to elicit public opinion on such an important issue either) about its substance -- to deliver the incarcerated businessmen, which will, in turn, hopefully, deliver the country from the clutches of the business syndicate.

Feature of the commission is that its dispensation will not be exclusive to the businessmen but will also include the politicians, particularly those that are behind bars on charges of corruption. This is an after thought, too, to accord an egalitarian character to the commission.

Noteworthy is the fact that the government is looking for another

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Owning up to a culpable offence and paying fines as a punishment cannot be an adequate expiation for the crime. But if the state feels that it is necessary for the greater good of the country, it must be applicable to all equally. Otherwise, this will go against the grain of natural justice as being discriminatory, and against the relevant article of the country's Constitution.

name to replace the much talked about "truth commission" -- a name accorded to an authority that was formed in several other countries with a more pious idea than to let off the hook, according to the perceptions of many, those alleged to have committed grave offences.

It is a sad reflection of our society and politics that most of those that have been taken into custody following the imposition of emergency, on corruption charges, are either businessmen or politicians. That does not in any way sully either of the professions. Not all businessmen or every politician can or should be painted with a broad brush.

However, in Bangladesh, many businessmen have taken to politics, and vice versa -- with predictable but unfortunate results. But the only calling to have suffered in Bangladesh had been politics. On the other hand, some businesses and businessmen-turned politicians have prospered.

It has become amply clear that business syndicates are strong enough to cause more than nuisance for the government if they

want to, and the very ham-fisted handling of some of the issues in the economic and commerce sectors has led to the market flux that has been exploited by certain sections of the less than conscientious business community. The consequence, many feel, has been the unbridled rise of prices of daily necessities. But if anyone feels that providing special dispensation alone to the businessmen now in custody will help stem the price rise should consider other options also.

The finger of guilt should not be pointed at any particular group collectively. The prima facie evidence against any person must be thoroughly investigated, and evidence so gained must be used to prove the case in the court of law. It doesn't speak well of either the anti-corruption drive or the legal system when alleged offenders are kept behind bars indefinitely without bringing any charges against them.

This saps public confidence in the system. And when some of those involved are the "luminaries" of the business world the impact is not only natural it is also inevitable.

The causes of excess liquidity in

the banks and poor rate of investment in capital goods are, therefore, not far to seek. This makes the vicious cycle of poverty even more vicious. However, by the same token, transgression of the law and contorting the system, either for political or economic benefits, cannot be allowed to go unpunished. But no one is guilty unless proven so, and that is why the sooner we can separate the alleged corrupt from the real ones the better will it be for us.

And this takes us to the operating mechanism of the new commission waiting to be christened. Some of its provisions, as reported in the media, deserve more than cursory attention.

Reportedly, the new commission will bring those among the 222 alleged corrupt in the list, that have not yet been charge-sheeted, under its ambit. They will be given the option of owning up to their crimes and paying a fine, whose volume will presumably depend on the volume of corruption indulged in. But what will make it a "bad law" is that it will not be retrospectively applicable.

Merely by confessing to their crimes and paying a fine the alleged persons can avoid a prison sentence and seek "rehabilitation." But those who have already been convicted on charges of corruption after the declaration of emergency will not get the "benefit" of the new provision. In other words, it means different dispensation for similar offence.

Owning up to a culpable offence and paying fines as a punishment cannot be an adequate expiation for the crime. But if the state feels that it is necessary for the greater good of the country, it must be applicable to all equally. Otherwise, this will go against the grain of natural justice as being discriminatory, and against the relevant article of the country's Constitution. Should this arrangement be implemented it must also allow those that have been awarded jail-sentence already on charges of corruption the advantage of the new provision.

One also fails to comprehend the word "rehabilitate" when the "confessing" offenders stand to have some of their rights curtailed by the commission, which they will be empowered to under the suggested provision of the proposed commission.

But it should also be kept in mind that being on the so-called list does not automatically prove one's culpability. And this has been clarified, though belatedly, by one of the advisors very recently. Thus, why should anyone on the list, or charged with corruption, volunteer a confession even if they are guilty, when they have quite a good chance to absolve themselves of the charges

through the exploitation of the many loopholes in our legal system? Further -- more, what will be the mechanism to ascertain or verify the statement regarding the amount profited through corruption?

And this brings us to the question of the anti-corruption drive in the country, particularly prosecution of the corrupt. The drive against corruption is multidimensional. The ACC's anti-corruption drive can see success if individual and institutional corruption can be stymied by identifying the corrupt, bringing them to justice, and ensuring that the trial results in conviction. For this, incontrovertible evidence will have to be gathered. The priority should be on putting on trial the alleged corrupt, prove the cases against them, and leave the court to award appropriate punishment. And the less time taken for the procedure to be completed the more will public trust on the ACC be reinforced. But again, while justice delayed can cause denial of justice, justice hurried often leads to justice buried.

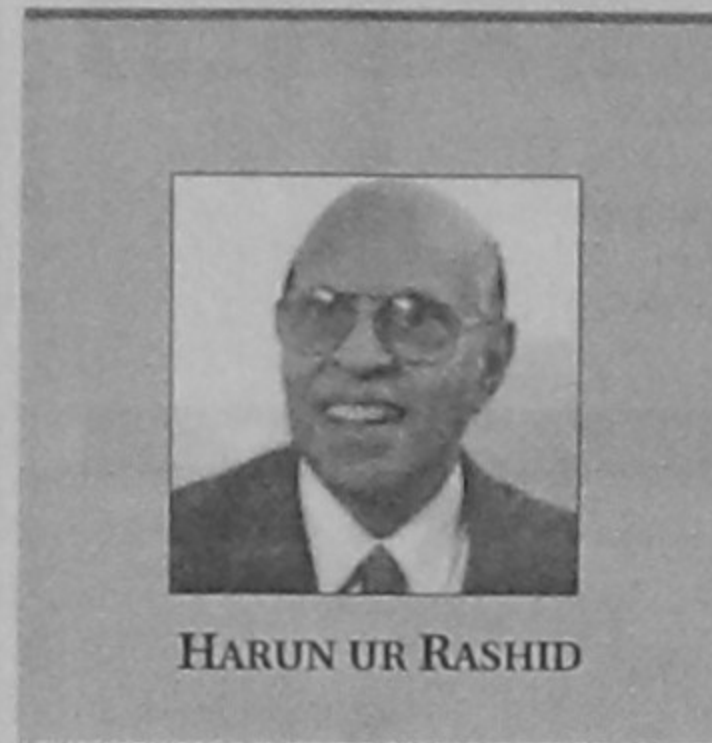
While one can understand the government's compulsion in forming a commission such as this as a corrective measure of actions gone awry, it should not lead to even more complications. But more importantly, the new arrangement should not be seen as a let-off mechanism for those that should really be behind bars -- for there are a few that no amount of confessions or fines can atone for their crimes.

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A day of mourning, reflection and action

BOTTOM LINE

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



HARUN UR RASHID

FEBRUARY 21 is a day of national mourning, reflection and action. It is the Language Martyrs' Day. It was fifty-six years ago that, among others, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiq and Salam sacrificed their lives for the honour and preservation of our mother language, Bangla.

In 1954, the United Front government of Abu Hussain Sarker declared this day as a public holiday.

February 21 is not only the Bangla Language Martyrs' Day in Bangladesh, but is also observed as International Mother Language Day. In November 27, 1999, Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) adopted February 21 as International Mother Language Day at the initiative of the Bangladesh government.

For the first time, at the call of Unesco, February 21, 2000, was observed as the International Mother Language Day.

Originally, the idea of an International Mother Language Day is believed to have been mooted by a few Canadian-Bangladeshis, and then the government of Bangladesh moved the proposal forward to Unesco. Bangladesh can rightly take credit for taking the initiative for the declaration of Unesco.

Therefore, it is a day of pride for all people of Bangladesh that the supreme sacrifice made on this day in 1952 has eventually led to the recognition of preservation of mother languages worldwide.

This Day has become a mile-

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

What did actually occur on February 21?

The Pakistani rulers wanted to impose Urdu on the Bengalee people, although Bangla speaking people constituted 56% percent of the people of united Pakistan. People of former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, strongly objected to it in 1948 when Mr. Jinnah, then the Governor General of Pakistan, announced it in Curzon Hall to Dhaka university students. There was an automatic "no" in response from students.

Mr. Dhirendranath 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 deaf ears of Pakistani leaders.

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

On February 21, 1952, agitated, unarmed students, both male and female, of Dhaka University decided to violate Section 144 (prohibiting an assembly of more than five persons) in order to proceed to the elected members of the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly (near SM Hall) to present their demand.

On their way, near the Medical College students' hostel number 12, at 3:30 PM, the police opened fire on

the peaceful procession of students on the order of a magistrate (a West Pakistani). Jabbar and Rafiq died on the spot, while three others died later in hospital (a makeshift monument had been set up by Medical College Students on the site of the current Shaheed Minar).

It is believed that many more were killed, including a ten year old boy, but their bodies were taken away by the police and were secretly buried. The rest is history.

Importance of mother languages

Mother language is what a child communicates in for the first time with his mother and father. It is a language a person never forgets, wherever that person lives. The mother tongue is a prism that determines first notions of the world to a child. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and thought is inseparable. It is the mother tongue that represents the 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 them are likely to disappear as smaller ethnic societies are gradually being assimilated into mainstream national and global cultures. For example, Middle Chulym is a language, now spoken by a handful of Siberian townsfolk (45 in number), has been

integrated into the Russian language, and once the last fluent speaker dies, the language will be extinct.

What is lost when a language is lost is another world, according to many language experts. Valuable ethnographic and cultural information disappears when a language dies, leaving a gap in understanding of the variable cognitive structures of which the human brain is capable.

Studies of different languages have revealed vastly 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 nature and human beings, 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.

Bangladesh is a multi-lingual country, although Bangla is overwhelmingly spoken in the country. The majority should ensure that indigenous languages of the tribal and adhivashi people in Bangladesh do not disappear. They must be promoted. Lingual variety will enrich our nation.

Importance of Bangla Language is an issue about which 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 is unique in the sense that it has many varieties of ways to describe an object. For example, in English, "eye" can be described in only one way, but in Bengali "eye" can be described in more than one way (akhi, nayan, chok, padmalochon etc).

Bengali writers in the past and present have enriched the language by transfusing Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English languages in it. Bangla was raised to its highest point by Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore) when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Have the ideals of the Martyrs' Day been fulfilled?

During almost 37 years of independence, the question for every one is whether the authorities and civil society have achieved the real significance of the Day. The test lies in 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 are imperative. In recent years, drop-out of poor students from schools (almost 50%) has become a big problem.

Book fair Since 1979, the Ekushey February Book Fair at the Bangladesh Academy premises has been held to honour the occasion. The fair will achieve its purpose if visitors to the bookstalls are able to buy good quality books. It is reported that during the first two-week period, only 69 serious books, but 259 novels and 141 storybooks came to the fair. Does it serve the purpose of the book fair?

It has been argued by many that some publishers are out to make a quick profit by urging noted writers to write novels and love stories for the fair. Since the Bangla Academy has nothing to say on the quality of published books at the fair, it has arguably become a purely commercial venture, exploiting young minds and sentiments.

Some argue that the very purpose of month-long Ekushey book fair is defeated by the cheap quality of many books, as they do not disseminate knowledge.

Another difficulty is that all books are not available from one stall because each publisher has its own stall (300-400 stalls in the fair) and a buyer has to move around all the stalls to buy books of his/her choice. The need for cooperation or coordination among publishers has to be addressed for the benefit of book lovers.

Another matter to be considered by the Academy is whether the book fair can be held in various parts of Dhaka metropolitan city for access to all, especially for the elderly who cannot stand for long in the queue to enter into the fair.

Every Bangladeshi has a right to read books in Bangla. But Bangla books have become very expensive because the paper and other materials for publishing books are costly. The government 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. Knowledge does not grow automatically. It needs to be carefully developed and nurtured.

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The end of conservatism



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writes from Washington

CONSERVATIVES are a gloomy bunch at the moment. Many believe that their party -- the Republican Party -- has lost its way and that it has done so by abandoning its principles. Aside from his foreign policy and Supreme Court appointments, conservatives find little to love about George W. Bush. His signature domestic policies include a vast expansion of government-financed health care

Political ideologies do not exist in a vacuum. They need to meet the problems of the world as it exists. Ordinary conservatives understand this, which may be why -- despite the urgings of their ideological gurus -- they have voted for McCain. He seems to understand that a new world requires new thinking.

(prescription-drug benefits), and increased funding for education while halfheartedly promoting vouchers and school choice. Bush also signed into law campaign-finance reform and supported a proposed immigration bill that would have allowed illegal aliens a path to citizenship. The Republican Congress is even worse, having indulged in an orgy of irresponsible spending. And now the party is set to nominate John McCain as its presidential nominee, a man who on several key issues has broken with Republican orthodoxy and voted with Democrats. For conservatives, a

return to principles is the only way to be returned to power.

David Frum, a former Bush speechwriter, begs to differ. "On the contrary," Frum writes in his smart new book, "Comeback," "the evidence suggests that a more consistent, more principled, more conservative administration would have been even more soundly rejected by the public than the unpopular Bush administration ever was." As Frum documents, every Bush policy that conservatives decry is in fact wildly popular. Public support for prescription-drug benefits ranges from 80 to 90 percent. And every Bush policy

conservatives favour is regarded by the public with great suspicion. A majority of Americans regard the Bush tax cuts as "not worth it," and would prefer increased spending or balancing the budget to cutting taxes. In the one area where Bush remains unfailingly popular with conservatives -- foreign policy -- public support has also collapsed. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of Americans who believe that military force can reduce the risk of terrorism dropped sharply between 2002 and 2006, from 48 percent to 32 percent.

Conservatism grew powerful in

the 1970s and 1980s because it proposed solutions appropriate to the problems of the age -- a time when socialism was still a serious economic idea, when marginal tax rates reached 70 percent, and when the government regulated the price of oil and natural gas, interest rates on checking accounts and the number of television channels. The culture seemed under attack by a radical fringe. It was an age of stagflation and crime at home, as well as defeat and retreat abroad. Into this landscape came Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, bearing a set of ideas about how to fix the world. Over the next three decades, most of their policies were tried. Many worked. Others didn't, but in any event, time passed and the world changed profoundly. Today, as Frum writes, "after three decades of tax cutting, most Americans no longer pay very much income tax." Inflation has been

tamed, the economy does not seem over-regulated to most, and crime is not at the forefront of people's consciousness. The culture has proved robust, and has in fact been enriched and broadened by its diversity. Abroad, the cold war is won and America sits atop an increasingly capitalist world. Whatever our problems, an even bigger military and more unilateralism are not seen as the solution.

Today's world has a different set of problems. A robust economy has not lifted the median wages of Americans by much. Most workers are insecure about health care, and most corporations are unnerved by its rising costs. Globalisation is seen as a threat, bringing fierce competition from dozens of countries. The danger of Islamic militancy remains real and lasting, but few Americans believe they understand the phenomenon or know how best to

combat it. They see our addiction to oil and the degradation of the environment as real dangers to a stable and successful future. Most crucially, Americans' views of the state are shifting. They don't want bigger government -- a poll last year found that a majority (57 percent) still believe that government makes it harder for people to get ahead in life -- but they do want a smarter government, one that can help them be safe, secure and well prepared for political and economic challenges. In this context, conservative slogans sound weirdly anachronistic, like watching an old TV show from ... well, from the 1970s.

"The Emerging Democratic Majority," written in 2002, makes the case that perhaps for these broad reasons, the conservative tilt in U.S. politics is fast diminishing. It gained a brief respite after 9/11, when raised fears and heightened nationalism

played to Republican advantages. But the trends are clear. Authors John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira note that several large groups have begun to vote Democratic consistently -- women, college-educated professionals, youth and minorities. With the recent furor over immigration, the battle for Latinos and Asian-Americans is probably lost for the Republicans. Both groups voted solidly Democratic in 2006.

Political ideologies do not exist in a vacuum. They need to meet the problems of the world as it exists. Ordinary conservatives understand this, which may be why -- despite the urgings of their ideological gurus -- they have voted for McCain. He seems to understand that a new world requires new thinking.

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