

Poems on Ekushey Theme Poems on Ekushey Theme Poems on Ekushey Theme Poems on Ekushey Theme Poems on Ekushey Theme Poems on Ekushey Theme

Note: There is hardly any Bangladeshi writing in English, creative or academic, prose or poetry, on *Ekushey*. All outpourings on this theme remain exclusively in the domain of Bengali. This fact is not surprising, given that it happened at a time when English creative writing was relatively unknown in these parts, and the truth is it is only lately that English creative writing is also being nudged by popular emotions and themes. English writing tends to remain aloof and cerebral, at a distance from the nation's teashops and streets, and the passions that can ignite and rule the streets. It is only with time and an enlargement of the subjects and topics that Bangladeshi English writers deal with will it engage with the nation's popular imagination and furies.



Till then on topics such as *Ekushey* one has to turn to the English publications translations and criticism - of the Bangla Academy, which has creditably tried to preserve some of the passions of that now distant day. It should be noted that while these writers may not quite live up to the standards now demanded of in Bangladeshi English writing, and that the language at times may be mechanical and atonal, it is also indisputable that such critical reading and sensitivity to the poets and the poems is deep and profound. As for

the poems themselves, if today they read as the direct, primal, unelaborated expressions of a simpler age, it is because they *are*. These poems, with their roots in anger and traditional similes, worked around simple rhythms, not only recorded feelings and the immediate events, but also functioned as a call to arms--a function that necessarily kept their movement, diction and tone, to an extent deliberately, straightforward and direct. Not for them the oblique, complicated utterance, play of forms, the nuanced exegesis, the, so to speak, Latinate, multisyllabic line. As editor M Harunur Rashid writes, "This is poetry of intense emotion. Emotion of this kind is to be come across over and over again in these poems. Love for man, love for one's mother tongue, love for one's country--all these go to make these poems unique in their own way."

Here are some poems and extracts from two Bangla Academy publications: *Ekushey'r Kabita: Poems on 21*" (edited by Mohammed Harunur Rashid, 1983) and *Poets Response to the Emergence of Bangladesh* (Mohammed Nurul Huda; 1986). One has to emphasize that it is difficult today, in this very different age and day, especially when an event has been overlaid with, and buried under myriad conventions and clichés of feeling, to understand the passions and furies that attended this day back in the old, now vanished East Pakistan. Hopefully, the notes from M N Huda's book will provide context and the vivid and poignant associations of imagery and words that may make for greater understanding for readers of these English translations of some *Ekushey* poems.

*Ekushey* is not an isolated phenomenon in the history of Bengali nationalism. Abul Hussain another veteran of the nineteen forties, emphasized the same as he goes on investigating into the 'games' played with the language since time immemorial:

Hossain uses the device of cataloguing while narrating the intrigues of the history of language. His reference to time (1948 or 1952) and places (Calcutta, Navadvipa, Gauda, etc.) serve as pointers to how and when the language fell victim to ominous designs of various quarters and interests. Tols, maktabas and Fort make us aware of three different influences that the language had to absorb in the course of its development. 'Tol' stands for the Sanskrit pundits who held the key to early Bengali, 'maktab' stands for the subsequent Muslim influences on it and finally 'fort' represents the Fort William College established and run by the Christian missionaries who played a pivotal role in shaping the up-to-date version of the language. Hussain also brings home the episode of Michael's (Madhushudhan Dutta) leaving home and coming back again. Stalwarts like Nazrul and Jibanananda are also remembered. In fine, he equates the language with his human existence, the country and countrymen.

Abul Hossain  
(translated by Mohammed Nurul Huda)

All games are played only with you.  
Not only today, not tomorrow  
Not in some '48 or '52,  
Not even on that immortal *Ekushey*,  
Not in Dhaka or Karachi  
Calcutta Navadvipa  
Or in Gauda,  
Not in Tols or Maktabas  
Or in the 'Fort',  
Not those people of today,  
Not only they, but also you and I,  
And our parents  
And their parents  
And their parents, too;  
For thousands of years  
Thousands and thousands of games  
In fields

Riverfronts  
Villages  
Markets  
In huts made of paddy stalks,  
In the mopped courtyards,  
In luxurious sofas,  
In winter and in summer.

All games are played only with you  
In many ways, for many years.  
Michael left home  
And came back again,  
The truant came back with a world title,  
Himself a rebel, Nazrul  
Made the whole country revolt,  
Jibanananda Das discovered the face of Bengal,  
Taking you to Barisal  
Fazlul Huq sobbed near the crumbling graves  
And inundated the lentil fields  
Shishir Bhaduri let his sobbing to  
The ears of Bengal for all times to come  
As he called out 'Sita, Sita',  
And my daughter, in the recent days,  
Plays with you and engages  
Herself always in rehearsals  
To hold you in her thrall.  
I, too, play with you  
As long as I am awake,  
I don't know what I do while sleeping,  
But if in you in my dreams,  
Sometimes I beseech you like a child  
For a word, toss about like one demented,  
All through the night.  
I know the depth of man  
Because I have tasted the flavour of your body,  
I have seen your face,  
And so I love my country and countrymen,  
And favoured as I am by you  
I bake my words like puffed rice  
In the hearth of my own heart.  
All games are played only with you  
Played by them  
And played by me alike.



artwork by sanjiv kanti das

After much blood sacrifice Bangla came to be recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan. And this spirit of the *Ekushey* did never die out. With the advent of every new 21st February, people trod the streets of Dhaka and other cities in mourning processions commemorating the martyrs and gathered at the altar of Shahid Minar and renewed their pledge regarding various problems and crises pertaining to national identity. The *Ekushey*, thus, got converted into a broader platform. This was aptly transformed into poetry by our poets. Sikander Abu Jafar could truly read that imbibed with the spirit of *Ekushey*, the history of the land was preparing to take a newer course. To him 'February 21 is a fearless journey on the road to consciousness.' Sikander developed a progressive outlook since the very beginning of his make-up as a poet. So unlike many of his contemporaries (Ahsan Habib or Syed Ali Ahsan), he hardly took refuge (in) poetic hide-and-seek in expressing his views. His role was more of a poet-worker than of an accomplished devotee of aesthetic excellence.

Sikandar Abu Jafar  
(translated by K Ashraf Hossain)

All the people get united in a second,  
They anointed their sinews, ribs and muscles  
With a new-born pledge,  
The history of the land pulsates on the horizon of time.

February 21 is a fearless journey  
On the road of consciousness,  
February 21 is a united being  
Of million men.

February 21 is written with the sleepless terror  
Of the conscience stricken egos,  
Who starts at the sound of falling leaves.

February 21 is the tearing explosion  
Of rage, of hatred,  
With her black flags, posters and blood-red scribbling of tears.

She is much changed now, alas!  
The unseen magic hands of treachery  
Stifles her; the black vampire of prudence spreads its wings;  
a shrouded giant stalks the stage of sorrow every year!  
(his name is foresight)  
A great popular upstage  
A strong faith in life  
Is now

February 21 is a mere silent memory  
Of the past,  
A misspent tear of people's pride,  
A pale history of an atrophied urge.

Sanaul Huq, belonging to the 1940s, subscribes to similar views as he too looks at the issue in historical perspectives. His emphasis is on the chain of changes, on sum(ming) up history in a few words referring to creation and disintegration of Pakistan, partition of Bengal and Bangladesh War. Huq deliberately uses the names of some seasonal red flowers like *Krishnachura* and *Palash* symbolizing the blood-smeared sacrifice of the martyrs.

Sanaul Huq  
(translated by Syed Najmuddin Hashim)

At times someone writes a poem  
Spends the livelong night  
Searching in letters of the alphabet  
The leaves with which to weave  
The names, the sound, the glow of words,  
Like the sparkle from the glow-worm's womb  
Sheltering in the dimple of the Akanda flower;  
How long ago was it  
When our favourite artiste  
Suchitra Mitra's voice  
Would enunciate Tagore songs  
To arouse words in the heart of music?  
Even before that  
The flowering Flame of the Forest,  
The blood-soaked alphabet  
In the cloistered haven of blackbirds--  
As if the starry night  
Echoes the uttered words,  
as if the solar universe  
echoes the cadence of classical Dhrupada,  
in the opera of words  
amidst the monsoon's rumble.  
One recalls Ustad Alauddin,  
The maestro in our immediate neighbourhood;  
So many changes since--  
The making and unmaking of states,  
The motherland suddenly foreign,  
In the sudden parting of blood-relatives  
The turmoil  
Kashiram Das suddenly deceased,  
Barkat and Salam departed,  
All dead and gone.  
The rudely awakened words  
Crow like a cock,  
The bright-red coxcomb flowers  
Bind the pages of our book,  
The letters of the alphabet  
Are a cascade of pearls--  
O, my beautiful Bengali language;  
At home and abroad  
It attains immortality  
By its time-conquering march,  
The orchestrated multiple voices  
Chanting in unison;  
What a wondrous spectacle  
Like the blessed rain  
At the month's end in Magha,  
The names of poems  
Blazing like the flaming blossoms  
Od Kingshuka and Pasha,  
Like the Kabori's bunched flowers  
That stand sentinel  
At my mother's grave!  
Classical times these--  
Like the nectar of grapes,  
Pots of honey,  
A floral offering of words--  
O, my beautiful Bengali language!

Abdul Latif's famous song *They Want to Snatch Away the Words of My Mouth* is a lyric of tense emotion. The very beginning line and title brings home the issue of language and condemns the ones who want to snatch away poet's mother tongue. He argues that one can never desert the language one has inherited from his ancestors. His way of presenting arguments as well as coinciding words and images is directly derived from the tradition of Bengali folk songs. The language he uses shows no trace of foreign influences; rather, he coins words from various dialects of Bangladesh. He also refers to great folk poets who have enriched the language over the ages.

Abdul Latif  
(translated by Mohammed Mirajul Quayes)

They want to snatch away  
The words of my mouth.  
They chain my hands and feet  
For sheer fun.  
What my grandfather spoke  
That too my father spoke  
And now tell me, brother mine  
Can any other tongue adorn these lips?

We won't have ti, no we won't  
We won't speak in an alien tongue  
We'll lay down our dear lives if need be  
To hold high  
The honour of the tongue of my forefathers.

Wehre else but here in bangla can you find  
Songs dear like my mothers  
And heart soft like hers.  
How can I forget, brother mine,  
My mother's honeyed words?  
Those whose songs still call  
The flood to a dead river,  
How can I afford to forget them  
Their peerless gifts through the ages?  
Mukund Das, Pagla Kanai  
Hason, Madon and Lalon--all;  
Their voices are also muzzled  
Can this sorrow be borne?

To uphold the honour of these gifted souls  
Who is ready to give his life?  
Come in groups all of you  
Or else you'll have forever  
Courtured your own disaster.

Don't be misled by their words.  
Brother, I forbid  
Don't dumb, you have your tongue  
Or be blind when you have eyes.  
They befriend you, brother  
And want to make you a washerwoman's mule  
That is why in meetins galore  
They whisper soft and sweet words.

Two centuries have you slumbered  
Bengalees, sleep not any more!  
Rise, there's no more time now  
Heaven't you yet understood  
Without Bangla there's no way out?

Apart from the largely acclaimed martyrs (Barkat, Salam, etc.), an unknown number of militant processionists laid down their lives during the Language Movement. Unidentified and unnoticed, they are like forgotten heroes killed in war. Humayun Choudhury refers to such martyrs ("But none ever engraved my name..."). Why are they so banished? The reason is not far to seek. During the peak hours of struggle, police used to take away the bodies of fatally wounded processionists and gave them back only after claims by relatives or their fellow comrades. But, at times, some of them remained ever unclaimed be cause of intricacies involved in the situation. Some even went either unnoticed by or they had no near and dear ones. Police often kept silent about them in order to reduce the number of official casualties. Such corpses were dropped by police at some convenient place where people could hardly trace out their identity or the cause of their deaths ("The fugitive light of the speeding police van/left my body unnoticed..."). But the fact is that their sacrifice did not go in vain. It is largely because of such selfless sacrifices that the battle of language was won by the Bengali people. More to it, such unnoticed sacrifices during various stages of the Bangladesh Movement crowned the entire process of the Liberation War with glowing success. Humayun Choudhury presents a surrealist description of how those unidentified corpses began to swell, growing bigger and bigger into a trembling shape and size of Bangladesh ("Thereafter the corpse began to swell...") In this poem Humayun Choudhury allegorically brings home the pervasiveness of Bangladesh War that was won at the cost of lakhs of innocent lives, most of whom, buried in mass graves, still remain unnoticed and unidentified. So the spirit of *Ekushey* also presaged the Liberation War that created Bangladesh.

Humayun Choudhury  
(translated by AZM Mustafizur Rahman)

I am waiting  
And waiting I will be.

For each traditional *Ekushey* engraves anew  
On faded bouquets three over-used names.  
Mute processions and thousands of footprints  
Obliterate our quest for the cherished address  
Of a free and accomplished motherland and  
In the first light of dawn ushered by the  
Morning procession

Are vainly uttered the songs,  
The songs of a sensuous life seeking to  
Conquer the enveloping darkness.  
But none ever engraved my name.  
I am banished,  
I have been ereased  
From the footnotes of the historians of the liberation war.  
I have no place, no address.  
No polular song meriting the medal of *Ekushey*  
Was ever composed in my name.  
I have always been banished  
From the marches and processions  
From the noisy stages of stormy debates  
Resounding from microphones of growing thunder  
Or from the unending monotony  
Of a hundred chirping poets beneath the banyan tree  
Of Bangla Academy;  
For an ill-tempered bull has chased  
And kept me out of the orgy of *Ekushey*'s carnival  
For more than three decades;  
And frightened and restless as I am,  
For three decades I have sheltered the red lotus  
Of my heart

I am not Salam, the tired clerk of the High Court,  
Whose hands are ink-stained  
From the ravages of piles of ledgers.  
I am not even Barkat, the bright youth of the  
University  
Whose clenched fist pierced the firmament.  
Or Jabbar, the plain rickshaw-puller  
Who hid his face deep in the full bosom  
Of his youthful wife.

Yet I was there,  
I was present there under the scorching heart of Ramna  
Like melted lead in the bubbling noon smitten  
By the bullets of '52  
In an incredible Phalgun  
Smeared with blood, bullets and *Krishnachura*.

The fugitive light of the speeding police van  
Left my dead body unnoticed,  
And till now I am unidentified  
Even after thirty-two colourful *Ekusheys*.

Thereafter the corpse began to swell,  
Its shape changed, growing bigger and bigger.  
It spread from the courtyard of the Medical  
College to the Race Course,  
From North to South,  
From East to West  
And tearing the stinking cloak of  
Belief and knowledge  
Passion and indecision  
And piercing through the worn-out and old  
Perception of time and land,  
It is not the trembling map of Bangladesh.  
Now the coiled Bay of Bengal hisses  
under its feet.

The head withstands the weight  
Of the Himalayas swaying in a terrible snowstorm  
And like an anchor the right hand grasps  
The warring plains of South Asia,  
And the Sundarbans gripped by its left hand  
Awaits an inevitable conflagration.  
Now it lies leaning downward  
On the sharp-edged knife  
For the pleasant time shall surely approach  
When that last throb of inarticulate pain  
Penetrates its heart,  
As ninety million grenades  
Detonate simultaneously in ninety million breasts.

Turning my face towards that final hatred,  
And my ears to that sound heralding the doom's day  
I wait  
And waiting I will be.

