

The spirit of Ekushey

It should move us to newer heights of achievement

FIFTY eight years ago, a band of young men made the supreme sacrifice of laying down their lives in the defence of our mother tongue Bangla. And they did so in the full knowledge that theirs was a death that would only harden the resolve of the entire Bengali nation in its struggle to be heard and to be accorded a place of dignity in the structure of the state. In other words, the struggle for Bangla in Pakistan was but the first manifestation of the general feeling in us that if we meant to live and thrive in self-esteem, we would need to keep eternal vigilance and thwart all the insidious moves that would be made to undermine our cultural heritage, indeed our historical calling as a society.

As the years after 1952 were to demonstrate all too clearly, the Bengali nation was always the target of political and social assault from the powers that were. And yet it was the spirit of Ekushey that kept us going. What essentially began as an insistent, determined struggle to ensure the dignity of our language was to evolve in time to a movement for autonomy before finally attaining the transcendental character of an armed struggle for liberty in 1971. It was this progression from a struggle for language to a war for national liberty that has been our defining principle as a people and as a state. It is this principle we uphold today as we recall the martyrs of February 21, 1952 for the glory they achieved and for the pride they engraved in our national self-awareness through their hallowed end.

All these years after 1952, it becomes important for us to step back and take a hard look at what we have achieved where the pre-eminence of Bangla in our collective life is concerned. Obviously a good deal remains to be done, especially when Bangla is the medium of instruction in our educational institutions. It is a pity that even after 38 years of national independence we are far from attaining a hundred percent literacy and the state of our education needs to be vastly improved.

The matter of translations of works from other languages -- in literature, the sciences, et cetera -- is a subject we must tackle firmly and quickly if Bangla is to attain a recognised and esteemed place in the global community. The very fact that Ekushey is nowadays observed globally as International Mother Language Day is a challenge thrown our way. It is that in terms of education, in terms of the scholarly, we must do a whole lot more to elevate Bangla to a place where it will fulfil our intellectual needs.

Finally, any observance of Ekushey must come in the knowledge that we need to pass on the legacy of the sacrifices of 1952 to our children and to our children's children in the interest of history. And that can come about through a promotion of good, cultured Bangla in the way we speak it and write it. Ekushey, in so many words, is a call to modernity for the Bengali nation. Let that be the focus as we reflect on the day today.

Our tributes go out from the inner recesses of our being to the martyrs of February 1952. Their sacrifice did not go in vain. Their aspirations will find a necessary way to fulfilment.

Prohibition of toxic-ship breaking

Loopholes continue to exist

THE ministries of commerce and environment and the Department of Explosives are the operative authorities which share the responsibilities in varying degree of saving the ship breaking yard workers from health hazards and the surrounding environs from pollution. But it seems there is little coordination in the way they operate or at worst, they are working at cross-purposes.

This is illustrated by the fact that the environment and forest ministry in a letter to the commerce ministry advised the latter to relax its rules regarding import of toxic ships without submission of pre-cleaning certificates from the exporters. This is shifting from the commerce ministry's amendment to its import order on January 28 making it obligatory on the ship exporters to submit pre-cleaning certificate before any ship enters our territorial waters.

It is stated by the environment and forest ministry that government officials would examine the ships to issue cleaning certificates at this end. What we can understand is that the responsibility of whether a ship carries toxic substances would now critically and entirely, devolve on our officials. Of course, these would have to be examined at our end; by all means do it; but would it not have been a fail-safe mechanism if the pre-cleaning certificates were produced by the exporters to do an effective cross-checking with? We feel that the relaxation of the rule could spawn manipulation, and even corruption, even though the environment ministry seems determined not to allow intrusion of hazardous vessels in to our maritime territory.

As it is, a large number of ship breaking yards themselves have no clearance certificates; yet they are operating with impunity risking all sorts of hazard to 30,000 workers and posing economic risks to their dependents.

Clearly, government's compliance with the High Court directives to formulate necessary ship-breaking laws in conformity with Bangladesh's obligations under international conventions and her own environment conservation act and rules has been long overdue.

Observing Ekushey in its real spirit

What is the meaning of observing the day with all solemnity by the urban middle class, if the larger mass of the working people, most of whom are unable to read and write and deprived of the knowledge to revisit their own glorious past, watch it all with an indifferent look?

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

THIS will be the 58th occasion on which Bengalees everywhere will observe February 21 as the immortal Language Martyrs' Day. The movement that the students of Dhaka University and other educational institutions launched, in defiance of the draconian laws imposed by the then-Pakistani rulers to press home their demands to establish the status of Bengali as the state language, have all found their due place in the pages of history. We are all proud that the day has, by now, earned global recognition as the International Mother Language Day.

The fact that the significance of immortal Ekushey, or February 21, has crossed geographical bounds speaks volumes for the glorious sacrifice of the language martyrs. So, there is no point in trying to further consecrate their sacrifice with complimentary phrases, an effort many make often in their writings and speeches. On the other hand, it is more important that our future generations and we further hold aloft the cause for which they laid down their lives.

Much water has flowed down the Padma since the language martyrs drenched Dhaka streets with their blood. Meanwhile, we won our independence as a sovereign nation, the struggle for which was not a singular event separated from the past. In fact, the language movement had sown the first seeds of the national independence struggle, for only through winning political independence from foreign domination can a people honourably establish their mother tongue. In other words, the struggle that started with the language movement completed its mission by achieving national independence. Yet, have we ever understood the underlying significance of the continuity of this struggle?

People, especially of the working class, most often look vacantly before a camera when faced with questions like "Do you know what is Ekushey (21st) February" or "Why are all these arrangements on this particular day for?" The questioners, who represent the educated middle class, often forget that this event's history, though so obvious to

them, is not the working people's cup of tea. Sometimes, some among the enlightened sections of society get upset with the common people's ignorance or their lack of historical sense. But how does one really know history? It is through education. Working class members, who are not enlightened and empowered, are hardly aware of their own past, let alone that of the whole nation. Their memories are bound by their own lives and their struggle for mere physical sustenance, day in day out. It is an irony that no struggle by any section of the people ever succeeds unless it draws strength from the mass people. This is also true of the historic language movement, which would never have seen the light of success if the common people were not behind it with rock solid unity. One may recall here that most students who marched with the protest rally of February 21, 1952 came from different corners of rural Bangladesh. Their blood made their cause close to their fellow people's hearts across the country. Sadly though, the harsh struggle for everyday existence and the penury they have been through has forced them to forget the history their own children once wrote in the letters of blood. This is undeniably something very unfortunate for a people known worldwide for their historic struggle, like the language movement.

It is at this point we have to face the old question afresh. Have we really been showing true respect to the language martyrs through our observance of Ekushey every year with much fanfare and publication ceremonies of new books in Bangla? What is the meaning of observing the day with all solemnity by the urban middle class, if the larger mass of the working people, most of whom are unable to read and write and deprived of the knowledge to revisit their own glorious past, watch it all with an indifferent look? Have we in the cosy urban ambience, who also control the politics, ever given serious thought on why and how we failed to bring the mainstream of society in the observance of Ekushey?

On the face of it, the question boils down to this: "We have been unable to convey the message of Ekushey February



We must continue the language martyrs' work.

among the greater mass, because the light of education is yet to reach every home." It is only after completing this task that we will be able to fulfil the mission the language martyrs have left unfinished.

There is no gainsaying the fact that successive governments have been trying, in their own way, to increase the number of educated people in society. In spite of their efforts, it cannot be said that they have been able to make much progress, for ignorance goes hand in hand with poverty. With the population increasing along a geometric curve, the attending poverty, which begets ignorance, is also growing in direct proportion.

This is again another uneven race that the nation is bogged down in. How are we to fight this most crucial struggle, which

was also implied in the struggle that the language martyrs waged fifty-eight years ago?

To show real respect to the language martyrs, it is therefore not enough that we remember them every February 21 through our songs, books, special supplements in the literature pages of newspapers, and placing floral wreaths at the base of the Shaheed Minar (Language Martyrs' Memorial). The best way to honour them is to succeed in completing the unfinished economic revolution so that the toiling masses are freed from the bondage of poverty and the curse of ignorance. It is this revolution that will ultimately remove the veil of ignorance denying them access to their own history.

Syed Fatahul Alim is a senior journalist.

International Mother Language Day

Bangladesh, as the initiator of the proposal, had also committed herself not only to preserve and enrich our own mother language, Bangla, but also to take initiatives for the preservation of 6,000 other languages currently spoken in the world as well as to promote the *ekushey chetona* (the spirit of our language movement) globally.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

MORE than a decade ago, the 30th session of the Unesco General Conference unanimously adopted a resolution tabled by Bangladesh and cosponsored by 28 countries, proclaiming February 21 as International Mother Language Day. It is a matter of pride and glory for the nation that our immortal "Amar Ekushey" is now also observed all over the world. On this day, people in 185 countries promise to preserve their mother languages, like our immortal language martyrs had done nearly six decades ago. What a befitting tribute to our martyrs!

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It is unfortunate that even this rare international achievement got entangled in our polemical national politics. Since the resolution was adopted during the Awami League's tenure, the BNP-led government that came to power in 2001 decided to downplay this national achievement and suspended all actions to fulfill our international commitment.

The audio-visual materials on Ekushey February, which we were expected to send to all the countries to promote the spirit of Ekushey, were not sent. The proposed Mother Language Study and Research Centre in Dhaka,

whose foundation stone was laid by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's visit to Bangladesh in March 2001, was not completed. This is particularly tragic since the Centre was expected to take concrete steps for the preservation of all mother languages, especially when a large number of them are dying at an alarming pace.

Even if we were not ready to play the international role, at least the proposed Centre could take some concrete steps to preserve all the mother languages in Bangladesh. The overwhelming majority of our people speak Bangla; yet there are roughly thirty minority ethnic and tribal groups, and about two million of our people speak in various tribal and dialectal and ethnic languages and dialects. These languages are also disappearing fast, and we must preserve them to preserve our linguistic diversity and heritage. The proposed Centre could be a beacon in this direction.

What have we done to internationalise our mother language Bangla in this computer era? Sadly, Bangla -- spoken by about 250 million people in the world today -- has not yet got its due place in the computer system. Global software makers have incorporated more than 250 languages into the operating systems, but Bangla, I understand, is still not among them. On the other hand, Bangla was incorporated in the computer Unicode as one of the state languages of India, and not as our national language. This tragic error should be rectified forthwith.

In this era of globalisation, we need to redouble our efforts to enrich Bangla by



Bangla is now recognised all over the world.

translating books and even the current best sellers. Here, one sees that some efforts have been taken by small commercial enterprises, but their accuracy in translation may not be up to the mark. Bangla Academy could play a more pivotal role in this regard.

What about the audio-visual materials on our language movement? The Department of Films and Publications could produce authentic documentary films on our language movement and our language martyrs. The government could also provide finance and utilise the talent of our internationally acclaimed film directors to make feature films based on our language movement.

The Ekushey Book Fair arranged at the Bangla Academy should be enlarged and internationalised so that publishers from all over the world feel inclined to participate, as they do every year in New Delhi and elsewhere. This would put our books and publishers on the world map, and thus benefit us immensely.

One feels sad that we have so badly let down our well-wishers abroad, particularly those who had co-sponsored our draft resolution. Our missions abroad,

taking into account the sensitivity of the home countries, could involve the local academicians and language specialists in our observance of the day in various capitals.

As someone who had the privilege of being associated with the proposal from beginning to its final adoption, and its formal launching in Paris, I believe that our mission in Paris has a special role in the observance of the day at the Unesco Headquarters every year through intellectual get-togethers and cultural exchanges.

Unesco formally launched the day a decade ago. It is now Bangladesh's turn to play the prime mover's role to spread the Ekushey spirit all over the world so that people feel encouraged to protect their respective mother languages. Let us then rededicate ourselves to fulfill our commitment. The proposed Research Center should be completed and commissioned as soon as possible.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary. He introduced the draft resolution as Bangladesh's Permanent Representative to Unesco at its 30th Conference on November 12, 1999 and piloted its unanimous adoption.