

Ekush is a Tale of One-Acre Pain

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They love, they are exiled from love
They do not know how to become happy.

Ekush is therefore an account of one-acre pain
The brutes have kept the Twenty-first occupied.

We shall have to go back there.
Ekush is a tale of one-acre pain
The brutes have occupied the Twenty-first since long.

The flag of protest has to be flown again
The bullets should hit us once more
We shall have to return afresh from exile.

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed

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Language, Nationalism and Struggle for Secular Bangladesh

important;...In nothing does the national character, the imprint of the mental and spiritual power of a people, express itself as clearly as in language." In his opinion 'language is the real home of mankind.' Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee said with more clarity, 'Had there been no language, there would not be any nation.' Further he said, "The Bengalee nation means the people who uses Bangla as their mother-tongue or use it as their intimate language'. In another way, the opinion of Dr Sukumar Sen too is similar. He said, "Language relates to nation, nation relates to country. With the beginning of Bangla language, the Bengalee nation owns their history simultaneously'.

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah speaking about our identity at the literary conference of East Pakistan on December 31, 1948 declared. 'We are Bengalee.' Language is the uniting bond of nationhood. Language is linked with culture. Culture represents the sum total of socio-economic pattern, life-style, history and legacy of people who speak the same language inhabiting in a particular area of land. At one time even anthropological similarity was considered to be the indicator of nationhood. But in recent times, difference of opinions are markedly noticeable in this regard. It is not unlikely that people having same anthropological ancestry have more than one state-identity. But that does not alter their original nation-identity which is determined by mother-tongue and culture. The diversity of opinions about the definition of nationhood still remains the cause of major and serious tragedy in our national life. The communalism between Hindus and Muslims and the use of religion in politics is responsible for this tragedy.

The renaissance that visited the Bengalees in the nineteenth century revolved around the followers of the Hindu and Brahmo faiths. Since renaissance was anchored to religion, not only the Hindu community in general, but also many secular and liberal-minded intellectuals considered Hinduism and Bengality corroborative to each other. The Bangla-speaking Muslims, on the other hand, who were not touched by this renaissance suffered from inferiority complex, and even felt shy to consider themselves as Bengalees because of the communal reaction of the Hindu community. Despite Bankim Chandra had a communal bearing, he considered Bengalee Muslims as part of the indivisible nationhood. Even Surendranath Banerjee considered linguistic unity as the determining factor in the construction of nationhood. Although having the same language, the Muslim society remained aloof from this renaissance as the newly awakened Hindu middle-class upheld religious sentiments in their nation-consciousness. When the Muslim middle-class who were already fifty years behind were drawn to English education, they too had by then developed a sense of separatism based on religion. The rise of communal politics in the sub-continent disarrayed, distorted and communalised the common nation-consciousness of both Hindu and Muslim communities alike and made it religion-based. In this matter, the aristocratic Urdu-speaking Muslims and the Ramayani myths of Indianism served as catalysts for both the Muslims and Hindus. In India, particularly in Bengal, the leadership of the Bengalee Muslims rested with the Urdu-speaking aristocrats and their Muslim clan of northern India. They never considered the Bengalee Muslims as pure and refused to recognise Bangla as the language of Muslims. The Hindu middle-class who believed in caste-class divide was dependent on the so-called Aryans of upper India. Hindus of upper India who prided in their Aryan ancestry were able to convince the educated Hindu Bengalees that Sanskrit or Aryan language was the vehicle of their religion and language. Stirring the glory of Sanskrit and old Hinduism, they were able to overwhelm the anti-British Hindu middle-class with confusion and narrow-mindedness so that they realised they were different from the Muslims as a nation. Hinduism and Hindi and Sanskrit languages impacted the Bengality in ways that created in them an all-India national outlook.

On the contrary, the Muslims accepted Urdu with Arabic alphabets in place of Sanskrit. Urdu, Islam and Mussalman had almost become synonymous. Aligarh movement, Nawab Abdul Latif of Bengal, Syed Amir Ali, Nawab family of Dhaka (even Suhrawardy family), Sir Abdur Rahim including educated Muslim leaders turned inimical to Bangla. Sir Rahim had even opposed teaching Bangla till matriculation. Religion-based language sensibilities of the two faiths ultimately heralded birth of nation-consciousness rooted in religion. The religion-

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International Mother Language Day How this great national honor was achieved at the UNESCO

had highlighted the need for preservation of mother languages, should not apparently pose any problem to any member-country. But in reality, many of the European and other countries, some of which are the main contributors to UNESCO's budget, have multilingual societies, and the issue of mother language is a highly sensitive issue in their countries. Their underlying concern was that the proclamation of the Mother Language Day might trigger off new unrest in their own countries. I personally met the Permanent Representatives of those countries and explained to them that the main objective of our effort is to preserve all languages. We also highlighted the historic fact that linguistic differences do not cause wars, intolerance does, and that respect for each other's mother languages would only strengthen national and international solidarity.

Our vigorous diplomatic efforts in Paris were successful and we were able to enlist co-sponsorship and support of some 28 countries from different continents, but one could still feel the underlying concern of some multilingual European member countries. Finally, on 12 November, I was given the opportunity to introduce the draft resolution at the Second Commission. In our broad-based statement, I underlined the primary role of UNESCO in the

based nation-consciousness originating from such unscientific, reactionary and religio-communalism that was based on the concept that Hindus and Muslims were two separate entities (as propounded by Hindu Mahashava and Jinnah of Two-Nation Theory) which ultimately culminated in generating religion-based state-consciousness. The Hindu and Muslim leadership had taken initiative to decide the limits of their followers in regard to their rights and prominence within the framework of India even before the idea to divide the country on lines of religion had matured enough.

It is true that National Congress and leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Moulana Abul Kalam Azad had a vision to found India as a secular state. But the India-wide leadership of the Muslim League took advantage of the deprivation, grievances, inferiority complex and rabid communalism of the Bengali Muslims to galvanise their followers to create Pakistan based on religion. In such ways the division of India was completed due to temporary, suicidal religious frenzy of the Bengali Muslims and imprudence of the narrow-minded Congress leadership. Thus was born an artificial state called Pakistan. Following the same argument that led to the creation of Pakistan, Urdu was declared as the state language of Pakistan. Consequent upon the imposition of Urdu language which had its origin outside Pakistan (Uttar Pradesh) on the Bengali-speaking people who constituted 56 percent of the total population of Pakistan, the Bengali people rose in protest to protect the honour of the Bengali language, Bengali nationalism blossomed and eventually a sovereign Bangladesh emerged on world map.

The language movement spearheaded by young Sheikh Mujib in 1948 was transformed into a robust movement in 1952. In reality, this movement centering on language issue gloriously culminated in defining Bengali nationalism or self-identification and in founding of a nation state. In terms of history, the language movement gifted us with four incomparable contributions:-

1. To shake off inferiority complex from the minds of the Bengali Muslims and inspire them with the idea of secular Bengali nationalism.
2. The concept of nation-state of the Bengalees that were so explicit in Bangabandhu's 6-point Programme prepared the Bengalees in stages which ultimately culminated in the liberation war of 1971 and emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign people's republic.
3. Language movement freed for the first time the mother-tongue, Bangla, Bengali nation and state-consciousness from the legacy of religion-based communal legacy. Language has no religion, it is universal. There can be no nation based on religion. State is no natural arm of a nation and language. State can be multi-national. But our linguistic and territorial unity made the emergence of Bangladesh inevitable through the classic leadership of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.
4. Lastly, the international appeal of the movement to protect the honour of mother-tongue Bangla. The recognition of Bangla as the main state language was the primary slogan of the language movement. As said earlier, the Bengali nation, for reasons of her racial characteristics, never nursed any negative attitude toward Urdu, Hindi, English or any other language.

In Bengal, Bangla was the common language for all. But here rulers' language was in domination. In ancient times, Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Moithili (Hindi) and in Mughal period Parsi were used as state language while Arabic and Sanskrit were used for religion and for ordinary conversation Hindi, Urdu and Hindusthani (mixture of Hindi and urdu) were widely used.

Translated by: Syed Badrul Haque

preservation of languages, expressed concern at the fast disappearances of mother languages, and emphasized the need to proclaim an International Mother Language Day to create greater awareness.

As regards earmarking 21st February as the day, I recalled the supreme sacrifice that our martyrs had made on that day in 1952 for the preservation of our mother language Bangla - an unprecedented event in



UNESCO's then Director General Koichiro Matsuura launching the International Mother Language Day at the Organization's Headquarters in Paris on 21 February 2000.

contemporary history. Here I also drew a parallel to the proclamation of May Day as the International Labor Day to commemorate the shooting and killing of striking labor of "8-hour working day movement" in Chicago in 1886.

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Nation and State-Building through Language Movement

knowledge, science and philosophy. In other words, they absorbed the world's best thoughts in Bangla language and culture. Although the medieval Bengal did not get the opportunity to embrace geographic discoveries, industrial revolution, development of science and technology, rationalism and abolition of the supremacy of church or religion, it demonstrated wisdom and foresight in putting 'man' above all else, which was the greatest product of European Renaissance. The famous poem of Chandidas claiming the supremacy of humans may be recalled here. It was an amazing achievement of the human tradition of the Bengalees. Similarly, the 'human jewel' or 'human avatar of the kali age' brought out from the hearts of pre-modern Bangladesh by Lalon Fakir, their modern edition manifested through the practice of Rammohun Ray's Bangla language and the worship of humanism filtered out by the West were articulated simultaneously. It then becomes evident that the roots of Bengalee culture go deep inside the native soil and has acquired the needed strength to take root and blossom on the global horizon. But the state honour of our language was not achieved in that manner.

It was on 21st February 1952 that the achievement of the glory of state-language by the Bangla language became inevitable. The strong and indigenous cultural base of the Bangla language and its international linkages has been an outcome of the characteristics of our Bengalee psyche. Again, the moral base of the cultural consciousness of the Bengalees is a commitment towards the flourishing of culture and language of all small national entities. That is why, there was a clear declaration from the doctrinaire leaders of the language movement, 'We seek equal honour for all languages' (see Khoka Ray's essay, written with the pseudonym Ali Ashraf, in the compilation 'Ekushey February Sangkalan', edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman). How scientific, global and farsighted the declaration of strategies for language movement by the Bengalees of Bangladesh was has been evidenced by the recognition of 21st February, the language movement day of Bangladesh, as the 'International Mother Language Day' by the global community 48 years after its occurrence. The selection of Bangladesh's 21st February for the flourishing of culture of all nations, small nationalities and suppressed languages is therefore a matter of immense pride for the Bengalee nation. But are we conscious about the need for making a distinct contribution based on the strength of our Bengalee culture and language?

Two. The power and promise of the language movement was multidimensional. Its roots did not lie merely in the goal of making Bangla the principal state-language of the then Pakistan. Its objective was to create a powerful, secular and worldly trend of mainstream culture by synthesising the progressive elements in the thousand-year old Bengalee lifestyle. If that was done, then it could mediate with the global trend of scientific progress and modern culture. As a result, our culture was expected to become a valuable component of global culture by blossoming into a distinct shape having original splendour and affluence. But that was a long-term goal. It was not that the leaders and participants of the language movement did not have in their minds the strong infrastructure that was needed for materialising it; that was certainly present in a seed form. But its main objective was overall flourishing of the anthropological race. It could have been done on the basis of ethnic right to self-determination under the federal state structure of Pakistan. But that possibility was shelved when the Pakistani autocrats resorted to racist repression instead of granting autonomy and cultural independence to East Bengal.

It may be mentioned that not only the materialists, the pragmatists within the Islamist fold of Bangladesh also rejected the vile attempt to impose Urdu language on Bangladesh by Jinnah, Liaquat Ali and others, and highlighted the inevitability of state language Bangla. Even before the creation of Pakistan, the utterances of Islamist scholars regarding the mother language of Bengalee Muslims and their objections against the attempts by rulers to impose Urdu after the establishment of Pakistan were both timely and logical. Here we shall present the articulations of only two among them. First, let me quote from Moulana Moniruzzaman Islamabadi, who was a renowned Islamic scholar and secular, nationalist political leader: "Bangla is the mother language of almost the entire Bengalee population. There is no difference here between Hindus and Muslims. Although the mother language of Muslims in Dhaka, Kolkata, Murshidabad and Chittagong towns has become distorted due to mixing of Urdu and Bangla, they are habituated with expressing their thoughts in both the languages; in fact, they are more dependent on Bangla rather than Urdu at all layers of their family lives. They have to use Bangla in all paper-works, documentations and correspondence. Therefore, there cannot be any difference of opinion that Bangla is their language as well.

"It is an undisputed truth that no nation can climb the ladder of progress without developing its mother language. If we look at the history of the civilised world, not a single instance can be found on earth where a nation had been able to climb the ladder of progress without the

Fortunately, our persistent behind-the-scenes lobbying worked. A good number of our co-sponsors made statements supporting our resolution. Consequently, the multilingual European delegations could not oppose our draft resolution and it was unanimously adopted at the Second Commission. To someone who was not directly involved in the lobbying process or familiar with multilateral diplomacy, this might have seemed easy sailing, but for those of us, who had been pursuing the matter tirelessly, this brought a great sense of achievement and relief.

Finally, as noted earlier, on 17 November the Plenary of the General Conference formally adopted our draft resolution proclaiming "Amar Ekushey" as the International Mother Language Day. Subsequently, the then UNESCO Director General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura formally launched the Day at the UNESCO headquarters on 21 February 2000, amid speeches, a Bangla musical program and display of books on languages.

In March 2001 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation of an International Mother Language Institute in Dhaka in the presence of the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. As a part of our international commitment, it should be our national endeavor to complete the project soonest possible to protect and preserve all languages. That would be a befitting tribute to our Shaheeds. ■

assistance of their mother language. It is true that the Arab nation ruled Persia for a long time after entering it -- but despite that they could not introduce Arab literature there in place of the native mother language. --- The Turks were able to reign over their empire spreading across three continents for the last 600 years with the help of their mother language. The example of India is even brighter. The mother language of the ruling class of the Mughals, Pathans and Muslims were Arabic, Turkish and Farsi for almost one thousand years starting from the Arab era, but their languages and their influence could not occupy the places of provincial or mother languages of India. Hindi, Gurmukhi, Gujarati, Telenga, Bangala, Assamese and Orissi languages of India remain intact in this land even today" (presidential address at the literary conference of Bengalee Muslims held at Bashirhat in 1334 B.S.).

The sarcastic remarks made by Moulana Akram Khan on the subject of mother language of Bengalee Muslims deserve special mention here. He had said: "There are many types of strange questions in this world. What is the mother language of Bengalee Muslims? Urdu or Bangla? This question is the strangest of all. What will a coconut tree yield - coconut or wood-apple? If anybody wants to enter into an argument with us on this question, then instead of debating with him, we shall try to buy him a ticket for Bahampur by collecting money from friends. With it the reality that Bangla language has been used as their written and oral mother language since the start of the Muslim history and this application of mother language will continue in the future as well" (presidential address at the 3rd literary conference of the Bengalee Muslims held in 1325; quoted from the Baishakh issue of 'Bangio Musalman Sahitya Patrika').

Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah presented the issue of mother language for Bengalee Muslims from the anthropological perspective of nation-building. He said, "We Hindus Muslims Buddhists Christians of Bengal are a single mixed race" (Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah Smarak-grantha 1985, p. 403). He told the Muslim students: "Why do you forget, you are Bengalee? The bloods of the Aryans, Mongoloids, Dravidians, Arabs, Parsis, Afghans and Turks have mingled in your arteries" (introduction to previously mentioned book, p. 16). Shahidullah's goal was to make possible the forging of a 'single nation' through equal participation of the Bengalee Muslims in the flourishing of Bengalee language and culture. He had advised the Bengalee Muslims to adopt native names for building the Bengalee nation in a coordinated manner. And there was no scope to doubt that the main pillar of this nation-building was the Bangla language. And that is why he had viewed the imposition of another language atop of Bangla as something akin to genocide in Bangladesh. And he urged the educationists including himself to revolt in order to resist such vile attempt: "We educationists should, however, emphatically protest, and if necessary should revolt against the fresh imposition of any language other than Bengali as the medium of instruction for East Bengalee students. This imposition will be tantamount to the genocide of East Bengalees."

Three. Consequently, the language debate among Bengalee Muslims, thoughts for nation-building and the final phase of the language movement (1948-52) are bound by the same thread. The Bengalees of Bangladesh dreamt of a state of their own by combining these three elements, and waged movements by sacrificing lives during '52, '54, '62, '66, '69 for upholding the honour of their language, autonomy and self-determination; they made possible the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign, secular and democratic nation-state by sacrificing the lives of 30 million martyrs. The struggle that started with the language debate of the middle-ages - when poet Abdul Hakim of Sandwip played a belligerent role on behalf of Bangla, his successors Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah and Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haque placed it within the context of a nation-building process.

Against this historical backdrop and trend, scholarly writers S. Wazed Ali ('Bengalee of the Future') and social scientist Nazmul Karim ('Samakal 57') could see the promise of Bengalee nationalism and nation-building, albeit in a seed-form. And by consolidating their experiences, the inspiration of Rabindranath ('Amar Sonar Bangla') for materialising the thousand-year old struggles and dreams of nation-building of the Bengalees, exuberant patriotism of Nazrul ('Nama Nama Bangladesh Mama' and 'Joy Bangla'), the heroic battles for independence by Titumir-Suryasen, the resolve of mythological Chand Sowdagar not to bow down his head, and by combining the courage and valour of 'Torap' and 'Hani' of Bangla literature, Sheikh Mujib became the undisputed leader of the Bengalees and established the liberal, democratic, secular, independent and sovereign state of Bangladesh. Bangladesh was transformed into a nation from the status of an ethnic community through this process.

There are many large ethnic communities in the sub-continent, such as - Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashtun, Gujarati, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, etc. But none of these could become the possessor of a nation-state. Only the Bengalees possess a state and a nation of their own. This impossible achievement could happen because of the Bangla language, struggles for its rightful status and the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. ■

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed