

A reminder of our values

Ekushey adds substance to our being

Ekushey is a perennial reminder to us of the values we live by as a nation. And these are values we reasserted in February 1952 through our spirited defence of our language when it came under threat from quarters not too happy about according it the place on the political and social pantheon it deserved. In 1952 and before it, the Bengali struggle was not so much against a foreign language as it was a movement against crude attempts to have Bangla take a back seat in our national life. The sadness comes in remembering that it took the lives of Bengali young men for their language to find its niche in the politico-cultural clime of the times.

With that feeling of sadness arises anew the awareness of Ekushey being the earliest demonstration, post-1947, of our fundamental secular moorings as a nation. In that broad sense of the meaning, Ekushey was not a beginning and an end. It was the inauguration of an evolutionary process that would take us forward in our efforts toward realizing our nationalistic aspirations. The seeds of cultural secularism opened up by the Language Movement of 1952 were to sprout into hardy plants of political autonomy and then sovereignty within a span of nineteen years. In other words, what we had branched out to achieve in terms of language in 1952 was to find fullness through the attainment of national liberty in 1971.

Nearly six decades after February 1952, it is time for us to sit back and take stock of what we have achieved so far and where we mean to go from here on. Our yearning for a better society where exploitation will be no more, where the rule of law will underpin democracy, where language will be the sheet anchor of the culture we present to the world remains. We have come a long way, but resting on our laurels will not be enough. For values need to be sustained and replenished with substance every step of the way. That is what Ekushey speaks to us of.

Train-bus collision

Whose negligence?

It seems that the authorities are least concerned with the many unauthorised and unmanned railway crossings that continue to be the cause of train-bus collisions and deaths with disturbing regularity. The two accidents that occurred in Jessore and Comilla on the 19th of Feb is a stark reminder of the lackadaisical attitude towards public safety.

The rail crossing at Shashidal in Brahmanpara in Comilla was unauthorised and as such had no gateman, while the one at Rajarhat in Jessore was authorized but had been left open. In this instance, we are told, the gateman forgot to close the gate because he did not hear the whistle of the approaching train in time to react appropriately.

These two accidents divulge a picture of very shoddy management of rail-road crossings. We are given to understand that there are more than a thousand unauthorised rail crossings in the country, and the only means of ensuring public safety is a notice-board warning, cautioning the public to look out and cross the point at their own risk. The bus drivers must also share the blame for not being careful enough at these points.

Admittedly, with the increase in road network number of such crossings has increased. Some of these roads belong to the Roads and Highways Department while the others are local union or district board roads. But whoever may have constructed these roads, the fact is that these are frequented by vehicles as well as pedestrians.

We would like to think that there are ways of guaranteeing security of the train as well those using these crossings than what we have at present. Regrettably, even many rail gates that are supposed to be manned remain unsupervised, as was the case in Jessore. The public

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 21

- 1848
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish the The Communist Manifesto.
- 1952
- Bangladesh Martyrs Day. In Dhaka, the then capital of East Pakistan, police open fire on a procession of students demanding the establishment of Bangla as the official language, killing four people and starting a country-wide protest which led to the recognition of Bangla as one of the national languages of Pakistan. The day was declared as "International Mother Language Day" by UNESCO in 1999 and first observed internationally in 2000.
- 1965
- US Black Nationalist leader shot dead  
Controversial black leader Malcolm X, who once called for a "blacks-only" state in the US, assassinated.
- 1972
- Nixon makes historic visit to China  
US President Richard Nixon arrives in China at the start of a week-long summit aimed at ending 20 years of frosty relations between the two countries.
- 1973
- Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114 is shot down by Israeli fighter aircraft over the Sinai Desert, after the passenger plane is suspected of being an enemy military plane. Only 5 of 113 survive.
- 1974
- The last Israeli soldiers leave the west bank of the Suez Canal pursuant to a truce with Egypt.
- Birth
- 1907
- W. H. Auden, English poet (d. 1973)

KALEIDOSCOPE

Is February 21 a mere ritual?



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE day the Language Martyrs made the greatest sacrifices to hold aloft the dignity of their mother tongue marks the beginning of a new history in the lives of the Bengali people. The cause for which the courageous students laid down their lives on that day had a universal appeal. It is not surprising that the day has now won worldwide recognition as the International Mother Language Day.

These are unquestionably great achievements in the life of a people and a nation. But does that mean that now we should go into resignation because we have had our life's achievement?

Why do we need to ask such a question 59 years after that great event in Bengali people's life? The reason is we have done little so far to complete the task for which the heroes of the language movement thought nothing of even sacrificing their lives. To all appearances, the yearly ritual of just going to the Shaheed Minar (Language Martyrs' Memorial), singing the elegy of the dead heroes and laying floral wreaths at the base of the martyrs' memorial ends our tasks.

And then we have the Ekushey (February 21) Book Fair and the cultural events at the Ramna Botomul (at the base of the banyan tree at the Ramna Garden). And as if to show honour to Bengali culture, some of our urbanites deign to eat panta bhat (wet boiled rice) with hilsa fish wearing punjabi and pyjama.

Certainly, the immortal language heroes did not embrace the bullet for such send-ups in the name of honouring Bengali culture. For they were the children of the common people, who constitute the overwhelming bulk of the population. They work hard in the fields from dawn till dusk.

BOTTOM LINE



HARUN UR RASHID

FEBRUARY 21 has been a day of national mourning, pride, reflection and action. It is also Language Martyr's Day. It was fifty-nine years ago on this day that Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiu and Salam sacrificed their precious young lives for the honour and preservation of our mother language, Bangla.

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

At the initiative of the then Bangladesh government, on November 17, 1999, the Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) adopted February 21 as International Mother Language Day, and observed February 21, 2000 as International Mother Language Day for the first time.

It is a matter of pride for all people of Bangladesh that the supreme sacrifice made on this day in 1952 eventually led to the recognition of mother languages worldwide. This Day has become a milestone in recognition of the right to speak, promote and preserve all mother languages across the world.

Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) described language as "the body of thought." This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

About 6,912 mother languages are thought to exist today. But social, demographic and political factors are all contributing to possible disappearance of about 2,500 languages. Of them, 196 in India, 192 in the US, and 147 in Indonesia are likely to disappear, according to a report by Unesco.

Furthermore, 199 languages are spoken only by a few people. For example, Middle Chulym, now spoken by a handful of Siberian townsfolk (45 in number), has been integrated into the Russian language. When the last fluent speaker dies the language will become extinct.

What is lost when a language is lost is

Their daily meals consist of a bowl of cold wet rice (panta bhat), one or two pieces of onion, raw chillies and, if they are lucky, a morsel or two of cold vegetable curry. That is usually the menu of their breakfast. And their lunch and dinner, too, are often the repetition of the same items with the exception that the rice in those two meals may be hot.

Most of the Dhakaites have their paternal homes in the countryside, where they have to journey at least once or twice every year for family reunions during the religious festivals. So, the urbanites of the capital city of Dhaka are yet to be so alienated from the countryside that they have to taste panta bhat on the morning of Ekushey February only. On the contrary, it should be too familiar to them to be caricatured in that way on the immortal day of February 21.

But what does this day signify to the mass people in general, for whose sake, the language martyrs paid their debt in blood? And what was the debt, really? Was it the language only or something more? For a people's language is the vehicle of the entire culture it represents.

The Bengali language, too, is the carrier of the culture of the Bengali people. And that culture is, of course, not the culture of the shahure babus (members of the urban gentry), whom we are often wont to term as the middle class. Here a line needs to be drawn between the urban gentry and the middle class.

The Bengali middle class is a conscious section of the people and they have always been at the forefront of every struggle for change against the forces of reaction, oppression and tyranny. But the section of the urbanites that make a travesty of the Bengali culture are not the true representative of either the middle class or the people as a whole. The sooner we are able to get rid of these aficionados of Bengali culture the better. And their way is



MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/ DRIK NEWS

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certainly not the one to commemorate language martyrs' cause.

The dignity of the mother language is not something removed from the dignity of the people who speak the language. And when the language heroes embraced death, they had also had in their minds the cause of their parents and people among whom they lived and the struggles they waged for their existence. And the language and the culture that we are trying to consecrate are not also isolated from the struggles they have been waging in the fields, at the factories and at other workplaces.

And it is also not only the men who are waging the struggle over the millennia. The women have also very much been in the struggle al through. And together through their struggles for social and economic freedom they have been evolving the language and culture,

for the dignity of which we observe February 21.

So, the letters and the words that make Bangla is made of the blood and sweat of the people who speak it. The people are still sweating and spilling their blood to establish their human, social and economic rights and for creating the condition for better life for their progeny. 21st February is a part of that ongoing struggle.

To pay true respect to the Language Martyrs, we will have to take a fresh pledge -- the pledge to build a prosperous Bangladesh where all the basic rights of the mass people and their children are protected, their right to better education, better jobs, better health and better shelter are ensured.

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Amar Ekushey

Precursor of birth of Bangladesh

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

The immediate starting point of the tragedy of February 21 was on January 27, 1952, when the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Khwaja Nazimuddin



MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/ DRIK NEWS

Many historians think that February 21 sowed the seed of a separate state of Bangladesh on the basis of Bengali nationalism.

announced at a public meeting that Urdu alone should be the state language of Pakistan. The students were infuriated by the announcement.

On February 21, 1952, agitated unarmed students, both male and female, of Dhaka University decided to violate Section 144 (prohibiting an assembly more than five persons) Order in order to proceed to the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly (near S.M. 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 under the order of a magistrate (a West Pakistani). Jabbar and Rafiq died on the spot, while three others died later in

hospital. (An impromptu monument was set up by Medical College Students on the site of the current Shaheed Minar.) It is believed that many more were killed, including a boy of ten, but their bodies were taken away by the police and secretly buried. The rest is history.

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

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

In 1979, the Ekushey February Book Fair at the Bangladesh Academy pre-

mises was opened to honour the occasion. The theme of this year's fair is Rabindranath Tagore, to mark the 150th birth anniversary of the poet.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the fair while it was graced by the presence of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. The PM had words of wisdom to say: "Read more books to know thyself, the country and the world." Amartya Sen observed that a special feature of Bangla was its capacity to absorb from foreign languages, and the sense of unity through language would take the Bengalis forward.

During the month of February it is reported 3,000 new books will be up for sale from publishers. The number of visitors to the book fair is on the rise and reading habit is on an upward curve.

Bangla books have become very expensive because the paper and other materials 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. A knowledgeable nation does not grow automatically. It needs to be carefully developed and nurtured.

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

Free adult education is necessary for mature people, and free education together with free learning equipment and school dress for poor children is imperative. In recent years, dropout from schools of poor students (almost 50%) before secondary school stage has become a big problem.

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

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