

In Quest of the Identity of Ourselves

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Thus, I would say the language movement had radically changed an entire generation. Their socio-political views and thoughts have been changed completely. For example, most of our politically conscious predecessors were involved in the politics of Muslim League and the movement for Pakistan. But the Muslims League faced a crushing defeat in the 1954 election in this East Bengal. This political party could never regain popularity in the Bengal as because the old generation Bengalis were disillusioned and the Muslim League itself failed to create any credibility or appeal to the new generation.

Let me cite a personal example. I was a student in a school at Mymensingh when the movement for state language came up. News of the agitation programme was not known to that school. The news of martyrdom of the students for the causes of language broke out like a wildfire throughout the country, and for the first time our school, even in such a remote area, went for a strike. We joined in a protest rally at the Thana headquarters two miles away from our school. The young adolescent students, who boycotted class to join the strike, returned to class the following day as changed individuals. The change was colossal. As if a radical change had occurred in the mindset of the student over a single day only. This change became consolidated and coherent further through the successive incidents.

For sure, it was not a matter of one person or a few people. An entire generation turned their faces away from Pakistan. Apart from the issue of language, there came down a new issue of martial law in 1958. Military rule means a denial to all the democratic rights, values etc. This is a rule by the law of the jungle. The Bengalis could not accept this rule. At the same time they also realized that this jungle law was clamped down to deprive the Bengalis from their rights. The rule of majority is ultimately established in any system of the democracy. But on the plea of parity in number, the Pakistanis managed to have equal representation at the central Parliament. They also enshrined it in the Constitution of 1956. Yet they could not be assured of their position. The

ruling Punjabi community apprehended that the Sindh, Baluch and Pathan might have joined the Bengalis to corner them in the politics of Pakistan. They canceled their amended Constitution and promulgated the military rule so that election could not be held.

It was never a coincidence that Pakistan was created through the general election of '46 and its funeral was done through another general election held in 1970. Both the elections were general elections and in between there were no elections in Pakistan. The crushing defeat of the Muslim League in the East Bengal in '54 caused frustration among the Pakistani rulers. As a result, they did not dare to go for a general election. Both the matters are examples of the absence of democracy which entailed economic inequality and deprivation as well as a denial to the individuality of Bengali i.e. their culture, tradition, language, lifestyle, social thinking etc. It was how the Pakistani rulers behaved, and it became gradually evident to most of the people.

An example may be cited from my experiences in the field of culture. It was at the beginning of the '60s, the birth centenary of Rabindranath Tagore was in 1961. But the Pakistan government would not allow celebration of the day. Of course where there were obstacles, there were resistances. Thus the innocuous cultural matter like the birth centenary of Tagore took the hue of a big political issue. The birth centenary was observed here gorgeously defying all the threats of imprisonment and torture. Thereafter, 'Shroutar Ashore' (a listeners' club) was founded first, and later the 'Chhayana' (a name taken from the title of a book of poetry by Tagore) was instituted. This kind of non-political institutions played a great role in exercising and expanding the culture of Bengali. The first day of 'Baishakh' (the first month of the Bengali calendar) gradually became a very popular

national festivity throughout the country. The program at the base of the banyan tree itself became a strong protest against the Pakistani autocrats. It has never been an unprecedented event that a cultural movement can so rock the mindset of a nation, and can ultimately changed the mindset radically. These words are being said as they are inalienably mingled with the culture of Bengali, national struggle of Bengali and the effort to establish their rights.

An experience of the Bengali nation is that whenever any anti-people force came into power, they first jumped to launch attack on the 'shahid minar', the masuleum for the language martyrs - that very particular 'shahid minar'. The 'shahid minar' was attacked repeatedly - the last being during

"Those who hate Bengali despite being born in Bengal
I cannot determine the antecedents of their birth.
Those whose minds are not calmed by the knowledge of native dialect
Why do not they leave their country and go to a foreign land?"
- Abdul Hakim (1620-1690)

our liberation war in 1971.

Thus the people have observed that, a common thread of unity runs through the events like language movement, democratic movement, 6-point demand, 11-point, Shahid Minar (monument for the martyrs) etc in the history of our liberation struggle. Those who were out to suppress the Bengali, and those who wanted to deny their rights, they launched their assault on these manifestations of Bengali's struggle. This is why the 'shahid minar' became an object of repeated target. Shahid minar was demolished. Again it was rebuilt by the spontaneous effort of the people. I am not aware of any such event elsewhere in the world as we mark on the occasion of the language martyred day on every 21st February by holding long rallies across Azimpur that converge with utmost sanctity into one at the alter of 'shahid minar'. This is not a matter of formal ceremony only, but also a matter of being in the quest of our self-identity. And especially it has been noted that wherever came down any barriers and obstruction, there came up the reinvigorated inspiration-encouragement and firm determination of the people to face the challenges for the emancipation of Bengalis.

I felt it many a times that the rate of literacy at that time in this Bangladesh was not more than 15/20 per cent. Many of them were not even familiar with the alphabets. There might be logic in the fact that the students, the educated middle class people and the intelligentsia were the activists in the movement; but how was this possible that the simple peasants of the village and the ordinary factory workers stood united to resist any attack on the language. They are totally illiterate and do not know how much is the difference between the letters of Bangla, Urdu or Latin alphabets. What is his problem if Bangla is transcribed in Urdu or Latin letters? Why has he, in which interest has he turned around - this question

We Are Here Not To Weep
Mahbub-ul-Alam Chowdhury

I have not come, where they laid down their lives
Under the upward looking Krishnachura trees,
to shed tears.

I have not come, where endless patches of blood
Glow like so many fiery flowers, to weep.

Today I am not overwhelmed by grief

Today I am not maddened with anger

Today I am only unflinching

in my determination.

The child who will nevermore get a chance

to rush into his father's arms,

the housewife who, shielding the lamp

with her sari, will nevermore wait

by the door for her husband,

the mother who will nevermore draw

to her breast with boundless joy

her returning son,

the young man who, before collapsing

on the earth, tried again and again

to conjure before his eyes the vision

of his beloved,

in their name,

in the name of those brothers and sisters,

in the name of my language,

nourished by the heritage of a thousand years,

in the name of the language in which

I am accustomed to addressing my mother,

in the name of my native land,

I say, I have come today,

here on the open grounds of the university,

to demand their death by hanging,

the death of those who killed

my brothers and sisters indiscriminately.

I have not come here to weep for them

Who gave their lives under Ramna's

sun-scorched krishnachura trees

for their language,

those forty or more who laid down their lives

for Bangla, their mother tongue,

for the dignity of a country's great culture,

for the literary heritage of Alaol,

Rabindranath, Kaikobad and Nazrul,

for keeping alive the bhatiali, baul,

kirton and the ghazal,

those who laid down their lives

for Nazrul's unforgettable lines:

"The soil of my native land

is purer than the purest gold."

Forty blooming lives fell

like innumerable krishnachura petals

on Ramna's soil.

In the husk of the seeds

Sprouting there from I can see

endless drops of blood,

the blood of young Rameswar and Abdus Salam,

the blood of the most brilliant boys of the university.

I can see each drop of blood

shining on Ramna's green grass like burning flames,

each boy a piece of diamond,

forty jewels of the university,

who, had they lived, would have become

the most precious wealth of the country, in whom

Lincoln, Rolland, Aragon and Einstein had found refuge,

in whom had flourished some of the

most progressive ideals of this century's civilization.

We have not come here to shed tears

where forty jewels sacrificed their lives.

We have not come, either, to plead

for our language to the killers

who had arrived with their rifles loaded,

with orders to shoot our brothers and sisters.

We have come to demand the hanging

of the tyrants and the murderers.

We know that our brothers and sisters were killed,

that they were mercilessly shot,

that one of them was perhaps called 'Osman'

just like you,

that perhaps one of them had a clerk for a father

just like you, or that one's father was growing

golden crops in some remote village of East Bengal,

or was a government functionary.

Today those boys could be living just like you or me.

Perhaps one of them had his wedding day fixed

just like me.

Perhaps one of them had left on his table,

just like you, his mother's letter

received a moment ago,

hoping to read it when he got back

from the procession he went out to join.

Those boys had harboured concrete dreams

in their breasts,

and they were killed by the bullets

of the cruel tyrants.

In the name of those deaths

I demand that those who wanted

to banish our mother tongue be hanged,

I demand that those who ordered

the killings be hanged,

I demand that the traitors

who climbed to the seats of power

over the dead bodies of my brothers and

sisters be hanged.

I want to see them tried and shot

as convicted criminals

on that very spot in this open field.

Those first martyrs of the country,

those forty brilliant boys of the university,

each of them had dreams of building

a quiet home in the bosom of this earth

with his wife, children and parents.

They dreamed of analyzing

the scientific theories of Einstein with greater depth,

they dreamed of finding ways

to put the atomic power at Man's service

in the cause of Peace.

They dreamed of writing a poem

more beautiful than Tagore's 'The Flute Players'.

O my martyred brothers

the spot where you laid down your lives

will continue to glow

even after a thousand years.

No footprints of civilization can wipe out

the marks of your blood from that soil,

although procession after procession

will one day converge here

and shatter its vague silence.

The tolling of university bells

will daily announce the historic hour of your deaths,

even if one day a violent storm

erupted and shook the building's very foundation.

Whatever may come to pass

the brightness of your names as hallowed martyrs

would never grow dim.

The cruel hands of the murderers

can never throttle your long-cherished hopes.

Some day we shall surely win

and hail the advent of justice and fair play.

O my dead brothers,

on that day, your voices,

the strong voice of Freedom,

will soar from the depths of silence.

The people of my country, on that day,

will surely hang from the gallows

those tyrants and murderers.

On that day, your hopes will shine like flames

in the joy of victory and sweet vengeance.

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Translation : Professor Kabir Chowdhury.

International Mother Language Day

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upholding the ideal of conservation of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in our world. The day carries a theme each year. The objective in 2001 was to develop relations among people belonging to all cultures by increasing inter-cultural communication through language education, more translations from one language to another and mutual discussions. The goal in 2003 was development and expansion of mother language education. While mentioning about the theme of International Mother Language Day in 2007, the UNESCO Secretary-General Koichiro Matsuura said, the bonds of familiarity and diversity which have developed through languages have led to local and global unions of man. In that sense, mother languages and multilingualism are complementary to each other. In the backdrop of global multilingual education, he advised learning three types of language - a mother tongue, a national language and a communicative language. He opined that it would be possible in this way to ensure coexistence of all languages and create a congenial environment for practicing them.

The United Nations declared 2008 as the International Language Year. The theme of the mother language day during that year was generation of language consciousness all over the world, preservation of linguistic diversity and cultural distinctiveness, increased literacy and running educational programmes via mother languages. As language is a vitally important ingredient in peaceful coexistence of all individuals and groups, the slogan for International Mother Language Day in 2008 was 'Language Matters'.

The year 2009 marked one decade of the International Mother Language Day. A new phase of International Mother Language Day started from that year. New hopes were expressed at this juncture; all countries were urged to create such an environment in all areas including formal and informal education and government administration so as to make the positions of the mother languages in all countries secure and consolidated.

The themes of the International Mother Language Day have repeatedly stated the need for preserving and flourishing the mother languages. But all mother languages of the globe are not on equal footing. We have seen in the history of civilisation that the freedom of many countries was usurped through force. The conquerors not only rendered the vanquished pauper by seizing lands and properties, the defeated were also separated from their own culture. If they did not agree to give up everything voluntarily, the conquerors did not hesitate to apply force and even resort to genocide. Many mother languages became extinct in this way. Many languages are now under threat. The reality is such that one language is becoming extinct every 14 days. It is certainly possible to revive many of the dead languages. It is not very difficult to protect and flourish the endangered languages. Even today, there is no writing option in many of the languages. We call them languages without alphabets. If writing arrangement could be introduced in them, that is, if they could be made literate, then these languages would become safe. These are not impossible tasks. What man cannot do alone, he can certainly do through united endeavours. Collective initiatives are now needed for preserving our linguistic and cultural diversities.

percolated in my mind. Was this then an outcome of whimsicality? Finally, I found my answer at an overseas movie titled 'The Train'. In this movie the invader Germans attempted to remove a number of invaluable pieces of artwork from the occupied France. They tried to convince the French that in order to protect those items from the havoc of war those should be transferred to a safe place in Germany. But the patriot Frenchmen well realized that once the artworks were removed out of their country those would never be returned. So they decided that they would protect those artworks at any cost. They would by no means let the Germans to take away those paintings. So they approached the driver and guards of the train which was meant for transporting the artworks.

It was decided after their discussion with the train driver and guards that those paintings would never be allowed to cross the border of their country. So they changed the names of stations and signals etc in such a way that the train continued to move around within the French territory only. Thus it never crossed the boundary of France into the territory of Germany. However, the guards and the driver had to sacrifice their lives for this. That is a different issue. But the similar question popped into my mind that the driver and the guard of the train have indeed never seen the artworks of these great French painters, or rather to say that never had the opportunity to see those. They did not understand all these things. Maybe these children would also not have the opportunity to see those. But what prompted them to sacrifice their lives? They did not hesitate to embrace martyrdom when they were made to understand that - those invaluable artworks were the invaluable French national heritage. The foreigners should not be allowed to take away such national heritage. This is why the illiterate train driver and the guard did not hesitate to protect these artworks in exchange for their lives. It was the same spirit which drove our illiterate peasants-workers to stand by the students and the multitudes in the language movement. Because they knew it well that if the language movement fell through, the Bengali would be enslaved by the Pakistanis. And not only their future, but also the future of their posterity would be sealed. The paths of their advancement and prosperity would be closed and they would have no way out of these paths.

This was why on that day the people from all walks of life irrespective of their educational background joined the countrywide language movement. As a matter of fact, here lies the greatness of a national movement. A national consensus develops overcoming all the narrowness and class barriers. The language movement gave us a national cause in which the interest of the people from all classes, all groups and all religious beliefs converged. This issue ultimately culminated into our war of liberation. And in this long struggle for independence, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the undisputed leader of the Bengali nation. Every year the 21st February reminds our new generation of this great history.

Translation : M Liaquat Ali Khan



United Nations Kofi Annan was present in that programme. Then, the International Mother Language Institute Act was passed in parliament in 2010 and the International Mother Language Institute was established. The Prime Minister of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh is the chief patron of this institute. The Prime Minister inaugurated the building-complex of International Mother Language Institute on 'Immortal Twenty-first February' of 2010.

It is true that this nation waged a movement to uphold the prestige of the Bangla language; but we do not hold any grudge against any language. We respect all mother languages equally. Although Bangla is the principal language spoken by a majority of the Bangladesh population, this country has over 20 small ethnic groups. It is mainly our responsibility to create adequate scope for conserving and flourishing their mother languages. The government has continued its efforts in this field. The programmes of the education ministry are also geared towards imparting education to children belonging to the small ethnic groups in their own mother languages. The Vision-2021 document of the present government speaks about bringing the backward segments of the population to the mainstream of national development through gradual reduction of discrimination. We have witnessed an objective expression of this pledge through the passage of the International Mother Language Institute Act and the setting up of International Mother Language Institute.

In effect, the International Mother Language Day is not merely a declaration or ideal for transforming everyone into a global citizen by eliminating the gaps in languages and communications, it embodies a wider connotation. In our view, if we can hold steadfast to this ideal, then not only would a country and its people speaking different languages be benefited, rather it would also spread on a global plane; unity in diversity would be established giving rise to a unified world with many languages and diverse cultures. It will be a beautiful world where all humans will live side by side peacefully.

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed