

'Ekush' holds a special place in the history of this country. It was the first scintilla of Bangladesh, long before Bangladesh was born. It is a unique example for a nation's struggle for its right, and the sacrifices made for a belief. It took the world decades to fully comprehend the stature of the event, but it eventually did, and in 1999, February 21 went beyond just the observance of "Shahid Dibosh" for Bangalees to a global celebration – of all languages. UNESCO, on November 17, 1999, declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day, and ever since, the meaning of the day has found new dimension. But has that embossed the spirit deeper in us, or has it gone a little astray? The youth of today, who are more accustomed to the 'newer' makeover of February 21 – particularly in the city, shared their thoughts on what Ekushey February means to them and how they perceive the way it is observed/celebrated.

Says Saurav, an English Literature graduate from

Dhaka University: "It is a reminder, more than anything, of the spirit of nationalism that the people of this country once held. Language is at the core of it; it was the first domino to topple that snowballed into the avalanche that brought us Independence. Also, I quite like how it is celebrated today; through it, new generations can get to know about the glorious chapter in our history. Culture evolves with time, and Ekushey February celebrations are no different. I think it has lost some of its depth and connection, at the cost of flamboyance."

Shariful Haque, a freshman at Dhaka University, echos the thoughts. "Ekushey means a sacrifice to me; one that founded the base of our consequent struggles for Liberation. In many ways, it was the example set by that movement which kindled our spirit." He, however, differed about the new generation's understanding of the day. "Many of the kids of the younger generation do not know clearly what happened; if you ask them, many can't even name

# The Need to Do More

What does Ekushey mean to the youth?

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PHOTO: STAR FILE



the martyrs, let alone those who were involved in it. I have nothing against the tradition of placing flowers to the Shaheed Minar, though. It is a way to show respect, and that is what's important here."

Eshita Hossain, a young physician, termed Ekushey February as the day to remember that "there has been oppression in the world at a level that even something like language may not be a birth right; it has to be fought for." She, too, thinks it unfortunate that many young people do not have a clear idea of what the day signifies. "Sometimes I feel like it has become a black-and-white Valentine's Day," she laments. "I feel like the gravity of the occasion has decreased. To me, Ekushey February is still Shaheed Dibosh, a day to remember our Language Movement martyrs. I look around and sometimes feel like it has become just an average public holiday. That saddens me," she adds.

Avia Nahreen, an graduate student of economics, is an example of that. She is on board with the celebration of Ekushey February, but fails to connect to the occasion within herself. "It has become sort of commercialized; I don't know why, but the 'Spirit of Ekushey' is something that hasn't occurred to me yet. I like the way it is celebrated, though. It has become a part of our national and cultural identity, and I believe that's necessary. I just wish something more constructive was done about the day, for us to connect better with our language."

Fahad Bin Aman, who has just stepped into university, feels similarly. "It's a symbolic day, of the great sacrifices of the Language Movement martyrs. However, to be honest, I don't feel that strong a tug towards it, personally. Having said that, I think it's better to keep trying to commemorate it, than forgetting it altogether. It was a great victory for us, and deserves to be celebrated. As long as it does not stray off its path, the celebrations are great. I have heard Hindi songs being played at Ekushey February celebrations, and that is something that disturbs me greatly. As long as it is done thoughtfully and respectfully, the observance of Ekushey February is a fantastic thing," he said.

But is the observance of Ekushey February all that bad, after all?

Farhan Chowdhury, an engineer who studied abroad for a good few years, disagrees. "I love it that there is a day to just celebrate our language. Groups and organizations are making an effort to show their love for the language. I go out on the day and see letters of the Bangla alphabet everywhere on the streets -- painted, cut-out, drawn on people's faces. Even if it is just for a day, we embrace our precious language like we really should. The Language Movement was about freedom of expression, and it is that part of the celebration that really resonates with me," Farhan mentions.

"It is a celebration of a language that is, as unpopular as it may sound, waning in some ways," Sidrat Jabeen, an internee doctor at a medical college hos says. "To many of those of the younger generations

particularly living in the urban areas, I feel like Bangla is losing its popularity because of its complexity as a script. It's complicated to write, and with English taught to students at very early ages, they do not feel the need to communicate solely in Bangla. Also, spoken Bangla is different from written, and when the writing is formal it becomes even more different," says Sidrat, who spent her childhood abroad and has had to make extra effort to learn Bangla. She is not all too excited about the trends in Ekushey February observations, either: "It just looks like corporate hoopla to me. A once-in-a-year celebration can never be the representation of a true spirit."

Nahin Taher, a student of English and Humanities at a private university, thinks the observance of Ekushey February has moved away from its original spirit. "These days, it's an occasion for fashion houses to sell black and white outfits. Corporations brand Ekushey February whatever way they can. And children don't go with their parents on 'Probhat Feri' any more, but rather teenagers and youths go to areas surrounding the Shaheed Minar, accompanied by their boyfriend/girlfriend. Ekushey February used to symbolise a revolution, a fight against bigger odds. It doesn't seem that way any more."

Behroze Rahman, a budding architect, thinks today's generation has a lacking of understanding of Ekushey February. "I feel like a lot of people don't care what day it is, as long as they get an additional public holiday where they can go out, meet their friends and significant others. I wish someone could sit them down and nail into their heads what Ekushey February is about. Our generation has two extremes: those who don't care about our history and culture at all, and those who dwell too deep inside it. I think both are bad. But what I like is at this time of year the newspapers bring out special supplements, TV channels make special programmes, even the advertisements are informative and inspiring. It is a time of year that reminds us all of our glorious history, so we have that going for us, which is nice," she added.

"I feel like the time has come for another Language Movement," says photographer Darshan Chakma. "Because the reasons why the Language Movement was held has not been fulfilled." He also distinguished Ekushey February from other national celebrations: "Pahela Boishakh or Pahela Falgun is a cultural celebration of ours, but Ekushey February is a celebration of our nationalism. It deserves a special spot. Frankly, I think foreigners have more respect for Ekushey February than we do." Darshan also spoke about a need to work on language. "Much work needs to be done regarding development of language, especially outside of Dhaka. The government also needs to work on indigenous language. As far as I know, they have plans to make textbooks in four indigenous languages -- Chakma, Marma, Garo and Mong, and I think it's a great initiative. But they need to do more."