

Remembering Ekushey's true spirit

All mother tongues must be preserved

TODAY is a day filled with pride and passion, for Bangalis in particular, being the flag bearers of a unique movement in which precious lives were sacrificed to uphold the honour of a mother tongue. The uniqueness of the Language Movement has been recognised by the world over, with February 21 being declared as the International Mother Language Day.

As the pioneering movement that led to our ultimate independence, Ekushey invokes the emotional attachment we have for our mother tongue, which provides us with our most basic identity and creates that inexplicable bond with our motherland. The observance of Ekushey is therefore not just a ritualistic commemoration but an assertion of our right to speak our language and our right to be free from oppression and discrimination. This is why Ekushey has such universal appeal and will resonate with people of all ethnicities.

And this is why as a nation, the foundation of which was created by our Language Martyrs and Heroes, we must uphold the spirit of their sacrifice and struggle by not only preserving the dignity of Bangla, the language of the majority, but all other languages of this land, some of which are on the verge of extinction.

It is unfortunate that we have not been able to ensure that children from indigenous communities receive primary education in their mother tongue, even though we pledged to do so 19 years ago through the signing of the CHT Peace Accord.

When we recognise the importance of mother tongues of all ethnic groups in our country, we are in essence, acknowledging their rights as equal citizens. As Ekushey symbolises our secular, pluralistic values as a nation, such acknowledgement is a moral obligation and embodies the true spirit that defines this day.

Malaysian recruitment halted

Why this reversal of policy?

NEEDLESS to say, we are as dumbfounded as everyone else in the country with the sudden announcement by the Malaysian government that it is putting a full stop to all foreign recruitment of workers. What is even more damning for Bangladesh is that an estimated 200,000 workers are working there without proper documents, and these workers are in all likelihood going to face deportation. The new policy throws into question what is to become of the recent government-to-government MoU that would be taking some 1.5 million new workers from Bangladesh to work in Malaysia over the next three years.

What has become clear is that the Malaysian authorities have buckled to domestic pressures that had been mounting on calls to do something about foreign workers residing in the country. A general slowdown of the economy, with hundreds of thousands of irregular workers working at wages lower than the national standard, has contributed to an air of hostility against unregistered workers.

A total about face after so much fanfare about taking Bangladeshi workers comes as a bolt from the blue. Needless to say, we fail to see why a proper assessment was not done before coming to such a drastic decision. We hope that Malaysian authorities will reconsider their decision to arrest and deport such a large number of poor

MALAYSIA'S TURN-AROUND IN LABOUR RECRUITMENT Consequence of non-transparency

C R ABRAR

THE long awaited access to the Malaysian labour market has suffered a major jolt. The authorities there have declared that they would not employ workers from any country until a stock taking of the labour needs was done.

The announcement came within 24 hours of the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for deployment of Bangladeshi workers over the next three years. It was the result of protracted negotiations between the two countries. The MoU also marked the recognition of the abject failure of the G2G policy stubbornly pursued by both parties and was intended to be the basis of what has been officially dubbed as the G2G+ policy. The revised policy provides room for third party engagement in labour recruitment.

The volte-face of the Malaysian authorities has understandably put their Bangladeshi counterparts in a difficult position. A lot of hope was pinned on the deal. Those following the negotiations are aware that it was the Malaysian authorities who enjoyed the upper-hand at the negotiating table and Bangladesh had to placate some of their unreasonable demands. This was done ostensibly to gain a foothold in the lost labour market, which Bangladesh has been striving for a long time. Therefore, there is every reason for the Bangladeshi authorities to feel betrayed by the latest Malaysian decision.

So, what led the authorities in Kuala Lumpur to reverse the decision reached only a day earlier? The decision was sudden, but was it entirely unexpected? Not really.

A storm was brewing on the labour recruitment issue in Malaysia for quite some time. Not only did the major stakeholders there feel outraged at the outbreak of the news that the country would bring in 1.5 million Bangladeshis over the next three years, there was a palpable lack of coordination among various government agencies involved and engagement with other stakeholders. This was often driven by selfish interest by players holding key positions of the state. Despite the fact that migrant workers have contributed in building modern Malaysia 'brick by brick', the policymaking process in dealing with them is fraught with inconsistencies and ad-hocism. The recent decision has not been any exception.

Let us now examine how lack of

transparency in the recruitment process and public perception of corruption of high officials have created what can be termed as an anti-migrant milieu there. This cuts across a whole range of actors that banded together, flexed their muscle and forced the government to renege on its commitment to take more workers from Bangladesh. The baseless and overenthusiastically publicised figure "1.5 million", to secure political mileage at the Bangladeshi end, galvanised the detractors at the Malaysian end.

In its reaction to the figure 1.5 million, the Malaysian Economic Action Council claimed that the country "only needs 1.72 million migrant workers to fulfill the needs of 3D (dirty, difficult and dangerous) sector". It also noted that increased inflow of foreign workers would adversely affect the wages of lower income groups.

The Malaysian Trade Union

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers categorically stated that it had never approached the government on this matter.

Immigration is a state subject in this federal country. Soon after the news broke out about the Bangladesh-Malaysia deal, the Sabah government reiterated its three-year-old position not to allow Bangladeshi workers in the state. Claiming that Bangladeshis did not have necessary experience and skills in the plantation work, the land minister of the government of Sarawak also made it clear that he too was opposed to the deployment of Bangladeshis.

The resistance to bring in workers was not necessarily restricted to the above stakeholders. Even rights activists were against the move, albeit for different reasons.

The Chair of the human rights organisation Hindraf Makkal Sakthi, a

the bare minimum".

Expressing concern over rising xenophobic and racist sentiments the Lawyers for Liberty questioned the move as well. It claimed that regularising the refugees and migrants already in the country would be a more sensible and practical path to pursue to fill the labour gap. The Master Builders' Association of Malaysia also urged the government to give priority to legalising the existing irregular migrants to meet the demand for large infrastructure projects such as Rapid and MRT projects.

A coalition of various workers' union, Rapat, had threatened a "public uprising" if the government went ahead with its plan. They also posed the question: what made the Deputy PM Zahid switch from his earlier position against over-dependence on foreign workers?

The Small and Medium Industry Association of Malaysia reported a drop of 30 to 50 per cent in their sales in 2015, and thus did not find any rationale in the decision to bring workers. Ikhlas, the Small and Medium Entrepreneurs Alliance, gave an ultimatum to produce a list of companies that require Bangladeshi workers and threatened to organise a protest in front of Bangladesh High Commission premises next month. Ikhlas accused Deputy Prime Minister Hamid of hatching a conspiracy to undermine the credibility of the Prime Minister.

The Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) opposed the measure on the ground that the government did not share the details of the new arrangement. It insisted that any "any increase in cost must be undertaken with prior consultation with employers who would have to bear the immediate cost burden". It also called on the government to remove "non-value added process and involvement of unnecessary third party service providers", a message that should not be difficult to comprehend by a discernable reader.

The above facts amply demonstrate that the Malaysian authorities had to pull back from its plan to bring Bangladeshi workers under severe domestic compulsion. It was a price they had to pay for making decisions that did not factor in economic and social reality. Perhaps there is a lesson to learn here for the policymakers of Bangladesh, the source country.

The writer teaches International Relations at the University of Dhaka. He also coordinates the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit. (RMMRU).

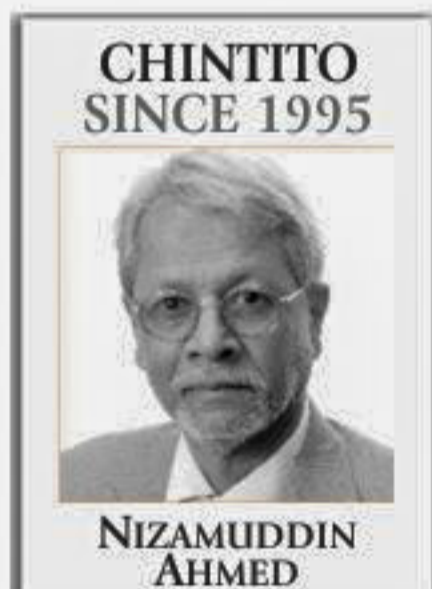
Let us now examine how lack of transparency in the recruitment process and public perception of corruption of high officials have created what can be termed as an anti-migrant milieu there. This cuts across a whole range of actors that banded together, flexed their muscle and forced the government to renege on its commitment to take more workers from Bangladesh.

Congress was also against the move and handed over a memorandum to the Human Resource Ministry on February 18, stating that the "influx would have an adverse impact on the local industries and employees". It demanded that the government spell out "which sectors will absorb the workers and what is the rationale for bringing them in".

Observing that the labour market in Malaysia at the moment is "soft and weak" the head of Malaysian Employers Federation demanded that any move to bring in more workers "must be based on actual demand". He also noted that despite the low unemployment rate (3.2 percent) 400,000 locals still needed jobs and underscored, not surprisingly, "the social problems that the influx would cause". Responding to the claims by the Deputy Home Minister that the government was acting in response to the needs expressed by the private sector, the

former Senator and Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's office not so long ago, observed that there was no justification to bring in more workers. He contested Deputy Prime Minister Hamid's contention that Malaysians were not interested in the 3D work on the ground that they take up those jobs in Singapore, Australia and other countries. The Chair insisted that there is a ready pool of unutilised and un/underemployed labour in the country that included 850,000 displaced estate workers, 350,000 stateless people in the peninsula along with nearly 3 million workers with irregular status. The Hindraf head viewed the decision to bring in Bangladeshi workers as "a move to enrich the elite cronies, flood the market even more with labour and thus reduce wages and assist mega companies accomplish their vision of the maximising profit while paying

The mad maddening election malaise



immediate bereavement. But happily, and not so for various other reasons, the message is from a candidate standing for the post of a member to the executive committee of a social club, which you probably have not visited in the last six months.

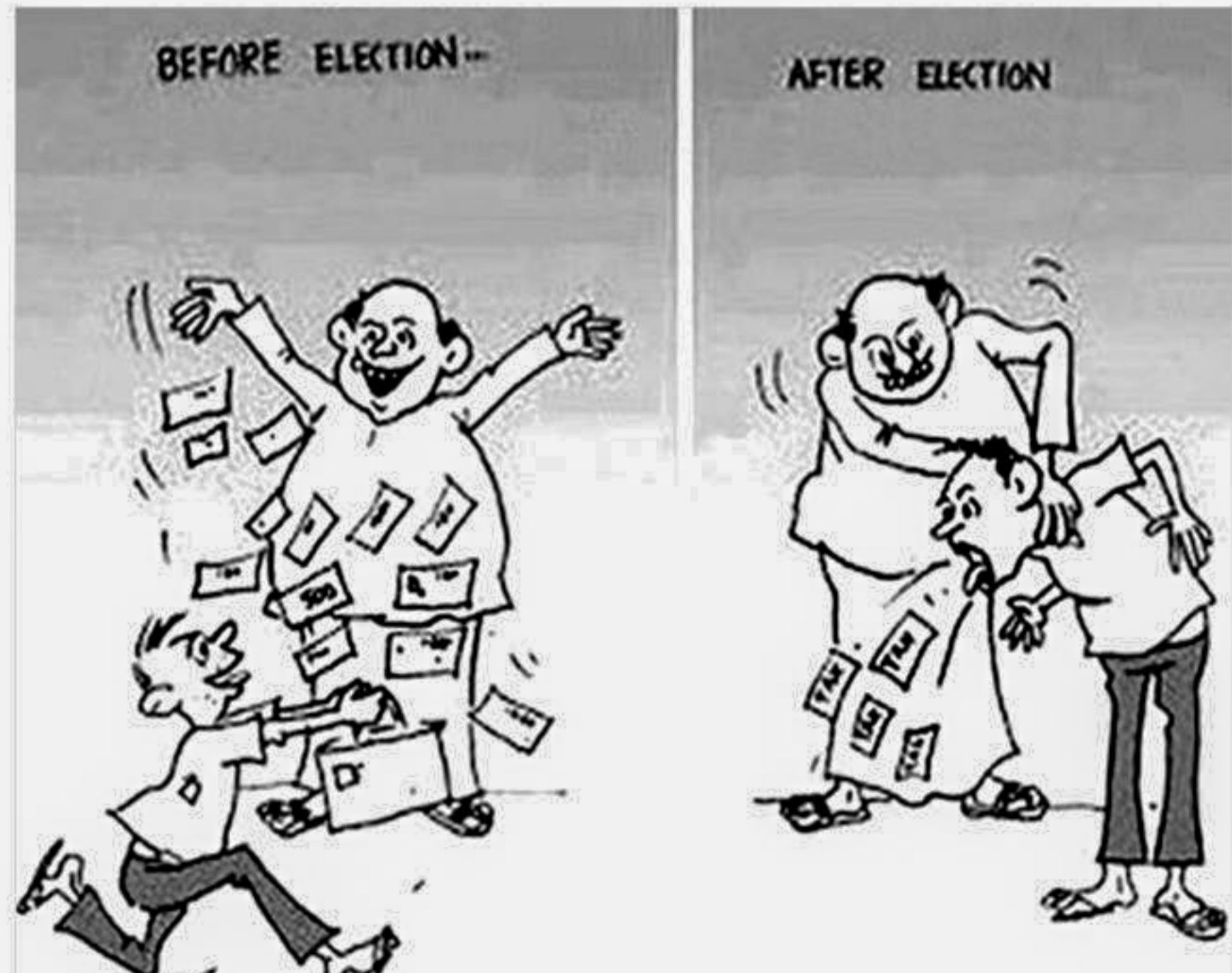
As you hit the pillow and make a mental note of definitely not voting for him, yet another message marks further intrusion into your nightly silence, as yet another candidate seeks your blessings. A few more messages should invalidate all the candidates and make your visit to the polling station meaningless.

You are then compelled to take a walk to the washroom. Switching on the light

This sheer madness of quasi-political people turning into admiration-seeking maniacs has again reached that point where we can safely conclude that we do not know how to turn it off.

you groggily question the mirror-mirror on the wall, "What have I done to deserve this? Would I be that bad a candidate?" Not at all. You could positively get those election aspirants out of bed and keep them out.

The biggest problem is if you vote for



them this year (based on their 23 SMSes, five posters by surface mail, three group emails addressed to 495 other IDs, two one-sided telephone conversations, one call from a common acquaintance, and a personally handed over leaflet on election day with a silly grin that says, "I have never met you before, but I want your vote"), they shall come back the next year based on the popularity (!) you were forced to thrust upon them.

You are at peace for barely nine months if you ignore the psychological stress of being ignored since after voting day. The cycle of irritating communications and panel communiques (*Aha! Panel! More about that in a while*) will resume after this round of nocturnal wake-up calls. You would want to switch your cell phone to 'silent', but fear that you may miss an emergency message from say a vice-president or a presidential candidate.

No one dares to contest an election of even say the Jackfruit Producers and Exporters Samity on his own for fear of being singled out. There will basically be two panels, not necessarily along any political lines because in such elections politicians are either not allowed or are petrified by localised politics. A third panel is usually not

possible because the number of voters not contesting from any panel would be embarrassingly low.

Within a panel, the candidates do not always know each other, several do not like each other, some even hate each other, but they all maintain the superficial grin that says, "I will never want to meet you again, promise, but I want your vote". Panels are a mechanism to ensure, well hopefully so, about 15-20 votes if panellists will vote in line with the panel. Sometimes, okay often enough, they do not, and then the fighting starts or in some cases resumes.

This sheer madness of quasi-political people turning into admiration-seeking maniacs has again reached that point where we can safely conclude that we do not know how to turn it off. Be it a club or a society or an association or a chamber, the candidates keep on hounding you on your front door, back door, under your door, indoor and outdoor. And your mailbox, inbox and all digital appliances are bombarded at the cost of your cherished privacy.

Suddenly they begin to address you as Respected Member. You never knew you had so much blessing because that is what they are after. Their political

naivety is demonstrated by the promises they make that you never demanded and you know, and they know too, that some of the pledges cannot be realistically fulfilled; those are issues that are to be tackled by national leaders, government departments and technical experts. Yet, for a bit of the 'blessings', a bit of a white lie has always been politically correct.

What for this exercise? Lavish dinners at 5-star hotels to seek your support seem like such a squander. Six-colour pamphlets introducing the panels with individual bios befitting a corporate application is counter to national policy on fair elections. Courier service is not inexpensive either. After taking office, it is not unusual for a committee to face shortage of funds. Well, you know for what they were already spent. I hope they know it too, but by then it is too late and then it's time for the next round of electioneering.

Most perplexing is why should the candidates felicitate the voters by blatantly offering them smoked haddock fishcake with tartare emulsion, rump of lamb and garlic crushed potatoes, crème brûlée, tea or coffee? Or at another posh venue, tandoori chicken, naan bread, kacchi biriyani, shami kabab, borhani, jarda? Nah! There is hardly any occasion where Bangla food is served. That is besides the point. Should it not be the other way round? Should not the voters pamper the volunteering candidate?

It is the elected office-bearer who will have to render service by sacrificing his time, family, business and freedom. So why this insane eagerness to get elected at all costs? What is the equation between the huge money spent and the small office attained? Or am I missing a link here? If it is for prestige alone, then such foolish people deserve no more than an appointment with a psychiatrist.

If the practice has to be tagged as an exercise in democracy, then rules that restrain all parties within decent comportment and codes which define the rationality between efforts and expectations has to be ironed out.

The writer is a practising Architect at BashaBari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net



Significance of Ekushey February

Ekushey February is not just to remember the sacrifices of the martyrs of the language movement by offering wreaths at Shaheed Minars as many people do nowadays. We rather need to understand why our heroic sons had sacrificed their lives. Their supreme sacrifice for the cause of their mother tongue had planted the seeds of freedom in the hearts of the Bangali, leading to our glorious Liberation War and a free country. Ekushey February teaches us how to raise our voice against injustice.

Sayek Ahmed Sajid
Department of English
University of Rajshahi

COMMENTS

"Robi-Airtel merger sparks mixed reactions" (February 18, 2016)

Lihan Mothin
I think this merger will make GP face tough competition.

Meraj Hossain
Before merging, both companies should ensure their