

## Remembering Ekushey

### Reassert our cultural identity

THE nation solemnly remembers the supreme sacrifice of the valiant souls who laid down their lives to establish the right of our mother tongue on this day in 1952. Their blood did not go in vain and the day has remained an eternal fountain of inspiration both to enrich our culture and heritage and in our fight against injustice and oppression.

Our struggle for cultural emancipation that planted the seed of freedom led to the emergence of independent Bangladesh. The Language Movement was a precursor of the Six-Point movement, the mass upsurge against Ayub regime in 1969, and ultimately the War of Independence which witnessed the birth of a nation rooted in an ethno-linguistic struggle. Throughout our recent history, it has worked as a catalyst reflecting our basic identity, a reminder to us of the values we live by as a nation.

The true spirit of Ekushey, however, does not lie in mere assertion of a nation's linguistic freedom. It is the values of democracy, equality and social justice that the day upholds, and calls for some sombre reflections as to what extent we have been able to materialise the dreams of the martyrs of 1952.

It is unfortunate that many minority languages have become extinct in our country. It is for the state to ensure that every non-Bangla-speaking people is accorded the facility and opportunity to practice its own mother tongue.

While we mourn the martyrs, we should also restate our resolve to be united in establishing a society based on freedom, equality and rule of law. This is essentially what Ekushey stands for.

## Human Organ Transplant Act counterproductive

### Amend it

YESTERDAY'S investigative report in our paper has unraveled the painful situation where patients in need of a kidney transplant cannot have one because of legal loopholes. The country's Human Organ Transplant Act 1999 stipulates that the donor in question must be one of the following: son, daughter, father, mother, brother, sister, paternal and maternal uncle and aunt, husband and wife. While the idea behind such strict criteria was to prevent the macabre business of selling kidneys, in reality this legal binding has deprived many individuals from getting the kidney they need to survive or imposed exorbitant costs in getting kidney transplants abroad. The law moreover, though well-intentioned, has not been able to stop the illegal organ trade.

It is appalling that every year around 30,000 people die of kidney failure because they could not get access to the right medical care which includes transplant and dialysis. The report has quoted a kidney specialist saying that the lives of at least 20,000 of these people could have been saved had they been able to get kidney transplants. It is a tragedy that there could be many more potential donors within the country if only the law would allow non relatives to donate kidneys as is practised in other countries. This would also allow many more patients to get transplants as the costs would be significantly less than going abroad to get a transplant.

The law therefore needs to be amended to make it easier for patients to get kidney donors even from non relatives. As far as combating the illegal organ trade, the law enforcement agencies must be more vigilant and efficient in clamping down on those involved in it through diligent investigation.

# What's in a word?

## SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

NELSON Mandel aptly said: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart".

There is something magical about one's native language. It's the glue that holds people together and provides a sense of comfort and security. Language also helps transcend geographical boundaries and religious divides, creating strong cultural and social bonds. My Indian friends who recently visited Dhaka observed that after the half-hour international flight from Kolkata, it felt like they had come home! I feel the same when I travel the other way. So, what is it that makes a foreign land seem like "home"? Is it just language or something beyond?

More than 70 years ago, Benjamin Lee Whorf, a chemical engineer who moonlighted as an anthropology lecturer at Yale University, introduced a novel idea about language's power over the mind, highlighting the fact that our mother tongue significantly influences the development of our thoughts. Whorf's theory was discredited due to the absence of evidence. Unsurprisingly, in the last

few years, new research has partially reaffirmed Whorf's claims that when we learn our mother tongue, we acquire certain ways of thinking. Since speech is cultivated from a very early age, it is only natural that it can go beyond language, affecting our experiences, perceptions, associations, feelings, memories and orientation in the world.

The fact is that the language we learn as a child always remains our "first language", or our preferred language. I

able to find an apt English translation for "godhuli" (twilight?) despite the fact that its orange hue colours the inner recesses of my heart each time I gaze at an evening sky.

While reflecting on the ways my mother tongue has influenced me, there is one particular incident that comes to mind. In 1969, when I had just started singing publicly, I selected a Tagore number, "Aji Bangladesher hridoy hote" (You have emerged from the heart of

that sowed the seeds of Bengali nationalism. Tagore's literary works were an integral part of this movement.

The resistance I encountered from the radio administration left such a strong impression on my mind that I felt compelled to join the fight for an independent Bangladesh. Through this experience, I realised that the struggle for Bangladesh's independence and the struggle for expressing our thoughts and ideas in our native tongue were deeply intertwined.

Recently, I was dismayed to read a news report that the very same song, "Aji Bangladesher hridoy hote", has been deleted from Bengali textbooks under pressure from communal forces. There is a sense of deja vu - as if we are living through another wave of attack on Bangla culture and language. It appears that the extremist groups have once again intensified their attempts to communalise the country. Their efforts are now focused on influencing impressionable young people, using one of the most effective tools - the language that shapes their perceptions of the world.

This month, as we pay homage to the martyrs who helped reinstate our language and identity, it may be time to renew our vow to protect and preserve Bangla from the onslaught of extremist forces. For language is not just a means of communication - it helps in the development of personality and character. As our mental horizons widen, as our intellectual boundaries expand, and as we navigate through the maze of information in the internet era, our native tongue keeps us anchored to our basic values and traditions. If we want to promote secular ideas and activities in public spaces, we must ensure that our mother tongue is not artificially choreographed to sway the views and beliefs of our youth toward extremism and bigotry. Most importantly, the national narrative propagated through our mother tongue must reflect the diversity and tolerance that are deeply embedded in our society.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.



have been living in an English speaking country for more than half my life. Yet, each time I leave my familiar environ and cross over to the other side, it takes me a while to accustom myself to the unfamiliar sounds and rhythms. I yearn for my mother tongue with its seductive lilt of *thea's* and *o's*. And, I still haven't learnt to twirl my r's the way native English speakers do. When I experience a beautiful sunset, I am reminded not of Eliot's "evening" "spread out against the sky, like a patient etherised upon a table" but of Tagore's "godhuli logone badolo gogone" (The twilight moment of the cloud-filled sky). Sadly, I have not been

Bangladesh, my Mother, in all your glory and splendour) for a radio rendition. The broadcasting authorities of the then East Pakistan informed me that the song could not be aired since it contained metaphorical references to the goddess "Durga", comparing her to Bangladesh, the motherland. I was shocked at the narrow and biased interpretation of the lyrics. Above all, I was frustrated that the freedom to express my love for my country in the words of the most revered poet of Bengal had been curbed. It was a time when turbulent tides of change were sweeping through the region - the country was overpowered by a surge of patriotism

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# Calling out to you, Begum Rokeya



LAILA KARIM

DEAR Begum Rokeya, I have been speaking to you for the past couple of days. I have been visiting you repeatedly in different sites, going back to your books and write-ups, and felt the urge to write to you. Technology has brought us so close today!

Dear Begum Rokeya, in your days, you fought against discrimination against women, and throughout your life you worked for the equal rights of girls and women. Your journey, along with that of some other visionary women of this land like Shamsun Nahar Mahmood, Begum Sufia Kamal and others, helped us get to this stage. I presume that you are observing the fulfillment of Sultana's dream. Today, your Sultanas are in leadership roles; that of the prime minister, a highly educated Speaker of the Parliament. You must be observing women at every place - from traffic signals to the Secretariat, as police officials and district commissioners and judges. Your Sultanas are now in the army, the navy and the air force. You will find them as Union Parishad members in the village as well as Ansars paving the way for other rural women to find their strength. I am certain that if you had known that more and more girls are being enrolled in schools and are doing better than boys in public examinations, you would have felt that your life's work was finally bearing fruit. You paved the path for us, and those who followed your footsteps made the path wider for us to tread easily.

Alas! Despite all these milestones in the past century, especially since our Liberation War, today, in 2017, we are standing at the brink of a possible step backwards. I am speaking about the special clauses of the proposed Child Marriage Restraint Act 2016. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 fixed the age of marriage at 18 for girls and 21 for boys. Since then, there have obviously been child marriages in this country, but as a nation we frown upon it, find it unacceptable.

I remember that when I was in the third year of college, my father called me to inform me that it was time for me to get married as I was over 18, and he had to think about his other five children, especially two other girls. He also assured me that he would ensure that his "would-be-son-in-law" 'allowed' me to complete my studies. I kept silent, as it was the norm back then to accept whatever decision your parents made for you. However, this is 2017, and according to a study (Belal hossain et al, DU) shared last month at a seminar, only 8 percent girls are consulted about their marriage even today!

Dear Begum Rokeya, today, we are calling you for help. Recently, the Parliamentary Standing Committee has cleared the text of the Child Marriage

Restraint Act 2016 with the special clause permitting parents to marry off both girls and boys at a lower age if the situation demands so (in case of rape and unwanted pregnancy caused by this). Apart from the age factor, another clause of acquittal of conducting child marriage under the stated age (Article 10) has also been kept. I am forced to wonder, do people think that girls will happily consent to marry their rapist, or deliver the child of a rapist

marriage that was also registered in the local Kazi office in the city. When I protested, she told me that in her situation, 'marriage' would be the only option to protect the girl and the family from a 'bad name'. The situation is worse in remote areas, where the community itself becomes the source of fear and anxiety. Most of the child marriage victims return to their parents in the next few years with a child in their arms or in

child marriage?

We called our leaders to revisit those critical aspects of the 'special clauses' of the proposed law. We stood on the road; we shouted slogans at the Shaheed Minar; we gave facts and figures; we shared the latest knowledge/findings; we met the powerful; we made fervent appeals for a second thought; our newspapers wrote numerous numbers of editorials and articles; talk show speakers spent hours speaking on



IMAGE: JEANPARKERSOWORLD

under the title of marriage? If the law is passed, it will give ample scope for misuse by different quarters, even by the parents of children who with or without proper knowledge may ruin their children's lives.

The childhood of these girls is snatched away in the name of marriage, and their tiny shoulders are bent with the many folds of responsibilities. By their mid 30s, most of these girls have the life of an old woman, and their later life is at the mercy of others. I felt ashamed when my housemaid informed me that her daughter, who is only 11 or 12 years old, has been married off, a

the womb, because their husbands have abandoned them - he couldn't take care of them anymore, or he lost interest in his wife and wanted to remarry. The parents of these abandoned girls become further burdened because of the additional mouths to feed. The situation worsens for her children if she opts for a second marriage, as there is fear of abuse from the stepfather or abandonment from the mother. If we think about it, wouldn't you say that there is a need for a cost-benefit analysis of this predicament, and for making people aware of the economic consequences of

those critical aspects of the law. And yet nothing worked, just as we had expected.

Dear Begum Rokeya, we badly need your help today to tell the decision makers that these special clauses are not required, to inform them that we would be able to handle the 'special circumstances' under the existing laws and with good governance. We just need to allow our girls to study and feel protected. So that they can make their space in the world on their own.

Sincerely yours,

One of your fellow sisters

The writer is a development worker.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Rescue our mother tongue

The extinction of languages indicates a disappearance of diversity, culture and a storehouse of indigenous wisdom. Mother tongue remains the most basic identity of an individual or a community. If it does not get its due place under the sun, then the community which speaks it is bound to meet its doom. This was primarily the reason why UNESCO designated Ekushey February as the International Mother Language Day.

Bangla seems to be gasping for air in many societies of Bangladesh, with a lot of Bengalis viewing their own mother tongue and culture in a demeaning light. Bengalis all over the globe should reflect on the disservice they are doing to their language. Meanwhile, concerned authorities should rise to the occasion to rescue all our dying languages and cultures to promote heterogeneity and keep the spirit of equality among all languages alive.

Kajal Chatterjee  
Kolkata

### Need for a cattle market in DSCC

There is a large cattle market in the northwest part of Dhaka that is under the purview of Dhaka North City Corporation, but there are no cattle markets in the Dhaka South City Corporation. There is, however, a dumping area filled by municipal waste at the north side of the Jatrabari-Demra road. A regular cattle market could be developed there. DSCC needs to come forward to take the responsibility and set up a regular cattle market for people living in the area. It will curtail the monopoly of the Gabtoli *haat*, the only cattle market in Dhaka, besides also serving as a source of income for the DSCC.

Md. Ashraf Hossain  
By email