



How February 21 became 'Ekushey'

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February 21, 1952 became a date deeply rooted in the heart of the Bangali people. This is a day of great national significance which got universal recognition as the Mother Language Day now being observed globally under the umbrella of UNESCO. There is no need to revisit that momentous event in nation's life when the youths sacrificed their lives to uphold the right of the mother language. February 21, 1952 was not the first such brutality that happened in the newly established state of Pakistan. In 1950, the killing of political prisoners in the Khapra Ward of Rajshahi Jail was a case of extreme brutality. There were other conflict with peasants and tribal people where police firing caused death of unarmed civilians. But those events, although tragic, could earn neither national significance nor universal recognition. What made February 21 exceptional and how the image of the movement was stamped in the minds of people requires deep study and understanding. Most importantly, the social dimension of the struggle needs to be analysed in a new light. History has provided us with a distance in time and we can look back to the event from a new perspective. With this in mind we can evaluate the movement from two different angles, firstly who defined the images of the movement in the minds of the people and secondly why and how the events of February, 1952 became so influential in the long struggle of the nation for freedom and emancipation.

Firstly, if we look back to the events unfolding in that turbulent time we will come across the word *Rashtra-bhasa Andolon* or the State-language Movement. The committee formed by the all-party alliance to protect the language right called itself *Rashtra-bhasa Sangram Committee*. The Communist Party circulated a leaflet on 10 February calling people to join the *Rashtra-bhasa Andolon* or State Language Movement. After the police firing a national conference of the All-Party State Language Committee was held at the Bar

**Hasina Bibi, Mother of Martyred Barkat.**

Council Library on 27 April. The conference adopted a 15-point Charter of Demand where the movement had been termed as *Rashtra-bhasa Andolon*. But within one year we found a new idiom to depict the past struggle when a new form of movement emerged. It was the students and youths of East Bengal who defined the language movement for the wider population with an artistic skill. The youths deeply felt that the movement required a new identity and they committed themselves to provide that. In various ways they defined a political act in cultural terms with innovation and creativity not seen before. The observance of the first anniversary of language movement became the occasion to rally the people and strengthen the spirit of resistance. No one knows who first proposed the idea to have a barefoot procession in the early morning to pay homage to the martyrs. The procession led by the girls in white Saree with black border was a scene Dhaka had never witnessed before. At the Azimpur Graveyard the persons in charge got confused. They had never seen anything similar and the guards

blocked the entry of women to the graveyard, but ultimately had to yield to the demand of the huge crowd. Boys and girls marched in two rows singing patriotic songs. Nation got a great gift of art when the song *Amar Bhaier Rakte Rangano* was born and became a legend by itself. Protest songs are not new in history and mostly such songs are period-bound. In few cases the support of the political forces made the songs popular, as it happened with the song of working classes of the world, the 'International'. That song was translated into many languages of the world including Bangla and sang at various meetings of working people. Fewer are the cases when a song became inspirational for the nation and a rallying cry by itself. This happened with the 'Negro' spiritual '*We shall overcome*' which got re-invented by the Black rights activists and anti-war marchers in the sixties of the past century and became the anthem of popular protest. '*Amar Bhaier Rakte Rangano*' written by 19 year old youth Abdul Gaffar Choudhury and set to tune by another young man Altaf Mahmud was picked up by the 'Marchers of the Morning'

of 21st February. Year after year its appeal grew as more and more people joined the march. It is unique in a sense that the song served a particular purpose, to be rendered only during the annual observance of February 21, but the particular song became universal and one that consolidated the people struggling to establish their national rights.

1953 was a defining moment in history when the first anniversary of language movement was observed with strong cultural content. Apart from musical rendition the literary urge to express the feel of the time got reflected in the anthology of writings edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, another young participant of the movement. This was a collective effort containing essays, stories, poems, songs as well as sketches by the young artists. The anthology titled simply as '*Ekushey February*', created a new idiom. Henceforth the term '*Ekushey February*' became synonymous with the language movement.

Hasan Hafizur Rahman initiated the work in January of 1953 to publish the anthology marking the anniversary of language movement. The office of the Pakistan Literary Council became the hub of the endeavour. The young writers got the patronage of elderly editor of literary journal 'Shawgat', Mohammed Nasiruddin. Anisuzzaman, a second year student (still a teen) of Jagannath Collage was close with Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Hasan asked him to write the dedication of the anthology and he quickly penned few lines in his nice handwriting. Hasan decided to put the facsimile of the text in the dedication page. This was duly done and the book carried the text handwritten by Anisuzaman but more important was what Anisuzzaman had written on behalf of the collective. The anthology was dedicated to the people of the land from where the martyrs of Ekushey were born and the people who uphold the promises of Ekushey. What these promises were have been eloquently reflected in the editorial which carried no name but was written by Abdullah Al-Muti. The editorial highlighted the democratic rights of the Bangali people to struggle against national oppression and linked that with the struggle of oppressed nations of the world. This in one way reflected the reality that Pakistan became a colonial state with domination of the West over the Eastern part, thus the struggle contained elements of self-determination.

The publication of the anthology faced police persecution; the printing press was raided and police confiscated the book. But the message of the publication spread out far and wide and the title got engrained in the minds of the people. One poem from the anthology became very popular. The young poet Alauddin Al-Azad wrote: "You have crushed our memorial/ But we are not afraid/ Eight crore people still stand steadfast/ That is our memorial." The poem written by Mahbub-ul Alam Choudhury, another teen-ager from Chittagong, became history by itself. Upon hearing about the police brutality in Dhaka he passionately wrote a long poem titled, "I am here not to cry but demand death by hanging."

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Language movement emerged at a time when there was no political challenge against the rule of Muslim League. Pakistan was created on the basis of 'Two-Nation' theory, the Hindu-Muslim divide. Communal ideological basis of Pakistan and the overwhelming Muslim support for a separate state put Muslim League in a strong