How February 21 ...

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The poem was recited in the mammoth protest meeting held in Chittagong. It was printed as a broadsheet but here also the police raided the printing house and seized all the copies. It so happened that the poet himself had no copy and all was lost. People remembered the poem but no text can be found anywhere. It is only after the independence of Bangladesh a lady, former school teacher, came forward with the text of the poem she transcribed in her diary from a copy seized by the police in a raid of SM Hall. Her brother, the police officer, gave the poem to her to make copy and protect the writing. Later on Professor Choudhury Zahurul Huq of Chittagong University found a copy of the seized document and the poem was published in full after almost three decades of the event.

Another literary cultural input constructing the image of Ekushey was made by Munier Choudhury who wrote and produced a play inside Dhaka Central Jail with other political prisoners as cast member. Munier Choudhury, a brilliant academic well-versed in world literature, took inspiration from the Irish play *'Bury the Dead'*. His play with no female cast had stark setting, as it was a prison-house production. The play Kabor (The Grave) centred on the martyrs of Ekushey marked the beginning of new theatre in East Pakistan.

Zahir Raihan, another young participant of the language movement, wrote a novel 'Arek Falgun' (Another Spring) depicting the observance of February 21 in 1953. Artistic renderation of language movement continued in many different ways and created a rich treasure for generations to come.

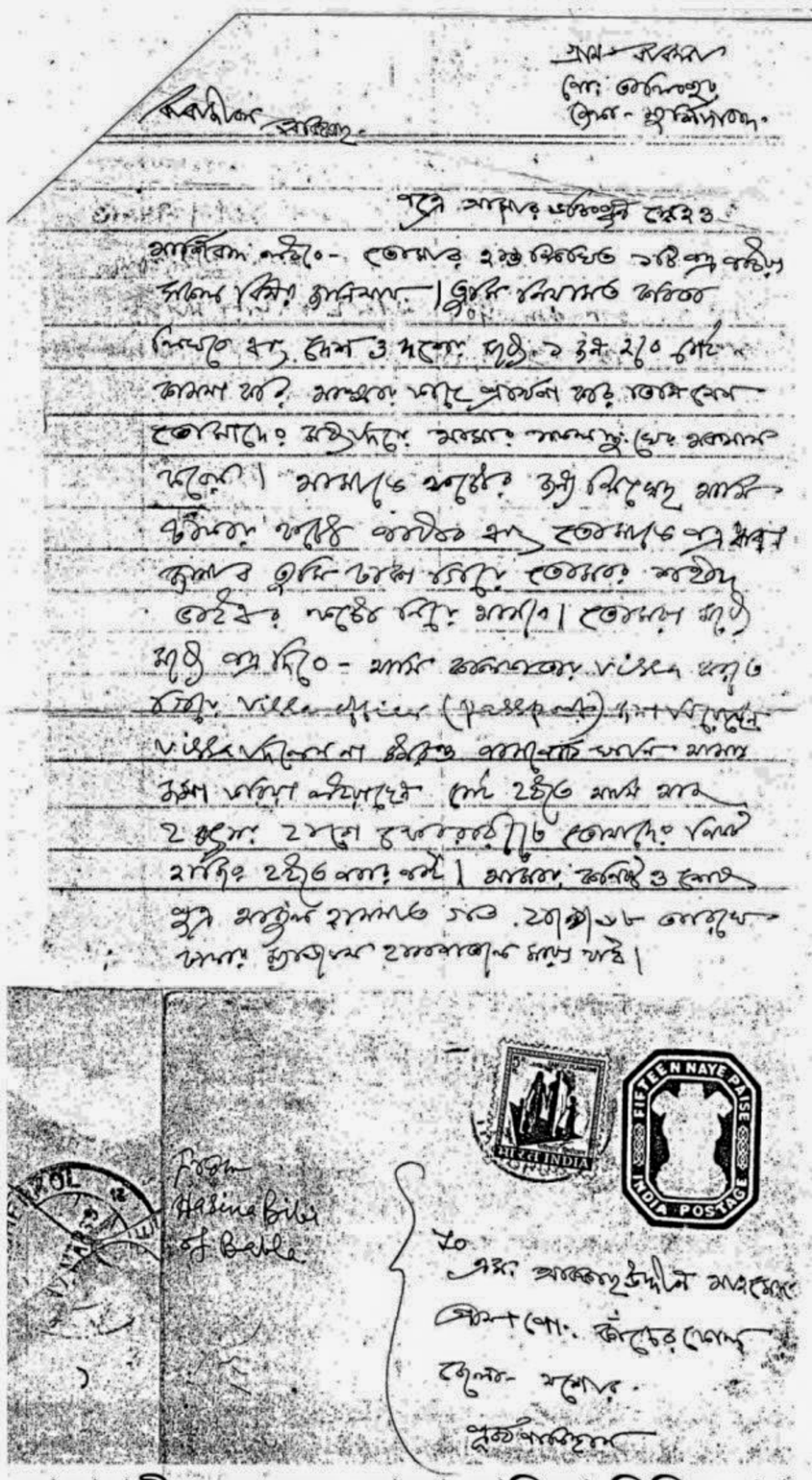
Language movement emerged at a time when there was no political challenge against the rule of Muslim League. Pakistan was created on the basis of 'Two-Nation' theory, the Hindu-Muslim divide. Communal ideological basis of Pakistan and the overwhelming Muslim support for a separate state put Muslim League in a strong position while the opposition was in disarray. The influence of A K Fazlul Hoque and his Krishak-Praja Party was minimal. The Congress and Communist Party in East Bengal lost their base with the exodus of Hindu population. Moreover, Communist Party faced un-official ban and the followers were persecuted and languished in jail. The Awami Muslim League although not banned, was in a similar situation. Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy settled in Karachi to practice in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, and engaged himself in the effort to launch the Jinnah Muslim League. On the other hand state and political power in Pakistan was concentrated in the West. Eastern wing was dominated politically, economically, militarily and in no way could mount a resistance. In such a scenario only national culture and identity could unite the whole people, made them aware about the domination and inspire them to struggle to establish their rights. The spirit of *Ekushey* opened the path of this national struggle and created a new possibility to resist culturally the power of the state. The literary-cultural resistance gradually took the form of political resistance which flowered in the 1954 election of the Provincial Assembly throwing Muslim League out of power in the Eastern wing. The 21st programme of the United Front had strong cultural components promoting resurgence of Bangali cultural identity. The introduction of Bangla at all levels was a major commitment. The establishment of Bangla Academy, construction of martyr's memorial, setting up a film studio was included in the 21st programme.

United Front government initiative to construct a memorial of martyrs took an interesting turn. Painter Hamidur Rahman and sculptor Novera Ahmed were commissioned to do the work and they designed a unique memorial with murals and sculptures. The tall columns represented the mother with her son and daughter. The design had abstract quality which people readily accepted. The artists could not complete the memorial as the United Front government was toppled and military rule was imposed in Pakistan in 1958. Years later, the government curtailed the original design and finished the construction in a half-hearted manner. Even though the original design was not implemented, the people embraced the memorial as a symbol of national resurgence and the site became the centre of celebrating Ekushey and much more.

The language movement was defined more in literary cultural terms than political and had shown possibility to move beyond the political divide. This truly became an event of national significance, uniting and inspiring the whole population. But the question is how come that language movement became so influential and touched the hearts and minds of people in every part of the country?

In the concluding chapter of his three-volume monumental work on the language movement, Badruddin Umar tried to answer this question. He observed that in 1948 when the first conflict on the issue of state language erupted the people were nonchalant about the movement, but in 1952 it was a completely different story. At that time, 90 percent of the population lived in the villages and the rural people responded strongly to the demand of the language movement. Like a true Marxist he opined that the shift in the mood of peasants and workers happened due to increase in exploitation of them. But one can argue that the situation was as bad in 1948 as in 1952. Then why 1952 became so appealing while 1948 did not find much resonance? Historians and sociologists will have their arguments on that. Here we can put an observation made by noted economist Amartya Sen in one of his many public lectures in Dhaka. He raised the same question and placed his humble observation. He noted that in 1950 Muslim League abolished the Zamindari system and thereby initiated a land reform in East Bengal without any intention to do that. The policy adopted by the Muslim League was obviously driven by their communal outlook as majority of landlords in East Bengal were Hindu, but the steps taken led to de-facto land reform and re-distribution of land. The beneficiaries of such act were large number of Muslim peasants which created new social mobility. They now got greater opportunity in life including that in education and employment. Amartya Sen observed that due to the change in rural East Bengal a new group emerged who identified their dreams and ambitions with that of the Bangali nation as expressed in the language movement.

From different perspective both Badruddin Umar and Amartya Sen noticed the massive involvement of people with the language movement. We can cite here one example of how a youth from humble rural background got baptism of fire in the language movement and defined his life in the light of that. M. Akkasuddin Ahmed of Kancher Pool, Jessore was a student of Class VII during the language movement. Local youth Sayeedur Rahman, a student of Dhaka Medical College who participated in the movement returned to his village when the college was closed sine die. He inspired Akkas and other students to be part of the struggle. Akkas later on became a teacher in the same rural school and throughout his life remained committed to the secular national values. In 1968 he established contact with Hasina Bibi, mother of Shaheed Barkat living at a remote village in Murshidabad, West Bengal. Hasina Bibi was known to the youths because of her earlier visit to Dhaka. When the Shaheed Minar was constructed in 1963 the student leaders invited Hasina Bibi to come and join the opening ceremony. The presence of the old mother of Martyr Barkat from rural West Bengal and the way she greeted the youths of East Bengal made a big impact. May be this had led Akkasuddin Ahmed to establish contact with her by mail. Abbasuddin Ahmed, son of Akkasuddin Ahmed, also a school teacher recently published the book of poem written by his father. He wrote the introduction and put in the book facsimile of the letter written by Hasina Bibi to his father. We can end the article with this letter which eloquently expressed the human aspect of the language movement, how an elderly mother blessed a youth in East Bengal with love and affection for all. She wrote the letter in an informal way which is difficult to translate. Placed below is the renderation of the text:



ভাষাশহীদ বরকত-মাতা হাসিনা বিবির পত্র

Babajibon Akkas (My Elixir of Life Akkas)

Please accept my affection and blessings sent with this letter. I came to know everything from your handwritten letter. I wish that you will write poems regularly and be one among many in the country.

I pray to Allah that the Almighty washes away my grief through all of you. You have asked for photo, I will send that to Dhaka and will let you know so that you can pick up the photo of your Martyred brother. Do write to me from time to time. I went to Kolkata and deposited my passport in the visa office for visa. They did not issue visa, moreover they kept my passport with them. It is two years ever since that I could not join you during the observance of Ekushey in February. My youngest and last son Abul Hasnat expired on 20/9/68 at the Medical Hospital of Dhaka.

The language movement or Ekushey was a spark that became wildfire and inspired the nation for generations to come. The issue of language right was the seed that blossomed into the right of the Bangali nation for self-determination. The linguistic-cultural identity was a negation of the communal divisive ideology of two-nation. The national identity creates harmony among various religious communities within the nation. Ekushey illuminated the soul of the people with that light and the people embraced Ekushey with all their passion. We find reflection of that both at national and human level. Thus 21st February became Ekushey for the Bangali nation.

The writer is an author and cultural activist.