

From *Ekushey* to International Mother Language Day and Beyond

(Based on a speech delivered in an event hosted by the Bangladesh Embassy in Singapore last February)

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Like every landmark day of every other country, Bangladesh's *Ekushey* February, or the 21st of February, 1952, has its roots decades back in its history. Like all such landmark days of other nations, it has also been gaining in symbolic stature for its people with every passing year. Indeed, in our time, the day can be seen as not only of national significance but of international consequence since from 17 November, 1999 the United Nations made it "International Mother Language Day."

The origins of the day of course is at the time when only a few months after the independence of Pakistan many Bengali Muslims realized that their right to speak in their mother tongue would be jeopardized in the very land that they had wanted to make completely their own. One by one, Pakistani rulers who privileged Urdu took a number of decisions that galvanized Bengali leaders into strong and principled opposition. On 8 December 1947, Bengali students met in the University of Dhaka's campus to demand that their mother tongue be made an official language of the nascent state. Their demands would be supported by leading intellectuals of East Pakistan. The great Bengali linguist and a professor at the University of Dhaka, Dr. Mohammed Shahidullah, for instance, pointed out that Urdu was not a language rooted even in West Pakistan and declared, "If we have to choose a second state language, we should consider Urdu," implying thereby the claim of Bengali to be the first language. By the end of the year a National Language Action Committee was formed and the movement to counter the imposition of an alien language at the expense of the mother tongue gained momentum throughout East Pakistan.

But the first real shock for these East Pakistani leaders came on 19 March, 1948. This was the day when Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the Bombay-based lawyer who had spearheaded the Muslim move for an independent Muslim state in India in its latter stages, declared arrogantly at a civic reception organized in Dhaka's Ramna Race Course Maidan that "Urdu, and no other language" would be the state language of Pakistan; anyone who felt different, he declared vehemently, were "enemies of Pakistan." Anger, resentment and the feeling

of being betrayed and put down were only some of the emotions that stirred up all the East Pakistanis present there. But Jinnah could not sense the mood of dismay and the indignation, and a few days later, speaking at the University of Dhaka's convocation, he reiterated his desire to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan.

Not surprisingly, even the Bengali Muslim leaders who had worked actively for the creation of Pakistan reacted sharply and openly to his speech. Among them was A.K. Fazlul Huq, once Mayor of Calcutta as well as Premier of Bengal; Huq had left his privileged position in the city after presenting the Lahore resolution of 1940 that had led to the creation of Pakistan. Among the protesters as well as the young Muslim Bengali student leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had once campaigned actively for Pakistan in Calcutta but had afterwards left India to work for his people directly in East Bengal, and who was destined to be our Bangabandhu.

In the *Unfinished Memoirs*, a book Bangabandhu had written in jail and left behind incomplete but that is now widely available, we can read of the rising political leader's growing dismay at Jinnah's position as well as the attempts being made by Urdu-speaking politicians in leadership positions in East Pakistan. In fact, Bangabandhu wrote in his unfinished memoirs that as early as February 1948 it had become obvious to him and to many East Pakistani Bengalis "that a great conspiracy was afoot to make Urdu and not Bengali the state language." Immediately, he and his friends met to "protest" against such a conspiracy (97); they also decided to declare 11 March "Bengali Language Demand Day."

By the beginning of 1952 things were coming to a head. On the one hand was Jinnah's successor as the Governor-General of Pakistan, Khwaja Nazimuddin, who was bent on imposing Urdu as the only state language of the country. On the other were the Bengalis of East Pakistan who were determined to resist such a policy and who would now be mobilizing for that reason. On 27 January 1952 Nazimuddin implied that he was going to go ahead with policy of "Urdu-only" as far as the state language was

concerned. As soon as Bengalis got an inkling of the central government's plan, many of them got together to form an All-Party Central Language Action Committee. Its members decided to hold strikes and rallies on the 21st of February to demonstrate against these developments.

It was when students had come together at the university gate on that day and had broken through the police line set up to stop their procession that police fired on them. This led to further protests and rallies and even more police action, including arrests of some demonstrating students. The climax came when students who wanted to enter the



East Bengal Legislative Assembly a little later to submit their demands were fired upon by the police. The consequence of this police action was the death of a number of students and people passing by, including Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar. Many others were injured while still others fled to safety for the time being. Even before the day had ended many Bengalis had come to realize what had happened by that time was extraordinary—their people had shed blood for their language and for their rights to break free of arbitrary shackles imposed by men who would have them alienated from

their own culture.

As early as the 23rd of February, 1952 a makeshift *Shaheed Smritistombo* or martyr's monument had been erected on the site of the protest. The police would destroy it three days later and still later when it was rebuilt. Thus in 1954 a new monument was built to commemorate the deaths that had occurred in and around the site. In 1957 the architect Hamidur Rahman began work on building a more imposing monument with the help of the sculptor Novera Ahmed. On both these occasions the United Front Ministry, consisting of many of the leaders who would lead the Bengali movement for complete freedom, including Bangabandhu, would be supporting the project to build the commemorative structure whole-heartedly. But the second United Front government was forced out of power like the first in 1958, and work on the project was stalled for some time. Nevertheless, Bengalis' insistence led the military government to ultimately withdraw its opposition to the construction. Consequently, the imposing monument depicting symbolically a mother standing amidst her martyred sons was completed and inaugurated by Hasina Begum, the mother of the martyred Abul Barkat, on 21 February, 1963.

However, the monument would be targeted by the marauding Pakistani forces at the time of the Bangladesh Liberation war—after all, it had become by this time the supreme symbol of the indomitable Bengali spirit to uphold their culture at all costs and a constant reminder of the biggest thorn in the Pakistani path to assume complete control over East Pakistan. Once Bangladesh was liberated on December 16, 1971, the government prioritized the rebuilding of the monument and it was resurrected completely by 21 February, 1973.

The United Front ministry that had been elected in 1954 to form the cabinet in East Pakistan had decided to create the Bangla Academy in the vicinity of the site of martyrdom to protect, preserve, promote, project and propel Bengali language and culture into the future. The whole month of February since then has been increasingly filled with events commemorating the Bengali language centered on the Bangla Academy. The immensely popular book fair,

known as the *Ekushey boi mela*, is of course the central event of the month. But *Ekushey* celebrations are not confined to the *Ekushey* monument located inside the University of Dhaka or the Bangla Academy book fair. In fact, the whole country now celebrates the month through book fairs, discussions on the language movement and its significance and cultural events. This is also the month when the Bangla Academy announces awards for outstanding Bangladeshi writers in different fields and when the government recognizes men and women who have made exceptional contribution to the country's arts and culture by conferring on them the *Ekushey Padak* or awards.

Even before the turn of the millennium, *Ekushey* celebrations had spread to Bengali-speaking communities outside Bangladesh. Inspired by the symbolic significance of a day when one focused fully on the central role played in one's life by one's mother tongue, Rafiqul Islam, an expatriate Bangladeshi residing in Vancouver, Canada, proposed in a letter to the then Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan on 9 January, 1998 that the day be proclaimed International Mother Language Day. The letter was taken up in all seriousness and by 1999 UNESCO had made the day International Mother Language Day. This was proof that the idea of *Ekushey*, once set in motion, like all momentous ideas, had even more earth-embracing consequences.

As I conclude, I think of the martyrs of 21 February 21, 1952. Certainly, they did not die in vain; their spirits live on amazingly. This day Bangladesh is always fully alive, if solemnly so, commemorating them whole-heartedly. Dhaka's *Ekushey Boi Mela*, in and around Bangla Academy, buzzes all February. On television recently, we saw a telecom company airing an ad where a Sierra Leone band sang in the mother tongue of the singers the *Ekushey* February song. Truly, wondrously, the spirit of *Ekushey* has possessed us all and will inspire us forever to uphold Bengali, our mother tongue and inculcate respect for all mother tongues of the world.

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Selina Hossain's *Bhumi O Kusum*: Marginality, Borders and Existential Refugee-hood in the *Chhitmahal*

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At this moment, when thousands of Rohingya refugees are sheltering in Bangladesh, the word 'refugee' gains new significance in the sub-continent. However, this article examines the semantic meaning of the term to encapsulate the affective experiences of some people who cannot be called refugees in the legal sense, and yet whose life experiences closely resemble the lack of status of a refugee's life. I draw attention to enclave dwellers whose existence forms the core of what I wish to say here. But to begin at the beginning we have to turn 70 years back: to the year 1947.

The partition of India in 1947 had the semblance of work well done in terms of population exchange or drawing up the new boundaries, particularly in the Punjab. However, the international boundary in the East, drawn up with indifference to actual lives and geographical realities, was one of the many unfinished labours whose lines of vivisection echoed in the detritus of broken lives, families, habitations and the secret selves of the nations that came into being at the stroke of midnight. After numerous Boundary Commissions and high-level meetings between India and Pakistan, the porous borders between the two nations still contained anomalies and regularly hit the headlines because they extracted a price far beyond the imagination of the policymakers. Significantly, the price was mostly paid by border dwellers, whose ties of trade and kinship often carried them across the invisible lines that demarcated citizenship and defined an alien. I examine a pressing issue of border making through the formation of enclaves in a novel by the well known novelist Selina Hossain called *Bhumi O Kusum*. In partition studies in South Asia, the terms "refugees" and

"migrations" do not encompass some aspects of marginalization that are faced by enclave dwellers. This existential marginalization of a whole people of border dwellers has translated to living on the fringe of society with material deprivations and often, because of nationality and gender, to suffer a double marginalization.

Selina Hossain's novel *Bhumi O Kusum* (Land and Flower, 2010) remains the only exploration of *chhitmahal* in Bangla literature from both sides of the border and can be considered an important intervention where literature's role in constructing a society's sense of reality can be seen fully laid out. Depicting Bangladesh's citizens in Dohogram, who live surrounded by Indian territories, the novel explores the lineaments of citizenship that radically transform or mutate the longing for a human subject to live and work peacefully and to belong to a land that may be constructed as *home*.

Before she began her novel, Hossain had visited the enclave of Dohogram-Angarpota a number of times to get to know about the inhabitants. The idea of the novel came to her when she realized that "those who live here are controlled by international relations....Dohogram-Angarpota belongs to Bangladesh but is surrounded and controlled by India.... This crisis of the human subject moved me immensely" (Interview to me, 2014). She was aware that there was hardly any narrative based on the history of enclaves and her novel would be a pioneering work addressing issues of belonging and violence that were often hidden in governmental statistics. Hossain's novel brings *chhitmahal* dwellers, and their "divided lives" on a center-stage as it lays bare their relationship to a land where they

live and labour.

Peopled with a wide range of characters both Hindus and Muslims, the novel's narrative timeline begins with the formation of the *chhitmahal* called Dohogram that is surrounded by India (although the land belonged to East Pakistan) and ends with the formation of independent Bangladesh. The Hindu inhabitants of the enclave feel like "proxy citizens" of the new state of Pakistan while in India they would be termed "refugees." In one life-time, that encompasses a range of marginalities (156). Even the Muslims are not real citizens either because they enjoy nothing of the benefits that citizenship brings. They even own no official documents (like an identity card) that allow them any access to the state's resources. The novel, in keeping with its subject has a fluid structure with episodic units tied together through a number of characters, although Golam Ali, Namita Bagdi, Monjila, her daughter Barnamala and Bashar are the ones who influence the narrative flow.

The interlocutory discursive trope of the text is land and belonging: this in turn constructs the ideal of a 'home' that gathers within it both a goal and a method: the inhabitants of the *chhitmahal* unite to form a responsible society although they are denied citizen's rights just as they participate in the formation of their collective identity. The novel celebrates the birth of Bangladesh but also suggests that it can be a nation only when it is truly inclusive: to deny citizenship to the enclave inhabitants is to construct a nation deeply flawed: "We are Pakistani...inhabitants of the *chhitmahal* called Chandraghana. We are surrounded by India on all sides. Our flags are decorated with the moon and stars. We can see Pakistan

when we look at that flag.... But Pakistan is an absence in the vessel in which we cook rice" (251). *Bhumi O Kusum* is a novel about the novelist's quest to "work through" (to use Adorno's phrase) the subcontinent's past and its connections to the present: not only in the synchronic life of the nation but the diachronic inheritance of identities that live within an organic cycle of nature's seasons and in the shadow of the partition.

Dohogram, situated next to the Teen Bigha Corridor, is a small space packed with people of all faiths and creeds. Hossain's strategy to explore this marginal community in constant dialogue with hegemonic state structures opens up a space that is between the factual and the metaphorical: the imagination of a 'home' is mediated through issues of territory and sovereignty; yet it is also something more than just land. Nitai the singer, who had left his ancestral home in another "chhit," ruminates: "Now there will be another turn and another new life will start: another kind of soil, another kind of grass, trees and plants. Birds and bird-calls.... To make a path and then to find a path again. And again...." (273). The passage points to a "third dimension" working within temporal markers of the idea of home: a home that is beyond the factual or metaphorical but consistent with the journey of humans through the earth, at once real and sublime.

Barnamala, whose name means the (Bangla) alphabet, scripts this new language of living and loving. The day she gets married to Ajmal she watches the soft light spread over the *chhit* under whose benediction the huts, the grass, the wild bushes, the mud track and the rice fields look ever new. Like the changes in Barnamala's life, the political fortunes of the *chhit* changes too: East Pakistan becomes independent Bangladesh

and Ajmal dies fighting for it. The political fate of Dohogram, however, does not change. Barnamala, at the end of the novel, has evolved through living and through suffering the contingencies of borders. But when she tries to enter Bangladesh to pay obeisance to her dead husband, the sentries stop her. She cries out, "I want the people of the *chhit* to be free. You cannot keep us prisoners forever." In her last cry the geo-bio identity of the citizen is effaced and Barnamala, "a citizen with no rights, in permanent deferral" refuses to be the "living dead." Her cry tears into the silence that surrounds her: she enters a perennial language of protest with her demand to be free. If we take Agamben's idea that only the bare life is authentically political, then Barnamala's cry to be free is the way in which she writes herself back into the body of the nation. Her cry is shot through with the "uncanny" for it reappears after the nation state has been formed and freedom has been proclaimed. It is a reminder how the postcolonial realities of border conflicts remain the marker of the enclave dwellers' life circumstances. The uneasy confluence of state repression and border porosity that had made Barnamala a 'divided body' now asserts its right to be free, not just from the prison of legality but in the momentum set off by her grieving and dying.

Author's Notes: The author wishes to thank Selina Hossain for her generosity. *One of the Key-note speakers at the Refugee Conference at ULAB, Dr. Debjani Sengupta, Associate Professor of English at Indraprastha College for Women, has shared a shortened version of her speech with The Daily Star readers. This paper has been previously published in a longer format in Looking Back: The Partition of India 70 Years On.*