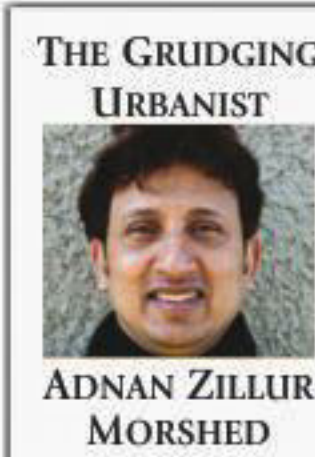


The political algorithm of 21st February



THE GRIDDING URBANIST
ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

UNDERSTANDING the political setting of the Language Movement and 21st February requires an examination of how religion played very different roles before and after the 1947 Partition in

nationalism or the pursuit of a separate homeland for Muslim Bengalis to a path of secular Bengali nationalism. "Whereas the pre-1947 nationalism was cloaked under the religious and/or communal surplise, the post-1947 nationalism was entirely secular." Disillusionment with the idea of Pakistan as a country in which all Muslims—irrespective of their ethnicities—would enjoy equal access to political power and economic opportunities gradually set in. The Bengali Muslims' excitement about economic emancipation under the statehood of Pakistan soon proved to be a pipedream.

Despite representing 54 percent of Pakistan's total population, East Pakistan had very little influence on the political decision-making process. The vacuum created by departing Hindus in East Pakistan's administration was soon filled by the Punjabi and Urdu-speaking Muslim elites from Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India. For many Bengali observers, "the creation of Pakistan symbolised for the Bengali Muslims a change of masters only and not the mode of domination and exploitation." Peter Bertocci

The language factor pushed the thorniest wedge between the Bengalis and the ruling class of West Pakistan. The vast majority of East Pakistanis spoke Bengali, while only a fraction of West Pakistanis spoke Urdu.

elaborated on the background of this state of affairs and noted that "differences of language and culture between Bengalis and the ethnic groups of West Pakistan became accentuated in the context of the growing regional inequities characteristic of Pakistan's political economy."

The language factor pushed the thorniest wedge between the Bengalis and the ruling



Morning procession of female students of Dhaka University, February 21, 1953.

class of West Pakistan. The vast majority of East Pakistanis spoke Bengali, while only a fraction of West Pakistanis spoke Urdu. However, the Urdu-speaking political oligarchy dominated the politics of West Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder and Governor-General of Pakistan, announced the following, while addressing the Dhaka University Special Convocation on March 24, 1948: "There can be only one state language. If the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison, that language, in my opinion, can only be Urdu." Such flagrant denial of the complexity of Pakistan's intricate ethnic and linguistic composition predictably ignited a nationalist passion among the Bengalis. Realising that the prevailing economic and political disparities between the two wings of Pakistan would not go away anytime soon, many Bengalis called into question the religion-based political vision that drove the creation of Pakistan. Many felt compelled to search for cultural, social, and linguistic roots that made them Bengali.

Acclaimed Bengali educator and philologist Muhammad Shahidullah sought to celebrate, albeit with a tinge of essentialism, his concept

of *Bengaliness* at the first Bengali literary conference of East Bengal, held in Dhaka, on December 31, 1948: "It is true that there are Hindus and Muslims. But what is transcending is that they are in essence Bengali. This is a reality. Nature with her own hand has stamped the indelible mark of Bengali in such a manner on our appearance and language that it is no longer possible to conceal it." Bengali activist-historian Badruddin Umar called the prevailing Bengali sentiment a "homecoming of Bengali Muslims." What Umar meant was that the Bengali Muslims finally realised the political fallacy of creating a pan-Muslim country, ignoring the robust complexity of the roles that religion, culture, tradition, and language play in forming ethnic identities.

While not rejecting the importance of the Islamic faith in the Bengali Muslim character, some intellectuals endeavoured to explain the syncretic nature of Bengali Islam, influenced by many organic factors of pre-Islamic folk values. More secular-minded Bengali Muslims disputed the argument that a faith that originated in the Arabian Peninsula could remain *pure* as it travelled across geographical

and cultural boundaries. They deemed that a pan-Islamic ideology—buttressed by the imposition of Urdu as the state language—able to cohere the ethnically divergent peoples of Pakistan was a doomed political position from the beginning. Their point of contention was to understand how faith blends with local cultural forms, values, and practices.

In *The Islamic Syncretic Tradition in Bengal* (1983), Asim Roy cogently demonstrated how medieval Muslim mystics converted Bengali Muslims by fusing the Islamic faith with native myths and cosmologies. Far from being a corruption of the faith, Bengal's syncretic Islam provided a rich tapestry of cultural amalgamation. As Rafiuddin Ahmed stated: "As in many other Muslim societies, Islam in Bengal has taken many forms and has assimilated values and symbols not always in conformity with Qur'anic ideals and precepts. The cultural idioms of Islam underwent rapid transformations here, giving birth to a set of popular beliefs and practices, which, in essence, represented the popular culture of rural Bengal rooted in the pre-Islamic past.... Islam in Bengal has not been able to escape the influences of local culture: The Bengali Muslims have remained Bengalis."

The ordinary Bengali Muslims' psychological predicament of opposing allegiances—to local culture and to an uncompromised interpretation of faith—would magnify in favour of indigenous roots of Bengali Islam after the Partition, when their disillusionment with Pakistan's promise of a safe haven for all Muslims became widespread. The coexistence of contradictory values explains "why the same region could support movements first for Pakistan, and then for Bangladesh." It is in this post-Partition shifting context that the Language Movement had sown the seeds of wider Bengali agitation for political and economic emancipation.

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Debasing the memory of Amar Ekushey



ZOBAÏDA NASREEN

ONLY that which does not cease to hurt remains in memory." — Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

(1887)

Growing up in a coastal town, I have seen people from all walks of life—students, artists, politicians, workers, peasants, and everyday families—participate in social rituals of Amar Ekushey.

Every year on February 21, they would passionately go on *prabhat pheri* to commemorate the historic event of 1952 when students and workers laid down their lives for the right to language. Carrying flowers in hand and singing the Ekushey song "Amar bhaier rokte rangano Ekushey February/ Ami ki bhulite pari?" in unison, they would march towards Shaheed Minar.

It was a day of remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest against oppression and autocratic attitudes of the ruling class, characterised by the collective agency of the people. It is no wonder that the Shaheed Minar became a sacred secular space where people would gather to protest injustices. Whenever the need for collective action arose, people looked to Ekushey to embolden themselves with a sense of collective power. This was true not just for anti-autocratic and anti-sectarian movements at the national level, but also for local protests against oppressions.

The way we observe Ekushey now has changed significantly over the years. We are evidently moving away from the language of grief and mourning. Sixty-seven years after martyrdom, the pain of loss has diminished, and our grief for the dead has faded. The sombre atmosphere has given way to a celebratory mood. Successive governments have also contributed in devising a language of celebration after Ekushey went international with its recognition by the United Nations as the International Mother Language Day. Its appeal to young people seems to be fading away as the day is becoming more and more commercialised. The collective exercise of remembering is long gone. And the Ekushey "celebrations" increasingly reflect a crass form of individualism, characterised by exhibitionism and attention-seeking: for politicians, it's a photo op; for celebrities, it's an opportunity to show their fans how much they love their language and country; for

ordinary people, it's a chance to wear new attire and take photos to post on social media.

What are the political and cultural implications of these changes? Does the direction we seem to be headed in run the risk of creating a disjunction between history and memory?

We all know that collective memory can mobilise social change. The act of remembering not only represents the context of a past event, but also influences and drives current efforts. Any popular resistance has to be able to establish itself based on

of belonging that allowed ordinary people's democratic agency to take hold and fired up resistance against oppression. It was a protest against stripping of our national rights and national repression. It represents the loss of meaning in the "Pakistan Ideology", which was based on the divisive "two-nation" theory, while giving way to a search for a new meaning, the "Bangladesh Ideology", based on the principles of "equality, human dignity and social justice." The emancipatory and egalitarian character embodied in Ekushey has, for generations, been a constant

International Mother Language Day, but I firmly believe it is our duty to mourn and remember.

If we give up mourning, we might soon no longer remember the past. It is how we approach a historical memory to keep it alive and relevant; our realisation and interpretation of its legacy depend on it. If we do not preserve and transmit the meaning of this historical day, our future generations will no longer be touched by the history that our heroes gave up their lives for. That would mean we do not belong.

That would mean we are from nowhere. We are part of a nation that is today carving out a place for itself on the world stage. How can we imagine going forward without a sense of belonging or as a people without history when we have such "immortal" memories?

The timeless promise of Ekushey is yet to be fulfilled. It still possesses tremendous symbolic significance that has the power to mobilise a collective force and bring about major changes. There is no denying that letting it go international has allowed greater participation of individuals

from all over the world, but it can have much greater influence nationally so that we can achieve more collectively. It is vital for the future generations to know that their people died fighting for their rights, and many people are still fighting.

The process of revision and/or erasure has begun. Only mourning and remembrance can stop the erasure of our collective memory.

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Have we forgotten about the sacrifices of the Language Movement martyrs?

PHOTO: ABDUS SALAM/PROTHOM ALO

collective memory. In other words, struggles are impossible without memory. In our nation's life, Ekushey occupies a unique place—not only as a reminder of the martyrdom of students and workers, the suppression of our mother language, and the assault on our culture, but also by instilling the sense of possibility and the potential power of the streets. At every turn of our nation's life when we felt we were making history, or in every struggle for democratic transformation of society, the memory of Ekushey's heroic resistance mobilised us.

Ekushey's immediate significance was more cultural and social rather than political, but in a very short time, it changed Bengali society forever. Ekushey is the day when we declared that this language is ours, that we belong to this land. It is the day when the heartbeat of an unborn Bangladesh was heard for the first time. The first clear expression of Bengali nationalism came with this Language Movement. Ekushey cultivated a sense of self and a sense

source of inspiration and vitality for social and political movements. That is why, it is so important to guard against attempts to debase the memory of Ekushey.

A key principle of the Language Movement is its appeal to universality: the idea that all human beings should have the right to practise one's own language and culture. It speaks for all the people and their languages. There is no denying that UN's adoption of Ekushey as the International Mother Language Day on November 17, 1999 made us all proud and boosted Bangladesh's stature on the world stage. UN efforts since the turn of the century to promote linguistic and cultural diversity the world over are undoubtedly a great development. But it is disheartening to hear some people argue that since Ekushey is now recognised as the International Mother Language Day, we should start celebrating it with the whole world, rather than observing it as a day of mourning. I am not opposed to celebrating the achievements of

যাদের আত্মত্যাগে একুশ পেয়েছে আন্তর্জাতিক মাতৃভাষা দিবসের মর্যাদা সেই সকল অকুতোভয় ভাষা সৈনিকদের প্রতি আমাদের সশ্রদ্ধ অভিবাদন

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