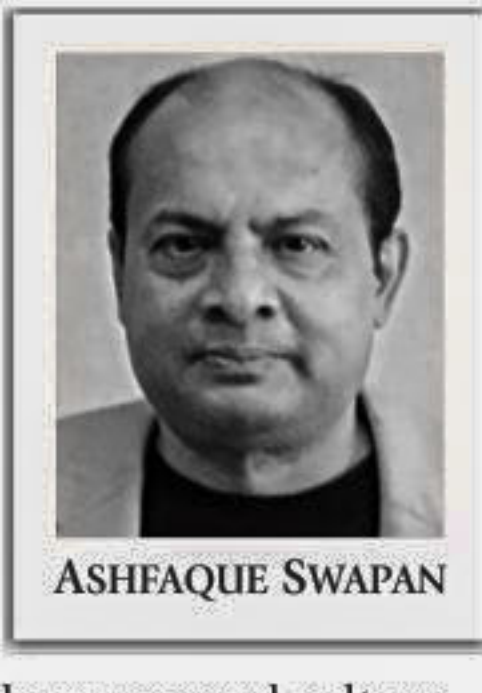


Ekushey February: The legacy and the challenge



FOR a perennially homesick expat living 10,000 miles away in Atlanta, February is a special month. It's that particular time in the year when Bangla lovers renew their pledge to nurture their



If we are to truly honour the sacrifice of the language martyrs, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the language that they died to defend not only survives but grows and thrives.

PHOTO: STAR

language and culture. For me, Ekushey is only nominally an occasion for mourning the language martyrs of 1952. It is also a time of celebration. The entire week around Ekushey is given to a joyous celebration of Bangla language and culture. I still have fond memories of my youth when the Shahid Minar compound would be bedecked in anticipation of the big day with festoons of Bangla quotes from literary luminaries of yesteryear. As Ekushey approached, Art College students would drape the streets leading to the Shahid Minar with exquisite hand-painted traditional designs—*alpanas*. From midnight, people would walk barefooted to lay wreaths in deeply affectionate remembrance of the martyrs who laid down their lives in honour of our language. A week-long slew of cultural events—poetry recitals, open-air plays—all open to the public, marked the occasion. The *piece de resistance*, of course, was the *Ekushey Boi Mela*, the book fair for which bibliophiles, yours truly emphatically included, waited all year. Several decades later, the enthusiasm

remains. I was impressed when I visited the book fair last year. It is no longer the small, cosy book fair of my college-going days that comfortably fit inside the premises of Bangla Academy. The book fair has assumed gargantuan proportions, occupying a substantial part of a large public park, and I walked through, giddy with joy, browsing through different

titles. My old favourite UPL was still there, and I also loved dropping into the elegant kiosk of Prothoma, with its array of interesting titles, all handsomely produced. I was particularly taken by an exquisite stall by Batighar, the Chattogram-based publisher. It was a rather small kiosk with only a handful of titles but I was struck with the sheer artistic beauty of its books as well as the kiosk itself.

However, as I walked through the length and breadth of the fair and took a thorough look, my feelings were decidedly mixed. For all the profusion of book stalls, the number of original publications was remarkably minuscule.

The fact of the matter is that publishing in Bangladesh is facing a crisis. I learned from insiders that a first print run of a new book today could be as little as 300 books—sometimes as low as 200! What a far cry from decades ago when the print run of reputed authors easily ran into at least 1,000 (This is partly to do with technology—in the old days the capital costs of a print run made anything less than that a dicey financial gambit).

But still, a 200-book print run? What a shocking indictment for a nation that prides itself on its language and its culture! Something is horribly amiss here. Of course, the cost of books has spiked with the means of the middle class falling way behind.

I also wonder whether the elite penchant for sending their kids to English-medium schools has played a role. Both my sisters and I grew up as voracious readers of Bangla books; none of my nephews read Bangla books. During my longer trips to Dhaka over the years I tried hard to engage them—to no avail. Their Bangla skills were not good enough, and they lived in a socio-cultural bubble divorced from the Bangla mainstream.

The state of Bangla publishing is like the proverbial canary in the mine: It's a flashing danger sign that all is not well with the state of the language. Books, periodicals are the lifeblood of a language and its culture.

Don't get me wrong, I am not advocating against English education. However, for the life of me I cannot understand why a command of English should come at the expense of an intimate understanding of Bangla. Some of our great litterateurs were scholars of English—like Buddhadeva Bose and his student, our poet laureate Shamsur Rahman.

It's over 30 years since I have moved to the US, but I read—and write—Bangla with equal pleasure.

So, start with something simple. Read a Bangla book. And ask others, especially school-going kids, to do so. I'm serious.

Dr Muhammad Shahidullah, a father figure in the world of Bangladesh's Bangla scholars, issued a trenchant warning in an article included in my high school Bangla textbook. He was writing about folklore, but it applies to Bangla as well. I paraphrase his admonition here: "All our efforts at promotion and preservation will be in vain if we do not have a heartfelt interest and engagement. It will all be just humbug, a hoax."

This year, I have no doubt that Ekushey will be marked, to borrow a cliché from old BTV newscasts, "due pomp and solemnity." Yet if we are to truly honour the sacrifice of the language martyrs, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the language that they died to defend not only survives but grows and thrives.

As the nation pays homage to language martyrs, we would do well to remember the old sage's cautionary words.

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India's military options to tackle terror after Pulwama

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IT has been a week since the ghastly terror attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed, a group based in Pakistan, on a convoy of Indian paramilitary troops left 40 people dead in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir. But the attack continues to spawn grief and anger across India as strongly as ever. Almost daily candle light marches, chorus of condemnation from the entire spectrum of society and the political class and the rising demand for a sharp riposte to terrorism are reflective of the anger. Prime Minister Narendra Modi summed up the mood best when he said the perpetrators of the attack will have to pay a heavy price and that his heart burns with the same fire as it does in others. He also vowed a fierce retaliation to the assault but left it to the security forces to choose the time and the venue of their choice. Soon after the incident, India made it clear that the incident bears the typical signature of Jaish-e-Mohammed and minced no words in pointing at Pakistan's direct role for the single deadliest assault ever in Kashmir.

This is not the first time that India has been subjected to major terror attacks sponsored and masterminded by state and non-state actors in Pakistan. In the 21st century, one has to recall the attack by Jaish-e-Mohammed on Indian parliament in 2001 which brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war after both sides mobilised troops to the border, an attack on Indian army cantonment which left 36 people dead on May 14, 2002, the 2006 serial train bombings by Lashkar-e-Taiba, another terror outfit in Pakistan, in India's financial capital Mumbai that killed over 200 people followed by the mayhem unleashed by ten terrorists who sneaked into Mumbai on November 26, 2008 leaving 166 people dead, two separate strikes on an Indian airbase in Pathankot (Punjab)

and an army camp in Uri (Jammu and Kashmir) in 2016 that left 27 people dead. But after the Pulwama incident of February 14, there is a widespread feeling that India must move beyond tokenism of candle light marches, denunciation and resort to coercive diplomacy like scaling down of Indian and Pakistani missions in each other's capitals and snapping of trade, train, road and air-links to isolate and pressure Pakistan in the international community. India's responses to terror attacks from across the border by and large has been confined to mobilising world opinion against Pakistan on the issue of terror, and political management of public perception at home by the government of the day. This template remained consistent till the assault on the Pathankot airbase in January 2016 but not after that.

The attack on the Uri army camp in September 2016 not only led to India scrapping its participation in the SAARC Summit in Islamabad that led to its eventual cancellation but also to a surgical strike by the special forces of the Indian army on the terror infrastructure in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. What now after Pulwama? This time too, India has got into a diplomatic offensive to isolate Pakistan as its Foreign Secretary and other senior diplomats briefed envoys of several countries based in India. India also lobbied to blacklist Pakistan for terror funding at the five-day meeting of the Financial Action Task Force, an inter-governmental body, in Paris. Pakistan was put on the grey list of the FATF in June last year to make it difficult for terror groups in that country to raise funds. In October last year, Pakistan was put on notice for inclusion in the FATF black list which would be a further blow to that country's already tottering economy.

One of the first responses India came up with a day after the Pulwama incident was in the area of bilateral trade—withdrawal of the



Indian security forces in south Kashmir's Pulwama district. PHOTO: AFP

Most Favoured Nation status granted to Pakistan in 1996 and hiking to 200 percent the duty on imports from Pakistan. Nothing more than that. There is general agreement in India that scrapping of MFN tag and increase in import duty do not pack enough punch to hurt Pakistan for two reasons: i) bilateral trade in any case is little above two billion dollars annually; and ii) a sizable portion of India-Pakistan trade is routed through third countries like Dubai and Singapore (unless country of origin is very strictly enforced).

There is a growing view that diplomacy has not worked with Pakistan and what is needed is hard military response against cross-border terrorism. There is little doubt that the Modi government has come under intense pressure to act hard after the Pulwama incident for the simple reason that here is a man who has carved out for himself an image of a decisive and strong leader. The pressure for hard

action is more when fresh parliamentary polls are just a couple of months away. That apart, Modi has also said that the time for discussions on tackling terror is now over and what is required is joint action. The US National Security Adviser John Bolton, during a telephone conversation with his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval, recognised India's right to self-defence to deal with terror.

But the question is, what are the hard options India has and how much of it can or will actually be employed? Will India carry out another cross-border surgical operation? Will it carry out aerial attacks on the terror apparatus in Pakistan? No doubt, use of hard power across the border runs the risk of escalating into a full-scale war between two nuclear-armed rivals. Has the surgical strike by India after the Uri incident set the benchmark for India's response or does it have to be something more than that post-

Pulwama? Can India go for an American-style air strike on the Jaish headquarters in Pakistan or drone attacks targeting the Taliban leaders holed up in Pakistan?

Two major challenges facing India's diplomatic offensive against terror emanating from Pakistan are: i) inability of the international community to pass the UN Convention against the menace for so many years due to lack of a consensus on the definition of terrorism; and ii) repeated veto by China, Pakistan's all-weather ally, in the UN Security Council to put Jaish chief, Masood Azhar, on the UN's list of proscribed terrorists like Hafiz Sayeed. China's stand is in spite of the fact that it has its own problem of militant insurgency. There are media reports in India that France will now lead a move to include Azhar in that list. Indian officials are likely to submit a dossier to establish links between Jaish-e-Mohammed and Pakistan's ISI. Another difficulty India faces in cornering Pakistan on the terror issue is that the US is reaching out to Pakistan to help restore peace in Afghanistan as Washington prepares to cut down its troops in that country. US, China, Iran and Russia have been in talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan and this has emboldened Islamabad, particularly its army which stands hand in gloves with the Taliban.

Moving on from the cross-border dimension of the Kashmiri issue to the internal one, Indian commentators like former career diplomat suggest the government should also introspect how a local Kashmiri youth was radicalised to carry out the suicide attack in Pulwama. It is now incontrovertible that he carried out the assault with help from Jaish-e-Mohammed leader Azhar and others.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote

BF SKINNER
(1904-1990)
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGIST

Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Sped
- 6 Chance to swing
- 11 Psychiatrist Alfred
- 12 Beetle's boss
- 13 Even though
- 14 Healer Barton
- 15 Still of films
- 16 Highway scofflaw
- 18 Museum focus
- 19 Plopped down
- 20 French article
- 21 Clarinet part
- 23 Takes the bus
- 25 Ventilate
- 27 Coquettish
- 28 Useful skill
- 30 Flat-bottomed boat
- 33 Diner order
- 34 Role for Angelina Jolie
- 36 Common bill
- 37 If all goes wrong
- 39 Outdated
- 40 Complete
- 41 Lukewarm
- 43 Pigeon's perch
- 44 Dancer Castle
- 45 Egypt's Anwar
- 46 Gave a hoot
- DOWN**
- 1 Seafood restaurant fixture
- 2 Stick
- 3 "The Mule" co-star
- 4 Slippery one
- 5 Attire
- 6 Recluse
- 7 Yarn
- 8 "The Mule" co-star
- 9 Concurs
- 10 Sign of sorrow
- 17 Birdie beater
- 22 Slight, in slang
- 24 Twice uno
- 26 Shake hands with again
- 28 Tennis great Gibson
- 29 "My country -- of thee"
- 31 One way to shop
- 32 Kind of bliss
- 33 Blubbers
- 35 Top story
- 38 One of Chekhov's "Three Sisters"
- 42 Geologic period

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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