

The heady days of history

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

Eminent educationist Rafiqul Islam, Professor Emeritus at ULAB and Ekushey Padak awardee, was a witness to the Bengali Language Movement, during his youth. Ahead of International Mother Language Day (February 21), he spoke about his involvement in the movement in a chat with Shah Tazrian Ashrafi. Below is a small part of the interview.

I still remember how there was so much commotion around the language issue in East Pakistan right after the 1947 Partition. In 1948, Liaquat Ali Khan brought amendments that sought to make English and Urdu the lingua franca of Pakistan, even though a majority of Pakistan's population spoke in Bangla. Once the news reached the Eastern wing, rumblings of a movement arose. In that climate, Dhirendranath Dutta proposed to include Bangla as the lingua franca. Many Muslim league supporters were in favour of Urdu. I cannot forget the time when I saw students welcoming Dhirendranath Dutta with a flower garland, while they hung a garland of shoes on certain Muslim league members.

On 11 March of that year, students surrounded Khwaja Nazimuddin's house, owing to their demands of making Bangla one of the official state languages. They lay down on the streets so that no one could cross over without meeting their demands. I saw Sheikh Mujibur Rahman there, alongside Oli Ahad and other prominent student leaders. At that time, the police began lathi charging and arresting hordes

of students. I saw how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took a gravely wounded demonstrator to the hospital and immediately returned to the protest site. That was one of my first brushes with political turbulence in a newly created country. My presence in activist assemblies held by prominent leaders was common.

On March 21, I witnessed Jinnah giving his speech about Urdu being Pakistan's lingua franca. His speech was met with a feverish bout of disapproval. "No!" the hecklers shouted. At another assembly a few days later, he replied to the dissenters by asking them to move to India. His notion was that Bangla is a Hindu's language. The underlying hint of communalism in his logic reminds me of an ironic anecdote: I was a part of the student delegation that met Jinnah sometime in late March about their language-related demands. One of us was a Hindu. Jinnah didn't want to speak with him on that account. However, when it was time for Asr prayers, as the students urged him to lead the prayer, he refused to do so. He said he did not pray.

Fast forward to 1952, sometime in late January, Khwaja Nazimuddin again declared that Urdu would be the state language. I was a first-year university student then. My friends and I were sipping tea at Madhur Canteen in Dhaka University. Hearing Nazimuddin's declaration, a small rally disapproving the decision erupted in the campus and we were swept in its tide.



Rafiqul Islam. PHOTO: COLLECTED

On February 19 that year, men on horse carts were blaring announcements throughout Dhaka: Section 144 was imposed, banning any kind of protest, rally, or disturbance. Then came the fateful day of February 21. Protesters were

adamant on violating Section 144 because otherwise there was no option of being heard. I watched as scores of people kept getting arrested and weathering lathi charges. I watched as the police violently cracked down on students inside the Dhaka University campus. We resorted to a nearby pond to neutralise the tear gas' burning sensation. A few hours later, a round of gunshots could be heard. Amidst all the din and panic, I saw a bunch of ward boys carrying a wounded body on a stretcher to an ambulance. Thin threads of bullet-smoke leapt out of the man's wobbly, shattered skull. I had a camera, but I still couldn't click photos—they disappeared so fast. Later, we discovered the body in a dark room. The police had planned to hide the body.

We heard another round of gunshots. This time, Abul Barkat was wounded severely. In his last moments, he was urging us to inform his family of his condition. So, I furtively snuck out with my bicycle avoiding the police and informed his family. They couldn't hide his body because he died at a hospital. I remember there were a rickshaw puller and a young farmer who also succumbed to

bullet injuries. But the state hid their bodies.

After the tragic episode, a Shaheed Minar was erected quickly by gathering cement and bricks from a nearby construction site at the spot, where gunshots felled protesters. It was formally inaugurated by Abdul Kalam Shamsuddin. But unofficially, the deceased rickshaw puller's daughter inaugurated it. Later, the army razed it to the ground. In response, we erected another Shaheed Minar, using black cloth in 1953.

As someone who has witnessed such a pivotal episode like the Language Movement of Bangladesh history, I believe that one should not fall into the trap of historical amnesia. To know one's country, one must objectively learn its history. After all, the essence of a country is lost on a citizen otherwise. We cannot just memorise figures and statistics regarding the casualties of our history. We have to learn how they became casualties.

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The first Shaheed Minar. This photograph was taken on February 24, 1952. PHOTO: DR ABDUL HAFIZ

A sliver of hope in ensuring children's rights



NCF aims to establish 'violence-free community' in all districts across the country.

RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA

National Child Forum (NCF) is an organisation for children by children, which aims to ensure children's rights in every sphere, guaranteeing child safety and promoting positive leadership.

The main objectives of the forum include campaigning against child marriages, promoting children's participation in different spheres, protecting every child's right against violence and negligence, empowering children to participate as change agents and encouraging networking and collaboration among children.

With the help of World Vision, an international humanitarian aid organisation, several child forums were established in different upazilas of Bangladesh, over the years. Later, selected representatives from these forums came together to form the first ever NCF in 2016.

"The aim of NCF is to prove that children are masters of their destiny and they have the power to create positive changes," shares Strala Rupa Mollick, Sr Technical Programme Manager, Child Protection and Participation, World Vision Bangladesh (WVB). "We believe children's participation is not only about asking them to express their views, but also about listening to them, taking them seriously and turning their ideas and suggestions into reality."

Under the leadership of current President Apurba Chandra Sarker and General Secretary Dola Akter Reba, NCF now operates in eight divisions across Bangladesh. NCF volunteers work in 54 upazilas under 24 districts, including Barishal, Rajshahi, Joypurhat, Bagerhat, Rangpur, Dhaka, Sylhet, Chattogram, and Mymensingh. Currently, there are 2,100 child forums across the country with more than 80 thousand members. Under NCF, there



All NCF members vow to protect the rights of every child.

are regional/divisional forum, district forum, upazila forum, union forum and village/ward forum. All the forums are led by children from local areas, who are 18 or younger.

Several NCF members were internationally recognised for their work. Akhi, a girl who was rescued from hazardous child labour, was recognised as 'Real Life Hero' from the United Nations, for making masks during the pandemic.

Dola Akter Reba has been involved with the organisation since 2014, when she was just 10 years old. Dola was shocked to find out that her mother was married at 13, and never truly had a childhood. "Growing up without a childhood because she was married is something I could not fathom," she says. In 2019, she visited the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, as a representative from Bangladesh.

Prevention of child labour and stopping all kinds of violence against children are two major goals of NCF. Advocating for children, setting child friendly help desks in every station, communicating and arranging dialogues with national and local government officials, arranging workshops, training sessions and emergency crisis management among others are primary tasks of every member.

In the last two years, members of the forum successfully stopped more than 800 child marriages across Bangladesh. Their activists stopped more than 200 child marriages in recent months.

According to the National Child Act, 2013, there must be a child help desk in every police station. "Our station did not have any child help desk. We initiated awareness campaigns with the locals, discussed it with police authorities and now, we have a child help desk," shares Roma

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NATIONAL CHILD FORUM

Bormon, representative from Kaharole, Dinajpur.

NCF has connections with local school teachers, and helps struggling parents with their financial burdens.

With World Vision's help, the forum reaches remote parts of the country to arrange various workshops, life skills-based training, and disaster management training programmes. WVB provides necessary financial support and skilled trainers for each workshop.

With their campaign, "Amie Pari Shishu Proti Sokol Prokar Shohingshota Protirodh Korte", more than 2,60,000 people were made aware about the dangerous implications of violence against children.

Over the years, their members declared 17,500 households as 'child violence free' across the country. Currently, they are working to ensure violence-free education in various educational institutes.

The forum members plan to execute their next campaign, "Rainbow Show-down", to teach children about 'good touch' and 'bad touch', sexual abuse while staying at home during the pandemic as well as necessary measures to safeguard their mental health.

"We plan to establish a child forum in all 64 districts of Bangladesh and to connect NCF with international organisations in the near future," shares Apurba. "We want to declare several more districts and upazilas 'free of child marriage and child violence' in the next five years."

An extended version of this article will be available online.

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The Daily Star's 'Muktijuddho Olympiad' launched

FARHAT CHOWDHURY

Celebrating 50 years of the independence of Bangladesh, The Daily Star recently launched 'Muktijuddho Olympiad', in partnership with food-tech company efood. It is the largest Olympiad based on the Liberation War of 1971.

It intends to disseminate information and facts about the war, and inspire today's youth by informing them about the heroic activities and resilience that our freedom fighters displayed in the fight to free the country. Participants can register in any of the categories: School students (Class 4 - Class 6 and Class 7 - Class 10), College students and University students. They need to register in the official site of the Olympiad, download the relevant question banks and prepare for the online round, which will take place from February 21 to 25.

The subsequent rounds will take place virtually and will be aired live on the official Facebook page of The Daily Star. This competition is scheduled to end with a grand finale on March 26, the Independence Day of Bangladesh.

The event has received praise from students, teachers, and parents. "It is indeed a great way to make our kids learn about the war that eventually resulted in the birth of Bangladesh," says Tahera Hossain, the mother of a fifth grader. "I am glad to see my son embrace the spirit of the Olympiad and participate in it."

Zakir Iqbal, a high school teacher, shared his opinion. "Many of my students have already registered in the Olympiad and I look forward to seeing some of them reaching the finals. It is a very good way to engage today's youth," he says.

"The Daily Star has been actively involved in launching campaigns and events that empower, educate and inspire the youth of Bangladesh," says Md Tajdin Hassan, Chief Strategy and Digital Transformation Officer, The Daily Star. "This Olympiad is one such example. We are thrilled to see more than 3,000 registrations from different corners of the country. We are grateful to efood for their relentless support and contribution in making this a true success. We hope that this event will help the youth become better and more responsible citizens, by embracing the values, morals, and resilience that our Liberation War continues to teach us."

Register for the competition here: <http://campaign.thedailystar.net/dsolympiad/>



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