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## Editor's Note

Sixty-nine long years ago today, our defiant women and men took to the streets to demand their right to speak in their native tongue and claim their cultural and political rights. The events that followed shaped the course of our nation's history. It came to be known as a precursor of the movement for statehood that evolved out of our deep-seated desire to be free from the shackles of tyrants—a desire that the people of this land have had for centuries and which resurfaced, in full force, on February 21, 1952. The events of this day became a defining moment for Bangladesh, seared into our collective consciousness, and intrinsically linked to our sense of identity and cultural heritage.

The supreme sacrifice of our martyrs has been widely acknowledged and treated with utmost respect, with February 21 now commemorated as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. However, the further we move forward in time and away from the events of 1952, the

more we run the risk of only ritualistically commemorating *Amor Ekushey*. We must ensure that this is not the case, and that our younger generations are fully apprised of the events of '52 and after, and are able to carry forward our collective dream of freedom from oppression, and of national unity and cultural diversity.

In this year's Ekushey Special issue, we focus on the rich history of Bangla and its continued metamorphosis throughout the ages, as well as the significance it holds for us in the 21st century, at the height of the digital era. We hope that in doing so, we can remind our readers how important it is to preserve the linguistic heritage of this land—not just in the case of Bangla, but for the languages spoken by all ethnic groups in Bangladesh, many of which are facing grave risks in the modern era.

**Mahfuz Anam**  
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# The hidden politics behind writing Bangla in Roman script

## SHAMSAD MORTUZA

In academia, the status of English is often contested in the Bangladeshi context. Is it a second language or a foreign language? There should not be any such question about our first language, our mother tongue in our everyday life. Bangla is our number one language. But we often switch to number two at any given opportunity. Many of the call centres have this linguistic option. There is also this mental switch that makes us travel between option one and two even when there is no button to press. What does it tell us about us as a nation and our attitudes towards our mother tongue? Interestingly, such code-switching or code-mixing has a political history that we often tend to overlook. Revisiting such a history will make us more aware of our commitment to our own language.

Given the rise of many digital interfaces, we often use Roman (Latin) scripts to represent Bangla pronunciation. Many of our Facebook comments are written using English; I too, am guilty of such lapses. I am not very proud of my unfamiliarity with the Bangla keyboard—occasionally I would use Google online input to write Bangla. I probably can do the same with Unicode input with other popular Bangla tools. While researching on the use of Roman scripts to write Bangla, I came across an interesting debate during the pre-independence period that goes on to show how the forces that tried to slight the spirit of Ekushey in 1952 continued to do the same in the succeeding years. Having an alphabet to give shape and voice to the innermost thoughts and desires is a freedom that was earned with the creation of the flag of an independent country in 1971, the seeds of which were sown in 1952.

On each Ekushey, we tend to focus on the imposition of Urdu as a state language for Pakistan. The relegation of Bangla to a second language would have meant that the Muslim middle class would suffer in professional and competitive sectors. The policymakers were keenly aware that language has some links to consciousness; our subjective experience is linked with phenomenal consciousness. At a cultural level, the use of Urdu was an attempt to "purify" Bangla from its Sanskrit influences. The import of many

royal court of Nepal a collection of Bangla poems, popularly known as *Charyagiti*. These poems date back at least to the 9th century and are credited as the earliest known examples of Bengali literature.

However, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah claimed that the poems go back to the 7th or 8th centuries. The language of the *Charyapada* is referred to as *Alo-Andhari* (light and shadow) or *sandhya bhasa* (twilight language) that includes names of places such as "Babgal Desh", "Panuya Khal" (the Padma river) and

words with Sanskrit roots.

Muhammad Hye in the essay "The Practice of Language in the Literature of East Pakistan" wrote, "Everyday diction and widely used words such as *jomijoma*, *ukil*, *muhri*, *ain adalat* have been removed to include some unfamiliar and strange Sanskrit words in West Bengal. Similarly, ordinary Bangla words have been replaced with *jomhuria*, *sadar e raisat*, *jasne azadi*, *Eid jamima*, *ashiana*, *gujarish*."

Looking back at the long evolutionary process of the language through which Bangla has distinguished itself from Sanskrit, Hye found these attempts unnecessary. The proposed reforms in the then Pakistan also included the Romanisation of Bangla scripts. Buoyed by the Turkish example, through which Mustapha Kemal Ataturk introduced a Latin-based script in place of the Ottoman Arabic alphabet, Pakistani and pro-Pakistani scholars wanted to write Bangla in Roman scripts. They argued that such Romanised alphabets would represent Bangla pronunciation with a high degree of accuracy. Even scholars such as Kudrat-e-Khuda and Dr Muhammad Enamul Haque saw this as a positive change. Bhashacharya Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee too felt that Romanised scripts would forge greater unity among the people of the Indian subcontinent. One wonders, if that was the case, why the British did not do so for their empire when they had the chance!

Muhammad Hye refuted the suggestion by saying, a common script has neither united Europe nor closed the Brit/US divide. In *Bhasha o Shahitya* (1969), Hye summarised the arguments that were forwarded by the reform committee, which were: since language and scripts are two separate entities, any change in



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new Arabic, Persian, Urdu words was deliberately done to make Bangla of the then East Pakistan look, feel, and read differently from that of West Bengal.

Having said that, we need to remember that Persian (Farsi) was the official language in Muslim India before the formal introduction of English in 1837. In 1907, Sanskrit scholar, archivist and historian of Bengali literature, Haraprasad Shastri, discovered in the library of the

"Babgali Bhaili". Bangla as a dynamic language grew with the incorporation of many words of its various invaders and colonisers. The modern Bangla alphabet originated from the ancient Indian Brahmi script, which is found in the stone tablets of Ashoka. There were many experiments to reform Bangla as a language. In West Bengal, the Arabic and Farsi words were avoided, while in East Bengal (Pakistan) there were deliberate attempts to avoid