

70TH ANNIVERSARY OF AMAR EKUSHEY

Our Language Movement: Moments, Momentum, Milieu



AZFAR HUSSAIN

Dr Azfar Hussain is interim director of the graduate programme in social innovation, and associate professor of integrative, religious, and cultural studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, US. He is also the vice-president of the US-based Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS).

OUR Bhasha Andolan—the Language Movement—was undoubtedly a major event in our political history. In fact, it was the first major political movement in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). Although 1952 is taken as the year of this movement, it neither began, nor did it end, in 1952 as such. Its history can be traced as far back as 1947 with the formation of the first Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad (State Language Movement Council) in October that year. But Ekushey February—February 21, 1952—marks a watershed moment in our history, when thousands of students assembled in front of the old Arts Faculty building of Dhaka University, shouting slogans like “Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai” (We Demand Bangla as the State Language), and later disobeyed Section 144. The police eventually opened fire, killing five students and injuring many more. As a Bangla poem succinctly put it once, “Bangla was written in blood in 1952” (translation is author’s own).

Indeed, the students themselves gave a conjunctural, but decisively fierce, voice to the Language Movement. But it quickly morphed into a people’s movement, as Badruddin Umar’s monumental, three-volume historical study of this movement rigorously reveals. Language itself turned

out to be a massive site of class struggle. In fact, this movement would not have been possible without the extensive participation of peasants and workers. And the movement increasingly assumed a liberationist, emancipatory character, at least cutting the first turf for our national liberation movement of 1971—fundamentally a people’s war against Pakistani neocolonialism—driven as it was by its three distinctly pronounced principles: equality, justice, and human dignity. But the very anticolonial ethos of our Language Movement was also evident right from the beginning, as the movement confronted and combatted what I wish to call linguistic colonialism.

But the era of linguistic colonialism is by no means over. Our middle-class, soggy, sentimental nationalism continues to celebrate the Ekushey on a yearly basis, while erasing, obscuring, and even occulting the sites of actual material contradictions and antagonisms that involve—among other things—the questions of class and gender, as well as the question of equality. This routine celebration also continues to evacuate the Ekushey of its radical content and emancipatory politics. Also, given the ways in which our mainstream, ruling-class political culture has

evolved—a culture characterised by anti-people, anti-democratic, and even fascist elements today—the Dhaka-centric annual “celebration” of the Ekushey repeatedly reveals how it’s reduced to a narrow “cultural” event, giving one the outrageously misleading impression that our Language Movement has nothing to do with the emancipatory aspirations and struggles of the oppressed in Bangladesh.

And the question remains: Along with economic justice or economic equality, where is linguistic justice or linguistic equality in our country today? There are violently unequal power relations between the privileged ones who know or use English, and the wretched of Bangladesh who speak or use Bangla (the ruling-class folks also use Bangla; but, no, I’m not speaking of them, and obviously they don’t belong to the wretched in question). The language question in this instance continues to be the question of class, although the former also ranges beyond the latter. There are also unequal power relations between what is institutionally and otherwise legitimised as “standard Bangla,” and non-standard Bangla/regional languages/dialects, etc. And, no less significantly, the languages of other nations, indigenous peoples, or ethnic

minorities in Bangladesh decisively remain the most marginalised languages in the country. Of course, despite the narratives of so-called progress—the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s line comes to mind, “Progress is history’s dirty joke”—we haven’t had any egalitarian language policy at the national level yet.

What all this means is that we have not yet been able to live up to the anticolonial spirit of our Language Movement. In fact, both our Language Movement and Liberation Movement have remained decisively and disastrously unfinished.

Finally, I’m not against learning English (or any foreign language), nor am I against what is called “technological progress.” But then, I question those who continue to celebrate the English language in the name of globalisation, conveniently mystifying the stubborn facts that globalisation itself is a euphemism for the current stage of disaster capitalism and digital imperialism; that it is a “globaloney” (to use Eduardo Galeano’s word) for many; that this very “globalisation” globalises unequal class relations, unequal race relations, unequal gender relations, and even unequal language relations themselves, as globalisation keeps unevenly connecting and interconnecting peoples, places, cultures, and languages across the world. And I think it is in this light that what has come to be known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution should be critically interrogated. But what we actually need is a new, even revolutionary politics that remains deeply committed to ensuring the integrity and equality of all mother tongues, among other things.



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

Bangla is our first language, we should treat it as such



MOHAMMAD AZAM

Dr Mohammad Azam is a professor at the Department of Bangla in Dhaka University.

SEVENTY years after the events of February 21, how far have we really been able to live up to the anti-colonial spirit of our Language Movement? The answer to this question is by no means a simple one.

If we look at the Pakistan regime as a colonial rule, we could say that we have succeeded, since the Language Movement is considered to be the foundation of our independence struggle in any discourse. But if we consider the issue of colonialism from a broader perspective, there are more failures than successes. The reason for our failure is that we have not been able to establish a similar critical view in the case of English as we did for Urdu. Other non-English-speaking nations deal with the dominance of English, a global language,

in their own ways, but we have not been able to come up with any mechanism yet to deal with it. From that perspective, we can say that we have not been able to live up to the spirit of our Language Movement.

There is much to be done when it comes to fully embodying the overarching spirit of our language struggle.

Given our history of struggle to give our own language, Bangla, its due respect, one may wonder: What ought to be its role in today’s globalised world. Unfortunately, we have not been able to ensure proper use of Bangla in our country. This is because, as much as we have seen Bangla from a nationalist point of view, as much as we have seen it emotionally, we have not seen it as a language of practical use.

First, I want to problematise the use of the word “mother tongue” when referring to Bangla, and use instead the term “first language”. There are many first languages in Bangladesh, but Bangla may be the language which is most in use.

First language can be used in offices,

A language must have its own economic potential—something we have failed to achieve in the last 70 years. And it won’t happen, unless we can establish Bangla as the first language at all levels of education, everywhere.

in higher education and for many other purposes. Although the use of Bangla is widespread in primary, secondary and even tertiary education, the same cannot be said in case of higher education and research. While common people use Bangla in their day-to-day life, we can’t say the same for our elite neighbourhoods. The section of people who are able to use English for economic purposes are not actually using Bangla. They are also not interested in teaching their children Bangla effectively as a language to read or write. A language must have its own economic potential—something we have failed to achieve in the last 70 years. And it won’t happen, unless we can establish Bangla as the first language at all levels of education, everywhere.

Establishing the use of Bangla in every sphere of society is important, because without doing so, we cannot make any plans for our entire population. What we need to do is use Bangla as the first language of instruction in education, while English should be made the second language. This doesn’t mean English should be neglected, however.

English should be taught systematically, so that students can achieve a good command over the English language through 12 years of schooling, which will ensure that they face no difficulty in using English when they pursue higher education. It is a wrong idea that our books in higher education should be in Bangla. Our students must be proficient in using English books, but the medium of instruction should be Bangla. All the research work must be done in Bangla as well. We should also use online platforms to teach English everywhere in the country. No one should feel that they are falling behind because they have no scope for learning the language.

If we can establish the use of Bangla in higher education and research, we will automatically see the changes we want everywhere. I think we should make a plan to teach at least 50 percent of the courses in higher education in Bangla by the next 20 years. If we can do that, we will be able to rid ourselves of the unnecessary worry of falling behind others.

As told to the Editorial Desk of The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote



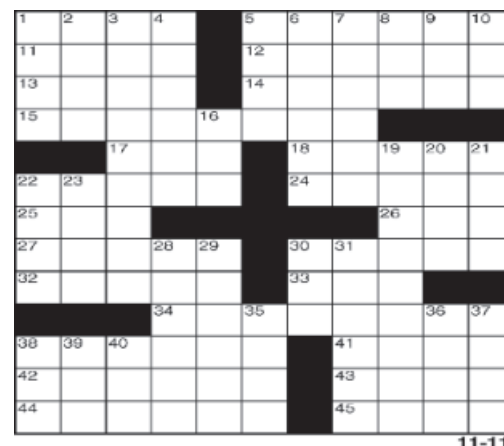
NELSON MANDELA

(1918 - 2013) Former South African president

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Dog’s dogs
5 Gift bag liner
11 Soothing stuff
12 Black Sea port
13 Whittle down
14 Straight
15 Makes major demands
17 Pig’s place
18 Heavy drinker
22 Western resort
24 Sleep sound
25 – Jima
26 Relieve
27 “Meet John Doe” director
30 Fishing spots
32 Bandleader Kay
33 Co. abbr.
- DOWN**
1 One of a bear trio
2 Weary word
3 Artisans’ places
4 Handles
5 Turnpike cost
6 Luncheads
7 Forwarded
8 Toronto to-D.C. dir.
9 Much of N.
- 34 Buffet staple
38 Pleistocene
41 Tug-of-war need
42 Brosnan’s Bond predecessor
43 Fencing sword
44 Set straight
45 Helper: Abbr.
- Amer.
10 Corn unit
16 Pro vote
19 One of Homer
Simpson’s favorite
20 War of 1812 port
21 Some wines
22 Clock sound
23 Not at home
28 Sales offer
29 Region of Spain
30 Tell tales
31 Tenor Bocelli
35 Lane’s co-worker
36 Big galoots
37 Convene
38 Altar promise
39 Sedan or SUV
40 Yale rooter



SATURDAY’S ANSWERS

FACT QUASAR
IRON UNLACE
SEAT ELOPED
HAL BEET
MIENS GOO
APING SCOOP
LYNX HAZE
PRESS HELEN
SOSTRAWL
REBUKE ONUS
EVADED REEL
PETERS ASTO

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার
পরিবেশ, বন ও জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন মন্ত্রণালয়
বাংলাদেশ বন গবেষণা ইনস্টিটিউট (বিএফআরআই)
(বন ও বনজ সম্পদের উন্নয়ন ও সঠিক ব্যবহার বিষয়ক গবেষণার একমাত্র জাতীয় প্রতিষ্ঠান)
Website: www.bfri.gov.bd

বীজতলা ও বন বাগানের পোকা-মাকড় ও রোগ-বালাই দমন করুন
সুস্থ, সবল চারা ও বৃক্ষ উৎপাদনে সচেষ্ট হউন।

পোকা-মাকড় ও রোগ-বালাই মুক্ত চারা মানেই অধিক উৎপাদনের নিশ্চয়তা

আক্রান্ত চারা সুস্থ সবল চারা

বিস্তারিত তথ্য, কারিগরি পরামর্শ ও প্রশিক্ষণের জন্য যোগাযোগ করুন

পরিচালক
বাংলাদেশ বন গবেষণা ইনস্টিটিউট
ডাকঘর : আমিন জুট মিলস
বোলশহর, চট্টগ্রাম।
Email:director_bfri@ctpath.net

আবাসিক
প্রশিক্ষণ ও প্রযুক্তি হস্তান্তর ইউনিট
বাংলাদেশ বন গবেষণা ইনস্টিটিউট
ডাকঘর : আমিন জুট মিলস
বোলশহর, চট্টগ্রাম।
টেলিফোন নং : ০২-৪৩১৮০০৯২
Email:ttu@bfri.gov.bd

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.