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I HAVE NOT COME TO WEEP

Every time there is injustice, every time those in power order or allow the innocent to be killed, the spirit that inspired **Mahbub Alam** Chowdhury to write his poem flares again.

NIAZ ZAMAN

In her memoir, translated into English as An Unknown Woman (2016), Jowshan Ara Rahman describes how the first poem on February 21, 1952 came to be written. Mahbub Alam Chowdhury, to whom she was engaged to be married, was the editor of the Chittagong monthly magazine Shimanto and the convener of the Chattagram Zilla Sorbodoliyo Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad, the all-party National Language Movement of Chittagong District. On the night of February 20, 1952, Mahbub, while working in the office of the Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad, came down with chicken pox.

Late on February 21, the news of the police firing on students in Dhaka reached Chittagong. Despite his high fever, Mahbub composed a long poem dedicated to the language martyrs: "Kandte ashini - phanshir dabi niye eshechhi" (I have not come to weep but to demand the gallows). That same night, copies of the poem were printed. A day or two later the poem was read out at a public meeting at the Laldighi Maidan. Mahbub's incendiary

> Mahbub Alam Chowdhury (1927-2007)

poem was confiscated and all available copies destroyed - though, as it happened, a police officer gave a copy to his sister, asking her to copy it down in her khata. This would later be recovered and the poem printed in its entirety. Meanwhile, fearing that he would be arrested, Mahbub was able to evade the police by fleeing in a burqa.

What was there about Mahbub Alam Chowdhury's poem that aroused the anger of the authorities? Perhaps because it demanded capital punishment for those who had shot and killed the protestors demanding Bangla as the state language. Perhaps because the number of deaths attributed to the police firing might incite further protests. As far as is known, there were five persons who died in the police



firing that day: Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, Abul Barkat, Abdus Salam and a young boy named Ohiullah. Shafiur Rahman succumbed to his injuries the next day.

It is thought by many even today that there were others killed as well in the police firing but that the bodies were hastily removed and buried. However, the number of forty in Mahbub's poem has not been corroborated by anyone. Using whatever information he got - some of it incorrect -- Mahbub wrote this moving poem. For example, he wrote about women being killed. Though women were in the procession - in fact, women were the first to emerge from the university campus there is no record of women being killed

Despite this misinformation, Mahbub's poem is powerful, demanding justice for those killed even while mourning the loss

I have not come where they laid down

under the upward-looking

krishnachura trees, to shed tears. I have not come, where endless patches

Glow like so many fiery flowers, to weep. Today I am not overwhelmed by grief, Today I am not maddened with anger, Today I am only unflinching in my

determination. Translated by Kabir Chowdhury The poet imagines the effect of the

killings on the families and loved ones left behind: on the child who will never rush into his father's arms, on the housewife who will wait in vain for her husband, on the mother who will never clasp her son in her arms, on the beloved who will not see her lover again. He has not come to weep, the poet says, for those who gave their lives for their language, for their culture, for their poets and their poetry, but to celebrate them.

I have not come here to weep for them who gave their lives under Ramna's sunscorched krishnachura trees

for their language those forty or more who laid down their

for Bangla, their mother tongue, for the dignity of a country's great

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culture, for the literary heritage of Alaol, Rabindranath, Kaikobad, and Nazrul, for keeping alive the bhatiali, baul,

kirtan and the ghazal, those who laid down their lives for Nazrul's unforgettable lines: "The soil of my native land

Is purer than the purest gold." Translated by Kabir Chowdhury

The dirge that accompanies the probhat feri, "Amar bhaier rokte rangano ekushey february ami ki bhulite pari" (Can I forget the twenty-first of February steeped in the blood of my brothers), is a song of remembrance and mourning. There is anger there too as well, but it is the iteration of the opening lines that accompany the barefoot procession on the day that people remember. By contrast, "I Have Not Come Where They Laid Down Their Lives" – the title given

to the translation by Kabir Chowdhury

-- is, from the very beginning, an angry poem, a poem of determination, even while being an elegy. At the same time, it is a poem that encapsulates what being Bangali means. It is almost epic in scope as it embraces the land and people of Bengal, the writers who have glorified its spirit. The complex of grief and anger, of celebration and remembrance make it unique.

In his essay "Twentyfirst February," in Essays on Ekushey: The Language Movement 1952 (1994), Khan Sarwar Murshid noted how the commemorations of Ekushey had become part of "a Government supported orthodoxy." The earlier fervour where individuals with small bunches of flowers in their hands walked slowly to pay their homage to the language martyrs has been replaced by political bands and institutional groups vying for position in front of the television

The fire that inspired Mahbub's poem seems to have died down where the Ekushey commemorations are concerned. The gate from which the procession emerged – now part of the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital – is lost behind makeshift shops and hordes of rickshaws. Only, if one looks up, can one see the plaque commemorating the event that took place there.

The killers of Rafiquddin, Jabbar, Barkat, Salam, Ohiullah and Shafiur Rahman were not punished. But, yes, Bangla became a state language along with Urdu. The events of 1952 have led to the recognition of the importance of mother tongues. On November 17, 1999, UNESCO adopted a resolution proclaiming February 21 International Mother Language Day. The day is no longer just Shaheed Dibosh, Language Martyrs' Day, but a day which recognizes the right of every individual to speak in his or her own

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The Language Movement Revisited

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

From the very early days of Pakistan's founding, its ruling elite tried to establish the notion of "Muslim self-rule and Islamic ideology" as the raison d'être of its existence, as it had also been the war cry of Muslim League politics in the pre-1947 days.

Moreover, the Muslim League organisation wanted to rule the newfound state in the same way the party itself had been ruled in the 1940s under the single leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

In the process of forming the nation and shaping the constitution based on the representation of

the people of Pakistan, whenever the question of Bangla as a state language (spoken by the majority of the country) appeared in the scene, it undermined the overarching concern of safeguarding the socalled Muslim interests. Therefore. we see, repeatedly, the government either wanted to sweep the language question under the carpet or endeavoured to dissuade the Bangalees from their demand.

Even after the unprecedented movements of 1952, when a Muslim League member of the Constituent Assembly moved a resolution to make Bangla one of the state languages of Pakistan,

the government again put a hold on the decision for a later, more appropriate day. But the event of February 21, 1952, was of such significance that it was impossible to ignore the demand for Bangla to be a state language after that. Ultimately, in 1954, Bangla was added to the Basic Principal Committee Report as a state language of Pakistan alongside Urdu and finally was enshrined in the 1956 constitution of Pakistan as a state language.

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East Pakistan's Language Issue

the state language is the language behind whose education the government will allocate the most funds, and the language that, when learned, will allow for someone to be considered highly educated in the eyes of the state.

The subjects are now kings. Thus their language is the state language Therefore, it is natural and appropriate that the state language of East Pakistan should be Bangla. The jingle of Urdu can already be heard from the mouths of some subservient Bengalis. But their powers of judgement cannot be praised. The attraction of Urdu and the reasons behind it have previously been discussed. Sayings such as these are expressions of the malnourished hearts of these 'mechanical humans'. This will break the spine of the Bengali nation. This will result in the Bengali Hindu Muslim freeing themselves from the English to turn themselves captive in the hands of Punjab, Sindh and Baloch. Powered by blind religious fanaticism, many are clamouring for Urdu. But I have already said that true religious understanding and knowledge of heritage will never enter the heart of Bengalis if it is not done through the Bangla language. For this, translation committees need to be formed and religious and other important matters pertaining to civilisation need to be translated from foreign languages

without further delay. Neglecting this responsibility now will result in scraps in the future which will neither be able to fill the need nor give satisfaction. There will never be any permanent prosperity for the nation like this. The egoism that is concealed behind the claims that Urdu is the superior language, the religious language or the aristocratic language will no longer work. The renaissance people will no longer be fooled by the tricks of the few or the cunning of the so called aristocrat. On the contrary, if you want to hold government service in East Pakistan, you must prove yourself by appearing for Bangla language exams until the secondary level. Otherwise, after the apprenticeship period, employees who can't prove themselves will be suspended on the grounds of lack of qualification and lack of sympathy towards the public. Bangla and Urdu should both be

adopted as the state language of **Pakistan**

In the entirety of Pakistan, Bangla speaking Hindus and Muslims are the majority. Still, we are not in favour of making Bangla the state language of West Pakistan, because that will hinder the natural progress of the West Pakistani public. Therefore, Urdu or Pashto will be the state language of West Pakistan and Bangla will be the state language of East Pakistan. This system is not indecent in any way, as modern and developed countries such as Russia and Canada are examples of

multilingual countries. If adjacent states within Russia can have multiple state languages, then East Pakistan and West Pakistan, which are fifteen hundred miles apart like Punjab and East Bengal, can definitely have two state languages, and that would be natural. In Russia, public sentiment holds sway, meaning the people are the true kings, thus the idea of forcing a language from a different province to be adopted as the state language can never find ground. In our country too, in the new state of Pakistan, the people will prove that they are king, the exploitation by those who hold titles won't be allowed to go on for much longer. If there is an attempt to force Urdu upon the Bengali Hindu-Muslims, that attempt will fail. Because smouldering dissatisfaction does not stay repressed for too long. Soon then, the relationship between the East and the West might cease to exist. It's the responsibility of the prudent politician to keep an eye on the public sentiment, and adopt principles and systems that are fair, and helpful to the progress of the entire nation.

Qazi Motahar Hossain was a renowned Educationist, Scientist and Litterateur.

The article first appeared in a booklet titled 'Pakistaner Rashtra Bhasha: Bangla na Urdu'. The booklet was published by Tamaddun

Majlish in September 1947. The article is translated from Bengali by Azmin Azran.

