



Bangabandhu’s speech at the national literature conference in Bangla Academy

We need golden human beings to build a golden Bengal

To build a nation properly, revolutionary changes need to be made in our thinking and consciousness just as more development activities are needed in industries, agriculture, transportation and all other sectors.

TRANSLATED BY AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN

Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivered the speech while inaugurating the first ever national literature conference in post-independence Bangladesh organised by Bangla Academy on its premises on 14 February 1974. Bangabandhu recalls the leadership role he assumed in 1948 when it began and then again in 1952 when he was put behind bars by the autocratic Pakistani regime. He emphasises how central cultural emancipation is to nation-rebuilding as it can elevate people morally and instil the right values among people. He then urges on the enlightened section of society consisting of litterateurs, intellectuals, artists and cultural personalities to fulfil their obligations for the cultural emancipation of Bangladesh. -- Translator

Honourable president [of Bangla Academy], president of the reception committee, guests from abroad, representatives from the diplomatic corps and the respected audience, This national literature conference has been

All sorts of memories pervade my mind when I recall the immortal 21st February. The Bangla Academy premises on which you've organised the literature conference carries everlasting evidence of the ebb and flow of the struggle of the indomitable people of this country for their mother tongue. Our movement for Bengali started on 11 March 1948. The tyrannical regime of that period resorted to inhuman assaults to silence our demand on behalf of our mother tongue. Hundreds of students and people were injured by the use of tear gas and lathi charges. On that very morning, I too was arrested along with my co-workers from a protest rally and procession. They started torturing and imprisoning us. But no power could ever deviate us from the path of truth. Anyway, then came the bloody day of Phalgun [the 11th month in the Bengali calendar year] of '52. I was in prison then. I was shifted to Medical College Hospital from prison for treatment. From Medical College Hospital, with the help of police sub-inspector Manik Miah, I managed to keep in touch with all members of the *Sarbādaliya Sangram Parishad* [All Party Agitation Council]. They decided to stage a movement on the 21st February after conferring with me. And I went on a fast unto death from 16 February after discussing the situation with them. I continued that hunger strike till 27 February. My friends from those days can perhaps recall these events even today. Our movement of that period was successful. Having waded through the bloody path of 21st February, the Bengali nationalist movement and the spirit of self-rule gained further momentum.

Artists, writers and cultural personalities have organised the national literature conference for the first time after independence under the aegis of Bangla Academy. Needless to say, this great initiative is a timely one. Due to years of oppression and deprivation, we're hungry, economically impoverished, and troubled with countless problems. We're involved in a struggle for economic emancipation and nation-building to overcome our problems. But we aren't poor when it comes to literature, culture and tradition. Our language has a two-thousand year old glorious history. Our literature is rich. Our culture is radiant with its unique features. To stand with our heads held high in the world, we must establish the prestige of our language, literature, culture and tradition abroad.

My dear friends, I know that in every stage of our struggle for emancipation, artists, litterateurs and cultural activists of the country have played active roles in tandem with political workers, hardworking people, farmers, labourers, students and the youth; endured torture and shed their blood. Among independent nations around the world, we can be proud of the fact that our political and cultural struggle advanced simultaneously during our fight for freedom. As the country is independent today, I have high hopes of what our writers, artists and cultural personalities can do. Those who are pursuing art and literature, and serving our tradition and culture, will have to move ahead, keeping close contact with the people of our country. Our people's thoughts, joys and sorrows – their lives – have to be presented through our literature and in our art. In literature, we must showcase the tales of joy and sorrow of the distressed

people of this country. We must utilise literature and art for their welfare. Unmask the corruption through your writings which has found its way into every part of the country. Support the government in its bid to uproot corruption. I'm neither a writer nor an artist but I believe people are the ultimate source of all literature and art. No noble literary work or great art can ever be created if it distances itself from people. I've struggled my whole life with people. Whatever I'll do in the future, I'll do with them.

Dear friends, My appeal to you is this– ensure that our literary and cultural endeavours aren't confined to city mansions. The heart and spirit of millions from rural Bangladesh must be reflected in it. I'll be most delighted if all these are valued properly in today's literature conference.

Dear guests, Problems have no end in this war-ridden country. We've financial constraints and face unbearable deprivation in many sectors. Yet I think that a lack of values is the most serious of all. We must immediately put the brakes on the crises in our national life caused by this dearth of values. I believe the writers, artists, cultural personalities, educationists and intellectuals can play a vital role in overcoming this catastrophic situation by reviving values and developing benevolence. Now the time has come for self-criticism and for them to see how sincerely they have fulfilled their duties and played their part for the welfare of the country. The nation and the country makes this demand on them today.

To build a nation properly, revolutionary changes need to be made in our thinking and consciousness just as more development activities are needed in industries, agriculture, transportation and all other sectors. I say this everywhere – we need golden human beings to build a golden Bengal. Such golden human beings won't fall down from the sky or come out of the crevice of earth. We need to create them out of the 75 million people of this Bengal. Through fostering new ideas, creative thinking and the right values, the creation of such new human beings can take place. Thoughtful writers, artists, educationists, intellectuals and cultural personalities are the skilled architects of *manavatma* [human soul]. Today, at this literature conference, I urge you to dedicate yourself to creating golden human beings. I sincerely convey my well-wishes to the guests from our friendly states who have joined us in this conference and people from different corners of the country who have gathered here. I wish this conference a great success and declare it to be formally open.

Joi Bangla.

Source: Majid, Pias. *Muktijuddha Bangabandhu O Bangla Academy* (The Liberation War, Bangabandhu and Bangla Academy). Bangla Academy, 2020, pp. 56-8.

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A TRANSLATION OF DR. MUHAMMAD SHAHIDULLAH'S "PALLISAHITYA"

Folk Literature

BY ABDULLAH-AL-MUSAYEB

Despite the absence of city singers, musicians and dancers, there is no shortage of such artists in the rural areas. The demands have been significantly fulfilled by the chirpings of song-birds, murmuring of rivers, rustling of fallen leaves, and swaying of the verdant grains. Literature is scattered and found in every corner of the countryside, including the fields and country roads. However, we are unaware of the literary materials dispersed across the rustic expanses just as we are oblivious of the sea of air that surrounds us.

By compiling the *Mymensingh Geetika*, Dr Dinesh Chandra has proven how a treasure trove of literature is concealed in the countryside. Romain Rolland, a literature enthusiast from the far-west, is fascinated by the beauty of Madina Bibi in *Mymensingh Geetika*. There are many rustic poets like Mansur Bayati out there, away from the urban eyes. Who will introduce them to the literary world? Where are the volunteers for this work?

How wonderful the stories were that we used to hear from our village grandmas before falling asleep in the evening. These rural legends are no less mesmerizing than "Aladin's Magic Lamp" or "Alibaba and Forty Thieves" from the *Arabian Nights*. Unfortunately, these have disappeared into the abyss of oblivion due to the influence of modern education. The legends of "Shepherd's Cake Tree," "Sleeping Princess of Rakshasपुरi," and "Ponkhiraj horse" are no longer told to children by modern, educated mothers. Instead, they are told the tales from the Arabian Nights or translated versions of Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. Due to the distortion and loss of these myths, and the social document of our distant past, we are losing the connection with our illustrious history. If the folktales were collected properly, archaeological research would show that the stories of these grandparents have travelled outside the Indian subcontinent.

These legends, with little or no change, perhaps, are still being narrated by the village-women to their children or grandchildren in Europe. Who will collect and preserve our folktales and folklores from the inevitable destruction? The task of gathering the legends is carried out by the Folklore Society, a group of eminent academics in Europe and America. These

are considered as important anthropological resources in the academic community.

The *Thakurmar Jhuli* and *Thakurdar Jhuli* by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar are not sufficient to be described here. If all the folklores of Bangladesh were compiled together, it would take a number of volumes like the encyclopedia.

We know now that "Fi, Fie, Foh, fun" and the "smell of the blood of a British man" are the monsters' babbles equivalent to those of our *hau, mau, khau, manusher gondho pau!* Where does the similarity come from? Does this imply that the English and the Bengali people formerly shared a common tent? In our daily conversations, we frequently quote proverbs like- '*Dath thakte dater morjada nei*' (we never know the value of teeth until they are gone), '*Dhori manch na chui pani*' (to make sure of something without risking anything), '*Chacha apon pran bacha*' (Every man is for himself) and so on. We also have "Khanar Bachan" - "*Kala ruye na keto paat/ Tate kapar, tate vaat*" (Don't cut banana leaves after planting/ There lies the food and the clothing). *Dak O Khana* contains moral lessons along with the history of our nation's secret past. For example, the proverb "Pirey bose perur khobor" (To get the news of the city staying indoor) reminds us of the time when Pandua was the capital of Bengal.

Nursery rhymes are another treasure of folk literature that children used to chant together like- *Roud hcche, pani hocche/ Khekshiyalir biye hocche* (The vixen gets married/ In the sun-shower). These nursery rhymes are largely being overlooked. The *Kapadi* players used to recount the cadences like- *Ek haat bolla baro haat singh/ Ure jay bolla dha ting ting*, which are also about to decline due to the influence of foreign games like football or cricket.

Let us then turn to folk-songs. The unique treasure of folk songs like Jari, Bhatiali, Rakhali, and Marfati are full of philosophical bents. These songs do not appeal to the elite society anymore as they are considered as the songs of illiterate peasants. Think of *Monmajhi tor baitha nere/ Ami are boite parlamma* (O Death, I am exhausted/ Take me away, I implore.) Can this song be compared with any of your modern songs?

So far, I have discussed the ancient resources of our rural life which can significantly enrich the literary treasury. Bengali literature nowadays refers to urban literature, or civic literature, chewing and munching on subjects like kings and queens, Babu and Bibi, vehicles, electric lights, movie theatres, and blowing tea cups. Who cares about the tales of rural peasants, fishermen, and labourers? Our poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore once sang *Ebar firau more* (Take me to the root), but went back to the civic literature. For the city dwellers, the village is mostly rotten, disgusting and repulsive, while for a few it is an exotic realm of delight. It is high time to build a rural literary terrain alongside the realm of urban literature. This proletarian literature is progressively gaining popularity in Europe and America. But where are the local poets, writers, and novelists to portray rural canvas in an engaging way?

Bengal has a rich tradition of folk literature which is on the verge of extinction. In my opinion, it is high time for the native sons to look back and learn to nurture the tradition. Otherwise, all our preparations will go in vain.

This essay is a revised version of an address delivered by Dr Muhammad Shahidullah as the President of 11th session of 'East Mymensingh Sahitya Sammilani' in 1936.

Abdullah-Al-Musayeb is an academic, researcher and translator.



organised to commemorate the 21st February – a day knotted with memories of the sacred Language Movement. At the outset I pay my respect to the eternal memories of those who accepted martyrdom during the Language Movement of 21st February. Standing before you reverentially, I also recall those who sacrificed themselves for the freedom and emancipation of Bangladesh.

My friends,