

Upholding the legacy of Ekushey

We must do better in preserving our linguistic heritage

As we observe the 73rd anniversary of the historic Ekushey February, we humbly recall the sacrifices of the martyrs and all those who fought to secure Bangla in its rightful place. The Language Movement of 1952 catalysed the assertion of our national identity in what was then Pakistan and became a forerunner to subsequent movements—the emergence of self-rule consciousness in the 1954 provincial election, the student movement of 1962, and the 1969 uprising—all of which ultimately culminated in our glorious Liberation War of 1971. The supreme sacrifice of the Language Movement's martyrs became a symbol of inspiration for sustaining our self-consciousness and dignity as a nation.

However, despite commemorating Ekushey February for more than 70 years, the unfortunate reality remains that we have yet to fully examine or articulate its significance as a nation. The use of Bangla in all aspects of life is still not firmly established. Translation works from other languages into Bangla often remains subpar. Original writing in Bangla is largely confined to literature, while scientific and other scholarly works are frequently written in English instead of Bangla.

Despite historical research clearly demonstrating the importance of the mother tongue in ensuring national cohesion, Bangla is not being properly used in all aspects of life. In fact, one could argue that Bangla, as the official language of Bangladesh, has suffered neglect at all levels. Thus, it is high time we, as a nation, reflected deeply on the use of Bangla and restore it to its rightful place.

Although the High Court Division issued a ruling on February 17, 2014 mandating the use of Bangla at all levels, offices, and forums in the country—and despite the existence of the Bangla Language Implementation Act, 1987—Bangla continues to face serious neglect. Admittedly, this is not a matter that can be resolved solely by a judicial decree or an act of parliament. It must be internalised by all of us and ingrained in our collective psyche.

Let us reiterate in the strongest terms that this should not come at the expense of learning other languages. English, in particular, remains essential due to its international significance. However, our great forefathers, who were experts in Bangla, were also highly proficient in English. So why can't we follow in their footsteps?

Additionally, while Bangla remains the official language, Indigenous languages continue to be spoken in our country—albeit barely. There is hardly any initiative to preserve these languages, many of which are on the verge of being lost forever. Let's not forget that Ekushey was such a monumental event that it has been immortalised through global recognition as International Mother Language Day, of which today is the silver jubilee.

In its true spirit, we must ensure that Bangla and all other mother tongues spoken across this country receive the respect they deserve.

Restore trust in electoral system

Those who abetted election rigging should be held accountable

We welcome the government's decision to take disciplinary action against officials involved in election rigging during the ousted Awami League (AL) regime. According to a report in this daily, 45 former deputy commissioners, now serving as joint secretaries, have been made officers on special duty (OSD) for election manipulation. Meanwhile, 22 former DCs and a joint secretary have been sent into compulsory retirement for their role in the 2014 and 2018 elections. Additionally, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) will likely be requested to open investigations against around 50 more former DCs.

The unethical collaboration of government employees in election engineering is not only a breach of their service terms—their pledge to serve the nation, not the ruling party—but also a violation that, during the controversial national elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024, stripped citizens of their voting and democratic rights. The manipulation of these elections helped sow the seeds of fascism in the country, as it deprived citizens of their ability to hold the government accountable in any meaningful way.

For over a decade, Bangladeshis were unable to freely exercise their voting rights to elect representatives who would formulate policies in their best interests. Instead, election rigging rendered people powerless, allowing AL to gradually take complete control of all governance mechanisms—leaving no meaningful opposition even in parliament. As a result, more businessmen-turned-politicians became policymakers, and making self-serving decisions at the expense of national interests became a regular occurrence. Corruption became the norm, while transparency and accountability at every level of governance were eroded, further entrenching authoritarianism. This would not have been possible if national elections had been free and fair; even local elections were not spared from such manipulation.

While some bureaucrats may have been pressured to collaborate with AL in election rigging, many benefited from it. All those involved must be identified, and a thorough investigation should be conducted to determine the extent of their complicity, with penalties imposed accordingly. However, the entire process—from identifying those responsible to delivering justice—must be transparent and adhere to due process.

We also urge the government to implement the Election Reform Commission's recommendations to establish checks and balances that will prevent future election manipulation. No political government should ever again have the power or means to deprive people of their voting rights.

EDITORIAL

A new reality for free media

We must learn from the past



THE THIRD VIEW

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MAHFUZ ANAM

Before, when we spoke the truth, we were countered by the state and its agencies. Now, when we speak the truth, we are countered not by the state, but by lies, accusations without any proof, and tagging on the basis of hate narratives. Outrageous accusations are being made against legacy media without any evidence. In rare cases, when examples are cited, they are either false, taken out of context, distorted, or twisted to suit a predetermined goal. Thus, the media today is facing a new challenge in the post-truth era with an audience that is not used to such falsehood, half-truths and distortions, and as such is being victimised and misled.

I am heartened by a recent comment by the chief adviser's press secretary, Shafiqul Alam, for his emphatic assertion of the need for a free media for a country's advancement. He also stressed the necessity to examine the media's role in distorting objective journalism and upholding the fascistic policy and governance structure of the past regime. He repeatedly stressed that power must always be held to account, and invited all media outlets to scrutinise his own government's performance in the spirit of total independence and professionalism.

We would like to commend him for his stance and focus on two aspects of his remarks: the need to examine our past, and to chalk out a path for the media's unfettered and independent future journey.

As for the past, it is true that most newspapers did not challenge the dictatorial regime of Sheikh Hasina during her rule of over 15 years. They either vigorously supported it or hid the truth, deflected issues that deserved criticism, or distorted facts so that the public wouldn't feel negative about the regime.

There were a few of us who defied all threats—both public and undercover—and carried on speaking truth to power. In the case of this newspaper, the antagonism burst into fury when we invited Prof Muhammad Yunus as chief guest at our 25th anniversary celebration in 2016. In the presence of thousands of invited guests, including 22 editors from South and Southeast Asia, a drama was enacted by several Awami League (AL) ministers who publicly staged a walkout, shouting condemnatory remarks, accusing this writer of having insulted them when Prof Yunus appeared on the stage to deliver the keynote speech. This newspaper was accused of "launching" (whatever that meant) Prof Yunus and giving him a huge national and

international platform to work against the Hasina government. (Given her venomous remarks, relentless personal attacks, and fictitious cases against Yunus ever since, one can understand her fury against this newspaper and its editor.) From then on, we were her declared "enemy," and she treated us as such. The avalanche of cases started within hours of that event using my remark on a TV show as a pretext.

This newspaper's editor was charged in 84 cases, 16 of which were for sedition. Several times on the floor of parliament, the former prime minister termed *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* "anti-state," "anti-Awami League," and

conferences or any of her functions. We were never allowed to cover her foreign trips or ask her questions as the head of the government. Over time, all her ministers, save one or two, started to avoid us, not allowing our reporters to talk to them and speaking against us whenever the occasion permitted. And all this while some 40 national and international businesses were asked not to give us any advertisement, abruptly reducing our revenue by 40 percent. This continued till the July uprising last year.

We are proud to say that *The Daily Star* never buckled, thanks to our staff, our board of directors, and the leadership.

The CA's press secretary also laid emphasis on examining not only the past, but also how media covered the events of July-August 2024, now popularly called the Monsoon Revolution. We welcome this decision and thank him for his praise that some media, in spite of severe threats, published prominently the number of students and general people being killed daily.

140 journalists have been accused of murder and cases have been filed against them on the basis of their reporting of the student-led mass uprising. Twenty eight journalists have been charged with crime against humanity. We strongly feel that the interim government's treatment of journalists has been sweeping, denigrating, and devoid of the sensitivity that this profession deserves. At this moment, we have the highest number of "murder-accused" journalists in the world. In this situation, how likely is it that the world will believe this government is handling the media fairly? Whatever criticism that this government has so far received from world bodies—Human Rights Watch (HRW), Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ), Reporters without Borders (RSF)—has mostly been for the way journalists are being treated.

It has been several months since the cases against journalists were filed. We know of no progress in terms of verification of the accusations. An eight member committee by the



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"anti-people." Many AL MPs castigated this newspaper in parliament, accusing us of "indulging" in all sorts of "conspiracies." Even some non-AL MPs joined the castigation, demanding the closure of this newspaper and jailing of its editor. On one occasion, the former prime minister spoke for 21 minutes in parliament denigrating this newspaper's editor, casting doubt on his role as a freedom fighter and raising all sorts of false questions against him. A few years later, during the opening of the Padma Bridge, she falsely accused this writer of travelling to the US and meeting high-level State Department officials and the World Bank president to lobby for the cancellation of the WB loan, as part of Prof Yunus's alleged "efforts" (totally false) to scuttle the Padma Bridge project. For nearly 15 years, we were never allowed to attend the former prime minister's press

We also need to examine the politicisation of journalist unions. A special focus should be given on the role of the owners of media houses who used their outlets to eulogise the Hasina government for business purposes, get illegal bank loans, get lucrative contracts, retain untaxed profits, and indulge in money laundering. When directed by the owners, working journalists did not have much of a choice. We think the editors should have tried to prevent that—and failing that, they should have resigned.

Against all the laudable things that are being said about the freedom of media and the present opportunity to engage in independent journalism, we are sad to say that some very disturbing signs can still be seen that are posing a new set of threats against free press.

As of November 2024, as many as

interim government was formed to monitor harassment cases against journalists on October 27. No progress on this account has been reported till now. All this, while the accused journalists are unable to do their regular jobs, take care of their families, and in some cases pay for their children's education. They are also suffering from social humiliation and leading a life of constant fear, lest they be arrested. For any criminal or unethical action, a journalist must face the law as any other citizen. But everyone must be guaranteed the due process under the law, which is their constitutional right.

We appeal to the interim government, given all their professed commitment to free and independent media, to take an immediate look into the cases against journalists and bring them to an accepted legal standard.

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

Technology can play a crucial role in language preservation

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MATHURA BIKASHTRIPURA AND SUSAN VIZE

After championing International Mother Language Day to become recognised by the United Nations 25 years ago, Bangladesh became known globally as a land of many languages. The foundation of this movement was the demand for official recognition of mother tongues, including Bangla. This 25th jubilee year reaffirms the importance of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in fostering dignity, peace, and understanding.

Currently, Bangladesh officially recognises 50 Indigenous communities, each with its own linguistic heritage, collectively speaking approximately 41 native languages. These languages belong to four distinct language families. According to the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), a Category II institute of UNESCO, around 15 languages in Bangladesh face the

threat of extinction. Among them, Rengmitcha language is notable—only seven people currently speak this language. International Mother Language Day is an opportunity for us to reflect on and propose actions to address situations such as this.

Evidence suggests that mother tongue education supports cognitive development, improves communication skills, and improves educational performance. According to *Chakma Jati (Jatiya Chitra O Itibritta)* by Satish Chandra Gosh, education in the Chakma and Marma languages was introduced in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in 1862, but was later discontinued. Despite several attempts over the years to revive language education programmes, they have all been short-lived.

The 1997 CHT Peace Accord reaffirmed the right of Indigenous children to receive education in their mother tongue. In 2012, the government took steps to introduce Indigenous language education under the National Education Policy. Since 2017, learning materials in Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Sadri languages have been introduced at the primary level. However, the initiative has faced serious roadblocks due to lack of trained teachers,

inadequate evaluation of teaching materials, budget constraints, a shortage of language-based teachers, and the inactivity of committees formed to implement education in Indigenous communities. As a result, the programme has not progressed as expected.

It is crucial to take effective measures for the revival, development, and preservation of Indigenous languages. This includes effective implementation of primary education programmes in Indigenous languages, formulation of a national language policy, introduction of departments or institutes on Indigenous language and culture in universities, promotion of mother tongue practice among the youth, initiatives for language development through information technology, and establishment of Indigenous language cells in government institutions such as Bangla Academy, IMLI, and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB).

The use of technology is one way that we can work to support these efforts. This year's theme for International Mother Language Day makes it an important time to consider how to tackle the issues above using technology. A cheaper and more accessible way to provide language instruction could be using internet-based language modules. These are already in widespread use on commercial platforms.

Artificial intelligence is at the forefront of many current discussions on education, and is a tool that could be utilised to address barriers such as teacher shortage. More sophisticated tech solutions, including development of content in Indigenous languages, have also been proposed. But as we lack content in these languages, these are not quite within our grasp.

Technology also offers many opportunities for documentation and preservation. As several of Bangladesh's Indigenous languages are critically endangered, ensuring that we act now is important. Collecting recordings and partnering with tech companies that can provide tools to develop orthographies and transcribe these into written content could help preserve these languages.

No language should be allowed to become extinct. Language is central to our identity and part of our culture, and therefore central to social and emotional well-being. To preserve endangered languages, long term planning and collective efforts are essential. When a language dies, we lose invaluable treasures of its environment, culture, and history.