

The Daily Star

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Ekushey's spirit must guide us all

Preserve and promote linguistic diversity, build a nation free of discrimination

On Ekushey February, we honour the heroes of our Language Movement, who sacrificed their lives to give Bangla its due recognition. Their courage and determination made it possible for us to speak, write and learn in Bangla with dignity, and to assert our cultural identity in the face of oppression. Over time, Ekushey February has taken on global significance and is now observed as International Mother Language Day. It highlights not only the importance of preserving Bangla but also the urgent need to protect endangered languages and mother tongues around the world. Yet, seven decades on, the question remains: are we truly living up to the spirit of Ekushey?

The essence of Ekushey is rooted in the right to use our mother tongue in all aspects of life. Yet, that is not the reality in Bangladesh today. In academia, for example, multiple streams of education exist, from primary to secondary and higher secondary levels, creating an unequal reality for the country's younger citizens. Meanwhile, Indigenous languages continue to fade due to little efforts to preserve them.

Language carries our history, traditions, and values. It connects generations, shapes our thinking, and fosters a sense of belonging. Preserving Bangla and other mother tongues in the country, therefore, requires concrete action. While Bangla must be actively promoted at all levels, the languages of minority communities, many of which are on the verge of extinction, must also be protected. Endangered languages should be preserved through education, institutional support, and legal safeguards.

The 1952 Language Movement was much more than a fight for Bangla. It laid the foundation for a political and cultural awakening in the then East Bengal. By resisting systematic discrimination against Bangla, people asserted their identity, dignity, and right to self-expression. That same spirit of resistance inspired all our later struggles, from the 1969 mass uprising to the 1971 Liberation War. Even the mass uprising of July-August 2024 draws on this legacy, uniting diverse political and social forces in the pursuit of equality and justice.

As we commemorate Ekushey February this year, we must strive to build a nation free from all forms of oppression and discrimination. The newly formed government must make a firm commitment to ensure the use of Bangla in every sphere of life, while also honouring the diverse languages that enrich our nation. Respecting and promoting every citizen's mother tongue is essential for national progress and cultural dignity. By embracing our linguistic diversity, we can build a stronger, more united nation where every citizen feels proud of their identity, and where culture and language thrive, respected and celebrated by all.

Complete haor embankments on time

Investigate allegations of delays and irregularities, take action

We are concerned by the delays and irregularities in the construction of crop protection embankments in the haor regions of Sunamganj. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, with the deadline only days away, work on dozens of such embankments still remains incomplete. In the haor areas, there is only a short window of a few months for crop cultivation every year. Timely completion of the work is, therefore, critical as even a brief delay can leave crops vulnerable to sudden rain and waterlogging.

According to the Sunamganj Water Development Board (WDB), work on 710 projects is underway in 42 haors across 12 upazilas of the district, covering the repair and construction of 602 km of embankments. Project officials say about 68 percent of the work has been completed. Leaders of the Haor Bachao Andolon, however, allege that only token soil dumping took place in a few projects on December 15, and that full-scale work has yet to begin. Meanwhile, even though allocations have been increased from Tk 130 crore last year to Tk 145 crore this year, bottlenecks in fund disbursement and administrative inefficiencies continue to stall progress.

In Sunamganj, rice is produced in roughly 225,000 hectares of haor land annually, and these haors are protected by more than 1,700 km of embankments. Any delay or disruption in their construction or repair directly threatens the livelihoods of thousands of farmers. Past experience shows that poor-quality embankments and administrative negligence can lead to widespread crop loss. The WDB has overhauled its approach to embankment construction. Yet, despite new policies placing district and upazila administrations directly in charge, oversight remains inconsistent. Locals have also alleged irregularities in project selection and in the formation of implementation committees.

If these issues are not addressed promptly and the embankments are not completed on time, crop damage and economic losses for local communities could be severe. We urge the authorities to expedite the embankment work, and at the same time ensure timely fund release, strengthen monitoring of construction, and enforce accountability at all levels. Regular site inspections should be mandatory to ensure that embankments are built following proper standards. Local government bodies and community organisations should also be actively involved in monitoring progress.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Language Martyrs' Day



On this day in 1952, students and other activists in Dhaka defied a ban on public gatherings to protest the declaration of Urdu as the state language of then East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). The police opened fire at the protest near the Dhaka Medical College and killed several people.

What the scheduling fiasco of Ekushey book fair tells us

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND



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Ekushey February (February 21) is a date that reminds the Bangladeshi people of their culture as well as their originary moments. Not too many states in the world have given a central role to language as the primary marker of their national identity. Bangladesh, the land where Bangla is spoken, has. Soon after Partition, the country, then the eastern province of Pakistan, realised that its civilisational core conflicted with the ruling class of the western province. Despite their demographic majority, the Bangalee people found their status relegated to second-class citizens and their language overlooked for administrative and academic use. Thus, the demand for Bangla as a state language, for which blood was spilled on February 21, 1952, became an inflection point that eventually caused the eastern territory to drift away from the religion-based two-nation theory and opt for an independent Bangladesh in 1971.

February is not only the month of language martyrs; it is also the month of books. The formal launch of the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela at the Bangla Academy grounds is more than a calendric event. However, in September last year, the Bangla Academy announced that they would prepone the book fair and start it not on the usual February 1 but a month and a half earlier, on December 17. The Bangla Academy director general mentioned the timing of the election and Ramadan as the main reason for the change. Then, on December 17, the academy announced that the fair would start on February 20 and run until March 15. With Eid-ul-Fitr holidays in between, the short span of the fair irked the publishers, who objected to this plan and decided to boycott this year's fair. Their concerns are valid, as constructing makeshift stalls is an expensive venture, and they won't be able to invest in such projects knowing that they will incur huge financial losses. A boycott is a major decision because publishers wait for this annual book fair, where they manage to showcase their new titles and earn 50-60 percent of their annual revenue.

The scheduling glitch—most

recently, the fair was rescheduled for a February 25 launch—exposes a deeper cultural anxiety in a transitioning Bangladesh. We need to ask questions about our cultural gatekeepers. And then there are those who are weighing national memory in market terms. And the immediate victims are the publishers who wait for this month to keep their business afloat. At the same time, these indecisions are symptomatic of weak institutional governance.

It is not the first time that the book fair is coinciding with the



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month of Ramadan. But this time, suddenly, there was extra alertness and sensitivity for religious practices that created the confusion in the first place. Some publishers showed concerns over recruiting volunteers or student staff during the Ramadan and Eid break. Seasonal storms could cause further worries if the fair extends until the end of March. The consultation with stakeholders seems less transparent, albeit ineffective. When over 300 publishers threaten to boycott an event, it signals a breakdown of trust. And not to address this matter as a national priority will be disastrous.

The Ekushey book fair has traditionally been our intellectual pilgrimage. In order to restore the fair to its former splendour, we must not only safeguard the publishers but also endeavour to comprehend the reasons behind its challenges. There

remain unsustainable.

So the entire Ekushey book fair ecosystem needs to be revisited. And it must speak of a "new Bangladesh," where inclusivity extends to independent and small presses, district-based publishers, minority-language publications, academic and scholarly presses, women-led publishing houses, and diaspora Bangla writers. The last-minute changes of date cannot promise any such inclusivity. The fair still heavily privileges Dhaka-centric, mainstream commercial publishers. A genuinely inclusive fair could subsidise marginal presses, create thematic pavilions (for translations, indigenous literature, and young adults), facilitate rights exchanges and translation grants, and include panel spaces curated outside metropolitan networks. We need to think beyond political majoritarianism

Reconciling hundi realities with LDC graduation goals



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At 2am in a remote village in northern Bangladesh, a mother waits for a phone call from a hundi broker. The monsoon rain hammers against the tin roof, a rhythmic intrusion on the silence of a house built by money earned thousands of miles away. Her son has just finished a sixteen-hour shift at a construction site in the Gulf, and the money he sends tonight will determine whether a family medical bill is paid tomorrow. In this late-night transaction, there are no forms to complete and no procedural delays. There is only a relationship of trust operating with a speed and proximity that the formal financial system has yet to replicate.

Bangladesh's Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation was widely framed as an economic milestone. However, the newly appointed government has officially initiated a process to seek a three-year deferral of this transition, potentially pushing the graduation from late 2026 to 2029. For policymakers watching foreign exchange reserves and trade preferences, graduation feels less like a trophy and more like a reckoning. The current administration's push for a delay, citing that the country is not yet ready for an "open-field competitive

environment", acknowledges a fundamental truth: the economic data previously used to justify a 2026 exit may have masked deep-seated structural vulnerabilities.

For decades, growth has been supported by preferential market access and international concessions. In a country whose rise has been underwritten by the labour of nearly 13 million citizens abroad, remittances remain a pillar of macroeconomic stability. They account for roughly 6-7 percent of GDP and represent one of the country's largest sources of foreign currency.

The pressure to stabilise reserves has sharpened enforcement against informal remittance channels. The war on hundi is a necessity aligned with global anti-money-laundering standards. But the crackdown risks dismantling informal networks before viable alternatives are in place.

The imbalance begins in credit policy. The Bangladesh Bank agricultural and rural credit targets remain heavily concentrated in short-term crop finance. Historically, a large majority of formal agricultural credit in Bangladesh has been seasonal, with a substantial share going to short-term crop loans and only a smaller

portion to longer-term investment in irrigation, machinery, or storage. Rural loans are only helping farmers survive from one harvest to the next, rather than helping them buy equipment or infrastructure that would make them wealthier in the long run.

According to Bangladesh Bank data, outstanding rural deposits stood at Tk 37,487 crore as of June 2025,

This credit structure creates a local liquidity constraint. Short-term crop loans must be repaid at harvest, often forcing farmers to sell produce at depressingly low prices to meet immediate deadlines. Households remain in cycles of subsistence rather than accumulation. For a migrant earning approximately \$400 per month, the 2-3 percent exchange rate differential in the hundi system can cover several days of groceries. More importantly, the funds arrive instantly. When repayment schedules or medical emergencies cannot wait, the informal system is a rational financial necessity.

This imbalance is not inevitable. To rebalance capital allocation, the credit framework must transition from a reliance on collateral to a logic of cash flow. A district-level loan-to-deposit framework could require that a defined share of deposits collected in a district be reinvested locally. Warehouse receipt financing could transform stored crops into recognised collateral, enabling farmers to access credit based on the value of their harvest rather than land titles. Alternative credit scoring could incorporate verified remittance histories, allowing landless households to build credit profiles.

The three-year "breather" requested by the new government offers a final opportunity to implement these reforms. As the revised 2029 deadline approaches, LDC graduation should not be measured solely by reserve adequacy or export diversification. A more significant test is whether the workers who generated the nation's foreign exchange remain integrated into the financial system they helped sustain.

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while loans disbursed in those same areas totalled only Tk 6,656 crore, even as deposits grew by nearly 15 percent compared to just a 1.2 percent rise in rural lending. Nationally, more than 90 percent of formal lending continued to flow to urban borrowers. Deposits mobilised in remittance-rich districts were not being recycled locally at a comparable scale. Liquidity generated in the periphery was routinely deployed elsewhere, lowering borrowing costs for large urban firms while leaving local credit conditions tight.