



Immortal Ekushey

Martyrs' Day and International Mother Language Day 2025



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Message

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On the occasion of great Martyrs' Day and International Mother Language Day, I pay tribute to people of all languages in the world, including Bangla. Since 2000, Bangladesh and UNESCO have been jointly observing this day in a befitting manner. "Make Languages Count for Sustainable Development" as this year's UNESCO topic is justified.

The Bengali nation, which had endured centuries of enslavement and domination, achieved its first victory in its struggle for independence on February 21, 1952. The language movement holds special significance in the history of the Bengali nation's liberation movement. The groundwork for the establishment of a democratic, language-based, non-communal state structure was established by this movement. On this day, Abul Barkat, Abdul Jabbar, Abdus Salam, Rafiquddin Ahmad, Shafiqur Rahman, and many others sacrificed their lives to protect the dignity of their mother language, Bangla.

In 1956, Bangla was granted the status of a state language, and February 21 was declared Martyrs' Day and a public holiday. On November 17, 1999, UNESCO recognised February 21 as 'International Mother Language Day.'

The Interim Government established through the July Uprising is working consistently to defend the dignity of the nation and its languages, which are essential to growth and prosperity. It is also working to ensure that the Bangla language is used in information technology. Textbooks in the mother languages of various ethnic groups, including Braille books, are being distributed free of charge.

Greetings and congratulations to everyone on great Martyrs' Day and International Mother Language Day 2025. I wish success to all the programmes undertaken on this occasion.

Professor Muhammad Yunus

Ekushey February and the New Bangladesh

Professor Mohammad Azam

1

The politico-cultural activities of at least five previous years had a role behind the historic incidents that took place in Dhaka on 21 February 1952. Detailed documents could be obtained about the participation of the country's regions in the central programme of 21 February. Undoubtedly, this movement could take place due to the large-scale activism and support of the mass-people of Bangladesh, especially the huge segment of middle-class citizens. Badruddin Umar has presented detailed background of this movement based on adequate information and data in his 3-volume book titled 'Language Movement and the then Politics'. Based on that, it can be said that the incidents of Ekushey (twenty-first) February were in fact a consolidated expression of the varied political spirits and realities of the people living in this land.

The language movement achieved swift results. The Bangla language became the key ingredient of political demands during the 1954 election. Bangla was recognized as the principal state language of Pakistan in the first constitution of that country. Later, the language movement was reborn in a new shape during the movement for autonomy. Bangla became the most important symbol during the cultural and political developments during the 1960s. Therefore, the constitutional recognition of Bangla as the state-language after the independence of Bangladesh was not a matter of fresh decision-making. This decision was inevitable as a continuation of the events that occurred during the previous two decades.

2

Many people are found to express concerns about the state of Bangla language in the month of February. This is not bad. This anxiety is necessary. The sorry state of Bangla language in Bangladesh cannot be visualised through the naked eye. It is also not comprehended through listening. This is because, the population overwhelmingly speaks a single language. As a result, Bangla is heard everywhere. But one cannot but become apprehensive when the terrible state of Bangla language is observed at aristocratic spots like the educational institutes, legal domain, offices and courts. As a consequence, those who become conscious about Bangla language at least in the month of February deserve commendation.

Usually, two types of concerns are heard nowadays on the question of Bangla language. First, the practice of 'correct' Bangla has gone down drastically; especially those who write in the social media appear to be less conscious about language. Second, people prefer to use English; they randomly mix English words even while speaking or writing in Bangla. I am proposing in this write-up that this particular concern is a 'fake' one. At least, it is not a practical concern.

The main reason for using the term 'fake' is because, our use of language is merely the result of many other activities. Consequently, if we speak about 'language-pollution' and 'language-mixing' without paying attention to those activities, and consider it as our duty, then there is no other option but to term it as 'fake'.

The language that one becomes habituated with depends on the linguistic medium that one uses in education. Initially, people learn language unconsciously, later it becomes part of their upbringing. It can be said that people start to consciously practice language by means of writing. When the medium of instruction is not Bangla, then it is foolhardy to expect that someone would become an expert in that written language. Besides, there is an established view in society that the Bangla language is good for nothing, especially with regard to higher education. In this situation, none should be blamed if he tries to learn English and attempts to speak in that language. Under these circumstances, mixing of languages would naturally occur – the linguists have shown this repeatedly based on facts and statistics. Therefore, the anxieties expressed by the genteel segment of our society about the two problems with regard to our language have been a natural outcome of a varying state of affair. If their concerns were genuine, then they would have spoken about the language of instruction, as well as the reality and result of language usage in various institutional tasks. As they do not do that, there is no option but to become worried about their worries.

Now the question is: Why do people express these impractical concerns? The first reason is ignorance. Languages undergo change, and the new forms gradually get absorbed in the standard language; but most people do not keep track of these. They consider the language that they got habituated with during their childhood as the eternal form of that language. Consequently, they become worried. This can be termed as a kind of ignorance. On the other hand, people consider mixing of language as bad from the standpoint that language has a 'pure' form, and mixing harms that purity. This concept of a pure language is also a superstition. In reality, no language is either pure or impure. Language entails mixing. As a result, mixing of languages is a natural outcome – like the languages themselves. English is getting more mixed with the Bangla language because of the specific language scenario in Bangladesh, which has been pointed out earlier. Concerns about the spoken language is both baseless and meaningless. This is applicable for all languages of the world – more in some and less in others. These are undoubtedly fake concerns.

Now the question arises, what are the genuine concerns? This is related to the state itself, which in turn is linked to the relationship between the state and its citizens; it is related to the long-term plans for erecting the future of the people. The reason why practical discussions on the Bangla language of Bangladesh have not started yet is because, we could not yet raise the discussion to the level of state-building. Let me explain with an example. Whatever the reasons behind the intense emotion we feel in Bangladesh concerning English usage, its visible and prime logic is related to development. But with the exception of a few countries like Singapore, there are only scant examples where development could be attained by using a second language. The use of own language in education is not deterring their development; neither is it hindering their emigration on a large scale with dignity and honour. Whether English or any other language, the language needs to be learned in a systematic way. Therefore, why has this view become so popular that is not felt anywhere else?

Becoming concerned about this should in fact be the real worry about Bangla language. If a state is to be built, if the people are to be turned into human resources through education – then all citizens, instead of only those who have the money to learn English language, should be brought under its fold. The dialogue on Bangla language will start when education becomes the ultimate goal of life – not settling in foreign lands by sending children abroad. We would realize then that the issue of preserving language-purity and the discussion on language-mixing are not only mere foams at the upper layer, they are also entertainment-oriented funny dialogues.

3

The language of any nation-state faces a deep crisis when it does not get a place in the formal or foundational spaces of the state. These areas are of three categories: official use, legal use, and educational use. The use of Bangla in the aristocratic offices of Bangladesh is very limited; The use of Bangla in the elitist courts is so rare that if one writes a verdict in Bangla, then it becomes a publishable news. As for education, it can be said that even the solvent middle-class children do not study in Bangla language anymore. This last aspect is more disastrous; because, through this, a generation is being groomed who would not even consider using Bangla language in those two domains.

The status of Bangla in higher education is in fact an appropriate reflection of the state of Bangladesh. You may claim that Bangla exists in the realm of higher education in Bangladesh – at least partially. It can even be said by relying on available figures that a majority of children are pursuing education in Bangla medium. The medium of instruction implies the language spoken in classes, used in answer-sheets and text-books. In that respect, the language of engineering and medical education was never Bangla, similar to the private universities. In Dhaka University, one could use Bangla in examinations at most of the departments; that scope remains even now. But the reality is that, writing answer-sheets in Bangla is now being discouraged. As a result, Bangla faces a crisis of non-existence despite its presence. If this reality is not made clear or cleaner, no discussions would be fruitful.

This state of affair in higher education is playing a deterministic role in primary and secondary education as well. The students of Bangla medium cannot cope much with the efficiency and cultural requirements of university classes; this kind of logic in fact creates a justification for adopting English from beforehand. The upper middleclass and affluent segments of Bangladesh society used to study in English medium even earlier on. Almost two decades have elapsed since the launching of English version education by the government. Consequently, only those who cannot buy English medium study in Bangla medium.

The question is, how could this situation prevail for such a long time? And why do we feel that it serves our purpose? What I want to emphasize is that, such a country in the world is very rare that could develop through education in a foreign language. The only example may be India, but the linguistic scenario in India is quite different from that of Bangladesh. Those who allude to this comparison or example resort to an erroneous assessment. But India is usually cited during discussions on this topic in Bangladesh because other examples are not readily available. Therefore, although not being run in an efficient manner, why does this practice of English continue in Bangladesh? In straightforward language, the reason is – we are not really imparting genuine education.

But what does that imply? What does the death of education actually mean? Then what do we do in schools-colleges-universities? We actually supply skills in the name of education. We perform exactly those tasks that can be done through specific skills. The 20-year strategy paper of the University Grants Commission (UGC) speaks about this objective. But the medium of instruction was not considered in that strategy paper. This is because, they assumed that the medium of instruction was already English. And, supplying skilled labour to the international market has been mentioned as the principal objective of higher education in Bangladesh in that paper.

Therefore, the main reason why we feel that higher education is being run well here is because we are supplying trained workers to the international market; or we have at least considered it as the principal objective. However, the task is not being performed efficiently. Usually, our students have to be made qualified for entering the global market by obtaining another degree from the developed countries. And the higher educational institutions inside our country are grooming pupils mainly for our service sector. To simplify: the task is mainly that of selling commodities. Education through the English medium is considered fruitful due to these two factors – supplying workers for the service sector and the international market. It cannot be termed 'education'; it can at best be called 'instruction'.

It should be mentioned here that our state does not run on knowledge. Bangladesh lacks an education system that can generate knowledge for running the statecraft. We borrow all technologies for running the state from abroad. Consequently, we do not need to realize the reality that we lack 'education'. Another truth is that, a majority of our children belonging to the middle and upper classes feel that Bangladesh does not have any future. They, therefore, have to travel overseas. Consequently, English medium education helps them in advancing their cause.

Because of all these factors, it may appear to us that our English medium education is being run well. But we are actually learning 'medium' instead of 'education'. That is, English is being taught, but not any 'subject' by means of English. Therefore, work is progressing well overseas as well as in the service sector of the country. But in reality, this situation cannot be sustained. Our circumstances are changing, the financial condition is improving. But we need education. In fact, the skilled manpower required for running corporate offices is not being groomed by our education system.

If we need quality education, if we require knowledge-generating education, then we need such an education that will result in our system producing graduates who can manage the statecraft of Bangladesh effectively. In that case, we need to overhaul our education system. Many big changes will have to be brought about. The first in the sequence will probably be establishment of Bangla as the medium of instruction. For imparting education in Bangla, slow advances have to be made towards it in the light of present reality. That is because, as I said before, Bangla is not really present in our education system. However, there is no possibility of getting acquiescence at the consumers' level if any revolutionary decision is taken. Social acceptance will have to be obtained through a gradual process. At the same time, the task of preparing Bangla for application in higher education should also continue in full gear.

Now, what initiatives should be taken? There is a strong presence of an entrenched superstition in our society – where Bangla and English are portrayed as rivals; removing this should be the principal priority. In fact, all of our able parents view this to be the case. It is a social fallacy, and dispelling this cannot be the job of an individual. An individual can hold any view, but the state is bound to respect that in a democratic manner. The state has to take effective measures for convincing people through practical initiatives by underscoring that two languages can function side by side in our working life. The reality has to be brought to the fore that people of the world learn second or third languages, which are applied for even creative or knowledge-oriented work. This should be the first task in the backdrop of the psychological reality prevalent in Bangladesh.

Secondly, the use of Bangla should be started right away in higher education without waiting a single day for preparation of text-books and vocabularies in Bangla. It should be particularly reminded that vocabulary or terminology is not an issue for Bangla or English. This realization is rare even among the academics. Actually, terminology is a matter to be addressed by relevant subjects or disciplines. And terminologies should be prepared by the practitioners of relevant disciplines based on their direct experiences as well as practices. Therefore, the work should commence right away without wasting any time for vocabulary or language, at least partially, as it is not possible to introduce the whole thing in Bangla overnight or all of a sudden.

By expanding through a gradual process, the situation will have to be brought to such a state when students of higher education in both private and public institutions are able to read, write, and answer examination questions in both Bangla and English. The students who are born outside the country and those who are not Bangalis or Bangladeshis can be kept outside this initiative. Higher education in Bangla and English should be compulsorily and effectively established for the children of Bangali parents who were born and brought up in Bangladesh, which should continue for a long time until we have the capacity to accept Bangla as the lone medium of education. Therefore, our goal for the moment should be the attainment of bilingual capacity by our children after receiving higher education.

We shall have to advance quite far in the third stage. If we really want to enter the realm of higher education, we shall have to deal with the research level, and that research has to be done in Bangla. Another thing should be reminded here: it is often said that people like Satyen Bose had practiced science in Bangla. It is not true. What they did was presenting the flavour or essence of science in Bangla. It is only another kind of literature. Practicing science in one particular language and presenting the flavour of science are not the same thing. The practice of science in Bangla in truly academic sense has never happened. The scientists have occasionally publicised their own or other people's research among the public in simple language. We have mistakenly termed this as practice of science in Bangla. For real practice of science, use of Bangla in writing dissertations for higher degrees should be made compulsory. Writing of dissertations in Bangla alongside those in English should be ensured. This is possible only through sufficient financial allocations. If this is not done, then it is impossible to ensure the aristocracy and effectiveness of Bangla language. Through the weight of this aristocracy, the bogus discourses observed from the highest to the lowest echelons of education could be eliminated forever.

4

The people of Bangladesh from the upper to the lower classes are obsessed with an intense love for English because of their infatuation for 'development'. This is, however, the reality all over the world. But there is a basic difference between us and the countries whose education systems appear to be acceptable and who have truly achieved progress. In those countries, the infatuations of individuals, families, or parties do not become the driving force for national education policies or systems. The national language becomes the carriers of education there. The state also makes sufficient arrangements for the learning of second or third languages. The situation is opposite in our case. Here, arrangements are made for forgetting the first language simply for facilitating the learning of English. The students are learning second or third languages abundantly across the globe alongside receiving education in their first language. But we are sacrificing our education only to learn the English language.

It is in this context that the history of state-language movement has become a necessary excuse for us. That could materialise due to the all-pervasive cultural voyage emanating from Ekushey February. The whole month of February has become important because of this day; and its practicality has assumed a different shape over the past few decades centring on the holding of Ekushey Book Fair. The love for Ekushey in the collective mindset of middleclass people appear to have played a major role behind this popularity of the book fair. February has become the month of language in our public discourse as well as bookish language. This language is Bangla. Consequently, a culture and tradition has evolved for discussing about the Bangla language centring on Ekushey February in the larger domain of mass media. A culture of presenting theoretical cum applied discourses on building a 'democratic' and 'developed' Bangladesh has also been built over a long period centring on February.

The first stage in building a democratic country is the use of people's language in all public domains including education. A huge segment of citizenry become victims of being viewed differently through the use of a language that has been learned by a few people. The culture that has been built for reviewing the language and the state in the month of February has generated huge opportunities for holding discussions on urgent issues of state-building.

The excuse of 21 February for introducing Bangla in all strata of society is not at all sufficient. But it is possible to advance the effective discourses for building a democratic and developed Bangladesh by utilising the culture of urgent and appropriate discussions centring on our language. That may be an essential step for the flourishing of our democracy and advancement. □

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21 february
International Mother Language Day



Bangla – My Tongue

Abdul Hye Sikder

Who teaches the bird to fly?
The river on how to tread a path?
The thorns of wood remain awake
For guarding the flowers!

Who taught the kitten
To find the milk?
Why do the birds sing forever
At daytime and nightly hours?
Why does the moon bloat and shrink?
The foams fall on the sea?
The pitcher of the blue hue
Tilts in a lake of the sky!

Procession of stars at night,
Light all around at daytime,
Whenever the sun shakes or frets
Colours change from white to black.
The path of good and bad
Are not always smooth –
The days are only made
By spilling the blood from heart.

Please call injustice an injustice
Tell oppression to go away
Please march in a procession
To bring smile to mother's face.
Light up the lamp of freedom
Grow the garden of flowers,
Giving up life for one's country
Can bring true contentment.

Who taught the embroidered quilt?
The display of gentle affection?
Who fills up the open field
With the song of human love?

Returning to this empty heart
Who has brought back hope?
The answer in one word –
Bangla – my tongue.

My tongue is Lalon Fakir
My tongue is river
My tongue is sorrow and mirth
The flow of life forever.
Harmony and affection
Fill my heart,
The world's conqueror –
My tongue – a sun-draped home.

Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed

