

21st February: Are we achieving the goal of the language martyrs?

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21st February is a day of national mourning and reflection. It is the Language Martyr's Day. On this day in 1952, Barkat, Rafiq, Shafiur, Jabbar and Salam and many others sacrificed their young precious lives for honour and preservation of mother language, Bangla.

21st February is not only the Bangla Language Martyr's Day in Bangladesh, but also is being observed as International Mother Language Day.

Since 2000, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has observed 21st February as the International Mother Language Day. This Day has become a milestone in recognition of the right to speak, promote and preserve all mother languages across the world.

Bangladesh can rightly take credit for taking the initiative for the declaration of the UNESCO.

Have the goals of the Martyrs' Day fulfilled?

The question posed above may elicit a variety of answers. But the real significance of the day to honour the martyrs seems to lie in the following:

- (a) whether all people, young and old, in the country are able to read and write Bengali
- (b) whether any good book in Bengali language has been recognized and earned any laurel in the world
- (c) whether the annual book fair at the Bangladesh Academy premises has served its purpose of disseminating knowledge to book buyers.

If one looks into the above facts, the answer may not be comfortable. It is because 21st February is more on rituals rather than on substance. Some argue it has departed from the ideals and goals of the martyrs.

Another fact that has been neglected over the years is that many do not know who were the language martyrs. What were the background and life history of them? How many people were killed or died later after the shooting? No one seems to know the exact or approximate number of deaths due to shooting.

In the school text books, hardly school students are aware of their background and what role did they play? There seems to be a vacuum in getting their life history of the martyrs. Is there any body or organization that is responsible for recording the detailed history of the language movement?

Day by day, investigating journalism traces some of the individuals who are alive today in the countryside and who fought for the language. People are aware of them only when they speak themselves about their role in the language movement. There is no systematic mechanism to get their stories out for the benefit of the nation.

Book Fair at the premises of Bangla Academy:

Since 1979, the book fair has commenced. It seems currently in the name of the book fair, one may argue that it has become a venture of commercialization and the venue is the vehicle for display of cheap love stories and romantic novels. Some publishers are out there to make quick money exploiting the passion and sentiments of young minds by urging noted writers to write for them. Is that the purpose of the book fair?

The book fair is to enrich the minds of readers on Bengali language and good quality books including well-researched books are to be available. If one looks at the statistics of number of books during the first two week period of the book fair, it is reported that 259 novels and 141 story books were published. Some of the novels cheapen the occasion by their stories of romance.

Is it the book lovers want from the writers and publishers on the occasion of 21st February to honour the language martyrs? The intelligentsia and civil society seems to be silent spectator in the matter. Have they abandoned their responsibility under the pressure of publishers and some fellow writers?

What did actually occur on 21st February?

Pakistani rulers wanted impose Urdu on Bangla people, although they constituted 56% per cent of people of united Pakistan. The people of former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, strongly objected to it in 1948 when Mr. Jinnah had announced it in the Curzon Hall. Mr. Dhirendranath Dutta, a member of the Constituent Assembly, argued in the Assembly that Bangla language ought to be one of the state languages of Pakistan. But all these demands fell on deaf ears on Pakistani leaders.

The immediate starting point of the tragedy of 21st February is that on 27th January, 1952, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Khwaja Nazimuddin announced at a public meeting that Urdu alone should be the state language of Pakistan. The students were infuriated on the announcement.

On 21st February, 1952, agitated students, both male and female, of Dhaka University decided to violate Section 144 Order (prohibiting an assembly more than five persons) in order to proceed to the elected members of the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly to present their demand.

On their way at the then site of the student hostels of the Dhaka Medical College, at 3-30 PM, (where the monument exists), the police opened fire on the peaceful procession of students by an order of a Magistrate (a West Pakistani). Jabbar and Rafiq died on the spot, while Barkat, critically injured died that evening in the hospital. The two other martyrs died in hospital and many more were secretly buried. The rest is history.

Importance of mother languages:

Mother language is what a baby child communicates for the first time with mother and father. It is a language a person never forgets, wherever that person lives. The

mother language is a prism that determines the first notions of the world to a baby child. The umbilical cord between mother tongue and thought is inseparable. It is the mother tongue that represents thought, culture and heritage of an individual.

Scottish historian and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) called the language "the body of thought". This implies that if a mother tongue is crushed, thoughts and ideas will inevitably die.

About 6,800 mother languages are thought to exist today. But social, demographic and political factors are all contributing to their rapid disappearance.

Language experts say that half of the number is likely to disappear as smaller ethnic societies are gradually being assimilated into mainstream national and global cultures. For example, the language, *Middle Chulym*, now spoken by a handful Siberian townfolk (45 in number), has integrated into Russian language and once the last fluent speaker dies, the language will be extinct.

Studies of different languages have revealed vastly different ways of representing and interpreting the world. For instance, some Native American and Australian Aboriginal languages reveal a completely different understanding of the relationship between nature and human beings and how it affects their lives.

Language experts believe that as mother languages disappear, a few dominant languages will exist, such as English, French, Spanish and Chinese, for commerce, education, science and culture in the world. The disappearance of mother languages will be a severe blow to linguistic diversity, cognitive science and cultural studies.

Preservation of Bangla language is an issue on which people of Bangladesh feel deeply and rightly so. It represents the thought, culture and heritage of Bangladesh. Anyone who wishes to gain an insight into the conditions of life in Bangladesh and to peer into social structures cannot do better than to study Bangla language and literature.

Of all the languages in South Asia, Bangla is the first to develop a literature of a very high order and still holds the model for other languages. Bangla writers in the past and present have enriched the language by transfusing Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English languages in it.

Bangla was raised to its highest fame by Rabindranath Thakur (Tagore) when he was awarded in 1913 the Nobel Prize for Literature for the slim volume of prose poems *Gitanjali* (Song Offering). Within a year it had been printed 20 times and many other translations followed.

Some educationists argue that the gap between the speech of books and media and that of ordinary life in the countryside needs to be bridged. So also the grammar of Bangla language needs to be simplified. Time has come also for reforming Bangla spelling so as to make it easy for Bangla language learners.

Knowledge-based nation:

Every Bangladeshi has a right to read books in Bangla. But the price of Bangla books is very too high because the printing paper and other materials for publishing books are costly. The authorities concerned may consider in exempting tax and custom duties on printing paper and other materials so as to make books easily available to readers at an affordable price. At the same time, the publishers must look into how the cost of books can be made cheaper by selecting less expensive paper, soft cover and simple design.

The *Ekushey February* Book Fair at the Bangladesh Academy premises will achieve its purpose if visitors to the bookstalls are able to buy good quality books, not just browsing them. A knowledge nation does not grow automatically. It needs to be carefully developed and nurtured.

Conclusion:

One must not, however, forget that learning other languages is useful in the days of inter-connected world and to be a multi-lingual is an asset for any person. Since English has become a language of commerce, higher education in overseas and computer, one may not neglect in learning English language for commerce and higher education.

21st February is more than a language movement for people of Bangladesh. Many historians think 21st February laid the seed of the foundation of a separate state of Bangladesh on the basis of Bengali nationalism that was aptly summed up by *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujib when he said : " I am a Bengali, my nationalism is Bengali".