



Snapshots from Bangladesh

By Hilary Smith

Language issues in Bangladesh can be said to be at the heart of the country's existence. After the Partition of Bengal at the end of the British colonial period in India, Urdu was imposed in East Pakistan as the national language on a population who spoke Bengali. This led to the Language Movement and on the 21st of February 1952 political activists and students at Dhaka University were demonstrating when police opened fire on the protestors. Dozens were killed. The 21st of February has now been designated by UNESCO as International Mother Tongue Day and celebrated around the world.

In Dhaka the "Martyr Monument", Shaheed Minar, was built to remember those who died in the Language Movement demonstrations, as well as the millions of others who died before Bangladesh gained independence 20 years later. The simple monument (pictured on page 2) symbolises a mother and her children, and today is a focus for national remembrance as well as activism. In the week I was in Dhaka two protests were held at Shaheed Minar: one for journalistic freedom in Bangladesh and one for the rights (including language rights) of the indigenous Chittagong Hill Tribes.

The other language spoken in the former British India was of course English, and the Bangladesh English Teachers Association (BELTA) is a flourishing organisation. I was lucky to be in Dhaka when BELTA was hosting a talk by TESOL International president-elect Dr Andy Curtis. I joined the audience and was made very welcome by BELTA president Dr Arifa Rahman and other members of the BELTA committee.



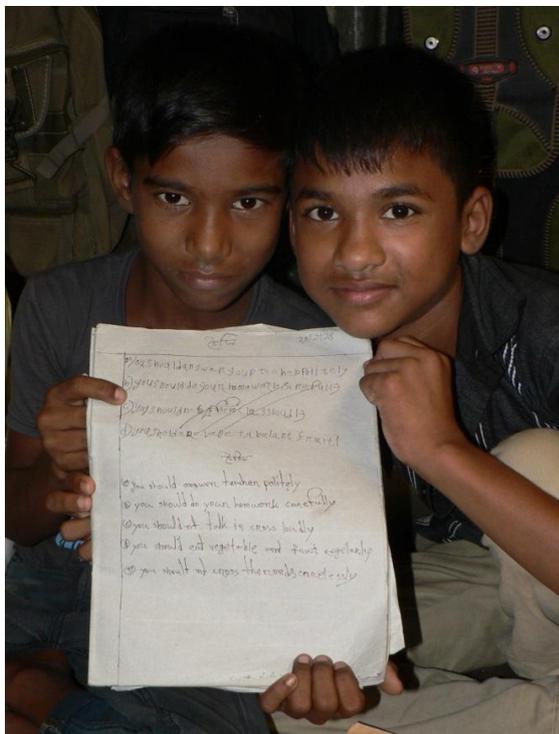
Vashantek Class 5 teacher Tania Akter at the door to her classroom.

A topical issue for BELTA members is communicative language teaching in the Bangladesh context. I was interested to catch up with Harunur Rashid Khan, who studied at Victoria University in Wellington. He has researched the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali polymath and educator in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Tagore advocated the mother tongue as the best route to learning English (and other languages), and was opposed to rote learning in

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education. The engaged style of teaching and learning he promoted has much in common with the modern communicative language teaching approach. Perhaps it is this heritage which has resulted in the lively and locally relevant textbooks I saw being used in Dhaka.

I was able to join a World Food Programme school feeding monitoring visit to two elementary schools in the Dhaka slum of Mirpur. More than 92,000 children in urban Dhaka receive a small packet of fortified biscuits for each day of school attendance. This provides 67 percent of their micronutrient requirements, and school attendance has risen as the need to work for money to buy food has decreased.



Vashantek Class 5 students Mohawer Moatu and Alum Meha show their English lessons: "You should answer your teacher politely ... You should eat vegetables and fruit regularly".

In the non-government Vashantek Child Learning Centre two shifts of classes share the use of the small corrugated iron room. Many of the children work in the garment industry as well as attend classes at the learning centre, but in spite of this they were lively and enthusiastic when we visited. All had their books neatly covered and were proud to show me their English exercises.

The children asked questions about New Zealand, and were keen to perform traditional dances and songs. At the She-e-Bangla Government Primary School, it was a surprise for us to hear one of the songs in Korean, taught by a visiting music

teacher; but this appeared to be accepted by the children as just another language!



Shilpi Akter Shumi, Amina Akter and Jharna Akter Faria singing a song in Korean at Sher-e-Bangla Government Primary School.

The challenges for education in Bangladesh are huge. However, the overwhelming impression from my visit was a cultural pride, enthusiasm for learning, and positive approach towards all languages, including English.

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Shaheed Minar, "Martyr Monument", in Dhaka.