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Donald Katz
U.S. Fulbright Student to Bangladesh



After staying up waiting to leave, we finally set out at 3 AM, yet I had been looking forward to Ekushey February for a longer time than this sleepless night. The holiday, its name meaning February 21st, remembers the martyrs who died that date in 1952 during the most significant episode of the Bengali Language Movement, which would set Bangladesh on a path to independence from Pakistan nineteen years later.

I first heard about the day's events from two Fulbrighters from Bangladesh who taught me Bengali at NC State. I was amazed to hear about the passion and history behind Ekushey February, particularly the way the country's people embraced it. Now, over a year later, and with a much greater

knowledge, respect, and love for Bengali as a language, I would get to experience it. I was told that the best way to go to Shahid Minar, the language martyrs' monument and the focal point of the remembrance, was when it is still dark, especially at midnight when government officials place the first commemorating flowers. My friends and I decided to arrive during the less busy hour of 3 AM, between the midnight rush and the daytime crowds.

The customary black and white dress contrasts with the yellows and oranges of the placed flowers. The many songs which have been written over the years about the language struggle are played over speakers in the streets surrounding Shahid Minar. During the day the streets are blocked off and jammed with lines. The streets themselves are painted with many colors and designs, and the faces of the martyrs can be seen hanging at every corner. It is a solemn, yet proud, atmosphere.



Before stepping on the monument's grounds, one first removes their shoes, then walks to the monument, and places a flower on its steps. By the time we arrived, the monument already had a large pile of flowers from the general public and governmental organizations. Each of us took one of the roses we brought and placed them in front. We stood and admired the scene, our minds on the martyrs who gave their lives to speak their mother language.

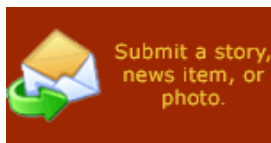


Afterwards we sat outside the monuments' grounds and watched the few people walking up. We came at the right time to avoid a wait, but in hindsight I would not have minded one. An



enormous crowd of people honoring the fight for their language would have been a moving sight to see: walking in black and white panjabis and sarees, singing to the songs being played through the air, and carrying the brightest flowers to honor the martyrs. I processed what it meant for Bangladeshis and all my thoughts while learning the language. It was an honor to take part in the ceremony with my friends who have grown up with such a proud history.

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