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PRESIDENT
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF
BANGLADESH

Message

On the occasion of great 'Shaheed Day (Language Martyrs' Day)' and the International Mother Language Day' 2020, I extend my warm congratulations and sincere felicitations to all multilingual people of the world along with Bangla-speaking people. It is a unique celebration in protecting mother tongue as well as own culture and heritage.

The great Language Movement is a memorable event in our national history. Today, I pay my deep homage to the language martyrs namely Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiur and so many unknown and unsung language heroes who laid down their lives for the cause of mother tongue Bangla. I also remember with profound respect, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Sarbodhio Rashtrobhasa Sangram Parishad (All Party State Language Action Committee), formed in 1948 and was arrested for his active role in the language movement. I recall Dhirendranath Dutt, the then member of Gonoparishad (Constituent Assembly) who raised the proposal before the Gonoparishad to turn Bangla into the state language. I also remember language heroes for their bravery, farsightedness, unmatched valour, organizing capability and taking instantaneous steps in this regard that facilitated the Language Movement to reach its ultimate culmination of February 21, 1952 and consequently, the Bangalee achieved their right to the mother tongue.

The aim of the language movement was to establish the right of our mother tongue as well as to protect self-identity, cultural distinction and heritage. Being a source of ceaseless inspiration, Amar Ekushey (Immortal Shaheed Day) inspired and encouraged us to a great extent to achieve the right to self-determination and struggle for freedom and war of liberation. With the bloodshed passages of Language Movement in February, we achieved the recognition of Bangla as our mother tongue and consequently, we attained our long-cherished independence under the charismatic leadership of the greatest Bangalee of all time, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971.

Language and culture are invaluable assets of human races. On the one hand, it encompasses the eternity of time, and on the other hand, it keeps flowing the diverse lifestyle of human civilization from generation to generation. Every day some languages of the world are becoming extinct due to multifarious causes including poverty, imperialism, commercialism, propagation of religion, immigration, motivated financial and human assistances, lack of proper exercise of languages, declining of birth rate of some races and nation, degradation of the environment and satellite culture etc. The extinct of language means to disappear of culture, nation and civilization on the earth. The people of the world will have to raise their voice for the preservation of defunct language along with flourishing respective mother tongue and culture.

In fact, to embrace martyrdom for the cause of mother tongue is a rare incident in world history. February 21 has now been recognized by the UNESCO as the 'International Mother Language Day' in 1999 with the spontaneous willingness and sincere endeavour of Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina along with the primary efforts of some Bangla-loving expatriate Bangladeshis. As a nation, it is our great achievement. International Mother Language Institute, an institute for the research and preservation of the flourishing and nearly extinct languages of the world, has been established in Dhaka in 2001. Besides, textbooks and teaching methods have also been introduced for the tribes minor races, ethnic sects and communities in our country with a view to protecting and developing their own languages and culture. Observing the International Mother Language Day, I firmly believe, will play a positive role in attaining the sustainable future through multilingual education.

The spirit of Amar Ekushey in now the incessant source of inspiration for the protection of own languages and culture of people around the world. Imbued with the spirit of Amar Ekushey, let the bond of friendship among multilingual people be strengthened, world's almost defunct languages be revived and the globe be diversified in respective societies- it is my expectation on Shaheed Day and International Mother Language Day.

Khoda Hafez, May Bangladesh Live Forever.

Md. Abdul Hamid

How the Martyrs' Day became
'International Mother Language Day'

Ahmad Rafique

The day was 17 November 1999. On that day, the 21 February (Martyrs' Day) was declared as the International Mother Language Day at the plenary session of a general meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The basis of that declaration was the adoption of a proposal submitted by Bangladesh at the United Nations (12 November). The genesis and history of that proposal was quite colourful. It may be recalled that the proposal was adopted unanimously during that UNESCO session. The episode was a matter of great pride and glory not only for Bangladesh, but also for all Bangla-speaking people.

Two expatriates (Canada) were involved in this initiative from the very outset. They were the Bangalis Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam. Coincidentally, these two names bore resemblance to the names of two martyrs who were killed by police firing in Dhaka on 21 February 1952. Imbibed with the love for language, these two youths Rafiq and Salam were active members of an organization called 'Mother Language Lovers of the World' in Canada.

Whatever might have been the reason, they suddenly became active on the matter. May be they realized that the Language Martyrs' Day, which brought recognition of state language for the mother-tongue through sacrifices and struggles in one's own land deserved international recognition. Rafiqul Islam became active on the issue probably out of this consideration. He discussed this with another lover of mother languages – the expatriate Abdus Salam. May be they also held discussions with other like-minded friends in foreign lands.

After that came the episode of sending letter. It was sent by the aforementioned organization on mother languages to the UN Secretary General on 29 March 1998, pleading for accepting the Martyrs' Day on 21 February as the International Mother Language Day. But there were some problems. Firstly, the issue was not under the purview of the UN Secretary General's office; rather it was under the jurisdiction of UNESCO. Secondly, as the UN and UNESCO were international bodies, they could not accept or implement such a proposal when it came from an individual person or private organization.

For this to be considered, the proper procedure was to send the proposal or petition on behalf of a member-state of the United Nations. The aforementioned world mother language lovers' organization was therefore given such an advice in reply to their letter. After that, they started communications with the Government of Bangladesh.

In reality, the initiatives undertaken on the issue were multi-dimensional. The labour, dedicated efforts and initiatives of the 'Mother Language Lovers of the World' as an organization and Rafiqul Islam as an individual were praiseworthy. Naturally, the letter sent to the UN secretary-general as well as the one received from UNESCO were submitted as attachments with the letter sent by Rafiqul Islam on behalf of the aforementioned organization to the Ministry of Education in Bangladesh.

The matter did not end there. The Bangladesh Government was urged to expedite the diplomatic and state-level initiatives by establishing communication with the UNESCO keeping in mind the subject's significance. On the other hand, the concerned department of Bangladesh Government also demonstrated much adroitness in pursuing the matter.

The wheel of actions centring on the subject of International Mother Language Day progressed very swiftly at different layers through sending a summary to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on behalf of the Education Minister ASHK Sadique. Luckily, no sides resorted to any procrastination on the issue.

UNESCO displayed a kind of interest on the subject for contentious reasons.

In our view, the theme of mother language was sufficiently sensitive in the global context, and there were dissents especially in countries of Europe having more than one language. There was also the question of conflict between the languages of the majority and minority populations. On the other hand, the United Nations usually declares international days for worldwide observance with the goal of creating empathy and solidarity on many issues.

The diplomats of Bangladesh took recourse to an intense diplomacy on the question of Mother Language Day. The rationale was that, the declaration of International Mother Language Day would be helpful in generating mutual respect, tolerance and international linguistic solidarity on the subject of mother languages. The renowned diplomat Syed Muazzem Ali had highlighted the latter aspect.

It should be remembered that just as there was anxiety in the global community about the extinction of many languages, similarly all nations nurture a sense of supremacy regarding their own mother language, which was in a sense parochial. Therefore, declaration of a Mother Language Day centring on events of a particular occasion might not have been liked by all. Here lay the ingrained problem in the issue.

Therefore, despite the liberal attitude of the UNESCO secretary-general, the subject of declaring 21 February as the International Mother Language Day was not an easy matter. There was scope for internal dissents behind the visible reactions outside. Therefore, the Bangladesh Government had to undertake a vigorous diplomatic endeavour for achieving its objective.

Syed Muazzem Ali disclosed that they were able to bring the situation in their favour through tireless efforts. The main problem was with those European countries that had more than one language. Even then, co-sponsorship supports and consents could be extracted from 28 countries of different continents. A big reason for that was the history of Ekushey (21 February), peaceful movement of unarmed students and the illogical and unjustified firing by police on their peaceful assembly and the resultant death of numerous students. That could conquer the minds of many foreign delegates. The firing by police and the deaths of innocent people came up for discussion again and again. That made the 21 February of 1952 both tragic and glorious. This kind of incident is quite rare in the history of the world.

But although rare, there are other examples in the global perspective. For example, worldwide observance of the May Day was initially in protest against the killing of workers. The workers of Chicago were waging a movement and enforcing a strike in 1886 in support of their demand for an 8-hour work-day when police opened fire on them. The 'May Day' is observed globally in commemoration of that incident. That was a day of protest. But the significance of International Mother Language Day was different. It is an occasion for showing respect and love for one's own language, which is also a symbol for the flourishing of all mother languages. There is no place for hatred or hostility here. The Bangladesh Government was able to convince the delegates attending the UNESCO session about these issues that were related to the observance of Language Martyrs' Day.

PRIME MINISTER
GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Message

I would like to greet the Bangla-speaking people and people of all languages and cultures across the world on the occasion of the glorious Martyrs and International Mother Language Day.

The great Ekushey is the symbol of grief, strength and glory in the life of every Bangalee. On this day in 1952, many valiant sons of the soil, including Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafique had sacrificed their lives for protecting the dignity of the mother tongue.

I pay my deep homage to the memories of the martyrs. I also pay my deep respect to the greatest Bangalee of all time, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who had led the language movement and all other language veterans.

In 1948, State Language Movement Council was constituted comprising Tamuddun Majilish, Student League and other student bodies as per a proposal of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The council called a general strike on 11 March to realize the demand for recognising Bangla as the state language. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with a number of student leaders was arrested on the day from in front of the Secretariat. They were released on 15 March. Bangabandhu chaired a public meeting at Amtola in the Dhaka University campus on 16 March.

The movement for the demand of mother tongue spread all over the country. On 11 September 1948, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested from Faridpur. He was released on 21 January 1949. He was again detained on 19 April and released at the end of July. On 14 October, Bangabandhu was again arrested from Dhaka and confined to jail. His undaunted inspiration from inside the jail provided new impetus to the people's movement. In continuation of the movement, the language martyrs sacrificed their precious lives on 21 February 1952 while breaking Section 144 imposed by the rulers.

The resonance of the pride of Amar Ekushey is now resounded in the hearts of the people of the world surpassing the boundary of Bangladesh. Some expatriate Bangladeshis living in Canada including Salam and Rafiq took initiative for recognition to the 21 February as the International Mother Language Day.

The then Awami League government placed the demand to the United Nations. Therefore, the UNESCO gave the recognition to the 21 February as the International Mother Language Day on 17 November 1999. The International Mother Language Day is now a source of inspiration to all people of the world in establishing the truth and justice.

We have already placed the demand before United Nations to make Bangla, spoken by over 26 crore people of the world, as one of the official languages of the UN. We established 'International Mother Language Institute' in Dhaka to preserve the languages of the world and carry out research on those.

Holding the spirit of Ekushey and war of liberation, our government achieved huge progress in every sector including macro economy, agriculture, education, health, communication, information technology, infrastructure, power, rural economic development, diplomatic success and cooperation during the last 11 years. Bangladesh is now a 'Role Model' for development in the world.

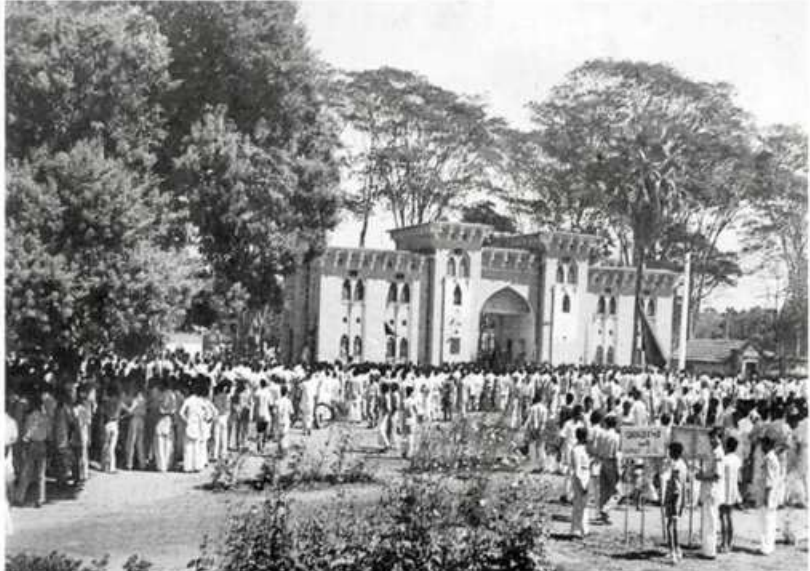
Through the implementation of Vision 2021 and 2041, and Delta Plan-2100 we have been working to build a hunger-poverty-free and happy-prosperous Golden Bangladesh as dreamt by the Father of the Nation. Let us be firmly committed in the spirit of the great Ekushey, we will unitedly build the Golden Bangladesh of the Father of the Nation.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu
May Bangladesh Live Forever.

Sheikh Hasina

The officiating diplomats and relevant officials were able to establish the significances of love for language and patriotism centring on the Language Martyrs' Day through relentless efforts. This information could be gathered from the relevant people via many sources.

The outcome of such an initiative of Bangladesh Government was positive. Even the sceptics did not hesitate to extend support to the proposal and voiced their opinion in its favour. A comment of Syed Muazzem Ali (who was intimately involved in the process) regarding this unprecedented initiative was very significant. He wrote, 'Fortunately, our relentless persuasion or lobbying bore fruit. A number of co-sponsors issued statements in support of our proposal. As a result, the multilingual European parties could not oppose our resolution.'



Ultimately, the declaration for observing 21 February as 'International Mother Language Day' was unanimously adopted at a plenary session of UNESCO's general meeting as a consequence of these actions. The accomplishment of the then government of Bangladesh headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was undeniable. It is now the responsibility of the Bangladesh missions abroad, the International Mother Language Institute at home as well as all concerned people to highlight this day by showing due respect.

A big deficiency in our national life is that we achieve many things through much labour by making many sacrifices, but we seldom take the initiative to hold on to those by according due honour. We should remain conscious about the International Mother Language Day by realizing its importance. We should continuously strive to preserve its prestige. Only then would the victory we achieved centring on the International Mother Language Day become meaningful. □ Author: Veteran of the language movement

Translation: Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed

My Courage

Habibullah Sirajee

I had the courage to glorify the language martyrs.

Now the time is for taking sides,
The moment the tongue touches wine after meal
The veins turn blue. Drifting on a current in another direction
The pull of shackles breaks down as I float;
Those who were on barbed wire, on knife's edge
They hoist the blood-coloured flag today.

I had the valour to repay my brothers' debt of blood with blood.
This age is by far the most damaging
The zeal dies easily, in exchange for a negligible price
Of human actions. Some wave the floating opportunities
In the pupil of their eyes. Becoming a habitual pillow
Made of feathery cotton I look at the sea and sky alone
Sorrow understands the real value of grief: the deft plough
Of power cultivates my own land.

I had the courage to be proud of my father's pledge.
It was as if living in utter stupor
It is difficult to understand which tongue
Becomes what snake; the fang with the jewel oscillates
Grace mingles with illusion, swoops on beauty –
How dangerous infatuation can be?
It is as if spending the night with the salt of infinite pain
At the confluence of animals bereft of labour and brain!

I had the courage to cross the limits of my age
I had the bravery to wash roads by igniting the flame of Sixty-nine
I had the guts to participate in the holy bath of Seventy-one
I have the boldness to become the joint family of Fifty-two.

Translation: Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed