



Proclamation of "International Mother Language Day". Expression of happiness and joy through lighting of candles

## How We Did it

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ment in close consultation with us. The statement highlighted the importance of mother language as an effective instrument of communication and as a means of expressing ourselves. It was at the root of a society's culture and heritage. Right to speak and write in one's mother language was an inalienable right that deserved to be protected in order to enrich our lives and to promote the culture of peace. Many mother languages had been lost and some were being threatened. Unless we recognised the importance of mother language people's right to express would not be realised and the potential for human resource development would be lost.

While many communities struggled to protect and promote their mother language, the sacrifice and success of the valiant sons of Bangladesh are unique and resplendent in this regard. On 21 February 1952 martyrs of Language Movement in the former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) shed their blood as the security forces killed them on the streets of Dhaka. This sacrifice deserves special niche in the history of world's language and communication. In order to commemorate the sacrifice of those who protected their mother language by establishing it as an official language at the cost of their lives, this particular day (the 21st February '99) should justifiably be observed throughout the world as the International Mother Language Day. The Bangladesh Delegation appealed to the member states to adopt the resolution and thereby accord and appropriate status to the mother language as a carrier of communication and cultural heritage. It was explained that additional fund would not be required for this purpose as every country would be free to observe the day her own way.

Representatives of the member states obliged the Bangladesh Delegation. None de... nor offered any amendment.

The proposed resolution was adopted unanimously in the commission. It was, however, to be placed in the plenary of the Conference for final approval.

We knew that the most difficult hurdle had been crossed. Approval in the plenary was a formality. We, however, had to wait up to 17 November '99 when the plenary took place. In the mean time we had to ensure that the formulation in the Commission II's draft resolution was appropriately worded. We were in touch with the Education Minister who was in Dhaka and worked in line with his advice. Tony Huque maintained intensive liaison with the DG's office and the Secretariat in order to guard against any weasel word or phrase in the formulation. Precautions were taken so that things went smoothly up to the last moment.

And the moment came on the 17 November '99. The Chairman of Commission II presented his reports along with the draft resolutions for adoption in the General Conference. Discussion ensued for a brief period. The resolutions were adopted unanimously. Resolution 30C/DR 35 recommending "that the General Conference proclaim 'International Mother Language Day' to be observed on 21 February" was now a formal decision of the General Conference of UNESCO. The news was at once transmitted to Bangladesh and the Education Minister broke the news in a press conference arranged immediately on the occasion. We, the members of Bangladesh Delegation and Mr. Tony Huque celebrated the occasion over lunch at Cathay Royal Restaurant, adjacent to UNESCO Headquarters.

This was a historic moment. I was overwhelmed to be so intimately involved in creating such a historic event. One has to be really lucky to be a party to such an event. The process was initiated by the expatriate Bangladeshis in Canada and it was wound up in the 30th Conference of UNESCO with the successful tabling of the proposal by the Bangladesh Delegation. The expatriate

Bangladeshi in Canada reportedly under the leadership of Mr. Rafiqul Islam, deserve special mention in this regard.

My memory travelled back to 1952 and the events thereafter. I was a student of grade II in a district town. I did not understand what mother language or what its importance was. All I remember was that some people were killed in Dhaka and every one around us talked about it. At times our school was closed and some senior students raised slogans in favour of Bangla which I hardly comprehended.

I started taking interest in student policies when I was a student of Dhaka College in 1962 and the agitation against the Education Commission Report was raging the country. We paraded the city streets shouting against the Report which was shelved by the government as a result. On entering the University I became a student activist. The importance of the language day dawned on me. I could measure the sacrifice made by our young martyrs for the cause of our mother language.

Since then I observed the day solemnly, sometimes with friends and fellow walkers, sometimes privately through rumination and reflection. As I grew up I found that 21 February was an integral part of our life. It validated our very existence. In all the critical national movements, 21 February would rekindle our hopes and aspiration. It was a source of inspiration and confidence in our struggle against oppression, discrimination, injustice or tyranny. The spirit of the 21 February transcended the border of mother tongue; it turned out to be a powerful instrument to realise human rights at all levels. Our struggle for mother language was thereby elevated in spirit to an all embracing, phenomenon inspiring us to struggle against various forms of injustice and violation against human rights. It was also a reminder of the strength of common people when they struggled unitedly for a fair cause.

Every year on this 21 February Bangladeshis feel themselves intensely; they express themselves boldly and emotionally. They find new meaning to their existence and have reasons to live at least one year more to see another 21st February. Such being the force of language — Bangla, our mother language — it was only a right step that the language day popularly called "Martyr's Day" in the country, should have a special place in the annals of languages. Thanks to our concerted efforts the world have now recognized our struggle to protect our mother language and thereby to protect our fundamental human rights. Salam, Jabbar, Rafique, Barkat laid their lives for the cause of our language and culture. They have become part of our life, and through establishing the 'International Mother Language Day' we have become part of history. Our generation has reasons to feel proud about it.

The Eiffel Tower passionately looked forward to embrace the new millennium. It counted down 'day 45' away from the millennium. The number loomed prominently atop the Tower. The sacrifice of our citizens for the cause of mother language was internationally recognised before the end of the century (millennium). Many sacrifices of similar magnitude were recognised internationally because such sacrifices took place in developed countries. It took more than forty-seven years for us to get recognition for the struggle and the sacrifice that marked our commitment to the mother language. Nevertheless we got it at long last. Through our utmost commitment and unrelenting struggle we protected our mother language, we won our independence and last of all we earned international recognition for our mother language and the sacrifice made for it. It appears, we have earned our right to live in the next millennium — vigorously and with a much bigger expectation.

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# THE EKUSHEY : FROM NATIONAL TO GLOBAL

— Dr. Mohammad Hannan

Bengali is probably the only exception amongst all vernaculars of the World as this is the only language to struggle for its due and dignity from very ancient days. In the very early days, during the reign of the 'Sens' a distinct and clear-cut religions ban was imposed on using Bengali. Those Practising Bengali are destined to be in the 'Rourava hell' was the pronouncement of the preachers. In the medieval also, there was conspicuous disdain for Bengali what led Poet Abdul Hakim to write 'Don't know the birth-identity of those, who being the sons of the soil of Bengal, disrespect Bengali'.

Ploy against Bengali was in force since the regime of the Britishers and till the days of Pakistan. Bengali had to fight against Urdu even before the 'partition' of 1947. It was Dr. Ziauddin, Vice Chancellor of the University of Aligarh, who placed Bengali in a direct conflict with Urdu by saying 'Urdu should be the state language of Pakistan as Hindi to India.' This was very promptly opposed. Man of great wisdom and sagacity of Bengal Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, in an essay in the Daily Azad, said 'Bengali should be the state language of Pakistan as most of the people of the country speaks in it; however if there be any need to have a second language for the state Urdu could be considered.'

As a matter of fact, it revealed after the birth of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 that Urdu is not a vernacular in none of the regions of the new-born country. Mother-tongue of the majority was Bengali; besides, it was 'Punjabi' in the Punjab, 'Sindhi' in Sindh, 'Baluch' in Baluchistan while Pakistan in the North-West frontier province. In no region of Pakistan Urdu was the vernacular. But the high-ups of the society, the rulers and the administrators who migrated from India to Pakistan as 'Mohajir' started trying to place Urdu on Bengali. Unlike other regions of Pakistan Bengali did not yield to this pressure for its indomitable fighting spirit having roots deep down in the history.

In fact, Pakistan witnessed movement for language on three occasions. First, within the first quarter of the birth of the country, in the first week of December 1947 when a proposal of accepting Urdu as the state language initiated by Fazlur Rahman, the Central Minister for Education, was passed in the Education Conference held in Karachi. This caused a long lasting repercussion. The student of the East Bengal burst in severe protest and paraded the streets of Dhaka on December 06. Second, a very significant one, also found its root in a series of

occurrences took place in Karachi, the then capital of the country. In the first session of Pakistan National Council, a Bangali-leader Dhirendranath Dutta, on February 23, 1948, proposed a correction that Bengali should also be one of the languages accepted in the Parliamentary proceedings besides Urdu and English. The claim of Mr. Dhirendranath Dutta was just and very general in nature. Bengali in no way spoke against any one, it only sought its justified position.

But Liaqut Ali Khan, Prime Minister of Pakistan, reacted vehemently and fiercely. He went on to see the prelude of separatism in it. No one in the Parliament of Pakistan stood beside Dhirendranath Dutta on that day barring Rajkumar Chakraborty alone. Bengali-Muslim members in the Parliament voiced against Bengali under the stewardship of Khwaja Nazimuddin. Protesting the Act, students went on strike in Dhaka. East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League, Chhatra Federation, Gonatantric Juboleague, Progotishil Lekhak Sangha and Tamaddun Majlish came under an umbrella to organise 'Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad'.

This union yielded very significant result. In the face of continue movement from March 11 to 15, 1948, Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Chief Minister had no option but to bow down to the students conceding the demand of making Bengali the state language with dignity.

That could put an end to the point of discord regarding language in Pakistan. But it was Khwaja Nazimuddin again, who ignited the language movement when he spoke in a Muslim League - public meeting at the Paltan Maidan on January 26, 1952. He, giving birth to a vigorous and destructive reaction in people's mind, said, 'Only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan. On the 21st February of the same year the members of the students' community won the dignity and recognition for their mother tongue through shedding blood.

It is astonishing that the Bengali could show such maturity and mental alertness in the Language Movement of 1952. The spirit that imbued people's mind in 1952 got the recognition of the UNESCO on the 17th November this year in the form of accepting a proposal. And, this is infact the recognition to all the vernaculars of the globe. Worth mentioning, Bengali, for absolute majority in its favour, did never try to on the neck of others, what it tried with allout efforts was

to achieve the dignity and honour of one of the state languages.

We, on this day, pay tributes to the heroes for whose contribution Bengali has won Worldwide recognition. The Multilingual and Multinational vernacular Loving Group (Bohu Bhashik O Bohu Jatik Maatreebhasha Premik Group) of Canada shall also go down in history. Regards and best of wishes to the members of the committee Jasson Morin (English), Susan Hovegins (English), Dr. Kelson Chao (Kantonize), Nazreen Islam (Kochi), Binete Martins (German), Krupa Joshi (Hindi), Rafiqul Islam (Bengali) and Abdus Salam (Bengali) besides the members of all committees. Also, best of wishes to Bangladesh Ambassador Syed Moazzem Ali and UNESCO-Executive Mozammel Huq (Tony Huq) whose tireless efforts contributed to the success. We also recall the contribution and the enormous and irresistible desire of A.S.H.K. Sadegue, the Education Minister of the country, who was instrumental in bringing the historic message of great achievement to the country. What the Education Minister in this context, spoke in his UNESCO Conference speech on October 28 (1999) is as hereunder:

"It is in this spirit, I draw the kind attention of this

would be lost until 1971 when Bangladesh got its freedom after bloody war leaving nearly three million dead. Bangla as a language has evolved through a thousand year and one of its great poets Rabindra Nath Tagore received Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 writing in this very language. Today nearly 200 million people in the World speak this language."

Linguists are of the opinion that the number of the vernaculars in the world is in the range of four thousand to six thousand. Of these most are obsolete. One of the famous language of the West is now out of use. Almost same is the case with Sanskrit in the Sub-continent where the use thereof has become confined in religious practices only.

'Chornish' was one of the Medieval British languages in which a lady was the last to speak back in 1777. With the expiry of the lady the language was ultimately lost.

But, if the language that can never die and this is what vernacular is in real sense of the term. Hebrew was the language in the Nuha-era which almost became a ghost-language after being in the use for several thousand years. However, the modern Israel has started using Hebrew again.



Moulana Bhasani seen with Bangubandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at 'Probhat ferry' on 21st February 1953

conference to a special resolution submitted by my delegation for your approval. This is about declaring 21 February as International Mother Language Day to honour about 4000 mother languages in the World. We believe that language is the most powerful instrument for preserving and developing tangible and intangible heritage of every society. The significance of the day i.e. 21 February is that on this day in 1952, that the entire 45 million of people of Bangladesh had risen in unison to protest against the decision of the then rulers of Pakistan that although Bangla was the language of the majority people of the country, it would not be given an official recognition and would be downgraded against another language used by a small minority. On that very day four persons were killed by the security forces shooting at a peaceful unarmed student demonstration.

Since that eventful day in 1952 many more lives

There is a school Philologists who opine that the birth of language on Earth dates back to five lac years. The extra ordinary step the UNESCO has taken on the brink of completion of the 20th century to keep the vernaculars alive with its dignity will contribute very significantly in the progression of languages.

From now on, the whole of the world will not only recall of heroism on 'Ekushey February' all vernaculars; small, neglected and oppressed, will be inspired for their survival in a group.

In Bangladesh, the sphere of our responsibility has also been widened towards the vernaculars of ethnic groups of the country though most of them do not have any alphabet of their own. This speaks of the significance of commemorating the 'International Vernacular Day' throughout the country.

(Translation : Ranjit Biswas)

