

A Befitting Tribute to Our Shaheeds

by Syed Muazzem Ali

Our Language Movement, in which Salam, Barkat and others laid down their lives for the cause of the mother tongue, and so many others were jailed or paid dear price, is a unique event in contemporary history. The whole country and nation will always remember their contributions. In our national life 21st February will always be remembered as the starting point of our war of self-emancipation and independence. If we do not understand the deep significance of the day, we will never fully appreciate the subsequent developments that led to our glorious War of Independence.

THE INITIATIVE FOR the proclamation of the International Mother Language Day had come from a Canadian multi-lingual group called the Mother Language Lovers of the World. The Group's President, Mr. Rafiqul Islam of Bangladesh, was in constant touch with me and Mr. Tozammel Huq, Senior Special Advisor to the then Director-General of UNESCO. At our suggestion, the Group approached our Government. Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina enthusiastically approved the proposal and it was accordingly officially submitted to the UNESCO Secretariat in mid-September 1995. The proposal, in the form of a draft resolution, was published on 26 October. It was assigned to the Second Commission of the General Conference that deals with Education issues.

Due to time constraints our Government was not able to approach other countries through our Missions for support, as would have been normally done. Naturally, the whole responsibility to pilot this resolution fell on the mission in Paris and the delegation. The Hon'ble Education Minister, in his statement to the General Conference on 28 October, said that the purpose for tabling our proposal for the declaration of 21st February as the International Mother Language Day was to honour about 4000 mother languages in the world. He noted that language is the most powerful instrument for preserving and developing tangible and intangible heritage of every society. He also noted the significance of the day in our national

history. During his stay in Paris from 25 October to 2 November, my mission arranged a number of meetings for him with the Ministers and Heads of other delegations. He personally sought their support for our draft resolution. The Hon'ble Minister, a former senior civil servant, was most understanding and supportive, and I received valuable guidance from him. He had complete trust and confidence in me and my mission. Before his departure, he entrusted me with the full responsibility of seeing the draft resolution through.

Our main strategy was to enlist broad-based support from all the six regional groups at the UNESCO. We got a major boost when UNESCO arranged a Round Table of Ministers of Culture in Paris on 2 November. The meeting, attended by 55 Ministers from different regions, expressed its deep concern at the disappearance of a number of languages from their countries. I represented Bangladesh at this meeting and utilized the opportunity to push forward our own draft resolution. I met most of the Ministers of Culture and explained the necessity of proclaiming an International Mother Language Day to create global awareness about this problem.

As a follow-up, I wrote personal letters to the Permanent Representative at the UNESCO, seeking their support. We were able to enlist co-sponsorship and support of 28 countries, namely Benin, Bahamas, Belarus, Comoros, Chile, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Gambia, Honduras, Italy, Iran, Indonesia, India, Ivory Coast, Lithuania, Malaysia, Micronesia, Oman, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan, Paraguay, Russia, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Surinam, Slovakia and Vanuatu. The list shows how well spread was our support base at the UNESCO.

The UNESCO Secretariat, in their comments, suggested that there should be a feasibility study of our draft resolution and then the recommendations should be submitted to the Executive Board through the Advisory Committee on Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education. Furthermore, they also hinted at the financial involvement of our draft resolution. UNESCO is currently going through financial crisis and any draft resolution, which involves additional financial allocation, is automatically shelved. We took up the matter with the high officials of the Secretariat and they agreed to delete the paragraph dealing with financial implications, but they continued to emphasize the need for a feasibility study and submission through the relevant bodies. This process would have taken at least two years since the next General Conference will meet in 2001.

I was not satisfied with this position at all. I considered it important to have the resolution adopted by the General Conference or else the draft would gradually be shelved away by the Secretariat and forgotten. Taking along Mr. T. Huq, I met the Deputy Director-General, Mr. Colin Power. My main aim was to get him to agree to let the draft resolution come up for discussion and adoption at the General Conference. I explained to him that if it was not done, then at a later stage the Secretariat would work out the modalities for its celebration. He finally agreed.

Our draft resolution on Mother Language Day should not apparently pose any problem for other countries. However, many of the European and other countries, some of which are the main contributors to the UNESCO budget, have multilingual societies and the issue of mother language is a sensitive one for them. I did sense this underlying concern and decided to personally meet the Permanent Representatives of most of these countries to explain to them that our draft

resolution would only seek to create awareness for the preservation of all mother languages. Simultaneously, I met the Chairman of the Second Commission, Mr. J. Boulmer of Slovakia and other members of the Commission's Bureau, and finally they agreed to consider our draft resolution.

Representatives of some friendly countries suggested to me that when I introduce our draft resolution, I should focus not only on my own experience but should also give a broader perspective to enlist maximum support. I requested all our sponsors, through individual letters and approaches, to speak in favor of our draft, if necessary. My great fear was that if a single delegation asks for a feasibility study or for its submission through the Linguistic Committee and Executive Board, then we would find it extremely difficult to convince them.

I was scheduled to introduce the draft resolution at the Second Commission in the afternoon session of 11 November, but due to time constraints, it was deferred to the next day. I was given the opportunity to in-

roduce the draft resolution in the morning session on 12 November. In my statement, I underlined the primary role of UNESCO in the preservation of languages, expressed concern at the disappearance of so many languages and emphasized the need to proclaim an International Mother Language Day to create greater awareness. I recalled the supreme sacrifice that our martyrs had made on 21 February 1952 for the preservation of our mother language Bangla. Naturally, I was worried about the outcome, but was trying very hard to display an air of confidence. A distinguished diplomat had once said, a diplomat is like a swan, serene and majestic on the outside but paddling like hell to keep himself afloat.

Fortunately, our vigorous behind-the-scenes lobbying worked. There was no opposition to our draft resolution, and the Second Commission unanimously adopted it. To someone who has not been involved in the lobbying process, this might have seemed easy sailing, but for those of us, who had been pursuing the matter tirelessly for the last fortnight, this

brought a great sense of achievement and relief. In this context, I would like to thank the Hon'ble Education Minister for his unwavering confidence in myself and my mission, and to Mr. T. Huq, Professor Kafiluddin Ahmed (Secretary Bangladesh National Commission of UNESCO), my Counselor Ikhlaq Choudhury, First Secretary Mustafizur Rahman and Personal Officer Mainuddin for their able support and persistent effort.

Finally, on 17 November the Plenary at its closing session formally adopted all resolutions adopted by the Second Commission, including our draft resolution. What a tribute to those who had fought for the cause of our mother language Bangla! What a tribute to Salam, Barkat and all the others who had laid down their lives for the mother tongue in 1952! I telephoned the Hon'ble Foreign Minister, the Hon'ble Education Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and all of them warmly congratulated me. The Hon'ble Prime Minister was informed about the adoption of the resolution and she sent her kind words of congratulations to me and the members of my mission. We felt encouraged and were deeply touched. It is indeed a historic achievement for our country and nation that 21st February, our Mohan Shaheed Dibash, has now been proclaimed as the International Mother Language Day. I am particularly happy that we had the privilege to pilot our draft resolution through the Secretariat, Commission and finally the Plenary.

Late S. M. Ali, the former editor of *The Daily Star*, wrote on 1 March 1991, while recalling his thoughts about Shaheed Dibash: "If there was a single most important question that dominated our thinking, it was our urge for self-assertion, in which our birthright to give our mother tongue the place of our state language was an integral one."

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The date 17 November 1999 will remain memorable for me. On that day we paid our humble tribute to our martyrs and pioneers of the Language Movement. The process has just begun, and we must work in the coming years, with the same degree of caution and enthusiasm, for the international observance of that day in a befitting manner.

The writer is the Ambassador of Bangladesh to France and our Permanent Representative to the UNESCO.

Slowly but surely Bangla was appearing in coins and postage stamps of Pakistan. Bangla was flourishing all over East Pakistan then. Think for a moment, though, if those students and Ricksha-pullers would not have given their blood, and Bangla was not recognized by the national leaders in Karachi, what would have become of our esprit de corps (morale)?

The kindred education evoked by the spill of blood on February 21, 1952, that of Dhaka Medical College, studied the entire population of the then East Pakistan. There was a strong bonding among Bangalees - rich and poor, educated and illiterate, city folks and farmers. Our combined voice was not heard in Karachi. As a result, Bangla was not recognized right away as a child. This scribe saw right before his eyes how slowly it dawned on Pakistani political machine to understand that Bangla cannot be ignored as a state language. First, in the year 1953 and 1954, the authorities were reluctant to recognize the sanctity of the day let alone recognize it. However, after the general election held in March 1954 in which the Jukta (United) Front, the combined party of Bangalees, had a landslide victory, the political bosses in Karachi woke up the day after the election results were published thinking the inevitability of the things to come. Bangla immediately became one of the state languages of Pakistan. Well, all these could be found in annals of the history of Bangladesh. The bottom line is that the supreme sacrifice of a few did not go in vain.

As we celebrate this day I was reminded the introductory lines of Professor David Crystal that he wrote in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. He asks, "Why does language provide such a fascinating object of study?" He answers, "Perhaps because of its (language's) unique role in capturing the breadth of human thought and endeavour. We look around us, and are awed by the variety of several thousand languages, and dialects, expressing a multiplicity of world views, literatures, and ways of life. We look back at the thoughts of our predecessors, and we find we can see only as far as language lets us see."

The writer writes from New Orleans, America



Our Promise and Pride — the Bangla Bhasha

by A.H. Jaffor Ullah

As the sun rises in Friendly Islands (Tonga) in Micronesia on February 21, 2000, the tiny country would wake up to celebrate the first ever International Mother Language Day. As the sun would move westerly more and more nations all over the world would celebrate this day. From Papua New Guinea to The Philippines, Siam, Myanmar, Iran, Turkey, European countries, Iceland, America, Kiribati Island, all would celebrate this Mother Language Day. School children all across the globe would learn from UNESCO's website or other publications that Bangalees in 1952 shed blood to uphold the dignity of their mother tongue.

IN 1994, I asked my 14-year-old "high schooler" son to write a rhyming verse in English to carry the sentiment of the ever popular Bangla phrase "Moder Gorob, Moder Asha, A' mori Bangla Bhasha." He looked puzzled when I assigned him the task. But within minutes he came up with the verse - "Our promise and pride, it's sung/Must be our sweet Bangla tongue, a seed to sow," I was extremely happy to see the translation coming from a kid who was born and brought up in America of Bangla parentage. Rashad was and is a true bilingual. Bangla is his mother's tongue (no pun intended). Come to think of it, my spouse still refuses to speak to him in English.

Today is a joyous occasion. An auspicious moment for the entire Banglae nation. For the very first time the entire world is celebrating this momentous day side-by-side with Bangalees. We have every reason to be proud. The sweet sacrifice of a handful of Banglae students exactly forty-eight years ago today has finally come to fruition. The entire world body agreed to celebrate this day in full galore to honor 'Omar Ekushe' (unvanquished 21st), which is a synonym for February 21, 1952.

Why is mother tongue so important especially when most urban kids are encouraged to learn English so that they could become computer savvy? Well, being proficient in English one might do very well for mercantile world. However, to quench heart's unquenchable thirst especially when one wants to express passion, ardor, ecstasy, rupture, etc., to their loved one, one needs to use the mother tongue. In our case, it is invariably the Bangla language.

East Bengal of 1940s in both pre- and partition days were as homogeneous as it is now. Nonetheless, there was a clique amongst us who thought perhaps injecting Urdu and Farsi into Bangla *Jabaan* (tongue) would be the proper thing to do. These people were far removed from the reality of life. There was even talk about to do away with Bangla script and to im-

port Farsi/Urdu script instead. Can you imagine now how ridiculous it could have been to read Nazrul or Jibanananda Das's poem in Farsi script? When that misadventure in social engineering did not pan out for the hardcore Islamists, they resorted to another misbegotten idea of theirs. They asserted - promote Urdu in East Pakistan. Bangla, the language of Brahmins, should be avoided at all cost.

The leadership of East Pakistan's Muslim League, who were weak and meek to start with, went along with the whims of their West Pakistani bosses. As a result, our mother tongue Bangla fell on the wayside. You see, the language Bangla although spoken by 55% Pakistanis at the time had become orphan right away. Maulana Akram Khan, who migrated all the way from Calcutta to open his Bangla newspaper *Azad* in Dhaka didn't even fuss about it. We did not hear any rumblings from the editors of '*Saugat*' (Nasir Uddin) or '*Mahe-Nau*' (Talim Husain). You will be hard-pressed to find one single publication those days that did not have Farsi or Urdu name. Let me name a few: *Ittefaq*, *Azad*, *Millat*, *Ittehad*, *Saugat*, *Mahe-Nau*, *Begun*, *Edaan*, etc. Does this mean anything? The newspaper and periodicals from Calcutta were proudly showing off their Bangla heritage by publishing *Desh*, *Nobokollo*, *Uto-Rath*, etc. This step-motherly attitude of Karachi-based politicians and intellectuals, who just migrated from United Province of British India, left an indelible mark on students of colleges and university (there was a lone university in Dhaka then) in East Pakistan.

This neglect for Bangla language at the national level was creating a schism between Bangalees and the rest of West Pakistanis. First, the students were talking loudly about it in the

corridors of the campus. Later, the professors, intellectuals, and the rest also joined the discussion. For some strange reason not known to this scribe, the political parties those that had strong roots in East Pakistan were also apathetic to the plight of Bangla language. In early fifties, however, all of a sudden, disrespect for Bangla by the Karachi authorities and their stooges in Dhaka became a burning issue of the day then. There was an element of spontaneity in the entire protest movement. Indeed, it was a protest movement without leaders. Dhaka University's central student union may have given the clarion call for protest, but everywhere in Dhaka, Chittagong and other districts towns there were rumblings. We all know now how did it culminate. A handful of students and some unassuming Ricksha-pullers fell victim outside the main gate of Dhaka Medical College on a bright *Falguni* day. Thus, a new era was spawned. It was the beginning of the end. The seed of discontent was sown.

The journey that was started on February 21, 1952 culminated on March 26, 1971. It took us over nineteen long years to complete the journey. However, recognition of another kind had to wait an additional twenty-eight years. That recognition came from the world body this year. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

In September 1999, the Bangladesh delegates attending the plenary session of UNESCO proposed that February 21 be proclaimed as 'International Mother Language Day' throughout the world to commemorate the martyrs who sacrificed their lives on this, very date in 1952. In its concluding session, all 188-member countries of UNESCO unanimously voted to declare that from now onwards the

Bhasha Shaheed Dibash (The Language Martyrs Day) of Bangladesh is celebrated as International Mother Language Day everywhere on this earth. This is a triumph not only for Bangla-speaking people of the world, but also for all folks living in this planet of ours. How many different languages are there in this world would be tough to answer. However, about four thousand is the number that is being mentioned in reference books. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* by David Crystal (1987) lists twenty top languages of world. These are as follows (according to number of speaker going from high to low): English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, Russian, French, Arabic, Portuguese, Malay, Bengali, Japanese, German, Urdu, Italian, Korean, Vietnamese, Persian, Tagalog, Thai, and Turkish. Thus, it hardly matters whether one speaks such obscure language as Andamanese (only 500 people spoke the language in 1950s and now the number is even lower) or as widely English (about 1.4 billion), everyone can be proud of his or her mother tongue.

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Ekushey: A Different View

by Aziz Ul Huq

Our writers and leaders both Islamic and secular have failed us. They provided only lip service when it came to our mother tongue. No serious efforts were undertaken to translate any great works of literature from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu to Bangla.

THE creation of Pakistan in its original form did not make much sense. The geographical distance and the cultural differences were overwhelming. It was a matter of time and process to arrive at the destination that it did. 1952 was a stepping stone towards the inevitable.

To me a national language serves several purposes. Firstly, it helps define the direction of national thought-process. Secondly, it helps the mass education process, be it technical or otherwise.

Most importantly, a national language representing the majority of the people brings the national administration and its services closer to the people. In this case Bangladesh has most probably been quite successful. In the case of mass education we have yet to achieve the full potential. Mass education was successful in many countries of the world including China, Korea and the former socialist block countries because of their policy of teaching in their respective mother tongues. Of course other factors played important roles.

I will mainly talk about how the language movement shaped our national thought-process.

Several years back I heard some one make a comment, which went as follows:

The greatest contribution of the 1952 language movement was that since that year Islam ceased to be a factor in the politics of Bangladesh. As time passed by I have begun to realize that what he said was not only true but more than that.

For over eight hundred years the Muslims ruled united

Bangladesh. Persian was the language of Muslim power in India. The British, upon occupying India, set about to curb the influence of Muslim rule, replaced English as the official language in place of Persian. Over the course of centuries, however Persian had permeated many Indian languages and in one case gave birth to an entirely new language Urdu that served as a contact between the Persian speaking elite and the citizenry.

Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu are rich in Islamic literature, history, jurisprudence and thoughts.

In 1946, Mahmud Hasan Khan, of the small Indian town of Tonk, compiled a bibliography of books written in Arabic Mojama ul Musannifin which has 40,000 writers in its survey. In Persian language, Muslims have produced more than 30,000 titles, in Turkish more than 20,000, in Malay, more than 20,000, in European languages more than 4,000, in Chinese more than 3,000 and in English more than 7,000 titles on Islamic and Muslim related subjects [1].

How many books of literature are there in Bangla which truly reflect Islam? How many books are there on Islamic history, law, social and political

sciences? Our writers and leaders both Islamic and secular have failed us. They provided only lip service when it came to our mother tongue. No serious efforts were undertaken to translate any great works of literature from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu to Bangla. No encouragement was provided to write books, poems or to produce works of literature to suit the needs of the Muslims.

I know of many people who hate reading Islamic books in Bangla but feels quite comfortable to do so in English. Bangladesh had a tradition of Islamic values. Some of which still exist among the masses. One such thing is naming a child with Islamic/Arabic names.

Forces eager to align Turkey with Europe and the Central Asian Muslim Republics with the Soviets did many things. One such thing was to change the alphabet of Turkish and the languages of the Central Asian Republics from Arabic to Latin and Cyrillic respectively towards the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea was to redirect the thought process of the Turko-Central Asian peoples from Arabic/Islamic to European and Russian/Die people eager to align with Eu-

rope and Russia succeed in their efforts? No, they did not. Today Turkey and the Central Asian Muslim Republics are reasserting their Muslim identity.

Individual Bangladeshis speak Bangla and are benefited by their own national language and have easy access to the administration which is very good.

My thoughts on this day would be to do the following:

1. Recognize the importance of English and Arabic along with Bangla and start teaching all the three languages in our schools. We must not keep English for the elite in private schools and keep Arabic confined to the Madrasa.
2. We need to translate technical books from English to Bangla and Islamic books from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu to Bangla.

Finally, our journalists, writers, novelists, poets and script writers need to write to meet the needs of the Muslims of Bangladesh. Islam is a complete way of life. If we have Bangla books only in very basic teachings of Islam and not in matters dealing with life itself then it is a matter of time before we start following the ways of non-Muslims in every thing and keep ourselves confined to Islam only in our very private matters.

[1] "The Power of Words", by Dr. Aslam Abdullah (page 24-25, The Minaret, Nov/Dec 1994, America's Source on Islam).

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Garfield

