

An achievement for the nation

From page 21
I was painfully aware of the negative attitude of the then President Nixon and his National Security Advisor towards our cause. Dr Kissinger, who in 1971 had reportedly referred to Bangladesh as "an international basket case" had to now accept the reality that Bangladesh can and has produced leaders who deserve International awards and recognition. Fate is, it seems, not without a sense of irony.

On 24 September '99 at a colorful ceremony at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, our Prime Minister received the award amidst thunderous applause. She delivered a poignant speech that touched us all. This was indeed a very memorable and emotional event.

From the high profile and tremendous goodwill that Bangladesh enjoys at the UNESCO, we approached the biennial General Conference with confidence and zeal. The General Conference is the highest legislative body of UNESCO. Its 30th session was held from 26 October through 17 November. The Bangladesh delegation to the Conference was led by the Education Minister Mr A S H K Sadique, and included, in addition to myself and members of my mission senior officials from the Education Ministry and prominent educationists. Our two main objectives were i) to get Bangladesh re-elected to the UNESCO Executive Board for another term of four years, and ii) to get approval of our proposal for the proclamation of 21st February as the International Mother Language Day.

The Executive Board, for all practical purposes, is the equivalent of the UN Security Council and the members are elected on the basis of geographic groups. It is very difficult to get re-elected, as those seeking election for the first time are always given preference. However, through intensive lobbying, in Paris and through our Missions abroad, we were successful and were re-elected with nearly a two-thirds majority on 9 November.

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 (Tony) Huq, Senior Special Advisor to the then Director-General. At our suggestion, the Group approached our Government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina enthusiastically approved the proposal and it was officially submitted to the UNESCO Secretariat in mid-September 1999. 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 should have been normally done. Naturally, the whole responsibility to pilot this resolution fell on the mission in Paris and the delegation. The 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 na-

tional 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 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. This shows how well spread our support base at the UNESCO was.



Shaheed Minar always inspired the Bangalees in their efforts for freedom

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 hinted at the financial involvement in the implementation of our draft resolution. UNESCO is currently going through a 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 until the next General Conference in 2001.

I was not at all satisfied with this position. I considered it important to have the resolution adopted by the General Conference, because in the conventional

situation, feasibility study or not or else, the draft would gradually be shelved by the Secretariat, and forgotten. Taking along Mr T Huq, I met the Deputy Director General, Mr Colin Power. My main aim was to have 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 adopted, the Secretariat could at a later stage 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 multi-lingual societies and the issue of mother language is a sensitive one for them. I could 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 our draft resolution is introduced, we should focus not only on our own experience but should also give a broader perspective to enlist maximum support. I requested all our sponsors,

but was trying very hard to display an air of confidence.

Fortunately, our vigorous lobbying behind-the-scenes worked. There was no opposition to our draft resolution and the Second Commission unanimously adopted it. To someone who was not 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 preceding fortnight, this brought a great sense of achievement and relief. In this context, I would like to thank the Education Minister for his unwavering confidence in me and my mission, and to Mr T Huq, Professor Kafiluddin Ahmed, Secretary Bangladesh National Commission of UNESCO.

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 laid down their lives for the mother tongue in 1952.

I telephoned the Foreign Minister, the Education Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and all of them warmly congratulated me. The 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.

Our Language Movement, in which Salam, Barkat and others laid down their lives and so many others had to go to jail and undergo immense sufferings for the cause of the mother tongue, is 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-determination and independence.

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 Permanent Representative to the UNESCO]

We remember language martyrs



Shaheed Shafiur, Rafiq, Barkat & Jabbar (Clock-wise)

From page 21
conquest, French became the court language, replacing English and used for all affairs of the State. English took a secondary position and lay dormant, but the fire smouldered for centuries. Chaucers-

'Whanne that Aprille with his shoures sote,
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote'

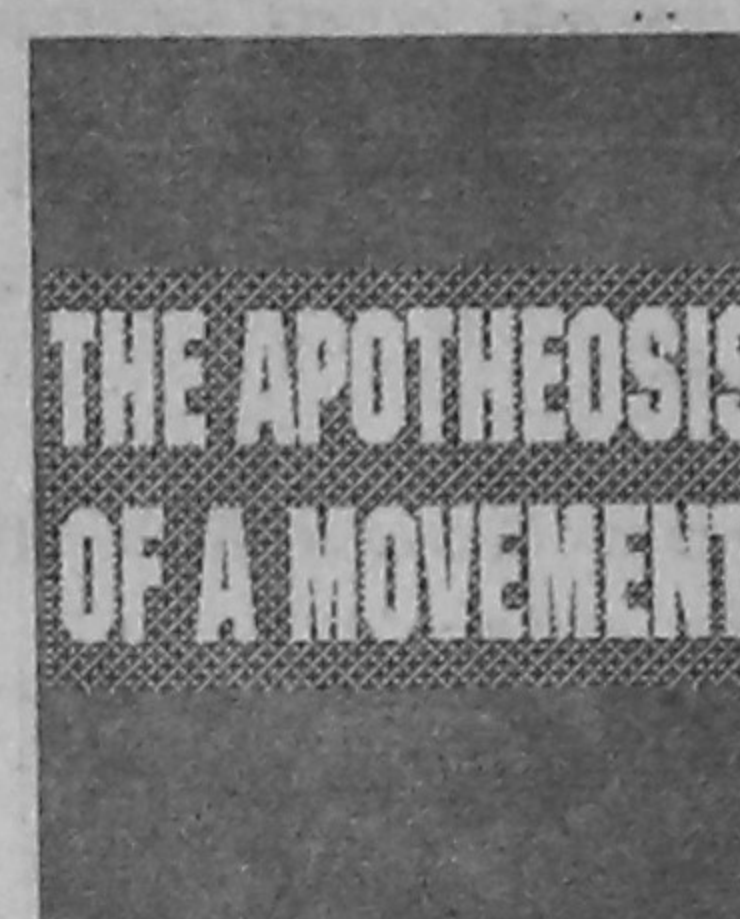
not only sent tremors all over England but also hit the yearning chords in all English hearts. It worked like an elixir to revive that language which later produced such writers as Milton, Shakespeare, Donne, Shelley and Byron—so precious to lovers of literature all over the world.

At times, when threatened, preserving one's Mother Tongue secretly in the family has been practiced by many ethnic groups in the world. In Spain we see Catalan preserved by the Barcelonians. The Swiss have four official languages: German, French, Italian, Romansch. The last one though spoken only by a handful of people helps give that ancient language a dignity and a place.

Not too far away in history, we have the example of India. Persian was the court language introduced by the Mughals and Muslim conquerors but Sanskrit remained a strong and robust language. It soon became a secret language and almost took on a religious aura.

After all, Sanskrit was not just an ancient language, it was the mother language of ancient Asia belonging to the Indo-European group. What a similarity there exists between Latin and Sanskrit! It steps into the spoken language of so many countries. What mystery can explain the world 'Ogni' (Sanskrit for fire) with 'Ignis' (Latin) and 'agun' (Bangla and Russian) all meaning fire?

Arabs not only take pride in the beauty of their mother tongue, but are emotional about it. Thus the automatic bond of a Mediterranean Arab with his African



counterpart transcends all barriers of colour, race or religion. It binds the Christians and Muslims of Palestine in as much as those of Egypt and Lebanon. Whenever any language has been threatened there is usually fierce resistance. The resistance can come in so many ways overt or covert. When the Japanese imposed their language upon the Koreans, they were merciless. But the resilience of the Koreans overcame that, and love for their own language only became stronger.

Bangalees have never been described as a martial race, but who conferred the certificate on some 'peoples' and belittled others for not being martial? Perhaps, Bangalees were never mercenary fighters for others; they chose to fight their own battles and that too without payment!

The fear expressed by certain quarters that with Bangla as the main language, we may recede into an intellectual backwater is unfounded. Before independence, Indonesia had barely 10 per cent literacy. Today that rate is over 90 per cent. This has been largely due to the fact that Bahasa Indonesia has supplanted Bahasa Belanda (Dutch) as the vehicle of the communication. Schools, Colleges and Universities all teach in Bahasa Indonesia and the government conducts its business in Bahasa only. In the Philippines also Spanish has been replaced by Tagalog, the local language, as the lingua franca of the Filipinos.

Mother Language Day

From page 21
in the minds of the Bangalees that they constituted a separate nation and that their destiny lay not with Pakistan but elsewhere as an independent country. The subsequent democratic mass movements of the late fifties, through out the sixties and the seventies, and finally the struggle for Independence and the War of Liberation owed a great deal to 21st February.

From 1953 onwards, beginning from 21st February 1953, the immortal 21st February is observed as a great national event all over Bangladesh, and also beyond the frontiers of Bangladesh: in several places in India, UK, USA, Canada and elsewhere, in fact, wherever there is a sizable concentration of

Bangla speaking people. Yet so long it has been mainly a national event of Bangladesh. But with the declaration of 21st February as the International Mother-Language Day it has transcended the national borders of Bangladesh and acquired an intentional significance and a global dimension.

At the initiative of the United Nations and its various organs a number of specific days have been declared over the years as international days for observance every year by the people of the whole world. All these days highlight some values, events and issues and are intended to generate a healthy awareness in the people of the world about them with the ultimate aim of making this world a better place to live in for the entire human population. Thus, we have the international literacy day, the international women's day, the international children's day, the international day for eradication of racial discrimination, the international day for ensuring pure drinking water, the international babat day, the international day for preservation of environment and many such others.

Some of these international days are linked with certain specific events that took place in some specific countries. While observing those days the people of the world recall those events and those countries as a matter of course. The world is thus brought closer and it provides many peoples of the world with a chance of getting out their insularity.

International Mother Language Day is particularly significant in the sense that it has a cultural importance. From now on, 21st February, so long observed in Bangladesh as the Bangla Language Martyr Day, will be observed here simultaneously as the Bangla Language Martyr Day and the International Mother Language Day. And in nearly 200 countries of the world various peoples speaking various language and belonging to various national cultures will observe 21st February as the International Mother Language Day. They will naturally celebrate their own mother languages, but while doing so it is more than likely that they will refer to Bangladesh and the

Language Movement launched by her people that reached a climactic point on 21st February 1952.

The declaration made by the UNESCO in November 1999 designating 21st February as the International Mother Language Day has placed Bangladesh on the cultural map of the world with a highly positive image. We the people of Bangladesh, should now do all that we can to further develop our mother language Bangla in all branches of knowledge so that it can play a worthy role in the community of world languages. We shall love, cherish and promote Bangla, our own mother language, but we shall not indulge in any kind of chauvinism.

While devotedly serving our own mother language we shall respect the mother languages of all the peoples of the world and make 21st February, the International Mother Language Day a great day, to be observed world-wide in the new century and the new millennium that we have recently stepped into. Long live 21st February, the International Mother Language Day.



People paying respects where the brave Shaheeds rest in eternal peace