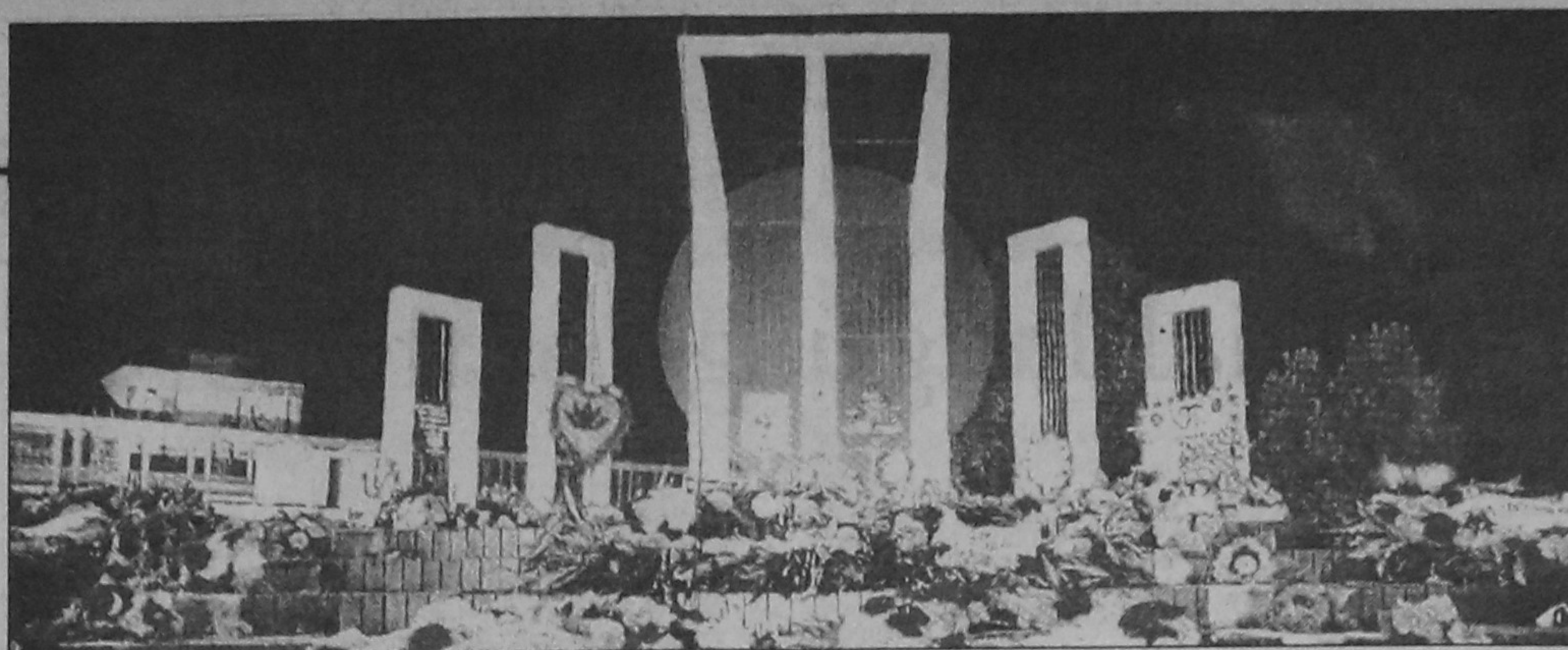


Language
Martyrs'
DayInternational
Mother
Language
Day

Language education and policy: Some reflections

by Dr A R Chowdhury

IT HAS BEEN forty-eight years since the martyrs of the language movement shed their blood to secure the sanctity of our mother tongue. Any division of time is artificial. Even anniversaries. But they can be moments for deeper reflection. We look backward, most often in gratitude, and then forward with new resolve.

This year the celebration of Ekushey February has a special significance. UNESCO has declared the day as the international mother tongue day. Given the recognition that it rightly deserves, Ekushey February has come to symbolise the struggle against evil forces. It has come to symbolise the difference between right and wrong; between standing up for one's inalienable right and meekly submitting to the whims of the oppressor.

The significance of this day is no longer confined within the boundaries of our country. It now symbolises the fight of each and every oppressed community against their oppressor.

On the eve of the Ekushey February, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last week announced the formation of a language institute to further the cause of the Bengali language. Such an announcement is highly laudable. The need for such an institute has been felt by experts and policy makers in this area for a long time. This institute can definitely contribute

in resolving some of the uncertainties facing the use of Bengali in all spheres of life. A language question arises whenever there are language problems requiring a solution. In this sense, there is hardly any country in the world in which there is no language question. The language question in Bangladesh arises from the fact that the colonial experience during the British rule has led to the importation of English which has taken on the roles of national communication, administration and medium of education from early primary to university level.

Thus the language question in Bangladesh is compounded by the addition of an imported language whose strength doesn't lie in numbers of speakers, but rather in the superior roles assigned to it. Since the English language was spread through the educational process and education was, and still is, largely restricted to a few, the population came to be divided into an elite that could speak the official language and the masses that were either illiterate or literate only in Bengali.

The crux of the language problem in Bangladesh is, therefore, the pursuit of solutions to language choice in different spheres. For instance, in education, to ensure that as many children as possible are given a meaningful education and that illiteracy is eradicated

among both children and adults; and in communication and administration, to ensure that participation in local and national affairs is not restricted to the few who can use English but is organised in such a way as to make mass participation possible.

The study of the colonial educational policies in British India will reveal that it led to the conscious breeding of an elite. The education envisaged

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The colonial legacy will be a recurrent factor in the language policy of this country. In practically all fields (education, communication, administration, politics and development), the question has always been whether or not it is desirable or even possible to break away from the existing practices, and if so at what cost. This constant

education, science and technology; and this same language will serve as their window to the outside world. In this context, the colonial legacy proves to be an advantage in that such a language already exists in English.

The question that remains to be settled is the scope that it should have in relation to Bengali. Should these requirements dictate a policy that aims to make everyone function in

of illiteracy. Since literacy liberates untapped human potential and leads to increased productivity and better living conditions, it is not surprising that countries with the highest rate of literacy are also the most economically advanced.

Similarly, mass communication with its emphasis on flow of information can provide a suitable climate for national development which, in turn, is concerned with total

in theory, educational institutions are free to decide upon. In practice, however, there are constraints, which may be historical, economic, socio-cultural, pedagogic or political, which limit the freedom of choice. In particular, the colonial legacy seems to determine current educational practices as it has proved virtually impossible in all but a few cases to break away from the inherited practices. The main point of contention is usually the role of Bengali in education in relation to education in English. In Dhaka, for example, the latter has been the major medium of instruction even from the primary level. The need for secondary and higher education tends to favour the continuation of the practice.

However, empirical results reported from various studies done in Africa and other regions show the negative impact of such policies and indicate the need to try out alternatives. For example, in Africa, this has led to experimentation in the use of African languages as medium of instruction at the primary level.

Even when positive results have been forthcoming from the experiments, such is the strong hold of the past that change in the direction of the positive findings has been resisted or slow in coming. Hence the challenge facing the policy makers in language education is not only to ensure a meaning-

ful education in Bengali, but also to evolve a viable programme in which both Bengali and English teaching reinforce each other.

The various areas in which the language question arises call for a co-ordinated plan of solutions. This must involve the formulation of policies and the provision of mechanisms for their implementation. Various models of language planning provide a paradigm as to how this should be done. However, language policies pursued in this country over the last few decades have been generally characterised by avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, and declaration without implementation.

There is a general feeling among our intelligentsia that language problems are not urgent and solutions to them can wait. It is true that the effects of not taking action on a language question may not show up in the same way as those of not taking action on, say, an economic problem. But the fact that the effects are hidden does not make them less serious or mean that they will somehow disappear. Not only the avoidance of the language problem, but the attitude of making pronouncements that cannot be implemented is also a form of avoidance. The longer a solution to a language problem is delayed, the more difficult it will be eventually to solve it.

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was an elitist one: English for the few who would later train the many in their indigenous languages. This, of course, presupposes that the few will also be proficient in their own languages. The major twist of this policy in British India was that the few succeeded in English largely to the detriment of their own languages; and, rather than being able to train the masses, they became alienated from them. The use of English as such divided the people into two nations, the few who gov-

pull between retention and change constitutes the major point of departure as well as dilemma for language policy makers in Bangladesh.

A modern state requires for its proper functioning high manpower, technology and contacts with the outside world. The complexities of these demands impose a constraint on the language policy in Bangladesh. Whatever the policy makers do with Bengali, they will need a major world language for access to higher

English or should varying degrees of participation be recognised involving 'the exploitation' of Bengali for certain functions and English for others?

National development is often defined narrowly in socio-economic terms. But even within such a restricted definition, the role of language is important. This can be shown in the link between literacy and development. The world's poorest countries are also the countries with the highest rates

human development. And the only way to ensure mass involvement is to pay more attention to the use of Bengali in education and the mass media. Given Bangladesh's high illiteracy rate, there does not seem to be any other viable alternative.

Language education may involve the use of a language as a medium of instruction or simply for initial literacy. Which language is selected for which purpose and at which level of education are all options that,

So much more to it than meets the eye

by Shamsad Mortuza

WHAT IS THE first image that comes to mind when you think of mother tongue? The smile of a mother, was my reply. How about something more concrete? Then it would be (literally) the Shaheed Minar, the memorial erected in honour of the language martyrs who sacrificed their lives for our language on February 21, 1952.

The conversation took place between Dr Joshua Fishman and me. Dr Fishman is considered the founding father of sociolinguistics and a Fellow of Stanford 'think tank'. He was visiting the University of Arizona to teach a summer class last year. It was a large auditorium, and there were nearly 200 participants from Venezuela, Guatemala, Latvia, Canada and Japan. The majority, however, came from different American Indian tribes who were trying to retain indigenous languages. Dr Fishman's seminar class, entitled 'Reversing Language Shift', was of the same nature.

"And why do you call them language martyrs?" Dr Fishman continued. "Well, because they died for our language. Had it been otherwise, my experience would be like most of my colleagues of this room." Dr Fishman, who had done some works on Bengali as well, took a moment out of his lecture to explain the resistance of the Bengali people vis-à-vis the encroachment of Urdu. He particularly highlighted the idea of martyrdom and the concept of sacrifice associated with language. I have never been so proud and thankful for my language. Last week's UN decision was a déjà vu.

The purpose of that seminar class was to measure the 'lan-

guage shift' of indigenous languages on the GIDS (Graded Inter-generational Disruption Scale) and draft future plans to salvage the mother tongues of the concerned groups. Simply put, language shift occurs when two languages come in contact and the powerful one affects or even engulfs the other. The class was designed to find means to identify such language shift and reverse the process.

Clearly the onslaught of English had its toll on the indigenous languages of North America. It was indeed a sorry sight to see elderly women breaking down into tears for the loss of their languages. It was heart wrenching to learn about the octogenarian woman from one of the Washington tribes who was the only speaker left of her language. Even at that age, she was planning to start a school to teach her community of their mother tongues.

With 150 million speakers of Bengali language worldwide, we probably cannot even dream of losing our mother tongue to a foreign language. Such comfort comes from the simple fact that a selected conscientious few

took a bold and right decision in 1952. The status of numerous threatened languages of the world gave a rare insight into the gravity of the language loss, and I was led to believe that nothing should be taken for granted. Even within the span of only three generations a language can become entirely extinct. I look at some of the Bangladeshi children who are now growing up in the United States and fear the impossible. On that note, however, the silver lining is that it is a group of expatriate Bangladeshis living

Mother Tongue Day comes as recognition of cultural pluralism. I think this declaration is a tribute to the fact that even in "a global village," in words of Dr Fishman, "people will continue to live their daily lives, to raise their children and to transmit their linguistic and non-linguistic heritages largely in terms of more particularistic, co-existing villages." On the flip side of the coin, I am not surprised to know that our global "big brothers" initially argued against the proposal to call February 21 an international

warrior. At a metaphorical level, this story tells us how the colonizer teaches his language to the colonized and benefits from it. The rise of Babu class in British India is a case in point. In Shakespeare's Tempest, Prospero teaches Caliban and Ariel his language in order to control them. The first thing that Caliban did was to curse Prospero with his 'newly learned art.' In reality, however, a new language often causes the erosion of the native mother tongues. Therefore, the postcolonial atmosphere tends

I find the recognition of Mother Tongue Day is recognition of women as well. The feminists who are constantly engaged in finding their niche outside the patriarchal design should find this decision refreshing. The Judeo-Christian tradition holds that God gave Adam the power to name all the objects in his freshly minted universe. Many feminists maintain that human consciousness emerges from mother's language. For instance, an aboriginal group of Australia thinks that language transmits from the mother to the child through breast-feeding. A biologist may rationalise this with gene theory but almost all societies link language with mother. (I wonder what do the Germans think of mother tongue in their fatherland). From a feminist perspective, the materiality of language becomes synonymous to maternity. Amar Ekushey is thus a tribute to the cadences of mothers' voice that introduce the world to us.

The UN decision is a pride that we all cherish and share. It is a return to our own mother, our source, and our soul. I know I am guilty of complicating a simple expression of pride. And that comes from the limitation of writing in my second language. Let me conclude referring to the Chilean Noble Laureate Gabriela Mistral. She wrote about the Absent Mother, "All the teachers that came after you, mother, have taught me only what you taught me in the first place, and they needed many words to say what you could say in just a few."

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In an age obsessed with globalisation, the declaration of Mother Language Day comes as recognition of cultural pluralism. I think this declaration is a tribute to the fact that even in "a global village," in words of Dr Fishman, "people will continue to live their daily lives, to raise their children and to transmit their linguistic and non-linguistic heritages largely in terms of more particularistic, co-existing villages."

In Canada who have taken the primary initiative to the International recognition for Ekushey.

Surely the UN's declaration came into effect as the world community realised the larger significance of mother tongue. I cannot agree more with poet Shamsur Rahman who observed that 'Amar Ekushey is Bangladesh's gift to the world.'

However, having said that, I think we should not also forget that the decision is a triumph of all marginal groups.

In an age obsessed with globalisation, the declaration of

day terming it as a local event. Finally, nationality prevailed. Thanks to our government and diplomats who pursued the cause and succeeded to convince 27 countries (including Pakistan) that Amar Ekushey is a local incident with a global significance just like that of May Day.

In any colonial design language plays a crucial role. According to a European legend, a warrior once killed a dragon and sowed its teeth into the ground. A troop of army sprouted from those teeth that immediately came in aid of the

to show allergic reactions to His Master's Voice.

As a former colony and a present marginal, least-developed country we have probably taken this issue a little further by successfully locating Mother Tongue into the center. At least for one day in a year, the Irish in Ireland and the Basque in Spain will think of the contribution of our language martyrs Salam, Barkat, and Jabbar. And in some part of the world, someone will sing for our language martyrs in the manner of Fakir Alamgir or Shumon Chatterjee.

Mother tongue memorial speaks
volumes about the past

Nearly 50 years after Pakistani police opened fire on students pressing for their language to be made official, the UN has declared an International Mother Language Day, commemorating events that ultimately led to the independence of Bangladesh. The voices of protest, writes **Moslem Uddin Ahmed**, have been heard around the world

THE VITAL ROLE of language in Bangladesh's independence struggle against Pakistan has been given worldwide recognition by the declaration of an International Mother Language Day.

When Pakistan was created in 1947 it was a geographically divided land; a predominantly Urdu-speaking west wing and a Bengali-speaking east, with more than 1,600 kilometres of Indian territory between the two.

A shared religion, Islam, proved an insufficient unifying factor. Politically, the two wings drifted apart, with the ethnic Bengali east accusing the ruling military of neglecting its interests. The differences cul-

minated in a bloody clampdown on democratically elected East Pakistan leaders, the flight of millions of people and a nine-month armed struggle for independence, finally achieved with the help of Indian intervention.

Bangladeshis still honour the role of the 'Language Movement', which from the 1950s pressed for official recognition of Bengali in Pakistan and was an important factor in the events that led to independence.

So when Education Minister A S Sadique attended a meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in Paris in November, he took the opportunity to propose an in-

ternational mother language day. He was motivated, he said, by a desire to recognise the sacrifice made by Bengalis in establishing their inalienable right to speak and write in their mother tongue.

His idea was accepted. Pakistan was among the UNESCO members who approved it. The day is to be celebrated on 21 February, the anniversary of the 1952 police killing of a number of Bengali-speaking Dhaka University students as Pakistan tried to maintain Urdu as the only official language.

They laid down their lives for the cause of our language and culture," recalled Dr Saadat Husain, secretary for primary and mass education, after the

Paris meeting. "They have become part of our life, and through establishing International Mother Language Day we have become part of history. Our generation has reason to feel proud about it."

UNESCO says the promotion of mother tongues will encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education, help develop awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions worldwide and inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue.

The UN move was warmly welcomed in Bangladesh. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was celebrating the decision at a function in Dhaka in December, she announced that Bangladesh would build an in-

ternational language institute. She gave no details, but officials say it will be financed by the government and UNESCO.

Concomitantly, controversy erupted at the celebratory function over one of the heroes of the language struggle, Abdul Matin. He was seated on the podium, but the speakers from the ruling party did not mention him.

Yet the septuagenarian Matin, better known as "Bhasa (Language) Matin" — was a key leader of 1952 student uprising. He was among rebellious students who broke a government ban on demonstrations and on whom the police opened fire. He saw his colleagues martyred.

The West Pakistani ruling quarters could never take Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan in confidence because of their proximity and cultural identity with the Hindu Bengalis," he wrote in his subsequent book on the Language Movement.

Matin is still politically active, with the Workers Party of Bangladesh, but has heart problems.

Abdul Matin is among us, but will not speak because of his illness," an announcer told the audience at the post-UNESCO ceremony.

Workers Party leaders claimed, however, that Matin been "deliberately held back from speaking out", with speakers more concerned about commemorating Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister's father. Workers Party leaders accused the ruling party of not wanting to let them share the glory for fear that the Left would benefit.

The main opposition alliance, led by former prime minister Khaleda Zia and ousted dictator H M Ershad — who are waging a movement designed to bring about the resignation of the Awami League government — boycotted the celebrations.

It is said that Bangladesh's political divisions cannot be healed even to celebrate a great unifying landmark in the nation's history.

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First Ekushey
of the new
millennium

by Kazi Aulad Hossain

UNLIKE THE PRECEDING centuries people all over the world started announcing from house tops a few weeks ago "Happy New Millennium", "Happy New Millennium". So, we too, people in Bangladesh, also started uttering like-wise "Happy New Millennium", "Happy New Millennium". Now we have already stepped into the next thousand years. I am not aware what the new millennium has brought for the people of other countries of the world. But the new millennium we have just stepped into has certainly brought a glad tidings for us — for all the 125 million people of Bangladesh the second largest Muslim country of the world. The glad tidings is that the world community has not only recognised our dear mother tongue, Bengali, as a very rich and resourceful language, it has also graciously been pleased to declare February 21, 1952 as the World Mother Language Day to be celebrated all over the world every year in recognition of the supreme sacrifice made by our students. This recognition has made us exultant particularly in view of the fact that this is our first 21st of the new Millennium as well as the first 21st of the 21st Century. We feel proud of this day. We must, therefore, offer our deep gratitude to Benign Allah for this bounty He has graciously been pleased to bestow on us.

In Ayat (Verse) 5 of Sura Rahman (Beneficent) of the Holy Quran, Almighty Allah says, "He (Allah) taught him (man) speech or utterance." ("Allamul Baian"). It is, therefore, evident that speech or language of man is one of many bounties of bounteous Allah and it is our sacred duty to preserve and develop it.

It is heartening that from now on people all over the world will observe, among others, 21st February as the World Mother Language Day with due solemnity and fervour. Like people of other countries, we also observe May Day, World Co-operative Day etc. And while observing May day on the first day of May every year, for instance, we recollect and reminisce with due respect how some courageous workers in Chicago's Hay Market laid down their lives with view to safeguarding the rights of the workers. So, dear readers, some of our courageous students gave their lives to uphold the cause of our dear mother tongue. And in the same way people of other countries will do the same on the 21st of February every year. We are proud of our students. We are proud of our mother language.

In may not be out of place to make a reference of the genesis of our language movement in a nutshell. After emergence of India and Pakistan as two independent states in 1947 the first president of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who was also the father of Pakistan nation visited Dhaka (his first visit) and during his stay in Dhaka he

made an unfortunate and unstatesmanlike statement while addressing the students of the Dhaka University. And that unwanted and unfortunate statement changed the course of history in this Gangetic Delta?

While addressing the university students Jinnah said with all the emphasis at his command "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan." And while saying this he was not surely oblivious of the fact that more than half of the total population of Pakistan spoke a very rich language like Bengali. Now, the pertinent question is that how a person of Jinnah's stature, a man, according to his own version, who was a "cold-blooded logician", a person who happened to be one of the few best lawyers of undivided India, who was once an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, a person who was a staunch democrat, and last but not the least, in the words of Beverly Nicholas, "the most important man of Asia," could say point-blank "Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan?"

The students of the University of Dhaka did not let Jinnah's aforesaid statement go unchallenged. They brought out a procession protesting his unjust statement and their slogan was, "We want Bengali as our state language." The procession was intercepted by the police but the students were determined to proceed and when the students tried to march on defying the police ban they (the police) opened fire and as a result four promising young university students fell like birds of prey and they lost their valuable lives. The inevitable result was that people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) stood behind the demand of the students vis-à-vis recognition of our language as a state language like one man. The then East Pakistan Legislative Assembly passed a resolution recommending to the central government of Pakistan to declare Bengali as a state language of Pakistan. The supreme sacrifice made by our beloved students was greatly responsible for creating a feeling among the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) that they were a separate and distinct entity. This distinction and feeling that they were a separate entity very much helped them to feel that they were a separate nation when the Pakistani army cracked down on the unarmed Bengali people on 26th March 1971.

Jinnah's aforesaid unstatesmanlike statement was a blessing in disguise for... are now a free and sovereign nation. By the grace of Almighty Allah we are fortunate enough to celebrate the first 21st of the New Millennium with due solemnity in view of the fact that 21st February has been declared by the World Body as "World Mother Language Day". Let us pray to Benign Allah for salvation of the departed souls of our students.