

Language Martyrs' Day

International Mother Language Day

Bangla should be official language of the UN

by Mir Lutful Kabir Saadi

THE UNITED NATIONS Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) proclaimed February 21 as the International Mother Language Day giving world recognition to the Bangalees' sacrifice for their mother tongue. The plenary of the UNESCO General Conference on November 17, 1999 unanimously adopted a draft resolution tabled by Bangladesh for proclamation of "International Mother Language Day" to be observed on February 21. The decision was taken unanimously by all 188 member-countries of UNESCO at its concluding session. The resolution states: "21 February be proclaimed International Mother Language Day throughout the world to commemorate the martyrs who sacrificed their lives on the very date in 1952."

UNESCO, one of the specialised agencies of the UN, is entrusted with the task of freeing humankind from illiteracy, advancing the spread of scientific knowledge, and increasing international understanding through exchange of education, science and culture.

Recognition of February 21 as the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO has put the nation into an honourable position in the eyes of the international community. It also brought the honour for the martyrs of the historic language movement they universally deserved for so long. Our great language movement has now been acclaimed all over the

world as a source of inspiration like the self-sacrificing workers of the Hay Market in Chicago, who sacrificed their lives for establishing their inalienable rights for eight hours work a day over a century ago on the first day of May. International recognition of February 21 is especially significant for Bangladesh as the day was a turning point in our history which ultimately led the nation towards independence.

The process of recognition of February 21 as the International Mother Language Day was initiated by expatriate Bangladeshis in Canada and was wound up at the 30th conference of UNESCO with the successful tabling of the proposal by the Bangladesh delegation. The draft resolution tabled by Bangladesh was co-sponsored and supported by 27 countries: Bahamas, Belarus, Benin, Camoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Gambia, Honduras, Indonesia, India, Iran, Italy, Lithuania, Malaysia, Micronesia, Oman, Pakistan, Paraguay, Philippines, The Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and The Vanuatu.

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The UN body's decision to honour the Great Language Movement in the then East Pakistan by the Bangla speaking people for establishing Bangla as a state language was in recognition of the unprecedented sacrifice made for the cause of mother language 48 years back. This is indeed a historic event for Bangladesh as the National Shaheed (Martyrs)

Day has now been proclaimed the International Mother Language Day.

While many communities struggled and are struggling to protect their mother language, the sacrifice and success of the valiant sons of Bangladesh are unique and resplendent in this regard. The 4,000 mother tongues all over the world have

In this regard the expatriate Bangladeshis in Canada deserve special thanks. Reportedly this group of Bangladeshis under the leadership of Mr. Rafiqul Islam took the initiative to bring the issue to the notice of the UNESCO. The same group also approached the Ministry of Education, government of Bangladesh and

must recognise that all the mother tongue as the medium or vehicle of their culture. Mother language is an effective instrument of communications 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

and tradition over one thousand five hundred years. Bangla alphabets are also used in Ahomia, Tripura and other languages. Linguistic scholars consider Bangla as the richest language among the South Asian nations. Besides Bangladesh, Bangla is also spoken in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura of India and Akyab of Myanmar. Bangla speaking people live all over the world. Bangalee Poet Rabindranath Tagore received Nobel Prize in 1913 for his classic poem 'Gitanjali'. Kazi Nurul Islam, Jasimuddin, Jibbananda Das, Farrukh Ahmed are prominent poet of Bangla literature. Their literary works have also been translated into many international languages.

At present the official language of the United Nations are Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish; Arabic has been added as an official language of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. In any consideration Bangla can be included as an official language of the United Nations. More than 300 million people speak Bangla in Bangladesh, India and by the people scattered in different parts of the world. The number of Bangla speaking people in the world is more than Arabic or Spanish speaking people. Bangla must be included as an official language of the United Nations which may need amendment to its Charter. The UN Charter may be amended by a vote of

two thirds of the members of the General Assembly and ratification by two thirds of the members of the United Nations, including the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Bangladesh's election as non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the term 2000-2001 is also another success for Bangla speaking people. Bangladesh is serving in the Security Council for the second time in its 25 years of membership of the United Nations. It also reflects respect and confidence for Bangla speaking people from the international circle. Finally, recognition of February 21 by UNESCO as International Mother Language Day is a great achievement for Bangla speaking people and it also revealed abundance of the world community upon them.

The government should take necessary steps for inclusion of Bangla as an official language of the United Nations. We humbly request all member countries of the United Nations to come forward in favour of Bangla as an official language of the UN as a symbol of respect for their own mother tongue. At the same time government must take initiative so that February 21 can also be observed as a UN day along with the International Mother Language Day. The writer is a special correspondent, IMPACT International (Magazine), UK, and a correspondent, GEMINI News Service, UK

The value of language and the language of value

by Syed Nageeb M Ali

WE HAVE FOUGHT for Bangla. We have made plays in Bangla. We have created fountains of literature in Bangla that bring tears to the eye and joy to the heart. And yet, I think, we come up with the most reasons to value our language.

There have been many reasons offered for valuing our mother language, all of which seem to miss the point. One line of reasoning goes as follows: linguistic diversity is a global communal good that is to be valued, and thus, we should preserve Bangla so as to promote variety. Another argument goes down the road of saying that if we do not learn Bangla well, we will not be able to learn foreign languages. And then of course, there's the protectionist view that we need to protect Bangla to defend ourselves from cultural imperialism. I wish to examine each argument in turn, showing how these really should be the roads not taken, but first let me offer you an analogy.

Let's say I meet you walking down Bailey Road after many years. You're striding down with a most wonderful family, children with beaming smiles, and you yourself ebullient with the joys of settled life. Now, if I were to ask you why you valued your family and you responded

that you loved your family because they are yours, that your life would be unimaginable without them, that they are a part of who you are, I would go my way, and wish for you the very best. But if you told me that you loved your family because you think the world with more families is better, or that loving your family will make it easier to love someone else's family or even worse, that you love your family because they protect you from other families, I would stop in my tracks, bewildered and puzzled wondering which brick fell off the wall and knocked your head.

So what I am getting at - to put all my cards on the table - is that we should value our language because it is ours and has over time provided sensible ways of referring to our lives. Before I get ahead of myself and put positive arguments for this point of view, let me show why the other roads lead to dead-ends.

The argument promoting linguistic diversity is very much an external argument for Bangla, that may appeal to the linguist, but has little reason to move the non-linguist. The linguist however would have on this basis as much reason to value Bangla as she would to promote the resurfacing of ancient Aramaic or teaching

Latin. On the basis of linguistic variety, we would have little to argue specifically for Bangla.

This is not to say that I oppose linguistic variety. Mother languages are valued objects because they have evolved over time to provide references for the lives of the people that speak them. It would be difficult for anyone to argue that thought does not influence language, and even harder to argue that our lives do not influence our thoughts. Thus, the Bengali may find useful Bangla expressions to understand his life, the Welsh may have a handy expression to express hers and so on and so forth. The differences that we face do provide good grounds for having our own mother languages, though the cosmopolitan spirit of creating Esperanto (a language that was devised to be universal) may be commended, the notion of having one world language to express all that we go through is rather ridiculous. Of course, different languages may be as good as one another at reflecting some human commonality. After all, we all do need nutrition, and we all yearn for a certain level of freedom. Yet, despite all the human commonality, there are context-specifics that we face as human beings living in different potholes on this rather large rock.

Let us turn to the path on the crossroads - we should learn our language because otherwise we could not learn others. Let us ask this: will learning Bangla really help us be multilingual? Each language provides us with a syntax and vocabulary and it is with these two that we put combinations of

(some European countries have educational systems that do this with splendid efficacy). Now memorizing the entire works of Tagore, I truly doubt will ever help me master Portuguese. At the same level, I would never approach a Shakespearean scholar thinking that his exposure to the slings and arrows of

forced to understand why we should protect ourselves from cultural imperialism. Opposition to cultural imperialism often leads to ethical relativism. This would seem to imply that our values are the right one to have given our circumstances and that other values do not make sense in Bangladesh. But actually, cultural relativism is an even weaker argument in the space of values - what it means is more along the lines that "we" have the right to form our values the way "we" want to, and that there isn't a concept of right or wrong to be attached to those values.

For one, when it is said that "we" have the right to form our values, who is the "we" that is being referred to? There is always some level of dissent in ours, or for that matter, any society, and it is hard to know whose values to take as "ours". Is it the values of the majority, the elite or all bald men with mustaches? Even if we could ascertain the values of the majority (a rather unlikely proposition), there are few fates suffered by minorities that are worse than tyranny at the hands of the majority. So what I am saying is that the defences of certain values as being Ben-

gali is nonsensical; there is really no way to back up the statement, "X is a Bengali value", or for that matter "Y is a value of culture Z." We may speak of Bengali laws (though many of these are British laws historically), and even standard norms of conduct, but we really cannot speak of objects being considered right or wrong by Bengalis pro tanto.

For another, ethical relativism really weakens any ethical statements we make. To make any fact or value culture-specific weakens the veracity of that fact. For example, to say that the force of gravity works in our culture but not in others, is to ascribe to an extremely weak concept of gravity. Additionally, to say that "Women are equal to men" qualified by "in our culture" would weaken the concept of equality. When we condemn the treatment of the Kosovars or Chechnyans, we are not asserting statements qualified by our culture. Rather, we are making assertions of how human beings deserve to live and to be treated globally. Similarly, assertions that we may make about how elders should be treated with respect and warmth, by no stretch of imagination do we mean that it is only Bengali elders who deserve this.

Thus, ethical relativism

isn't the way we want to go, being fairly nonsensical. It makes sense for us to protect ourselves from "cultural imperialism" if the institutions we have make sense. For example, if we want to protect our belief in Allah, a way in which we construct our world, it makes sense for us to protect these. After all, we do have the right to our own theological beliefs. But on the other hand, if what we want to protect is child labour or for that matter, child abuse, or women's subordination, the road to justification is fraught with potholes and difficulty.

Now, I guess it is time for me to shed some light on the avenue that hopefully will not lead to a dead-end. Of course, this is the most obvious route, but in our recent discourse, this has been the road not taken. The reason we should value Bangla really is that it is ours. It is a language that provides us with a set of references to communicate to one another about our daily lives in a way that other languages do not. We have lovely words for our six seasons that differ from the English "Fall" and "Autumn"; words that through repeated use come alive in our minds with vivid imagery. Our literature is filled with poignant accounts of brave-

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Advertisement for '21' (February) featuring the Bengali numeral '২১' and the word 'ফেব্রুয়ারী'. It includes the text 'আন্তর্জাতিক মাতৃভাষা দিবসে' (International Mother Language Day) and 'সম্মানিত গ্রাহক ও শুভানুধ্যায়ীদের আমাদের আন্তরিক শুভেচ্ছা' (Warm wishes to our honored customers and benefactors). Logos for 'জনতা ব্যাংক' (Janta Bank) and 'বাংলাদেশ কৃষি ব্যাংক' (Bangladesh Agricultural Bank) are also present.

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