

Mother Language Day : Honouring the pioneers

MAJOR GENERAL (RETD) SYED MUHAMMAD IBRAHIM, BIR PROTIK

THE pioneers I am referring to are (i) Albert Vinzon, (Philippino) (ii) Carmen Cristobal (Philippino), (iii) Jason Monir (English), (iv) Susan Hodgins (English), (v) Dr. Kelvin Chao (Cantonese), (vi) Renate Mertens (German), (vii) Karuna Joshi (Hindi), (viii) Nazneen Islam (Kachi), (ix) Rafiqul Islam (Bangla), (x) Abdus Salam (Bangla). Mr. Rafiqul Islam is the president and others are the members of 'Mother Language Lovers of the World' in Canada.

These ten persons had been awarded the 'Ekushe Padak' last year and as the system goes the medals will actually be presented this year. They need to be invited by our government. It will be an honour to honour them. As a matter of great co-incidence, two out of the ten have same names as the famous SALAM and RAFIQ of 21 February 1952 fame. These ten have honoured the people who speak 6528 Mother Languages across at least 188

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countries spread over all continents.

On the 17th November 1999, the UNESCO General Conference during its 157th session, unanimously passed 21st February as the International Mother Language Day. That decision is as historic as the Day itself. People all over the globe must be made known about the background of both the days. But here I will talk of the latter days only.

Rafiqul Islam stays at Vancouve with family. He was born in April 1953 in Comilla. He and his younger brother Saiful Islam were freedom fighters in 1971 and Saiful became a martyr in direct combat. Another gentleman staying with family in Vancouve is Abdus Salam. Salam hails from the district of Chittagong. These two sons of the soil spent days and nights pondering how to advance the cause of Mother Languages. So on 9th January 1998

Rafiqul Islam wrote a letter of proposal to Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the UN. Rafiqul emphasized the necessity of protecting and nurturing mother languages of the world. Many mother languages have perished for want of such protection and cultural or linguistic aggression. Much effort had been made to preserve endangered species (among animals) but little effort have been made to preserve endangered mother languages. Hence the declaration of a day and its befitting observance could go a long way to achieve this goal. Rafiqul Islam and Salam proposed that no other day could be better or more relevant than 21st February.

On 23rd February Mr. Hasan Ferdous (who is the Officer in Charge of Public Enquires Department) of the Secretary General's Office wrote back to Rafiqul Islam

and advised him to arrange for such a proposal to be placed or pleaded by any one or more member states. The advice was a step forward and also demanded wider action. So Rafiqul with nine others formed a ten member organization called "Mother Language Lovers of the World". Then onwards, the Language Lovers acted unitedly but they were mostly represented by Rafiqul and Salam. They approached Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Canada. They continued to pursue the matter with Mr. Hasan Ferdous. Rafiqul and Salam were directed to the UNESCO headquarters. Ms Ana Maria Mailof was very enthusiastic and supportive. With her informal advice, Rafiqul and Salam contacted the National Commission for UNESCO of Canada, India, Finland, Bangladesh and Hungary and requested them to formally propose

the matter to UNESCO. On 16 April 1999, Hungary responded and it was the first. Then other countries followed. At Bangladesh, the then PM Sheikh Hasina was apprised but rather late. The dead-line to reach the proposal to UNESCO was before 10th September 1999, if it was to be acted upon in 1999. The Prime Minister was instrumental in ordering a 'short-circuit' of the procedures so that the proposal reached Paris in time. The then Secretary of the Education Ministry Mr Quazi Rakibuddin, the then education Minister Mr. Sadeq, UNESCO National Commissioner of Bangladesh Secretary Professor Kafiluddin, and Mr. Moshiur Rahman (one of the Directors in the PM's Office) played active role in managing the matter in Dhaka. Mr. Tony Huq who is a Senior Advisor to the Director General of UNESCO

and Ambassador Syed Moazzem Ali and Mr. Ikhtear Chowdhury of Bangladesh Embassy in Paris also played a very active role in expediting the process. The entire embassy in Paris was enthusiastic. Finally 29 countries including Pakistan co-sponsored the proposal which was unanimously adopted.

Bangladesh celebrated 21st February 2001 with more enthusiasm and dignity than ever before. That was well done. But more needs to be done. The minimum this year is to invite the 10 members of the organization to Bangladesh as State Guests and honour them. Convener of the Bangladesh Chapter of Mother Language Lovers of the World, Mr. M H Mehrab, is working hard towards this goal. They would need state patronisation. We hope the PM and Education Minister would be around with enthusiasm.

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All health information to keep you up to date

Children don't wet the bed on purpose

Wetting the bed (nocturnal enuresis) is usually small problem which, if handled badly, can become a big one.

It is worth remembering that all newborn babies 'wet the bed' and almost no teenagers do. Learning to recognise the sensation of a full bladder, waking up and going to the toilet are all part of a child's normal development, just like learning to walk and talk.

Just when this happens will vary from child to child. By the age of three about 50 per cent of children are dry at night, but it is generally felt that no action is needed over bed-wetting before the age of six.

The reason why some children take longer than others to become dry at night is probably due to them being deep sleepers who are not awakened by the message from their bladder telling them that it is full. There is often a family history of being late-developers in this area.

In the older child help may be needed as bed-wetting can inhibit some normal social development such as going on camps, or staying overnight with friends.

Medical advice, to exclude rare cases where a physical problem such as infection, diabetes, or a mechanical problem with the bladder is the cause, should be sought in cases where:

! Bed-wetting starts after a relatively long period of dryness.

! Daytime wetting past three or four years old.

! Bed-wetting after six or seven years.

Many people blame emotional upsets for bed-wetting. This is not often the case, except for short episodes that might coincide with the arrival of a new baby, a move to a new house or other events that might cause some temporary feelings of insecurity.

Many different methods have been tried to treat bed-wetting (or, to be accurate, --Espeed up the normal development). The most successful is the bed-wetting alarm system, which wakes the child when urine is first passed. Certain drugs will sometimes help, but must be used with caution.

It is important not to get cross with children who wet their bed. They don't do it on purpose and are just as keen as their parents for it to come to an end. If bed-wetting is creating problems, seek help.

Next: Nutrition news

Caring for adolescent girls

NAIMUL HAQ

AN international team of over 140 participants including 25 adolescent girls and boys from 16 countries are in Dhaka participating in a week-long February 2-7 international review on Meeting the Development and Participation Rights of Adolescent Girls.

The review meeting, organised by UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO, marks a major step forward in building practical partnership among governments, development partners and the adolescents.

South Asia is considered home to more than a million adolescents. The main focus of this convention is understanding the adolescents; acceptance of their identity, dignity and social and cultural values. Perhaps, this deliberation could bring an opening for a global movement through --

Sharing of experiences, reviewing strategies and interventions and identifying lessons learnt from the participating countries;

Building networks and linkages between countries and the organising partners to strengthen programme implementation through exchange of information;

Identifying technical support needs in programming for adolescents and generating indicators to measure impact of the project; and lastly

Hearing the views and experiences of the adolescents at first hand.

The global effort is supported by the United Nations Foundation to lend impetus to initiatives in developing countries for realising the rights of, specially, adolescent girls through a global project.

The meeting was formally inaugurated on Saturday (February 2) at a city hotel by Begum Khurshid Zahan Haque, Minister for Women and Children Affairs as the chief guest while Md. Fazlur Rahman, State Minister for Youth and Sports attended as the special guest. Mahfuzul Islam, Secretary of MWCA was also present. Morten Giersing, Dr. Suneeta Mukherjee and Ms. Sunita Acharya, representatives of UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO, respectively, delivered speeches on their common interest and commitment in realising the rights of the adolescents.

The Project incorporates active participation of the adolescents at every stage from planning, implementation to monitoring and evaluation. The outcome of the review meeting in Dhaka is geared towards future directions for global work on adolescents and building networks and connections between countries and organising partners. More importantly, the exchange of ideas and experiences among

adolescents, who often bring fresh vitality and outlook, will enable them to actively participate in decisions affecting their lives and the society at large.

Recognising the reality of adolescent girls, the United Nations Foundation has come forward to support initiatives in developing countries for realising the development and participation rights of adolescent girls through a global project. The project initially supported the countries through UNICEF field offices in assessing the situation of adolescents and

fifth of its total population. Out of this, 13.7 million are girls. The number of adolescent girls can be further broken down into 7.6 million in the age group of 10-14 and 6.1 million in the age group of 15-19 years. For every adolescent girl living in the urban areas there are more than five living in the rural areas.

Data shows that half of the girls below 19 years in Bangladesh are married and by this age, about 58 per cent of them are already mothers or are expecting a child.

The literacy rate among

Mauritania, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, Senegal and West Bank and Gaza.

In addition to UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO agencies with extensive experience in research on and work with adolescents like the Population Council, Commonwealth of Youth Programme, International Centre for Research on Women became some of the key associates in this project.

The participants will observe the field level implementation of the adolescents' project in Bangladesh, which adopts an innovative

pation rights of adolescents

Basic education: The reality of adolescents in many countries show that they are often deprived of access to formal schooling. In most cases they are engaged in work, where such access is difficult without recourse to alternatives like non-formal schooling or second chance education.

Adolescent friendly health services: Existing health services in most countries are not geared to meeting the special needs of adolescents.

Access to life-skills and livelihoods: Life-skills enable young people to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to manage their own lives with confidence and competence and make informed choices. Livelihood or vocational skills enable young people to achieve economic self-reliance and pursue future career options.

Enabling environment: where community, society and families understand and address the special needs of the adolescents and provide them with an environment free from violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination.

Participation: to change the traditional mind-sets in society regarding young people and adolescents by ensuring that they are consulted on matters concerning their own lives and enabling them to contribute to the well-being of the society.

Adolescent girls project: Why and how?

The Project started in 1999 following a planning meeting held in Pawling, New York, USA involving several country participants, including adolescents themselves. In this planning phase of the Project, Bangladesh, China, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Jamaica, Jordan, Malawi, Mali, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Zambia participated.

Countries identified specific areas of intervention for their concentration. In many of the countries in Africa, HIV/AIDS and its prevention through involvement of young people was an area of focus. Other countries focused on education or empowerment of girls through life-skills and livelihood training, responding to issues of concern like early marriage, gender discrimination and subordination of women and girls.

An important aspect of the Project has been ensuring the participation of young people in the planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of the interventions.

The Project has evolved now from the planning stage to the implementation stage. Recognising their common interest and commitment in realising the rights of ado-



Adolescent girls in Bangladesh.

Photo: Courtesy UNICEF

designing interventions applicable to the particular context of respective country.

This review meeting is part of the Adolescents Girls Project initiated in 1999 and will focus on the situation of adolescent girls, which is particularly complex. In many parts of the world deep-rooted traditions of patriarchy and subordination women and girls to an inferior status from early childhood, make it difficult for adolescent girls to realise their rights.

Consequently, they remain deprived of some of the fundamental rights like basic education, adolescent friendly health services, access to life skills and livelihoods, right to participate in decisions affecting their life and an enabling environment free from violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination. "These are some of the areas that the review will throw lights on in the context of youth participation, gender concerns and community mobilisation," said one delegate from India.

Bangladesh has nearly 28 million adolescents, more than one

Bangladeshi females aged 15 and above has, however, shown a marked increase. It rose from 24 per cent to 43 per cent between 1990 and 1998.

Adolescent girls working in the garment sector gives a gloomy picture. About 400,000 girls aged 14 to 19 years are now employed in different garment factories across the country. Their working conditions are far from being ideal but many enjoy sort of autonomy and independence from their families than other girls.

Most of the female garment workers come from rural areas and are single when they start working. It is estimated that there are 250,000 female child domestics in the capital, 90 per cent of them are between 9 and 16 years of age.

Bangladesh is involved in the project since the initial planning stage. The country offices of three partner agencies UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF offered to jointly host the meeting in Dhaka. Other countries participating in the meeting are Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ghana, India, Jordan, Malawi, Mali,

model to address the needs of both married and unmarried girls, and is being implemented through a partnership between the government, adolescents, NGOs, UNICEF and UNFPA.

Why adolescents?

According to the accepted definition of WHO, the age group between 10-19 is termed as 'adolescence'. This is a very crucial stage in the lives of young people. Unfortunately society often views adolescents as problems. It is not recognised that these young people also have rights to an enabling and supportive environment offering them the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Young people can bring in unique energy, strength, optimism and idealism if they are given the right chance. They are on the threshold of adulthood and the opportunities they get will determine the extent to which they can realise their own potential and make meaningful contributions to the society.

Development and partici-

lescents, this phase is built on a close partnership between the three major UN agencies, UNFPA, WHO and UNICEF.

Bangladesh is implementing an innovative model, based on partnerships between the Government, adolescents, NGOs, UNICEF and UNFPA in addressing the needs of both married and unmarried girls. A field visit to some of the project areas in Bangladesh is part of the programme for the meeting in Dhaka.

Naimul Haq is a staff correspondent of The Daily Star.

Nothing to say

ALIF ZABR

TALKATIVENESS or the gift of the gab (in which we excel) may not, convey messages if there is no message. But the medium is saturated with huge traffic; specially of the political kind. Political GINGO (garbage in, garbage out) generated in Dhaka is of astronomical proportion, completely beyond the capacity of the listener to process or digest. Love's labour's lost. But why this dedicated indulgence on non-communicative unhappiness?

This mini-mania is confined mostly to the political leaders rather than in the more pleasant field of salesmanship who undertake speech-marathon exercises, day in and day out to keep the public on good humour.

If there is no message, some have to be artificially created for ethical consumption. Keep the electorate busy away from getting the messages from the opponents. But the digestibility of the inputs cannot be guaranteed. Verbosity has layers of non-transparency; even after peeling off the skin. The politicians have nothing to hide, except their hide. It is armoured, for one thing.

Our spicy speeches are like our hot and spicy curries. It is a tropicalized specialty, not popular in the temperate zones (where the developed nations are located). Too many spices mask the natural odour of the vegetable, fish or meat. Which means that the palate is not neutral, and has to be artificially stimulated in the marginal or core areas for the return on the public

investment by the politicians.

The art of presenting virtual reality is a billion dollar business in cosmetics. The French are more directly fastidious about their cuisine; they tell tourists like us to stay in France for a minimum of five years, to neutralize the insensitive tongue, before relishing the natural taste of French food. The colours in

The new and modern political style is to hit first, and talk not later. We (in the LDCs) prefer missives to missiles.

the tropics are so bright and brilliant. But this rainbow-laced politics is not able to bring the colours nearer home.

The politicians imitate the feminine mystique of hiding reality, and radiate virtual attractiveness. Temporary distraction may be good as resting periods, but not if carried on for full five years, as the politicians do, whether in or out of power. Now we are having a taste of sound beating about the bush. What has happened to the silence of wisdom?

The greatest background function of talking is to hide what is in the mind, the cynics would assert. Journalism obliges with partial analyses, supposed to be looking at both sides of the coin simultaneously. This is not possible with a two-dimensional coin. A tennis ball, for example, can be looked at from several thousand angles (perspectives) in three dimensions. The

question is: what has happened to the third dimension in politics? This is the missing bit in the jigsaw puzzle in Dhaka. Life is more than flat 2-D politics.

Define it? Impossible. Like trying to define the feminine mystique; or the cosmic consciousness of a drop of water, in which the whole universe is reflected (convergence is a focussing device). The politicians are not reflective, like the moon. They emit radiation, like the fiery sun. But, like the sun, they are not millions of miles away, but only a foot away, glaring from the front page of newspaper. Too much proximity with power in not good for health. Besides, they emit smoke (screen). The politicians claim that they are near to our hearts. But the heart cannot be neutral. It feels.

What is the difference between a Shavian cut, a Churchillian drive, and our politician's googly (mayonnaise with hot spices)? Indescribable; as is ecstasy. Drama is staged with light effects. Field endeavour needs the sweat of the brow. For a browbeating demo, visit Dhaka. Wars of the Churchillian age will no longer take place, as demonstrated in Afghanistan recently.

The new and modern political style is to hit first, and talk not later. We (in the LDCs) prefer missives to missiles. The Afghan blitz had nothing for the five human senses, unless it was to black all (as was administered to the al-Qaida prisoners by Uncle Sam, as alleged by the EU and others).

If you have nothing to say, do it.