

International Mother Language Day

How it happened

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THIS year we are commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of "Amar Ekushey" the immortal 21 February. In our national life, Ekushey February or "Mahan Shaheed Dibash" is the historic starting point of our war for self-empowerment and independence. Our Language Movement, in which our martyrs had laid down their lives for the preservation of our mother tongue, is a unique event in contemporary history.

It is a matter of great national pride that on 17 November 1999, UNESCO General Conference had unanimously adopted a resolution tabled by Bangladesh proclaiming our "Shaheed Dibash" as the International Mother Language Day. Earlier, on 12 November 1999, as Bangladesh's Permanent Representative to the UNESCO, I had the privilege to formally introduce the draft resolution at that Conference. This triumph at the UNESCO is a befitting tribute to our Shaheeds and a historic achievement for the nation. Certain quarters are trying to give the impression that this honour was achieved at the UNESCO without any effort on the part of our governmental machinery. This is a distortion of facts and it is necessary to put the entire matter in proper perspective to fully appreciate our national achievement.

Initially, a Canada-based multilingual group called "Mother Language Lovers of the World" had submitted a proposal for the proclamation of 21 February as the International Mother Language Day to the UN Secretary General whose office, in turn, had directed them to contact the UNESCO -- the most relevant UN organization to deal with the language issue. Accordingly, the Group's President, Mr. Rafiqul Islam, had contacted UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. But UNESCO or UN are both inter-governmental bodies and cannot accept any proposal from private bodies or individuals, nor do they have any authority to take any decision in this regard. So they asked him to contact any member-country. Rafiqul Islam contacted me, and Mr. Tozammel (Tony) Huq, a senior official at UNESCO Secretariat at the time. Both of us greatly encouraged them and explained to them the procedure to contact our government.

When the proposal was formally processed by our UNESCO National Commission and Education Ministry and placed before former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, she promptly approved it. Thereafter the proposal was officially sent to the UNESCO Secretariat by the end of September 1999. The Secretariat, however, circulated the proposal in the form of a draft resolution on 26 October 1999, just before the General Conference. But in their comments on our draft resolution they made two observations: first, they suggested that there should be a feasibility study of our draft resolution and the recommendations should be submitted to UNESCO Executive Board through the Advisory Committee

The fast disappearance of mother languages is a global phenomenon and it should be addressed internationally, regionally and formally. The UN, UNESCO and prominent academic and research institutes in various countries can play leading role in this vital area. Among the regional organizations, EU is already playing an important role in preserving various European languages. Likewise, other regional bodies, such as SAARC, ASEAN, OAU and OAS, can play equally important roles in their respective zones.



UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura launching the International Mother Language Day at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 21 February 2000. Photo also shows (from right to left) Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, former President of Iceland and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Languages, Syed Muazzem Ali, former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to UNESCO, H M Fodha, Director of UNIC (Paris) representing UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Felix Marti, Chairperson, UNESCO Advisory Committee for Linguistic Pluralism and Multilingual Education.

on Linguistic pluralism and Multilingual Education; secondly, in view of UNESCO's serious budgetary problems, they suggested that the financial implications of the proposal should be clearly spelt out.

I did not accept the Secretariat's position, and consulted with Mr. Tony Huq. Together we met the then UNESCO Deputy Director-General, Mr. Colin Power, and explained to him that the main thrust of our draft resolution was to create greater awareness for the protection and preservation of mother languages which are disappearing fast from the face of the earth. Hence, if we go for feasibility study and the proposal is submitted through the UNESCO Executive Board and the Language Division, as suggested by the Secretariat, then the initiative would be deferred by at least two years and by then many more languages would be lost. As regards budgetary implications, we assured him that implementation of our draft resolution would not require any extra budget for the UNESCO, as each member-country would draw up their own respective programs to commemorate the day. Mr. Power, an Australian national, was fully aware of the importance of the issue and, after our discussions with him, he agreed to withdraw the observations and forwarded our draft resolution to the Second Commission of the General Conference for consideration. I also met the Commission's Chairman, Mr. J Boulmer of Slovakia, and urged him to take up our draft resolution at the Commission.

Our draft resolution, which had highlighted the need for preservation of mother languages, should not apparently pose any problem to any member-country. But in reality, many of the European and other countries, some of which are the main contributors to the UNESCO's budget, have multilingual societies and the issue of

mother language is a highly sensitive one in their countries. Their underlying concern was that the proclamation of the Mother Language Day might trigger off new unrest in their own countries. I personally met the Permanent Representatives of those countries and explained to them that the main objective of our effort is to preserve languages. We also highlighted the historic fact that linguistic differences do not cause wars, intolerance does, and that respect for each other's mother languages would only strengthen national and international solidarity.

The former Education Minister of Bangladesh, Mr. A S H K Sadique led Bangladesh delegation to the UNESCO General Conference from 25 October to 2 November 1999. In his general statement, he inter-alia highlighted the importance of the issue of mother languages. We arranged meetings for him with the Education Ministers from other countries to enlist their support. Due to our vigorous efforts we were able to enlist co-sponsorship and support of about 28 countries from different continents, but one could still feel the underlying concern of some countries.

In the meantime, a Cultural Ministers' Conference was held at the UNESCO headquarters on 2 November, attended by about 55 Cultural Ministers from all over the world. I had been asked by the Government to represent Bangladesh at the Conference. I took full advantage of the situation, met many of the Cultural Ministers and personally sought their governments' support to our proposal.

Given the extreme sensitivities on the language issue, representatives of some friendly countries suggested to us that at the time of the introduction of our draft resolution, we should give a broader perspective to enlist maximum

support. Our 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 dissuade them.

Finally, on 12 November, I was given the opportunity to introduce the draft resolution at the Second Commission. In our broad-based statement, I underlined the primary role of UNESCO in the preservation of languages, expressed concern at the fast disappearances of mother languages, and emphasized the need to proclaim an International Mother Language Day to create greater awareness. As regards earmarking 21 February as the day, I recalled the supreme sacrifice that our martyrs had made on that day in 1952 for the preservation of our mother language Bangla -- an unprecedented event in contemporary history.

Fortunately, our vigorous behind-the-scenes lobbying worked. None of the countries opposed the draft resolution, and the Second Commission unanimously adopted it. To someone who was not directly involved in the lobbying process or familiar with multilateral diplomacy, this might have seemed easy sailing, but for those of us, who had been pursuing the matter tirelessly, this brought a great sense of achievement and relief. Finally, as noted earlier, on 17 November the Plenary of the General Conference formally adopted our draft resolution. It was indeed a historic achievement for our country and nation that 21 February, our Mohan Shaheed Dibash, was proclaimed as the International Mother Language Day. Subsequently, the present Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Koichiro Matsuura on 21 February 2000, formally launched the Day at the UNESCO headquarters, amid speeches, a Bangla musical program and display of books on

languages.

The original initiator of the proposal the "Mother Language Lovers of the World" -- deserve the nation's appreciation and praise. It was indeed most befitting that the immediate past Government selected the Group's President Rafiqul Islam and other member Abdus Salam -- both Bangladeshi nationals -- for the award of Ekushey Padak this year. I personally supported this move and strongly recommended that their initiative should be fully recognized and duly appreciated. It is also necessary to record the valuable contributions made by Tony Huq, Colin Power, J. Boulmer, Counsellor Ikhtiar Momen Chowdhury, First Secretary Mustafizur Rahman, Professor Kafiluddin Ahmed, Mohammad Moinuddin and others who made the proposal a reality.

The proclamation of the Day is just the beginning and not the end of the matter. Bangladesh, as the pioneer of this draft resolution, has committed herself to not only protecting her own language but also to honouring the 6,000 other mother languages currently spoken in the world. The proclamation of Amar Ekushey as the International Mother Language Day confers on us the sacred responsibility of working towards the preservation of the linguistic heritage of mankind. Experts fear that a great majority of the languages currently spoken might disappear in the foreseeable future. This process has to be halted and a truly globalised world has to be created on the basis of cultural diversity and linguistic pluralism. Communication and information technology has considerably narrowed the linguistic divide, which had separated us in the past. We already have means to translate from one language to another instantly and, with the passage of time, the current techniques will be further perfected. But if we lose languages, we will surely lose a part of the heritage of mankind.

The fast disappearance of mother languages is a global phenomenon and it should be addressed internationally, regionally and formally. The UN, UNESCO and prominent academic and research institutes in various countries can play leading role in this vital area. Among the regional organizations, EU is already playing an important role in preserving various European languages. Likewise, other regional bodies, such as SAARC, ASEAN, OAU and OAS, can play equally important roles in their respective zones.

Last year it was decided to set up an International Mother Language Institute in Dhaka and the foundation stone was laid during the visit of UN Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan to Dhaka. We have to proceed in the matter with a sense of commitment and urgency. Otherwise, we would surely lose a good opportunity to enhance our national image internationally.

Muazzem Ali, a retired Foreign Secretary, was Bangladesh Ambassador to France and Permanent Representative to the UNESCO when the International Mother Language Day resolution was adopted.

An all peoples' day

Hence the lofty position of universal reverence our language martyrs have carved for them in the very sanctuary of every being's heart - a position of envy, unparalleled in the whole of the planet. Rafique, Shafique, Barkat, Salam, Jabbar and other co-martyrs are no more Benglaee heroes only but international ones who are equally admired by every individual throughout the length and breadth of the world and at all nooks and corners of the globe thus investing the language Martyrs' Day with a unique position in the calendar of the red-letter days.

M. ARSHAD ALI

SACRIFICES are good deeds. Like all other good deeds they never go unrecognised and unrewarded, unsung and unhonoured, however giant the forces opposed to it may be. It is in the very nature of evil that it tries to annihilate the truthful, good and constructive. The destructive forces of evil, the monsters of inequity never let slip any chance to pounce upon the constructive powers of good so that the mankind cannot benefit from the uninterrupted progress of civilization. They never respite or relax; they are ever wakeful and alert to put any conceivable and inconceivable halt to the advancement of mankind. The good however, never fails to rise up to the occasion and prove itself equal to the task of challenging the evil and subduing it to trounce it out. The evil finally gives in and the good emerges out victorious though at a tremendous cost and sacrifice of irreparable nature.

Those who fall fighting with the evil are held high in popular esteem, for their supreme sacrifice earns security and opportunity for their comrades and contemporaries as well as posterity. So long as the posterity exists and enjoys the achievements the sacrificing heroes have bequeathed for them, popular remembrance celebrates their glory i.e. their ideals and deeds are immortalised in the memory of the people who encourage historians to write in letters of gold about the valour of the martyrs. They are as dear to the heart of the people as the cause they fight for. The nature of the loftiness of the cause - the involvement of public interest in the struggle determines the nature of popular reverence for those who take part in it. If the struggle centres round a temporary issue that involves a topical event i.e. the event though important for the time being is deplete of far reaching implications and consequences, its appeal diminishes with the passage of time and eventually disappears from popular mind. Dissimilar is the case with issues that revolve round the question of man's existence and his sustainability and continuance. The sacrifice made in the struggle involving such issues continue to undulate the mind of the people eternally. The people are aroused with benign thoughts and lofty ideals that inspire them to make sacrifice in their turn for the achievement of national objectives when need arises.

In times of crises when the dark forces cloud the national horizon the heroic sons of the soil shine like luminous stars to lead the people through thick and thin.

"To the innermost heart of their own land they are known,

As the stars are known to the night
As the stars that are stary in times of our darkness
To the end, to the end, they remain."

All nations have their heroes of the above stature, but a few of them can be proud of having been blessed with heroes whose influence and importance transcend the national boundaries. Their contribution assumes

universal significance and they are regarded as international heroes as they sacrifice for causes that

concern the lot of all nations of the world. Such international stature was incarnated in the figure of those working people who laid down their lives on the 1 of May in Hay Market in Chicago for securing their rights to work for not exceeding eight hours a day. As every country of the world is populated by the workers, the May Day martyrs are mourned, remembered and regarded all over the world. So the location of their death did not stand a bar to their being universalised.

An occasion of the kind of May Day, our Shahid Day (Martyrs' Day) gains more in importance compared with the former. May Day created the opportunity of the working people who are opposed to by the capitalists. The capitalists do not see the May Day eye to eye with the labouring class with the consequence that theirs is a divided loyalty to the martyrs, for they, the former, by their class limitation, do not have the same intensity of the sense of respect for the struggle that occasioned the May Day. Our Shahids (Martyrs) of the Language Movement are, however, claimant to, and do deserve, a universal homage in that they laid down their lives to hold aloft the position of their mother tongue from the compulsion of fleeing into a second class language. Everybody does have a mother tongue - the white and the black, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the aboriginals and the cosmopolitans, the literate and the illiterate all have it. Every man, nay perhaps every living thing including plants and animals feel comfortable and convenient only when he can communicate through his mother tongue - the most important factor for creating an enabling environment in which he can consider himself to have been provided with the normal opportunity for self-expression and self-development. Let alone the illiterate, the highly educated individual finds himself at bay if put in a situation where he is deprived of his mother tongue to express himself properly, adequately and perfectly. Hence the lofty position of universal reverence our language martyrs have carved for them in the very sanctuary of every being's heart - a position of envy, unparalleled in the whole of the planet. Rafique, Shafique, Barkat, Salam, Jabbar and other co-martyrs are no more Benglaee heroes only but international ones who are equally admired by every individual throughout the length and breadth of the world and at all nooks and corners of the globe thus investing the language Martyrs' Day with a unique position in the calendar of the red-letter days. It has been an all-peoples' day the second of which is yet to be. And UN has acted up to universal expectation by having declared and recognised it as the International Mother Language Day. The sacrifice of the language martyrs of Bangladesh is, thus, transfigured into that of all peoples of the globe - peoples of all hues and races, of all habitations and locations, of all classification and distinctions, of all castes, and creeds and of sexes and features. Everyone on earth cannot but take pride in the sacrifice and achievement of our language martyrs and sing in praise of them.

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Preparing for the great occasion.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Genesis of Language Movement: Some reminiscences of the glorious past

AQ KHAN

ON the occasion of 50 anniversary of the Language Day the glorious role played by Dhaka Medical College students in the Language Movement of 1948-1952 is worth recalling. What happened at the medical college has received the least attention so far. It is at the hostels of the DMCH that student leaders planned their strategies for the language movement.

It was at the Dhaka Race Course Maidan (Shurawady Udyan) in March 1948 that Mohammedi Ali Jinnah, Governor General of Pakistan, on his first visit to East Bengal (East Pakistan) addressed a public meeting and in a most outrageous manner announced, "To make it finally clear, Urdu and only Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan." Such atrocious proclamation was a shock to many and I came back from the meeting disillusioned and broken heart. It kept me wondering as to how a person of his stature and eminence could make such an utterance in complete disregard of the tenets of democratic polity, apparently with the ulterior motive to silence the voice of the language of the majority, though the struggle and sup-

port for creation of Pakistan mostly came from Muslims of Bengal.

The following day in the Dhaka University convocation address at the Curzon Hall, it was reiterated by Mr Jinnah, consequent upon which an instantaneous commotion ensued and students voiced their vehement protest, shouting "No" at the top of their voice. It was also rejected by the intelligentsia.

As a matter of fact, conspiracy against Bengali language started much earlier than March 1948. It was the most apparent when in September 1947, post cards, envelopes, money order forms, coins and currency notes were printed only in Urdu and English, denying any place for Bengali, the language of the majority in Pakistan. Further, for superior service examination, the circular of Pakistan Public Service Commission, 1947, made provision for Urdu, English, Hindi, Sanskrit, Latin and other languages, but made no provision for Bengali language. However, it is not known whether there had been any change of mind in Jinnah, as no further views were heard from him on the issue, nor he ever made any statement expressing to leave the matter to be decided by the popular wishes of the people.

Eleventh March, 1948 was declared a protest day with a call for hartal (general strike). Hartal was observed throughout the country successfully when all educational institutions went on strike from 12 to 15 March. Then Provincial Assembly was held at Jagannath Hall. I was a student of Dacca Medical College residing at Block 18 of the hostel. The Dhaka Medical College hostel was housed in some 21 bamboo-barracks arranged in two rows.

Preparations were afoot from the morning for the observation of protest day by Medical College students. Loudspeakers were installed facing Jagannath Hall, the venue of the Provincial Assembly. The Provincial Assembly was to meet at 3 pm. Chanting of various slogans including "Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai" and appeals to the legislators were continuously made through loudspeakers. The main approach to the Assembly was through the main road by the side of the hostel. The D.M.C. Hostel became the heart of the movement. The passage in front of the hostel was virtually under the control of students. The police in patrol pickups were moving to and fro to keep the road clear, but to no purpose.

There was an apprehension of possible raid. A dedicated underground worker, Nadera Begum, was in the hostel. It became urgently necessary to move her to a safer place to avoid possible arrest. On a quick glance around, the western side of the hostel was found free from any police coverage and I was requested to move her to my house. The situation was so pressing that there was no time to seek the consent of my parents. Made up in the disguise of a male, wearing salwar and shirt and covering the head with a turban made with a white bed sheet and given the impression of moustache with ink, she was whisked away in a rickshaw on the Baksibazar side of the hostel. I kept myself looking from the back of the rickshaw to make it sure that we were not followed. Finally I reached my house through various lanes in the old town. My mother enquired about the mustached young man, the peculiar dress and of my return at the unusual time. I explained her the situation quickly and also disclosed the identity of the 'young man'. My mother knew her family and readily took her to her room and got her dress changed, but was not quite willing to allow me to go back to my hostel.

I could eventually persuade her to agree returned to my hostel.

Protest demonstration was also held in the heart of the city. Police resorted to baton charge injuring many and arrested several hundred (Shahed Ali, 2000, Matrie Bhasha Dibash. Tamaddun Majlish). A huge procession of students and public, breaking the police barricades was approaching at the venue of Provincial Assembly. Members of the Assembly passing by the front of the hostel gate were approached and persuaded to support the cause and move necessary resolution in the Assembly. The venue of the movement by then was moved to the front of Dacca Medical College hostel gate which became the epicenter of the movement. There were spontaneous response with chanting of slogans and the movement gained momentum and in no time reached its climax. Tension rose to its height. Sher-e-Bangla came out of the Assembly hall and addressed the crowd saying in Avgi Mjv wUJe aHqQ-iv AvgtK cwilf K v ejZ w'f'Q byj (they are suppressing my voice, they are not allowing me to speak in the Assembly)

But in the face of tumultuous

movement of students and public hand in hand, Nazimuddin, Chief Minister of East Bengal had no other alternative but to agree to eight-point demand and signed the historic agreement with Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad (State Language Struggle Committee) on 15 March, 1948.

From 1948 to 1951, 11 March was observed as State Language Day, and there was no major incidence related to it. However, the election of 1950 was fought against Muslim League by Jukta Front (Joint Front) with 21-point demand. There was a landslide victory for Jukta Front. Student community as a whole worked very hard for the victory. The Chief Minister of East Pakistan, Mr Nurul Ameen was defeated at Nandail constituency at the hand of an MA final year student, Khaleque Nawaz.

We had the privilege of inviting leaders of Jukta Front -- Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Haque, Hussain Shaheed Shurawady and Moulana Bhashani -- to a dinner at our hostel. Honoured guests were received at the northern gate in front of Block No 1. We enquired of Mr Shurawady about the implementation of 21-point

programme. He pointed out his finger to Sher-e-Bangla, as if the responsibility of implementation lied on him alone. Later, when Shurawady became the Prime Minister of Pakistan, he claimed that, 20 points out of 21 have been achieved (purported to have been achieved, with the appointment of the Prime Minister of Pakistan from East Bengal).

On 20 January 1952, Mr Nazimuddin as Prime Minister of Pakistan denied to make Bengali state language of Pakistan. The utterance of Mr Nazimuddin was in betrayal of his agreement he made with the Sangram Parishad on 15 March 1948. In the meeting of 30 January held at the Bar Library, a committee was formed with Moulana Bhashani as chairman and 21 February was declared as the Language Day. Rest of the story is well known, and need no elaboration.

Giving world recognition to the Bengali's sacrifice for mother tongue, UNESCO proclaimed February 21 as "International Mother Language Day" -- a rare honour bestowed to February 21. It was initiated by a group of expatriates of different lingua franca (with selfless spirit of students)

including Bangladeshis residing in Canada. Rafique along with other nine language lovers belonging to Canada-based "Mother Language Lovers of the World" played the pioneering role for the recognition and declaration of February 21 as the International Mother Language Day. The other nine members were: Abdus Salam (mother tongue-Bangla), Albert Vinzon (mother tongue-Filipino), Carmen Cristobal (mother tongue-English), Susan Hodgins (mother tongue-English), Dr Kelvin Chao (mother tongue-Cantonese), Nazneen Islam (mother tongue-Kachi), Renata Martens (mother tongue-German), Karuna Joshi (mother tongue-Hindi). Their contribution for such a rare honour will be remembered with gratitude by the Bengali speaking people all over the world. It will also be remembered with gratitude the vigorous support given by different countries for declaration of 21 February as the "International Mother Language Day."

Dr Khan, a physician, is a front line language movement activist.