International Mother Language Day

21st February... What does this date mean to you?

Syeda Sabita Amin

ON this day in 1952, lives were lost but at the end of the day our nation marked Bengali as our mother language. The sacrifice of countless lives has brought us where we are today. So many people lost their lives to uphold the prestige and to defend the rights of their mother tongue.

On this very date in 2000, UNESCO declared it as the International Mother Language Day. But what really happened? I met up with my Uncle, Syed Muazzem Ali, Former Foreign Secretary, who had played a significant role in the adoption of Bangladesh's resolution on International Mother Language day. As he is a role model to me I couldn't wait to meet him. He lovingly gave me the history of how this date was marked into the lives of people all around the world.

In 1952, where were you and what did you witness?

Back then I was in school and resided with my family in Gopalganj, where my father Syed Mostafa Ali was posted. It obviously had an impact on both me and my family. My Uncle Syed Murtaza Ali wrote a book regarding a speech in 1947.

What is the background leading to proclamation of the International Mother Language day?

As you know Amar Ekushey, the Mahan Shaheed Dibash, is an unprecedented event in contemporary history, and holds a unique place in our struggle for emancipation and independence. It is a matter of pride for us that this day is now observed all over the world as International Mother Language Day. The UNESCO General Conference took a decision to that effect on 17 November 1999, when it collectively adopted a resolution tabled by Bangladesh and co-sponsored by 28 other countries. As the initiator of the proposal, Bangladesh has committed herself not only to protect and enrich her own mother language, but also to take initiatives for the preservation of 6000 other languages currently spoken around the world.

What was the process?

The proclamation of the day is a rare international honor for Bangladesh. Personally, it is the most satisfying moment in my diplomatic career, as I had the privilege to formally introduce the resolution as Bangladesh's Permanent Representative to UNESCO and also to pilot its adoption. The initiative for the proposal came from a multilingual group based in Canada, called the Mother Language Lovers of the World. They got in touch with United Nations and then with the UNESCO. They deserve our full praise for initiating the move. But the UN and UNESCO are inter-governmental bodies, and they cannot accept any proposal from individuals or private groups. The UNESCO, therefore, advised the group to get in touch with a member country, and submit the proposal as an official proposal. Consequently, the group got in touch with us and we directed them to approach our Government. Our government approved the proposal. We got the proposal officially just two days before the opening of the General Conference of UNESCO and it was submitted as a proposal from the Government of Bangladesh. All further negotiations on this issue took place at inter-governmental level. I had the privilege of undertaking the negotiations leading to adoption of the resolution.

Did our resolution have a smooth sail at the UNESCO General Conference?

Not at all. There is a misconception that our resolution was adopted without any effort. To someone not familiar with multilateral diplomacy, our proposal looks quite noble and non-controversial. But in reality, language issues touch on a highly sensitive and delicate subject in a number of multilingual member countries in Europe and Africa. These countries are currently engaged in internal conflicts based on their linguistic, ethnic, cultural and tribal divides. They were fully aware that the language movement was the first step in our struggle for freedom and independence and they were apprehensive that proclamation of the day might create new movements in their countries. Incidentally, some of these multilingual European countries are also principal contributors to the UNESCO budget. They have strong influence in all UNESCO deliberations, and were in a position to easily kill our initiative on both political and budgetary considerations. Naturally, I had to make sustained efforts to allay their apprehensions, and at the same time obtain broad-based co-sponsorship from other continents to demonstrate to them that our proposal has a much wider support. Despite our efforts, we were able to get only a limited number of co-sponsors from Europe. The entire deliberation took place in such a record speed that the Representatives of the multilingual member countries were taken by surprise. However, the underlying concern subsequently did surface, and they did try to block the formal launching of the day at the UNESCO Headquarters on 21 February 2000. Again, it was Colin Powell who came to our support.

In simple words explain what you felt when you heard that your work had paid off.

It was the proudest moment of my Diplomatic career.

And finally what is the relevance of this issue in our Country?

Well, this global phenomenon has important relevance to our own country. We have a homogenized population, and the overwhelming majority of our people speak Bangla, our national language. However, one must not forget that there are quite a few well-known tribal and ethnic languages in Bangladesh. There are roughly thirty minority ethnic and tribal groups, and about two million people speak in various tribal and ethnic languages and dialects. Some of these dialects are unique; some are derived from others. It is necessary to preserve our linguistic diversity and the government should take initiatives to protect these. The tribal people should have the opportunity to preserve and display one's language and cultural traits. Respect for each other's cultural and linguistic heri-