The mother tongue

S. I. Zaman laments on how, for all our posturing on February 21, we have let Bangla slide towards decline

LANGUAGES either evolve into something greater or become extinct --a sort of Darwinian "survival of the fittest." Nonetheless, development of language in all its facets is probably the greatest and the most sublime of all of man's creative attributes. It is the ultimate form of communication and interaction.

Bangla now ranks as the world's fifth most widely spoken language. Only Chinese, English, Spanish and Arabic have topped it. It even beats Hindi and French. And it has the added honour of being the only language for which people shed tears and blood so that they could speak and write freely in that language, without fear of suppression, without inhibition, without fear of condemnation, derision or scorn.

Thanks to Unesco, February 21 is now recognized as the International Mother Language Day, a fitting tribute to the sacrifice of those four students on a crisp February day of 1952 in Dhaka.

It has been well over half a century since February 21, 1952. Considering the gradual decadence of Bangla, the question whether or not Bangla has been given its due honour here at home, or indeed, whether or not the language was really worth the fight is really moot.

Needless to say, of all the languages in the Indian subcontinent Bangla is the most enterprising of them all, in terms of its vast literary output -- not something that can be said of its sister, "Hindi." The period beginning in the early nineteenth century and ending in perhaps late 60s of the last century could safely be called the heyday of Bangla and its literature.

Bangla literature was at its zenith in the 30s of the last century, when Tagore's literary works were buzz words among contemporary scholars, poets, politicians, statesmen, writers and thinkers; Nazrul was giving Bangla poems and songs a new dimension, the *Kollol Goshti* (analogous to the Bloomsbury group in London) was churning out writings, essays and pieces in Bangla, as had never been seen hitherto.

Even some notable figures from outside Bengal flocked to universities in the greater Bengal to study the language and its literature. Can we honestly feel that we still attract the same adulation for our mother tongue, Bangla, from outside?

The tragedy for Bangla, and indeed for *Ekushey*, is that, in its own native land, it has been relegated to a position below a foreign language called "English." Indeed, Bangla is officially the state language of Bangladesh. And we do see Bangla script on the ad signs, traffic signs, car signs, etc., and its presence is ubiquitous. And indeed, we all communicate in Bangla, or do we?

In fact, we have managed to banish from our lives the "true Bangla." What we speak is a bizarre hodgepodge of Bangla and English. And indeed, this colloquial degradation of the language of our middle class is a result of a subconscious effort to speak in English rather than in our mother tongue.

The lower class, or more appropriately the working class, speak in their regional rural dialects (not exactly Bangla, per se), which are only intelligible to those proficient in those dialects; and to the vast majority of the "educated" middle class, being at the receiving end of comments like "your English is bad and that's understandable, because English is not your mother tongue" may seem outright slanderous and can cause momentary discord.

But this same group of people would nonchalantly and gleefully declare that their Bangla is a bit sketchy due to years of neglect! Sketchy? It's your mother tongue, for God's sake! People often come up to me to say how strange it is that I should speak such



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