

## Special Supplement

## GLORIOUS MARTYRS' DAY &amp; INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2009

SATURDAY 21 FEBRUARY

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## INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

Bengalis. The central martyrs memorial built to commemorate the glorious contribution of language martyrs is a perpetual source of inspiration in our national life. The love of mother language is merged in the love of motherland and has become a principal weapon to fight against all kinds of injustice, dictatorship, religious prejudice and fanaticism. Its appeal is no longer confined to Bangladesh or to the geographical and cultural boundaries of Bengali language. One day the world organization realised this truth. 21st February no longer has remained the mother language day of Bengalis alone but has become the mother language day of people of different languages in all countries of the world.

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## 21st February International Mother Language Day

formally by a country and not by a private organization. When this was communicated to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina by the then Education Minister A.S.H.K. Sadek, Sheikh Hasina directed the Education Minister to ignore all bureaucratic complexities and diplomatic formalities and send the proposal urgently to the UNESCO to declare 21st February as the International Mother-Language Day.

With the right initiative of the Education Ministry of the Bangladesh government and the Bangladesh UNESCO National Commission, the formal proposal duly reached the UNESCO. Meanwhile during her visit to New York to attend the General Assembly session in September 1999 and again during her visit to Paris to receive the UNESCO Peace Prize, she discussed the issue with the relevant authorities.

The article on how the mother-language day got recognition written by Syed Moazzem Ali, Bangladesh Ambassador to France and Bangladesh Permanent Representative to UNESCO in 1999 that appeared in the fiftieth anniversary of Amar Ekushey supplement of the daily Janakantha is quite revealing. The English rendering of the important excerpts of the article reads: 'Initially, a Canada-based multi-national group, named Mother-Language Lovers of The World submitted a proposal to the UN Secretary General to declare February 21 as the International Mother-Language Day. The office of the UN Secretary General asked them to contact UNESCO in this regard. UNESCO was the right forum to consider language issue. Accordingly the Chairman of the Group Rafiqul Islam contacted the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. But UNESCO or UN both being inter-governmental organisations cannot officially accept any proposal from any private organisations or individuals, far less to take any decision in that respect. They therefore advised him to contact any member-state for their purpose. Rafiqul Islam contacted both me and Tozammel Huq (Tony), then a senior official of the UNESCO. We encouraged him much and explained how to proceed with our government on the issue.

Bangladesh UNESCO National Commission and the Education Ministry processed the proposal formally and submitted to the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her approval which she did immediately. This proposal was officially sent to the UNESCO Secretariat toward the end of September, 1999. The UNESCO Secretariat, however, distributed the proposal in draft form just before the start of the general session on October 26, 1999. Commenting on our proposal, they mentioned two issues. Firstly, they told us that a feasibility study of the proposal has to be made and also that the recommendations of the study needed to be forwarded to the UNESCO Advisory Board through the Advisory Committee on Linguistic Pluralism and Multi-lingual Education. Secondly, in view of UNESCO's budgetary constraints, it's financial aspects should be spelt out in clear terms.

Instead of UNESCO's viewpoints or their guideline, I discussed the matter with Tony Huq. Together we saw the then Deputy Director General of the UNESCO, General Collin Power. We explained to him that the main burden of our draft proposal was to lay emphasis on how to protect the fast vanishing languages in countries of the world and also to create general awareness among people in that regard. If we go for feasibility study and the proposal is submitted through the UNESCO's Executive Board and the Language Division, our efforts shall be delayed at least by two years and in the meantime many more languages shall be lost permanently. We assured him our draft proposal shall not require any extra budgetary provision. For, each of the member-state shall prepare their own schedules to observe the Day. Australian

We are deeply moved at the transformation of such an overwhelming prestigious event centering round Bengali language.

However, not one, but many responsibilities lie on us. We must remember this. I am speaking a few words in brief. First, in Bangladesh there are a few small nation groups. Without support and patronisation, not only the development of their languages will suffer, but their language may be threatened with extinction with the passage of time. It will be a great tragedy if that happens. Second, the literateurs of Bangladesh have been creating literature of high standard for a long time. But without translation we have failed to reach the outside world of different languages. We do not have much time to waste. Translation has got to be done in

citizen Power was fully aware of its urgency. After we had discussed with him about the issue, he agreed to our viewpoints and rescinded his earlier stand. He sent the proposal for consideration by the Second Commission of the General Assembly. I met the Chairman of the Commission, J. Bulmar of Slovakia and requested him to raise the issue for discussion at the Commission.

In our draft proposal we underscored the need for preservation of mother tongue. This normally should not create any problem for any member-state. But in reality, multilingual societies exist in many European and other countries and the issue of mother-tongue is utterly sensitive. Some of these countries are important funders to the UNESCO budget. What worried them most is that the Mother-Language Day, if announced, might provoke new discontentment in their own countries. Personally, I met the Permanent Representatives of those countries and convinced them that our main purpose was to protect the languages from extinction. We also laid stress on the historical realism that linguistic differences do not cause war, intolerance does, if we are respectful to each other's languages that surely will strengthen national and international solidarity.

Former Bangladesh Education Minister A.S.H.K. Sadek led Bangladesh delegation to the UNESCO general session starting from October 25 to November 2, 1999. He, in his speeches, highlighted the importance of mother-tongue along with other issues. We, in our bid to secure support to our cause, arranged meetings of our Education Minister with his counterparts of other nations. It indeed was due to our intense initiative and lobbying that we had been able to gain support of 28 nations in different continents. A repressed concern of some of the countries could however be perceived.

On November 2, 55 Ministers for Culture of various nations of the world met at a conference held at the UNESCO headquarters. Our government asked me to represent Bangladesh at the conference. I utilised this opportunity to the best of my capacity. I met the Ministers of many countries and sought their support to our proposal.

The language issue being a highly sensitive one, representatives of certain nations friendly to our cause, advised us to submit the draft proposal delineating its broader perspectives. Our major concern was that in case if any of the representatives ask for a feasibility report or for submitting the proposal through the committee on language issue and executive board, it would be nearly impossible to stop them from their move.

Finally, I was allowed to submit the draft proposal to the Second Commission on November 12. In my elaborate statement, I pointed out the role of the UNESCO to protect languages, expressed deep concern at the fast vanishing of languages and emphasised on the necessity of declaring the International Mother-Language Day for creating language awareness amongst nations. To underline the importance of declaring the Day on February 21, I mentioned that the example of embracing martyrdom by our people to protect the honour and dignity of our mother-tongue is an unparalleled event in the contemporary history.

The intense lobbying that we carried out in the background worked to our benefit. None of the countries opposed the proposal; it was accepted unanimously by the Second Commission. To one who does not have direct knowledge about the lobbying process or the multi-dimensional diplomatic manoeuvrings, he or she might consider it to be an easy job. But to us who had been pursuing the matter vigorously, it was an extra-ordinary achievement and gave us immense satisfaction no doubt. Lastly, the draft proposal as mentioned earlier was formally approved at the full session of

many languages as much in English, French, German, Russian etc as in eastern languages like Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Iraqi and Arabic. It is a daunting task. But with planning it is achievable and possible to make progress. Now is the time to begin the work with a short term and long term planning with concerted and coordinated efforts of department of foreign languages of private and public universities, foreign language Institute of Dhaka university and cultural centres of different Embassies. It is as much necessary to translate Bengali literary works into foreign languages as it is essential to translate the best literature of foreign languages into Bengali. It is urgent not only for literature but is also desirable for world amity. Much can be talked about. But I wish to conclude my writing here.

Translation: Abdul Hannan Writer-National Professor

the General Assembly. It surely was a historic achievement for our country and the nation that February 21 had been declared as the International Mother-Language Day. Later the present Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura formally inaugurated the Day at the headquarters through speeches, Bangla music and exhibition of books on language.

The real initiator of the proposal, Mother-Language Lovers of The World deserves compliments and praise. Our government nominated the President of the organisation, Rafiqul Islam and its member, Abdus Salam for awarding the Ekushey Padak. No doubt they have been rightly honoured. I personally supported the move and impressed upon the relevant quarters to accord them national honour. Those who made invaluable contribution to materialise our proposal include Tony Huq, Collin Power, J. Bulmar, Counselor Iftekhar Momen Chowdhury, First Secretary Mustafizur Rahman, Prof. Kafiluddin Ahmed, Mohammad Moinuddin and others, and their names justly need to be recorded as well.

No doubt the declaration of the International Mother-Language Day on Feb 21 by the UN is a singular achievement for our nation. We must now try to uphold the honour and dignity of our achievement with full accomplishment to our mother-tongue Bangla as state language.

In the 21st century, globalisation, free-market economy and free electronic culture are a serious threat to languages of most of the countries of the world. By the end of this century thousands of languages may slip into oblivion or turn into sub-language of under-developed communities.

In such a scenario, what is needed to protect the innumerable languages-known or less known-is to eschew all kinds of complexes about their own languages, letters and cultures and become respectful and conservative and never to accept any alternative language to their own. In the 21st century, English has emerged as the lingua-franca for international communication. May be for the sake of survival in the competitive world, our computer literacy might not be enough. We might have to learn English. But that should not be at the cost of our mother-tongue. Learning foreign language should be complementary to our mother-tongue, and not an alternative.

In Bangladesh, aside Bangla, there are other languages prevalent among different tribal communities like Chakma, Marma, Garo, Khashi, Santal, Tripura and Onrao. Bangla-speaking people should be respectful to them and help develop their indigenous languages. It should be the responsibility of the Bangla-speaking people to come forward to protect the languages that had co-existed with Bangla since ages from extinction and help their nourishment.

The message of the International Mother-Language Day urges us to be respectful to all languages of the world and also to be caring to one's own mother-tongue along with others. We should be mindful to see that our language does not swallow any other languages, and other languages as well should behave in the same manner. Our mother-tongue is Bangla. It should be ingrained in our psyche to passionately love and respect other languages no matter better or less known.

Here as I involve in discourse on our cherished mother-tongue, Bangla, I am however reminded of our much lamented language-hero and martyr of our liberation war, Munir Chowdhury's unforgettable utterance:

"আমার মাতৃভাষা কি? বাংলা ভাষা। সমগ্র বাংলা ভাষা। বিচ্ছিন্নপন্থী বাংলা ভাষা। অভিশানে আছে যেহেতু রমণী মাতৃ সমাধীনোয়োগ্য। শৃঙ্খল থেকে তন্ময়, গর্ভধারণী থেকে পিতৃরমণী। বাংলা নয় আমার মাতৃভাষার ফোলাশত রূপ। তারা সব গর্ভনীর সহচরী। আমার মাতৃভাষা তিব্বতের গুহাচারী, মনসার দর্পক্ষকারী, আরাকানের রাজসভার মনিময় অলংকার, বরেন্দ্রভূমির বাউলের উদাস আশ্রয়। মাইকেল-রবীন্দ্রনাথ-নজরুল ইসলাম আমার মাতৃভাষা। আমার মাতৃভাষা বাংলা।"

Before I sign off this article, we may also remember the immortal lines of Atul Prasad: 'মোদের গরব মোদের আশা আঁমরি বাংলা ভাষা' and of Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury's 'আমার ভাইয়ের রক্তে রাঙানো একুশে ফেব্রুয়ারি আমি কি ভুলিতে পারি।'

Translation: Syed Badrul Haque

## Bangla, Only Bangla We want As the State Language

Asad Chowdhury

Even the rain becomes longed alphabets  
The folk songs gave consent  
Demand for petro increases day by day in suburb  
The lean and tall Abdul Latif from Britania Hall  
Makes the city cry, singing his poetic song  
Long before the tri-coloured British flag

Comes down slowly  
By the soaked hands of brothers' blood

The villages transform into cities,  
Nabisco bread replaces the green 'kolmi'spinach  
The Kanan Debis and Jagomoy Mitras amazed us,  
But still, how mighty the alphabets are!  
We want Bangla as the State Language ...

Rights for living and for language blends together  
Enough time has passed  
The water and air of Dhaka becomes polluted.

Yet the soul cries  
Bangla, only Bangla we want as the state language  
In rains; folk songs; among cities and villages,  
Everywhere—In this green Bangla.

Translation: Fatema Zohra Haque

## THE SONG OF EKUSHE

Mohadev Shaha

Ekushe means they are coming  
Salam is coming, Barkat is coming  
Tajul is coming

Ekush means the return of war of independence  
the brave hearted youths facing bullets are returning  
the invincible courage in the youthful eyes are returning

The martyrs are returning  
freedom is returning  
Bangladesh is returning

In this land of Padma and Meghna '52 is again returning  
'69 is returning  
'71 is returning

Ekush means it is coming, dream is returning, future is returning  
Ekushe does not mean past, but tomorrow  
Not death but birth

Ekushe means Hijol Tomal plants of traditional Bengal  
Vatiali song, pond garlanded by Shapla flowers  
the boatman of Padma  
the open city streets of Dhaka, long line of procession  
bare foot walking  
The plaintive note whole day 'Can I forget?'

Ekush means it is coming  
The day of Bengali language is coming  
The day of Krisnachura and palash flowers is coming  
the day of shivering world is coming

This Ekushe mans smell of golden paddy in the field  
The silver fish in the river  
the boaman with sails

Ekush means dream spread beyond the horizon about future  
Ekush means the painting of Jainul  
Poetry of Nazrul  
Rabindranath's heart warming song

Ekush means my golden Bengal  
Ekush means first of Baishakh  
Ekush means the foot steps of martyrs  
Ekush means what is immortal everlasting

Ekush means they are coming  
the martyrs are coming  
freedom is coming  
Bangladesh is coming

Translation: Abdul Hannan

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## 21st February In Context of Language-based Politics In South Asia

favour of Hindi as the common language of India, and wanted to impose Hindi on the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Benaras. Their decision had it that India upon independence should adopt Hindi as state language.

Although their movement was in low key and not widespread, it was quite visible. The Muslims of Benaras, in their response, started political activities with a view to protecting their language Urdu. This was how the language-based politics got started in South-Asia. Beyond politics, it also communalised the language. Hindi belonged to the Hindus and Urdu to the Muslims. In other words, language too was now brought within the fold of religion.

But it was a common knowledge that Hindi originated through a cross-breed of languages during the Mughal period. Hindi was the mixture of many local sub-languages. This language was introduced as a common language; it contained many Persian words spoken by the rulers, particularly in the Armed Force. It can be assumed that Persian words influenced the Hindi language considerably during the Mughal rule. This hybrid language was styled Hindusthani. It got currency as a uniform language all over Hindustan. Communalising of Hindusthani began right from the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Hindusthani language was divided into two distinct divisions. Persian words were expunged from the Hindusthani and replaced by Sanskrit words, and with its Devnagri alphabets Hindi became the language of the Hindus. As against this, Hindusthani with Arabic alphabets containing Arabic/Persian was the Urdu language for the Muslims and the language was seized with communal character. This was precisely the background of Dr. Ziauddin's proposal of 1947. He considered Urdu to reflect Muslim identity and that it was the inspirator-language for the Muslims.

Sir Syed Ahmad, the then front-ranking Muslim leader in his reaction to the decision taken at Benaras in 1867 said that henceforth Muslims and Hindus shall not be able to take any unified stand on any issue. It was the precursor to the political divisions between the Hindus and the Muslims. His farsighted remark was 'May be at present there is no open hostility between the two religious communities. But in future this hostility would increase manifold because of the

educated segment of the two communities. Those who would be living in future should be able to see this transformation. Hector Bolitho, biographer of Mohammad Ali Jinnah commenting on the Benaras episode wrote: 'Thus was born the thought of the parting of the peoples, to which Mohammad Ali Jinnah became the heir, although many years were to pass before he acknowledged that it was his destiny to fulfill Syed Ahmad Khan's disturbing prophecy'. What he uttered in 1948 at the Ramna Race course and Curzon Hall that Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan was as per his earlier decision. He like Dr. Ziauddin, ardently believed that Urdu was the language of the Muslims, and their number in this regard was not significant. He in his last days admitted to his personal physician that his decision was wrong.

The attempt to impose the mother-tongue on the minority

citizens of Pakistan was essentially guided by religious emotion that provoked the Bengalees to start their powerful resistance movement. The constitution of 1956 had to be amended to accommodate Bangla as one of main state languages of Pakistan following successful culmination of the language movement launched by the Bengalees. To elucidate, unless the politics of language was started and also the intense movement for Bangla initiated, Urdu alone would have remained as the sole state language of Pakistan. Evidently, politics of language greatly impacted the character of the constitution of Pakistan.

What happened in Sri Lanka was just the opposite which however apparently seemed so natural. The overwhelming majority of people speak Sinhala. On the other hand, the language of the minority community is Tamil. Racially too they were Tamil. In 1956

constitution, Sinhala was recognised as the only state language which exemplified majoritarian democracy. The language of the second largest community went by default. This was the root cause of Tamil rebellion which had turned out now to be a powerful fighting force.

Let us now turn to India. In 1961 blood was shed in Barak valley to protect the honour of Bangla. But on a general assessment, the manifestation of the politics of

language in India was different. The administrative boundaries of states that was demarcated after independence was not compatible with areas of various linguistic characteristics. For example, in Madras state there were multi-lingual people such as Tamil, Telegu, Kanara and Malayalam. Telegu-speaking people started the language politics first. In 1953, despite strong opposition by Nehru, they were able to get Telegu-speaking state, Andhra. Taking lesson from this experience, Indian government decided to set-up States' Reorganisation Commission. In 1965, the boundaries of Indian states were reorganised as per recommendations of the Commission as under:

State	Language
Madras	Tamil
(later Tamilnaru and presently Chennai)	
Kerala	Malayalam
Mahisur	Kanara
Gujrat	Gujrati
Maharastra	Marathi

In 1960, language-wise Punjab was divided into two states, Punjab and Hariyana. Punjab was for Punjabi-speaking and Hariyana was for Hindi-speaking people.

Hindi, of course, was the lingua franca of India as was decided at Benaras in 1867. But, fifteen regional languages were recognised at a time by the Indian constitution such as:

1. Asomi 2. Bangla 3. Gujrati 4. Hindi 5. Kanara 6. Kashmini. 7. Malayalam 8. Marathi. 9. Uria 10. Punjabi 11. Sindhi 12. Tamil 13. Telegu 14. Sanskrit and 15. Urdu.

There are many days set aside by the UN that are observed by member-states on different dates. One such dates is 21st February, International Mother-Language Day which has its origin in Bangladesh in South Asia.

