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## Language Movement: Some Issues and Perspectives

participants of language movement that they had involved themselves in every stage of the movement. When action against section 144 started in 21 February morning, a team of female students also came out to the street. At the outset two teams of male students got out and they were arrested by the police. The third team comprised of female students. As the team advanced, the police started baton charge and threw teargas shell on them. The female students did not stop. They rather tried to proceed towards the general assembly hall. Excited students were throwing brickbats towards the police. The police opened fire. Women were equally active alongside men in such a tense situation that day. They were not afraid at all. They were courageous enough to make the movement successful even though baton charge, teargas and bullets were hovering on their head. Some of the female students had stayed at the varsity campus the whole day and returned home in the evening.

With their firm dedication women were absolutely the frontline participants of the history of language movement.

The general assembly was in session at the time of police firing on the procession. The news of police firing reached there during the session. Mawlana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish first raised the issue and demanded that there should be investigation of police firing first and the session should run afterwards. Assembly member Anowara Khatun also had her strong and emphatic speech. After a very hot and harsh debate 35 assembly members including Anowara Khatun came out of the council room. The disrespectful event (women lagging behind) had not happened at all in the assembly session that day.

Rafiquddin was the first martyr of 21 February. His head skull was blown up by police firing. Instantly after the incident Amanul Haq and Kazi Idris had this historic scene photographed with the assistance of medical student Halima Khatun. That day our nurses became furious against the government action as they engaged themselves for serving the injured ones at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Thus, the incident of protest became luminous with their support and co-operation.

Protest, procession and hartal were observed across the country including Dhaka city on 22 February. The women who could not join the procession threw flower petals on the procession. There is no reason to consider this issue as a trivial one. It was the women who introduced the custom of offering flowers to the procession as a source of inspiration. Many in their reminiscence have mentioned that many female students including Nurunnahar Kabir had written posters the whole night. Their names have been elapsd from the history. Badges were made through cutting the black saree of a woman. She is also forgotten. In fact, women were not running after their fame at that time. They wanted the success of the movement. They wanted to uphold the dignity of mother language. This achievement of women paved the way of a huge horizon for them in the history. The concerted effort of both men and women had created history. The goal obtained through the glorious language movement was 'Independence'- the birth of Bangladesh.

In the history of independent Bangladesh it is very often said that the issues covering from language movement to liberation war need to be nurtured deeply in the nation's history from its social and political point of view. Father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with his judicious thinking and deep prudence had ushered our socio-cultural history from language movement to the liberation war. Bangabandhu mentioned his own participation in the language

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## 21st February: International Mother Language Day

Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UNO, of declaring a day named 'International Mother Language Day,' this group said:

The Bengalis have played a very important role in protecting their Mother language from serious crisis related to its existence. In today's world there are many Nations and/or Communities still facing serious crisis and threat against their Mother Languages. (quoted from photocopy of the original letter)

Ten members of seven nations and languages were signatories to this letter of the 'Mother Language Lovers of the World.' They were: Albert Vinsion and Carmen Cristobal (Philippines), Jason Morin and Susan Hogins (English), Dr. Calvin Chao (Cantonese), Nazneen Islam (Ka-Chi), Renate Martins (German), Karuna Jossi (Hindi) and Rafikul Islam and abdul Salam (Bengali). The initiative-takers were informed from the office of the Secretary General that they needed to establish contact, not with New York, but Paris, with the UN organization for Education, Science and Culture, UNESCO, there, One Bengali officer working at the UNO, Hassan Ferdous contributed significantly to this process.

One year had passed in the mean time. But, Rafikul Islam and Abdus Salam had not got frustrated at all. Rafikul Islam was perhaps the first to make a phone-call to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Anna Maria Mejlok of the Language Section of the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, referring to that phone-call from Rafikul Islam, wrote to him, "Regarding your request to declare the 21 February as International Mother Language Day, the idea is indeed very interesting." That means that it was then that the idea appeared 'very interesting' to an official of an international organization. On April 8, Maria wrote again to Rafikul Islam residing then in Canada as follows, "Of course, as I also have mentioned to you, the eventual adoption of the document depends on the interest of the Board Member." That meant that the proposal had to be raised not by any individual, but through a member-state of the Governing Body of the UNESCO. This official, Maria, at the language-section of UNESCO-headquarters was perhaps personally interested in this matter. So, she sent Rafikul Islam addresses of some member-states of the governing body of the UNESCO. Bangladesh, India, Canada, Finland and Hungary were among them. Proposal, and very short time was left for that.

When Rafikul Islam contacted the Minister of Education in Dhaka, it sent a note to the Prime Minister's office very speedily, as it was a state issue. The Ministry, requesting for urgent action, wrote as follows,

Our Proposal regarding International Mother Language Day must reach the UNESCO headquarters before September 10, 1999. ... Under the circumstances, the summary is being placed before the Prime Minister for her kind consideration.

Only two days' were to go, Students of history, on behalf of the whole nation, may, at this point, remain not only thankful, but grateful also, to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and Education Minister, A. S.H.K. Sadek. Bypassing rigid rules of bureaucracy, these two persons took a historical decision. They sent the proposal to the UNESCO headquarters, without going through the formal procedure of passing a file at the Prime Minister's secretariat.

That was Thursday, September 9, 1999. A proposal and its defense in a paragraph of seventeen lines, signed by Mr. Kafiluddin Ahmed, the Secretary of the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO (BNCU), reached Paris. The last sentence read that Bangladesh "proposes that 21 February be sacrificed their lives on this very date in 1952.

That was the 157<sup>th</sup> session of the Executive Board of the UNESCO and its 30<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. But, two big problems cropped up at the UNESCO. Firstly, UNESCO thought that observing such a day would entail preparing a big budget. Thoughts of necessity of such budget for every year were about to lead to a rejection of the proposal right at the beginning. At the same time, the Director General of the UNESCO tried to name it as International Mother Tongue Day, And not as International Mother Language Day, He proposed

movement in his address at a Bangla Academy literary congregation in 1974. He said, "Then came the blood-stained Falgun of 1952. I was in jail. I was transferred to Dhaka Medical college hospital from the jail for treatment. From there, I made contact with all members of the All Party Movement Council through a police sub inspector named Manik Mia. They decided to proceed with the movement of 21 February after having consultation with me. I also started fast unto death strike from 17 February on their advice. I continued that strike till 27 February. My friends of that time may recall that incident. Our movement was successful that day. Bangalee's spirit of independence and nationalism movement got momentum through the blood-stained path of 21 February."

Bangabandhu in his speech at Engineering Institute on 24 January, 1972 said "The 1952 language movement was not merely a movement of attaining state recognition for Bangla language; it was Bangla's movement for political, economic, literary and cultural emancipation."

In his 10 January 1972 address at Suhrawardi Uddayan he said "You also know that it was decided that I would be sent to the gallows. A grave was also dug for me beside my cell. I am a Muslim. I know, a Muslim dies only once. So I decided that I would not give in. At the time of proceeding towards the gallows I would say I am a Bangalee, Bangla is my country, Bangla is my language."

This was how Bangabandhu evaluated the language movement and mother tongue. Because of his political farsightedness and extraordinary prudence our country and mother language could reach its pinnacle of glory.

There was a meeting at the Bangla Academy premises on the observance of first 21 February in 1972. It was presided over by poet Sufia Kamal. She said "Many of our friends are no more today. Grasses are still blood-stained. Promise upon them those who have dedicated themselves that you will protect your independence. You will save the dignity of Bangla ". The people of Bangla are quite vigilant to protect the independence. Bangla language is recognized in the country's constitution as the state language of the republic. UNESCO declared 21 February as the International Mother Language Day in 1999. Then Sheikh Hasina was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. On receiving approval from the education Minister and subsequently from the Prime Minister, the UNESCO Commission of Bangladesh submitted the proposal to the UNESCO Headquarters on time. 28 Members of UNESCO endorsed Bangladesh's proposal in black and white. A woman, Sheikh Hasina the Prime Minister and the head of the government realized the importance of the matter through her wisdom and quickly decided to acquire the 'Day'. We do not want to mention the frustration that might have happened if it were late in taking this timely step. Taking the quick decision, she ordered for settling down the issue on behalf of Bangladesh. Here also the wisdom of woman was proved. 6 members of the 10-member committee that took the initiative of declaring the international Mother Language Day in Vancouver were women. The program specialist of the UNESCO language department was a woman also.

Changes in women's political and social condition have started after many years of language movement. Starting from the head of the government down to a garment worker, there is no scope of any second thought for women. The women have advanced a lot. Development in women has got momentum. The women did not mistake in identifying their position instantly after '47 and onwards. As we recall the issues covering from the language movement to the liberation war, that bright side of independent Bangladesh becomes luminous instantly. There, the souls of the mother language and the independence mingle with each other.

(Translation: Abdulla-Al-Shahin)

sanctioning a fund of .1 million dollars and placing of the issue as a Feasibility Study two years later at the 160<sup>th</sup> session of the Executive Board. The relevant decision of the UNESCO read as follows:

The Director General has no objection to this draft resolution. He feels, however, that it would be advisable to prepare first a feasibility study. ... International Mother Tongue Day (N.B. not mother Language Day) will be carried out and will be submitted to the Executive Board at its 160<sup>th</sup> Session.

## Diplomatic Efforts of the then Education Minister

Even in one such set of circumstances, A. S. H. K. Sadek, Bangladesh's Education Minister attending the Assembly, launched some diplomatic efforts. On one night he arranged for a meeting with the leader of the Pakistan delegation, Ensuring Pakistan's support for the proposal was very much necessary. For in consideration of the political and cultural questions over which incidents of 21 February took place, there was possibility of sensitive reaction to Pakistan's response. A positive role of that country could influence the support of other Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia. In 1999, a military government was ruling Pakistan. So the Education

Minister of Pakistan had not joined the Assembly, her Education Secretary was leading the Pakistan delegation. During the meeting, A. S. H. K. Sadek marked that the Education Secretary of Pakistan had at one time worked under him in Pakistan Civil Service. What else was marked is that the Education Secretary of Pakistan could talk very well in Bengali. That meeting thus became very fruitful. He assured of his support to the proposal. A tea-party was arranged the next morning in honour of the Saudi Education Minister. The Minister said that he would convey his opinion about the matter at a later time. The Bangladesh Education Minister could well get it that as it was a matter of 1952, the Saudi Minister wanted to give out his opinion after knowing Pakistan's opinion. At a later time, Saudi Arab turned so enthusiastic that they turned into joint mover of the proposal of declaring 21 February the International Mother Language Day.

Some problems were there form the European countries. They did not have any objection to declaring International Mother Language Day, but they raised question about the date of 21 February. Bangladesh Minister for Education placed it with logic and emotion before the countries of the West that the Bengalees were the only people in the world who had shed blood for their rights to the mother language, and that happened on 21<sup>st</sup> February. As May 1<sup>st</sup> bore glories of the happenings at Chicago happenings of 21<sup>st</sup> February were equally significant.

On getting the proposal of International Mother language Day. Papua New Guinea of the Pacific Ocean realized that different clans and national entities of their country had hundreds of separate languages, many of which had been moving towards extinction. Taking zeal at he proposal of declaring 21<sup>st</sup> February the International Mother Language day, they offered to become a supporter-member.

A. S. H. K. Sadek came back to Bangladesh on November 4, 1999 on completing this 'primary phase' of declaring 21 February the International Mother Language Day. He conveyed the information to BSS with joy at the airport. BSS circulated it on the 4<sup>th</sup> November. Among the dailies of the country, only Borer Kagoj published it on 5<sup>th</sup> November in half-column box news with the heading, 'On the way to International Mother Language Day' Bhorer Kagoj

The Monument  
Alauddin Al Azad

Have they destroyed your memorial monument?  
Don't you fear, comrade,  
We are still here—  
A Family of forty million, alert and wide awake.

The base that no emperor could ever crush,  
At whose feet the diamond crown, the blue proclamation,  
The naked sword and the tempestuous hoof  
Crumbled into dust,  
We are that simple hero, that unique crowd,  
We who work in fields, row on rivers, labour in factories!  
Have they destroyed your brick Monument?  
Well, let them, don't you fear, comrade,  
We, a family of forty million are alert and wide awake.

What kind of a death is this?  
Has anyone seen such a death?  
Where no one weeps at the head of the departed,  
Where all sorrows and pain from the Himalayas to the sea  
Only come together and blossom  
Into the colour of a single flag!  
What kind of a death is this?

Has anyone seen such a death  
Where no one laments any estrangement?  
Where the sitar only turns into the  
Gorgeous stream of a mighty waterfall!  
Where the season of many words  
Leads the pen to an era of poetry!

Have the destroyed your brick monument?  
Well, let them. We forty million masons  
Have built a monument with the melody of violin  
And the bright colours of our purple heart.

The lives of the martyrs float like islands  
On the deep starry eyes of rainbows and palash flower;  
We have etched for you their names through the ages  
On the foamy stone of eternal love.  
That is why, comrade,  
On the granite peak of our thousand fists  
Shines like the sun  
The glow of a mighty pledge.

(Translation: Kabir Chowdhury)

further wrote as follows,

....there will be voting through secret ballot on the proposal from Bangladesh regarding this. Votes will be cast by delegates from 188 member states of the UNESCO. ... A. S. H. K. Sadek Bangladesh Minister for Education, told BSS yesterday that he was hopeful that all the member-states of the UNESCO would vote in favour of this proposal from Bangladesh regarding the honour of mother languages. (Bhorer Kagoj, November 5, 1999)

Thus, finally it was possible on November 17 (1999) for 21 February to secure the status of the 'International Mother Language Day'. In the session, Saudi Arab joined Bangladesh as mover of the proposal. The names of Ivory Coast, Italy, Indonesia, Iran, Oman, Comoros, Gambia, Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Bahamas, Benin, Belarus, India, Vanuatu, Micronesia, Egypt, Russian Federation Lithuania, Sri Lanka, Syria and Honduras were declared as its supporters.

## International Mother Language Institute

At the festive gathering of Paltan, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a declaration of setting up an International Mother Language Institute for research on protection of the honour and rights of the near-extinct and

developing languages of the world.

Actually, one coincidental situation developed there regarding this. In the month of July of 1999 Mr. Rejeeb Humayun, Professor of Dhaka University, met the Education Minister A. S. H. K. Sadek, and placed a letter for setting up an organization named International Mother Language Institute. He therein suggested how one archive could be set up for preserving identity and flow of different languages of the world. As the proposal appeared important to him, the Minister advised Professor Humayun to submit this to the Government in the form of a project. No sooner had Dr. Rajeeb Humayun prepared and submitted one tentative proposal for the project, the declaration of recognition of 21 February as the International Mother Language Day came of

17<sup>th</sup> November. The proposal for such a project came at a very due time, and it could be termed historical.

The Language Movement had its inception for the state-status of Bengali language. It can be easily guessed what could have happened if the plotting for imposing Urdu on the mother language of the Bengalees had succeeded. In 1952, the demand of the Bangalees was: Bengali will have to be given the status of one of the state languages of Pakistan. The worlds 'one of the' implied that the Bengalees were respectful to other languages of the then Pakistan. Now that the Pakistanies are no longer here, no question of domination of Urdu either is there, But, mother tongues of national entities other than the Bengalees are there. Transformed into International Mother Language Day, 21<sup>st</sup> February has now turned her eyes in the direction of saving those mother tongues of those nationalities also. The Bengalees are a great nation, their philosophy of language had to be accepted by the whole mankind.