

Bangla a UN language?

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BANGLA reached international heights for the first time at the hands of Rabindranath Tagore when he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. That a poet from a far-off land was awarded the world's most prestigious literary accolade brought his language into global focus. For the second time Bangla caught the attention of the world in the year 1952 when Bengali people's love of their language gave rise to a historic movement. Bangla gains a permanent position of dignity when it was declared the state language of new-born Bangladesh by its constitution. The proud and independent people of Bangladesh valued it so highly that their leader Sheikh Mujib addressed the UN General Assembly in Bangla in 1974. In the course of events, the Bangalee's 'Mother Language Day' (21st February) was declared the 'International Mother Language Day' in 1999 by UNESCO in commemoration of the historic Language Movement of 1952. With all these achievements, the people of Bangladesh feel very enthusiastic about seeing their beloved mother tongue much further from the present position.

proposed in the UN General Assembly that Bangla be one of its official languages. She put forward the proposal during her address to its 64th Session. She argued that Bengali as a language holds a "singular place as a symbol of people's faith in the power of languages to sustain cultures, and indeed the identity of nations". The Parliament led by her passed a resolution in 2009 endorsing her claim following which the Indian State of West Bengal also passed a similar resolution in its parliament. Apart from these governmental efforts, many private/ personal measures are also being taken in support of this popular cause.

But the United Nation has so far shown no sign of cognizance of the importance of the case. Why the UN is so indifferent to this enormous public demand is not very clear. It is not as if they have set the seal on the process of inclusion of any more official language(s). As a matter of fact, there is no hard and fast rule as such about the inclusion of languages in the UN. The UN Charter, in its 1945 constituent document, did not categorically provide for any official languages. The Charter was, however, passed in five languages (Chinese, French, Russian, English, and Spanish). In 1946, the first session of the UN General Assembly adopted the above-mentioned five

languages as official and two languages (English and French) as working languages. The second session of the General Assembly (1947) adopted permanent rules of procedure relating to UN languages in conformity with the 1946 rules, but with an exception to their application. The 1947 rules did apply only to the General Assembly, not to other UN organs.

The proposal to add Spanish as a third working language was passed on 11 December 1948. Again in 1968, Russian, and in 1973 Chinese were added as the working languages of the General Assembly. Arabic was made both an official and a working language of the GA in the same year (1973). Thus all six official languages were also made working languages of the GA.

The six official languages (Chinese, French, Russian, English, Spanish and Arabic) used in the UN are spoken either as mother tongue or second language by 2.8 billion people in the world who are less than half of the world population (the world population now is 7 billion). So the UN cannot equally represent the interest of the speakers of the rest of the languages. Language is not merely a means of communication in a people, it also represents their beliefs and disbeliefs, hopes and aspirations, culture and society. So the non-inclusion of

other major languages of the world may amount to a disregard of the majority of people. Being the largest human organization, the UN should not indulge in it. It should rather give all the major languages room for global recognition.

In addition, to include a language as an official or a working language of the UN is not as difficult as the inclusion of the members of its security council where the tug of war is very intense. One may clinch the deal based on the simple logic that the UN is the world biggest association of the people, so the language spoken by a larger population should be accepted as one of its official languages.

A number of languages like Portuguese, German, Italian, Japanese, Hindi and Urdu are waiting in eager anticipation of being included in the UN official language list. The respective countries are strongly laying their claim to it. Bangladesh has recently appeared on the scene. Could she be able to outdistance her major rivals for this selection?

Although it is hard to come by, it is not impossible. It is not always the military might that matters. Ban Ki-moon was not selected as the UN Secretary General on the basis of his country's martial power. The UN has internationalized our 'Mother Language Day' recog-

nizing the sacrifice of lives made by Bangladeshis for the right to language. The reason why they have dignified the 'Bengali Language Movement' should apply to the case of selecting the historic language as one of its official languages.

For the above reasons, the proposal for making Bangla a UN language has found favour with the people of Bangladesh. But we are not ultra-nationalistic. We do not want to upset the apple cart of others. We want more languages to be the official language of the UN including our Bangla. It is the sixth largest language of the world in terms of native speakers. As many as 300 million people across the world speak the language. The number is far larger than that of the French speakers, and nearly equal to that of the Arabic speakers. So it has got every right to be selected as one of the UN official languages. The UN can easily increase the number of its languages by taking one or more from among the languages of the claiming countries. Where's the harm in that???

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Saga of our independence

MAHBUB HUSAIN KHAN

HERE are two significant dates in the history of our independence, Twenty-first February and twenty-sixth March. There are other memorable dates and occasions, as also days of tragedy when our leaders, including Bangabandhu and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman have been assassinated and when Bangalis have risen in protest against colonial domination and sacrificed their lives to demolish dictatorship. But these two dates still reign supreme.

The first occasion which ignited the Bengali ire and conscience was when Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared at Dhaka that 'Urdu and Urdu alone..' would be the state language of Pakistan. And on twenty-first February when it was declared by the Bangalis that Bangla should be the country's State Language, it was the beginning of the end of the Pakistan as a nation of which East Pakistan was a part. Personally I have taken part in all of the twenty-first February memorial ceremonies from 1953 (with my father and till his death on 7th July, 1957), excepting the years 1968 when I was away from Bangladesh. In 1952, on 21st February my father was at the Dhaka University campus. My mother and myself stayed at home, though we were supposed to attend the wedding of a cousin of my father's on that day. This marriage did not survive and the divorced groom died a few years after 1952.

Every year since 1953, on Ekushey February, we have seen posters, flyers, booklets and books dedicated to Ekushey February which always leads onto 26th March 1971 and then 16th December 1971. In February of 1995, Syed Shamsul Haque published his novel in verse from Antargata

which recounts the drama of 1971, as played out in a village in Rangpur (Syed Shamsul Haque's birthplace), and the aftermath of the Liberation War. Freedom fighters, collaborators, moralists, opportunists, the village and the city (Rangpur) are interwoven in the author's very own irrepressible literary style in which the tale of genocide, the mourning of deaths, and the celebration of victory earned keeps us reading tilt the very last verse.

The litterateurs and journalists have always been in the forefront of the 'Ekushey' publications. The National Press Club has been publishing an Ekushey collection, These collections contain poems, essays, stories about Ekushey February and our liberation struggle, and about

contemporary Bangladesh sixty years after 1952. Each poem or essay is in a Class by itself, and the authors form the 'honour roll' of personalities of Ekushey and the Voice of Liberation. The 'Ekushey Shonkolon' is an example of what literary and cultural

innovation and intellectual effort can attain. The saga of our independence evolves from such collections.

THE new millennium opened with international recognition of our language martyrs sacrifice and our movement for linguistic, cultural and national identity. With the designation of Ekushey February

Almost the whole of the population of Bangladesh, almost the whole of the states of West Bengal, Tripura and some of the people of Assam and Meghalaya have Bangla as their mother tongue. Taking into account the Bengali diaspora spread all over the world, about 250 million people have Bangla as their mother tongue. This is quite

a significant number considering the fact that the number of people who speak English, which can truly claim to be a universal language, is no more than 500 million.

To propagate the linguistic characteristics of Bangla, the Bangla Academy was inaugurated by the then Chief Minister Abu Husain Sarkar on December 3, 1955. I was present on the occasion along with my parents, my father

Muhammad Husain Khan (who died on 7th July 1957) and my mother Khodeja Khatun (who died on 3rd February, 1990) Since then, Bangla Academy has been the centre for ideological and political protest, and the evolution of the Bangla language and culture.

Though sanctioned, funded and nurtured by the Pakistan government from 1955 till the promulgation of Martial Law in 1958, Bangla Academy was like a neglected child who should have remained invisible for the rest period under the Pakistan government. Yet, much of the students political and cultural protest during the period 1958-71 were centred in and around Bangla Academy, and were philosophically encouraged and actually participated in by the management and employees of the Academy.

The very building, which was originally Burdwan House, that had seen the hatching of conspiracies against the language movement of 1948 and unleashed the bloodbath of February 21, 1952, is now the symbol of Bangalee poets, Bangalee culture and Bangalee literary tradition and intellectualism.

Although a gathering of hook lovers and display of books took place at die Bangla Academy after liberation, the first formal Bol Mela started in 1981 with 14 stalls. This has now grown to over four hundred stalls every year. The Ekushey Boi Mela, a celebration of the Bengali way of life, is also a celebration of youth. It is also away to inculcate the spirit of Bengali nationalism and pride in our traditions in the generations born after 1971.

Salam, Jabbar, Barkat and Rafique laid down their lives for cause of Bengali language and culture. They have become part of our life. And through establishing the International Mother Language Day on February 21, Bangladesh and its people have become a glorious part of the history of the world.

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ARTWORK: RIANA RAHMAN

as International Mother Language Day global recognition was given to our role in ~'indicating the importance of the mother tongue in the national context and in our private lives. The meaning of the term 'mother tongue is that all children learn their language on their mother's laps.

International Mother Language Day is our moment

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hopes and aspirations, thoughts and ideas are reflected. The eventful Language Movement of 21st February has decisively proved that these aspects of a nation are by all means different from those of other nations and that no nation agrees to accept anything imposed on it by force. From this point of view, our 21st February is a symbol of universalism and testifies to a fact that relates to all languages and peoples of the world.

Bengali is spoken by a large number of people in Assam, Tripura and especially West Bengal as their first language. Bengali literature and poetry has been enriched by many reputed litterateurs and poets born in West Bengal. However, the common people of West Bengal are not rigid about expressing themselves through a pure Bengali language environment. They rather tend to merge in mainstream Indian culture. But the form and use of Bangla in

Bangladesh is much more convenient being the state language. Here the Bengali language and our culture go hand in hand.

In our country Bangla still needs to be given proper attention. We observe the day of 21st February with a lot of enthusiasm, including a month-long book fair, decorating the mausoleum, recalling the martyrs, discussing the significance of the day, telecasting programs on different TV channels, publishing write ups and so on. But unfortunately after the month of February all the enthusiasm fades away sooner than expected. What we are worried about here too is that Bangla is also losing its decency and purity by the aggression of English and so called westernization. It is worth mentioning that a group of youths who are working as radio jockeys and in the electronic media like to speak Bangla in distorted accents and pronunciation. We insist on learning English with special attention to natural pronunciation and as

per demand of the times. We also insist on learning to speak Bengali in its standard form. We don't want it spoken in a blended form like an alien, hampering its long achieved dignity. What is more important in connection with this matter is to have some kind of barriers and paradigms of guidelines in the electronic media and radio with a view to keeping up the standard variety of Bangla as it truly is.

In addition to the above, English medium schools in our country don't seem to pay proper attention to Bengali when teaching it to their students. As a result, most of the students in these schools remain weak in Bengali. They neither like to speak their mother language for English nor can they write in Bengali properly. This is a serious malpractice and humiliation as far as our language is concerned. Nevertheless this situation can easily be overcome by changing the attitude of the school authorities. They can arrange Bengali

extemporaneous speech competitions, writing competitions and poetry recitation side by side with English to mark different occasions and inspire the students to practise mother tongue by giving out awards to them.

The United Nations has honoured Ekushey as International Mother Language Day. Now it is our sole responsibility to highlight the achievements of our language in the international environment. We rarely see in our media what endeavours our foreign ministry has undertaken to present the history of our Liberation War and language movement before other nations. Bangladesh's embassies can do a lot of things by setting up libraries where translation of important books of Bengali literature, documentaries, films, posters, brochures, etc, will be kept and displayed on different occasions for Bengali people living abroad and foreigners. Moreover, they also should establish Bangladeshi cultural

centers, like American, Indian and British cultural centers, in foreign capitals. Such centers will reflect the history of our language movement and freedom struggle properly and respectfully.

Last but not the least, a law can be enacted through parliament on the basis of which Bangla Academy will form a monitoring team to safeguard the standard of Bangla in both speaking and writing. It is notable that in France, without the consent of the academy of France, no new words can be introduced to the public. The media, books and newspapers need its permission to use any new words. Our poets, writers, journalists, teachers, intellectuals and media people have, therefore, to be more conscious about using the Bengali language.

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