

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

Significance of International Mother Language Day

Mother tongue

MUHAMMAD ABDUL MAZID

THE Bangla Language Movement of February 21, 1952, popularly known as Ekushey (the 21st), was a socio-political-cultural movement in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) advocating the recognition of the Bangla language as an official language of Pakistan. Such recognition would allow Bangla to be used in government affairs.

In fact, the Language Movement sixty one years ago catalysed the assertion of Bengali national identity in the then Pakistan, and became a forerunner to Bengali nationalist movements, including the emergence of self-rule consciousness in 1954 general election, student movement in 1962, 6-point movement, uprising in 1969 and, subsequently, the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

The supreme sacrifice of the martyrs of the language movement on February 21 (1952) became an epitome of the inspiration for sustaining self-consciousness and dignity as a nation. It established the only nation in the globe which is named after its language, Bangladesh. February 21 was such an epoch making event that it has been immortalised by global recognition as International Mother Language Day.

In 2000, Unesco declared February 21 as International Mother Language Day for the whole world to celebrate, in tribute to the Language Movement and the ethno-linguistic rights of people around the world. We as a nation feel proud today that Bangladesh, Bangla and the supreme sacrifice of our language movement are being pronounced, much-admired, gratefully remembered and honoured world wide.

The prestige and position of Bangla, the mother tongue of the people of Bengal, in day-to-day life can be traced back to the seventeenth century, as documented in the poems of Abdul Hakim (1620-1690) of Swandwip, Noakhali. The seventeenth century bard was hesitant to classify if not condemn those who were born in Bengal but hated Bangla. From the mid-19th century, Urdu language had been promoted as the *lingua franca* of

Indian Muslims by political and religious leaders.

Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah (1873-1965), an educationist and social reformer, wrote in 1918, *Bangabhasha o Musalman Shahittya* (Bangla language and Literature of the Muslims), that one must respect Bangla and recognise its incomparability over other languages like Urdu, etc. Ahsanullah made this observation because of the attempts by contemporary intelligentsias to establish Urdu as the *lingua franca* of Muslims in Bengal.

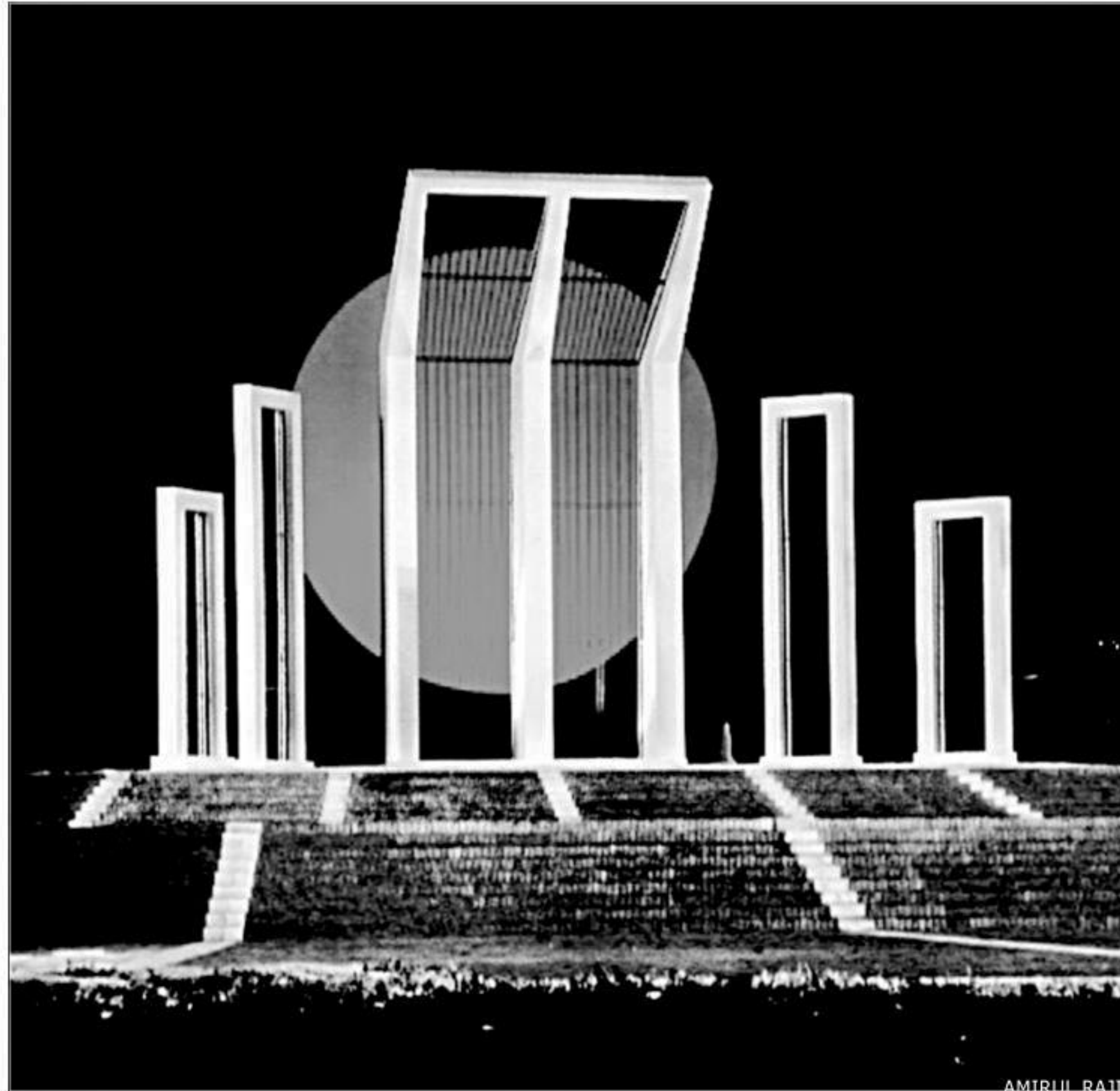
As early as the late 19th century, social activists such as the Muslim feminist Roquia Sakhawat Hussain (1880-1932) chose to write in Bangla to reach out to the people and develop it as a modern literary language. Exactly twenty five years before February 1952, two papers were presented on the second day of the Two-day First Annual Literary Conference (February 27-28, 1927) of the Muslim Shahittya Shamaj (Muslim Literary Society) on the appropriateness of the use of Bangla in Muslim society in general and education in particular. Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) inaugurated the Conference.

Abul Hussain (1896-1938), the secretary and one of the founders of the Shahittya Shamaj, which led the Shikha Movement, wrote that the mother language barrier had been the major obstacle in the way of social development of the Muslim community in Bengal. The two wings (East Pakistan, also called *East Bengal*, and West Pakistan) of the state of Pakistan after its formation in 1947 split along cultural, geographical and linguistic lines. In 1948, the government of Pakistan ordained Urdu as the sole national language, sparking extensive protests among the Bangla-speaking majority of East Pakistan.

Facing rising sectarian tensions and mass discontent with the new law, the government outlawed public meetings and rallies. The students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law and organised a protest on February 21, 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on that day. The deaths provoked widespread civil unrest. After years

of conflict, the central government relented and granted official status to the Bangla language in 1956.

The Language Movement not only laid the foundations for ethnic nationalism in many of the Bengalis of East Pakistan but also heightened the cultural animosity between the authorities of the two wings of Pakistan. In fact, Ekushey played an



important role in making Bengalis aware of their cultural and national heritage and ultimately led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. After 1971, even today, *Ekushey* has been a guiding philosophy for any movement against oppression, injustice, disparity and denying of civic rights, and in the comprehension of the socio-economic emancipation of the people of Bangladesh.

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MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

HOMO Sapiens are one group of beings on earth but with a vast range of diversities caused either by the environment or by necessity. This is recognised by the world religions with their claims of being for the whole of humanity rising above the differences, contending with the diversities, for the clarity of the message conveyed. The mother language factor as an existing reality applies to all other fields of

Mother Language Day.

Looking beyond the sentimental reasons of attachment common to human beings, the mother language is deeply interwoven with the innermost feelings in the sub-conscious and with impulsive expressions. It is the mode of expression of the people of any given group with a distinctive language or even a dialect.

The same feelings of nostalgia are evoked by the mother language as by the sweet smell of mother's milk, long after being a babe in the arms.

Such feelings are common to all groups that have a mother language of their own at whatever stage of evolution. However, a language is not a static entity and, as everything else, is subject to change. This process is identified in modern terms as evolution of a language, which is mostly through natural causes of change or even through manipulation. The latter, however, does not gain acceptance simply by resorting to such tactics. Expressions that gained currency through such manipulations often remained for a period of time and then vanished into thin air.

Mother Language Day recognises that a mother language has to take its own course of evolution, and the distortions and adulteration willfully perpetrated on a mother language have to be taken into account. Many media organisations as well as certain pundits of language are guilty of such perpetrations to suit their own ends.

The mother tongue is a tool of the masses that use it and cannot be owned by any such organisations or individuals to distort and adulterate as they please. Such adulteration is viewed with much displeasure by all who love their mother tongue as a distinct mode of expression, which does not need arbitrary borrowing from other languages except in its colloquial form. Distortion of the English language is tantamount to the "murder of the Queen or the King." No one dares tamper with that language on any account.

Because of the significance of a mother language and its right to be preserved with no willful or manipulated distortions of its expressions media organisations using the mother language of Bangladesh should make a note of the fact that the distortions they make are also a murder of a language, which they have no right to commit.

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Women's role in '52, '71, Shahbagh

PARVEZ BABUL

A mother and her daughter joined Shahbagh *Projonmo Chottor/Gonojahoron Moncho* in Dhaka and expressed their solidarity with the movement in demanding death sentence for the war criminals. While her daughter chanted slogans the mother cried with joy! During the last 42 years, the mother could not demand justice for the killing of her husband by the war criminals during the Liberation War in 1971, but her daughter had demanded justice now. Better late than never she realised, being a freedom fighter.

Those memories of 1971 took her 42 years back to a battlefield where she chanted the slogan *Joy Bangla*, and today her daughter too chanted *Joy Bangla*. She felt proud of her daughter. She smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes with a corner the white *sari* she wears as a widow. The irony of fate is that people know her as a widow instead of knowing/recognising her as a freedom fighter! Maybe the reason is that she is a woman.

Many of you may remember that there was a poster in 1971 with the writing *Banglar mayera, meyera, sokolei muktijodha* (mothers and daughters, all of them are freedom fighters of Bangladesh). That is true for this mother and daughter. Who knows, maybe more mothers and daughters like them, who lost their near and dear ones in the Liberation War, were also demanding justice like in Shahbagh elsewhere in Bangladesh.

In fact, active participation of girls and women has given a new dimension to the Shahbagh gathering and all over Bangladesh. It established the historical truth that women of Bangladesh must get equal credit for their participation in Bangla Language Movement in 1952 as well as in the Liberation War in 1971. 1952 helped create 1971 and placed our independent Bangladesh on the map of the world. So, the credit should go equally to women and men for this great achievement!

Lucky Akter's slogans encouraged/energised all the participants at Shahbagh. They also encouraged the people of Bangladesh to believe in the spirit of the Liberation War and to join the movement with the feeling that they were fighting another war against the same enemies/war criminals who killed three million people and dishonoured about half a million women of Bangladesh in 1971. Definitely, this new revolution will help us build a new Bangladesh free from war criminals through a renewed spirit of patriotism in today's children, youths, girls and women, boys and men, irrespec-



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tive of race or gender or whether they were rich or poor. In the Bangla Language Movement in 1952, it was women who first went to the streets during the curfew. They broke Section 144, avoided police barricade, assembled at Amtola on Dhaka University campus and joined the movement. Dr. Halima Khatun, Dr. Sufia Khatun, Rawshan Ara Bachchu, Sufia Ibrahim, Fazilatunnessa, Rani Bhattachariya, Pratibha Mutsuddi, Sofia Khan, Zulekha, Nuri, Sara Taifur, Sufia Ahmed, Safia Khatun et al were among the protesters. Some of them were arrested and harassed.

Language Movement activist Professor Halima Khatun told me that after February was recognised as International Mother Language Day, the Movement has

been getting due importance. But women's contributions are still ignored. As a result, 60 years after the Language Movement, the nation does not have a written history about their valiant role. It is really a matter of great regret.

The new generation and the world know very little about the contribution of women in our Language Movement. It is true that 1952 created 1971. Finally, we earned Bangla and Bangladesh with the sacrifice of the martyrs of the Language Movement as well as the martyrs of the Liberation War. We must keep in mind that February 21 is not only a day for us, but also a day for all the people of the world, as it is now International Mother Language Day, declared by Unesco in 1999.

Prominent freedom fighter Dr. Laila Parveen Banu told me: "Liberation War of 1971 has made all classes of girls and women of Bangladesh courageous, confident and encouraged to march forward. So the empowerment of women in Bangladesh was accomplished by them. But we could not still build a Bangladesh with gender equality, which we dreamt of in 1971 and fought for. Only a small number of women in our country are empowered, those who are well off; but unfortunately poor girls and women have been fighting to survive because most of them are disempowered. Thousands of girls are working in the garment industries and contributing a lot to earn foreign currency, moving the wheel of mainstream development; what is the government doing for them, nothing." Dr. Lalila added that we expected a social change and democracy in our country, but that change did not happen and democracy is not yet established. 42 years after our independence, women still work in the brickfields, but they do not get equal wages as men. So discrimination against girls and women exists in many sectors, and in their families also, she concludes.

So, I would like to say that Shahbagh is a sign of women's empowerment that we expected. I express solidarity with those women and the logical movement of Shahbagh, and demand required security from the government for all the people who have established a noble example by organising this movement for the sake of the Golden Bengal we collectively dreamt of in 1971. But the pitiless truth is that, though the women are freedom fighters, most of them have been suffering from abject poverty, but there is no one to help them. It seems there is none to listen to their sorrows.

Women's contribution must be discussed in all the forums and documented properly in all the documents of the Language Movement and the Liberation War. Above all, women's contribution should be given greater emphasis. Their active participation and invaluable personal, social and collective contribution helped us to be winners in many movements. Women have struggled and fought equally like men. If we feel proud of Amar Ekushey on February 21, Victory Day on December 16, and the Shahbagh movement and others, women must get their due share of credit. I pay a tribute to all the martyrs and activists. Long live revolution and long live our blood-earned, beloved Bangladesh. I am proud of my country, everywhere, always!

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