

Twenty-first of...

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government. The minister only said that the recommendations were being considered by the government. Only that much; then discussions on other subjects were started in the assembly.

It was difficult to conjecture what was in store for the next day, the 21 of February, which proved to be a massive explosion in an apparently peaceful environment. But it could be understood from later events that the government was ready for such an outburst. This demand for making Bangla the state language was also raised from different localities of the country's mofussil areas.

The news about opening of fire on the students on 21 February spread like wildfire almost instantaneously. The speed and swiftness with which the news of 21 February of Dhaka spread from one village to another in rural Bangladesh, and the protests, agitations and anger it generated thereby heating up the entire nation was quite unimaginable. All-out strike was observed in Narayanganj in support of the demand for state language Bangla on 21 February. The intensity of the discontent generated when news of firing reached the place in the afternoon was impossible to measure. From then on, a deep unrest gripped Narayanganj manifest through agitations, protests and movements and its intensity gradually increased. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the centre of movement was shifted to Narayanganj from Dhaka for some time. Strike was also observed in Comilla for making Bangla the principal state language. When a large procession was moving around the town, a group of 'Urdu-speaking people' attacked them; this news was published in the daily '*Azad*' on 22 February. When news about the killings by the police reached Comilla, a public meeting was held almost immediately at the town-hall under the chairmanship of Meer Zahirul Haque. The barbaric attack of the police was sharply criticised during the meeting and demands were put forward for resignation of the Nurul Amin cabinet, granting the status of a state language to Bangla and taking punitive measures against the Mohajirs or immigrants.

The East Bengal legislative assembly was in session on 20 February, where the chief minister Nurul Amin was placing his budget. The session was adjourned for that day to be reconvened at 3.30 pm on 21 February. Immediately after the resumption of that session, Moulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish informed the assembly that there was no point in sitting for the session when the future hopes of the country – the students – were being shot dead by the police. First, there should be an enquiry, and only then the house could continue, he said. Dhirendranath Datta said almost simultaneously that the police had killed the students by entering the hospital compound and had arrested over 200 students. One could not participate in the session's proceedings in that situation. Manoranjan Dhar asked, what was the crime of the students? They wanted recognition of Bangla as the main state language. Should the administration be run by trampling the corpses of students? In between these arguments and debates, chief minister Nurul Amin told a shameless lie that the police did not enter the hospital compound. Nurul Amin did not spell out through his mouth that anybody had died due to bullets fired; he only spoke about injuries. Despite repeated efforts by the opposition members, he did not agree to undertake a visit to the hospital for observing the situation on the ground. Nurul Amin tried to separate the issue of language from the clamping down of section-144 and subsequent firing incidents. He argued, whether imposition of section-144 was justified was a different matter. There were many means to raise questions about it – but when it was actually imposed, none should have broken it. In his language, 'The question was not that of language, the question was that of law'.

It can be clearly understood that the chief minister Nurul Amin tried to divert the language question as well as the course of language movement in a different direction after the incident. That is why he proposed a resolution in the afternoon session of 22 February to recommend according recognition to Bangla as the state language. But his address over radio on 24 February exposed the detestable ploy Nurul Amin resorted to for poisoning the minds of the majority people of the country and providing a distorted and ugly explanation for the overall language movement.

Meanwhile, the whole of Bangladesh was boiling with rage. Innumerable public meetings, processions and protests were being held in villages, ports, towns, sub-divisions and districts. The streets were bustling with a flood of angry processions. The 'All-Party State Language Action Council' was constituted during a public meeting in Mymensingh. Presided over by Fakhruddin Ahmad, thousands of people staged protest demonstration at this meeting in an unprecedented manner. Some proposals put forward by Rafiquddin Bhuiyan without the permission of the chair were supported by the masses with thunderous applause. Immediate resignation of the cabinet was also demanded.

The extent of profound dissatisfaction and intense excitement flowing through the whole of Bangladesh can be gauged if an incomplete list of the protest meetings, processions and strikes organized at different places after the 21 February episode is provided. Public meeting was held at Chasharha of Narayanganj under the chairmanship of labour leader Foyez Ahmad. Protest meetings were organized at Tangail, Brahmanbaria, Shibchar of Faridpur, Char Atrai, Maizidi of Noakhali, Sonaimuri, Porshuram, Khilpara, Gaibandha of Rangpur, Dhalgachhi, Ishwarganj of Mymensingh, Dharmakurhe, Tilaikpur of Bogra, Panchbibbi, Chandpur of Comilla, Khulna, Bagerhat, Pabna, Sirajganj, Shahjadpur, Hatia and Sandwip of Chittagong, Barisal, Rikabibazaar of Dhaka, Joydebpur, Baida, Sreepur, Fenchuganj, Netrakona, Mominpur of Kushtia, Kumarkhali, Kishoreganj, Daudpur, Shayestaganj, Magura of Jessore,

The Language Movement and...

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linguistic as well as nationalistic existence—struggle. We were forced to fight for what is ours forever. People of all walks of life of the then East Bengal rose up with that promise. The students were first to protest. However, people of this land offered them strength, courage and inspiration.

The Language Movement initiated with the presentation of proposals by the then prominent student leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the meeting of the Youth League on 6-7 September 1947. He proposed, Bangla should be the medium of writing and the official language. Discussion and decision making regarding what should be the state language of Pakistan should be left to the people. At different stages of Language Movement especially in the formulation of the 21 point State Language Declaration by *Rashtra Bhasha Sangram Parishad* – An Association for the struggle of the State Language (1947), leading procession demanding Bangla as the State Language, including the demand to make Bangla the state language of Pakistan in the 10 Point Demand of East Pakistan Muslim League, signing the 8 Point Agreement with the Chief Minister of East Bangla, organizing meeting of students at *Bai Tala* (under the historic banyan tree) of Dhaka University (16 March 1948), the leadership and promptness of Bangabandhu was unparalleled. It can be said that he was one of the organizers, leading force and visionary of the Language Movement. It is to be remembered that at the culminating point of the Language Movement, Bangabandhu was locked in jail. But he was completely involved with this movement. From Jail he maintained active contact with the leaders of the movement and provided them with necessary advices and suggestions. It is under his leadership that all the movements of post Forty-Seven were directed. It is he who is the organizer of the Movement for Independence, announcer of Independence, Father of the Nation and the greatest Bangali in the recorded history of thousand years. He has re-introduced Bangla afresh to the world by giving speech in Bangla in the United Nations. Later on, Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina followed the footsteps of her father. Her love for the Mother Language is beyond question. She has set up unparalleled example by realizing the promise of establishing the use of our mother language Bangla in all spheres of scholarship.

It is our wish that no other nation should face the plight of bloody sacrifice that the Bangali nation experienced in preserving their mother tongue, culture and uniqueness. But how that can be possible? Many of us has given a thought about this matter in a localized way. Their wish is certainly praise worthy. This feeling and effort gradually spread beyond the borders of the country. A multilingual and multinational organization, *The Mother Language Lovers of the World* was inspired like us. Ten prominent personalities of seven languages were involved with this organization. There were two Bangali among them – the freedom fighters Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam. On behalf of this organization, Salam wrote a letter on 29 March 1998 to the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi A. Anan referring to the unprecedented sacrifice of the Bangali Nation in preserving the dignity of their mother tongue. He mentioned in his letter that mother tongues of different nations and communities of the present world are endangered. If 21 February could be declared the International Mother Language Day like other Days of the United Nations, this precedent would inspire to the preservation and promotion of all mother languages of the world. A year passed after sending that letter. No reply came. In the meantime, Rafiqul Islam came to know that Board members of UNESCO should be interested to a proposal like this and that such a proposal should come through the member states. Without any delay he informed the Education Ministry of the Government of Bangladesh that the proposal to declare 21 February the International Mother Language Day should reach UNESCO Headquarters by 10 September 1999. At that time the daughter of Bangabandhu, Sheikh Hasina was the head of the Government. The then minister for Education A.S.H.K. Sadek understood that this task could not be accomplished so fast following normal administrative procedure. In this situation the Honorable Prime Minister was the only hope. Her prompt decision helped the breach the red tape. The proposal was sent to the UNESCO Headquarters on 9 September 1999. It was raised in the 157th session of the Executives Council of and the 30th General session of



Pirolistan Gaon, and Ramkrishnapur of Tripura. This list is not complete, neither is a complete list required. It is sufficient to understand that all segments of the population of Bangladesh were directly participating in the process of struggles in the language movement.

Within one week of 21 February, the nervous and panicked ruling coterie in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country staged barbaric episodes one after another in the country; similarly public opinion in favour of the language movement was also swiftly consolidated at the same pace. The movement reached such a peak and its pressure inflated with such speed that the Muslim League became bewildered and dumbfounded as a party. On 23 February, the MLA of Habiganj Nurul Momen Khan issued a statement condemning the police atrocities. On 27 February, Shamsheruddin Sikdar of Barisal resigned from the League Parliamentary Party. Two days prior to that, the vice-president of Mymensingh District Muslim League Mosadder Ali Khan also resigned from his post. The students of Lahore also demonstrated in support of Bangla language and wore black badges as a sign of mourning. The most prominent newspaper of West Pakistan – '*Dawn*' expressed strong support for the language movement. All these events took place within one week of 21 February.

The nervousness that overtook the ruling party after 21 February could not be tolerated by many in that party. It was also true that they could see the cruelty, inhumanity, illogic and immeasurable heartlessness in the behaviour of the ruling party. At a public meeting held in Chittagong on 27 February, member of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly Abul Quasem said that he would try his best to make Bangla the state language. It has already been pointed out that he was not the lone exception. But more curious was the statement by Khan A. Sabur. Part of his statement was like this:

When the government and the students are all seeking to make Bangla the state language, then where is the conflict? Why is section-144 needed as well? ... Mr. Nurul Amin appears to have been driven by the mean advices given by a third class daily of Dhaka in committing series of tortures on the students and people's leaders by raising the bogey of foreign ghosts and Indian agents, and especially of a Hindu conspiracy. By shunning power-mongering and thinking rationally, he could appreciate where he was taking the country to under the spell of egoism.

After that, he said after advising for taking lessons from the lives of Mussolini and Hitler:

I would request him with all humility not to hit cruelly the honour of millions of patriots in the country by being driven by the advices of those handful and so-called patriotic salaried persons.

It must be said that it was not possible to express condemnation in a more stern language. But Sabur Khan realized within one week that he was standing on the wrong track. For that reason, he had to issue a statement through the daily *Azad* on 5 March with the title 'Today's Duty'. The content of that statement was not far from that daily which he had contemptuously described as third class.

The Nurul Amin government was looking for a way out to save itself from the wrath of the masses. He did find a way. From then on, this path became a fabricated road for the ruling party. The speech that Nurul Amin delivered over radio on 24 February provided clear indications about which track the government would follow to foil the movement, save its skin, present a distorted explanation of the language movement and sow seeds of discord, dissatisfaction and doubt among a large segment of the population. Nurul Amin said at the very start of his radio address:

If public opinion is expressed about language or any other problem in accordance with the constitution, then the government has no intention to silence anyone.

After that he brought allegations of confusing the people and misleading them against some Kolkata newspapers and said:

It is seen from the situation evolving from last Thursday that it is essential to uncover more information about the significance of that event and expose the motives of those people who had been instigating or planning such an event. ... The demand of the language movement was nothing; a destructive conspiracy was hatched to disturb the peace by breaking law and discipline; the incidents and circumstances following the imposition of section-144 proves that.

The people of the ruling party then started to composedly sing the tune of the chief minister. It could be deciphered that power, politics and class interests were much bigger than the dictates of conscience, country's welfare, religious spirit and the sense of justice. The provincial revenue secretary Tofazzal Ali urged the countrymen to help detain the anti-state elements through his radio address. At a meeting in Dinajpur, Moulana Abdullahel Baqui issued warnings against the opportunists of language movement; Mufti Azam Alhaji Aminul Hossaini called for self-defence against the conflicts of language and province, and advised caution against the enemies of Islam. By leaving behind its exceptionally glorious role, the daily *Azad* also concentrated on vilifications by capitalising on the need for safeguarding the solidarity of Pakistan and cautioning against anti-state conspiracies. Quotations from the speech of Nurul Amin started to be incorporated in the newspaper editorials. The new public safety act was also passed with amendments.

There was no reason to think that the storm of language movement was stopped after this flow of a reverse-tide. It took much more time to halt that storm; and that happened not because of the false publicity and repressive policies of the government, but because of realizing tangible goals of the movement. □ (Abridged)

Translation: *Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed*

UNESCO. Director-General of UNESCO announced, "The Proposal for International Mother Language Day will be accepted, and it will be raised in the 160th Session the Board of Directors." The proposal of Bangladesh got a unanimous support and with which the long cherished aspiration of the Bangla speaker materialized (17 November 1999). The proposal was passed to celebrate 21 February as the International Mother Language Day commemorating the sacrifice of the brave sons of Bangladesh who laid down their lives for the protection of their Mother Tongue in 1952. In fact, laying down of lives to establish the right of Mother tongue is quite a rare precedent in the history of the world. The Bangali nation created that example. And by preserving the glory of our mother tongue among all linguistic communities and creating inspiration by spreading that spirit, Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina created a superlative example. She is indeed one of the mother Language lover statesman of the present-day world.

When 21 February was declared the International Mother Language Day, a rare excitement was created among the people of the country. On this occasion a meeting was organized at the Paltan Ground on 7 December 1999. The Chief Guest of the meeting was the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. At the presence of a huge crowd, she announced 'International Mother Language Institute' will be established in Dhaka for the preservation and promotion of the developing and endangered languages of the world and research on language related aspects. Today's International Mother Language Institute is the outcome of that declaration. The main objective of this institute is to work as one of the epicenters of language related research work in the world.

Everyone has the right to gather knowledge in their mother language. But the reality is not that much inspiring. If we check, we can see that only a few languages are being used as the medium of gathering knowledge. Bangla is also lagging in this respect. The main reason is that the penetration of Bangla in the field of information technology is not that much mentionable considering many other languages. If this challenge cannot be overcome, Bangla will not be valued in the world. The governments, scientists and linguists of the world are working to attain that goal. Very soon there will be qualitative change of this situation. That day is not far away when all kinds of creative activities of the information technology will be performed in Bangla. Then fame of Bangla will also increase.

International Mother Language Institute is one of the leading institutes of the country dedicated to the preservation and promotion of mother languages. Honorable Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of this institute at Segunbagicha, Dhaka in 15 March 2001. On that day the then Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi A. Anan was present with her. Construction of the Institute building started on 6 May 2003. But it was not completed as per our desire. The construction was suspended in 2003. At last the construction work of the 1st phase of the project was completed in 2010. The Honorable PM Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the newly constructed Institute building on the International Mother Language Day 2010.

Since its establishment, the Institute has been organizing the celebration of International Mother Language Day, national and international seminars as well as language and culture related programs. Research journals in Bangla and English are being published from this institute. Linguists from home and abroad contribute in these journals regularly. In the meantime, the research work titled *Ethno-Linguistic Survey of Bangladesh* has been conducted and its reports are going to be published gradually.

A representative team of UNESCO visited the International Mother Language Institute when request letter was forwarded to recognize the Institute as a UNESCO Category 2 Institute as per Inter-Ministerial meeting of the Government. As per the recommendation of the representative team, the Institute received the status of a UNESCO Category 2 Institute. In the agreement signed with UNESCO in this regard, two matters were given especial emphasis: a) Offering support in the development of mother languages and mother tongue-based education and b) Preservation and promotion of the mother languages of the world for the development of multilingual education.

The inspiration that was inherent in the immortal Language Movement has now received a realistic shape. Practice of Bangla language is gradually spreading outside the country. Department of Bangla is being opened in famous universities throughout the world. Interest to learn Bangla outside the country is also swelling. The trend will increase in the days to come. This world will get to know Bangla language and Bangali nation in a new light. It is the wealth of Bangla that will establish the prominence of this language in the world arena. □

Translation : *The writer himself*

Ode to Language—the Best Ornament of Beauty

Nirmalendu Goon

To the blissful shade of the homestead built
in the shadowy hamlet by my great grandpa
I love to carry myself to nestle thither even today.
My joys know no bounds as I feel, as though,
I return to my mother's womb.
Mother Earth's lap binds me in love
more abidingly than mother's lap.

I soothe my sunburnt person in the summer
As I bathe in the crystal-clear water of the pond dug by my grandfather.

I recall my father's face in gratitude
When I feel satiated with the mango, blackberry and jackfruit juice,
To my bewilderment father raised these fruit-bearing trees
in almost the same manner as he did his offsprings.


When I jot down the dear feelings of my life,
I recall my predecessor Shahid Barkat
Who sacrificed his precious life to save
Bangla language from the onslaught of the enemies.

I feel grateful more to the martyrs of language
Than to my great grandpa, grandpa and father.
The reason why I do so, for sure, boils down to the fact
That my fettered motherland wouldn't have won freedom
Had the Bangla language not been established
at the cost of my brothers' blood that day.

And indeed I couldn't have written my love poems
Had my mother tongue not been established
at the cost of my brothers' blood that day.

How could it be possible for me to describe
the exquisite beauty of my beloved
And express the weal and woe of mine as I do it today?
I couldn't have realised that Beauty can be decked with
The LANGUAGE - the best ornament.

Translation : *Saera Habib*



Blood-soaked Vernacular

Rabiul Husain

A deep darkness covers all over the universe
Invisible emptiness is the backbone of the sky
Innumerable Planets Stars Suns Moons Constellation Thus
All are the alphabets of language nebula high

Bright ornaments of empty light spread all over
Heart-soul of aerial path suddenly adorned mother and earth
Darkness is translated supernaturalness in light there
They are the language-measure of ignorance scale of emptiness worth

They are the true caravan-mate in darkness unknown
Symbol of veteran tour-guide competent usher
Walking of darkness holding hand in hand with light shown
Sparklings go on in shoulder to shoulder to volunteer

On this International Mother Language Day aforesaid words echoe fully
Bangla of Bangali relates to every standard language
Seeds of independence now fully a tree an invaluable lapis-lazuli
Her every alphabet imperishable blood-soaked vernacular is free always

Translation : *The poet himself*

21st February—Our Identity's Core

Hasan Hafiz

Ekushey—you're the day when passions flamed and made history.
You're the bountiful sky glowing with comet-like daring
You don't belong only to Bengalis anymore; this precious gift
Bestowed from blood spilled from love of one's mother tongue
Is now for the world's people; it's the gift of indomitable youths
Who sacrificed their lives for civilization. Ekushey—
Your auspicious immortal melody is no longer the possession
Or heritage of Bengalis alone! Even in far-off Sierra Leone,
In another part of the globe, one can hear your melody
In the ankle bells of its belles. The Bengali language's classy cadences
Resound in newfound cultural pride. A sacrifice made at great cost
Now inspires others speaking other neglected mother tongues.

A once slighted but invincible language has ascended to glory,
Step by step, self-propelled, through movements and a liberation war.
Fluttering of stringed *dotaras*, *shapla* flowers and *doyle* birds
And fierce roars came together to drive the tyrant to oblivion.

Ekushey is in truth the name of a freely-flowing river
And it's this truth that we've been able to etch worldwide.
You enable languages spoken even by tiny communities to flourish,
Spread, be respected and conserved. You provide inspiration
To rebel against tyrants; you offer succor for one's identity formation.

Translation : *Fakrul Alam*