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Message

Today is 21 February, The great 'Shaheed Day (Martyrs Day)' and 'International Mother Language Day'. On this memorable day, I recall Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar, Shafiur and many unsung heroes of language movement with deep homage who laid down their lives to establish the right of mother tongue Bangla. On the occasion of International Mother Language Day 2024, I extend my sincere greetings and congratulations to the people of various languages of the world including Bangla and other ethnic groups.

The great Language Movement is an unforgettable event in our national history. Today, I remember with profound respect, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Sarbodoilo Rashtrabhasa Sangram Parishad (All Party State Language Action Committee), formed in 1948. He was imprisoned for leading the Action Committee. I recall all the language activists including the then Member of Gonoparishad (Constituent Assembly) Dhirendranath Dutta, whose farsightedness, boundless sacrifice, courage, organizational skills and instantaneous decision resulted in the final outcome of the language movement on February 21, 1952 and consequently, Bangladesh achieved their right of mother tongue.

In 1947, on the basis of Two Nation Theory, the British-ruled India was divided into two countries- India and Pakistan. With thousand kilometers apart, East and West Pakistan had completely different languages and cultures. Therefore, when Urdu was declared as the only state language of Pakistan, the Bangalee Nation took to the streets in protest to protect the status of their mother tongue 'Bangla'. Basically the Language Movement was the movement to establish the right of our mother tongue as well as to protect our ethnicity, self-identity and cultural distinction. The imperishable spirit of Amar Ekushey (Immortal Shaheed Day) gave us endless inspiration and immense courage in achieving our rights to self-determination, struggle for freedom and in the War of Liberation. With the bloodshed passages of Language Movement of February, we achieved the recognition of Bangla as our mother tongue and consequently, we attained our long-cherished Independence in 1971 under the charismatic leadership of the greatest Bangalee of all time, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

February 21 has now been recognized by the United Nations as the 'International Mother Language Day' with the spontaneous willingness and sincere endeavour of Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina along with the primary efforts of some Bangladeshi expatriates in 1999. As a nation, it is one of the great achievements for us. It is a unique celebration in protecting mother tongue as well as own culture and heritage. I urge upon all to uphold the glory and right of Bangla language earned at the cost of sacrifices and blood of martyrs.

Nowadays, the spirit of Amar Ekushey is the incessant source of inspiration for the peoples of the world in protecting their languages and cultures. But we have to be more diligent in proper practice and preservation of Bengali language and culture. With the blessings of information technology, we are now the inhabitants of a global village. Therefore, to maintain pace of advancement with the developed world, our present generation has to be skilled in different languages which are recognized as international communication media. Observing the International Mother Language Day will play a positive role in the development and preservation of our own language as well as in building a sustainable future through multilingual education - this is our expectation.

Embracing the spirit of Amar Ekushey, let mutual respect be awakened among the people of different languages and cultures of the world, let a colorful world without discrimination be developed-it is my expectation on Shaheed Day and International Mother Language Day.

Joi Bangla.
Khoda Hafez, May Bangladesh Live Forever.

Mohammed Shahabuddin
Mohammed Shahabuddin

Dreams About Mother Tongue
Muhammad Zafar Iqbal

If you search for the sweetest language in the world on the internet, Bangla is often the first to be mentioned. What does the term 'sweet language' imply? We won't delve into a detailed discussion or debate about the specific criteria that contribute to this recognition. The reason lies in the fact that the sweetness of the language is not something new to us; it has been known for a long time. The global poet who penned our national anthem acknowledged this sweetness during its composition, saying, "Oh mother mine, words from your lips are like nectar to my ears!" If it were not a sweet language, when else would it resonate in our ears like a soothing melody? The topic that resonates pleasantly with us Bangla speakers is not only sweet for us but is also a delightful language for speakers of all languages across the globe.

For people in other nations worldwide, Banglamight be considered merely a sweet language, but to us, it holds much greater significance. Our deep affection for the language became evident in 1952. During the crucial days of the language movement, we came to realize that being Bengali is our core identity. To be honest, it was through the language movement that the seed was planted for the birth of the independent state, Bangladesh. In 1971, as the Pakistani military unleashed a brutal reign of terror on the unarmed Bangladeshi people, crushing their dream of independence, their first act of symbolic violence was the demolition of the Martyr's Monument. The military junta was ignorant that the true essence of the Shaheed Minar soared higher in the hearts of the people of this country than it does as a physical structure. They could blow up or demolish the external structure, but they did not know that the minaret etched in the hearts of every Bangladeshi cannot be touched even with a hundred explosives.

Beyond its inherent sweetness, this language is spoken by an impressive number of around 270 million people, spanning diverse communities in Bangladesh, West Bengal, and as a second language globally. To comprehend the magnitude of this figure, consider this: if you randomly select thirty individuals from any part of the world, on average, at least one of them will be a Bangla speaker! Furthermore, nearly a hundred million Bangla speakers are dispersed across various countries globally—many nations might not even have a population of a hundred million! Notably, the national anthems of both Bangladesh and India are crafted in Bangla. The poet Rabindranath Tagore, who composed these two national

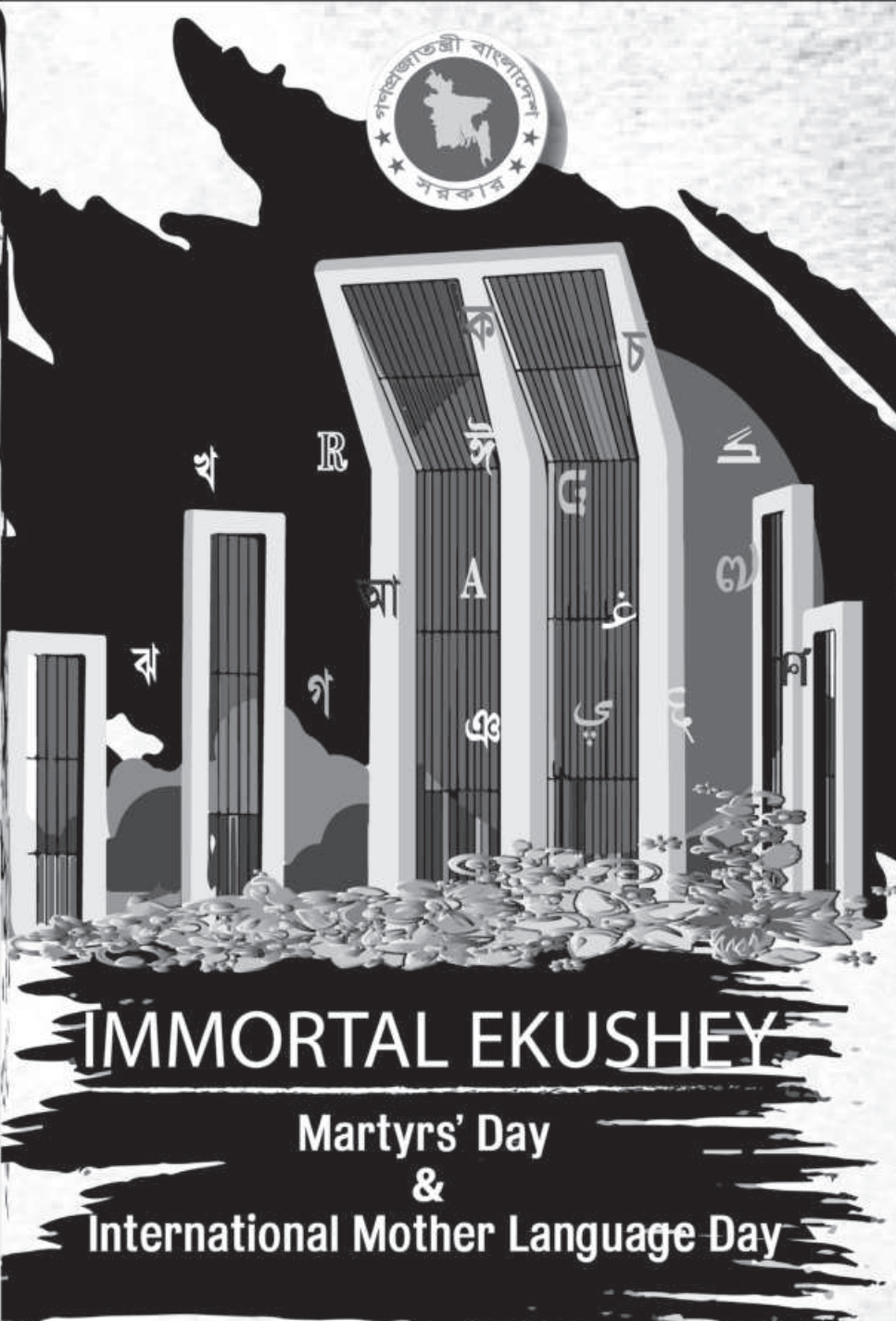


anthems, also won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his writings in Bangla. It is believed that if Bangla literature is properly translated and showcased in the global literary sphere, then perhaps the number of Nobel Prizes in this language could potentially increase! Bangla is the national language of Bangladesh and one of the official languages of India. Yet, it doesn't end there. What astonishes many is that Bangla is designated as the honorary official language in Sierra Leone, a small African country, symbolizing that nation's fondness for the people of Bangladesh.

Language serves not only as a tool for interpersonal communication but also as a conduit for acquiring and nurturing human intelligence. Simultaneously, it acts as the bearer and conveyor of a community's culture. A language mirrors the traditions, culture, lifestyle, and even the history of that community. Language is so intricately woven into human life that when one nation seeks to subjugate another, the initial action often involves an assault on the language of that nation. Throughout history, numerous instances of attacks on language abound. For every nation, the significance of the mother tongue is so paramount that nations vehemently resist any attempts to undermine it.

The latest significant example of standing up against attacks on language is the Soweto Uprising in South Africa. In protest against the imposition of the Afrikaans language in South African schools, thousands of black students took to the streets on June 16, 1976. The police force of the apartheid government of that time opened fire on them with incredible cruelty, resulting in the tragic death of about 700 students. Today, that day is declared a holiday in South Africa and celebrated as Youth Day.

Another example of resistance against linguistic oppression is the Barak Valley movement in Assam. In this case, the student community took to the streets to protest the exclusive declaration of Assamese as the official language, ignoring Bangla. On May 19, 1961, the police opened fire on the protesters, resulting in the tragic loss of 11 lives, including Kamala, a 16-year-old girl who had recently taken her matriculation exams. As a result of the movement, Bangla gained recognition as the official language status in three districts of the Barak Valley.



The history of our language movement in our country is known to all of us. When the then Pakistan government tried to forcefully impose Urdu as the state language of East Bengal, present-day Bangladesh, a massive mass movement started in 1948. It reached its climax on February 21, 1952, when the government opened fire on the protesters, resulting in several casualties. As a result of the language movement, the government yielded in 1956, recognizing both Urdu and Bangla as state languages. The 21st of February is commemorated in Bangladesh as Martyrs' Day, symbolizing a deep emotional connection among the people due to the sacrifices made on this day.

Since 1999, the 21st of February has been observed not only as Language Movement Day in Bangladesh but has also gained international recognition as International Mother Language Day. This is undoubtedly a matter of great pride for us, but at the same time, it also places a significant responsibility on us. Our obligation extends beyond advocating for our mother tongue, Bangla; we must also safeguard and promote the languages of all ethnic communities in our country. Children of other linguistic backgrounds should be given the opportunity to speak and receive education in their native languages. It might come as a surprise to many that the most recent survey has revealed a total of 41 mother tongues spoken by various ethnic groups in Bangladesh, including Bangla.

The total number of languages spoken in the 195 countries of the world is almost six thousand, a staggering statistic. However, linguists express concerns that approximately half of these six thousand languages may disappear within this century, as an estimated one language vanishes or faces extinction every two weeks. A language is considered extinct when the last fluent speaker of that language passes away. Of the 41 living languages spoken in Bangladesh, 14 are currently considered critically endangered. Without intervention, these languages might face extinction within a few years. For instance, languages like Kharia and Remgmit, which have only a few speakers left, are at risk of extinction because the next generation does not see the appeal or necessity of learning them. As a result, no one is learning these languages, posing a significant threat to their survival. Since language is one of humanity's cultural treasures, it is as crucial as biodiversity. Dedicated efforts must be made to preserve them. With the help of technology and scientific methods, it is possible to revive a moribund language by documenting and conserving it. The Maori language of New Zealand and the Ainu language of Japan have been revived in this way. Even if a language dies, with enough information collected about it, there is potential for revival. Hebrew is an example of a language that was considered dead but has been revitalized.

Just as there are endangered languages in the world, there are also dominant languages that slowly engulf smaller ones. Countries with strong economic power or prolonged colonial influence have often suppressed or exerted influence on the language of the subjugated nation. This phenomenon has been observed in numerous instances, with English being a prominent example. On the other hand, our language boasts a vast number of speakers, ranking almost as the fifth-largest in terms of numbers, but it lags significantly in the hierarchy of influential languages. A primary factor contributing to this is the incomplete integration of the language into computer systems. Nonetheless, there is promising news as Bangladesh has undertaken a substantial project to enhance its cherished mother tongue in information technology through dedicated research and development efforts.

There was a time when linguists, poets, literary figures, writers, and language scholars used to work exclusively for language, literature, and art. It was assumed that scientists and technologists had a different field of work, and that their opportunities to engage with language or literature were limited. However, the situation has changed, and now technologists and scientists can directly participate in fundamental tasks. In our country, information technology experts at universities and research centers are working on various aspects of language. These endeavors have flourished solely because they were economically profitable. Thanks to the economic support of the Bangladesh government, extensive efforts have been made to enrich the Bengali language in the field of information technology at last.

As an example, efforts have been made to preserve the endangered mother languages of small ethnic groups in our country. Through this project, specific and self-inspired initiatives have been taken for each language, including original vocal recordings, comparative dictionaries, oral literature, visual documents, and phonetic translations. The goal is to preserve the language and, if necessary, revitalize it. To ensure the inclusion of everyone in the country's overall activities, information technology-assisted software is being developed for those with speech, hearing, and visual impairments.

The Bangla language is extensively utilized through technology on the web, mobile devices, and computers, with a collective effort to ensure there are no hindrances when using it. Software has been developed to facilitate the use of intonation in writing and transforming written text into intonation, contributing to the seamless integration of the language into daily life. Addressing a certain level of disorder in Bangla spelling, a spell checker has been created to tackle this issue, which is already widely in use. Special software developed to digitize printed and handwritten Bangla information is also reducing our dependence on the outside world. Previously, we had to rely on giant technology companies like Google or Microsoft for such tasks. This initiative aims to ensure self-reliance, so that we will not be puppets in the hands of others while serving our mother tongue in the future. Many software programs have already been implemented as a result of this ambitious project to enrich the Bangladeshi language, and many more are in the works. It is hoped that this project will quickly bring about a revolutionary change in our mother tongue in our country.

In any crucial project involving information technology today, the use of artificial intelligence or machine learning is essential, requiring vast amounts of data or corpora in the language of the computer world. Bangladesh has undertaken a massive initiative to create a national corpus by coordinating three crore carefully selected words. Once completed, it will be akin to the British National Corpus or the American National Corpus, representing Bangladesh's language for international research and encouraging innovative work. Currently, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now being used in any significant project involving information technology, and it requires a vast amount of data or input, known in computer jargon as a 'corpus'. The massive initiative to create the national corpus of Bangladesh, which comprises three crore (thirty million) well-organized words, will establish a 'Bangladesh National Corpus' with an international standard similar to the 'British National Corpus' or 'American National Corpus' upon completion. This will provide us with the opportunity to conduct more research and new work on our mother tongue. Young researchers in our country will have an unprecedented opportunity to conduct research on language, and we will witness some remarkable innovations in our own language.

We have already begun to envision our beloved mother tongue reaching new heights on the international stage through the collaborative efforts of our poets, writers, storytellers, linguists, scientists, and technologists. We eagerly await its tangible implementation this time. □

Translated by- Farikshit Chowdhury.



PRIME MINISTER
GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S
REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH
08 Falgun 1430
21 February 2024

Message

On the occasion of the great Martyrs' Day and International Mother Language Day, I pay my homage to the people of all languages and cultures of the world, including Bengali. UNESCO and Bangladesh have been jointly celebrating this day with due dignity since 2000. This year's theme of the day is "multilingual education: a pillar of learning and intergenerational learning," which I think is worthy.

The importance of the language movement in the history of the Bengali liberation struggle is immense. The foundation for a non-communal, democratic, and language-based state system was laid through this movement. On this day in 1952, Abul Barkat, Abdul Jabbar, Abdus Salam, Rafiquddin Ahmad, Shafiur Rahman, and many others sacrificed their lives to protect the dignity of our mother language, Bengali. I pay my profound respects to the memory of the martyrs of all languages, including Bengali; I remember with profound tribute all the language movement activists, including the Greatest Bengali of all time, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose supreme sacrifices and struggle elevated the esteem of our mother, land and people.

The glorious history of the language movement of Bengali from 1947 to 1952 is a source of inspiration in our national life. The Father of the Nation was repeatedly imprisoned for leading the language movement. At the Education Conference held in Karachi on 27 November 1947, it was decided that Urdu would be Pakistan's state language. When the news reached Dhaka, the students of Dhaka University immediately protested in front of Khawaja Nazimuddin's residence. Shortly afterward, Sheikh Mujib, a law student at Dhaka University, used his organizational experience to play a vital role in establishing the Chhatra League in Dhaka on 4 January 1948. In the first session of the Constituent Assembly on 23 February, Dhirendranath Datta of Comilla moved an amendment proposal demanding the inclusion of Bengali as the language of the Assembly. Rejecting the proposal, Khawaja Nazimuddin declared in the Legislative Assembly that the people of East Bengal would accept Urdu as the state language. But to counter the reckless decision of Nazimuddin, an all-party Chhatra Sangram Parishad was formed on 2 March at Fazlul Haque Hall of Dhaka University comprising Chhatra League, Tamaddun Majlish, and other parties. Many language movement activists, including Sheikh Mujib, were arrested in front of the Secretariat for leading the strike on 11 March and were released on 15 March. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led a rally under the historic mango tree at Dhaka University. On 21 March, Jinnah spoke out boastfully in favor of Urdu at the Dhaka Racecourse Ground. While declaring Urdu as the state language of Pakistan at the students' convocation on 24 March at Curzon Hall, the students immediately protested.

To transform the language movement into a national campaign, Sheikh Mujib organized a nationwide tour plan, participated in an extensive campaign, and addressed rallies. He was arrested from Faridpur on 11 September 1948 and released on 21 January 1949. He was arrested again on 19 April and released in July. He was detained again on 14 October 1949 and released on 27 February 1952. Sheikh Mujib had been in touch with language movement activists and Chhatra League leaders from 1 January 1950 while in Dhaka Central Jail and had given advice and suggestions to add momentum to the movement. He sent memos to the three fellow messengers on 3 February 1952 to call for a nationwide strike on 21 February. The jail authorities shifted Sheikh Mujib from Dhaka to Faridpur Jail on 16 February while he went on a hunger strike.

The budgetary session of the East Bengal Executive Council was scheduled on 21 February 1952. Following the advice and instructions of Sheikh Mujib, a general strike was called all over the country on that day. Students violated Section-144, and the police started firing bullets indiscriminately; some lost their lives in the blink of an eye, many were injured, and many were arrested. A strike was observed on 22 February. In 1956, the Awami League constituted the cabinet, declared Bengali the status of the state language, announced 21 February as Martyr's Day for the first time, declared it a public holiday and took a project to construct the Martyr's Monument. Unfortunately, those aspirations were no longer fulfilled with the military takeover on 7 October 1958.

The Father of the Nation in independent Bangladesh directed Bengali in all official activities. He included Bengali as the state language in the constitution. He delivered a speech at the United Nations' 29th General Assembly in Bengali and upheld the dignity of our mother language in the world assembly. During the Awami League Government's 1996-2001 term, Rafiq and Salam, two Bangladeshi expatriates from Canada, along with some members of the international community, formed the 'Mother Language Preservation Committee.' They sent a proposal to the United Nations to celebrate International Mother Language Day on 21 February. UNESCO recognized 21 February as 'International Mother Language Day' on 17 November 1999. We have established the International Mother Language Institute. We have taken initiatives to preserve the world's endangered languages and protect their dignity. We have ensured the use of the Bengali language in the ICT. Since 2017, we have been distributing Braille books for the visually impaired and textbooks in the mother tongues of the ethnic groups free of charge.

Bengali nationalism was established through the language movement. Following the ideals of Bengali nationalism and the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, we have made Bangladesh a role model for development in the world in the last 15 years. We will transform the country into Smart Bangladesh by 2041- bringing change towards Smart Citizens, Smart Government, Smart Economy, and Smart Society. In addition, we are also implementing Bangladesh Delta Plan-2100. I firmly believe that together, we will be able to establish the developed, prosperous, and self-esteemed 'Golden Bangladesh' as the Father of the Nation dreamed.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu
May Bangladesh Live Forever.

Sheikh Hasina
Sheikh Hasina

We Have Ekushey February
Mahadev Saha

We have Ekushey February,
There is also March – the month of freedom,
We have our glorious history of liberation war;
We have the immortal poem of Sheikh Mujib,
The struggle this time –
Hundreds of blazing, roaring processions at his call.
We have the new Boishakh, the pride of triumph,
We have our month of language, the
Celebration of Alphabets.
We have so many achievements, glories,
Unmatched deeds galore,
The Mother Language Day brought us honours globally.
We shall never lag behind,
Never shall we bow down,
We shall remain eternally awake with the spirit of Ekushey.

Translation: Er Helal Uddin Ahmed