

Significance of the International Mother Language Day

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21 February is being observed globally as the International Mother Language Day. The decision was proclaimed at the 30th General Conference of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held from 26 October to 17 November 1999 in Paris. UNESCO considered the threat to linguistic diversity posed by the globalization of communication and the tendency to use a single language, and thus recognized the importance of establishing an International Mother Language Day to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multiculturalism. The day has been selected on the ground that on this day in 1952, people of Bangladesh sacrificed their lives for their mother tongue. Nowhere ever in the world, languages have been given such a respectable status.

Language is the prime carrier of a culture. It is also the most powerful instrument of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage. During the course of world history, many cultures and civilizations have been shattered, devastated and crushed because of the demolition of their languages. Nations in the past have not only lost their freedom to the powerful, influential and predominant ones, their languages and identity has withered and been lost as well. It is estimated that around 6000 to 7000 languages are spoken in the world today. This initiative of celebrating a day specifically as Language Day will enable development of a fuller awareness of

such linguistic and cultural traditions and will inspire solidarity based on understandings, tolerance and dialogue. The day reaffirms the commitment of UNESCO towards preserving language diversity and reflects the importance of increasing efforts to conserve languages as a shared heritage of humanity (<http://students.washington.edu/bsauw/>).

Why 21 February?

Why did the UNESCO choose 21 February for this special occasion? People of Bangladesh sowed the seed by expressing their love, respect and defending their language. UNESCO, in appreciation and recognition of the unprecedented sacrifice made by the Bengali people for the cause of their mother tongue (*matribhasa*), selected 21 February for this prestigious occasion. To keep the glory and pride of their language, Bangladeshi people fought and sacrificed their lives on 21 February 1952. The story is painful and heroic but the nation also proud of it. The Paris meeting also put on record how solemnly the people of Bangladesh have been observing the day as Martyrs' Day (SHAHEED DIBASH) ever since 1952, and how the People's Republic of Bangladesh has been observing the day as a special national day since its emergence as an independent state in 1971 (http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/I_0083.htm). By declaring 21 February as the International Mother Language Day, the world has recognized the sacrifice Bangladeshi people made during the rule of Pakistan.

1947 saw the end of the British Rule in India, which left it divided in two. The two countries were founded on the basis of religion, with Pakistan as an Islamic state and India as a secular one. The All India Muslim League (AIML) leaders felt that the

Hindus and the Muslims are two different nations and cannot live together and most of them demanded a separate nation for Muslims in an otherwise Hindu-dominated subcontinent. At the 1940 AIML conference at Lahore, Jinnah, the First Governor-General of Pakistan, made clear his commitment to two separate states:

"The Hindus and the Muslims belong to two different religions, philosophies, social customs and literature . . . To yoke together two such nations under a single state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partition_of_India

Eventually, a communal state, Pakistan came into being with two separate wings, East Pakistan (the South-Eastern part of India) and West Pakistan (the North-West Muslim majority India), separated geographically by India. Today's Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan between 1947 and 1971. Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the First Governor-General of Pakistan. He was originally from the Northern part of India where the major language was Urdu. Shortly after coming into power, Jinnah, in a meeting in Dhaka, on 21 March, 1948, declared that Urdu and only Urdu shall be the official State Language of Pakistan. Bengali people strongly resisted this declaration. Students and intellectuals of East Pakistan protested and demanded that not Urdu alone but Bangla also should be one of the state languages. That is how the Language Movement began in 1948 in the province known as East Pakistan.

Jinnah referred to those who fought for Bangla to be one of the state's languages as the enemy of Pakistan. The rationale of this demand can be understood if Pakistan's geographic, demographic and linguistic distribution during that time can be considered.

In 1951, the area of East and West Pakistan consisted of 344,218 square miles, in which West Pakistan was 290,298 square mile (84% of total area), whereas the rest of was East Pakistan (16%). In that year, the total population of Pakistan was 74 million, of which 56% lived in East Pakistan and 44% was in West Pakistan. Although the area was smaller, more people lived in East Pakistan (today Bangladesh). India was divided based on religion. However, like India, Pakistan was also a multiethnic country, where Bangalee, Panjabi, Sindhi, Poshtu, Beluch and some other tribal groups were living. Below is the distribution of population by the language spoken at that time in Pakistan:

Table: Percentage of Language spoken by region in Pakistan, 1951

Language	East Pakistan	West Pakistan	Total Pakistan
Bangla	98.16	0.02	56.40
Panjabi	0.02	67.08	28.55
Sindhi	0.01	12.85	5.47
Poshtu	0.00	8.16	3.48
Urdu	0.63	7.05	3.37
Baluch	0.00	3.04	1.29
English	0.01	0.03	0.02
Other	1.16	1.77	1.42
Total	100	100	100

Census Report of Pakistan, 1951, as quoted in (Rahman, 2003) p. 70.

The above statistics show that Urdu was not the mother tongue of any province in Pakistan. Urdu was spoken by only those who went to Pakistan from Northern part of

India after partition. It has been mentioned before that Jinnah was from Urdu-speaking areas. The group consisted of only 3% of the population. However, Pakistan Government tried to impute Urdu on 56% Bangla-speaking people in the name of Islam's language. The minority group of people of West Pakistan was exercising their national, political and military power. That was one of the ways how Bangali people of East Pakistan were oppressed, persecuted and tortured by the West Pakistanis from the very beginning of the birth of a nation that was based on religion.

The intention was to make people of this part literally impaire in every sector of their lives. 98.16 percent of the people of East Pakistan were speaking Bangla, still the Government used Urdu and English in the money, stamps, money-order forms, tickets and virtually everywhere. Bangla was omitted from competitive examinations of Public Service Commission, Army, Navy and Air force. Urdu was prioritized in all the Medias. English and Urdu were selected as the official language of Pakistan (Gonoparishad) Parliament and in the first meeting of Gonoparishad on 23 February, 1948, Bengali members demanded Bangla to be used besides Urdu and English. However, their request was knocked down, and they were referred as "Indian spy".

As a protest against this conspiracy, Bangladeshi people started their language movement at the beginning of 1948. Students went on strike on 26 February, 1948. The All Party Action Committee, was formed on 2 March, 1948, and a strike was called across the country on 11 March, 1948. The slogan, "we want Bangla as a State Language" chanted by people on the streets. Police beat them mercilessly. Language movement reached its climax on 21 February, 1952 through such small protests at different times (Alhelal, 1986).

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Khaja Nazimuddin visited East Pakistan on 27 January 1952 and like his predecessor Jinnah, he declared that Urdu would be the only national language of Pakistan. The people became furious and the movement became violent from then on, and the All Party Action Committee called a nationwide strike on 21 February 1952 as a protest against Nazimuddin's announcement. They again raised the issue of making Bangla as one of the national languages of Pakistan besides Urdu. The Government promulgated special powers (section144) into force from 20 February and banned all sorts of meetings and processions for 30 days. The All Party Action Committee decided not to break the 144. However, general students from Dhaka University thought otherwise and they gathered on the University campus and came out as a team of 10 members from early morning on 21 February. Police challenged them but in vain. There were fights between Police and the general public for the whole day in different places and at last the armed forces came in and fired many round of fire arms. Many Students and general public were killed. It is still impossible to know the number of people killed because police took dead bodies aside. However, Pakistan Government published a press release on 24 February, 1952 about the killings by the police and they admitted killing of 6 students. They were: Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin, Abdul Jabbar, Shafiur Rahman, Wahedullah and Abdul Awal. Two names were already known to be missing from that Government List – Abdus Salam and Salauddin. So, it leads many to believe that the true number will never be known (Rahman, 2003; Umar, 1970, 1975, 1985; Bangla Academy, 1986).

This movement ultimately ended in the adoption of Bangla as one of the state

languages of Pakistan in 1956. However, the movement was not isolated to this as it sowed the seeds for the independence movement of the Bangladeshi people which resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971.

Language is not only the principal representative of a culture of one nation but it also creates sense of patriotism and nationalism in people's mind. Bengali and Bangla language is an appropriate example of that. Bengali people created one of the greatest political and cultural histories in the 20th century. The events of 21 February 1952 proved that a nation which is strong and powerful politically cannot destroy a spirited civilized nation if they have a unifying language like Bangla. Pakistani leaders forgot that Bengali people and Bangla have a history of thousands of years behind them. The Pakistani government wanted to deny the existence of a language like Bangla in the name of Islam. When they were not able to do that, they conspired in other ways against the Bangladeshis., such as, trying to replace Bangla alphabet with Arabic, banning 100 years birthday celebration of Rabindranath Tagore, prohibiting broadcast of Rabindrasangeet (songs of Rabindranath) in the government-controlled media and so on. But they did not realize the power of language. The power had been proved through the sacrifice of the people of Bangladesh. Thus it is logical that if world leaders want to select a day as a specific Mother Language Day, 21 February must be considered. This is because no other nation has ever sacrificed their lives in such a way as Bengali people did to defend their Mother language.

This small history also proves that Mother Tongue, for any nation in the world or minority groups within nations, is the most

important part of their culture. It is also related to the existence of a nation. The liberty of Mother Language is the liberty of a nation. Bengali people have proved that and following the path of February 21 they liberated their country from the clutches of Pakistan.

I have consulted the following books and Webpages

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