

## Universal Language Day

People all over the world are sensitive about their language. Likewise the people of East Pakistan because the two wings East Pakistan and West Pakistan, were so culturally, racially different they represented an entirely different entity. So, when Jinnah announced that Urdu and only Urdu would be the state language of the new state of Pakistan, little did he know he was opening a Pandora's box. Had the Lahore Resolution of 1940 been implemented as planned, as "states" instead of "state," both the wings could have prospered in accordance with their own ideals without the exploitation of one wing by another. When East Pakistan was liberated through a savage, bloody war, it literally had no industry worth the name. But that is going ahead of ourselves.

When Jinnah made his announcement we wonder if he realised the irony of choosing a national language for Indian Muslims that represented a period of decline and debauchery in their history! He himself spoke only broken Urdu with a pronounced Gujrati accent. The word Urdu is supposed to come from "horde". The Mongol and Mughal armies had a veritable Foreign Legion of camp followers. They developed their own dialect based on Persian and Hindustani in order to communicate. Since many of them were Muslim, and the Koran is written in Arabic, words from this language found their place but until the reign of Aurangzeb, Urdu remained a socially despised dialect of mercenaries. Sycophants reigned at the court, and during this period of moral and political decadence, a handful of brilliant poets and a majority of mediocre courtiers elevated Urdu to literary status. After the British took over India, the Muslim landed classes of Uttar Pradesh retained Urdu as their mother tongue, while the Hindu landowners and aristocrats were quite happy with Hindi.

Virtually all East Pakistanis spoke Bengali, the sixth largest spoken language in the world. West Pakistanis spoke half a dozen languages, none remotely like Bengali. The only apparent link between the two sections were a common belief in Islam and the fact that both were formed out of heavily Muslim areas of the former British Indian Empire. Bengali and its culture were very dear to the people and they took this announcement as a slight to their language and so the students of Dhaka University rose up in protest only to be shot down by the police. Thus the demand for Bangla to be introduced at all levels of state activity increased and if there was ever a powerful reason behind the emergence of the country as a free state, it was the determination of Bengalis to uphold the sanctity and place of their mother tongue.

The spirit of nationalism is one that always takes a broad view of things. Indeed a big chunk of nationalism happens to be an emphasis on modernity. That again means a people, or a nation, even as it strives to claim its particular place in the global community, remains cognisant of the need to take ideas from other cultures in a manner that adds to the richness of its own. The bottom line was to introduce Bangla in all spheres of state activity - politics, culture, administration, etc, while at the same time equipping people with the necessary linguistic and intellectual strength to tackle the outside world. Therefore the need to maintain Bangla did not overshadow the need to speak English. Each year as February approaches, the people of Bangladesh become confident of their heritage but at the same time they are willing to embrace the ideas that flow in from other parts of the globe.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a student of that era and like many others he was a firm supporter of the need to maintain our mother tongue. But when in power he was not up to the task. However when on that fateful day of February 21 1952, the police opened fire on unarmed students marching to protest the announcement that Urdu would henceforth be the state language, although so many years have passed, we are still mindful of their sacrifice. As the years roll by, students are still showing respect to these martyrs and now that it is also known as International Language Day, the day is even more poignant.