

The Way 21st February Became International Mother Language Day

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THE 30th biennial general conference of UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) was held in Paris from 26th October to 17th November, 1999. A six-member delegation of Bangladesh led by the then Education Minister A.S.H.K. Sadek participated in the conference. As one of its members I stayed in Paris from 7th to 14th November. I had the opportunity to attend many international conferences but the participation in the UNESCO's general conference was the most remarkable event in my life.

Some non-resident Bangladeshis along with few others of different nations living in Vancouver, Canada formed an excellent organization, known as 'Mother Language of the World'. Among the organizers, the names of two Bangladeshis Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam (What a wonderful coincidence! both Rafiq and Salam are the martyrs of 1952) are memorable. They proposed that 21st February be proclaimed as the 'International Mother Language Day' and sent this proposal first to UN headquarters in New York and then to Paris. But they were told by UNESCO officials that such a proposal must come from a member country and not from any organization. The 'Mother Language of the World' then contacted the Ministry of Education, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in this regard. When the matter was brought to the notice of the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, she immediately instructed the Education Minister to take necessary steps.

While attending the opening session of the general conference, the former Education Minister submitted the Bangladesh's proposal formally and solicited the support of the member countries. As per schedule I reached Paris on 7th November. Two other members of the delegation Dr. Avesha Khatun, Director General, Secondary and High Secondary Education and Prof. Kafil Uddin Ahmed, General Secretary, UNESCO National Commission for Bangladesh were already in Paris. The honourable Ambassador of Bangladesh to France Mr. Syed Moazzem Ali informed me that our proposal to proclaim the 21st February as the 'International Mother Language Day' would be placed in Commission-2 on 12th November for discussion and consideration. He apprehended

that some members of the Western countries may oppose the proposal because UNESCO will need about one hundred thousand US dollars per year to observe the day. He requested me to lobby in favour of our proposal to the delegates attending the conference. I am basically a teacher and have no experience in diplomatic dealings. However, I felt very strongly from the core of my heart that I must do something for this great endeavour and

I assured the Ambassador that I would talk to the delegates of African countries. I spent two years in teaching in the University in Zambia, Lusaka and Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria in early eighties. In that connection I travelled to few other African countries and had the opportunity to know something about their society, language and culture. The Colonial rule and exploitation for years together grabbed their mother tongues and replaced them with English, German, French etc., and even today Nyanja, Bemba and many other languages are fighting for their existence. This picture is not only true for Africa but also exist in Asia and South America.

Patriotism and love for mother tongue are inherent qualities of human being. Language is an important weapon for the emittance of spirit and inspiration towards one's motherland. We have proposed to declare the 21st February as the 'International Mother Language Day' to make it memorable in the history of the world the sacrifices made by our people at Dhaka on 21st February, 1952 in order to free our beloved mother language from the colonial aggression of West Pakistan.

Once 21st February gets its recognition as the 'International Mother Language Day' observance of this day would be able to protect the mother tongues of many ethnic and small communities as an umbrella. 'International Mother Language Day' would not only honour the perception of a particular country, rather it would enlighten the dignity of the mother tongues to every nation, especially the weak and underdeveloped ones. My explanation and analysis on the significance of this day seem to have convinced the African delegates whom I have talked to and they assured me of supporting our proposal whole-heartedly. In the meantime another member of the delegate Dr. Sadat Hossain (Presently Home Secretary) reached Paris on 10th November.

Twenty eight countries including Pakistan extended written support to the proposal of Bangladesh. The countries are Sri Lanka, Benin, Oman, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Belarus, Philippines, Ivory Coast, India, Comoros, Indonesia, Gambia, Honduras, Micronesia, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Iran, Pakistan, Lithuania, Italy, Malaysia, Paraguay, Chile, Slovakia and Syria.

This proposal of Bangladesh will be placed in the technical committee of UNESCO, Commission-2 on 12th November. In case it is rejected, all our efforts would go in vain. On the other hand, approval in Commission-2 means everything is almost over. Because it will then be adopted as a routine matter in the general conference on 17th November. It means Commission-2 is the most powerful body in this matter. So all

of us were in severe tension—our nerves were under pressure. Who knows what happens? If we succeed it will be definitely the most glorious achievement for us of the 20th century. That is why the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was very anxious and kept constant touch with the Bangladesh Embassy.

On the 12th November, the session of Commission-2 started at 10 AM as per prefixed agenda. Moazzem Ali, Dr. Sadat Hossain and myself took our seats on the Bangladesh desk and behind us seated were Ikhtiar Chowdhury, Councillor of Bangladesh Embassy, Tozammel Haque (Tony Haque), the special Adviser to the DG-UNESCO and Prof. Kafil Uddin Ahmed.

Mr. Ludovít Stanislav Molnar of Slovakia, the honourable Chairman of Commission-2 placed the proposals, one after another before the house which were debated, rejected or accepted with or without amendments according to the merit. At about 3 PM local time, the historic resolution No. 30C/DR.35 of Bangladesh was placed in the house. On behalf of Bangladesh Moazzem Ali delivered his thought-provoking speech eloquently and convincingly and tried hard to justify the rationale of the resolution. We were overwhelmed with anxiety and probably our blood pressure also increased. There were about three hundred delegates of the member countries present in the session. The honourable Chairman asked three if there was any objection to the resolution. Good Luck Bangladesh!—good luck to the 200 million Bengali. The resolution was adopted unopposed. What a sensation! We lost ourselves with jubilation and effusive. We embraced each other on the desk itself. It seemed to me that it was a reflection of the emotional outburst of the whole Bengali nation through the six of us. The delegates of the friendly nations also congratulated us. What else could be the greater achievement than the indispensable and irrefutable resort of our assistance, the mother language got international recognition. The international recognition of this day being antecedent of self-abnegation of the Bengali people for their mother tongue has not only increased the dignity of Bengali language but also the image of Bangladesh has become luminous. It has already been mentioned that the resolution was adopted as a routine matter in the general conference on 17th November. In taking decision to proclaim 21st February as the 'International Mother Language Day' the UNESCO has not only recognised the self sacrifice of the Bengali nation for their mother language but also honoured the independence movement of Bangladesh which emitted from the sacrifice of the martyrs of the 21st February.

To achieve the proclamation of the International Mother Language Day, the diplomatic dexterity of Bangladesh is unequivocally commendable. In

this regard the sincere and timely initiative of the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the role played by the former Education Minister A.S.H.K. Sadek, Ambassador Moazzem Ali and Tony Haque are exceedingly laudable. And of course Rafiq and Salam of the 'Mother Language of the World' tied the whole Bengali nation with gratitude. I myself feel proud to be associated with this historic event.

Our responsibility has increased many times after the recognition of the great Language Day as the 'International Mother Language Day'. We should be engaged in endeavouring from right now so that our education, culture, science and technology can spread through our pride, the mother tongue Bengali. We can rightly evaluate the recognition which the World community has bestowed upon us, provided the government gives proper attention to enrich our language and those who are concerned with education perform their own responsibilities.

After the proclamation of the 21st February as the 'International Mother Language Day' the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that an 'International Institute of Mother Language Research' would be set up at Dhaka and accordingly she laid the foundation stone of the proposed Institute near the Shilpakala Academy on 15th March, 2001. The honourable Secretary-General of United Nations Kofi Annan, graced the occasion by his presence. It is a praise-worthy initiative. Nearly six thousand languages/dialects of the World including those becoming extinct would be preserved and studied in the proposed institute. It will be like a museum of world languages. Given the danger that many of the 6,000 languages/dialects spoken today many disappear in the next thirty years, it is critical that the international community redouble its efforts to protect this common heritage of mankind. Along with the language, the concerned race, culture, history and tradition are also becoming extinct. As a result one day the world loose multifariousness in languages. The proposed institute at Dhaka will surely give the future generation throughout the world an opportunity to learn the linguistic diversity, culture and history of hundreds of races. It is learnt that the present government is thinking of scrapping the project of the construction of the institute. This has raised a great concern to the members of the civil society of the country. I believe that in recognising the 21st February the UNESCO has brightened the dignity of the Bengali nation. In return the proposed institute would not only honour the great initiative of UNESCO but also increase the prestige of Bangladesh worldwide.

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