



**Dr. A. Kumar**

## **21<sup>st</sup> February, The International Mother Language Day** **By Dr. A. Kumar**

**(A brief history of Bengla Language Day, published in The Voice, Canada in March 2003)**

A number of specific days have been declared over the years as international days for observance by the people of internationally, at the initiative of the United Nations and its various organs, To name a few, we have the international literacy day, international women's day. international children's day, the international day for eradication of racial discrimination, international day for ensuring pure drinking water, international habitat day, international day for preservation of environment and many others.

It is a matter of great pride for Bangla Desh as it is this country which is behind the birth of International Mother Language Day. There is a reason, a cause, history and a lot of sacrifice by the Bangla Deshi people that today we are celebrating this day. I find it imperative to state the brief history behind. Language Movement Day or Language Revolution Day (ভাষা আন্দোলন দিবস *Bhasha Andolon Dibosh*), which is also referred to as Language Martyrs' Day or Martyrs' Day (শহীদ দিবস *Shohid Dibosh*), is a national day of Bangladesh to commemorate protests and sacrifices to protect Bengali as a national language during the Pakistani regime in 1952. This movement had also sown the seeds for the independence movement which resulted in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 with the help of its historical friend, India.

In August 1947, a new state called Pakistan emerged on the world map. But it was comprising two far-flung geographical areas, one in the west and the other in the east, separated by 1600 kilometers, India being in the middle. The language of the majority of the people of eastern wing of Pakistan, was Bangla. Bangla had a rich tradition of literature spread over thousand years. The Bangalis also had a highly developed culture that had little in common with the culture of the people of western Pakistan. Mr. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the then Governor general of Pakistan, declared Urdu the only language for both west and east Pakistan at a public meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1948. During 1950-52, the emerging middle classes of East Bengal underwent an uprising known later as the Bengali Language Movement. Bangladeshis (then East Pakistanis) were initially agitated by the decision by the Central Pakistan Government to establish Urdu as the sole national language for all of Pakistan. The situation was worsened by an open declaration that "Urdu and only Urdu will be the national language of Pakistan" by the

governor, Khawaja Nazimuddin. The peoples of the east Pakistan (whose main language was Bangla) started to protest against this. Accordingly, a student meeting on 21 February called for a province-wide strike. But the government invoked Section 144 on 20 February. The student community at a meeting on the morning of 21 February agreed to defy section 144. The government decided to quell protests by brute force. Near the current Dhaka Medical College Hospital, police fired on the protesters and numerous people, including Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Sofiur, Abul Barkat and Abdul Jabbar died.

Bangladesh officially sent a proposal to UNESCO with the request that a Resolution be adopted declaring 21st February as International Mother Language Day. The Language Division of UNESCO marked this proposal as the Draft Resolution (35) and sent the same to Commission (2) for consideration. The Commission unanimously recommended the proposal for presentation at the Plenary Session of the General Conference of the UNESCO. This proposal from Bangladesh was seconded by India, Gambia, Chile, Ivorycoast, Italy, Indonesia, Iran, Oman, Comoros, Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, the Philippines, Honduras the Bahamas, Benin, Blearus, Vanatua, Micronesia, Malaysia, Egypt, Russia, Lithunia, Srilanka, Saudi Arabia, Surinam and Slovakia. 21<sup>st</sup> February was proclaimed the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1999. The unanimous decision was taken at the 30th General Conference of the UNESCO held on November 17, 1999.

Since then, The International Mother Language Day is being celebrated every year in the UNESCO Member States and as well as its Headquarters. The only objective is to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism as it is an established fact that the languages are the most powerful instruments of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage.

In the modern day world and the increasing chaos and mess, especially in the under developed world, all moves to promote the dissemination of mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to development fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue. This will also strengthen the international relations at all levels to promote business, finally leading to prosperity so that this world becomes a better place for the generations to come.

The world's nearly 6,000 languages will be celebrated on International Mother Language Day. But at the same time, it is important here to mention that today, about half of the 6,000 or so languages spoken internationally, are at the verge of being extinct. This year's theme will be devoted to the topic of languages and cyberspace.

UNESCO's declaration of 21st February as the International Mother Language Day has brought fresh glory and prestige to Bangladesh which is making significant strides towards peace, progress and prosperity at home and discharging international obligations abroad. From 1953 onwards, starting from 21st February 1953, the immortal 21st February has been observed as a great national event all over Bangladesh, and also

beyond the frontiers of Bangladesh: in several places of India, UK, USA, Canada and elsewhere, wherever there is a sizeable concentration of Bangla speaking people. While devotedly serving our own language, we shall respect the languages of all the peoples of the world make 21st February - The International Mother Language Day - a great day, to be observed worldwide. There is also an Organization named "Mother Language Lovers of the World" in Canada. There are ten English, Kutchi, Cantonese, German, Filipino, Bengali and Hindi speaking members in that organization Long live 21st February the International Mother Language Day! (Reference: Wikipedia & Prof. Kabir Chowdhury in Bangla Desh Quarterly March 2000

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