

অমর একুশে - Immortal 21

21 February is a day when history was etched in blood for a concept that was unheard of – the right to mother language. In the history of the world, many conflicts arose. But few others can match in terms of conviction with the language movement of the people of Bangladesh. When the right to speak its mother tongue was threatened, the Bangla speaking people protested for their rightful cause.

In 1947, the Indian sub-continent was partitioned into two states - India and Pakistan. Pakistan was distinctly divided into two parts – a thousand mile apart from each other - East and West Pakistan. East Pakistan is demographically larger than West Pakistan as nearly 56% of Pakistani population live in the eastern part, who speak Bangla as their mother tongue, while in West Pakistan there were several linguistic people speaking Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, Poshtu and Urdu. Yet, Urdu was chosen as the only state language giving no consideration of the language of the majority – Bangla.

The whole situation reached to the climax in 1952, when Pakistani Government made it clear that no consideration will be given to Bangla as even the second official language. The students protested vehemently against the decision. When the government banned all procession, students marked the day of 21 February for protest supported by people of all walks of life and poured into the streets in defiance of the ban to uphold the right of their mother language.

The heavily armed police opened fire which killed and injured many peaceful protesters. It became evident that the Pakistani government will not acknowledge the socio-cultural identity of the Bengali people. Thus, the History was written on the day as it marked the start of liberation struggle of the Bengali people. Since 1952, 21 February remained a solemn day and a day of reckoning for the Bengali people in their journey towards ultimate independence in 1971.

Every language is a distinct characteristic and powerful instrument of identity, culture and heritage of its people. The languages are also part of a global heritage and once extinct, that part of human civilization is also erased from the face of the earth. Today, there are only 6909 living languages. About 6% of them have more than a million speakers each, and collectively account for 94% of the world population.

Native languages of smaller tribes/nations gradually become extinct because of non-use. About half of the existing languages are spoken by fewer than ten thousand people, and about quarter have fewer than one thousand speakers. During the 90's, one language was lost every two weeks. This was as heartrending as the extinction of a living species. Nothing but a genuine compassion personified by an event could have altered the course of this rapid rate of extinction of languages. Thus, the Bengali Language Movement became the epitome of this struggle and grew into an event of immense global significance.

On 9 January 1998, a Bangladeshi-origin resident of Vancouver, Canada wrote a letter to then UN Secretary General Mr. Kofi Annan requesting him to take steps for saving the world's languages from extinction by declaring an International Mother Language Day. He proposed the date as 21 February commemorating the 1952 Bengali language movement and the ultimate sacrifice of the people in Dhaka for upholding the right of mother language.

On 17 November 1999, following overwhelming support from the international community, 21 February was recognized and formally announced as the 'International Mother Language Day' by UNESCO (30C/62). It was formally recognized by the UN General Assembly (A/RES/61/266) calling "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by people of the world" on 16 May 2009. Since then, in many countries, replica of the Language Martyrs' Memorial was also erected in recognition.

Since 2000, **International Mother Language Day** is being celebrated on 21 February around the world in order to promote the spirit of multiculturalism and multilingualism, protect all languages from the danger of extinction, research about linguistics and, above all else, respect every language of the world.



Photo: Language Martyrs' Memorial in Dhaka

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