

A Brief History of International Mother Language Day By Bangla Caravan



The 21st February is recognized as the International Mother Language Day (IMLD), chosen because of the tragic – yet catalyzing events that transpired on that day in 1952, in Bangladesh. The origin of this day is engraved in the hearts and minds of the speakers of the Bengali language because of the events of February 21st, 1952.

At the partition of India in 1947, the Bengal province was divided according to the predominant religions of the inhabitants. The western part became part of India and the eastern part became a province of Pakistan known as East Bengal and later East Pakistan. However, there were economic, cultural and linguistic frictions between East and West Pakistan.

These tensions were apparent in 1948 when Pakistan's government dominated by the West Pakistanis declared that Urdu should be the sole national language. This sparked protests amongst the Bengali-speaking population who were the majority in entire Pakistan. The government outlawed the protests but on February 21, 1952, students at the University of Dhaka and other activists organized a protest. Later that day, the police opened fire at the demonstrators and killed four students. The unrest continued as Bengali speakers campaigned for the right to use their mother language. Many more people died demonstrating in solidarity with the demand to establish Bengali as one of the national languages of Pakistan.

Finally, Bengali became one of the national languages in Pakistan on February 29, 1956. Following the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, Bangladesh became an independent country with Bengali as its official language. The students' deaths in fighting for the right to use their mother language are now remembered on International Mother Language Day. The Bengali language movement represented the quest for equality, human rights, struggle against the Pakistani oppressive regime, and for emancipation.

On November 17, 1999, UNESCO proclaimed February 21 to be the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) and it was first observed globally on February 21, 2000. The resolution to proclaim IMLD by UNESCO was first suggested by Mr. Rafiqul Islam, a Bangali Canadian living in Vancouver, Canada. He wrote a letter to the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on 9 January 1998 asking him to take a step to saving the world's languages from extinction by declaring an International Mother Language Day. Mr. Islam proposed the date as 21 February to commemorate the 1952 killings in Dhaka.

Also, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 2008 as the International Year of Languages to promote unity in diversity and international understanding through multilingualism and multiculturalism, and on May 16, 2009, it called on its Member States to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by people of the world.

Each year the celebrations around IMLD concentrate on a particular theme. Theme for 2018: Preserving linguistic diversity and promoting multilingualism to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG #4 on education of the 2030 Agenda emphasizes the importance of appropriate languages of instruction, usually mother tongues, in the early years of schooling, to facilitate access to education while promoting fairness for indigenous and minority groups and their languages.

In Bangladesh, the IMLD is a public holiday, where it is also known as Shohid Dibosh (in Bengali) or Martyr's Day. It is a pivotal day in the country's history. On this day, people lay floral wreaths at the Martyr's Monument. It is a time to celebrate Bangladesh's culture and the Bengali language and demonstrate support and solidarity to all other nations struggling to preserve their mother languages and cultures.