



mother  
tongues

## INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY FELL YESTERDAY

# MOTHER, MOTHER LANGUAGE AND MOTHERLAND



Bangladesh High Commissioner  
Tareq Md Ariful Islam

## THIS YEAR'S THEME: AN EXPLAINER

Language is one of the most visible and 'fundamentally characteristic of the faculties of humankind'. It is the most powerful instrument of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage. However, humans are not endowed with the gift of language as soon as they come to the world: they only have the physical and mental capability to learn a language. As a newborn baby is fed by his/her mother, he/she begins to imitate the sounds made by his/her mother. The mother and the infant begin to communicate between themselves in their common vernacular. Thus originates the language of humankind which becomes the Mother Language or Mother Tongue of an individual in a given community.

Mother Language has the most permanent impact on the formation of any individual. Mother Tongue cognitively establishes a direct connection among heart, brain, and tongue.

Through it, we started thinking and expressing ourselves to the world. A child utters his/her first words, expresses first feelings and experiences first emotions in mother tongue.

Mother Language sparks the most original thinking in an individual; spurs imagination, creativity, and innovation in human mind. It symbolizes ethnic identity. Every mother tongue therefore, needs to be held in due respect – just as one's mother and one's motherland.

To build and develop our motherland, we need to impart proper and complete education to our future generation. Mother Language can be an important vehicle for that because evidence tells us that learning first in one's mother tongue leads to better outcomes in the future. Learning and preserving mother tongue is not an obstacle to learning other languages rather it is complementary.

Today, many languages of diverse ethnic groups and communities are on the verge of extinction risking loss of their identities. Peace-stability-sustainable development of our motherland can only be ensured by embracing linguistic and cultural diversity and promoting multilingualism. Protecting and promoting the fundamental right of every people to use their respective mother tongue, therefore, has always been crucial.

As the mother nourishes us, protects us from all adversities, the mother tongue sustains us socially, mentally and emotionally; and the motherland provides us a safe abode and sustenance.

Three rolled into one, embodying 'mother-ness'; and exuding an overarching benevolence where all can resort to.

Let us renew our struggle to preserve our three precious treasures: Mother- Mother Language – Motherland.

**Q:** How does this observance preserve endangered languages?

**A:** There is a reality that often escapes our attention. Every two weeks, a language disappears from Earth, taking with it identity, culture, cumulative knowledge and intangible heritage of humankind. This is an irreparable loss, and one major purpose of IMLD is to turn this tide. Through subsequent multiple, consensus UN General Assembly resolutions, Member States of UN while welcoming the proclamation by UNESCO about the IMLD also expressed their resolve to preserve and protect all the languages across the globe particularly those facing extinction. So, we have a huge mandate from the comity of nations. Observance of the Day impresses upon policy makers and other stakeholders to step up their obligations towards mother language.

As we observe the day in different capitals, governments and peoples are developing fuller awareness of endangered languages and the values they carry and the necessity of their preservation. In many capitals and at the UNHQs particularly when we observe the day, we partner with those countries that are facing the challenges of extinction of many of their indigenous languages spoken by smaller groups of people. We share the best practices of each other for preservation and promotion of such languages. This is developing a critical mass of member states which will only grow in the years to come. Hopefully this will eventually turn into a global movement for promotion and protection of all Mother Languages.

**Q:** How does it promote multilingualism?

**A:** The protestors in February 21, 1952 wanted Bangla as a State Language alongside Urdu. The concept of multilingualism was implanted there. Ever since 1952, the day has been celebrated in every corner of Bangladesh with that solemnity goal in mind. Today, you will get to see many dialects in Bangladesh as well as different languages of ethnic groups.

The IMLD not only commemorates multilingualism. Each year, in the theme of the observance we also see a progression towards multilingualism. For instance, in 2019, the theme was indigenous languages as a factor in development, peace and reconciliation. The theme of 2021 was "fostering multilingualism for inclusion in education and society." So, the element of multilingualism is getting stronger.

Multilingualism and cultural diversity strengthen the unity and cohesion of societies and promote understanding, tolerance and dialogue, all of which are vital for realizing the 2030 Agenda. Multilingualism also contributes to the maintenance of peace – harmony – stability and towards promotion of deeper trust – respect – understanding among diverse cultures and communities. It also promotes a culture of peace and non-violence. Multilingualism celebrates unity in diversity and international understanding.

Multilingualism is essential, because when 40% of the world's inhabitants do not have access to education in the language they speak or understand best, it hinders their learning, as well as their access to heritage and cultural expressions. Mother Language can be an important vehicle for that since evidence tells us that learning first in one's mother tongue leads to better and lasting outcomes in future. And the impact is profound and widespread.



Bangladeshi High Commissioner Tareq Md Ariful Islam with Foreign Minister Prof. G. L. Peiris.



**Bangladesh has established the International Mother Language Institute (IMPLI), a statutory body unique of its kind, to conduct research for preserving the endangered languages of the world and upholding their dignity. The prime objectives and missions of IMLI are collection and preservation of languages of the ethnic groups of different nations and countries of the world, conducting research and training programmes in this regard, collecting information of different language movements including Bangla, and conducting research on those as well as disseminating historical information concerning language movements among the member countries of UNESCO.**

the status of a UNESCO Category 2 institute.

Since 2017, we have taken initiative to teach our ethnic minority children in their native language from the pre-primary level up to Class II (and gradually learn Bangla from Class III). Currently, textbooks are being published in 05 ethnic languages other than Bangla and the students are getting the books on the first day of the year, for free.

**Q:** February 21 has been designated as UNESCO as IMLD. Why was this day selected?

**A:** The day was selected in memory of our Language Martyrs who shed blood on the streets of Dhaka on this very day in 1952 to secure the right to speak in our mother language Bangla. We commemorate the day as our Language Martyrs' Day.

Naturally, the idea to celebrate International Mother Language Day (IMLD) first came from Bangladesh. We made the proposal to the UNESCO in 1999, under the guidance of our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to proclaim the 21st of February as the International Mother Language Day (IMLD). Following tedious deliberations, 28 countries co-sponsored the proposal, and it was unanimously adopted through a resolution. All SAARC countries co-sponsored the Resolution. Through subsequent multiple, consensus UN General Assembly resolutions, Member States of UN welcomed this proclamation by UNESCO and expressed their resolve to preserve and protect all the languages across the globe particularly those facing extinction.

UNESCO proclamation of February 21 as International Mother Language Day (IMLD) recognizes "the unprecedented sacrifice made by Bangladesh for the cause of Mother Language on February 21, 1952". So,

there cannot be a more suitable day than February 21 to capture the spirit. The IMLD is observed every year throughout the world since February 2000.

Observance of the day is to celebrate the fraternity of languages; also to bring up the importance of thousands of mother/native languages and peoples' efforts worldwide in upholding respective linguistic heritage. That is how the day went beyond Bangladesh and became global.

**Q:** How does Bangladesh observe the day worldwide?

**A:** The predominant mode of expression of culture is language. Mother Language is the best vehicle for education as well as nourishing and practicing culture in society. It is the most powerful instrument of preserving as well as developing one's tangible and intangible heritage. Contribution of Mother Languages in preserving cultural diversity, nurturing creativity and promoting multilingualism is critical. International Mother Language Day is an apt occasion to remind all that Mother Language is a bearer of respective cultural heritage; it is about one's identity, it is about promotion of inter-cultural dialogue; it is an effective tool to ensure inclusive learning for all. Respect for language also contributes to promoting understanding among diverse cultures and communities.

In that spirit, Bangladesh Missions abroad have been observing and promoting the International Mother Language Day in collaboration with other countries and stakeholders in all the major capitals in the world. It is an important vehicle of our cultural diplomacy. Multilingual cultural performance is a common mainstay in all such observations. We bring different language speakers, hold panel discussions on importance of Mother Language, erect

makeshift Language Martyrs' monuments and arrange blood donation camps. As we do so, we always maintain the cultural uniqueness and authenticity of the host country. Through this we are promoting all the Mother Languages of the world.

For instance, Bangladesh High Commission in Sri Lanka, in collaboration with the Government of Sri Lanka and some other Sri Lankan partners has been commemorating the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) in Colombo as a signature public event since 2015. Every passing year, the scale, scope, participation, outreach of the observance as well as interest about it has been growing.

The High Commission observed the Day yesterday at the Independence Square involving the wider Sri Lankan audience and projecting the spirit of pluralism, inclusion, multilingualism and multi-culturalism. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa graced the observance.

Children and youth of diverse linguistic heritage and ethnicities were an integral part of the observance to stimulate their creative ideas and thoughts about mother tongue and universality of languages. We were partnered by the Education Ministry of Sri Lanka, United Nations in Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Scout Association. Some diplomatic missions in Colombo also joined in.

Arts Competition, Essay and Poetry competition in Sinhala and Tamil languages have been conducted throughout the island keeping in consideration Sri Lanka's Constitution which promotes multilingualism by recognizing Sinhala and Tamil Languages as National and Official Languages. We also hosted a panel discussion with the Sinhalese Language Institute of the University of Colombo the same day. This year's theme has been set as 'Mother-Mother Language-Motherland' which again embodies turning to our roots.

The following are excerpts from an interview with Bangladesh High Commissioner Tareq Md Ariful Islam on the International Mother Language Day, a global initiative of Bangladesh.

**Q:** Why did Bangladesh take the initiative regarding the International Mother Language Day?

**A:** In 1948, within one year of founding Pakistan, the Pakistani rulers declared that only Urdu shall be the State Language of the Nation, even though Bengali-speaking population was 55% of the entire population. It is then that we realised that our 'identity' has to be upheld. Because, once you cut off a population from their mother tongue – then eventually they get de-linked from their heritage, from their roots. As a result, they are unable to reap the benefits of their age-old wisdom and knowledge bases of their past generations. The people of Bangladesh realized this in the early '50s. It was an eye-opener.

Thus began our language movement demanding Bangla to be made our State Language alongside Urdu. This was basically a movement to defend our linguistic heritage and our own identity. By early 1952, the language movement gathered further momentum and our people (in present-day Bangladesh) started standing up to defend our mother tongue 'Bangla'. On February 21, 1952, our students and youth brought out peaceful rallies on the streets in Dhaka to protest the decision of the Pakistani rulers. But, without any provocation, police fired at the protest march. Several Bengali students and ordinary people were killed. This happened within the first five years of (united) Pakistan. So, the 1952 language movement made the people of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) realize that this was not what they fought for. This led to our struggle for Independence and the emergence of independent Bangladesh.

Hence, we understand the value of speaking, preserving, and using the mother tongue. And we have learned it in the hardest way, at the expense of our blood. Inspired by the supreme sacrifice made by its 'Language Martyrs', Bangladesh has always been a global proponent of preserving and protecting mother tongue. This spirit led us take the initiative of having an IMLD.

**Q:** Can you explain measures taken in Bangladesh for promotion and protection of languages?

**A:** Bangladesh has established the International Mother Language Institute (IMPLI), a statutory body unique of its kind, to conduct research for preserving the endangered languages of the world and upholding their dignity. The prime objectives and missions of IMLI are collection and preservation of languages of the ethnic groups of different nations and countries of the world, conducting research and training programmes in this regard, collecting information of different language movements including Bangla, and conducting research on those as well as disseminating historical information concerning language movements among the member countries of UNESCO. IMLI has gained