



Shaheed Minar ((Martyr's Memorial)

Amar bhaiyer rokte rangano Ekushey February, ami ki bhulite pari? (Can I forget the twenty-first February, Incarnadined by the blood of my brother?)

Can I Forget the 21<sup>st</sup> of February?

By Umme Al-wazedi

Every year, we celebrate 21<sup>st</sup> February or Ekushey to remember those who sacrificed their lives in the Language Movement. From the year 2000 21<sup>st</sup> February has been commemorated as the International Mother Language Day. However, this recognition did not come easily. 21<sup>st</sup> February is a day that had been drenched in blood in the history of Bangladesh.

The present Bangladesh was a part of undivided India. It became a province of Pakistan in 1947 and was known as East Pakistan. In the creation of Pakistan religion, not cultural similarity was the uniting factor. The languages of the two provinces were different; the people of West Pakistan spoke Urdu and the people of East Pakistan spoke Bangla (Bengali). The euphoria of religious identity did not last long as the practical situation became different. In the first session of Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan in 1948 it was decided that there should be a unified language. In March 1948, Mohammad Ali Jinnah arrived in East Pakistan and declared that Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan. In January 1952, Khwaja Nazimuddin visited East Pakistan and in a meeting in Paltan Maidan (Palton Field) recapped Jinnah's pronouncement. In protest,

Dhaka University National Language Committee called a strike on January 30 and a meeting was held at Amtala. Throughout January and February strikes were called in protest. A province-wide hartal was called on 21<sup>st</sup> February. The government declared Section 144 on February 20 prohibiting all public meetings, rallies and processions. The students defied and started bringing out processions after the meeting on February 21. The policemen were ordered to shoot randomly on the procession. In the firing, Abul Barkat, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, and Abdus Salam were killed and numerous others were wounded. There was blood every where and on that day the color of the blood and the color of the Krishnachura and Palash tree became one. The sky roared with the cries of hundred mothers for the loss of their sons. On the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> February, a Shaheed Minar (Martyr's Memorial) was constructed on the spot where the students had been killed.

The struggle for an independent language went on through strikes and meeting and after the resounding victory of the United Front in 1954, Bangla was recognized and declared as a state language of East Pakistan. From then on the day has been observed by walking bare feet to the Shaheed Minar with garlands of flower and people chanting: "Can I forget the twenty-first February, incarnadined by the blood of my brother?"

The spirit of Ekushey had far reaching effects—it contributed to the creation of Bangalee nationalism and united the people of East Pakistan to have a separate state based on language and culture. After nine months of freedom struggle, the death of 3 million people and the rape of 2 hundred thousand women, East Pakistan gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 and became a sovereign state: Bangladesh in the map of the world.

Ekushey's spirit influenced two Bangladeshi members of an organization named "Mother Language Lovers of the World" in Canada to propose to UNESCO in 1999 to declare the 21<sup>st</sup> February as International Mother Language Day. The Bangladesh Government formally proposed and on the 30<sup>th</sup> session of General Conference UNISCO gave a historic declaration: 21<sup>st</sup> February will be celebrated as the International Mother Language Day throughout the world.

We are proud of the fact that when over the past 500 years 4.5 percent of the total number of living languages (6, 000) have disappeared, our language stands distinctively and will never be extinct. Every year when we celebrate Ekushey we are thankful to those brothers and countrymen who gave their lives for us, so that we, our children and children of generations to come can speak in Bangla and establish our identity as Bangladeshis.