

Ekushey February belongs to the world

Abed Chaudhury

In 2000 while living in France I met a number of diplomats who played key roles in convincing UNESCO that 21st February should be declared International Mother Language Day. In a party in the house of the Bangladesh ambassador to Paris I heard the background story that brought this idea to fruition.

The idea originated in the form of a letter from Bangalis living in Canada but apparently needed formal presentations, lobbying, as is often the case in any UN type deliberations. A crucial person in these UNESCO efforts narrated to me how he was able to recruit the help of even the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for this proposal. The government of Sheikh Hasina put its full weight behind this proposal and finally in 1999 21st February was declared the international mother language day in order to promote linguistic diversity and also to preserve the demographically weaker languages of the world.

In Bangladesh this recognition has been seen as a major victory for our most venerated national event as well as a victory for our diplomatic efforts. Indeed people of Bangladesh can be justifiably proud of formalising this international awareness which remembers the sacrifice that Bangalis made on behalf of their own language. Today Bangla is a national language and as 6th largest language of the world in terms of population is a true mega-language that is

unlikely ever to be threatened with extinction.

However for UNESCO this day has a very different significance. UNESCO is mainly concerned about the loss of human heritage because of extinction of languages. Many languages of the world face extinction and 21st February has a real significance for these languages.

One of these languages is Ngunnawal, the language of the original inhabitants of Canberra region. During a recent talk while unveiling the Sydney language memorial in Ashfield park I spoke about the absence of the word “seed” in Ngunnawal language. According to many the language has become extinct leaving behind only about 200 words which are preserved without any grammar or syntax. I mentioned this as a dramatic evidence of how once vibrant languages are getting extinct leaving behind mere fossils of words kept in libraries. I appealed to the audience for words meaning “seed” in aboriginal languages. Seed represented main food item of aboriginal people for thousands of years and I wanted to restore these names if possible in the area of seed genetics, the topic of my research.

I received an email from a gentleman who was in the audience informing me of words meaning seed in several aboriginal languages. I quote from his description.

Aange (Arrernte language from NT)
Dharranggulk (Datiwuy language from NT)
Mil (Ngiyampaa language from NSW)
Yitpi (Kurna language from SA)

There are not 4 or 5 but 600 such languages in Australia, many of them facing extinction. It is assumed that 14 languages become

extinct every year, thus taking us away from linguistic plurality to linguistic uniformity and in the process a continuous destruction of human heritage.

In Bangladesh itself we have 3 million inhabitants who speak 40 of our own aboriginal and tribal languages. These languages contain in them elements of our ancient history and true heritage. We Bangalis must become aware of these threatened languages and cultures and try our best to preserve them through appropriate learning, policies and behaviour.

The true spirit of Ekushey in a global modern incarnation is not just the victory of Bangla language, rather it is a cry to save threatened languages and cultures. UNESCO through the original proposal originating from Canada and through the efforts of the then Bangladesh Government of Sheikh Hasina has recognized in it a universal theme of preservation of threatened languages of the world.

Let us continue to champion this theme. For instance when celebrating the culture of Bangladesh in Sydney we can try presenting a Chakma song, a Manipuri dance or say the greetings in Garo or Oraon language. We should also increase our knowledge of the origin and culture of our

tribal people and think of “them” as “us”.

The recent unveiling of a memorial in Ashfield Park of Sydney through efforts of Ekushey Academy of Sydney and support of Bangladesh Government is a step in the right direction. That memorial, enjoying bipartisan support from Bangladesh pays particular homage to our own martyrs of 21st February, and has become a symbolic memorial for linguistic diversity of Australia and the world.

However the weaker languages of the world need particular attention. A similar memorial can perhaps be erected in Canberra to remember particularly the indigenous and threatened languages of the world. That gesture will crystallize our extreme concern for their immediate disappearance. With 600 languages facing threat of extinction the capital of Australia is more appropriate than any other capital of the world for such a memorial.

We can do a lot more than just express our sorrow and recapitulate our struggles of Ekushey. Through a process of sublimation of our grief and memory of 21st February we can also become true champions of linguistic diversity and stand up for the threatened languages and cultures of our own two countries and of the world.