International Mother Language Day: Celebrating Linguistic Diversity and Multilingualism

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International Mother Language Day is a significant observance held annually on 21 February to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and to encourage multilingualism. This day, first announced by UNESCO on 17 November 1999, was later recognized by the United Nations General Assembly with the adoption of UN resolution 56/262 in 2002.

The purpose of Mother Language Day is to foster the preservation and protection of all languages used by people around the world. The United Nations General Assembly, in UN resolution 61/266, also established the year 2008 as the International Year of Languages.

The idea to celebrate International Mother Language Day originated in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, 21 February holds historical significance as it marks the anniversary of the

Language Movement, when Bengalis fought for recognition of their mother tongue, Bengali, in 1952.

International Mother Language Day is not only observed in Bangladesh but also by Indian Bengalis in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Jharkhand, Tripura, and the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The declaration of 21 February as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO on 17th November 1999 was a tribute to the Language Movement carried out by the Bangladeshis, who were then known as East Pakistanis. When Pakistan was created in 1947, it consisted of two geographically separate parts: East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan).

In 1948, the Government of Pakistan declared Urdu as the sole national language, disregarding the fact that the majority of the population in East Pakistan spoke Bengali or Bangla. This decision led to protests from the people of East Pakistan, who demanded recognition of Bangla as one of the national languages alongside Urdu.

The demand for language equality was first raised by Dhirendranath Datta from East Pakistan on 23 February 1948 in the constituent Assembly of Pakistan. In response to the protests, the Pakistani government banned public meetings and rallies.

Despite the ban, the students of the University of Dhaka, with the support of the general public, organized massive rallies and meetings. On 21 February 1952, the police opened fire on the peaceful demonstrators. Tragically, Abdus Salam, Abul Barkat, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar, and Shafiur Rahman lost their lives, and hundreds of others were injured.

This incident stands as a testament to the immense sacrifice made by these individuals for their mother tongue. Since then, Bangladeshis commemorate International Mother Language Day as

a day of remembrance, visiting the Shaheed Minar, a monument built in memory of the martyrs, and its replicas to express their deep sorrow, respect, and gratitude.

International Mother Language Day is a national holiday in Bangladesh, allowing people to reflect on the importance of linguistic diversity and the need to protect and preserve all languages. It serves as a reminder that language is not just a means of communication but also a vital part of cultural identity.

The resolution to establish International Mother Language Day was suggested by Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam, Bengalis living in Vancouver, Canada. In their letter to Kofi Annan on 9 January 1998, they urged him to take action to save the world's languages from extinction by declaring an International Mother Language Day. Rafiq proposed the date of 21 February to commemorate the tragic events of 1952 during the Language Movement in Dhaka.

On International Mother Language Day, let us celebrate the richness of linguistic diversity and embrace the beauty of multilingualism. It is through the preservation and promotion of all languages that we can truly appreciate the cultural tapestry of our world.