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The International Mother Language Day

What it started as an assertion of distinctive identity by students of Dhaka University in 1952 has today blossomed into recognition by UNESCO of every nation's right to communicate in its own language. When the "boys" lost their lives very few understood the import of such a sacrifice. But that incident led to the formation of a distinctive identity that ultimately led to the formation of an independent country of Bangladesh 19 years later. Today, there is a global movement to protect, as many languages as possible, throughout the world.

After it was decided by the Pakistani authorities to establish Urdu as the state language of Pakistan the majority people felt alienated from the new state. They felt that they were being discriminated in their own country. This sense of deprivation ultimately led to the development of a national identity that was language-based. During the Pakistani period (1947-1971) 21st February was observed as the focal point of all nationalist activities. It gave the nation a sense of belonging when the state was providing none.

It all started when some students of Dhaka University protested Pakistan's founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Quaid-i-Azam of Pakistan's speech where he said that "Urdu and Urdu alone shall, and will be, the state language of Pakistan." Jinnah first made that announcement at the Race Course (present-day Suhrawardy Udyan) and later at the Curzon Hall. On both occasions, students protested the pronouncement. Little did Jinnah realise the import of his statement and that he was creating more resentment than cordiality.

Alienation of a state is reflected in many ways. Discrimination is carried out in a number of ways. One of the tools is to deprive a nation of its right to its own distinctive linguistic identity. Over the years the perception grew wider and today everybody recognises that this was probably an important perception.

The folk wisdom of the people of the lower Gangetic delta has proved to be right on more than one occasion. They have found political angles on different issues when the world was totally in the dark about it. Yes, they also had to pay a high price for pursuing their cause. But the world today is a much better place than what it was before.

Perhaps because it was the first to feel the wrath of European colonialism Bengalis also generated what was then known as the Bengal Renaissance. In the fields of modern education and culture, Bengalis pioneered movements. Naturally, they were the first to take on the British Raj. The fight against colonialism was also coupled with a struggle against feudalism. This resulted in the creation of Pakistan. But hopes of a better deal were quickly dashed after the Pakistani rulers preferred the language of the elite rather than of the masses.

The elitism was displayed in everything that the new rulers did. The tenant-farmers of East Bengal, freed from their servitude through the Land Tenancy Act of 1950, were not ready to tolerate it. They felt that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. As they struggled for a new world the movement for Bangladesh