

***EKUSHEY* FEBRUARY – INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY:
HISTORY, SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES¹**

1. INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Ever since its declaration by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1999, International Mother Language Day (IMLD) is celebrated globally every year on 21st February. The celebration aims at enhancing awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions all over the world by protecting and promoting all languages and linguistic diversity for multilingual education. The UNESCO declaration honored the people around the world who speak about 7000 distinct mother tongues/languages in some 188 countries. Unfortunately, many native/indigenous languages in various countries, including Canada, are now extinct and/or threatened by more dominant languages. According to one source, one language dies every 14 days; as a result, by 2100, nearly half of the 7000 languages that are spoken will most likely have disappeared (Abbi 2017).² Today, close to 3000 mother tongues, particularly those of native/indigenous or First Nations people, are seriously endangered. Therefore, use of and/or speaking one's mother tongue/language in a multiethnic and multilingual country like Canada is still not something that we can all take for granted. Canada has only two official languages (English and French), but we speak more than 300 mother tongues/languages in our homes across Canada. The worldwide annual observance of IMLD has given rise to a new awareness regarding the importance of saving our mother tongues, and the value of multilingualism and linguistic and cultural diversity.

We are thankful for the invitation to present on the background and significance of IMLD at the *Canada 150 Conference on Migration of Bengalis to British Columbia*. Many of you at this conference may not be fully aware of the contributions of Bengalis in BC to this historic IMLD declaration. The Bengali community took the initiative, coordinated with UNESCO and provided the leadership leading to the proclamation on 17 November 1999 of the *Ekushey* or 21st February as UNESCO's official International Mother Language Day. Why was February 21st/*Ekushey* chosen? What is the significance and spirit of IMLD within the context of Canada 150? How to plan and implement this monumental task to develop in all of us a deep sense of respect not only for our mother tongue but for those of others as well

¹ We dedicate this paper to the late Rafiqul Islam, the architect of International Mother Language Day.

² Professor Anvita Abbi is the recipient of the prestigious Kenneth Hole Award for her outstanding lifetime contributions to the description and documentation of languages of India. She also worked closely with elder Haida women for documentation and preservation of Haida language.

– more particularly minority and Indigenous or First Nations languages – thus promoting intercultural understanding through language and dialogue?

In this paper, we set forth a brief background and history of IMLD, discuss the relevance of *Ekushey* or 21st February to IMLD, and consider the significance of IMLD in creating a global family of mother language lovers – a linguistic community for the protection and conservation of all mother languages – as well as the challenges in achieving this goal. Finally, we provide our “BC model” to illustrate how to involve local communities and school systems for developing greater awareness, particularly among the younger generations, of mother languages for a sustainable future for all people within the local, national and global community.

2. THE STORY OF IMLD: HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Rafiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi-Canadian, a freedom fighter for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and a resident of Surrey, BC, sent a letter on 9 January 1998 to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan requesting that the UN take steps for saving all languages of the world from the possibility of extinction. He also asked the UN for the declaration of an International Mother Language Day, and proposed *Ekushey* or 21st February – in memory of the language martyrs of 1952 in then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) – as the day for international commemoration. The request was denied on the grounds that any such proposal needed to be tabled by a UN member state rather than by an individual or an organization. Instead of giving up his proposal, Rafiqul Islam – a remarkably gentle and polite person with a strong conviction and a penetrating vision – formed the “Mother Language Lovers of the World Society” (MLLWS) along with another Bangladeshi-Canadian named Abdus Salam from Burnaby BC. The original MLLWS Committee consisted of 10 members representing seven different mother tongues/languages: Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam (Bengali or Bangla); Albert Vinzon and Carmen Cristobal (Tagalog); Jason Monir and Susan Hodgkin (English); Calvin Chao (Cantonese); Renate Martens (German); Karuna Joshi (Hindi); and Nazeen Islam (Kachi). Rafiqul Islam was made the President of the MLLWS. As Director, Abdus Salam re-wrote the original letter by Rafiqul Islam on behalf of the 10-member MLLWS Committee and sent it to David Fowler, then Canadian Ambassador to the UN, with a request to submit the letter to UN members. David Fowler then sent the letter to the Ministry of External Affairs in Ottawa for approval, which took about a year. Meanwhile, Rafiqul Islam continued regular communication with the UN and the Government of Canada.

Around June 1998, Hasan Ferdous, the Chief Information Officer of the UN and a Bengali himself, contacted Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Salam (Rafiq-Salam)³ expressing his support for their dream of an IMLD, but advised that the MLLWS should route their efforts through UNESCO with respect to this matter. As advised, they made contact with Anna

³ As a matter of co-incidence, Rafiq-Salam have the same names as the famous Rafiq and Salam of 21st February, who were killed by the Pakistani police force in Dhaka during the Bengali Language Movement of 1952.

Maria Majlof of UNESCO's Bureau of Strategic Planning, who provided immense support and informally guided them through the UN system to make it happen. Accordingly, Rafiq-Salam also contacted the National Commission for UNESCO in Bangladesh, Canada, Hungary, India and Finland. Hungary was the first to reply on 16 April 1999 giving their full support to the proposal. However, there was still a snag – i.e., the proposal must be made to the UN as a proposal from the country itself.

It was almost late August 1999 when Rafiq-Salam and the MLLWS approached the Minister of Education, Mr. A. S. H. K. Sadek, Government of Bangladesh (GOB); he forwarded the proposal to then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who showed keen interest in the proposal. The Prime Minister asked for approval from all her ministries before submitting it to the UN. However, time was running out as the proposal had to be with the UN by 10 September 1999 in order for them to act upon it for that year. Unfortunately, the Education Minister was out of the country at that time. In desperation, Rafiqul Islam called UNESCO National Commissioner of Bangladesh Professor Kafiluddin Ahmed, who conveyed the message to Education Minister A. S. H. K. Sadek. Upon his return, the Education Minister raised this issue directly in the *Jatiya Sangshad* (Parliament) in the presence of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who gave her instant approval. Rafiq-Salam had a sleepless night in Vancouver, remaining close to the phone while this was playing out in the *Jatiya Sangshad* in Dhaka. This fast-track approval by the Prime Minister helped in the eventual submission of the proposal on 9 September just before the deadline. The dream was very close to being realized.

Once the proposal arrived at the UNESCO Secretariat in Paris, all possible efforts were made to convince other member countries to sign the proposal. The Bangladeshi proposal in the form of a draft resolution was published on 26 October 1999. Twenty-eight member countries supported the draft resolution. UNESCO then submitted the resolution to the UN General Assembly on 12 November 1999. Five days later, on 17 November 1999, the resolution was adopted by the 30th Session of UNESCO's General Conference, which declared *Ekushey/21st February* as "International Mother Language Day." All 198 countries attending the Conference, including Canada, supported the UNESCO resolution. The Conference unanimously agreed to observe 21st February as "International Mother Language Day" to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

The adoption of IMLD by UNESCO was an incredible international event with far-reaching impacts on language, culture and human rights – locally, nationally and globally. First of all, language counts. It is not only a means of communication, but is also the most powerful tool for preserving and developing our culture and heritage. Secondly, education in one's native language, particularly in a multicultural and multilingual context, provides a sense of inclusion. With IMLD, there is a new awareness that our adults – both men and women – should achieve literacy and numeracy, which supports the current UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4.6). Thirdly, preservation and exchange of language fosters intercultural understanding and helps build global citizenship. In the words of former Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova, "linguistic and cultural diversity may be our best chance for the future: for creativity, innovation and inclusion" (Bokova 2014).

3. WHY WAS EKUSHEY/21ST FEBRUARY CHOSEN?

The UNESCO resolution recognized the great sacrifices made by the people of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) during the 1952 Language Movement. The date chosen for IMLD, 21st February, represents the date in 1952 when students of Dhaka University demonstrating for recognition of their language – Bengali (or Bangla) – as one of the two national languages of newly independent Pakistan were shot and killed by the police. There is perhaps no parallel history anywhere on earth where people gave their lives to protect their right to use their mother tongue. Thus, it was quite appropriate for UNESCO to proclaim 21st February International Mother Language Day throughout the world to commemorate the martyrs who sacrificed their lives on this very day in 1952. The UNESCO resolution further said that IMLD would not only promote linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also develop fuller awareness about linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue.

The historic 21st February has now assumed new dimensions both at home and in the international arena. For Bengalis, it represents a new “identity” which is global; the international community bestowed this honor on us as Bengalis. Additionally, the *Ekushey* is viewed as the source of our independence and secularism that will inspire all our future generations to come. The *Shahid Minar* (Language Martyrs’ Monument) at Dhaka University and the annual celebration of Ekushey/21st February all over Bangladesh is a clear demonstration of this national sentiment. With a total of nearly 250 million speakers, Bengali is the sixth most spoken language in the world today. IMLD will remain as a “gift” from the Bengalis to the world.

4. IMLD: JUBILATION AND RESPONSES

International Mother Language Day was celebrated for the first time on 21st February 2000, and was inaugurated by a ceremony held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2000-2007). Rafiqul Islam and his wife Buli Islam were in attendance as invited guests of UNESCO in Paris. Since 2000, IMLD is celebrated globally every year by member countries under the leadership of UNESCO, as well by many social and linguistic/community groups around the world. In 2001, the Government of Bangladesh, in recognition of the MLLWS’s efforts and contributions to the declaration of 21st February as International Mother Language Day, awarded the Society the *Ekushey Padak* (Medal). The *Ekushey Padak* is the second highest civilian award in Bangladesh, introduced in memory of the martyrs of the 1952 Bengali Language Movement.

Internationally, an immediate response to IMLD was the formation of International Mother Language Committees in many countries. International Mother Language Monuments were built in countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, the USA, the UK, Italy, Denmark, Norway and many others. One of the first such monuments was Canada’s *Lingua Aqua*, the first audiovisual Mother Language Monument in Surrey (BC) as a permanent

reminder of IMLD.⁴ This was done under the leadership of Mohammad Aminul Islam, another Bangladeshi-Canadian from Surrey. The City of Surrey paid for the *Lingua Aqua* from its “Cultural Capital of Canada” funds received from the Government of Canada.⁵

Despite UNESCO’s promotion of linguistic diversity and the need to protect minor languages, activities at the local level remained largely confined to annual celebrations. Rafiqul Islam wanted to change this by establishing a “global secretariat” for IMLD with country-level committees and representation to move forward UNESCO’s agenda for the protection of languages and education in native or mother tongues. A draft constitution and programs for action were prepared accordingly. Rafiqul Islam also made a four-part video series on “Language and Multiculturalism in Canada” to disseminate the message of IMLD through local TV channels.⁶ Unfortunately, Rafiqul Islam was diagnosed with and treated for leukemia in 2011-2012 with a brief remission, and passed away on 20 November 2013. This was a great loss to the MLLWS and the world. Many people around the world loved Rafiqul Islam. In 2016, the Government of Bangladesh awarded the *Swadhinota Padak*, the highest civilian award, to Rafiqul Islam (posthumously) and Abdus Salam. Buli Islam and Abdus Salam received the award from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 24 March 2016.

5. THE “BC MODEL” FOR IMLD IMPLEMENTATION

Canada is one of the most endangered zones for languages. In Canada, there are 89 listed Indigenous mother languages; of these, 85 are living/spoken and four are already extinct. Three of four extinct languages are from BC; further, of the remaining 85 languages, 14 are listed as endangered, of which seven are from BC (Islam). Against this backdrop, and with BC being the “home of IMLD,” we need to protect, conserve and promote all mother languages. Thus, for the MLLWS, British Columbia provided a “test” ground for IMLD implementation.

Following the adoption of IMLD and the initial euphoria, the MLLWS – and more particularly Mohammad Aminul Islam – took on the challenge of implementation of IMLD in the City of Surrey and in BC. Working with local municipalities and the provincial government in BC, Mohammad Aminul Islam and his MLLWS team have created a revolutionary model called the “BC Model” for implementation of IMLD. To date, this is perhaps the only tested framework for IMLD implementation. It took the team almost 10 years to develop this model. The model consists of two phases. The first phase is called the “Integration of IMLD,” based on local recognition of IMLD to create an understanding of its value and enhance public awareness. In this phase, we received tremendous local support from various levels of government, including formal proclamation of IMLD. Under this phase, the MLLWS worked with local municipalities – for instance, Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, Burnaby, North Vancouver and New Westminster – for proclamation of 21st February as IMLD, which was done by all the municipalities in 2007. In BC, IMLD received the highest level of recognition signed by Hon. Judith Guichon, the Lieutenant Governor of

⁴ For more information, see <http://www.motherlanguage lovers.com/>

⁵ The City of Surrey was awarded a \$2 million grant in 2008. The design and construction cost of the *Aqua Lingua* was \$120,000.

⁶ The authors were interviewed in two episodes of the four-part TV series made in 2010.

British Columbia. Additionally, the Mother Language Festival is held annually with the support of the City of Surrey and the Arts Council of Surrey. Many community-level organizations, including the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association (GVBCA), are local partners in annual IMLD celebrations.

The second phase was dedicated mostly to the implementation of IMLD in the School Districts of British Columbia. The target group of this phase was the children and schools as a “platform” to facilitate IMLD in a sustainable manner. Children are the carrier of mother languages. IMLD is now part of the BC School Year Calendar and curriculum to uphold the importance of mother languages and linguistic diversity and cultural traditions. We tried this model in the School District of Surrey, which has around 70,000 students who speak 172 mother tongues/languages. The new awareness in the school systems will help students celebrate and share their own and/or other languages and cultural heritages. Beyond Surrey, the School Districts of Vancouver, Richmond, Langley, New Westminster, Delta, Burnaby, West Vancouver and North Vancouver have also recognized and incorporated IMLD into their School Year Calendars. Our mission and the “BC Model” reflect and comply with UNESCO’s Education 2030 Framework for Action SDG4. In a recent letter to Aminul Islam, the Assistant Director General (ADG/Education) of UNESCO noted with thanks “the amount of work undertaken by the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society to raise awareness about mother languages and preserve linguistic diversity in British Columbia and Canada.”⁷ Concerning the “BC Model” for IMLD implementation, the UNESCO letter urged the MLLWS “to continue efforts locally and globally on IMLD implementation using the BC Model.”

The MLLWS has also adopted a “2020 Vision” for further advancement of IMLD in BC as well as in Canada and internationally. In BC, implementation of IMLD will soon cover all 60 School Districts with an estimated 650,000 students who speak over 200 different mother tongues. The Trustees of each School Board (10 per school x 60 = 600 Trustees) are being consulted for their support to eventually establish a Mother Language Institute in BC. The work is already in progress. We are also working with the Federal Government of Canada to officially declare *Ekushey*/21st February as IMLD. In 2007, with the help of the local Member of Parliament (MP), a proposal (Bill C-407) was tabled in the Canadian Parliament. Currently, the MLLWS is working through a Federal Minister to table the Bill again in the Parliament in 2017/2018.

Finally, the MLLWS is working internationally for globalization of IMLD. Currently, we have MLLWS chapters in the USA, Australia, India and Bangladesh. We have plans to further expand the MLLWS to all UNESCO member countries. As is evident from the above discussion, our efforts from the local to the global are achieving good results. We are proud that BC and Canada are leading the way globally. Thus, the BC Model and 2020 Vision will fulfill Rafiqul Islam’s visionary plan for a “global secretariat” of the MLLWS in the near future.

⁷ ADG (UNESCO) Letter to Mohammad Aminul Islam (Ref: ED/IPS/ESG/17/6140), dated 29 July 2017.