

# International Mother Language Movement (IMLM)

*A movement to celebrate all mother/heritage languages in Australia including the languages of Indigenous Australian's*

## BACKGROUND

Mother language refers to the first language learned at home by a child. On 17 November 1999, UNESCO announced to observe International Mother Language Day annually on 21 February worldwide to promote awareness of linguistic, cultural diversity and multilingualism. This UNESCO decision was prompted by the extraordinary efforts over few years initiated by expatriate Bangladeshis. Bangladeshis took the lead to ensure global recognition of the significance of all mother languages.

The history behind the ground breaking initiatives and the UNESCO decision had its foundation in Bangladesh and in Bengali language. In Bangladesh, 21st February is a commemoration in recognition of a historic campaign in 1952 to have Bangla recognised as the national language. On that sad but very proud historic day, a number of students of University of Dhaka and common people were killed by police and army in Dhaka during Bengali language movement protests. In fact the language movement of 1952 in Bangladesh (East Pakistan at that time) worked as a key inspiration for Bangladesh to achieve its independence in 1971.

To commemorate this movement, a solemn and symbolic sculpture, was erected in the place of the massacre in Bangladesh. The day is revered in Bangladesh and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in West Bengal in India as the Language Martyrs' Day. To echo the same respect for mother languages many cities of the world followed the track of Bangladesh and already established 'Mother Language Monuments'. Tokyo built a replica of original monument in Bangladesh (Shaheed Minar), monuments are built in Ashfield Park Sydney, London and Oldham in the United Kingdom, Bari of Italy and Surrey of Canada and few other cities.

To commemorate the global movement of acknowledging significance of the mother languages of various countries around the world – the Bangladeshi-Australian community has taken the lead of campaigning and establishing another movement to signify 21<sup>st</sup> February. This is the proposed *International Mother Language Movement (IMLM)* in Australia. A day of national significance, celebrated across Australia to respect not only the growing numbers of mother languages in Australia but also to preserve around 250 local Indigenous languages, some of which are in the verge of getting lost.

We propose to commence a three year plan initially involving increasing community awareness, fund raising activity to support language conservation and also to erect a National Mother Language Monument (NMLM) or Place on a land of national significance in Canberra, Australia. This movement will allow us to commemorate 21 February every year as the 'International Mother Language Day' to signify global importance of all mother/heritage languages. The IMLM is a movement (rather than any static time limited goal) in Australia and has few components that we would like to achieve over a longer period of time. These components are:

1. Enhance community awareness on the significance of valuing mother/heritage languages and fund raising activities (through various media campaign and an annual International Mother Language Walk commencing on 21 February 2014 in Canberra);
2. Involve Australian Champions (e.g. academics, celebrities, politicians, journalists etc.) to promote the movement (2014-15);
3. Erection of a National Mother Language Monument or place in Canberra to commemorate 21 February (by 2016);
4. Commencement of a national campaign to include the significance of Mother/Heritage languages and its history in mainstream education curriculum (long term goal);
5. Pursue fund raising activities to support preservation of our native languages and other Australian languages (ongoing/long term goal).

This IMLM will recognise the linguistic diversity of Australia. This movement will complement the spirit and practical measures to conserve our Indigenous languages and respect linguistic diversity among Australian

communities. The movement will include plans to encourage variety of community activities with the 'Multilanguage focus' to celebrate mother languages across the globe.

This movement will present Australia as the world leader by not only recognising 21 February as a day of national significance but also its commitment to preserve mother languages from all over the world including our own Indigenous languages.

The Bangladeshi-Australian community in Canberra has already taken the bulk of the responsibility to lead the movement in partnerships with Australian communities and peak groups including the Indigenous community, multicultural peak bodies, diplomatic missions, universities, media and ethnic language schools network.

The Bangladeshi-Australian community is seeking active involvement of all segments of Australian communities. This is to value their own mother languages and support the initiative to signify the importance of a national movement on mother/heritage languages in Australia.

As part of the initial planning phase, we have completed a workshop in December 2013 to share backgrounds, visions, ideas, thoughts, process and programs among our peer Australian communities and peak organisations. This workshop was the first of many more to come to assist all of us to come up with a joined up approach and support structure to successfully implement the IMLM initiatives.

### **December 2013 Workshop**

In addition to the discussion of the scope of the IMLM project, the purpose of this particular workshop was to engage with wider communities, community peak groups and government stakeholders to:

*Develop a set of agreed actions to guide the IMLM team to promote awareness among the wider Australian communities through an International Mother Language Day Walk (IMLDW) in Canberra on the 21 February 2014. This Walk will incorporate associated events such as multicultural food/wine stalls, cultural performances, games, exhibition/information on linguistic diversity and socialising opportunities between community members.*

The workshop focused on the following key issues (but was not limited to):

1. *Where have we come from? (background of this movement);*
2. *Where are we now? (progress to date);*
3. *Where do we want to be? (the goals);*
4. *How do we get there? (the pathways);*
5. *What is the way forward? (immediate and future actions); and*
6. *How will we govern? (roles and responsibilities).*

### **Achieved outcomes**

The Workshop achieved:

- Agreement among all participants to support IMLM and the way forward;
- Development of a multilateral Working Group to lead the IMLDW;
- Action plans with roles and responsibilities to host the IMLDW;
- Actions plans to cope with critical issues (e.g. promotion, wider community involvement, funding, logistics) to influence the IMLDW; and
- Commitments to make it happen.

### **Way forward**

The **International Mother Language Day Walk** on 21 February 2014 in Canberra as immediate milestone.