



In Depth - International Mother Language Day

Every year, **The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) celebrates 21st February as International Mother Language Day to promote mother tongue-based multilingual education.** The day is also a reminder of how language connects us, empowers us and helps us to communicate our feelings to others.

The world has over 7,000 languages whereas **India alone has about 22 officially recognized languages, 1635 mother tongues, and 234 identifiable mother tongues.**

International Mother Language Day

- **UNESCO declared 21st February as International Mother Language Day** in 1999 and World has been celebrating the same since 2000. The day also commemorates a long struggle by Bangladesh to protect its mother language Bangla.
- The resolution to mark 21st February as the International Mother Language Day was suggested by Rafiqul Islam, a Bangladeshi living in Canada. He proposed the said date to commemorate the 1952 killings in Dhaka during the Bangla Language Movement.
- **The initiative was aimed at preserving and promoting mother languages.** The aim was to protect the diverse culture and intellectual heritage of different regions of the world.
- **This year the day was celebrated as International Year of Indigenous Languages.** The aim is to raise awareness regarding the consequences of losing indigenous languages, across the world.

Concerns

- **According to the UN, every two weeks, a language disappears and the world** loses an entire cultural and intellectual heritage.
- **At least 43% of the estimated 6000 languages spoken in the world are endangered.**
- Only a few hundred languages have been genuinely given a place in education systems and public domain. Also, 40% of the global population does not have access to education in a language they speak or understand.
- **Less than a hundred languages are used in the digital world.**
- Apart from globalization, rush for learning foreign languages for better job opportunities is a major reason behind the disappearance of mother languages.
- **When languages disappear, the world loses a rich tapestry of cultural identity.** Opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression, valuable resources for ensuring a better future also get lost.

Importance of Mother Languages

- **Mother tongue is the very first language that one hears,** understands and gets familiar with. Thus, it plays important role in shaping feelings, emotions and thought processes.
- Use of mother language **helps one in getting comfortable with his/her cultural identity.**
- Maintaining mother languages is necessary for preserving cultural heritage and identity.
- Dissemination of mother languages encourages linguistic diversity, thus inspires solidarity based on understanding, tolerance, and dialogue.

Way Forward

- **With the help of technology, every mother language can be maintained.** Google's Project Navlekha in India is an example. The project is aimed at increasing the online content in Indian local languages.
- **People should be made aware of the professional viability of pursuing degrees in native languages.** With a degree in a native language, one can take up professions like Language Expert, Translators, and Tourist-Guide etc.
- Also to maintain any native language, it is necessary that it is spoken. Use of native languages at homes, schools, and offices should be encouraged.
- E.g. The Upper House of India has an arrangement for interpretation of 22 languages i.e. members are encouraged to speak in their native languages.
- **Countries like France, Germany, Italy, China have developed their mother languages as a powerful medium.** Other countries need to learn from these to preserve their cultural and linguistic identity.

Bangla Language Movement

- When Pakistan was created, its two regions West Pakistan and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) were entirely different in culture and language.
- In 1948, Pakistan Government declared Urdu as the only national language. People of East Pakistan protested as their mother language was Bangla. They demanded Bangla to be at least one of the national languages in addition to Urdu.
- To crush the protest, the then Pakistan Government banned all public meetings and rallies. Defying orders, students of Dhaka University continued to arrange massive rallies and meetings.
- In 1952, police opened fire on rallies, killing 4 student protestors and injuring many others. The protest continued and in 1956, Pakistan was forced to grant official status to Bangla.
- Every year on 21st February, Bangladeshis visit the Shaheed Minar (Dhaka) to honour the Martyrs and those who fought for the cause.