

21 February – World Mother Tongue Day

On 17 November 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February as International Mother Tongue Day. This day has been celebrated every year since February 2000. The purpose of this day is mainly to promote linguistic and cultural diversity as well as multilingualism. Why 21 February and not any other day? The answer to this question is simple. On this day in 1952, the Bengali Language Movement demonstrated for the recognition of the Bangla language spoken in the Dominion of Pakistan. It demanded that this language should be used as an official language in government affairs, as a medium of instruction in schools, in the media, currency, and on official stamps.

The Bengali experience mirrors that of South Africa. In June 1976, African students in Soweto demonstrated after the apartheid regime decided to make Afrikaans a compulsory language of learning in African schools. The regime was forced to reverse its decision. After independence, the democratic government recognised the nine indigenous African languages, as well as English and Afrikaans. As a result, South Africa has become a diverse country with different languages and cultures.

After declaring all eleven languages official, the government also established language committees to ensure that African languages are promoted. The PanSALB (Pan South African Language Board) was established to achieve this objective by ensuring that all indigenous African languages are promoted and spoken freely. All South Africans can now express themselves in the language of their choice.

To promote mother-tongue use, everyone is encouraged to speak their own language, to write in their own language, and to read books written in their own language. By doing so, they will be truly promoting their language, culture, and heritage. In recognising the significance of language, UNESCO declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, suggesting that we should celebrate and promote our languages not only for a day but for the entire year.

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