

Park plaza establishes reflective space to honour languages, enrich culture

## Meeting place lauds mother tongues

MELISSA MARTIN



*International Mother Language Plaza place to reflect on linguistic rights*

*Dancers Noshin Raisa Azad, Mishu Islam and Nuzhat Subah perform at a ceremony Tuesday to unveil the International Mother Language Plaza at Kirkbridge Park in Winnipeg. JESSICA LEE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS*

Published: 10/13/2021

TWO years ago, Khawja Latif and other members of the Bangladeshi community began to dream of a place that would honour the languages they and others carried within them: the words of diasporas, immigrants, Indigenous nations. Languages that still ring across Manitoba, passed from one generation to the next.

Now, that dream is a reality.

On Tuesday, organizers officially cut the ribbon on the International Mother Language Plaza, a gathering space and sculptural installation at Kirkbridge Park in Richmond West. The grand opening marked the culmination of two years of work.

“I’m overwhelmed by the reaction I have received today,” said Latif, president of the Manitoba Bangladesh Bhaban Corp., after a ceremony which included Bangladeshi dance, speeches from dignitaries and a presentation by students of nearby Bairdmore School, who offered greetings in their own heritage languages.

The plaza features an Indigenous medicine wheel, watched over by a replica of the Shaheed Minar monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh. That monument was designed by sculptors Hamidur Rahman and Novera Ahmed to honour those killed in the 1952 Bengali Language Movement, which ultimately gave rise to Bangladesh’s independence from India.

In that way, the plaza recognizes that groundbreaking fight to secure rights for Bangla speakers, which eventually inspired the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to honour Feb. 21 as the International Mother Language Day, a statement of support for global ethno-linguistic rights.

“Any Bangladeshi, if they come here they will feel emotional, for sure,” Latif said. “That’s brought us together.”

To design the medicine wheel at the plaza’s heart, organizers consulted with students from Southeast Collegiate, a unique institution that offers students from Manitoba First Nations lodging and education centered on Indigenous culture. Students consulted with elders and studied medicine wheels from across different traditions.

The final design features a red circle at the heart of the plaza, which symbolizes the person, surrounded by bands of four colours: white, which faces cardinal north, followed clockwise by yellow, red and black. At Tuesday’s ceremony, collegiate director-principal Sheryl McCorrister was delighted to see the design was executed faithfully.

“As you go through the medicine wheel, it describes you going from birth to an elder,” McCorrister said. “Each colour represents one part of that. It’s the cycle of life and

there's so much importance in that... It's the first time I've seen it, I'm so excited. It's beautiful."

On recent afternoons, Latif and other organizers have gone to the plaza to sit and talk with people who visit, telling them about how much language can mean to identity, and to maintaining a connection to one's heritage culture. He hopes it will serve as a place for reflection on the value of language.

"We came for prosperity, freedom, and other things," Latif said. "But we also lost some other things: a connection to our own culture. If we can bring it here, we can put it into the discussion. It can be part of this beautiful country. And we can contribute to the Canadian culture, and make it more rich, more diverse and truly multicultural."



***Students from nearby Bairdmore School perform a song at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the International Mother Language Plaza.  
JESSICA LEE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS***