

Plaza and monument celebrating diverse languages unveiled in Winnipeg

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International Mother Language Plaza initiated by Manitoba Bangladesh Bhaban Corp.

[Rachel Bergen](#) · CBC News · Posted: Oct 12, 2021 5:45 PM CT | Last Updated: October 12



Khawja Latif, president of the Manitoba Bangladesh Bhaban Corp. helped unveil International Mother Tongue Plaza in Winnipeg on Tuesday. The corporation was instrumental in the creation of the plaza, which is a replica of a monument in Dhaka, Bangladesh. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

A monument celebrating the diverse heritages and languages of people living in Winnipeg was unveiled Tuesday in the Richmond West neighbourhood.

The International Mother Language Plaza in Kirkbridge Park, initiated by Manitoba Bangladesh Bhaban Corp., acknowledges the struggles many groups have fought to protect their language.

"We are losing mother languages, each and every nation who are colonized or otherwise occupied, and nobody's talking about it or taking heed of it," Khawja Latif, the president of the corporation, said at the ceremony.

"This site will provide a place for people to gather and be a reminder of the rich existence of linguistic and cultural diversity in our civilization, and nurture respect for each and everyone's heritage."

He says five sculptures present in the plaza — four smaller ones and a large one — represent a mother and her children and show that family is the centre of language.



Dancers commemorate Bangladeshi culture on Tuesday at the unveiling of the International Mother Tongue Plaza in Winnipeg. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

The plaza is especially meaningful to the Bangladeshi community. It's a replica of the Shaheed Minar monument in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, also known as the Martyr monument.

It's a reminder of the Bengali language movement, which advocated for Bengali to be an official language of Pakistan.

That movement peaked on Feb. 21, 1952, when police killed student protesters.

That day has since been declared the International Mother Language Day.



Ahmed Al-Emran Nickon drove to Winnipeg from Calgary to see the International Mother Tongue Plaza unveiled on Tuesday. The monument is a replica of one in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and represents the fight for the Bengali language. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

Ahmed Al-Emran Nickon drove all the way to Winnipeg from Calgary to witness the plaza being unveiled

"This is one of the most important monuments in our country, and we can see the exact replica over here and this is the first time happening in Canada," Al-Emran Nickon said. "I drove all the way over here just to witness this historical moment."

Bangladesh became a country in 1971, nearly 20 years after the height of the Bengali language movement. Al-Emron Nickon says the country's tie to the language can't be overstated.

He says *desh* means country and Bangla is the language, which shows the importance of the mother tongue in the south Asian country.

'Language is part of our culture and our identity'

Staff and students from two local multicultural schools that emphasize the importance of language were also present at the ceremony.

Southeast Collegiate principal Sheryl McCorrister spoke of the importance of preserving Indigenous languages. Her school, which has students from different Manitoba First Nations, emphasizes traditional and cultural teachings as well as academic education.



Sheryl McCorrister, principal of Southeast Collegiate, spoke about the importance of preserving Indigenous languages at the unveiling of International Mother Tongue Plaza in Winnipeg on Tuesday. (Jeff Stapleton/CBC)

"Language links our past history to our future," she said. "Language is so important that it grounds and solidifies Indigenous culture and heritage. You have to know where you come from in order to move forward in life, to know where you're going and never be afraid of change."

The plaza also includes a medicine wheel to acknowledge the site's location on Treaty 1 territory, the homeland of the Métis Nation and traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dené and Dakota peoples.

"By building this beautiful gathering place here, change has taken place and moved us forward ... it's a real statement of truth and reconciliation," McCorrister said.

Students from nearby Bairdmore School spoke in their mother languages, including Bengali, Cantonese, Punjabi, Kurmanji, Arabic and Oromo.

Principal Karen Brawdy says they represent just a few of the more than 30 languages spoken by students and staff.

"Our language is part of our culture and our identity," the Grade 6 students each said.

With files from Stephanie Cram