Who is a Bangladeshi?

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If a pucca or authentic Bangladeshi's mother tongue must be Bangla, then count me out. Bangla is my second language! My mother tongue is a colloquial dialect spoken around my hometown Feni, which has some vague resemblance to Bangla. While the natives of the Feni-Noakhali area can pronounce individual P and F perfectly, they cannot help but switch the two letters in words to the chagrin of the listeners!

Here is a classic Feni Benglish: "Ai Farty-te Pun Nai" (There is no fun in this party.) I have actually been asked: "Afni ki Poren-ae Thaken?" (Do you live in a foreign land?) My wife and sister-in-law were in stitches on a recent visit to our ancestral village when they asked one of our cousins to buy a phone card and his response was: "Fre-Faid, na Fost-Faid"? (Pre-paid or Post-paid?)

"Khash Noakhalians" take such malapropism one degree deeper into unintelligibility. My mother-in-law once asked a Noakhalian what time it was. She thought that the bizarre response, "Aantlai Hanstaijjai," was a mixture of Arabic and French! (It means, "I think it is 5").

Correct enunciation requires perfect tongue-mouth-throat coordination, and muscle work. Colloquial Bangla speakers bypass the hard work, while still being comprehensible. People from our area call their town, "Heni," because it requires less effort to pronounce than "Feni."

While those from the "Royal District" (Feni-Noakhali) are fully cognizant of their elocutionary deficiencies, and would do anything to hide their linguistic inferiority complex, fellow butchers of the Bengali language – the Chittagonians and the Sylhetis – show no such remorse! They confidently burst into Chittagonian and Sylheti dialects as soon as they encounter someone from their district. Some Sylhetis even defer to their Assamese heritage and refuse to call themselves Bangalis! Nevertheless, Feni, Noakhali, Chittagong and Sylhet are considered part of Bangladesh.

Since pure spoken Bangla is not a prerequisite for a Bangladeshi, what about those whose mother tongue is not Bangla? Although everyone in Bangladesh speaks some Bangla, some Bangladeshis' mother tongue is Urdu or tribal languages. Are they any less Bangladeshi than those whose mother tongue is Bangla? I don't think so. On the contrary, many of them, both at home and abroad, have contributed enormously to the independence and subsequent development of Bangladesh. They are as patriotic, if not more so, than some native Bangla-speakers. Clearly, proficiency in spoken Bangla is not a requirement to be a Bangladeshi.

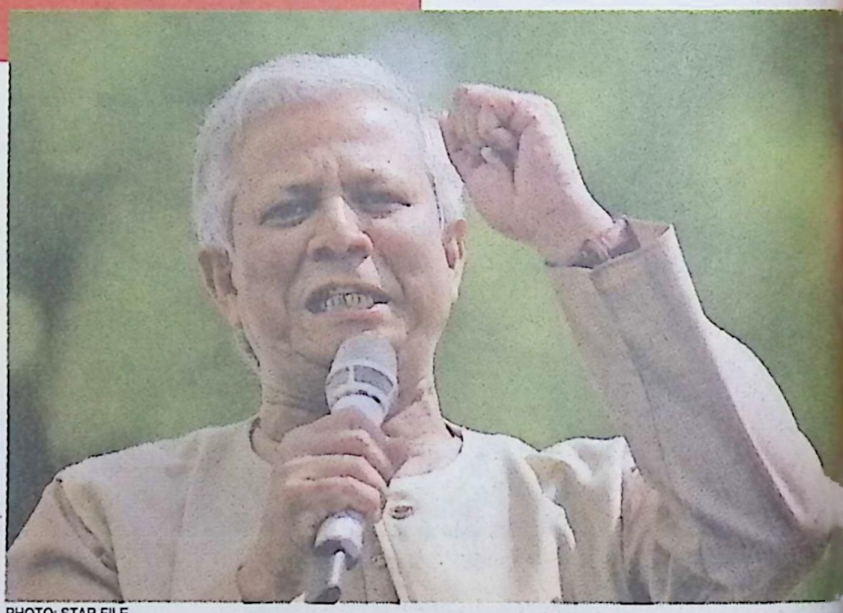


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Dr Muhammad Yunus

What about ethnicity? Except for the tribals, Bangladeshis are ethnically fairly homogenous. While "Bangladesh" connotes the land of the Bangalis, there is no dispute that the tribals and those of Mongoloid origin in the Chittagong Hill Tracts – who are not Bangalis - are as Bangladeshi as Bangalis.

What about religion? Bangladesh hosts Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and animists.