

# The extinction of Bangla

**NAIRA KHAN**

EVERY year the month of February makes me immensely proud to be a native speaker of Bangla. At the same time I am also happy to be writing this article in English. Although purists will denounce the use of any other language during this month it would be good to remember that February 21 was made more auspicious with its recognition as the International Mother Language Day, and therefore all languages are equally important.

As a linguist in Bangladesh working with Bangla, the month of Ekushey can be somewhat amusing. With all kinds of purists coming out of the woodwork, we are constantly bombarded with questions and requests to preserve the purity of Bangla. If you humour the diatribe of the purists you would begin to believe that Bangla is on the brink of extinction. Their grievances seem to be centered on two issues: usage of non-standard dialectal variants and code-mixing. In other words, that the usage of other dialectal forms instead of the standard variety and the more serious sense- mixing English with Bangla, popularly known as *Banglish*, is distorting Bangla to the point of extinction.

For those who take issue with non-standard dialectal forms, it should be noted that the standard variety is a dialect too, one that was selected and transfigured into the standard variety through a conscious sociopolitical decision making process. Part of that standardisation process is the establishment of institutions for the purpose of codification and preservation of the variety. Therefore, while non-standard dialectal forms will seep into a speaker's idiolect depending on their linguistic and educational background, it by no means poses a threat to

the standard variety. On the other hand, a considerably larger group takes umbrage with the mixing of English with Bangla, often exemplified by the variety marked by Radio Jockeys (RJs). Purists of Bangla are obviously blended by the mixing of any language with Bangla; but more interestingly, natural bilinguals i.e. those who are proficient in both English and Bangla and mix them freely in speech, also take serious

to switch from one language to another, while the RJ variety mixes the two hitherto, usually to create an impression of fluency in English.

Whatever the mechanism of code-mixing and whether non-standard dialectal forms are used or not, the Bangla language is by no means endangered or even under threat. In fact, Bangla is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. Every variation that arises is a natu-

bility of it becoming obsolete is nearly zero.

It is the nature of languages to be in a constant state of flux. Interestingly, the so-called distortion or 'destruction' of Bangla that has purists so worried is actually a sign of Bangla being a live and vibrant language. Such variation is what keeps a language alive, making it a robust living language. A living language is like a freely flowing river. It has a life of its own. If you try to control or even stop the evolution of a language by strictly prescribing its rules of usage, you will find that the natural variety - that which the speakers use in spontaneous speech - will continue to flow on, while the prescribed variety language will become fossilised in books, leading to its inevitable demise. Such was the fate of dead languages such as Sanskrit and Latin.

The concept of purity in any language is a fallacious one. Variants such as Banglish are simply another step in the evolution of Bangla. In fact Banglish can be considered a city based urban dialect of Bangla. We should revel in the fact that a new variety has arisen in our own city amongst a particular age group through access to media, which in itself reflect interesting social factors.

There is no denying that the standard variety has its particularly delineated spheres of usage with codified books serving as recommended guidelines of usage. But that does not mean we should shackle the language in the form of the standard variety and oppose any sort of variation that naturally arises through group usage by labeling it as a distortion of the language. Variation in any language is the will of the language to live; it is the life of the language.

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SOURCE: INTERNET

issue with the RJ type variety of Banglish. The reason for the latter group to find the RJ variety different and 'unnatural' is primarily due to the difference in how the two languages are mixed. Natural bilinguals usually utilise syntactic breaks

ral part of the evolution of Bangla. People seem to be under the impression that using non-standard forms will render the standard variety obsolete. Given that there are institutionalised efforts to preserve and maintain the standard variety the proba-

# Teaching my child her mother tongue

**LAVINA AMBREEN AHMED**

ALMOST every morning I chat with my mom on Viber or Skype. We are thousands of miles apart, she is in Bangladesh and I am in the United States. Technology helps us stay in touch. A couple of weeks back she told me I should teach my daughter "Amar bhaiyer rokte rangano Ekushey February", since Ekushey February was just round the corner. I immediately got defensive, told her that I would have to first explain the significance of the song, the meaning behind the emotional lyrics and the history of Bhasha Andolon (Language Movement) patiently to my seven-year-old daughter Areesha, before she would be interested in learning the song. Teaching Areesha, Bangla, is a sore topic that gets me frustrated these days. I often feel like a failure as a Bangladeshi parent, for not being able to do a better

job of instilling a sense of pride in my daughter for her cultural heritage.

When she was born, I promised myself I would make sure my child knows how to speak my language and teach her the significance of Ekushey February, Muktijudhho, Pahela Baishakh etc. As someone born and raised in Bangladesh, these historical events of my country form an important part of my identity that I proudly carry with me wherever I go. Naturally, I want my daughter to know, that her parents came from a land with a very rich and unique history. I do not want her to be like so many first generation "American Born Confused Deshis" who are born abroad and never quite learn the language of their parents well. Now seven years later, I realise, teaching my child my language and culture in a foreign land is harder than I expected.

When Areesha started talking, she

picked up both Bangla and English at the same time without much difficulty. We always spoke to her in Bangla at home and people would comment on how fluently she was able to communicate with us in

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our native language. But then she started kindergarten in the US, and I noticed she was becoming reluctant to speak in Bangla, especially in front of others, and was more comfortable responding to my questions

in English. At seven, she is of course at an age where she wants to 'fit in' with her classmates. She wants to assimilate into the mainstream culture; be 'American' like her friends in the way she talks, eats, dresses, in every aspect of her young life. As I am busy these days juggling multiple responsibilities, I don't pressure her enough to converse with me in Bangla, because to be honest, I feel it is an added chore for me.

I started talking to other immigrant moms like myself to understand the challenges they face while trying to inculcate their own culture into their children. Dr. Nazneen Ahmad, a professor of Economics at Weber State University, is my fellow Utah resident and my role model of a Bangladeshi immigrant parent. Her five-year-old daughter Auhona, expresses herself very clearly in Bangla without using any English word in her sentences.

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