

CHATGAIYYA

My Non-existent Talent



PHOTOS: AMIR HAMJA

MARISHA AZIZ

There are dialects, and then there's the Chittagonian dialect, or *Chatgaiyya*, as we so fondly refer to it. Chittagonian, unlike other dialects, has very little resemblance to Bangla. In fact, on a particularly bad day, a person speaking rapid Chittagonian may sound similar to someone trying to get rid of a persistent ball of cough from his throat.

There are some people (namely me) who think the *Chatgaiyya* dialect deserves to be called a language, because of the vast difference between it and Bangla. Nevertheless, it is a dialect, and it is an integral part of life for residents of Chittagong, along with *mezbaan* and the naval beach. However, the anomaly to this is me. Despite living in this city my entire life, I can barely string together two words in *Chatgaiyya*. This is an embarrassment of the highest degree.

The reason behind my ineptitude is quite simple, actually. Neither of my parents is from Chittagong, so no one speaks *Chatgaiyya* at home. Consequently, I never picked it up. Unfortunately, this excuse sounds incredibly pathetic when I present it to people. Some point out that I could always learn from the daily conversations that I hear out on the streets every day. I conveniently forget to let them know that my brain is too slow to learn such a complicated vocabulary. For instance: until recently, I thought Chittagonians were obsessed with brinjals because they use the word *bekgune* so much (*bekgune/begun*, get it?). But apparently the word actually means "everyone". Makes so much sense, doesn't it? Besides, I am someone who has

trouble remembering the simple differences between British and American English. For someone who repeatedly forgets to add the "u" in "colour", learning Chittagonian is like trying to climb Mount Everest with asthma and little clothing.

You might wonder why this is such a big deal to me. It is just a dialect, after all. But when you've lived in a city for so long



and you can't even begin to understand the language there, you start feeling like you're missing out on life somehow. Existential crises may follow this discovery. Also, people judge you. A lot.

Most of the taunts and laughs I've heard can be taken light-heartedly, but there were a few exceptions. Chittagonians naturally take pride in

their challenging dialect – some more so than others. At one particular gathering, someone said to me, "You probably think our dialect is beneath your status, don't you?" I didn't know what to be more upset at: the fact that I was being considered too proud to learn a dialect or the part where, as a 14-year-old, I had no "status" to begin with. I tried to master the beautiful art of not caring, and it was

quite effective when I wasn't thinking about my plunging self-esteem.

Now that I have grown older and (marginally) wiser though, I have realised that the best way to tackle this problem is to avoid it. I have trained myself to walk away from conversations which might reveal my "secret"; I show great interest in the empty inbox on my phone; I

impersonate a goldfish when I have to sing along to local songs along with the audience at functions and shows. Once, I had kept up my nodding, clapping, and goldfish-impersonating even after the performance was over and the singer had left the stage. Fun times.

It gets a little tougher at people's homes, though. I can't blatantly ignore my hosts, so I've used other tactics. I've learned to school my facial features into an interested, understanding expression whenever people decide to switch to *Chatgaiyya* at gatherings. Contributions to the conversation are out of the question, of course. Showing interest in the furniture and decorations will please the hosts and keep them from trying to engage me in too much conversation. If all else fails, I can always feign interest in my bowl of fluorescent yellow noodles (this is also something else many Chittagonians excel at – cooking noodles that are shockingly yellow). I just have to make sure my mouth isn't too full, in case my attempts fail and I hear THE question ("You don't know Chittagonian?!").

I will probably have to employ these tactics, and come up with new ones, for quite a long time, if not forever. However, it still feels good to hear people yelling at each other in *Chatgaiyya* when I come home after long trips. That's because, even though their language is difficult for me, Chittagonians are actually very cool people.

Despite being a hopeless fangirl, Marisha Aziz lives under delusions of awesomeness. Contact her at marisha.aziz@gmail.com to give her another excuse to ignore her teetering pile of life problems.