



Amago Bhasha

In celebration of our ethnic and linguistic diversity

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RACIAL, religious, national, tribal, and ethnic lines dissolve on February 21. Unlike independence days, religious holidays, cultural festivals, or birthdays of national figures, International Mother Language Day celebrates something the whole world can appreciate: our right to use our native tongue. Whether we speak a national language sanctioned by the government or a local language spoken by only an underprivileged minority, we celebrate. Whether our language is written in letters, syllables, characters, Braille, or not written at all, we celebrate. Whether we produce our language through our mouths or through our hands, we celebrate. The spirit of this holiday is universality. And yet, ironically, it is celebrated in the land of its origin lacking the spirit it has inspired abroad.

Of course, the differences between the way Bangladeshis view Ekushey February and the way the world views International Mother Language Day are rooted in the holiday's special place in Bangladeshi history. Before being recognised worldwide by UNESCO in 1999, the tradition began as a commemoration of the deaths of Bangla-speaking students by the Pakistani authorities in 1952, as they were protesting the adoption of Urdu as the single official language. And as we all know, their protest became part of the nationwide Bangla Language Movement and sowed the seeds for the revolution which ultimately gave birth to Bangladesh. Because the story of Ekushey February is so tightly intertwined with Bangladeshi identity, many have come to view the holiday as a celebration of Bangla—or more specifically, of one variety of Bangla—instead of a celebration of the mother tongues of all Bengalis, of all Bangladeshis, and of all people. In this way, Ekushey February has been reduced to another ethno-nationalistic holiday in the country of its conception.

Now, one may try to argue that Bangladeshis are simply so linguistically homogeneous that it is natural to recognise only Bangla, but in fact we are all aware that this is not the case. Not only is Bangladesh ethnically heterogeneous—with Bengalis long coexisting with lakhs of Santals, Biharis, Khasis, Garos, Bishnupriya Manipuris, Oraons, Mundas, Chakmas, Marmas, Tipperas, Mros, and other peoples—it is also highly diverse linguistically. In addition to the myriad of Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, and Dravidian languages spoken by the indigenous non-Bengali groups, the country is rich with countless dialects of Bangla. (The term “dialect” is used here in the scientific sense, denoting any distinct variety of a language, whether it is the “standard dialect” or otherwise.) Indeed, experts describe Bangla as a “dialect continuum”, where neighbouring dialects—such as those of Tangail and Gazipur—are mutually intelligible (people from one group can easily understand

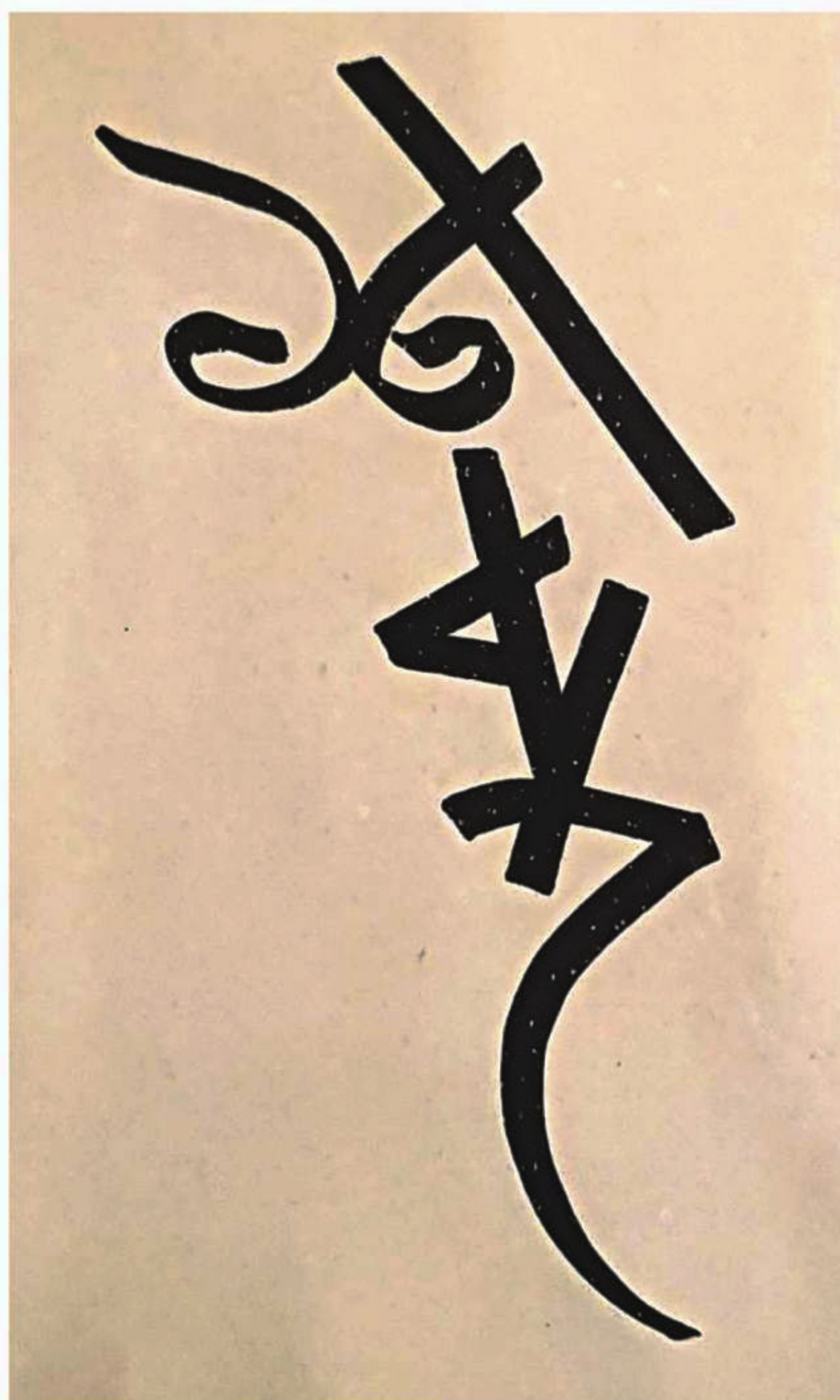
those of another), but dialects spoken geographically far apart—such as those of Noakhali and Dinajpur—are mutually unintelligible. At the geographical extremes, Chittagonian, Sylheti, Mal Paharia, and Rohingya are so unintelligible to speakers of other dialects that they are almost universally considered by linguists to be separate languages on their own.

This diversity of Bangla dialects is the result of centuries of natural language change, further influenced by successive waves of migration, colonisation, and globalisation. Every dialect has evolved in its own way, with each generation making small changes in pronunciation or

called “Nadia Standard”, as it is loosely based on the local speech of Nadia and Murshidabad Districts, the dialect is widely called *cholino bhasha* or *cholti bhasha* (“current language”), *shuddho Bangla* (“pure Bangla”), or even *bhalo Bangla* (“good Bangla”), revealing our ideological biases towards it.

Of course, the term *cholti bhasha* (“current language”) is not a jab at other dialects per se, but an acknowledgment that the other commonly-written form of Bangla—called either *shadhu bhasha* (“language of sages”) or *boier bhasha* (“language of books”)—does not reflect the actual or current speech of any region

(Sylhet). In the extreme southeast, speakers offered *ek zon mainsher duga hola asil* (Noakhali), *ugga mansher duo poa asil* (Chittagong City), and *ek jontun diba poa el* (Chittagong Hill Tracts). On the other extreme, speakers of far western dialects said *ek jonor duto beta achhle* (Mal Paharia) or *yahok noker duita chhaoga rohina* (Kharia Thar). No one at the turn of the 20th century was spontaneously uttering the sentence *kono ek bektir duita putro chhilo*, although under the constraints of *shadhu bhasha*, that was the way to write it. It was not until prolific Bengalis of the late 19th and early 20th centuries began to write the way they spoke that the use of



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intonation, adding or losing vocabulary items, or slightly adjusting some rules of grammar. Since every dialect has undergone these processes, no single dialect can be scientifically shown to be “better”, “more refined”, or “purer”. Nonetheless, there remains a widely accepted belief amongst speakers of many languages that only one dialect of their language should be exalted above the others; in the case of Bengalis (from both India and Bangladesh), it was the dialect native to the regions north of Kolkata and west of Kushtia that were elevated to a status not shared by any other dialect of Bangla. While in linguistic circles it is

of Bengal. In the Linguistic Survey of India, conducted in the early 1900s, Irish linguist George Abraham Grierson found that each region of Bengal has its own way of producing the same sentence. To express “a man had two sons”, those in the north said *ek manusher dui chhaoa chhilo* (Dinajpur) or *ek zon mansher duikna beta asil* (Rangpur). In the southwest, *ek lokkar dutta po thailo* (Medinipur) would be more common. In the east-central region, one could say *ek zoner duto sol sel* (Jessore) or *kero mansher duga pola asil* (Faridpur). In the east, Grierson transcribed *ek zoner duidi saol asilo* (Dhaka), *ek bedar dui put asil* (Comilla), and *kono mainshor dui fua asil*

shadhu bhasha began to wane. In its place, a compromise dialect between the pronunciation and grammar of *shadhu bhasha* and those of the central districts (where many of these writers hailed from) arose, in which the aforementioned sentence would be *ek jonor dui chhele chhilo*. By the end of the 20th century, all major publications in both Bangladesh and West Bengal had converted to this central dialect-style *cholti bhasha*.

Of course, having a written form brought closer to the spoken form is a good thing; typically, this encourages



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