

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD’S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Protect languages, protect peoples



THE images of indigenous people are exhibited by the Bangladeshi government for various purposes. A video entitled “Beautiful Bangladesh: Land of Stories” and made by the Bangladesh Tourism Board also features the water festival of Marma communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) to attract tourists to Bangladesh. In 2010, the government issued stamps using the images of indigenous women in recognition of the country’s rich diversity and to promote tourism in the CHT. As well as posters carrying these images, one may also have come across news and photos of “tribal” dances being performed for our foreign guests. However, when it comes recognising their unique identity, the state has been less than enthusiastic and rather claims that there are no “indigenous” people in Bangladesh. It has even made it mandatory that foreigners willing to visit the CHT will have to get permission from the home ministry.

These communities, thus, face the paradox of attracting inbound tourism but lacklustre response to questions of their own identity and recognition. This year, the theme of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples is “Indigenous Languages”. A survey conducted by the Institute of Mother Language in Bangladesh disclosed that among 41 indigenous languages, 14 are endangered, and the reason for indigenous languages being used less is the declining numbers of indigenous people who speak the languages as well as the dearth of government support to keep the languages flourishing. Each of these languages signifies a distinct culture and is a source of pride for the native speakers. Researchers have found the existence of approximately 7,000 languages in the world. The Endangered Languages Project found out that more than 40 percent of the world’s languages are endangered, and that one language dies out every 14 days. This happens when, among other reasons, speakers of minority languages are wiped out by war, violence or other forms of threat, or when the process of intergenerational transmission of language somehow gets intermittently or destroyed.

This needs to be kept in mind when we talk about the languages of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, where unwanted interruptions have taken place even in schools. One of my friends had dropped out twice from school. The first time was because of a misunderstanding between him and the class teacher. He told me that in the Chakma language, unlike in Bangla, there is no division between the distinct referential terms of address such as “tui”, “tumi” and “apni”. The Chakma language has only one way of addressing a person, and that is “tui”. So when my friend Barun was eight years old, he addressed his class teacher as “tui”. The teacher, who was a Bengali, could not accept it, thinking it was meant to disrespect her, and so she beat him badly. Later, Barun dropped out of the school.

In the CHT Peace Accord, signed in 1997, Clause 33 (b) states that primary education should be conducted in the mother tongue. However, it took nearly 13 years of lobbying and activism before education in one’s own language (read indigenous language) was officially recognised, in the National Education Policy 2010 (Sections 18, 19 and 20). After that, the government set out to prepare and publish textbooks in five indigenous languages for the pre-primary level. It was stated in 2013 that books of indigenous languages were delivered to children who speak those languages. But not enough teachers from those communities were recruited to ensure the purpose behind the clause is served. It gets trickier when the children enter the primary and secondary levels, where they don’t have the opportunity to study in their mother language. As a result, they are forced to change brusquely from studying in their mother language to a second, different language.

Central to this state of incongruity is the fact that the state exercises power over the indigenous people through the domination of Bangla language. Michel Foucault treats power as a net-like organisation of relationships running through the whole social body. This analysis enables us to see that power is not concentrated in the state apparatus; the state must rely on other knowledge-producing apparatuses to render its functioning possible.

I recall a Marma friend who once told me about an experience of his father that, he said, was quite common in the indigenous communities. He said that his father’s name



Stamps issued by the government of Bangladesh in 2010. COURTESY: ZOBAIDA NASREEN

was Jibon Chowdhury. When I expressed my surprise at the nomenclature, he explained that when his father was admitted to school, his Bengali class teacher found it difficult to pronounce his Marma name and so changed it to Jibon. It was easier to pronounce for the Bengali people, and thus his father lost his right to his Marma name.

The exercise of power through language is not limited to imposing Bengali names only; sometimes we see derogatory names being used by security personnel on the streets

such as “Chakku” for Chakma, “Mogh” for Marma and so on. Scott (1990) said that when a commoner addresses the sultan in Indonesia, he uses the term “hamba”, which roughly translates to “your slave”, and he was traditionally positioned before the throne in a posture of wretched humility. Every such encounter that brings together people of different statuses in such societies is designed to underline and support these differences by rules of language, sign, tone, and dress.

Can forced naming be treated as an

“ordinary” issue? Just the contrary. Such naming practices can be considered a form of violence (Dawes, 1991). Among post-structuralist theorists, this is an essential and commonly raised critical maxim. The act of naming can be a matter of forcibly attaching a label to a person or object with which one has only the most random of relationships. Names create an “other”, establish hierarchies, enable surveillance, etc. Naming is a strategy that one uses in power relations. Discussing the naming practices of Nambikwara children in “Of Grammatology”, Jacques Derrida identifies naming as an act of “originary violence” that is productive of both the disciplinary violence of the law and the cognate violence of its infractions: “war, indiscretion, rape”. Naming is the authority’s attempt to classify and control disparity. For Derrida, as well as for others, this is at the heart of post-structuralist logic.

Along with that, the dominance of Bangla language is seen not only in the official activities in the CHT but also in other areas of the life of the people. The Bengali settlers of Khagrachari changed the names of various places originally deriving from Chakma, Marma and Tripura languages. In some cases, the religious identity of Bengali Muslims was given precedence over others in naming/renaming places. The nationalist sentiment demonstrated by the alteration of names of different places in the CHT can be easily understood when you look at the history of the names of those places.

The change in names can be interpreted as a tool of domination, just as it is used as a weapon of resistance. Graves (1998) states that inherent in language is a political grammar of social oppression and social resistance. Scott (1990) refers to the process by which Aesopian language may offer a means of direct vituperation, which is very much like the process by which everyday forms of struggle give way to overt, collective inscience.

As we observe the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples today, we must remember this process and understand why it is so important to protect all indigenous and minority languages. Because when a language dies, a culture dies with it too, and if we allow it to happen, we will never be able to resist the hegemony of language and power.

.....

Zobaida Nasreen teaches anthropology at Dhaka University. Email: zobaidanasreen@gmail.com

State of our indigenous languages

KHOKON SUITEN MURMU

AN estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, living across 90 countries, speak more than 7,000 languages and represent 5,000 different cultures. The combination of languages, cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and intellectual property enhances the cultural integrity of a nation. Language is the wheel of this mixture that helps to keep cultural integrity active. Disruption of this process will result in the extinction of numerous languages and cultures.

However, every two weeks, an indigenous language disappears, placing at risk the respective indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. Hence, addressing the critical loss of indigenous languages the United Nations declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL 2019) not only to benefit the people who speak these languages, but so that others appreciate the important contribution they make to our world’s rich cultural diversity.

It’s generally assumed that at least 54 groups of indigenous peoples live in Bangladesh. However, the National Committee recommended 50 indigenous communities to be enlisted on the gazette of “Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institutes Act of 2010”. Based on this recommendation, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs made an amendment to this Act and enlisted 50 indigenous communities instead of 27. The 50 indigenous communities are: Bawm, Barman, Bagdi, Banai, Baraik, Bedia, Bhil, Bhumij, Bhuimali, Chak, Chakma, Dalu, Garo, Gorait, Gurkha, Ganju, Hodi, Ho, Hajong, Koch, Kole, Khasi, Khyang,

Khumi, Kurmi Mahato, Koda, Kora, Kharria, Kharwar, Lohar, Lusai, Monipuri, Marma, Malpahari/Pahari, Munda, Mro, Malo/ Ghasimalo, Mahali, Mushor, Oraon, Patro, Pangkhua, Rajwar, Rakhaine, Santal, Sabar, Tangchangya, Tripura, Teli and Turi. Each of these communities has a different language, cultural heritage and knowledge, etc.

According to Justice Habibur Rahman, indigenous peoples speak 37 languages (Bangladesher Nanan Bhasa, 2014) aside from Bangla. The number of languages spoken may increase if a proper census is carried out. There are communities who no longer speak

their language and there are others who speak their language but do not have alphabets. There are threats of the extinction of languages spoken by the ethnic communities. Thus it is important to nurture and preserve the alphabets of their languages.

Kapaeng Foundation with the International Labour Organization conducted a focus group discussion on 25 indigenous communities out of the mentioned 50 under the project “Improving indigenous and tribal peoples’ access to justice and development through community based monitoring” targeting 10 specific domains. The survey

found 92 percent of community respondents agreed that their language is in a vulnerable state, 4 percent agreed their language is critically endangered and 4 percent agreed their language is already extinct.

The survey showed that the indigenous communities’ children face lack of access to quality education because of the lack of education being provided to them in their mother tongue. The government’s recent initiative of introducing education based on the mother tongue for selected groups of indigenous communities is being welcomed, although its scaling up to cover more children

and the inclusion of other indigenous groups would also be important. However, the government is yet to take any step to institutionalise the indigenous languages in the higher education system. Furthermore, the Education Policy 2010 doesn’t mention the benchmark of indigenous languages’ standardisation through formal institutionalisation in the higher education system. It is not just the land-related and social issues that cause despair for the indigenous communities, but there are also serious concerns about their languages and cultures.

The language of a community is like a roof under which its people find psychological shelter and hearth and live their life as one family. Bangladesh as a sovereign country is yet to properly address the state of indigenous languages. Article 13(1) of UNDRIP explicitly recognises the right of indigenous peoples to revitalise, use, develop and transmit their languages to future generations.

February 21 was declared the International Mother Language Day by UNESCO in 1999. The whole world has been observing this day since February 21, 2000. The declaration was made as a tribute to the Bengali people’s Language Movement (then the East Pakistanis). However, the right to language of the indigenous peoples of this country is yet to be fully recognised. In this sovereign country that is Bangladesh, the government should acknowledge the contribution of indigenous peoples as well as recognise their right to self-determination, culture, language and education.

Khokon Suiten Murmu is Project Coordinator of Kapaeng Foundation, Central Cabinet Member of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP) and National Committee Member of Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF).



PHOTO: COURTESY

QUOTABLE  
Quote

**THOMAS JEFFERSON**  
(April 13, 1743 – July 4, 1826)  
THIRD PRESIDENT OF THE  
UNITED STATES  
  
*When injustice  
becomes law,  
resistance becomes  
duty.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Prepares for a trip

6 Life stories, for short

10 Some messages

11 Track events

13 Linguine or penne

14 Like draft beer

15 Employ

16 -- Lanka

18 Lincoln nickname

19 Thought-related

22 Evergreen shrub

23 Setting piece

24 Boredom signs

27 Ranch workers

28 Jai --

29 Embrace

30 Causing hallucinations

nations

35 Drunkard

36 Finish

37 Memorable period

38 Fragrance

40 Boston airport

42 Return to base

43 Fill with joy

44 Silent OKs

45 Tennis star

Monica

DOWN

1 Invigorate

2 Stockpile

3 Batter of verse

4 Young fox

5 Cuts drastically

6 Expose to intense heat

7 Holm of “The Hobbit”

8 Stop sign shape

9 Gull or tern

12 Tiny dots

17 Use oars

20 Jaded type

21 Mature

24 Bothers with barks

25 Campaign loser

26 “Nice job!”

27 Pre-snap meetings

29 Rooster’s mate

31 A lot

32 Permitted

33 Furious

34 Walking aids

39 Coffee, in slang

41 Bullring cheer

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO  
dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

DARE

NIVEN

ONAIR

PETNAME

ERAREGETWELL

SORRELEDDELL

ADAMS

TRAP

WETSUIT

IPO

LANAI

LICIT

REDS

ACED

SALON

STONE

PAW

EDDY

NOTBAD

EVAN

TGAIN

LAPATE

ELATE

DALE

BEETLEBAILEY

byMortWalker

BABYBLUES

byKirkman&Scott