



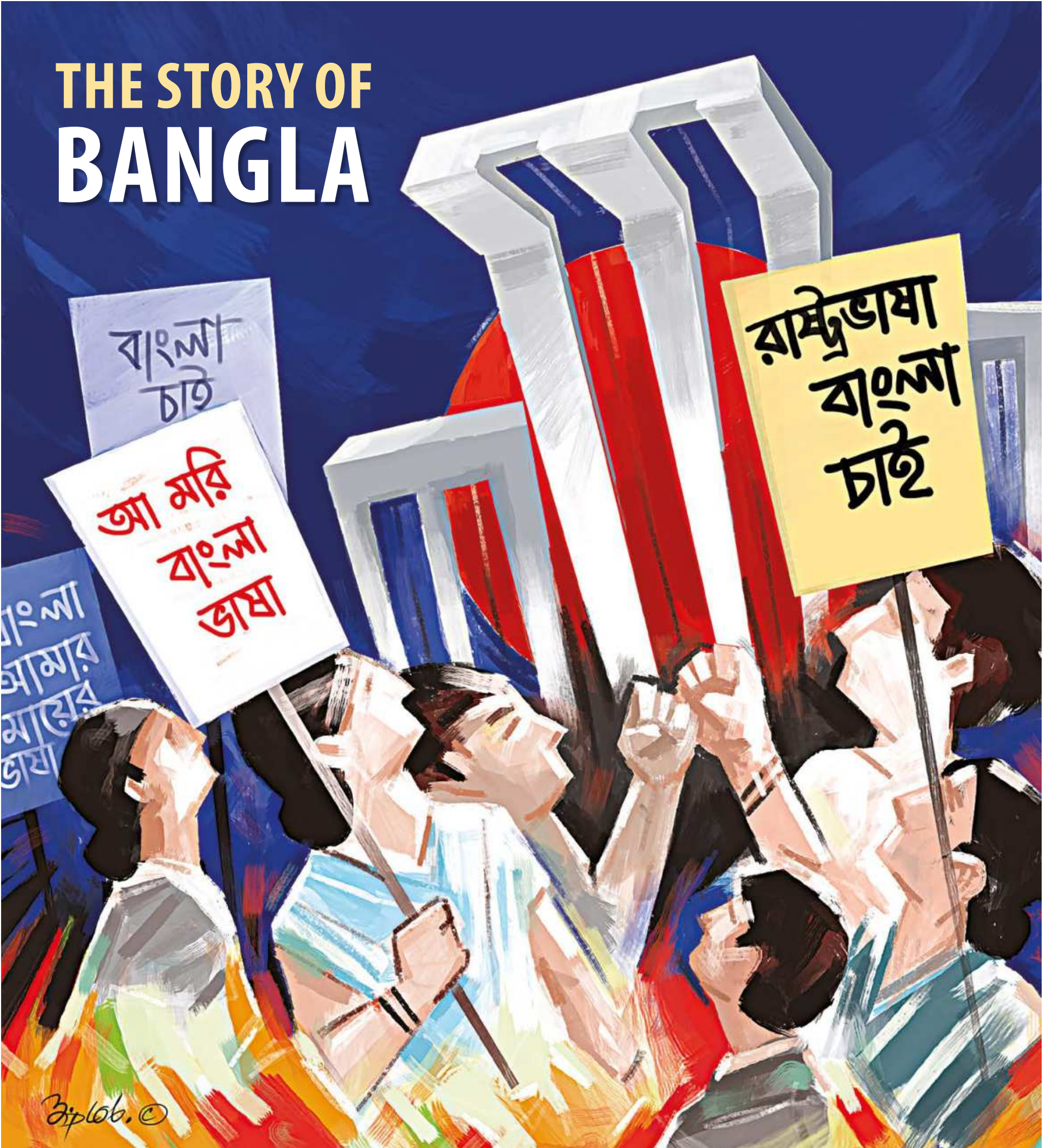
AMAR EKUSHEY

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THE STORY OF BANGLA





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Editor's Note

Sixty-nine long years ago today, our defiant women and men took to the streets to demand their right to speak in their native tongue and claim their cultural and political rights. The events that followed shaped the course of our nation's history. It came to be known as a precursor of the movement for statehood that evolved out of our deep-seated desire to be free from the shackles of tyrants—a desire that the people of this land have had for centuries and which resurfaced, in full force, on February 21, 1952. The events of this day became a defining moment for Bangladesh, seared into our collective consciousness, and intrinsically linked to our sense of identity and cultural heritage.

The supreme sacrifice of our martyrs has been widely acknowledged and treated with utmost respect, with February 21 now commemorated as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. However, the further we move forward in time and away from the events of 1952, the

more we run the risk of only ritualistically commemorating *Amor Ekushey*. We must ensure that this is not the case, and that our younger generations are fully apprised of the events of '52 and after, and are able to carry forward our collective dream of freedom from oppression, and of national unity and cultural diversity.

In this year's Ekushey Special issue, we focus on the rich history of Bangla and its continued metamorphosis throughout the ages, as well as the significance it holds for us in the 21st century, at the height of the digital era. We hope that in doing so, we can remind our readers how important it is to preserve the linguistic heritage of this land—not just in the case of Bangla, but for the languages spoken by all ethnic groups in Bangladesh, many of which are facing grave risks in the modern era.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star

The hidden politics behind writing Bangla in Roman script

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

In academia, the status of English is often contested in the Bangladeshi context. Is it a second language or a foreign language? There should not be any such question about our first language, our mother tongue in our everyday life. Bangla is our number one language. But we often switch to number two at any given opportunity. Many of the call centres have this linguistic option. There is also this mental switch that makes us travel between option one and two even when there is no button to press. What does it tell us about us as a nation and our attitudes towards our mother tongue? Interestingly, such code-switching or code-mixing has a political history that we often tend to overlook. Revisiting such a history will make us more aware of our commitment to our own language.

Given the rise of many digital interfaces, we often use Roman (Latin) scripts to represent Bangla pronunciation. Many of our Facebook comments are written using English; I too, am guilty of such lapses. I am not very proud of my unfamiliarity with the Bangla keyboard—occasionally I would use Google online input to write Bangla. I probably can do the same with Unicode input with other popular Bangla tools. While researching on the use of Roman scripts to write Bangla, I came across an interesting debate during the pre-independence period that goes on to show how the forces that tried to slight the spirit of Ekushey in 1952 continued to do the same in the succeeding years. Having an alphabet to give shape and voice to the innermost thoughts and desires is a freedom that was earned with the creation of the flag of an independent country in 1971, the seeds of which were sown in 1952.

On each Ekushey, we tend to focus on the imposition of Urdu as a state language for Pakistan. The relegation of Bangla to a second language would have meant that the Muslim middle class would suffer in professional and competitive sectors. The policymakers were keenly aware that language has some links to consciousness; our subjective experience is linked with phenomenal consciousness. At a cultural level, the use of Urdu was an attempt to "purify" Bangla from its Sanskrit influences. The import of many

royal court of Nepal a collection of Bangla poems, popularly known as *Charyagiti*. These poems date back at least to the 9th century and are credited as the earliest known examples of Bengali literature.

However, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah claimed that the poems go back to the 7th or 8th centuries. The language of the *Charyapada* is referred to as *Alo-Andhari* (light and shadow) or *sandhya bhasa* (twilight language) that includes names of places such as "Babgal Desh", "Panuya Khal" (the Padma river) and

words with Sanskrit roots.

Muhammad Hye in the essay "The Practice of Language in the Literature of East Pakistan" wrote, "Everyday diction and widely used words such as *jomijoma*, *ukil*, *muhri*, *ain adalat* have been removed to include some unfamiliar and strange Sanskrit words in West Bengal. Similarly, ordinary Bangla words have been replaced with *jomhuria*, *sadar e raisat*, *jasne azadi*, *Eid jamima*, *ashiana*, *gujarish*."

Looking back at the long evolutionary process of the language through which Bangla has distinguished itself from Sanskrit, Hye found these attempts unnecessary. The proposed reforms in the then Pakistan also included the Romanisation of Bangla scripts. Buoyed by the Turkish example, through which Mustapha Kemal Ataturk introduced a Latin-based script in place of the Ottoman Arabic alphabet, Pakistani and pro-Pakistani scholars wanted to write Bangla in Roman scripts. They argued that such Romanised alphabets would represent Bangla pronunciation with a high degree of accuracy. Even scholars such as Kudrat-e-Khuda and Dr Muhammad Enamul Haque saw this as a positive change. Bhashacharya Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterjee too felt that Romanised scripts would forge greater unity among the people of the Indian subcontinent. One wonders, if that was the case, why the British did not do so for their empire when they had the chance!

Muhammad Hye refuted the suggestion by saying, a common script has neither united Europe nor closed the Brit/US divide. In *Bhasha o Shahitya* (1969), Hye summarised the arguments that were forwarded by the reform committee, which were: since language and scripts are two separate entities, any change in



PHOTO: STAR

new Arabic, Persian, Urdu words was deliberately done to make Bangla of the then East Pakistan look, feel, and read differently from that of West Bengal.

Having said that, we need to remember that Persian (Farsi) was the official language in Muslim India before the formal introduction of English in 1837. In 1907, Sanskrit scholar, archivist and historian of Bengali literature, Haraprasad Shastri, discovered in the library of the

"Babgali Bhaili". Bangla as a dynamic language grew with the incorporation of many words of its various invaders and colonisers. The modern Bangla alphabet originated from the ancient Indian Brahmi script, which is found in the stone tablets of Ashoka. There were many experiments to reform Bangla as a language. In West Bengal, the Arabic and Farsi words were avoided, while in East Bengal (Pakistan) there were deliberate attempts to avoid



The diverse and continuing evolution of Bangla

SAMEER UD DOWLA KHAN

A story that has long been repeated is that Bangla derives from Sanskrit. The truth—the *satya*, *sachcha*, *shacha*, *hacha* or *hasa*—is much more complicated.

Some things are clear. Bangla's core—the bulk of its basic nouns like *hat* (hand) and *pa* (foot), its verbs and the way they're conjugated, the little pieces of hard-to-translate elements (and I don't mean so-called "untranslatable" words like *obhiman*—I mean little words like the *to* in *bhalo korechho to!*)—these were all inherited from Bangla's ancestor language. But here I don't mean Sanskrit (or technically, Old Indo-Aryan), which ceased to be a spoken language by the 6th century BCE, well before the Indo-Aryan cultural world even reached Bengal. Given this gap of over 1500 years between spoken Sanskrit and Old Bangla, what is our linguistic ancestor?

The Prakrit core and the long shadow of Sanskrit

Modern linguists describe Bangla's predecessor using terms relative to our own reality, but of course no speaker called their language "Proto-Bengali-Assamese", "Eastern Apabhraṅṣha" or "Spoken Magadhan

of *kor-i* (I do) is *kor-lam* (I did)—began as a Prakrit pattern using the suffix *-illa*. Furthermore, pronunciation had changed so much that words like *satya* (truth) had evolved into *sachcha* even by the Buddha's early Prakrit (c 500 BCE), and over a millennium later, evolved into Old Bangla *shach* (I'll return to this word in a moment).

The bulk of our basic vocabulary underwent exactly this process: take a Sanskrit word, make tiny changes every generation for a couple of millennia, and it becomes Bangla. These are *tadbhava* words, derived from Sanskrit through Prakrit to Bangla by natural evolution in pronunciation. These are distinguished from *tatsama* words, Sanskrit words that

Sanskritisation of written Bangla, and has since entered mainstream speech as *shotto* or *shotti*. As a result, with *shotti* bringing a Sanskritic air of sophistication, our own *shacha* became associated with being uneducated. You'll hear it in a further evolved form, in Dhakaia *hacha* or Sylheti *hasa*, but you might not have realised that this is not just a local word, but was in fact previously the only Bangla word for "truth", before *satya* was revived after some 2,500 years after its natural passing. The same thing can be said for *rat* vs *ratro* (night), *shaj* vs *shondhe* (evening), *majhe* vs *moddhe* (within), *nun* vs *lobon* (salt): countless native Bangla words compete for linguistic space against their own Sanskrit grandparents.

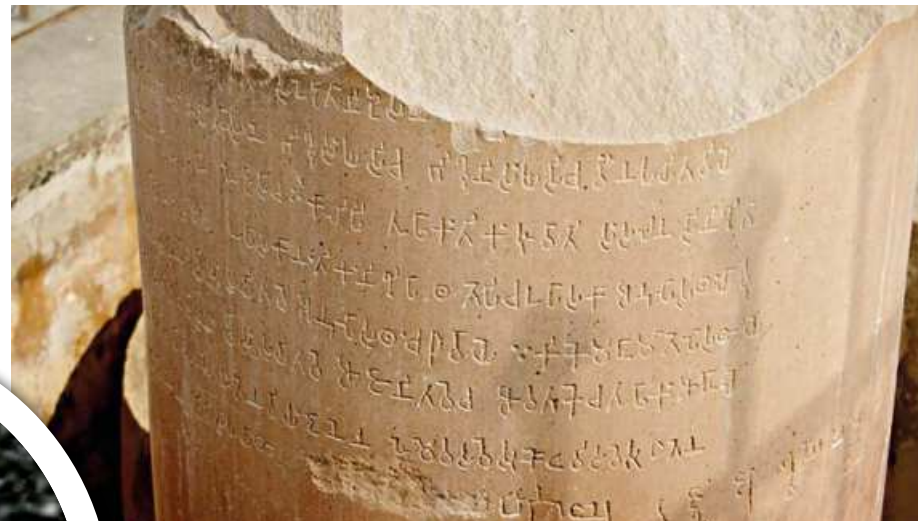
languages of Bangladesh today.

Contact in the modern era

During the 200-year-long Mughal rule of Bengal, the Bangla vocabulary expanded to include Persian words for concepts in the legal system (*dorbar*: court, *ain*: law), administration (*jela*: districts, *khajna*: revenue), military (*kella*: fort, *tir*: arrow), and religion (*roja*: fasting, *namaj*: prayer). Although they amount to only three percent of words in a typical Bangla dictionary, Persian words are so firmly established they could easily masquerade as native to the language. Consider the following sentences, where the Persian-derived words are underlined (many of which were in turn borrowed into Persian from Arabic):

Besh gorom dekhe chadorer kono dorkar nei. Aste kotha bolchho keno? jore bolo! rastae beshi aoj hochchhe. Choshma dao, porda shorao! khoborer kagoj porbo. Aenata shorie dealta kemon khali-khali lagchhe. Dokan theke hajarta jinish kine anlo. Golap baganta ami khub pochhondo kori. Jaegata ashole kharap na!

Trade with the Portuguese introduced words that have become indispensable around the house, like *chabi* (key), *janala* (window), *istiri* (ironing), *almari* (wardrobe), *botam* (button), *fitra* (shoelace), *shaban* (soap), *balti* (bucket), *gamla* (basket), and of course the indigenous names of many fruits brought from the Americas: *pepe* (papaya), *anarosh* (pineapple), *ata* (custard apple), *sofeda* (sapodilla), *kaju* (cashew), and countless others. But no European language has had



A pillar of Asoka, with the Brahmi script used to render an early Prakrit, in Sarnath, India.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

did not go through that evolution. But how does a 2,500-year-old Sanskrit word appear in Bangla without evolution?

Bengalis are notorious for loving Sanskrit, even more than other South Asians do (is it because Bengal was never truly Sanskrit-speaking, and this is our way of compensating for it?). So, as the elites of Medieval and Modern Bengal were already familiar with Sanskrit, they were comfortable borrowing a Sanskrit word or two (thousand) into their everyday speech, much like cosmopolitan Bengalis today draw effortlessly from English. This reintroduction of so much Sanskrit into what is effectively its linguistic granddaughter is part of what distinguishes Bangla from its closest sisters such as Assamese.

Let's return to "truth". You might have thought, ah! I know *satya*, we pronounce it *shotto*. So how does *shach* fit into all this? *Shach* or *shacha* is arguably our authentic word for "truth", derived from *satya* through the natural evolution of Sanskrit to Prakrit to Bangla, but was replaced by a cryogenically frozen *satya* through the

The role of pre-Indo-Aryan languages

We know unfortunately little about what was spoken in the kingdoms of ancient Bengal, before adopting the incoming Prakrits of the Indo-Aryan culture expanding down the Ganges. However, vestiges of those non-Indo-Aryan languages are presumably baked into what makes our Bangla itself different from other Indo-Aryan languages, since of course, the majority of the proto-Bengali population would have only eventually learned Prakrit as a second language. Many of us know from personal experience that when learning a second language, you often bring bits and pieces of the accent and grammar of your first language into the second. In fact, we find clues to our pre-Indo-Aryan languages in the tendency east of the Padma to pronounce *chh* and *j* as *s* and *z* (*zaitese* for *jaitechhe*), our inability to distinguish the *murdhonno no*, or our fondness for the *ng* sound (as in the name *Bangla* itself). It's worth noting that the minority languages of Bangladesh also have these properties, suggesting that proto-Bengalis may have shared at least some linguistic features observed in the non-Indo-Aryan

Bengalis are notorious for loving Sanskrit, even more than other South Asians do (is it because Bengal was never truly Sanskrit-speaking, and this is our way of compensating for it?).

as overwhelming a presence as English, which has successfully taken on the role previously held by Sanskrit and Persian, in providing a source for vocabulary to complement, replace, or preclude the coining of native Bangla words.

The Bangla script

The earliest form of writing in the post-Vedic Subcontinent was the Brahmi script, popularised during the 3rd century BCE reign of Asoka, who decreed that his edicts of non-violence (after a particularly bloody war) be engraved on columns across the Mauryan Empire. The very idea of writing as mass communication was



The Gupta (late Brahmi)

script for "Sanskrit". PHOTO: COLLECTED

Prakrit". While Classical Sanskrit was reserved for formal use, everyday communication in Medieval Bengal would have been in one or more "Prakrits", the languages that developed naturally (*prakritik bhabe*) from the accumulation of hundreds of years of tiny changes to spoken Sanskrit.

By the time these Prakrit languages arrived in early Bengal, they were substantially distinct from Sanskrit. For example, the complex, irregular verb system of Sanskrit—where the past tense of *kar-omi* (I do) is *a-kar-avam* (I did)—was completely scrapped in Prakrit. In fact, the way we mark past tense in Bangla today with *l*-based suffixes—where the past



The circulation of Bangla books

Translations, online selling, and social media

SARAH ANJUM BARI

While writing a text, a literary text in particular, many authors tend not to think about its afterlife. Imagining, experiencing, and putting the story down on paper takes precedence during those moments of creation. And yet a future journey for that text does emerge with or without the author's intent—for every story written, there exists somewhere a community of readers, and through the process of publication it becomes part of the larger network of produced literature. Something similar happened to the metaphysical life of the Bangla Language Movement of 1952. It was a deeply personal struggle for the close to 4 crore 40 lakh Bangla-speaking people of East Pakistan who demanded that their mother tongue be instated as one of the official state languages of Pakistan. Upon achieving success, that personal struggle became part of global history when UNESCO proclaimed February 21 as the International Mother Language Day, in 1999.

I begin with this comparison because it highlights the significant impact that circulation can make in the endurance

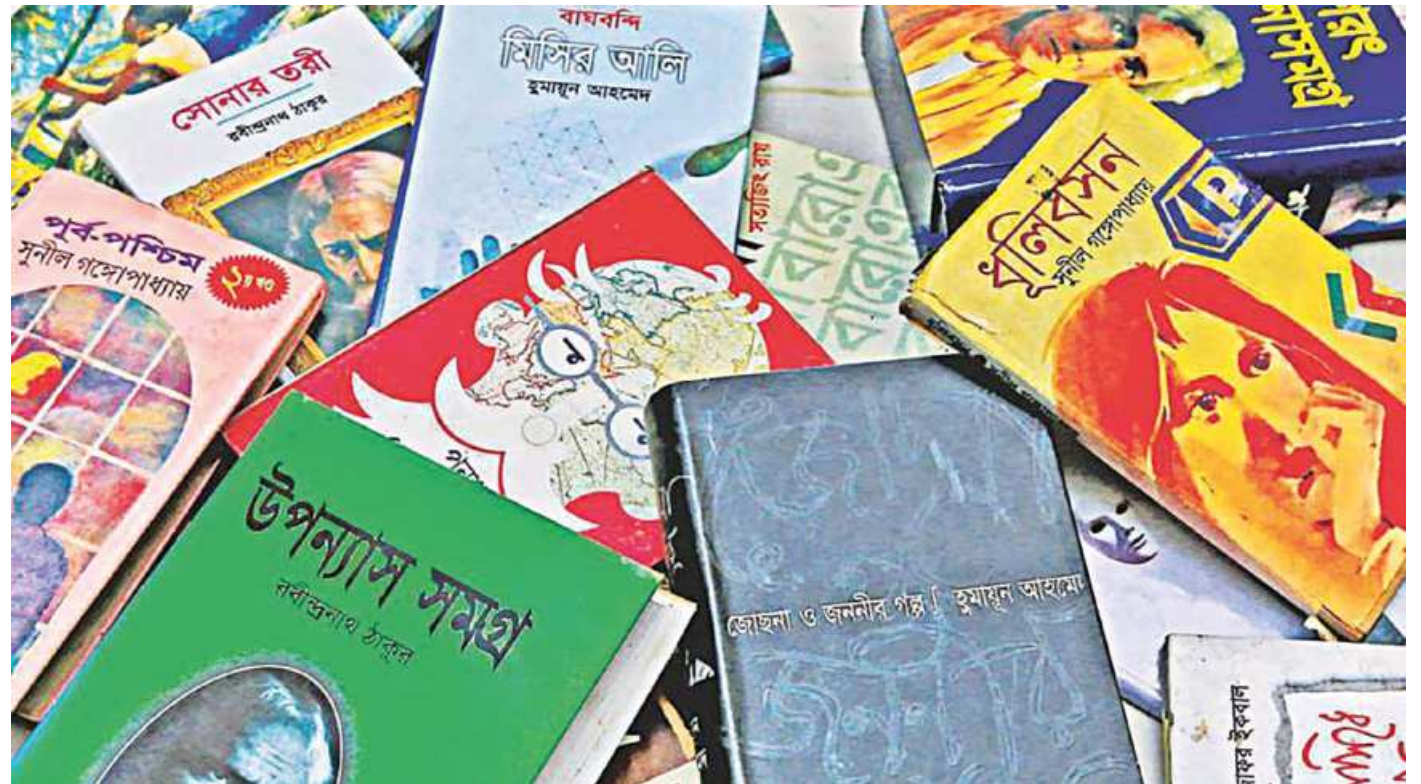


PHOTO: STAR

Whereas Goodreads suggestions are at the mercy of Amazon's algorithms and print spaces and opinions of critics can limit traditional reviews of books in newspapers and magazines, Instagram allows a diverse range of readers to discuss books in an informal format. The downside is that there is often less traditional literary expertise involved in such reviewing.

of languages, literatures, and histories, as has been highlighted by the scholarly works of Roger Chartier, Pierre Bourdieu, or even by the ideas of Tagore in "Bishsho Shahittya", his essay on World Literature. For the past decades, translation has played a major role in this process of circulation, and for the past few years, digital platforms including virtual marketplaces and social media have all but commanded the fate of books brought out by publishers. Sixty nine years since the Language Movement, if we are to examine the performance of Bangla texts across the world, the role of these platforms in helping not only to create texts but to *circulate* them, is vital. I began exploring this idea with high

hopes when I first decided to write about it, but conversations with publishers, editors, and book bloggers have revealed to me that Bangla literature has managed to make a very tiny space for itself in the thriving virtual world of books.

The first step, in the case of circulation beyond borders, is the consistent flow of such good quality texts. From Bangladesh, among the most laudable of these initiatives came in the form of the Library of Bangladesh series started by Bengal Lights Books edited by the Dhaka Translation Centre and author-academic Arunava Sinha, for which writer Shabnam Nadiya has translated Shaheen Akhtar's *Beloved Rongomala* (2019), Professor Kaiser Haq has translated Shaheed Quaderi's *Selected Poems* (2018), and Pushpita Alam has translated Syed Manzoorul Islam's *Absurd Night* (2018), among others. Rights for the books' distribution in the "Rest of the World Other Than Bangladesh" were shared with India's Seagull Books, who could then circulate them across the US and UK through the University of Chicago Press.

"The pity is that along the way, no fresh books [in the series] have found their way. This means the Library is stagnant," Naveen Kishore, publisher of Seagull, tells *The Daily Star*. "We need someone there who can find, scout, and curate interesting texts."

Bangladesh's University Press Limited (UPL) is an industry leader in the same operations as Seagull in terms of exchanging rights with overseas presses including Hurst Publishers, Columbia University Press, and notable others. Yet the feedback on these initiatives have been lukewarm.

"The response has been rather discouraging most of the time," UPL publisher Mahrukh Mohiuddin shares.

"Quality of translations has been a factor, given that most of the translations were prepared through individual initiative and not under the supervision of a proper institution. Some form of collaboration in these projects would have had an enriching effect. Whatever little benefits we were able to reap digitally were possible through authors' personal networks."

Access to digital selling platforms is another obstacle. Whereas local platforms like Rokomari.com, online bookstores, and the use of social media have helped domestic sales, helping bypass defaulting brick-and-mortar stores, trying to sell Bangladeshi books abroad brings its own set of issues. Bangladesh cannot operate directly on Amazon. Local publishers have to arrange orders through other countries, and in most instances, the shipping and other bureaucratic charges leave very little for profits.

"The way any serious literary publishing of this nature gathers root is to build a sustained and strong backlist," Naveen Kishore of Seagull comments. "Usually small numbers across the growing backlist continue to sell over the years and make enough cash flow for you to keep doing more translations. Here the word 'cashflow' is significant. Our distribution allows us to reach the world but the numbers are small; interestingly as 'big' or as 'small' as say translations from the French or German. But you also need to keep in mind that these are of specialist interest and not every store in the English speaking West keeps them. So events and constant engagement with the social media are vital for spreading the word to the diaspora communities. The only way to succeed is to keep the list growing and at some point achieve a critical mass or a large corpus of Bangla

literature in translation, not just through Seagull but also other publishers."

"If we could have some independent entity promoting Bangladeshi content globally, that would be helpful. It isn't cost effective for individual publishers to do this. We have tried and struggled," says Mahrukh Mohiuddin.

This is where social media comes in. Twitter is the realm of acquisition announcements, news updates, and slogan-sized dispatches of opinions. Facebook is fast becoming a channel for virtual book club discussions and book sales; and Goodreads' suggestions can add some exposure. But it is Instagram's bookstagram community that draws the largest traffic for a mostly young book-reading audience. Bookstagram has turned book promotions into a thriving and, more admirably, democratic enterprise. Whereas Goodreads suggestions are at the mercy of Amazon's algorithms and print spaces and opinions of critics can limit traditional reviews of books in newspapers and magazines, Instagram allows a diverse range of readers to discuss books in an informal format. The downside is that there is often less traditional literary expertise involved in such reviewing, and much focus lies on the aesthetic appeal of book covers (which publishers have been able to utilise to their benefit). Moreover, the platform creates space for more heartfelt and honest responses to books—few reviewers have professional niceties to maintain with authors or publishers, their language is more relatable and less jargon-riddled, and they often highlight how one book can appeal differently to different groups of readers.



The promise and challenge of Bangla in the digital age

SELECT WEB RESOURCES ON BANGLA LITERATURE AND CULTURE

»» BOIHERHUT

This is a closed group on Facebook for Bangla book lovers. You can also go to Amazon.com and search “boiherhut”—over 70 titles will show up.

»» AMARBOI

An archive of over 5,000 Bangla books from both Bangladesh and West Bengal, freely downloadable at Amarboi.com.

»» LIBRARY OF CONGRESS RECORDINGS OF BANGLA WRITERS

Audio recordings of some of the giants of Bangla literature reading from their own work, including Humayun Ahmed, Shamsur Rahman Sunil Gangopadhyay and Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Other writers include Selina Hossain, Mahasveta Devi, Nirmalendu Goon and Sankha Ghosh. Link: <https://www.loc.gov/acq/ovop/delhi/salrp/bengali.html>.

»» TAGORE WEB

Songs by numerous artists, and short stories, novels, poetry, essays, etc of Rabindranath Tagore at tagoreweb.in.

»» LIBERATION WAR ARCHIVE

An astonishingly rich archive of books, documents, essays, audio and video on Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 at liberationwarbangladesh.org.

ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

Every Ekushey, we renew our pledge to the language martyrs of 1952 that we will ensure that our beloved Bangla continues to flourish. To redeem this pledge, we need to remember a critical fact: The continued survival of a language depends on how well it adapts to the changing technologies of the age.

Where is Bangla headed? Can we feel secure in the knowledge that Bangla will not only survive but also thrive in the digital age?

The digital age offers both enormous promise and challenge. Language and culture flourish under complex social and political circumstances. Having said that, there are historical moments when technological innovation becomes a game changer.

and periodicals, modern Bangla was born. A variety of factors led to the rebirth of Bangla, but the introduction of printing provided the key impetus.

Fast forward to the final decades of the 20th century. The digital age is another quantum technological leap that was a global cultural inflection point. Digital technology and the Internet revolutionised language and communication. Its most significant contribution was to offer universal access to the printed word. Once limited to a chosen few who could type, now even a first-grade kid could write her school report on a laptop at home.

As the digital revolution spread all over the world, it became disturbingly clear that all languages are not created equal. Affluent, technologically advanced nations

show up as junk text on anybody's screen. In desperation, some designers displayed Bangla text as graphic files. In such circumstances, a Web search in Bangla was a fool's errand.

Bangla has come a long, long way since then. Mass usage of Bangla on the computer is comparable today with any other developed language—a breathtaking achievement since the bad old days. How this came about is a quirky story. It was in Bangladesh—where official usage of the language is ubiquitous—that the need for professional Bangla word-processing software was most deeply felt. Amid a number of abortive attempts, Bijoy word-processing software came to rule the roost. The software became—and still is—the industry standard in Bangla publishing in Bangladesh. But mass usage was still



ILLUSTRATION: STAR

Consider German printer Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type, circa 1450. This quantum technological leap completely changed how printed material reached the public. Books and periodicals, once the domain of calligraphers, were no longer limited to an extremely small elite. Mass publications led to exponential growth in dissemination of ideas.

Bangla had to wait over three and a half centuries until the 18th century, when Christian missionaries introduced printing. Contact with Europeans at this time resulted in an intellectual efflorescence of upper caste *bhadralok* Bengali Hindus. With the founding of Fort William College in Kolkata, and a robust exchange of ideas with a newly enabled culture of books

adapted to new digital changes with alacrity, while languages like Bangla (and other South Asian languages, for example) fell way behind. Although Bangla did not wait as it did for the printing press, it was definitely a latecomer to the digital party. It faced serious setbacks in the beginning. There wasn't a user-friendly Bangla word-processing software, so it was very difficult to type (this led to the God-awful use of “Banglish”—typing Bangla in Roman script). In the beginning, a gaggle of players developed Bangla software, but there was an amateurish, boutique feel about the efforts.

The advent of the Web presented its own set of problems. There was no standard for Bangla font. Web pages had different installed fonts, which could

a pipe-dream because Bijoy came with a catch. It had its own Bangla keyboard. A user had to master a separate keyboard in addition to the traditional QWERTY Roman keyboard of the computer.

So while Bijoy brought Bangla up to speed in the digital age, its socio-cultural effect was regressive. The need to master a separate Bangla keyboard proved too onerous for the general computer user. Only a select few whose profession demanded it—typists and print industry people—mastered Bijoy. All of this was reminiscent of the pre-digital era when access to the printed word belonged only to a chosen few who could type or set type.

It was not long before a remarkable new Bangla software stepped into the breach. The true credit of universal usage



The hidden politics behind writing Bangla in Roman script

FROM PAGE 2

the script will not harm the language; Roman scripts are scientific, Bangla is not; a single script can be used to learn Urdu, Bangla and English; it will strengthen the bond between the two wings of Pakistan; many countries such as Turkey and Indonesia have adopted Roman scripts (and they would soon become the most widely used scripts in the world); if India insists on all provincial languages to be written in Dev Nagri including that of West Bengal, Bangladesh will be the only country using Bangla alphabets; Bangla is a difficult language, which is contributing to the illiteracy of the nation; foreigners will find it easy to learn Bangla in Romanised scripts; and Romanised Bangla is typing-friendly.

Hye renders a point-by-point rebuttal to expose the fallacy of the arguments, to add: "Given the geographical and linguistic differences, the national solidarity of Pakistan should consider the following issues. People across the borders need to mix freely, win the hearts of the others, restore the balance in distributions of wealth, equal opportunities in jobs, avoid the master/



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

slave mentality, practice cooperation, ensure justice" (free translation).

For Hye, the attempt to Romanise Bangla is an insult to any nation proud of its heritage. He also reminds readers that Mualana Muhammad Akram Kha, who chaired the East Bengal Language Committee in 1949, gave his opinion against such introduction of Roman scripts. Conversely, Golam Mustafa felt

that Arabic scripts could be adopted in place of Roman ones. He argued that Urdu, written in Roman scripts, would lose its Islamic character. Since Arabic was the script of other provinces of Pakistan, it would make sense to write Bangla in Arabic for locating Pakistan in an Islamic culture. However, he also realised the huge task of converting already written literatures in Bangla in a new script, and

was not very keen on any such shift.

Responding to the Islamicisation of Bangla with the import of 80 percent Arabic-Farsi words, Ajit Guha wrote, "Language does not have a religion. There is no religious language. If Bangla is the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims, then the people can best articulate their Islamic religiosity through this language."

Reading about the discourse that was available in the pre-independence period made me reflect on the mental chains that colonialism entails. Today, there is a new trend of writing Arabic expressions, as suggested by the internet. People all too often correct you on how to write an Arabic word in English. Many of our Bangla words are losing their usage with the advent of the new media lingo. Typing Bangla in English (Latin script) is not an innocent act; it has its own politics. It has its own economy. Pressing one or two has a different implication when we look back to understand the significance of February 21.

Shamsad Mortuza is Professor of English (on leave), University of Dhaka and Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

Navigating Bangla literary translations

FROM PAGE 8

Bangla speakers translating a Bangla text into English might be tempted to keep many of the Bangla words or Bangla constructions to give a sense of the original. Sometimes, they do the exact opposite. For example, should one translate the word *anchal* or retain it? Many years ago, Miss AG Stock was translating a poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam with the help of a Bangla speaker. In the poem, two culture-specific words were translated into English. Perhaps the Bangla co-translator felt that no English-speaking audience would be familiar with the words. Thus the words "*anchal*" and "*bhatiyali*" were changed to "*skirt*" and "*boat*."

Amar Sonar Bangla by Tagore also uses the word *anchal*. How does Wikipedia translate our national anthem? The Bangla line reads: "*Ki anchal bichhayechho boter mule, nodir kule kule.*" The translation reads: "What a quilt hast thou spread at the feet of the banyan trees and along the bank of every river."

Instead of using inappropriate equivalences, it is better to use the culture-specific Bangla terms. In fiction, one can always embed the explanation if necessary in the line or paragraph. The translator with a command of English, who also knows that there are cultural differences which cannot be translated, would retain the original words. Perhaps the best translators try to adopt a middle path—stay as close to the original text without becoming absurd.

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The diverse and continuing evolution of Bangla

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novel in the Subcontinent, and on top of that, the fact that this early writing was in the local Prakrits rather than Sanskrit reflected that Asoka knew that even imperial proclamations must be in the language of the people if they are to be effective.

The Brahmi script remained stable for 700 years after those first Edicts, notably regular in its system of consonant symbols and vowel markings, with simple, angular shapes, easy to transcribe on stone columns, cave walls or copper plates. Only in the Gupta Empire of the 4th century CE did this system begin to change. In a sense, scribes never stopped using Brahmi; each generation had just made small local changes until it evolved into the myriad of scripts we see today, from Tibet to Sri Lanka and ultimately out to the Philippines.

Some of the more conscious changes to the Brahmi script arose because scribes shifted to writing Sanskrit, which although largely dormant for almost a millennium by then, saw a resurgence under the Guptas. And with its more complicated sound system, Sanskrit required changes to the script. Brahmi needed new consonants and vowels: Prakrits had one *s*-sound, so Brahmi only needed one letter *so*, but Sanskrit had three, which we still call *talobbo sho*, *donto sho*, and *murdhonno sho*. Symbols that we call *oi-kar* and *ou-kar*, plus two *ri-kar*'s and even two *li-kar*'s were derived especially for Sanskrit. And most notably, consonants had to combine not just with vowels, but also stack onto other consonants—what we now call *juktakkhor* or *juktoborno*. This expanded Brahmic system remains the core of all

modern Indic scripts today, including the Bangla script.

Bangla's future

While a script can display signs of inertia, especially in the age of standardised fonts, the evolution of a spoken language never stops. Generations upon generations of speaking vernacular Sanskrit led to the many Prakrits, and from one eastern Prakrit came Bangla. The process has no reason to stop; mass media and globalisation can suffocate linguistic diversity, but it cannot stop language change. As such, Bangla will continue to grow with each generation, but how?

The once-substantial influence of Persian has largely subsided, and in its place, it appears English will continue to serve as the language from which we freely borrow new basic terms as well as technical vocabulary (which Sanskrit helps us with as well). Persian's role in religious vocabulary, however, has already been replaced by appealing to Arabic more directly, as we see in trends such as shifting from Persian *Khoda Hafez* to *Allah Hafez*.

Aside from these externally-focused trends, we can also look at change within Bangla. Each regional variety of Bangla is the local descendant of the various Old Bangla dialects that derived from eastern Prakrit. But not all varieties are treated equally; that of the Nadia-Kushtia region (in which *jaitechhi* becomes *jachchhi*: I'm going) swept across Bengal as a new standard since the 1800s, and is likely to encroach further on other regional varieties due to its exclusive position in formal education. It's commonplace to find Bengalis who can understand their grandparents' Noakhailla or Puran Dhakaiya but can only speak in this

so-called "*shuddho*" Bangla.

Given the sheer numbers of speakers, it's thankfully unlikely that regional varieties of Bangla will disappear. But more than English, *shuddho* Bangla will serve as the strongest factor in shaping exactly how these varieties will change in the future. And as both a linguist and a speaker, my hope is that we document Bangla's continuing evolution without having to sacrifice its own diversity, thousands of years in the making.

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ILLUSTRATION: STAR



The circulation of Bangla books

FROM PAGE 4

The exchange of comments on posts, stories, and live sessions between bloggers and followers also allows for a more organic flow of ideas surrounding a book or author.

But while a search for #bookstagram brings up 56.1 million posts on Instagram at the time of my writing this article, #bookstagrambd brings up only 35,500 posts and variations of “bengalibooks”, “banglabooks”, and “bengaliliterature” bring up barely over 5,000 posts. And whereas podcasts, book clubs, and individual

profiles promoting literatures of colour from other parts of the world, even neighbouring India and Pakistan, boast tens of thousands of followers, few profiles featuring Bangla works exist to begin with, and their follower base is substantially lower. Here, too, access and mobility deter traffic—international giveaways by publishers and bloggers often leave Bangladesh out.

“I think maybe there is a language barrier,” says Samira Ahmed popularly known as The Millennial Ma, among the most popular Bengali Instagram bloggers based in the UK, who also features books. “Indian or African readers

promoting local writers use mostly English to communicate. If people post bilingual captions, make most use of IGTV, reels, live sessions etc., it can work better.”

If the Covid-19 pandemic had any positive effect on our lives last year, it was the drastic rise in the scale of conversations across communities. Unlike ever before in *The Daily Star's* history, each of our departments were organising live sessions with authors, publishers, artists, and politicians on an almost weekly basis, and unlike with print interviews, our readers and viewers could partake in those conversations

through live comments. This has only proven that boundaries of geography and logistics are porous and malleable, and with some enthusiasm on the part of both parties, circulation of literatures between Bengal—comprising Bangladesh and West Bengal—and the wider world is not an impossible feat. Assistance from businesses and governments could help ease the financial and logistical barriers. As always, writers, artists, and readers can take care of the rest.

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The promise and challenge of Bangla in the digital age

FROM PAGE 5

of Bangla in computers must go to the Avro word-processing software. Avro's masterstroke was to take a page from the word-processing rationale followed by languages like Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Word-processing in these languages present a difficult challenge. Chinese and Japanese, for instance, have thousands of characters. How does one design a keyboard for it? Software designers came up with a brilliant solution. Instead of using keys to represent script, why not use the QWERTY keyboard and spell out the words? In other words, use the Roman keyboard and spell the words phonetically in the Roman alphabet. This spared the user from mastering a separate keyboard. Anybody who used a computer was familiar with the QWERTY keyboard anyway.

To be sure, Avro was not the first phonetic Bangla software. But Avro had two things going for it. It was free and it was open source. What that means is the public-spirited designer made the source code freely available for further innovation. This has led other public-spirited software designers to constantly update and embellish it so that today it is a sturdy, extraordinarily user-friendly software that can be used on Windows, Mac and pretty much anywhere else.

As a Bangladeshi, I feel proud that Avro is the overwhelming favourite software for Bangla all over the world (I have no statistics, but my guess is Google input tools may be a distant second). Universal access to Bangla on the computer has led to prodigious Bangla content on the Web, and with acceptance of Unicode font as standard for Bangla, it is possible to search the Web in Bangla. The Bangla Wikipedia page is a growing resource.

However, universal access to Bangla on the computer is a means, not an end. The broader goal is to use this extraordinarily powerful digital technology to promote Bangla publishing. One critical area where Bangla has missed a trick is in the field of eBooks. An eBook is a version of the printed book that can be accessed on the laptop, smartphone or tablet or a specialised device expressly designed for the purpose of reading books, for example, the Kindle eBook reader made by Amazon.

According to the American Association of Publishers, 234 million eBooks were sold in the US in 2018 (this is 13 percent



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

of total sales of a whopping 1.8 billion books sold in all formats). Given the dire state of the Bangla publishing industry—the average print run of a Bangla book is a paltry 300 books in Bangladesh—eBooks offer an especially promising avenue (the publishing industry in West Bengal is considerably more robust, but I worry about stagnation when I see authors who were in their prime several decades ago, some deceased, still on current bestseller lists).

The initial costs of publishing eBooks are minimal; storage, shipping and subsequent production costs are negligible, and its reach is global. Bangla readers, it must be remembered, are spread out all over the world with substantial expatriate communities in the US, UK and the Middle East. Yet, eBooks have an appalling record in Bangla publishing. None of the leading publishers in Dhaka or Kolkata published Bangla eBooks until last year, when Ananda Publishers in Kolkata, the heavyweight in Bangla publishing, launched eBooks on its customised app. In Bangladesh, Bengal Books was the only leading publisher that attempted a short-lived effort to publish eBooks, and now, only Adarsha Publishers publishes eBooks. Its website mentions a booklist of 157 books, but it's not clear how many are available as eBooks. In West Bengal, relatively smaller boutique publishing

houses like Parul, Guruchandali and Srishtisukh publish eBooks. The size of the booklist is modest.

Why have Bangla eBooks failed to take off? Is this a chicken-and-egg problem? Is it Bangla publishing that is reacting to reader apathy, or are readers scarce because a culture of reading Bangla eBooks has failed to develop due to the lack of eBooks? Are Bangla readers too old-fashioned to adopt the new technology of reading books online?

The Facebook group BoierHut offers a stirring rebuttal to naysayers. The group, launched in 2012 by an Atlanta-based Bangladeshi expat bibliophile, has grown into a global family of Bangla book lovers. A group of administrators from Bangladesh and West Bengal screen over 500 posts each day to maintain the Facebook group, which is dedicated to discussions exclusively about Bangla books and literature, exclusively in Bangla. It has over 165,000 members, drawn from West Bengal, Bangladesh and pretty much all over the world, and provides access to over 40,000 online Bangla books put up by members. Administrators say massive numbers of books are downloaded, though obviously the fact that a book is downloaded does not prove that it has been read.

BoierHut founders readily concede that making all these books available is an ethically grey area that raises copyright

issues. However, BoierHut has never made a cent on this, so the whole effort is towards promoting Bangla books and literature. The stunningly positive response from Bangla readers has apparently generated enough goodwill to soothe the qualms of publishers, because BoierHut is on excellent terms with publishers in both Dhaka and Kolkata. Last year, BoierHut took another historic step and started publishing Bangla books on Amazon's Kindle. There have been scattershot efforts before this, but BoierHut is the first to do it in a professional way. It registered as a company in the US and officially signed up with Amazon. It signed contracts with authors and publishers, pledging a commission on sales.

All told, there are currently over 70 titles with authors from Dhaka and Kolkata. Of course, it's a long, steep, uphill climb, and total sales are quite modest—around 450 eBooks.

This makes BoierHut's efforts all the more laudable—this is obviously far from a get-rich-quick scheme. Instead, BoierHut represents one of the loftier Bangladeshi traditions epitomised by organisations like Chhayanaut and Bengal Foundation—it is dedicated to the broader goal of promoting culture. There are caveats. Amazon supports purchases in India but does not support purchases in Bangladesh, so readers in Bangladesh have to find a workaround (the same titles are available on Google Play). Even more galling, Amazon does not support Bangla—although it supports Hindi and Gujarati. Bangla books, therefore, are in a grey area.

All of this goes to show that Bangla eBooks still have some ways to go. However, we can take heart from the fact that in the initial days, Bangla had a rough time entering the computer age, but ultimately weathered the challenges quite well. With hard work and dedication, a concerted effort is the need of the hour to build Bangla eBooks as a robust outlet for Bangla publishing.

Literature is the cradle of our culture, and it draws sustenance from the vibrant exchange of ideas made possible by books and periodicals. It is the essence of our identity, and its promotion is the most meaningful way to honour the memory of the martyrs of 1952.

Ashfaque Swapan, an Atlanta-based writer and editor, is contributing editor for Siliconeer, an online South Asian publication.



Navigating Bangla literary TRANSLATIONS

NIAZ ZAMAN

A lot of translations are being done in Bangladesh, from English into Bangla and Bangla into English; much of the latter by native Bangla speakers. While native Bangla speakers may have had 12 years of English education, they often lack the language skills necessary for literary translation. Why then, do they persist in doing so? Perhaps because they feel that some writers are so important that his or her writing should be presented in a world language. They often say, "If Tagore had not been translated into English, would he have won the Nobel Prize?" As Syed Manzoorul Islam said at a PEN workshop on translation in 2003, "Readers and scholars in the West tend to confine themselves to writers whose works are available in English."

Since its inception, the Bangla Academy has been publishing literary translations in English. This includes poetry as well as short stories, novels and plays. Its journal also includes translations of stories and poems—occasionally even novellas. University Press Limited (UPL), the largest publisher of English language books in Bangladesh, has also published a significant number of literary translations: including Brother James's translation of the *Gitanjali*, Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud's *A Thousand Year Old Bengali Mystic Poetry*, and Fakrul Alam's *Selected Poems of*

and Death in Krishnanagar (Mrityukshudha) and another translation of *Kuhulika as The Revolutionary*.

In 2005, writers.ink made its debut with the launch of *Tree Without Roots*, Syed Waliullah's translation—or transcreation—of his novel, *Lal Salu*. *Night of No Moon*, Afia Dil's translation of Syed Waliullah's *Chander Amabasya*, and *Cry, River, Cry*, Osman Jamal's translation of *Kando Nadi Kando*, followed. It has also published single writer anthologies of poetry and short stories. In 2011, it published a Bangladeshi edition of Mirza

translate into that language.

Some years ago, a translator working with Al Mahmud's fiction excused his poor translation. Either it was false modesty or he really knew his shortcomings and requested readers to consider his work "as an effort of a poor pen." At the same time, he expressed the hope that somebody better would come along to do justice to Al Mahmud's writings. What he was doing was translating Bangla writings that needed to be translated into English for a non-Bangla reading public as a stop-gap measure until someone "with proper

unnecessary. In Bangla, it is perfectly all right to say, "*She mone mone bhablo*," literally translated as "He thought in his mind." In English, however, the words "in his mind" are redundant. Similarly, in Bangla, the word *sal* is given next to the year: 2010 *sal*, for example. In English, however, we would not normally say "in the year 2010," but just "in 2010." Similarly, in English, one would not say "inside his heart, he felt unappreciated and unloved." Since it is quite evident that it is inside one's heart that one feels unappreciated and unloved, the first three words are unnecessary.

Translations from Bangla also need to be toned down. Bangla is a more emotional language than English. For example, when referring to the Pakistani soldiers fighting in 1971, most writers in Bangla use the phrase "*hanadar bahini*," that is, the marauding forces. How to translate this phrase becomes a problem for even Bangla speakers with almost native English fluency. Thus, a sentence in a translation, which was then in progress, had a sentence that read: "On the 25th of March, the barbaric aggressor Pakistani armed forces began killing Bengalis." The young translator was advised to avoid adjectives and adverbs and allow the verb/action to convey the meaning. However, many Bangladeshis might feel that this sort of translation tones down the emotion of the original and might even be misconstrued as a deliberate whitewashing of aggression.

One of the problems of a translator working with languages from different cultures is to find equivalent terms. Some years ago, I was translating a short story by Makbula Manzoor. The story was about a young woman who was raped during 1971, betrayed by the man she loved, and consequently had to leave her village to work in the city. The title of the story was *Kochuripana*, meaning water hyacinth. For an English reader, the hyacinth is a beautiful flower; for an educated western reader, who has read Greek mythology, the flower carries suggestions of homosexual love. In Bangladesh, where this beautiful flower floats on the river ways, clogging them and becoming a nuisance, it is waste, unwanted rubbish. Therefore, instead of using *Hyacinth* for the title, I used the word *Flotsam*, to give the sense of something unwanted but also floating—as the protagonist is after the war.

Often, translators just haven't read enough of contemporary literature in the target language. Thus, they are not familiar with the idioms of the language they are translating into. Even translators who are good in English slip up. No native English speaker would ask, "Have you taken your lunch?" It would be either "Have you had your lunch?" or, more commonly, "Have you had lunch?" Similarly, the Bangla word "*kol*" is literally "lap." But "*kol*" isn't always lap. Sometimes it means "arms."



Artwork from *Teabag Stories: Art on used teabags by Md Sadiuzzaman.*

Ihtesamuddin's *The Wonders of Vilayet*, translated by Kaiser Haq.

Considering the importance of translation, the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) launched the Dhaka Translation Center (DTC) in 2013 with the translation of three short stories by Hasan Azizul Huq. It organised workshops, and Bengal Lights Books (BLB), a sister concern, co-published a collection of stories emerging from those workshops: *The Book of Dhaka*. The Library of Bangladesh Series has been "conceived and created" by DTC at ULAB to "make works of leading Bangladeshi writers accessible to world audiences in high-quality translations." The series editor is Arunava Sinha. Apart from Hasan Azizul Huq, BLB has published Syed Shamsul Haq, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Rizia Rahman, Shaheen Akhtar and Imdadul Huq Milan.

Translating from one European language into another or from one Asian language into another is somewhat easier than translating from a European language into an Asian one or vice versa. Despite differences, the cultural contexts are similar in the first case but different in the latter. Apart from cultural content, the rhythms of a language learned but not spoken are difficult to acquire well enough to write creatively in it or to use it for literary translation. It has often been said that one must have learned a language at one's mother's knee to be able to write creatively in that language or to

knowledge and authority" came along to do so.

For Bangla speakers who wish to translate into English, common problems are with tense, verbs, tautology and tone. Perhaps the main problem with any translator of Bangla fiction is tense. In *Translation*, Rimi B Chatterjee notes "In Bengali... the conventional literary tense in novel and story writing is the simple present." In English, however, the literary tense is usually the past tense—although recently, a number of books in English have also used the present tense. Translators who begin to translate a story in the present tense often move to the past tense as they go on—and then get confused with the tenses, which keep shifting.

The apparent absence of the verb in many Bangla sentences is also problematic. Bangla fairy tales, for example, often begin: "*Ek raja. Tar saat rani.*" Literally, these sentences translate as "A king. His seven queens." Translators who want to be "true" to the original leave out the verbs. While a sentence fragment in English can be quite effective, these sentences in Bangla are not really fragments as the verb is clearly understood by the Bangla reader. A good translator would supply the verb in English that the Bangla reader automatically supplies—along with tense, depending on the context.

While a Bangla sentence might frequently omit the verb, it might also add words that in English would be

For Bangla speakers who wish to translate into English, common problems are with tense, verbs, tautology and tone. Perhaps the main problem with any translator of Bangla fiction is tense.

Jibanananda Das. It has also published several anthologies of Bangla short fiction in translation.

The Nazrul Institute has published a number of English translations of Nazrul's writings. *The Poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam*, a bilingual edition, edited by Mohammad Nurul Huda, provides several English versions of some poems. Nazrul's *Kuhulika (Enigma)* was translated by Kabir Chowdhury, keeping the same name as the Bangla original. The poet's novels and short stories were not given the importance given to his songs and poems. It was not until 2012, that Nazrul's epistolary *Bandhon Hara* was translated by some members of The Reading Circle as *Unfettered*. Subsequently, its publisher, Nymphaea Publication, also published *Love*