

# Lost in (Sylheti) Translation

**FARHAT AFZAL**

When people discover that my family originates from Sylhet, the first question they ask me is if I speak the Sylheti language. The regional dialect of the Sylhet division is so distinct from the typical Bangla we speak, that it is often considered a separate language. On such occasions, I would give them a coy reply, “Thura, thura.” A little bit of Sylheti is what I’m capable of speaking.

But I don’t tell them the truth. I don’t tell them that when they make fun of the language by enunciating each word distinctly, I’m reminded of the fluency with which my grandmothers speak. I don’t tell them that if needed, I too can perhaps hold entire conversations in the language. I don’t tell them any of this because in certain social circles of a metropolitan city like Dhaka, regional languages have gradually lost their footing. I don’t tell them all this because to them, Sylhet is a mystical land where all its inhabitants are somehow connected to the city of London and where they speak in a strange dialect that makes outsiders laugh.

It is astounding to think how aptly Sylheti can express certain emotions in a rather specific way. “*Kita kita khorer*” can be the inexplicable feeling related to a wide range of emotions from heartburn to heart-break. Any kind of physical or mental suffering can be described as “*beesh*”, meaning poison, while a severe kind of bodily pain



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

becomes “*baedna*”. After a particularly exhausting day, nothing expresses how utterly broken you feel physically than by saying “*Shorir bhainga forer*”. Perhaps one of the strangest word usages in Sylheti language is that of the word “Bengali”. A non-Sylheti person is referred to as Bengali, because prior to the partition of British India, Sylhet was not a part of Bengal, but was made a part of the Province of Assam in 1874.

In my family, my grandparents’ generation and my parents’ generation conversed

among themselves effortlessly in this language of their ancestors. But when it came to interacting with us youngsters, they made a conscious effort of switching to *shuddho* Bangla. This resulted in a strange predicament where we heard a language being spoken, but weren’t given the opportunity to speak it ourselves.

I understood the reasoning behind this. Bangla was taught at home and English was taught at both home and school. Additionally, there was also this fear of developing

a habit where we end up speaking only Sylheti and English languages, a practice prevalent specifically among British Bangladeshis living in London, and a fate our elders desperately wanted us to avoid. In between learning and perfecting these two languages, the practice of Sylheti dialect rather lost its importance. It remained in the background, like an old piece of family heirloom. Valuable, yes, but not really contributing to our daily lives in any way.

As I got older, the language continued taking a backseat in my life. Sure, I kept hearing it being spoken at home. And just for fun, I myself would infuse random words in between conversations with my elders. A little “*jee oy*”, or a random “*bala*” – meaning “yes” and “good”, respectively – is the extent to which Sylheti had a presence in my speech.

And yet, these little bouts of expression filled me with a lot of joy. Speaking Sylheti made me feel more connected to my loved ones, in a way that is different from how it did when I spoke Bangla. It makes me anxious to think one day this language might completely disappear from my life. If that happens, I will lose a certain part of myself, as Sylheti is very much ingrained in my identity and the person that I am.

*Farhat Afzal is a Senior Academic Associate at Bengal Institute. She can be contacted at farhatafzal91@gmail.com*

## OPINION

# Youth, elders, and the weight of tradition

**SADIA SHYRA CHOUDHURY**

Sylhet is a city where the majority of elders are always preaching traditions. Maybe you are familiar with parents boasting about their own childhoods, forever uttering statements like: “I would always listen to my parents when I was your age, but kids these days are disobedient.” Or “We never questioned the choices our parents made for us. They knew what was best for us.” So on, and so forth.

This is where the conflict begins between the traditional minds of Sylheti elders and the modern and ambitious young citizens who foresee vast opportunities ahead of them.

Sylhetis are known for being conservative and traditional, even secluding males from females in the fear of the females turning “bad” or having their “reputation tarnished” because of the opposite gender – which all boils down to lack of freedom and choice of an individual. Embrace tradition. Climb up the social ladder. Respect, pride, honour. That is all one needs to think about. The idea of protecting generational “pride” and “honour” is implanted into most children’s minds.

Where is our individuality? Looking left and right, there are many, many opportunities for us. The modern world provides us with everything we could ever ask for. Why can’t we embrace ourselves and enjoy life then? This conflict between Sylheti parents and children is ongoing and continues to be a tug of war for many. While many want to pursue their dream careers, they have to face the consequences and hurdles of constant black-

mailing, guilt-tripping and emotional manipulation from their strict and conservative parents and elderly.

The hurdles are greater for females when it comes to freedom of choice and what they can do and how they can act, speak, or even move. Parents and elders live in fear that their daughters will not find worthy suitors in the future if they do not act a certain way and accomplish certain things in life. Because of this fear, heavy restrictions are placed upon women. Autonomy and agency is taken away – though, they deny this when confronted because of a lack of broader perspective and their backdated mindset. They don’t know what autonomy and agency is, let alone understand its importance.

This is very problematic for young females with dreams, as they constantly battle their parents and elders to achieve them and become independent individuals rather than depending on a man for the rest of their lives. It’s almost as if they forget that women are human too. Women are treated like accessories for men to this day, and it is a very common scene in Sylheti households and society here in general. Dehumanising women has never been uncommon; the wider world is doing something to change this.

We need to communicate more. Be open minded and open to change. After all, there is no progress without change. And there is no change without cooperation.

*Sadia Shyra Choudhury finished her A Levels in January 2021. Reach her at sshyrachoudhury@gmail.com*



PHOTO: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD