

MISSING BANGLA AWAY FROM HOME

ADHORA AHMED

When I jolted awake from the nightmare, it dawned on me that this year marks the 70th anniversary of Ekushey February.

At the time of writing this article, it has been a few months since I moved abroad for my higher studies. The shift has not only been geographical, but linguistic as well.

Here I am, in a place where I have to speak, read, and write in English most of the time. Furthermore, I am majoring in English Literature. In short, English dominates my life. It always has, but now even more so.

I went to an English medium school. As the common stereotype goes, English medium students are usually weak in Bangla. I take pride in the fact that I can debunk the myth, because my Bangla grades had always been excellent, perhaps thanks to my uncanny habit of reading Bangla newspapers front to back that lasted well into my teens, something that formed rather independently.

And of course, I grew up reading Bangla books alongside English ones, although not as much as I would have liked to. One way or another, English would end up taking precedence, one step ahead of my mother tongue.

In this land far away from home, I have my ways to keep in touch with Bangla. I call my parents at least once every day, twice if we're lucky enough to overcome the significant time difference. And when we can't talk, we text. Using Bangla, of course. I have also met some Bangladeshi students at my university, and I noticed how Bangla made it easier for me to socialise. So, gratefully, not a day goes by that I don't interact in Bangla at all.

This brings me to the recent nightmare. Just when I became confident in my continuing prowess in Bangla, despite English dominating every aspect of my life, the nightmare shattered my smug façade.

In the dream, I was miserably failing my O Level Bangla exam, skipping entire questions and being unable to write down words I knew so well. I gave up and handed in my paper too early. In reality, I had scored an A* in that exam. I know that language is more than just grades, but I never really struggled with my mother tongue.

Then, was this dream an omen that I would soon start to lose my grip? Or is it a reminder of how Bangla is one of the few things these days that feel familiar?

Then, I remember, this year is special for our language. It has been 70 years since we demanded the right to use it everywhere, proudly. But now, the presence of Bangla in my life has become so restricted, only to a few closed circles.

Even though I love what I study and would not have it otherwise, I sometimes wish I could delve deeper into our literary heritage. This reminds me that it has been a while since I held a Bangla book in my hands.

Perhaps this nightmare just made me realise how much I miss my mother tongue.

Adhora Ahmed tries to make her two cats befriend each other, but in vain. Tell her to give up at adhora.ahmed@gmail.com



ILLUSTRATION: MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN



Does speaking a new language give you a new personality?

FARNAZ FAWAD HASAN

How cool would it be if you could morph into a whole new personality in a matter of seconds?

You have probably noticed that when you talk in a foreign language, you sound a little different. Your tone, demeanour, and body language changes as well. Do you know why this happens?

Learning a language is a form of mimicry. We learn our native languages by imitating the speech of those around us. In a sense, we mimic the little nuances and gestures of the people we learn them from. Humans have extraordinarily robust associative memories. How we perceive things, and consequently what we value and how we behave, is influenced by the setting in which we learn and use them.

American Bangladeshi Zara Chowdhury, living in Chicago, expresses her feelings about speaking Bangla, "I never truly practised Bangla until I went to Bangladesh for a visit, despite the fact that I grew up hearing it in my home. I felt self-conscious and restrained, as if I were trying too hard to please."

Shaina Sabria, a student who can speak multiple languages, describes Bangla as "a warm, cosy blanket". She feels safe when she communicates in her first language. While speaking in English makes her feel knowledgeable and confident, French gives her a sense of sophistication, she says.

Every language has distinct syntax and structure. The occurrence of this personality transition is supported by a number of hypotheses. The contentious Sapir-Whorf hypothesis tries to explain why some people's

thoughts in a foreign language are incomprehensible to those who do not speak that language. The Inuit, for example, can think more intelligently about snow because the Inuktitut language contains more intricate and exact terminology for different types of snow.

Language and cultural values are inextricably interwoven as well. A study found that a bilingual person who is also bicultural will make decisions dependent on the circumstances. Cultural frameshifting is the term used to describe this.

When you actively strive to learn a language, you absorb some of the language's cultural norms. The cultural accommodation hypothesis strongly supports this assertion. For example, when you interact in, say, Japanese or Korean, your tone rises, and your behaviour becomes different. Based on who we're speaking to and what they believe in, we instinctively adopt cultural conventions into our speech.

So, does learning a language transform you into a completely different person? Perhaps not. However, it does make you "feel different."

"To have another language is to possess a second soul," said medieval emperor Charlemagne. He was onto something.

References

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Farnaz Fawad Hasan is a disintegrating pool noodle wanting to stay afloat. Reach her at farnazfawadhasan@gmail.com.

The Many Languages We Speak

TAZREEN JAHAN BARI & MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

For Bangladeshi people, February 21 – Ekushey February – is a day of the year when national pride is at an all-time high. People wear black and white, and display their enthusiasm and love for our mother language.

Under the semblance of ethnical homogeneity in Bangladesh, where Bangla is heralded as our national language, it is not always easily realised that the linguistic heritage of our country instead is varied, rich and diverse. Bangladesh is home to not one, but 41 different languages. Ubii Prue Chowdhury, a 26-year-old teacher at the Vola Nath Para Government Primary School and a member of the Marma community, understands this perfectly.

"I speak only Marma, Chakma, and Bangla. I have students from the Tripura community who don't speak Bangla at all, and I don't speak Kokborok (language of Tripura people). I sometimes manage by communicating with them through their friends," she shares.

"When we were younger, schools didn't teach lessons in Marma," she recalls. "We were made to learn Bangla. There were people of different ethnicities in my neighbourhood so I learned Bangla from other children. Therefore, I didn't have a tough time learning Bangla at school. Interestingly, I had more issues learning Marma."

There are currently upwards of 1.5 lakh Marma speakers in Bangladesh, making it one of the major minority languages here. Although a Marma script exists, the language is mostly practised verbally.

"My grandfather can write Marma well, my father can speak well but not write it, I can only speak it," adds Ubii. "We were never encouraged to learn Marma. The reasoning was that you study to get a job and you need Bangla for work. So, why learn Marma?"

Ubii, however, agrees that the situation is changing now, saying, "Nowadays they do teach native languages at school. However, they only teach it in government schools in the towns. Kids who go to smaller or private schools in small communities and neighbourhoods aren't being taught their languages."

Despite there not being sufficient practice of Marma writing, Ubii feels hopeful, "The Marma language is preserved well by our writers. As we have our own alphabet, we can use it to write about our own culture and history. Marma Unnayan Sangsad (MAUS) publishes many books to preserve our history and culture. But only a few people are doing this work."

The Chittagong Hill Tracts boast vibrant linguistic diversity as people from different indigenous communities hold on to their own cultures. However, the linguistic experience differs from one community to another, as, unlike Marma, not every language has its own script.

Bhuboneshwar Tripura is a final year university student in Dhaka. "Our language Kokborok is mostly passed down orally. We don't have any written form.



DESIGN: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

This makes holding on to our language very difficult. Some people write Kokborok using Roman letters and some Indian states do have a written form, but not in Bangladesh," he says.

Growing up surrounded by other Bengali speaking families, Bhuboneshwar mostly acquired Kokborok and Bangla naturally, although not without glitches, "I speak Bangla fluently now. But when I was young, and even now sometimes, I face issues with pronunciation. I used to feel nervous and mispronounce words. Other kids in school would make fun of this."

Being mocked for her language is something Prachi Talukder, 23-year-old university student and a member of the Chakma community, shares experiences of. She says, "I grew up in Rangamati and there were many Bangla-speaking people around me so I kind of naturally learned Bangla. Before I was admitted to school, I was taught to write in Bangla from home."

"Sometimes when I speak in Bangla and I mispronounce or can't remember certain words, I receive negative attention and mean comments from people. It's not every day, but it does happen a lot. These

days we are so used to speaking Bangla that even at home we mix up Bangla and Garo. Sometimes I can't remember certain words in my own language, but I remember them in Bangla. My friend circle mostly consists of Garo people, but we speak in Bangla among ourselves these days," Basil shares.

Apart from the gradual loss of spoken

Garo, the written form of Garo language is also disappearing slowly. As Basil recounts, "We do not practice writing it at home or in the community. Even in villages, education is mostly given in Bangla; kids are not encouraged to learn writing in Garo. The Garo alphabet is mostly lost. Recently, the government has taken initiative to help primary students learn their mother tongue first. But for Garo children, they are mostly learning in Bangla."

The list of languages includes Khyang, Mru, Tanchangya, the ones spoken in the north west such as Santali and Kurukh, and those spoken in Sylhet region like Mon-khem. But there are speakers of other languages much closer to Dhaka.

Nahid Hassan, online entrepreneur and mother of two, recounts how language is a very important part of her family history. "Born in Pakistan, I came to Bangladesh in 1986 at the age of 9 or 10. I still speak to my parents in Urdu. Two of my sisters still live in Pakistan," she shares.

Nahid's journey learning Bangla while growing up largely revolved around her own choice, "It was very difficult for me to learn Bangla. My parents never forced us to learn anything. My chhoto chachi used to teach children so I saw her Adorsho Lipi (Bangla alphabet book) and was fascinated. There began my journey of learning Bangla."

But Nahid's connection to Bangla is more personal than that. "My father is Dhakaiya so I realised early on that Bangla is my father's language. My mother, however, is from Mumbai; she's a Memon."

For Md. Anisur Rahman, AutoCAD Designer at Integrated Design, learning Bangla was a natural process too. "When I first started working back in the 1990s, I was the only non-Bangla speaker in my office," he recalls.

"My father was a Sufi-like person who was obsessed with Urdu poets," Anisur says. "He used to speak Urdu. At home, I still speak in Urdu. However, after so many years, Bangla has become more prominent in my day-to-day life. I cannot write in Urdu, though. So, I generally just use it informally at home."

"As I grew up in Bangladesh, I have naturally picked up Bangla together with Urdu. I never felt any shame about it. In fact, I was always proud of knowing two languages where most people knew just one," Anis shares.

Celebrating International Mother Language Day, as a Bangladeshi, comes with recognising the cultural diversity within our own society. The stories of people from across our land reminds us of the many different languages Bangladeshi people call their own.

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Tazreen is a part time English major and full-time feminist attempting to be the 21st-century reincarnation of Judith Shakespeare. Reach her at tazreenzahan@gmail.com.

Mritti is a Sub-editor at SHOUT. Find her at mrittiakan@gmail.com