

OPINION

RAKHINE, BANGLA, AND ENGLISH: Freedom in three languages

The Burmese language, to me, has a strange connection with the smell of coriander and delicate rice noodles soaked in fish broth.

KRISHITI AUNG LEONA

Growing up in a bicultural household, I was exposed to two languages, two cultures, as a child. I picked up both the languages as my mother tongue—Bangla and Rakhine. Eventually, a third language, English, penetrated my little bubble when I enrolled in school. It soon took over the other two tongues and became the language in which I read my first book, made my first friend at school. It is through the amalgamation of these three languages that my world is shaped.

The Rakhine language is a dialect of

in fish broth, and with the street cart which sold my favourite Burmese dessert: fluffy parathas with condensed milk spread. In this language, I can hear my cousins' excited shrieks as they jump into the chlorine waters of Sukhenta Park near Thaketa Township.

Despite this sense of comfort, I feel more connected to English because of my love for books. As a teenager, every month, I hauled stacks of secondhand books from Nilkhet. I was a lonely child and grew up to become a lonely teenager. I was never very attached to my peers. Consequently, books were all the company I had. They were my playmates as a child and the closest confidantes as a

newfound identity as a child writer but after that, I submitted several short stories to a few Bangla magazines. Since then I became a voracious reader and collector of Manik Bandhopadhyay's books; his works have retained my love for the Bangla language.

When we graduated to Class Five, meanwhile, we had a new compulsory subject along with other regular courses: French. I pursued it only for academic purposes; I could not keep up my practise of the language and subconsciously bid adieu to it. But deep within my heart, I am determined to pick up French lessons again.

Language is one of the most powerful tools we can employ to emancipate the most marginalised in our societies. Can you think of a world where everyone could interpret religious texts? Exploitation disguised under religion could become a thing of the past. When Martin Luther had translated the Bible into the German language in 1534, which was the language the masses spoke, it had become a revolutionary act—the translation not only helped shape ideas for The Reformation but also had a ground-breaking impact on the lives of common people. It was so radical that it had shattered the absolute powers of the authorities who were once believed to be unconquerable. Such events prove how language empowers one by breaking barriers and ending years of oppression. The goal isn't just to pursue a tongue, but to communicate, and disseminate information and ideas.

I belong to the Rakhine community, and with frequent visits to our ethnic settlements in Kuakata, I realise every day how important it is for the people of our community to get a good grip of the Bangla language. As much as I believe it is fundamental that we should preserve and have the agency to exercise our ethnic languages, we must also be willing to excel in the language in which official work is done. If we do not, people from our ethnic and marginalised communities will continue to substantially lag in many sectors.

This idea was originally propagated by Dr BR Ambedkar when he chose to write *The Annihilation of Caste in English*, and not in the language of the Dalit communities. Dr Ambedkar had an incredible reason for it. He mentioned, if the upper-class people in the Indian subcontinent contained the words of his book, the debate that the text had spurred would not have reached global leaders. Its impact would not have been this great if it was limited to a local tongue.

Furthering this idea, many Dalit activists today have set up projects which teach marginalised people English. In one of her latest collections of essays titled *Azadi*, Indian author, and social activist Arundhati Roy explains how she was frequently treated in a hostile manner for choosing not to write in one of the Indian languages. She reveals how she has been bombarded with questions and blamed for propagating anti-national sentiments for writing in English. Citing a Dalit activist, Roy writes that the English language is used as a tool "to rise up the ladder and become free forever".

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▲ COLLAGE: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

the Burmese language. I first boarded a Yangon-bound flight from Dhaka in 1999 at the age of three with my mother to visit her family, who had migrated there in the late 1980s. The very first Burmese I heard was at a Sunday Bazar with my Mingree (maternal uncle). So, for me, Burmese is reminiscent of the long-lost summer vacations of my childhood. It reminds me of my Doh-Doh (Grandma) and the story she told me of the witch who turned a prince into a wax statue, and how a warrior princess saved him from melting under the sun. This language, to me, has a strange connection with the smell of coriander and delicate rice noodles soaked

troubled teenager, and through that, books sealed my bond with the language.

Although my mother is not Bengali, Bangla holds a very special place in her heart. She is an avid listener and ardent singer of Rabindra Sangeet; the one who always persuades me to brush up on my Bangla and who ensured my eloquence in it by reading stories of Tagore and Sharat Chandra to me as a child. When I was 15 years old, I participated in a national writing contest. The contestants had to submit a poem or a short story in Bangla on the Liberation War. To my sheer disbelief, I had won that contest! It took me a while to sink into my

FEATURE

Books to read on the Bangla language movement



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Countless stories, poems, essays, and novels have been written about the Bangla language movement of 1952. Biographies of martyrs have been authored.

Zahir Raihan, who took an active part in the language movement, details these experiences in his extraordinary work, *Ekushey February* (Anupam Prokashoni, 1970).

Notable author Bashir Al Helal published a book on the movement set against a large canvas, titled *Bhasha Andolonor Itihas* (Agamee Prokashoni), with the third edition having come out in 2016. In his book, Al Helal traces back to events before the movement and gives a detailed account of what happened throughout the month of February in 1952. Such an elaborate discussion has found a place in few books since.

Ahmad Rafiq, one of the students who had spearheaded the language movement, wrote several books on the topic: *Ekusher Muhurtogolo* (Prothoma Prokashon, 2017), *Teknaf Theke Tetulia* (Prothoma Prokashon, 2019), and *Rashtra Bhasha Andolon Onushonggo O Itihas* (Anindya Prokashon, 2017), among others.

Rafiq, through his work, emphasises that the language movement was not confined to the capital. Just as the students erupted in protests in Dhaka city, so did parts of Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Bogra, and other parts of the country—movement for the demand of Bangla to be instated as state language, the activists who led the protests outside Dhaka, and other previously unknown facts come up in Rafiq's book.

While Rafiq's *Bhasha Andolonor Golpo Shono* seeks to draw children into reading about the movement, his *Bhasha Andolon Itihas O Tatporjo*, co-authored with Abdul Matin, offers insightful reading for adults. Edited by Matiur Rahman, *Ekusher Potobhumi*, *Ekusher Smriti* (Prothoma, 2012) is another discerning read.

From the Bangla Academy have arrived books such as *Shongrami Abdul Matin* written by Mohammad Ali. Professor Anisuzzaman has written on *Prothom Shahid Minar O Piyaru Shordar*. Aminur Rahman Sultan has written about the language activist in *Shongrami Gaziul Haque*.

Despite this scattering of titles, there seems to be a dearth of books on the language movement—especially when one considers the innumerable research material available on the 1971 Liberation War.

Fiction writer Imdadul Haque Milon believes the onus falls on writers: "The reason for this scarcity is that writers do not want to put in the hard work. For this, vast research is needed".

"The books that currently exist are not adequate", author Selina Hossain, who has written both fiction and nonfiction on the topic, points out.

Farid Ahmed, publisher of Samay Prokashon, points out that the language movement took place 70 years ago. "Ten books from Samay have been published on the event", he shares, echoing that the research for such a topic takes considerably more effort and source material.

Shah Alam Shazu is a writer and journalist.

READERS REPORTS

Only one thing missing from the Boi Mela

ILHAMUL AZAM

As the Ekushey Boi Mela comes and goes, I feel a certain dread of losing creatively admired people who are anticipated in our cultural celebration of intellectualism. This time the anxiety amplified for my unforgivably late blankness for not having Humayun Ahmed ever. On July 19 of 2012, I was too naive to comprehend the tears of my mother that were shed in front of the TV. This year, when I stepped inside the entry gate, my consciousness was engrossed in looking for the creator whose hair would've faded if he lived today—I knew that he was not going to be there but I just couldn't give in to reality. I still wanted to feel his books pressed hard—as if they would fall—against my bony hands. I searched, looking to greet some book of his that I hadn't read, to exempt myself from the painful emotion of losing "sir" for a while through reading. I looked for newly published books of young



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

writers, wishing I would come across something resembling his genius when Humayun Ahmed was a juvenile. I spun around to the gentle chaos, I saw readers, I saw writers, I saw children snatching books from parents; I couldn't help an instant of involuntary grin. I prayed to god that this tradition remains as the name suggests—Amar Ekushey Boi Mela!

To have your Boi Mela experience featured on *The Daily Star*, send us an email and your name to thedailystarbooks@gmail.com.

THE BOOK REPORT

Unique stall decor at the Ekushey Boi Mela

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Every year, in February, Dhaka's Suhrawardy Uddyan is dotted with colourful pavilions and stalls inviting readers from across the nation. Publishers come up with unique and creative ideas to adorn their spaces, in an attempt to make themselves stand out in the crowd. While some of them depend on traditional motifs and logos, others use the pictures of prominent authors and new books that they are publishing.

This year, while strolling across the Ekushey Boi Mela, I came across a variety of styles in stall decor. Despite the delay in inauguration, publishers have put in a lot of effort in designing their spaces, bringing together a fascinating display for visitors. Many pointed out that it was disheartening that the fair would be ending so soon, but, the silver lining to it was the considerable turnout despite the short duration.

Anya Prakash's pavilion featuring Humayun Ahmed is almost impossible to miss. Located right next to the lake, the pavilion is modelled after a one-storey building, with a life size cutout of the eminent author looking over the rooftop. From a distance, it looks like Ahmed is actually present at the fair, smiling at his readers and cherishing the festive atmosphere of the Boi Mela.

Another stall that grabbed my attention was Kureghar's rural setup. Living up to its name, the publishing house presents an overall aesthetic charm, with an earthy colour scheme. The graphics of manuscripts add a touch of old

world charm, and ropes wrapped around the pillars complement the theme.

Mizan Publishers, on the other hand, continues its legacy of recreating the Curzon Hall. Their pavilion imitates the British-era architectural marvel and serves as a source of attraction amidst the busy fair. Through their work, this publication house intends to promote Bangla heritage and culture.

Considering the main essence of Amar Ekushey Boi Mela and International Mother Language Day, Gourab Prokashoni has designed its stall centering the language movement. They used Bangla alphabets and



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

characters to represent the very movement celebrated by the fair—with letters dangling from the roof of the stall and printed across the banner.

Shobdoshoili's stall, displaying achromatic colours, ribbons, and other decorations, explores the various elements of a book. The black and white colour palette symbolises the relationship between ink and paper. In an

age where we are slowly drifting away from physical books and switching to digital media, Shobdoshoili wants to revive the practice of writing and producing quality content.

Bhashachitro, on the other hand, has used recycled materials to decorate their stall. Old manuscripts of published books and their colourful cover art create a unique collage on their walls. In order to captivate readers, the publishers came up with the idea of a selfie corner featuring the discarded book covers. It provides a space for readers to interact with authors, get their autographs, and take pictures with them.

Following the idea of in-house pavilions from Kolkata's Boi Mela, Shrabon Prokashoni decided to create an inclusive corner for readers of all age groups. Visitors can walk inside their cart, browse through new releases, and sit and talk with authors.

My personal favourite from the lot is Nabanna Prokashoni's culturally rich stall. From the bamboo walls to jute mats, it offers an ideal representation of Bengali culture featuring colourful earthenware pots, paper decorations, kula, chalani, and other bamboo handicrafts. Everything from this stall reminded me of a typical village fair with simple ornamentations, much like the initial days of Boi Mela, when stalls were not as sophisticated and publishers did not have much resources to adorn their displays.

Maisha Islam Monamee likes reading, scribbling, and blogging. Suggest her new ideas and follow @monameereads on Instagram.