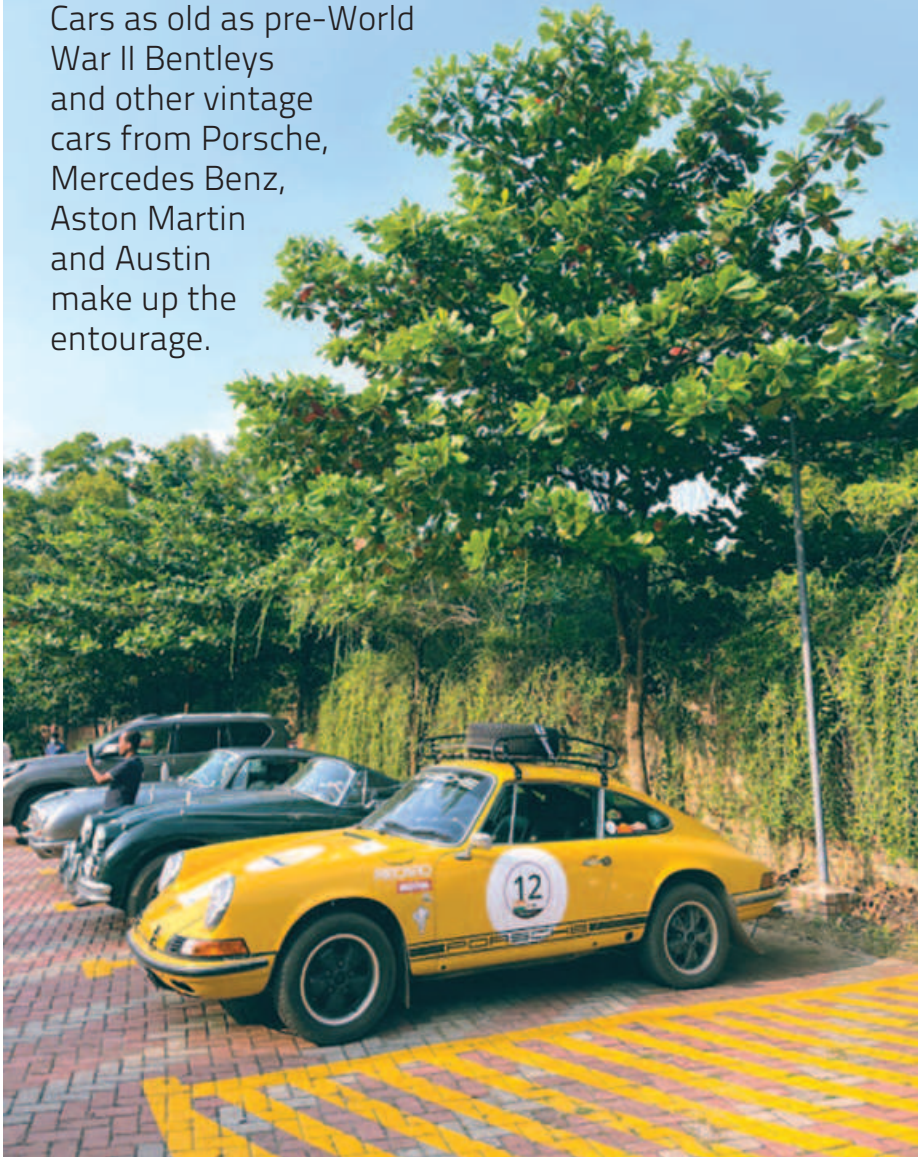




# SMELLS LIKE TEA, SPICES, MOUNTAINS, AND PETROL

ARFIN KAZI

Destination Rally, a collective vintage car rally group originating in Belgium, with members from all over Europe came to visit Bangladesh as a part of their East Himalaya Rally, which started from Kolkata in India and covered Nepal and Bhutan. Cars as old as pre-World War II Bentleys and other vintage cars from Porsche, Mercedes Benz, Aston Martin and Austin make up the entourage.



As a part of their route, the team entered Bangladesh through the Sylhet border and made their way through Moulvibazar to Rajendrapur, where we could catch them and ask about their experience so far in the country as well as a little bit about the group's origin story.

**Origin story**  
Destination Rally is a Belgian collective group, managed by Bruno Leunen, who is also the rally director. Being an avid traveller and car enthusiast, it was Bruno



Leunen's passion for driving which drove the project: arranging Rally with classic cars in exotic locations with guaranteed scenic routes. Apart from that, the team has amenable mechanics with a parts car on deck, a trailer, also including an ambulance for any sort of medical emergency in any location.

**East Himalaya Rally Bangladesh route**  
Originally, the plan was to go through Myanmar first and then enter Bangladesh, but due to the situation still being unstable in the country, they chose to enter directly into Bangladesh. The management team of the rally tends to visit the countries beforehand to choose the routes that the rally is going to use. When it came to driving in Bangladesh, the rally team tried to avoid main highways because of the traffic conditions, instead, they used local public bypasses to get the cars around to their destinations. So far, they have explored Sylhet,



Moulvibazar, and Rajendrapur, and they will move to Pabna and then Jessore, and then successfully back to Kolkata, where the rally is said to end.

Coming from the Destination Rally team, their overall experience was good in Bangladesh, the roads were comparatively good compared to other terrains they had driven before although, upon entering the country, a Porsche 911 broke down, and people have been hospitable, welcoming and friendly and the Bangladeshi food was appreciated.

**The cars**  
There were 18 cars in total registered for the rally, mostly European classics, starting from Porsche 911Es, to an Aston Martin DB6. A few Mercedes Benzes were the oldest, dating back to 1950. A couple of SL convertibles and W123s, an Austin Healey, pre-World War II Lagonda and Bentley, a Jaguar E Type, two BMW 800cc motorbikes and a Toyota Hilux were there and have been the Destination Rally saviour since day one.

**Future rallies**  
The Destination Rally team wants to return to Bangladesh in 2025. But before that, the team has planned to go to Sri Lanka in January 2023; a few cars will start heading to the country after the immediate end of the rally, in Kolkata. The team always hopes to expand the entourage and include more classic cars in their rallies and is always looking out for new challenges and scenic routes.

Photos: *Itmam Bashir*

# MEET THE BENGALI AI

SHAMS RASHID TONMOY

Nowadays, while we tend to use Google Translate to quickly turn everyday English into Bengali and call it a day, the accuracy of the translation might be far from perfect. Native speakers tend to find notable flaws in AI-generated translations, and many would even claim that AI lacks the fluency and touch of conversational language, especially Bengali - a language filled with many different regional dialects that are quite different from the more standardised written form that we are used to.

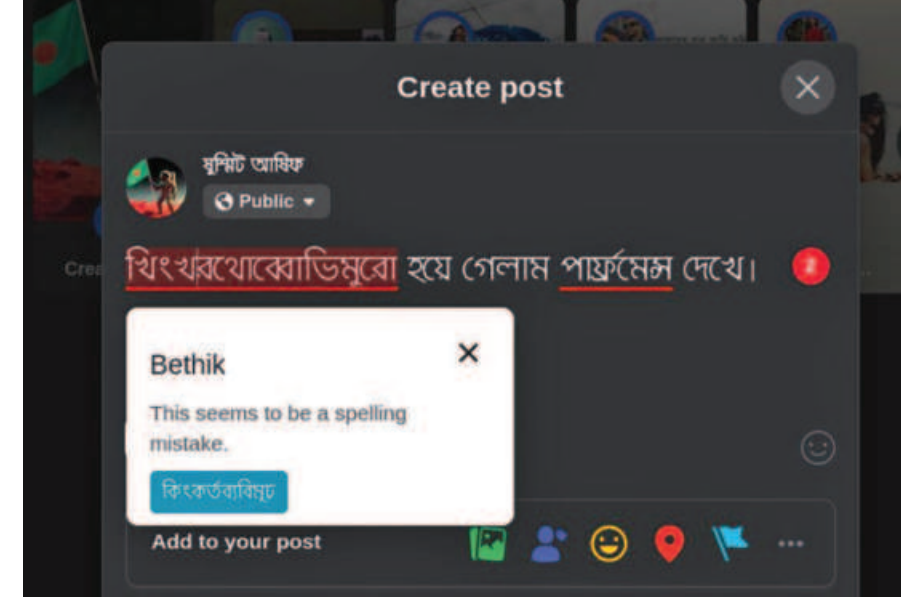
So, is it simply not possible to teach AI conversational, everyday Bengali in spoken and written form? While we may not have reached a definitive answer to that question yet, there is a certain language project going on that tackles this exact conundrum.

**The Bengali speech recognition campaign**  
Founded in December 2017 by a group of BUET, KUET and BRACU graduates, Bengali.AI is a voluntary research initiative that aims to democratise AI research in Bengali by teaching AI the Bengali we use every day. By looking into how computers read, speak and understand language, this non-profit initiative creates large-scale machine learning datasets to teach AI the complex yet beautiful Bengali language. Their datasets, collected from various Bengali-speaking demographics, are made available to researchers for free to help train artificially intelligent systems.

Bengali.AI's currently ongoing project on Bengali speech recognition has produced the largest publicly available Bengali speech corpus. As diversity is a key part of building a conversational Bengali dataset, Bengali.AI is aiming to collect voice data from as many people as possible. Right now, they are running a special campaign on social media called 'Bok bok', where Bengali speakers from



**The logo of Bengali.AI, according to co-founder Imtiaz Prio, represents how AI visualises Bengali patterns. The intricate contours present in the image are templates that computer vision systems use to parse complex images as sets of ones and zeros.**



anywhere in the world can contribute their "voice data" for the public domain research dataset.

**How to participate in 'Bok bok'**  
To contribute, simply login to the contribution platform and start reading the sentences that appear on the screen, loudly and clearly. As a token

of your contribution to this constant development of the Bengali database, Bengali.AI awards an honorarium to anyone who contributes. If you want to participate, simply follow the procedures in this link: <https://commonvoice.mozilla.org/bn/speak>

According to the Coordinator of Bengali.AI, Asif Sushmit, since February 21, 2022, the Bengali speech recognition campaign has gathered around 2,000 hours of data from over 22,000 people - the standard benchmark for training industry-grade speech recognition models. They aim to achieve a higher landmark of 10,000 hours to include more nuances and diversities of the language so that researchers can train their own AI better. Bengali.AI plans to use this voice data to fine-tune the conversational aspect of the language AI and build a publicly available automated speech recognition system. In theory, this AI will be able to understand conversational Bengali similar to Alexa and Siri, with the added benefit of being tweaked by anyone, anytime, free of cost.

**Other projects**  
Bengali.AI's journey began in 2018 with NumtaDB, a dataset containing over 85,000 images of hand-written Bengali digits. The dataset was compiled to build

Bengali digit recognition algorithms that are free of geographical, gender and age-based biases. In 2020, the Bengali.AI team published the first-ever dataset of over 500,000 handwritten Bengali graphemes, and launched an international Kaggle competition in collaboration with Google. This competition had over 2,000 teams from all over the world, regardless of their native tongue. These teams consisted of some of the biggest names in AI like NVIDIA and H2O.AI - all joining forces to solve optical character recognition for Bengali.

By 2021, Bengali.AI launched many side projects, all catered towards the advancement of machine learning and natural language processing of the language. Some of these publicly available projects include: a Bengali dictionary that can automatically analyse speech annotation, a transcriber aimed towards transliterated or "Murad Takla" Bengali text, and Bethik - the opensource Bengali spell checker that can spot and fix high-degree Bengali typing errors. Made by a team of 40 students from SUST and BRACU, as well as voluntary researchers from many different fields, Bethik will be made publicly available within the next month.

Currently, Bengali.AI is a community of over 6,000 international researchers who are all working towards achieving what many deem impossible: democratising Bengali language-related technology. By making everything open source, publicly accessible and 'rectifiable' - an important part of the recipe, the lack of which has led to the downfall of similar projects in the past - Bengali.AI wishes to help make technology accessible to anyone 'Bengali'. With their ever-expanding database of Bengali derived from thousands of native speakers, we may be on the path towards an AI we can speak everyday Bengali with.

