What does Bengali really mean to us?



Dr Shishir Bhattacharja is professor at the Institute of Dhaka University

SHISHIR BHATTACHARJA

What does the word "Bengali" mean? It means either i) the sum total of all the dialects spoken in the Bengali-speaking areas, including Bangladesh, West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura – an umbrella term for all these dialects; or ii) the Standard Dialect of Bengali (hereinafter SDB), a language of the Indo-European family used in the areas mentioned above.

I am a so-called native speaker of Chittagonian, the easternmost dialect of Bengali, and I learnt SDB at school. Most Bengalis, like me, competently speak dialects like Sylheti, Dhakaiya, etc, and usually speak SDB with a local accent. Bengali or Chittagonian - which dialect is my mother tongue? What is the difference between a dialect and a language? Such popular questions or issues need to be handled in politics, not in linguistics. It is said that a dialect that is supported by an army becomes a language, and a dialect that lacks such an army remains a dialect forever.

Ideas like "mother tongue" and "native speaker" have long been proven to be myths (like ether in physics). One is either a learner or a speaker of a dialect, and no two speakers excel equally in the dialect they speak. Some speakers, usually writers, excel more than others in using their language(s).

Bangladesh, a former British colony, inherited English as its official language. English nowadays is the most widely used lingua

emphasis on learning this language. Unfortunately, neither during the Pakistani era nor since the independence of Bangladesh have the authorities been able to decide upon the status of Bengali and English in this country. As a result, Bangladesh does not have a language policy yet.

As Bengali is spoken and understood by all the citizens of Bangladesh, using Bengali as the one and only vehicle of communication in administration, courts or business would be optimal. If we want to attain a hundred percent literacy rate,

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, verdicts given in Bengali are still rare. Private universities claim with much pride that their medium of instruction is English. Even Dhaka University, which is known for having led the Language Movement in the 1950s,

taught and learnt as a language like to learning English in Bangladesh.



ILLUSTRATION: NAFIA JAHAN MONNI

prefers English as its medium of instruction and communication.

Nowadays, Bengali is outrun by English in every sphere of life. Even invitation cards for birthdays or marriage ceremonies are written in English, Signboards and billboards are overflooded with English jargon. We often see people in the media who can hardly utter a sentence without encrusting English words onto it. Government institutions (e.g. BGB or Teletalk) and regional cricket teams are all named in English. All these indices point to the fact that Bengali is not the de facto official language of Bangladesh, although it is the de jure one.

The ultimate goal of the Language Movement (1947-1952) was to compel the authorities to that their medium of instruction recognise Bengali, the mother tongue of the majority, as one of

language of Pakistan, Bengalis would lag behind in competition with other nations, and this would hinder them in the long run in their sustainable development. International Mother Language Day is definitely a misnomer for February 21, because the then Pakistani authorities did not deny our right to speak our so-called

was exclusively economic. Had

any language other than Bengali become the de facto official

mother language. What they did, in fact, and what nation-states often try to do is not recognise a particular mother tongue as one of the official languages of the state. Although language veterans including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman knew exactly what they were fighting for, we, the beneficiaries of their toil, out of a little bit of whim and a lot of showoffs, have completely forgotten the true significance of February 21.

Quebec, the French-speaking province of Canada, has been suffering from linguistic discrimination for decades. It adopted a language law in the 1970s, known as Law 101, by dint of which an autonomous Language Commission, answerable exclusively to the governor-general, was established. The language commissioner, with its language offices situated in different cities of the province, minutely protected the interest of the French language in the educational, legal, administrative, and business sector, and as a consequence, French soon became the de facto official language of Canada along with English.

As with most issues in Bangladesh, the question of language has never been handled with enough care and wisdom. Each year, during the month of February, a considerable amount of crocodile tears is shed for the Bengali language. But since the very first day of March, washing its hands (like Pontius Pilate after pronouncing the death sentence to Jesus), our beloved

prefers English as its medium of instruction and communication.

using Bengali as the only medium of instruction at the primary and secondary levels is commendable.

Rather than using English as the medium of instruction, it can be

be taught at primary and secondary levels for two reasons: i) English is the means of communication with the outside world, and ii) English may be needed in higher education, because it is one of the lingua academica of our time.

Ethnic minority children should receive part of their primary education in their respective languages. As citizens of Bangladesh, a predominantly Bengali-speaking nation-state, they have to learn Bengali and obviously English. Subjects like literature and history may be taught in native languages, whereas subjects like maths and science can be taught in Bengali or in

We may teach English in schools, but we cannot expect Bangladesh to ever become an English-speaking nation. There are natural constraints in fact, they teach English with an accented Bengali. Despite receiving comparatively more inputs from the SDB, very few can speak this dialect with a proper accent. If the authorities dream of making English the medium of instruction, the project will be dumped. What is meant by an official language? It's the dialect used as

up in this country hardly receive

any input in English. English

teachers at school or college do

not usually speak proper English;

the medium of communication at the court, in the administration, in media, in educational institutions as well as in commerce. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, verdicts given in Bengali are still rare. Private universities claim with much pride is English. Even Dhaka University,

which is known for having led the the official languages of Pakistan. nation marches in a completely franca, and, therefore, we must put French or Chinese. English needs to Children who are born and brought Language Movement in the 1950s, The reason behind the movement opposite direction.

The most rudimentary question is this: if the authorities of a university, instead of taking actions against the officers. One such committee misdeeds of the ruling party's student After a writ was filed on February has already recorded Phulpori's wing, lean on their side, would probe committees bring true results? How likely is it that the truth will When will BCL's torture of common

Did the IU authorities take BCL assaulters' side?



The Daily Star Bangla.

GOLAM MORTOZA

The Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) has added a new dimension to the ritual of torturing common students. The latest episode happened at the Islamic University (IU) in Kushtia last week: a non-resident student was beaten up overnight by a group of students led by two BCL leaders. But what's curious is the aftermath of the incident - specifically, the role that the vice-chancellor, proctor and the hall provost played. Firstly, it seems they have unofficially given the control of the university residential halls over to the BCL. Secondly, what are the authorities - namely, the VC, proctor and the hall provost - supposed to do following such an incident? Do they try to find out the

What was the IU authorities' stance before and after the news of

the torture incident broke out? Let's revisit the incident in brief. On February 12, at around 11 pm, Phulpori, a non-resident female student of the university, was allegedly summoned to the common room of Deshratna Sheikh Hasina Residential Hall by Sanjida Chowdhury, vice-president of the BCL IU unit, and Tabassum Islam, an activist of the same unit. There,

they tortured her till 3:30 am. In her written complaint, Phulpori alleged that at one point, she was forcibly disrobed and videotaped. "They threatened to spread the video if I told anyone about this incident," she said in her complaint. "While beating me, they [Sanjida and Tabassum] said not to hit me in the face so that there is no visible trace of the torture."

On February 15, I spoke with the IU VC, proctor and the hall provost on the phone about this incident.

The proctor said, "I received two complaints. The alleged victim and Sanjida Chowdhury filed a complaint each."

"So one of the alleged torturers also filed a complaint?"

'Yes, she also filed a written complaint," the proctor confirmed. "What did Sanjida write in the

complaint?" "She clarified her position and sought security. She also refuted the

allegation of torture against her."

This means it is not a complaint; rather, Sanjida has defended herself. "I forwarded both the complaints

actions." the proctor told me. "Three days have passed since the alleged torture. Could nothing be done during this time?"

to the VC's office seeking necessary

The proctor said, "We learnt about the incident late on February 14. We formed a probe committee on February 15. The committee will submit their report in seven days, and actions will be taken based on that report."

So the proctor came to know about the incident two days later. What was the hall provost, Dr Shamsul Haque, doing during that time?

When I asked, the provost said, "On February 12, at around 2:30 pm, a group of 30-35 students came

> The most rudimentary question is this: if the authorities of a university, instead of taking actions against the misdeeds of the ruling party's student wing, lean on their side, would probe committees bring true results? When will BCL's torture of common students stop?

to me with a non-resident student [Phulpori]. She seemed to be in tears. They said Phulpori's elder sister, who was a student at Dhaka University, had threatened them through her friend, over phone."

"So, all of the 30-35 students complained?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Were Sanjida and Tabassum among them?"

new, non-resident student got her elder sister to threaten BCL leaders here from Dhaka?"

"They claim so. In any case, I don't

that she be removed from the dorm. I told her to leave the hall and stay somewhere else. But after an hour, 30-35 students returned to my office with her, complaining that she had gotten her sister's friend to threaten

puller. Where could she go? I gave her a few days to rectify the issue. I also convinced the complaining students to give her time. We settled the issue.

"On February 13 morning, I came to know that the student had left the hall. I also learnt that she had been tortured the previous night. But I did not receive any complaint about

"But didn't Phulpori file a written complaint?"

"Not on the 13th. There were media reports that Sanjida and a few others tortured Phulpori from late February 13 night till early hours of February 14. Students of Deshratna Sheikh Hasina hall brought out a procession late at night and went to the VC residence. Members of the proctorial body arrived. I also went there. They demanded that the reports that were printed in the newspapers be withdrawn. The VC assured them over phone and sent them back."

"So, you didn't get a written complaint from Phulpori?"

"She submitted a written complaint at the hall at around 12 pm on February 14. Based on that complaint formed a probe committee. We will know everything when they submit a report within seven working days."

Then I spoke with IU VC Prof Shaikh Abdus Salam why no action was taken in the three days following the incident.

He said, "Nothing can be done until the probe committee submits their report. We need to know the truth."

These statements from the IU VC, proctor and hall provost are highly significant. They shed light on how and why student torture and persecution are taking place in our universities. It is also evident that the university administrations usually take the attackers' side.

Note that the torture of a newly admitted student coming from a poor family started on February 12 afternoon. The provost said he "Do you find it believable that a informed the proctorial body about this on February 13 afternoon, whereas the proctor claimed that he came to know about it on February 14 day's end. This anomaly in their know how Phulpori even moved into statements is noticeable. Also, the

the hall. The students demanded provost subtly placed the blame on well. The High Court also ordered to much can be hoped for.

knowing the BCL leaders' influence. 16, the High Court's directives finally moved things along: the provost

the victim student, saying her sister form a probe committee comprising had threatened Sanjida et al, who had a judicial magistrate, university control of the hall in question, fully teachers and administrative cadre

"Then I informed the proctor. ordered BCL leaders Sanjida and be revealed? We can't comment students stop? Two members of the proctorial body Tabassum to leave the hall. Later before the investigation is over. on, the duo were suspended from However, given our past experiences that Phulpori's father was a van the ruling party student wing as with such probe committees, not Ishtiaque Khan.



Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Bangladesh Police Police Headquarters, Dhaka www.police.gov.bd

International Tender Notice

Date: 20/02/2023

Memo No. 44.01.0000.024.02.011.2022.216 Sealed tenders are hereby invited from the Breeders/Principals/Suppliers/Local Agents in their official pad for supplying of Dogs as required by Bangladesh Police in fiscal year 2022-2023. Ministry/Division Ministry of Home Affairs. Police Headquarters, Dhaka Agency Inspector General, Bangladesh Police. Head of procuring entity Invitation for Purchasing of Dog. 44.01.0000.024.02.011.2022/01(2022-23) Invitation Ref. No 20 February 2023 **KEY INFORMATION** One stage two envelop Procurement method FUNDING INFORMATION Budget and source of fund GOB Revenue. PARTICULAR INFORMATION 21 February 2023 Tender publication date Last selling date 05 April 2023. Closing date and time 06 April 2023 at 12.00hrs 06 April 2023 at 12.30hrs. Opening date and time Name & address of the office Addl. DIG (Transport), 3rd Floor, NCCOM Centre, Police Headquarters, Phoenix Road, Fulbaria, Dhaka-1000. 3rd Floor, NCCOM Centre, Police Headquarters, Dhaka-1000 Place of selling/receiving/opening tender document Date and time of pre-tender meeting (optional) 07/03/2023 at 15.00pm, Office Room, Addl. DIG (Transport), 3rd Floor, NCCOM Centre, PHQ, Dhaka. INFORMATION FOR TENDERER

Eligibility of tenderer

(i) Up-to-date trade license (ii) Up-to-date income tax certificate (iii) VAT registration certificate (iv) Other requirements described in the Standard Tender Document (PG-4).

Brief description of goods Identification of item Tender security amount in BDT or equivalent Price of tender document (BDT) 5,00,000.00 PROCURING ENTITY DETAILS

Sarwar Murshed Shamim, BPM. Name of official inviting tender Addl. DIG (Transport), 3rd Floor, NCCOM Centre, Police Headquarters, Dhaka-Designation and address of the official inviting tenderer Phone: +88 02 223384779, E-mail: addldigtrans@police.gov.bd Contact details of official inviting tender

Special instruction No tender will be received after the deadline of submission

The procurement process will be performed according to the Public Procurement Act-2006 & PPR-2008

The procuring entity reserves the right to reject all/any tenders or annul the tender proceeding without causing any reason. The procuring entity also reserves the right to increase or decrease the quantity of tender items. The bidders must abide by the decision of the HOPE

Sarwar Murshed Shamim, BPM BP 7401020793 Addl. DIG (Transport)

Bangladesh Police For Inspector General, Bangladesh Police Police Headquarters, Dhaka

Phone: +88 02 223384779

Completion time

180 days