

The Daily Star

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Don't let these mother tongues die out

Govt must take steps to preserve near-extinct languages

Every February 21, we pay our respects to the language martyrs who had made the ultimate sacrifice so that, 71 years later, speakers of Bangla could use their mother tongue freely in all spheres of life. However, this day also brings to our attention the thousands of languages around the world whose existence is under constant threat. And we fear for the status of the languages which are dying out in Bangladesh itself, with next to no efforts being expended to preserve them. The number of living languages in the country currently stands at 42. Of these, 36 languages are spoken by Indigenous peoples.

According to a linguistic survey conducted by the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), there are 14 languages in the country which are considered to be endangered. Of these, for instance, only two speakers of the Kharia language exist anymore. Neither of them has been able to convince their younger kin to practise the language, nor can they themselves write in it. With the passing of these two Kharia speakers – sisters over the age of 70 who reside in Sreemangal upazila of Sylhet's Moulvibazar district – the language and the culture associated with it will all but die, too. And this is the unfortunate fate facing several other Indigenous languages, including Kondo, Koda, Soura, Mundari, Kole, Malto, Khumi, Pangkhua, Rengmitcha, Chak, Khyang, Lusai, and Laleng (Patro). And even the more widely spoken ethnic languages, such as Sadri in the northern flatlands, are becoming more and more diluted with Bangla.

It is an understandable but unfortunate tragedy that the youth of many Indigenous communities themselves do not feel keen on using their own languages, with Bangla being the dominant language in all arenas. Couple that with the relevant government authorities' own lack of efforts, and it is no wonder that these languages are on their way out of existence. We must ask, what has the IMLI been doing to ensure that the country's Indigenous and ethnic languages can be promoted and preserved? The aforementioned linguistic survey has been its only notable achievement since its establishment in 2010. But even that is supposedly coming out in volumes, with the first and only one being published way back in 2019. The government's initiative to print textbooks in Indigenous languages (till a limited number of classes) also falls short as it has failed to ensure that there are teachers appointed in schools who are properly trained and can actually conduct lessons in these languages, too.

The UN has declared the period between 2022 to 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. We hope that our language authorities will heed this initiative and not only take active steps to preserve the dying Indigenous languages of the country, but also fulfil some of their earlier promises in this regard as well as the demands of Indigenous and ethnic communities themselves. We cannot just sit back and watch the demise of so many rich languages and the cultures attached to them. Lest we forget, the state is constitutionally mandated to "take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities."

Can all Phulporis be saved?

BCL's reign of terror at public universities must stop

The recent incident of brutal torture inflicted on Phulpori, a first year student of Islamic University in Kushtia, by two leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and their cohorts at a residential hall of the university has once again exposed the terror tactics that BCL leaders and activists generally use to establish their supremacy on our public university campuses. By now, we all know the details of how Phulpori was tortured for hours and threatened by the female leaders of the IU BCL unit for staying at a residential hall without taking their permission.

Unfortunately, after Phulpori filed a written complaint with the university authorities, it took them a while to take any action in the incident. They only ordered Sanjida and Tabassum, the two accused in the incident, to leave the hall following a High Court directive. But is this enough of a punishment for committing such a heinous crime? While we understand that the university authorities cannot take any action against the accused before their probe committee submits its report, given our past experiences, we cannot be assured that such a committee would form its reports independently and on time – particularly when none other than the BCL is involved.

The IU episode has reminded us of the many past incidents where ordinary students were tortured, harassed or even had to die at the hands of BCL cadres at our public universities. The brutal murder of Buet student Abrar Fahad by BCL goons is still fresh in our minds. And, only the other day, we came to know of another incident at Rajshahi University where a male student was mentally and physically tortured by BCL men. Around the same time, we also learned how BCL leaders and activists at Dhaka University are mugging commuters and general students on campus, creating an atmosphere of fear. The ruling party's student wing has literally turned the gono rooms of public universities into torture cells, under the very noses of hall authorities.

However, the news that the university's BCL unit has suspended the two accused members has given us some hope that change is possible, if we all fight together. The courage that young Phulpori showed in the face of opposition from all, including the university administration, should encourage all students to stand united against such atrocious activities of the ill-intentioned groups in all university campuses.

We urge the IU authorities to conduct an impartial probe into the incident and give exemplary punishment to those involved in torturing Phulpori. Until then, they must take responsibility for ensuring her safety and security, and that of her family members, so that they are not harmed in any way by the BCL and their followers.

Can the new monetary policy solve our problems?



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MM AKASH

Behind the Bangladesh Bank's announcement of this year's monetary policy was a certain pressure applied by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF said it wasn't right to adopt yearly monetary policies. Our economists, too, have suggested that there is no harm in adopting quarterly monetary policies instead of yearly, as we would get access to more information. This condition isn't necessarily in opposition to the government's interests, so the government has accepted it. This will lead to increased re-evaluation of the monetary policy, which is good.

The IMF had other conditions too, one of which was to reduce all manners of subsidies. The main agenda, though, was subsidies in the energy and power sectors. If fuel prices are not subsidised, then the power sector is also not subsidised, and that leads to an increase in electricity prices.

Depreciating the taka against foreign currencies was another IMF condition. The taka's exchange rate against the US dollar is artificially high in the market, and reducing that may also be beneficial. But an after-effect of this change is a rise in import expenses. This would lead to a dual effect as 30 percent of our economy is now dependent on foreign trade. Exports should become cheaper, leading to more exports and, consequently, more export earnings. But that doesn't always happen in our country. We have made ready-made garment (RMG) products cheaper, but buyers still want even cheaper prices. They are making delayed payments. The increase in shipping prices is wiping out any increased profits.

The statistics, however, show that there has been a recent uptick in exports. One of the hypotheses of the government's monetary policy is that exports will increase in the future and that will lead to a resolution of the forex reserve crisis we are in. But there are doubts that are posed by a potential increase in fuel prices, which depends on how the Russia-Ukraine war progresses. Even though fuel prices are going down now, it could increase at any time because of the war. So, this monetary policy is being devised in a period of uncertainty. The Bangladesh Bank governor has announced this monetary policy while being stuck in a wedge between this uncertainty and pressure from the World Bank.

The governor has some positive



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expectations here: fuel prices will go down; remittance will increase; export incomes will go up; and forex reserves will be replenished. This will all lead to a decrease in the necessity for currency depreciation. But the IMF has imposed the condition that the exchange rate needs to be brought to the market level as soon as possible. To do that, the taka's value needs to be depreciated gradually and cautiously in terms of the US dollar. That work has begun already.

The IMF loan is not large. It may be able to finance three months' import costs. This loan will not help us survive, but the prestige of getting an IMF loan will lead to us being able to acquire more US dollars from other sources. This may help in mitigating the dollar crisis that looms if our exports don't go up and if we can't substitute our imports properly.

The monetary policy this time around is a cautious one in the face of two distinct pressures. They have assumed some positive preconditions to tell the tale of an expected sunny picture. The first question here is, how much will this be reflected in reality? The second question is, if it is indeed the reality, does it have any other negative effects? The answer to the first question is that it can be real if the war in Ukraine doesn't intensify

and lead to an increase in fuel prices. It can also be real if our export market diversifies and expands, which will depend on whether the worldwide recession and the downturn of demand for foreign goods get fixed.

The expected growth rate has been reduced from seven percent to six percent, which also seems appropriate. The printing of money is by and large

necessary. If part of the money from the monetary expansion and the credit expansion cannot be diverted to these programmes, then it might lead to a political crisis.

The method of this social expenditure is missing in this monetary policy – so are the details of how the capital is going to reach SMEs. The process with which the

government might ensure that it won't reach large scale non-performing loan takers is also absent.

There is nothing to complain about in terms of the steps the government is taking on the supply side, but on the demand side, they have not ensured that the capital will reach the sectors that are crucial and urgent. There is no gap in the policies that have been announced, but the gap is in their implementation.

We're living in a system of crony capitalism, where those close to the government, relatives of the ministers, privileged contractors of government megaprojects start their work with government money, and midway through, they hold the government hostage by saying they can't finish the project without more money. The government is then forced to pay up.

Monetary expansion, money printing, and interest rate cap can benefit the section of society that has already exploited the government for money, and they can also benefit SMEs, small peasants, remittance earners, and garment workers. Which section will be benefited depends on the implementation.

Transcribed and translated by Azmin Azran.

The three eras of loss and damage



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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The world has entered the third era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change. In the first era, the experts were focused on completely avoiding the potential losses and damages from climate change by stopping – or at least drastically reducing – greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, which caused the global temperature to rise. This understanding came from the scientific community through the first and second assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At the global policymaking level, it led to the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 and subsequent Kyoto Protocol in 1997, in which developed countries agreed to reduce their emissions, with developing countries to follow later.

One other aspect of this first era was the emphasis on mitigation measures to reduce emissions, which was treated largely as an environmental issue.

However, when the third assessment

report (AR3) of the IPCC was published in 2001, it became apparent that the promises of reducing emissions were not taken seriously, and emissions were continuing to rise.

The main message from AR3 was that the world had failed to avoid climate change impacts through mitigation, and that there would now be inevitable impacts that the world now needed to prepare for through adaptation measures. This started the second era of minimising losses and damages. The second important message in AR3 was that, while all countries would be adversely impacted over time, the poorest countries and the poorest communities in richer countries would be affected first and the hardest.

This, in turn, led to adaptation being adopted as a new strategy at COP7 in Morocco in 2001. This era of adaptation actions also meant that the development actors both at national and global levels began to get involved in climate actions along with the environmental actors.

Unfortunately, the world failed to

make use of the adaptation measures too. Hence, as of last year, we entered the third era of addressing loss and damage from human-induced climate change. The turning point was the publication of the sixth assessment report (AR6) of the IPCC where the climate scientists, for the very first time, stated that there

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was unequivocal scientific evidence that there were adverse impacts that could be attributed to the fact that the global temperature had already gone above one degree Celsius since the First Industrial Revolution due to GHG emissions.

This game-changing scientific report was accompanied by the visible evidence of unprecedented extreme weather events such as floods,

cyclones, heatwaves and wildfires around the world.

At the UNFCCC level, this reality was also recognised by the historic achievement of establishing a funding mechanism to address loss and damage, agreed upon by all countries at COP27 in Egypt last year.

One of the most significant outcomes of this realisation is that climate change and development can no longer be treated separately. Indeed, the main lesson of the Covid-19 global crisis also points to the need to tackle all the different crises facing the globe in a multisectoral as well as multinational manner, which is not easy.

As we enter this third era of loss and damage, for which no country is really prepared, the whole world will need to find better ways of cooperation within and across national boundaries. Bangladesh has the opportunity of being a global leader in this mission. The first step would be to acknowledge the reality of losses and damages from human-induced climate change in different parts of the country, and then involve all stakeholders in developing a national strategy to tackle loss and damage through a whole-of-society approach.

This new initiative on loss and damage can then build considerable knowledge and capabilities for the government as well as civil society to adapt to climate change.