

A CALL FOR Bengali Language Outreach

The geopolitical fact that Bengali is the national language of Bangladesh, or that it is one of the official languages of India, is not sufficient for people of the world to take an interest in it. Sheer population numbers of speakers are also not enough. Something else is needed for people to take an interest in a foreign language. You have to make either it economically powerful or you have to make it culturally attractive.

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Apparently, Bengali (or Bangla) is the seventh spoken language in the world by population. By some statistics, its position is sixth, and even fifth in another! I am not elated by this because the number of speakers of a language does not demonstrate its acceptance nor its popularity, globally or locally. Indeed, despite its giant population base, Bengali remains unknown to most of the world. Many are surprised to learn that Bengali is spoken by more people than Russian or Japanese.

In large American bookstores (which are quickly disappearing), you will find a language section. The books therein are to learn Spanish, French, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, etc. You may find a book on Hindi, but almost never anything on Bengali. Somehow, we seem to have accepted that other people in the world don't have an interest in Bengali. And we Bengalis have no plans in making them interested in it either. We can cite a few examples of foreign Banglaphiles like Father Detienne, Kazuo Azuma, Clinton Seely, William Radice or Hans Harder, but these few luminaries do not represent the overall lack of interest globally.

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There is a legend that UNESCO



A scene from Pather Panchali. Satyajit Ray's films sparked initial interest in Bengali language and culture, but unfortunately, this enthusiasm proved to be short-lived.



▲ Professor Kazuo Azuma spent 20 years translating the entire literary works of Rabindranath Tagore into the Japanese language.

conducted a survey that found Bengali to be the sweetest of all languages. You can fathom the absurdity of such a news item if you consider how difficult it would be to conduct such a survey (and why would UNESCO even do it?). A respondent would have to listen to recordings of more than one hundred major world languages and rate them subjectively. Unfortunately, this fake news – just do a cursory internet search – has now a life of its own. We may love the “sweetness” of Bengali, but at the same time we should not quote unverified and absurd news.

What would attract a non-Bengali speaker to learn Bengali? Economy is definitely a factor. Since the rise of China as an economic powerhouse, Mandarin as a major foreign-language course has spread globally. But I think the cultural impact of a nation carries more weight in dispersing its language far and wide.

There are two countries where Bengali is taught seriously at an undergraduate level: Japan and China. In Japan, the University of Foreign Studies in Tokyo offers a four-year Bengali language course. For many Japanese, their love affair with Bengali began when Rabindranath first visited the country in 1916. Soon after, Japanese students started coming to Shantiniketan. During the 1990s, under the leadership of Kazuo Azuma, Rabindranath's complete works in 12 volumes were translated directly from Bengali into Japanese – a labor of love encompassing twenty years. The concept of cultural ambassadorship is paramount here. Rabindranath almost single handedly introduced Bengali to the world.

During the first three decades of

the twentieth century, Rabindranath's name was well known in Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Ninety years ago, in 1932, the following review of a book of selected poems by Rabindranath translated by Nagendranath Gupta appeared in The New York Times. The reviewer, Eda Lou Walton, an American poet and academic, writes: “What is the appeal to us, the English-speaking, of a poet whose verse is actually a translation from Bengali? How was it that the Nobel Prize for literature was given to Tagore when the judges had before them only a thin volume in which the poet had rendered into English a few of his poems originally in Bengali? Everyone knows Tagore's work, his readers are of every race, and his rhythmic lines are known in translation in many languages. This could not happen were it not for the fact that there is in this Indian poet's work something which speaks through every language, a kind of poetry which is rather universally recognized as concerned with the very spirit of poetry.”

The regard that Rabindranath created for Bengali did not last and the appreciation by the outside

critique of his poems, published by a friend who last month published the poems themselves...This is the world of Calcutta's little literary magazines, a proud industry that thrives in this lively city, despite the grim poverty of the surroundings and the almost universal lack of profit.”

Borders goes on to write: “Like Krittibas, most of Calcutta's journals are published in Bengali, the language of a people whom other Indians regard as unusually artistic and literary...”

Ironically, at present, the language for which Bengalis profess so much love, is somewhat shunned in the affluent economic sectors of Kolkata.

Some Indian Bengalis do not consider this language a viable mode of communication and don't see its future as a global language. In the coffee shops of the rich in Kolkata, the waiters take orders in English. Even such a talented director as Rituporno Ghosh resorts to using

in importance after the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. The gradual economic upliftment of Bangladesh and its dynamic connection with the rest of the world shored up Bengali. As a result, we hear about Nazrul, Lalon, or Charjapad studies by scholars outside of Bangladesh

and India. The question is: Has this induced more non-native speakers to learn it, and also, if they are going to learn it, what sort of Bengali are they going to learn? In recent years, in Bangladesh, there is a deliberate trend to use more and more local dialects, especially the Dhaka-based one, in movies and plays. Language, after all, is molded by social settings. The result of this transformation is that foreigners learning the standard form of Bengali, will be unable to comprehend this application of the vernacular. There is now a dichotomy between the standard language used in newspapers, prose narratives, and

as such. I would argue that such a disjointed use of language renders it dull in expressing complex scientific and philosophical thoughts. We have also stopped coining new Bengali words that are necessary for coherent contemporary expression.

Many people lament the lack of translation of Bengali literature into foreign languages, especially into English. They may think translation is a panacea. I believe there are two problems with this mind set. You may translate as much as you want, but if international publishers are not interested, you end up publishing the translated book in your country only. The translation, then, does not reach your intended readership. In the target country, there needs to be interest in the culture and lifestyle of the source country. Interest cannot be generated through isolated books only; various forms of outreach are required (e.g., achievements in arts and music, science and technology, sports, etc.). Also, currently, most of the translations are done by Bengalis themselves. Even though they may be capable translators, they occasionally miss the nuances of the target language and culture. In this case, target language speakers who are adept in Bengali could play a bigger role.

There are not enough resources available for people who want to learn Bengali. A casual search for learning Japanese, Korean, or even Farsi would yield many resources on YouTube or other websites, but no similar standard Bengali learning programs are easily found. Overseas, the Bengali schools serve mostly second-generation Bengalis, without much outreach to initiate programs designed for non-Bengali speakers. The Bengali programs offered at American universities to date are restrictive in scope. In contrast, there are organized Bengali language programs in China and Japan, even though those are directed to career opportunities.

French and German language classes are offered through their embassies in various countries. No such initiative is offered by the embassies of Bangladesh or India. Indian authorities are not keen to promote regional languages so it would be unrealistic to expect such action from them. Bangladesh, however, might be able to offer such opportunities, providing Bengali classes overseas and possibly scholarships to students who desire to learn Bengali. In the end, it is up to us to devise ways to promote the Bengali language and culture and to strengthen the scope of the language itself as a more useful tool in our intellectual world.

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(L) Rabindranath Tagore and Mukul Dey with 'Kiyo-san' and another Japanese lady at Tomitaro Hara's Sankei-en in Yokohama, Japan, August 1, 1916. (R) While there have been some translations of classic Bengali works, the shortage of strong interest and skilled translators occasionally results in missing nuances of the target language and culture.

world for the great literary tradition of Bengal again declined. Once in a while, interest did appear through a crack. One example is the film legacy of Satyajit Ray. Another example is found in the following article from a 1976 issue of The New York Times. Under the title Literary Magazines, Films and Plays Thrive Amid the Squalor of Calcutta, William Borders writes: “In a dim and cluttered garret apartment, three young essayists thrash out the wording of an article on the imagery in Christopher Marlowe's lesser plays. In a busy Arts coffeehouse nearby, a middle-aged billing clerk who, when asked his occupation replies “poet,” is fretting over a long

English dialog to express complicated philosophical ideas. A case in point is from the movie Abohoman where the character played by Dipankar Dey says (in English): “Your clone has taken a life of her own, Dipti. Ekhon konta bhalo, sophistication or the lack of it.” The educated middle and upper classes of Kolkata tend to express their intricate ideas in English, but they don't try to formulate the same ideas in Bengali. This habit perpetuates through generations, rendering Bengali – in daily life – out of use in expressing difficult modern thoughts, including, for example, in the writing of doctoral dissertations.

Without question, Bengali grew

television newscasts and the language used on the streets of Dhaka. If and when a language learning book for Bengali is to be found among other language resources in that large American bookstore, which Bengali will it introduce?

Even though we profess love for our mother tongue and feel proud of our language movement, we do not seem to have the self-esteem necessary to use the language to its fullest wealth and potential. In the end, we have a distillation that is a mixed language peppered with standard Bengali, local dialect, and English. Many may argue that this is the reflection of a reality and should be accepted

