

Preserving the uncharted

Laleng language and the Patro community's journey



Khairun Nahar Ipshita is a researcher.

KHAIRUN NAHAR IPSHITA

Laleng, an Indigenous tongue, is attributed to the Patro community who inhabit the culturally rich environs of Sylhet Sadar, Jaintiapur, and Gowainghat areas within the geographical boundaries of Bangladesh. Deeply rooted in traditional Hindu customs and practices, the Patro community holds historical significance dating back to the British colonial era. During their rule, the British conducted surveys to gather information about various communities and their languages, but when it came to the Patro community, they figuratively closed the door behind them, resulting in a significant knowledge gap regarding the Patro people and their language within the wider population. This lack of awareness isolated the Patro community from the broader society, leaving them somewhat disconnected.

In the past, Laleng speakers within Patro society exhibited a pronounced conservatism, holding the belief that their language should be safeguarded from widespread use as a means of communication with outsiders. This protective stance aimed to maintain the exclusivity of Laleng, preserving its uniqueness and cultural identity.

As a result, Laleng remains shrouded in anonymity as it belongs to a linguistically unclassified family. Many language specialists have conjectured that Laleng may be affiliated with the Sino-Tibetan language family. However, despite extensive research by language

identity. As their ranks dwindle, the vibrant Laleng language teeters on the brink of irretrievable loss.

Moreover, relentless advance of globalisation and the ever-evolving sociocultural landscape have gradually led to limited intergenerational transmission of Laleng. The young generations, primarily influenced by the medium of instruction in Bangla and English during their educational journey, find themselves utilising Laleng in a restricted manner. Regrettably, even within the confines of their homes, they relinquish the opportunity to engage with their parents in their native language. This decline extends beyond linguistic loss, posing a threat to the community's identity and knowledge systems passed down through generations.



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

This worrisome trend highlights an alarming decline in prominence and prevalence of Laleng within the Patro community. The impact of these transformative forces underscores the urgent need to address the challenges facing the preservation and revitalisation of Laleng as a crucial component of the Patro cultural heritage.

To counter this, Laleng speakers and their affiliated organisation have undertaken several proactive initiatives aimed at the preservation of their language and culture. They are fostering a supportive environment where the use of their native language within their own community is actively encouraged.

Furthermore, within the framework of the Enhancement of Bangla Language in ICT through Research and Development (EBLICT) initiative, an integral component known as the Digitisation of Ethnic Languages in Bangladesh has emerged. This commendable endeavour, spearheaded by the Bangladesh Computer Council and the ICT Division, with the executory organisation Dream71 Bangladesh Limited, aims to amass an extensive digital repository of 40 ethnic languages in Bangladesh.

This ambitious undertaking embarks on a transformative journey of archiving the Laleng language, particularly focusing on its unique sound system. By meticulously collecting and documenting the intricate details of Laleng's sound patterns, this project seeks to create an invaluable resource for future generations, ensuring the enduring legacy of the Laleng language and its rich cultural heritage.

Within the realm of this project, Laleng possesses an inherent exploratory nature, particularly when it comes to the intricacies of its sound patterns. Given Laleng's yet-not-to-be-determined linguistic affiliation within a language family, there exists an opportunity to unveil the extent to which its phonetic characteristics align, whether the sounds are aligned with those of the Sino-Tibetan languages or not, as well as its underlying structural foundations. The burning question here pertains to the distinct language structure that vividly influences the development of Laleng. To comprehend this, a thorough exploration of both synchronic and diachronic aspects is imperative, as words are subject to change while structure necessitates investigation. All of these might be

the aspect of future research.

Operating within this comprehensive framework, an extensive audio repository of linguistic data has been meticulously compiled for Laleng, encompassing a substantial collection of 300 minutes dedicated to words and grammar, and both predefined and spontaneous expressions. This ambitious endeavour aims at fostering an invaluable resource for Laleng speakers to revisit and rekindle their connection with their language and rich cultural heritage.

Laleng, the language spoken by the Patro community, holds within its depths a treasure trove of untold stories that offer a profound glimpse into their vibrant culture. To unveil this wealth of linguistic heritage to the world, a meticulous process of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription is currently underway. This endeavour will infuse the spoken essence of the Laleng language with renewed vitality, propelling it towards the realm of modernity and technological progress. By embracing this transformative journey, Laleng's narrative will transcend the confines of the past, emerging as a beacon of cultural richness that resonates with both present and future generations.



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Ignorance is not an excuse for powerful nations to avoid meaningful steps to enforce a ceasefire.

The world in the eyes of Palestinian children



Md Mahmudul Hasan, PhD is professor of English at the International Islamic University Malaysia. He has edited (with Mohammad A Quayum) 'Bangladeshi Literature in English: Critical Essays and Interviews'. He can be reached at mmhasan@iiu.edu.my

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

Palestinian men, women, and children have been subjected to mass murder for decades. This time around, since October 7, 2023, extensive Israeli aerial and ground attacks have killed nearly 30,000 of them (as of February 27, 2024). The number of casualties is increasing steadily with every passing day.

Let's not forget that tens of thousands of severely injured Palestinians are languishing without care, as the Israeli bombings have not spared even healthcare facilities. Many have suffered life-changing injuries and will have to live with physical and/or mental disabilities, if they survive. Bear in mind that, because of the imposition of Israeli blockade since 2007, a humanitarian crisis was already looming large in the Gaza Strip. Israel didn't need the October 7 incident as an excuse to impose that blockade and other repressive measures on Palestinians. What is worse is that the extreme human sufferings of Palestinians have become normalised in the eyes of many.

While one brutal murder is too many, this spike of Israeli violence against Palestinians has continued, killing innocent people in their thousands for months. We are not talking about a mass murder that happened in the pre-modern era when channels of communication were limited. Israeli forces have been mass-murdering Palestinians in full view of the world, via live-streaming at times. Therefore, ignorance is not an excuse for powerful nations to avoid meaningful steps to end hostilities or to enforce a ceasefire; for them, condoning Israel's gross human rights violations is a calculated, opportunistic choice.

Some powerful Western governments are providing Israeli forces with sophisticated weapons to carry out its mass murder campaign, while others have chosen to be silent observers. The hypocrites among world leaders seek to feed us with lip service and sugar-coated rhetoric of peace, or limit their responsibility to urging Israel to avoid civilian casualties. But under the surface, they concede to Israel's unquenchable thirst for Palestinian blood and land, while also earning

profit from selling deadly weapons to Israel. As a result, it has been able to dispossess Palestinian landholders in most parts of Palestine, and build illegal settlements in Palestinian lands by means of expulsion and land robbery—all without much international opposition.

The spectre of vulnerability, insecurity, suffering, and death of the Palestinians is a sore to our collective conscience and weighs heavy on our hearts. What is even more unbearable is to see children slaughtered in scores by Israeli air strikes or bombardments, or injured and abandoned due to the death of their parents and other family members. It is heart-wrenching to see Palestinian toddlers following their injured mothers who are running to safety.

People who have children of comparable age to those Palestinian children may find such media images more difficult to view and process. They are perhaps more likely to feel the sharp pinch of those children's suffering. Many of the surviving children in Palestine, especially those in Gaza, have no idea why they have been attacked and killed day in and day out. Some of them may have seen—on TV—happy children going to school and running and playing. They may wonder why their lives are different and why their very existence is at stake, and why their schools as well as their houses are bombed.

Some older Palestinian children may have read about powerful countries that talk about human rights, rule of law, international humanitarian law, and the sanctity of human life. They may wonder why all these normative values have no meaning or relevance for them. Many Palestinian children may have heard about the International Court of Justice and may have anticipated that it would pass a powerful verdict that would put moral pressure on world leaders to intervene and stop Israel from killing their loved ones. They may have been disillusioned by the actual ICJ ruling that seemed to have given Israel the free pass to kill as long as it can avoid the charge of genocide.

These Palestinian children know a world that has little regard and respect for their lives and for the lives of their parents and other loved ones. They live in a land where their houses can be demolished by Israeli bombings or bulldozers and their properties expropriated by the Israeli government at any time. The world that they know intimately is one where their mothers put each of their siblings in a different room to sleep in a vain attempt to at least save some of them from Israeli bombs at night.

The world that Palestinian children know is full of checkpoints, control systems, and multiple walls of separation. As a result, their movement is severely restricted and they are constantly under the spotlight of Israeli surveillance. The children, their parents, siblings or others in the community can be picked and put in Israeli dungeons at any moment, where they suffer further humiliation for indefinite periods of time.

For decades, Palestinian children have seen Israeli forces and settlers dishonouring their mothers and sisters, humiliating their fathers and torturing their brothers. They have seen their older siblings discontinue education because their universities have been destroyed by Israeli bombs. They have seen their fathers coming back home with bloodstained clothing because their mosques were bombed while people were worshipping. Palestinian children see their elder siblings not coming back home because they were picked up by the Israeli forces. Against all such gross violations of human rights, they have not seen any legal protection.

The Israeli mistreatment that Palestinians experience on a regular basis started in a major way in 1948 when the state of Israel was founded on Palestinian land. Therefore, those who are adults in present-day Palestine had a similar childhood and have lived their whole lives under Israeli occupation. Thus, Israel and its international backers are failing the Palestinian children of today, as they failed their parents and grandparents in the past decades. Their humanity is taken away in the same way as it was taken away from their forebears.

The multigenerational Palestinian crisis has remained a blot on the global conscience. One honourable way to remove this blot is to restore the humanity and dignity of Palestinians. The sooner it is done, the better for us all. It will remove an element of hypocrisy from the international order shaped and regulated by former colonial powers.

In the past, Laleng speakers within Patro society held the belief that their language should be safeguarded from widespread use as a means of communication with outsiders. This protective stance aimed to maintain the exclusivity of Laleng, preserving its uniqueness and cultural identity.

specialists, where Laleng belongs remains elusive. This enigma adds to Laleng's allure, highlighting the intricate nature of language evolution and diversity within the broader linguistic landscape.

There has been a disconcerting and precipitous decline in the numerical strength of the Patro, once a flourishing race. With approximately 6,000 speakers of Laleng, this decline jeopardises the very fabric of their linguistic heritage and collective

শেখ হাসিনার নির্দেশ
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Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
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Establishment of Sheikh Russell Aviary and Eco-Park, Rangunia, Chattogram (2nd Phase) (1st Revision) Project.
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