

Preserving Indigenous languages through films

MATHEWS CHIRAN

In a remote Garo village, an elderly Indigenous couple lives by themselves. One day, they receive two letters—one from the forest department and another from their grandson. Their neighbour's son reads the letters to them, revealing that their grandson, who works as a firefighter in Chittagong, will visit them the next day. Overjoyed, the couple prepares for his arrival. The old man sets out to catch fish and his wife prepares traditional food, while they witness their neighbours leaving the village, forced to migrate to India due to forest-related litigations. Their grandson, however, never arrives. Unbeknownst to them, he has died in a fire rescue mission. Still, the elderly couple waits for days, longing for their grandson, even as their village slowly empties.

This poignant scene is from a short film called *Bikingri Etchaluk* (*A snail without a shell*). Entirely in the Mandi/Garo language, the film beautifully captures the vulnerability and simplicity of Indigenous life. Its title metaphorically represents the fragile state of Indigenous people, much like a snail without a shell—unprotected, exposed. The film, created in 2023 by Mohin Rakhaime, a Kazi Nazrul Islam University graduate, has been recognised at national festivals and selected for international screenings, including the New York Asian Film Festival, International Film Festival of South Asia Toronto, Dharmashala International Film Festival and Diaspora Film Festival.

Films like this, created by young people from the Indigenous community, are a rarity in Bangladesh, where storytelling in Indigenous languages through cinema is still an uncommon practice. Yet, in a country where many Indigenous languages are vanishing, films like *Bikingri Etchaluk* create ripples, if not waves, in efforts to preserve these languages. According to the International Mother Language Institute's latest survey, 14 Indigenous languages in Bangladesh are on the verge of extinction. The reasons are clear—lack of patronage, lack of institutional support, and an environment that fails to nurture these languages.

Among all art forms, film is one of the most powerful mediums for impact. A visual narrative can reach audiences far and wide, making Indigenous languages more visible and relevant. When characters converse in Indigenous tongues on screen, it leaves lasting

impressions. Language is meant to be spoken and practised, and films provide that space, ensuring its endurance. Indigenous cultures, historically rooted in oral traditions, rely heavily on storytelling. The Garo language is one such example, predominantly passed down orally rather than through writing. Oral storytelling is central to their linguistic heritage. By documenting folktales, myths, and historical narratives in Indigenous languages, films help preserve these traditions, ensuring they are not lost with time.

However, preserving Indigenous languages through films is not without challenges. Many Indigenous youths are fluent in speaking their mother tongue but struggle to read or write it. Others understand the language but lack fluency in speaking. This loss is largely due to the absence of an ecosystem that fosters language learning and usage. Mohin Rakhaime, the director of the aforementioned film, despite being a Rakhaime himself, admitted that while his parents are fluent in reading the Rakhaime script, he sometimes faces difficulties decoding its written format. He learned to read and write his mother tongue at home, not in school. He acknowledges that there is little motivation for Indigenous youth to learn their languages, and films featuring these languages are very few. His goal is to create more films in Indigenous languages, particularly in Rakhaime, hoping that the movies would inspire future filmmakers.

There are many significant logistical challenges in making Indigenous-language films. Directors often struggle with dialect accuracy and pronunciation. Finding skilled art directors and costume designers familiar with Indigenous aesthetics is also difficult. The biggest challenge, however, is finding actors who can speak Indigenous languages fluently while delivering strong performances. Many Indigenous languages in Bangladesh have been influenced by Bangla, creating linguistic hybrids that distort film authenticity.

Fidel Drong, a Dhaka University graduate and filmmaker, faced similar issues while directing *Umbrella*, a Garo-language film. Throughout different scenes, he incorporated Bangla due to linguistic limitations. Another challenge arose in choosing between Abeng and Achik, the two major Garo dialects. Plainland Garos typically use Abeng, while those in the hills speak Achik. Fidel ultimately settled on Abeng to connect with Bangladeshi Garo



A still from the Indigenous film *Umbrella*.

audiences, blending Bangla and Garo words to maintain accessibility.

The producer of *Umbrella*, Antony Rema—also a member of the popular Indigenous band *Madol*—spoke about the difficulties of making Indigenous films. He pointed out that Garo people have *Serenjing*, a unique musical storytelling tradition combining mythological, historical, and social themes through songs, dialogues, and dramatic expressions. However, few people today can perform *Serenjing* because it is no longer actively practiced. This decline mirrors the gradual loss of Indigenous languages. Antony recalls watching *Khabak Ni Khabak* (*Love of My Life*), a Garo-language romantic film directed by Tiresh Nokrek, in his childhood. The film, with its beautiful Garo songs, changed his perspective on Indigenous-language cinema. However, *Khabak Ni Khabak* was never archived, and today, no official record of the film exists.

The absence of proper archiving is another major concern. Indigenous filmmakers and festival organisers have repeatedly raised this issue. Currently, no central authority systematically collects and preserves Indigenous films. According to Indigenous directors, there are only about 20 to 25 Indigenous-language films in Bangladesh. Funding remains a major obstacle. Filmmaking requires significant financial resources, which are often beyond the reach of Indigenous filmmakers.

Despite these barriers, efforts are being made to promote Indigenous cinema. The Hill Film Festival in Bangladesh, held every two years in Rangamati and Dhaka, serves as a

platform for screening Indigenous films. Around 300-400 people attend the festival, which receives support from organisations like Drik and the Goethe-Institut Bangladesh. However, according to Festival Director Adit Dewan, there simply aren't enough Indigenous films to screen because of the financial obstacles Indigenous directors face.

The Bangladesh government can play a crucial role in supporting Indigenous-language films. The information and broadcasting ministry, which provides grants for various film productions, could allocate specific funding for Indigenous-language cinema. While there are some documentaries on Indigenous people, there is a significant lack of Indigenous-language feature films. Young Indigenous filmmakers must be supported through funding, training, and workshops to create high-quality films that authentically represent their communities. Additionally, Indigenous films should be promoted through television, online streaming platforms, and national film festivals.

There should also be a shift in mindset regarding Indigenous films. They should not be viewed as controversial or anti-state. *Mor Thengari* (*My Bicycle*) considered Bangladesh's first Chakma-language film, faced censorship issues. The 64-minute film began shooting in 2012 and had its first premiere in 2014 at a festival in Dhaka. Directed by Aung Rakhaime, the film was submitted to the Bangladesh Film Censor Board in May 2015, only to be banned shortly after, allegedly because it did not portray security forces in a favourable light in the context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict.

Despite the ban, the film gained international recognition, earning accolades at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival in Estonia, Russia's Silver Akbuzat International Festival of National and Ethnic Cinema, and the Kolkata People's Film Festival, among others. In a bold act of resistance, a group of like-minded young filmmakers, students, and educators organised an independent screening of *Mor Thengari* alongside *Michiler Mukh*, a film by director Zakir Hossain Raju, at Suhrawardy Udyan in August 2024. Such films should be encouraged rather than restricted, as they provide valuable insights into Indigenous lives, struggles, and cultures.

The United Nations declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, which led to the proclamation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032). This decade-long initiative aims to safeguard Indigenous languages by ensuring they are actively spoken and passed down to future generations. Promoting Indigenous films is a vital part of this mission, as cinema serves as an accessible and engaging tool for language preservation and cultural celebration.

Indigenous people have long been revered as exceptional storytellers. Their oral traditions carry the history, wisdom, and values of their cultures. These stories are not just narratives; they are the heartbeat of their communities, preserving identities and connecting generations. In the modern era, one of the most powerful mediums for storytelling is film. By translating Indigenous tales into cinema, filmmakers have the opportunity to reach broader audiences, ensuring that these narratives endure and thrive. Films not only capture the essence of Indigenous languages but also elevate their visibility, preserving them in ways that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

As one of the most influential storytelling tools today, film provides a dynamic platform for Indigenous voices. Indigenous stories must be told, and their languages must be heard. To keep these languages alive and vibrant for future generations, Indigenous filmmakers must be supported, and their work must be celebrated. Language, after all, is the soul of a culture. If we fail to preserve it, we risk losing an irreplaceable part of our collective human heritage.

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The art, identity, and culture behind book covers

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

The annual Amar Ekushey Boi Mela plays a crucial role in sustaining the publishing industry. Although sales plummet once the fair ends, the fair's limited duration sees the release of just enough books to keep the industry of book cover design thriving.

Simple beginnings

Dr SM Zahid Hossain, professor of Graphic Design, Crafts, and History of Art at the University of Rajshahi, is a noted authority on the history and development of book cover designs in Bangladesh. Reflecting on the need for cover art, Professor Hossain said, "A good book cover introduces a publication to its audience and readers."

Depending on the subject or content, the design changes as the graphic art of a non-fiction book or a textbook will differ from that of a children's novel. It is up to the designer to create the individuality through the cover art.

We have now entered the digital age, where books are no longer limited to print but have evolved into digital formats. Yet, the necessity of a cover remains, even for digital editions.

In the early 20th century, covers were primarily produced using letterpress printing, often featuring only the title in simple, unembellished forms. Later, in the Indian subcontinent, some artists incorporated lithography and woodblock printmaking techniques. This marked the beginning of artistic

cover designs in Bangladesh.

"Kazi Abul Quasem was a pioneer designer acclaimed for his colour illustrations. Back in the colonial period, he made significant contributions to book illustrations and cover designs," shares Professor Hossain.

The post-1952 era ushered in a new phase for Bangla books, and covers underwent significant transformations. The most significant cover of that period was the homage to the events of February 21, 1952—edited by Hassan Hafizur Rahman, and published in 1953. The cover bears historical significance as one of the first political works in Bangla.

Post-Liberation War, *Nondito Noroke* by Humayun Ahmed features one of the most evocative cover designs. The use of vivid colours—white, red and green—and Qayum Chowdhury's signature line work for the woman and the child in her womb, along with his abstract designs behind the figure, all seem to tell the story of a woman in distress, without giving away the story or being too literal in its representation.

Today, Bangladesh boasts a robust printing industry and it is not astonishing that we have a strong heritage of powerful book covers designed by some of the prominent artists in the country. From Zainul Abedin, Quamrul Hassan, Qayum Chowdhury, Hashem Khan, Biren Shome to Samar Majumder—leading artists have always contributed to this field. Designers like Dhrubo Esh have created a niche in cover design and are acclaimed for their works.

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Along with the publications, covers are also given their due importance, which is why cover design has flourished as a field of art. The Bangla Academy and Jatiyo Grantha Kendra



have made significant contributions by awarding the best cover design, attracting young designers to this field.

Words from a bibliophile

Farhana Azim, 43, is an avid reader of Bangla books. Even as a bibliophile, the changing scenes in the book cover industry have not failed to create an impression.

"The content of our books, irrespective of whether they are fiction or non-fiction, is very different from global titles and this uniqueness is reflected in book designs," says Azim.

Perhaps, even when compared to

Bangla publications from West Bengal, India, our designs have a distinct touch. Folk art, too, has made significant contributions to shaping the minds of artists, and it strongly resonates in Bangladeshi book art.

Some art historians and bibliophiles alike often complain that book art now does not reflect the contents of the manuscript. As a puritan, Professor Hossain, too, believes, "The cover must bear some semblance to the content. Software and templates are there to help artists, but one must not rely too heavily on them. There should always be a human touch to book covers."

Azim, however, holds a different view. "While many argue that some of the more popular publications in Bangladesh, fiction and poetry in particular, misrepresent the content of the book, I personally do not judge a book by its cover at all. I take it as art in one of its finest forms. The designer should be free to use their creative brilliance in narrating a parallel story, and not necessarily be tied down to the content."

Art and the artists

Sohag Parvez is a prominent painter and a prolific designer. His works bear a signature touch and a reflection of our culture. As a specialised designer of children's books, and being true to his artistic individuality, Parvez primarily uses watercolour—his favourite medium—for designing covers.

"Whenever I am asked to design, I ask for a synopsis from the author. It is important to know what the writer desires from the cover design and what the content demands," shares Parvez.

He adds, "One must have a clear vision of what the audience will find most eye-catching. Children are mostly attracted to realistic imagery, while a more mature reader may find semi-abstract or abstract concepts more engaging."

Like many, Parvez believes that book cover designers should have a forte in drawing to achieve the best results.

Syed Najmus Sakib is a graphic designer who has witnessed art transform from manual techniques to the dawn of AI. As a young artist, he sees the advent of technology as a boon for the creative fields. "Software has given us the freedom to channel our creativity in the shortest possible time. I see artificial intelligence as the next step forward," he asserts.

On AI restricting human creativity, Sakib responds, "That depends solely on the user. AI broadens the human capacity to think and create. One still needs to generate creative prompts to get the best result. We have all moved from hand-drawn illustrations to software, as it has simplified the process. It would not be possible for someone devoid of finer aesthetics to create a digital masterpiece!"

All bibliophiles worth their salt will agree that book covers offer a visual narrative that enhances the reading experience. Cover designers, seasoned artists, and emerging talents continue to push boundaries while maintaining a connection to tradition. The fusion of art, identity, and culture in book covers will undoubtedly continue to evolve over time, bridging the gap between creativity, technology, and the written word.

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