AMAR EKUSHEY
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2025

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ILLUSTRATION:
SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

THE IMPACT OF THE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT on our national psyche

The Language Movement became a cornerstone of the Bangalee national psyche, symbolising resistance to external threats and shaping collective identity through historical and cultural performative (rather than constative) engagements. It was not merely political, but existential—intimately tied to the preservation of the Bangla language, literature, and cultural heritage.

FARIDUL ALAM

The words crafted by Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury—*"Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano Ekushey February"* (My brothers' blood dyes the streets of 21st February)—encapsulate the very essence of Bangladesh's identity, forged through passionate resistance to the authoritarian imposition of a neo-colonial official language policy and the assertion of an unbreakable bond between language and an incipient national consciousness. *"Ami Ki Bhulite Pari"* (How can I forget that crimson stain?) is more than a mere lament for the blood spilt on February 21, 1952; it is a rallying cry for the cultural and political revolution that laid the groundwork for Bangladesh's eventual independence, encompassing the power of language in the formation of a mythogenic collective cultural identity, and beyond.

It is through language that a nation articulates its collective memory, expresses its aspirations, and creates the narratives that sustain its cultural and political existence. Even as language evolves, it remains a site of resistance, belonging, and identity, constantly shaping national selfhood. Historical struggles to preserve linguistic heritage—whether resisting colonial impositions, asserting indigenous tongues, or codifying dialects—underscore its centrality in nation-making. As Benedict Anderson suggests in *Imagined Communities*, language is the foundation of national identity, fostering a shared sense of belonging among people who may never meet. The nation is "imagined" because its members are united—not through direct interaction but via a shared linguistic framework—where print capitalism, public discourse, and cultural symbols transform language into a unifying force that sustains collective national consciousness.

The 1952 Language Movement and the revival of Hebrew illustrate the transformative power of language in shaping national identity and political struggle, though in distinct historical contexts. The Language Movement was a defiant resistance against linguistic imperialism, as the people of the then East Pakistan fought to preserve Bangla as the core of their linguistic and cultural identity against the imposed dominance of Urdu, not even a majority language. It represented a reactive process of identity formation in an unfriendly and hostile political environment. This struggle proved pivotal in the eventual emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. In contrast, the revival of Hebrew was a cultural reclamation, transforming a liturgical language into a modern spoken tongue, fostering unity among Jewish communities, and strengthening their national identity. Although the Bangalee linguistic-cultural identity predates India's partition by over a thousand years, its connection to the creation of a separate nation—through yet another partition—was catalysed by the Language Movement. This narrative continued to evolve thereafter, shaped by the shifting sociopolitical contexts of the nation.

Parallel movements across the world illustrate how language serves as a powerful force in shaping national and cultural identity. The Catalan and Basque language movements in Spain and the Quebecois struggle for linguistic rights in Canada—all underscore the deep nexus between language and cultural identity. From the Gaelic revival in Ireland to the Maori language revival movement in New Zealand, these struggles reflect how linguistic assertion becomes a site of resistance, self-determination, and national consciousness.

The Language Movement became a cornerstone of the Bangalee national psyche, symbolising resistance to external threats and shaping collective identity through historical and cultural performative (rather than constative) engagements. It was not merely political, but existential—intimately tied to the preservation of the Bangla language, literature, and cultural heritage. Martin Heidegger's concept of language as the "House of Being" suggests that language is not just a communication tool but the very structure that organises human existence. Without it, a profound sense of homelessness arises—an existential void mirrored by the cultural alienation felt during the Language Movement. The imposition of Urdu in East Pakistan represented a strategic attempt by the repressive regime to supplant Bangla as the shared official language, undermining the existential foundation of the majority population. This estrangement resonates with Homi J Bhabha's idea of the "unhomely," capturing the disjunction and dislocation typical in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

However, the Language Movement played a pivotal role in transforming this imposed estrangement into a site of resistance, reclaiming Bangla as both a home and a foundation for national consciousness. Jacques Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" emphasises how language constructs reality itself. Our histories, identities, and national consciousness are mediated through linguistic structures, sensory stimuli, and cognitive frameworks. Every perception, every claim to reality, is filtered through these structures, shaping our understanding of the world. The Language Movement exemplifies this truth: language is at the core of national identity, a dynamic force that not only shapes but also resists efforts to displace it, preserving the integrity of cultural and political identity. It is a dynamic text—subject to continual reinterpretation and reconfiguration—that challenges and deconstructs any canonical, primordial identities. Its legacy persisted in the movements leading up to the 1971 Liberation War and its aftermath, including the 2024 July-August uprising.

Badruddin Umar, in *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Totkalin Rajniti* (*The Language Movement in East Bengal and Contemporary Politics*), argues that the Language Movement was not merely a linguistic struggle but a pivotal moment in the political discourse on Bangalee identity, signalling the emergence of a nascent nationhood. The forced imposition of Urdu, as Umar notes, reflected a political disregard for the distinct cultural and linguistic identity of the then East Pakistan's people, deepening their alienation and sparking resistance. This phenomenon culminated in the deaths of several students on February 21, 1952, amplifying political consciousness and setting the stage for Bangladesh's eventual independence in 1971—an assertion of political sovereignty, cultural integrity, and economic survival.

The 1905 movement against the British partition of Bengal (Swadeshi Movement) was a defining moment in early Bangalee nationalism, opposing the colonial division along religious lines designed to weaken Bangalee unity. However, it did not directly engage with nation-state identity politics. In contrast, the Language Movement of 1952, built upon this nationalist foundation, forged its own path, prioritising linguistic and cultural autonomy. The Language Movement was crucial in the formation of Bangladesh's national identity, catalysing the pursuit of sovereignty. While the Bengal Renaissance—centred in Kolkata and shaped by figures like Tagore and Nazrul—influenced the movement, the Language Movement was grounded in Dhaka, where a distinct resurgence of Bangalee identity emerged, free from Kolkata's legacy and tutelage. It blended egalitarianism and secularism, though the model of secularism in Bangladesh has since become contested. Originally enshrined in the 1972 constitution, it has evolved with shifting political dynamics, increasingly shaped by the rise of religious conservatism. This development has blurred the lines between religion and politics in complex ways, sidelining the Language Movement backstage while foregrounding the history, as it plays out through dynamic narratives, continuously reframed by changing sociopolitical contexts.

Homi J Bhabha's concept of the nation as a continuous, contested process of narration offers valuable insight into Bangladesh's evolving political and national identity. As a pivotal moment in the country's history, the Language Movement could be seen as the foundational "text" that continued to unfold. Initially emerging as a bulwark against a repressive regime to preserve linguistic and cultural autonomy, it quickly transformed into a conduit for shaping the broader trajectory of Bangladesh's nationhood. This resistance was not merely reactive; the movement actively engaged in the construction and redefinition of national identity in opposition to external forces, particularly the Pakistani state. In Bhabha's own words, "In each of [the] 'foundational fictions,' the origins of national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affirmation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal,displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation."

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BANGLA LANGUAGE and literature after '47

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

After the Language Movement of 1952, the literary community of East Pakistan, particularly the younger generation, embarked on a new creative journey driven by the ideals of non-communalism, modernity, and experimentation with forms.

PRIYAM PAUL

The partition of British India in 1947 posed significant challenges to the state-building process in both India and Pakistan, including in Bengal, which faced the complexities of being divided between the two new nations. The Bangla language, which had thrived during the colonial era, suddenly found itself in an uncertain position within these newly formed states. After partition, the status of Bangla became deeply intertwined with religious identity, leading to a drastic shift in its socio-political landscape. Consequently, Bengal's literary figures engaged in deep reflection and practical discourse, seeking to understand the future role of Bangla in the context of nation-building.

As the Bengal province was divided, the composition of its population also changed. East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, while West Bengal remained a part of India. However, Calcutta, the undivided capital of Bengal until 1947, remained in West Bengal, while Dhaka was once again attained as this province's capital city. While both India and Pakistan concentrated their efforts on making Hindi and Urdu their state languages from the beginning, the question of what status Bangla would hold in these new states became a matter of concern. Literary figures sought to reconcile the high status Bangla had once enjoyed with the realities of the new political landscape.

For instance, poet Jibanananda Das (1899–1954) authored an extensive article in May 1951, titled *Bangla Bhasa o Sahityer Bhabishat* (*The Future of Bangla Language and Literature*), where he analysed the condition of the language in the context of post-partition Bengal. As one of the prominent figures among the modern poets of the 1930s, he critically assessed its future, exploring both its historical developments and prospects in a new, rapidly shifting context.

He stated that while English had been the state language of India, it would not retain the same position in the post-independence state, as India had already designated Hindi as its official language. However, he argued that Hindi was a far less developed language with a less significant literary tradition compared to English. At the same time, he acknowledged the crucial role English had played in enriching Bangla. He noted that, despite the challenges, English had greatly influenced Bangla. When Bangla first came into contact with English around 150 years ago, the latter was a far more developed language and thus helped foster not only Bangla literature but also critical thinking within the Bangla intellectual circles.

Jibanananda remarked that Bangla writers had greatly benefited from English for centuries, absorbing its power deeply. However, in independent India, Bangla no longer needed to borrow anything from Hindi, except perhaps for job-related purposes. While English had elevated Bangla, exchanging it for Hindi now would be a "loss and erosion" for Bangla. Though it might appear as prejudice against Hindi, this sentiment reflected the challenges faced by Bangla literary figures during that time.

The primary reason for the differing status of Bangla and Hindi lies in the rapid development of Bangla during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Jibanananda noted that, due to the contributions of Rabindranath Tagore, Bangla reached a literary sophistication comparable nearly to French or English. Notably, Tagore became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

Before this, Bengal had served as the British bridgehead since 1757, with Calcutta functioning as the colonial capital from 1772 to 1911. The city became an intellectual and educational hub, attracting students and scholars from across India and beyond to its numerous institutions of higher learning. Throughout this time, Calcutta remained a vital transnational trading centre. Many government and educational institutions were based in Calcutta. As the seat of the Council of the Governor-General of India and the viceroy, Calcutta also witnessed the rise of prominent institutions such as Hindu College, which later became the renowned Presidency College. Although Calcutta lost its status as the capital of British India in 1911, the presence of Rabindranath Tagore—an iconic figure of Indian culture and civilisation, yet distinctly a Bangla poet—continued to draw scholars and academicians. Bengal had a thriving literary culture, but by the 1930s and 1940s, its literary standards declined compared to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

With independence came the division of Bengal, and Bangalees were split between India and Pakistan, losing their once-undivided territory and population. Jibanananda observed that the size of a state does not necessarily determine the vibrancy of its language. He pointed to Greece and England as prime examples, where, despite relatively small territories, Greek and English gained prominence in global arts and literature—Greek in antiquity and English in modern times. However, Jibanananda noted that Bengal had already been weakened by famine before partition, compounded by large-scale migration both before and after. He highlighted that West Bengal suffered immensely from the influx of refugees from East Bengal and the economic losses caused by partition. As people struggled for basic survival, their focus shifted to bread-and-butter issues, making the prospects for Bangla language and literature in West Bengal seem overwhelmingly bleak. But the gradual decline of Bangla literature, according to him, had already begun there, even before the calamities of riots and mass migration.

In addition, he explained that while Bangla and its standard verbal form had almost entirely dominated West Bengal—spearheaded by the educated society—by the 20th century, the influence of standard Bangla began expanding alongside local dialects, most of which were Eastern Bangla dialects. He argued that these Eastern Bangla dialects represented the most organic variations of the language. However, due to partition, this evolution was disrupted, as communication between the two parts of Bengal became very difficult due to the separation of the newly formed states.

Jibanananda Das observed that the language issue in East Pakistan had become increasingly serious over the years, particularly concerning the question of Pakistan's state language. However, he expressed hope that Bangalee Muslims in East Pakistan would strive to establish Bangla as one of the state languages, which, in turn, would benefit the status of Bangla in West Bengal. Writing in 1951, his prediction proved true after the events of February 21, 1952. Ultimately, Bangla was officially recognised as one of Pakistan's state languages in 1956.

After the Language Movement of 1952, the literary community of East Pakistan, particularly the younger generation, embarked on a new creative journey driven by the ideals of non-communalism, modernity, and experimentation with forms. This newfound spirit was reflected in numerous significant publications and literary circles, marking the rise of a new wave in East Pakistan's literary landscape. Munier Chowdhury (1925–1971) was one of the most prominent figures in this movement. In 1952, he was arrested for protesting against police repression and the killing of students on February 21. He remained in detention until 1954, during which time he wrote a one-act play, *Kabar* (1953), which was staged inside the jail with prisoners playing various parts. Later, he became one of the most influential professors at Dhaka University, leaving a lasting impact on both academia and literature.

Munier Chowdhury delivered a lecture in 1969 on the emerging new wave of Bangla literature in East Pakistan. In his speech, he highlighted key shortcomings of contemporary Bangla literature, including excessive rusticity, suburbanity, localism, and oversimplification. He stressed the need for a shift towards civility, refined knowledge, intellectual depth, and cultural sophistication. Chowdhury acknowledged the significant progress made by young literary figures of the 1960s in this direction, and wholeheartedly welcomed their efforts—particularly praising *Kanthaswar*, a literary journal edited by Abdullah Abu Sayeed, despite not being a part of their literary circle.

Jibanananda once observed that Bangla language and literature had been in decline in undivided Bengal since the 1940s. However, a counter-development emerged in East Pakistan during the 1960s. The poet of *Rupashi Bangla* passed away in 1954 and did not witness this literary resurgence in Dhaka, but in his article, he expressed hope for the literary future of Bangla on the eastern front. Despite being under an oppressive regime, East Pakistan experienced a renewed spirit in Bangla language and literature, a phenomenon reflected across various literary forms—a point later emphasised by Munier Chowdhury. Notably, Badruddin Umar argues that the literary vibrancy of the 1960s under Pakistani rule remained unmatched in independent Bangladesh. This suggests that the rise and decline of Bangla language and literature cannot be understood in absolute terms but rather as part of a complex and evolving trajectory.

Priyam Paul *is a journalist and researcher.*

The impact of the language movement on our national psyche

The Language Movement's legacy, much like Said's notion of travelling ideas and Lacan's *objet petit a*, is neither static nor confined to its original moment but remains a dynamic force, continuously reimagined in Bangladesh's unfolding political narrative.

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Following independence, this narrative continued to evolve through political struggles, reflected in ongoing debates about democracy, freedom of expression, fundamental rights, religious and minority indigenous rights, secularism, and justice. These issues forced the nation-in-the-making to confront questions that demanded the prevailing identity be renegotiated and re-narrativised. The July-August uprising further exemplified this contested process, as mass protests against an authoritarian government marked a new chapter in the redefinition of the political order. Citizens, dissatisfied with the status quo, utilised the uprising as a platform to challenge the existing political framework and assert their vision for Bangladesh's future.

Edward Said's Traveling Theory also offers a lens through which to understand the Language Movement as a text that continues to unfold, adapting to new political contexts while retaining its foundational significance. Much like Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire that structures the subject's longing—the Language Movement functions as a recurring point of reference in Bangladesh's national consciousness, embodying an ideal of linguistic and cultural sovereignty that is never fully realised but continually pursued. Just as linguistic theories evolve when they move across cultural, racial, and geopolitical spaces, the Language Movement has undergone reinterpretation across historical moments—from the fight against linguistic imperialism in 1952 to its legacy in the 1971 Liberation War and the July-August uprising. While the movement initially asserted linguistic identity as a site of resistance, its meaning has expanded, shaping ongoing struggles over political sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and democratic aspirations. The Language Movement's legacy, much like Said's notion of travelling ideas and Lacan's *objet petit a*, is neither static nor confined to its original moment but remains a dynamic force, continuously reimagined in Bangladesh's unfolding political narrative.

The battle for linguistic rights in Bangladesh has transcended mere preservation; it is now a fight against cultural homogenisation, through the external loci of control.

FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

In the end, the stability of any political order hinges not only on institutional mechanisms but also on the collective will of its people—a continuous reaffirmation of shared belonging and purpose. As Ernest Renan famously asserted, the nation is a "daily plebiscite," a recurring act of commitment that must be actively renewed. Central to this process is the interplay between collective memory and collective forgetting, which forms the national psyche. The memories that a nation chooses to remember and those it chooses to forget shape the boundaries of its identity, marking the contours of inclusion and exclusion. Yet, when national identity is tethered to linguistic hegemony, this daily reaffirmation becomes exclusionary, creating a centre-periphery binary that marginalises indigenous communities and ethnic minorities while also entrenching existing inequalities within the dominant linguistic group itself. In moments of upheaval, this dynamic is further amplified, as the terms of inclusion and exclusion are renegotiated. Without a conscious and deliberate engagement with these fractures—one that acknowledges the multiplicity within the national fabric rather than suppressing it—the very idea of a cohesive national community risks becoming a hollow ideal, failing those whom it purports to represent. The future, then, depends on an ongoing negotiation—one that is never settled but always in the making.

February 21 this year marks the silver jubilee celebration of International Mother Language Day, grounded in the 1952 Language Movement, which highlights the vital connection between language and national identity. While Bangladesh's initiative led UNESCO to recognise the day in 1999, its spirit has been co-opted by political forces and vested interests, particularly by the ousted government, to suppress freedom of expression and dismantle liberal democracy. This year's theme, focused on linguistic diversity, resonates deeply with Bangladesh's ongoing struggle, where globalisation threatens linguistic erosion, with dominant languages overshadowing others and undermining the foundation of language-centred national consciousness. The battle for linguistic rights in Bangladesh has transcended mere preservation; it is now a fight against cultural homogenisation, through the external loci of control.

On this day, Bangladesh must move beyond ritualistic homage and reaffirm the importance of mother-tongue education and multilingual policies, while also reclaiming the true, untainted spirit of the Language Movement—undaunted, unbowed, ushering in a dawn of a new beginning, rooted in the wisdom of the past.

Dr Faridul Alam *writes from New York City, US.*

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LANGUAGE, LAND, LABOUR, AND LIBERATION

Reclaiming the radical roots of Ekushey

The Movement's political dimensions were inseparable from its cultural implications. The battle for linguistic rights reflected deeper socio-economic struggles, as language relations mirrored class relations. The participation of peasants, workers, and marginalised communities ensured that the Movement transcended middle-class concerns, transforming into a broader anti-colonial and democratic project. This mass participation laid the groundwork for subsequent political movements, including the Liberation War of 1971.

AZFAR HUSSAIN

Every time the question of language surfaces it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore.
- Antonio Gramsci

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.
- Frantz Fanon

If I draw upon—and combine or even constellate—the insights of the Italian Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci and the Caribbean anti-colonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon, I might argue that the question of language is more than merely linguistic; that it is simultaneously a social, political, and cultural question—even a complex and contested site of both anticolonial and class struggles. I will return to these interconnected Gramscian-Fanonian conceptual nodes later. For now, let me begin with some general observations on our 1952 Language Movement, through which, however, I will critically interrogate certain standard or official narratives—narratives marked by the violence of erasures and elisions.

Of course—as I have argued elsewhere—our middle-class, soggy, sentimental nationalism continues to celebrate the Language Movement of 1952 on February 21—Ekushey February—in its own way, year after year. And, in doing so, it erases, obscures, and even occults the sites of real material contradictions and antagonisms—contradictions that involve, among other things, questions of class and gender. This routine celebration thus persistently evacuates Ekushey of its radical content and emancipatory aspirations. Moreover, given the trajectory of our mainstream political culture that has evolved since the birth of Bangladesh as a sovereign state—a culture that was decisively shaped by anti-people, anti-democratic, and even fascist elements, a culture that has by no means come to its end today—the Dhaka-centric yearly "celebration" of Ekushey repeatedly exposes how it has been reduced to a narrow "cultural" event—as if it has nothing to do with the emancipatory aspirations and struggles of the oppressed in Bangladesh.

But Ekushey February is more than a historical moment; it is part of a larger history of mass movements—peasant uprisings, workers' struggles, and even indigenous rebellions—in the then East Pakistan. Drawing on Badruddin Umar's monumental, people-centred, three-volume work *Purbo Banglar Bhasha Andolon o Totkalin Rajneeti*, one can trace the roots of the Language Movement back to 1947-1948, when the first waves of resistance emerged from peasants, workers, *adibashis*, and communists, despite their internal differences and tactical pitfalls.

But official, middle-class narratives of the Language Movement often accentuate the roles of prominent leaders—sometimes important as they were—while remaining audibly silent about the struggles and sacrifices of the genuinely oppressed: women, peasants, and workers. Without their persistent resistance, the 1952 Language Movement would not have gained momentum, nor would Bangladesh have emerged as a distinct state in 1971. The true protagonists of both the Language Movement and the National Liberation Movement were these so-called "ordinary" people, with peasants, workers, women, Indigenous communities, and different minorities playing remarkable roles.

Thus, history writing itself remains a contested terrain—an ongoing site of struggle—where absences, silences, and omissions are far from neutral or innocent.

The challenge then decisively resides in recuperating and reclaiming the radical content of our Language Movement, although this does not mean a simple return to the past. History, after all, offers no straightforward return. We cannot go back to 1952 or the preceding years that set the stage for that historical event. What we can do, however, is rediscover and reinterpret the movement's significance in light of our present conjuncture—one shaped by the possibilities opened up by the July uprising of 2024, yet still marked by persistent inequalities in production relations and power relations that structure everyday life in Bangladesh.

With this in mind, I intend to address some questions that remain largely unexamined in our standard narratives of the Language Movement. Here, I find Nafis H's relatively neglected piece, "Language for Liberation: The Class Struggle Behind Ekushey February," particularly instructive, as it foregrounds the often-overlooked roles of marginalised communities. As Nafis H reminds us: "Today, as [...] *adibashis* struggle to maintain their existence, it bears remembering that Ekushey February stands on the sacrifice of not only Bengalis but also *adibashis*." Badruddin Umar similarly argues that the Language Movement did not erupt suddenly; its socio-economic and political roots had been forming since at least 1947.

Indeed, East Pakistan was then a classic case of internal colonialism under West Pakistan, with structural disparities becoming flagrantly evident soon after the Partition. For instance, by 1952, West Pakistan had developed 22 times more electric distribution infrastructure than East Pakistan. Healthcare spending plummeted in the east, while nearly 99% of foreign aid went to development projects in West Pakistan. Between 1947 and 1952, East Bengal faced successive crises: widespread food shortages, government corruption, skyrocketing prices of essentials, rampant smuggling, and a scarcity of non-agrarian jobs. In Sylhet, the food crisis even degenerated into famine as the government's policies drove farmers into hardship. The salt crisis of 1950-51 further exacerbated suffering when the government prohibited imports from India and forced East Pakistan to purchase overpriced salt from Karachi, causing a 200-fold price surge.

Our Language Movement was not simply about choosing Bangla as the state language; it was about asserting self-definition against an imposed linguistic regime. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

To add to this already grim scenario, partition had drained approximately 1.33 billion rupees from East Bengal by 1948-49 alone. These material conditions, along with the struggles of peasants, workers, and Indigenous communities, laid the foundations for the 1952 Language Movement—an event far more complex and politically charged than the sanitised narratives we routinely encountered during the Awami fascist regime in particular.

To fully grasp the significance of the Language Movement, we must consider the earlier waves of resistance in East Bengal—an internal neo-colony—before 1952. Three key movements stand out, revealing how poor peasants—Hindu and Muslim alike—along with Indigenous peoples and communists, got united against the *zamindari-jotdari* system and the ruling classes. These include the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-47, the Nachol Rebellion of 1949-50, and the Hajong Rebellion of 1949-50.

The Nachol Rebellion, led by Santal activist Matla Sardar and communist leaders Ramen and Ila Mitra, saw peasants of all communities rise against exploitative *jotdars*. Though initially successful, the movement was violently repressed by the Pakistani state; activists faced brutal torture, and Ila Mitra was imprisoned and tortured. I can't help but recall lines from a Bangla poem I wrote in my late twenties: "Remember Chandipur, Dharol, Ghasura, Jagdai, Kendua, Napitparaa, Rautara, Shyampura —those villages that rose in rebellion!/ Remember the sunlit eyes of those Indigenous peasants in the middle of the epic of the autumnal harvest?/ Remember! Remember!"

The Hajong Rebellion, meanwhile, emerged from the relentless exploitation of Indigenous Hajong peasants, who lost their lands under British rule and were crushed by the Tanka system, which imposed fixed and ever-increasing taxes in kind. In July 1949, the Pakistani government killed 40 Hajong villagers in their sleep and tortured seven activists to death. Yet the rebellion persisted with remarkable resolve, led by figures like Kumudini Hajong and Rasamani Hajong—the first woman to be killed. Their slogan was clear and uncompromising: "*Jaan debo tobu bhaat debona*" (Slay us if you must, but our rice stays ours!).

Alongside these peasant rebellions, communists also mobilised workers, staging 26 strikes involving more than 12,000 participants within just four months between August and December 1947. Without these interconnected struggles—peasant, Indigenous, and working-class—the Language Movement of 1952 would not have moved beyond its middle-class origins to become a genuine mass movement.

Of course, Ekushey February itself remains a watershed moment in our history. On that day in 1952, thousands of students gathered in front of the old arts faculty building of Dhaka University, chanting *"Rashtra Bhasha Bangla Chai"* (We demand Bangla as the state language). Defying Section 144, they faced police bullets, with five killed and many more injured. As one of my poems aptly put it, "Bangla was written in blood in 1952."

The Language Movement, to which students provided a conjunctural but decisive voice, quickly morphed into a mass movement, as Badruddin Umar's work meticulously documents. Language itself emerged as a significant site of class struggle, with peasants and workers playing crucial roles in shaping the Movement's emancipatory and anticolonial ethos. From the outset, the Movement directly challenged what might be termed linguistic colonialism.

Many conventional accounts fail to explore the intersection of language and colonialism, thereby missing the deeper relationship between decolonisation and democratisation. Such narratives rarely consider the broader political and social implications, particularly the potential for the total emancipation of Bangladesh's "ordinary" people: women, peasants, workers, and marginalised ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities, our Indigenous peoples included. The language question remains unresolved in our history, deeply entangled with issues of land, labour, and the body—the four material sites of both oppression and opposition. Without freeing these sites from the systemic forces of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, genuine emancipation remains elusive.

This formulation, while broad, becomes evident when we examine Bangladesh's political economy today. The land question, for instance, remains fraught with class-based inequalities and the dispossession of minority communities. The ongoing struggles of tea workers in Sylhet exemplify this dynamic, as they fight for their land amid corporate and state collusion. Labour, too, remains a site of acute exploitation. Once justly described by Samir Amin as part of the "periphery of the periphery" under global capitalism, Bangladesh's labour force, particularly its female workers, endures some of the world's harshest working conditions despite official narratives of development.

Labour here is not a homogeneous entity; rather, it comprises various categories of workers subjected to varying degrees of proletarianisation. The labouring body, particularly the gendered body, becomes central to understanding the language of struggle that emerges from these conditions. Jean-Jacques Lecercle's concept of the "labouring body," with its biological, social, and experiential dimensions, underscores how language is rooted in the material realities of labour and exploitation.

Turning to the language question, we find resonances with anti-colonial theorists like Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi asserts that language fundamentally shapes people's relationship with their environment and the world. While Rabindranath Tagore also engaged with the relationship between language and being, it was Kazi Nazrul Islam who explicitly identified language as a site of anti-colonial struggle. For Nazrul, as for Ngugi, language is more than a medium of communication; it is a political praxis that challenges colonial and class-based hegemonies.

Our Language Movement was not simply about choosing Bangla as the state language; it was about asserting self-definition against an imposed linguistic regime. The movement thus functioned as a political act of resistance against linguistic and cultural colonialism, particularly against the attempts to impose Urdu as the sole state language. The partition of India serves as a crucial backdrop here. Partition was driven by colonial power structures, middle-class political interests, and inadequate cultural resistance to British domination. The creation of Pakistan ushered in a new phase of internal colonialism, with West Pakistan dominating East Bengal economically, politically, and culturally.

The attempts to impose Urdu signified this cultural colonialism. Despite Bangla being the majority language, the state sought to establish Urdu as the unifying linguistic standard. The assertion that "Urdu, Urdu alone, shall be the state language of Pakistan" paralleled British colonial linguistic policies, which sought to marginalise Indigenous languages and cultures. The 1952 Language Movement was thus both a political and cultural struggle, directly confronting this attempt to erase linguistic diversity and impose a singular, elite-centric identity.

The Movement's political dimensions were inseparable from its cultural implications. The battle for linguistic rights reflected deeper socio-economic struggles, as language relations mirrored class relations. The participation of peasants, workers, and marginalised communities ensured that the Movement transcended middle-class concerns, transforming into a broader anti-colonial and democratic project. This mass participation laid the groundwork for subsequent political movements, including the Liberation War of 1971.

However, the linguistic landscape of Bangladesh remains marked by inequalities today. The dominance of English in elite and institutional settings perpetuates a class divide, privileging a small, affluent minority while marginalising the majority who communicate primarily in Bangla, Indigenous, or other languages. This linguistic hierarchy mirrors broader social inequalities, as access to English often determines access to education, employment, and social mobility. Regional dialects and Indigenous languages face even greater marginalisation, reflecting the ongoing dynamics of cultural and linguistic colonialism.

Globalisation—often glorified as a force for connectivity but, in reality, a euphemism for capitalism's latest stage—exacerbates these inequalities. As Ngugi and Fanon both recognised, the spread of dominant languages often serves as a tool of cultural imperialism. In Bangladesh, the valorisation of English within educational and corporate spheres creates a linguistic hierarchy that aligns with global capitalist interests. The result is a deepening of class divisions, with linguistic competence in English functioning as a gatekeeper of privilege.

This internal linguistic divide also manifests in attitudes towards Bangla itself. Some members of the urban elite take pride in their inability to speak or write in Bangla, positioning themselves as cosmopolitan while dismissing the cultural and historical significance of their mother tongue. Such attitudes reflect a colonial mindset, perpetuating the belief in the superiority of global, market-friendly languages over locally rooted ones. And, of course, the languages of Indigenous peoples and other minorities remain the most marginalised in the country, while Bangla asserts itself as the dominant tongue.

Thus, the unfinished nature of the Language Movement, like the liberation movement, calls for renewed engagement with the politics of language. This engagement must move beyond nostalgic commemorations to address the structural and ideological forces that continue to marginalise linguistic and cultural diversity. It requires a collective effort to challenge the ongoing legacies and active forces of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism that shape our linguistic practices and policies.

Ultimately, the struggle for linguistic justice remains inseparable from broader struggles for social, economic, and political emancipation. As Fanon reminds us, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture." In Bangladesh, reclaiming the radical spirit of the Language Movement means not only defending Bangla but also ensuring that linguistic, cultural, and social practices reflect the principles of equality, justice, and dignity—the three core principles of our national liberation movement that were recently reclaimed by the July uprising itself—for all communities. Only then can the unfinished project of our Language Movement move towards its emancipatory horizon. And, at the risk of sounding "utopian," I contend that this moment in our history demands a new politics—indeed, a new revolutionary politics—without which building a "new Bangladesh" will remain impossible.

Dr Azfar Hussain *is director of the graduate programme in social innovation and professor of integrative/interdisciplinary studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan, US. He is also summer distinguished professor of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) and vice-president of the US-based Global Centre for Advanced Studies.*

AMAR EKUSHEY
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2025

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Preserving Indigenous languages through films

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.

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 *Bikinggri 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 Rakhaine, 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 *Bikinggri 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 Rakhaine, the director of the aforementioned film, despite being a Rakhaine himself, admitted that while his parents are fluent in reading the Rakhaine 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 Rakhaine, 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 audiences, blending Bangla and Garo words to maintain accessibility.

A still from the Indigenous film *Umbrella*.

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 Rakhine, 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.

Mathews Chiran *is a development practitioner from the Indigenous Mandi/Garo community.*

The art, identity, and culture behind book covers

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.

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

It is much more than just a protective wrapper. A book cover creates the first impression a writer wishes to convey to readers. Since the dawn of printing, books have been a testament to the technological developments of the time, and a reflection of the culture and art of the region. From simple lettering to digitally crafted covers of this generation, book art has undergone a revolution that mirrors the changing landscape of the nation's publishing industry.

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 Qayyum 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, Qayyum 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.

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.

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.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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.

Mannan Mashhur Zarif *is senior sub-editor at The Daily Star.*