



PHOTOS: GULSHAN SOCIETY

FEATURE

WHOSE LANGUAGE MATTERS: On inclusion, identity, and silence

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STAR BOOKS REPORT

Recall one of the most memorable posters from our Liberation War: "Banglar Hindu, Banglar Christian, Banglar Buddho, Banglar Musolman, Amra Shobai Bangali". Widely shared even today, especially during important junctures in our political history, the poster testifies to the secular foundational principles of Bangladesh on one hand and erases the non-Bangali identity from the nationalist movement on the other; the latter remains a phenomenon that is persistent even during our present moment.

All this and more were discussed at a panel titled "Language Matters" at the Gulshan Society Bhasha Utshob on February 22. Featuring linguists, activists, academics, and artists including Manosh Chowdhury, Naira Khan, Sharmee Hossain, Reng Young Mro, and Ruposhree Hajong, and moderated by Nazia Manzoor, the panel supplied a critical as well as emotional commentary on the issues of linguistic hegemonisation, power imbalances, the marginalisation of non-Bangali languages and identities, and the aftermath of the revolutionary spirit of July 2024. Below is an excerpt from the hour-long conversation that encapsulates the dichotomies characterising Bangladesh's independence struggle and its relationship with its own languages.

NAZIA MANZOOR: The first Sadaf Saaz and I first discussed this panel, we began by reflecting on what the core questions, primary ideas, and fundamental concepts of a discussion on language at a Bhasha Utshob should be. And time and again, we kept returning to the same point—whenever we think about language, we do so from a deeply Bangali-centric perspective.

So, the question we want to raise here is: Is there room to step away from this Bangali-centric viewpoint and reconsider our approach to language? And if so, how does this panel engage with that idea?

RENG YOUNG MRO: The first school I attended was a village school named Ronjupara Registered Beshorkari Prathomik Biddaloy. Back then, all of our teachers were Bangali or Bangla-speaking, which made communication very difficult for us. We struggled to understand most of what they were saying. As a result, our foundational

primary education remained weak. I studied in that village school until class five, but because of this struggle, when I later enrolled in a school in Rangamati, I was demoted from class five to class three. Since I wasn't fluent in Bangla—or English, for that matter, as both are dominant, state-endorsed languages—I had to start over from class three.

I remember in college, during a Bangla class, there was a debate about whether Bangladesh's national language should be considered one's mother tongue or whether one's first language should be the language learned at home. Our teacher concluded that since all residents of this country live within its borders, *Bangla is the mother tongue of all of us*.

Earlier, while sitting in the audience, I was listening to another discussion panel where people were speaking fluently in English and Bangla. And inside me, my nervousness was only growing—because I have struggled under the weight of these two colonial languages—and yet here I am, sitting on a red-carpeted panel, breaking through those barriers to participate in this discussion. That contradiction within me is unsettling; yet, at the same time, it feels significant.

MANOSH CHOWDHURY: I can offer a perspective here. Thanks to Reng, as I was not familiar with his wit before, but his 3-minute speech effectively conveyed the challenges faced in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the grand nationalistic pride that sometimes leads to cultural suppression.

One point to keep in mind is that many of us who are genuine Bangla speakers often forget that in Bangladesh, other ethnic groups who, as recently as under the previous Prime Minister, were labeled as "minorities" or even derogatorily called "khudro nrigoshthi", are still fighting for their rights. The new government still has not fully lifted this stigma, and many of those who go to school or college today are, in fact, trilingual. But this trilingualism is often dismissed, ridiculed, or misunderstood as something unnecessary or forced, just as it was in the case Reng mentioned.

About 20 years ago, the Santal community opened a mother-tongue school that was ultimately demolished. On one hand, Bangali

apologists argued that there was no real need for a Santal language school. This is a crucial question, but those of you who live here in Gulshan also question whether everyone must learn Bangla. These two issues are, in fact, intertwined, but the key point is that the value of establishing a Santal language school in Bangladesh was undermined before it could even begin, and the people in the region destroyed the school before it could come under the attention of government officials. This is the linguistic-political reality we live in.

NM: Ruposhree. I would like to ask you about your experience in this matter.

RUPOSHREE HAJONG: Thank you. I am Ruposhree Hajong. I am a member of the



Hajong community. It is estimated that there are about 15,000 Hajongs in Bangladesh, but the actual number is likely less. We, the Hajong community, primarily reside in areas such as Sherpur, Netrokona, Mymensingh, and Sunamganj. The language we speak is the Hajong language, and we call it by this name. The Hajong language does not have a written script, that is, it has no alphabet of its own. Over time, the language has been passed down orally.

In class six, when I moved to the upazila, I often saw that when I spoke in Bangla, the other students would laugh. Maybe the teacher had asked something, and I was answering in Bangla, but everyone would just laugh at me. In those moments, I would immediately fall silent. I endured a lot of pain during classes six and seven

because of this. However, when I joined the missionary school in class eight, I noticed that there, I was the only one who could speak a little Bangla, while others couldn't. At that point, I felt like no one would mock me anymore, and I had survived.

In this way, gradually, my sense of Bangla language developed. One of my biggest struggles is that, since the Hajong language doesn't have an alphabet, I, as an artist (I have completed my honours and masters in Fine Arts from Jahangirnagar University), cannot preserve any written symbols of our Hajong language. So, what I do is incorporate elements of the Hajong culture into the corners of my canvas, based on my compositions. For example, I might include something like our traditional weaving patterns, or our traditional dress, or even some songs from the Hajong language, subtly woven into the artwork. Today, I should have worn our traditional Hajong dress, Pathin, but many people are not familiar with it, and normally when it's seen on the streets, people stare incessantly, which makes me feel uneasy.

What I mean is that no one else knows my language except me.

SHARMEE HOSSAIN: This is a very interesting discussion, and I would like to add something to it. As Nazia was saying: How do we move beyond Bangali centeredness? In reality, this question brings up another question, too. Even if we set aside other languages, which Bangla are we referring to here? The Bangla I speak while living in Gulshan? Or the one spoken by a farmer in Baghmara? The way we wear different masks of language—how we choose which language to use depending on whom we are speaking to—is something we need to reflect on. We must also consider the power dynamics that exist within Bangla itself, across its various dialects. When Ruposhree was speaking, I understood her. Yet, whether for political reasons or other factors, these two languages are still regarded as separate.

NM: Naira Apa, could you share your insights on this matter: The linguistic tension that we experience in terms of the power hierarchy—how we understand what language is, which languages get spoken, which are prioritised, and how the classroom

either challenges or reinforces these dynamics?

NAIRA KHAN: What we heard from Reng and Ruposhree highlights that even in establishing Bangla identity, there was a struggle. And in the process of doing so, we ended up at the other extreme—marginalised languages.

When people talk about language distortion, I always ask, "Then what is the pure form?" And when they refer to a pure form, they mention Promito Bangla (previously termed as Shuddho Bangla). Then I ask, "What is shuddho or standard Bangla?" What is it really? It's just another dialect. And which dialect is it? The Kolkata dialect.

At this point, we have a distinct Dhaka dialect that differs from the Kolkata dialect. Why was the Dhaka dialect originally chosen? Because the political seat of power was there. If the political seat of power had been in Chittagong or Noakhali, I would have had to learn the Noakhali dialect. Why? Because when people adopt the dialect of those in power, it benefits those in power.

What I've noticed, though, is that our students deliberately use words like "porsi", "khaisi" even when they are told that they must not. It's their way of saying, "No, I am not subscribing to your norms."

NM: A form of resistance.

NK: Right. The new generation is consciously and purposefully breaking free from [rigid forms of practising language].

NM: Tracing back from the time of the Liberation War till now, even after the recent Mass Uprising of 2024, we are seeing a resurgence of that nationalist imposition—whether in the online sphere, on the streets, or even in spaces like book fairs, where a police officer might judge you based on your private conversation and attack your personal identity.

When we talk about language and its inextricable link to identity, there's a weight of responsibility that comes with it. The identity we inhabit and the language we speak—both shape how we present ourselves. But this also creates fractures: Which identity takes precedence over another and why?

This article has been abridged for print. Read the full discussion at The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature's websites.