KHARIA'S LAST SPEAKERS

Holding on to a fading world

Pius Nanuar, along with Dhirghu Kharia, his wife, and other Kharia language speakers from the Rajghat Tea Garden in Moulvibazar.

PHOTO: SREEJON PAL

"If we two die, this language will die with us," said Veronica, the elder of the two. Her voice trembles with emotion, aware that their mother tongue might vanish from this land forever.

MINTU DESHWARA

In the heart of Moulvibazar's Sreemangal upazila, inside the Bormachhara Tea Garden, a language is quietly slipping into oblivion. Spoken now only by two elderly sisters, Veronica Kerketa and Christina Kerketa, the Kharia language—once a vibrant medium of cultural expression—is facing imminent extinction.

The sisters, who belong to the tea garden, are the last fluent speakers of Kharia in Bangladesh. A language once spoken by an entire community is now confined to their conversations after work, spoken softly over evening meals and during daily chores.

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The sisters, seven years apart in age, learnt Kharia from their parents, who were brought from Ranchi, India, by British planters during colonial times to work in the tea gardens. Veronica, now retired, and Christina, still a daily wage worker, are widows and live in separate houses within the same village. But they meet often and speak only in Kharia to one another.

They are also fluent in Bangla and communicate with others in Sadri or Bagani when needed. However, none of their children or grandchildren speak the language. "I tried to teach them," said Veronica. "But they had no interest. They prefer Bangla."

Christina echoed her sister's concerns. "Once we're gone, no one will speak Kharia here anymore. The government must take steps now, or it will be too late."

"Only a handful of ten to fifteen people in Sreemangal can recall a few Kharia words," said Jaharlal Indwar Pandey, the head of the Kharia community in the area. "Our ancestors came from Ranchi to then Asam after 1884. They brought the language with them. Now, even though some of us can understand it, we don't know how to keep it alive."

Nestled in Bormachhara, the local Kharia community—just 24 families strong—comprises around a hundred people in total. But within this tight-knit group, the language that once bound generations together now lingers only in memory. There is no platform, curriculum, or organised effort to pass it on. No books, no schools, and no linguistic support. Without these, Kharia has steadily slipped away from daily life.

"Only my mother and aunt speak it," shared Hilarus Soreng, son of Veronica Kerketa. "When they talk to each other, the children laugh—they don't understand a word."

PHOTO: ADNAN SOYKOT

Young Kharia children listen as Veronica Kerketa speaks to them in their ancestral Kharia language at Bormachhara, Sreemangal upazila, Moulvibazar.

According to the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), there are an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 Kharia speakers across Bangladesh. But on the ground, the reality appears much grimmer. Independent verification suggests only Veronica and Christina can speak it fluently.

Dr Mohammad Ashaduzzaman, Director of IMLI, acknowledged the urgency. "We are currently working on documentation and research on endangered languages, including Kharia, Kanda, and Rengmitchaya," he said. "Our team has already visited Sreemangal and plans to return. We're preparing proposals for the government and will hold regular awareness events and community discussions."

Despite this momentum, the absence of a structured education model continues to hinder progress. Dr Mashrur Imtiaz, Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Dhaka University, who conducted a field survey in 2018, estimated that fewer than 20 people in Sylhet still speak Kharia.

"I'm not aware of any institutional work or research on the Kharia language," he said. "There are no people who speak it, and no schools."

But there is a glimmer of hope. "I have a Kharia grammar book that I collected from India," Dr Imtiaz added. "Using this, a basic grammar can be developed for new learners so that the language can be preserved."

Pius Nanuar, a Kharia social activist who conducted a population study in early 2020, found around 5,700 Kharia individuals across 41 villages in Sylhet division. Despite recent government attention, tangible support remains limited. Visits from officials and IMLI signal growing awareness, but these gestures haven't yet translated into lasting initiatives.

What the community needs is simple yet vital—a language school with proper funding and resources. For now, the burden of preservation lies squarely on the Kharia people themselves.

Families try to pass down the language informally. Some even reach out to Kharia-speaking regions in India for materials. But these grassroots efforts, noble as they are, struggle without institutional backing.

Students from Jagannath University have created the docu-film The Last Leaf, focusing on the Kharia community of Bangladesh. With deep respect and authenticity, the film highlights the cultural richness, resilience, and challenges of the Kharia people. Director Shajnin Rahman emphasises the importance of preserving their language and culture, while Executive Producer Adnan Soykot underscores the power of storytelling to give voice to marginalised communities. The Last Leaf is a tribute to the dignity and heritage of the Kharia tribe.

Because Kharia is more than a means of communication. It is a vessel of the community's identity, history, and rituals. Letting it vanish would mean losing an entire heritage.

With sincere collaboration among the government, academia, and the Kharia community, there is still time to rescue the language—before its final echoes fade into silence.

Mintu Deshwara *is a journalist at The Daily Star.*

"Most couldn't say what a home looked like"

In conversation with Nasir Ali Mamun—renowned photographer, writer, and author of *Ghor Nai*, a poignant chronicle of the lives, dreams, and despair of Dhaka's homeless.

The Daily Star (TDS): What inspired you to begin interviewing people living on the streets?

Nasir Ali Mamun (NAM): After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, I pioneered portrait photography in the country. For over 30 years, I continued this practice, capturing portraits of prominent individuals from various walks of life. Over time, I started to feel that—being born and raised in the capital city—I should also pay attention to what lies beneath my feet, so to speak. I noticed that many small children—boys and girls—were on the streets. I began asking: why are they here? Are they beggars? I started investigating and eventually became involved with Prothom Alo.

Many of these people were concentrated in areas like markets, Sadarghat, Kamalapur Railway Station, and other locations where people arrived from different parts of Bangladesh. As I continued my inquiry, I realised that these people are not all homeless in the same way. There are two categories: those who live on the streets—sleeping and staying on the roads—and those who live in slums across different parts of Dhaka. The first group begs during the day or wanders around, perhaps hoping for some food or help. Some don't even beg; they just roam. They come from various districts and rural areas of Bangladesh. The main problem they face is poverty. Then there are issues like parental divorce, polygamy, or being separated from their parents at a young age. Many of these children never learn the whereabouts of their parents again, and vice versa. These are the truly homeless.

In contrast, those living in slums are not technically homeless. They have some form of shelter, however informal. But those without an address—they are truly without identity. Every human being has an address. But these people—these children—have neither a visible identity nor an address. In essence, they are the dispossessed, the address-less people. Isn't that astonishing? The government has no statistics on them. No NGO, to my knowledge, has worked specifically with those who are truly homeless. They sleep on the streets, all looking the same—lying down, sitting, roaming.

TDS: What was your interviewing style or technique?

NAM: My main focus had always been on the children, though I did interview a few elderly men and women. But the children were at the heart of it.

I developed a set of seven common questions to identify who was truly homeless and who lived in slums or at least had some form of address. Just by asking those seven questions, I could differentiate between them. I then began conducting interviews using informal language—colloquial speech—transcribing exactly what they said, including their incorrect pronunciations. I noticed that many of the boys and girls, especially girls between the ages of 12 and 14 or 15, would often flee.

Cover of the book *Ghor Nai* by Nasir Ali Mamun.

The boys would too. I used to wonder—why do they run away? I treated them kindly.

Eventually, I discovered that this approach wasn't enough. I stopped carrying bags. I started taking just a small camera, a tiny tape recorder, wore old clothes, and began approaching them more naturally. Then they began to come to me—they felt I was one of them. Many of them said that people like me had come before—chhokra-baj, meaning undercover CID officers. The girls also said things like, "These people talk nonsense—they're bad people." They had already experienced much.

৬০ বছরের আবদুস সাত্তার

রাজধানীর বেশির ভাগ মানুষই দোজখে যাবে

A snapshot from the book *Ghor Nai*. Sixty-year-old Abdus Sattar, captured on the streets of Dhaka, declares: "Most people in the capital will end up in hell."

These street children sleep exposed—they have no protection, no homes, nothing. Their bodies, their desires—everything exists in a kind of liminal zone, like a no man's land between two countries. That's where these people truly exist.

And we, as a society, have created this situation. These people—homeless individuals—are not accepted anywhere. We don't give them jobs. Many of us say they are thieves, robbers, or that they will kill us and run away. These are the kinds of narratives that exist about them.

TDS: Was it difficult to publish these stories?

NAM: Normally, no one publishes this kind of writing. First, they said, "Why are you bringing this up? What daily newspaper gives space to these kinds of people?" I said, "Just give it a try—print one." One piece was published. Then, after two and a half months, I requested again and got another published. In the meantime, people like Humayun Ahmed, Latifur Rahman (the patron of Prothom Alo), and Justice Habibur Rahman called up the editor, Matiur Rahman, and praised the writing, saying, "I want to read more." After the third piece, the column continued for almost three years—between 2002 and 2005.

TDS: What was the response to your series?

NAM: What surprised me most was the reach of these writings—they were read by everyone, from students in Class Five to elderly readers. The response was overwhelming. Two books eventually emerged from the series. The first, Ghar Nai, was published by Mowla Brothers in 2010. The second, Charalnama, came out in 2016, published by Agamee Prakashani. I co-authored it with poet Shakhawat Tipu.

He was conducting research based on these interviews. His work explores why these people come to Dhaka—what compels them to leave their homes. Within just three to three and a half years of arriving, their native or regional dialects begin to vanish. They adopt Dhaka's hybrid, semi-standard street language. Only those from Chattogram and Noakhali tend to retain their original dialects; the rest lose theirs entirely. This blended Dhaka dialect becomes their new mother tongue.

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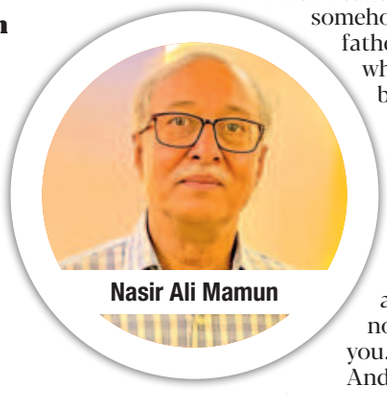

Nasir Ali Mamun

In effect, a new kind of language is born—a language of the homeless. But it's more than just speech. Through it, we catch glimpses of their psychological landscape, their perceptions of society, and their views of wealth and privilege. These interviews reveal all of that. And why are they so distrustful of us? Because of how we treat them.

When I asked them what a home is like, most couldn't describe it. They would simply say things like, "Room... room... room..." That was the extent of their understanding of 'home'.

TDS: Was there a moment during your interviews that left a lasting emotional impact on you—something you still carry with you today?

NAM: There was a boy named Shahadat. His father came looking for him after his story was published. I asked the man to stay nearby, as the boy was somewhere in Karwan Bazar and not easy to find. A few days later, I came across Shahadat on the street. Even then, he refused to tell me where he was sleeping. Eventually, I found out—he was living on a footpath across the road from Karwan Bazar, under an overbridge.

I asked his father to come with me one night. He arrived, his face wrapped in a gamchha—a poor man, no doubt about it. We began searching for the boy. When I called out to him, Shahadat somehow recognised his father—not from his face, which was mostly covered, but from his clothes, his lungi, his worn shirt, his posture. Only his eyes were visible. And yet, Shahadat knew. He froze.

Then he ran to him. I said, "Son, don't be afraid. It's your father—no one's going to hurt you."

And then—what I saw in that moment—I've witnessed only once in my life. The two of them embraced tightly, sobbing into each other's arms. It was overwhelming.

Another boy once said something to me that I've never forgotten: "I'll open every lock with the key of my heart." I was stunned. Where had he found such language? He used to sleep on the streets and earn a living repairing locks. I asked him, "You make keys so others can open their doors—but you're so poor, what will you use to unlock your own future?"

He replied, "I'll open it with the key of my heart." Isn't that extraordinary?

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul.**