

Rising child sexual abuse: What are we missing?



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Does depravity have a limit? I ask this question in the context of child sexual abuse in Bangladesh, which has been setting new standards of frequency, barbarity, and cruelty.

As per data compiled by Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), child rape cases have increased by 75 percent in the first seven months of 2025 compared to the same period last year. What does this say about our society? Even more horrific is that out of the 306 girls raped this year, 40 were mere toddlers up to six years old, 94 were between 7-12, and 103 were teens, meaning below 18. Although largely unreported, experts claim that child sexual abuse within families is common, as is the rape of boys in madrasas and such residential settings. Most recently, a teenage girl with intellectual disability was raped by a 27-year-old man in Bandarban's Lama Upazila. The chilling reality is that families, educational institutions, and the state have completely failed to protect our children.

According to ASK, cases for only 251 out of the 306 incidents were registered, leaving the rest out of the justice system. However, there is no guarantee of justice even if cases are filed or perpetrators arrested. Most get out on bail either using money, political clout or some lacunae in the system.

It is important to note some of the horrific incidents of child abuse in recent past to remind ourselves that our children are in grave danger, requiring urgent action.

The rape and murder of an eight-year-old in Magura, by the father-in-law of her elder sister (a child bride herself), and abetted by her mother-in-law and husband, shook the nation to the core. The students all over Bangladesh rose to protest. The rapist was handed death sentence. Following this gruesome murder, in July, the body of a nine-year-old was found in a mosque where she was a student studying the Holy Quran. She was raped before being murdered; the alleged perpetrators were the imam and muazzin of the mosque in



FILE VISUAL: STAR

question. Boys also fall victim to sexual abuse, but due to the social stigma attached to the rape of boys, cases mostly go unreported. ASK reports 30 such cases between the ages of 7-12 during the first seven months of this year. What is more concerning is that these numbers do not tell the entire story, and there are probably as many such cases not being reported.

parents about it unless a serious injury takes place. Add to that the social stigma the child has to endure. Often, they cannot go back to their school or play with their friends. Parents have reported having to move from their neighbourhood to avoid the social humiliation.

For those of us who have invested decades working to address gender-based violence,

the situation is increasingly frustrating and demoralising. We are frustrated with the system that does not work, the laws that do not get implemented, and the general attitude towards women and girls that does not change. We are now wondering if we have missed a plot. Is our strategy at fault? Is there a need to look at this issue differently? Most importantly, are we only talking among ourselves?

This brings us to the issue of justice. The entire process of seeking justice is so time consuming, financially crippling, and humiliating that most parents give up halfway, while many don't bother to file a case. The so-called "sensational" cases get attention, and quick justice or "zero tolerance for child sexual abuse" is promised. However, except in a few cases, as the dust settles, all promises are forgotten, and the justice system goes back to its usual pace. In the Magura rape and murder case, the offender was sentenced in three weeks. But what about the thousands of other cases, some waiting for years to be resolved? Unless justice is delivered equally for everyone, faith in the justice system will not return.

It is important to note some of the horrific incidents of child abuse in recent past to remind ourselves that our children are in grave danger, requiring urgent action. The rape and murder of an eight-year-old in Magura, by the father-in-law of her elder sister (a child bride herself), and abetted by her mother-in-law and husband, shook the nation to the core.

The conclusion is: it cannot be "business as usual." Some drastic changes have to take place at the institutional, societal, and family levels. One of the actions we have missed out on is engaging with offenders. Perhaps it is time to get into their minds to find out the root cause of their perverted behaviour that has destroyed the lives of so many children.

Whatever strategy we take up henceforth, there is no doubt that prevention and protection must go hand in hand to stop this rot that is causing such harm to our children, robbing them of their childhood, and preventing their healthy, happy growth.

Will Bangla speakers ever be culturally united?



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We usually understand language as a means of communication between people. But language is not limited to communication alone; it also affects or shapes power structures and sociocultural identity. In the age of neoliberalism, language is caught in a complex web where politics, commercialisation, globalisation, cultural exchange, and language rights are all intertwined. Their collective influence determines which languages gain influence and which lose importance or face extinction. Language can also be a source of ethnic tensions and even hatred.

The reason for this little introduction is to draw attention to the recent activities of India's ruling bloc in relation to the Bangla language and its speakers, and the divisions that have emerged in response. One such instance saw a letter from Delhi Police, dated July 24, referring to Bangla used by suspected illegal immigrants as a "Bangladeshi

Bangladesh," he said.

Around the same time, there have been a number of incidents across India reflecting a broader pattern of linguistic profiling and harassment. For instance, on August 20, Hindi-speaking businessmen and shopkeepers beat up a dozen Calcutta University students in Sealdah, calling them "Bangladeshi" and "Rohingya" for refusing to speak Hindi. Beyond West Bengal, similar incidents have unfolded in Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and other BJP-ruled states, where Bangla-speaking migrant workers have been harassed, assaulted, or even detained on suspicion of being "illegal Bangladeshi." In several cases, those with valid documents were still picked up or pushed across the border in so-called "push-back" operations, showing how language is being used as a proxy for exclusion and expulsion.

But isn't Bangla the mother tongue of both Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis?

Contemporary developments in both India and Bangladesh may make it easy to forget, but the wider region once known as the Indian subcontinent has a long history of struggles for the Bangla language. One of the earliest took place in the erstwhile Manbhum district (then in Bihar, now mostly Purulia in West Bengal), which was historically inhabited by Bangla speakers.

According to the Constitution of India, there is no national language as such. Hindi is just one of the two official languages of the Union, alongside English, while 22 languages, including Bangla, are recognised in the Eighth Schedule. Why, then, are Bangla speakers being targeted?

The project that the BJP-RSS bloc is trying to impose through language politics aims to strengthen the North Indian power structure by projecting the inevitability of their Hindutva vision (Hindi-Hindustani). Although this agenda has faced strong resistance in South India, and from progressive Indians elsewhere, in West Bengal it is playing out as *Bangla against Bangla*.

Regional dialects and preferences, both spoken and written, are being manipulated to support a "Bangladeshi" "foreigner" narrative and sow divisions.

It is well known that many people from West Bengal migrate to other Indian states or countries in search of work. Many do not speak the standard, urban Bangla of Kolkata, and are thus branded as "Bangladeshi" and sometimes pushed across the Bangladeshi

even religious divides.

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VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

again, they have been divided—by colonial tendencies, by radical nationalist politics, sometimes on religious grounds, sometimes regionally, and sometimes across borders. Some sow division from within the country, others from abroad. That is why it remains doubtful whether Bangla speakers scattered across Karachi, North India, Assam, Tripura, and Bangladesh will ever reach some unity, even within their respective borders, based on

language." This caused an outrage in West Bengal, where the Trinamool Congress (TMC) accused BJP of insulting Bengali identity through such mischaracterisation. The BJP, however, alleged that TMC was defending illegal Bangladeshi settlers, asking whether "a heavily Urdu-influenced dialect" could qualify as the "real" Bangla language.

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By contrast, rural people still follow the Bengali calendar in all their work—whether in farming, festivals, or lunar schedules. In many cases, this calendar is their primary guide. Here, language and culture are still largely tied to their everyday existence, transcending

their common linguistic heritage.

This is not a call for establishing linguistic dominance, but for preserving the history and culture of the language through united efforts—something that could serve as a source of strength for the speakers of other languages struggling against similar politico-cultural marginalisation. Such unity could also create shared opportunities in the cultural marketplace. Books, songs, films and other products of culture could together form a vibrant market for the 30 crore Bangla speakers, however loosely connected, thus strengthening their collective confidence and offering a shield against all humiliation.

But who will create such unity?