

Defiance in tongue and spirit



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Have you noticed how easily expletives are permeating our everyday conversations? Roll down your car windows and allow the white noise to enter your personal space, open the TV to watch a talk show, walk through any public place, or watch short videos on social media, and you will come across words once considered unutterable. Obscene and profane words show up almost everywhere, and with remarkable ease. And the shocking thing is, it is not the feisty Gen Z that is violating languages or linguistic norms. We have all subscribed to these changes: journalists, politicians, civil servants, preachers, educators, the working class—you name it. We are using words in public that were previously spoken only in private space or in special circumstances.

Language is a dynamic entity that evolves not in isolation but with the full weight of society. The demographic and technological landscape of Bangladesh is responsible for these linguistic changes. Today, the youngest generations dominate almost all public spaces, both physical and virtual, with the country's median age of 26 (Worldometer). New speech habits form in these spaces. Our sense of space is further formulated by the urbanisation process: around

40 percent of the population now lives in cities. By design, cities unite diverse populations from various backgrounds and promote mixed-class interactions and relatively anonymous urban life. Cities also disrupt traditional social structures. The shift is further intensified once we move to the digital sphere. Our internet penetration is around 44.5 percent, and our mobile connections have already outnumbered the population itself. The growth of digital space has led to the emergence of digital language, or more specifically, digital vernaculars.

When we started texting in Romanised Bangla, we were initiated into an online communication process that steadily seeped into our everyday offline talk. Teachers are tired of capitalising "i" and expanding "r" into "are." Now that over one-third of the population uses social media, it is quite evident that our online behaviours have an impact on real-life interactions. When we type a post or comment, our devices suggest and dictate our language choices and expressions. We get fascinated with the new and embrace novelty. Take the 2012 example of Murad Takla's diction, for example. It was a clear case of transliteration going wrong. Someone dared to say "Murod thakle" ("If you have guts"), but ended

up typing "Murad Takla," meaning Murad the Bald. The comedy became a platform for a collective delight in subversion. Errors became memes. Memes became inside jokes. And in-jokes became a new shared register to resist linguistic gatekeeping. To laugh at the absurd spellings is to endorse that script.

Social media rewarded this

a structural change that coincides with the series of acts of defiance in which our young generations were involved. Therefore, the defiant derogatory language cannot be seen without referring to the major student-led movements of the past decade. It started off with the No VAT Movement in 2015 when private university students rallied against a

angry students took over the streets. Memes, transliterated chants, and blunt expletives flooded social media, carrying rage across the nation.

Then the nation had a deadly experience during the Covid pandemic, which suddenly made all social norms irrelevant. We transitioned to virtual space out of necessity and got pulled into its

their spirit. They were indomitable, impatient, and bold, unwilling to pitch their demands in any low, polite frequency.

With these student leaders enjoying the media spotlights, we are having a review of what is considered proper Bangla or English. This linguistic generation gap is not just about words but about authority. Here is a generation who refuses to care. Language for them is a weapon of rebellion. These students, who defied bullets, tear gas, and torture, are now defying the decorum of politeness. A blunt expletive can be a battle cry; a meme or a photocall can undercut anyone in power. Our city walls still adorn the graffiti to show us the fruits of political disobedience.

For a puritan, the distortion of Bangla for a nation that rose from the shadow of the 1952 Language Movement and the dilution of Bangla by English profanity and Roman letters may feel like betrayal. But we need to remember that language has never survived by purity. Our Bangla has been influenced by Persian, Arabic, English, and regional dialects. Now it is absorbing TikTok syntax and transliterated punchlines. We cannot stall the changes within language. Then again, we need to distinguish between harmless intensifiers and harmful slurs, to teach context rather than enforce blanket bans. What looks like linguistic chaos is in fact linguistic vitality. And the sooner the national leaders realise it, the better. We need clear guidance from the authorities on not how to preserve purity, but whether we can communicate meaning, civility, and the democratic energy that makes our language, like our people, unafraid to change.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

linguistic play that often bordered on profanity. It encouraged others to use quirky, loaded languages, albeit slang. These changes in language indicate the wider structural forces that are reshaping how we communicate with others. The normalisation of vulgarity is more than a breakdown in manners—it is symptomatic of

proposed tax on tuition. Many of the slogans they used were in Bangladeshi, and the code-mixing was laced with irreverence for the authority and their protocols.

We saw the same pattern in the Road Safety Movement in 2018. After two schoolchildren were killed by a speeding bus in the capital,

various lures. The generation who saw and participated in these phenomena was once again called into action to dethrone the dictator. During the July uprising last year, protesters, mostly young, abandoned deference in both speech and slogan. The distorted, playful, sometimes vulgar register of these movements defined

Another report draws clear conclusions on genocide in Gaza



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Yet another blistering addition to the ghastly accounts of cruelty regarding the ongoing actions of Israel in Gaza made its appearance on September 16. It came in the form of a report by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (COI), a lashing publication finding Israel guilty of committing genocide on the strip. Of the five elements outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention, Israel was found guilty of four. (The state's interest in transferring Palestinian children from one group to another is yet to show itself.)

The relevant acts outlined in the report include instances of killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, and imposing measures intended to prevent births, all conducted with the specific intent to destroy the Palestinian people as a group. "Today we witness in real time how the promise of 'never again' is broken and tested in the eyes of the world," Navi Pillay, the commission's chair, said in a press conference following the report's release.

This report finds itself in the adhesive, if gruesome, company of such publications as Amnesty International's December 2024 effort, "You Feel Like You Are Subhuman," and the August 2025 conclusions of the

International Association of Genocide Scholars. Francesca Albanese, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, has also been admirably busy drumming up interest in the links between genocide and starvation. Such bountiful material has yet to convince the Israeli authorities to pause their efforts in Gaza, now culminating in the systematic destruction of Gaza City and the displacement of its population.

The COI authors, all sound and weighty figures of international jurisprudence, also found that Israeli President Isaac Herzog, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant "incited the commission of genocide and that Israeli authorities have failed to take action against them to punish this incitement." More broadly, Israel's political and military leaders responsible for prosecuting the war strategy "are ultimately responsible for the commission of the underlying acts of genocide by members of the Israeli security forces," with such leaders being "agents of the State of Israel."

The mental state for establishing genocide were established by relevant statements made by members of the Israeli authorities. In addition to this, there was "circumstantial evidence of genocidal intent and that genocidal intent was the only reasonable

inference that could be drawn from the totality of the evidence." Israeli authorities and security forces "had and continue to have the genocidal intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip."

The COI also makes various recommendations, including the obvious one of ending the commission of genocide and Israel's compliance with the three provisional orders of the International Court

There is certainly much to draw upon, be it the commission's findings or the excoriating report by UN Special Rapporteur Albanese. The latter tartly exposes the misuse of international humanitarian law as an instrument of Israeli advancement, making a mockery of aid to the very people the state seeks to dislocate, kill and humble.

of Justice (ICJ) made in January, March and May last year; immediate implementation of a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and conclusion of military operations in the occupied Palestinian territory that entail genocidal acts; restoration of the UN aid model, unimpeded; and investigation and punishment of acts of genocide and incitement to genocide against the Palestinians in the strip.

Pointed words are also reserved for the international community, among them that all member-states pull their weight in insuring the prevention of genocidal acts in Gaza, cease the transfer of arms and equipment to Israel or third parties "where there is reason to suspect their use in military

operations that have involved or could involve the commission of genocide," ensure that corporations and individuals within their territories and jurisdiction are not part of the genocidal programme, and facilitate necessary investigations and prosecutive proceedings against the State of Israel and corporations and individuals regarding genocide, its facilitation and incitement.

The UN commission of inquiry arose in 2021, when it was established by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate alleged violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel. The September report makes much of three previous reports issued by the COI, and three papers relevant to international law violations committed by all the parties to the conflict.

To have reached findings of genocidal intent is a tall order indeed. The mental threshold needed to satisfy genocidal intent is a dizzyingly high bar to meet. The ICJ, even as it considers Israel's own actions in Gaza at the litigious prodding of South Africa, has shown itself reluctant to identify the destructive intent (dolus specialis) against an identifiable group as protected by the UN Genocide Convention. In the Bosnia vs Serbia case, Serbia was not found to be responsible for the commission of genocide, but for its failure in preventing it with respect to the killings of over 7,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica in July 1995. The court imposed a giddy standard of proof: that the pattern of acts in destroying the identifiable group should "have to be such that it could only point to the existence of such intent." It was a standard criticised by Judge Awn Al-Khasawneh in his dissenting opinion, feeling that such acts as "population transfers" and "evidence of massive killings systematically targeting the Bosnian Muslims" evidenced obvious genocidal intent.

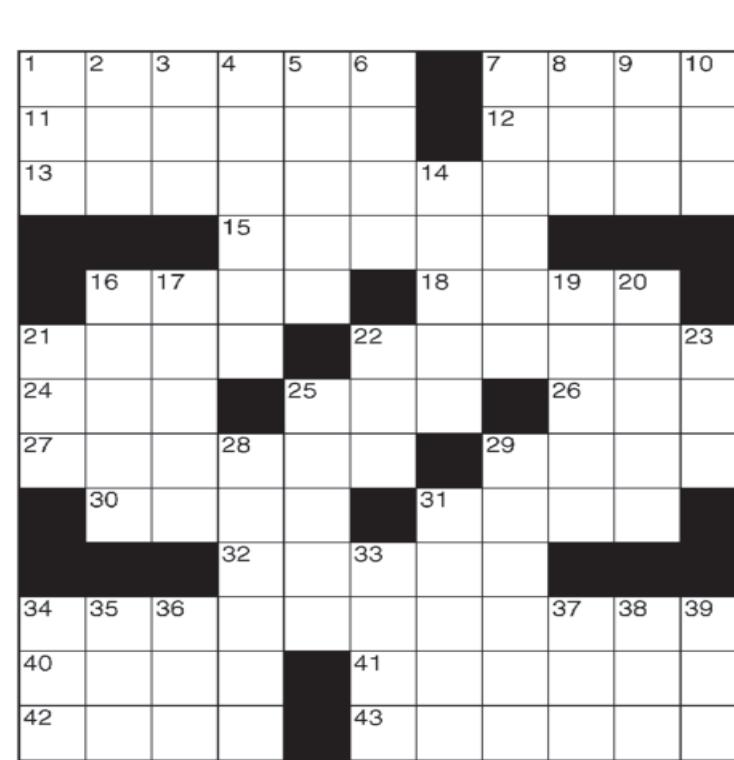
In 2015, the ICJ also found that neither Serbia nor Croatia had committed acts of genocide against each other's populations during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, despite killings and the infliction of serious bodily or mental harm to both groups by virtue of them being members of an ethnic group.

Judge António Augusto Cançado Trindade, in his dissenting opinion in Croatia vs Serbia, proffers a salutary observation, "Perpetrators of genocide will almost always allege that they were in armed conflict, and their actions were taken 'pursuant to an ongoing military conflict'; yet, genocide may be a means for achieving military objectives just as readily as military conflict may be a means for instigating a genocidal plan."

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The response from Israel is also instructive in terms of how that state fits within the law of nations, which it has sought to reinterpret with postmodern elasticity. A statement from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs makes short work of the report as "distorted" and "false," accusing the authors as "Hamas proxies, notorious for their antisemitic positions" and demanding the "immediate abolition of this Commission of Inquiry." That would be all too convenient.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

