



Mairia Tripura, Heali Tripura, Tongam Tripura, and Tumbas Chakma holding textbooks written in their mother tongues.

PHOTO: KHOKAN BIKASH TRIPURA JACK

# Are Bangladesh’s multilingual youth being heard?

As we celebrate International Mother Language Day 2026 under the theme “Youth Voices on Multilingual Education”, it is time to ask a deeper question: are the voices of Bangladesh’s multilingual youth being heard, supported, and sustained within the current education system?

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In a world where globalisation provides unprecedented access to information and opportunities for education, business and social activities, “killer languages” have emerged as a threat to multilingualism. We often hear from parents that they want their children to learn English, or, as the case may be in Bangladesh, Bangla, because they will have better education and livelihood opportunities. This can be based on a false assumption. Around 40 percent of learners worldwide still lack access to education in a language they understand best, highlighting the scale of the challenge.

There is clear evidence that learning in multiple languages, starting with the mother tongue and then gradually adding national and global languages, is good for cognitive abilities and does not impair language skills in second and third languages. Opening the language learning window in young children, an optimal, biologically determined period from birth to the onset of puberty when the brain is most receptive to acquiring languages, strengthens language ability. During this childhood period, the brain’s ability to create neural networks for language is high, and this has pay-offs for neural development and, hence, cognitive capacity. Neuroscientific research consistently shows that multilingual learning strengthens executive function, memory flexibility, and problem-solving skills.



A display of alphabets representing the languages spoken by Indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Supplementary learning materials are scarce, and literacy support often ends too early. Students often acquire basic literacy in their mother tongue during early schooling but lose these skills due to the lack of continued institutional support, creating a paradox where education introduces literacy but fails to sustain it.

Yet opportunities remain substantial. Bangladesh’s experience shows that progress is feasible with sustained investment. Successful programmes demonstrate that community participation strengthens outcomes, especially when communities are involved in teacher recruitment, curriculum development, and school governance. Multilingual education is therefore not merely an educational intervention; it is also a matter of linguistic justice. The challenge now is not whether multilingual education is valuable, but how it can be strengthened sustainably.

As Bangladesh moves forward, strengthening multilingual education requires a comprehensive approach. One urgent priority is expanding multilingual education beyond the early primary level. Literacy development cannot be sustained if mother tongue instruction ends after Grade III. Teacher recruitment and training must also be strengthened, including recruiting teachers from indigenous communities and equipping them with multilingual pedagogical skills. Resource development must expand to include textbooks, storybooks, digital tools, and teaching aids that are culturally relevant and linguistically accurate. Digital platforms, community archives, and youth led language initiatives also offer new pathways for preservation and learning.

Policy coherence is equally important, and multilingual education must be integrated into the broader national education framework rather than treated as a temporary initiative. Research must also be strengthened so that policymaking is guided by evidence. Most importantly, youth voices must be included in policy discussions. Young people are not merely beneficiaries of multilingual education; they are its future custodians.

Youth today live in a multilingual world shaped by mobility, technology, and globalisation. Supporting their multilingual abilities is both an educational necessity and a cultural investment. The linguistic diversity of Bangladesh is not a problem to be solved but a resource to be nurtured. Multilingual youth represent a bridge between tradition and modernity, between local identity and global participation.

International Mother Language Day is therefore not only a commemoration of the past but a call to future action. Listening to youth voices on multilingual education means recognising that language rights are ongoing commitments. Its success will ultimately depend on whether societies invest in that diversity. The voices of multilingual youth are already speaking. The question is whether we are ready to listen.

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A child is being taught the letters of the Saura language, an endangered language in Bangladesh.

Language is not only for economic gain; it is also central to identity, cultural preservation, and societal cohesion. Preserving and passing on our cultural heritage contributes to local and national identity and enriches the world. Promoting cross-cultural understanding helps us to avoid past mistakes, stimulates innovation, and has significant economic potential.

At the heart of this is education that includes mother tongues and other languages. UNESCO defines multilingual education as the use of at least three languages: the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language in education. In countries such as Bangladesh, where there are mother tongues including indigenous and local languages, the national language Bangla, and then important educational and business languages such as English, the ability to speak multiple languages is clearly advantageous. But it is not necessarily easy to achieve.

How does a teacher manage a classroom where students have multiple mother tongues? How does the Ministry train teachers to manage