AMAR EKUSHEY
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2026

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BANGLADESH IN MANY VOICES

Linguistic diversity in an age of transformation

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Language Movement of 1952 was not merely a struggle over words; it was the first collective assertion that dignity, democracy, and self-determination in this land would be rooted in language. From that demand for Bangla emerged a political consciousness that eventually gave birth to Bangladesh itself.

On International Mother Language Day 2026, as Bangladesh once again honours the martyrs of 1952, we do so in a country that speaks in many tongues and now thinks increasingly through machines, screens, and codes.

Bangladesh's linguistic landscape is far richer than its dominant narratives often suggest. Alongside Bangla flourish dozens of indigenous and regional languages, each carrying its own history, worldview, and rhythm of life. These languages are not cultural ornaments; they are systems of knowledge shaped by rivers, forests, labour, migration, and belief. To celebrate Ekushey today is to recognise that protecting linguistic diversity is inseparable from protecting cultural memory, social justice, and the right to be heard.

Yet Ekushey must also speak to the present. Bangladesh stands at the threshold of rapid technological transformation. Artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and data-driven governance are reshaping how citizens communicate, learn, and participate in public life. The danger is clear: languages that are not digitally visible risk being rendered invisible altogether. The opportunity is equally powerful. Technology can democratise language, enabling preservation, translation, archiving, and everyday use in ways unimaginable before.

This moment calls for conscious choices. Bangla must continue to evolve as a language of science, technology, and global exchange. At the same time, digital futures must be inclusive. It must be ensured that minority languages are documented, encoded, and carried forward into the next generation.

Today, Bangladesh faces a quieter but no less serious crisis—one of cultural confidence and the spirit that once animated the Language Movement. When language becomes reduced to utility alone, stripped of its ethical, political, and cultural force, the legacy of Ekushey risks being hollowed out. Re-emphasising the values of the Language Movement in this age is not an act of nostalgia; it is a necessity. It reminds us that language is tied to justice, plurality, and participation, and that technological progress without linguistic and cultural consciousness can deepen exclusion rather than overcome it.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher
The Daily Star

In protest against the proposal to make Urdu the sole state language of Pakistan and to introduce the Bengali language in Arabic script, nearly ten thousand students brought out a massive procession from the premises of the University of Dhaka. February 4, 1952.

PHOTOGRAPH: **RAFIQUL ISLAM**

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Bangla in the age of algorithms

ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

With the rise of generative AI and large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT or Gemini, we can now hold conversations with machines in Bangla. AI has begun to read, write, and even craft creative content in Bangla. For the first time in history, language evolution is partly being steered by machines trained on digital data. As this new voice enters our linguistic world, what will it mean for the language itself—for how we speak, shape, and pass it on?

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

A phrase begins to circulate almost casually on a social media platform. By the next day, it is everywhere—spoken, typed, laughed over and argued about. The phrase is slightly absurd, two words fused in a way no dictionary has yet recorded, still instantly legible: "Chagol Kando." Someone turns it into a meme. Journalists start using it in headlines. Within days, the words feel familiar, as if they had always belonged to Bangla.

This is how Bangla often evolves nowadays, not through official announcements or grammar books, but through social media, digital technology and moments of collective emotion. For over a millennium, the language has absorbed conquests, riots, religions, partition, and war. New words entered the daily vocabulary, pronunciations softened or hardened across regions, and grammar bent to usage.

Language is finely attuned to the world around it, shifting in small ways almost every day according to the prominent linguist and former Director General of Bangla Academy, Professor Monsur Musa. "Bangla has evolved over one and a half thousand years. With every political change comes an ideological shift, and the language evolves alongside it. For instance, during the recent July uprising, many new words entered the Bengali language. A great deal of graffiti appeared carrying words that had never existed before," he said.

How has Bangla evolved: A brief history

Bangla belongs to the Indo-European language family and, like many major languages, its origins are debated. Linguists such as Suniti Kumar Chatterji and Sukumar Sen argued that Bengali emerged around the 10th century CE, evolving from Magadhi Prakrit in its spoken form and Magadhi Apabhramsha in its written form. A different view was proposed by Dr Muhammad Shahidullah and his followers, who placed the beginnings of Bangla earlier, around the 7th century CE, tracing its development to the spoken and written varieties of Gauda.

"Before the Aryans arrived, this region possessed a "Non-Aryan" (Anarya) culture. The arrival of the Aryans led to a fusion of these two groups, creating a "Sankar" (hybrid or mixed) culture and nation. This racial and cultural synthesis marked the beginning of the linguistic blending that would define Bangla," explained Dr. Mohammad Ashaduzzaman, Professor in the Department of Linguistics, Dhaka University. From this point forward, the language began to be shaped by social, political, and economic factors, as well as by traders and religious missionaries who brought their own linguistic influences.

Around the time of the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the form of Bangla we recognise today began to take shape, drawing largely from the dialect spoken in the Nadia region. Over time, this dialect gained prominence and gradually formed the basis of modern standard Bangla.

How will AI influence the future of Bangla?

Historically, people were the primary drivers of the evolution of Bangla. Writers standardised forms and communities collectively decided what sounded "natural." But in the 21st century, technology has also been a powerful co-author. Social media shortens expressions. Autocorrect nudges spelling choices. Search engines influence which words people use to find information.

Now, artificial intelligence (AI) has added a new layer. With the rise of generative AI and large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT or Gemini, we can now hold conversations with machines in Bangla. AI has begun to read, write, and even craft creative content in Bangla. We can turn to it with our questions in Bangla and receive instant replies.

For the first time in history, language evolution is partly being steered by machines trained on digital data. As this new voice enters our linguistic world, what will it mean for the language itself—for how we speak, shape, and pass it on? And what of young people, still learning Bangla, yet already turning to LLMs to converse in it?

"LLMs like ChatGPT or Gemini operate within a limited set of response patterns, typically around 10 to 20. When someone consults an LLM, or a student seeks educational help from it, their vocabulary and ways of expressing ideas can become confined to these fixed patterns. It can quietly guide how people write. Over time, these micro-influences accumulate," mentioned Nishat Raihan, an LLM researcher at George Mason University. "Previously, if 20 different people tackled the same question, they would each bring unique expressions and approaches. Today, that richness of language and diversity of thought is at risk of narrowing, particularly among young people who rely on it heavily for assignments and homework."

Many linguists share similar concerns, viewing these technological shifts through the lens of language use and creativity. "AI's language is mechanical, and it is often quite noticeable whether an assignment or a piece of creative writing has been produced with AI. Bangla is a powerful language that can express a single idea in many different ways. As the use of AI increases, Bangla may gradually lose some of this multidimensional expressive capacity," noted Dr. Tariq Manzoor, Professor in the Department of Bangla, Dhaka University.

The corpus crisis and the digital gap

One major obstacle for Bangla in this age of AI is the absence of a strong, comprehensive corpus. While English utilises systematic processes to track word frequency and evolution, Bangla lacks an official, systematically updated record.

"In the Oxford or Cambridge dictionaries, you'll see that they systematically record new words as they are added to the language. In English, they maintain a corpus of the language, which allows them to track even small changes. By studying word frequencies, we can observe which words are increasing in use, which are declining, and which are disappearing from the language altogether. This is an efficient process to keep track of language changes," explained Professor Musa.

Drawing on language change and language contact theories, Professor Musa highlighted how semantic changes, borrowing, and code-switching (alternating between languages in conversation) have become increasingly common. "Religion has played a significant role in recent language change. The usage of words related to religion has grown substantially. Currently, there is no system for officially adding new words, and we do not have any formal corpus. New words appear through newspapers, and we infer their meanings from context. Without an official corpus, Bangla currently lacks discipline, and many words are used incorrectly in the wrong context."

This poses a major problem for the language in the age of LLMs, which are essentially "probability machines" trained on existing records. The absence of a clean digital corpus forces AI to rely on fragmented, messy, or outdated data. This is especially critical for a language that shifts rapidly during political upheavals; an AI trained six months ago may be "linguistically illiterate" to the new vocabulary emerging from events like the July uprising, for which no registration system currently exists.

Moreover, research shows that Bangla is one of the least used languages on the internet despite having such a vast number of speakers. English accounts for 54% of online language content, and the top 12 languages (English, Russian, German, Spanish, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Italian, Persian, Polish, Chinese, and Turkish) make up over 90% of all content, whereas Bangla constitutes less than 0.1% (Hernandez, 2019, p. 8). As of 2022, Bangla Wikipedia ranked 65th in the world. This is alarming, given that a substantial share of LLM training data comes from the internet. On top of that, a large portion of Bangla text online is plagued by inconsistent spelling, grammatical errors, and irregular structure. Researchers often depend on Bangla Wikipedia and NCTB textbook data for training models, but these sources may not consistently guarantee high-quality inputs.

"Lack of high-quality data online is a major obstacle in training LLMs to perform reliably with Bangla prompts. We classify Bangla as a mid-tier resource language: the available data allows only somewhat acceptable performance. A lack of sufficient data forces reliance on low-quality sources, and AI trained on such data produces poor content, creating a negative feedback loop that further degrades future model performance," noted Raihan.

To address this, LLM researchers recommend mechanisms such as reinforcement learning (RL) with human feedback, which help filter out incorrect outputs. RL techniques like GRPO (Group Relative Policy Optimisation) evaluate groups of responses relative to one another, improving overall accuracy, stability, and reliability of language generation.

The "power group" bias in data

Professor Monsur Musa points out yet another factor responsible for shaping language. "In our society, the most influential groups are the middle and upper-middle classes. They play a particularly significant role in shaping linguistic trends," he explained. "In the past, we did not use as many Arabic or Persian words in our everyday speech, but recently their usage has noticeably increased."

These same groups also have the largest digital footprint. They dominate social media platforms, blogs, and online forums, producing a disproportionate share of the written content that feeds today's digital ecosystem. As a result, when AI systems are trained primarily on internet data, they inevitably learn and replicate their linguistic patterns, vocabulary choices, and worldview.

This creates a subtle but serious risk. The speech forms of rural communities, working-class populations, minority ethnic groups, and speakers of regional dialects are far less represented online. Their idioms, pronunciations, cultural references, and lived realities may not appear frequently enough in digital text to meaningfully shape AI training data. In the long run, the nuances, dialects, and expressive richness of millions could fade from the digital record, quietly erased from the linguistic future being shaped by algorithms.

Preparing Bangla for the AI age

Since the use of AI and LLMs will only grow in the future, the central challenge is to make Bangla fully compatible with the AI age so it does not fall behind. Raihan of George Mason University advocates developing LLMs dedicated solely to Bangla. "We need our own LLM model, which is exclusively trained on high-quality Bangla data. Even if the model is small—for instance, we trained a model with 1 billion parameters and nearly 9 billion Bangla words, which is very minimal compared to big LLMs. Still, its performance can be exceptional for Bangla prompts because it is trained only on Bangla data."

Such models, he argues, help reduce the risk of distorting the language, producing incorrect spellings, or imposing English sentence structures on Bangla responses. However, training these models is expensive, and he emphasised that government support is essential to develop large-scale Bangla LLMs.

Moreover, building robust Bangla LLM requires a high-quality digital Bangla corpus—something Bangla still lacks. As Dr. Manzoor noted, "Some efforts to build a comprehensive and updated corpus have already begun through government initiatives. The challenge, however, is the limited number of skilled language teachers and experts in this field in our country, which inevitably slows the progress of such initiatives."

He also stressed that publishing houses need to ensure that all their materials are uploaded in Unicode fonts and that digital reading options, such as eBooks, are developed alongside printed books. Clinging only to paper readership, he implied, is no longer realistic.

There is also a broader cultural issue. "We're not language-conscious as a nation, unlike many countries that actively work on the development and stabilisation of their language," observed Professor Musa. "Language will change, but if it keeps changing every day drastically, it will become incomprehensible. People from the same community will not be able to understand each other." Promoting Promito (standard) Bangla in administration, education, and public life is essential to avoid such issues according to scholars.

Where English must be used, Professor Ashaduzzaman recommends prioritising transliteration to retain linguistic continuity. He also mentioned the ICT division's project – Enriching the Bangla Language in Information Technology through Research and Development – that was launched in 2016 with a budget of Tk 15.9 crore.

Under this initiative, Bangladesh Computer Council was supposed to develop 16 tools, including a Bangla corpus, automatic translator from Bangla to the world's 10 major languages, Bangla OCR (automatic recognition and composition of typed and handwritten text), speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, national keyboard (Bangla), Bangla font conversion engine, spelling and grammar checker, screen reader (software that automatically reads written text aloud), sentiment analysis software, keyboards for indigenous languages.

If properly implemented, the project would enable automatic composition of spoken Bangla, allow computer devices to read written text aloud, quickly convert printed books and documents into softcopy, provide accurate machine translation in Bangla, and build a comprehensive corpus of spoken and written Bangla. The project also envisioned developing more than nine software programmes compatible with Windows, Mac, and Linux, as well as more than seven apps for Android and iOS, aiming to strengthen Bangla's global standing and advance Bangla's recognition as an official language of the United Nations.

"Almost 10 years have passed, but barely any progress was made on that project. If this project is fully implemented, the status of Bangla could improve significantly, making the language more compatible with and resilient to the technological changes ahead," remarked Dr. Ashaduzzaman of University of Dhaka.

Echoing this concern, Dr. Manzoor agrees that the challenge lies not in technology itself, but in institutional preparedness. "If we can establish proper processes, digital media and AI can strengthen Bangla and expand its usability. For example, we are still far behind in areas such as voice-to-text, text-to-speech, digital dictionaries, terminology development, translation, and conversion into IPA. This has to change for Bangla to thrive in the digital future," he said.

Greater investment in Bangla-language AI research and model development is essential, with trained linguists, computer scientists, and social scientists working in close collaboration, supported by sustained government funding according to scholars. Ultimately, our collective actions will determine whether Bangla merely survives in the age of AI, or truly claims its place within it.

PHOTO: ZARIF FAIAZ

Miftahul Jannat *is a journalist at The Daily Star. She can be reached at miftahul@thedailystar.net*

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Marma artists performing an open-air dance, with Chittagong Hill Tracts alphabets in the background.

A cultural team from the tea gardens performing on stage.

PHOTOS: PHILIP GAIN

BEYOND BANGLA

Why Bangladesh's other languages matter

There are many other very small ethnic communities—such as the Kol, Kora, Kadar, Kheroar, Dalu, Pangkhua (or Pangkho or Pangkhu), Bhumali, Shobor, and Ho—each with a population of fewer than 2,000. These communities are engaged in a difficult struggle to preserve their languages. Both smaller and larger ethnic communities face challenges in sustaining their mother tongues while also navigating Bangla as their second language.

PHILIP GAIN

Bangla is one of the approximately seven thousand languages spoken worldwide, with around 250 million native speakers in Bangladesh and West Bengal. In terms of the number of native speakers, it ranks as the seventh most widely spoken language in the world. In Bangladesh, Bangla is also spoken as a second language by diverse ethnic communities and tea workers, many of whom belong to distinct ethnic identities.

Fifty ethnic communities are included on the official list of Khudra Nri Gosthi (small ethnic communities). In addition, the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD) has documented another fifty smaller or lesser-known ethnic communities, as detailed in its two books—Lower Depths: Little-known Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh and Slaves in These Times: Tea Communities of Bangladesh.

These non-Bangalee communities collectively speak more than forty languages: ten in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), about a dozen in the tea gardens, and others spread across the northwest, north-central, and northeastern regions of Bangladesh.

Many of the mother tongues spoken by Adivasi and other smaller ethnic communities are at risk of extinction. Some of these languages lack alphabets and have no written form. Today, they are spoken primarily by elderly members of the community, while the younger generation is no longer able to speak them. One such example is the language of the Koch, which has no written script.

In the tea gardens, a language known as "Jangli" illustrates the severity of the crisis facing the mother tongues of marginalised ethnic communities. Bound to the labour lines of the tea estates and living in conditions akin to servitude, these communities face the gradual erosion of their linguistic heritage.

Some of the languages spoken by very small ethnic communities are strikingly beautiful. One such community is the Chak, also known as the Sak, in the Bandarban Hill District. With a population of fewer than 4,000, the community possesses a distinct language called Chak. Concentrated in 21 remote jungle villages in the Naikhongchhari and Bandarban Sadar upazilas, the Chak people maintain a linguistic identity that is uniquely their own.

The power of their enchanting songs, dances, and music is deeply rooted in their language. Although the Chaks speak Bangla as a second language, many in the more remote villages struggle to communicate fluently in Bangla. For thought, expression, and learning, Chak remains their primary and most natural language.

The smallest of the ethnic communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts—the Lushai—with a population of 380, has its own language. Because of their small population and geographic isolation, the Lushai, speakers of the Mizo language in Bangladesh, depend heavily on community transmission within families and villages. While the language remains strong in Mizoram (India), in Bangladesh it is more vulnerable due to a small speaker base, limited institutional support, and pressure to use Bangla for education and administration.

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

There are many other very small ethnic communities—such as the Kol, Kora, Kadar, Kheroar, Dalu, Pangkhua (or Pangkho or Pangkhu), Bhumali, Shobor, and Ho—each with a population of fewer than 2,000. These communities are engaged in a difficult struggle to preserve their languages. Both smaller and larger ethnic communities face challenges in sustaining their mother tongues while also navigating Bangla as their second language.

The languages that Indigenous communities of Bangladesh speak provide them with distinct identities and add colour to their lives, as demonstrated in their rituals, festivals, cultural performances, attire, and social behaviour.

The language and cultural diversity, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has been vividly noted by a Swiss-German ethnologist and academic known for his extensive fieldwork among the Mro and Khumi.

"If there is anywhere on earth where one can find within an area of a few square miles several different ethnic groups exhibiting distinctly different cultures, then it is in certain regions of the southern Chittagong Hill Tracts. Here, within one and the same mouza, one may find four groups speaking completely different languages, building different types of houses, wearing different clothing, and following different customs and different religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Animism)." (L. G. Löffler, Mru—Hill People on the Border of Bangladesh)

Languages spoken by small communities are particularly vulnerable and may gradually disappear. Nearly a dozen languages—including Santali, Mundari, Mahale, and Garo—are spoken in the tea gardens of Bangladesh but receive little attention. While a few individual scholars have given some attention to these languages, there has been little or no engagement from state bodies such as the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI). For many of these languages, there are no comprehensive lexicons, basic word lists, or grammar books.

There are, however, notable examples of high-quality linguistic research on some ethnic languages of Bangladesh. Foremost among them is The Language of the Modhupur Mandi (Garo): Grammar by Robbins Burling, a professor at the University of Michigan, who devoted much of his life to studying the language, culture, and society of the Garo people in Modhupur and India. The book provides a detailed analysis of Mandi (Garo) phonology, morphology, syntax, and dialect variation, and is written for speakers, learners, and linguists alike. It is complemented by additional volumes, including a word list, glossary, and lexicon.

Baboharik Garo Obhidan by Himel Richil is a 495-page dictionary compiling words used in everyday Garo speech. Together with Burling's word list and lexicon, it offers a strong foundation for the preservation and further study of the language.

A Santal Dictionary is one of the most important dictionaries of the Santali language, compiled by Paul Olaf Bodding, a Norwegian missionary, linguist, folklorist, and scholar. Published in the early twentieth century, it is a comprehensive Santali–English dictionary based on extensive fieldwork among the Santal people in present-day India and Bangladesh. The dictionary, published in multiple volumes (approximately 6,000 pages), documents thousands of words, idioms, and cultural expressions, making it not only a linguistic resource but also a valuable record of Santal society and oral tradition. It remains a benchmark reference for scholars and speakers of Santali today.

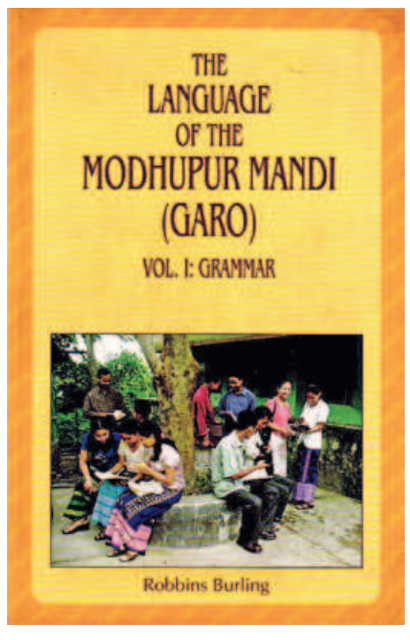
A Grammar of Hyow is a comprehensive linguistic study of the Hyow language, spoken by the Khyang, a small ethnic community of 4,826 people (2022 census) living in the Bandarban and Rangamati districts. The work documents phonology, morphology, syntax, and core grammatical structures. It serves both as an academic contribution to Tibeto-Burman language studies and as an important resource for the preservation and documentation of an under-described Indigenous language.

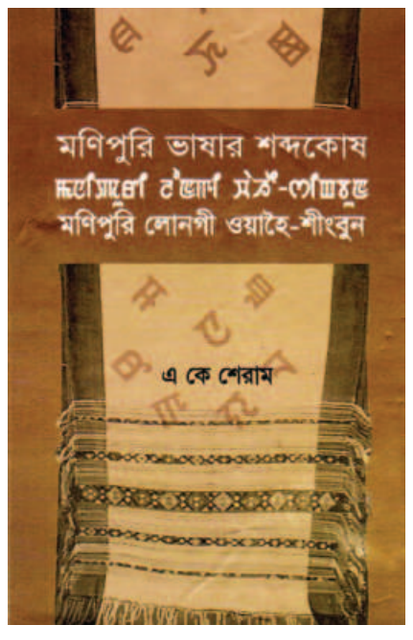
A. K. Sheram, a Manipuri scholar, has done a commendable job with his mother language, Manipuri. His work, Manipuri Vasa'r Shobdokosh, is a 78-page trilingual (Bangla–English–Manipuri) dictionary that systematically documents Manipuri vocabulary with meanings, usage, and linguistic explanations, aiming to support both learners and researchers. The book also provides an introduction to Manipuri phonetics, scripts, and grammatical features—often using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)—to clarify pronunciation and structure for Bangla readers. Overall, it serves as an important reference work for preserving, studying, and standardising the Manipuri language in Bangladesh. Similar studies of other languages would be a significant step forward in preserving those that are threatened.

Bangladesher Nanan Vasha by Muhammad Habibur Rahman (former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court) provides an overview of the linguistic diversity of Bangladesh, discussing the historical origins, scripts, sounds, and social contexts of Bangla alongside many Indigenous and minority languages. Through concise chapters on languages such as Arabic, Urdu, English, Khasi, and others, the book explains how migration, religion, education, and state policy have shaped language use in the country. Overall, it highlights Bangladesh as a multilingual society and underscores the cultural value and vulnerability of its lesser-known languages.

The studies on languages other than Bangla spoken in Bangladesh mentioned above are indeed noteworthy. However, there are many other linguistic and ethnographic studies that still need to be examined and undertaken. There is little doubt that systematic research on these languages remains limited. In the interest of safeguarding languages, cultures, histories, and the very existence of smaller communities, it is essential that academia and learners receive proper orientation and sustained support. In this regard, state authorities and relevant institutions bear a particular responsibility.

A Garo family in conversation at a family adda, comfortably using their mother tongue. Photo: Philip Gain





Philip Gain *is a researcher and director of the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD). He can be contacted at philip.gain@gmail.com.*

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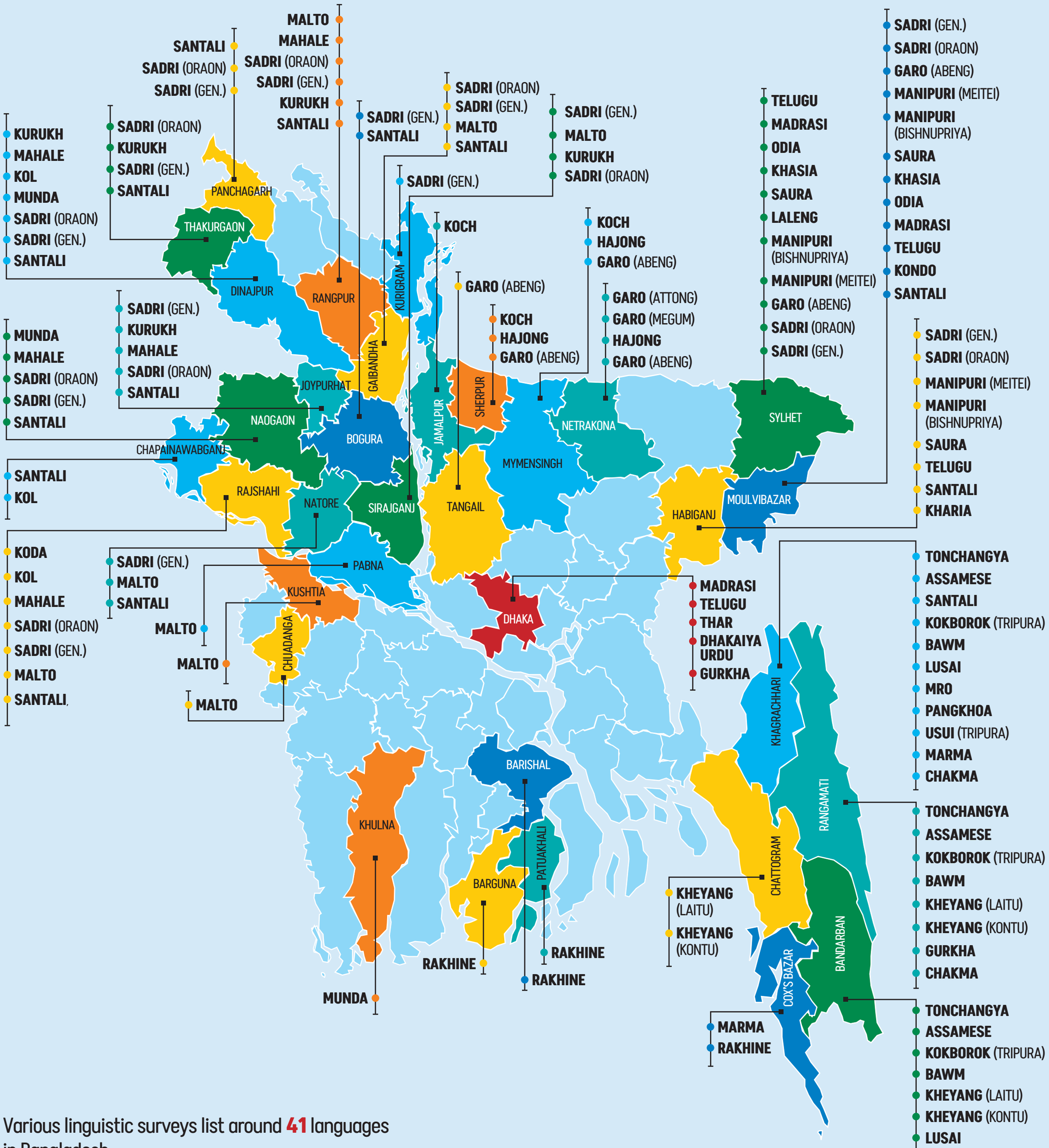
LANGUAGE MAP OF BANGLADESH



Various linguistic surveys list around **41** languages in Bangladesh.

NOTE

1. Bangla, in its various dialects, is spoken widely across Bangladesh.

2. This map is not an exhaustive representation of all languages in Bangladesh; several languages have yet to be included. In preparing this map, we have drawn on information provided by the Language Research Hub.

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What two decades with Hyow taught me about language loss

In my experience, Hyow is a relatively stable language, but it is not without the risk of losing its distinctiveness. I already hear an overwhelming proportion of Bangla words when young Hyow speakers communicate with one another. With intense and long-standing contact, there is a strong possibility of structural change in Hyow.

MUHAMMAD ZAKARIA

More than seven thousand languages are spoken across the world today, yet their distribution is significantly unequal. About ninety-seven percent of the world's people speak only about four percent of these languages. Behind these numbers are communities whose histories, ways of understanding the world, and identities are tied to languages spoken by only a few thousand people. UNESCO estimates that nearly half of the world's languages are endangered and that one language disappears approximately every two weeks. Language loss therefore represents one of the most pressing cultural crises of the twenty-first century.

Bangladesh is not exempt from this global reality. Our national identity is historically intertwined with language politics. The Language Movement of 1952 established Bangla as a central symbol of sovereignty and dignity, and it inspired UNESCO to recognise 21 February as International Mother Language Day. Yet this powerful national narrative has often obscured the country's internal linguistic diversity. Hyow is one such language, part of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Bangladesh, and one that I have been researching for the last twenty years.

Hyow (its endonym), officially known as Khiang (an exonym), has a population of 4,826 according to the Population and Housing Census 2022. The word 'Hyow' refers to the Chin ethnic community, which belongs to the South Central (formerly Kuki-Chin) branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. It is spoken in around thirty-one villages across three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and along the border areas of Chattogram and Bandarban.

Dawbeo Khyang, a late Hyow speaker whose stories contributed to the corpus used in compiling the language's grammar.

Hyow has two varieties, Laitu and Kongtu, spoken in lowland and highland areas respectively. They show only minor linguistic differences. Hyow forms part of a broader linguistic continuum that stretches from the Chittagong Hill Tracts into the Chin and Rakhine states of Myanmar. A language called Laitu is spoken in around twenty-two villages along the Yangon–Sittwe Asia Highway, and another language, Le(i)tu, is found along the Lemyo (or Lemro) River in Rakhine. Although their names are similar and they share linguistic features, they are not fully mutually intelligible with Hyow. Some external classifications treat Hyow as a dialect of Asho, spoken in southern Rakhine. However, linguistic evidence shows that Hyow is a distinct language and not mutually intelligible with Asho.

Becoming a linguist was not what I had planned as an undergraduate student at the University of Dhaka. I began working as an interior designer in my second year as an undergraduate and was preparing to pursue it as a full-time profession. Everything changed in 2006 when I attended a workshop on language documentation conducted by David Peterson, who had been working on South Central languages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts since 1998.

PHOTOS: MUHAMMAD ZAKARIA

Haney Khyong, an animistic ritual honouring the river deity, in which one chicken and two goats are sacrificed to seek household harmony and a bountiful harvest.

After a month of training, we travelled to Bandarban for fieldwork. I was assigned to work on Hyow alongside another student. Our language consultant, Hlakray Prue, later became a pioneering figure in building educational and professional opportunities within the Hyow community. That one week of fieldwork—collecting wordlists, analysing basic linguistic constructions, and interacting directly with speakers—left a lasting impression on me. It was the first time I realised how much knowledge a language holds and how fragile that knowledge can be.

Language documentation emerged in the mid-1990s as a response to global language loss. Therefore, its introduction as a methodology in Bangladesh was not too late. The workshop on language documentation that I attended was its second edition; another cohort had participated in a similar workshop in 2004. In both 2004 and 2006, the groups of participants included students as well as teachers. Unfortunately, there was no institutional capacity building for language documentation even after these two workshops. As it was not easy for Dr Peterson to travel to the Chittagong Hill Tracts regularly due to his teaching commitments at Dartmouth College, he employed me as his research assistant to transcribe and translate audio recordings of Hyow oral stories.

From 2007 to 2009, I conducted intermittent fieldwork on Hyow. During this period, I was also part of Dr Peterson's expedition to track Rengmitca speakers in the remote areas of Alikadam in Bandarban. Even after these opportunities, I was unable to develop my skills in documentary and theoretical linguistics fully, partly due to a lack of institutional resources. I completed my MA in Linguistics in 2009 and was then diverted from my research on Hyow by my new job as a teacher at Scholastica.

It was not until 2013 that I was able to prepare myself to pursue a PhD programme and finish what I had started. Out of the forty-eight months of my PhD programme at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, I spent almost fourteen months in Bandarban recording, transcribing, translating, and analysing different genres of texts in Hyow. In the early stages of my PhD, I concentrated on the sound system of Hyow. It took me almost six months to conduct acoustic analysis and measure the physical properties of different vowels, consonants, and tones in the language. Generally, researchers use three to four hours of annotated texts to write a grammar. Writing a grammar as part of a PhD dissertation, however, is a mammoth task. As a result, researchers also rely on elicitation, a technique that was used extensively in earlier periods to translate sentences for investigating specific grammatical features of a language. However, since direct translations from English or other major languages are problematic, modern language documentation methodologies place emphasis on natural texts. As I already had several hours of Hyow texts from my fieldwork between 2007 and 2009, the corpus size available for writing the grammar of Hyow was very strong. In total, I had ten hours of annotated natural texts on which to base the grammar of Hyow.

For typologists who compare structural patterns across languages, such as word order or agreement systems, Hyow and its closely related languages are particularly important. They exhibit structural features that are rarely documented elsewhere, making them valuable not only for the community itself but also for a broader understanding of human language.

Language shift among younger generations is increasingly evident. Migration to urban centres, Bangla-dominant education systems, and the consumption of digital media are accelerating the erosion of intergenerational transmission. At the same time, digital technologies are increasingly mediating access to education, public services, economic opportunities, and cultural participation. In my experience, Hyow is a relatively stable language, but it is not without the risk of losing its distinctiveness. I already hear an overwhelming proportion of Bangla words when young Hyow speakers communicate with one another. With intense and long-standing contact, there is a strong possibility of structural change in Hyow. This is true not only for Hyow but also for other Indigenous languages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and it is not merely an impressionistic observation.

These gradual changes may seem subtle, but they raise an important question: what must be done before a language begins to lose not only its words but also its linguistic structure and identity? In recent years, there have been small-scale initiatives to introduce education in the mother tongue. We have also seen large-scale initiatives aimed at developing digital tools and digitising Indigenous languages. We can expect new initiatives focused on developing AI-based digital tools to emerge very soon because of their global appeal. If we assess the outcomes of the first two sets of initiatives, we may gain insights into what to expect from the latter. From my conversations with local scholars involved in mother-tongue education initiatives, I detect frustration in their voices. This is largely due to administrative weaknesses. There appears to be a lack of coordinated effort to make these projects successful. As a linguist, I also believe that such initiatives must be linguistically well informed. Large-scale initiatives to develop digital tools for Indigenous languages, such as keyboards, likewise need to be grounded in sound linguistic analysis. Without this, there is a real risk of errors in these tools and a waste of public funds. We already have strong linguistic research on Cak, Chakma, Hyow, Khumi, Koda, Marma, and Pangkhua. Researchers working on these and other languages should be involved in any initiatives of this kind. Anticipated initiatives to develop AI-based tools for languages in Bangladesh will require even greater care, as their quality depends directly on the quality of the data on which they are trained. Moreover, such projects will require the development of scholars within local communities. In the case of Hyow, a robust corpus already exists, and some community members possess strong metalinguistic knowledge due to their involvement in earlier research.

The development of digital tools and artificial intelligence may offer new possibilities, but technology alone cannot safeguard a language. Without careful linguistic analysis, high-quality data, and sustained community involvement, even the most advanced systems will fail.

Before a language falls silent, what it needs most is commitment from scholars, institutions, and the community itself. Ekushey teaches us that language is dignity, and languages survive when people decide that they matter.

Muhammad Zakaria *is a Swiss National Science Foundation Advanced Postdoctoral Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Bern.*

The Bawm language at a crossroads

SHAILA SHOBNAM

On International Mother Language Day, the story of the Bawm language in Bangladesh stands as both a testament to resilience and a warning of fragility. Spoken by a small Indigenous community concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bawm is a Kuki-Chin language with a rich oral and written tradition. Its future, however, depends not only on memory and emotion, but on deliberate choices made by families, community institutions, and the state.

For Lalrithang Bawm, Central President of the Bawm Students' Association, the language is inseparable from identity. Growing up in Lairunpi Para in Ruma, Bawm shaped his childhood without question. It was the language of home, of village paths, of church services, and of everyday interaction. Even today, he continues to use it with family members and in social and religious gatherings.

He observes that younger Bawm speakers are engaging less with stories and songs as digital media replaces traditional communal spaces. Limited textbooks, fewer trained teachers, and the absence of policy support threaten intergenerational transmission. Without timely intervention, the language risks serious decline within the next two to three decades. Yet, with growing awareness and youth involvement, Bawm can survive as a core marker of cultural and collective identity.

A young female Bawm student from the University of Chittagong shares similar concerns. Within the community, Bawm continues to thrive in churches and literature, but outside these spaces, Bangla dominates everyday communication. Many urban-educated youth speak Bawm fluently in conversation yet struggle with literacy, as vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and traditional narratives gradually fade from regular use.

Zem Laltharngak Bawm, the General Secretary of the Young Bawm Association, grew up in New Eden village in Ruma, where Bawm once shaped every aspect of daily life. For him, the language remains a core element of identity, culture, and heritage. Yet he has watched generational change with concern. Older speakers command a wide range of vocabulary, idioms, and proverbs, while younger speakers often simplify expressions or mix Bangla and English into their speech. The decline of historical narratives and ceremonial language now threatens cultural continuity.

He points to structural obstacles as a major concern. Schools overwhelmingly use Bangla or English as mediums of instruction, leaving little institutional space for Bawm. Teaching materials remain scarce, trained teachers are limited, and formal support continues to be weak. Although the government introduced pre-primary textbooks in five Indigenous languages—Chakma, Garo, Marma, Sadri, and Tripura—in 2017, aligned with UNDRIP Article 13(1), Bawm community children remain deprived of this significant government initiative.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Youths of the Bawm community staged a protest on International Mother Language Day in 2025, demanding an end to the persecution of their people.

For the older generation, the contrast with the past feels profound. Pastor Sawn Thuang Loncheu, a senior leader in multiple Bawm organisations and Secretary of the Bible Translation Committee, has spent decades working to preserve Bawm language and culture. He has witnessed the language's evolution firsthand. Oral traditions—stories, songs, customs, and hymns—are gradually declining in daily practice, even as efforts continue to document them in written form.

He notes that Bawm is rarely used outside the community. In marketplaces, towns, and cities where Bawm speakers are few or absent, the language gives way to Bangla. Yet he remains encouraged by youth-led initiatives. Young people organise annual programmes featuring songs and cultural dances through associations such as the Young Bawm Association, the Bawm Students' Association, and the Bawm Women Association. In his view, younger generations are increasingly active in protecting both language and culture, recognising them as the primary markers of collective identity.

Literacy remains central to his vision. The Bawm Primer Book, written and published by Rev. L. Dollan in 1952, laid the foundation for reading and writing in Bawm. Since then, children have learned it in Sunday school. Because Bawm uses the Roman alphabet, anyone familiar with the English alphabet can read it. Today, the Holy Bible, hymn books, and other materials are printed in Bawm, making literacy more accessible and reinforcing language use in religious life.

For long-term survival, he believes recognition and inclusion by the Education Department of Bangladesh are crucial; without curriculum integration, preservation depends largely on community effort. He emphasises that the Bawm community, which is entirely Christian, values honesty, sincerity, and peaceful coexistence, urging people to use, develop, and preserve their language, while warning that losing a mother tongue means losing a people. Across generations, Bawm remains strong in homes, villages, churches, and cultural gatherings, but weakens in schools, workplaces, and urban spaces dominated by Bangla or English. While technology offers tools for preservation, it also risks diluting traditional language use.

Bawm alphabet

A a	Aw aw	B b	Ch ch	D d	E e	F f
a	aw	bi	cho	di	e	efi
[a/ə]	[ɔ]	[b]	[c]	[d]	[e]	[f]
G g	Ng ng	H h	I i	J j	K k	L l
gi	ngi	hesi	i	je	ke	el
[g]	[ŋ]	[h]	[i]	[ʤ]	[k^h/k]	[l]
M m	N n	O o	P p	R r	S s	T t
em	en	o	pi	ar	esi	ti
[m]	[n]	[o]	[p]	[r]	[s]	[t]
Th th	U u	V v	Z z			
thi	u	vi	zet			
[t^h]	[u]	[v]	[z]			

Bawm alphabet

In recent years, the Bawm community has faced an escalating humanitarian crisis that has reshaped the social and cultural landscape of Bandarban. They have experienced mass arrests, prolonged detentions, and the near-total lockdown of villages such as Bethel Para, Pankhyang Para, Suanlu Para, Faruk Para, Eden Para, Darjeeling Para, Ronin Para, and Sunsaung Para. Many have been forced to leave their ancestral homes, while others continue to live under intense surveillance and fear.

This combination of displacement, detention, and restricted movement has fractured the communal spaces—churches, village gatherings, and intergenerational households—where cultural practices and language transmission naturally occur, placing additional pressure on an already vulnerable linguistic community.

Once a language flowed with idioms, proverbs, and ceremony, spoken fully by elders. Today, youth speak a simpler Bawm, shaped by city life and screens. Yet love for the language endures. Across generations, the call remains the same: nurture, speak, and preserve Bawm, the heart of their culture and identity.

On this International Mother Language Day, the Bawm language stands at a crossroads. Its future will not be decided by sentiment alone, but by sustained practice, institutional recognition, and collective will. The language is still alive. Its endurance now depends on deliberate action. Long live the Bawm.

Shaila Shobnam *is a Barrister-in-training at BPP University, Britain, and an LL.B. (Hons) graduate of the University of London.*

AMAR EKUSHEY
INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY 2026

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THAR: A language born on the rivers

Although elderly members of the Bede community speak their mother tongue among themselves, they mostly use Bangla for occupational reasons. As a result, their mother tongue has reached a critical stage.

RANJANA BISHWAS

Among Bangladesh's ancient and marginalised communities, the Bede occupy a significant place. Their distinctive way of life, culture, and language have shaped a unique identity. Yet it can be said that little to no research has been conducted on the Bede language using linguistic methods. This is despite the fact that the language of the nearly extinct Bede community holds considerable historical and linguistic significance.

Researchers have offered various interpretations of the term "Bede". Some of these explanations are derogatory, while others are appreciative. Samarendranath Mollick states: "...they are non-Aryan. Through contact with various communities, certain influences of Aryan religion and culture have affected them. Yet in terms of nature worship, attire, and behaviour, they still remain at a primitive, wild stage. They speak their own language, perform snake charming, and sell the roots of various medicinal plants...". Before the establishment of Vedic civilisation, those who had taken initiation from Vedic practitioners were ostracised by local orthodox groups and labelled as 'Bede'.

Rabi Chakrabarty and Kalim Khan argue that "through the establishment of the Daksha Yajna, the Vedic practitioners founded Vedic civilisation in India. But long before that, those who had abandoned the primitive communal society dispersed to various places while preserving their own language and culture." According to this view, the Bede are essentially recognised as members of the ancient indigenous or primitive communal society. The early Vedic period is generally considered to span from 1800 BCE to 1000 BCE. By that measure, the history of the Bede's nomadic life in Bengal dates back approximately three and a half to four thousand years.

Oval-shaped makeshift tents of the Bede community.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

Settlements of the Bede Community

As Bangladesh is a riverine country, the presence of the Bede can be observed almost everywhere. They generally live on boats or set up temporary tents on government-owned land. In some places, they are seen living in small huts known as toila. Typically, their settlements are located along riverbanks or near marketplaces. Large numbers of Bede live across regions such as Dhaka, Manikganj, Sunamganj, Munshiganj, Chandpur, Madaripur, Barishal, Netrokona, Jashore, Khulna, and Natore.

Anthropological and linguistic identity

From an anthropological perspective, the Bede community belongs to the Proto-Australoid group. They identify themselves as Manta. For this reason, some researchers believe that the Manta indigenous people who arrived in Bangladesh with the Arakanese king in 1632 were the ancestors of the Bede. However, historical anthropological research has proven this claim to be incorrect. The group that came with the king were primarily the Magh or Marma community. There is no physical or linguistic similarity between this Mongoloid group and the Bede. The Bede are broadly divided into three main clans: Mal Manta, Shandar Manta, and Bajikar Manta. They typically have dark skin, broad head shapes, very curly and coarse hair, thick noses, medium height, heavy or thick lips, and strong, well-built bodies.

Dr Atul Sur, citing ancient Sanskrit literature, describes them as 'non-Aryan' and characterises their customs, behaviour, and language as 'strange'. The name of this 'strange' language is Thar. In regional Bangla, thar means 'hint' or 'gesture', but in Bede terminology it refers to the name of their language. From a linguistic standpoint, Thar is a distinct language. Just as Bangla, Teth, Ashek, Santali, or Mandi are separate languages, Thar too is the mother tongue of the Bede. However, due to the absence of a written form, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between standard Thar and spoken Thar.

Some researchers claim that Thar belongs to the Sak–Luish branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, but no concrete evidence has yet been found to support this claim. Limited analysis instead suggests that Thar shares considerable similarities with Bangla and Assamese, both of which belong to the Indo-European language family. As the Bede have long lived in close contact with Bengali communities, Bangla has had a strong influence on their language. Field studies show that they have adopted many Bangla words into their own language through adaptation. Conversely, Bangla itself has absorbed some Thar words, such as noko, which appears in regional Bangla as nok or lok, and khomor, which is used to mean khoma, or mouth.

Notable similarities can also be observed between Thar and Bangla in sentence structure and word order. Like Bangla, Thar generally follows a subject–object–verb pattern, with the verb placed at the end of the sentence. For example:

- AvwgfvZLvB--Svwg eZb UvwM (Jhami baton tagi) I eat rice
- †m KvR Ki†Q -- Zvb Kvg KivcvB†Q (Tan kam korpaiche) He is working

The language spoken by the Bede is not uniform across Bangladesh. Just as there are three main clans, there are also many sub-clans. Occupational and regional factors have created variations in their language, complicating the identification of linguistic features. Possibly for this reason, researchers Najmun Nahar Laiju and Dr Asitbaran Pal have classified the Bede language as a coded language.

Coded languages are often mistakenly associated with the criminal world. Yet not all coded languages are criminal languages. Criminal argots tend to change rapidly once the police learn the meanings of certain words. Such changes are not observed in the Bede language. The stigma attached to their language dates back to the British colonial period, when the Bede were listed as a 'criminal tribe'. In reality, secret or coded languages are also used among journalists and spies. Dr Sen has noted that Charyapada also employed cryptic words, known as sandhya bhasha. However, the Bede language does not use cryptic expressions in the manner of criminal argot.

Although elderly members of the Bede community speak their mother tongue among themselves, they mostly use Bangla for occupational reasons. As a result, their mother tongue has reached a critical stage. The International Mother Language Institute has published a Thar–Bangla dictionary of the Bede language. Although the number of entries in this dictionary is very limited, analysis suggests that Thar was once a fully developed language with a rich vocabulary. Speakers of Thar have moved from that glorious past into a lifeless present. Due to the absence of a written form, this language of a once linguistically rich community in Bangladesh is now on the path to extinction. For various reasons, interest among the younger generation in learning and using the language is steadily declining. As a result, there is little doubt that this intriguing and diverse language is heading towards extinction in the near future.

Conclusion

The Thar language of the Bede is not merely a means of communication; it is a bearer of their history, culture, and social existence. Although long coexistence has forged a deep relationship with the Bangla language, Thar has retained its distinctiveness to this day. Yet the lack of a written form, social change, and linguistic intrusion have rendered the language endangered. It is therefore urgent to undertake initiatives for the preservation and study of this language. Otherwise, the loss of this ancient language of the Bede community will mark yet another step backwards in the linguistic diversity of human civilisation.

Ranjana Biswas *is a folklore researcher and the author of several books on the Bede community, their language, and culture. The article has been translated by* **Samia Huda**.

The last speaker of Saura

MINTU DESHWARA

In a small village near the Indian border in Sreemangal, that fear is becoming painfully real. For the past six months, Samra Saura—believed to be in his 90s—has been gravely ill. He can no longer walk without assistance. Speaking even a few words leaves him breathless. Most of the time, he simply stares in silence.

When this correspondent visited Saura Palli in Rajghat Union on Monday, the frail elder whispered only a few words in his native tongue: "If I die, the language will die. Please take initiative to save my mother tongue before I die. My identity lives in this language."

According to community members, Samra Saura is the last person in Bangladesh who could fluently and accurately speak the Saura language.

Alkumar Saura, 56, described him as a one-man army for their mother tongue. "Even though he understood other languages spoken in the tea gardens, he would always speak Saura. The younger ones sometimes laughed at his pronunciation, but they also tried to repeat words after him. Because of him, we tried."

Today, no one else in the community can speak the language fluently. Those above 70 remember fragments—a few scattered words. But full sentences, conversations, stories—those lived almost entirely with Samra.

"For 15 to 20 years, people came, took interviews, and recorded his voice. We thought something would happen," Alkumar added. "However, nothing happened. Slowly, our mother tongue is disappearing before our eyes."

Grandparents teaching their grandchild the letters of the Saura language.

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

The elderly man is Samra Saura, the only person among the Saura community who once spoke the Saura language fluently with everyone. Now seriously ill, he is no longer able to speak as he once did.

A member of the Saura community brought this book from India for them. However, no one is able to read it properly.

The International Mother Language Institute has identified Saura as one of 14 endangered languages in the country. Only around 120 Saura families remain nationwide. In Saura village, located about 200 yards from the Indian border near Sreemangal Upazila of Moulvibazar, just 22 families live.

Most work as tea garden labourers. None has access to higher education. There is no institutional system for preserving or teaching their language.

Seventy-year-old Sridhar Saura said they have repeatedly appealed to the government to protect their mother tongue. Yet nothing has been done.

Within families, Bengali, Odia, and Sadri have largely replaced Saura. "Many people confuse our language with Odia or call it a jungle language," said 72-year-old Umila Saura. "So, we speak Bengali. When we speak Saura, people look down on us."

Language shift has accelerated among children.

Sagor Saura said, "We heard a few words from Grandpa, but we cannot speak properly. At school everyone speaks Bengali, so we also speak Bengali."

Another child, Resmi Saura, admitted that classmates often laugh when they try to speak Saura. "They say it is slang. So we feel ashamed."

Sanjoy Saura added, "When Grandpa speaks it, we do not understand everything. If someone explained it to us, we would be more interested."

Their words reflect a pattern experts describe as a breakdown in intergenerational transmission—often the final stage before language extinction.

Researcher Porimol Baraik pointed out that the International Mother Language Institute Act (2010) emphasises the preservation of all ethnic languages and the development of written forms. However, he said implementation remains weak.

"Although NGOs work on improving the socio-economic conditions of small ethnic groups, language preservation is often neglected," he added, calling for stronger state intervention.

Samar M. Soren, Indigenous Language Technology Specialist, Head of the Language Resource Hub (LRH), and Global Taskforce Member of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), UNESCO, said: "The Saura language in Bangladesh, also known as Savara and spoken by the Savara people mainly in the tea gardens of Sylhet and Moulvibazar, is in serious danger of disappearing. Ethnologue calls it Sora, but it is also referred to as Saura."

The International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) classifies it among the endangered languages of the country, with a very small number of speakers remaining, mostly older members of the community. Intergenerational transmission has become extremely weak, as younger generations are not learning or using it regularly, largely due to the influence of dominant languages like Bengali and the small size of the community itself.

The language has almost no presence in digital spaces, media, or education, with very limited literacy materials and scripts (though it has its own Sorang Sompeng script, Bengali is more commonly used for writing in Bangladesh) and no official government recognition or support. Community interest in and prestige for Saura have declined over time, making it harder to pass on. Along with the Saura language, valuable traditional knowledge such as folklore, rituals, songs, stories, and local cultural practices is at high risk of being lost forever.

Without urgent efforts in documentation, revitalisation programmes, community involvement, and institutional backing, Saura faces a very real chance of vanishing completely in the coming years. "We need to act now to help preserve this important part of Bangladesh's linguistic and cultural diversity," he added.

AFM Zakaria, professor of anthropology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, echoed the concern.

"A language survives through family-based practice," he said. "When one generation does not or cannot teach it to the next, extinction becomes inevitable. Sometimes languages are not lost by force, but through social pressure and inferiority. That is a silent form of cultural violence."

He stressed the urgent need to collect audio and video documentation from last speakers like Samra Saura.

Sixty-year-old Jamini Saura said only two elders once spoke the language fluently. One passed away years ago. The other now struggles even to speak.

"It seems that when he dies, our language will die with him," she said quietly.

If that happens, it will not simply mark the loss of a language. It will mark the disappearance of songs, wedding rituals like Sunkara, oral histories, and an entire worldview shaped over generations.

An anthropologist said it would raise an uncomfortable question: if a language dies with one person, is it merely a personal tragedy—or a collective failure?

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

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Preserving the A'chik tongue

The digital evolution of Garo identity in Bangladesh

Members of the Garo community performing a traditional dance during a cultural gathering.

PHOTO: ARSHADUL HOQUE ROCKY

MUSRAT HOSSAIN MITHILA

The mist still clings to the ancient Sal forests of Madhupur and the rugged edges of the hilly terrains of Netrokona and Mymensingh, much like the stories of the Garo people—A'chik, as they call themselves. If you walk through these landscapes at dawn, you might still hear the rhythmic thud of a wooden pestle or the distant hum of a folk tune, but more often now, you hear the sharp, digital ping of a smartphone. The A'chik Ku'sik (Garo language), a vibrant member of the Tibeto-Burman family, is currently standing at a fragile crossroads where centuries of oral tradition are being forced to evolve within the high-speed demands of a globalised world. It is a story of a language trying to find its feet on a digital floor while keeping its heart buried deep in the forest soil.

To understand the weight of this struggle, one must first explore the name the community claims for itself. According to Michael Mridul Kanti Sangma, an Ethnic Language Specialist at FEEL (Friend of Endangered Ethnic Languages) and a veteran language surveyor, while the world knows them as "Garo," they identify as Mandi. He explains that the word originates from "Ma·ani de," literally meaning "children of the mother." This linguistic root is the umbilical cord to a matrilineal heritage, where identity and belonging are passed down through mothers. "My language is my identity," Michael asserts. "It is completely different from any other; its pronunciation and accent carry a unique soul."

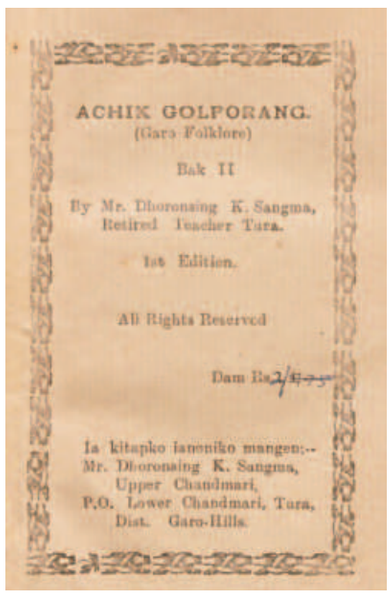
For the Mandi, when a language like this fades, it is not just words that disappear; it is a specific way of honouring womanhood and nature that vanishes from the human record. In their world, to lose the language is to lose the very map of their ancestry.

For generations, this heritage thrived as an oral masterpiece, surviving without a formal indigenous script. While folklore whispers of a lost ancient writing system—some say it was written on skins that were lost during a great famine—the language was largely formalised in the late 19th century by American Baptist Missionaries using the Latin script. However, forcing a language born of the hills into a foreign alphabet is a complex task. We hear from Newton Nokrek, a Garo community member and student at the University of Dhaka, who points out that the lack of a structured, indigenous written version remains a significant hurdle. "Our traditions and beliefs have been transferred orally," he says.

This oral tradition is now being tested by a harsh "Language Shift." In urban hubs like Dhaka, parents often prioritise Bengali and English, fearing that practising A'chik Ku'sik might limit their children's career prospects. This creates what linguists call "receptive fluency" -- a generation of young Garos who can understand their parents' stories but cannot find the words to speak back in their own tongue. It is a silent tragedy where the conversation between generations becomes a one-way street.

The real revolution, however, is happening in the pockets of the youth. The future of A'chik Ku'sik now depends on being "typable." Community-led tech initiatives have developed Garo-specific keyboards for smartphones, allowing a teenager in the village to text their grandmother in their mother tongue without the clumsy interference of Bengali autocorrect.

Michael Mridul Kanti Sangma views this as a vital opportunity, noting that the younger generation is becoming more interested in practising literature through digital tools. As a community member, Newton Nokrek echoes this optimism, believing that building Natural Language Processing (NLP) datasets for AI could grant A'chik Ku'sik



ACHIK GOLPORANG.
(Garo Folklore)
Bak II
By Mr. Dhoronsing K. Sangma,
Retired Teacher Tura.
1st Edition.
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Dam Rs.
Ia kitapko laneniko mangen;--
Mr. Dhoronsing K. Sangma,
Upper Chandmari,
P.O. Lower Chandmari, Tura,
Dist. Garo-Hills.

Achik Golporang (Garo Folklore), Volume II, by Dhoronsing K. Sangma, an early printed collection of Garo oral traditions.

A chart illustrating the Garo script and phonetic system.

the "prestige" it needs to compete in a globalised world. If a young person sees their language recognised by a computer or a translation app, the psychological barrier of "backwardness" begins to crumble. This digital evolution is not just about convenience; it is about proving that a "forest language" is sophisticated enough for the silicon age.

However, the struggle for survival is marked by two stark realities. There is a profound institutional gap; while the National Curriculum Textbook Board (NCTB) has published pre-primary materials, Michael warns that they are only available in limited areas, which is not enough to sustain a community of over 200,000 speakers in Bangladesh. Without expert teachers and a mandatory curriculum, these books often sit gathering dust, symbols of a promise only half-kept. Furthermore, the social pressure to assimilate remains heavy. Newton recalls a painful personal truth: "In my childhood, when I spoke my language in public, people would stare at us as if we were strange." This social stigma, combined with the dominance of Bengali, often forces the mother tongue into the shadows of the home, stripping it of its power in public life. When a language is treated as a secret, it eventually stops being a living force.

The evolution of the language requires more than just pride, it requires a structural overhaul of how the language is taught. Grammar development is not just for linguists; it is the skeleton that allows a language to stand tall. Currently, experts are working to standardise the phonetic rules of the language to prevent it from fragmenting into mutually unintelligible dialects. Because A'chik Ku'sik is tonal and rich in glottal stops, it often feels "squeezed" when written in Latin or Bengali scripts. Standardising these nuances is essential for creating a uniform literary tradition that can be taught in schools and preserved in digital archives. It is a race against time to document the elders' vocabulary before the last of the "pure" speakers are gone.

The path forward requires a harmony between the state and the soil. Newton Nokrek argues that institutional recognition and Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) are essential to give the language prestige in schools, citing the existing models in Meghalaya, India, where the language holds official status. The Garo language is rich with words that defy translation. Terms like middima (a sense of spiritual presence), ka·sroka (to love gently), and rim·preta (to hold with care) capture emotions that Bengali or English simply cannot convey. These words are the artifacts of a civilisation that sees the world through the lens of community and the environment. Without these specific sounds, the Mandi worldview becomes flattened, losing its vibrant, spiritual dimensions.

In the shadows of the hills, the transition is also about reclaiming the physical spaces where the language lives. When a Mandi youth types a message in A'chik, they are not just communicating; they are performing an act of resistance against the erasure of their history. The keyboard becomes as essential as the drum used in the Wangala harvest festival. As Michael observes, the survival of the language depends on its ability to move from the kitchen to the classroom and finally, into the global digital ecosystem. This move ensures that the language evolves rather than merely surviving as a relic of the past.

As we look toward the future, the survival of the A'chik tongue is not just a concern for the Mandi people; it is a test of our collective commitment to human diversity. In an era where AI and global connectivity threaten to homogenise culture, the smallest voices deserve a platform. We see a generation of youth who are no longer ashamed to wear their identity on their digital sleeves. They are the bridge builders, taking the stories told by the hearth and turning them into code. The goal is a future where a Garo child can walk into a classroom in Dhaka or a digital space online and feel that their mother tongue is a bridge to the future, not a weight from the past.

Musrat Hossain Mithila *is a contributor to Slow Reads, The Daily Star and an undergraduate student of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Dhaka. She can be reached at mmusrat30@gmail.com*

Hajong and the cost of being unwritten

SB MERAJ

Every ten years, there is a quiet argument that never makes the news. A census worker knocks on a door and asks a simple question: "Mother tongue?" The answer comes back—Hajong. It always does. The people saying it do not hesitate. They know the difference between Hajong, Bangla, and Assamese. They switch between languages every day without confusing them. The confusion usually happens on paper, somewhere far away, when someone decides that Hajong should just be grouped under Bangla anyway.

That is how a language begins to disappear without actually dying. Not through silence—Hajong is still spoken, sung, joked in, and argued in but through classification. Official records like neat categories. Hajong does not behave neatly. It lives in a strange middle space: historically shaped by Tibeto-Burman roots but now an Eastern Indo-Aryan language, carrying traces of both worlds in its bones.

The people who speak it have been clear about one thing for decades: Hajong is not Bangla, not Chakma, and not Rajbangshi. Yet official systems keep folding it into bigger linguistic umbrellas. The census might record the numbers, almost eighty thousand speakers identifying themselves, but recognition stops there. The language name shows up almost by accident, simply because the population crosses a statistical threshold.

Step into a Hajong household, and none of this bureaucratic confusion exists. Stories move from elders to children without translation. Songs carry rhythms that do not quite sound like neighbouring tongues. Children teach each other words in schoolyards. The language is alive, stubbornly so, even when outsiders barely know it exists.

And that is the strange tension at the heart of Hajong—a language fully present in everyday life but half-visible in official memory. It survives through people who keep speaking it, even while the world keeps trying to rename it. Between identity and administration, between heritage and paperwork, Hajong stands in a narrow space—not lost, not fully acknowledged, but constantly negotiating its right to be itself.

This is where the story begins: with a language that refuses to be absorbed into someone else's category and a community that keeps answering the same question again and again—no, this is not Bangla. This is Hajong.

People ask the same question repeatedly: can a language without a script survive? It is a very modern worry, born from forms, keyboards, and official stamps, as if a language only matters when it has fonts and grammar books. Hajong does not work like that. It lives in stories, songs, gossip, and small jokes shared during long days of work.

The real pressure comes from the outside world. Modern Bangladesh runs on written words—certificates, applications, notices, and everything typed and sealed. Hajong speakers learn Bangla to move through this system. They switch easily. They have to. But every time Hajong stays outside the classroom door, a quiet message lingers: your language is private, not public.

There is tension, though. Younger speakers text in Bangla because the Hajong language lacks a standard written form. Online spaces rarely fit. Teachers rarely mention it. Official recognition remains vague, often buried under larger language labels. Speaking Hajong becomes a daily balance between practicality and identity.

So, can Hajong survive modern Bangladesh? Maybe survival is not the right word. The language is not fading quietly—it is alive and stubborn. The real question is growth. Can it step into classrooms, archives, and public spaces? Can a country built on written language make room for one that mostly lives in speech?

In Bangladesh and Northeast India, written Hajong literature exists, but in scattered forms. Researchers have documented grammar and folklore; a few community writers have published poems, memoirs, and cultural histories—often in Bangla, Assamese, or English rather than in Hajong itself. Small community booklets and school efforts try to turn spoken words into something that can be held and shared.

PHOTO: SUVRADEB HAJONG

Members of the Hajong community gather in traditional attire during a *Hakobata* (picnic) in Netrokona, celebrating community bonds, cultural identity, and shared heritage.

Yet challenges remain. Young Hajong activists are collecting songs, recording elders, and experimenting with writing systems. Along the fading borderlands, Antor Hajong carries a language on his shoulders. Moving from village to village, he teaches Hajong to children and elders, fearing its slow disappearance. Antor says, "I do not know about the future, but without a script or without any existence and literature, a language cannot survive." Financial hardship has stalled his efforts. Antor adds, "I started this programme for the sake of the language, but due to financial reasons, I could not continue it. Without the involvement of the government, the preservation of the language cannot happen."

Writer and poet Dolon Hajong worries that Bangla words are steadily replacing native ones. Dolon Hajong states, "Almost 20–30 percent of words have been mixed with Bangla... not working in the long run." With only a few works preserved by the Birishiri Cultural Academy, a government organisation for indigenous communities, hope now rests on a forthcoming Hajong dictionary.

In the age of AI and other technologies, digital tools learn dominant languages, and platforms prioritise widely used scripts. Where does a language without a standardised script stand? Can technology become a bridge—through digital dictionaries, audio archives, or AI-driven documentation—or will the absence of data push Hajong further into invisibility? Dolon Hajong reflects, "There are no highly educated people in the Hajong language anymore. Maybe 10–12 years ago, there were, but not now. If you search today, perhaps you would find only two or three individuals. If there is no academic command over the language or no people with that level of expertise, then technology will be of no use. Before using technology, it is essential to strengthen our proficiency in the language."

If algorithms are trained only on what is already written and published, how will they recognise a language that mostly survives in memory and speech? And if young Hajongs grow up scrolling more than listening, will technology archive their mother tongue—or quietly replace it? Only the future will be able to answer that.

SB Meraj *is a writer, theatre artist, and film enthusiast. He can be reached at sbmeraz.14mgbhs@gmail.com.*

AMAR EKUSHEY
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The Daily Star
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S8

Language, power, and the erasure of Kol

A group of young Kol boys standing in front of a vibrant traditional mural.

MASHRUR IMTIAZ

To explore the future of linguistic diversity in Bangladesh from the perspective of the Kol language, I begin by revisiting a few unconventional yet academically sound facts about the Kol people. Such a discussion is necessary not only to correct persistent misrecognitions but also to situate the Kol within broader historical and linguistic debates. From there, I turn to the voices of the Kol community themselves, who speak of an ongoing shift in their language, culture, livelihood, and heritage. This situation of language endangerment raises fundamental concerns about the multilingual future that Bangladesh aspires to build.

Kol is an endonym that refers to the Kol people, their land, culture, and language in both India and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the Kols are a marginal community among the indigenous peoples of the plains. While the origin of the language is not clearly known to Kol speakers themselves, various explanations of its probable origins have been proposed by linguists and anthropologists. Linguistically, Kol is an endangered language belonging to the Munda family. It is spoken in north-western Bangladesh and shares significant similarities with other Munda languages spoken in India. Kol is the primary language, or mother tongue, of the Kol indigenous community, which possesses its own distinct linguistic and cultural identity. However, many Kol people today express concern about losing their mother tongue and native traditions.

Currently, among Kol speakers, there is an increasing trend of borrowing words from other languages. The influence of Santali and Bangla is particularly noticeable. Kol speakers reside in several districts of Bangladesh, including Rajshahi, Chapai Nawabganj, Naogaon, Rangpur, Dinajpur, and Kushtia. More specifically, they are concentrated in Chapai Nawabganj (Sadar and Gomastapur), Rajshahi (Godagari and Sadar), and Dinajpur (Kotwali and Kahorol). According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census of Bangladesh, the ethnic Kol population stands at 3,822, of whom 1,842 are male and 1,980 are female.

At the same time, it is important to address a larger issue of naming and representation. In the plains of Bangladesh and eastern India, many indigenous communities are today homogenised under the generalised ethnolinguistic label 'Santali'. This classificatory reduction overlooks the internal diversity of Munda-speaking populations and reproduces a long-standing simplification rooted in colonial knowledge production. While contemporary administrative and public discourse often collapses multiple identities into 'Santali', earlier scholarship used a different umbrella term, 'Kol'. Although that label also carried colonial baggage, it reflected a broader recognition of a Munda linguistic-cultural cluster rather than a single dominant identity.

The shift from 'Kol' to 'Santali' is not merely terminological; it denotes changing regimes of representation, power, and visibility. Naming practices are political acts, as they determine which languages are recognised, which identities are institutionalised, and which communities become statistically invisible. From a decolonial perspective, the uncritical use of homogenising umbrella terms—whether 'Kol' in colonial archives or 'Santali' in contemporary bureaucratic discourse—constitutes an epistemic act that marginalises smaller Munda-speaking groups and erases localised linguistic ecologies.

Importantly, discussions of the Kol language tradition also bring forward a bold and alternative origin narrative of Bangla that foregrounds the historical and structural affinities between Bangla and the Kol–Munda language continuum. In 1977, anthropologist Clarence Maloney revisited conventional views on the evolution of Bengali. While acknowledging the widespread belief that Bengali was derived from Sanskrit, he argued that Sanskrit functioned primarily as a liturgical and literary language that enriched Bangla rather than serving as its direct ancestor. Engaging with G. A. Grierson's outer-band theory, Maloney argued that structural differences among Bengali, Marathi, and other languages complicated the idea of a single Magadhan Prakrita origin. Significantly, he proposed that Bengali may have developed as a pidgin on the Bengal plain through processes of Munda contact and pidginisation. Similarly, prominent linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji acknowledged Kol (or Munda) influences in Bengali, identifying numerous words in modern Bangla—such as kadali, kambala, mayura, tambula, utpala, mera, and meni—as being of Kol origin. Reinforcing this line of inquiry, distinguished linguist Muhammad Shahidullah presented his influential paper 'Munda Affinities of Bengali', published in 1931. He demonstrated phonological, morphological, syntactical, and lexical connections between Bengali and Munda languages and concluded that the relationship between Bengali and Kol was intimate.

Filming an interview with Kol girls, recorded by a member of the Kol community.

Beyond academic arguments, Kol remains a rich repository of folklore, song, rhyme, and religious literature within the Munda language family. In recent times, the Roman script has been used to write Kol, often with special diacritic markers. Kol speakers are fluently multilingual, typically using Santali and Bangla alongside their mother tongue. While Kol is used primarily within the community, Bangla dominates outside their villages. The influence of Munda languages on Bangla is visible in vocabulary related to agriculture, habitation, kinship, counting, and the natural world. Words such as ku i (twenty), pet (belly), c^{h}ula (oven), and d^{h}ol (drum) are recognised as deshi words of indigenous origin. Thus, Kol is not peripheral to the linguistic history of this region. It is foundational.

However, the future of Kol remains fragile. According to Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), Kol remains between level 6 and level 7, indicating a precarious state of intergenerational transmission. Field observations suggest that level 7 is increasingly applicable: while the child-bearing generation can speak the language, transmission to children is weakening. Under the Expanded GIDS (EGIDS), Kol is moving from 'vulnerable' (6a) towards 'threatened' (6b). Recent fieldwork indicates that it is already in a threatened state, as the youngest generation is gradually losing fluency in their mother tongue.

The situation of the Kol language in Bangladesh cannot be understood merely as a case of gradual linguistic decline. Rather, it must be situated within broader theoretical discussions of language endangerment as a political and historically structured process. Recent arguments in linguistics claim that language endangerment is not a 'natural' outcome of linguistic evolution but a consequence of power, inequality, and colonial history. This consideration is particularly relevant to the Kol case.

Language endangerment occurs when intergenerational transmission weakens or ceases. In the Kol context, field observations indicate precisely such a precarious condition: while older generations speak Kol fluently, younger generations increasingly shift towards Bangla and, in some cases, Santali. This pattern reflects what sociolinguists describe as language shift, where a community gradually abandons its ancestral language in favour of a dominant one. However, as theorists such as Roche and Belew cautioned in 2025, such shifts are rarely voluntary or 'natural'. They are embedded in systems of linguistic inequality.

In Bangladesh, Bangla occupies a position of state prestige, educational dominance, and economic mobility. Santali, in certain contexts, also functions as a more numerically and institutionally recognised Munda language. Within this hierarchy, Kol becomes doubly marginalised: first by national linguistic centralisation around Bangla, and second by homogenising classifications that subsume smaller Munda-speaking groups under 'Santali'. As a result, Kol speakers often adopt dominant languages for education, employment, and social acceptance. This mirrors Roche and Belew's argument that language endangerment emerges through political domination, linguistic marginalisation, and cultural assimilation. Importantly, the erasure of the name 'Kol' itself through shifting classificatory regimes illustrates how naming practices function as acts of power. When a language becomes statistically invisible, it becomes politically invisible. Thus, Kol endangerment is not simply about vocabulary loss or borrowing; it is about unequal recognition within state and knowledge systems.

In this contemporary phase, we now need to reconceptualise language revitalisation as a form of resistance and decolonisation. In the Kol context, documentation, community-based language teaching, and the assertion of Kol as an endonym are not merely academic exercises. They are acts of epistemic reclamation. Recording oral literature, transcribing narratives in Roman script with diacritic markers, and analysing Kol's structural features are steps towards restoring intergenerational transmission and community dignity. Under Fishman's GIDS and the Expanded GIDS framework, Kol currently falls within the vulnerable-to-threatened range, signalling a fragile stage of transmission. Therefore, language documentation is necessary, and revitalisation must be community-driven. Without active participation from Kol speakers themselves, especially the younger generation, documentation alone cannot secure survival.

Ultimately, the future of linguistic diversity in Bangladesh depends on whether languages like Kol are recognised not as relics of the past but as living systems shaped by historical contact, colonial intervention, and contemporary inequality. Bangladesh's history is inseparable from the struggle for language rights. International Mother Language Day reminds us of that legacy each year. The question, therefore, is not whether Kol will survive on its own. The question is whether Bangladesh is prepared to imagine a multilingual future that includes its endangered indigenous voices. I have often searched for this answer in my interactions with a Kol child named Aranya Biraj Kol, who now creates small online videos in his own language along with his father. At times, the answer remains unspoken in the quiet gaze of Rumali Hasda Kol, a Kol woman recently displaced from her ancestral homestead. If we can confront these existential questions beyond the month of February and beyond ceremonial remembrance, of course, we may finally begin to find answers to issues that are intricate, essential, and profoundly human.

Dr Mashrur Imtiaz *is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Dhaka.*

WILL THE NEXT GENERATION SPEAK KOKBOROK?

S. DISHA

In a small village of Khagrachhari, a grandmother calls her grandson to dinner in Kokborok. Her voice carries the warmth of generations and is filled with the words she learned from her own mother. But the boy replies in the Chakma language. He understands her, yet he hesitates to answer in his mother tongue. The language that once flowed naturally at home now struggles to survive even within its own walls. Such moments have become very common across Tripura communities in Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and parts of Cumilla. The once-prominent language of this indigenous community is now slowly fading away with each generation.

Kokborok, which literally means "language of the people," belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and is spoken by the Tripura community of India and the border regions of Bangladesh, mainly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and nearby areas. For generations, it has survived as a community language with limited written use, carrying the history, culture, and identity of its people. However, today, Kokborok stands at a critical stage where its survival faces serious challenges.

At present, Kokborok has very limited written and literary development in Bangladesh. Unlike some neighbouring regions, such as India, there is little formal grammar documentation, textbooks, literature, or standard learning materials. Most communication remains oral. It does not yet have a standardised written form. In addition, the language lacks sufficient literary resources. While some poems and short stories exist in Kokborok, the available body of literature is still too limited to support the language's growth effectively. The community launched its first Kokborok book in Bangladesh only as recently as 2022. Nikke Tripura, a community member, shared, "Our language is mostly oral, and we still lack a proper written form in Bangladesh. Some people use Roman letters, and India has developed a writing system, but now the government and community are working together to develop one."

FILE PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Three first-grade students from the Tripura community pore over a Kokborok textbook. The photograph was taken at Doluchhora Government Primary School in Sreemangal upazila, Moulvibazar. Photo: Mintu Deshwara.

Schools mostly use Bangla and English as the mediums of instruction. As a result, children grow up prioritising these dominant languages rather than their mother tongue. In multicultural school environments, some even adopt other indigenous languages, such as Chakma, due to environmental influences. Barna Tripura, a university student in Dhaka, shared that by growing up surrounded by Chakma families, she gained the ability to speak that language more comfortably than Kokborok. She explained, "Most of my friends spoke Chakma, and school used Bangla, so I naturally learned those languages. My family rarely used Kokborok at home. My parents were working parents, and my mother does not even know proper Kokborok. Therefore, I never really learned it. Only my aunt in my family knows Kokborok."

However, recognising the vulnerable condition of this language, the government initiated the teaching of Kokborok in community schools in 2017. Still, the results have not been satisfactory due to inadequate teacher training and the limited economic value associated with the language. Mathura Bikash Tripura, Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity, explained, "Although children are now being taught Kokborok in schools, the outcome remains disappointing." He also added, "The younger generation has little interest in learning their mother tongue because it offers fewer economic benefits in terms of employment or educational opportunities."

Future of the language

The future of Kokborok in Bangladesh appears uncertain and fragile. Although the language is not yet extinct, it is clearly moving towards endangerment. Without immediate efforts to increase daily use, proper documentation, and sustained institutional support, Kokborok may gradually disappear under the pressure of dominant languages such as Bangla, Chakma, and Marma.

Dr Md Mostafa Rashel, Associate Professor of Linguistics at BUP, shared that Kokborok is already in a vulnerable state. According to him, "The language is not yet fully endangered, but it is clearly moving in that direction. Due to the strong influence of Chakma, Marma, and Bangla, community members are no longer able to use Kokborok regularly. As Chakma, Marma, and Bangla become more common in daily communication, many original Kokborok words are slowly being forgotten. The younger generation, especially children, is not fully acquiring these traditional words, which leads to a gradual loss of vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Our current focus is to document the language so that it does not vanish completely."

Urbanisation has added another layer of difficulty. Mathura Bikash Tripura, Executive Director of Zabarang Kalyan Samity, shared, "Many young Tripura people who move to towns or cities feel embarrassed to speak Kokborok in public. Even when they use it, they often mix it with Bangla or English. This code-mixing weakens the purity of the language and reflects a declining sense of linguistic pride among the youth. Some people still value their mother tongue, but unless this attitude changes among the younger generation, the future of Kokborok remains uncertain. We are trying to increase engagement with them, but the results are not yet satisfactory."

There is still hope, as small efforts are beginning across villages and community schools, such as local classes, children's books, and cultural programmes. Linguists and activists believe that if Kokborok is taught in schools, used at home, and supported through digital media and literature, it can survive and even grow again.

Impact of technologies

At present, technology has had a limited impact on Kokborok in Bangladesh, but it is beginning to open new possibilities for the language. Some digital tools, as well as expanding online content and e-books, could support the preservation and learning of the language through documentation alongside traditional methods, although such initiatives remain in the early stages. Dr Md Mostafa Rashel shared, "Tools like Google Translate are now available. It can detect and translate Kokborok. Although the translations are not fully accurate, they provide a starting point for making the language more accessible and for supporting learning."

For Kokborok, survival is not just about words on a page or lessons in a classroom. It lives in conversations at home, the songs sung in villages, and the stories passed from grandparents to children. Yet today, those voices are fragile, and the language is slipping into the shadows of Bangla, Chakma, and English. Documentation and tools such as books or apps can help, but they cannot replace daily use and practice. Kokborok will thrive only if the next generation chooses to speak it, share it, and carry it forward as a living part of their identity. When a language disappears, it is not only words that are lost; it is stories, songs, history, and a people's way of seeing the world. Saving a language is more than preservation. Saving Kokborok means preserving the voice of the Tripura community itself.

S. Disha *is an undergraduate student of Applied Linguistics at BRAC University, exploring the intersections of culture and community.*