



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 Khyang (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.

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(itu), 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

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

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.

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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.

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.

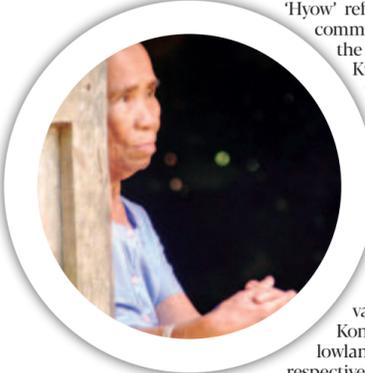
After a month of training, we travelled to Bandarban for fieldwork. I was assigned to work on Hyow alongside another student. Our language consultant, Hlakray Prue, later became a pioneering figure in building educational and professional opportunities within the Hyow community. That one week of fieldwork—collecting 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

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



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

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



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.

of this significant government initiative.

For the older generation, the contrast with the past feels profound. Pastor Sawm Thuang

Bawm alphabet

A a	Aw aw	B b	Ch ch	D d	E e	F f
a	aw	bi	cho	di	e	efi
[aʼ]	[a]	[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]	[j]	[kʰ/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			
[ʰ]	[u]	[v]	[z]			

Bawm alphabet

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.

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.

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