



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

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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

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

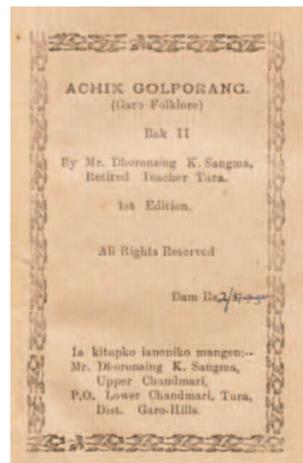
for creating a uniform literary tradition that can be taught in schools and preserved in digital archives. It is a race against time to document the elders' vocabulary before the last of the "pure" speakers are gone.

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-pretta (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.

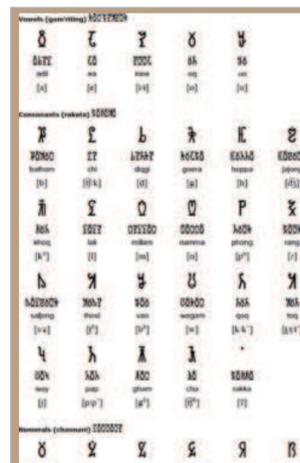
In the shadows of the hills, the transition is also about reclaiming the physical spaces where the language lives. When a Mandi youth types a message in A'chik, they are not just communicating; they are performing an act of resistance against the erasure of their history. The keyboard becomes as essential 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.

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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

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

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



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

school efforts try to turn spoken words into something that can be held and shared.

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.

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