

Cultural Daily

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The Bangla Language & the Fight for Belonging

Shomita Mahmud · Thursday, March 9th, 2023

The Bangla Language & the Fight for Belonging

by Shomita Mahmud

Culture is the basis of humanity, and my culture is being Bengali, as in from Bangladesh. To me, being Bengali includes the foods that we eat, the clothes that we wear, and also the way we go about our lives. We are each taught different concepts of being respectful and how to speak, or what is socially acceptable versus what is not. I was born and raised in America, but I still have ties with my culture because I was raised in a household that kept up with traditions from back home. Along with growing up Bengali, I was also raised with the ideals of my religion, Islam. Majority of Bangladesh's population is Muslim, including my parents, so they also grew up being taught the ideals that they taught me. An example of these ideals is to hand items to people with our right hand. This is more of a sign of respect in Bengali culture, but in Islam, the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had tended to use his right hand to interact with others. Muslims are taught that the more we follow prophet Muhammad, the better we are as a Muslim. More times than not, many individuals in my culture and religion force the two to coincide with each other, even if it did not actually mean they belonged together, such as saying that something may be prohibited because of our religion, when in reality, it is just a cultural thing that is seen to be wrong.

Although I was raised in such a household, I still do not know a lot about the deeper history of my country. Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan until 1971. For a bit more context, up until 1947, India was a part of Great Britain. During this time, there was a great divide between the Hindus and Muslims in India, so Pakistan became independent from them. According to O.H. K. Spate's article "The Partition of India and the Prospects of Pakistan," Muslims in India "struggled for existence" (Spate 6). This is something I find important to note, as it feels a bit condescending to me after seeing the history of Bangladesh. When Pakistan was formed, it automatically became two parts because the two, East and West, were divided by land. In order to get to West Pakistan from East, or vice versa, one would have to pass through India because there was no direct way to get to it otherwise. With the vast distance between the two parts of Pakistan, each side adopted their own languages; West Pakistan spoke Urdu, but East Pakistan spoke Bangla, which resulted in having small differences in the cultures. At one point, the main government, which was located in West Pakistan, wanted to make Urdu the official language. Before Bangladesh ultimately decided to fight to separate from Pakistan in 1971, they fought for their language. The official language of Pakistan was only Urdu for a long time, but after the Bengali language movement in 1948 and 1952, Bangla also officially became a part of the official languages in Pakistan in 1956 (Rahman 838). Though written out, it seems as though this was a quick act, but it was far from it. According

to scholar, Tariq Rahman, West Pakistani press and media had “declared that Hindus and communists had created the Bengali language movement as a way to break Pakistan up into parts (Rahman 833). When looking at this with the knowledge we have now, this is far from the truth. After the Bengalis of Pakistan had their own official language in the country, they began to realize how different they were from West Pakistanis. This was around the time, they decided that it was time to stand up to the West Pakistani military for their “indiscriminate attacks and declare independence”(Hossain 28). Bangladesh gained their independence after Pakistan’s surrender in 1971. Today, Pakistan and Bangladesh have very similar cultures, but the small differences in food and traditions are what differentiate the two.



Bhasha Andolon [side].

This is a memorial to the students who gave their lives to establish Bangla as the official language of Bangladesh when it was part of Pakistan.

Now why is this even important to culture? How is it different from other people’s cultures? Language is something that should come with a country, but before Bangladesh could even become one, they were not even allowed to have their own. They fought to keep and use their language for years. And yet, even after they had their own language, they had to fight again: this time for their own freedom and independence. Since I was born in America and am only ethnically Bengali, I decided to ask my parents, who were born and raised in Bangladesh, about their stance on the fight for the language. As my dad explained to me the history of how Urdu almost became the only official language of Pakistan, he said that “My mother tongue is Bangla, and if someone tried to tell me that my national language was to become Urdu, I would feel that a part of me was being taken away.” To describe why he felt this way, he gave me an example that I could relate to; Imagine English, the language you are fluent in and are comfortable with, the language that you know how to read, write, and speak, is taken away from you and you are forced to communicate in a language that you are far from familiar with. He also told me about a lot of the history of the fight

to have their own language that was not in any of the papers I found online. The Bangla language movement, called “bhasha andolon” in Bengali, was the Bengalis of East Pakistan fighting for their rights. My dad also mentioned how he is more comfortable with Bangla. Language is a form of expression. He says that when he came to America, about 30 years ago, there were not many Bangladeshi people, so whenever he saw or encountered another person from Bangladesh, he felt close to them even if they were a stranger. They could share feelings with each other because they could relate to each other. The language had brought them together. As for my mom, who also feels similar to my dad, says that she is proud to own the language because it is one of the only languages that a group of people had to fight for. The 21st of February is the day Bangladesh recognizes the fight the people of East Pakistan went through for Bangla to become the official language, and since 2000, World Language Day falls on the same day. My parents emphasized the fact that it is so much easier to converse and express themselves with their mother tongue and that they cannot imagine ever being forced to speak something else.

One more thing I learned from my parents was that there is a song dedicated to the individuals that fought for the language. It is called “Amar Bhaiyer Rokte Rangano” which loosely translates to “stained in my brother’s blood.” One of the lines of the song that really stood out to me is “Ami ki bhulite pari?” which translates to “can I even forget?” in which the lyricist, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, asks how he could ever forget the blood, sweat, and tears that the strong individuals had put in. This research has shown me just how important language is. Without it, one cannot properly express themselves. Not only is the Bengali language a form of expression for Bangladeshis from all around the world, but it is a way to feel comforted and accepted in a society in which you may not be. Such as my dad in America: he felt like an outcast, but seeing another person speaking Bangla gave him a sense of comfort in himself and allowed him to feel like he belonged somewhere.

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