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ENSURING LINGUISTIC SUSTAINABILITY IN BANGLADESH: CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES. PART I



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Ensuring Linguistic Sustainability in Bangladesh: Challenges and Approaches

Abstract. This study investigates the obstacles to language sustainability in Bangladesh, which boasts a wealth of linguistic diversity, and proposes a comprehensive plan to support this variety. The study begins with an examination of Bangladesh's linguistic demographics, highlighting the multitude of languages spoken by the country's various ethnic communities. It then delves into the historical context of language movements in Bangladesh and illustrates how language serves as a crucial marker of identity and unity. Subsequently, this research explores the socio-economic, political, and educational factors that contribute to language endangerment and change. It discusses the consequences of these changes on cultural identity, transmission of knowledge, and community well-being. This study proposes a comprehensive framework for language sustainability in Bangladesh, emphasising five key components: documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages, implementation of comprehensive multilingual education policies, utilisation of modern technology in language preservation, promotion of cross-cultural understanding through exchange programs, and national policy support for language rights and diversity. These initiatives aim to enhance linguistic sustainability, foster social cohesion, and empower marginalised communities. This study argues that by addressing these challenges and adopting these strategies, Bangladesh can secure a sustainable linguistic future and preserve its diverse cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Indigenous Languages, Language Endangerment, Linguistic Sustainability, Multilingual Education Policies.

Asigurarea durabilității lingvistice în Bangladesh: provocări și abordări

Rezumat. Acest studiu investighează obstacolele în calea sustenabilității lingvistice în Bangladesh, care se mândrește cu o diversitate lingvistică bogată, și propune un plan cuprinzător pentru a sprijini această varietate. Studiul începe cu o examinare a demografiei lingvistice din Bangladesh, evidențiind multitudinea de limbi vorbite de diferitele comunități etnice ale țării. Apoi se adâncește în contextul istoric al mișcărilor lingvistice din Bangladesh și ilustrează modul în care limba servește ca un marker crucial al identității și unității. Ulterior, această cercetare explorează factorii socio-economici, politici și educaționali care contribuie la periclitarea și schimbarea limbii. Se discută consecințele acestor schimbări asupra identității culturale, transmiterii cunoștințelor și bunăstării comunității. Acest studiu propune un cadru cuprinzător pentru sustenabilitatea limbii în Bangladesh, subliniind cinci componente-cheie: documentarea și revitalizarea limbilor pe cale de dispariție, implementarea politicilor cuprinzătoare de educație multilingvă, utilizarea tehnologiei moderne în conservarea limbii, promovarea înțelegerii interculturale prin programe de schimb și sprijin politic național pentru drepturile lingvistice și diversitate. Aceste inițiative urmăresc să sporească sustenabilitatea lingvistică, să încurajeze coeziunea socială și să împuternicească comunitățile marginalizate. Acest studiu susține că, abordând aceste provocări și adoptând aceste strategii, Bangladesh poate asigura un viitor lingvistic durabil și își poate păstra moștenirea culturală diversă.

Cuvinte-cheie: identitate culturală, limbi indigene, periclitarea limbii, durabilitate lingvistică, politici de educație multilingvă.

Introduction

There are many different languages spoken in Bangladesh, Bengali being the national language. In addition, there are many other indigenous languages that are spoken by various ethnic groups. Notwithstanding this diversity, the dominance of global languages such as English and Bengali, along with socio-political factors, poses a serious threat to the survival of many indigenous languages. Most indigenous languages spoken in Bangladesh are spoken only, do not have scripts of their own, and are used mostly at home and in daily interactions with neighbours. Unlike most people living in Bangladesh, the vast majority of indigenous people speak Bengali. However, unlike their illiterate counterparts within the indigenous population, some indigenous people have received formal education through the educational system and can communicate and write in Bengali [1]. This situation contributes to a monolingual situation in Bangladesh, leading to a dilution of cultural distinctiveness and diversity. Ensuring the sustainability of languages in Bangladesh has become a pressing concern that warrants immediate attention. Diverse strategies have been implemented to protect and promote the local languages of Bangladesh. The year 2019 has been designated by UNESCO as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, in order to enhance global awareness of this issue. The preservation of languages is essential to protect the cultural heritage and diversity of Bangladesh. Language functions as a medium for transmitting knowledge, principles, and traditions across generations. The absence of language puts the cultural legacy at risk of disappearing, endangering the unique identity of a community. Thus, the protection of indigenous languages in Bangladesh is crucial to the preservation of its rich cultural heritage.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. What are the key challenges to linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh?

2. What are the existing approaches to ensuring linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh and how effective are they in addressing the identified challenges?

Findings and Discussions

Languages in Bangladesh: Bangladesh's sociocultural tapestry is intricately composed of a vast array of languages, exemplifying its astounding diversity. Bengali (or Bangla), which holds the dual role of the nation's official language and the most spoken tongue, serves as the harmonising linguistic element for its people. The various dialects of Bengali further accentuate the linguistic opulence of the nation, making it notable on a global level.

Despite this fact, Bangladesh has a vibrant linguistic mix that goes beyond Bengali, highlighting a variety of languages that reflect the diverse ethnicity of the country. Sylheti emerges as a language of great cultural importance in the northeastern areas of the Sylhet Division. Similarly, Chittagonian, a notable language, thrives in the coastal regions of the Chittagong division.

There are numerous languages, such as Chakma, Marma, and several others, which contribute immensely to the incredibly diverse linguistic tapestry in the mesmerising Chittagong Hill Tracts. These fascinating languages serve as the primary means of communication for various ethnic communities, playing a vital role in the preservation and protection of their treasured cultural heritage and intrinsic identity. Although they may not be as widely spoken as the widely known Bengali language, they undeniably hold an exceptional significance as proud carriers of these remarkable communities' age-old traditions. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the deep historical and cultural connection that the Rohingya language shares with the resilient Rohingya community. In the enchanting land of Bangladesh, apart from the languages, one encounters a vast array of smaller, yet equally vibrant ethnic communities, each proudly cherishing their own unique languages such as Santali, Tripura, Bishnupriya Manipuri, and Hajong, among several others. These captivating

languages effortlessly weave extraordinary stories and distinctive narratives into the very fabric of the country's rich linguistic tapestry, adding to its awe-inspiring diversity and enriching its cultural tapestry in ways beyond imagination.

According to Awal [2], due to the sociopolitical engagement of Britain, Bangladeshi people began learning English during the 18th century. Due to the professions of people, social status, globalisation, and the English language being a lingua franca, the English language has gradually gained popularity in Bangladesh. To promote global marketing, technology, and scientific advancement in Bangladesh, English lessons have always been mandatory in education policy [2, p. 123-124]. However, despite this linguistic richness, indigenous languages in Bangladesh often face significant challenges. The dominance of Bengali and English, the lack of official recognition and support, and the pressures of urbanisation and globalisation pose risks to their sustainability. Recognising this linguistic diversity, addressing these challenges, and fostering a more inclusive and supportive linguistic ecosystem is, therefore, critical to ensuring linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh, thus preserving the country's linguistic heritage for future generations.

Does Bengali language exist in future?

In the digital age of Bangladesh, the widespread use of technology, including mobile phones, has forced the Bengali language to face significant pressure. Despite its widespread use, many people lack an understanding of the Bengali language in its purest form, resulting in errors in spelling and sentence structure. However, there is ongoing debate regarding the existence of a 'pure' form of Bengali. If a consensus on a pure form were to be reached, regulation may be necessary to control the current chaotic usage. The misuse of the language and the emergence of Bengali-English hybrid languages have rendered linguistic purity increasingly elusive. Those who participate in learning, reading, or writing Bengali face a range of challenges, including pronunciation and appropriate word choice, which hinder the distinction between linguistically acceptable and unacceptable norms.

The history and complexities of the Bengali language led to numerous spelling challenges due to the varying types of words and their individual rules. For example, words 'tatsama' borrowed from Sanskrit can sometimes have alternate spellings, while words 'non-tatsama' often offer more flexibility. This makes establishing a uniform spelling rule quite difficult, with many exceptions accepted through common usage. The Supreme Court, concerned about Bengali distortions on radio and TV, established a committee of various professionals to enforce spelling rules, but its activities remain unreported. A practical usage dictionary could help address current Bengali language issues, but there is no complete dictionary or usage dictionary yet, and efforts to create such a resource are behind. Furthermore, Bengali usage in academic and scientific discourse differs from daily life, necessitating a more firm and meaningful application. Sentence construction issues are prominent, with Sanskrit and English influences on Bengali writing and conversation. This influence has set a language standard. Finally, the debate about whether to adopt foreign words as they are or adapt them to Bengali spelling and pronunciation continues. However, adapting foreign words to the Bengali system is preferred to maintain the language's identity and avoid the introduction of new symbols.

Significant changes have occurred in Bengali spelling. The compound letters are segmented and the vowels 'i' and 'ee' are modified. Taking this into account, there may be a need to resolve confusion, disorder in Bengali spelling, and refine the words 'tatsama' and 'tadbhava'. In the realm of language teaching, the focus on grammar has decreased in the 21st century, and this shift is apparent in Bengali spelling as well. Advances in computer and information technology have driven these extensive changes, leading to different spelling practices. Naturally, this will lead to a change in methods.

Bankimchandra's Bengali language differs from that of Rabindranath, as Vidyasagar (1820

-1891) Bengali is different from Saratchandra (1876-1938), or as Hasan Azizul Haq (1939 -2021) Bengali contrasts with Humayun Ahmed (1948–2012). Through the literature, the language has been adapted to suit different regions. Bengali speakers in the 21st century often hesitate to recognise the distinction between formal, informal, and colloquial language equally. This conflict is still present everywhere, from educational institutions to high offices [3]. Tagore [4] wrote:

"Those who write in Bengali must inevitably engage in genuine conversations in Bengali. They must have a deep affection and faith in the Bengali language. Bengali is not an official language, not a university language, not a language of honour, not a language of income, but our mother tongue. Those who neglect it do not get the opportunity to truly understand Bengali. They judge the language by translations, which is why I insist their opinions hold little value in this regard" [4, p. 234-236]. [Translated from the original]

Currently, the use of Bengali is quite strict grammatically. The language is often overly ornate and frequently strained by the overuse of adjectives. Although Bengali punctuation traditionally follows English punctuation, there is much more indeterminacy in the use of punctuation in Bengali compared to English, even with terminal punctuation marks. Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) contemplated conjunctions or inflections in Bengali and argued for the necessity of an independent type. There is a sense of stagnation in the use of Bengali. The number of writers capable of writing pure Bengali is steadily declining. Even good newspapers do not make enough effort to print Bengali perfectly. This lack of care creates chaos in the language. Due to printing errors, fewer people are reading these articles. However, these errors are not taken seriously, which makes the language seem stagnant. Careless printing can transform 'Narmada' into 'Nordama'. Anxiety about the fate of the Bengali language is increasing. Within this digital epoch, indications of deterioration in the Bengali language are increasingly emerging [3].

The Bengali medium is increasingly marginalised, while the English version receives more focus. Future leaders in politics, administration, and international relations will be those educated in English. This could diminish the role of the Bengali language in public and government affairs. In 1972, Bengali was introduced to public universities with a clear commitment to enrich the language. However, over time, efforts to advance Bengali, including producing and translating textbooks for higher education, have decreased in favour of English. Students and teachers at public universities are rapidly moving to English, often overlooking national or public interests. Private universities operate primarily in English, with only a few offering studies in Bengali literature. Initiatives to include Bengali in fields such as medicine, engineering, and law have also stopped. However, from the 2003-2010 National Education Policy, English gradually recovered its relevance in politics, and English-medium institutions began to grow rapidly [5].

In Bangladesh, the language proficiency gaps between students and teachers have significant implications for both parties. Historically, teachers in rural remote primary schools demonstrated proficiency in Bengali, English, and Sanskrit. However, recent changes in pedagogical methodologies have led to the divergence of two distinct groups of individuals: one educated in institutions with medium English proficiency, but struggles with Bengali, and another educated in Bengali schools with medium English proficiency, but lacks English language skills. This disparity has resulted in the marginalisation of Bengali speakers in areas such as marketability, technological competence, and skill development. The lack of meaningful dialogue in Bengali on knowledge-intensive topics further exacerbates this divide. The current state of the Bengali language's framework for knowledge discourse is considered embryonic and inadequate for intricate discussions. This lack of a robust language for knowledge discourse not only impedes the evolution of thought but also perpetuates an intellectual deficit among Ben-

gali speakers. The reluctance of Bengali authors to participate in an original and intellectually stimulating discourse in their vernacular language further underscores this predicament. Therefore, the challenges faced by Bengali speakers who are solely dependent on their mother tongue highlight the need to recognise bilingual proficiency as a prerequisite to participate in advanced knowledge discourse [6].

Challenges to linguistic sustainability

The significance of linguistic sustainability is increasing as language and communication evolve. This idea refers to the protection, advancement, and durability of languages, which are essential to preserving human diversity and cultural wealth. Nevertheless, in a world that is becoming more globalised and digitalised, guaranteeing linguistic sustainability comes with a set of difficulties. Numerous obstacles exist, including socio-political factors contributing to language shifts and extinctions, as well as educational policies and market forces that marginalise specific linguistic groups.

Linguistic dominance: The concept of linguistic dominance refers to a situation in which one language is significantly more prevalent or widely used than other languages in a particular region or country. This often leads to the marginalisation and potential extinction of minority languages, which poses a major challenge to linguistic diversity and sustainability. In Bangladesh, Bengali, also known as Bangla, is the dominant language, spoken by approximately 98% of the population [7]. It is the official and most widely taught language in the country and is widely used in government, media, and education, making it the primary means of communication and a significant symbol of national identity.

The prevalence of Bengali as the dominant language in Bangladesh has significant implications, particularly in terms of the marginalisation and disregard of other languages spoken by ethnic minority groups in the nation. The educational system primarily prioritises Bengali and English [8], reinforcing the prominence of these languages and contributing to the neglect of others. The issue of Bengali dominance encompasses various dimensions and is of the foremost importance in Bangladesh. The socio-economic pressure to acquire proficiency in Bengali as a second language or, in some cases, as a replacement for native tongues, influences socio-economic advancement. Since Bengali serves as the primary language of instruction, commerce, and public life, proficiency in Bengali is considered crucial. This dominance also extends to cultural practices and the formation of identity, where languages are integral to cultural identities. Consequently, the widespread dominance of Bengali threatens to erase unique cultural identities associated with minority languages. Although linguistic dominance is not exclusive to Bangladesh and similar situations exist elsewhere, the intricate socio-political landscape and linguistic diversity in Bangladesh emphasise the need to address this issue as part of broader efforts to ensure linguistic sustainability and preserve cultural heritage.

Lack of official recognition and support: The survival of minority languages in many multilingual societies depends on the degree to which they are officially recognised and supported. Official recognition involves the formal acknowledgement of a language by a governing authority, while support includes various measures aimed at preserving and promoting the language. In Bangladesh, Bengali is the only recognised official language and serves as the primary language of administration, education, and the media. In contrast, other languages spoken in the country, particularly those of indigenous communities, do not have the same level of recognition and support. This institutionalised marginalisation has significant implications for the sustainability of languages in Bangladesh. The lack of official recognition means that these languages are not visible in the public sphere and are deprived of legal and institutional support. Consequently, indigenous languages are not included in educational curri-

cula or used in public services or media. The lack of resources to learn and teach these languages leads to a decrease in their use over time.

The lack of government support also affects how these languages are regarded and valued in society. When a language is not officially recognised, it may be seen as less prestigious or useful, discouraging its use, especially among younger people. This issue is especially noticeable in Bangladesh, where Bengali has a dominant status, and the global influence of English often diminishes the importance of indigenous languages.

The lack of recognition and assistance for indigenous languages can also contribute to social inequalities and marginalisation. As stated by Dua [9], language conflicts in developing countries have become vital to nation building progress, affecting political mobilisation, nation building, and the distribution of language-related resources, particularly in education and mass communication. This emphasises the complex connection between language, identity, power, and access to resources, highlighting the importance of language in shaping social structures and dynamics. When a specific language is not officially recognised or supported, its speakers may face difficulties in accessing public services, educational opportunities, and social and economic progress, resulting in social exclusion. The lack of official recognition and support for minority languages presents a significant obstacle to maintaining language diversity in Bangladesh. To ensure the preservation and promotion of linguistic variety, comprehensive language policies that provide official acknowledgement and support to all languages are essential.

Urbanisation and globalisation: The impact of urbanisation and globalisation on linguistic diversity is significant, leading to a decrease in minority languages and an increase in linguistic uniformity. Bangladesh serves as an example of this trend, where the rapid growth of cities has resulted in language alterations and the possibility of language loss. In search of economic opportunities, people from rural regions often abandon their mother tongues and adopt the dominant language, Bengali, to assimilate into society and the economy. This transition is particularly prevalent among younger generations, who perceive indigenous languages as less advantageous for social and economic advancement in urban areas. As a result, these languages are not passed down to future generations, resulting in their gradual decline and eventual disappearance.

Globalisation magnifies these repercussions by promoting the adoption of global languages. In the case of Bangladesh, English has gained widespread recognition, as it is considered indispensable for education, commerce, and technology [8]. Although the use of universal languages can provide socioeconomic advantages, it simultaneously contributes to the deterioration of indigenous languages. In general, the forces of urbanisation and globalisation present substantial obstacles when it comes to preserving linguistic diversity and safeguarding minority languages.

It is essential to recognise the profound impact that globalisation has on the identities and values of diverse cultures. The immense popularity of global cultural products, such as movies, music, and literature, which are widely spoken in languages, can lead younger generations to adopt global cultural values, while neglecting their native languages and traditions. This pressing issue emphasises the urgent need for linguistic sustainability in Bangladesh, which encompasses various aspects of society, culture, cognition, and policy. These crucial factors will be thoroughly examined and contextualised in the subsequent analysis, specifically within the context of Bangladesh. However, significant efforts are underway to promote multilingual education and preserve the rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh to effectively address these challenges.

Language as a Keystone: Protecting Cultural Heritage, Human Rights, and Societal Prosperity in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, diverse languages are cruci-

al to preserve culture, promote human rights, and achieve social stability. These languages facilitate communication, improve education, and contribute to cognitive growth. The protection of linguistic sustainability is paramount, as it protects cultural heritage, ensures equitable rights, and fosters a cohesive community. Recognising the value of cultural preservation, human rights advocacy, education, and the advantages languages offer is vital in shaping cultural identity, heritage, and community unity. Valuing and supporting language diversity and sustainability unlocks the potential of citizens and paves the way for a thriving future.

Cultural preservation: Languages play a significant role in maintaining the cultural heritage of a community. Each language is a repository of knowledge about the associated customs, folklore, traditional knowledge, and ways of thinking [10]. For example, the Santali language, spoken by the Santal community, has a rich tradition of oral literature and music. The loss of such a language could result in the extinction of this unique cultural treasure. Therefore, it is essential to prioritise linguistic sustainability to protect the diverse cultural fabric of Bangladesh. Languages are not only means of communication, but also vehicles of cultural identity. When a language is lost, its cultural and historical value is also at risk of being forgotten. By preserving languages, we can ensure that the unique cultural history of a people is preserved for future generations.

Human rights: The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) recognises language rights as fundamental human rights. All communities in Bangladesh, regardless of size, have the right to use, maintain, and promote their native language. Ensuring linguistic sustainability is particularly important for minority and indigenous linguistic communities in Bangladesh, as it protects their language rights and prevents violations. This declaration upholds language rights, ensuring that the right to use, maintain, and develop the native language is not infringed upon and that minority and indigenous communities are given the same respect and rights as any other linguistic community. Consequently, these communities can continue to use and nurture their languages without discrimination [11]. Language diversity and sustainability play a crucial role in shaping the cultural, social and political landscape of Bangladesh, making it imperative to understand its importance to foster inclusive development and preserve the rich linguistic heritage of the country.

Educational success: According to UNESCO (2008), the provision of native language education, particularly during the early years, is crucial in achieving better learning outcomes. However, the education system in Bangladesh mainly emphasises Bengali or English, which can be a challenge for minority and indigenous communities. To enhance educational success for all students, it is essential to expand the use of various languages in education. This can be achieved by developing appropriate teacher training programmes and resources. In addition, efforts must be made to promote the use of minority languages in the classroom and beyond. Finally, more research is needed to evaluate the impact of mother tongue-based education on learning outcomes [12].

Cognitive benefits: The concept of multilingualism, which is supported by the idea of linguistic sustainability, has been linked to various cognitive benefits, including improved critical thinking abilities, improved multitasking skills, and improved memory [13]. By advocating for the preservation of linguistic diversity, it is possible to improve these cognitive abilities throughout the population. This is because multilingualism encourages people to adopt new, unrestricted ways of thinking. Through exposure to different languages, people can develop higher levels of creativity and openness. Furthermore, research indicates that exposure to multiple languages can reorganise the brain, leading to more efficient information processing.

Socio-political stability: Promoting and recognising linguistic diversity can contribute to a more solid socio-political foundation. It is a necessary step on the path to foster harmonious co-existence. Addressing potential tensions ro-

oted in linguistic and ethnic differences is vital to maintaining peace. This idea is of particular relevance in Bangladesh, where languages and ethnic backgrounds can generate conflicts. By advocating for linguistic diversity and giving equal importance to all languages, Bangladesh may find itself avoiding these tensions altogether. The concept of mutual respect would be one that is actively practised among the various communities. Consequently, this effort would create a future where people feel more included and respected, no matter how they communicate. The protection of the rights of speakers of minority languages has proven to be beneficial time and time again. If communities are encouraged to preserve their cultural heritage and identities, many people will also begin to embrace these differences. This small act may ignite linguistic inclusivity, valuing everyone's language background. Celebrating language diversity fosters harmony and cooperation, breaking barriers and building bridges. As a result, Bangladesh would be seen to thrive as a powerful nation with deep roots in unity and cooperation. People of different backgrounds would come together through meaningful dialogue and engage in cultural exchanges that transcend language barriers.

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