

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF MINORITY LANGUAGES IN BANGLADESH: A NEW HOPE

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Abstract

This study focuses on the present situation of the minority languages in Bangladesh and the measures taken by the government which has created a hope for the ethnic minority who are not Bangali (major group) but Bangladeshi. The article consists of three principal sections. Section one defines the term ‘minority’ and offers examples of linguistic minority populations. Section two describes minority language and education. It then highlights the steps taken by the present government for mother-tongue based education and minority language documentation and preservation.

Keywords: Minority languages, Bangladesh, Education, Government

Introduction

This paper describes the minority languages’ situation in Bangladesh, particularly in the education domain. Minority people of Bangladesh had once no recognition from the government, *let alone* their languages. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, great importance was attached to Bengali. In fact, since 1971, the government of Bangladesh has advanced the interest of the Bangalis at the expense of not-Bangalis (e.g., ethnic minority groups). The first constitution of Bangladesh which was ratified in 1972 placed Bangali at the centre of Bangali nationalism.

About the state language, the Constitution states: ‘The state language of the Republic is Bengali’ (Constitution of Bangladesh 1972, 3). Thus the constitution favoured Bengali and ignored the minority languages. Bengali was used to promote nationalism and transmit the history, culture, and tradition of the people.

The Constitution of the country defines nationalism as the unity and solidarity of the people that come from a shared language and culture. The constitution also defines Bengali nationalism as “the unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which derives its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bengali nationalism’(Article 9). However, new steps and strategies taken by the present

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government for the promotion and preservation of the ethnic minority languages have created new hope among these communities.

Ethnic Minorities' Language and Demography

The minority languages are the languages of the minority people of the country. However, in defining minority languages, experts opine that these languages do not depend only on the number, but also on power (political, economic and/or cultural) and also the outlook of the speakers of the concerned languages (Allardt 1984; Bhatt & Mahboob 2008; *Pandharipande 2002*). Most of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh have languages of their own (Rahman 2010). The minority languages in the country belong to different language families (See Fig. 1). Unlike the illiterate tribal people, some of them who have been formally educated and can speak and write Bengali (Rahman 2010). The tribal people use 80% to 100% of their languages at home; besides this, they use Bengali and other ethnic minority languages as well (Durrian 2007; Rahman 2010). Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) tribal people always speak their mother tongue while in North Bengal of Bangladesh less than 60% of tribal people speak their own languages (Rafi 2006).

At present, the number of ethnic minority people and their groups in Bangladesh are controversial and indistinct (Durnnian 2007; Rahman 2010). For instance, previous censuses (e.g., 1991, 2001 and 2011) do not provide enough information about the number and groups of the ethnic minority people. The census of 1991 reveals 29 of the ethnic minority groups among which some groups have been mentioned twice, and again, some other groups have been omitted (Durnnian 2007). The census of 2001 has not separately shown the number and groups of the ethnic minority people. The last census that is the census of 2011 revealed nothing new and followed entirely the report of the previous one. According to the report of the Kapaeeng Foundation of Bangladesh (2017), there are more than 54 ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh, but Sarker and Davey (2009) report that their number is 46. However, from the majority of the sources, their number is found to be 45 (Borchgrevink 2007; Drong 2007; World Bank 2008). The census report of 1991 exhibits that there are 1.2 million ethnic minority people constituting 1.13% of the total population of the country. Borchgrevink and McNeish (2007) report that the number of minority people in Bangladesh is 2.5-3 million, which is 2% of the total population of the country. Though the tribal people live in different parts of the country, the majority of them are found to live in the CHT region. The tribal people are divided into two groups: the Plains group and the Hill group. The former groups live along the borders of the northwest, north, and northeast portions of the country and the latter in the southeastern part of the country known as the Chattogram (newly changed spelling) Hill Tracts (CHT) (Mohsin 2003). The geographical distributions of 45 distinct tribal groups are shown in Table 1.

Minority Languages and Education

No sufficient information on the education of the minority community is available. One of the main reasons is that the government has not sufficient official record about their number, group, and location. On the whole, the rate of literacy in Bangladesh is medium. However, it is very low among minority communities (Hossain & Tollefson 2007). The rate of enrolment of the minority children in the primary school is significantly lower than the majority Bengali speaking children (Durnnian 2007). The ethnic minorities in CHT have very few educational, literary, or public resources (Mohsin 2003; Rahman 2010).

More than half of the tribal people here are illiterate. The condition of women is more degraded. Compared to other primary schools, the number of primary schools in CHT villages is significantly poor. The number of high schools is also very few in the CHT villages (Kapaeeng Foundation 2017). One of the main causes of this problem of the education of tribal groups is the language issue. Hossain (2009) notes that “33 percent of the total 50 percent dropouts of tribal primary students occur due to language problems” At home, the tribal people mostly converse in their own languages. Again, when their children are at school, they have to learn their lessons in Bengali, which they do not understand. Besides, the curriculum of their education does not include their culture, customs, and way of living (Mohsin 2003). Many times, even if they feel the call of nature, they are to sit still because they cannot seek permission in Bengali from their teacher to go out. Moreover, when at home, they cannot get any help in their academic education from their respective parents, who also do not know Bengali.

Table 1. Location and Distribution of Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh

Location	Ethnic communities
Mymensingh, Tangail, Netrokona, Jamalpur Sherpur	Garo, Hajong, Koch, Barman, Dalu, Hodi Banai, Rajbangshi
Gazipur	Barman, Garo, Koch
Coastal Area (Patuakhali, Barguna and Coxsbazar district)	Rakhain
South-West (Jessore, Satkhira, Khulna district)	Bagdi (Buno), Rajbangshi, Santal
Chitagong Hill Tracts (Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari district)	Chakma, Marma Tripura, Bawm, Pangkhu, Lusai, Tanchangya, Kiang Mru, Asam, Gurkha, Chak, Khumi
North-Bengal (Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Noagaon, Bagura, Sirajgonj, Chapainawabgonj, Natore district)	Santal, Oraon, Munda, Malo, Mahali, Khondo, Bedia, Bhumij, Kole, Bhil, Karmakar, Mahato, Muriyar, Musohor, Pahan, Paharia, Rai, Sing, Turi
Greater Sylhet (Sumangonj, Mouvlibazar, Sylhet, Hobigonj district)	Monipuri, Khasia Garo, Hajong, Patro, Kharia, Santal, Oraon

Source: World Bank Report titled "Bangladesh - indigenous/tribal population and access to secondary schools (draft): indigenous peoples plan," Report no. - IPP280, April 4, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 1-2.

All these obstacles in their education have an adverse impact on the mind of the school-going children. The government should take steps for the removal of the main obstacle (e.g., language barrier) on the way to their education.

Steps were taken by the present government

The present government has been taking steps for the improvement of the situation of the ethnic minority communities particularly for their education

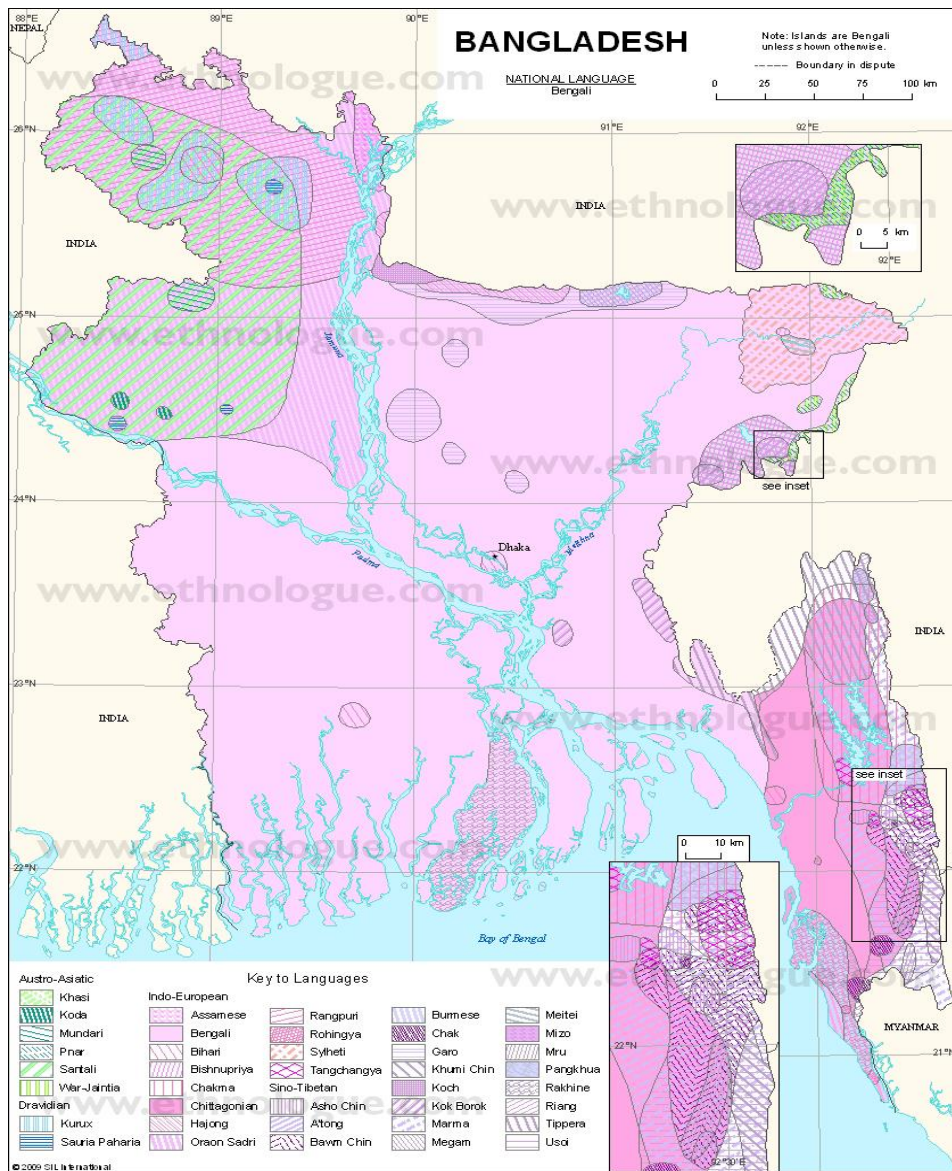


Fig. 1. Languages of Bangladesh. (Source: www.ethnologue.com)

For example, for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, mother-tongue based education has been recommended by the education policy 2010. Under this policy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) constituted a committee for writing textbooks for the pre-primary students of six different ethnic groups. Consequently, in 2017, students from the five ethnic-minority communities (e.g., Marma, Chakma, Garo, Sadri, and Tripura) received textbooks in their own languages. The concerned department of the government assures that gradually all the ethnic minority students will get mother-tongue based education. After 49 years of independence, this initiative of the present government will not only help the ethnic minority community of Bangladesh but also show up hope for all the neglected and deprived an ethnic minority of the world. Also, 210 primary schools in the CHT region were nationalized in 2017. This can be considered as a remarkable achievement in the field of minority education of the present government.

Moreover, the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) has been set up to protect and preserve ethnic minority languages. All the spoken languages will be documented by this institute. In this regard, the bold leadership of the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina surely deserves praise.

Conclusion

Although the present government has taken many important steps for the promotion and development of the minority languages, some more steps need to be taken. An amendment may be made to the Constitution to include minority languages to ensure their status and right of use and practice in all social and academic arena. A constitutional recognition of minority ethnic languages will add to the promotion and preservation of marginalized ethnic identity. In addition, the authority may arrange necessary training and other logistic support for the teachers to teach the textbooks which have been written specially for the minority ethnic groups in their languages. These measures will not only benefit the languages of the minority ethnic groups but will also be able to bring them to the mainstream society. These initiatives will play a vital role in Bangladesh in achieving the vision 2040 as set by the present Government and in facing the new challenges of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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