



## Preserving and Promoting Indigenous Languages of Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh: A Strategic Planning Framework

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### ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is a country with multi-ethnic communities. The majority of the population is Bengali-speaking Bengalese. Around fifty indigenous communities are the rest of the population who have other indigenous languages. Because of the narrow scope, any languages in such conditions have a chance of extinction. For a vibrant and harmonious multi-ethnic society, linguistic and cultural diversities require respect and recognition. Besides, these languages possess epistemic values and are considered sources of primitive knowledge. The government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has taken an affirmative initiative to preserve indigenous language and culture. To meet this goal, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages is imperative. By Article 23(A) of its constitution, its education policy of 2010 and its law 'Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institutes Act of 2010' indigenous language rights are restored. Following the government decision, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board publishes primary school textbooks in five indigenous languages. But these are not enough to keep all the indigenous languages alive. Many more actions are necessary to facilitate the constitutional declaration of indigenous language development like publishing textbooks in more indigenous languages, indigenous language teachers' training and other initiatives. This paper attempts to fill the gap between initiatives taken by the government and the actual necessity of full-fledged affirmative action as it is necessary as the source of the indigenous knowledge. It primarily depends on the literature, official documents and interviews of the respected stakeholders. The outcome of this study is important for the national integration of the countries like Bangladesh that possess a multi-ethnic, pluralistic society.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous languages, indigenous knowledge, multi-ethnic communities, linguistic and cultural diversity

## **INTRODUCTION**

Bangladesh is blessed with many ethnic communities possessing distinct indigenous languages, cultures, heritages, traditions, values, customs and life systems. Its natural environment and diversified localities are nurtured and cultivated by tribal ethnic people in different regions, especially in hill tract areas. A few other communities also live in plain lands along with the Bengali communities. The life patterns of these indigenous people are distinct and quite natural. Their interaction with the natural environment is pretty consistent with ecosystems and hence ecologically balanced. Their attitudes towards nature are the expression of their ecological wisdom. As a country of multi-ethnic and cultural communities, Bangladesh is seemed not fully prepared yet to receive such natural wisdom that is practiced by them. In practice, there are certain limitations: primarily, there is a lack of realization that this knowledge is significant not only for the ethnic minority communities but also for the whole nation. Secondly, there is a communication gap between the mainstream Bengali people and the ethnic minority communities because of being unknown to the languages of each other's. As Bengali is the only official language in the country and the medium of teaching-learning in schools and universities, so indigenous languages are not widely known to other people. In fact, language is the revealed form of unrevealed thoughts, i.e., beliefs, convictions, perceptions, attitudes, values and philosophy.

Epistemologically, these are the great sources of gaining indigenous knowledge. Approximately, there are more than fifty indigenous communities in the country, like *Chakma*, *Marma*, *Khasia*, *Garo*, *Tanchangya*, *Magh*, *Hajang*, *Monipuri*, *Munda*, *Kachhari*, *Oraon*, *Kuki*, *Tripura*, *Santali*, *Malpahad*, *Mikir* and *Shadrietc*, to name a few. Thus, considering them as sources of knowledge is a prerequisite to recognizing them as important as Bangla. The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has taken an affirmative initiative to preserve indigenous languages and cultures through new policies and publishing textbooks in a few indigenous languages. However, many of other indigenous languages are now in an endangered status and some have already been extinct. Therefore, many more initiatives are necessary have to be taken for preserving those languages. This paper, therefore, attempts to propose initiatives to conserve and promote indigenous languages in Bangladesh for their epistemic value by analyzing the current policy framework gap. It focuses on the research questions below:

- 1) What are the measures that have been taken by the Government of Bangladesh to preserve the indigenous languages of the ethnic minority people?
- 2) What are other initiatives that are needed to preserve these languages and keep them alive?
- 3) Why is preserving the indigenous languages of the ethnic minority people in Bangladesh important epistemologically?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The issues of indigenous languages of ethnic minorities in Bangladesh are increasingly getting importance in the academic disciplines from multiple perspectives. Until 2009, the focus of the study was to address the importance of official recognition of these languages and to show the absence of proper government initiatives to preserve these languages. The focus slightly shifted after a policy has been taken to educate the children of ethnic minorities in their own languages in the National Education Policy–2010 and for the declaration of the constitution regarding the preservation of indigenous languages. Researchers now find what are the challenges to executing such policies and seek solutions to overcome these.

Rahman (2010) studied the challenges with this language policy and planning in the context of Bangladesh to the implementation of a multilingual language-in-education policy for linguistic minorities. She identified four major challenges: the first is the controversial demographic information; the second one is linked to the first one, which is the selection of minority languages and the problem of standardization of language; the third one is the centralized and stratified structure of education of the country; and the fourth is the poverty and natural disasters as problems. Thus, she offers suggestions for resolving the controversies by creating and maintaining a national database. That will help in recording correct and consistent data on the number of groups, their members, languages and cultures. The challenge of standardization can be solved and the selection of minority languages can be sorted out by means of needs analysis through the effective discussions among the members of different indigenous communities. Their direct and active participation in developing textbooks in the indigenous languages will provide culturally appropriate teaching and learning materials for indigenous teachers and students. In preparing textbooks and in recruiting teachers, local management should be prioritized over central imposition.

Bhuiyan (2016) investigated indigenous languages in Bangladesh from the human right perspectives considering a language as the linguistic right. This right should be understood by the government as well as by the indigenous people as it is relative to their economic, cultural and social life. There are challenges to enjoying this right that must be overcome. The government should take more initiatives to create an opportunity for using their own languages in education and in other activities. In that case, with the guidance of other organizations and following the constitutions of other countries, an affirmative action can be taken such as: ensuring the rights of indigenous language speakers, establishing indigenous language institute, and flourishing the job market. Indigenous people have also their own responsibility to be aware of their linguistic rights.

Ghosh (2017) provides a different insight that Bangla in spite of being the language of the majority of people becomes a victim of the domination of English. Thus, in a multilingual setting in Bangladesh, the condition of the indigenous languages of tribal people in the country is more vulnerable because of two-fold domination, primarily by Bangla and secondarily by English. He concluded that lack of a proper policy and planning for language and an absence of appropriate procedures to execute policies make the situation more inconvenient for native languages as they are not protected by any law and supported by any institution.

Turin (2007) in a study discovered an exciting connection between biological and linguistic diversity and thus showed a relationship between preserving minority languages with the preservation of culture and habitats, and the socioeconomic and political status of minority communities in the context of the Himalayan region, especially of Nepal. Collecting and studying numerous data on languages Turin wonders that Nepal has more language families than that of Europe combined and has more distinct and individual languages in one country than the whole of the European community. But linguistic diversity is increasingly being endangered and largely lacking from discussions about integrated development in the country. He upholds the position of language in Nepal's bio-cultural context and recognizes the interconnection of the language with the particular perspective of other fields like ecology, constitution, law, census, media, education, gender, conflict and culture.

Awal (2019) investigated the causes of 'language loss' in the socio-linguistic position of Bangladesh, which indicates the historical and political reasons behind it. Other reasons are linguistic imperialism, the domination of majoritarian languages called

linguicism and the physiological state of indigenous speakers about their mother languages. He finds a connection between linguicism and language loss, which can be considered a violation of the linguistic human rights of Bangladesh. In that case, the role of the media and government are profound in addressing language extinction and revival.

Similarly, Pun and Gurung (2020) studied the issues of language endangerment focusing on language policy and preservation of linguistic diversity from the sociolinguistic perspectives in the context of Nepal. In Nepal, the only medium of instruction is the Nepali language that reduces the role of indigenous languages. In their study, they have identified language prevention barriers such as unfair national policy of the government of Nepal towards the indigenous language, the parent's passive role in transmitting their languages to their children, non-availability of trained and qualified language teachers, negative attitude of education administrators, indigenous language speakers' disinterest and political domination. They have suggested language preservation strategies such as the government's support for giving official status to their native languages, emphasis on the formulation and implementation of education policies, and encouragement on speaking their native languages. Above all, a collaboration of the indigenous language communities with the government is required to preserve and promote linguistic diversity in Nepal.

Wamalwa and Oluoch (2013) conducted a study on language endangerment and language maintenance in the context of Kenya. They identified the causes of language endangerment like the degree of bilingualism dominant in the language, socio-economic disadvantage of the minority language, prevalence of negative attitudes towards the minority language and non-transmission of the minority language to the younger generation. They observed that as most of the African languages have not been phonemically coded and many languages are critically endangered and need an urgent means for their preservation. The language situation in Kenya is not different from that and they highlight some of the endangered languages in the county. They suggested an electronic method for the preservation of the endangered language.

Rahman (2022) conducted a study in the context of Bangladesh. In her research, she proposed a balancing act to be applied among the national language Bangla, the international language English and the indigenous languages in the language-in-education planning that can ensure a harmonious co-existence of the languages in Bangladesh. She observed discrepancies between facts and the official status of the language in the country. As Bangla has the status of the language of the state, the nation seems linguistically homogeneous or monolingual. But the reality is contradictory as English has been considered a significant language used in education, media and governance within the country, but it has still not been able to gain any official recognition. The country is yet to set any specific roles for Bangla and English. The language of ethno-linguistic minorities has long been unconsidered by most of the educational policies in the country. She proposed a framework for an inclusive, and bi-multilingual language-in-education policy and planning in Bangladesh.

A review of the literature shows that the above-mentioned works focused on the challenges of the implementation of language planning, the perspective of linguistic rights, the monolingual domination, the causes of language endangerment, the strategies of language preservation and the necessity of legal protection in the context of Nepal, Bangladesh Kenya. The limitation we have observed in the literature is the absence of the focus on the connectivity between the preservation of the languages and the importance of these languages as the sources of knowledge in planning a framework in the context of Bangladesh. The present study is intended to understand the strategic planning framework for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages in

relation to the epistemological importance of these languages as they are considered the sources of knowledge.

## **METHODOLOGY**

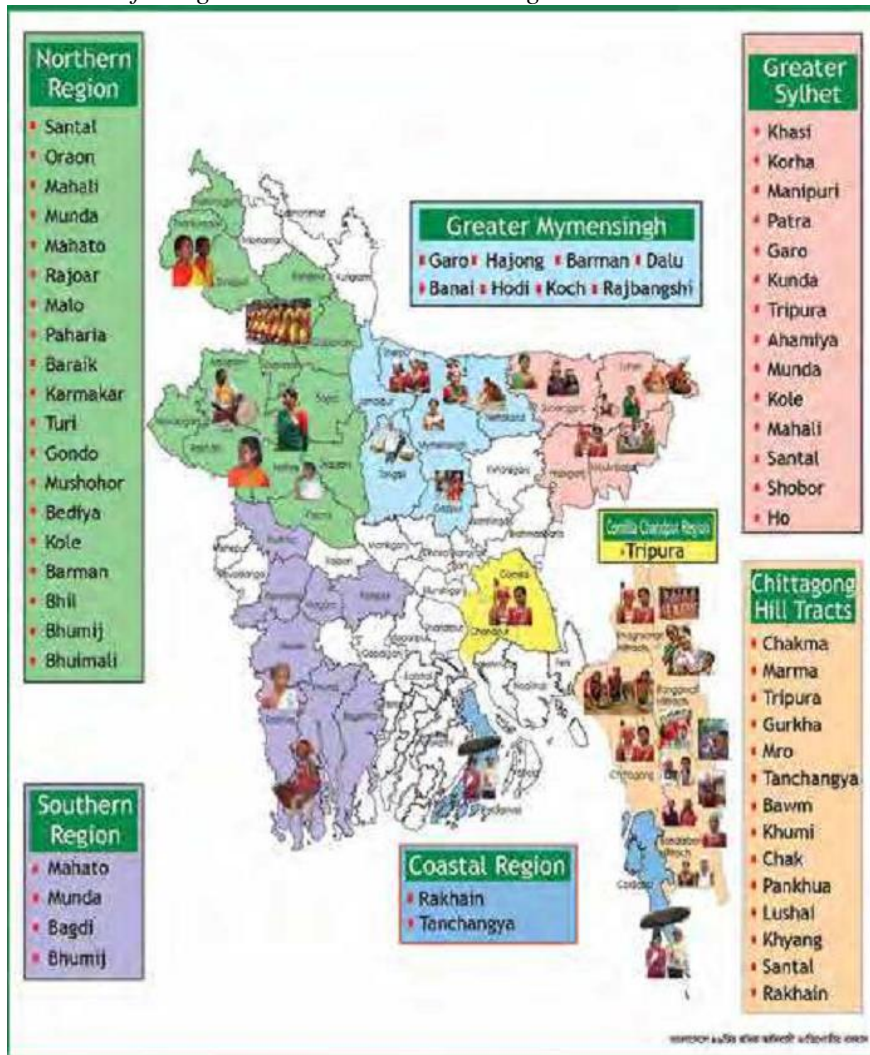
This study is based on a constructivist philosophical approach called “epistemological constructivism,” which holds that our knowledge is "constructed" through the convention, the people’s perception and the societal experience (*Social Research Glossary*, 2022). Following qualitative research design and strategy, this study is conducted through a literature survey and content analysis. Information on indigenous people, languages and culture has been gathered from relevant journal articles, reports and books. Related policies, acts and rules have been reviewed to identify a legal framework for indigenous languages and cultures. The analysis of current provisions indicates that there is much to do for achieving the optimum goals set by the government. A strategic planning framework comprising some measures has been proposed to conserve and promote indigenous languages based on analyzing current policy measures gaps and successful practices in other countries. It further seeks to reveal a relationship between indigenous knowledge with indigenous languages within a theoretical framework called “primitivism”. Primitivism refers to the lifestyle conforming to a pre-industrialized society that is anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian in nature. It is intended to return the earth holding that it is a sacred place that needs to be preserved without considering capital making. It necessitates a certain amount of self-sufficiency and capacity to move around without the convenience of mechanized transportation. It indicates the ability to grow one’s own food, care for one’s health, living off the land causing minimal to no impact, without the use of technology that pollutes or degrades the environment by resisting projects such as deforestation, industrial pollution and excessive carbon emissions (Slocum, 2010). Therefore, primitivism functions as a theoretical foundation for gathering indigenous knowledge.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Ethnic Minority People in Bangladesh**

Ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh are distributed throughout the country in a scattered pattern (Figure 1). In the border regions and in other parts of the ‘plains’ Bangladesh like the northwestern districts such as Dinajpur and Rajshahi, and the central northern districts such as Tangail and Mymensingh, and northeastern districts such as Greater Sylhet, and south and southeastern districts such as Greater Barisal, Chittagong and Cox’s Bazar, many ethnic minority peoples live there. The Population Census in 2011 shows the total population country’s ethnic minorities approximately 1,586,141. In percentage, it represents 1.8% of the total count of population of the country. However, ethnic minority peoples of the plain land believe that their total number of populations is projected at about 2.0 million. The mostly populated ethnic minority peoples of the plains are the Santal, constituting almost 30% and another groups including the Garo, Hajong, Koch, Manipuri, Khasi and Rakhain, etc. respectively (Chowdhury, 2014). In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), there are eleven ethnic minority groups such as Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Mro, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Khyang, Bawm and Pangkhua who altogether identified themselves as the Jumma people (High Landers). For centuries, they have been living there. Some Assamese and Gorkhas also live there. Most ethnic communities in the plains manage themselves within small groups in the small area in the Bengali-populated region.

**Figure 1**  
*Location of Indigenous Communities in Bangladesh*



Source: Chowdhury, 2014

### Indigenous Languages in Bangladesh

The development of the indigenous languages in Bangladesh is a gradual process. Since its independence, Bangladesh is continually concentrating on many other important issues. The indigenous language development initiative is one of them. Before 2008, there was not any specific policy on that issue. However, after that, it has got importance through different state policies for preserving and promoting indigenous languages. In Bangladesh, there are forty-five different languages apart from 'Bangla' (Sultana, 2011). The mentionable languages among these are Chakma, Garo, Magh, Khasia, Manipuri, Oraon, Munda, Santali, Kuki, Tripura, Kachhari, Malpahad, Hajang, Shadri, Mikir, etc.

The latest Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) identified that these languages are used by forty five different indigenous communities (Roy, 2012). Though the indigenous communities in Bangladesh have their own languages, not all have written scripts. Chakma, Marma, Rakhaine, Tripura, Mei-tei Manipuri, Santal, Mro and Berman-Khatriya have their own alphabets. Mandi, Lynggam and Koch communities

have proposed alphabets for their respective languages for a while now. Sections of the Khasi, Mandi, Mahali, Bawm, Khumi and Santal influenced by the Christian missionaries use Roman alphabets after making some changes to meet their language needs (Partha, 2021). Furthermore, there are some ethno-linguistic communities e.g. Khasi, Santal and Garo are now use Roman or Bangla script for writing, once who had their own script. Apart from Marma and Chakma, a number of communities who have only oral languages and do not use any script for writing. Numerous ethnic languages in Bangladesh have been extinct; some others are going to be extinct or endangered in the last few decades. Among others, Khumi, Lusai, Bawm, Khiang, Murong and Pankhua are some of the endangered languages of Bangladesh (Rashid, 2015).

### **Provision of Indigenous Language Preservation and Promotion**

Bangladesh has faced the same issue that previously prevailed in British-India and in even the Pakistan period. Earlier the indigenous rights issue in Bangladesh was dealt in a different way. However, since independence, Bangladesh has dealt with this issue passionately. Progress has been observed in this respect. The country has declared constitutional rights for ethnic minorities. To implement this, so many policies framework have been made. The Government of Bangladesh has gradually advanced regarding such issues. The following are the gradual progress of the state initiatives:

#### ***Issues of National and Indigenous Culture in the Constitution of Bangladesh***

The constitutional obligation for the initiative of the conservation of the national language, literature, cultural tradition and the heritage of the people are clearly declared in Article 23 of the constitution (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011) as it states:

The state shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture.

Through the constitution (Fifteenth Amendment) Act, 2011, Article 23A has been inserted to conserve and promote the local culture as well as the tradition of the communities including tribes, minor races and ethnic sects, "The state shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

#### ***Policy Framework for Indigenous Issues***

Law of Bangladesh, Ethnic Minority Cultural Institutions Act, 2010 (Act No. 23 of 2010), legislation enacted to establish provisions for the establishment of cultural institutions of minor ethnic groups and related issues in order to preserve and develop the unique regional cultural heritage of different ethnic groups and communities of Bangladesh. Besides, the National Cultural Policy 2006 declares in its Aims of Cultural Policy 2(1),

1. To protect and promote all cultural expressions in Bangladesh regardless of caste, class, religion, origin etc. 2(3) 3. To protect, preserve and develop cultural elements of small ethnic groups and 5.8 Development of Indigenous Culture. With this development, UNESCO agreed that small ethnic groups are more recognized by main stream culture in Bangladesh.

***Indigenous Issues in the National Education Policy of Bangladesh***

The indigenous language issues are now considered by the government as important, which are reflected in the national education policy. The commitment for the development and promotion of indigenous languages and cultures are clearly declared in the aims and objectives of the country's National Educational Policy 2010: "To promote the continuity of national history, tradition, and culture through an intergenerational process; ...23. to promote and develop the languages and cultures of the indigenous and small ethnic groups" (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

To actualize this policy regarding the promotion of indigenous languages, the facilitation of learning in the mother languages of the indigenous peoples and ethnic communities is emphasized and clearly stated in the pre-primary and primary education section of National Educational Policy of Bangladesh as it mentions: "To facilitate learning in the mother languages of the indigenous people and small ethnic groups at the primary level of education" (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

***On Educating Children of Ethnic Groups***

To ensure the education of the children of ethnic minority people in their own languages, a lot of affirmative initiatives have been incorporated such as preparing teachers from ethnic communities and preparing texts in relevant languages. In its Article 18 in the education policy, it is stated that

Measures will be taken to ensure the availability of teachers from ethnic groups and to prepare texts in their own languages so that ethnic children can learn their own indigenous languages. In these initiatives, especially in preparing textbooks the inclusion of respective indigenous communities will be ensured. (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011)

Considering the special circumstances of the marginalized children of the ethnic communities, the policy has been taken for providing a special assistance for them. In its Article 19 in the education policy as it states: "Special assistance will be provided to the marginalized indigenous children" (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

Due to lack of the available primary schools in all the areas where the ethnic minority people live, the policy has been taken to establish school in those areas along with the residential facilities for teachers and learners and other necessary opportunities. Article 20 in the education policy states,

There are areas where no primary school exists. Primary schools will be set up in these areas inhabited by ethnic people, both in hilly or plain lands. In some areas, there is a thin ethnic population. So, the schools may suffer from dearth of children. So, in order to create opportunities of enrollment of sufficient number of children, residential facilities for teachers and learners have to be created. (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011)

Ethnic communities receive considerations along with others who are socio-economically in the backward position. For them, the special steps are avowed for the advancement of their secondary education in the education policy that states: "To make efforts to mitigate discriminations among various secondary educational institutions and among various socio-economic, ethnic and socially backward groups; special steps will be taken to support advancement of education in the backward regions as long as necessary" (Ministry of Education, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011). Similar attempts have been taken for the children of ethnic communities along with others to



prepare them for higher education. The policy for higher education strategy states: “Measures will be taken to provide residential facilities, special help and scholarships for the children of freedom fighters, of small ethnic communities and socially backward groups for sundry reasons” (Ministry of Education, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

For the fine arts and crafts education, the same policy of providing special opportunities has been declared for the students belonging to small ethnic groups along with others. It states, “Special opportunities will be created for the students belonging to backward classes and small ethnic groups” (Ministry of Education, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2011). The policy for the teacher training has been made for the development of students of the ethnic groups along with others considering their special need. In its Chapter 24 Teachers Training, this policy (Ministry of Education, the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2011) is stated as,

to encourage them to teach students by creating equal opportunities for all, irrespective of religion, race and socio-economic conditions; to help them acquire efficiency in delivering education to the students of disadvantaged community and small ethnic groups and the disabled learners by sincerely responding to their special needs.

In this way, this education policy can be considered as inclusive for the education of the ethnic minority children and students, which indicates a well motive of the government. If the government considers this issue and incorporates associated matters, then the indigenous language can be developed and indigenous knowledge might be gathered.

### ***Indigenous Language and Knowledge***

The indigenous language is also a way to gather the indigenous knowledge. Language has an important role to frame human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine and ecology. Pun and Gurung (2020) showed the interrelation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity, as the former one plays an important role in protecting environment, the later plays an important role to preserve history and culture. Thus, with the death of a particular language, its history and culture also die. For this reason, whether languages are big or small, they should not be forgotten or neglected. For indigenous people, land is the basis of their livelihood. In their regions, they use forest, land and water bodies for hunting, farming, gathering and fishing. Their relationship with land is distinctive in nature in emphasizing social and cultural dimensions beyond the economic aspect. They have their own covert and precious knowledge about the usage of plants and other natural resources.

The small-scale communities become gradually marginalized as well as their traditional livelihoods threatened because of an involvement of giant multinational pharmaceutical companies for their sole profit making approach. That will cause the local knowledge to be lost to posterity in the process. Therefore, for the welfare of the future generations, the indigenous knowledge and languages should be reproduced, translated and documented. Turin (2007) explains why a language should be preserved; he mentions four reasons:

First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet and the extinction of each mother tongue heralds the end of another slice of cultural uniqueness. Second, every language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional, cultural identity and worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, as German philosophers have called it. When a language dies, the framework through which an individual interprets and interacts in the world in which he lives goes with it. Third, an individual language is the repository of the history

and beliefs of a people, and these oral traditions are rarely translated into the dominant language when the tongue in which they were created is on the cusp of disappearance. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to a conservation and biodiversity readership, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology.

The Government of Bangladesh has mentioned some provisions of the indigenous knowledge in some policy frameworks in this respect that are mentioned as below:

- The Bangladesh Biodiversity Conservation Act, 2017 states that the government will recognize the indigenous knowledge of the local community and take necessary initiatives to conserve such knowledge.
- The National Forest Policy 2016, Bangladesh declares that the cultural and religious beliefs regarding the forest of the indigenous people living within and around the forest area will be recognized. Moreover, their knowledge on the forest, wildlife and biodiversity conservation is encouraged. Active participation of the indigenous people in the forest conservation and management as well as afforestation program, are emphasized in this policy.

All these are some positive initiatives taken by the government. But gradually more strategies will need to be taken into consideration and invent new policies to actualize the full intent and find out the challenges to conserving and promoting indigenous languages.

### **Initiatives Taken in Other Countries of the World**

In the African context, the loss of indigenous language is also a vital issue. Many scholars have suggested the revitalization programs, active and protracted program of language documentation, systematic description and codification of the indigenous languages, ensuring literacy, etc. (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013). Wamalwa and Oluoch having mentioned a workshop held in Bamako, Mali in 2006, cited some suggestions like establishing a database for listing languages in order to concentrate and optimize research efforts. It emphasized on a linguistic research on standardization and harmonization of orthographies and alphabets, and terminology development and preparation of tools for using African languages in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013).

In the Latin American context, Mexico has gradually taken many positive initiatives including an amendment of constitution that prohibits discrimination related to the national or ethnic origin (Article 1) and recognizes the indigenous peoples' collective right to "preserve and enrich the languages, knowledge and all the elements that constitute their culture and identity" (Article 2 Section A.IV) (ILO, 2008). It disseminated the Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination to ensure the equality of opportunities for the indigenous people through the bilingual educative programs that promote interchange of culture and to provide scholarships to support alphabetization, and to give education at all levels and vocational training (Article 14). It has also a specific law on the indigenous peoples' languages: the General Law on Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples that recognizes the right of all Mexican people to communicate in their own languages without restrictions (Article 9); the rights of indigenous peoples for bilingual and intercultural education creates an opportunity for them to be active participants in the use and teaching of their languages (ILO, 2008).

In Australia, approximately among 250 indigenous languages, at least half are lost and 100 are in advanced stage of endangerment, only about 20 languages are strong in terms of having speakers across all generations (McKay, 2011). McKay emphasizes on the language policies like 'language categories' and 'language maintenance' for the

policy framework of the preservation of the Australian indigenous languages. Whereas ‘language maintenance’ is for the first language, ‘language revival,’ which includes three sub-categories such as language revitalization, language renewal and language reclamation, ‘language awareness’ and ‘language learning’ are for the second language (McKay, 2011).

In the South Asian context, a regional approach is observable by the attempts of International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) based on Nepal whose focus is to work specifically within Nepal, and in general across the greater Himalayan region serving the eight countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan (Turin, 2007). In India, a positive initiative has been taken for the preservation of endangered languages by the Government of India that is known as “Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India” (SPPEL). In this scheme, the government prioritizes those languages to be documented first which are spoken by less than 10,000 speakers as not linguistically studied before. Primarily, 117 languages have been identified and listed for the documentation (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2016). In Nepal, there are over 123 languages spoken by 125 ethnic groups as their mother-tongues; many of them are on the endangered list (Pun & Gurung, 2020). For the preservation of those languages, efforts taken by the scholars, governments and individuals are mentionable. But these are not sufficient yet which can be said as an action in the process. Pun and Gurung (2020) suggest that the government’s support for giving the official status to the indigenous languages, indigenous language communities collaboration with the government, formulation and implementation of education policies and indigenous people’s self-awareness on speaking their own language are required for the preservation and promotion of indigenous languages.

### **Major Challenges to Conserve and Promote Indigenous Languages**

- **Absence of Record**

Currently, there is no documentation of indigenous languages, community and their demographic composition in Bangladesh. According to a linguistic survey of the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) in 2018, 14 ethnic languages, mostly spoken in north Bangladesh, eastern Sylhet region and the Chattogram Hill tracts, were declared endangered. Many have only 10-12 native speakers and do not have a written form or alphabet (Sakib, 2022). Absence of linguistic survey at regular intervals makes the endangered languages more vulnerable to be extinct.

- **Lack of Textbook in All Indigenous Languages**

In 2017, the government started publishing books starting from pre-primary to class three in five different languages including Chakma, Marma, Kokborok, Garo and Sadri (Roy, 2021). But the program is poorly equipped and due to lack of book availability has made the things worse. Books in other indigenous languages are yet to publish.

- **Deficiency in Indigenous Language Education Facilities**

The government’s initiative of printing books in indigenous languages from pre-primary to class three was severely affected due to lack of qualified teachers. Furthermore, there is a severe lacking in the quality enhancement facilities (e.g. specialized teachers’ training college) for the teachers in the indigenous communities.

- **Lack of Institutional Facilities**  
Institutional facilities e.g. libraries, folklore society and literary society play a great role in the conservation and promotion of indigenous languages. Such institutional facilities, however, in the indigenous communities are rare in Bangladesh.
- **Lack of Understanding the Values of Indigenous Languages**  
Indigenous languages abode the domain of cultural diversity, unique cultural identity, heritage, worldview, biodiversity conservation, agricultural, botanical, medicinal and ecological knowledge. Unfortunately, a significance of indigenous languages is hardly understood by the non-indigenous as well as indigenous people in Bangladesh. Therefore, most people are reluctant about the conservation of indigenous languages.
- **Absence of Efficient Work Plans**  
Understanding the core values of indigenous languages, the government has formulated several policies. However, optimum results of such policies are yet to achieve due to the absence of efficient work plans.

### **STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK: POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

A strategic planning framework is essential for conserving and promoting indigenous languages. Table 1 summarizes the strategic planning framework that can be adopted for the conservation and promotion of indigenous languages in Bangladesh.

**Figure 2**

*Planning Framework to Conserve and Promote Indigenous Languages*



*Source:* Authors, 2022

In this study, the following strategies have been identified to preserve and promote indigenous languages that make a strategic planning framework. They include

- **Documentation**  
This is essential to prepare a comprehensive record of the indigenous languages in Bangladesh. This record should be checked by the respective indigenous communities and recorded in the national concerned policies. Furthermore, a national database needs to prepare on indigenous languages including the

demographic composition of each indigenous community. Such database will be useful in identifying the endangered indigenous languages. Consequently, appropriate measures can be adopted on a priority basis.

▪ **Book Publication**

The government of Bangladesh started publishing books starting from pre-primary to class three only in Chakma, Marma, Kokborok, Garo and Sadri languages. Textbooks should be developed for all indigenous groups gradually up to the secondary education level. Emphasis should be given to the languages, which are in the threatened condition of being extinct. The alphabets and textbooks should be developed, conserved and published in those languages, which are regarded as the most endangered on a priority basis. Lexicographical works are an obligation to the semantic development as well as record words, dictions, vocabulary, phrases and idioms. Compiled dictionaries of various indigenous languages can save valuable words and lexical resources of a language to a great extent.

▪ **Teaching Quality Enhancement**

Qualified teachers are imperative in the conservation and promotion of indigenous languages. Teachers' training colleges should be established in the areas of indigenous people living communities to enhance the quality of teachers.

▪ **Library**

It is necessary to set up public libraries in the indigenous communities. These libraries will act as the community information centers and develop the social, cultural and economic cohesion and solidarity of indigenous communities. Under the direction of the Directorate of Public Libraries, Government of Bangladesh, these community information centers may be operated. To enrich the language and literature of the indigenous communities, the collections of the concerned language and literature need to be increased in the libraries. In addition, dissemination among the members of indigenous communities is also essential.

▪ **Folklore Society**

Establishing folklore societies can play a key role in the conservation and promotion of indigenous languages. Since folklore augments pertinent vocabulary, by using the folklore in a text based approach language teachers that can conserve and promote indigenous languages. Additionally, the languages to be learned in the context are upheld by the folklore. Therefore, culture, values and traditions are preserved in the indigenous communities through the usage of folk narratives.

▪ **Awards and Incentives**

Awards and incentives in terms of funds, technological and institutional support should be introduced at the individual and organization level who are involved and contribute to the process of indigenous language conservation and promotion.

▪ **Media Support**

To make the people aware of the values of indigenous languages media can play a vital role. Different programs like documentaries, cultural programs, dramas and telefilms can be broadcasted on television and radios. Besides, journals, magazines, newspapers and social media can present different aspects of indigenous languages and cultures. For instance, a government newspaper, *The Sikkim Herald* in Sikkim, India was published in eleven official languages.

▪ **Technological Attachment**

A language that has been codified can be preserved through the Extensible Markup Language and Portable Document Format (PDF). Languages that have not been codified can be preserved in an audio format. Languages that have difficulties for preservation and promotion, the audio format is considered as a feasible preservation option. MP3, a digital audio encoding format, has been widely used in the consumers' audio storage. Besides, the digital audio compression is used for the transfer and playback of music on the digital audio players (Wamalwa & Oluoch, 2013). The young generations of the indigenous communities are reluctant on learning their own languages. Rather they prefer to learn English and Bengali to make their life smoother. The young generation uses mobile phones, computers and other devices where they need to use the English or Bengali language. All indigenous languages should be inserted into the devices in phases so that the young generation feels connected with their own languages.

▪ **Research and Development**

It is necessary to establish research cells for indigenous languages that should be set up to develop and make indigenous languages to continue living. The International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), an affiliated institute of the University of Dhaka, can play a leading role in collaborating with the indigenous people. Short courses can be introduced at the initial stage. Simultaneously, the IMLI can work on the preservation and documentation of indigenous languages together with the concerned authority. Some public universities such as Jahangirnagar University and University of Dhaka have the language institutes. These language institutes can offer courses on different indigenous languages. In the long run, such public universities can start departments for the advance study of indigenous languages to conserve and flourish these languages.

**CONCLUSION**

Language embraces the culture, history, knowledge, tradition and heritage of a nation. Diversified languages promote social cohesion, solidarity and cultural diversity. Realizing these, the Government of Bangladesh has initiated some policy frameworks to conserve the indigenous languages; some of which are gradually becoming endangered, even threatened to be extinct. A constitutional recognition of indigenous issues, establishment of the Cultural Institutions of Minor Ethnic Groups, indigenous language provision in education policy, encouraging indigenous knowledge in forest management and biodiversity conservation are some of the notable initiatives by the Government of Bangladesh. However, such initiatives are not sufficient to preserve and promote indigenous languages. This study, therefore, recommends comprehensive documentations, publication of books in all indigenous languages, developing qualified teaching personnel, library facilities, establishment of folklore society, provision of award and incentives, media support, technological support, and research and development to preserve and promote the indigenous languages in Bangladesh. The findings of this study are critical for the policy makers to frame out further initiatives to preserve the indigenous languages and thereby enhance the cultural diversity and promote a multi-ethnic, pluralistic society.

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