When my mother said she was lonely, I knew I had to relearn my Bengali language

Kia Abdullah Mon 21 Dec 2020 *www.theguardian.com*

In this strange and isolating year, reacquainting myself with Sylheti gave me a new understanding of my family

Kia Abdullah with her mother in 1986

1. I never understood the Bengali girls at my London school who were proudly monolingual. “I only speak English,” they would declare loudly as if it were a badge of honour. Perhaps they felt that it lent them a sense of individuality in a student body that was 90% Bengali. Perhaps it proved that they were modern, progressive, assimilated – no longer tethered to the quaint customs of their immigrant families.

2. I took the opposite view and held my ability to speak Bengali close like an amulet, a secret cipher that unlocked another world. A language after all is more than just vocabulary, it conveys a multitude of subtleties: the pitch of a person’s humour, the sting of an insult, even the texture of grief. When my mother told me “amar shoril ekere kulya zargi”, I knew that the nearest translation – “my body is loosening at the seams” – failed to capture the poignancy of a woman in her twilight years lamenting the loss of her health.

3. I cherished the ability to slide in and out of my mother tongue, but language is a strange thing; if you fail to hold it firm, it easily escapes you. After moving out of my family home, I rarely spoke Bengali. When my father died in 2007, my mother became the only person with whom I ever spoke it. Over the following decade, my fluency gradually faded. Whenever I spoke to my mother, I found myself relying more and more on “loan words”. When I failed to find a word in Bengali, I’d fall back on an English one. When speaking with my mother, I used words I knew she would understand such as “bread” or “hospital”, but increasingly I was reaching for phrases I knew would confuse her, “publish”, “postage” or “argument”.

4. For years, we muddled along, supplementing words with expression and gesture: a displeased crease of the lips or flick of the wrist. In 2020, however, we were stripped of these gestures. On the phone, in self-isolation, we were left with only words. And I no longer had enough of them. Our conversations grew awkward and stilted. I found myself repeating questions I knew by rote, caught in a banal circuitry: what did you do today? What did you eat? What are you doing for the rest of the day? I began to call her less and less until one day in the summer she told my sister she was lonely. I realised I had failed – not just this year but the many before it. In the face of this, I vowed to relearn my first language.

5. My biggest challenge was finding things to read or listen to in Bengali. The vast majority of broadcast material is produced in Sadhu Bhasa, the formal version of the language. I speak the colloquial Sylheti – spoken by 11 million people in Bangladesh, parts of India and the Bengali diaspora – which is markedly different. In fact, some scholars argue that it's a different language altogether (think Spanish versus Portuguese).

6. I started with Duolingo, but was told that the English-Bengali course was only 60% complete. Next, I tried Italki, an online platform that connects students and teachers through video. There, I found 20 Bengali tutors (compared to 1,700 Spanish), none of whom taught Sylheti. I then tried radio and podcasts but, again, found nothing in Sylheti. I bought Learn Sylheti Bangla In 30 Days, but the ebook was poorly formatted and ran on in a single, indecipherable block. Finally, I turned to YouTube. There, after digging for hours, I came upon a news channel that issued bulletins in Sylheti.

7. Because I learned the language as a child, there was no need to revisit the basics; rather, I had to work on my vocabulary. I began to listen to the bulletins three times a week. I soon realised that the frequent use of loan words wasn't a personal fault, but part of the language itself. "Arrest", "police", "headquarters" and "postmortem" were all used as part of Sylheti speech – a likely consequence of a century of British rule and decades of globalisation.

8. Through the YouTube bulletins, I started to regain my fluency and even grew an affection for the stoic, no-nonsense delivery of the channel presenter. At the same time, I asked my sisters to switch to speaking Sylheti with me. They are all married to Bengali men and therefore speak it more frequently. Sadly, this had mixed results. As soon as we encountered friction, we intuitively switched to English. Nevertheless, I persevered – listening, absorbing, practising. Over the following months, my vocabulary improved rapidly. I regained words I'd lost and learned ones I'd never known. For many second-generation immigrants, fluency is too long gone, so I was deeply grateful that mine could be revived.

9. I've started calling my mother more frequently. I still trip up on certain words, but can express myself much more clearly. Now, I can ask her more than what she has done today, what she's eaten and what she's doing for the rest of the day. When she makes an observation, I can catch it in all its bite and glory – like the time she remarked "tai ekshor fon gontor farborni". This wonderfully caustic insult was aimed at a dim neighbour and the meaning ("as if she could count a hundred pounds") isn't nearly as stinging in English. Relearning Sylheti acquainted me with her different guises. Like a lens finding clarity, it brought new shapes into focus: her sharp intellect, her withering wit, her occasional bouts of melancholy.

10. The author Simon Van Booy wrote that "language is the greatest legacy you could ever leave your children or your loved ones: the history of how you felt". In this strange and isolating year, language gave me more than knowledge of myself, it gave me an understanding of my mother.

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