

Why do I speak Bangla?

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I have a love-hate relationship with dinner parties. As a Bengali twentysomething who grew up in the United States, you could say these gatherings defined a certain part of my cultural upbringing.

In suburban American-Bengali communities, these affairs usually involve women, “aunties” as I call them, crowding around a kitchen, assisting the host serve culinary marvels straight from Siddika Kabir’s cookbook.

Their husbands sit in the drawing room and attempt to solve the world’s political problems over a game of cards. Late into the evening, there is tea, and if we’re lucky, the culturally enlightened among us will find a harmonium somewhere and grace us with their talents. What’s there not to like?

So we’ve talked about the love, let’s talk about some of the hate. While I was growing up, it was without fail that at these gatherings, I was asked in some way or form: “Your Bangla’s pretty good, how did you learn to speak so well?”

I never really understood why my linguistic capabilities earned me so much Bengali party street cred. One thing the nine-year-old me did know was if I forgot Bangla, the next winter vacation I went to Dhaka, my Mama, one of my favourite people in the world, probably wouldn’t buy me an ice cream cone if I asked for it in English. And that, in my nine-year-old mind, was serious cause for concern.

Sixty-two years ago, four brave men, Abdus Salam, Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, Abul Barkat, and Abdul Jabbar, sacrificed their lives for me to be able to speak the language that gave me those adolescent moments of fame.

I have these men and the Bengali Language Movement to thank for my ability to enrich my life with the music of Tagore and Nazrul, the poetry of Jibananda Das, and end of workday phone calls from my Ammu that just wouldn’t be the same if they weren’t in Bangla.

So, how is it that Western-immersed Bengalis like myself choose to speak and converse in Bangla? It is around Ekushey February that my mind wanders, and I try to find an explanation to these questions.

The truth is, I don’t have an answer, but a feeling. Bangla is an escape from the language of my meetings, exams, and excel spreadsheets. It is a language whose script to me is like art. Bangla is chaos.

It is those winter vacations in Dhaka where I am lost in a sea of family, awful traffic, and stories of my parents’ youth. Bangla is the smell of my grandfather’s beard, and the taste of patishapta pitha. Bangla to me is love.