Bangla for Local School Curriculum

I am writing to encourage members of the local Bangladeshi community to support the seminar aimed at promoting better understanding of the need to encourage the uptake of Bengali as a language in the HSC curriculum.

At an administrative level, this will take place in Lakemba this upcoming Sunday, 23rd October, 2010.

I have agreed to be involved for a number of reasons.

My sister and I have been lucky enough to have visited Bangladesh regularly while growing up which meant we were able to maintain a reasonable speaking ability in Bangla. This has helped retain strong ties to our ancestral cultural identity. These ties have remained largely secular.

As a father of young children, I would love my daughters to grow up and have the opportunity to learn Bengali as a possible subject in their HSC. The adolescent years are a key time when youngsters are attempting to understand their backgrounds and identities. This is complicated for those of us with backgrounds quite distant from Western ones.

In our community, this complexity has largely been transmitted through a growing religiosity among second and third generation Bangladeshis. A similar trend has occurred among other Muslim groups, unlike other ethnic communities which become more secularized. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, but it partly reflects a lack of connection with a cultural heritage.

I am far from some expert on Bangla culture and the arts, but as a growing community in Australia with more and more presence and visibility, I feel our attempts to maintain any sort of heritage in this country are dominated through the practice of religion with little secular, cultural expression from those of us Bangladeshi-Australians who have grown up here.

The annual Boishaki Mela organized by Razzaque uncle is perhaps one of the few, large scale events with a purely secular basis. It has been a huge success, but remains nostalgic and aimed at students and first generation Bengalis.

It is unlikely that most children of Bangladeshi descent born and raised here in Australia will learn Bangla. They will pick up some from grandparents or from mothers who are raised in Bangladesh but married to Bangladeshis raised locally.

All of the major communities that have prospered in recent decades have language schools associated with the HSC curriculum. The most common are Greek, Italian and Arabic, reflecting their large communities.

One concern parents seem to have is the fear that what they consider is a difficult language will be hard to score top marks in. Many of the top students study languages from their ancestral backgrounds. The nature of scaling means that the degree of difficulty intrinsic to the language bears no relation to the ultimate marks. The marks are scaled according to the overall caliber of the students studying the subject. It is also assessed by what the same group scored in other subjects they studied. Bangladehis are largely academic and will almost certainly have high average marks as a group, meaning those studying the language for the HSC will almost certainly be scaled highly.

Bengali is the 8th most spoken language in the world. Our community is becoming a very large one locally, especially when international students are included. The time has come to stamp some of our community's presence with the uptake of Bangla within the HSC curriculum. The fears associated with it are largely without basis and will be easily smoothed out with better understanding. Furthermore, the numbers of students required by the Department of Education prior to them giving approval is marginally over a dozen. It would border on an embarrassment to the community is such numbers could not be reached.

As a simple beginning, please attend the seminar. Thereafter, let us make sure your children and grandchildren have the opportunity to study Bangla as part of the local, Australian education curriculum.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr Tanveer Ahmed
Consultant Psychiatrist
Columnist, *Sydney Morning Herald*
18th October, 2010.