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CONTEMPORARY STUDIES IN DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS

# LANGUAGE USE AND IDENTITY

THE SYLHETI BANGLADESHIS IN LEEDS

Shahela Hamid

This is the first ethnographic survey of language behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of different generations of Sylheti migrants of rural origin. For Sylheti Bangladeshi migrants the use of the *maatri bhaasha* ('mother language') – whether this is the regional variety (Sylheti) or the standard variety (Bengali/Bangla) – is highly significant. The analysis indicates unequivocally that Sylheti is dominant among immediate and extended family and friends. It is the lingua franca of the majority in that no other language is necessary for this encapsulated community.

This book provides detailed analysis of the relationship between Sylheti Bangladeshi migrants' language use and their understanding of the concept of 'mother language'. It examines the socio-historic and socio-political background of the Bangla language and Bangla nationalism, the role of the mother tongue for speakers of regional language varieties, the typology of diglossia in Bangla, and linguistic differences between Sylheti and Bangla. The enduring popularity of Sylheti and evidence of Sylheti–English bilingualism serve to substantiate the concept of the additive role of minority languages in a bilingual context.

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*For my mother*  
*— who taught me to never give up*





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## Preface

The phenomenon of language maintenance and/or shift (LMS) described in this book is a comprehensive analysis of language use and behaviour of different generations of unskilled Muslim migrants from rural Sylhet. The work departs from other studies of LMS in South Asian communities by identifying the people of Sylhet (Sylhetis) as a distinct ethnocultural group within the Bangladeshi cultural majority. The criteria used in the selection of rural unskilled Muslim migrants in diaspora do not deny the existence of skilled and semi-skilled Sylheti Muslims and Hindus. There is no comprehensive community level empirical, ethnographic sociolinguistic study of the Sylhetis in the UK. Sociological surveys of the Sylhetis is a post-1981 phenomenon and as the UK census does not include questions on ethnic language use, the Sylheti-Bangladeshis were Pakistanis in the 1971 census, as it was not until December 1971 that Bangladesh became an independent sovereign state.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces Bangladesh and Sylhet with a brief description of ethnic composition, linguistic situation in the migrant's country of origin, the two native language varieties, socio-historic and socio-psychological perceptions towards Bangla, Sylhet's links with the British, patterns of migration and settlement in the UK and changing concepts of identity. Chapter 2 outlines approaches on language contact and the relationship between bilingualism, diglossia and language maintenance and/or shift (LMS) and the theory of language as an ethnic core value in attempting to understand the processes of language maintenance. A review of approaches and methods employed in the survey of LMS is described in Chapter 3 with reference to the social and cultural parameters of language behaviour, different dimensions of data elicitation techniques and questionnaire design. Leeds survey data is analysed in Chapter 4 to examine the use and function of Sylheti, Bangla and English in formal and informal domains by investigating each individual's network of linguistic contact (INLC) and language and identity perceptions. Overall findings on patterns of language use across generations are concluded in Chapter 5.





## Background to the Study

This research relies on sociological studies (e.g. Ghuman and Gallop 1981; Carey and Shukur 1986; Sian and Shukur 1986; Adams 1987; Eade 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Chowdhury 1993; Ballard 1994; Gardner 1992, 1993, 1995; Gardner and Shukur 1994; Eade, Vamplew and Peach 1996; Gazioglu 1996; Peach 1997; Blackledge 1998), and sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Verma et al. 2001; Hamid 1998; Khanna et al. 1998; Lawson and Sachdev 2004, etc.) in particular. Although much of Gardner's (1995) work relates to the Sylhetis in Sylhet, her description of the effects of overseas migration provides a balanced view of the migratory processes of the Sylhetis in Bangladesh and of those in the UK. However, she does not discuss the impact of migration on language. Studies on multilingualism in British migrant communities from South Asia have investigated the Panjabi Hindus (Saxena 1995), the Sikhs (Agnihotri 1979) and the Gujarati communities (Northover 1988). The most diverse study of multilingualism is the questionnaire-based Linguistic Minorities Project survey (LMP 1985), which studied the use and status of eleven non-indigenous languages in the UK making significant contributions in the area of ethnic minority language research by putting non-indigenous languages of England on the map and contributing to the debate on integration of different ethnic minorities into British society.

Lack of information about the Sylheti group's linguistic situation, language practices in their country of origin and the socio-historic and socio-political influence on native languages in their repertoire reveal the necessity to define the 'language-centred' ethnocultural group described by Smolicz (1992) as one in which the group's survival depends on the preservation of their mother-tongue. To put features of LMS into context in a 'language-centred' community, this chapter reviews the historic, political and socio-psychological significance of Bangla, the standard official

language and the assumed mother-tongue of all Bangladeshis. Since factors influencing LMS are sociological, political, economic and linguistic, the first step in the investigation is a brief physical and political geography of Bangladesh with special emphasis on the region of Sylhet. The demographic description of Sylhet examines why migration was overwhelmingly from Sylhet, the process and type of migration and patterns of settlement as important mechanisms in reinforcing the group's cultural and linguistic behaviour. In doing so the socio-political background of Bangla as a potent symbol of ethnic and national identity is analysed through a chronology of major historical and political events in Bengal as the basis for nascent Bengali nationalism.

## Physical geography of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the largest wetland in the world, formed by the interaction of innumerable rivers and streams, its configuration being determined and continuously changed by them. The literal translation of the word Bangladesh is 'country or land of the Bangla-speaking people'. Bangladesh covers an area of 147,570 square km with a population of 123.1 million (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2000). The climate is characterised by high temperatures, heavy rainfall, excessive humidity and six seasonal variations. Silting-up of rivers and destruction of natural vegetation results in damaging floods. Tornadoes are frequent between March and May, bringing devastation to central and coastal parts of Bangladesh. The six physical divisions of Bangladesh are Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal and Sylhet.

### *Ethnic composition*

Bangladeshis are a heterogeneous group of people and on the basis of their geographical habitat, ethnic minorities of Bangladesh are divided into the Hill group and the Plains group. Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuras and other

tribes are inhabitants of the Hill group while the ethnic group of the plains include the Garos, Santals, Khasias, Rajbansi and others (Mohsin 1997). The 1991 census reports twenty nine ethnic communities in Bangladesh differentiated on the basis of race, language, patterns of settlement, societal structure such as hereditary chiefs or village headmen, religion, beliefs and religious rituals. Most are agriculturists. Muslims constitute 86.6 per cent of the population. Hindus are the largest minority followed by Buddhists, Christians and a few other sects (Rashid 1991).

### *Language and literacy*

Bangladesh is a multilingual country. The state language of the republic is Bangla (Bureau of Statistics 2000) and Bangla, the reported mother-tongue of over 98 per cent of the population (Rashid 1991) is the language of education and literacy. Bangla and a wide variety of its dialects is the first language of the population. Some of the other thirty-eight living languages are Chatgaiya, Noakhalia, Chakma, Mogh, Bomang, Garo, Manipuri and Sadri and the Haijong dialect (<[http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=Bangladesh](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Bangladesh)>). The Haijong dialect which was the name given to the language spoken in the region of Sylhet is now known as Sylheti. There is also the Urdu-speaking non-Bengali Muslim refugees of Indian origin known as the Biharis seeking resettlement in Pakistan after the 1971 War of Liberation (an issue that has remained unresolved since the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971). The education system comprises primary and secondary schools, colleges, universities and *madrasahs* (religious seminaries). Three parallel education systems are in place simultaneously: the Bangla medium, the English medium and the *madrasah* system of education. Primary education is free and compulsory. Education is free for girls until grade eight in rural areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2000). However, Education Watch, a survey carried out by the Campaign for Popular Education (Campe) in 2003–2004 revealed that one out of five children is unable to enrol in government primary schools. One in every three enrolled dropped out before completing primary education and one in every three remained semi-literate or non-literate after completing

five years of primary education. Two major aspects of the problems were identified as access to primary education and asymmetry in the quality of teaching. The reasons for limited accessibility and poor quality were mismanagement, inadequate infra-structure, lack of quality teachers and poverty (The Daily Star, Editorial, March 14, 2005).

### Sylhet: Area of origin of the migrants

Tucked away in the northeast of Bangladesh, bordering the hills of Assam lies Sylhet with an area of 12,569 square km (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2000). Sylhet division is divided into four sub-divisions, one of which is also called Sylhet (e.g. Sunamganj, Sylhet, Maulvibazar and Hobiganj). Sylhet District Gazetteer (1975) records Bangla as the language spoken by 96.63 per cent of the population and describes Sylheti, the 'dialect' spoken by the Sylhetis as a modification of standard Bangla which is not intelligible to the people of other districts. It must be clarified that none of the languages other than Bangla and Sylheti had a writing system. Mohanto's (1997) study separates the indigenous people of Sylhet into two main groups, the *Adivasis* and the tribal people. The *Adivasis*, including their sub-groups, constitute twelve ethnic groups, while the tribal people consist of seven ethnic groups. Therefore, many different languages other than Bangla and Sylheti are spoken by the ethnic groups of Sylhet. The census of 1961 records 3.36 per cent of the population of Sylhet speaking a language other than Bangla as mother-tongue (Bangladesh District Gazetteer 1975). To examine how rural Sylhetis were drawn into the UK labour market a historical account of Sylhet's link with the British, recruitment of Sylheti men on British sea-going vessels and reasons why in the course of international migration a regional pattern developed in such high proportion from Sylhet is described.

*Sylhet's link with the British*

The region of Sylhet was a part of the British District Administration System governed by the East India Company till 1765 (Mohsin and Haroun 1999). Throughout its administrative history under the British rule Sylhet was a part of Bengal or Assam provinces. In 1905, Lord Curzon, the Governor General of India, partitioned the Bengal Presidency into the provinces of East Bengal which was joined with Assam and West Bengal. Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong divisions and Assam constituted the province of East Bengal while Bihar Orissa and the districts of West Bengal constituted the province of West Bengal. In 1911, the British Government annulled the partition of Bengal and the district of Sylhet was reverted to Assam (Islam 1999). This arrangement continued till the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 when the people of Sylhet opted to join East Bengal based on the language, culture, religion and ethnicity they shared with the Bengalis of East Bengal. The political and economic structure laid down by the British in Sylhet was significantly different from other districts under the East India Company especially as much of the rural population tended land which, despite the revenues paid to the British, was their own. The farmers were owner cultivators rather than tenants and were thus not under the control of the *zamindars* (land revenue collectors). The 1960 Agricultural Census records 71 per cent estates as owner occupied. The Sylhet Gazetteer records the district of Sylhet as 'the land of peasant proprietors' (Bangladesh District Gazetteer 1975: 163). Gardner (1995) claims that economic independence may have influenced their propensity to migrate. Since competition between families over land, and thus social status, were key features of *talukdars*' (landholders') areas, migration may have been the means to earn foreign wages to improve their economic position. Migration was an opportunity that only middle-income rural families could afford and those who had sufficient surplus to pay for documents and fares ventured into the risk attached to migration in the early days.

*Migration and the Sylheti Bangladeshis*

Bengal has been involved with overseas migration for hundreds of years (Visram 1986). Although there is a specific history of migration for each migrant group, the common factor is an early connection with the British who realised their importance as a valuable resource of cheap labour (Gardner 1995). From the earliest days of the East India Company's operations *lascars* (seamen) were employed by British ships that docked in Calcutta (Robinson 1986). These men performed unpleasant tasks on ships with wages far lower than their British counterparts (Adams 1987). The sailors who came from Noakhali, Chittagong and Sylhet were the first South Asians to be drawn into the global market. However, it was Sylhet that formed close ties with Britain as they began to monopolise employment on sea-going vessels. The river traffic brought cargo ships in the rainy season and these boats stopped at Markhuli, Enatganj, Sherpur, Maulvibazar, Baliganj and Fenchuganj in Sylhet and except Markhuli, all other areas are key migrant areas (Gardner 1995). Many of the major migrant areas in Sylhet are near the river Kushiara and the Surma, which once carried goods on the Calcutta (Kolkata) bound boats. The density of population along the Surma and the Kushiara is to a large extent responsible for moulding the history and economy of the region (Rahman 1999). Exchange of information between the boat people and the locals tempted many young men to try their luck at the Calcutta docks.

Chowdhury's (1993) account of Bangladeshi settlers in the UK reveals that it was customary for farmers to send their sons or kin to work on mercantile boats carrying goods between Assam and Bengal (Calcutta) through Sylhet. The boat traders' interest was unharmed until mid-nineteenth century when the British introduced steamers. Steamer stations built along the banks of the Surma and the Kushiara affected the boatmen's trade and to compensate for the loss the boatmen incurred, the British recruited them as crew on board British steamer-ships. The steamer service from Calcutta to Assam expanded rapidly and the local men's experiences on steamer-ships and with the waterway system were reasons more and more people were employed from Sylhet to work in engine rooms. Once in Calcutta, many engine room crews looked for employment on

sea-going vessels. This is how the link with British sea-going vessels began. The number of Bengali men employed as ship workers was relatively small over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but by the beginning of the twentieth century the demand for labour began to grow. By early twentieth century, a small number of Sylheti men were leaving their villages for the docks in Calcutta and stayed in or around the dock area till they found work. Many had contacts with brokers who were kinsmen or men from their own or nearby villages in Sylhet and provided the going-to-be recruits with lodgings and helped to arrange contacts with the Navy or British owned Shipping Companies (Gardner 1997). *Sarengs* (foremen) who were powerful and had substantial influence over who was chosen as a ship's crew usually recommended their own kinsmen or co-villagers. The jobs which were mostly in the ship's engine rooms suited the recruits who had previous experience of working in the steamer-ship engine rooms. The British believed that having come from the sub-tropical climates the men would be able to withstand heat. Working conditions were appalling but the wages made a substantial difference to a rural family's income and for the British the *lascars* provided cheap labour. Once the ship docked in any of the ports in Britain many Sylhetis 'jumped ship' (Gardner 1995: 582) and looked for friends and kinsmen to find them work and accommodation. A small but steadily increasing population of Sylhetis was established in Britain by the 1950s but it was not until the 1960s that widespread migration developed (Adams 1987, Gardner 1992, 1995).

The Commonwealth migrants who were a source of cheap labour for British industries contributed towards building the economy but the increasing presence of 'non-white' people caused public concern and by 1960s became an issue for a government debate (Solomos 1989: 45). These Commonwealth migrants were portrayed in negative terms by the media and within the parliamentary debate (Gardner 1995: 44). Their negative portrayal and the anti-black riots in London and in Nottingham in 1958 were reasons to curb further black labour from entering and settling in Britain (Fryer 1984: 384). In response to the disturbances, the 1948 Nationality Act, which granted citizenship to anyone from a former British colony, was amended. The New Commonwealth Immigrants Bill was introduced in 1962, which stated that only Commonwealth citizens who

had Ministry of Labour Employment Vouchers could enter Britain as primary immigrants. This act was intended to limit immigration but had the opposite effect. The Sylhetis realised that entry into Britain would become increasingly difficult. As a consequence many Sylheti men already living in Britain obtained vouchers for their kinsmen or close friends. To obtain further cheap labour some industries provided fares in advance along with employment vouchers to potential migrants (Gardner 1995: 44). Many single men brought their wives and children from Sylhet and perpetuated a chain effect (Gardner 1992: 583).

### *Chain migration*

During the 1960s thousands of Sylhetis settled in London while others ventured to industrial cities such as Manchester, Leeds, Bradford and Newcastle to work in factories (Gardner 1993: 148). The role of sarengs was now passed onto Sylheti brokers who became key figures in promoting migration by providing their kinsmen and co-villagers with lodgings in boarding houses. The men worked in Britain sending back as much money as possible. The lascars of the early days accumulated sufficient money to send back home to purchase land; some returned to Sylhet to marry and some to be reunited with their families. Their children were brought up in Sylhet, while the men stayed in the UK in cheap boarding houses usually owned by the Sylhetis. Financially the trouble was well worth it as back in Sylhet their remittance went far and their economic position improved. Initially only a few rural migrants had envisaged becoming permanent settlers in Britain as the sole purpose of their entry into Britain was to earn and save as much money as possible before returning home (Gardner 1993). Ballard (1994) describes these migrants as sojourners: had their initial objectives remained unchanged, the South Asian presence in Britain would have developed very differently. The labour vouchers soon came to an end and subsequent Immigration Laws made entry into Britain more difficult. In 1965 the government issued a white paper on immigration where from 30,130 vouchers in 1963 only 8,500 were to be issued every year. In 1968, a second Commonwealth Immigration Act was introduced to control the