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## The Santals of Bangladesh

Francesco Cavallaro# and Tania Rahman\*‡

*#Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

*\*Department of English Language and Literature, National Institute of Education, Singapore*

*‡Corresponding author*

### **Biodata**

Francesco Cavallaro is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has worked at various Universities in Australia and he is now living and working in Singapore. His research interests are in sociolinguistics and bilingualism. He has published on language maintenance and shift, the demographics of the Italians in Australia, language attitudes in Singapore and on the use of technology in the classroom. He is the author of the forthcoming book “Sicilians in Australia: Language shift and maintenance”, published by The Italian Australian Institute. La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Tania Rahman is studying MA in Applied Linguistics at the department of English Language and Literature at National Institute of Education, Singapore. She also holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and ELT and a Bachelor of Arts in English from the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. She has worked as a lecturer at the Department of English of Dhaka City College in Dhaka. Her current research interest is revitalizing languages of ethnic minorities. Other fields of interest are Language Planning and Policy, Second Language Acquisition, Teacher Education, Needs Analysis and English Language Teaching.

### **Abstract**

The Santals, a significant community among the forty five distinctive minority groups in Bangladesh, possess a rich cultural heritage and their language, Santali, bears their unique cultural identity. Over the years voices have been raised for legal rights for the indigenous minorities of the world and for the preservation of indigenous languages. With its rich cultural heritage and history, the Santali language has a unique value for the Santals and deserves special attention for conservation. A multilingual education system with provisions for mother tongue education is a way to promote awareness for their endangered linguistic heritage and can be an effective way to enable indigenous people in Bangladesh to learn their traditional language, the national language, Bangla, along with English. This paper first gives a detailed description of the Santals and their language. Issues of linguistic rights are discussed in the context of indigenous people in Bangladesh, and suggestions are made for the process of integrated public involvement in the multilingual education process for the Santals.

**Key words:** Indigenous people, Language Revitalization, Language Maintenance, Language rights, Santals, Santali, Bilingual/ Multilingual Education.

### **Indigenous people and Language rights**

It is a widely accepted fact that by the turn of the next century 3,000 of the 6,900 languages still spoken around the world will disappear, and that around 2,400 will become endangered (Hale 1998). UNESCO has recognized this fact and has made the conservation of indigenous cultures and cultural diversity in general as one of its key responsibilities. On its sixty-first session on September 13, 2007 and following more than two decades of debate, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a milestone declaration with an “overwhelming” majority of 143 votes in favour, only 4 negative votes cast (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United States) and 11 abstentions. This declaration outlines the rights of the world’s indigenous people, numbering more than 370 million individuals and representing nearly 6000 languages and cultures, to maintain their traditional cultures and customs, and outlaws any discrimination against them (UNPFII 2007). While the numbers seem to indicate a healthy linguistic environment, most of these languages and cultures are “fragile in the face of political, social and economic changes” (Czermak, Delanghe and Weng 2003:1).

The United Nations has designated the Tribal People of the world as “Indigenous People”. Some other similar terms regarding the concept are “cultural minorities,” “ethnic minorities,” “indigenous cultural communities,” “tribals,” “scheduled tribes,” “natives,” and “aboriginals” (ADB 1998:1). Terms and definitions in relation to the concept may vary depending on the acceptance or preferences on a country-to-country basis, or on the basis of use by academic discipline, and even on the usage of groups concerned. A working definition of ‘indigenous peoples’ as reflected in ADB’s operations is:

Indigenous peoples should be regarded as those with a social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society, which makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the processes of development.

*(ADB working paper on “Policy on Indigenous Peoples” 1998:3)*

‘Adivasi’ or *Adibashi* is a term to refer to indigenous peoples in Bangladesh in general (Sarker and Davey 2009). However, the terms ‘Adivasi’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘tribal’ and ‘indigenous’ are used interchangeably in documents and literature in Bangladesh to distinguish these groups of people. For instance, in 2004, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh used the term ‘indigenous’ in a message to the indigenous peoples on the occasion of United Nations International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, whereas the government used the term *adivasi/ethnic minority* in the final version of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Government of Bangladesh 2005). In “Primary Education Situational Analysis, Strategies and Action Plan for Mainstreaming Tribal Children” (MoPME 2006), they are called ‘tribal’. ‘Adivasi’ and ‘indigenous’ are used in this document since these people self-identify with these terms (Durnnian 2007:18).

The lack of recognition of the ‘existence of the different peoples within the country’ in the Bangladesh’s Constitution, and ‘a general reluctance’ of the state to acknowledge the ethnic minorities as anything but ‘backward segments of the population’, are often marked to be the reasons behind the low economic standings and low standards of education of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh (Borchgrevink and McNeish 2007:16). The term ‘Tribal peoples’ is the most common term used in political discourse in Bangladesh and is used without any association to territory as implied in the terms ‘indigenous’ or its complementary term in Bangla, ‘Adivasi’. Because of the political emphasis on Bangladeshi nationhood, the recognition of diversity and cultural rights has been inhibited. Despite the fact, there is a glimpse of hope against this general background, and ‘hopefully an indication of an emerging change’, as the Adivasi peoples in the country and related issues have been mentioned as a

concern in the Bangladesh Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) (Borchgrevink and McNeish 2007:16).

The struggle of ethnolinguistic minority groups' efforts in maintaining their languages and cultures has been the subject of considerable debate and research in recent times. See in particular the advocates of minority language rights (May 2001, 2003, 2006), and of linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994). There are many reasons why communities shift away from their (minority) mother tongues to the language of the majority. At the same time there are also many reasons why minority languages should be maintained (see Cavallaro 2005). These issues are beyond the scope of this article, and they have been dealt with to some degree in this issue by David, Cavallaro and Coluzzi.

Within the context outlined above, this paper presents a discussion of the Santal people, a minority group in Bangladesh. Their demographics, language and educational expectations are explored and discussed.

### **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is one of the five countries that comprise the vast land of 'the Indo-Gangetic Plain' (Eraly 2000:3-5). The history of the sub-continent abounds with the confluence of many cultural influences including Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Mughal, Arab, Persian, Turkish and British influences. In world history, particularly in the history of the sub-continent, the geographical area recognized today as Bangladesh including neighboring territories, such as the Indian states of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, was known as Bengal. For more than five centuries, it was under the rule of the Mughal Empire. It then became the Bengal Presidency and came under British rule. The nation was known as East Pakistan after the Partition in 1947, struggled for self governance from the then Pakistani rulers and achieved independence in 1971 (Majumdar 1943; Rahim 1963; Rashid 1978; Muhith 1978; Rahman 1980; Rahim 1981; Baxter 1984; Mascarenhas 1986).

The majority of the people in Bangladesh is Bangali (Bengali), and speaks Bangla (or Bengali). This group of people is the direct descendents of the inhabitants of Bengal (Majumdar 1943). Ethnically, they belong to a rather mixed group comprising 'eastern Indo-Aryan' people or the branch of the Sanskrit speaking Indo-Aryans who migrated to the Bengal delta in 50 BCE (Eraly 2000; Keay 2001),

and of the Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian peoples, ‘closely related to the Oriya, Assamese, Biharis, and other East Indians, as well as to Munda and Tibeto-Burman peoples’ (Banglapedia 2006, Paragraph 5). They speak Bangla, a language that belongs to the eastern Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. They are called ‘Bangali’ in their native language (Banglapedia 2006).

The history of the emergence of the Bangalis as the dominant group of people in Bangladesh is still contentious. According to one account, in its earliest period in history, different groups of people inhabited Bengal and the areas which they inhabited came to be known after the names of these groups (Banglapedia 2006). Thus the ancient *janapadas* (an Old Bangla word for ‘localities’) of Vanga, Pundra, Radha and Gauda were regarded as inhabited by non-Aryan ethnic groups with those names (Banglapedia 2006). There are accounts and references that point out that the ancient people of Bengal varied in race, culture and language from the Aryans, the compilers of the Vedic literature (Majumdar 1943; Eraly 2000; Keay 2001; Sengupta 2001). Dialects of the languages spoken since ancient times within Bengal (including the Austric, the Dravidian, the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese and the Indo-European (or Indo-Iranian) languages) are found in the Bengal Delta. Traces of the original settlers of Bengal (the non-Aryan ethnic groups of people) such as the Nisadas or Austric or Austro-Asiatics - are reflected in the appearances, lifestyles and cultural practices of the present day minority peoples known as Kol, Santal etc. All these tribes had their own languages and cultures. Non-Aryan dialects did not disappear altogether with the advent of the Aryanization process. Significantly, the languages spoken by all those ethnic groups and tribes contributed to the development of the language now known as Bengali, or Bangla. Hence the birth of the Bangla language is estimated to have taken place at around 700 A.D. The emergence of the Bangla language as a unifying force for the various groups was to start the slow process of the predominance of the Bangla-speaking people in Bengal (Sengupta 2001).

Since independence, Bangladesh has not had a consistent language policy. Hossain and Tollefson (2007) report how Bangla and English have been favoured while effectively ignoring the language issues concerning the country’s linguistic minorities. In Bangladesh, minority languages function as the Low languages in diglossic relationships with the High language, Bangla, the official language of Bangladesh. The minority language is used in informal settings and Bangla in official, administrative and educational settings (Lawson and Sachdev 2004).

In the Bangladeshi context we can look to May's (2006) argument where he says that no matter what steps are taken inevitably in any community the majority languages will dominate. However, he goes on to say that speakers of minority languages "... should be accorded at least some of the protections and institutional support that majority languages already enjoy" (p. 265). In the following discussion, we will see that, until recently, Bangladeshi minority groups, and the Santals in particular, have not been treated on a par with the majority Bangla speakers.

There are about 45 tribal/indigenous communities in Bangladesh. The reliability of the data in the 2001 national census regarding indigenous population in Bangladesh is questionable for lack of specific questions on indigenous issues on the data collection form used for the past censuses (Durnnian 2007:18). The 1991 census data on indigenous people shows the total indigenous population as approximately 1.21 million (1.13% of the total population). The reliability of this data has been put to question for the inconsistency by the censuses in identifying the accurate number of the indigenous groups in Bangladesh: only 27 of the 45 groups were identified of which some communities were mentioned twice (Durnnian 2007:18-19). The current estimate by the World Bank (2008) is around 2 million indigenous people; while Borchgrevink and McNeish (2007) reported that Bangladesh has an estimated indigenous population of 2.5 to 3 million, or around 2% of the total population. The Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, an organized group for upholding the rights of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh, claims that the population is higher, at approximately 3 million (Durnnian 2007:19). In a recent study (Rafi, 2006), it has been claimed that the indigenous households comprise 1.5% of the total households in Bangladesh. Considering all these anomalies and applying a national average annual growth rate of 1.48 percent between the censuses of 1991 to 2001, Durnnian (2007:19) suggests that a more accurate estimate of the population of indigenous people in 2001 could be around 1.8 million people.

The geographical distribution of the 45 distinct indigenous groups in Bangladesh is given in Table 1. The geographical locations of the indigenous people, living mostly in remote areas, are scattered in six major areas or regions in Bangladesh (World Bank 2008).

Table 1 Location and distribution of Indigenous People in Bangladesh

| Location  | Indigenous Communities   |
|---|--|
| Greater Mymensingh<br>(Mymensingh<br>Tangail<br>Netrokona<br>Jamalpur<br>Sherpur district)  | Mandi, Barman<br>Garo, Dalu<br>Hajong, Hodi<br>Koch, Banai<br>Rajbangshi   |
| Gazipur   | Garo, Barman, Koch   |
| Coastal Area<br>(Patuakhali, Barguna and Coxsbazar district)  | Rakhain  |
| South-West<br>(Jessore, Satkhira, Khulna district etc.)   | Bagdi (Buno), Santal<br>Rajbangshi   |
| Chitagong Hill Tracts<br>(Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari district)  | Chakma, Tanchangya<br>Marma, Khiang<br>Tripura, Mru<br>Bawm, Asam<br>Pangkhu, Gurkha<br>Lusai, Chak<br>Khumi,  |
| North-Bengal<br>(Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Gaibandha,<br>Noagaon, Bagura, Sirajgonj,<br>Chapainawabgonj, Natore district etc.) | Santal, Bhil<br>Oraon, Kole<br>Munda, Mahato<br>Malo, Karmakar<br>Mahali, Muriyar<br>Khondo, Pahan<br>Bedia, Musohor<br>Bhumij, Paharia<br>Rai, Sing<br>Turi |
| Greater Sylhet<br>(Sumangonj, Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Hobigonj district)   | Monipuri, Patro<br>Khasia, Kharia<br>Garo, Santal<br>Hajong, Oraon   |

Source: World Bank Report titled “Bangladesh - indigenous/tribal population and access to secondary schools (draft): indigenous peoples plan”, Report no. - IPP280, April 4, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 1-2.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is the abode of most of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh but other areas in which these communities live include Jamalpur, Mymensingh, North Bengal, Gazipur, Sylhet, and the coastal areas of Patuakhali and Barguna.

Bangla is spoken as their mother tongue by an estimated 110 million people and by 250 million including those who speak it as a second language in Bangladesh and neighbouring India. The next two most spoken languages in Bangladesh are Chittagonian with around 13 million speakers, and Sylhetti with about 7 million speakers (Gordon 2005). Some of the smaller ethnic minority communities of



Bangladesh include Chakma, Garo, Manipuri, Marma, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Khasi, Kuki, Tripura, Mro, Hajong and Rakhain. The total population of some of these smaller groups in 1991 and 2001 is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Indigenous population in Bangladesh (1991-2001)

| Indigenous groups | 1991      | 2001      |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Bangshi           | 2,112     | 3,126     |
| Bawm              | 6,978     | 10,327    |
| Buna              | 13,914    | 20,592    |
| Chak              | 2,000     | 2,960     |
| Chakma            | 252,986   | 374,419   |
| Koch              | 12,631    | 18,694    |
| Garo              | 68,210    | 100,951   |
| Hajong            | 11,477    | 16,985    |
| Harijon           | 63        | 93        |
| Khasi             | 13,412    | 19,850    |
| Khyang            | 2,345     | 3,471     |
| Khumi             | 1,241     | 1,837     |
| Lushai            | 662       | 978       |
| Mahat/Mahatoo     | 3,534     | 5,230     |
| Marma             | 154,216   | 228,240   |
| Monipuri          | 24,902    | 28,562    |
| Munda/Mundia      | 2,112     | 3,126     |
| Murang            | 22,178    | 32,823    |
| Muro/MO           | 3,211     | 4,752     |
| Pahari            | 1,853     | 2,742     |
| Pankue/Pankoo     | 3,227     | 4,776     |
| Rajbangshi        | 5,444     | 8,057     |
| Rakhain           | 16,932    | 25,059    |
| Santal            | 202,744   | 300,061   |
| Tanchangya        | 21,057    | 31,164    |
| Tipra             | 1,242     | 1,838     |
| Tripura           | 79,772    | 118,063   |
| Urang             | 11,296    | 16,718    |
| Uruo/Urua/Uria    | 2,481     | 3,672     |
| Others            | 261,746   | 387,384   |
| Total             | 1,205,978 | 1,784,847 |

(Source: Adapted from World Bank Report titled “Bangladesh - indigenous/tribal population and access to secondary schools (draft): indigenous peoples plan”, Report no. - IPP280, April 4, 2008, vol. 1, p. 3)

The distribution of four major indigenous communities – Chakma, Santal, Marma and Mandi (Mundia/Munda) - is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows a Santal concentration in the north western part of Bangladesh comprising the districts of Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rongpur, a Mandi concentration in the Madhupur forest in Mymensingh, and a Chakma and a Marma concentration in the Chittagong division:



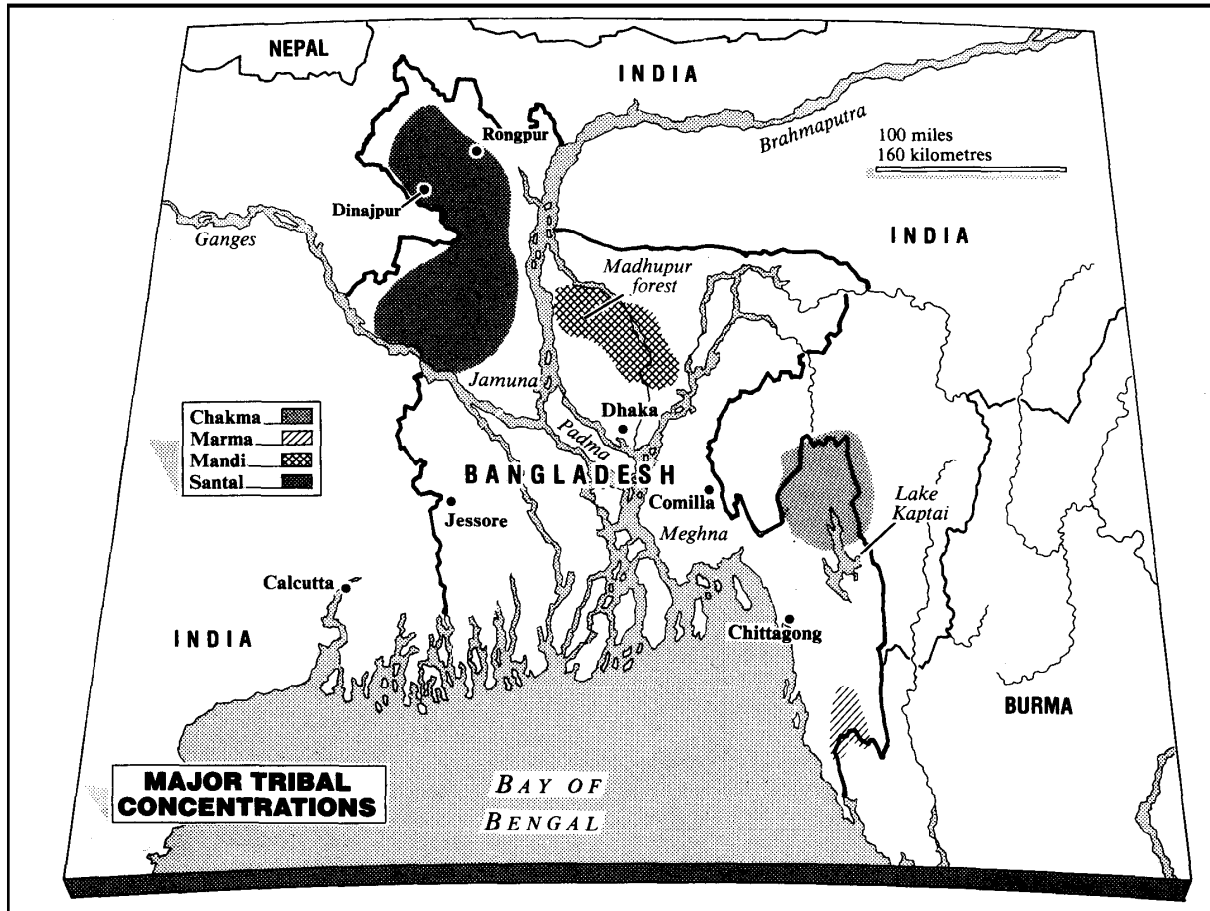


Figure1.

Distribution of the Major Indigenous Groups in Bangladesh. Source: Timm (1991).

### The Santals

The Santals are one of the larger tribal/indigenous groups in Bangladesh (see Table 2). Communities of Santals are also located in India and Nepal. The number of Santal people living in Bangladesh is still debatable. In a survey conducted in 1941, the Santal population was recorded as 829,025 (Banglapedia 2006). In the censuses conducted after the Partition in 1947, the Santals were not distinguished from other minority groups. As a result, the accurate statistics of their population in the then East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) are now vague and unclear. In the 1980s, the Christian missionaries estimated that the Santal population in northern Bangladesh was over 100,000. The 1991 census recorded the Santal population as over 200,000 (Banglapedia 2006). In 2001, according to one estimate, the Santal population in Bangladesh was numbered around 157,000 (Gordon 2005), but the World Bank report (2008) has estimated the number around to be 300,000 (Table 2).

The language of the Santals, Santali, belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family and is a member of the North Munda subgroup (Anderson 2006a). This view is supported by Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) which specifies Santali as belonging to the Austro-Asiatic family. The Munda group of languages, often known as Kol or Kolarian, is split into the South Munda and the North Munda subgroups. Within the North Munda group there exists a dialect continuum between Korcu and a sizeable group of Kherwarian languages, of which Santali is a member (Anderson 2006b; Majumder 2001).

The Santali script, which is known as ‘Ol Cemet’, ‘Ol Chiki’, or simply ‘Ol’, was created by Pandit Raghunath Murmu, a renowned Indian educationist, in the 1930s, as part of his efforts to promote Santali culture (Lotz 2004; Carrin 2008). The Santali script uses thirty letters and five basic diacritics, and includes six basic and three additional vowels. Before the development of this script, Santali was either not written at all, or was written using the Bengali or Oriya scripts. During British rule the Roman alphabet was established as the preferred written form of Santali.

Literacy rates are very low in Bangladesh as a whole, and particularly lower among the minority groups (Hossain and Tollefson 2007). The Santals in Bangladesh have very few educational, literary or public resources. The situation is quite different among the Santals living in India where there is a significant use of the Santali language in a “functioning network of organizations, journals and publications, supported by a sizeable (mostly urban) elite that organizes conferences or regional meetings and actively contributes to other public platforms” (Lotz 2004: 131). Anderson (2006b) also reports of short wave radio broadcasts in Santali in India and of the lobbying by the newly founded “Tribal” state of Jharkhand to have a form of Kherwarian declared as yet another state language. However, very few or no Santali books are available in Bangladesh, except for texts written by Christian missionaries to teach Santali (see Bompas 1909 for a translation of Reverend P.O. Bodding’s Santali folktales; Archer 1974). These are all in the Romanized script. Currently educated Santals write Santali in both Bangla and Romanized scripts but most prefer to write in Bangla because of the phonetic similarities between Santali and Bangla.

Like the dubious nature of their demographic data, the ethno-linguistic history of the Santals is also ambivalent. Researchers such as Majumder (2001) state that the Austric-speaking Proto-Australoid

people (one of the earliest settlers of the Indian subcontinent who existed before the arrival of the Aryans in this part of the world) were the ancestors of the Santals. Majumder has shown that there is considerable debate about the evolutionary histories of these tribal people:

The proto-Australoid tribals, who speak dialects belonging to the Austric linguistic group, are believed to be the basic element in the Indian population (Thapar 1966, p. 26). Other anthropologists, historians and linguists (Risley 1915; Rapson 1955; Pattanayak 1998) have supported the view that the Austro-Asiatic (a subfamily of the Austric language family) speaking tribals are the original inhabitants of India. Some scholars (Buxton 1925; Sarkar 1958) have, however, proposed that the Dravidians are the original inhabitants, the Austro-Asiatics being later immigrants.

(Majumder 2001:534)

It is difficult to determine the exact time and reason for Santal settlement in Bangladesh. The 1881 census mentions that at that time Santal settlements were already present in the districts of Pabna, Jessore, Khulna and Chittagong. According to another viewpoint, the Santals migrated to Bangladesh during the British rule in search of employment. At that time, the Santals were living in India in the regions of Chotonagpur and Santal Pargana. (Sarker and Davey 2009).

In terms of education, employment and land ownership in Bangladesh, Samad (2006) reports that the Santals are at a considerable disadvantage in comparison to the majority population and even in comparison with some other minority groups:

The Santals are one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable indigenous communities in Bangladesh. For hundreds of years, they have been facing serious violations of human rights and the pace has accelerated since the independence. Land-grabbing, threats, evictions and killings have marginalized them to such an extent that their existence in Bangladesh is currently at stake. They do not have access to decision-making bodies and don't get justice. Thus, they have become one of the poorest and the most vulnerable sections of the population.

(Samad 2006:9)

The fact that the Santals are disadvantaged even in comparison with other smaller indigenous groups can be explained by recent socio-political events in the relationship between the Bangladeshi state and indigenous people. Borchgrevink and McNeish (2007) report of a clear distinction existing between the tribal minorities situated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in southern Bangladesh and those, like the Santals, living in the plains area in the northern part of the country. This is because the indigenous groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts waged an armed struggle against the central government for over 25 years. The Peace Accord signed in 1996 ended the violence and recognized “the region as ‘tribally inhabited’, the traditional authority structures of the peoples, and opens up for a certain amount of political autonomy” (Borchgrevink and McNeish 2007:16; Ramkanta 2003). While the advantages gained through the Peace Accord are still rather limited in comparison to the majority population, they are still much better than the conditions suffered by the indigenous people in the northern regions of Bangladesh.

The Santals’ lack of access to education, employment opportunities and land rights is, as cited above, to an extent, due to the negligence from the state, which so far has not been able to ensure these rights to its minority communities. Since its independence from Pakistan, several political parties have come to power, but none has worked effectively for the question of land ownership, which has been in dispute since the India- Pakistan Partition in 1947, and education and jobs for the minorities in the country:

Even the laws themselves promote the process, as for instance the act introduced after partition of Pakistan and India that allowed the confiscation of land owned by Hindus (adivasi traditional religion is in many cases referred to as Hindu), which was retained with only slight modifications after Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan. (Borchgrevink and McNeish 2007:16)

The ‘slight modifications’ brought to these laws have been of little help in solving the landlessness of the Santals in Bangladesh. A section of the Bangla-speaking majority population has been taking advantage of the lack of education and language skills in the majority language, and the illiteracy of the minority groups in Bangladesh to take over the traditional land of these groups (Sarker and Davey 2009; Lawson 2003). To date these disadvantaged people are struggling for survival in the land that they have inhabited for generations.

Land loss often results from the manipulation of public records or bribery of judges and municipal officials. This process is simplified when the victim's family is illiterate and belongs to a disliked minority group.

(Matthews and Ahsan 2002:250)

Facing such discrimination and violence, the disadvantaged community is struggling for survival and has had little time or energy to devote to voicing their demands for their rights to preserve their language and culture.

As stated above, in Bangladesh the Santals face discrimination from the majority community, and the Bangla speaking population and the government have done little to help the Santals protect themselves from the continuous land grabbing and dispossessions. Indeed there is a feeling among the minority peoples of Bangladesh that they are continuously being overlooked in favour of the majority group in all facets of life. These include employment opportunities and education. These issues have led to a deep sense of social insecurity. At the same time, the exposure to Christian run welfare programmes in the poverty-stricken communities of the Santals and as a result of financial aid from NGOs (see Gauri and Galel 2005 for a more detailed discussion on the roles of NGOs in Bangladesh), the desire for modern education is growing among the Santals.

The disadvantaged position of the Santali community vis-à-vis the majority Bangla-speaking population has also meant that the Santali language is facing the threat of extinction. The community is rapidly shifting away from its traditional language to Bangla as a consequence of competition from the majority language and from the lack of language maintenance support from the (Bangla-speaking) authorities who are responsible for policy making and language planning. Santali needs extensive research and educational efforts for it to be effectively revived, maintained and preserved.

### **Multilingual/Bilingual education initiatives in Bangladesh**

As stated earlier, in Bangladesh, Bangla is spoken as the first language by the majority of the population, and, despite Bangladesh's linguistic diversity, no language policy for the country's ethnolinguistic minorities has been developed so far. At the same time, the country's education policy documents emphasize the importance of mother tongue in primary education. However, 'mother tongue' in

Bangladesh seems to only refer to Bangla, the language of instruction and literacy in all formal schools, as well as in adult literacy classes.

The minority languages have not been able to make their way into the education sector. To make situations worse, there are very few teachers from the minority communities. The indigenous minorities have an exceedingly low level of literacy. Despite this fact, a glimmer of hope can be seen in Bangladesh's commitment to achieve the Education for All (EFA)<sup>1</sup> goals. There are now a number of non-governmental organizations are developing and administering non-formal schools around the country. A few of them are working in educational and literacy programmes among indigenous children. Most of these use the mother tongues of these minority learners as the media of instruction.

In line with such initiatives in the International Decade for the World's Indigenous People, the EIC (Education for Indigenous Children) program was launched by BRAC [Building Resources Across Communities (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee)] in October 2001 concentrating particularly on 'the needs of indigenous children' in Bangladesh and to raise consciousness among the members of the mainstream Bengali society about indigenous issues (Sagar and Paulson 2003:1).

BRAC is the largest among all the NGOs operating within Bangladesh. In order to achieve its major aim of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, BRAC carries out a wide range of projects in fields such as education, micro-finance, health and research. It has been providing selected services in the 'non-formal primary education' (NFPE) sector in Bangladesh for more than two decades, but it has stepped up its presence in indigenous education in Bangladesh since the EIC program commenced in 2001 (Sagar and Paulson 2003:1).

In 2003, around 14,289 indigenous students were enrolled in 928 BRAC-initiated NFPE schools. These schools had a mixed (Bangla- indigenous) population or, in many cases, were made up solely of indigenous students. However, Sagar and Paulson (2003) also mention a number of problems among the indigenous students in BRAC's NFPE programmes. They point to a low enrolment and high dropout rates of indigenous students due to "low self-esteem, poor relations with Bengali teachers and

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of Bangladesh has committed itself to meet the Dakar Declaration Education for All (EFA) by 2015 and sequential agreements. EFA stresses that all children have access to a *completely* free and compulsory primary education of good quality (Durnnian 2006:21).

classmates, [and] problems with Bangla as the language of instruction” as well as “negative misconceptions towards ethnic minorities both among Bengali children in the classrooms and within mainstream Bengali communities” (p. 1).

Sagar and Paulson (2003:2) report, though, that BRAC has recognized these problems and the need for a “targeted education strategy” for indigenous students and has conducted field observations, research, and discussions with indigenous parents, communities and other NGOs working with these disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh. The outcome is a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)-funded six-pronged education program aimed at achieving the following main objectives:

- Increase the enrollment of ethnic minority children in mainstream education
- Boost the self-esteem of indigenous people
- Create a positive attitude among the mainstream Bengali population towards indigenous people.

The six programme areas, as in Sagar and Paulson (2003:2 – 6) are:

1. Establishment and administration of *new schools* for indigenous children incorporating their mother tongues as medium of instruction.
2. *Material development* in terms of ‘creation of new materials in Bangla and the students’ mother tongues for use in indigenous classrooms’.
3. *Human Resources, Capacity Development and Training* for school staff recruited from the indigenous communities.
4. *Advocacy* for ‘indigenous groups and creating *Linkages* among communities, government and other NGOs’.
5. *Monitoring and Evaluation* of lesson plans, student performances, attendance, and teacher performances and *Research* initiatives including a comparative study on the quality of indigenous vs. mainstream education and the performance of indigenous children in BRAC schools.
6. *Stipend programme* for indigenous students to continue their post-primary and post-secondary studies as well as for indigenous teachers who wish to complete their secondary school certification or post-secondary education.

For the Santals, it is obvious that these programmes can be of enormous help. Although it will take some time for these programmes to be developed and for them to start having an effect, these



programmes have the potential to better equip the Santals to enter and stay within the mainstream education system. A good education would then enable them to improve their quality of life by enabling the Santals to have access to better job opportunities.

It has been found that many indigenous children in Bangladesh are denied admission to primary education because they often do not speak fluent Bangla (Save the Children, 2004 cited in Durnnian 2007:2). In Bangladesh, in comparison with the majority Bangla-speaking children, indigenous children have significantly lower enrolment rates, have higher dropout rates and receive fewer years of formal instruction than the national average (Durnnian 2007:2). The enrolment rates may vary among indigenous communities. On the whole, approximately 44.5 % of the indigenous children aged 6-10 years in Bangladesh get admission in primary schools compared to 80% of the Bangla-speaking group (Save the Children, 2004 cited in Durnnian 2007:2).

These marginalized people need to be literate in their L1 (Santali) and, in order to reap the benefits of the formal education system, in the other two dominant languages, Bangla and English. In order to achieve this end the CIDA-funded programmes are not enough. Initiatives are also required on the part of the local Santal community, the Bangladeshi government and educators. Concerted effort is needed from linguists, teachers and decision making bodies responsible for planning, assessment and evaluation of the curriculum and materials to design suitable bilingual/multilingual educational programmes for the Santals. Once implemented in Bangladesh, a bilingual/multilingual education for the Santals through mother tongue education will be instrumental in leading the community on the road to an improved socio-economic standard of these people and thereby, contributing towards the maintenance of their ethnic language.

### **Challenges to Developing Multilingual Education Programs in the Bangladeshi Context**

Establishing the types and number of programmes outlined on the previous section is not an easy task. This is particularly true in a country like Bangladesh where educational resources are limited.

Malone (2003) posits that to compel someone - children or adults alike - to learn in a language ‘they neither speak nor understand’ would not be a rational way to extract better results from them (p.6). The above statement seems to capture the main problem with the Bangladeshi approach to indigenous

education, where minority speakers are forced to learn the majority language at school. The result, as stated above is low rates of enrolments, high dropout rates and low educational achievements by members of the minority groups.

Resistance by the majority groups towards minority educational programmes in the Bangladeshi context can be discussed in terms of the general reasons given by Malone (2003) as to why multilingual education “can’t be done” (see also Sarker and Davey 2009; Durnnian 2006; Samad 2006):

*Supporting diversity will foster divisiveness and lead to ethnic conflict.* A widely held assumption regards linguistic and cultural diversity as the root to ethnic strife. The argument for such presumption rests on the belief that the unity of a nation depends on a monolingual and monocultural atmosphere. This viewpoint has been debunked by numerous researchers and educators (Cummins 2000; see also Harrison 2007; Nettle and Romaine 2000). John Waiko, the then Vice Minister for Education of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea, put it very succinctly:

Diversity means more viewpoints to clarify, more ways of solving problems, more creative ideas, a greater ability to deal with change. There are many examples of the power of harnessing diversity. The modern European community is as strong as its ability to harness its diversity. Where diversity is crushed and fought the nation becomes weak and divided

(Waiko 1997: paragraph 38)

Malone (2003) also contests this position through a contradictory argument: she argues that most often restraint on the mother tongue and ethnic identity leads to discontent and rebellion. To prove this point we need look no further than the national history of Bangladesh that shows how the Bangladeshis struggled and achieved independence from Pakistan primarily over the issue of mother tongue education. When Pakistan first gained independence Urdu was imposed as the national language of both West and East Pakistan. It was this issue that finally sparked the War of Independence (Hossain and Tollefson 2007). Cummins (no date) also argues for the endorsement of multilingualism and multiculturalism in a society and relates it to the nation’s socio-economic development en masse:

“In an era of globalization, a society that has access to multilingual and multicultural resources is advantaged in its ability to play an important social and economic role on the world stage.”

(Paragraph 7)

*There are too few mother tongue speakers qualified to teach at the tertiary level.* Since many ethnic communities are still deprived of quality education, there may be lack of teachers belonging to these communities with the minimum teaching qualifications required for instruction in the formal education system. In Bangladesh, for example, the presence of primary level teachers coming from the indigenous communities in the formal education system is unfortunately negligible. There is also the problem of getting qualified teacher to work in remote areas. Often, qualified Bengali speaking teachers holding university degrees or teacher training qualifications who do not want to be posted to remote indigenous areas hire people to work as their substitutes or proxies in their teaching positions. These proxy teachers (who may neither be university graduates nor have any training in teaching) may or may not show up at the school at all (Durnnian 2007:3). The government has also been negligent in considering ethnicity when assigning teachers to their postings, as the following example from a government report shows:

There are 27 teachers in Netrokona district from the [Adivasi] community, but they are often not assigned to their own community schools.

(Ministry of Primary and Mass Education 2006:6).

It is, therefore, normally the case that rural areas where indigenous communities live do not have teachers speaking the minority languages, and the Bangla-speaking teachers face difficulty in communicating with indigenous children in the classroom.

In order to handle such problems, quality education for the minority communities should be ensured to enable the minority language speakers for developing teaching skills. Throughout the world, particularly in developing nations in Asia, a step taken in this regard has been ‘to equip non-professional minority language speakers as teachers, providing them with careful pre-service training and on-going supervision and support’ (Malone 2003:7). BRAC’s initiative of the “Education for Indigenous Children” program in Bangladesh is such an attempt in which the minority language speakers have been

provided with training and support appointing them as teaching assistants. In Papua New Guinea, members of such communities have been recruited as teachers for early primary grades as in the mother tongue elementary classes constituting the first three years of formal education (see Malone, 2003). Hornberger, and Swinehart (2009) report that the programme for Professional Development in Intercultural Bilingual Education for Andean Countries (PROEIB Andes) based in Bolivia has been increasingly successful in training indigenous teachers and then these teachers have been returning to their communities.

*There are no instructional materials that 'fit' all the minority language communities.* Mere translations of the dominant language curriculum into minority languages might end in alien and unsuitable contents for indigenous learners, particularly for communities living in remote places. The absence of mother tongue instruction for indigenous children in the primary education curriculum in Bangladesh has been noted as one major reason for the incompatibility of the curriculum in relation to these children (Durnnian 2007:6). As the Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Network report states:

[T]he curriculum is prepared for the [non-Indigenous] Bengali plains. As part of the government's overall scheme to bring indigenous peoples' culture into the mainstream, the curriculum is entirely oriented to the dominant Bengali model, allowing no space for the religious values, ideas and aspirations of hill tribal culture. Conformity to the Bengali 'norm' lies at the heart of the lessons, which are themselves communicated by approximately 95% Bengali teachers, with some schools having no indigenous teachers at all.

(Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Network 2003:36)

The research by Indigenous Children's Education Forum (2006) mirrors the true picture portraying the dire consequences of following such culturally inappropriate curricula in Bangladesh:

[F]ailure to engage indigenous students in meaningful ways results in classroom experiences that are incomprehensible and culturally invalidating. The result is that indigenous children often lose interest, underperform and drop out, and remain trapped in conditions of deprivation and marginalization.

(Indigenous Children's Education Forum 2006:22)

Development of integrative curricula appropriate for various ethnic groups may seem to be a mammoth task. However, there are answers to this problem. One ‘promising’ solution, according to Malone (2003), is that the national education department (such as the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education in Bangladesh) can prepare intended learning objectives alongside curriculum guidelines for each instructional level. These ‘centrally produced’ materials can help minority language teachers develop their instructional plans using culturally appropriate content to teach different subjects to the minority students (Malone 2003:7). Malone cites a remarkable example of such initiatives taken by the Department of Education in Papua New Guinea (see also National Department of Education 2003, in Kale and Marimyas 2003).

*The minority languages lack graded reading materials that can be used in their schools or departments.* Malone (2003) acknowledges the fact that very often minority communities ‘lack graded reading materials that enable new learners to gain reading fluency and then encourage them to continue reading’ (p. 7). She also admits that it is a challenging task to create literature in multiple languages. It has been recognized that the ‘education that indigenous children in Bangladesh receive is of a lesser quality than children from the majority group receive through the primary education system’ (Durnnian 2007:3). This is true in the case of the Santals and other indigenous communities in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, it has been proven in many cases that minority language speakers have the capacity to develop outstanding reading materials if they are provided with proper training and support (Kosonen 2005, 2008; Premsrirat and Malone 2003; McCaffery, Merrifield and Millican 2007). Locally produced materials are found to be “especially enjoyable and stimulating to new readers because they are about people, places and activities that are familiar to them” (Malone 2003:7).

*Minority communities lack funding to support their programs.* Without external support it is difficult for the minority language communities to maintain their own education programs (Malone 2003:7). The communities need financial support to meet infrastructural costs such as classrooms and other instructional costs for the purchase of reading materials and other necessary classroom supplies. Even though the infrastructural costs can be managed when ‘community members offer their homes and other local buildings for use as classrooms and volunteer as teachers and writers’ (Malone 2003:7), the communities will still be in need of funding to bear the daily instructional costs. In a poverty-stricken

country like Bangladesh, financial hardship is the main obstacle for the education of the indigenous people.

Even when educational resources are available, these people, stricken by severe poverty, cannot even provide their children with the basic educational needs such as reading and writing materials, tuition fees and school uniforms. Many children in Bangladesh are not able to go to school or have to dropout from school very early because the financial conditions of their families compel them to look for employment at a very young age or because they need to look after their siblings in absence of the parents when they are away at work. Many indigenous children in Bangladesh are engaged as child labour in agriculture with their parents, or as ‘bonded labour’ at the households of local elite Bangalis (Sarker and Davey 2009:8).

There are a number of reasons behind the marginalization of the indigenous communities in Bangladesh and it is not within the scope of this article to discuss them. What needs to be highlighted is that there exist ‘negative socio-religious attitudes’ and ‘open discrimination’ against the indigenous minorities by the Bangla-speaking majority group. Because of this, most indigenous people live in remote areas far away from the majority Bangla-speaking communities. As a result, many of the government-funded schools are located very far from the indigenous habitations. Due to the lack of availability of schools within a manageable walking distance, many indigenous children never even attend school (Durnnian 2007:2). To make situations worse, owing to the distance of schools from the indigenous communities, the lack of government interest and low participation of the communities in schools, the school buildings actually present in indigenous areas are usually in very poor condition and lack many of the basic facilities enjoyed by pupils in majority language speaking areas (MoPME 2006):

“[T]he schools are run down or non-existent and many of the teachers are absent or have never actually visited the schools.”

(AITPN 2003:36).

The recent joint programmes of various Bangladeshi government agencies, NGOs and of minority indigenous communities, some of them discussed earlier in this article, do seem to hold the promise that the necessary resources will be found. However, in a country such as Bangladesh, financial and educational initiatives aimed at helping the indigenous population are extremely slow in being

implemented and whether any of the government initiatives, such as construction of new classrooms and their maintenance planned under the Primary Education Development Programme II (PEDP II)<sup>2</sup>, have aided the indigenous communities or not, remains a question (Durnnian 2007:4).

### Conclusion

Quality education, according to Durnnian (2007:3), is an education that is:

- 1. relevant (to children's needs, context now and the future),*
- 2. appropriate (to children's abilities, language, culture and potential),*
- 3. participatory (to able children, families to play a full role in the process of learning and the organization of the school),*
- 4. flexible (to respond to different and changing contexts in which children live – environmental, economic, social developments and realities),*
- 5. inclusive (accessible to all, all children active in their learning and play, seeing diversity and differences between children as a resources to support learning and play),*
- 6. protective (from exploitation, abuse, violence and conflict).*

Unfortunately, indigenous children's learning needs, particularly education in their mother tongue, has not been actively pursued in Bangladesh. As a consequence, the education system has failed to provide an education that meets any of the six criteria listed above and has, therefore, largely failed the indigenous children of Bangladesh.

A recent government strategy for indigenous children in Bangladesh (MoPME 2006) identified that indigenous parents do not find government schools and their curricula appropriate to tribal/indigenous communities or livelihoods and that they do not represent their cultural values and language. Government reports sometimes mistakenly attribute the cause of children's illiteracy to the indigenous parents' unawareness regarding the importance of education (Durnnian 2007:7). These reports are, on the whole, misinterpreting the real reason for these children's lack of education. Research evidence shows that parents are generally reluctant to send their children to a school if it is administered

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<sup>2</sup> The PEDP II, a partnership initiative between the Government of Bangladesh and 11 international donor agencies, is a sub-sector programme to improve the quality of the formal primary education system in Bangladesh. To address the specific education constraints and difficulties of indigenous children, the "Primary Education Situational Analysis, Strategies and Action Plan for Mainstreaming Tribal Children" (2006) has been approved under the PEDP II and the umbrella of Inclusive Education. This is the only government plan to ensure education for indigenous children.



in an ‘alien’ language that the children do not speak (AITPN, 2003; ICEF, 2006). Parents, therefore, lose confidence in the quality and value of the lessons imparted through the education system and simply do not send their children to school. The exclusion of indigenous children’s mother tongues in schools has diminished local interest and participation in education.

The significance of universalising primary education and eradicating illiteracy before the end of the past millennium had been agreed on long since 1990 when representatives from around the globe (155 countries and 150 organizations) gathered at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand (5-9 March 1990) to discuss the issue. There the world community for the first time documented the goal of providing quality basic education for all people. In this meeting, the urge for “Education for All” to ensure equal access of all citizens, including girls and women, the poor, the disabled, and the AIDS affected, to develop opportunities and resources, was voiced unanimously. The principal objective of the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People (2005-2014) declared by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2004 highlighted “further strengthening international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education and health”. The economic and social instability that inflicts indigenous peoples with age-long suffering in many parts of the world has been reflected in the international community’s concern over the issue through the declaration of a Second International Decade. The inclusion of education for ethnic minority communities affirming their cultural and linguistic heritage and provision for quality lifetime learning opportunities in “Education for All” had been emphasized as obligatory in that conference.

The rich variety of ethnic languages and cultures in many parts of the world, particularly in Asia and the Pacific, are faced with the threat of extinction. Linguists and policy makers worldwide have debated the necessity, possibility and urgency of meeting the language and education needs of these ethnic minority language communities in different sessions of the UNESCO from 2001 to 2003. This shows that experts and policymakers are finally working together to promote the linguistic and educational requirements and potentials of indigenous people throughout Asia and the Pacific. However, more needs to be done to help countries like Bangladesh to achieve these lofty aims.

In Bangladesh, the Santali language is an integral part of the Santals' cultural identity. Unfortunately it is under pressure from the majority language, Bangla. Steps need to be taken in order to sustain the linguistic heritage of the community and the centuries of traditions and customs it is associated with. Language education, more specifically, mother tongue education for the Santals, can be an effective measure to preserve the Santali language and culture. Research has shown that bilingual education, or a mother tongue based multilingual education system is an effective measure of conserving and revitalizing an endangered language (Cummins 2000; Fishman 1991, 2000; Alexander 2003; Hornberger 1989, 2003; Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester 2000). Therefore, an effective, strong, culturally oriented and sustained mother tongue based bilingual/multilingual education program has to be developed for this minority group in Bangladesh in order to increase educational opportunities, which will play a crucial role in improving the Santals' quality of life and facilitate the maintaining and revitalizing of their indigenous language.

The Santal people and their language are integral parts of Bangladeshi heritage. The conservation process for this unique cultural heritage can only be successful when the government, together with other interested parties, lends their support to the maintenance efforts of this minority community. At the same time the indigenous people themselves must be encouraged and recruited to actively participate in the teaching, learning, planning and policy making process of their language, traditions and culture. In this way a sense of pride and a common purpose can be established within the community. Only through such a comprehensive approach can conservation of this historically and culturally rich language be achieved.

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