

THE KURUX-SPEAKING COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH AND THEIR IDENTITY

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the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

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Ethics Statement

This thesis has been conducted following all ethical guidelines. The participants for this thesis volunteered to sit for the interview and no participant's sentiment or physical well-being was hurt during the process of the interview. Furthermore, their identities have been kept confidential.

Abstract

Kurux is one of the many indigenous languages that can be found in Bangladesh. It is a language of the Dravidian language family, spoken by a small indigenous community, known as the Uraons who live in the Northern region of Bangladesh. The overall condition of the indigenous languages in Bangladesh is quite vulnerable because of the wide-spread use of Bangla as the official language. The National Language Policy is hegemonic that has reified the status of languages other than Bangla or English to a lower realm. As a result, the indigenous communities are now inclining more towards becoming competent in Bangla by almost forgetting their own language. By forgetting their own language they are putting their identity at risk as language, culture and identity are intertwined with each other. The deterioration of one aspect will ultimately result in the deterioration of the others. The Kurux language is also on the verge of becoming extinct as the new generation was found to be more interested in learning Bangla or English for attaining better jobs or assimilate with the Bengali population than holding on to their identity as an indigenous group. This is an important issue to be addressed because if the identity of a whole community is threatened, that community is often left in a state of confusion as they cannot assimilate completely and their rights are denied as these people get labelled as the minority of a state. This paper, therefore, explores how the different generations perceive their identity and how this perception is linked with their language being endangered. The data for this paper was collected from members of different ages from the community. Analysing the data, it was found out that the older generation is aware of the declining condition of their language and how their identity is threatened alongside. They strongly feel that the upcoming generation should learn both the languages simultaneously instead of completely forgetting their own language. However, the younger generation seems to not know Kurux at all and they are more concerned about attaining a good position in society than just being bothered about their

identity. This is the sad reality of the community currently. If this pattern continues, it is plausible that the Kurux language will be lost in the near future.

Keywords: *Indigenous languages; identity; Kurux; Uraon*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Research Context

In 1999 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Social Organisation (UNESCO) declared that February 21 will be observed as International Mother Language Day to raise awareness of linguistic and cultural tradition as language is one of the key instruments for recognising and preserving one's ancestral legacy and identity, therefore promoting linguistic diversity and multilingual education (Mohsin, 2003). The impetus behind this was acknowledging the sacrifice of the Bengali people that started with the Language Movement of 1952. After the birth of the state of Pakistan in 1947, which was divided from India on the basis of religion, the Urdu speaking West Pakistanis tried to impose their language on the East Pakistanis, majority of who spoke Bengali. This ignited the Bengali nationalism notion on the basis of their language and culture. The East Pakistanis realised that language was not only for communication but it was a way of life. Therefore, they demanded Bengali to be one of the national languages of Pakistan which was the beginning of the Bengali's quest for independence (Mohsin, 2003).

After independence, Bangladesh was named after the language that the majority spoke and the citizens of this country had to take up the identity of Bengali, as mentioned in Article 6 part 1 of the constitution formulated in 1972. This policy was highly hegemonic and chauvinistic (Mohsin, 2010). They faltered to take into consideration the linguistic rights of the indigenous people who have been living on this land even before the people we now call "Bangali" and has their own mother tongue. Even though the Constitution mentions under Article 28 not to discriminate based on anyone's race, religion or birthplace, no Bangladeshi

law or the Constitution mentions anything about the rights of indigenous people (Rahman, 2010).

1.2. Background of the Study

In reality Bangladesh is home to nearly 50 different communities that speak around 37 indigenous languages, some of which are Chakma, Garo, Khasia, Magh, Manipuri, Munda, Oraon, Santali, Kachhari, Kuki, Tripura, Malpahad, Mikir, Sadri, Hajong. Amongst these languages some have been spoken for a thousand years (Sarkar, 2022). Out of all these languages, the government has only formulated books in 5 indigenous languages following the national school syllabus, namely Chakma, Marma, Garo, Sadri and Tripura, some of the major indigenous groups residing in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Northern Bangladesh (NCTB, 2022).

Even though a handsome amount of money was spent on printing these books and were distributed amongst the children on the January 1, 2022 in occasion of the book distribution for free that the government holds every year countrywide, the books were not efficient in providing education to these indigenous students, one of the reasons being the lack of teachers in those languages or from the respective community. As a result, the schools had no other option but to turn to books written in Bengali that are used by the mainstream and teach the contents in Bangla to the indigenous children (Sarkar, 2022). As the children completely submerge into learning Bangla at school, they slowly understand that it is imperative to be competent in Bangla to get a proper job in Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2019).

1.3. Importance of the Study

A number of languages used by the indigenous people are on the verge of completely losing its vitality. The condition of some languages has gone so far to an extent that it is no

longer possible to document these languages for preservation. Many indigenous groups agree with the fact that loss of language results in the loss of culture and eventually has a toll on the self-identity of individuals of the respective community (Ball, 2013). Language, cultural identity and society are intertwined with each other, which means that the deterioration of one of the aspects will result in the degradation of the other aspects too. The cultures that face such consequences find themselves in a state of confusion and difficult to fit in either of the cultures (Jensen et al, 2011). When this is the case with the dominant indigenous groups in Bangladesh like Chakma, Santal etc., the smaller communities are therefore left in a much vulnerable position regarding their identity and well-being. It is necessary to address the conditions that these smaller indigenous communities are living in and how they are identifying themselves with some of the community's languages on the brink of extinction. This paper, therefore, examines the language of the Uraons, Kurux, and how the community speaking this language deal with the notion of identity and balances it with their aspirations of attaining a source of earning.

1.4. Kurux: The Language and Its People

There are four main language families that the indigenous languages in Bangladesh can be grouped into, namely Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan (Rahman, 2011). Kurux is a language in the Dravidian language family and its sister language is Sauria-Paharia. This is the language of the Oraon indigenous group. Communities speaking this language can be found in many parts of India and Nepal and in smaller areas in Bangladesh and Bhutan. In a 2011 census, Kurux only had 2,084,390 language users together in the aforementioned countries. This language does not have its own written form.

Worldwide the status of this language is such that only the adults and only a few young people can use this language. Therefore, according to Ethnologue 2022, this language

is a threatened language except in Nepal. In Nepal, this language is still widely used in both formal and informal settings such as within friends and family and sometimes at work or for education. However, this rate of usage is gradually decreasing due to urbanisation (Eberhard et al. 2022).

In Bangladesh, the Uraon or Oraon indigenous group residing in Dinajpur, Panchagarn, Rangpur, Saidpur and Thakurgaon districts in the Rangpur division are the users of this language. It is believed that people of this community migrated from India to the Northern parts of Bangladesh about more than a hundred years ago and replaced the Kurux language with Sadri, a language under the Indo-European language family. As a result, the number of Kurux speaking people decreased. In 2011, in a survey it was found out that only approximately 50,000 people spoke this language and the number is gradually going downhill (Eberhard et al., 2022). That is why this language is an endangered language now as most of the speakers of this language are adults and a very few number of young people.

The people of this community are mainly farmers by profession. When the season for planting or reaping crops comes, people from this community are called by the landowners for the job. They prefer this job as the workers on the fields are paid on a daily basis which they find more profitable. They are Christians in majority while a small number of the speakers of this language are followers of Hindu religion (Eberhard et al., 2022). The vitality of this language, or the state of the language being alive or threatened, is not as strong as the other indigenous languages of Bangladesh and very slowly the functionality, the use of this language in formal settings is decreasing.

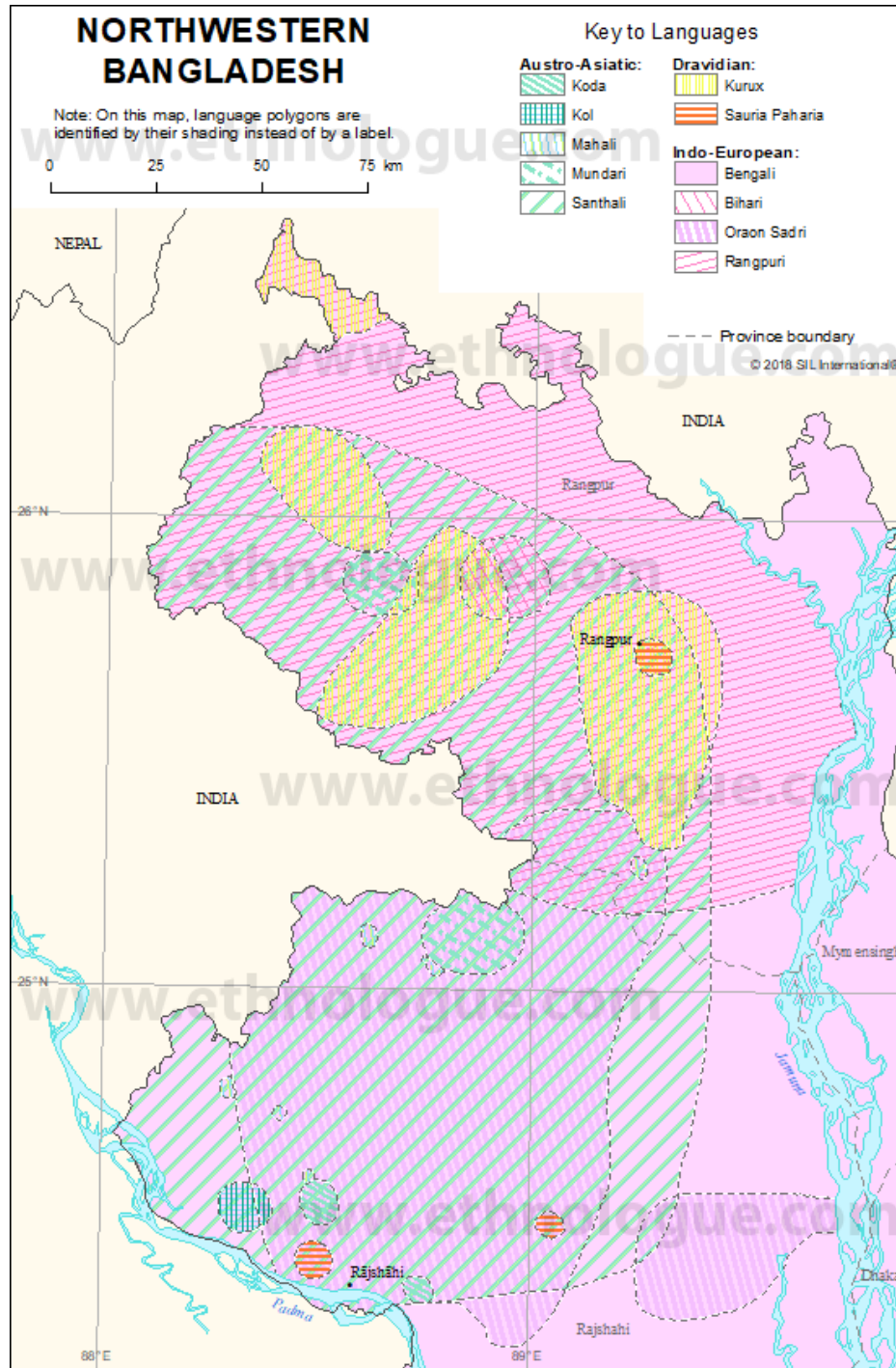


Fig: Map of parts of Bangladesh where Kurux-speaking community exist.

Source: Ethnologue (Eberhard et al., 2022)

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1. Language and identity

Claire Kramersch has defined the concept of identity as “the way in which the subject presents and represents itself discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally through the use of symbolic systems (Kramersch, 2009). Language is one of the many symbolic resources that facilitate the cultural production of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall in the book “A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology” discusses thoroughly on the issue of the correlation between language and identity. They discuss that when individuals are put into groups, it is not based on pre-existing superficial similarities but power and agency. When certain individuals are grouped there rises a “sense of alterity” or the presence of an Other that can be juxtaposed to one another. The authors mention that ethnic identity emerges as a way of establishing distinctions between the groups of the mainstream. Consequently, where there is difference, hierarchy becomes an inseparable characteristic. The group with greater power will try to dominate the other subordinate groups by imposing policies that are only beneficial to them. That is when they are not recognised as an identity but rather as the norm against which other groups are analysed or judged (Barth, 1986). The media often paints and showcases a false picture of multicultural harmony when in reality many ethnic identities, where the differences lie in physical, cultural and linguistic specifications, are being erased under the notion of nationalism (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

Markedness is a process through which some social characteristics that are highly recognisable in contrast to other identities, gain a dignified status and become unmarked or the norm. Unmarked characteristics vary according to the context, for example the most common unmarked characteristics worldwide is the characteristics of the colonisers;

whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality and Christianity (Urciuoli, 1996). Unmarking of a powerful identity happens when it caters to the wide network of supralocal ideologies. As a result, these unmarked identities gain power over the other groups and take the top position in the hierarchy. Consequently, the language of the unmarked identity also becomes unmarked. Zambia is a country that has speakers of 73 languages and all these languages are arranged hierarchically with English securing its position at the top. “When one category is elevated as an unmasked norm, its power is more pervasive because it is masked” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). On the other hand, the marked languages are then considered as a deviation from the norm or indeed as failures to measure up to the standard. Languages or marked identities are believed to be socially deficient in some ways which is way they do not conform to ideological expectations and, therefore, this highly hegemonic ideology causes the marked identity to be marginalised even within their own culture (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

Marmion et al.’s study on the Aboriginals residing in Australia reveal that these people of the minority group think that their own language is an important part of their identity. They also believed that using their language increased their state of well-being. Three reasons came up through the survey.

- i) Using one’s own language enhances the sense of belonging to their respective tradition, culture, ancestor, community or land. Otherwise, there is risk of alienation when one is not closely involved in the aforementioned aspects.
- ii) Using own language brings in a sense of empowerment through the development of self-esteem, and pride.
- iii) Communication within the community and between members of different generation keeps the bond between the community strong.

2.2. Previous Studies on the Relationship between Language and Identity

There has been a number of works done on the concept of identity, culture and language. West defines identity in terms with power relations. He mentions that it is the desire for recognition, safety, affiliation and material acquisition that shapes our identity in this world and language plays an important role in determining the social groups who can access the aforementioned desires. The language used by the more powerful group will always prevail and imposed on the others. Moreover, language allows them to articulate the specific material resources according to their wants and needs which is why the powerful group of people continue to survive as they have access to privileges (West, 1992). On the other hand, Bourdieu emphasises on the relation between identity and symbolic power. He mentions that speech will not hold the same importance unless it is spoken by the right person. For this to happen a large network of social relationships is required. For example an idea put forth by an employee will not be given the same importance as put forth by a higher officer in the same firm. Therefore, the identity of the speaker matters for his or her speech to be taken into account (Bourdieu, 1977). Weedon postulated the concept of “subjectivity” that she defines as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987) and the medium through which these thoughts are articulated is language. Language also works as “the place where the actual forms of social organisations and its consequences are both defined and contested” (Kim, 2003). Vygotsky mentions that educational settings are not natural settings but the zone of proximal development. His framework is built on the meaningful interaction, both culturally and linguistically, within the zone of proximal development which will help a child to develop better cognitive structure, backed up by continuous revision and feedback (Vygotsky, 1978). Studies by other scholars have found that culture has an important role in the knowledge acquisition and information processing in a child. Trueba mentions that effective learning can only take place only when the culture of

a child that he or she grows up in is recognised (Trueba, 1988). A study on the undergraduate students in Miao, China showed that students were more motivated to succeed academically because of their strong cultural identity as they believed the academic success they achieve will increase the pride of their own ethnic group (Trueba & Zou, 1994). This same analysis came up in Cummins' study on minority groups in the United States. Incorporation of the students' own language into the school programs result in higher academic success amongst the minor social groups and also reinforces their cultural identity (Cummins, 1986).

2.3. The Constitution of Bangladesh and National Language Policy

Language is considered as a key component of Bengali nationalism as the name "Bangladesh" literally means the country of Bengali-speaking people. The state has used language as its crucial identity indicator. The government of Bangladesh identifies with the language they speak and thus constitute of members who identify themselves as "Bangali". However, they have imposed the nationalist notions of identification, development and education onto the non-Bengalis who have been living on this land for centuries.

After the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan the Constitution, that was formulated was written in Bangla, mentioned in Article 6 part 1 that all citizens will identify as Bangali. The government felt the need of developing a policy of "one language, one culture and one nation" which led to the enacting of the law titled "Bangla procholon ain" in 1987 that legitimised the use of Bangla in all spheres of life for its citizens with English as the lingua franca for communicating with foreigners. The only non-Bengali member of the parliament and representative of the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Manobendra Narayan Larma, himself being a member of the Chakma community, refused to sign the Constitution and pointed out that it was wrong of the government to impose the identity of Bangali onto the indigenous people living in Bangladesh. He gave a logical explanation of how everyone

can be identified under the name “Bangladeshi” since everyone lived on the land called Bangladesh but not Bangali because there were many others who did not speak Bangla as their mother tongue (Arna & Sultana, 2022). In 1972, Manobendra Larma with the help of Parbatya Chattagram Jonoshonghoti Samity (PCJSS) initiated a military insurgency in hopes of attaining political, economic and cultural rights of their own identity. This heightened the hostility between the Bengali and non-Bengalis and during this time the Chittagong Hill Tracts came under military control. It was during this period that a number of human rights were violated, that includes rapes of women, and this lasted for around two decades (Mohsin, 2003).

The position of the non-Bengalis were pushed further to the margins when the state paid no heed to the restoration of the indigenous languages but instead established a Bangla Academy to encourage development and protection of the Bengali language and culture. Raja Devasish, Chakma Chief, pointed out that Bangla, the state language of the country does not need protection, it is the indigenous languages that are on the verge of extinction. He refuted by saying that the Constitution mentions Islam as the state religion, however, other religions are free to practice their own religions. The case is not the same when it comes to other languages spoken in Bangladesh (Mohsin, 2003).

2.4. Language-in-education

Language-in-education or “acquisition policy” is a mechanism of manipulating and imposing ideologies through practice. This is done through formal education and the language policies facilitate this process (Shohamy, 2006). Therefore, this process is concerned with language teaching- methodologies, materials, teacher training, and evaluation (Rahman, 2010). These policies in Bangladesh have prioritised English for possibilities in economic development and Bangla as the symbol of nationalism (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007).

The 1974 Commission Report established that Bengali is the mother tongue and thus important for cognitive development like natural intelligence, thinking and imagination in students. As a result, Bangla made its way as the sole medium of instruction in education in the later years(Hossain &Tollefson, 2007).This is how Bangladesh adopted a policy that permeated them to attest Bangla as the official language of Bangladesh and the sole language to represent the nation (Rahman, 2010). The National Education Policy that was formulated in 2000 did not take into consideration mother tongue based education for the indigenous communities.

In recent years, the government has taken some initiatives to facilitate education for the minorities in their respective mother tongues. For the first time in national policy making, the government pledged for mother tongue based education for the indigenous people in the National Education Policy 2009. While this was a commendable step there were a number of challenges that had to be faced.

2.4.1. Controversy regarding indigenous demography

The state has not been able to provide with the correct number of indigenous communities and their population. The censuses from 1991 and 2001 lacked sufficient data as it either mentioned some indigenous groups twice or some did not even make it way in the list. While the 1991 report mentions that there is only 1.2 million indigenous people while World Bank (2008) says that there are 2 million indigenous people in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum, an organisation that works for the rights of the indigenous people in Bangladesh, found out that the indigenous population residing in Bangladesh is approximately 3 million (Durnninan, 2007). Rahman mentions in her article,

“Unless a consensus has been reached about the exact number of indigenous groups and their group members, the problem of deciding on the selection and

standardisation of indigenous languages to be used as the media of instruction for the indigenous children will still prevail” (Rahman, 2010).

2.4.2. Standardisation of Indigenous Languages

Most of the indigenous languages that can be found in Bangladesh do not have their own orthographies. They use their language only within their community and prefer speaking in Bengali in situations outside of the house. This gives rise to two problems, firstly, there is no accurate source that provides with a reliable report of the accurate number of speakers of the different indigenous languages, and secondly, the debate is on-going on which script to use for these indigenous languages as most indigenous languages are written in Bengali, Devanagari or Latin (Lewis, 2009). Even some indigenous groups put emphasis on learning English or Bengali for acquiring jobs at national or international levels (Rahman, 2010). For example, the Oraons who speak Sadri prefer writing their language in Bangla because of two reasons. Firstly, as they have lived within Bengali communities it is easy for them to acquire Bangla alphabets as they are more familiar to the Bengali vernacular. Secondly, they believe that writing their language in Bangla will help the Oraon children to get hold of Bangla more efficiently and become competent in it which will help them land on better jobs which they think will not be possible if their script is written in English or if a new orthography is invented (Malone, 2007). This makes it difficult to standardise a vernacular for indigenous languages.

2.4.3. Stratified Education System

The education system of Bangladesh is largely separated into Bangla medium that follows Bangla as medium of instruction, English medium that follows English as the medium of instruction and Madrassah that follows religious instruction for Muslims (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). When such a stratified education system already exists it becomes

difficult to implement policy strategy for the indigenous community. A new administrative body known as the Hill District Councils (HDC) was established after the Peace Accord was signed between the government and the militant indigenous groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1997. One of the responsibilities of HDC is appointing local community teachers for the primary education in the indigenous mother tongue as mentioned in Section 33b of the Accord. Though this responsibility is under “special function” their resource is very limited because of lack of educational budget at the local level (Durnnian, 2007). Due to the scarcity in budget the system even failed to develop materials like textbooks or curricula. Moreover, the policy mentions the involvement of community members but it has not been clearly mentioned as to how they are to be involved in the process (Rahman, 2010).

Lastly, it is the economic considerations that make it difficult for the under-developed or developing countries like Bangladesh to implement and sustain the policies in mother tongue based education for the indigenous languages (Harbert, 2009).

2.5. Impact of language loss on identity

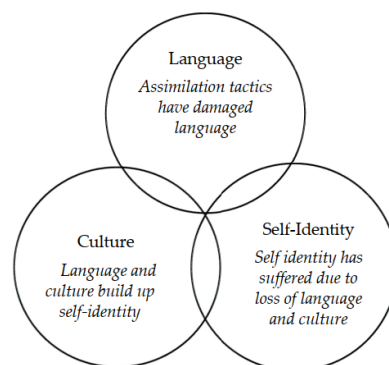


Fig: Interconnection of language, culture, and self-identity (Khawaja, 2021)

Khawaja in his article talks about the loss of identity as a consequence of language loss in the indigenous groups in Canada. Colonialism is an important factor for the indigenous people to be stripped off of their identity. It is an on-going system of oppression

because of which the indigenous groups are forced to let go of their lands and are imposed on with government-sponsored programs of assimilation (Khawaja, 2021). Gradual Civilisation Act that was put forth in 1857 in Canada forced the indigenous men to be assimilated into the Canadian society. Later in 1876, indigenous children were forced out of their homeaway from their parents for residential schools that were located far away from their abode. These children were even separated from their own siblings at school. Such extreme steps of assimilation were undertaken against the children because they are easier to mould into the Canadian society than the adults. One method of assimilating children into the European customs of colonisers was the complete prohibition of the use of indigenous language at school. Corporal punishment was also inflicted upon the children when anyone was found using their native language. This played a major role in the loss of indigenous languages in Canada. Furthermore, in the process of assimilation the state the schools have portrayed the indigenous children as outcasts and therefore stripped them off their right to practise their language or culture. The hegemonic fact that indigenous history is of no importance at all has stopped the elder generation to transfer knowledge from them to the newer ones(Khawaja, 2021).

Language is one of the fundamental rights and a characteristic of an individual's cultural identity. "Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes the right to the highest attainable standard of mental health" (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Research has shown that Indigenous communities that could not converse in their own language resulted in anincreased number of suicide rates (Hallett et al., 2007). In Canada, due to the suppression of the usage of indigenous language the younger members of the community have been left feeling alienated. "Even in cases they (some indigenous grandparents in Canada) can speak the colonial languages, the inability to communicate in their ancestral languages with their grandchildren leads to the dilution of

stories meant to be conveyed through intergenerational oral traditions” (Khawaja, 2021). The severe disconnection between the generations due to the lack of mode of communication can lead to a sense of seclusion. They develop the feeling that their culture or practices are not valued the same way as the coloniser’s culture is valued and thus can decrease their motivation to connect with their ancestry and history. Gradually the future generations would not be interested in connecting with their heritage anymore thus further weakening their cultural identity.

Another important factor that affects the well-being of the indigenous people is racism. Victims of racism go through a number of mental and physical issues. Indigenous communities experience racism at many levels; from the government, justice system, healthcare system etc. “This systematic racism has resulted in widespread racial profiling of indigenous individuals” (Khawaja, 2021). To escape this systematic racism, the younger generations are further demotivated to practice their own language and rather pick up the practices of the mainstream in hopes to fit in or be accepted by them to experience less racism.

In Bangladesh, as the state language was standardised to be Bangla, all the policies were also written in Bangla. This became difficult for the indigenous community to understand policies written in Bangla. For example, in Chittagong, forests are an important resource for the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Garo communities to earn money from. They mostly earned their livelihood through the cultivation on “jhum”. However, the state has appropriated the forests for Reserve Forests (RF). The procedure for appropriating a forest for the RF even the government has to go through a number of processes. Firstly, under Section 4 of the Forest Act established in 1927, a public notification is announced. Following that, under Section 20, the lands are brought under the government for RF and many more procedures entail. However, none of these procedures are followed, for example, the

announcements are not given properly or the person whose land is being occupied barely knows anything about the policies. Language barrier plays a very important role here as most of the times it so happens that the land owners are not made aware of the terms and conditions because they use a different language. Apart from the Reserve Forests, the government has also undertaken a program of Bengali settlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on the lands that originally belong to the indigenous community. The atrocities do not end here as the government has put a ban on the cultivation of “jhum”. Consequently, some of the indigenous farmers had to shift to ploughing while the others had to completely give up their land. While the government stripped them off of their own properties, they also forced them to let go of their culture which is jhum cultivation. When these indigenous people are duped into losing everything to the government they cannot seek legal help also because these procedures are also written in Bangla which becomes difficult for them to understand. “Their (the indigenous people) inability to understand the Bengali language, combined with the government’s refusal to grasp the significance of their connection to the forests, have had extremely damaging effect” (Mohsin, 2003). Because they are unable to communicate in Bangla they are often tricked into paying high interests every year, with their land as collateral. They do not seek legal help either because of the language barrier. The Garos who were a matrilineal society are moving towards a patrilineal society because of the becoming landless day by day and seeing private properties being built on their lands. The women of this indigenous group have lost their status, and often they are now subject to sexual violence (Mohsin, 2003).

Reyhner in his article mentions that indigenous languages work like a channel to show their cultural value to the world. Those students to whom their language is passed down tend to not assimilate into the positive side of the mainstream culture. They are often left in a confused spot where they are neither a part of the mainstream culture nor a possessor of their own

culture and are thus left alienated. The most extreme consequence of such a condition is that they become more prone to join gangs to attain a sense of belonging through the common grounds of cultural identity but instead get involved in illegal and harmful practices like criminal activities and drugs or alcohol. This is how they enter into the negative aspect of the mainstream culture and attain those when they completely lose their sense of self (Reynher, 1999).

This shows how language issue has such a vast impact on the lives of these indigenous communities and how they are slowly losing their traditions and culture that have been continuing for hundreds of years and are integral parts of their identity.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative approach to analyse and understand the perspective of the two generations towards their own language.

3.1. Research Questions

Through the analysis the researcher has tried to answer two research questions:

- 1) What is the current situation of Kurux language amongst its community?
- 2) How do the users of this language perceive their identity as an indigenous group?
- 3) Are they more inclined towards protecting their identity or prefer to blend with the mainstream Bengali speaking community?

3.2. Research Framework

For this paper Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of practice and *habitus* has been used. Bourdieu believes that linguistic practice or the use of language is a kind of a social activity rather than just a set of symbols with abstract system of rules. By repeating this practice a social being's way of life in the world is established, which Bourdieu calls *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). The context to develop a habitus is however not the same for everyone as other social factors play a role in that given context such as socio-economic condition, age, class etc. Moreover, it also depends on the user how they want to engage the practice in their everyday lives. The sedimentation of habitual action brings about the identity of an individual or group (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Therefore, by analysing the function of the Kurux language as opposed to the Bangla language used by the indigenous group this paper aims find how this habit affects the identity of the Kurux speaking community.

3.3. Participants

The participants for this research paper are members from the Kurux speaking community residing in Rangpur. As the family, most importantly the mothers, play an important role in the cognitive development in children during their early years and are the decision-makers to determine which path their children will follow academically, in this case the linguistic practice. Therefore data was collected from two mothers, Monisha Ekka and Smriti Lakda , aged 26 and 28 respectively. Monisha and her husband work as farmers in the fields of Muslim landlords when season comes. Other than that she identifies as a housewife who looks after her 2 children. She has completed her studies till class five but could not carry on further after her marriage. Smriti is strictly a housewife who rarely works in fields. She does not have any academic record as her family could not afford sending her to school. They both were married off at a very early age but within the same community. The other participants of the next generation were their school-going daughters Ritu Ekka, aged 10 and Mira Tirki, aged 12 respectively, both studying in the fourth grade. Data was collected from these two families to understand how the two generations perceived their identities as an indigenous group when their own language is on the verge of extinction. Some data were also collected from two community members, Robi Tirki (28) and Moni Ekka (58). They are two concerned persons who are working as activists to restore the vitality of Kurux again. Robi Tirki has been working with SIL for the past five years where he has to collect data regarding this language for the proper documentation of it since this language has no written work done as of yet. Moni Ekka works with the Church to enlighten everyone in the community to not give up Kurux and to keep it alive.

3.4. Research Tools

As this research was done by collecting data from three groups of people, three sets of questionnaires were prepared to be asked to the participants (see Appendix A, B and C). During the interview, these questions were modified according to the answers given by the participant's answer as it was a semi-structured interview.

To collect the data, a mobile phone was used and a recorder was used to record the conversation. The mobile phone was kept on speaker mode so that the recorder could easily capture the whole conversation. The conversations were converted verbatim to English and incorporated in the findings section that was done on the computer.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

As the participants live in the village areas of Rangpur, it was difficult to communicate using social media platforms. As a result, participants were interviewed over the phone and those were recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and three different sets of questions were prepared for the three groups of participants. These interviews have been used as the primary source. The participants were most comfortable answering the questions in Bangla, despite being members of a different language speaking community; therefore the answers were collected in Bangla and later translated to English.

3.6. Data Analysis Procedure

After the participants were interviewed, some common themes were extracted from those. These themes followed the research framework that found out the factors that lead to the habit formation of speaking a specific language, eventually shaping the identity of an individual through the practicing of a language. In this case, it was seen that as Bangla had a wider range of use, thus greater functionality in the daily lives of this community, the community, especially the young generation are influenced to become competent in Bangla.

Once the themes were determined, the researcher went back to the interviews to analyse the findings and find suitable quotes to validate the analysed. Therefore, all of these were later compiled into a thematic qualitative analysis that answers the aforementioned research questions.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

It was assured that none of the participants were mentally or physically hurt during the interview process and it was also assured that the participant's sentiment was not threatened during the process. The participants willingly volunteered to participate in this research. To protect the identities of the participants pseudonyms have been used for all the interviewees.

Chapter 4

Findings

Through the analysis of the data from all the six participants, some recurring themes came up. These themes are the possible reasons behind the current condition of the Kurux language within its community in Bangladesh. These findings also bring about the relationship between language and their identity and how they are inter-related to each other. These themes have been accumulated and arranged in the findings section. Firstly, the point that was repeated by, mainly, the adults was the role of schools in the deterioration of the status of their identity. The second theme is pertaining to the first theme that is the inadequacy of teachers from the community in schools which is a reason why Kurux is not being practiced by the younger generation. Thirdly, the faulty programmes undertaken by the NGOs and other organisations are behind the unsustainability of those programmes. Even if these programmes intend a good outcome, often lack of proper follow-up results in these to be not very successful. However, the biggest role behind the subtractive bilingualism amongst the young generation of the Kurux-speaking community comes from the family, which is the fourth theme. Apart from the family dynamics the socio-economic status of the community also plays an important part in the prestige of the language in question. Lastly, the perception of identity of each participant was collected and analysed.

4.1. Subjugation of Identity at schools

Ritu started attending school in grade 1 at the age of five while Mira started when she was seven years old. They both go to Lohani Para Primary School that strictly follows the National Curriculum and syllabus as followed by other schools all over the country. They study all the basic subjects as per other primary schools in Bangladesh, such as, English, Bengali, Mathematics and Religion. The government provides them with the required books

for each subject published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board every year on the first day of each year for free. The only exception that is seen here is that the religion books are provided to the students according to their respective religions. While some members of the indigenous community follow the Christian religion, the others are followers of the Hindu religion. No books were published from the government in Kurux language whatsoever.

In the classroom, it was observed that the ratio of the Bengali Muslims to the indigenous children was equal. The class was completely conducted in Bangla and the indigenous students were so used to using Bangla that they had no problem in comprehending the lectures and communicating with the teacher in Bangla. The use of Kurux is completely non-existent in the school setting; however, some indigenous children were seen using their own language during playing with their friends outside of the classroom in a very low tone so that others could not hear them at all. Ritu says, *“We sometimes use our language to pass on a secret message while playing games so that the opponent doesn’t understand our strategy and sometimes we use it to taunt the opponent. Other than that we do not use it as much.”* Moreover, the indigenous children had more interest in learning the Bengali language and were seen participating more in class than the Muslim students.

Ritu’s mother, Monisha gives us a possible explanation for the younger generation to forget their language. She says, *“I have tried to make Ritu competent in Kurux but because the children are attending schools at such early ages in this generation that they are becoming more used to listening and using Bangla.”* As the children spend a handful amount of time within the school premises everyday, except for weekends, they are more used to listening to Bangla for the majority of the day.

Robi Tirki recollected his school days and shared how he had faced racism for using his own language occasionally at school. He also shared an incident that had happened to him

when he was a student. He said, *“Our food habit is a little bit different from that of the Muslims. When I took any food item that was common in my culture at school for tiffin, the other Muslim students would make fun of me and would influence the other students to not talk to me because I was different. They would call me names that were very insulting. As they were in majority I always felt alone and I no longer wanted to express my real identity as a member of an indigenous group.”* A similar incident happened to his paternal cousin who he decided to completely change his identity before registering for a university by taking up a new name that is ordinary to the mainstream, albeit his official documents were under his real name and identity.

4.2. Lack of community teachers

The teachers in the primary schools in remote village areas are appointed by the government. These schools only have teachers of the Bengali speaking Muslim community who come daily from the neighbouring villages where Muslims reside in majority. Therefore, the students only get to interact with their teachers during the school hours, which is from 9am to 4pm. The condition of these schools is not very convenient either. The infrastructure of these schools is very poor as there is no proper maintenance. Moreover, there is a lack of teachers. The school that Ritu and Mirago go to is run by only 3 Bengali speaking Muslim teachers.

All of the participants in this research have agreed on the fact that this community requires more teachers from the community itself. However, this is a sad reality that in that whole village there now only exists three Kurux speaking teachers who are also about to retire due to various reasons. Moni Ekka’s husband, who is also a member of the community, was also a school teacher but retired due to health issues. Moni Ekka says, *“We had many Kurux speaking teachers during our time but gradually the numbers started to decrease. I*

studied in a Christian missionary school where the sisters used to communicate with us in Kurux which is why the language is so ingrained in my head and even today I am comfortable speaking in Kurux.” Robi Tirki points out that the situation is such that only one person in a thousand pursues higher studies and most of the people from the community are uninterested in doing anything other than agricultural work in the fields. Women are married off early as they believe in the superstition that if a woman is not married off early then they might have problems bearing a child and thus become mothers at a very early age which decreases their motivation and locomotion to do anything other than working at homes or in nearby fields. The men remain indifferent to the thought of taking up a profession that requires an educational background as they like to live a leisured life by working in the fields during the day and enjoying their nights by drinking home-brewed alcohol. Moreover, the “Adivashi” quota for job applications was removed and therefore the number of candidates running for the position of a teacher decreased immensely. As a result, the overall status of the community remains poor and no teacher from the community emerges.

Some non-government organisations, such as RDRS, has employed relatively younger members from the community in these primary schools as teaching assistants whose primary job is to help the students of the Kurux speaking community but they also do other jobs at the school such as conducting the daily assemblies. However, their job is to not encourage the Kurux speaking students to speak their own language but to help them become competent in Bengali.

4.3. Inefficiency of external organisations

Both Ritu and Mira attended Sunday Mission School before getting admitted to the primary school. Classes at this school were held only on Sundays that were run by the Church and occasionally foreigners from NGOs would come to teach the students of the Kurux speaking

children. The children got elementary education such as the English and Bangla alphabets, numbers and children's rhymes. Sometimes they would distribute stories and poems in Kurux language. However, as these books were published by the Church with the help of the foreigners, and as Kurux does not have its own orthography, these books were written in English font. This caused a problem for the children as they did not know how to read advanced English. Ritu said, *"Maybe if the books were written in Bangla we could have taken help from our parents and listened to the poems and stories but as my parents or anyone in the family do not know English so I had to give away the books."*

RobiTirki also mentioned that many organisations do come forward to work for the language that the community speaks but as the participants do not get any lucrative incentive they remain uninterested in helping with the documentation of the language. As Robi has worked with SIL as an assistant to collect data from the people he got a small amount of money as remuneration. However, the people from whom the data was being collected did not agree to participate because they were not receiving any benefit from it. As a result, it was difficult to restore any unknown information regarding the language.

4.4. Family dynamic as the influencers and decision maker

The family plays a role in the cognitive development of a child, and in this case language development in the child. Both the mothers, Monisha and Smriti , mentioned that during their time Kurux was the only language used as the medium of communication within their community. Monisha mentioned that she got some Kurux speaking teachers who would usually conduct the classes in Kurux except during Bangla classes. Smriti does not have any academic background and they both emphasised on the point that they learnt Bangla just by hearing from the Muslim neighbours. That is why the mothers still have problems in understanding standard Bangla unlike their children who are fluent in Bangla. Lakda said,

“During our time we did not require much to speak in Bengali so we did not find it necessary to become competent in Bangla but my daughter’s generation requires becoming competent in Bangla because they spend the majority of their day at school, interacting with her classmates who are also from the Bengali speaking Muslim community and the teachers. She also brings up the point that the parents do believe that learning Bangla will give them a chance to get a better job and prosper in life.” Smriti says, “While I do want my daughter to keep her identity as a Kurux-speaking member, I also do not want her to have a fate like me. I want her to work and earn money and there is other way to do that other than doing good results at school.” This shows the dynamic of the functionality of the two languages in this area.

At home, the common scenario now is that the children can comprehend Kurux but cannot answer in that language. They are more at ease to speak in Bangla. Mirasays, *“My mother usually instructs me in our language which I understand but I feel more comfortable replying back in Bangla.”* Monisha says she when her daughter was born she taught Kurux as her first language. Until the age of four Ritu could use Kurux fluently but as she started going to school her lexicon in Kurux started to deteriorate.

However, there is a mixed reaction amongst the parent generation of this age on the aspect of their identity as an indigenous group. All of the participants, except for the children seemed concerned regarding the issue of their identity becoming extinct with their language. Monisha said, *“I want my children to embrace their identity as a member of the indigenous community while pursuing higher studies. In my opinion, she should learn and practise both the langauges.”* RobiTirki also mentioned that he would surely teach his own language to his future generation and at this point transmission from the existing family members who know the language is the only way to keep the language alive. However, according to Monisha

many mothers are now encouraging their children to be completely immersed into the Bengali culture in aims to secure better professions outside of the community.

4.5. Socio-economic condition's influence on language prestige

The Kurux speaking community are mostly day labourers who work as farmers. As per the words of Robi Tirki very few people pursue higher studies and secure jobs in higher sectors.

“We do not have the will to take an initiative to save money or invest our time into something like education. Whenever any foreign organisation or any NGO comes forward to help us in any kind of way, be it materialistically or educationally it is our tendency to either leave it behind or sell it off in return for some money, enough to buy alcohol or other addictive substances. It is almost as if we want to stay poor which makes development within our community difficult.” He also says that it may be because of the lack of education that the community behaves in such a way. However, the new generation has a motivation to break this cycle and pursue other professions. For example, Ritu wants to become a part of the missionary that will allow her to interact with foreigners who frequent the Church. She also feels that being involved in Church activities will allow her to learn better English which will eventually facilitate her scopes out of the country. Miraon the other hand wants to become a doctor when she grows up. However, they think that learning Bangla and English is more important to pursue in these professions rather than emphasising on protecting their identity.

This same notion was reiterated by Robi Tirki when he said that the new generation is ready to give up their identity and blend with the mainstream. One of the reasons for such mentality is the socio-economic state of the community. He says, *“People already see us in a different eye because we are “Adivashi”. Moreover, because we are somewhat put in the level of the lower income category, our status is made even more vulnerable. That is why we prefer hiding our identity to everyone.”*

4.6. The Notion of Identity and the Attitude towards Kurux in Bangladesh

A common question to all the participants was, “*Would you teach your language to your future generation? Why?*” To this, all the adult participants answered with a strong yes and stressed on the point that what would their identity be if their own language is not making its way to the next generation. Smriti said, “*If our future generation does not speak our language then there will not be any logic in calling us “adivashi” anymore. We would just assimilate into the Bengali population.*” Robi Tirki said, “*We have already lost our lands which were once only ours. We do not want our history and ancestry to be completely demolished. Our language is probably the only aspect we are left with to claim that it ours.*” Moni Ekka said, “*Of course we want our children to attain higher positions in the socio-economic context but not at the cost of completely losing ourselves.*”

When asked about what would be the best scenario of protecting both their identity and future possibilities, Monisha answered, “*My opinion is that, we should learn both the languages, Kurux and Bangla, with equal importance.*” She also said that we cannot only blame the school as the reason behind losing our language, but the families also play a vital role. Transmission of the language from one generation to another is the way to keep this indigenous language alive. Many families themselves are influencing their children to not learn Kurux; as a result, awareness within the household regarding this issue has become imperative at this stage.

Slowly, the community is understanding that diversity matters and their language is of importance too, even for job prospects. A recent incident has opened everyone’s eyes. Three young bachelors from the community were called for an interview in Dhaka. They had successfully overcome all the stages to attain the job which were held in Bangla. However, during the interview, the interview board asked the three gentlemen to say the Kurux form of

some Bangla words. None of the interviewees could answer and they all failed to attain the position of an employee at the firm.

However, the younger participants, Ritu and Anita, did not answer the question of teaching Kurux to their children with the same vigour as their parents or the elder community members did. Even though they said “yes”, it felt as if they were compelled to say so. Their interest lies more towards learning better Bangla or English and excelling at school.

This shows the difference in mentality within the same family regarding the notion of identity through language within the same community.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Revitalisation of an indigenous language is not only restoring the language but restoring their cultural strength and diversity amidst the dominant individualistic, materialistic and hedonistic culture (Reyhner, 1999). According to renowned sociolinguist Joshua Fishman schools have their limitations in revitalising a language, but most importantly it is the transmission of the language from one generation to another at home that keeps the language alive (Reyhner, 1999). Marmion et al. in their research on aboriginals in Australia, who are also a marginalised group of people, found that the participants themselves agreed that amongst many other ways to keep a language alive, “the key to keep traditional languages strong is ensuring their use and transmission” (Marmion et al., 2014).

Fishman categorised eight stages of language loss in his book *Reversing Language Shift* in 1991. The scale starts from stage 1 that marks the languages that are still vital and functional as an official language and ends with stage 8 which marks the language that is extinct with only a few older people who speak the language (Reyhner, 1999). After analysing the status of Kurux in Bangladesh it can be placed at stage 7 where the community has fluent adult speakers but they might be beyond their childbearing years. This situation was seen amongst the participants for this research where the mothers and community members who are above the age of 25 are fluent speakers of Kurux while the children are not competent in the language.

One recurring point that was mentioned by all the adult participants was the employment of more teachers from the community. It is similar to the result of a survey on the aboriginals in Australia; the participants unanimously strongly agreed that indigenous language should be taught at school (Marmion et al., 2014). “If college educated supervisors

use the language, other workers will also be encouraged to use it” (Reyhner, 1999). It is important that there be more educated members in the community that the children of that society can look up to and discuss worldly matters in their own language. As Kurux has been deduced to be currently in stage 7, Fishman provides with some suggestions regarding revitalising the language. He says that as stage 7 only has a few adults speaking the language, one of the ways can be to build “language nests” where the adults who are fluent in the language will provide childcare in the pre-school level where the children will be completely immersed in an environment that only allows the use of the indigenous language (Fishman, 1991). When there will be more teachers from the community the students will be encouraged to practice the language even out of their homes alongside learning other subjects for the board examinations. Reyhner mentions in his article

“Similarly, for language revival efforts to be successful, children need to feel that it is “their” indigenous language and that speaking the language makes them a member of an important and worthwhile group. As with any “club,” there needs to be interesting and important projects and activities for the children to do.” (Reyhner, 1999)

Reyhner also mentions from Frank Smith’s (1988) book *Joining the Literacy Club* that it is important that students think studying language is an inseparable part of their own identity.

The next most important way to revitalise a dying language is through the transmission of the language from one generation to another. This is where we see that the parents not being on the same page. While some parents are eager to teach their language to their children, other parents prefer teaching the more vital language, which is Bangla in this case, to the children from the earliest age. However, Fishman writes in his book, “The road to societal death is paved by language activity that is not focused on intergenerational continuity” (Fishman, 1991).

In conclusion, it can be deduced that this language can be saved if proper steps can be taken very soon. It is important for the indigenous people to become more aware of their rights and take small initiatives in order to achieve them. Bhuiyan recommends some initiatives such as formulating dictionaries in the respective indigenous language, writing books, translating their own literature to Bangla or English so that it becomes accessible to other cultures which will expose their culture to others, accumulating the intellectuals of the community who can find strategies for revitalising their language, protesting against decisions taken by the government that subjugates the indigenous community further and creating an economic zone where transactions will be done in the respective indigenous language. It is important to make job opportunities in the respective indigenous language available to its members because without the functionality of the language the community members will not come forward in protecting their own language only for the sake of protecting their identity (Bhuiyan, 2019). Of course, a large amount of financial help is required for these steps to accelerate, therefore communities can approach national or international organisations who work for the betterment of indigenous languages and its people's rights.

For the Kurux speaking community, the first step would be to end the dispute on whether to write this language in English or Bangla font. Once that is settled some books can be published privately or put forth a proposition to the government to come forward for publishing books from the board for this community. Next would be to establish better schools and inspire the people of this community to take up the profession of a teacher so that the students can keep up with their practice even at school. Studies have found out that children learn better when the leaning process is conducted in their mother tongue (Liddicoat, 2007). Therefore, mother tongue based education is imperative for improving the status of Kurux, at least in the primary level alongside studying in Bangla. One of the most important

steps, however, is to raise awareness within the households. Mothers should be encouraged to teach their children Kurux and practice using the language whenever and wherever possible to eventually turn it into a habit. There are still a lot to do but with the financial and structural help of some external organisations and encouragement within the community, the language can slowly gain its vitality back and thus let the people of this community keep their own identity.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Questionnaire for community members

- 1) What is your full name?
- 2) What is the name of the village you grew up in?
- 3) How many members did you have in your family when you were growing up? Which language was used at home amongst family members?
- 4) What is your current profession?
- 5) Could you provide some details about your academic background?
- 6) What is your first language?
- 7) Around what age did you start learning a second language? Where did you first encounter this language?
- 8) Which language are you most comfortable speaking in?
- 9) When you were growing up what language was spoken by most of the people around you?
- 10) Did you ever face harassment in public spaces because of the language you speak? If you are comfortable, can you please share some incidents? How did you take it?
- 11) Why do you think are some of the reasons why the condition of Kurux has come to such a point?
- 12) How do you think the mothers learnt the Bengali language in the first place?
- 13) Do you believe that your language is a part of your identity?
- 14) If the situation continues this way what do you think will be the effects of losing your language?
- 15) What suggestions do you have that can be taken to save the language?

Appendix B: Questionnaire for mothers:

- 1) What is your full name?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) Tell us about your educational background.
- 4) What is your profession?
- 5) What language are you most comfortable in using?
- 6) When did you first learn the Bangla language?
- 7) His your husband of the same community? What language does he speak?
- 8) What was the first language of your child?
- 9) When your child was growing up did you expose your child to the culture of the Kurux speakers or Bengali speakers?
- 10) What is the difference in language use at home after your child started to go to school?
- 11) Do you discourage your child to use Kurux?
- 12) What is identity to you? Do you think your identity is related to the language that you speak?
- 13) Are you aware of the declining number of Kurux-speaking members in your community? Why do you think this is happening?
- 14) Do you think that the parents have any role behind the condition of the language today?
- 15) In your opinion, do you think parents will be influenced to teach their children Kurux anymore?
- 16) What do you think are some of the solutions that will improve the situation?

17) Do you want your child to continue speaking Kurux? What will be the ideal situation in your opinion- children should learn only Bangla, children should learn only Kurux, or children should learn both the languages? Why do think so?

Appendix C: Questionnaire for the children:

- 1) What is your full name?
- 2) Which class are you in?
- 3) What is the name of your school? How far is it from your home?
- 4) What do you want to become when you grow up? Do you think your language will help you in any way to become what you want to?
- 5) Do you know Kurux language? Can you write in Kurux?
- 6) Which language are you most comfortable in?
- 7) In which situations do you use Kurux?
- 8) At school, does anyone tease you for using Kurux?
- 9) Did you have any difficulty understanding Bengali when you got admitted to a school?
- 10) Do your parents discourage you to speak Kurux in any situation?
- 11) Have you ever seen books written in Kurux? Where did you get it?
- 12) What do you think is identity? What is your identity? Do you think your language has anything to do with your identity?
- 13) Will you teach the Kurux language to your children?
- 14) Do you think it will be a problem when your language becomes extinct?
- 15) Are you in support of saving the language or do you want it to disappear?
- 16) What possible ways are there to save the Kurux language?