

# Learning to think for themselves

They were once people who had others to think for them, help them do their most personal tasks. But now, as A Maher was told, they had more pressing issues like planning families and children and vacations

ROKEYA Sultana, fondly called Liza by her parents, was a normal child of her age. She was also an active girl finding sports to her liking and following it up in commendable fashion. Liza is a slightly different, proud Olympic medalist for Bangladesh. When she gave birth to the eldest of her three daughters, Liza's mother experienced some extent of labour pain which she along with her family did not realise at the time. When Liza was around 3 years old she suffered from a severe bout of typhoid which affected her vocal and auditory abilities. Two years after that and 5 years after her birth, Rokeya Sultana's family labelled her as intellectually disabled.

Intellectual disability is a silent affliction lurking in the slums and chateaus of Bangladesh, a malady made more difficult to spot because of an imprecise definition. Its figures are a headache too, tugging at the shrouds of sanity with an estimated 3% of the total population of Bangladesh intellectually disabled. That is a staggering 3,300,000 people that the Society for Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled (SWID) have to deal with in their mission to help those to think who cannot think themselves. But only temporarily. Says Mr Nurul Islam, the Executive Officer of Administration at SWID.

This is a disorder that is difficult to define in general people, earlier, used to know only about the 'handicapped' or physically disabled people. But the intellectually disabled are usually structurally sound with only their mental abilities hampered. People with physical difficulties may also have mental deficiencies. It is a blurry line between defining the two.

Generally, people with intellectual disabilities have problems in coordinating simple daily actions like putting on their clothes, brushing their teeth and maintaining personal hygiene. They have to have constant attention from atten-



Balancing the beacons of hope

could have been initiated through a much easier and hassle-free process, but for NGOs like SWID it is a hurdle overcome indeed.

A fitting conclusion would be to finish with a few words about Ratul, an assistant working at the SWID offices, having grown up with them from an early age. He became a married man two months back and as he proudly shows a picture of a pretty wife, he tells us how he would be getting along to pick her up for some shopping. After that he has a dinner with newly-made friends in their neighbourhood. Notice him striding off a little less closely and you would have passed him off for the perfect gentleman. Which all of them are entitled to be.

# Tracing the roots of tribal languages

By A H M Zehadul Karim

WHILE most of the country is linguistically homogenous, there are at least eighteen non-Bengali speaking tribes scattered over its different regions. In 1981 the 633,216 members of these tribes made up only 0.7 per cent of the total population. A great majority of the tribal population (403,723) lives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The genetic view gives a linguistic hypothesis that differs sharply from others, proposing that the origin and development of the Chakma language is distinct from Bengali. The Chakma proponents of this view try to prove their hypothesis by showing phonetic similarities between Chakma and Bihari groups of languages.

There are twelve ethnic groups in the CHT. Linguistically, the majority of these are Bhojonee, Chakma, Magh, Pankhuy, Tanchangya, Kuki, Lushai, Khumi and Khyani - belong to the Kuki-Chin sub-family of the Tibeto-Burman language. The rest - Tipra, Morung and Riang - come from the Bodo sub-linguistic group. Chakmas no longer speak a Kuki-Chin language, but their ancestors certainly did.

an offshoot of the Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid race, living in the hills and mountainous regions of the Patkoi range (see Grierson 1903, vol. III, part III). The Tipras have their own language also known as Hallami. Hutchinson (1909) tells us that Hallami is the language of the Morungs and Kukis as well as the Tipras. There is evidence that Hallami is spoken by the immigrants of Hill Tippera who settled in Sylhet in Bangladesh, and belongs to the Kuki group (see Grierson 1903, vol. III, part II: 109). However, there is no question that Tipra has a close connection with Bara. Anderson (1885) supplied a list of Tipra words with their Bara equivalent that shows close relationship between vocabularies of the two languages.

Tibeto-Burman language. While Grierson was conducting his survey on the Lushai, the Deputy Commissioner of the Lushai Hills told him, "this dialect of the Khuki-Lushai Hills District, as I believe it is of all the tribes of the South Lushai Hills, being understood by all. It is the language of the Saillau (Sylou) clan..." But the Lushai people as reported by Lungleh (Shakespeare 1898) quoted in Grierson (Ibid:129), speak other languages as well. Some of these appear to differ so much from Lushai as to be hardly entitled to be called dialects of it. While Shakespeare (1898) does not indicate why such a break-up occurred, there could be two reasons for it. First, an ethnically and linguistically diverse migration (as evidenced in Grierson 1903) to the hills occurred in the past, pushing some Lushai forward. In such a case of "language mixing" the dominant language (see Trudgill 1983) would have the advantage. Second, the Lushais live in villages, where they have every chance to be acculturated.

their local schools. This eventually helps them gain admission to institutions of higher education where they study side by side with their Bengali peers. Perhaps for this reason, the Lushai are educationally and culturally more advanced than many other CHT tribes.

Although little is known of the history of the Chakma language, it is presumed that the written form of ancient Chakma was close to that of Burmese. Presently, Chakmas speak an aberrant form of the Chittagongian dialect of Bengali. The genetic view gives a linguistic hypothesis that differs sharply from others, proposing that the origin and development of the Chakma language is distinct from Bengali. The Chakma proponents of this view try to prove their hypothesis by showing phonetic similarities between Chakma and Bihari groups of languages. They contend that Chakma sprang from the NIA (eastern) group of languages and thus is closely related to the western Magadhan languages through Assamese.

There is a striking similarity between Tipra and Bara. Except for negligible differences in pronunciation, they are same. Bernot (1957) contradicts Anderson when he argues that the Tipra language is nearer to Burmese. However, the comparative vocabulary list supplied by Phayre (1841) and Lewin (1869) do not support Bernot's statement. These lists seem quite different from Burmese. We believe that the Tipras have been considerably affected by Indian civilisation. Many of them in Tripura (India) now speak Bengali (Bassaignet 1958; Maloney 1984).

The Kuki language, as Lewin (1869) indicated, is the same as that of the Lushai. This view was also held by Levi-Strauss who found the Kuki linguistically and culturally similar to the Lushai. Ishaq (1971), however, pointed out that the Kuki language is an intermixture of various CHT languages. The basis for such diametrically opposing views is that Kuki use Assamese and Bengali terms that have popularly been applied to various hill tribes, such as Lushais, Rankhols, Thados, etc. McRae, on the other hand, attributed the linguistic position of Kukis to the fact that Maghs and Kukis are believed to have descended from the same progenitor. This proposition will not bear much scrutiny. However, this much is certain that the Kuki-Chin language belongs to the Burmese branch of the Tibeto-Burman family. Levi-Strauss (1952) presents a short account of the CHT kinship system that includes Kuki terms which Shafer (1955) identified as either Pankhu or Banjole. To add to the controversy, Abdus Satter (1975) in his *Aranya Jonopode* tells us that Kukis do not allow any other languages and dialects to be mixed with their own. Satter adds that Kukis are so conservative in their attitude that in conversation with a non-Kuki, they either speak their own language or express themselves through gestures and postures.

Two conclusions may be deduced from this: first, the CHT tribes at present belong to different loosely constructed tribal ethno-linguistic groups. None constitutes a unilineal unit by itself. Rather, they share diversified linguistic traits and in some measures have borrowed much from the neighbouring non-tribal population.

Grierson (1903), however, strongly affirms that Chakma is a broken dialect of Bengali. It is spoken in central CHT, in the Chakma chiefs' circle, and around the peripheral zone of the river Karnaphuli at present, it has undergone so much transformation that it is almost worthy of being classified as a separate language.

Phayre's (1841) *Account of Arakan* and Lewin's (1869) study of comparative vocabulary show a linguistic similarity between the Morungs and the Tipras. *Nouba* and *nauba* are respectively used by the Tipras and the Morungs for the English word, *air*. Similarly, *buffalo* corresponds to *mashi* for both the Tipras and the Morungs.

In the past, the Lushai language was unwritten, although there are several tales and songs that have endured. Recently, the Christian influence has become so strong among the Lushais that they have transcribed their language into Roman characters. Now, the Lushai have a written grammar and dictionaries for their language. Moreover, Lushai boys and girls now learn Bengali in

the Pankhu and Bhojonee tribes, as Hunter (1876) documented, descended from a common ancestor and show a great similarity in their languages, customs and habits. Lewin (1869) maintained the same view. He further detected a resemblance of these two languages to Lushai.

Varma (1973) clearly states that the Chakma is based on south-eastern Bengali. Careful examination of Grierson's data on Chakma words and syntax show that Chakma is closer to the south-eastern Bengali dialect. The Chakma word *ru* to denote you is virtually identical to south-eastern and eastern Bengali words. One or more Chakma words have some striking phonetic similarity with the eastern pronunciation. The Magh's language is a dialect of the Burmese, and is written with Burmese script. Their present dialect is known as *Mughi*. As the Maghs are Arakanese, their dialect is of Arakanese origin. As Hall puts it, "The Magh's language is Burmese with some dialectal differences and an older form of provincialism, especially noticeable in their retention of the *r* sound which the Burmese have changed to *y*." However, some Maghs who have settled in certain parts of Chittagong (e.g. Patharghata, Momin Road, Buddhist Temple Street, etc) speak a local Chittagong dialect of the Bengali language.

There has been a considerable amount of change and amalgamation in the CHT languages over the past centuries. Many tribes have either lost their original ancestral language or have modified and/or absorbed scripts and dialects from other languages. For example, the Chakmas were originally Kuki-Chin speakers, but presently they speak an aberrant form of the south-eastern Bengali dialect.

The Khyani's language is similar to that of the southern Chin

and currently contains a large admixture of Marma and Bengali. Houghton distinguished between the people of northern and southern Chin, but the languages he described were identical. Phayre (1841), on the other hand, remarks that there is some difference between the dialects spoken by the northern and southern tribes. Grierson also affirmed that the Khyani spoken in the CHT is identical with the southern Chin, but it might differ from the language of the northern part of Chin hills.

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# Linked for life with fish and nets

The children from the coast, their fate linked to nets and fishes, sail to the rough sea instead of going to school, writes New Network's ASM Oliullah

AFTER a hectic day of fishing along the coast, the tiny boat anchors on the bank at dusk. Extreme exhaustion is written all over the face of young fisherman Aminul, his vest and thin lungi (loincloth) dripping wet. Now 14, Aminul has been helping his father in deep-sea fishing for the last two years.

Most of the fish that we net after a day's hard work goes straightaway into the hands of the mahajans (owners of the boats and trawlers or traditional money-lenders). If we catch 300 fish, we receive only 50 taka. The rest goes into their purses," complains Aminul. His father had taken some money from a mahajan, who provides conditional money-lending facilities to fishermen. Although Aminul has no idea of how much his father owes to the mahajan, he at least knows this much, that he will have to share their catch with the moneylender for at least another year.

According to local residents, more than 500 fishing boats and trawlers return to the Shyamraj Shulji bank loaded with fish during the heavy monsoons. But once the monsoon is over, the number nose-dives to nearly 300. An almost identical situation prevails at Betua, Bheribhanga, Atakpara and Bashirdun coastal banks.

When asked why, instead of sending his kid to a school he has involved him in the fishing trade, Islam says, "How could I possibly educate my son? Unless we catch enough fish, we would not be able to repay the debts we owe to the mahajan. Without my son at my side, I'm totally helpless."

He goes fishing with his uncle. His father and elder brother was lost to the rage of the sea two years ago. Every year, countless adults and children drown while fishing in the Bay of Bengal.

They are foreigners to a world where there's no saline water of the sea, rickety boats and the smell of fishes. Sirajul Islam (50), has been a fisherman for a long time. His son, Liaquat, who is only 14, assists him in his professional chores.

Meanwhile, for most minor fishermen, fishing boats and trawlers are their hearth and home. They spend the entire day on the boat and even have their meals there. Occasionally, they even stay on their boats for days together.

Meanwhile, the matabbar or the local headman of Betua, Khaleque says: "Fishing is the only option of livelihood open to the coastal people. Theirs very little cultivable land. Besides, cultivation is almost impossible due to frequent thunderstorms and cyclones. It is only during the winter that some winter-crops are grown."

Aminul never went to a school. Neither does he have any clue what education is all about. He is familiar with a life where one braves the troubled waters from dawn to dusk in search of fishes, only to hand those over to the mahajans at the end of the day. The teenager's future is seemingly chained by the unfair conditions imposed on him and his family by the moneylender.

Unforeseen threats include: (1) "spectacular epidemics" that erupted as "black band disease", first in Caribbean corals, and much of the globe thereafter; and (2) a shift from sporadic to sustained "bleaching".

Sea anemones, sponges, mollusks and other species that interact with algae in coral are also bleaching. Implications are stark because reefs are the sea's richest ecosystem. They harbor about 65 per cent of marine fish species. Properly managed, a kilometer of reef can yield, on average, 15 tons of fish and other sea foods, a World Bank study estimates.

Overlapping stresses may have partly caused the epidemics. No 21st century virus or bacteria has been pinpointed. "It is much more likely that the coral's vulnerability is new... Reef decline would also be a social disaster in the making."

There are in fact, hundreds of children like Aminul and

Today, there's also white, yellow, red bands, patchy necrosis, white pox, Type I and II rapid wasting syndrome and dark spot of white plague," notes *State of the World 2000* report.

Man's heavy footprints, however, are stamped all over these "tropical forests of the oceans." Blast and cyanide fishing, reckless tourism, pollution, etc. have wrecked havoc.

"Nature has no reset button," the report warns. Asian policy makers, therefore, should avoid brittle monoculture technologies and plan instead for diversity.

When sea surface temperature climb beyond 28 degrees Celsius, patches of reef turn white. "Bleaching" results as coral polyp expels algae. When the sea cools, reefs slowly recover.

The scale of these epidemics has no clear precedent," the Worldwatch Institute report adds. "Simply finding common names for them is beginning to tax the lexicon of marine biology."

Damaged reefs could rack up in 25 years, losses well over \$137,000, per kilometer, the book, *Sullied Seas*, estimates.

Future policies for reefs and other ecosystems must work with nature. Both executives and legislators have to think through "ripple effects." Innovations outside traditional policy institutions need to be encouraged. —DETI/News

But the 1998 summer sizzled as the hottest, since records were first compiled in 1864. For much of the late 1990s, sea surface temperatures soared past 30 degrees Celsius.

By end of the decade, mass bleaching was occurring in ev-

ery coral reef region in the world — a phenomenon that had never been observed before," Sydney University notes. About 70 per cent of corals from the African coast to southern India, died.

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As for other tribes, the Tanchangya seems to have been a branch of the Chakma, though they still retain their own language. The Riangs are related to the Tipras and live in parts of CHT adjacent to Tipperah. Their language belongs to the Bodo sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Khumi, according to Phayre (1841), have two main divisions in their tribe — the Khamis and the Kumis, which are also called Awa Kumi and Aphiya Kumi by the Arakanese. The Kamis and the Kumis that have been distinguished from a geographical viewpoint clearly correspond to the divisions cited by Phayre (1841).

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Second, such lingua-cultural acculturation may be the result of the peripheral spiritisation effect of Bengali culture or what may be called social and geographic pressures of the eastern Bengali dialect, which they also use in inter-tribal speaking. This, however, is not a recent phenomenon. Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903) observed that "over the greater part of the CHT, south-eastern Bengali" is used as a kind of lingua franca, in addition to many Tibeto-Burman languages current in that area."

Indian artifacts and state-of-the-art technology mix easily at his office in Belem, a booming port at the mouth of the Amazon River where Moore has pursued his quest in relative anonymity for 13 years. Then the MacArthur Foundation gave him a prestigious Genius Award in 1999, and the \$135,000 prize helps keep the project going.

Moore is in it for the love of linguistics and a greater understanding of the universal properties of language. But his research also is helping piece together a picture of Amazon prehistory.

Because physical evidence is scant, little is known about the early peoples of the Amazon. By tracing how words evolved from a root language, linguists can get an idea of how cultures developed here as early as 8,000 years before European explorers arrived in the 16th century.

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