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Dhakaiya Sobbasi and their language

PHOTO: **MOHAMMAD ANISUL HOQUE**

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MD. SAHABUDDIN SABU

When Subahdar of Bengal, Islam Khan Chishti, entered Dhaka in 1608 or 1610, he was accompanied by a diverse group of North and North-West Indians, Afghans, Iranians, Arabs, and other foreign Muslims and Hindus. This influx of migrants continued for nearly 250 years. Many of them settled along the banks of the Buriganga River, in what is now Old Dhaka, and their descendants form the core of its original population.

From around 1610 onwards, a unique mixed language began to develop among these families — an amalgamation of Arabic, English, Gujarati, Turkish, Pali, Portuguese, French, Persian, Munda, Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindustani (Urdu and Hindi). This creolised tongue became the regional spoken language of Dhaka's original inhabitants. Even today, many native families in Old Dhaka continue to use this language in their homes, communities, markets, and social gatherings.

However, the exact number of speakers has never been officially documented — perhaps because the language has not been taken seriously by scholars or authorities. Among the old Dhakaiyas, this linguistic tradition is now known as the 'Sobbasi' language, and its speakers identify themselves as

Sobbas or Sobbasi. Today, Sobbasis reside in various neighbourhoods under Sutrapur, Kotwali, Bongshal, Chawkbazar, Lalbagh, and Hazaribagh thanas of Old Dhaka.

The term 'Sobbas' comes from 'Sukhbas', meaning to live happily, which evolved into 'Sokhbas' (happiness as 'sokh'), and finally 'Sobbas'. This linguistic shift mirrors other Dhakaiya transformations like 'Rai Saheb Bazar' to 'Rasabazar' or 'Takht' to 'Takta'.

One of the complexities of the Sobbasi language lies in the use of *a-kar*. There are two types of *a-kar* pronunciation: one with emphasis and another with a softer tone. For example, "cloud of sky" is expressed in Sobbasi as *asmanka abar*. In *asmanka*, each *a-kar* is pronounced with emphasis, while in *abar*, the *a-kar* is spoken softly. Those unfamiliar with the Sobbasi language may struggle with pronunciation due to this nuance. Sobbasis rarely use *chandrabindu* and tend to speak quickly — for instance, *Chan Khar Pool* becomes *Changkhakapol*. Similarly, *u-kar*, *e-kar*, and *sh* sounds are less used, with both *sh* and *s* typically pronounced as *s*.

Although the Sobbasi language of Dhaka is a rich urban dialect, research

on its origins is scarce due to the lack of written records. As a purely spoken language, it has been passed down orally through conversation, stories, rhymes, and proverbs. Traditionally unwritten, it has only recently begun to be documented using the Bengali script. Notably, the Bangla-Dhakaiya Sobbasi Dictionary was published on 15 January 2021, marking the first major effort to preserve and study this unique dialect.

Urdu expert Professor Kaniz-e-Batul notes that 18th-century Dhaka's rice trade brought together Bengali and Hindustani speaking Marwaris, shaping a mixed urban tongue that evolved into the Sobbasi dialect. Historian Sharif Uddin Ahmed adds that Hindustani—a blend of Hindi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic—was the main conversational language in Dhaka. During the Mughal era, it served as the lingua franca across towns and cities, enabling communication among diverse communities.

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For example:
Bengali: *Kujor abar chit hoye ghumanor shokh.*
Sobbasi: *Kujaka Fer Chet Hoke Soneka Saokh.*
Kutti: *Gujarbi abar chit oya whiber sock.*
Bengali: *Kukurer pete ghee hojom hoy na.*
Sobbasi: *Kottaka Petme Ghi Hajam Hotani.*
Kutti: *Kuttar pete gi ojom ohe na.*

In 1838, James Taylor listed 162 occupations in Dhaka, each group speaking its own language. However, in markets and on the streets, Hindustani served as the common tongue. The Sobbasis were part of this multilingual population. Even today, Dhakaiya Kuttis refer to Hindustani as *bazaira*

vasha, meaning "market language."

In early 19th-century Dhaka, the upper class spoke Persian, later shifting to authentic Urdu, which they continued using until 1971—and many still do. They excluded the Sobbasi dialect from their social circles. However, those unfamiliar with either authentic Urdu or the Dhakaiya Sobbasi dialect often find it difficult to tell them apart.

After 1947, the arrival of Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, or 'Biharis,' further influenced the Sobbasi language. This overlap has led to frequent confusion between the two speech forms, though they remain distinct.

Language is like water in a flowing river—it moves forward, carrying along whatever it encounters, with no turning back. In the Sobbasi dialect, new words are constantly being added while many old ones fade away. Still, it can be said that this urban dialect, now widely spoken among Old Dhakaiyas, began its journey with Hindustani in Dhaka around 1610. Over time, it has evolved under the influence of various languages and continues to thrive in the heart of the city.

Md. Sahabuddin Sabu is a researcher and the author of the Bangla-Dhakaiya Sobbasi Dictionary.

"Don't reduce garment workers to victims—recognise their struggles"

Dr Rebecca Prentice, Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Development at the University of Sussex, has studied garment workers' health and labour rights for over two decades. Her journey began with fieldwork in Trinidad in 2003, and most recently brought her to Bangladesh in April, in collaboration with the Ethical Trading Initiative. She spoke to The Daily Star about the current state of labour conditions and workplace safety in Bangladesh, and the evolving challenges garment workers face in the post-Rana Plaza era.

The Daily Star (TDS): How do you view the current situation of Bangladeshi garment workers?

Rebecca Prentice (RP): When I was doing fieldwork in Trinidad in the 2000s, the garment industry there was falling apart. With China and Bangladesh rising as export giants, small Caribbean countries found it hard to compete for lucrative North American markets.

What I saw in Trinidad was how workers who had devoted their lives to the garment industry suddenly found themselves with fewer and worse job prospects. Though my book emphasises workers' creative agency to build livelihoods and get by, they felt abandoned by an industry to which they had given the best years of their lives.

This sense of disposability is exactly what Lamia Karim writes about in her book on Bangladeshi garment workers, Castoffs of Capital. She tells us how workers in Bangladesh see their work opportunities vanish around the age of 35. Despite working in the industry for 20 years by that point,

these aged-out workers rarely have savings.

TDS: Could you tell us about your collaboration with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), and how its work has the potential to improve conditions for garment workers in Bangladesh?

RP: The approach to improving labour standards that ETI favours is called social dialogue. It involves bringing together worker representatives and managers in a structured way to talk about issues of concern on a regular basis and create joint action plans. Social dialogue within a workplace can be used to address a range of problems, but it requires commitment from employers to give workers a voice and influence over their working conditions.

Not enough factories engage in social dialogue; I believe it is fewer than 100 garment factories in the whole country. According to Bangladesh's labour law, the practice should be widespread. ETI also promotes the formation of workplace trade unions, which significantly improves labour conditions.

TDS: As the garment sector in Bangladesh embraces environmental sustainability, how do these initiatives relate to workers' rights, wellbeing, and job security?

RP: The Bangladesh garment industry deserves recognition for its efforts toward environmental sustainability—improving

energy efficiency, reducing water usage, and managing waste responsibly. Certifications like LEED reflect these achievements, but they do not account for workers' rights or conditions, offering only a partial view.

As climate change intensifies, workers face new hardships: rising temperatures on factory floors, increased flooding that disrupts commutes, and higher home cooling costs that impact rest and recovery. While factories race to meet global brands' sustainability targets, the wellbeing of workers is often overlooked. Simultaneously, automation is displacing jobs, with machines housed in air-

ILLUSTRATION: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Dr Rebecca Prentice

conditioned rooms while garment workers endure stifling heat with only fans—insufficient during extreme weather.

To address this gap, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) is piloting 'green social dialogue'—an approach that involves educating workers on environmental issues and giving them a platform to express how climate change is affecting their lives and workplaces.

TDS: What is your response to the concern that stronger labour rights could make Bangladesh less attractive to global brands?

RP: If raising wages and improving labour standards harms Bangladesh's attractiveness to multinational brands, that is an unjust situation indeed. But there is much that can be done about it.

One legacy of the Rana Plaza disaster is that there is greater awareness of the responsibility of global brands to engage in ethical sourcing practices. These obligations need to be legally enforced, not voluntary.

New legislation in the European Union (EU) will demand that multinational corporations identify and prevent environmental and human rights risks across their supply chains. These regulatory changes should prevent brands that import into the EU from profiting from a race to the bottom in labour standards.

TDS: How do global media narratives around tragedies like Rana Plaza shape perceptions of garment workers, and do they risk overshadowing workers' own agency and activism?

RP: Images of the suffering of Rana Plaza workers and families played an important role in raising public awareness of labour conditions in the global garment industry. However, what these images of suffering fail to convey is the huge role that garment workers themselves play in improving their labour conditions—through strikes, street protests, and demands for fair wages.

A spectacle of suffering falsely portrays workers as passive, as though they are waiting to be rescued by the very institutions and actors that have harmed them in the first place. It is important for people to understand that despite all their hardships, Bangladeshi garment workers are not passive; they are an active political force doing their best to improve their situation.

The interview was taken by **Shormila Akter.**