



## THAR: A language born on the rivers

**Although elderly members of the Bede community speak their mother tongue among themselves, they mostly use Bangla for occupational reasons. As a result, their mother tongue has reached a critical stage.**

RANJANA BISHWAS

Among Bangladesh's ancient and marginalised communities, the Bede occupy a significant place. Their distinctive way of life, culture, and language have shaped a unique identity. Yet it can be said that little to no research has been conducted on the Bede language using linguistic methods. This is despite the fact that the language of the nearly extinct Bede community holds considerable historical and linguistic significance.

Researchers have offered various interpretations of the term "Bede". Some of these explanations are derogatory, while others are appreciative. Samarendranath Mollick states: "...they are non-Aryan. Through contact with various communities, certain influences of Aryan religion and culture have affected them. Yet in terms of nature worship, attire, and behaviour, they still remain at a primitive, wild stage. They speak their own language, perform snake charming, and sell the roots of various medicinal plants...". Before the establishment of Vedic civilisation, those who had taken initiation from Vedic practitioners were ostracised by local orthodox groups and labelled as 'Bede'.

Rabi Chakrabarty and Kalim Khan argue that "through the establishment of the Daksha Yajna, the Vedic practitioners founded Vedic civilisation in India. But long before that, those who had abandoned the primitive communal society dispersed to various places while preserving their own language and culture." According to this view, the Bede are essentially recognised as members of the ancient indigenous or primitive communal society. The early Vedic period is generally considered to span from 1800 BCE to 1000 BCE. By that measure, the history of the Bede's nomadic life in Bengal dates back approximately three and a half to four thousand years.

**Settlements of the Bede Community**  
As Bangladesh is a riverine country, the presence of the Bede can be observed almost everywhere. They generally live on boats or set up temporary tents on government-owned land. In some places, they are seen living in small huts known as toila. Typically, their settlements are located along riverbanks or near marketplaces. Large numbers of Bede live across regions such as Dhaka, Manikganj, Sunamganj, Munshiganj,



Oval-shaped makeshift tents of the Bede community.

Chandpur, Madaripur, Barishal, Netrokona, Jashore, Khulna, and Natore.

### Anthropological and linguistic identity

From an anthropological perspective, the Bede community belongs to the Proto-Australoid group. They identify themselves as Manta. For this reason, some researchers believe that the Manta indigenous people who arrived in Bangladesh with the Arakanese king in 1632 were the ancestors of the Bede. However, historical anthropological research has proven this claim to be incorrect. The group that came with the king were primarily the Magh or Marma community. There is no physical or linguistic similarity between this Mongoloid group and the Bede. The Bede are broadly divided into three main clans: Mal Manta, Shandar Manta, and Bajikar Manta. They typically have dark skin, broad head shapes, very curly and coarse hair, thick noses, medium height, heavy or thick lips, and strong, well-built bodies.

Dr Atul Sur, citing ancient Sanskrit literature, describes them as 'non-Aryan' and characterises their customs, behaviour, and language as 'strange'. The name of this 'strange' language is Thar. In regional Bangla, 'thar' means 'hint' or 'gesture', but in Bede terminology

it refers to the name of their language. From a linguistic standpoint, Thar is a distinct language. Just as Bangla, Teth, Ashek, Santali, or Mandi are separate languages, Thar too is the mother tongue of the Bede. However, due to the absence of a written form, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between standard Thar and spoken Thar.

Some researchers claim that Thar belongs to the Sak-Luish branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, but no concrete evidence has yet been found to support this claim. Limited analysis instead suggests that Thar shares considerable similarities with Bangla and Assamese, both of which belong to the Indo-European language family. As the Bede have long lived in close contact with Bengali communities, Bangla has had a strong influence on their language. Field studies show that they have adopted many Bangla words into their own language through adaptation. Conversely, Bangla itself has absorbed some Thar words, such as noko, which appears in regional Bangla as nok or lok, and khomor, which is used to mean khoma, or mouth.

Notable similarities can also be observed between Thar and Bangla in sentence structure and word order. Like Bangla, Thar generally follows a subject-object-verb pattern, with the

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

verb placed at the end of the sentence. For example:

• AwwgfvZLvB--Swwg eZb UvwM (Jhamibaton tagi) I eat rice  
• Ꞥm KVR Ki+Q -- Zvb Kvg KivcvB+Q (Tan kam korpaiche) He is working

The language spoken by the Bede is not uniform across Bangladesh. Just as there are three main clans, there are also many sub-clans. Occupational and regional factors have created variations in their language, complicating the identification of linguistic features. Possibly for this reason, researchers Najmun Nahar Laiju and Dr Asitbaran Pal have classified the Bede language as a coded language.

Coded languages are often mistakenly associated with the criminal world. Yet not all coded languages are criminal languages. Criminal argots tend to change rapidly once the police learn the meanings of certain words. Such changes are not observed in the Bede language. The stigma attached to their language dates back to the British colonial period, when the Bede were listed as a 'criminal tribe'. In reality, secret or coded languages are also used among journalists and spies. Dr Sen has

noted that Charyapada also employed cryptic words, known as sandhya bhasha. However, the Bede language does not use cryptic expressions in the manner of criminal argot.

Although elderly members of the Bede community speak their mother tongue among themselves, they mostly use Bangla for occupational reasons. As a result, their mother tongue has reached a critical stage. The International Mother Language Institute has published a Thar-Bangla dictionary of the Bede language. Although the number of entries in this dictionary is very limited, analysis suggests that Thar was once a fully developed language with a rich vocabulary. Speakers of Thar have moved from that glorious past into a lifeless present. Due to the absence of a written form, this language of a once linguistically rich community in Bangladesh is now on the path to extinction. For various reasons, interest among the younger generation in learning and using the language is steadily declining. As a result, there is little doubt that this intriguing and diverse language is heading towards extinction in the near future.

### Conclusion

The Thar language of the Bede is not merely a means of communication; it is a bearer of their history, culture, and social existence. Although long coexistence has forged a deep relationship with the Bangla language, Thar has retained its distinctiveness to this day. Yet the lack of a written form, social change, and linguistic intrusion have rendered the language endangered. It is therefore urgent to undertake initiatives for the preservation and study of this language. Otherwise, the loss of this ancient language of the Bede community will mark yet another step backwards in the linguistic diversity of human civilisation.

Ranjana Biswas is a folklore researcher and the author of several books on the Bede community, their language, and culture. The article has been translated by Samia Huda.



## The last speaker of Saura

MINTU DESHWARA

In a small village near the Indian border in Sreemangal, that fear is becoming painfully real. For the past six months, Samra Saura—believed to be in his 90s—has been gravely ill. He can no longer walk without assistance. Speaking even a few words leaves him breathless. Most of the time, he simply stares in silence.

When this correspondent visited Saura Palli in Rajghat Union on Monday, the frail elder whispered only a few words in his native tongue: "If I die, the language will die. Please take initiative to save my mother tongue before I die. My identity lives in this language."

According to community members, Samra Saura is the last person in Bangladesh who could fluently and accurately speak the Saura language.

Alkumar Saura, 56, described him as a one-man army for their mother tongue. "Even though he understood other languages spoken in the tea gardens, he would always speak Saura. The younger ones sometimes laughed at his pronunciation, but they also tried to repeat words after him. Because of him, we tried."

Today, no one else in the community can speak the language fluently. Those above 70 remember fragments—a few scattered words. But full sentences, conversations, stories—those lived almost entirely with Samra.

"For 15 to 20 years, people came, took interviews, and recorded his voice. We thought something would happen," Alkumar added. "However, nothing happened. Slowly, our mother tongue is disappearing before



Grandparents teaching their grandchild the letters of the Saura language.

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

our eyes."

The Saura language—an Austro-Asiatic language—is also spoken in parts of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Bihar in India. It has a written form and even primary-level textbooks in parts of India.

In Bangladesh, however, the situation is starkly different.

The International Mother Language Institute has identified Saura as one of 14 endangered languages in the country. Only around 120 Saura families remain nationwide. In Saura village, located about 200 yards from the Indian border near Sreemangal Upazila of Moulvibazar, just 22 families live.

Most work as tea garden labourers. None has access to higher education. There is no institutional system for preserving or teaching their language.

Seventy-year-old Sridhar Saura said they have repeatedly appealed to the government to protect their mother tongue. Yet nothing has been done.

Within families, Bengali, Odia, and Sadri have largely replaced Saura. "Many people confuse our language with Odia or call it a jungle language," said 72-year-old Umila Saura. "So, we speak Bengali. When we speak Saura, people look down on us."

Language shift has accelerated among children.

Sagor Saura said, "We heard a few words from Grandpa, but we cannot speak properly.

At school everyone speaks Bengali, so we also speak Bengali."

Another child, Resmi Saura, admitted that classmates often laugh when they try to speak Saura. "They say it is slang. So we feel ashamed."

Sanjoy Saura added, "When Grandpa speaks it, we do not understand everything. If someone explained it to us, we would be more interested."

Their words reflect a pattern experts describe as a breakdown in intergenerational transmission—often the final stage before language extinction.

Researcher Porimol Baraik pointed out that the International Mother Language Institute Act (2010) emphasises the preservation of all ethnic languages and the development of written forms. However, he said implementation remains weak.

"Although NGOs work on improving the socio-economic conditions of small ethnic groups, language preservation is often neglected," he added, calling for stronger state intervention.

Samar M. Soren, Indigenous Language Technology Specialist, Head of the Language Resource Hub (LRH), and Global Taskforce Member of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL), UNESCO, said: "The Saura language in Bangladesh, also known as Savara and spoken by the Savara people mainly in the tea gardens of Sylhet



The elderly man is Samra Saura, the only person among the Saura community who once spoke the Saura language fluently with everyone. Now seriously ill, he is no longer able to speak as he once did.

and Moulvibazar, is in serious danger of disappearing. Ethnologue calls it Sora, but it is also referred to as Saura."

The International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) classifies it among the endangered languages of the country, with a very small number of speakers remaining, mostly older members of the community. Intergenerational transmission has become extremely weak, as younger generations are not learning or using it regularly, largely due to the influence of dominant languages like Bengali and the small size of the community itself.

The language has almost no presence in digital spaces, media, or education, with very limited literacy materials and scripts (though it has its own Sorang Sompeng script, Bengali is more commonly used for writing in Bangladesh) and no official government recognition or support. Community interest in and prestige for Saura have declined over time, making it harder to pass on. Along with the Saura language, valuable traditional knowledge such as folklore, rituals, songs, stories, and local cultural practices is at high risk of being lost forever.

Without urgent efforts in documentation, revitalisation programmes, community involvement, and institutional backing, Saura faces a very real chance of vanishing completely in the coming years. "We need to act now to help preserve this important

part of Bangladesh's linguistic and cultural diversity," he added.

AFM Zakaria, professor of anthropology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, echoed the concern.

"A language survives through family-based practice," he said. "When one generation does not or cannot teach it to the next, extinction becomes inevitable. Sometimes languages are not lost by force, but through social pressure and inferiority. That is a silent form of cultural violence."

He stressed the urgent need to collect audio and video documentation from last speakers like Samra Saura.

Sixty-year-old Jamini Saura said only two elders once spoke the language fluently. One passed away years ago. The other now struggles even to speak.

"It seems that when he dies, our language will die with him," she said quietly.

If that happens, it will not simply mark the loss of a language. It will mark the disappearance of songs, wedding rituals like Sunkara, oral histories, and an entire worldview shaped over generations.

An anthropologist said it would raise an uncomfortable question: if a language dies with one person, is it merely a personal tragedy—or a collective failure?

Mintu Deshwara is a journalist at The Daily Star.



A member of the Saura community brought this book from India for them. However, no one is able to read it properly.