

## **Does loss of a language equate to a loss in identity?**

Maya Khemlani David  
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics  
University of Malaya  
Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia

### **Introduction**

The objective of this study is basically to determine whether the loss of language results in the loss of culture by soliciting opinions of members of the Sindhi community. This is rather a controversial issue with some sociolinguists arguing that language is the core of a community's culture while other sociolinguists argue that for some communities language may not constitute a core value of their culture and identity.

### **The Sindhi Community**

The term "Sindhi" describes both the community and the language (David 2001:13). The Sindhis have traditionally been a trading community and they have been described as the "modern Phoenician of the East" (vaswani, u.d.:13). Sindhi firms have been established in many parts of the world since the nineteenth century and initially they were engaged in the trading of textile goods before they branched out into manufacturing, real estate, hotels, investment and travel (David, 2001:12).

### **Literature Review on Language loss among Community Members in the diaspora**

The Sindhi Hindu community in many parts of the world appear to have shifted away from the use of their ethnic language. In India, Daswani and Parchani (1978) reported, "Sindhi in India today is a language with a limited sociolinguistic function. It is largely an in-group language used for intragroup communication, maintained essentially by the women and older generation men. Among the educated and cosmopolitan Sindhis, the language has even a more restricted function of communication with the members of the older generation within the family (p. 4)".

In a study of Sindhis in Malaysia, David (1999) reported that the third generation of Sindhis have adopted English and Malay as their primary languages, and Sindhi (usually mixed with English) has been reduced to the role of a 'private language', when there was a need to exclude an out-group member. David (1999: 65) states "Sindhi is being replaced by an international language which is neither the national language nor the majority language".

Discussing the Sindhi community in Hong Kong Daswani and Lock (2003) paint a similar picture of language shift. They report that English seems to have "made the most significant inroads even into domains such as friends and family that were traditionally the preserve of the ethnic mother tongue Sindhi". They explain "Not only is the medium of instruction in these schools English, but also use of English is generally enforced at all times. Thus, the present generation of Sindhis have a much reduced chance of making local friends and learning Cantonese during their schooling" (Detaramani and Lock

2003: 252). In comparing two minority Indian communities in Hong Kong i.e. the Punjabis and Sindhis of Hong Kong, they demonstrate that the Punjabis have a high ethnolinguistic vitality while the Sindhis are moving away from the use of their ethnic language.

In the Philippines yet another sociolinguist, Dewan paints a similar picture of the community. Studying the Sindhi community in Metro Manila Dewan states that “language shift takes place primarily from the first generation to the second and is completed by the third” (Dewan, 1987: 254).

David (1998) based on an observer’s study of the community argues that language per se does not make up the core identity of Malaysian Sindhis. In this study the aim is to solicit the opinions of community members themselves.

### **Theoretical Input**

One approach to studying culture falls under the label 'cultural sociology', which combines the study of culture with cultural understandings of phenomena. Griswold (2004) explains how cultural sociologists approach their research:-

...if one were to try to understand a certain group of people, one would look for the expressive forms through which they represent themselves to themselves... The sociologist can come at this collective representation process from the other direction, from the analysis of a particular cultural object, as well; if we were to try to understand a cultural object, we would look for how it is used by some group as representing that group. (p. 59)

Cultural sociology is about meaning-making. Cultural sociologists investigate how meaning-making happens, why meanings vary, how meanings influence human action, and the ways meaning-making is important in social cohesion, domination and resistance (Spillman 2001:1). In other words, because of the perspective of cultural sociologists, their approach to studying culture involves looking at how people make meaning in their lives out of the different cultural elements that surround them.

This research intends to see how the Sindhis express themselves and how this is facilitated by their cultural elements as these are considered important in forming identity and social functioning.

### **Methodology**

Emails were sent out to my Sindhi friends and cousins living in Singapore, Hong Kong, Curacao, Canada and Mumbai (India) with a request to forward the survey questions to their network of friends and relatives. They were asked the following questions:

What is your dominant language? Sindhi?

If not Sindhi does not using the Sindhi language make you feel any less Sindhi?

If no, then what apart from language, makes you feel Sindhi?

### Data Analysis

33 responses from 11 countries were obtained. The responses came from Singapore, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Canada, Phillipines, Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand, and America. The majority of the responses were from Sindhi Hindus with only 3 from Sindhi Muslims and one from a Sindhi Christian. The focus of this analysis is the Sindhi Hindu community and the analysis will be on responses received from Sindhi Hindus in 10 countries.

Results from the email interviews are plotted as below:

Does not using Sindhi make you feel any less Sindhi?	No (disagree)		Yes (agree)		Somewhat	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Singapore	1 (Hindu)		1 (can't speak)		1 (can speak)	
Malaysia	1 (Hindu)		1 (can speak)	1 (Hindu can't speak)		
India	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu)	1 (can't speak) 1 (can speak)	1 (can speak) 1 (can speak)		
Sri Lanka	1 (Hindu)					
Curaco			1 (can speak and write) 1 (doesn't speak)	1 (Hindu) 1 (Hindu)		
Canada	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu) 1 (Hindu)			
Australia	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu)				
China	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu) 1 (Hindu) 1 (Hindu) 1 (Hindu)				
Bangkok		1 (Hindu-can speak)				
America	1 (Hindu)	1 (Hindu)				
TOTAL	8	9	8	5	1	
MACRO TOTAL	17		14		1	

Note that this frequency count does not reflect the views of the community that they represent, rather these numbers are based on the number of replies received.

The e-mails received reflected the networks of the Sindhis, which shows how they have branched out into the different parts of the world, including that of China. The correspondents from China including Hong Kong revealed that their children are moving away from Sindhi to other languages, such as Mandarin and English.

18 respondents (inclusive of the one who answered 'somewhat') said that language does not equate to cultural death because there are other elements which constitute identity. 18 said that other core values include other markers, which will be described in the next

section. Another 14 agreed that language death equates to cultural loss. In other words, language is the primary core value which precedes other values.

The aim of this paper is to discuss these other values which according to the subjects make them feel Sindhi (see Table 1). These values will now be discussed.

**Table 1“Other core values” (cited by the Sindhis who felt language is not the only cultural marker)**

Sindhi food	6
Distinction between Sindhi culture and other cultures	3
Networking	9
Sociopersonalities	6
Religion and sociocultural practices	3
History	4
Surnames	2
Genetic roots	5
Dressing	2
Socioeconomic status	2

## 1. Food

Food plays a role in defining one’s culture. This is what Sindhis from various parts of the world had to say about Sindhi cuisine. One Sindhi woman from Canada wrote that “food that makes me feel Sindhi as well as our way of celebrating various festivals makes me feel Sindhi”. One Singaporean Sindhi in his 20s wrote, “Being Sindhi is about all our Sindhi food” and this sentiment is resonated by a Sri Lankan Sindhi, also in his 20s who wrote: “I’m 24, live with my parents, and eat Sindhi food regularly (courtesy of my mum!)”. One lady in India wrote, “[other values we hold are] our old generation the language, the food”. Another in Australia wrote, “I believe that I am a Sindhi because I still follow our Sindhi values and culture. Our Sindhi food.” A Canadian Sindhi lady wrote that “being able to cook Sindhi dishes”, contributed to her identity as a Sindhi. A Sindhi Hindu male in his early 50s, who is an English language newspaper manager in Singapore wrote, “For someone who does not speak the language, I suppose the other aspects that count include the food (we had special Sindhi dishes, like *pialo* etc).

## 2. Distinction between Sindhi culture and other cultures

Comparing and contrasting her culture with others is a way an American Sindhi is able to identify himself as being Sindhi. He wrote “culture outside of language makes me feel Sindhi...the culture of Sindhis that had developed from being "Westerized"... those living in Europe, the US, Canada and the Caribbean.” Similarly, one lady from Hong Kong made the comparison between ‘feeling Indian’, and ‘feeling Sindhi’. She wrote: “I guess most of the times I feel that I am Indian rather than Sindhi. However when I meet other Indians who are not Sindhi, I tend to feel more Sindhi”. This can be related to what Macionis (2001: 169) wrote as the construction of ingroup and outgroups. He said, “...an

ingroup is a social group commanding a member's esteem and loyalty. An ingroup exists in relation to an outgroup, a social group toward which one feels competition or opposition."

### **3. Networking**

Macionis (2001: 170-171) defines network as "a web of weak social ties...which may be weak, but they can be a powerful resource. For immigrants seeking to become established in a new community, businesspeople seeking to expand their operations, or anyone looking for a job, who you know is often just as important as what you know. Not using Sindhi did not make one respondent feel any less Sindhi, but networking with other Sindhis helped many of them feel part of the Sindhi community. The subjects provided the following responses:

- having dinner together
- women hosting kitty parties
- men discussing politics
- networking with other Sindhis overseas
- family networks including extended families

One Singaporean wrote: "Maybe it's more of Sindhi gatherings than traditions. In Singapore I suppose these would be the gatherings at Sindhi Merchants' Association, gatherings at Singapore swimming club (the Sindhi hangout) and High Street Centre where the Sindhi trading/import & export businesses are. The Sindhis in Singapore are a small but closely-knit community I'd say. We see lots of familiar faces during Diwali Ball, sometimes at Singapore Swimming Club, and during weddings especially."

In Hong Kong links with the Sindhi diaspora are maintained for marriage partners. Detaramani and Lock (2003: 252) (p. 252) state "The Hong Kong Sindhi community is a relatively self-confident community, conscious that they are the largest and arguably the most successful of the Indian communities in Hong Kong. Rather than look to a homeland, they tend to take pride in their links with the international Sindhi diaspora, which is reflected in marriage patterns."

One Canadian Sindhi said that she believes that extended families are one of the identity markers of Sindhis. She writes, "Extended families are a rarity in this part of the world .... I would assume having elders in the home who are well steeped in their cultural identity would help maintain and carry forward traditions as I have witnessed in the Sindhi community in Canada...."

Network plays a vital role in keeping one's culture alive. In China, one Sindhi wrote that Sindhis in China often meet at a place called Regal Court where they socialise. He also wrote: "... but the Sindhi Culture is not lost, it is in fact that despite the loss-(of language) we have a strong sense of belonging."

Resonating with this view one lady lecturer from Hong Kong said that not using Sindhi did not make her any less Sindhi, but networking with other Sindhis helped her and her Sindhi friends feel part of the Sindhi community.

Other voices suggesting the rampantness of such gatherings include the following:-

“The men often meet to talk about politics and have dinner together although they are not related to each other. They work together....” (Sindhi from China)

“We see lots of familiar faces ... during weddings especially.” (Singaporean Sindhi)

“And if you go to their weddings or a Diwali Ball it, it makes one aware of being a Sindhi”. (Malaysian Sindhi living in Hong Kong).

“We had a Sind Ki Sham here in Singapore at the Sindhu House and it was really enjoyable.” (Singaporean Sindhi)

#### **4. Sociopersonalities**

The Sindhis also note that they appear to possess certain characteristics which signify their Sindhiness. These include the fact that they are:-

- adaptive (adaptable to any life style and seem to settle well in any new country or community they go to)
- outgoing, sociable
- feel nostalgic towards Sindh, and Sindhis (my feelings for Sindh and Sindhi people)
- always late for parties and dinners
- thrifty
- like to gossip
- greedy

Another marker which reflects the Sindhi personae is their accommodativeness towards other cultures. As one Australian Sindhi arguing that "being a Sindhi is more than being able to speak Sindhi" says : “We are deep at heart very conventional Asian, however very adaptable to the western way of life without loosing our Sindhi identity.

One Indian Sindhi wrote, “I am so proud to say that Sindhis have proven over the years to be adaptable to any life style and seem to settle very well in any new country or community they go to...

One Sindhi male in China wrote, “We, Sindhis, are able to adjust and mingle with all nationalities as we are so flexible and versatile. Not being able to speak our language is a bit of a handicap when we try to express ourselves more openly but it is certainly not a hindrance.”

A widely travelled Bangkok Sindhi Hindu wrote that the Sindhis are able to assimilate.

Some negative qualities emerge too in the data. One 3rd generation Sindhi Hindu girl from Hong Kong and currently studying in America wrote:

- Sindhis are stingy. when in the presence of Sindhis it is not necessary to speak in Sindhi to realize **their thriftiness**.
- Sindhis **gossip** a lot. again, no need to speak in Sindhi to realize this. Hearing countless aunties gossip about things that have no relevance to my life makes me acutely aware of the fact that I am Sindhi. The whole community knows each other - this can be rather annoying for the most part yet I guess this depends which region you are located in, for instance in Hong Kong, the Sindhi community is small. Try if you will, yet you cannot escape the common gossip... I would not be surprised if my Sindhi friend knew who was dating her uncle's sister's daughter's friend's son (if that makes any sense).
- Sindhis are '**generous**' -**giving of gifts**. I say 'generous' because most of the time, I feel like the receiving party is obligated to reciprocate by giving back a gift. anyway, this is not a custom that I tend to find with my other friends, even though some of my good friends are Indian.”

## 5. Religious and sociocultural practices

The religious ceremonies that usually involve community members tend to bind the Sindhi Hindu community together. These include:-

- religious practises like “asadiwar”and observing “cheti chand”
- celebrating Diwali with community members
- ceremonial rituals (weddings, funerals, childbirths)
- customs and costumes which are different from other dialect groups,
- “being vegetarian on Monday and on full moon - tend to associate that with being Sindhi”
- “There are enough Sindhi customs/practices (call it what you will) established, to the extent that not speaking the language does not make me feel as though I am missing out on anything”
- “our way of celebrating various festivals makes me feel Sindhi”
- “following certain important Sindhi customs and rites which were laid down by our forefathers long ago”

One lady from India wrote, “stories of my ancestors that are very unique to Sindhis e.g. *teejri, cheti, chand,saatein*” One Sindhi from China explained that the Sindhis go to the temple whenever the occasion demands. They do meet for lot of religious Sindhi satsangs.

The many customs and religious rituals peculiar to the Sindhis makes community members realise that they are Sindhi notwithstanding the fact that they do not use the Sindhi language. In fact this is nicely summed up by a 23 year old Sindhi girl from Hong Kong now studying in USA who says, “Speaking in English (or any other language), regularly as opposed to Sindhi does not make me feel any less Sindhi. There are enough Sindhi customs/practices (call it what you will) established, to the extent that not speaking the language does not make me feel as though I am missing out on anything.”

## 6. History

Their joint and common experience of things or the experiences of their forefathers makes them realise that they have a common heritage which include:-

- losing their homeland
- folklore
- certain stories, myths and anecdotes of the Sindhi race
- understanding Sindhi history

A widely travelled Bangkok Sindhi Hindu said that although she is able to speak Sindhi (and is proud of being able to do so), she believes that there are other variables such as stories of her ancestors unique to the Sindhis. She says, “... stories of the partition & hardships my parents & their families went through, reading up on the Sindhi civilisation” help her to be aware of her Sindhi identity

One Sindhi doctor from India wrote: “In the beginning I never realised that I am a Sindhi until my parents began telling us certain stories, myths and anecdotes of the Sindhi race. Even then I did not know what a Sindhi was until I went to India to do my further studies wherein I did some personal research into the Sindhi beginnings.”

Their pride in overcoming obstacles and not only surviving but thriving made one Indian Sindhi say, “Sindhi heritage is great, we have learned to live in other lands and succeeded very well despite losing our homeland.”

A Canadian Sindhi wrote, “Familiarity with history, culture and literature, may also be the other factors.” (to make up Sindhi identity)

## 7. Surnames

Historical and family names play a role in reminding Sindhis of their backgrounds. One Singaporean Sindhi wrote: “Our Sindhi names are also very indicative of us being Sindhis.” Sindhis are also identified through markers such as the Sindhi surnames which one Malaysian Sindhi noted as “ending in ...ani”.

## 8. Genetic Roots

One cannot run away from one's identity as a Sindhi. This is very nicely expressed by One Sindhi male who said "Not speaking Sindhi certainly does not make you feel less of a Sindhi just as the Chinese born and brought up abroad who cannot read and write Chinese do not feel less Chinese. You cannot be or feel other than what you are. You are born in a family, a culture, a nationality (nationality you probably can change) but you cannot be or appear to be other than yourself. If you do not wish to appear or call yourself a Sindhi then it is merely playacting.

A Canadian Sindhi wrote "I believe being Sindhi, does not necessarily mean being able to speak the language or use the language more or less often. It certainly is one of the factors but, I believe, the most important factors are genetic roots."

## 9. Dressing

Sindhi take pride in their dressing and tend to spend much on external displays of wealth. One married Sindhi Hindu female in her 40s from Malaysia but living in Hong Kong said, "Being a Sindhi makes one feel a Sindhi. Using the language is hardly important because frankly in today's times, the new generation hardly speaks the language... And if you go to their weddings or a Diwali Ball it, it makes one aware of being a Sindhi, the dress code they use and the diamonds they wear, makes a non-Sindhi feel like one is attending the golden globe award night in USA." A Singaporean Sindhi Hindu male in his early 50s wrote, "Sindhis like to dress in a glamorous manner...".

## 10 Socioeconomic status and entrepreneurship

Sindhis (apart from the ones in India) are generally perceived to be rich. As one respondent reports, "... if you went to a party where everyone is either into the textile, sundry, electronic or watch line, then you definitely know that u are at a Sindhi gathering." They are also well known for their entrepreneurship capabilities. One Indian Sindhi wrote, "Sindhis especially the business groups have succeeded in their business venture anywhere in the world," while a Bangkok Sindhi Hindu wrote, that the Sindhis have a "spirit of enterpreneurialship". A Singaporean Sindhi Hindu male in his early 50s, who is an English language newspaper manager wrote, "The Sindhi focus on business and business interests prevails."

One of the respondents forwarded an e-mail which reflected the international cultural norms of the Sindhi community and how they were perceived. It sums up the Sindhi personae.

AREN'T WE PROUD TO BE A SINDHI?

Greetings everyone, or would it be politically correct to say "Jhulle Lal". A rather long introduction, but bear with me and have a giggle. I am a very proud Sindhi. I have relatives living

in more places in the world than AT&T has connections to. Me and my family or relatives, will settle in any part of the world to make money.

I have to look at an atlas to find out where most of my relatives live. I have more frequent flier" miles than God. The in-flight crews of Northwest, United, Cathay Pacific or Japan Airlines, know me on a first name basis. The U.S. Customs in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco or Seattle, has already got me blacklisted" for carrying more stuff than I have declared.

I can order merchandise in at least 5 different foreign languages, and speak these languages more often than I speak Sindhi. Even though I get the best possible price on something.....I still complain.

I swear I was born the offspring of a Hinduja, but were given up for adoption at an early age.

I can calculate foreign currency exchange rates faster than the clerks at most Thomas Cook locations.

Attending a Sindhi wedding for me and my family is like attending a fashion show.....

Attending a Diwali Ball is like attending the Academy Awards.....

It is also where we have to dress to the hilt or will be considered a peasant. Diwali is celebrated as a beautiful holiday.....to count our blessings, and pray for more money.

We attended a Sindhi Wedding, where the preponderance of Diamonds is enough to rival the annual output of De Beers.

I anxiously attend parties or social engagements, for the mere fulfilment of discussing my business accolades.

When the price of Gold drops, my family goes into a stage of mass-depression. When the price of a commodity like.....Johnnie Walker "Gold Label" drops, we feel ecstatic.

My dream at night is about breaking into the Gold Bullion in New York City.

I have two bottles of Johnnie Walker "Blue Label" sitting in my bar. I have even more bottles of "Black Label" sitting in my bar. I believe.....The economy of Scotland, and its GNP, is solely determined by the total number of Sindhi Weddings that year, and the amount of Johnnie Walker consumed.

I have an Uncle that is either in the Suit Business, or the Jewellery Business. I have another Uncle that is in the Electronics business, Toy business, and the Garments business.

I have even more Uncles in businesses that simply sell everything, and can't even define the type of business that they are in.

The Status Quo is obviously not good enough. I eat Chinese food, Thai food, Indonesian food, Malaysian food, Korean food, or Italian food more often than Indian food.

I know more Chinese dishes, and Thai dishes, than Indian dishes.

I have one or more bank accounts in India, compounding at interest rates faster than the rate that bacteria multiplies on stale gulaab jamuns.

At the ripe age of three (3), I had the ability to distinguish a real Oyster-perpetual Rolex from a fake one.

As a Sindhi, I consider myself part of a high-society Indian Mafia.

My Dad drives a Lexus. My Mom drives a Lexus. My Uncle drives a Lexus. My other Uncle drives a Lexus. I believe.....The economy of Japan vs. Germany is reflected by the number of Lexuses vs. Mercedes-Benzes purchased by Sindhis in the last year.

I have one parent that is slightly overweight and has a "Sindhi-Belly"; usually caused by prosperity.

I have an Auntie that can spread gossip on the phone faster than any bulk emailing program currently available on the market.

Through nurturing, I learn at an early age that I have an insatiable appetite for wealth.

At age five, when my Dad asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up...?"

I answered, "RICH!"

## Conclusion

Culture is a word for people's "way of life", meaning the way they do things. Not everyone agrees on the meaning of culture. To the Sindhi community there are other values, apart from language, which represent the way of life of the community, gives them a sense of identity and helps with their daily social functioning. Culture to the community encompasses food, networking, dressing, surnames, religion, sociocultural practices etc. These are reflected in their meaning-making and helps them form a sense of what it means to be a Sindhi. Being connected to the Sindhi community gives them a sense of identity and makes them feel "Sindhi".

In an earlier study based on observations by the researcher David (1998) states that for the Malaysian Sindhi community language per se does not make up their core identity. This exploratory study also provides a similar picture of many of the Sindhis coming from different parts of the world. Being connected and having social and business ties and networks with other Sindhis is what it means to be Sindhi to the respondents interviewed.

## References

- David, M. K. (2001). *The Sindhis of Malaysia: A Sociocultural Account*. London: Asean
- David, M. K. (1998). Language Shift, Cultural Maintenance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of a Minority Community: The Sindhis of Malaysia. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 130, 67-76
- Daswani, A. (2000). The cultural heritage. Retrieved August 28, 2005 from the Sindhi internet resource. <http://www.sindhi-net.com>
- Dewan, R. (1987). *Deethnicisation: A study of language and culture change in the Sindhi immigrant community of Metro Manila*. Unpublished PhD thesis, De La Salle University.

- Detaramani, C. & Lock, G. (2003). Multilingualism in Decline: Language Repertoire, Use and Shift in Two Hong Kong Indian Communities. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 24 (4). 249-273.
- Griswold, Wendy. (2004) *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Spillman, Lyn (2001) *Cultural Sociology*. Blackwell Publishers: Great Britain.
- Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopaedia (1997). Marriage. Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia Multimedia CD. Microsoft.
- Macionis, J. J. (2001). *Sociology*: 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. NJ: Prentice Hall.

NOT TO BE CITED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION

[mayadavid@yahoo.com](mailto:mayadavid@yahoo.com)