

## CHAPTER 2

# THE BACKGROUND OF THE PUNJABI PEOPLE

### 2.0 Overview

This chapter introduces the Punjabi community in Malaysia. It shows their place of origin (as seen in Map 1. The State of Punjab. Appendix G), their migration to Malaysia and it shows how members of the community had to adapt to the new environment by adopting the English language in order to survive in the new multiracial society. It depicts the initial role of English as a means of survival in a multilinguistic environment. The latter part of Chapter 2, shows how the role of English developed in the time period after that to become so important that it has taken the status of first language among the Punjabi community, causing the mother tongue to move to a subordinate place. It closes with the effects of the shift from the ethnic language to the English language.

### 2.1 Historical background of Punjabis

This study is on the Punjabi ethnic minority found in Malaysia. The study first examines who the Punjabis are and where they come from.

The Punjabis are a minority North Indian group, whose roots can be traced back to the state of Punjab in the sub continent of India. The map of the state of Punjab (Map 1) shows the places of origin of this minority group. The Punjabis are actually made up of people from three major religious backgrounds, that is, Sikhs, Punjabi Hindus and Punjabi Muslims. The immigrants who came to Malaya were mainly from the districts of Amritsar, Chandigarh, Hoshiarpur and Patiala. (shown on Map 1). These immigrants came from both the rural (agricultural areas) and urban areas (administrative centres) of the districts. In the rural areas most of the people were just farmers, while in the urban areas some of them carried out trading in little shops.

According to Amarjit (1973), almost all the Sikhs who came to join the police force of the British colony were from rural areas, while the other religious groups who came later, did so as commercial immigrants and they were traders from the urban areas. These immigrants used Punjabi as their mother tongue but had some knowledge of the English language from the British Raj in India.

## **2.2 The Punjabi Language**

The Punjabi language originated from the Indic language of Sanskrit. Sanskrit is the oldest living Indo-European language that is now used chiefly as the sacred language of Hinduism. Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu are varieties of the same language.

The languages of Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu are dialects with differences in speech habits, different pronunciations of the same words and use of different words for the same thing. Sometimes although words are arranged in different ways, they are mutually intelligible. J.E. Schwartzberg (1978), in 'A Historical Atlas of South East Asia' points out that there is very little difference between what is described as Hindi and Punjabi and one could easily have argued a case for mutual intelligibility in the area.

Although it is mutually intelligible, many words used in the Punjabi language are provincial and unknown in other districts. For example, the word wife is "woti" in some districts like Amritsar, while others say "biwi", "joru" or "patni" depending on the province from which the speakers originated. The early migrants who came from the various districts of Patiala, Hoshiarpur, Chandigarh and Amritsar brought along their own dialects. According to Amarjit (1973), many of these people tended to form cliques according to differences in religion and dialects, although all shared the same culture and homeland.

### **2.3 Migration of the Punjabis**

The study looks into the history of this group of people who migrated from a Punjabi speaking environment to a new multilingual world. According to Amarjit 1973, the migration was not sudden but took place in stages, she says:

"They migrated to Malaya in three phases. During the first phase 1870s to 1920s the type of immigrants who came from the rural areas were principally of the illiterate class. The second

phase was broadly from 1920's until the outbreak of the Second World War, when the immigrants originated from the commercial and educated classes. The third phase took place between 1947 to 1953, when India attained independence in 1947 and the Punjab was partitioned between India and Pakistan thus displacing many Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims".

(Amarjit 1973: 4)

Through table 1, the study shows the total number of Punjabis who migrated to Malaya within the time period mentioned above, (1921-1947) compared to the total number of North Indian migrants. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the Punjabis according to religious groups during this period. This is to establish the fact that although the majority of North Indian migrants were Punjabis, they were made up of varying religious groups. It is clear, therefore that there was a large number of Punjabi migrants who settled in Malaysia between the years of 1921 and 1947. The numbers were rather large enough to maintain their mother tongue.

**Table 1. The number of Punjabis in Malaya 1921-1947**

	1921	1931	1947
Total Number of North Indian Migrants	21,759	34,156	42,109
Punjabi Ethnolinguistic Group	15,451	18,149	30,592

**Table 2. Religious composition of the Punjabis 1921-1947**

Sikhs	9,307	18,149	10,132
Hindus and Muslims	6,144	N	20,460
Total Punjabis	15,451	18,149	30,592

N= no information available.

(Amarjit 1973: 205)

#### 2.4 Occupation

In order to show the history of their migration and settlement in Malaya the study looks at the different religious groups of the Punjabi community.

According to Amerjit (1973), the British, who were the colonial rulers in Malaya at the time of migration, reserved special occupations for the different religious groups of Punjab. For instance, the Hindus were given clerical posts, while the Muslims were incorporated into the police and the Sikhs into the army. Some of the other Sikhs and Hindu Punjabis who followed their relatives on their own later, started out as cloth vendors, going about on foot peddling, hawking their wares both in towns and the rural areas of Malaya. Their main customers were labourers in the estates, clerks and railway employees who either could not afford or were otherwise unable to go to town to purchase textiles and other necessities. They mostly bought their wares from these "Bhais" as they called

them, on instalment basis. Frugal living and careful saving enabled these Punjabi vendors to set up and extend their areas of business in urban areas. Many of these Punjabi vendors later became textile merchants (e.g. Syarikat Makhanlal and Sons in Kuala Lumpur), provision merchants ( Sambhi Sdn. Bhd.in Kuala Lumpur) and traders dealing with import and export trade ( Gian Chand Sdn Bhd in Kuala Lumpur).

## 2.5 Needs leading to change

As history has it, the Punjabi community came in stages and took up employment with the British or began as businessmen in a multiracial, multiethnic and multilinguistic nation comprising, according to Khoo (1991), of 61% Bumiputras, 28% Chinese, 8% Indians and 3% others.

These immigrants spoke excellent Punjabi, which was their mother tongue, but according to several of the original migrants who are still surviving (Appendix B-interview 2), they found it difficult to survive using only the mother tongue. Putz (1992) observed a similar situation in Namibia in Africa where the people needed a language to link them with the neighbouring countries. He said that the people knew that Afrikaans will not take them anywhere so to break out of isolation and be part of the international community they needed English, the language of international communication.

Occupational necessity to communicate with the multilingual group in Malaysia made it imperative for the original Punjabi migrants to learn and use a common language, which in those colonial days, was English (Malaysia was

under the British Rule until 1957 when it attained Independence). This was to enable them to trade, to satisfy their own daily needs to fill in forms and converse with government authorities, as well as communicate with the other races. Initially, this was the role played by the English language, but later with the realisation that the mother tongue no longer served them as it had done before migration (Fasold 1984), the role as well as the status of English began to rise among the Punjabi ethnic group.

## 2.6 Distribution of Punjabis today

Where did the Punjabi people settle in Malaya? As can be seen from Map 2 (Appendix G, Map 2. Distribution of The Punjabi Community in West Malaysia), the Punjabis are found scattered all over Malaysia today. A few of those who had been originally employed as policemen, trustworthy security guards and in clerical posts settled in the small towns such as Taiping, Raub, Seremban and Kulai where they were working. They are found scattered from Penang in the North to Johore in the South. However, the majority of the Punjabi population who were businesspeople and professionals settled in urban areas like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Malacca and Penang. Their relatives who brought along a variety of skills later joined them. The subjects of this study are mainly concentrated in Kuala Lumpur and Malacca.

Unlike the original immigrants, who worked in the police, army and as small businesspeople, a large portion of the young generation are now professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and lecturers. Many others are successful

businesspeople running sports shops (G.S.Gill and Sons), textile shops (Amitbal Sdn Bhd), tour agencies (Paradise Tour and Travel), educational centres (Bangsar Tuition Centre, A-Tech.Institute), entertainment centres (Iguana in Bangsar, Dukes in Jalan Duta) and many other kind of businesses in Kuala Lumpur.

## 2.7 Development of English

The initial part of Chapter 2 showed how members of the immigrant Punjabi community adapted to the new environment. The latter part shows how English, which seeped into the lives of the Punjabi community, gradually rose in its role and status. Why did this happen? According to S. Connor (1995) a situation such as this occurs when there is encroachment on the territories of indigenous peoples, mass migration or when there is a desire to learn the dominant language of the world, notably English.

Since English was the dominant language during the British rule, the minority group, which in this case are the Punjabis, preferred to communicate with the other races in English rather than use the local dialects. The reasons were, firstly, they were familiar with English from the British "Raj" or rule back home, compared to the foreign languages of Malay, Chinese and Tamil, which were the dominant languages of the multilinguistic society in Malaya at the time of their migration. Secondly, they needed a language to link them with the ruling government in the new land, to enable them to reap more benefits while being in the good books of the rulers. To study the introduction and development of



English to its present role and status in the Punjabi community, the study looks at the early years of their settlement in Malaya.

### 2.7.1 Prior to 1970

Platt and Weber (1980) say that British English was the language of the government and administration during the colonial period. It was an important language of commerce particularly in trade with the British and other European firms as well as in local business negotiations at higher levels. It gave its speaker access to jobs of a certain status such as lower ranking civil service positions, sales jobs in larger stores, tellers in banks etc.

English developed among the people in Malaya through the English medium schools. The first English medium schools can be put into two categories: the free schools and the mission schools. The English medium schools of Malaya used English as the medium of instruction for all lessons and children were expected to speak English in the classroom. This made it compulsory for the new generation to learn English.

An additional stimulant to learning the language was that English was regarded as a prestigious language, the way to better employment, the language that opened up knowledge of the western way of life. In addition to this, Asmah Haji Omar (1976) says that the only tertiary education available at this particular period of time was in English. She says that those seeking higher education had no choice but to learn English because the University of Malaya established in 1949 in Singapore was an English medium University and required a good

command of English for admission. She says that later in 1961, when the University of Malaya was established in Kuala Lumpur, the medium of instruction was also English. Winter (1984) found that the minority groups in Western Europe and The United States of America also became conscious of the necessity for the speakers to learn the majority or standard language in order to be able to receive a higher education and thus get ahead in society. The limited geographical range of application of the mother tongue made them turn to English, as did the Punjabis in Malaysia.

Studies of the education system of Malaya indicate that the medium of instruction in this period was English. All the Punjabi children, together with all the children of the other ethnic groups, were sent to the English schools existing at that time. This step began the process of a gradual language shift from the mother tongue to English among the new generation who were receiving an English education.

### **2.7.2 Post 1970**

After the attainment of independence from British rule, there has been a considerable change in the function and status of English throughout Malaysia. English is no longer the only medium of instruction, offering a key to tertiary education and subsequently to higher paid employment. However, because of its international status, English remains as a language of considerable importance as stated by the Education Review Committee in 1960:

“English holds a dominating position in international

councils and commerce, in the textbooks and literature of the world. A command of it is one of our national assets.”

(Platt and Weber 1980: 158)

English language has now become an important second language in schools and institutions of higher learning. This is the national education policy of the new independent government of Malaysia. The study goes on to see the effect of this national policy on the Punjabis in Malaysia.

## **2.8 Effect of the change in the educational policy on the Punjabis**

Many of the first generation Malaysian Punjabis, in accordance to the pre-independence education policies, had an English medium education. For many, English gradually became the language used for free and easy expression of ideas among this generation and they began to use it in their homes as well as schools. The role of English, for the Punjabis, probably began as a means of communication in a multilinguistic society during early migration. Subsequently, the post 1970 period probably saw it becoming a mode of easy expression of thoughts among the new generation of English educated Punjabis.

This new additional role sees English gradually move out of the classroom to become a widely used language among this ethnic group. The fluency in English of this English educated generation would typically be better than that of the younger group who have undergone an education with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction and English as the second language. However, according to Asmah Haji Omar (1976) the level of proficiency in

English does not only vary according to the choice of an English or Malay medium education but also according to urban and rural schools.

In the education report made after the release of the 1998 SPM results, the Minister of Education states that Malaysian students from the urban schools, as evident from the analysis of the English results, generally have a higher level of proficiency compared to their counterparts in the rural schools. Asmah Haji Omar (1993) states that the proficiency in English in the urban schools is generally at a higher level compared to their counterparts in the rural schools.

The Punjabi children from the urban areas therefore, appear to have a greater fluency in the English language with comparatively more exposure to English films, newspapers, more contact with tourists and expatriates. In most urban settings, many Punjabis of the English medium education era frequently appear to use English with siblings and in some cases even with parents. Asmah Haji Omar (1993) says that it is normal for people of the same vernacular to converse in English with no legitimate excuse whatsoever but just because they can express themselves better in the language in which they were given their education. This additional role further raised the status of English from the mode for intercommunity communication to intracommunity communication as well.

Another catalyst to raising the status of English, could be the feeling among the Punjabis that the educated citizen needs to be multilingual, with English an obvious choice for one of his languages. Kachru (1986) who did a study of English among Indians states that most Indians, which includes the Punjabis, believe that education for all children must include an international

language. According to him the people's personal feelings and high regard of the English language is the main cause for the increasing role of English in their lives.

He states this when he says:

“Competence in English and the use of this language signify a transmutation, an added potential for material and social gain. One sees this attitude in what the symbol stands for. English is considered a symbol of modernization, a key to expanded functional roles and an extra arm for the success and mobility in culturally and linguistically complex and pluralistic societies. It internationalizes ones outlook. In comparison with other languages of wider communication, knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science and travel. In short English provides Linguistic power.”

( B. Kachru 1986: 7 )

## **2.9 The Role of the English Language among the Punjabis**

Urbanisation, affluence, education and the fact that the Punjabis are a minority group in a multilingual setting have resulted in the assimilation and use of English and the regional language of Malay. Khubchandini (1963) points out that English enjoys a high status in most of the Indian bilingual groups. She says that the individual skill of using English comes to symbolise the social status of the Indian. It is considered to be a pre-requisite to social advance. The role of

English is seen as a prestige symbol even among the Gaelic speakers in East Sutherland (Fasold 1984) and the people of Namibia in Africa (Putz 1992). This resulted in many Punjabis gradually increasing the use of the English language even in intracommunity communication.

Fishman (1964) in his theory, states that the dominant language will gradually, stage by stage, replace the mother tongue in all except the most intimate or private domains. According to Gal (1979), a society, where the habitual use of one language is being replaced by another, is experiencing a language shift.

Dewan (1989), in his writings explains that a shift away from the ethnic language is faster for the function of counting and reading and slower for the function of watching movies or listening to music. It can be observed that the third generation of Punjabis, although unable to speak very fluently in their ethnic mother tongue, can still enjoy watching Hindi movies and listening to Hindi songs. (The spoken versions of Punjabi and Hindi are similar. The major difference in these sister languages is in the accent and some lexical items. They are mutually intelligible as the variation is mainly in the script used. All Punjabis who understand Punjabi are able to understand Hindi and the various dialects of Punjabi found in Malaysia). While the communicative role finds English as the dominant mode, receptive bilingualism survives and hence, understanding of the spoken language remains for a longer period. As a result of this, the role and status of English in the entertainment sector faces a strong competition from the mother tongue.

Initially it was the migrant settlers who triggered the frequent use of English by accommodating their children's language choice. The second generation Malaysian born parents initiate the change themselves, as their fluency level in the mother tongue is very low. The research will prove that there has been a language shift and that English has become very important in the lives of the Punjabi people. Evidence in a research project done by Chitravelu (1985) indicates that English has displaced the mother tongue of most ethnic groups in urban areas. She states that in the urban areas almost every person knows at least one word of English and even those with very little education have a tendency to acquire and use English.

Chitravelu (1985) says that the role of English has spiralled because most of the people in the private sector carry out international business in English. In addition, legal firms, housing development firms, architectural firms and banks use literature which is mostly in English. The majority of professions have their training and literature in the English language. According to Asmah Haji Omar (1983), at unofficial levels, English is spoken in almost every aspect of Malaysian life, particularly in urban areas. She points out that due to its high social status and the important role played, both educated and uneducated members of various ethnic groups wish to acquire an ability to speak the English language.