Some misprints in the printed paper version have been corrected in this PDF version.

The identity politics of language and script in South Asia

CARMEN BRANDT

Multiscriptality in Delhi.

In many parts of the world, the writing system of a language hardly attracts any political attention. For instance, most European languages are written in the same script – the so-called Latin or Roman script – and neither English, French nor German nationalists would today claim this writing system only for their own language, or name it the English, French or German script. The predominantly monoscriptal situation in present-day Europe (with some exceptions such as the Greek, Cyrillic, Armenian and Georgian scripts) – owed to the education monopoly of the church and the importance of the Latin language and script in the past – leaves little space for identity politics surrounding writing systems. The strict separation of the Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian language after the breakup of Yugoslavia based, among other things, on diverging scripts – Cyrillic for Serbian and the Roman script for Bosnian and Croatian – is an exception. By contrast, there is hardly any South Asian region where writing systems do not play the role of a demarcator between languages, an identity marker, and/or an alleged stabiliser for small languages.

The 'Bengali script'

Although script hardly is a matter of discussion in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi, particularly Bengali intellectuals too should spare a second thought not only to language politics in general but also to script, when they are celebrating their legacy of the Bengali Language Movement and portraying Bengali[1] even today solely as a victim of other languages – initially Urdu, but more recently English and Hindi. Already the fact that most Bengalis will refer to the script of their language exclusively as the 'Bengali script', though it is used for many other languages as well, e.g. Assamese, Bishnupriya, Chakma,

Perso-Arabic script as an identity marker in Calcutta.

Meitei, Santali, etc. gives a glimpse of the dominant role of the Bengali language in the eastern part of South Asia. Whereas some of these languages had their own script or only an oral literary tradition until literacy was spread among its speakers, Assamese has, like Bengali, a long literary tradition in this script which Assamese speakers naturally refer to as the 'Assamese script'. In fact, the term 'Eastern Nagari' seems to be the only designation which does not favour one or the other language. However, it is only applied in academic discourses, whereas the name 'Bengali script' dominates the global public sphere. Still, when the International Organization for Standardization officially declared this writing system the 'Bengali script', the uproar among Assamese intellectuals came as no surprise.[2] Certainly, the common name of this script is not owed to any rightful entitlement based on historic developments. It is rather solely the result of the predominantly Bengali perception of this script caused by the high demographics of Bengalis and, above all, writings of Bengali linguists already during colonial times. While many Bengalis also tend to perceive other languages written in the same

Meitei Mayek on an election campaign poster.

Chakma in Eastern Nagari as well as in Chakma script with Bengali translation on a Buddhist temple in Rangamati.

script (the Eastern Nagari) as inferior, since those languages are allegedly written only with 'borrowed' letters, in other parts of South Asia some languages are actually written in several scripts. Though *one script for several languages* is an issue different from *several scripts for one language*, the socio-political reasons and identity formation processes behind the choice for one particular writing system have led to similar hierarchical perceptions of the languages concerned. In some cases, the perceived hierarchy of a language actually depends on the uniqueness of a script.

The strengthening of Punjabi through Gurmukhi

The most prominent example in this regard is the case of Punjabi and its three scripts: Gurmukhi, Nagari[3], and Shahmukhi (a variant of the Perso-Arabic script). While Nagari is mostly used by Hindus in India today, if they write in Punjabi at all, and Shahmukhi by Punjabi Muslims in India and predominantly in Pakistan, it is particularly the Gurmukhi script which has helped Punjabi to become a vibrant functional and literary language. However, apart from being currently associated exclusively with Punjabi, Gurmukhi owes its status to the formation of the religion nowadays known as Sikhism. Following the example of other contemporary (15th-17th century) religious movements – Bhakti and Sufism – which heavily influenced it (cf. Oberoi 1995), the preference for religious teachings in local languages was a notable feature of Sikhism. From today's perspective, Sikhism could have been subsumed under the categories of Bhakti or Sufism as well had it not been for its holy book – the *Adi Granth* – in which we find hymns composed in several languages, for instance Braj Bhasha, Hindi, Persian and Sanskrit, but overwhelmingly Sadhukkari, and only to a lesser extent Punjabi (Wessler 2009: 92). It was the Gurmukhi script, a modified Landa script otherwise used for

Chakma in Chakma, Eastern Nagari and Roman script, Rangamati.

Meitei Mayek in an advertisement, Imphal.

business purposes, chosen by the second Sikh Guru Angad (1504-1552), which helped this new religion to demarcate itself from other religious movements. Interestingly, even though the *Adi Granth* combines several languages, Punjabi – the native language of the overwhelming majority of Sikhs – written in Gurmukhi "became the single most important factor in the preservation of Sikh culture and identity […]" (Singh 2004: 81f.).

Though today Punjabi is for the larger part spoken in Pakistan, only in India does it enjoy a vibrant status as a functional and literary language. We can only speculate about what the present situation of Punjabi in South Asia would have been without the introduction of Gurmukhi. But, judging from today's situation of Punjabi in Pakistan, where it lacks official recognition and support, we can at least get a glimpse of a possible scenario. Sabiha Mansoor (1993: 126f.), for example, points out that Punjabi students tend to neglect their mother language, which many consider to be inferior to Urdu. In India, by contrast, besides the eminent role language and script play for Sikhs, another important step for establishing Punjabi as a vibrant functional language was its declaration as an official language of the newly created state of Punjab in 1966. Without Gurmukhi, Punjabi would have run the risk of being categorised as a dialect of Hindi; the language of the Hindus in this region has actually been officially classified as a dialect of Hindi, not the least because of their preference for Nagari, or at least for non-use of Gurmukhi.

The equation of Gurmukhi with Punjabi in a handicraft shop in Delhi demonstrates the importance of script and language for Sikh identity.

Urdu, Hindi and English in Lucknow.

Meitei and English on a shop signboard in Imphal.

Emblem of the Chakma King office in Rangamati.

Hindi, Urdu and English in front of the Bara Imambara in Lucknow.

The rise of Hindi and decline of Urdu in India

The problematics of language subsumption and delimitation are perhaps most apparent in the case of Hindi and Urdu, called by many scholars one language with two scripts (cf. King 1994) – Urdu in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script and Hindi in Nagari.[4] The separation of these twin languages can be traced back to the 19th century, a time when the emergence of nationalism in South Asia led to new symbols for real and imagined communities. The Perso-Arabic script, the dominant script for the language known until then under several terms – for instance Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu – was identified as foreign and Muslim, whereas the Nagari script served the demands of a resurgent Hindu elite in search of an authentic 'Indian' identity, including recourse to a past constructed on the basis of a discourse heavily influenced by Sanskrit-based Orientalist visions, which led also to the rejection of other scripts such as Kaithi, which was considered to be not sophisticated enough. The introduction of Nagari and conscious production of Hindi literature in this script has led to the decline of Urdu as a functional and literary language in India. In December 2010, the Urdu poet Javed Akhtar told me that though recurring Urdu literature hypes among urban elites – made possible by printing Urdu texts in Nagari – still ensure Urdu poets respect and income, the role of Urdu is on a continuous decline in India. My discussion with a young Muslim woman in Bombay on the present status of Urdu in India hit the nail on the head. She proudly stated that Urdu was her mother language, but later on confessed that she cannot read any Urdu literature. Like many other better off Urdu speakers, her parents preferred sending her to a Hindi medium school, while only overwhelmingly poor Urdu speakers fall back on Urdu medium schools in India. In this way, Urdu is of course still kept alive in its region of origin but rather on a spoken than written level, since poor students of Urdu medium schools hardly author any literature or use this language for administrative purposes.

The threat of Urdu as a national language

In contrast, Urdu plays a dominant and dominating role in Pakistan, even though it is spoken natively by less than eight percent of its population – primarily by the so-called Muhajirs, i.e. descendants of people who migrated to this part of South Asia from Urdu-speaking regions of India, predominantly during the partition of 1947. The condition of Punjabi hinted at above applies with slight deviations also for other languages in Pakistan: Balochi, Brahui, Pashto, Saraiki, Sindhi, etc. The neglect of these languages for administrative purposes, education, and literature is mainly caused by the exclusivist language policy of the Pakistani state, which leaves little space for other languages (cf. Ayres 2009). On the one hand, Urdu serves as a lingua franca in multilingual Pakistan but, on the other hand, it also degrades other languages due to the lack of official recognition and public support for these on a national level.

Not only does the language Urdu play an omnipresent role in Pakistan but also its script. Apart from English and thus the Latin alphabet in public space, Pakistan today can be considered a monoscriptal country, though several languages in this region were written also in other scripts before 1947, e.g. Punjabi and Sindhi. The adoption of the Perso-Arabic script, a writing system which often has an identity strengthening function for Muslim communities, is also observed in several Indian regions where it was for a while applied by Muslims for languages written otherwise in scripts of South Asian origin, for instance Malayalam and Tamil. But whereas for languages in India the Perso-Arabic script plays only one role besides other scripts, which has led to bi- or multiscriptal situations such as for Konkani[5], in Pakistan it has wiped out almost all other writing systems. Attempts to similarly dispose of the Eastern Nagari script – the so-called 'Bengali script' – in then East Pakistan were made in the beginning of the 1950s (cf. Umar 2000: 89f.). Actually, the strong resistance of Bengali intellectuals and politicians against Urdu as the sole national and functional language in Pakistan was one factor that had led to this idea. Since the replacement of Bengali by Urdu seemed to be beyond reach, the introduction of the Perso-Arabic script for Bengali could have added at least a 'Muslim' identity marker and given all languages in the newly established Pakistan a

homogenous look.[6] Unsurprisingly, the long and strong literary tradition of Bengali in the Eastern Nagari script and the resistance of people in then East Pakistan made this impossible.

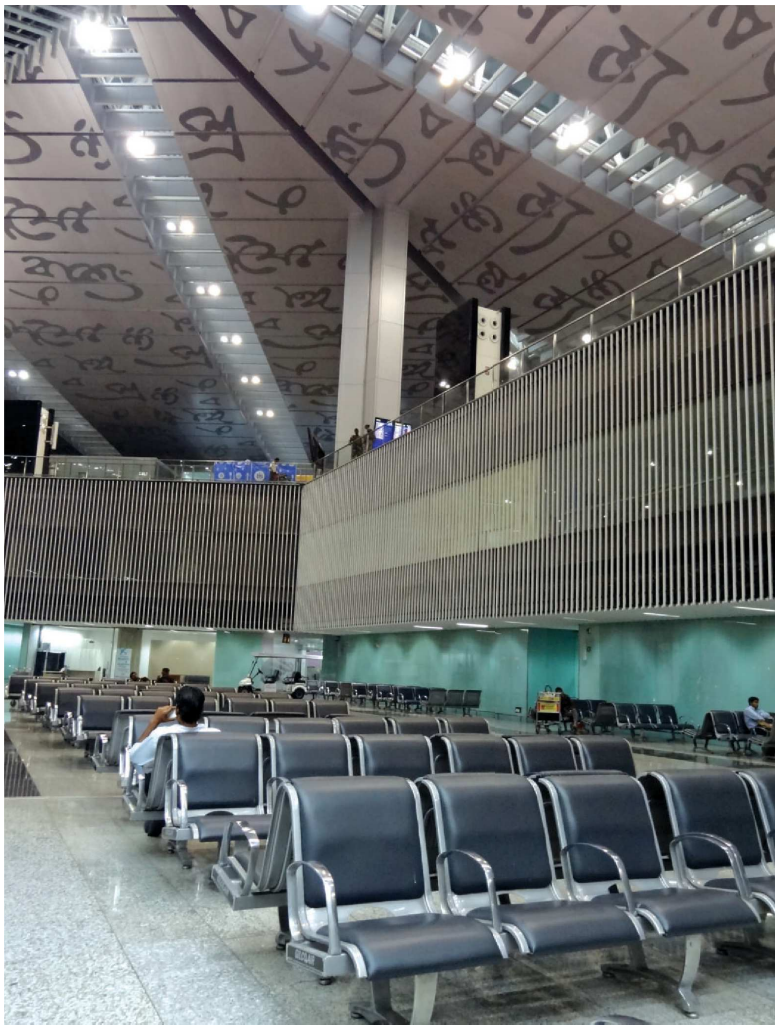
Meitei and the revival of its old script

However, in the past, the Eastern Nagari script itself has played a similar role in the east and northeast of South Asia. Apart from languages which had only an oral literary tradition and whose speakers have adopted this writing system often voluntarily, there are also cases in which the Eastern Nagari was enforced on languages that already had a literary tradition in their own respective scripts. A more recent example is Sylheti, a language which was dominantly written in Sylheti Nagari and only after 1971 degraded to the status of a dialect (cf. Kershen 2005: 147) for the sake of a greater Bengali identity in independent Bangladesh. Not only was Sylheti's status as a language challenged, but its speakers were also discouraged from using its script which as a result is hardly in use today. Conversely, the attempt of Bengali administrators during British colonial times to introduce Oriya education in Orissa only in Eastern Nagari ultimately failed. While the misperception of many Bengali and British scholars during the 19th century that Oriya is only a dialect of Bengali supported the endeavour to introduce the 'proper' script for this 'dialect' – similar to the introduction of Eastern Nagari for Sylheti –, Assamese and Bishnupriya were and are even today by many considered to be dialects of Bengali because they historically share the same writing system with Bengali. Speakers of the latter language are spread over several Indian union states in the northeast of India and Bangladesh but are mainly settled in multilinguistic Manipur where Bishnupriya has also only a minority status.

The state language of Manipur, Meitei (also Meiteilon and since 1992 officially Manipuri), is another prominent example of a language adopting the Eastern Nagari script. Though there is a lack of details about how the Eastern Nagari script replaced the original Meitei script – the so-called Meitei Mayek – we know at least that this process must be related to the spread of Vaishnavism among the Meiteis. According to Meitei Mayek lobbyists I have interviewed recently, the local Meitei king declared Vaishnavism as the official religion in the first half of the 18th century after he was converted by a Bengali Vaishnava from Sylhet. In order to establish the new religion and wipe out the old one, many temples of the local religion Sanamahism and most of its manuscripts written in the Meitei Mayek were destroyed and new writings related to Vaishnavism in Eastern Nagari introduced. Though Vaishnavism was already practised much earlier in this region and the introduction of the Eastern Nagari must have been a more complex process, this simplified narrative of Meitei Mayek supporters today, which seemingly serves the instigation of patriotic feelings among Meiteis, is widespread.

The Eastern Nagari script plays a dominant role for Meitei and had replaced the Meitei Mayek almost completely. Only since the 1930s, with the emergence of Meitei nationalism, has this script been experiencing new attention. Meitei nationalism not only centres around native traditions, but is also fed with sentiments against other groups which are considered to be a threat to Meitei culture. While some ethnic groups in Manipur – so-called 'hill tribes' – are often portrayed as being culturally inferior to Meiteis and thus considered to be no danger to the nationalist agenda, the Bengali language, its writing system, and the Bengali people and their culture and religions seem to be the main targets of Meitei nationalists. Though this actually reflects the same concerns many other groups in the east and northeast of South Asia have, the movement against Eastern Nagari, in this case self-evidently labelled the 'Bengali script', serves to make such fears very visible.

Since script became an important identity marker for the Meiteis in the 20th century, various agents had been trying to re-establish the old script, but until recently with little success. Only in April 2005 was the revival of the Meitei Mayek accelerated when militant



Eastern Nagari at the airport in Calcutta.

Meitei Mayek and Eastern Nagari on a signboard in Imphal.

lobbyists burnt down the central library of Manipur in Imphal in order to emphasise their demand to introduce this script officially. Nearly 145,000 books, written mostly in Eastern Nagari, were destroyed. The government knuckled under and acceded to the demands only one month later and, most importantly, introduced the Meitei Mayek in textbooks for first and second graders in 2006 (Singh 2011: 28). Since then, textbooks in the Meitei Mayek for the next grade are introduced every year, which has produced a generation of Meiteis that can read their language only in the Meitei Mayek, whereas their older relatives have command only over the Eastern Nagari script. Although the spread of the Meitei Mayek among the population is thus still very limited, the visual impression one gets when visiting Imphal, the capital of Manipur, is very different: the Meitei Mayek can be seen on almost every signboard, advertisement or publication. After talking to several shop owners the reason for this became obvious: they are afraid that their signboards otherwise will be destroyed by Meitei Mayek lobbyists.

Though there are Meiteis not linked to these militant activists who are eager to learn the Meitei Mayek, I have met as well many Meiteis who show no interest at all to learn this script. Among other reasons, this lack of interest seems to be owed to the circumstance that there are hardly any publications in the Meitei Mayek – for instance only one newspaper – most books, newspapers and magazines are still printed in the Eastern Nagari script having the Meitei Mayek only on the front page as a visual identity marker. But regardless of the attitudes of Meiteis towards the Meitei Mayek today, with the help of government support the fate of the Eastern Nagari for Meitei seems to be sealed.

Chakma and its revived script

Chakma constitutes a similar case: many of its speakers take pride in an old script, though the majority can neither write nor read it since Chakma is today predominantly written in Eastern Nagari. Although George Abraham Grierson classified Chakma as a Bengali dialect in his *Linguistic Survey of India* in 1903 (Grierson 1968: 321), this publication is a cornerstone for the revival of the Chakma script, since he provided an overview of the writing system to which Chakma traditionalists refer overwhelmingly to this day. However, besides diverse attempts to introduce Chakma in its own script (actually closely related to the Burmese writing system) in various schools run by NGOs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the only government institution already active in implementing this script is the Tribal Cultural Institute (also ক্ষুদ্র নৃ-গোষ্ঠীর সাংস্কৃতিক ইনস্টিটিউট) in Rangamati which has developed textbooks, a font and keyboard. The revival of the Chakma script must be seen in the context of a widespread trend among ethnic minority groups – often so-called 'Adivasis' – in the whole of South Asia for whom script serves today not only as an important identity marker, but also as a demarcator from dominating languages, and as an alleged stabiliser.[7] But contrary to, for instance, Meitei and its script, which are heavily backed by the government of Manipur, similar efforts for minority languages in Bangladesh seem to be naïve.

Though the National Education Policy of 2010 states that '[m]easures will be taken to ensure the availability of teachers from ethnic groups and to prepare texts in their own languages so that ethnic children can learn their own indigenous languages' (Ministry of Education 2010: 15), such measures are yet to be implemented, and matters do not look promising. Besides those for the Garo, Marma, Sadri and Tripura languages, textbooks for Chakma and, above all, in Chakma script too are planned to be introduced in 2015.[8] However, the goal behind the introduction of these textbooks is not the preservation of these languages or their scripts; these measures aim at reducing the high rate of early dropouts among ethnic minority children and increasing their chances of catching up with higher education in Bengali. Thus their mother language is to

serve only as a bridge medium during the first few years of pre-school and primary education. The future of minority languages in Bangladesh is thus not automatically ensured.

After talking, for instance, to several Chakmas and Santals, I realised that though their own languages and in the case of Chakma, script is indeed an important identity marker, especially poor members of these communities are very much aware that Bengali and its script is unavoidable for social upward mobility, and hence, they often favour education in Bengali. It is apparent that the economic and political realities in Bangladesh leave hardly any space for cultural and linguistic heterogeneity. Thus the role of Bengali in Bangladesh today, as well as in the rest of east and northeast South Asia in the past, can easily be compared to that of Hindi and Urdu – dominating languages which contribute to the decline of other languages and writing systems in their respective regions of political power.

Meitei in Meitei Mayek and Eastern Nagari at the Manipur University library.

Notes

1 This article, written in English, uses English language names as a matter of course, not those of the original language, thus 'German' and not 'Deutsch', 'French' and not 'Français', 'Greek' and not 'Elinika', 'Armenian' and not 'Hayeren', 'Georgian' and not 'Kartuli', etc. – and therefore also 'Bengali' and not 'Bangla'.

2 Also in the Unicode, this script is listed only under 'Bengali', while the two graphically deviant characters for Assamese are referred to as 'Bengali letter ra with middle diagonal', for ৰ(ra), and 'Bengali letter ra with lower diagonal', for ৱ(va), instead of 'Assamese letter ra' and 'va'.

3 Also referred to as 'Devanagari'. The usage of the term 'Nagari' follows authors like King (1994) and Rai (2001). The main reason for preferring Nagari over Devanagari is that, though Devanagari is used in manuscriptology to differentiate this Northern script style from the Southern Nandinagari, in modern terminology the term *deva* (Sanskrit 'god, godly') has been applied to *nagari*, the name form previously common , to impute a divine aura to this script (because of the nearly exclusive Western Orientalist use of Nagari to print Sanskrit) and hence a status of superiority in relation to other scripts in India.

4 In addition to the diverging scripts, the vocabulary of Hindi and Urdu vary at the formal level. Hindi prefers words of Sanskrit origin, while Urdu draws extensively from Perso-Arabic and, in sporadic cases, Turkic sources. However, in daily life, speakers of both languages might not even realise that they speak two 'different' languages.

5 Konkani is the official language of the Indian union state Goa, but is also spoken in other parts of India and even Pakistan. Depending on the dominant writing system of the region or the religion of its speakers it is written in the Latin, Perso-Arabic or Nagari scripts, or the scripts otherwise used for Kannada and Malayalam.

6 Interestingly, Ayub Khan proposed to write all Pakistani languages, also Bengali and Urdu, in the Latin script following the example of the introduction in 1928, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, of the Latin alphabet for Turkish (until then written mainly in the Perso-Arabic script). Unsurprisingly, this attempt, which can be perceived as the secularisation of language standing in strong contrast to the dominant state identity of Pakistan based on Islam, ultimately failed.

7 For other examples of script revival and invention, e.g. Santali, in this context see Brandt (2014).

8 Interestingly, Santali was dropped from this plan after controversies between Santals preferring the Eastern Nagari script and those lobbying for the Latin alphabet emerged. This actually portrays the divide inside the Santal community along religious lines – between those who practise the traditional Santal religion and/or Hinduism, and Christians respectively.

References

- Alyssa Ayres; 'Speaking Like a State: Language and Nationalism in Pakistan.' Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Carmen Brandt; 'Script as a Potential Demarcator and Stabilizer of languages in South Asia', in: Hugo C. Cardoso (ed.): 'Language Endangerment and Preservation in South Asia.' (Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication 7.) Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press: 78-99, 2014.
- G. A. Grierson (ed.): 'Linguistic Survey of India, vol. 5; Indo-Aryan Family: Eastern Group, pt. 1: Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese Languages.' Repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968.
- Anne J. Kershen : 'Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields 1660-2000. (British Politics and Society.)' London/New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Christopher R. King,1994: 'One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India.' Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- Sabiha Mansoor 1993: 'Punjabi, Urdu, English in Pakistan: A sociolinguistic study.' Lahore (et al.): Vanguard Books.
- Ministry of Education, 2010: 'National Education Policy.' Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- Harjot Oberoi 1995: 'The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition.' 2nd impr. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Alok Rai 2001: 'Hindi Nationalism.' New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Harimohon Thounaojam Singh 2011: 'The Evolution and Recent Development of the Meitei Mayek Script', in: Hyslop, Gwendolyn; Morey, Stephen; Post, Mark W. (eds.): 'North East Indian linguistics, vol. 3.' Delhi: Cambridge University Press: 24-32.
- Pashaura Singh, 2004: 'Sikh Identity in the Light of History: A Dynamic Perspective', in: Singh, Pashaura; Barrier, N. Gerald (eds.): *Sikhism and History*. New Delhi (et al.): Oxford University Press: 77-110.
- Badruddin Umar, 2000: 'Language Movement in East Bengal'. Dhaka: Jatiya Grontha Prakashan.
- Heinz Werner Wessler 2009: 'Ādigranth', in: Arnold, Heinz Ludwig (ed.): 'Kindlers Literatur-Lexikon, vol. 1: A-Bak,' 3rd edn. Stuttgart & Weimar: J.B. Metzler: 92-93.

CARMEN BRANDT is a lecturer cum research fellow at the South Asia Section of the Institute for Oriental Studies, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, since 2007. Apart from teaching Bengali, Hindi and other courses, she is the author of Educating Santals: The Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Joypurhat (Bangladesh) and the Issue of Cultural Alienation. Carmen has written her PhD on the perception of itinerant communities in Bengal in fictional and non-fictional sources. She is also interested in the media landscape of Bangladesh and India and focuses in her recent research project on the socio-linguistic and political dimensions of script in South Asia.

All photographs taken by the author.