

### Diachronic Spirantization and Deaspiration in Sylheti

Sylheti has merged the dominant four-way Indo-Aryan T TH D DH laryngeal (see Pandey 2014 for an overview) to a two-way T D contrast (IA /p p<sup>h</sup> b b<sup>h</sup> t t<sup>h</sup> d d<sup>h</sup> ʈ ʈ<sup>h</sup> ɖ ɖ<sup>h</sup> c c<sup>h</sup> ɟ ɟ<sup>h</sup> k k<sup>h</sup> g g<sup>h</sup>/ > Sylheti /ɸ b t d (t) (d) s z x g/). It seems to have balanced the loss of contrast in stops with the creation of fricative phonemes, leading to phonemic pairs like /ɸ b/. In this paper, I reconstruct the diachronic development of the Sylheti obstruent inventory through the interaction of two processes—spirantization and deaspiration, presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Spirantization and deaspiration of IA stops in Sylheti*

		<b>Spirantization</b>	<b>Spirantization and deaspiration</b>	<b>Deaspiration:</b>
<b>labial</b>	voiceless voiced	p > ɸ	p <sup>h</sup> > ɸ	b <sup>h</sup> > b
<b>dental</b>	voiceless voiced			t <sup>h</sup> > t d <sup>h</sup> > d
<b>retroflex</b>	voiceless voiced			ʈ <sup>h</sup> > ʈ ɖ <sup>h</sup> > ɖ
<b>palatal</b>	voiceless voiced	c > s ɟ > z	c <sup>h</sup> > s ɟ <sup>h</sup> > z	
<b>velar</b>	voiceless voiced	k > x*	k <sup>h</sup> > x*	g <sup>h</sup> > g

\*except adjacent high vowels

In modern Sylheti, aspiration as a contrastive feature is lost. Spirantization only affects voiceless grave consonants, with both plain and aspirated labials and velars /p p<sup>h</sup> k k<sup>h</sup>/ affected. The palatals' change of /c ɟ/ > /s z/ is different from the grave stops as the voiced one is also affected, and there is a change in place along with spirantization. Evidence from other Eastern Bangla varieties also suggests a separate process of depalatalization whose output converges with that of spirantization. I propose two hypothetical trajectories of the application of these changes:

- 1) Spirantization occurs first, with two possible trajectories:
  - a) aspirated stops are spirantized first (p<sup>h</sup> > f) before spreading to the voiceless series (p > f); deaspiration occurs independent of spirantization
  - b) plain stops are spirantized first (p > f), followed by deaspiration (p<sup>h</sup> > p); subsequent spirantization of deaspirated stops

In both these scenarios (1a and 1b), there is an intermediate stage where the contrast between the underlying aspirate and plain stops is maintained, i.e., a situation with a chain shift.

- 2) Deaspiration occurs first; spirantization affects the grave stops, perhaps allophonic

In scenario (2), the four-way contrast is levelled to a two-way contrast in one step, leading to a merger. I argue that it is likely that spirantization as a complete sound change preceded deaspiration to maintain sufficient lexical contrast in intermediate stages (Boersma 2000). The merger was a result of the extension of these processes from positional to context-free changes, and the likely trajectory is the one in (1a). I further use evidence from the occurrence of the two processes in neighbouring Eastern Bangla varieties to support my analysis. This is because there is little historical evidence of Sylheti phonology due to its

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status as an unwritten low variety that is in a diglossic relationship with Standard Bangla in both India and Bangladesh.