

Rabha: An observation of language loss in West Bengal

Khabir Ahmed ¹, Dr. Sathi Roy Mondal ²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Sociology Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam University, Indore.
Email: ahmedkhabir81@gmail.com¹

²Assistant professor at Department of Sociology Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam University, Indore.
Email: sathibira29@gmail.com²

ABSTRACT

Language loss is associated with one of the endangered languages i.e. that are at the risk of falling out of use as their speakers die out or shift to some other language. North- East frontier of India, being home to a multitude of small ethnic communities, present a number of cases related to language endangerment. Many of the small ethnic languages in this region are gradually losing its vitality at an alarmingly faster rate due to number of factors. Rabha is one of the indigenous ethnic groups of the Northern part of West Bengal belonging to the Mongoloid race of people. They are predominantly found in the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and the plain areas of Darjeeling district and Cooch Behar. Other than North Bengal, they are now living at Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Kamrup, Shonitpur and Darrang districts of Assam; and West Garo-Hills district of Meghalaya and Bangladesh. They are also scattered in a small number almost in all other districts of Assam and six other states of North Eastern India. The 2011 census of India put the number of speakers at 31,119. There are many debates on the origin; ethnic identity of the Rabha, in spite of that it is agreed by most of the scholars, and historians that the Rabha originated from Rabha, a tribal community belonging to Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson, 1903). Today, Rabha have lost their language and shifted to Bengali as their mother tongue. But, the loss of a language is an irremediable loss for all humanity, for each and every language embodies the unique cultural and historical wisdom of a people. In this context, the focal point of the analysis undertaken for the present paper is the sociolinguistic status of Rabha in West Bengal. The aim of the paper is to explore the historical, economic, political, cultural and psychological reasons which contributed to the loss of the language of Rabha.

Keywords: Language loss, Rabha, language endangerment, West Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

Grierson (1903:100) has put them in the Bodo sub-group of Assam and West Bengal branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group. Many of the tribes and sub-tribes of this language group have lost their speech, and nowadays, most of them have preferred to speak Bangla language as mother tongue. Rabhas are one of such

tribes who are divided into different clans or branches. These Rabhas branches are Rangdani, Maitori, Totla, Kocha, Bitolia, Dahuri and Shong& etc. The first three branches are said to be superior to others, especially concerning social status.

Every community mentioned above has its own sociocultural basis, which have been formed with their primitive believes and knowledge, these are also connected with the religious traditions, which are also closely related to rituals. The socio-cultural basis have been created by the way of explanation of some natural phenomena and incomprehensible relations between cause and effect. There are many supernatural legends from which may social customs have been created. The social life is also controlled by these customs and traditions.

Most of the basic things of the Rabha culture and religion, including legend, myth, ritual and philosophy are derived from Tibeto-Burman. A partial influence of the tantric buddism has fallen on the myth and mythology of the Rabhas.

The Rabha tribe of North-Eastern India is a section of the Bodo group of the Kiratas (Indo- Mongoloid). They are little known tribe but interesting in many ways. At present, they are mainly living in Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, North Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. They have also occupied in Assam like Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Shonitpur, Bongaigaon and Darrang districts.

Language Loss

Language loss is associated with one of the endangered languages i.e. that are at the risk of falling out of use as their speakers die out or shift to some other language. Linguist Michael Krauss estimated that 90% of the world's languages would be severely endangered by 2100. Linguists estimate that of the approximately 6,500 languages worldwide, about half are endangered or on the brink of extinction. When a language is lost, a world perspective is lost too, as a language is the carrier of different aspects of a culture.

There are several factors which lead to a language loss. Julia Sallabank (2010) points out the following four causes for language endangerment:

1. Natural catastrophes, famine, disease: for example, Malol, Papua New Guinea (earthquake); Andaman Islands (tsunami)
2. War and genocide, for example, Tasmania (genocide by colonists); Brazilian indigenous peoples (disputes over land and resource); El Salvador (civil war)
3. Overt repression, e.g. for 'national unity' (including forcible resettlement): for example, Kurdish, Welsh, Native American languages
4. Cultural, political, economic dominance, for example, Ainu, Manx, Sorbian, Quechua and many others.

North- East frontier of India, being home to a multitude of small ethnic communities, present a number of cases related to language endangerment. Many of the small ethnic languages in this region are gradually losing its vitality in an alarmingly fast rate due to number of factors. Rabha, one of the indigenous ethnic groups of the North Eastern part of India also falls in this category.

Factors leading to loss of Rabha language

Some of the factors which contributed to the loss of language of Rabha were observed as under:

Political factors

In the time of Koch kings of Kamata Cooch Behar, Naranaryan and his brother Shukla- Dhwja (Chila Roy) conquered almost all the North-East India in the last part of the 16th century. They placed in every part of their newly conquered areas a group of Rabha people for defence and to rule the area. But after the death of great Koch empires the Koch kingdom was broken into pieces except Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Goalpara, Rangpur and Garo-hills. Other areas were conquered by the local leaders. The Rabha settlers did not come back to their homeland thus a small numbers of Rabha people are still living in many ares of the North Eastern India.

Religious factor

The emergence of higher class of people in West Bengal and the spread of Hinduism also contributed partly to their language loss, as they started following Hindu rituals as they most of them have become hindu by religion.

Language attitude

Attitude towards a language play a major role in language maintenance or loss. Negative attitude towards a language is one of the root causes which leads to language death or loss. Rabha, as they are the minority group of people living alongside the dominant language of the state, Bengali, most probably their attitude towards their own language was discouraging and they felt inferior to speak inn their own language which eventually lead to their language loss.

No written history

One of the major factors which contributed to the loss of Rabha language is because they don't have a written record. Rabha is an oral language and they don't have any written history in their own language. Had they had a written record, it would have been easy for that language to develop a program of reviving the language. As it is an orally transmitted language, when it came in contact with the Bengali language, which was a powerful language during the time of Ahom rule, they gradually got assimilated with the Bengali people in every aspect and finally forgot to retain their own language.

Conclusion:

Thus, in the case of Rabha, factors which contributed to the lost of their language can be seen as political cause, religious cause and their attitude towards their language. In this manner it can be said that ensuring positive attitude among the community towards their language is of utmost importance. Negative attitude towards a language can be seen as one of the evils which contribute towards language loss. Hence, it is of utmost importance to ensure positive attitude towards their language or dialect lest it gets completely wiped away. Each language embodies their own unique knowledge, once the language is lost, the knowledge system itself gets lost, and once the language is lost, it's very difficult to revive a language.

REFERENCES:

- Abbi, A. (2001). *A Manual of Linguistic Fieldwork and Structures of Indian Languages*. Freebadsts & Muenchen Germany: Lincon Europa.
- Census of India. (2011)/ www.unsusindia.gov.in
- Chatterji, Suniti Kumar 1926. *The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*. Calcutta: Rupa& Company. Vol.I, 1986
- Grierson.G.A. 1903.*Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. V (Ind0-Aryan Family - Eastern Group)*, Part I. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass. 1968.OA AAA Grierson, G. A (ed.) (1903-28) "Linguistics Survey of India". Vol- III, pt. III, Reprinted 1967-68, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi- Varanasi, Patna.
- Labov, William. 1963. The social motivation of a sound chane. *Word* 19. 273-309 Saha, R.M. (2015). *The cultural heritage of the Rabhas*. Kolkata:Anjali Publications.
- UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. 2003. *Language vitality and Endangerment, UNESCO*.