

The Linguistic Situation of the Tribal Languages of Assam



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Abstract: Multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic people inhabit in Assam. Amongst these languages Assamese language is being used as a state-language as well as means of communication in Assam. Moreover, Assamese being the main medium of instruction in govt. schools, every student receive formal education in the Assamese language irrespective of their multilingualism. The tribal language of Assam is used among the particular tribe only. These languages lack heritage as there is no script for the same. Some languages are written with the help of the script of other languages. Albeit, the languages could not be opulent in case of written literature. Moreover, the languages have much adversity, for which languages face arduous challenges in the path of development. The current unprecedented development of science and technology, the expansion of transportation and communication as well as educational development etc. has made this challenge more forceful. Also the restricted use of the languages has led to their endangerment. In this case the current situation of these languages of Assam, the problems of tribal languages as well as the development of the language and the obligations towards nurturing these languages are discussed in this study. This paper also describes the degree of endangerment of the tribal languages of Assam and assesses its vitality with reference to the factors proposed by UNESCO. At the end of the study we can conclude in at to keep alive these languages, the govt. as well as the integrated tribe should make proper language planning and take all necessary steps. The only appropriate and useful reliable language for present and future will encourage and attract the future generation to use the same.

Keywords: Tribal language, Challenge, Language problem, language planning, Linguistic situation, language development.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Indwelling with varied languages, the linguistic demography of Assam is marvelous. The state is a meeting place of three major language families: Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic. In this multi-lingual state the Assamese language of the Indo-European language family has been positions as the state language and lingua-franca. The tribal languages of Assam are of Sino-Tibetan origin. The scholars have classified the Sino-Tibetan language to Tibeto-Burman and Thai-Sin. The native languages of Tibeto-Burman origin used in Assam are – Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, Deori etc. and of the Thai-Sin origin are Khampti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, Turung. These languages have some common attributes (Bhimkanta Boruah:2003)

- The members of these languages are members of particular tribe and the language is limited within the tribe.
- These languages are mutually abstruse and for public interaction they generally use the Assamese language.
- Some of these languages are mainly tonal. The words of these languages are monosyllabic. For which the native speaker of other language can't easily capture it.
- In the pronunciation of these languages, the appearance of the short and long term vowel is dissimilar. That means by use of long and short term vowel, it can make different meaning. This characteristic does not have in the Assamese language.

The unwritten (other than the languages of Thai-Sin branch) as well as the tradition of not writing these languages had led to the loss of its place in the integrated society extensively. Moreover, the lack of written literature, lack of lexicon-grammar, the linguistic minority, receiving education in a second language as a medium of instruction, the scarcity of exercise of native language among the new generation, the process of urbanization, the mutual abstruse, the extreme effect of Assamese or other dominant language etc. has led these languages the path of danger. If we do not take necessary steps considering these problems in near future, there is every possibility, that the area of applying these languages will shrink or the possibility of the extinction of these languages has also been expressed. In this case, these tribal people are emotionally surrounded by profound crisis of existence. In this study, an attempt has been made to make the vigilant people alert and conscious by highlighting the problems and the current existence of these languages.

A. Aims and Objectives

- To discuss the principal problems of the tribal languages of Assam.
- To highlight about the current as well future linguistic situation of the tribal language.
- To discuss about our obligations towards resolving the problems of the tribal languages of Assam.

B. Limitations of the Study

In this study, instead of discussing distinctly the problems of individual tribal language of Assam, a general discussion of problems of all the tribal languages of Assam has been discussed.

C. Method of the Study

For this study, the necessary datas has been collected through Observation method.

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The relevant datas have also been collected from various books, experimental archives and internet. In discussing the subject matter, Descriptive and Analytical method are used mainly.

II. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

A. The Principal Problems of the Tribal Languages of Assam

The problems of which the tribal languages are suffering stand as the main obstacle on the path of development and upbringing of these languages. These problems can be classified and discussed under the following heads –

Unwritten Language

To keep language alive and the main tool to conserve its history is script. Language is limited in light of time and space. To liberate a language from this limitation, script is of utmost necessity. With the help of script only the language of mind can be preserved giving it a literary form. Literature carries the identity of a particular race. Against afresh with the help of scripture, a language proceeds towards the path of development with a definite identity and the language gets established with the help of the practice of writers or intellectuals. But other than the languages of Thai-Sin neither of the languages has no any script of their own. On the other hand, though the Thai-Sin languages have script, there is no rich tradition of opulent writing. This is the first and foremost problem of the tribal languages of Assam. In accepting a new script, it is necessary to keep relevance the pronunciation rule of the language. In this case, there is the necessity of special study of the languages. For the time being, these languages were tried to be written in amended Roman script or Devanagari script. Well, for the fewer no. of literate people, it could not meet the expected reader society. As a consequence, the people also had to be disappointed by not getting proper response from the reader.

Lack of Written Literature

Literature is the pillar of a race. The mental, intellectual, social, cultural, ethnical dimensions of a society are expressed by its literature. In this connection, none of the tribal languages has any developed and rich custom of written language. Due to the lack of any written literature, the historical study of the evaluation of these languages to the present form has not been possible. Moreover, written literature has affluent impact on the development and expansion of the language. For such inadequacy, these languages couldn't establish it as a medium of educational instruction in many places.

Use of Second Language as a Medium of Instruction in Education

The growth and expansion of tribal languages of are still in a static situation as these languages haven't got any recognition as a medium of instruction in education. Because the growth of a colloquial language depends mainly

on the expansion. Only the Bodo language of Assam has been recognized as a medium of instruction up to post-graduate level. On the other hand, the languages like Mising, Rabha, Dimasa, Deori, Khampti, Turung, Phake etc. are limited within a single subject till the primary level. If a language gets recognition as a medium of instruction, many ways of various studies and research of the subject in that language opens up. But as a consequence of not getting recognition, various direction of the study of tribal languages of Assam is still unturned.

Impact of Globalization and Urbanization

As a consequence of the current globalization and urbanization process, the tribal languages of Assam are suffering for the peril of existence. Currently it is seen that most of the tribal people are coming out of the pastoral arias and are attracted towards urban life. As an impact of the urban life, there has been visible change in the oral language of these people. Most of youth of the new generation even know nothing about their own language and culture or a few of them suffer from inferiority complex. Moreover, as they opt for second language for higher education, there is a considerable change in their language for join impact of other languages. On the other hand, there are some parents take prides in learning other languages in lieu of mother tongue. Consequently, such children can't play any role in safeguarding of these languages.

Linguistic Minority

Assam is a state of combination of Aryan and Non-Aryan. Before the advent the Christ various people of varied community like Australian, Negro and Mongoloid etc. came to Assam and inhabited with full unity. At the beginning, the people of Mongolian tribe didn't settle permanently. They kept on changing their habitation in search of livelihood. Consequently, for changing their habitat, the nexus of the earlier resident detached and they turned to be linguistic minority. At present the number of the native speaker of tribal language is also not satisfactory. Because a large number of speakers of a community can be protect and maintain their language by regular use in daily life. According to the tribal languages of Assam, the native speakers of other languages don't feel to learn these languages or there is not any necessity to learn it. These languages need to struggle for identity as a consequence of the impact of other language around as well as the social and cultural effect.

Lack of Lexicon-Grammar

The complete lexicon-grammar of a language is noteworthy. But the study of the tribal languages of Assam is note done in a sufficient way because of the trend of the colloquial use. The special study of a language enables to clarify the dialects or forms of regional languages and plays a role to give a synergetic form. In the lack of such study, the users of regional language don't want to give recognition to other regional language.

Consequently, there comes a lot of hindrances in completion of the rules of grammar or dictionary. Due to the lack of the study of tribal languages of Assam, the study of grammar and dictionary has not been expanded. Moreover, at the school level, though these languages are being recognized among the integrated tribes, lack of books and magazines are the result of these reasons.

Mutually Recondite Language

One main hindrance, in the path of the development of the tribal languages of Assam is mutual abstruse. Instead of being of the same language family, due to the lack of proper study and the limitation of the language to a particular tribe, the language is quite recondite for the people of other tribe. Therefore, in that language, if the literary study is done with the help of other’s script, the native speakers of other language do never read it.

Inhabiting as in Island

If the inhabitation of the tribal people is observed, it can be seen that, most of them live within the same tribe or clan. Though the people are enclosed by the Assamese language, for example, Bodo speaking people inhabit in lower Assam is mainly in Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Kamrup, Nalbari etc. In the same way, the native speaker of Mising, Karbi, Rabha, Dimasa etc. are also enclosed by the Assamese language. These people protect communication with the native speaker of the languages for the sake of education, business etc. In this case, these people are bound to be bilingual by acquiring Assamese as the integrated language. Therefore, various parts of the Assamese languages have been mixed up with their languages. This has threatened the attribute of these languages. For example, the tribal languages of Assam were mainly tonal language, but at present of toneless Assamese language, the tone of the Mising language has been vanished.

B. The Present and Future Probable State of the Tribal Languages of Assam

In this study the situation of the tribal languages is discussed based on the three perspectives. This are;

- (i) Language Problem
- (ii) Language Use and Maintenance
- (iii) Language Attitude

In the Perspective of Language Problem

Language is just like the heartbeat of a race or society. The identity assembled experience as well as the heritage of a nation is implicit in the language. But the overall and rapid development of human civilization and science and technology has raised a tough and big challenge on the face of all the minority feeble languages of the world as well as the larger tribal language of Assam. The present civilization is based on science and technology. If a nation or race can’t move forward adapting with the advanced civilization, there is the every possibility of the extinction of language, culture of that race. The possibility is more intensified in case of language, which can’t preserve in written forms as well as languages with less study and practice. The tribal languages of Assam are already standing on such kind of possibility. Because a language survives on the need of its usage. If a language can’t fulfill the need of usage of present and future of a society or race, it can’t survive in the long run even with utmost care. In a recent publication of UNESCO, the pioneer organization of UNO, in ‘Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’ (2011) has included 2700 such endangered languages. The UNESCO has classifies the world’s languages on the basis problems the languages have faced. The classifications are as follows:

Table 1: Degree of Endangerment of Language (UNESCO, 2011)

Sl. No.	Degree of Endangerment	Characteristics
1	Safe	The languages, which used by all ages, from children up.
2	Vulnerable	Maximum number of children speak their language, but in the specific domain (e.g., home) it may be restricted.
3	Definitely endangered	Children may not be use their language in the home as ‘mother tongue’ in near future.
4	Severely endangered	Language is used by the older generations like grandparents; but the next generation e.g. mother, father generation may understand it only and they don’t speak or use the language to their children or among themselves.
5	Critically endangered	Only the grandparent and older generation speak the language to a limited extent or occasionally.
6	Extinct	Nobody can speak or understand the language. That means every speakers are passed away.

Amongst these along with North-Eastern languages of India, the tribal languages of Assam have also found place. Amongst these the Tai-Phake and Tai-Aiton are the severely endangered. The languages are most endangered which are only spoken by the grandparents and understood by the second generation and they have left speaking with the third generation in the same language. The present number of native speaker of Tai-Phake and Tai-Aiton is limited to 2000 only. Deori, Mising, Tiwa, Kachari etc. are definitely

endangered languages. Because the new generation of these tribal languages do not use it as a means of communication and the children have also abandoned to use it as their mother tongue. According to the information published in the spreadsheet of UNESCO, the number of native speaker of Deori is 28,000, for Mising it 5.5 lakhs. On the other hand it is around 59000 and 28000 for the Kachari and Tiwa respectively.

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The tribes which are using a language, accordingly with place and environment, such languages are categorized as vulnerable languages. Karbi, Bodo, Rabha, Dimasa etc. have been enlisted in the spreadsheet of vulnerable languages. As per the data of the spreadsheet, the present number of Bodo speaking people is around nine lakhs. Karbi speaking people is around 4.2 lakhs. On the other hand it is 1.12 lakhs and

1.5 lakhs for Dimasa and Rabha respectively. It is notable that, the Tai-Ahom language has been extinct owing to such situation. Therefore, the tribal languages may gobble towards the path of death, if proper steps are not taken to conserve it. According to 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger' (2011) the degrees of endangeredness of the languages of Assam are as follows:

Table 2: Endangered Languages of Assam as per Degrees of Endangeredness (UNESCO, 2011)

Name of the Languages	No. of Speakers	Degree of Endangerment
Bodo	900000	Vulnerable
Mising	550000	Definitely endangered
Karbi	420000	Vulnerable
Rabha	150000	Vulnerable
Dimasa	112000	Vulnerable
Bishnupuria (creole)	72899	Vulnerable
Manipuri		
Kachari	59000	Definitely endangered
Deori	28000	Definitely endangered
Tiwa	28000	Definitely endangered
Tai-Khampti	13000	Vulnerable
Bagani	12000	Critically endangered
Singpho	5000	Definitely endangered
Tai-Aiton	2000	Severely endangered
Tai-Phake	2000	Severely endangered

In the present time a language can survive only the basis of use in all domains of their daily life and the language will have to transfer from generation to generation. In this case, the community of a language should have positive attitude towards their mother tongue. Based on the liveliness and activeness or the impassive quality of a language, it can be measured various degree of endangerment, which are assessed by the UNESCO i.e. from safe to extinct. Regarding the tribal languages of Assam, it is seen that the knowledge i.e. understanding and speaking skills of the languages are not properly transferred from one generation to others, especially which are living in the urban areas. Therefore, it is a huge challenge to protect and maintain the languages for upcoming future. That was the past, when all members of the community's people had interacted each other using their own language. But today it has not seen. A language expresses the cultural heritage, social and ethnic identity of the community and also reflects the knowledge, which is collected years by years. This specialty defines a community and separates it from other community people. But very few of each speech community speakers of Assam speak their own mother tongue in the maximum domain of their daily life, but some of the language speakers use their own mother tongue for only private and restricted communications. On the other hand the urban people, which are belong to a tribal community using and adopting a dominant language i.e. Assamese, Hindi or English and also following the culture of the specific speech community.

In the Perspectives of Language Use and Maintenance

A Language can survive through the Proper maintenance and use. In this case, every speaker should have the proficiency in all of the Language skills. The speaking and writing skills are assessed as the productive skill. Language proficiency depends upon the ability of the above two

language skills. A language is used in various purposes, occasions and domains, which are very essential for every language. Besides the domains like home, education, business, religion, working place (Office, court) etc. there are many new and emerging domains in the present time. For the better growth and maintenance a language should be used in the entire new domain i.e. literature, print media, electronic media (television, radio), internet and the new media etc. Based on the flexible use of a language UNESCO has categorized six different degrees.

- Firstly, the dynamic language, which is used in all the new domains.
- Secondly, the robust/active language, which is used in most of the new domains.
- Thirdly, the receptive language, this type of language is used in many new domains.
- Fourthly, copying language, this language is used in some of the domains.
- Fifthly, the minimal language, this type of language is used in a few of the new domains only.
- Lastly, the inactive language, which is not used in any of the new domains (UNESCO, 2003).

Most of the speech communities of Assam like Bodo, Mising, Rabha, Deori, Singpho and Karbi people have tried to expand their language by introducing as a medium of instructions in education. In this case, only Bodo language has got the recognition till the master's level in Gauhati and Bodoland University and also can write research paper or thesis for pursuing Ph.D. or M.Phil. degree. The Bodo language is being used as an official language in Bodoland Autonomous region.

The Indian constitution also gives a special status as a scheduled language for the better development of the language. At present, the language is being written using the Devanagari script since 1963. But in media including radio programs, television and internet the language does not have broadcast satisfactorily. Therefore, Bodo should be kept as robust/active language category. Because in most of the new domains the language have been used. Besides Bodo, the above mentioned languages as well as Khampti, Phake, Aiton, Turung and Khamyang are used as a subject at primary level schools only, but till present these systems are not expanded satisfactorily. Also in media these languages have not been used. Only in Missing, 20 minutes of duration a program is being broadcasted under the title of 'Karpung Puli' on every Wednesday at 7.15 through the centre of Dibrugarh Radio. So, accordingly, these languages can be kept under the 'grade 1' as the languages are used only in a few of the new domains. For maintaining the vitality of a language it should have applicable as a medium of instruction in education domain. It is remarkable that all the dominant language have rich writing traditions. There are not scarcity of literatures, grammars, dictionaries and all written documents, which materials focuses the strong vitality of the respective language. Which language has rich oral literatures and traditions, there should have the education system, by which the language can make the vitality for survive in upcoming future. The languages, which have not any script for writing, they should have adopted a script as per the pronunciation system of the language. Books, magazine and other written materials should be prepared and completed as per the proper planning. It also brings socio-economic growth and linguistic awareness to the community. Among the tribal languages of Assam Bodo language has reached the position as majority of the Bodo speakers studied the language from primary level to post-graduate level. And also have done research works like M.Phil. and Ph.D. in the medium of Bodo language. There are sufficient dictionaries, grammars, texts and literature in this language and also used the language in administration in the Bodoland territorial region and used as a medium of instruction at some colleges and university level. Though Bodo language has all the accessible materials, but in media the language is not regularly used. Besides Bodo, the Chino-Tibetan origin languages of Assam are adapt a practical orthography to develop the languages and some materials are being written. Though the languages are a part of the primary school curriculum, but till now it has not properly done. On the other hand, the Tai origin languages have their own script and older religious written materials also exist, but there is no rich tradition of opulent writing. Moreover, these languages are not used in school curriculum.

In the Perspective of Language Attitude

The attitude of the native speakers becomes the deciding role for maintaining a language properly and effectively in a consolidated way. Positive stance of the native speakers of a certain language community only can increase the longevity, language vitality, language planning, policy of their

language etc. through its regular use. Language attitude towards their own mother tongue and other language always indicates about bilingualism, code mixing and code switching, people's language selection, natural instinct of a certain community towards language change, language maintenance etc. specially, language attitude becomes a significant subject for study when it is about promotion and extension of a language spoken within a minority speech community and determining its contemporary and impending positions. Regarding the language attitude UNESCO has also categorized six degrees, which are as follows:

- Firstly, the grade five: In this situation the each and every member of the respective community value their language and wish to be promoted.
- Secondly, the grade four: In this situation most of the members of the community support to maintenance their language.
- Thirdly, the grade three: in this situation many speakers of language support to maintenance of their language, but other members are unconcerned or they may even wish to language loss.
- Fourthly, the grade two: in this situation some speakers support language maintenance; others are unconcerned or they may even wish to language loss.
- Fifthly, the grade one: in this situation only a few speakers support to maintenance of their language; others are unconcerned or they may even wish language loss.
- Lastly, the grade zero: in this situation there are no any members who don't cares if their language is lost; all member support to use a dominant language. (UNESCO, 2003)

The attitude which people have towards different languages, dialects, accents and their speakers. Such attitudes may range from very favourable to very unfavourable, and may be manifested in subjective judgements about the 'correctness', worth and aesthetic qualities of varieties, as well as about the personal qualities of their speakers. Language attitude may have important effects on language behaviour and on language change. (Peter Trudgill, 2003:73) Regarding language attitude of the tribal people of Assam we have seen that most of the members of each speech community have positive attitude towards their language as well as their culture and they heartily wish that their language will get proper development and growth. But in the present days the evolution of science and technology, fast growth of transportation and communicating systems, wide spread of mass media, the mutual relation, mutual dependence and momentum are raised between various speech communities and ethnic groups. As a result the tribal people have come in contact with various communities and languages and compelled to use other dominant language i.e. Assamese, Hindi or English. In 'The Bilingual Situation of the Mising Speech Community of Assam: Sociolinguistic Study', an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, the researcher has tried to investigate the attitude of the Mising speech community towards their language and culture.

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He found that most of the speakers (80% above) from the community have shown a positive attitude towards their language and culture. They also wish and prefer about the teaching-learning process of the language and support for the expansion of education in the medium of the language. The attitude of the Mising speech community towards broadcasting programmes in Mising language through mass media for the maintenance and growth of the language is also seen to be positive. (Gakul Gogoi, 2017) Such results of the study, we can conclude that the majority of the tribal people have positive attitude towards the expansion and growth of their own language. On the basis of such positive distinctiveness the tribal languages of Assam can include under the 'grade 4'.

III. APPLICATIONS AND DUTIES IN RELATION TO THE LANGUAGES

To solve the problems of which the tribal languages of Assam are suffering, proper language planning as well as implication of the plan is of utmost necessity. Measures to be taken with proper language planning covering both corpus and status of the languages. The readers to be encouraged and attracted to buy and read both the rudimentary and translated literature of these languages by eminent publications. In this case, to procreate readers, it is the utmost necessity to teach the way of reading and writing the languages to the particular people speaking the languages. In these, the govt. or the conscious educated native speaker should take proper steps. Importance to be given to the expansion of the language through mass communication and broadcasting. Along with this, the integrated language speaking students should be compelled to take education in these medium even from basic primary level, they should be made vigilant about the language, the languages to be constructed making it apt for future. We can't hope for the future generation to study a language with respect to the nationalism feelings an unessential language.

IV. CONCLUSION

Base on above discussion we can summarize the main points as follows:

- Each and every tribal language of Assam is alive as colloquial form and all languages belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family.
- The principal problems, which are affecting on the languages, are: unwritten language, lack of written literature, use of second language as a medium of instruction in education, impact of globalization and urbanization, linguistic minority, lack of lexicon grammar, mutually recondit language, isolation etc. These factors make the languages as endangered and the languages face arduous challenges in the path of development.
- Based on the language use and users UNESCO has included these languages as endangered language. Besides Bodo language each and every language has not got the recognition as the instruction in formal education. Because the Assamese language is used as the medium of instruction in govt. schools of Assam

and most of the tribal people have taken education in the medium Assamese language. Also in media like radio, television, internet these languages have not been used. Therefore, the tribal languages of Assam have not expanded and growth likes other dominant and vital languages.

- Most of the tribal languages of Assam have survived to develop and progress their own language. But only Bodo language has achieved the success. For practical use most of the languages adapted a prominent orthography to develop the languages and some materials are being written. But inability of reading and writing competence in the respective language, the languages have not maintained and developed in proper way.
- Most of the language speakers from the respective community have shown their positive attitude towards the language. Attitude towards broadcasting various programmes in their languages through mass media i.e. television, radio or new media for the growth and development of the language is also seemed to be positive. On the basis of such positive approach of the tribal communities will be very fruitful while the language has reached in dangerous situation and while the maintenance and development will have required in upcoming future.
- In the present days it is seen that the practical demand and necessity of tribal languages are decreased among the new generation of the respective language speakers. For which in near future, the languages may face great challenges in protecting and maintaining their existence. For such feature, complexities may be arising for maintenance and development of the languages.
- To solve the problems of the tribal languages of Assam we should have taken proper language planning as well as implication of the plan covering both corpus and status of the languages. And also give importance to the expansion of the language through mass communication and broadcasting; provide textbook, grammar and dictionary, proper language policy from the primary level of education etc.

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