Language Retention and Change among the Immigrant Tea Garden Labourers of Assam, India

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Background

Indian Tribes display a very high degree of diversity in their language affinity. Despite the relative isolation suffered by these tribal communities, there have been areas of contact in which give and take between the tribal and the non-tribal languages have continued throughout history. The geographical patterning of tribal languages[1] suggest that along the zone of contact between them and the non-tribes, progressive interaction has resulted in the fusion of linguistic elements on either side. The incidence of bilingualism and multilingualism among the tribes has increased phenomenally.

A striking feature of the language scene in tribal areas is the growing shift[2] in language affinity of the tribal communities. This fluid situation in which the tribes are losing their linguistic identity and are being identified with languages spoken by other tribes or the dominant regional languages of the states in which they have been living is observed in many parts of India. It may be assumed that as tribal/non-tribal interaction was growing, a section of the tribal population shifted to other dialects/dominant languages with which it had no traditional affinity. This shift to the dominant languages of the regions of their habitation indicated a process of language shift and assimilation into the regional languages.

The language shift was however, not necessarily from a tribal to a non-tribal dialect. In fact, several tribal groups shifted over to other tribal dialects as contacts between them were growing fast. As a result, they lost their own traditional dialects. Ahmad (2002: 310) notes three main dimensions of language shift taking place among the Indian tribes. First; there are a number of tribes who speak a dialect with which they are traditionally identified. This is a case of language retention[3]. Second; there are cases where tribes or a section of the tribes declare a regional language as their mother tongue. This is evidence of continued process of language shift indicating gradual assimilation of the tribal group into the dominant regional language. According to Ahmad, tribal regions where the process of regional development has brought tribes face to face with the non-tribes have witnessed this phenomenon more significantly. Third, the tribal groups living

in the periphery of their traditional areas of concentration have tendency to declare as their mother tongue a language which is spoken by a dominant tribal group or the official language of a neighbouring state. This process indicates that the tribes are getting exposed to other tribal/regional languages. As a result they are getting assimilated into these languages.

While language shift has been a major process/problem in tribal areas, it is remarkable that a very significant proportion of the tribal population in India have been able to retain their language. The 1961 Census recorded that as many as half of the tribal population of India retained their own dialects as mother tongues. There are many tribes who have been able to retain their mother tongue despite pressures of various kinds. The situation however varies from tribe to tribe and from region to region. Three distinct regions in India may be identified as far as the degree of language retention among the tribes is concerned. Language retention is more or less cent per cent in areas of tribal fastness in which tribes live in a state of exclusivity (e.g. the North-East). Around 25-60 per cent tribes retain their mother tongue in areas of tribal-non-tribal intermingling (e.g. mid-Indian tribal belt and Assam). Very few tribes retain their mother tongue in other areas where tribes have been assimilated into dominant cultures of the region of their habitation.

The problem

The foregoing description of the language situation in the tribal areas of India provides only a broad pattern for the tribal people living in different parts of India. Given this broad pattern of the language scene, the present paper however, confines itself to a specific problem of language change and retention among the labourers working in the tea gardens of Assam. A large-scale migration of a community from its home state to another state may lead to language attrition, though Indian communities never came under this threat, despite large movements from one state to another. Language maintenance is the hallmark of Indian migrants. (Abbi: 2001:240)

The problem of language shift and retention however is significant among the numerically smaller communities, tribes and other such groups who have left their traditional place of residence for one reason or other. They are unable to retain their cultural identity and as a consequence their linguistic identity as they have to interact

with a dominant culture group in the process of their socio-spatial interaction and adjustment. Such groups more than the others are faced with the problems of assimilation or absorption. As a response to these situations and as a defense mechanism, they adopt various tools in retaining their linguistic identity by way of bilingualism or multi-lingualism. Where the pressures are too high for whatever reason, they end up with a complete switch over to another language. However, these processes are never uniform either socially or spatially. There are significant variations observed between the sexes and among people of different age groups. Locational factors too exercise powerful influence on the process of language change. The present paper makes an attempt to understand this complex process of language change[4] among the labourers in two selected tea gardens of Assam.

The tea garden labourers of Assam, the subject of the present research, came from outside the region and were faced with a difficult situation with regard to maintaining and preserving of their cultural/linguistic identity. They had to make several adjustments in the process of their socio-spatial interaction in an alien environment. The present research aims at getting a deeper insight into the structure and content of the pattern of their adjustment by taking language change and shift as a clue.

The main objectives of this research are to understand the pace of language change taking place among the tea garden labourers with a particular reference to the development of bilingualism, multi-lingualism and shift to other languages; to examine the propensity of the change as it varies between sex and age-groups and among communities and to explain the pattern of change in the context of tea garden labourers' social and cultural adjustment and interaction in an alien environment to which they were forced to come a century and half earlier.

Only two tea gardens in Assam namely Dikorai and Pertabghur Tea Estates of Sonitpur district were selected for an intensive study. The study is mainly based on data collected through field investigation conducted in these two selected gardens. Stratified random sampling has been employed to identify 30 per cent of the total population classified by their ethno-lingual identity. If a community is represented by two families, it has been excluded from the sample. Respondents have been selected from different labour lines and from different distance zones from the nearest town. Care was taken to

include in the sample respondents belonging to three major age cohorts (6-18, 19-49 and 50 years and above). Table-1 presents the percentage of population belonging to different ethno-lingual communities residing in the two selected gardens.

Table-1 Proportion of Major communities in the Sample Gardens

Community	% to total population	
	Pertabgarh	Dikorai
Munda	19.29	19.7
Oriya	16.31	26.8
Khariya	3.15	5.58
Guwala	4.03	4.47
Oraons	--	7.88
Mahali	3.15	6.31
Santhal	5.78	7.03
Teli	10.17	--
Bhumij	4.38	1.57
Jullah Muslim	5.61	2.06
Kaya	2.4	--
Panika	1.92	3.5
Others	23.82	25.1

Only the communities common to both the gardens are mentioned in the table and the category representing the "others" include the uncommon ones. As many as 22 communities in Pertabghur and 19 communities in Dikorai Tea Gardens were enumerated. Mundas accounted for the largest ethnic group in Pertabghur while the Oriyas constituted the second most numerous ethnic groups. Together these two communities accounted for a little less than 40 per cent of the total population in Pertabghur Tea Garden. The other important communities in this garden include the Telis, the Santalis, the Jullah Muslims and the Bhumij.

The Oriyas are the most numerous community in Dikorai Tea Garden followed by the Mundas.

Historical Background

The tea gardens in Assam in general and the selected gardens in particular have been the areas where the immigrant population constitutes the majority. The process of immigration began during the colonial times and continued in the post Independent era owing to unavailability of local labour. The tea garden labourers came into Assam after annexation of Assam by the British (Taher: 1993). Several England based companies started tea gardens since 1837. Initially, forced by the inimical attitude of the local

Assamese people, they recruited Chinese labour from British settlement in Singapore (Borpujari: 1985) but later found Indian labourers from mid-India more profitable. These labourers were brought from diverse social, ethno-lingual and economic background from a wider region in Eastern India comprising tribal areas of Bihar (now Jharkhand), Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh as the local people were found unwilling to work in the tea gardens. Thus started the introduction of the system of importation of immigrant labourers to Assam, which eventually culminated in the formation of the tea garden labour community. These immigrant tea garden labourers were called *Coolies*, a term since prohibited from official use, and constituted a body of "legalized serfs". Most of them were tribes and were brought to work in the tea gardens either by force, kidnapping or by fraud and were forced to remain tied to the gardens without much interaction with the neighbouring areas or with their home and community. Most of them continued to live in clusters of their community affiliation leading to continuation of their language and culture for a longer period than expected. However, living together within the garden forced diverse ethno-lingual groups to develop a composite language called *Sadri* for inter-ethnic communication. This was possible through a mixture of all languages. These tea garden labourers lived a life of misery with low wages and extremely poor health and educational facilities throughout the colonial period and this further isolated them from the larger communities. While intra-garden interaction increased, their external contacts were few. Increase in their population and with mechanization in tea gardens in the post Independent era forced many of them to seek work outside the tea gardens which now provided fewer employment opportunities and this resulted in some external contacts to the tea garden labourers. Since much of the immigration was family based, continuation of the mother tongue was a distinct possibility and it restricted possibility of language shift. Social relations such as marriages could still be practiced within the community. All these developments in the tea gardens added a new ethnic type to emerge in the broad spectrum of the Assamese culture complex and the tea community slowly adapted itself to the dominant culture through different route. Language change was a felt necessity. The labourers became bi-lingual and multi-lingual in their strive towards adjustment in the alien land.

Socio-Linguistic Characteristics

The socio-linguistic characteristics of the tea garden revealed that the multi-ethnic social composition of the tea garden labourers has provided an ideal background for the development of bilingualism and multi-lingualism among them living in conditions of semi-isolation. The residential segregation adopted by the colonial managers as a strategy for their control in the past however contributed to the maintenance of their mother tongue in some communities. The influence of the dominant regional language, i.e. Assamese acts as a powerful influence in the process of bilingualism or multi-lingual character of the labourers. Socio-cultural interaction within the gardens has paved the way for the growth of a new mixed language known as *Sadri* acting as a *lingua franca*. The spread of literacy and education among the labourers in a language other than their mother tongue has been a relentless force in the process of language change and shift. This is particularly evident in younger generation and those who are literate. The role of occasional, weekly or daily market centres have also played a significant role as a spatial factor in bringing diverse ethno-linguistic, cultural and racial groups together and creating suitable conditions for language change among the tea garden labourers. A major factor in the process language change is the near total absence of any link of the labourers with the place of origin and consequent culture loss. Inter community marriages too have contributed in no uncertain manner in enhancing language change among the labourers. The generally deplorable conditions and low socio-economic position of women is a factor explaining sex differential in the process of language change.

Nature of Language Change

Data on selected tea gardens revealed that a very large proportion of the labourers have already shifted to other languages or are in a process of shifting (See Tables-2 and 3). Such a process is more pronounced among communities which are of very small size. A critical population size seems imperative to retain one's own mother tongue for a long time. Small numerical size of the population in some communities seems to have forced them to adopt a different language and assimilate with a larger group rather than aggressively maintain their identity through language retention. On the other hand communities with larger population size have been able to retain their hold over their

original mother tongue to a very great extent while becoming bilingual or multi-lingual in
the process of their adjustment to an alien cultural environment.

Table-2A; Pertabghur: Inter Community variation in Language Shift

Community	% to total Pop.	% speaking Mother Tongue	% not speaking mother tongue	Remarks
Munda	19.3	61.7	38.3	28.3 As, 5.5 H, 5.5 Or
Oriya	16.3	58.1	41.9	30 As, 11.9 H
Bhumij	4.4	36.0	64.0	40 As, 12Or, 8Sa, 4 G
Khariya	3.15	44.5	55.5	38.9 As, 11.1 Or, 5.5 Ma
Teli	10.17	36.2	63.8	44.8As,16.4 Or,2.6H
Mahali	3.15	44.5	55.5	27.3As,16.7H,11.5K
Sabor	1.75	40	60	30As,20Or.,10M
Prajab	3.33	42.1	57.9	36.8As,15.4Or, 5.7M
Ghasi	2.10	0.00	100	50As,25Sa,16H,9K
Kaya	2.45	42.8	57.2	42.7As,7.4H,7.1Or
Modi	1.22	0.00	100	42.9AS,28.6H,28.5G
Santhal	5.78	44.4	55.6	18.2As,21.2Kh,16.2Or
Guwala	4.03	47.8	52.2	34.8As,8.7H,8.7Ma
Jullah Muslim	5.61	0.00	100	45.8As,13.6H,30.1K,10.5Kh
Khodal	1.4	0.00	100	50As,25H,25Or
Sonar	1.01	50.0	50.0	33.3As,16.7Or
Phulenda	0.87	0.00	100	80As,20H

As: Assamese, H:Hindi, Or: Oriya, M: Munda, Sa: Santhali, Kh: Khariya, Ma: Mahali
Source: Field Survey

Table-2B ; Dikorai: Inter Community variation in Language Shift

Community	% to total Pop.	% speaking Mother Tongue	% not speaking mother tongue	Remarks
Oriya	28.8	48.4	51.6	31.2 As, 12 H, 5G 3.4M
Munda	19.7	42	58	35.5 As, 8.5 H, 9.5Sa,4.5Or
Bhumij	1.57	38.8	61.2	52.8As, 8.4H
Mahali	6.31	38.5	61.5	46.1 As, 9.6H, 5.8 M
Baraik	3.27	62.9	37.1	29.6As, 7.5Ora
Mulli	1.21	0.00	100	60As, 40Or
Khariya	5.58	45.6	54.4	39.5As, 7.5 H, 4.3Or, 3.1Ora
Panika	3.5	0.00	100	61.4As, 19.7G, 10.3H, 7.6Or
Guwala	4.7	39.6	60.4	44.5As, 7.5H, 5.3Or, 3.1Ora
Ghasi	1.4	0.00	100	75As, 25M
Khumbha	0.90	0.00	100	75As, 25M
Oraon	7.9	48.1	51.9	36.1As, 6.7Sa.3.7G, 3.5H, 1.9Or
Santhal	7.03	50.0	50.0	41.6As, 4.6Or, 3.8H
Rouhtia	1.33	0.00	100	63.3As, 36.7Or
Jullah Muslim	2.06	0.00	100	53As, 29Or, 18Sa
Sabor	2.06	47.0	53.0	35.4As, 17.6Ora
Sonar	2.18	38.4	61.6	50As, 11.6 Or
Ganju	2.49	47.5	52.5	43.5As, 9H

As: Assamese, H:Hindi, Or: Oriya, G; Guwala, M: Munda, Sa: Santhali, Kh: Khariya, Ora: Oraon
Source: Field Survey

Table-3; Selected Gardens: Average Shift: All Communities (in %)

Language to which shifted	Pertabghur	Dikorai
Assamese	36.83	38.85
Hindi	9.4	4.33
Oriya	6.03	7.65
Munda	4.92	3.44
Guwala	1.94	1.68
Santhali	1.94	1.98
Oraon	--	0.98
Khariya	1.97	--
Mahali	0.57	--
Kaya	1.32	--

Source: Field Survey

In both the gardens, complete language shift is found among communities of smaller population size. Such communities include Ghasi, Panikar, Jullah Muslims, Khodal and Phulenda communities in Pertabghur and Modi, Panika, Ghasi, Rouhtia and Jullah Muslim communities in Dikorai Garden.

There are two distinct and separate processes observed in this kind of a change. One, the process of language shift among the minority groups and the second, the process of bilingualism or multi-lingulalism among the majority groups. In any case, language change has been a single major outcome cutting across communities present in the gardens.

Table-4A Pertabghur: Inter Community Variation in the Extent of Bilinguals

Community	% to total Pop.	% speaking Mother Tongue	% bilinguals
Munda	19.3	61.7	42.5
Oriya	16.3	58.1	49.9
Bhumij	4.4	36.00	42.5
Khariya	3.15	44.5	48.2
Teli	10.17	36.2	39.5
Mahali	3.15	44.5	57.0
Sabar	1.75	40	47.6
Prajab	3.33	42.1	36.7
Ghasi	2.10	0.00	62.4
Kaya	2.45	42.8	48.4
Modi	1.22	0.00	65.0
Santhal	5.78	44.4	52.5
Guwala	4.03	47.8	41.7
Jullah Muslim	5.61	0.00	65.8
Khodal	1.4	0.00	52.4
Sonar	1.01	50.0	61.2
Phulenda	0.87	0.00	51.3

Source:Field Survey

Table-4B Dikorai: Inter Community Variation in the Extent of Bilinguals

Community	% to total Pop.	% speaking Mother Tongue	% bilinguals
Oriya	28.8	48.4	48.3
Munda	19.7	42	45.2
Bhumij	1.57	38.8	45.2
Mahali	6.31	38.5	43.5
Baraik	3.27	62.9	44.2
Mulli	1.21	0.00	64.3
Khariya	5.58	45.6	55.3
Panika	3.5	0.00	63.3
Guwala	4.7	39.6	39.6
Ghasi	1.4	0.00	69.3
Khumbha	0.90	0.00	57.0
Oraon	7.9	48.1	61.2
Santhal	7.03	50.0	52.4
Rouhtia	1.33	0.00	65.0
Jullah Muslim	2.06	0.00	68.3
Sabor	2.06	47.0	55.7
Sonar	2.18	38.4	65.2
Ganju	2.49	47.5	55.2

Source: Field Survey

The process of language change reveals some interesting characteristics (see Tables 5 to 7). In the wake of a changeover to other languages, two separate patterns are discernible. First, a process which is intra-garden wherein there is a marked tendency to shift to the language spoken by a dominant community within the garden and second, a process that is inter-regional wherein the communities accept the dominant language as the second or third language. It is the numerically smaller communities which tend to accept an intra-garden language much more than the dominant groups.

Table-5; Selected Gardens: Male Female Variation in Bilinguals (%)

Community	Pertabghur			Dikorai		
	Male	Female	Difference	Male	Female	Difference
Munda	37.1	31.2	5.9	33.8	32	1.8
Oriya	29.1	31	-1.9	36.2	26.7	9.5
Bhumij	35.7	21.4	14.3	42.9	33.3	9.6
Teli	47.2	31.2	16.0	-	-	-
Khariya	36.4	27.3	9.1	36	38.1	-2.1
Mahali	30.0	37.5	-7.5	46.4	30.4	16.0
Santhali	27.8	26.7	1.1	36.7	25	11.7
Guwala	30.7	23.00	7.7	26.1	29.5	-3.4

Source:Field Survey

Table-6: Selected Gardens: Percentage Multilinguals

Community	Pertabghur	Dikorai
Munda	2.78	4.00
Oriya	6.33	6.77
Bhumij	8.5	4.00
Khariya	7.5	12.5
Mahali	3.95	3.25
Guwala	4.66	3.46

Source:Field Survey

Table-7; Male Female Differences in Multilinguals(%)

Community	Pertabghur			Dikorai		
	Male	Female	Difference	Male	Female	Difference
Munda	5.6	4.9	0.7	4.6	3.4	1.2
Oriya	6.9	5.2	1.7	6.0	4.0	2.0
Bhumij	5.0	3.8	1.2	5.9	4.7	1.2
Khariya	9.4	7.6	1.8	17.1	8.8	8.3
Mahali	7.9	8.2	-0.3	9.1	8.7	0.4
Guwala	6.8	5.3	1.5	7.5	6.7	0.8

Source: Field Survey

It is evident that the smaller communities are far more multi-lingual than the dominant ones. The rate of change and shift is more among the males than that of the females, though there are some exceptions. This is by and large true in the case of extent of bilingualism too. More males are bilinguals. Male female differential in bilingualism is however much less pronounced compared to the differential observed in the case of multi lingualism. A very large proportion of the males is multi-lingual. More females have accepted another language spoken within the gardens as the second language while more males have adopted the regional language i.e. Assamese. More females have retained their original mother tongue than their male counterparts.

Table-8; Selected Gardens: Bilingualism and Distance from the Town(%)

Population	Within 10Kms	10-15 Kms	Above 15Kms
Total	80.7	72.3	61.5
Male	92.3	78.5	59.6
Female	68.8	52	46.3

Source: Field Survey

Table-9; Selected Gardens: Multi-lingualism in Various Age Classes (%)

Age	% Multi-Linguals
Less than 5	3.5
5-10	10.1
11-15	31.0
16-20	48.5
21-25	55.6
26-35	50.5
36-45	44.0
46-65	39.0
66-70	29.0
Above 70	27.0

Source: Field Survey

The most important determinants of the rate of language change appear to be age, sex, literacy, income and distance from the town area (See Tables 8 to 9). The young adults have either shifted to another language or are invariably multi-lingual compared other age groups. Likewise, the males are more affected by the process of language change than the females. Similarly, the literate as well as people of higher income is

greatly affected by language change. The section residing in close proximity to the towns too displays a greater propensity towards language change.

Concluding Remarks

It is evident that the labourers in the tea gardens, uprooted from their original community network in tribal territories located in mid-Indian upland have made strenuous efforts in adjusting to the alien socio-cultural setting both within the tea gardens and to the outside world. The nature of linguistic change bears testimony to this. Their identities as separate communities have received a rude shock and are fragmented at different levels to create new ones. At one level, it has strengthened a new found bond among themselves as a distinct community in contrast to the dominant regional culture of the Assamese adding an indistinguishing element in the broader synthetic culture of Assam. At another level, they have made serious efforts to assimilate with the regional culture by identifying themselves with the languages of the surrounding area. Both the identities are simultaneously present in the cultural traditions created by the tea communities.

Evidently, such a process of socio-cultural adjustment has not been uniform across the communities or among the sexes or all age groups. Some communities, the males and the younger generation are far more integrated into the dominant regional ethos while some other communities, particularly those with a large population, the females and the old continue to remain less integrated for reasons already mentioned earlier.

Socio-geographical factors in terms of location of the tea gardens, the residential pattern of the labour lines, the location of the market centres and the urban areas, spread of education and other such factors have also played significant roles in this process of socio-economic transformation which the labourers have experienced in recent years.

Notes:

1. Notion of tribal language is elusive in Indian context. There are four major aspects to be noted in this context. First, tribes in India do not form a homogenous category either socially or culturally. The concept of tribe in India is an administrative, judicial and political one and the tribes are therefore referred to as Scheduled Tribes. Second, 285 communities in India have been scheduled as tribes in India which itself is an index of their ethnic diversity. Less than half of these tribes however speak a tribal mother tongue. Third languages spoken by these scheduled communities are considered 'tribal language'. There is no linguistic definition of tribal languages. Fourth, only 18 languages are

scheduled languages in India, while there are 96 non-scheduled languages of which 92 are tribal languages.

2. The issues of language shift and obsolescence have gripped the minds of linguists, anthropologists, sociologists and geneticists for the last fifty years as it is understood that diversity of languages is essential to human evolution. "….an ethnic language once lost is far less easily recovered than other identity markers, and the cultural content that the ethnic language carried is never fully recoverable." (Dorian: 1999:33-34). In a multi lingual milieu such as India it can be an extremely hazardous task in identifying language shift. The method of identifying language shift in the present research does not follow the complex linguistic methods but is dependent upon a more sociological technique of asking through head counts if a person does or does not speak his/her mother tongue at any situation, be it at the level of family, work place, market or other public spaces. If the person does not speak his mother tongue at none of these spaces, he/she is considered to have completely shifted to another language.

3. Associated with the concept of language shift are concepts of language retention and language death. While language retention is seen in the context of minority languages being able to retain their mother tongue in spite of the dominance of a regional/national language, language death is the opposite of it. A combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors play a role in language death. Depleting demographic size of the speech community, extent of language shift, motivational factors including the attitude of the speakers towards their own languages as well as the attitude of the speakers of the dominant language towards the speakers of minority language, and the strength of the support system received from institutions such as school, home, government, business, society and so on.

4. The term change is used here in a loose sense and does not convey the meaning of language change as understood by linguists who understand language change in a multiple context of changes in syntax, phonology, morphology and semantics. The language change in this research refers to language shift and development of bilingualism or multilingualism as processes of societal adjustment.

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