

Spatio-Cultural Maintenance of Bengali Diaspora in Kerala

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Abstract

The desolation or spread of any people from their original homeland across the globe and efferent their culture as they go is known as Diaspora. Diaspora has been now given the nod as a key factor influencing social and economic development of society. Diaspora also abundantly impacts upon linguistic behavior of the society at multiple levels. This study aims to coordinate the relationship between society and the language in a multilingual scenario where each state has its own ethnic group and language. The motive of sociolinguistic study of Diaspora is to sketch the interaction of language and society, i.e. how language relates to social categories and cultural aspects of various kinds such as class, age, gender, etc. The study here focuses on few aspects of linguistic behavior of Bengali Diaspora in Kerala as the Bengalis in Kerala consists of 0.01% of total population, according to 2001 census report. The study will scrutinize how the Diaspora people maintain their language and other cultural entities in their day-to-day life. The research is based on a sociolinguistic survey, conducted among these people to understand how far the Diaspora has affected upon their linguistic behavior and to see the variations prevalent among different strata of Diaspora. Findings suggest that along with extensive codes switching it encompasses slowly emerging changes in the culture.

Keywords: Bengali Diaspora, Kerala, Desolation, Culture, Scrutinize, Code switching, spatio-cultural maintenance

Introduction

The concoction of ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular community found in human societies forms something known as culture. Culture plays an important role in anthropology, fringe the range of phenomena that are connect through social learning in human societies.

In this paper, I would like to find out the way through which different magnitudes of culture is maintained in a different geographical area. Society, culture and language all flourishes in a certain defined contexts. Mass departure or migration is a common trend in human history and the spreading of cultural practices and language behavior is the result of this phenomenon, as it is a universal nature of language to spread over. Also, it is the normal behaviour of human being to preserve their language and culture in another socio-cultural environment where he/she is living. In this paper, I like to evaluate the measures taken by the Bengali folk in Kerala to maintain their language and culture in Kerala.

Maintenance of Bengali Cultural Habits in Kerala

The reasons for spreading the Bengali folk in Kerala are many. Mostly it is because of the wide booming of technology in the state that attracted many youngsters across India to join the IT field in Kerala. Many of the educated people in Bengali Diaspora in Kerala migrated here because of this reason while others are part of central government offices like VSSC. Some of them would consider this place as their second mother land, since they have been staying here more than ten years, as part of their job. Even though they are away from their home land, they find time to do and celebrate all the cultural practices and festivals of Bengal.

The spatial and cultural differences of Bengal and Kerala are high and are evident in almost all cultural practices including their language behavior. But we could find certain similarities even in the wide level of divergence. Through these divergence and similarities, the Bengali folk in Kerala maintain their culture and language. For example, a ritual known as *annaprasan* is conducted for the babies when he/she is five or seven months old. This is just to welcome the baby to eat the normal home-cooked food after it crosses the stage of eating baby food pattern which is also practiced by both Bengali and Malayali people. Eventually Bengali living in Kerala also practice the traditional custom by feeding rice pudding (*kheer* or *payash*), but not with the traditional rice (*gobindobhog*), as it is not available in Kerala.

Another ceremonial ritual is marriage, Bengali living in Kerala performs the marriage ceremony but cannot follow the same traditional ceremony like Turmeric ceremony (*gaye holud*), Wedding ceremony (*bibaho/bie*), *Bou Bhaat*, *Phul Shojja* (flower bed), *Oshto Mongola*, *Shubhochuni Satyanarayan Puja*, because all the essential elements are not available for Bengali diaspora people living in Kerala and as a result, Bengali Diaspora people are bound to follow certain Malayali custom for the ceremonials and rituals.

In a study like this, all the cultural and geographical differences and its varying magnitude may consider as the plot for identifying the natural situation for maintaining culture. In a geographical point of view, both states are situated in entirely different parts of the country. Kerala is in extreme south part of India while West Bengal is located in the eastern part of the country. So we could easily identify the differences in all the cultural practices including food, marriage and other ceremonies, rituals and worshipping. Because of these divergences, it is a task for a Bengali person to maintain their culture in Kerala without considering the cultural norms of the land.

It is the natural phenomenon, in such a cultural context, the culture and language of Kerala is being influenced in many ways among the Bengali Diaspora. The social conditioning like the work environment, nature of work and the cultural space where a Bengali person is settled are the decisive factors.

Use of Language as Cultural Product

The social media, television, Internet all play major role to preserve the culture and other social practices including language behavior. It reduces the spatial difference by providing a space to live in their socio-cultural environment virtually. They are always in touch with the political and social situation of their homeland by reading Bengali newspaper like *Anandabazar*

Patrika, Bartaman Partika that are not available in Kerala. Viewing Bengali TV programmes and Bengali movies by a Bengali housemates staying in Kerala may also consider as a cultural practice for building up homeland's socio-cultural context with in a different geographical area.

Spreading up of art and musical forms are other ways of maintaining cultural behaviour, as the rich tradition of their community signifies through these art forms. Though Boul music and Rabindra sangeet of Bengal are widely acknowledged art forms, they have no base in the cultural context of Kerala. Musician relating with these forms among the Bengali diaspora do all their effort to establish these musical forms in Kerala. Many Bengali persons including children practice these musical forms in Kerala.

In case of language maintenance, it is noticed that Bengali diaspora people living more than ten years in Kerala are having their own land. And, this factor contributes a lot towards their attitude to the languages. From the study, it is observed that informants use Bengali along with Malayalam in certain cultural contexts by using the codes of Malayalam language. In home domain, they use only Bengali. While having in-group conversations they use code mixing of Bengali and English; whereas, in case of mingling with other communities, they try to use only English. Making declarations of love, or praying to a deity they use Bengali only. But in case of children, they mix more than two languages together like English, Hindi, Bengali and Malayalam in one sentence itself which proves the multilingual characteristics of a Bengali Diaspora. It is observed that informants use Bengali language only at home by code mixing of English. The other languages used at home vary between various classes or categories. The second generation of Bengali speakers uses English language in their home domain, whereas old people use only Bengali language. The languages such as English, Malayalam and Hindi are taught in the schools of Kerala. As there is no Bengali language in the school, learning of the Bengali language in Kerala cannot be possible.

An overview of the result regarding language use indicates that next to Bengali language, English is the dominant language and the next is Hindi and then Malayalam. If generation is taken as one of the variable, it is seen that second generation has shifted to English and Hindi for writing and somehow Malayalam for reading and speaking. First generation- Bengali speakers can read, write and speak Bangla. Whereas, the second generation people can only speak the mother tongue; neither can read nor can write properly. However, in the case of the older generations, they use Bengali at home and wherever they met with Bengali friends they use only Bangla as if their satisfactions glitter in happiness of expression. Children speak Malayalam and English with their friends, whereas Bengali with their parents and use English very often. It is also observed that older people show keen interest in Malayalam literature which makes them desire to learn Malayalam language. One of old age informant informed that she somehow manage to read "*Balarama*". Again, it is also observed that maintenance of native language and local culture by the migrant Bengali in Kerala is going on through various functions at the Trivandrum Bengali Association (TBA), Trivandrum, for last forty six years. In Kerala, there are many Bengali associations and by means of regular meetings, cultural programmes, social and economic endeavors, these social organizations try to bring together all their members under their community customs and to get integrated into its main stream. All the festivals of Bengali in west Bengal such as Durga puja, Kali puja, Lakshmi puja and the arts forms like Dhunochi

nach, Gita paat etc. are being celebrated and observed by the Bengali Diaspora in Kerala. The majority of the Bengali living in Kerala felt that their children should be proficient in Hindi and English. The negative attitude towards one's mother tongue and a high positive attitude towards English, Malayalam and Hindi predict that the migrant visualizes the practical utility of the language studied and the opportunities available for getting job. Some informants believe that they have no use of learning Bengali because they can communicate in Malayalam with Malayalis and English or Hindi with other people. In the case of Central Government Employees, they use Hindi in almost all contexts, even though their mother tongue is Bengali. So they are not bothered about the mother tongue and their children are learning Hindi or any other foreign language. In the case of IT sector employees, they are using only Hindi or English. The following are the sentences as uttered by Bengali speakers. The influence of Malayalam is evident.

1. *ami cor k'ai*
I rice eat.1sg.PRS
I eat rice
2. *t'ik ace feri feri*
correct present correct correct
It's ok
3. *ambalam-e jabo*
temple-LOC. go. 1sg.FUT
I will go to temple
4. *kafi kaico*
coffee drink.PST.
Did you have coffee?
5. *ma amake ekfu cuq vellam debe?*
mother me.DAT. little hot water give.2H
Mother, will you give me some hot water?
6. *bifon ma:ra: hoece*
heavy rain happen.PST
It rained heavily
7. *tumi nona: bolo-na*
you.2H lie tell.2H.FUT.-NEG.
Do not tell lie
8. *aj jolika: afeni*
today servant come.PST.NEG.
Today servant didn't come

9. *qi: edik-e aje.*
You.FEM. this side-LOC. Come.1sg.FUT.
You(f) come here
10. *ami aj vaikittə big bazar jabo.*
I today evening big bazaar go.1sg.FUT.
Today evening I will go to Big Bazaar
11. *amra notun vanđi kineci.*
We new car buy.1sg.PST
We purchased new car
12. *ami fudu mati: k^haj.*
I only mati: eat.1sg.PRS.
I eat only *matti*(fish name)
13. *ami pa:l hərliks dije k^hai*
I milk horlicks with eat.1sg.PRS
I drink milk along with Horlicks
14. *ami venđa:kija: dije dupur-e b^hat k^heici.*
I okra with afternoon.LOC. rice eat.1sg.PRS.PRF.
I have eaten rice with okra (a kind of vegetable)
15. *ami sku:l t^heke efe vefakku:nnu hoec^hilam*
I school from come.PST. hungry become.1sg.PST.
I was hungry after coming from school

Attitudes Towards Language

Certain class differences are prominent in the Bengali diaspora in Kerala. The people mentioned above belong to the educated class. The other groups of Bengali folks are those who have migrated from Bengal to this land as labourers. This is because of the static nature of gulf economy that functions as the backbone of state's per capita income. As the class difference is high in all respect, it is high task to consider both class in a common platform for analysing cultural habits and language behaviour. But the common feature is that the laborer class acquires language fast and many factors of communication like code mixing and code switching are functioning more perfectly, in a bilingual or multilingual environment, due to the interaction with the common Malayali folk.

Conclusion

Language is the most important ingredient in any speech community. It is not a mere means for communication and interaction but also for establishing and maintaining human relationships.

This study brings certain observations regarding language maintenance and language attitude of the migrant Bengalis in Kerala.

- The migrant Bengalis in Kerala consider English and Hindi as the languages for better social mobility, power and prestige.
- The second generation Bengali immigrant has almost convergence to English and Hindi for all basic needs. Except that his mother tongue is only restricted to the home domain at the oral level. But some people is learning Malayalam to take the potential interest in Malayalam literature.
- This study also shows that Bengali immigrant have a better adaptability of using other languages with mother tongue such as Malayalam, Hindi and English.

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