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Bilingualism and Language Maintenance in Barak Valley, Assam - A Case Study on Rongmei

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Abstract

Rongmeis are one of the linguistic groups of Northeast India which constitute an important ethnic group in the region. They were considered as the aborigines of Barak Valley (this valley includes three districts of Assam, namely, Cachar, Karimgang and Hailakandi) and even today they are an integral part of the Barak Valley diaspora. Rongmei is one of the tribes of Zeliangrong Naga. Zeliangrong is a name given to the amalgamation of three tribes, namely, Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei. The Rongmei population has been divided into a number of exogamous clans: Kamei, Gonmei, Gangmei, Ruammei, Dahengmei, Golmei, Panmei and Reammei. Rongmei Nagas have their own language, and they also speak Sylheti Bengali. As the area has large Sylheti Bengali population, the lingua franca is Sylheti Bengali, and almost all the Rongmeis are bilinguals. It is also to be noted that those who are educated and who went out in search of jobs can also speak English and Hindi.

It should be mentioned here that Bengali is the dominant language in Barak Valley and Rongmei is highly influenced by Bengalis. For the fact, Rongmei people used to borrow some lexical items to fulfill the needs of their day to day communication.

The present paper attempts to discuss the issues of language maintenance by the bilingual Rongmeis of Barak Valley, Assam.

1. Introduction



This paper presents a case study exploring the language maintenance by the Rongmei community in Barak Valley, Assam. *Over the past few decades, Barak Valley has been transformed from being predominantly bilingual to a dynamic potpourri of multilingual society.* (Reference taken from Mishra, A.K. and Rajasree Dutta. 1999. *The Manipurians in Barak Valley: A Case Study of Language Maintenance*. Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area, Vol. 22.1) There are many different languages spoken by the different linguistic communities in the Valley but most of them are considered as minority or lesser known languages because of their negligible numerical strength and some other socio-political reasons. One such community is the community of Rongmei speakers, who are bilinguals, i.e., along with their mother tongue, they are well versed in Bengali (an Indo-Aryan language). The present paper will show the issues of bilingualism and language maintenance in Barak Valley with special reference to Rongmei.

2. People, Language and the Land



The Rongmei are known for their simplicity and hospitality. They are honest, generous and cheerful. Rongmei is the name of the people as well as the community that speaks the language. Linguistically, Rongmei is a Tibeto-Burman language which is mainly concentrated in the three states of North Eastern India, viz., Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. Rongmei is formerly known as Kabui, and '*Ruangmei is an alternative spelling of Rongmei*' (Neihlalung.K.G., 2008 *Pacgaymeilat*. Published by – Rongmei Literature Committee). The total population of Rongmei is given in the Census of India, in the name of Kabui, is about 94,758 (Census, 2001).

3. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate how the Rongmei people maintain their language, as their language has been highly influenced by Bengali. The study will also highlight whether bilingualism affects maintaining their language or not.

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4. Data and Methodology

The paper is based on the data collection in Rongmei community, which has been carried out in different parts of the Barak Valley of South Assam where the native speakers of the language are concentrated. A questionnaire was administered to many informants of both sexes belonging to different age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions. Data consists of 1500 vocabularies belonging to different semantic fields such as flora and fauna, foods habits, religious and cultural items, household articles, and natural phenomena and so on and the data has been crossed checked by the other speakers of the same variety.

5. Bilingualism

Like most of the tribal people of Northeast India, Rongmei are bilinguals. Along with their mother tongue, they speak English, Bengali or Hindi in some specific purposes. However, Rongmei used the Bengali in most of their communication with other linguistic groups. This may be the reason that Bengali is the dominant language of Barak Valley; almost all the communities used Bengali in their inter-ethnic communication. Another reason is that the Rongmei language is not being taught in the school as a medium of instruction or a subject. So, the utility of their language is very less in comparison to the other languages like English, Hindi and Bengali, etc. It is also observed that most of the business persons and employees are Bengalese, and they hardly know the Rongmei language.

It may be claimed that the average of bilinguals among the Rongmei is 60-70%. However, it is increasing in the recent years due to the impact of mass media, radio, television, cinema, etc. Here, the spread of bilingualism in both the rural and urban areas leads to borrowing lots of Indo-Aryan lexical items in groups of Rongmei speakers. Particularly, the younger Rongmeis use loan words liberally from the Indo-Aryan languages, Bengali and Hindi, and from English occasionally in place of their indigenous lexical items. So the large parts of their Rongmei vocabulary are not used by the younger generation so far.

6. Language Maintenance

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In the words of Fasold (1984), “*Language maintenance is a sociolinguistic factor when a speech community collectively decides to continue to use the language that they traditionally used.*” Language maintenance is not only crucial but also a challenging task for each and every community to preserve to the extent possible its distinct linguistic and ethnic identity. However, for a minority community like Rongmei, home seems to be the main source for language maintenance. Undoubtedly, all Rongmeis reported that they speak Rongmei at home and encouraged their children to use the language in their home domain. It may be the reason that they have a positive attitude towards their language and used it as a tool for identifying themselves as a distinct ethnic community. However, Rongmeis use Bengali outside the home domains with non-Rongmei friends, doctor, nurse, pharmacists, bus drivers, conductors, in banks, in post offices, in hospitals, etc.

It is also obvious that *institutional support* is one of the factors which can empower an ethnic community to maintain its language by any speech community. But it is not happening in the case of Rongmei. That is, the Rongmei language is not taught in the schools or any other institutions so far, and yet their use of Rongmei in the home domain helps them maintain their language. However, lack of institutional support has restricted the lawful use of their language in many other domains. Hence without institutional support they are able to maintain their language only in their home domain. As mentioned earlier that home is the main source for the language maintenance among the Rongmeis of Barak Valley.

Religion also plays a vital role to maintaining their language, because when they pray they use their mother tongue and the priest recites the mantras in Rongmei too. The Rongmei of Barak Valley has not shifted their cultural values, i.e., they still wear their traditional dress and celebrate festivals with their songs and dances in the traditional ways. Every year Rongmei people celebrate the ‘Gaan Ngai’ festival in the month of December or January with joy and pride.

Inter-ethnic marriage is also prohibited in their society. If exogamous marriage takes place, it is not appreciated/encouraged by the society. They seem to believe that if they allow Rongmeis to marry persons from some other communities, ultimately they will be the losers,

because they are less in number and the couples will no longer be able to maintain their language because they will find a common language for both, rather than continue the use of Rongmei and the traditions represented by it. Objection to of inter-ethnic marriage indirectly helps Rongmeis to maintain their language.

The print media also helps one to maintain the language. There is a monthly magazine called “**Latzin**” published by Pou Pei Chapriak Research and Development Council Northeast India, Silchar. This is another source which helps them to maintain their language.

7. Conclusion

It is true that Rongmeis of Barak Valley are bilinguals and they are well versed in Bengali, the dominant language of Barak Valley. However, Rongmeis do have the positive attitude towards their language. It is proved that they never give up their language for the sake of any material advantage or prestige. They maintain their language in their home domains without any institutional support. One may argue based on the case of Rongmais that bilingualism may not be a dominant factor when a community fails to maintain their language.

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