Phonological Analysis of Rampurhat Variety of Bangla

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Abstract

Bangla is an Indo-Aryan language majorly spoken in West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. Reportedly, the different dialects of Bangla are spoken by more than two hundred million native speakers across the globe. Different researchers had classified these dialects in various ways based on where it is spoken. However, there are some discrepancies in the classifications as the same variety of Bangla spoken in a few regions have been classified by researchers differently. It can also be observed in the case of Bangla spoken in a socio-economically backward district of West Bengal, Birbhum. This can be due to different factors including limitation of access, lack of data, domination of more prestigious variety, overt prestige of speakers, etc. It is even more important to point out that due to the lack of enough research, many distinguishing features of Birbhum Bangla have remained unnoticed till date.

This study aims to analyze the phonological features of one of the regional varieties of Birbhum Bangla spoken in the Rampurhat region by comparing it with the Colloquial variety of Bangla.

Keywords: Birbhum Bangla, Rampurhat variety, regional dialect, phonological features

1. Introduction and Background

Many attempts have been done by researchers to classify the various Bangla dialects. Grierson (1898) divided the Bangla dialects based on their geographical locations where he mentioned Birbhum Bangla as a Western Bangla dialect. Later, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1975)

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classified it as Eastern Radhi, and Sukumar Sen (1993) called it Jharkhondi Bangla. Other researchers have also referred to it as Radhi or Jharkhondi Bangla. It can be observed that some of the features of Birbhum Bangla are somewhat similar to Radhi and Jharkhondi Bangla. However, features of Birbhum Bangla have not been studied in-depth in the past and the classification cannot be confirmed yet. Therefore, it is important to do a systematic study of this language and its varieties to be able to classify it properly.

The terms *Language, dialect,* and *variety* are often disputed and used interchangeably depending on the context. R. Wardaugh (1986) tried to explain these terms with different examples. He defined Language as a combination of multiple dialects and clarified that each speaker of a language speaks at least one dialect. According to him, "A dialect is a subordinate variety of a language" and also mentioned that in case a language has only one dialect, both the terms become synonymous. Hudson (1996) defined 'a variety' of a language as 'a set of linguistic items with similar distribution'. The word 'variety' can therefore be used to refer to any kind of variation in language including dialects, pidgins, creoles, regional varieties, sociolect, idiolect, etc. In this case, the Rampurhat variety of Birbhum Bangla has been investigated in this study further.

The word 'birbhum' is believed to come from the Mundari word 'bir' which means 'forests' and Birbhum refers to the 'land of forests'. Another belief says that the meaning of the word 'bir' refers to 'brave' and Birbhum is, therefore 'the land of the braves'. Even if the etymology of the name is in dispute, it cannot be denied that this place is a land of rich diversity. It is the home to indigenous tribes such as Santal, Munda, Kol, Ho, Oraon, Paharia, Mahali, etc. It also derived its great heritage from Tagore's Shantiniketan, Santals, and Bauls of this region.

Apart from this, Birbhum is majorly an agricultural district and most of the people are dependent on farming as their major income. It is only in recent years that the natives of this district have realized the importance of literacy and started sending their children for higher education so that they can find better job opportunities. According to Human Development Report Birbhum (2009), in terms of most of the human development indicators, Birbhum lags behind most of the other districts of West Bengal.

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Linguistically, there is a wide variety of Bangla spoken in this district and it is believed that the form of the language changes every few miles. It is therefore inappropriate to use the umbrella term 'Birbhum Bangla' for a specific regional or social variety spoken in Birbhum. One such variety that has been studied in this discussion is a regional variety spoken in the Rampurhat region of Birbhum and it can be referred to as the Rampurhat variety.

This language is mostly used among family members, friends and can also be heard in the local markets of Rampurhat. It is restricted to these social spheres as its usage is often associated with prestige, social status, economic status, and educational qualification. Many a time, the native speakers of the Rampurhat variety try to communicate in the standard Bangla deliberately to hide their linguistic identity in public places. Other users who managed to move out of the rural areas and secure a good social status prefer to use it in selective contexts only. Moreover, the new generation is not encouraged to use this language and is often ridiculed for the same. So, like many other regional varieties of Birbhum Bangla, the Rampurhat variety is also at high risk of getting endangered in the coming years. However, it is important to explore such understudied languages and preserve their linguistic features. A brief phonological analysis of the Rampurhat variety of Bangla has been done here to take a step ahead in documenting the language.

2. Data Collection

The data used in this study is qualitative in nature and had been collected through participant observation. The language consultants included native speakers of the Rampurhat variety including four female and four male consultants of the age group of 40 to 60 years. The collected data were also cross-checked with two older speakers of 69 and 85 years of age. A detailed study with more language consultants will be required in the future to analyze the language further.

3. Phonological Features of Rampurhat Variety of Bangla

The number of phonemes in the Rampurhat variety is similar to that of Standard Bangla i.e. it has thirty-five phonemes with seven vowels and twenty-eight consonants. The two varieties

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are different from each other based on the changes in vowel and consonant sounds in the Rampurhat variety. Few participants in the study suggested that some of these variations are influenced by being in close contact with the languages of the indigenous tribes living in surrounding areas as well as the neighbouring states: Bihar and Jharkhand. A few phonological variations and processes are discussed here in the following sections with examples.

3.1. Vowel Sounds

- /i/ changes to /e/ in word-medial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
piʈol	peʈol	brass
ʃikol	ʃekol	chains
biɾokʈo	beɾokʈo	irritation

- /e/ changes to /æ/ in word-initial, word-medial and word-final position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ekanno	ækanno	fifty-one
pet	pæt	stomach
ṯel	ṯæl	oil
ḏena	ḏæna	loan
ʧʰele	ʧʰelæ	boy/ child
meje	mejæ	girl/ woman

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- /e/ changes to /i/ in word medial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
d̪eʃlaɪ	d̪iʃlaɪ	matchstick
ʧena dʒana	ʧina dʒana	acquaintance
dʒekhane	dʒikhane	where

- /a/ changes to /ɔ/ in word-medial and word final-positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
d̪uar	d̪uɔɾ	door
paiɾa	pɔiɾa	pigeon
nouka	noukɔ	boat

- /a/ changes to /o/ in word-medial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
pɔt̪aka	pɔt̪oka	flag
hãʈu	hõʈɔ	knee
t̪alu	t̪olɔ	palm

- /a/ changes to /æ/ in word-medial and word final position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
biɾal	biɾæl	cat
dana	dæna	wings
bãka	bæ̃ka	slant

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kãʈʰa	kæ̃ʈʰa	blanket
bʰikha	bʰikæ	charity
ʃubʰida	ʃubʰidæ	amenities/ comfort

- /o/ changes to /ɔ/ in word-initial, word-medial and word-final position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
oɾa	ɔɾa	they
oder	ɔder	theirs
poaʈi	pɔʈi	pregnant
upobash/ uposh	upɔsh	fasting
tulo	tulɔ	cotton
kouʈo	kouʈɔ	container

- /o/ changes to /u/ in word-medial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
t̪omar	t̪umar	yours
lok	luk	people
koʈʰai	kuʈʰai	where
mon	mun	mind/ heart
ʃona	suna	To hear
bon	bun	sister

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3.2. Consonant Sounds

- /k/ changes to /g/ in word-final position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
lok	log	people
bok	bog	heron
kak	kag	crow

- /kʰ/ changes to /k/ in word medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
d̪ekʰa	d̪eka	to see
ʃukʰ	suk	happiness
ʃãkʰa	sẽka	Shell bangle

- /gʰ/ changes to /g/ in word-medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
megʰ	mæg	cloud
digʰi	d̪igi	lake
bagʰ	bag	tiger

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- /dʒʰ/ changes to /dʒ/ in word-medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
bondʒʰi	bundʒi	niece
madʒʰaɾi	madʒaɾi	middle
medʒʰe	medʒæ	floor

- /ʈ/ changes to /ʈʰ/ in word-medial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
bẽʈe	bẽʈʰæ	short
ʈʰũʈo	ʈʰũʈʰɔ	idler
ẽʈo	ẽʈʰɔ	leftovers of food eaten by someone

- /ʈʰ/ changes to /ʈ/ in word medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ʃoʃʈʰi	ʃoʃʈi	sixth
kaʈʰ	kaʈ	wood
goʃʈʰi	guʃti	tribe/family

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- /ɖʰ/ changes to /ɖ/ in word medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ɖuɖʰ	ɖuɖ	milk
ʃubiɖʰa	ʃubiɖa	comfort
ɖʰãɖʰa	ɖʰãɖa	puzzle

- /n/ changes to /l/ in word-initial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
noi	lɔi	not
newa	lewa	to take
nala	lala	drain
naɾu	laɾu	Round sweet
naʈi	laʈi	grandson

- /ʃ/ changes to /tʃʰ/ in word-initial position

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ʃutʃalo	tʃʰũtʃlɔ	pointed
ʃẽk	tʃʰæ̃k	heat
ʃommukʰ	tʃʰamukʰ	in front of

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- Deletion of /r/ in consonant clusters in word-medial and word-final positions

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
proṭʰom	poṭʰom	first
tʃoiṭro	tʃoṭ	month of March
dʒonṭrona	dʒonṭona	pain

3.3. Phonological Processes

The Rampurhat variety often shows evidence of incorporating various phonological processes to simplify speech production. Some of those modifications in the vowel and consonant sounds have been discussed in this section.

- Vowel Prothesis: Vowel sounds are often added in the initial position of words which begins with consonant clusters. This includes commonly used words from English as well.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
spɔrḍʰa	aspɔrḍʰa	audacity
sṭri:	isṭri	wife
sku:l	isku:l	school
steʃon	isteʃon	station

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- Anaptyxis: Vowel sounds are usually added in the medial position of words borrowed from English.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
plet	pelet	plate
bled	beled	blade
glas	gelas	glass
kri:m	ki:rim	cream

- Syncope: In the Rampurhat variety, an unstressed vowel is often deleted from word medial position.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
baṯaʃa	baṯʃa	kind of sweet
kãnʧakɔla	kãnʧkɔla	raw banana
beguni	begni	brinjal fry

- Apocope: The final sound/s of a word is often deleted in the Rampurhat variety of Bangla.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
pawa	pɔ	to get
poa	pɔ	one-fourth unit
laṯʰi	laṯʰ	kick
paṯa	paṯ	leaf (plate)

- Progressive assimilation: A preceding sound usually has an effect on the following sound in the word.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ʃud̪d̪ʰo	ʃud̪d̪o	pure
d̪olna	d̪olla	swing
kʰælna	kʰælla	toy

- Regressive assimilation: A sound in Rampurhat variety is often affected by the following sound due to the ease of articulation.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
kɔrola	kɔlla	bittergourd
muɾkʰo	mukʰkʰu	illiterate
baʈna	banna	to grind
pãtʃʃo	pãʃʃo	five hundred

- Voicing: In the Rampurhat variety, a voiceless consonant often becomes voiced due to the influence of its phonological environment.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
prod̪ip	pod̪im/ pid̪im	lamp
at̪op	at̪ob	a variety of rice

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ɔʃoʈʃ	aʃudʒ	impure

● **Devoicing:** The sounds in the Rampurhat variety sometimes changes from a voiced consonant to a voiceless consonant in different words.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
biːdʒ	biːtʃi	seed
tʃʰad̪	tʃʰat̪	terrace
ɾodʒgaɾ	ɾodʒkaɾ	livelihood

● **Aspiration:** Plosive consonants like /p, ʈ, t̪, k/ often changes to their aspirated counterparts /pʰ, ʈʰ, t̪ʰ, kʰ/ in the Rampurhat variety of Bangla.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
pukur	pukʰur	short
bõʈi	bõʈʰi	a traditional vegetable chopper
dupur	dopʰor	afternoon

● **Deaspiration:** The aspiration in plosive sounds is often reduced or lost in the Rampurhat variety.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
bid̪ʰoba	bed̪oba	widow

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| ʃukʰ | ʃuk | happiness |
| hoʈʰaʈ̪ | hoʈaʈ̪ | suddenly |

- Nasalization: When a vowel sound is followed or preceded by a nasal sound in the Rampurhat variety, they usually get nasalized.

Colloquial Bangla	Rampurhat variety	Gloss
ʃond̪ʰe	sãdʒʰ	evening
gram	gã	village
paniʃɔl	paĩʃɔl	water chestnut

Conclusion

The Rampurhat variety of Bangla is one of the many varieties spoken in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. It is a concern that many native speakers of the Rampurhat variety disregard this language as a low variety and suggest their next generations not to use it anymore. This attitude can lead to the gradual death of this language variety and can be a threat to the linguistic diversity of Birbhum. This study attempted to get an overview of the phonological features of the Rampurhat variety and how it is different from the colloquial variety of Bangla. However, further study with more data is required to discuss the applied phonological rules and analyze this language variety in detail.

This study discussed some of the features of the Rampurhat variety based on a small-scale research including limited native speakers of the language. It is observed that there are several phonological differences between the Rampurhat variety and the Colloquial variety of Bangla. Many of these variations seem to be influenced by the ease of articulation. Some of the

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phonological processes that substantiate this are vowel prothesis, anaptyxis, syncope, apocope, devoicing, and assimilation.

With respect to vowel and consonant sounds, the differences in the Colloquial Bangla and Rampurhat variety can be observed by any speaker of Bangla. Even though these varieties are mostly mutually intelligible, there is a significant difference in how certain words are pronounced due to the changes in vowels. For example, the word /niṭṭo/ 'regularly' pronounced as /liṭui/ goes through significant changes from /n/ to /l/, deletion of /ṭ/ and vowel change from /o/ to /ui/. Even though the phonological changes have been discussed in this study, an extension of this study is required to analyze the processes in depth by using the Optimality Theory and other phonological theories.

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