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A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present a sociolinguistic profile of Saihriem dialect spoken mainly in the five villages of Cachar district of Assam, viz., Balisor, Noxa, Nagathol, Bagbhar and Saihriemkho. More exclusively, this paper presents a sketch of location of speakers, genetic affiliation, population, bilingualism, language uses and maintenance, attitude, culture, festival, religion and lastly its comparative vocabularies with Hmar language.

Introduction

India is a country where many languages are traditionally spoken. The Kuki-chin sub-group of Tibeto-Burman language family includes more than 100 languages and dialects spoken in North East India including the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Assam. Assam is a state of breath-taking picturesque exquisiteness, rarest flora and fauna, lofty green hills, vast rolling plain, potent waterways and a land of fairs and festivals. The tribes of Assam are the colourful people; one such tribe is Saihriem. Saihriem is one of the dialects of Hmar language of Kuki-Chin sub-group spoken in Northeast India.

The Area and its population (Location and speakers)

The Cachar district is located on the bank of river Barak (South of Assam), is bounded by North Cachar Hills and the states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram and neighbouring country, Bangladesh. Copious tribal groups have travelled here through different routes as the terra firma is coupled to a number of states of India. Aryans, Austro Asiatic, Dravidians and Tibeto-Burmans had been the most important races that came and dwelled in primeval Assam. One such community is Saihriem. In Assam they are found in the North Cachar Hill and in five villages of Dholai Sub-Division, Cachar district, viz., Balisor, Noxa, Nagathol, Bagbhar and Saihriemkho.

The Saihriem is spoken by approximately 2000 people in the five villages of Cachar, Assam (According to Saihriem Youth Organization, 2010). However, the Census of India has not included population of Saihriem spoken in the Assam. In our field study, we calculated the

total population of Saihriem in the five villages is roughly around 1500.



Fig:1 Map of Cachar District

Scope and Orientation of Study

The scope of this work is to provide an introductory sociolinguistic profile of Saihriem dialect spoken in Cachar District of South Assam. Earlier studies on the Saihriem dialect are fairly limited. Anthropological data on Saihriem is also scarce.

Data and Methodology

The present paper is the outcome of the authors' field visit in the month of February, 2011 in five villages, namely, Balisor, Noxa, Nagathol, Bagbhar and Saihriemkho of Cachar District of Assam. The data for this paper have been procured from both the sexes, i.e., male and female. The authors have also concentrated on people from different age groups, i.e., younger, elder and aged people.

Genetic and Ethnic Affiliation

Genetically, the Saihriem belongs to Kuki-Chin Sub-group of Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan phylum. Saihriem has close affinities with other Kuki-Chin languages of North East, viz. Aimol, Kuki/Thadou, Ranglong, Mizo, Rangkhoh, Kharam, Chiru etc. Ethnically, Saihriem belongs to mongoloid race.

Bilingualism

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarna, Ph.D. Scholar

A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

Like most of the tribal inhabitants of Northeast India, Saihriem are bilingual. Along with their mother tongue, they speak English, Bengali or Hindi in some specific purposes. However, Saihriem use 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 use Bengali in their inter-ethnic communication. Another reason is that Saihriem dialect is not 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

Language Use and Maintenance

The people seem to be interested in the survival of their mother tongue, but at the same time, they do not feel that there is any threat to it. The Saihriem people do not speak English, Bengali, or Hindi amongst themselves. They use the vernacular in all situations except with outsiders. They use Bengali with acquaintances belonging to Bengali community and with non-Bengali acquaintances they use either broken Hindi or English. Now let us discuss the domain of language maintenance by the Saihriem speakers. According to Anne Pauwels, “The term *language maintenance* is used to describe a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community continue to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with the dominant or majority language to become the main/sole language in these spheres”. In our field work we have found that home is the main significant domain for the language maintenance of the Saihriem speaker. In home basically all the members of the family interact with each other using their mother tongue. This home environment is one of the strong factor which leads to language viability.

Fishman (1972) has described two different approaches in studying a language in the home domain. One’s “family” includes father, mother, children, domestics, and so on (Braunshausen and Mackey: 1962, 1965, 1966), as well as what Gross (1951) specified as dyads (e.g., grandfather to grandmother), i.e., the language of the interaction between speaker and hearer within the home domain. Saihriem speakers have friends mainly with members of their own community, with whom they obviously speak in Saihriem. But with non-Saihriem friends they use Bengali, Hindi or English. In the religious domain also their dialect is used

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar
A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

extensively. For example, when they pray in church they use their dialect as a medium of expression.

Language Attitudes

According to Lambert (1967), attitudes consist of three components: the cognitive, affective and conative components (Dittmar 1976: 181). The cognitive component refers to an individual's belief structure, the affective to emotional reactions and the conative component comprehends the tendency to behave in a certain way towards the attitude (Gardner: 1985). Language attitudes are the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others (Crystal: 1992). Our respondents were also asked a set of questions relating to the use of and their attitude towards the Saihriem, the responses to the questions indicate a clear view as regards speaking Saihriem at home. An overwhelming majority of mothers, children want to speak Saihriem at home which is closely linked to their linguistic identity.

Attitude towards Other Languages

Questions were asked about what the respondents feel on the use of and their attitude towards the Bengali and English languages. The Saihriem speakers reported a positive attitude towards both the languages. It is due to the reason that they are less in number in such public situations. When they come to bazaar, hospital, and shops they use Bengali, because most of the businessmen are Bengali and they hardly know Saihriem. Towards English they have some approbation and attraction. They also, along with other communities, view English as one of the prestigious languages in the world. As a result of this view, they send their children to English medium schools. Moreover, the spread of Christianity also may have influenced their culture and created an interest and fascination for English.

Family



The Saihriems culture is patriarchal. The male, i.e., father is the head and supreme authority and he takes the final decision in the family and the line of descent is traced through the father only.

Festival and Religion

The culture is enriched with a good number of tribal songs and dance forms. *Khong* is a kind of drum, *totorot* ‘flute’, and *rosiem* ‘bamboo flute’. These musical instruments are played during their dance and song performances especially in time of festival like *Sipuiroi* (lit. any seeds ready for planting i.e., maize, paddy etc. and *roi* ‘festival’) (5th December). It is the season when all the crops and paddy had been gathered. Harvest dance is a famous dance included in their folk dances, known as *Chonglam* (lit. Chong ‘owner’ and lam ‘dance’) and the bamboo dance is called *Sareltok* (lit. sarel ‘pestle’ and tok ‘to strike’). There is also a hunting dance which is called *Salulam* (lit. salu ‘hunted’ and lam ‘dance’). Although, these dance, festivals etc. are still prevalent in their society; it is rarely practiced by them because of modernization and Christianity.

Traditionally, Saihriem people are animists and they used to follow the religion of their own ancestors and they used to practise religious worship like *Kholoirobong* which is performed in the evening to satisfy all the evil spirits around them. Zingdewan, worshiping of sun, by

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar
A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

sacrificing pig, cock, etc. were also practised. Due to their conversion to Christianity, these practices are not followed now. As of now there is at least one church in each village where religious rites are performed according to the tenets of Christianity.

Dress and Ornaments

Like other tribes of the region, Saihriems have their traditional garments. Now a days, the use of traditional dresses and ornaments is confined to woman only. *Pon* is wrapped around the loin and it is long enough to touch the ankle and *Songkol* is an upper garment worn by women. *Dir* is a 'Dhoti' type, lower garment worn by men. Except some few older people, almost all male members have given up the use of their traditional dresses. Even the traditional ornament is less worn by younger generation.

Food and Drinks

Rice is the staple food of Saihriem people. Rice is eaten daily. Vegetables, meat and fish are taken along with rice. Most of the people prefer to eat boiled curry. They are fond of drinking liquor, rice beer, which is called zu. They are fond of chewing betel nut and pan. Other types of liquor are drunk occasionally during festivals and leisure periods.

Way of Building Houses

The Saihriem houses are generally built on wooden planks or bamboo raising the floor from one to two feet above the ground. They use both the wooden and bamboo posts in constructing their houses and thatch, hay and elephant grasses are used for roofing purpose.

Occupation

Agriculture is the main occupation of Saihriems. They practise shifting cultivation/slash and burn cultivation. Some other crops other than paddy are also cultivated: sesame, sorghum, maize, gourd, maize, chilli, pumpkin, etc. Many people rear pigs, goats, ducks, chickens for their eggs and meats, etc. Weaving is also an important work carried out by woman with the help of traditional handloom. Most of the household clothes are made from cotton thread. But now people use the readymade threads bought from the markets.

Village Administration

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar
A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

Like other tribes, the Saihriems have their own system of village administration and jurisdiction called *Village Council*. The council head is called *Village President* elected among the elderly people and he is the chief of the village. The Saihriem village council consists of the *President*, *Vice President*, and *Secretary*. The president presides over the village council and the council decides all matters relating to the village affairs like cases of disputes, thefts, incest, elopements, etc. The cases are taken to the law-courts only when the village council fails to settle.

Marriage, Birth and Death Rituals

Child marriage is not prevalent among Saihriem people. Traditional way of marriage is no longer practiced in the Saihriem society. They perform their marriage in the church called *Holy Marriage*. The minimum age for girl is sixteen and for a boy it should be twenty or so. They strictly follow monogamy. Exogamous marriage is also not followed; as such a man can marry to the girl belonging to the same clan/tribe. That is to say, that there is no restriction/bar for a girl and a boy to marry belonging to a same tribe/clan. Marriage is commonly done by negotiation. However elopement is also common in the society.

After the birth of a child, a naming ceremony is celebrated in which the child is named according to the sex. Maternal uncle plays an important role for naming the child and he is specially invited. This entire name giving ceremony is called *Hmingphuk*. A ceremony called *naituksul* is done on the tenth day in which the baby will be taken outside and the near and dear ones are invited.

After the death of a person, the dead body is buried in the graveyard according to the Christian religion. All the kith and kin are informed about the funeral. They sing funeral songs so that the death person's soul may live in heaven. This death ritual is called *Khosot Inleng*.

Arts and Crafts

The Saihriems are good in handicraft work. They manufacture most of the household materials by themselves. Most of the things, viz., *bem* 'basket', *ngabom* 'fishing trap', *kira* 'winnowing tray', *pat* 'handlooms', *thal* 'arrow', *kisei* 'spears', are made from bamboo, cane and wood.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar

A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

Comparison of Saihriem Vocabulary with Hmar

Saihriem	Hmar	Gloss
bu	bu	‘rice’
khoi	khuoi	‘bee’
thoivai	tho	‘housefly’
in	in	‘house’
kel	kel	‘goat’
kizu	mazu	‘rat’
mit	mit	‘eye’
thingra	thei	‘fruit’
tui	tui	‘water’
that	that	‘kill’
sikmi	phaivang	‘ant’
thir	thir	‘iron’
se	fe	‘go’
ui	ui	‘dog’
asei	sei	‘long’
zalna	khum	‘bed’
ho	hung	‘come’
totorot	totorot	‘flute’

Conclusion

The Saihriems are known for their simplicity and hospitality. Saihriems of Cachar, like other brethren in Assam, are a peace-loving tribe. They are very hard working and having high perseverance. They live in the midst of other tribal communities like Aimol, Kuki, Hrangkhoh and other Indo-Aryan groups. Saihriem is considered to be a dialect of Hmar but it shares around 70% of lexicon only with Hmar. The application of the terms *language* and *dialect*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar
A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem

within Kuki-Chin subgroup is governed also by the socio-political view/s taken by particular groups about the *dialect or language* status of their speech, not necessarily by the use of linguistic data and/or mutual intelligibility only (Thirumalai, personal communication). The loss of culture and religion is highly noticeable in them. However, the present trend among the younger generation of speakers shows a growing awareness of their ethnic and linguistic identity, and the need to preserve and promote their culture and religion through education in the mother-tongue and through revival of their traditional social and cultural practices. This trend of language revitalization is an encouraging sign that the Saihriem dialect and the Saihriem way of life will survive.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 5 May 2012

Debajit Deb, Ph.D. Scholar and Samir Debbarma, Ph.D. Scholar
A Sociolinguistic Profile of Saihriem