

A Sociolinguistic Study of Kharam

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Kharam male in indigenous Dress



Kharam female in indigenous Dress

Abstract

Kharam is one of the Government recognized scheduled tribes of Manipur having its distinct language, custom and ethnic identity. Kharam is the name of the language and the community that speak the language. The term *Kharam* itself is a compound word *kha* means 'south' and *ram* means 'land' or 'place' which literally means 'Southland'.

The Kharam is mainly spoken in Tuisemphai, Laikot Kharam, Laikot Phaijol, Purum Likli, Kharam Thadoi, Tampak Kharam, New Keithel Manbi and Kharam Khullen villages in the Senapati district of Manipur. The total number of Kharam speakers in Manipur is 1000 according to Tribal Research Institute, Manipur (2013). Interestingly, the Kharam is absent in any classification of Tibeto-Burman languages made by Grierson (1903), Benedict (1972), Matisoff (2000, 2003). In fact, the Kharam language is closely related to Purum, Kom, Koireng and Chothe. The present paper is an attempt to explore '*A Sociolinguistic Study of Kharam*'.

1.0 Introduction

Kharam is the name of the language as well as the community that speak the language. The speakers of Kharam are mainly found in Senapati district of Manipur and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of the language. The term Kharam itself is a compound word *kha* means 'south' and *ram* means 'land' or 'place' which literally means 'Southland'. The Kharam is mainly spoken in Tuisemphai, Laikot Kharam, Laikot Phaijol, Purum Likli, Kharam Thadoi, Tampak Kharam, New Keithel Manbi and Kharam Khullen villages in the Senapati district of Manipur. Kharam has close affinities with other languages Kom, Purum, Aimol etc.

There are more than thirty six indigenous tribal languages in Manipur which includes Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Kaka Naga, Kharam, Koirao, Koireng, Kom, Lamkang, Mao, Maram, Mizo (Lushai), Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Paomei, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Salte, Tangkhul, Tarao, Thadou, Waiphei, Zou.

According to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2009 edition), there are 196 endangered languages in the Indian sub-continent. Out of 196 Indian languages listed by UNESCO, about 89 languages are located in the North Eastern region. However, UNESCO's report failed to give a clear picture of endangered languages in Northeast India. If we consider the case of Tarao, Paomei and Kharam in Manipur, UNESCO' list of endangered

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languages in North Eastern India should be reviewed for the further correction, i.e., these three languages are not listed by the UNESCO in their list of Endangered languages in the region.

1.1 Name and Identity of the People

Manipur is one of Border States in the North Eastern part of the country having a beautiful landscape and rich cultural and linguistic heritages. It is bound by Nagaland in the North, Assam in the west and Mizoram in the South. It has a total area of 22,327 sq. Km. It is interesting to know that this small state is not only the abode of many endangered species including birds, animals, flowers, and valuable medicinal plants but also a large number of indigenous languages which are so-called minority or lesser-known or endangered languages in terms of their potentiality, social reputation, numerical strength and socio-economic status. There are more than thirty-six indigenous tribal languages in Manipur.

The Kharam tribe is one of the indigenous as well as least populous tribes of Manipur. They are one of the 34 recognised schedule tribes in Manipur. Kharam is the name of the language as well as the community that speaks the language. Kharams are mongoloid people and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Kharam Pallen village is the main and most important among the other Kharam villages. The Pallen suffix stands for 'earthen wall' for fortification of the village. Thus, Kharam Pallen stands for 'a village in the southern highlands fortified by earthen walls'.

1.2 Origin

The Kharam is one of the very early inhabitants of Manipur. They came into contact with Zeliangrong tribes and the Meitei rulers of Manipur, especially with king Khagemba of Manipur (1597-1652 A.D.) who gave protection to our people. During the Burmese invasions, of Manipur culminating the Anglo Burmese War (1824-26). Raja Chandrakriti Singh (1850-1886) brought the Kharams together and made them settle in the present village of Kharam Pallen. Both stone and copper inscriptions were issued by the said king declaring the Kharams as the protected subjects of kingdom of Manipur. According to Kharam tradition, they migrated from a mythical cave called Laiyang you Laiyang –phai which is identified with somewhere in the south West. Ultimately, the Kharams came to western Manipur hills and settled in Koubru Laimaton range in Senapati District.

1.3 Geographical and Demographical Background

The Kharam are found only in the senapati district of Manipur. They live in four villages which are located on hill slopes except one. The names of Kharam villages are:

1. Kharam pallen
2. Tampak kharam
3. Tuisenphai
4. Laikot phaijol.

Though they are located in the same district, they live quite far from each other. Tampak Kharam is located in the plains with the least population occupying the smallest area of land. Kharam pallen is the oldest and biggest one. Kharam Pallen is the farthest of all from Imphal with a distance of about 37 kms. It is on the National High Way 53. Now it is called as National High Way 37.

Table-1: Distances from village to village

SL No.	Villages from	To	Distance in kms
1.	Kharam Pallen	Tampak Kharam	10 kms
2.	Kharam Pallen	Tnisenpai via Imphal	51 kms
3.	Kharam Pallen	Laikot Phaijol via Imphal	59 kms
4.	Laikot Phaijol	Tuisenphai via Teiyong	16 kms

The other languages spoken in the neighbourhood include Naga, Kuki and Manipuri, etc. The population of the Kharam tribe cannot be ascertained from the census report of India.

Table-2: Population of 1990 with their respective villages.

SL No.	Name of village	No. of household	No. of members	Male	Female
1.	Kharam Pallen	53	306	153	153
2.	Tampak Kharam	3	15	9	6
3.	Tnisenphai	23	136	64	72
4.	Laikot Phaijol	29	168	91	77
5.	Others	32	178	92	86

	Total	140	803	409	394
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2.0 Religious Rituals

Religious rituals play an important role in the life of the Kharam people. In order to enjoy good health and serene mental and spiritual of life, Kharams perform rituals to appease the evil spirits which are believed to cause physical, mental and spiritual problems to the people individually or the village as a whole.

2.1 Religion

The traditional religion of the Kharams is polytheism, where they believe in a supreme being called “Pathen”, lesser gods, goddesses and spirits. Pathen is the creator of the whole universe and the human race. Besides Pathen, there is a village deity called Baongpa who is a kind and benevolent deity. Now-a-days, the majority of the Kharam people have converted into Christianity. However, a small population still follows the traditional religion. The majority of Kharam people are Christians and there is a very small population of non-Christians. Before the advent of Christianity, they worshiped their local deity. On every Sunday, they attend the church.

2.2 Ritual at Birth

Elderly women are engaged in the delivery of a child. As soon as a child is born, a name is given to it to assert that the child belongs to the human race and not to the spirits. Otherwise, they believe that the evil spirits are waiting to name the child, who will then have a short span of life. After the birth of a child, the child is not taken outside till a ritual called “Neitolsok” is performed by the maternal grand father. He will call upon the deities and evil spirits that can cause any kind of sickness to the child and commands them to depart.

2.3 Rituals at Death

When a person dies, the body is given a final bath and made to wear the traditional costumes. If the family is poor and does not have the costumes, these can be borrowed from the same clan members and should not be from the other clansmen of the deceased. The body is then kept in front of the main door. Songs are sung in honor of the deceased. Items that the family intends to give are all bundled and kept near the body. The body is buried in a common

grave yard maintained outside the village gate. After the burial, an animal is killed by the family of the people in the belief that such animal is given to the departed soul. Rice beer is distributed to those who attend the ceremony. On the fourth day of the burial, the left part of a fowl is given to the dead and the right portion is for the living. The former is wrapped in leaves. Two women take rice, fowl and bamboo cups and place them over the tomb of the dead. It is believed to be eaten by the departed.

3.0 Marriage Rituals

The Kharam society is patriarchal. The Kharam society consists of a number of clans with a common ancestor each clan. Marriage takes place among them but intra-clan marriage is strictly prohibited by the custom on the ground that they are like brothers and sisters. When a boy and a girl are in love, marriage does not take place immediately, but it takes 3 years after the marriage proposal is accepted. The parents are informed in the first place and marriage proposal is announced 3 times in 3 consecutive years. On the completion of 3 years, marriage takes place at the groom's residence. On the day of marriage, the parents or the relatives of the groom must approach the parents of the bride three times to ask for her hand. Finally, when the third request is granted, the girl is led by her relatives to the residence of the groom with blessings from her parents. The village chief and his councilors are invited to the groom's residence and they play an important role in marriage ceremony.

Like many other tribal society in Manipur, Kharam is also a male-dominated society. To Kharam, marriage is customary duty and is a sacred one too. It is common belief that all should marry to give company to each other and for reproduction of the members in their community. The proposal for marriage comes from the parents of the boy.

There are three types of marriage customs in Kharam.

- a) Preferential marriage: It is a marriage between one's mother's brother's daughters.
- b) Love marriage: It is a marriage after selection of mates by individuals.
- c) Arranged marriage or engaged marriage: It is also a marriage arranged by parents.

3.1 Traditional Festivals

There are three main festivals in Kharam.

They are:

- a) Annual festival
- b) Occasional and
- c) Feasts of merit.

Regarding the festival, there are three different criteria determining the festivals. Sex, marital status and age are also categorized in this festival. In the first category of the festivals, it is based on the sex, marital status and age. In the second category, the whole population participates but under the order of the highest body of village administration. Feasts of merit are mainly for male individuals. The dominance of the male sex in a society is reflected by these festivals.

Lapu, lapi, lamtaakchei, meithal kaap, kaang yu ka-in, nungak rothar, saratha kakoi and muda are of annual festivals.

3.2 Language Affinities (Ethnologue, 2013)

Sino-Tibetan,

Tibeto-Burman,

Kuki-Chin-Naga,

Kuki-Chin,

Kharam

Kharam is one of the Tibeto-Burman languages of North Eastern India which has close affinities with the languages like Purum, Koireng and Kom. The lexical similarity of Kharam is 71% to 73% with Purum, 58% to 60% with Kom, 64% with Koireng (ISO 639-3; kfw).

3.3 Cultural and Literary Background

The Kharams are patrilineal and patrilocal. The marriage is strictly exogamous and proposal for marriage comes from boy's side after the boy chooses his life partner. Marriage within the clan is not permitted. The Kharams are a very industrious tribe. Kharam women are experts in weaving. They have a great heritage of traditional skills in weaving. Kharam women traditionally wear the dresses made by them.

They have a literary society called “Kharam Literary Society” but there is not much written literature. They have rich folktales but are not available as written documents. They are very rich in oral literature which have not yet been documented in the systematic way till today.

4.0 Script

Like many other tribal languages of North East India, Kharam does not have a script of its own. In fact, they used to write their language in Bengali and/or Roman Script.

4.1 Education

The Kharam did not have a formal education system in the past and they remained pure traditionalists. Under the traditional system, informal education was imparted through the dormitory system where the older boys taught the juniors a variety of skills, customs and manners, etc. A Government UJB school was established only in 1955 at Kharam Pallen village. In 1989, there were 35 students in the school. Out of which 22 were boys and 13 girl students (Sangkham, 2006). After long time, a private junior high school was set up in Laikot Phaijol in 1984. Since their conversion to Christianity, some of the families in Kharam Pallen have managed to send their children to missionary schools like the Don Bosco High School in Mao town to undergo higher studies. Some Kharam people were qualified with M.A. degree and even MBBS students in recent years.

According to the findings conducted in 1990, percentage of class eight passed is 4.86% and that of matriculation and above is 2.25% only. It is an indication that they have a long way to go as far as formal education is concerned.

4.2 The Polity

Each of the Kharam villages is an independent political and administrative unit with their own system of local self governance, either in the traditional structure and modified forms. In the traditional structure, the village is administered by the village council of elders known as the *Kataar*. The *Kataar* is represented by the Khokalakpa, Yukapanapa Lupkalakpa, Pakhatkalakpa, Hitang, Naingaikal akpa naipang in that descending order. In earlier days, the khokalakpa was chosen by reading signs of Yen-khong-tamba , that is, the observation of the position of the legs of a dying cock.

In recent times, politics at the village level had crept into the nomination or selection of the village chief. The tradition of father to son has been interrupted with a modern trend of voice vote in favour of the person of the choice of the stronger or influential group in the village.

4.3 Economy

Kharam Pallen is the only Kharam village with sufficient land for cultivation and activities. The other villages, namely, Tampak Kharam, Tuisenphai, Laikot and Laikot Phaijol do not have own products. The main occupation of the villagers is agriculture and farming activity. Agriculture is practiced both in the river basin (tampak lou) and in the hill slopes (pamlou). The main cash crops are banana and tree bean (*parkia roxurburghii*). Both the items, namely, the banana and the tree bean, produced from Kharam Pallen are of good quality and they are much sought after in the local market. The sale from these items help families to meet the needs such as the purchase of clothing, food supplement and essential commodities, medicine, some luxury items, etc. for the family.

5.0 Status

Kharam is not a scheduled language but it was officially recognised by the Government of India as a scheduled tribe of Manipur by an act of Parliament on January 8, 2003. Kharam is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges and other institutions and it is also not used as the medium for broadcasting programmes of All India Radio, Imphal, till today.

5.1 The Language

Kharam is one of the 34 government recognized tribe in Manipur. This language has the genetic features of Tibeto-Burman. It has SOV word order and pronominal marking on verb. Different word classes are formed by affixation. Though it is a recognized language, it has limited published works. There is one translated published book of short stories of the Holy Bible and one song book in Kharam. The name of the short story is Holy Book of Kharam and the name of the song book is Kharam Song Book.

Most of the Kharam speakers can understand and speak Meiteiron (Manipuri), the official language and lingua franca of the State of Manipur.

5.2 Grammatical Features

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1. Gender distinction in Kharam is determined on the natural recognition of sex, i.e., gender is not grammatically marked in this language. Kharam has natural gender.
2. Number is not grammatically significant in Kharam, i.e., there is a no subject predicate agreement as far as number is concerned.
3. Case relations in Kharam are expressed by means of postpositions.
4. Numeral system in Kharam is of decimal type. There are native ordinals in Kharam.
5. The normal order of words in an unmarked sentence is subject-object-verb (SOV).
6. Negation is mainly formed by affixes, i.e., prefixation or suffixation.

5.3 Monolingualism

The monolingual speakers are not found among Kharams.

6.0 Bilingualism

There is widespread bilingualism in urban areas of Imphal, Lamlong, Yaingangpokpi, New Keithelmanbi, especially in Imphal district. Kharams are bilingual in Kharam and Manipuri in Imphal whereas the Kharams of New Keithelmanbi are bilingual in Kharam and the Meitei dialect of Khumbong.

Kharams are bilingual in Kharam and Meiteilon in Manipur. In addition to their mother tongue, they tend to use Manipuri, Hindi, and English according to the situation or the person concerned. Fluency of English is largely dependent on the educational background of the person concerned. Some people can speak Hindi fluently but they cannot read Hindi.

6.1 Language Attitude

The attitude of the Kharam people towards their mother tongue is highly positive. There is a great effort to maintain their language in order to preserve their identity. Kharam people always try to develop their language.

6.2 Mass Media

- ❖ There are a few programmes at All India Radio Imphal and DDK Imphal.
- ❖ There is no feature film in Kharam language.

6.3 Language Use in Domains

- ❖ Kharam people use their language at home domains and also for outside communication among themselves.
- ❖ When the friends or guests belonging to different language groups visit their house, they speak Manipuri.
- ❖ When they talk to their non-Kharam neighbours or when members of other language groups are present, then they use Manipuri.

7.0 Conclusion

How long will they be able to maintain their language even when they have a positive attitude towards their language in the midst of globalization, modernization and standardization? There is no written literature; their literature remains oral till date. Reading materials which can be used in the formal education system are to be prepared. In addition, they are not so prominent socio-political status including their negligible numerical strength exerts great pressure on the people and it is possible that their language may lose ground day by day. Children of this language go through education using other languages. Their mother tongue is very sparingly used by the younger generation of this community while communicating among themselves.

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