NEW TRENDS IN THE VERBAL BEHAVIOUR OF
NABADWIP : A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: There has been a tremendous socio-economic change in West Bengal, a state of India, since independence of India in 1947. This has been accentuated by the influx of other variety of Bengali speaking immigrants from Bangladesh. Consequently, languages as the critical tool of communication and socialization has also changed.

The present paper which is a micro-level sociolinguistic study of Nabadwip, an ancient township, adequately reflects the micro-level sociological and linguistic changes of West Bengal and their corerelationship. All casual factors of social change in West Bengal are operative in Nabadwip including congregation of immigrants. Moreover, the dialect as spoken in Nabadwip was the basis of the emergence of the Standard Colloquial Bengali as it exerted a tremendous influence in the formative period of Bengali language.

Forms of caste dialects are getting obliterated though caste as the core of an ideological superstructure controls the social behaviour. Other linguistic changes are also noted. But what is most important is that an emergent speach-pattern amongst the young generation is betraying the potency of becoming a newer form of the Standard Colloquial Bengali in near future.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

During the last four decades, and particularly since independence of India in 1947, the verbal behaviour of the Bengali Speech Community of West Bengal, a state of India, is showing vast changes which should be studied on the pararmeters of linguistics and the social sciences as well as of their tools and apparatus to evaluate these changes in an attempt to codify their social meaning. Though sociologists and linguists had all along underlined the social nature of
communication and socialization, still there were few studies in this regard before 1960's. But following William Labov and Basil Bernstein, the two most original thinkers, a host of studies of languages of Europe and America have come out. Unfortunately socio-linguistic studies of closed and traditional societies of the Third World are few and far between. These societies offer at any point of time a conjunction of forces of the social classes as well as of castes in the social matrix which make them more complex and intricate.

1.2

The socio-economic causes for change in the social structure, pattern of social functions and role-relationships, domains and social network, belief-system and value-system and norms and agencies of socialization of West Bengal are many. Partition of Bengal in 1947 and consequent influx of 15 million immigrants(20); gigantic but haphazard efforts since 1947 for modernisation and urbanisation(25); conscious effort for women liberation(3); land reform and mechanisation of agriculture(12); struggle for upward mobility among castes(2); population explosion(Census of India : 1991); -- are some of the major indices of the causes of change. But the most important factor of social unrest and ferment is the yawning gap between the aspiration of people for development and the poor realisation which is causing despair and frustration resulting in convulsive actions by the youth(1).

1.3

Consequently, language as the most important media of communication, socialization, symbolization and group identification has to change by shouldering new loads and adjustments(19).

2.1 Coverage

For our purpose we undertook a micro-level study of the change in the verbal behaviour of the people of Nabadvip area for the following reasons:

2.2 Nabadvip is a very ancient place, the ancient topography of which has baffled the investigation of scholars. For the present purpose we shall accept the topography of Nabadvip in the Modern period and its evolution from the Early Medieval period as has been established by scholars(26), (8). Upto independence and partition of Bengal in 1947, Nabadvip was a small township with surrounding villages and was famous as a religious place and centre of learning(9). The static and traditional pattern of social production based on the caste-system held sway and the famous Renaissance of Bengal in the 19th Century failed to stir Nabadvip off
from its moorings of the traditional social system(22),(18). In short, a particular type of feudal mode of production which has been characterised as "Asiatic Mode of Production" by Karl Marx (Capital : Vol I : Chapter 14) was deeply entwined with a functioning caste-system where social role-relationships were ascribed rather than acquired and this regulated the social life in Nabadwip including its pattern of habitation. Thus, from North to South Nabadwip was divided into many pārās (area of habitation) and each pārā was subdivided on caste lines like Brāhman pārā, Karmakār (blacksmith) pārā, Jēlē (fisherman) pārā, Chutōr (carpenter) pārā etc. This reflected the caste-based trade divisions and settlements of the locality.

Since 1947 the habitation pattern of Nabadwip on caste lines has been totally upset and in its stead a new pattern based on class and immigrant concentration has developed. Thus the Eastern side near the Ganga, the extreme Northern side beyond the old embankment in Catir Math and extreme Southern side in Manipur and Haritāla witnessed sprouting up of innumerable colonies of the immigrants of various classes and castes. Meanwhile the older inhabitation areas have been slowly reset on class with mixed population of immigrants and older native residents.

2.3 The evolution of the dialect of Nabadwip from 10th-11th century has been adequately described by scholars(7). Different dialects of Bengali have not developed from a single source which may be called Proto Bengali "but they were derived from various local forms of late Magadhi Apabhraṣṭa which developed some common characteristics that may be called Pan-Bengali". (ibid : 139-140). But the caste dialects within the general framework of regional dialects have a deeper anthropological strand connected with the evolution of the Bengali race from Proto-Austroloid, Mediterranean-Dravínian and brachycephalic Alpine races(27). Thus caste dialects also developed which unlike regional dialects are neither distinct entities nor linked with socio-economic class. Rather with all their characteristic features which distinguish each other these caste-dialects were to be seen within the framework of regional dialects. But as we have seen in Nabadwip these characteristics are getting levelled up.

2.4 Though the ancient history of Nabadwip is shrouded in mystery, recorded history is available since circa 1202 A.D. when Muhammad-i-Bakhtiyār in a surprise attack on the royal palace of Laksmana Sēna captured Nabadwip. Throughout the medieval period, that is, upto the 18th Century Nabadwip retained its glory as a seat of learning and culture. Because of the political and
cultural supremacy that Nabadvip enjoyed in the ancient and medieval period, the dialect of Nabadvip which is Eastern Radhī exerted a tremendous influence on Bengal in its formative period. It slowly emerged as the Sista Calita or the Standard Colloquial Dialect. From the 18th Century onwards the Dialect of Calcutta which is also Eastern Radhī has buttressed the position of this dialect to be accepted as the Sista Calita and the literary language.

2.5 There has been a vast influx and congregation of immigrants from East Bengal (now Banglādēsh) to Nabadvip so much so that two-thirds of the present population of Nabadvip are immigrants (20). Immigrants speaking different sub-varieties of East and North Bengal dialects became diglossic thus making Nabadvip a veritable language laboratory.

2.6 The socio-economic causes of change as enumerated in Section 1.2 are in operation in Nabadvip. Though there is no big industry here, unemployed and helpless immigrants have established flourishing weaving centres as cottage industry in their colonies and this form of employment tends to reinforce dense multiplex networks replacing old caste-based network. Added with other factors this is helping to break up the old social order. So today profession is neither absolutely ascribed by birth, nor totally conformative to caste. Still the caste-system forms the core of an ideological superstructure which effectively controls the social behaviour (16).

2.7 The most important thing is that Nabadvip is a miniature representative of the fluidity and the tentativeness of the present-day social picture of West Bengal. As we pointed out, the post-independent effort of modernisation and social transformation has brought in its wake fissures and new constellations in the structure, role-relationships, pattern of social functions, value and belief-system of the society of West Bengal. The influx of immigrants has lent an accentuating effect on the ongoing process of social transformation. A micro-level study of Nabadvip from a socio-linguistic perspective will reveal not only the interrelationship between language and social forces but also the emergent pattern of the verbal behaviour of the people of Nabadvip which will be valid for, or at least useful indicator of West Bengal as a whole.

3.1 Methodology Adopted

At first we undertook a detailed demographic study and the social network of the Municipal area of Nabadvip and its surrounding villages. Long years of participant observation helped us to select twenty...