

THE MANIPURIS IN THE BARAK VALLEY: A CASE STUDY OF LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of language maintenance is crucial in bilingual or multilingual communities. The Manipuri language (also known as Meithei) belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and is the official language of the state of Manipur in India. It is also spoken in the Barak Valley region of South Assam. The districts of Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj are collectively referred to as the Barak Valley. The present paper investigates the case of language maintenance by the multilingual Manipuri speakers of the Barak Valley.

The majority of Barak Valley Manipuri speakers live in Cachar district. According to the 1971 census of India, the number of Manipuri speakers in the Barak Valley was 72,290 and that of Bengali speakers was 1,332,268. The numbers of male and female speakers of Manipuri were 36,383 and 35,907, respectively.

The Manipuris in the Barak Valley are multilingual. Besides their mother tongue, they speak a dialect of Bengali, which is the dominant language in the Barak Valley.

The present study is based on data collected from the members of the Manipuri community living in and around Silchar, Lakhipur, Pailapool, Karimganj, and Hailakandi subdivisions of the Barak Valley. A questionnaire was administered to 74 informants of both sexes belonging to different age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions. Language use was studied in terms of the communication network within the family and communication patterns outside the home (the language used with friends, at schools/colleges/offices, at the marketplace, hospital, etc.). The questionnaire also elicited data on language preferences and language skills, language as medium and subject, language used in literary and cultural associations, intergroup language use, attitudes to language, language of mass communication, language and identity, and so on.

The Manipuri speakers have a higher social status in the state of Manipur than in the Barak Valley, where they are still considered as outsiders and are not given as much respect.

With respect to their religion, the Manipuris are no different from the Bengalis of the Barak Valley. They are almost one hundred percent Hindu. The older generation is not very well educated, but the younger generation is more concerned about their studies and is better educated. Although the number of Manipuris studying at the university is relatively low, almost all the eligible Manipuris attend school and/or colleges.

The Manipuri speakers are settled mainly in the following areas of the Barak Valley: Jiribam, Banskandi, Lakhipur, Pailapool, Sonai, Kabuganj, Hailakandi, and Karimganj. According to the available records, the Manipuris were not found in the Barak Valley until around 1757 AD. They came to the Barak Valley, mainly to Jiribam (situated at the Assam-Manipur border), at the end of 1757 to avoid torture at the hands of the Burmese who had attacked Manipur and defeated the king of Manipur. In 1765 Jai Singh, the king of Manipur, came to Cachar to seek help. He stayed there for some time and with him came a large group of Manipuris, during the period of 1775-1782 AD. Jai Singh's efforts to return to Manipur and defeat the Burmese proved futile. Jai Singh died in 1798; in 1818 Raja Govindachandra, the ruler of Cachar, called to his aid an exiled Manipuri prince, Chaurjit Singh, who had been given shelter in Cachar by Jai Singh. During this period, many other Manipuris came to Cachar. The Burmese were finally driven out by the British, and a treaty was made between David Scott of the East India Company and Raja Govindachandra on March 6, 1824. Even after the Burmese left for good, many Manipuris remained in Cachar.

The Manipuris who settled in the Barak Valley have weak ties with their original homeland of Manipur, but they do somehow maintain them. They correspond with their relatives and friends living in Manipur and occasionally even pay them visits.

So far as the degree of similarity between the minority (Manipuri) and majority (Bengali) languages is concerned, the two languages are very different. Bengali belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European, and Manipuri to the Tibeto-Burman family. Although there are important differences between the two languages—for example, Bengali does not have tones, but Manipuri does—there do exist similarities between the lexicons of the two languages. Manipuri has borrowed a large number of Bengali words, such as *bhut* 'ghost', *sabha* 'meeting', *dhora* 'axle', *gadha* 'donkey', *ghari* 'watch', *ghus* 'bribe', *ghuli* 'bag', *bhara* 'fare', *ghat* 'pitcher', and so on, as well as the names of the days of the week. Manipuri does not have aspirated voiced stops, but the

inclusion of Bengali words has resulted in the acceptance of these sounds into the Manipuri speakers' sound system.

There has been a considerable interference on the Manipuri spoken in the Barak Valley. Besides the development of voiced aspirated stops in Barak Manipuri, there has been a loss of tones. Manipuri is basically a tonal language with two register tones: the high or rising tone (marked ´) and the low or falling tone (marked `). The tone is phonemic and brings about change in meaning. Some tonal minimal pairs follow:

í	'blood'	ì	'thatch'
íbə	'to be ill'	ìbə	'to write'
húbə	'to steal'	hùbə	'to lose'
təùba	'to do'	təúba	'to dig'
càbə	'small'	cábə	'to eat'
tàbə	'to hear'	tábə	'to fall from above'
wànbə	'to have breakfast'	wánbə	'to purchase'
út	'camel'	ùt	'ashes'
kábə	'to climb'	kàbə	'to separate'
məkù	'owl'	məkú	'scale (fish); bark (tree)'

However, the Manipuri language spoken in the Barak Valley now cannot be called a tonal language. The words which originally had tones are now being used without tones, the difference in meaning being known by the context. This is clearly due to the influence of the majority language, Bengali. Also, there are a considerable number of original Manipuri words that have been replaced by common Bengali words, such as the following:

<i>Manipuri</i>	<i>Bengali</i>	
yumsə kəysə	budhbar	'Wednesday'
səgolsen	brəspətibar	'Thursday'
ləusiŋ	gyan	'knowledge'
phiduj	sadi	'marriage'
khunai	səmaj	'society'
higok	nil	'blue'
khorirol	sahittə	'literature'
həinəbi	əibbas	'habit'
səmkəkpa	napit	'barber'
məratəppə	sənti	'peace'
khonjan	bəṭ	'banyan tree'

Now let us discuss the domains of language use by the Manipuri speakers of the Barak Valley. Home is an important domain for language maintenance, since at home interaction is mainly with members of the family and it is expected that the mother tongue will be the language in use. Fishman (1972) has discussed two different approaches in studying language use in the home. 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 interaction between speaker and hearer within the home domain. In the Barak Valley the language used by Manipuris in the home domain is obviously Manipuri. The older and younger generations both used the Manipuri language in childhood. The Bengali language is not used in the home environment.

Interpersonal communication is that area of language interaction in the total linguistic repertoire of a group that involves individuals of one language group interacting with individuals of other language groups in situations such as the following:

- i) market transactions
- ii) interaction in hospitals
- iii) interaction with public transport drivers and conductors
- iv) interaction with priests in temples, and also the language of prayer
- v) language used to interact in public places (e.g., banks, post offices) and with authority figures like teachers and administrators

Since these domains involve mostly public "supply and demand" activity, it often happens that choice of language plays a significant role in smooth transactions. For example, in market transactions the seller often conducts his affairs in the language of the buyer. But in the case of the Manipuri speakers of the Barak Valley, the buyer (a Manipuri speaker) conducts his affairs in the language of the seller (a Bengali speaker). Sometimes Hindi is also used.

The Manipuri speakers make friends mostly with members of their own community, with whom they naturally speak Manipuri. With acquaintances belonging to the Bengali community they use Bengali, and with non-Bengali acquaintances they use Hindi.

With doctors, nurses, and pharmacists the Manipuris generally use Bengali; occasionally Hindi or English is also used.

While traveling in buses, auto-rickshaws, taxis, etc., the Manipuris use the language of the drivers and conductors, which is usually Bengali; again, sometimes Hindi is also used.

In the domain of religious activity only the Manipuri language is used. The priests recite the *mantras* in Sanskrit, but normal conversation takes place in Manipuri. The language of prayer is also Manipuri.

While interacting at banks, post offices, and with children's teachers and administrators, the Manipuris use Bengali and Hindi. Sometimes English is also used.

In cross-group interaction, the use of a particular language depends on the language of the groups. A Manipuri will use Manipuri while interacting with another Manipuri and Bengali while interacting with a Bengali speaker. In the case of a non-Bengali group or person, the language used by the Manipuri will be either Hindi or English.

The social/political leaders of the Manipuri community use Manipuri in the following situations: public speeches, among themselves, and informally with members of their own community. Those Manipuris who work in offices and other workspots mostly use Bengali and Hindi with their superiors and subordinates: Bengali with Bengali-speaking colleagues, and Bengali and Hindi with outsiders.

At schools and colleges the Manipuris use Manipuri, Bengali, and English with teachers or superiors. At schools Bengali and Manipuri languages are used with classmates or colleagues, whereas at colleges English is also used in addition to Bengali and Manipuri.

Radio, television, and the cinema are key sources through which comprehension of a language is acquired or maintained. The print media are sources through which a person's literary skills are maintained. Investigation into this area of language use may reveal processes of language maintenance or shift. The languages of the print media in the Barak Valley are Bengali and English. Manipuri newspapers and magazines are not available there, so the Manipuris must read newspapers and magazines in Bengali or English.

The Silchar radio station broadcasts programs in Manipuri every day for about an hour. The Manipuris (especially in the Jiribam area) also have access to radio programs broadcast by the radio station in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. Most of the Manipuris listen to news broadcasts in Manipuri regularly. They also occasionally listen to other programs, such as folk/film songs, talks, etc. The main reason for listening to the radio programs is that they enjoy them, and the programs in Manipuri are better understood than those in Bengali or some other language like Hindi or English.

Manipuri is taught as a subject in some of the schools and colleges of the Barak Valley and at the university as well. Manipuri is not used as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges, but is so used to a great extent in the

Manipuri Department of Assam University, located in Silchar, where the Manipuri language is taught by teachers belonging to the Manipuri community.

Broadly speaking, languages reflect differing norms of social and cultural behavior. Therefore, in order to understand the nuances of the complex behavior of a linguistic community like the Manipuris, it is essential to correlate the structure and use of Manipuri with its social and cultural aspects. The co-existence of Bengali and Manipuri languages can be defined as:

- a) dominant vs. subordinate, and
- b) majority vs. minority.

In the Barak Valley Bengali functions as a dominant majority language and Manipuri as a subordinate minority language. The Manipuris feel that their children should study through the medium of Manipuri as the language of instruction. They also feel that the use of Manipuri is necessary for Manipuri identity and solidarity.

There is a link between the dominant language group and the linguistic minorities in relation to differential power structures inherent in multilingual societies. Members of linguistic minorities are aware that they will continue to interact with the dominant language group time and again, living in the same place, and will alter their behavior in order to lessen the likelihood of conflict. In other words, the socio-cultural environment within which different groups come into contact constantly influences their linguistic behavior. Extended periods of stay probably influence the linguistic minority toward total assimilation with the host society. It is also possible that the group will show processes of acculturation and at the same time retain their distinct identity. The Manipuris in the Barak Valley have not shifted their cultural values. They still wear their traditional dress and maintain the same food habits. The dances, festivals, and *pujas* like Krishna-puja, etc., are celebrated in the Manipuri way. They feel that retaining their own cultural values will help them maintain their independent identity.

Although the Manipuris do not have a negative attitude toward the dominant language Bengali, they do not use Bengali at home or for communication with the members of their own community. The Manipuris do not consider Bengali to be important for social status and prestige. They listen to radio programs in Bengali because they have a wide coverage and because they help in acquiring the culture and literature of the Bengalis. However, the Manipuris believe that the radio broadcasts in Manipuri are helpful for promoting the use of the language and for providing a sense of integration. In meetings of the Manipuri associations and organizations they use only Manipuri, whether meeting formally or informally. Also, they think that their mother tongue is useful for higher education and also rather useful in finding jobs.

Although in Manipur a Manipuri can marry a person from another speech community, the Manipuris of the Barak Valley do not allow marriages outside their own community. If an exogamous marriage does take place in their community, it will not be accepted by the society. This also helps Manipuris to maintain their mother tongue.

Institutional support also helps language maintenance. In this region Manipuri is taught both at school and college levels, and now it is taught even at the university level.

Although the Manipuris and the Bengali speaking community are both Hindu, there are inherent differences in social and religious practices, and hence in some sense Manipuri speakers are isolated from other communities. Manipuri thus acts as the unifying force. The dynamics of the multilingual society leads the Manipuri community, otherwise isolated, to maintain their mother tongue.

Another contributing factor to linguistic and cultural maintenance is that the Manipuri speakers of the Barak Valley have not severed their ties with the Manipuri speakers of Manipur.

Regardless of the variability of intra- and inter-group differences among the communities, the Manipuri language emerges as the most important factor in the maintenance of Manipuri identity and solidarity.

On the basis of the above discussion, it can be concluded that despite some interference from Bengali, the Manipuris of the Barak Valley maintain their mother tongue. They use Manipuri in the home, and Bengali is only used occasionally for communication in the marketplace, offices, and so on, due to functional and situational needs.

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