

Experiment in Rabha language development¹

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Abstract

A review of the 2001 Jomtien declaration reveals that millions of children, most of them girls, still have no access to education and that millions of adults are still illiterate. Steps have been taken by various national governments to implement Education for All but efforts are yet to include all people, particularly ethnic minority language communities like the Rava, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa, and Lapcha in India.

According to the 1991 Census Report of India, Rava is the fifth largest of twenty-one ethnic minority language communities in Assam, northeast India. The Rabha community comprises 1.05 % of Assam's total population. According to our study, Ravas have eleven linguistic sub-groups, only three of which have their own writing system. However all the sub-groups are now unifying to identify a commonly accepted form of the language i.e. Rangdania, using Assamese script. This has helped the groups that had already lost their language to re-learn it. Moreover, the use of Assamese script helps them transfer to Assamese, the majority language of the state. This facilitates the process of integration with Assamese society.

Rava is one of the endangered languages of Asia. In addition to facing the loss of their linguistic and cultural heritage, the Rava people lack access to relevant education in the language that they speak and understand. The action research described in this presentation was conducted with the Rava community to prepare bilingual reading materials for preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage. The research motivated the Rava People to develop learning materials for children. These materials are now being field-tested and adopted.

Introduction

Since its inception in 1995, State Resource Center (SRC) Assam has been actively involved in the state literacy campaign. As part of the literacy drive, SRC has been developing prototype materials for neo-literates. However it was observed that many illiterate people were not coming forward to take part in the literacy campaign. When the reason was sought, it was found that it is seldom conducted in their mother tongue. Research also shows that mother tongue is the best medium for imparting education. Moreover it is seen that literacy is successful only where the community is at stake in the campaign. This comes from a spirit of voluntarism and the community taking ownership of the campaign. Keeping these factors in mind the SRCA has taken up the literacy campaign through mother tongue.

At the same time, Dr. Debadatta Barkataki, Director, SRCA, attended an international workshop entitled "Minority Language Material Production on Research and Country Experience" organized by UNESCO. Later on SRC Assam submitted the proposal for production of learning materials in a participatory manner to UNESCO, Bangkok. The minority language decided upon was Rabha language spoken by the Rabha tribe inhabiting Assam and its neighboring areas.

In this project entitled "Action Research on Literacy Through Indigenous Language", SIL International has come forward to provide the academic support. Since the language spoken by the Rabha people did

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not have their own script, Assamese script was unanimously decided upon with the consent of the Rabha Sahitya Sabha (Rabha Literary Society). This is due to the fact that most of the indigenous language speakers use Assamese as a communicating (link) language while dealing with people of other language groups. Assamese can be easily used to express their language and the people already know Assamese both in the spoken and written form. Besides many Assamese words are common to the Rabha language.

The Rabhas

As per census Report of India, 1991, Rabha is the fifth largest tribe among the 21 ethnic minority communities of Assam constituting 1.05 of its total population.

Language details	Total	Percent of total population	Rural	Urban
Total, all languages	22,414,322	100.00	19,926,527	2, 487,795
Rabha population	2,36,931	1.05	2,31,202	5,729
Rabha Language Speakers	112,424	0.500	111,554	870

Our study has shown that there are as many as 11 sub-groups. They are: Rangdani, Maitoria, Dahori, Patirabha, Sunga, Bitolia, Kosa, Dumesa, Totla, Mohadi and Hana. However the Modahi is not a true subclass but it refers to those Rabhas who are excessive consumers of alcohol while a Dumesa is the offspring of a Rabha and a Garo.

It is noteworthy that among these various subclasses, the Rabha language is spoken at present by only a handful of the tribe who belong to Rangdhanian, Maitoria and Kosa groups. Of the three sub-classes, there is 99% similarity of speech between the Randhanian and Maitoria and 50% between them and the Kosa. The remaining sub-classes do not know the Rabha language and use Assamese to communicate. From the socio-cultural viewpoint also it is seen that only these three groups have preserved the age-old Rabha rites and rituals.

The Rabha society is matriarchal. The village economy is based on agriculture and both men and women work in the fields. The women love to wear colorful clothes that they weave themselves and they wear a lot of beads and silver ornaments. The Rabhas celebrate three main festivals and also observe Farkanti in remembrance of the dead kings of their clan. In the various festivals, both men and women sing and dance to the local instruments like the *karra*, flute and *singa*. The Rabhas are non-vegetarians and rice is their staple food. They brew a local beer called *junga*, which is consumed, not only is religious festivals, death, birth and marriage but also on a daily basis. The Rabhas prepare as many as ten different varieties of beer. This is one of the characteristics that distinguish the Rabhas from other tribes of the region.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methodology is applied in the project. After the initial field survey, the feedback is utilized to organize a series of meetings, seminars; awareness drives with academic support from SIL International.

Investigation and research

Under the initiative of a field investigator, identification of the Rabha populated areas in the districts of Assam was successfully carried out. The field study also included data on what are the various sub-classes of the Rabha tribe, which tribe is dominating the socio-cultural arena, availability of basic literacy provisions etc.

Activities

Awareness. In the second step, SRC Assam held a one-day awareness camp on October 18, 2002 at Agia, Goalpara to highlight the project before the Rabha community and for identification of the writers/participants for the workshop to be held. The meeting further discussed about the material

preparation workshop to be held from November 9-13, 2002, which will be participated by Rabha writers representing different districts of Assam.

Workshops. In the course of this UNESCO aided project workshops were held respectively in Bongaigaon and Goalpara. The first workshop on material production in Rabha Language was held from 9th to 13th of November 2002 and was attended by the Representatives of SIL and the Rabha writers. The main objective of the workshop is the production of reading material in Rabha Language. Organized by SRC Assam with the academic support of SIL International, the workshop could successfully formulate several manuscripts of learning materials in Rabha language, which was duly field-tested. In total 5 books are published till date.

Outcome

With the production of bilingual materials in Rabha language involving the community, a demand for it is created. Based on it, SRC with assistance from SIL has brought out a Rabha primer. Moreover this project has created awareness among the Rabha people about their rich and varied culture.

After the success of the first primer, the State Government had shown an interest in the project. The Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara, Ms Archana Verma, IAS, released the primer at a public meeting. It is now in the process of field- testing. This primer is basically meant for children (between 6-14 years). The preparation of the second primer is underway.

SRC Assam also prepared primers for adult learners. These are as per NLMA norms. Better known as the IPCL primers, they are targeted at providing skills by developing the three R s within a time span of 200 hours. A training manual for teachers is also prepared by SRC Assam.

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