

Languages of the North East with special reference to Khasi

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There are 3 major language families in the Northeast, (i) Tibeto-Burman Languages, (ii) Indo-Aryan Languages, and (iii) Austro-Asiatic Languages. However, speakers of the fourth language family of India the Dravidian, are also found scattering across Northeast. The co-existence of these languages in the Northeast, defines Northeast as a huge area of rich cultural and linguistic diversity. The inter-relationship and cultural assimilation between these different linguistic and ethnic groups have made the region an interesting area of ecological and linguistic research.

1. Linguistic Situation in the Northeast

Linguistically, Northeast is a home of hundreds of Tribal and minority languages belonging to the mostly the three major language families mentioned above. However, since these languages co-exist with major languages are constantly facing threat of being suppressed and engulfed by more dominant/powerful/ prestigious languages. Most of them are considered to be facing the threat of becoming endangered. (major reason being Language Shift) Language Shift, (which may or may not be a conscious process) serves as a survival strategy, in such a huge multilingual area. Its consequences being (i)



development of new languages like the Nagamese as a lingua franca, or (ii) adoption of the language of the majority like the case of Bengali in Tripura.

2. Khasi and Its Dialects

To a linguist, dialects are language varieties within the same language group or family. Usually, language varieties belonging to a particular group of languages differ from each other only in small ways. For instance; pronunciation. Moreover, they are mostly mutually intelligible and they depict only regional differences within the same language family. Each variety has its own status. However, a chosen variety that is raised to the standard of a written form(process of standardization) is usually a standard language Khasi which is a cover term for all languages affiliated to it in terms of linguistic characteristics, belongs to the Mon-khmer sub-branch of the Austro-Asiatic family. In the census report of India (2001), Khasi population was just 11, 38, 356 . The main varieties (dialects) of Khasi are:

- Khasi
- Pnar
- Bhoi
- War

Within the boundaries of the standard Khasi spoken in and around Shillong, there still exist variation. Examples: Mawlai Khasi, Malki Khasi, Nongthymmai Khasi, and others.

3. Standard Khasi

Sohra (cherrapunjee) dialect or variety, by chance, emerged out as a standard dialect in 1841, when Thomas Jones, a welsh missionary transcribed it, using the Roman script. Since then, it has been used as a link language between the dialect speakers of the above.

4. Khasi as an endangered language

The first UNESCO report (2009) included Khasi among the 120 endangered tribal languages in India. However, two years later, it was taken out of the list of endangerment. and was considered to be safe. While talking of endangered languages, scholars and linguists also talk about issues and processes like linguistic rights of minorities, language revitalization, language documentation, language development, language modernization and so on. Openort, a researcher at UNESCO stated that “Efforts should be made to preserve language and communities whose mother tongues are under threat of extinction should actively work for reviving them.” Similarly, a spokesperson for INTACH talked about the ‘need and value to preserve India’s rich heritage of its composite culture (War and Lyngdoh 2011).

5. Preservation of Khasi Language

Linguistic Rights as a constituent of Human Rights Law is concerned with both individual and socially collective group rights. The Barcelona’s Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (1996) declares certain articles in relation to Human Rights Laws, to preserve community and language. Enshrined in the Constitution of India that came into effect on 26th January 1950, is Part XVII, that consists of Articles on Official Language which include Articles 345 – 347 on Regional Languages and on Language of the State. The Constitution itself, allows the States in India to specify their own official language(s) through legislation. The Indian constitution does not specify the official languages to be used by the states to conduct their official functions. It allows each state



to freely adopt Hindi or any language used in its territory as its official language or languages through its legislature. Moreover, the language(s) chosen by the States need not be one of those listed in the Eighth Schedule. The following are some of the steps taken to preserve Khasi Language.

- Among some sections of the Khasi society there is a small movement for the development of the Khasi language and literature. The Khasi Authors' Society and the Department of Khasi in the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, are two prominent agencies for development. These agencies, consistently work to promote, not only the standard Khasi language but also its dialects and varieties.
- Currently, efforts to appeal to the people the importance of maintaining cultures and traditions through language have been seen in the forms of discussions and debates that have taken place in different forums and gatherings. Apart from academicians and intellectuals, non- governmental organizations and laymen also take active part in such movements.

6. Meghalaya Language Act 2005

The Meghalaya State Language Act, 2005 received the assent of the Governor on the 1st May, 2005 and published in the Gazette of Meghalaya Extra Ordinary issued dated 4th May, 2005 that Khasi & Garo Languages have been recognized and notified as Associate Official Languages of the State.

English is still the major official language. The Act emphasizes that though the Khasi and Garo languages continue to be associate official languages in the state, only English will be used in all civil and criminal courts and all inter-district official communication.

7. Domains of language use of Khasi



The Khasi and Garo languages are found not to be sufficiently developed as to be able to be used in the domains of administration, legislation and judiciary. The domains for the use of Khasi for instance, are limited only in the field of education, print media, advertisement, transport, audio-visual media, church services and meetings, meetings of the Seng Khasi and Sein Raj (Practising indigenous religious, political and other meeting) gatherings, rituals, and all informal situations.

Khasi is also used in the traditional institutions called Dorbar Hima, Dorbar syiem, Dorbar Raid, Dorbar Shnong, different levels of councils in the traditional form of governance which runs parallel with legislatures. Khasi is used in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, Pnar is used in the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and Garo in the Garo Hills Autonomous district Council, at the level of state Assembly, English is used.

8. Promotion of Khasi Language

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9. Problems of policy making/ language planning



Decision making as a process of language planning is highly complex as it involves policy formation, organizational structures like agencies and academies, administrative procedures, implementation strategies, utilization of resources and other social and political factors that have various constraints in their own way. Language planning in Meghalaya is a slow process. So far, the government of Meghalaya is playing a small but crucial role in having come up with the Meghalaya Language Act (2005) as mentioned above. Apart from the government, government- aided institutions like the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) and other boards that implement the learning and teaching of the Mother Tongue, Hindi and English, play small part in promoting native languages or mother tongues as medium of instruction at higher levels of education. Schools still follow the National curriculum system, the three language formula (TLF).

Like most of the other states official languages, Khasi is still excluded from functioning as a language of science and technology, and as a language for higher education, for instance, university education, etc. Therefore, the domain of use of the language is far too limited to promote it as an inter-state link language or language for wider communication.

The historical dominance of English over more than a century in many aspects of social and political communication has prevented the development of the language. Its functional purpose and importance have been completely reduced. In Meghalaya, problems of implementing a good language policy start from the planning agency itself which is the State government, which has not taken much initiative to develop policies to promote, preserve, strengthen and extend the domains of usage of the languages of the state.



Another reason that prevents implementing a good language policy is the extent of multilingualism in the state. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, where the standard Khasi is supposed to be spoken, is dominated by majority of other communities that belong to different linguistic groups. This restricts the use of the associate official languages Khasi and Garo in many domains.

10. Step that should be taken to tackle the above problems

The State should develop language policy to increase functionality of the associate official languages in the public domains such as legislation, judiciary, administration, media, business, education, etc. This will help to promote the longevity of the languages (Benedikter 2009).

There should be language movements/planning agencies to promote linguistic rights and linguistic status of the languages of the region. (language movements against official policies of imposing dominant languages is seen as a way to promote the use of tribal and minority languages in many parts of India). Right to education in mother tongue/ one's own language should be encouraged.

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Web Resources

- CIIL, Mysore: www.lisindia.net/Khasi/Khasi_use
- Constitution of India: www.india.gov.in/got/constitutions_india.
- UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages: www.helsinki.fi/~tasalmin/europe_index.

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