

Socio-Linguistic Profiling of Tripura with a Special Reference to Darlong Language

Ramtanu Brahma*

Ph.D. Scholar, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

Corresponding authorRamtanu Brahma***Article History***Received: 05.08.2018**Accepted: 09.08.2018**Published: 30.08.2018*

Abstract: This paper is dedicated to give socio-linguistic situation of Tripura and also highlights the different language families existing in the state of Tripura. It also try to identify the Kuki-Chin group of languages spoken in Tripura. Special reference has been given to Darlong language which has less than ten thousand speakers. The conclusion has been drawn on the basis of the fieldworks and real life situation that has been faced by the author during his field work in some Darlong villages. The description and conclusion of this paper will provide some important first information to the reader and future researchers on the socio-linguistic and the languages of Tripura.

Keywords: Tibeto-Burman, Darlong, Kuki-chin, Socio-linguistic, Language Endangerment.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or area[1]. It is one of the most important aspects to know people and their place and culture. The linguists can only analyze grammar of a language and give its genetic classification however, whether, if it is a dialect or a language is in fact decided by its speakers and the politics. Linguistically, North East India is the most heterogeneous region which houses almost half of the languages listed in the Census of India. There are total nineteen tribal languages in Tripura out of which only Kokborok is taught in university level. In case of those tribal language, normally, the Roman script has been used to write the translated version of the old or new Testaments and to document some of their folk tales and folk songs and social events.

The author visited towns and villages of Tripura, especially in the Darlong spoken areas in order to study the grammar and socio-linguistic situation of the Darlong language vis-à-vis other local languages spoken in the state. Efforts have been made to get maximum possible primary data in addition to some secondary sources. The Darlongs are also known as Kuki by the outsiders and represented the same nomenclature in some state government records. In due course of my field visits some books and journals published by the community or personally and in which their motives of preservation and promotion of their own languages were reflected.

Thus the present paper makes an effort to depict the core linguistic scenario of Tripura state and try to highlight the different language families according to the Linguistic Survey of India [2] and present studies by the linguists. The prime focus will be given to analyze the linguistic situation of the Darlong language referring to its origin and the area where it is spoken. Therefore this paper is expected to provide preliminary views of the linguistic situation of Tripura and guide the future researchers who are interested in languages of North East India and socio-linguistics aspects of the region.

¹ Definition of the language by Oxford Learner's Dictionaries.

² See (Grierson, 1909) Linguistic Survey of India, Volume 1, Digital Library of India.

Linguistic demography and composition of Tripura

Linguistically, Tripura is a home of four distinct language families: Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. At large, these language groups belong to the Tibeto-Burman by the number of languages and Indo-Aryan stands out to the biggest language family by number of its speakers. As per 2001 census, the population of the state is 36,73,917 and out of which the population of Schedule Tribe is recorded to be 31.8% of total Population. The native Bengali speakers constitute the majority of the state's total population. There are 14 languages under Tibeto-Burman family, and their speakers are recognized as the schedule tribes. Each of the tribes has their distinct language and culture. The schedule tribes are Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Garo, Halam, Jamatia, Khasia, Kuki, Lepcha, Lushai, Meitei, (Mizo), Mog, Munda, Noatia, Orang, Reang, Santals, Tripuri and Uchui. The present linguistic demography of Tripura according to the Census of India, 2011 is shown in Table 1.

Table-1: Shows the major languages spoken in Tripura according to the Census, 2011

Serial No.	Languages	Language family	Number of speaker
1.	Bengali	Indo-Aryan	24,14,774
2.	Bhil	Indo-Aryan	3,105
3.	Bhutia	Tibeto-Burman	28
4.	Bishnupuriya	Indo-Aryan	22112
5.	Chaimal/Saimar	Tibeto-Burman	549
6.	Chakma	Indo-Aryan	79,813
7.	Garo	Tibeto-Burman	12,952
8.	Halam	Tibeto-Burman	57,210
9.	Jamatia	Tibeto-Burman	83,347
10.	Khasia	Austro-Asiatic	366
11.	Kuki (Dalong is also included)	Tibeto-Burman	10,965 (including Dalong and other Kuki languages)
12.	Lepcha	Tibeto-Burman	157
13.	Lushai/Mizo	Tibeto-burman	5,384
14.	Manipuri/Meitei	Tibeto-Burman	23779
15.	Mog	Tibeto-Burman	37,893
16.	Munda	Austro-Asiatic	14,544
17.	Noatia	Tibeto-Burman	14,298
18.	Orang	Dravidian	12,011
19.	Reang	Tibeto-Burman	188,220
20.	Santals	Austro-Asiatic	2,913
21.	Tripuri	Tibeto-Burman	592,255
22.	Uchui	Tibeto-Burman	2,447

Bengali is the most dominant language in the state, over all other 21 languages in Table 1 by its number and status. It is a primary official language of followed by English and Kokborok. Kokborok is the only Tibeto-Burman language which is used as medium of instruction in schools at primary level in the Tripuri dominated area. Masters in Kokborok is offered under Tripura University. If we follow the 'UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework'[3], the languages in Table 1, except Bengali, all are vulnerable and language like Chaimal is definitely endangered. There are numerous evidences of linguistic borrowing, especially, lexical items from the Bengali language by all minor languages of the state and the Dalong (Kuki) is not an exception in this case. Usually in government records the Dalong are reflected as Kuki and outsider call their language as Kuki.

Socio-linguistic Scenariy of Study Area

The Dalong is spoken in the state of Tripura and where we find other native speakers representing three language families like, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and Astro-Asiatic. The languages viz., Bengali, Chakma and Bishnupriya Manipuri, Hindi comes under Indo-Aryan; all tribal languages like, Kok-Bork, Ranglong, Rangkhoh, Dalong, Chorai, Mizo, Kaipeng, Chakachep, Korbong, etc. falls under Tibeto-Burman and Santhali and Oraon under Austro-Asiatic. Bengali is the single dominant language in the state followed by Kok-Borok and both are included in state official languages. Bengali speakers of Sylhet variety are living almost in all districts and sub-districts of the states and their language is used as lingua-franca even among the hill tribes of the state.

³ (Austin & Sallabank, 2011), quoted *UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework* on page No 3 to introduce the different levels of language endangerment.

All the Darlong villages are in northern part of Tripura. In the context of Darlong speakers, majority of their villages are surrounded by Bengalis, Reang, Garo, Meitei and Debarma. In such situation they become naturally bilingual. Though, they may not even understand other neighbouring Tibeto-Burman languages but almost all of them can speak local Bengali dialect at the functional level. And some of the elderly Darlongs are very fluent in Bengali since their schooling was completed from Bengali medium schools. As a result of their co-existence they have borrowed some of the words from more dominant languages like Bengali and Kokborok.

The Darlongs are one of the twenty scheduled tribes communities living in the state of Tripura. They are one of the microscopic ethnic community living in the state. Darlongs are one of the itinerant tribes according to their tales and recent self documented history. Kuki is commonly used exonym for them, which has become pejorative at present context among the community. In the state government record population of the Darlongs are not reflected exclusively since the government categorically put them under Kuki group with Halam and Hrangkhawl. In the Linguistic Survey of India 1903, Grierson clubbed their language under Halam language spoken in Tripura. Like other Kuki-Chin group of people in the region they also share the legendary tale of “Sinlung” a cave or hole located somewhere in southern China. Literally “Sinlung” means closed stone, where *sin* “close” *lung* “stone”.

The Language

To be precise, the term Darlong is the name of an ethnic community and the language they speak. Darlong called their language as *Darlong Tawng* or *Hriam Tawng*, where “Tawng” means language. There are several interpretations to the genesis of the term Darlong. These interpretations are mostly grounded to their previous live style and history. But most convincing interpretation was reflected in Letthuma Darlong’s [1] monograph ‘The Darlongs of Tripura’. Glottolog 3.3 [4] classifies Darlong as Central Kuki-Chin language under Tibeto Burman Language family. The language has got two varieties: Awmhroi and Fathlei as reported by a native speaker. According to the primary report 90% of the Darlong speaker speaks Awmhroi variety and the rest 10% speaks Fathlei variety.

Table-2: Names of the Darlong villages with population distribution

Name of Villages	Male	Female	Total
Boitang	328	289	617
Khalaigiri	134	103	237
Champhai	78	69	147
Sertlang	176	185	361
Muruai	193	199	392
Deora	413	425	838
Tuingoi	245	262	507
Darser	116	104	220
Khawhreng	80	77	157
Zion	-----	-----	-----
Zamthla	-----	-----	-----
Darchawi	-----	-----	1506
Saibual	384	392	776
Talan	75	69	144
Nazareth	33	36	69
Serhmun	85	75	160
Khanchon	207	208	415
Hmunbei	231	236	467
New Kathal	247	211	458
Old Kathal	296	337	633
New saikar	77	73	150
Upper Saikar	117	90	207
Pipla	-----	-----	-----

Darlong spoken area

Darlong is spoken in two neighbouring countries India and Bangladesh [2]. In India it is spoken in the state of Tripura especially in the northern part of the state surrounded by Mizoram in the east, Assam in the north and Bangladesh in the west. The native speakers of the language used to live in 22 villages under two districts [1]. However,

⁴ Glottolog 3.3 edited by Hammarström, Harald & Forkel, Robert & Haspelmath, Martin is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

very recent, Darlong Hnam Inzom (DHI) listed as many as 24 Darlong villages where they mentioned the names of villages including its male and female population except in the case of three villages without the number of family and population record. The distribution of Darlong demography according to the DHI Annual Report, 2017 is given in Table-2.

As we can see that Darchawi is the largest Darlong village, so far its number of the speaker is concerned. Darchawi is located in Unokoti district under Kumarghat sub-division and around one and half kilometer away from the Kumarghat town. According to the GPS tracker on my smart phone Darchawi is located Longitude: 92.043402 and Latitude 24.144958 and Kumarghat Railway Station is the nearest train station to reach that village. Hmunbei, is another old Darlong village under Dhalai district in Tripura, located at Latitude 24.073088, and Longitude 91.999479, while Nalkata Railway Station is the the nearest station to reach the said village.

Origin of Darlong

Racially Darlongs are belong to the Mongloid stock like other tribes of North East India. Historically, they belong to old Kuki group. In fact, Darlongs are reflected neither in the history nor in some monographs written by Christian missionaries in the late 1800s and 1900s. Therefore, very little is known about them before they entered and settled in Longtarai ranges in present Tripura and thereafter, they gradually moved on to different places and came to settled in the present places of their habitation. In true sense it is very intricate task to trace the origin of the tribe which does not have written text and own writing system. Therefore the history and origin of the Darlong had been explored through their orature. Orature have been the preferred means to retain cultural and tradition of different tribes in northeast and also system for documenting and transmitting their customs verbally from one generation to another. Initially they started in the form of speeches or songs that later transform into folktales, folksongs, ballads, sayings or even chants.

J. Shakespeare [³, ⁵] states that “I estimate that Thang-ura must have lived early in the eighteenth century. The Zadeng followed the Rokum, and, passing through Champhai, moved westwards and about 1830 ruled some 1,000 houses divided into four villages situated near the banks of the Tlong or Dallesari river, round the **Darlung** peak. In alliance with Sailo chiefs of Lalul's family, they attacked and defeated successively the Hualgno (a Lushei family settled between Tyao and Manipur rivers) and the Pallian, who were their allies against the Hualgno”. From this statement of Shakespeare gives us some hints that the Darlong are the descendant from Thangur chief those who settled in and around the Darlung hill for many decades.

Languages used by the Darlong native speakers in different domains



CONCLUSION

Impact of the dominant languages like Bengali and Kokborok is more on other minorities languages. Various Bengali dialects based on area are functioning as lingua franca in the day to day social life of Tripura in the broader context. Bengali is used as the medium of instruction in the school and colleges run by the state government. English is also used in the institution for higher languages. Darlong is a Kuki-Chin group of language with below ten thousand speakers. Both the new and old Testaments have been translated into Darlong with the help of the Bibles International. Roman script is used to write the language with a little variation. Every year the community publishes souvenir and

⁵ Lt. Colonel J. Shakespeare, 1912 in his book ‘The Lushei Kuki Clans’ mentioned about the migration record of the different clans of the Lusheis, presently known as Mizo (page-3)

journals in their own language and produce the Gospel songs and videos including some music videos by the younger generation which are available in social Medias and on the youtube.com. In the schools they learn Mizo as their second language. Comparatively, Darlong speaker give effort to maintain the originality of the language. However they freely borrow the lexical items from Bengali, English, Mizo and sometimes even from Hindi. Attitude of the younger generation towards their language is relatively low, when employment and inter community communication is concerned. Impact of the dominant languages are less on Darlong in comparison to other languages with larger number of speakers like Kokborok, Reang and Chakma. Therefore, Darlong can be considered as less endangered than other languages which have more speakers so far attitude of its speaker is concerned.

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