Where Children Lose Their Language:
The endangered Linguistic Identity of the Rajbanshi Children
of North Bengal

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CONTENT

1. Introduction:

The relevance of Linguistic Human Rights (LHR) lies in the fact that people can be discriminated in terms of language. Apart from gender-race-religion, 'language can also be used in discriminatory ways, so that some groups become invisible.' (Phillipson and T, Skutnabb-Kangas: 1999:51).

In a complex society, monolingualism becomes the norm. The State expects that the 'Others' should assimilate to the dominant culture and as a result 'becomes invisible', and the seed of language death can be found in these language communities. Language Death and the maintenance of linguistic and cultural identity are two different possibilities. Attitude towards the language decides the future of the languages. The future of an Endangered Language (or a language, which is not apparently endangered but is actually endangered) has been decided by the factors like:

(a) Whether the speakers think that the language is difficult to maintain

(b) Whether the members of the speech-community use their own variety in presence of the dominant language or not etc.

In many cases, people of the oppressed language deny the existence of their language or the young generations replace the language by using the prestigious variety. But on the other hand, some 'aware' speakers try to revive the linguistic variety. This revival is involved with the language attitude and also awareness regarding linguistic rights.

Linguistic Human Rights deals with the rights of every linguistic group to retain their linguistic behavior in their own language/mother tongue. Most of the linguistic communities cannot retain this as the powerful linguistic group threatens them, and the powerful groups are the only important linguistic groups of a nation state in most of the cases. Speakers of the so-called 'dialects', 'vernaculars' and 'patois' mostly lose their LHR as they do not have 'a language'. But 'In order to form a nation or state you have to have a language'. (T, Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 426)

It has been observed that, not only the minorities but also many other dominated speech communities face psychological violence. The hegemony of dominant languages results in 'Linguicism' – which involves 'Ideologies, structures and practices which are used to

legitimate, effectuate and reproduce and unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language.' (T, Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988:45)

   Some attempts to prevent this discrimination and protect the rights of these dominated people have been made since 1945. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) was among these attempts where it was mentioned that linguistic minorities should not be denied their rights. They should use their own language.
 A draft of Universal declaration of Linguistic Rights was presented to UNESCO in 1996 where LHR of (1) individuals and (2) linguistic communities was assured. Educational Language Rights was an important part of this declaration.

   Educational Language Rights were also upheld in Article 5.1(C), UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960), which has stated that the first two years of a child's schooling should be done in his/her own mother tongue.   In India, the constitution has also demanded teaching through mother tongue in first two years of schooling.

   In an amendment in 1956, the constitution of India had directed the states 'to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups' (Act 350A).
The Kothari Commission Report (1966) was in favour of the Three Language Formula where it was said that the child should get education in her mother tongue in early school years.   The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) of NCERT has also emphasized mother tongue education in early school years.   The scenario of school education in India 'suggests that the language question needs to be addressed urgently and with sincerity.' (The Pratichi Education Report, 2002:37).

   The present project wants to reflect on the language problems of the Rajbanshi school children of North Bengal in terms of their LHR. The condition of these children in relation to LHR can be viewed from two perspectives.

 (1) The poor performance of the Rajbanshi-speaking children because of their lack of familiarity with the Bengali code

 (2) In the state of West Bengal, the reign of Bengali monolingual authorities deny

the marginalized people's linguistic identity.

The Research Problem posed in the project is:

The Rajbanshi school children of North Bengal lag behind in their classroom performances due to their encounter with an unfamiliar language, and face problems of interaction in classroom due to incomprehensibility of the target language.

2. Methodology

The study is based on extensive **fieldwork** in some selected parts of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal.   The fieldwork was conducted in three parts, the different areas were

(a) Lataguri – Uttar Matiyali New Additional Primary School

(b) Jalpaiguri Town- Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School

And (c) Amguri- Some teachers and students of Amguri village

 One of the research methods was detailed **classroom observations** in two schools. Teachers in respective classes were requested to mark each student on their understanding of 'good', 'average' and 'bad' students. A few students from each group were chosen by random sampling, and observed in their classroom.   The observations were recorded by a qualitative questionnaire.

Interaction with students included Picture Story Test, voluntary story-telling session and interview with teachers. Children's problems with the first language textbook provided by the West Bengal Board of Primary Education were also taken into consideration.

   The children who were observed in the classroom observations could not articulate their problems in the classrooms; interviews were conducted with some higher-level students who could express their difficulties as a school student. A compilation of such interviews could help us to better understand the problems posed in this project. For this purpose, some students of Amguri village and also some students from North Bengal University were interviewed.

In a separate section of this project, Rajbanshi and its structural differences with the Standard Colloquial Bangla were marked.

An attempt has also been made to analyze the language curriculum of the children in terms of the present situation in the area.

3. Linguistic Human Rights and Primary Education: the West Bengal Scenario and Rajbanshi Children

The most important domain where the Linguistic Human Rights is threatened is in the domain of schooling. Children in many schools are not allowed to speak (or are given punishment for speaking) their linguistic variety in the classroom. By not allowing a child to use her home language in the class, she is denied her right of self-expression. It affects the children's linguistic identity, and thus the formation of social-national identity in terms of a bigger perspective. Thus the language textbooks of early school-curriculum silently kill the language of the children of the dominated groups.

The early language curriculum of the West Bengal Board of Primary Education at a first glance does not seem to be problematic. But the hidden aim of the curriculum can be understood from the teacher's handbook provided by the board.

In 1980, the Education Minister of West Bengal Government Mr. Partha Dey has mentioned in his article '*Prathomik store prothom bhasha*' (First Language in Primary Level) that, learning through mother tongue cannot be compared with any other methods of learning.(Dey 1980:619)

But in practice, West Bengal Primary Education Board has decided Bangla (as the primary first language), besides Urdu, Hindi, Nepali and Santali (in some selected schools) are to be taught as the First languages. As mentioned in 'The Position of Languages in School Curriculum' (Chaturvedi and Mohale, 1976), Bangla should be the

medium of instruction in West Bengal throughout the school education as it is the majority language.

In the curriculum handbook for teachers published by the West Bengal Board of Primary Education, '*Prathomik Shikkhar Shikkhakrom O Pathyosuchi*' (Curriculum and Syllabus for Primary Education) it has been mentioned that the child should learn to 'transfer his/her home language into the 'standard' language'. But it has not been mentioned that the 'transfer' is not an easy task in most of the cases. Neither there is any mention whether the students' mother tongue is Standard Bangla or some other varieties , nor there is any consideration of that whether the teachers have the ability to explain things by using the students' home language or not.

Though the directions of the Primary School Board in Bengal emphasize the use of Bangla in school curriculum, many other languages are spoken in the province. And there is also a continuous effort to mark some other varieties as dialects of Bangla and putting them under the umbrella of 'Bangla' is order to increase the numbers of the Bangla speakers in the linguistic census. 'The rural 'non-standard' varieties are rated grammatically 'incorrect' and 'bad', conceptually 'deficient' and sociologically 'deprived'.' (Bernstein, 1971:225). These communities, though speak a very different variety from Standard Colloquial Bangla, are pressurized to use the language in various spaces.

An article on a Pratichi Trust Seminar published in Anandabazar Patrika dated 26th December, 2007 Swati Bhattacharya has mentioned that 'A survey is needed on the language of education. 7% of the primary school students in West Bengal belong to various tribes. Ramaprasad Bandyopadhyay, a teacher from Murshidabad Sebamilani Primary Schools has informed that, 'if the students are taught in Standard Bangla, the students cannot understand. Bangla is the second language for them and English is the third language.'…What can be the language policy for them? Providing local teachers for the (tribal) children? A separate textbook for them? Or teaching through their mother tongue up to a certain level?' (Translation from Bangla by author)

Rajbanshi community of North Bengal speaks a very different linguistic variety which is regarded as a dialect of Bangla by the governmental authorities. And thus the children of this community are compelled to use Bangla is their classroom.

It is not only the case that the Rajbanshi children are not allowed using their own language in the classroom; use of Rajbanshi words, in many cases is a stigma for them for many of their upper caste classmates. Childhood memories of many of the high school students of this community assured the fact. Language has become the key of threats on one hand, and on the other hand the threatened linguistic use of the community leads to the threat towards the formation of the child's identity from the very childhood. The Rajbanshi children have continued to think themselves as the subordinated group.

The directions for using Bangla are stricter now, because of the language movement and the movement-zone is the land of many Rajbanshis. There is an initiative to link this issue with the language movement by the authorities, as some of the participants of the Kamtapur Movement[1] are Rajbanshi. The children who speak Rajbanshi at home will be benefited if provided with education in mother tongue. But they are indirectly or directly told in classrooms that they are not permitted to use their linguistic variety in classroom.

'Whether Rajbangshi is a dialect or a distinct language, in its own right, is a matter of controversy. In recent times, this issue has become central to the Kamtapuri political movement in north Bengal. …one significant revelation of a survey carried out by the DPEP in 1996 in West Bengal is discussed. The survey found the first generation learners in Kochbehar, a north Bengal district, lagging behind in vocabulary…The authors point is that the seeming poverty of vocabulary might be the result of children's inability to cope with the school-language which is too alien from their mother-tongue.'

(Bandyopadhyay, 2004: 16)

During the field work (in three phases) many instances were found where children have faced difficulties as they are taught in Bangla, provided with books in Bangla – which is very much alien to them. In the rural school it was observed that most of the students

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[1] It should be mentioned in this regard that, the term 'Kamtapuri' according to many scholars denote the indigenous people of a large area of North Bengal. Vaskar Nandy, who is associated with 'Swadhikar' has informed that Rajbanshis are also a part of the Kamtapuri population. But some other scholars do not use the term. The movement in northern Bengal is popularly known as 'Kamtapuri Movement'.

cannot understand simple Bangla instructions. Some teachers had informed in an interview that, in case the students write name of some objects in Rajbanshi, there are clear instructions to mark them 'zero'.

4. The Rajbanshis and their language: how different from Bangla

Rajbanshi is spoken in almost seven districts of West Bengal, four districts of Assam, one district of Bihar and also in Nepal and Bangladesh. According to the 1991 Census of India, there were 2,839,481 Rajbanshi speakers in India. Official sources claim Rajbanshi as a dialect of Bengali in West Bengal and a dialect of Assamese in Assam. Grierson also mentions Rajbanshi as a well-marked dialect of Northern Bengal (Grierson 1903, Vol. 5, Part-1: 163).

In the framework of the historical linguistics, Rajbanshi has been put in Bengali-Assamese group, which has been put in the Indo-Aryan language group of the larger Indo-European set. But the history of Rajbanshi people directly connects them with Tibeto-Burman group as they are said to be the offshoot of Koch tribe. 'It is said that they belong to the great Bodo family that entered India in the 10th century B.C. from the east and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North Bengal' (Singh, K.S., 1998: 2927). In this connection, it should be mentioned that there are two different theories among the Rajbanshi scholars regarding their anthropological background. One stream directlt relates them to the Tibeto-Burman Group as Sanyal (…..) has mentioned. But the another stream tries to show the community's connection with the Aryan kings and also wants to establish that a Sanskritized version of Old Bangla is the ancestor of Rajbanshi, which is an effort to connect their past with the glorious privileged class.

The anthropological pasts of the Rajbanshis have been wonderfully described in an article by Dipak Kumar Roy (2006:74 in Roy, Nikhilesh ed. *Degor*), which has mentioned a detailed genealogy of the Rajbanshi community, its origin and the division, which could be helpful to understand the history of the community.

RAJBANSHI

Indo-Mongoloid

|

KOCH   > **Hinduization**

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Social Sub-Group

(Madashi, Saru, Koch (Rabha), Heremiya, Koch-Kahar(Rawani Kahar),

Morangiya(Samtiya, Thunthuniya, Rabaniya, Pashucharan, Deshiya,

[Baradeshi(Dhanuya), Charadeshi (Dhokoi, Dhyakra, Dhunikoch)],

Paliya(Matuyan or Babupali, Sadhupali)

|

Kshatriyization > Other Communities-Dhimal,

| Tharu, Jalda, Rabha,Hazong, Mech,

| Baidar etc.

| > Koch-Rajbanshi+ Bhutiya=

| Dobhashiya

THE RAJBANSHI SOCIETY

A linguist can structurally differentiate Bangla and Rajbanshi, which can be helpful to demonstrate that Rajbanshi is much different from Bangla and imposing the language as a dialect of Bangla can be absurd.

The major criteria by which Rajbanshi can be differentiated with Bangla are[2]:

1. Phonetically, both some vowel and consonant sounds of Bangla are different from Rajbanshi. (Piplai, 2007: 26-27) Widely used Bangla vowel /✈/ is totally absent in Rajbanshi.

2. The syllable pattern of Rajbanshi and Bangla are also different.

3. Rajbanshi verb forms are quite different from Bangla.

4. The verbal morphology of Rajbanshi is different form Bangla. Rajbanshi verbs change according to number, which is a remarkable feature. It is not present in Bangla morphology.

For example-

Bangla	ami	jai	Rajbanshi	mui	za
	I	go-present-1p-sg		I	go-present-1p-Sg.
Bangla	amra	jai	Rajbanshi	hamra	zai
	We	go-present-1p-plu.		We	go-present-1p-plu.

5. Rajbanshi pronouns are quite different from Bangla pronouns.

E.g. Bangla /ami/ is /mui/ 'I' in Rajbanshi

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[2] International Phonetic Alphabet has been used to mark the linguistic differences between Bangla and Rajbanshi. It is difficult to demonstrate it otherwise.

Bangla / tui/ is /t❷mra/ 'you (singular)' in Rajbanshi

Bangla/tomra/ is /t❷mrala/ 'you (plural)'in Rajbanshi [symbols as International Phonetic Alphabet] It should be pointed out that these difference in pronominal terms create a confusion among the teacher-student interaction in a class where the teacher is not a Rajbanshi speaker and the students speak Rajbanshi, as the [+ honorific] pronoun in Rajbanshi is [- honorific] in Bangla.

7. Plural formation in Rajbanshi is done differently than Bangla.

t❶e⚯⊛a	la
boy	plural

'Boys'

t❶aoyar	gh❷r
child	Plural

'Children'

8. Case markers of Rajbanshi are different from Bangla. In many cases, the case

   endings of Rajbanshi resemble the case-endings of Prakrit. For example-

Accusative and Dative case-endings are /-ok/ in Rajbanshi.E.g.

ma♦▦ar	c📖hatrok	porebar	b❷♦ail
teacher	Student-accusative	To read	Made to sit-present-3p-singular

Bangla:

ma♦▦ar	c📖hatroke	porte	b❷♦alo
teacher	Student-accusative	To read	Made to sit-present-3p-singular

'The teacher made the child study.'

9. Verbal paradigms of Rajbanshi are much different from Bangla.

Verb to eat, Present Tense

		First Person singular	First Person Plural	Second person Singular	Second Person Plural	Third Person singular	Third person Plural
Rajbanshi	Indefinite	/mui khao/	/hamera khai/	/tui khai♦/	/toma khao/	/uyay khat♦e/	/umra khay/
Bangla	Indefinite	/ami khai/	/amra khai/	/tumi khao/	/tomra khao/	/♦e khay/	/tara khay/

Rajbanshi	Progressive	/mui khat♦❷/	/hamera khat♦i/	/tui khat♦it/	/toma khat♦✈n/	/uyay kha♦✈/	/umra khat♦✈/
Bangla	Progressive	/ami khac📖c📖hi/	/amra khac📖c📖hi/	/tumi khac📖c📖o/	/tomra khac📖c📖o/	/♦e khac📖c📖he/	/tara khac📖c📖he/

Rajbanshi	Perfect	/mui khait♦u/	/hamera khai♦i/	/tui khai♦it/	/toma khait♦✈n/	/uyay khait♦e/	/umra khait♦e/
Bangla	Perfect	/ami	/amra	/tumi	/tomra	/♦e	/tara

		kheyec□hi/	kheyec□hi	kheyec□o/	kheyec□o	kheyec□he/	kheyec□he /

The differences between the verbal case endings of two languages are that Rajbanshi has more forms than Bangla in terms of the present tense case endings.

10. In syntactic structure the formation of negative is different than Bangla.

Rajbanshi	mui	na	Zaim
	I	Neg.	Go+ Future+ 1p-Sg
Bangla	ami	jabo	na
	I	Neg.	Go+ Future+ 1p-Sg

'I shall not go'

The Rajbanshi negative particles are pre-verbal while in Bangla these are post-verbal.

11. Finally, the differences between two varieties can be understood from the

vocabulary differences. E.g.

Rajbanshi	Bangla	Meaning
□a□uya	ha□	'bone'
t□aoya	bac□c□a	'child'
etti	ekhane	'here'
m□□□□	ma□□o	'meat'
gad□ana	g□la	'neck'
n□□o	lej	'tail'
□h□le ph□la	c□hu□□e ph□la	'to throw'

bhata	b❷r	'husband'
bayu	bon	'younger sister'
a▦a	ru▦i	'roti'
moc▢c▢i	l❷⚲ka	'chilli'
ne⚲ul	a⚲ul	'finger'
nic▢ot	nic▢he	'downwards'
abo	didima	'mother's mother'
azu	dadam❷♦ai	'mother's father'
♦ak	♦obji	'green vegetables'
pai♦a	p❷y♦a	'paisa'
m❷♦o	m❷♦a	'mosquito'
↓h✈kenai	nok	'nail'
↓igi	pukur (big ponds are /dighi/)	'pond'
uporot	upore	'upwards'
▦eu✳i	c❷▢▢✳ai	'sparrow'
jyat poit	jamaibabu	'sister's husband'
ku♦iyar	ak	'sugercane'

5. **The Study**

Rajbanshi is spoken in seven districts of North Bengal, most of which area is socio-economically backward. The Northern part of West Bengal has been showing poor performance in educational achievement, which are very much related to the socio-economic development of the area. The drop-out rates in the schools are also higher in this area.

One main reason for poor academic performance of the children here is the language problem. Providing early education to the children in Rajbanshi has never been taken into account seriously. Rather, using the language in classrooms is 'prohibited.'

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Teachers of the Rajbanshi speaking area informed me that in some particular teacher-camps the teachers have got clear instructions of not to use Rajbanshi in classrooms. Teachers are critical towards this approach.

During the field work of the project it has been noticed that, the teachers have agreed with the fact that the **students' poor performance is mainly because of the incomprehensibility in the school language**. The students do not understand the language of the textbooks and thus they are reluctant to come to the school. Now the question is, isn't it possible for the concerned authorities of West Bengal to introduce the language of the majorities of Northern Bengal as a school language too?

In fact, a Bridge Reader was proposed by some local intellectuals in order to combat the Rajbanshi children's language problems in schools. But the issue had never been taken into account by the concerned authorities. Nandy (1999:12-13)has mentioned that the language movement of North Bengal, along with various demands, has demanded a separate centre for research on Rajbanshi language at the North Bengal University. There were demands for preparing elementary textbooks in the centre also.

The proposal of the Bridge Reader in order to facilitate the Rajbanshi children has never been taken seriously relating the issue with the ongoing language movement of North Bengal. The demand for a separate 'Kamtapur'[3] state had been started in 1970s. In order to stop the movement Rajbanshi speakers were boycotted in many parts of North Bengal. The demand for introductory school education in Rajbanshi was totally ignored by the governmental authorities. The blind boycott from the linguistic group is a violation of the community's LHR.

5.1. Classroom Observation:

The primary method adopted for the study was Classroom observation. Students of **one rural school (**Uttar Matiyali New Additional Primary School) and **one semi-urban school** (Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School) were observed throughout the school-time (approximately four hours per day) for one month. In both the schools, Standard 4th

students were primarily observed, but the students of Standard 1st and 2nd in the rural school and the students of Standard 1st (Standard 1st in this school has been divided as Upper-1 and Lower-1 by the teachers) [4] in a school of Jalpaiguri town were also observed in some classes.

Various problems of the classroom e.g. the students' difficulties in reading-writing, teacher-student interaction, difficulties in understanding the textbooks etc. were tried to be understood by the detailed observations. The students, however, were also observed outside their classroom, e.g. in the playground before and after the school-time. Two schools of Jalpaiguri district were selected for the study. One of the schools is a rural school where more then 95% students are Rajbanshi, and the other school is situated at the town where there are few Rajbanshi students, but there are also students who speak Bangla, Mundari, Oraon, Assamese etc.

The infrastructural facilities of the schools were also enquired.

Name of the school	Type of the School	Boys/Girls/ Co-Educational	Total No. of students	Location of the school	School building	Boundary Wall	Drinking Water
Uttar Matiyali NAP	Primary	Co-Educational	138	Lataguri, South Mal Block, Jalpaiguri Rural	Building not in good condition, paucity of classrooms	No	Yes
Subhashna-gar Mahutpara	Primary	Co-Educational	170	Jalpaiguri Town, Semi-	Building Reasonably good	No	Yes

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[4] The teachers of the school have informed that it is not possible for them to cover the syllabus of Standard 1st in a year because children have severe language problems. So they divide the Standard 1st in two years.

Primary School				Urban			

Name of the School	Toilet	Library	Playground	Staff-Room	Electricity	Mid-Day Meal
Uttar Matiyali NAP	Only one (for teachers and girl students)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Subhashna-gar Mahutpara Primary School	Yes (for both teachers and students)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Primary information of the schools can help us to understand the background of the schools. Now let us see the number of students per class in both the schools. In Uttar Matiyali New Additional Primary School, the number of students per class is the following:

Standard 1st-56

Standard 2nd-25

Standard 3rd- 30

Standard 4th-27

In Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School the numbers are:

Standard 1st-36+34[5]

Standard 2nd-34

Standard 3rd- 31

Standard 4th-34

The important fact to note is that, the decrease of students from Standard 1st to Standard 2nd in Uttar Matiyali School. **Almost 50% of the students are dropped from the very beginning class of the school**. It was assumed by the researcher that, one main reason for the dropout could be poor socio-economic conditions of the families of the village. But the teachers have informed that, after implementing the mid-day meal scheme, parents want to send their kids ton the schools regularly. On the other hand, in the other school, not much change in the number of students is observed between Upper-1 and Standard 2nd.

The Classroom observations have tried to understand the linguistic problems of the children in the classroom. The focus of the observations was:

- Whether the students can **understand the teacher's instructions or not**
- Whether the students can **understand their textbook**
- Whether the students are **free in the classroom or not**
- Whether some particular students can **follow the teaching style of the teacher**
- Whether the students are **performing well in the written tasks given in the class or not**

In case of the rural school, the problems with the instructional language of the teacher were a great problem if the teacher had not used Rajbanshi in classroom. Specifically, in case of the Standard 1st and 2nd classes, only three or four students were active in the class. Many students were seen sitting completely blank in the classroom.

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[5] The syllabus of Standard 1st in the school is covered in two years, thus there are two batches of standard 1st in the school- Upper-1 and Lower-1

- The teacher of the class was teaching a particular text for four days. And when he asked simple questions from the text, **only two or three students could reply**.

- The **classes were one-way. Some students were absolutely blank**. The teacher was reading out from the text loudly and the students could hardly understand anything.

- In Standard 1st and 2nd classes, when the teacher has asked the students to read out few lines form the already-discussed text, the **students could not follow the teacher's instruction**. When the teacher had asked in Rajbanshi, some students responded. In an observation of Standard 1st and 2nd classes, when the teacher had asked the students to read out from the text, some Standard 2nd students could read by spelling out almost every letter of a short text, with great difficulty.

- In a Standard 4th class, **when the teacher was explaining things by using colloquial Rajbanshi while teaching a poem, students could follow well. But when he switched to Bangla, their response had weakened**.

- In Standard 4th classes, word-by-word translations helped the students understand the teacher's words. When the teacher had tried to speak Bangla in the class, the students found great difficulties.

Now let us look at the students' problems of understanding the text.

- In many cases it was difficult to make out whether the students could understand the text or not because **there wasn't any response from the students' part.** Especially, the **girls were absolutely silent** in most of the classes. Teachers were mostly encouraging the boys.

- One important observation was that **the students could not understand the meanings of most of the textbook's words**, even some of the simple Bangla words.

- Because of the difficulty in understanding the text, **they were disinterested in the textbook**. In some cases**, they could not understand 3-4 words of a 5-word sentence.**

- **Explaining the text in Rajbanshi helped the students**. When the teacher of Standard 4th explained the text of a poem from the textbook 'Kishalay', the students could understand it better. If the teachers have to use only Bangla in the classroom, will it be possible for them to teach the students at all?

Few of the so-called 'good students' of the class were participating in the class.

- Maximum students of the class were totally silent. Generally, boys were participating comparatively freely. **Girls were silent**.

- **One or two of them had seldom responded.** Some Standard 4th students had volunteered for reading, but all of them had read mechanically.

- Some students seemed to memorize the text already; **they were not actually reading it but uttering the text from memory.**

- Some particular students, who were seen sitting completely blank in the classroom, had responded as they were asked some questions in Rajbanshi.

 The students who could not follow the teaching style of the teacher were the maximum of the class.

- In Standard 1st and 2nd, **a few students could actually follow the teacher** (the teachers have informed outside the classroom that all these students have private tutors).

- Even in Standard 4th, there were some students who could not follow the teacher.

The most important factor concerning the writing tasks given to the students is that,

- **Writing tasks were not given to the children of Standard 1st and 2nd.**

- **Some students of standard 4th do not know how to read and write alphabets**

The picture is quite different in Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School. Only a few students of the school were found as poor performers in the school. And these few students were parts of a Muslim Rajbanshi community of North Bengal. Before starting the observations, the teachers were asked regarding their judgments regarding the students' performance. Interestingly, the group of 'bad students' marked by the teachers comprised Muslim students whose home language is Rajbanshi.

In this school, the findings of the observations were quite different.

- Most of the students from Standard 4th seemed to understand the texts. But some students (already mentioned group of students) could not follow the teacher.

- Even in the observations of Standard 1st classroom, the students' performance was better than the students of the rural school, though some particular 'bad' students were silent.

- The students of this school were not found to imitate the teachers. But some 'bad' students of Standard 4th like Jyotsna Begum, Marjina Begum and Habibur Rahaman were seen to imitate the teacher several times.

- In Standard 4th classes, the teacher used the following instructions-finding opposite words, making sentences, finding antonyms, reading out from the text, arranging jumbled letters to form words etc. 'Good' students did not find problems to follow the teacher's instructions.

- In Upper-1, short questions from the texts were asked in some classes. It seemed that they understood the texts.

- Standard 4th students could answer well when the teacher had asked questions based on the text. There weren't any evidence from which it can be said they have great difficulties in understanding the text.

- Not everybody had participated as the teacher in standard 4th classes asked some short questions. Specifically, some 'good' students were answering.

- But students from every group had volunteered to read out from the text. Many of them had also volunteered to write on the blackboard. Some standard 4th 'bad' students were facing difficulties while reading out from the text, but in discussions they had participated comparatively freely.

- In Lower-1, many students were not participating freely in the class. But in Upper-1, students were free in participation. Some students, however, were not willing to participate. Some 'bad' students of the Upper-1 class were silent in the class. But they were trying to participate in the class. In the Upper-1, no students could be termed as completely 'blank'. But students were not paying attention to the class; they were playing at the corner of the classroom. Some standard 4th 'bad' students were not getting interest in the class, but still they were participating in the class.

- Different types of writing tasks were given to the standard 4th students. Teacher had asked the students to write the answers of some short questions on the blackboard. Most of the 'good' students had performed well, but some students had written wrong spellings. 'Bad' students did not volunteer, but two of them had performed well in writing tasks.

5.2. The Picture Story Test

The children's achievement in schools were tried to understand from the language proficiency through a picture story test. The children of Standard 4th were given a simple colourful picture storybook and asked to describe the story. The story was selected from a National Book Trust book named *belun* 'balloon'

In the village school, the students were first asked to describe the story in Rajbanshi first, after a few days they were asked to write the same story in Bangla. In the Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School, the students were asked to write the story in Bangla.

One probable assumption of designing this methodology was that students will not be able to write in Rajbanshi because they lack the habit. The formal literacy norms have always allowed them to confront Bangla in school or texts.

The constructions (phonological, morphological, lexical or syntactic) were helpful to scan their descriptions of the picture stories.

- The performance of the students' in picture-story writing, as a whole was very poor.

- Most of them had not used any punctuation. Only one student of Standard 4th (Dhananjay Roy) had used punctuation.

- Some of them were confused about which verb form to use. They seemed to be unfamiliar with Bangla verb forms and thus have not used proper verb forms, or create some verb forms which do not exist. In most of the cases, they had mixed Bangla verb-forms with Rajbanshi verbs (for example, Manasi Roy has used the form /k❷m❷r he♟ele ha▦▦et♦e/ 'he is leaned while walking').

- Some students had written all the words together, there were no gaps between the words; it seems that they do not have any writing habit at all. Monoj Roy has written all the words together, there are no gaps. So one cannot distinguish separate words from his writings.

They were confused about how to describe the story; it seemed that they do not have the habit of writing at all. Though some differences were found between the two writings, the students who had used words from Rajbanshi vocabulary were expressive better. Ruma Roy seems to be more creative in her story written in 'home language' where she has mentioned,

/ e   t♦ele▦▦a   kanna kort♦e/
  this   boy-classifier. do-Pres-prog-3p
'This boy is crying'

Ruma Roy's overall description of the story in home language was also more creative and more imaginative.

Generally, the detailed study of their description of two picture stories can say that, the students have not achieved the required achievements for standard 4th students, and

they are lagging far behind. The confusion in language choice, non-mastery in skills for writing a paragraph, and poor performance in a writing task were observed while analyzing the picture stories of Uttar Matiyali School.

Let us discuss the writings of two particular students.

1) Manasi Roy (G-A student) - these particular students had shown some features of Rajbanshi in her first writing. She had used a number of words from Rajbanshi vocabulary. E.g. /he⚥ele/ 'bending' (Bangla /hele/ or /nuiye), /pakhigila/ 'birds' (Bangla /pakhigulo/), /aka◆et/ 'sky-ablative' (Bangla /aka◆ theke/), /pakhila/ 'birds' (Bangla /pakhigulo/), /gise/ 'go-past-3p' (Bangla /g✈c📖he/) etc.
She has not used any punctuation mark in her writings.
In her second writing (in school language), she has tried to change some verbs.
She could not describe the story properly, but she could describe some actions.

2) Kanika Roy (G-B) - In both of her writing, the story line is not clear. She had faced problems in writing verbs. In writing-1, she had used the word /phakc📖he/ for the word 'blowing', but in Writing-2, she had used the word /ph❷kac📖c📖he/.
As a whole, her writing cannot be regarded as a good writing.

Ruma Roy and Anjana Roy have written some verb forms which are Rajbanshi verb forms, Manoj Roy's description of the picture story was without any word gap, and he has written all the words of sentences together. Only two students, Khagen Roy and Dhananjay Roy could understand the storyline though could not express it well.

In Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School, the performance of the students in writing the picture story was much different from the performance of Uttar Matiyali schoolchildren. Many of the students have marked the punctuations. Some have used complex and compound sentences. Spelling mistakes are minor. Some students have given minute descriptions.

It was noticeable that the students whose home language is Bangla (or East Bengali) have written the story more or less good. But students whose home languages are Rajbanshi (and also Assamese, Munda etc.) could not write the description well.

Rashida Khatun, Sharmira Thakur, Sabina Yasmin, Pushpita Roy, Beauty Begum could not follow the story line, but the constructions are good. Poor students of the class, most of who are from Nasya Sekh Community and speak Rajbanshi performed badly. Some of them have not marked punctuations. Some stories were difficult to understand. Some spelling mistakes were found, too.

To give example:

A "Good" student of the class like Pranab Sarkar has written complex sentences like:

/ ♦e   dekhlo   je   ♦e ♦❷pno dekhc☎he/

he see-pres-3p   that he dream see-pres-prog-3p

'He realizes that he is dreaming'

In Sharmita Thakur's description of the story, there were also some instances of complex sentences. E.g.:

/ ♦e   jete   jete   dekhlo   je   p❷the   ✈k▦a   belun   pore
ac☎ ☎he/

He   while going see-3p-pres that   on the way one-cla.   balloon lie- 3p-pres.

'While walking he realized that there is a balloon lying on the ground.'

5.3. The Creative Mind

In the initial methodological plan for the project, only classroom observation and picture story were thought as the main tool for the study. But, after spending time with the children of Uttar Matiyali School before their school time in the playground, it was thought that Story Telling can be a very important tool for the study.

Children of the rural school always speak Rajbanshi among themselves. But in classrooms they are compelled to give answers in Bangla. So, there is a major difference between the children's fluency in these two varieties.

Students of all the classes were asked to assemble together and they were asked to tell stories to other children. A few students had volunteered to tell. An important fact to note was that, some of the students had tried to tell stories in textbook language, i.e. literary Bangla but neither could they tell the stories fluently in Bangla nor the students had enjoyed. The students themselves have selected the 'best story teller' among their peers, and the 'best story tellers' have described the stories in Rajbanshi.

Story telling was seen as a Verbal Protocol Analysis as the students' discourse was individually analyzed as they were asked to 'talk aloud'. The idea behind it was to look at the students' language production and fluency. The choice of language while telling the stories was also an important point in case of the Uttar Matiyali School.

The formal story-telling session for the rural school was quite interesting; total 9 students had volunteered to tell stories.

Ruma, a student from standard 4th had described the story partially in Bangla and partially in Rajbanshi. Her pronunciation carried a regional accent. Fluency was average. She had used many Rajbanshi words while describing the story.

Sarajit, a standard 4th student who is a marked backbencher, had gladly volunteered to tell a story. He had told the story totally in Rajbanshi. His fluency was good, students had enjoyed.

Kaushal, a 'good' student from standard 4th had started telling a story in bookish Bangla, but paused in between. It seemed that he had tried to memorize the story from somewhere and thus could not continue.

Khagen, another 'good' student of standard 4th had described the story in partial Bangla with average fluency.

Manasi, a 'good' standard 4th student had used some Rajbanshi and English words to tell her story. Her fluency was medium.

Paritosh, a student of standard 3rd had described his story completely in Rajbanshi. Students enjoyed his story a lot. His fluency was good.

Biswamita, another standard 3rd student had described a long story in totally Rajbanshi. Her pronunciation and vocabulary were regional.

Dipali, also standard 3rd student had narrated her story in Rajbanshi, too. Her fluency was more or less good.

Paritosh was considered as the 'best story teller' of the day by the children, who had narrated the entire story in Rajbanshi.

Ruma, Manasi and Bulti, these three students had tried to tell stories partially or completely in Bangla. These three students were asked to tell the stories again in 'home language' (Rajbanshi) later, outside their classroom where no teachers were present. Ruma admitted that she had tried to tell the story in 'school-like language', later she had agreed to narrate the story in 'home language', and it had resulted in a bilingual story. Her fluency was better than the previous day.

Manasi had said that she had learnt the story from her grandma. She had also agreed to tell it again in 'home language'. But she had tried to speak in Bangla. She was not successful.

The analysis of story-telling was definitely n important part of the study, as it has directly pointed out the fact that the **Rajbanshi schoolchildren are comfortable and creative in their own language**, while use of Bangla had become a hindrance in their creativity. Doesn't it mean that if these children would be provided school education in their own language, we will not observe huge numbers or drop-out?

5.4.What did the Teachers say?

It would be really nice if the students themselves could talk regarding their language problem in classrooms. But as the students were not aged enough to point out their problems, teachers were asked regarding their students' problems. The teachers were

asked about not only the problems from the students' side, but also their problems in communication with the students etc. Teachers of three areas were interviewed as a part of the project.

(a) Teachers of Uttar Matiyali New Additional Primary School were asked regarding their students' problems in classrooms

(b) Teachers of Subhashnagar Mahutpara primary School were also interviewed in order to understand the problems of the school students

(c) Some teachers of Amguri village were interviewed in order to have an understanding of the students' problems in that area. It should be mentioned that the particular area was selected as a 'target' by some authorities. Some of the teachers of this area teach in Rajbanshi and refused to teach in Bangla.

(a) Teachers of Uttar Matiyali School are three in number. (One of them himself could not communicate well in Bangla as Rajbanshi is his mother tongue) They have informed that one important task can be to inform the concerned authorities regarding the children's problems and to provide textbooks in the students' language. More writing tasks and class discussions are needed according to these teachers.

The headmaster of the School along with another teacher from another primary school of the locality was interviewed in order to understand the students' problem better. The teachers informed that the students cannot even follow short instructions in Bangla. If they teacher asks them to bring the 'big book' or 'small book', they cannot understand.

Another big problem happens because of the teacher appointments. Sometimes, teachers who cannot speak and understand Rajbanshi are allotted for the Rajbanshi children's schools. The communication between the teachers and students is actually nil in these cases. Teachers whose home language is also Rajbanshi practically translates each and every line to the students so that they can understand it. But if a teacher does not know Rajbanshi, they suffer as they cannot understand their teacher's words.

Debendranath Roy, a teacher from village Jhar Matiyali, adjacent to Uttar Matiyali had also been interviewed. **The teacher clearly informed that, if books prepared in**

Rajbanshi are provided for the schoolchildren of the area, students will definitely benefited. He is also optimist about the local resources, which could be used as the materials of the text.

(b) There are five teachers in Subhashnagar Mahutpara Primary School. The teachers were interviewed twice. In the first day's interview, the teachers have informed that many of their students face problems when they first come to school. In order to combat that, they have divided the syllabus of Standard 1st in two years. Otherwise, it would not have possible for many of the newcomer students to learn the syllabus of Standard 1st within one year.

In the first day's interview with the teachers, when they were asked that how many Rajbanshi students are there in their school, the teachers were reluctant to answer. But when they were interviewed again after a few days, the teachers have informed that many of the students are Rajbanshi.

One particular teacher had informed that these students are 'bad students' because they belong to 'lower caste' and they speak a derogatory language. It is also impossible to teach them Bangla.

But the headmaster of the school had informed that he often use Rajbanshi in order to explain things. He was sure that teaching them by using their own language helps the students.

(c) In a third field trip, the selected field area was the Amguri region and two teachers of the region were interviewed personally. One of these teachers was threatened by governmental authorities for using Rajbanshi in classroom.

This particular teacher has informed about the traditional Rajbanshi systems for teaching the students alphabet in schools. The systems are no more used in the area. The teacher has informed that students who speak Rajbanshi at home cannot understand many of the words in their textbook as they use totally different terms at home. In many cases,

it becomes difficult for a teacher to explain each and every word of the textbook by translation.

The teacher had mentioned a teachers' camp which was organized by the Sarva Sikhsha Abhijan and it was clearly declared that the local language 'should not be used' in the classroom by any means. Many of the teachers, para-teachers and resource persons informed that it is impossible not to use the local language in class because it is the home language of the children.

5.5. What did the students say?

Students' responses were supposed to be a very important tool for the project. But if the primary schoolchildren were asked to tell if they face any language problem in schools, the main problem was that they could not articulate it well.

So, a set of questionnaires were prepared to interview some students who are continuing/ has continued higher education. They were asked to recall the problems during their school time and articulate it.

Some students from Amguri village and some students from the postgraduate Bengali class of North Bengal University were interviewed. Firstly; they were asked to tell about their language problems in educational institutions and secondly; they were asked some questions which had tried to understand the feelings of their own identity in terms of their linguistic identity.

While conversing with these fellows in an informal conversation/setting, the key intention of the researcher was to relate the speaker's linguistic behaviour with their identity.

Kalyani Roy and Antara Roy, two cousin sisters from Amguri village have informed that, they have inferior feelings for they cannot speak 'Shuddha Bangla' (pure Bangla). In fact, they could not understand Bangla at all till 3rd standard had learnt to read books in Bangla later but still could not understand many words. Problems in morphological level were also identified.

Aparna Roy, a graduate student who is also from the same village studies Bangla literature but does not know many basic words from Bangla vocabulary yet. She finds pronunciations and spellings of Bangla tough. Aparna confirmed that her Bengali class-mates neglect her because she is 'Rajbanshi'. Her mother is searching a match for her, but maximum matrimonial columns mention that 'we do not need any Rajbanshi girl'.

Kokil Chandra Roy and Saptarshi Roy, two graduate students form the same area who also informed that they had to face major problems in schools , only if the teacher had explained the text in Rajbanshi they could understand it.

Five students from the postgraduate Bengali Distance Course Classes were also interviewed in order to understand their views. When the students were asked how they would like to introduce themselves, four out of five students said that they will term themselves as 'Rajbanshi' (not Bengali). When they were asked if they think that their variety is different from the nearby town or city; interestingly, everybody had said that their variety is different from Bangla. All the students have mentioned that they are proud of their own speech variety. When they were asked if they want to have a different speech-style, one of the students said that he is not sure, two of them said that they don't want to change it and one of them informed that she wants to speak the standard language. Everybody mentioned that, they feel embarrassed because of their 'caste dialect', they want to speak Bangla. All the students are aware of their various infrastructural problems like- poor communication system, they do not have electricity in their villages in most of the cases, and the irrigation system is also bad.

When they were asked if it is necessary to speak the local language, all of them said that it is necessary to speak Bangla, not Rajbanshi. What is compelling them to speak out *'Amader Bangla boltei hobe'* (We have to speak Bangla)? Is the process of killing Rajbanshi is becoming successful?

6. **How is the Situation in Rajbanshi Area?**

Though most of the languages of the world are becoming 'endangered' as a result of threat from the dominant languages, still in complex society the birth of a new language is possible. These new born languages, in most of the cases die in course of time. The death of the newborn languages is also case of language endangerment and language death. The powerful languages and authorities in these cases do not accept the existence of these languages. Rajbanshi is not an exception.

People of northern part of West Bengal, who were deprived in terms of many socio-economic factors for a long time, when demanded their own linguistic rights, the reply from the governmental front was a denial of the fact that they have their own rich culture, and they are not actually a part of the Bengali cultural pattern. Instead, the linguistic-cultural heritage of the Rajbanshis is very much different.

The non-acceptance of the Rajbanshi people's demands resulted as a larger movement, which is continuing still now. Because of this movement, the governmental authorities in West Bengal are rejecting any issue related to the involvement of the Rajbanshi language. The issue that the Rajbanshi-speaking schoolchildren are lagging behind in schools because of the language problem is not taken into account seriously but Rajbanshi is announced as a prohibited language in the classroom. Let us discuss the situation of the Rajbanshi zone briefly which will be helpful to understand how the governmental authorities are silent to solve the problems of the children of northern Bengal.

In order to look at the Rajbanshi language problem, one needs to understand the position of Bengalis vs. the Rajbanshis in north Bengal. It includes
(1) The role of the local Bengalis and their attitude towards the Rajbanshis
(2) The role of the governmental bodies in order to prove that, Rajbanshis do not have their own culture, but they are part of the Bengali culture.

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The 'Bengalaization' process always dominates Rajbanshis, who are the largest scheduled caste community of West Bengal. As Annamalai has pointed out, 'the basic ingredient of nationhood is a sense of sharing among the people living in a country. The sharing may be a real or an imagined historical past or a dream of the future.' The Rajbanshis of Bengal are demanding their own linguistic state. Though the constitution of India has given the provision of allowing more than one official languages for the states, the linguistic imperialism is practically marginalizing the other languages. And the silent slogan in West Bengal is 'Bangla=Bengal'.

The linguistic identity of the Rajbanshis have always been put to a pressure, as Rajbanshi has always been termed as a 'dialect' of Bengali in order to show the Bangla-dominance. The politics behind incorporating the Rajbanshi people among the Bengalis is a violation of the Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)

Though the Rajbanshis were the indigenous people of the northern part of Bengal, at present they are

'facing a lot of hardships and are fast loosing their ethnic identity, culture, language and civilizational attributes under pressure of alien Bengalis(Bhatias), who mostly came from downstream region of southern East Bengal(now Bangladesh) to this territory.'

(Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 260)

Nandy (1999:8) has mentioned that during the time of partition (1950s), the riot of 1964 and also during the war of 1971, many Hindu Bengalis had migrated in the northern part of Bengal. A number of educated middle-class Bengalis had also migrated to this area due to administrative reason. (e.g., in the tea garden area) Because of these migrated people, the indigenous people of North Bengal were marginalized.

A major socio-economic deprivation led the indigenous people to utter words in terms of their identity through uttering the demands for their own rights. The

Rajbanshi children's rights to get education in their own language were also a demand of the people as Nandy (Ibid: 12-13) has mentioned that,

'…as the children do not get education in their mother tongue, the Kamtapuri children leave the school soon.' (Translation from Bangla: author)

7. Conclusion

7.1. The Language Policy Question

In the Language Education Policy of India, the issue of mother tongue education for the children of non-powerful communities has never been discussed seriously. The National Curriculum Framework of NCERT though has emphasized the importance of mother tongue education in early school years, but it could not suggest an apt way to solve the problem in terms of the minority children. The role of the governmental authorities concerning primary education in West Bengal has also become questionable as there are clear instances to prohibit the use of Rajbanshi in the classrooms.

Can we suggest any way out for these children? Srivastava's 'Vernacular-cum-Transfer Literacy Model' can be one of the options for the attested problem. The students will first start learning through their home language and gradually shift to the SCB in higher classes.

'Initiate literacy in the language style in which illiterates have oral competence and then transfer it, if necessary, to the language recognized as the medium of instruction in the formal educational system of the region.' (Srivastava, 1993:85)

Bandyopadhyay (2004:18) has mentioned that

'One solution may be the introduction of a supplementary reader written in a specific community language added to the standard primer.'

Introducing a Bridge Reader can also be a solution in order to combat the problems of Rajbanshi Schoolchildren. And it should finally be mentioned that giving the children early education in their mother tongue would definitely be advantageous for their overall education, psychological, cognitive and social development is also related with it. And it will surely lead the children to high proficiency in the dominant language, too.

7.2. Programme that can be taken

An important question is how to use the findings of the paper. As it was evident from the picture story analysis the primary school students have not build any skill even in writing a short paragraph.

The Classroom Observations found…

If an alternative education programme can be launched for the Rajbanshi children, the aim of the programme should include:

- To allow children to construct texts freely
- Not to tell them explicitly or implicitly that their linguistic variety is 'bad'
- In the beginning stage of their education programme asking the children to tell words which they use frequently at home
- Allowing the children to write small sentences in their home language

7.3. The Theoretical Output

The present state of the Rajbanshi speech-community can be evaluated as a part of the conclusion of the project. It is important to understand:

- The attitude of the Rajbanshi speakers towards their own linguistic variety
- The urge to maintain their linguistic variety
- If people deny their linguistic identity
- Is there any language replacement by the younger generation
- The tendency to use the high culture linguistic variety
- The rate of code-mixing and switching
- Language choice by the members of the speech-community in presence of Bangla speakers

It is to be mentioned that the awareness of linguistic rights is firstly to be noted by the intellectual elites. Thus it is also very important to have an understanding about the common people's view in relation to the revival of language.

7.4. Rights of the children: viewed in terms of equity rights

From theoretical viewpoint, Rajbanshi can be termed as an endangered language, where the members of the linguistic speech community are threatened by the dominant linguistic group and the presence of Linguicism is very much there according to the survey report.

<div align="center">(….to be continued)</div>

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Acknowledgement

<u>Note:</u>

- In many cases, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols have been used to demonstrate the linguistic features of Rajbanshi or Bangla. In order to describe the children's writing samples the IPA has also been used. To view these examples, IPA fonts are needed. These fonts are downloadable from the website of Summer Institute of Linguistics.

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