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**A Salvage Linguistic Anthropological Study of the
Endangered Māñgtā Language of West Bengal,
India**

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Abstract

The present paper is a salvage Linguistic Anthropology, in which attempt has been made to document a nearly-extinct language known as māṅgtā bhāsā, and to suggest appropriate measures for saving it from complete extinction. The word māṅgtā is said to have been derived from māñā, which means 'to ask for' or 'to beg'. The language is spoken by a few groups of the Bedia, which is a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in India with a population of 88,772 as per Census of India, 2011 (Risley [1891]1981; Bandyopadhyay 2012, 2016, 2017). Bedia is a generic name for a number of vagrant gypsy like groups which Risley has divided into seven types. They live by a number of professions such as snake-charming, selling of medicinal herbs, showing chameleon art or multi-forming. Almost all of them have become speakers of more than one language for interacting with speakers of different languages in the neighbourhood for the sake of their survival. Even the present generation has almost forgotten their native speech, and their unawareness of the language becoming extinct is of concern to us. Elders still remember it and use it sometimes in conversations with the fellow members of their community.

The ability to speak this language is construed with regard to the origin of this particular group of Bedia. In fact, the language had given them the identity of a separate tribal community while they demanded the status of ST in the recent past. Thus, socio-historically, the māṅgtā language has a special significance. In spite of being a distinct speech, there has been almost no study conducted on this language. This is one of the major motives for taking up the present endeavour. This project conducts morphological, phonological, syntactical and semantic studies on the māṅgtā language. Sociolinguistic aspects of this language have also been considered. The language has its roots in the Indo-European language family with affinity to the Austro-Asiatic family. The paper interrogates whether māṅgtā can be called language or speech. The study required ethnographic field work, audio-visual archiving, and revitalization, along with sustainable livelihood protection of speakers of the language.

Keywords: Bedia, chameleon art, māṅgtā language, extinction, revitalization

Introduction

Declining or vanishing of languages has been one of the major challenges to humanity. It is a global moment when we celebrate diversity of various sectors of life, from the bio-genetic to

environmental. As such, one cannot ignore the cultural diversity manifested through languages. In this context, it is a disquieting fact that only ten percent of the total languages of the world are safe, leaving a robust ninety per cent of the total languages at the brink of extinction or decline (Hale et.al.1992). According to this estimation, there are 6000 languages in the world. This suggests that about 5400 languages are facing a threat to their existence. Grenohle and Whaley (2001) expressed that half of the extant languages at present will cease to exist in the next 100 years. UNESCO has estimated that around 3000 languages are endangered in the world¹. Grenohle and Whaley (2001, 465) define that:

“A language is classified as endangered if there is an imminent risk of it no longer being spoken.”

They categorize four types of endangerment. These categories are the following:

- i. Threatened Language – In this case there is a distant possibility of survival.
- ii Declining Language – Here, we notice a steady loss of the speakers’ base.
- iii. Moribund Language – It happens when the present generation no longer learns or speaks the language.
- iv. Extinct Language – This is the state of complete extinction of language.

UNESCO has also categorized levels of endangerment into vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct¹. These categories may better be understood as some ideal state of risk, as the nature of language loss does not always fit into any of these categories perfectly, and there are spatio-temporal variations in this regard.

Anthropologists, more particularly linguistic anthropologists, and linguists, have studied the nature, cause and consequences of language loss (Reyhner et.al. 1999; Rau et.al. 2007; Harrison 2007). They have advocated sustained and systematic efforts towards revitalization of languages. Reyner et.al. (1999) emphasized the revitalization of indigenous languages. Rau and Florey (2007) were concerned more about the documentation and revitalization of Austronesian languages. Harrison(2007) has evinced the great damage caused through the death of language.

Of these endangered categories of languages, the ‘Moribund’ language category states that there will be no first generation speaker. But it is silent on whether older generations speak it or not. In the present case, the older generations know the language but they usually do not speak it. This does not completely fit the critically Endangered category as mentioned by the UNESCO. Here, “the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.”

Moreover, not all the members know the language equally. Only one or two villages have a few knowledgeable persons. Therefore, it needs immediate attention to revive and document this language, as there exists no mention in any record of this language. With regard to the māṅgtā language, we start with the community which is the carrier of this tongue.

Bedia Māṅgtā Community

The Bedias is a scheduled tribe in West Bengal having a total population of 88,772, which is 1.67 percent of the total tribal population of West Bengal, as per the 2011 census. Risley (1892; 1981) has mentioned that the Bedia (Bediya as he spelt it) is the generic name of a number of vagrant gypsy like groups in which he included seven broad types 1. Babajiya, Lava, or Patwa , pedlars 2. Bazigars, Kabutari, Bhanumati, Dorabaz, acrobats and conjurers. 3. Mal or Ponkhwa

4. Mir –shikar or Chirimar who were hunters and fowlers, catch bird with satnali or light lance divided into sections like a fishing rod 5. Samperia, snake charmers, hawkers, makers of fish –hooks 6. Shandars, pedlars, divers 7. Rasia Bediyas. They are seen to practice a syncretic form of religious faith representing both Hinduism and Islam. However, the group under the present study admits to be the follower of Hinduism. Several have mentioned forty three divisions or groups (khom) among the Bedias. Traditionally, they are a nomadic or semi-nomadic group.

The Bedia under the present study live by a profession called bahurupee (chameleon). They know a language with which they used to engage in conversation among themselves. Now, the older generations know it but do not use it in their conversation. The younger people are not interested in learning this language. The word māṃgtā means to ‘ask for’ to ‘to beg.’ Since the people live by showing their chameleon art from house to house or in the market place or in train compartments, their profession appears to be somewhat of a begging. Thus, the people themselves concede to the term for their language, in spite of its derogatory connotation. The people are themselves known as the māṃgtā community – though they prefer to be named as bahurupee. However, the other names of their community are pākherā, pākhmārā, byādh – all indicating the nature of subsistence they were used to.

It has already been mentioned that these people were nomadic. Gradually, they shifted to a semi-nomadic way of life. Their sedentary settlement is of recent origin, when the connectivity in their area increased and they could commute. They believe that they are the descendants of the Kalketu, the great hero of Chandimangal of medieval Bengali literature. They also add that their language was in use in Gujarat, the city founded by Kalketu as per the text. Kalketu was a hunter (byādh) by profession and used to roam about the forest. These people were also used to hunting and catching birds in the forest for selling at the market and their own consumption.

Another version of their origin is that they were brought from Odisha by Bhabadeb Bhatta, a minister of a regional ruler and a social reformer of medieval Bengal in the 11th Century. But the Bedia themselves did not subscribe to this story. They claim that the group who were brought to Bengal by Bhabadeb Bhatta are the Bajikars who live in a village under same police station area. They have no similarity with the Bajikars. This history has a link with their language; some of the local intellectuals are of the opinion that they were engaged by the king for doing espionage work. Their language was the code language for that work. Rather, they are more inclined to communicate that they were hired by the Nawab to fight against the Mirzafar. They also consider themselves as Khsatriya, the warrior caste, suggesting that they were in the army nawab (Muslim ruler of Murshidabad). Their being taken to the Bahurupee profession as a community is also recent.

Table-1: Knowledge of languages among the studied population.
(MOL – monolingual, BL-Bi-lingual, MUL-multilingual)

Age Group	Male			Know Mangta	Female			Know Mangta	Total
	MOL	BL	MUL		MOL	BL	MUL		
0-4	9			0	7			0	16
5-9	6			0	14			0	20
10-14	6	2		0	5	2		0	15

15-19	1	6		0	1	6		0	14
20-24		3	6	0	2	4		0	15
25-29		2	2	0	3	1		0	08
30-34		4	1	0	4	2		0	11
35-39		2		2	4			1	06
40-44		5		1	4			1	09
45-49		4		2	0				04
50-54		1		1	0				01
55-59		1		1	3			2	04
60+		4		3	6			5	10
TOTAL	22	34	9	10	53	15	00	9	133

Again, it is seen that among them, 15.38 per cent of males know the mangta language, and 13.85 per cent are multilingual. In the female population, 13.24 per cent know the mangta language. The younger males are the multilingual section. This capability is earned to facilitate their vocation in the urban areas where they come across people speaking a number of languages. (Table-1)

Tabel-2: Status of literacy in the Mangta speaking community.

Level	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Non-Literate	Can sign	Total
No. (%)	30 (25.64)	19 (16.24)	2 (1.71)	52 (44.44)	14 (12.82)	117 (100.00)

Only 55.56 per cent are literate, and 44.44 per cent are non-literate in the studied population. 45.9 per cent of the females have received formal education. Over the past one decade, the literacy rate has been improved. Female literacy significantly increased from 15.89% to 45.9 %.9 (Table -2).

Features of Language

Vocabulary

We have already indicated that the language remains almost unused and unspoken. The existing vocabulary also indicates the loss of many words. The community now converses in the Bengali language, the lingua franca of the region (Bengali has approximately 250 million speakers from West Bengal, Assam, Tripura in India and Bangladesh). However, a representative vocabulary of their own presents its difference with the dominant language of Bengali.

English	Mangta	Bengali	Eng.	Mang.	Beng.
House	Dābi	Ghar	Road	Kostā	Rāstā
Fire	Kogun	Agun	Field	Jhānt	Math
Forest	Jhun	Jangal	Cow	Nemru	Garu

Puffed rice	Nibhuje	Muri	Rice	Konojā	Bhāt
Water	Ciyeni	Jal	Tree	Nihāch	Gāch
Hunting	Lugeno	Śikār	Net	Khālso	Jāl
Bird catching			Glued		
Stick	Khengro	Nalā	Stick	Cabre	Athākāthi
Door	Jhāpāṭ	Darja	Window	Nijānlā	Jānlā
Man	Geli	Lok	Woman	Enniyā	Mahilā/Mejē
Lad	Dhunis	Chele	Boy	Lol	Bālak
Wife	Khutu	Bau	Child	Chilke	Śisū

From the vocabulary, we can identify three sources of their words.

1. Indigenous / Native word – Khalso, lol, geli, dhunis
2. Derived word- jhichana, kosta, jhat, kolo
3. Loan word –byadh, bahurupee, etc.

The common rule as it appears is that they use k, jh, as a substitute in the Bengali word. e.g. Rasta – Kosta, Math – Jhat. This is seen mostly in case of the words which are not fitting to their traditional way of life.

Pronouns and Kin terms

The pronouns and kinship terms are very interesting and show the influence of Bengali kinship terms. The examples are-

Bengali	Mangta	Bengali	Mangta
Āmi(I) Bāmi	Tumi (You)	Turi	
Āmāke (To me)	Bāmāke	Se (He)	Sekor
Tomār (Your)	urof	Tāhāder(Their)	Tutir
Mā (Mo)	Ni mā/Al mā	Baba (Fa)	Ni baba/Albaba
Bon (Si)	Khoin	Bhai(Br)	Khoine Utki
Dādā (EB)	Khoiner Jhār		
Chele(So)	Khetā	Meye (D)	Khiṭi
Māmā (MoB)	Jhāmā	Māsi (MoSi)	Jhāsi

Use of Verbs

Bengali(English)	Mangta
Khāoyā (Eat)	Kutei(che) [Bāmi kānuā khāteibo – I shall eat rice]
Basā (Sit)	Doeslām
Śooyā (Sleep)	Dhunke
Dāṛāno (Stand)	Thor Koyeche
Jāoyā (Go)	Chuleichi [Bāmi chuelchi – I go/ Bāmā Chuelchi – We go.]
Asi (Come)	Khāulchi

Present form = verb no change

Past form = verb + eo (Chuleicheo, Khoilecheo etc.)

(baharupee performers) from the state government. They earlier lived in comparative isolation, and were regarded as one of the untouchable communities. Later, they applied for the status of a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and were enlisted as such. To prove their identity as a separate tribe, they were required to indicate that they have a distinct language. But, in their day to day life, they were required to perform before a Bengali speaking community. Therefore, the language of their communication is strategically Bengali.

It thus appears that the language is always playing a decisive role in their survival as well as identity formation. However, since they do not have any immediate threat to their identity of ST, they pay little attention to their declining language

Linguistic Anthropology vis-à-vis Salvage Linguistic Anthropology (SLA)

Linguistic Anthropologists have identified a number of causes behind the dying of language (Grenoble and Whaley 2001, 2006). These include:

1. Colonialization
2. Industrialization
3. Monolingualism in education policy
4. Exploitation of natural resource and displacement of people
5. Disruption of cultural patterns
6. Larger language hegemony.

All these above mentioned factors are directly or indirectly responsible for the loss of language. In addition to these, economy and ecology play very important roles in case of the Bedias under the present study. It has been revealed that they needed to shift their economic activities owing to ecological factors. The language which supported their occupation and could be protected in their isolation was to undergo decline in the changed milieu.

Therefore, we can take up a comprehensive approach towards the revival of this language in an anthropological way that we may call Salvage Linguistic Anthropology (SLA). Linguistic Anthropologists, as Alessandro Duranti notes – “see the subjects of their study, that is, speakers, first and above all as social actors, that is, members of particular, interestingly complex, communities, each organized in a variety of social institutions and through a network of intersecting but not necessarily overlapping sets of expectations, beliefs, and moral values about the world”(Duranti 1997, 3). However, Duranti places this within a broader perspective to address major anthropological issues through language practices. SLA takes up this cue to pin point its focus on a more comprehensive study.

1. Ethnographic study of community.
2. Documentation of the piecemeal or fragmentary linguistic elements as so far surviving. (Language Documentation Handbook – CIIL 2016)
3. Reviving and encouraging folklore of the people to reflect their cultural artifacts.

The present study has adopted a similar approach, in order to present more or less a descriptive account of the language and its speakers. It argues that the corpus of the language is best preserved if its oral tradition is protected. It is a fact that the community cannot be reverted to their earlier way of life, but at best what can be done is a comprehensive collection of the oral texts of the language and its use in contextual situations. The study reveals that still a a

small section of the population know the language to a greater or lesser degree. If the remaining vocabulary and linguistic features can be determined without any delay, we can definitely affirm its status as a language or speech and can save it from extinction.

Footnotes

www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages (acc. On 20.01.19)

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