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**Language Vitality, Attitude and Endangerment:
Understandings from Field Work among Lodha
Speakers**

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Abstract

Lodhas are marginalized scheduled tribe groups in West Bengal, India. They were labeled as criminal tribes until the revocation of the Criminal Tribes' Act of 1952. Lodha is an Indo-Aryan language, spoken by Lodhas in some villages in West Bengal, India.

This paper has four objectives. First, this paper discusses the effect of dominant languages. Here we attempt to study the impact of Bangla on the Lodha language. This paper discusses the language attitude of Loedha community. To develop their economy, these communities attempt to interact with the non-tribal Indo-Aryan populations and thus attempt to forget their own language. The paper then discusses in detail the Lodha language attitude, thus landscaping the present condition of Lodha. We then discuss the socio-economic condition of Lodha, and how this condition creates a barrier for these people. Finally, this paper aims to assess the nature and degree of language endangerment of Lodha based on UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework.

Keywords: Lodha, endangerment, socio-economic, attitude.

Introduction

Lodha is a language spoken in the Jhargram and Medinipur districts of West Bengal. The language is also spoken in the Mayurbhanj and Baleswar districts of Orissa. Some accounts (e.g. Gordon 2005) suggest that the Lodha (or Lodhi) language is related to Sabar[a], an Austroasiatic language. However, Das Gupta (1978) suggests that the Lodha language appears to be an Indo-Aryan variety, and not an undocumented member of the Munda language family (c.f. Anderson 2008). The language mainly resides in the Jhargram district in a multi-ethnic environment with Santals, Kheria, Oraon, Bhumij, Mahalis, Mahtas and Sadgops.

The paper describes the present situation of the people of the Lodha speech community and their struggle for existence. The paper also describes the mixed language attitudes of Lodha speakers towards their native language. This paper presents a descriptive and analytical framework, where interviews were used to collect primary data, as were preliminary surveys, observations and inquiries. The data collection occurred in August of 2018.

The Lodha Tribes

The Lodhas are a set of marginalized scheduled tribal groups in West Bengal. They were labeled as criminal tribes until the revocation of the Criminal Tribes' Act of 1952. In the Census of 1951, Lodhas were considered as a caste along with Savaras. The Census of 1961 tentatively classified them under the Austric family of language. However, in the Census of 1971, the Lodhas were merged with Savara and Kheria tribal communities so as to dilute their identity (Ghatak 2013). As such, the total population of Lodha, Kheria and Savar, according to the Census 2011, was 84,966.

Lodha speakers are also fluent in Mahta, Adibasi, Bangla and Hindi, and live near the fringes of forests. As such, they are a group of food gatherers and mainly subsist on the collection of wild roots, tubers and edible leaves from the jungle. They hunt birds, lizards and alligators for food. Traditionally, they are forest dwellers, but have now begun to cultivate crops, either as owners of land or as agriculture labourers.

Socio-economic Status and its Projection on Life and Language

British colonial rule affected the freedom of living of many communities in India through the introduction of 'permanent settlement' and other land related measures, in order to increase social revenue. The forest or village in which Lodhas lived had been encroached into by agricultural communities such as the Santals, the Mahtas and the Sadgops. Lodhas had weaker agricultural operations than these other groups, and rather, had preference in collecting jungle vegetation and food for subsistence, through picking, hunting and trapping of animals. The denigration of the situation of the Lodhas was such that the government had shown preference toward cultivated classes, who funded the Government. As such, Lodha communities were prohibited from free access into the forest, and thus pushed to develop agriculture. The communities faced government and other oppression, labeling the community as dacoit, thieves and as criminal activists. In 1900 there were many criminal cases committed by members of these communities, where, eventually, they were categorized and declared to be a criminal tribe in 1916 under the Government notification No 7022-23 of 20th May, 1916.

As such, Lodhas were given status as a criminal tribe until the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1952. From 1956, the Lodhas were recognized as a Scheduled Tribe and later categorized as a Primitive Tribal group in 1982, that is, a special weaker section of the tribal community in need of special care by the Government of India. Despite being formally de-criminalized by a post-independence Indian state, Lodhas are still socially excluded, marginalized and face varying degrees of oppression. Lodha communities symbolize low economic income groups, and depend on collections of minor forest products, fishing and hunting. However, people in these communities have begun to seek employment as wage laborers, medicinal plant gatherers and so forth. For this reason, they are economically below the poverty line. With relation to housing, they reside in huts with little furniture and utensils. As such, village living conditions are low, with malnutrition ranking high among ailments of these communities.

Effects of Dominant Languages

Lodha speakers also largely speak Lodha, Bangla, Odia, Adibasi, Mahta and Hindi. Adjacent communities use Santali, Mahta/Kurmali Mahali, Bangla (in higher castes). As such, Lodha speakers speak those languages according in various contexts. In one primary school in the village, only Lodha people are able to study. However, in high schools, ethnic mixing is allowed. The Indian government has built schools with hostel facilities, particularly for Lodha children, and for which, the government has employed Santals or

Bangali teachers. The schools in tehse communities use Bangla (and English) as a medium of study. Lodha children begin to learn Bangla from the age of three, at which time, they begin school. As such, the Lodha lexicon is largely affected by Bangla and other languages.

Lodha is mostly used in the home, where Bangla is used mostly in schools, markets and so forth. Lodha speakers have replaced several terms in the Lodha language, including names of birds, animals, kingship terms and body parts, where the replacing words are borrowed from Bangla or Oriya, both with and without phonological alterations. In our collection and analysis of the Lodha language corpus, we observed that the Lodha language is heavily influenced by Bangla. Lodha do have their own unique lexicon, though as shown below, many words are borrowed from Bangla.

English	Lodha in IPA	Bangla in IPA
Corn	jonar	b ^h uʈʈa
Orange	jamir	kɔmla lebu
Papaya	p ^h ipa	pepe
Pumpkin	b ^h oital	kumro
Garlic	rosun	rosun
Carrot	gajor	gajor
Ginger	ada	ada
Cauliflower	p ^h ul kopi	p ^h ul kopi

Though the speakers were able to recall some body part terms such as raja (eyeball), jona (nostril) and muhu (lips), for some terms they borrowed words from Bangla such as kan (ear), aṅgul (finger) (aṅgul in Bangla) and catuah (palm) (cetoh in Bangla). Borrowing is also found in animal and bird names. However, some animals and birds were referred to in Lodha, such as gede (duck), cirna (eagle), kukra (hen), ciru (squirrel), p^hiriṅ (deer), and so forth. here, many other animals were addressed in Bangla. These included cil (kite), tja (parrot), idur (mouse), and cita (panther).

Language Attitudes

Language attitudes are of key importance in assessing the revitalization of endangered languages (Sallabank 2013). Positive attitudes of the speaker towards their mother tongue signal language retention tendencies and negative attitudes signal language shift tendencies. In the case of Lodha, it has been seen that there is positive change in the attitude of the speakers towards their language, despite that their economic and social situations do not encourage these communities to speak Lodha. Lodha is neither taught in schools nor does anyone outside their community use the language. Members of the communities are forced to learn and speak Bangla. Although the literate younger members feel that they should not abandon their language, they believe that their forefathers ignored their language. Consequently, they do not grasp that the loss of their language will lead to loss of identity.

There are mainly three reasons for attitude shifting:

1. Lodha speakers are less in number; they desire to become the larger group which is the dominant community of the area.
2. The Lodha community faces oppression of language and identity from neighboring communities.
3. Bangla is a 'Prestigious' language and one of the scheduled languages of the India. They think if they shift into Bangla language they can remove their 'criminal' identity.

Prestige is one of the most important issues in the Lodha language. Lodhas speak Mahali when communicating with Mahali speakers, and Bangla when communicating with Bangla speakers, yet only use Lodha within their own community. A large number of Lodha speakers are not conscious of their identity. They do not ignore that they are Lodha, but believe that losing the language has led them to their present economical and social identities.

Understanding Language Vitality through the UNESCO Scale

Language endangerment has been a concern of linguists from the mid to late twentieth century. A language becomes endangered when its use discontinues. Endangerment and vitality are elements of gradation, and are inversely proportional to each other. A higher rate of vitality indicates a lower rate of endangerment and a lower rate of vitality points to a higher rate of endangerment. There are several methods with which to measure language vitality. However, to assess the nature and degree of the language endangerment of Lodha, we draw on UNESCO’s language vitality and endangerment framework.

No single factor can be used to assess a language’s vitality or its need for documentation. There are nine factors in UNESCO’s Vitality scale; six factors to evaluate vitality and state of endangerment, two factors to assess language attitudes, and several factors to measure the urgency for documentation. These nine factors assist to identify the overall socio-linguistic situation of Lodha:

Intergenerational Language Transmission

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages.
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
Definitely Endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation.
Severely Endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation.
Critically Endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of the great-grandparental generation.
Extinct	0	There exist no speakers.

Source: UNESCO (2013)

Lodha is mostly spoken by the parental generation. The youngest speakers of Lodha use their language for interaction with parents. As such, Lodha is classified as ‘definitely endangered’ (Grade 3) with regard to factor 1.

Absolute Number of Speakers through Integration

A small language group may also merge with a neighboring group, losing its own language and culture. This is also the case for the Lodha language. Lodha is a small community socially and economically more backward than other neighboring communities. As such, Lodha communities have a tendency to merge with other communities in order to effect social and economic upward mobility.

Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Proportion of Speakers within the Total Reference Population
Safe	5	All speak the language.
Unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.
Definitely Endangered	3	A majority speak the language.

Severely Endangered	2	A minority speak the language.
Critically Endangered	1	Very few speak the language.
Extinct	0	None speak the language.

Source: UNESCO (2013)

The number of speakers in relation to the total population of a language community is a significant indicator for measuring language vitality. The Lodha language and culture frequently merges with neighboring Bengali or other communities. As such, Lodhas lose their language, where little of the population currently speaks pure Lodha, but rather, engages in language mixing.

Trends in Existing Language Domains

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
Universal safe	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
Multilingual parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most function.
Dwindling domains	3	The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
Limited or formal domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
Highly limited domains	1	The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few function.
Extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.

Source: UNESCO (2003)

Lodha is mainly used in home domain. The older generation or the younger speakers become semi speaker of their own language. Lodha is used at festivals or at ceremonial occasions. The Lodha have adopted the deities of neighboring Bangali Hindu communities, and celebrate Hindu religious festivals e.g. Kali Puja, Durga Puja. To perform these religious rituals, they draw on Lodha mantras.

Response to New Domains and Media

Some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into new domains, but this is not the case with Lodha communities. Lodha is not introduced in schools, and there are no media channels broadcasting in Lodha.

Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Education in a language is essential for language vitality. However, in the case of Lodha, there is no established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts and everyday media. Writing in Lodha is not used in administration or education.

Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use

There are no books written in the Lodha Language. AS such, teaching Lodha in schools is difficult. Lodha speakers are also not significantly aware of aspects of their language, and are not active in their appeal to the Indian government to vitalize the language. Following from that many projects on Tribal languages are in effect, the Indian government is taking steps to document the language. This type of

documentation creates awareness of the present conditions of Lodha. However, this is an extremely slow process.

Community Member's Attitudes toward their Language

Despite that Lodha communities have little awareness of aspects of their language, they do not see the language as significant enough or essential enough for the community so as to promote the language.

Amount and Quantity of Documentation

There are no grammars nor dictionaries in Lodha. Similarly, there are no written texts, literature nor audio or video records.

Conclusion

With the death of a language, we witness the death of the community's history, culture, ethno linguistic practices and the overall identity of the community. This is becoming the case with Lodha and its ethnic community. The struggle of this community has always been for existence. Yet, the Lodhas wish to remove their identity, their language, as this identity has created barriers. The Lodha continue to exert little effort into saving both Lodha language and community, but the efforts are waning.

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