Journal of ELT and Education (JEE), an international refereed quarterly
ISSN: 2618-1290 (Print), 2663-1482 (Online); Volume: 2, Issue-3 & 4, July-December 2019, Page: 66-72

Citation:
Rahman, A., Chanda, S. S. & Parvin, S. (2019). The Language of the Urang Community of Bangladesh: An Analysis. *Journal of ELT and Education*. Volume-2, Issue-3 & 4, 66-72.

Article Info:
Received: 02.09.2019; Accepted: 20.10.2019; Published: 22.10.2019

Website:
JEE is unconditionally available online at **www.jee-bd.com** with neither subscription nor any membership required.

Copyright © Center for Academic Research and Development (CARD), a concern of Hello-Teen Society, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Review Paper

The Language of the Urang Community of Bangladesh: An Analysis

***Abdul Rahman[1], Snehangshu Shekhar Chanda[2], Shahnara Parvin[3]**

Abstract

The study focuses on the life of the Urang community of Bangladesh, especially on the language of this ethnic community living mainly in greater Sylhet for ages. Data have been collected through field visits and semi-structured interviews with 64 members of the community. The result shows that, even though the Urangs have traditionally been working and living in different tea gardens in Sylhet, a lot of them are now engaged in various professions including jobs even in some government offices. Linguistically the Urangs are predominantly bilingual: they speak Kurukh and in some cases Sadri for intra-communal communication whereas they use Bangla for communicating with mainstream Bangladeshi people. 37.50% of the respondents have opined that their mother tongue Kurukh has its writing system when 62.50% are of the view that Kurukh has no written script. However, none of the respondents has been found to be able to write even a single word in Kurukh. The study concludes stressing the need for taking proper steps to revive this endangered language.

Keywords

The Urangs, Language, Kurukh, Sadri

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is known for its cultural diversity where people of different cultures based on their regional, religious and ethnic identities have been living side by side in harmony for centuries. It is home to more than two dozen of ethnic communities settled in many a district of the country, especially in the hilly regions. One of the many such ethnic communities living in Bangladesh is the Urang community. It is worth mentioning here that the variation in the English spelling of the name of the community in question may be confusing as the word Urang is sometimes and in some documents spelt as Oraon, Uraon, Oran, and even Oram. This community is also known as the Kurukh tribe according to the mane of their hero-king Karakh. One, however, should

Corresponding E-mail: clickshibly@gmail.com
[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Economics and Social Sciences, Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Chattogram, Bangladesh
[2]Professor, Department of Basic Science and Language, Sylhet Agricultural University, Sylhet, Bangladesh
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of Bangla, Sylhet Government College, Sylhet, Bangladesh

remember that all these variations in the name and spelling of the Urang community refer to the same and one ethnic group that we have preferred to mention as the Urang community in this study.

Anthropologists opine that originally Urangs are Austric as a race and in terms of language they are Dravidians and that is why researchers often describe the Urangs as the descendants of Dravid-speaking Kurukha race. Though their ancestral home is in India, now they are found in neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It is not clear when the Urangs immigrated to Bangladesh but it is assumed that they entered into Bangladesh during the Mughal rule. Although the Urangs in Bangladesh are scattered across the country, the largest number of the Urangs are settled in greater Sylhet, particularly in Habiganj and Maulavaibazar. As per the Census Report of 1991, the number of Urangs in Bangladesh was 11,296.

Most of the ethnic communities living in Bangladesh are bilingual: they use their tribal mother tongue to communicate with the people who belong to the same tribe while they learn and use Bangla, most often the local Bangla dialect, as the lingua franca for intertribal communication and for communicating with mainstream Bangladeshi people. That said, it is not always possible to have a lingua franca for intertribal communication, especially when it comes to communicating with less progressed ethnic groups. In such a situation, usually an interpreter's help is sought. Furthermore, as a result of Christian missionary activities, a lot of people of many ethnic communities have converted to Christianity and as a result of this many of the ethnic people turn multilingual as they speak English too along with their ethnic mother tongue and Bangla. It should also be remembered that while only a few ethnic languages have still retained their original writing systems, for example, Chakma and Marma, many of the ethnic languages either have already lost their original written scripts, resulting in these languages' being spoken-only languages, or adopted scripts of other languages to write their own languages. However, the few ethnic communities that have preserved their original writing systems till date; it has been observed that the young generations of those communities are quite unfamiliar with the written scripts. This is due to the fact that the schools that the young generations of these ethnic communities went to, have been teaching students to read, write and speak only Bangla and English until recently. However, over the last few years, initiatives have been taken to preserve the written forms some of the dominant tribal languages through printing books in these languages that are being taught to school children.

With respect to the languages used by the Urangs, it is documented that the Urangs living in India and in other countries in Indian subcontinent use Sadri, a dialect of Hindi, as lingua franca. However, the Urangs living in Bangladesh are said to use Kurukh language as their mother tongue (see www.banglapedia.org). Regarding Kurukh, the mother tongue of the Urangs, it was usually written with the Devanagari alphabet until when Dr. Narayan Oraon decided to introduce a new script for his native language Kurukh. The script is known as Tolong Siki that was published and introduced to some schools in Jharkhand, a state in eastern India, in 1999 and officially recognized by the government of Jharkhand in 2007. Tolong Siki script is now promoted by Kurukh Literary Society and a few books and magazines have already been published in this script. Even it is taught is some schools in India. According to Omniglot, an online encyclopedia of writing systems and languages, there are some Kurukh speaking people in Bangladesh, along with many Urangs who speak Kurukh in some states of India and in some other countries in Indian subcontinent. An image of Tolong Siki, the alphabet that is used to write Kurukh, the mother tongue of the Urangs, is found on Omniglot's website. The Tolong Siki script is as follows.



Image 1: Tolong Siki alphabet that is used to write Kurukh language.
(Source: https://www.omniglot.com/writing/tolongsiki.htm)

Even though studies have been conducted on various aspects of the life of the Urangs, for example, their beliefs, religion, folklore, and socio-economic status, these studies either relate to the Urangs in general, i.e. the Urangs living in Indian subcontinent, or conducted earlier. Our extensive literature review indicates that no studies have been conducted so far on the language of the Urangs living in Bangladesh, especially in Sylhet.

2. Objectives

The current study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- To find out the language(s) used by the Urangs living in Bangladesh
- To know about the written script of the Urangs

3. Literature Review

One of the earliest literatures dealing with religious beliefs of the Urangs or Kurukhs was reviewed by Hahn (1900), a German Lutheran missionary working in Lohardaga, the heartland of Urangs in Chotanagpur, India, for 25 years and he wrote *Kurukh Grammar*. Subsequently a book entitled *Kunrukh Folk-lore in the Original* (Hahn, 1905), was published that contained folklores and myths of the Urangs. A critical text with translations and notes was later written by Grignard (1931), another European missionary, entitled as *Hahn's Oraon Folk-lore in the Original : A Critical Text with Translations and Notes* and it is very important for scholarly study and analysis of the religion and language of the Urangs.

As the present study was conducted in and around different tea gardens of Sylhet district, (mainly because the Urangs have been working and living for many generations in different tea estates of Sylhet) it is worthwhile to review literature pertaining to tea garden labourers. The findings of some studies show the sub-human life of tea workers both in terms of working environment, living

conditions and health and sanitation as most of tea workers live below the poverty line (Barkat, 2010) and their poor income (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2014; Majumder & Roy, 2012) often lead them to live without basic human rights. Labourers are to accommodate themselves in a small dilapidated house, sometimes with their pet animals (Das, Islam, & Zakirul, 2006; Majumder & Roy, 2012). Workers living in tea gardens are not facilitated with sanitary toilet rather majority of them are inured to use open place for excretion of faeces (Khan, 1991). High rate of illiteracy, ignorance, social exclusion, economic hardship etc. bound them to maintain traditional life without minimum opportunities (See Ahmad, Yasin, Rowshon, & Hoque, 2015; Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2014; Chowdhury, Hasan, & Karim, 2012; Kabir, 2007).

4. Methodology

The present study was conducted following mixed method research design conducted from November to December, 2018 from inside and outside the tea garden areas near Sylhet city. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with 64 respondents who were selected randomly. Some of the collected data were analyzed quantitatively while the rest was analyzed qualitatively. The authors themselves visited the area, collected data and mingled with the common people of the community to observe the languages the community used. Since huge number of Urangs work in tea gardens, this study focused predominantly on the tea garden workers. Field visits were carried out to different tea gardens in Sylhet to talk to various respondents.

Additionally, a few undergraduate students of Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University who belong to different ethnic communities living in Chattogram Hill Tracts were interviewed to get an overall idea about similarities as well as differences among and coexistence of different ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Demographic Description of the Urang Participants

Out of the total 64 respondents interviewed, 65% percent were male and 35% were female. In the past they worked only in tea gardens as wage labourer and lived inside or outside the tea garden. They had no land of their own but nowadays few of them had settled outside tea gardens as well.

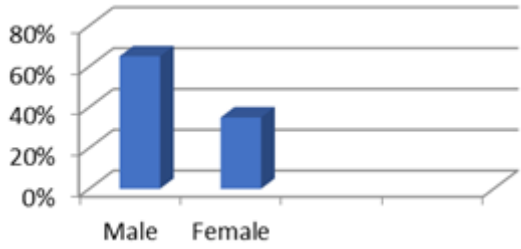


Figure-1: Gender of the respondents

Whereas previously most of the Urangs used to work in tea gardens only, nowadays, a good number of them were engaged in different types of professions. For example, some of them were found to work as electricians, some as masons, even some were found to work in private and government offices.

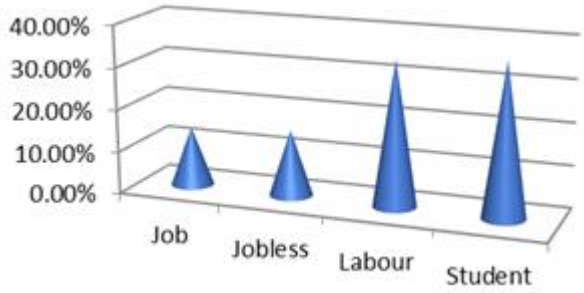


Figure-2: Professions of the respondents

As the chart shows, out of the 64 respondents 14.06% were in various jobs, 15.62% were jobless, 34.37% were labourers and 35.93 % were students. It is clear from the chart that the rate of literacy among the Urangs is good and on the increase.

5.2. Language

Upon asked if they had any writing systems for their original languages, out of the total, 37.50% said that they had their own writing systems. On the other hand, 62.50% opined that they had no written scripts. However, none of them was able to write any words in Kurukh language though Kurukh has its own writing system. The Urang children were observed to speak Kurukh at home and they were used to using Bangla at schools and outside home. The older people were seen to use Sadri language. They said that they were used to using both Sadri and Kurukh for intra-communal communications. Since the community originates from Nagpur of India, both Sadri and Kurukh are their mother tongues. As the Urangs have been living in Bangladesh for long, all of them were found to be fluent speakers of Bangla and they said were used to communicating through Bangla outside their community. Even though the respondents had shown strong feelings towards standard Bangla, they were not found to be fluent in Sylheti, the local dialect of greater Sylhet. At the time of this study, all the respondents were observed to be capable of speaking Kurukh. However, the young generation of the community had been found to be interested in learning English which is taught as compulsory subject at schools. Some words in Kurukh were found to be similar to those in the local Bangla dialect. For example, some names of ornaments such as tikli, bala, payra, bali and kanpasha etc. are the same both in Kurukh and Bangla. Many words relating to relationships were also found to be common to both languages: for example, ma (mother), baba (father), mama (uncle), bhagina (nephew) etc.

English	Bangla	Urang Dialect
What is your name?	Tomer nam ki?	Tor nam ki?
Where are you going?	Tumi kothai jaiteso?	Tay kaha jathis?
What class do you read in?	Tumi kon classe paro?	Toy kon classe parishla?
How many brothers and sisters do you have?	Tomer koy bhai bon?	Toni koy bhai bon?
What does your father do?	Tomer baba ki kore?	Tor bap kikorela?
A Puja will be held at my house tomorrow.	Kal amader barite puja hobe.	Kail hamni ghore puja hoy.
You will meet me tomorrow.	Tumi agamikal amer sathe dekha korbe.	Toy agamikal amer sathe dekha korish.
It is difficult to work at tea garden.	Cha bagane kaj kora khubi kothin.	Cha bagane kaj kora bejan kothin.
I want to succeed in life.	Ami jibone unnoti korte chai.	Ham jibone unnoti korek khojila.
I will go to Baluchor Bazar.	Ami Balucor bazare jabo.	Ham Baluchor bazare jabo.
What does your father do?	Tomer baba ki kore?	Tor bap kikorela?

(Table: 1 An interview with Sumon Urang, a member of the Urang community)

The Urang people who were engaged in various jobs were found to be interested in learning and speaking standard Bangla. They wanted their children to be fluent both in English and Bangla. However, in the survey area nobody was found who was able to write kurukh language.

5.3. Language related to Agriculture

During the study, the people of the Urang community were shown images of some of the agricultural tools and asked what they called those tools in their language. The following chart contains the tools shown to the respondents.

English: Plow
Urang: Langol



English: Hand Fork
Urang: Akhashi



English: Axe
Urang: Tabol



English: Hoe
Urang: Nirani



English: Hand hoe
Urang: Hat nirani



English: Hammer
Urang: Hatura



English: Sickle
Urang: Kaste



English: Shovel
Urang: Belcha



English: Spade
Urang: Kodal



English: Scrapper
Urang: Khurpi



English: Sprayer
Urang: Chitanor jontro



English: Watering bucket
Urang: Pani chitanor patro



6. Conclusion

The study can be concluded here by saying that the people of the Urang community who have been living in Sylhet for many years are hard-working. Though the previous generations of the community used to work and live in tea gardens, with the passage of time a lot of Urang people are now engaged in various jobs outside ranging from wage earning as day labourer to office work. For communication, they use their tribal mother tongue Kurukh and some of them speak Sadri for intra-communal communication while they use Bangla for communicating with mainstream Bangladeshi people. As almost none of them know how to write their mother tongue Kurukh, mainly due to the fact that they hardly have any books written in this language, this language can be considered as an endangered one. Initiatives should be taken to revive this language by printing books and periodicals in it and by teaching it to the people of the community. The result of the study has implications for socio-economic and linguistic studies of ethnic communities living in Bangladesh.

References

Ahmad, I., Yasin, M., Rowshon, A., & Hoque, A. K. M. R. (2015). Study on socio-economic and educational condition of tea worker at sylhet in Bangladesh. *Journal of Tea Science Research*, *5*.

Ahmed, S., & Chowdhury, S. R. (2014). The rights of tea workers of Bangladesh in the light of existing labor laws and standards: a study on selected tea estates of Sylhet district. *International Journal of Research in Commerce, IT & Management*, *4*(7).

Barkat, A. (2010). Assessment of the situation of children and women in the tea gardens of Bangladesh, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Department of UNICEF-BCO. *Human Development Research Center, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dhaka: September*.

Chowdhury, M., Hasan, G. M. J., & Karim, A. (2012). A Study on Existing WATSAN Condition of Two Tea Gardens in Maulvibazar. *Journal of Environmental Science and Natural Resources*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3329/jesnr.v4i2.10125

Das, T. K., Islam, S., & Zakirul, H. (2006). Human rights of the tea gardeners: case study of selected gardens in Sylhet. *Asian Affairs*, *28*(3), 25–39.

Grignard, A. (1931). *Hahn's Oraon folk-lore in the original : a critical text with translations and notes.* Patna: Government Printing Press. Retrieved June 05, 2019 from https://www.worldcat.org/title/hahns-oraon-folk-lore-in-the-original-a-critical-text-with-translations-and-notes/oclc/652176150&referer=brief_results

Hahn, F. (1900). *Kurukh Grammar*. Calcutta: Bengal secretariat press.

Hahn, F. (1905). *Kurukh folk-lore, in the original.* Calcutta: The Bengal secretariat Book depot. Retrieved May 29, 2019 from https://www.worldcat.org/title/kurukh-folk-lore-in-the-original/oclc/2892856?referer=di&ht=edition

Kabir, M. (2007). Tea Plantation workers and its working circumstances: A micro-level study. *The Economic Journal of Nepal*, *30*, 184–194.

Khan, M. R. (1991). Primary health care status of the tea estate population, a study conducted for the Bangladesh tea rehabilitation project. *Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)*.

Majumder, S. C., & Roy, S. C. (2012). Socio-economic conditions of tea plantation workers in Bangladesh: a case study on sreemongal. *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, *I*(X).