

Community Displacement and Language Shift (In Reference to the Khamyang Community of Assam)

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Abstract:

Language extinction has become a global crisis at the present time. Linguists and sociologists across the world have shown concern about this matter. A report says that every fourteen days, a language vanishes. However, language extinction does not always mean that native speakers of the languages are dead. Language Shifting is another cause of language extinction. The root cause of language shift is mainly discussed from a social perspective. Language endangerment may result from external forces, such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. Thus, negative attitudes towards one's own language may be an internal cause of a community. Sociolinguists have found that various factors seem to correlate with language shifting and diminishing in size. Voluntary or forced migration to a location outside their traditional territory has been a major cause for a community to change their language. Generally, minority people who migrate to other places sooner or later shift to the new dominant language. The present paper is a study on a small minority group, named Khamyang, living in Upper Assam, to discuss how the displacement compelled them to shift their language.

1.0. Introduction:

Language is an integral part of society and an individual's identity. Language is the medium of expressing people's experiences and wisdom from their primary stage. This vehicle transmits and perpetuates wisdom. Each language has a unique view of the world, belief system, and literature, whether written or oral.

Language loss refers to the loss of identity and a unique culture. With this, we lose the wisdom and experience that culminate in thousands of years. Each ethnic group shares a set of values that mark the membership of a specific group. As long as people adhere to these values, they are considered members of a group. However, when they abandon these values, they have no reason to call themselves members of that specific ethnic group.

A report says that all over the world, about 90% of languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the century. It is also worth mentioning that approximately 96% of world languages are spoken by 3% of the world's people. Of the six thousand languages in the world, at least 50% of the world's languages are losing their speakers. (Language Vitality and Endangerment: UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages)

Many factors contribute to this condition, such as the small number of speakers, their age, whether children are using the language or not, the use of other languages regularly in various cultural settings, feelings of ethnic identity and attitude about their language in general, the urban drift of the population, governmental apathy, the language used in education, as well as economic intrusion and exploitation. The language may

also lack prestige and passionate support from its speakers. Due to the decreasing number of speakers, many languages are on the verge of losing its identity falling out of use. If a language loses all its native speakers, it becomes extinct.

2.0 Language Shift:

A language extinction does not necessarily mean that the people who speak it have all died. More often, speakers may shift to different languages over one or more generations. The root cause of the language shift is mainly discussed from a social perspective. Social behaviour and speakers' attitudes towards their languages and domains of language used in the community, as well as other macro social factors, are mainly responsible for language shift.

Some of the significant causes of language shifts are as follows:

1. Parents push children to learn prestigious languages thinking that they can learn only one language well
2. Due to natural or man-made disaster (sudden shift)
3. Migration outside the traditional territory (planned shift)
4. Use of a second language in school-causing widespread shift
5. National language policy (causing some but not universal shift)
6. Other factors causing language shift

Aim of the Paper:

Sociolinguists have found various other factors that seem to correlate with language shifting and diminishing size. Voluntary or forced migration to a location outside their traditional territory has been a cause. This paper discusses how forced migration and displacement can push language toward endangerment. Of course, no single factor alone can be used to assess a language's vitality and state of endangerment. For this, a very small community, called Tai-Khamyang, is selected for discussion.

3.0. Tai-Khamyang

Linguistically, Khamyangs belong to a Tai-speaking group and are Buddhists of the Theravada School. The 'Tai' is a genetic branch of Mongoloid population of Asia. The Tai people are now mainly habitants of Assam in the west to *Kwangsi* and *Hainan* in the east, and from the interior of *Yunnan* in the north to the southernmost extremity of Thailand (Siam) in the south. According to *Ahom* history, the Khamyang (Nora) people had a kingdom near *Mungkong* and *Maunmit* of the *Patkai* range and it was known as 'Khamjang'.¹(1968:1)) In the Tai language the 'y' is pronounced as 'i', so, the word 'Khamjang' becomes khamyang in pronunciation. The Tai Khamyangs, after crossing over the *Patkai*, got divided in to two groups namely the 'Man Nam' and 'Man-Noi', 'Man Nam' (man= village, and 'nam' means water or river) means low land or riverside dwellers and 'Man-Noi' ('Noi' means high land) means 'highland dwellers'.²(Ibid-1)

The Singphows Kingdom is located near Khamjang. Singphows were stronger than Khamyangs in terms of power and number. They were threatened to attack by the Singphows. The Khamyang group of *Khamjang* was numerically smaller, so they were compelled to move to another place. Thus, the Khamyang people searched for safer places to live in. Incidentally, the Khamyangs came into contact with the Khamtis of *Namsum* (*Tengapani*) and *Mungteola* (*Sadiya*). Khamtis invited the Khamyangs to dwell with them. The Khamyangs inhabited with Khamtis for four years. However, they did not stay with them

for long periods of time. Thus, after four years, in 1784, they entered the Ahom Kingdom. The 'Man Nam' group of the Khamyangs sought support of Gaurinath Singha, the Ahom king to stay permanently in the Ahom kingdom. At that time, Gaurinath Singha refused to help the Khamyang people because of the Mowamaria rebel. Khamyang decides to return to Mungteola. In 1794, they returned to the Ahom kingdom, and requested through Purnananda Buragohain to allow them to inhabit permanently in the Ahom kingdom. In this way, they settled in *Dhali*.

After the advent of the British period in Assam, William Bruce, head of the Assam Tea Company, wanted to establish a Tea Estate in *Dhali*. The Khamyangs of *Dhali* were forced to leave again. They went to the southwest side and established a new village called *Bargaon*.

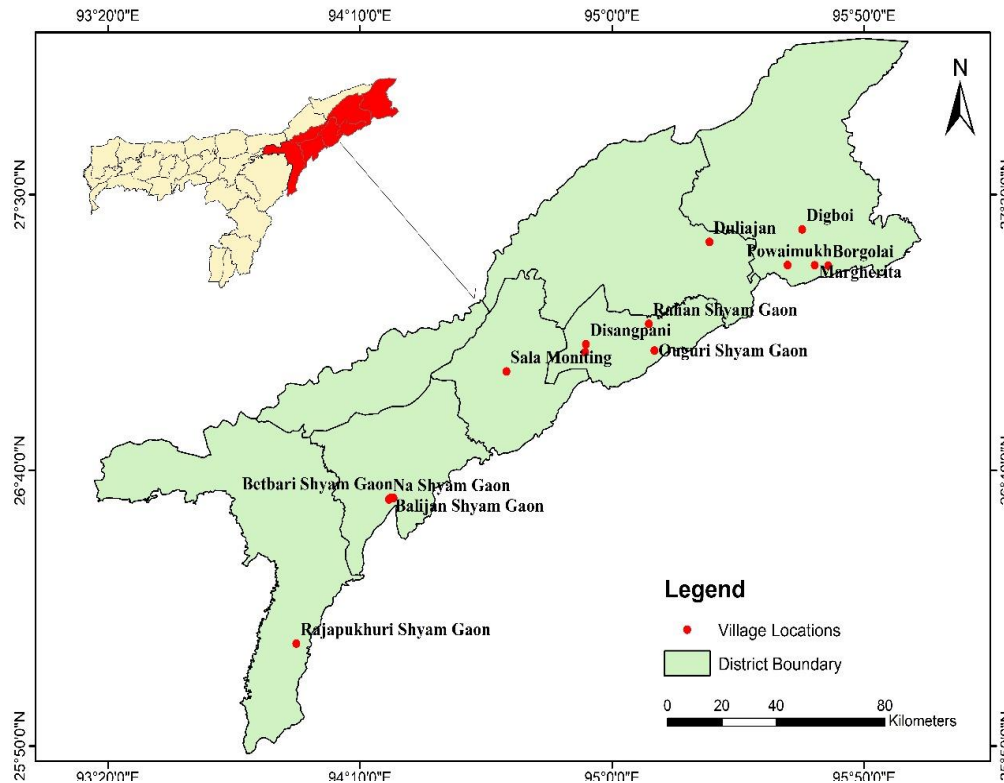
In the meantime, some other Khamyang people came from *Mungteola* and joined the earlier group in *Bar Gaon*. Unfortunately, the people were infected by Haiza, and about half of them were perished. This dreadful situation compelled them to leave the village. They went to the southwest of *Bar Gaon* and established a new village called *Pani Nora Gaon*. However, they did not stay for a long time at *Pani Nora Gaon* because of their internal problems. They established three new villages in the District of Jorhat, namely *Na Shyam Gaon*, *Balijan Gaon* and *Betabari Shyam Gaon*. In 1836, they established *Disangpani Gaon*, and in 1868, *Salapathar Gaon*, both in the Sivasagar district. It all happened due to the increasing number in population. For the same reason, some of the Khamyang people established new villages named *Rahan Gaon* in Sivasagar and *Ek Nang Rajapukhuri Gaon* in Golaghat District.

The second section of the Khamyang group 'Man-noi' came to the Ahom kingdom during the later part of the *Mowamaria* rebellion. In January 1839, the Khamtis attacked the Britishers and killed Colonel White along with 80 soldiers. The Khamti people advised Khamyangs to leave the place for security reasons. Thus, the 'Man-Noi' group crossed the Brahmaputra and came to Dibrugarh. They established a village named *Khanikar Gaon* in Dibrugarh District and lived there for about 60 (sixty) years. Next, they then went to *Jokai* and spent some time there. In 1922, they shifted again and started living on the bank of the *Patkai River*, adjacent to *Makumkilla* in Margherita. During World War II, British military forces evicted them from that place. In 1946, after the Second World War, the displaced 'Man-Noi' group of Khamyang established a new village named *Pawaimukh* near the *Buridihing River*, where they are currently living.

At Present, people of the Tai-Khamyang group are found primarily in the Districts of Tinsukia, Golaghat, Sivasagar and Jorhat in Assam and adjacent parts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are distributed mainly in 14 villages in Assam. The villages were as follows:

1. Golaghat District: Rajapukhuri Shyam Gaon
2. Tinsukia District:
 - a. Margherita
 - b. Duliajan
 - c. Digboi
 - d. Pawaimukh; and
 - e. Borgolai
3. Sivasagar District:
 - a. Salapathar Shyam Gaon
 - b. Rahan Shyam Gaon
 - c. Sala Moniting
 - d. Disangpani
 - e. Ouguri Shyam Gaon
4. Jorhat District:
 - a. Balijan Shyam Gaon.

- b. Na-Shyam Gaon
- c. Betabari Shyam Gaon.



The speakers of Khamyang exist only in *Pawaimukh Village*. This village is situated in the subdivision of Margherita in Tinsukia district. Khamyang people in other villages now use ‘Asamiya’ regularly. In *Pawaimukh* alone, the older people in Khamyang use the Khamyang language in a very limited situation. The younger generation of Khamyang, even in *Pawaimukh*, does not know their language. The younger generation used *Asamiya* in their regular conversations. Only kinship words from Khamyang are used.

4.0. Causes of language Shift: From Khamyang to Assamese

Generally, minority people migrate to other places sooner or later, shifting to the dominant language of that place. This is a gradual process; it does not occur overnight, and it follows certain patterns. The fact that the original language would become weaker over time and might become extinct is not caused by the low proficiency of its speakers, but by the fact that there is an increased use of the new language. Over the period of time, new languages have been increasingly used. Language skills in the first language are affected by a decrease in their use.

The original language can be retained as long as it is used by the community at home and by their families. Once the new language enters at the home, there is hardly any chance for the original language to survive. The Khamyang people were scattered across different places in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, owing to their displacement and natural migration. Therefore, their intra-community contact again weakened the areas inhabited by them (Golaghat, Sivasagar, Jorhat, and Tinsukia districts), which were mainly dominated by Assamese-speaking people. Assamese served as the language of communication among different language groups. They used Khamyang to communicate within the group. Outside, however, they had to communicate with other people. Therefore, they had to speak *Asamiya* in order to communicate

with others. Language death only occurs when intra-ethnic communication disappears, and, as mentioned before, this can normally happen only when the group itself dissolves because of demographic causes. The institution of marriage is an important agent of socialization, and hence intra-community marriages can serve as a tool for the retention of the linguistic and cultural identity of a man and can inspire change in the use of language patterns among speakers of minority languages and their children. This means that the likelihood of preserving a minority language is greater in marriages among individuals who speak the same indigenous language than in situations where spouses speak different languages. In the case of Khamyang, mixed marriages within the Tai community were common. It is also observed that most families do not use Khamyang at home and is no longer learned as a first language. A negative attitude towards their language was mainly responsible for this. This demographic situation may be responsible for the same. The non-use of a minority language as a medium of learning in schools creates a negative attitude among native speakers towards their inherited language.

Language is an important marker of ethnic identity. In the case of the Tai group (except Ahom), religious identity was stronger than language identity. They belonged to the Buddhist *Therabadi* School. I have already shown the places that Khamyangs mainly inhabited. The lack of close contact within the community and different cultural phenomena restricts them from communicating within the community in their own language. Other Tai groups, such as Tai-Aiton, Tai-Phake, and Tai-Tuning, Tai-Khamti have their own languages, and they also use *Asamiya* for intercommunity communication. It generally occurs when a negative attitude develops towards their inherited language, which gradually induces them to shift to a widely used language.

Active and prolific production of reading materials, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, is useful for a language. Similarly, new domains of the language with the changing world help community speakers. Khamyang has its own scripts that are mainly used in religious writing. A writing system for a language may bring pride to the language community. However, so far as the Khamyang language is concerned, nothing has yet come out in printed form, and the fact that the members of the Khamyang community seem unconcerned about the need to obtain literacy and have their intellectual outputs in print. The language is inactive and not used in any new domain.

One important point is the tendency to merge with the local dominant language from a wider perspective. This tendency is generally observed in the minority groups. The numerical weakness of a language community and the absence of a suitable ambience are the main reasons for this.

5.0. Thus, Khamyang is critically endangered. Table 1, shows the degree of endangerment.

Factors Rating Comments

Factors	Rating	Comments
F1: Transmission	0	The language is no longer being learned as a mother tongue by children at home
F2: Number of total speakers	-	Only 37 native speakers
F3: Ratio of Speakers	-	-
F4: Language domains	1	The domains are limited/ dwindling.
F5. New domains	0	Khamyang is not used in any new domain.

F6. Education	0	The language is not used in school.
F7. Policies	0	No such policies have ever adopted.
F8. Attitude	0	People are not concerned about their language loss
F9. Documentation	0	A very little process has been seen.

Table 1: Assessing the language vitality of Khamyang.

The results point out that Khamyang is moribund and highly endangered.

Conclusion:

The sociolinguistic effects of migration stretch to the extent of making significant impact on intra-community relationships. Generally, it seems that ‘Different sub-groups of the population have different migration propensities, and there is a relatively small group which continues to move frequently and a larger group who rarely moves.’ If both the communities are equally strong, and there is no third language to communicate then there is a chance for pidgin language. If a larger group culturally and linguistically dominates the area, social factors urge the minority people to assimilate with larger groups then, they have no way to sustain with their native language.

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