



## Primary Education of Rajbangsi Children in Cooch Behar and NEP 2020

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### ABSTRACT

*According to Linguistic Human Rights, every individual has the right to express themselves in their mother tongue. The first learning in schools should help students discover the world of knowledge through a language or mother tongue that they understand best to help them develop their linguistic, social and cultural identity. In a larger scenario, this could help cope with the increasing dropout cases and prevent linguistic, social and cultural deprivation.*

*Preserving linguistic and cultural diversity is our duty towards humanity. This research primarily focuses on the present scenario of pre-primary and primary students of Rajbangsi speakers in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. By surveying the adequateness of the steps taken to preserve this mother tongue of the Bengali language, this paper would also delve into the critical role that NEP 2020 could play to help preserve, exercise and spread this language.*

### 1.0 Introduction

Language helps to unify people by communicating our thoughts. However, language can also work as a tool to discriminate against people. Children at an early age are very prone to their surrounding environment. To help students create a better understanding and playful happy reading experience, NEP (National Education Policy 2020) focuses on learning through mother tongue/ home language/ local language to help children develop their linguistic identity and recognise the rich cultural heritage of their language community.

People belonging to Rajbangsi speaking community for a long time are deprived of this facility of learning through their mother tongue, especially in academics, making their language and

linguistic identity vulnerable, as people are restricted to use their mother tongue in academic spaces, workplaces, and even at marketplaces. This linguistic discrimination discourages them from embracing their linguistic identity and forces them to identify with the majority speaking, Standard literary variety of Bengali (S.B.). Linguistic discrimination poses many threats to the Rajbangsi speaking community and its language. In academics, they struggle to cope with the medium of instruction, thus increasing more boundaries towards understanding the subject. In some places, using their mother tongue in the classroom is considered a non-standard practice. As a result, to make children comfortable with the prevalent variety, parents also try to communicate in Standard literary Bengali variety, even at home. People are discouraged from using Rajbangsi for communicating in public places, such as in marketing areas. This practice leads to a feeling of social and linguistic depravedness. Thus, this growing mentality should be given proper attention before it poses a threat of language endangerment, as the younger generation is losing interest to use their mother tongue and trying to adapt to the language of academics.

To help children of the Rajbangsi speaking community overcome this situation and build a healthy learning environment, the State Government, with the help of their respective Kamtapuri Bhasa Academy, is preparing textbooks for pre-primary and primary classes of all subjects in their mother tongue, which are still awaiting their approval. This research aims to find out the present pedagogical environment of the Rajbangsi speaking children in Cooch Behar and how the NEP could help in preserving this mother tongue of the Bengali language.

## 2.0 Aims of the Research

This fieldwork aimed to find out the academic environment to which Rajbangsi speaking children are exposed. The academic environment could influence their preference to use and cultivate their mother tongue, as the younger generation plays a crucial role in carrying forward the linguistic heritage. This also reveals the approach and tendencies of the adult generations, especially parents, towards their mother tongue. Thus, it could help identify the problems, discover how helpful the measures were taken so far, and how the NEP 2020 could help save and flourish this mother tongue of Bengali.

## 3.0 Research Questions

Keeping in view the research aims, the following research questions are examined.

- I. How cooperative is the teaching environment in pre-primary and primary schools of the Rajbangsi region in using mother tongue for pedagogical purposes, according to the Rajbangsi speaking children?
- II. What is the preference for communication at home and other non-academic spaces?
- III. Are the children encouraged by parents, teachers and classmates to use their mother tongue?

- IV. What is the emerging pattern of language use in this area among Rajbangsi speaking community?
- V. What could be NEP's (2020) role in promoting education in this mother tongue?

#### 4.0 Research Methodology

Fieldwork for this research is conducted in the semirural areas of Cooch Behar of West Bengal. Participants for this research are students, parents, teachers and academicians. With the help of a questionnaire and a few personal interviews, informants from the Rajbangsi speaking community are enquired about their preferences. Their views are then collected and analysed to find out the pedagogical situations of Rajbangsi children at pre-primary and primary Gades in the schools of this area.

The pattern of data representation structure is given below:

- Line-1 Standard Bangla variety in IPA (SB)
- Line-2 Cooch Behar variety in IPA
- Line-3 Glossing level
- Line-4 Running text in English language

The complete instance of the above structure for the sentence "I eat" is given below:

(1)	SB variety	ami	kʰai
	Cooch Behar	mui	kʰaŋ
		I.1SG.NOM	eat-INDEF-PRES-1P-SG
		I eat.	

#### 5.0 The Rajbangsi Variety

##### 5.1 Rajbangsi Speaking Community and Rajbangsi language variety

According to the 2001 census of India, with 30,551 speakers in West Bengal and a total of 82,570 speakers in India, Rajbangsi is considered as another important mother tongue of the Bengali language. Rajbangsi variety is also known as Kamtapuri or Kamatapuri. Rajbangsi is spoken in the northern districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, West Dinajpur, Malda and Darjeeling of West Bengal, and in some parts of Assam. Rajbangsi is part of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. However, it also shares common features with the North-Eastern dialects of Bengali language, and it is also influenced by the Tibeto-Burman languages such as Rabha, Koch etc.

## 5.2 Language Family: relation from the origin of Rajbangsi

Regarding the origin of the Rajbangsi variety, two theories are prevalent. According to one theory, during the reign of Mahapadma Nanda around 366- 338 B.C., a branch of Aryans was driven out of the Magadha, who later took shelter in the Eastern region. Their language came to be known as Rajbangsi.

Another theory directly links Rajbangsi to the Tibeto-Burman group. According to this theory, the Rajbangsi variety was accepted as the lingua-franca by the Koch kings after they invaded North Bengal and Assam in the 16th century (Linguistic Survey of India: West Bengal, 2011). Instead of the ongoing search of its proper origin, Rajbangsi is generally considered belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family.

## 5.3 Socio-Linguistic Information

As stated earlier, Rajbangsi variety is the second mother tongue of the Bengali language. Kamtapuri Bhasa Academy, in collaboration with the State Government, has prepared textbooks for pre-primary and primary schools in Rajbangsi medium this year. These books are available for classes one to four. Based on the reviews and responses from the Rajbangsi community students', books for other classes may be published in future.

The literary variety of Rajbangsi mother tongue that could be recognised and understood by the whole community is not available yet. Thus, the textbooks are prepared based on the Rajbangsi variety, primarily spoken in the Cooch Behar region for pedagogical purposes. Rajbangsi, as a member of the Bengali language, follows the Bengali script, which has evolved from the Brahmi script.

## 5.4 Difference between Rajbangsi and Bengali

Rajbangsi is considered one of the two mother tongues of the Bengali language, as instead of sharing a common origin, linguistically, it has unique features.

- The significant differences, which a child has to overcome for understanding the Standard literary Bengali variety (SB), come from the fact that Rajbangsi has grammaticalised number system. This marvellous feature is not witnessed in any other varieties of the Bengali language. Thus, in pre-primary or primary standards, children must cope with this vast grammatical difference to understand any basic Bengali sentence.

For example-

(2)	SB variety	ami	k <sup>h</sup> ai
	Cooch Behar	mui	k <sup>h</sup> aŋ
		I.1SG.NOM	eat-INDEF-PRES-1SG
		I eat.	

(3)	SB variety	amra	k <sup>h</sup> ai
	Cooch Behar	hamra	k <sup>h</sup> ai
		I.1PL.NOM	eat-INDEF-PRES-1PL
		We eat.	

[PRO 'pronoun'; 1 '1st person'; V 'verb'; INDEF 'indefinite/ simple'; PRES 'present'; SG 'singular'; PL 'plural']

Here the verb agrees with its subject and changes according to its number.

- Rajbangsi verb forms are quite different from the Standard literary Bengali variety of Kolkata.
- Rajbangsi pronouns are also very different from the Standard literary Bengali variety.

For example-

(4)	SB variety	apni	(5)	SB variety	je
	Cooch Behar	tomra		Cooch Behar	unæe
		you.2/3FSG			(s)he.3SG
		you.honorific			(s)he

- Vocabulary difference poses another hurdle to the children.

#### Rajbangsi written text sample

(6)	SB variety	ʃond <sup>h</sup> a	utr-e	ʃay
	Cooch Behar	ʃoinḍa	ut <sup>h</sup> tur-ia	ʃay
		Evening.NOM	set-INF	go-INDEF-PRES-3SG
		The evening sets in.		
(7)	SB variety	hollaḍ <sup>h</sup> oni	bari-ṭe	eʃe
	Cooch Behar	hollaḍ <sup>h</sup> oni	bari-ṭ	aʃi
		Holladhoni.3SG.NOM	house-LOC	come.CONJP
		ḍæk <sup>h</sup> e	bari	p <sup>h</sup> āka
		ḍæk <sup>h</sup> e	bari	p <sup>h</sup> āka
		ḍæk <sup>h</sup> -INDEF-PAST-3NSG	house.NOM	empty.ADJ.NOM
				keo
				nei
				kan
				anyone.3SG.NOM
				NEG
				Returning home, Holladhoni sees that the house is empty. Nobody is there.

(8)	SB variety	ḍaoo	oi.ḍike	baganbari
	Cooch Behar	k <sup>h</sup> olambariṭ	oḍi	baganbari
		front courtyard.LOC	in that side.PP	graden house.LOC

*kʰane dʰækʰe*                      *onek*                      *lok*  
*kʰanoŋ dʰæke*                      *mæla*                      *lok*  
 CLAS see-INDEF-PRES-3SG    many.ADJ              people.3PL.NOM  
*ʃɔro hoe-cʰ-Ø-e*  
*ʃɔro hoi-c-Ø-e*  
 gather be-PER-PERS-3PL

In the open place of the old garden house, he sees that many people have gathered.

- (9) SB variety    *holla dʰoni*                      *picʰon*                      *tʰeke*  
 Cooch Behar    *holla dʰoni*                      *pacʰ-pak*                      *tʰaki*  
                     Holladhoni.NOM              behind.LOC              from.PP  
*ũki.mere*                      *dʰækʰe*  
*ʃiŋri.ʃiŋri*                      *dʰækʰe*  
 peek.ADV                      stare.INDEF-PRES-3SG  
 Holladhoni, peeks from behind.

- (10) SB variety    *maloti-r*                      *bʰaoyia*                      *gʌner*                      *sur*  
 Cooch Behar    *maloti-r*                      *bʰaoyia*                      *gʌner*                      *sur*  
                     Maloti-POSS.GEN              Bhaoyia.ADJ              song's.GEN              melody .ACC  
*cʰara*                      *onno*                      *kono*                      *tu*                      *ʃabɔo*  
*cʰara*                      *oinno*                      *kono*                      *tu*                      *ʃabɔo*  
 except.INDEC                      any.ADJ other.ADJ              slight.ADJ              noise.ACC  
*ʃona ʃay*                      *nʌ*  
*ʃuna ʃay*                      *nʌ*  
 heard be-INDEF-PERS-3SG    NEG  
 Except from Maloti's melody of Bhaoyia song, no other noise could be heard.

- (11) SB variety    *aʃte.aʃte*                      *ʃonaki*                      *pʰulʃi*  
 Cooch Behar    *aʃte.aʃte*                      *ʃonaki*                      *pʰulʃi*  
                     Gradually.ADV    Jonaki.3SG.NOM              Phulti.3SG.NOM  
*ar*                      *nɔgen*                      *mɔnce*                      *aʃe*  
*ar*                      *nɔgen*                      *mɔncotɔ*                      *aʃe*  
 and.CONJ                      Nagen.3SG.NOM              on the stage.LOC              come-INDEF-PRES-3PL  
 Gradually Jonaki, Phulti and Nagen come on the stage.

- (12) SB variety    *ʃarao*                      *gan*                      *ta*                      *dʰɔre*  
 Cooch Behar    *umurao*                      *gan*                      *kʰan*                      *dʰɔre*  
                     they.3PL.NOM    song.ACC              DET              do-INDEF-PRES-3PL  
 They start to sing.

This previous sample text, is taken from the short story collection, 'Dhuplung-Dhaplang' written in Rajbangsi variety. (Ray, 2016).

#### **6.0 NEP 2020 on Mother Tongue Education: what is new?**

Acknowledging the importance of mother tongue in building the nontrivial and fundamental concepts, NEP continues to emphasise mother tongue or home language teaching. Home language could be similar to mother tongue or refer to a language 'spoken by the local communities'. Public and private schools are instructed to use home language/ mother tongue/ local language/ regional language as the medium of instruction 'until Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8', wherever possible. Encouraging publication of high quality textbooks in home language/ mother tongue/ local language/ regional language, NEP hopes to bridge the gaps between the language spoken by the child and the medium of instruction. Teachers are also encouraged to use a bilingual approach where teaching-learning materials are unavailable.

These innovative and constructive education policies could help develop Rajbangsi as a medium of education and promote the use of Rajbangsi variety among the community.

#### **7.0 Analysis**

Based on the responses by the informants, it is found that for academics, Standard literary Bengali variety is the preferred variety. According to the informants, children are not directly prevented from using their mother tongue, but they are also not encouraged to use that variety. It is stated that even when teachers are enquired in Rajbangsi, they always respond in the Standard literary Bengali variety (S.B.). Even in case of difficulty in understanding, teachers do not prefer to use Rajbangsi in a classroom, although Rajbangsi is another mother of the Bengali language (Bengali is another mother tongue), and children have the right to learn in the medium of their mother tongue.

A graduate student recollecting her school days reported that in school with Rajbangsi speaking children, they preferred to use Rajbangsi variety, but for non-Rajbangsi speakers, they used the S.B. variety. However, the scenario is different in the case of children who are in the primary section now. According to them and their parents, Rajbangsi is avoided not only among classmates but also at home. Parents encourage S.B. variety at home to make their children comfortable in that variety to reduce the burden of understanding a subject through an alien medium, especially at an early age. In public places, they mostly prefer to use the S.B. variety to communicate with non-Rajbangsi speakers.

It is evident from fieldwork data that, at ground level, Rajbangsi as mother tongue is not encouraged to be used, especially in academics. The use of mother tongue for primary education is

still at an experimental level. The NEP 2020 guidelines could help change this situation by focusing on the use of the mother tongue/ home language/ local language as the medium of learning until Grade 5 for both public and private sectors. It could make learning an enjoyable process, even where books are unavailable. Thus, the implementation of NEP 2020 could greatly help Rajbangsi speaking students.

## 8.0 Conclusion

Through this research, it is found that the use of Rajbangsi as a mother tongue at pre-primary and primary levels is still at an early stage. Various factors are responsible for this situation. First, according to the West Bengal Board of Primary Education curriculum handbook, teachers are instructed to make children learn to shift from his/ her home language to the 'standard' language. This contradicts the Linguistic Human Rights and the New Education Policy (2020). To help children learn to be able to shift between two varieties or languages is in practice a difficult task, especially for a child. Thus, the mother tongue gets neglected in the process. Lack of teaching-learning materials in this medium is another big hurdle for teachers and students. Finally, the preference of using S.B. variety among parents discourages the use of the Rajbangsi variety.

The present steps taken by the Government are showing a ray of hope in changing the scenario. NEP's mother tongue policy could genuinely encourage the Rajbangsi community students to appreciate their mother tongue and help to carry forward their rich linguistic heritage.

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## 10.0 Appendix 1

### Questionnaire



1. In which mother tongue children are taught in (Bengali medium) schools?
2. Among classmates, which is the most commonly used language?
3. Does the use of Standard literary Bengali variety of Kolkata in academics hinder their understanding of the subjects?
4. Are the children prevented from using their mother tongues in schools?
5. Are the children encouraged to use their mother tongue in schools?
6. Which language do children and parents prefer to use at home?
7. In public places, which language is preferred?

### 11.0 Authors Biographical Note

Reti Sarkar is presently a doctoral fellow from Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is a language and linguistic enthusiast and loves finely crafted literature. From Jadavpur University, she has completed her post-graduation in Linguistics. Her current research area is core linguistics.