

An Ethnolinguistic Study of Koch

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Abstract

The present paper aims at providing a preliminary description of the endangered linguistic identity of the Koch community of West Bengal through historical point of view. According to UNESCO (ISO 639-3), this is a severely endangered language in India. Koch consists of an indigenous community in the northern part of West Bengal. Historically major population of Koch community was distributed around different regions of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and the plains areas of Darjeeling district and Cooch Behar. Other than North Bengal, they are now living at Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Kamrup, Shonitpur and Darrang districts of Assam; and West Garo-Hills district of Meghalaya and Bangladesh. They are also scattered in a small number almost in all other districts of Assam and six other states of North Eastern India. The 2011 census of India put the number of speakers at 31,119. There are many debates on the origin; ethnic identity of the Koch. Amidst all these debates, it is agreed by most of the scholars, and historians that the Koch originated from Koch, a tribal community belonging to Tibeto-Burman language family (Grierson, 1903). According to Rebat Mohan Saha, they opted for the change of their name without least hesitation in later times. After independence of India, a number of Koch people have changed their name from the Koch to the Rabha to get maximum benefit from the government. As a result of this process there are many cases of anomaly: a father with a Koch title but his son having a Rabha one. At present the Koches and the Rabhas are their sect-names with their title, such as the 'Kama', 'Hakasam', 'Bantho', 'Nogra', etc.

While we often describe the modern era - framed by the Post-Enlightenment narrative - as one marked by an unprecedented concern for identity and identification, there are many debates on the origin, ethnic identity of the Koch. Still it is agreed by most of the scholars and historians that the Koch originated from Koch-Rabha or Rabha, a tribal community who belonged to Indo-Mongoloid race.

Focus of This Paper

I propose to focus on many registers of identity politics, namely, caste and ethnicity and make a case study of the Koch of North Bengal, West Bengal. Since the colonial period huge number of people of different castes, classes and religions migrated to this region, particularly in the post-colonial period huge number of people migrated from East Bengal, as a result they became dispossessed minority in North Bengal without their own land and property. Moreover, because of changing their title most of the people have faced different types of crises and problems. This paper would then examine the historical evolution of Koch identity as well as about language and in all terms of culture in their livelihood.

Focus of the Study - Fieldwork

The study is based on an extensive **fieldwork** in some selected North Bengal districts of West Bengal. The fieldwork was conducted in three districts of North Bengal in West Bengal. They are:

1. Cooch Behar (Tufanganj and Buchamari village)
2. Alipurduar (Kamakkhyagurr, janabasati)
3. Jalpaiguri (Jaldapara and forest area)

Beside this, data primarily has been collected based on researcher's own encounters with people in different situations. Data has been collected through interviews with the Koch speakers as well as relevant literature of this area.

1. **Method:** Interviews, audio-visual recording and questionnaire
2. **Participants:** About 30 informants (equal number of male and female subjects).
3. **Age:** This study has adopted Labov's (1963) age grouping and the age group in the study has been divided into five segments:
 - 14 to 30 yrs
 - 31 to 45 yrs
 - 46 to 60 yrs
 - 61 and above

Interaction with people included picture story test, voluntary story telling session, and the various random interviews with people. The observations were recorded by a qualitative questionnaire.

Keywords: linguistic identity, Koch community, endangered language, cultural history. Post-colonial

Introduction

The present paper is given the title "**An Ethnolinguistic Study of Koch**". Koch language belongs to Sino-Tibeto-Burman language family which is spoken by the people of Koch-community of North Bengal in West Bengal. According to UNESCO (ISO 639-3) is a severely endangered language India. Koch, an indigenous community of northern portion West Bengal, in the past they were the majority people of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur and the plain areas of Darjeeling district and the Cooch Behar.

The present study is based on the data collected from the speakers from Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar (district) which have the largest and oldest Koch villages in West Bengal. There are many villages where Koch language is spoken in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal.

Vowels

A vowel is defined as a voiced sound informing which the air issues in a continuous stream through the pharynx and the mouth, there being no obstruction and no narrowing such as would cause audible friction.

The Tibeto-Burman vowel system is made up of the five phonemes / i,e,a,o, u /, (Benedict, 1972) . But Koch consists of seven distinctive vowel phonemes. They are shown in the chart below:

Koch Vowels Chart

	Front	Central	Back
High	I		u u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	ɔ

Consonants

Consonants can be defined in terms of both phonetics and phonology. David Crystal (1985) says that the consonants are “the sounds made by closure or narrowing in the vocal tract so that the airflow completely blocked, or so restricted that the audible friction is produced”. We have found 22 consonants in Koch language.

Koch Consonants Chart

	Bilabial	labiodental	Alveolar		Post alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b		t d				k g k ^h	
Nasal	M		n				N	
Fricative		f	s		ʃ ʒ	tʃ		H
Lateral			l					
Approximant	W					j y		

Colour Terms

Koch

penek	Gloss
balan̄	black
pisak	white
pit̄in̄	red
hindʒulun̄	green
hud̄i	blue
fugdur	yellow
	brown

Gloss

black
white
red
green
blue
yellow
brown

sɔntortwui	orange
bantao	purple
bɔflek	pink
fugd̥ur	grey
bantao	violet

The data above shows that the term *fugd̥ur* is used for the brown and grey colours. Another example of such use is seen in the term *bantao* which is used for both purple and violet colours.

1.1 Geographical Location

At present, they are mainly living in Alipuduar, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling districts of West Bengal; Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Kamrup, Shonitpur and Darrang districts of Assam; and West Garo-Hills district of Meghalaya. They are also scattered in a small number almost in all other districts of Assam and six other states of North Eastern India.

1.2 A Brief History of Koch

Dr. Rabati Mohan Saha said, the true history of the North-Eastern India was unknown till the Ahom invasion in the soil of India. Before this nothing definite was known, except some scattered facts from ancient coins and inscriptions as well as the records of the Greek and Chinese travellers.

The Sino-Tibetan speaking mongoloids were confined only to a part of India, i.e., Northern and North-Eastern tracts corresponding to the present-day Nepal and sub-Himalayan areas, North-Bihar, North-Bengal, East-Bengal as well as Assam and its adjacent six states of North-Eastern India.

According to Dr. Rebati Mohan Saha (quoted in Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee), they came to India in a period not earlier than 1500 B.C. He also remarks that the early Mongoloid people entered probably through Assam, and their advent in the east might have been as old as that of the Aryans in the West.

The Koches created a glorious history in the 16th Century A.D. They have conquered the vast area of the North-Eastern India. They were also ruling many areas as Chieftains, Zamindars or Kings of the tribal groups, after they had entered in the North-Eastern India.

1.3 Number of Speakers

The 2011 Census of India put the number of speakers at 31,119.

1.4 Material Life of the Koches

According to informants, information agriculture is the only means of the Koches to earn their livelihood. Nowadays, the younger generations have been enabled to get education and try to find out lower grade jobs. There are very few people who have started trade and business. A few young Koches are joining the Indian Army or police.

About seventy or eighty years ago, Mother was the head of the family and owner of all the property including land, buildings, farms, implements and cattle. As per the matriarchal system, when her son was married, he was sent to his mother-in-law's house. Similarly, after the marriage of her daughter, her son-in-law had to come and live in her house and he was treated as her son. Under the influence of their neighboring Hindu families, they have changed from matriarchy to patriarchy.

1.5 Agriculture

After many years, they came down to the plains area and settled there, adopting agriculture and animal husbandry. They began to produce various kinds of crops for their food and also cotton for their clothing.

1.6 Chokot (Rice-beer)

The womenfolk are hard-working, but the men folk were lazy and indulged in drinking 'Chakat' (rice-beer). The Koches use 'Chakat' in all their worship of gods and goddesses and animistic spirits. It is also used in all their social functions right from their birth to death. They also consume rice lavishly after the harvest and entertain their near and dear ones with 'Chakat' during reception.



Rice-beer brewing. I took it during my fieldwork (from sankoch.com).

1.7 Hunting

The Koches were very fond of hunting wild animals. The Koch society was democratic in the true sense, because the meat gathered out of hunting was distributed in equal share to every house in the village.

After independence of India, the refugees took shelter in North Bengal and lower Assam, they settled in around the outskirts of small forests. And as per rules of the government to conserve forest and protection of wildlife, hunting was banned. Even the tribal people were restricted to collect their firewood for cooking purpose only.

1.8 Fishing

The Koch girls and women are very much interested in fishing. Generally, the Koches select the highland where there are rivers or lakes near that place. For them, fishing is not only for obtaining noted and favoured food, but it is also a great entertainment. Most of the girls and women of the village, come out in groups for catching fish amidst songs, dances, telling legends and making questions and answers.



Source: I took it during the field work from informants.

1.9 Economy

The Koches who are living in the reserved Forests of the Governments of West Bengal and Assam are called ‘PANI KOCH’ (Fani-Koch). Pan or fan means ‘tree’ and Pani-Koches means the Koches who live in the forest. They have been preserving their old and traditional language and culture. But they are the poorest sections among the Koches, as revealed in the fieldwork. Nevertheless, the Pati Koches of the undivided Kamrup district of Assam are more literate and their economic condition better than the Kocha.

1.10 Food Habit

The Koches take their meals twice in a day; rice and pulses as their main food. Occasionally they eat fish or meat. However, they do not prefer green vegetables that they can easily collect from their neighborhood or dwelling areas.

1.11 House

Being a poor tribe, the Koches build their houses with bamboos and straw-type grasses. In earlier times, they built large houses with some rooms, but at present, the size of the houses has become smaller. The roofing of a few houses is constructed with corrugated tins and they use one part of the Veranda as Kitchen.



Source: I took it during the field work.

1.12 Festival

Most of the Koch festivals are connected with cultivation of crops. Baikho is the greatest festival of Koches and it is concerned with cultivation. During this ceremony, the villagers take part joyfully to worship the Baikho for the welfare of villagers and their cultivation. The festival is collectively performed once in a year. Khokchi festival was once the most intently desirous and the most important event among the Koches. The Baikho festival is associated with the agriculture and agricultural activities. It takes place in the first full moon of Jyaistha, which is the time for the plantation of paddy plants.

Langa is a festival of Koches which is also concerned with agriculture. Langa is a village deity, who is also worshiped once in a year during the month of March and April. Langais worshiped with the hope for the welfare of villagers, crops and animals. Kocha Khaiti is a festival which is celebrated in the month of April and May. In this festival, all the villagers take bath early in the morning and women prepare varieties of cakes. Taking rice and cake (which they made) as a ‘prasad’, all villagers gather in the priest house. All the villagers prepare rice beer in the priest house one day before the festival.

1.13 Birth

Like in all other societies, there are three stages of human life of the Koch (Rabha) society-Birth, marriage and death. The birth of child is the first significant stage of human life.

According to the religious belief of the Koches (Rabhas) the human soul and body came from the ‘Risibay’ the supreme God, through natural objects like a hill, hillock, river, bog, spring or any kind of tree or creeper. The human soul and body collect from that object and come to the earth. The soul leaves the world through which it came into the world. That is why the remember that object and the story while offering the water into the mouth of the dying person; which is called ‘Chika barai’.

There are few socio-religious functions in every section of the Koches. These are ‘Panchuti’ Okbomimichikmanani, Naming ceremony, Annaprasan, etc.

1.14 Marriage

According to informants, the Koch society sanctions three types of marriage by purchase, by gift and by service. But at present the system of marriage by purchase has been totally stopped. The current practice of marriage is through negotiation and in a few cases by service in the house of a girl or by gift and by mutual understanding, etc.



Source: I got it during the field work from informants.

1.15 Death

The Koches believe that the death of the human body is unavoidable occurrence. They cremate the dead body with firewood. Only a child below eight years is put into the grave. The Koch-Rabhas carry swords and shields like warriors in the funeral procession. Before the start of the procession, they drink rice-beer and make merry with songs and dances.

1.16 Funeral Ceremony

The objective and the means of the funeral ceremony are identical in all the sections of the Koches. Ceremony takes place from the day following death to thirty days. The whole family observes the funeral ceremony until it is over. In funeral ceremony, the cooked foods including fish, meat and wine are offered in three parts to the ‘YAMA’ the regent of death, the ancestors and the dead person himself or herself.

Generally, the Huji or Deoshi offer ‘Chakat’ into the cooked foods. In a few areas all relatives offer water and ‘Chakat’ after the Huji. Then the song and dance of the family members, relatives and the invited persons will start. This is the main part of the ceremony. The males and females take part in the dance in separate groups.

This testified to the fact that the Koches believe in the existence of a world beyond death as well as in rebirth. The pregnancies, birth, first feeding of rice ceremony are almost same found among the adjacent Hindus. However, the name giving ceremony is different.



Source: I collected it during the fieldwork.

1.17 Dress

Traditional dress and ornaments are one of the most interesting subjects of the material culture. Basically, Koch women made their clothes in their wooden loom. They are fond weaving and have a good skill in weaving art. Therefore, their dresses are full of designs. But male dresses are not having much design. Sometimes it is designed by stripe of different colour. Traditional dress of male is known as ‘pazal’ and worn in waist and hangs down to the knee. The males also use turban on the head and small cloth to tie round the waist. They used different thread for them; they called this thread in their language as ‘Senkanen’. Besides, both male and female use a kind of big and long cloth, which is used as wrapper in winter season. It is called the ‘Pachar’.



Source: I took it during the fieldwork.

1.18 Divorce

Divorce is indeed a rare case in Koch society. There is a system of divorce named ‘PAN CHIRA’(to divide the betel-leaf by the wife and husband).

1.18 ReligiousBelief

The Koches generally worship their own animistic God, Goddess and spirits. The Rishibai (supreme God), Rntuk, Grimbuda, Kancha-khaity, Daldandbai, Dingaa-kater, Khokchi, Chaku-chipi, Khetar-Dinga, etc. and the Aryan Gods and Goddesses like Kali, Shiva, Hari-Thakur, Laxmi, Saraswati, etc.

In all their worship the Koches (Rabhas) offer ‘CHOKOT’ and fruits, sacrifice pigs, fowls and pigeons to satisfy the God, Goddess and the spirits and rid themselves from illness, poverty and other plights. For the worship called Huji, Deosi or Saranga from his or her own clan act as priests. But in a few areas, they engage Hindu Brahmins to perform the rites and rituals of worship.



Source: Got from informants (sankoch.com)

1.19 Musical Instrument

The Koches make their musical instruments with bamboo, wood and leather, they use leather in their Kham (drum) other instruments are- Kara or Karanal (a six-foot long flute), Baidog or Badungdappa, Tentak or TemekaBangshri or Bashi, etc.



Source: I collected it during the fieldwork (sankoch.com).

1.20 Koch People

The Koch alternative name is Kocha. Koch was the old and traditional name of the tribe and their subsequent name is the Rabha. The Koch section did not participate in the great Baikho festival of King Dadan. The Koches are dwelling in the lower Assam, mainly in the undivided Goalpara district; West Garo-Hills of Meghalaya and Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar plains area of Darjeeling of West Bengal and Rangpur district of Bangladesh.

There were two huge conventions, one held one on the 1st to 3rd January 1973 at Kazigron in the district of Dhubri and another on the 8th to 10th April 1973 at Ghaksa in the district of Kokrajhar. In these two meetings, the leaders, village headmen, educated and interested persons from both the sections, Koches and the Rabhas of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal participated. They discussed and came to a decision that they were the same tribe because their language, culture the Hasug or Barayie, the clan, social and religious system and beliefs, and the system of preparation of ‘Chokot’ or ‘Choko’ were the same.

There was no difference between the Rabhas and Koches. Therefore, the slogan of this unity was “Kochan-Rabha, Rabha-Kocha,” i.e., “The Koch is Rabha and the Rabha is Koch.” For this unity, the Koches have to give up the glorious, old and the traditional identification. After that, the Koches were known as the Rabhas.

After changing their identity, the Koches, who were identified as the scheduled caste by the Government rule, became the scheduled tribe. That was the gain for them, but they had lost their glorious identity of the Koches, who were the rulers of lower Assam, the North East and Southern part of West Bengal.



Source: I took it during the fieldwork.

1.21 Occupation

Generally, Koches are based on agriculture. So, the village economy depends upon the production of the paddy. From the very beginning, they have been cultivating paddy like Asu, Phorma, Bilsa and Sali, etc. and in different seasons they also grow jute, mustard, pulses, sugarcane, etc. Vegetables like potato, cabbage, chilly (winter vegetable), brinjal, radish, etc., are also grown up. In their agricultural pursuits, men and women are equal partners. Fishing, livestock, sericulture or manufacturing of bamboo and cane goods are some of their subsidiary occupations.

1.22 Language

According to Dr. Rebati Mohan Saha (quoted in scholars like Grierson G.A., Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and N.N. Acharya), the original homeland of the mongoloid tribes was in the southern Siberia. But their Sino-Tibetan speeches were formed in the south-west of their homeland in pre-historic times.

Dr. Rebati Mohan Saha said, ‘The area of characterization for the primitive Sino-Tibetan speech appears to have been North-Western China between the headwaters of the Huang-Ho and the Yang-tsze-King rivers.’

The Koches and Rabhas once used to think themselves to be separate branches of the Bodo group, on account of the geographical division caused by the turbulent Brahmaputra. The Rabhas are living in the east and the Koches in the western side of the river. But in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century the system of communication was improved and the Koches and the Rabhas were introduced to each other. They came to know that they were the same tribes in almost every respect.

According to Dr. Rebati Mohan Saha, they belong to the same group, they opted for the change of their title without least hesitation. After independence of India, a number of Koches have changed their title from the Koch to the Rabha to get maximum benefit from the government.

As a result of this process, in many cases there is some anomaly, a father with a Koch title, his son having a Rabha one. At present the Koches and the Rabhas are their sect-names as their title, such as the ‘Kama’, ‘Hakasam’, ‘Bantho’, ‘Nogra’, etc.

1.22 Folk Culture of Koch

Folk culture is indigenous in nature and the vast treasures of folk culture have been the pride of civilization as well as the nation. The western part of Assam, a large part of the North Bengal, some parts of Meghalaya, Tripura and Bangladesh inherit a common cultural heritage. It is the culture of the son of the soil, the culture of indigenous ethnic group of Koch, glorified by the elevated history of Koch Kingdom and in different geographical backgrounds; it is popularly known as Koch Culture, Goalparia Culture and Vaoaiya Culture, etc. It is the tune of Bena, Dotora that unites the people across the country sometimes irrespective of their religion.

Conclusion

Ethnolinguistics study is a wide area covering the relationship between language and culture, language and cultural mind, language and social systems, language, and communities' ethos and values. The present study is collected in a restricted domain with a purpose of showing how classificatory methodology is adopted in a culturally conscious way by the people belonging to the Koch community as a whole.

This study has certain limitations. An attempt has been made to show some aspects by way of relating language and culture and for revealing the way in which cultural consciousness is commonly revealed through language.

Overall, the present study is an attempt to relate the cultural consciousness of Koch with living reality called Koch language.

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