

## **LANGUAGE SHIFT: A STUDY OF RAKHAIN LANGUAGE IN KUAKATA**

**Md. Tariqul Huq<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This study attempted to explore the academic and socio-economic issues related to the shift of Rakhain language into Bengali in Kuakata. It revealed that how these issues endanger Rakhain language and cause gradual shift of Rakhain language into Bengali Language. Primary data were collected by using two semi-structured questionnaires. One questionnaire was administered to 50 Rakhain students who studied in SSC and HSC levels at Misripara Fatema Haai Secondary School and Kuakata Khanabaad Degree College. Another questionnaire was administered to 10 Rakhain parents who lived at Aamkholapara and Misripaara Rakhain Polli in Kuakata. A focus group discussion with 10 Rakhain community leaders was also conducted for collecting data. The major findings of the study disclosed that lack of Rakhain language school, use of Bengali language as a principal medium of communication, low value of Rakhain language in society, lack of support from government and NGOs, socio-economic pressures and reluctance of Rakhain young generation to use Rakhain language were responsible for Rakhain language shift into Bengali language. The study concludes with some recommendations that will help maintain and revitalize Rakhain language in Kuakata.

**Key Words:** Bilingual speaker, Language shift, Rakhain language, Revitalization.

### **Introduction**

In different parts of Bangladesh, indigenous languages like Chakma, Marma and Tripura are spoken without having official status or recognition. Unlike Bengali and English, these languages are not mainstream and dominant languages. Due to the overwhelming pressure of dominant languages like Bengali and English, the indigenous languages are gradually becoming endangered, which contributes to the loss of culture, heritage and values (Sultana, 2011). The Rakhain are one of the indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Kuakata is a panoramic sea beach on the southernmost tip of Bangladesh which is located in the Patuakhali district. In Kuakata, Bangla is a majority or dominant language and Rakhain is a minority language. Due to the social and economic status of Bengali language, many Rakhain parents move their children towards majority (Bengali) language. “Language shift is a process in a bilingual community where more speakers tend to use majority language in domains where they formerly used the minority language. The minority language community adopts the language of the majority as their regular means of communication because language gives better chances for upward social mobility and economic success” (Appel and Muysken, 1987). Jaspaert and Kroon (1988) showed a different perspective on language shift, looking at it from the individual's point of view rather than from that of the speech community as a whole. They mentioned that the shift takes place when individuals decide to use the newly acquired language instead of their mother tongue. Ferguson (1996) tried to clarify the concept of language shift by using some questions related to language choice and shift. Some of these questions are: “what language should be the official language of the government and used in

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Barisal, Barial-8200, Bangladesh, Email: tariqulbu@gmail.com

laws and administration? What language should be used as a medium of instruction at the various levels of the education system? What do the speakers of a language believe or feel about its aesthetic, religious and logical values? What do the speakers of a language believe and feel about other languages in the country?"

In a bilingual community, two languages with High (H) and Low (L) statuses or distinct functions are normally used. Normally in such a situation there is a functional division between the two; the (H) being reserved for 'formal', 'public' use, often legally recognized as the official language and (L) being reserved for 'informal', 'home' use, often considered as the 'unofficial' language (Bell, 1976). In Kuakata, it has been found that Bengali language is considered a High variety, which is appropriate for government use, education and the media whereas Rakhain language is considered as the Low variety appropriate for home and informal situations. As a result, the shift of Rakhain language into Bengali language is taking place gradually. Fishman (1972) noted that "the use of language in different domains is very important". For example, in a 'family domain', 'religious domain' speakers can use a special language or a language variety which can be different from 'work domain' or 'education domain'. Inspired by the Fishman studies, many researchers tried to find out the factors which lead to language shift and maintenance (Sinha, 2013). Reviewing various studies, Romaine (1995) identified some factors which can be significant for language shift. These are the numerical strength of the group in relation to other majorities and minorities, social class and educational background, attitudes of the other majority and minority, government policy towards language and education. A number of studies (Gal, 1979; Clyne, 1982; and Grosjean, 1982) have shown that situational factors relating to socio-economic conditions influence speakers' language behaviour to a certain extent. Grosjean (1982) said that "the key determinant for language choice and shift depends on language preference, socioeconomic status, education, power relation, ethnic background". It is generally believed that at the time of the arrival of Kuakata, Rakhain people were generally monolinguals in their native language. But subsequently they had become bilinguals in Rakhain and Bengali languages. Nowadays they are becoming monolinguals in Bengali language. Due to the lack of Rakhain language school, low value of Rakhain language in society, lack of support from government and reluctance of young generation to use Rakhain language, their language (Rakhain) is being gradually shifted into Bengali. If this process continues, Rakhain language, with the passage of time, will no longer be found in Kuakata. Fishman (1991) considered such type of process an intergenerational discontinuity of heritage language where fewer speakers, readers, and writers are found. Keeping all these issues in mind, the researcher had carried out the study with some objectives. The objectives of the study were:

- a. To investigate the present condition of Rakhain language in Kuakata.
- b. To identify and explore the issues of language shift of Rakhain language into Bengali.
- c. To provide recommendations based on findings for the revitalization of Rakhain language.

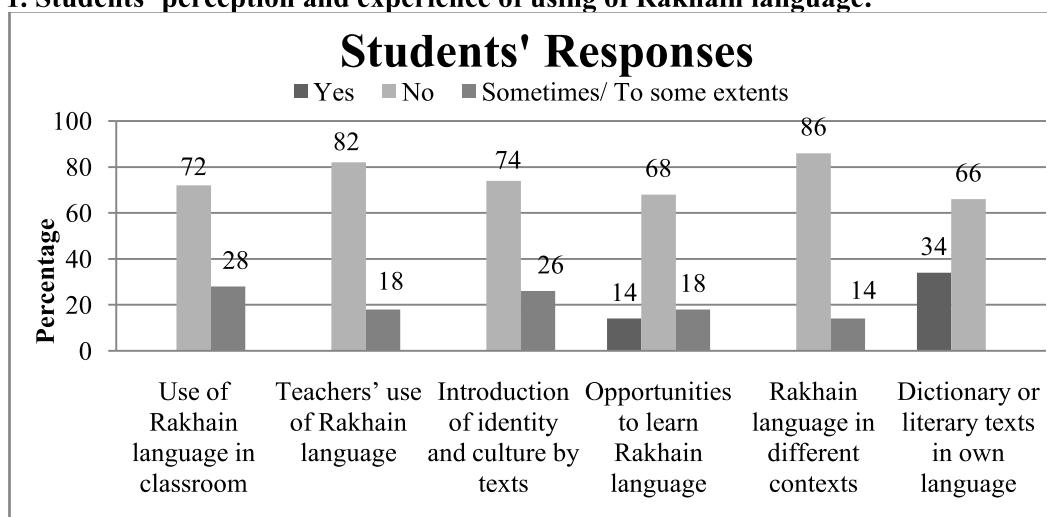
### **Methodology**

This was an exploratory study in which two semi-structured questionnaires (one was for the Rakhain students of SSC & HSC levels and the other was for the Rakhain parents) were used as data collection tools. A focus group discussion with 10 Rakhain community leaders was also administered for data collection. The transcribed data from the two semi-structured questionnaires and tape-recorded focus group discussion was employed by the researcher to achieve credibility of the study. For constructing questionnaires, a list of written questions emphasizing on the respondents' academic environment, learning situations, socio-economic pressures, support from government and NGOs and feeling of identity was used. This study adopted random

sampling procedure. The total number of respondents was 60 (50 were Rakhain students at SSC, HSC levels and 10 Rakhain parents). A pilot survey was conducted and the questionnaires were modified in line with the findings from the pilot survey before it was used for final data collection. The modified questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the session by the researcher. The researcher explained the purposes and objectives of the survey before distributing the questionnaires. The students and the parents filled in the questionnaires during the session and returned to the researcher at the end of the session. The questionnaires filled out by the participants were computed and analyzed using the Microsoft Office Excel 2007.

## Results and Discussion

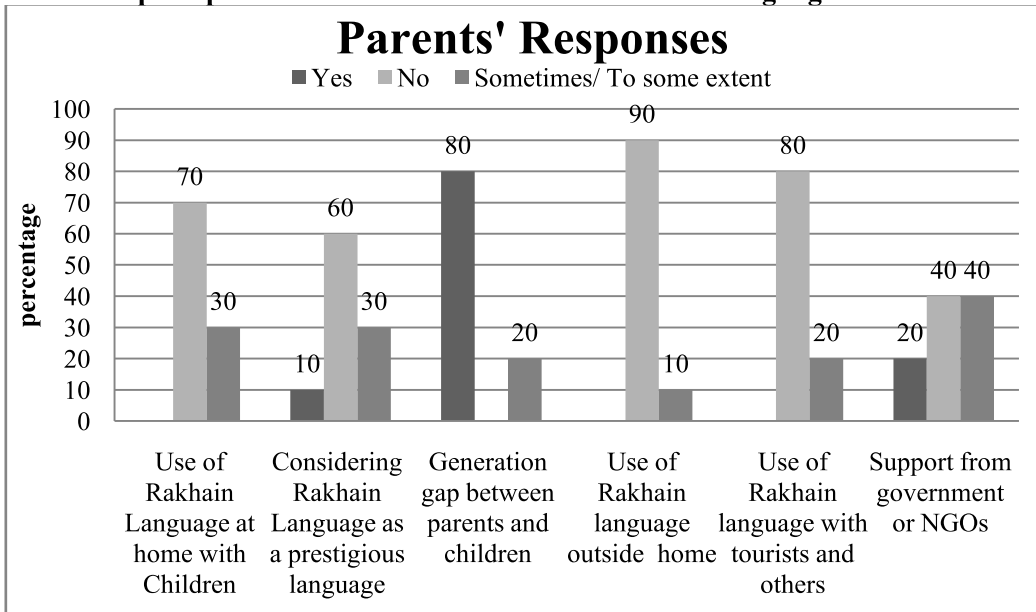
### 1. Students' perception and experience of using of Rakhain language:



The findings in figure 1 show that the majority of the respondents (72%) admitted that they were not allowed to use Rakhain language in the classroom because the textbooks are either in Bengali or English while 28% of the respondents were of the opinion that they were sometimes allowed to use their own language as a means of communication when they were involved in pleasant and funny activities in the classroom. These findings have similarities with the findings of the study of Afreen, 2013 who worked on the language shift of Chakma speaking people in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and found that the educational system of CHT followed national curriculum and textbooks. As a result, indigenous students learned Bengali language effectively which would ultimately lead to the language shift. A large percentage of the respondents (82%) stated that teachers did not use Rakhain language in the classroom as Bengali or English language is the medium of instruction and the remaining 18% of the respondents mentioned that some teachers belonging to their ethnicity used Rakhain language at the earlier stage of education (pre-school to primary school level). These findings had affinities with the findings of the study of Greenhill, 2009 who investigated the classroom environment of indigenous students at the primary school level and mentioned that the teachers and students were different in terms of their language communities, mentalities and thoughts. That's why; the majority of the indigenous students could not adapt the classroom environment and communicate properly. A majority of the respondents (74%) reported that the texts they were using did not introduce their ethnic identity and present their culture while 26% of the respondents mentioned that some textbooks including Bangla,

History, and Geography of NCTB at the Primary and Higher Secondary School levels to some extent presented their ethnic identity and culture in Bangla language. These findings show similarities with the findings of the study of Afreen, 2013 who mentioned that the text books, in most cases, reflect the Bengali culture and way of living. As a result, the indigenous students could not relate their life and culture to the topics of the books. A majority of the respondents (68%) stated that they did not get opportunities enough to learn their mother tongue from the age of 5 to 12 due to the lack of Rakhain language schools while 14% of the respondents opined that they had learning opportunities and 18% of the respondents mentioned that they sometimes got language learning opportunities because they were taught by the monks of Misripara Bouddha Bihaar and Gora Aamkholapara Bijoy Raama Bouddha Bihar who were skilled in Rakhain language. Another important finding related to the use of Rakhain language outside classroom was that a vast majority of the respondents (86%) opined that they could not use their own language when they visited local markets, hospitals and other social service centres because Bengali was used as the principal medium of communication while a small percentage of the respondents (14%) mentioned that they could sometimes use their language at those areas when the officials of their own ethnicity provided them services. In minority language situation, the minority language can no longer be effective because it can only be used in the village boarders, informal situations but it cannot go far in the wider and formal contexts (Gal, 1979). Borbely (2013), in his study of the language shift of Romanian minority in Hungary, mentioned that in the formal situations like market place, healthcare centre or shop, the majority language (Hungarian) was used more. On the other hand, in the informal situations like home, church, the minority language (Romanian) was used more. In terms of the textual use of Rakhain language, a majority of the respondents (66%) were of the opinion that they did not have sufficient dictionary, periodicals or literary texts in the Rakhain language while 34% of the respondents opined that they were sometimes introduced to some ancient literary texts, calendars and periodicals by their grandparents, priests but they could not understand and did not feel motivated.

**2. Parents’ perception and attitudes to the use of Rakhain language:**



The findings in figure 2 show that a majority of the respondents (70%) did not use their mother tongue with their children at home while 30% of the respondents opined that they sometimes used. Borbely (2013), in his study of the language shift of Romanian minority in Hungary, showed that half of the children rarely used the minority language (Romanian) with their parents at home, more than one fourth of them never used Romanian with their family, and only one fourth of the total sample answered that they used frequently their own community language at home. The results reflect that the use of Hungarian in the community increases rapidly. In a minority community, the use of the majority language at home within the family is the sign of developed language shift situation. A large percentage of the respondents (60%) said that they did not consider Rakhain language as a prestigious language in terms of greater use and function in the context of Bangladesh while 30% of the respondents opined that they sometimes considered their language as a prestigious language when they learned it in their earlier stages of education and enjoyed its use in their cultural and religious programmes. Only a small percentage of the respondents (10%) mentioned that they considered their language prestigious. Sinha (2013), in her study of the language choice and shift of the Bangladeshi community in Britain, found that the members of the parent generation considered Bengali language an important part of their identity but they did not consider it prestigious in the context of Britain and they also expressed their opinion about the importance of English language because the proficiency of English will give them better opportunities in terms of getting education, jobs and health services. This instrumental motivation pushed them to improve their proficiency in English which would ultimately lead them to their Bengali language into English (Sinha, 2013). A vast majority of the respondents (80%) expressed that they found a generation gap between their parents and children in terms of using Rakhain language and celebrating culture as their children tended to use Bengali language and were accustomed to celebrating Bengali cultures but their parents (the grandparents of children) loved to use the Rakhain tongue and celebrate their culture like Saangrai, Bouddha Purnima while 20% of the respondents did not find the generation gap as they let their children and parents know Rakhain and Bengali culture side by side. While working on the language shift of Manukau Pasifika, Taumoefolau, Starks, Davis and Bell (2002) found that the older people like grandparents could speak fluently in their native language but the younger people were attracted to the majority language and culture; and tended to shift to the majority culture more enthusiastically. It has been a common phenomenon in almost all the researches done regarding language shift. A vast majority of the respondents (90%) mentioned that they could not talk to others outside their community as their language had low (L) value as it was not used in local administration, job sectors and social service centres; and people of the local Bengali community did not feel interested to use or learn the (Rakhain) language while the remaining of the respondents (10%) opined that the use of the Rakhain language was sometimes possible outside their community when tourists and local people on some festivals or occasions desired to hear it with Bengali or English translation. Sinha (2013), in her study, showed that the members of the grandparent and parent generation used Bengali at home whereas they used English at work, shopping centers, banks and various other domains. But the members of the child generation used English in all the settings including home. A large percentage of the respondents (80%) were of the opinion that they could not use their own language with the tourists and others because most of the tourists were from other language communities. Only 20% of the respondents mentioned that sometimes they used Rakhain language with tourists if they felt eager to hear it with Bengali or English translation. The minority language gradually becomes weaker among the community members when it slowly retreats from more and more social

settings (Fishman, 1985a). A total of 40% of the respondents opined that they did not get support from local government or NGOs to promote the use of Rakhain language while other 40% of the respondents mentioned that they sometimes got support from local government and NGOs in terms of getting few books published for pre-primary and primary school levels. Only 20% of the respondents reported that they got support but support was not enough to practice and preserve Rakhain language.

### **Findings from Focus Group Discussion**

As the study explored the issues of language shift, it was very important to investigate individuals' perspectives and statements about language shift. Focus group discussion seemed well suited to that purpose. The focus group discussion enabled researcher to gain powerful insights into how different socio-linguistic factors speed up language shift. The participants in focus group discussion expressed different points of view in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. The most notable feature of this group was that the participants were interested in sociolinguistic issues of Rakhain language and they had more critical views on the socio-economic factors which lead Rakhain language to shift into Bengali language. Dorian (1998) mentioned that the dominant language of majority group, with its high value and socio-economic facilities, encourages the minority language group to give up their ancestral language. Majority of the participants (90%) claimed that the members of Rakhain community, in most cases, could not get access to the local socio-economic and political activities. For them, the linguistic background of Rakhain community and small numbers of population were the main reasons that created obstacles to be involved in local socio-economic and political activities. One of the participants named Mong Chaang said:

*"In Kuakata, we, the Rakhain people, are deprived of socio-economic opportunities. Besides, we do not have political leaders who will speak for our rights. This type of situation compels us to choose Bengali language; because Bengali language offers us good jobs, better education and better health service. Due to the high value of Bengali language in Kuakata, our young generation prefers to learn and use it in all contexts. As a result, the shift of Rakhain language into Bengali is gradually taking place."*

Many of the participants mentioned that the distribution of minority (Rakhain) and majority (Bengali) language use in primary, secondary and higher secondary school levels influences students' attitude towards their own language. They mentioned that Bengali language is frequently used by the teachers in the classroom and in most cases the classroom texts are in Bengali or English. In addition, there are no primary or secondary schools for Rakhain students where Rakhain language is used as the main medium of classroom instruction. As a result, from the very earlier stage of schooling, students do not get opportunity to learn (read & write) Rakhain language which causes gradual language shift. 75% of the participants said that families' (grandparents, parents) language use is responsible for children's attitude to their own language. In this regard, one of the participants named Choten Rakhain said:

*"Parents and grandparents are not aware of the frequent use of Rakhain language. If they use their own language in different contexts, their children/grandchildren will tend to use their own language. But nowadays, the real scenario is that grandparents'/ parents' generation do not consider their language a prestigious language and they do not encourage their children to read and write Rakhain language at home or outside home. This reluctance of grandparents/parents towards the use of their own language may influence children to shift the use of Rakhain language into Bangla language"*.

90% of the participants supported the view that Rakhain language should be used frequently in different contexts like working place, business, and festivals which will create a feeling of

self esteem among the Rakhain language users. One of the participants argued that the isolation of the Rakhain community from the local Bengali community in social, political and economic activities may speed up language choice and shift. Hoffman (1991), in his study, observed that the isolation of a minority community from the majority community under certain cultural, social and economic conditions compelled its members to adopt the language of the majority community. A number of studies (Davis, 1998; Shameem, 1995; and Nakanishi, 2000) have shown that the socio-economic and cultural factors play pivotal roles to the language shift of different minority communities. A vast majority of the participants expressed that due to the lack of academic and economic support from local government and NGOs, it is impossible to promote the extensive use of Rakhain language.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations might be useful:

- Local neighbourhood institutions have to be established where Rakhain people of all ages can learn Rakhain language and bolster its frequent use in different contexts like market, hospital and different social service centers etc.
- National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) should publish books on history, language and literature in Rakhain language up to HSC level. Teachers who have Rakhain language background should be recruited for using those books in the classrooms.
- A language research centre should be established in Kuakata for conserving Rakhain language where the concerned authority will do research, publish literary books and magazines. Through their research activities and publications, Rakhain language and culture will be disseminated into the new generation of Rakhain community.
- Some lucrative jobs at the government and non-government levels should be offered to the Rakhain people who have sound knowledge on Rakhain language. As a result, Rakhain parents and students will feel a high value for their language and practice more to uphold it.
- Incentives should be offered to the Rakhain parents to use their own language with their children. The monks and the other language experts who are concerned about the maintenance and revitalization of Rakhain language need to be officially recognized and rewarded by the local government.

### **Conclusion**

An indigenous language is a marker of ethnic identity. It protects the cultural right of an indigenous group and is related to their heritage. Throughout the study, it has been surprisingly observed that Rakhain language is being marginalized and overlooked by the new generation of Rakhain community. Besides this, the present education system, parents' reluctance to use of Rakhain language and lack of support from local government and NGOs pave the way for language shift. This disregard toward the Rakhain language in the long run might very well push the eventual dissolution of Rakhain community in Kuakata, as its language, culture and identity will erode through the course of time. The findings of the study, I believe, will help language planners, policy makers and researchers look into the vital issues of Rakhain language shift into Bengali; and the recommendations based on the findings will help them maintain and revitalize Rakhain language in Kuakata.

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