

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Multilingualism in Sikkim: An overview

Krishna Maya Manger

Department of Nepali, University of North Bengal, India

Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of multilingual scenario in Sikkim, one of the smallest states of India. Sikkim is as rich as other Indian states in its linguistic diversity. More than sixteen languages from the Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman families are spoken here. The study reveals that about 80 percent of the total populations are multilingual in the state. The existence of multilingualism in Sikkim can be categorized as societal multilingualism

Keywords: Multilingualism, Sikkim, Indo-Aryan languages, Tibeto-Burman languages

1. Introduction

As per the genetic classification of languages, Sikkim embraces two main language groups: the Tibeto-Burman and the Indo-Aryan. The Tibeto-Burman group embraces the Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Newar, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Bhujel, Sunuwar and Sherpa languages and Indo-Aryan group consists of Nepali, Hindi and English, out of which Nepali is the lingua franca in the state. Besides these Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi is also rarely spoken amongst the few scarce communities here. Thus the linguistic diversities have naturally created an ambience for begetting and sustaining the multilingualism in Sikkim. Not only the linguistic entourage but also the social, cultural, educational and administrative entourage of the state is encouraging the multilingualism. A detail study on the existence of the multilingualism in Sikkim as a social resource and the linguistic strength will be discussed in length later in this paper.

2. Multilingualism in Sikkim

The history states that the *Lepchas* are the real inhabitants of Sikkim. The accounts of *Limbus* and *Magars* residing in Sikkim since 12-13th centuries have been found, followed by the *Bhutias* around 14th centuries and Nepalese around 19th century permanently settle down in Sikkim thereafter. After the merger of Sikkim into Independent India in the year 1975, a visible migration of different castes, classes and races from the plains took place on the pretext of business, commerce, employment and livelihood. It was quite natural that Sikkim in return had been bestowed with the different cultures, customs, norms, dogmas and languages together with the migrants.

Sikkim shares a unique place within the Indian democracy after its merger but the distinct qualities of its cultural, social, religious diversities have had a long and appealing legacy since long before. The Indian parliament in the year 1977 under Article 345 declared Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali as the three major languages of Sikkim which in fact carries an authentic proof of Sikkim being a multilingual state since then (Lama, 2004). The linguistic diversity of India itself is a well applauded ornament yet the very fact of Sikkim being into Independent India adds a more commendable multilingual diversity.

After the state government in the year 1995, officially recognized the eleven more indigenous languages as state languages of Sikkim, the multilingualism has flourished in Sikkim all the more. Together with this, an effort has been made to preserve and uplift the socio-cultural-religious distinctiveness of these linguistic communities. The tri-lingual concept of the Indian educational system offering the education in mother languages in the primary section has been introduced. Most of the schools have indigenous language teachers on different languages like Lepcha, Bhutia, Rai, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Newar, Limbu etc. catering primary education on their own mother languages. The Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu languages are offered as one of the elective subjects in the graduation level as well.

The linguistic survey of Sikkim (2005) has stated Nepali as the most spoken language in the state. This is the most widely spoken and accepted language to all communities making it a *lingua franca* in the state. The total population of Sikkim all who communicate in this language as their mother language is around 3,38,6066. The second largest community to speak in their mother language is the Bhutia with 41,825 populations. In addition to this, other languages like Lepcha, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Newar, Bengali, Malayalam, Hindi, Tibetan, Urdu, Sunuwar, Punjabi; Sherpa etc. too share a sizeable population as shown in the chart below:

Language	Speakers	Language	Speakers	Language	Speakers	Language	Speakers
Nepali	3,38,606	Limbu	34,292	Bengali	6,320	Malayalam	1,021
Bhutia	41,825	Sherpa	13,9922	Urdu	2,930	Magar	Below 1000
Hindi	36,072	Tamang	10,089	Tibetan	1,977	Sunuwar	Below 1000
Lepcha	35,728	Rai	8,856	Punjabi	1,364	Newar	Below 1000

Table 1: The linguistic communities and population of Sikkim

The above survey portrays more than sixteen languages and linguistic communities as a whole in Sikkim. Among them Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha, Rai, Sherpa, Magar, Newar, Limbu, Sunuwar and Tamang are the indigenous languages and Punjabi, Bengali, Malayalam, Hindi and Urdu are the other migrated languages from the other parts of India together with the business, commerce, employments etc. The chart shown above carries an alarming language percentage of indigenous languages like Rai, Magar, Sunuwar, Newar, Gurung population almost towards the verge of extinction. The simple reason behind this for now can be concluded as the linguistic shift of the people. The linguistic survey of Sikkim brings out yet another important figure of linguistic communities mentioning them as multilingual. Though the linguistic skills are different but as a whole 80 percent of the people have been figured as multilingual in the data provided by the linguistic survey report. The figure is shown below:

Linguistic Community	Multilingual Speakers (in %)	Linguistic Community	Multilingual Speakers (in %)
Bhutia	77.68	Rai	74.43
Lepcha	74.51	Tibetan	80.32
Limbu	72.50	Sunuwar	---
Tamang	81.83	Newar	---
Sherpa	78.29	Magar	---

Table 2: the multilingual population of Sikkim

As per the figure above, the maximum indigenous linguistic communities have the ability to speak and understand more than two languages. In one hand, the linguistic communities like Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Tamang, Sherpa, Rai, and Tibetan are 80 or more than 80 percent multilingual in English, Hindi and other indigenous languages apart from being multilingual in Nepali. On the other hand, the population of linguistic communities like Sunuwar, Newar, Gurung and Magars are not included in the multilingual group survey as they fall below 10,000 populations in the national level itself.⁸

All the linguistic communities of Sikkim speak and understand Nepali language compulsory as because the medium of communication in terms of business, office and livelihood is in Nepali. To communicate to other linguistic communities away from own community, people here choose to speak in Nepali as it's the most common means of communication. Even in the academic scenario the Nepali language is the first choice of the people irrespective of their communities. Therefore without any debate Nepali language is the primary choice of any linguistic communities in the arena of multilingual prospective of Sikkim.

There are three categories of linguistic communities in Sikkim who use Nepali language. The first category consists of Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu and people from the plains who use Nepali as their second language. The second category consists of indigenous communities like Rai, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Newar and Sunuwars who have embraced it as their first language. The third category includes all the linguistic communities of Sikkim who wish to learn, speak and know Nepali besides their own mother language. But to clarify these three categories into distinct groups is next to impossible. The reason behind this is the trend of inter communities mingling situation because of the urbanization or compromised habitation. However a sizeable numbers still choose Nepali as their second language in the villages and remote areas.

The other languages like English and Hindi too are used as second language by a large section of the people in Sikkim. Since, Hindi is the national language of our country; it's used widely for business and the academic purposes. Most of the people here in Sikkim are bilingual or multilingual in Hindi.

English is the massive means of communication universally. The education system of Sikkim has made it mandatory medium of communication in the educational institutions. Hence a majority of the educated lot of Sikkim speak English as their second language.

Apart from English, Nepali and Hindi, the people of Sikkim are not only multilingual in their indigenous languages but also among the inter-community languages. For instance, the places in Sikkim like Mamley and Kamrang of South Namchi are vividly Magar dominated area. They use Magar as their first language without exception. But even some communities like Rai, Tamang who have settled among these communities profusely use Magar language in their daily communication.

3. Conclusion

Sikkim is as rich as other Indian states in its linguistic diversity. More than sixteen languages from the Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman groups are spoken in Sikkim. Nepali being the lingua franca of the Himalayan state, it is the most populated language here. The state has recognized the eleven other indigenous languages such as Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Newar, Bhujel, Sunuwar and Sherpa as the state languages. Hindi and English are the medium of communication in the educational institutions and are spoken as the second language by maximum linguistic communities. In addition to this the migrated languages like Urdu, Bengali, Malayalam and Punjabi are spoken too. The study census shows that these four languages are spoken and populated more than some of the indigenous languages of the state. The survey further states that 80 percent of the

linguistic communities are multilingual and apart from Nepali, English and Hindi these indigenous linguistic communities are multilingual. Thus, considering all the facts as above, it may be concluded saying that the people from different linguistic groups in Sikkim have shown themselves as multilingual groups. The existence of multilingualism in Sikkim can be thus, categorized as societal multilingualism rather than personal multilingualism.

4. References

1. Edward, John. 1994. *Multilingualism*. London: Routledge.
2. Aronin, Lerissa, David Singleton. 2012. *Multilingualism*. Amsterdam: John Publishing
3. Comapany.
4. Dua, Hans R. 2009. *Ecology of Multilingualism*. Mysore: Yasodha Publications.
5. Registrar General of India, Language Division. 2008. *Linguistic Survey of India (Sikkim Part I)*.
6. http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-documents/lsi/ling_survey_india.html.
7. Registrar General of India, Language Division. 2012. *Linguistic Survey of India (Sikkim, Part*
8. *II)*. http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-documents/lsi/ling_survey_india.html.
9. Wardhaugh, Ronald. 2008. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics (5th Edition)*. Malden, USA:
10. Blackwell Publishing.
11. Wei, Lee, Mellissa G Moyer (Ed.). 2008. *Research Methods in Bilingualism and*
12. *Multilingualism*. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing.
13. Lama, Mahendra P (Ed.), 2004. *Sikkim Study Series (Vol. V)*. Gangtok, Sikkim: Information and
14. Public Relation Department, Government of Sikkim.