

A Sociolinguistic Exploration of the Vaiphei Tribe

Kabita Singha

Assistant Professor, Centre for Language Proficiency and Professional Development, Assam Down Town University, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract

It is said that the Vaiphei people have come from a khul 'cave' but there are no such written records to refer, as it is a belief amongst the elder people of the tribe as it is considered to be an oral myth delivered from generation to generation. Adding to it, it is also believed that the name of the village Khawvaiphei is where the term Vaiphei originates. Vaiphei is a hill tribe with its own language, culture, and identity in Northeast India. The language and community are referred to as Vaiphei, which is interesting. In a similar vein, the majority of the tribal people living in Northeast India have also embraced the usual practice of using their own name as the name of their extended language or dialect. Vaiphei are Mongoloids by ethnicity, and their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. Despite not being mutually intelligible, it is closely connected to Paite, Hmar, Gangte, Thadou, Kuki, and other languages because they have similar vocabularies. The present paper attempts to provide a preliminary description of the endangered linguistic identity of the Vaiphei speaker of Assam and highlight the sociolinguistics feature of language endangerment in the community.

Keywords: Vaiphei, Language, Tibeto-Burman.

1.0. Introduction

It is appropriate to cite Matisoff et al. (1986) in this regard since they employ the phrase "loconym" to refer particularly to the name of the places, that have been expanded to function as language or dialect names. In a similar vein, the majority of the tribal people living in Northeast India have likewise embraced the usual practice of using their own name as the name of their language or dialect. In this sense, Vaiphei is not an exception, since the name of the people is also used as the name of the language. The two northeastern Indian states of Assam and Manipur are home to the majority of the Vaiphei speakers. Nonetheless, the Churachandpur area in Manipur and the Dima Hasao district in Assam are home to the bulk of Vaiphei speakers. Furthermore, Meghalaya and Tripura also have a small population of Vaiphei speakers. Eight villages in and around Ditokchera¹—Kaizakham, Lalzal, Kaiengphai, Disamatang, Tuivawmphai, N. Nachangzawl, Gamnuam, and Bolsol Vaiphei Veng—are home to the language's speakers in Assam. It's also important to note that, with the exception of a small number of speakers who are dispersed throughout the Churanchandpur district of Manipur, the majority of Vaiphei speakers are located in rural Assam and Manipur. As to the 2011 Census of India, there were 42,748 Vaiphei speakers in total. Vaiphei is a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family's Kuki-Chin group genetically (Ethnologue, 2017). As was previously indicated, Vaiphei is distantly linked to Mizo and closely

¹ I am grateful and I thank Manuel Suantak, Sang and Muan for helping me during this research period.

connected to various Kuki-Chin languages of Manipur, including Paite, Gangte, Kom, Chothe, and Thadou. To be more precise, Vaiphei and the other Kuki-Chin languages of Assam, Manipur, and Tripura share the majority of their lexicon. In addition, Bradley (1997) offered a different classification of the Kuki-Chin-Naga group, where Vaiphei can be categorized as Old Kuki.

2.0. Literature review²

Brief Customary Laws and Practices of the Vaiphei Tribe is a book by the Vaiphei Social and Cultural Organization. The sociocultural features of the Vaiphei tribe, such as aspects of birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, social administration, etc., are covered in this book.

The Zillai Dictionary (English - Vaiphei) was produced and published by Tinlet. This bilingual dictionary has vaiphei as the target language and English as the source language. As with English alphabets, the lexical items are ordered alphabetically from A to Z.

Vaiphei to Vaiphei, Manipuri and English Dictionary is a compilation and publication by P. Kamlam Vaiphei. This is the first trilingual Vaiphei dictionary, with Manipuri and English serving as the target languages and Vaiphei as the source language.

Additionally, Suantak K, in her thesis included description of the Vaiphei phonology, morphology, and phonetics. The aforementioned thesis discusses the vowels, consonants, phoneme distribution, syllabic structure, and tone of the Vaiphei language. The thesis also covered the morphology of nouns and verbs, covering aspects, adverbs, gender, number, pronouns, case, word formation, and so forth.

Singha K, also concentrated on the Vaiphei numerals in her M.Phil. dissertation, "Numerals in Vaiphei." The social background and linguistic affinity were emphasized, with a primary focus on structure and the different types of numerals that were covered.

3.0. Education

It is a widely known fact that the tribal people of Northeastern India lack their own script to write their literature in its own language. With only slight alterations, they write their language in Roman script. The Vaiphei speakers have a rich oral literature that includes folktales, folksongs, ballads, oral narratives, and other forms of storytelling, but they lack a robust written literature like many other tribal people of Northeast India. Nevertheless, the Vaiphei people's priceless legacy has not yet been properly documented or recorded. The younger members of the same tribe are therefore ignorant of their extensive oral history, which is in danger of disappearing due to the rapid pace of globalization. However, as the rate of education and literacy rises, so does the awareness of language loss and its endangerment, leading to an increase in linguistic research. The Vaiphei people are aware of the importance of education in the contemporary world. Every youngster, regardless of gender, has an equal opportunity to pursue education. The Vaiphei language has not been included as a subject or as a medium of teaching in educational institutions in Assam, as was previously stated, whereas in Manipur it is taught as a subject but not as a medium of instruction. Regardless of their financial situation, parents send their kids to English-medium schools since there are no resources for them to receive an education in their own tongue. Additionally, Vaiphei people converse among themselves and utilize their own language in the home. Therefore, spoken language is passed down from generation to generation.

² The data used in this paper was collected from the region of Assam mainly focusing on Haflong and Ditekchora.

4.0. Economy

The vaiphei people's primary activity is agriculture, Jhum cultivation, or shifting cultivation, is the agricultural technique used by them. Another major source of income in the community is the betel nut plantation. When it comes to arts and crafts, the Vaipheis are skilled. The skill of making products from bamboo is seen in large number with excel and furnished work. The males are skilled and knowledgeable in the arts of working with bamboo and cane, particularly in the creation of choki, chairs, mats, rice trays, and other types of baskets. In addition, the male members also hunt, fish, and chop firewood. The women in the society are not only housekeepers and weavers they take care of household chores, but they also grow jhum by planting, weeding, and other tasks. However, it is also noted that in this day and age, their modernization has led to the fact that they now make money from a variety of businesses in addition to farming, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities. In contemporary times, those who pursue education also find employment in both non-governmental and governmental establishments.

5.0. Bilingualism:

The Vaiphei's are bilingual, as many indigenous groups in Northeast India do. Most of them can communicate in Hindi, English, and Manipuri in addition to their native language. It is important to remember that a speaker's educational background and geographic location have a major influence on their level of English fluency. The Vaiphei community in Manipur is proficient in speaking Manipuri, which is the state language. On the other hand, the Vaiphei community in Assam primarily speaks Hindi, a dialect of the language known as Haflong Hindi.

6.0. Language Vitality:

The Vaiphei people have a good and positive attitude towards their mother tongue. They believe that the finest medium for expressing cultural values is their mother tongue. The language is still widely used today for oral literature, cultural ethos, indigenous knowledge systems, and identity. There is no sense of inferiority toward their mother tongue among the young children, even when they speak and use it among themselves. As a result, the community has maintained and made a huge effort to preserve and protect its identity.

Language vitality assessment by UNESCO has several factors which is used to evaluate the vitality of a language and also it checks “whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next (Fishman 1991).”

One of the six main criteria used to assess language vitality is the proportion of speakers. The proportion of speakers in the population as a whole is a one of the key measure of accessing the grade of the language. World atlas of Languages by UNESCO refers Vaiphei as not in use by majority of speaker and so is in the verge of extinction based on many criteria and statistics. As Education mentioned in 3.0 is also the issue which is included in the assessment. There could be a number of reasons for this endangerment, but the most important thing is to treat it seriously and understand the steps that needs to be taken to keep the language from extinction and gradually try to add on the grades utilizing techniques like language maintenance and revitalization processes, among many others.

7.0. Conclusion

The term Vaiphei is thought to have come from the name of the village, Khawvaiphei. Located in Northeast India, the Vaiphei are a hill tribe with a distinct language, culture, and identity. The Vaiphei

language is a member of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, and they are Mongoloids by ethnicity. The Vaiphei people live in Tripura, Assam, Manipur, and Meghalaya. A small number of languages, including Paite, Gangte, Kom, Chothe, and Thadou, exhibit strong affinities with one another as they belong to the same family. Regarding the language that was previously identified as endangered, every member of the tribe ought to be informed of the ways in which it might be preserved. Vaiphei books are written in Roman script using modified alphabets because there is no written script. They have an extensive collection of folktales and oral literature. In addition to their proficiency in handicrafts and cultivation, they also have a strong career orientation and a growing rate of education. Vaiphei are bilingual since they speak other widely spoken languages in addition to their own. Based on different criteria and assessment the language has been registered as about to extinct by UNESCO which is a serious issue and should be addressed and try to work positively and understand the steps that needs to be taken to keep the language from extinction.

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