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Influence of Dravidian Languages on the Bengali Dialect of Barak Valley

Rama Kanta Das, M.Phil., Ph. D.

The Barak Valley

The geographical area which is known as Barak Valley is situated in the southern part of the state of Assam. Apart from two hill districts, i.e. North Cachar Hill and Karbi Anglong Hill, there are two river valleys in Assam – one is Brahmaputra valley after the name of the river Brahmaputra and another is Barak valley after the name of the river Barak. Dr. Suhash Chatterjee said: "...the term 'Barak Valley' is of recent origin. Indeed, Barak valley is the post-partitioned undivided Cachar district in Assam." (Chatterjee: 2000) This comprises of three districts, namely – Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. This valley is the dwelling of various races, tribes and castes, such as *Bengalee*, *Manipuri*, *Assamese*, *Khasi*, *Garo*, *Naga*, *Mizo* or *Lusai*, *Dimasa*, *Sakacheep*, *Chorei*, *Kuki* (old and new) and the various *Janajati* of tea garden. For this variety of demographic pattern this valley is known as the 'Anthropological Garden' among anthropologists and historians.

Research on Barak Valley

The valley is surrounded by the state of Manipur situated in the east, Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the west, North Cachar hill in the North and the state of Mizoram in the south of this region. It covers 6,922 sq. km. which occupies 8.82 percent of the total geographical area of Assam.

Several research works have been done on various aspects of the Barak Valley, such as – *Srihatter Itibritta* (History of Sylhet); *Cacharer Itibritta* (History of Cachar); *Srhatta-*

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Cacharer Prachin Itihas (Ancient History of Sylhet and Cachar); *Barak Upatyakar Loksanskriti* (Folk Culture of Barak valley); *History and Folklore: A Study of the Hindu Folk cult of the Barak Valley of North East India*; etc. But there is no research work in the discipline of Linguistics to explore the Dravidian influences on the language/s of this region though there is enough scope for this type of study.

Language, society and culture are intimately connected with each other. Language can never be separated from society and culture. And hence the language of a caste, tribe or race is used always in the context of that particular society and culture. Therefore the influence of Dravidian languages in the Bengali dialect of Barak valley indicates that the Bengali culture prevailing in this region is also deeply influenced by the Dravidian. The Austric and Mongoloid races had migrated in this valley from time immemorial and in course of time. Numerous archaeological remains and their present settlements also prove their existence from historical age. Regarding Dravidian migration, there is no such historical evidence discovered in this valley. Yet the linguistic influence proves that without any political and geographical boundary or identity, Dravidian culture had deep rooted influence over the Bengali culture and dialect of Barak valley region.

In the present paper we discuss the Dravidian influence on the following:

- i) Place names (ii) Terms relating to flora and fauna; and (iii) Other words.

Place names

The study of Bengali place names will remain quite incomplete without the help of Dravidian linguistic analysis. Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee rightly stated: "In the formation of these names, we find some words which are distinctly Dravidian; e.g. -jola, -jota, joti-jotika etc.; hitti, hitthi-vithi, -hist (h)I, etc.; -gadda, -gaddi; pola-vola and probably also -handa, -vada, -kunda, -kundi, and cavati, cavada, etc. ; ... An investigation of place-names in Bengal, as in other parts of Aryan India, is sure to reveal the presence of non-Aryan speakers, mostly Dravidian, all over the land before the establishment of the Aryan tongue." [Roy: 1993, (Quoted from Chatterjee's 'The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language)]

Dravidian suffixes and prefixes borrowed in the nomenclature of places of Barak valley are – 'ai', 'baita', 'patti', 'kudi', 'kopa', 'kapan', 'khai', 'khola', 'pai', 'koti' etc.

- a) Dravidian 'patti' stands for small village or town. This suffix is used in the place names of this region to denote a lane of a town. Such as – Shillong patti, Rahman patti, Tula patti, etc.
- b) 'Kudi' in Dravidian means home or villa. It used in several place names like Sabirakudi, Chengkudi, Shilkudi, Kanaikudi, etc. of this valley with same meaning.
- c) Tamil 'kuppam' (meaning hillock) > 'kopa', such as – Gabindakupa, Bhatirkupa, Bhitarkupa, Ujankupa, etc.

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- d) Dravidian ‘*baitha*’ meaning settlement, is found as ‘*baitha*’ in one of the place names as prefix – Baithakhal. Baitha – settlement; khal – channel.
- d) ‘*Pur*’ is one of the common suffixes not only of the place names of Barak valley but of the place names of Bengal too. E.g. Mahadevpur, Gavindapur, Shantipur, Kalyanpur, etc. This suffix is derived from Dravidian ‘*ur*’ means “‘town’, which could have the meaning, originally, of a place, ‘where there are many people or many wares’.” (Lahovary : 1963) Dravidian ‘*ur*’ was adopted in Sanskrit as ‘*puram*’ > *pur* (Bengali).
- e) Dravidian ‘*pai*’ means small branch of a river. Using this word twice only one place is named in this region as ‘*paipai*’ meaning a place surrounded by various channel.
- f) The suffix ‘*khai*’ is derived from Dravidian *kabaiyi* > *kaiyi* > *khai*, meaning man made channel. Place names with this suffix are Borakhai, Lakharkhai, Kudikhai, Kamarkhai, etc. In Bengali dialect of Barak valley unaspirated letter is pronounced as aspirated letter, such as – *k* > *kh*; *g* > *gh*; *c* > *ch*; *p* > *ph*; *d* > *dh*; *t* > *th*.
- g) In several place names of Barak valley, Dravidian ‘*jod*’ and ‘*jodi*’ meaning streamlet, is used both as suffix and prefix, e.g. Elongjudi, Chengjud, Boaljudigram, Judbadi etc. ‘O’ phoneme is pronounced as ‘U’ in Barak valley. It is the dialectical characteristics of this valley.
- h) Dravidian ‘*Kalam*’ (Malayalam) and ‘*kol*’ (Kannada) mean threshing-floor. In the place names of this valley ‘*khola*’ is used as both suffix and prefix to indicate widespread field, e.g. Khola, Itkhola, Kholagram, Chankhola, etc.
- i) Dravidian *kaupana* > *kapan*, means fertile land. Place names relating to suffix *kapan* are – Jatkapan, Nagkapan, Kaibartakapan, etc. (Das: 2009)

Terms Relating to Flora and Fauna

- a) In Barak valley, cat is known as ‘*bilai*’ whereas in standard Bengali it is called ‘*Bidal*’. Dialectical word ‘*Bilai*’ is nothing but the corruption of Dravidian ‘*bilal*’ which means cat.
- b) In the Bengali dialect of this valley ‘ram’ or ‘sheep’ is called ‘*meda*’ (masculine gender) and ‘*medi*’ (feminine gender). These two terms seems to have been originated from Dravidian word ‘*merro*’, ‘*mari*’.
- c) A kind of bird in Barak valley is known by the name ‘*kuda*’. The name has been derived from Dravidian ‘*kuru-ku*’ which means bird.

- d) In Dravidian, seed plant is called ‘*sajje*’ and in Barak valley the ear of the paddy is called ‘*hija*’. ‘*Hija*’ is the corruption of ‘*sajje*’: *sajje* > *hajje* > *hijje* > *hija*. Mention may be made that in the dialect of Barak valley ‘*s*’ and ‘*sh*’ are pronounced as ‘*h*’. For Example – ‘*se* > *he*; *sokol* > *hokkol* etc.

Some Other Terms

In standard Bengali, son is called ‘*chele*’ whereas in the dialect of Barak valley son is known by ‘*pula*’. The word ‘*pula*’ has been directly derived from Tamil ‘*pillai*’. Dravidian ‘*akali*’ stands for hunger. In Barak valley, scarcity is called ‘*akal*’ and it is interesting to note that a baby born during the period of scarcity of food is named as ‘*akalir maa*’ (*maa* - mother) or ‘*akalir bap*’ (*bap* – father). Some other examples are given below:

<u>Dravidian origin & meaning</u>		<u>Bengali dialect & meaning</u>
ari (sister)	>	jhiyari (daughter), bouyari (daughter in law)
aria (kinship)	>	adipadi (neighbour)
goda (face)	>	godan (shape of the face)
ur (belly)	>	ur (arms)
kuto (small, lean)	>	kuttimutti (small, lean)
vitu (house)	>	vita (house) etc.

In conclusion we can say that in spite of lacking historical and archaeological evidences about migration of Dravidian people in the Barak valley region of North-east India, the Bengali dialect of this valley had been influenced by Dravidian languages. And it will be interesting to investigate further how and in what situation the Bengali dialect of this valley had come in contact with the Dravidian languages.

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