On the Identity of Toto Community: An Anthropo-linguistic Investigation*

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ABSTRACT

The origin of the Toto community of North Bengal, India and their language have been termed as a ‘mystery’ by many people. The paper aims to understand the history of Toto people and their language by analyzing some traditional oral narratives that are still practised by the community. Along with that, the paper gives a brief analysis of certain grammatical markers of contemporary Toto and tries to point out certain changes in the language based on a documentation of Toto done in the 1940s. The paper also argues that Toto community members can be related to the Proto Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian family. The language was probably modified and mixed with the languages of some other communities that came into contact with the Totos.

1. Introducing Toto Community and Their Language

Toto community, their settlement and language was discovered in early 19th century, earlier the community was in absolute isolation. The language and cultural practices of the Toto community were investigated and discussed by a number of people since then. The earliest account on the community and their language were parts of different surveys conducted by the British government of India. Tags like ‘primitive’, ‘non-civilized’ and ‘wild’ were often associated with the Totos, as the community was not much known to the enlightened people during the British rule. After independence of India in 1947, the governmental agencies of India initiated some development schemes for different communities including the Totos. It made the community accessible to the non-dwellers of the Toto speaking area. Adjacent communities often term them ‘civilized’ at present. Along with the changes in mobility pattern and access to development practices, the community also changed its cultural practices and their language. Health conditions and mortality rates of the community members have been improved comparatively recently as reflected in various statistical data. The community has increased the number of members presently. 1951 census recorded 321 members while 1531 members

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were recorded in the year 2015. Still, the language of the Totos is labeled as ‘critically endangered’ according to the UNESCO language vitality index. At present, isolation and survival are not the only enemies for the community. Rather, threats from dominant languages and culture are pressurizing the Totos to change its culture and language and contributing to the ‘endangered’ tag to its existence.

Toto is termed as a Tibeto-Burman language which is spoken at a small village named Totopara at Alipurduar district in West Bengal. The village is located at Indo-Bhutan border at the height of around 2000 feet. The village is isolated by forest area and river Howri. The nearest town Madarihat is located at a distance of 21 kilometers from the village. Six months in a year, the Howri river is flooded and Totopara remains isolated as it is difficult to cross the river. The location of the village is the following: Tading village of Bhutan and Kalikhola orange orchard in the north, forest area in the south, Torsa river in the east and Bhutan mountains and forest of Duars in the west. Totopara village has 1996.96 acres of area. The village is divided in seven habitats or Bastis by small streams of water. The streams have bridges now that made the frequent contact between the hamlets possible.

Existence of Toto community was not known before 1815. The community was discovered by British Government employee Babu Kishen Kanta Bose in the year 1815 while conducting area survey. During 1889-94, Sunder surveyed some part of Duars and prepared a small report. It is believed that the Totos live at their present habitation since 18th century; they were nomadic hunter-gatherer group earlier.

Grunning (1916) mentioned ‘The Totos are a ‘curious race’ whose village is built on a hill called by them as ‘Badoo’, about 5 miles from the Huntapara tea-garden. There are only about forty houses of them left and they do not know whence they came, nor of what race they spring, though they allege that they have been at Totopara for many generations. They have a language of their own ..they associate little with other races, they can only speak a few words of Bengali and it is very difficult to communicate with them.’ A survey on their language was done in 1890 as a part of Linguistic Survey of India (LSI), Vol. 3 part I by Grierson (1909). Details of the language were not given in LSI. Grierson (1909:250) mentioned that ‘They are considered to have immigrated from Bhutan. They are a very wild tribe and no non-Totos know their language. There is said to be only one Toto in existence who knows a little Bengali besides his own language.’ He found only one member of the community who can communicate in some Bengali. Partial translation of a Toto text is available in LSI.

The affinity of the Totos with other communities has not been understood properly. Basu (1995:17) stated that as the old members of Toto community informed, after the battle with the Rabhas

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1 Regarded as Trans-Himalayan languages in recent days.
2 Basu (1995: 11) mentioned that the old members from Toto community informed that they used to stay at one place and collect resources from there, after some days they moved to a new place for resources. They used to hunt and eat flesh of the animals.
only 13 Totos were alive. The present sub-groups of Toto are named after those 13 people. It is assumed that during the Indo-Bhutan war the Totos had migrated again. At that time Totos had settled at four different habitations of Duars.

Toto people of Totopara speak a language which is called ‘Dengaka’ by them. However, their language is termed as ‘Toto’ by others. It is the name that is used to refer to the community. A number of other languages are spoken at Totopara at present. In Grierson’s time it was reported that the community speak only their own language. Presently, Toto community members are multilingual in nature, as they are not an isolated community anymore in terms of mobility, development and communication. Nepali is the most frequently used language. Nepali is used outside the home domains of the Toto people for communication with other community members. Bangla is also spoken in the village as it is the official language of the state of West Bengal. Though Bangla is used for the signboards of Tribal welfare department, heath centre, school and co-operative bank of the state, people continue to use Nepali as the lingua franca. In fact, most of the Toto community members are sequential bilinguals where Nepali is acquired after Toto. There are settlers of other communities (the other community members speak, for example, Oraon, Marwari, eastern Hindi, Bangla, Sadri etc.) in Totopara. As a result, Toto community members also occasionally communicate in Rabha, Garo, Mech, Rajbanshi, Tamang, Sadri etc. As the village is located at Bhuran border, many of the community members regularly go to Bhutan to work at orange orchards, road construction sites and factories. Some of the community members can speak and understand Doya and Dzonkha spoken at Bhutan as a result. The community has high degrees of multilingualism which is mostly sequential in nature.

Toto community members used to marry among themselves and in Dhimal community earlier. At present, some of them are marrying members of other communities. As a result, children of the next generation are becoming simultaneous bilinguals of Toto and Santali/Rajbanshi/Tamang. Nepali and Bangla are acquired later by these children.

The community has started to experience major changes in its linguistic behavior in the new globalized world. Access to television and internet brought changes in the linguistic behavior. Bollywood songs are popular among the young members at present. But it is interesting to note that when the globalized world offered different accessible languages through new media to the community members, most of them have chosen Nepali as the language of entertainment. Women listen to Nepali songs through radio channels or downloaded youtube videos when they work at maize fields and orange orchards or cook at the kitchen and feed their domesticated pigs.

The nature of multilingualism is unique among the Toto community members. Access to different language is available through interaction with other communities and mobility patterns of the members. The paper aims to:

a) Understand the history of Toto community members by analyzing some traditional oral narratives that are still practiced by the members.

b) Review certain grammatical markers of contemporary Toto to understand the language change perspective. Analysis of certain grammatical markers of contemporary spoken Dengaka/Toto and Toto spoken in the 1940s can also help to understand how their language was modified.

c) Argue that Toto community speaks a language that was probably related to proto-Sino-Tibeto Burman-Austronesian. The language was probably modified (and mixed) as the community was in contact with other Speech Communities as result of migration.

It can be inferred that the community has migrated a long way and the migration altered the morphosyntactic features of the language. The language of the Totos may have got influence from the Brahmaputran languages of Tibeto-Burman group as they migrated through Sino-Tibetan area and settled at the northern part of Bengal.
2. Fragmented History of the Toto Community

It has been mentioned by different sources at different times that only some fragmented history of the Totos is available. Nothing is known about their origin and homeland. It has been found that David Scott, the collector of Rangpur (presently in Bangladesh) sent a British Government employee Babu Kishen Kanta Bose to Bhutan government in the year 1815. Bose found a tribal group called Toto in Lukepur village of Falakata Tahsil, Western Duars. Probably, Toto is a name given to the group by outsiders, not a name that is given by the community itself.

Four areas were reported as the habitation of the Totos: Totopara in Falakata, Tatpara in Alipurduar, Totpara near Dhupguri, and Tatgaon in Mal. It can be assumed that Totos migrated from Bhutan to Lukepur village at Falakata and Tatpara at Bhatabari, Alipurduar. Totopara in Banarhat area were probably displaced for tea garden construction. The settlement near Mal area was probably affected because of the course change of the river Teesta. Totos reside at only one village called Totopara, Madarihat at present. All the habitations of the community were situated near a river and forest, even the present settlement is not an exception. After the Indo-Bhutan war, Totopara village (1027.36 acres) was recorded and tax of 60 rupees was granted.

Mitra (1951) termed Totos as a ‘rare race’. He mentioned that they live in only one village of the world and their origin is not known. Mitra also mentioned that they are different from the Bhutia, Mech, Garo and Rajbanshis who reside in northern Bengal. Bhutia domination began from the same time perhaps. Roy Burman (1959) in his detailed ethnographic account of the Totos mentioned that the Bhutias used to have conflict with other communities and carry them as slaves. The Duars came under the control of Bhutias and Totos probably had migrated as they were slaves of the Bhutias. Sanyal (1955) stated that Totos are a distinct tribe, but they are culturally similar with the Bhutanese people. Anglo-Bhutan war (1864-65) allowed many communities to migrate. Apart from that, establishment of tea gardens forced some communities to migrate in Duars area. Indian Forest Preservation Act (1886) also influenced many communities as the use of forest resources became controlled.

Sanyal (1955:67) talked about the older Toto settlements in detail where he mentioned, ‘Although the Totos are now found only a single village there is evidence of other Toto settlements in Western Duars, a tract of country spreading from the river Teesta on the west up to the river on the east, within the district of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. The old settlements generally lie along the old road from Champasuri ferry ghat on the river Teesta within the deep Chumkdangi forest of Baikunthapur at the northern apex of the districts of Jalpaiguri through the forests of western duars to Alipurduar and thence to Santosh ferry on the border of Assam.’ Sanyal mentioned that Totos always settled near rivers where water was plentiful for their settlement.

Roy Burman (1959) thought that Totos came from Deingcho region of Bhutan and the eighth generation was residing at Totopara during his visit to Totopara in the late 1950s. Though there has been no clue on the origin and homeland of the Toto community, Toto has been termed as a Tibeto-Burman language. Glottolog resources (2017) mentioned Driem (2001) who has added Toto to the Dhimalish (including Toto and Dhimal) to the Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw group of languages, which is categorized under Brahmaputran languages.

It is found from different sources that the Totos have changed their habitations a several times and they have always settled near rivers. The whole area of western duars was under Bhutan till 1865. Culture pressure from other communities (Rajbanshi, Mech etc.), attack of Malaria and other diseases drove them out from different settlements. The present habitation was probably chosen by the community as it is secluded, surrounded by hills. Isolation helped the community to preserve their language and some cultural practices.

Chatterji (1951) mentioned that when the Aryans arrived at North Bengal and Assam, a group
of people called Kiratas were located at Bhutan, Nepal and Sikim who speak Tibeto-Burman languages of the great Bodo group. These two groups had conflict for supremacy of hills and plain. At fifteenth century, they were drove out by Tibetans who took possession of whole Bhutan and duars, These Tibetan rulers were called Bhutias. In 1772, Bhutan took control over Coach Behar and the Raj of Coach Behar asked help from the East India Company. A treaty was signed between Coach Behar state and the East India Company in 1773. But the Bhutias still came to western duars to carry slaves. Bhutan war 1864-65 demarcated the boundaries of Bhutan and British India. Totopara was included in newly formed Jalpaiguri district in 1869.

The Totos were termed as ‘appear to be a distinct tribe’ (Sanyal, 1955:72). They were not put in Bodo group where Koch, Rajbanshi, Mech, Garo etc. were included. The Lepchas and other sub-Himalayan tribes were put in group of Tibeto Burman speakers who speak a non-pronominalized class (as reported as LSI). Totos were provisionally put in this group. In has been found that in terms of dress and other cultural markers they have been related to Lokhe or Bhutanese but it has been mentioned that they have characters of their own.

Different accounts by different people are found on the possible identity of the Toto community and their language. Yes, no specific conclusion has been drawn on the identity of the Totos. They have been termed as Mongoloid people who speak Tibeto-Burman language.

3. Tibeto-Burman Language Family: Some Questions

Van Driem (2002) discussed the history of the development of the Tibeto-Burman language family. In 18th century, it was found that Tibetan and Burmese languages are genetically related. Van Dreim (ibid) mentioned Klaproth (1823) who suggested that Tibeto-Burman and Chinese have common roots excluding certain Daic and Austro-Asiatic languages. Later, Sinitic and Daic languages were grouped together. There was a change in ideas regarding the role of Sinitic languages in Tibeto-Burman family.

![Figure 2: Tree 1 = Tibeto-Burman languages, Dreim, 2002](image1)

![Figure 3: Tree 2 = Sino-Tibetan Languages, Dreim, 2002](image2)
The diagrams above portray changes in the classifications of the language family. There were difficulties in deciding the status of Sinitic language as some people considered Sinitic representing a different phylum. According to Van Dreim (2002:234) ‘The separate treatment meted out to Sinitic by proponents of Indo-Chinese and the inclusion of the genetically distinct Daic languages can in retrospect be attributed to the misguided emphasis placed on typological features, the ignorance of Sinitic historical phonology, the inability at the time to distinguish between borrowed from inherited vocabulary in Thai, and the fact that the limited repertoire of reflexes of Tibeto-Burman morphological processes in Chinese had not yet been generally recognized.’

There were debates regarding the inclusion of Daic languages in Sino-Tibetan family. Sinitic was regarded as a separate trunk in the Sino-Tibetan family, but Sinitic was regarded as closely allied with some Tibeto-Burman languages of Bodic and Kiranti groups. It should be mentioned at this point that a number of languages from northern Bengal have been regarded as Bodo and Kiranti group of languages, but in depth analysis of the features of these languages may put them into a different group of languages.

In reality, it was difficult to differentiate between languages of probable different origin that co-occur. Driem (2002) explained the situation with an analogy of patch of leaves on the forest floor:

‘The patch of forest leaves provides a more informative framework than a false tree.’ (Ibid: 236) The idea of false tree is important to note at this point, because it was possible to create and establish relationship between languages on the basis of superficial linguistic features. Tibeto-Burman shares the East-Euresian area with many other linguistic stocks like Daic, Austroasiatic, Altaic, Indo-European, Dravidian, Hmong-men and a number of isolates. So, the analogy of fallen leaves on forest floor seems to be more useful than describing the situation by assuming the existence of certain trees. Because, when languages of different stocks co-occur at a space, there is diffusion of structural and lexical features across families. It makes the genetic affinities of languages blur; there is cultural

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Recently, Abbi (2015) mentioned the discovery of Tai Kadai group of languages following Sharma (2014). Tai Kadai languages of India have been reported to have different structural properties from Tibeto-Burman languages.
diffusion as well. The analogy of the patch of fallen leaves can also be helpful to understand the situation of many Tibeto-Burman languages of northeastern India as languages of different typological features co-exist. It is important to note here that the British surveys conducted in the northeastern part of India noted phenotypic difference among the speakers of Brahmaputran languages.

Linguists and archeologists have tried to understand such situations together to understand the history of different communities who have been labeled as ‘Tibeto-Burman’ by various sources. Hazarika (2006) stated that as British archeologist Cunningham did not attempt any archeological survey in formidable forest-clad hilly regions of northeast, many archeologists-anthropologists-historians are not aware of the detailed background of this area. Local people are also ignorant about their past. Hazarika (ibid) quoted Dreim (1998) regarding the link of archeological-linguistic investigations: ‘The first migration/split within the language family out of this area (Szechwan Yunnan) was the migration of the western Tibeto-Burman to the fluvial plains of the lower Brahmaputra and the surrounding hill-tracks. Neolithic implements found in this area represent artifacts of the Eastern Indian Neolithic, for which neither calibrated nor stratigraphic dates are available.’

It has been assumed that the Tibeto-Burman population of northeast India creates a Neolithic cultural complex that originated in Sichuan (area comprising of the upper courses of the Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze where the run parallel). sino-Austronesian archeological records led to the conjecture of sino-Austronesian theory proposed by Sagart. The theory suggested that the early Neolithic culture of southern China comprised of people who were millet cultivators who belong to a different origin and homeland.

Sagart proposed that Proto-Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian (PSTAN) was spoken by early farmers who migrated southward and eastward and adapted to a wetter environment. According to Sagart, ‘A migration brought some of these eastern dialect speakers to Taiwan, reached by 5,500 B.P. There their language began to diversify into the modern Austronesian languages. As to the Tai-Kadai languages, which show a strong evidence of relatedness with the austronesian languages, I have hypothesized that they are not a sister group of austronesian having remained on the mainland when the pre-Austronesian migrated to Taiwan, but a daughter group of Austronesian, sharing some innovations with the Malayo-Polynesian languages.’ Sagart looked at the cultural vocabulary of the migrated people.

Bellwood (2005) can be quote at this point: ‘Austro-Asiatic, Sino-Tibetan and Austronesian previously underwent major expansions. Linguistic dating estimates for the foundation of the proto-languages of these languages indicate ages generally between 7000 and 4000 years ago, post hunter-gatherer and pre-iron, in cultural items.’ Bellwood believed that the two main language families of

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4 mantos.web.elte.hu/sinotib/page1.pdf for the reference
5 Neolithics maintained contact with rice cultivators. Impression of rice contained in ceramic vessel was found from Yangsho from around 6th millennium B.C.
6 It is important to keep in mind that the existence of the seventh language family of India has been found recently (Abbi, 2015) with the discovery of Tai-Khamti languages of northeastern India that belong to the Tai-Kadai language family. The languages are spoken in Burma. Four Tai-Kadai languages have been found in India, most of them are endangered. Khamti has around 13,100 speakers, Phake has 5000 speakers, Aiton has 1500 speakers and Khanyang has 50 speakers. All four Tai-Kadai languages are spoken at Assam in India. There is a need to examine whether Toto is related to this family, as Toto shares some linguistic features with those languages. Abbi (2015) mentioned the following features of Tai-Khamti languages of India: isolation morphology, SVO word order, lack of distinction between alienable and inalienable possession, presence of associative plurals, presence of enclitics and words indicating tense, aspect and mood at the end of a sentence.

7 Sagart used Swadesh’s 100 word list, Yakonthov’s 35 word list for basic vocabulary data.
Neolithic Southeast Asia were probably Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic. It has been stated that the time period of migration of the Austro-Asiatic speakers have not been dated until now, but it is assumed to be earlier than the Tibeto-Burman speakers.

Bhattacharya (2016:63) talked about the fact that Austro-Asiatic languages originated in South East Asia and arrived in India. It was stated that, ‘...the study of language origins has taken an explosive ‘genetic turn’ within the last decade or so, with the result that there is now a vast literature that has redefined the boundaries of the discipline studying language origins.’ It has also been mentioned that now it is believed that a ‘genetic boundary’ seems to exist that corresponds closely to the linguistic boundary between north and south-west/south-east Chinese languages. Following Sagart, Bhattacharya (ibid: 66) mentioned that southern Chinese divergence is due to the ‘Austric’ gene flow following colonization of south China. Bhattacharya mentioned the following: ‘There are two views on the origin and migration of this language (Van Dreim 2001; Fuller, 2007; Kumar et.al 207; Chabuy et. al 2011), The first view states Southeast Asia as its place of origin and their subsequent migration to South Asia during the Neolithic (Higam, 2003), whereas pre-Neolithic organized dispersal of this language family from South Asia was hypothesized by the second view (Fuller, 2007’).

A number of researchers claimed that Austronesian originated at the South East Asia and entered India through north-east. It is claimed that the Munda branch of Austro-Asiatic group was originated in India and the Mon-Khmer branch was migrated from South-East Asia. In this regard, it is important to find if there are more languages in India, apart from the Mon-Khmer group, who can be considered as a member of Austronesian group. One needs to understand if some languages of India have still not been attested as Austroneisan.

The present paper assumes that Totos from Totopara, Northern Bengal might have a Proto-Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian link. It can be assumed that the language of the Totos have been originated from South East Asia too and probably migrated to India via Southern China, Nepal and/or Bhutan. It can be assumed until further research that the language of the Totos originally belonged to an Austronesian group. They have later adopted the creolized Tibeto-Burman speech or Boro-Garo creoloid speech (Delancey, 2010) and modified due to a long term contact with Brahmaputran languages. The paper presents two supportive arguments to establish the claim: one supportive argument can be given following a number of cultural practices of the Toto community along with analyzing the content of traditional songs, another supportive argument in based on certain observations of the language change perspectives of Toto/Dengaka.

4. Cultural Practices and Ethnomusicological Data: Supportive Tool to Trace the Probable Origin of the Totos

For the present study, advertising texts from topmost IIT coaching institutes from Kota were selected. Data drawn from sources such as advertisements, brochures, pamphlets, websites, social media etc. and was analyzed. Under linguistic analysis of advertising language used by IIT Coaching Institutes in Kota, Phonological characteristics and Semantic characteristics, and emotive language were analyzed. For the graphological / the graphitic use of punctuations, color, images, figures and numbers and their usage was studied.

The argument that Toto might have originated from a probable Austronesian link or Proto-Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian source needs more supportive data. Data from cultural practices, oral narrative and ethnomusicological analysis help to create a ground for the argument.
Basu (1995: 16) mentioned some oral narratives of Totos regarding their past in her study on the oral narratives of Toto. She listed some verses used for worship and some songs that are sung during the ceremonies. She did not give gloss of the songs, Bangla translations have been given with the Toto songs written in Bangla script. By understanding the structural aspects of Toto, the texts seem to be partially clear and intelligible.

Lahiri and Piplai Mondal (in press) tried to understand the changes in Toto songs and noticed a number of interesting features of the songs composed by Totos. It was found that:

- Toto community members have two distinct types of songs in practice.
- The old songs are known by only a few members and the language is not intelligible to them.
- The new songs have a different pattern from the old songs that have been recorded.
- A notation analysis of two types of songs revealed that the new songs are structurally similar to Nepali popular songs while the older songs have its own structure.
- The new songs have different functions as well. The new songs are composed on contemporary social issues while the old songs have certain themes.

The Toto community members believe that the older/traditional songs are learnt by only a few members and the songs are learnt through dreams. The acquisition of knowledge through dreams has been mentioned by Roy Burman (1959:515) where he mentioned a story about the Pawo (who knows how to cure illness through divine order). The Pawo saw the God (Ishipa) dressed like a Bhutia lama in his dreams and he saw that the God performed certain types of dances. Next morning, the person mentioned the dream to Kaji or the head priest. The songs are learnt similarly through dreams. There is a separate category among the Totos called Leh-Gemi. The Leh-Gemis achieve their post at different points. The Leh-Gemis also saw Ishipa in their dreams where Ishipa gave them a book to read. They inform the priest that they have learnt the songs. During the next Wunchu festival, they are allowed the sing the songs. Sometimes the priest also gets a dream that certain person is now entitled to sing songs. All Leh-Gemis do not have mastery over all the songs.

The interpretation and source of these dreams were not clear when some of the informants mentioned their experiences of learning songs through dreams. An old lady informed that she learnt the songs through dreams when she was around twenty years old. She mentioned that she has taught the songs to another lady who lives in a far off place, but she didn’t teach the songs to her own daughter. Another younger member of the community mentioned that he learnt the songs but he did not understand the language of those songs. The language is a very old language and the name of the language is not known to him, as mentioned by the informant.

The role of songs was vaguely understood. Roy Burman (1959)’s mention of supernatural beliefs among Toto community members can be a clue but not sufficient in this regard. So, there was a need to understand the concept of dreamtime as an instrument of knowledge.

It is extremely important to note that the concept of ‘dreamtime’ is considered as a religio-cultural worldview in the belief of the Australian aboriginals, who belong to Austronesian group too. In aboriginal beliefs, dreamtime is related to their ancestral knowledge and there are performances related to the ancestral knowledge which is termed as Wangga Geme. There are certain song-men who are eligible to perform; only a few men in a generation are recognized as the singers during these performances. Aboriginal people believe that in the beginning of time, in the dreaming, the world was flat. As time progressed, creatures emerged from ground and they had the power to change from an...
animal to a human form. Humans created songs to sing and teach the knowledge to others. The ancestral knowledge that are to be passed across generations and time contain some themes: power of soil, history of their own lives, songs to heal the wounded or sick, injuring enemy including rain, arresting the flood and causing the wind to turn back etc. It is believed that the power is accessible to present inhabitants when the spirits of ancestors are drawn towards his own identification of song (also acts and design) on a particular occasion.

The songs have short verses and a characteristic of melodic forms in areas with different languages and musical techniques. It is thought that when a visitor of afar fails to understand the meaning of a song, he/she can determine from the musical structure, to which totemic line the song belongs. The songs have the following content:

- ‘The land is my mother, my mother is the land’
- ‘The land is our food, our culture, our spirit and identity’
- ‘We don’t have boundaries like fences, as farmers do. We have spiritual connections.’
- ‘Everything was created in our dreamtime’ etc.

The Aboriginal Art and Culture Centre in Alice Springs, Australia stores the aboriginal music that is 40,000 year old. The aboriginal beliefs related to dreams are the source of their ancestral knowledge. The knowledge is not only related to the creation, the dreamtime songs also have the history of migration of the aboriginals. The songs store the routes of migration as well.

The Toto songs of dreamtime are also performed by certain chosen song-men who can perform them during occasions. The songs of the Totos have mention of certain geographical locations that can help one to track their route of migration. It has been mentioned earlier that not much is known regarding the origins and migrations of Totos.

Let us look at the following Toto dream song mentioned in Basu (2006):

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9 as found from aboriginalart.com.au
10 The old Toto songs have similarities with songs of the Santals, an indigenous Austric groups of India.
Aboriginal songs pass ancestral knowledge from one generation to another through songs. Toto people probably preserve their ancestral knowledge through songs too. The origin of the Toto songs has yet not been discovered, and the language is not intelligible to the present day community members. A number of words from the songs whose languages have not been deciphered included some unknown words that resemble some places names, which probably indicates some routes of migration. As different communities of the world have retained their knowledge of their ancestors in cultural practices, storing the knowledge of migration routes through songs is possible for the Toto community.

The Toto dreamtime songs have mention of some words that resembles certain places of their probable travel route: Mekong, Wallaga, Tungning hills and Langtang (from the words of traditional songs recorded by Basu, 2006) If we consider those words as place names, then we find the following: Wallaga is located at southern Australia which is the homeland of the aboriginals; Mekong is a river that is flown through Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma and Southern China. A place called Langtang is also found in the songs which probably refer to a location at Nepal. The songs mention Tung ning hill (Basu, 2006:152). Tung ning hill probably refers to a location of Taiwan was habitation of Taiwan aboriginals in 17th century. Totos have a song using a probable place name ‘Tung Tung’ indicating disappearance of cranes that destroy crops. The place can probably be located Taiwan. Only partial reconstructions of the songs are possible, but partial reconstruction of the songs can help us to reconstruct a possible route of the Toto migration.

Roy Burman (1959) described certain themes of the dream songs that are performed during festivals. These are:

- Sadu: Songs for energy of the moon
- Jemo: Songs of energy of the sun
- Samasuti: Disappearance of bushes
- Tungtung Gamo: Disappearance of cranes that destroy crops
- Tashe: Blessing of Ishpa

Apart from the songs, some cultural information has also been recorded in the traditional Toto knowledge that can give clues regarding their origin, which can help us to reconstruct their language.

- Badoo Hill is the source of birth and death by the Totos (Basu, 1995:173). According to the aboriginal culture, ‘Badu’ is the focus of the moiety sequence. Interestingly, there is an island named Badoo in the pacific which is the homeland of aboriginal tribes.
- Death rituals have use of a stick in aboriginal cultures. Toto people have a death ritual where women have to carry stick for few days after death (Basu,ibid).
- Toto people have migrated from Bhutan via China, but they are millet cultivators. Earlier, it has been discussed that the proto Austronesian people were millet cultivators which has been evident from archeological sources.
- Different habitations of the Totos in northern Bengal compelled Sanyal (1955) to conjecture that the community has always settled near rivers. Dependence on river culture and including worship of rivers can help one to understand the importance of water and river in the daily life of the Totos.

Influence of Buddhism is evident in Toto community has been understood by some ethnographic accounts. Roy Burman (1959) mentioned the presence of Lamas in Toto society. It has been found that
Tamang lamas came to Totopara and gave some papers where dragon was drawn. *Ishpa* has been manifested in the dreams in a disguise of Bhutia lama. It can be inferred that the Toto community has adopted a number of Tibetan/Chinese/Bhutanese cultural components in their cultural that made them look similar to many other Tibeto-Burman speakers. It can also be inferred that along with the amalgamation of Tibetan/Chinese cultural factors, Totos have also altered their language.

Bielmier (2003) in the review of Van Dreim’s book ‘On the Languages of the Himalayas and their Links (nearly) around the World’ (2001) mentioned that many languages spoken in the Himalayas have ties to language stocks far beyond the region. The languages of Himalayan region have roots from western Iran to China, the Malay Peninsula and Vietnam in the east and even beyond into the Pacific Ocean by touching the Austronesian languages. The review mentioned that, ‘The basic problem is to correlate systematically linguistic and prehistorical archaeological data. I think, the author is aware of this when he writes...in addition to information on language communities, present speculations about prehistory and the ethnolinguistic identity of cultural assemblages identifiable in the archaeological record (p. IX). And it is only natural that this overview does not therefore pretend to be the last word on the subject. Much of the rich ethnolinguistic heritage of the Himalayas still awaits discovery, and what is written here will require enhancement and revision’ (p. X). (Bielmier, 2003:95)

5. Analyzing Some Aspects of Toto/Dengaka Language

Toto is labeled as unrelated to other Tibeto-Burman languages as the basic vocabulary system and some parts of Toto grammar do not match with the other Tibeto-Burman languages of the surrounding (Rabha, Garo, Mech etc.). Toto morphology has the following features that can be discussed in this regard. According to Delancey (2010), reorganization of an originally Tibeto-Burman grammar needs in-depth research. It has been mentioned that the Bodo-Garo was a vehicle of languages across the Brahmaputra valley. The paper mentioned that more complex morphosyntactic systems are due to the retention of original or old features of languages, and less complex features are due to reversion towards a creoloid structures. The paper suggested that Boro-Garo was introduced in this area in 1st millennium BCE and it became a lingua franca in 4th-6th millennium BCE. Probably Toto has kept some remnants of their ancestral language as they remained isolated for a longer time. Later, they followed the similar pattern where the language has become creolized and undergone a linguistic change due to language contact.

Delancey (ibid) mentioned that to avoid complexities related to reconstruction of Tibeto-Burman languages (traditionally regarded as a branch of Sino Tibetan family), the term Trans-Himalayan is used instead of using the term Sino-Tibetan. Many Trans-Himalayan languages have been reported to lose complexity, but archaic forms have been found in the languages that remained isolated.

Toto can be termed as a Trans-Himalayan language which has preserved some archaic forms. Again, some forms have probably been altered due to contact with other languages. For example, the lingua franca, which is probably the Bodo-Garo creolized speech spoken in northern Bengal.

Modification of certain morphosyntactic features were found from the languages by the Totos in 1940s and the language spoken by them in recent days.

Toto uses the plural maker ‘bi’ now which has not been mentioned by Sanyal (1955). Sanyal mentioned the following plural markers with the pronouns.

- ka (I), ka-nina (we)
- nôti (you-sg/plu)
- a-pe (he), lotaumumi (they)
The contemporary Toto has been simpler in terms of plurality, where ‘bi’ is used for all persons to denote plurality. ‘bi’ refers to a group in Toto as the different clan members are named by adding a ‘bi’ with their clan names, e.g. Dantrobi, Digbi, Nugbi etc.

a. Case markers of Toto can also be helpful in understanding the typology. The following Toto case markers have been mentioned by Sanyal (1955:101):

Dative: to
Genitive: -ko
Ablative: sho

It has been mentioned that Toto does not have distinct markers for accusative, instrumental and locative cases.

The following case markers have been found in contemporary Toto:

Dative: lagi  Genitive: ko, ng  Ablative: so  Instrumental: so  Locative: ta

Ablative as well as instrumental case markers have shown syncretism in present day Toto. A distinct locative marker has been added. Genitive case has two different markers.\textsuperscript{11}

b. Toto/Dengaka uses a number of sentence final particles. A number of works on Toto mentioned that Toto has word final particles that carry information on Tense, Aspect and Mood. Basu (1995) mentioned that present tense is marked by the marker ‘ro’, past is marked by the marker ‘mi’ and future is marked with ‘ga’. It has also been mentioned that ‘ga’ particle is used with interrogative sentences, ‘pa’ with imperative sentences, ‘cha’ with conditional sentences. There are some more sentences final particles, e.g. ‘ko’, ‘ti’, ‘to’ etc. In Chakraborty (2006), the role of the particles is not clear. ‘mi’ has been termed as ‘present’ and ‘ro’ has been termed as marker for future within the verb phrase. It can be observed that the same particles have been identified as markers for different tenses by different people.

Different accounts of these sentence final particles have been given in Sanyal (1955) where it has been mentioned that: simple present tense is formed after adding the word ‘ro’ after the verb, simple past is formed by adding the word ‘mi’ after the verb and simple future is formed by adding the word ‘ga’ after the verb. It has also been mentioned by Sanyal (ibid) that the present progressive is almost like the simple future.

The paper assumes that the contradictory accounts on the particles have been found as the generalization of the particles is not dependent on tense/aspect, but the focus is on modality. It has a rich pattern of modality where deontic, dynamic and epistemic modality are expressed with certain markers.\textsuperscript{12} Toto/Dengaka particles represent the following modality patterns:

- **ro**: deontic modal marker, represents present progressive and future together.
- **ga**: dynamic modal marker, represents dynamicity of the verb
- **na**: deontic modal marker, represents past event that is still continuing
- **mi**: epistemic modal marker, denotes some epistemic information

Mei (2002) in the article on the expression on time in Tibeto-Burman mentioned non-prefixive ‘ro’

\textsuperscript{11} Himmelmann (2005) gave examples of some Phillipine-type Austronesian languages where genitive marker is –ng. Toto uses –ng as genitive marker. Tagalog uses –ko as possessive marker and –sa as ablative marker. These two examples can also help in reconstructing Toto morphosyntax. There is a need to figure out if Toto uses some case markers that are different from Tibeto-Burman languages.

\textsuperscript{12} Cheng (https://sites.ualberta.ca/~icl2013/ABSTRACTS/Cheng.pdf) discussed similar type of deontic modality in Kanakanavu and Mayrinax Atayav, two Austronesian languages from the viewpoint of a cognitive framework. It has been stated that these two languages have a typical deontic modal expression which has a unique lexical source that refers to habitual actions that are strongly expected to occur in the future. Necessity expressions and planned actions never happened as the core meaning of the lexical source.
particle that denotes ‘upstream’ and marks a realis-irrealis distinction. Toto uses the same particle probably.

c. Benedict (1976) mentioned that interrogative particle in proto-Sino-Tibetan was ‘ga’. Toto sentence final particle ‘ga’ is a question particle.

It has been observed that Toto has undergone some changes in past few decades. It is assumed that the language has undergone some changes over a long time that altered its structure.

6. Endangerment of a Non-Attested Group: How Critical?

UNESCO termed Toto as ‘Critically endangered’ in terms of vitality index. Number of speakers played a role in determining the status. Link with Austronesian aboriginal culture and language can add a different layer to the vitality status of the speech community.

It has already been mentioned that presently Totopara is a sub-himalayan multi-ethnic forest village where there are Bengali, Nepali, Rajbanshi, Mech, Rabha, Garo, Lepcha, Marwari, Bihari community members. Toto speakers of the present generation are connected to the world outside the village. Some of them have studied at Kalimpong at Darjeeling district and Coach Bihar town. Many of the community members travel outside the village. They have regular access to Nepali and Bollywood songs through radio, television and 3G internet. Geographical isolation does not act as a barrier to the community’s life presently. Members of Toto community use different languages for different domains: Toto at home (mixed marriages led to some community members to use Santali, Nepali, Bangla at home), Nepali at village (also Sadri at haat or market), Bangla at school etc.

7. Concluding remarks

The paper claims that Toto can be related to Proto-Sino Tibetan- Austronesian language. It can be assumed that the language of Totos has been modified by different languages due to long term contact. It is also assumed that the language will be altering due to Indo-Aryan influence (Bangla and Nepali) in future, as the community is functionally multilingual at present.
• Though Totos are considered as hill tribe, the community has different tools for fishing and different practices for preparing fish to eat.

• It has been mentioned that Totos reside on a hill which is termed as ‘Badoo’ by them. Interestingly, it has been found that Badu is the name for moiety sequence of the aboriginals. There is an island called Badu as well in the aboriginal area, where the housing pattern resembles with the Totos. Badu hill is the source of birth and death according to Toto belief.

• There are similarities in death rituals as well. Aboriginal groups use a stick after death of a family member. In Toto community, women carry stick after certain days of a death in family.

Instances of changes reflected in certain grammatical markers of Toto were observed from a data source of 1940s and the data collected from contemporary Toto speakers. It has been observed that a number of forms (plural markers, case markers etc) have been altered. It can be inferred that the markers have been altered due to contact with adjacent languages. Thus, it can be argued that the language of Toto community has altered as the community came in contact with different communities. The Boro-Garo creolized speech probably put a mark over the language. Interestingly, the cultural practices retained the clue that can help one to probe whether Toto originated from Proto-Sino Tibetan- Austronesian or not.

The assumption that the songs of Toto community give clue of their probable homeland, following the concept of dreamtime, needs to be verified. The perspectives of language change can be observed based on the data mentioned and the assumption that the Speech Community adopted a Trans-Himalayan creoloid speech can be a complementary understanding. At this point it is important to share the findings of a genome study of the Toto community. Sarkar et. al (2016) found that Y-Chromosomal Haplogroup of Toto community members revealed the presence of parental lineage ‘D’ which has a highest frequency in central and south Asia (including Japan). So, the assumption of the Austronesian link of the Totos can be supported by the genome study data.

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