

# **PART I: PRELIMINARIES TO RECONSTRUCTION**

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1. Methodological goals

The goals of this study are (1) to articulate a method for reconstructing linguistic history in a dialect continuum, and (2) to demonstrate the efficacy of the method by reconstructing the history of a subgroup of Indo-Aryan: Kamta, Rajbanshi and Northern Deshi Bangla.

Indo-Aryan has been the subject of some major historical linguistic studies using the classical methods of the philological and etymological study of old texts (e.g. Bloch 1920, Chatterji 1926), and occasionally also the Comparative Method (e.g. Southworth 1958, Pattanayak 1966, Maniruzzaman 1977). The philological approach is limited to lects possessing a historical corpus of written literature—which rules out the majority of New Indo Aryan lects—and even then the method is fraught with problems.<sup>1</sup> Notable amongst these are:

(1) the difficulty of drawing conclusions from ancient writings about the vernaculars of the time when these writings are often intentionally archaic and artificially distanced from spoken norms;<sup>2</sup>

(2) the difficulty of adjudicating between rival claims to linguistic ‘ownership’ of an ancient text when the linguistic histories are characterised by interconnectedness rather than discrete divisions. A famous example relevant to the present study is the case of the *Caryapadas*, an early New Indo-Aryan (NIA) collection of Buddhist mystic songs. They have variously been claimed to represent ‘Old Bengali’, ‘Old Oriya’, ‘Old Maithili’, ‘Old Asamiya’, and ‘Old Kamta’—invariably by scholars belonging to the language group in question.

Methodological dependence on ancient texts may give rise to certain problems of interpretation, but the Comparative Method is not necessarily any better placed to

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<sup>1</sup> cf. section 1.7 regarding the use of the term ‘lect’.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Katre’s comments: “Like OIA which continued to flourish as a language of literature when MIA was the general channel of communication among the people, MIA in its turn appears to have been used for literary purposes long after it ceased to be current as a common medium of communication. This explains the highly artificial character of MIA literature and its production since 1000 A.D., particularly in its latest phase of Apabhramśa” (Katre 1968: 3).

deal with the realities of dialect continuum history. The Comparative Method has been only sparingly applied in historical Indo-Aryan studies, and has been found wanting in important respects. The limitations and problems connected with this method are discussed in detail in section 3.3. In brief, linguistic changes are reconstructed by the Comparative Method, but all too often the *sequencing* of these changes cannot be established by that method alone. This problem is caused by the fact that different lects in a continuum undergo identical innovations *even after divergence and differentiation*. Innovations with a wider range over a set of languages, or a geographical area, are not necessarily older than changes with a more restricted or localised range. How, then, are we to determine the sequencing of a string of innovations? One alternative is to abandon the goal of reconstructing the sequencing of changes, and conclude the reconstruction with a diagram of overlapping isogloss boundaries instead of a chronological and historical account (cf. e.g. Maniruzzaman 1977). Though conceptually valid, this approach is, from an historical perspective, less than optimal.

Therefore, the project undertaken here is to synthesise the methodological strengths of philology, etymology, the Comparative Method, and dialect geography, within the framework of a sociohistorical theory of language change. Such an approach can be applied to lects with unrecorded and recorded histories alike; it can (in many instances) disambiguate the sequencing of changes reconstructed by the Comparative Method; and it can reconstruct the complex interconnections between linguistic histories without undue reductionism.

## **1.2. Present controversy**

The language varieties treated in this study are, at present, the subject of considerable controversy and disagreement. In essence the controversy is being played out on a political stage, with major disagreement over how, or whether at all, these language varieties should, officially, be recognised. Since gaining independence the nations of South Asia have seen many such language debates, involving fierce feelings, strong words, and political demands (Gopal, 1966, Kodesia 1969, Yadav 1966). Both sides, confident of their own position, welcome new research, expecting their own position to be reinforced by the findings. As an outsider entering the fray, I am acutely aware

of the need to avoid bias and unwarranted conclusions—not least because the controversy exists in part (though by no means entirely) because of the expert pronouncements of colonial British scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These expert opinions were usually formed during the course of anthropological, linguistic or even administrative surveys, *with little subsequent accountability to the speakers*. If it can be avoided, it is my desire not to repeat this mistake.<sup>3</sup>

With the scene set in this way, it is imperative that the historical reconstruction be undertaken using the best methodological tools available, and with a clear understanding of the limitations of each tool. This need is exacerbated by the untidy realities of a dialect continuum, and the theoretical and methodological problems they pose to reconstruction. A substantial part of this project, therefore, is the evaluation of existing historical linguistic methods, and the innovation of new approaches better suited to the task of reconstructing linguistic history in a dialect continuum. The methodological chapter and its application in later chapters should be of interest not only to Indo-Aryan specialists, but to historical linguists more generally.

The scope of the study is introduced in section 1.3, followed by a summary of the empirical findings in 1.4. A sketch of various social dynamics in section 1.5 leads on in section 1.6 to a discussion of the problem of naming the KRNB language varieties. Finally, previous studies of KRNB are surveyed in section 1.7.

### **1.3. Empirical scope of the study**

The empirical-historical goal of this study is to reconstruct the linguistic history of a subgroup of lects which are here termed *Kamta, Rajbanshi and Northern Deshi Bangla*. This long-winded attempt at political correctness is necessary at present given not only the climate of controversy, but also the social diversity represented by the speakers of the lects (cf. 1.5-1.6).

This language cluster was first treated as a whole in the *Linguistic Survey of India* under the name ‘Rajbanshi’ and classified as a ‘dialect of Bengali’ (Grierson 1903-28i). However, both Grierson’s *classification* and preferred *name* are either

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<sup>3</sup> It is my intention that at minimum a summary of the findings of this study will be translated into at least one KRNB lect and published locally.

unacceptable or unknown to the vast majority of speakers today (cf. 1.6). The cluster is classified in the Ethnologue as *Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Eastern zone, Bengali-Assamese* (Gordon 2005)—a classification whose final detail of ‘Bengali-Assamese’ is questioned by this historical reconstruction (cf. 7.3.3).

The geographical extent of this linguistic cluster is generally accepted to include lects spoken in several districts of Nepal, India and Bangladesh, as shown in Figure 1-1.



**Figure 1-1. The region where KRNB lects are spoken, with international boundaries and district names marked**

Several different social, religious and ethnic identities are found within the speaker population, including (in alphabetical order): *Deshi* (‘local’) *Muslims* (who also identify themselves as *Bangalis*), *Gangais*, *Meches*, *Rajbanshis*, and *Tajpurias*. The adjective *Deshi* ‘local’ is important enough to this study to warrant a brief discussion. This term is an in-group identity marker, distinguishing the indigenous mainstream population from the *Adivasi* ‘tribal, aboriginal’ (including Bodos and Santalis) on the one hand, and the *Bhattia* on the other hand. The latter term denotes those who have migrated into the area from the South, who consequently identify themselves straightforwardly as *Bangalis* and speak lects much more similar to Standard Colloquial Bangla. Table 1-1 summarises the political areas in which each socio-religious grouping is found.

<b>Geographical area</b> <b>Socio-religious group</b>	<b>Nepal</b>	<b>Bihar</b>	<b>West Bengal</b>	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>Assam</b>
<b>Rajbanshi</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Tajpuria</b>	✓	✓	×	×	×
<b>Gangai</b>	✓	✓	×	×	×
<b>Deshi Muslim</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Poliya Hindus</b>	×	×	✓	✓	×

**Table 1-1. Distribution of socio-religious groups in the KRNB region**

The scope of the reconstruction is governed by the historical origin and development of the KRNB lects. The question of origins can validly be interpreted as tracing the linguistic ancestry as far back in history as possible—to Middle and Old Indo-Aryan, and indeed to proto-Indo-European. Such was the task undertaken by Chatterji (1926) for the Bangla (or Bengali) language, and consequently his study has been described as “not only ... a complete picture of the development of Bengali from OIA, but also ... a short survey of the historical development of Indo-Aryan languages from the old stage to the new” (Maniruzzaman 1977: 32-33). Such an extended historical scope of reconstruction is not attempted in the present work. Instead the origin of KRNB is reconstructed from the point in history where it developed its unique proto-characteristics. This occurred when certain innovations were propagated within an historical speech community—innovations that have been inherited into the present day KRNB lects and identify them as a subgroup distinct from neighbouring lects including Bangla and Asamiya.

It is generally accepted that KRNB forms part of an historical linguistic subgroup with Bangla, Asamiya and Oriya (along with certain other smaller lects). Chatterji (1926) termed this subgroup *eastern Magadhan* (a descendant of common Magadhan), with the Bihari lects making up western and central Magadhan. However, this subgrouping may not be as robust as previously thought (see the discussion in 7.3.2). Until further reconstruction is undertaken (1) at an all-Magadhan level and (2) based on robust historical methodology—in particular, by distinguishing innovation from retention—the intervening stages between proto-Magadhan and proto-Kamta will remain open to doubt.

The present study includes phonological, morphological and sociohistorical reconstruction, which come in chapters 4, 5-6 and 7 respectively. The linguistic scope is limited to a reconstruction of (i) the phoneme inventory for proto-Kamta; (ii) inflectional morphology of proto-Kamta; and (iii) the formal characteristics of some proto-Kamta vocabulary. Semantic and syntactic changes are not reconstructed, except as they impinge on the construction of cognate sets (where semantics becomes relevant) and the reconstruction of morphological changes (where syntax becomes relevant). The proto-vocabulary that results from phonological reconstruction is given in Appendix A in the form of a comparative wordlist. Further limitations of the present study are:

- 1) Exhaustive research has not been undertaken of ancient documents in the Cooch Behar district archives that may shed further light on the linguistic history of, at least, central KRNB. The reconstruction relies primarily on spoken rather than written lects, though written lects still have an important role in establishing chronology (see 3.4.3.2). A thorough description of the use of innovative KRNB features in the available historical literature remains to be undertaken. Upon completion of that task, the conclusions outlined in this study regarding the sequencing of changes may need revision.
- 2) This work is also not a reference grammar for any KRNB lect. This remains an outstanding need, especially for the socially important lect spoken in Cooch Behar which is something of an up-and-coming standard in the North Bengal area.
- 3) Changes of a non-phonological nature affecting derivational morphology (e.g. agentive nominalisation strategies) have not been reconstructed, and await further study. For further discussion of limitations to the morphological reconstruction see sections 5.1 and 6.1.

With linguistic study of KRNB still very much in its infancy, it has not been possible to do justice to all these areas of potential research. However, upon completion of this work, I hope further scholarly activity will test its findings against written records,

and against a more exhaustive set of linguistic features including derivational morphology.

#### **1.4. Summary of historical findings**

The historical findings of this study are summarised in this section as an aid to understanding how the reconstruction of numerous details in Chapters 4-6 fits within the overall account of linguistic history reconstructed in Chapter 7.

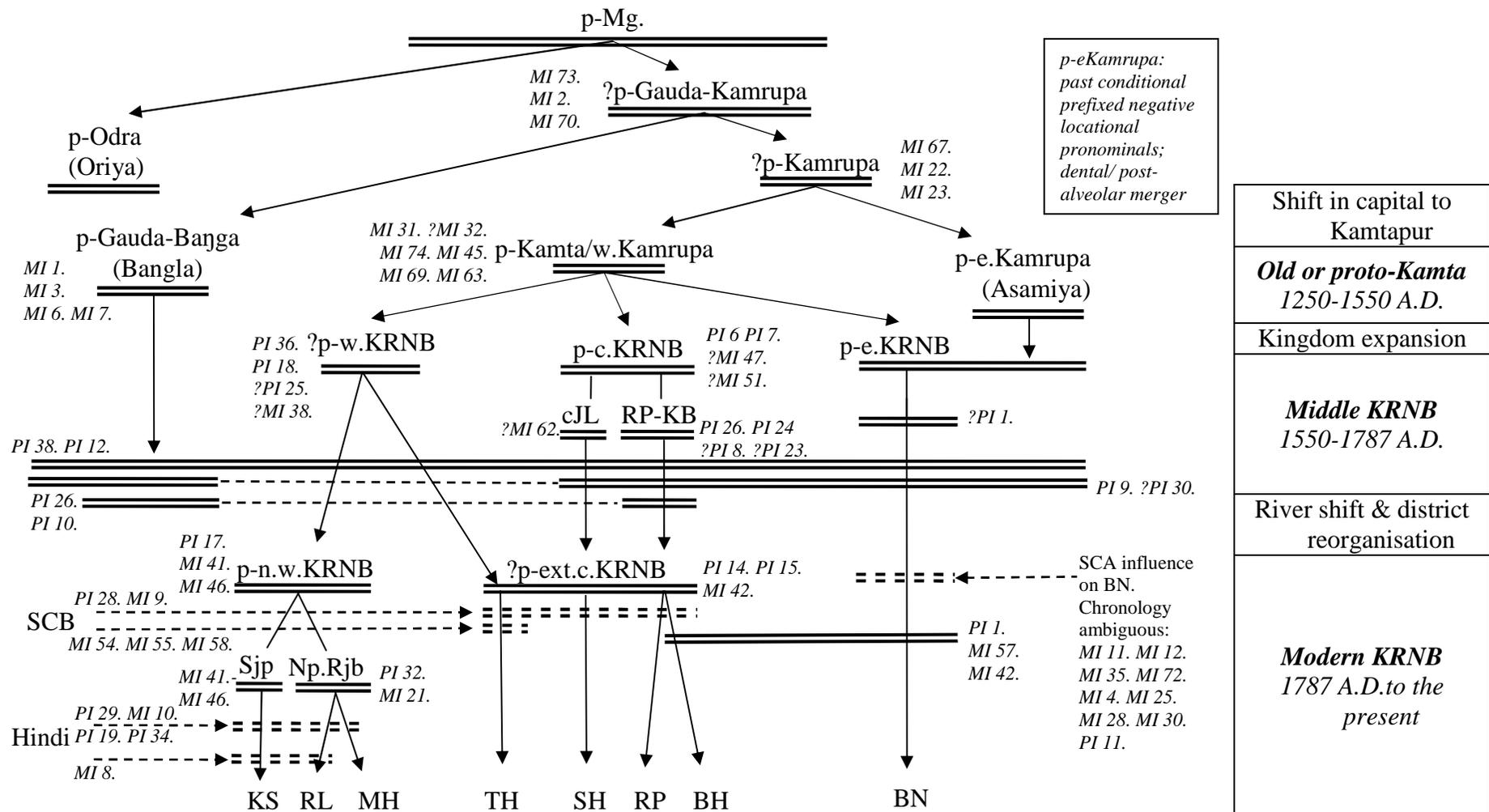
Morphological reconstruction in Chapters 5-6 provides diagnostic evidence for a common historical stage ancestral to the 8 KRNB lects examined in those chapters. On sociohistorical grounds, this stage is termed ‘proto-Kamta’ in Chapter 7 and assigned the chronology of c.1250-1550 AD—sandwiched between the establishment of the Kamrupa capital at Kamtapur in 1250 AD, and the political (and plausibly linguistic) expansion under Koch King Nara Narayana in 1550 AD (see further 7.3.1). The absence of phonological changes to define this period is not odd in its regional context. The phonologies of Bangla and Oriya were also stable during this period, and Oriya phonology has been remarkably stable from that time to the present day.

A mix of more localised phonological and morphological innovations occurred subsequent to the breakup of the proto-Kamta speech community. Each of these innovations has been assigned to either the middle KRNB or the modern KRNB period based on its geographical range and the associated methods established in Chapter 3. The sociohistorical events which define the historical boundary between middle and modern KRNB are the shift in course of the river Tista in 1787 AD and the reorganisation of districts under the new colonial powers at around the same time.

The middle and modern KRNB stages are characterised also by the propagation of innovations with a wider scope and influence beyond KRNB. During the middle KRNB period such changes are phonological, and include the loss of final \*ɔ̃ (cf. 4.4.11) as well as changes in the voicing quality of sonorants (cf. 4.3.4). During the modern KRNB period, both phonological and morphological features have entered KRNB lects in different areas due to increased diglossia through the promulgation of standardised State languages. In today’s Bengal the influence is from SCB, in Assam it is from Asamiya, and for the Nepal Rajbanshi and Bihar Surjapuri the influence

comes from Hindi, and to a lesser extent Nepali. Special mention may be made of eastern KRNB, whose history is problematic because of the mixed nature of its linguistic ancestry. In Chapter 4, Bongaigaon (BN) is shown to have undergone the common Asamiya phonological restructuring. In Chapters 5 and 6, BN is then shown to have inherited some of the proto-Kamta changes. However, where these clash with proto-Asamiya changes the Asamiya ancestry wins out. Consequently it has not been found possible within this study to establish the sequencing of eastern KRNB's historical relations with proto-Asamiya as against proto-Kamta. This is not to say that eastern KRNB is *only* a mix of proto-Asamiya and Kamta features—it also possesses some unique innovative features of its own (cf. 4.3.1 and 5.4.1).

This summary of the reconstructed history is modelled in Figure 7-21 (reproduced below) by means of a tree diagram which has been schematically altered in keeping with the sociohistorical theory of language change (cf. 3.4.4).



Reproduction of Figure 7-21. The linguistic history of KARNB from proto-Magadhan, through proto-Kamta, middle and modern KARNB, to the present

## 1.5. Overview of key social dynamics

As an introduction to the problem of naming the KRNB lects examined in the next section, I here outline three key sociohistorical dynamics which figure in that discussion: *conversion*, *autonomy* (and its loss), and *conflict*.

Language history across north India is time and again linked with religious conversion. The importance of Sanskrit to Hinduism has provided general momentum for non-Aryans to convert linguistically to an (Indo)-Aryan language upon embracing Aryan religion. In the case of the KRNB lects we must not only consider mass conversion to Hinduism, but also subsequent mass conversion to Islam of at least half of the speaker population. The latter conversion process, while leading to a small increase in the use of Persian and Arabic origin vocabulary, has had nothing like the linguistic impact of the earlier conversion to Hinduism, though there has been a noticeable *social* and *sociolinguistic* impact. The expansion of Islam into the KRNB-speaking area came from the Bangali (Bengali) south, and it has led to an *increased identification by converts with that Muslim (and Bangali) south*. As a result, though Muslims in Rangpur and Hindus in Koch Behar speak highly similar Indo-Aryan lects, they are highly dissimilar in their understanding of their social identity and the sociolinguistic identity of their mother tongue. Muslims in Rangpur consistently identify themselves as Bangalis, and conceive of their mother tongue as included within the concept of ‘the Bangla language’. It is no doubt also relevant that these same speakers joined the rest of their nation in fighting the war of independence against Pakistan. Of central importance in that war was the status given to *bangla bhasha* ‘the Bangla language’ as an authorised language of administration, alongside Urdu. The KRNB-speaking Hindus, by and large, share no such feeling of commonality with the Bangali south. Most of these identify as “Rajbanshis”, which brings us to the second sociohistorical dynamic—autonomy (and its loss).

The term *Rajbanshi* is derived from Sanskrit and means ‘the royal race’, or ‘descendants of the King’. The term harkens back especially to the autonomous kingdom established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under the Koch kings, of which more will be said in Chapter 7. Under the reign of the Koch kings, even up to 1950 AD, this

kingdom maintained its general autonomy from the Bangali south as well as the Asamiya north-east, though its size was gradually reduced over the centuries. Prior to the establishment of the Koch dynasty, the KRNB area was also autonomous and distinct from the kingdom of Gauda (which later became Bengal). From the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the kingdom was referred to as *Kāmatā*, and ruins of the old capital of *Kāmatāpur* may be visited today just south of Cooch Behar town. The Hindus of today's north Bengal are keenly aware of their generally autonomous social history. As a result, there is an increasing use of the term 'Kamtapuri' to denote both a person of local origin—a "son of the soil"—and the language of local origin, KRNB, as spoken by Hindus and Muslims alike. Understandably, the term 'Kamta' as a language name is politically controversial, implying as it does linguistic autonomy, rather than heteronomy with respect to 'the Bangla language'.

It will now be clear to the reader that the historical and present situation of the lects in question involves *conflict* over sociolinguistic ideas. In general the conflict is between KRNB speakers who believe in their own sociolinguistic autonomy, and speakers of closely related lects (Bangla and Asamiya) who believe in the heteronomy of KRNB—"your mother tongue is a dialect of our language". As stated above, Muslim speakers identify with the Muslim south and its Bangali identity to a greater degree than the Rajbanshi Hindus, with the result that the language conflict is today restricted to the Indian side of the border. Unlike the monsoon floods which sweep down from West Bengal into northern Bangladesh, the Indian-side conflict regarding KRNB language has produced barely a trickle in Bangladesh.

These three social dynamics taken together account for the social and political sensitivity of the subject matter of this study. They also account for its circuitous title. The terms 'Rajbanshi' and 'Kamta' have wide circulation in India and Nepal, but not in Bangladesh. To label all the lects as 'a northern deshi Bangla' would match the ideology and sentiments on the Bangladeshi-side, but widely offend on the Indian and Nepali sides. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the present and historical context is not suited to a unitary, overarching 'language name'. This of course is a judgement call that other scholars may choose to disagree with.

## 1.6. Naming the language and dialects

As it turns out, the question of naming is not of great consequence to the study because the linguistic realities and histories are the same whatever name we give to them. However, as some name or other must be used, an overview is given here of the different terms on offer, including their historical roots and present connotations.

- **Bahe:** This name is favoured in Rangpur district and its adjoining districts. It is derived from a local word used as part of their greetings, especially between males. Its function is similar to the term “mate” in the colloquial Australian greeting “G’day mate”. Grierson (1903-28) claimed this term referred specifically to the Darjeeling ‘sub-dialect’ of ‘Rajbanshi’ but in this assertion he is off the mark. This term is used across North Bengal (though most prominently in Rangpur) with the function described, and the same situation was reported by Clark (1969) forty years ago. Clark’s observation that the term is also used by south Bangalis to refer with disdain to the north Bangalis of Rangpur still obtains today. However, discussions with many Rangpuri speakers lead me to believe that they have embraced this term with pride as a mark of their distinct identity within Bangladeshi society.
- **Deshi bhasha:** This term for the language is favoured in all areas, especially amongst people who wish to be non-committal on the political controversy. The term means ‘the language of the *desh*—the nation, the region, the locality’. Accordingly its reference is too generic for it to be of much use in distinguishing KRNB from other lects which, in their own region, are likewise the ‘deshi bhasha’. In Oriya, there is an Indo-Aryan variety spoken by Adivasis (‘aboriginals, tribals’) which is similarly named Desiya Oriya (cf. Gordon 2005). The notion of the ‘Northern Deshi Bangla’ is incorporated within the acronym KRNB.
- **Dhekia, Dhekri:** These terms have been found to be favoured in the north Dinajpur area of Bangladesh, the former variant among Hindus, and the latter among Muslims. Interestingly, Goswami (1970) and Grierson (1903-28) mention a very similar name *Dhekeri* for the western Asamiya lect, Kamrupi.

The meaning there is apparently disdainful, which does not seem to be the case in Dinajpur.<sup>4</sup>

- **Kam(a)ta**, or **Kamtapuri**: These terms are favoured in West Bengal by two groups of people: (1) those in favour of the establishment of political autonomy in north Bengal; and (2) those who insist on a non caste-based language name, e.g. Barma (1991, 2000). The second category of proponents criticise the term Rajbanshi as being too caste-centric and exclusive to the Hindu speakers (see below). The term Kamta(puri) is not accepted by the West Bengal government because of the overtones of autonomy (discussed in 1.5). Some argue that the shorter variant ‘Kamta’, is not intended to have the political overtones of ‘Kamtapuri’ which as a term suggests association with the ideology of the Kamtapur Peoples Parties and other related political parties. Recently the *Kāmatā Sahitya Sabhā* ‘Kamta literature society’ was founded. It has as one of its aims the promulgation of this language name.
- **Kamrupa**: Chatterjee (1926) uses this term to refer to the stage of linguistic history ancestral to both Asamiya and KRNB. In the present study, Kamrupa is used with the same meaning, and is not considered synonymous with KRNB which is a further development (cf. section 7.3.4. N. Das (2001) maintains that ‘Kamrupa’ or ‘Kamrupi’ is a more fitting title than ‘Kamta’ for the KRNB varieties. However, the term ‘Kamrupi’ is most popularly used today to denote the western dialect of Asamiya spoken in the greater Kamrup region of Assam (cf. Goswami 1970). It seems well fitted to denote both (1) the modern lect of the greater Kamrup region of western Assam (east of the KRNB area), as well as (2) the historical lect ancestral to both KRNB and Asamiya. In this study I refer to the western dialect of Asamiya as *Kamrupi*, and the historical ancestor of proto-Kamta and proto-Asamiya as *proto-Kamrupa* (see Figure 7-21, reproduced on page 10).
- **Koch Rajbanshi**: This term is an extended form of the more widely used term Rajbanshi, described just below. The extended form specifies that reference is

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<sup>4</sup> Grierson writes: “according to Rai Gunabhiram Baruah’s Buranji, this name was given to this portion of Assam by the Ahoms to denote that it had been conquered and consequently ‘the people hated the name’.” (1903-28; vol. V)

to the descendants or race of the *Koch* king. This is somewhat pertinent as there are multiple south Asian social groups that go by the Sanskrit appellation *Raja-vangshi* ‘Royal race’. N. Das (2001) has criticised the name Rajbanshi for this very reason, of being too broad in its reference; the same might be said of other generic names including *deshi bhasha* ‘the local language’.

- **Rajbanshi:** This term is favoured in south-east Nepal by Rajbanshis, and in West Bengal by Rajbanshis who favour *linguistic* autonomy but reject the *political* overtones of ‘Kamtapuri’. In Nepal there is a *Rājbanśhi bhāśhā prachār samiti* ‘Publishing society of the Rajbanshi language’, which has its office at Bhadrapur in Jhapa district. This term is criticised for being caste-centric, and in particular excluding the Muslim population who speak the same lect but do not subscribe to the Hindu designation of Rajbanshi. In addition to this there is the problem of breadth of reference just mentioned.
- **Rangpuri:** This term is favoured in the Rangpur area, interchangeably with ‘Bahe’. Chaudhuri (1939) prefers to use this name, as it avoids the problem of caste-centrism. However, with a sizeable number of speakers now located within a different country to Rangpur, and lacking any special historical reason for choosing Rangpuri over Kamta, it is unlikely that this term will catch on further afield.
- **Surjapuri:** This term is favoured in north-east Bihar and adjoining portions of Dinajpur district of West Bengal by Rajbanshis and Deshi Muslims alike. The entry in the Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) for Surjapuri seems to be a variation of this name (perhaps simply an orthographic difference). The speakers of Surjapuri I have mixed with pronounce the language name as [surɟapuri].
- **Tajpuria:** This term is favoured in south-east Nepal among Tajpurias who reject the name Rajbanshi for their mother tongue on the basis that it is a caste designation not their own.

In this study I have chosen to use an acronym, KRNB, to refer to the subgroup of lects which go by the names above. The acronym is not intended as a long-term

solution to the various debates over naming, but the responsibility for a solution rests with the speakers themselves. The acronym KRNB stands for Kamta, Rajbanshi and Northern Deshi Bangla. These three terms used together sum up quite efficiently the main differences in the social lenses through which speakers perceive the identity of their mother tongue. The only social group that is not well represented by this acronym is Surjapuri.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the meaning of these terms will inevitably change, and over time the definitions given above may become obsolete. The social situation among speakers of KRNB is in a period of flux; different leaders in different countries and states are calling on speakers to adhere to different language ideologies, and each ideology comes with a different language name attached. The outcome is far from determined.

## 1.7. 'Language' and 'dialect'

Distinguishing between 'a language' and 'a dialect' is notoriously problematic for the NIA lects. The problem results from the following paradox: 'language' and 'dialect' are popularly understood to be dichotomous terms—*either* something is 'a language' *or* it is 'a dialect'—and yet the very nature of a dialect *continuum* is that internal linguistic divisions are a matter of *degree* rather than dichotomy. Polar opposites may be clearly distinguishable, but they are separated by intermediary cases which are ambiguous. Furthermore, in a dialect continuum the variation is not one-dimensional but involves multiple geographical and social dimensions. Therefore, what may be polar opposites along one dimension or from one analytical perspective, are from another perspective merely intermediary cases whose status is ambiguous. There are no unambiguously fixed *linguistic* points in a dialect continuum.

There are of course (apparently) fixed *social and political points* in the speech community, and it is these factors that traditionally determine whether something is considered 'a language' or 'a dialect'. The resolution made at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in 1997 on whether Ebonics (African American English) constitutes 'a language' or 'a dialect' supports this view:

The distinction between “languages” and “dialects” is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones.

(The full text of this resolution is a handy summary of some key issues in distinguishing ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, and so is reproduced in Appendix E. The resolution is referred to below as “the Ebonics resolution”.)

The analysis of how, in practice, social and political relations result in language/dialect classifications is taken a step further by Chambers and Trudgill:

A useful concept in looking at the relationship between the notions of a ‘language’ and ‘dialect continuum’ is the concept of heteronomy. Heteronomy is simply the opposite of autonomy, and thus refers to *dependence rather than independence*. We say, for example, that certain varieties on the West Germanic dialect continuum are dialects of Dutch while others are dialects of German because of the relationship these dialects bear to the respective standard languages. The Dutch dialects are heteronomous with respect to standard Dutch, and the German dialects to standard German. This means, simply, that *speakers of the Dutch dialects consider that they are speaking Dutch, that they read and write in Dutch, that any standardising changes in their dialects will be towards Dutch, and that they in general look to Dutch as the standard language which naturally corresponds to their vernacular varieties.* (Chambers & Trudgill 1998 [italics added—MT]).

Four socio-cultural phenomena are given by the authors in the course of illustrating the meaning of ‘heteronomy’:

- 1) Speakers **consider** that they are speaking Dutch;
- 2) Speakers **read and write** in Dutch;
- 3) Standardising changes are **towards** Dutch;
- 4) Speakers **look to** written Dutch as the written variety which corresponds to their spoken varieties.

This description clearly demonstrates that the relation between dialects and ‘a language’ is primarily an *ideological* relation (Enfield 2003: 4). The relation is between the *ideas* held by speakers regarding the varieties they speak, and the *ideas* regarding the varieties they write. These ideas are socio-cultural (rather than

linguistic) phenomena, and they determine the variety which speakers select as the medium for reading and writing.

Understanding that differentiation between ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’ comes down, in practice, to socio-cultural ideology elucidates two phenomena observable in the present KRNB situation. Firstly, the general Bengalis—those from the south of Bengal—in large part consider KRNB to be ‘a dialect of Bengali’. As this socio-cultural group are in the dominant position of socio-cultural power within the state of West Bengal, it is their linguistic ideology which has governed policy up to the present. Secondly, a good number of KRNB speakers in West Bengal ideologically understand themselves to be speaking not ‘Bengali’, but ‘Kamta’, or ‘Rajbanshi’, or ‘Deshi’, depending on their political persuasion (cf. 1.5-1.6). However, because as a socio-cultural group they occupy a less politically powerful position than that of the Bengalis, their linguistic ideology has made only very minor impact on government policy. In this context, it is easy to understand how the group occupying the less powerful political position can feel disenfranchised by the ideology of the powerful. On the other hand it is easy to see why Bengalis generally fail to understand the sentiments expressed by KRNB speakers.

This discussion of ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ is concluded by returning to the resolution produced by the Linguistic Society of America concerning Ebonics. That issue is somewhat analogous with the KRNB issue—involving a mismatch of language ideologies between that held by the socio-culturally and politically dominant group on the one hand, and the less powerful on the other. The statements of the resolution are given here with some summarising and substitution; “KRNB” is substituted for “Ebonics”, “Bangla” for “English”, and “West Bengal” for “United States”. Substituted words are underlined.

1. The variety known as “Kamta”, “Rajbanshi”, and “Northern Deshi Bangla” and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. ... Consequently, characterizations of KRNB as “slang,” “mutant,” “lazy,” “defective,” “ungrammatical,” or “broken Bangla” are incorrect and demeaning.

2. The distinction between “languages” and “dialects” is usually made more on social and political grounds than on purely linguistic ones. ... What is important from a linguistic and educational point of view is not whether KRNB is called a “language” or a “dialect” but rather that its systematicity be recognized.
3. As affirmed in the LSA Statement of Language Rights (June 1996), there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity. For those living in West Bengal there are also benefits in acquiring Standard Bangla and resources should be made available to all who aspire to mastery of Standard Bangla.
4. There is evidence from Sweden, the US, and other countries that speakers of other varieties can be aided in their learning of the standard variety by pedagogical approaches which recognize the legitimacy of the other varieties of a language. From this perspective, a recognition of the vernacular of KRNB students in teaching them Standard Bangla is linguistically and pedagogically sound.

There is one aspect of the KRNB situation which is not covered by the above resolution: KRNB speakers have, especially during the past decade, developed a copious written literature in their own lect. If the defining characteristic of ‘a language’, as distinct from ‘a dialect’, is taken to be the existence of a written literature (a common definition applied in South Asia), then the growing KRNB written corpus must have some bearing on the issue of classification. The language vs. dialect issue will not feature prominently in this study, though some further relevant comments are given in the concluding chapter.

The attentive reader will have noticed that the term ‘lect’ has already been used in this study both for entities traditionally termed ‘languages’ as well as for those termed ‘dialects’. This technical term is synonymous with ‘linguistic variety’, and encompasses the referents of both terms ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ without distinguishing the entity regarding its relations of linguistic autonomy or heteronomy.

## 1.8. Review of previous linguistic studies of KRNB

Before the present study, there has been no in-depth, modern linguistic treatment of the KRNB lects as a whole, let alone systematic reconstruction of their history. This situation is in keeping with the general pattern of NIA research described by Blench & Spriggs:

The Indo-Europeanist habit of ignoring what are strangely called ‘minor languages’ has resulted in a virtual lacuna in research on Indo-European languages of India with only small numbers of speakers. One of the more evident tendencies in Indo-European linguistics is to give primacy to written languages, such as Sanskrit. Thus, reconstruction of the Indo-Aryan languages is in terms of relating the present-day forms to attested Sanskrit (cf. Turner 1966) rather than subjecting the body of Indo-Aryan languages to the usual procedures of historical linguistics. The consequence has been a striking inadequacy of fieldwork to describe the more than 300 unwritten Indo-European languages spoken in the India-Pakistan region in the 1990s ... The conventional practice of historical linguistics in the region is thus in a rather backward state (Blench & Spriggs 1998: 10).

The previous linguistic studies pertinent to KRNB can be divided into several categories. Firstly, KRNB has been addressed briefly in survey volumes, most significantly by Grierson (1903-28) in the monumental, though methodologically limited, *Linguistic Survey of India*; and also in van Driem’s (2001) survey of the Himalayan languages, where the Rajbanshi people are included because of their Tibeto-Burman ancestry. A more concentrated survey of KRNB has been undertaken recently covering bilingualism, intelligibility, and language use across the KRNB lects (Ngwazah *et. al.* 2006), which follows up a similar survey of KRNB within the borders of Nepal (Epele *et. al.* 2001).

Into the category of survey we may also place Bandyopadhyay (1991), which is the first volume of a multi-volume dictionary project based at the University of Calcutta, under the Education Department, Government of West Bengal. The project involves the collection and publication of data for the non-standard Indo-Aryan varieties of West Bengal. Given the geo-political scope of the project, these lects are termed by the authors as Dialectal Bengali. The lexical entries are sorted by the Indic alphabet

system, and the first volume covers entries beginning with the vowels অ /ɔ/, আ /a/, ই /i/. The first volume includes maps of the delimitation of dialects as understood by the surveyors but these have not been used in this study as the criteria for the delimitation are not made explicit, and most of the test locations on the maps are unlabelled. The project includes the local lects of northern West Bengal, and thus there is some overlap with the KRNB lects. Moreover, the usefulness of the dictionary for comparative work is limited by the ordering system, which is sorted alphabetically by lexical item rather than by reference to a proto-form (the method employed by Turner, and in Appendix A). The accessibility of the dictionary for descriptive purposes is likewise limited, because the user cannot at present sort or filter the data in any way. This project will be of significant use for future linguistic studies if it is made available in electronic form. Such a format would enable researchers to sort and filter the data using the criteria relevant to their purposes.

After survey treatments, the second category of previous studies in KRNB consists of linguistic works whose scope is limited to the description of a particular KRNB lect. This category of studies does not include systematic analysis of the broader KRNB linguistic context, or reconstruction of the history of the group as a whole. Studies in this category are Grierson (1877) and Chaudhuri (1939) for Rangpuri, Wilde (2002) for central-eastern Jhapa Rajbanshi, Toulmin (2002) for eastern Jhapa Rajbanshi, Datta (1971) for Goalparia lects, and Sanyal's (1965) treatment of a Jalpaiguri variety. All of these studies have their own strengths and limitations, and none of them fulfill the still outstanding need for a reference grammar of at least one KRNB lect. We may also mention in connection with this category studies by Chaudhuri (1940) and Islam (1992) which address the Rajshahi dialect of Bangladesh (southern neighbour to KRNB), and Goswami (1970) which examines the Kamrupi dialect of Asamiya (eastern neighbour to KRNB).

Thirdly, KRNB has been touched on peripherally in some major historical studies of other NIA lects. Most notable of course is Chatterji (1926), and then Kakati (1962), Shahidullah (1966), and Maniruzzaman (1977).

Fourthly, there are studies of KRNB undertaken within a traditional Indic or Sanskritic model of analysis (Barma 1991, 2000). The categorisation of KRNB lects

as western, central and eastern (which is verified by this study) was first put forward by Barma (1991).

Fifthly, there are studies such as that by D.N. Das (1990) for Goalparia which use what I term an ‘etymological method’. This method involves comparison of contemporary forms with the putative ancestral forms in Sanskrit, resulting in pseudo-correspondences. The correspondences are ‘pseudo’ because the reconstruction is not controlled by the principle of regularity of sound change. In order to distance themselves from this pseudo-comparative method, studies such as Southworth (1958), Pattanayak (1966) and Maniruzzaman (1977) refer to the conventional Comparative Method of historical linguistics as ‘controlled reconstruction’.

Sixthly, there are essays, in particular by N. Das (2001) as well as Bhakat (2004), which are essay-length treatments of a range of sociolinguistic, linguistic and other historical topics concerning KRNB.

Seventhly, there are word lists published for some KRNB varieties. Most notable is that found in Hodgson (1880), which (based on linguistic features) seems to record a western Jalpaiguri or possibly south-eastern Darjeeling variety of KRNB, labelled by him as ‘Koch’. Goswami (1974) contains a comparative wordlist of Goalparia and Kamrupi lects, and Damant (1873) gives a short list of words belonging to the Indo-Aryan dialect of the Palis (pronounced Polis, and also called Poliyas) which he is unable to derive from an Aryan source. ‘Poliya’ denotes a Hindu social group of Dinajpur, and is used mainly on the Bangladeshi side of the border.

In conclusion to this section: despite considerable linguistic research on the standardised eastern NIA languages that border KRNB—SCB and SCA—nothing close to the same degree of analysis has been undertaken for KRNB. The descriptive study of KRNB up to the present has either lacked linguistic systematicity, depth of analysis, or breadth of scope at the level of the subgroup. In the area of historical reconstruction, the present position of Indo-Aryan studies is inadequate *even for the standardised lects*, let alone KRNB:

Within the Eastern Indic language family the history of the separation of Bangla from Oriya, Assamese, and the languages of Bihar remains to be worked out carefully. Scholars do not yet agree on criteria for deciding if certain tenth century AD texts were in a Bangla already distinguishable from the other languages, or marked a stage at which Eastern Indic had not finished differentiating. Such agreement may emerge once the contemporary enterprise of producing serious descriptions of the modern languages has achieved its objectives. The priorities may then permit greater attention to the unfinished task of drawing rigorous maps of the past (Dasgupta 2003: 352).

In making a fresh start on the historical study of KRNB, it is essential to apply the most appropriate linguistic theory and methodology to the task of “drawing rigorous maps of the past”. The next chapter outlines the research design of this study, followed by an in-depth discussion of theoretical and methodological issues in Chapter 3, and then the actual business of historical reconstruction in Chapters 4 to 7.