

‘RAJI’: LANGUAGE OF A VANISHING HIMALAYAN TRIBE

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a repository for the culture and worldview of its speakers. Its grammar and lexicon store the shared experiences of past generations, and a language is the channel by which knowledge and beliefs of one generation are transmitted to the next. It confers a sense of identity upon its native speakers. Today there are at least 6000 living languages across the world. Of them, 330 languages have more than one million speakers each and there are 51 languages that have only one speaker each. David Crystal (2000) believes that only 4% of the languages in the world are spoken by 96% of the total world population and conversely, only 4% people speak the remaining 96% of the world languages. Gradually these 96% of the world’s languages are shifting, decaying, or dying out. It must be understood that with the disappearance of any language minor or major, not only the language, is lost but also its cultural heritage and its worldview. By allowing languages to die out we are destroying what deserves to be preserved.

India is a multilingual and pluricultural country where approximately 380 languages are spoken. It has the world’s fourth largest number of languages. These languages belong to four different language families – Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tibeto-Burman. Some patches of this vast linguistic expanse are from the group of 96% languages mentioned above and yet are unclassified and are undergoing gradual extinction. One such patch is Raji / Rauti spoken by a tribe Banraji / Raji / Banmanus, presently inhabiting the submontane region of the central Himalayas in Uttaranchal. This paper aims to discuss the nature and status of this tribal language on the basis of linguistic, socio-economic, and psychological factors observed by the researcher during her two field visits to different Raji hamlets.

ETHNIC HISTORY

Raji is a little known tribal community that was brought to light for the first time in 1823 by the then commissioner of Kumaun, C.W. Traill. It is said that

the Rajis or Banrawats are descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas, who were comparatively earlier settlers of the region than the Nagas or the Khasas. Atkinson (1882) stated that these early tribes entered India by the same route as the Aryans, and the Kiratas were the first of these others to arrive. In the course of time, Kiratas were gradually uprooted from the region by the dominating impact of other ethnic groups; but their few descendants remained in Kumaun and Nepal. In Kumaun they are called Rajis but they are not aware of their prehistoric Kirati origin. The legend now current among them, as told to me, is that they were descendants of the royal family of Askot. Until a few decades ago they lived a life typical of the Neolithic age, as cave dwellers and food gatherers – subsisting on hunting, fishing and jungle produce. A few years back a researcher opined, “they are one of the very few tribal communities still inhabiting caves and rock shelters” (Bora: 1988)

By nature they are very shy and aloof. Previously they used to carve and trade wooden bowls and boxes for grain, cloth, etc. with surrounding sedentary Kumauni villagers. But conditions have changed in the last several decades and Raji have given up ‘silent trade’. Now they work as wage laborers, practice agriculture or raise livestock. They no longer make their clothing from forest materials, but purchase cloth from the markets. The enormous pressure of Hinduization, together with pressure to lead a sedentary life, has immensely affected their way of living, but one thing is clear: they still avoid socialization with neighboring Kumauni families. Due to their socio-economic backwardness, the Rajis have been identified by the government of India as a primitive tribe in 1965, and as a scheduled tribe in June 1967. Still they cannot be considered aboriginal, since they had not inhabited the region from the beginning.

In physical appearance, Rajis now exhibit mixed physical traits of Aryans, Dravidians, and Mongoloids. They are of wheatish complexion, of average height, have straight and scanty hair of brownish color, an intermediate head type with medium nose, and small grey eyes. Some of them have the Mongoloid epicanthic fold. William Crooke has linked Rajis with non-Aryan groups whereas Atkinson has found a racial mixture of the Tibetans and Khasas in their physical features (1882:366). D.N. Mazumdar has assigned them a Mongolian affinity. Besides this Dr. Pitchard has conjectured that the Rajis resemble the other numerous aboriginal tribes found along the Himalayan border, all possessing the physical characteristics of the Bhotiyas in general and very unlike the Doms (1882:336). It appears that the intermingling of different ethnic elements for centuries has caused the disappearance of the original Raji racial features.

Rajis call themselves Hindu by religion, but their deities and gods are different. According to Crooke "...they worship Devi...when anyone gets ill, they worship the Gods, ghosts, and demons of the jungle, but they erect no temples in their honor." Like other people of the Himalayan region, they believe in spirits, goblins, and spirit mediums. Apart from birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, they observe no other rituals. They consider the birth of a child as a blessing from God, but do not name the child before six months, perhaps because of the high rate of infant mortality. According to Sherring, "all children have two names, one Hindu and the other in the aboriginal tongue..." It seems that now this transitory phase has passed and all of them have Hindu names. Rajis only look after their children up to the age of six years. After that the child is supposed to lend his hand in economic pursuits. Community endogamy and village and clan exogamy is the norm amongst the Rajis, and its violation, though accepted, is not encouraged. They have quite characteristic wedding rituals, and the custom of bride price exists in their community. Mostly nuclear families are found in this community. A married son has to support his wife and child independently. Among the Rajis a woman, in principle, holds a comparatively low status because of the custom of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence within a broadly patriarchal system. But in practice, she possesses a key status and is a pivot round which the whole community revolves. Rajis have a peculiar death custom. Traditionally they neither burn nor bury their dead but leave the body in the forest to be consumed by wild animals. But due to the process of Sanskritization, nowadays they either bury their dead or practice cremation. Surprisingly enough, customary expressions of joy and fun, so usual among tribal communities, seem to have little place in Raji culture. They do not even have linguistic expressions for such activities in their language. It is rather strange that living amongst such a rich herbal surroundings as they do, they do not take recourse to herbal treatment and use very few herbal medicines.

HABITATION AND POPULATION

Rajis have been located living in small, remote and distant hamlets, consisting of from four to fifteen households. Most of these hamlets lie in an inhospitable terrain amidst dense forests far away from the surrounding Kumauni villages. In India, they are confined to the Pithoragarh district of Kumaun division, distributed in nine villages, viz. Kimkhola, Bhaktirua, Ganagaon, Chipaltara, Kantoli, Chaurani, Altodi, Kutakanyal and Khirdwari, which fall under the jurisdiction of Darchula, Didihat, and Champawat tehsils. Recently a few families have been located in a village named Chakarpur. It

must be noted that a culturally contiguous Raji-Raute tribe lives in southwest and western regions of Nepal (Fortier:117).

From time to time different researchers have attempted to determine the population of this tribe. Since they are semi-nomadic foragers, it is often difficult to establish the exact demographic details. The first record of their population came from the assessment of Mr. C.W. Traill in 1823 when the total number of families recorded was just 20. In 1864 Captain Strachey mentioned only about 5 or 6 families. After Independence, in 1969, The Harijan and Social Directorate of Uttar Pradesh produced a report that estimated the population as 254, which declined by 10.23% in two years' time, so that in 1971, the enumeration was 228. It is surprising that the very same department assessed their total population as 371 in 1981, whereas the census report claimed it to be 1087. In the 1991 census report, it dwindled down to 356. According to Dr. Dev Singh Pokaria's study in 1998 their total population was 667 in all the nine villages.

RAJI / RAUTI LANGUAGE

Many scholars have presented their views on the genealogy of this tribal language. According to Grierson, (1909) and Dr. S.K. Chatterji, it is probably a member of the Tibeto-Burman family. Grierson listed it under the name "Jangali" and classified it as a Tibeto-Burman language akin to the Nepal Himalayan subgroup, on the basis of data, which included a large number of Indo-Aryan words. On the other hand, some linguists like Dr. Shobha R. Sharma and Dr. D.D. Sharma have suggested that the surviving components of the original Raji language are paleolinguistic relics of some of the Munda dialects, which in the ancient past were spoken in their area. "...The basic linguistic stock and structure of it was of the Munda language, that was spoken by the Himalayan regions...but their constant and intimate contact with the speakers of the Tibeto-Himalayan and Aryan languages of the region for time immemorial has exercised its influence on its stock as well as structure" (D.D. Sharma:173). According to Dr. Shree Krishnan, "we have not addressed the question of the genetic affiliation of Raji other than to assume that it is a Tibeto-Burman language." Information provided by *Ethnologue* is a bit confusing. There Raji is listed under Nepal, with the remark that it is spoken 'possibly also in India', but the fact is that the Raji population in India is no less than that of the Nepali Raji-Raute (J. Fortier). Apart from linguists, a few historians (Badri Dutt Pandey:1993), anthropologists (B.S. Bisht:1994), and scholars related to other fields (M.M. Sharma:1977), have worked to collect their vocabulary.

On the basis of the data I have collected and compared with other Tibeto-Burman languages like Chepeng, Kham (Raute), Tinan, and Magar, light may