

‘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 "Janggali" 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

be shed on the genetic affinity of Raji. I believe it is a Tibeto-Burman language with large-scale lexical and grammatical borrowings from Indo-Aryan languages. In the following table only a small number of basic vocabulary items of these languages are presented, though this list could be greatly extended.

English	Raji	Chepang	Magar	Kham	Titan
one	da:	ʔat, yaʔ	kat	da:	itsa
dog	kui	kuiʔ	chiuw	kui	khui
die	ʃi:ya	ɔəi:	siəya	shi / siya	si
tree	ʃi:ŋ	siŋhʔ	rukʰ	siu / singh	-
nose	ʃina:	ɔəina	minha	tsina / sina	nya
sleep	l:se	ʔenʔ / ʔemʔ	misni	siya / se	dus
fire	mʰe	mʰe:h	mʰe:h	me:h	meə
water	ti / chi	ti	di	ti / chi	soti
I	na:	ŋa:	ŋa:	ŋa	gye
you	ŋa	naŋ (S) niŋ (Pl)	na:	ŋa	kaəʔ

Table 1

I would also like to mention a few other points to substantiate my view:

(a) There is a prominence of the nasal sound 'ŋ' in Raji. One of the striking features of Tibeto-Burman languages is that they have the nasal 'ŋ' prominently occurring in all distributions. See, e.g. Raji *dijo* 'buffalo', *xu:ŋ* 'three', *hoŋ-ko* 'catch', *khu: ŋya:* 'sit' etc.

(b) Raji reflects the original TB numerals from one to six. Other numerals are borrowed terms. The case is very similar in the old Magar and Kham languages. For example:

English	Raji	Magar	Kham
one	da:	kat	da
two	ni:	nish	-
three	xu:ŋ	soŋ	sum
four	pa:ri	pi	pari
five	pŋa	ŋa	rŋa:

(c) There is an absence of a gender system in Raji, as in the other TB languages.

(d) Raji has a flexible word order and in colloquial speech the subject of a sentence is often dropped.

(e) Tibeto-Burman languages can generally be regarded as giving a greater prominence to mood or aspect than to tense. This situation is similar in the case of Raji.

(f) In most of the Tibeto-Burman languages speakers have freedom to specify a particular semantic relation depending on whether or not the specification would help clear up the ambiguity of a sentence in a given context (La Polla:1994). The use of case affixes is non-obligatory in Raji also. For example:

1. mət̪a: fɪŋ ya: ka: ha: rɛ
 monkey tree LOC jump PROG NONPAST
 'The monkey is jumping in the tree.'
2. pa:kʰa: tʰa:y ga:v kʰəRəkva:y
 roof kept grass dry
 'The roof kept the grass dry.'

RAJI: AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

Much has been written on language endangerment since the 1990s, especially since Krauss (1992) broached the matter. Recently books such as Crystal (2000) and Dixon (1997) have augmented the literature. These studies underline the fact that linguistic diversity can be lost with dramatic speed, so that native speakers of endangered languages can quickly lose their cultural heritage. But the question is who is to define which language is endangered and which is not? Wurm (1998) has suggested a five-level scale for ranking 'safe' vs. 'not so safe' languages, as follows:

- (a) *Viable languages*: have population bases that are sufficiently large and thriving to mean that no threat to long-term survival is likely.
- (b) *Viable but small languages*: have more than 1000 speakers, and are spoken in communities that are isolated or have strong internal organization, and that are aware of the way their language is a marker of identity.

- (c) *Endangered languages*: are spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favorable circumstances and with a growth in community support.
- (d) *Nearly extinct languages*: are thought to be beyond the possibility of survival, usually because they are spoken by just a few elderly people.
- (e) *Extinct languages*: are those where the last fluent speaker has died, and there is no sign of any revival.

Actually the real picture of language endangerment may not be so simple, and can have many intermediate stages. In the case of Raji it can be said that it falls somewhere between the 'c' and 'd' groups. Further elaborating group 'c' Wurm stated that "the best yardstick for (language endangerment) is the behavior of a language in various generations of a speech community, especially that of children." The language can be listed in the category of 'potentially endangered' if not more than 10-30% of children learn it. If there are only a few child speakers left, and the youngest good speakers are young adults, then the language is 'endangered'. The language is called seriously endangered if their youngest good speakers are largely past middle age. If only a handful of mostly old speakers are left, the language is 'moribund'. If no speakers seem to be left, the language is 'believed extinct'. If one tries to judge Raji according to the above criterion one finds that only about 20% of Raji children like to use their mother tongue, whereas 60% of children are indifferent, and 20% do not want to speak it at all, as they are finding it more advantageous to shift from their ancestral language to the more useful Kumauni. It should be noted that Raji exists only in spoken form and that literacy among Rajis is quite low. Only 5% of the total population is literate, and that only up to class V or VI. Only one boy in the whole community has passed the tenth grade, and only one other is about to enter it. Three Rajis are working as class IV employees in government services, that is about 0.5% of the total population. It has often been claimed that in situations where reading and writing have been attained in the mother tongue, before the 'other language' appears, shift may be slower than in a situation where the mother tongue is used only orally. The data collected from different hamlets clearly shows that a few old Rajis are still monolingual, especially those who reside in far away and inaccessible places. Young and middle aged Rajis are mostly bilinguals and a few of them are using the other language unconsciously. It is interesting to note that there are trilingual speakers who can speak Raji, Kumauni, and Hindi. Hindi is the

language of administration, education, and the media. Some of the literate Rajis are able to read and write Hindi. The domain distribution of their language behavior shows that Raji is consistently maintained as the language of home, family, and religious activities, but outside their hamlets, i.e. in the market or at their workplace, they usually use the local Kumauni dialect. Though a very small number of Raji children go to school, Hindi is the language of education. The following table shows the domain distribution of the Raji language.

<i>Language</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Religious Activities</i>	<i>Home/Family</i>	<i>Other Places</i>
<i>Raji</i>	-	84%	75%	30%
<i>Kumauni</i>	25%	16%	20%	55%
<i>Hindi</i>	75%	-	5%	15%

Table 2. Use of Raji language according to domains

It is clear from the above table that in terms of discourse Raji belongs to the 'defunct' category. It is being used less and less frequently, and gradually becoming functionally less versatile. Due to poor socio-economic interactions Rajis rarely come into contact with the media. Roughly 10% of Rajis get a chance to listen to the radio and that mainly when they visit nearby towns in search of their livelihood, but only 3% own one. They listen to news and other programmes broadcasted in Kumauni or Hindi. Almost no one has exposure to visual media.

PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE RAJI LANGUAGE

Apart from the number of speakers involved, native speakers' attitude towards their mother tongue is also crucial for the very existence and development of any language. My data clearly reflect the native population's lack of pride in its linguistic heritage, which can be one of the main reasons for its endangerment. Responses given to questions like 'Do you like to speak Raji?' 'Do you think speaking Raji is good?' 'Do you feel proud of your language and culture?', clearly show that 60% of Rajis have an indifferent attitude towards their language, and 90% of them do not consider it worth speaking. A sense of the inferiority of their language has slowly crept in, and lurks in the minds of most of the native speakers.

AGE	YES	INDIFFERENT	NO
5-15	20	60	20
16-25	30	10	60
26-35	25	10	65
36-45	40	05	55
46-55	55	05	40
56-65	90	05	10
66+	-	-	-

Table 3. Do you like to speak Rauti?

AGE	YES	INDIFFERENT	NO
5-15	05	90	05
16-25	10	10	80
26-35	15	05	80
36-45	25	05	70
46-55	50	05	45
56-65	85	05	10
66+	-	-	-

Table 4. Do you think speaking Rauti is good?

AGE	YES	INDIFFERENT	NO
5-15	-	100	-
16-25	15	50	35
26-35	25	35	40
36-45	35	35	30
46-55	45	30	25
56-65	55	30	15
66+	-	-	-

Table 5. Do you feel proud of your language and culture?

If a language has only a small number of speakers, but they are not under any pressure or economic threat from any major language, it has no reason to be in danger or to disappear. On the other hand, languages with a large number of speakers can be in danger of eventually disappearing if their speakers are under intense economic and cultural pressure from any dominant language. When

viewed thus we find that Raji has a small number of speakers and is under the continual pressure of their economically as well as linguistically richer neighbors. Presently Rajis are at the crossroads. Their language does not serve their economic or educational needs. They do not realize the cultural importance of their language and the identity conferred by it. Their desperate struggle for existence overrides and supersedes their language loyalty. As Dorian (1980) rightly puts it, "language loyalty persists so long as the economic and social circumstances are conducive to it; but if some other language proves to have greater value, a shift to that other language begins." This situation is adversely affecting the status and chances of survival of this indigenous language.

The attitude of the dominant group is also not encouraging in the case of Raji. Most of the Kumauni people consider it as an inferior language and refer to it as 'Jangli'. They often persuade Raji speakers to adopt the dominant language in place of their native language. Due to the decrease in population over the years, and the shrinking scope of its functional domains, the Raji language is quickly assimilating to the languages of the dominant culture. As a result, the original variety is getting more and more restricted in use. In my opinion, these factors push Raji towards the category of endangered languages. The need of the hour is not only to document the Raji language but also to work educationally, culturally, and politically to increase its chance of survival. To fulfill this aim pedagogical materials and literature should be produced and language development in necessary domains must be promoted with the help of members of the community itself. It is my firm belief that it can be revived, given enough financial, sociological, psychological, and political support. While governments see language maintenance from the point of view of economic feasibility, it is a matter of academic concern for linguists. It is the inherent right of a community to demand the survival of its language, since it is its life and soul, and its extinction means an inevitable loss of cultural identity. A community that gives up its language under compulsion loses its moorings. Hale (1992) has rightly observed, "...language loss in the modern period is of different character. (It is) *loss of cultural and intellectual diversity* in which politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled."

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