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Raji Orthography Development

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ABSTRACT

Raji is a little known tribal community whose descendants are the prehistoric Kiratas. They live in dense forests far away from the surrounding Kumauni villages of Pithoragarh district. In 2001 Census their population was reported to be 732 in all the ten villages. Sir George Grierson, in his book 'Linguistic Survey of India' had named this language as 'janggali' which has only spoken form.

Following the framework established by Wurm and the stages of threatenedness discussed in Fishman's GIDS (1991) Raji can be assessed as "potentially endangered and at stage 6, language which means the language is at risk." While chalking out a revitalization programme for this oral language I realized the need of orthography development for this language. It is an established fact that Orthography gives stability to a language and not only conserves it but also helps in the standardization process. So after preparing a small grammar book, with the help of collected phonological and grammatical material of Raji the next important task before me was to develop an orthography system. The present paper focuses on the early stages of orthography development for this previously undocumented indigenous language

KEYWORDS

Kumaun Raji, Language endangerment, Revitalization, Orthography development

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Raji Orthography Development

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1 Introduction

In India Raji tribal community was brought into light for the first time in 1823 by the then commissioner of Kumaun G.W. Traill. It is said that Rajis or Banrawats are descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas, who were comparatively early settlers of the region than the Nagas and the Khasas. Atkinson (1882) stated that these early tribes entered India by the same route as the Aryans and the Kiratas were the first to arrive than the others. In 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 pre-historic Kirati origin. The legend current among them, as told to me, is that they were descendants of the royal family of Askot. Presently, in India,¹ they have been located living in ten small, remote and distant hamlets, consisting from four to fifteen households.² Most of these hamlets lie in an inhospitable terrain amidst dense forests far away from the surrounding Kumauni villages of Pithoragarh district.

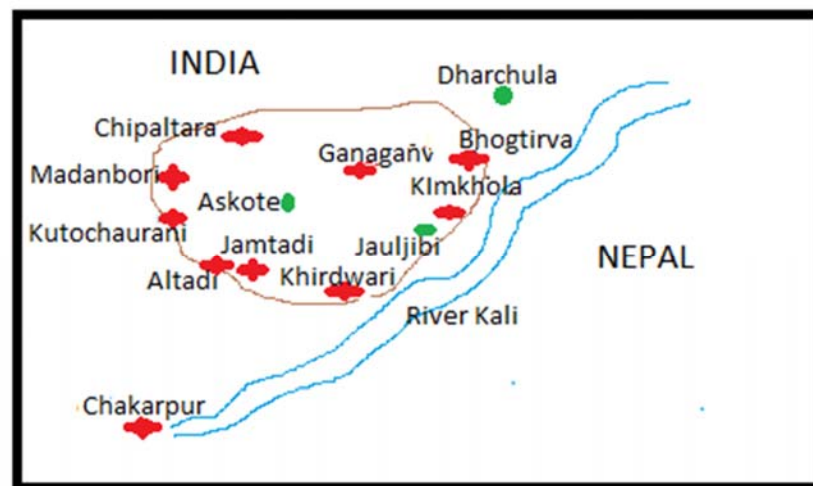


Figure 1. Map of Raji hamlets

¹ According to the Census 2011 their total population in all the ten hamlets is 732.

² The names of the Raji hamlets are- *Kimkhola, Bhogtirua, Ganagaon, Chipltara, Madanbori, Kutachaurani, Altodi, Jamtadi, Khirdwari and Chakarpur.*

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 the caves and rock shelters" (Bora: 1988). Due to socio- economic backwardness, the government of India has identified Rajis as a primitive tribe in 1965 and as scheduled tribe in June 1967.

In physical appearance, presently Rajis exhibit mixed physical traits of Aryans, Dravidians and Mongoloids. They are of wheatish complexion, of average height have straight and scanty hair of slight brownish colour, intermediate headed type with medium nose, round to long face, small eyes with grey pigments. Some of them have mongoloid epicanthic fold. Crooke (1896) has linked Rajis with the non-Aryan affinities where as Atkinson has found racial mixture of Tibetans and Khasas in their physical features. Mazumdar (1944) has related them with Mongolian affinities. Driem (2001) takes Rajis as an indigenous South Asian racial Mongoloids.

2 Raji Language

The name of their language is also Raji/Rawati³ which is an ethnonym used both for the group and the language they speak. Grierson (1909), in his book *Linguistic survey of India* had named this language as '*janggali*'; and due to geographical affinity placed it in Tibeto-Burman family. Chatterji (1926) also supported Grierson's claim. On the other hand some linguists like Sharma (1987) and Sharma (1994) have suggested that the linguistic components of Raji language were paleo-linguistic relics of some of the Munda dialects, which, in the ancient past were spoken in the Himalayan region. In my previous works (Rastogi: 2002; 2012) I have tried to establish that though this indigenous language belongs to Central Himalayish branch of Tibeto-Burman family yet long contact with Indo- Aryan languages like Kumauni and Hindi has not only affected its vocabulary but also its grammar.

It must be noted here that a culturally contiguous Raji- Raute tribe lives in the southwest and western regions of Nepal. Rautes were Nomadic their some groups have now started to settle down. Rajis have four different groups in Nepal –Bandali Raji, Purabia Raji, Naukhele Raji and Dharchula Raji.⁴ Researchers have studied and are still trying (Reinhard: 1974, Khatri: 2013) to find out the commonalities among these groups. In our earlier published work I and Fortier ((2004, 2006) have tried to establish, that "a definite and close relationship between the two groups(Khamchi spoken by Rautes and Raji/ Rawati spoken by Indian Rajis) does exist. Without detailed morphological and grammatical comparison it is difficult to say that whether they are two dialects of one language or two separate but closely related languages."

³ In *Ethnologue* the name of the language is mentioned as Rawat [jnl]/ government given name Raji (ISO639-3).In my earlier works I have mentioned the name Rawati not Rawat for their language as the word Rawat is used as a caste name in the Northern hill region of India. But later on I dropped it as the group is comfortable with Raji name.

⁴ Johan Reinhard and Guru Prasad Gautam p.c.

3 Present state of Raji/ Rawati language

At present its vocabulary is shrunken many words have been replaced by loans and structural simplification is also evident. All community members speak a highly mixed variety, and there is intergenerational language transmission. However, education and literacy development occur exclusively in Hindi and bilingualism is prevalent in the community. Thus, while it continued to be learned as a first language by children, the proficiency of these speakers is limited. In terms of language use Raji belongs to the “defunct” category in certain domains and is gradually becoming functionally less loaded. Presently a highly mixed variety of Raji is used within the community, mainly at home and for religious activities. Communication with neighboring people occurs in the language of the dominant community Kumauni or Hindi.

Following the framework established by Wurm(1998) and the stages of threatenedness discussed in Fishman’s GIDS (1991) Raji can be assessed as “potentially endangered and at stage 6, which means the language is at risk.”⁵ While chalking out a revitalization programme for this oral language I realized the need of orthography development for this language. Orthography gives stability to a language and not only conserves it but also helps in the standardization process of the language. So after preparing a small grammar book, with the help of collected phonological and grammatical material of Raji the next important task before me was to develop an orthography system. The present paper focuses on the early stages of orthography development for this undocumented indigenous language.

My work on Raji began in 1998. I started interviewing Raji speakers about their language with little or no reference. In the beginning I just had a word list collected by Bisht (1994), a sociologist, which contains approximately 25 words. During interviews, my method was to ask for a lexical item for example ‘head’, showing them the item physically if possible. As Rajis are basically shy people and shun interaction with outsiders it was very difficult to interview them. A local boy Kushal Singh Kanyal helped me a lot during my first field trip. During my second visit I had a sentence list (Abbi: 2001) which helped me in the data collection. To understand the issues of language maintenance and shift I also administered a questionnaire during this visit. The data for the present paper originated from my third and longer visit to the community in 2004. To involve the younger generation of the community during the first phase of the orthography development programme I conducted an essay competition in their residential school to judge their preference of script between Devanagari and Roman. While collecting the data sometimes I used to write in Devnagari (script used for Hindi and Kumauni, the neighboring dominant languages of the region). During the data collection I noticed whenever the data was written in Devanagari the informants seemed happy and more involved in the recordings. Seeing this I decided to transcribe the data both in IPA and Devanagari. When I asked them about their preference for writing down their language their obvious choice was Devnagari. During the very early stage of language documentation process I compiled several word lists, established a list of phonemes, and shifted from a phonetic orthography to a tentative phonemic orthography. This first orthography was based on my phonemic analyses. The result was a first tentative orthography in collaboration with the community. After receiving grant from University Grant’s Commission, India to work in the area of revitalization of Raji, in 2007 I again visited the field and tested and cross checked the orthography. Several changes were made to my first tentative orthography. The new orthography was tested

⁵ *Ethnologue* describes it as “the Status” – 7 (shifting).

informally with several community members and approved. In March 2010 a Raji Alphabet book for the community was published and distributed free of cost among the community members.

4 General Principles in Orthography Development

Introducing native literacy for an oral language can have many positive and negative implications. Some negatives are highlighted by Hinton (2001) such as - native speaker's loss of control over the language; freezing of the language and disagreement within the community. Positives of writing the oral language include- written language documentation for language survival; expansion of language use to other domains; empowerment of the community. During the early years of my work I had realized that Rajis have very negative attitude towards their mother tongue. They seem to be acutely aware of the fact that their mother tongue has very little scope in promoting upward mobility and it will not provide them food, education etc. The attitude of the dominant group was also not very encouraging. So in Raji's context the question whether to write down their language or not was never important because their language was neither important for them nor they had any sense of pride for their mother tongue. Gradually I started working in this direction and after working with them for around nine years I succeeded in instilling the importance of their mother tongue and the need for its preservation. As a result many youngsters and some middle aged Raji came forward and helped me in the present orthography development programme.



Figure 2. Model Essay Contest , Raji Residential School, Jauljibi

To involve Raji students in the process an essay contest was organized and to present a model before the teachers and the students a contest was held on 6th Nov 2004. In all nine students of class iv and v took part in the competition. I wrote two Hindi sentences on the blackboard and then translated them in Raji and wrote those sentences in Devnagari on the blackboard. After explaining the process I ask them to write ten sentences of Raji in Devnagari on the topic 'My Family'. During this 'essay competition'⁶ Raji children saw written form of their language. The children were pleased

⁶ In 2004 we (myself and Dr Fortier) had organized an essay completion in 'Raji residential School' at Jauljibi.

and eager to learn to write their mother tongue. Since the written form was similar to the dominant language, they felt a sense of pride.

Mostly new orthographies show one –to – one relation between phonemes and graphemes. This type of orthography is generally preferred over phonetic writing. To create a phonemic orthography one needs to do basic phonological analysis of the language. In Gordon's (1986) view there are two consequences of phonemic orthographies - firstly possible inconsistency among various representations of a single word; secondly, possible creation of homographs. Therefore it is not always easy to follow one phoneme–one grapheme rule. In this situation factors like-orthographic depth, under and over differentiation and functional load come into play. In Seifart's opinion orthographic depth differentiates between shallow and deep orthography. In shallow orthographies there is a correspondence between written representation and their phonemic form whereas deep orthographies are those with a correspondence between written representation and their underlying form. Apart from these linguistic factors the main non-linguistic factor in orthography development is social, political and cultural acceptability. Taking into consideration these linguistic and non – linguistic factors I have developed an orthography system for Raji, which is described in the following section.

5 Raji Orthography Development

I completed this work in three stages. When I first started documenting the language it was purely phonetic. Once I had defined the phonemes, I shifted to phonemic orthography. This first tentative orthography provided material for the discussion during my next visit. After consulting many younger and middle aged community members I made corrections and revised the tentative orthography. This working orthography is almost identical to the tentative orthography I had established previous to my second field trip. Only three changes were made (a) use of only one grapheme for long and short /i/ and /u/, (b) No grapheme for the allophonic variation of / n/ etc., (c) use of symbol used in Sanskrit language / ॠ. Then I prepared a Raji alphabet book with the help of this informally tested and community approved orthography and distributed it among the community speakers.

In what follows I describe the largely phonemic orthography developed in the second stage and the changes made to this tentative orthography. Raji has thirty consonantal phonemes: sixteen stops (eight voiced and eight voiceless), three nasals, two fricatives, four affricates, two trills, one lateral and two glides. Out of these, retroflex stops are limited to borrowed Kumauni / Hindi terms. The vowel system includes seven short vowels. Interestingly length, nasalization and glottalization are part of phonetic system but they do not present contrast with other phonemes. Such as all vowels have nasal counterparts irrespective of their proximity to nasal consonants but nasalization is not phonemic.

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Retroflex	Velar	Glottal
Stops	UA/A	UA/A		UA/A	UA/A	UA/A	
Voiceless	p p ^h	t t ^h			T T ^h	k k ^h	
Voiced	b b ^h	d d ^h			D D ^h	g g ^h	
Affricates							
Voiceless				c c ^h			
Voiced				j j ^h			
Fricatives			s f				h
Nasals	m	n				ŋ	
Laterals		l					
Trills			r		R		
Semi vowel	w			y			

Table 1. Raji Consonants

There are seven short vowels in Raji –

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low	ɛ	ə	a

Table 2. Raji Vowels

Phoneme	p	p ^h	T	t ^h	T	T ^h	k	k ^h
Grapheme	प	फ	त	थ	ट	ठ	क	ख
Phoneme	b	b ^h	D	d ^h	D	D ^h	g	g ^h
Grapheme	ब	भ	द	ध	ड	ढ	ग	घ
Phoneme	c	c ^h	J	j ^h	s	ʃ	h	m
Grapheme	च	छ	ज	झ	स	श	ह	म
Phoneme	n	ŋ	L	R	R	w	y	
Grapheme	न	ङ	ल	र	ड़	व	य	
Phoneme	I	u	E	O	ε	ə	a	~
Grapheme	इ	उ	ए	ओ	ऐ	अ	आ	◌̃

Table 3. Phoneme to grapheme correspondence

In oral language form Raji people pronounce long and short form of both /i/ and /u/ vowels but these are neither distinctive nor allophonic. In the tentative draft two different graphemes were used but after a lot of discussion, the community decided that they need only one grapheme each for them. Likewise nasal /ŋ/ is allophonic variation of /n/ that always comes at the end of the word. Since they wanted to write it down (most of them were aware of Devnagari) it has been given a grapheme in the writing system. Similarly Retroflex trill /R/ is a borrowed sound which was earlier used in loan words only but now alveolar trill /r/ is sometimes pronounced as retroflex trill such as /paRi/ and /pari/. In the whole data I have received only one word where nasalization creates a meaningful difference /ha/ and /hã/ but they decided to retain it, because they felt it adds local flavor to the orthography. Allophonic variation of / n, m, l, w/ aspirated / n^h, m^h, l^h and w^h/ are also found in Raji phonological system. These sounds are found in initial position only. To write these sounds I suggested them to use a symbol used in Sanskrit language / ॠ because it was easy to write and more easy to use with computers instead of vowel less consonants of Devanagari. I am happy they like my suggestion as a result all the vowel less consonants are written with / ॠ.

vowel	अ	आ	इ	उ	ए	ऐ	ओ
signs	-	ा	ि	ु	े	ै	ो

Table 4. Vowel Signs

Thus while developing Raji orthography following four main factors were considered-

- Using Devanagari conventions
- Representation of phonemes only
- No special symbol
- Consulting community members

6 Conclusion

This work describes the process and methodology of Orthography development of Raji, a previously undocumented language, spoken by a small number of speakers in the district of Pithoragarh. This work was done in collaboration with the community. My role was to make them aware regarding the importance of documentation and preservation of their mother tongue. I provided them guidance with linguistic issues and spelling options. Some of the decisions taken during this early stage may need revision in future. As mentioned earlier in the next phase I prepared an Alphabet reader “Raji varna mala” for the community.



Figure 3. Distribution of RAJI alphabet reader at Raji Awaasiya Vidyalaya, Jauljibi

The book presents all the alphabets and related words with the help of colorful pictures related to Raji community. At least four words of each alphabet and a sentence having that particular word have been given in the reader. In the end a list of Raji pronouns, numerals, colour terms and kinship terms have also been given. In the year 2009 it was distributed free of cost for the benefit of the community.

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