

THARU LANGUAGE: A BRIEF STUDY ON SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECT

(With special reference to Tharu variety spoken in Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh, India)

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Abstract

Tharus are spread over the Himalayan Tarai Region on the Indo-Nepal border. Tharu people speak the language of the Indo-Aryan language family. This study is based on the sub-group of Tharus residing in Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh. The sociolinguistic situation of Tharu language is multilingual. They use their mother tongue in most domains and also use other languages outside the community.

1. Introduction

Tharu tribe people are spread at the Himalayan foothills in the Tarai area at Nepal and India border. Tharu is an umbrella term and there are many ethnic and language groups under it. Outsiders generally view the Tharus as one homogeneous group. The Tharu, however, recognize many different subgroups distinguished by clan, region, cultural differences, and language (Webster 1993: 4). Tharu is an 'ethnonym', as it is used for language as well as for the community. The name 'Tharuhat' is famous for the region where Tharus live. Tharus are the ethnic minorities of Nepal and consist of about 6% of the total population of Nepal. Tharus are spread on both sides of the India and Nepal border from Bihar to Uttarakhand. Out of the two, a larger population of Tharus live in Nepal. Both sides of Tharus share a common culture and still make marital bondings. But being in two different countries, Tharus are also linked with their respective countries' language, culture and civilization. Tharus in India are more developed than the Tharus of Nepal, although their condition is no better compared with other communities in India.

There are many groups of Tharus, such as Rana, Dangaura, Kathariya, Kochila, Chitwania etc. All the Tharus exist in Himalayan Tarai Region on the Indo-Nepal border. Tharu tribe live in Udham Singh Nagar, Pilibhit, Lakhimpur-kheeri, Gonda, Basti, Bahraich, Shrawasti, Gorakhpur and Motihari districts of India and Dang, Chitwan, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur, Morng, Saptari, Jhapa districts of Nepal. They are of the Mongoloid physical appearance and are distinct from the Mongoloid tribes towards the middle ranges of Nepal. Srivastava (1958), in his description of Tharus cultural characteristics, confirms the view that they represent the northernmost extension of the middle Indian aboriginal races rather than the Mongoloid people inhabiting the Himalayan ranges.

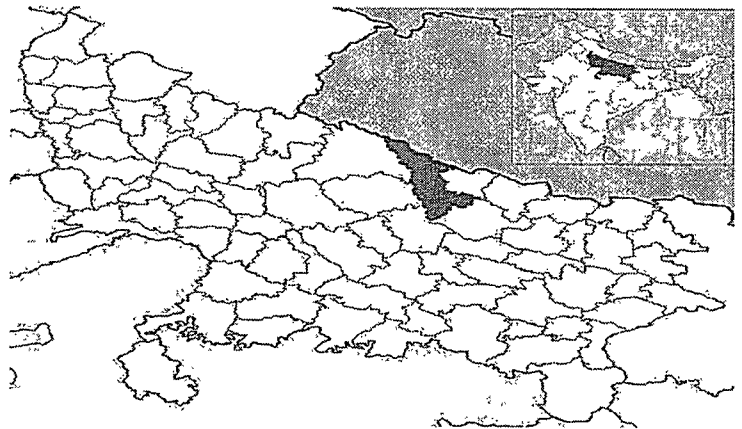
Tharu people speak the language of the Indo-Aryan language family. This study is based on the sub-group of Tharus residing in Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh. Generally, people

do not know about the sub-category of language or language variety of the Tharus. There are many contradictions about the origin and name of the Tharu community. The famous proposition is that the name 'Tharu' came from the 'Thar desert'. Many writers, without any substantial evidence, have put forward their proposition that the Tharus migrated from the Thar desert in the 13th to 15th century and they began to call themselves, or others call them the Tharus. One of the belief is that after the defeat of Maharana Pratap, King of Chitour Garh of Rajasthan, in the battle of Haldi Ghati with the Mughals, the women fled away from there and they came in this dense forest region near Nepal with their bodyguards and servants for shelter. Thereafter the women made marriages with the servants and bodyguards.

Some scholars proposed that the Tharus are a pre-Aryan race of Mongoloid origin. Another story of Tharu origin is that they originated in Nepal and are the descendants of Gautama Buddha, and Suddhodhana was Tharu King of Kapilvastu. Some scholars also believe that the Tharus are a branch of Kirat because of their Mongoloid appearance. Some Tharus have Mongoloid appearance and others are of Australoid appearance, pointing to the fact that Tharus are a hybrid of Kirat and Nishadhas. Nepali historian 'Shiva Raj Shrestha' wrote that Tharus are a hybrid of Mongoloid race (Kirat) and Australoid race (Nishadhas). This can be visibly seen in their physical appearance where most of them are Mongoloid. Some genetics study says about the Tharus that 'the East Asian layer in the genetic ancestry of the Tharu is older than the expansion of the Tharu within the subcontinent (potentially from the Tarai region) and also, the expansion of the Tharu was followed by extensive admixture and assimilation with the local populations,'.

2. Demography

In this study, we have taken data of Tharu language of Bahraich district only. According to the 2011 Census, Bahraich district has a population of 3,487,731. It is situated between the 28.24 to 27.4 Latitude & 81.65 to 81.3 eastern Longitude. Bahraich share its border with Lakheempur- Khiri, Sitapur, Barabanki, Gonda and Shravasti districts in Uttar Pradesh as well as Bahraich borders with Nepal's Bardiya and Banke districts.



Northern part of the district is Tarai region which is covered by the dense natural forest where Tharus resides.

Total population of Tharu, according to Census 2011, is 11,159 (5606 male, 5553 female). Mostly, Tharus are spread in Mihinpurwa block of Motipur tehsil and few are in Bahraich. During our visit we took the data of the population of each village of Mihinpurwa block.

Tharu community belongs to the Schedule Tribe category. Tharus live in a total of 26 villages and their total population is 10,760. In these 26 villages, there are 8 villages where the Tharu population is less than 10 and in 5 villages the Tharu population is between 10 to 50.

3. Society

The Tharu people themselves say that they are the people of the forest. Tharu people have always been backward and poor. They live a difficult life as they are disconnected from the mainstream and therefore any form of developmental projects or schemes could not benefit them. Tharus have a rich indigenous knowledge system that helps them in their livelihood. They have lived in the forests for hundreds of years practicing a short fallow shifting cultivation. Their main occupations are agriculture, hunting and fishing. They plant rice, mustard, corn and lentils and also collect forest products such as wild fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants and materials to build their houses. They also hunt deer, rabbit, wild boar, and go fishing in the rivers and oxbow lakes. Historically, they were the only ones that were able to reside in the malarial jungles on the Indo-Nepal border.

On a social level, not much progress has taken place among the Tharu tribe. They lag behind in education, technology and communication. Literacy rate is still very low and women are especially deprived of higher education. The economic condition of the Tharus of this area is poor and backward and many still live below the poverty line. Only a few people from the Tharu tribe have government jobs and are working in other service sectors while many have to migrate outside the district or state in order to find jobs.

In spite of innumerable external influences, the tribes have retained their uniqueness and ethnicity. They have distinctive cultural characteristics which can easily be differentiated from the other community. They are culturally distinct and ethnic population.

Tharus are very rich in their culture and tradition. They have a unique way of life. The



goods and artifacts of their daily life like dresses, ornaments are attractive and fascinating. They have a strong ritual system for various occasions. They celebrate many festivals by dancing and other gatherings.

Tharus have rich folk literature. They have

a variety of literature genres, i.e., story, song, joke, proverbs etc but has no written records. In the past, they used to write their folk literature in some different style of writing in Devanagari script.

4. Tharu language

The Tharu community lives in contact with other languages, specifically Nepali and Hindi, and it makes language vitality necessary to investigate. “Tharus do not have a language of their own and speak more or less the language of Aryan races with whom they are in immediate contact” (Grierson 1903). But, his observation was flawed. Like other tribes, Tharus too have their own language. Lewis (2009) and Epele et al. (2012) lists four dialects of the Tharu language, namely- Rana Tharu, Dangaura Tharu, Chitwania Tharu, and Morangiya or Kochila Tharu. It is still debated whether different Tharu groups speak the dialects of the same language or separate languages having distinctive features of their own.

Ethnologue lists five Tharu dialectal varieties, based on the sub-categorisation of Tharu language. It lists Tharu (Dangaura), Tharu (Kathariya), Tharu (Rana), Tharu (Madya Ksetriya) and Tharu (Madya Purbiya). All the varieties have been assigned different ISO (International Organization for Standardization) codes. Each community claims their language is different and is considered as a matter of pride and prestige for the community to speak in their mother tongue.

Most of the Tharus of Bahraich district use their surname as ‘Chaudhary’. There are some who use their surname as ‘Rana.’ Some people say that their variety belongs to the Dangaura sub-category. This area is very close to Bardiya district of Nepal and here mostly Dangaura speech variety is spoken. Throughout the Bahraich district, the same variety of Tharu language is used. As compared to other languages in the region, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Nepali, Tharu shows differences in linguistic characteristics. Although they all are from the Aryan language family.

Tharu speakers are not much aware about the protection and preservation of their language. They use vocabulary that they find suitable for communication. Many of them are multilingual and they understand Hindi, Awadhi and Bhojpuri. The Younger generation is also familiar with English. Tharu vocabulary is also used in other Indo-Aryan languages in the neighbourhood. Bhojpuri and Awadhi too have many words from Tharu. Tharu pronunciation is different and in some cases is similar with other Indo-Aryan languages. A comparative list of vocabulary in Tharu and Hindi is given below:

Sl.	Tharu	IPA	Hindi	English
1.	LAURA	ləura	LADAKA	boy
2.	LAWARIYA	ləwərija	LADAKI	girl
3.	DUSAR	ɖusər	DUSARA	another
4.	KAISIN	kəisɪn	KAISE	how
5.	DADA	dada	BADA BHAI	big brother
6.	GHORAWA	g ^h orəwa	GHODHA	horse
7.	SISA	p ^h ʊsə	DARPAN	mirror
8.	KA	mɔsi	KYA	what
9.	KAKA	kaka	CHACHA	uncle

10.	KARIYA	kərija	KALA	black
11.	RAKHI	rak ^h i	RAKH	ash
12.	BADARI	bədəri	AASAMAN	sky
13.	TARE	təre	NICHE	under
14.	PIYAR	pījər	PEELA	yellow
15.	AAGI	aqi	AAG	fire
16.	UPPAR	uppər	UPAR	above
17.	LOTA	loṭa	LOTA	a type of pot
18.	DASAIN	dəsəi	DASHAHARA	a festival
19.	MANAI	mənəi	AADAMI	man
20.	CHAUR	caur	CHAWAL	rice
21.	MUS	mus	CHUHA	mouse
22.	BAURAH	bəurəha	PAAGAL	mad
23.	BHAATA	b ^h ittər	BAINGAN	brinjal
24.	DUBBAR	dubbər	DUBALA	weak
25.	NON	k ^h un	NAMAK	salt
26.	SURA	sura	SUAR	pig
27.	CHURI	curi	CHUDI	bangle
28.	MOCHH	mo ^h	MUCHH	mustache
29.	DAL	dal	DAL	pulse
30.	DAHI	dəhi	DAHI	curd
31.	KAKAWA	kəkəwa	KANGGHI	comb
32.	HARDI	hərđi	HALDI	turmeric
33.	RASARI	rəsəri	RASSI	rope
34.	KATHI	kat ^h i	LAKADI	wood
35.	TIKULI	ṭikuli	BINDI	bindi

5. Domains of language use and language vitality

Domain of language use is very important for the development and sustainability of a language. It also reflects the sociolinguistic situation. In the time of globalization, people live in a society where they have to make contact with other communities for various purposes. Tribal communities are also adapting to the modern lifestyle. According to Khubchandani (2001: 26), "The inter group communications among tribal record a wide range of variation in the claims of bilingualism, mostly depending upon the degree of heterogeneity in their contact environments and their attitude to languages surrounding them."

Tharu language is not used for official or educational purposes. Tharus use other languages in addition to their traditional language which is Tharu. Here are some of the description of the different domain where the languages are used by Tharus:

1. What language (s) is used at home?	
With grandparents?	Tharu
With spouse?	Tharu, Hindi
With children?	Tharu, Hindi
With grand children?	Tharu, Hindi
With siblings?	Tharu, Hindi
With pets and livestock?	Tharu, Hindi
2. What language(s) is used at school?	
With the teacher in the classroom?	Hindi
With the teacher outside the classroom?	Hindi
With friends of the same community in the classroom?	Tharu, Hindi
With friends of other community in the classroom?	Hindi
With friends of the same community outside the classroom?	Tharu, Hindi
With friends of other community outside the classroom?	Hindi
3. What language(s) is used at the market?	
With the merchant of the same tribe/community?	Tharu, Hindi
With the merchant of the other tribe/community?	Hindi
With an acquaintance in the market?	Hindi
4. What language(s) is used at a place of worship?	
While praying to god?	Tharu, Hindi
While reciting or performing rituals?	Tharu, Hindi
While singing religious songs?	Tharu, Hindi
When get possessed?	Tharu
While talking with other worshippers at the worship place?	Hindi
For religious discussions at the place of worship with the priest?	Tharu, Hindi
5. What language(s) is used at the community meetings?	Tharu, Hindi
6. What language(s) is used with a stranger?	Hindi
7. What language(s) is used with the healer/native doctor?	Tharu, Hindi

The use of Tharu is limited to a few domains only. In the assessment of vitality as per the UNESCO language vitality parameters, Tharu would fall in the ‘unsafe’ category, where language is used in only specific social domains. People know their language but when they come in contact with other communities for various social and educational purposes, then it becomes necessary for them to speak Hindi. Although, within the community, Tharu is used as a main language for day to day communications. This language is active in various domains of daily use as well as communities that have a strong attachment with their heritage. Communities are getting used to the modern livelihood yet they want their culture and tradition alive.

Conclusion

Tharu region is surrounded by dominant languages like Hindi, Awadhi and Nepali speakers. English is taught in school and is also used in many social platforms as well. These diverse domains see different languages being used in the area apart from their mother tongue. People use their language in domains of language use such as singing, recreation, storytelling, debating, praying, quarrelling, abusing, singing at home, family gatherings, village meetings etc. Tharus use their mother tongue with their family members discussing different family matters. But they have to use other languages when communicating with other communities and because of this, there is a shift from their mother tongue towards the dominant languages, although there is much intergenerational language transmission. Tharus are very rich in their culture and tradition but lack written records. Their folk literature is not much available in written format.

In conclusion, the sociolinguistic situation of Tharu language is multilingual as the community use their mother tongue as well as other languages in their daily life. People know and understand the languages of their surroundings as well as languages like Hindi and English that are official languages of the country. The Tharu community is not economically sound and they are struggling to benefit from modern livelihood and education. Globalization is also affecting their language vitality and it is difficult to avoid mixing of languages although the community have an attachment for their mother tongue and want it to grow and preserve it. Tharu is used in local music and films. The Younger generation is keen on using the language and in maintaining their culture and traditions. From the evidence of language use and the practice of culture and traditions, it can be said that Tharu is not facing a situation of endangerment.

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