

# The Himalayan

ON S U N D A Y

## The moribund language

The Kusunda language is on the verge of extinction and when it does, we may lose more than just words

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For centuries the Kusundas roamed the dense forests of Nepal. They moved frequently foraging the wild for food, living in temporary 'lean-to' sheds made of boughs and leaves. With coats of wild creepers, they ensnared clawed birds and with bows and arrows, hunted monitor lizards and palm civets. They never so much as went near cattle and mostly foraged for root vegetables like yams.

But apart from their semi-nomadic culture, the most fascinating aspect of the tribe has always been their unique language, which to this day baffles linguists and anthropologists all across the world.

Today, with less than 150 of them scattered across parts of the country in Surkhet, Dang, Tanahun, Gorkha, the Kusundas are among the most seriously endangered and a relic tribe of South Asia. Their once semi-nomadic culture has all but ceased to exist. Their origin and ancestry remain shrouded in a thick veil of myths and speculations and the fate of their language rests solely on the shoulders of 47-year-old Kamala Khatri.

### A language isolate

On January 25, Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda breathed her last. As per the Kusunda's age-old tradition she was buried in a newly dug grave close to the Arjun Khola in Kulmang, Dang, where she resided with her family for most of her life. She was 85 years old.

Gyani Maiya was seen as the most prominent figure in preservation of the dying Kusunda language. Not only was she articulate in her speech but equally erudite in the culture of her tribe, which hardly any living Kusundas today abide by or are even aware of. Much like her ancestors, she avoided dairy products and given their affinity for root vegetables, even planted yams in her humble kitchen garden. As a memorabilia of her once semi-nomadic past, she also kept a snare of tangled cords at her stead, using it at times for entrapping jungle fowls according to Uday Raj Ale, an author and campaigner of the Kusunda language.

For myriads of curious linguists and anthropologists, Gyani Maiya was the go-to resource person. "She was tremendously energetic for someone over 80," elucidates Ale, with her help also published a book on the history, culture and language of the tribe called *Kusunda Tribe and Dictionary* in 2017. It took Ale five years to compile a 1,500-word dictionary of the language and the multiple theories pertaining to the tribe's past.

Prior to Ale, few others stepped up to the task of understanding the complex nature



GYANI MAIYA SEN KUSUNDA

Kusunda's phonetics and grammar. Among them, the most early of those attempts goes back to 1850s, when Brian Hodgson, the British Resident to the Court of Nepal, published around a list of 223 words in his *Comparative Vocabulary of the Languages of the Broken Tribes of Nepal* (1857).

After that, a little over 100 years would elapse before the next batch of researchers published their findings on Kusunda vocabulary.

Johan Reinhard, an American anthropologist with Sueyoshi Toba, and a Japanese linguist, collected a number of Kusunda words together with a short text narrated by a Kusunda named Tek Bahadur, which was published in the article *A Preliminary Linguistic Analysis and Vocabulary of the Kusunda Language*.

While Kusundas did appear in many journals after Hodgson first wrote about them, it was only after Toba and Reinhard's article that the world finally woke up to the peculiar nature of the Kusunda language.

Linguists identify the language as an isolate, which is to

say that it doesn't relate to or has any genealogical relation to any other language of the world, though there have been several attempts to link it to an established language family.

A 2004 article, *Kusunda: An Indo-Pacific Language* purports to be of the Indo-Pacific family, which historically occupied a vast area from the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean to the Solomon Islands in the Pacific. Likewise, others have linked it to Tibeto-Burman language and even Munda language spoken by the Munda people in eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal.

Phonologically, Kusunda possesses sounds that don't exist in any other language in Nepal that they use uvular consonants," explains linguist Madhav Pokharel. The ethnic group call themselves *Mehag* (meaning Lion or The King of the Jungle) and is pronounced with the back of the tongue against or near the uvula.

### The last speaker

Even in the late 1840s, Hodgson had already described the



DHAN BAHADUR KUSUNDA AND HIS WIFE IN THEIR TRADITIONAL ATTIRE

tribe as being scanty in numbers and had even predicted its demise: "The lapse of a few generations will probably see the total extinction of the Chepangs and Kusunda."

The language doesn't have a text of its own making the archiving and preservation part all the more challenging. The archives that remain are mostly audio recordings of a few Kusunda speakers. Linguist Bhojraj Gautam, who has written multiple articles on quantification and dextis of Kusunda, has over 20 hours of Gyani Maiya's recording. Gautam himself speaks conversational Kusunda but isn't too optimistic about the language's immediate future.

"Interest in Kusunda language began much later," observes Gautam. "Scholars after 1980 began their quest searching for native speakers, when there probably were no more than six to eight of them and now there only remains one," he adds referring to Kamala.

Part of the reason for this might be because the media has been too impetuous in pronouncing the language dead in more than one occasion.

On April 18, 2018, mainstream media from all across the country broke the news of 75-year-old Raja Mama Kusunda's demise with headlines that pinned him as the last native speaker of the endangered Kusunda lan-

guage. Some called him the lone Kusunda speaker while many even went so far as to announce the extinction of the language with the death of its supposed last speaker.

Just recently on January 25, similar assertions began surfacing on the Internet following the Gyani Maiya's demise. "This is mostly because the few speaker who were dispersed across regions, some in Dang, some in Surkhet and a few even in Palpa, were unaware of other Kusundas and reckoned themselves as the last," conjectures anthropologist Gokarna Gyawali, who after seven years of field study has published his PhD research titled 'Endangerment of Language: Culture, Cognition and Identity'. And this research is based on a case study of the Kusunda people of Nepal.

Even in the *Ethnologue*, the language was deemed extinct in the 1990s. This was before the scholastic world was to be introduced to Gyani Maiya, Kamala and Prem Bahadur Shahi, who is now 87 years old.

In 2004, the Central Department of Linguistics (CDL), Tribhuvan University, brought the three together to run a three-month intensive linguistic research, which in 2006 was published as *Notes on Kusunda Grammar* by David Elwaters.

"They were housed in a rented flat in Kirtipur," explains

Pokharel, one of the four contributors to Waters' article. "It was there that Gyani Maiya for the first time met Kamala. They were in fact cousin sisters."

Back then Gyani Maiya wasn't as fluent as she became later in her life. Lacking practise both she and Prem Bahadur could only speak in broken sentences, as per Pokharel. "Kamala, on the other hand, was the most fluent speaker we ever encountered," he reflects, precisely because she used to practise with her mother Puni Thakuri until her death in 2010. Originally from a village of Sakhi in Rolpa, she is now the only descendant of the Kusunda with a firm grasp of the language. But regardless of her anthropological significance as the only surviving hope to help understand the peculiar nature of the Kusunda language, Kamala, lives a life of deprivation.

Temporarily residing in Lamahi, Dang, she makes her living working at a small local restaurant, mostly doing the dishes. The income is barely enough for a household she shares with her three sons, a daughter and her 75-year-old husband. "I also have a granddaughter," beamed Kamala, in a phone conversation with *The Himalayan Times* from Dang, referring to her daughter's three-year-old child. Before returning to her home country in 2014, for 10 years she earned her living in



KAMALA KHATRI

Photo: Courtesy Gokarna Gyawali / Bhajraj Gautam / Uday Raj Ale

Shimla, India. After the last few years of financial burden, however, Kamala has begun contemplating life abroad yet again. "I have some things to take care of at Shimla," explained Kamala when asked if she would be leaving soon.

"But for now, I will be helping with the language class."

In January last year, the Language Commission in a bid to resuscitate the dying language began conducting language classes assigning Gyani Maiya and Kamala as the resource persons with Ale as the facilitator and teacher. The sessions were to be conducted regularly but after a couple of weeks the classes were discontinued. "The sessions are divided in four phases of the 360-hour-long course," explained Ale, who reassured commencement in the next couple of days itself.

Both Gyani Maiya and Kamala were offered a language stipend of Rs 3,000 a month but even without the classes being carried out, Kamala is being paid the amount promised to her. "I received Rs 18,000 lump sum of the last six months," she confirmed.

Married to a non-Kusunda, the government doesn't regard Kamala as part of the endangered tribe, which is why she or her family can't reap benefits of the 'tribe on the verge of extinction allowance' as mentioned in the Social Security Act 2073. Such intermarriages with other ethnic groups among the Kusundas are often seen as being the primary reason for their dwindling numbers, as per Gyawali.

"We Kusundas get Rs 3,000 allowance from the government but that too is infrequent and troublesome to obtain for some," informed Dhan Bahadur Kusunda, the Chairman of Kusunda Development Society in Gorahi. For four months now, Nara Bahadur hasn't been getting his allowance as promised, Dhan Bahadur said, giving an example from Gorahi.

Apart from allowances, under the government's Janata Awas Karyakram (People's Housing Programme), many Kusunda families have also been provided with permanent shelter.

Although Kusunda language is now being taught to tribe members at Kulmang and Lamahi, the language still struggles to gain traction and move beyond a rudimentary level. Few seem able to dedicate the time needed to learn Kusunda and become fluent speakers. Without additional resources and interest, the language, in any meaningful form, may soon exist only in scholastic journals and archived audio recordings.



TIBA B KUSUNDA AND HIS FAMILY IN PVTUHAN



KUSUNDAS USED BOW AND ARROW FOR HUNTING