

Endangered Orality in Kinnaur: Linguistic and Cultural Interference

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Abstract

This paper examines the decline of native languages and oral traditions among the Kannaura tribe in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, and the cultural consequences of such changes. Kinnaur, a linguistically diverse region, is home to both Sino-Tibetan and Indo-Aryan languages spoken by the Kannaura people. Despite being recognized as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution, which has supported the preservation of its cultural identity, the tribe faces challenges from linguistic assimilation, urbanization, and technological advancements. The study identifies the key factors contributing to this decline and highlights the risks posed to the community's heritage. It also proposes pragmatic strategies for revitalizing oral traditions, emphasizing their critical role in preserving the tribe's unique cultural identity.

Keywords: Kinnaur, endangerment, vitality, indigenous, mother tongue, revitalization.

1. Introduction

The Kannaura people, residing primarily in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, India, are a tribe whose languages and oral traditions have long been central to their identity. They speak eight languages, including seven from the Tibeto-Burman family and one from the Indo-Aryan family (Negi 2023). Lacking a writing system, their languages serve not only as a means of communication but also as vital repositories of traditional knowledge and history.

The languages of Kinnaur are essential to the community's identity, connecting people with their past, cultural values, and lived experiences. With no written tradition, these languages serve as a repository of knowledge, passing down stories about ancestors, gods, and nature. However, this heritage is under threat due to the dominance of languages like Hindi and English (Negi

2023). As younger generations shift to the “trendy” languages, they are also adopting new cultural practices that distance them from their traditions. This shift is leading to the decline of oral traditions—such as folk songs, rituals, and mythology—that have been central to Kinnauri culture (Negi 2021).

Linguistic interference from dominant languages like Hindi and English is altering the Kinnauri language, with changes in the indigenous lexicon, structure, and semantics. This shift is accompanied by broader cultural changes, such as shifts in social, economic, and political practices. As Hindi and English become more common in education and daily life, younger Kinnauri speakers increasingly use these languages, seeing them as markers of social mobility. This is causing a divide between generations, with younger people losing touch with traditional linguistic practices and oral customs (Negi 2021).

The cultural implications of this linguistic shift are significant. Oral traditions that once preserved collective memory and cultural values are fading as digital media and formal education take over. Knowledge about agriculture, spirituality, and the environment, once passed down through oral storytelling, is also being lost. This paper explores the relationship between language, culture, and identity in Kinnaur, focusing on how the erosion of oral traditions is tied to sociolinguistic, cultural, and political forces. By examining linguistic and cultural interference in the Kinnauri-speaking community, this study aims to understand the challenges facing the preservation of Kinnauri oral traditions and the cultural heritage they represent.

2. About the Tribe and Their Languages

Kinnaur is located on the northeast side of Himachal Pradesh in India. It shares international land border with Tibet on the east, Uttarakhand on the south, Shimla district on the west and Spiti district on the northern side. It is situated at latitude 31°34'59.99"N and longitude 78°24'59.99"E. The district is spread over an area of 6,401 square kilometers. It is divided in three administrative sub-divisions: Kalpa, Nichar and Poo. Population of the district is about 84,000 (Census 2011) which is 1.2% of the population of Himachal Pradesh and density of population is a low 13 person per square kilometers (Census 2011). (See fig. 1 for geographical map of Kinnaur).

At different stages in history, Kinnaur had intimate contact with the north plains and Tibet which influenced their language and culture. The inaccessible topography, steep valleys, and rugged mountains have shaped the daily lives of its people, contributing to the development and

preservation of its distinct linguistic and cultural identity. The isolation of this region, with its limited access to outside world, has allowed the languages and oral traditions to thrive for centuries, deeply intertwined with the natural environment and the rhythms of local life (Negi 2021).



Figure 1. Administrative map of Kinnaur

<http://himachalpradeshtravel.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Tourist-Map-Kinnaur.jpg>

Kannaura tribe is locally called *Kanoora* or *Kanaura*. The tribe has been referred as Koonawur (Gerard 1841, Cunningham 1844), Kunawura (Jaschke 1865), Kanawara (Joshi 1911) Koonawara (Konow 1905; Grierson 1909) or Kinnar (Sanskritayan 1948).

Nothing concrete is known about the Kannaura people, except sporadic mention in ancient literature. Gerard (1841) in ‘Account of Koonawur’ noted,

“In absence of authentic records the early history of Kinnaur is obscure and the reference to their past is confined to the legends and mythological accounts. The historical incidents surrounding the north Indian plains between 6th B.C. to 7th century A.D., indicate that Kinnaur was part of the extended territories of the Magadha Kings, Maurya Kings, the Kushanas, the Gupta Empire and Harsha. Their territories extended from the north plains up to northwest India and inner Himalayas. Evidences to this effect are found in the historical records of each these empires. After the decline of the Harsha, local tribe heads

kept fighting for control over the land. They were called Thakurs and controlled small territories. Chinni, Labrang and Kamru Thankurs are some of the known Thankurs from that period.”

Kannaura tribe speaks about eight languages, seven from Tibeto-Burman and one Indo-Aryan language family (Negi 2021):

Kinnauri is spoken uniformly in Kalpa and Nichar sub-divisions of the district, and in some villages of Poo sub-division. It is the most widely spoken language of the tribe. Bhoti Kinnauri is spoken in Poo sub-division. The influence of Tibetan language and culture is noticeable in villages in upper Kinnauri. Chitkuli is spoken in Rakcham and Chitkul villages of Sangla. Sumcho is spoken in Kanam valley of Poo. Jangrami or Jangshung is spoken in Asrang, Lippa and Jangi villages of Poo. Sunam is spoken in Sunnam village of Poo. Chhoyuli is spoken in Nesang and Kunnu Charan villages of Poo. See Table 1 for languages of Kinnaur.

Language	ISO 639-3	LF	Area	Population
Kinnauri	kfk	TB	Lower Kinnaur	30,000-35,000
Pahari Kin.	kjo	IA	SC of lower Kinnaur	9,000
Bhoti ¹ Kin.	nes	TB	Poo tehsil	6,600
Sumcho	scu	TB	Sumcho & Ropa valley	2,500
Chitkuli	cik	TB	Chitkul, Rakcham	1,300
Sunam	ssk	TB	Sunnam	400
Jangrami	jna	TB	Jangnam valley	2,700
Choyuli	-	TB	Nesang, Kunu charang	700
Total			about 600 villages	70,000-84,000 ²

Table 1. Language varieties of Kinnaur with their area and population

The Indo-Aryan language ‘Pahari Kinnauri’ is spoken by a particular social class in regions of Kinnaur. The classification of Pahari Kinnauri is:

Indo European –Indo Iranian – Indo Aryan --Northern zone -- Himachali – Pahari Kinnauri (Ethnologue).

This study focuses on the Kinnauri speaking population of Kinnaur living in Kalpa and Nichar sub-division. See Table 2 for the classification of TB languages of Kinnaur.

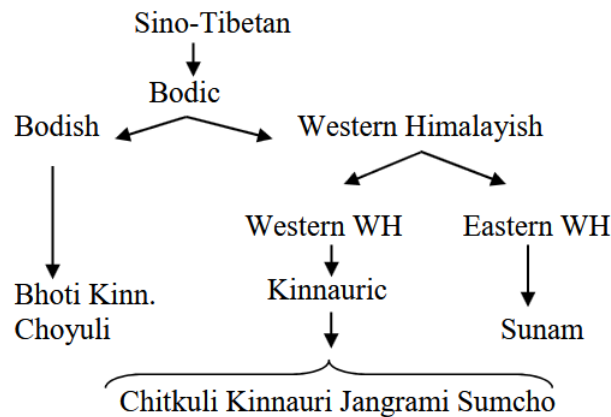


Table 2. Classification of TB languages of Kinnaur

(Benedict1972)

3. Linguistic Characteristics of Kinnauri

Kinnauri belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. It shares linguistic characteristics with several other languages spoken across the West-himalayan region, classified into various sub-types based on region and the specific practices of local communities. Kinnauri language shows phonological variations which is a reflection of the topographically and culturally varied landscapes of Kinnaur that creates relative isolated regions.

Kinnauri exhibits a rich pronominal system, tonal qualities, honorific system and politeness markers (Negi 2016). The phonological structure is distinctive from Indo Aryan languages like Hindi or other regional languages. This tonal feature in Kinnauri is an essential part of Kinnaur’s cultural fabric, with many oral traditions, such as songs and prayers, relying on the tonal modulation to convey meaning and emotion. The complex system of honorifics and politeness markers reflect the hierarchical social structures within Kinnauri community. The system of address—based on age, gender, and social status—reinforces the cultural norms of respect and deference that are central to Kinnauri society.

4. Oral Traditions

Oral traditions in Kinnaur are not merely a form of entertainment, but a critical practice that reinforces social norms, transmits historical memory, and imparts moral values to younger generations. Oral narratives in Kinnauri come in various forms, including folktales, songs,

proverbs, and ritual chants, each serving a different purpose in the social and cultural fabric of the community.

Folktales are among the most cherished oral traditions in Kinnauri culture. These stories often filled with mythical creatures, gods, heroes, and moral lessons, serve to both entertain and educate. In the lores of *Devi Chandika Kothi* (Goddess Durga, a local deity), *Grosnam Maheshwar* (deity of Nichar), Kinnauri orality vividly reflect the deep-seated values, beliefs, and worldview of the community (recorded narratives). These stories, imbued with themes of profound love, sacrifice, repentance, and hardship, are central to the cultural fabric of Kinnaur.

The songs of *Devi Dutt* and *Thakur Moni* are integral to the cultural and spiritual landscape of Kinnaur, reflecting the very essence of the community's social fabric. These songs go beyond mere rituals or entertainment; they are carriers of the region's moral and social codes, embodying values that shape the community's collective identity and social cohesion.

The narrative of *Padma Dasi*, too, reflects a deep connection between love and suffering. The song conveys the protagonist's devotion and the hardships she faces on her journey of repentance and moral recovery. These stories show that suffering is not just a personal trial but an integral part of the moral and spiritual journey, leading to enlightenment and balance.

The mythological significance of *Kinner Kailash*, as a divine abode, further strengthens the connection between the community's spiritual beliefs and their environment, with tales depicting the sacred mountain as a symbol of divine power, purity, and protection.

Folksongs of religious gurus; *Sunam Negi Rinpoche*, *Locha Rinpoche* from Asrang plays a significant role in the spiritual and cultural life of the people of Kinnaur. The lores have managed to preserve the centuries old beliefs and interactions with Buddhist traditions of spiritual teachings, rituals, and monastic practices in the area.

Collectively, these folktales and folksongs serve as both a moral guide and a cultural archive, reinforcing the Kinnauri community's belief system, which values love, self-sacrifice, and redemption in the face of adversity. These themes continue to shape the identity of the people, linking past and present generations in a shared understanding of their spiritual and cultural heritage.

While folk stories entertain people, they also help in imparting historical knowledge and moral lessons. Mythological stories have a special place in Kinnauri folk tales. The story of

mythological figures like *Kansa Raj* and *Lord Krishna*, tales of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* are popular in Kinnaur. In the folktales of tales, we see bravery, dishonesty, justice, intelligence, feuds etc. Apart from this, evil spirits, animals, birds, demons, Kings, queens or princes and princesses have been the main characters in the folk tales here.

Songs associated with various seasons—such as the harvest season, crop season, winters, spring, and New Year—are deeply intertwined with the agricultural and cultural practices of the community. These songs, which are often passed down through generations, not only reflect the cyclical nature of life but also the spiritual significance of each season, reinforcing the connection between the people and the land they cultivate. They encapsulate the rhythms of daily life, the hardships and joys tied to each season, and the deep respect for nature and its cycles.

For instance, during the annual *biish* festival, which marks the arrival of spring, Kinnauri songs and hymns are performed, invoking blessings from deities and ancestors. Similarly, oral storytelling—whether through mythological tales, historical narratives, or personal anecdotes—remains central to community life, providing moral lessons and preserving the collective memory of the Kinnaura people.

Proverbs are another key aspect of Kinnauri oral culture. The proverbs presented here offer rich insights into Kinnauri culture, mirroring the community's values, relationships, and worldview through a blend of humor, wisdom, and cautionary advice.

For example, the proverb "*mii jigicu batang teeg*" parallels the Hindi saying "uncii dukaan phiki pakvan" (a high shop but bland food). This shows how Kinnauri proverbs often emphasize the gap between appearances and reality, urging people to look beyond surface-level impressions.

Another interesting saying, "*ma to gorbonu laik, ma to sansaru laik*" meaning 'neither good for family, nor for the world,' convey the significance of personal integrity. It reflects the deeply introspective nature of Kinnauri culture, where self-awareness and personal conduct are key to maintaining one's dignity and place within the community.

The proverb "*mai gucu gucu gvao, naar gucu gucu haar*" which means "if you tease a fire repeatedly, it gets extinguished, if you tease a woman repeatedly, she runs away" draws from local traditions like *haar* or *hari*, which allow women to leave her in-laws if mistreated. The proverb highlights the delicate balance of relationships and the consequences of persistent

harassment or disrespect. It also conveys an inherent respect for women's autonomy and personal choice within the social context.

In "*banthini totoh thi lanni, gar piigre duyo*," (what to do with beautiful face, if teeth are yellowish) the focus is on the value placed on both physical and moral attributes. This proverb appears to poke fun at a certain village's women, whose beauty is overshadowed by the yellowing of their teeth. It underscores the idea that outward beauty must be complemented by good habits and a balanced lifestyle, or else it becomes meaningless.

Clearly, Kinnauri proverbs serve as a dynamic tool for social learning, offering lessons on relationships, personal behavior, and community expectations. Through these proverbs, the Kinnauri people preserve their cultural wisdom and pass it down through generations, using storytelling as a means to embed deep moral values in everyday life.

5. Sociolinguistic and Cultural Forces Shaping Kinnauri Orality

The preservation of Kinnauri is increasingly threatened by a range of sociolinguistic and cultural forces that are reshaping the linguistic landscape of the region. These forces include growing bilingualism, linguistic interference from dominant languages, and the broader forces of cultural globalization. As Kinnauri speakers, particularly among younger generations, adopt Hindi and English, the oral traditions that have long been the cornerstone of Kinnauri culture face unprecedented challenges.

In Kinnaur, language shift is one of the most significant sociolinguistic phenomena currently influencing the preservation of Kinnauri orality. While Kinnauri has traditionally been the primary language spoken at home, in local markets, and during religious and cultural ceremonies, the growing adoption of non-native languages among younger generations is gradually diminishing the everyday use of Kinnauri. This shift is rooted in the larger sociopolitical and economic changes occurring in the region, where Kinnauri, once the dominant language, is increasingly seen as a regional or local language with limited utility in a broader national context.

One of the primary drivers of this language shift is the rise of bilingualism, especially among the younger Kinnauri-speaking population. Hindi is also the lingua franca in the region. Hindi is now the medium of instruction in most educational institutions, and the prevalence of English, especially in higher education and professional environments, has made it an essential tool for

social mobility and economic opportunities. As a result, the younger generation is increasingly fluent in Hindi and English, while their proficiency in Kinnauri is often limited to familial and traditional contexts.

The declining domains of language use of Kinnauri also challenge the intergenerational knowledge transfer in Kinnauri culture, especially with the increasing dominance of Hindi and English. The rise of formal education and the pressures of modern life have led to a decline in the practice of storytelling and other oral traditions, resulting in a gap between generations.

The role of media in shaping language practices cannot be overstated. Television, cinema, and the internet, all of which are dominated by Hindi and English content, are powerful tools for cultural and linguistic dissemination. For the younger generation, exposure to Hindi and English-language media has not only led to the passive erosion of Kinnauri but also to an active preference for languages that offer more social prestige. Hindi and English, through their widespread media presence, have become symbols of modernity, success, and upward mobility, further undermining the status of Kinnauri as a language of everyday life.

6. Strategies for Preserving Kinnauri Orality

The preservation of Kinnauri orality, an integral aspect of the community's cultural heritage, is critical in the face of pressures of modernity and globalization. Efforts to safeguard this indigenous oral tradition would involve an approach that combines community-driven initiatives, the integration of orality into modern education, and the revitalization of cultural practices. The Kinnauri language, with its rich repository of stories, songs, rituals, and ecological knowledge, faces significant challenges, but through strategic actions, these traditions can be revitalized and passed down to future generations.

Community-driven initiatives are one of the most effective means of preserving the Kinnauri oral traditions. Efforts to document and safeguard Kinnauri oral forms can help ensure that this vital part of Kinnaur's heritage does not vanish with the passing of the older generations. A significant step in this process is the establishment of oral archives that record stories, songs, prayers, and other traditional forms of communication in Kinnauri. These archives can serve as a valuable resource for future generations, providing a comprehensive record of the language in its various forms. Elders, who are the custodians of Kinnauri oral traditions, can be encouraged to participate in these projects, ensuring that their voices and knowledge are preserved for posterity.

In addition to oral archives, cultural preservation projects can focus on compiling Kinnauri folktales, proverbs, and songs into accessible formats, such as books, documentaries, or audio recordings. Local initiatives, often spearheaded by community groups or NGOs, can work in partnership with linguistic experts and anthropologists to ensure that these projects are done with cultural sensitivity and respect for traditional practices. These initiatives could also promote the creation of Kinnauri language resources—such as dictionaries, textbooks, and language guides—that not only help in the documentation of the language but also serve as educational tools for future generations.

Local schools and educational institutions play a key role in preserving Kinnauri orality. Schools in Kinnaur can introduce Kinnauri as part of the curriculum, offering lessons in the language to ensure that younger generations learn to speak, read, and write it. Teachers, especially those fluent in Kinnauri, can be trained to incorporate oral traditions into the classroom, fostering a deeper connection to the language and culture. In this direction, the government, under the NEP 2020, has introduced primers in Kinnauri language in pre-schools in Kinnaur with the objective to take mother tongue to the schools and help early learners learning in their mother tongue and therefore promote local languages.

Another innovative approach is to use modern technologies to bring Kinnauri oral practices into the digital age. Digital platforms such as podcasts, mobile apps, and social media offer a new avenue for revitalizing Kinnauri orality, especially among younger generations. Podcasts can be created to feature stories, interviews with elders, and discussions about Kinnauri culture and traditions. This format allows for the language to reach a wider audience, even those who are not geographically located in Kinnaur. Mobile apps designed to teach Kinnauri can include audio recordings of stories, proverbs, and songs, creating interactive and engaging learning experiences for users. These technologies can also serve as repositories for the oral archives, making it easier for younger Kinnauri speakers to access, learn, and engage with their language.

Social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook can be harnessed to share videos of traditional performances, storytelling sessions, and educational content in Kinnauri. Younger generations are already well-versed in using these platforms, and by sharing Kinnauri content in these familiar formats, the language can be normalized and celebrated in modern,

relatable ways. Digital technologies not only preserve oral traditions but also help make them more accessible, fostering engagement from people across age groups and geographic locations.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the intricate relationship between language, culture, and identity within the Kinnauri-speaking community in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh. The findings underscore the pivotal role of Kinnauri orality—in the form of stories, songs, proverbs, and rituals—as a central cultural asset. These oral traditions serve not only as a means of communication but also as a living archive of the community’s history, ecological knowledge, and spiritual beliefs. However, this cultural heritage is facing significant threats due to the growing linguistic and cultural interference from Hindi and English, which are increasingly replacing Kinnauri in key domains such as education, media, and everyday communication.

The shift towards bilingualism and the dominance of Hindi and English have had a profound impact on the preservation of Kinnauri oral traditions. While older generations continue to engage in traditional practices, younger people are often more comfortable with Hindi or English, leading to disconnect between generations. Language shift is eroding the transmission of oral traditions, resulting in the loss of invaluable cultural knowledge, especially in areas like agriculture, ecology, and religion. Moreover, the increasing presence of modern media, tourism, and migration has further accelerated this process, making it more difficult for Kinnauri orality to thrive in its original form.

Given the crucial role of Kinnauri orality in shaping cultural identity, it is imperative that active measures be taken to preserve this heritage. Language revitalization efforts, such as community-driven documentation, incorporation of oral traditions into education, and the use of digital tools, are vital to the survival of Kinnauri.

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