Endangered Language, Identity Crisis and the Vanishing Community: A Sociolinguistic Study of Darma

Ashish Kumar Pandey

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Abstract

Language and social identity are indispensably related and dependent on each other. In many cases, the language of a community defines and constructs the identity of the community; it is very much evident in the case of Darma people. The entire Darma community is known after the language that they speak, which is, Darma. Of late, the community is facing an identity crisis as their language amidst pressures from the dominant languages like Hindi, is shifting. Though, the shift appears to be Linguistic, it has some deeper repercussions as the whole Darma culture is affected. This research paper attempts to locate possible reasons of language shift and its socio-cultural effect on the community, for instance, lack of school education in Darma medium is one of the reasons of language shift among others which is distancing these people from their culture and training them in other dominant languages and cultures like Hindi and English. Furthermore, on the basis of the findings, the paper finds that Darma language needs to be protected and preserved not only to save an endangered language but also to help Darma people retain their identity and culture which are embedded in their language. The study has been conducted by using observation method and personal interview with the respondents.

Keywords: Darma language, Darma community, Social identity, Identity crisis, Darma medium schools, language and culture, Tibeto-Burman languages, Language abandonment

Introduction

According to a report *Language vitality and endangerment* submitted to UNESCO, "Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language embodies unique cultural wisdom of people. The loss of any language is thus a loss of all humanity". (01) As the report has emphasized, there exists a very close relationship between the language and the survival of the linguistic community that speaks that language. Linguists across the world are concerned about the facts that render a language endangered. Julia Sallabank in an article "Language Endangerment: Problems and Solutions" states that "As only about 80 of the 6000+ languages in the world have more than 10 million users, it is clear that the vast majority of languages are used by relatively a small number of people". (52-53) Here it is clear that most of the endangered languages in the world have small number of speakers. It is due to various reasons like Political, social, economic, religious and other dominant factors. According to Maureen Hoffmann,

There are many reasons why a language might become endangered or even extinct. The physical loss of speakers (due to genocide, natural disasters or similar cause), the

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disintegration of the language community (due to displacement, assimilation into the dominant population, or the economic concern), the homogenizing effects of mainstream media (in the form of dominant language television, radio and print media), and the forced abandonment of language (through overt suppression, often accompanied by the institution of dominant language schools) are among the possible factors that lead to language abandonment. (14)

These above reasons are main factors for categorizing any language whether it is endangered or extinct. For instance, the above parameters given by Maureen Hoffmann are subtly applicable to Darma language which is a language being spoken by a small number of people in Himalayan region and the language has become endangered. The language of Darma has had a long and interesting history, going back, some would say, as far as the Lord 'Shiva' who had made his residence in the Himalayan region and appointed them for his care. There are other stories too about the origin of this community. However, these people came into the public eye in 1962, when India and china conflict happened. That was really a time of struggle for the entire community because they used to move for their trade between Tibet and India before the war. And hence after the Indo-China war, they had to stop at one place and their trade suffered. So, when two or more communities close their spots for trade, they have to find other resource for surviving by themselves. It was after that time that they came down and started living in the lower Himalayan region and hence become visible to peoples' eye. The community henceforth came into contact with the other languages and cultures.

According to Maureen Hoffmann, there are many reasons why a language might become endangered or even extinct. The physical loss of speakers (due to genocide, natural disasters or similar causes), the disintegration of the language community (due to displacement, assimilation into the dominant population, or economic concern), the homogenizing effects of mainstream media (in the form of dominant language television, radio and print media), and the forced abandonment of language (through overt suppression, often accompanied by the institution of dominant language schools) are among the possible factors that lead to language abandonment. (14)

Darma Language of the Himalayan Region

The above reasons are main factors for categorizing any language whether it is endangered or extinct. For instance, the above parameters given by Maureen Hoffmann are subtly applicable to Darma language which is a language being spoken by a small number of people in the Himalayan region and hence the language becomes endangered. The language of Darma has had a long and interesting history, going back, some would say, as far as the Lord 'Shiva' who had made his residence in the Himalayan region and appointed them for his care. There are other stories too about the origin of this community. However, these people came into the public eye in 1962, when India and china conflict happened. That was really a time of struggle for the entire community because they use to move for their trade between Tibet and India before the war. And after the Indo-China war, they had to stay at one place and their trade suffered. When two or more communities close their area for trade, they have to find another resource for surviving by themselves. It was after that time that they came down and started living in the lower Himalayan

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region and hence become visible to people. The community came into contact with other languages and cultures at that time.

Language

Darma language is being spoken in the valley of Darma, which is situated in the Dharchula Tahsil Pithauragarh District of Uttrakhand. The Darma people have very small inhabitants below three thousand according to the census of 2001. Researcher has been working with the community for four years. This long duration has helped him, and the community come close to each other. Researcher has been surprised when Darma people are eagerly accepting his proposal of documentation of language. The community opens all the windows for him. The researcher's primary action was finding out, whatever literature has been preserved. And the secondary step was to analyze that literature. According to available literature whatever I have seen in Rang library which is situated in Dharchula (migrated place) they call themselves Shauka (traders). In their literature they wrote down their ancient history, where they came from, who they were and why they did not go back to that world. They call themselves Brahmins and they still maintain the decorum and sanctity of Brahmanism.

Darma Tribe

Darma tribe belongs to Darma valley, Dharchula Tahsil, Pithauragarh district of Uttaranchal state. It is one of the fifteen tribes, as stated in undivided Uttar Pradesh 1[THE CONSTITUTION (SCHEDULED TRIBES) (UTTAR PRADESH) ORDER, 1967 (C.O. 78) in clause (1) of article 342 of the Constitution of India. Darma language belongs to Tibeto-Burman language family. In Tibeto-Burman language family Darma is categorized under western Himalayan region. Dr Grierson was the first researcher who had researched this language and he gave the name Darmiya, after that he called them Bhotia. However, Bhotia is not an acceptable term for Darma people; it is regarded as a derogatory word. The Darma language does not yet confirm any genetic relation with any language. So, Darma may not be related to any community or language without complete affirmation of genetic relation. The detail of Darma language may be understood as follows:

g. West Himalayan
i. North
ii. Northwest
iii. Almora
Rangkas, Darmiya, Chaudangsi, Byangsi (M. Willis-2007)

There are three dialects of Darma language as "Darma, Chaudangs and Byangs though genealogically belong to one group". (D. D. Sharma 08) According to Sharma, these are all genetically related with each other. However, there is no proof available which establishes their genetic relation. The most interesting thing about the Darma community is that there is a very close relationship between the language and the community and it is communal identity.

Social Identity

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The study of the relationship between the identity of a community and a language has been one of the thrust areas of Sociolinguistics since decades. Many linguists have contributed their scholarship in the field of applied linguistics where the language and the identity of the community have been the central discussion. A close scrutiny of the Darma community and language might establish the fact that there exists an inseparable relationship between the community and language. Darma valley is situated in the eastern Uttrakhand (western Himalayan region) near India and Tibet border. The name of Darma is based on Darma River (Darma Ganga) which is at Indo-Tibetan border. In this valley there are nineteen villages out of which, most of the Darma people live in the fourteen villages. These are: *Dar*, *Bangling, Vurthing, Sela, Chal, Nagling, Baling, Dugtu, Dantu, Saun, Baun, Filam, Go*, Dhakar, Tidang, Marccha, and Sela*. At *Tidang, Darma* joins *lassar ynagti* (river) then it is called Dhauli Ganga. It is the name of the valley and the people who belong to this valley are called Darma people and the language they speak is also called Darma. Most of their villages are located on the bank of Dhauli Ganga River. There are three valleys Byans, Chaudans, and Darma in that area, the inhabitants of these valleys habitually speak the language specific to the valley they live in. Most of the residents in these valleys are multilingual; they know their language as well as Hindi, Nepali and Kumauni.

Whatever this researcher has analyzed after gathering audio visual data through different software, researcher has concluded that in all the fourteen villages of Darma valley do have variations in their language at both phonological and morphological levels. This difference cannot be as well perceived as sound phonetically, as much as morphologically. But it has less possibility to be measured by others in general. Informants told how the community is practicing religious traditions. They have strong faith in the Lord *Kailash Mansarover*. They all are followers and are supplicating for peace of the ancestor soul. Since 1962 it was part of India, now it is in Tibet. Apart from this every individual village has its own Clan (God) local names *Gibla Dev* and *Chipla Dev*; they believe that their God protects them from any natural or artificial calamity. There is a little bit difference in praying to the gods in all these villages. The Darma community is largely based on agriculture. Some of them are also working in the government sector, and private sector. The above-mentioned discussion of the community and their practices may reveal that there exists a very close connection between Darma community and Darma cultural identity which is again rooted in their cultural practices.

Major Crisis

However, the major crisis that the community has faced came after the Indo-China war which has forced these people to come down and mix with the people of other community. That was the biggest crisis for them in retaining their identity, especially for any community which is suffering from lack of basic requirements which they need, and they want to find them from any source. Earlier, Darma people used to migrate from their valley to the Dharchula during the winter season in the month of October and again at the season of summer they used to go back to their valley. They were moving till 1962, however, after that the trade was closed and maximum people shifted to Dharchula in the Pithauragarh District of Uttrakhand. Dharchula is a linguistically diversified place where the people come from across the country because it is a base camp for pilgrims of Kailash Mansarovar, which is situated in Tibet near *Lipulake Darra* Indian border.

Government Help

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Government has provided facilities for them in many ways in Darma valley, through the Indian military, SSB, BRO, and BSF and so many other govt. groups and non-government organization that are working there for the betterment of their society. Basic consumption items are being provided by them like grains, food and clothes and also maintain their houses whenever they need improvement. Beyond these facilities the Darma people want to educate their children in the arena of global acceptance.

James' (1890) has discussed *self as materiel, self as social and self as spiritual* in his book *Principles of Psychology*. This description is a person's relation of their own body with all its emotional attachment and interrelation with others, and the spiritual morality of person. If the individual or the agency makes up their mind towards these three states in language or society then it would never continue by means of their stability of identity.

However, Darma community has had different types of architecture for their shelters, according to the atmospheric situation from ancient times; but after Government intervention of social schemes for scheduled tribe act, the architecture of houses is changed because of earthquakes and so many threats of natural hazards. Having been in emotional touch with their homes, it was a heart-felt deep hurt, as well as loss of identical connectivity of genuine homes. It is also one of the biggest reasons Darma community is unable to transmit a home culture to the future generation.

Diglossic Situation
After the intervention of dominating languages like Hindi and Kumauni, Darma has gone into a diglossic situation, which is still unable to reinstate Darma, even after so many efforts made by the community. In that situation, Hindi is treated as upper level language and Darma as a lower level language. Always there are two kinds of languages spoken at the same time in a society, which are known as high and low standard languages that are spoken by the upper class and lower-class people in the society, existing together at the same place. The high prestige language always dominates the low prestige language in the society; this may happen because of various reasons. It could be social, political and/or due to lack of employability. If the speakers turn their minds off their languages, the result could be discouraging and probably language will have no existence anymore in society. Block David in an article "Issues in Language and Identity Research" (14-15), has identified three broad reasons: first is psychological angle of predominantly social reasons, second one is interrelationship between individual and social structure in language identity and the third one is a socio-economic stratification. Many of other issues arise in the language identity to comprehend the actual situation whereby language establishes its own panorama of language and culture. These three situations are alarming to sustain the identity pertaining to language, culture, and attitude and beliefs of that society. In case of Darma these situations are equally applicable and are the reason behind the changing of people's mind towards the Darma language.

Socio-Cultural Identity
The study about socio-cultural identity was started in the 1970s to 1980s. The second language researchers showed their interest in developing the relationship between identity and language. "Social identity" was seen in reference to the relationship between the individual and

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larger social world. (Norton 01) "While cultural identity referenced the relationship between an individual and the members of a particular ethnic group". (Gumperz, 1982) In the case of Himalayan language Darma, the social identity is under threat because of the use of domains, which are related to the social phenomena like family, school, workplace, transportation, social services, judiciary and so on. In these places, people are hardly using their mother tongue. They frequently use Hindi and Kumauni and sometimes English. People are also adopting Hindi language for social contact and hence get to follow Hindi culture. The famous Indian festivals like Holi, Dipawali, Dashahra, and others are being celebrated by the Darma people. Regarding social etiquette, for example, the way of greeting - *namaskaar, pranaam, touching elders' feet* and using nonverbal communications like physical gestures, eye contact, using symbols and so on, they are shifting towards mainstream Hindi cultural identity as well as social identity.

Darma Community

On the eve of a social gathering, it was compulsory to wear traditional dress according to informants. When researcher was seeking information now, as to why this has not been followed as usual. The communities' views now have been spread among cities and countries. There are fewer possibilities to perform the same acts of ritual on every occasion. That is why it is up to the member who is performing the ritual. Their traditional dress is named as *chungachola* for male which is a long kurta and pajama with a big turban and *rangachola* for female which also is a long gown with some little difference. The difference is found in some type of jeweled embroidery typical for male and female. But many of them who are working professionals and who care only for social gathering, avoid wearing traditional clothes. This shows the change of attitude towards their culture. The cultural change which may be noticed in marriages is that they have adopted Hindu culture for their marriage system. The Hindus mostly prefer arranged marriages. They also tried to adopt that, but since they have a matriarchal society, the marriage system remained quite flexible and the proposal for marriage may be sent by either the boy or the girl. However, they still have certain kind of rituals which they perform at the time of marriage like *Chakti,* which is one kind of local wine that they offer to their God and after that it is served to all the members of the community.

Identity of a language is deeply engrained in the cultural practices of a group, for instance, different rituals and traditions like marriage are performed in the language of the community. Various folk songs that are sung at the time of any communal performance which express the age-old wisdom of that community maintain a close relation between the individuals of the community and the language of the community. Hence the identity of the language refers to an individual's social and cultural perspective which maintains the relation between the individual and a larger social world. In the case of Darma language, a lot of instances are evident when the individual is turning away from their communal identity and moving away from their linguistic reality.

Language Shift and Politics of Recognition

This research basically focuses on one of the aspects of Darma language which primarily deals with the shifting of Darma language towards Hindi which is one of the major languages spoken in North India. Hence, when Darma language came into contact with Hindi, which is a dominant language in the region, it has been subtly influenced by that. Hence, the shifting of

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Darma language is in fact influencing the social identity of Darma people. Social identity may be described as an "…identity [which] encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputation, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances". (Ochs 424) This is how the identity gets affected by the second language environment. In social gatherings, the sharing of knowledge, feelings, attitude, and social acts are affected by those who are not directly related to that particular community.

The term 'Identity' itself may be defined as the relation between individuals to society, culture, language, paralanguage and so on. Identity must have relation to people's individuality. Every individual belongs to the Himalayan Tibeto-Burman language "Darma" is struggling for identity. The social identity of the Darma community is shifting amidst the global pressure of the social acceptance of Darma community. If Darma language could not exist at the level of social, cultural and moral context, it indeed becomes endangered. The identity of community has connection with the social, cultural, and ethnographical background of community. The identity creation is that social process which takes an elongated time to establish. Then it may be adapting a language, culture and ethics of other societies or cultures. Darma community is also undergoing this threat that it is gradually adopting the socio-cultural practices of other communities. The place where Darma people are living at present is not their original home. They have migrated to this place and have come from Darma valley. Earlier, they used to migrate from Dharchula to Darma valley, but now most of the Darma people have permanently settled in Dharchula only because conditions were unfavorable at the border. Dharchula is a business hub between India and Nepal and so many cultures are at the point of amalgamation in that town which is indeed affecting the culture of the Darma people.

Fraser calls this 'politics of recognition' when identity is only about politics whereby the person who belongs to a developed society thinks of himself as superior and others as underdeveloped, having no identical recognition or very low culture. R.H. Robins in *Short History of Linguistics* (1967) stated that "most cultures in the 'world have engendered among certain of their members some realization of the scope and power of language". (01) It does not mean that only the culture is endangered, but the language is also affected by the various means, one of them is that if the old generation cannot transmit the language, culture and ethics to present and coming generation then how it could be possible that the language will have more perpetual effect in the society. Sometimes it is dependent on prestige and the power of language to transmit the culture to the next generation, but if a more prestigious language dominates the area, it indeed becomes difficult for the native language to perform its task of transmission of culture.

Language can retain its identity, if it has existence in the society at social, cultural and moral levels. If it is shifting towards another language because of various reasons like education, employment, or for social status, the community might have to accept the norms, values, attitudes, beliefs, egos and the central power of the society and culture or language towards which it is shifting. The Darma language is shifting towards Hindi because their language does not assist them to find a job, or employment. Further, they want to educate their children in Hindi or English mediums which might ensure a secure future for their children. There are few missionary schools which educate them only in English medium, while the rest of them are Hindi medium schools.

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There is only few schools that give them education in Darma as well as Hindi. Hence, most of the children in Darma community are being educated in Hindi medium while a few in English medium with only a few exceptions being taught in Darma medium. However, there is an eternal threat which is hidden in this system of education and that is that their culture which is gradually shifting towards, primarily Hindi and also English. Hence, the present generation of Darma people is moving away from their culture.

Language Preservation & Conclusion

As the abovementioned discussion indicates that the Darma language is shifting towards other dominant languages and cultures, namely, Hindi and Kumauni. Darma seems to be endangered because of many reasons; one of the major reasons is the population of Darma speakers, which is very less. According to census of India 2001 the population of Darma people is only three thousand nineteen people. Almost fifty percent population has migrated to other places. The area where Darma people are living is a very small area. And around the locale of the Darma community are some dominant languages. Since Darma language is gradually shifting towards Hindi and Kumauni languages, the Darma language needs to be preserved.

In fact, the rejection of Darma language is coming from the Darma society itself as most of the speakers have accepted Hindi as a medium of communication and they prefer the use of Hindi over Darma. The Darma community is trying to retain its cultural identity through cultural performance as language preservation through the community development centre. Eventually community is unable to sustain the identity of community. The MHRD ministry of India has recognized the need of the hour about such kinds of Languages in India. So, the ministry has planned through CIIL (Central Institute of Indian Languages) to work on the documentation and preservation of such languages. CIIL is deeply involved in the documentation and digitalization of Darma language.

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Ashish Kumar Pandey
Department of Linguistics
University of Lucknow
kumar16pandey@gmail.com

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