

Arunachal Pradesh: A Paradise for a Linguist

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is a paradise for the linguist. The state is a reservoir of numerous ethnic and linguistic communities, some of which extend their fraternity to Tibet, Bhutan and Myanmar. The state is home to variegated tongues of the broader Tibeto-Burman family, although the grouping may not be all inclusive. Past records of allocation of space and reorganization of districts provide a comprehensive account of the sister languages and community settlements. The place names indicate the original settlers and the prominent community. The speakers' identification may not match their linguistic affiliation owing to political and administrative factors. English is the official language, and Hindi and Assamese are the *lingua franca* of the state. The state is a paradise for diverse indigenous communities with 32-34 languages¹. Three scripts are used in the state – Tai-Khamti, Wancho, and Bhoti/classical Tibetan; the other communities write in Roman or Devnagari script.

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, the largest of the seven sister states of North-East India, is bounded by the mighty Himalayas and the undulating slopes of the Patkai ranges. The mountains are interwoven with the mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries Siang, Lohit, Subansiri and Kameng. The state is bounded by Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north, Burma (Myanmar) in the east; and the Indian states of Assam and Nagaland in the south. The variegated linguistic and ethnic communities maintain a continuum across its international borders. The mountainous terrain and river valleys scatter the settlements of the communities in varied gradients. The resultant individual isolation contributes to the unique diversity of the populace.

Linguistic distribution

The diverse tongues of the state are a reservoir of different language families and cultures. The languages of Arunachal Pradesh are broadly divided into a wider Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-

¹ Lomdak, Lisa, Feb 2017

Burman) and a small Tai group of languages; and into the following ethno-linguistic groups (Lomdak, Lisa 2017).

- Lolo-Burmish languages - Lisu/Yobin
- Bodhist languages - Tshangla (Monpa²), Brokeh, Khamba, Memba, Meyor, Lishpa, Chugpa
- Sal languages - Tangsa, Wancho, Nocte, Singpho (Burling, 2003)
- Tani languages - Apatani, Adi, Nyishi, Galo, Tagin, Mishing,
- Mishmi languages - Idu, Digaru, Miju
- Hrusso language -Hrusso-Aka
- Tai-Khamti and other Tai varieties

This division does not apply to all the languages, nor is it easy to place the numerous tongues into distinct compartments and is still a matter of further research by historical linguists.



The district-wise distribution of the linguistic communities (some are endangered and lesser known languages) is listed in the following table.

Districts ³	Languages
Tawang	Monpa
West Kameng	Shertukpen Aka/ Hrusso Shartang Bugun/ Khowa

² The Monpa group of languages are categorized by Blench (2014) as Central Monpa, Southern Monpa, Kho Bwa, East Bodish and Bodish.

³ The Primary Census (2011) Abstract for Arunachal Pradesh identifies 16 districts in the state

	Monpa (Dirang, and Kalaktang) Sajolang (or Miji ⁴) (in Nafra subdivision)
East Kameng	Aka (Koro) Puroik Nyishi Sajolang (or Miji) (in Lada circle)
Papumpare	Nyishi Tani ⁵ group
Kurung Kumey	Nyishi Bangru (Tani) Puroik
Kra Daadi	Nyishi Puroik
Lower Subansiri	Apatani Nyishi
Kamle district	Nyishi
Upper Subansiri	Nyishi Tagin(Nah) Galo(few)
Shi Yomi	Adi Tagin Memba
West Siang	Galo Memba Adi
Central Siang	Adi
East Siang	Adi Galo Idu Mishmi
Upper Siang	Adi Khamba Memba Idu Mishmi (Tuting circle)

⁴ Miji is also known as Sajolang

Lower Siang	Galo
Lepa Rada	Galo
Lower Dibang Valley	Idu Mishmi Adi
Dibang Valley	Idu Mishmi

⁵ Tani languages are an approximate dialect chain based on the fact that language contact is the main factor in its evolution

Anjaw	Miju Mishmi, Digaru/Tawrã Mishmi Zakhring/ Meyor
Lohit district	Miju Mishmi, Digaru/ Tawrã Mishmi Idu Mishmi (Tezu)
Namsai	Tai Khamti Singpho
Changlang	Singpho Tangsa Tutsa
Tirap	Nocte, Ollo, Khappa, Tutsa
Longdin	Wancho

Political and administrative history: linguistic continuum

Each district bears a different linguistic picture – some districts are inhabited by similar linguistic groups with dialectal variations, others share the space with varied tongues. The chronicles underlying the reorganization of borders and boundaries provide the linguistic picture and ethnicity of the people.

The present designation of Lohit district accounts in the year 1965 from Mishmi Hills district in 1948 to Lohit Frontier Track from 1954 to 1965 with its headquarter at Sadiya. In 1980, Dibang Valley district was carved out of Lohit district. The Mishmis⁶– Idu, Miju and Digaru Mishmis who shared the same district, are divided in Lohit and Dibang valley.

Namsai district was carved out of Lohit in 2014. The major occupants of the district are Tai Khamti (few settled in Changlang and Assam) and Singpho (also in Changlang district). Lohit (the erstwhile Mishmi Hills Tract) still retains the Mishmi community, particularly Miju Mishmi.

The political and administrative history of Sadiya has relevance to the present linguistic communities of Namsai – Tai Khamti and Singpho. The Tai Ahoms migrated through the Patkai range 1228 AD, fought against the Chutiyas, and took over the administration of Sadiya in 1523 AD. In 1675, the Tai Ahom king Sadiyakhowa Gohain defeated the Mishmis.

⁶ Mishmis are also known to be an ethnic tribe of Tibet.

In 1751, the Tai Khamtis entered through the Patkai range and settled in the Tengapani area (present Namsai district) followed by Singphos. In 1794, Khamti and Singpho together ousted Sadiyakhwa Gohain; and Sadiya was ruled by the Khamtis of Tengapani (Namsai). Although linguistically apart, Tai Khamtis and Singphos are culturally akin to each other, and even today maintain fraternal relations.

Tirap district was divided into Changlang on 14th November 1987 and Longdin in 2013. Changlang district is inhabited by Singpho, Tangsa, Tutsa and also few Nocte, Deori and Tibetan refugees.

Tirap district is home to Nocte, Khappa, Ollo, Tutsa, and Wancho; however, Nocte is the most prominent. Presently, Wancho finds distinct space in Longdin district. These languages have structural resemblance and lexical similarity. Tangsa⁷ and Nocte (Khappa, Ollo and Tutsa) are sister languages, and Wancho diverges from them, yet encompasses the same group along with Singpho.

West Kameng district is bounded by Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the west, Tawang in the north-west, East Kameng in the east and Assam in the south. Tawang, which was historically part of Tibet, was also carved out from West Kameng district in the year 1989. Hence, the districts generally abound in people of Tibetan languages and believers of Tibetan Buddhism. The tongues of the people are akin to ethnic groups of Tibet and Classical Tibetan in Bhutan.

Adi are a large populace inhabiting Siang, West Siang, East Siang, Lower Dibang valley, Lohit, Namsai, Changlang of Arunachal Pradesh with dialectal varieties - Padam, Minyong, Pangis, Shimong, Ashing, Pasi, Karko, Bokar, Bori, Ramo, Pailibo, Milan, Tangam, Tangin, and Gallong. However, a small portion of Adi is Lhoba, an ethnic community of Tibet.

Majority of the districts are covered by the 'Tani' speakers – Adi, Nyishi, Hill Miri, Tagin, Apatani, Galo, Mishng who are spread over Papumpare, Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, East Kameng, East Siang, West Siang, Upper Siang, Lower Dibang valley and Lohit district. Among these, Nyishi is the largest ethnic population of the state, and spread over KraDaadi,

⁷ Tangsa or Tangshang Naga also resides in Kachin state, Myanmar.

Kurung Kumey, East Kameng, Papum Pare, parts of Lower Subansiri, Upper Subansiri, Kamle, Pakke -Kessang and also in pockets of Lakhimpur and Sonitpur districts of Assam.

Galo speakers reside largely in West Siang, Lower Siang and Lepa Rada districts, and also partly constitute the population of East Siang and Upper Subansiri districts.

Three new districts have been created recently - Shi Yomi (Adi, Tagin, Memba linguistic communities) carved out of West Siang, Lepa Rada (Galo community) in Lower Siang, and Pakke Kessang in East Kameng - thus summing up to 25 districts⁸.

The language shows dialectal variation in different circles/ villages bounding the districts. Village names mark the original settlers who no longer reside in the same area; reasons include shifting of the original settlers to a place where their group or clan resides in large numbers may be occupied by another dominating linguistic group. Nongtaw village (Namsai) was a Singpho area - they shifted to Wakheta village in Bordumsa circle (Changlang district). Alternately, the original settlers may now identify themselves with another dominating group name; for example, Deobeel (old name, Nonglu), located in Namsai is a Singpho area and was inhabited by the same community; but presently the Singpho are converted to Khamti.

Status of linguistic communities and their affiliation

The district wise linguistic scenario of Arunachal Pradesh is complicated, unlike that listed in the census reports. One name or label of a particular community is known to have various sub-tribes. It is possible that one or two sub-tribes may have different cultures and varying degrees of intelligibility. A section of the population of a sub-tribe considers itself under the label of a 'so-called' main tribe. Shartang spoken in Nafra and Dirang circles of West Kameng district identify themselves as Boot Monpa; although linguistically they are similar to Sherdukpen/ Mey. Noctes are the prominent community of Tirap district. Until 1991, Tutsa was regarded as a sub-tribe of Nocte; Ollo (still a sub-tribe) seeks independence. Khappa is regarded as a literary variety of Nocte. The dominance of Noctes can be further understood while categorizing a section of the linguistic community in Tirap as "Wancho speaking Noctes".

⁸<http://www.arunachalpradesh.gov.in/districts/>

Conclusion

The linguistic paradise, Arunachal Pradesh is home to diverse ethnic communities and reservoir of language families. The linguistic communities of the state are so numerous with structurally diverse language groups that it poses challenge to classify them under few labels. There lies immense scope for research in the documentation of languages. The entire enormous linguistic populace is not listed as scheduled languages; these create difficulty in administrative tasks. Hence, those linguistic communities identify themselves with another community which is politically secured and shares cultural affinity.

The dominance of English and media languages are gaining prestige and power at the cost of losing the mother-tongue languages. It is a concern that with the death of a distinct tongue, the culture and indigenous knowledge will disappear. Each living tongue is unique and needs to be preserved in the tongues of the speakers.

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