

## Hunter-gatherer to Sedentary Lifestyle: A Paradigm Shift

By

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### Introduction

Rajis/Banrajis/Banrawats/Banmanus /Rajbaar<sup>1</sup> is one of the last hunter-gatherer communities that were brought into light for the first time in India in 1823<sup>2</sup> by the then commissioner of Kumaun. It is said that they are descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas, who were comparatively early settlers of the Himalayan region than the Nagas and the Khasas. Atkinson (1882) stated that these early tribes entered India by the same route as the Aryans and the Kiratas were the first to arrive than the others. In course of time, Kiratas were gradually uprooted from the region by the dominating impact of other ethnic groups; but their few descendants remained in Kumaun region of India. The legend current among them, as told to the author, is that they were descendants of the royal family of Askot<sup>3</sup>.

Until recently Rajis lived a life typical of the Neolithic age, as cave dwellers and food gatherers - subsisting on hunting, fishing, and jungle produce. The author has herself seen the caves where they used to reside in earlier times. The Government of India has identified them as a scheduled tribe way back in 1967 and declared them as a primitive tribe in 1975. Still, they cannot be considered aboriginal as they had not been inhabiting the region from the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> All these words are exonyms as Rajis call themselves 'bhulla' In 2001 during interviews the author observed that many community members use this word for themselves. The sorry state of the Raji language and their culture can be understood by the fact that in 2017 when the author inquired about this word no one was aware of it.

<sup>2</sup> Traill, C. W. 1823 *Report on Kumaon*. Asiatic Researchers, 16:150.

<sup>3</sup> The King of Askot had two sons. One day they both went hunting in the forest where the elder son killed a cow by mistake. Killing a cow is taboo in the Hindu religion so he felt ashamed of himself. He fled to the jungle to escape from the situation. The younger son then ruled the kingdom. Rajis are descendants of the elder son.

In facial features and appearance, presently they exhibit mixed physical traits of Aryans, Dravidians, and Mongoloids. Most of them are of dark wheatish complexion, of average height have straight and scanty hair of slight blackish color. Some of them have mongoloid epicanthic folds. It appears that the intermingling of different ethnic elements for ages has caused the disappearance of their original racial features.

Presently, in India, they have been located living in eleven<sup>4</sup> small, remote, and distant hamlets, consisting of twelve to thirty households<sup>5</sup> in an inhospitable terrain amidst dense forests far away from the surrounding Kumauni villages of *Pithoragarh*, *Champawat*, and *Udham Singh Nagar* districts of Uttarakhand, the 27th state of India carved out of Uttar Pradesh on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, 2000.<sup>6</sup> Raji was originally a wanderer community so doing a headcount was always a problem for authorities as a result, we get very fluctuating numbers. The first record of their population came from the assessment of Traill in 1823 when the total number of families recorded was just 20. According to the last 2011 Census, their total population was around 732. Society for Endangered and Lesser-Known Languages (SEL) conducted a census survey in 2019 and their total count was 889.

### Language and Culture

Sir George Grierson, in his book 'Linguistic Survey of India,' had named their language 'janggali'; and due to geographical affinity placed it in the Tibeto-Burman family. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee also supported Grierson's claim. On the other hand, some linguists like Dr. Shobha. R. Sharma and Dr. D.D. Sharma has suggested that the linguistic components of the Raji language were paleo-linguistic relics of some of the Munda dialects, which, in the ancient past were spoken in the Himalayan region. In her previous works Rastogi (2002; 2012) has tried to establish that though this indigenous language belongs to the Central Himalayish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family yet long contact with Indo- Aryan languages like Kumauni and Hindi has not only affected its vocabulary but also its grammar. It must be

<sup>4</sup> In Government records and earlier writings of Rastogi number of Raji hamlets has been mentioned as ten. In absence of any geographical map, Rastogi has also prepared a map of ten hamlets. In 2019 during the census survey conducted by SEL the fact about a new Raji hamlet came out. Though Government records still show the number as ten but they themselves mentioned that the community resides in eleven hamlets named- *Kimkhola*, *Bhogtirua*, *Ganagaon*, *Madanbori*, *Kutachaurani*, *Altodi*, *Jamtadi*, *Kantoli*, *Khirdwari Kulekh*, and *Chakarpur*.

<sup>5</sup> Earlier this number was four to fifteen only. Rastogi, K. 2000 *A Socio-linguistic Study of Raji / Rawat*. Man and Life. Vol -26.239-246.

<sup>6</sup>In the beginning, the state was named Uttaranchal, in January 2007, the new state changed its name to Uttarakhand, meaning northern region, which was the traditional name for the area.

noted here that a culturally contiguous Raji- Raute tribe lives in the southwest and western regions of Nepal. Some groups of nomadic Raute have now started to settle down. Rajis have four different groups in Nepal –Bandali Raji, Purabia Raji, Naukhele Raji, and Dharchula Raji.<sup>7,8</sup> Researchers have studied and are still trying (Reinhard: 1974, Khatri: 2013) to find out the commonalities among these groups. In her earlier published collaborative research work author has tried to establish that Banrajis are linguistically and culturally closer to the nomadic Rautes of Nepal. Based on linguistic affinity and material culture the author opines that they used to wander in the forests of Nepal and crossed the border unknowingly and gradually came into contact with residents of this region.

A close look at the traditional Indian Raji socio-economic framework and its linkages reveals that these people have, for centuries in the past, managed to live an almost isolated life and have remained completely cut off from the mainstream culture. But for the last some decades now things are changing and they are gradually shedding their shyness and intermingling with the outsiders. Now they regularly visit the nearest market places to sell wood/grass pales though strictly to a few chosen shopkeepers or to buy eatable items, medicine, etc. or to work as daily wagers. Due to this frequent contact, the Banrajis have not only borrowed some of the ways of living and eating practices of the neighboring people but have also acquired some of the customs. For instance, in earlier times, they used to worship nature. The Sun, Moon, mountain, forest, land, and water bodies were considered pious, and cannot be owned by anyone. According to their belief, all these natural bodies care for humans. Their chief Gods 'Churmul' and 'Chiplakot' are, in fact, the names of two present mountain peaks. They believe in spirits, goblins, and spirit mediums. 'Amabubu' is the name of the Goddess who helps them in solving problems in the times of calamities; whereas 'Sameji' is a demon spirit. Slowly, they started worshipping Hindu Gods and Goddesses. During the early transitional period, their temples were always built-in hidden places but now their temples are located in the open area and they follow rituals and customs that are common among Kumauni speakers. Similarly, their marriage custom was quite different and simple in earlier times but presently they prefer to take out 'barat' and call 'Kumauni Pandit' to perform a marriage ceremony. Likewise, now they prefer to burn their dead instead of throwing away the body in the jungle as they used to do in the past.

<sup>7</sup> Johan Reinhard and Guru Prasad Gautam p.c.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Field Bulletin published by UNESCO, they originally belong to Surkhet and are called Purbe (atharathar). The other two groups reside in Bardiya (nauthar) and Bandale (barthar).

## Paradigm Shift

The following table throws light on the past and present status of this community and provides a clear picture of the cultural changes through which the community is passing.

Before 1998 <sup>9</sup>	1998 <sup>10</sup>	2022
Earlier they were hunter-gatherers, nomadic. Do not worry about future and do not believe in possessing things.	Started leading a sedentary life but not comfortable with the idea (author's observation). Land, water, and other natural	Now they are settled and lead sedentary life in eleven hamlets. They often talk about my land, my village, and my family.
Porcupine hunting and collecting jungle produce was their occupation	Hunting, fishing, crude cultivation, agricultural laborer, wood cutting was their main occupation	Hunting (very rare) cultivation, agricultural laborer, wood cutting AND a few of them are in jobs. Some of them have migrated to other states also.
Make their clothing from 'baubinia' <i>malu</i> trees	Buy clothes from the market. All the females were dressed in petticoat and vest like blouse.	Many females have started wearing salwar- kurta. A few of them have started wearing night gowns.
'diomelanophyma' tuber and meat were their staple food	They eat rice, 'maduwa', some other local food and meat.	Most of them eat local food. Noodles & momos have become popular among the children. Meat remains their favorite food.
Use to follow barter system <sup>11</sup>	A barter system is seen in a few cases but they have started using money	Most of Raji women & children have bank accounts and are able to

<sup>9</sup> This information is corroborated from the writings of other earlier researchers.

<sup>10</sup> Author met them for the first time and started her research on/ with the Raji community.

<sup>11</sup> Majumdar in his book *Races and Cultures of India* Universal Publishers Lucknow (1944) called them 'invisible traders'<sup>11</sup> as in earlier times they used to leave their crudely made wooden bowls like- 'theki', 'pala' and 'kunna' at the doorsteps of Kumauni people at night and barter them for grain and other desired items.

**All children used to have two names. One is used within the community and the other one is for the outsiders.**

**Now they have only Hindi names like – Pushpa, Mohan etc.**

manage it

**/rajwar/** title has become very popular among the whole group. Now, they have started using it as their second name and one can often find the Hindu title as the middle name like ‘Nandan Singh Rajwar’

**Polyandry was practiced though publicly denied**

**They practice monogamy**

**Monogamy is popular.**

Second marriage is not common. Girls have started marrying outside the community. Their husband and offspring are called ‘desi’

**No familiarity of liquor and tobacco**

**Most of the male drink and smoke. Some women have also acquired this habit**

**Now they have realized the evilness of these habits and some of them are trying to leave it like their local neighbours**

**Raji women used to make necklace from glass beads**

**Due to unavailability of material and lack of time they have stopped making it**

**Only two or three Indian Raji women in the whole community remember the technique of making it**

**Raji men used to make wooden pots from a specific named ‘*sanan*’ tree.**

**Stopped making it, due to laws enforced by the forest officials**

**Only two or three Indian Raji men in the whole community still know this folk art.**

**Shy and aloof in nature, didn’t like to interact with**

**Interacted with selected outsiders, not friendly with**

**Have started to open up. Middle aged use their**



others. They used to speak a language which is very different from neighboring languages Hindi and Kumauni

anyone. Speak a highly mixed variety of language which is used almost exclusively in the private and intra-community domain 'Outsiders' do not use the language

language in front of others also ( public domain) but youngsters ( 10-18 yrs) avoid speaking it at homes. Some shopkeepers have learned their language.

**Nil**

Literacy rate was very poor only 5% of the total Raji population was literate and that only up to class v or vi. Only one boy in the whole community passed the tenth grade and another was preparing for class 10<sup>th</sup>

All the children have primary education. Some of them are in class 11 & 12. A few of them are eager to study further.

**Data** collection was herculean task as they did not bother for their culture or language and were not eager to cooperate Concepts of pride, like dislike were alien to them. Their self-esteem was very low. Thus, a very poor attitude towards their language and culture was observed. Attitude of the locals was also demeaning and degrading

Now many of them have helping and cooperative attitude. Sometimes initial resistance can be seen but once the objective of research was explained, most of them came forward to help the author. Presently some of them are involved in Raji revitalization program. The attitude of locals has not changed much. They still try to exploit them

Thus, it is clear that low socio-economic status of the entire community, miniscule population, heavy lexical borrowing, replacement of lexical items, and diminishing language attitude has pushed their language/culture towards endangerment. Due to globalization in the

name modernization a historically nomadic forest dwelling people are forced by misplaced savior complex of the local or national government to assimilate in the mainstream as a result their economic dependence on the neighboring community has increased and their traditional methods of survival gradually become redundant. Governmental development programs have been either poorly envisioned executed or both. Moreover, the state government does not have a defined language policy, especially one catering to the tribal population. Several programs and policies for the ‘upliftment’ of the Raji people have been initiated, including the establishment of residential schools and scholarship opportunities for students who complete secondary and higher secondary education. None of these policies cater to the preservation, development, or revitalization of their language and culture.

### **About the Author**

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