

Darma, Chaudangsi, and Raji

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1.0 General Introduction

Dharchula is a sub-divisional head-quarters of Pithoragarh district, where the main population consists of the Byangs (Byang-khung), Chaudangs (Bangba:mi) and Darma (Darma:) tribes. Other ethnic groups, who speak the Indo-Aryan languages Kumauni and Nepali, live side by side with these tribes. The Kumauni people call the tribals names such as Sauka:, Sakya:, and Sa:k. The river Kali flows to the eastern side of Dharchula town. This river serves as a natural boundary between India and Nepal. The township across the river in Nepal is known as Darchula, only a phonetic variation of the Indian word Dharchula. Nineteen kilometers upriver from Dharchula is the town of Tawaghat, at the confluence of the rivers Kali and Dhauli, the river Kali coming from the eastern side of Mount Puloma and the river Dhauli coming from the western side. Mount Puloma divides Byangs/Chaudangs Valley on the eastern side from Darma on the western side.

The tribals in the valleys are both settled and migratory. In Darma Valley there are eighteen villages inhabited by the Darma tribe. This valley is divided into two geographical regions, Malla Darma (Upper Darma) and Talla Darma (Lower Darma). Talla Darma consists of eight villages which are settled permanently, whereas the ten villages of Malla Darma migrate to the lower regions around Dharchula and down to Jaulzibi, which is 28 kilometers downriver from Dharchula, and stay there during the winter months (October to April). During the winter months most of the people are engaged in the spinning and weaving of woolen clothes, carpets and blankets. During the summer they cultivate crops in the upper regions.

In Byangs/Chaudangs Valley there are seven villages of Byangs and fourteen villages of Chaudangs. The Byangs occupy the upper region of the valley and the Chaudangs inhabit the lower region of the same valley. The Byangs migrate during the winter like their Malla Darma brothers to the settlements in and around Dharchula town and go back to the upper region during the summer months.

Though the number of Byangs villages (seven) is only half that of the Chaudangs villages (fourteen) in this valley, the Byangs tribe is socially and linguistically dominant over the Darma and Chaudangs tribes. The Byangs consider themselves to be superior to the Darmas and Chaudangs. This sense of superiority may be due to the fact that the Byangs are more educated and economically more prosperous.

The People of India Project initiated by the Anthropological Survey of India in 1985 gives a list of 4,635 communities found in the country on the basis of their field work, but none of the three Rang communities (Byangs, Chaudangs, Darma) are mentioned in that list. But the Raji tribe, which is a very small community, is listed. It may be possible that these people have been given an alternative name like Bhot or Bhotia, which is very much the current term in official records and a common popular term used for most of the speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages in this area.

All these tribes had barter trade with Tibet before the Indo-Chinese conflict disrupted the trade in 1962. Because of this, some older people have a working knowledge of Tibetan as well. The border trade began again in July 1992 after the signing of an agreement between India and China. The name of the trade centre is Nihurchu Mandi in Tibet. During the interim 30 years these tribals became settled traders in Dharchula and in some semi-urban settlements. Nowadays the tribals are going for higher education and occupy government jobs both in the central and state government departments and other organizations.

2.0 The Languages

The common name for all the TB languages used by these tribes is /ranglo/. The morpheme /raj/ means 'self' or 'own' and /lo/ means 'language' or 'speech'. The individual names of each language are give below:

- (i) Bya:ns, Bya:ngkho lo, Bia:ngsi, Bia:nsi (Byā:si)
- (ii) Darma, Darma:, Darma: lo, Da:mia (Da:rmiyā)
- (iii) Chauda:ns lo, Chanpa: lo, Bangba: lo, Chauda:ngsi, Chauda:nsi.

The last names in these lists were coined by the Indo-Aryan speakers (Kumauni). The names were coined on analogy with the names of Indo-Aryan languages such as Bengali and Panjabi. The names Darmiyā, Byangsi, and Chaudangsi mean the language of the Darma, Byangs and Chaudangs people respectively.

The people of all three tribes are multilingual in Hindi, Kumauni and their respective mother tongues. One might say that they have accepted Kumauni and Hindi as additional mother tongues along with their native languages, since all three are learnt right from childhood. Hindi is a prestigious language, and is the official language of the state and the medium of education at all levels. It is also the medium of inter-group communication among these tribes and between these tribes and the other adjacent linguistic groups. The people prefer to communicate in Hindi in many of the domains of language use. It appears that over a period of time the native languages of these people may be lost in favour of Kumauni and Hindi, similar to what happened to the extinct language Johari or Rangkas once found in Johar Valley.

There is no script for these tribal languages. The people of the tribes have tried to develop a script to maintain their mother tongues but have not been able to develop a suitable one. Even if they develop a script for these languages it will be based on the Devanagri script which is used for Hindi, Nepali, and Kumauni.

On the basis of the data collected, the phonology and skeleton grammars of Darma and Chaudangsi have been worked out. However, these are in no way comprehensive studies of either language. It has been observed that there are dialect variations between Malla Darma and Talla Darma. Even village to village variations were reported by the informants. Therefore for a comprehensive study a long term project should be undertaken in order to record the variations in the Tibeto-Burman languages of the region. Since the languages are loosing ground to the Indo-Aryan languages, there is an urgent need to record them in detail so that valuable data will not be lost forever.

