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Introduction to Nuristani Tribes, Languages and Dialects

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Abstract

In eastern Afghanistan, Nuristan lays in mountains. Almost all valleys and rivers, home to indigenous people, rich of culture that date back to ancient civilization. As new modern world takes shape and almost all aspect of life has changed, very little changed in these valleys. Nuristan is home to eight major tribes and each tribe has its dialect. This paper illustrates Nuristani Languages and its dialects and tribes reside in valleys for thousand of years.

Keywords: Nuristan, indigenous, culture, tribes, language, dialect

Introduction

Nuristan Province formerly known Kafiristan (means the land of Non-Muslims) is historically rich zone of Gandahara Civilization. According to Encyclopedia Britannica Nuristan Province lays in eastern Afghanistan where its northern boundaries touch the range of Hindu Kush Mountains. It is mountainous, rainy and forested. (Britannica, 2018)

Geographically, Nursitan Province is located in eastern Afghanistan, on the Afghanistan - Pakistan border. It is bordered by Badakhshan province in the north, Pakistan in the east, Kunar and Laghman provinces in the south, and Panjshir in the west. Nuristan's topography consists of mountains and river

gorges; the entire province is extremely difficult to access, and often impossible in the winter. (Naval Postgraduate School)

In 1890s, Afghan King Amir Abdurrahman sent his envoy named Ghulam Haidar Khan, the chief of the army to Nuristan where he called on people to convert to Islam perhaps forcibly and that Kafirstan got replaced with Nuristan Province (Ghubar, 1990).

The Encyclopedia Britannica also wrote that Robertson stayed in Kamdesh Village in 1890 to 1891 and wrote about the 'forced conversion' happened in those years and that the name got changed from Kafirstan, the land of infidels to Nuristan, the land of enlightening (Britannica, 2018).

Ghubar, Afghan historian writes that its eastern part is called Bloor, and western part is called Katoor which is also known as eastern Nuristan, and western Nuristan. The Eastern Nuristan boundaries with Kunar Province and the Western Nuristan boundaries with Laghman Province (Ghubar, 1990).

Ghubar adds that it is the richest area in terms of culture of old Hindu Kush. It means the richest cultural hub of Gandahara civilization prior to Muslim invaders. Despite laid in mountains, Nuristan has preserved its two biggest qualities. One its tribal societies and second their dialects which is untouched and unexplored so far.

1. Known Nuristani Tribes

According to ethnographic exploration, there are several tribes in this province who either speak a different language or a different dialect of a same language.

Gujjar Tribe

So very little about the Gujjars is known that the mere mention of them sends one scrambling for dust-covered manuscripts of the British Raj. It is thought they were initially encountered by Alexander during his thrust into India, although this and every theory about the Gujjars remains in dispute. They speak a tongue wholly unrelated to any Indo-European language, although many have by now learned local languages for commercial purposes. They roam with their herds, usually of cows, from the high Himalayas in India to the Hindu Kush of Afghanistan, although rarely are they seen in Afghanistan anymore, as Pakistan has hindered their passage through its territory and most preferred to stay within India. Some in India remain Hindu, although further west many are Muslim. Often they can be recognized by their avoidance of others, and their brightly hennaed beards. They are proud, fierce, and loyal. Their traditions are millennia old, and they have preserved them well in the face of great adversity. They are somewhat related to Nuristanis, although exactly how is a subject of conjecture. Similar to Nuristanis, some genetic root gives many Gujjars a distinctly European appearance, up to and including blond hair and blue eyes (Dalrymple, 1989).

Tajik Tribe

Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, after the Pashtuns and comprise between 25-30% of the population. The Tajiks in Afghanistan tend to live in settled communities as opposed to a nomadic lifestyle. They are of Iranian descent and primarily speak Dari. The majority of Tajiks are Sunni Muslims. Tajiks made up the majority of the Northern Alliance, both in terms of membership and leadership. Tribal ties have largely broken down among the Tajiks; therefore, social organization is defined primarily by geography. Despite their lack of cohesiveness the Tajiks are often brought together due to the perceived common threat posed by the Pashtuns (Dalrymple, 1989).

Kata Tribe

Kata Tribe is considered the biggest tribe which is also called the Katroor Tribe. As they wore black skins of goats, they were called 'Sia Poshan' black wearing people. They are categorized as eastern and western Kata Tribe. People of this tribe who live in eastern part are called white wearing and those live in western part are called black wearing (Ghubar, 1990).

Kaam Tribe

Kaam is actually small tribe of Kata Tribe, live in the door of the province bordering with Kunar Province. Kaam is known to be the toughest tribe and never surrender to invaders. Prior to Islam, Kaam was a difficult tribe to accept the King (Ghubar, 1990). Ghubar adds that it is important tribe in terms of marchandization. People in this tribe trade for past centuries.

Persun Tribe

Persun Tribes dwell in the center of the province. According to Afghan historian, Ali Ghubar it is one of the most ancient tribes of Nuristan Province. I have searched after this tribe in books and on the internet but I could not find much.

Awhgun Tribe

This tribe lives between Peach Vallay of Kunar Province and Alingar Valley of Laghman Province. Kantinva Valley and other valleys are their major valleys of their dwelling. People of this tribe were known White Wearing. Earlier it was called Kalah Tribe (Nuristani, 1988).

Gwar Tribes

Gwar Tribe lives on the both sides of Landay Siend (short river). It is also called Septemara. Gwarriors live in one hundred and seventy four villages. Most of them live by animal farming and only few people left the valley for different life in cities (Program, 2007).

2. Nuristani Language and Dialects

Locked in the range of Hindu Kush Mountains, Nuristanians preserved their language and dialects. There are few T.V programs aired by Afghan National Television and Radio Station known as RTA (Nariwal, 2005).

Minority Rights Home, a webpage online posted about Nuristani Language that they speak a unique version of Indo-European Language (Minority Rights Home, 2020). Their dialects are studied in details as following.

Erdi Language

One of the Nuristani languages is Erdi Language. Western Erdi Language is mostly known to researchers. Erdi language is called Kafiri Language and the following dialects are included (Ghubar, 1990). I relied on Ghubar to bring about Erdi language. I could not find about Erdi Language. Perhaps, it is a dialect of a different language.

Kati and Kamveiri Language

Kati language is also spoken in Nuristan Province. It is reported that it is spoken on the right bank Pech River which is the largest hub for Nuristani Languages. It is also called Kathani Language (Nariwal, 2005).

Richard F. Strand published a paper in *American Journal for Oriental Study* published a paper titled NOTES ON THE NURISTANI AND DARDIC LANGUAGES . In his paper he noted that Kati is also called Kateviri Language. Alongside with Kativiri Language there is Kamveiri. Strand believes that several isoglosses separate Kamviri from Kativiri Language. He has noted some phonological differences.

Strand adds that Kamviri is spoken by almost four thousand people in Kamdesh and other villages (Strand, 1973)

Ghulam Muhammed Ghubar, Afghan Historian also noted that in the middle of Ramgil and Kalum Rivers there is that unique civilization and people of this area speak Kati Language.

Wesi-weri Language

Strand referenced George Buddrus concluding three dialects of Wesi-weri language (Strand, 1973).

Strand adds that upper dialect is spoken in the village of Supu, the middle dialect in Saaci, Pronz and Parun while the lower dialect is spoken in Paski village.

Waigly Language

Waigly Language is spoken in Waigle Valley. Perhaps, the word Waigle or Waigly was not like this at the beginning and it was Wai Aali. Anyhow, other neighboring areas have its influence in those languages

(Ghubar, 1990).

Ashkoni Language

Ashokani Language is spoken in Paroon Valley. It is reported that Sustrat language which is mostly known as non Indo-Aryan language has its impact on Ashkoni Language. Paron is located on the bank of river – which flows into Peach Valley River.

Amili Language

This language connects Nuristani and Dardi Languages and because of its features it could be from Dardi language branch. This language is spoken in Amili Valley.

Dardi Central Language

Nariwal believes that there are many complicated dialects or languages included. Dividing based on its feature, there is Northern and Southern Branch of Dardi language (Nariwal, 2005).

Northern Branch: Kalishi and Khawara languages are studied under this category. Both languages have affixations largely. For example, verb of this language changes to its subject accordingly.

Southern Language: this language is a complex of the following dialects. Gwari, Shumashti Watapoori Kurangali Ninglami Pashaye Dialects, Nariwal classifies.

Pashaye Language

The word Pashai is two morphemes. *Pasha* means surrender and *ye* means head. Which means lowering head for respect (Nariwal, 2005). Nariwal further explains that it means surrendered Nuristani to Islamic faith.

Pashaye language is full of far-rooted dialects. It is spoken with different dialects in Alingar and Alishang, and Halatak, Dara Noor, Farar Valey and some other areas near Kunar River (Nuristani, 1988).

Shumasti Language

Shumasti Language is spoken Shumast Upper Valley and in left side of Mazar Valley. In his article Nariwal claimed that there is very little written about this language which could be true.

Watapoori Language

Watapoori dialect is famous in Watapoor, Kunar and Kater Gul valley on the left side of Pech Valley. Some believe that this language is now too rare. (Ghubar, 1990)

Gwari Language

Gwari language is Gwari Pati in some areas. It is spoken language of Chatral upper Valley. Some call it Tersati Language. It is one of the ancient alive language of Nuristani tribes (Ghubar, 1990).

Kalasha-ala language

This language is spoken in southern Chatral. Guluskwa and Berar areas of Chatral where the Kalash speak their language is also a cultural rich place (Nariwal, 2005).

Strand who lived in eastern Nuristan Province for twenty seven months has noted that Kalasha- ala is a language spoken in Kalsum village in Wygal Valley, and has two major dialects and must not be confused with the Kalash Lanague of Chitral which is other side of Hindukush Mountains (Strand, 1973).

Lakhtu and Dardi Language

Ghubar wrote that Lakhtu is a spoken language of people live in Kunar and Nuristan province, and most of its speakers live in those valleys are nomadic, while, Dardi is very rare language. It is mostly verbal and never written. Very few people speak this language in Kuz Kunar and some areas in Nuristan(Ghubar, 1990).

Conclusion

The Nuristani languages, formerly known as Kafiri languages, are one of the three groups within the Indo-Iranian language family, alongside the much larger Indo- Aryan and Iranian groups. They have approximately 130,000 speakers primarily in eastern Afghanistan and a few adjacent valleys in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Chitral District, Pakistan. The region inhabited by the Nuristanis is located in the southern Hindu Kush mountains, and is drained by the Alingar River in the west, the Pech River in the center, and the Landai Sin and Kunar rivers in the east. The languages were previously often grouped with Indo-Aryan or Iranian until they were finally classified as forming a third branch in Indo-Iranian.

Most Nuristanis are from the Kata Family and Janaderi Branch. However, there are other Nuristani tribes as well, some of the Kata of Janaderi people live in Ozhor (now Karimabad), Gobor, Buburat, Ayun, Broze and Mastuj. There is a very popular rock associated with this tribe located in Karimabad (Juwara) called kata bont (Kata is the name of the tribe; bont meaning "stone" in the Chitrali language).

The Nuristani do not have a formal tribal structure as the Pashtuns do, however they do designate themselves by the names of the local regions they are from. In total, there are 35 such designations: five from the north–south valleys and 30 from the east–west valley.

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