

The Dhangar : A Dravidian Tribe in Nepal

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The Dravidian speaking tribes, with the exception of the Brahui in Baluchistan, have long been thought to be located almost exclusively in central and southern India. Only one small Dravidian tribe, the Maler, has been found located as far north as the southern side of the Ganges River. It is for this reason that I thought that both ethnologists and linguists would be interested to hear of a Dravidian tribe located still further north near the foothills of the Himalayas¹).

I had first heard reports in 1968 of a tribe reputed to be from South India from a Peace Corps volunteer, who was stationed in Dhanusha District in the eastern Tarai (lowlands) of Nepal. He said they were called the Dhangar and were located in the village of Sakhuwa about 10 minutes walk from the larger town of Mahendranagar.

While working on another project in September, 1970, I came across the same tribe located in Jabarha, a village about two hours walk west of the main highway to Kathmandu and the bazaar town of Jitpur in Parsa District of the central Tarai.

There are about 20 houses of Dhangar and 9 houses of Paharis (hill people) in the village. I was told by Dhangar that their ancestors came originally from Chota Nagpur (Orissa and Bihar), but they had no idea of the reasons or the period the migrations occurred. They call themselves Rajbangshi, the name of a larger tribe located throughout the eastern Nepalese Tarai and in Bihar. Since their language is so different from that of Rajbangshi and their caste position is so much lower (they are considered untouchable), it appears that they may have taken this name for status reasons, a not uncommon practise in either Nepal or India for lower castes to do.

They said that there are villages of Dhangar located in several districts to the east, especially in Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha,

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Saptari, Sunsari and Morang districts. Although they said they do not hunt in Parsa District, they had heard of Dhangar to the east using bows and arrows for hunting. I did not collect much ethnographic data in my brief stay in their village, but it appears that they share some of their customs with tribes living in the surrounding area. They worship at the major festivals of Dassehra and Holi, and worship Saraswati, a major Hindu deity. They dress similar to other tribes of the area and have the same basic agricultural practises, house types, and shamanistic practises.

I mainly concentrated on collecting basic linguistic data in order to establish whether or not they truly had a Dravidian language, and, if so, to which tribe they were most closely related. I later compared the vocabulary list I had collected with Dravidian languages listed in the Linguistic Survey of India²⁾. I found the basic vocabulary and grammar to be almost exactly the same as that of the Kurukh or Oraon of Chota Nagpur. There is, however, a fair number of Bhojpuri (the Indo-European language spoken in this portion of the Nepalese Tarai) words in the Dhangar language.

The Linguistic Survey of India lists one other name for the Oraon as being Dhangar. "Dhangari simply means 'the language of the Dhangars', a caste whose business it is to dig wells, tanks, etc."³⁾ The Survey estimates the number of Oraon to exceed 500,000.⁴⁾ I could not, however, find any Dhangar listed in the Nepal Census or any Rajbangshi as being listed in the districts mentioned above.⁵⁾ On the basis of their being located in several districts in the central-eastern Tarai, it appears certain that there must be at least a few thousand Dhangar in Nepal.

Referring to the origins of the Oraon and the closely related Maler, the Survey mentioned the following: "According to their own traditions, the ancestors of the tribe speaking these two languages lived originally in the Carnatic, whence they moved north up the Narbada River, and settled in Bihar on the banks of the River Son. Driven thence by the Musalmans, the tribe split into two divisions, one of which followed the course of the Ganges and finally settled in the Rajmahal Hills, while the other went up the Son and occupied the north-western portion of the Chota Nagpur

- 2) Linguistic Survey of India, Munda and Dravidian Languages, Vol. IV (edited by G. Grierson, New Delhi, 1909; reprinted 1967). See the List of Standard Words and Phrases in the Languages of the Dravidian Family, pp. 646-681.
- 3) Ibid, p. 407.
- 4) Ibid, p. 406.
- 5) His Majesty's Government, Ministry of Economic Planning, Central Bureau of Statistics, Rashtriya Jan-Ganana, 2018 Ko Parinam, Part 2, Kathmandu 2024 (1967-68).

plateau. The latter were the ancestors of the Kurukh and the former of the Maler. This account agrees with the features presented by the two languages which show that (like Gondi) they must be descended from the same Dravidian dialect that formed the common origin of Tamil and Kanarese".⁶⁾ If this story is taken to be true, then it seems likely that the Dhangar went north to Nepal only much later after they had first settled in Chota Nagpur, since the Dhangar vocabulary is still so close to that of the Oraon (and not of the Maler).

For comparative purposes I have listed below a few examples of Dhangar and Oraon words with the English translation.

<i>English</i>	<i>Dhangar</i>	<i>Oraon</i>
one	unta	onta
I	in	en
thou	nin	nin
hand	khed	khed
nose	mui	mūi
belly	kul	kul
wife	mukka	mukka
water	am	am
dog	ala	ala
go	kala	kala

One Dhangar informant mentioned that Dhangar are still today emigrating from Chota Nagpur to settle in the eastern Tarai. Thus it is possible that the Dhangar may not have been in Nepal for more than a few hundred years.

In any event the discovery of a Dravidian tribe in Nepal does serve to provoke a thoughtful reexamination of some of the arguments for the possibility of Dravidian influences in some of the languages in Nepal and for the possibility of some Nepalese tribes, especially the important Tharu and Newar tribes, having originally emigrated from areas in central and southern India. The Tharus speak various dialects of the major Indo-European languages (Bhojpuri, Maithili, Abadi, etc.) spoken in the area in which they reside, but some Tharus with whom I have spoken claim that their ancestors originally came from southern India. The Newars, speaking a Tibeto-Burman language, have a tradition of their ancestors coming to Nepal from South India.⁷⁾ At present no conclusive evidence has been presented as to the origin of either the Tharus or the Newars, but scholars

6) Linguistic Survey of India, Introduction, Vol. I, Part I, pp. 90-91.

7) Nepali, Gopal Singh, The Newars, Bombay, 1965, pp. 28-29.

who dismissed out of hand the possibility of these tribes coming from South India because of the great distance involved should be prepared to reconsider this contingency.

It appears certain that the Dhangar will continue becoming more acculturated into Nepali society. They have already begun to substitute some Nepali and Bhojpuri words for Dhangari ones, and the settling of Paharis and Mahdesis (plains people) into the forested area in which the Dhangars prefer to live has increased tremendously in recent years due to malaria eradication and increased pressure on available land. A study of their customs and language should be carried out in the near future, therefore, especially as the culture of the Oraon of Chota Nagpur has undergone significant changes since the time of S.C. Roy's work with them.⁸⁾ The Dhangar may provide the opportunity to study customs which the Oraon in India no longer follow, and which may themselves soon be due for extinction.

- 8) Roy, S.C., *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, Ranchi, 1915. For further information on changes that have taken place in Oraon life see: *Culture Change in Tribal Bihar: Munda and Oraon* by Sachchidananda, Calcutta, 1964.