

# SOCIOLINGUISTIC PROFILE OF SHERPA IN SIKKIM

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*The study is based on the primary data collected during 2017 and 2018 in Sikkim using the questionnaire designed by the Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University. Information about number of speakers, language vitality, domains of usage and causes of language endangerment were collected from the consultants who were both male and female from age 26 to 85 years with various occupational background. The study found that though the Sherpa speakers are positive towards their language, it is quite worrisome about the sustainability of Sherpa language in practice.*

**Keywords:** Sherpa, language attitude, minority, Sikkim

## 1. Introduction

This paper highlights a sociolinguistic situation of Sherpa language spoken in Sikkim and North Bengal, India. It looks at the vitality of Sherpa language and language endangerment situation among the Sherpa speakers.

### 1.1 The people

The word ‘Sherpa’ refers to both the community and language. It is a compound word that consists of *syar* /sjà:r/ ‘east’ and *pa* /pà/ ‘person’. Sherpa in Sikkim trace their migration story to Kham of modern Tibet. According to Joshua Project<sup>1</sup>, Sherpa people are found in five countries about 39000 people including India.

The population of Sherpa is found in Sikkim and North Bengal, India. According to 2011 Language Census of India, there are 16012 persons who claim to be Sherpa speakers. Sherpa language consultant Passang Ongdup Sherpa from Upper Perbing, South Sikkim district has estimated that Sherpa population in Sikkim and North Bengal are about

25000. The Sherpa population is found in all four districts of Sikkim (see Figure 1). They have been living in Perbing area of South Sikkim, Okharey area under Sombaria of West Sikkim, Phadamchen (Nimachen) area under Rongli sub division in East Sikkim and Kabi Tingda<sup>2</sup> area under Mangan in North Sikkim. The population is mainly concentrated in Sombare area of West Sikkim district.



Figure 1: Field survey locations (Map adapted from <https://my.atlistmaps.com>)

The Sherpa community traditionally practices Buddhism. Within the several sects of Buddhism, it follows Vajrayana. Mountains are also worshiped as god with several beliefs and interpretations. Day-to-day religious works are

<sup>1</sup> A US based Christian Organizaition which attempts to among others coordinate missionary work around the world. [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/14906](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14906)

<sup>2</sup> In Kabi Tingda, however, the speakers are also known as Kagate group.

performed by lama. A person is trained to become a lama in monastery or gumpa. Learning and meditation take place from gumpa. Individual families also keep aside a place called chosem /*tc<sup>h</sup>òsèm*/ in one portion of their house for religious activity. These days, some Sherpa also practice other religions like Christianity. They observe *Losar* 'New Year' as a major festival. It signifies the beginning of life in Tibetan culture.

Farming is one of the main occupations of Sherpa people. They cultivate cardamom, maize, and root vegetables (e.g., potato, carrot, radish, yam, beetroot). Maize is the most common crop. Yet, due to the influence of modernity and economic opportunity, they are also involved in government service, business. Some of them also go to big cities like Delhi for livelihood.

## 1.2. Language

Ethnologue ISO code for Sherpa is 639-3 xsr. There is no separate ISO code for Indian variety from the Nepal variety. As per the Language Census 2011, Government of India, Sherpa is spoken by 16012 people. Sherpa language belongs to Bodic group within the Tibeto-Burman family. Bradley (1997) classifies Tibeto-Burman language family into six major groups, Western Tibetan/Bodic, North East Indian, Kuki-Chin, Central TB, North Eastern, and South Eastern. He placed Sherpa under Bodic which is further divided into subgroup called *gTsang* under Central Bodish (see Figure 2). Other languages listed in this subgroup are Lhomi, Jirel, Halung, and Nubri.

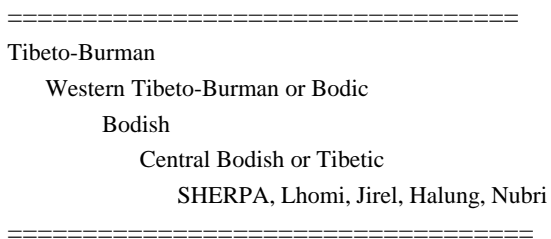


Figure 2: Western TB or Bodic language classification (adapted from Bradley, 1997).

Thurgood also categorized Sherpa under Bodic branch within Central or U-Tsang under Tibetan dialect (Thurgood & LaPolla, 2003, p. 9). The Linguistic Survey of India, Registrar General, India, however has placed Sherpa in Bhutia group

within the Bodish language group (Mukherjee, 2013).

The Sherpa language is spoken in Sikkim and North Bengal in India. Varieties of Sherpa like Solukhumbu Sherpa and Helambu Sherpa are spoken in Nepal (Graves, 2007). In fact, the population of Sherpa is greater in Nepal. Bradley mentioned global population of Sherpa to be about 70,000 with major chunk in Nepal, followed by India in Darjeeling and a little number in China (Bradley, 1997, p. 8). Within Sikkim, Sherpa may be spoken by about 20,000 to 30,000 people. Sherpa variety varies from village to village particularly on lexical words with no major mutual unintelligibility. Although, the reason cannot be ascertained, there seems to be a noticeable dialectal difference between Kabi Tingda variety in North Sikkim and the rest of variety from other districts. Although, they are all known as Sherpa, a section of Sherpa population from the North district of Sikkim especially from Kabi Tingda is also called as Kagate. Gazetteer of Sikkim 2013 grouped Kagate as one separate Nepali communities in Sikkim (Kharel & Bhutia, 2013, p. 121). Sherpa is one of the State recognised languages of Sikkim since 1997. Sherpa is being taught as a subject of learning in some government schools in Sikkim, namely Government High School, Perbing, Namchi sub division, South Sikkim.

Sherpa is written in Sambhota (Tibetan) script. School education materials are written in Sambhota/Tibetan script. Sambhota is used mostly by those who learnt it formally from Tibetan schooling or modern schooling. Due to technology and its easy access to it, Devanagari or Roman script is commonly used in writing in daily basis among the Sherpa community members.

There is no previous linguistic work on Sherpa language of Indian variety. Baskaran (2013) under Linguistic Survey of India carried out a sketch grammar featuring phonology, nominal system and some aspects of syntax of Sherpa. However, for the Nepal variety of Sherpa, there are many noticeable linguistic works (Graves, 2007; Gawne, 2016; Gautam, 2018). There are also a dozen books on Sherpa lexicon prepared by linguists and native speakers of Nepal (Tournadre et al., 2009).

## 2. Methodology

The main aim of the survey was to ascertain the sociolinguistic and language endangerment situation of Sherpa in Sikkim and North Bengal. To accomplish this, I followed the questionnaire compiled by the Centre for Endangered Languages (CEL), Sikkim University in which the author was involved. The questionnaire is based on language endangerment measuring scale adopted from UNESCO (2003), GIDS (Fishman, 1991), EGIDS (Simon & Lewis, 2013), and SPPEL Language Documentation Handbook (Bhattarcharya, et al., 2016). The first part of the questionnaire is a sociolinguistic profile which has 42 questions to be interviewed with the consultants and the second part is for linguistic data elicitation. The sociolinguistic profile was designed to discover as to how much a consultant can speak his/her language, where the speaker uses his language on daily basis, and other questions related to language prestige and language attitude the native members of the community have. The field survey team formally and physically administered the questionnaire to 32 people from the four districts of Sikkim.

In addition to formal interview with 32 members, there were informal interactions with the several Sherpa community members. All the respondents were of age between 26 to 85 years old. The informants includes both genders, educated and uneducated, young and old, and people from different occupations such as house wives, farmers, ex-army men, government service holders, social leaders, religious workers and teachers as shown in Figure 3 and Table 1. Three separate field surveys, each lasting about 10 days in average were conducted in the following areas: Phadamchen area, under Rongli Sub-division of East Sikkim, Upper Perbing area under Namchi Sub-division of South Sikkim Okharey area, under Sombarey Sub-division, West Sikkim and Kabi Tingda, under Mangan sub division in North Sikkim between 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 1).

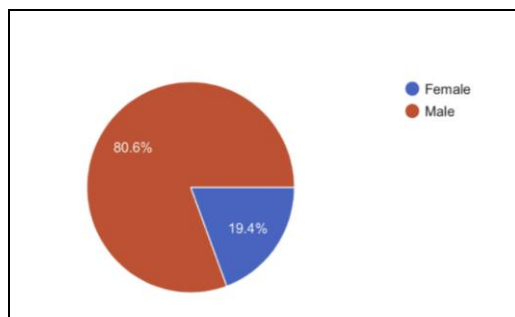


Figure 3: Gender distribution

Table 1: Occupation summary of the language consultants

Occupation	Percentage
Business person	9%
Ex. service persons	2%
Farmer	53%
Government service holders	8%
Teacher	7%
Social worker	6%
House wife	14%
Others	1%

## 3. Patterns of language use

### 3.1 Domains of language use

In a home domain, normally elders use Sherpa. However, the degree of the usage of Sherpa among parents and children within the family or home domain is quite worrisome. Our main Sherpa language consultant from Kutey, Upper Perbing speaks in Nepali with his children and grand children. In the level of neighbourhood, Nepali is common among the Sherpa speakers themselves. In monasteries, Sherpa is actively used but that is only for religious function and for those who are being trained to become a religious leader for a long term purpose. The following section shows domains of language use as responded formally by language consultants or respondents from across the districts of Sikkim and North Bengal.

#### 3.1.1 Home domain

In a response to a question ‘what language do you speak at home?’ in which the answer-options were given as (a) Sherpa, (b) Nepali (c) Bhutia, and (d) Tibetan, many respondents answered that they use both Nepali and Sherpa with more respondents

showing the usage of Nepali more than Sherpa. Further, the usage of Nepali is largely more with children and grand children. With their pets and livestock, Nepali is commonly used. Figures 4 to 7 show the language use within home domains.

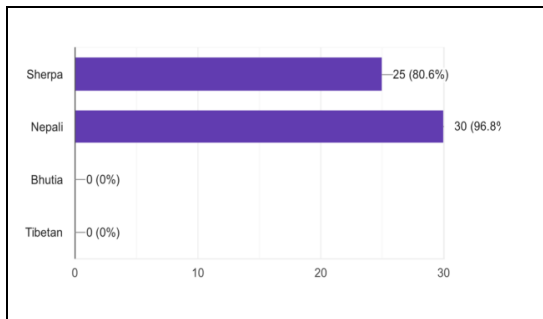


Figure 4: At home

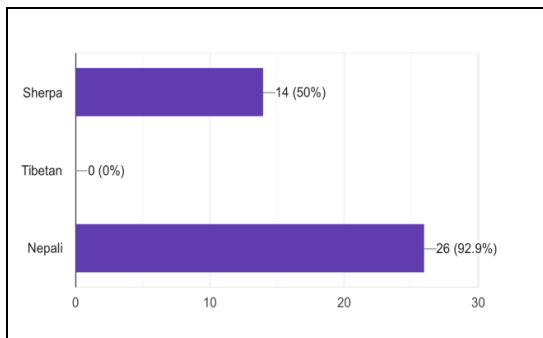


Figure 5: At home with children

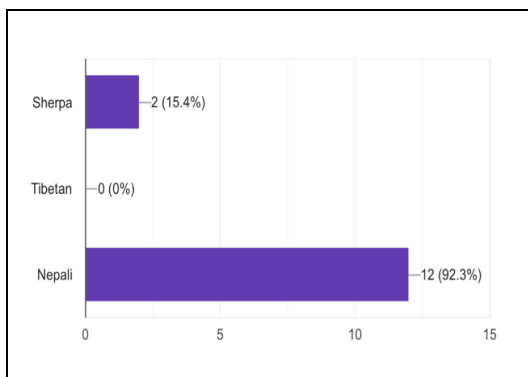


Figure 6: At home with grand children

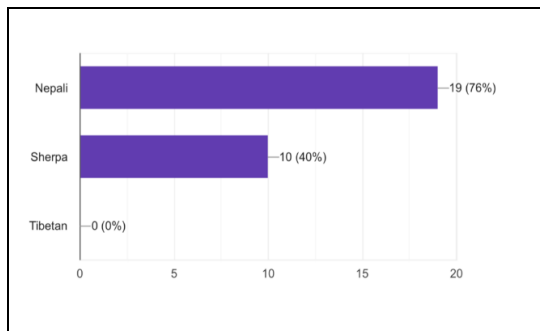


Figure 7: With pets and livestock

### 3.1.2 Outside home domain

Outside of home, Sherpa community members generally use Nepali followed by Sherpa. Hundred per cent of the respondents said Nepali is used in school. In religious places like *gompa*, the percentage of the language usage between Sherpa and Nepali is higher in Sherpa. Majority of the respondents said Sherpa is used while worshipping. Figure 8 to 10 show the responses of the language usage outside of the home domain.

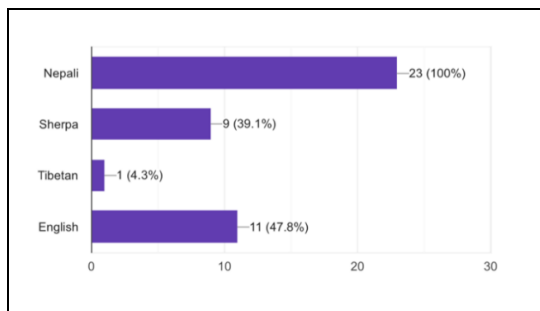


Figure 8: At educational set-up

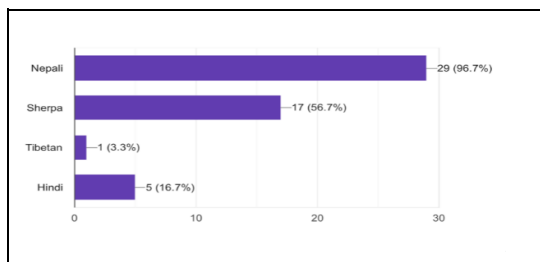


Figure 9: At market place

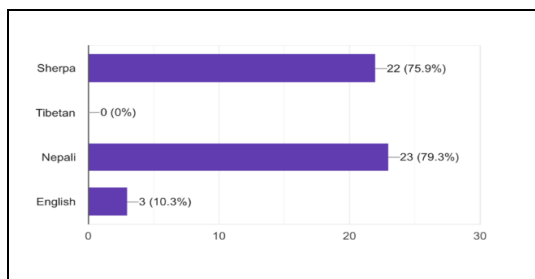


Figure 10: At community meeting

There is no regular publication or program in media like newspaper, radio and television in Sherpa language. The Sikkim Herald is a government run weekly newsletter for about eight minority languages in Sikkim. Sherpa written in Sambhota script is one of these languages. In social media like Facebook and WhatsApp, majority of them use English, Hindi or Nepali. Many of them responded that Sherpa has a written form (i.e. Sambhota script) but many could not remember any published books or materials. There are some text books for teaching and learning Sherpa prepared by Human Resource Development, Government of Sikkim.

### 3.2 Language attitude

Sherpa community members have a very positive attitude towards their language and are ready to learn and preserve it. All the respondents said they are proud of their language and expect that their children will speak and use Sherpa when they grow up (Figure 11). However, they feel that one language is not enough for carrying out various activities in life and believe that learning other language can improve their knowledge. All the respondents desire their children to learn Sherpa well followed by English, Hindi and Nepali.

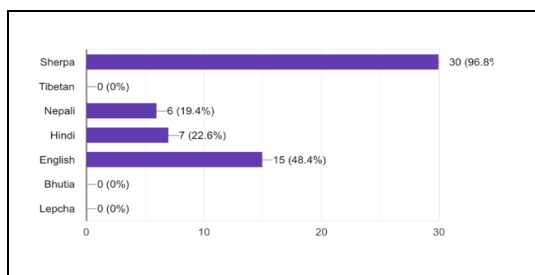


Figure 11: Preferred language for their children.

### 4. causes of Language endangerment

All the respondents say that they can speak their language but they feel that their language is dying day by day. All the respondents (at least bilingual) were asked to break down the percentage of their total proficiency in Sherpa. 38 percentage of the total believe that they can speak Sherpa about 80%, 22 percentage of them can speak about 50%, and 12 percentage of them can speak about 25%. Sherpa is rapidly disappearing especially among the youth and children. Based on this study, the degree of Sherpa endangerment level may be placed in the category 'Definitely Endangered' based on the UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment scale. This means only parental generation uses Sherpa in general. In the language endangerment scale by Micheal Kraus, Sherpa may be placed in 'B minus' level where it means the language is spoken by adults aged 30 and above but not by younger parents (as illustrated in Grenoble, 2011, p. 41).

There are political, social and economic factors that caused language loss or a language losing its vitality. As with many other endangered languages, one of the main reasons of Sherpa language endangerment is due to modernization. Children are sent to schools outside of Sikkim, e.g., Siliguri and Kolkota. Within the state, schools and boarding homes have Nepali or English as lingua franca and there is no chance of Sherpa language getting a place to survive. This is the case similar to Bhotia, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel and other minority languages in Sikkim.

Secondly, for job opportunities, local languages have no importance and hence the community members try to learn English and Hindi well. In this survey, 80 per cent of the respondents answered that they believe one language is not enough for all types of work today. Among the speakers, there is a belief that there is no economic value in Sherpa and this is the reason they go out to learn other language(s) which have high economic value and in such course of time, their language becomes secondary.

In addition, difficulty of language maintenance among the speakers could be due to its linguistic features. Yliniemi (2019) pointed out that Denjonke, a Sikkimese and a language related to

Sherpa spoken in Sikkim is losing due to 'fear of losing face and lack of economic value in knowing the Denjongke' (p. 13). Denjongke has honorific and non-honorific forms. These features are in common in Sherpa as well. Sherpa learners are often concerned of getting mocked by others when they could not reply or use a correct register of their language.

There is a written culture among Sherpa. Although in day-to-day life, usage of Davanagri script or Roman script is a common practice, Sherpa community adopted Sambhota script to be used by the community. Either many of the community members do not know how to use this script, or due to technology, they prefer using Roman or Devanagari script in daily life. Inability of many speakers to use Sambhota script also is an impediment to maintain and promote Sherpa language.

Further, difficulty in maintaining one's language is perhaps due to the concept of village setting in Sikkim and this is true for all other small languages like Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, etc. Based on this field survey, it is observed that there is hardly any one settlement that is exclusively occupied by one single community in Sikkim except for some villages in North Sikkim district like Lepcha. This is one of the factors where the social setting is not conducive to maintain one's language and naturally compelled the inhabitants of the settlement to use Nepali, the lingua franca of Sikkim, instead of their own language.

#### 5. Implication and conclusion

Sherpa language is greatly threatened. However, efforts made by the community members to strengthen Sherpa language are very encouraging and must be supported. Government of Sikkim is also doing well to preserve and maintain its state indigenous language(s) by introducing Sherpa in schools and higher secondary schools. Due to this government policy, Sherpa is being taught in some government schools and is learnt by children with great enthusiasm these days. There are about 25 Sherpa language teachers appointed by the Sikkim Government in Sikkim. Denzong Sherpa Association is socially active and supportive for the preservation of Sherpa language. There are many social media groups which encourage the use

of Sherpa. Traditional songs and dances are recorded by themselves and they are uploaded onto social media (e.g., YouTube, Facebook). A native musical band like REWA BAND is very enthusiastic to perform their folk music and compose lyrics in Sherpa often in the genre of popular music.

The Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University is actively taking care of endangered languages in Sikkim and North Bengal. Five languages including Sherpa are being digitally archived at its language archive Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas Endangered Language Archive (SiDHELA). This archive is one of the first digital archives in the country for preserving and documenting endangered languages.

The future of Sherpa as a language is however quite vulnerable. Almost all the Sherpa members in Sikkim are at least bilingual and many can speak upto four languages. Among the younger generation, approximately upto 35 years of age, most of them are not fluent or know Sherpa a little. Members of the community understand the importance of maintaining Sherpa but due to economic opportunity and values, social and political factors, its importance is decreasing day by day. Youth dance, sing, and socialize predominantly in Nepali. It may be seen that Sherpa language is transmitted sparsely to children in some families of the community but as mentioned above, the pattern of the language use among them is worrisome. The number of the speakers is not huge. The community is not politically protected like having their political representative in the government or having an autonomous area. The Sherpa community has a very positive attitude towards their language and its members have a great enthusiasm to preserve their language. However, the enthusiasm and positivity of the community members have not been materialized because of practical limitations and lack of training. In addition, Sherpa language can't be used outside the Sherpa community as Nepali and English or Hindi is given importance in every domain. Therefore, Sherpa language is under severe threat. The Government of Sikkim is quite proactive in preserving minority languages but symbolic recognition of a language by government and community members' pride in their language

are not enough for language like Sherpa to be saved.

Together with the community members, experts and government, more efforts and systematic support should be implemented to safeguard Sherpa language.

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