

A Sociolinguistic Survey Among the Pardhan Community of Central India

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Abstract

This report summarises a brief survey conducted among the Pardhan community of central India. The fieldwork was conducted in August 2005. The purpose of the survey was to assess the need for language development work among the Pardhan people. Questionnaires, informal interviews, and observations were the research tools used in this survey. The findings are: (1) Pardhan does not appear to be a distinct language at this time and (2) Pardhan people speak dialects of Gondi as their mother tongue.

1. Purpose and goals

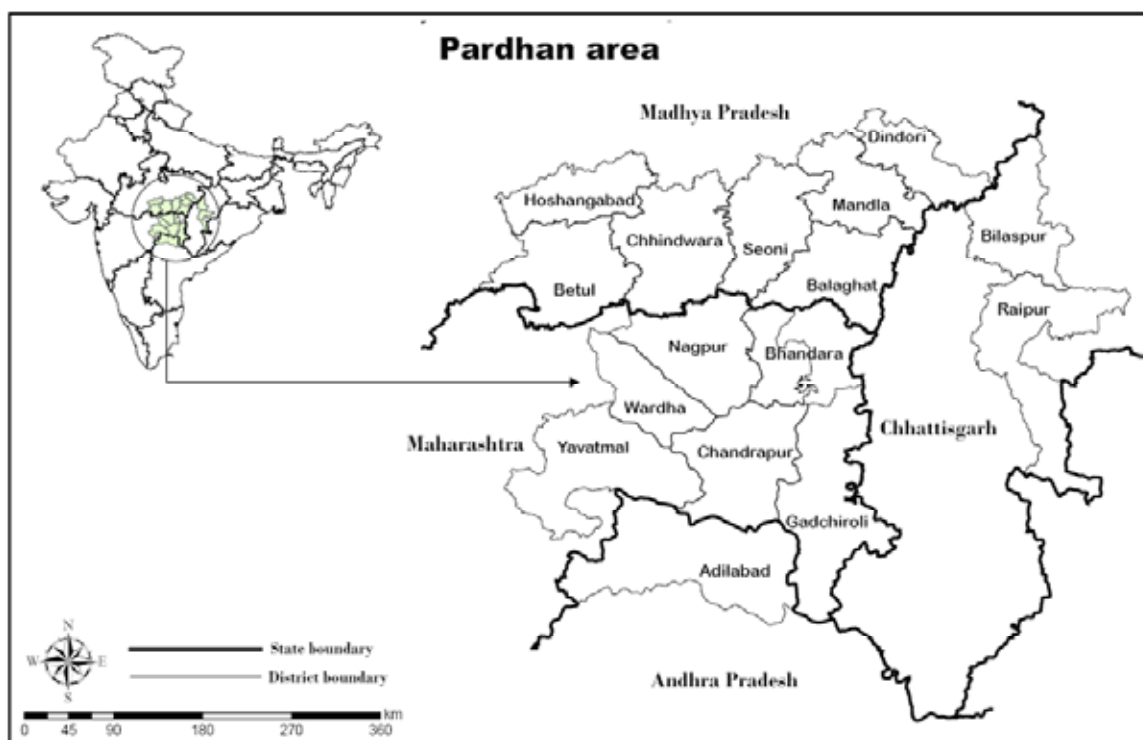
This brief sociolinguistic survey among the Pardhan community of central India was conducted in August 2005. The purpose of the survey was to assess the need for language development work among the Pardhan people. To fulfil this purpose, the following goals were formulated:

- Find out which languages the Pardhan use in Madhya Pradesh.
- Attempt to confirm or refute reports that the Pardhan in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh use the languages of their neighbouring communities.

The research tools used during the survey fieldwork were informal interviews, questionnaires, and observations.

2. Geography

According to the Ethnologue (Gordon 2005), the Pardhan people live in four states in central India: Andhra Pradesh (Adilabad district), Madhya Pradesh (Seoni, Mandla, Chhindawara, Hoshangabad, Betul, Balaghat, and Jabalpur districts), Maharashtra (Bhandara, Garhchiroli, Nagpur, Wardha, and Yavatmal districts), and Chhattisgarh (Raipur and Bilaspur districts).



3. People

The Pardhan community is a Scheduled Tribe within the Gond cluster. The Gond cluster consists of different caste groups. In villages where the Pardhan live, they generally make up about one-fourth of the population. According to the government of India census, in 1981 the total Pardhan population was 116,919.

The word *Pardhan* or *Pradhan* in Sanskrit means 'chief minister' or 'his agent.' Traditionally, the Pardhan people were bards and musicians for the Gond rulers, preserving the entire folklore of the Gond rulers through oral communication. Each Gond community retained one Pardhan family as a traditional bard. The bard is regarded as an emissary of the local deity, and brings blessings to the family he visits. This occupation has become less significant at the present time as a result of modern development (<http://www.oberlin.edu/faculty/rknight/pardhan.htm>).

According to some Pardhan subjects interviewed during this survey, many of the present-day Pardhan people are trying to earn their living in ways other than serving the Gonds. Some have become wheat farmers. Others are also attending school and trying to qualify for jobs in the government or private sector. As a result of education, many Pardhan people now hold high positions in society and government affairs.

The Gonds have been referred to as the most prominent *adivasi*¹ group of central India, both in terms of numbers and historical importance (Von Furer-Haimendorf 1982:14).

¹ *Adivasi* is the term used by the government of India to refer to the indigenous peoples of India.

According to Pardhan subjects interviewed on this survey, intermarriage between members of the Gond and Pardhan communities is restricted.

4. Languages

The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) classifies Pardhan [ISO 639-3: pch] as a Dravidian, South-Central, Gondi-Kui, Gondi language. Other speech varieties listed in the Gondi group are northern Gondi, southern Gondi, Khirwar, Maria, Dandami Maria, Eastern Muria, Far Western Muria, Western Muria, and Nagarchal.

Each of the four states where the Pardhan people live has its own official language: Telugu in Andhra Pradesh, Hindi in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and Marathi in Maharashtra. Hindi is also commonly used as a language of wider communication in Maharashtra. Telugu is a Dravidian language. Hindi and Marathi are Indo-Aryan languages.

5. Previous research

Beine (1991) did a sociolinguistic survey among Gondi-speaking communities. This research included dialects of Gondi, but there was no separate study on Pardhan. Aside from the Ethnologue listing of Pardhan, the researchers were not able to locate any other published information that specifically refers to or describes Pardhan as a separate language.

6. Findings based on survey fieldwork

During the fieldwork for this survey, the researchers collected data in Seoni, Balaghat, and Mandla districts of Madhya Pradesh. The researchers administered questionnaires and conducted interviews in several villages in these districts.

Based on the responses of Pardhan subjects to questionnaires and interviews, it appears that Pardhan is not a separate language at present, although the Pardhan people remain a distinct community.

Pardhan subjects who live among Gonds reported speaking the local Gondi dialect as their mother tongue. One Pardhan woman told the surveyors, “Gonds and Pardhan are the same in almost all respects except in intermarriage. *Roti khaana kapra sab chalta hein lekin abitak beti ko nahi chalta* (‘we will eat together but we won’t give girls’). We use the same language. Even if we use different dialects, we understand each other. There is no difference between us and the Gonds in regards to language use.”

Pardhan subjects said they use Gondi in the home, in the village, and with neighbours. For interactions with non-Gonds, they reported using the state language or language of wider communication in their respective areas: Telugu in the border areas of Andhra Pradesh, Hindi in Madhya Pradesh, and Hindi and Marathi in Maharashtra.

One Pardhan man said, “We understand their [the Gonds’] language and they understand ours, though there are little variations in the languages². But we cannot marry their daughters and they cannot marry ours. There are lots of people who speak Gondi in nearby marketplaces. You will find a lot in different parts of the state [Maharashtra]. Some will speak Hindi and the others Marathi.”

The researchers did not meet any Pardhan people who reported speaking a distinct language called Pardhan. They called their mother tongue Gondi. Pardhan subjects who said that they speak Gondi as their mother tongue generally expressed positive attitudes toward Gondi.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this survey indicate that (1) Pardhan does not appear to be a distinct language at this time and (2) Pardhan people speak dialects of Gondi as their mother tongue.

References

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²This subject was apparently referring to the way Pardhan people speak Gondi, rather than considering Pardhan as a separate language.