

**A SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY AMONG
THE NAGARCHI COMMUNITY OF
CENTRAL INDIA**

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Abstract

This report summarises a brief sociolinguistic survey conducted among the Nagarchi 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 Nagarchi people. Interviews, observations, and attempted wordlist collection were the tools used in this survey. The findings are: (1) Nagarchal (also known as Nagarchi) does not appear to be a viable language at this time. (2) Nagarchi people in central India have shifted to Gondi and Hindi.

1. Purpose and goals

The purpose of the survey was to assess the need for language-development work among the Nagarchi people. To fulfil this purpose, the following goals were formulated:

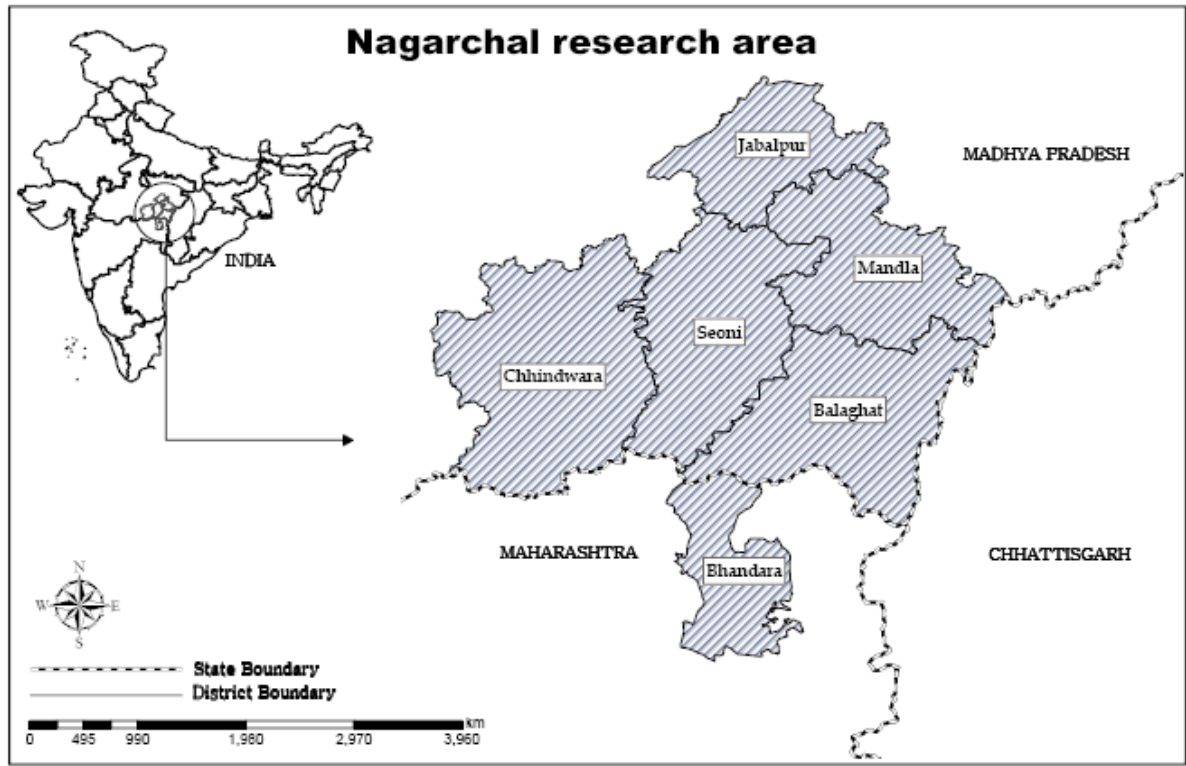
- Find out the geographical area where the Nagarchal language is spoken.
- Find out which languages the Nagarchi people speak among themselves and with other communities.
- Assess the vitality of the Nagarchal language.

The research tools used during the survey were interviews, observation, and attempted wordlist collection.

2. Geography

According to the Ethnologue (Gordon 2005), the Nagarchi people live in four states in India: Madhya Pradesh (Balaghat, Chhindwara, Mandla, and Seoni districts), Maharashtra (Bhandara district), Chhattisgarh (Durg district), and Rajasthan. This survey did not include fieldwork in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan because the Nagarchi people are widely scattered and difficult to locate in those places; it also seemed unlikely that they

were speaking a distinct language called Nagarchal. The survey area is shown in the following map.



3. People

According to the government of India 1981 census, the total population of the Nagarchi people was about 7,090. Singh (1998:2540) says that their traditional community role has been to serve as drummers; they are often invited to play the drums during birth and marriage rituals. Because of this role in the villages where they live, the Nagarchi people have been dispersed over a fairly wide area. In central India, many of them live among the Gonds. It appears that there are now no villages where more than about eight Nagarchi families live together, and there is no village where only Nagarchi people are found. During the survey fieldwork, the researchers observed that, generally, no more than two Nagarchi families settle in a given village. The Nagarchi follow the Hindu religion. They practice endogamy. Their education level is generally low.

4. Languages

The language of the Nagarchi people has been called Nagarchal; alternate names are Nagar and Nagarchi. The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) classifies Nagarchal [ISO 639-3: nbg] 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 Pardhan.

Grierson (1906:1–62) listed Nagarchal in his grouping of central-eastern Rajasthani dialects. Since the Nagarchi people settle among larger communities, it is likely that in Rajasthan, they shifted to the dialect of Rajasthani spoken wherever they lived. It is fairly common for people in India to refer to their language or dialect by the name of their caste or tribe. This would account for the language name Nagarchal.

Each of the four states where the Nagarchi people live has its own official language: Marathi in Maharashtra and Hindi in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan. Rajasthani is also widely used in Rajasthan. Marathi, Hindi, and Rajasthani are all Indo-Aryan languages.

5. Findings based on survey fieldwork

During the fieldwork, the researchers mainly interviewed Nagarchi people in Nandi and Jharketi villages, Seoni district, Madhya Pradesh. It is reported that these places have the main concentration of Nagarchi people. Very few Nagarchi families were found in other villages.

Nagarchi people interviewed by the researchers said that their traditional mother tongue is called Nagarchi. They said that the Nagarchi language is very different from Hindi, and that it is close to Gondi. They said that they spoke this language in the past, but, for social reasons, are not using it any more. The main reason seems to be that many of them are spread among the Gonds and other communities in their role as village drummers. Some Nagarchi people told the researchers that their language is *Purani Bhasha*, which means ‘old language.’ One interviewed subject said that the Nagarchi people shifted to Gondi and Hindi fifteen to twenty years ago. Subjects said that they do not use the Nagarchi language even in the home domain at present; they reported using Hindi more often.

The researchers attempted to collect Nagarchi wordlists in many areas, but this was not possible because the people no longer speak Nagarchi. Even elderly Nagarchi people were not able to provide wordlists in the Nagarchi language.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this survey indicate that: (1) Nagarchal does not appear to be a viable language at this time. (2) Nagarchi people in central India have shifted to Gondi and Hindi.

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