Languages, Literature and Scripts of Lahul and Spiti:
An Introduction

- Tobdan

**Names:** There are ten dialects or languages spoken in Lahul and Spiti. These are Spitian, sTodpa, Punan (Gahari), Khoksari, Rangloi (Gondhla, Tinan), Lohari-Lahul, Chinuli (Chinalbhashe, Chinal), Pattani (Manchhad, Songla, Melogs), Miyari (Patanam) and Tindiyali. Besides, Bhoti is religious language of a large section of the population of both Lahul and Spiti.

**Area:** These languages are named on the basis of the area in which they are spoken or the group of people who speak them. Khoksari is spoken in the upper part of Chandra or Tinan valley, around Khoksar village. Rangloi or Tinan is spoken in the lower part of this valley. sTodpa is spoken in the upper part of the Bhaga valley. Punan or Gahar is spoken in the lower part of that valley. Pattani is spoken in the main valley of Chandrabhaga. Besides, four villages on the left bank of Chandra and three villages in Miyar valley near to Udaipur also speak the same language. In the side valley of Miyar or Patanam the language of the same name is spoken. Tindiyali is spoken in Tindi and a few nearby villages near to the border with Pangi. Although the area is adjoining to Pangi and the language is much like Pangwali, yet it carries some of its own peculiarities. The name and the language has been coined for the first time in this paper. Chinuli is spoken in Pattan and in some villages in Tinan valley by the people of the group of the same name. Lohari-Lahul is spoken throughout Lahul by the professional class of the smiths. Spitian is spoken all over Spiti.

**Number of Speakers:** The number of speakers of each language can broadly be estimated on the basis of census of India report for 2001 as under: Spitian: 11,000, Lohari-Lahul: 150, Chinuli: 1000, Pattani: 10,900, Punan: 4,400, sTodpa: 2,100, Rangloi: 2,300, Khoksari: 700, Miyari: 1,300 and Tindiyali: 1,200. There is not much variation between the figures of the present and the later census. The figures regarding the two languages of Lohari-Lahul and Chinuli have no firm and reliable bases.

**Scripts:** Presently Devanagari, Roman and Bhoti scripts are used in the offices, and educational and religious institutions. Besides, there are evidences of use of the following scripts in the past in the district: Sarda, Tankri, Persian and Gurmukhi.

Two inscriptions have been found in Sarda in Lahul. One is found engraved on a stone lying in the wall of Triloknath temple. Another has been discovered inscribed on the back of a small idol of a Boddhisattva in the Dolma monastery of Chhokor in Tinan valley. This has been noticed and examined by GCL Howell, Francke, Vogel and Rahul Sankrityayan. It contains only mystic syllables, (Francke, 1926-II: 214). Specialists date them to around eighth-ninth century. The script has reached Lahul in association with Indian Buddhism.
In the temple of Mrikula devi at Tindi there is a drum (dhol) made of a precious metal said to have been donated by Moosa Verman, the Raja of Bhramour (Chamba), 9th century C.E. It contains an inscription in Sarda. However, the letters have become illegible.

An inscription in late Sarda or Devases script is found in Margul temple of Mrikula Devi belonging to the middle of sixteenth century, (Vogel, 1911: 249-251, pl. LX).

Inscriptions in Tankri on three mohras, metal masks, have been found from the temple of Naunath, village Rwaling, of the time of Tedhi Singh 1742-67, Raja of Kullu. We also have a document issued from Sultanpur in Tankri by the same Raja in 1760. Tankri was the script of the official language of Kullu and Chamba. Lahul remained under Kullu for long period. But the use of the script among the people had been very limited.

Revenue records were prepared in Urdu during the British period and it was also taught in the schools. It was taught for sometime after the Independence in the schools after the merger of the the district of Lahul-Spiti with Himachal.

Punjabi was taught upto eighth class in schools during the time when Lahul and Spiti were in the Punjab state. Its script is Gurumukhi.

Bhoti script arrived in the region with the advent of Tibetan Buddhism. Some inscriptions from Spiti like that in the monastery of Tabo belong to eleventh century. Bhoti script remained in use constantly with the Bhoti language with both the ecclesiastic class and the layman.

**Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India:** One of the greatest gifts of Grierson’s Linguistic Survey of India (1903-1928) was that it classified the languages of India and the surrounding countries into different families and further into groups and sub-groups. The readers got clear map of the languages and knowledge of interrelationship between them. Contributions about six languages were submitted to the Survey from Lahul and Spiti. The contributors were Missionaries, European scholars and administrators. Selection of the languages depended on one’s area of interest, convenience and choice.

The languages about which samples were submitted were Lahul Dialect, Spiti Dialect (Spitian); Manchati or Patni (Manchad or Pattani); Chamba Lahuli; Rangloi, Gondli or Tinan; and Bunan (Punan). These were all placed under Tibeto-Himalayan Group of Tibeto-Burman family of languages. These were further sub-divided. The first two were placed under non-pronominalised group and the rest of the four were classified as Western Group of Complex Pronominalised languages. Two names appearing in the Survey as Chamba Lahuli and Lahul Dialect call for our attention.

**Chamba Lahuli:** T. Grahame Bailey studied the language of Lahul around Udaipur and Triloknath which during the British period was known as Chamba Lahul. The language he
Lahul Dialect: Jaeschke contributed a specimen for the language called Lahul Dialect to Grierson’s Survey. It contained words of colloquy and a piece of composition from *dorchod*, *(rdo-rje gcod-pa)*, Vajračhedikā. *Dorchod* is a small but important sacred book. It is a compulsory text book of novice monks in Lahul. But it is not a local creation.

Grierson remarks, ‘the Lahul dialect has, however, been mentioned and partly described by the late Rev. H.A. Jaeschke, and it will therefore be possible to make some few remarks which it is hoped will be sufficient to show how the dialect should be classed’. Further he says, ‘our information about the inflexion of nouns and verbs is exceedingly scanty. We only know that the usual suffix of the verbal noun is *ce*. He further remarks, the Tibetan of Lahul can be described as a link between Western Tibetan and Central Tibetan. The compound consonants of classical Tibetan have, sometime been simplified in different ways. It will therefore be of interest to compare the phonology of these forms of speech with the written languages of classical Tibetan. Although not indicated, from the Grierson’s remarks we construe that Lahuli Dialect principally represented sTodpa. Presently, in view of our exercise of identification of the languages there is no language named as Lahul Dialect. This may be understood as a group constituting Bhoti, sTodpa, Khoksari and Miyari. Similarly there exists no Chamba Lahuli.

Pronominalised languages: The three languages of Punan, Rangloi and Manchad are known as pronominalised. Grierson observes that in some Himalayan languages there is a unique tendency to distinguish the person of the subject by means of pronominalised affixes. They incorporate a pronoun in the verb. He further remarks that this practice is in agreement with that of Munda languages like Santhali, etc., (Grierson, 2008, III-I: 273). Therefore, the linguists conclude that the speakers of these Himalayan languages might sometimes have come into contact of the speakers of Munda languages. This feature first came to be known through Kinnauri. Jaschke showed the relationship of Punan language with the Kinnauri in 1865. The relation between Kinnauri and Munda languages had been known before this, (Tobdan, 2008: 29).

Some examples of pronominalisation in the Lahuli languages may be given as below. Examples are from Manchad.

1. The personal pronouns have three numbers, *ka* = you; *ke-ku* = you two; and *kye-re* = you all, and so on.

2. There are double forms of the dual and plural of the first person. Thus *heng-gu* = I and you; *henda-re* = I and you all; *nye-ku* = I and he; *nye-re* = I and they.

Tinan, Grierson remarks, occupies an intermediate position between Manchati and Bunar.
Some languages of Lahul could not be represented in the above Survey. Grierson designates the languages of the sub-Himalayan hills as Pahari and that of the Western portion or the present Himachal Pradesh as Western Pahari Group of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Three languages of Lahul viz. Chinuli, Lohari-Lahul and Tindiyali may be placed under the same Western Pahari group of languages of Indo-Aryan Family. Bhoti, sTodpa, Khoksari and Miyari may be placed with Spiti under the Tibeto-Himalayan Group of Tibeto-Burman family of languages under the non-pronominalised group of languages.

**Literature and History of Study of the Languages:** So far there has been no effort made on the part of any public institution or the concerned communities about the study of any language of the area, except on ‘Chinal’ by the Himachal Academy of Arts Culture and Languages.

**The Moravian Mission:** An initiative in the study of the Lahuli languages was made with the founding of the mission office of the Moravian Church in Lahul at Kyelang in 1856. H.A. Jaeschke, a great linguist, who had been commissioned to devote himself to the task of translating the Bible into Tibetan joined the mission in 1857. He stayed here for eleven years and returned to Germany in 1868.

Professor Jaeschke was already fluent in seven languages including Sanskrit and Tibetan. Jaeschke’s first work, an article, about the languages of Lahul appeared in 1865. Jaeschke also got published a grammar of the Tibetan language, purported to have been based on the local languages, at Kyelang in 1865. He published a Tibetan-German and a Tibetan-English Dictionary (1881). Roerich remarks on the works of Jaeschke that, ‘Jaeschke in his Tibetan Grammar (reprinted, 1929) frequently refers to the dialect of Lahul, although in most cases the examples quoted in the text are called West Tibetan, and no differentiation is made between the different Dialects of the Western Tibetan group’, (Roerich, 1933: 83). The list of the words called words in the Lahul dialect contained in the Introduction to his Tibetan English Dictionary (1881) belong to sTodpa language. In this direction some other members of the mission also made valuable contributions.

St. Mark’s Gospel was published in Bhoti script in three languages of Punan, Rangloi and Manchad. A.W. Heyde translated some verses in Punan in 1908. A.H. Francke completed a version of St. Mark and was lithographed in 1911. His Manchad translation was printed by lithograph in 1914 and that of Tinan in 1915, (Hooper.1882:140pp). Francke also collected inscriptions and lithographed from Kyelang.

Manchad was studied by Bailey (1908) under the name of Chamba Lahuli, (Bailey, 1908: 37-52).

Spitian, Lohari-Lahul, Miyari and Tindiyali have not been studied. Therefore no individual distinctive feature about any of them can be given.
Khoksari and sTodpa (Kolong) were studied by Roerich (1933). About Khoksari, Roerich remarks, ‘the Koksar sub-dialect in many details agrees with that of Spiti, but its phonetic structure is influenced by the neighbouring Himalayan dialects such as Tinan and Manchat,’ (Roerich, 1933: 85).

**Chinuli and Lohari-Lahul:** Chinal or Chinul was studied by D.D.Sharma. The language is archaic and is closely related with Sanskrit. Sharma remarks that, it is ‘direct descendant of Sanskrit,’ (Sharma, 1991: Preface). Lohari-Lahuli is closely related to this. They are rich in Ghure (folksong) but not with the same antique characteristic as the language. Some of them are of historical importance. This literature is shared by all groups of the society in Pattan.

**sTodpa:** Georges de Roerich studied sTodpa which he calls Kolong, knows also as sTod-skad, and also Khoksar (1934). He also made a comparative study of the two. Tobdan also has contributed a work on the language (2015). In sTodpa verbs don’t change with the change of number, gender and tense. These expressions are shown with the use of helping verbs. Peculiarly the language shows difference in the actions taking place in view of the observer and that taking place beyond his view.

**People's Linguistic Survey of India:** People’s Linguistic Survey of India, organized by Bhasha organization, Baroda, is another landmark in the study of Indian languages. The following languages of Lahul and Spiti district are included in the volume of Himachal Pradesh of the Survey: Chinalbhashe (Chinuli), Tinan, sTodpa, Pattani, Punan, Bhoti, Lohari-Lahul and Spiti, (Devy and Tobdan, 2015).

Certain languages which were left out from the Grierson’s Survey have been included in the present Survey. These are: Chinalbhashe (Chinuli), sTodpa, Bhoti and Lohari-Lahul. Still material regarding three languages viz. Khoksari, Miyari (Patanam) and Tindiyali could not be gathered. The most positive factor of the present Survey has been that the contributors are all themselves speakers of the languages which they have contributed. In fact the Survey is not an analytical work but it has a collection of good material on the languages represented.

**Bhoti:** Bhoti is the religious language and possesses written literature on Tibetan Buddhism. It is a common language of communication between a vast population speaking different languages within the area and beyond. There are books in the monasteries and with most of the households kept in the prayer rooms with the objects of worship. Its utilization, however, remains confined to a particular section of the society and that too with a limited purpose. There has been no mentionable contribution in the stock of literature from the area since its advent in the area more than a thousand years back. In Spiti, however, Rang Rig Ras-chen has been a well known writer whose works are available.

**Oral Literature:** All the dialects or vernacular languages are rich in oral literature. They have songs and stories. But not much effort is being done to collect and preserve them. In Tinan there are songs and stories of different kinds. In sTodpa there are marriage songs and songs sung...
during different social occasions called bag-glu, gral-glu i.e. marriage songs, gathering songs, etc. In Punan there are songs called Gregs. In Pattan the songs called Ghurye are in mixed language of Pahari and local language. Satish Loppa (1994) has made a collection. Some samples of the languages have been preserved in the Chandratal magazine and Tobdan’s ‘Kunzom’.

The Bhatts, a class of Brahmin, in Pattan, function as priest in performing religious rites of Hindu custom. It is interesting that although the performances are done according to the sacred scriptures yet they give recitations composed in folk language which is again in a language mixture of Pahari and folk language. This literature is wholly oral and is not available in written form.

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