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Sunam (Kinnaur, India) – Language Snapshot

Harvinder Kumar Negi

Ropa, Kinnaur, Imachal Pradesh, India

Language Name:	Sunam
Language Family:	Tibeto-Burman
ISO 639-3 Code:	ssk
Glottolog Code:	sun1241
Population:	about 390
Location:	31.81, 78.45 (Sunnam, Pooh, Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, India).
Vitality rating:	Threatened (EGIDS - 6b)

Summary

Sunam is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodic branch spoken by about 390 people in Sunnam village, located in Pooh tehsil of Kinnaur district in Himachal Pradesh, India. Locally, it is referred to as *sunnampakad* (language of Sunnam), and is totally undescribed. It is mentioned in comparative grammatical texts, but only in the context of other languages of upper Kinnaur. Sunam is linked to Bunan, spoken in the Lahaul valley. The language is employed by the upper caste community in Sunnam, where Sumcho, Hindi, and Kinnauri are also in use. Since 1990 Sunnam has undergone many changes in cultural, economic, and physical demography due to the construction of roads and the building of schools, where Hindi is the only medium of instruction. Although, the Sunam language is actively used in the community, Hindi is increasingly present in many domains of daily use.

किन्नौर जिलाई सुन्नम फयूलून सुन्नमपा कद, सुमजाई पिनीसाई चूई ढाई निसा छेरब मनमी मिपंग सु चनली कद तिब्बती-बर्मन हिन। रंगते फयूलून उई कद लो सुन्नमपा कद लोतनी। सुन्नमपा कद के दीगेन्य लशबे नंग चल्बे जुग कायाद मन्नी। ओया लोशीवंग निया उई (सुन्नमपा कद) लाहोल ले बूनान कद नंग छेरम-छरम रुवशीनी निया। सुन्नमपा कद सुन्नम फयूलून कुन्नस पै कद यिन। सुन्नमपा कद मथैया डोरोंग कद शुम्बो, किन्नौरी, हिन्दी ली मीपंग लोशीनी। सुमचू बोशंग दूनचि सुन्नम फयूलून छेतिग मोटर-रे अम नंग लशबे इस्कूल खुलक का गयबची कद पंग दिया। इस्कूलुन चिगजापंग हिन्दी लबनी। निंसंघचंग मीपंग देशंग बोदी वाश हिन्दीयून कमचित ली चलनी। उई लेखसु सुन्नमकदे खाइनता सैफंग रादा।

1. Overview

Sunam is one of the languages spoken by the heterolinguistic Kanaura people living in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh (India). The language is spoken in Sunnam village of Pooh tehsil in Kinnaur, and belongs to the Bodic branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Bradley 1997: 3). The location of Kinnaur is shown in Figure 1.

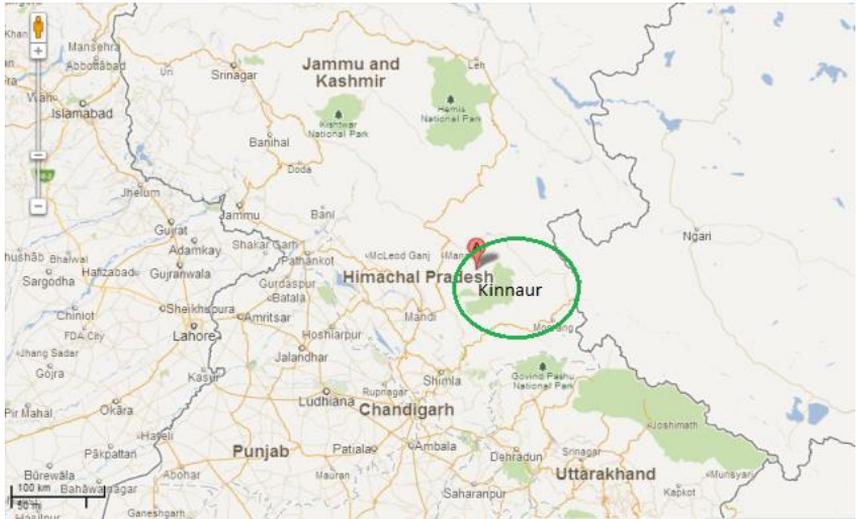


Figure 1. Map of Kinnaur.

The total population of Sunnam is 671 (Census of India 2011), of whom 390 belong to the Scheduled Tribe (the upper caste community), and about 280 belong to the Scheduled Caste (lower caste community). Sunam is the tongue of the upper caste, while the lower caste speaks a variety of Sumcho, another Bodish language (Glottolog code shum1243). The actual number of fluent speakers of Sunam is unknown, since not all members of the community speak it. Non-Sunnam women who marry into the village speak their own languages. The community has a positive attitude towards Sunam, which is acquired by children, and is used in all daily domains in spite of a rapid increase in the use of Hindi. However, many of the youngest generation, who attend boarding schools, speak only Hindi, with no knowledge of Sunam.

The name ‘Sunnam’ is derived from the ‘three water streams’ of Ropa valley. The community refer to themselves as *sunnampa* (from Sunnam) and to the language as *sunnampakad* (language of Sunnam). Ethnically, people in Kinnaur are labelled as the ‘Kanaura tribe’, which in mythology has been described as a distinct population, somewhere between humans and gods (Bajpai 1981). Kanaura shows linguistic heterogeneity and comprises about eight language groups, who have shared historical and cultural narratives. The Constitution of India assigns them the status of a ‘Scheduled Tribe’, which provides them with some opportunities in education and employment.

Sunam is an undescribed language. It is mentioned in comparative grammatical texts only in the context of the languages of West Himalayas. Early written literature calls it Thabor (Gerard 1841: 88, 1842: 551; Cunningham 1844: 223–225), a general term used to refer to the languages of upper Kinnaur (Cunningham 1854: 391; Bailey 1909: 661–662). Jaschke (1865: 94) linked Sunam with Bunan, spoken in the Lahaul valley, while Grierson (1909) called it a variety of Nyamskad, another language of upper Kinnaur.

In classifications of languages of West Himalayas, Sunam is mentioned as a Thebor language (Shafer 1967: 3; Benedict 1972: 7; Bradley 1997: 7; Saxena 1992: 2), a term that refers to the languages of Sumco and Jangramang valley in upper Kinnaur. Widmer (2018) mentions Sunam as a member of the Eastern branch language of West-Himalayish languages, while classifying other languages of Kinnaur (Kinnauri, Chitkhuli, Jangrami, and Shumcho) as Western branch languages. Due to scarce data on Sunam, it has been broadly classified as a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodic branch (Bradley 1997: 3).

2. Socio-cultural life

Sunnam village is located at an altitude 3,000 metres in the Ropa valley of upper Kinnaur along the Ropa stream, within a radius of 20 kms. The neighboring villages to Sunnam are Ropa, Giabong, Talling, Ruskulang and Syaso. Figure 2 presents a satellite view of Sunnam.



Figure 2. Satellite view of Sunnam village

<https://earth.google.com/web/@31.75139864,78.47301817,2732.12294679a,942.14855414d,35y,133.28343152h,59.98445659t,-0r>

In the absence of reliable written records, the history of Sunnam village is obscure, with information about the past only preserved in traditional songs and religious chants. Sunnam people are traditionally pastoral, engaged in crop cultivation (especially apples), and livestock rearing. They are also today involved in government jobs and businesses. The village, with houses constructed of wood and concrete, is well connected by roads and telecommunications.

Religion in Sunnam is a mix of animist beliefs, ancient Hinduism, and Buddhism. Deities have a strong presence in social life, with the main deity being *Thakur Dungyor*; another important deity is *devta Yulsa*. Sunnam is historically important for Buddhists; Lama Tenzin Gyaltzen, also called 'Khunu Lama', was born there in 1894. He was a great scholar of Tibetan grammar and philosophy, and one of the teachers of the current Dalai Lama.



Figure 3. Local deity, and the Buddhist temple in the background.

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3. Language situation

Sunnam is a multilingual community, with the Sunam language in direct contact with Sumcho, Kinnauri, and Hindi. Sumcho is spoken by the lower caste in Sunnam and also in the neighboring villages of Talling, Ruskulang, Talling and Syaso. Kinnauri is spoken by non-Sunnam women who marry into Sunnam, and is also employed in neighboring Giabong and Ropa villages. Migratory labourers speak Nepali and Pahari. In conversation with the lower caste in Sunnam, the upper caste uses a mixture of Sumcho and Sunam.

Young people speak Sunam with their peers and at home, however they show lexical borrowings, and often switch between Sunam and Hindi. Hindi and English are taught in schools from Class 1 onwards, and some children attend English-medium schools located outside the region, resulting in them speaking Hindi and little Sunam. Elders mostly speak Sunam and know Sumcho, in addition to rudimentary Hindi (Negi 2016).

4. Language status

Since 1990, globalization has caused many changes in the cultural, economic, and physical demography in Sunnam. Opening of roads and apple cultivation have improved local living standards, and building of schools in Sunnam has improved access to modern education. Hindi is the medium of instruction in school, where Sunam has no role. School-going children are strictly required to use Hindi in school; outside, they speak a mix of Hindi and Sunam, and at home they mostly speak Sunam. Parents are under pressure to use Hindi at home to help their children with homework, and to improve their language skills. They believe that good proficiency in Hindi is important for education and jobs. Earlier, marriages were homogenous but nowadays it is common for non-Sunnam women to marry into Sunnam families. They speak their own tongue, such as Kinnauri, or use Hindi until they learn Sunam.

The dominant position of Hindi in many daily domains is a threat to the vitality of local languages. Currently, Sunam is used vigorously by the community. However, with a small population, lack of literacy and documentation, and a gradual increase in the use of Hindi, Sunam is facing the threat of being replaced as the main language in the community. The parental generation and their children are increasingly bilingual or multilingual, while the most fluent speakers are elders. The intergeneration transmission of language and cultural legacy is under threat. For these reasons, Sunam can be described as a 'Threatened' language.

5. Current research

Sunam is so far a totally undocumented language. Our current research aims to develop an audio and video corpus of the oral literature in Sunam. So far, proverbs, folk songs, tales, life histories, and personal narratives have been recorded with the help of elders through personal interactions and informal interviews. The collected corpus will be transcribed and translated into both Hindi and English. From the collected data, a vocabulary list and basic grammar will be prepared. At present, a sociolinguistic profile of Sunam is being prepared.

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