

Being Kumaoni on Social Media

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Abstract

In the context of creation of a separate state of Uttarakhand on ethnic lines, and a consequent UNESCO listing of kumaoni as an endangered language, this paper examines the process of identity assertion, as well as re-imagination, through social media. The analysis of kumaoni identity maintenance as well as re-structuring is conducted through a qualitative methodology. Through a purposive sampling of popular social media content from Facebook, as well as audience interaction through comments and reactions to posts, the author examines the kumaoni identity. The themes that emerged in this paper are - a). imagery of the Bakhai (physical place) to describe a Facebook live post (virtual space) b). multilingualism and ethnic identity in lived experiences, and c). linguistic assertion through structuring of the language of audience reactions. In conclusion, the present research identified a renewed assertion of the kumaoni identity, mediated by an intense penetration as well as the influence of new media content, since 2015.

Keywords: Kumaon, Identity, Social Media, Habitus and Field, Language.

Introduction

Kumaon is one of the two divisions in the state of Uttarakhand, India, which falls largely within the central Himalayan and Terai region. The language spoken in the region is kumaoni, which is from the larger group called Central Pahari, identified as the “Inner Sub-Branch” of the “Indo-Aryan Languages,” by Grierson, in the 1927 Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson 1927:162). The kumaoni ethnic identity is constructed, maintained, and articulated through this language. However, kumaoni has been identified as ‘endangered’ by UNESCO (UNESCO nd), despite the creation of a separate state of Uttarakhand (the erstwhile hill districts of Uttar Pradesh) on ethnic assertions (the debate based on the differences between *pahadi* vs plains people¹). With the decline in language, the kumaoni identity automatically becomes threatened, as perceived by the kumaoni people.

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