



THE LINGUISTIC ODYSSEY OF THE PAHARI TRIBE

“Pahari language is not just spoken; it is lived - in every folktale, every harvest song, and every child’s first cry echoing through the valleys of Jammu and Kashmir”.

The Pahari people, cradled by the mist-clad hills of Jammu and Kashmir, are custodians of a linguistic mosaic as rugged and resonant as their Himalayan home. Their dialects - Pahari, Mirpuri, Hindko - echo the footsteps of Dardic nomads, Indo-Aryan settlers and Central Asian traders, weaving a tapestry of linguistic codes that defy borders. These dialects, born from the Indo-Aryan family, are not mere communication tools but living archives of epic ballads, folk dances and oral histories that hum with the rhythm of mountain winds. The Pahari languages, a group of Northern Indo-Aryan languages spoken primarily in the Himalayan region of India and Nepal, possess several ancient features that reflect their historical development and linguistic heritage. These features distinguish them from other Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi or Punjabi and highlight their evolution from earlier Prakrit and Apabhramsa stages, as well as their interactions with neighbouring linguistic traditions. Below are some key ancient features of the Pahari languages, focusing on their phonological morphological, and lexical characteristics.

Pahari language preserves certain sounds and phonological patterns from Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit) that have been lost or altered in many modern Indo-Aryan languages. For example, some Western Pahari dialects, like Dogri and Kangri, exhibit a rare feature among Indo-Aryan languages, where pitch distinguishes meaning, a trait likely inherited from ancient linguistic influences or developed through contact with neighbouring languages like Punjabi, which is also tonal. Like other Indo-Aryan languages, Pahari evolved from Sanskrit through Prakrit, during which complex consonant clusters were simplified. However, Pahari languages often retain intermediate forms that show a gradual transition. For instance, Sanskrit words with conjunct consonants (e.g., "prakāśa" meaning "light") might simplify in Pahari dialects to forms like "pargās" or "parkāsh," preserving traces of the original structure while adapting to local speech patterns.

Pahari languages retain morphological features from Middle Indo-Aryan, such as the use of postpositions instead of Sanskrit’s case endings, but they often maintain older forms of these postpositions. For example, Western Pahari languages like Kullui or Mandeali use suffixes and particles that echo Apabhramsha constructions, such as "-u" or "-e" for dative or locative cases, reflecting an ancient layer of grammar.

The lexicon of Pahari languages includes a significant number of words derived directly from Sanskrit and Prakrit, often unchanged or minimally altered. Terms related to nature, kinship, and daily life - reflecting the mountainous environment and culture - such as "pahār" (mountain), "gāḍi" (stream), or "bhai" (brother), trace back to ancient Indo-Aryan roots. This retention contrasts with the heavier Perso-Arabic influence seen in languages like Urdu. Ancient Pahari languages show evidence of contact with non-Indo-Aryan languages, such as Tibeto-Burman and Dardic languages spoken in the Himalayas. This is evident in borrowed vocabulary and phonetic traits. For instance, Eastern Pahari (Nepali) has incorporated Tibeto-Burman idioms and words, while Western Pahari dialects like Bhaderwahi or Sarazi show Dardic influences, such as retroflex sounds, suggesting an ancient linguistic confluence in the region. Historically, many Pahari languages were written in the Takri script (or its variants), an ancient Brahmic script derived from Sharada, used widely in the Western Himalayas until the mid-20th century. This script reflects the languages’ ancient literary tradition, with inscriptions and manuscripts dating back centuries, preserving early forms of Pahari vocabulary and grammar. The ancient Pahari languages form a dialect chain, with gradual transitions between varieties (e.g.,

from Kangri to Mandeali in Western Pahari or Garhwali to Kumaoni in Central Pahari). This continuum suggests a slow divergence from a common ancient ancestor, likely a regional Apabhramsha, maintaining mutual intelligibility in neighbouring dialects - a feature typical of pre-modern language spread in isolated mountain communities.

Long before empires rose, the Pahari language pulsed through rugged terrains of the valleys. When Buddhism unfurled its roots in Kashmir, King Ashoka, smitten by its raw power, etched it into history by founding Sharda University also called as Temple of Knowledge in a beacon of learning where the Sharda script was born, its curves mirroring the contours of the peaks. For centuries, Pahari reigned as the lingua franca of mystics as well as monarchs, a language of both courtly decrees and shepherd songs. Like the Himalayas themselves, Pahari is restless - shifting, borrowing, shedding. Linguists trace its veins to Prakrit, the “natural” ancestor of Indo-Aryan languages like Punjabi and Dogri. Yet, it defies simplicity. Every 20 kilometers, dialects morph - Hazarvi melts into Poochvi, Rajouri dances with Karnahí. In the west, it dons the cloak of Hindko (“mountain speech”), while in Jammu’s hills; it flirts with Dogri’s cadence. Even Punjabi absorbed its words woven into Pahari’s linguistic fabric, as seen in Mian Mohammad Bakhsh’s Sufi masterpiece Saif-ul-Mulook.

The term *Pahari* springs from Sanskrit’s *parvata* (mountain), birthing a lexicon as layered as the terrain:

- *Pára* (heavy), evoking the weight of glacial boulders.
- *Pár* (load), a metaphor for life’s burdens in steep valleys.
- *Párna* (to tear), echoing landslides that reshape the land.
- *Párvatí* (mountain stream), a nod to Shiva’s consort, daughter of the Himalayas.

These words, alive in Dogri and Punjabi, bind the Paharis to a pan-Indo-Aryan legacy. The Pahari linguistic tradition is diverse and ancient dialects spoken across the Himalayan region, including Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu & Kashmir and parts of Nepal and Pakistan.

The Pahari people speak Pahari, a language widely spoken across the Pir Panjal Range. Historian C.E.W. Beames identified the inhabitants of the southern slopes of the Pir Panjal, extending from Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand to Nepal, as Paharis, highlighting their minimal differences in physical appearance while noting strong similarities in culture, daily life, social structure and economy. According to the 2011 Census, the Pahari population of Jammu and Kashmir was 10,22,982 constituting 8.16% of the total population of the region. Due to shared settlements with Gujjars and Bakarwals, 71% of Paharis reside in Poonch and Rajouri districts, 19% live in Uri, Boniyar, Keran and Karnah tehsils, while the remaining 10% are dispersed in fragmented settlements without a defined territorial unit. Many such manuscripts were present in Archive of Jammu Kashmir State popularly Known as “Gilgit Manuscript” which were shifted to India in 1947. Information available was that its written in a Prakritised Sanskrit or Sanskritised Prakrit, The language is similar to Pali and shed light on the earliest Buddhist History and cultural, and recognizing its linguistic effects on Chinese, Korean and Japanese Languages.

ANCIENT LINGUISTIC COMPOSITION OF PAHARI LANGUAGES

<u>Influence</u>	<u>Key Features</u>
Indo-Aryan Roots (Vedic and Prakrit Influence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The Pahari languages belong to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European family and share commonalities with Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramsha traditions.➤ Many archaic words in Pahari dialects trace back to Vedic Sanskrit.➤ The evolution of Middle Indo-Aryan (Prakrit) languages, such as Shauraseni and Ardhamagadhi Prakrit, influenced Pahari speech forms.
Dardic and Kashmiri Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Northern Pahari dialects, especially in Jammu & Kashmir, exhibit Dardic influences from languages like Khowar and Shina.➤ The presence of retroflex sounds, distinct phonetics and shared vocabulary with Kashmiri reflects this impact.
Tibeto-Burman Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ In some high-altitude regions of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, interaction with Tibeto-Burman languages (such as those spoken by Bhotiya and other Himalayan groups) has contributed loanwords and phonetic variations.
Persian and Arabic Borrowings (Medieval Period)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Due to historical Persianate influences, Persian and Arabic words entered the Pahari lexicon, particularly in areas like Kashmir and Jammu.➤ This influence is seen in administrative, cultural and religious vocabulary.

KEY PAHARI LANGUAGE GROUPS IN INDIA

One famous Pahari proverb from the Western Pahari dialects
(such as those spoken in Himachal Pradesh) is:

"Pahar na susseda, par pahar di chhaya sussedi hai."

Translation: "The Mountain doesn't rest, but the shadow of the mountain does."

The Pahari language groups in India are a fascinating subject, deeply rooted in the cultural and historical fabric of the Himalayan region. These languages, primarily spoken in the mountainous areas of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, belong to the Indo-Aryan language family. They include dialects like Dogri, Garhwali, Kumaoni and others. The evolution of Pahari languages is closely tied to the migration and settlement patterns of Indo-Aryan-speaking communities in the Himalayan region. Over centuries, these languages developed unique phonetic, grammatical and lexical features influenced by the geography, isolation and interactions with neighbouring linguistic groups. Historical inscriptions and epigraphical studies suggest that the Pahari languages began to take shape as distinct entities around the 11th to 13th centuries.

Pahari languages serve as a marker of cultural identity for the communities that speak them. They are deeply intertwined with local traditions, folklore and rituals. These languages contribute to India's rich linguistic diversity, showcasing the adaptability and evolution of human communication in varied terrains. Pahari languages are a repository of oral traditions, including songs, stories and proverbs, which are crucial for preserving the intangible cultural heritage of the region. They play a role in fostering a sense of belonging and unity among the Pahari-speaking communities. The Pahari linguistic tradition represents a fascinating blend of ancient Indo-Aryan heritage, Dardic connections and Himalayan cultural exchanges, making it a vital part of India's linguistic diversity

<u>Linguistic Category</u>	<u>Specifications</u>
Western Pahari	Dogri, Kangri and Chambeali
Central Pahari	Garhwali and Kumaoni
Eastern Pahari	Nepali also known as Khas Kura

EVOLUTION OF THE PAHARI LANGUAGE IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

The evolution of the Pahari language in Jammu and Kashmir is intertwined with the region's socio-historicity, geography and cultural interactions. Pahari refers to a group of Indo-Aryan languages and dialects spoken primarily in the Himalayan foothills, including parts of Jammu and Kashmir. In this context, Pahari is often associated with the Pahari-Pothwari dialects spoken in some regions of Pakistan occupied Kashmir and the Western Pahari languages like Bhadarwahi, Sheerazi and others spoken in the Jammu region. Its development and historical significance reflect centuries of linguistic diversity, cultural exchange and socio-political dynamics.

The origins of Pahari in Jammu and Kashmir can be traced back to the broader Indo-Aryan linguistic family, which evolved from Sanskrit and Prakrit languages around the early centuries CE. The rugged terrain of the Himalayas fostered the development of distinct dialects as communities remained relatively isolated. In Jammu and Kashmir, Pahari dialects emerged as a continuum, influenced by neighbouring languages such as Kashmiri, Punjabi, Dogri and Persian.

The roots of Pahari likely lie in the Old Indo-Aryan languages spoken in the Gandhara and Kambojah regions (part of the ancient Aryavarta tribal republics), areas contiguous with the modern Pahari-speaking zones. These early forms, sometimes referred to as "Old Pahari," were used in oral traditions and possibly early written records, though evidence of the latter is scarce due to the lack of a standardized script. The influence of Sanskrit and Prakrit is evident in the vocabulary and grammatical structure of Pahari dialects, suggesting a gradual divergence as these languages adapted to local needs and environments.

From around the 11th century onward, with the advent of Muslim rule in the region, Persian became the lingua franca of administration and culture in Kashmir and parts of Jammu. This period marked a significant evolution in Pahari, as it absorbed a wealth of Persian vocabulary, syntax, and expressions, especially in POK. For instance, Persian enriched everyday Pahari speech with terms related to governance, poetry and religion. Pahari remained the spoken language of the masses while Persian dominated official and literary spheres - prevented Pahari from developing a robust written tradition during this time. However, oral folklore, songs and narratives thrived, preserving the language's vitality.

Under Mughal rule, Pahari continued to evolve through contact with other Indo-Aryan languages like Punjabi and Sindhi, which were also influenced by Persian. The Khasha dialect, a Western Pahari variant, briefly gained prominence as a court language in parts of the region during the 16th century, reflecting its growing status. The 19th century saw the composition of significant oral and semi-literary works in Pahari dialects. For example, the Sufi poet Mian Muhammad Baksh's Sayf-ul-Mulūk (completed in 1863) blended Mirpuri Pahari with Punjabi, Persian and Arabic, showcasing the language's adaptability and cultural depth.

British colonial administration in the 19th century introduced Urdu as the official language of Jammu and Kashmir, sidelining Persian and further marginalizing Pahari. Pahari speakers, especially in J&K, became multilingual, using Urdu for education and administration while retaining Pahari as their mother tongue. Despite this, Pahari dialects persisted in rural areas and among diaspora communities, particularly in regions like Mirpur, where they adapted to local influences without losing their core identity.

The partition of India in 1947 divided the Pahari-speaking regions, influencing their linguistic trajectories. In POK, Pahari-Pothwari dialects thrived orally, while in Indian Jammu, Western Pahari dialects like Bhadarwahi and Sarazi faced endangerment due to the dominance of Hindi, Dogri and Kashmiri. Efforts to standardize and preserve Pahari have emerged in recent decades. In Jammu and Kashmir, the recognition of Pahari as part of the Scheduled Tribes (via the 2024 amendment) reflects its cultural and linguistic importance.

The Pahari language holds profound historical significance in Jammu and Kashmir, serving as a marker of identity, resilience and cultural heritage amidst political upheaval and external influences. Pahari encapsulates the traditions, folklore and lived experiences of the hill communities in Jammu and Kashmir. Its oral traditions - songs, proverbs and stories - have preserved a distinct cultural identity that differentiates Pahari speakers from neighbouring Kashmiri, Dogri, or Punjabi communities. Works like Sayf-ul-Mulūk highlight Pahari's role in blending spiritual and literary traditions, connecting the region's people to their historical roots. The multiplicity of Pahari dialects (e.g., Mirpuri, Pothwari, Bhadarwahi, Sarazi) reflects the region's linguistic diversity, shaped by its geography and history of migration and trade. Despite lacking official status or a standardized script, Pahari has endured centuries of domination by Persian, Urdu, and Hindi. Its survival underscores the resilience of its speakers, who maintained their mother tongue even as they adopted other languages for practical purposes. Pahari's evolution through contact with Persian, Punjabi and Kashmiri positions it as a linguistic bridge, facilitating cultural exchange across the region. Its adaptability has allowed it to absorb and integrate diverse influences, enriching its vocabulary and expressive capacity.

Below are some insights and representative quotes or sayings, drawn from the ethos of Pahari-speaking communities that highlight their linguistic heritage. These Pahari proverbs are not necessarily verbatim from historical figures but are crafted based on the documented cultural and linguistic pride of Pahari tribes, as seen in their folk literature, songs, and modern advocacy.

<u>Pahari Proverbs</u>	<u>Translation</u>
On Language as Identity: "Meri boli, meri pehchaan."	("My language, my identity.") This is a common sentiment among Pahari speakers, such as those in Himachal Pradesh or Jammu and Kashmir, where dialects like Kangri, Mandeali, or Pahari-Pothwari are seen as markers of their unique hill culture, distinct from the plains.
From Oral Tradition: Jithe boli badaldi, othe sanskaar vakhre."	("Where the language changes, there the traditions differ.") This saying, reflective of Western Pahari communities, underscores how their linguistic diversity-spanning dialects like Chambeali, Kumauni, or Garhwali-shapes their cultural heritage.
On Preservation: "Boli nu sambhaal, nahi taan virsa kho javega."	("Preserve the language, or the heritage will be lost.") This reflects efforts by Pahari communities, to maintain their linguistic roots amidst pressures from dominant languages.
Cultural Wisdom: "Pahar di boli vich pahar di rooh vasdi hai."	("The soul of the mountains lives in the language of the mountains.") This poetic expression, inspired by the folklore of tribes like the Gaddis or Kinnauris, ties their linguistic heritage to their rugged, mountainous environment.
Community Reflection: "Asi apni zabaan naal judde haan, te zabaan assi naal."	("We are connected to our tongue and our tongue to us.") This mirrors the sentiments of Pahari-speaking tribes in Jammu and Kashmir, where language reinforces kinship and tribal unity, even as they've fought for recognition, like the Scheduled Tribe status granted in 2024.

The evolution of the Pahari language in Jammu and Kashmir is a testament to the region's dynamic history, marked by isolation, interaction and adaptation. From its roots in ancient Indo-Aryan languages to its modern-day struggles for recognition, Pahari has played a vital role in shaping the cultural and social fabric of the region. Its historical significance lies not only in its linguistic richness but also in its embodiment of the resilience and identity of the Pahari-speaking people, making it a crucial thread in the tapestry of Jammu and Kashmir's heritage. Today, as efforts to preserve and promote it grow, Pahari stands as both a relic of the past and a living link to the future.

JAMMU & KASHMIR DIALECTS

<u>S No</u>	<u>Dialect</u>	<u>Regional Presences</u>
01	Kaghani	Spoken mainly in Karnah, Kupwara, Bandipora, Uri and Baramulla
02	Chibali	Spoken in Rajouri and in surrounding areas
03	Parmi	Spoken in hamlets of area like Qazigund, Tangmarg and Shopian.
04	Pothwari	Spoken in Mendhar, Poonch and in certain areas of Rajouri.
05	Hindko	Spoken in Kokernaag, Bandipora and its adjoining areas and even in Lolab.

The Above table depicts the Pahari Dialects and accents of Jammu & Kashmir.

THE RENAISSANCE OF PAHARI LANGUAGE

The 20th century saw Pahari script ascend from oral tradition to literary canon. In 1978, the **Pahari Cultural and Linguistic Academy** became its torchbearer, nurturing poets like *Syed Tariq Pardesi* and storytellers like *Sideeq Ikhtishampuri*. Folk singers-*Syed Iqbal Malangami* with his soul-stirring ragas, *Abdul Rashid Qureshi* with ballads of lost kings-transformed village squares into concert halls. Even the Gujars, nomadic brethren of the Paharis, etched their sagas into prose, proving that a language born in isolation could conquer pages and hearts alike.

Pahari cultural centers and lok adab (folk literature) play a significant role in promoting the Pahari language, a group of Indo-Aryan languages spoken across the Himalayan regions of northern India, including Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir. Their efforts are rooted in preserving linguistic diversity, fostering cultural identity and countering the pressures of dominant languages.

Pahari cultural centers act as hubs for community engagement and language revitalization. They organize events such as literary festivals, poetry recitals and storytelling sessions that showcase Pahari dialects like Kangri, Kumauni, Garhwali and Pahari-Pothwari. These gatherings provide a platform for native speakers to use and celebrate their language, encouraging younger generations to connect with their linguistic heritage. For example, initiatives like the Regional Pahari Literary in Jammu and Kashmir have aimed to promote Pahari alongside other regional languages, strengthening cultural ties through shared expression. Centers often collaborate with local artists, musicians and writers to produce content - songs, plays, or books in Pahari, making the language relevant in contemporary contexts.

Lok adab, encompassing oral traditions like folk tales, songs and proverbs, is a vital tool for promotion. Since many Pahari dialects historically lacked a standardized script (often using Devanagari or Takri informally), oral literature has been the backbone of their transmission. By preserving and performing these works, lok adab keeps the language alive in its most authentic form, reflecting the lived experiences, values and humor of Pahari-speaking communities. Cultural centers amplify this by documenting oral traditions - sometimes transcribing them into written form - or broadcasting them via local radio and TV, as seen with Radio Kashmir and Doordarshan in Srinagar airing Pahari programs. This not only sustains linguistic vitality but also bridges generational gaps, as elders pass down stories and songs to youth who might otherwise shift to dominant languages.

Together, these efforts counter the endangerment flagged by UNESCO, which labels many Western Pahari languages as "definitely" or "critically" endangered due to declining intergenerational transmission. Cultural centers and lok adab resist this by fostering pride and utility in Pahari, where Pahari speakers push for recognition in national censuses, a model that could inform similar advocacy in India.

Today, Pahari stands at a crossroads - caught between the homogenizing roar of globalization and the whispers of its ancestors. Yet, like the cedar roots that split rock, it persists. Enshrined in Jammu and Kashmir's Sixth Schedule, taught in schools and sung at weddings, it remains a testament to a truth as old as the peaks.