



Synopsis of Enduring Voices trip to Arunachal Pradesh March 2008

The Enduring Voices team visited Arunachal Pradesh, the northeasternmost state in India in March 2008. We prioritized this region because it is a part of the Greater South Asia Language Hotspot, and we visited two separate regions within it. We recorded half a dozen languages, most of which lacked any available recordings and are extremely poorly known to science. We were the first group of trained linguists that have ever visited the first area. In the second, an Indian linguist had worked there in the 1980s, but no recordings of his work are available. We made unique and in some cases the first ever known recordings of several languages.

The Enduring Voices team consisted of Chris Rainier, Dr. Greg Anderson, Dr. David Harrison, and Dr. Ganesh Murmu, a linguist and member of an Indian indigenous tribal ethnic minority group, the Santals. Dr. Murmu is one of the few tribal scholars who has achieved such a high level of respect and expertise in the whole of India. He is the director of the Department of Tribal and Regional Languages, Ranchi University, which is a unique institution training a new generation of tribal scholars working on their own languages. Dr. Murmu's team received the first of a series of "language technology kits" we are distributing, and Ranchi University will continue to serve as our host institution in India for future expeditions.

In the first region, we concentrated on the Aka people. Aka is a culture undergoing rapid change, facing strong pressures to assimilate to majority (Hindi) culture. Most people still live from domesticated animals, for example raising cattle and pigs and trading these for rice and other goods, and many still practice traditional (animist) religion. But a significant portion of the population now spends time in the lowlands working or participating in formal schooling, and they have brought many new cultural habits back up to Aka country. The pressures on Aka culture are evident in rapid inter-generational shifts in language use, education, traditional architecture, clothing, and religious beliefs.

The second part of the trip focused on the Apatani. The Apatani live in compact bamboo villages, practice rice and fish cultivation, and still have many traits of traditional life. One cultural practice that is being lost however is the elaborate system facial tattooing and ornamental nose plugs worn by women. We were able to witness a Donyi-Polo (sun and moon worship) religious ceremony, the traditional religion of the Tani peoples.

The Enduring Voices linguistics team will spend the next few months processing this data. We are planning a follow-up expedition towards the end of 2008, and expect to have significant scientific findings to announce after that is completed.

www.nationalgeographic.com/mission/enduringvoices/



The Enduring Voices team in Hong Village, Arunachal Pradesh, India, March 2008.
Left to right: David Harrison, Talo Rija (Apatani language consultant), Gregory Anderson,
Ganesh Murmu, Chris Rainier.
Photo ©2008 by Chris Rainier, assisted by Boa Yamik