

## Speak to awaken: Revitalising Kusunda

**Uday Raj AALEY**

Independent Researcher

**Timotheus A. BODT**

SOAS University of London

**EDITORS:**

Gabriela PÉREZ BÁEZ (University of Oregon)

Justin SPENCE (University of California, Davis)

### **ABSTRACT**

In the mid-19th century, when first described to western science, the Kusunda people and their language were already in a precarious position. Since then, the language has been described as ‘dying’, ‘moribund’, ‘dead’ and ‘extinct’ on several occasions. Remarkably, though, Kusunda speakers survived right into the 21st century when changes to the political and social situation in Nepal inspired renewed ethnic and cultural consciousness among minority groups. In this context, the small remaining Kusunda community expressed their wish to document and describe whatever was still known about their language and culture and create a vibrant speech community once again.

In this chapter, we describe and critically examine the ongoing efforts to teach the Kusunda language to community members again. While it is still too early to judge the success of the efforts to awaken the Kusunda language, we will show that its initialisation and continued progress depend on the interest of the community, the support of the government, and the efforts of a dedicated community linguist. We also briefly discuss the main limitations to the awakening efforts, including factors affecting attendance in and operation of language classes; we also present how traditional gender roles, marriage patterns, seniority relations, socioeconomic conditions, and scattered residence of the Kusunda community affect awakening efforts.

### **RESUMEN**

Quando el pueblo Kusunda y su lengua fueron descritos por primera vez para la ciencia a mediados del siglo XIX, estos se encontraban ya en una situación precaria. Desde entonces y en varias ocasiones, a la lengua se le ha calificado de ‘moribunda’, ‘muerta’ o ‘extincta’. Sin embargo, los hablantes de Kusunda siguen presentes en el siglo XXI en

un momento en el que los cambios políticos y la situación social en Nepal ha inspirado una nueva conciencia étnica y cultural entre grupos minorizados. En este contexto, la comunidad Kusunda que se conserva ha expresado su deseo por documentar y describir todo aquello que aún se conoce sobre su lengua y cultura, y por crear una nueva y dinámica comunidad de habla.

En este capítulo se describe y se examina de manera crítica los esfuerzos actuales por volver a enseñar la lengua Kusunda a los miembros de la comunidad de herencia. A pesar de que cualquier evaluación de los logros de estos esfuerzos sería prematura, se muestra que el que hayan surgido estos esfuerzos y que se hayan mantenido depende del interés de la comunidad, del apoyo del gobierno, y del compromiso de un lingüista comunitario. También abordamos las limitantes principales de los esfuerzos por despertar una lengua incluyendo los factores que afectan la asistencia a las clases y la organización de estas; también explicamos cómo los roles de género, las prácticas culturales en torno al matrimonio, las relaciones en base a edad y estatus socioeconómico, y lo dispersa que está la comunidad Kusunda afectan a la evolución de los esfuerzos por despertar la lengua.

## 1. THE KUSUNDA AND THEIR LANGUAGE

Kusunda (ISO 639-3: kgg; Glottolog code: kusu1250) was once spoken across the Middle Hills, the Lower (also: Inner, Lesser) Himalayan Range, the Inner Tarai Valleys, and the Sivalik (Chure) Hills of mid-western and central Nepal and may once have been even more widespread. At present, the Kusunda population is concentrated in the Inner Tarai Valleys of Surkhēt and Dān Dēukhurī districts and the Middle Hills of Pyuṭhān district.<sup>1</sup> The earliest available written records indicate that the Kusunda were nomadic hunter-gatherers, a lifestyle that some maintained until the mid-20th century. The Kusunda constructed temporary shelters or ‘lean-tos’ from branches and leaves and obtained everything they required from the forest. The men were expert hunters, using a bow with long arrows to shoot roosting birds such as pheasants, jungle fowl, and hill partridges as well as tree-climbing animals like squirrels, monitor lizards, and civet cats. The Kusunda did not practice sedentary agriculture, nor did they rear any domestic animals. Instead, the Kusunda women developed a custom

---

<sup>1</sup> Transcriptions of toponyms and names of Nepalese authors and their works when written in Nepali follow standard Indological transcription unless the Nepalese author has published in English, in which case we use the published (Romanised) name. The only major exception is the name Kusunda itself, which we use rather than its transcription Kusundā.

of visiting villages and trading forest produce or, in the absence of products to trade, begging for food grains and other necessities.

The Kusunda call themselves either *gilaṅdei m'ahəq* 'king of the forest', often shortened to *gim'əq*, or *begəi*, the name the Kusunda also use for people of the Ṭhakuṛī caste. The Nepali name Kusunda (Nepali: कुसुन्डा Kusunḍā) used to carry a strong derogatory and pejorative undertone across much of central and western Nepal. Hence, many Kusunda people in rural areas officially adopted the surname वन राजा *Van rājā* 'forest king', while others adopted the caste name Ṭhakuṛī or the surname Kusunḍā. Because only people with the official surname Kusunḍā are eligible for government support for people from a disadvantaged group, families with the surnames Van Rājā and Ṭhakuṛī are now either changing back to Kusunḍā or adding Kusunḍā to their surname. As a group, they now accept the official name Kusunda and no longer consider its use offensive. The Kusunda are referred to in present-day Nepal as one of the आदिवासी जनजाति *ādivāsī janajāti* 'indigenous ethnic groups', literally 'aboriginal tribes', a designation similarly not considered offensive and in line with the national terminology applied to indigenous groups in Nepal.<sup>2</sup> We will, therefore, apply this term to refer to the Kusunda in this chapter.

Our research is mainly based on our personal observations of the history, the present situation, and the awakening efforts of the Kusunda language. Uday Raj Aaley has been involved in these efforts since 2008 and Tim Bodt joined the efforts in 2018.<sup>3</sup> We also conducted semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with the Kusunda people involved in these efforts. These interviews<sup>4</sup> were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English and a selection of statements made during these interviews have been quoted in this chapter. Though these quotes reflect the personal point of view of the people who made them, they were commonly seconded by other people present. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the interviews by informing them what we are working on, and what their contributions would be used for. They were all aware of our purposes and stated that whatever they said could be used for writing articles and chapters regarding the Kusunda revitalisation process.

---

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed overview of the designations, 'caste', 'tribe', 'ethnic group' and 'indigenous ethnic group' in the context of Nepal and their development over time, we refer to our forthcoming article (Bodt and Aaley in preparation).

<sup>3</sup> In the remainder of this chapter, we will refer to ourselves and other participants in the Kusunda awakening efforts beyond the first mention, by given names.

<sup>4</sup> With Kamala Khatri on 22-03-2022 in Ghōrāhī, Dāng; with 11 student learners and Kamala Khatri on 23-03-2023 in Dharnā, Dāng; with Dhan Bahadur Kusunda on 24-03-2022 in Ghōrāhī, Dāng; with adult learners on 25-03-2022 in Supailākhufī, Dāng; and subsequently for clarification through phone and app contact.

In this chapter, we start with outlining the present situation of Kusunda, which by the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had nearly become extinct (section 2), but then became the subject of several efforts to awaken it and thus strengthen the identity of the Kusunda people (section 3). We think that it is apt to call the modest initial efforts to recreate a vibrant Kusunda speech community a process of ‘awakening’, given that, besides one exception, Kusunda was basically no longer spoken on a daily basis for five or six decades. In section 3, we describe three of the four current efforts to awaken Kusunda: the continued description of the language, the language classes, and ways to encourage language use beyond these classes. We then present our preliminary observations regarding the success of the awakening efforts to date and describe the three main factors that seem to influence this success: the support of the community, of the government, and of a dedicated individual (section 4). In section 5, we describe six factors that presently limit the success of the Kusunda awakening efforts: the limited duration and teaching staff for classes and varying levels of the participating learners; the scattered residence of Kusunda people; the traditional seniority relations limiting transmission of the language to the older generation; the expense and time it takes for people to attend the classes; the marginalised socio-economic conditions of the Kusunda people and the traditional division of gender roles; and the prevailing marriage patterns and their impact on language transmission to the next generation. In section 6, we provide some short-term and long-term suggestions to overcome some of the limitations discussed in section 5. We then end with a conclusion.

## 2. DEMISE AND REVIVAL OF THE KUSUNDA LANGUAGE

As a nomadic hunter-gatherer community that depended on the forest to sustain themselves, the Kusunda were probably never numerous. Their social structure was characterized by small bands consisting of a few families belonging to one or two of the Kusunda clans periodically traveling across wide geographical distances within their home range. We don’t have any information regarding the number of Kusunda people, the number of clans, or their original home range and migratory path prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. That said, the first report on the Kusunda dating from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century indicates the population was already in decline (Hogdson 1874: 48). In Bodt and Aaley (under review - b), we offer our insights into the possible reasons for the decline of the Kusunda: internal factors, such as their social organisation and marriage practices, but also external pressures, such as the growing sedentary population and increased pressure on the forest resources and government policies aimed at stemming deforestation and creating national unity.<sup>5</sup> By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kusunda people had become scattered across a dozen districts of mid-western Nepal, with little or no

---

<sup>5</sup> In the same article, we also reconstruct the most likely Kusunda home range, the migratory route of the two last remaining Kusunda bands, and their clan system, all based on reports from the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Reinhard 1976) and anecdotal evidence collected from the remaining Kusunda elders.

contact between individual Kusunda families and no unrelated Kusunda partners to marry.<sup>6</sup> As the Kusunda people married outside their own community into more numerous ethnolinguistic groups, with the national language Nepali often the medium of communication, the Kusunda language ceased to be passed on to the next generation.

In the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were several attempts to locate the “last” speakers of Kusunda. While a little over 150 people ethnically identifying as Kusunda could eventually be identified, only a few of them remembered their language and most of them were in advanced age. Some research (e.g., Watters, 2005; Watters et al., 2006; Donohue & Gautam 2013 & 2017) was conducted with the two remaining speakers individually, and then in 2019, we recorded the speakers, Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda and Kamala Khatri, together (Aaley and Bodt 2019 & 2020a).<sup>7</sup>

The efforts to awaken the language came into full swing in the 2010s. Between Kamala Khatri’s 2017 return from India, where she had lived and worked for 10 years, and Gyani Maiya’s demise in 2020, the two of them had several encounters where they spoke Kusunda again, heralding a short period of limited language revival, albeit involving only two speakers. In early 2020, Kusunda ceased being spoken in a natural language environment.<sup>8</sup> As one speaker still lives (Kamala), Kusunda does not yet fulfil Leonard’s definition of a ‘sleeping’ (or ‘dormant’) language in the strictest sense, as Leonard states that the key criterion includes “the existence of documentation and of people with heritage to the language *but no individuals with substantial knowledge of the language*” (Leonard 2008: 23, emphasis added). Nonetheless, describing the present efforts to recreate a vibrant speech community as ‘awakening’ Kusunda is apt. because Kusunda was basically dormant for the last 50 to 60 years. There is no active speech community, all new learners have no extant knowledge of the language, and the process of revitalisation is similar in many respects to starting with no speakers at all. By using the available materials – mainly the vocabulary and grammatical descriptions by Watters et al. (2005, 2006), Aaley (2017), and new materials and insights we collected – attempts are now ongoing to awaken the Kusunda language. The efforts to awaken Kusunda are fortunate to be able to rely on the insights and expertise of Kamala, the last speaker of the language, for example, by improving the pronunciation of the learners and practicing conversation with them.

---

6 The Kusunda practiced tribe endogamy but clan exogamy. Due to several reasons, such as fragmentation of the remaining bands, too intermittent occasions of these bands meeting, and a generational gap, there was a lack of partners of a suitable age and clan.

7 In Bodt and Aaley (under review - c) we describe the backgrounds of the last Kusunda speakers and semi-speakers. In the same article, we also contend that it was largely through the wider societal and political changes that have enveloped Nepal since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the Kusunda awakening was initiated.

8 At the end of the most recent session of the Kusunda class (section 3.2), Kamala interacted in a natural way with several of the student learners in what could herald the awakening of Kusunda as a spoken language.

### 3. ONGOING AWAKENING EFFORTS

Currently, the awakening efforts for Kusunda take a four-pronged approach. First is the continued description of the language. The second is the teaching of the language in a formal classroom setting. The third is the development of written materials and other media as well as apps to encourage the use of the language outside the classroom.<sup>9</sup> And finally, though beyond the scope of this chapter, is the creation of awareness about the Kusunda and their language among the general public within and outside Nepal, for which we similarly refer to Bodt and Aaley (year1). We have summarised these activities in Table 1.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Actors</i>
<b>Description of Kusunda</b>		
Transcription and translation of recordings	Ongoing	Kamala, Uday and Tim
Description of lexicon, grammar etc.	Ongoing	Kamala, Uday and Tim
Development of Dēvanāgarī orthography	2017	Uday
<b>Kusunda classes</b>		
Pilot class	2016	Uday, Gyani Maiya, Kamala, learners, Nepal Kusunda Development Society
First session	2019	Uday, Gyani Maiya, Kamala, learners, Nepal Language Commission <sup>10</sup>
Second session	2021	Uday, Urmila, Kamala, learners, NLC
Third session	2022	Uday, Urmila, Kamala, learners, NLC
Fourth session	2023	Uday, Kamala, learners, NLC
<b>Use beyond the class</b>		
Social media	Ongoing	Uday, learners, community
At the hostel	Ongoing	Uday, learners, community
At home	Ongoing	Uday, learners, community

<sup>9</sup> We only discuss this approach insofar as it is directly related to the Kusunda classes, with further ways in which use beyond the classroom is promoted discussed in more detail in Bodt and Aaley (year1).

<sup>10</sup> Henceforth abbreviated to NLC.

'Kusunda Picture Book'	2022	Uday and Tim, learners, community
Mobile app and audio book	2021	Nia Tero, Uday, learners, community
<b>Promotion of Kusunda</b>		
Documentary 'The endangered Kusunda language'	2020	NLC, Gyani Maiya, Uday
Jingle	2021	Uday, Kamala, Urmila
Virtual reality documentary	2021	Gayatri Parameswaran and Felix Gaedtke, Kusunda community, Uday
Book 'Sojāk'	2021	Uday
Book 'Gemyehaq - King of the forest'	2022	Uday
Documentary 'The untold tale of Kusunda'	2023	Uday

Table 1. Activities Undertaken for the Awakening of Kusunda

### 3.1 CONTINUED DESCRIPTION

There are only two historical sources on Kusunda, namely the materials collected by Hodgson in the 1850s (Hodgson 1848, 1857, 1874) and those by Reinhard (Reinhard 1968, 1969, 1976; Reinhard & Toba 1970) a century later. Both these sources consist almost exclusively of basic vocabulary. They do not contain substantial information on verbal paradigms, they do not include elicited sentences, and there are no recordings or transcriptions of natural speech. The majority of basic vocabulary contained in the sources was elicited again from Gyani Maiya and Kamala, the last remaining speakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by Watters et al. (2005, 2006) and Aaley (2017). Comparison of the historical materials and the more recent data can provide insight on the phonological and lexical development of Kusunda in the past one and a half centuries; however, the historical data cannot be a source of linguistic forms for the revitalisation of the language, even in the few cases that contain lexemes for which later speakers could not provide forms or provided different forms. One reason for this is that those data all rely on single respondents; another is that we have insufficient information on the background of the respondents, including the variety of Kusunda that they may have spoken. Possible elicitation and transcription errors, in both Hodgson and Reinhard's data, further complicate their usefulness for our revitalisation purposes. Relying on historically documented data is a good option for some languages that awaken after a long period of dormancy, and in some cases even the only

option. In the case of Kusunda, the availability of more recently collected data and the presence of a speaker of the language, even if she is the last, make reliance on the historical data less preferred.

At present, the main description of Kusunda is the grammatical sketch by Watters et al. (2005, 2006). This description also forms the basis of the first Kusunda dictionary (Aaley 2017), where the lexicon from Watters et al. (2005, 2006) was augmented and improved with new entries. Between December 2017 and June 2018, the NLC supported Uday to further describe Kusunda, develop an orthography in the Dēvanāgarī script, and prepare teaching materials. Uday also contributed to a 66-page book detailing the available knowledge about Kusunda history, culture, and language (Ācārya, Udāsī & Ālē 2018) and wrote four textbooks (a first unpublished version, followed by Ālē 2021a, 2021c and 2022a), an overview of the existing sources (Ālē 2021b), and a Nepali-language publication that highlights and promotes the Kusunda people, their language, and their culture to a Nepali audience (Ālē 2022b). Tim, who holds a PhD in linguistics and previously worked in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (India), became involved with Uday’s work in 2018. In July and August 2019, we made video and audio recordings of Gyani Maiya and Kamala (Aaley & Bodt 2019, 2020a & 2020b) and they are using these recordings as the basis for further analysis and description. We also published a Kusunda pictorial book to encourage its use and understanding among the Kusunda people and the wider Nepali public (Aaley & Bodt 2022).

### 3.2 THE CLASSES

At present, there has been one pilot class session (2016) and four official Kusunda class sessions (spring 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2023), details of which are summarised in Table 2. More information on the individual classes is provided below this table.

Year (CE/VS), session	Target group	Duration (days / hours)	Location	# Participants	Teacher	Resource person	Budget (NRS)
2016/2073, pilot	Mixed	10	Ghōrāhī <sup>11</sup>	25	Uday	Gyani Maiya, Kamala	n.a.
2019/2075, first	Mixed	45 / 90	Kulmōhar <sup>12</sup>	20	Uday	Gyani Maiya, Kamala	240,000 <sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In Dāñ.

<sup>12</sup> In Lamahī, Dāñ.

<sup>13</sup> At the time roughly equivalent to 2,100 USD.



<b>2021 / 2077, second</b>	Adults	30 / 60	Supailākhuṭī <sup>14</sup>	9	Urmila	Kamala	188,000 <sup>15</sup>
	Students		Dharnā <sup>16</sup>	12	Uday	-	
<b>2022 / 2078, third</b>	Adults	45 / 90	Supailākhuṭī	9	Urmila	Kamala	220,000 <sup>17</sup>
	Students		Dharnā	13	Uday	-	
<b>2023 / 2079, fourth</b>	Adults	20 / 40	Supailākhuṭī	9	Urmila	Kamala	50,200 <sup>18</sup>
	Students		Dharnā	12	Uday	-	50,200

Table 2. Summary of Kusunda Classes

In 2016, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society<sup>19</sup> organised a pilot Kusunda language class attended by 25 participants of different ages. During this pilot class, Uday taught the participants the basics of the language assisted by the two last remaining speakers. By the end of the class, learners had obtained a better understanding of their Kusunda heritage and mastered some basic vocabulary and phrases. Given the success of this class and the enthusiasm of the participants, it was then decided to expand the program.

The first official session took place in February and March 2019 (Khadkā 2019). Participants ranged in age from 9 to 65 years, twelve of whom were school students and eight were adults literate in Nepali. Seventeen of the participants belonged to the Kusunda indigenous ethnic group and came from the four districts with the highest number of Kusunda people: Rōlpā, Dāñ, Pyuṭhān and Surkhēt. There were also three non-Kusunda learners. The budget provided by the NLC was used to purchase teaching materials and pay the learners and the teachers. Every student received 100 Nepal rupees per class as encouragement for participation. Accommodation and food were separately funded. The teaching materials were written by Uday and based on the dictionary (Aaley 2017) and copies were distributed to the students, but this first textbook was not officially published. The setup for these

<sup>14</sup> In Ghōrāhī, Dāñ.

<sup>15</sup> At the time roughly equivalent to 1,600 USD.

<sup>16</sup> In Ghōrāhī, Dāñ.

<sup>17</sup> At the time roughly equivalent to 1,800 USD. The NLC provided a budget of 125,000 Nepal rupees as well as the textbooks, while the remaining 95,000 Nepal rupees was provided by the government of Ghōrāhī Sub-Metropolitan City.

<sup>18</sup> At the time roughly equivalent to 380 USD.

<sup>19</sup> The Nepal Kusunda Development Society (NKDS, Nepali: नेपाल कुसुन्डा विकास समाज Nēpāl Kusunḍā Vikās Samāj) was established in Ghōrāhī, Dāñ in 2010 with aims to represent the Kusunda people in Nepal and uplift their situation.

Kusunda classes was very simple. Classes were taught either outside or in a small hut where learners sat on the floor and teachers made use of whiteboards.

This first session can be seen as an introductory class. The learners were introduced to the Kusunda language written in the Dēvanāgarī script and some basic Kusunda words for the human body, kinship terms, crops, flora, and fauna, and how to introduce oneself to others. The Dēvanāgarī script was used because it is also used to write Nepali, the national language, and is the script that most Nepalese, including most Kusunda, are familiar with. Because the phonology of Kusunda is substantially different from the phonology of Nepali, several adaptations had to be made to the Dēvanāgarī script, for example, to represent the uvular stops (see Bodt and Aaley year1).

The second session was supposed to be taught in early 2020, but as the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading, the session was postponed to March 2021. There were two separate groups this session, an adult group, and a group of students in grades 4 to 10. Uday taught the student class with twelve children (one attending irregularly), nine females and three males, aged 11 to 17, and their 29-year-old warden. The adult group was taught by Kamala and Urmila Kusunda (Nepali: उर्मिला कुसुण्डा Urmilā Kusunḍā), the daughter of the chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society, who is a bachelor-level student. In this group, there were nine literate adults aged 15 to 55, six females and three males. It was not possible for all the learners from the first session to attend the second session: eleven of the learners were new, whereas nine had also attended the first session. For the second session, Uday and Urmila and Kamala used a textbook based on a format designed by the NLC to teach the endangered languages of Nepal (Ālē 2021a). According to Kamala, the availability of this Kusunda textbook greatly facilitated the classes. This time, the budget provided by the NLC was used to fund food but not accommodation, as the students stayed in a hostel and the adult participants came as day scholars. The budget was also used to provide the learners with the textbook, a pen, copy books, and 100 rupees per class for participation. The topics of this second session went a bit further than the first session and included verbs and verbal tenses, other parts of speech, different types of sentences, as well as an introduction to possibilities for creative writing, such as letter writing, short stories, essays, poems, and songs. When the Delta variant of COVID-19 arrived in Nepal, this session was cut short before completing the full 90 hours of teaching.

In the adult education classes, Kamala was assisted by Urmila. Because Kamala is illiterate, she depended on Urmila to read the Dēvanāgarī script in the textbook that was used, even though Urmila does not know Kusunda and is learning the language herself. Urmila first read the Nepali words and sentences, and then the Kusunda translation, both of which the learners can also read as they are all literate in the Dēvanāgarī script. Kamala then provided the correct pronunciation, which learners repeated several times. The adult learners from Rōlpā and Surkhēt who had attended the first session

could not attend this second session because the new location did not have lodging. Instead, local adult Kusunda participants from Ghōrāhī attended this session as day scholars.

The third Kusunda class took place in March and April 2022. As in the second session, there were two separate groups. One new learner replaced a participant from the second class who left, but otherwise all participants were the same as in the second session. As before, only food was provided, as the students stayed in a hostel and the adult participants came as day scholars, but the participants were still provided with the second published textbook (Ālē 2022a), a pen, copy books, and 100 rupees per class for participation. The topics of this third session included word compounding, adverbs, complex sentences, prepositions, and advanced creative writing exercises. The students viewed the monologues and conversations of Kamala and Gyani Maiya recorded in 2019 and were also given suggestions on how to share what they had learnt, for example, with their relatives, neighbours, classmates, and friends.

The fourth session of Kusunda classes took place in February and March 2023. The NLC decided not to sponsor the adult classes after an evaluation in consultation with Uday, Kamala, and Urmila, citing a lack of tangible progress. However, the Ghōrāhī Sub-Metropolitan City decided to bridge the gap and fund the adult classes. Due to financial constraints caused by COVID-19, the budget provided by both agencies was less than in previous years. As a result, the classes lasted only 20 days, with 2 hours of class every day. The NLC funded the student classes in Dharnā by providing stationery and a reduced rate of 75 rupees per class for participation. Except for one new non-Kusunda student replacing a non-Kusunda student who could no longer participate, all learners were the same. The fourth session focused on speaking practice and creative writing. The students were also sent on a fieldtrip, during which they were asked to write down a description of what they saw, their surroundings, the crops, the plants, the animals, and the people and their daily activities. There was no additional textbook prepared for this session. The NLC agreed to publish a collection of the poems, essays, and stories written by students in Kusunda with Nepali translations and edited by Uday.

In Dharnā, the student classes in the second and third session lasted for 40 days. The students attended a total of 60 contact hours of Kusunda class, consisting of one and a half hours every morning before the start of their regular classes, with Saturday being a holiday. The Kusunda classes are not part of the regular curriculum but run in addition to their normal classes, which follow in the morning and afternoon. In addition, the students are expected to study Kusunda for another 45 minutes each day in the evening, making a total of 90 hours of study. Language classes take place in the common room of the hostel for students from disadvantaged castes and indigenous ethnic minority groups sponsored by the government of Lumbinī province, located at the Mahēndra Secondary School in Dharnā. Therefore, the class hosts students who originate from households in Pyuṭhān and Dān districts, but not from other districts where Kusunda people live. This we discuss in more detail in

section 5.2. The Secondary School hosts students up to grade 12, so when they graduate from the school, students can no longer learn Kusunda. In the hostel, the students eat, sleep, and study together. This way, they form a small language nest. The fact that their hostel warden, Khamba Rokaye (Nepali: खम्बा रोकाए Khambā Rōkāē, Chetri caste), is also participating in the classes encourages the use of Kusunda outside class hours and throughout the year.

The Kusunda classes are conducted in Nepali as the medium of instruction and communication. The textbooks also have Nepali as the intermediate language. This is the default approach necessitated by the fact that no actual Kusunda speech community exists. Because of that, Kusunda cannot be used as a language of instruction, nor can immersive learning be used as a learning strategy. On the other hand, all the Kusunda learners know Nepali and for most it is their primary, and often only, language. Indeed, earlier research has shown that in a process called ‘translanguaging’, speakers of more than a single language draw on multiple linguistic features from a multilingual repertoire, in which the dominant language acts as a resource for supporting the meaningful emergence of the target language (García and Li 2014). The dominant language can progressively be replaced within specific domains or contexts of use where the awakening language is favoured (Cenoz & Gorter 2017; Bommleyn & Tuttle 2018; Zahir 2018). A similar approach is being taken for Kusunda. Learners first build a foundation established through Nepali as their dominant language, then use of Kusunda can be extended into other domains and contexts. Because a significant part of the original Kusunda vocabulary, such as terms related to flora and fauna and the nomadic lifestyle, appears to have gone into disuse without ever having been recorded and because much vocabulary related to modern contexts (such as information technology, science, politics etc.) is non-existent, there will be continued reliance on Nepali and code-switching between Kusunda and Nepali may be inevitable, as observed in the conversations we recorded between Gyani Maiya and Kamala.

The students indicate that thus far, they feel more comfortable writing Kusunda than speaking it. Indeed, the classes have had a major focus on learning the basics of the language in writing. There has been relatively less attention to speaking. The fourth Kusunda class specifically focussed on creating fluency in speaking and encouraging the use of Kusunda outside of the class, for example, with family and friends.

### 3.3 ENCOURAGING USE BEYOND THE CLASS

The Kusunda classes last only around a month per year. To encourage learners to continue using what they learnt during the remaining eleven months of the year, several initiatives, some more traditional and some innovative, are being developed. Uday is encouraging the students to use Kusunda in social media, for example, in spoken or written text messages, and in creative writing, in poems, songs, and prose. Some of them are now using the language, for example, on Instagram, in

Facebook messenger, and in the TikTok app. Hima Kusunda also wrote song texts and a poem and will now proceed with more creative writing exercises. Other initiatives, such as an app that was developed in 2019, a picture book released in 2022 and others, are discussed in Bodt and Aaley (in preparation<sup>1</sup>). These means of promoting the language could encourage other Kusunda people and others to learn the language. As Hima explained:

*We should spread whatever we know through any means such as the internet, for example, through the video and audio of us learning words [with Gyani Maiya during the first class], through which the Kusunda language can be learnt. There is no compulsion of having the book [textbook], you can even find our videos on YouTube.*  
(Hima Kusunda, 27-03-2022)

Because the 12 students stay together in the hostel in Dharnā, they have opportunities to meet and communicate in Kusunda. The hostel warden, 30-year-old Khamba Rokaye, is also attending the Kusunda classes. Thus, she communicates more and more in Kusunda with the 11 other students staying in the hostel. Her participation, and that of two other non-Kusunda girls Sunita Devkota and Asmita Nepali (सुनिता देवकोटा Sunitā Dēvkōṭā, of the highest Bāhun caste and अस्मिता नेपाली Asmitā Nēpālī, of the lowest ranking ‘untouchable’ बादी Bādī caste), is both surprising and encouraging. Despite not being Kusunda, they have voluntarily joined the second and third classes and have made equal progress to the Kusunda students. Sunita and Asmita joined the classes because their classmates and friends were participating; Asmita also stays in the same hostel as the Kusunda students. While Khamba had heard about the Kusunda from the Lōk Sēvā book that is used in preparation for the entrance exams for government jobs, it was not until she became the warden of the hostel that she first met Kusunda people. Khamba expects that the Kusunda awakening will continue in the foreseeable future and expects that, after learning the language herself, she can become a teacher to continue Uday’s work and teach Kusunda to others in the future:

*Even though I am not a Kusunda, I am happy to learn this language. (...) Not only the students [here] but all the Kusunda people should gather and learn the language, because that will help other [Kusunda] children to learn the language. (...) I also want to teach the [Kusunda] language to other kids. I am happy to learn about this part of the Kusunda history and think this may be a future job opportunity for me.* (Khamba Rokaye, 23-03-2022)

Similarly, Hima Kusunda expects that she will be able to teach Kusunda to others and will teach whoever wants to learn the language, whether Kusunda or non-Kusunda:

*I have learnt a lot from the classes, and I am working hard so this language [Kusunda] might bring me rewards. I have learnt the basics and can teach them to others. I am still learning, but once I learn all, then I can teach others, too. I think I am already qualified to teach my brothers and other non-Kusunda the basics [of the language].* (Hima Kusunda, 23-03-2022)

A similar objective is expressed by Nirmala Kusunda (Nepali: निर्मला कुसुण्डा Nirmalā Kusundā):

*If we [the students] all learn this language together and study hard, then it will be useful for us, and we hope for more progress in the future. We are the ones that should save this language. (...) Later, I want to teach the next generation [i.e., teach her own and other children the Kusunda language].* (Nirmala Kusunda, 23-03-2022)

Many language revitalisation efforts around the world tend to focus primarily on language teaching, with intergenerational transmission commonly a secondary objective or not the focus of the efforts at all (Pérez Báez, Vogel & Patolo, 2019). Similarly, the focus of the efforts to awaken Kusunda are mainly directed at the Kusunda classes (sponsored by the NLC). But both the teacher Uday, the resource person Kamala, and the students themselves are acutely aware that learning the language by itself will not be sufficient to preserve it for posterity. As section 5 will show, there are several factors that influence the success of this intergenerational transmission. Among these, the scattered Kusunda population, the prevailing gender roles, and the patrilocal marital customs and patronymic caste and tribe affiliations are all considered detrimental to transmission of Kusunda to the next generation of Kusunda children.

#### 4. SUCCESS OF THE AWAKENING EFFORTS

Awakening Kusunda is not something that will be achieved in five or even ten years. It will need the continued input and effort of all concerned individuals and agencies for many decades to come. Because the process of awakening the language is only in its initial stages, it is hard to measure its success at this moment. We can only share observations on the progress made by learners and the extent to which they bring what they have learnt into action.

After two structured Kusunda classes in Dāñ district, we observed significant differences in the level of proficiency in Kusunda between the adult learners in Supailākhūṭī and the student learners in Dharnā. The knowledge of the nine adult learners did not extend beyond limited knowledge of vocabulary and a few simple sentences that were taught. In fact, the resource person for these classes, Kamala, complained that the progress of the learners was too limited. She attributed this primarily to a lack of concentration, discipline, and effort. Sometimes learners did not turn up for class at all. During

the classes, most of them would read the textbook out loud and repeat Kamala's pronunciation. But they would also disturb the class by laughing about what was being taught and creating unnecessary noise, remarking repeatedly 'What kind of language is this?' In addition, the learners did not make serious attempts to memorise what was taught and practice it at home. To the learners' excuse that the Kusunda language was too difficult, Kamala responded:

*For those people who don't really want to know [the language], no matter how often and how much you tell them, in the end, they won't know. If they had a brain, then they would have listened to others [the teachers]. No matter which language it is [that they are being taught], if they learn it, they can speak it. (Kamala Khatri, 23-03-2022)<sup>20</sup>*

Kamala advised Urmila to teach the learners according to the book, instead of ad hoc, and since then the situation has improved and the learners are taking more interest, at least during the classes. But still, Kamala does not seem to have much trust that the group of adult learners will be able to preserve the Kusunda language. Despite Kamala's misgivings about the adult learners, the learners themselves indicate that they find Kamala and Urmila's teaching and handling of the class good. And Uday remarked that whereas for the student learners the third session that was being evaluated was the third Kusunda class, for most of the adult learners it was only the second class. In addition, learning at a younger age is usually easier than learning at a later age. In section 5 we will discuss some additional reasons that might explain the lack of progress among the adult learners.

The student learners in Dharnā, on the other hand, have made much more progress. They do not only know vocabulary, but they can also construct sentences, introduce themselves, and hold small conversations. They start using Kusunda more commonly outside the classes and are trying to use Kusunda in daily conversation instead of Nepali. Unlike the adult learners, who live scattered around Ghōrāhī municipality and only meet each other during class, the students have the advantage of staying together in the same hostel, spending much of the day between 4 p.m. and 9 a.m. together. They have also started using Kusunda in social media apps such as TikTok and Facebook. According to Hima Kusunda:

*We are learning more day by day and I hope this will continue. I hope we can speak more in the [Kusunda] language, and even though we don't yet understand much when*

---

<sup>20</sup> One of the anonymous reviewers of this chapter commented that Kamala's statement about the learners may be considered offensive. However, as the only remaining speaker of the Kusunda language and considering the time and effort Kamala puts into awakening the language, we think that she is in a unique position to judge the progress, as well as the motivations and intentions of the learners. While in English translation her comments may sound harsh, in the Nepali context they are acceptable, especially coming from someone in a clear seniority position like hers.



*others [Gyani Maiya and Kamala, from the 2019 recordings] talk, we can now understand a little. It is a big achievement for us to reach from zero to here in the Kusunda language. That is a good thing. (Hima Kusunda, 27-03-2022)*

However, she also indicates that simply learning the language is not sufficient, and that they should put their knowledge into practice and start using it daily:

*The more we actually use this language, the more it will survive. If we study it, we should also apply [the knowledge] and use the language [by speaking]. If we only study it, but do not apply it, there will be zero impact. (Hima Kusunda, 27-03-2022)*

Recently, Kamala visited Dharnā and interacted with the students. She was happily surprised with their progress and their ability to hold small conversation with her in Kusunda. According to Kamala, the students are doing well mainly thanks to the good teaching by Uday. She has full trust they will be able to preserve the Kusunda language in the future:

*Since the students can speak it [the Kusunda language], I am relieved that the language will continue to exist. I have no stress because they [the student learners] can speak it at home. (...) I have no worries. Even after my death, they will continue to speak [the language]. They will keep [protect and preserve] it. They have it [the language] in their hearts, their minds, and their mouths. (Kamala Khatri, 23-03-2022)*

It is interesting to note that in the case of the adult Kusunda learners, the approach that was applied does not seem to work well. The progress of the adult learners, who had Kamala as their resource person but Urmila (in terms of knowledge about Kusunda their equal) as their teacher, was relatively limited. Perhaps Kamala's lack of formal education is one reason: Not having been formally taught herself, it was difficult for her to transfer her knowledge by depending on Urmila. This stands in stark contrast to the initial pilot session and the first session of the Kusunda classes, both of which were facilitated by Uday with Kamala and Gyani Maiya assisting. The more structured approach taken by Uday and his knowledge of Kusunda achieved better results than the loose set-up by Urmila, who did not know Kusunda. The presence of two speakers of Kusunda, Gyani Maiya and Kamala, during the pilot session and the first class would also have contributed to a more successful approach than the presence of Kamala alone. Similarly, the more traditional approach of teaching employed by Uday for the student learners had more tangible results. However, as the student learners have now reached a certain base level of competency, they indicated the need for speaking practice and actual conversation. For them, Kusunda should primarily be a spoken language: while writing the language enables them to memorise words and phrases more easily, they need to be able to converse for the language to survive. Therefore, the student learners remarked that they would like to have classes with Kamala present. Similarly, Kamala indicated that having Uday as the teacher would add to the professionalism of the adult classes and increase the students' learning experience. In other words,



both the student classes and the adult classes would benefit from combined teaching by both Uday and Kamala. We get back to this in section 6.1.

We have hitherto identified three main factors that have influenced the progress of the efforts to revitalise Kusunda and that are likely to impact the successful outcome of these efforts in the future: the support of the community; the support of the government and other external actors; and the dedicated support of individual actors.

#### **4.1 COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

While Gyani Maiya was working with Uday on the Kusunda dictionary, her son, Prem Bahadur Pun, expressed the wish to also learn his mother tongue. He encouraged Uday and his mother to not only document and describe the language, but to also explore the opportunities to ‘rescue’ Kusunda and guarantee its survival into the future by teaching it to people like himself. In an unfortunate turn of events, Prem Bahadur suffered an accident and did not survive to learn his own language. However, this event stimulated both his mother and Uday to work towards the awakening of Kusunda. Right until her passing, Gyani Maiya provided her full support to these efforts. Similarly, Kamala, as the last speaker of Kusunda, has provided and continues to provide input on numerous occasions. Although both have been financially compensated for their work, the monetary benefits were never their main motivation. Rather, they both made considerable sacrifices in their personal lives to fulfil the expectations people have had about sharing and disseminating their knowledge of the Kusunda language and culture. Likewise, the students in the four batches of Kusunda classes have all been extremely motivated to spend their time and learn the language, despite the unfortunate circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic posing serious obstacles since the first session and additional limitations we discuss in section 5.

There are two things that the Kusunda community can’t provide to support the awakening of their language: the financial resources and the required teaching skills and resources. As an extremely marginalised community, most Kusunda people are subsistence farmers. There are no ethnic Kusunda who have regular paid jobs, either in government service or in private companies and only a few do paid labour on a temporary or seasonal basis. Furthermore, educational levels among the Kusunda are generally low with only two Kusunda studying at bachelor level and one student having reached class 12. Hence, the Kusunda community is unable to provide the financial resources or the educational backstopping for revitalisation, which is why the government of Nepal and other external financial supporters and the guidance, support, and input from a dedicated community linguist are crucial.

## 4.2 GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The federal government of Nepal, through the NLC, has provided considerable input to the documentation, description, and revitalisation efforts of Kusunda. It funded research on the history of the Kusunda, the description of Kusunda and the Kusunda language (Ācārya, Udāsī & Ālē 2018). After that, the NLC financially supported Uday to write the textbooks for the Kusunda classes (Ālē 2021a & 2022a). The NLC also funded the Kusunda language classes by providing the budget to pay the teachers and resource persons, the teaching materials, and the remuneration for participants. In total, between January 2019 and April 2022, the NLC has spent 704,000 Nepal Rupees (nearly 6,000 US dollars) for the four-year project called *Kusundā bhāṣā pustāntaraṇa* 'Intergenerational transmission of the Kusunda language'.

The Kusunda classes are initiated, monitored, and evaluated by the NLC, which works with local governments to administer the financial support (e.g., funding for the pilot session was routed through Lamahī municipality). Because more Kusunda people stay near Ghōrāhī, the second session was moved there, and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society became the mediator between Ghōrāhī municipality as recipient and distributor of the funds for participants, facilitators, and instructors. Indirectly, the government of Nepal also supports the awakening efforts by funding the education of a group of nine Kusunda students from Lumbini province in Dharnā. They are part of a 20-student quota for marginalised castes and indigenous ethnic groups, with other students belonging to the Indo-Aryan माझी Mājhī indigenous ethnic group and the previously untouchable Hindu बादी Bādī 'musician' caste. The tuition fees for the students are borne by the government, which also provides them with separate hostel accommodation, food, and school materials. The concentration of these Kusunda students in a single middle secondary school and single hostel is a great advantage because it creates a language nest and facilitates learning Kusunda.

In monetary terms these funds, grants, and budgets may seem trivial (see Table 2), especially from a western perspective. However, as may be clear from the achievements thus far, they make a significant contribution to the awakening of the language. One major factor may be that none of the actors involved in the process is mainly driven by financial gains. Whether it is the Kusunda learners, Uday as the teacher, or Kamala as the resource person, and to some extent even the NLC and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society, all strongly support the goal of awakening the language. This is why they provide their input at minimal remuneration. A significant downside to this is that all of them need to find a balance between their involvement with the project and their other day-to-day activities which, for some, means basic provision of livelihood through farming, for others it means education, and for still others it means paid jobs or activities. Obviously, then, a less resource-strained budget would enable them to become involved on a more permanent basis.

Despite the laudable input by the Nepal government in documenting and preserving the Kusunda language and culture and in trying to uplift the socio-economic situation of the Kusunda people, there is criticism from some Kusunda people that these actions are not enough, and progress is hampered by government corruption and misappropriation of funds. Among the Kusunda, as among other indigenous ethnic groups and lower castes, there are also continued misgivings about the perpetual dominance of high caste Hindu Nepalese in the political and administrative system of the country. However, this is a widespread issue in Nepal and not unique to the situation of the Kusunda. In the words of the Chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society:

*The Nepal government census [of 2011] says that there are 28 people speaking the Kusunda language, but where are they? Compared to the Nepal government, outsiders know more about us and our language. The Nepal government doesn't see us, doesn't listen to us, and doesn't acknowledge us. Even when they know about us, they don't do anything. People from indigenous communities like us have been ignored and neglected.* (Dhan Bahadur Kusunda, 26-03-2022)

#### 4.3 INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

Finally, in the efforts to awaken Kusunda, the dedication of Uday has been instrumental. Uday is a community linguist, an ethnic Magār who, like more and more Nepalis, does not speak his own language anymore. Uday lacks a formal linguistic education and a formal affiliation to a linguistic academic institution. Nonetheless, out of his own interest, motivation, and perseverance, he has conducted research and released publications on the language and the culture of the Kham Magar, Thāru and Kusunda people.

In 2008, while Uday was the editor of a local newspaper in Dāñ, he was first introduced to the Kusunda by Prem Bahadur Pun, Gyani Maiya's son, who asked him to write about his mother, the Kusunda people, and their language in local newspapers (Ālē 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015 & Aaley 2016). After Prem Bahadur's sudden demise, Uday wrote the Kusunda dictionary (Aaley 2017). Around that time, the NLC was looking for an expert on Kusunda to run the four-year project *Kusundā bhāṣā pustāntaraṇa* "Intergenerational transmission of the Kusunda language" which they contracted Uday to do. Since then, he has been officially executing the project.

Over the years, Uday has built a close personal connection with many Kusunda people, including the last remaining speakers (e.g., Ālē 2012 & 2014a; Panṭhī 2016; KC 2016). For the Kusunda community and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society, the close cooperation with Uday whom they have personally known and whom they trust and respect, serves as a guarantee that their culture and language are not only properly documented and preserved for posterity, but may also be revitalised.

Kamala indicates that without Uday, they would never have been able to teach the language and attempt to awaken it and that Kusunda would instead be destined to become lost forever:

*Everyone stepped forward for the development of the Kusunda language, but no one was able to do anything, except for sir [Uday]. If sir wouldn't have stepped forward, the language would have finished. (...) People didn't know about our language. (...) Thanks to sir [Uday], people got to know about the Kusunda language and that it still exists. If it hadn't been for sir, it [the Kusunda language] would have finished. (Kamala Khatri, 23-03-2022)*

Kamala's remark addresses another poignant issue. For speakers of endangered languages, purely academic exercises in which their languages are simply documented and described may well be considered meaningless if they do not translate in tangible efforts to preserve and revitalise those languages.

The Chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society also acknowledges the difference that Uday's efforts have made in awakening the Kusunda language. Whereas others came before him, they were unable to make the same difference that Uday has made. In the Chairperson's words:

*If he here [points at Uday] had not been there, our Kusunda language would have already finished. (Dhan Bahadur Kusunda, 26-03-2022)*

Hima expresses similar sentiments regarding the pivotal role that Uday played in preserving the Kusunda language, whilst also acknowledging the contribution by Kamala:

*If sir [Uday] and elder sister [Kamala] had not been there, we have no idea where our language would have gone [what would have happened to our language]. (Hima Kusunda, 23-03-2022)*

Moreover, Uday's interest in and mastery of the Kusunda language has been a boost for the students and Kamala's confidence:

*Even though sir [Uday] is not Kusunda, he can speak the language and he has been able to teach us the [Kusunda] language, right, this motivates me and the others [students] to learn. (Hima Kusunda, 23-03-2022)*

Kamala makes clear that although Uday makes mistakes, he knows Kusunda and teaches it well. Kamala also contributes the success of the classes in Dharnā directly to the teaching of Uday and his actual knowledge of the language. For Kamala, the intricate connection between the Kusunda identity and the Kusunda language is so strong that she even considers Uday, who is an ethnic Magar, a 'pure'

Kusunda by virtue of him being able to communicate in Kusunda and because of what he has done to promote the language:

*The only pure Kusunda is sir [Uday]. That is the truth. If sir hadn't been there, it [the Kusunda language] would have finished. (Kamala Khatri, 23-03-2022)*

However, Kamala also sees the dependence on Uday as a liability of sorts:

*There is no one [who speaks Kusunda], and sir [Uday] won't stay here forever. He is only here for three or four years. He will have to go somewhere; he is just there for teaching the Kusunda language. The language is finishing. He [Uday] is doing his job when he is here, but when sir [Uday] goes away, the language will be finished. (Kamala Khatri, 23-03-2022)*

In this respect, it is encouraging to know that some student learners are extremely motivated to learn Kusunda themselves as well as to teach it to others once they have sufficiently mastered it.

The sometimes-pivotal role played by certain individuals in the initiation of revitalisation efforts is acknowledged in the survey by Pérez Báez, Vogel & Patolo (2019: 463-464), who found that 24 surveys (out of a total of 245 surveys) reported on efforts initiated by a single person working on an individual initiative and that 19 surveys mentioned the initiator(s) of the effort by name. However, although Uday does indeed play a major role in the Kusunda awakening, he was not its initiator. As the comments above indicate, even though Uday is an outsider to the Kusunda speech community, his linguistic skills in Kusunda make him an honorary community member now. Similarly, right from the outset, the Kusunda classes did not only include learners that can be considered ethnically Kusunda. One of the initiators of the Kusunda awakening was Gyani Maiya's son, whose children attended the first Kusunda class, even though they all have the Magār surname Pun because Gyani Maiya's husband was a Magār. Similarly, the subsequent sessions all had participants belonging to various castes. This seems to reflect the general attitude of the Kusunda people that the Kusunda language is not the exclusive property of the Kusunda people. In Hima's words:

*If I get the opportunity, I am happy to teach. Both Kusunda and non-Kusunda should learn and teach the language. (Hima Kusunda, 23-03-2022)*

## 5. LIMITATIONS OF THE AWAKENING EFFORTS

We have identified several factors that currently limit the Kusunda awakening efforts, which do not suffer from a lack of community enthusiasm and engagement, government support, teaching resources and teaching staff, or participants. Instead, some of the challenges we face pertain to Kusunda as a language isolate that has incomplete description and poor documentation, factors we

discuss in more detail in Bodt and Aaley (under review - a). Here we focus on the structure of the awakening efforts themselves, as well as the socio-economic characteristics of the Kusunda community and how they affect the progress of the current Kusunda classes and the future of awakening efforts. Obstacles include the limited duration of the Kusunda classes; the scattered residence of Kusunda community members; traditional seniority relations; travel distance and lack of funding and free time; socio-economic conditions and traditional gender roles; and prevailing marriage patterns and their impact on language transmission.

Perhaps interesting to note is that among the Kusunda, prejudice and discrimination were never mentioned as a reason not to attend the Kusunda classes. This factor was specifically mentioned as a reason for Ainu people in Japan not to attend Ainu language classes (Martin 2011: 77).<sup>21</sup> Despite their marginalised status within Nepalese society, most Kusunda people now have a significant sense of pride in their unique identity, which includes their language. Similarly, the Kusunda student learners have never objected to or felt any kind of hesitation regarding the presence of non-Kusunda people in their classes. In fact, they greatly appreciate and encourage efforts by non-Kusunda in the Kusunda classes, their school, and society at large to learn about their language and culture through various means (see Bodt and Aaley, under review - a). Other reasons mentioned in the Ainu context, such as the difficulty to combine classes with work (section 5.4); the language class timetables (section 5.4); the low perceived socio-economic benefit of learning Kusunda and relevance to daily lives (section 5.5); and factors related to the class setup (section 5.1) were also mentioned in the Kusunda context.

### **5.1 DURATION, TEACHING STAFF, VARYING LEVELS OF STUDENTS**

The Kusunda students, Uday, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson, and Kamala indicated that, ideally, the Kusunda classes should be longer so that more can be taught. The 40 days of Kusunda class in each session are too limited to transfer much knowledge, in particular, speaking practice. The students in Dharnā also think that learning Kusunda for three months a year, concurrent with their normal study schedule, would be more beneficial to them.

Another problem has been that the adult classes lacked the formal teaching support of Uday, resulting in a limited transfer of knowledge, while the student classes lacked the presence of the last speaker, Kamala, so the students could not learn from and practice with her. Therefore, a suggestion has been to have both Uday as the teacher and Kamala as the resource person teach the adults as well as the students. This would result in more structured classes for the adults and consequently enhance their progress. At the same time, having Kamala in the student classes would increase their opportunity to interact in the Kusunda language and improve their speaking abilities.

---

<sup>21</sup> Like Kusunda, Ainu is a language isolate. Ainu is spoken in Japan and Russia.

An additional limitation that Uday has observed is the differing ages and hence levels of the learners in the student class, ranging between grade 4 and grade 12. This makes it difficult to teach Kusunda to them. The older students, being more accustomed to classroom teaching and self-study and having a higher proficiency in reading and writing the Dēvanāgarī script, quickly pick up the material taught. But the younger students, who have just started their enrolment in an educational institution, are quickly overwhelmed by all the new things that they are being exposed to, and consequently take considerably more time to learn the language.

## 5.2 SCATTERED RESIDENCE

In the literature on language awakening and revitalisation, the importance of community-centred domains of language use is well described (e.g., Bommeleyn and Tuttle 2018; O'Regan 2018; Zahir 2018). A close-knit and compact speech community makes language awakening much easier, and at the same time, language awakening and revitalisation will provide a major impetus to strengthening the culture and community life in general. As a result of the absence of a compact speech community, the case of Kusunda is an unfortunate negative example of how this paradigmatic relationship holds.

The Kusunda people live scattered across at least 12 communities in eight districts of Nepal, while the classes are at present only conducted in Dāñ district. The hostel facilities for disadvantaged students in Dharnā are provided by the government of Lumbinī province of which Ghōrāhī is the capital. Of the districts with considerable Kusunda populations, this province only includes Dāñ and Pyuṭhān districts. Other districts where many Kusunda, including school-going children, live fall in other provinces, namely Gōrkhā (Gaṇḍakī province) and Surkhēt (Karṇālī province). Bringing students from these provinces to Dharnā has hitherto proven difficult to arrange due to administrative and logistical problems and a lack of funds. This excludes potential learners from other districts who have not even been invited to attend the classes. Attempts to include them in the future are ongoing.

In addition, Kusunda individuals who attend the classes and learn Kusunda to such a degree that they can hold small conversations face limited applicability of the language once they leave the location where teaching takes place and join their respective families again. Once back in their homes, most Kusunda learners don't have anyone around them to talk Kusunda with, even if their own proficiency has reached to a level where they could. Only the 12 Kusunda students in Dharnā live together and can communicate in their own language on a regular basis throughout the year.

## 5.3 TRADITIONAL SENIORITY RELATIONS

The students from Dharnā only return home once or twice a year and though they attempt to speak Kusunda to their relatives in the village, the period of contact is very short and the temptation to revert to Nepali is high. Moreover, the situation of language transmission is reversed now: Instead of parents



teaching the mother tongue to their children, the children now teach the mother tongue to their parents. This has an inherent limitation by virtue of the traditional relationships between parents and children and the respect that needs to be accorded to one's seniors. It is generally not acceptable for children to tell their parents what to do or how to do it, which includes teaching them how to speak. Instead, the students feel it is easier to talk to their juniors, such as younger brothers and sisters, cousins, or nephews and nieces, in the household and teach them the language. Regarding this, Hima explains:

*During the holidays [in the village], I wanted to have a conversation with my sister-in-law [in Kusunda]. But she felt shy because she doesn't understand the [Kusunda] language. So, I taught my small niece some words. (...) I often speak Kusunda words to my uncle's son and daughter. They get confused and ask what I mean. This conversation usually takes place when herding the cattle and cutting grass. They ask a question [what something is called in Kusunda] and then I answer the word. While they get confused at first, if we continue to speak these Kusunda words, then they might learn it. We try to speak in Kusunda more and more with our family, and when they don't get it, we explain them what it means. (Hima Kusunda 23-03-2022)*

#### 5.4 TRAVEL DISTANCE, EXPENSES, AND LACK OF TIME

For the adult learners who attended the classes in Supailākhuṭī and are all from Dān district, scattered residence is already a limiting factor in their progress. Kamala remarked that the adult learners that she has been teaching there have not made much progress learning Kusunda. She observed how most of them attended the class but did not pay much attention, instead joking and laughing about the oddities of the language. She also complained that the adult learners do not seriously study what they learnt once they reach home and that they did not attempt to speak the language in their household. We tried to find reasons for this apparent lack of motivation and consequent progress by asking student and adult participants specifically about what motivated them to learn Kusunda and what made it difficult for them to achieve a certain level of progress. We learned that one of the main factors is that the students in Dharnā have the advantage of forming a small language nest with classes conducted in their hostel, but the situation is different for the adult learners.

For example, take the case of 35-year-old Fani Kusunda (Nepali: फानी कुसुण्डा Phānī Kusunḍā) and her husband, 30-year-old Juddha Bahadur Kusunda (Nepali: जुद्धबहादुर कुसुण्डा Juddhabahādur Kusunḍā): Juddha's father is Kusunda, and his mother is Magār, and like many children of mixed marriages, Juddha never learnt the Kusunda language and speaks only Nepali. Fani is an ethnic Magār, but she never learnt the Magār language because everyone in her family spoke Nepali. Both Fani and Juddha are literate in Nepali. At home, Fani and Juddha speak Nepali to each other and to their two children, ten and seven years old. Both Fani and Juddha have been attending the second



and the third Kusunda class. While Juddha is a daily wage labourer, Fani stays at home to take care of her children and her mother-in-law. They live in Ambāpur village, and it takes them around 20 minutes by autorickshaw or two hours on foot to reach Supailākhuṭī, where the Kusunda class is held. Because the autorickshaw charges between 100 to 200 Nepal rupees one way, they usually walk. This means that after preparing breakfast and bringing their children to school, Fani and Juddha start walking at 10 a.m. to arrive in time for the Kusunda class at 12 p.m. They attend the class till 2 p.m. and then walk back, reaching home at 4 p.m., just in time to pick up the children from school, prepare dinner, and go to sleep.

Fani found Kusunda a bit hard to pick up in the beginning, but also finds the Kusunda classes interesting and fun. She thinks that by continuing classes and putting in more effort, she will master the language eventually, but readily admits that once back home, she and her husband do not speak or even practice Kusunda, but only speak in Nepali. In addition to the time and expenses incurred while attending the Kusunda classes, Fani also finds it hard to combine the classes with her duties as a mother and housekeeper, a problem more common for female participants in the adult class, which is also recognised by the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson and Uday. At the same time, Fani's husband must forego a day of paid work to attend the class for just two hours. Although they are each provided with 100 Nepal rupees per day to attend, this is by no means sufficient to cover their travel expenses and opportunity costs. In view of this, it is remarkable that they still maintain enthusiasm to attend the classes and a hopeful outlook for the future of the language:

*It [learning Kusunda] is extremely difficult for me. I really want to learn this language, but I face a lot of barriers. Since my husband doesn't know any household chores, I have to do it all by myself. But I'm still eager to learn this language. (...) I think if we put our full effort in preserving it [the Kusunda language], then it won't get lost. Even though it is difficult to learn it. (Fani Kusunda, 12-04-2022)*

These conditions explain why the adult learners in the Kusunda class have not been able to make as much progress learning the language as the young students in Dharnā. They find it hard to make time available to attend the two hours of class each day and once they reach home, they do not find the time and opportunity to practice what they learnt, even when, like in the case of Fani and Juddha, both husband and wife attend the classes.

## 5.5 SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

A recurrent theme among the learners of Kusunda is the lack of interest that Kusunda men show in their language, and culture in general, as compared to the Kusunda women. The number of females learning Kusunda is higher than the number of males, and the females also appear to make better

progress than their male counterparts, who seem rather aloof about learning the language. The words of Fani Kusunda are quite striking, especially because she is herself an ethnic Magar, while her husband is the ethnic Kusunda:

*He [my husband] doesn't care about the Kusunda language as much as I do. (Fani Kusunda, 12-04-2022)*

One of the male students, Man Bahadur Kusunda (Nepali: मानबहादुर कुसुण्डा Mānbahādur Kusunḍā) also says:

*These days, I can't focus on the Kusunda language, and I didn't learn much more here in Dharnā [than what he learnt in Lamahī during the first class]. Still then, at first, I didn't know anything about the Kusunda language, but at least, now I can understand some. (Man Bahadur Kusunda, 23-03-2022)*

Indeed, while having a short question and answer session in the Kusunda language with Hima, Man Bahadur did not understand some questions that she asked and misunderstood other questions. He was also less fluent in speaking the language compared to Hima. While overall his competency was laudable, the contrast with Hima's proficiency was quite stark. Man Bahadur admitted his progress was relatively limited but also indicated that, in general, girls are more interested to learn the language than boys (see his quote in section 5.6). Khamba Rokaye also indicated it may just be a matter of a lack of effort and focus on his behalf:

*You [Man Bahadur] are not focusing on your studies enough; you should work harder on [learning] the [Kusunda] language! (Khamba Rokaye, 23-03-2022)*

We then attempted to find reasons for the apparent lack of engagement and interest for the Kusunda language among the Kusunda men by specifically asking Man Bahadur and the other male students about their reasons for not putting in as much effort and consequently not making as much progress as the female participants. From their responses, we learnt that it is not so much a lack of interest, but rather the result of prevailing socio-economic conditions. One reason is the traditional Nepalese perception that men are supposed to be the breadwinners in the household. For adult males, their main concern in life is to have a job and bring home money. For example, 34-year-old Tej Bahadur Kusunda from Surkhēt is very much interested and motivated to come to Dāñ and learn Kusunda for one month a year. However, because he is married and a father of three children, he must provide the livelihood for his family and, thus, can't attend the classes. The main concern for male students is that they should either excel in studies so they can obtain a well-paid job, or they should find opportunities to obtain skills and establish contacts that will get them a lower paid job right after or even while studying. Being able to speak Kusunda is not considered a skill that assists in obtaining a job or in any

other way contributes to an income. Hence, learning the language is a very low priority when compared to, for example, earning money as a daily wage labourer or studying the normal subjects in school. Women and female students, on the other hand, do not feel this pressure. For many of them, marriage still means leading the life of a housewife and mother and learning Kusunda is simply an additional competency. However, the limitations of combining the role of housekeeper with attending the Kusunda classes were already mentioned in section 5.4.

Interestingly, Man Bahadur has taken the advice he was given during the third session close to heart, and he has used the intervening year to catch up on his knowledge of Kusunda. During the fourth session, there was a marked improvement in his proficiency. Together with the other senior students, Hima Kusunda, Khamba Rokaye, and Asmita Nepali, he has obtained a good knowledge of the vocabulary and basic grammar of Kusunda and fluency in speaking. Uday and Kamala are convinced that if they get the opportunity to continue learning and practicing Kusunda in the near future, they will attain more and maintain this fluency.

The students in Dharnā recognise that not every Kusunda who may be interested in learning the language is as fortunate as they are. Some of them see this as a motivation to learn the language well so they can then teach it to others:

*Kusunda females have shown more interest in learning the language than the Kusunda men. Even though some other Kusunda may be interested to learn the language, they may find obstacles on their way and not get the same opportunity as we do. And I feel sad for them.* (Hima Kusunda, 23-03-2022)

Martin (2011: 81) reports from Ainu that the attendance of men in Ainu language classes was similarly hampered by socio-economic conditions. Men often indicated that they were unable to attend the classes due to work commitments or because of being too tired after work. Participating women also indicated that attendance by men may be low because learning Ainu had little benefit for maintaining or improving the men's social status within mainstream Japanese society.

## 5.6 PREVAILING MARRIAGE PATTERNS AND LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION

This pervasive traditional view on gender roles is worrying from the point of view of language awakening as it hampers transmission to the next generation, a problem exacerbated by the traditionally patrilineal descent and patrilocal marriage systems still prevalent across much of rural Nepal. Only Kusunda men who marry women from other castes and indigenous ethnic groups can transfer the Kusunda ethnicity and surname to their children. Because of patrilocal residence after marriage, the language of the father and his parents is more commonly spoken within the household, not the language of the mother. The Kusunda women who marry men of other castes and indigenous

ethnic groups and move in with their husbands and in-laws are expected to, and most commonly will, linguistically assimilate to the language that the in-laws speak. It is often hard for mothers to speak to their children in a language different from the language spoken by her in-laws, especially if that language is considered somehow ‘inferior’ or ‘useless’.

Khamba Rokaye, addressing one of the male students, Man Bahadur, recognises this problem and says:

*As a woman, we may have limited influence on the language choice of our children. But as a man, you have a better chance to teach your children the language. (...) You are in a better position to teach your children and grandchildren. In other communities [she gives the example of the Thāru], when children speak from an early age like two years, they learn the language more authentically. Right now, you are learning at a relatively late age, but the Kusunda people will have the advantage [of you knowing the language], so you can teach your children at an early age. (Khamba Rokaye, 23-03-2022)*

Man Bahadur agrees, saying:

*Girls have more interest [in learning the language] than boys. But on the other hand, I think that men are in a better position to teach the language to the next generation. (Man Bahadur Kusunda, 23-03-2022)*

Because practical experience in the recent language awakening efforts shows that more females learn the language, including more female students, and that in general they know the language better than males, the marriage of Kusunda girls outside their own caste with a subsequent break in the transmission of the language is considered a kind of a ‘loss’. There is a rising understanding that marrying within one’s own indigenous ethnic group will ultimately prolong the culture and language of the Kusunda. Therefore, many Kusunda, including the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson, have expressed the wish that there should be more endogamous marriages between Kusunda men and women, as was the practice in the past. However, the clan exogamy practiced by the Kusunda remains an issue.

For example, in Pyuṭhān there are six Kusunda girls and four unrelated Kusunda boys of (near-)marriageable age (in rural Nepal generally between 13 and 16 years, even though the official age of marital consent is 20 years), but all are of the Śāhī clan and so cannot marry one another. However, there is increasing contact between Kusunda families in different districts, in part because of the Kusunda classes and social media. Thus, there are opportunities for Śāhī clan youth to be betrothed to Sēn clan youth. Of course, the proponents of this endogamy realise that such marriages

can't be enforced. But because arranged marriages are still widely accepted, a more active role of the parents is generally encouraged. There are currently over two dozen younger Kusunda children, and the expectation is that continued Kusunda classes in the format currently practiced in Dharnā will bring them together and hopefully result in endogamous marriage alliances.

Perhaps one of the positive outcomes of the language awakening process and the creation of awareness about the Kusunda and their language will be that both the speakers themselves and Nepalese society as a whole will attach more value and importance to the language. This will create opportunities for Kusunda mothers to teach Kusunda to their children, even if they marry non-Kusunda and end up not speaking the language with their husband and in-laws.

We and members of the Kusunda community have developed the impression that due to these underlying reasons, female Kusunda show more interest and motivation to learn the language. Even when they consider a career, rather than getting married at young age, they feel that knowing Kusunda may bring them some benefit in the future. They are also more enthusiastic to transfer their knowledge of the language to their children, even when they end up marrying and living in a non-Kusunda speaking household. Fani, for example, expressed optimism that if both she and her husband would learn how to speak in Kusunda, they would be able to teach the language to their young children once they became a bit older.

## **6. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Taking the factors in section 5 into account, we would like to make several suggestions and recommendations for the Kusunda awakening efforts in the coming years.

### **6.1 LONGER CLASSES WITH COMBINED TEACHING AND FOCUS ON SPEAKING**

The learners, the resource person Kamala, and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson all agreed that the classes should ideally be run for a longer duration – not their daily duration, but the number of days. Up until now, the classes have been limited to 60 to 90 hours total, with an average of two hours per day during one to one and a half months. The general feeling is that around three months per year would be more beneficial.

To address the issue of limited progress in the adult language classes and the need for speaking practice, we propose a two-step approach to teaching Kusunda. First, Uday (with Kamala present for pronunciation) will teach a more formal introduction to the language that includes basic pronunciation, vocabulary, verb tenses, and common phrases. This initial stage will then be followed by an advanced stage that involves mainly speaking practice, for which Kamala will be the main focal person and Uday will play a supporting role.

Although these changes to the setup of the Kusunda classes seem relatively straightforward in principle, the question is whether they can be implemented. By 2022, the NLC's project had already reached the end of its four-year duration and, due to budget constraints, the Commission was only able to fund the students' classes of the fourth session, with the adult learners' session funded by Ghōrāhī Sub-Metropolitan City. But instead of the proposed three-month duration, both classes could be held only for 20 days. In addition, Uday and Kamala may have other obligations and receive other opportunities, which would divert their time and attention from the Kusunda classes. Therefore, the future of the Kusunda classes beyond 2023 is far from secure.

## 6.2 CREATING A KUSUNDA COMMUNITY

The scattered residence of the Kusunda people and the absence of a viable Kusunda community is one of the primary factors in the gradual loss of the language and one of the biggest impediments to the survival of the language and the Kusunda people as a distinct ethnicity. While we do not have an immediate solution to this conundrum, there have been proposals to address it as far back as the late 1980s.

According to van Driem (2001: 261), a proposal to resettle Kusunda families in a single location to preserve their language and culture was floated in a 1987 article written for a Nepali newspaper by Hēmant Rāj Bhaṇḍārī (Nepali: हेमन्त राज भण्डारी). Since its establishment, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society has proposed creating a village community where the few remnant Kusunda people could settle together in a single defined geographical location. The aim is to obtain five to seven bigha (33,860 to 47,404 square meters) of non-registered land, but a minimum of one to two bigha (6,772 to 13,544 square meters) is required. There, they could have a primary school that teaches Kusunda as the mother tongue for the lower grades in addition to the standard curriculum in Nepalese and English. There could be non-formal adult education and other programs that would encourage use of Kusunda in daily life. The Kusunda settlers could be provided with plots of land in ownership they could use for agriculture purposes and an established community forest would enable them to reconnect with the forest and its resources. There should be adequate infrastructure (roads and telecommunications) and facilities (electricity, water) and they should also have access to employment and skills training, so it should be located near a major population centre. Providing access to land in full ownership, funds for basic housing, education, and employment would alleviate the often-marginalised conditions in which many Kusunda households live at present. In this way, a Kusunda community could be created that would awaken both the language and the culture. The site could also be visited by academics interested in the Kusunda and their language and by tourists interested in seeing the Kusunda culture.

The question is where and how much land the authorities in Nepal would be willing and able to allocate. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society has made this idea public several times (e.g., in Śarmā 2018 and Himalaya TV 2021), and while the authorities agree that it is a good idea, they have not come forward with tangible support. The Nepal Kusunda Development Society proposed a site in Kulmohar, Lamahī, Dāñ several years ago. However, the lack of Kusunda people in the area and the demise of Gyani Maiya halted the project, as the mayor of the municipality argued that providing the Kusunda with land would invariably result in protests from other people in the area. Moreover, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson is not convinced that, the full benefits of such a project would reach the intended beneficiaries, considering the levels of corruption he perceives affecting many departments.

In addition, such a project would involve the relocation of a considerable number of households consisting of multiple individuals. Beyond the question of whether this is practically feasible, there is also the question of whether any wish to revitalise the Kusunda culture and language is worth such profound changes in people's personal lives. However, we and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society Chairperson believe that since the resources that the Kusunda people have in their present locations are so limited and the land they live on is almost invariably non-registered, they would readily volunteer to participate in such a resettlement project.

Despite these practical problems, the creation of a Kusunda community would greatly facilitate the inter- and intragenerational transmission of the language, the continuation of language classes, and the endogamous marriage of Kusunda youngsters. In addition, this idea may contribute to the socio-economic uplifting of the marginalised Kusunda people and the preservation or resurgence of their culture and identity.

### **6.3 INCREASED FINANCIAL COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Some foreign linguists and students of linguistics, upon learning about the Kusunda revitalisation efforts, have questioned the payment of 100 Nepal rupees per class (a mere 80 US cents at present rates, even further reduced to 75 rupees in the last session) as compensation for attending the classes, stating that such a financial incentive would naturally encourage anyone to attend the classes even in absence of any earnest interest or motivation. We think that such questions and comments are short-sighted and indicate a lack of understanding of the situation about rural areas of Nepal and of the Kusunda community, in particular.

The school-going children are willing to spend a minimum of two hours a day preceding their regular school hours attending language classes, in addition to having to spend part of their free time studying Kusunda on top of their formal curriculum. Similarly, for the adult learners, they have had to combine the month-long Kusunda classes with their regular daily work, whether household chores or



paid labour. Hence, we think compensating this opportunity cost is justifiable. In fact, any lack of attendance or motivation among the adult learners may be directly attributable to the near absence of financial compensation. If anything, we think an increase in compensation for the adult learners is appropriate, especially for travel expenses and foregone wages (see section 5.4). In the same line of reasoning, more financial rewards may encourage especially male students to put in more effort learning Kusunda, rather than using their free time to acquire other skills and competencies (see section 5.5).

#### 6.4 KUSUNDA LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING

Considering the time scale involved in creating a Kusunda learning community and the uncertainty of Uday and Kamala's availability after 2023, one of the greatest needs appears to be training more trainers. Some current Kusunda learners should not only learn the language better themselves but should also learn how to teach others the language. This would decrease the dependency on Uday and Kamala. These new trainers could then be paid by the NLC and employed on yearly contracts through the Ghōrāhī (for Lumbinī province) and Vīrēndranagar (for Karṇālī province) municipal governments to teach Kusunda, for example, for two three-month periods to the students in Dharnā (with students from other provinces also enrolled there) and for three two-month periods to adult learners in Pyuṭhān, Dāñ and Surkhēt. The senior students from the Kusunda classes, Khamba Rokaye, Hima Kusunda, Asmita Nepali, and Man Bahadur Kusunda are obvious candidates to become Kusunda teachers.

#### 7. CONCLUSION

Throughout the 170-odd years that the Kusunda have been the subject of linguistic and ethnographic descriptions, the Kusunda language, culture, and even people have been described as 'almost extinct', 'near vanished', 'dead', 'moribund', and even 'extinct'. Such 'death metaphors' are as unfortunate as they are untrue. Their fatalistic implication holds no real meaning for the Kusunda people themselves, whose positive and hopeful outlook should serve as an example to the academic and scientific community. In Kusunda, we heard Kamala and Gyani Maiya use phrases such as *tigi gipen phəŋdzi* 'our language is over / finished' (Nepali: हाम्रो भाषा सकियो *hāmrō bhāṣā sakiyō*) or *tigi gipen miʔi dəgən* 'our language got lost (lit. went missing)' (Nepali: हाम्रो भाषा हराइ गयो *hāmrō bhāṣā harāi gayō*) in natural conversation. For example:

*phəun, phəun. miʔi dəgən, miʔi dəgən hana?*<sup>22</sup> (Kamala Khatri, 08-08-2019)

<sup>22</sup> In Nepali: सकियो सकियो । यो हराइ गयो, यो हराएर कहाँ गयो ? In English: It [the language] is finished, it is finished. It [the language] got lost, where did it get lost?



Similarly, in Nepali, Kamala used a phrase such as हाम्रो भाषा सकियो *hāmrō bhāṣā sakiyō* ‘Our language is over / finished’ and हामीले हाम्रो भाषा हरायो *hāmīlē hāmrō bhāṣā harāyō* ‘We lost our language’, whereas Hima said हाम्रो भाषा कहाँ गयो जान्थ्यो *hāmrō bhāṣā kahāṁ jānuthyō* ‘Where would our language have gone?’ A language that is ‘finished’, ‘lost’ or ‘gone’ somewhere is less final and irreversible than a language that is ‘dead’ or ‘extinct’: Despite some assertions to the contrary, especially in religion, horror, and science-fiction, even modern western science has been unable to revive the dead or bring back an extinct species.<sup>23</sup>

On the contrary, the once ‘finished’ Kusunda language is replenished from Kamala’s memory, the available recordings of Kamala and Gyani Maiya and the descriptions by Watters et al. (2005, 2006), Donohue et al. (2014) and others. Similarly, the ‘lost’ Kusunda language can now be retrieved and, though it had temporarily ‘gone’ somewhere, it is now slowly returning. When speaking Nepali, the Kusunda call processes alternatively known as ‘awakening’, ‘reclamation’, etc. as भाषा बचाउनु *bhāṣā bacāunu* ‘to save the language’: Again, emphasis is placed on the presumption that the language is still present and available ‘somewhere’, rather than it already being ‘dead’. In Kusunda, Gyani Maiya and Kamala expressed the factual situation that both were still able to speak Kusunda, as a matter of them ‘bringing’ the language to the present: *tigi gipən tok togdan* (in Nepali: हाम्रो भाषा हामीले ल्यायौ। *hāmrō bhāṣā hāmīlē lyāyau*) ‘We brought our language’. Perhaps the following advice by the late Gyani Maiya to Kamala, who had just remarked that her lack of practice makes her forget her language, reflects their attitude to language loss and revitalisation:

*Oləŋ oləŋ aiga jeudze. Oləŋ oləŋ aiga gipən.*<sup>24</sup> (Gyani Maiya Sēn Kusunda, 08-08-2019)

Serious efforts are now ongoing to give the language another chance to survive into the future. These efforts to awaken Kusunda are not a matter of “We should...” expressed by linguists, politicians, or other external agents. Instead, they are the outcome of a favourable constellation of factors. Socio-political events and changes in Nepal since the turn of the century, such as the Maoist uprising, the abolishment of the monarchy, and the promulgation of the new constitution, have triggered the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic consciousness of the Kusunda people, but also motivated the Nepali government to initiate work on marginalised groups and endangered languages and cultures, and Uday was there to conduct research on Kusunda and facilitate the classes. Ultimately, the efforts to awaken Kusunda

<sup>23</sup> When asked to translate Nepali हाम्रो भाषा मर्यो *hāmrō bhāṣā maryō* ‘our language died’ to Kusunda, Kamala came up with the literal translation *tigi gipən ogdzi* ‘our language died.’ In Kusunda, however, the verb ‘to die’ is only used in reference to higher living creatures (animals, humans). This example quite poignantly illustrates the inherent danger of relying on elicited examples, rather than on natural speech, in linguistic description.

<sup>24</sup> Nepali: अहिले खोजीखोजी लेउ । भाषा खोजीखोजी लेउ । In English: Now search well and bring it [the language]. Search the language well and bring it back!

came from within the community itself: It was Gyani Maiya's late son Prem Bahadur's wish and the Nepal Kusunda Development Society's proposal that kindled the first trial Kusunda class in 2016.

But being a small, scattered, and marginalised community with low levels of formal education and limited access to resources, the Kusunda rely on outside actors to support the realisation of their wish. They have found a dedicated advocate for their history, their language, and their culture in Uday, who acts as the bridge between the community, the Nepal government, and other outside parties. Over the years, this cooperation has resulted in efforts to document, describe, and ultimately awaken the Kusunda language. Through the NLC, the federal government of Nepal supports these efforts with practical input, logistical support, and financial backing. At the same time, foreign interest in the language by various linguists, anthropologists, journalists, cinematographers, and others has secured funds and practical support as well. The synergy of these actors and their efforts make the awakening of Kusunda an achievable goal. Ultimately, though, the success of these efforts depends on the Kusunda people themselves and, in particular, the language learners who will need to exhibit perseverance and perhaps make considerable personal sacrifices. If Kusunda is to remain a living language, it needs to be spoken on a daily basis. As long as the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions for this can be implemented, there is a chance that the Kusunda community's wish for their language to survive will be realised.

Some of the measures to recreate a vibrant Kusunda speech community proposed in this article, such as encouraging endogamous marriages, educating children in schools with hostel facilities away from home, and resettlement of Kusunda people to a single location may, especially in the current age, contravene existing western notions of personal freedom and liberty. They may invoke images of forced relocation of indigenous Americans and Australians to reserves and boarding schools. We think it is important to accentuate that these measures have been proposed by the Kusunda community itself and not by a government or an external agency aimed at either segregating or forcefully assimilating the Kusunda people. They are considered the ultimate measures to be taken to preserve and promote the Kusunda language and culture.

Finally, the situation of Kusunda is very specific in many ways, and there may not be many linguistic communities faced with similar limitations, constraints, and opportunities. Many other languages either have a relatively sizeable speech community, even though not all members still speak the language, or they have closer and more distant relatives in the same language family with more numerous speaker populations. Kusunda, on the other hand, is a language isolate with only a single speaker left and a widely scattered population. Many of the more standard approaches to language revitalisation have limited applicability in the case of Kusunda. Another problem is the very limited funding available for Kusunda revitalisation. A budget of less than 6,500 USD for language classes would not go a very long way in many other contexts. It is largely due to the dedication of

people like Uday, Kamala, and the learners themselves that results have been achieved. In general, efforts for language revitalisation in Nepal have only recently started, and Kusunda is a trail blazer in this respect. With most of Nepal's languages not even having been adequately described, the general focus of linguistic research is, understandably, on documentation and description. However, as the case of Kusunda also shows, ongoing documentation and description should go hand-in-hand with preservation, promotion, and, where needed, revitalisation, lest languages cease to be spoken almost unnoticed. The limitations of section 5 and the suggestions and recommendations of section 6 may be points of learning and attention for other revitalisation efforts, especially in the Nepalese and South Asian context.

Indeed, what may become clear from the Kusunda case, but what is by no means a new or unique observation, is that language awakening efforts can never have a 'one solution fits all' approach. In addition to the linguistic aspect of language awakening, the very specific socioeconomic, cultural, political, and other factors of the targeted community should be considered if success is to be achieved. These factors may be very different across continents, countries, and communities.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The research that forms the basis of this chapter was made possible through the financial support of British Academy, Postdoctoral Fellowship PF20\100076 "Substrate language influence in the southern Himalayas", the NLC's project Kusundā bhāṣā pustāntaraṇa "Intergenerational transmission of the Kusunda language", and the SOAS Seedcorn fund X074. We would also like to thank the last speaker of Kusunda, Kamala Khatri, and the Chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Welfare Society, Dhan Bahadur Kusunda for sharing their ideas. Finally, we would like to thank all the participants of the Kusunda classes and, in particular, those who shared their progress, their views, and their opinions with us: Fani Kusunda, Hima Kusunda, Pima Kusunda, Man Bahadur Kusunda, Premi Kusunda, Phali Kusunda, Ramesh Kusunda, Nirmala Kusunda, Anil Kusunda, Shyam Kusunda, Khamba Rokaye, Sunita Devkota and Asmita Nepali. All participants have given their informed consent for using their views in this publication.

## REFERENCES

- Aaley, U. R. (2016). Kusunda: An Endangered Tribe and Language. *Jakhera*. 187–191.
- Aaley, U. R. (2017). कुसुण्डा जाति र शब्दकोश [*Kusunda tribe and dictionary*]. Lamahī, Dān: Aarambhkhabar Weekly.
- Aaley, U. R. & Sen Kusunda, G. M. (2015). Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Kusunda. In *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (in various mother tongues)* Part 2: 96-104. Indigenous Media Foundation Nepal. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/kusunda-kusanda> on 24-04-2022.
- Aaley, U. R. & Bodt T. A. (2019). *New data on Kusunda*. Humanities Commons. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/1zy2-k376>
- Aaley, U. R. & Bodt T. A. (2020a). New Kusunda data: A list of 250 concepts. In *Computer-Assisted Language Comparison in Practice*, <https://calc.hypotheses.org/2414>
- Aaley, U. R. & Bodt T. A. (2020b). New Kusunda data: A list of 250 concepts. In Johann-Mattis List (ed.) *Computer-assisted language comparison in practice - Tutorials on computational approaches to the history and diversity of languages. Volume 3*. Jena: Department of Linguistic and Cultural Evolution, Max-Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:39671/>
- Aaley, U. R. & Bodt T. A. (2022) [2072 VS]. कुसुण्डाको चित्रकथा [*Kusunda Picture Book*]. Lamahī: Kusumhahayav Offset Press.
- Ācārya, B. R., Udāsī, T. R. & Ālē, U. R. बावुराम आचार्य, टीकाराम उदासी, उदयरज आले. (2018) [2075 V.S.]. कुसुण्डा भाषाको इतिहास [History of the Kusunda language]. काठमाडौँ: भाषा आयोग [Kathmandu: Language Commission].
- Ālē, U. R. उदयरज आले. (2012) [2069 V.S.]. कुसुण्डा जातिको खोजिमा भैंटारिडा [In search of the Kusunda tribe]. नयाँ युगबोध राष्ट्रिय दैनिक [*Nayām Yugabōdh National Daily*], 18 Kartik [04 November].
- Ālē, U. R. उदयरज आले. (2014a) [2071 V.S.]. हराउन्डाई 'बनराजा' [The disappearing 'kings of the forest']. नयाँ युगबोध राष्ट्रिय दैनिक [*Nayām Yugabōdh National Daily*], 09/08/2014.
- Ālē, U. R. उदयरज आले. (2014b). कुसुण्डाको जातीय चिनारी [Identity of the Kusunda Tribe]. In कोपिला छविलाल (सं.) [C. Kōpilā (ed.)] आदिवासी जर्नल [*Indigenous Journal*]. चैलाही गा.वि.स. परिषद, लमही देउखुरी: नेपाल आदिवासी जनजाति महासंघ [Cailāhī V.D.C., Lamahī, Dēukhurī: Nepal Federation of Indigenous Tribes]: 11–23.

- Ālē, U. R. उदयराज आले. (2015). कुसुण्डा जाति: एक अध्ययन [Kusunda Tribe: A Study]. *Indigenous People in the World*. Lamahī, Dēukhurī: नेपाल थारु भाषा र साहित्य सम्प्रदायको मञ्च [Nepal Tharu language and literature society] Samranchhan Manch: 11–24.
- Ālē, U. R. उदयराज आले. (2021a) [2078 V.S.]. कुसुण्डा गिपन (कुसुण्डा भाषा कक्षा) आधारभूत पाठ्यसामग्री-२०७८ [Kusundā Gipan (Kusundā Language Class) Basic Textbook-2078]. काठमाडौँ: भाषा आयोग [Kathmandu: Language Commission].
- Ālē, U. R. उदयराज आले. (2021b). कुसुण्डा भाषाको पार्श्वचित्र (प्रोफाइल ग्रन्थसूचीसहित) [*Background of the Kusundā language (with bibliography)*]. शङ्खमूल, काठमाडौँ: भाषा आयोग [Śāṅkhamūl, Kāṭhmāḍaum̃: Language Commission] (report presented at International Mother Tongue Day, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2022).
- Ālē, U. R. उदय राज आले. (2021c). सोजाक [Sōjak]. काठमाडौँ: नाउ हियर मिडिया [Kāṭhmāḍaum̃: NowHere Media].
- Ālē, U. R. उदयराज आले. (2022a) [2078 V.S.]. कुसुण्डा गिपन (कुसुण्डा भाषा कक्षा) आधारभूत पाठ्यसामग्री-२०७८ [Kusundā Gipan (Kusundā Language Class) Basic Textbook-2078]. काठमाडौँ: भाषा आयोग [Kathmandu: Language Commission].
- Ālē, U. R. उदयराज आले. (2022b) [2078 V.S.]. गेम्पेहाक [Gemjehaq – King of the Forest]. दाङ: नेपाल कुसुण्डा विकास समाज Dāng: Nēpāl Kusundā Vikās Samāj [Dāng: Nepal Kusunda Development Society].
- Bodt, T. A. & Aaley, U. R. (under review - a). Revitalising a language isolate - Kusunda. [Under review for K. Hildebrandt, Y. Modi, D. Peterson & H. Suzuki (Eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Tibeto-Burman Languages*. Oxford University Press].
- Bodt, T. A. & Aaley, U. R. (under review - b). Decline of the Kusunda of Nepal. [Under review for *Asian Ethnology*].
- Bodt, T. A. & Aaley, U. R. (under review - c). Revival of the Kusunda of Nepal. [Under review for *Asian Ethnicity*].
- Bommeleyn, P. & Tuttle, R. (2018). Tolowa Language in the home. In: L. Hinton, L. Huss & G. Roche (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language revitalization*, 115–122. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Cenoz, J. & Gorter, D. (2017). Minority languages and sustainable translanguaging: threat or opportunity? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 38(10), 901-912. DOI: 10.1080/01434632.2017.1284855

- Donohue, M. & Gautam, B. (2013). Evidence and Stance in Kusunda. *Nepalese Linguistics* 28: 38–47.
- Donohue, M. & Gautam, B. (2017). Quantification in Kusunda. In D. Paperno and E. L. Keenan (Eds.) *Handbook of Quantifiers in Natural Language Vol. II. Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy* 97: 431–451.
- Donohue, M. & Gautam, B., & Pokharel, M. (2014). Negation and nominalization in Kusunda. *Language*, vol. 90 nr. 3: 737–745.
- van Driem, G. (2001). *Languages of the Himalayas: an ethnolinguistic handbook of the Greater Himalayan region*. Brill.
- Himalaya TV हिमालय टिभी. (2021) [2077 VS]. लोपोन्मुख कुसुन्डा जातिलाई भाषा, संस्कृतिभन्दा बास जोगाउने चिन्ता (भिडियोसहित) [Endangered Kusunda ethnic group is more worried about protecting residential land than language, culture (with video)]. 29 Mansir 2077 VS [13-03-2021]. <https://www.himalayatv.com/2020/12/14/19807/>
- García, O. & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hodgson, B. H. (1848). On the Chépáng and Kúsúnda tribes of Nepál. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* XVII (2): 650–658.
- Hodgson, B. H. (1857). Comparative vocabulary of the languages of the broken tribes of Nepal. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 26: 317–371.
- Hodgson, B. H. (1874). *Essays on the languages, literature, and religion of Nepál and Tibet*. Trübner and Co.
- KC, D. (2016). Book on Kusunda tribe to release soon. *The Kathmandu Post*, 03/20. <https://kathmandupost.com/art-entertainment/2016/03/20/book-on-kusunda-tribe-to-release-soon>
- Khadkã, N. नारायण खड्का. (2019). कुसुण्डा भाषा सिक्र सुर्खेत र प्युठानबाट दाङमा [From Surkhêt and Pyuṭhãn to Dãñ to learn the Kusunda language]. सेतोपाटी [*Sētōpāṭī*], 02/27. <https://www.setopati.com/social/176177>
- Leonard, W. Y. (2008). When is an “extinct language” not extinct. *Sustaining linguistic diversity: Endangered and minority languages and language varieties*: 23–33.
- Martin, K. (2011). Aynu itak: On the Road to Ainu Language Revitalization. *Media and Communication Studies* 60: 57–93.

- O'Regan, H. (2018). Kotahi mano kāika, kotahi mano wawata – A thousand homes, a thousand dreams: Permission to dream again. In L. Hinton, L. Huss & G. Roche (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language revitalization*, 107–114. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Panṭhī, S. शिवराज पन्थी. (2016). कुसुण्डाको शब्दचित्रमा सर्वजानिक भाए आले। [Kusunda's word picture became public]. नयाँ युगबोध राष्ट्रिय दैनिक [*Nayāṁ Yugabōdh National Daily*], 23/04/2016.
- Pérez Báez, G., Vogel, R. & Patolo, U. (2019). Global Survey of Revitalization Efforts: A mixed methods approach to understanding language revitalization practices. *Language Documentation and Conservation Vol. 13*: 446–513.
- Reinhard, J. (1968). The Kusunda: Ethnographic Note on a Hunting Tribe of Nepal. *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research*. 10: 95– 110.
- Reinhard, J. (1969). Aperçu sur les Kusunda: peuple chasseur du Népal. *Objets et Mondes* 9 (1): 89–106.
- Reinhard, J. (1976). The Ban Rajas – A vanishing Himalayan tribe. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 4(1): 1–22.
- Reinhard, J. & Toba, T. (Sueyoshi). (1970). *A preliminary linguistic analysis and vocabulary of the Kusunda language*. Summer Institute of Linguistics and Tribhuvan University.  
<http://www.language-archives.org/item/oai:sil.org:37031>
- Śarmā, G. गोपाल शर्मा. (2018). कुसुण्डा भाषा बचाउन कक्षा सञ्चालन [Conducting classes to save the Kusunda language]. *Annapurna Post* 25 Kārtik 2075 VS [11-11-2018].  
<https://annapurnapost.com/news/kusunddaa-bhaassaa-bcaaun-kkssaa-snycaaln-112496>
- Watters, D. E. (2005). Kusunda: a typological isolate in South Asia. In Y. Yadav, G. Bhattarai, R. R. Lohani, B. Prasain & K. Parajuli (Eds.) *Contemporary issues in Nepalese linguistics*. Kathmandu: Linguistic Society of Nepal, 375–396. <http://www.languagearchives.org/item/oai:sil.org:37009>
- Watters, D. E., Yogendra P. Yadav, Madhav P. Pokharel & Balaram Prasain. (2006). *Notes on Kusunda grammar (a language isolate of Nepal)*. National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities. <http://www.language-archives.org/item/oai:sil.org:3028>
- Zahir, Z. (2018). Language nesting in the home. In L. Hinton, L. Huss, & G. Roche (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language revitalization*, 156–166. Taylor & Francis Group.