Kamala Sen on reviving the near-extinct Kusunda

UDAY RAJ AALEY AND SUBHASHISH PANIGRAHI TALK TO KAMALA SEN ABOUT HER JOURNEY AND PLANS TO KEEP THE ONCE NEAR-EXTINCT KUSUNDA LANGUAGE ALIVE

Uday Raj Aaley and Subhashish Panigrahi collaborated for an interview with Kamala Sen, the sole fluent living speaker of the Kusunda language of Nepal, which is known as Gejmehac gipan by native speakers of Nepal. Linguists predicted that this language isolate was on the verge of extinction when Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda, a community elder and a fluent speaker, died in 2020. Since 2019, language classes led by Aaley Sen-Kusunda, and and her younger sister, Kamala Sen, have helped to revive the language. Panigrahi's 2019 documentary Gyani Maiya, and 2024 interview series Gejmehac Gipan, feature conversations between Sen-Kusunda and Aaley, making them the most detailed video documentation of Kusunda to date.

Can you tell us about yourself?
My name is Kamala Sen. I was born to Bhim Bahadur and Puni Maya Sen Kusunda in the Buribang village of Rolpa district in the Lumbini province of Nepal. I grew up in several villages: Buribang, Uma, Hamja, Panchekot, Mairi, Sakhi, and Tunibot. I now live in Supailakuti in the Dang district, and I am a homemaker.



Photo Kamala Sen Uday Raj Aaley

How did you learn Kusunda? Did moving between different places affect your fluency in Kusunda?
I learned Kusunda from my parents, and all of us in my family spoke Kusunda then. My father also spoke some Khas language, but my mother was only fluent in Kusunda. Even though we moved from village to village, we continued to speak Kusunda at home. So, I never had any problem speaking our language.

How much Kusunda did you speak once you became an adult? Did you ever have to stop speaking it?
My mother and I spoke Kusunda until her death in 1985. I was 32 years-old then. I got married in the Tunibot village in Rolpa, and my Chhetri husband and I moved to Shimla in India for work, where we lived for 10 years. My husband and children spoke only Nepali. As none at home would understand Kusunda, I did not have anyone there to speak Kusunda with.

Back in Nepal, my elder sister Gyani Maiya and I did speak Kusunda until her death in 2020. Since my mama (maternal uncle), Prem Bahadur Shahi, had forgotten Kusunda, except for a few words, we spoke sparingly in Kusunda. There was no-one I knew who understood the language.

Can you tell us about your involvement in the children's education programme in Kusunda?
I got involved in the Nepal Language Commission-supported Kusunda language class as the Commission made me a resource person. Even though I spoke Kusunda, I didn't know then how to teach others. Uday Aaley had learned Kusunda from didi



(elder sister Gyani Maiya) and started teaching. The classes are going well now. Children learnt to speak – five or six out of 20 students speak well now. They and I can now converse in Kusunda. But they still have to read and learn more.

What are your wishes for the protection and promotion of Kusunda?

I want the Kusunda people to learn Kusunda and speak it at home. These classes aside, I don't have anyone to speak Kusunda with. I myself don't know how to read and write. Due to these language classes, some students are able to understand, write and speak the language. More students should also be taught in such classes. Since these classes are short-lived, students don't get to learn as much as they want.

The state, local governments and the Kusunda community need to pay more attention to protect Kusunda. The Kusunda community is really small. Our language can only be spoken by bringing everyone together. Now that there are some efforts to protect Kusunda, we need widespread support. I can't save our language alone. Some of us Kusundas have begun to understand the importance of our language. Some of our students are performing well, and this gives us hope too.



Photo **Uday Raj Aaley and Kamala Sen**
Uday Raj Aaley

Uday Raj Aaley is a language researcher, lexicographer and writer from Nepal who has studied the Kusunda language for a long time. He has authored the trilingual dictionary Kusunda Jatira Shabdakosh (2017) and two books about the language – Gemyehak (2023) and Kusunda Gipan (2022).

Subhashish Panigrahi is a civil society leader, filmmaker and archivist working in the society, language, media and technology intersection. His 2019 documentary Gyani Maiya depicted the latend remains the most extensive video documentation of the Kusunda language, winning a National Geographic Society award. His works are available at psubhashish.com.

FIND OUT MORE...

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