

Revisiting the Ethnolinguistic Positioning of Balmiki Language of Odisha: A Bibliographic Appraisal

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Abstract: Languages are not distinct and discrete units with easily identifiable linguistic features. Sometimes linguistic features overlap and cross the boundaries of time and space. So it becomes difficult for linguists to identify languages and their boundaries. Besides this, the process of identification of languages gets complicated by non-linguistic purposes such as social and political reasons. Scientifically, documents and reports prepared by different governmental and non-governmental agencies specifying the identities of languages with their own agenda complicate the matter of identifying languages. It is also noticed that the methods employed for linguists also impact objective identification since their methodologies and interpretations are based on different philosophical underpinnings. In this context, an ethnolinguistic analysis to establish the identity of a language becomes important. Most of the tribal languages and the languages spoken in remote areas are understudied. It is very difficult to know if they are different languages or a cluster of varieties of a single language. The case of Balmiki is an example of this kind of confusion. Balmiki is a familiar word in the sub-continent of India. It is used as a supra-label for different ethnic groups in India. It is also used for a language spoken in the bordering areas of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. Governmental and non-governmental reports have identified and listed it under different titles. Linguists who have worked on this language have different views about the identity of it. Some scholars believe that it is an isolated language while some other scholars think it is the same language that is spread in both the sides of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh.

The present study critically attempts to ascertain the ethnolinguistic position of Balmiki spoken in Odisha vis-à-vis Kupia or Walmiki has spoken in Andhra Pradesh using the bibliographical evidence and see if they are