Why South Asia People Group Data Looks So Different

BY **BILL MORRISON** AND **A SOUTH ASIAN RESEARCHER**

Bill Morrison (bill@joshuaproject.net) has been instrumental in building the Joshua Project database of people groups since 1999, and lives in Colorado. He also served with Campus Crusade for Christ and The Navigators. Bill wrote this article with a researcher who has spent 30 years compiling extensive data on South Asian people groups/communities.

South Asia people groups are not ethnolinguistic

People group lists historically have used two factors to identify each people group: language spoken and ethnicity, where "ethnicity" is defined broadly. Such lists may be referred to as ethno-linguistic because both factors were used to form the lists.

However, in practice, language spoken has been given more, if not exclusive, emphasis than ethnicity as people groups were identified. This emphasis on language spoken has worked reasonably well in most parts of the world, but it does not work well in South Asia.

The South Asia people group data is not ethno-linguistic if by that term we mean a list of language groups and subdivisions of language groups. A very different approach is used for South Asia.

Language groups vs. people groups / communities

The classic definition of a people group is "For evangelization purposes, a people group is the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a Church Planting Movement without encountering barriers of *understanding* or *acceptance*."

Outside South Asia the approach is to emphasize the *understandability* portion of the people group definition. This approach produces a list of people groups identified first and foremost by language spoken and may involve subdivisions of language groups.

However, in South Asia the approach is to define people groups consistent with the strongly held sense of "community" pervasive in that region. The term community does not refer to a physical location, but rather caste or social grouping within a structured hierarchy. The Indian term is *jati*. Barriers between communities/castes determine who one can associate with, share a meal with, marry, what homes one might enter, what occupation one might have, religious tradition and much more. This has profound impact on defining people groups and on church-planting. South Asian communities are the largest practical identity in which the gospel can take root and spread through relational pathways and means. The community perspective emphasizes *acceptance* barriers in the traditional definition of people group. Self-identification rather than language is the key determinate in defining South Asian people groups.

Relationship between South Asian people groups and languages spoken

In South Asia, individuals and people groups are typically multi-lingual. Quite often, languages spoken do not identify the community an individual or people group is part of. This many-to-many relationship between people groups and languages creates a highly complex situation. People group websites show only a very simplified presentation of this complexity. However, detailed South Asia district-level people group, language and religion data is available.

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Importance of self-identification

A goal for South Asia researchers has been to consistently identify people groups by how individuals identify themselves. An illustration of this perspective can be seen in one definition for Aboriginal used in Australia: "An Aboriginal is one who identifies as an Aboriginal, and who is perceived as belonging to an Aboriginal community by the Aboriginal community". In South Asia, individuals typically know the community they have been born into, and this is how they identify themselves to census and other government inquiries. This approach helps to identify the groupings through which the gospel message is most likely to flow without encountering significant barriers of acceptance. It is important to avoid identifications imposed from outside the communities themselves.

This self-identification produces a much more granular list with many more people group entries for South Asia. Outsiders may only see broad classifications such as Jat, Rajput, Brahmin or Pashtun and not see the distinctions and barriers between self-identified communities. It might take years of humble observation for an outsider to truly understand the difference between, for example, the Chetti Bania and Srimali Bania.

Toward a "unimax" list

Dave Datema and Kevin Higgins touch on the "unimax" view of people groups in their articles in this issue. A unimax people is "the **max**imum-sized group sufficiently **uni**fied to be the target of a single people movement to Christ". South Asia people group data is based on self-identification and barriers beyond language which is a significant step toward a unimax view of South Asian peoples.

Long-term, on-site research is needed to fully identify unimax peoples. Current South Asia people group lists provide an excellent starting point for workers seeking to understand local realities. Certainly, there will be cases where two or more communities need to be merged on a list to better conform to what is discovered, or perhaps one community needs to be split to form several communities.

Current South Asia people group data is not perfect, but it has integrity and is faithful to the people who have collected, collated and published it over past decades. It is generally consistent with how individuals in South Asia identify their own communities. Caste cohesiveness may be diminishing, especially in urban areas, yet self-awareness of the community a person has been born into remains reasonably strong in most of South Asia.

The Joshua Project website is utilized by many more from India than any other country, including the United States. It is not unusual for an Indian to write saying such things as "my community is larger than that," or "you should modify the name of my community." However, very rarely have any users raised objections to the overall approach and presentation of the people groups of South Asia.

The non-ethnolinguistic, self-identification-based, granular, unimax nature of South Asian people group data makes it very different from the people group data in the rest of the world. Thankfully, the Lord has provided a remarkably rich dataset for the most complex people group situation in the world. May it be used to advance His kingdom in South Asia. (MF)

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