

The Vowel Phonemes of Sadri- A Phonological Analysis

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Abstract: Sadri is a lingua franca used for inter-tribal group communication in eastern-central India. The origin of Sadri and other related terms is somewhat obscure. Nowranggi suggests the term ‘Sadri’ comes from the word ‘Sadan’ which is derived from Old Indo-Aryan word ‘nisada’ referring to an ethnic group of North-east India. Sadri is known by different names. Lewis lists the following alternate names: Chota Nagpuri, Gawari, Jharkhandi, Nagpuri, Sadan, Sadani, Sadna, Sadrik, Sradri etc. Since Grierson, there has been general consensus that Sadri belongs to the eastern group of the Indo-Aryan languages and is regarded as a sister language of Oriya, Bengali and Angika. Sadri is mainly spoken in Western and Central Jharkhand, but also in parts of Orissa, Chattisgarh, West

Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh. Lewis estimates the total number of speakers to be 1,970,000 for 1997. The census of India provides the figure of 2,044,776 speakers. In addition to this group of native speakers, Sadri is also used as a lingua- franca by a large number of so called ‘tribal’ groups, among others the Kharia (South Munda), Mundari, Bhumij (North Munda), Oraon and Kurukh (North Dravidian) and a number of speakers of these tribal groups have adopted Sadri as their first language and no longer speak their traditional languages. The Sadri language in Assam is highly influenced by the dominant language Assamese. As a result, the speakers of the same language are going to loss not only lexical items relating to indigenous flora and fauna, games, food habits, cultural artifacts etc., but also its original linguistic features. So, the description, documentation and codification of the language are highly required for the preservation and revitalization of the language. This paper is an attempt to present and analyze the vowel phonemes as a part of he phonological analysis of the Sadri language spoken in Sonitpur district of Assam.

Keywords: Sadri, Indo Aryan language, Vowel segments

Introduction: Sadri or Sedan is originated as the mother tongue of the Sedans, an Aryan group amongst the Non-Aryans in Chuta Nagpur Plateau (Navarangi, 1965:5). It evolved as a link language of the Adivashis living mainly in and around Chota Nagpur Plateau that spreads over present day Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and parts of West Bengal and Odisha. About 97 or so heterogeneous communities like the Munda, Kharia, Ho, Oraons etc. come under the umbrella term Adivashis. These communities, mostly belonging to three language families namely, Austro-Asiatic, Indo-Aryan and Dravidian used Sadri as their link language for inter and intra community communication. From pidgin, Sadri gradually evolved as a Creole, primarily due to inter community marriages between the various linguistic groups amongst them. The offsprings of these bilingual parents adopted this link language as their mother tongue. Goswami (1976:15) gives a list of such groups who use Nagpuria Sadri as a second language and those who use it as their mother tongue. According to the 2001 Census Report, there are 2,044,776 Sadri speakers in India.

When the British tea planters brought the Adivashis to Assam, as laborers, in the 19th century, Sadri as a link language came along with them. The Adivashi people were brought mainly because they proved efficient and were paid lower wages compared to the local laborers. They came mostly from the Southern, Eastern and Central parts of India. These labourers were brought for an indentured period. When the period was over, the laborers had to leave the gardens. Instead of going back to their original homelands, after the indentured period, they settled down in villages outside the tea garden and took to cultivation and some other professions. In due course of time, the laborers employed by the tea gardens were called ‘tea tribes’ and those who worked as the cultivators outside the tea gardens were called ‘ex-tea tribes’. The Tea Laborer Appointment Policies led to the emergence of these two groups. Today, the ‘tea tribes’ and the ‘ex-tea tribes’ have come together on one platform. They now call themselves Adivashis. The names ‘tea tribes’ and ‘ex-tea tribes’, according to them are derogatory.

There are about 845 tea gardens (Toppno 1999) in Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Lakhimpur, Tinisukia, Sonitpur and Kokrajhar districts of Assam. The approximate population of the Adivashis in Assam has been estimated to be 70 lacs. However, the language data for the study have been collected from these districts of Assam. **Vowels:** Sadri has six vowels. The vowel system shows a three way contrast of front, central and back. The vowels are distinguished at the three levels of tongue height: high, mid and low. There are two way contrasts namely front and back at the high

level. On the other hand, there is three way contrasts i.e. front, centre and back at the mid level while there is only one central vowel at the low level. The vocalic phonemes in Sadri are /i, e, ə, a, o and u/. The front and central vowels are unrounded while the back vowels are rounded.

The vowels of Sadri are voiced, but voicing is not a relevant feature of the language. Nasalization is phonemic in the language and appears to be compatible with all monophthongs. Vowel length, on the other hand, is not phonemic. To get a better idea, the vowels of Sadri are shown in the following figure:

	Front		Central		Back	
	UR	R	UR	R	UR	R
High	i				U	
Mid	e		ə		O	
Low			a			

Figure: 1. Sadri Vowels

Contrastive pairs of vowels: To prove its identity as a phoneme, we have to contrast vowels with each other in the same identical environment. Let us discuss the following examples-

- | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| /e/ vs /a/: | /tal/ ‘a tree’ | /tel/ ‘oil’ |
| /ə/ vs /u/: | /əmər/ ‘immortal’ | /umər/ ‘age’ |
| | /p ^h əl/ ‘fruit’ | /p ^h ul/ ‘flower’ |
| /i/ vs. /e/: | /bare/ ‘about (post-position)’ | /bari/ ‘garden’ |
| | /hil/ ‘shiver/shake’ | /hel/ ‘keep on/ begin’ |
| /o/ vs /u/: | /jur/ ‘(too) much’ | /jor/ ‘strong’ |
| | /luk/ ‘hide’ | /lok/ ‘person’ |
| /a/ vs /ə/: | /kam/ ‘work’ | /kəm/ ‘less’ |

/bar/ ‘classifier for day’ /bər/ ‘banyan’

/i/ vs /a/: /didi/ ‘elder sister’ /dada/ ‘elder brother’

 /raja/ ‘king’ /raji/ ‘consent’

/i/ vs /e/ vs /ə/: /ki/ ‘what’ /ke/ ‘who’ /kə/ ‘speak’

Description of Vowels:

/i/: It is a front high unrounded vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words, i.e. initially, medially and finally. Let us take the following examples-

Initially: /ila/ ‘a fish’ /ita/ ‘brick’ /inam/ ‘prize’

Medially: /bhagina/ ‘niece’ /mithun/ ‘bison’ /minjur/ ‘peacock’

Finally : /imti/ ‘ant’ /ghungi/ ‘snail’ /injri/ ‘prawn’

/e/: It is a mid front unrounded vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words. Let us take the following examples-

Initially: /ekla/ ‘alone’ /ekhən/ ‘now’ /etna/ ‘so much’

Medially: /temrəs/ ‘guava’ /lembu/ ‘lemon’ /pepta/ ‘papaya’

Finally: /jabe/ ‘go’ /nie/ ‘below’ /hamnike/ ‘us’

/a/: It is a low central unrounded vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words. For example-

Initially: /agun/ ‘fire’ /aja/ ‘great grandpa’ /and^har/ ‘darkness’

Medially: /dalim/ ‘pomegranate’/k^hakra/ ‘crab’ /b^halu/ ‘bear’

Finally: /poka/ 'insect' /papla/ 'butterfly' /at^ha/ 'glue'

/ə/: It is a mid central unrounded vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words. For example-

Initially: /ənt/ 'finish' /əlga/ 'isolate' /ənjan/ 'unknown'

Medially: /hərin/ 'deer' /bəkli/ 'heron' /pədum/ 'lotus'

Finally: /khabə/ 'eat' /kərbə/ 'to do' /dibə/ 'to give'

/o/: It is a rounded back mid vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words. Let us take the following examples-

Initially: /ok^həir/ 'mortar' /oriya/ 'Oriya' /očul/ 'rules'

Medially: /jok/ 'leech' /poka/ 'insect' /k^hol/ 'open'

Finally: /ariyo/ 'all four' /bəčabo/ 'saving' /d^ho/ 'wash'

/u/: It is a high back rounded vowel. It occurs in all the three positions of words. Let us go through the following examples-

Initially: /ukil/ 'lawyer' /ug/ 'grow' /umər/ 'age'

Medially: /suga/ 'parrot' /kuli/ 'cuckoo' /pura/ 'total'

Finally: /lembu/ 'lemon' /alu/ 'potato' /b^halu/ 'bear'

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it is observed that Sadri has a six vowel system showing a three way contrast of front, central and back. The vowels are distinguished at the three levels of tongue height: high, mid and low. There are two way contrasts namely front and back at the high level. On the other hand, there is three way contrasts i.e. front, centre and back at the mid level while there is only one central vowel at the low level. The vocalic phonemes in Sadri are /i, e, ə, a, o and u/. The front and central vowels are unrounded while the back vowels are rounded.

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