

Heritage Voices: Language – Kutchi



About The Kutchi Language

Kutchi (also spelled as Kutchhi, Kachchhi, or Cutchi) is an Indo-Aryan language from the Indo-Iranian group of the Indo-European language family. It is derived from one of the *prakrit*, or ancient vernacular languages of India that evolved into the modern Indo-Aryan languages of the Northwestern subdivision.

Kutchi is spoken primarily in the largest district of Indian's westernmost state, Gujarat. In addition, several communities of Kutchi speakers are situated directly across the border in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. Significant numbers are also found in Malawi, Kenya, and Tanzania as a result of the Indian Diaspora in East Africa. Pockets of speakers are found in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. Kutchi is spoken by about 885,000 people around the world (Kachchhi language, n.d.).

Location of Kutch. Source: [Google Images](#)



The Region of Kutch

Kutch, which was previously an independent state, became part of the Bombay state following the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and later part of Gujarat when the great multilingual state was divided into Gujarat and Maharashtra.

As a border region, Kutch was of special importance to both India and Pakistan following the Partition.

Disputes over the political boundary between the two nations, bequeathed by the British Indian Government, were handled by a neutral arbitration commission in Geneva. The Indo-Pakistan Western Boundary Case Tribunal in 1969 ultimately decided on a boundary that reallocated 90% of the territory to India and 10% to Pakistan, thus stretching the linguistic area across the two countries (Wetter, 1971).

The Northern part of the district of Kutch is a seasonal salt marsh referred to as the Rann of Kutch, which is submerged in water during the monsoon season. The remainder of the year, the sands turn into salty flats. The name "Kutch" literally means something that is periodically wet and then dry. The name is also said to be derived from the Sanskrit word for *island*, or the Kutchi word *kachbo*, for *tortoise*, as the shape of the land mass resembles the shape of a turtle (Gujarat Tourism; Menon, 2009). The region is surrounded by the Gulf of Kutch and the Arabian Sea to the South and West, and the Rann of Kutch to the North and East, making it geographically isolated from the rest of India for much of the year.

In 2010, Gujarat began a series of tourism ads in English and Hindi labeled "Khushboo Gujarat ki" (The Fragrance of Gujarat), through which Kutch was highlighted as a must-see attraction of the state.

Click on the links below to view the ads on YouTube:

[Hindi](#)

[English](#)

Status of Kutchi

Kutchi is cited as a dialect of Sindhi by some, and a dialect of Gujarati by others. It is lexically similar to both Sindhi and Gujarati, and to some extent mutually intelligible by both. The neighboring languages that surround the district of Kutchh, including Sindhi, Kathiawari (a dialect of Gujarati), and Marwari (a dialect of Rajasthani), contribute to the complex combination of shared linguistic traits.

The 2001 census of India lists Kutchi as a sub-language of Sindhi (Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs, 2001). This designation has led to protest for the recognition of Kutchi as an independent language. Measures taken to preserve and revitalize the status of the language include the establishment of the *Kutchi Sahitya Academy* and the *Kutchi-Mitra Daily* newspaper (Maheshwari, 2010). Of the 2,535,485 speakers of Sindhi in India, an estimated 823,058 claim Kutchi as their mother tongue (Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs, 2001). Sindhi is listed as one of the 22 official languages of India in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution, with nearly 3 million speakers who are not affiliated with any state in particular, but rather spread throughout the country. In addition to recognition as an official language of India, Sindhi is a provincial language of Pakistan, with numbers indicating the presence of nearly 19 million speakers (University of California, n.d.).

Advocates for the registration of Kutchi as a separate language have demanded that the language be listed separately from Sindhi in the 2011 census, but data have not yet been made available (Maheshwari, 2010).

Structure of Kutchi

Kutchi is categorized as an SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) language like other Indo-Aryan languages. Similar to these languages, word order is not rigid, but rather flexible. The subject, object, and verb are freely moved around within a sentence, fulfilling various pragmatic purposes, such as establishing a different point of focus, naming a topic, or revealing new information. Due to the lack of articles in Kutchi, definiteness or indefiniteness of a noun is based on context and word order. The word for *one*, *hikro*, can be used as an indefinite article, when the meaning is “acertain.” Demonstratives can be used to mark definiteness of a noun.

All nouns are classed by grammatical gender. In Kutchi, *topi*, or *hat*, is feminine, while *darvaajo*, or *door*, is masculine. Distinguishing between masculine and feminine nouns is crucial for correctly conjugating verbs that agree with gender and number. In addition, Kutchi has inflecting adjectives that agree with the gender of the noun, as well as non-inflecting adjectives. The figure below gives examples of inflecting and non-inflecting adjectives.

Figure 1: Adjectives

Red hat	Rathi topi (inflecting, feminine noun)
Red door	Ratho darvaajo (inflecting, masculine noun)
Clean hat	Saaf topi (non-inflecting, feminine noun)
Clean door	Saaf darvaajo (non-inflecting, masculine noun)

Personal and demonstrative pronouns in Kutchi are displayed in the figure below:

Figure 2: Pronouns

	PERSONAL				DEMONSTRATIVE	
	First		Second		Third	
	S	P	S	P	S/P Proximal	S/P Distal
Nominative	a:ũ	asã	tũ:	aĩ:	hi:	hu:
		pã	aĩ:	loka		
Oblique	mũ:	asã	to:	ã:	hin	hun
		pã	ã:	loka		

First and second person are marked by personal pronouns, while third person is indicated with the use of demonstrative pronouns. Respect is embedded into Kutchi with two second-person singular pronouns, *tũ:* and *aĩ:*. *Tũ:* is used in communication with anyone younger (e.g. *Tũ:* kiy ayen? = How are you?), and *aĩ:* is the formal counterpart used when the addressee is older (e.g. *Aĩ:* kiy ayon = How are you?). When using the respectful pronoun *aĩ:*, verbs must be conjugated in the same pattern as the second-person plural pronoun *aĩ:* *loka*. While pronouns in Kutchi do not distinguish gender, verb conjugations do mark gender in first, second, and third person in several tenses as shown in the shaded regions below.

Figure 3. Gender Agreement

Personal Pronoun		Present Tense	Present Progressive Tense	Past Tense	Past Perfect Tense	Future Tense
A:ũ (I)	Male	khyan	khyant o	khad os	khad o vos	khend os
	Female	khyan	khyant i	khad is	khadi vis	khend is
Tũ: (You)	Male	Kha	khyent o	khade	khade ve	khene
	Female	kha	khyent i	khade	khadi vyen	khen yen

Kutchi's phonetic inventory exhibits a set of four implosive stops that differentiate the language from the majority of other Indo-Aryan languages. Implosive stops are more common to Sindhi, thus varieties of Kutchi that are closer to Gujarati have a fewer number of these sounds. Kutchi includes the [b], [d], [ɟ], [g] implosive consonants (Cole, n.d.). These distinct sounds are demonstrated in words like *bara* (outside), *bai* (sister), *dari* (beard), *jaro* (cobweb), and *gayn* (song).

Orthography of Kutchi

Kutchi is one of India's unwritten languages that has recently been revisited with the hopes of establishing a written form that helps the language achieve equality in rank among other Indian languages.

It has been hypothesized that the Kutchi language was once written in either the *Khojki* script or the *Dholavira* script, both of which are extinct today. The Kutchh Museum in the city of Bhuj houses examples of the extinct script. One option for establishing a written system for a language is to adopt an existing script. In India, Kutchi has been written in a modified version of the Gujarati script for years (shown in Figure 4), while some communities in India and Pakistan have chosen to write in the Perso-Arabic script of Sindhi (shown in Figure 5). Due to the fact that the language straddles two borders, and two religious communities, it is understandable that there is no consensus, but rather a socio-religious divide in the choice of script.

Figure 4: Modified Gujarati Script for Kutchi

Vowels and vowel diacritics

અ	આ	ઈ	ઈ	ઉ	ઊ	એ
a	ā	i	ī	u	ū	e
[ɛ~ə]	[ɑː]	[i]	[iː]	[u]	[uː]	[eː]
પ	પા	પિ	પી	પુ	પૂ	પે
pa	pā	pi	pī	pu	pū	pe
ઐ	ઑ	ઔ	અં	અઃ		
ai/â	o	au	aṁ	aḥ		
[aĩ~e~æː]	[oː]	[ɔ̃~oː]	[əŋ]	[əh]		
પૈ	પૌ	પૌ	પં	પઃ	પ્	
pai	po	pau	paṁ	paḥ	p	

Consonants

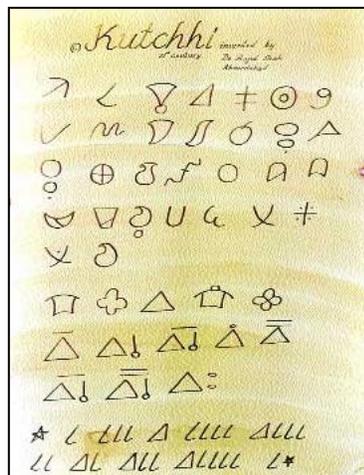
ક	ક્ષ	ખ	ગ	ઘ	ઙ	ચ	છ	જ	ઝ
ka	kṣa	kha	ga	ḡa	ṅa	ca	ca	cha	ja
[kɛ]	[kʂɛ]	[kʰɛ]	[gɛ]	[gʱɛ]	[ŋɛ]	[tʃ/cɛ]	[tʃ/cɛ]	[tʃ/cʰɛ]	[ʒɛ]
ઞ	ઝ	ઞ	ટ	ઠ	ડ	ઢ	ણ	ત	
za	jha	ña	ṭa	ṭha	ḍa	ḍha	ṇa	ta	
[zɛ]	[ʒɛ/ʒʰɛ]	[nɛ]	[tɛ]	[tʰɛ]	[d/tɛ]	[dʱ/tɛ]	[dʱ/tɛ]	[t/tɛ]	
ત્ર	થ	દ	ધ	ન	પ	ફ	ફ	બ	બ
tra	tha	da	dha	na	pa	pha	fa	ba	ḷa
[trɛ]	[tʰ/tʰɛ]	[d/dɛ]	[dʱ/dʱɛ]	[n/nɛ]	[pɛ]	[pʰɛ]	[fɛ]	[bɛ]	[bɛ]
ભ	મ	ય	ર	લ	વ	શ	ષ	સ	હ
bha	ma	ya	ra	la	va	śa	ṣa	sa	ha
[bʱ/βɛ]	[mɛ]	[jɛ]	[rɛ]	[lɛ]	[v/vɛ]	[ʃɛ]	[ʂɛ]	[sɛ]	[hɛ]

(Source: [Omniqnot](#))

Figure 5: Sindhi Alphabet for Kutchi

ج	پ	ٺ	ٺ	ٺ	ت	پ	پ	ب	آ	ا
ɟiːm	peː	ʈeː	ʈeː	ʈʰeː	teː	bʰeː	beː	beː		ˈelːɪf
j	p	ʈh	ʈ	ʈh	t	bh	ɸ	b	ā	-
[ɟ~j]	[p]	[ʈʰ]	[ʈ]	[ʈʰ~ʈʰ]	[t~t]	[bʰ]	[ɸ]	[b]	[a~aː]	
ز	ڙ	ر	ڍ	ڍ	ڙ	ڙ	د	خ	جھ	چ
zeː	ʈeː	reː	dʱaːl	dʱaːl	dʱaːl	dʱaːl	dʱaːl	xaː	ɟʱiːm	ʃeː
z	ɹ	r	dʱ	dʱ	dʱ	dʱ	d	h	jh	ʃ
[z]	[ɹ]	[r]	[dʱ]	[dʱ]	[dʱ~dʱ]	[dʱ~dʱ]	[dʱ~d]	[x]	[ɟʱ~ʃʱ]	[ʃ]
ح	چھ	چھ	چھ	گگ	گگ	گھ	گگ	ک	ڪ	ق
haː	ʈʰeː	ʈʰeː	neː	ŋeː	geː	gʱaːf	gaːf	kʰeː	kaːf	qāf
h	ch	c	ñ	ŋ	g	gh	g	kh	k	q
[h]	[ʈʰ~cʰ]	[ʈʰ~c]	[ɲ]	[ŋ]	[g]	[gʰ]	[g]	[kʰ]	[k]	[q~k]
ڦ	ف	غ	ع	ش	س	و	ڻ	ن	م	ل
pheː	feː	veːŋ	eːŋ	ʃiːŋ	siːŋ	vaːoː	ɳuːŋ	ɳuːŋ	miːm	laːm
ph	f	g	-	ʃ	s	v	ɳ	n	m	l
[pʰ]	[f]	[v]		[ʃ/ʃ]	[s]	[v~v]	[ɳ]	[n]	[m]	[l]
				ي	ي	ي	ھ	ه	و	و
						jeː	ˈdʱo	heː		
				ay/ê	e/ī	y	ˈʃeʃmiː	h	au/ô	o/ū
				[ɸi~eː]	[eː/iː]	[j]	ˈheː	[h]	[au~oː]	[o/uː]

(Source: [Omniglot](http://omniglot.com))



Another option is to devise a new script, which, in the case of Kutchi, is accredited to graphologist, ayurvedic doctor, and psychologist, Dr. Rajul Shah. In 2009, Shah developed a pictorial script for which she received copyright and claimed to be the 27th recognized script of India, and first script of pictorial format for any Indian language (Kutchi language gets script, 2009). With aspirations of gaining acceptance in educational institutes, and translating the history of Kutch from the modified Gujarati script to this new format, Shah claims that her work has been welcomed by the Kutchi community.

Kutchi in the United States

While Kutchi speakers in India may or may not have adopted these systems of writing, Kutchi speakers in the United States continue to pass on the language through oral tradition. There are no heritage language schools or classes for the Kutchi language in the United States. In addition, classes in Sindhi are virtually non-existent and classes in Gujarati are few. While Hindi language programs for heritage speakers are fairly well established at community centers, places of worship, and even institutes of higher education, and other Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language programs have surfaced as well, there are significant challenges to the maintenance of many of these languages. Despite the existence of 3.4 million South Asians living in the United States, due to small community size, the heterogeneous nature of Indian communities, and little incentive and demand for the instruction of such languages in K-12 settings, the pressure for maintenance lies primarily in the family domain (South Asian Americans Leading Together and Asian American Foundation, 2012).

In my family, I have heard younger cousins express concern about speaking a language that has little to no economic value, and questioning why we couldn't just be speakers of Hindi, a language with much more social, political, and economic mileage. The answer is that Kutchi is the language of our culture and tradition. However, in addition to being a Kutchi speaker, I would also identify myself as a heritage speaker of Hindi/Urdu due to shared linguistic traits, and exposure to these languages through local communities, cultural events, films, and other opportunities.

Despite the fact that Kutchi language classes do not exist in the United States, there are commendable efforts taking place by the Kutchi community to maintain our cultural and linguistic heritage. The Kutchi Cultural Association (KCA) is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) corporation based in Sacramento, California, dedicated to fostering, promoting, and preserving the Kutchi culture, language, and heritage. KCA began as an initiative in 2003 to unite all Kutchi speakers in the area, for the purpose of maintaining the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of the community. While KCA does not offer explicit instruction in the Kutchi language, it provides a forum for Kutchi speakers of all ages to participate in camping trips, sports days, bowling nights, community clean-up events, picnics, and volunteer activities. The KCA also organizes a biannual Eid function, where members have the chance to participate in skits, fashions shows, singing, and dancing. In 2003, several KCA members collaborated to write and perform a play consisting of songs, jokes, and dialogue performed entirely in Kutchi. The KCA aims to reach their target of 200 members by 2014.

About the Author: Mahida Bachu



I am a Kutchi speaker, born and raised in Havre de Grace, Maryland. My maternal and paternal great grandparents were originally from India, but they migrated to East Africa in search of work. My grandparents on both sides were born in Kenya in the 1940's. My paternal grandparents later moved to Uganda, where my father was born in the city of Lira.

Following the mandated expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972, my father's family fled Uganda and resided in Italy for several months before arriving in the United States. They landed in New York City in 1972, and it was in the United States that my father found home at the age of 8. My mother was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and was raised there until the age of 17, when she married my father and moved to the United States.

Despite this history of extensive migration, my family has managed to maintain its original Indian heritage to a great extent. With a fairly large Indian community in East Africa, my parents and grandparents were exposed to the diverse linguistic and cultural communities of India without ever stepping foot in the country that they felt, and continue to feel, the most cultural allegiance to.

I was raised in a predominantly Kutchi speaking household. Upon starting school, my siblings and I began to learn and use more English. My parents spoke to us primarily in Kutchi at home and sometimes in public, and expected us to reply in Kutchi as a matter of responsibility and respect. My parents were fairly strict about the maintenance and use of Kutchi. On a daily basis we would hear *Kutchi Kuchho!!* (Speak Kutchi!!), *Buli venda* (You guys are gonna forget it!), *Anjay bachay ke kuro Sikhiynda poy?!* (What will you guys teach your kids then?!). We were also told that if we didn't say something in Kutchi, then they simply didn't want to hear it, which often resulted in an abrupt end to the conversation.

The linguistic dimension of my home was supported by the fact that we grew up in a three-generation household, where Kutchi was the only language we were to use for interactions with our grandparents. My mother and grandmother would sometimes use Swahili as their "secret" language to discuss matters that we were intentionally and obviously excluded from.

Although my family's cultural heritage is influenced by the years spent in East Africa, in terms of both material and non-material aspects of culture, my parents didn't feel that it was necessary to teach us the Swahili language. However, our language, though minimally, has been affected by the Swahili lexicon in the form of some borrowed terms. Some of these words are used unknowingly, and others are used as a matter of preference, like the Swahili word *bakuli* for *bowl*, instead of the Kutchi word *vatko*, or the Swahili word *jikoni* for *kitchen*. Other Swahili terms like *machungwa* (orange), *sahani* (plate), *mboga* (vegetables), *ndizi* (banana) are modified into *machungo*, *saani*, *boga*, and *dizi* to fit Kutchi pronunciation patterns.

I grew up in a fairly homogenous, tight-knit community in which I had one Indian friend that I attended high school with, in addition to my sister who was only two years older. I don't regret growing up this way because it allowed me to negotiate my identity and situate myself among others while also having the opportunity to share my culture and gain acceptance and appreciation by others at a very personal level.

Upon going to college at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, I was faced with an extremely diverse student body, with a strong South Asian population. This discovery was at first a bit uncomfortable, unsettling, and overwhelming, but it quickly became favorable. I studied abroad in India during the summer of 2011 in the Marathi-speaking city of Pune, Maharashtra. Although I didn't have the opportunity to visit Kutch, in Pune I met a native Kutchi speaker by chance during a shopping excursion and was able to hold a conversation with ease.

Today, Kutchi and English are both significant in conversation with my family. At times they are used as individual languages and at times this division is blurred. Code-switching and code-mixing are regular tendencies in conversation with anyone who is Kutchi/ English bilingual. An utterance like, *It's so hot today, ne?*, exemplifies one of the many ways in which switching between languages in a single sentence is achieved. Plural endings of Kutchi may be added to English words to yield words like *bookun* instead of *books*, and then used in a sentence like *Bookun table the rakhi de* (Put the books on the table). Switching may also occur at clause boundaries, as in the example, *Sometimes I'll start a sentence in English, ne poy khatham karyan Kutchi mein* (and then finish it in Kutchi).

Conclusion

While Kutchi is a little-known language in the United States, it is still the language of my culture and heritage. Learning, fostering, and promoting the use and value of this language fuels pride and interest in our linguistic heritage. It helps bilingual Kutchi and English speakers born and raised in the United States to negotiate their identities and situate themselves within two linguistic communities. Efforts taking place at both family and community levels are praiseworthy, as they empower younger generations to learn and speak their heritage language with pride and contribute to the maintenance and preservation of language and culture.

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