

Language Shift by Indigenous Population: A Model Genetic Study in South Asia

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ABSTRACT Language shift is a phenomenon where a new language is adopted by a population with virtually no influence on its genetic makeup. We report here the results of a case study, carried out on the Mushar populations, which is thought to have undergone language shift from Munda (an Austro-Asiatic language) to Hindi (an Indo-European language). We compared the mtDNA and Y-chromosomal phylogenies of this population with those of the neighbouring Indo-European and Austro-Asiatic speaking populations, standing at similar social status. The results revealed much closer genetic affinity of the Mushar people to the neighbouring Austro-Asiatic (Mundari) populations, than to the neighbouring Hindi-speaking populations. This example shows that the language shift as such is not necessarily a signal for a rapid genetic admixture, either maternally or paternally.