

# The Lamkang Diaspora in Hyderabad: 2017 User Research for CoRSAL

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## 1. Introduction

This report describes interviews with eleven members of the Lamkang community who were living in Hyderabad in 2017. The Lamkang community is based mainly in Manipur, Northeast India, and the Lamkang language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family.

The goal of the interviews was to gain information for the design of the planned Computational Resource for South Asian Languages, or CoRSAL. CoRSAL is intended to become an online repository for materials on Tibeto-Burman languages, many of which are spoken by indigenous communities in Northeast India. CoRSAL will be a resource both for indigenous communities seeking to preserve and revitalize their languages and cultures, and for linguists and other researchers.

The idea for CoRSAL originated with Shobhana Chelliah, Professor of Linguistics at the University of North Texas (UNT). She invited Christina Wasson to join the development team for CoRSAL in order to ensure that the process would follow principles of user-centered design, which is one of Wasson's areas of expertise (Wasson et al. 2016; see also [www.christinawasson.com/research](http://www.christinawasson.com/research)).

### ***Conducting Research with Future Users of CoRSAL to Ensure Their Needs Will Be Met***

In fall 2016, Wasson's class in Design Anthropology conducted user research for CoRSAL. The goal of the class project was to understand how people might use CoRSAL, what their needs were, and what kinds of technology constraints they faced. This information would help the CoRSAL development team meet the needs of these users. Students interviewed members of four groups who were intended to become future users of CoRSAL: 1) indigenous communities whose materials would be included in CoRSAL, 2) linguists, 3) computational linguists, and 4) depositors (Al Smadi et al. 2016, Wasson et al. 2018). For the indigenous communities, students interviewed three Lamkang individuals by phone.

In summer 2017, Shobhana Chelliah took five UNT students to Hyderabad on a study abroad trip. The students took part in a field linguistics workshop where they analyzed the linguistic patterns of the Lamkang language by working with Lamkang consultants who were living in Hyderabad. One of the UNT students was Janette Klein, who had been in Wasson's 2016 Design Anthropology class, and who had, in fact, interviewed a Lamkang person for that class project.

Since Klein was not studying linguistics – she was a Ph.D. student in information science – she asked if she could conduct the same type of interviews in Hyderabad that she had conducted for the Design Anthropology class project. In other words, she would collect more information about how Lamkang people might use CoRSAL, what their needs were, and what kinds of technology constraints they faced. Chelliah and Wasson agreed to this plan. Klein conducted interviews with eleven Lamkang consultants in Hyderabad. All interviews were audio recorded. The recordings ranged in length from 12 minutes to an hour and 9 minutes, with an average of 42 minutes. Klein gave all recordings to Wasson.

There was some delay before Wasson's research team was able to focus on Klein's recordings, due to other research pressures. One recording was transcribed by Emma Nalin, Wasson's research assistant, in fall 2017. The rest were transcribed by M. Nicholas Orzech, Wasson's subsequent research assistant, in fall 2018. Orzech then coded the transcripts in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis program, using a code list developed for Wasson's 2018 research in Northeast India. With the assistance of Dedoose, Orzech analyzed the patterns in the transcripts and wrote most of this report. Since Wasson and her research team had, by then, visited the Lamkang community in Manipur, the most interesting thing about the Hyderabad interviews was learning about the experience of Lamkang people who live in diaspora. We use the term "diaspora" to refer to "the mass, often involuntary, dispersal of a population from a center (or homeland) to multiple areas" (Pierre 2013). Those living in diaspora face the challenge of maintaining their original language and culture in a new environment. Orzech's analysis was conducted using the experience of diaspora as a lens.

The interviewees included seven women and four men. One man was not asked his age, but all other participants were between the age of 22 and 32, with most being 23-25 years old. The length of time they had lived in Hyderabad ranged from five months to seven years. Klein asked whether they wanted us to use their real name or a pseudonym; 6 asked for pseudonyms, while 5 permitted use of their real names.

## **2. Growing Up with the Lamkang Language in Lamkang Villages in Manipur**

All of the interviewees learned to speak the Lamkang language as children from their family members and close kinship/village networks. They all recalled hearing songs and stories in Lamkang while growing up, but expressed disappointment that they no longer remember them and that those who taught them have since passed away. (Two interviewees actually recounted traditional Lamkang stories for us featuring animals and elements of traditional Lamkang culture.) One man named Rob told us how proud he was of his grandfather, a Lamkang folk singer, saying, "Most of our tribe and our village came to learn from him, still many, until 60 to 70 years he can remember past stories, and lyric, folk song lyrics. We are proud of him." While participants like Rob indicated that older generations continue to be seen (at least by those in diaspora) as the ones holding the most authentic cultural and linguistic knowledge, these people are getting older and dying, leaving many to wonder, sometimes with great passion, what the future will hold for Lamkang language and cultural identity.

## **3. Diaspora: Leaving the Lamkang World**

All of the interviewees were young men and women who lived in Hyderabad for work or school, far from their home villages. This offered a unique opportunity to explore the effects of diaspora on young Lamkang people and the ways in which they struggle or continue to connect with the cultural and linguistic traditions of previous generations. Our participants told us that the Lamkang community in Hyderabad is small, comprising about 30-50 people. We

cannot say to what extent our interviewees' experiences reflect Hyderabad's total Lamkang population.

All of the young men and women originally came from small Lamkang villages in Manipur ranging in size from about 30-80 households, with some interviewees moving in their youth from these villages to larger towns after suffering from ethnic violence. William Shilshi, for example, moved from his small village to Chandel, a town of 20-30,000 people, after his family's home was burned down during violent Naga-Kuki clashes that shook the Hill Districts of Manipur in the early 1990s. Our interviews indicate that migration to these larger towns and district headquarters such as Chandel Bazaar led to an increased emphasis on speaking the Manipuri and Anal languages of the other inhabitants, and thus less emphasis on learning and teaching the Lamkang language.

While ethnic violence was mentioned as a reason for leaving Lamkang villages in the past, the drive for young people to leave their home villages and towns today and move to large cities like Hyderabad and Delhi appeared to be due to greater education and work opportunities. Some like William lamented living so far from Manipur, saying "I love to be more at home in my hometown than staying here.... Just there is no jobs there other than government jobs, and government jobs we have to pay [a] bribe." A young woman named Shangnung Shankhil elaborated on this, saying that the main reason for the Lamkang diaspora within India was:

*"Because of the employment... and the education system is... different compared to the city... What you learn there is like not enough, compared to the studies that you get here [Hyderabad]. So, nowadays everybody after the schooling – even before schooling – they come out and do their schooling, but some stay back and home and do their schooling but they come out for college." (Shangnung Shankhil)*

These statements and others given by participants indicate that whether for primary/secondary education or for college, many young Lamkang in Manipur were expected to leave their home villages eventually, making diaspora an essential part of the modern Lamkang experience in India. Indeed, most of the participants described a two-phase sequence: first living in hostels or boarding schools in nearby towns for their primary/secondary education, and then leaving the region altogether for college. Some comments focused on the effects of this trend on their home villages:

*"If you go to villages now, it's only the older people... The younger ones, the youngsters like us, we are all moved out for studies, and then for jobs... If we stayed back at home, how would we change... It would be back to the square one..., [like] our parents, how they have started. It would be just like that. It won't grow. We'll be like them... I mean not in a bad way or anything, but we want to study instead of doing what they're doing." (Shangnung Shankil)*

*"[The average age of people left in the village is] around 40-50... [Because] most children would be moving to cities and towns for studies. And elder[s], I mean their mothers, fathers, most of them would be staying at the village... and most of those people who are in their 20s or 25-30... are out of the village, out of town for studies, for jobs, and all over the cities in India... There are not much old people there. I mean, most of them passed away." (William Shilshi)*

While the impression of home villages being mostly empty of young adults may be exaggerated, it was described frequently enough to warrant mentioning. The patterns of Lamkang diaspora may also vary according to village. For example, Rengshing said that his village was mostly made up of "grandfather[s], and some children." On the other hand, a 24-year-old woman named Eva told us that most of the people remaining in her small village of about 33 households are about her age. Most of those interviewed told us that their grandparents had passed away, which is not surprising for individuals in their mid-20s or early 30s.

Some interviewees described whole families moving away from their home villages in order to provide more opportunities to their children. For example, Rob described migration from his home village saying, "We have... 84 households. Of that, 40 to 50 they stay in the village. But thirty-something, go to other place to educate their children," which another woman present also confirmed, "The whole families leave too, yes." Rob's statement seemed to indicate continued relationships between these families and the community.

The difference between life in these villages in the hills of Manipur and the bustling city of Hyderabad is stark. Shangnung said that family and friends visit her from time to time, but "They can't stay here for long... They (older and rural/farming people) feel pointless coming to a city." Other participants explained that older Lamkang from the villages rarely travel further than the local district headquarters, let alone to Delhi or Hyderabad.

Despite the existence of a small Lamkang community in Hyderabad, all interviewees expressed a degree of concern and frustration at not being able to speak or read the Lamkang language very often. Some, like Mary, live with Lamkang family members and thus speak the language relatively often or even daily, while others have small group of friends from Manipur whom they meet and speak Lamkang with only infrequently. Other descriptions included:

*"Most of the time I'm with the localites here, the ones who speak different dialects, so I don't speak Lamkang much. Only when I meet my people, then I speak." (Shangnung Shankhil)*

*"Coming here in Hyderabad I'm using Lamkang very less because my uncle he's working. Before I woke up he will go for work and he will be back, when he is back, everyone is busy with their own work... We are exhausted so no time for memorization even with my own uncle. And whole day I will be with those Rongmei people and them,*

*they don't know Lamkang and I don't know Rongmei so we used to talk in Manipuri.*"  
(Leivon Steney)

These selections seem to describe the general experience of young Lamkang in the city – that even if they live with or near relatives and other Lamkang speakers, their work or school obligations keep them from using the language often, and they end up speaking other languages used in Manipur (with other migrants from the region), Hindi, or English. Another woman named Ringdam Shilshi said that she also mostly speaks other languages, because “they [her friends] don’t know [Lamkang],” while a woman named Ellie reported that despite speaking Hindi and Manipuri, she mostly speaks English while in Hyderabad. With most participants’ reading/writing knowledge of Lamkang far below their speaking abilities, those that we interviewed did not report any contact with written Lamkang while in Hyderabad, outside occasionally reading from the Lamkang translation of the Bible (see “Religious Organizations” below).

Interviewees varied in the amount of time that they had been in Hyderabad, ranging from five months to almost eight years. They all identified the Winter break (December-January) as the best time to return home, describing staying from a few weeks to 40 days in their villages/towns in order to celebrate Christmas and New Year with their families, though most did not return every year. Interviewed in the summer of 2017, a man named Rengshing Dilbung said that he had not been home since the 2014/2015 winter break, and Ringdam Shilshi had not been home since she arrived in the city in 2014. When asked whether he saw changes in his village since coming to the city, Rengshing said simply, “No changing.” William Shilshi described having stayed seven years in Hyderabad before returning to his hometown for 25 days for Christmas/New Year, and frequently expressed his preference for the rural areas of Manipur over the big city. He said that he would ultimately prefer a job in his village, but that would require obtaining a government job, and that for the time being he was happy with his work at an Amazon call center. Others like Ringdam emphasized their preference for staying in the city, usually due to greater opportunities for career growth. Despite the growing tendency for young people to speak more English, William and others indicated that friends and relatives in their home villages still speak exclusively in Lamkang.

#### **4. Growing Up in the Multiple-Language Context of Manipur**

Manipur is an ethnically and linguistically diverse region, and this is reflected in our interviewees’ discussions of language mixing and contexts where multiple languages are spoken regularly, both in their childhood villages/towns and since moving to Hyderabad. Because of this diversity, most of our participants spoke – in addition to Lamkang – Manipuri, Hindi, and English, with some also speaking Anal, and others reporting using other local languages like Langmai, Maring, and Telugu (as a result of mixed families and diaspora in Hyderabad). It was notable that only two out of the 11 interviewees reported understanding or speaking Telugu, the official language of Hyderabad, and most spoke primarily English and Hindi while in the city.

One of the difficulties mentioned frequently by our participants was the variations that exist even within the Lamkang language in different areas/villages, partly due to the influence of neighboring languages. This can lead to language mixing. For example:

*"We are difference between Eastern and Western Lamkang... where we used to use different words sometimes, which we don't understand, because... they are mixing with Manipuri people, they are staying together with them, so sometimes when they are talking they used to add Manipuri dialect and mixed up. And when seniors mixed up and started talking with those youngsters, kids growing up... we used to think that it was the correct word, so we used to use those... but sometimes those words which... we are using are not correct."* (Leivon Steney)

*"If we come from different villages, certain villages use a certain word in a certain tone, or the tone is in a somewhat different to the area, so... I don't know which one is the correct one... I think it depends on the [position]... and where they're staying... What describe for them we might say it's not correct, and when you say this, they might say, 'No, we say it like this.'"* (Shangnung Shankhil)

These quotes reveal a degree of confusion among young Lamkang speakers concerning which words belong to their language and which are borrowed from neighboring languages, in particular Manipuri, which is the dominant language in Manipur, and Anal, which is somewhat similar to Lamkang. Several interviewees such as Rachel emphasized that education in boarding schools, where children from various ethnic groups live and study together, contributes to this mixing. Ringdam Shilshi, expressing the complexity of communicating in such a linguistically diverse setting where each ethnic group does not necessarily speak the language of the others, said, "There is no Lamkang, all are mixed tribe." She has a small group of Lamkang friends, but said that for the most part she speaks English, Hindi, and Manipuri.

Our interviewees also talked about switching between languages in order to communicate with members of different communities in Manipur. David explained this code-switching by saying, "I think that it depends on the locals and it depends on the people you meet. When I meet a Manipuri guy I speak Manipuri, when in my community, I speak Lamkang. When I meet somebody else, out of my state, I'll speak in English, or else, Hindi." Having this toolbox of languages enables Lamkang youth to communicate with people from different parts of the county (and the world), but their own language often gets lost in the mix, due to the total population of Lamkang speakers numbering less than 10,000. William describes an experience shared by David (and others) of having to consciously adapt his language in order to communicate effectively: "There are different tribes in the town, and I didn't know how to communicate with them. They didn't know Lamkang, I didn't know their languages, so I started learning Manipuri at the same time [as] English." He also indicated that some of these other languages such as Anal are linguistically similar to Lamkang: "Our languages are almost similar, I mean, though I can't speak, I can almost understand what they're talking... I cannot speak their language, but I can understand, they can understand what I'm talking, and I can



understand... But we talk in Manipuri." Since Manipuri is the language of the dominant ethnic group in Manipur, it is a widely used lingua franca in that state.

As a result of language-mixing, many of our participants said that the Lamkang language spoken today has been diluted and most people no longer speak it correctly. For instance, William told us, "The grammar we speak right now is not... appropriate... Everyone is speaking the way they love... It's not a good grammar." This confusion in language affects children most of all, who grow up speaking multiple (often similar) languages, frequently with little to no formal instruction in grammar and spelling. One interviewee told us, "Young children when they speak, when they heard from the other tribes' other language, if similarly, they will pick up that language and then they will use that... [if] we understood people, we let them. But my grandfather, he never allow us to speak [other languages]." This shows an interesting tension regarding when (if at all) children are corrected in their speaking, since the dominant emphasis is on understanding rather than grammatical accuracy. Some who described this language mixing seemed resigned to the confusion as part of the situation of a small tribe like the Lamkang in the diverse modern world, but some expressed clear concern about the loss of their language and distinctive cultural identity. William told us, "If [measures to preserve the language] are not introduced now, Lamkang language will be vanished in the next 20 years... Those villages far from the cities, they will still speak, but majority of the people won't bother to speak." Descriptions like this make it clear how critical tools like CoRSAL are for teaching and preserving culture and language among young Lamkang today.

### ***Linguistically Mixed Families***

Two of our interviewees came from families where one parent was Lamkang and the other parent belonged to a different group. While this small number prevents any generalizations about the experience, it is interesting that in both cases the father was Lamkang and the mother belonged to a different tribe (either Langmai or Maring), and the children did not speak Lamkang in their early childhood, possibly as a result of living in the area of their maternal family. Both began speaking later in childhood. Rachel, for instance, told us, "My mother is pure Langmai, and my father is pure Lamkang. We are mixed... When I was small I don't know how to speak Lamkang language, I used to speak only Langmai... my grandma used to get angry... and my grandmother was scolding my father and my mother, so I started learning... Because actually, I'm Lamkang tribe, but mostly I'm speaking in my mother's language." This quote gives insight into some of the inter-tribal/linguistic politics that can emerge within families of mixed groups, and how older Lamkang often stress the importance of the Lamkang language more than others. Rachel told us that it was only her paternal grandparents that encouraged her to learn Lamkang, and that her maternal (Langmai) grandparents didn't care for the language: "My mother learned it [Lamkang], but my grandparents didn't learn it. They didn't know Lamkang language, only my mom."

Rob also gave compelling insight into the experience of linguistically mixed families in Manipur, describing a childhood of not speaking Lamkang in favor of his mother's language Maring, and the social ostracization that his mixed ethnicity brought from some of his young

peers. He said, "I am mixed, half Lamkang half Maring. After I studied for two, three standards [grades], I started speaking Lamkang again. For my childhood, I learned from my mother. Most of my friends they told me that... I look like my mother's tribe... so they told me that I'm Maring tribe. Some of the stranger friends, they wouldn't linger with me, wouldn't... be friends with me. So at that time, I didn't give any trace of speaking Lamkang at all. But my grandparents, they're pure Lamkang. They're very much interested in Lamkang. They know about the Lamkang old stories and then, after I started learning, six, seven standard, I started listening to Lamkang stories. So that I learn something about Lamkang stories that I can tell you." These comments reiterate the importance of older members of the community in transmitting the language and traditional knowledge orally, a tradition that is endangered by young people leaving the villages.

### **5. Age Differences in Knowledge of Lamkang Language**

Due to the trends identified above, multiple interviewees indicated their belief that older Lamkang people have a stronger connection with the Lamkang language and speak it in a more pure form than younger members of the community. William told us, "The language we speak right now, it's not 100% Lamkang language. It's mixed up with Manipuri." When asked about when this perceived dilution of the Lamkang language occurred, he described his belief that this is a recent phenomenon, saying, "As far as I know, it starts from our parents' generation, not from our grandparents. That time, they would speak in 100%. So from my father and mother's generations, even they don't speak 100% Lamkang language." Others described the same feeling that the language they speak is not the same Lamkang spoken by their ancestors. Rengshing Dilbung expressed her desire to reclaim a purer version of Lamkang, saying, "I want to research... my original language that [I] can't speak now, [it's] lost... I want to research that."

Many of our participants said that the elders of their community would teach the younger generations and point out their mistakes, such as David who said, "They used to correct us, say 'this is wrong,' 'this needs to be pronounced like this,' 'this needs to be said like this.' But... we don't care. We thought that when I grow up I will learn those things... I'm still confused now, what is correct... I'm trying to figure out, uh, I think those days, when my parents told me those things... I should have written it down." He went on to say that even though he doesn't understand these nuances and differences himself, he still tries to correct the language of younger Lamkang as best as he can, saying, "I'm trying to correct them now [i.e. when they are young]. Because I don't want to make them feel like what I feel like now... From our forefathers, what they've spoken and right now what we have spoken there is like something different." Rob also described learning traditional songs and stories in Lamkang from elders, but lamented that "they didn't make any institutions to make all of this [permanent], they don't have writing schools at all." Without learning formally to read and write in Lamkang, most of the stories taught by village elders have since been forgotten. Because of this, Rob and others said that focusing on teaching Lamkang children about their language and heritage is the most important way to preserve the heritage in such a diverse environment.

## **6. English**

The importance of English for young Lamkang was another theme that consistently came up while speaking with our interview participants. This was especially the case when recounting stories about school, particularly the boarding schools that are popular sources of primary and secondary education in Manipur. Speaking of such schools, Rengshing said, “They learn English only,” and this was also emphasized by Eva, Ellie, and others. An important consequence of the privilege given to English language education is the relegation of native languages to secondary or tertiary status in individuals’ lives. Leivon described harsh punishment and humiliation used in her school when she was growing up to ensure that students did not speak their local languages. She told us, “We are studying English back in school, we must to use... only English... We used to get punishment when we are not talking in English.... If I’m talking in other language... I have to wear that I’m a donkey. They put on my neck and I have to go around until I find someone talking in other dialects. And then, not English but using other languages. If I didn’t find that person, I have to wear that I’m a donkey sign until my senior years or they ask me to take off sign.”

While our interviewees referenced the importance of learning English for academic and professional opportunities, they also indicated that the idolization of English among young Lamkang and humiliating punishments like those described above are leading to many not wanting to use their native languages anymore, due to a perceived lack of cultural sophistication. Speaking of Lamkang teenagers, William told us, “They prefer more to speak in English... And even if they know Lamkang language, they would act like they don't speak much, and [that] they don't know much. This [is a] fashion thing, or something. Yeah, some people who want to be more civilized.” This embarrassment to speak one’s native did not seem to be represented among our interview participants, all of whom showed genuine concern for the preservation of the Lamkang language and cultural traditions. This may indicate changing views among the younger generation, or simply different tastes.

## **7. Language Preservation Barriers**

All interviewees indicated that their home village/town had no cultural library or central location to make materials relating to Lamkang language and cultural heritage available for public access. It seemed that in most villages, traditional instruments, clothing, and written documents were kept in individuals’ homes, and in the headquarters of the Lamkang Language and Literature Society. Unfortunately however, the interviews only asked about libraries, and did not ask about places offering community access to computers or digital media. This would have been very interesting, as all villages mentioned were described as having few computers, if any. Establishing centers like this would serve both purposes of giving a central location for preserving Lamkang material heritage and giving access to the internet (possibly) or digital cultural media such as CoRSAL. Having such a location is critical, considering that the Lamkang are a smaller and economically worse-off tribe than others in the region, and the repeated concerns of participants (such as from William cited above) that the Lamkang language and culture would be extinct in the coming decades if serious efforts are not made to preserve it.

Echoing these concerns, Shangnung told us, "Sometimes... I feel like we should preserve our traditions, customs, and stories... Like, one time I was talking to my friend, he's a [unclear] master in history, and he was talking about our tribe and how it is, like, getting extinct, we were- because- the history of our tribe is only with the senior of our tribe. Now, I mean they won't live hundreds of years, and they keep passing away, so there should be some ways to store them... we was just talking saying we should write a book and stories and all, like Lamkang folk stories and all." She also mentioned that awareness of the importance of such cultural heritage work is growing, saying that "people are getting more educated or this sort of thing, they have this sense of preserving." Our interviews overwhelmingly showed that people want to preserve the Lamkang heritage, but besides the literature societies and faith-based groups, there doesn't seem to be an organized grassroots effort among Lamkang young people to promote their language.

## **8. Religious Organizations and Lamkang Language**

Our participants told us that all Lamkang today are Christian (mostly Baptist or Catholic), and churches and religious organizations are some of the primary means by which young Lamkang interact with their language and cultural traditions. Additionally, the only piece of written Lamkang text that *any* of the interviewees (and apparently their families at home) possessed when interviewed was a translation of the Bible. They all expressed appreciation to have scripture available in their native language, but most reported finding it difficult to read and understand the text. We were told that Christian organizations (along with the Lamkang Language and Literature Society) also sponsor the cultural festivals held periodically in Lamkang villages in Manipur, indicating their centrality in the social life of young Lamkang.

Ellie reported that church services in her home village are held throughout the week from Wednesday to Sunday, and that they mostly include hymns sung in Lamkang. While she said that they did not have a full translation (due to continued translation and publishing), Leivon told us that reading from the Bible during services like this was a good way to learn how to read and write in the Lamkang language: "We used to read together and like we used to learn, we want to learn more how to read fluently in Lamkang... So we used to read together Bible. One chapter each day, each night one chapter. The whole chapter we use to read... So... reading on that Bible we find ourselves improving." She also described formal classes in reading and writing Lamkang being associated with church services, telling us, "Sunday... morning we used to have some devotion, learn songs and so on. And those, during that time we, our Lamkang leaders, they were giving us chance to learn our Lamkang language and alphabet." She said that it is difficult teaching adults to read and write in Lamkang through these sessions due to infrequent attendance and other issues, and as a result "leaders they are giving more privilege and opportunities to the kids to learn [to read and write]." Religious gatherings also offer opportunities for young people to learn Lamkang stories and traditions that are not explicitly religious/Christian. Rob told us, "every Saturday for... youth night, after church worship program, they discuss about folk songs and any of Lamkangs celebrations and... the villagers and those youngsters they perform it."

Leivon also offered insight into how Lamkang religious/language teachers are trained by elders at the Lamkang Naga Baptist Association (LNBA), and then in turn teach their communities. She said, "at least once in a month or twice in a month they used to train those Sunday school teachers... how to train a child and... teach them how to use the actual words, correct words, so just little by little those teachers they are learning from those Lamkang leaders, because those leaders they cannot go to every villages and teach the kids... And they will come back to their own villages and every Sunday they will teach them the alphabet and how to read and write. And we are asked to use only Lamkang Bible if possible." This description is fascinating, as it demonstrates how accurate knowledge of reading and writing Lamkang is concentrated in a small number of tribal elders, and with each successive training/teaching there is a danger of losing accuracy. It is clear that Lamkang language education is closely tied to religious institutions and practices in Manipur and that these organizations may benefit from tools such as CoRSAL.

Even in diaspora in Hyderabad, multiple participants mentioned attending regular worship gatherings that involved using the Lamkang language in some capacity. Mary told us that members of the city's Lamkang community gathered from time to time for prayer and devotion, sometimes using the Lamkang Bible and sometimes other translations, based on the individual's comfort with the language. Rachel says that her fellowship meetings meet on every third Sunday in Hyderabad, and hold a religious service only in Lamkang. There was no explicit indication that our participants belong to the same fellowship groups; in fact, they seem to describe different patterns of attendance. They were also not asked about their religious denomination or whether they knew other Lamkang men and women that were interviewed, with the exception of Rengshing Dilbung and William Shilshi, who grew up in the same village until their villages split into separate communities.

## **9. Cultural/Ethnic Pride**

On multiple occasions, participants expressed great pride for their Lamkang traditions and identity, along with appreciation for the fact that someone is attempting to preserve the heritage of the Lamkang, a small tribe that, in the incredibly diverse India, seems to have slipped through the cracks. For all of the young men and women interviewed, pride in the Lamkang language was inextricably tied to pride in Lamkang identity and cultural heritage, bolstered by a recognition and fear of the language's precarious situation in the world today and a desire to inform the world of their existence. Eva, expressing sentiments shared by the others interviewed, said, "I love to have my own language, and I want to teach to others my [unclear], and I'm proud to be in this Lamkang tribe." Others shared Eva's desire to share the Lamkang language, not only with the next generation, but with outsiders as well. David told us, "I don't know whether it's special for others, but it's special for me because it's my language. I want... to let everyone know that this kind of language still exists in this world. I still want the language, that everybody knows, whenever everybody Google it, they find it or still see this language exists in Google also." This was an interesting reference to the importance of cultural information being available on the internet and preserved digitally, a theme that came up in the discussion of language practice/pedagogical materials. William expressed appreciation for

the work being done to preserve Lamkang heritage, which he said is largely absent in India: "I should be the one to thank you all. In India I know no people from my tribe who's doing this kind of job, there's no one who take an interest in this kind of initiative to preserve the culture, and... I don't find it. But you people are doing this awesome job."

## 10. Language Materials

The interviewees were asked about what materials they believe would be most effective in teaching Lamkang language literacy (reading/writing) in rural villages. In retrospect, we should have also asked about language learning materials for those living in diaspora, but this was not a consideration at that time. For Lamkang villages, most participants specified a preference for paper materials, due to poor internet and electrical infrastructure, and likely an interest in owning more tangible expressions of their culture. Those who showed interest in electronic mediums mostly saw this as an effective way to reach young people and children, as well as those living in larger towns or cities with better internet. They also noted that mobile phones would be an ideal medium for such efforts, as they are more widespread and affordable than computers, and mobile phone data has become cheaper in recent years. William described some of the difficulties with teaching the Lamkang language institutionally in diverse environments like Manipur, saying,

*"In schools there are different tribes of children, so implementing books would be difficult for them... In their villages that is far from the town and cities, it would be useful for them. But for those Lamkang children staying in the town... even the books would not allow to teach them, because there are other tribes' children in the class. Their parents could teach them maybe."* (William Shilshi)

This indicates that even with effective materials, the priority placed on other languages will largely relegate Lamkang learning/practice to the home and family outside school.

Our participants consistently mentioned that books printed in Lamkang should target children because, in the words of William, "adult people... won't bother to go and read. We have to start this from the beginning, from the children. So... if there is books, then the children can learn from kindergarten." Leivon shared this sentiment, suggesting a cultural trend of adults not reading as much as young people: "Of course there are parents who are interested in reading books but we, Eastern and you are Western, it's quite different really. It's quite different they are not much interested... If it's not compulsory they don't read much books." Shangnung suggested that printing comic books like "The Adventures of Tintin" in Lamkang, in addition to original Lamkang comics, would be an effective way to engage children and teach them the language and traditional stories/myths. Mary expressed similar interests, indicating that such picture/storybooks would help to teach children (and others) all of the stories that her generation's grandparents had taught them, but which they have since forgotten. William explained that most adults simply wouldn't have much time for studying. He told us, "Well if there are books also, I won't even bother to go and read it all the time, I mean I would read it when I'm free, but this should be implemented from now. There should be book

and list, so that children can learn when they grow.” Others indicated that children's books should feature characters with Lamkang names and aspects of life familiar to Lamkang children, showing a desire for Lamkang role models for young people.

Opinions about Lamkang language media tended to focus on infrastructural limitations and tangible printed literature, but interviewees also discussed things that they would like to see on digital mediums, such as heritage preservation information:

*“Everyone is using phone, laptop, so of course obviously... if we can find online studies on phone, but what I want to say is there are many villages which they didn't get network... we get like electric and communication... But when it comes to browsing and using net... it's not good, so producing with the books and comics already this is also not a bad idea because children... doesn't use phone but they like watching videos so they I think it will be good for them to watch the videos so they can learn faster from there.” (Leivon Steney)*

*“If there is an article online, and not physical book [that would be better]. If there is... websites, it would need to contain different things... Even though I'm Lamkang, I don't know these things. I mean, there's cultural... They used to wear these horns or something, I don't even know those names. So, if there are websites, ok, it should contain those things. Even dress, and the names of [unclear], [saying] ‘this is what it is called.’” (William Shilshi)*

## **11. Reading and Writing Lamkang**

Some participants indicated that long periods of not using the Lamkang language except in oral form as a result of diaspora has led to them forgetting how to read it. A young woman named Leivon told us, “It will be four, five years I think that we have learned this Lamkang alphabet... But now I’ve given up for so many years that I’ve forgotten. Without looking, I cannot read now.” David also said that difficulties in reading and writing was the most important issue faced by the Lamkang community today, indicating that inconsistency in spelling and grammar rules was confusing for many attempting to learn the written language and teach it to others. He expressed gratitude for the “good job” being done by Dr. Chelliah’s team to preserve the language. Much of this inconsistency likely emerges as the natural result of sounding out and spelling words as best as possible, as well as the influence of other languages/local village dialects.

One interviewee believed that one of the problems with learning and preserving the Lamkang language was the use of the Roman alphabet. When asked about the ability of most Lamkang to read written documents, he said, “It would be challenging... [because] it is in the English alphabet... We don't have this alphabet.” He added that having a unique Lamkang alphabet “would be great,” a point that is interesting and seems somewhat counter-intuitive, as most of the young people already learn English and use it in school and social media, making a new script a potential barrier to literacy for most people. In general, the greatest barriers to reading

and writing identified by this group of young Lamkang people was a lack of materials to practice with (with the exception of the Bible, which everyone mentioned is difficult to read), perceived inconsistencies in spelling and grammar, and in some cases a lack of familiarity with the script itself, along with generally low levels of literacy among older generations who carry most of the cultural knowledge.

## **12. Technology Infrastructure and Technology Use**

It seemed that internet connections and other technology were more available in Lamkang communities than they had been just 10 years ago, especially in larger towns, but remained difficult to access in small villages. Many participants said that this lack of internet connectivity was a problem specific to the rural Manipur region, such as Rachel who said, “because in Manipur, it's not good, it's not working, sometimes there is no internet, it's very slow... in other state[s], this outside state, internet is working, just in Manipur.” William said that less than 10% of homes in his home village have a computer-- more than others that we interviewed, many of whom reported only a handful if any. Power outages are common in these villages, and are mostly related to weak infrastructure, though William also mentioned payment affecting power availability, explaining, “If you don't pay, then the electricity will be disconnected. So, in the past one day you will have access to electricity, one day it's completely off... The electric people and the government people will come and they will disconnect the electricity connection... So now people prefer to pay their bill.” Despite these comments, power outages seem to be related to general weakness in power lines, which efforts towards infrastructural development in the region have begun to improve. In fact, William said that whereas before his home did not have good internet, when he returned after seven years in Hyderabad he was surprised that his parents had connection nearly 24/7.

Since these issues are related to rural infrastructure, they largely do not affect young Lamkang living in diaspora, many of whom are students who use laptops and smartphones to complete schoolwork. While most interviewees reported only limited computer access in their home villages, it seems that most individuals (young people at least) have smart phones and use them regularly. Individuals' phone plans/connectivity were not asked about during our interviews, though this would be interesting information to have in light of the dramatic reduction of data plan prices that have attended the “Digital India” campaign advocated by the country's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and spearheaded by innovative mobile phone/media providers like Jio (Mukherjee 2018). While the specifics remain uncertain, our interviews make it clear that internet connectivity is improving in Manipur and more young people have access to mobile phone data for internet browsing and streaming. This means that programs like CoRSAL, if adapted to a mobile format, should be able to reach a large segment of the population in these areas, especially younger generations.

## **13. Diaspora and the Lamkang Sense of Place**

Our participants gave us valuable insight into the importance of diaspora in the modern Lamkang experience. At the same time, the interviews painted an impression of Lamkang



culture as being closely tied to a sense of *place*, particularly the small hill villages which were described with so much poetic nostalgia. For instance, many of those whom we interviewed took their surnames from the name of their clan within the Lamkang tribe, and one woman in particular was named after the village of her birth, which she no longer lived in. This indicates a powerful connection with the tribe's ancestral lands, a bond which is being challenged by intraregional migration and as young Lamkang increasingly move to cities for education and work.

## **14. Design Implications**

Our research findings generated five main design implications for CoRSAL.

### **1. CoRSAL Will Be Valuable for Lamkang Living in Diaspora**

- Many interviewees were concerned about forgetting their linguistic and cultural knowledge, or believed they did not acquire full knowledge before they left their communities
- They had no easy way to look up information about their language and culture
- Interviewees took great pride in their language and culture and wanted it to be more visible on the internet

### **2. In Lamkang Communities, Children Should be Primary Target for Language and Literacy Materials**

- CoRSAL can be a valuable educational and reference tool for programs aimed at teaching Lamkang literacy
- Interviewees said that most adults in villages don't have time to study regularly
- For children, language learning has to mainly happen outside of school because in many schools, students belong to multiple tribes and the language of instruction is not Lamkang
- Young people are comfortable using online tools

### **3. Take Technology and Infrastructure Constraints into Account**

- Mobile phones are much more common than computers, so CoRSAL should work well on smartphones
- Internet access is variable; worse in rural areas, better in towns

### **4. Content for CoRSAL Suggested by Interviewees**

- Lamkang dictionary (the most common suggestion)
  - A way to look up "how do you say X"
  - Guide to spelling
- Grammar guide
- For children, picture books and graphic novels like "The Adventures of Tintin" and "Asterix" translated into Lamkang

- For children, original comics depicting traditional Lamkang stories and featuring Lamkang names, places, and lifestyles
- For adults, materials to practice reading with that are easier to read than the Bible
- Short videos, both educational and for entertainment, which can be streamed or downloaded to mobile phones
- Collections of traditional Lamkang stories, poems, and songs
- Information about cultural traditions and artifacts (for instance, names and pictures of traditional Lamkang garments and music instruments)

## 5. Enable Printing

- Interviewees suggested that many members of Lamkang villages would prefer printed materials over online materials
- Perhaps CoRSAL could put reading materials online but make them easily printable

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### **For More Information**

For more information about the user-centered design of CoRSAL and other language archives, see <https://www.christinawasson.com/research>.

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