

THE ENDANGERED TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA

Banita Behera¹
R. Senkuttuvan²

¹Southern Regional Centre, Mysore

²Anthropological Survey of India, Ministry of Culture (Govt. of India)

¹*Behera.banita1985@gmail.com*, ²*jarawa.senkuttuvan@gmail.com*,

1. Introduction

The Indian union is multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual with more pronounced diversity in cultural traits across the country. The fact that whatever one does or practices is controlled by the environment in which one lives or in other words the environment moulds the culture of a particular group. In modern days the impact of developmental programmes, industrialization, urbanization, education, legislation, communication, new economic policies, etc forced the people to a new environment and brought many changes in their life and culture. This forced adoption to the new environment has resulted in paradigm changes in their knowledge, awareness, behavior, education, ideology, etc. which ultimately affected the most vulnerable section of the society i.e. the local tribal folks. Moreover, the people belonging to the dominant tribal and caste groups have migrated to the hilly tract, dominated the new environment and the weaker tribal groups are forced to compromise at the mercy of the stronger groups. So in the process of stress in the new and changing environment, the tribes adopt many cultural elements during different time and space. Though they started to exercise the superimposed culture or cultural entities during course of time and their strong urge to protect their identity keeps some of their indigenous and unique cultural heritages intact.

2. General

Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous people, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hopes of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood, and enhance social mobility.

A five-level classification used by Stephen Wurm, focusing on the weaker languages

- a) Potentially endangered languages: Socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers;
- b) Endangered languages: Have few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults;

- c) Seriously endangered languages: Have the youngest good speaker age 50 or older;
- d) Moribund languages: Have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly very old;
- e) Extinct languages: Have no speakers left.

One such cultural identity is their language which speaks about their culture in time and space. The tribal groups crippled by limited capacity are unable to retain and revive their linguistic identity in the long run and to the greater extent assimilated with the linguistically dominant tribal/regional language. These linguistic interactions endanger their native language and force them to adopt such tribal/regional language in their intra-community interactions too. In general no language issue is raised by these linguistic minorities to safe guard their language and this study attempts to document this valuable legacy transmitted from generation to generation before it disappears completely.

A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children. The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world.

In all parts of the world, members of ethno-linguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favors of another language, including in child rearing and formal education. Among ethno-linguistic communities, a variety of opinions on the future prospects of their languages can be observed. Some speakers of endangered languages come to consider their own language backward and impractical. Such negative views are often directly related to the socioeconomic pressure of a dominant speech community.

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Another way of trying to introduce some order into endangerment is through the use of linguistic criteria, reflecting the range of functions for which languages are used and the types of structural change which they display. Endangered languages come to be used progressively less and less throughout the community, with some of the functions they originally performed, are either dying out or gradually being supplanted by other languages.

In India there are numerous spoken languages including hundreds of dialectal forms, distributed around and representing different language families of India, i.e, Indo – Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro- Asiatic and Dravidian. According to Grierson's linguistic Survey (1896-1928) there were 722 speeches out of which 179 languages and 544 dialects were found. The people of India series (1993) of Anthropological Survey of India identified 325 languages spoken at home and with kin groups of which 77 were major languages. According to Grierson's linguistic Survey (1896-1928) there were 722 speeches out of which 179 are languages and 544 are categorised dialects. The people of India series (1993) of Anthropological Survey of India identified 325 languages spoken at home and with kin groups of which 77 were major languages. According to the 2011 Census there are scheduled languages 22, non-scheduled 100, and 234 identifiable mother tongues each with 10,000 or more speakers at all India level and includes many tribal languages too. The more recent virtual reference in Ethnologue of 16th edition listed 452 individual languages out of which 438 are living and 14 having no known speakers in India.

In fact, how many languages are there in India is a question, time and again raised by many. The answers given are many a time either vague or the number produced from different sources quoted erroneously, give a controversial picture of the reality. Moreover linguistic diversity in India is marked by the fuzzy linguistic boundaries between dialect and language, between languages around state and international borders, between speech forms differentiated on socio-cultural and political groups (Annamalai 1992)..But this kind of sharp declining language data i.e. language and mother tongue, worries the social scientists like Anthropologists, Linguists, etc as languages are the carriers of the past indigenous knowledge to the future.

It is worth reporting that as per Schedule 8 of Constitution of India there are 533 tribal groups overlapped in more than one linguistic boundary marked in different states. The 2011 census figure on tribal mother tongue may further endanger the language situation. So the need of the hour is to document the tribal languages in the existing language situation before it disappears. So the linguistic identification is not easy and moreover no official inventory of languages spoken in India except official data on languages in the Indian decennial Census. In this regard many research organizations and Universities are engaged in the field of endangered language research to protect these languages. Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social positions with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hopes of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood, and enhance social mobility.

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knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. In all parts of the world, members of ethno-linguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favor of another language, including child rearing and formal education. Among ethno-linguistic communities, a variety of opinions on the future prospects of their languages can be observed. Some speakers of endangered languages come to consider their own language backward and impractical. Such negative views are often directly related to the socioeconomic pressure of a dominant speech community.

The Austric languages of India are by and large, declared by the tribal population and thus all these languages have been grouped in the list of the tribal languages. These languages belong to the mono-syllabic oslating types which are of great importance to the scholars of linguistics and anthropology.

The Austric family of languages may broadly be classified into two subfamilies. Austronesia and Austro-Asiatic. The Austronesian group of languages is spoken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Hawaii and Malagasy islands. Two branches of the Austro-Asiatic (Munda and Mon-khmer) are confined to India.

The languages belonging to the Austro-Asiatic family are scattered over a vast geographical region from the Aravalli hills in the west to the chotanagpur plateau in the east, continuing through West Bengal to the North-Eastern states of India. Andaman and Nicobar islands where the Austric speech is confined only to the Car Nicobars, it is important to note that the Austric region coincides with central India which has the highest concentration of the population of India with a little more than one third belonging to the Austrics. The major Austric languages of India, Munda group Bhumiji, Gadaba, Ho, Koda/ Kora, Kharia, Korku, Korwar, Munda/Mundari Santali, Sarava etc. The Mon-Khmer groups are Khasi, and Nicobarese. The languages of the tribals of the region may be classified into three major linguistic groups-The Austric, The Dravidian and the Indo-Aryan. About 20 percent of the tribes of the region declared languages belonging to the Dravidian family as their mother tongue. Kurukh, Oran, gandi, kui, Bhotada, khond are important among the Dravidian languages, while Santali, Mundari, Savara, Kharia are important languages belonging to the Austric family. The tribal languages of India represent valuable relics of the country's past cultural heritage in the form of oral tradition and folk-lore and must not be allowed to be destroyed.

All the eight states namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim that form the North East part of India have their own culture and traditions. These states, also known as rainbow states, are predominantly tribal lands inhabited by numerous tribal communities speaking languages from the Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic linguistic families. Each of these tribal communities has unique cultures which are totally distinct from each other. The main aspects of culture such as a custom, tradition, language lifestyle demarcates one community from the other. If we take Language, North East India is a melting pot of various languages. Each tribe is presumed to have its own languages, and each language is presumed to be spoken by just one tribe. A map of the tribes is expected to look no different from a map of the languages. Tribes and languages are even called by the same name i.e. Angamis speak Angami, the Garos speak

Garo, the Mizos speak Mizo and so on though all the hundred or so languages that are spoken in the North East.

Some of the tribal languages dominate in their states but they may be a threat to other smaller tribal languages. They were influenced by majority languages. Many decades ago, Manipur state adopted Bengali script by abandoning its own native script due to various socio-political reasons. The community now wants to revive the native script which is also taught in schools as an additional script with Government support. The educationists and the scholars now want only Manipuri script to be used in schools and therefore now involved in the preparation of textbooks in Manipuri script. This greatly enhances the community's self image of their language and develops a positive attitude for its use and maintenance.

Each tribe speaks different languages which are not understood even by its immediate neighboring tribe. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh people speak about 50 languages. In Nagaland one tribe does not follow the language of another tribe. The Air broadcast languages programme in at least about 15 tribal languages for Nagaland. The population of the North East region is all multilingual in composition and character. In this context, to venture to offer a readymade and all acceptable solution off the sleeve will certainly look over ambitious, if not ridiculous. The solution needs a careful study of the situation and the needs and aspirations of the people inhabiting the region from time immemorial. Therefore, the matter may best be left with the people depending solely on their collective wisdom to find out the best possible answer to the otherwise vexed and complex problem of language in the region, but thanks to the collective wisdom of the people that they could find out at least a workable solution and carry out the normal activities of trade and commerce, administration, education and their day to day activities as effectively as possible under such a situation. In the process, the society slowly and steadily with increased realization and also under the compulsion of living together for mutual benefit and progress gradually emerged as a multilingual society. During this process, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland developed a language of their own which is now termed as Nagamese and Arunachalese, a kind of Assamese which is understood by different languages there. This newly developed language is a lingua franca for the people of the said region. It also illustrates a point of linguistic importance that prescriptive grammar cannot keep a language in an iron jacket for all time to come. It changes, it grows, and it expands and serves the people and also removes the communication gap. But the point here needs to be stressed is that while Nagaland and Arunachal have evolved a workable solution of this type, even though Hindi is also used in a restricted domain. In this process the society also tends to become multilingual. It is now seen that the man/woman of the region uses at least three languages in his/her day to day activities. The way of life and the nature of work of a person normally decide the number of languages one will have to choose to carry out his normal functions in life.

However, the problem of language is nothing new to the region. It existed before also but thanks to the collective wisdom of the people that they could find a workable solution and carry out the normal activities as mentioned before. In this context, the society slowly and steadily/sturdily with increased realization and also under the compulsion of living

together for mutual benefit and progress. We can observe in the Munda area of Mul kangiri in Orissa state (Desiya Bhasa). Now in Arunachal Pradesh, a new trend is emerging in language patterns. The school level medium of instruction is Hindi because of the Govt. policy. Due to Lynggam's socio-economic backwardness, aspirations of upward mobility are leaving them to learn the Khasi and the Garo languages which are the official languages of the state machinery, Naturally the younger generation are partially promoted as bilingual. This is one instance to show how a language grows out of a necessity and how it functions effectively and satisfactorily to meet the local needs and aspirations of the people.

According to Encyclopedia Wikipedia "an endangered language refers to a language that is at risk of falling out of uses". In other words, a language is really endangered when it is used in limited domains and ceases to pass from the older generation to the younger one in a particular community. However the different dimension of language endangerment is noticed from region to region and country to country. It is interesting to note here that the Tripura state itself has a number of indigenous endangered languages for which no effort has been made to protect and preserve in this early stage of language endangerment. Most of the tribal languages in Tripura are unexplored in terms of description, codification and graphization. As a result they are on the verge of extinction when confronted with the mainstream language group. No initiatives were taken from the government bodies for preserving the endangered languages which are very few in numbers. Although the officials of Shiphahijala Wildlife Sanctuary and State Zoo, Government of Tripura were engaged to protect the wild animals like tiger, rhino and birds etc, in the year 2008, but unfortunately the idea of preserving a language is still unfamiliar to the governmental and non-government agencies in the state of Tripura. In Tripura the critically endangered languages are Chaimol, and Korbong.

Chaimal and Korbong are the Kuki-chin languages/dialects spoken by the sub-tribes of a community. Korbong is spoken as a first language in three to four villages of Champak Nagar Gram panchayat, West Tripura district by 117 speakers whereas Chaimal is spoken in Gandacherra, Ambassa and North-Tripura by 100 speakers (Census Report of Tripura, 2001). The numeral strength of both the tribes is negligible and they are surrounded by the larger linguistic groups like Bengali and Kokborok. Socially, politically and economically the status of Korbongs are very low. They live in remote hilly areas in the jungle. On the other hand, the Chaimol people are also dependent on Jhum cultivation and moving around one place to another to find the appropriate place for the cultivation. Both the Korbong and Chaimol are farmers; they are not aware of the position of their languages. Due to availability of schooling in their mother tongue, they have their formal education in Bengali medium schools and the children are not educated in their respective mother tongues. Naturally, parents encouraged their children to speak the school languages i.e., Bengali for better performance in the examination. It is also observed that Korbong language is highly influenced by Kokborok and most of the Korbong people can speak Kokborok along with their mother tongue and regional language Bengali. So the percentage of bilingualism towards Kokborok is also 95 percent which is higher than any other tribes in Tripura. They freely borrowed the lexical items from Kokborok and used to

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fulfill their day to day communication in certain levels. So the interesting point to be made here is that both the tribes have a negative attitude towards their mother tongues because of the cultural, socio-economic, and political reasons.

The following are the suggestions for revitalization of endangered languages

- a) Documentation of the languages by writing grammar, dictionaries, wordbooks, pictorial glossaries and by recording the spoken language. Many endangered languages are spoken only: no written material exists.
- b) Government should provide sufficient funds for taking up projects for the revitalization of those programmes.
- c) Government should formulate a policy regarding the minority and endangered languages.
- d) Implementation of Tribal languages up to primary in school education.
- e) Community based programmes should be organized. For example religious or story telling sessions.

Conclusions

Language endangerment may lead to the loss of a language. The loss of language directly or indirectly leads to the loss of social history and ethnic identity. Thus, language documentation, description and development are very important tools to preserve and protect the minority or the tribal endangered languages of India. The factors responsible for the language endangerment vary from language to language in a certain level of socio-linguistic environment.

The following factors held responsible for endangerment of tribal languages

- a) Speech communities are highly influenced by other dominant speech communities.
- b) There is no indigenous script and written literature.
- c) Tribal language is not being taught in the schools in the formal education system.
- d) Inter community marriage
- e) Negative attitude of their own mother tongue
- f) Lack of initiatives for development documentation and description of the tribal language.

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