

## **Ethical Issues in Conducting Linguistic Research on Endangered Languages**

**Dr. Deepa Moni Boruah, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to discuss the ethical dilemmas that arise in application of ethical principles while conducting field linguistic study on an endangered language. Ethics are a set of values and principles and standards of conduct established by a profession or group. The people associated with the profession or group has to conform to the principles, values and standards of conduct. Ethical principles and values are not based on the concept of efficiency but are based on the standards of morality. Ethics uphold principles and values that are morally right, as against values that are morally wrong. Thus, when issues are analysed ethically, they are seen from the point of view of morality instead of efficiency. Therefore, various kinds of institutions, ranging from medical organizations to law enforcement agencies adhere to certain ethical principles, values or codes. Similarly, the academic fraternity also observes certain ethical guidelines in conducting research work. Linguistic research involves collection of data from respondents. While conducting such researches, a researcher has to adhere with some ethical guidelines and ensure that ethical guidelines are not violated. Language attrition is now a serious problem to be addressed and recently it has become the core area of research for Field linguists. Many indigenous languages and dialects became extinct as their speakers stop using the native language over many years. When a language dies out, future generations lose a crucial part of the culture that shapes their beings as disappearance of language carries away the vast knowledge about history, culture, tradition as well as the natural environment. Many tribal languages of India are now on the verge of extinction and an effort has been going on for preservation and conservation of dying languages. A wide documentation of language as well as culture has a great impact in preservation and revitalization of a particular language and the community. A field work was carried out to investigate the endangered language of a particularly vulnerable tribe, the

Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh. The tribe under study is affluent in their ethno-medicinal practices and other traditional knowledge system. While obtaining the data from participants, a researcher may encounter various ethical problems in the course of research work. The paper discusses the ethical issues that arise in collection of data and practicing visual documentation of the tribe to restore their language and culture.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Indigenous, Endangered, Language Documentation, Preservation

## **1.0 Introduction**

Ethics has become a cornerstone for conducting effective and meaningful research. As such ethical behaviour of individual research is under unprecedented scrutiny (Best & Kahn, 2006, Field & Behrman, 2004; Trimble & Fisher, 2006). Ethics are a set of values and principles and standards of conduct established by a profession or group. The people associated with the profession or group has to conform to the principles, values and standards of conduct. Ethical principles and values are not based on the concept of efficiency but are based on the standards of morality. Ethics uphold principles and values that are morally right, as against values that are morally wrong. Thus, when issues are analysed ethically, they are seen from the point of view of morality instead of efficiency. Therefore, various kinds of institutions, ranging from medical organizations to law enforcement agencies adhere to certain ethical principles, values or codes. Similarly, the academic fraternity also observes certain ethical guidelines in various areas. One of these areas is research. Linguistic research involves collection of data from respondents and makes analysis of the obtained data. While conducting such researches, a researcher has to follow some ethical guidelines and ensure that ethical guidelines are not violated. While observing such ethical guidelines a researcher may face various challenges. Ethical problems have major influence on the research and handling these problems is necessary to obtain data in ethical way. The present paper deals with discussion on ethical dilemmas arise during conducting field work in some of the remote villages of Baiga tribe of Anupur and Dindori District of Madhya Pradesh.

## **Language Attrition and Remedial Steps**

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With the initiative of University Grants Commission (UGC), many central universities of India have established full-fledged Centres for preservation and promotion of endangered languages. Through these centres, long term research will be undertaken for documentation, conservation and promotion of endangered languages exclusively all over India.

### **UNESCO Report**

A study conducted by UNESCO (2009) reveals that India has the largest number of endangered languages in the world -- 191 Indian languages are endangered and five as already extinct. Madhya Pradesh is inhabited by 43 scheduled tribes and the main tribal groups in the state are Gond, Bhil, Baiga, Korku, Bhariya, Halba, Kaul, and Maria. Studies reveal that many indigenous languages are dying out worldwide due to the lack of native speaker of that particular language. UNESCO in its 2009 report mentioned that about 200 languages are endangered which are categorized into five different levels of vitality: unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. In India, out of 1006 languages 196 language are endangered or on the way to extinction. Out of 196, 84 languages are unsafe, 62 definitely endangered, 6 severely endangered, 35 critically endangered and 9 extinct.

### **PLSI Report**

The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) did a comprehensive linguistic survey of the country in the year 2013 and it said that currently 780 different languages are spoken and 86 different scripts are used in the country. It reports that India has lost nearly 250 languages in the last 50 years or so. 4,000 of the worlds 6,000 languages face a potential threat of extinction, out of which 10 per cent is spoken in India. (Devy, Ganesh. N. 2013).

## **Rushing to be Monolingual**

Language as a means of communication is vital for humankind through which we, human being express our ideas, thought and feelings to others. The loss of any language is, therefore irrevocable loss for all humanity. Human society solely based on its indigenous language and regional dialects, which make a significant contribution to the “common heritage of humankind”. When a language dies, it takes away the vast knowledge of the community. The languages which are at the great risk of extinction are tribal languages. In India many tribal groups have lost their mother tongues and simply speak local or regional languages. One of the reasons of tribal language loss in India is due to the conversion with the prestigious language for their better livelihood and security. Tribal people replace their language with their regional language by encouraging or tolerating bilingualism. The new generation eventually becomes monolingual to the new tongue and gradually the native language moves towards the course of extinction.

## **Tribal People and Their Languages**

Besides, weighing the current situation, tribal people prefer to learn or adopt the regional/official language that offers more job opportunity in the job market and better gain. Indian tribal languages are a good indicator to the lifestyle and history of many of the famous tribes of India. It is our noble responsibility of each individual to take initiative to preserve. The languages used by tribal communities in India are indeed quite complex, but priceless relics of India’s past and nearly overshadowed glory. They are a unique and major part of our global heritage. Tribal tradition and practices pervade all aspects of Indian culture and civilization, yet this awareness is often lacking in popular consciousness and the extent and import of tribal contributions to Indian philosophy, language and custom have often gone unrecognized or been underrated by historians and social scientist. In order to keep alive the India’s rich culture and heritage its utmost important for all of us to preserve the tribal language that reflect the Indian culture in every aspect.

## **Usefulness of Linguistic Study**

A wide documentation of language as well as culture has a great impact in preservation and revitalization of a language and the community. Linguistic study involves analysis of primary data and for this purpose; linguists adopt field survey method. While collecting data from informants, researcher may come across with ethical dilemmas that may have a major influence on the research. On the other hand, it is necessary to carry out a research work ethically keeping in mind that the work does not harm or hurt the sentiment of the informants/community under study. Every research has a responsibility to protect the participants in an investigation.

## **Baiga Tribe**

In order to investigate the endangered language of the Baiga tribe, a particularly vulnerable tribe groups (PVTGs) of Madhya Pradesh a field work was carried out. It was carried out in the Baiga villages, namely, Gopalpur of Koranjia Block of Dindori district and Garjanbeeja, and Debri Dadar of Pusparajgarh Block of Anuppur District, Madhya Pradesh. The tribe under study is affluent in their ethno-medicinal practices and other traditional knowledge system. The present paper discusses the ethical issues involved in field linguistic study on Baigani, the native language of the Baiga. The present paper throws light on the ethical issues emerged while conducting fieldwork, particularly in terms of informed consent, risk and benefit and intellectual and cultural property rights of the Baiga tribe.

### **1.1 The Baiga and Baigani Language**

The Baiga, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of Madhya Pradesh, inhabit Mandla, Balaghat, Dindori and Anuppur districts of the state. They are also found in small numbers in the districts of Sioni, Chindwada, Bilaspur, Kawardha and Durg districts of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The Baiga is classified as one of the primitive tribes of Madhya Pradesh on the basis of pre-agricultural technology, low literacy and stagnant and diminishing population (Tewari 1984); they reside in the forest covered hilly tracks of Baigachak area in Dindori district.

The Baiga's economy is highly depended on agricultural, animal rearing, hunting, poultry-farming and collection of minor forest produces. Forest continues to be major source of livelihood for the Baigas as they sell a number of forest-based products in the local market. They practice Bewar, a shifting, slash and burn method of growing crops. Forest is the important source in the form of 'fauna and flora' to meet their domestic requirements (Elwin, 2007). It is assumed that Baigas may have lived in Central India at least for 20,000 years. According to 2011 census report the total population of Baiga in Madhya Pradesh is 390,000. From the literature (Thomson, 1867; Ward 1870, Russel and Hilaral, 1919; Census of India 1931; Roy 1935; Singh, 1990; Elwin 2007) it is evident that the Baigas are offshoot of the Bhuiyan tribe and have many sub branches such as Bhumia, Binijhwar, Bharia, Bhaina, Dhanwar, Saonta, etc. leading to the confusion to the ethnic identity and affinity, thereby they are void of some reservation benefit. They are worshiper of the Mother Nature and this scared belief prohibits them from ploughing the earth. Baiga means a sorcerer or medicine man. The name Baiga is also applied to anyone who serves as a village priest. They utilize their traditional knowledge and indigenous systems of medicine for the treatment of various diseases and ailments. They are largely dependent on traditional herbal medicines for treating diseases. Shifting cultivation or Bewar cutting is not only their chief occupation or main source of livelihood but also a way of life to them.

The Baiga tribe is a patrilineal tribe and endogamous. They allow marriage between a man and his immediate relations of his mother's side. The classificatory system of Kinship prevails in Baiga.

### **Baigani Language**

Baigani language is the native language of the Baiga, one of the primitive tribes of Madhya Pradesh, and an endangered language of India. As per 1961 census reports their mother tongue is Baiganiboli, a dialect of Chhattisgarhi language belonging to the Central group of Indo-Aryan languages. It is believed that the ancestors of the Baigas spoke an Austroasiatic language but due to numerous reasons they lost their language and started to speak a new variety which is later recognized as a variety of Chhattisgarhi influenced by Gondi and Western Hindi. According to Verrier Elwin (1944) Baigani is now recognized as a corrupt form of Chhattisgarhi, but it was once supposed to be a real language with a large number of speakers". Baigani as Grierson in his

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*Linguistic Survey of India*, states that it is a corrupt form of Chhattisgarhi but is freely mixed up with words and idioms taken from other languages including on the one hand Gondi and on the other Bundeli. It is said that the Baigas inhabit different districts speak distinct languages due to influence of their neighboring languages. Baigas of Mokal hills speak a Chhattisgarhi variety whether the Baigas of Mandala district speaks a variety which is a mixture of Hindi and Awadhi languages. It is evident that Baigani language was constant contact with Gondi, Hindi and Chhattisgarhi languages, for a very long period of time and gradually it assimilated several linguistics features of neighboring languages and with time, it had lost its original Austro-Asiatic language traits and the speaker of the bygone language adopted a new variety which is similar to Hindi or Chhattisgarhi. The newly emerged variety of language is called as Baiganiboli by the Baigas. The original Baigani language is already extinct and hardly any written records or documentation are available. The original language is lost without leaving any written records to trace it. The language also did not have any orthography form.

In 1944, Verrier Elwin documented some Baiga folksongs in his literary piece “Folks songs of the Mokal Hills”. In 1947 Prof. S. C Dubey also made an effort to document some of the folk songs of the tribes.

An analysis shows that the language of the folksongs (documented) show similarity with the Chhattisgarhi variety.

I have conducted a preliminary linguistic study on the prevalent form of Baiganiboli and data analysis reveals that the current form of Biagani has many primary vowel sounds, which can be further distinguished on the basis of length. The initial investigation shows that Baigani language exists 8 primary vowel sounds but not limited too.

The primary vowels of Baiganiboli can be classified into front and back, round and unrounded vowels. The result also shows that the language has many diphthongs like -/ia/, /ai/, /au/, /ua/, /ɔi/, and /ou/ which can be further classified as Rising and Falling Diphthongs. Based on the data collected during the study, it is found that the language has 4 Rising Diphthongs- /ai/, /au/, /ɔi/ and /ou/ and 2 Falling Diphthongs -/ia/ and /ua/.

A comprehensive study is needed to be carried out to find out exact number of diphthongs, central diphthongs as well as Triphthongs of the language. In case of consonant sounds,

besides Plosive, Fricatives, and Lateral, the analysis shows the prevalence of Aspirated stops in the language. It is also found to be a common feature of the language.

The language is also found to be inflectional and suffixal in nature. Reduplication is found to be one of the important morphological features of the language. In my earlier study on “A Morphological Study of Baiga Kins, ip Terminology” (published in *Language in India*, 2016), it was noted that suffix plays an important role in Baigani and its role in differentiate gender in Baigani language is significant. In the relationship terms of Baigani language, it is observed that Baiga people use adjectives like /bərka/, /məʒula/ and /nan/ meaning elder, middle and younger with root words to differentiate the age. These adjectives are used in the case of brothers, sisters, Father’s brother, Father’s sister, Mother’s brother and Mother’s sister to distinguish age in the relation. The study also reveals that the language has morphological feature like Reduplication which is found to be an important morphological feature in Baiga Kinship terms and the reduplicate is most often repeated only once. A comprehensive linguistic study is needed to carry out on the language to understand

## **1.2 Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (2000)**

### **A. Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding**

#### **(i) Consultation, negotiation and free and informed consent are the foundations for research with or about Indigenous peoples.**

Researchers must accept a degree of Indigenous community input into and control of the research process. This also recognizes the obligation on researchers to give something back to the community. It is ethical practice in any research on Indigenous issues to include consultation with those who may be directly affected by the research or research outcomes whether or not the research involves fieldwork.

#### **(ii) The responsibility for consultation and negotiation is ongoing.**

Consultation and negotiation is a continuous two-way process. Ongoing consultation is necessary to ensure free and informed consent for the proposed research, and of maintaining that consent. Research projects should be staged to allow continuing opportunities for consideration of the research by the community.



**(iii) Consultation and negotiation should achieve mutual understanding about the proposed research.**

Consultation involves an honest exchange of information about aims, methods, and potential outcomes (for all parties). Consultation should not be considered as merely an opportunity for researchers to tell the community what they, the researchers, may want. Being properly and fully informed about the aims and methods of a research project, its implications and potential outcomes, allows groups to decide for themselves whether to oppose or to embrace the project.

**B. Respect, recognition and involvement**

**(i) Indigenous knowledge systems and processes must be respected.**

Acknowledging and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems and processes is not only a matter of courtesy but also recognition that such knowledge can make a significant contribution to the research process. Researchers must respect the cultural property rights of Indigenous peoples in relation to knowledge, ideas, cultural expressions and cultural materials.

**(ii) There must be recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of peoples as well as of individuals.**

Research in Indigenous studies must show an appreciation of the diversity of Indigenous peoples, who have different languages, cultures, histories and perspectives.

**(iii) The intellectual and cultural property rights of Indigenous peoples must be respected and preserved.**

Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights are part of the heritage that exists in the cultural practices, resources and knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples. It is a fundamental principle of research to acknowledge the sources of information and those who have contributed to the research.

**(iv) Indigenous researchers, individuals and communities should be involved in research as collaborators.**

Indigenous communities and individuals have a right to be involved in any research project focused upon them and their culture. Participants have the right to withdraw from the project at any time.

**C. Benefits, outcomes and agreement**

**(i) The use of, and access to, research results should be agreed.**

Indigenous peoples make a significant contribution to research by providing knowledge, resources or access to data. That contribution should be acknowledged by providing access to research results and negotiating rights in the research at an early stage.

**(ii) A researched community should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by the research project.**

Research in Indigenous studies should benefit Indigenous peoples at a local level, and more generally. A reciprocal benefit should accrue for their allowing researchers often intimate access to their personal and community knowledge.

**(iii) The negotiation of outcomes should include results specific to the needs of the researched community.**

Among the tangible benefits that a community should be able to expect from a research project is the provision of research results in a form that is useful and accessible.

**(iv) Negotiation should result in a formal agreement for the conduct of a research project, based on good faith and free and informed consent.**

The aim of the negotiation process is to come to a clear understanding, which results in a formal agreement (preferably written), about research intentions, methods and potential results. The establishment of agreements and protocols between Indigenous peoples and researchers is an important development in Indigenous studies. Good faith negotiations are those that have involved

a full and frank disclosure of all available information and that were entered into with an honest view to reaching an agreement.

### **1.3 Ethical Issue in Linguistic research on Endangered Language:**

As it was discussed in the earlier section of the paper, a fieldwork was conducted on three remote Baigavillages, namely Gopalpur, of Dindori district and Garjanbeeja and Debridadarof Anuppur district, Madhya Pradesh. Almost 90% of Baigani speakers are illiterate at Garjanbija village and the highest education is upto class V. The villagers are ignorant about the research work and research activity. They restrict among themselves and usually avoid contact with outsiders. Lack of education and aversion attitude towards the external world are incessantly influencing the development activities including research work on the tribe. Ensuring proper communication and exchange of information pertaining to research and potential outcomes of the research to the villagers is intricate due to lack of knowledge.

Informed consent is given by a participant on the basis of a full explanation of the research project provided by the researcher. The explanation should be provided to the researcher participants in a manner which is intelligible to them. This is the main aim of informed consent.

The first and foremost problem arises while conducting any research is getting consent from the participants. The decision of a person to take part in a research as a participant must be based on his/her consent. The participant should not be forced to take part in research. It is entirely an individual choice of a participant, whether he/she wants to take part in the research. If somebody gives consent for participation in research, it does not necessarily imply that his/her participation will continue to the end of it. The participants are also free to withdraw their participations at any moment.

While conducting the field work in Garjanbeeja village, the first ethical problem emerged in case of informed consent. It was observed that the decision on consent of a female participant depends on the male counterpart. Females of the village remain busy in working in the field for cultivation and they spend most of their day-time in the harvesting field. Thus, there was an ethical problem in attainment of the consent from the female participants as it depends on male person of the family.

Contrary to Garjanbeeja village, Debridadar which is almost 40 kilometers away from the previous village presents a different scenario. Although the village is still deprived from receiving many government amenities; it is found to be a little developed village in comparison to Garjanbeeja. The villagers are ready to make interaction with outsider and knowledgeable about the research and research related activities. The participants were keen to participate in the research and were proud over their command on the language. They were eager to know their contributions and disclosing personal identity is considered to be worth rewarding.

60% of the total population of Gopalpur village of Dindori district is Baiga people. Rest 40% of the population belong to Gond tribe. The participants of this village asked for monetary benefit in response to providing information for research work.

Field linguistics determine the long-term benefit to the community in the form of preparation of dictionary, Thesaurus, Grammar, Literary book, primers, developing writing system, Learning materials, specialized glossary for domain and knowledge. Unlike clinical research, linguistic research inflicts no harm to the community neither the participants. Instead, linguistic research provides maximum benefit by preserving literary heritage and indigenous knowledge system of the community under study. However, immediate benefit from linguistic studies is limited especially for the tribal community like Baiga, having limited written resources and without an existing writing system. Engaging the community people in the project are also not viable except in some minor works due to lack of proper education.

According to ethical guidelines, researchers should respect and maintain the privacy of the participants and respondents. The influence of this ethical issue has been tremendous in social research. Researchers do not have the right to violate the privacy of the research participants. Unlike other clinical research, the participants of field linguistic researches were keen to participate in the research and feel pride over their command on the language. They were eager to know their contributions and disclosing personal identity is considered to be worth rewarding.

Instead of hiding, disclosing personal identity is matter of a great pride for the informants in field linguistic research works.

Ethical dilemma also arises regarding intellectual property right of indigenous knowledge of the Baiga. The intellectual property of Baiga, their traditional knowledge and indigenous systems of medicine for the treatment of various diseases and ailments as well as cultural and literary heritage are not protected by any copyright law. Field linguists tend to gather a large amount of language material in the form of notes, audiotapes, and, sometimes, videotapes. The question arises whether it would be ethical to use of language materials, photographs or visual documentation of their traditional culture and knowledge for publications and future research work. Since, the language belongs to the community; the confusion prevails on ownership of the data. In many instances, field linguist find it difficult to adhere to the ethical guidelines on endangered language.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Field Linguists studies have no harm to the community under study (it is non-invasive). It provides the community long term benefit as well as facilitates the community to preserve their language. Research on endangered languages is not always restricted to obtain linguistics data of the languages. Revitalizing such languages require documentation of the languages and to support speakers of these languages in their desire to maintain them, facilitated them by developing in information and communication technologies. The linguistic studies assist a language in its systematic advancement and enable the community to maintain the language. Field linguists have ethical responsibilities not only to individuals and communities, but also to knowledge system. It is ethical for a researcher to go back to the community studied with the benefits of the work and acknowledge the sources of information and those who have contributed towards the research.

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