

Assessing Language Vitality:
A Case Study of Cholanaikkar Tribe in Kerala, India

Dr. Sreelakshmi KM
tlk2sri@gmail.com

Language contact and language shift are two inevitable processes which a speech community goes through, as they come in contact with another speech community, gradually leading to a complete shift-loss of their native tongue. It would not be a false statement to say that the idea of language death/vanishing tongues no more remains a myth. Over the years we have seen people shifting from their mother tongue to the dominant language. In the present scenario one can hardly find a monolingual speaker. A language can easily become extinct because its speakers diminish; and after a long time, it loses its speakers; then finally the language disappears (Lauder 2011; Lauder 2018).

Cholanaikkar, one of the oldest tribes in Kerala, is at the verge of extinction today. With a population of less than 400, these natives are struggling to keep its roots alive. They are mostly spread over the western ghats of Kerala including Karulayi, Chungathara and Vazhikadavau. The heavy monsoons help these Western Ghats flourish more that the tribe's life is completely depended on the forest's rich flora and fauna. Cholanaikkars survives on the wild roots, forest greens, wild mushrooms, seeds, plant shoots, honey, reptiles, wild animals, etc.

The language of Cholanaikkar, *cholanaika*, belongs to the Dravidian language family. As per the UNESCO, this language comes in the definitely endangered group. Even though the government has identified the tribe as a protected tribal group, the risk of language loss still remains a threat. One of the reasons behind this language loss is the cultural mixing. The cultural mixing is an inevitable factor for these tribes as they come in contact with the mainland people on a daily basis including labour.

In the recent years, the local ecological knowledge to resource management has been described well by researchers. (Berkes et.al.2000, Gadgil, et.al. 2000, Pilgrim, et.al. 2007, 2008, Berkes 2008). Maffi (1998) describes language as a resource for the nature. According to her the growing body of literature exists on the interlinkages between linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity (Maffi1998, 2005). The knowledge of the language is often non translatable but links the speaker to their diversity. The cultural understanding of the community can not only lead to their sustainable managements but also to the ecological interactions and relevance of it (Pilgrim,

2008). Wolfram, Walt, and Schilling (1998) points out that when a language and ecology becomes extinct, their identity too dies with it.

Linguistic Ecology of Cholanaikkar

In the present scenario in India, the country is witnessing an attempt to impose¹ a certain Indo Aryan language, Hindi, over other language families. The new prescribed “one language formula” is further pushing down the speakers of their language to the situation of endangerment. Lest not forget the states in this country was formed based on their linguistic features². Though the language families including Dravidian groups are against this modernisation linguistic theory, it also gives a nightmare to the minority communities.

As the Cholanaikkar are trying to maintain their mother tongue the new language policies imposed by the modern state of India is another threat. The community’s culture is already mixed with the dominant culture and efforts need to be initiated to save the language before it vanishes. According to Hinton, making audio or video recordings from people who can still speak the local language with the aim of documenting and archiving them is one way to defend a language from extinction (Hinton 2011). Hence, with the aim to save the Cholanaikkar language, as the initial stage, through an ethnolinguistic study, this research focuses on the language ecology of Cholanaikkar community.

For a tribal community with 363 speakers (KIRTADS³ census, 2011) left, taking the legacy of their mother language to the next generation is no easy task. With no script and speakers declining day by day, the threat of critically endangered is not far. This tribe does not have many literate people and surviving as hunters and gatherers have further restricted this tribe to use their language within their household. The low status given to their language has also valorized this tribe. The sociolinguistic milieu of both the state and the country has further forced the tribe to accommodate the dominant language. Though many studies/research claim this language is a sub-dialect of Malayalam or Tamil or Kannada, this truth behind a stable language is being invisible⁴.

Language Maintenance

Language shift and language loss are a gradual process. Language shift happens when the community favours other language/s over their tongue. In this process of language shift occurs

¹<https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/explained-how-centres-hindi-push-may-end-up-harming-indias-unity/1709285/>

² Mitchell, Lisa. (2009). *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India: The Making of a Mother Tongue*. Indiana University Press.

³ <https://kirtads.kerala.gov.in/tribals-in-kerala/>

⁴ Muralidharan, R., A Descriptive Study of Cholanaikka, Ph.D, thesis (Unpublished), Annamalai University, Annamalainagar, 1988.

the language endangerment, then to language death. When the last speaker of the language dies, language death happens. One of the major contributing factors to the language death is when the dominant language takes over more and more domains of the minor language. Hence, it is important to maintain the endangered language present in any form. According to Multamia Lauder (2011), if a language is known to be endangered, efforts are needed to preserve and document it even though the language has limited functions.

The Cholanaikkar tribe is largely dependent on the forest. The older generations of the tribe are treasured with infinite knowledge and wisdom related to their tribal culture. A tribe enriched with the knowledge from traditional herbal medicines to various techniques of farming, is struggling to retain their language. Even though there is a decline in their speakers, the elders have taken an initiative in the maintenance of their mother tongue. Hinton (2011) points out that there is need to have a designated effort to encourage and strengthen language that is still used by young speakers but has begun to show its decline (Hinton 2011: 291).

Before we study about language endangerment, we need to look into the contributing factors that lead a language at the verge of extinction. Through a theoretical approach Fishman (1991) focuses on the “casual factors” of language shift which is largely social. It seems that the Cholanaikkar tribe too is affected by such casual social factors. Some of the reasons behind the endangerment of Cholanaikkar language are, the language is not taught in any educational institutions including *anganwadis*. Secondly, the domination of Malayalam and the government’s existing policy of three language formula and the new policy to impose Indo-Aryan language into Dravidian family which will worsen the present language situation. Thirdly, migration to the mainland in search of job, better education, and lifestyle. Fourth, the younger generation of the community is unaware of the importance to learn and keep alive their mother tongue. Due to the low status given by the dominant language speakers, the younger generations prefer to use the dominant language than their mother tongue. Similarly, the younger generations are unaware that when their language dies, identity, culture, and roots die with it too.

In the present scenario, one could find Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada words in the language of Cholanaikkar. This might raise the question to many: Is this language a dialect of Malayalam or Tamil or Kannada. The truth is Cholanaikkar’s language is a language belonging to the Dravidian family. As the tribe shares the borders with Tamil Nadu and Karnataka it has become difficult to eliminate the other dominant languages’ words from their present vocabulary. Communicating alone in their mother tongue with outsider is not an easy task. Hence, they have shift to the dominant language Malayalam.

In the recent years, the Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS), a Government of Kerala Initiative, has

embarked on a new mission to create script and save 37 tribal languages in the state including Cholanaikkar. This aboriginal tribe has survived so far through their indigenous knowledge about their living environment. Their rich knowledge is entirely stored in their mother tongue. This new initiative of language retention would safeguard the language in the future.

Domains of Language Use

i) Market

The Cholanaikkars reside in the deep forest of the Western Ghats. Though they survive on edible wild flora and fauna, they have to come in contact with the outside world for many purposes. Cholanaikkars travel to the market to buy and sell fruits, vegetables, groceries, equipment, clothes, etc. When they come in contact with a native Malayalam speaker they switch to Malayalam. At the same time when two Cholanaikkars meet, they speak in their mother tongue.

ii) Education

The children in the community start their education at the age of five. Once they reach five years, these children leave the forest and are admitted to Indira Gandhi Model Residential School in Nilambur. The government of Kerala has set up a school specifically for Cholanaikkars and Kattunaikkars. They share many linguistic similarities. These children are given education in the school till twelfth class. The Cholanaikkar students talk among themselves in their mother tongue, while with their teachers in Malayalam and with Kattunaikkars they mix their native tongue with Malayalam. The teachers of the school are also able to partially understand the tribal language over the years of teaching-co-residing with these tribal children. Even though these children could speak their mother tongue, they are unaware of its depth.

iii) Other Domains

A language is endangered when its speakers shift from their mother tongue to another due to various reasons. Traditional rituals, songs, folklore, and flora and fauna are only some of the domains where the language is substituted with another in later stage. In the case of Cholanaikkars, they have retained their language in these domains along with household conversations. As the tribe resides in the deep forest, they use their mother tongue for communication. Though lots of Malayalam words have been assimilated into their vocabulary especially in younger generation, still efforts are taken by the community to not use the dominant language in their mother tongue at least when they are with the community.

Assessing Language Vitality

There are several grades in which the language vitality can be assessed. Fishman (1991) proposed the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) in order to categorise and compare different levels of language endangerment. In 2010, Lewis and Simons proposed and

Expanded GIDS with assessment tools 0-8 scale which could calculate the intergenerational transmission, domains of use literacy and political status etc.

Table 1. EGIDS assessment table

Level	Label	Description
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the childbearing generations are transmitting it to their children.
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves, but none is transmitting it to their children.
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.

According to the Expanded GIDS, the language of Cholanaikkars can be leveled under 6a- The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language. This tribal language has no script and is used and learned by the younger generation as their mother language.

In 2003, the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's ad hoc committee of linguists proposed nine determining factors for assessing language vitality and degree of language endangerment. These are graded from 0-5 value. This value is also used by Atlas of the World's languages in Danger⁵ to measure the endangerment level.

Table 2: UNESCO Nine Factors

Factor 1	Intergenerational Language Transmission	The language is transmitted from one generation to another
Factor 2	Absolute Number of Speakers	363 speakers (KIRTADS census, 2011) (Even though younger generation speaks the language they are not aware about the in-depth knowledge about their language)
Factor 3	Proportion of Speakers within the total population	Moderate
Factor 4	Trends in Existing Language Domains	Malayalam
Factor 5	Response to New Domains and Media	Use Malayalam
Factor 6	Materials for Language Education and Literacy	Malayalam
Factor 7	Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and use	Government of Kerala has set up a school for this tribe especially. But institutions use Malayalam for teaching.
Factor 8	Community Members' Attitudes Toward their own Language	Even though younger generation speak the language they are not aware about the in depth knowledge about their language
Factor 9	Amount and Quality of Documentation	No concrete documentation has been done yet

Table 3: Present Speakers of Cholanaikkar and assessing their mother tongue knowledge.

Age	Understand	Speak
3-5	yes	yes
6-15	yes	yes

⁵<http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>.

16-25	yes	yes
26-35	yes	yes
36- 45	yes	yes
46 -55	yes	yes
55 and above	yes	yes

A Step for the Future

Over the years the linguists have made us familiarize with the terms **language documentation**, and **language revitalization**. These are two inevitable terms to describe the situation and to save the language. Grenoble and Whaley in *Saving Languages* (2006) have emphasized on the future steps towards revitalization. Along with the challenges in the documenting-reviving a language, it also suggests the importance of keeping the enthusiasm of the speakers especially the younger generation.

A Script

As the Cholanaikkar community doesnot have a script of their own, a script can be developed for this tribe. The script can be borrowed from one of the Dravidian languages or from the dominant language where the tribe resides. One of the most important points that should be taken care of while the script is being developed is that the tribe should be consulted. Remember, the script is not developed for the researcher’s purpose but for the welfare of the community and for their future. Introducing a beginner’s guide would help both younger and elder generations to revive a taste in their mother tongue.

Documentation Methods and Tools

Languages can be recorded using minimal equipment of audio-video recorders. Presently, the researchers use handy audio recorders and smart phones with external microphones/lapels. The interviewer – informer conversations can be recorded through these tools. These recorded data can be further documented and transcribed. New dictionaries can be done using the tool-software ELAN⁶, FLEx⁷ etc. These recorded data can be archived (open-access) in ELAR⁸.

⁶The Language Archive (TLA) is an integral part of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. It contains various types of materials, including audio and video language corpus data from languages around the world; photographs, notes, experimental data, and other relevant information required to document and describe languages and how people use them; records of speech in everyday interactions in families and communities; naturalistic data from adult conversations from endangered and under-studied languages, and linguistic phenomena. <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/>.

⁷SIL International develops and supports a wide range of software to assist with language development activities: linguistic and cultural research, literacy and mother-tongue education, dictionary development, community and computer-assisted translation, and vernacular media production. FLEx allows the user to build a "lexicon" of the language, i.e. a word-list with definitions and grammatical information, and also to store texts from the language. <https://software.sil.org/>

Conclusion

With less than 400 speakers remaining, Cholanaikkar is definitely an endangered group. As seen in most of the tribal language contexts, Cholanaikkar younger generation prefers to use the dominant language. The community has a very low population and the people migrating outside the forest in search of opportunities are more. A shift in the intergeneration can be seen. At the same time the speakers use their mother tongue once they are back in their home, and forest. But for how long will they follow this language maintenance at home is a question to consider. Hence attempts to document and revitalize this language shall remain vital.

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⁸ The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) is a digital repository for preserving multimedia collections of endangered languages from all over the world, making them available for future generations.

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