



Preserving tribal languages in India: Can the Modi Government Take up the Challenge and Deliver?

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In rural Indian villages, Hindi or English are in vogue with younger generations, and are often required travelling to larger towns for work. In big cities, colonization, as well as globalization, has also spurred a switch to English and other popular languages. A group of linguists, working on language revitalization have identified "hotspots" where local tongues are at risk of disappearing; these are places with rich linguistic diversity, but high risk of language extinction due to relatively few remaining speakers and a lack of recordings or texts that would help with language preservation.

How do languages face extinction?

“The history of the world's languages is largely a story of loss and decline. At around 8000 BC, linguists estimated that upwards of 20,000 languages might have been in existence; today the number stands at 6,909 and is declining rapidly. By 2100, it is quite realistic to expect that half of these languages will be gone, their last speakers dead, their words perhaps recorded in a dusty archive somewhere, but more likely undocumented entirely”, according to Danny Hieber, in Why do languages die?

Globalization is the result, not a cause, for language decline as trade and capitalism, fuel the use of link languages, causing a shift in the lingua franca, as a need to succeed in trade, which slowly kills the language, which is less used. Trade does not kill languages more than it kills any other type of cultural practice, like painting or

music. Trade enhances the *exchange* of cultural practices and fosters their proliferation; it does not generally diminish them. It is only when the state adopts a trade language as official and, in a fit of linguistic nationalism, foists it upon its citizens, so much so trade languages become "killer languages."

It is not just that schools redefine success, away from those things valued by the community, and towards those things that make someone a better citizen of the state. No, the most significant impact of compulsory state education is that it ingrains in children the idea that their language and their culture is worthless, of no use in the modern classroom or society, and that it is something that merely serves to set them apart negatively from their peers, as an object of their vicious torment.

But these languages clearly do have value, if for no other reason than simply *because people value them*. Local and minority languages are valued by their speakers for all sorts of reasons, whether it be for use in the local community, communicating with one's elders, a sense of heritage, the oral and literary traditions of that language, or something else entirely. Again, the praxeologist is not in a position to evaluate these beliefs. The praxeologist merely notes that free choice in language use and free choice in association, one not dictated by the edicts of the state, will best satisfy the demand of individuals; whether for minority languages or lingua francas; what people find useful, they will use.

This has become all the more important to consider, against the backdrop of the impending AEC, the Asean Economic Community, which is the coming together of all the ten member countries of ASEAN, wherein, the use of English has become more important for most people in the world and there has been a sudden scramble at least in Thailand, in order for its people to develop a more competitive advantage as most often it has been said that Thais in general lack English language skills and that might make them lose to other countries, where English is more widely spoken like the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore as well as Myanmar as all these three have been former British colonies.

All through history, languages have naturally ebbed and flowed, rising to prominence before gradually falling from use. But a complex mix of economic, social, and cultural factors is now causing them to disappear at a faster pace. Experts believe that more than half of the world's roughly 7,000 languages will vanish by the end of this century alone, at the rate of one language every two weeks.

India's languages fall into at least seven major language families. Of these, the Munda family—comprising at least a dozen tribal tongues spoken in eastern and central India—is among the most threatened.

Close to twenty percent of all Indian languages are on their death bed and facing extinction but the Munda languages are the most vulnerable. Over the last few decades, linguists have analyzed several Munda languages such as the widely spoken Santali and Mundari, but the majority are poorly studied and sparsely documented. Many have yet to be rendered into computer typefaces, unable to cross the digital divide.

Fortunately, even the most obscure of the Munda tongues—such as that of the isolated Asur tribe in the eastern state of Jharkhand—still have at least a few thousand speakers, according to senior researchers and linguists who have been closely studying the tribals in the area in focus. "Even though many Munda languages are spoken by relatively smaller numbers of people, they are still the only languages spoken in the villages where these communities live.

Compared to some indigenous languages of North America that have only one or two speakers left, a lot of endangered languages in India still have between 2,000 to 10,000 speakers, so we can still imagine effective interventions to prevent extinction," said Harrison.

The role of globalization

All major publications on language endangerment around the world blame this aspect of language evolution on globalization, especially books such as Nettle & Romaine (2000), Crystal (2000, 2004), Skuttnab-Kangas (2000), Maurais & Morris (2003), and Hagège (2006), which have covered the subject matter very broadly. The aspect of globalization that has retained the most attention, is that of 'world-wide network of rapid transportation and communication, which have emerged around the world and the ensuing networks of economic interdependencies, as well as the world-wide diffusion of industrial and other cultural commodities.

The fact that usage of English has also spread much wider even in countries which had not been colonized by the United Kingdom or dominated militarily by the United States (such as those of the former USSR) has also been pointed out as a correlate of globalization in the present sense. Many things have gone wrong in this particular discourse, revealing that linguists have focused on (epi)phenomena which are mere by-products of globalization rather than on the likely causes of language endangerment. For instance, there have been frequent mentions of McDonaldization (as the spread of McDonald stores around the world) and the world-wide diffusion of Hollywood movies not only as signs of the Americanization of our planet, they also act as evidence that it is becoming more and more uniform culturally.

McDonaldization and other aspects of Americanization, as the world-wide diffusion of American culture (including technology and its brand of Capitalism) have thus been cited as manifestations of globalization.

What has not been interpreted adequately is the fact that it is the emergence of worldwide networks, of rapid and long-distance transportation and communication (which in turn facilitate the mobility of people and goods), that has made the Americanization process possible. Also, the process has not always promoted the spread of English. McDonald stores in non-Anglophone countries are not operating in English, just like their menus have not replicated the original American menu. Nowadays, Hollywood movies are usually released concurrently in many major languages (sometimes in editions adapted to local cultures), because the industry is more interested in making money than in spreading English and/or American values. The literature accompanying American computers in non-Anglophone countries is not exclusively in English. BBC and Voice of America radio programs also broadcast in a wide range of languages other than English, which suggests that even at such an ideological outreach level, the spread of English is not the main goal.

Reality and the example of Koro language in Arunachal Pradesh.

“Nearly 80 per cent of the world’s population speaks only 1 per cent of its languages. When the last speaker of a language dies, the world loses the knowledge that was contained in that language,” explains Gregory Anderson, a National Geographic Fellow and director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. The institute is dedicated to the documentation, revitalisation and maintenance of endangered languages.

It was he, along with David Harrison of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, who discovered the Koro language and its fragility during an expedition to Arunachal Pradesh. It would be an irony if Koro Aka becomes extinct a few years on. And a bigger irony still if Hindi triggers the demise.

Hindi plays an important role as a unifier in Arunachal Pradesh where 26 tribes speak 50 distinctly different languages in addition to innumerable dialects and sub-dialects.

“The state is a linguistic hotspot with a different language or dialect every 10 km. Most tribes do not comprehend the language that others speak. In the absence of effective communication, conflicts were inevitable. Hindi was promoted in a big way after the Chinese aggression and this allowed the tribes communicate with each other better,” says Rajesh Sachdeva, the director in-charge of the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore. He had spent a decade-and-a-half researching languages in the North-east.

Koro belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, a group of some 400 languages of which more than 100 are spoken in India. At present, only around 1,200 men and women speak the language. The remaining 600-odd consisting of youth and children, converse only in Hindi. They all reside in a cluster of five disjointed hamlets — Yengsey, Sopung, Pichang, Chichang and Yeme — located in the Bana block of East Kameng district.

Nestled among the remote virgin hills to the south-west of the state, three of the five hamlets — Yengsey, Sopung and Yeme — can be accessed after a 250-km journey by road from capital Itanagar. The other two do not have motorable tracks. One has to trek for a day to reach them.

Bhalukpong, the entry point for tourists doing the popular Bomdila-Tawang circuit along the China border, is closer at 130 km. “I have always spoken Koro Aka. So my sons and daughters learned the language. Other elders of the community also spoke the language at home, and hence, their children speak Koro. But the young are not as passionate about the language. They speak to their kids in Hindi. Hence, my grandchildren and other children of the community are not learning the language,” he says.

Already, locals have stopped singing songs in ethnic languages at the Chingdang festival. Now, all the songs sung are in Hindi and English.

Payo speaks a language that few comprehend and fewer still can communicate in. But that doesn't stop him from carrying on in his tongue even when it only gets him an embarrassed silence. “Nu harena (how are you)?” he asks his grandson Lain. The seven-year-old flashes an impish smile, which he always does when his grandpa says anything in the language he cannot comprehend.

Payo knows Hindi, but he speaks only in his mother tongue. The septuagenarian is the head jibi or mukhiya of Yangsey village in the East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh and proudly sports the government badge that anoints him ‘koche ka mardon’ (chief arbitrator). Everyone in this remote hamlet respects his wisdom — not just at the arbitration table — but in other spheres of life as well. And it is a testimony to his wisdom that Payo only speaks the language he does.

“If I begin to speak in Hindi, other seniors in the village who know the native tongue will follow suit. That will kill the language and our unique identity. I cannot betray my forefathers,” Payo explains in Hindi, making an exception for an outsider.

Payo speaks Koro Aka (also referred to as Jejuale Aka), a centuries-old tongue. Koro Aka was classified as a language only recently after two American linguists stumbled upon the tribe two years ago during a National Geographic expedition to document endangered languages.

Payo's son-in-law Singdo Yame understands the elder's concern, but points out that Hindi eases conversation with kids. "The kids converse with each other in Hindi which they learn in school. If I speak to my son in Koro, he'll simply not understand," he reasons.

But the threat to Koro existed even before Hindi arrived, from other dialects of larger communities. Hruso, for instance. Says Kobing Yame, who migrated two decades ago from Koro-dominated Sopung to his in-law's house in the Hruso-dominated Palizi, 15 km away: "The only difference between the two tribes is the language they speak. Over the years, many Koro men and women have married into Hruso families and the latter language has prevailed in these homes. Hruso has been slowly gnawing away at Koro since it has a 5,000-strong population in 20 villages of East Kameng and West Kameng," points out Kobing, who married a Hruso and picked up the language. His children, however, speak only Hindi.

Diversity dilemma

The vast majority of languages indigenous to Arunachal belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, many of them from the Tani branch. These include Nyishi/Nishi, Apatani, Bangni, Tagin, Hills Miri, Galo, Bokar, Lower Adi (Padam, Pasi, Minyong, and Komkar), Upper Adi and Milang. Only Mising is spoken outside Arunachal Pradesh — in Assam — while some northern Tani languages like Bangni and Bokar are spoken in small numbers in Tibet. The Tani languages are among the better-studied in the region. To the east of the Tani area are three virtually undescribed and highly endangered languages of the 'Mishmi' group of Tibeto-Burman, Idu, Digaru and Miju. To the west and north of the Tani area are Bodic languages. Between the Bodic and Tani areas are a large number of undescribed and unclassified languages like Sherdukpen, Bugun, Aka/Hruso, Koro, Miji, Bangru and Puroik/Sulung. Finally, there are an unknown number of Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepalese origin, including Gurung and Tamang, which are not classified as 'tribal'. Outside of Tibeto-Burman, there is a single representative of the Tai language family in Khamti language, which is closely affiliated to the Shan dialects of northern Burma.

In Manipur, languages of the Kuki tribe have been mainstreamed and are taught in school. Others like Hamar and Paite are strong and healthy. Maiteis in Manipur have even revived their own script. But Sachdeva recognises that smaller languages like Koro, Hruso, Miji, Sherdukpen, Bugun, Bangru and Puroik Sulung in Arunachal Pradesh; Deori and Tiwa in Assam; Chiru and Monsang in Meghalaya; and varieties within the Khasi fold are endangered.

If all goes well, Payo Dagio's question "Nu harena?" will soon get him the reassuring reply: "Nei kaplayei." (I am fine); It is upto the government led by the astute Narendra Modi, to work a formula to preserve languages, for like Mahatma

Gandh said- India, lives in its villages and it needs to protect its cultural and secular identity! The UN Atlas of Endangered Languages lists 18 languages with only one remaining speaker. With about one language disappearing every two weeks, some of these have probably already died off. One language dies every 14 days. By the next century nearly half of the roughly 7,000 languages spoken on Earth will likely disappear, as communities abandon native tongues in favor of English, Mandarin, Hindi or Spanish.

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Conclusions

The subject matter of language loss is obviously much more complex than the relevant ever-growing literature in linguistics has revealed. There have been far too many suggestions by linguists for a long time, with many proposals and solutions to what is considered as a tragic loss to mankind: the loss of diversity in the languages we use across the globe, which is fast dwindling.

Population pressures, globalization and the spread of industrialization are the most recognized perpetrators of "language murder". Global economic patterns often force small, unindustrialized communities to imbibe a different culture. This may occur when individuals physically move to another geographic location where their culture is no longer the prevalent one, or when they allow or encourage a different culture to prevail in their place. This phenomenon, know as cultural assimilation, consists of several stages. During the first, the speakers of the vulnerable language face immense pressure to speak in the dominant language. This pressure comes in a range of forms, from peer pressure to government laws. The second stage is qualified by developing bilingualism - people begin to gain proficiency in the new language, but continue to speak in their native tongue. During the last stage, younger generations find themselves being more familiar with the dominant language, and less connected to their mother tongue. The most concerning aspect of the final stage are the increasing feelings, particularly amongst children, of shame and inferiority about the native language of their parents and grandparents.

India, should not let this happen: it is the moral obligation of the Modi government to step in and look at this issue: for, in its cultural diversity, India lives; we need to leave behind as many languages as we can for the future generations, which are already threatened by the explosion of technology and globalization, where English looks the most likely winner; we need to be more sensitive and preserve languages now, for tomorrow, may be too late!

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language that goes to his heart.” Nelson Mandela

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