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navigating
language
in a digital
world

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a journal which seeks to reflect through free discussion, every shade of Indian thought and aspiration. Each month, a single problem is debated by writers belonging to different persuasions. Opinions expressed have ranged from janata to congress, from sarvodaya to communist to independent. And

the non-political specialist too has voiced his views. In this way it has been possible to answer a real need of today, to gather the facts and ideas of this age and to help thinking people arrive at a certain degree of cohesion and clarity in facing the problems of economics, of politics, of culture.

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N E X T M O N T H : E D I T I N G H I S T O R Y

742

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a symposium on

the challenge posed

by digitization

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The problem

Avinash and Rekha, a young couple, live on a farm in the midst of an evergreen forest in the Western Ghats. Avinash, educated in Germany, always wanted to lead a life in harmony with nature, and Rekha joined him in this venture. Farm work kept them busy, and they had to raise two children, Geeta and Rakesh, that required extra attention.

They were shocked when they realised that their four year old child Rakesh, had stopped responding at the age of two years. He had been a normal child interacting with parents and his sister. Initially they did not notice this change, thinking that child was not particularly responsive due to his quiet nature. It is only when he stopped communicating they began to worry. Was he dumb? That was not the case as he used to respond normally. Why did he stop responding?

The parents discovered the cause only after they took the child to the All India Institute of Speech and Hearing in Mysore. It took several months of treatment for him to become normal again. It turned out to be an addiction to the mobile phone that had resulted in this affliction. As both the parents were busy, they gave him the mobile to play with instead of personally interacting with the child. He soon got himself immersed in the gadget and was able to watch videos and channels showing children's programmes, thinking that there was no need to respond. Soon he became detached from the parents and his sister, as he was conditioned towards one way communication with digital tools. This interfered with bonding and parental attention.

A child spontaneously acquires language skills though observing others, reading facial expressions and how to manage their emotions based on everyday experience, first interacting with the immediate family and gradually with other people. When they are given

mobile phones and other gadgets at an early age, they miss these natural steps of learning language, impairing their cognitive skills in dealing with others.

Obviously, this is the impact of digital tools moulding the brain at a tender age – blocking the spontaneous path to acquiring basic skills for communication or learning a language. The digital era has ushered a fundamental change in the way the child is learning language skills, adapting to the needs that may lead to new ways of wiring the brain to deal with the virtual world. It is a game changer in the life of the children and childhood with drastic impact on parenting.

It is quite normal that parents and grandparents approve, appreciate and even envy the ability of toddlers to handle digital gadgets with high levels of sophistication, which they presume to be a feat. Similarly, children see their parents using these digital tools constantly, instead of interacting with family members or other people around them, as was the experience of Rakesh.

For Noam Chomsky, American linguist and philosopher, the capacity to learn language is hardwired in the human brain and linguistic tools are merely a trigger for developing language skills. For others, it depends on the environment in which the child-adult interaction is crucial in learning the language. In today's world, with the digital realm overarching every sphere of our lives, do we need to develop new theories about how children behave and adapt to this new digital reality?

The lockdowns in the Covid era has led to closing of schools and switching to online classes. This has forced children towards mobile/digital addiction impacting not only their behaviour and health but also impairing the ability to communicate with peer group and wider society.

What language is accessible to people online? Is there any possibility of learning a child's mother tongue using digital tools? Or will one be forced to opt for the dominant language that is represented in the cyber world? What are the implications of such limited choices for a multilingual subcontinent like India?

With the immense diversity of cultures and varied ecological zones stretching from the high Himalaya to the coastal regions, linguistic diversity runs deep in the Indian psyche. The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PSLI) has documented 780 different languages in the country. Unfortunately, these stands threatened as almost 400 of these languages are at the risk of dying.

This diversity emerges from different linguistic origins that often include diverse scripts. Our language family traces its roots to the Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic origins. These long-standing traditions are linked to the linguistic diversity existing in different regions that have resulted in multilingualism. For an ordinary Indian citizen speaking, reading, doing business, and writing in more than one language is not unusual.

After independence, the formation of states that comprised the Indian Union was based on the dominant language spoken in each specific region. The 'identity' politics of language was one of the modes of political and democratic struggle. One of its objectives was to facilitate people's active participation in developmental and cultural programmes through the usage of local language.

India is the only country to have declared 22 languages as official 'scheduled' languages, and six (Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam and Odia) languages as 'classic' languages with a history and lineage of more than a thousand years. Unfortu-

nately, the way we framed our language policy has had devastating impact on hundreds of languages that became invisible for official purposes as they are categorized as 'unscheduled languages'.

Though our Constitution provides rights to speakers of minority languages, the ground reality shows that dominant languages like Hindi and English are gradually becoming entrenched in the minds of the younger generation as they get lured by these languages that provide livelihoods, prestige and raises their social status.

However, in recent years the spontaneous trait of multilingualism is under threat from the central government that is keen to propagate Hindi as a national language and to revive Sanskrit as the heritage language. The imposition of Hindi on the southern region of the country, especially Tamil Nadu, has resulted in strong opposition. The South, over the decades, had reconciled itself to accepting the Three Language Formula (TLF). In addition to Hindi and English, the regional language of the state was given priority in governance and education.

Today, the threat to multilingualism is inherent in the digital era. Most of the communications and business is conducted online. Invariably English is the only dominant language on the internet, forcing people to become bi-lingual rather than multilingual. Though the government has launched the Digital India Mission to develop digital content in scheduled languages, it is doubtful whether this will succeed in providing equitable access to people who use multiple languages.

The first language used on the internet was English and by the 1990s it made up 90 per cent of the content. However, this pattern is changing at a faster pace than expected. A large share has been taken over by French, German, Spanish and Chinese, and the share

of English has shrunk to 30 per cent over the past couple of decades. The use of Chinese grew by 1277 per cent in a decade since the 2000!

According to *Ethnologue*, of the ten most spoken languages in the world, Hindi occupies third place with 637 million speakers, after English and Chinese. A survey of 10 million websites revealed that only 0.055 per cent of sites have content in Hindi. Though India's central government prides itself on promoting Hindi as a national language, its presence online is dismal. It clearly shows how the cyber world has reinforced digital colonization in favour of dominant languages. If this is the online reality of our national language, the fate of regional languages and their exclusion seems to be a forgone conclusion.

China has the largest number of internet users in the world, and they use the Chinese language. Compare this to the second largest internet user, India. Though India is the second largest digitizing economy in the world, the ordinary people are forced to consume digital content in English as the cyber presence of Hindi or other scheduled languages remains almost negligible.

Initiating a more proactive policy, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, GoI, has mandated that all mobile applications to be sold in India from July 2017 should have access to different Indian languages. Nevertheless, we find that its use is very minimal as most people prefer to type the regional language in roman script rather than their mother tongue.

To enhance the IT skills of the rural masses, the central government launched the National Digital Literacy Mission in 2019 with a budget of Rs 2351 crore. It focused on luring rural communities into the formal financial sector – banking, insurance and Mutual Funds – rather than building people's skills to handle digital resources. It is more interested in entrenching the rural population into the mainstream financial sector, ignoring the social and cultural needs that are intricately linked through using the local language.

Bharatvani app, developed by the Central Institute of Indian Languages, is an attempt to make Indian languages and mother tongues visible on the internet, and help younger generations to use them online, and also provide cyber space for endangered languages. These are worthy goals to help scheduled and unscheduled languages to establish themselves online. However, the reality is discouraging. I tried to use this app to find information in Kannada; it was not only difficult to navigate, but was least interactive.

It is the ideologies of the ruling party that dominate while allocating funds in favour of languages that

have political support. According to the data released by the Ministry of Culture, GoI, from 2017 to 2020 Sanskrit received Rs 643.84 crore, Tamil 23 crore, Telugu and Kannada 3 crore while Malayalam and Odia received no funds at all. Thus, the priority of the government was not to save endangered languages but to pump in funds for heritage language like Sanskrit and other languages which are already well established and do not need governmental funds to survive.

The language policy in India lacks vision, commitment and passion. More than funding, we need bare-foot engineers with a deeper understanding of language skills and technology to help the language acquire a digital presence. This will help in building the competence of native computational linguists that can empower the endangered languages and infuse much needed vitality to overcome the digital divide.

In contrast to government funding, digital Czars like Google, Amazon, and Facebook that reap enormous financial benefit from the data generated by Indian netizens, have pumped in funds towards digital empowerment. During the Covid crisis, Google's CEO announced a Google for India Digitalization Fund, committing to invest USD 10 billion or Rs 75000 crore over the next five to seven years. It is somewhat bizarre for a foreign company to commit such an exorbitant amount to facilitate the dream of digital India. This amount is several times more than what the government is spending on language digitization.

India is the second largest country of active internet users with a base of more than 540 million; their annual spending power is USD 300 billion. The next generation users will be from the rural hinterland, looking for digital content in their own languages. It is this micro market that Google wants to reach through its digitization fund that will bring windfall profits. It makes good business sense, increasing market share through their payment portals like Google Pay. It is the profit motive that is the driving force behind this massive funding rather than facilitating digital inclusion of vernacular languages.

It would be naive to think that through charity these digital giants want to enable every Indian citizen to access online content in their own languages like Tamil, Punjabi or Kannada. For them language is merely a 'commodity' rather than a repository of a world view transcending commercial interests.

India has the largest number of qualified software engineers that work for multinational companies. Nevertheless, we have failed to harness their knowledge to build for us the appropriate language soft-

ware in the many different languages we use. Language standards are now being defined and set by companies based in the US, with little understanding of the nuances of our linguistic diversity.

Smartphones, laptops and other devices sold in India are designed for use in English, neglecting the local language interface. This is in complete contrast with Japan, China or Korea where these gadgets are made for native language users. In order to resolve such issues, Indians cannot depend on foreign companies, we need to take charge and find our own solutions to access the digital world, allowing an easy interface.

Language reflects an evolution of the diversity of culture in different contexts of regions and ecosystems. It represents the repository of accumulated knowledge over the generations. Each language is unique because it teaches us to think and know the world in a different way. The language is deeply related to how we think, formulate our ideas and our relationship within the society and its links to nature. It is the product of a particular ecosystem that has relevance to the soil and the way people live.

Unfortunately, this thinking process rooted in the mind of local people is likely to be destroyed when the dominant language replaces the native language. It is not a simple shift from one language to other, but sets in a process of colonization of the mind, entirely changing the way people think and relate to themselves in the society. Eventually, it leads to the replacement of one's own culture and values by the colonizing language.

The decimation of indigenous languages is an outcome of the destruction of the survival base of these communities, especially the tropical forest ecosystems, coastal areas or common grazing land for animal herders in the dry regions. Large developmental projects like mining and thermal power plants are appropriating the survival base of indigenous communities in the hinterland of central and eastern India. This process has forced the tribal community to become ecological refugees, often uprooting them from their survival base. It has severed the link that the language has with its ecosystems, and their surroundings. Millions of people have been displaced, not only depriving them of their livelihood but their identity of language.

In recent years the spread of globalization and economic liberalization has led to the weakening of local languages and cultures. The homogenization and integration as part of economic development has forced societies and nations to quit their vernacular languages in favour of the dominant languages that rule the market.

Efforts to replicate the Singapore model in the Andaman's is bound to take a toll of language diversity. Jarwa and Onge, spoken only by few hundred people will disappear, severing the link of Africa and Asia. The last speaker of Bo language in this island died recently. She was the lone speaker of this historical language that originated 70,000 years back in Africa.

Sharada, the ancient language of Kashmir is already on the way to extinction as there is hardly anyone who can speak the language or read its script, which resembles ancient Brahmi. The whole world knows about the conflict in Kashmir, but the people, even in India, are not aware of the death of a language called Sharada, once a flourishing language in the entire western Himalayan region in the 9th century AD.

Is it possible to save these dying languages using digital technology of recording sound and speech? The National Geographic Society launched its 'Enduring Voices Project' to document oral languages using digital formats and multimedia. As part of this initiative, Koro, a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by less than 1000 people in Arunachal Pradesh, was documented and hailed as a solution to conserving endangered languages.

Despite such initiatives, it is doubtful if we will succeed in saving endangered languages through the top-down process of documentation and digital tools. This will, at best, result in creating a repository of documents resulting in language museums. This would be similar to attempts at seed conservation in safe vaults in the cold region of Norway. Language survives when it is spoken by people in their own environment; it is living through the expression of people. It is dead when taken out of its context and immediate environment where it has evolved.

It is feared that of more than 6000 currently spoken languages, 50 to 90 per cent would be lost by 2050. The silencing of native languages will only lead to the erosion of diverse cultures and the different ways to know the world. Like monocultures in agriculture and forestry, the homogenization of languages will greatly reduce the diversity of life forms. According to Wade Davis, an authority on endangered languages: 'Native languages are driven out of existence by identifiable forces that are beyond their capacity to adapt to.' He further remonstrates that 'genocide, the physical extinction of a people is universally condemned, but ethnocide, the destruction of peoples' way of life is not only condemned, it is universally – in many quarters – celebrated as part of a development strategy.'

Alarmed by the accelerated threat towards extinction of languages, UNESCO has launched the

register of good practices for language preservation. The objective is to empower endangered languages to adapt to the changes with hands-on experience and learning from the successful ventures where languages like Basque and Catalan have been successfully rescued. In reality it is impossible to learn from other models. Each case is region-specific and ecosystem-specific and needs a unique innovative approach. Under such critical circumstances, it is doubtful if the preservation of languages can withstand the onslaught of economic and cultural globalization.

In this context we need to analyze 'The Endangered Languages Project' sponsored by Google. The main aim is to document 3000 languages that are on the verge of extinction, helping people to create high quality recordings of last speakers of language and facilitating language learning through social media. It is ironical that the world's search giant that is responsible for reducing the diversity of languages online is claiming that through the same technology it wants to save the endangered languages. It sounds like the green washing efforts of another giant, PepsiCo, that destroys the freshwater resources in rural areas through its plants to manufacture cold drinks and then launches projects to save water through watershed projects as part of corporate social responsibility.

Despite these discrepancies, India is definitely one of the hotspots of language diversity. Will we succeed in maintaining this diversity in the context of the ongoing digital revolution? With the spread of information technology (IT) and increasing number of Indians gaining access to internet based mobile applications, should we hold out any hope for the revival of endangered languages? Will the minority languages find space to ride on the information highway? Or will languages like English and Hindi overtake them, forcing them to make an early exit?

Crowd sourcing and internet connectivity has certainly made it easier to produce materials online. Dissemination and consumption of minority languages has become cheaper than the expensive print material. This has paved way for flourishing language subcultures. The release of numerous language learning applications has provided great opportunities to learn new language skills.

According to linguists only five per cent of all the living languages are digitally 'ascending'. About 250 languages can be called well established online, whereas the remaining 6700 plus languages remain on the margin, threatened by a digital tsunami. India is home to numerous indigenous communities that have an oral

language without a script. They will never be able to occupy the digital space.

Despite this dismal scenario languages like Tulu, Byari, Bhojpuri, Khasi and Mizo are charting a different path towards revitalization. Tulu is one of the regional dialects in coastal Karnataka spoken by 1.8 million people around the Mangalore coast and in the bordering Kasaragod district, Kerala. Within Tulu, the diversity is astonishing. It is one of the major languages of the Dravidian family, with a 2000 year history.

Though it has no digital presence as it does not have any script, it is thriving. The basic reason is the commitment and passion with which the native speakers have been using it in their daily lives, thereby passing it on to younger generations. Though Kannada, Hindi, Konkani, Malayalam and English coexist in the region with a strong culture of multilingualism, Tulu has retained its integrity and vitality. This uniqueness and pride of speakers may help them to survive in the digital world.

The unique idea of Oral Literary Festivals called 'The Listener' planned by the Imsai Foundation in Manipur and INTACH Tripura, is an innovative strategy to empower endangered languages that do not have a script. In this the participants tell stories, recite poems and perform ballads, representing oral languages of the north-eastern region of India. In contrast to the regular literary formats, this effort provides an opportunity to witness the passing on of the oral traditions that have survived from mouth to ear for centuries.

Coming back to Rakesh's story, he is now six years old. He is almost normal with improved communication skills and controlled access to digital tools. Thanks to digital exposure, he speaks English and Hindi fluently, and although his English accent is totally foreign, he speaks good Hindi. Both these languages are not spoken at his home and surroundings. He barely manages to speak Havyaka Kannada, a dialect spoken in the Western Ghats region of Karnataka. His mother tongue accent is akin to a foreigner speaking Kannada.

From the point of acquiring language skills, he is definitely multilingual. Shall we say digitization has had a positive impact on his language learning skills? Or is it the outcome of a limited one way exposure to the dominant languages in the digital realm? Will he acquire the skills to communicate in a real time frame of speaking local *colloquial* Kannada rooted in daily life?

PANDURANG HEGDE

Language diversity in digital futures

G. N. DEVY

THE Census office released the Census of India 2011 data related to languages in July 2018. With all its tables and charts, it appears to be perfectly harmless. But, scratch the surface and you find that it is heavily doctored. It tells us that in 2011, our countrymen stated a total of 19,569 ‘raw returns’ (read, non-doctored claims).¹ Of these, close to 17,000 were outright rejected and another 1,474 were dumped

* G.N. Devy initiated the People’s Linguistic Survey of India and is the Chief Editor of its 50 Volume series published by Orient BlackSwan.

1. The term ‘return’ in its administrative technical sense = ‘register/stat/present’, normally used during the Census process, official surveys, etc.

‘Raw Returns’ is the heading that the Census uses for ‘unprocessed’ mother tongue names. After they are processed by the Linguistics cell of the Census office, they are called ‘Mother Tongues’, and after a further and more refined processing, they are called ‘languages’.

because not enough scholarly corroboration for them existed. Only 1,369, roughly 6% of the total claims were admitted as ‘classified mother tongues’. Rather than placing them as languages, they were grouped under 121 headings. These 121 were declared as languages of India.

One may well ask how does this matter. It matters because the data for Hindi has been bolstered up – shown at 52 plus crore – by adding to its core figure of speakers, the speakers of nearly fifty other languages. These include Bhojpuri, claimed by over five crore, many languages in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Bihar, claimed by close to a total six crore people. At the same time 17 of the 22 scheduled languages are reported by the census as showing a downward trend in their rate of growth in comparison to its growth in the previous decade.

The architecture of the presentation of the language census data has at its foundation the principle of exclusion. It is imposed on the languages that people of India have claimed in the census exercise as being their languages. To use a term from medical sciences, this act amounts to imposing an involuntary aphasia on citizens. In this instance, the numbers on whom it is imposed run into crores. And that is no small matter.

Since our Constitution gives us the fundamental and non-negotiable right to free expression, and since it not only accepts but encourages the idea of a multilingual India, is there not something profoundly unconstitutional in intimidating writers and thinkers or in wilfully suppressing people's languages? The UNESCO brief for language rights describes denial of mother tongues or any wilful concealment of mother tongue by member states as equivalent to genocide. A strong word, indeed, but necessary, thinks UNESCO. Quite ironically, the justification for both these actions is drawn from a common source; and that is a deeply flawed idea of nationalism. It holds that anyone critical of the current regime is an enemy of India, an anti-national trying to 'spread disaffection towards the state', in a simple word, seditious.

With respect to languages, the argument says that if we have any large multiplicity of languages, it may result in the disintegration of our national territory. The love for the nation and its integrity are, of course, of prime importance. But a nation becomes great by the thought and knowledge it produces, by nurturing the freedom of mind and by the fearlessness of its citizens. States that consciously encourage creating societies incapable of producing a critique of the system generate what the ancient Latin described as hegemony.

The English language drew the term 'nation' during its historical phase known as Middle English from the Latin root '*nationem*' signifying birth and ancestry. In its semantic trajectory within the English language 'nation' was initially rooted in the idea of 'belonging to a geographical area or location.' It decidedly referred to an area, territory and the people who inhabited it. The idea that a nation should ideally have a single language that will keep the people bound together was added to its range of signification during the early 19th century. This was the time when a new kind of longing for the past was emerging among the English painters and poets as a result of the devastation of the countryside due to rapid industrialization. In that mood of nostalgia, ancient poets (Homer and Aeschylus, in particular) began to be described as '*vates*' or prophets and language – more particularly, 'the original' language – as a spiritually potent agency of human liberation.

For instance, P.B. Shelley, in his essay, 'A Defense of Poetry' (1821), lauds poetic language as a means of providing 'harmony and unity' to the prophetic vision of poets. This was precisely the time when the struggle for creating a united Italy had started. The unscientific association between a given language and a given people as 'nation' started emerging during this post-Napoleon era of European politics. By the time Germany emerged as a nation during the 1860s, the idea that, in addition to a shared history and a 'cohesive people', a common language too became an essential feature of a nation. With language, there were other features of intangible culture and history that got added to the prevalent meanings of the word nation. For instance, the Irish Home Rule League decidedly revolved around Catholic

Christianity; and in Spain and Germany, musical heritage and metaphysical philosophy too came to be part of their idea of nationhood.

There is no doubt that the Indian struggle for national independence was influenced by all of these varieties of meaning associated with the term nation. Towards the turn of the century, some of the influential leaders of public opinion in India had started imagining the 'nation' for anchoring the complex economic and political struggle towards independence. Lokmanya Tilak and Sri Aurobindo tried to base it on what they thought were the foundations of Indian culture, and they tried to describe the nature of that foundation by harking back to India's ancient past. It is true that for over a century, since Sir William Jones launched the Asiatic Society as an enterprise in cultural archeology, a lot of that past had been episodically described. Yet, the work of European Indologists, the break in Indian tradition was the centre point.

In the works of nationalist leaders, the main thesis was based on the twin principles of the longevity and continuity of Indian culture. However, as events shaped, following the First World War, the idea of nation in Indian politics came to be imagined quite differently. Just as the Home Rule League, catalyzed in India by Annie Besant of Irish origin, was side-stepped, so was quietly dropped the idea of the Aryan past in the face of the rise of Fascism in Europe quietly dropped. Hence, in the 1920s, public figures in India had to engage with the language issue in the context of the possible formation of India as a free nation.

The first major manifestation of the collective thinking on this issue was the Congress resolution on setting up of Linguistic States (1927) which was a clear acceptance, not so much as the

desire, for a multilingual nation, but certainly of the need to preserve linguistic identities of the territories that would eventually join the nation. Previously, the Congress had set up its provincial committees along linguistic lines; and after 1927, the election manifestos of the Congress often included preservation of multiple linguistic identities as one of its obligations. By this time, the eleven volumes of George Grierson's massive *Linguistic Survey of India* had been published; and it was well known to opinion makers that India had at the beginning of the 20th century an amazing wealth of languages. Grierson had detailed 189 languages and several hundred others considered by him as 'dialects'.

Debates in the Constituent Assembly were, therefore, mindful of the need to imagine India as a nation with many languages and the dangers in straightjacketing it within a monolingual or bilingual administrative apparatus. Not surprisingly, the Constitution made space for 14 languages in its 8th Schedule as specially designated languages, the Scheduled Languages. Through a series of additions to the list, the number of Scheduled Languages at present is 22.

The years from 1947 to 1956 were quite tumultuous from the language perspective. First there was a committee set up in 1948 by Dr Rajendra Prasad to examine if linguistic states would be a viable idea. Then, another committee was set up in the same year that included Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Pattabhi Sitaramaya to examine the proposition. Dr Ambedkar too submitted a memorandum asking for a state for Marathis. Pottu Sriramalu, asking for an Andhra Pradesh for Telugu, died in a fast unto death. Finally, a States Reorganization Commission was appointed in 1955; and on its recommendations several

states were created with language at the core of the state identity.

However, throughout this process the idea of India as a nation with many languages had been firmly accepted by people, the state and most importantly was already enshrined in the Constitution. Five years later, when the Census for 1961 was conducted, it showed a remarkable degree of confidence in the idea by listing 1652 mother tongues as being in existence and claimed by the people of India as their mother tongues.

As a result of the extensive debates on the language issue, the Constitution took an extremely nuanced stand. Article 120 provided for the use of Hindi or English for business in the Parliament. Article 210 provided for the use of the state language or Hindi/English for the business of State Assemblies. Article 344 provided for a Language Commission for the upkeep of all languages included in the 8th Schedule. Article 343 stipulated a fixed period of fifteen years for replacing English with Hindi, but in a sub-clause also provided for further extending the period if such an extension was found necessary; and Article 347 empowered the President to recognize any languages not included in the 8th Schedule as 'State Languages' if a substantial number of people made such a demand.

Thus, while the Constitution laid down the objective of replacing English with Hindi, it also underscored the improbability of doing so within a very short period and also validated the democratic aspiration of various language communities to have their languages included in the 8th Schedule or, at least, recognized as the 'state Languages' within their own state.

By accepting language as the backbone in the state reorganization process soon after Independence, the government of India clearly upheld

the idea of a nation that can be one though speaking in many different tongues. This is not to say that the promotion of Hindi as a possible replacement for English was overlooked. That objective was indeed stated many times in speeches and through providing grants. A Hindi *kosh* (compendium) for providing terminology was mooted and a yearly Hindi week was made mandatory. It is another matter that the *kosh* soon became a butt of ridicule owing to its preference for Sanskrit-based terminology that was found literally 'unpalatable' and ignored the ease of communication.

Language, like other prominent identity markers, is an emotive issue. No government so far has had the courage to openly accept that a complete replacement of the English language by Hindi in the working of Parliament and the administration, in communication between the states and the Centre, in higher education and research and in industry and business; it was a near impossibility. Besides, the Indian demographics are such that owning up to the reality could be politically suicidal for any party or government. Therefore, successive governments have presented the official language data to show a constant growth of Hindi.

In 1971, out of 54.82 cr population, 20.28 cr was reported as Hindi speaking. In successive census counts, the figures for Hindi were shown as steadily rising: 1981: 25.77 cr out of 66.52 cr; 1991: 32.95 cr out of 83.86 cr; 2001: 42.20 cr out of 102.86; and 2011: 52.83 cr out of 121.08 cr. The decadal growth was placed at 36.99% (1971), 38.74% (1981), 39.29% (1991), 41.03% (2001) and 43.63% (2011). What the census does not mention is that since 1971 several 'other' languages have been brought under the rubric of the Hindi language.

The 1652 'mother tongues' mentioned previously were reduced to a mere 108 'languages' by introducing a cut-off point of 10,000 for any group of speakers to have their 'mother tongue' listed in the published data. The cut-off point has no scientific basis either in linguistics or statistics. Its justification is drawn from the politics of an electoral democracy. It would be interesting to see the language data of the most recent census that was carried out in 2011. In it, the speakers who claimed Hindi as their mother tongue totalled 32.22 cr. But, in order to bolster it up, the following 53 other languages, most of them completely independent as languages and some like Banjari even mutually unintelligible with Hindi, were shown as sub-sets of Hindi:

Awadhi 38,50,906; Baghati/Baghati Pahari 15,835; Bagheli/Baghel Khandi 26,79,129; Bagri Rajasthan 2,34,227; Banjari 15,81,271; Bhadrawahi 98,806; Bhagoria 20,924; Bharmauri/Gaddi 1,81,069; Bhojpuri 5,05,79,447; Bishnoi 12,079; Brajbhasha 15,56,314; Bundeli/Bundelkhandi 56,26,356; Chambeali/Chamrali 1,25,746; Chhattisgarhi 1,62,45,190; Churahi 75,552; Dhundhari 14,76,446; Gawari 19,062; Gojri/Gujjari/Gujar 12,27,901; Handuri 47,803; Hara/Harauti 29,44,356; Haryanvi 98,06,519; Jaunpuri/Jaunsari 1,36,779; Kangri 11,17,342; Khari Boli 50,195; Khortha/Khotta 80,38,735; Kulvi 1,96,295; Kumauni 20,81,057; Kurmali Thar 3,11,175; Lamani/Lambadi/Labani 32,76,548; Laria 89,876; Magadhi/Magahi 1,27,06,825; Malvi 52,12,617; Mandeali 6,22,590; Marwari 78,31,749; Mewari 42,12,262; Mewati 8,56,643; Nagpuria 7,63,014; Nimadi 23,09,265; Padari 17,279; Pahari 32,53,889; Palmuha 23,579; Panch Pargania 2,44,914; Pando/Pandwani 15,595; Pangwali 18,668; Pawari/Powari 3,25,772; Puran/Puran Bhasha 12,375; Rajas-

thani 2,58,06,344; Sadan/Sadri 43,45,677; Sirmauri 1,07,401; Sondwari 2,29,788; Sugali 1,70,987; Surgujia 17,38,256 and Surjapuri 22,56,228.

If one were to take these out of the Hindi language, the ratio between the total population under the Census, 121.08 cr and the population of the Hindi speakers 32.22 cr to just a little less than 4:1. All of this cold data, otherwise fairly uninteresting, goes to show why no government so far has been able to replace either the regional languages or the English language entirely by Hindi.

India has traditionally been a multilingual area. Neither the Sanskrit language in ancient India nor the Persian language during the 17th century were able to displace the large variety of languages that Indians had been using for communication and imaginative expression. During colonial times, the English language entirely replaced the native languages of North America and Australia; but despite such efforts, it did not displace Indian languages. On the contrary, the contact with Sanskrit strengthened Prakrits, the contact with Arabic and Persian brought a rich vocabulary bounty to Indian languages and the presence and influence of English resulted in an unprecedented efflorescence of literature in the Indian languages. The open spaces and ambivalence in the Constitution on the language issue is a testimony to the deep understanding of the cultural and social history of India.

Archaeological and historical researches during the last two centuries have made it possible for us to learn about the complex linguistic transitions and migrations that took place over the last five millennia, roughly from the early Harappan times to the present. During this long period, the Indian subcontinent accepted language

legacies as distinct as the Avestan of the Zoroastrians, the Austro-Asiatic of the Pacific the Tibeto-Burman of the East and Northeast Asia. The Indic (or the Indo-Aryan) languages in the northern states together with the Dravidic languages in the South and the Tibeto-Burman languages in the Northeast, each with a great variety of sub-branches, make for the larger bulk of Indian languages. Throughout the known history of the subcontinent, there has been an active exchange and cultural osmosis between indigenous languages and migratory languages, producing in the process great literature in many tongues.

The *People's Linguistic Survey of India* has estimated that there are nearly 780 living languages in the country at present. Scholars claim that there are approximately 6000 living languages in the world. Thus, India is home to one out of every eight languages on earth. The diversity is impressive not only in numerical terms. A language is not just a communication system, it is a unique world view. Hence, the great diversity of languages in India needs to be seen as the diversity of world views, of the unique ways of perceiving the world.

Over the last three decades, scientists have come up with mathematical models to predict the life of languages. These predictions have invariably indicated that the human species is rapidly moving closer to extinction of a large part of its linguistic heritage. These predictions may differ on the exact magnitude of the impending disaster, but they all agree on the fact that close to three quarters or more of all existing natural human languages are already half in the grave. Since it is language, mainly of all things, that makes us human and distinguishes us from other species and animates nature, and since human consciousness can but

only function given the ability for linguistic expression, it becomes necessary to recognize language as the most crucial aspect of our cultural capital.

It has taken human beings continuous work of about half a million years to accumulate this valuable capital. In our time we have come close to the point of losing most of it. Historians of civilization tell us that probably a comparable, though not exactly similar, situation had arisen in the past some seven or eight thousand years ago. This was when human beings discovered the magic of nature that seeds are. When the shift from an entirely hunting-gathering or pastoralist economies to early agrarian economies started taking place, we are told, the language diversity of the world got severely affected. It may not be wrong to surmise that the current crisis in human languages too is triggered by the fundamental economic shift that has enveloped the entire world. This time though the crisis has an added theme as a lot of human activity is dominated by man-made intelligence.

The technologies aligned with artificial intelligence have all been heavily dependent on modelling the activity of the human mind along linguistic transactions. The intelligent machines modelled on entirely neurological or psychological systems are still not commonly in use. The language-based technologies are now well-entrenched partners in the semantic universe(s) that bind human communities together. Language today is as much a system of meaning in the cyberspace effecting communication between a machine and another machine as much as it has been a system of meaning in the social space achieving communication between a human being and another human being.

Neurologists explain the current shift in man's cognitive processes by

pointing to the rapidly changing ways in which the brain stores and analyzes sensory perceptions as well as information. Linguists have raised an alarm about the sinking fortunes of natural languages through which human communication has taken place over the last seven millennia. They have started noticing that the use of man-made memory chips fed into intelligent machines make heavy dents in the human ability to remember and even the tense patterns of natural languages. Technologists, particularly those astride the leading glory of technology – the ICT – have been talking of network communities as a substitute for civilizations.

All in all, there is excitement in the air, and there is alarm in the minds. This is so on all fronts of knowledge, in all aspects of social organizations and all branches of human experience. Collectively, for all nations, all ethnic and cultural groups of humans, the vision of a life well beyond our imagination has started appearing on the horizon even if it has not become fully manifest. This makes a mockery of all that the human brain and mind have so far held as being natural and permanent.

Probably, just as the Industrial Revolution and the associated rise of capitalism in European countries placed the traditional agrarian society at risk, giving rise to the long-drawn conflicts between labour and capital, this great transition facing us globally will create strife and, consequently, violence of an unprecedented order. This time too the post-human societies are likely to get divided between those with access to the digital and those without it. Already, some linguistic laboratories have started publishing lists of 'digitally dead languages'. Already, the communities not networked are being described as 'non-civil'. The political

economies of the world seem to have already resolved that citizens without unique digital identities can be written off as the nowhere people.

It would be tragic if we forgot to look at the struggles and the plight of those who are on the digital fringe. For a very long part of human history, language continued to retain its character as a predominantly 'free' system that was sturdily resistant to government controls, market regulations and cultural oppressions. However, over the last few centuries, particularly since the rise of technologies that apparently function as assistance to language transport – printing, photography, electronic-language-storage-and-reproduction, digital-encoding-and-decoding of human language – language acquisition, languages transmission and language use have started getting rapidly monetized.

Today, as never before, the economically dispossessed classes all over the world are finding it difficult to access language acquisition according to their needs and desires. We now notice a digit-powered linguistic class and a digit-deprived linguistic class. The divide is too deep to bridge by following any conventional or prevailing economic ideologies. A technological reversal in the evolution of languages too is a hugely unrealistic proposition. The only hope for ensuring any future for 'linguistic homo sapiens' is to envision together and integrate economic development and linguistic federalism. If the rural landscapes and marginalized communities can be safeguarded, the currently threatened languages will find a safe passage to the future; and only if those languages continue to survive shall we have access to the knowledge that helps us to build a sustainable future society. The two are so intimately interlocked.

Atrophy of languages in times of digitization

ASHA SARANGI

DIGITIZATION has revolutionized the way human beings connect to one another in the world today. It has invented new forms of communication and transmission of knowledge systems. The changes brought in by the invention of railways, printing press, television, telephone, computer and mobile phone, among others, has resulted in the creation of unprecedented national and transnational network of relationships predominantly in the spheres of economy, education, health, politics and culture.

The technological revolution precipitated by arrival of the Internet has transformed the world in ways unseen before. David Crystal considers it important to 'investigate whether the Internet is emerging as a homogeneous linguistic medium or it is a collection of distinct dialects or whether it is an aggregation of idiosyncratic usages that defy any given classification.'¹

Language as a system comprises of three broad sub-systems – words (lexicon), grammar (grammatical structure) and sound (phoneme). These structural properties are constantly in relation with the extra-

1. David Crystal thinks that the Internet is proving to be very different from our earlier linguistic behaviour and is truly revolutionary. See David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

linguistic variables situated socially. Whether it is *langue* and *parole* in Saussure's theory of sign-system or Voloshinov/Bakhtin's *ideological sign system*, it refers to both abstract and material components that together characterize language as a system. However, languages and their distinctive structural patterns are products of a given historical cultural context. A wide range of scholars from the fields of Social Sciences and Humanities have dealt with language as a structure and culture using a variety of approaches.

Gal and Irvine suggest how particular linguistic ideologies provide 'rationalization, coherence, order and boundaries maintained through maps, grammars and monographs.'² As a productive activity indicative of forms of cultural patterns and hegemonies, it entails the possibility of a dialectical relationship between the individual and collective, and between the social and

2. A number of anthropologists, historical sociologists, literary and cultural historians, linguists and political scientists have analysed the category of language conceptually and empirically by alluding to it as a structure and culture. For example, Susan Gal and Judith Irvine have shown the ideological uses of a language on the institutions of family, schools, courts and nation-states. See Susan Gal and Judith Irvine, 'The Boundaries of Language and Disciplines: How Ideologies Construct Difference', *Social Research*, Winter 1995.

political.³ For Bourdieu too, language is ‘not simply an instrument of communication but contains the potentiality of an act of power.’⁴

With more than 7000 languages in the world spoken by thousands of communities, how will digital technology enable all or some languages to become the languages of communicational power and resources of cultural, economic and political capital? Would it not be the case that digitization of languages will lead to far greater endangerment and weakening of their linguistic habitus? How will the minority languages survive this overwhelming digital invasion?

The proponents of digital revolution have argued that digitization will usher in greater accessibility and non-hierarchical parity among learners of languages of the world today, and the digital modes of learning or dissemination of information will create democratic, discursive and egalitarian public sphere that could possibly result in greater participation and inclusive citizenship. However, digital economies and their exchange values will create newer cultural and political ideologies as constituted, encoded and enacted in and through languages contained within the borders of the national sovereignties and their global networks. The digitization of languages will predominantly penetrate three domains of education, media and politics as a powerful and inescapable form of communication reflective of a collective social and political order in a particular society.

3. Charles Taylor argues that language expresses and constitutes the self through certain communicative practices. See Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers, Vol I*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

4. P. Bourdieu, ‘The Economics of Linguistic Exchange’, *Social Science Information* 16, 1977.

Digitization in the sphere of education uses digital technology consisting of computers, Internet, software applications of various sorts and mobile devices for purposes of teaching and learning in schools, colleges and universities. The acquisition of languages through the digital techniques will draw upon a kind of technological determinism affecting and shaping learners understanding about the grammatical, visual and phonetic components of the languages. In their race for control over the universal need of learning and communicating in languages of the day by people of all age groups, the software companies – small or big – celebrate the virtues of easy and equal access to learn new and more languages without any social or cultural hierarchies.

The digital instructional methods and modes required to learn particular language/s promise much faster pace of learning and a sense of rapid integration into the emerging world language system. The new images, signs, pictorial representations and sensory standardizations are used to de-individualize the process of learning language/s and make them into tools of machine learning based on computational linguistics, digital automation and artificial intelligence applied at every level. The digital replay of recorded lessons to learn language skills for purposes of reading, writing and speaking depart from the traditional ways of collective and shared human world of learning processes at large.

However, the individual and collective improvisations in the domains of accent, natural expressions, spontaneous mixing and marshalling of new coinages of words and images can’t be easily simplified or standardized through digitized modules and lessons. The latter acquire the character of rapid language learning courses

as a singular individual exercise undermining the primary idea of language itself as an art to signify thoughts and thought structure in a collectivity. Language both as mental construct and socially-culturally mediated activity, is lost to technical rationality in the age of mechanical reproduction facilitated by the Internet revolution. The three fundamental domains of the mind – conceiving, judging and reasoning – applied through the uses of language and its repertoires are overpowered by the digital literacy and learning capsules in this drive for digitization.

The speakers of minority and endangered languages will experience the digital language divide much more due to the hegemonic control of dominant national or international languages in the cyber world. The inaccessibility to Internet, digital devices and technical-pedagogical skills required for learning or teaching languages to large sections of people inhabiting far-off and remote places in different parts of the world creates a digital literacy divide on a daily basis. In such a situation then, instead of rebuilding the multilingual or plurilingual social order, the world will be moving closer to defined linguistic uniformity or digital linguism of a kind that will aim at simplifying the linguistic diversity and density. Both syntactic and semantic aspects of a language will have to be placed within the modular digital rationalization.

It is important to unravel the ideology of digitization underlying states’ decisions to promote digitalism in the post globalization times. How does this reinforce the domination of dominant languages and marginalization of the minority languages? It is to be noted that certain languages are seen to be purer and more sacred than others for their excessive use of the digital platform. However, aren’t there subtle discriminatory strategies at

work and how do they reinforce the hierarchization of various sorts while considering some languages more digitally equipped than others?

How will digitization capture the essence of a proverb '*kos kos par badle pani, chaar kos per bani*' (that water changes after every ten miles and language after every forty) characterizing the relationship between mobility and linguistic heterogeneity of people in India? Will digital technology be able to express this changing repertoire of languages, their speech varieties, languages of 'front yard and backyard' and their vernacular spheres?⁵

How will the languages of migrants, homeless, displaced and stateless refugees be retained in the digital world? Who will speak for them to give names to their languages or dialects? Here language is not a stable or static entity but in ever growing relational flux or fluidities of various sorts. The meaning of words and utterances acquire locational signification in their songs and passages of travels transcending the defined geo-linguistic boundaries. The religious pilgrimages and congregations show intimate assemblage of verbal registers, idioms and multiple oral linguistic expressions that can't ever be digitally recorded.

The linguistic pluralism and its hetero-normative modes of articulation shows us a variety of literary forms, narrative styles and communicational aesthetics whether in the form of *dastangoi*, *quissas*, *raj jat yatras* or *rath yatras* evolved for centuries in different regions and sub-regions of the country. This multi-vocal seman-

5. U.R. Ananthamurthy used this expression to indicate the plural linguistic order of his parental home in his essay 'Towards the Concept of a New Nationhood: Languages and Literatures in India' in Peter deSouza (ed.), *Contemporary India: Transitions*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

tic diversity of Indian languages finds itself in the domains of homes, market-places, transactional sites of land and labour or affective emotions of pain, suffering and love.

The multilingual dialogical interaction among people as followers of particular religions or sects shows how languages as community perform through their scripts, vocabularies, literariness and syntactical improvisations brought in the religious sermons preached and shared by clergies, gurus, saints and preachers. These communicational sites characterize the unique shared world of beliefs and practices like rituals and rites among the followers. Here languages are living species intersecting and borrowing from each other in their historical continuum at times divided and separated but also bounded entities creating boundaries among nations and states to mark differences among the people and their cultures sociologically, politically and historically.

The 'print capitalism' brought in the desacralization of Latin and literalization of dominant regional languages, which emerged as languages of the new markets, commerce, pedagogies, school textbooks, newspapers and literary works.⁶ It showed signs of linguistic secularism whereby the languages of God and Church began to be taken over by the languages of people and common masses. The invention of new scripts and their standardization became a marker of modernity. New nations and states began to assert their linguistic sovereignty through these new languages of power and hegemony. These languages became languages of empire and imperial expansion creating the 'command of language and language of command.'⁷

6. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London, 1991.

For the colonial state and its officials, translation carried new modes of communication privileging the written over the oral languages. The multilingual translations (translating one dominant language into many languages or vice versa) of religious texts, literary tracts and school textbooks, among others, provided people to see the internal working of a language and its meaning system in its multiple, plural and relative ways. The languages in print began to be used as instruments of new forms of communicative power to highlight cultural differences based on identities of caste, religion, race, gender and region. The linguistic and religious pluralism and its identification with categories of caste, class and race began to reflect in the idea of nation and nationhood.

A number of language movements since the late 19th century in colonial India showed how the ethno-linguistic identity of groups and communities expressed and preserved through their languages became a rallying point for everyday practices in the social and political lives of individuals. The symbolic and material imageries drawn from the mother tongues, pidgins, creoles, vernaculars, dialects and non-specified speech varieties began to be used in powerful ways to confront the colonial state and its violence. People used indigenous and linguistic-cultural modes of proverbs, satires, rhetorical utterances, idioms, analogies and allegories to communicate their disavowal of colonial authority and its arbitrariness.

The notions of *swaraj* (self-rule), *swadeshi* (self-reliance) and *samaj* (society/country) were part of the

7. Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command' in Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1987.

modern vocabulary of national sovereignty and nation-ness of India in post-colonial times. The languages of democracy whether in the spheres of politics, economy, education, occupation, culture or ideology go beyond mere digital representation which, if truly democratic, must rescue the voices of the marginalized, oppressed and unspoken masses of the society and their speeches of resistance and counter-hegemonic narratives.

A language must build as well as borrow from other languages. While words may be borrowed, these must be firmly woven into the fabric of the language, expanding it and making it more expressive. Technological digitization will lead to greater monopolization of the information-based knowledge system moving towards a more homogenized market of global political economy that will favour only a few languages to compete in the transnational ethnography of communication.⁸

What would this digital culture do to languages and their life worlds? Would languages acquire the character of moving and shifting images? The contemporary digital world thrives upon a more autonomous and non-collective kind of individual life with limited social interaction. Would this not have an impact on the river like flow of languages and their emotive habitus?

8. Following Dell Hymes' famous model of 'ethnography of speaking', the discursive character of languages would be represented in spaces/places, people participation, ends and objectives, speech acts or events, stylistics, representational modes from formal and informal writing systems, interactional patterns or networks of relationships among users of a language and a specific literary genre. See Dell Hymes, 'The Ethnography of Speaking' in T. Gladwin and W.C. Sturtevant (ed.), *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Anthropology Society of Washington, Washington, DC, 1962.

The world of feelings whether of pain, suffering or outburst of laughter and happiness is being sustained and experienced privately through digital technologies of various sorts by an individual. Digitizing languages also means digitizing cultures and their habitus in the contemporary world. In this way, the language-culture relationship in both ideological and material spheres can be seriously affected and compromised. No technological intervention can be outside the process of 'mechanical reproduction'⁹ which will affect the production of literature, dance forms, songs, literary sensibilities, music and linguistic registers of various sorts.

Digitization thrives and survives through hybridization of various sorts. It invents new names and coinages and works by inserting new lexicons and phrases borrowed, sometimes indiscriminately, from different languages and their word power. It brings up some sort of exclusive exoticization to the assemblage of words and phrases that are used instantly without much of an understanding about the language system. In a way, it leads to the gradual atrophy of languages and shrinking of their vast cultural and linguistic habitus. It creates new norms for recognition of a language through 'demeaning image of themselves or oppression of certain forms' resulting in considering some languages less salient for use or appropriating certain titles based on perception and conception of the group or community of language users in the spheres of market, occupation, economic activities, political participation and global networks.¹⁰

9. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, New York, 1968.

10. Charles Taylor's idea of recognition can be aptly applied here to languages too. See Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition'

Digitization works more through langue (sign system) and less through parole (utterance), the latter involving human agency and its critical innovativeness in reconstructing the linguistic structures and practices over a long period of time. For example, the use of Bihari by Grierson clubbed together geographical, cultural, regional and linguistic repertoires to label something like a Bihari – a stereotypical term with certain prejudices and misrecognitions merging several lesser known languages and dialects under this label that has continued to be in use for more than a century now.¹¹

How will the Indian state ensure that the principles of social justice and equality are extended to the category of language even when a large number of languages are not taught or used as mediums of instruction? Would digitization only apply to the twenty-two languages of the Eighth Schedule which have been accorded a constitutional status? What will be the criteria for the selection of digitization of languages? Languages like Bhojpuri, Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Urdu and others are transnational global languages with a large number of people using these languages in different countries and continents.

Even though a large number of Indian languages are already being used in radio broadcasting, TV channels, newspapers, and internet communication, the Indian state has specified only select languages that are to be used in entrance examinations whether for JEE, CBSE, NEET or any other. The NEP 2020 promises to reinforce multilingual school education through an excessive use of digi-

in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994.

11. G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol 5, Part II*. Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1967 reprint.

tal technology aimed at teaching and learning of the mother tongues.

It is in this regard that the translation of books, reading material and standard teaching tools for use in multilingual classrooms has gained prominence in policy documents and preferences of the government in India at present. The digital access to printed books and periodicals in different disciplines through an open access system and other gateways reduces institutional hierarchies and their restrictions to learners of the day.

The global hegemony of the English language and its intrusion in all spheres of life in different parts of the world today, is further reinforced and institutionalized through multiple digital networks. Even if people of a multilingual country like India or Nigeria, for example, speak hundreds of languages as mother tongues and local dialects, English has come to be seen as the language of mobility and progress linked to the national and global economy. Will digitization deprive children from the comfort of their mother tongue learning and living? How will hundreds of mother tongues of a country be made part of the world language system consisting of languages like English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi and Persian as the world hegemonic languages.

For less commonly learned languages to survive, it is important that national governments, civil society organizations, and state institutions come together to develop and produce new online content and techniques of teaching and learning these languages. To promote and preserve their knowledge systems, it is pertinent that both digital and conventional modes of literacy and writing programmes are put in place for language planning. Writing of languages is internal to their survival and it 'outlasts the spoken word'

and is like a 'process of translating time into space.'¹²

The multilingual social fabric of India is being tested in times of a health emergency arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic during which the minority and tribal languages have begun to perform the task of public communication and dissemination of information about safeguards from the Corona virus. Interpersonal communication whether with the medical staff, health workers or other sections of the society was not limited to use of dominant languages recognized by the state or media alone. The crisis of communication was most effectively made sense of through people's own tongues and vernaculars of the home and market, of local and global images and signs using digital technology and the electronic media.

The Digital India project maps out in domains beyond the technological tool kits for imparting education whether of languages or subjects. With only about 25 per cent of Indian households having an Internet facility, which plummets to about 15 per cent in the rural areas, the worst affected are the marginalized, rural and poor population. Whether it is in the domain of education, economy, employment, occupation, hospitals and medical facilities, the dream of a digital India cannot be possible without an uninterrupted power supply and broadband connectivity for several hours a day, along with equitable distribution of connectivity to the poor and the marginalized population at large.

The digital multilingual media – both electronic and print – in India has shown the underlying ideological-political structures communicated through several digital platforms under the state regulatory mechanisms and

12. Amalia E. Gnanadesikan rightly points out that writing turns words into objects in, *The Writing Revolution: Cuneiform to the Internet*. Wiley-Blackwell Publication, UK, 2009, p. 2.

disciplinary regimes. The institutional surveillance will affect the world of vernacularized alternative modernity, a sphere of continuous cultural and political articulation, negotiation and assertion of individual and community rights of dissent, resistance and radical transformations.

Digitization has shown a new communicational order using tropes, metaphors, metonyms, analogies, synecdoche in various regional languages and their dialectal variations in the political oratory and speeches of leaders' use of political ideologies of exclusive nationalism. The historical and political project of building up the heterogeneous and hetero-glossic notions of modernity in multicultural India can be possible if the democratic iterations and enunciations find resonance in its multilingual traditions, histories and publics. This might unfold both the symbolic and material worlds of communicative network beyond digitization of languages.

A dialogical pluralism will bring forth new forms of intellectual radicalism with analytical tools to make sense of social, cultural and political differences drawn from the polyphonic traditions of languages, religions, regions and cultures. Both cyber culture and cyber space exhibit a world of linguistic communication putting in place interactions and relations between people and technologies with issues of representation, images, meanings and significations, all of which are central to the idea of a language and language system. The digitized language world system is one based on unequal access, distribution of information and its political economy of newer hierarchies. Yet the digital communication across linguistic, geographical, cultural and political borders and boundaries can possibly open up possibilities of a new order of a world language system.

Endangered languages of India in cyberspace

UMARANI PAPPUSWAMY

SEVERAL scholars predict that almost 90% of the world's languages will disappear by the end of the 21st century thereby reducing the number from about 7000 to 700 or so. As is well known, at least 96% of the living languages that are either official languages of a nation or a dominant language of a region are spoken by only 4% of its people. Based on the criteria developed by UNESCO,¹ 2471 languages are endangered,² out of which 197 of them are spoken in India that makes it the country with the most endangered languages in the world. One might wonder how these languages would survive in this era of advanced information and communications technology given the fact that English and other high-resourced

languages dominate the scene. Though this situation is typical in many countries, our focus here is only on such languages spoken in India.

The dynamics underlying the language endangerment in India are more complex than those prevailing in the rest of the world. Of the total population, 96.71% speak one of the 22 scheduled languages as mother tongues while 3.29% speak 'other' tongues.³ It is the tiny part of India, namely, the North East, that houses most of the non-scheduled languages (at least 62 out of 99) without which the linguistic diversity of the country would be half of what it is now.

There are many languages labelled as 'tribal'⁴ languages in India.

1. UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, UNESCO, 2003.

2. Christopher Moseley (ed.), *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (3rd edn.). UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2010. Retrieved 9 September 2018 from <http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas>

3. Census of India 2011, Office of the Registrar General, Ministry of Home Affairs, GoI. Retrieved 9 September 2019 from <http://www.censusindia.gov.in>

4. The Government of India has recognized some of the tribes as notified tribes and the languages of these indigenous communities are referred to as 'tribal languages' in the Constitution (Article 342).

Except Bodo and Santali, none of them are scheduled languages. As stated in the Census of India (2011), India has about 8.6% of tribal population who are the speakers of most of these small languages. They are concentrated in three distinct zones: (i) North East India; (ii) Central and East India comprising Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and West Bengal; and (iii) Southern India. All these tribes (henceforth referred to as indigenous communities) speak a variety of languages that are low-resourced, less-explored, under-described and less-documented. Most of these do not have any writing systems. In some of these communities, there are thousands of speakers remaining while others have only a handful of them, for instance, Ruga spoken in Meghalaya is left with only three fluent speakers.

Numerical strength cannot be the only criterion to determine whether a language is endangered or not because there are at least 49 languages in UNESCO's list that have more than 100,000 speakers – 15 of them endangered and 34 unsafe.⁵ Only in a few cases, the language loss could be due to a smaller number of speakers in that language which, of course, does matter because if we lose these speakers, their cultures, along with their languages, would be lost. Intergeneration transmission of language and culture does not seem to take place in many communities mainly because they do not live in their traditional lands anymore and further, the younger generation tend to assimilate into the dominant culture and language of the region.

5. Umarani Pappuswamy, 'Language Endangerment, Ethnic Minorities and Identity Crisis in the Indian Subcontinent', *Science and Culture* ('*Ciência e Cultura*') 71(4), 2019, pp. 29-38. São Paulo out./dez. 2019, versão On-line ISSN 2317-6660.

Thus, the languages spoken by these smaller communities are disappearing from the globe at a faster rate than before in the history of mankind due to various other causes such as economic globalization, urbanization, language shift due to the dominant language(s) of the nation or region and several other sociocultural, political and linguistic reasons that prevail in India. This has a direct impact on the intangible cultural heritage and their identity. Endangerment of these languages leads to language loss which will eventually lead to an irreparable loss of indigenous wisdom and knowledge.

Despite globalization and the dominant role played by the major languages of the world, the advances in information and communication technology provide ample opportunities to make these languages visible in cyberspace. This, in turn, will certainly strengthen the efforts being made by government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academicians, language enthusiasts, community people, and many others to protect, preserve and promote these languages in all possible ways.

Documenting linguistic and cultural knowledge of the smaller languages of India is not a new thing. Christian missionaries began this task much earlier. Dictionaries and grammar sketches were published in many of the lesser-known languages of the country. Sir George Grierson, an Irish linguist and civil servant, in the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-28) documented 364 languages and dialects spoken in British India.⁶ Thus, the term 'endangered' might be relatively new but the concept has existed for a very long time.

6. George Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India* (compiled and edited). Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1903-28.

The Government of India through its several language policies began the task of documentation of tribal and border languages through the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) since the 1970s and over the past five decades the institute has produced several bilingual and multilingual dictionaries, grammars, primers, pictorial glossaries and other materials for the development and promotion of the country's tribal languages.

In addition to this, the then Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India also started the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages housed at the CIIL in 2013 with a goal of producing dictionaries, grammars and ethnolinguistic sketches. The MHRD also set up several Centres for Endangered Languages in many central universities through the University Grants Commission (UGC). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) too through its Language Division in Kolkata began projects such as 'Mother Tongue Survey of India' and 'New Linguistic Survey of India' to document linguistic knowledge of several tribal languages of the nation. Besides this, several PhD theses, grammars and dictionaries are being produced on endangered, tribal and lesser-known languages by individual researchers, universities and other academicians across the globe.

Recently, with the help of digital tools and advances in data management systems, multifunctional documentation has been the norm in India regarding endangered languages. The deliverables of the above-mentioned projects and researches by individuals and educational institutions are mainly to: (i) To build lexical knowledge resources such as dictionaries, pictorial glossaries and encyclopedia of endangered languages intended for

linguists, native speakers, and language learners; (ii) To build grammars for researchers and for community users; and (iii) To initiate capacity-building for safeguarding endangered languages of minority linguistic groups through literacy, lifelong learning and education and to share knowledge with like-minded organizations, agencies and institutions.

Due to a lack of technological and linguistic resources, the outcomes of most of these projects and research are not completely digitized and made easily available and accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The publications are mainly in the print media and only recently efforts have been made by many institutions to digitize the available books, dictionaries and other print materials, for instance, the Bharatavani⁷ Project of CIIL, Shodhganga⁸ project of UGC, among others.

Technologies are seen as one of the most effective tools for language maintenance, revitalization and development of a language. Use of technology was, in fact, considered as one of the factors for assessing vitality and endangerment of languages by UNESCO. The last two decades have seen the presence of many endangered languages in cyberspace all over the world. Still there seems to be a digital divide in that not all these languages get digital inclusion. In the digital world, many of the endangered languages of India are almost 'extinct'. They do not find any visibility be it in social networking, internet banking, e-commerce, healthcare facilities or education. This will certainly deprive the younger generation of their language and identity who will be forced to shift to the dominant language and

7. See <https://bharatavani.in/> for details.

8. <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/> is a huge digital repository of Indian theses.

culture of the region that is technologically rich.

Low-resourced, severely and critically endangered languages face multifaceted challenges for embracing and using digital technologies. The scenario in India is very bleak. First, there is a lack of resource to make these languages 'technology ready'. Little drops of water make a mighty ocean! It is essential for linguists, anthropologists, community speakers and software giants to team up and carry out digital data pooling – digitization of the existing recorded data lying all over the country in many institutions on and in these endangered languages. The use of artificial intelligence techniques speeds up many tasks such as transcription of recorded data. Such activities are popular in several countries, for instance, Australia has partnered with Google and uses open-source AI platforms like Tensor Flow that save millions and millions of human transcribing hours. Microsoft has come up with AI based translators such as Microsoft Translator Hub that does text-to-speech translations in run time. Such initiatives are yet to catch up in India.

The lack of orthography is another serious bottleneck. This is related to literacy. In order to enter cyberspace, the unwritten languages should first be reduced to 'writing'. There is an urgent need to develop orthographies. But this is not an easy task either. Pappuswamy⁹ discusses the issues and challenges in devising effective orthographies for unwritten languages. Without orthography, developing resources for such languages have a low priority.

9. Umarani Pappuswamy, 'Issues and Challenges in the Search of Effective Orthography for Unwritten Languages of North-east India' in Anvita Abbi (ed.), *Unwritten Languages of India*. Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 2017, pp. 117-159.

Most of the technologically rich languages have interactive dictionaries and corpora freely available on the world wide web. Such resources are slowly coming up for the endangered languages too. The impact of globalization causes these 'small' languages of India to disappear faster than linguists can build machine readable corpora and other lexical resources. Until orthographies are devised and put in use, their oral traditions, literatures and histories could be used to create interactive digital resources. Talking dictionaries and spoken corpora could be produced for use by children and adults in the community and loaded with additional linguistic and anthropological information for use in academia.

On the one hand, it may seem like digital and social media networks are major players in wiping out small languages. But on the other hand, technology is a super saviour for safeguarding these languages. Several communities that have access to mobile phones and other handheld or larger electronic gadgets try to exploit technology. Many mobile apps allow them to simply record audio and video messages in their mother tongues. Even speakers of languages that do not have a writing system, use roman script or script of the language of wider communication of their region to communicate with their families and other community members in their mother tongue. The script might not be theirs, but they are happy to use their language in the social media.

Yet another problem is that many in the community are technologically illiterate. Nevertheless, it is important to get the elders to share knowledge and wisdom of their language and culture and social life with the younger ones through video chats that could be automatically recorded by the corpora developers.

Another major issue is access to technology. There are several communities, for instance, Mnar in Jirang village of Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya, who live without electricity or places which have poor internet connectivity or the ones that are geographically and socially isolated from mainland India (for instance, Andamanese and Nicobarese). Without basic amenities, the digital world is just a dream for many communities. Nonetheless, it is important to create digital space and digital resources for their future use.

Digitization does not mean simply developing digital tools. In order to promote the endangered and dormant languages, two perspectives should be considered: (i) to ensure sharing of knowledge and resources across the community for language maintenance and cultural sustainability, and (ii) to ensure information is authentic, all stakeholders including academicians and community members, should work together to eliminate social and power hierarchies. In order to do this effectively, significant planning needs to be done at different levels.

Language technology planning, family language policy and community-based language planning are essential. Language technology planning will open doors for language use in text editors, online dictionaries and cell phones for languages spoken by the indigenous communities. Virtual keyboards, lexical and corpora-based easy-to-use digital tools should be developed in as many low-resourced languages as possible with the help of the community so that indigenous communities are not deprived of their linguistic rights to use technology like everyone else in the world. MOOCs and other online teaching materials could be created for these languages in a bi/multilingual environment.

The Government of India's Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat initiative announced in the National Education Policy 2020 could be implemented by developing both print and digital materials on the tribal or indigenous languages of India that could be utilized in the fun project/activity on 'The Languages of India' in Grades 6-8. Short films and documentaries could also be produced on the culture and society of the indigenous communities and made available as open-source digital resources so that there is considerable amount of visibility in cyberspace.

Taking insights from two distinct areas of research, child language acquisition and language policy, a new framework called Family Language Policy (FLP) evolved almost a decade ago that considers the family as an integral site of language policy.¹⁰ Family language policy will certainly foster language conservation and revitalization. Language marks one's identity. Thus, it is important to be an active user of one's own native tongue while communicating with kith and kin. Technology can certainly add to this activity.

Mobile apps for day-to-day communication in social media such as Email, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, will not only be the means to get people to use their language but also serve as a dynamic corpus of their languages in cyberspace. Rather than relying on slow or no internet connectivity to share media with fellow community members, Bluetooth and other local wireless networks could be used on mobile phones, tablets, iPads and other portable devices. This would ensure easy distribution of the family and community related ceremonies, festivals and other 'sharable' rituals within the

10. K.A. King, L. Fogle and A. Logan-Terry, 'Family Language Policy', *Language and Linguistics Compass* 2(5), September 2008, pp. 907-922.

family network, and thereby add to the conservation of their languages and cultures.

Community based language planning¹¹ is generally motivated by the needs and desires of the local communities, oftentimes shaped by the available resources and opportunities. This type of planning when equipped with technology will empower these low-resourced languages in several ways. Communities have used several devices since the early days, the most common ones being community radio stations which are perhaps the most modest, cost-effective and popular technology devices that reach out to thousands of people. These are still popular among many communities in India, for instance, Radio Kotagiri 90.4 MHz among the Nilgiri indigenous communities of Tamil Nadu to listen and talk in their own language. This station broadcasts in several local languages such as Toda, Jenu Kurumba, Betta Kurumba, Kota, Baduga, Soliga, Paniya and Kattunaickan.

There are several other resources such as YouTube channels, Twitter and Google groups, available for languages like Atong, Khasi, Betta Kurumba among others. These are created primarily by individuals and access to the public may be restricted. It is crucial for the community to build unique websites for use by members of the linguistic families and subfamilies of the region. Youngsters from the respective communities could be trained to facilitate the upload of multimedia information about the linguistic, cultural and other ethnic knowledge of their societies. Public recordings can be played by anyone, anywhere at any time but access to private recordings

11. M. Paul Lewis and Gary Simons, *Sustaining Language Use: Perspectives on Community-based Language Development*. SIL International, Dallas, 2016.

could be made available only to certain authorized community members thus maintaining secrecy of the esoteric indigenous knowledge within the community.

Besides this, the community should also take interest in developing resources both in print and digital modes for the benefit of their younger generation. For instance, they can contribute effectively through crowd sourcing technology to the development of talking dictionaries of cognate indigenous languages with the goal of promoting multilingualism on the one hand and providing space for development of their native languages or mother tongues on the other hand. This could be achieved with the help of fluent speakers and all the digital materials developed could be used in families and communities to transmit their language across generations.

As Strubell notes, ‘the way people bring up their families – including the language they choose – is not for the authorities to decide.’¹² Family is the place where language choices are made. Language maintenance depends on the choices made in the families. Thus, it is in one sense the responsibility of the elders to transmit their languages to the next generation.

In this digital era, the more the younger generation become actively engaged online the greater is the threat to their worldviews getting altered as they would subconsciously be absorbed in the western outlook of life. This could marginalize indigenous populations around the world by depriving them of their culture and identity.¹³ In order to prevent this from

happening, it is essential to develop digital tools in the native tongues of the indigenous communities and focus on capacity building in this area by seeking support from the families and communities who are the keepers of the languages.

To sum up, technology can be used to safeguard, revitalize and promote endangered languages. Despite the several issues and challenges, it is imperative to find concrete and multifaceted measures and means to document, digitize and disseminate indigenous knowledge using technology before it is too late. The existing language policies of the nation should be revised to accommodate language technology planning and support family language policies and community based language planning. The decade 2022-2032 has been declared the Decade of Indigenous Languages by UNESCO. Efforts should be made by governments, NGOs, communities, researchers, language enthusiasts, software developers and other computer professionals to come together and undertake the huge responsibility of sharing the digital space with the indigenous communities to showcase their languages and cultures.

This would undoubtedly help accelerate the technological empowerment of these languages by 2032 which in turn will empower the communities as well, thereby eliminating social, political and economic inequalities existing in the modern world. It would not just reverse the language shift among indigenous populations but also help in sharing their invaluable indigenous knowledge with the rest of the world.

12. M. Strubell, ‘Catalan a Decade Later’ in J.A. Fishman (ed.), *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21st Century Perspective*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, UK, 2001, p. 268.

13. Bushra Ebadi, ‘Technology Alone Can’t Preserve Endangered Languages’, 2018. Retrieved 5 May 2021 from <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/technology-alone-cant-preserve-endangered-languages>

On the vitality of indigenous languages

MADHU RAMNATH

Language: The music with which we charm the serpents guarding another's treasure.

–The Devil's Enlarged Dictionary

THIS paper attempts to understand the status and probable future trends of indigenous languages in India. It is based on the author's knowledge of some of the tribal languages spoken in Bastar district, in eastern central India—Halbi, Durwa, Gondi and Bhatari – as well as regular communication through WhatsApp with two indigenous youth groups. Both these groups have members of the Durwa community. However, one is a village-level group of about 30 people, communicating in Durwa (mainly) and using the Devnagiri or Roman scripts. The other is a district-level group of about 300 people, using the Devnagiri script and

communicating *only* in Bastariya Hindi, a speciation of Hindi that combines Halbi, Odia and Hindi. I have also consulted with one of the leaders of the Halba Samaj, especially on the matter of effect of the dominant languages (Hindi and Chhattisgarhi) on Halbi. Some preliminary research work on the ecology of language has also been an aid to developing this paper.

Earlier authors¹ have developed, and extended, the biological concept that accounts for the vitality of species and organisms in their natural environments to explain how languages fare in social environments.² Languages

1. C.F. Voegelin, N.W. Schutz, Einar Haugen.

2. S. Mufwene, 'The Ecology of Language: Some Evolutionary Perspectives', in E. Kioko, N.N. do Couto, D.B. de Albuquerque and G.P. de Araújo (eds.), *Da Fonologia a Ecolinguística*. Thesaurus, Brasília, 2013.

too have lives, and go through the processes of birth, have vitality (or weakness) if they are maintained well, are endangered, and die, if there are ultimately no speakers. In this sense languages can be conceived as species whose fate depends on the interactions of the speakers.

Mufwene mentions that vitality of language depends on how regularly speakers use it in the various settings;³ that is, whether a speaker is able to use the language in all the areas of knowledge and experience, in only some of these domains, or in none of them. In monolingual settings this is not an issue but when there is more than one language spoken in an area this implies population contact and language coexistence and, usually, language competition. This competition is then resolved when the speakers select a language.

A central concern will therefore be whether policy and legislation about the inclusion of a language in a school or state will suffice to retain or improve its vitality. Conversely, we will also be able to understand whether the non-inclusion of a language in official capacities necessarily weakens it or causes it to be less spoken.

The village-level WhatsApp group mentioned above are of Durwa-speaking adivasi youth from a specific village in Bastar. Durwa is an agglutinative language and spoken with different accents; even within as small an area as central-eastern Bastar, and the contiguous western part of Malkangiri district, there are about five distinct accents, each distinct enough to place the location of the speaker. The language has no script and our messages are conveyed in the Devnagiri and Roman scripts. Neither of these scripts have notations and symbols that do justice to Durwa phonetics,

3. Ibid.

and words like *venjñen* (I came, tend to get rounded off to *venyen*, and *chokkóm*, lots or many, are now displaced by ‘khoob’ from the Halbi). There are several other words that have a *jñ* in their construction and it is probable that the written word, the script, freezes the fluidity of sound, making other pronunciations of such words a ‘deviation’.

The first WhatsApp group members speak Durwa, and many of them are bilingual in Halbi,⁴ as some of the families migrated here from Halbi-speaking regions. Some of these families speak Halbi at home and Durwa within the community. The postings in this group are about village affairs, births and deaths, marriages and festivals, sometimes with small video-clips about a dance or a ritual. Some people also post information about seasonal phenomena, like the flowering of a species. There are also invitations for fishing expeditions, or a call to come and share some palm toddy. The variety of knowledge domains discussed is wide and vibrant, and is a reflection of the community’s near total engagement with various aspects of their social and natural environment. Despite biligualism in Halbi – which serves to bridge socio-economic and inter-group gaps – there is no linguistic or cultural dislocation.

Despite the positive description of the WhatsApp group mentioned above the vitality of the Durwa language, in the larger context of the district, is waning. Most villages have schools where the medium of instruction is Hindi; in addition, the lingua franca of central Bastar, especially in the weekly markets, as well as com-

4. In the Census of India, 2011, the survey on bilingualism among the Parji group responded with Halbi as their only bilingual language; among the Parji, the Durwa are the only people with more than 10,000 speakers and hence figure in the Census.

munication with people from other indigenous communities, is conducted in Halbi. It is not that Halbi or Hindi threaten Durwa (or Gondi); but these former languages provide the speakers with a socio-economic advantage and provide an impetus in being bilingual in them. The reason a language is chosen is seldom linguistic but social and economic, or if it obtains a political gain. A certain level of ‘higher’ status in speaking Hindi over Halbi cannot be ignored.

In addition, the advent of modern education has left the young tribal people with less opportunity of using their language in all the domains of knowledge and experience usually attributed to their way of life. This includes food collection from the forest, festivals and celebrations (during which time they may be in school), and a spiritual engagement with their environment. The younger generation in tribal communities have little knowledge of the names of forest plants and of the fish in the surrounding streams – and associated words used in collecting, processing or using them – as these domains of experience are no longer visited. Over time the modern youth’s vocabulary is reduced to the home and related domains with many loan-words from the dominant Hindi and Halbi languages they are in contact with.

A comparable situation is encountered when one examines the vitality of Halbi, spoken in Chhattisgarh,⁵ Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha. The Halba people in Chhattisgarh occupy the higher rungs of the socio-economic ladder and are bilingual in Hindi (and in Chhattisgarhi in northern Chhattisgarh). Though there is a successful move within the Halba Samaj (Halba Society) to make

5. Halbi is spoken by about 7,65,464 speakers, the majority of whom reside in Chhattisgarh. Source: Language Census 2011.

Halbi the official language in their meetings in south Chhattisgarh, this has not worked in the north. In the north the Samaj has let go of their language as an intrinsic part of their ethnic identity. Among the educated Halba youth – many of whom hold government positions – the mother tongue has given way to Hindi, which is also the state language as well as being one of the important Scheduled languages of the country and provides obvious advantages to its speakers.

The situation with Gondi, a Dravidian language, is different with 3.2 million speakers and the peoples, also known as Koitur, spread across several states. The Koiturs live in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha. As the state boundaries were redrawn along linguistic boundaries in 1956 (States Reorganization Act) the Koiturs became minorities in the states they inhabited. The state languages were the medium of instruction in schools. All these (state) languages except Telugu belong to the Indo-Aryan family and could have made it difficult for the Koiturs to learn them and navigate their way through society. Despite their wish Gondi has not been added to the list of Scheduled languages; nor have Mundari and Oraon with 7.2 million and 1.1 million speakers respectively. However, due to their large populations in several pockets, as in south Bastar, parts of Adilabad, etc., the language still retains a strong vitality. Incidentally, the language of the central Indian Maoists is Gondi.

Today vast populations of indigenous peoples migrate to other places where the economic and educational advantages are greater than in their native regions. They inevitably become bilingual in the language of their adopted home with the new language becoming

dominant over the course of time. On their visits home many of these people speak their language with many loan words, the first steps of language erosion. Another curious fact is that these *returnees* often speak their version of the language among themselves and, due to its 'higher' status, enter the language of the peer group in the village by way of imitation. These inter-group and inter-individual interactions are complex⁶ whereby new norms and structures evolve. New loan words and concepts become a part of the original language which may weaken the vitality of the language.

Of the 176 indigenous languages listed in the Census of India 2011, none were included as a Scheduled Language until 2001. In 2001 this was 'rectified' with the inclusion of Bodo (a Tibeto-Burmese language with about 15,00,000 speakers) and Santhali (an Austro-Asiatic language with 72,00,000 speakers). To have a clearer view about how tribal languages fare in India, it helps to look at the figures of bilingualism. As David Crystal⁷ remarks, 'multilingualism is the normal human condition'; however, the language a people are bilingual in tells of an existing cultural dislocation that will lead to a linguistic dislocation.

Bilingualism⁸ has increased in India from 19.44% (1991) to 24.79% (2001) to 26.01% in 2011. All the 14 tribal groups speaking Austro-Asiatic languages are bilingual in Odia, Bengali and Hindi; only the Khasi also speak English. And the 45 tribal groups speaking Tibeto-Burmese languages are bilingual in only one tribal language, Lushai/Mizo, though many also speak English.

6. S. Mufwene, 2013.

7. D. Crystal, *How Language Works*. Penguin Press, Australia, 2008.

8. Bilingualism is a self-declared characteristic, not measured or tested according to any scale.

Of the 99 tribal languages surveyed, which include the clusters of languages not included in the analysis as there are less than 10,000 speakers, bilingualism was reported in only 11 languages. These tribal people spoke Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Odia, Assamese, Bengali, English, Nepali, Manipuri, Halbi and Lushai/Mizo, of which only the last two are tribal. Except English, the rest are all Scheduled Languages of the states; all except Telugu, Manipuri and Lushai/Mizo belong to the Indo-Aryan language family. The overall trend is one of a few dominant (mostly non-tribal) languages becoming second languages of many hundreds of other language speakers. This implies a cultural influence which will have an impact on the domains that will continue to be used in the original languages: a change in their vitality is inevitable in the long run.

The other WhatsApp group mentioned in the beginning turned up a curiosity. This is also a Durwa indigenous group of educated youth, many of them working at small jobs in small towns in the district, away from their native villages. Here the discussions are exclusively in Bastariya Hindi, a pidgin form of Hindi and Halbi. Communications are carried on mainly in the Devnagiri script, on subjects ranging from information about job vacancies in the district (in the forest department, in mining companies, in schools) as well as about adivasi pride and identity. Postings include upcoming tribal festivals and talks by tribal politicians and leaders. A whole series of exchanges centred around adivasi people not being Hindu, for instance. But seldom was it about their forest-based heritage, the ongoing implementation of the Forest Rights Act, or other issues concerning the community as a whole.

At one point during this discussion, I asked of the group why we don't

converse in Durwa, and about 'Durwa matters'. The initial responses were rather apologetic, with a few people admitting that they do not speak the language. But quite soon someone declared that he felt hurt if a 'nakli Durwa',⁹ meaning me, made fun of them not speaking their language. Then others joined in, in a similar vein, and silenced me, and the exchanges continued as before. I had assumed that language was an integral part of cultural identity but here was an instance where ethnic identity was asserted in a newly acquired hybrid pidgin.

The notion that colonial languages such as English and French have 'wiped out' native languages needs revisiting. There are only 2,60,000 people who claim their mother tongue as English in India. As in other parts of Asia, which was colonized by the British, a very negligible proportion of the native peoples – usually the elite – speak English, the rest speaking their own languages or a version, usually pidgin, a kind of speciation of the language. Where business negotiations are conducted between countries in English – as in India, Singapore, Malaysia, etc. – the lower-ranking workers, who form most of the staff in any transaction, continue to speak their own languages. This is the case in most of the south-east Asian countries as well as in Africa, and it has given birth to more than a hundred creole languages,¹⁰ each with its own stable lexicon, a consistent system of grammar, and where children learn it as their native language.

Though the decadal increase of English speakers has risen in India to 14.67 (2001-11), and people bilingual

9. Literally 'fake'.

10. The largest spoken creole is Haitian Creole with about 10 million speakers; Tok Pisin, spoken in Papua New Guinea, has about four million speakers.

in English have probably increased as well, there is little evidence of it 'taking over' native languages. In fact, it is evident that more than the colonial languages it is the native dominant languages, whether state or official, that erode the vitality of tribal languages.

Policies that curtail the access of indigenous people to their natural environments, as with legislations concerned with tiger or other wildlife conservation, are factors that impact tribal languages. Such policies limit the traditional experience domains of the community, distancing people from the flora and fauna and their landscapes, thereby putting a large section of their lexicon into disuse. Over time the younger generation's ability to speak their language as well as their elders, and to teach it to their children, will be limited and negatively affect language vitality.

By itself, language is an abstract concept: it is the speaker(s) who give it a reality by speaking it. Its vitality can be known by seeing the number of knowledge-experience domains it is used in. One notices that the spread of any 'big' language, such as Odia, make the children of parents speaking a 'minor' language (such as Juang, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in Odisha) speak the dominant language, perhaps maintaining the mother tongue only in the home domain. The next generation may have switched to Odia altogether and may, or may not, decide to learn and speak Juang like her grandparents: it is a decision dependent on social, political, economic and psychological factors, whose combination continuously change and remain difficult to predict. This is quite in line with the fate of a species in varying ecological and climatic conditions, individual elements of which affect the vitality and robustness of the organism, and its potential to survive.

Section 29(1) of the Constitution of India says that 'Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same.' This is like stating that an organism or species has the right to grow and thrive in a certain region, without also making sure that the conditions for doing so exist. The above analysis on bilingualism also raises the question of whether giving a language a Scheduled or official status changes anything on the ground, in terms of the vitality and maintenance of the language. For instance, would giving the Kamar or Chenchu languages an official status, but denying the peoples their 'natural ecologies',¹¹ in terms of their ways of life and territories, in any way be enhancing the vitality of the languages? The Kamar need to harvest bamboo and process it into various handicraft; the Chenchus, honey hunters *par excellence*, with a language that transcends the tangible regarding simple honey collection, require the freedom to practice their tradition that will encapsulate their full vocabulary related to honey collection.

The example of Sanskrit shows that despite full official support a language will not grow. It has less than 25,000 registered speakers in 2011,¹² shows a decadal increase, but it can hardly be claimed that the language is vital. Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra have between 2300-3800 speakers each; there are a few hundred speakers in some states, and none or negligible numbers in most. Yet, it is a Scheduled language as it is part of India's heritage: there may not have been any intention to promote it beyond a status that is propped up

11. A phrase coined by the Brazilian linguist, Hildo Honório do Couto.

12. All figures from the Census of India, 2011.

artificially, the foundation being wishful hope and funds. Over the last three years more than Rs 640 crore¹³ have been spent to promote this language; there are TV channels broadcasting Sanskrit news; there are newspapers and institutions that publicize the language. However, it is doubtful whether the language will attain any vitality in the sense of people learning it and passing it on to the next generation.

Languages need their space-times to survive and remain vital and, if that is missing, no legislation will help. What we need to keep a language vital, and to maintain it, would be to keep intact its 'natural ecology' – both social, which implies socio-economic organizations, and non-social ecologies, meaning the landscapes – which is different than a legislative or a political decision to give it a certain status.

It has been remarked¹⁴ that the maximum linguistic diversity is found along the equatorial rainforest. The size and density of the forests such as in Borneo, the Amazon and the Congo may allow for the communities to exercise all their knowledge and experience domains fully. Where there is language contact it may allow for multilingualism without a selection process eliminating one or the other. Whatever the case, it is doubtful that state, or national, policies to preserve them have played a positive role, other than in *not* destroying these natural ecologies. People-centric conservation policies, that encourage the experience of all traditional knowledge-domains of a people, might lead to better linguistic diversity.

13. <https://thewire.in/government/sanskrit-language-promotion>; this is more than what is spent on the five classical languages Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Odia.

14. Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; quoted in S. Mufwene, 'Colonisation, Globalisation, and the Future of Languages in the Twenty-first Century', *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 4(2), UNESCO, 2002.

The many languages of digital infrastructures

PUTHIYA PURAYIL SNEHA and ANASUYA SENGUPTA

THE ongoing pandemic has compelled much needed reflection on questions of access and infrastructure in India, especially during a time that has rendered the internet and digital technologies as essential, and in many ways the 'new normal'. Even as we have been coming to terms with how best to cope with a myriad set of new regulations for public and private life now, framed with the promise of a 'digital India' in mind, the need to create diverse, inclusive and equitable information societies has become the need of the hour. Linguistic barriers in particular, in reading, writing and speaking in multiple languages on digital interfaces (whether internet or mobile phones) remain persistent today across the world, especially for marginalized and non-dominant communities.

According to the Net.Lang Report published by the Maaya Network and UNESCO in 2011, about 97 per cent of the world's population speaks about 4 per cent of the world's languages. Conversely, about 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by only about 3 per cent of people around the world.¹ This disparity is reflected online as well, where out of

1. Laurent Vannini, Crosnier Herve´ Le, and Irina Bokova, 'Net.lang: Towards the Multilingual Cyberspace', in *Net.lang: Towards the*

more than 7,000 existing languages, only a small percentage is recognized as being in use on the internet.²

A recent initiative by Ethnologue (an online and print database and resource on languages) to translate Covid 19 safety guidelines across different languages also notes that many still do not have access to a *single* resource on the pandemic.³ More languages are becoming endangered and disappearing every day, even as there are language shifts, and transformations in the way that they are mediated through digital technologies. It is more imperative than ever therefore, to address these knowledge and infrastructural gaps in order to make the web more multilingual, accessible and safe, particularly for marginalized and non-dominant communities.

While the problem of linguistic disparity on the internet may seem like a recent one, prompted by advance-
Multilingual Cyberspace. C&F e´ditions, Caen, 2012, p. 13.

2. Miguel Trancozo Trevino, 'The Many Languages Missing from the Internet', BBC Future, BBC, 15 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200414-the-many-languages-still-missing-from-the-internet>.

3. 'Coronavirus and Local Languages: How Do You Say, "Wash Your Hands"?' , *Ethnologue*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/health>.

ments in technology that languages have simply been unable to keep up with, its antecedents are much older, and intertwined in a complex history of colonial infrastructures of knowledge production. Perhaps the most seminal exploration of this relationship between language and colonization is in the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, theorising the role of language in perpetuating the objectives of imperialism, through its construction of culture, literary tradition and history.⁴ The 'language debate' since then, has transcended the realm of postcolonial studies, with several efforts in theory and practice across the world aimed towards linguistic decolonization.

Closer home, G.N. Devy, in describing a contemporary 'crisis of knowledge' in India, notes that it is the result of a 'cultural amnesia' of Indian knowledge traditions, as well as the fact that knowledge production in the Global South or colonized nations are not considered on par with that of the West. He further notes the long-term impact of such disparities, reflected in a lack of understanding of and attention to indigenous, tribal and minority languages in India, a result of both the colonial encounter and the caste hegemony deeply ingrained in knowledge traditions of the country.⁵

The resulting uneven development and use of languages, whether in education, governmental administration or governance in other fields like technology, continues therefore to be a norm rather than the exception. The advancements in the growth of the internet and digital technologies over the last couple of decades, while offer-

ing much promise to address some of these disparities (through initiatives such as Digital India for example) still face ongoing challenges, given a persistent and complex digital divide.⁶

Like with other long-standing forms of systemic social exclusion, linguistic barriers are a result of the asymmetries of power and knowledge, and the internet is both a reflection as well as sometimes a deepening of these forms of inequity. However, there are several efforts being undertaken across the world today, towards making the internet more multilingual, and thereby more accessible and equitable in its representations of multiple forms and systems of knowledge. This essay is a set of reflections on two recent projects on languages and the internet, and some observations and learnings on the scope and nature of the challenges, as well as the challenges and potential strategies to address them.

As illustrated above, there is still much to learn about the inequities that persist in terms of the access and use of marginalized and non-dominant languages on the internet, not only in India but across the world. Our reflections here are informed by two recent efforts to map and address some of these issues. The first is a forthcoming report on the 'State of the Internet's Languages' (STIL), led by Whose Knowledge?, in collaboration with the Oxford Internet Institute and Centre for Internet and Society.⁷ The report brings together data and stories on

how people read/write/speak online in multiple languages. Working with the premise that 'language is a proxy for knowledge', the report looks at how most human knowledge, especially those produced in non-dominant and marginalized languages, continues to remain under-represented on the web.

The initiative defines marginalized and non-dominant languages as those marginalized in both global and local contexts by different historical and ongoing dynamics of power and privilege. For instance, most languages that are not European colonial languages – English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Dutch – are marginalized in terms of published content, whether in print or digitally. At a more 'local' or 'regional' level, within highly multilingual contexts like South Asia and India, dominant (and sometimes considered 'national' or 'official') languages like Hindi, Urdu, Sinhala or Bangla can eclipse others in use and status.

Multiple forms of systemic power and privilege further reinforce and exacerbate existing inequities online, as a result of which consumers of knowledge are not part of the 'design, architecture, substance, and experience of this information infrastructure.'⁸ Through a set of narratives drawn from data visualizations of the prevalence of languages on prominent web platforms, and stories about personal experiences of individuals and communities engaging with the internet and digital technologies in their many languages, the report attempts to map these extant knowledge gaps. It also attempts to highlight work being undertaken by people across the world to create a multilingual internet, which is essential to ultimately creating better access and accessibility to knowledge on the web.

8. Ibid.

6. Muntazir Abbas, 'Unavailability of Local Language Content a Barrier to Digital India: Ajay Prakash Sawhney', *ET Telecom.Com*, 31 July 2018, <https://telecom.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/unavailability-of-local-language-content-a-barrier-to-digital-india-ajay-prakash-sawhney/65212852>.

7. 'State of the Internet's Languages', Whose Knowledge?, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://whoseknowledge.org/initiatives/state-of-the-internets-languages/>.

4. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, Oxford, 2011.

5. G.N. Devy, 'Post-Memory Education' in *The Crisis Within: on Knowledge and Education in India*. Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2017, pp. 52-68.

The second is a series of collaborative and exploratory short-term research projects on Wikimedia platforms and communities in India, undertaken by team members of the Access to Knowledge programme at CIS.⁹ The projects work on a range of topics, from systemic issues such as a gender gap and bias in the participation and content creation on Wikipedia in Indian languages, access and reuse of cultural content across languages, and challenges in using these platforms in multilingual classrooms, to experiences of content creation in Indian languages on diverse Wikimedia projects beyond Wikipedia (Wikidata, Wiktionary, Wikisource, and so on).¹⁰

While the research projects here are still in an exploratory phase, the process of working on them has been informative, in terms of highlighting practical challenges and potential for undertaking research on Indian language Wikimedia platforms. Both the above initiatives highlight several asymmetries in the development and access to content and (digital) infrastructures for languages other than English, as well as efforts being undertaken by communities to address them.

In the course of this research, it has become clear that a significant foundational reason for the inequities related to creation and use of content and digital infrastructure for non-dominant/marginalized languages is the effects of colonization. In fact one of the key attempts of the STIL report is an effort to unpack precisely what is meant by ‘decolonization’ itself. As illustrated by many of the stories in

9. Wikimedia Meta-Wiki, ‘CIS-A2K’, Meta, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 23 February 2021, <https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/CIS-A2K>.

10. Reports on some of the completed projects may be seen here: https://cis-india.org/@_search?Subject%3Alist=A2K%20Research

the report, the inherent complexities of the discourse often make very unclear our own locations as decolonial subjects in the present context. The presence of inter-language marginalization, such as between ‘classical and vernacular’ languages or dialects, further complicate the discourse. Some examples of these include the debates on classical language status accorded to several languages¹¹ or the recent concerns over the National Education Policy (2020) and its purported imposition of Hindi in the Indian educational system.¹²

Stories from the STIL report also outline the complex relationships between languages that have been shaped by histories of colonization and conflict, such as that of Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka, French and Arabic in Tunisia, or the attention to ‘minority’ languages in Europe (such as Basque, Breton, Karelian and Sardinian). Similarly, the politics of classification of languages, such as colonial/ postcolonial languages, dominant, marginalized, endangered and disappearing languages are also closely informed by these colonial histories, and continue to affect their representation and usability on the internet.

Disparities in the development of multilingual content on the web, are also closely related to their imbrication within, and perpetuation of, systemic inequalities, of race, caste, class, gender, sexuality, bodily ability

11. A.R. Venkatachalapathy, ‘The “Classical” Language Issue’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(2), 10 January 2009, <https://doi.org/https://www.epw.in/journal/2009/02/commentary/classical-language-issue.html>.

12. Kumkum Roy, ‘Examining the Draft National Education Policy, 2019’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 54(25), 25 June 2019, <https://doi.org/https://www.epw.in/engage/article/examining-draft-national-education-policy-2019>.

and beyond. The gender gap and bias on Wikimedia projects is a well-documented challenge across most languages, owing to a lack of content about and participation by contributors across a spectrum of gender and sexual identities and topics.¹³ This content and participation gap in Indian language communities has also been persistent, despite several efforts to address the challenge. It continues to be driven by socio-cultural factors such as the restricted access to public spaces and digital infrastructure by women, lack of training in technical and communication skills, limited leadership roles and concerns about community health and safety on online platforms.

The limited availability of good quality, informative and educational content on gender and sexuality in languages other than English is therefore a visible gap in digital information infrastructures, not only in India. As noted by stories in the STIL report, searching for terms or topics related to gender and sexuality (such as homosexuality) in local languages, for example, very often throws up irrelevant and derogatory content online, many a time in English. The problem is further compounded for persons with disabilities who may be looking for content on sexuality and disability in Indian languages, as there is very little available, in accessible online formats. The authors therefore also discuss the need to then rely on multiple platforms, including social media, for relevant information and ways to proactively and safely engage in discussions on gender, sexuality and disability in languages other than English on the internet.

13. ‘Gender Bias on Wikipedia’, Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 12 May 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia

The question of form and format is an important one to address in the context of digital information infrastructures, as the internet is still primarily a textual medium most easily accessed by visually-able people. This raises specific challenges for multilingual content. Many languages across the world, including in India are oral and/or use signs and images, and therefore often do not have a script, or use borrowed scripts of a dominant language. As a result, it is important to ask what non-textual forms of multilingual content are, and where they are on the internet.

Santali, for example, which is spoken by close to 7.6 million people in India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, and is the third most-spoken Austroasiatic language, was primarily oral until the introduction of the Ol-Chiki script in 1925.¹⁴ It was added to the Unicode Standard¹⁵ in 2008, which then facilitated the creation of online content in the language. Another example is the group of indigenous languages of Arrernte, spoken by Aboriginal communities of central Australia, which also has a highly developed sign language.¹⁶ The Indigemoji app launched in 2019, is another recent effort in bringing the knowledge produced in these languages online, in the form of indigenous emojis.¹⁷

The majority of existing languages, therefore, contain a wealth of knowledge and histories that may not

be expressed purely through writing, and it is essential to look for ways in which existing digital infrastructures may provide affordances for their usability and development online.

The gaps in digital infrastructure highlight several larger concerns with respect to technological development, access and skills that continue to persist in the creation and use of multilingual content online. Many Indic scripts are not fully Unicode compliant, or have not been added to the standard, as a result of which they are not available for use or rendered correctly in online formats, and therefore remain inaccessible. The lack of Optical Character Recognition (OCR)¹⁸ for many languages further makes digitized content inaccessible, and thereby not searchable or amenable for further use. This prevalent digital divide due to linguistic barriers in accessing devices, platforms, apps or software is further aggravated by a lack of sufficient digital or technological literacy in using these tools.

There is also a paucity of efficient content management systems in non-dominant languages, in part due to these technical barriers in the process of identifying and sourcing content, translation, digitization and archiving. In addition, there are multiple technological as well as skill related challenges that prevent the effective preservation, access and use of multilingual content and tools. A simple example here would be to look at the language support offered by web browsers like Google, and the accuracy of their translations. Although the

Google Translate API¹⁹ is a useful feature that keeps improving over time based on its training on language datasets, a persistent challenge in some Indian language Wikimedia projects has been that of poor quality content, based on machine translations.²⁰

These issues therefore need to be addressed both at the level of the efficacy of software and tools itself, and in terms of training and building human capacities in working with digital technologies in multiple languages. Access, or rather ‘quality of access’, in terms of being able to use the internet and digital media optimally in our preferred languages, still remains a concern in different parts of the world.

These infrastructural gaps also disproportionately affect efforts in the preservation and use of endangered and disappearing languages, a large number of them spoken by marginalized or non-dominant communities. There are significant efforts all over the world to aid this, such as a project on using social media to support the revitalization of Indigenous languages in Turtle Island,²¹ or the efforts of several researchers and practitioners working to create awareness and use of the Zapotec languages on the web.²²

foundation.org/news/2019/01/09/you-can-now-use-google-translate-to-translate-articles-on-wikipedia/

20. Kyle Wilson, ‘Wikipedia Has a Google Translate Problem’, The Verge, 8 May 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/8/18526739/wikipedia-translation-tool-machine-learning-ai-english>.

21. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Government of Canada, ‘Using Twitter to Support Indigenous Cultural Revitalization and Youth Well-Being’, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 29 November 2012, https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/society-societe/stories-histoires/story-histoire-eng.aspx?story_id=325.

22. See: <https://www.facebook.com/yelnban/>

14. ‘Santali Language’, Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 5 May 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santali_language.

15. ‘About the Unicode® Standard’, Unicode Standard, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://unicode.org/standard/standard.html>.

16. Adam Kendon, *Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia: Cultural, Semiotic and Communicative Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013.

17. ‘Indigemoji’, Indigemoji, accessed 12 May 2021, <https://www.indigemoji.com.au/>.

18. U. Pal and B.B. Chaudhuri, ‘Indian Script Character Recognition: A Survey’, *Pattern Recognition* 37(9), 2004, pp. 1887-1899, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patcog.2004.02.003>.

19. Runa Bhattacharjee and Pau Giner, ‘You Can Now Use Google Translate to Translate Articles on Wikipedia’, Wikimedia Foundation, 11 January 2019, <https://wikimedia->

There is a need to therefore understand the issue of language diversity and plurality in terms of local contexts and challenges, through numbers but also embodied personal experiences, in order to support and aid these efforts in creating a more equitable and decolonized internet.

Finally, an overarching problem when looking at infrastructural gaps in creating a multilingual internet, is that of ownership and regulation. Policy reforms encouraging development of technological support for low/non-literate communities and non-dominant and marginalized languages are the need of the hour, and have often been impeded by the challenges mentioned above. Global regulatory bodies have laid out measures and guidelines, such as the W3C²³ and ICANN²⁴ practices on language use, or the UN recommendations on policies for protection of linguistic minorities.²⁵ These need to however be adapted to local needs and challenges of specific language communities.

For example, many security vulnerabilities exist on social media platforms due to a lack of recognition of discriminatory or hateful regional language content (which often escapes filters built on algorithms trained on English datasets), and these are often targeted towards women and other marginalized, vulnerable communities.

23. 'Internationalization', W3C, accessed 12 May 2021. <https://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/i18n>.

24. 'Internationalized Domain Names', ICANN, accessed 12 May 2021, [https://www.icann.org/resources/pages/idn-2012-02-25-en#:~:text=Internationalized%20Domain%20Names%20\(%20IDNs%20\)%20enable,allowed%20by%20relevant%20IDN%20protocols](https://www.icann.org/resources/pages/idn-2012-02-25-en#:~:text=Internationalized%20Domain%20Names%20(%20IDNs%20)%20enable,allowed%20by%20relevant%20IDN%20protocols).

25. 'The Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Diversity Addressed by UNESCO', UNESCO, 17 January 2019, <https://en.unesco.org/news/protection-and-promotion-linguistic-diversity-addressed-unesco>.

Mechanisms for maintaining safety and community health in online spaces predominantly engaging with regional languages is therefore an important area of focus.

Ownership of digital infrastructure and content also adds another layer of complexity to this discourse, where data privacy,²⁶ regulation of content and liability of intermediaries²⁷ (Internet Service Providers, messaging apps and Over-The-Top, digital and social media platforms for example) are heavily contested topics. Recent developments in laws related to online content have raised concerns about a chilling effect on free speech, especially with respect to content on social media and its impact on greater plurality on the web.

Another important regulatory challenge is the (lack of) awareness of intellectual property rights and possibilities for open licensing which may help free up a large volume of content in diverse languages for wider public access on the internet. On Wikipedia, for instance, content donation efforts are often impeded by concerns of copyright violation, and lack of awareness about open licenses. The legal 'language' or vocabulary of open access and licensing also remains predominantly English. How, for example, do we translate terms such as open access, metadata or copyright in Indian languages in easily understandable ways?

26. Amber Sinha and Arindrajit Basu, 'The Politics of India's Data Protection Ecosystem', *EPW Engage* 54(49), 14 December 2019, <https://doi.org/https://www.epw.in/engage/article/politics-indias-data-protection-ecosystem>.

27. Aman Taneja, 'India Invokes IT Act to Regulate Digital Content but New Norms May Fail Legal Scrutiny', *Firstpost*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/india-invokes-it-act-to-regulate-digital-content-but-new-norms-may-fail-legal-scrutiny-9351061.html>.

The observations shared here outline just some of the challenges faced by several languages in India and across the world, in terms of their representation and use on the internet. As illustrated by many of the examples above, technological barriers are deeply embedded in different structures of power and privilege, just as the knowledge gaps at different levels. To use the same metaphor as earlier, the 'many languages' of digital infrastructure – including its technology, regulation and access – are not easily translatable, and therefore need contextualization to be made more accessible to the people whose engagement with the web is most affected by these factors.

The concept of large-scale digital access across multiple languages also needs to be problematized and critiqued with more nuance, as illustrated time and again over the last year, whether in terms of challenges of moving to remote, online education, or now with access to public vaccination programmes facilitated through a single digital platform. Localization of resources, including data, tools and platforms, with respect to languages, is therefore an important aspect of facilitating large-scale access, especially in a country with the linguistic diversity and complexity of India. Importantly, the issue of multilinguality needs to be addressed in all its nuance and history, and by proactively centering the voices of individuals and communities it most affects.

We need to understand better the intersectional nature of the problem of access to the internet, and the impact of ownership and regulation of digital media. Most importantly, we need to acknowledge ongoing community-led efforts to address these challenges. These contextually rich 'translations' would help immeasurably in creating an equitable, safe and accessible internet in India and across the world.

A tale of India's frontier languages in the digital age

BANANI CHAKRAVARTY

THIS is the best of times, yet it is the worst of times for languages. Best because one may write in any language and still be able to express oneself in this digital age. Unlike in the print age, expertise on language and the status of one's preferred language does not matter any more while using digital media. Everyone has the freedom to compose and send text in any language of choice. But is it really so simple in practical life? What about peer pressure? What about the constant exposure to multiple languages other than one's mother tongue? What about the need of preserving the sanctity of the mother tongue? Or is that not important to the speakers any more?

Many believe that digitization is the only way to preserve a dying or endangered language. It is true that documentation of different trajectory, such as grammar and folktales, may help in immortalizing a language in the digital domain. But unless the language is used by its speakers, it would cease to be a natural or living language any more. Only its use in spoken and written media can assure the survival of a language. Here, attitudes toward the mother tongue, as well as pressures from the dominant language count as much as heritage and traditions. To enhance the prestige and use of an endangered language mother tongue, the involvement of the community and

government is as important, if not more, than digitization.

Digitization of languages has been happening at two levels. One is through the domain of experts such as linguists, anthropologists and computer scientists. They are busy documenting many aspects of various languages. Language digitization is important as it helps to preserve the literary and linguistic heritage. In this age of information explosion, it has become easier for a digitally literate person to reach and use these sources. It also helps in immortalizing contemporary language form as the standard language.

The second level of digitization is being done by non-experts or ordinary real users of the language. Easy access to the digital world empowers common users with equal right to use the mother tongue as they think suitable for expression. A speaker always vies for the simplest and most effective way to communicate with other users. The use of multiple scripts and multiple languages are quite commonly seen in writings in the new media. As a result, digital languages are experiencing rapid changes unlike before. It may be possible that many languages will change in the near future, so much so that they could become unrecognizable as present day languages. The other possibility is that such languages may not be used any more by the users and they would become dead languages.

It is clear that the two processes are not complementary but contrastive. The experts are trying to preserve languages as they are, whereas common users are turning and twisting languages like never before. The question is who will win the game? History reminds us that common users are often more powerful as they are in greater numbers and the real users.

India's Northeast is a gold mine of language varieties. Its complex and

multifaceted linguistic world has drawn the attention of linguistics for long. Grierson's linguistic surveys, which became part of his *Linguistic Survey of India*, was one of the earliest proofs of this. Linguists generally concur that many of these languages evolved here itself from different origins such as Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer), Tibeto-Burman and Aryan languages. Many languages came here much later, in the recent past. Different castes and tribes use different languages as their mother tongue. However, they felt the need to interact with other communities residing in the same area for a long time.

Knowing only one language has never been sufficient in this part of the country. The everyday economy and political transactions have been facilitated through the knowledge of multiple languages. This has also facilitated inter-language exchange in terms of borrowing and enriching from other languages. That is why most of the communities know at least two local languages. It is also not rare to find persons who know more than ten languages.

Earlier, when there was no communication boom and little social-political interaction, it was easier to maintain the basic features of a language. Languages maintained their features unaffected or with little changes for centuries. In fact, the existence of so many languages in India's Northeast is the result of isolation due to political, geographical as well as cultural factors among different communities of the region.

Colonization induced major transformations in infrastructure, economic and cultural landscapes that changed the aforementioned scenario by bringing the diverse, isolated communities loosely under onefold. However, some of these linguistic processes

had taken place earlier too. Historians normally refer to manifold exchanges between the residents of modern Assam and the state of Nagaland in pre-colonial times as examples of such linguistic interplay.

In the 20th century, planning and power play among different language communities resulted in ranking several languages as 'major' and others as 'minor' or 'other' languages. Languages which have scripts, a written literary tradition, and official patronage, generally dominate other languages used in the same area. Languages that are used in official correspondence and education get stabilized with technologically empowered uniform writing systems and a standard language. Government language planning expedited that process. By placing the Assamese language at the top of the language hierarchy as the medium of education and use in official matters, the British colonial government began that process in the late 19th century. This idea of easy governance with one official local language played a crucial role in shaping Assamese as a language ready for contemporary technology such as print as well as for use in new genres of literature such as novels and short stories. Textbooks, grammars, dictionaries and journals empowered Assamese as the most prominent and dominant language of the province.

Other surrounding languages such as Boro, Rabha, Tiwa, Mishing or Karbi did not enjoy government patronage at that time. However, these languages attracted the attention of Christian missionaries working in the area. The missionaries produced and published a few religious texts, grammars, vocabularies and dictionaries of these languages, often using the Roman script for this purpose. But these efforts were not enough to uplift

the prestige and social power of these languages as they lacked government patronage.

At that very point, the attitude of the speakers of these languages also got a makeover. Encircled by a powerful language in the social landscape, they began to relegate their mother tongue as the language to be spoken at home or only on informal occasions. On the other hand, the Assamese language was the medium to be used in all official, educational and written settings. The shaping of Assamese as a printable language, and critical reliance on the eastern dialect of the language, was at the centre of the standardization process of modern Assamese, downgrading most of its dialects to informal oral use. For those speakers outside the eastern Assamese mother tongue realm, bilingualism became common. For them, it became quite natural to use one dialect as the mother tongue and the other as the formal language. As a result, multiple changes were activated in these dialects.

In pre-modern times, until the British came and occupied India's northeastern region, language was used only to communicate, both orally and in writing. Powerful literary tradition grew out of the fluid Assamese linguistic landscape. Yet, given these highly fluid linguistic cultures, it would not be wrong to suggest that languages were not identifiable with the political identity of any community. Language boundaries were also blurred. All language forms such as language, dialects or lingua franca enjoyed similar status. Litterateurs used one or a combination of two or more languages that suited their target readers or rather listeners. Rarely did someone sermonize on the correct or incorrect use of the language. Speakers and authors could use or borrow as many words and expres-

sions from other languages as they deemed necessary to communicate.

Colonialism-induced modernity and nationalism abruptly changed the fluidity of language use in the region. The connection between language, identity and heritage came into being. Preserving the sanctity of the mother tongue became one of the main agendas in nationalist discourse.

Writing and printing technology discouraged and banished commoners – both illiterate and semi-literate – from mainstream literature. They were relegated to the so-called domain of folk literature. Digitization has now restored power to the commoners as in the oral era. As social media is seen as a cross between formal and informal settings, digital literacy has enabled everyone to express themselves freely. Rudimentary or lack of knowledge is not a hindrance at all. It is like a folksong of the old times when anyone could freely sing his or her composition on the riverbank without any inhibition about the rule-book of grammar or poetics.

Almost everyone around us who posts comments or writes something on these new digital platforms, are expressing or articulating their feelings and emotions without any inhibition. Many of them would never think of writing for newspapers or magazines as they are seen to be more formal and elite.

This new practice of mass participation on digital platforms will impact all languages. The idea that language change can be controlled is illusionary. In this digital age, no language can isolate itself anymore – global, national or local. Assamese and other languages of this region are also experiencing deep and swift changes.

As students engrossed by language use in a multilingual situation, we are well aware of the impact and

influence of one language on other languages in the same area. For example, the course of Assamese is decidedly influenced by the surrounding tribal languages of the area. Most 20th century linguists are agreed on this. This language also carries with it many features and words from the languages it has been in contact with at different times. But those changes were very slow, and it did not alter the basic framework of the language. However, the new changes are very rapid and noticeable to the naked eye. The confidence gained by digital freedom is altering the fate and power of languages in the Northeast like never before. For example, there is no hesitation in mixing more than one language in writing a message or blog as these platforms are not considered formal. When one knows more than one language, one has three linguistic choices – the option of preferring either of the two languages as the first choice. Or it might be a mixture of both languages. Digital writers now randomly practice all of these choices.

Exposure to electronic and digital media has brought with it some major changes in language use. Earlier one had to be content with exposure to one or two languages. One could speak one language at home, another at school or at the workplace. One could get limited exposure to another language as the third language. But the new exposure explosion through mobile phone, computer and television set exposes us to more powerful and dominant languages around us. In Assam, the most visible languages on these platforms are English, Hindi, Assamese, Boro and Bengali. Intermittent exposure to these languages has resulted in fluidity in linguistic behaviour of the users. Now one may enjoy as many languages as one wants. For example, one has the option of

using one or two languages for education and information, another for news, and yet another for entertainment.

The daily exposure to so many languages has blurred the boundaries between different language systems. Moreover, most of us have the tendency to lean towards the more powerful and prestigious language in our repertoire. Hence, the less powerful languages are being downgraded as the not-preferred language of the users. The interplay of this attitude and lack of institutional support has already made most languages (other than the ones stated above) vulnerable. Their domains are shrinking. Many kinship and culture specific terms are no longer in use; they have lost a number of speakers. The continuous and ever-growing pressure will definitely make them more vulnerable unless their community as well the government steps in.

The emergence of Boro as a dominant language of Assam in the last century is a result of community efforts to link the language to the identity of the community. Fortunately, in the case of a few other tribal languages such as Tiwa and Tai-Ahom, community effort to teach these languages are showing results. But these sparing efforts are not enough yet.

As stated earlier, the coming of print in the 19th century, paved the way for standardization of the Assamese language. Standard Assamese selects a single sound or word out of several such forms available in different dialects of the word. It also uses a fixed spelling and a uniform grammar. The modern standard Assamese (*manya Asamiya*) is predominantly based on the eastern dialect as American Baptist missionaries, who used to print and publish first in Assamese, settled in Sivasagar in East Assam in the 19th century. Writings in the Assamese language and

literature over the next century further consolidated that position despite protest and challenges from many.

Digitization is beginning to change this trend. If one writes for digital media, she is no longer dependent on the rules of standard Assamese. One can use a word from any dialect without feeling guilty. For the record, using any expression from other dialects in writing was enough to be reprimanded in the late 19th and early 20th century. Spellings in digital media are not uniform and standard any more. The great Assamese dictionary writers must be turning in their graves; but their efforts seem futile looking at the spelling patterns of digital writing in Assamese. Digital languages now allow dialects an equitable linguistic status. The use of non-standard abbreviation and shortening is the new normal. A combination of digits and alphabets, e.g. 2 mi (you) is also quite popular.

How will these changing socio-linguistic equations impact the dominant Assamese literary cultures? Will Assamese language become more dominant and new versions of the language emerge, like different types of English such as Indian English or Caribbean English? Or will it become more of a lingua franca with deep impact from the more dominant languages such as Hindi and English? It is too early to comment.

The digital explosion over the last twenty years has changed our perspectives about language use, both in reading and writing. The dominance of English on the Internet has familiarized us with the language and the Roman script. The ripples created by selecting the Roman script to write Boro language in the latter part of the last century now seems like a story from a faraway time. In this digital age, it does not matter to the common people

whether their language has a script of its own or not. The Roman alphabet has already conquered the digital world.

Roman emperors must be ecstatic to note the spread of the Roman script throughout the globe. Assamese youngsters and adults alike mostly use the Roman script on their mobile phones and tabs. This script is used by almost everyone including students from English and Assamese medium schools. It is the preferred script for writing Assamese whether they be school dropouts or highly educated people. When asked to explain the reason behind this preference, they find that typing in the Roman script is much faster than Assamese. It is interesting to note that their choice is based on the swiftness in creating and sending posts and comments, which is a trademark of the virtual world. The only icing on the cake is that the liberty to use this script to write Assamese has emboldened many from English medium backgrounds to start writing in Assamese.

The digitization of languages acts differently in the case of major and minor languages. Major languages of this part of the subcontinent such as Assamese, Bengali or Meitei might not share a similar history in terms of origin or evolution, but they enjoy a common history of the written literary tradition as well as the advantages of having political and cultural patronage.

In the pre-digital age, 'small' languages were prone to the danger of erosion or extinction from the neighbouring dominant language. For example, in Assam, Moran or Sonowal speakers only use remnants of their erstwhile mother tongue in extremely limited cultural and religious contexts. A similar outcome awaited groups of Rabha, Mishing and several other tribes who shifted to Assamese language after coming into close contact

with it. The mother tongue of the Pati-Rabhas, a sub-group of the Rabha tribe, is now considered a dialect of the Assamese language. Only a few sounds, accents and words as well as folksongs remain as souvenirs of their story of shifting to the dominant language.

The major languages will hopefully survive this age, taking advantage of digitization. But smaller languages may not be so fortunate. Institutional efforts to link language to national or regional unity are already shrinking spaces of these languages. A digital onslaught may be the last nail in the coffin.

Digitization is a two sided coin, and one has to accept both sides. Digitization brings the world to us and then, in return, asks for a heavy price. A few changes in one's mother tongue are inevitable. It would definitely be a setback were the changes to overpower the language and makes it unrecognizable. But losing a language owing to peer pressure is the real danger in the offing. One may argue that language loss is not unique to the digital age. It has been happening throughout the history of mankind. While that may be true, there could be an alternative argument. Earlier, language death was not directed at eradicating diversity. One language death generally counts for a new language emerging in some other part of the world. But this new trend is taking us towards the hegemonic idea of one language one world.

It is not our intention to predict a doomsday scenario for less powerful languages. It may not be the end for all of them. However, many of them, if not most, will pave the way for more powerful ones. Those lucky enough to survive would also have to bear the onslaught of other powerful languages. In this process many of them will be unrecognizable enough to be labelled as a new language. Or some of them may not survive this age.

The survival of languages: the Khasi

ESTHER SYIEM

THE tale of the Lost Script is often remembered; not simply any longer as the older generation did, but self-reflexively, with practised skill. It is a tale that recalls the time when God called all the people of the world to come and receive their own scripts. Among others who went was the Khasi messenger accompanied by a plainsman who kept his within the safety of his knotted ponytail. We are not clear about where the Khasi put his. But we do know that when they had to cross a river swollen with the rains the Khasi put it into his mouth. What follows is history being retold in artful ways. He swallowed the script: the one reason why Khasis have no script of their own.

Whilst the resultant narrative has disempowered a community when it has been used as a measure of comparison to other literate communities, it has also provided it with the empow-

ering ability of viewing the incident of the loss through the distancing lens of humour. The Khasi messenger is a typical specimen of the lackadaisical spirit of a community that continues to thrive, however, on its own terms. When I heard about it as a child there was no written literature available. It was told with simple humour in denigration of the Khasi messenger's negligence.

As time passed with the spread of education and the general tendency to create labels of all sorts, this story has been published, retold and re-crafted through different mediums. The overarching view has always been that of loss, which was obvious before, but which has become sharper now; an empowering contradiction that has steered many communities in North East India towards taking a re-look at their ground realities.

From the Nagas to the Mizos, the Garos and Bodos, the tribes of Arunachal and other plains tribes of North East India, to name a few, the tale of the Lost Script emerging from within these communities but in different forms and content, has been in oral circulation and projected as the foundational certainty around which has been structured their unstructured oralities. Struggling as they are today with language loss, not to mention other social and economic deprivations, these communities have displayed remarkable resilience in reorientating themselves towards a future that is marginalizing their core imperatives.

Be that as it may, if one were to look at the material reality surrounding them one would find resistance as being the key element of their struggle. This is widely reflected in domains that pertain to essentializing identity as in their cuisine, traditional wear, chants and songs or ritualistic practices but which have also been perversely commodified to cater to the patronage of other literate peoples.

In this respect, in order to understand resistance, I would like to clarify upon two sides of an existing coin, both of which have different stories to tell. These are the two realities that communities in these parts are dealing with: the commodified reality, that faces an encroaching world, that caters to the expectations of the hungry hordes, hungry for diversion in this supposedly globalized village of easy accessibility. The trope for this in Meghalaya as in other Northeastern states, lies in the expanding number of Bed and Breakfast Inns that have sprouted without containment. Yes, tourism has been an asset for many states and exhibiting one's own has been a practised skill that has gradually emerged in the far corners of many regions dependent upon the earnings that it brings; which

is fair enough, but which comes at a cost to the soul of culture which is language.

The other aspect of the same coin has been kept away from the curio seeker and collector's insanity. It is this that has preserved these fragile oral communities from complete collapse. This is the resistant core of indigenous thought, the 'oral resistant', that lies at the heart of language. Preservation of this singular asset has always rested with the elders of these speaking communities. They have ideally, existed unseparated from the land and its offspring, and have encircled and been encircled by a universe made sentient by the speaking tongue. But their numbers are fast depleting as are the forests and natural environment that have cradled the wisdom of the ages and maintained the natural balance of our communities.

In an age of information, when almost everything is monetized, loss of this 'oral resistant' would surely, as in the depleted communities of the American Indian, result in severe crisis, near impossible to manage. Language loss, as everyone knows, is a fallout of many factors that stem from a globalized world.

Within the remoteness of the oral resistant, closed to trifling transactions, lies contravening germ of dissent that has authorized the alternative narrative for the Khasi community. This germ stems from the *rngiew* of the *jaitbynriew*; translated literally, it simply means, aura; that which naturally emanates from and surrounds a generation of people or an individual; to be nurtured at all times, in the uphill struggle of trying to maintain the challenging equations of life both at a personal micro level and at a larger macrocosmic level.

The *rngiew* provides the benchmark for the evolutionary progress of

a community. It is intangible but manifests itself through a community's ability to grow; in terms of the inner health of its people. It is an all-embracing term that comprises the relational stability that must exist, interlacing realities and experiences, in all aspects of life. Surely then if language is lost this would be an indication of the depletion of the *rngiew* of a community; something that warrants urgent attention; which is the reason why I now turn my attention to a group of young Khasi rappers, Khasi Bloodz (although there are others too), whose dealings with the larger world, 'oppositional to an imagined dominant majority' has brought them face up with questions that dip into the historical and sociological, as well as the existential.

Khasi rappers have indigenized priorities through language, mainly working through social media, and have also participated in performances outside the state. The call is to keep the *rngiew* alive, which will be manifest in more contemporary ways too as it adapts to change and the rappers, steeped in the creation of new vocabularies, amongst others, delivered in the spirit of rap, an imported art form, are adding more to the depth of a community's *rngiew*.

The indigenous art form that may superficially be connected to it is the *phawar*, largely extempore and accompanying social and gaming events. These art forms thrive on the use of language and are dependent upon the transactions that emanate from a deep self-consciousness of the unpredictability of the lived circumstance.

North East India as we all know is an unstructured conglomeration of communities with separate languages, different worldviews and religions, comprising mostly patriarchal communities, with two communities being

matrilineal, and many sections being Christian in population. Historically speaking, the impact that the Christian Church has made upon the language of many of these communities may be seen in the framing of the indigenous alphabet. In the Khasi context with the growth of an informed indigenous literati, other letters were added. Translations immediately took place, primarily to fill the gap in what was considered to be the non-existent written literature of the indigenous; at first from Christian texts, but gradually moving towards secular translations.

The contemporary situation finds the Christian Church contributing in its own way towards maintaining the primacy of local languages. Sermons and homilies, indigenized worship songs, pamphlets and many other forms of published literature, have audibly enveloped communities that are constantly reviewing their capacity for expression through language. In the arena of the Church, the indigenous language needs no turning back. In church gatherings impromptu translations from the local language into English or Hindi, to name two, take place very often and there is pressure to coin new words and phrases to meet the demand of the translation paradigm. This occurs not at the academic, isolated level but on the streets with the local congregation being the main participant in the refreshment of language.

On the same page may also be found the local imprint of the spoken and chanting language of the indigenous religion like *Niam Tre* or members of the socio-religious organization, *Ka Seng Khasi*. In recent years they have revamped themselves and witnessed a revival, where their auxiliary partners are taking a proactive stand in advancing the cause of Khasi-ness centred around religion, language and culture.

The picture presented so far seems to be a positive one. Hidden within the nooks and crannies of the dominant tribal languages, however, are a number of linguistic varieties that are only spoken by a few hundred or a few thousand. The moot point is, where do they go from here, when their permanent domicile is strictly within these regions naturally mapping out their own linguistic trails.

And it is in the observations of the noted Khasi thinker and writer, W.R. Laitphlang that the truth of the situation comes to the fore, wherein he observes, that it is in opening up remote villages by constructing roads and providing infrastructure to give them easier accessibility that loss happens. What he meant was loss of environment as well as culture, of which the subsequent loss is language. Can the development worldview then, that has always sidelined small narratives seek to redress its actions merely by taking the digitization stance?

Agreed digital technology has achieved what no other technology has. And it is in the right spirit that language conservation be attempted in whatever form. But one needs to see the unbridgeable chasm that exists between grassroot reality founded upon physical phenomenon and hyper reality founded upon the digital, which is the very substance of the contemporary. But again, if we were to preserve these small languages (which is surely required) the means for doing so would have to be the digital way.

There have been many sincere efforts digital or otherwise – a case in point is the phenomenal PLSI (Peoples Linguistic Survey of India) series instituted by noted thinker, writer, conservationist, social worker, Ganesh Devy – to testify to this difficult venture that is still on-going. The accumulated result of many of these efforts

have, till date, been somewhat partial however – the reason why Ganesh Devy chose to go out to document the speaking language of the person on the street in order to redress the lack – erring on the side, perhaps, of the more populous of the smaller linguistic nations, because of the paucity of resources, financial or otherwise in respect of more ‘undeveloped’ communities; for every endeavour, let us not disagree, is solely dependent upon financial means and financial gain.

This is where government intervention is surely needed, but sensitively however, keeping the realities and expectations of these small speech communities uppermost in mind. The New Education Policy of the Government of India with its emphasis upon mother tongue education seems to open a small window of hope for linguistic minorities. The question, however, is the fairness of its delivery system, for these languages as the proverbial saying goes, cannot be bought nor can they be sold; commonly looked upon only as interesting specimens for generating study.

A preliminary linguistic mapping, as was attempted and to large extent achieved by the PLSI, is unaccountably required. What the People’s Linguistic Survey of India achieved was not simply a collection of linguistic data. It revived stories, recreating links blurred with time, and generally giving small communities a perspective that would have been erased from memory. More importantly, it gave them a sense of dignity and purpose in being able to export their language, possibly for the first time, to the rest of the country and the world. This has been an undertaking fuelled no less than by a vision, humane in approach.

In a country like India, where development has never been uniform, the challenge of each linguistic com-

munity has to be met on its own grounds. The PLSI demonstrates the possibility of language conservation at the grassroots level, where a linguistic resource has been created that could be included in the school curriculum. The significant lead that the PLSI has made is in confirming that the survey can never be complete. Each volume is open ended. The editors of each volume keep an open door for fresh entries of any other language or language variety that could be included in the volume. Its success lies in the understanding that language conservation is an ongoing venture. There are no easy paradigms to deal with it for the soul of language lives on even when it is thought to be verifiably dead; like the classical languages.

May I at this point look at Easterine Kire, the famous Naga writer who in one of her interviews was asked questions pertaining to her identity. Her short but pointed answer was that she was first of all Naga. Other identities followed only upon this. This is a pithy answer indeed that points to the cultural and linguistic component of the personal. It is upon this that all else hinges.

In the case of small communities in North East India, where one's mother tongue is only spoken at home and no validation exists through printed literature, where histories, let alone literary histories are yet to be documented, Easterine Kire's answer is surely an indication that this tertiary sense of the world outside one's own community is common to the speaking communities of this region. We may contrast this with the famous golfer, Tiger Woods' description of himself as Cablinasian, Caucasian, Black, American Indian and Asian: a fitting acknowledgement of a globalized, corporate identity, which of course has its own narrative to speak of, the least of which is 'insecurity'.

And I refer to insecurity as being a state of mental anxiety on the part of most native speakers in Meghalaya, suggestive of similar feelings felt by smaller language groups in other Northeastern states. The angst is almost physical; the turmoil considerably emotional. For smaller linguistic groups like the Biante and Mikir, the feeling is one of unfair suppression in which the local politics of language has indeed left them far behind. The felt gap in their consciousness is visible in the struggle that they try, to borrow the Khasi term, to keep the ringleader of their community alive through a fraternity of language enthusiasts.

The internal dynamic of language binds them to common practices, common habits, common goals and a common sense of being disempowered and hence a discrediting sense of insecurity with which they are still contending. It is true that language engagement through the digital has increased the profile of the larger group of smaller languages like the Khasis and Mizos. But to stem the tide against other smaller languages requires the combined effort of the community itself working from within, but oftentimes with much needed help from external agencies.

The paradox in this situation lies in the double-edged awareness that the post-colonial has inducted into its worldview: awareness but also helplessness at the enormity of depletion; combined with a newly acquired orientation towards a more efficient future that is scientific and rational with its own call for an alien, global language. The choice for language conservation is in the hands of each one of these communities. But it is at this point that the intervention of an external agency is required to make communities aware of themselves as they should be. Machine translation

and apps are facilitating agencies that have, however, only been able to keep some aspects of language in circulation, but what we need to understand and cater for are communities in transition, trying to catch up with the rest of the world.

When the colonial takeover occurred, almost everything was overturned with vulnerabilities being exploited and cultures dismissed. The very essence of language is linked to culture. And when culture dies language dies. Does language then have to be taught again to its people as has happened in some regions of the world, and that too in a cultural void? If documented virtually, does it have a chance of proper survival or growth? The threat of loss is here to stay and communities must fight back as indeed they are trying to, with every inch of themselves.

The ways by which technology can step in is made complex by the sheer smallness of such communities which will make such endeavours unprofitable. The printed medium has provided worthy solutions in the form of standard dictionaries and grammar books, translations and histories etc. The digital medium has also provided justifiable assistance. But in many regions where communication is problematic, language libraries maybe set up and a network of such institutions established. The idea of the living, talking museum could be central to this network and centres be established for the study of language in which may be nurtured a community of individuals, devising holistic strategies for the conservation not only of a single language but languages that are found to be interrelated to one another.

Community involvement in conservation efforts have always had positive results in the realm of ecology. Language conservationists will need

to play a similar, interactive role. Possibilities of working together with this other group of conservationists would surely create an unenviable reserve of local language and native knowledge that would then require the biologist/ the local healer for aid to reinvoke, in order to recall the indigenous complex of the plant world. Where the digital has worked via innumerable devices to collect and process data and freeze it in virtual space, the centres/libraries/ living museums/hotspots of language learning would provide key access to the life of a language through living, learning, teaching and trained individuals that would utilize the digital to reinvigorate language.

A team of collaborators working together would attract more innovative ways of handling language loss, for as far as the situation in North East India stands, languages cross each other at odd points through stories and narratives that change form and content as they pass from one community to another. This trajectory forged in language cannot merely be handled by the methodologies of the digital alone. It requires the intervention of human intelligence to assess losses, refresh language within a web of relatable knowledge systems; for, although the new model cannot revive old systems in entirety, it can at least place the languages of this region within grasp of each other so that they do not become frozen in unused space.

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Preserving linguistic diversity

SHOBHANA CHELLIAH

THE linguistic diversity of India is one of its crowning glories. We face a challenge in preserving this diversity because the languages in the four core language families, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic, are not equally resourced. Most widely resourced are English, Sanskrit, and the 22 languages on the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

But, from here, there is a steep downward drop in resources for the dialects of scheduled languages, non-scheduled languages, their dialects, and the hundreds of languages that have less than 10,000 speakers. For these languages, there may be little in print, no newspapers or journals, little to nothing taught at schools or studied at universities in or about the language, and only the lightest digital footprint if any. And indeed, many of these languages lack a writing system. Languages that are low-resourced are in danger of lowered vitality and eventual loss.

Only a small percentage of the approximately 6000 languages of the world have entered the digital world and are used in multiple domains of interaction: in the family, in school, at

work, and so on. Hundreds of other languages are being lost as transmission from elders to children is disrupted through the break of traditional societal structures. This disruption comes in many guises, including migration for economic reasons. Think of speakers of Sora from Odisha moving to Delhi to find work – children of the second and third generation diaspora community may speak some Sora, but most likely will have lost the language associated with rituals and feasts, since traditional rituals and feasts are most likely eschewed in Delhi as children assimilate to Delhi culture, Delhi language, and Delhi ways of being.

Languages can stop being spoken in situ as well, as elders encourage their children to use a majority language because of its higher prestige and as a pathway to economic security. We need only to look at the thousands of English language shops in Delhi to see the power of language prestige.

When a low-resource language is no longer spoken, because there is little recorded about the language in audio, video, or text, that language can be silenced forever. A question we may well ask is, so what? Why is it of

interest that less than 5% of India's languages are well resourced? The answer to this question goes to the heart of a new subdiscipline of linguistics called Documentary Linguistics. Documentary linguists take up the challenge of preserving linguistic diversity, working side by side with language communities to stem the tide of language loss. These language documenters recognize the urgency in preserving language information because it holds irreplaceable knowledge including information on cultural practices, community history, weather patterns, flora and fauna, and linguistic complexity.

When a language is lost, the connection of communities with their past histories and culture is broken. It appears that such connections are needed for the mental health and societal well-being of the community, especially for the young. In fact, it has been observed that preserving and celebrating mother tongues can bring healing and renewed confidence. Linguists find that language information from smaller languages is often needed to build an accurate picture of language pre-history and development. As well, the structures of smaller languages can be novel and complex, and can add to our theories of the possibilities and limits of human language. Finally, the information embodied in languages spoken by communities with close connections to the land, have a wealth of information about the land and environmentalists and agriculturalists are now seeing the value of partnering with indigenous communities to better understand the environment, weather, and land.

Documentary linguists and, increasingly, as I discuss below, community language documenters, use technologies and traditional linguistic analytics to create preservable audio

and video recordings, transcriptions, and translations of language samples. In doing so, they create a record of languages that can be easily accessed and used for language learning, culture and language dissemination, linguistics, and other sciences. Access is made possible through archiving in open-access language archives with high-quality metadata. The documentary linguist does not produce materials for consumption by just linguists. Rather, the products of language documentation are meant to have broad and meaningful societal impact.

I now turn to the specifics of language documentation in India. The first thing to note is that the urgency and desire to document under resourced languages come from communities of language users themselves. As I detail in *Why Language Documentation Matters* (Springer 2021), many community documenters are linguists, but many are not. Let me highlight a few cases here to provide the reader with knowledge that language preservation and revitalization in India is a movement with momentum and not an occasional activity.

Mosyel Syelsaangthyel Khaling from the Uipo (Khoibu) tribe of Manipur has worked since the age of 17 to collect the remembrances of Uipo elders—to record Uipo traditional stories and other speech events. Khaling is currently a student of linguistics and supports younger Uipo scholars, who are studying linguistics so they can create documentation of Uipo. Consider also Chikari Tisso, who is a speaker of Karbi which is spoken in Assam, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh. Tisso has published books and articles in and about Karbi and created audio and video documentation recordings of speech events for Karbi, many of which have been transcribed and archived.¹ Tisso has worked with

linguists to create a grammar of Karbi and is now compiling Karbi songs and lullabies. The items collected by Khaling and Tisso are of great value in unpacking the linguistic structure of Uipo and Karbi. Each additional speech sample adds to the picture of the sound system (phonology) word structure (morphology), sentence structure (syntax) and word meaning (semantics). Each time we learn more about these languages, we can confirm our theories of how languages work or of how we must revise these theories. There would be no progress in language science without the additional language samples from languages like Uipo and Karbi. No language is so small that it cannot have an impact on language science.

Sometimes, in our pride of status, we ignore the complexity that resides in languages spoken by smaller groups. For example, the way that verbs are conjugated in Lamkang, a language of the South Central subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family spoken by somewhere between 5 and 10 thousand speakers in the Chandel district of Manipur state. It took me and my team several years to unpack the Lamkang verb to discover how speakers indicate who did what to whom. It is done using prefixes and suffixes which pattern differently depending on if the situation being talked about is in the past or future. In fact, the very shape of the verb stem must be changed if the event is in the past or future (think of English 'be' versus 'is'). These and other facts about Lamkang can be found in the journal *Himalayan Linguistics*.

In addition to community language documenters, we have several

1. Karbi Language Resource on the Computational Resource of South Asian Languages Archive: <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1781683/>

high profile linguists and interested academics engaged in language documentation. Ganesh Devi, for example, has been the conceptual and practical lead for the People's Linguistic Survey of India which is organized under the nonprofit Bhasha Research and Publication Centre. Devi worked with 3500 volunteers (linguists, historians, native speakers, speakers of related languages) to collect information on languages state by state. Kavita Rastogi founded the Society for Endangered and Lesser-known Languages to revitalize endangered languages by encouraging language documentation through the creation of grammars and dictionaries and material for teaching the language in formal and informal classroom settings. The society also works to build capacity for language documentation through training workshops.

Finally, we point to the work of field linguistics, such as Anvita Abbi who has, along with her students, created substantial descriptions of language samples, dictionaries, and teaching materials for many languages of India.

There also exists support from the Indian government for the documentation of less-resourced languages. For example, a Centre for Oral and Tribal Literature was recently added to the Sahitya Akademi organization. The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) has sponsored Language Documentation and Archiving workshops. The Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner under their Language Division oversees the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) to create databases of demographic and linguistic information on languages. The Ministry of Human Resource Development funded the scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages

(SPPEL). The University Grants Commission funded centres for endangered languages at major universities such as Tezpur University in Assam, and University of Hyderabad in Telangana.

So, there is plenty of goodwill, interest, and even money supporting the preservation of linguistic diversity in India. To truly move the dial from interest to action and sustainable results, language documenters are supplementing traditional pen and paper records of how a language sounds, what words are in the language, and how people talk to each other with audio and video recordings. These audio and video recordings provide primary data for further analysis such as instrumental acoustic analysis. Audio and video also allow for an exponential increase in the quality and quantity of language samples used for language analysis, and this has made language documentation of interest to computational linguists interested in machine learning with smaller datasets. Digital language collections are also of interest to information professionals as they explore best practices for organizing digital files in digital language archives.

Digital language data is needed for maximum social impact of language documentation. Why? Because languages with a digital footprint have a higher chance of survival than languages with no digital presence. When only a few speakers remain and memories of words and languages are low, speakers can reclaim and revitalize languages from digital sources. Digital language data is needed for improved linguistic analysis. Why? Because digital data allows for a deep dive into structure including instrumental analysis and creating testable and falsifiable analyses.

So, this is the aspirational goal for language documentation in India:

to make the curation of digital language data a habit, and open access archives a reality. We already see some success in this area with the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayas Endangered Languages Archive (SiDELHA), the first open access language archive in India using international archiving standards.² UNESCO has affirmed 2019 the start of an international decade of Indigenous languages and, by doing so, has renewed a long-standing clarion call that language rights are a core aspect of human rights. As we continue to respect and affirm the human rights of all populations in India, we create pathways for language preservation that respect links to tradition, family, land, and ways of being. It is a curious juxtaposition, but so accurate, that to access tradition, we must rely on technology.

Let me end this essay with an observation. It seems to me that the road to preserving linguistic diversity in India cannot be from a top-down perspective. There are simply too many languages and too many disparate ecologies of language use for one methodology and one set of scientists to effectively gather language samples.

There is a groundswell of interest from young speakers of indigenous languages who are seeking training to document their languages. With appropriate capacity building, respecting individual students' ambitions to be successful linguists, information technologists, and computational linguists, we can work with India's upcoming students to document many of these languages. The approach would result in a win-win: language documentation created by speakers, for speakers, and a generation of linguistic experts creating digital records of the languages we so collectively treasure.

2. <http://14.139.206.50:8080/jspui/handle/1/6541>

Maithili in the digital space

MITHILESH KUMAR JHA

THE digital world presents a unique challenge to languages like Maithili. In India, the digital presence of many well established and recognized modern Indian languages has been minimum. They encounter a stiff challenge from ‘global’ English. Since the ICT (information and communications technology) revolutions in India, a massive shift has taken place from the ‘native’ and mother tongues to a slightly standard, hence prestigious, ‘national’ and ‘international’ or ‘global’ language. This poses a serious threat to India’s linguistic diversity. In contrast to widely held beliefs, the digital space reinforces the practices of domination and subordination that exist in the ‘real world’ of languages. One could even argue that the digital world accelerates the processes of domination and homogenization. If unchecked, it could pose a serious existential threat to the minor languages.

Maithili has a rich literary tradition. However, its modern trajectories have been a chequered one. The previous century and a half have seen Maithili struggle for recognition as an independent modern Indian language.¹ Thus, the question of modern Maithili is intertwined with the question of

1. Paul Brass, *Language, Politics, and Religion in North India*. Cambridge University Press, 1974; Mithilesh Kumar Jha, *Language Politics and Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

identity and struggle for its recognition. Literary pursuits in Maithili, therefore, become, at the same time, a conscious political act. The publication of novels, magazines, newspapers, and other forms of literary pursuits have become markers of defiance against the classification of Maithili as a ‘dialect’ of Hindi.²

Although Maithili has achieved ‘official’ status and recognition as an independent language, in popular discourse it is still considered a ‘dialect’ or ‘variety’ of Hindi. It is not used as the medium of instruction in primary schools despite repeated demands from its speakers. Caste, class, and intra-regional biases further obstruct its growth. There is a little scope that the digital space will empower Maithili enough to overcome these formidable challenges. However, the way forward for languages like Maithili is not to shun the digital world but to engage with it creatively and actively. Like in the real world, success in the digital world will depend on its speakers’ endeavours.

Maithili, an Indo-Aryan language, has its script – *Mithilakshar* or *Tirhutta*.³ It is also written in

2. Interestingly in North India, there are 48 languages recognized in the Census as ‘varieties’ of Hindi. See, Anvita Abbi, ‘Vanishing Diversities and Submerging Identities: An Indian Case’, in Asha Sarangi (ed.), *Language and Politics in India*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kaithi, Newari, and Devanagari. However, since the early decades of the 20th century, Devanagari is predominantly used even though there has been a relentless demand for the revival of Mithilakshar. Maithili is one of the twenty-two scheduled languages recognized by the Indian Constitution. It is spoken in North Bihar (in India) and the Terai region in Nepal. In Nepal, it is the second most widely spoken language after Nepali and recognized as its second official language. However, there has been a long and hard battle for Maithili's recognition as an independent language in India. According to the Government of India's Census report, 2011, it has more than 13.58 million speakers.⁴ Maithili faces many challenges despite being recognized by the PEN (1948), Sahitya Akademy (1965), and in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution (2004). It is not yet recognized as an official language in Bihar, although the neighbouring state of Jharkhand recognized it in 2017.

Maithili, in comparison to other North Indian languages, is distinct. Its first prose, *Varnaratnakar*,⁵ was written in the 14th century by Jyotirishwar

3. As a script it is much closer to Bengali and Assamese. See, Anshuman Pandey, *Request to Allocate the Maithili Script in the Unicode Roadmap*, 2011, Available on <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/286729526.pdf> Accessed on 27 March 2021.

4. However, there are dispute about the total number of Maithili speakers. There are many estimates that put this number as 47 millions (https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Talk:Maithili_language#/Actual_Number_of_Speakers Accessed on 7 April 2021); whereas other estimates put this number as 34 millions (<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/mai>. Ritu Nidhi and Tanya Singh. *SMT Algorithms for Indian Languages – A Case Study of Moses and MTHub for English-Maithili Language Pair*, in P.K. Singh et. al. (eds.), Proceedings of ICETIT 2019, LNEE, Springer, 2020); still other keep this number as 35.5 million speakers; see Anshuman Pandey, *Request to Allocate the Maithili Script in*

Thakur (1294-1348). This text describes the society, culture, politics, flora, and fauna of Mithila. Vidyapati (1350-1448) is Maithili's most illustrious poet. His influence could also be traced to modern Bengal, Orissa, and Assam. Rabindranath Tagore started his literary pursuits by imitating Vidyapati's style.⁶ Vidyapati's songs are so deeply embedded in the lives of Maithils that they survived orally for more than five centuries before its compilation in the 19th and early 20th century.

Since Vidyapati, there have been uninterrupted literary productions in Maithili. In modern times, G.A. Grierson's (1851-1941), *Maithili Chrestomathy and Grammar*, Chanda Jha (1831-1907), particularly his *Nachari* and *Maheshwani*, Babu Bholalal Das (1897-1977), Bhuvaneswar Singh 'Bhuvan' (1907-1944), Harimohan Jha (1908-1984), Baidyanath Mishra 'Yatri' aka 'Nagarjun' (1911-1998), Kashikant Mishra 'Madhup' (1906-1987), Surendra Jha 'Suman' (1910-2002), Ramanath Jha (1906-1971), Mayanand Mishra (1934-2013), Kanchinath Jha 'Kiran' (1906-1988), Lily Ray (b.1933), besides many others, have immensely contributed to the growth of Maithili language and literature.

Maithili and Hindi share a love-hate relationship. *Maithili Hit Sadhan* (1905), *Mithila Moda* (1906), and *Mithila Mihir* (1908) also carried articles and columns in Hindi. A special issue of *Mithila Mihir's Mithilank* (1936), edited by Surendranath Jha 'Suman', discusses this inter-

the Unicode Roadmap, 2011. Available on <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/286729526.pdf> Accessed on 27 March 2021.

5. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Babuaji Jha 'Agyat', *Varna-Ratnakar of Jyotirishvara Kavisekharacharya*. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1998.

6. Tagore's *Bhanusingher Padavali* is a testimony to Vidyapati's influence on Tagore.

relationship threadbare. The book *Vidyapati Deshmei* published in the 1950s reassess these antagonisms.

It was when Maithili was classified as a 'variety' or 'dialect' of Hindi that Maithili speakers fiercely opposed it. Hindi, however, is regarded as a language of opportunity and *status*. In comparison to Maithili, Hindi magazines and newspapers have a larger circulation. Still, people in the region are conscious of and vocal about Maithili's distinct status. They fiercely oppose attempts to appropriate Maithili literary figures or their works.

As mentioned above, Maithili has its own script – Mithilakshar or Tirhuta. It is similar to Bengali and Assamese. These languages are considered sister languages having a common origin. However, due to the unavailability of print technology in Maithili, Maithils adopted Devanagari script in the early decades of the 20th century. Later, a Maithili font was created using Bangla's font. However, these and several other attempts to revive Mithilakshar or Tirhuta have by and large failed.

According to Devnarayan Yadav, former director of the Mithila Sanskrit Research Institute, Darbhanga, more than twelve thousand Sanskrit manuscripts in the Mithila region are available in Mithilakshar.⁷ It shows that Mithilakshar was widely used and popular earlier. Mithilakshar is still in use on ceremonious occasions and symbolically on public platforms such as railway stations and other public institutions in Mithila. However, in print it is highly unlikely that it would replace Devanagari.

Digitalization holds a great promise of reviving and promoting

7. <https://www.jagran.com/bihar/darbhanga-language-speaking-and-script-writing-will-develop-21454191.html> Accessed on 7 April 2021.

Mithilakshar. Microsoft and other tech agencies are involved in preserving and promoting the world's languages and their scripts. In this direction, a Unicode for the Maithili font has been created and approved.⁸ It has solved the discrepancies associated with various available Maithili fonts. One had to install the specific font of a document one wanted to read/print. Unicode has solved that problem.

The Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC), Pune, Government of India, also developed software for a Maithili font in 2014. It is based on Unicode. The Centre regularly updates this font. There have been similar attempts in Nepal and India to develop and popularize Maithili fonts. Many of them claim to have developed Maithili fonts in 2003 and 2004.⁹ A committee was recently set up by the GOI¹⁰ for the preservation and promotion of Mithilakshar. Several online groups, particularly on social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other web-portals,¹¹ are promoting Mithilakshar. Their activities have grown manifold since 2015. Online classes and workshops are regularly held. There has indeed been a phenomenal rise of language enthusiasts in recent decades promoting Mithilakshar. Still, Devanagari is widely used in Maithili publications.

Maithili's digital presence started in the early 2000s and has proliferated since 2010. In proportion to the number of speakers, it now has a sizeable dig-

8. Anshuman Pandey, *Request to Allocate the Maithili Script in the Unicode Roadmap*, 2011. Available on <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/286729526.pdf> Accessed on 27 March 2021.

9. For instance, Vinay Jha's *1 Dev Mithila* (2004); C.K. Raut's *Tirhuta Lipi* (2003); Gangesh Gunjan Jha and Sravin Kumar Mishra's *Maithili* (2004) and so on. For details see, Ashish Anchinhar's *Maithili Web Patrakaritik Itihas*, available on <https://sites.google.com/a/vidaha.com/vidaha-pothi/> accessed on 28 March 2021.

ital presence in all formats and on all platforms – audio-video, journals, magazines, newspapers, discussion forums, apps, fonts, and software. The digital space does provide a wider online base for Maithili writers, intellectuals, speakers, and language enthusiasts. Maithili's first digital presence was the blog, *Bhalsarik Gachh*, in 2000 on Yahoo Geo Cities by Gajendra Thakur.¹² Now there are innumerable blogs, groups, and online news/magazine portals. A few prominent and active among them are – *Videha*, *Katek Ras Baat*, *Mithimedia*, *E-Mithila*, *Maithili Jindabad*, *Mithila Mihir*, *Hello Mithila*, *Esamad*, *Mithila Samad*, *Maithili Times*, *Anchinharakhar*, *Samachar Mithila*, *Mailorang*, *Mithila Mirror*, *Mithila Live*, *Mithiladarshan News*. They have also bridged the divide between the Maithili diaspora and Maithils living in the Maithili-speaking region. In other words, the digital space has brought Maithili speakers, writers, intellectuals, artists together.

Mobile internet has truly democratized the digital space. In Maithili, too, many speakers are connected to the digital world through mobile phones. WhatsApp has become a major source of content creation in Maithili. Vinay Jha is attributed to having cre-

10. The MHRD, GOI set up this committee for the promotion and protection of Maithili Language and its Scripts in 2018. It also invite the committee's recommendation for establishing a Script and Manuscript Centre at Darbhanga. For details visit <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=188375> Accessed on 28 March 2021.

11. Such as *Mithilakshar Saksharta Abhiyan*, *Mithilakshar Siksha Abhiyan*, *Durvaksata*, and so on.

12. Ashish Anchinhar, *Maithili Web Patrakaritik Itihas*; Gajendra Thakur, 'Antarjaal aa Maithili', *Antika*, Oct-Dec 2009-Jan-Mar 2010, p. 6. After its closure due to discontinuation of Yahoo Geo Cities this webpage is now available on <http://www.vidaha.com/2004/07/bhalsarik-gachh.html>

ated a font for Mithiakshar typing on mobile phones in 2019.¹³ WhatsApp and other apps related to Maithili have truly revolutionized the modes of communication. The first app related to Maithili was created in 2013.¹⁴ There are now more than a hundred apps, with a few having more than fifty thousand downloads.

The Maithili Machan and Madhubani Literature Festival,¹⁵ started by Savita Jha Khan, have creatively used the digital space to bring various facets of Maithili language, culture, and tradition to one platform. In the last few years, it has done a commendable job in promoting Maithili literature in and beyond Mithila's border. Maithili Machan also hosts a book exhibition at the annual Delhi International Book Fair and provides a platform to Maithili authors and writers, experts, and intellectuals to discuss the challenges facing the language. They regularly host online talks and panel discussions. They now have dedicated YouTube channels, websites, and social media pages to showcase their events and achievements.

In a very short period, by a skilful combination of online and offline modes of organizing events, Mithila Machan and Madhubani Literature Festival have done a commendable job in promoting Maithili language and literature.

The Maithili Patrakar Group is an apex organization of journalists from the Maithili speaking regions in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Nepal.¹⁶ They are committed to the betterment of the region by highlighting issues ignored

13. Ashish Anchinhar, *Maithili Web Patrakaritik Itihas*.

14. Ibid.

15. In 2021, MLF organize its fourth edition in Darbhanga.

16. <http://www.dezbridge.com/clients/mithila/index.html>, Accessed on March 25, 2021, 5 pm.

or sidelined by the governments and mainstream media. They organize a Mithila Mahotsav in the Press Club of India, Delhi, to highlight the rich tradition and culture of Mithila. However, they are hardly active, and their website provides few details except for the Mithila Mahotsav.

Videha is the first Maithili fortnightly e-journal published under the able editorship of Gajendra Thakur. Unlike many other Maithili web portals and e-magazines, *Videha* has attained a milestone by consistently publishing its issues since its inception in Jan 2008. The 318th issue of *Videha* was published on March 15, 2021.¹⁷ Gajendra Thakur started one of the first acclaimed Maithili blogs, *Bhalsarik Gachh*.¹⁸ He also played a critical role in providing digital content for the opening of Maithili Wikipedia in 2014.¹⁹ In this endeavour, many groups and individuals from Nepal have also played a vital role.²⁰ Maithili Wikipedia has close to ten thousand user accounts and more than thirteen thousand articles as of March 2021.

Videha provides an excellent platform to new and emerging Maithili writers, the most notable among them are Jagadish Prasad Mandal, Rajdeo Mandal, Umesh Paswan, Munnaji, Ashish Anchinhar, Chandan Kumar Jha, among others. It has created a vast

17. <http://www.videha.co.in/> Accessed on 27 March 2021 at 11 am.

18. Gajendra Thakur, 'Antarjaal aa Maithili', *Antika*, Oct-Dec 2009-Jan-Mar 2010, p. 6.

19. Ashish Anchinhar, *Maithili Web Patrakaritik Itihas*, in developing the web contents of Maithili Wikipedia, Umesh Mandal's contribution is immense. He, according to Ashish Anchinhar, has developed more than 70% of Maithili Wikipedia's web content. *Videha* too played a crucial role in this endeavour between 2008-13.

20. <https://glocalkhabar.com/wikipedia-maithili-language-approved/> Accessed on 28 March 2021, 10 am

archive of important works – past and contemporary – in Maithili. They are freely available for download in pdf format. *Videha* also provides links to various important portals associated with Mithila and Maithili.

Another significant contribution of *Videha* is to archive every community's songs, culture, and literary traditions. In that, it has systematically countered the usurpation of Maithili and its 'legitimate' representation by a few dominant castes in Mithila. *Videha* has done a yeoman service in the preservation and promotion Mithilakshar. All its fortnightly journals are available in Mithilakshar, besides Devanagari and Braille. Many books are also available in Mithilakshar. *Mithila Darshan*, *Mithila Darpan*, *Ghar Bahar*, and many other print magazines and periodicals are also using online platforms, particularly social media, to reach a wider audience.

Since 2013, *Mithila Mirror* has contributed immensely to Maithili's professional journalism. Its founder, Lalit Narayan Jha, has played a critical role in showcasing Maithili language, literature, and culture. He now has a YouTube channel – *Mithila Mirror*. Its coverage of the last flood and other social-political issues affecting Mithila have been widely appreciated. This channel has more than 123 thousand subscribers, and many of its videos have more than a million views.

Rajni Pallavi's YouTube channel (since 2008) has been a milestone in showcasing the rich heritage of Maithili songs. Similarly, Ganga Maithili's, Neelam Maithili's, Mithila Darshan's, Mithila Machan's, and Pravesh Mallick's YouTube channels have attracted millions of Maithili's speakers. Audio-video songs of celebrated singers like Harinath Jha, Kunj Bihari Mishra, Rambabu Jha, Sunil Jha

'Pawan' available on YouTube have reinvented their image among the millennials. It has reignited their love for the language and culture. Similarly, short films, videos, and songs on Chhath, Holi, Durga Puja attract wider acclamation for singers like Vikash Jha, Madhav Rai, Kanti Prakash Jha, and other cine stars.

Maithili Thakur is a sensation in today's Maithili-speaking region and beyond. Shloka's versatility has a different appeal, particularly to youngsters. Their phenomenal success in recent years is also due to their digital presence and instant access for millions of viewers. Maithili Thakur has contributed to more than one genre of Maithili songs. She also sings in other Indian languages. Shloka's rap songs enthrall the audience far and wide. They have created a new audience for Maithili songs. So has the classical singing of the Mallick Brothers (Prashant and Nishant Mallick). They have revived the Dhrupads of Darbhanga Gharana. YouTube videos of these stars have attracted many viewers. They have become great ambassadors of Maithili language and literature in the digital space.

Maithili cinema's growth has been rather slow. The first feature film in Maithili was *Mamta Gabay Geet* (made in 1962-63 but released only in 1981). Another film, *Kanyadan*, was made and released in 1965. In recent years there has been a growing interest in Maithili movies even among non-Maithili speakers. Many movies are now released or streamed on over-the-top (OTT) platforms. The Chandra siblings – Nitin and Nitu Chandra – and theirs www.bejod.in have produced many films in Maithili. Their most notable and critically acclaimed feature film, *Mithila Makhan* (2020), won a national award for the best movie in the language.

Similarly, *Gaamak Ghar* (2019) by Achal Mishra, has heralded a new era in Maithili cinema. It is centred around a house and narrates the story of a changing middle class household and their longing for relationships, society, and village life. It received critical acclaim during the MAMI (Mumbai Academy of Moving Images) Film Festival, 2019. It was streamed on the MUBI platform in 2020 for the general public and received much appreciation. *Gaamak Ghar* has won many national and international awards. It has taken Maithili cinema to the world stage.

The digital space, particularly social media, has turned out to be an effective medium for mobilizing public opinion. Maithili speakers have used it to their advantage to put pressure on the authorities to meet their demands. In recent decades, the rise of the Mithila Student Union has been phenomenal. It has played a major role in mobilizing public opinions on many issues concerning Mithila and Maithili. It has led and run many successful campaigns, among others for quality higher education, controlling floods, establishing an airport and the construction of an AIIMS in Darbhanga.

The digital platform has undoubtedly broadened the limited space available in print for Maithili. It has led to the rise of a new set of writers and audiences. The communication between the two is direct and instant. It has democratized the literary space in many ways. However, it has its own set of limitations. First, there is little or no editorial control over the contents available in digital Maithili. Second, there is an imminent danger of hybridization. The unchecked use of words and literary styles of other languages, often at the cost of available words in Maithili, could pose a serious challenge to the growth of the language.

Besides, there are several challenges facing digital Maithili which are similar to print Maithili. First, many of these web portals are irregular or inactive. Second, they are individual centric, reinforcing divisions and hierarchies of the social world in the digital space. It has often led to institutional and group rivalries. It is hard to bridge the existing gaps of caste, class, region, and gender. Third, like in the print era, the common Maithili speaker is indifferent to the web portals. Language enthusiasts and literary productions have increased manifolds in the previous two decades. However, Maithili's success in countering the predominance of Hindi and the growing aspiration for 'global' English, has been rather limited.

The success of digital Maithili is that it has brought the Maithili diaspora emotionally and psychologically together. It has played a significant role in the digital presence of Maithili. This attitude for the preservation, promotion, and circulation of Maithili literature is like their attitude towards the publication of Maithili journals and magazines in the early decades of the 20th century. However, how successful digitization will be in 'connecting' the diaspora or 'revisiting' their Maithili roots is debatable.

In the digital world, languages like Maithili exist and will continue to exist as they do in the real world. They have made their presence felt. However, they are likely to exist only at the margins for the larger world and may remain as 'invisible' as before. It does not mean that they should leave this space. They must engage and expand their digital presence. However, their success will depend largely on how active their speakers are. Digital platforms and technology alone can neither guarantee their preservation nor growth.

The sixth eco-zone: Tamil in the digital age

V. GEETHA

FOR over a century and more, Tamil speakers, users and enthusiasts have staked claims to their language as being as important, classical and singular as any of the world languages that were upheld as worthy bearers of culture in the mid-19th century and after. With the progress of Indian nationalism, as language and marker of cultural and civilizational difference, Tamil was counter posed to Hindi, which was viewed by a range of political actors from the right to the left as a unifying lingua franca for the nation-to-be. Even as they opposed the imposition of Hindi, the Non-brahmin and anti-caste movements in the Madras Province called for greater literacy in English, which, they claimed, was a more useful and viable national language.

Meanwhile, the use of Tamil in all aspects of communication, from the political to the scientific was proclaimed to be central to a politics that was equally committed to equality and social justice and in that sense considered itself the obverse of 'Hindu-

Hindi-India'. Tamil thus became the very form of the modern-secular, never mind that its claims to being so, rested on its antique past. As reinvented tradition, this latter was made to cohere with the demands of the present.

I argue in this essay that these historical and political claims continue to haunt, in one way or another, Tamil digital worlds.

Those familiar with Tamil history know that ancient Tamil poetry conceived of the world as comprising five eco-zones, with each defined in terms of the interrelationship between landscape and people, between specific geographies and the human acts of living, labouring and loving that unfolded in them. When Tamil speakers took to the digital universe with enthusiasm from the late 1990s, one enterprising digital publisher from Chennai named the portal that he set up 'Aaraam Thinnai' or the sixth eco-zone: rendering it a crucial aspect of Tamil life-worlds, even while signalling its evident newness. This gesture,

of aligning the present, however different, to a past that was apposite to the moment at hand, would be repeated in any number of digital instances.

The Tamil digital universe owes its existence to four intersecting spaces: of the global Tamil scholarly world, both academic and non-academic; the techno-eutopic landscapes imagined by the Tamils of Malaysia and Singapore; the diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil universe; and finally, the realms of popular communication in Tamil Nadu, including of contemporary social media.

In the 1990s, these worlds came together, and on account of developments in Tamil computing. This latter had its beginnings in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and soon enough there was considerable interest and investment in creating viable word processing modules, computer typefaces and solutions that would allow for an easy use of the Tamil language on the internet. Tamil language teachers in departments attached to universities in Europe and North America, amateur computer enthusiasts across the Tamil speaking world, and technologically proficient Tamils from Malaysia and Singapore helped to leverage a presence for Tamil on to the worldwide web by the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, the government of Tamil Nadu also expressed interest in developing Tamil digital technology and this provided a context for assessing existing initiatives and exploring others.

There were parallel developments with regard to content. Electronic archiving of Tamil literature and circulation of select Tamil e-texts on the internet began in the 1980s. These efforts gathered apace in the years that followed, and resulted in the launching of Project Madurai in 1998. Self-consciously modelled on the practices of those who collated palm-

leaf manuscripts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and pioneered the publication of the corpus of texts known to the world as Sangam and post-Sangam literature, this initiative, undertaken by Tamil scholars and enthusiasts across the world, set the tone for subsequent archiving efforts.

Archiving acquired a political turn, as Sri Lankan Tamils sought to create digital repositories for Tamil texts from the island. Interestingly, in both Singapore and Malaysia, the state encouraged archiving efforts, viewing these as essential acts for the preservation of uniquely Tamil-Malaysian and Tamil-Singaporean histories and heritage.¹

From 1966 onwards, World Tamil Conferences have been held at regular intervals and these helped take forward a sense of global Tamil citizenship, and in the event, provided the ideological and cultural modalities that rendered the language 'world historical'. Scholars such as Father Xavier Thaninayagam from Sri Lanka provided the ideological and cultural heft and labour to these efforts, which resulted in the making of a sensibility, at once particular and expansive, rooted in discussions to do with origins, identity and cultural endurance, and yet looking to a future where Tamils across the world might reimagine and renew their civilizational memory.

The other history that is germane to our discussion has to do with the Tamils' struggle for national self-determination in Sri Lanka. Among other things, this led to a prolonged civil war (from the 1970s), and made for a large number of Tamils fleeing the island. After the initial trauma of

1. This short history of Tamil computing is drawn from diverse sources. See, in this context, <https://www.projectmadurai.org/faq.html#1.1>; <https://cutt.ly/Vbyz4ym> (accessed on 17 April 2021).

exile and resettlement, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora devised several channels for cultural contact between dispersed populations. Shaped by intra-Tamil tensions and restiveness this emergent Tamil universe whose coordinates were everywhere but which had no physical location, viewed the digital world as a space to voice its political and nationalist concerns.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who had emerged as the most visible and triumphant face of the Tamil resistance, came to command an authoritative presence in this context, and anchored their vision of the Tamil nation-to-be in a range of coercive and communicative practices. The latter proved far-reaching, and eventually comprised forays into radio, television, and the digital world. An eponymous site, tamilnation.org, was the most fitful expression of this last endeavour (copyrighted in 1998) that looked to the future, but in ways that linked the present to the certitudes of antique and medieval Tamil history. In its heyday, the site ran into thousands of web-pages, and was nothing short of a compendious discursive universe, a miniature Wikipedia for all things Tamil. It won several awards for its many features, and while it suffered a temporary disappearance with the brutal end to the civil war, has been restored to the internet, where it now exists as its own archive.

A parallel but essentially different effort at working with digital space unfolded in Sri Lanka, a few years hence, in 2005, with a group of young Tamils setting up an archive of texts having to do with Sri Lankan Tamil history and culture. Noolaham (library), as it is called was conceived of as a poignant tribute and memorial to the great Tamil Library in Jaffna that was burned down in 1981. Equally Noolaham imaged itself as a reposit-

tory that sought to collect and keep safe Tamil texts, magazines and sundry publications (noolaham.org.).

Given the multiple times that Tamils in the north and east of Sri Lanka had to move, and the many times that their homes and possessions, including books, were destroyed, this effort sought to keep alive a tradition of scholarship and publishing, even as war and dispossession threatened to destroy the fragile yet consequential world of Tamil print. Over time this archive has grown in significance, and currently it views its mission as also accounting for the diversity of voices in the Sri Lankan Tamil context, including of Muslims, women, the indigenous Veddas and the Plantation Tamils (migrant workers from India, who came over in the early and late colonial periods).²

Around this time (in 1999) the Tamil Nadu government set up the Tamil Virtual University (now known as the Tamil Virtual Academy), and which has since undertaken a slew of tasks, including familiarizing Tamil speakers and users with Tamil software and related technical know-how, providing ways and means to expand the Tamil language's presence on the internet, and setting up a Tamil digital library, comprising texts from the past and present, for which copyright clearances have been obtained. The Academy is self-consciously global in its orientation, and asserts the importance of ensuring that Tamil lives on in the digital age, even as its long history is preserved for future generations, not only in Tamil Nadu, but as the Academy's website has it, in the forty countries where Tamil is spoken and used in a daily sense.³

Meanwhile, in Tamil Nadu by the early 2000s, Tamil blogs and sites had

begun to emerge, and in the first decade of the 20th century, the worlds of popular print media were reborn in digital space. Since the last decade, there has been an explosion of plebian presence in digital space: demotic political and social wisdom, everyday self-making that is at once ingenious and ironic, and remixes of popular cultural expressions that possess transgressive aspects, as also more routinized engagements with the world of film and television. Caste and religious partisanship is also evidently present, even as it is called out by bahun and dalit counter-publics, which propel forth their visions of history, the present and hopes for the future.

Increasingly, queer voices and sites, and a range of feminist expressions are beginning to be heard as well. All of these have made for a distinctive and contentious politics, lively, acrimonious and at times self-obsessed – and shaped as much by the inexorable algorithmic logic of social media, as by ideological disputation.

In all this, Tamil in the digital age continues to bear the marks of an older history, of a moment, which enabled us take to science and rationality, democracy and the republic, even as we sought to become a modern people, in and through an affective relationship to language and culture. On the one hand, E. V. Ramasamy Periyar and others in the Self-respect movement looked to replace affective cultural ties, with rational, just ones and it is not accidental that some amongst them advocated that Tamil ought perhaps be written in the roman script (they were fascinated by Kemal Ataturk's language reform policies).

On the other hand, as this politics that valued social justice sought to

take on the verities of Indian nationalism and the hegemony of the 'brahmin-bania', identified with the semantics of Hindi (and by that same token, Sanskrit) it came to be mediated through linguistic and cultural affect. The digital world of today bears the impress of this history, and even as Dalits and feminists query the limits and content of language-based identity, their responses unfold within an affect-laden cultural universe.

The paradoxical unity of cultural affect and political critique was constitutive of the Sri Lankan Tamil presence on the worldwide web as well. When the Tamils from Sri Lanka proclaimed their claims to digital nationhood in and through *tamilnation.org*, they spoke both as global citizens who inhabited a virtual space that knew no boundaries, and as beleaguered people who had a certain investment in memory and national history. In fact, the claims of culture haunt the Tamil techno universe as well: Muthu Nedumaran the talented font designer from Malayasia, views his efforts at ensuring the presence of Tamil in ever expanding digital worlds as helping to preserve it as common heritage, which ought to exist on its own terms, in and through a distinctive script, and not only as transliteration and translation.⁴

Given the bind of history, and especially the way we inhabit the past in and through structures of feeling that shape our understanding and action, we might want to ask what histories are likely to prove germane as we look to the internet and machine-languages to remember, record, archive and go forward in our quest for retaining our links to language, community and memory.

2. For details about Noolaham, see <https://cutt.ly/IbymcgO> (accessed on 17 April 2021).

3. For a short description of what the Tamil Virtual Academy does, see <https://cutt.ly/ObsrNV9>

4. View in this context, 'Creating Trouble with Strokes', a talk by Muthu Nedumaran, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ODHwe0eUUU>

Interview

With **Andras Kornai**, Professor, the Computer and Automation Research Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, by **Pandurang Hegde**, activist Chipko/Appiko movement.

Professor Kornai's paper on 'Digital Language Death'¹ provides information on the reach and presence of languages in the digital world and its impact on the survival of languages in the coming years. Of approximately 7000 languages spoken today, some 2500 are generally considered endangered. After extensive research he argues that this consensus figure vastly underestimates the dangers of digital language death; less than five per cent of all the languages can still ascend to the digital realm, but most languages are destined towards a massive die-off caused by the digital divide.

Andras Kornai has co-authored a position paper on the Indian Subcontinent Language Vitalization project with the objective of turning as many languages and dialects of the subcontinent as feasible into digitally viable languages. With the strong multilingual base, he feels that there is scope for halting the human cost of digital language death by helping digitally still languages to access the digital realm through 'a champion' language like Hindi or other regional languages other than English.

Pandurang Hegde: *How do you look at the major challenges and prospects of languages in the digital era? Do you think that the digital realm provides equal space to all languages?*

Andras Kornai: No, of course not. Languages whose speakers are more literate, more educated, and are concentrated in areas with better internet access have a huge advantage. The main challenge, at least the way I see it for India, is to make sure that intellectuals don't abandon their native language in favour of English,

Hindi, or other well-entrenched regional languages, but they build up education, literature, news, and even business in their mother tongues.

The digital era has posed a civilization challenge to the diversity of languages, as your research has shown; only a few languages have the chance of survival. Your findings show that only five percent of the languages that exist today can ascend in the digital era, and the other 95 percent of languages will be pushed towards extinction in the coming years. What are the main reasons behind this?

The key reason is the lack of overlap between the digitally literate and the native speaker populations for these languages. If, as the famous saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a town, with a university, to raise a community of intellectuals. It is not sufficient to send a smart kid to some faraway college – what we need is a community of such kids who will want to talk to each other by texting in their native language.

Do you think that the extinction of minority languages is a natural phenomenon of an evolutionary process in which dominant languages appropriate the space available to other minority languages in society? Can one argue that the present domination of a few languages in the digital world is part of this evolutionary process, or is it something entirely different?

This is new, and qualitatively different from the wellknown processes whereby languages, typically based on individual decisions of their speakers, slowly give way to other languages. In the article you mention, I related the current process to the Neolithic Revolution: 'Evidently, what we are witnessing is not just a massive die-off of the world's languages, it is the final act of the Neolithic Revolution, with the urban

agriculturalists moving on to a different, digital plane of existence, leaving the hunter-gatherers and nomad pastoralists behind.’

What are the ideal conditions under which languages acquire digital ascent? Is there a successful model of crossing the digital divide? Do efforts to revive Basque and Catalan language in Europe provide an alternative model?

Whatever conditions favour general education, from elementary up to postgraduate level are required – ‘ideal’ is hard to define, but this has to do with the willingness of the population to better their lot. Again, this is a revolution – you must stand up and be counted! The only way to stand up is by education, native language instruction gradually extending from literacy to all skills (e.g. medical, law, engineering) that require an advanced degree. For this, you need teachers (not just elementary and high school teachers, but also college professors offering courses in their native language) first and foremost. Note that the Basque and Catalan efforts are largely driven by computational linguists who already have PhD level education.

Africa and Asia are the major hotspots of language diversity. But the communities speaking diverse languages are not only digitally disenfranchised with poor connectivity, but many languages exist in only the oral form. Under these circumstances, what are the possibilities and policies required for digital inclusion?

You answered the question: since languages that only exist in oral form have no digital future, the first step is to develop literacy, beginning with a standardized orthography. Only policies that help this will have a chance for success, and even these must fight an uphill battle.

Can machine translation tools developed by Google and the National Geographic’s Enduring Voices project equip capacities of smaller endangered languages to survive and revitalize in this gloomy scenario of linguicides?

No, I don’t think so. Every little bit helps, but it is simply not possible to revitalize top down; the effort must be bottom up, starting with the speakers of the language, and again, involving intellectuals, teachers, linguists, poets, etc. etc., who take their language seriously.

You have worked on the digital re/vitalization of languages in the Indian subcontinent; is it possi-

ble to revitalize a language having a meager presence in the digital realm? Do we have a working model/s showing such possibilities? Do you see any opportunities for funding such revitalization of languages by the government or corporate entities in India or South Asia?

Let me stay silent on the funding opportunities as I know nothing of this. But a meager presence can mushroom into a far larger presence, as long as people are committed. Perhaps the best form of funding would be for equipping teachers with laptops which can record video and audio, and more important, can enable participation in digitally mediated conversations (Zoom, Skype, Teams, Google Meet, and others) taking place in the language and recorded (with the permission of all concerned of course).

Languages have evolved in different ecozones that depict the worldview of their surroundings; often, it is closely linked to livelihood. With the increasing acceptance of a digital form of communication, can languages be de-linked from their roots and flourish in the digital realm?

Yes, absolutely. This is especially meaningful for languages that have significant scholarship going back to centuries, as is the case with many languages of India. But if the livelihood is dominantly agricultural, with no written material, not even contracts, legal documents, private letters, sacred texts, etc. this is going to be next to impossible.

In India, Google is investing USD 10 billion over the next ten years towards digital empowerment of the languages. Will the profit-driven corporate sector help in conserving endangered languages? Does it contradict the reality in which their policies of propagation and domination of monoculture of languages in internet are driven by the e-commerce?

I would not be dismissive of corporate efforts. To the contrary, I think this could be a huge help. India has dozens and dozens of languages (see my paper with Prof. Bhattacharyya) that have a very good chance of making the digital transition. Even borderline cases like Rajasthianic have crores of speakers. A speaker population of 10,000 can sustain quality high schools, and a lakh can sustain college-level education. Note that Basque has 7.5 lakhs, Catalan 4.1 million. As it stands, India already has very high-quality experts to revitalize the diverse languages in the Indian subcontinent.

Indian languages and language technology

PRIYANKOO SARMAH

THE way Indians communicate and access information is changing, and both the rural and the urban population in the country are not left untouched by it. Currently, the number of smartphone users in India is about 700 million, and it is estimated to reach about a billion in 2025. As the use of smartphones increases in the country, so do the digital services that are dished out as part of the smartphone ecology.

Evidence of the changing ecology was seen in the teaching and learning environment that arose due to the 2019-20 Coronavirus pandemic. During the pandemic, the learners had to adapt themselves to virtual learning, and the teachers had to make themselves and their materials smartphone ready. There was a need for both the population to make themselves digital or smartphone worthy. This caused many to wonder whether this is a glimpse of the future of education and society we are witnessing. There was also a concern that these 'smart' devices somehow make us lose our individuality and make us behave in a predictable, uniform way to suit the technologies we are using. Naturally, a larger question emerges that if we are going to lose out to homogeneity and lose our individual culture and languages in the digital world.

India is an incredibly complex country with numerous languages and cultures. The 2011 Census of India, participants reported speaking 19,569 mother tongues. Of course, after scrutiny, this number was reduced to 1369 mother tongues and 1474 'unclassified' mother tongues. While some of these languages and cultures are thriving and are relatively well known, many others, in the nooks and corners of the country, struggle to survive for another generation. Nevertheless, it is noticed that there are hardly any cases where people have abandoned their language at their own will. In all cases, people are seen to be emotionally attached to their own languages and cultures. Therefore, when a piece of information is communicated to the people in their own language or mother tongue, it goes beyond serving the intended purpose of the message, and becomes a vehicle for emotional connection.

The business world has already recognized the 'trust' a person has in information provided in her mother tongue. Several studies on consumer behaviour have shown that people are more likely to trust the information if provided in their mother tongue. About 68% of the internet users in India consider digital content to be more credible when presented in the

local language. Hence, in trade and commerce the importance of localization and multilingualism is widely acknowledged. Nonetheless, the question at the end of the day is whether all languages will be given equal importance and patronage by the business world.

In the last decade, the way people search for information has changed. Technology used in searching and accessing information on the internet has taken an unexpected but more convenient turn. Worldwide 7 out of every 10 search engine users prefers searching for information through voice rather than by typing text. It is assumed that very soon voice search will completely replace search by typing text. Moreover, the interactions themselves will be voice interactions in both ways, limiting the need to write or read text, even in the major languages. In India, 28% of the search engine users are using voice search, and every year the number of Indians using voice search is increasing exponentially. At the same time many of these voice searches are not in English, but in Indian languages, which has made Hindi the second most popular language worldwide in terms of voice searching.

The multilingual voice search raises several concerns such as voice based privacy issues, delegation of written forms of languages as secondary medium of interaction on web enabled platforms etc. However, it does seem like a great idea for languages that do not have a script or for people who lack the ability to read and write the language they speak. It seems like a favourable proposition for the Indian users, many of whom are proficient speakers of their mother tongue but are unable to write or read it because their formal education was in a language other than their mother tongue or simply because their mother tongues are

not written. This seems true for both under resourced and well-resourced languages in the Indian context.

Building technologies for a tool such as voice search, is time and cost intensive which makes the technology companies prioritise the work, not surprisingly, in languages that have more revenue potential. Apart from the revenue generation aspect, there are other aspects related to building technologies. The speech and text resources required to build such speech technologies is voluminous. To put things into perspective, an automatic speech recognition (ASR) system built for English by the Chinese giant Baidu, used about 11940 hours of English speech data along with text transcriptions. The computational power required to process such an amount of data is exorbitantly costly.

The resulting ASR system of Baidu, when tested on an evaluation speech database, popularly known as the Wall Street Journal Evaluation Set of 1992, yielded an accuracy of 96.9%. In the test involving the evaluation speech database, accuracy is calculated based on how many words were correctly recognized by the ASR system. Interestingly, when the human subjects were asked to listen to the same speech, they made more mistakes in recognizing the words than the deep neural network (DNN) based speech recognition system. Human accuracy in recognizing the words correctly was 94.97% about 2% worse than the DNN based system. Hence, in several tasks involving speech or image classification, the deep neural network based systems perform better than humans, provided the systems are trained on large amounts of data.

For most of the Indian languages such an amount of speech and text resources are unavailable. Hence, even though languages, such as Bangla

or Kannada, have voice search abilities on several popular internet search engines, languages such as Assamese or Bodo, in spite of being Schedule 22 languages with sizable populations, are not likely to find themselves in the league of voice search enabled languages very soon. With the inevitable growth in voice based technologies in the next few years, the speakers of Assamese or Bodo will possibly perform voice searches in one of the few languages these technologies are available in. In other words, there will probably be a new cyber lingua franca for many of these smaller, low-resourced languages, pushing them to the brink of marginalization in the digital world. Without relevant language technology for these minor or low-resource languages, speakers may begin switching to the major languages and start considering their own languages less useful.

I strongly believe that these divides created by technology may also be bridged by technology itself. Over the last few years, all around the world the problem of digital divide in language technology development is taken up with utmost seriousness. There are several research paradigms that have developed which aid language technology development in the absence of large speech and text databases in languages. Methodologies such as, transfer learning, low resource language technology development, no-resource language technology development and zero-shot learning etc. all aim at developing language technologies for low or zero resource languages.

The top 10 languages used on the internet accounts for 77% of the users whereas all the other languages in the world account for only the remaining 23%. This inequality in the digital world was addressed in a conference in Paris organized by

UNESCO, in December 2019. Language Technology for All (LT4All), organized as part of UNESCO's celebration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, was aimed at encouraging the truly multilingual internet and language technologies, with special focus on indigenous languages.

Use of language technology built with local languages has been very effective in achieving last mile connectivity in several domains, such as, public health and agriculture. One such example of effective multilingual language technology implementation is from Africa. Viamo, formerly known as VOTO Mobile, started in 2012 and implemented Interactive Voice Response systems (IVRS) in various African languages to disseminate public health information. It is to be noted that such IVRS systems needed a basic phone connection, but did not require any internet connection. However, the language technology working in the background in recognizing the voice inputs of the users was sophisticated as the ones mentioned earlier for the voice user interfaces.

Similarly, in India, the Technology Development for Indian Languages initiative by the Ministry of Information Technology, has funded the Mandi project. A farmer can dial a phone number and receive information about the prices of agricultural commodities in the local markets and weather information in the user's district. The farmer can speak into the system in any of the nine scheduled Indian languages (namely, Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Oriya) and receive the automatically spoken information in the same language.

Viamo and the Mandi project are two examples where language technology has made information

accessible to the end users with the use of a simple feature phone and without the need for an internet connection. The technology built in the Mandi project is extensively used in the Sufal Bangla Agri Price Information Service, a joint initiative of the Government of West Bengal and CDAC Kolkata. I am told that this system receives an average of 450 queries every day.

In the Indian scenario, the language technology development is made further complicated by the fact that India has a considerable linguistic diversity and at the same time too little is known about these languages. The official language reports in India, which divides languages into several categories, such as scheduled, non-scheduled and mother tongues, themselves a hindrance in uniform development in language technology across all Indian languages. It is noticed that funds for language technology development are usually allocated for the scheduled languages and the non-scheduled languages and mother tongues are often left unfunded.

However, the recent National Education Policy (NEP) of India seems to treat the linguistic diversity of India, coming out of the previously established hierarchies. The policy insists on imparting children's education in their home or mother languages. The policy also emphasizes on the need to create quality text resources for teaching in the home or mother languages. NEP's emphasis on education in mother tongues will also lead to resource creation in the minority languages of India, which finally may be the stepping stone for the creation of digital resources for these languages. Here, the state offices of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) can play a pivotal role.

The SCERTs in the states are responsible for developing textbooks for various languages spoken in each state. A more streamlined and systematic method to identify linguistic communities in need of the development of educational resources in each state and facilitating community initiatives in developing educational resources should be done in a mission mode.

One striking feature among almost all the linguistic communities in India is the existence of literary organizations. At least from my experience in North East India, I have observed that a linguistic community usually has a literary society that takes a call on how language will be promoted and used in the community. While doing so these organizations ensure community participation and chalk out plans for promotion of literacy in their own languages with their own writing systems. I strongly believe that these organizations have a key role to play in informing the policymakers about their desire to get support for creation of necessary resources in their language. If these organizations can facilitate community driven text and speech resource creation, it can be shared for further technology development. The outcomes of such initiatives will be beneficial for both the potential users and the stakeholders.

The digital divide is very much prevalent on the internet and most languages in the world are not well represented in cyberspace. However, this may not be the only reason why a language could become extinct. There are more potent reasons why languages could become endangered and even extinct, such as political reasons, unfavourable language policies and pressure from a dominant lingua franca. The adoption of lingua franca, in the Indian scenario, determines whether the users of minority languages will keep using their original language or not.

For example, though English has been popular in India, its role is restricted as the language of knowledge. Hence, English may not threaten local languages and cultures. On the contrary, the minority languages in India may actually be threatened by the major Indian languages spoken in their vicinity, which are used as lingua franca and may replace minority languages from the daily use of the users. Some of these languages may serve only as cyber lingua franca with their use restricted only to information retrieval from the internet.

The future digital world is likely to be dominated by visual and auditory media. While the population with internet and smartphones will access information using voice user interfaces, the ones without will possibly access information through alternative arrangements such as connecting to the same information server through a simple phone. However, whether such technology will be developed uniformly for all languages will depend on several factors. At government policy level, changes need to be brought in to do away with hierarchies that prioritize technology development in only a handful of languages. A national level policy on language technology development with exact milestones will also help achieve the goal of resource generation mentioned in the NEP.

At the local level, community language organizations need to upgrade their way of functioning and prepare exhaustive language documentation. If needed, such organizations can approach experts who can advise them on resource creation and technology development. These organizations can also approach local governmental bodies to make them aware of the need to incorporate language technology development programmes for their communities. Such community

based spoken and textual resource generation in digital form will be helpful in creating textbooks and other educational materials to be used by the next generation of speakers. Moreover, many linguists will vouch that resource creation efforts become unsustainable after a period if there is no continuous and active participation from the linguistic community.

History can testify that any technology without thoughtful planning and implementation may be disadvantageous for a section of the society. Language technology may not be able to make a minority language go extinct, nevertheless, it may push minority languages to the brink of marginalization. Such marginalization will prevent members of these communities from accessing crucial information on health, education and civil and legal rights in their own language. In such situations, community level initiatives, empowered by policy level decisions, may be the best way for these languages to survive in the digital world without being digitally marginalized.

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Books

WANDERERS, KINGS, MERCHANTS: The Story of India Through its Languages by Peggy Mohan. Penguin Random House, Gurgaon, 2021.

WRITING the past of the nations or regions is a consolidated practice in History and allied disciplines, and so are Historical Linguistics and Sociolinguistics the established approaches to make sense of the past and the present of languages. What has been lacking is linguistic history – history of language or languages, save few like Ostler and Schulman.

Given the dearth of engagement with the history of language, any attempt towards linguistic history deserves appreciation and Mohan's book particularly so for being the first of its kind that weaves the past of select languages of India in the interesting, rather inevitable theme of migration. The book relates *the story of India through its languages* (and that's the subtitle of the book) having chosen the languages, namely, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Hindi-Urdu, Nagamese and Indian English. Peggy limns a fascinating picture of these languages where migration happens to be the

guiding and elucidating theme that cuts across the time and space these languages inhabit. Indeed, the last decade has seen a surge of interest in language and migration and this book can be seen as one of them but stands out for its focus on India in general and for its concrete anchor on select languages representing the wide canvas of the subcontinent. What follows is not a neat summary of each chapter but my notes or responses to the ideas presented across the chapters.

The book opens with the chapter 'A Tiramisu Bear', telling one curious fact that among polar or grizzly bears only males migrate and female do not, and the population sustenance or the spread is linked to this. This acts as a guiding analogy that works across the stories of the languages that come ahead in the book. Before we see what the individual stories are like, it is important to note a few important points. As much as this is a story of Indian languages, it is also, importantly, the story of Peggy herself. Peggy is a polyglot with Creole English (a Caribbean language) as her first language, and Bhojpuri (coming from paternal side her father being a Trinidadian Bhojpuri/Indian) and Canadian English

(coming from her maternal side), besides several European and Indian languages added (see p. 2-3). She is a trained linguist who has worked on Trinidad Bhojpuri, taught linguistics, and been an expert witness in terrorism trials. Her fiction *Jahajin* is a riveting account the weary migrants settled into life as indentured labourers on the sugar estates. So, here is a book coming from a polyglot, linguist who is not blinded by mere theoretical bookish models, not restrained by the limiting Eurocentric approaches, but open to insights coming from the fringe. And that is evident from the references she brings in from recent genetic research or the insights drawn from evolutionary biology or as mentioned above, drawing parallels from the patterns of polar or gizzly bears.

Another upside of the book is that it has something phenomenal to say. The ‘focus of the book is not on the languages themselves, but on what language can tell us about migrations and the fusion and change they bring’ (p. 16-17). One such insight being that the suddenness in change seems to be more probable in certain instances than the generally held idea that any change in connection to the structure of language has to be gradual. This insight comes from juxtaposing the stories of creoles or multilayered languages across the globe. These ideas have been put to work to make sense of language not as a form but as a process (p. 15). All of this, in a way, invests into relating the story of ‘the little people’ (to use her often employed phrase) which is barely told, known or thought of, and this is imminent through the story of every language in the book. In terms of the method, it ‘is like the difference between the approaches of anatomy and physiology, with physiology being the one that studies how things work, and not simply what they look like’ (p. 15).

The second chapter of the eight chaptered book called ‘the hidden story of Sanskrit’ is a core and dense chapter of which I discuss two points here. The typical narrative of the Aryan invasion has been set aside by the idea of gradual migration (p. 26). This consisted of males migrating and marrying the local women for progeny. The idea of maternal/paternal substratum typically found in case of creoles is also parallel only to an extent. And in connection to Sanskrit there are several layers at which creole like definiteness barely applies. This is supported by the reference to the genetic research regarding mtDNA and Y-DNA (p.26, 28). Drawing references from a journal called *BMC Evolutionary Biology* (p. 29) the male migration in the Bronze Age that took place from the Pontic-Caspic region is further attested. One prominent and ever-puz-

zling linguistic feature of Vedic is ‘retroflexion’. The retroflex are the speech sounds unique to Dravidian languages and Indic languages where the tongue is folded back to touch the roof of mouth to produce the series T, Th, D, Dh, N, and S and L, the first five of these are sounds that are represented in the third row of the alphabet chart of Indian scripts that follow Devanagari distribution. This feature has been discussed at length. The issue being when and how come Sanskrit – an Indo European (hereafter, IE) language – gathered these sounds. None of the other IE languages have these. Madhav Deshpande’s views have been brought in and responded to in connection to retroflexion.

Works of Emmenau, Mehandale, Jan Gonda, Witzel have been referred to give an elaborate account of retroflexion. The author agrees with Deshpande on retroflexion not being an original Sanskrit feature, but doubts his argument that it had been introduced into recitation over several centuries. She believes that such changes, additions happened rather suddenly, based on the parallels drawn from how it operates or operated in the Carribean. She argues that were this retroflexion to be resisted deliberately, it would have been rather easy to do so as a conscious effort as the language of liturgy and instruction is more open to be rigid. Effectively, this addition of retroflexion to the language was rather sudden and unplanned.

She later draws a convincing parallel of Livonian – a Finno Ugric language and Latvian. The point is though Livonian got extinct as such, i.e. no native speaker remained, certain grammatical features like tonality or the contrastive tone were retained in Latvian. Thus, Livonian did survive in face of Latvian in a sense. This example serves as a parallel to explain how a feature like retroflexion – a non-Indo European one, got assimilated in Vedic Sanskrit. The story of Sanskrit has two steps. The first being the entry in the northwest and the second when the Vedic practices got rather consolidated under the Kuru regime, and this was the ‘expansionist phase, backed by military might, rejigged *shrta* rituals and the beginnings of grew into a caste-system in Kurukshetra, the ‘land of Manu’ (p. 73).

The third chapter on Malayalam is based on the idea of how the Namboodiri Brahmins’ migration, to an extent, is a replay of the story of Sanskrit in the northwest – the difference being it would have been more peaceful and most probably rather devoid of the second step. Peggy does raise the question of unusual loss of the person, number, gender marking on Malayalam verbs – which other Dravidian languages have. She evokes a parallel to Marathi habitual forms of the

verb where person marking is lost but number and gender are retained. However, this loss of the marking on verbs in Malayalam remains unexplained, though she does mention similar loss in Nagamese when compared to its Assamese counterpart. One important otherness of Malayalam is the fusion literary language style called Maniprvalam which stands out for its heavy Sanskritisation and that is explained with apt examples.

The next chapter, how the Indo-Aryan languages were born, rightly accounts for the marking of the gender on the verbs in the western Indo-Aryan languages like Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati etc. and its absence in Sanskrit. However, Dravidian languages (except Malayalam as mentioned above) do have such markings on the verb. So, the idea is to say structurally some grammatical features are rather more like Dravidian and starkly unlike the IE or Sanskrit. The idea of substratum does come through to explain some facts here. However, when it comes to a feature like ergativity (this is that strange sentence where one has to begin ones sentence with *ne* as in *usne*, and in some tenses or moods you cannot begin with *vo* etc. at all), having discussed internal genesis theories, she also brings in research that hints towards the extinct, unknown/undeciphered Harappan languages which could have had ergativity. The otherness of the eastern varieties is also discussed in comparison. Ideally more such features could be studied which are neither explainable from the Dravidian or the IE sides, to see into the heads of ‘the little people’ of the past – who are saved in these grammatical structural features.

Chapter five, To Urdu and Hindi via Turki, brings forth the hitherto unexplored and unarticulated mediation of Turki or Turkic languages in shaping Hindi/Urdu. Though present day form evinces the Turkic to a very limited extent, once upon a time, Turkic languages like Uzbeki, Chugtai played a significant role for a limited period before Persian decisively took over. One apparently surprising but actually rather predictable feature was the contemporaneity of Khusro’s language. And the language has remained largely unchanged when compared to Khusro’s expression, and it is the literary styles of Sanskritized Hindi and Persianized Urdu that extend the impression of the changed language. The vowel shifts (Ordu > Urdu, o changing to u), consonant shifts (Kha > h. Khanum > hanim across Turkish-Uzbeki-Urdu is a fresh piece of information. This opens up the possibility of future research to explore Urdu vowel system vis-à-vis the vowel shifts that took place between Persian and Turkish (or Turkic languages) before and after they

(the vowels and the vocabulary containing those vowels) arrived in Hindi-Urdu.

Chapter six on Nagamese juxtaposes its case with Sanskrit, Malayalam and other languages discussed and the intriguing part of it is that despite there being no apartheid situation this language has come into existence, and is observable peacefully while the first languages of the Naga people continue to coexist. The contrast with the other cases is that there is no engulfing of any language by spread of Nagamese, and that ‘the first intruder, in the Naga case, was not a human migrant but the market which brought the tribes out their mountain strongholds’ (p. 220). The author rightly classifies Nagamese as the youngest Magadhan language – a new addition to the group. Also, the author notes how it has lost the markers on the verbs like Malayalam. And though this is an instance of simplification of the paradigm (i.e. reducing the number of distinct forms), a typical feature of creole, both Malayalam and Nagamese lack other characteristics of creole.

Chapter seven, Indian English as an invasive species, draws a parallel to the two steps of Sanskrit. Except that unlike the pre-Vedic, Vedic migrants, the British didn’t make India their home forever. Also, the second step is marked by independence where the life of English is organically held even in the absence of the British. English now enters the bilingual repertoire of a child way earlier and faster than it would in the British times. And that there is a kind of diglossia between English and Indian languages. It is apprehended as the slow variant of language death (p. 242). However, at present, English plays a functional role (like one shopkeeper being able to carry out the conversation only related to selling, convincing etc.) while speakers of Indian English being mostly diglossic.

The final chapter, Confluence, highlights the ‘bitersweet story of convergence’. It cautions us with the overriding theme of punctuated equilibria where individual languages need not go wrong to be ruined but it is the environment that may change all of sudden, giving a massive blow or another life to the languages. The sheer variety of cases, like Prakrits which are quite close to the target language, then creoles which have grammatical structure of the older languages in mind and vocabulary of the new dominant and then we have cases like Urdu and Malayalam which follow the verbs of one source but have affinity to nouns from another source.

So, is this a book of conjectures? Yes. We come across parallels drawn and the cases of languages juxta-

posed with lots of ‘would haves’ across the book. But these are intelligent conjectures, and the juxtapositioning and the parallels are convincingly argued to make the story of every language compelling. As goes the Henri Poincare’s quote, ‘it is far better to foresee even without certainty than not to foresee at all’; this book offers a hindsight, a way to look into the past and the present of languages based on what has happened or generally happens to languages, the process or the physiology that lends the insightful hindsight.

We are witnessing a time when several kinds of claims of purity are being made, racial purity being one. This book narrating the story of convergence, of intricate and inextricable mixing and layers of encounters and coexistence can be read as the one that underscores the inclusive, hybrid, multilayered idea of India. May this story of languages of India help us change the language of our story of India.

Chinmay Dharurkar

Research Centre for History and Culture, Beijing Normal University and BNU-HKBU United International College, Zhuhai

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**LANGUAGE POLITICS AND PUBLIC SPHERE
IN NORTH INDIA: Making of the Maithili
Movement** by Mithilesh Kumar Jha. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2018.

REGIONS and spaces that are significant for the mythic and modern history of Mithila and the Maithili language appear in Mithilesh Kumar Jha’s *Language Politics and Public Sphere in North India: Making of the Maithili Movement*. The title links the book to the field of literary and print history whose proliferation over past decades has revealed varying dimensions of the modern polities of North India. This study would have bene-fited from a closer engagement with the

* Rochelle Pinto is the author of *Translation, Script, Orality: Becoming a Language of State* (Orient Blackswan).

claims and conclusions of these texts as they impinge on the question of Maithili, though the author does present the themes of various pertinent texts in the introductory sections. However, with recent attempts to emphasize a singular language for the country, this detailed account of a region in what is often represented as a uniformly Hindi-speaking territory is a useful contribution.

Jha’s work makes it apparent that linguistic identities and literary imaginations that were an uneasy parallel to the emerging dominance of Hindi were nonetheless not symmetrical with each other. Instead, each acquired different dimensions and representational values across history. Thus Maithili, as this book indicates, appears to have developed neither a popular written idiom nor become a vehicle of popular political representation until the late 20th century. Languages such as Maithili were not positioned to be the bearers of sub-nationalist identities. They were philologically contained as dialects, which allowed for them to be interpreted in administrative terms as localized and therefore subordinate variants to Hindi.

The striking aspect of the movement is the preponderance of the Mithila region as a defining cultural symbol that acquired modern dimensions, but that remained an exclusively brahmanical referent through the late 19th and early 20th century. While the claim for Mithila took on the dimensions of a territorialized and linguistically defined nationalism, an idea that was paramount at the turn of the century, it did not substantially alter or expand its symbolic or ideological potential to represent interests other than those of a fragmented brahmanical elite until the late 20th century.

Though the author references theories and arguments indicating that the surge towards linguistic nationalities was not a natural but a dominant process, the book retains a strong loyalty to Maithili nationalism. The trajectory of argument is shaped by the expectation that a modern linguistic identity would be voiced around Maithili as a natural political phenomenon. As a result, the story of Maithili tends to be driven by its deviance from the timeline of dominant linguistic nationalities, which occasionally makes for difficult reading, as each source is mined for its perspective on the issue, leading to repetition.

However, the text also highlights dimensions of language use that emerged in relation to political structures such as the Darbhanga Raj, which was significant to the renewal of Mithila as a cultural symbol and to the development of a modern infrastructure for language. Rather than reproducing the philological pattern

of a linear inevitable progression towards the present, the author points to the conflicting philological positions for Maithili, as he states, ‘looking westward from the company seat at Kolkata... Maithili... appeared to be a dialect of Bengali. However, looking eastward from the Mughal Imperial seat at Delhi for philologists like Kellog and Hoernle, Maithili appeared to be a dialect of eastern Hindi.’ The text mentions the role of Buddhist literature such as the *Charya Padas*, and its significance as a linguistic lineage for a cluster of regional languages such as Assamese, Bengali and Maithili.

Seeing the mass movement for state recognition as the only form of success for a linguistic movement, leads to a conflation of claims for Mithila those for Maithili, though there are many indications that both were not necessarily as significant for some of the protagonists discussed. For instance, the first two histories of Mithila were written in Urdu in 1868 and 1883, the book states, indicating the need to separate conceptions of region and language. While Grierson’s grammar appeared in 1880, the same year that the Darbhanga Raj extended its support for Maithili print, Hindi was made the language of the courts in 1881. The ambiguous actions of the Darbhanga Raj and associations of Maithil upper caste elite indicate that Maithili was envisioned neither as the language of administration nor of religious modernity by those who sought to be significant figures in modern politics. It was Calcutta University which first recognized Maithili as a subject of study in 1917. Other aspects likewise, do not lend themselves to the model of a singular territorialized language with a singular script. Mithilakshar or Tirhuta as a script was used to write Sanskrit dramas, in which dialogues were rendered in Maithili. Thus, Sanskrit and Maithili textual production continued simultaneously, without a naturalized convergence of language and script. These details suggest a more complicated relationship of language to script other than the division between unlettered speakers of Maithili and a Maithil elite seeking recognition for the region. In fact, the text indicates the diverse roles of Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, and Hindu, aside from various other languages that were thrust into marginal roles by the emergence of Hindi, such as Bhojpuri.

Varying geographies and their asymmetries make for interesting details. While the Mithila region did not have physical boundaries, its empirical referents acquired prominence, as it historicized. Against the idea of a homogenous linguistic region, the book reveals that a sizeable number of Maithili speakers live in the Terai/Madheshi region of Nepal, and that the language

emerged in print in Jaipur, Banaras, Allahabad, and Kolkata.

One of the more interesting chapters of the book is the one tracing post-independent politics when Mithila as a region acquired more democratic dimensions through the vision of socialists such as Lakshman Jha, who demanded statehood as a means to resolve problems of floods and famine, rather than the restoration of social orthodoxy. This is also the chapter that reveals that the exclusion of Maithili could also signal different forms of inclusion. Thus, Maithili was removed from the Bihar Public Service Commission exams, which saw mass protests, while in 1980, the Maithili-speaking chief minister made Urdu the second language of state. Given that this is the only point where a popular claim for Mithila appears, it is not clear whether popular writing or print ever bridged the gap between Maithili speakers and the Maithil elite.

The first chapter presents the Congress and leftist conceptions of nation as broadly identical in advocating cultural plurality and religious secularism. This flattened perspective enables an anodyne depiction of Savarkar’s Hindutva, which, the text states, ‘takes the idea of the Indian nation prior to both pre-colonial and pre-Mughal times.’ Though intended only as a thumbnail sketch in the book, this depiction is more reflective of what has become the contemporary common sense on nationalism, as accounts of the uses of nationalism by the Congress and the left would challenge this. Further, this formulation elides the explicit exclusion that is inherent to Savarkar’s conception of Hindutva. A few more details and dates would help illuminate the connotations to the names for Mithila, such as Tirhutiya. The book appears not to have undergone a process of editing, an omission that draws as much attention to the publisher as to the author.

Rochelle Pinto

Independent researcher, Bengaluru

TALK ON THE WILD SIDE: Why Language Can’t be Tamed by Lane Greene. Hachette Book Group, US, 2018.

THE threat to the existence of languages seems unreal to Lane Greene for whom language is like a wolf – robust, organic and evolving to suit the changing conditions in the wild. With infectious enthusiasm, the polyglottic columnist considers the deep strangeness of language to be its saviour against potential vulnerability. After all it is human invention that is bound to evolve

with time with different users contextualizing it to suit their communication needs. If that be so, why shifts in expressions and meanings of words should be worrisome? It is only the purists who love one dialect and may take it as an imminent sign of linguistic ruin.

Written words do abide by grammatical conventions, but it is the spoken language which is continually in flux 'providing speaker a menu of options for getting ideas effectively into the reader's mind.' Each language has two sides to it – one formal and the other normal, with the formal having a limited role. Profiling the changes that are sweeping the language (English), Greene wonders when the purists will appreciate normal English as relevant because 'formal written language isn't the only form of language that matters.' Language is a many-faceted thing. Slang and dialect, jocular and off-beat, teen-speak and text-driven, and corporate jargon and political ramble. Do these forms pose a threat to language or enhance its versatility? While this could be open to differing interpretations, it does show that each facet fills a distinct need. 'Not all language is well behaved, nor does it need to be.'

Erudite and ebullient, *Talk on the Wild Side* argues that decentralized changes are not only acceptable but inherent to language. Else, neither will language live nor will it continue to be spoken by people. Humans have done important things with languages and continue to do without letting them fall apart into pieces. The wild side of language is that it is adaptable, but that hardly applies to native languages which easily fall prey to the hegemony of dominant ones. That being not the subject of his inquiry, Greene instead argues that language doesn't fall apart even when people do novel things with it or adapt it to suit varied needs. Every language, therefore, remains a unique product of human genius.

The core idea behind this immensely readable book is that language is always changing, influenced by externalities of the times. The words may not mean the same they did a century ago, and there is nothing wrong with it because languages always evolve towards simplicity. Greene cites the word *buxom*, which originally meant pliable, then happy/gay, and now, a large-chested woman. The need is to accept language as it remains relevant to the context in which it is adapted. The fact that English language enriches itself by integrating words from other languages (especially Hindi) every other year bears testimony to its absorptive capacity of integrating words from other cultures. That is the dynamic nature of language.

However, there are purists who fear that such integration corrupts language, and which may eventu-

ally bring its terminal decline. Such impression may be far from the truth. Most language experts today – those who really understand what language is and how it works, rather than those who focus on how they think it ought to work – sit closer to the descriptivist camp, rather than being prescriptivists. Arguing instead that the latter group is wrong, Greene feels that language can never be tamed or shaped to the will of a select few prescriptivists who keep nuances of grammar closer to their chest without realizing that the regimentation of language may bring its downfall. Language should be allowed to evolve.

Talk on the Wild Side is full of sweet spots that unfold many aspects of language in an ever-changing world. It is both a guide to the great debates and controversies of usage, as well as a love letter to language itself. It touches upon contemporary developments in technology to generate and create languages, or to help with translations. These aren't flawless! However, letting the power of language slip into the domain of technology is fraught with political control. As language is inextricably connected to power, majority-language nationalism may lead to political upheaval. Allowing the one who's holding the sword will eventually decide who's mispronouncing the word. The future of language, therefore, should be in the hands of those who use it. Instead of attempting to tame it, we should allow it to roam freely and evolve in its own way. Greene is clear that neither is thought language nor grammar. Language is culture, dynamic and evolving.

Sudhirendar Sharma

Independent writer, researcher and academic

TURBULENT TRANSFORMATIONS: Non-Brahmin Srivaisnavism on Religion, Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu by Katherine Young. Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2021.

Turbulent Transformations brings a critical caste lens to the study of what has been viewed as a significant sectarian (pertaining to a definable sect) religious tradition in Tamil Nadu, Srivaisnavism. At a time, when the term Hindu appears infinitely extendable, and capable of assimilating a range of positions, arguments and beliefs, it is sobering to remember that not too long ago, the term did not have the meaning it does today. Religious practice hinged on sectarian beliefs and organi-

* V. Geetha is the author (along with S.V. Rajadurai) of *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, among other books.

zations and were not easy to coopt within a so-called 'national' religion.

This book examines Srivaisnavism in its sectarian existence: not as doctrine or soteriology, but as a creed adopted by a group of practitioners, comprising Non-Brahmin and Dalit individuals and families in Tamil Nadu. Katherine Young puts late colonial and contemporary experiences of Srivaisnavism in conversation with their social and political milieu: defined by the powerful anti-Brahmin and Self-respect movements on the one hand, and a politics, anchored in a felt and expressive Tamilness, on the other.

There are three parts to the narrative: The opening chapters point to what made Srivaisnavism attractive to Non-Brahmins in a religious milieu, dominated, at least from the early medieval period, by the Brahmins and temples that were under their control. In line with other scholarly thinkers on the subject, Young notes the devotional world of Srivaisnavism made for a limited, though, fervent communitas. It held out the promise of spiritual equality and salvific freedom for all, irrespective of birth, sex and caste. While not socially consequential in all instances, and limited by the real world structures of royal and spiritual authority and property and caste standing, this promise drew Non-Brahmin sudras, from the cultivating, artisanal and trading classes and sections of the so-called outcastes into the Srivaisnavite fold.

We see how this freedom was reworked and updated in and through a dormant yet powerful language of rights and equality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as sudra spiritual mentors updated their spiritual claims, often in the face of Brahmin authority and control. Young does not quite dwell on what made this possible, though she places it within the moment of modernity. There is a rich history of ideas here that stands to be unravelled, and the book gestures towards it, without actually laying out the protocols for what might be done henceforth.

The chapters that follow (Chapters 3 to 6) proceed from the late colonial past to the immediate present, and here we are introduced to a range of Srivaisnavas, most of whom are from the Naidu and Vanniyar castes. The former comprise Telugu speaking men and women, who, however identify themselves with Tamil Vaisnavism, as expounded by the 12 Alwars, devotional poets from Brahmin, Non-Brahmin and Dalit communities, whose writings form a distinctive literary and spiritual corpus, viewed, in some instances as equivalent in value and significance to the Vedas. While Young references Dalit adherents of the sect now and then,

we hear of the views of only one group of them, all belonging to a single family and kin cohort.

Young's subjects comprise men (and a few women) who, originally were from families of farmers, weavers and in some instances traders. At the time of the interviews, a substantial number of them were town, if not city dwellers, living in well-marked peri-urban or suburban neighbourhoods, in the close vicinity of a Vaisnavite shrine. Identified as 'Bhagavatas', as different from Brahmin Srivaisnavites, their sense of religious belonging appears to have to do with an expansive and egalitarian vision of the faith espoused by Ramanuja, the eleventh century sectarian leader and philosopher. This is as true of the Dalits as it is of the Non-Brahmins, though with Young's Dalit interviewees, we see a faith leavened by democratic fervour.

In expressing their Srivaisnavism, these sectarians challenge Brahmin monopoly over Srivaisnavite doctrine and text, seek to uphold the importance of the Tamil Vaisnavite devotional corpus, and insist on their right to propagate their vision of the creed. Young notes that proselytization was a key feature of all medieval sectarian traditions, and in the late colonial and modern period, this assumed particular institutional forms: the setting up of associations such as sabhas and the equivalents of what in the past were known as 'Sri Ramanuja Kutams' (assemblies of adherents to Ramanuja's sect), the conduct of lectures, publishing of tracts, and the ordination of people that desired to enter the Vaisnavite fold, through specific rituals. In contemporary times, such sabhas also offer 'secular' goods, to do with health and astrology.

What has proved contentious though is this: who possesses the right to ordain whom, and through what means. Traditionally, Srivaisnavism has been propagated by lineages of men, drawn from 74 Brahmin families, who hold themselves to be official teachers of Ramanuja's doctrine, and are known therefore as 'acharyas'. There was another line of adherents, men who gave up their householder lives and turned ascetics, and who came to be known as the 'jeeyars' and this included both Brahmins and Non-Brahmins. Acharyas perform the rite of spiritual ordination (known as samashrayanam) for Brahmin adherents, but usually are averse to doing this for Non-Brahmins. While some Non-Brahmins were able to persuade the acharyas to ordain them, this does not happen often, and it is the Non-Brahmin jeeyars who end up ministering to their fellow caste men and to Dalits. But this does not include the actual ordination ritual, during which the marks of Vishnu are literally branded on to the skin of the would-

be adherent, which even Non-Brahmins concede is a Brahmin prerogative. Young presents us one exception here, a Brahmin who has since been hailed as Ramanuja of the present, for daring to ordain and consort with sudras and Dalits. She also points to governmental efforts to set up schools of spiritual learning for Non-Brahmins and Dalits, backed by court rulings, but notes that these have not been sustainable.

Even as Non-Brahmin sectarians challenge Brahmin reluctance to be their spiritual mentors and protest being kept out of spiritual communities and temple-related rituals, such as chanting from the Tamil spiritual corpus of texts, they are not frontal in their opposition: they appear to want to achieve a separate but equal status. And besides, they are uneasy with the strident and passionate language of rights, as put forth by the Self-respect movement, and many expressed their misgivings over the latter, even as they noted that in their younger days they had been drawn to it. The Dalits who appear in the book are clearly drawn to Gandhi than Periyar or Ambedkar. While all Non-Brahmins featured in the book profess a caste-free religiosity, it is not clear if the Bhagavatas wish to remain fraternal with Dalits in the broad sense of the term.

Young does not comment or gloss such views for us, but only presents them. She is more forthright in her pointing to the privileges and claims exercised by Brahmins, which she contrasts with the richer and more layered history and content of Srivaisnavism. In this context, she distinguishes between the two strands of Brahmin Vaisnavites: the Northerners (Vadakkalai) and the Southerners (Thenkalais) and notes that the latter, were more eclectic and egalitarian and favoured the use of Tamil as a language of worship, and that they were often disdained as not being Brahmin enough. On the other hand, the Thenkalai group too was not particularly forthcoming when it came to heeding the spiritual claims put forth by the Non-Brahmins, possibly because, Young reasons, they sensed a challenge to the general Brahmanical control over the temple, the priesthood and the system of shares that separated out temple honours. In this context, she reviews the history of legal struggles to access and equality, and points to the equivocal stance adopted by judges, which, in practice, endorses Brahmin claims.

Missing in Young's appraisal of the social, civic and spiritual progress of Tamil Brahmins (which she does in the last two chapters of the book) is a critical sense of their claims to exclusivity. Brahmin exclusiveness rests on its perceived privileged relationship to scriptural and philosophical traditions of learning, but

this is asserted rather than demonstrated, given that apart from a handful of them, Brahmins are not familiar with these latter. Further, the priesthood that is often viewed as an iconic symbol of privilege was not historically in possession of this learning either, being trained only in secondary rituals. The fictions that underwrite Brahmin claims to exclusivity including in the secular sphere of the arts, which Young concedes have been challenged, need to be further interrogated.

Curiously, Young has not sought to visit the temples and associations of Srivaisnavites of Southern Tamil Nadu, which have had a longer history of ecumenism, with respect to doctrine as well as practice. Tamil scholars such as Tho. Paramasivam have written extensively on the subject: Paramasivam's masterly book on the Alagar Kovil, the temple of Alagar in Madurai, is a wonderful historical and ethnographic account of the temple and its festivals, and how a provisional and liminal communitas has been built and sustained over centuries.

While valuable as an account of a field of experience that has attracted little scholarly attention, Young's narrative does not quite produce for the reader the 'turbulence' promised in the title. While it invokes conjuncture and context, and gestures towards the importance of place-making and everyday religiosity, it does not seek to locate these within a broader social history of Tamil life, as it has unfolded in post-independent India.

V. Geetha

Historian, Chennai

POWERSHIFT: India-China Relations in a Multipolar World by Zorawar Daulet Singh. Macmillan, New Delhi, 2020.

THIS book presents China-India relations both shaping, as also being shaped by, a larger Asian rejuvenation in the midst of a global transition towards a reformed multipolar order. At the core, however, the author contends how their disputed border remains the most formidable challenge which calls for not just more objective analysis but also locating these in their changed power profiles where mutual equations have become far too intertwined with their regional and global interface. He especially cautions Indian experts to steer clear from rhetorical assessments of China from either romantic or utilitarian extremes.

Second, Daulet Singh shows how their 1980s template of ensuring 'peace and tranquility' along disputed borders – that saw Beijing offer in 1993 critical nuclear

fuel for India's Tarapore reactor after the US and France had abruptly refused supplies, sign two most detailed confidence building agreements in 1993 and 1996, and then stand firmly neutral in the 1999 India-Pakistan Kargil War – has become far too fragile. This template finally failed them in their prolonged violent face-off in 2020, which has seen both sides desperately exploring newer equilibria in their relations. Other than their intentions, their force and infrastructure modernization has itself increased both the frequency and intensity of their border face-offs which alludes to an urgent need for revamping their extant methods and mechanisms for resolving recurring tensions.

Based on the author's engagement with the archives and his earlier work, *Power and Diplomacy* (2018), this volume explicates various complicated British legacies that underlie Indian discourses being animated with polemics. He shows how India's northern borders were not even on the original agenda of the much fabled 1914 Simla Conference of which the McMahon Line was nothing but an afterthought that was summarily rejected by China's nationalist government. Its insignificance was further reinforced by continued British ambivalence on its sanctity. The British were willing to concede Tawang to the Tibetans for their explicit recognition for the rest of this line. Indeed, till Major Bob Khatling's February 1951 expedition, Tawang was under the *de facto* control of Tibetans. Till 1947, they had continued to claim not just Tawang but Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and parts of Ladakh to create some kind of federation of Tibetan-speaking Himalayan nations. This explains India signing a spate of agreements with these Himalayan kingdoms.

Likewise, the western sector was also never resolved by the British; they were not interested in border demarcation but only in ensuring their 'exclusive' access for commerce. So, as China liberated Tibet in 1951, it surreptitiously expanded its control across this larger Aksai Chin region. Later, realizing the precarious nature of what came to be called its soft underbelly, the Chinese became insistent on India accepting this entire region as being part of China and as a bargain offered to even recognize the McMahon Line. India, on the other, could never appreciate this swap between the two sectors as it took the McMahon Line as being the settled border. After half a century of negotiations when India finally accepted to go for the package deal, this boundary question had been subsumed by their larger geopolitical dynamics as emerging economies. The author contends that the unprecedented rise of China and now its early recovery from the Covid-19

pandemic, has further exacerbated their asymmetry where even an external balancer (read the US) can no longer offset the 'structural superiority' of China.

For Daulet Singh, more specifically, it is the rise of Asia, decline of the West, and changing China-South Asia equations that are shaping India's immediate periphery as the most contentious region for China-India relations. He believes China is least bothered about South Asia's domestic politics as it focuses on protecting its larger economic investments. It is South Asian regimes that often assume China to be their insurance against western pressures or hedge against India's interference in their internal affairs. For India, China's intrusion in its periphery is often responded to emotionally, making it overlook their critical 'overlapping interests'. He concludes that in the face of a 5-1 advantage in economic power – which is even greater when measured in high technology, human and scientific capital – history offers no example of accommodation between a major power (China) and a rising power (India).

Powershift alludes to China's two big rapprochements – first with the US in the 1970s and then with Russia in the 1990s – and how both were the *consequence* and not the *cause* of the grand political detente (emphasis in original). But today's China remains extremely sensitive to any third country taking sides in what it now calls its 'great power competition' with the US. The author believes that the informal Modi-Xi summits of 2018 and 2019 had briefly cast a reset in their relations based on the premise of India abiding by 'strategic autonomy' whereas most Chinese increasingly see India as choosing to stand with the US. For the immediate, he believes India must begin from the border; give up ideas of extended deterrence by responding on the seas to China's challenge in the Himalayas, and suggests creating agreed buffers in the grey zones, coordinate patrolling to avoid violent scuffles and then gradually explore new equilibria of cooperation and contestations in their broader strategic equations as two emerging powers.

While the book stands out for its exhaustive analysis that makes an important value addition to the spirited India-China discourse, it also often becomes repetitive, and prescriptive, revealing an unwanted flab that may be trimmed in its subsequent reprint.

Swaran Singh

Professor and Chairman, Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, JNU, New Delhi

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Essay

That house of horrors

IN February 1863, a Chinese birds' nest collector anchored his boat at North Point in the Andamans. Soon, the inhabitants of the islands – the Great Andamanese – sighted the boat and swam up to it. The Islanders appeared genial. They started dancing, and at the same time, kept purloining whatever they could get hold of on the boat.

This news reached Colonel Robert Christopher Tytler, the superintendent of the British penal settlement in the islands. At his behest, an officer named Paul disguised himself as a Burmese, and reached North Point with presents of coconuts and plantains. That evening, two Great Andamanese approached the boats. One, named King John, looked askance at Paul and the presents, and said something to the other. Both retreated to the shore, deciding not to return. Later, around thirty Great Andamanese took the bait, and swam up to the boat. They were devouring food, when, suddenly, the boat sailed. Several sprang overboard in fright.

Eleven Great Andamanese were kidnapped that day. They were brought to Ross Island, where the British naval brigadesmen pantomimed a murder to explain them the reason of their capture. While nine Islanders were released immediately, two – Jumbo and Snowball – were taken prisoner. Both were held responsible for committing the gravest of all crimes – an Englishman's murder.

The Andamans, until their colonization, had remained shrouded in mystery. In 1789, the East India Company set up a settlement on Chatham Island on the southern Bay of Port Cornwallis (now called Port Blair), which was transferred to the North East Harbor in 1792. An inimical climate and high mortality rate led to its unforeseen closure in 1796; the islands were left alone for the next 62 years. After the Great Rebellion, the British founded a penal settlement in the Andamans

for the Indian dissidents. Two hundred political prisoners reached the remote archipelago in March 1858. Their number grew exponentially over the years. Soon, the vast tracts of pristine jungles were cleared; the traditional homelands of 'savages' were ravaged. A once-feared abode of ferocious 'cannibals' had now metamorphosed into a nefarious British penal colony.

The Islanders valiantly resisted the Empire. But their bows and arrows were no match to the enemy's muskets. Scores of indigenes were massacred and cornered in no time. The British adopted a mix of punitive and friendly measures. And, by early 1862, they succeeded in establishing 'friendly relations' with some Great Andamanese. These overtures, however, abruptly turned sour the following year.

On 28 January 1863, the British naval brigadesmen had reached a Great Andamanese camp at North Point to seal 'friendly relations' with the 'savages'. Around thirty Islanders surrounded the party in a cordial manner. Everything went as planned until the Great Andamanese seized a petty officer named James Pratt and shot him to death with their arrows. An indiscriminate firing into 'the mass of savages' ensued, exterminating an unknown number of men, women and children.

Back at the settlement, the news of an Englishman's murder had enraged Tytler. While reporting the incident to the Government of India, he portrayed the Islanders as 'a race of treacherous cold-blooded murderers, assuming the garb of friendship for the purpose of carrying out their diabolical plans'. Tytler wanted an exemplary vengeance. And now that the culprits were finally apprehended, he was keen to banish them from the Andamans.

On 31 March 1863, two Great Andamanese visited Ross Island where Jumbo and Snowball, in

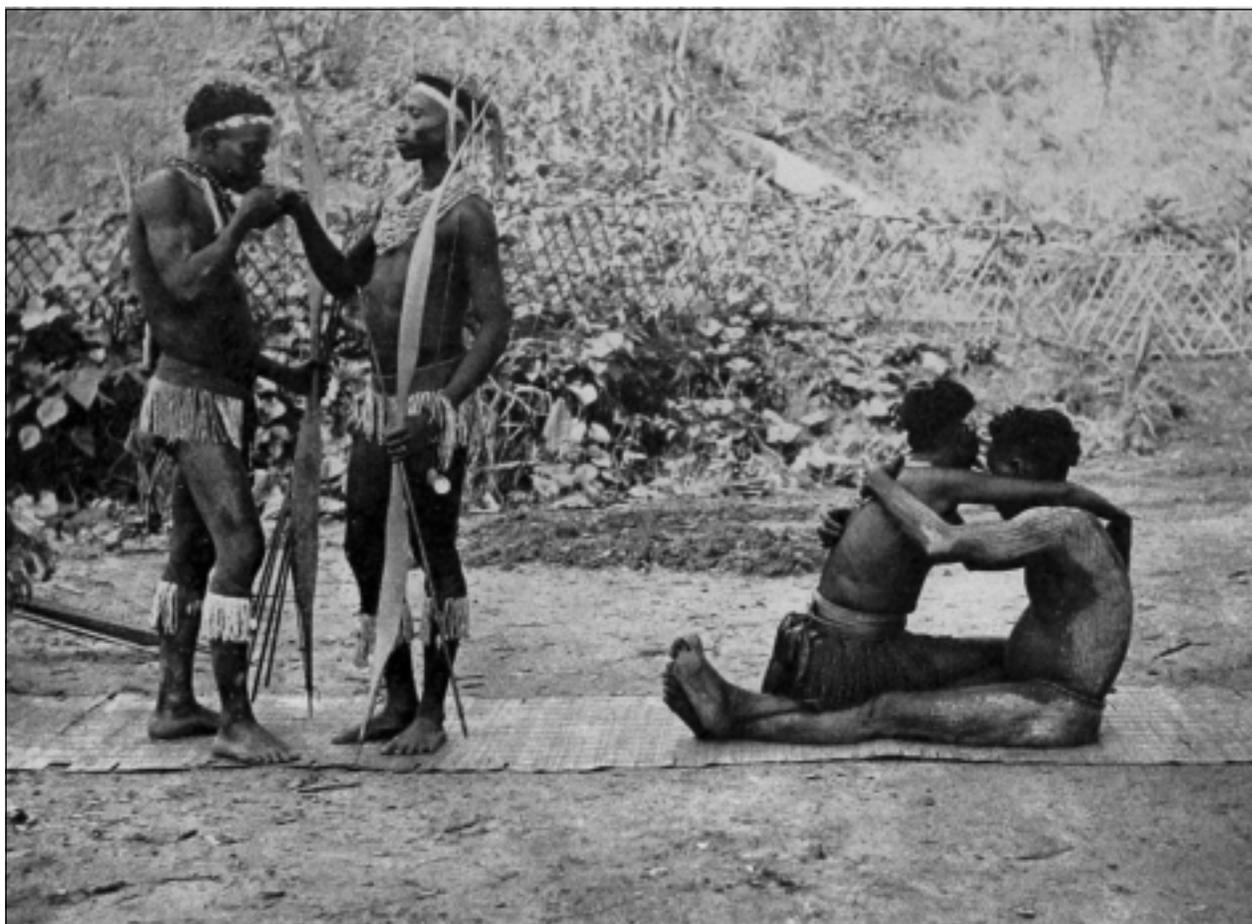
heavy brass shackles and leg irons, were chained to the station signal gun at the Naval Brigade barracks, awaiting transportation to Calcutta's Alipore Jail. Robbed of their freedom, both were pining away in misery. The harrowed visitors 'begged hard' for the captives' freedom. Then they implored the British to at least remove the captives' fetters. But when nothing moved the British, the visitors eventually left heartbroken.

Sundered from their homes, families and friends, Jumbo and Snowball spent time lying on the stone floor in the verandah of naval barracks where weeks and months felt like eternity. Among their tribespeople, they were worthy men. But, here, on Ross Island, they were merely objects of idle curiosity who flocks of people would regularly come to see as if they had come to visit wild beasts in a menagerie.

In April 1863, Tytler, upon further investigation, realized his lack of judgement. Pratt's murder was not unprovoked. That fateful day, soon after reaching the camp, Pratt had essayed to rape a Great Andamanese woman. The disgraceful act of a fellow white man turned the table on Tytler. But his visceral prejudice against the Andamanese got the better of him.

The Islanders, for millennia, had lived in the Andamans as free as birds. But Tytler perceived them nothing more than a fossil – a 'truly savage' race. He decided to confine and 'civilize' them. 'There is no doubt that their [Snowball and Jumbo] retention here has been productive of good results, for the aborigines, ever since we have had these two men in custody, have behaved themselves in a most unusually inoffensive manner,' Tytler wrote to the Government of India on 6 May 1863.

Sometime around May or June that year, Jumbo's wife – Topsy – and a boy named Sambo arrived at Ross Island. A small hut was built where all the Great Andamanese were kept under the watchful eyes of guards. An officer named Henry Fisher Corbyn started teaching English language to Topsy and Sambo. His methods, to say the least, were inhumane. The Islanders began to complain of headaches and often shouted in protest. But Corbyn only intensified his 'coercive measures'. The Great Andamanese were often slapped. They also tried to hit back in retaliation. And when they could not, they hurled abuses. The torture was too much for the 'savage boy', who 'one day



The Great Andamanese meeting (right) and parting (left).

Image: Wikimedia Commons

brought with him a bodkin, and... pointed it at my eyes with a sign that he would pierce them with it, unless I gave up that obnoxious mode of teaching him' described Corbyn.

Jumbo and Snowball were also taught alphabet and basket making. In the meanwhile, several Great Andamanese were induced to visit and live with their friends on Ross Island. Many arrived. More huts were built. The 'enclosure' was named as 'Andaman Home', of which, Corbyn became the first officer-in-charge.

The British were tightening their grip on the hitherto free people. By June 25, they had confined around twenty-eight Great Andamanese. 'A much higher object might be attained in the compulsory confinement of these savages than merely impressing them with a sense of our liberality', rationalized Corbyn.

Tytler did not want the (confined) Great Andamanese to 'run wild in their woods' again. 'The aborigines, from our experience of them, have proved themselves to be a truly savage, treacherous, and ungovernable race of people, devoid of civilization, in every sense of the word' he cautioned Corbyn on 30 June 1863. By keeping the 'savages' in 'custody as hostages', the superintendent wanted to secure a 'better behaviour' of these 'inhospitable people' towards his settlement.

Tytler's politics was simple – lure the 'savages' to the 'Andaman Home' by offering them food, and then scare them into submission. To make the Islanders feel insignificant, he demonstrated to them the destructive power of the British Empire.

One day, Tytler showed them a pocket revolver, with which he shot six bullets into a tree. The horrified Islanders 'quake[d] with fear'. How could something, so small, be so lethal? They wondered! The incident had its effect. 'If I point one at them, they implore me to desist, or at once jump out of the way in dread', wrote Corbyn.

That year, the 'savages' saw things beyond imagination. Word spread from one islander to another. Soon, they realized how fragile they were. 'The savages have conceived such an exaggerated estimate of our capabilities of destruction, that twenty armed Natives or Europeans would put to instant flight a thousand of them,' wrote Corbyn.

Corbyn ventured deeper into the jungles. Those were perilous expeditions. But he had Topsy and other Great Andamanese by his side. 'Condemned' biscuits and rice, 'defunct cattle', coconuts, plantains, pigs, looking glasses, knives, and 'refuse commodities' were distributed generously to break the ice. 'We gave them a

bag of condemned biscuits which had been thoroughly soaked with saltwater, and so long lying in the Commissariat storerooms that they had formed into lumps which were mildewed and filled with maggots,' wrote Corbyn. Thus, contacts with several Great Andamanese were established.

The taste of alien food enticed many to the 'Andaman Home'. The squeaks of the pigs were 'the best bait'. 'They shouted and danced wildly, and unable to resist the spell plunged through the surf and soon surrounded the boat, throwing in their bows and arrows, and calling 'Mio' [Maia, Sir] 'Rago' [Pig]', narrated Corbyn.

In return, the Islanders were induced and often compelled to give away their bows and arrows. Skulls and other remains of ancestors were stolen or forcefully taken away from huts for museums and science. On seeing the British party, the Islanders had now begun to hide their possessions.

They loathed the British. But, above all, they feared them – their power to unleash massacres. The Islanders began to cave in without much resistance. 'An aged woman... talked loud and angrily, as if cursing. I made the usual salutation which she returned, but after doing so gnashed her teeth close to my hand, and then contemptuously flung it from her, as much as to signify that she had a good will to bite and tear me if she could. She exhibited the same animosity to other Europeans', Corbyn narrated an incident.

'It is not any particular love of us, but chiefly the greed of food which tempts them to the Settlement', wrote Corbyn. Sure, food tempted them. But that was not it. The Islanders had their own reasons. When Jumbo was kidnapped, Topsy resolved to follow him to the enemy's stronghold. She played docile, accompanied the British on several contact missions (even in the territory of the archrival Jarawas) and acted as their guide, interlocutor and savior in the wild. She endured everything. And all that was only for love's sake.

Topsy and Jumbo were madly in love – two souls indivisible. 'She screamed and cried, and clung to her husband Jumbo, and appealed with tears to Colonel Tytler not to allow them to be separated, and when we pulled away from the island, she kept her eyes fixed on the beach, and shouted to Jumbo who ran along the shore and responded to her cries till we were out of hearing', Corbyn narrated one incident.

Likewise, other Great Andamanese also visited the settlement because their chiefs were incarcerated there. The Islanders shared deep community bonding. Even the British, who contemptuously caricatured

them as 'savages', were surprised to see their love for one another. 'I never knew people more eccentric in their affection. They will sometimes, when they meet again after only a night's separation, fall on each other's necks and weep most affectingly, though they have been at the same time on the same island, and separated only by the distance between my house and the Andaman Home', wrote Corbyn.

In July 1863, the ailing Great Andamanese chief, Snowball, was released. Two pigs were given to his tribe to celebrate the occasion. By the year's end, many Islanders ended up in the 'Andaman Home'. Their numbers soared; upwards of forty in February 1864. But all was not well on Ross Island. Despite slogging away alongside the convicts in 'clearing sites', 'making thatching and bamboo framework', construction, piggeries, cattle sheds; the indigenes received meagre facilities. A cowshed was their 'only dwelling'. And when they attempted to go home, '*parawallahs*' (policemen) would restrain them.

The Islanders loved painting (and tattooing) their bodies with clay. A substitute for clothing, it prevented them from chills. But, to Tytler, those were 'degrading' and 'barbarous' practices that he strictly prohibited on Ross Island. The sudden change in diet and lifestyle, forced confinement, and mental and physical torture, took their toll on the Islanders. Soon 'severe illness' broke out, and many began to perish.

Conditions worsened; several indigenes began to escape. 'Parawallahs' strengthened their surveillance. Intoxicants were used as deterrents. And many Islanders were chained. 'The Andamanese were detained against their will in the Andaman Home... considerable and illegal pressure was put on them to keep them there' wrote M. V. Portman.

Despite 'strict watch', all the Great Andamanese managed to flee on March 1. Many swam off distances in irons. Corbyn followed them to North Point where Jumbo and Topsy were apprehended. 'If the escaped Andamanese did not make their appearance to-morrow we should inflict summary chastisement on Jumbo', he threatened Topsy and took her husband as hostage.

That night, Jumbo was mad with rage. Even five men could not control him. The British were anxious that if Jumbo escaped, they would lose their influence on the 'North Tribe'. Jumbo was chained up. As long as he was retained, the British had control on his tribe, and several Great Andamanese would have come to Ross Island to live with him.

Soon, the Islanders were made to return. Several accompanied Topsy. On March 7, Corbyn, along with

Jumbo, went for a search towards Port Meadows and brought back six Great Andamanese. In the meanwhile, Topsy and other Great Andamanese had again run away.

About three weeks later, a corpse washed ashore on South Point. Corbyn surmised it was a young Great Andamanese lady, Annie. Later, Annie was found alive. The dead was Topsy. That day, while her husband was away, the 'harshness and worse' of '*parawallahs*' made Topsy jump into the ocean for safety. But 'being weak at the time', she could not make it alive to the nearest shore.

By April, around 17 Great Andamanese were brought back. But they were again hankering to escape. Tensions escalated. Now a face-off between '*parawallahs*' and the Islanders was inevitable. That month, the anxious British selected two sites on the mainland shores, around three to four miles away from Ross Island, and quickly set up two outpost 'Homes'. The (old) 'Andaman Home' was abandoned. That house of horrors, and the 'repressive policy' which it epitomized had proved to be a catastrophe.

But all was not yet over. In fact, it was merely the beginning of the Great Andamanese end. Soon, thousands were dead before their time; largely due to deadly epidemics—pneumonia, syphilis, ophthalmia, measles, mumps, Russian influenza, gonorrhoea. Estimated conservatively at 3,500 in 1858, the Great Andamanese were reduced to 90 by 1931; and even fewer lived to see the fall of the Empire in 1947.

Later, it was found that Jumbo and Snowball were 'unjustly punished'. Pratt was shot down by an islander named Jacko whose wife he had attempted to rape. 'There is not a man in the Brigade, (I am told so by themselves), who believes that either Jumbo or Snowball had anything to do with Pratt's death', wrote Major Barnett Ford, the new superintendent of the settlement.

Snowball passed away early. But Jumbo lived long. And, when, in 1882, that 'very old man' died, the memories of Topsy were also put to rest forever. Nothing in the Andamans now suggests us that once here lived a brave Andamanese woman named Topsy, and that she was a terrific lover. But the islands do remind us that here once came a man and a woman of power – a popular beach (Corbyn's cove) and the second highest peak (Mount Harriet) in the Andamans are named after Corbyn and Harriet Christina Tytler.

The latter, Tytler's wife, ironically, never liked these islands.

Ajay Saini

In memoriam

M.N. Ashish Ganju 1942-2021

Ashish Ganju succumbed to COVID-19 on May 4, 2021. I am offering this tribute in his memory as a longstanding friend and sometime comrade-in-arms.

Ashish was widely acknowledged as a visionary architect and charismatic teacher, but also as an iconoclast for his contrarian views on architectural and habitat issues. This blunted the significance of his message in the public domain. Those who knew him better, however, were aware that his views had compelling intellectual and moral underpinnings and, moreover, determined how he lived his life. Not only did his convictions define his professional positions, they guided his personal conduct as well. The organic unity of his worldview made him a remarkable individual for both the professional community and his students. In an ambivalent world of shifting or confused values, Ashish was steadfast in holding on to views that conferred on him the aura of a guru.

As I write this, I wonder when I became aware of these attributes. I have known him from the day we started our architectural studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, in July 1959 and remained a close friend since then. While I might lack critical distance, I have had the opportunity to engage with him at close quarters. Even as an earnest and callow undergraduate, I could recognise, in our casual or academic exchanges, the integrity of his intellect and professional stance, which only deepened over the years. But I realise that this impression was based on empirical

observation, eliding insights into the structures of the more foundational beliefs that I knew existed. We never had occasion to discuss the subject, but from the little I could surmise, I was aware that his ethical and moral being was profoundly embedded in Kashmiri Shaivism and Tibetan Buddhism; but he acknowledged my atheism and never displayed these roots as a badge or ever used them as a cudgel to make his point.

Ashish's temperament and lifestyle derived from the hybrid modernity that most western-educated Indians share, and so, I believe, it was his ability to authentically synthesise the two streams of his identity that shaped his unique, fiercely held persona. As far back as 1986, Gautam Bhatia recognized it, when he dedicated his book, *Punjabi Baroque and Other Memories of Architecture*, '...To Ashish Ganju, and to honesty/whose markings on the face/are the etchings of a man/who refuses to be disgraced...'

Ashish was at Kharagpur only for two years after which he left to complete his undergraduate studies at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. He immersed himself in the cultural churning taking place in the '60s and, unlike many of his contemporaries, returned to India for 'further studies'. He learnt by teaching at several institutions and undertaking assignments for UNICEF and the Rural Development Department of the Government of India to design multipurpose community centres for remote villages all over India. As he wrote later, 'It was

an extraordinary voyage of discovery, learning from the wisdom of our indigenous communities about age-old building practices, and living in harmony with nature.’

We resumed our friendship and professional dialogue when I returned to Delhi in 1972. Our exchanges were sporadic, but an invitation from Raj and Romesh Thapar to put together the August 1974 issue of the *Seminar* magazine on The Indian Architect, was instrumental in cementing our bond and giving structure and meaning to our discussions. As fledgling practitioners and part-time academics, we were concerned about the insignificant status of architects in creating the built environment and the limited perception they had of their role in securing the welfare of society. We realised, as others had earlier, that the colonial roots of our professional ideology and practice were impediments that needed to be exorcised. Little had been achieved to address this issue. The ‘Seminar’ project helped coalesce our ideas and refine our agenda, and this led to the formation of the GREHA collective, which made it possible to engage a wider circle of interlocutors in critical discourse on the nature of Indian architecture and urbanism.

The GREHA initiative segued in 1990 to the establishment of the TVB School of Habitat Studies in New Delhi. As Founding Director, Ashish was central to its development. It was a conceptually bold initiative, challenging the inherited pedagogy of architectural education by formulating a research-oriented curriculum which focused on developing strategies to address the contemporary complexity and diversity of the country’s habitat issues. Both teachers and students were learners in this enterprise. What Ashish learnt after he returned to India became the major pedagogical scaffolding on which the curriculum of the school was built. The curriculum directed its gaze toward the local community and context, and away from the treadmill trying to ‘catch up’ with the West. I believe that its significance is captured by what Mimar Sinan, the great 16th century Ottoman architect, used to tell his apprentices: *love* is the hardest craft to master, meaning that to train a complete architect, education must feed both head and heart.

Reforming architectural education was only one facet of Ashish’s vision, which emanated from two propositions: one, that architecture begins at the civilisational conjunction of history, geography and philosophy; and two, that cities are not economic engines, they are collectives of human beings. The objective of the act of architecture, he said, was to engage in a ritual process that paid obeisance to societal values, cultural

symbols and civilisational archetypes; it was not to invent the form of buildings. The structure of Indian urbanism should, therefore, be based on the social, anthropological and indigenous capacities of individuals. He not only propagated this vision but, more importantly, lived it. For over two decades, he lived in Aya Nagar, a rapidly urbanising settlement on the outskirts of New Delhi, where he built his eco-sensitive residence and studio and engaged with the local community to upgrade its physical environment, rehabilitate the open spaces, and regenerate its intrinsic cultural, historical and spiritual significance: in a word, he engaged with architecture as he defined it.

In July 2019, The Aga Khan Trust for Culture invited me to conduct a workshop on New Horizons for Architectural Education at the Manipal Institute of Technology, and I invited Ashish to join me. The workshop itself was a well-trodden ground for both of us, but it gave us the opportunity to spend three days talking as of yore. He told me about the various projects he had engaged with over the past few years, like the History Project for the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, to research and articulate the history of architecture with a focus on geography, culture, society, and philosophy; the Building Beauty Programme, based on the concepts of Christopher Alexander, to enable students to perceive what soulful, humane environments might be; and the Architecture and Society conferences he conducted every month at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. Ashish was as animated and polemical as the person I met sixty years ago. That was my last extended discussion with him.

Ashish collated his ideas, together with long-time conversational partner Narendra Dingle, and published *The Discovery of Architecture: A Contemporary Treatise on Ancient Values and Indigenous Reality*. It is an architectural manifesto for a modernising India, yes, but it also captures the essence of his intellectual and moral being, casting him as the eternal iconoclast.

His death is untimely. As the country contemplates the contours of a post-pandemic city, the issues of architecture and urban planning will be foregrounded. The iconoclast Ashish Ganju’s humanistic views on the subject would have been critical in mediating the outcome of these deliberations.

A.G. Krishna Menon
Architect, urban planner and
conservation consultant, Delhi

D.L. Sheth 1936-2021

Dhirubhai will be sorely missed. He was many things. He was mentor to many. He was an institution builder, and CSDS could not have provided the space for exploring the world of thought and ideas if Rajni Kothari, Dhirubhai and Ashis Nandy, and some stellar others, had not consciously cultivated the centre as a place where people could come with their view of the world, and leave after having had conversation, discussion and debate around it.

In an age when the distinction between prejudice, opinion and public reasoning is threatening to collapse, Dhirubhai's ability to listen with patience tinged with just that dash of scepticism, and then to ask the discomfiting question, was a trait that I know I went seeking, as I suspect would be true of many others.

He had moved to Delhi from Gujarat to set up what was to become CSDS and been its Director for a spell. He had been President of the PUCL in Delhi (1991-93) and he was a member of the National Commission for Backward Classes (1993-96). He had worked, and written, extensively on democracy in its many facets. He was a founder of Lokayan, which was conceived in CSDS and then set itself up as an NGO, as a movement for an alternative approach to politics and development. He has written, edited, advised, investigated. He, however, never pulled rank, and that made every conversation accessible and friendly. In all the times that I have knocked and walked into his room to test an idea on Dhirubhai, he never, not once, gave even a hint that he was in the middle of something and would rather not be disturbed. He always had time.

There is a lot that he said that teases the mind. Say, for instance, what he said in his conversation with Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the renowned Portuguese legal scholar: Indian social science is not rooted because of language. If the knowledge that is produced is in a language that most do not know, how do you democratize knowledge?

Subaltern studies was unique. It makes history as experienced and lived by people. For the first time, subaltern makes the discipline of history interdisciplinary.

The issue, he said, is about democratizing knowledge and freeing it from power systems.

You cannot have one universal knowledge system; you need diversity.

Oppression should not be theoretically concretized, he said, in the context of writing about the Dalit cause. Social knowledge is not social science.

Through the years, the inhumanity of poverty and exclusion, and the barriers set up by caste and class, was never forgotten.

Gandhi could never have done what Ambedkar did for Dalits. But Ambedkar, or any of the others, could not have done what he did for Dalits without the softening, questioning and erasing as far as possible that consciousness of the oppressors, of people practicing untouchability, to whom it was that Gandhi spoke. That, he said, is the dynamic of transformation. It's not one against the other.

Without alternative politics, we can only remain on the margins as critics. And this is why he saw the Aam Aadmi Party as an experiment to watch.

Going back over his writings, his critique of the move to internationalize the issue of caste at the Durban conference on race took some doing. It was not that caste was not an international matter; quite the contrary. And true that the 'international community' understands racial discrimination more easily than casteism. 'To fit one's case in readymade, given categories does save one the trouble of thinking through and communicating the specificities of one's own situation', he wrote. 'The protagonists of the campaign are, however, not prepared to face the question as to what impact this international recognition of caste as race might have on the more than a century old anti-caste movement of the Dalits. Would the promise of a few short term advantages deprive the Dalits of benefits gained through a long movement?' He then set out the consequences that he saw would ensue from a 'campaign to equate race with caste'. It must have taken some doing, that writing.

In a serious vein, but yet raising a chuckle, we could recall his thinking about who may be radical and who may not. Radical, for me, is always left, he says. That is, anti-status quo. Right can never be radical. Then: anything that wants to monopolise power in society is right. Right radical is a contradiction in terms.

About a decade ago, at one of the annual dinners when CSDS brings in its extended community, Rajni Kothari said something he must have many times, this time with chagrin. (And I paraphrase, as I captured it in my imagination.) CSDS was established to be the place where people would come from all parts of the world to debate their ideas and test them among their peers. That has ceded ground to the centre becoming a place from where people launch themselves to reach places far and near to

display their work. Dhirubhai, it may be said, was a notable exception. Not that he didn't travel to conferences and seminars; but you could depend on him being there, inviting conversation, always ready to lend an ear.

Usha Ramanathan
Law researcher, Cuttack

Siddharth Shriram 1945-2021

DURING the past year my wife Nasrin and I had kept in close touch with two of our closest friends in India, Pippa and Siddharth. Both Siddharth and Nasrin suffered from a very serious asthmatic condition and the two of them would compare notes and exchange advice on the phone as the Covid pandemic grew in intensity during the course of the last year. Nasrin and I were maintaining strict isolation in our apartment in Dhaka, while Siddharth and Pippa were doing the same in their spectacular home not far from the international airport in Delhi. They had the benefit of living in a house with an enormous garden. But we all agreed that we should take every possible precaution until we were able to get ourselves vaccinated.

Both Siddharth and Pippa and Nasrin and I received our two shots of the Astra Zeneca vaccine at roughly the same time. In late April they informed us that they had got permission to go to Thailand and would be leaving in early May for Huahin where they had built a beautiful mansion in a gated compound. We had enjoyed their hospitality at this beautiful retreat on more than one occasion. By then the second wave of the pandemic in India was taking a heavy toll so escaping to a secluded retreat made good sense.

They were thunderstruck when on the eve of their departure they both tested positive. Shortly thereafter they were both hospitalised. Siddharth's condition deteriorated rapidly. His last days in this world were spent on a ventilator. We were in daily contact with Pippa, hoping and praying for a miracle. On the 17th of May he passed away.

Nasrin and I met Siddharth for the first time at a party hosted by my old Oxford friend Pradeep (Bogey) Rao and his wife Cuckoo in May 1992 shortly after I arrived in Delhi as the Bangladesh High Commissioner to India. In the following months Siddharth and I met for lunch a few times, I introduced him to some of my businessmen friends from Bangladesh. Siddharth invited me to visit the Delhi Policy Group, a think tank which he had just established.

In early 1994 our friend Pippa came to stay with us. We took Pippa with us to a party hosted by Anji Seth and his wife. Siddharth arrived late at the party. He walked up to us, we introduced him to Pippa. Little did we know that this was going to be a life changing event for both of them. We have often heard the expression 'love at first sight'. Here for the first time in our lives we were witnessing it happen before our own eyes.

In the months that followed Siddharth became an integral part of our lives. From being a friend we became a family. Pippa moved in with Siddharth and the two remained together until his death.

Looking back over the past 27 years I recall vividly the time we spent together in South Africa, in London, in Mauritius, in Thailand, in Hong Kong and of course in Delhi. Siddharth's zest for life was infectious. We would discuss politics, International affairs, Indo-Bangladesh relations, books, art, golf, cricket, business, mutual friends, the list of subjects was endless. I remember the laughter, the gourmet meals, the champagne but I also remember our many conversations about his love and concern for Rula, Chhaya and Krishna.

He was passionate about golf. He played golf, he supported its development and loved to talk about golf. His annual pilgrimage to cover the Masters, one of the premier events in the world of golf, produced some excellent reports. Today as I watched on TV the final day of the PGA won by Phil Mickelson at the age of almost 51, I thought how much Siddharth would have enjoyed watching this historic event.

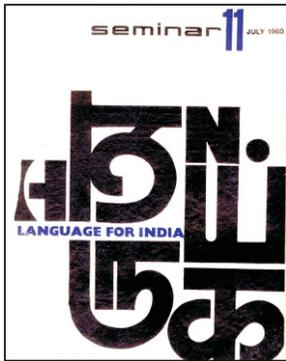
The Delhi Policy Group was another great passion of his. He took enormous pride in its work.

Not only did he and Pippa have one of the best art collections in Delhi but they would spend several weeks every year at an art school in Italy and over a period of time became very accomplished artists. More than once I mentioned to Siddharth that collectively his multiple interests qualified him for a PhD in life, or in cricketing terms he was an outstanding all rounder.

We will miss the marvellous dinners that Siddharth and Pippa hosted in their beautiful homes, the lively conversation, the laughter, the champagne and experiencing in the company of Siddharth the sheer joy of living. In the words of his daughter Chhaya 'he is now free to continue his journey further, always there in spirit'.

Farooq Sobhan
Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to India

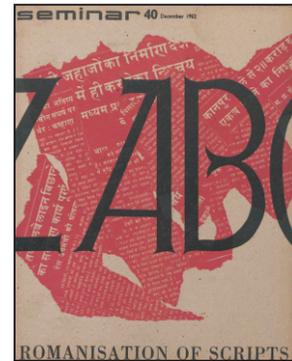
11 ♦ July 1960



A LANGUAGE FOR INDIA

a symposium on some aspects of the linguistic battles of a sub-continent

seminar
with a critical edge...

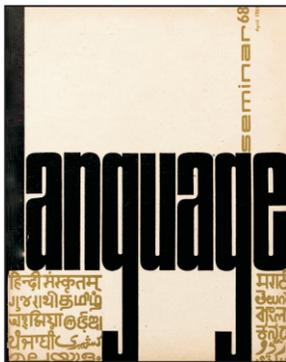


ROMANISATION

a symposium on the possibilities of a single script through romanisation

40 ♦ December 1962

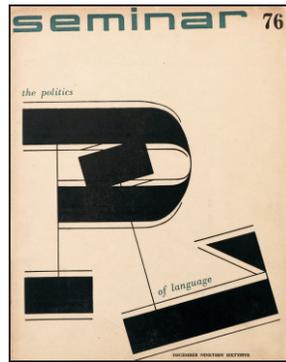
68 ♦ April 1965



LANGUAGE

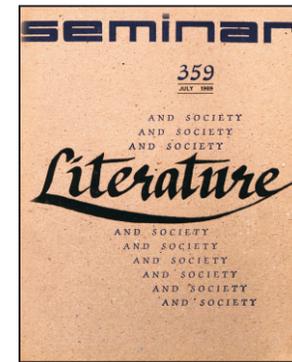
a symposium on the issues involved in the language controversy

76 ♦ December 1965



THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

a symposium on the background to the war over words

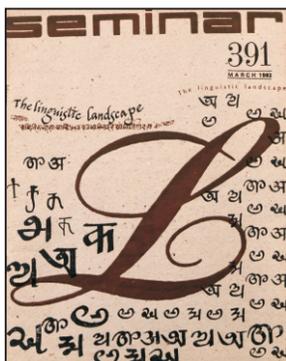


LITERATURE & SOCIETY

a symposium on contemporary Indian literature

359 ♦ July 1989

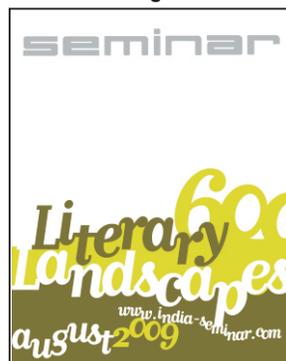
391 ♦ March 1992



THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

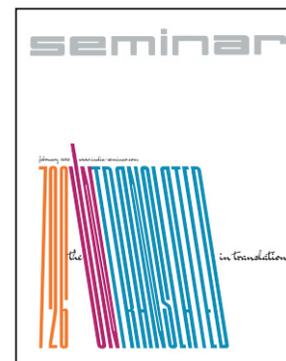
a symposium on the state of our language(s)

600 ♦ August 2009



LITERARY LANDSCAPES

a symposium on language, power and recognition in Indian writing



THE UNTRANSLATED IN TRANSLATION

a symposium on the linguistic and non-linguistic force of translation

726 ♦ February 2020