

On the vitality of indigenous languages

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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 Bhatia — 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.