

Policy Initiatives and Media Interventions in Preservation of Endangered Languages of North-East India

Uttam Kr Pegu*

Abstract

The focus of this study is to assess the policy initiatives and media interventions in preservation of endangered languages in North-East India. The region has been a crucible for the drama of language conflicts, yet it remains an enchanting linguistic mosaic. India tops the list of countries having maximum number of dialects on the verge of disappearance with 196 of its languages listed as endangered including 80 in the north-east. While this has implications for cultural identities and knowledge systems, members of a language group must be aware of the factors that lead to language endangerment and make informed decisions about measures that ensure language continuation. While endangered languages continue to reel under the pressure of becoming extinct, the need to create awareness and preservation of endangered languages is indispensable. This paper addresses the need to preserve and maintain endangered indigenous languages. It concludes that there is an urgent necessity to preserve and document endangered languages because each language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity.

Key words: Language endangerment, Language conflicts, Linguistic mosaic, Cultural diversity

Introduction

Languages have always gone extinct throughout human history but in recent times they are rather disappearing at an unprecedented pace. United Nations Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) observes that languages are the centre piece of the cultural diversity of the world yet they are also a vulnerable part of the world's cultural heritage. Safeguarding endangered languages is a crucial task in maintaining cultural

diversity because each language embodies unique local knowledge of the culture in which it is spoken. The focus of this study is to assess the status of endangered languages in North-East India with emphasis on Arunachal Pradesh. The pristine beauty of the region reflects a wide splendor with each community having a distinct language. Language endangerment is alarmingly increasing in North-East and perhaps nowhere else in the world would the loss be as profound

* Uttam Kr. Pegu is Assistant Professor (Sr.), Dept. of Mass Communication & Journalism, Tezpur University, Napaam, Tezpur, 784028, Assam, India. Email: uttamkp@tezu.ernet.in

as in the region. It is therefore, necessary to act quickly in order to preserve them before they are extinct.

According to UNESCO (2003), a language is considered endangered when it is on the verge of extinction. A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it and when it is not passed on from one generation to the next. This is to say that an endangered language is one that is at a risk of falling out of use. If a language loses all its native speakers, it becomes a dead language. Krauss (2007) says that a language is endangered if there is no transmission of it to the younger generation. While it is a fact that many endangered languages are only spoken with no written texts, it is important to act quickly in order to preserve them before they are extinct. While it is important to dissect the policy initiatives in preservation and revitalization of endangered languages, it is equally necessary to examine the impact of globalization on endangered languages.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there were an estimated 6,800 living languages worldwide. More than half of these are endangered and taken together 96 percent of the world's languages account for only 4 per cent of the world's people (UNESCO, 2001). Most of the world's language heterogeneity, then, is under the stewardship of a very small number of people. By a conservative estimate two languages are lost each month. Most linguists agree that a large majority of the

languages in existence today will disappear during this century. Why should development workers and scholars be concerned about language losses that directly impact only 4 per cent of the world's population?

Losing one's first language effectively means forfeiting much of one's social and cultural identity. Fishman (2001) puts it powerfully and warrants an extended quote: Such a huge part of every ethno-culture is linguistically expressed that it is not wrong to say that most ethno-cultural behaviors would be impossible without their expression via the particular language with which these behaviors have been traditionally associated. Over the past two decades, awareness of the state of endangered languages has greatly increased and along with this awareness has come an increase in efforts to document such languages.

There are apprehensions that languages are going extinct at an increasing rate largely as a result of colonization and globalization, where the language of the economically powerful takes over (Mufwene, 2001). In other words, the main reasons for language endangerment today are socioeconomic, political, and cultural. It is observed that speakers of minority languages adopt the majority language so that their children will have better job prospects or because the minority language is simply not promoted in the society.

While some minority groups choose not to speak their language for fear of

persecution, members of other minority groups see the invading dominant culture as more appealing and modern and abandon their traditional culture and language. Dorian (1998) observes that these trends have accelerated with the rise of the nation-state and the one language-one state ideology and with the introduction of the Western education system and economies. The globalization of culture that accompanies economic integration has led to English competing with national languages and endangering minority languages (Grenoble & Whaley 2006).

Hale (1992) notes the importance of linguistic diversity to human intellectual life not only in providing subject matter for linguists but also as forms of artistic expression and cultural heritage. Most important, however, linguistic diversity can be considered a human right from the speakers' point of view (Hill, 2002). When a language becomes endangered, it loses not only speakers but also the social context where the language is spoken and becomes impoverished and structurally simplified with heavy influence from the locally dominant language.

International organizations such as UNESCO, linguists from all over the world, members of endangered language communities, governments and non-governmental organizations are actively working to preserve endangered languages. This is done by developing linguistic documentation, creating orthographies, producing dictionaries and

language-learning materials. Other efforts include promoting positive attitudes toward an endangered language both outside and within the community, planning linguistic programs and enforcing linguistic policies. In all this activity a clear theoretical distinction is made between what Fishman calls 'reversing language shift' (which is now referred to as language revitalization) and 'language maintenance' (Fishman 1991, 2001).

While language revitalization attempts at increasing the number of speakers of an endangered language and to extend the use of the language to different domains, which requires a change in the attitudes of the speakers themselves, language maintenance on the other hand would necessarily mean the support given to languages that are still vital but requires protection from outsiders' attitudes (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Language revitalization and language maintenance are therefore, essential for the survival of a language.

India exhibits a unique mosaic of more than 400 languages and 3,000-odd dialects making it a very distinct linguistic, cultural and ethnic landscape. One unique feature of the Indian languages is that the composition of each linguistic group includes multiple group identities in terms of caste, class, religion or region which are more divisive and exclusionary than the linguistic identity. That means membership into a linguistic group cuts across different castes, religions, regions

or social classes. While India celebrates the existence of such linguistic and cultural diversities which is unparalleled, the forces of globalization have threatened the existence of many of the languages particularly in the North-East, particularly those which are numerically less represented. The UNESCO report on endangered languages is a pointer in this aspect.

That indigenous languages and cultures are disappearing at an alarming rate around the globe has been noted by many (Krauss 1992, Hinton et al., 2002). Perhaps nowhere else in the world would this loss be more profound than in North-East India. With five language families (Tai-Kadai, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Dravidan, Austroasiatic) represented in well over one hundred languages amongst its 8 states, the region perhaps could well be the most linguistically diverse region in the world. Many linguists today see it as their obligation to assist in preventing this great loss to mankind by documenting and describing languages and working with communities to preserve and/or revitalize their languages.

There is an utmost necessity to document and revitalize endangered languages as many of them will disappear within the next few decades. Several scholars predict that up to 90% of the world's languages may well be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the twenty-first century which would reduce the present number of almost 7,000 languages to less than 700. It seems clear and unequivocal that every effort should

be made to document and preserve endangered languages; however, it is also important to be explicit about the reasons to support these efforts.

Objectives and Research Design

The study has adopted explorative research method for conducting the research. This study is intended to examine:

- a. Endangered languages in North-East with an emphasis on Arunachal Pradesh
- b. Language policies in India and
- c. Media interventions in preservation of endangered languages

Endangered Languages in North-East

North-East constitutes a single linguistic region with about 220 languages in three different language groups (Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan and Austric) that share common structural features. Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language spoken mostly in the Brahmaputra Valley, developed as *lingua franca* for many speech communities. The hill states in the region like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are predominantly inhabited by tribal people with a degree of diversity even within the tribal groups. Besides the indigenous inhabitants, people from Tibet, Burma, Thailand, West Bengal and Bangladesh have migrated into the region at various periods of history. Table 1 shows the details of Major Tribes in North-East India, state-wise.

Table 1: Major Tribes in North-East India

State	Major tribes
Arunachal Pradesh	Adi, Abor, Aka, Apatani, Nyishi, Galo, Khampti, Khowa, Mishmi, Momba, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Hrusso, Tagin, Khamba
Assam	Barmans in Cachar, Boro, Borokachari, Deori, Hojai, Kachari, Sonwal, Lalung, Mech, Miri, Rabha, Dimasa, Hajong, Singpho, Khampti, Garo
Manipur	Aimol, Anal, Angami, Chiru, Chothe, Gangte, Hmar, Kabui, Inpui, Rongmei, Kacha Naga, Liangmai, Zeme, Koirao, Thangal, Koireng, Kom, Lamgang, Mao, Maram, Maring, Any Mizo (Lushai), Tribes, Monsang, Moyon, Paite, Purum, Ralte, Sema, Simte, Suhte, Tangkhul, Thadou, Vaiphui, Zou, Poumai Naga, Tarao, Kharam, Any Kuki tribes, Mate,
Meghalaya	Khasi, Jaintia, Synteng, Chakma, Dimasa, Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam, Any Kuki tribes, Lakher, Man (Tai Speaking), Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, Mikir, Any Naga tribes, Pawi, Synteng, Boro Kacharis, Koch, Raba, Rava
Mizoram	Chakma, Dimasa (Kachari), Garo, Hajong, Hmar, Khasi and Jaintia, (Including Khasi, Synteng or Pnar, War, Bhoi or Lyngngam), Any Kuki tribes, Lakher, Man (Tai-speaking), Any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, Mikir, Any Naga tribes, Pawi, Synteng, Paite
Nagaland	Naga, Kuki, Kachari, Mikir, Garo
Sikkim	Bhutia (including Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa, Yolmo), Lepcha, Limboo, Tamang
Tripura	Bhil, Bhutia, Chaima, Chakma, Garoo, Halam, Bengshel, Dub, Kaipeng, Kalai, Karbong, Lengui, Mussum, Rupini, Sukuchep, Thangchep, Jamatia, Khasia, Kuki

(Source: Annual Report, 2013-2014, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India)

Researchers found that Assam with 55 languages, Gujarat 48, Maharashtra 39 and West Bengal 38 are among the most linguistically diverse States. “As per the 2011 Census, there are about 122 languages spoken by more than 10,000 people. Of them 22 are the scheduled languages. Other than the 122 languages,

the survey has come up with languages that are spoken by less than 10,000 people many from tribal areas, nomadic communities and from the interiors of north-eastern part of the country,” as noted by G.N. Devy (President of People’s Linguistic Survey of India).

Arunachal Pradesh is the richest among the states with 90 languages. Work on the independent survey, now in its final stages, has so far thrown up interesting results. For instance, it has been found that West Bengal has the highest number of scripts at nine, according to G.N. Devy.

Arunachal Pradesh is home to numerous tribes who speak a wide variety of languages. The pristine beauty in the region, each place reflects a wild splendor and each community of people seem to be the kindest and most generous in this world. Indeed, it will be shame if these unique languages and cultures are lost. Along with the loss of language and culture mankind misses out on the unique essence of wisdom embodied within these languages and culture. Loss of language and culture is tantamount to loss of human knowledge.

It has been noted that 36 languages of Arunachal Pradesh are on the verge of becoming extinct very soon. The reason could be because there is lack of proper documentation or the dearth of carriers of the old legacy. There has been no effort initiated to save some of the languages including Koro, Nath, Tangam, Bugun, Meyor and Miji. These languages have found place in UNESCO's list of 196 endangered languages throughout the world. In the list, smaller communities like *Meyor* and *Bugun* face the biggest threat. Even languages of largely populated tribal groups like *Adi*, *Galo* and *Nyishi* have been categorized as unsafe by UNESCO.

It is an irony to note that efforts to save these dying languages are minimal. The languages of small communities like Meyor and Bugun face the biggest threat. Dwindling population coupled with the onslaught of Hindi and Assamese languages are gradually giving slow death to these unique languages. According to the UNESCO (2009) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* data, 36 languages of Arunachal Pradesh have been identified as endangered. What is worrying is that even languages of largely populated tribal groups like *Adi*, *Galo* and *Nyishi* too have been categorized as unsafe by UNESCO due to the heavy influence of Hindi language.

Of the endangered languages of Arunachal Pradesh, Koro stands out as it is spoken by only 800 people in the state and most of the speakers are younger than 20. Koro adds just one entry to the list of 6,909 languages worldwide. Koro was identified by a group of Indian language surveyors' way back in 2003 but the discovery did not surface till now. The surveyors also discovered Aka and Miju, languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. According to K David Harrison, Koro must be preserved since it is a source of the knowledge. It is believed that a language becomes extinct every two weeks. By 2100, it is estimated that more than half of the 6,910 languages spoken on earth will vanish.

While other North Eastern ethnic groups like Mizo, Naga, Manipuri (both tribals and Meitei), Khasi, Bodo, Mishng and

others have managed to safeguard their language and culture, sadly the tribal groups of Arunachal have miserably failed on that account. “Historically Mizo, Naga, Manipuris and to a certain extent Boro’s have all fought strongly for their cultural and linguistic identity. But they seem to have taken people of Arunachal for granted and therefore is not serious about saving unique tribal languages,” says Scott C Delancey, Head, Department of Linguistic, Oregon University, USA.

Language Policies in India

India has been a crucible of language conflict and contrary to the state building efforts in other empires, India remains a linguistic mosaic. The UNESCO Atlas identifies 196 languages that are endangered in India, which comprise 84 languages that are ‘unsafe’, 62 languages that are ‘definitely endangered’ and 6 and 35 languages that are respectively ‘severely’ and ‘critically’ endangered

(Table 2). There are apprehensions that languages worldwide are disappearing at an unprecedented rate. While this has implications for cultural identities and knowledge systems, members of a language group must be aware of the factors that lead to language demise for them to make informed decisions about measures that ensure language continuation into the future.

As per facts revealed by UNESCO, India tops the list of countries having maximum number of dialects on the verge of disappearance. With 196 of its languages listed as endangered including around 80 in the Northeast, India is closely followed by the US which stands to lose 192 languages and Indonesia, where 147 are in peril. However, the Indian Government says UNESCO has put certain dominant Indian languages within the endangered category (Table 3).

Table 2: Countries with the Most Endangered Languages

Country	Degree of Vitality					Totally endangered
	Unsafe	Definitely endangered	Severely endangered	Critically endangered	Extinct	
India	84	62	6	35	9	196
USA	11	25	32	71	53	192
Brazil	97	17	19	45	12	190
Indonesia	56	30	19	32	10	147
China	41	49	22	23	9	144
Mexico	52	38	33	21	-	144
Russian Federation	21	47	29	20	19	136
Australia	17	13	30	42	6	108
Papua New Guinea	24	15	29	20	10	98
Canada	24	14	16	32	2	88

Source: UNESCO (2009)

Table 3: Distribution of Endangered Languages in India as per number of Speakers

Degree of Vitality	Data not available	Zero to 5,000	5,000 to 10,000	10,000 to 20,000	20,000 to 50,000	50,000 to 1,00,000	Above 1,00,000	Total
Extinct	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	9
Critically endangered	4	22	2	4	2	1	-	35
Severely endangered	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	6
Definitely endangered	4	19	8	6	6	4	15	62
Unsafe	3	4	5	3	22	12	35	84
Total	11	60	15	13	30	17	50	196

Source: UNESCO (2009)

Surprisingly the UNESCO's assessment includes Meitei (Manipuri), Khasi and Mizo, which are the main languages of the states of Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The UNESCO list needs to be seen as an indication of trends rather than as an accurate fact sheet. We need our own assessment. It is an irony to note that there has been no proper enumeration of languages in India for nearly a century. The last comprehensive exercise was carried out by George Grierson, an Irish linguistic scholar who carried out the first linguistic surveys in India between 1894 and 1928, listing 189 languages and several hundred dialects.

The Government of India has initiated a scheme known as "Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India". The Mysore-based Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) works on the protection, preservation and documentation of mother tongues/languages of India spoken by less

than 10,000 speakers, depending on the degree of endangerment. The UGC recently created Centers for Endangered Languages in 9 central universities and 11 state universities. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has recognized the Baroda-based Bhasha Research Centre as a centre of excellence. Also, according to G.N. Devy, the Census of India has started a rapid survey of mother tongues.

It is depressing to know that an accurate picture of the country's languages does not exist. Moreover, the Census of India counts speakers rather than languages and does not recognize languages with less than 10,000 speakers as languages at all and just groups them as 'others' under major languages. Because of this, the languages that are at risk are the ones which are being ignored. The divide between major and minor languages and the official sidelining of the latter which is enshrined in the VIII

schedule of the Indian Constitution has also resulted in a power struggle among linguistic communities to the detriment of the weak. Currently an expandable list of 22 scheduled languages obliges the state to help the languages prosper and make official documents available in them. The development of non-scheduled languages on the other hand, requires no such obligation.

In India, which is linguistically an extremely diverse country, there emerges several issues in respect of evaluating government policies towards minority languages. First, there exists a lack of definitional clarity between what constitutes 'majority' and 'minority' language as Hindi, the official language of the Union of India, is the language of only about two-fifths of the total population of India. In 2002, the Supreme Court decided that the operative unit in respect of determining who belongs to a minority within the meaning of Article 30 will be the state and not the whole of India.

Further, the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution specified 14 major languages of India and it was deemed necessary in the interest of the educational and cultural advancement of the country that concerted measures should be taken for the full development of these languages. Eight more languages were included in the Schedule in subsequent years - Sindhi (1969), Konkani, Manipuri and Nepali (1993) and Bodo, Dogri, Maithili and Santhali (2003). As per the 2001 Census, these scheduled languages are utilized by

96.6% of the population of India. In addition to the 22 scheduled languages, there exist about 100 non-scheduled languages having a minimum of 10,000 speakers. Besides these two categories, there exist numerous other languages and dialects in India.

The Constitution enabled the Parliament to create new states and underlying the major reorganization of the states of India in 1956 (and in subsequent years) was the rationale that linguistic minorities be offered adequate opportunities for political and economic growth to ensure that there is no feeling of discrimination or neglect. These 29 states of India have the power to legislate their own official languages. It is a pity to note that there has been no attempt to track the inventory of languages in the country and their conservation - the last proper survey was the Linguistic Survey of India conducted between 1894 and 1928, under the direction of George A. Grierson, an official of the Indian Civil Service which identified 364 languages and dialects at that time.

Media Interventions in Preservation of Endangered Languages

While endangered languages continue to reel under the pressure of being extinct, the need to create awareness and preservation on endangered languages becomes all the more pertinent. The media could play an important role in this aspect as it is believed that media representational practices shape and affect

public perceptions. It is surprising how little attention is paid to the loss we could have due to extinction of languages. In the mainstream politics and media, there is hardly any discussion on the rich cultural reserves and heritage we have in the form of languages and how fast this reserve is being depleted. The media seems to be a silent spectator to our understanding of language endangerment.

It is seen that by and large news articles often present only the numericals regarding the rate of language loss which is seen as more urgent to linguists than to the general public. Furthermore, when the media portray the need to preserve the death of language it does not include the necessity of empowering cultural groups and to link the issue more clearly to the cause of language endangerment. While the media point to the events of history or the policies of prior governments as the primary cause of language extinction, this rightly underscores how policies of inequality have historically affected languages of indigenous groups in particular. Moreover, media do not evaluate present day policies that might perpetuate such inequalities between groups.

The media view language loss as something trivial and instead place the fate of languages within a broader context of modernization which implies that minority languages have no other alternatives except succumb to the powerful forces of globalization. The global media particularly consider

language extinction as inevitable as it sees the prevalence of English as increasingly dominant and essential in a global environment. This necessarily means that any attempt at mitigating language loss through government policy or grassroots efforts seems futile in the face of these powerful forces. The media need to relook at the way how it reports endangered languages. It should give the public or politicians enough information to frame sound policies on language preservation and revitalization.

While there are disagreements among language experts about how actively governments should be involved in the promotion and protection of endangered languages, there is an apprehension that the public is not well informed about the plight of the endangered languages and the advantages of language diversity. It is in this aspect the mass media could be very instrumental in meaningfully educating the people on the importance of language preservation. Nettle and Romaine (2000) assert that the situation that is most often confronted is that of 'neglect' and according to them language extinction is a fact of modern life and most revitalization efforts is rather too late or unrealistic in the face of globalization.

People seem to be indifferent to language loss or extinction particularly in the North-East. Moreover, the national or the regional media do not consider endangered languages worthy of being important as this may not earn them any

TRPs or increase circulation. The country boasts of hundreds of TV channels, thousands of newspapers, community radio stations, yet an effort in communicating the people on endangered languages remain a distant endeavor. When a language dies, the knowledge of a culture, customs, oral traditions and other inherited knowledge are no longer transmitted among native speakers. As each language dies science in linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology loses some diversity in data sources.

Conclusions

Language loss leads to the irrevocable loss of cultural heritage of a particular community. Thus, endangerment of languages raises concerns not only among linguists but to the general public as well. The loss of each

language reduces the linguistic diversity regardless of the reasons why people abandon their language and adopt another language. There is an urgent necessity to preserve and document endangered languages because each language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity. While language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional or cultural identity, it is the repository of the history and beliefs of a community. Moreover, language embodies a fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, ecology and a host of other areas. As each of these is dynamic and constantly reshapes through the behaviors of the population with which it is associated, bemoaning ancestral traditions alone may not be sufficient. It remains unclear why there is not much of an effort to preserve and revitalize endangered languages.

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