

Endangered Languages: Some Concerns

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A recent UNESCO report indicates that India has the largest number of endangered languages in the world. A matter of concern, besides the absolute numbers, is the distribution of these endangered languages across number of speakers. The languages under threat include both scheduled, non-scheduled as well as official languages of some of the states. Policies for protecting and promoting the entire range of endangered languages are needed if the linguistic diversity of India is to be preserved.

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (2009), the third in the series, presents a grave picture of the world's languages which are extinct or are on the verge of extinction.¹ The report (the Atlas from here on) provides updated data on about 2,500 endangered languages, which are classified on the basis of several criteria into five different levels of vitality: unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. It states that out of the approximately 6,000 existing languages in the world, more than 200 have become extinct during the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 are severely endangered, 632 are definitely endangered and 607 are unsafe.

The Atlas series is the outcome of an initiative by UNESCO to promote and preserve the world's linguistic and cultural diversity by safeguarding languages in danger of disappearing. It unanimously adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity at its 31st session held in October 2001, which recognised the relationship between biodiversity, cultural diversity, and linguistic diversity. To generate and disseminate knowledge on endangered languages and to foster cooperation between local, regional, national and international organisations, UNESCO set up the ad hoc expert group on endangered languages in 2003. This group identified six factors to develop a language vitality and endangerment framework, i.e., intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, proportion of speakers within the total population, shifts in domain of language use, response to new

domains and media and materials for language education and literacy. Three more factors were added later: governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, community members' attitudes towards their own language and type and quality of documentation (UNESCO 2009).

The Atlas provides fairly detailed information on the status of endangered languages in 155 countries. Though India has the largest number of endangered languages (196), the US reports the largest number of languages (53) that have become extinct from the 1950s (Table 1). The latter also has the largest number (71) of languages that are critically endangered.

Need for Linguistic Diversity

Language is critical to such basic mental processes such as thinking, understanding and even dreaming. Arguments for preserving linguistic diversity in terms of protecting and promoting languages and providing linguistic rights can be classified into three broad streams, viz, identity-based, justice-based and diversity-based arguments.

Identity-Based: Language is not simply a tool for communication but is a central and defining feature of identity as all human thoughts are conceptualised through a language and all human values are pronounced and perceived through it. It follows that since language is a significant factor in building one's identity, it must be preserved. People identify with the (local) community of speakers of their language, recognise one another as members of the same group on the basis of language, and have a more or less settled desire that the group should survive and flourish into

Table 1: Countries with the Most Endangered Languages

Country	Degree of Vitality					Total Endangered
	Unsafe	Definitely Endangered	Severely Endangered	Critically Endangered	Extinct ¹	
India	84	62	6	35	9	196
US	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

(1) From the 1950s.

Source: Constructed from data in UNESCO (2009).

the indefinite future (Patten 2001: 697). Arguing for a policy of language protection, May suggests that language is a constitutive and significant factor in one's identity formation and provides their speakers with a sense of individual as well as collective forms of linguistic identity (May 2003: 141).

Justice-Based: Language is the most important tool of participation in the polity of the state and not being able to speak in the dominant language (or languages) of

Diversity-Based: The last argument for the preservation of linguistic diversity is that this diversity is a value and provides alternatives to choose from different cultures representing different systems of meanings and vision of good life as none can claim to have achieved this in totality (Parekh 1995: 205). Further, it has been argued that each language is itself a manifestation of human creativity which has value independent of its use and also that it is a human accomplishment and end in itself (Reaume 2000: 250).

Table 2: 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: Constructed from data in UNESCO (2009).

Table 3: Government Attitude towards Languages

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes towards Language
Equal support	5	All of a country's languages are viewed as assets and protected
Differentiated support	4	Non-dominant languages are explicitly protected primarily as languages of private domains. The use of the language is considered prestigious.
Passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
Active assimilation	2	There is no protection for minority languages and the government encourages assimilation to the dominant language.
Forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognised nor protected.
Prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

Source: UNESCO (2003): *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, document submitted by UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme for Safeguarding Endangered Languages, Paris, 10-12 March.

a state can have a serious impact on an individual's employment, educational and recreational opportunities. This leads to discrimination and injustice. Supporting the policy of "official multilingualism" as one based on egalitarianism, Patten asserts "that the same kinds of valuable institutional spaces and resources that are made available to speakers of one language in the community ought to be at the disposal of speakers of other languages as well" (Patten 2001: 710). Unequal linguistic endowment in the form of ability to speak or not speak the dominant language can be the source of interpersonal injustice and every citizen should possess the right to mobilise support for a language community or policies that he or she considers a collective or public good (Laitin and Reich 2003: 103).

Linguistic diversity is, therefore, essential to the human heritage with each and every language embodying the unique cultural and historical wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is an irrevocable loss for all humanity.

The Indian Situation

The Atlas identifies 196 languages that are endangered in India, which comprise 84 languages that are "unsafe", 62 languages that are "definitely endangered" and six and 33 languages that are respectively "severely" and "critically" endangered (Table 2). Nine languages – Ahom, Aimol, Andro, Chairel, Kolhreng, Rangkas, Sengmai, Tarao and Tolcha – have become extinct in India from the 1950s. Though these endangered languages are spread across the entire country there is some degree of concentration, with

many of these languages being located in the north-east as well as the tribal belts of West Bengal and Orissa and in Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand. These languages are also diverse in terms of the number of speakers, who range from zero to 27.14 lakhs (Gondi) as per the 2001 Census.

Besides the aspect of having the highest number of endangered languages, the distribution of these 196 languages as per the number of speakers is also a matter of concern. In the two categories with the least degree of vitality, that is, "critically" and "severely" endangered, 28 out of 37 languages (75%) have less than 5,000 speakers (Table 2). In the same two categories 92% of the languages have less than 20,000 speakers. On the other hand, in the category which has the highest vitality within the endangerment schema, viz, "unsafe", about 85% of languages have more than 20,000 speakers.

The Atlas incorporates the "absolute number of speakers" as one of nine factors in constructing its endangerment framework because a very small population is especially vulnerable to extinction as a result of both natural disasters such as earthquakes, epidemics or even tsunamis as well as man-made causes such as genocide or war. It is a matter for investigation as to whether the number of speakers in almost all the "critically" and "severely" endangered languages are so low because these languages are just advanced within the trajectory of becoming extinct or whether these languages had a very low number of speakers to begin with. In either case, there is clearly a need for the initiation of remedial policies to protect and promote these endangered languages.

Language Policies in India

The Atlas incorporates government policies towards non-dominant languages as one of the nine factors (titled "Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies including Official Status and Use") in constructing its endangerment framework. The government of a multi-lingual country may have an explicit language policy in which, at one extreme, all languages may receive equal official status or, at the other extreme, one language may be designated as the sole official language of the nation (Table 3).

In India, which is linguistically an extremely diverse country, there emerge 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.² 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 (Sengupta 2009).

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 utilised 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 of India enabled the Parliament to create new states and underlying the major reorganisation 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 28 states of India have the power to legislate their own official languages.

The 196 endangered languages in India, as identified by the Atlas, have been classified as between scheduled, non-scheduled and “others” categories in Table 4. Surprisingly, two languages included in the Eighth Schedule – Manipuri and Bodo – are endangered in terms of being “unsafe” (Table 4). Two-thirds of non-scheduled languages are also under threat to different degrees with half of them being “unsafe”, 14 “definitely” endangered and two “critically” endangered. Of the remaining 128 endangered languages that are neither scheduled nor non-scheduled, 33 are “critically” endangered.

Among the official languages of the states of India, seven – Ao, Angami, Chang, Khasi, Kheimnungan, Konyak and Manipuri – are endangered. There is clearly a need for re-evaluation and revamping of the existing policies in India towards non-dominant languages.

Conclusions

The specific nature of the federal framework in India and the formation of the states on the linguistic principle was an attempt to ensure the effective integration of linguistic minorities into the economic, political, social and cultural mainstream. In fact, the disparate economic performance of the states over the past 25 years has actually resulted in the linguistic “minority” states performing better than the “majority” states (Sengupta and Kumar 2008).

The analysis in the preceding sections, however, also suggests that a large number of the smaller “minority” languages are threatened and these include scheduled and non-scheduled languages as

well as the official languages of some states. There is a need for immediate initiation of policies for protecting, revitalising and promoting the entire range of endangered languages if the linguistic diversity of India is to be preserved. A coordinated mechanism has to be created which needs to operate at the level of both the centre and states with clearly delineated roles for the two-tiers of government. The state governments also have to show greater initiative in evolving targeted and effective programmes that encourage greater involvement of local governments in each state.

NOTES

- 1 UNESCO published the first *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* in 1996. A second, updated English edition of the Atlas was commissioned by UNESCO in 1999 and appeared in 2001, which lists, region by region, some 800 endangered languages.
- 2 Statement IV, Census of India 2001. Hindi (41.03%) is followed by Bengali (8.11%), Telugu (7.19%), Marathi (6.99%) and Tamil (5.91%).

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Table 4: Categorisation of Endangered Languages in India

Degree of Vitality	Category			Total
	Scheduled	Non-Scheduled	Others	
Unsafe	2 ^a	50 ^b	32	84
Definitely endangered	–	14 ^c	48	62
Severely endangered	–	–	6	6
Critically endangered	–	2 ^d	33	35
Extinct ^e	–	–	9	9
Total endangered	2	66	128	196

(a) Bodo and Manipuri. As per the 2001 Census, there are 13.5 lakh Bodo speakers and 14.7 lakh Manipuri speakers in India.

(b) These languages are Adi (1,98,462), Anal (23,191), Angami (1,32,225), Ao (2,61,387), Balti (20,053), Bhumij (47,443), Bishnupuriya (77,545), Chakru (83,560), Chang (62,408), Dimasa (1,11,961), Gondi (27,13,790), Hmar (83,404), Ho (10,42,724), Kabui (94,758), Karbi (4,19,534), Kharia (239,608), Khasi (11,28,575), Khezha (40,768), Kheimnungan (37,755), Koda (43,030), Konyak (2,48,109), Korku (5,74,481), Korwa (34,586), Kui (9,16,222), Ladakhi (1,04,618), Liangmei (34,232), Lotha (1,70,001), Lushai/Mizo (6,74,756), Maram (37,340), Maring (22,326), Mundari (10,61,352), Nissi (2,11,485), Nocte (32,957), Paite (64,100), Phom (1,22,508), Pochury (16,744), Rabha (1,64,770), Rengma (61,345), Sangtam (84,273), Savara (2,52,519), Sema (1,03,529), Sherpa (18,342), Tamang (17,494), Tangkhul (1,42,035), Tangsa (40,086), Thado (1,90,595), Tulu (17,22,768), Wancho (49,072), Yimchungru (92,144) and Zemi (34,110). The figures in the parenthesis are the number of speakers of the language as per the 2001 Census.

(c) These languages are Deori (27,960), Gangte (14,500), Juang (23,708), Khond (1,18,597), Coorgi (1,66,187), Kinnauri (65,097), Koch (31,119), Kolami (1,21,855), Kom (14,673), Konda (56,262), Lepcha (50,629), Limbu (37,265), Malto (2,24,926) and Miri (5,51,224). The figures in the parenthesis are the number of speakers of the language as per the 2001 Census.

(d) These languages are Gadaba and Parji which, as per the 2001 Census, were spoken by 26,262 and 51,216 persons, respectively.

(e) From the 1950s.

Source: Constructed from data in UNESCO (2009) and Census of India (2001).