

Centering *Bhasha* (Indigenous Languages): An Ecolinguistics Perspective

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Abstract

The 21st February is celebrated as the International Mother Language Day to commemorate the sacrifice of Bangladeshis who struggled to keep their mother tongue (Bangla) alive. The day is also celebrated to mark respect for world's indigenous languages (*Bhasha*), which are on the verge of decline and demise. Notwithstanding the fact that, increasingly, English has gained most of the linguistic ground world over, the tacit and now most vocal resistance to 'English imperialism' is witnessed in at least the third world countries like India and its neighbors. In fact, because of extraordinary intervention of ICT and virtual world promoters like social media, the question of English has come to be the Shakespearian question in *Hamlet*; "to be or not to be". The moot point is, should we resign and accept English as *fait accompli* or to think of alternative ways to turn 'English advantage' to our side without denying the fact that indigenous languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. As far as English in multilingual, multicultural and multireligious context like that of India is concerned, one must remember that language is a cultural product and also the potent vehicle to transit culture. Language is not only the medium but also the creator of thoughts and truth. These functions of language are necessarily associated with one's mother tongue as these are the markers of one's identity. Indian philosopher of language Bharthari (570 AD) said that language constructs our world; *jagat sarvein sabdein bhashatei* (we take cognizance of the world through language). Therefore construction of meaning is at the centre of language use, which is manifested through literature resulting in *gyan* (knowledge) and *anand* (bliss), the twin objectives of literature obtainable through indigenous literature created in mother tongues. The dwindling ecological diversity and declining linguistic diversity are the two greatest challenges before the world in modern times. The following research article discusses why we should care for promoting linguistic diversity (*Bhasha*) and solutions thereof.

Keywords: Language, Literature, Culture, Thought, Linguistic Diversity, Indigeneity

Introduction

As community of human beings, we are confronted with two major challenges; dwindling ecological diversity and declining linguistic diversity. Ecological balance is essential for our biological survival; similarly linguistic diversity is essential for our cultural and cognitive survival and growth. The declining linguistic diversity in Indian context is worrisome because India has always been known for its linguistic and cultural diversity. According to the 23rd edition of *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (<https://www.ethnologue.com/ethnologueblog/garysimons/welcome-23rd-edition>), there are 7117 living languages world over. The linguistic statistics of India are quite interesting and at the same time a matter of concern. *Ethnologue* (<https://www.ethnologue.com/country/IN>) lists India as home for 460 established languages, 447

living languages, 13 extinct languages, 419 indigenous languages, 64 institutional languages, 122 developing languages, 111 languages in trouble and 14 dying languages.

The figures given by People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), a massive project of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Baroda (Gujrat, India) are still more startling; there are approximately 780 living languages in India, out of which 1/5th indigenous languages have disappeared in the last five decades. Prof. Ganesh Devy, the Chairperson of PLSI asserts that these Indian indigenous languages are crucial for the effective development of fragile communities and for stemming the erosion of India's diverse multilingual and composite heritage. According to American linguist Michael Krauss (1934-2019) the rate at which things are going, the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages. According to the Foundation for Endangered Languages (England based organization), over half the world's languages are moribund i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation.

Linguistic diversity and indigenous languages

Are we doing enough to preserve and sustain linguistic diversity? Is not the world (particularly India) gradually moving, knowingly or unknowingly towards a monolingual/ unilanguage situation? The majority of Indian indigenous mother languages are termed as dialects (*boli*). Since the distinction between language and dialect is arbitrary, the actions to maintain linguistic diversity become biased, dillydallying and despirited.

The world celebrates the 21st February as International Mother Language Day to commemorate the sacrifice made by Bangladeshis for saving their mother language (Bangla), also the day is celebrated for centering (reestablish/mainstream) such indigenous languages or so called 'dialects'. This can be done by understanding the role of mother language in a person's life and its relationship with so called modern international languages like English and others.

The overarching point - the need to center *Bhasha* can be answered by understanding the binary of medium v/s meaning. Which should be the hero, medium or meaning? The choice is difficult but ultimately meaning has to be the hero. Besides being a semantic entity, meaning refers to the core function and nature of language. Language is an enigmatic subject. Language in its mundane sense is a medium of communication; but more importantly language is a cultural product, repository of heritage and indigenous knowledge and most importantly an instrument of thought. These perspectives on *Bhasha* point toward its indigeneity which has been an area of research and discussion for philosophers like Indian grammarian Bhartrhari (570 AD), Soviet linguist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), Indian philosopher Adi Shankracharya (700 AD), Austrian British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), American linguist Noam Chomsky (1928) and British linguist David Crystal (1941). They have defined language and its functionality in terms of the aforesaid perspectives. That is why the phenomenon of language particularly indigenous languages is psychological, sociological and anthropological in nature.

The nature and essentiality of a language is best manifested in literature. Literature is interface of *bhav* (emotions) and *vichar* (ideas) and the objective is to foster *rasa* (pleasure) and *anand* (bliss). Now it is the *Bhasha* or the indigenous languages which have the capacity to create the aforesaid idea of literature. Mother language is the natural source of literature as defined above. Therefore one develops depth and seriousness of ideas in one's mother language. Bhartrhari has also said that *jagat sarvein shbdein bhashayatei* (we take cognizance of the world through words). Language constructs our world. Even Tatriya Upanishad proclaims that language

is the mother of ideas and ideas are the father of language. These seminal voices established the quintessential role of mother language in a person's life.

Mother language offers *atamsamman* (self respect) and *swabhimaan* (self-esteem). According to Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), every word has life (sense, sound and thought), and words are not mere symbols of communication. Such an understanding of words and meanings can be found in the lexicon of *Bhasha* languages. But words of today's 'social media driven life' are lifeless and dilute in nature.

Importance of *Bhasha*

Indian linguist Rabindranath Srivastava (1936-1992) describes *Bhasha* as language of mother; language of cradle. Child constructs its *bhashai bodh* (linguistic cognition) and *jeevan bodh* (life cognition) through mother language. Mother language is language of road, market and wider social life using which an individual connects with ideas, traditions, culture and community history. The celebrated Hindi poet Bhartendu Harishchander (1850-1885) has described the importance of *Bhasha* (mother language) vis-à-vis modern languages like English in the following words;

“nij bhasha unnati aha, sab unnati ko mool; binu nij bhasha gyan kei, mitei nay hiya ko seel; angreiji padh kei jadpi’ sab gun hot prveen, pai nij bhasha gyan kei; rahat heen kei heen”

(root of all progress is one's own mother language, one may become skillful by studying English but in the absence of knowledge of mother language, one remains poor of the poor)

Today's virtual world has taken over virtuosity. The words like *sahitya* (literature), *bhasha* (language), *vichar* (idea), *arth* (meaning) have been rendered meaningless or lost their original essence. The moot point is; how can we center (re-establish) *Bhasha* in a medium driven society of 'fast forward data hungry creatures'. Since English rules the world, local and indigenous languages are being decimated by relegating them to the status of dialects.

As quoted in David Crystal's book *Language Death* (2009), Australian linguist Stephen Wurn (1922-2001) says that many languages in danger of disappearing today would not be in this position if it were not for the attitudes of most speakers of the large metropolitan languages with whom they are in contact, with most of those firmly believing that monolingualism is the normal and desirable state for people to be in and which, in consequence put the speakers of such endangered languages at disadvantage regarding their own language.

The indigenous people's narratives have been found to be authentic and truthful. The national histories of a diverse nation like India have to be necessarily constructed on people's narratives which are not only the carriers of our past but also state future vision of the world and life. Unlike the written narratives which are subjected to the test of truth and objectivity, oral narratives are self sustainable because their language, form and structure are not barriers to their construction. There is dire need to preserve and disseminate history embedded in cultural memories of all indigenous communities. British linguist David Graddol (1953-2019) in his book *English Next* (2006) asserts that the future of English cannot be bright at the cost of indigenous languages. In Indian multilingual and multi cultural context, oral literature crosses language borders.

Current technology shift has redefined knowledge creation, storage and dissemination and it has affected our cognitive processes. As a result indigenous languages are in a state of inertia or have become extinct. British linguist Roger Fowler (1938-1999) in his book *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism* (1982) recommends study of language of literature from a sociolinguistics perspective. He believed that all discourse is part of social structure. Globalization cannot be understood without putting indigenous life in perspective. Native contexts and narratives are getting extinct.

Mainstreaming (reestablishing) of *Bhasha* is important. Because linguistic diversity is essential for understanding the evolutionary thought processing of human species on earth. Mutual exchange of thoughts embedded in indigenous languages facilitates creation of knowledge societies. *Bhasha* facilitates interface of thoughts and cultures. Professor Bhalchader Nemade in his book *Nativism (Desivad)* (2007) asserts that no language is primitive in any sense and the spoken norm (for most of the indigenous languages) is not in any sense underdeveloped. Bhartrhari in his book *Vakyapadia* (5th Century CE) asserts that thought becomes clear by a study of different systems of thought; what points can possibly be contradicted by him who learns only his systems. Intellect acquires acumen by familiarity with different traditions. This has been uttered in the context of indigenous nature of languages because one gets well versed in parallel knowledge traditions embedded in these languages of indigenous communities.

Professor Leanne Hinton of California University says that loss of language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems; oral, literary and music traditions, environmental knowledge systems, cultural practices and artistic skills; destruction of diversity of knowledge systems must be stopped. It is very similar to what national poet of India Ramdhari Singh Dinkar (1908-1974) said:

“Jatyon ka sanskritik vinash tab hota hai, jab vei apni pramparayon ko bhulkr dusron ki pramparayon ka anukaran karnei lagti hain. Jab vei man hi man apnea ko heen aor dusron ko shreishth mankr mansik dasta ko sweichch sei swikar kar leiti hain. Parampririk aadan prdaan to sanskritiyon ka swabhavik dharma hai, kintu jahan parvah eik tarfa ho to vahan vahi kaha jayeiga ki eik jaati apni bhasha ko chhodkr dusron ki bhasha ko aona leiti hai aor usi mein tutlaane mein apna param gorav mannei lagti hai. Yah gulami ki prakashthaa hai kyonki jo jaati apni bhasha mein nahin sochti vah pramparaa sei chchut jaati hai aor uskei swabhimaan ka prchand vinaash ho jata hai”.

(The cultural demise of communities takes place when they start following other traditions forgetting their own. When they accept superiority of others and accept mental slavery voluntarily. Mutual exchange among cultures is a natural process, but if the exchange is one way, then what can be said is that a community deserts its own language and feel proud in babbling/stuttering in the second language. This is height of slavery, because the community which cannot think in its own language remains behind the traditions and its self respect gets completely destroyed.)

According to David Crystal, shift in economic pursuits can be a reason for language loss of lesser known and *Bhasha* languages but at the same time languages influence economy of a nation. According to ‘human capital theory, languages are an important resource of the workforce which can enhance productivity. Local languages are seen to be valuable because they promote community cohesion and vitality, foster pride in a culture, and give a community (workforce) self confidence. (*Language Death*, p. 31)

Most of the *Bhasha* languages are in the form of so called dialects (*boli*). Since the distinction between dialect and language is arbitrary and indeterminate, dialects in fact are languages with complexity and uniqueness of sounds, grammar and vocabulary. Most of the dialects have vanished or are vanishing leading to decimation of *Bhasha*. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is based on two principles; linguistic determinism (our language determines the way we think) and linguistic relativity (distinctions encoded in one language are not found in any other). *Bhasha* languages are to be studied and viewed through this hypothesis. The global trend towards standardization and unilanguage situation must be stopped and linguistic diversity to be preserved.

Kannada scholar M.M. Kalburgi (1938-2015) in his essay *Place of Indian Folklore in the 21st Century* writes that folk songs and indigenous narratives are vanishing because their ritual and agrarian contexts have vanished. The compulsion of modern times pretending to be more literate and knowledgeable have rendered a complete burial to oral mode of discourse. Ceylonese philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) in his article *The Bugbear of Literacy* (1947) proclaims that the functional literacy cannot be considered sole criterion for evaluating the total human potential. Cultures are never blanks; modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture. Indian linguist M.J. Warsi says that a language is more than a means of communication. It is a repository of a community's collective history and heritage.

Predominance of elite or so called modern international languages is unnecessary and unacceptable. Indigenous linguistic and cultural identity must be preserved and sustained. All academic and political attempts must be made to promote study of indigenous authors, thinkers and texts like Andal (alvar saint), Lal Ded (1320-1392), Narsinh Mehta (1414-1481), Sankardev (1449-1568), Gurunanak (1469-1539), Meerabai (1498-1556), Kabir Das (15th Century), Surdas (16th Century), Bulleh Shah (1680-1757), Pandit Lakhmichand (1903-1945), Shah Hussain (1538-1599), *Silapattikaram*, *Manimekhalai*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Jatakas*, *Panchtantra*, *Geet Govindam* etc.

Positive attitude towards one's mother language, self esteem boosting activities, storytelling sessions, drama groups, poetry reading sessions, folk performances, public speaking competition in vernaculars, strong literary tradition, more space in daily newspapers, research on indigenous texts/ authors/ contexts, indigenization of the texts and contexts and incorporate vernacular literature in English Language Teaching (ELT), revival of story tradition (katha pratha), prescribe autobiographies of great Indian strugglers like Rassundari Devi (1810-1899) (*Aamar Jiban*, 1876), promoting status of indigenous speakers within dominant community, economic prosperity of *Bhasha* speakers, increased presence of *Bhasha* speakers in educational systems, interventions of ICT/ technology, developing writing systems for indigenous languages etc could be some of the primary initiatives to check decline of indigenous languages.

Case Study of Haryanvi Language

In order to contextualize the aforesaid discussion on the need to center (reestablish) indigenous / mother languages, the case of Haryanvi language is presented here. Though Haryanvi is considered to be a dialect of Hindi language, but going by the history of Haryanvi, one discovers that the Haryanvi lexicon contains words from the following languages. This can also be construed that these languages borrowed words from Haryanvi and appropriated them. A few such examples are:

Vedic words: *aal, kaar, khr, khaari, goo, jani, jaar, naadi, pit, baan, samar, nanad, manaa, mahas, munj, reinu, jobbn*

Sanskrit words: *ambar, kot, cheer, chudaa, daya, jag, raj, sansar, ageitaa, osar, kag, kheip, chomaasaa, choon, byahtaa*

Prakrit words: *khijayya, taavei, khadaa, kuun, gaanth, ghav, raad*

Arabic words: *kafan, kasai, takrar, frar, firak, majal, hud, algojaa, alla, imaan, asool, ulaad, kali*

Persian words: *Aabru, gup, chugl, talak, tukka, dangal, pasang, peer, hukka, daanaa, tabeej*

Turkish words: *klgee, chogaa, jajam, kaabu, kartus, kudtaa, chakuu, top*

English words: *chimni, ticket, trunk, truck, bundal, boot, bank, bottle, master, muffler, rail, suite, order (aadr), pistol (pistol), compounder (kumpodr), college (kaaleij), girder (gaatr), time (teim), santri (santri)*

The word Hindi was used for the first time in 13th century as 'hindvi' by Persian poet Oofee. Even famous poet Amir Khusrow (1253-1325) in his Persian-Hindi dictionary 'Khalikbaari' uses 'hindvi' 30 times but Hindi 05 times, whereas the origin of Haryanvi goes back to Vedic times. Hence historically Haryanvi is much older to Hindi but due to the requirement of coded grammar, documented linguistics, lexicon, and established literary tradition, Haryanvi continues to be treated as a dialect. Infact Hindi is the urbanized form of north Indian dialects/ indigenous languages like Haryanvi and others. Even Haryanvi qualifies all the four criteria i.e. grammar, lexicon, linguistics and literary tradition; only difference is that these parameters are to be written down. Moreover the best test for functionality of any language is its literary manifestations. Pandit Lakhmichand and many more Haryanvi poets have composed seminal oral literature represented and performed through *swangs* (folk theatre) and *raginis* (folk songs). The range of themes covered in these oral renderings is very wide and comments on almost every aspect of life. A few examples are as following:

1. *“unch neech karmon sei hotei, yo veidon nei farmaya; janam jaat ka jor chlei na, karm hi badei batayaei”*

(according to Vedas, actions decide your upper or lower status in society, One's actions are taller than one's birth or caste)

2. *“Balmiki nai kraya karm bheel ka isliyei bheel kuhagya, shiksha laagi sapt rishiyon ki karan tapasya laagya; bheelaana aalaa kaam chhod diya maharishi ki padvi paagya; gyan vigyan shastr padhkei khud ramayan banyagya”*

(Valmiki was called a Bheel (a lower caste), because of his actions; out of his love for education he worshipped saints, and as a result after abandoning the job of a Bheel, he was conferred the title of a great saint; out of his self reading of science and knowledge texts, he created the great epic Ramayana)

3. *“Lakhmichand ratya kr hr nai, puri hogi aas teiri; satguru ji ki thal karei bin, na ho budhee paas teiri”*

(Lakhmichand worship the name of god, your wishes will be fulfilled; without the blessings of Guru, your intellect will not get through)

4. “*jeetei ji ka meil marei pai kiska dava ho sai, bakhat beetjaya gayee baat ka kei pachchtava hovei sai; khali maati padi rahi kei fayada lag karan main, royei tei koyei farak padei naa such ho sabr karan main; aadei badei badei oot digrgei too sei kon bichari, is din nai iksaar bana diyeei raja aor bhikhari*”

(the world is as far as we are alive, who can claim life after death; once the time is gone, no repent for the words said; just a mound of earth, no point in having affinities; weeping will not make a difference, patience will help; in this world the greatest rowdies and bad sons have gone away with the times, who you are; both king and pauper are alike on the day of death)

Having contextualized Haryanvi as one of the case studies of indigenous languages, should *Bhasha* be allowed to die or decline. Should not all such indigenous languages be preserved for posterity so that the cultural and traditional richness of the past be transferred to the next generation? The need to center (reestablish) *Bhasha* (all indigenous languages) is urgent and demands comprehensive action plan involving the surviving indigenous people using the concerned language.

Prof. Ganesh Devy is of the opinion that we need not to privilege scripts; English does not have a unique script of its own, all Indian indigenous languages are important. Moreover, in indigenous tradition, it is believed that knowledge is neither a privileged discourse nor a discourse of the privileged. Integrate multilingual and multicultural Indian context in curricula so that non-indigenous languages like English also become instrument of liberation of Indian mind and relocating Indian mind in its own native self.

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