

## A Study On The Preservation Of Indigenous Languages With Special Reference To North-East India

**Mr Deependra Sarma**  
HOD, English  
Rangapara College, Assam

**Miss Meghali Saikia**  
Research Scholar  
KKHSOU, Guwahati

### Abstract

The world's indigenous languages are under threat of disappearing, with one language dying every two weeks and many more at risk. The importance of languages cannot be undervalued. Preserving language is the preservation of invaluable wisdom, traditional knowledge and expressions of art and beauty. When a language dies, along dies the culture, knowledge and a way of life. The paper attempts to present about the diversity of languages in India specially North-east, the endangerment of several indigenous languages of the region, efforts of documentation and preservation of these languages and the urgency of taking a rearguard action.

**Keywords:** indigenous languages, preservation, death, endangerment, action

### Introduction:

India is one of the most linguistically rich countries. "Every language is a temple, in which the souls of those who speak it is enshrined" is a quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes which perfectly describes the sacred meaning a language has for its community. When we lose a language, it is a loss of an entire universe, including its cultural myths and rituals. Swami Vivekanand once said that language is the chief means and index of a nation's progress. For those of us whose native language has millions of speakers, it would be hard to imagine our language dying out in the near future. Max Farrell, a PhD student adds, "The more isolated a language in its family tree, the more unique information it contains and ultimately contributes to linguistic diversity." The Tausiro language and Resigaro language in the Amazon basin has only one speaker left.

UNESCO describes endangered languages as those whose speakers have disappeared or shifted to another language-usually the main language of a dominant group. Between 1950 and 2010, 230 languages were extinct, according to the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. According to the United Nations, "the world's indigenous languages are under threat of disappearing, with one language dying every two weeks and many more at risk".

**Reasons for Language Extinction and Death:**

Languages can die for number of reasons. Some have become extinct relatively quickly due to natural disasters, civil conflict and world wars. The political issues revolving around ethnicity and the hegemony of a particular community has seen the demise of the aboriginal languages of the Tripura state, which has triggered native communities to demand separate state. In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, language loss occurs mainly due to a lack of people speaking them. Other reasons may be the failure of the elders to teach the language to the younger generation. In other cases, native speakers feel like their language is inferior compared to that of another. Thus, they end up using another language instead of their own. The movement of people to urban areas can force people to learn the language of their new environment. Changing employment pattern favors majority language. Inter-marriage can also endanger the language and lead children to speak only the most common languages spoken between husband and wife. In addition, encroachment of materialism in traditional communities allowing spiritual, moral and ethical values being overshadowed by consumerism is another cause. The non-recognition of languages with less than 10,000 speakers by the Government has made it difficult for many languages to come under the ambit of many of the country's linguistic laws and policies. In areas with high insurgency, the native language is not understood by law enforcement agencies, leading a gap in communication.

In India, Hindi and English are the dominant languages. There are a large number of languages in India that are endangered and some are slowly going extinct. Andaman and Nicobar, a union territory of India tops the list with 11 critically endangered languages, mainly tribal dialects. Among the states, it is Manipur with seven languages, followed by Himachal Pradesh with 4 endangered languages. Andro and Sengmai, once spoken in some parts of Manipur, their users switched to Manipuri, the dominant language of the region. Experts stating that of the 300 languages that are there in the region, 70-80 have already slipped into the endangered category. These are the languages that need to be protected and preserved. Several linguists around the world are working on similar efforts. According to Dr Pangersenla Walling, linguistics expert from Nagaland University, out of the 187 endangered languages in India that are facing the threat of extinction, 64 are in the northeast. However, these efforts are not enough. More efforts should be made to use audio-visual to document languages since this particular medium allows researchers and language enthusiasts to understand a language even if they don't know the script. Other languages which are in an endangered state in Sikkim are Groma, Majhwar, Thulung and Yakha which have between 20,000 to 25,000 native speakers each. According to SIL Ethnologue, the number of speakers of Singpho, Tangsa and Tai Phake communities are 2500, 40100 and 2000 respectively. Until recently, UNESCO has put Asur, Birhor and Korwa in its list of the world's endangered languages with Birhor being categorized as 'Critically Endangered', with just 2,000 speakers left. The number of Bodo speakers in Assam declined to 4.53 per cent of the total population in 2011, from 4.86 per cent in 2001. There are many reasons as to why Indian languages are facing extinction. Indians do

not find it necessary to learn or write in their mother tongue. This means advanced knowledge is not produced in these languages. Therefore, other languages have essentially become languages of translation. Moreover, as the Indian government adopted Hindi as the official language of the Union Government, Hindi has inherited many Indian languages.

#### **The most common methods to protect languages:**

**Creating recorded and printed resources:** Linguists, anthropologists and committed citizens work to interview, record and document languages to preserve them via durable, physical media. These resources are published and preserved in libraries, academic institutions, museums and cultural centers. Languages like Sherdukpen, Bugun, Aka/Hruso, Koro, Miji, Bangru and Puroik/Sulung of the Bodic and Tani areas are largely undocumented and heading towards extinction.

**Teaching and taking language classes:** The proven method to ensure the survival of language is the development of schools that teach in languages of minority (tribal languages) which enables the speakers to preserve and enrich the language.

**Using digital and social media outlets:** The internet has connected rare language speakers with each other and with researchers. Even texting has helped formalize languages that don't have a set writing system. Native languages shall receive priority over other in the use in public media whether it is print and electronic media. A vast digital project on the lines of Project Tiger for preserving and growing India's endangered languages must be launched. Linguists and enthusiasts utilize social media channels, YouTube, and other platforms to create courses, share expressions or sayings that are fading from the repertoire, record Karaoke versions of traditional songs with printed lyrics to affordably preserve recorded audio, video and text of the target language.

**Using the Internet as a repository of the language:** It is used to catalog, store and translate the languages. New technologies are also in place for storing languages easily and have them translated for everyone who is interested to learn.

**Insist on speaking and studying your native language:** Groups, families and individuals can resist the urge to succumb to a dominant group's language and insist on speaking their native language. Among the Tai origin languages, Tai Turung and Tai Khamyang have reached a critical stage, even as there are lakhs of people from the Ahom community in Assam.

**Encouraging the younger generation to learn the language:** In communities where the culture and native language is endangered, teaching children, who are often more apt at picking up languages, will help protect and restore dying languages, instill a sense of identity and belonging and teach them to accept and be proud of their heritage and upbringing.

**Creating language surrounding:** Not speaking its own language can hurt a group's claim to special ethnic status. Parental generation should always interact and communicate with their children in their native language, encourage them to read books and watch movies in their native language, let them know the folk tales, folk songs and culture of their native language as well if they have a script of their language then they should be taught the alphabets of the native language.

**Protecting other languages:** Out of the 197 endangered languages, only Bodo and Meitei have official status in India, as they have a writing system. Such an Act forgets that most of our great scriptures and epics are part of an oral tradition, embossed into actual writing over centuries. Such methodologies should be reformed, granting greater recognition to oral traditions in different languages.

**Video recording the native speakers while talking:** This almost guarantees that the language is preserved since the recording can just be stored online for everyone to see.

**Encouraging universities to open degree programs or special courses for learning endangered languages:** Universities are also encouraged to provide funding to language experts who are interested in conducting research or preservation efforts for a specific endangered language.

**Education through the medium of mother tongue must be made mandatory:** Teaching mother tongue at the initial stages of education gives an impetus to the growth of mind and thought and makes children more creative and logical. It occurs around the world today in classrooms where children are punished or humiliated for using languages and dialects that deviate from an accepted standard. This situation can lead to the devaluation of a mother tongue and to its ultimate disappearance in the long term.

**All the business of the government should be held in people's language:** "Many local languages in Assam and the northeast are now confined to traditional rituals. These languages are spoken only during prayers or while performing cultural practices. But in day to day lives, there is hardly any use of these," said Dr Arup Kumar Nath, faculty member of Tezpur University.

**All the labels and manuals on the marketed products must be in the local languages:** There are developed countries like China, Japan, where the medium of communication is their own language. But we in India have cultivated this notion that English is 'gyaan ka bhandar' (pool of knowledge), and our own language are no good. This should not be the case. The government should try and maintain the labels and manuals in the local language so that learning one's own language becomes important for all.

**Inter-generational transmission of language must be encouraged:** There should be no discontinuation of parent to child transmission of language. Children in the family must be taught to

use mother tongue and respect it as it is their heritage. Languages like Pochury, Kuki and Chakhesang have less than 20,000 native speakers.

**Storytelling in native languages:** Audio-visual documentation of the important aspects of such endangered languages like storytelling, folk literature and history.

**Encourage Indian language publications, journals and children books:** we must accord a sense of dignity and pride to those who speak, write and communicate in their native language. More people should write poetry, stories, novels and dramas in Indian languages.

**We must eliminate artificial boundaries:** we must use a “natural order of the Creator” approach.

**We must work together:** whether it be as a family, a community, or on a national level, we must work together.

We must provide training and certification as well as must inform public opinion.

Moreover, major dialects should be given scripts so as to promote and upgrade them to the status of languages. The policy of the three- language formula should be revisited to promote regional languages. Dictionaries and learners’ books need to be written for every language and dialect spoken in the north-east.

#### **MAJOR STEPS TAKEN:**

1. Our Constitution, by way of Article 29(1), confers rights to protect one’s own language, script and culture, and Article 30 confers rights to minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.
2. **Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL)** was instituted by Ministry of Human Resource Development (Government of India) in 2013. The sole objective of the scheme is to document and archive the country’s languages that have become endangered or likely to be endangered in the near future.
3. University Grants Commission (UGC) provides financial assistance for creation of centers for endangered languages at Central and State Universities to undertake research projects.
4. The State government adopted the Multi-Lingual Education (MLE) programme in 2006 to address the issues of language barriers faced by tribal children.
5. Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) was established in 1969 to coordinate the development of Indian Language and it is under the administrative control of MHRD.
6. The Supreme Court has recently decided to make available its judgments in six Indian languages, which is a positive step in the direction of removing language barriers and ensuring equal access to justice. In the Rajya Sabha, a provision has been made for its members to express themselves in any of the 22 scheduled languages. The Finance ministry has decided to

conduct the examinations for employment in Regional Rural Banks in 13 regional languages, in addition to English and Hindi.

7. Adivasi Lives Matter (ALM), a social media based platform for Adivasi content tries to bring out their untold stories. Every Monday, ALM uploads an Adivasi “Word of the Week” on Instagram for the readers. They also conduct capacity building workshops for Adivasis and trains them to use mobile phones for article writing, photography, video creation. They also encourage women to participate.
8. The Sarbananda Sonowal-led NDA government is set to make the ability to speak and write in Assamese mandatory for people seeking state government jobs in Assam.
9. In Karbi Anglong, Khelma and in Nagaland, Yimchunger are among the languages that are facing threat of extinction at present but Dr. Arup Kumar Nath said young people from these regions still want to keep a hold on these old languages. “NEP has ushered in a ray of hope for Khelma and Yimchunger languages that hardly has around 5,000 and 85,000 speakers respectively,” Nath said.
10. Under the *2019 Year of Indigenous Languages*, UN Member States are encouraged to promote action in five main areas of the UNESCO *Strategy for the Safeguarding of Endangered Languages*:
  1. Increasing understanding, reconciliation and international cooperation.
  2. Creation of favorable conditions for knowledge-sharing and dissemination of good practices about indigenous languages.
  3. Integration of indigenous languages into standard-settings
  4. Empowerment through capacity building
  5. Growth and development through elaboration of new knowledge.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Languages are never static. They grow, shrink, transform, merge and sadly, die. Languages are the spark of a people, the bearing of cultures, and with their extinction we lose our collective purpose, self-determination and unique insights into human history and the evolution of language itself. With each missing piece, we are further from seeing the full picture. The 2% corporate social responsibility (CSR) limit should be encouraged to be spent on saving languages and crafts, documenting them and building accessibility tools. Saving a language isn't just a matter of recording words or phrases and digitizing them to be held in an online vault. Language is inherently about people, culture and identity. Culture travels in the spoken word. One shouldn't forget what happened in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) between 1948 and 1952. The Pakistani government ordained Urdu to be the sole official language and people decided to defy the law. Several agitations were held which even took a violent shape at some place and finally the Pakistani government was compelled to give Bengali its due status. We are not expecting a similar situation in our country but we are expecting a democratic approach towards a matter of people's concern.

There is still hope. A language like Bhil has showcased an 85% growth in speakers in the last 20 years. Probably one of the most notable languages that had a revival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is Yiddish due to rapid popularity of online forums in the 2000s. Therefore, we must incentivize the energetic younger generation to keep alive their mother tongues and dialects, and teach our children to love, protect and nourish the beautiful legacy of languages that we have received from our ancestors. The above mentioned practices would keep India's purported pluralism alive, giving it renewal.

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