
Project to document NE's endangered languages

Staff reporter

GUWAHATI, Nov 22 – An intelligent mix of community involvement and government support could possibly help revitalize some languages of the North-east, which face threats of being endangered, and worse, dying out. Research scientists Dr Gregory Anderson and Dr K David Harrison of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, told *The Assam Tribune* that the people of the region should appreciate the incredible diversity of languages and dialects, which they believe is also a common treasure of humanity.

At the end of a tour of Arunachal Pradesh, the duo who are part of Enduring Voices, a project to document endangered languages, agreed that there was a chance to revitalize some of the indigenous languages of the region, because people still took pride in their cultures and their languages.

Dr Anderson said that some of the endangered languages of the region could be described as having unique characteristics, including the nature of sound systems not found in nearby areas. "We have documented the Aka and Miji languages in some detail and found them very interesting," he said.

According to the researchers there was a great need for supporting such languages, because they enrich understanding not just about modes of communication, but help access information, that is equally valuable.

Revealing the importance of safeguarding languages, Dr Harrison remarked, "...when we lose a language, we lose centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, myths, mathematics, music, the unknown and the everyday."

He underlined the need for promotion of the languages in schools, because school age children were not being acquainted with their native tongues, ultimately leading to their disuse. "Significant shifts could be observed among schoolchildren, who are more familiar with other languages like Hindi or English," he noted.

As part of the project – a joint initiative of National Geographic Society and Living Tongues Institute – Dr Anderson and Dr Harrison with National Geographic Society photographer Chris Rainer are touring 'language hotspots' around the world documenting linguistic communities, which are dwindling with time.

The researchers have already identified areas of greatest endangerment and diversity of languages and the first map was published in October 2007 National Geographic magazine. Additional material would go into production of a two-dimensional thematic map and lesson plans for school students.

The project seeks to improve the social standing of the threatened languages by helping communities appreciate the intrinsic value of their languages, and fostering community-based efforts at language revitalisation.

As a goodwill gesture, the researchers today handed over a media kit comprising a digital video recorder, a digital still camera and a sophisticated sound recorder to the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University.

Ongoing efforts under the project would seek to raise understanding and awareness about the endangered languages of the North-east, for which ties have already been formed with the GU Linguistics Department. The project further envisages reaching out to various communities so that extensive documentation could take place at the community level.