

Vikram Sampath, biographer and historian at age 32

Three rarely photographed tribes of Kutch

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Business Standard

WEEKEND

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Brahmins in Mattur village in Karnataka (right), where Sanskrit is supposedly spoken; (below) Kachim, one of the few hundred speakers of Koro. A 2008 expedition by National Geographic's Enduring Voices Project began documenting Koro, which was previously unknown to linguists



SAGDER RAHARSHI/SHANA

In the hills of Arunachal Pradesh lives an isolated tribe that speaks a language that was hidden from the world till just about five years ago. Linguists stumbled upon Koro while researching two other little-known languages, Aka and Miji, in villages accessible only by climbing steep hills and crossing streams in bamboo boats. Koro has only 800-1,000 speakers, most of whom are older than 20 — a clear sign that the language is not being passed on to the young. It has no script. Koro has every factor it takes to become extinct, perhaps in a generation or two.

In the Andaman Islands, the population of the Great Andamanese is up from 43 in 2005 to over 50, but the number of people who can speak the language has shrunk to five. All the rest speak Hindi. The old language, which is really four languages (Jeru, Khora, Bo and Sare), has no future. The last speaker of Khora, Boro Sr, died recently. And before her died the last speaker of Bo, Boa Sr. Khora and Bo are now extinct.

In Kashmir, written on the walls in remote villages or on old Muslim graves, along with epitaphs in Persian, is a script which just about 10 people in India can read today and fewer still can write. Sharda came into being around the 8th century and was much in use in Kashmir till the first quarter of the 20th century. Today, it is almost gone.

The picture is grim — the predictions more so. UNESCO's *Atlas of World's Languages in Danger* (2009) listed India as the country with the largest number of languages in danger, at 196. It later revised it to 198. One of the "hotspots" where local languages are at high risk is Arunachal Pradesh. Linguists consider it a "black hole" due to little data on scores of

Mind your LANGUAGES

According to UNESCO, 198 of India's mother tongues are in danger. Venu Sandhu and Indulekha Aravind on what we may lose and what is being done about it

small tribes and their languages. "Many languages of India still await documentation. No one knows exactly how many," says K David Harrison, a National Geographic Society fellow and director of research at the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in the USA. It was a team of National Geographic's Enduring Voices Project (which documents endangered languages) that discovered Koro.

The phenomenon at work here is what sociologist Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916-99) called Sanskritisation: the effort by communities, tribes included, to follow the customs and practices of those above them in the caste hierarchy. This helps communities to move up the social ladder. One manifestation is the adoption of Hindi as the means of com-

munication. This is particularly true of languages that do not have a script or literature. In the absence of books, theatre and cinema, there is nothing to gain from learning the original language. This has pushed many a language into disuse.

For tribes, there is "prestige" associated with "other" languages like English and Hindi that promise economic mobility. There is also peer pressure to adopt the language of the larger, surrounding community and the political advantages of aligning with a larger group. Some experts think that "mixed" or inter-lingual marriages are also a factor, where the husband's mother-tongue is different from his wife's and they live in a third state, resulting in their child usually speaking the language of the third state or Hindi/English.

Behind the dwindling numbers are stories of loss of identity and worldview. Anvita Abbi,

professor of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, who has written the *Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language*, says it contains words which have no equal in Hindi or English but give perfect insight into the life of the island-dwellers. Like *theca*, which means "one who is intoxicated after drinking honey". There is a good reason this word exists. "A Great Andamanese can drink up to 1 kg of honey in one go," explains Abbi. Similarly, there is a word for "one who chews" or "one who returns after hunting" or "one who roams around." But these words and the worldview they represent are disappearing. Hindi is what the Great Andamanese speak. Children go to the Vivekananda School. Their parents, too, cannot recall the last time they themselves spoke in Great Andamanese.

The few Kashmiri Pundits who can read and write Sharda are hopeful that the younger generation will turn its attention to this ancient script, traces of which were also found in the archaeological remains of some idols in Afghanistan. V N Drabu, a Delhi-based scholar and retired history professor, is past 80. He can read Sharda, and learnt it when he was 65. "Till 70 years ago, Pundits would write horoscopes in Sharda. But now it's dead," he says. "It was the script judges used in courts. Financial records were also maintained in Sharda," adds Bhushan Lal, another elderly scholar in Delhi. "But migration and exodus from Kashmir took its toll on the script."

Organised and targeted efforts to revitalise these languages can take place only once the endangered languages are accurately identified. The wiry, bird-like figure of G Devi Prasada Sastry contrasts with the enormity of the task before him. As head of the Centre for Tribal and Endangered Languages at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, on Sastry's narrow shoulders rests

the task of drafting a White Paper on the language situation in each state, which details the status of each speech community and tells whether and to what extent a language is endangered — a little more than a day's work in a country with over 6,000 written mother-tongues. Ironically, in a country with such linguistic diversity, the last time this exercise was undertaken was during the Raj, in the Linguistic Survey of India (1894-1928).

The trigger is UNESCO's 2009 report. It created a stir in the media and in Parliament, though soon after its publication, members of a few language groups the atlas had pronounced extinct disputed the findings. Aimol, for instance, was listed as an extinct language, but incensed members of the community said there were at least 6,000 speakers in Manipur! The atlas was corrected.

This is not the only anomaly. Sastry, who can speak seven languages, introduces one of his assistants, Loveson Taraon of Khurungmul village in Manipur, and asks him to speak in his mother tongue, Taraon. He obliges. Taraon is a language classified by Unesco as critically endangered, meaning "the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently". But Taraon, who is in his 20s, is no grandparent, nor does he speak his language infrequently. It is the same with petite Neiboi Bapui Purum, another staff member at Sastry's institute, whose mother-tongue, Purum, is also supposed to be endangered. She faces light-hearted ribbing about her "endangered" status.

Sastry's team collects data, transcribes recordings and works to preserve endangered languages by developing a script and preparing picture glossaries and dictionaries. Since the launch of the project, the team has covered over 100 speech communities in the North-east, and is working in Orissa and Jammu & Kashmir. The original deadline of 2010 has passed but Sastry is confident the exercise will be over in 2012-13. Even his impending retirement in August does not perturb him. "My job is to keep the language alive, not just record it... If a language is lost, it is an intangible heritage that is lost forever," he says.

The Enduring Voices Project is trying to document and revitalise struggling languages with a new tool: talking dictionaries. "For these dictionaries, we record thousands of words and create a first-ever Internet presence for a small language that allows it to expand its voice and reach a global audience," says Harrison. The project is looking at Ho, a tribal language of India with about 1 million speakers but under pressure from more popular languages.

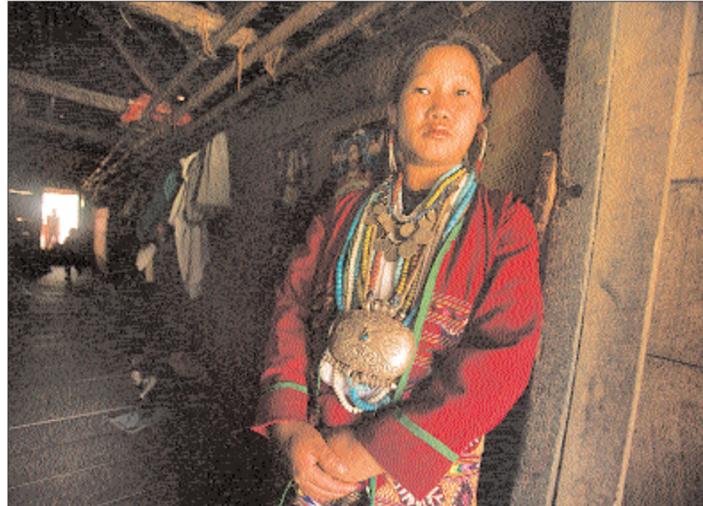
Ultimately, the effort to preserve a language has to come from its speakers. In picturesque Mattur village in the Shimoga district, 300 km from Bangalore, an attempt to preserve linguistic heritage is slowly losing steam. Mattur, on the banks of the Tunga, has a large community of Sanketi Brahmins. It was hailed in the media as a Sanskrit village, where most people not only know Sanskrit but use it in daily conversation.

The effort to revive Sanskrit dates to 1981, when Mattur's villagers greeted a Vishweshra Teertha swami of Udupi Pejawar Mutt by organising an entire programme in Sanskrit. The swami said he would give Mattur the title of "Sanskrit village" if they would work to promote the language, which they did, says M B Srinidhi, secretary of the local chapter of the Delhi-based Samskruta Bharati. Walking along the narrow lanes of the *aghararam* (the Brahmin part of the village) it is easy to imagine that Sanskrit is spoken here. In reality it is Sanketi, a mix of five languages, and Kannada that are used in conversation.

T N Gireesh, the 40-year-old headmaster of the Sharada Vilas High School and Samskrut Pathshala, says children's interest in Sanskrit is waning. "They are not as curious and enthusiastic as they used to be," he says, adding that people seem to have grown inured to Sanskrit after the first flush of enthusiasm, and that children now have other distractions. "Earlier, when we used to stage small skits to promote Sanskrit, people would be curious and watch, but that's no longer the case." At the school, Sanskrit words are introduced in classes I-IV, while sentences are taught from class V on. Children from surrounding neighbourhoods and from different religions and castes also attend the school. But though several boys summoned to the headmaster's room affirm that they enjoy learning Sanskrit and intend to live in the village and farm like their parents, a couple of girls outside say they will "drop" the subject after class VIII, when it is no longer compulsory.

Like humans, languages too seem to have a lifespan.

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VANISHING VOICES

Language	Area	Number of speakers
Great Andamanese	Andaman Islands	5
Jarawa	Andaman Islands	31
Onge	Andaman Islands	50
Sentinelese	Andaman Islands	50
Tangam	Arunachal Pradesh	100
Tai Rong	Arunachal Pradesh	100
Tai Nora	Arunachal Pradesh	100
Shompen	Great Nicobar Islands	100
Ruga	Meghalaya	100
Handuri	Himachal Pradesh	138
Na	Arunachal Pradesh	350
Mra	Arunachal Pradesh	350
Lamongse	Islands of Little Nicobar	400
Kundal Shahi	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir	500
Purum	Manipur	503
Koro	Arunachal Pradesh	800-1,000
Tarao	Manipur	870
Toto	West Bengal	1,000
Toda	Tamil Nadu	1,006
Mech	Assam and West Bengal	1,000

Source: Christopher Moseley, ed., *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edition, UNESCO Publishing, Paris 2010 (Some findings have been disputed)