

India's many dying words

SPEAKING IN TONGUES: The recent death of a 65,000-year-old Andamanese language has underlined the threat of extinction that hundreds of Indian tongues face, says **Tasneem Nashrulla**

Depending upon how you define what a language is, India has between 400 to 700 tongues.

Nearly 200 are dying.

The most recent loss came two weeks ago, when an 85-year-old woman called Boa Sr died. She was the last native speaker of Bo, one of the ten languages of the Great Andamanese tribe.

There was a related tragedy: Most Indians were probably not aware that such a language or community existed.

"Most of the smallest groups in the country are ignored in most official discourse for administrative convenience," said Dr Gregory Anderson, director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, a non-profit group in Oregon in the US, via e-mail.

"Many are found in the poorest and most underdeveloped or remote parts of the country, so they are peripheral to the popular experience, in both a literal and figurative sense," he said.

The death of Bo has exterminated a 65,000-year-old culture, bringing into focus the looming threat of extinction that hundreds of little-known languages in India face.

India has an official record of 400 distinct tongues, but the actual number may be 700, because not every language has been documented, according to National Geographic, a global scientific and educational organisation.

Of these, at least 196 are endangered, says UNESCO's 2009 edition of the *Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*.

But the problem is not peculiar to India. According to National Geographic, experts believe that more than half of the world's roughly 7,000 languages will vanish by the end of this century, at the rate of one language every two weeks.

The Enduring Voices project, a joint undertaking of the Living Tongues Institute and National Geographic, working with local communities around



■ Dr Gregory Anderson (extreme right) at work in Arunachal Pradesh, recording words and songs in the undocumented Miji language, a Tibeto-Burman dialect that has only about 4,000 speakers.

CHRIS RAINIER

the world to document and help prevent languages from becoming extinct, has identified India as a "language hotspot", i.e. an area where there are concentrations of diverse and poorly known endangered languages.

Of these, the most critically endangered ones are Jeru, of the Great Andamanese group, which has just seven speakers, and two from the Andamanese group: Jarawa, which has 250 speakers, and Onge, which has less than 100 speakers, said Anderson.

He explained that a dominant community expects a nearby tribe to learn its language, creating a power imbalance between the two languages and communities. "When negative values about the tribal person's language and identity are internalised by the com-

munity, their members abandon the language that marks them in this way, whenever possible," he said.

The Enduring Voices project works closely with the Ranchi and Guwahati Universities and the University of Hyderabad to create audio-visual recordings of words, sentences, stories and songs by tribal communities and develop multimedia tools to help the community revitalise their language. It also serves as a scientific record of the language. The government gives no money to these projects, which run on public donations and grants.

"You could instead ask what the government is doing to eliminate language and culture," retorted Narayan Choudhury, a doctoral candidate at the School of Languages, Literature and

GASPING FOR BREATH

THE TAI NORA or Khamyang language, a Tai language of Tinsukia District in Assam, has perhaps only 50 speaker.

RUGA, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodo-Garo sub-group, may not even have 100 speakers.

JAD, another Tibeto-Burman language of the Himalayish family has maybe 300 speakers from Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand.

KODA The most endangered language of the Munda (Austro-Asiatic) family is **KODA** with 300 speakers in Burdwan and Bankura Districts of West Bengal.

There are also a small number of Dravidian languages from the southern part of the country, for example, Vishavan and Aranadan of Kerala, which have 150 to 200 speakers or so.

Source: Dr Gregory Anderson, director of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, a non-profit group in Oregon, US

Culture Studies in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, who was part of a team of linguists who undertook the documentation of the Great Andamanese languages and cultures.

He said that only the English and Foreign Languages Institute in Hyderabad and foreign organisations work to document endangered languages. "It has been proven that the Great Andamanese people were direct descendants of the pre-Neolithic people who happened to be in the Andaman Islands at the time the tectonic plates moved and formation of land masses of the world took place," said Choudhury.

"The death of Bo meant the loss of a gamut of Indian links with the world at large," he continued. "If people do not speak their mother tongue and are forced to learn and speak other languages, the fate of other minor languages might well be the same the world over."

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