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Off the Coast of India, Another Language Dies

By Ishaan Tharoor

On some days, Boa Sr would sit silently in the jungle surrounding her home on one of India's Andaman Islands and gaze up at the sky. According to researchers who looked on, birds perched above would descend to the ground and inspect her; in turn Boa Sr spoke to them in her native tongue, calling them her ancestors and her friends. Her speech was rich with words of the natural world, words of the forest and the sea that some linguists suspect date back tens of thousands of years to the first migrations of man. Boa Sr was the last person alive to know them. In early February, she passed away, leaving behind no surviving siblings or children. As she died, so too did the language of her people.

Boa Sr, thought to have been around 85 years old at the time of her death, was the last living member of the Bo, one of 10 tribes that comprise an ethnic group known as the Great Andamanese people. Like some other indigenous groups on this archipelago 745 miles (1,200 km) east of the Indian mainland, the Great Andamanese evolved in isolation for millenniums until the 1850s, when the colonial British began to settle the Andamans. Since then, the population has plummeted, from at least 5,000 to just 52 people now lumped together in a sprawl of cottages on one island. For most of those left, especially children, specific tribal tongues have given way to a pidgin Andamani dialect of Hindi. Boa Sr was in effect their last link to the olden days. "It's the end of thousands upon thousands of years of history," says Miriam Ross, spokeswoman for Survival International, a London-based NGO that defends the rights of tribal peoples. "A whole way of looking at the world is finished, and there's no way of bringing it back."

Experts say the vanishing of the Bo language comes at a particularly perilous moment in the history of human speech. "There's a consensus [among linguists] that we are seeing an unprecedented pace of language extinction. And it is accelerating," says David Harrison, a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and co-founder of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages. Of the world's roughly 7,000 spoken languages, over half are spoken by only 0.2% of all

the people on earth. Nearly 80% of the world's population speaks just 83 languages, a proportion that is growing as globalization and urbanization encourage migrants and rural outliers to learn the dominant tongue in lieu of their own. Every 14 days, estimates Harrison's institute, a language dies.

Over the centuries, obscure dialects and isolated communities have come and gone, dispersed by conquest or ecological disaster. But linguists stress that something vital gets lost with the death of each oral language. Anvita Abbi, a professor of linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi who spent the better part of the past decade studying the languages of the Andamans, says the speech of hunter-gatherer societies like the Bo carry an intimate, encoded understanding of the natural world and its biodiversity. Though the Bo seldom strayed from the few islands they inhabited, they have at least 67 words for varieties of birds and some 150 for fish. "There's a vast knowledge base slipping from our grasp," says Abbi.

The way of life of the Great Andamanese (whom the Bo belonged to) was dramatically disrupted once the British set up a penal colony in the archipelago in 1858. Punitive raids as well as the spread of diseases brought in by settlers decimated their ranks. After Indian independence, New Delhi attempted to save the Greater Andamanese by forcibly relocating all the tribes' remaining members to one isle, but that led to the gradual loss of distinct hereditary tribal customs and lore. Today, says Abbi, alcoholism is rife among the men, and there is no infrastructure to teach children the language of their forefathers.

Other groups indigenous to the Andaman Islands have fared comparatively better by living in total seclusion. The mysterious Sentinelese — named after North Sentinel Island, their ominous-sounding home — are protected by an Indian government policy barring most outsiders from making contact with them. The few anthropologists who have seen the Sentinelese have gleaned little about their language or culture before being chased away by a hail of arrows.

Of course, most indigenous peoples don't have the good fortune of being left alone. With a corporation stripping a forest here and a megacity sprouting there, the pressures of the globalized world are weighing all the more heavily on some of humanity's oldest communities. But, says Harrison of the Living Tongues Institute, all's not doom and gloom for the planet's endangered languages. After decades of neglect, governments and international organizations like UNESCO have started committing significant funds to tribal research and education projects. This is happening in tandem with recent grass-roots efforts to defend native tongues. "There are signs of a growing global movement to revitalize these languages — and in unlikely places, from inner cities in North America to the Australian Outback," says Harrison.

Still, while once endangered languages like Maori or that of native Hawaiians now have a good chance of survival, it's too late for Boa Sr's ancient language. Over the years, she was reportedly

patient and eager when sitting down with Abbi and a team of researchers as they compiled an incomplete glossary of Bo vocabulary and made recordings of her singing some folk songs, including parts of an old island creation myth. Boa Sr once lamented to Abbi that she had forgotten so many of the tales of her long-deceased elders. Says Abbi: "She forgot these stories because she had no one to tell them to."

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