



## The Destiny of Indigenous Languages: Maintenance and Revitalization

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### Abstract:

Language is the best creation of mankind on earth because it is through it that humans have been able to integrate themselves with the whole cosmos. The rational mind of the globe is the treasure house of knowledge that proves meaningless without language. The diverse identical features manifested by the multitudes of communities scattered round the globe have contributed a lot in shaping and reshaping the human society in which we are living today. The continuous process of human interaction with array of situations have created thousands and thousands of languages with certain identical features in successive time periods of human history. Indigenous language is such a language which is native to a particular area and used by the people who have the bearing of common cultural sharing. The threshold of 21<sup>st</sup> century has already set an alarm for the gloomy fate of so many indigenous languages world over which will mean only a dirge to be played on the death of so many cultures of our society. The paper has an endeavor to highlight the reasons behind the deteriorating health condition of these indigenous languages and at the same time the focus would be on the maintenance and revitalization of such languages for the better sustainability and bright future of this world.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language, cultural sharing, maintenance, revitalization, sustainability.

The history of human civilization begins with the evolution of language or languages which caused the context called society. The journey of the human race from the stage of hunting and gathering to the point of the establishment of agriculture as the prime occupation of the mobile people could have been successful only by making negotiations and building common understanding through an abstract system of sound and images. The system that we call today language cannot be taken for an invention of a day or two rather it is an outcome of a long process of evolution encompassing hundreds and thousands of years. The diverse geographical and climatic conditions created multitudes of communities which got manifested through varied linguistic

contexts. The process of the interaction in between the communities generated innumerable languages as to suit the cultural bounding of the users of these communities. What we know as indigenous languages have carried certain conventionalities which their users have transferred from one generation to the other. These languages have proved themselves to be a little bit flexible to allow capability in them to express the cultural changes taking place in the various communities world over. At the same time, these languages have always been found with their endeavor to create certain boundaries as to save their individual identity. This has become almost a trend to receive all the indigenous languages for endangered languages which is not correct. Even the dominating and strong languages which have shown their global expansion are indigenous. When we talk about maintenance and revitalization of indigenous languages our focus generally remains confined to the endangered or marginalized languages only. We forget the broader concept of multilingual society of ours and indulge our thought get narrowed by the politics of the exploiter and the exploited, the centre and the marginalized and so on. D. P Pattanayak in his article “Multilingualism and Language Politics in India” (1984) has revealed the similar view when he writes:

[I]nternational and national politics in most countries seeks to replace the relationship of interdependence with one of dominance and subordination. The arguments are so clothed in economic terms that one is led to believe that the path to economic development lies via such relationship. But what is sold in the name of development, modernization, and progress is westernization. (129)

This has been the part of our realization that it is not only politics that defines language, quite reverse to it is also that languages have participated in giving a particular way to politics as it can be observed in so many multilingual countries like India. When language as an emblem of identity becomes too important, I mean more than it is proper, that leads to split in multilingual countries. Before the realization of the nation states world over there was much more fluidity in the aboriginal languages and so there was wider scope for much more language contact. So many multilingual communities existed and their contacts with one another generated countless mixed languages. As the case might have been, so we are quite unable to tell from which ancestral languages these mixed languages have been originated. Here at this juncture this can be made that the historical study of the aboriginal languages used to have so many loans from contact and yet the single basic thread of identity could have continued them till date. So far as the revitalization of the aboriginal languages are concerned our endeavor should be to explore opportunities for these languages to grow further and supply to the whole human race the blessings of divine creativity.

The anthropologists and the linguists world over have initiated empirical studies on the status of aboriginal languages world over and they have shown too much concern for the survival of Indigenous languages in recent years. They have anticipated the loss or demise of so many languages within the present century. Such over consciousness on their part has brought to the fore some realities of the situations

which have hindered the process of maintenance and revitalization. They have revealed the secret behind the decimal success of so many efforts undertaken on the line to protect and safeguard the interest of these aboriginal languages. The major cause behind the failure appears to be political than others such as social, economic, psychological etc. In the name of revitalization we have initiated so many measures like documentation and establishing direct relationship with indigenous people, empowering certain linguistic communities by giving economic support to them but all these efforts fall flat and blow up in thin air in front of the power politics which is omnipresent across the globe. We chance to see a considerable amount of literature over pouring the print world raising the vital issues pertaining to language endangerment and language revitalization of such indigenous languages. So many pilot projects have spent huge amount of resources to identify the weaknesses and sufferings of these languages and also they have come up with some effective measures which need be executed in successive time period but due mainly to certain misunderstanding or error of judgement, the result does not seem to be that promising. The execution of revitalization process of Belfast Irish may be taken for an instance to prove that the result is not optimal as McCloskey in his article “Voices Silenced: Has Irish a Future?” (2001) reveals “... [T]he smell of failure has hung around the ‘revival’ movement like a corrosive fog for decades.”(43). So many language programs are being handled by educational institutions across the globe but the efforts do not seem to reach near optimal result as the users of these endangered languages do not find ample time and space in their curricula. The reason behind this is the least involvement of indigenous people in the process. Moreover, the training program imparted on these indigenous people to hone them with suitable language skills had been followed as continuous strategies which have proved themselves to be self-defeating. One of the reasons behind the minimal outcome of such strategies and practices is that the resources granted to the endangered language community is not shared by the neighboring indigenous language communities. In view of such circumstances mentioned above it is quite mandate on our part to explore such tools and techniques which may prove themselves more effective in revitalization of the endangered languages and at the same time they may consolidate the relationship in between the aboriginal languages world over.

In the Indian perspective the problem has the denotation quite different than the notion of the west. The age long multilingual and multicultural historical background of India does not allow us to see the problem using the cosmopolitan spec. We have to divert our mind from the Euro-centered philosophy which is mostly based on centralization of power and probe into the root of Indian philosophy where we have the remedies of the gravest problems cropping up these days. Our thinking supports self-regulating small communities having their aboriginal languages with the force of uniqueness and creativity. U. R Ananthamurthy in his article titled “Globalization, English and ‘Other’ Languages” (2009) delineates:

...[w]e have come to realize that concentration of power in any form is evil, and we need not reject wholesale the great ideas of anarchist thinking that is seen in visionary thinkers like Tolstoy and Gandhi. They believed in self-regulating small communities, largely rural communities in the case of Gandhi, for humankind to be creative and live in harmony with Nature. (58).

The intellectual tradition of the aboriginal language communities is quite an inseparable ingredient of their linguistic ethnography. The linguistic diversity embrace within its purview a very wide range of human competencies and capacities. This should also be perceived as a fact that any living tradition implies change and for that matter our greater goal should be to maintain diversity in the world of people. Hence mere documentation and recording of the fading tradition of aboriginal languages should not be thought as only and final solution. The local languages have the hidden potential in them to create and develop new traditions. Our endeavor should be to motivate the users of these languages grow with cultural wealth and integrate themselves as the part of diverse intellectual tradition. They have to come forward with much amicability discarding all the play of selfishness to join hands together in protecting and safeguarding the interest of their neighboring languages which are the reservoir of intellectual wealth. They have to understand the importance of the local languages. Ken Hale in his article “Languages Endangerment and the Human Value of Linguistic Diversity” (1992) advocates this reality when he says, “[T]he loss of local languages, and of the cultural systems that they express, has meant irretrievable loss of diverse and interesting intellectual wealth, the priceless products of human mental industry.” (36). The very meaning of the revitalization of aboriginal languages lies somewhere in the collective approach directed to intellectual nourishment across the globe. The politics of power that subjugates so many aboriginal languages to the point of their total extinct in the name of globalization is the major issue to be handled first. The second aspect of consideration is the information processing of indigenous languages which is beyond the capacity of the Western notions of literacy. Barring a few aboriginal languages like English, Arabic, Chinese and Hindi more than 4,000 out of 6,000 plus aboriginal languages do not have their orthographies. The vocal manifestation of such impoverished languages still remain a great challenge for us. Even if they are transcribed to the pages they seem to project mere skeleton of the traditions their ancestors have transmitted to them generation after generation. In want of proper government and educational support, selection of suitable popular media, appropriate implementation of language education policies, the deplorable condition of the majority of such indigenous language have no hope for any improvement. Our endeavor should be to locate such indigenous languages and classify them on the basis of the degree of threat they are receiving in the present economic and sociopolitical context. Such endangered languages which are on the verge of total extinct must receive our priority in the matter of revitalization process. All such linguistic and statistical tools should be engaged to have the transparent and clear cut picture of the situation prevalent. Our policies must be carved out on the basis of the holistic analysis of the linguistic

context of such endangered languages. Well, the community participation that speaks the hard reality need be encouraged so that the loyalty of the users of the aboriginal languages may get consolidated. It is through literature that the languages have attracted the world community develop tendency in them to know diversity. What we observe nowadays is the strong wave of decolonization and nativization ready to counter challenge the authorities who are badly engaged in Globalization which is the other form of colonization. Great many literary figures and novelists of the third world countries have shown their aggressive reaction through their write-ups. The question is whether such reactions are going to help the other aboriginal languages? The answer does not seem to come as positive. What we require mostly these days is to promote the studies in comparative literature and translation. Since literature of an aboriginal language happens to be the most powerful medium that carries with it the vibrant cultural heritage crossing the barriers of time, space and community it is desirable to support these areas of studies on priority basis. The creativity of the aboriginal languages demands the favor of the intellectuals of the communities who have command over these languages.

As the findings of the research on the nature and evolution of language suggests us we have so many linguistic and genetic traits hidden in languages Salikoko S. Mufwene in his book *The Ecology of Language Evolution* (2001) talks about different internal variables of language such as idiolects, dialects and sociolects which define its evolutionary characteristics. He has also revealed that the languages do not follow a uniform way of evolution and also pin pointed the fact that they are changing several times in their life time. So far as the birth and the death of the aboriginal languages are concerned no research done has been able to come-up with exact denotation. Here it is to say that the evolution process of language is different than the evolution of organism. For example as Mufwene in his article "Language Birth and Death" (2004) states:

[T]he concept of "language birth" is in fact a misnomer of some sort. The birth involves no pregnancy and delivery stages, and the term refers to a stage (not a point in time!) in a divergence process during which a variety is acknowledged post facto as structurally different from its ancestor. For instance, no particular point in time can be associated with the emergence of creoles as separate vernaculars from the colonial European languages from which they evolved. Unlike in the case of organisms, but as in the case of species, language birth cannot be predicted. (204)

There are certain divergence features of an ancestor language or some attributes which our linguists demonstrate as an outcome of the contact with other languages which may be taken as for separating points to recognize a newly born language. Likewise the death of a language is not like a sudden collapse of an organism rather it happens to be a prolonged state of the change process. The community level loss of language competency does not mean that all the speakers stop using it at the same time and at the same extent. The destiny of indigenous language speaks volumes of

uncertainty and ambiguity. The research already undertaken by Nancy C. Dorian, an American linguist has already made it quite understandable to us that it is rather doubtful whether a language is living, in a moribund state or 'in poor health' when it is used by the speakers. Any process of statistical assessment regarding the maintenance verses loss cannot gain cent percent accuracy.

We have to remember that the importance of the aboriginal languages lie mostly in the interests and activities of their respective users. The changing socio-economic condition may compel them to undervalue or marginalize their native languages and shift them to the other languages. The revitalization process must consider it to be vital while initiating any language preservation program. The adaptive needs of the speakers should be identified and opportunities and resources need be made available to those people so that they may remain loyal to their native languages. Such policies are to be made that may take aboriginal languages for diverse cultural resources and their optimal exploitation by the communities should be ensured. Nancy H. Hornberger in her article "Language policy, language education, language rights: Indigenous, immigrant, and international perspectives" (1998) has rightly asserted "[L]anguage policy with a "language as resource" orientation can and does have an impact on efforts aimed at promoting the vitality and revitalization of endangered indigenous languages, and it is in this sense that we can speak of language policy itself as a resource." (452). The language policy of the nation states should be carved out as to support the primary education of the children in their respective mother tongue. It may be a great challenge for the government of such nations where the communities are multilingual to provide textbooks of different subjects in the aboriginal languages but successively it may be made possible. The problem takes its grave turn when it relates to the availability of huge economic resources, the availability of the translators who have the command over at least two languages, recruitment of the trainers who may facilitate such language skills in the teachers so that they may be quite capable to impart education to the children at the elementary level in aboriginal languages. Even then such measures of revitalization cannot be free from the difficulties and loopholes. Until and unless the community people, mostly parents take the responsibility of motivating their children feel esteemed to learn their native tongue all such maintenance and revitalization programs will prove meaningless. Bernard Spolsky in his article "Reassessing Maori regeneration" (2003) presents the similar view when he writes:

[T]here has not yet been language revitalization in the sense of the restoration of natural intergenerational transmission. Balancing this, there is good evidence that language loss has been checked, and that school-related and community-approved processes are leading to steady-state language maintenance. (571).

Apart from value added language literacy programs which have been initiated in certain communities in the name of revitalization we also need to have a collaborative model in every day work situation. The involvement of bilingual staff school

administrator, teachers, community leaders and also the academic professionals should be ensured. A collaborative language educational research can promote the local people have their vested interest in developing themselves as researchers. The linguists having specialization in particular area of research may be involved to support such revitalization programs following up collaborative model. Watahomigie & Yamamoto in his article "Linguistics in action: The Hualapai Bilingual/bicultural Education Program" (1987) have rightly stated "[I]t is vitally important that anthropologists and anthropological linguists undertake the responsibility of training native researchers and work with them to develop collaborative language and cultural revitalization and/or maintenance programs." (79). In addition to this the curriculum should be designed as such so that the children may know the importance of their local history, life style and language. The teaching materials should find ample space for activities and involvement. In fact, language policy decides the fate of the aboriginal languages to be the part of the larger global context. The speakers of the aboriginal languages in today's changing situation may get the wider scope to explore opportunities. Nancy H. Hornberger (1998) in her article mentioned above has also highlighted this point by arguing:

[T]here is also consistent and compelling evidence that language policy and language education serve as vehicles for promoting the vitality, versatility, and stability of these languages, and ultimately of the rights of their speakers to participate in the global community on, and IN, their own terms. (455).

Thus the global perspective of the maintenance and revitalization of aboriginal languages as we have seen means the transfer of the diverse heritage and intellect through various channels to help the world gain much strength than it can have without them. The destiny of so many indigenous languages depends by and large upon their usability. It is the matter of dependability and interchangeability of certain linguistic and cultural features across the barriers of time and space that decide the fate of so many aboriginal languages world over. Our interest in multiethnic backgrounds of diverse local communities drive us to take some positive steps so that our tradition and history may remain live on us. There are people in this world who are blessed to have the language following certain tradition of writing. The others have the advantage to peep into their past but the question is hanging over about the destiny of those who have not developed any tradition of writing as yet. We will have to take pain to write the history of such aboriginal unlucky communities countless in number scattered across the globe. For this we will have to depend on so many other resources like data available in census records, archeological investigation, public health records and so on. We have to help transcription of so many aboriginal languages which have been struggling hard for their survival mostly in want of proper documentation through ages. The revitalization of such languages which have the rich tradition of the folklore, the folktale, folkdance, folk music, the rituals and rites etc. need immediate attention of the world. The transcription and documentation of such aboriginal languages must be taken on priority basis. The revitalization and

maintenance of the aboriginal languages do not mean recreating a community of native speakers rather their purpose should be to hold such issue like promoting self-respect in the users, making available resources to the community to get empowered and reclaim their ethnic identity. The linguistic and cultural rights of the local population need be ensured at any cost regardless of their size or the state of the languages they are using. The attitude of open-mindedness at the grass root level should be enunciated through creative drive by the language users. The seminars and the workshops should be organized on the aboriginal language issues to create awareness in the community.

To conclude with the destiny of indigenous languages is to see the sunshine if the efforts of constant linguistic research is directed both at micro level and macro level is facilitated. We have to know that language rescue is a very complex task and community participation in the aboriginal language projects has the potential to fight any challenge coming in the way of the revitalization process of such languages. This can be said to be the need of the hour to save the destiny of these languages for the better prospect of the prospering world.

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