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Endangerment of Indigenous Languages of Sikkim

Abstract

In the contemporary Nepali speech community of Sikkim and Darjeeling, there is an internal dynamics about ethnicity within which the issue of language is embedded and has been a defining factor of the dynamics. The region's populace is identified as "indigenous" and their languages "endangered" in the lines of the UN's parameters. With depleting linguistic diversities, lack of documentation and lack of public discourse on the issue of language endangerment, this paper advocates that Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars is a "language hotspot," and requires a language policy geared towards "language documentation" to empower the region's endangered languages and their indigenous speakers.

Key words: Speech community, language endangerment, indigenous language, linguistic ecology, language hotspot

I

The frontiers between the present day India, Bhutan and Nepal were often not demarcated and porous in the past. Similarly, the populace too were criss-crossing the fleeting boundaries as subjects of the respective communities. It is after the formation of the sovereign nation-states, these communities became the respective citizens of these countries (see Sinha 2006 for India). The present day Sikkim and its former territory Darjeeling (till 1835) are populated primarily by the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepali including Limbus. The Lepchas are considered to be the autochthones of Sikkim, and all others have populated the region at different intervals of time on account of different reasons.

Besides the push and the pull factors (see Dhungel 2006; Subba 2002), Pradhan

(1982) cites the Nepali historical records dating 1815 and 1826 to support the idea that there was to and fro movement of the people between eastern Nepal and Sikkim and Darjeeling. He also points to the Magars in Sikkim citing the 'History of Sikkim' by Namgyal and Dolma (1908) that mentions the Lepcha and the Magars villages in 1641 before the establishment of the Chhogyal's regime in Sikkim (Pradhan 2004: 6). The presence of the Magars in Sikkim, undoubtedly, led Hooker (1848) to conclude that the Magars are the indigenous people of Sikkim.

In 1866, the district of Darjeeling was carved out by including Kalimpong, which was under the Bhutanese till 1864, and the other areas which were not a part of the Darjeeling Tract (see Pinn 1986; Mukherjee and Mercer 1962).The first population census of Darjeeling in 1872 shows the total population of 94,712 of which 34% were Nepalis (see Pradhan 2004 for greater detail on population). Hence, Rai (1994) writes that the British got Darjeeling "together with the Nepali people living thereon."

The first census of Sikkim was conducted in 1891. The survey records shows that of 29, 611 people of which Lepchas, Bhutia and Limbus were 19.45%, 16.52% and 11.33%, respectively. On the other hand,the Nepali speech community members constitute 52.67%. In short, these narratives and census data assert that Limbus and host of others communities now collectively called the Nepalis were the inhabitants of Sikkim, and claims that all the Nepalis of Sikkim are not migrants (see Choeden 1995).

On the linguistic front, from the 17th century onwards, Nepali language was used in the administrative and the legal systems of the kingdom of Sikkim (BNRP 1992). The Sikkimese coins engraved in Nepali in Devanagari script were in circulation in the 19th century (Bhattacharya 1983). With the Nepali language at the forefront, the Nepali consciousness with its epicentre at Darjeeling, swelled in its vibrant expressions in fields of art, literature, music, theatre, politics, and in common every day life, accepting different cultural practices and prejudices (see Chalmers 2003; Hutt 1997). On the Indian soil, the different communities came under a rubric of 'Nepali,' distinct from that of Nepal (Subba 1985, 2002; Gurung 1998, 2001; Hutt 1997). Soon, the Nepalis of the region pioneered in defining ethnicity, history, literature and inclusive politics (see Gurung 2003; Golay 2006).

With the emergence of Nepali language based identity to encompass all the members of the Nepali speech community and for the development of other languages of the Nepali speech community (see Hari Prasad Pradhan's inaugural lecture and Parasmani Pradhan's proposal for the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924 in Hutt 1997: 117; Pradhan 2004: 14-15), other languages of the Nepali speech community lost their pace and space in the linguistic ecological condition of Darjeeling and Sikkim. A linguistic demand in favour of Nepali initially 'as an educational medium at the primary level' began in the early part of the 20th century and widespread after the Griffith Commission (1930). In independent India, it became a national issue, which took the form of a language movement (1956-1992) for the inclusion of Nepali language in the VIII Schedule of the Indian Constitution (see Sinha

1978). With the recognition as one of the scheduled languages of India, and with the reinforcement of the status as the lingua franca of the region, medium of education and literary expressions, etc., Nepali language gained ground over several languages of the Nepali speech community.

On the other hand, language is often used as a symbolic badge of membership and distinctiveness in the Nepali speech community. Turin (2004) captures this relation in the context of Nepal, which is more or less applicable in the Indian context too with an addition that languages spoken in the past but not mother tongues at this time interval are often associated with the identification:

i. **Single-to-many:** Rai at the basic level is a single constituent member. Each sept speaks a range of at least 15+ languages from each other such as Bantawa, Puma, Chamling, Rokdung, Thulung, Kulung, Sampang, Dumi, etc.
ii. **One-to-one:** Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Thami, etc. each has a language of their own irrespective of their septs.
iii. **Many-to-single:** Newar; Chettri, Bahun, Kami, Damai, etc. share a single language.
iv. **All-to-one:** Nepali by all the member of the Nepali speech community.

With these sense of multiple linguistic identities and affinities, the constituent members conceive themselves to the language they speak (see Miyaoka, 2001). In turn, the linguistic identities have defined the ethno-politics of the region.

II

In the contemporary Nepali speech community of Sikkim and Darjeeling after the recognition of Nepali in 1992, there is an internal dynamics about ethnicity within which each member of the Nepali speech community is asserting its distinct, separate status to avail and participate in the resource utilisation and decision making processes and institutions (see Sinha 2008; Shneiderman and Turin 2006). The procedures and priorities of each member community is different, yet the issue of language is embedded and has been a defining factor of the dynamics.

Since human language is intimately connected with individual, society, culture and environment, and thrives on domains of its use, the language use as well as vocabulary and grammar are also controlled by the socio-economic and politico-cultural conditions and the socio-cultural experiences of their speakers. In other words, language is a parasite that exists in an environment that are either friendly, or hostile or indifferent and shows its signs of language vitality as safe, endangered, or extinct (see UNESCO 2003 on Language Vitality and Endangerment).

Language endangerment, owing to the plethora of reasons, is a global epidemic. It is estimated that about seven thousand distinct human languages were spoken worldwide. By the end of the 21st century, it is estimated that half of the world's languages will be

extinct (Krauss 1992; Nettle 1999). It is a resolution that language endangerment require immediate concern and prompt action specially in the context where forty percent of world's languages are endangered at various degrees (see Harrison 2007:7).India's share in the UNESCO's endangered language list is the largest with 196 endangered languages particularly concentrated in the Eastern Himalayan including Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars. It is important to note that although the detailed studies is yet to be carried out, yet from the studies so far it is accepted that more than known thirty five languages of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars are endangered in various degrees and domains, and many mother tongues are yet to be explored and identified.

The 2016 United Nations' resolution states the urgent need to document, promote and revitalise these endangered languages since these languages are crucial for education to employment as well as for environment to economy. Further, 2019 being proclaimed as the International Year of Indigenous Languages reiterates the 2016 United Nations' resolution regarding these languages which are catalyst for transformation towards knowledge societies and to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

With the above two notions on the Nepali speech community and indigenous languages, a question arises — are the constituent members of the Nepali speech community indigenous? Although the term "indigenous" is defined in various ways over the years — often it connotes to tribes, first peoples/nations, aboriginals, ethnic groups, *adivasi, janajati.* Or even to the occupational and geographical terms like hunter-gatherers, nomads, peasants, hill people. In many cases, the term "indigenous" has negative connotations leading to discrimination and sufferings. Rather than defining "indigenous people" the United Nations identify them based on the following fundamental criterion of self-identification:

1. Self- identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
2. Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies
3. Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources
4. Distinct social, economic or political systems
5. Distinct language, culture and beliefs
6. Form non-dominant groups of society
7. Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as dis tinctive peoples and communities.

As a matter of fact, 22% of the world's population i.e. more than 370 million indigenous people are spread across 70 countries, and speak the major share of the world's almost 7000 languages. Since the indigenous communities are marginalised in various forms, their languages and cultures are endangered in various degrees. Hence, indigenous peoples' languages are also endangered languages, and endangered languages are, mostly, the language

of the indigenous peoples. On the basis of the above criterion, the various communities of the region including the Nepali speech communities — with more than thirty five known and several unexplored languages qualify to be called as indigenous people/communities of the region and their languages as endangered indigenous languages.

III

In the absence of linguistic surveys, the information on Indian languages at a national level as well as on time scale can be obtained from Census of India. It is claimed that the decennial Census of India "reflects" facts about its people, and covers state, district and village/ward levels in its operation. According to the Census of India 2011, India has 19, 569 mother tongues.[1] After "rationalisation" and "classification" (see Census of India 2011: 4 for details), there are 121 languages in India which includes 22 Scheduled Languages and 99 Non-Scheduled Languages.

Within the Non-Scheduled Language, all other languages and those mother tongues which have returned less than 10,000 speakers each or "were not identifiable on the basis of the linguistic information available" (ibid.) have been classified under a particular language as "Others" are included. Most often, the indigenouspeoples' languages fall in this category recapitulating the fact they are spoken by smaller number of people, unidentified and unclassified, and often endangered in a highly sensitive state and stage. Hence, "availability of linguistic information" becomes a tool to understand and provide comprehensive evidence leading to appropriate local and national policies to safeguard these languages that is geared for development of Indian societies.

A.R. Das's *Sociolinguistic Survey of the Darjeeling Himalayan Area* (1995: 329) highlights the linguistic scenario of Darjeeling, and captures the essence of the depleting linguistic ecology with an alarm call that "...the present situation of their galloping decreases in ethno-lingual numbers of which the catalytic factors being the educational urge and occupational facilities as well as social status and political insecurity, it can be said that it is a wilful suppression of their own linguistic identity, which again is being threatened complete annihilation by the conducive situation made by the environmental pressure."

Sikkim is known for its vibrant ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity comprising of indigenous peoples and their languages. Rai (2018) recounts that "Sikkim is demographically and linguistically diverse. It has predominantly two major language families viz. Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman. It is a mosaic of various communities with diverse languages — Bhujel, Bhutia, Gurung, Kulung, Limboo, Majhi, Sampang, Tamang, Thulung, Bantawa/Rai Bhasa, Chamling, Khaling, Dumi, Rokdung, Dukpa, Koich (Sunuwar), Lepcha, Magar, Newari, Sherpa, Thami/Thangmi, Tibetan, Nepali, Hindi, Bangla, English, Shingshaba, Marwari and various *Magadhan* languages like Bhojpuri, Angika, Maghi, etc. In other words, Sikkim is home to more than thirty four languages which are also spoken in Nepal, Bhutan, and other Indian states."

Since Sikkim became a part of India, the Government of Sikkim in compliance to the Constitution of India has enacted several legislative resolutions/acts regarding languages. In 1977, under the Sikkim Official Languages Act 1977, Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha were adopted (Sikkim Government Gazette No. 121 dated 27 October 1977). In 1981, an amendment to the Sikkim Official Languages Act 1977 included the Limbu language (Sikkim Government Gazette No. 36 dated 3 April 1981). The 1995 amendment included Newari, Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sherpa and Tamang to the Sikkim official languages category (Sikkim Government Gazette No. 76 dated 21 April 1995). Further amendment in 1996 made the Sunuwar language to the list (Sikkim Government Gazette No. 141 dated 28 October 1996).

On the basis of demographic as well as linguistic consideration, the 11 languages — Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Bhutia, Rai, Gurung, Newari, Magar, Tamang, Sherpa and Sunuwar are accorded as the Sikkim Official Languages amidst many indigenous languages, and English "for transaction of business in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim in addition to the official languages of the State" (Sikkim Government Gazette No. dated 09 April 1990). The rationale behind the inclusion of these languages was "to be used for the official purpose of the State of Sikkim," later it was amended to include "for transaction of business of the state Government" and "to join in any post in a regular service/cadre…must have proficiency in Nepali language or in any of the official languages…" (Sikkim Government Gazette No. 219 dated 14 June 2017).

As per the Census of India 2011, Sikkim has population of 6,10,577 constituting 5.26% of the total population of India. From 2001 to 2011, there is a decadal increase of 69,726 which roughly equates with the total population of Sikkim in 1911. It is the continuation of the trend since 1971. Of its total population, 3,82,200 speaks Nepali (accounting 73.64 % including other scheduled languages) and 26.36% non-scheduled languages. Bhotia, Lepcha, Limbu, Rai, Sherpa and Tamang along with their "Other" mother tongues are classified as Non-Scheduled Languages[2] while Gurung, Newari, Magar, Sunuwar, etc. are "Other" mother tongues (with 5333 persons) despite being Sikkim's State Official Languages.[3] Other than Nepali, which is one of the scheduled languages and the official languages of Sikkim as well as lingua franca, all other State Official languages are endangered to various degrees blurring the distinction between the state official and non-official languages as well as between Non-Scheduled Languages and Other mother tongues. Further, if one has to ascertain emerging domains of language use; paradoxically, Nepali too falls in the line with other languages of the state. Although reliable literature on endangered languages scenario of Sikkim and Darjeeling in particular is almost nonexistent, yet various linguistic and ethnographic documentation and description projects and surveys often serve as a pointer highlighting the plight of these languages.

One of the modern linguistic surveys of Sikkim (2005-2006) was conducted by Mark Turin in association with the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and the Department of

Human Resource Development (formerly Department of Education), the Government of Sikkim. The primary objective of the survey was to prepare a list of languages spoken in Sikkim, with their genetic, geographic, demographic, educational and sociolinguistic profile. In his survey, Turin (2012) summaries that Nepali is the lingua franca in Sikkim; Magar, Tamang, Newar are at the verge of being ceased as mother tongue;emergence of Englishas the most important language; and the teaching of local languages as subjects in government schools is encouraging to enhance status of those endangered languages.

Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore initiated *the Language Information Services (LIS-India Project)* provides information on different aspects of Sikkim's languages.Linguistic Survey of India-Sikkim (1995-2000 and in 2008) conducted by the Office of the Registrar General of India focussed on Bhotia and Tibetan, Lepcha, Limbu, Sherpa, Rai, Tamang, Newari, Gurung, Mangari, and Sunuwar. The survey stresses on the linguistic situation of Sikkim in the historical, political and social background, and highlights the emergence of Nepali as the first most populous language as well as the language used for education, administration, etc.

The People's Linguistic Survey of India – the Sikkim chapter (Devy and Pandey 2018), under the aegis of Bhaasa, a nongovernmental organisation based at Ahmedabad, provides the primary information about the communities and their languages of Sikkim along with the description of the languages and the texts. It, undoubtedly, brings to light the plight of languages and communities vis-a-vis the linguistic policies and vitality. Further, Vatsagopal (2003); Khawas (2001); Sinha (2001, 2014, 2017, 2018, *in press*); Rai (2013, 2015, 2016, 2018a&b); Rai (2014); Bhujel (2014, 2016, 2018a&b); Tamang (2018); Thapa (2018); Chhetri and Takhellambam (2018); Mataina (2017); S., Hima (2018); Chettri (2018); Yliniemi (2019); Manger (2019); CEL reports (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e), etc. amplifies the fact that the languages of Sikkim are either healthy, extinct, moribund or at the verge of being extinct. Sinha (*in press*) highlights the fact that languages of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars are rarely documented with an exception of few that the Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University has carried out since 2016.

IV

Although language is at the forefront of the ethnic politics and of the legislative enactments, most often, each individual language is provided a "status making" initiatives — recognition, publication of grammars, dictionaries, writing systems, school syllabi, etc. Such approach, however, has "incrementally endangered" the other languages of the regions (see Rai *in press*); and has not addressed the fact that languages like parasite thrive on its environment, and needs a coordinated effort towards vitalising linguistic ecology (for ecolinguistic approach see Mühlhäusler 2002).

With more than known thirty five languages endangered in various degrees and domains, and many mother tongues yet to be explored and identified, this biogeographic region has

several distinct political boundaries, yet Darjeeling, Doars and Sikkim can be identified as a single linguistic ecology for shared historical, cultural as well as demographic considerations. In an ecolinguistic map, it roughly covers 29° N - 22° N and 84° E - 98° E. In brief, Sikkim is a part of the Eastern Himalayas; and consequently, a part of a biogeographic hotspot and of a linguistic ecology (see Sinha 2017 for its prevalent linguistic ecology in response to Haugen's (1972) ten ecological questions).

In a radically new way to look at the distribution of global linguistic diversity, to assess the threat of extinction, and to prioritise research, Anderson and Harrison (2006) coins "language hotspot" to represent areas where we find a concentration of: a high levels of endangerment, a high genetic diversity in terms of language family, and a low levels of documentation — writing systems, grammars, dictionaries, texts, and audio and video materials. Based on the biodiversity hotspots model, "language hotspot" model is basically designed to visualise, track the trend, and to prioritise resources. They have identified more than two dozen hotspots to date, and eastern India is one of them.

Although eastern India is characterised as "low" threat level in comparison to the other language hotspots, with its depleting linguistic diversities, lack of documentation resulting lack of "availability of linguistic information" and further compounded by lack of public discourse on the issue of endangerment, Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars requires a strong, determined language policy — beginning with the establishment of a clearing house/language institute for documentation of these indigenous endangered languages.

Such endeavours will not only define the linguistic contours of the said ecolinguistic region in terms of preserving and promoting endangered languages as well as compliment the national and the international endeavours with respect to the region's endangered languages, but also makes the region linguistically healthy and reenergises the indigenous communities and the biocultural diversity (see Maffi, et al. 2001: 74). Importantly, the indigenous communities' participation in the language documentation creates linguistic and human resources; consequently, it empowers the communities and the speakers of the endangered languages. Finally, such empowerment of the indigenous communities through their endangered languages will contribute significantly to the transformation of their societies towards knowledge societies and to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In brief, a strong determined language policy focussing on the establishment of a clearing house/language institute for documentation of these indigenous endangered languages is the need of the hour.

Warning: lack of strong language policy will *contribute* to the extinction of these indigenous languages of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Doars.

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