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DISAPPEARING LANGUAGES, VANISHING VOICES

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'This shrinking in the diversity of languages and their extinction are also related to the migration of people to countries which have a common language' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

English as a common language in India has been acting as a thread by connecting multilingual Indians since the time of the British Raj. While communication in English is not much of a problem in the cities, the language becomes an impediment in the remote areas. This leads to the question: why cannot all people in the world speak in the same language? It would be so much simpler and strengthen our power as a united human force.

Let us look at the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In Chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis, it is said that the descendants of Noah, after the aftermath of the great flood, spoke a common language. They migrated towards the east and finally settled down at a place called Shinar. They began building a city and a tower tall enough to reach heaven as a demonstration of their collective strength.

Yahweh, the god of the Hebrew Bible, became alarmed and annoyed on observing this, and broke them into many groups, each speaking a different language to reduce the power of their collective strength. This created confusion in terms of communication and understanding and the project failed. Some people are of the opinion that the British made a blunder teaching English to Indians which helped them to unite, communicate and become powerful enough to end colonialism.

Irrespective of whether the story is true or not, the writer of this narrative knew the power of a common language. Language is a vehicle to transfer information, ideas and emotions.

An estimated 7,000 distinct languages are spoken as a mother tongue across the world. But these languages are shrinking rapidly. An interesting mathematical model published in The Economic Journal which forecasts the extinction of 40% of languages with less than 35,000 speakers within 100 years. By extinction it is meant that the languages will no longer be spoken as a mother tongue, or as the principal language. In essence, the diversity of languages is shrinking with time.

Mother tongues of about half the people in the world belong to a pool of 10 most spoken languages; language diversity faces a grave threat. Today, English is the most widely spoken language of the world. British colonial rule helped spread the language.

This shrinking in the diversity of languages and their extinction are also related to the migration of people to countries which have a common language. When people migrate, there is pressure to shift to the dominant language spoken in the country where they live in order to capitalise on the social and economic advantages offered by the new place. In the process, first-generation migrants become bilingual, the next generation has a weaker grasp of its mother tongue, and the third generation may no longer speak or understand their grandparents or great-grandparents at all. India is a good example with increasing migration to English-speaking countries. English now has 340 million native speakers and more than 1.2 billion second language speakers, with much scope for further growth. One wonders what would happen to Hindi, with an estimated 586 million second language speakers in the world. Would it grow to the level of English?

The Index of Linguistic Diversity (ILD), which was introduced to quantitatively understand the trends over the past 30 years in the number of mother-tongue speakers of the world's languages, is a measure to gauge the decline of languages. There is also a Language Diversity Index, where the probability that two people selected from a population at random will have different mother tongues; it ranges from 0 (everyone has the same mother tongue) to 1 (no two people have the same mother tongue). Obviously, countries that have people with a smaller number of mother languages have a lower LDI than countries with a large number of mother tongues. For example, the United Kingdom has an LDI of 0.139 when compared to 0.930 for India. Interestingly, although the predominant language in the United States is English as in the United Kingdom, due to the significant presence of migrants from different countries, the LDI of the U.S. is 0.353. In terms of LDI, the three lowest ranking countries are Haiti (0.000), Cuba (0.001) and Samoa (0.002), while the top ranking three countries are Papua Guinea (0.990), Vanuatu (0.972) and the Solomon Islands (0.965).

The ILD demonstrates that globally, linguistic diversity declined by 20% over the period 1970-2005. Regionally, indigenous linguistic diversity declined over 60% in the Americas, 30% in the Pacific including Australia and almost 20% in Africa. But calculating the index from a sample of only a certain number of languages, let us say 1,000 languages out of 7,000 languages, over a period of time may not give us the correct picture as the world population is also increasing. The index actually tries to understand the distribution of speakers among all the spoken languages of the world. What has been found is that the distribution is becoming greatly uneven with the passage of time.

What we see is that a greater number of people in the world are transitioning to just a few dominant languages at the expense of several smaller ones, resulting in a loss of linguistic diversity, where, finally, some of the languages are becoming extinct. According to the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), dozens of languages today have only one living native speaker, which shows how precariously placed some languages are. Once they vanish, an identity and culture also vanish.

Language is not only a vehicle for communication to express ideas and emotions but it also carries cultural values and indigenous knowledge. The extinction of languages will only result in shrinking cultural diversity and an increase in cultural homogenisation.

According to a report published by UNESCO in 2018, 42 languages are heading towards extinction in India. These were spoken by less than 10,000 people. According to the norms set by UNESCO, any language spoken by only 10,000 people is potentially endangered. Most dying languages are from the indigenous tribal groups spread across India.

The world is very concerned about biodiversity and is alarmed by the loss of species. Different languages can be compared to distinct species in the linguasphere, if we can use such a term.

Any loss of language is not only a loss of linguistic diversity but also a loss in terms of associated cultural variations, opinions, views and knowledge. It is time to evolve ideas to arrest the decline of languages on the larger global canvas. The world must at least try to find ways and means to preserve some of its endangered languages. The LSA is doing an admirable job in trying to learn about these endangered languages; it is also making videotapes, audiotapes and written records of the languages, along with their translation. It is hoped that other institutions will emulate this and act to reduce the disappearance of languages in whichever way they can.

***Suprakash Chandra Roy is a writer, author and former Editor-in-Chief of the journal,* Science and Culture**

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Santiniketan, the town in West Bengal, was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list during the 45th Session of the World Heritage Committee in Saudi Arabia on Sunday, said UNESCO in a social media post on "X".

"BREAKING! New inscription on the @UNESCO #WorldHeritage List: Santiniketan, #India. Congratulations!" the UNESCO wrote on X (formally Twitter) on Sunday.

Established in 1901 by poet and philosopher Tagore, Santiniketan was a residential school and centre for art based on ancient Indian traditions and a vision of the unity of humanity transcending religious and cultural boundaries.

A 'world university' was established at Santiniketan in 1921, recognising the unity of humanity or "Visva Bharati".

Distinct from the prevailing British colonial architectural orientations of the early 20th century and of European modernism, Santiniketan represents approaches toward pan-Asian modernity, drawing on ancient, medieval and folk traditions from across the region.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) on Sunday called the inclusion of West Bengal's Santiniketan in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list as a proud moment for all Indians.

Taking to X, PM Modi said, "Delighted that Santiniketan, an embodiment of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's vision and India's rich cultural heritage, has been inscribed on the @UNESCO World Heritage List. This is a proud moment for all Indians."

Meanwhile, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said "Glad and proud that our Santiniketan, the town of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, is now finally included in UNESCO's World Heritage List. Biswa Bangla's pride, Santiniketan was nurtured by the poet and has been supported by people of Bengal over the generations."

India had been striving for a long to get a UNESCO tag for this cultural site located in the Birbhum district.

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KARNATAKA'S MONUMENTAL CHALLENGE

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The Chennakeshava temple at Belur in Karnataka is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. | Photo Credit: SRIRAM MA

The Hoysala temples at Belur, Halebid, and Somanathapur in Karnataka were recently declared as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This has brought to the fore the rich repository of architectural and cultural properties in the State as well as the challenges involved in their conservation.

In Karnataka, 609 monuments are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and 848 monuments, including temples, mosques, churches, tombs, forts, citadels and stepwells, are protected by the Department of Archaeology Museums and Heritage (DAMH) of the State government. In addition, there are about 20,000 historically important temples and sites under the Muzurai or Endowment Department; these have a semblance of protection. But there are also as many monuments that are outside the ambit of any legal protection. While Karnataka boasts of harbouring the second highest number of centrally protected monuments in the country after Uttar Pradesh, and the highest number of State-protected monuments, it also faces the challenge of ensuring protection to lesser-known cultural properties. Without such protection, these properties could be encroached on or lost.

However, identifying heritage sites and monuments for protection calls first for their documentation. To its credit, the DAMH has already launched such an exercise. The process of mapping monuments across all taluks to update the inventory list began three years ago. But considering the funding pattern for the project, no more than 15 to 20 taluks are taken up every year. Given that Karnataka has 227 taluks, the exercise is bound to take not less than a decade, and that too only if funding is consistent.

By the time documentation across all the taluks is completed, and monuments are notified as protected, many may disappear due to developmental pressures and the forces of modernisation. The challenge in their conservation also stems from the fact that a majority of them are not standalone monuments. Local communities have lived alongside them for decades. The conventional approach of barricading the monuments as a protection measure will not work and calls for a via-media approach. The monuments at Srirangapatana, Vijayapura, and Kalburagi are examples of such continuity.

Given the fact that a sizeable number of historically important monuments are religious in nature, the DAMH floated the PPP model of conservation. This entails funding by the private

sector, the release of matching grants by the government, and a nominal contribution from the local community to give them a sense of ownership and make them partners in conservation. In a little more than a decade since the project was launched, more than 150 monuments have been conserved under the PPP model but almost all of them were taken up by one group. The challenge before the DAMH is to get more such interested groups on board.

The PPP model and the involvement of the public is also imperative given that the DAMH has only 12 engineers to look after the 848 monuments under its ambit. Besides, the annual budget for the department is approximately 28 crore of which about 50% goes towards salaries for the staff. This leaves very little for actual conservation. The fund crunch is such that the DAMH has also taken the MGNREGA route to get the precincts of monuments overrun by vegetation cleaned up through Zilla Panchayats.

In another bid to overcome the paucity of funds, the government has launched the 'Adopt a Monument' scheme under the tag line 'Namma Smaraka (Our Monument)'. About 280 monuments have been listed as eligible for adoption, which entails maintenance and creating facilities for tourists. while conservation work, if any, will be under the supervision of the DAMH and as per ASI guidelines.

This is expected to broaden the scope for public and institutional involvement, make them stakeholders in the conservation of monuments, and strengthen heritage consciousness. But experiences from elsewhere in the country in seeking corporate involvement or promoting adoption of monuments indicate that only the more popular sites or Grade A monuments, which attract tourists, receive importance under the scheme. The greater challenge is to secure funding for lesser-known monuments and turn the conservation exercise into a tool for socioeconomic development of the local community.

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