



The Local Languages Of Uttarakhand: Endangered To Extinct

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Abstract : Language is a visible and powerful indicator of group's identity. Language holds the intricate memory and information for thousands of years of a culture. So the essence of who the people are is only passed down through the generations, much like a blue print for how a people are to live. We must aware that when a language ceases to exist, so does its cultural world view, and much of the heritage of the community is lost. The study aims to preserve the linguistic diversity being lost as elders die and young people turn to the national languages taught in schools and used by the media. There is a need for more attention on the issue as well as international cooperation to implement effective solutions that protect and preserve linguistic diversity despite the constantly changing socio-cultural and economic landscape of the world that threatens the existence of the local languages.

Index terms- Endangered , indigenous migrants , Regional Languages

Uttarakhand , a land of pilgrims, is also getting recognition for its unique culture and local ethnicity with bewildered diversity of tribes having local habitats, modes of livelihoods, languages and dialects. The *devbhoomi* is broadly divided into two parts, Kumaon and Garhwal region but in these regions, one can also find various tribes like Tharu, Jaunsari, Bhotia, among others. Uttarakhand is home to people of multiple ethnicities who speak multiple languages. Although the main languages of Uttarakhand associated with are Garhwali and Kumaoni. They vary as according to the socio-cultural standard of the local people and the degree of their emotional attachment with the traditional style of life. There is the necessity to encourage more and more people to write in different forms of literature and plan for their publication and circulation. We must collect and make available information of use in the preservation of endangered language.

At present, we must give more concern to their traditional languages diminishing day by day. We can see in the whole world that the local Languages are dying out around the globe through globalisation, social change, a shift in populations from rural areas to cities, and often well-intentioned education in national languages and national cultures rather than local indigenous languages and traditions. Local language is the primary identity of the people and culture. The older generation is adept in this knowledge, but they are reluctant in disclosing this knowledge to others. People tend to ignore the role of local language in carrying information, communicating values, attitudes, feelings ideologies in the field of development.

It is necessary to preserve the cultural heritage of Uttarakhand, their values and ethics so that the upcoming generation could be grateful to them. With shrinking usage of indigenous languages of Uttarakhand, threat of extinction lurks over them. Major regional languages of Uttarakhand include Kumaoni, Garhwali. According to estimates, till last century over 80% of the populace of the state used to speak these languages which has now reduced to 40-50%, mostly in remote areas among indigenous communities. However, we are losing their original traditions, culture and language. The use of local language in communication is essential in eliciting community participation in development programmes. We need a plan for expansion of education in the remote areas so that their originality must be revived and be brought to limelight.

Unfortunately when one community depends on another for necessities, it loses own language as they have to continuously communicate in the language of the dominant community. Another problem is of social strata. They do not want to speak their traditional language because they want from their children to speak English and to maintain social status in the higher society. They feel ashamed to talk in their language. Astonishingly the teachers in primary schools don't motivate them to speak in their mother tongue as they call it 'junglee bhasha'. So the younger generation feels inferior and less inclined to speak it. Historians, linguists and sociologists point out that loss of language is not just the language lost but the entire culture and tradition associated with the language disappears with time.

Sandesha Rayapa-Garbiyal commented, "The loss of a language is also the loss of a culture that it's associated with. Promotion of indigenous languages is important to save the cultures and traditions that contain the indigenous knowledge within their language systems."

For instance, the Rung community of Uttarakhand is one of the few indigenous communities of the world that still practices transhumance (migration on vertical levels). Their language Runglwo contains a vast vocabulary of indigenous knowledge of flora, fauna, Himalayan medicines and treatments etc. that might even hold a key to various diseases. The community holds a secret/key of treatment of various diseases. She further adds, "Indigenous and regional languages are facing threat of extinction because dominating languages such as Hindi and English tend to devour the indigenous languages. Promotion of indigenous language is important to save culture and tradition which has been contributing to the world since times immemorial."

Other indigenous languages of the hill state include Tharu, Jan, Rangpo, Darmiya, Byangsi, Raji, Chaudangsi and Rawat among 17 spoken in Uttarakhand alone.

According to the recent Unesco's report provided by Atlas of the world's language in danger, showcases that Garhwali language is in the unsafe category along with quickly becoming extinct. There are several reasons as to why this is happening, where one of the prime reasons is that there are more than 2.5 million migrants from Uttarakhand in their nearby cities. With time the people on the hills are also speaking in Hindi more than in Garhwali since it is the most common way of communicating to each other putting it in a verge of extinction. The people have lost touch with their roots since it is looked down on by the people in the developed parts of the country. The worst part is that there are no efforts or active being made by the people or political leaders for the conservation of this now almost extinct language. Our Constitution, by way of Article 29(1), confers rights to protect one's own language, script, and culture, and Article 30 confers rights to minorities to establish and administer educational institutions.

The National Education Policy, 2020 does bring in some ray of hope with emphasis on education in mother tongue till Class 5. This, however, needs to be backed by other policy changes including strengthening the Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India Scheme which was launched by the then Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2013. Further, assistance must be provided for research on these languages under the National Research Foundation as envisioned in the National Education Policy, 2020. Many of the endangered languages as a subject can be introduced in schools, especially in areas where members of the community speaking such languages reside. In the case of lack of teachers in those languages, special recruitments from among the members of those communities can be initiated. Most importantly, community members need to play a crucial role in passing on the linguistic heritage to future generations. Pro-active steps like these from both the Government and the people will save much of our linguistic heritage from extinction. The effects of that language loss could be "culturally devastating," One

critic Basu wrote. “Each language is a key that can unlock local knowledge about medicinal secrets, ecological wisdom, weather and climate patterns, spiritual attitudes and artistic and mythological histories.” As Nancy Rivenburgh wrote for the International Association of Conference Interpreters, what’s happening with today’s language loss is actually quite different from anything that happened before. Languages in the past disappeared and were born anew, she writes, but “they did so in a state of what linguists call ‘linguistic equilibrium.’ In the last 500 years, however, the equilibrium that characterized much of human history is now gone. And the world’s dominant languages—or what are often called ‘metropolitan’ languages—are all now rapidly expanding at the expense of ‘peripheral’ indigenous languages. Those peripheral languages are not being replaced.”

That means that out of the around 7000 languages that most reputable sources estimate are spoken globally, only the top 100 are widely spoken. And it isn’t just our understanding of the human mind that’s impaired, she writes. In many places, indigenous languages and their speakers are rich sources of information about the world around them and the plants and animals in the area where they live. In a time of mass extinction, that knowledge is especially precious.

“Medical science loses potential cures,” she writes. “Resource planners and national governments lose accumulated wisdom regarding the management of marine and land resources in fragile ecosystems.” Many of these regional languages along with Kumaoni and Garhwali have been accorded status of endangered languages by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The UNESCO categorizes threat to a language in four categories depending on degree of threat of extinction to those in upcoming two-thirds generations- Vulnerable, Definitely Endangered, Severely Endangered and Critically Endangered.

Garhwali is a regional language which is spoken in the northwestern Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. The language has many dialects like Srinagariya, Badhani, Tehri, Lohbya, Jaunsari etc. which differ from one another. Today, Jaunsari is a "definitely endangered" language as per the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Kumaoni language uses the Devanagari script and follows the same rules of grammar as other Indo-Aryan languages. Kumaon has a rich culture which is reflected in its literature, theatre and folk music. Today, Kumaoni speaking population is declining. The *Raji* tribe is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) dwelling majorly in the eastern part of the *Pithoragarh* district of Uttarakhand. The *Raji* language has been listed under the ‘*severely endangered*’ language by UNESCO (The Guardian, 2011) and things become more worrying when the speakers of that very language turn unenthusiastic in using their mother tongue. On conversing with the people of *Khirdwari* it became very evident that now they are more frequent in using *Kumaoni* language while communicating with each other. The old lady said: “*Bachche ab jyaada hindi aur pahadi bhasha bolte hai, humari bhasha hum bade hi aapas me bolte hai .*” (The young ones preferably converse in Hindi or Kumaoni, we the elderly ones still use our indigenous language.)

The turning of *Raji* language as a ‘*defunct*’ language, and then we also witnessed the withering away of *Raji*’s traditional components, this hints towards the incompetence of the State in protecting the culture of indigenous masses as enshrined in the constitution.

Large scale migration of the population to cities due to lack of opportunities, minimal use of Garhwali for communication social as well as official, Hindi language being used for everyday conversation within families, lack of support from the government, these are rapidly shrinking interest shown towards it by the people themselves. At present, there are several threats which loom over the Garhwali and Kumaoni languages. Several other languages of India are already extinct and many more are endangered. Assam, for example, has a unique family of six Tai-Kadai languages (a language group primarily spoken in South East Asia and China like Thai, Lao, and Shan). Of the Tai languages, Tai Ahom and Tai Turung are already extinct. Tai Khamyang with less than 50 speakers is a critically endangered language. The three other Tai languages – Aiton, Khamti, and Phake have less than 3,000 speakers in total. The primary threat to these languages is that most young generation speakers are switching to more dominant or official languages of the region, which in this case is Assamese. Many people who previously spoke these Tai languages today speak Assamese and those from newer generations do not know any Tai words. Also, the medium of instruction being Assamese or English in the majority of the schools, children often tend to learn those languages and give up their mother tongue. The limited number of speakers often makes it difficult for the

Government to establish schools teaching these languages. Further, being proficient in the official languages makes it easier to get employment. All these factors together have pushed these languages on the verge of extinction.

As such, to avoid this stage of extinct, we must take some steps such as the native kids and especially the younger generation here have lost touch with their language roots in this case, technology can play a major role in its conservation where they can be taught Garhwali through podcasts, e books etc. Language can also be promoted via music, literature, cinema, TV shows etc, where it can be successfully preserved for a longer duration of time and pass it on to the next generation in an even more convenient manner. Large scale regional fairs and functions should take place where people can represent their cultural and traditional values with the help of songs, debates, stories etc. various state level competitions should be held where the locals display their traditional jewellery, food, attire etc. The younger generation and kids can be taught Garhwali by organizing fun Garhwali themed parties along with performing various public promotion works on large cultural platforms. Famous personalities can be also approached to lend a helping hand in protecting and successfully preserving the dialect in a more effective manner. We have to raise awareness of endangered languages, both inside and outside the communities where these are spoken, through all channels and media.

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