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Language Endangerment and Preservation: A Study of Tribal Languages of Tamilnadu

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Abstract

There are 461 languages spoken by the Tribal people of India (Census 2011). Due to the less usage of the tribal people's language, it faces a significant threat of becoming an endangered language. Some tribes, like the Sentinelese Tribes in the Andaman Island, want to lead their lives in their natural habitat. They are called primitive tribes. But some tribes have to interact with the urban people to survive in this modern world. Due to that interaction, the influence of modern culture and suppression of their original identities, they adapted to modern culture. While some of their customs and traditions are continued to be practiced by them, due to less usage of their own language, tribal language endangerment happens. This article focuses on Tribal Languages spoken across Tamilnadu, Government's schemes and measures to preserve tribal languages and cultures, and ways to preserve tribal languages using modern technologies. Tribal languages of Irula, MalaiVedan, Toda, Kota, Kattunayakkan and Badaga are analysed in this article. Government schemes like Tribal Research, Information, Education, Communication and Events (TRI-ECE), Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) and their results are discussed in this article. This article also explores modern technologies which can be used to preserve tribal languages.

Keywords: Tribal Languages, Preservation, Culture, Endangerment, Modern Technology

Introduction

Language is not only a communication tool but it also plays a vital role in preserving and transferring people's culture. For example, when Tamil people see their friends or relatives, the first thing they ask is, "Saptimgala?" (சாப்திங்களா?) or "Have you eaten?". It is not a mere casual greeting. It reflects the Tamil culture's emphasis on hospitality, respect and care for others, highlighting the significance of language in conveying cultural values. Similarly, the culture and traditions of Tribes are reflected and transferred to the next generation through their language. But due to interaction with the urban people for survival, the influence of modern culture and suppression of their original identities, they adapted to modern culture which resulted in less usage of their own language. This article focuses on the languages and cultures of Tribes of Tamilnadu, namely, Irula, MalaiVedan, Toda, Kota and Badaga. Government schemes on preserving tribal languages and the role of modern technologies in preserving tribal languages are explored in this article.

Language of Irula Tribes

Irulas are the indigenous tribes living across Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka. As per the census of India (2011), there are 189, 621 Irula people residing in Tamilnadu. They are classified under particularly vulnerable Tribal groups. They were traditionally hunters and food gatherers and are experts in snake - catching. The linguist, Kamil Zevelebil did research on the Irula language and showed that it is an independent Southern Dravidian Language. He states that the Irula language emerged from a Pre-dravidian population that adopted an ancient pre or proto Tamil dialect, which eventually blended with their native language. The Irula language has several dialects including Kasaba (North Irula), Mele Nadu, VeteKada and Urali. The Irula language is similar to Tamil, especially to old Tamil and some features from Kannada. The Irula language is written in Tamil alphabet in Tamilnadu and Malayalam alphabet in Kerala. Like many tribal languages, the Irula language is also considered as vulnerable according to the UNESCO Atlas of world languages in danger.

Language of MalaiVedan Tribes

MalaiVedans are a lesser known tribe of Tamilnadu and Kerala. They were once hunters in Western Ghats but now primarily engage in agricultural activities, with a population of 7,500 spread across Madurai, Dindigul, Theni and Nilgiri districts of Tamilnadu. They believe that they are the descendants of ‘Kannappa Nayanar’, who is known for his devotion to Lord Shiva. Their language is closely related to Tamil and Malayalam Language.

Language of Toda Tribes

According to census (2011) there are 2,978 Toda tribes living in Nilgiri district of Tamilnadu. The red and black embroidery design on white fabrics worn by them makes them a unique tribe. Their main occupation is buffalo herding and dairy farming. They consider buffalo sacred. They perform rituals for dairy activities, milking and churning butter. Their language is noted for their trills and fricatives. They are having /y/, /ə/ and /æ:/ as separate vowel sounds that cannot be replaced with any other vowel sounds. The Toda language is considered to have derived from Toda - Kota subgroup of South Dravidian. Toda language didn't have any written script so they are using Tamil alphabets.

Language of Kota Tribes

There are around 2500 Kota tribes residing in the Nilgiri district of Tamilnadu. Kotagiri, “Mountain of the Kotas”, is the traditional home for Kota tribes. ‘Ko’ denotes cow, they believe that their ancestors were residing in cows, thus the place they survive is called ‘kokkal’, the living place of cows. They are known for their Pottery, Music and Blacksmithing. The Kota tribe's economy is based on agriculture, forestry and traditional crafts. Kota language is also known as “Ko-v-Mannt”. It is identified as an unique Dravidian language by Robert Claswell (1870). They have their linguistic ties with Tamil and Kannada language. Due to urbanization and modernization, the Kota language is facing a significant threat of becoming an endangered language.

Language of Kattunayakan Tribes

The Kattunayakan Tribes are also known as ‘JenuKurumbas’, traditionally hunt gatherers. They are living across Tamilnadu and Kerala. The Kattunayakan Tribes are recognised as one of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). They speak a language called, “Nama Bhasha”, which means our language. It can be classified under Dravidian language. It consists of some elements of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada.

Language of Badaga Tribes

Similar to Kota and Toda tribes, Badaga tribes is also an ethno-linguistic tribal community residing in Nilgiri district of Tamilnadu. They have their unique cultural heritage, traditions and customs. Unlike most tribes living in Tamilnadu, in Badaga tribe there are a lot of college graduates and professionals in various fields. They have their unique language called, ‘Badugu’, which is closely related to Tamil and Kannada. Their language has no written script.

Government Schemes to Preserve Tribal Languages

The Government of India undertook various schemes and measures to preserve and document tribal languages. The most notable schemes are Tribal Research, Information, Education, Communication and Events (TRI-ECE) and Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL).

In the 2022-2023 budget, 15.01 crore rupees are sanctioned for the scheme Tribal Research, Information, Education, Communication and Events (TRI-ECE). Under this scheme, various activities were undertaken to preserve and sustain tribal knowledge and languages. Those activities include, research studies / publications of books, documentation including audio visual documentaries on promotion of rich tribal cultural heritage, research and documentation of Indigenous practices by tribal healers, medicinal plants, Adivasi languages, agricultural systems, dances and paintings, organization of tribal crafts and food festivals, etc. These activities plays a significant role in preserving and promoting tribal culture, practices and Languages. (Ministry of Tribal affair, 2024)

The Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) was instituted by the Ministry of Education (Government of India) in 2013. The core objective of this scheme is to document and protect tribal languages across India. This scheme is monitored by the Central Institute of Indian languages located in Mysore, Karnataka. Presently languages which are spoken by less than 10, 000 speakers or languages which or not linguistically studied earlier are considered to be documented in this scheme. Nearly 107 languages have been listed for the documentation under this scheme. Documentation of grammar, ethno linguistic profiles of more than 500 lesser known tribal languages are targeted to be achieved in coming years.

There are many other important schemes undertaken by the Government of India in preserving tribal languages. The University grants commission(UGC), provides funding for research and studies on indigenous and endangered languages of India. The UGC also established various centers for endangered languages in central and state universities of India. Recently, the Tamilnadu government had announced “Tamilnadu Fellowship for Tribal Research”, which provides fellowship for students and scholars who are doing research on Tribal culture, systems and Languages. Thus, the government of India and Tamilnadu are taking lots of efforts to preserve and promote Tribal languages.

Role of Modern Technologies in Preserving Tribal Languages

Modern technologies can be adapted to preserve and document tribal languages. Online dictionaries and lexicons can be prepared to document tribal languages. This will not only document the Tribal languages but also help people and students who wish to learn and know about them.

Mobile apps can be created to provide access to tribal language dictionaries and lexicons. For example, Lexin and Toolbox apps help to create and manage dictionaries, which are suitable for documenting tribal languages. We can promote and create awareness about tribal languages using mobile apps. For example, Firstvoices, a language learning app which provides courses and resources for learning indigenous languages, including tribal languages. There are many other apps which provides a platform for language documentation such as Saymore, FLEx, etc. Creating

digital archives can also help to preserve and document tribal languages. Ojibwe Language App, Hawaiian Language app and Cree language app are some the apps created to document and promote the particular indigenous languages. Such apps related to specific tribes can be created to preserve and protect tribal languages in India.

Virtual reality (VR) and Augmented reality(AR) can be used to preserve tribal languages. Language Revitalization project, adapted Virtual reality and Augmented reality to revitalize tribal languages. Artificial intelligence(AI) and Machine Learning (ML), will be helpful in translating tribal languages. Gamification techniques can be used to teach and encourage tribal language learning. Similarly, there are more digital technologies that can be utilized to preserve, promote and document tribal languages in India.

Conclusion

Documenting a language is like documenting a culture. Preserving tribal languages helps in learning about the culture, traditions, medicinal practices, etc. The study on Tribal languages of Tamilnadu, highlights the issue of language endangerment and need for preservation efforts. Linguistic diversity is a valuable asset for a country. Thus more efforts have to be made to protect the languages of Indigenous people. The usage of modern technologies such as mobile apps, online dictionaries, digital archives can play a significant role in preserving and documenting Tribal languages. The government and people have to join together to preserve Tribal languages and promote rich cultural heritage of its indigenous communities.

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