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Geographical Distribution and Cultural Significance of Tribal Language Families in India

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Abstract:

This research paper focuses on tribal language families and indigenous people living in India. India stands out for exceptional linguistic diversity, representing some of the world's major tribal language families. According to the People's Linguistics Survey of India (PLSI), an estimated Seven Hundred Languages are spread across the diverse geographical areas of the nation. These are spanning the arid terrains of Rajasthan, the sub-Himalayan belt, and the oceanic regions of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Waves of migration over the thousand years stand as evidence of the Indian subcontinent contributing to the linguistic diversity in India. In European countries, the idea of a nation has its foundation in the common language principle, such as English, French, and German, whereas India does not adhere to this concept. Though Hindi is widely used, it is not the only national language. Hindi has been enlisted as an official language along with English for administrative and parliamentary transactions. The inclusion of numerous languages is anticipated because the notion of language and regionalism is of significance in the Indian social reality. For instance, Indian languages like Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Telugu, and other Indian languages are concerned with regional states such as West Bengal, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh.

Keywords: Tribal Languages, Tribal Communities, Linguistics diversity, Geographical Distribution, Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Significance, Multilingualism, Endangered Languages.



Introduction:

In most Northern States, languages are highly diverse, making it impossible to designate a single language for the entire state. Moreover, imposing a single language across single ethnic groups could have significant consequences; taking Manipur as an example, over thirty tribal languages are spoken in addition to Hindi, English, and Manipuri. The lingua franca of the Meitei people in the Imphal valley Nagaland accounts for Eighteen major tribal languages beside their numerous branches sub-branches. Arunachal Pradesh accounts for more than fifty tribal languages.

Tribal Languages

The total distinct languages are spoken in the world today is estimated around seven thousand. Here, the African continent and the Indian subcontinent alone accounts for more than thousand native languages each. However, a tremendous linguistic diversity is found among the indigenous population in the island of New Guinea, where more than thousand languages are crammed into a region little bigger than the twice the size of Rajasthan. This attests to the fact that linguistic diversity is more pronounced among the tribal population which is marked by great heterogeneity as compared to the more homogeneous group in Europe where all the European rest of Russia has less than hundred native languages in the midst of tremendous linguistic diversity. In India tribal languages both in diversity and distribution have enriched the Indian linguistic situation.

Languages spoken in India

India is marked by its remarkable linguistic diversity hosting the important language families of the world. The People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) has estimated a total of Seven Hundred Eighty languages diversely scattered in different geographical regions from the arid Thar region in Rajasthan to the sub-Himalayan mountains region to the oceanic zone in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian subcontinent has been home to innumerable human groups coming in waves of migration spread over thousands of years and the enormous linguistic diversity attested to this fact. In India, the most spoken language is Hindi which has been enlisted as the official language along with English for administrative and parliamentary transactions. The Indian constitution does not recognize any specific pan-Indian national language rather a total of Twenty-Two languages have been enshrined in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution as official languages and the inclusion of both languages is anticipated the notion of language and regionalism is of significance in the Indian social reality.



For Instance, Indian languages like Bengali, Canadian, Malayalam, Marathi and Telugu are associated with regional states like West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. However, in most North Eastern states, the languages are diverse and therefore a single language accounting for the entire state is not found also the imposition of a single language on diverse ethnic groups would have far-reaching implications. Now, we discuss the distribution of tribal language families in India concerning the geographical distribution of travel language families. The dividend speakers are mostly distributed in south India and Central India the ostrich-speaking tribal people or groups are mostly distributed in middle India and the Andaman Islands and especially in Northeast India.

The Tibeto-Burman speaking communities are located in Northeast India and the Indo-Aryan speaking groups are especially distributed in certain pockets of middle India and Northwest India. It is important to mention that although tribes are classified based on linguistic categories, the definition of Indian tribes based on language families is not found. One of the important characterizations of tribes is speaking a common language not speaking a particular language family. In this context, the tribal groups belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family account for a little over one percent a little above three persons belong to the dragon language family. Over Eighty percent of the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking groups have been identified as tribes in India. The entire Austric languages-speaking communities have been identified as a tribe.

The Classification of Tribal Language Families:

The tribal languages are classified into four main language family that is Austric, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, and Tibeto-Burman which is otherwise called Sino-Tibetan. For example, the Austric family according to the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) the tribal languages falling within the Austric family are Munda languages and Mon- Khmer which constitute branches of the Austro-Asiatic division of the great Austric family.

The Munda branch comprises Fourteen tribal languages spoken largely in Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur region of Jharkhand, Kandhamal and Mayurbhanj in Orissa Betul in Madhya Pradesh West Bengal, and Terai region of Himalayas.

George Grierson in his important contribution identified eight autonomous Munda languages further branching into different dialects. He used the common term Kherwari to name different dialects spoken especially towards the Northeastern region of the central Indian plateau and the adjoining areas, the important ones being Bhumij, Ho, Korwa, Mundari, and Santhali. The



important Munda languages identified are Asuri, Birhor, Gadaba, Juang, Kharia, Koda, Kurku, Savara and Turi. The distribution of the Mon-Khmer branch is geographically distinct and is represented by the two languages that are Khasi in Meghalaya and Nicobarese in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Dravidian Family:

By comparison, the distribution of the Dravidian language family is less diverse than the other language families. However, this language is spoken by a large chunk of the population in the Indian mainland. Generally, this language is broadly classified into a central Dravidian group and a Southern Dravidian group. The earliest classification of the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) based on Caldwell's study identified two sub-divisions: the Dravida language and the Andhra language. The Dravida language includes Gondi, Kanarese, Kodagu, Kota, Kui, Kurukh, Tamil, Toda, Tulu, Malto and Malayalam; while the Andhra language includes Brahui, Kolami, and Telegu.

The Dravidian languages are distributed mainly in the Deccan plateau and the adjoining coastal plains. This language family also demarcates the state boundaries of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala in terms of the spoken language.

The tribal population speaking languages falling under the Dravidian family inhabit primarily the southern part of India and middle India. Concerning tribals belonging to the Dravidian language family, Gondi speakers comprise the largest group scattered diversely across Madhya Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh. In central India, some important Dravidian languages are Kui spoken by the Kondh of Orissa, Kurukh spoken by the Oraon and Malto spoken by tribes of Rajmahal hills. Among the tribes of South India, the languages of the Badaga, Chenchu, Irula, Kadar, and Toda, etc. are included in the Dravidian language family.

Tibeto- Burman

Tibeto-Burman speakers in India are mostly confined along the Himalayan belt contiguous with the international boundaries. The Tibeto-Burmese language is said to have entered India from the mountain's region in the North and Special all along the Himalayas. The tribal groups speaking the Tibeto-Burman languages belong to the Mongoloid stock mostly inhabiting the North East region of India.

The Tibeto-Burman family languages are considered to be a branch of the larger Sino-Tibetan family, which covers a large area extending from Jammu and Kashmir in the West to Assam,



Indo- China and parts of eastern China. Generally, the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese family is further divided into two groups: Tai and Tibeto-Burman. The Tai group includes the diminishing Ahom language of Assam, Khampti, Phakial, etc. The Tibeto-Burman group is further divided into the Tibeto-Himalayan branch, North Assam or Arunachal branch and Assam- the Burmese branch.

The Tibeto-Himalayan branch has two sections: one is Bhotia and Himalaya. The Bhotia section includes Ladakhi, Lahuli, Sherpa, and Sikkim Bhutia; While the Himalayan section importantly includes Lepcha, Toto, Rong, etc. The Arunachal branch includes Adi, Apatani, Mishing Miri, etc. While the Assam-Burmese branch further includes sections like Bodo, Naga, Kachin, and Kuki-Chin.

The Bodo section includes Dimasa, Garo, Kachari, and Tripuri, etc. the Naga section includes Ao, Angami, Rengma, Sumi, and Lotha, etc the Kachin section can be represented by Singpho; while the Kuki-Chin section includes Lushai, Thado, Ralte, Sokte and Manipuri, etc.

Indo-Aryan

The Indo-Aryan speakers comprise the largest group in India with an estimated two-thirds of the Indian population speaking one or other form of Indo-Aryan language. However, the tribal speakers of the Indo-Aryan language are comparatively smaller, and mostly are interspersed with dominant Indo-Aryan groups, or overlap with the major language. In distribution, the Indo-Aryan languages are widely spread from Kashmir to the Konkan coast and from Gujrat to Assam. Some of the tribal communities belonging to Indo -The Indo-European language family are Bhils of Rajasthan, Warli of Maharashtra, and Hajong of Meghalaya. Studies suggested that the earlier Dravidian speakers adopted the Indo- Aryan speech from the arriving dominant Indo-Aryan speakers, were pushed southwards or were converted to the Indo-European language family.

This is indicative among the southern Indo-European speakers like Banjaras and Pardhis who are nomadic tribes with a well-recorded history of migration from Rajasthan a few centuries ago.

Multilingualism and Tribal Languages

The definition of tribes as speaking a specific dialect is debatable and problematic in the Indian context. The Kond and Paraja of south Odisha speak Oriya along with Kui and Parji, the Santhals of Santhal Parganas speak Bengali and Hindi along with Santhali, the Chencus and



Koyas speak Telugu along with their Indigenous while the Naga tribes usually speak Nagamese and the language of their neighboring tribes aside their mother tongue, and the similar feature is found among other Indian tribes.

Studies also reveal that there exists a communication language, which is a language of tribes or dominant communities, but a regional language. For instance, in South Odisha most of the tribes know three languages; the language specific to the group, the dominant language of their neighbours (Oriya), and 'Desiabhasa' which is the regional language, which is translated as folk language and is different from all. Not every endangered tribal language is due to isolation like among the Andaman islanders or a decline in population like the Toto and Foraging tribes. Conversely, the immense linguistic diversity and multilingual condition have led to a sharp decline in languages like Kurukh with millions of populations.

Multilingualism is an important feature among tribal groups influencing not only the nature of tribal languages but also the sociocultural transactions. For instance, an average Oraon may speak Hindi, Nagpuri, Sadri, and even the indigenous language of neighbouring tribes besides Kurukh. Many studies have shown that the cluster of languages spoken inside the mother tongue tends to show regional differences even among the same tribal groups. Thus, an Oraon and Santal tea garden tribe in Assam would speak Assamese and other regional languages other than Kurukh and Santhali, which would differ substantially from the Oraons and Santals of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas.

This is significant in the multilingual context since the speakers use different linguistic codes switching from one to another during the conversation. Thus, the adaptation resilience and diminishing of tribal languages are determined by geographical location and cultural contact.

Hodson suggested that during social contact between different language groups, the social status of the group is important in determining which group learns the language of the other group. Following this some scholars have mentioned the prestige, pride and solidarity of a particular language group in remaining monolingual. Be that as it may, economic transactions play a vital role in the multilingual process where in many cases outsiders have learned the local tribal languages for economic viability. However, in general, tribal languages are attributed a lower status in comparison to other dominant languages.

Verrier Elwin in his study among the Bondo Highlanders observed that the Bonda use Mundari for daily conversation but use Oriya for two distinct purposes; the market transactions when



they involve weight and measures; and some magical and religious recitations are done in Oriya.

So, in this way, the tribals use multilingual language in their scenario. The Bonda believe that Oriya is a superior language and superior entities should be addressed in a superior language. This linguistic process cannot be detached from social life where the notion of class and status influences the contour of tribal languages.

Contemporary Situation of Tribal Languages

The study of tribal languages among the students of anthropology and linguistics has generated renewed interest in tribal communities. One of the concerns has been the decline of tribal languages which the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) has listed as endangered languages. One of the unique features of tribal communities in India is multilingualism. Barring some relatively isolated tribes, the tribal India is marked for its multilingualism where tribes speak languages other than its mother tongue. For instance, an average Oraon would speak Nagpuri, Sadri and Hindi besides their language Kurukh. This is how due to the speaking of multilingual languages in the area the local languages are in an endangered situation. With respect to endangered tribal languages, it is not only found among tribes with dwindling populations but also tribes with large populations but not speaking their indigenous language in a multicultural and multi-ethnic context.

Many tribal languages are fast disappearing in India. The People's Linguistic Survey of India has estimated that about two hundred twenty languages have disappeared during the last 50 years, and most of these languages are tribal languages in India.

In India, many tribal languages have vanished from the face of the earth, especially among the Andaman tribes, and more are expected to become extinct soon. In India, this phenomenon is observed even in the Indian mainland among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs), like the Asur, Birhor, Chenchu, Maram, and Toto and also among North-eastern tribes like Chiru, Khoibu, and Koirang.

While the number of speakers of certain tribal languages has increased over the years these tribals or tribes are also subjected to tremendous social change and retaining the original language has been a formidable task. Thus, in India, both relative isolation and growing cultural contact have led to a steep the decline in survival and continuity of tribal language.

**Conclusion:**

The study of tribal languages among the students of anthropology and linguistics has generated renewed interest in travel communities. One of the concerns has been the decline of tribal languages which the Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) has listed as endangered languages. The People's Linguistic Survey of India has estimated about 220 languages have disappeared in half of the century. It is important to note that endangered languages listed by UNESCO reveal the diminishing languages of the Indian population or indigenous population. In India, many tribal languages have vanished from the face of Earth, especially among the Andaman tribes and more are expected to become extinct soon. This phenomenon is observed even in the Indian mainland among the particularly vulnerable tribal groups. While the speakers of certain travel languages have increased over the years these types are also subjected to tremendous social change and retaining the original language has been a formidable task. Thus, in India, both relative isolation and foregoing cultural contact have led to a steep decline in the survival and continuity of tribal languages.

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