Cultural Diversity and Bio-Diversity: A Study through Language Diversity

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The choice of the University Grants Commission to establish the North-East India Centre of Diversities on the campus of North-Eastern Hill University is eminently justified. While a philosophy of pluralism is generally inherent to the concept of diversity, the link between bio-diversity and cultural diversity, albeit explicit in the above project, has remained rather elusive to my mind. This elusiveness made me philosophically restless till a certain perceptible link got itself established in my thought. The present essay is an attempt to explicate the close link between cultural diversity and bio-diversity. The link is made feasible through the mediation of the concept of language, the essential feature of all culture, within which all human pursuits, scientific and cultural, are carried out. In order to argue out my position, I shall firstly explicate how language is an essential feature of culture. Secondly, if language is the core of a culture, a language death may harbinger the death of culture itself. Thirdly, the phenomenon of language death may have to be studied against the backdrop of linguistic imbalances. Fourthly, with the loss of language and culture, there results the loss of cultural wisdom, embodied in the form of life, represented by the language concerned. A great deal of cultural wisdom is the knowledge associated with our environment. Bio-diversity, needless to say, is a striking endowment of our environment. Thus there is an inextricable bond between the cultural, therefore, the linguistic, diversity and the bio-diversity. Finally, I shall instantiate the study with special reference to the Northeastern region of India, a veritable treasure trove for both the cultural and the linguistic, on the one hand, and the biodiversity, on the other, thus eminently vindicating the judicious choice of the 'diversity project' on the part of the University Grants Commission.

A. Language: An Essential Feature of Culture

Culture is the sum total of an entire way of life of a people embodied in a

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system of symbols. The system of symbols can work both at the ideal (e.g., a value, a norm) and the material (e.g., a painting, a dress) level, thus enabling us to speak of an ideal culture and a material culture. Culture therefore embodies a concatenation of meanings that are historically transmitted through the symbolic forms. Thus the meanings are collectively shared by the members of a community. Indeed, human beings, for a meaningful communication within a given community, fall back on the system of commonly accepted patterns of meanings embedded in the symbols. Through these meanings we perpetuate and develop our knowledge of the environment, both natural and social and, more importantly, our attitude to life.[1] Needless to say, language is the greatest of the symbolic system of meanings. Perhaps, among all the features of a given culture language is the most important feature, without which there would not be a culture at all. This is convincingly argued out in recent times by a great many philosophers of language, most notable among them being Wittgenstein.[2]

(i) Language and Cultural Identity

Language may be said to constitute the basic index of cultural identity. It is further argued, and this not without reason, that the ethnic identity, a narrower aspect of the larger cultural identity, is directly traced back to language by the ethnic community. While this is true of all communities, it is amply evident today in the African continent, to say nothing of India's Northeastern tribal communities. The larger and the mainstream communities have often fallen back on a common language for the formation of their nation states and also for their provincial states within the federal set-up in the larger nation-state. It is common knowledge that India's federal states are formed on linguistic basis. Now, if language represents a form of life for a community, it manifestly provides us with the basic information about a given culture. It is the most easily identifiable, if also the accurate, instrument of the cultural knowledge and wisdom of a community. What is more, it is also the most effective vehicle to facilitate the process of socialization and acculturization, through which a member acquires a social identity as belonging to a group. In concrete, a member of a community acquires his socio-cultural identity through a system of shared institutions, values, norms, ideas and so on - in short, the whole of his specific culture embedded in the language.

What does a language do to a group's identity? Firstly, it serves as the most explicit and ubiquitous outward sign of the group identity.[3] It is the unmistakable index of the group's cultural ethos. We do not create a language

consciously. We are simply born into a linguistic community, and unconsciously appropriate through language its cultural ethos, and make it a part of our nature. Further, if there should be an occasion for the choice of one language over another, the chosen language becomes the most easily perceived trait of a newly recognized cultural identity. Secondly, language serves as a key to access and assess the community's past tradition, through either an oral tradition or/and written literature. This way language renders an unmistakable service to retrieve the tradition, even after a particular civilization may have ceased to exist. We can think of the existence of a language without a living culture and civilization, but not the existence of a culture and civilization without a language. For example, the ancient Vedic or the Egyptian civilization may have ceased to be living today, but we can learn about their past through the Vedic and Egyptian languages respectively, despite there being now no spoken Vedic or Egyptian language. These languages have long since ceased to be spoken by the people, but they continue to be the ancient languages available to the academic scholarship. Thirdly, language often defines in the present, as it did in the past, the political and the geographical boundaries. Political implications of the linguistic identity cannot easily be ignored or downplayed. Nation-states, and the federal states within the nation-states, are often defined on the basis of a linguistic identity. This is specially true of the provincial states of India after its independence, not withstanding certain infelicities that have resulted from the experiment of the formation of the linguistic states.[4] Political ineptitude, to say nothing of the conscious choice of a script for the use of a language, in handling the socio-political problems, here, can be potentially dangerous for the maintenance of peace and harmony among the people, as is amply evident in the multi-ethnic countries, in general, and in Northeastern states of India, in particular.

Because the language is by far the best index of one's cultural identity, it is nearly impossible to retrieve and articulate the wealth of one's cultural identity without a reference to language. This only goes to suggest that there is such a close link between the two that many of the properties of the language are shared by the culture and vice versa. This perhaps is the implication of the observation of the linguistic philosophers that language is a 'form of life'. It is primarily through language that a group of people becomes a society, and the society, a closely knit community, with a shared life. Culture, it has been already said, represents a common way of life, comprising a body of shared knowledge, including values and norms, we come both to inherit from the past generations and to bequeath to our posterity. This is the kind

of knowledge, values and norms that we learn either by way of formal and indirect instructions or informal and direct participation in the way of life of the community. We internalize the concerned knowledge both through the institutions of formal education and through the observation of other's behaviour in the community. Therefore all cultural knowledge is that type of knowledge which is readily accessible to all the members of a community, in virtue of a shared life therein.[5] Language does have a rare cohesive power in the life of a people. If people no longer speak a particular language, or perhaps have never spoken it, they are generally excluded from that culture, even if they may, on many other counts, believe themselves to be part of that group. This is specially true of an indigenous language, which becomes 'an obligatory feature of ethnicity'.[6] Even in a non-ethnic community, inability to speak one's language is often seen as a serious handicap for the person. The loss of language in his case is compared to 'the cultural heart attack'. Almost tongue in cheek, a noted linguist concedes that, to be sure, such a linguistically handicapped individual 'can survive heart attack; and so can culture'.[7]

Let us see at some length how culture is embedded in one's language. Firstly, a great deal of vocabulary of a language is derived graphically from the culture-specific concepts. The way one cultural group uses its vocabulary can be vastly different from that of another cultural group. For example, for a Teutonic cultural group, a plant is 'what drives into the soil for stability'; to a Sanskritic cultural group, a plant (*padapa*, from the "*pa*, to drink), is literally 'what draws its sustenance from its root/foot (*sa padena pibati);* to the Khasi cultural group, a plant (*jingthung)* is 'what has sprouted from a seed' (from the verb *thung)*. While the Teuton thinks of a plant in terms of its being rooted in the soil for stability, the Sanskritist graphically thinks of a plant in terms of nutrition, and the Khasi even more radically thinks of the same in terms of germination. The thinking patterns are imaginatively different to three different cultural groups. While the syntactics of a language (e.g., the impersonal usage like 'It rains') is determined by the culture only to a limited extent, its semantics, however, is determined in illimitable ways by the concerned culture. Once again, it may be illustrated. The languages of the hill tribes in the Northeast may have a stronger sense for the spacial directions of 'up' and 'down' than north and south (e.g. 'upper' Shillong, 'lower' Lachumiere). The sense of the east and west likewise may be more pervasive than that of 'north' and 'south'. Even so, their names of places suggest their identification in terms of hills, mounds, rocks and water-bodies, as is amply evidenced in the Khasi language (e.g. Mawlai from *Maw*, literally

stone, rock, hillock; Umiam from *Um*, literally water). A great deal of vocabulary is so culture-specific that any two languages of the two distinct cultures constitute two mutually exclusive forms of life. Languages are not merely different ways of expressing the same ideas, but they express in a more radical way the different sets of ideas, that are not necessarily shared by the different cultural universes. For example, the word for the 'head of the family' may reflect either a patrilineal or a matrilineal cultural universe, as the case may be.

Secondly, because a culture represents a transmitted knowledge, it becomes a tradition (literally, 'what is handed over') through the instrumentality of language. Even before a written literature comes to form itself, due to the invention or adoption of a script, a cultural tradition is transmitted orally, thus at once freeing itself from the evolved necessity of the (written) literature. This is partly because orality fundamentally precedes all scripturality.[8] One generation passes on the cultural knowledge to another (next) generation through its language (speech), even if the concerned culture were to be only preliterate. While orality is the sufficient and necessary condition of a culture, scripturality is only a later accretion, if also an additional embellishment, of a culture for transmitting the tradition. Language, then, both in its orality and scripturality, plays the role of a formative institution, serving as a fit vehicle for the transmission of tradition in the life of the members of the society, right from their childhood to other responsible stages of development. The process of socialization of the members of the society takes place, remind the sociologists, through the mediation of language. The gradual integration of children into the society as its responsible members takes place almost imperceptibly through the instrumentality of language.

(ii) Power Dynamics of Language Diversity

The cultural identity bestowed by the language can have serious political dimension, too. For the diversity of languages may have its own power dynamics. While there is no superior or inferior language *per se*, because every language is meant for an effective and adequate communication, it is possible that a particular language, (often of a majority cultural group), may come to be used dominantly to assert a greater solidarity of the majority of the people, who use it as its first language. This dominance of a language, particularly for the social solidarity, may even don a national apparel, and gain an undue advantage over other languages, and thus come to acquire an extra respectability for itself in being bestowed with the honour of a 'national

language'. But the plain fact is that the natural user of that language as his first language comes to wield a certain social, more often, a political advantage, that the users of other languages cannot garner for themselves. What is more, the majority group may, through the many agencies of the government, promote its language in all administrative and educational processes, either overtly or covertly, and thus obtain an undue advantage for itself. Secondly, the dominant language can be psychologically used as a boundary marker. This can create a distance between those who use it and those who do not, or cannot.

Thirdly, even among the majority users of that dominant language, there are several dialects of the same language, but a particular form may be accepted as the standard version for both speaking and, more importantly, for the written communication and such other important communicative functions as administration, education, print and audio-visual media. Thus the particular form of language so chosen is often taught formally through the formative institution of education, formalized through administration, and popularized through media. In Meghalaya, for example, Thomas Jones not only chose the Roman script for the Khasi language, but also chose the Sohra dialect to be the standardized one, amidst stiff resistance from the British officials, to say nothing of the non-Sohra natives. Despite the standardized version of a language, other versions of the same language in the form of dialects however continue to exist among the particular sections of the people. This is partly because of a certain vitality of the dialects that continually enrich the vocabulary of the standardized version, and partly because of the desire of people to affiliate themselves to localized social structures. One may experience some artificiality in the use of the standardized form of language, if also a detached formality, while there is a rare spontaneity and intimate freshness in the dialects. Besides the richness of vocabulary, the local forms of pronunciation and syntactic formation continually enrich the standardized version itself of the language, as the tributaries perennially enrich the mainstream of a river. The truth of the matter is that any variety of the language, so long as it is spoken by a group of people, will serve as an adequate language for communication. Hence, no language is inadequate or inferior or incorrect language. What is more, if the new needs of communication do arise for a language group, its language, too, evolves to meet effectively the new needs. Thus language, too, like a living being, grows continually.

That no language *per se* is superior or inferior to other languages needs to be underscored, because in our social interactions we often tend to exhibit almost unconsciously, language-based prejudices. We judge some people as rustic, uncultured, uneducated and inferior, merely on the basis of their way of speaking a language. Conversely, we judge others as highly cultured, refined, educated and superior, again, on the basis of their way of speaking a language. The accent, intonation, vocabulary and other peculiarities are highlighted to make untenable judgments. Here, we erroneously judge the language competence on the basis of a standard dialect, whose choice is dictated merely by politics than linguistics. We adopt here a juridical viewpoint, and ignore the many other functions that a language performs. This observation is not meant to downplay the correct use of grammar, much less, the skill of speech required for effective communication. It is rather meant to underscore the point that it may sometime so happen that a certain language gains importance for written or speech communication, not because of its intrinsic superiority to other languages, but because of a host of historical contingencies. Standardization of a language then clearly has socio-political, and not linguistic, reasons.

However, once chosen and standardized as the preferred media for communication, it comes to enjoy a privileged status and a greater advantage towards mutual intelligibility. But the danger here is that the standard form tends to exert a normative pressure on other dialects, often to the detriment of the latter. Indeed, the very distinction between a language and dialect cannot in principle be linguistically sustained. Every dialect is basically a language. If a dialect comes to be treated politically as a language, it is because of the standardization it comes to acquire due to historical contingencies. Behind the process of standardization lies the political pressure exerted by the dominant group, deriving a certain advantage, or privileged position, for communication. It is wrong to think that the standardized form is absolutely correct. Conversely, we ought not to believe that the 'dialects', spoken by the subordinate, or subaltern, groups of people, are either deficient or inferior. They are merely marginalized due to the lesser number of its speakers or their subordinate status. The patterns in these dialects are less standardized; however, on this ground, the dialects do not become less of a language. But the greater or lesser number of people, who speak a language, then bestows on it a majority or minority status. The recognition of this truth is of paramount importance, because the minority language may gradually veer into suffering the so called 'language death'.

B. Language Death

(i) Concept

Due to a host of reasons, some of which are predominantly political, the number of speakers of a language can so dwindle as to bring about a situation that there would be gradually none left behind to speak that language, resulting in the phenomenon called 'the language death' for the concerned language. I am aware that there is no unanimity among the linguists on the meaning of language death. If it is understood as the irrevocable loss of a language, because there are no more speakers of that language, the concept of language death, argue some linguists, cannot be sustained. They contend that a dead language can be revived, as is the case of the Hebrew language. Again, the so called dead language can still continue to 'survive' for research, as is the case with many a classical language. In my considered opinion, the concept of language death may still be accepted, if we understand by the phrase that a language has ceased to be in current use, in as much as it is no more spoken by a community; it has ceased to be a living language. With this modification, the concept perhaps can be subscribed to. Language death does occur gradually. The speaker of a language often gives up the use of his language due to a host of reasons, and thus hastens the process of language death.

(ii) Reasons

Firstly, despite the degree of attachment and affinity people feel for their ancestral language, the continued use of their language may not provide them with an economic benefit. In such a situation, people tend to increasingly use an 'alien', but standard form of, language they are taught in the school. They are pragmatically compelled to use that language in the market place. They are obliged to use it in all written communication for official purposes. Thus they move more and more away from their own language. To put it more positively, their attachment for the ancestral language is reinforced only if it gives them an economic and political advantage; then, people do not feel impelled to substitute it by any other language. If however it does not, they do not hesitate to give up their ancestral language, and they prefer the use of the standardized language. Thus they unconsciously allow the gradual marginalization and extinction of their own language. The survival and development of a language, or its death, are due to historical vicissitudes. The vicissitudes for language death may be in the form of political suppression, social discrimination and, more importantly, economic deprivation. Dorian,

an authority on language death, thinks that all three reasons can work in unison[9]. Secondly, the extreme smallness of a group often results in further reduction of the members of a group, and brings about language death, especially if the ethnic group also practises endogamy. The gene pool of the group loses its diversity over the years due to the endogamous breeding. Thirdly, ethnic conflicts and large-scale wars can also decimate the size of a group, hastening the language death. Fourthly, epidemics, too, wipe out a sizable number of the speakers of a minority language, especially if the community has no access to modern means of hygiene and health care. The 'primitive' communities, in particular, are observed to have a high mortality rate. Finally, there is large-scale displacement, or migration, of a people, due to either natural catastrophes or other socio-economic hardships.

At the international level there are other forces in operation, colluding to the language death, and the corresponding snapping of the lifeline of communities. Globalization, liberalization, market economy and patent laws primarily serve the economic interests of the multinational corporates. Thus economically developed and powerful nations deprive the indigenous people of the benefit, accruing from their wealth of the traditional knowledge. We may give a random example. Turmeric and garlic are grown in plenty in the South-east Asian countries. But the patents on their medicinal properties are sought to be obtained by the western countries in recent times. Crass commercialization of many a traditional resource has deprived the indigenous ethnic people an easy access to their own collective and shared resources. While the governments are urged to come up with effective legislations at the national and international level to protect the economic interests of the ethnic communities, these communities themselves should be conscientized to protect, preserve and promote their natural resources; and these include their indigenous languages, too. But this is often a losing battle for the speakers of minority languages, along with their resources, for they are compelled to fall in line with the forces of the market, globalization and liberalization. More often than not they miss out on the benefit from the new economic order, established, maintained and run by the corporates. In this scenario, the speakers of minority languages tend to gradually neglect the use of their own languages in the cause of playing out the global economic games.

(iii) Prevention of Language Death

One of the effective ways of preventing language death is through education in one's mother-tongue, especially at the primary level. However, I am not callous to the need of a link language that serves as a window, both at the

national and international levels, in an age, when the distances have shrunk, and the commerce is dictated by the global forces of the market. I do subscribe to the view that higher education, to be sure, will have to be pursued in a medium that has the widest possible global circulation. This is needed, if we have to benefit from globalization and liberalization, to say nothing of the benefits that accrue to us from the openness to world cultures and civilizations. Yet, at the same time, it needs to be stressed that the early and the primary education must be imparted in one's mother tongue for both the psychological development and the acculturization of the child into the ethos of the community and the larger society. With the above stress on the need of being at once local without ceasing to be global, it must however be noted with all the seriousness that the world's minority languages are faced with the grave threat of extinction. Michael Krauss,[10] a noted linguist, warns us that the threat of the disappearance of 90 percent world's minority languages within the next century, precisely because they are used less and less, stares us in the face. This is especially ominous for the languages in Asia, because Asia is the home for one-third of world's languages. Linguistic diversity cannot any more be taken for granted.

Linguists refer to the phenomenon of 'language death' also as 'language murder' and 'linguistic genocide'. The process of the extinction of language is currently in operation across the Americas, Australia, Africa and Asia. Surprisingly, the catalytic agents of the extinction are the mass media and the education systems, as they succeed in empowering the use of a single language, usually the language of the politically dominant community, at the cost of linguistic diversity. To be sure, both forces are ably wielded by the global economics, the military might and the political systems.[11] When children are compelled to study in the early stage in a language, other than their mother tongue, and in the language of the dominant community, it is only a matter of a generation or two before the complete linguistic transfer for the linguistic minorities. The role of the media, print as well as the audio-video, and its pervasive power on us are there for everyone to see. Likewise the role of the educational system, too, in the linguistic transfer is hugely important. The largest number of languages (approximately of 1.38 billion people) is not used in the formal educational systems. They are often without a written form; in a sweeping judgment, as it were, they are simply branded as unfit for formal education. Children from the minority language communities are thus forced to learn through a medium, national or regional, which is alien to them, and they find it difficult to master it. They are thus placed *ab initio* at

a disadvantaged starting point educationally. The number of the school drop-outs is directly linked to the initial linguistic handicap suffered by these children of the minority language groups.

Like the skin of our body, language, though it may appear merely marginal and peripheral, is really pervasive. Skin provides the information about our physical appearance, age, ethnicity, race and culture. Being a tactile sense, it constitutes an important sense field, especially in our early stage of childhood development, in as much as our first contact with another physical body, living or non-living, is through the sense of touch. A handshake may not be a mere social ritual, but a cognitive experience through the tactile sense. Even so is our language, because, through it, we not only define our own culture but also come in contact with another culture; through it, we have access not only to self-identity, but also to the identity of another cultural community. Language therefore becomes an important means of cultural bonding. Through it we are made to move from the peripheral to the central, from the external to the internal, from the visible to the invisible, realm of reality. In short, through language, we reach out to the 'soul', as it were, of one's own and also another's community.

Language death cannot be easily arrested by the piecemeal sops provided by the governments. What is perhaps needed is the radical improvement of the prestige attached to a minority language within the dominant community.[12] This can be done by improving the general economic status, power and authority of the people, who speak a minority language. Further, the arresting of language death can also be achieved, more positively, by the production of a literature in the language concerned, in a manner that it makes a mark on the stage of world literature. This presupposes that the language is not merely committed to writing, but also that both the quantity and quality of literary output is further ensured, and made easily available to people. The literary enterprise is inseparably associated with the ready availability of a script for the language. But it may be noted, here, that the non-availability of an independent script for a language is not necessarily a handicap for the growth of a literature in the concerned language. All that is required for the literary output is the suitable adoption and adaptation of a script readily available in its environment. Moreover, language death can be warded off by finding a place for the language in the electronic technology and media. Finally, assigning the language a distinct place within the educational system, in particular, at the school level, can go a long way in not only arresting the language death but also making it a dynamic force in the culture and

civilization of the people. But, unfortunately, linguistic imbalances do exist, and they can hasten the language death.

C. Linguistic Imbalances

We may now turn our attention to certain linguistic statistics that are alarming.[13] There are about 6700 languages spoken all over the world. If we are to read the linguistic map of the world carefully, we are startled at certain facts. As globalization and liberalization engulfs the world, 90 percent of the total number of the languages may be treated as endangered. What is more, the pace of their extinction is equally rapid. It is believed that they are likely to disappear within the span of a century. Language death has still not seized us seriously, partly because it occurs so silently that we hardly take note of it, let alone be alarmed by it. About 83-84 percent of these endangered languages are 'local', in the sense that they are restricted to a people living in a small geographical area. Indeed, four to five thousand of the world's languages are spoken by small ethnic, or indigenous tribal communities. On the contrary, half of the world's population speaks only 10 percent of the world's 'greater' (read, having a large number of speakers) languages. The average speakers of the lesser 90 percent of the languages number only 5000 to 6000. The above statistics at once reveals crucial facts about the linguistic imbalances as well as the precarious status of minority languages.

Let us focus for a while our attention on the linguistic imbalances. Imbalance of the languages may be studied, highlighting the way they are distributed on the globe. Europe speaks 4 percent, the Americas 15 percent, Africa 31percent and the Pacific region and Asia 50 percent of the languages. Within the Pacific and Asian region, 25 percent of the languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea and Indonesia (roughly 1500 languages). While the Pacific and Asian regions have the largest linguistic diversity, Europe has the least diversity. The linguistic diversity of India is phenomenal, in that as many as 380 languages are spoken here. Of these 240 languages are spoken in the Northeastern region alone. The linguistic map of India thus reveals that India's language diversity is the maximum in Northeast. Since the region has the rare distinction of having the largest linguistic diversity, we need to ponder a while on the phenomenon of language death.

The survival of language diversity of Northeast India in recent times is observed to have come under serious threat. A number of reasons for the threat can be cited. Firstly, the region suffers from a relative isolation of ethnic communities due to the difficult geographical terrain. The terrain is

largely hilly and mountainous with the crisscrossing of rivers and the valleys. The transportation facilities are deplorably poor. The railways, the cheapest mode of mass transportation, have not spread widely due to the difficult terrain that makes the laying of the railways prohibitively expensive. Roadways are equally scanty. Inland river-water transportation is almost non-existent, although it could be effectively tapped on the Brahmaputra. The relative isolation of people from one another may preserve their mother tongue, but does not develop it in terms of its literature vis-à-vis other languages. When there is no healthy interaction among the communities, all languages suffer equally. When the number of speakers of a language dwindles over time, the language becomes gradually extinct. Secondly, since the region is not economically developed, there is steady migration of the people to the towns and cities. This is especially true of the youths, who move out of the region for education and jobs, thus decimating the speakers of a language in the region. Thirdly, ethnic conflicts and the resultant displacement of the people are sporadic in the region. Fourthly, for many ethnic communities, education in mother tongue is not available, because the educational policies do not provide for it for a host of socio-political reasons. More often than not, most minority languages are not taught at the level of primary education even as a second language. This is partly because of the dominance, or hegemony, of the languages of the majority communities. A linguistic minority, it has already been shown, if it cannot master the language of the majority, is put to a great many economic and social disadvantages. What is more, in the process of gaining a mastery over a language other than its own, and that too, from a disadvantaged position, the minority community tends to pay little attention to the development of its own language, thus helplessly paving the way for its gradual extinction. Language chauvinism, on the part of the dominant group, invariably plays its part in the policy and the practice of education in the region, where one's language has to naturally grow. The threat for gradual extinction of the linguistic diversity of Northeast India is manifestly true. What happens in concrete, when the linguistic diversity disappears, and the language death occurs?

D. Relation between Language and Diversity

Language death harbingers the destruction of diversity, both cultural and biological.

(i) Loss of Cultural Diversity

Language death has serious repercussions on the survival of a culture, in as

much as language represents a form of life, and language is the index par excellence of a given culture. When a language ceases to be living among a people, they are subjected to the loss of culture itself. The most distinctive feature of culture being language, the extinction of language directly brings about the extinction of culture itself. Generally speaking, the loss of a language and the loss of a culture are coterminous. However, it may so happen that a language may somehow be made to survive by a handful of scholars, even after the loss of a culture; but it is now no more a living language. It continues to exist only as a fossil, to be deciphered and re-interpreted by the scholars (e.g., the Indus Valley language). With language death, there is invariably the death of the whole culture itself, replacing its whole worldview. The worldview, it may be stated, includes one's constructed knowledge of the world the one lives in, both natural and social. Because a language is the repository and index of a cultural worldview, its death results in the incapacity of the speech community to resolve its problems of relating itself to the physical as well as the social worlds. Thus there is an indissoluble bond between the word and the world. With the loss of language, we suffer the irreplaceable loss of a source of knowledge that sustained an entire cultural life, argues a noted linguist.[14]

(ii) Loss of Biodiversity

A significant part of the knowledge of the world we live in is the knowledge of the biotic world. This biotic knowledge too is lost irrevocably with the language death. This perception has forced a scholar to coin the phrase, 'the death of a biotic worldview'.[15] There is an intimate relation between a language and our knowledge of the biotic world available to it. The description of the geographical spread of languages on the globe reveals the fact that maximum number of languages is spoken in the tropical countries. We can identify, on the basis of the study conducted by Sethi[16], two important belts of language density. The first runs from the western African coast through the Congo basin to eastern Africa. The second runs from India through the peninsular South Asia to the islands of Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific. India is one of the 17 countries housed in one of the two major linguistic belts. The two belts together account for 60 percent of the world's languages. Geographically however the two belts comprise only 90 percent of the global land area, but the meagre land area of the two major linguistic belts constitute the heart of the tropical forest land. It is a veritable home to an incalculable bio-diversity of plants and animals. Needless to say, there is a close link between the linguistic diversity and the bio-diversity. It is a fact

that the concerned region houses, speaking economically, some of the poorest countries of the world. But, paradoxically, the region has the richest language diversity and bio-diversity. The tropical forests are a home to innumerable plant and animal species. Again, the same land mass of the tropical countries is also a home to innumerable ethnic communities with their equally innumerable languages. Thus it becomes now clear to us that bio-diversity, ethnic (cultural) diversity and linguistic diversity are endemic to the region identified by us. We could say that the region of the tropical forests, with its people, countries, cultures, languages, flora and fauna, is the diversity hotspot. It is the hotspot remarkably characterized by a linguistic, cultural and biotic pluralism. The correlation among the linguistic, the biotic and the ethnic-cultural diversity in the region is an indubitable fact.

If languages represent the varieties in forms of life (as seen by philosophers), and if the latter represent the cultural and ethnic diversity (as viewed by anthropologists), and if the innumerable species of life-form represent the bio-diversity (as perceived by biologists), all endemic to the region of the tropical forest countries, the bond between cultural diversity and bio-diversity is inextricable, and it is convincingly forged and mediated by linguistic diversity (as seen by linguists). Indeed, linguistic diversity is directly linked to the many ways in which human beings relate themselves culturally to one another, and physically to nature and its biotic world. Language indeed is the key to both cultural identity of the people and their knowledge of the biotic world around them. Therefore, the loss of a language (and with it, of the culture itself) results in the loss of our knowledge of the natural world, most importantly, of the biotic world. The passage now from the loss of the knowing of the biotic world to that of the being of the biotic world is a direct one. The language death results unmistakably in the death of a culture. Again, with the death of a culture there is the loss of the knowledge of the biotic world around it. This at once paves the way for wanton destruction of the bio-diversity. The nature that sustained so far a culture in a symbiotic relation, now, comes to be pitted against a new worldview, characterized by a language of violence to the same nature, best captured in the expression 'the exploitation of nature'. This perhaps is what was referred to as 'the waning of the tropics' by Evans Pritchard.[17] The worldview, that so far spoke a language of harmony and peace with nature, may now be replaced by a dominating and domineering worldview, that comes to speak a language of violence to, and exploitation of, nature, unknown to the tropics so far. The first casualty, then, of the phenomenon of language

death, and the consequent loss of the culture of a people, is the knowledge of the bio-diversity that has sustained so long the biological life of the community. Thus language death adversely advances the biotic death. The linguistic world, the cultural world and the biotic world go hand in hand in their life and death. Let us see how, in concrete, the linguistic, the cultural and the biotic diversities are inextricably knit together.

Anthropologists attest to the fact that the indigenous people have a rich and diversified knowledge of the many species of plants and animals in their environment. The languages of ethnic communities, written and spoken, are repositories of the rich and varied knowledge. The tribal people usually transmit the extra-ordinary store of knowledge through their folk-songs, tales, myths and legends. Their oral traditions open us up to a whole new world of knowledge unknown to us. They communicate to us the many names of the diverse species of plants and animals. The medicinal properties of herbs, readily available to them in their environment, are fully utilized by them to treat cuts, wounds, bruises and fractures, if also to fight infections. In every tribal society there is a body of knowledge of the indigenous medicines. For example, the Garo medicine men in the East Garo Hills at Balpakram have distinguished themselves as the expert traditional herbal healers. If their language is lost, for whatever reasons, the medicinal knowledge too, preserved in their language, is lost for ever. The possibility, far from being imaginary, is too genuine to be ignored. For close to their region, Ruga language, once spoken by the same tribe of the region, is now a dead language. The loss of the traditional knowledge is a tragedy, not only to the indigenous tribe, but also to the whole mankind.

Languages then are the store-house of rare medical information. The medical information concerning plants and animals, stored in the languages, may be made available to us in the written treatises, but more often in the oral traditions, as it may so happen that a minority language may either have no script of its own, or not have adopted some other script to develop a written literature. The traditional system of knowledge related to the flora and fauna, endemic to one's surrounding, is often stored in the myths, legends, folktales, and other oral traditions encapsulated in the language of a people. The names, medicinal properties, multiple uses, time of flowering and fruiting, of hibernation, if any, and a host of other details pertaining to the numerous species of plants are stored in the languages of people. Even more so, the names, habits, habitat, mating behaviour and propagation of many species of animals, the meanings they communicate in the sounds they make and so on,

are all preserved in their language. The tribal people thus live in close proximity, indeed, in total involvement with their physical and living environment.

Therefore, if the language is lost, along with it is lost irrevocably the traditional medical information about the plants and the biological information about animals. Speaking of the former, language also contains a host of other details on the surgical instruments and procedures, the concoction of varieties of medicinal potions and their right administration.[18] Therefore language is not a mere tool for a specific work, like a tourist map for finding a place, it is rather what serves as a key to the whole culture of a people, giving us at once an access to the 'soul' of a community.

If however a language, for reasons already stated, is either lost or used less and less by a people, the traditional wisdom in respect of the flora and fauna is either irrevocably lost or progressively diminished. When there is inability to communicate effectively in one's language, one gradually loses contact with one's environment itself and, thus, with the traditional wisdom, pertaining to one's biotic world. This is amply proved by the fact that children, taken away from their native environment to the cities for education, tend to lose the capacity to communicate effectively in their own language. They forget the names of the varieties of plants, flowers, fruits, seeds, birds and animals endemic to their native land. This alienation from their native land brings about the greater alienation from their language community itself. The alienation becomes complete, once they settle down permanently in an altogether different language community for the sake of a job, business and such other contingencies dictated by the vicissitudes of modern life. The increasing disuse of one's own language is followed by a corresponding distance, both physical and psychological, from the traditional wisdom stored in their native tongue.

Language then lives in, and is nurtured by, a community. Language and community sustain each other mutually. Moreover, the richness of the vocabulary in a given language directly depends on how closely the objects and concepts, represented by words, are related to life, as it is lived out daily by the people of a community. Eskimos have several words for snow, Philippinos for rice, Arabs for camel and sand, India's Northeastern hill tribes for basket, shawls and bamboo, in each of their languages. There may be subtle nuances to the several words used. The Northeastern tribes have different names for different species of bamboo, all of which are just 'bamboo'

to the unskilled eyes of others in India. What is more, every species of bamboo has a specific and most effective use in the tribal world.[19] Again, the lack of knowledge of the properties of an object in his environment, along with his corresponding inadequacy in the use of his language, on the part of a member of a new generation, brings about for him a rupture with the past; he is uprooted from his tradition. Such a rupture is at once a radical break in the lifeline that nurtured and sustained him in the community. Thus a veritable wealth of resources falls into oblivion; later generations of researchers struggle to recover the concerned wealth, but, often, in vain. The task of reinventing the wheel of life of a community is nearly impossible if the language has ceased to be a living force in the community. The measure of success for the reinvention of the wheel of life and its wisdom then directly depends on the language continuing to be a living force in the life of the people. Survival of an ethnic language of a region has a close link with that of ethnic culture itself. Therefore pro-active measures on the part of governments for the protection of (ethnic) cultural identity and language become imperative. Protection of the ethnic and linguistic identity however does not mean that the concerned ethnic group is closed to the cultures of other communities. Such radical closure is neither desirable nor feasible. It rather means the promotion of its own language and cultural identity, while being open at the same time to other languages and cultures. A classic example here is the survival of the Caribbean creole among the erstwhile slaves in the U.S. in their songs, rituals, dances, celebrations, resistance movements and the recollections.[20] Yet another equally revealing example is the survival of the Hebrew language and culture, through the religious institutions and learning among the diasporic Jews throughout Europe for centuries, till their language could pass into the modern nation state of Israel.

E. Contextualization

We may now contextualize our study, briefly though, of the situation of Northeast India. The region is characterized by a rare cultural, linguistic and biotic diversity, as amply indicated above. Yet, in recent times, due to a host of reasons[21], the region is subjected to a tremendous stress on its cultural and linguistic life, therefore, on the bio-diversity of the region. The cultural diversity of the region, along with its linguistic and biotic diversity, is under stress. Its cultural, linguistic, floral and faunal worlds are under threat of irreparable loss. Rapid urbanization, new types of administration, education, spread of Christianity and increased cross-cultural interactions have all brought in radical changes in the socio-cultural life of the tribal people at a pace

rarely anticipated by the relatively isolated communities in the region. More importantly, the many new catalytic agents of change have prevented the younger generation of people from striking deeper roots into their own cultural soil, and thus acquiring a deeper knowledge of their own language and literature, oral or written. What is more, there are pervasive forces of globalization, liberalization, mass media, communication technology, to say nothing of the new structures of social, political and economic realities that have shaken the foundations of the tribal way of life, long in close proximity with their natural habitat. Their culture being subjected to radical changes, many of their languages are on the verge of extinction. While the tribes themselves, in general, are facing the problem of losing their cultural identity, linguistic minorities in the region are struggling to survive in the vastly altered situations.

The close link between language and culture is nowhere seen as perceptibly as in the region. Languages, dialects included, have a great influence on the socio-political behaviour of the people. As seen already, language right away gives a social identity to an ethnic group in the region. The truth of the statement extends remarkably to the dialects as well. Thus, there may be a certain variation in the dialects spoken by the Monpas of Tawang and Dirang, but the variation bestows specific identities to the two groups of the Monpas. Conversely, the Khasis and Pnars may understand each other's languages, yet, they claim distinctive cultural identities to themselves. Thus languages, more than anything else, define the cultural identity of the groups of people. The identity derived from language often cuts across geographical territories and political boundaries to unite a people into a single nation spread over more than one nation states; and, yet, the dialects may separate them as distinct cultural groups. Therefore, a greater autonomy given to the development of the languages and dialects invariably helps the ethnic communities to guard their specific culture, language and bio-diversity.

Inter-cultural communication among ethnic groups a century ago was negligible in the region, partly due to their geographical isolation. Today, however, the scenario is not the same, as there has been a marked change in the systems of transportation and better road connectivity, mass media and rapid communication, both print and audio-visual, and of greater participation in one another's religious and cultural festivals. This has necessitated the use of link languages among the ethnic communities. We see now in the region such link languages as English, patois Hindi, Nagamese and others.

This way the relative isolation of the communities is considerably broken down. But it is imperative that while such link languages are used across ethnic communities, they are not allowed to marginalize the particular languages that cohesively bind the members of the specific communities. Mother tongue in fact should be given all due encouragement to grow in its daily use, to say nothing of the development of its literature. After all it is their mother tongue that gives them the distinctive cultural and ethnic identity.

The languages of the region may be expected to share certain common features. Many of them are phonologically monosyllabic. Unlike the Sanskritic and Dravidian groups of languages of mainland India, most languages of the region are Sino-Tibetan-Myanmarese in their origin. By virtue of their minority status, it may be said that they share a few common features of the other minority languages of the world. Firstly, they are spoken mostly by tribal communities. Tribal people everywhere, it is observed, tend to use a good bit of phatic communication, as distinct from a formal discourse. On the face of it, their communication seems to be devoid of a system of logic - so it would appear to an 'outsider'. There may be a grain of truth in the appearance. Much of their conversation is meant to establish linkages and contacts to reinforce relationships and, above all, to genuinely acknowledge the presence of other persons. The phatic conversation is a form of initial welcome and greetings to the person, who is sought to be immediately incorporated in the group as a familiar member for carrying out a conversation. This done, the conversation may soon acquire a more serious tone, and veer into a formal discourse. Some such phatic expressions in their languages are 'Where to?', 'Did you eat rice?' They are not meant to be answered literally. They are approximately similar to such English (or urban?) expressions as 'Hello!', 'Hi!' and 'How do you do?' The question, 'How do you do?', often asked in an elite culture, one may say, is vague. Its answer too is equally vague like 'O.K.!', 'Fine!', 'So, so!", or simply a repetition of the same. No one is expected to give a detailed report of one's medical history in answer to it. Similarly to the phatic question, 'Where to?', or 'Did you eat rice?', the equally phatic answer may be, 'Oh!', 'So far!' or 'Have eaten!', respectively.

Kinship relations, captured in languages of tribal societies, are tenderly depicted, sometimes quite humorously, but they are deeply respected. The articulation of the relations reveals an affinity with nature, in particular, with the animals in their environment. The Khasis, for example, use the terms 'dog', 'cat' and 'rat' to indicate the familial generations of son, grand-son and great grand-son. Needless to say, such articulations have now become

the terms of endearment. Further, in tribal societies, people often do not address a person by his proper name as a mark of respect. The Garos, for instance, would not address a man or a woman directly by name, especially if they happen to be parents. They would rather address them as 'the father of so and so', 'the mother of so and so'. In day-to-day conversation, parents, thus have an identity derived from their children.

Tribal languages reveal a form of life characterized by their close affinity with nature. The affinity is celebrated in such of their narratives as folktales, myths, stories and legends; in their rituals, dances and religious festivals. It could be said that their life revolves around the rhythm of nature itself, as if their life were symbiotic with that of nature. Thus, their life and activity (especially agriculture and hunting) are an imitation of the life of, and the events in, nature itself. It is as though the tribal man lives, dies and rises again in unison with the life, the periodic decay and the renewal of nature itself. The belief systems of most tribes of the region depict their intimate bonding with nature. For example, many tribes of the region celebrate in their folktales their belief that people can be transformed into tiger. The Garos entertain the belief that, if a person is attacked by a tiger, his name should be immediately changed, so that his identity is now kept hidden from the tiger to ward off a second attack. The creation stories of the Hynniewtrep people[22], their stories of Manik Raitong, of Nohkalikai are inextricably associated with one or the other aspect of nature. While these stories may explain the natural and social phenomena, they also serve as a blueprint for a significant human life, in as much as they hold out certain values and norms for the ideal human life.

However, alienation from one's culture, brought about by a host of factors in the region, has hastened the alienation from one's language, too. The region, partly because of its difficult geography, lacks in adequate professional educational facilities, infrastructure for health schemes, and investment for the industry and so on. This naturally drives the people, in particular, the younger generation, to urban centres elsewhere in the country, thus, at once snapping them off their cultural roots. Once they move out to the 'alien' cities, they are, first of all, removed from their own linguistic and cultural environment. Thus, their linguistic up-rooting results in the cultural up-rooting. With this linguistic and cultural alienation, the loss of the traditional wisdom, inherent in their linguistic and cultural community, becomes complete. The truth of the statement becomes more than evident in our interaction with the people, alienated from their culture and language. Such people have

simply lost their vocabulary of everyday life, expressive of their cultural values and ethos, agricultural and house building practices, names of birds and animals in their environment, social rituals, and even such household articles like basket, shawl etc.[23]

Language is more than a mere tool for expressing ideas in communication. It is also an institution for a harmonious coexistence in the society. It is a symbolic system par excellence for the manifestation of a form of life with all its rich diversity, at once social, religious and political. In short, the most potent cultural symbol. Therefore, language death at once harbingers the loss of cultural identity for the individual and community. With the loss of cultural and linguistic identity, one invariably suffers the loss of the knowledge of their biotic world, as the words representing the items and ideas in their biotic world summarily disappear. His biotic world, for all practical purposes, becomes fossilized. The Northeast Indian societies are seriously facing the threat of their linguistic, cultural and biotic fossilization.

Tribal languages, it is observed, have much less words for expressing the abstract ideas, but they are said to have a much richer vocabulary, that denotes directly the objects of daily use; and also the birds, animals and plants they come in contact with in their day to day living. Even when they are compelled to use certain abstract notions, for example, a blessed state like 'heaven', it is often pictorially depicted. Thus, for the Khasis, heaven is a place, where people, in particular, the family members, are gathered together, after death, to participate in the communal meals, symbolized by the exchange of the traditional betel leaf and nut (*kwai)*. In the Garo language the abstract idea of generosity is pictorially described as 'giving with hands full' (*jaksrame).* The idea of 'remembrance' (*jingkynmaw)* among the Khasis, is pictorially described as 'keeping in stone', possibly referring to the practice of keeping the bones of the deceased ancestors in a stone monument. The languages of the region have numerous words for rice, knife, bamboo, basket, shovel, shawl and so on, which are all objects of daily use. Tribal languages are replete with songs, riddles, proverbs, sayings, stories, which preserve their traditional wisdom. Hence the language death invariably results in the loss of culture itself, impoverishing it of its traditional wisdom, encompassing the biotic worldview. Alienation from one's language then hastens the cultural alienation, and this, in turn, destroys the relevance of the objects and ideas of daily life. "When the language is alive, the people are alive" (*Haba ka Ktien ka Im ka Jaidbynriew ka Im*) was the clarion call of the leaders of the movement for the creation of the hill state of Meghalaya, in the wake of

the Assamese language being made the state language of the undivided Assam. Philosophers, linguists and anthropologists could not agree more.

Let me conclude. There is an inextricable bond between cultural diversity and bio-diversity, mediated through linguistic diversity. If language death occurs, it is invariably followed by the loss of the cultural identity itself and, thereafter, the loss of bio-diversity as well. Language diversity and bio-diversity are extremely dense in Northeast India. We may require for the region certain judicious policies, promoting the primary education in mother tongue, writing of books in the vernaculars, and making tribal literature easily available to the people. This has to go hand in hand with the appreciation of the traditional wisdom stored in the local and minority languages; with a more pragmatic approach to the problem of inter-relationship among languages, when people are confronted with the need for a link language. The educational policy that politically guards the interests of the language of the dominant community at the cost of the minority languages may have to be re-examined afresh, and the corrective measures be expeditiously taken up, to check linguistic imbalances. Language issues have from time to time given rise to clashes among the communities of the region, and elsewhere in the country, and we cannot afford to ignore any longer the linguistic and cultural aspirations of the people. The linguistic and cultural diversity in the region must not be seen as a negative and deleterious source of conflict and clash, but as a positive and beneficial resource for the protection of its bio-diversity. Indeed, a natural gift to be passed on to our posterity.

Notes and References

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Harper and Collins, 1973, pp. 89ff.

2. Wittgenstein argues that language embodies a form of life. *His Philosophical Investigations* (3rd edn., London: Prentice Hall, 1973), which is a rejection of the picture theory of language, expounded in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (1st edn., London: Routledge, 1981), discusses at some length the linguistic moorings of all culture. See also his *Culture and Value*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

3. David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

4. Border disputes between nation-states, as well as between provincial states, are a living reality. One of the reasons for the disputes is that there are bilingual communities on the borders, and the aspiration of the people to belong to one or the other state is often divisive.

5. Brian T. Riley, ed., *Socio-Linguistics: Language in Culture and Society*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000, pp. 114ff.

6. David Crystal, *Language Death*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

7. Ibid., p. 122.

8. See my "The Writ versus the Word: Christianity Encounters Tribal Religions", in *Indian Missiological Review*, vol. 12, No.3 & 4, 1990, pp. 275-287.

9. N. Dorian, "Linguistic and Ethnographic Fieldworks", in *Handbook of Languages and Ethnic Identity*, ed., J. Fishman, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 25ff.

10. Michael Krauss, "Preliminary Suggestions for Classification and Terminology for Degrees of Language Endangerment", colloquium paper, in *The Endangered Languages of the World*, ed., M. Brenzinger, Bodgodesberg: Karl-Arnold-Akademie, 2000.

11. Nitin Sethi, "Words are Biotic", in *Down to Earth*, 11(15), 2002, pp. 29-35.

12. David Crystal, *Language Death*, p. 27ff., Dorian, op. cit., p. 41.

13. George Plathottam, "Language, Plurality, Biodiversity and Ethnicity: Identity and Change in North-East India", in *Mission*, X: 2, 2008. I am grateful to many ideas of Plathottam, in particular, his statistics. Also see his article titled "Language Plurality, Biodiversity and Ethnicity: Identity and Change in Northeast India" in T. B. Subba et al (eds), *Christianity and Change in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2009, 158-73.

14. Stephen A. Wurm, "Language Death and Disappearance: Causes and Circumstances", in *Endangered Languages*, eds. R. H. Robins and E. M. Uhlembeck, Oxford: Berg Publishing Ltd., 1992.

15. Nitin Sethi, op. cit., pp. 29-35.

16. Ibid., p. 30.

17. E. Evans Prichard, "Zande Theology", in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays*, Free Press, 1962.

18. One is amazed at the minute details on medication and surgical techniques in the Sanskrit medical treatises (*ayurveda*) of Caraka and Susruta.

19. Plathottam reports that he ended up getting a wrong consignment of bamboo staves for his scout boys, not knowing the precise name of the variety he needed, while placing the order. Op. cit., p. 141.

20. Brian T. Riley, op. cit., p. 157ff.

21. Frederick S. Downs, *Christianity in North-East India: Historical Perspective*, Shillong: North-Eastern Hill University, 1996. O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in North-East India*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1993.

22. See my "Khasi Cosmogonic Myth: A Functionalistic Interpretation", in *Tribe, Culture, Art*, eds., Vanlalnghak and Siby K. George, Guwahati: DVS Publishers, 2005.

23. Survey conducted by Plathottam reveals that language death is hastened in direct proportion to the number of years spent outside one's home, to the lack of books in a given language and to the absence of education in one's mother-tongue. Op. cit.