

SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF INDIAN TRIBAL LANGUAGE FAMILIES

Dr. M K Devappa

Principal and Associate Professor

Department of Sociology

Government First Grade College, Arehalli, Hassan district, Karnataka state, India.

E-mail Id: dr.devappa@gmail.com

Abstract: A tribe consists of individuals who share a common lineage and cultural practices, often choosing to reside in a self-contained community. In India, tribes represent the indigenous populations that are dispersed across the nation. They form a crucial segment of the Indian demographic, and their cultural practices contribute significantly to our intangible national heritage. Therefore, it is essential to explore some of the prominent tribes in India. This document provides detailed insights into the distribution of tribal language families in India, the phenomenon of multilingualism among tribal languages, and the current status of these languages.

Keywords: Tribal Languages, Indian tribal, Language families, Indian religious, Family and language

1.0 Introduction

India is renowned for its extraordinary linguistic diversity, encompassing significant language families from around the globe. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India, there are approximately 780 languages distributed across various geographical areas, ranging from the arid Thar Desert in Rajasthan to the subHimalayan mountains and the coastal regions of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian subcontinent has been a melting pot of numerous human groups migrating over millennia, and this vast linguistic variety reflects that history. In contrast to Europe, where the concept of a nation often hinges on a common language such as English, French, or German, India presents a different scenario. Although Hindi is increasingly recognized as a widely spoken language and is designated as an 'official language' alongside English for administrative purposes, the Indian Constitution does not endorse a singular national language. Instead, it acknowledges 22 languages in the Eighth Schedule as official languages, with the possibility of adding more in the future. The relationship between language and regional identity plays a crucial role in Indian society; for example, languages like Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, and Telugu are closely tied to their respective states: West Bengal, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. However, in many Northeastern states, the linguistic landscape is highly diverse, making it impractical to designate a single language for the entire state. Imposing one language on various ethnic groups could have significant consequences. In Manipur, for instance, over 30 tribal languages are spoken alongside English, Hindi, and Manipuri, which serves as the lingua franca for the Meitei community in the Imphal valley. Nagaland features around 18 major tribal languages, each with numerous dialects, while Arunachal Pradesh boasts more than 50 tribal languages. These tribal languages serve as distinctive markers of identity, as the terms Adi, Angami, Apatani, Ao, Lotha, and Sumi represent ethnolinguistic categories that encompass both the respective ethnic groups and their languages.

It is estimated that there are approximately 7,000 distinct languages spoken worldwide today. Notably, both the African continent and the Indian subcontinent each host over 1,000 native languages. The highest degree of linguistic diversity, however, is observed among the indigenous communities of New Guinea, where more than 1,000 languages are densely packed into an area slightly larger than twice the size of Rajasthan. This highlights that linguistic diversity is particularly pronounced among tribal populations, which exhibit significant heterogeneity, in contrast to the more homogeneous groups found in Europe, where all regions west of Russia have fewer than 100 native languages. Within the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity in India, tribal languages contribute significantly to both the variety and distribution of languages, enhancing the overall linguistic landscape of the country.

2.0 Distribution of tribal language families in India

Tribal languages are categorized into four primary language families: Austric, Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, and Tibeto-Burman (Sino-Tibetan). It is crucial to note that while tribes are organized according to linguistic classifications, there is no definition of Indian tribes based solely on language families. This is because a key characteristic of tribes is the use of a common language rather than adherence to a specific language family. In this regard, tribal groups that belong to the Indo-Aryan language family represent just over 1 percent, those in the Dravidian family

account for slightly more than 3 percent, while over 80 percent of the identified tribes speak Tibeto-Burman languages, and all communities speaking Austric languages are recognized as tribes. Geographically, Dravidian speakers are primarily found in South and Central India; Austric-speaking tribal

groups are mainly located in Middle India, the Andaman Islands, and sparsely in Northeast India; Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities are concentrated in Northeast India; and Indo-Aryan-speaking groups are scattered in specific areas of Middle and Northwest India.

2.1. Austric: The Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) categorizes tribal languages within the Austric family into two main branches: the Munda languages and Mon Khmer, both of which are part of the Austro-Asiatic division, alongside the Austro-Nesian languages. The Munda branch consists of 14 tribal languages predominantly spoken in regions such as Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur in Jharkhand, Kondhamal and Mayurbhanj in Odisha, Betul in Maharashtra, and certain areas of Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and the Terai region of the Himalayas. George Grierson made significant contributions by identifying eight distinct Munda languages, which further divide into various dialects. He referred to the dialects prevalent in the northeastern part of the Central Indian Plateau and surrounding areas as Kherwari, with notable dialects including Bhumij, Ho, Korwa, Mundari, and Santhali. The key Munda languages recognized are Asuri, Birhor, Gadaba, Juang, Kharia, Koda, Kurku, Savara, and Turi. In contrast, the Mon-Khmer branch is geographically more dispersed, represented by two languages: Khasi, found in Meghalaya, and Nicobarese, spoken in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

2.2 Dravidian: In contrast, the Dravidian language family exhibits less diversity compared to other language families. Nevertheless, it is spoken by a significant portion of the population in mainland India. This language family is generally divided into two main groups: The Central Dravidian group and the Southern Dravidian group. The earliest classification of these languages, based on Caldwell's research, identified two subdivisions: Dravida and Andhra languages. The Dravida category encompasses languages such as Gondi, Kanarese, Kodagu, Kota, Kui, Kurukh, Tamil, Toda, Tulu, Malto, and Malayalam, while the Andhra category includes Brahui, Kolami, and Telugu. The Dravidian languages are primarily found in the Deccan Plateau and the neighboring coastal regions. This language family also serves as a linguistic boundary for the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala.

The tribal communities that speak languages from the Dravidian family are mainly located in the southern and central regions of India. Among these tribes, Gondi speakers represent the largest group, spread across Madhya Pradesh to Andhra Pradesh. In Central India, notable Dravidian languages include Kui, spoken by the Kondh in Orissa, Kurukh, spoken by the Oraon, and Malto, spoken by tribes in the Rajmahal hills. In South India, the languages of tribes such as the Badaga, Chenchu, Irula, Kadar, and Toda are also part of the Dravidian language family.

2.3 Tibeto-Burman: The Tibeto-Burman language speakers in India predominantly reside along the Himalayan region adjacent to international borders. It is believed that the Tibeto-Burmese languages migrated into India from the northern mountainous areas, subsequently spreading throughout the Himalayas. The tribal communities that communicate in Tibeto-Burman languages primarily belong to the Mongoloid ethnic group, mainly found in Northeast India. These languages are classified as a subset of the broader Sino-Tibetan language family, which spans a vast region from Jammu and Kashmir in the west to Assam, parts of Indo-China, and eastern China. The Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese language family is generally categorized into two main groups: Tai and Tibeto-Burman. The Tai group encompasses the declining Ahom language of Assam, along with Khampti and Phakial, among others. The Tibeto-Burman group is further subdivided into the Tibeto-Himalayan branch, the North Assam or Arunachal branch, and the Assam-Burmese branch.

The Tibeto-Himalayan branch consists of two sections: Bhotia and Himalayan. The Bhotia section includes languages such as Ladakhi, Lahauli, Sherpa, and Sikkim Bhutia, while the Himalayan section features languages like Lepcha, Toto, and Rong. The Arunachal branch comprises languages such as Adi, Apatani, Mishng, and Miri. The Assam-Burmese branch includes subdivisions like Bodo, Naga, Kachin, and Kuki-Chin. The Bodo section encompasses languages such as Dimasa, Garo, Kachari, and Tripuri; the Naga section includes Ao, Angami, Rengma, Sumi, and Lotha; the Kachin section is represented by Singpho; and the Kuki-Chin section consists of languages like Lushai, Thado, Ralte, Sokte, and Manipuri.

2.4 Indo-Aryan: The Indo-Aryan language speakers represent the largest demographic group in India, with approximately two-thirds of the population communicating in various forms of Indo-Aryan languages. In contrast,

the tribal speakers of these languages are relatively fewer and are often found alongside the predominant Indo-Aryan communities or share linguistic features with major languages. Geographically, Indo-Aryan languages are extensively distributed, stretching from Kashmir to the Konkan coast and from Gujarat to Assam. Notable tribal groups within the Indo-European language family include the Bhils of Rajasthan, the Warli of Maharashtra, and the Hajong of Meghalaya. Research indicates that earlier Dravidian speakers may have adopted Indo-Aryan languages due to the influence of incoming dominant Indo-Aryan groups, or they may have migrated southward or transitioned to the Indo-European language family. This phenomenon is evident among southern Indo-European speakers such as the Banjaras and Pardhis, who are nomadic tribes with a documented history of migration from Rajasthan over the past few centuries.

3.0 Multilingualism And Tribal Languages

The characterization of tribes by their use of a particular dialect is a contentious and complex issue within the Indian context. For example, the Kond and Paraja communities in South Odisha communicate in Oriya, as well as in Kui and Parji. Similarly, the Santhal people from Santhal Parganas utilize Bengali and Hindi alongside their native Santhali language. The Chencus and Koyas converse in Telugu in addition to their indigenous tongues, while the Naga tribes typically use Nagamese and the languages of neighboring tribes in conjunction with their mother tongues. This linguistic diversity is also evident among other tribal groups in India. Research indicates the presence of a lingua franca, which serves as a communication medium among tribes or dominant communities, yet is classified as a regional language. In South Odisha, for instance, many tribal members are proficient in three languages: their specific tribal language, the dominant language of surrounding communities (Oriya), and 'Desiabhasa,' a regional dialect that translates to folk language and is distinct from the others.

The decline of endangered tribal languages is not solely attributed to factors such as isolation, as seen with the Andaman islanders, or population decrease, like that of the Toto and foraging tribes. In fact, the rich linguistic diversity and prevalence of multilingualism have contributed to the significant decline of languages such as Kurukh, despite its millions of speakers. Multilingualism plays a crucial role among tribal communities, affecting both the characteristics of their languages and their socio-cultural interactions. For example, an average Oraon individual may communicate in Hindi, Nagpuri, Sadri, and even the indigenous languages of neighboring tribes, in addition to Kurukh. Research indicates that the variety of languages spoken alongside the native tongue can exhibit regional variations, even within the same tribal groups. Consequently, Oraon and Santhal tea garden communities in Assam may converse in Assamese and other local languages, differing significantly from their counterparts in Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas, who primarily use Kurukh and Santhali. This multilingual dynamic is significant, as speakers often switch between different linguistic codes during conversations. Therefore, the evolution, resilience, and decline of tribal languages are influenced by geographical factors and cultural interactions.

Hodson proposed that the social status of different language groups significantly influences which group acquires the language of the other during social interactions. In this context, some researchers have highlighted the concepts of prestige, pride, and solidarity within specific language communities that choose to remain monolingual. Nevertheless, economic interactions are crucial in the multilingual landscape, as many individuals from outside these communities have learned local tribal languages to enhance their economic prospects. Generally, tribal languages are perceived to hold a lower status compared to more dominant languages. Verrier Elwin's research among the Bonda Highlanders revealed that the Bonda people primarily communicate in Mundari for everyday conversations, while they resort to Oriya for specific purposes: market transactions involving weights and measures, as well as certain magical and religious rituals. The Bonda regard Oriya as a superior language, believing that it should be used to address higher entities. This linguistic dynamic is deeply intertwined with social life, where class and status perceptions shape the landscape of tribal languages.

4.0 The Contemporary Situation Of Tribal Languages

The examination of tribal languages by students in anthropology and linguistics has sparked a renewed focus on tribal communities. A significant concern is the decline of these languages, many of which have been classified as endangered by the Linguistic Survey of India. According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India, approximately 220 languages have become extinct over the past fifty years. A brief review of the endangered languages listed by UNESCO highlights the alarming reduction of languages spoken by indigenous populations. In India, numerous tribal languages have disappeared, particularly among the Andaman tribes, with more likely to follow suit. This trend is also evident on the Indian mainland, especially among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs) such as the Asur, Birhor, Chenchu, Maram, and Toto, as well as among Northeastern tribes like Chiru, Khoibu, Koirang, and Maram. Although the number of speakers for some tribal languages has increased, these communities face significant social changes that make it challenging to preserve their original languages.

Consequently, in India, both relative isolation and increasing cultural interactions have contributed to a sharp decline in the survival and continuity of tribal languages.

5.0 Conclusion

The preservation of language and its historical significance relies heavily on the use of script. Language is inherently constrained by the dimensions of time and space. To transcend these limitations, the implementation of script becomes essential. It is through script that the thoughts and expressions of the mind can be captured in a literary format. Literature embodies the cultural identity of specific communities. With the aid of written language, a language can evolve and establish a clear identity, supported by the contributions of writers and intellectuals. However, aside from the Thai-Sin languages, most languages lack their own writing systems.

Although the Thai-Sin languages possess scripts, they do not have a robust tradition of extensive literature, which poses a significant challenge for the tribal languages of Assam. When adopting a new script, it is crucial to align it with the phonetic rules of the language, necessitating thorough linguistic research. Currently, attempts have been made to represent these languages using modified Roman or Devanagari scripts. Unfortunately, due to the limited number of literate individuals, these efforts have not resonated with the intended audience, leading to disappointment among the community due to the lack of adequate engagement from readers.

6.0 References

- i. Cu Caktivçl: Tribal Languages of India. 1976.
- ii. Languages shifts among the schedules tribes, Ishtiaq, M (1999) in India. A get globe Ishtiaq. Motilal Banaridass Publications, Chennai.
- iii. Jannah, Sunil: The tribals of India. Oxford University Press. 2003
- iv. Rabindra Nath Pati (2002). Tribal and indigenous people of India—problems and prospects. APH Publishing, New Delhi.
- v. W KB (1996). Problems of Tribal Development in Gujarat in RS Manna (eds.) Tribes of India ongoing Challenges. MD Publications, New Delhi.
- vi. Vidyarthi, L.P, Rai, Binay Kumar: (1976). The Tribal Culture of India. Concept Publishing House: New Delhi.
- vii. Forbes, C.J.F.S (1878) ‘On Tibeto-Burman Languages.’ In The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland 10: 210-27.
- x. <https://nativetribe.info/major-language-families-and-branches-of-indian-tribal-languages/#:~:text=India%2C%20a%20land%20of%20vibrant%20cultural%20heritage%20and,major%20language%20families%3A%20Austroasiatic%2C%20Dravidian%2C%20Indo-Aryan%2C%20and%20Tibeto-Burman.>
- xi. Hodson, T.C. (1936) ‘Bilingualism in India.’ Transactions of the Philological Society of London, pp.85-91.
- xii. Konow, Sten (1908) ‘Notes on the Munda Family of Speech in India.’ In Anthropos 3: 68-82.
- xiii. Shapiro, Michael C. and Schiffman, Harold F. (1981) Language and Society in South Asia. New Delhi: Motilal Banaridass.
- xiv. <https://www.tribesindia.com/tribal-languages/>